



ISLAND REFUGE

BROOKWELL ISLAND  BOOK TWO

REGAN BLACK

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ISLAND
REFUGE

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About Island Refuge

Have old secrets followed her home?

Lila Copeland seized her chance for a fresh start and never looked back. After years of school and training, she's coming home to put her stamp on the family bakery.

Unfortunately, trouble follows...in the form of Travis Upton. The security expert isn't just the man she's been crushing on for months, he's the man accusing her of a major jewelry heist.

When Travis's investigation reveals a serious threat to the gorgeous baker,

the easiest way to protect her is to pose as her doting boyfriend.

Their talk of love may only be white lies, but the kisses are as real as the danger closing in.

As the thief applies more pressure, putting the people and town she loves in the crossfire, Lila will do whatever it takes to help Travis close his case. Even confess her ugly secrets.

Travis, undaunted by her past, is determined to give the woman who holds his heart the safe haven she needs and the happy future she deserves.

In Regan Black's books you'll meet strong, sexy heroes and the courageous women they'll do anything to protect!
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Chapter 1

With his cell phone to his ear and his eyes on his laptop screen Travis Upton glared at an alert from his Guardian Agency bosses. The idea that several hundred grand in watches and jewelry was stashed on the yacht, right under his nose, was more than annoying.

Reputation was everything in the security industry.

“Are you sure about this report?” It was a dumb question. Whoever sent this intel was tied to the agency. And anyone working for the agency was a credible witness.

“We know the watches and jewels are gone,” said Swann.

“The insurance company asked for our assistance, concerned about these heists,” Gamble added. “In the last year the yachts they insure have been targeted. The pattern is too obvious to ignore.”

Gamble and Swann were law partners who managed the elite Guardian Agency based out of Chicago. With international clients, they offered protection and discrete investigation as well as assistance to law enforcement agencies when requested.

“Surely other yachts have been targeted as well.”

“The ratio is much lower. The company suspects an inside job,” Swann explained. “Mason’s yacht was moored just two slips away. Everything indicates something went wrong and it’s possible the stolen items ended up on her yacht.”

Travis gritted his teeth. “Or an accomplice is on this yacht.”

“An outside possibility. One we can’t ignore,” Gamble agreed.

“We are scheduled to stop in Charleston for a week,” Travis reported. The newlyweds were determined to explore the area and take advantage of this extended break in their schedules.

He and the protective detail were looking forward to some time away from the yacht. Not everyone on his team was built for seafaring. The vessel was comfortable enough and the crew skilled enough to keep the ride smooth. But it was still days and days of nothing but ocean.

“We’d like you to take the lead on this,” Swann said. “You have people to manage the personal protection?”

“Not full staff, no,” he admitted. He and two other bodyguards were traveling with the couple on board. They could technically cover the twenty-four hours in three shifts, but he preferred shorter shifts. When they stopped at a port, Travis would bring in additional bodyguards for coverage to ensure no one burned out. “We could use a couple extra hands to rotate in. On the yacht, we’re pretty much a skeleton crew.” He was determined to give everyone the downtime they needed. “The yacht is secure,” or so he’d thought. “And we’ve had relaxing days at sea, but we could all use some additional breathing room.”

It was hard to explain. Being on the yacht wasn’t exactly hard work when it came to personal security, but the obvious constraints could weigh on a person. Travis had spoken with the captain at length about how to keep his team feeling sharp and focused. He’d learned there was a high turnover for a

reason.

In fact, the current chef would be leaving the crew once they reached Charleston. Lila Copeland had family in the area, according to the captain, and she'd planned for an extended break.

"We have Brett Robinson in the area as well as Logan Harris," Swann said, thoughtfully. "There are other options as well. We'll have our new coordinator reach out to you."

Travis did a double take at Brett's name. He hadn't realized the man was tied to the agency. And a new coordinator implied growth. Travis was all for that. He appreciated job security. "That's great. What's his name?"

"Her name is Jess Keller," Gamble replied. "She's our new regional director and she can get you the coverage you need." Gamble paused, and Travis heard the rattle of a keyboard. A moment later his email chimed. "There," Gamble said. "Her name, photo, and contact information for you."

"Thanks." He opened the email and seeing the name and the face, recognition clicked. "Oh, right. Isn't she a cop in Key West?" The same cop who'd saved Travis's good friend Max during a nasty incident—if he was thinking of the same woman.

"That's right."

"She's a hero," Travis said. From his brief acquaintance, Jess had a good head on her shoulders and was generally unflappable. He couldn't blame her for going into the private sector. Especially with Gamble and Swann. The two men knew how to build an irresistible employment offer and they managed the Guardian Agency with expertise and compassion. "We sure think so," Swann agreed. "And we're pleased she's eager to tackle this new challenge."

Travis wondered what Jess's new role meant for the agency as a whole. Then again, he was confident however things shifted with management and affiliates, Gamble and Swann would take care of their people—they always did.

"I'll coordinate with Keller," Travis said. "Once I'm sure Juliet is comfortable with the staff changes, I'll give this my full attention."

Gamble and Swann gave him their thanks and ended the call, leaving Travis to ponder what the hell was going on.

Chapter 2

Lila Copeland stood in the galley kitchen on the lower deck of the yacht, assessing it with a critical eye. They would dock in Charleston, South Carolina tomorrow morning. And though she would be disembarking at that time, she refused to leave things out of order for the chef who would come aboard to replace her.

She paused, a little surprised to find she'd miss this place. The kitchen was a dream with top-of-the-line appliances and finishes, smart details, and meticulous organization making the job easier. Over the past few days as they

neared the port, Lila and her assistant, Toni DeLuca, had cleaned every surface and utensil. They'd conducted a full inventory of fresh food and pantry supplies on hand. Lila had kept up the log of meals served, noting the favorite dishes of those on board. The spreadsheet helped streamline their supply runs and hopefully would make the transition easier for the next chef.

Hollywood celebrity Juliet Mason and her new husband were enjoying an extended private cruise honeymoon from the Bahamas to Miami to Maine. Lila had found the challenges of life on the yacht offset by the delight of cooking for the couple and small crew. The galley was well-equipped, making it a joy to work in. Toni, as her singular assistant, was an absolute pro and she'd kept things lively in the galley, as a coworker and a friend. She was going to miss the adventurous lifestyle and yet she couldn't wait to get home and back to her true love of bread and pastries.

Being Juliet's head chef for the past six months—on and off the yacht—had been a great experience. One she'd leaned into wholeheartedly. But overall, these recent months only solidified her plans going forward.

Raised in a small town on the Carolina coast, Lila had once craved travel. Charleston had opened her eyes to all kinds of foods and ignited her drive to become a chef. As a kid she devoured every experience that expanded her view of baking, cuisine, and the world at large. Her grandmother had specifically urged her to get out and explore before deciding whether or not to return and eventually take over the family bakery where she'd gotten her start. Lila had been leaning toward coming home and made up her mind during their stop in Miami.

During her short time ashore, she realized just how much she missed the steadiness of being on land. The pure joy of a roomy bed instead of a narrow bunk in a shared room. Her heart and hands were ready to settle down back on the island she called home.

Lila gave Toni the rest of the evening off so she could wallow in her last night on board. Alone, Lila opened the pantry for inspiration for tomorrow's breakfast. Deciding on potato pancakes, a crew favorite, she opened the bin and spotted a plastic bag wedged into the back.

Grumbling, she dialed down the flare of annoyance. Galley protocol was to empty any produce bags and stow them properly, but as oversights went, this one was minor. Neither she nor Toni would've done this on purpose. Mistakes happened. And this most likely came from someone else on the crew helping unload a delivery. There was no reason to go on a stereotypical-

chef tirade. That kind of outburst always bothered her. In the bakery, she'd been taught to be respectful of everyone and, following the example set by her grandparents, to save any corrections like this for a private conversation. Besides, their bakery was small and open to the public. No one wanted to ruin a customer's experience with a temper tantrum.

Though she'd worked in kitchens led by temperamental chefs, that wasn't her aspiration. Kitchens were challenging places to work and when chefs were unreasonable it made life worse. On the yacht, she'd been determined to keep a level head and Toni and others had given her excellence in return.

A wayward bag in the potato bin wasn't a big deal and definitely not important on her last day. She grabbed the bag and did a double take. It wasn't empty. Neither the weight nor the shape of it felt right. The sharp angles and hard sounds inside the bag were more metallic than produce-like.

What in the world? Looking inside, she found smaller bags made of black velvet. Concerned, baffled, she went straight for her office.

Office was overstating it, but the tiny cubby served the purpose. Wedged between the freezer and a pantry, it was a smart use of space. She moved her laptop aside and upended the bag, scattering the smaller velvet bags across her desk.

One by one she opened them, shocked to see expensive luxury watches, a pearl necklace, and several pieces of stunning jewelry. Diamonds, rubies and other gems glowed in settings of gold, silver, and platinum.

For a moment, she reveled in the gorgeous, gleaming haul. It was nearly irresistible and the quality was obvious. She'd learned early in life how to judge the fake from the genuine. She did a quick and dirty estimate. The watches alone accounted for nearly half a million dollars. Nerves and memories made her fingertips tingle.

How and why had these pieces landed in her potato bin?

She hadn't seen any of these pieces on the newlyweds. And although she didn't always meet every guest personally, word traveled fast among the crew when a guest wore something as obvious and memorable as the pieces littering her desk.

She had to report this, but who should she tell? More importantly, could she trust people who barely knew her to believe she wasn't involved with what appeared to be a serious crime? If anyone went digging into her past, it could prove hard to convince them she merely stumbled upon the items.

But there was no reason for anyone to dig up anything. Her background

check had obviously passed any concerns or hurdles or she wouldn't have been hired. Chewing on her lip, she tried to imagine *her* reaction if Toni or anyone else on the crew reported this find to her. She wanted to think she'd give the benefit of the doubt to the folks she'd worked alongside for months now.

So how did something like this get into her kitchen?

A chill slithered down her spine. Was this a thief's error or a setup? *No*. The automatic denial surged through her. A setup made zero sense. Juliet went out of her way to hire people who could work together with the least amount of friction. Sure, moods came and went, but overall, if someone was difficult, they didn't stick around. Lila didn't have enemies here on the yacht. And she wasn't in contact with her parents or anyone else who knew her before she'd moved to Brookwell and into the steadying influence of her grandparents.

In short, there was nothing to fear.

She reached for the phone as she debated the wisdom of calling the captain or the head of the personal security team. She'd almost made up her mind when the light changed. A person filled her doorway, blocking the light and casting a shadow over her desk and all the items that did *not* belong to her.

"Hello, Chef."

Lila's head snapped up, her gaze locking on Travis Upton, the man who led Juliet's personal security detail. He stood as still as a statue in all his tall, dark, Adonis-like glory, staring at her. Or rather at the items glittering on her desk. In a subtle variation of the boat crew uniform, he wore dark blue shorts, a dove gray polo shirt and oiled brown boat shoes. He must've come straight from an upper deck. His thick dark hair was windblown, his sunglasses hooked in the placket of his shirt. His blue eyes reminded her of the clear summer skies back home.

For a moment, she savored the spike of attraction and the skip in her pulse. The man was way too handsome and Lila was forever struggling not to melt into a puddle at his feet.

Every time she saw him her heart did a swoony little spin and her pulse kicked into warp speed. The combination always left her a little breathless. Under different circumstances, she might've asked him out, but she refused to date anyone on the crew. Neither the captain nor Juliet had any rules against it, as long as no one got weird or caused trouble after a breakup.

As Lila struggled to recover her breath and explain, she realized this

encounter was no exception. In fact, seeing him right now was worse because of the stolen property that appeared to be in her possession.

“I... I w-was just going to call you,” Lila sputtered.

“Is that so?” He folded his arms and leaned one well-built shoulder casually against the door frame.

“Y-yes.” She set her teeth. Stammering only made her look guilty. She was innocent. Always had been. “Look what I found.” She gestured to the flashy items.

“Hard to miss all of that,” he said.

She didn’t care for his cold voice or his downright icy gaze. She had seen his professional expressions and understood the subtle variations in his generally stoic demeanor. At times when Juliet and her husband went ashore, he was hard and assessing, as if he could ward off any threat with a glance. And he could be cool and aloof. It seemed any glimmer of friendliness was always tempered by a cautious reserve. He took his responsibilities seriously, a character trait she greatly admired.

Most days.

She didn’t need him coming to the obvious, if incorrect, conclusion here. Panic threatened, turning her palms damp. What if some of this did belong to the newlyweds and Travis was conducting a yacht-wide search to find the missing items?

“This isn’t what it looks like,” she blurted into the silence. Dumb move. All she had to do was explain the situation calmly. She’d done nothing wrong.

Travis was stern, yes, but the care and attention he gave his primary client extended to the rest of the crew. She knew he took steps and monitored the details about various destinations and situations that protected everyone on board.

“You can’t possibly think that I...” Her voice faded away. She couldn’t finish the sentence. Not when his glare threatened to give her frostbite. She tapped the phone mounted on the wall. “I was about to call you. Because of this. Because I *found* this. A few minutes ago.”

As explanations went, it was a weak start.

Something flickered in his clear blue eyes. She recognized disappointment, having seen it often enough in her early years and later in plenty of kitchens around the world when she failed a test or missed the mark with her baking.

Travis’s disappointment gave way to wary speculation. Goosebumps

scampered down her arms. “Found it where?” he asked.

“The kitchen. Are you looking for any of this? I mean obviously someone should be. I don’t recognize anything here.”

“You keep track of the jewelry folks wear?” he asked far too casually.

“No.” She pulled her hands into her lap and willed herself to stop freaking out. She hadn’t done anything wrong. “I found this,” she repeated. “Here in the kitchen. All of these bags were in this one.” She shook the plastic bag. “This bag was caught in the back of the potato bin.”

One dark eyebrow twitched upward. “Odd place to bury your treasure.”

It took everything she had to suppress the shiver that rolled through her. Buried treasure might evoke delightful or exciting images of childhood adventures for most people. For Lila the reference might as well be quicksand. She gripped the edge of the desk, willing herself not to slide back into the bad memories and habits of her childhood. She’d made a choice and cleared a new path, following it into a better life and the career and bright future that stretched out ahead of her.

Excuses weren’t needed here, only the simple truth.

“It’s not mine,” she managed. “We both know that.” She willed the statement to be true. Surely he wouldn’t believe she was capable of this. “You know I’m too busy to steal anything when we have guests.” Even when they didn’t have guests, being the full-time chef kept her hopping. She flicked the plastic bag again. Printed with a generic “thank you” message, no store branding at all, it would probably be a dead-end instead of a lead. “This was balled up in such a way that I thought it was empty at first.” She poked at one of the velvet bags. “But all of these were inside it.”

He huffed and seemed to become more intimidating without moving an inch. “You’re leaving us tomorrow, right?”

“Yes.” She couldn’t wait to tell her grandmother she was certain that small-town bakery life was what she wanted. Since she wasn’t a thief, she had to believe this unexpected situation wouldn’t throw a wrench in those plans. “I’m moving back home.”

She’d disembark in Charleston with only the personal items she’d brought aboard and a few souvenirs. Mementoes that didn’t amount to one percent of the value of the loot in front of her.

“So this is... what?” He lifted his chin in the direction of the treasure. “A downpayment for your own restaurant?”

“No.” She kept her voice even and cool, refusing to be baited.

“Are you divvying up the take for an accomplice?”

That was too far. It was her turn to glare. He seemed completely unfazed, holding his relaxed post in the doorway. She should not find anything about his demeanor or stance sexy. Not at all.

But she did.

Fine. She was a lost cause when it came to Travis, but she wasn't a thief. She had to explain this. Had to make him understand this find was completely an accident. Had to convince him she wasn't a criminal or a closet kleptomaniac.

Trying to peer around him, she motioned him closer. “Come in and close the door. Please.” She couldn't afford for someone else to catch sight of this. Convincing Travis would clearly be enough of a challenge. The idea of it spiraling out of her control, of being dragged into a whirlpool of accusations, investigations, and police procedures made her stomach cramp.

To her surprise, he did as she asked without any argument or snarky commentary. He tucked his hands into his pockets. With the door closed there was suddenly too much of him and not enough room in the tiny office. She took a steadying breath, only to have his specific masculine scent, already burned into her memory, filling her nose and lungs.

“I'm listening,” he prompted.

“Right.” She pressed her hands flat on the desk, keeping her fingers away from the beautiful items. “There is no accomplice. I *did not* steal any of this.”

He tilted his head. “Your fingerprints are going to be all over that haul.”

“You're right.” She wiped her hands on her chef's coat, for all the good that would do. “I did think of that. *After* I realized what was here. Not like they make see-through velvet bags.”

He snorted out something that sounded remarkably like a laugh. “Do they package potatoes in velvet?”

“Of course not. Which is why I opened up everything.” She pinned him with her meanest Executive Chef expression, clearly missing the mark when his lips twitched. “Whatever you're thinking, none of this is mine. I *found* it,” she insisted. “I didn't take any of it.”

“So you said. In the potato bin.”

“You don't believe me.” She folded her arms, keeping her seat when she desperately wanted to stand up and go toe to toe with him until he accepted her explanation. Protesting too much would likely make her look more guilty. “You're the security guy. Why would I put all of this in my potato bin?”

“Not every criminal is a genius,” he said.

The man was infuriating. She managed to keep the opinion to herself.

He shrugged. “Besides, who else would look there? May I?” He leaned toward the narrow desk.

“Go ahead.” How much closer did he have to get to see these items were the real deal? His torso brushed her shoulder and she felt the sizzle all the way to her toes. She had to curl her fingers to keep from touching him as the yacht gently swayed on its route through the water.

He used the temple tip of his sunglasses to nudge a few items, focusing on one of the watches. “I got an update today about goods similar to these that were recently reported stolen from Miami.”

She closed her eyes, felt him move out of her personal space. This couldn’t be happening. She’d gone ashore in Miami to explore a few restaurants as well as shop for produce and a few specialty grocery items. To a security expert that probably equated to opportunity. “I have no motive to steal anything.”

That was possibly the biggest understatement of her life.

Travis made another rumbling sound. “Assuming that’s true, how did all of this wind up in your kitchen?”

“I have no idea,” she began. “This has nothing to do with me, other than I was unlucky enough to find the bag.” She raised her chin, daring him to accuse her outright.

Inside, she was quaking. Her bravado would shatter if he pressed her.

Somehow, she’d forgotten her past and the ugliness lurking in those dark years before her grandparents had agreed to raise her on Brookwell Island.

In some ways, letting down her guard was a big win. Back then, she didn’t believe she’d ever feel worthy. And yet, she’d walked around a major city with a global celebrity, heedless of any consequences. Lila hadn’t given a single thought to the paparazzi that trailed after Juliet. That was one big reason the newlyweds were honeymooning on the yacht.

Lila, a relaxed and confident adult, hadn’t cared at all about being caught in any of those photos. And that mistake, assuming it did connect to the stolen goods, might bring the darkness of her childhood roaring back into her life.

She willed him to back down, to accept there wasn’t much he could do.

They’d reached a stalemate of sorts. He wasn’t actually law enforcement. With the captain’s approval, he *might* be able to confine her to her quarters until they reached Charleston, but doing so would only cause a stir. And

unless any of the items belonged specifically to Juliet or her husband, there wasn't much point.

"If not you, then who?"

"Not Toni, if that's where your suspicious brain has gone. She wouldn't do anything like this."

"People do all kinds of things for a quick buck."

Lila didn't care for the doubt on his face or the skepticism hanging in the air. "Her family is loaded. Unless she's in it for the rush, this wasn't her."

"In it for the rush?" he echoed. Confusion flickered across his face and gave her a boost of hope. "Hm. Then who?"

"No idea. Doesn't that question fall into your area of expertise?"

Heat flared in his gaze. Annoyance or something else? Either way, a zing of anticipation slid over her skin. *Not the time.*

"Do you have a safe in here somewhere?" He glanced around the tiny room.

"No. It's a kitchen."

"Gloves?"

She nodded. "Those I have."

"But you didn't think to put them on when you discovered these weren't potatoes?"

She managed not to snarl at him, though she was sorely tempted. She might be making miniscule progress. He hadn't tried to restrain her or called someone to witness his seizure of the stolen property. "I had no idea what I was getting into."

"*That* I believe."

It wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement of her claim of innocence. It was also possible that he was merely saying the words that would get her to trust him. She'd trusted him since her first day and she had to hope that logic would prevail, if not immediately, then soon.

Since she'd been here, Travis had consistently demonstrated integrity and dedication. He had a cool, steady presence and, on rare occasions, an edgy sense of humor. Besides, Juliet Mason didn't skimp when it came to quality people.

A fact Mr. Security here would be smart to remember.

She scooted around him and out into the kitchen, returning quickly with gloves for both of them. His expression was still clouded with plenty of doubts. This would be an uphill battle for sure.

“Are you ready to accuse me of something?” she challenged.

“Not yet.” He wriggled the gloves over his large hands.

She watched and waited. There were a few mumbled words as he examined the various pieces. Picking up one of the watches, he whistled low. The Rolex Submariner was easily worth a hundred thousand. The Patek Philippe in rose gold was worth more than twice that. She didn’t volunteer the information, but she was curious when he did a double take.

He flipped the watch over, reading the caseback. “Registration number is intact.”

“That should make your job easier,” she said.

He nodded absently. With reverence, he tucked each item back into its respective velvet bag. “This wasn’t a smash and grab operation.”

She agreed, but kept the potentially incriminating thoughts to herself. As a chef, her knowledge of luxury watches, gems, and how to protect stolen goods should be limited. As the daughter of thieves, she recognized the velvet bags were cheap, stiff, and new. At best, a rudimentary effort to protect the valuables during transit.

When he finished, his gaze latched onto hers. Leaning against the desk, he studied her. “Walk me through what you were going to do.”

“I decided to call you,” she began. “Right before you showed up. Because who else would know what to do with this?” It was mostly true. Thieves who dealt with items like this were few and far between. Lila might know the next step would be to fence the items or remove the gems to fence separately, but she no longer knew where or how to find those people.

“Why are you leaving the crew when we reach Charleston?”

It wasn’t the question she expected. “Well, it sure as hell isn’t to sell off stolen goods.”

He did a double take and then laughed. She counted that as progress, even if the sound and the expression tempted her to snuggle up close to him. “I’m going home,” she admitted before she thought better of it. “My family owns a bakery in a small town not far from Charleston. There’s been talk about retirement and transition,” she said. He didn’t need to know all the gory details of her past. “I’m excited to get involved again and take over when they’re ready.”

He studied her in that quiet way of his. A not-so-small part of her wanted to revel in his clear interest, but logic prevailed. He wasn’t thinking she was pretty or debating how to ask her out. No, most likely he was picturing her in

prison stripes.

“The bakery is everything.” Had she ever said those words aloud? Strange that she’d admit it for the first time to him. “I’d never risk my future there for a thief’s high or a fast buck.”

His eyebrow notched up and she realized her mistake. She shouldn’t know anything about the manic rush of stealing, that thrill of taking what someone else prized.

A normal person would be appalled by those emotions.

She hadn’t been. No. At first, she’d been all too eager to please her parents and for a time, she’d been the best pickpocket in the family. Therapy had eventually cleared up those twisted versions of love and approval.

Therapy and her grandparents. They’d rescued her before her parents could do irreparable harm.

“Must be some bakery,” he said at last.

“It is.” She smiled in anticipation. “If you have time, get over to Brookwell Island. The Bread Basket is on Central. You can’t miss it. Gram’s strudel sells out fast, though, and the doors close at two.”

The bakery had been an anchor point all her life. The rhythm of it was as strong and true as a heartbeat. Even after being away, she could mark time by the recipes, everyday and seasonal, the customers and suppliers. All those details were better than any clock or calendar in Lila’s view. For weeks now, the closer she was to going home, the more eager she was to dive in and get started.

“Hey.” Travis snapped his fingers. “Did I lose you?”

She blinked, bringing Travis’s face back into focus. “Guess so. For a second. Sorry.”

He shook his head. “No problem. Other than the stolen property.”

“Right.”

He scowled at the bag. “Going home is that important?”

“It’s everything,” she replied.

“You’ve heard the saying you can never go home again, right?”

“Yes.” A saying that had never been true for her. Gram always reminded Lila she had a place to call home. “I’m sure I’ll bump into challenges,” she allowed. Brookwell was a small community. A factor that was both a pro and con in Lila’s opinion.

Sadness clouded his eyes, making her wonder. Was going home hard for him? Is that why he’d chosen a career that meant living out of a suitcase? She

remembered feeling untethered when she'd been with her parents. Remembered when everything had changed and loading the car for what her mother called a "midnight adventure" wasn't fun anymore.

Then she pulled herself together. His past wasn't her business. Although she was happy to have him starring in her private fantasies, that was completely irrelevant. She needed to park herself in the professional-distance zone, ignoring any concerns about what might've been hard times in Travis's past.

Concerned he might still think she was involved with the thefts, she asked, "What are you going to do about this?"

He puffed out his cheeks on a sigh. "I'll take it and get a police report started."

"You aren't telling the captain?"

His jaw set as if that was the worst idea. "I will, yes."

She folded her arms. "So if it's not me, you think he's involved?"

He rolled his eyes. "I find that highly unlikely, Chef."

"But it's easy to believe *I'm* a thief." She knew it was her old baggage talking and she hadn't quite mustered outrage as much as sheer offense. Couldn't help it. If a security expert saw a potential thief in her after all this time, what else did she need to change?

"You were the person in possession of stolen goods," he pointed out calmly. "When I walked in, you were so engrossed you didn't hear me at the door."

Hard to argue with the truth. Her thoughts were circling and getting her nowhere. "As long as your report doesn't imply I'm involved, have at it." She stepped as far away as the tiny space allowed.

It wasn't far enough. He moved to collect the bag and her heart rate kicked up. The man smelled so good. Salt and sea air, and something warm underneath that was just *him*.

"What should I do if the real thief comes looking?"

"That's not likely while we're underway."

It made her uneasy to think someone on the crew was behind this. "Humor me," she urged.

"If anyone goes looking for sparkly potatoes, call me," he said.

Not the assurance she'd hoped for, but what else could he do? "Will you trace the serial numbers on those watches?"

He hefted the bag in his hand. "I'm sure the police will."

“Right. Okay, then.” She needed him out of her space. Needed time to think. Did she dare poke around for the latest whereabouts of her parents?

No. She couldn’t do that. Wouldn’t. The odds of this being tied to her were slim to none. Opening that can of worms and taking a chance they caught wind of her query wasn’t worth the potential fallout.

He opened the door and stepped out into the kitchen. She followed, grateful they were still alone.

“Will you let me know what you find out?”

“Why?” That singular eyebrow lifted again.

“Curiosity.” She held up her hands, surrendering. “Forget I asked. Apologies.”

It was for the best if she didn’t know any further details. She had a bakery to inherit and a fabulously quiet, routine life ahead of her.

“Do you have a lunch cooler handy?”

“Always.” She started toward the cabinet where they were stored.

“Great, thanks,” he said, following her. “I’ll take the items out in that. We can put this bag back where you found it.”

She spun around, the cooler clutched to her chest. “No. My kitchen is not becoming square one of whatever sting operation you have in mind.”

He smiled, huffed out the softest of laughs. “As of tomorrow morning it won’t be your kitchen.” He lowered his voice. “We stopped in Miami. Our next destination isn’t a secret. The report came across my desk because the items were stolen from vessels in and around the marina where we docked. If the thief isn’t on board, it’s possible they plan to recover the goods in Charleston. The thief may try to board once we dock.”

He was staring into the plastic bag now, as if sizing up each individual velvet sack.

“Yes.” She sighed.

His gaze snapped to her face. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, you can use the potatoes as decoys. I’ll get them.”

She scooted by him and he returned to the office. She met him there with the potatoes. Though it would’ve gone faster if she’d helped, she watched him pull the gloves on once more and trade potatoes for precious items. Finished, he seemed satisfied.

“Is that it for me, then?” she asked. “Not that it isn’t fun aiding and abetting the good guys.” Please let that be all. She still wasn’t sure he believed her.

“That’s all. Thanks for your help.”

“Of course.”

He frowned and she barely smothered her frustration. “I’ll be back down in a few minutes with an AirTag. If someone does come back for the stash, we should be able to track it.”

She forced a smile. At least that would clear up any doubts about her involvement. “Whatever you need to do, be my guest.”

When he was gone, she sank into her chair, relieved and frustrated. That was not how she’d envisioned Travis noticing her. Oh, well. He’d stay a fantasy and she’d eventually meet someone wonderful back home.

For now, she had work to do. Work that would be way more challenging with his distracting masculine scent lingering in the tiny office.

Chapter 3

Once they were docked in Charleston the next morning, Travis was immediately in the weeds dealing with schedules, walk-throughs, and introductions. As he'd hoped, Brett fit in immediately and would take the lead in town. Juliet was a friend as well as a client, and he knew the city inside and out.

Momentarily relieved of his primary responsibility, Travis shifted his focus to the stolen goods as promised. There was a pressure, the good kind, to live up to the Guardian Agency reputation for security and investigative work.

Overnight, he'd made a few calls, met with the captain, and confirmed his appointment with the insurance representatives. Apparently, the company planned to log the recovered pieces and return them to their rightful owners as soon as the police were done collecting evidence.

And he'd stalled as long as possible, waiting for that decoy bag to move.

By noon, he had little to show for his efforts. Everyone and everything on the yacht seemed to be in motion. Except the bag with the tracker. It remained in the potato bin.

Travis couldn't help wondering if that was a sign that Lila *was* involved. Instead of resisting the idea, he let it play out. If she was in on the heist and he caught her sorting the loot, that meant she'd left without her get-rich-quick money. She wouldn't have taken the decoy bag and incriminated herself further.

Sadly, the scenario was plausible.

He swore. What if the family bakery story was a ruse, or worse, the business was failing and she *did* have a motive to steal items she could fence for fast cash?

Was he so easily fooled by a pretty face?

When it was Lila? Yeah. Though he didn't like admitting it. Her soft green eyes, lush mouth, and ivory complexion sprinkled with freckles over her nose and cheeks had knocked him breathless the first time they'd met. And her lovely features were framed by that curling red hair that gleamed gold in the sunlight. Simply put, she was beautiful.

That was quite the endorsement for a man who'd protected his share of celebrities. His current, primary client was considered one of the most beautiful women in the world. And yet, when she was out with Lila, he would spend the entire shift fighting the distraction of the chef.

But if she was connected to the thefts, why be so cooperative? Was she just a skilled liar? He would've sworn she was telling him the truth—including exactly where to find her. For a second yesterday, closeted with her in that miniscule office, he'd thought she was inviting him to come see her at the bakery.

Clearly wishful thinking on his part since she'd left this morning without a word.

Not that she had reason to speak with him. They weren't exactly friends and he hadn't been all that available or visible. He'd caught a glimpse of her hugging Juliet and then striding away, her curly ponytail swinging with every

step.

Maybe she'd managed to pocket one of the valuables before he'd caught her. Or, more likely, going home agreed with her. He wanted to believe it was the latter, but he couldn't rule out the former.

For Travis, home was his suitcase. He'd joined the military right out of high school and never looked back. His current permanent address was a post office box in Chicago, monitored by the agency. The majority of his life was managed online, leaving him free to travel per client demands. The active, nomadic lifestyle suited him to the bone. Staying in one place indefinitely gave him the jitters.

With his cell phone in his pocket and the stolen goods packed securely with the rest of his belongings, Travis donned his sunglasses and left the yacht. Hopefully, he'd be back on duty by the end of the week to continue the journey up the coast.

Brett had handed over keys to an agency vehicle that was waiting for him in the parking lot. The insurance company was expecting Travis, but first he needed to check in at the marina office. Better to have as much information as possible before that meeting and he was looking for any other vessels recently arriving from Miami.

The short answer was none. The police and insurance investigators could do more digging, but for now, it was the best he could do. Double-checking the app for the AirTag was working, Travis could only press forward.

He hadn't expected anyone to recover the stash before they reached Charleston, but with all the coming and going this morning, he'd expected the thief or an accomplice to make a move. Which only brought him right back to Lila being in on it from the start.

Or maybe the thief was smart enough to wait until the action died down. Once the newlyweds were away from the yacht, things would appear calm. Deserted. That would be the window he'd wait for if he'd been the culprit.

How had Lila phrased it yesterday? Oh yeah. *A thief's high.*

He gave that phrase, her use of it, considerable thought as he drove away from the marina. Should he share her name with the insurance investigator? Probably the smart thing to do. The responsible choice.

And yet, he kept circling around the question of how and why the thief had stashed the haul in the potato bin at all. Had the thief's high made Lila sloppy? Was she covering for someone else?

It made him antsy that he didn't have those answers. Or any others.

Anticipating this meeting, Travis had combed through the security footage in and around the yacht and hadn't found an obvious culprit, other than Lila. Not among the crew and not among the support services personnel at the Miami marina. He'd sent all the recorded surveillance files to the insurance company, as requested.

Was it wrong to be grateful that none of the footage directly incriminated Lila?

Yeah, that wasn't the right attitude. Especially since he was the security lead on this assignment. He should keep an open mind while they gathered the facts. He couldn't let his personal attraction and perception allow him to overlook the most likely suspect.

The fact remained, he'd gone looking for the stolen goods and found them in her possession. He hadn't seen them in the potato bin, only accepted her explanation of finding the bag there.

Paused at a stoplight, Travis rolled his head, trying to loosen up the tight muscles in his neck and shoulders.

It was gonna suck if she was guilty.

Frustrated with the situation and annoyed with himself, he pulled forward as the light changed. He had to give the insurance company her name. Had to let it play out. If she was innocent, they'd clear her.

But would they clear her before the investigation put her plans in jeopardy?

He did not want to be the person who wrecked her life or ruined her reputation.

His cell phone chimed and an alert flashed across his navigation app. The tracker was moving.

Travis pulled over at the first opportunity and studied the tracker. It moved slowly, in fits and starts, along the marina walkways. That was strange. He signed into the security app and searched the cameras for any sign of Lila returning to the yacht, but whoever had the decoy bag, it wasn't her.

After a quick debate, he continued on to his meeting. The investigators would probably jump on this new evidence. They'd have the stolen items and the AirTag would lead them to the culprit.

When he reached the parking garage, he found a space. Cutting the engine, he checked the app again. The decoy bag was still in the marina. Weird. Maybe something in the area was messing with the signal.

To ease his mind about Lila's involvement, he opened up the electronic sign-in log for the yacht. Anyone coming in for deliveries or services had to

provide ID along with a name and their company affiliation. Only Juliet's friends were excluded, though there was a record of who visited and when. The cleaning service had come aboard and groceries had been delivered to the slip.

He sent the information, including a screenshot of the sign-in log, to Connor Brady, the oversight and research assistant the agency had assigned to Travis for this case. Researchers for the Guardian Agency usually worked remotely, and this was no exception. Still, they had the tech skills that made them as effective as if they were on site. If anyone could sort out the tech tracking questions, it was Connor.

Hoping this wasn't an AirTag malfunction, Travis took his suitcase and the belongings inside that totaled way more than his personal net worth, and headed to the office for his meeting.

An hour later, the stolen goods had been turned over and Travis had given a thorough statement to the police and insurance team. A few theories had been bounced around, but no solid leads. Travis was tasked with following the tracking device and reporting any developments to the police.

Once he was out of the building, he checked his phone. Connor had sent several texts, knowing better than to bother calling during the meeting itself.

Travis skimmed through and managed not to swear out loud as he hurried back to his vehicle.

Connor's text explained the decoy bag had made it a block away from the marina and then stopped moving half an hour ago. Travis verified it on the app, then set his navigation for the fastest possible route.

He called Connor on the way. "The decoy bag is off the yacht?" he demanded as soon as the researcher answered.

"Yes." Connor muttered something Travis couldn't make out. "Confirmed."

"Who took it?"

"No idea," Connor admitted. "Working on it. The cleaning crew is still on board."

"What about the groceries? They would've had access to the kitchen," Travis pointed out.

"Everything confirms the note on the log that the groceries were delivered to the slip. No delivery folks came on board or entered the galley. Yacht cameras and the closest external CCTV confirms that."

External CCTV. Travis almost laughed. Of course Connor had tapped into

additional sources.

“I wish we had a camera in the kitchen,” Connor muttered.

“Previous chef claimed we were trying to steal his recipes,” Travis said. But he should’ve taken the extra step yesterday, to hell with how it might’ve offended Lila. He had to stop these mistakes where she was concerned. “Can you have someone check the potato bin?”

“Already done,” Connor replied. “Bag gone, bin full.”

“Someone got on that boat.” A security breach was never acceptable, even when the focus wasn’t locked on to the primary client. Travis wrestled with temper and embarrassment as he sorted through the facts.

“I’ll find out how.”

“And I’ll call back when I have the decoy bag.”

Travis ended the call just as the navigation app announced that he’d reached his destination. A parking lot. Great. At least it looked like a private lot that contracted with offices rather than a lot that catered to tourists. The app showed he was right on top of the AirTag, but Travis didn’t see anyone else around. Not even an attendant in the little box at the gate.

All he could do was keep looking. If he found the decoy bag near a specific vehicle, that would narrow Connor’s search area.

He walked up and down the aisles of parked cars. None of the vehicles in the lot had any kind of business logo or designation. Most were sedans, with a couple of minivans and motorcycles in the mix. Nothing here resembled the typical service providers that frequented the marinas. And none of these vehicles triggered any memory of the few he’d seen at the marina when he’d left earlier.

He also didn’t see any sign of the decoy bag, though the app insisted he was close. He did another circuit, surprised no one had called the cops yet. To an outsider it must look like he was casing the lot for a future crime.

Turning a slow circle, he tried to put himself in the thief’s shoes. Assuming Lila wasn’t connected to the thefts, the real culprit would be shocked and furious to find velvet wrapped potatoes where they were expecting high-value jewelry and watches. He would’ve been mad as hell and ditched the decoy bag, whether or not he’d spotted the tracker.

Travis was only a block away from the marina. Could the thief have tossed the bag out a window as he’d driven past? He moved toward the street, following the curb until he spotted a plastic bag near a trash bin anchored to the sidewalk.

He looked inside and found everything. He sent a text to Connor, along with a couple of photos. Connor could use his skills to identify the vehicle, and hopefully the driver, who'd dumped the bag.

Next, because he wasn't in the mood for a lecture, he sent a text update to the insurance investigator. Until Connor identified a vehicle or the police could pull prints from the bag, this was a dead end.

At his car, he tossed the bag into the trunk and drove over to the police station where Detective Bradley, local lead on the case, took it into evidence.

While he waited for Connor to work the angles and searches, Travis returned to the marina. Parked in the lot, he thought about the way that tracker had jumped around. Someone had been making rounds or deliveries. The cleaning van was still there, but that was the only car he recognized.

He headed for the marina office and convinced the manager to let him take a look at the footage from the camera that monitored the parking lot. He watched a dingy van pull in and park. The logo was for a fresh produce company. The driver got out, went around to the back and loaded a hand truck with boxes and started down the gangway. When he returned, the hand truck was still loaded, but the boxes and crates were different.

He called Connor and relayed the latest information as he walked back to the car.

"Yeah, I'm a half step behind you," Connor said. "The produce deliveries come in and apparently, they take old produce out with them. Part of the service."

"So someone emptied that potato bin and inadvertently handed over the decoy bag."

"Or intentionally," Connor pointed out.

"Also an option," Travis agreed. And it didn't clear Lila. It downright implicated her. She had to know it worked that way. In Travis's opinion, if she'd been innocent she would've suggested the thief might be connected to the grocer. It was the only logical reason to put a stash in that potato bin. He also recalled that yesterday, the potatoes had felt and looked fresh. Why would they have ordered more?

"Can you look back and check how often potatoes are ordered for the yacht?"

He'd been protecting Juliet for over a year and plain white potatoes weren't on her plate very often.

"Sure," the tech wiz replied.

A prickly sensation crept across the back of his neck. Something was way off about all of this. Something beyond the serious value of the stolen items. "One more thing. Please," he added belatedly.

"Name it."

"Check on the status of Lila Copeland."

"You think she's in on it?" Connor wondered.

Logically he couldn't rule her out. In fact, just about everything pointed directly to her. Which only made that prickly sensation worse. "She had access," Travis allowed. "I'm more concerned she's being set up."

His instincts were screeching now. She'd mentioned a thief's high, but she'd also said she was doing an inventory when she found the bag. Considering how rarely potatoes were served on board, would she have found the stash if she hadn't been leaving the yacht?

"No," Travis said. "No, I don't think she's in on the heist." He forced himself to voice his real concern. "I'm worried she might be a target now. It wouldn't be a big leap for a thief to believe she'd found the stash and left the decoy bag behind."

Connor whistled low.

That summed it up.

"I'm on it," Connor promised. "I'll get back to you as soon as I have something."

Travis wasn't happy. He was downright pissed off. Someone had committed a crime right under his nose, in territory that he'd been charged with keeping safe.

Lila had been, by default, under his protection too. Technically, she wasn't his concern any longer and yet he had to go. Had to find her and make sure she was safe. What was the name of the family bakery?

Telling himself that what he was about to do fell under the umbrella of finding the thief and breaking up a criminal enterprise, he searched for bakeries on Brookwell Island. Just one, he noted, and the Bread Basket was listed as closed for the day. Damn. Where would she go? Hopefully, by the time he got over there, Connor would have an address.

Every instinct he had warned him that things were about to go to hell.

Chapter 4

Lila poked around downtown Charleston for a bit after she left the yacht. It felt good to get her land legs back, even while she dragged around her single suitcase. She wandered, getting familiar with the area once more, and treated herself to a hearty lunch at an Irish pub. Over a savory stew and a traditional, perfectly-baked soda bread, she debated between taking the ferry to Brookwell or using a rideshare app.

Ferry, she decided, sending her grandmother a message so they could meet at the dock on the island. Her heart warmed with all the nostalgia of going

home by ferry. The trip would take longer, but that only gave her more time to wallow in all the feelings that were rolling through her.

It seemed important, significant to return by ferry. She'd visited the island often as a kid. Most of the time her parents drove. But the year that everything changed—eventually for the better—she'd crossed on the ferry. Her parents had dropped her at the dock on the first day of summer break. No, the second day, she remembered. The first day had been the long drive from Tennessee to Charleston, where they'd slept in the converted van overnight.

She hadn't known that would be the last time she'd see either her mom or dad in person. Through the summer the scheduled weekly phone calls trickled off to zero contact, until she made the decision, with the support and approval of her grandparents, to stay on Brookwell. To create separation from the parents who didn't seem to know what to do with her, aside from teaching her how to lie, cheat, and steal.

She had no idea about the full legalities, only that there were some formal requirements. To this day she didn't know if her parents had been sober when they relinquished their parental rights to her grandparents, just grateful those signatures were accepted and filed. Still more thankful that without a murmur of stress or complaint, her Gram and Grandad handled the details so she could start high school in the fall with the rest of the island kids.

For a girl who hadn't seen much of a normal, healthy childhood, her grandparents had given her the world. Learning that love was more than words, and backed up by actions that created stability and hope? That had been priceless.

Empowering.

Seeing the world through the eyes of people with real character and integrity had changed her forever.

She tore off another bit of bread and chewed, lost in thought. It was possible admitting all of that to Travis would've cleared her of any doubt immediately. Or not. He wasn't head of security because he was gullible. Besides, she didn't dwell on those early days of her life. Those weren't the circumstances or memories she wanted people to connect with the woman she was now. Sure, the rough start might tug on a few heartstrings. Might even inspire someone at a low point to make a turn for the better.

Not that she'd done it alone. It still bothered her that she couldn't declare, without any doubt, that she would've found a way out of the destructive

gravity of her parents on her own. Granted, she'd been a kid. A kid who'd had the advantage of relatives who weren't afraid to intervene and offer up an option.

Maybe one day she'd be ready to share more and give back in that way too. First though, she wanted to bake and explore the range of her talent and creativity. She wanted to be known for her pastry, rather than her past. She was the granddaughter of Connie Copeland, Brookwell Island legend. And she was an innovative baker in her own right who would soon take up the family legacy.

She couldn't wait.

Her phone chimed with a recorded voice message from Gram. She tapped it, holding it close to her ear. "I'll be at the ferry. Can't wait to give you a big hug." In the background, Lila recognized the sounds of Gram's staff cleaning and prepping. "Callie and I have everything set for tomorrow, so I booked you a room at the Inn for a couple of nights. You deserve a few days to sleep in. Don't want my rattling around before work to wake you up. Love you."

Leave it to Gram.

Lila knew better than to text back anything other than complete agreement. And a room at the Inn was an absolute treat. After the yacht, she'd probably get lost in their famous posh suites.

At one time, the Inn on Brookwell Island had been a luxury destination for Charleston's elite. Historically booked solid from Memorial Day to Labor Day to accommodate weekend sailors and beachgoers.

The town had grown up around the Inn and its clientele and now was a destination all on its own. In part because the Inn had fallen into disrepair through the course of various owners who didn't understand the need or costs of proper upkeep. Eventually, the town government stepped in, with an assist from the state historical society. The Inn was now owned by the town and under the management of an expert team who truly cared about preservation and providing excellent hospitality.

And Lila would enjoy a few nights of absolute bliss.

It would also ease her transition into a more predictable routine. A mini-vacation between dream jobs. While she'd been out seeing the world and getting the life experiences Gram wanted her to have, she'd missed being home and the weird, demanding hours the Bread Basket required.

Leaving the restaurant behind, she moseyed through downtown Charleston toward the ferry dock at Waterfront Park. Several things had changed in her

absence. Not a terrible thing, definitely not unexpected, but what did that mean for Brookwell?

Everyone had claimed going abroad after culinary school was the best option for her. But she'd missed Brookwell during her time away. The homesickness was a constant pinch in her heart. There had been amazing experiences and sights to see. Cities to explore and places to improve her skills. But there had also been many, many weeks of waking up without the sound of the Atlantic Ocean nearby. Without the warm sand under her feet as she walked the beach after work and watched the sun dance in a sparkle of light across the water.

She bought her ferry ticket and found one of the oversized porch swings to lounge in before it was time to board. Seagulls wheeled over the water and, as dusk fell early this time of year, the pelicans glided by on their way to roost.

It was good to be home. Or nearly so.

In her mind the minutes ticked down, growing louder until at last the ferry boarded. Lila moved to the bow, heedless of the cold wind. As if standing at the forward rail would get her there faster. But she was nearly giddy, her anticipation increasing with every sea-blown minute. Surely, it was her imagination that the coastal air smelled better here than anywhere she'd been over the last few years.

True or not, it's how she felt and she was going to embrace it. No, she was going to lean into her own feelings and her own goals and dreams. No more full menus, aside from meals she'd make for herself or for her and Gram. The first steps off the yacht had been a celebration of her new focus and her true passion.

Baking was life. And she had some great recipes she couldn't wait to run by Gram and, hopefully, add to the Bread Basket menu. Although she'd initially resisted, her time away had broadened her horizons, allowing her to expand and test new flavor combinations. She'd always be grateful to her grandmother's wisdom for pushing her out of her comfort zone.

She smiled to herself. No sense admitting that right away though.

The daily offerings at the Bread Basket were relatively predictable and based on hard sales data from years of serving the island residents and visitors. Those recipes were seared into Lila's mind and hands but Gram was always curious and willing to innovate. That alone was the biggest reason their modest family bakery was still in business.

The arch of lights over the island dock came into view and Lila bounced on her toes at the railing. She couldn't wait for that first big Gram hug. The woman had been her mother, her mentor, and her friend. This year was going to be a blast as they worked together again and began the first stages of transitioning ownership so Gram could retire.

"You seem excited," said the woman standing next to her.

Lila grinned. "Oh, absolutely. I've been away a long time."

"You're from Brookwell Island? Wow, that must've been some serious small-town life."

"I guess so." Lila had found the smaller community a comfort and more of the stabilizing influence she needed. The engine throttled back in preparation for docking. It was maddening, if necessary. "Is this your first visit?"

"Guilty as charged." The woman smiled, but it seemed brittle around the edges. Lila's intuition reared up and she tried not to let it show. She didn't know the woman or her reasons for hopping the last ferry to the island.

It wasn't as if the sidewalks rolled up at dinner time. According to her grandmother's updates, there were more and more evening attractions on the island, courtesy of the Inn's programming as well as other community initiatives. Even a rideshare service that shuttled people back to Charleston after ferry hours ended.

Lila refused to let this weird moment dim her enthusiasm. Ever polite, she kept up a friendly conversation about the island until the ferry docked and the gate was lowered. She did her best not to race away, but she was relieved to make her escape.

Her suitcase wheels rattled beside her as she crossed the metal gangway, her eyes scanning the area for Gram. Lila probably should've come straight over from the yacht. She'd been more than willing to jump into the job. Except Gram wouldn't have let her lift a finger to help. At least not for a few days.

She knew Gram wouldn't want to discuss business this evening, but the ideas kept bubbling up. She had suggestions to boost the bakery's bottom line and make the transition easier for her grandmother's eventual retirement.

Lila wasn't in a hurry to nudge her out the door. Gram was a legend and her leaving would mark the end of an incredible era. Lila just didn't want her to feel as if she had to work to max effort every single day. The woman deserved all the time she wanted to relax and enjoy her golden years.

"Lila! There's my girl!"

The small crowd parted for Connie Copeland as she rushed toward Lila. Lila, tears welling in her eyes, ran to meet her, releasing her suitcase to throw her arms around her grandmother.

For a moment, that was all she needed. All she could hear was Gram's big laugh. She could only feel the warmth of the hug and breathe in the comforting scents of the bakery that always clung to Gram.

Gram held her at arm's length. "You look amazing." She frowned a little. "Skinny, but amazing."

Lila chuckled. "Skinny is an asset on a yacht."

"Well you're back where you belong now."

"That I am." The truth in those words sank deep into her heart. Deeper still into her bones.

Gram squeezed her tight once more. "Welcome home sweetheart. I can't wait to hear all about life on the yacht."

Lila wasn't sure there was much more to cover. She kept her grandmother apprised with alarming regularity for a grown woman. Then again, they had so much in common and a close friendship that only strengthened their family bond. Lila had never felt quite so lucky and blessed as she did in this moment.

She had a place to call home. Family who wanted only the best for her life. She had a town she was proud of and she'd learned the skills necessary to make a vibrant career in a field she was passionate about.

"Thank you," she murmured, dropping her head to Gram's shoulder.

"For showing up?"

Lila straightened and knuckled away an errant tear. "That, yes. And all of it, Gram."

"Don't you dare make me cry." Gram pressed Lila's hands between her own. "You get me started and it's bound to ruin the evening."

"Did you make plans?"

Gram beamed at her. "You're lucky there's no parade." Her eyebrows snapped together. "Though I tried, the school marching band wouldn't go for it."

"Only you," Lila said with a laugh.

"I almost convinced the police chief to give us an escort, until his lieutenant pointed out we'd only create more of a traffic problem."

"You're incorrigible," Lila managed. She didn't mention that a police presence would've scared the heck out of her. Part of her still expected Travis

to pop up and arrest her on grand theft charges any minute now.

She wondered how things were going with the decoy bag. Was it still in with the potatoes or had the thief tried to retrieve it? She probably would never know how any of that turned out. A result that was for the best, to be sure.

“Hey! Don’t forget your luggage.”

Lila turned to see the woman who had made her uncomfortable earlier. She was rolling Lila’s suitcase closer. “Oh my gosh. I was so excited I just left it in the way. Thank you so much.”

“Happy to help,” the woman said. With another sharp-edged smile, she walked away. “Take care.”

“Made a new friend?” Gram asked.

Lila fought off a strange shiver. “I guess so. We chatted for a minute before the boat docked.”

“Hm.” Gram hooked her arm though Lila’s. “Let’s get home. I’m parked over this way.” She patted Lila’s hand. “And the Lowcountry Gold barbecue is waiting.”

“You’re the best!” Lila’s stomach growled.

“I know my girl,” Gram said with a smile.

The ferry dock was a short walk from Brookwell’s town center, but Gram had been doing more driving due to her aching knees. Lila hefted her suitcase into the back and then settled into the passenger seat, knowing Gram would want to give her a tour and update on the way.

They passed the Bread Basket on Central, snugged in between a few other shops that were also closed for the day. She breathed in the familiar scents of home and eyed the softly lit display in the flower shop window next to the bakery. Across the street, business at a couple of the newer restaurants was picking up. “That looks promising,” she said.

“The new spots do bring in loads of visitors. Unless we want to trash the island neighborhoods in favor of fancy hotels, this is a good compromise to keep Brookwell flush.”

Gram drove on and they passed the Inn, all lit up with sparkling lights and what appeared to be a private gathering out front. After dinner, Lila could come back and check in. She was so excited about the surprise.

“Are you really going to make me wait before I come back to work?” she asked as Gram turned down a side street and into one of the oldest neighborhoods on the island.

Her grandmother chuckled. “Absolutely. You need some time to just be yourself.”

“Come on, Gram,” Lila said. “You know I don’t do idle.”

More fallout from spending her formative years with parents who rarely were up and about in time to get her to school. But everything inside her smiled when she fell in with her grandparents’ early-start routine. Gram once said that being a baker was genetic and Lila was thrilled to have inherited the important baking genes.

“You’ll be running the whole show soon enough,” Gram was saying. “And every *healthy* business owner needs to learn how to relax.” She glanced at Lila’s suitcase. “Is that all you have?”

She’d made a habit of shipping gifts directly home, rather than dragging them with her from one temporary place to the next. She would set up a video call and Gram would open the boxes and listen to the stories behind each acquisition. It had been one of her favorite ways to stay in touch.

The rest of her belongings were stored in her old bedroom, the one she expected to stay in until she could find the right house on the island. “The result of being a nomad for so long. It’s good to be home. Better to know I’ll be staying.”

Gram pulled into the driveway and parked the car. She cut the engine and turned to Lila. “You aren’t obligated,” she said. “If it’s not right, you tell me. Tell me before it makes you bitter.”

Lila swallowed the immediate protest, knowing where this was coming from. “You’ve never made me feel obligated for any of it,” she reminded her grandmother. “And you’ve sent me away to see the world.” Reaching out, she covered Gram’s hands with her own. “I’m back. I’m here. Because I want to be *here*. Because nowhere else in the world is home.”

“You’re sure.”

It wasn’t a question, but Lila responded anyway. “I’ve never been more certain of anything.”

“If it changes—”

“I promise to say something.” She smiled. “Now let’s go get that barbecue.”

Chapter 5

Travis watched Lila walk away with her grandmother. Though he'd been too far away to hear the conversation, it was obvious how excited they were to be reunited.

That was one worry crossed off his list.

He'd nearly made himself nuts trailing after Lila once Connor had confirmed she was taking the ferry across to the island. If she'd been so keen on getting home, why not hire a car? He'd assumed she had doubts or reservations about going back to island life, but those had all been put to rest.

Based on Connor's latest intel, he knew she had the money to get home by any route she preferred. The woman didn't have a dime of debt. Her credit card—singular—was paid off each month. Mostly recurring charges for her cell phone and streaming services. She didn't have student loans and she'd pretty much banked every dime since starting with Juliet.

Travis had done the same thing. When lodging and most meals were covered, when transportation was covered by a fleet of vehicles owned by the client, the paycheck stretched a whole lot further.

More than once this evening, he considered telling her what he was doing and why, but she'd seemed so content to wander, he hadn't wanted to wreck her peace.

And then he'd spotted the woman tailing Lila and his worry took on a sharp edge and a new angle. It had been quite a balancing act, sticking close enough to intervene if necessary without being spotted by either woman.

Talk about a rush. He hadn't been in such a complicated field exercise in years. He liked it, though he didn't like the potential real-time consequences for Lila if he made a mistake.

"If you're getting off, best do it now," said the man standing near the gate. "Once I start letting passengers on, you're stuck."

Travis decided not to make an issue of that incorrect assumption. If he wanted to get somewhere, he had the skills to make it happen, gate or no gate. "Sure. Thanks for the lift."

He headed down the gangway, scanning the scene. He was primarily concerned with the woman who'd tailed Lila and approached her on the ferry. As if on cue, he noticed her standing too close to Lila's luggage.

Was this the exchange they'd planned?

He expected the stranger to steal the suitcase. Instead, she rolled it closer to Lila before going on her way. Travis wasn't buying it. The woman wasn't here by coincidence, she was involved. He texted Connor, only to get a response that facial recognition was still working.

Fine. He knew how to do things old school.

Knew the value of putting in the legwork.

He messaged Connor about Lila's departure from the ferry dock with her grandmother and went in search of the new woman in this puzzle. He caught up with her at a busy restaurant on the main street, but she didn't meet up with Lila or anyone else. She placed a to-go order and headed down to a picnic area.

There were lights strung overhead and several groups were already there, from families to friends, enjoying food from various vendors. If Travis wasn't keyed into his target, he might've appreciated the area more.

Connor must've been tracking Lila's cell phone, because he sent back news that Lila was at her grandmother's home, providing that address for Travis.

Travis consulted the app on his phone that gave him an overview of the island. He plugged in the grandmother's address, then the name of the bakery, getting a feel for most likely routes. He'd walk it later if he had time.

Sending another text Connor's way, he requested a search of hospitality registrations. Lila would be with her grandmother, but what about the woman? She'd arrived on the last ferry. Where would she spend the night? Would she catch a ride back to Charleston?

His instincts were driving him to stick close to Lila, so he needed to find somewhere local as well. The last thing he needed was to draw attention to himself by getting caught loitering on the beach or dozing on a park bench. He had a feeling the island law enforcement frowned on that behavior.

A few minutes later, as Travis demolished an order of tacos from a food truck near the picnic area, Connor called.

"How's it going?"

"A lovely night out here," Travis replied. And his target was lounging at a small high-top, picking at her food and studying her phone. She could be doing anything, but Travis worried she was making arrangements to intercept Lila. "What's it look like at your place?"

"No name yet." Connor sounded perturbed. "As for the reservations, Lila is booked at the Inn. Checking in tonight and staying three nights total. Reservation was made two days ago."

"Seriously?" Just when he was ready to park Lila in the innocent column, she did something he couldn't ignore. "Any similar reservations?"

"You mean single women?"

"Yes."

Connor snorted. "A bunch actually. Several are connected to a wedding party."

"Nothing that fits what we're looking for?" Although he had no idea how Connor would find a thief or stalker from a hotel reservation alone.

"I called in backup," Connor said. "There are bed and breakfast places all over the island and we need to clear those too."

Travis figured the new woman would stay near Lila. "Unlikely." He had to

be careful what he said while he was out here in public where anyone could overhear him. The woman turned and he was able to get a new photo to send Connor's way. "We could go deep sea fishing, but we'd have to break up the party and I don't think that's what they want."

Connor chuckled. "Clever. And I'm tracking. We'll focus on what we know about the guests at the Inn."

Travis appreciated working with an expert. "Sounds great. I'll keep exploring our options."

Which meant finding a way to identify this woman and her interest in Lila.

The woman eventually got up and walked away, gliding in and out of a bar with live music and eventually walking the few blocks toward the Inn. From the shadows of an oak-lined street, moving along with groups of tourists, he watched her meander through the structured gardens in front of the Inn. She wasn't actually doing anything suspicious, but it felt all wrong because of the way she'd trailed after Lila earlier. Something about the unnamed woman struck him as slick. Worldly. As if she was on the verge of picking her next target. Just when he was sure she'd head to the parking lot to steal a car, she bypassed the valet stand and joined the queue where guests could catch a ride.

He crossed the garden and chose a bench where he could wait and watch without being obvious. From his new vantage point, he'd get a good look at whatever vehicle picked her up. He counted it as the lucky break they needed when the car drove by, the ride-share app logo lit up on the corner of the windshield, bright enough for him to make out the license plate number the driver added for security confirmation. Travis memorized the information and sent the text to Connor before the car reached the end of the gently winding driveway.

Now, all he had to do was find a way to insert himself into Lila's life until they could sort out whether or not she was part of the theft or being targeted by the thieves.

He didn't want to believe he'd been fooled, but the alternative wasn't so great either. If he'd inadvertently put a target on her back, the least he could do was stick around to protect her.

He was halfway to Lila's grandmother's house, and wishing he hadn't left his car in Charleston, when Connor informed him Lila had just arrived at the hotel. Turning around, he jogged back the way he'd come. He rushed into the lobby in time to see Lila and her grandmother at the registration desk.

“Lila!” he called. “I made it.”

She spun around and gawked at him. “Travis?” Her mouth opened and snapped shut. She glanced at her grandmother, a flash of panic in her gaze. “What? How?” She swallowed. “What are you doing here?”

He couldn’t have asked for a better reaction. He could definitely build off this and use it to their combined advantage. “I know. I’m sorry,” he said, pulling her into a hug. He brushed a kiss to her cheek and chalked up the immediate flare of heat to nerves. The woman smelled so good. Cinnamon, vanilla, and clean ocean air were all tangled up in her curls. As her arms came around him, he felt the knot in his chest loosen.

Good grief, he couldn’t afford to be so distracted while he was working. One way or another, he needed her to get on board quickly or he was sunk. “I’ll explain later,” he murmured at her ear. “Play along.” Sliding one hand around her back, he reached out to shake hands with her grandmother. “You must be Mrs. Copeland. Lila has told me so much about you.”

“Gram, this is Travis Upton.”

“Is it?” There was a twinkle in her eyes as she smiled. “Pleasure to meet you, young man. Call me Connie.”

He looked back to Lila and gave her his best sheepish smile. “I know we agreed I wouldn’t visit until next week. I’m sorry.” He squeezed her close. “I shouldn’t crash your time alone with your grandma. But the agency cut me loose earlier than expected.” He shrugged. “I couldn’t stay away.”

Lila stared while her grandma studied the two of them with a shrewd gaze.

“Apologies for showing up empty-handed,” he continued. “Normally, I bring flowers along when I’ve been away.”

Connie’s eyes twinkled again. “Is that so?”

“She has a thing for lilies.”

“That’s true,” Connie agreed, her graying eyebrows arching slightly.

Lila was gawking again. The detail was something a partner should know. Definitely a partner who’d just shown up in her hometown. And details were his thing, as essential in his line of work as oxygen. “Forgive me?”

“This time.” The edge in her voice gave him a boost. She was tough and though she might make him pay later, she wasn’t going to wreck this quite yet. “How did you find me?”

Or maybe she would. “The location sharing thing, remember?”

Her gaze narrowed for a second and when her expression cleared, he wasn’t sure the smile could be classified as warm. “Right.” She dragged out

the word.

“Obviously, it’s pointless on the yacht,” he explained to her grandmother. “But we use it when we’re in port. Or did.”

“I’m afraid Lila hasn’t mentioned you at all,” Connie said.

“I was working my way up to it,” Lila said.

Travis was half-afraid that was a true admission. He worried that maybe she feared she had to warn her grandmother someone might come looking for her in connection to a big-ticket robbery.

“It’s so new,” she continued. “The two of us, I mean.”

“I can see that,” Connie beamed, her eyes alight with mischief. “Let’s go sit down and get acquainted.”

When Connie turned to lead the way to a lounge area that bridged the far side of the lobby with the bar, he tugged Lila close. “We’re good. I promise I’ll explain.” He breathed in her scent and before he knew it, his lips were brushing her cheek.

She jerked under his touch and looked up at him. Suddenly, her mouth was right there. Soft and lush and tempting. Her gaze dropped to his lips and need thrummed through his blood. A quick kiss would fit the cover he was trying to establish.

Yeah, right. The demanding beat of his heart had nothing to do with the case or her protection.

“Lila, can I—”

“Yes.” Her reply whispered across his lips. Her mouth was hot and sweet. Perfect. Her fingers curled, gripping his shirt. Pulling him closer or steadying herself? Didn’t matter. He was kissing Lila. The reality surpassed any fleeting fantasy he’d entertained in recent months. His hands at her waist held her steady, kept her close, even when she broke the kiss.

“We’re in public,” she murmured. “Small-town rumors are worse than the truth.”

What a weird way to put it. He wanted to know that story and why her voice carried a trace of pain. Hell, he was ready to march into battle and clear away any haters, past or present.

“Lila!”

They both glanced over at Connie and the seats she’d found for them.

“That deserves a discussion,” Lila murmured through her teeth.

“We do need to talk,” he agreed.

“You’ll come to my room once she heads home.”

Heat shot through his veins, his body happily misinterpreting that demand. “Done.”

This wasn’t him. He didn’t struggle with self-control. During an op, his focus didn’t waver. Right now, he was so consumed with her he barely recognized himself.

They sat down with her grandmother and when a waitress stopped by, Connie ordered hot chocolate for each of them. “Seemed best, since you and I are driving.”

He gave the older woman points for being direct. It was clear she didn’t approve of him staying over with her granddaughter, even in a hotel.

“Gram,” Lila scolded without any real heat. “We’re all adults.”

“Mm-hm.”

The chairs were situated in a way that he couldn’t hold Lila’s hand or otherwise touch her and he tried to appreciate that. The small distance wasn’t enough to clear his thinking. Her scent still monopolized his senses and her taste lingered on his lips.

“I should thank you,” he said to Connie. “Without your encouragement we might never have met. Lila told me you urged her to get out and explore the world.”

“Experience is life.” Connie raised her eyebrows at Lila. “New or not, why is this the first I’m hearing about someone significant?”

Her grandmother was going to be a tough sell. For a moment, Travis considered telling her the whole truth. But it would be so much easier on everyone if they could make her believe he was here because he was romantically attached to her granddaughter.

“As I said, it’s new. And, um...” Lila’s voice trailed off.

“And I’m pushy,” he interjected. “She’s trying to be polite, but once I knew she was leaving the yacht crew, I couldn’t let the best thing that ever happened to me slip through my fingers.”

“And I do apologize for dropping in. We’d agreed I’d swing by after I finished a brief detail in Charleston.” At Connie’s furrowed brow, he explained. “I’m in personal security. It’s not always easy to schedule time away. But the assignment wrapped up and I’m officially on vacation.” He reached over and patted Lila’s knee as if he did that all the time.

“Vacation?” she echoed, gripping his hand hard.

“Officially.” He paused as the hot chocolates were delivered. “As long as you don’t mind having me around. I know it’s been a while since you’ve seen

each other. I can always go hang out somewhere else.”

“Of course not,” Connie answered for both of them. “I want to get to know the young man in Lila’s life.”

“Gram. It’s—”

“New. I heard you.” Connie sipped her hot drink, her gaze holding his. “Have you been to this area before?”

Lila made a frustrated sound and stirred a candy cane into her hot chocolate. He liked the rosy color in her cheeks and her grandmother seemed to count her embarrassment as a good thing. Gave him hope that his spur of the moment plan would work out. There was nothing worse than going undercover with someone who couldn’t sell the story. Innocent or not, he needed to figure out who that other woman was to her and if being followed tied Lila to the jewelry theft.

“Not South Carolina specifically,” he replied. “This is a beautiful part of the Atlantic Coast.”

“Sounds like you’re well-traveled.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he assured her. “Mostly for work. While I don’t always get to be a tourist, I do enjoy some marvelous views and experiences.”

“My husband and I traveled as much as we could when we were young,” Connie said. “He was military and moving was always as much of an adventure as the places he served.”

“No truer words,” Travis said. “During my service I only had to worry about me. I didn’t envy the family guys.”

“Didn’t you?”

He saw the trap. Connie wanted more than a short-term fling for Lila. Travis respected that. Ignoring the pang of lying to a woman he was starting to like, he said, “Not when it came to moving, ma’am.”

Connie threw back her head and laughed. “You’re a delight.” She winked at her granddaughter. “I see why you’re smitten.”

“Mm-hm.” Lila stirred that candy cane with renewed vigor.

They chatted about things to do and see on the island and Travis figured he’d cleared the first hurdle. An important one. The conversations were bound to get more challenging, starting with the talk he needed to have with Lila as soon as they could be alone.

Connie set aside her mug and stood up. “A baker’s hours are early ones,” she declared. “You two enjoy the next few days.” She walked over and gave Travis a warm hug. “You’re welcome anytime, anywhere, Travis. With one

exception.”

“Gram!” Lila choked. “No.”

Connie shook her head. “Has to be said. Until there’s a wedding band on your finger, he’s not sharing your room at my house.”

Lila’s cheeks blazed, going nearly as red as her hair. “I cannot believe this.”

“I mean it.” Connie wasn’t swayed. “My roof, my rules. It’s always been that way. If you want to get up to any shenanigans, you’ll have to do it elsewhere.”

Travis slid his arm around Lila’s waist. “We understand, Connie.”

“I’m fully aware my views are archaic,” the older woman actually giggled, “but I’m too old to change now.”

“No worries. Lila and I are experts in discretion,” Travis assured her. “Lila’s important to me.” There was a solid truth. “I only want what’s best for her and what makes her happy.” Another truth. Assuming she was innocent, this was his chance to explore the attraction he’d been ignoring on the yacht.

“Travis!” Lila’s fiery gaze bounced between him and her grandmother. “The two of you are ridiculous.”

“Don’t flap at me,” Connie said with a chuckle. “You’re a short walk from your suite.” She hugged Lila, then held her at arm’s length. “Do not come anywhere near the bakery tomorrow.”

“But, Gram.”

“I mean it, sweetheart. Take some time with your young man. Enjoy yourselves. Your granddad and I learned early on to make time for each other away from the business. Now it’s your turn.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Lila embraced her grandmother once more. “Call me if you need anything.”

“I won’t.”

“Humor me.”

“Fine.” Connie rolled her eyes. “I’ll call if I need you. Let’s plan on dinner tomorrow. We’ll go to Lila’s favorite place. They always have room for us.”

Lila groaned, but Travis thanked her.

“And Lila?”

“Ma’am?”

“Your suite is on the delivery list for strudel tomorrow.”

“Seriously?” Travis had heard Juliet going on and on about Lila’s incomparable strudel and the family recipe, but he’d never had it.

Connie wiggled her eyebrows. “Guess I’d better increase the order.”

And with that sly comment, she gave them a wave as she walked out.

“She’s a menace.” Lila glared at him. “You both are.”

“Well, you’re amazing.” He grinned at her, since they were still in public view. “Want to go upstairs and talk about it?”

Her gaze turned stormy, bordering on mutinous. “Is there an alternative?”

“No.”

She flashed her keycard. “Follow me.”

He would. Tonight and wherever she went until this case was resolved. And he was willing to follow her long after, though it wasn’t practical. They were on two separate paths and this curious interlude wouldn’t last. She was passionate about being home and he... wasn’t.

She needed stability and routine and family.

He valued stability and routine. Along with training, preparation, and new challenges.

As for family, he’d always known he wasn’t that kind of guy.

Chapter 6

Lila wondered how long it would take for the mortification to fade, or if her face would feel this tight and overheated forever. She'd reached for her suitcase, only to have Travis pluck it from her as if it weighed nothing.

Why did he have to be so strong and competent? He'd thoroughly charmed Gram, a feat only managed by her grandfather until tonight.

She could hardly storm off or send him on his way now. The best option was to pretend their meeting and introductions had been planned, she decided, moving toward the elevator. They were still in public view and

she'd made enough of a scene by throwing herself at his mouth earlier. The memory made her pulse skip and a fresh wave of heat flooded her face. "For the record, my favorite place in the world is the bakery."

"So where are we going to dinner?"

"The fish camp." She waited for the groan or some kind of protest. Fish had been a daily staple on the yacht.

"Do we have to catch it or cook it ourselves?"

"No."

His lips twitched. "Then count me in." He slipped his hand into hers while they waited for the elevator. To keep up appearances, she was sure.

She tried not to like it. When that failed, she tried to ignore the way his hand enveloped hers. He made her feel safe, even when she knew he was working an agenda she couldn't see clearly.

"What are you *really* doing here?" she whispered. "Did the thief take the bait?"

He gave her a gentle tug and she found herself right up against his hard body once more. The contact shouldn't thrill her, but it did. From her head to her toes awareness simmered, just under her skin, making her want things that were impossible. Dangerous. Travis was a man built for action as part of his chosen career and the innate assurance that radiated from him was an intense, dizzying turn on. Especially in close quarters.

"Bucking for another kiss, sweetheart? Or just intel for your partners?" Of course. He might as well have doused her with a bucket of cold water. He still saw her as a suspect. She was frustrated and appalled that he could kiss her senseless and believe the worst of her at the same time. That was a level of performance she hadn't expected.

The elevator arrived with a chime, a timely reminder that they weren't alone. *Yet*. She needed to remember this was all fake for him. This ruse was only a means to an end.

She was likely a means to an end.

Having worked in close quarters with Travis for months, she understood his focus and commitment. If he'd been tasked with finding the thief, he'd do it. She couldn't call it tunnel vision, because as a personal protector, she knew he was hyper-aware of his surroundings, constantly assessing and dismissing any number of factors.

He carried her luggage in one hand and kept the other wrapped snugly around hers all the way to her room, releasing her only long enough to get

inside. He set down the luggage and pulled a gun from a holster at his ankle. The shock kept her silent while he searched the suite, turning on lights as he went.

Simmering with more annoyance than attraction now, she waited by the door. “Satisfied?” she demanded when he returned to the main room.

Heat flared in his gaze. “Not even close.”

She had no idea what to do with that. They needed to clear up any doubts he had so she could send him on his way. She refused to perpetuate the lie they’d fed to Gram. “Is the room clear, Mr. Bodyguard?”

“Yes.” Frowning, he tucked his gun away.

She rolled her suitcase into the bedroom and then pulled the door shut before turning to face him. She didn’t like the way he was looking at her. The personal interest faded and his hard, professional expression was in place. “We need to talk about that stunt downstairs.”

His mouth firmed and then he moved back toward the hallway. She started to follow, but stopped when she heard the deadbolt at the door engage with a click and thunk.

“Who was the woman on the ferry?” he asked, walking back into the room.

“Do you still think I’m tied to those thefts?”

Her question collided with his and she did a double take. “What woman?”

“You spoke with her on the ferry,” he clarified. “Later, at the dock, she returned your luggage. You left it behind when you saw your grandmother.”

The woman’s sly smile drifted into her memory, but his words pissed her off. “You were following me? All day?”

“Yes.” He folded his arms, his biceps testing the fabric of his shirt. “No. Not all day. I tracked you down after the decoy bag was dumped.”

Feeling defensive, she didn’t dare show it. She toed off her shoes and pulled the tie from her hair, rubbing the tension from her scalp. For a second she thought she saw that heat come back into his eyes. Her body’s immediate response was annoying—she didn’t want to like how he looked at her.

“I didn’t touch that bag. Not after you put it back.”

“I believe that.”

Her patience snapped. “Then *what* is this? Why follow me at all? I am not your thief.”

“What did the woman want?” A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“World peace?” His expression grew stormy. Too bad. “I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

She stalked over to the kitchenette. The long counter had a sink, coffee pot and microwave tucked up against a small refrigerator. Plates, bowls, and drinkware occupied the open shelving and a dishwasher was set into the lower cabinetry. Pulling open the fridge, she found bottled water and took one for herself. “Water?”

“No, thanks,” he declined. “Just tell me what she said, Lila.”

She twisted off the cap and took a long drink of the water. He probably thought she was stalling. His opinion didn’t amount to much right now. “It was small talk,” she said. “About the island. She wasn’t my contact or co-conspirator, she was a *tourist*. We get those here. She didn’t mention stolen goods or potatoes. Why won’t you drop this? At the very least you could leave me out of it.”

“I can’t.” He took off his shoes as well. His feet were bare. She’d seen him barefoot on the boat more than once, when he was off duty and relaxing. That was different. This was... This was her room, her space. Her cheeks were on fire again. This felt way too intimate and completely wrong while he was interrogating her.

“What are you doing?”

He pulled out his phone, sparing her a quick glance. “Getting comfortable.”

“Why?” She watched, waiting as he seemed to check his messages. This wasn’t happening. She couldn’t cope with him a minute longer. “Get out.” She crossed the room, grabbed his elbow and tried to drag him to the door.

Tried and failed. He didn’t budge.

“Travis, you need to go.”

He shook his head. “You need me to stay.”

What? She’d never said anything of the kind. Aside from what she now realized had been all-too-real responses to his displays of fake affection, she hadn’t once encouraged him. Hadn’t so much as batted an eyelash in his direction. He had no reason to think she *needed* him.

“Lila, you’re in danger—”

“Wrong,” she cut him off. “This is a dead end.”

“—and it’s my fault.” He held up his phone.

She was staring at a photo of the woman he’d been asking her about. “What is this?”

He guided her to the couch and with a gentle nudge, she was sitting down. “I’m sorry, Lila. I had no idea it would go down this way.”

She’d never heard this tone from him before. A mix of regret and

determination. She didn't care for it. Not at all. What a shock to learn she preferred his stoic almost over confident tone. Horrible scenarios flashed through her mind, but none of them made any sense. So what if he'd uncovered the worst secrets in her childhood? She'd been a kid. Her parents had been the criminals. And she was so far removed from it now. "You said you believed me."

"And I do. I had doubts," he confessed. "Some things you said yesterday raised red flags."

Because she'd let down her guard. More accurately, being close to Travis eroded her normal defenses. Either way, she knew better than to reveal so much to someone like him. A man with an unshakable moral compass and experience identifying sketchy people.

Not that she'd spent much time doing sketchy things herself, but clearly something from her parents had rubbed off.

"And today?"

"Well, today..." His voice trailed off and he pushed a hand through his hair. He moved back, taking a seat in the chair. With elbows braced on his knees, he explained. "Today, when that decoy didn't move, I thought it could be because you'd managed to stash part of the theft before I caught you." He winced. "Or maybe you'd warned off your partner."

She didn't bother protesting. What was the point? Clearly, he was going to think whatever he wanted to think. Lacing her fingers together, she refused to give him any further ammunition. He'd either explain and leave, or she'd take herself to Gram's house and get her luggage later. Gram had enough connections in town that it wouldn't be a big problem.

"But you don't have a partner. You're not the thief."

Nice of him to finally get the message. She watched as he shoved to his feet and started pacing back and forth in front of the window. "The agency put a researcher on this to help me out. We've been trying to ID this woman since I noticed her tailing you."

Lila would've felt stupid for not noticing she was leading a short parade, but she'd been focused on the joy of being home. Home with Gram. Her *real* home. Where she'd been safe and stable. She hadn't seriously had to worry about being followed in years.

Again, not sharing that with him.

"Connor, my research assistant," he explained, "doesn't know her real name. Not yet. But he did finally find an image of her in this area after other

thefts were reported a few months ago.” Travis rubbed his eyes. “And now, thanks to the decoy, we’re pretty sure she thinks you have the stolen goods she expected to pick up today.”

Lila took a breath. One of them had to settle down. She’d never seen Travis so agitated. “If you’re right, why didn’t she just steal my suitcase at the dock?” It was the logical move for a thief.

“That might’ve been the plan. But there were lots of people around and you’re a local. Maybe she thought it was safer to wait.” He sat down again. “You went with your grandmother, so I followed her. She didn’t meet with anyone. She bought a meal from one of the food trucks, then walked over to the Inn. From there she caught a ride-share car and left.”

“Good.”

“Connor was able to track the car’s route, including stops.”

Unease prickled across her nape. “And?”

He held out his phone to her once more. “She’s on the island. Specifically, Connor caught sight of her on Central.”

Lila took the device and studied the image. It was grainy, from a security camera. She agreed it was probably the same woman and she was standing near the wall between Gram’s bakery and the flower shop next door.

“Gram has nothing to do with this,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. “For that matter, neither do I.”

“She would disagree.” He shifted suddenly, coming to sit next to her on the couch. “That was taken less than an hour ago. You’re in danger, Lila. I thought the decoy bag would be the cleanest way to wrap this up. Instead, I’ve made you a target.”

A sickening dread swirled in her stomach. What if this *was* tied to her somehow? What if her parents had somehow recognized her when she’d been out with Juliet? There was no way for her to ask. She hadn’t spoken to either her mom or dad since moving to Brookwell. Even if she could drum up the courage to tell Travis about the possibility, she had no additional information to share. Not a phone number, not even an address.

Her parents had completely fallen out of her world. She supposed Gram might still have some information, but it was unlikely. Lila hadn’t so much as seen a Christmas card from her parents since that fateful summer.

“Well, what are you doing about it?” she asked. “Can the police pick her up and question her?”

“For standing on a street?” He shook his head. “Connor is getting the word

out so we can try and get someone following *her*.”

She closed her eyes. “And what do I do?”

“You let me stick close.” He drummed his fingers on his knee. “Let’s keep up the new boyfriend angle, it’s the most logical explanation.”

“I can’t go into the bakery with you underfoot.”

“With luck, we’ll have this cleared up before Connie lets you get back to work. In the meantime, you can show me around Brookwell and—”

“And you’ll stay where?” she asked. As if she didn’t know the answer.

He cleared his throat. “Here. On the couch,” he clarified quickly. “Connor arranged to have my car and luggage dropped off.”

“What a guy.”

Her sarcasm appeared to bounce right off him. “The thief wants the goods and the value of those items implies she won’t give up. She doesn’t know you didn’t take them. I swear this won’t be forever. A few days at most.”

She didn’t see a way to toss him out, not now. Gram already believed they were a couple. As much as she rejected the idea of bringing trouble to Gram’s door, it was already here. Probably for the best if she didn’t try and handle it on her own. The last time she’d been close to the shady world of thieves and burglars, she’d been a kid. She might know the general system, but she didn’t have any helpful contacts and her street smarts were rusty.

Worse than rusty if she’d missed both a stranger and Travis on her tail all afternoon.

“Fine. Stay. I hope the couch is comfortable.”

“You’re going to bed?” he asked as she walked away. “It’s early. We need to make a plan.”

She shook her head. “Right now my only plan is to sleep. If we’re joined at the hip from this point forward, we’ll have plenty of time to discuss any and all plans tomorrow.”

His brow furrowed. An odd change to his normally stoic expression. He really was worried about this. “Okay,” he said at last. “Good night.”

As if she’d wait on his approval or permission for anything. With luck he’d reach that conclusion for himself and soon.

“Good night, Travis.”

She closed the bedroom door, but she couldn’t close him out of her thoughts. Weary, she changed into a nightgown. Her body ached all over and she felt as if she’d been hit by a truck. Silly to be aching all over simply due to the stress of having Travis foisted on her.

That kiss danced through her mind as she snuggled into bed and closed her eyes. She couldn't put any stock in that moment, no matter how exciting. Any feelings that liplock had stirred up were fake. An illusion. He'd given a performance for anyone watching them. It was her responsibility to tuck it away and keep herself steady in his presence.

Her earlier joy of coming home was dust, crushed under the weight of the situation.

Maybe it was fitting, some sort of universal closing of the circle. The first time she'd changed her life to call Brookwell her home, she'd been doing it to escape her thieving parents. This time she didn't know the thief who'd intruded on her life. She wasn't sure that was any better.

Regardless, she'd shake off this mess just as she had done it the first time around.

No one was going to destroy her dream or derail her plans for the quiet, family-bakery life she'd been longing for.

Not even her self-appointed protector.

Chapter 7

The next day, Travis couldn't fault Lila's cooperation, planned or not. She'd emerged from the bedroom at just past seven, with a warm and friendly attitude. Definitely a morning person. He supposed that was a requirement for a pastry chef who wanted to run a bakery.

Dressed in jeans and a long sleeve Henley, with her auburn curls braided back from her face, she'd offered to order breakfast for them while he cleaned up.

Wary it might be some kind of trick, she assured him she wouldn't leave

the suite without him.

He'd asked her to trust him, the least he could do was trust her in return.

So he did. Sort of. He'd sent a request for Connor to keep an eye on the cameras around the Inn and then sped through his morning routine.

Just in time for the room service delivery that included the strudel her grandmother had promised.

The chilly ocean prevented them from eating on the balcony, though she'd opened the curtains to the bright and clear morning. He'd found everything delicious from the perfectly prepared omelet to the piping hot coffee.

The frown on her face told him Lila wasn't equally impressed. "Something wrong?"

She shook her head. "What do you think?" she asked, holding up a corner of a croissant that had been served alongside the omelets.

"Plain," he admitted. He refilled his coffee cup. "Especially compared to the strudel." That earned him a smile that gave him a bigger jolt than the caffeine. "Coffee is excellent, along with everything else."

She nodded, her critical gaze returning to the pastry. "I'm wondering if it's environmental or just an off day. I remember these being much better."

"Juliet claimed your croissants were better than anything she'd had in France."

Her green eyes locked on him, sparkling with pride. "Seriously?"

He plucked up another slice of strudel. "She claimed this was the bomb too, and she was sure right about that."

Lila's smile widened. "Gram's cornered the market on strudel. I'd say ninety-five percent of the locals are addicted enough to order regularly."

"Why not one hundred percent?"

She chuckled. "Doctors and diets. Although Gram did modify the recipe to reduce the sugar and such. That was mostly for Chief Caldwell and his police department." She poked at the croissant. "I think this is a humidity issue." Peering up at him, her lips curled into a sassy smile.

He was pretty sure if she kept aiming that particular smile at him that he would need a doctor. The woman was potent, a special kind of addiction that he feared might be permanent. It seemed like every hour he had to remind himself he was here to protect her.

"You know why Juliet loves my croissants?"

"Because you're talented?" he ventured.

"That too," Lila agreed. "But I experimented with fillings and flavors while

I was with her. She's partial to featherlight tropical flavors and I managed to work that into the dough, to create something just for her."

He was impressed, even though he had no clue how anyone would manage that. "Something you want to introduce to folks here?"

"Absolutely." She traded the plain croissant for strudel. "It'll have to be limited runs, and likely baked super early in the mornings." She sighed over the strudel. "And if what I have in mind fails, I can adapt the recipe for strudel."

She wiped her mouth and her hands. "Ready to see the metropolis of Brookwell? Gram's likely to quiz you later—if only to make sure I've shown my new boyfriend all the sights."

"Will I need to take notes?"

"Not if you're observant." Getting up, she went to grab a pair of bright blue sneakers.

He polished off the last of his coffee and set the cup aside. "Observant is my middle name."

"Oh, I hope your parents weren't so cruel."

He did a double take, grateful she was distracted. There were degrees of cruelty in the world and while his parents didn't top the list, they hadn't been anything to hold up as a positive example.

"Any chance we can make a plan before we leave the room?"

"I have our plan," Lila said, bouncing on her toes. "We'll tour Central Street first, because contrary to Gram's orders, I want to see the bakery in action, especially as it relates to the other businesses nearby. And I have a few friends who need to know I'm back. After that, I thought a stroll along the beach was in order and maybe a quick circuit of the island if I can track down an old friend who works at the marina."

An old boyfriend, maybe? Time would tell. Right now, though, he needed to focus. "I meant a plan for any potential trouble."

With a smile, she flicked that away. "You'll handle the trouble."

"So confident."

"Have you forgotten that I've seen you in action frequently over the last six months? We weren't on the yacht the entire time."

She had a point.

She was also in her jacket already and was looping a small bag over her shoulder and across her body. "Come on."

At the door, he stopped her, holding it shut when she would've opened it.

“If there is trouble, you have to promise to cooperate with any orders I give you.”

Her gaze turned stormy and damned if that didn't turn him on as well.

Staring down at her, he waited. They could stand here all day if necessary, he wasn't leaving this suite without her word on this.

“What kind of orders do you plan to issue?”

Was she kidding? “This is serious, Lila. Keeping you safe is my priority.”

Sympathy and some emotion he couldn't pin down flickered through those green eyes. “I promise to obey all of your safety commands, Mr. Upton.”

“Thank you.” He paused, knowing he should take her word and just let it go. Maybe the thief would cut her losses rather than face certain exposure in such a small town. But he kept talking. “I will hold you to that promise, Lila. I expect you to keep your word.”

Her eyes flashed and her gaze dropped to his mouth for a split second. And in that there-and-gone moment he was lost to the memory of kissing her. Tasting her.

Of wanting more. Everything.

“Travis.” She tugged on his jacket. “Whatever you think you know about me, I don't lie, cheat or steal. I do, however, keep my word.”

She nudged him aside and yanked open the door. “Let's get moving before Gram gets the really wrong idea.”

“What idea would that be?” he asked, his voice low as they moved through the quiet hallway, the carpeting swallowing the sound of their steps.

“That we're honing our baby-making skills.”

He tripped, righted himself quickly. “You're kidding.”

At the elevator, she smiled, that wicked expression scattering his thoughts. “Part of the small-town charm, Mr. Upton. Everyone is sure they know your business.”

Suddenly, she pressed close to his side, her hand linking with his. When she looked up at him, he saw affection and interest she'd never aimed at him before. And then he heard the voices, understood what prompted the change from sassy teasing to fake devotion.

Fake, but delivered with an expertise that left him wishing it was real.

Playing along, he dipped his head and brushed his lips over hers. Nothing false about the sizzle that shot through his system. Thankfully, some previously untapped willpower eased him back, keeping the gesture light.

The elevator arrived and Lila chatted breezily with the family that had

joined them. They were taking in a few days of sand and sun before heading back to the northeast for the resumption of school.

He listened while Lila made a few suggestions and then marveled as they parted ways with the family in the lobby.

“You’re an excellent Brookwell ambassador,” he said.

She gave a little curtsey without missing a stride as they walked out into the sunny, cold day. “Thanks. Tourism is the lifeblood around here. I’ve been well-trained on that issue.” She stretched her arms wide and took a deep breath. “Walk or drive?”

“If we’re staying around town, I vote we walk.” There had been times during the cruise that the yacht had felt too small, as if he couldn’t stretch his legs. Which was ridiculous, since they stopped frequently for any number of entertainments and activities. “Do you miss the yacht?”

Her laughter rang out, as clear as the sky overhead. “Not even a little.” She took his hand once more, as if that’s what they both wanted. “I’m a landlubber at heart. The kitchenette in the suite feels like an upgrade and we both know it’s a fraction of what I had to work with on the yacht.” She tipped her face up to his. “Are you eager to get back?”

“Not exactly.” She clearly wanted him to elaborate. “Juliet and her husband are great. The assignment is a good one. Weird but good.”

A frown pleated her brow. “Weird how?”

He had to drag himself away from the study of her freckles. “It’s like a yo-yo,” he said after a minute. “On the yacht we’re practically off duty, but then we go into shore and we have to be sharp and alert.” And right now, he needed to ignore the soaring blue sky, the swaying palms, and the sexy woman beside him. He needed to stay sharp and watchful for anyone taking too much interest in Lila.

Up ahead, the tree-lined street gave way to a town center that was straight out of a seaside painting. Clean bright storefronts marched along in neat rows. Traffic moved at a sedate pace on Central, the main street connecting the island to Charleston. “Were you born here?”

“No. Why?”

“Because I have yet to see a hospital.”

She pointed down a side street that moved toward the center of the island. “There’s a shiny new clinic down that way, along with most of the basic medical professionals the community needs. Charleston is where we go for serious stuff.”

“So you were born in Charleston?”

That frown reappeared and she tried to shift away from him. He held her close. For appearances, obviously.

“No,” she said, not really relaxing. “My parents moved around a lot,” she said. Her gaze drifted toward the shops then across the street, where the food trucks had been last night. “Eventually, I moved here. Living with my grandparents gave me the stability I needed in school and... and in life.”

Questions rolled through his mind. Questions for her and for Connor. He could hardly judge her for a rough homelife. And he was proof that a person could rise up out of unpleasant circumstances and become productive.

He could see the sign for the bakery over the door and unless he was imagining it, he was sure there was a hint of warm cinnamon in the air. To his surprise, she turned at the corner and steered him over to a bench. Immediately, he switched his focus, searching for the threat. But he didn't see anything or anyone.

“Problem?”

“Gram was serious about me staying away. And I wanted to take a few minutes just to see how foot traffic is at this hour. January isn't thick with tourists, so this is mostly local business.”

He stared down at her. Couldn't help it. This side of her was new and intriguing. Too many people were sure they wanted to run a business. Confident they could do it. Lila Copeland had clearly given her choices a great deal of time and thought. She might look relaxed to any passersby, but he could feel her intensity and focus.

“This isn't just you stepping into the family business,” he observed after several minutes. This mattered to her. “You have plans.”

She glanced his way, her eyes sparkling. “You have no idea. Tropical chocolate croissants are only the beginning.” She wriggled in the seat, her thigh gliding along his. “Or strudel,” she amended with a small shrug. “I'm not going to undermine what makes the Bread Basket great, but I do want to put my stamp on it.” She sighed. “Eventually. Right now, I really want another cup of coffee, but I promised to keep my distance.”

“From the coffee shop?”

Her nose wrinkled. “From town. All the shop owners talk. Gram will know I was here.”

“But you're supposed to be showing me around.”

“True.” She brightened, her mouth curling into a smile. “Let's go,” she

said, catching her lush lower lip between her teeth. “She won’t be grumpy if you’re with me. Just remember to keep up the pretense.”

Like he was suddenly an expert in fake dating. Oh, he’d stepped into the boyfriend role a time or two at the client’s request, but it wasn’t his preferred mode of protection. It had certainly never been something he’d instigated.

Until Lila.

Which only painted his decisions last night as more extreme.

Holding hands, they crossed the street and into the coffee shop. The short line moved quickly and he ordered two black coffees while she greeted... everyone. Everyone seemed to know her and seemed genuinely pleased she was home. He was introduced, ogled, and hugged while she was embraced and showered with compliments.

If this was small-town life, he wasn’t sure how anyone coped with it.

“Overwhelmed yet?” she murmured as they headed toward the bakery.

Before he could answer, the front door of the flower shop, Island Blooms, swung open. A woman with long dark hair trailing behind her nearly tackled Lila. “Ohmygosh! It’s really you. You’re home!”

Lila, clearly a pro at exuberant greetings, pushed her coffee cup safely into his free hand before she wrapped up the other woman in a big hug. When she stepped back, her arm still around the dark-haired woman, she beamed at Travis with a look that made him feel like her hero. “Nina, this is Travis Upton. We went to high school together.”

“Best friends since tenth grade. And not just because of her twenty-four seven access to Connie’s strudel.” Nina stuck out her hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Travis.” Her gaze, full of questions, locked with Lila’s. “We need to catch up,” she said in a mock whisper.

His phone rang and he apologized as he returned Lila’s coffee. Tugging his phone from his pocket, he saw Connor’s name on the screen. “Excuse me a minute?”

Lila nodded. “We’ll be inside.”

“Perfect,” he said, walking a few paces from the door as the women went into the shop. Swiping the screen, he said, “I’m here. Any news?”

“Not the kind you’re hoping for,” Connor replied. “They chased an intruder off the yacht early this morning.”

A chill that had nothing to do with the brisk January morning skated across the back of his neck. “Why am I just hearing about it now?”

“The initial assumption was an attempt to get to Juliet. You’re not...”

“I’m not on her detail,” Travis finished for him. “I get it. What changed?”

Connor cleared his throat and Travis imagined him in a dark room, hunched over his keyboard, the glow from his monitors reflecting on his glasses while he pulled up a report. Of course, it was purely speculation. For all he knew the guy was working on a sunny beach in Bora Bora. He’d never met Connor in person and video calls were rare among Guardian Agency personnel.

“Nothing. It’s just a hunch. I, um, tapped into security from another yacht. Physically, the intruder fits the build, but so do a lot of other people, especially in a wetsuit. Intruder ducks into the galley, creeps along the lower deck, and through the salon before being spotted. Then they’re over the side and into the water.”

“They don’t surface?”

“Not that we’ve seen. It was dark, hard to see anything in the water though.”

Travis didn’t like it. His instincts were humming. “Anything taken or left behind?”

“No and no. And that’s what bothered me,” Connor admitted. “The jetboard was on the lower deck and a set of his and hers watches had been left on the bar in the salon. Worth about six grand combined, they belong to another couple that Juliet is connecting with while she’s in town.”

“Okay, explain your theory.” If the intruder was also the thief, leaving behind a potential payout didn’t make sense. Money was money. Which meant the specific items Lila had found were of greater significance.

The chill on the back of his neck slid down his spine as he listened to the research expert echo his own thoughts. “Want me to coordinate with the insurance company?”

“Not yet. They’re out for blood when it comes to stopping this theft ring. I’ll reach out when we have something more than our hunch. Keep digging.”

“All right. And Jess Keller asked you to reach out as soon as you have a minute. By phone or drop in at her new office. I sent you the address.”

“Thanks.” Travis glanced into the shop where Nina and Lila were having an animated conversation. It didn’t seem like the old friends wanted to part any time soon. “My next call, I promise.”

Before that, he needed to get back to the charade of devoted boyfriend. Ducking into the flower shop, he apologized and requested a fresh bouquet for Connie. “Need to make up for last night,” he reminded Lila as he tucked a

wayward curl behind her ear.

“Everything okay out there?”

“Fine,” he assured her. “The office needed a small clarification on my last report.” He smiled when her eyes went wide. “No big deal.”

She seemed to accept the explanation. At the very least, she didn’t pepper him with questions in front of her friend.

He paid for the flowers despite Nina’s offer to comp the bouquet and resumed their exploration of the town center.

“If you’re really trying to warm up Gram,” Lila said, “save the flowers for dinner tonight. She’s polite if customers bring in scents, but she’d expect me to train you better.”

He laughed. “I’ll earn more points if I don’t let you go in there at all.” Wrapping his arm around her waist, he ushered her along, hoping Connie got wind of his effort.

She shared stories about being a teenager in town and the history of various shops from the bookstore to the ice cream shop at the end of the block. Apparently Lila’s grandparents had packed an entire childhood into her last years as a kid, giving her traditions and memories that created the woman he was enjoying so much today.

“The food truck space is new, but it’s a smart move,” she said. “Not just the variety for the island locals. It fosters a connection with Charleston and that helps all of us.”

He hated to spoil the friendly mood, but he did need to speak with Jess and he wasn’t sure the office was within walking distance. “Mind if I make another call before we continue our Brookwell tour?”

“No.” She bit her lip, her gaze darting about the square. “Should I be concerned?”

“Not a bit,” he promised. He’d been keeping watch for any signs of the thief. At the moment, they seemed to be in the clear. Besides, Connor was monitoring the roadway and ferry dock and would give him a warning if necessary. “It won’t take long.”

She strolled a few paces away, toward the water fountain under the shade of a sprawling live oak tree, while he dialed Jess’s number. The introduction was quick and efficient. Jess offered him any support he might need, including in-person backup if the situation devolved. He appreciated that, especially after her years of service on the Key West police force.

“I’ve asked Connor to copy me on any alerts or issues,” she said. “I trust

that's not a problem?"

"The more the merrier," he said. "I'd like to think I'm being paranoid," he admitted.

"Somehow, I doubt that's the issue." She laughed softly. "I understand instincts. Trust yours. If you need anything, just call."

"Thanks."

Right now, he was more concerned about the older man who'd joined Lila under the tree. The man was older and in good shape for his heavy frame. Travis pegged him as early-to-mid fifties. Gray hair at his temples, crow's feet at the corners of his bright eyes. Deep grooves bracketed his mouth when he smiled warmly at Lila.

Too warmly.

The greeting hadn't been as direct or joyful as Lila's reunion with Nina, but the hug had gone on a bit too long, in Travis's opinion. "We'll keep you in the loop," he said to Jess while he watched his girlfriend—whoops, make that *fake* girlfriend—reconnect with this older guy.

"Sounds good."

The call ended, he took a second to pull himself together. He had no business judging Lila or the man she was speaking with. The urgency thrumming in his blood was only about the protection detail. About keeping her safe. He didn't envy the way she looked at this guy. Couldn't.

It was absurd.

And yet, he struggled to smother the visceral reaction as he walked over to join them. Whoever this man was, he was too old for her.

Way to over-assume. He didn't really know Lila's preferences when it came to relationships. Couldn't begin to define the type of man she might find appealing. They'd lived and worked in close proximity on the yacht, but that wasn't exactly real or normal. They hadn't ever spent time trading secrets or turn-ons.

Much to his dismay right now.

Pride and desire warred with common sense. She wasn't his girlfriend. Was not. And even if he had been her true boyfriend, he couldn't cave to this urge to destroy another man for smiling at her.

Lila was chattering away, her back to Travis, until the older man lifted his chin. Lila spun around, eyes still sparkling. Travis set his teeth, determined to be polite, no matter what was going on.

"Hey!" she said, slipping her hand around his arm. "Travis, this is Will

Frasier. One of my favorite people in the world.” Her fingers squeezed his forearm. “Will, Travis Upton.”

Had she sensed his impulse to interrupt and behave badly? He stuck out his hand. “Pleased to meet you.” He forced his lips into a smile. “Lila’s been showing me around.”

“So I heard,” Will said. His handshake was strong and carried a warning that he cared for Lila. “Lila tells me you’re a new addition in her life.”

“It’s true,” Travis agreed. He looked down into her pretty face and the smile came more naturally, the tension in his shoulders relaxing. “On a personal level. We’ve worked together for months.”

“On the yacht,” Lila explained.

“You’re not at sea any longer,” Frasier pointed out. His mouth tilted into a semblance of a smile, but his eyes were cool as he studied Travis.

This guy was in plain clothes, but he reeked of law enforcement. That, at least, was something Travis understood. If she had friends on the police force, that could work to their advantage with a thief in the area. He would talk to Jess about it.

Between them, Lila laughed, the sound stilted rather than cheery. “I’m a grown up,” she reminded Will. “You don’t have to bother with the gruff father routine.” She turned to Travis. “I told you about making the decision to stay with Gram rather than my parents.”

Vaguely, but he nodded along as if he had the whole story and understood all the reasons.

“Will stepped into the shoes my dad never wanted to fill,” she explained. “He’s also Chief Caldwell’s lieutenant on the Brookwell police force.”

Just as he’d thought.

Will huffed. “Big title in a small department,” he clarified. “Lila became the daughter I never had. My wife and I had three wonderful sons. But Lila gave us a chance to spoil a little girl.”

She snorted. “As if. I was a teenager.”

“That attitude is forever,” Will said to Travis. Affection colored his voice as he spoke to Lila, “Still needed spoiling from our perspective.”

“You’re just a big squish,” she accused lightly.

“Never tell my boys.”

She grinned at Will, her face shining with admiration. “Your secret has always been safe with me.”

Seemingly taking pity on Travis, he explained. “Shortly after Lila decided

to stay, my wife and I bumped into her at the registration table for the annual October 5K fun run. Her grandmother didn't want her training alone in the early hours. So I became her training buddy." He winked. "The rest is history."

Obviously the Frasier's had helped Lila adapt during a tough time. Made Will one of the good guys in Travis's mind. "This is a beautiful place to call home."

"We like it. And she knows every square inch of it better than most." Will's gaze skimmed over Travis. "What is it you do?"

"Right now I'm on vacation," he lied smoothly. "I'm told I need more practice when it comes to rest and relaxation." He smiled at Lila as if that opinion had been hers. "On the yacht I led the personal security team."

Will's chin bobbed once. Travis figured that counted as probationary approval. He pressed the momentary advantage. "I know Lila will soon dive into work at the bakery. Any suggestions for the new guy in town?"

Will's eyebrows lifted and lowered. "You like to stay busy, huh?"

"My dad always said there were worse habits." Another lie. His dad hadn't been around to offer any kind of advice.

"Around here there's always something going on. If you're an early riser, nothing beats an open water fishing trip. You do like seafood?"

"Absolutely." Travis smiled. "Connie says we're having dinner at the fish camp tonight. Would you and your wife like to join us?"

Lila sucked in a gasp and her face paled. A cloud passed through Will's eyes, then cleared as a slow smile creased his face. "I'm surprised Connie didn't tell you," he said to Lila. "I just remarried."

"Seriously?" Lila threw her arms around Will's neck. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you." He patted her back. "My grief was pretty well known."

"And with good reason."

Will rolled his shoulders. "You're right. My new wife, Maureen, is from Key West. We're splitting time between here and there as we get settled. Tonight isn't good for us, but I do appreciate the invitation." His gaze locked on Travis once more. "Why don't we plan on a barbecue at my place this weekend? I can get to know your young man better and you can meet Maureen. She'll love you."

Those last three words were for Lila alone. He didn't mind. Not even with the implication that he'd be facing a familial interrogation over a meal. Travis was all for getting to know the people who were important to her.

“This weekend?” Lila twitched her mouth. “Sure. We’d like that. Right?” She wasn’t as adept at fibbing as Travis, and he feared Will caught the suspicious hitch in her voice.

“If you want to catch up before that, you can always call or come to the station,” Will said. Yep, she was about to blow their cover story. But he couldn’t really intervene without coming across as problematic or controlling to a man who’d known her most of her life. A man who, as a cop, had been trained to observe and assess people and situations.

“Tell me, Travis,” Will began.

Travis braced against the obvious change in the man’s tone.

“Are you an independent contractor?”

Oh, this guy was serious about protecting Lila. Travis couldn’t be mad about Will going back to the station to run his name and background. He wasn’t worried. No unsavory skeletons in his closet. Lots of people enlisted at eighteen and never went home again.

“No sir. I’m licensed with the Guardian Agency.” And never more thankful for the affiliation than right this minute.

“Out of Chicago?” Surprise lifted Will’s eyebrows.

“Yes, sir.”

“Huh. Guess it’s a small world.” Suddenly the intensity eased up again. Apparently, the connection alleviated his lingering doubts about Travis.

“You know of the group?” Travis asked.

“A bit. It’s a new connection.” He paused, as if uncertain how much he should share. “A few people helped us out on a recent job,” he replied. “I was impressed by their work.”

There was clearly more to that story, but he could nudge Jess for details. Or wait until Will shared more on his own. Maybe at the barbecue, if Travis was still in town this weekend. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Where are you headed next?” Will asked Lila.

“I thought we’d walk down to the marina to see Eli.”

Travis felt another pang of possessiveness. Was that the friend she’d mentioned earlier?

“That’s a good walk,” Will said. “Go and enjoy the marina, but Eli’s in Key West.” He glanced at Travis and covered a chuckle with a not-so-subtle cough. “Eli’s my wild child. He decided to stay and train with one of the Guardian Agency guys. Used to be a protector. You know Max Crosby?” he said, apparently taking pity on Travis.

Hell, yes, he knew Max. Admired him in the field and as a person. “Max is good people,” Travis agreed. “I learned a lot working with him.” He missed seeing Max, as a fellow security expert and as a friend, but he was happy to hear that his new plans were working out.

“That was my assessment, too.” With that, and one more hug for Lila, Will went on his way.

They walked down to the marina anyway and Lila shared a few stories as they went. Her earlier excitement had dimmed, though she didn’t let it show whenever she introduced him to yet another person she knew.

When he asked, she only smiled and claimed to be lost in thought.

That only raised his concerns that whatever she was thinking about went a whole lot deeper than coming home and helping her grandmother transition to retirement.

Chapter 8

That evening, Lila sipped white wine and let her gaze skim over the marsh as night fell. She and Gram and Travis were among the first to arrive for dinner at Parker's Fish Camp, due to Gram's early schedule. All her senses told Lila not much had changed and yet everything around her felt different.

The view was comforting. The air blowing across the porch was crisp and clear. The sounds of a restaurant in good working order were so very familiar.

But Travis had her seeing everything in a new light. He changed it all. She

couldn't get away from his scent, his presence, and how she felt being in constant proximity.

Running into old friends while showing Travis around town hadn't been unexpected. This was Brookwell. Not just a small town, but a small *tourist* town, in the off-season.

Which meant fewer visitors to buffer her from all those friendly faces and memories.

She'd been on edge all day. Wondering if the thief would make contact or get caught in some trap she assumed Travis had planted. She felt like bait.

That wasn't nearly as bad as feeling like a liar. Holding hands, introducing Travis to everyone as if he mattered. As if he'd be in her life once this awkward situation ended.

It was probably for the best that Eli was out of town. Several years younger, he was the little brother she'd always wanted. When they'd met, she found him silly and charming. She'd had more patience with his antics than his brothers did. They'd become close friends, sharing in the joy of board games, distance running, and a weird mutual fondness for Godzilla movies. She wasn't great with lies, despite the best effort of her parents.

Eli would surely have seen straight through this charade with Travis. He would've insisted on the details. Insisted on helping.

Although this stunt was the easiest explanation for having Travis around, all the pretending tripped her up inside. Her heart kept fluttering when he'd look at her with that banked heat in his gaze. Her skin tingled whenever they touched and the effect shimmered through her, setting off sparks in places that had no business sparkling. Shouldn't the facts put a stop to those reactions? Shouldn't she be immune?

Apparently not.

Crushing on the man posing as her boyfriend was the worst. Because she wanted everything she felt, every small affection or hot glance, to be real.

It wasn't.

It was not.

And frankly, she was annoyed. This wasn't how her grand return was supposed to go. She shouldn't be sitting here in one of her favorite restaurants longing for the yacht. She'd been counting on a few days at the Inn peppered with long, easy conversations with Gram, some time catching up with friends, and then back to the work she loved. Her passion was pastry and she'd been so eager to demonstrate her new ideas for Gram, to test them

out and talk about eventual updates to the bakery menu.

Instead she was longing for the refuge of her tiny cabin on a luxury yacht where no one else could see her. She felt vulnerable, on the verge of exposure, surrounded by people who knew her well and were so pleased to see her bring home a significant other.

Surely someone would figure out Travis wasn't really interested in her.

"Have more of the smoked fish." Gram pushed the appetizer plate closer. "You've barely touched anything tonight."

She smiled at her grandmother. "That's not true. I've already eaten my weight in hushpuppies."

"Mm." Gram was clearly unconvinced.

And then Lila picked up on the speculation in that wise gaze and immediately scooped fish dip onto a cracker. "So good." The last thing she needed was Gram thinking she might be pregnant.

Not that it would be a tragedy, but still. Gram would assume it was possible, especially with Travis sharing the suite. The fewer rumors and unspoken hopes, the better for Lila.

Spotting one of the owners approaching their table, Lila smiled at Travis.

"More intros?" he murmured.

She nodded as Gram hopped up to give a hug to the woman, Jackie Parker. "Jackie and her brother Eddie recently took over for their parents," Lila filled him in quickly.

"How is everything?" Jackie asked. Her dark hair was styled back from her face and her dark eyes sparkled behind bright pink horn-rimmed glasses. "I've got Eddie working on something special to welcome you home, Lila."

"You didn't need to do that," she protested. She made the introductions and answered what had become expected questions about life on a yacht and cooking for a celebrity.

"If I never have to plan another menu, I'll be happy," she admitted.

Jackie agreed with a vigorous nod. "I'm so glad to leave that to Eddie. And I'm confident he prefers to leave the marketing to me," she added with a big laugh. "Thankfully our skills complement each other. We'd fight like kids again otherwise."

"Your parents are so proud of you two," Gram assured her. She turned to Travis, "Jackie and Eddie took over a couple years ago and didn't miss a beat." She settled back into her seat. "Got a postcard from your mom just last week," she said to Jackie.

Jackie's eyebrows lifted over her eyeglasses. "And when will you take her up on the offer to visit?"

"Soon, I hope," Lila answered before Gram could make up any excuses. "She hasn't let me into the bakery yet, but some travel time is definitely in her future."

"Good for you, Ms. Connie!"

"We'll see. I like it here."

"Here is home," Jackie agreed. She chatted with them until the server delivered the surprise. "Enjoy, my friends!"

And they did. The three of them savored the perfectly roasted stuffed flounder on a bed of risotto with charred peppers and tomato. "Eddie's outdone himself," Gram gushed.

Lila agreed, grateful that sharing the plate made it less obvious that nerves were affecting her appetite.

She wasn't sure if he sensed her distress, or just decided it was time to step up, but Travis steered the conversation toward life on the yacht. As she pushed food around her plate, he regaled Gram with tales of their rather mundane adventures in a way that caused Connie to laugh time and again.

He really was good with people, a skill she'd noticed when they were on the yacht. And something she appreciated even more right now.

For Lila, the encounter on the ferry and the details Travis had shared, left her struggling. She saw potential trouble on the face of every stranger. Which was ridiculous. She didn't have enemies. She didn't have the stolen items. Common sense and logic had to prevail. The only smart move for the thief was to cut their loss and find a new target. Preferably a target well away from the island.

They'd been out and about all day, with no issues. She hadn't seen any signs of tension, aside from that short chat with Will. Surely the lack of trouble meant the threat had passed. He didn't need to stick around and guard her out of some sense of misplaced guilt. It wasn't his fault stolen goods had landed in the potato bin. And, contrary to his belief, she didn't fault him for a thief's decision to follow her and make sure she hadn't claimed all those items for herself.

She wanted to forget the stolen goods, forget the fears from her past that had reared back up again and upset her stomach. She was over this, hadn't had a single blemish or misstep since moving in with her grandparents. Letting the past intrude on the present was silly in the extreme.

And yet, here she was, being consumed by the ugly memories.

Travis's thigh gently bumped hers under the table and she reacted, her hand gliding over his knee before she realized her intention. Her cheeks heated, along with the rest of her. Goodness, she was a wreck.

She wanted to forget the yacht, the crush, the entire mess. And she could. Would. As soon as Travis left. But while he was here, she was stuck lying to the most important person in her life.

Finished with his meal, he sat back and draped his arm across the back of her chair, his thumb painting light strokes on the back of her shoulder. She should've known he'd go all in on the boyfriend role. The kiss was her first clue, but even before that, his work ethic had been obvious during their months with Juliet.

The combination of easy touches, smoldering glances, and the way he smelled was pure temptation. She couldn't have created a more perfect boyfriend if she designed him herself.

And it was obvious to Lila that the wheels were already turning in Gram's head. Connie liked Travis. Worse, she liked Travis with Lila.

It would hurt her when he left, hurt her more when Lila confessed the elaborate lie.

But that was tomorrow's problem, she thought as yet another neighbor stopped at the table to speak to Gram and welcome Lila home.

If the thief was close, as Travis suspected, they were sure getting a demonstration on small-town dynamics. She sipped her wine, pondering. Maybe the plan was to show that getting to Lila wouldn't be easy and the smart decision was to move on.

She'd have to ask him later. When they were alone in the suite.

That would be a good diversion from all the other things she could ask him. Like whether or not more kisses were on offer.

As the neighbor moved on, Travis gave her a little squeeze, drawing her attention. "If I didn't know better, Connie, I'd say that you set all this up."

Gram waved that off. "How on earth would I have managed that? This is just how small towns work."

"You're trying to scare him off," Lila said. The gleam in Gram's eyes disproved that theory, but she'd stick with it.

"Not at all."

Travis shifted, his leg brushing hers again and her body relished the contact. "My theory is she's trying to make it obvious that people are

watching.”

“And gossiping.” Lila raised her glass in a silent toast. “He’s got you pegged, Gram.”

Connie only chuckled.

Maybe it was the wine, or the hot shivers sizzling under her skin. “I’ve got news for you,” Lila said. “The island grapevine isn’t a deterrent to any of the shenanigans that might happen in a location that is *not* under your roof.”

“Lila!” Gram exclaimed in mock horror. “That doesn’t strike me as polite dinner conversation.” Then she dissolved into laughter. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Hm. I wonder where I got it.” Lila reached for her water glass and changed the subject. “We bumped into Will Frasier today.”

“He looks good, doesn’t he?” Gram leaned close and lowered her voice. “Has a standing order for baked doughnuts once a week. He claims Chief Caldwell doesn’t know the difference.”

“He invited us to a barbecue this weekend so I can meet his wife.”

“She’s lovely,” Gram said. “You’ll be instant friends.”

“You didn’t say anything,” Lila accused.

Gram patted Lila’s hand. “It happened so fast, over the holidays. And he’s so happy.”

“I noticed.”

“Right? I was going to tell you last night, but I got distracted.” She aimed a wink at Travis. “Your news was more important to me.”

Guilt was a bitter aftertaste in Lila’s mouth. She had to figure out how to tell Gram the truth. And sooner rather than later. She’d been home only twenty-four hours, but the longer this went on, the more she abused that precious trust she’d been granted at fifteen, the harder it would be to heal the inevitable rift.

Would Gram even want to retire and hand over the family legacy once she learned about all these lies? Doubtful.

Lila felt a rush of heat flood her face. She should just tell her now. Tell her all of it and let the chips fall. If something happened, if the thief made contact, it would be a bigger challenge to convince Gram she hadn’t been in on it from the start.

But they were up and leaving before she found her courage. Outside, near Gram’s car, Lila hugged her tightly. “You’re sure you don’t want help tomorrow morning?” Lila asked.

“Of course not, my darling.” She patted Lila’s cheek. “Take your time, enjoy yourself. You deserve the break.” She smiled. “Go on and take your young man for a walk through the marsh.”

“Gram.”

Connie sighed. “Fine. If you can’t stay away, come chat with me tomorrow. After noon. Any earlier and I’ll have Callie throw you out.”

“Seriously?”

“I have the right to refuse service to anyone,” Connie reminded her. “One day so will you.”

Travis pulled Lila close. “I’ll make sure we aren’t early.”

Her cheeks caught fire again at the not-so-subtle implication. Thank goodness for the faint lighting out here. “Drive safe, Gram.”

Connie waved. “I always do!”

Still, Lila watched until she was out of the parking lot. “You don’t think…”

“The thief has no reason to target your grandmother or the bakery.”

For any other client, she would accept it as truth. But Travis didn’t know the whole story about her parents. No one did. She had to tell him, if only so he would let her tell Gram to be watchful.

She wrapped her arms around her middle and stepped back only to catch herself as she heard another group nearby. “Let’s take that boardwalk path.” She slid her hand into his. “The marsh is completely different at night.”

“If you say so.”

She led him around the restaurant and down the path while night birds called to each other. Within a few minutes, they could see the Charleston skyline in the distance, dotted with glowing church steeples. “I have to tell Gram all of it. I can’t keep lying,” she blurted out when she was confident they wouldn’t be overheard.

“Is that what’s been on your mind all day?” He tucked a curl behind her ear.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, turning away. She leaned into the railing, staring out over the dark maze of grasses and water. Something splashed nearby and a frog croaked.

“Do what?”

“Be so nice when we’re alone.”

“Lila.”

“I can’t keep up the lie, Travis. It will ruin everything. She likes you. And she loves me.” Lila shivered under the weight of her past. “She loved me

when my parents didn't have the time or inclination. She believed in me when I was a bad bet. If something happens, if the thief does anything and she hears about it, that trust is damaged. I—" Her breath hitched and it took her a second. "I don't want her to ever doubt her decision to raise me as her own."

"Shh." He covered her hand with his. "I had access to your background check. Where is this coming from?"

"My parents." Now she hiccupped. Good grief she was an adult, not a toddler. She pulled herself together. "I wasn't trying to hide anything from you. Or anyone. It was the way you looked at me on the yacht."

"Like you were guilty."

"Yes."

He squeezed her hand, then moved closer, drawing her up against him. "I know you're not a thief." He turned her into his embrace, his hand moving up and down her back. "It didn't take long to understand it was a coincidence on the yacht."

"My parents were thieves," she mumbled into his chest. "My dad, Connie's son, got caught up with the wrong girl—the wrong crowd—in college and was never right again. They were training me to be like them when my grandparents intervened and took me in that summer." He was warm and strong and he hadn't shoved her away yet, so she kept going. "I think Will knew. They consulted him, I'm sure. All those training runs had to be part of making sure I was staying on the right path."

Travis chuckled. "You're hardly the type to veer off into criminal behavior."

"Says the man who wanted to arrest me a couple days ago."

"My bad." He caught her chin between his fingers. "My initial doubts were more about shock than anything else. It's pastry or death for you."

She laughed. How did he manage that? "Pastry or death?" She held his gaze, too surprised by the reflection of her own desire to say anything more.

He watched her, his thumb gliding over her cheek. "Fits doesn't it?"

Pretty much. Her hands curled into the fabric of his shirt as she drew herself into his embrace. Pressing onto her toes, she kissed him. There was more to say, more to discuss, but first this.

She breathed him in, reveled in the heat of his mouth, his tongue tangling with hers. It was perfect. Better than any other kiss she'd had. The sensual promise in the way he held her was laced with more than desire. Though that

pulse of lust was beating hard in her ears and quickly overwhelming her in the best way possible.

He was warmth and strength and hope.

Suddenly she knew—with him—she could be safe and daring. With her secrets. With her body. Possibly even with her heart.

“Lila.” He spoke her name, over and over, into her skin as his mouth trailed down the column of her throat. “You. I want you. If—”

“Yes.” Cool air drifted over the places his mouth had been. This time the shiver was pure pleasure. “There’s more.”

“Let it wait,” he whispered. “It doesn’t matter.” He cradled her head in his palms and kissed her deeply.

She melted, needing his support to stay upright, clinging to his shoulders. She heard footsteps, a faint “whoops” and then they were alone again. “We can’t stay here without causing a scandal.” She swallowed a giggle. “And there is more. More to say,” she clarified.

He tucked her head under his chin. “More to this too.”

His words echoed in her head and through her body—a vow, a promise, a temptation—all the way back to the Inn.

Chapter 9

Travis's pulse thundered in his ears.

From a kiss. A hot and involved kiss, to be sure, but his body was responding as if his life depended on kissing her again.

They only had a short drive to the Inn and yet, it felt like they'd never get there. He needed a distraction, but he didn't want to crush the mood. Far from it. The sooner he had Lila in his arms again, the better he'd feel.

She'd trusted him with her past and what seemed to be her deepest worry. He wouldn't let her down. Reaching across the console between them, he

caught her hand. “Tell me more about the Inn.”

“What?”

He rested his fingers on the inside of her wrist, more than a little gratified to feel her pulse racing too. “The Inn. A place like that doesn’t just materialize on an island like this.”

“Oh. But—”

“Distract me, Lila. Or I might combust before we get back to the room.”

“Oh.”

This time she dragged out the word and he would’ve sworn she was trying not to laugh. Thankfully, she did as he asked and started spewing the facts.

“It’s an island fixture,” she began. “Back in the 1940s it was pretty small. Thirty luxury suites, a grand ballroom and upscale dining room dripping with chandeliers. By the ‘70s it had fallen into disrepair, mostly due to a hurricane and for a time, according to Gram, people on the island considered it an outdated eyesore.” He laced his hand with hers as he turned into the long driveway. “So what changed?”

“A very determined mayor. He had serious political clout in the state and some financially savvy friends. He drummed up interest and support for the idea of community ownership. The Inn is owned by Brookwell residents who bought into a reinvestment and refurbishment campaign. Everyone who did that, my grandparents included, still owns a little piece of the Inn and receives dividends each year.”

“Impressive,” he murmured.

“Definitely,” she agreed. “Over time, they expanded, adding community events and running advertising to make it a desired destination. The management company is really good and cooperates with the Brookwell board. Together they’ve managed to grow the building and meet tourist expectations without hurting the easygoing vibe on the island.”

“Remarkable.”

“You’re right. I guess like most of the locals, I just take it for granted.”

“Something I won’t be doing tonight.” He handed his keys to the parking attendant and hustled around to join Lila. Hand in hand, they all but ran for the elevators.

In the elevator, they were alone and he had to kiss her again. “This isn’t sudden,” he admitted between kisses. “Not for me. Not new.” His breath sawed in and out. “I’ve been wishing for you for months.”

Her eyes went wide as she stared at him. “You’re making that up.”

“I’m not.” He was sure she didn’t mean to offend his honor. “Why would you say that?”

Her gaze narrowed and then the elevator doors parted on their floor. She hurried into the hallway, dragging him along by the hand. “You mean it?”

“Honesty should be my middle name.”

“Right.” She reached into her purse for the room key, but he already had his out. “Because we’re being so honest here.”

Damn. Another misstep. Lying to her grandmother was tearing her apart. “Between you and me, yes.” He pulled her to a stop in front of her door. “Nothing but the truth for us. I’m attracted to you. Have been for months.” He watched the rosy color flood her cheeks, the immediate heat come into her green eyes. Her lips were still full from their earlier kisses. “But we were working in very close proximity.” He leaned close, his thighs pressing lightly into hers. “Then you were all about leaving the yacht. I was staying. And...” He brushed his mouth over hers, nibbled at her lower lip.

“And?” She gripped his biceps, then slid her hands up to his shoulders.

He wanted to feel those hands on his bare skin, wanted to feel her skin against his. She’d be supple and soft and he was ready to devote his full attention to learning what gave her pleasure.

Anticipation was a steady tension in his muscles. This was the closest he’d been to a relationship. Ridiculous since his tie to Lila was fake. Well, it had started out as an act, but it was real now. He’d watched over her for months as part of Juliet’s staff. Longed for what couldn’t be due to their different career trajectories.

She was ready for home and his home was the job.

If they could have tonight... Well, it wouldn’t be enough, but it would ease that ache that had plagued him. And it wasn’t like they’d caught the thief yet. Maybe he and Lila could have tonight, could agree to enjoy the time together, until they reeled in the culprit for the insurance company.

For her safety.

“Travis?” Her fingertips skated along his jaw, reminding him he owed her an answer.

“Figured I missed my chance.” He twirled her curling hair around his finger. She was silk and light and he celebrated that his chance was now. And he’d make the most of every minute she gave him. Pouring on the charm and all those little displays of affection had taken their toll on him. He’d thought a cold shower would be the highlight of the evening. He’d never been happier

to be wrong.

“Huh.”

That wasn't the response he'd expected. “Care to elaborate?”

Her eyes sparkled and lust shot through his system. “Not in the hallway.”

“Your wish, my command.” He tapped the keycard and she turned to open the door. Right on her heels, he nearly knocked her forward when she stopped short.

Peering around her, seeing the catastrophic mess, he surged in front of her.

Someone had ransacked the suite, torn it apart in what appeared to be fury. Travis knew better. He recognized the signs of a violent, thorough search.

“If I say run you do it,” he instructed in a low whisper.

“Where? Where would I go?” she demanded, her voice barely audible.

He wasn't up for a challenge to his orders. “You promised to cooperate,” he reminded her.

Unwilling to debate it further, he pulled his gun and moved into the room. He did a swift and thorough search of the suite and within minutes, he was confident they were alone.

“Call the police,” he told her as he dialed Connor.

She reached for her phone, hesitating. “Gram will hear about it.”

He stared at her while he waited for his assistant to pick up. “We're reporting this. Not up for debate.”

“Travis.”

The tremor in her voice convinced him to hold the line on this. Someone had come into her suite and trashed it. A search, yes, but also some petty destruction for the sole purpose of causing distress.

Because he'd aimed the thief at her.

He had to protect her and shelter her from as much heartache as possible. He sighed. That meant sheltering Connie as well.

“Upton?” Connor's voice in his ear only underscored his resolve.

“Yeah.” He wanted to tell Lila to sit down, but there wasn't a place she could do that without disturbing evidence. She hadn't yet seen that her clothing had been sliced to ribbons, her suitcase dismantled. “We walked into a tornado.” He gave Connor a brief rundown of the scene. “No sign of forced entry.”

“Keycards and fobs can be copied,” Connor said.

“I'm aware.” Travis swore. “I need you to get Jess Keller to Lila's room at the Inn. Quietly.” As a former cop and with connections on the island, she'd

know how to manage this without stirring up gossip that would get to Connie before Lila did.

Lila caught his hand, holding tight. When he looked at her, she whispered, “Thank you.”

“All right.”

He caught the hint of judgment in his assistant’s voice, and appreciated that advice wasn’t offered, only cooperation.

“Comb whatever feed you can find for any sign of the woman. This has to be her work.”

“On it.”

“Any chance you can arrange for fresh clothes? Enough for a few days, please. We can get toiletries from the Inn.”

“Done,” Connor confirmed. “I’m booking you into a different room now, under my name. Do me a favor and don’t take anything out of that room.”

“As if the cops would let us.” Lila’s fingers tightened. “But you’re worried about some kind of tracker?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll make sure we’re clear before we go,” Travis promised, ending the call. He wrapped Lila into a big hug. Nearly all of that crazy lust had faded. Another missed chance. He was focused on comforting her, even as he wished it wasn’t necessary. It infuriated him that this persistent thief had ruined what was sure to have been a mind-blowing physical connection.

“Jess Keller will be here soon. Connor booked a new room for us. We’ll go as soon as Jess clears us.”

“How?” She pressed back just enough to meet his gaze. “How did this happen?”

They’d covered this. “My fault,” he reminded her. “Back on the yacht, I made a mistake.”

“No.” She frowned and on reflex, he reached up to smooth the tiny lines away. “How did anyone get inside?”

“It’s easier than most people realize,” he said. “Would’ve been nice if she’d climbed in through a window and possibly been noticed by a witness,” he grumbled.

“What now?”

“I’ll take some pictures. Let’s try to determine if anything is missing without tampering with the scene.”

She folded her arms, glaring up at him. “We both know nothing’s missing.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “Maybe. Best to be sure. Um...”

“What?”

“Your clothes were—”

She bolted. To her credit, she deftly tiptoed around the chaos to get to the bedroom. But the sound she made when she got there surprised him. No tears or fear, it was fury, pure and simple. She cursed a blue streak, but she didn’t touch a thing.

Standing in the doorway, her face was flushed with temper. “I heard you ask your assistant for clothes.” Her eyes closed and she took a deep breath, clearly struggling for control. “This?” She flicked a hand toward the mess behind her. “This was just mean. Rude.”

He hoped that was all. Profiling wasn’t his specialty, but he’d seen some dark and unpleasant things during his career as a protector. And that apparent mean streak bothered him.

The money tied up in the theft was motive enough for the thief’s persistence. But if they were dealing with a personal issue as well, they needed to find that connection ASAP.

The soft knock on the door had to be Jess. He opened it to see Will Frasier right behind her, holding a bottle of wine. “Thanks for the invite,” Jess said brightly. “We can’t wait to catch up.”

When the door was closed, the mood shifted immediately.

“Thanks for coming so fast,” Travis murmured.

Jess and Will took in the scene in silence, then stared at each other for a long moment.

“Comprehensive,” Will said.

“Mean,” Lila said. “The bitch shredded my clothes. *All* of them.”

With a silent look, Jess and Will split up, Jess going to the bedroom with Lila and Will staying with Travis.

Will grilled Travis about the situation, start to finish, including Lila’s admission about her parents and why she couldn’t bear lying to Connie. “She shared a lot with the man who *isn’t* the boyfriend.”

He nearly admitted how much he wanted to be. That was between him and Lila. “Part of the protection plan,” he said.

“Uh-huh.” Will shook his head and took more pictures. “I’ll get someone in here tomorrow to dust for prints.”

“Good.” Travis tucked his hands into his pockets. “We have a new room ready.”

“Your group is efficient,” Will muttered. It didn’t sound like a compliment. “Girl should be with her grandmother.”

Travis rocked back on his heels. “You’d rather have them dealing with this alone?”

Will glared. “Hell, no.” He aimed a finger at Travis. “But you’re trouble.”

“True.” The older man had a point. “I am sorry for it.”

Jess walked out of the bedroom, Lila in her wake. Both of them looked grim. “We found a note,” Jess stated.

“Wedged into the lining of my suitcase.”

“A place where someone would’ve hidden stolen items?” Travis asked.

Lila shrugged. “I suppose.”

Jess, wearing gloves, held up the note. “Return what’s mine,” Jess read aloud. “Last ferry tomorrow. Cooperate or things will get messy.”

“Like this isn’t messy.” Lila grumbled.

Travis worried that whoever was doing this knew the best way to manipulate Lila was through the only family she had left. He glanced at Will and Jess and realized they’d come to the same sour conclusion. Thankfully, no one voiced any concern for Connie, but Jess did send him a text that she’d get protection in place.

“We’ll walk you to your new room,” Jess said. “We can trade keys there.”

“All right.”

“What about tomorrow?” Lila wondered.

“Leave that to me.” Will’s smile was calculating. “You two go about your visit as if nothing’s wrong. I’ll take a team down there for a special training.”

“And what do I tell Gram?”

“We’ll talk to her tomorrow,” Travis said. “Together.”

Relief washed over her. “You mean it?”

She was staring at him as if he deserved a medal rather than a reprimand. “Yes. I promise.”

A moment later, she was plastered against him. He gave her a quick embrace and stepped back, putting a good amount of distance between them before Will forcibly intervened.

Chapter 10

Exhausted, Lila groaned when someone knocked on the door of their new room. “Who could that be?”

“Probably our replacement clothing and such. I’ll handle it.”

Of course he would. She wasn’t exactly tired. Heck, it wasn’t even that late. She was just wiped out emotionally and physically. The fallout from all the highs and lows and adrenaline surges of the last few hours.

But tomorrow things would take a turn in their favor. Tomorrow would be the beginning of the end of this mess. Starting with coming clean with Gram.

She was grateful to Travis for so much already, but especially that he would help her explain the lies about his presence here.

She heard the soft exchange of voices at the door and then the click and tumble as Travis locked up again.

This room was smaller than the previous suite, but she wasn't complaining. Travis's assistant had come through in a big way just by finding a new room. She really hadn't wanted to relocate to another B&B. Definitely didn't want to go into Charleston. Too far from Gram. And she refused to go to Gram's house while the thief was in a destructive mood.

He returned to where she waited on the loveseat, with a large rolling suitcase, a shopping bag from the spa, and a big basket.

"What's all this?"

"Provisions." He hefted the suitcase onto the stand near the bed. "You can unpack and sort the clothing," he suggested. "Unless you'd rather unwrap."

"All right." Her thoughts were sluggish in the aftermath of the room invasion. She hadn't given any thought to where he might sleep. In the suite, the couch had been roomy enough for him. Here, it was the floor or the loveseat. That hardly seemed fair after everything Travis had done.

"You should take the bed tonight."

When he didn't reply, she glanced over. He'd apparently decided to unpack the bag from the spa at the vanity counter.

"Floor's fine."

So he had heard her.

"They sent up everything we need. Plus a few things I don't recognize," he added. Hands tucked in his pockets, he stared at the basket. "Want me to open this?"

Why wouldn't he look at her? A few hours ago he'd been talking about missed chances. About making the most of the moment. They'd been ready to tear off their clothes. She unzipped the suitcase and found one side filled with menswear, the other side full of options for her.

"Sure." She quickly transferred the clothing to the drawers near the closet, one for each of them. "Looks like Jess roused the managers of the shop downstairs," she said, crossing the room. "Most everything has the Inn logo on it."

He chuckled. "We can go to Charleston tomorrow and shop if you want."

"After we talk to Gram."

"After," he agreed. He reached for the bottle of wine. "Thirsty?"

“Why not?” She retrieved the glassware from the tray near the television. “This hasn’t been the rest and relaxation I hoped for between the yacht and taking over the bakery,” she admitted.

“That’s on me.” He handed her a glass. “But it’ll get better, I promise.”

“Starting tomorrow.” She tapped her glass lightly to his and they both drank. He seemed restless, as if he couldn’t settle, moving to the window, then back to check the locks at the door.

“Are you planning to stand watch all night?”

He turned then, met her gaze, and she saw a flicker of the earlier fire in his brown eyes.

She wanted that fire, wanted to burn with him, to be consumed by desire and lust until there was no more room for fear or doubts. Probably not the best reason to jump into bed with a man, but this wasn’t a normal situation.

“They sent up board shorts for you,” she said, surprising herself.

“Are you requesting a costume change?”

Was she? A memory of him lounging on the sunny back deck of the yacht, fresh after a swim in the ocean, filled her vision. He’d been sprawled out, those long, muscled legs crossed at the ankles, his hands behind his head showing off his torso and arms to full advantage. His eyes had been shielded by dark glasses and in her private thoughts she’d imagined him watching her, need and hunger in his gaze.

“I’ll do it,” he said. “As long as they delivered a bikini for you.”

“They did,” she whispered.

“I told you I was braced for regrets.” His voice was low but it rumbled through her like distant thunder. “You’re a vision in a bikini, Lila.”

He meant it. And in that moment, she realized not everything had been a lie or stunt. The intensity and the wonder in his eyes now was the same as their first kiss in the hotel lobby. What was she waiting for?

Tomorrow they’d tell Gram the truth, but the ruse wouldn’t be over. Not until the thief was caught. Which could be as early as tomorrow evening if Will’s idea worked.

And then he’d be gone. Back to work. Off the island. Out of her life.

She set the wine aside and walked into his arms. “No more missed chances, Travis.”

“And no regrets?”

“Never.”

Tonight, right now, was for the two of them. Her whole world was his kiss.

His mouth and hands on her skin, at last. She tugged open his shirt, her hands skating over that gorgeous chest, pausing just long enough for him to put his gun out of the way.

Then it was only the two of them and the joy of discovery. Pleasure, layer by layer, building to a crescendo. And the sweet, sweet fall back to earth within the strength and comfort of his arms.

Chapter 11

The high of waking next to a warm and sexy Lila quickly faded when they walked into the bakery at just after ten the next morning.

Connie's cheerful greeting dimmed when they asked to speak with her privately. Lila had pegged the timing and although Travis had rehearsed what to say and how, the truth spilled out in a jumble under Connie's disapproving glare.

"Lila wasn't given much of a choice," he finished. "My apologies to both of you."

“I’m sorry, Gram,” Lila whispered.

The silence stretched. Awkward. Uncomfortable. In a different life, Travis suspected Connie would’ve made an excellent detective. He sure as hell wanted to keep rambling until she gave some sign that she’d heard enough.

“But you care about her?” Connie demanded.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

“Gram.”

“It’s obvious.” Connie shot her a quelling look. “Then don’t waste more time here. Go on and catch whoever is behind this nonsense.”

“We’re doing our best. I’ll be around until it’s settled.”

“Good.”

He found the picture of the woman outside the flower shop. “Does this woman look familiar?”

Connie studied the image and then shook her head. Standing, she said, “My girl was never a thief. And whoever thinks otherwise doesn’t know her at all.”

That was good and bad news for Travis in the context of the note and intimate destruction of Lila’s belongings. He’d been hoping the older woman would have some insight on the woman who’d been trailing her.

Lila was staring at the floor, looking miserable.

Connie wasn’t having it. “I thought you’d worked past this,” she said, her voice tender. Reaching out, she gripped Lila’s shoulders. “You hold your head high.” She waited until Lila obeyed. “There were no secrets when you came to live with us, sweetheart. Your parents, to my dismay, were useless by the time you came along. You did what they asked, but that wasn’t *you*. Not in your heart.

“Anything from before your life here was simply a little girl looking for approval. Looking to survive. If what they thought about you was the truth, you wouldn’t have turned your life around so easily. That’s strength inside you, not weakness.”

Lila hugged her grandmother hard. “Thank you.”

“For what? Loving you?” She shot Travis a pointed look. “Loving you is easy. Always has been.”

He could see that for himself. Not that he was in love with her or anything. He cared about Lila. He cared about her safety and wellbeing. As more than a professional, sure, or he never would’ve slept with her last night. Still, it was a bit unnerving thinking of Lila and love in the same sentence. Happy ever

after wasn't on his radar right now. He didn't think it was on hers either. They were both too committed to their career plans. Plans that didn't line up geographically.

Lila told Connie they were going shopping in Charleston and she cautioned her grandmother to stay alert and call the police for anything out of the ordinary. Connie agreed, even as she shooed them out the back door.

"You know Jess will have someone close by," he reminded her as they walked back to where he'd parked his rental car.

"I'm trying to remember that."

He was trying to remember it too. He didn't want Lila to suffer any more loss or grief.

At the car, he opened the door and she paused to face him. "Thank you."

To his surprise, she kissed him right there. In public. "We don't have to keep pretending."

"Who's pretending?" She grinned at him. "You were amazing with Gram, filling her in without letting her get scared. Taking the blame for the whole mess."

"None of this is your fault."

Whatever was going on in her head, that earned him another kiss, and he gave up on the analysis for a few precious seconds.

"Keep it up and we won't make it to a single store," he warned.

She hopped into the seat and grabbed the seat belt. "For what it's worth, that's really only a threat when baking tools and kitchen supplies are on the list."

"Duly noted."

And he discovered she hadn't been making it up. When it came to shopping for clothes, she was efficient and practical. But when she'd passed by a specialty cookware shop, he might've lost her for the rest of the day.

Thankfully, Connor called with an update and that proved more important than the macaron baking sheet she'd been studying. Outside on the sidewalk, he held the phone so Lila could hear the news along with him.

"Lt. Frasier has the training exercise in place. I caught sight of her near the Waterfront ferry stop in Charleston. Timestamp was yesterday morning."

"Nothing on Brookwell?" Travis queried.

"No."

"What next?" Lila asked. "Should we go do something to attract her attention?"

Travis stared at her. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. Visit a pawn shop or, um, a jewelry store?”

Connor sputtered but Travis saw red. “You’re not bait,” he said through gritted teeth.

“I kinda am,” she countered. “And if she’s close to me—us—she’s not threatening Gram.”

He ignored that. Couldn’t deal with that logic here and now. They’d discuss it later, in private.

“Have you dug up any possible connection to Lila?”

“None.” Connor didn’t sound happy about it. “We’ve been searching through every detail.” He paused. “I know how invasive that sounds and I’m sorry, Lila. But no one stands out. I can’t find any contacts prior to your move to Brookwell with any connection to you at all. No one you’ve been in contact with has anything to do with this. They’ve all been cleared.”

“Not even my parents?” She bit her lip.

Travis knew the question cost her. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, offering his support. When she leaned in, he could feel her desperation. This difficult situation just seemed to get worse.

“We haven’t eliminated that possibility,” Connor replied. “So far, there’s no clear indication of their involvement.”

“That’s good.” She cleared her throat and when he saw the question in her eyes, Travis urged her to speak up. “Can you... do you know if they’re alive?”

Connor was quiet for a moment. “We believe so, though I can’t confirm it. I’m working out timelines and running down last known and current whereabouts.”

“Thank you.”

She tucked her hands into her jacket, the one with the Inn logo, and pressed her lips together. He caught the sheen of tears in her eyes.

“Is anything painting a picture for you?” he asked Connor.

“No.” The researcher was clearly frustrated. “Everything indicates a bad place, bad time situation.”

Travis wanted to agree, but he couldn’t shake off the personal element to that room search. “All right. We’ll keep operating on the assumption that the thief is convinced Lila has the loot and won’t leave without it.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have more.”

“You’re doing great, Connor. If we’re at a dead end with the thief on this

end, let's go back." They were missing something and he couldn't keep Lila dancing on this razor's edge much longer. She needed to feel safe. For herself, her grandmother, and their family legacy. "See what you can dig up on how the stolen goods got into the galley. Maybe the investigators missed some clue in the original theft reports. Jess can help with the contacts at the insurance company if you need her."

"You got it."

Ending the call, Travis slipped his phone back into his pocket. "You okay?" he asked Lila.

"Sure."

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he guided her down the sidewalk, toward the Battery. "Forgive me if I call your bluff."

She was quiet for several minutes. "I don't know why it bugs me. My parents," she clarified, though he knew what she'd meant. "They let me go. Not that I wanted to stay." She pushed her hair back from her face. "I did the therapy. With all the enthusiasm of a sulky teenager at the start." A smile flickered over her face. "And Gram's right. I could see I didn't want that life."

"You were built for better."

She shrugged. "So why does it hurt? After all this time, I should be over it."

They walked along the wide sea wall, with the breeze blowing and people moving along in various pursuits. "Because parents are supposed to be better." He drew her to the railing, taking both her hands in his. "And kids regularly assume blame for things outside of their control. I sure as hell did. I couldn't get away from home fast enough. I made it through high school and enlisted immediately. I left home and didn't look back. Didn't go back. Not ever. Not for weddings, funerals, or reunions."

She studied him for a long moment. "And here you are, one of the best people I know."

Something inside his chest seemed to crack and a warmth seeped through. It was the strangest damned feeling. A sensation that originated with Lila and made him want to burrow closer.

He'd never been the clingy guy. Hell, he figured he was full up on friends and relationships weren't a priority at this point. Not when the job he loved could take him anywhere for extended periods of time.

But looking at her, the longing was so unexpected it stole his breath.

She lifted a hand to his heart and he was sure she could feel it thundering in an uneven rhythm. “You were built for better too.” Her gaze shifted out over the water, in the direction of Brookwell. She slid her arms around his waist and he wasn’t sure if the contentment was hers or his. “Brookwell is the only real home I’ve known. Gram gave my life a restart that summer and I was all in. Still am. Thanks for everything you’re doing to help protect what matters most to me.”

“You’re welcome,” he managed. His throat was tight with the sudden influx of emotions he typically avoided. He was afraid that what mattered most to him, was her.

If he was right, if the feelings rocketing through his system were more than a sense of obligation for pointing trouble at her, more than superb sexual satisfaction, then he was on the cusp of some serious, life-changing decisions.

He hoped he would know how to make sense of it when they caught the thief.

Chapter 12

They didn't catch the thief.

Lila was trying to be patient, but it wasn't easy with the threat looming over her like a sword about to fall. Either Will's impromptu training exercise had scared off the woman, or she was better at hiding than anyone had a right to be.

Connor and Travis concluded that the meet at the ferry dock had been a ploy, though neither of them could sort out the end goal. While all attention had been on the ferry dock, nothing else in Lila's life had been disturbed.

The thief hadn't made contact either. The insurance company hadn't reported any additional thefts or issues near the marina.

It had been four days and, on the surface, it seemed the crisis had passed. Lila kept suggesting she was finally in the clear.

No one shared her opinion and the vote among the security experts was that she should remain at the Inn, under Travis's protection. Though she agreed it was a better choice for Gram's safety, she was also greedy when it came to time with him. In bed and out, she wanted to savor the closest thing she'd had to a serious relationship in ages.

It was more than the sex, though that was phenomenal. She felt as if she was making a new best friend. They talked less about the past and more about the present and future. Despite his clear intention to resume normal Guardian Agency assignments, she was enjoying this interlude. Being the object of his exceptional focus—professionally and personally—was an incredible feeling.

He made her feel valued. He supported her schedule and efforts when she returned to the bakery, and he found ways to help. Everyone in town still treated him like her boyfriend, including Will, Jess, and Gram.

Day by day, her feelings for him grew, taking root in her heart. She suspected she was falling in love with him. The smart thing would be to pull back, protect herself from heartache, but when she tried, the distance felt all wrong.

Whether or not she loved him with all she had right now, she would miss him when he moved on. Why not enjoy it? So she made a choice and focused on happiness and joy. On the laughter when he shared stories about his military life and his protection career.

On the tenderness that swamped her when he held her close.

Right up until her cell phone rang at five o'clock in the morning, just as someone knocked on the door of her room.

She grabbed the phone and Travis went to the door. "What's wrong?"

"Lila? This is Callie. At the bakery."

"Of course." Lila was up and out of bed. She grabbed clothes and scrambled for the privacy of the bathroom. The young woman sounded upset and through the door, she could hear the low voices of Will and Travis. "What do you need?"

"I was opening with Connie today and—" Her voice cracked and then there was only silence.

Lila froze. "Callie?"

“Sorry. I’m here. Um. Sorry. The bakery is... Someone broke in and—”

“Lila, this is Chief Caldwell. I sent Will over your way.”

“What happened?!” Lila demanded. “Is Gram okay?”

“She’s been transported to the clinic, just as a precaution. She was spitting mad about it.”

At that, Lila took her first deep breath. “Okay. Spitting mad is good.”

“Yes, I agree.” Caldwell continued, “The bakery was vandalized and Callie is overwhelmed. We’re processing the scene now. I asked Will to bring Travis here, so you can be with Connie at the clinic.”

“All right.” She figured Travis got the easy task. Gram didn’t like doctors much at all, less when they were aimed at her. “All right,” she repeated. “I’ll need frequent updates,” she reminded the Chief.

“Connie demanded the same, but I’ll funnel them through you.”

“Perfect. Thanks.”

Travis caught her as she barreled out of the bathroom. “Take a breath.”

She did, her gaze locked on him. “Right. I’ll be calm once I see her.”

“Good,” Will said from where he waited by the door. “I’ll drive you over and Travis can drive himself to the bakery.”

“Wasn’t there someone watching the bakery?”

Will scowled. “Yes. As I told Travis, the rookie on the overnight shift will be reprimanded. Callie says he was asleep in his vehicle when she and Connie found the mess.”

“He’s okay?” Lila asked.

“Groggy, dismayed, but seemingly well. We sent him to the clinic too for a tox screen.”

“Will thinks he might’ve been drugged somehow.”

Lila’s knees threatened to buckle. They had to get a handle on this situation immediately. “And you’re sure this is related to the thief?”

With Travis’s encouragement, Will handed over his phone. “Pictures from the scene.”

She scrolled through, her stomach twisting into knots.

The bakery was a disaster. It looked as if their own private tornado had torn through. Utter destruction in every photo. Bags of flour and sugar were torn open, the contents spilled over the floor. Racks were toppled, and equipment was scattered everywhere.

No wonder Callie had been overwhelmed. Lila felt the urgency pressing on her to get to the clinic, but she needed all the details first.

The last photo showed a message scrawled on the wall in bright red frosting: *You know what I want*

“What about the front counter?” she asked when she reached the end of the series of photos.

“Nothing disturbed outside of the kitchen,” Will said.

“Because whoever did this knows how to hit below the belt,” Lila grumbled. “When you find the thief, I want a chance to punch her lights out. Gram too,” she added, refusing to entertain any ideas of Connie being weak.

Will’s eyebrows arched, but there was a ghost of a smile on his mouth. “We’ll see.” He tucked his phone away. “At this rate, the whole town will want to take a swing.”

“Good.” That would be a rich fantasy she could use to distract Gram. “I need to get to the clinic.”

Travis handed her a jacket and her shoes. “I’ll be over as soon as we sort this out.” He bent and kissed her cheek under Will’s stern expression. “Stay away from the officer,” he whispered in her ear.

She used his shoulder to steady herself as she shoved her feet into the shoes. “I hadn’t even considered that.”

“Good.” He kissed her on the lips this time. “Don’t.”

And then he hustled out the door.

“You need anything else?” Will asked.

She shook her head. “I’ve got my phone. Anything else I can call Travis.”

“Or a friend.”

“That too.”

Will offered up a few reassurances on the short drive to the clinic and promised they would share details as they came to light. They walked inside and she heard him ask about the officer who’d messed up while she darted off with another nurse to see her grandmother.

The nurse pushed open the door and Lila rushed in, unsure what to expect.

“Lila!” Connie opened her arms. “Finally. Let’s get out of here.”

“Sure thing,” Lila replied, crossing to the bed. She bent down and gave Gram a gentle hug. The machine monitoring vital stats beeped softly and steadily. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. Get me out of this dumb gown.”

“As soon as the tests are done, Mrs. Copeland.”

Gram scowled. “Don’t you Mrs. Copeland me, Diedre. You’ve been eating my apple strudel for your whole life.”

“And thankful for it,” the nurse agreed. “I’ll happily break you out of here myself the minute the doctor gives the all clear.”

Gram sniffed. “There’s not a thing wrong with me.”

“Shouldn’t take long then.” With a cheerfully unrelenting smile, Diedre left.

“Making friends everywhere you go,” Lila said. She pulled a chair closer. Gram looked pale, despite the big talk. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“What’s going on? I told them not to call you.”

“As if Will would let you get away with that.”

Gram grumbled, her fingers curling into the edge of the blanket. “It wasn’t your morning to open.”

But Lila wished it had been. “I saw a few pictures. That must’ve been a real shock.”

Gram nodded, but didn’t elaborate.

Lila felt utterly helpless. “We’ll have it cleaned up before you get back.”

“Can you open today?”

“No, Gram.” She hated that there wasn’t a better answer. “Even if the police didn’t need to search for evidence.” Her grandmother covered her face, let out a frustrated groan. “We’ll need time to clean and get new supplies.”

“And you’d be smart to call the health inspector, just to avoid trouble,” Gram added, clearly resigned.

“Are there any event orders I need to figure out?” Between her grandmother and herself, they could rent space from another restaurant kitchen if necessary.

“No. The standing orders will understand.” She rolled her eyes. “Probably already heard about it. Or will soon.”

She had a good point. The island grapevine was a blessing at times. The less she had to talk about it, the better. “I’ll start making calls once we hit our normal opening time. I can cover expenses and salary.” There hadn’t been much to spend her money on while she’d been in Juliet’s employ.

Gram took hold of her hand and gave her a hard shake. “All of that’s under control. But don’t you dare try to hide any trouble from me. I’m stronger than you think.”

Lila thought Gram had never looked more fragile. “You’re the strongest woman I know.” She lifted her hand and gave it a kiss. “You’re the best, Gram.”

“I’ve got the best girl, that’s for sure.”

They were interrupted when Dr. Nyland came in with a suggested evaluation plan. He'd come to Brookwell a few years ago and seemed to get along well with the locals. After urging Gram to cooperate, Lila stepped into the hallway at the doctor's request.

She checked her phone, but Travis hadn't sent any messages yet.

A few minutes later, Dr. Nyland emerged. "She's a pistol."

Lila smiled. "What are you concerned about?"

"Shock mostly," Dr. Nyland said. "Walk with me."

Lila fell into step beside him. The man was in his forties, kind, pragmatic, and practical with a good sense of humor. "At her age, this was a terrible scare. When she came in she was trembling and couldn't stop."

Lila gulped, suddenly scared herself. "She seems steadier now."

"Yes. A great sign," Nyland agreed. "I want to keep her overnight at minimum," he continued. "We'll push fluids, run a few tests. She's healthy, Lila, and I want to keep her that way."

"Same." She laced her fingers together. "How can I help?"

"While she's here, just be supportive, keep her mood up. Try to avoid business talk."

Lila sighed. "That'll be a challenge."

He patted her shoulder. "I believe in you." Nyland smiled. "Are you taking over the bakery?"

"That's the plan. But I'm not running her out."

"No." At the nurse's station, he stopped, folding his arms. "She has a lot to offer and she loves to stay busy. Needs to feel involved."

"You know her well."

He tipped his head. "I like to think so. We'll take good care of her."

"Thank you." Lila nearly ran back to the room, desperate for every possible moment with Gram.

She paused, hearing voices. Hearing Will, she opened the door. "Am I interrupting?"

"Not at all." Will smiled, though it was strained. "Just going over a few things."

Gram was scowling again. "Apparently no one saw anything helpful. The lock on the back door was busted and everything was trashed when we walked in."

A tremendous wave of relief rolled over Lila. If Gram had interrupted the vandal she might've been seriously injured. "I'm sorry. We'll fix it," she

said. "I promise." She avoided Will's gaze.

"What about the cameras?" Gram asked Will. "We installed those to prevent this nonsense."

"I'm glad you did," Will said. "So far we don't have hard information, but we're just getting started."

"Excuse me." Lila slipped out of the room. She'd ask Travis how much time those searches usually required. No sense upsetting her grandmother further by making Will explain it now. She checked her phone for messages. There were hours yet before opening hours and she didn't know what to do. She was out of her depth. Heading for the coffee station, her mind went back to the pictures Will had shared, particularly that message on the wall.

This was about the theft and the stolen items she did *not* have. Her grandmother had been targeted, caught up in a mess she didn't deserve. That wouldn't do. There had to be some way to catch this thief and bring this situation to an end.

The shock, the full scope of the danger pressed in on her. Everything inside her went tight. Her heart felt pinched, her lungs too small. She stepped away from the coffee machine and found a chair.

"Lila?"

She looked up, baffled to see Travis striding toward her. "You're at the bakery."

"Not anymore."

She wasn't proud of the way she jumped up and threw herself into his arms. But she was so grateful for his warmth and strength as he held her in a secure hug. He cuddled her close, kissed the top of her head. "How is she?"

"Dr. Nyland says she's mostly fine." She explained what the doctor wanted and why. "Will's in there with her now."

She looked up at him. "Is there any news?"

"Not really." He swallowed and she saw the trouble brewing in his gaze.

"What aren't you telling me?"

Travis's mouth set in a flat line, his brow knitting. "Obviously, we're dealing with an escalation." He walked her outside to the patio. Faint sunlight filtered through the pergola, but the early winter-morning chill lingered. "Jess tells me the officer keeping watch was drugged. Connor hasn't spotted the woman we suspect anywhere in the area."

"How is that possible?"

He tucked his hands into his pockets. "I really don't know and that makes

me mad. No one should be able to move about so freely.”

“Average height and build makes it easy to blend.”

“So I’ve heard,” he grumbled. “Whoever is behind this is watching you too closely. They know where to strike for maximum effect. I don’t like that.”

“Why won’t they give up?” A tremor shook her straight to her toes.

“I’m not sure. We’re doing all we can, through the police department, the insurance company, and Guardian Agency channels.”

He paused and she braced for more bad news. “Just say it. Please.”

“Connor asked if you can forward calls to the bakery to your cell phone.”

She hadn’t thought of that. “Yes, of course.” When it was done she looked up. “Anything else?”

“He’ll monitor your calls, if that’s okay. You can trust him.”

“I trust you,” she admitted. “By extension, I trust anyone on your team.”

He stepped in close and gave her shoulders a squeeze. “Thank you.”

She rested within his arms for as long as she dared. The comfort was priceless. Maybe she should be more independent, considering they weren’t in what she’d call a real relationship. They were in a situation with extra benefits.

And somewhere along the line, she’d fallen in love. She could feel it moving through her like a river—an unstoppable force she’d have to deal with eventually.

But today, there were other things at the front of her mind.

“How is Callie?” Lila asked.

“I sent her home, told her we’d call her in when it was time to clean up.” He rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “She’s shy, but pretty hardheaded about helping. I assured her you’d keep her informed about Connie’s progress.”

“Sounds like the Connie Copeland effect is working on her. Gram always sees potential in people. Always.”

“This will be over soon. You and your grandmother—hell, the whole town—won’t be dealing with this forever.”

She smiled up at him. “Why is your confidence so unshakable?” It was one of his most appealing traits, though she managed to keep that detail to herself. For now. She wasn’t sure he wanted to hear how much she cared. How much she loved him.

She didn’t want to upset the balance between them right now. Having his help, his protection, and yes, his affection would be enough.

“Lots of practice. More than a few failures in between,” he admitted. “Go on and be with your grandmother. And let me know if anyone makes contact.”

With a kiss, Travis left her to work his case. She tried to do as he asked, returning to Gram’s room and doing what Nyland asked as well.

Throughout the day, between tests and naps, Lila talked with Gram about as many things that weren’t business as possible, though every topic eventually circled back to the bakery or how the bakery fit into the town.

Nina arrived with a cart full of flowers for the room and she was a lovely distraction for both Gram and Lila.

Nina’s mother, Roxy, wasn’t far behind. She bustled in on a cloud of positive energy before shooing Nina and Lila away. “We’re setting up a call with the Parkers,” Roxy explained, holding up the tablet she carried. “We’ll just bore you youngsters to tears.”

Nina and Lila made their escape to the coffee station. “My mom is determined to convince Connie to visit the Parkers in Florida for a week or so and let you handle the clean-up and reopening.”

“I would love that,” Lila gushed. “Everyone would love that,” she said, thinking of Gram’s friends, staff, and business neighbors. Having Gram away from all this chaos would be perfect. “I’ve been wondering how to keep her from overdoing it once Dr. Nyland releases her,” she said.

“Leave it to Mom.” Nina grinned. “No one can resist when she’s made up her mind.” Nina pulled a bottle of water from the drink cooler. “Now tell me all about Travis. He’s been Lt. Frasier’s shadow over there all day.”

The question should not have been a surprise. Nina was sincere with her desire to reconnect and this was life on Brookwell in a nutshell. People could be nosy, but down deep, most of them cared about the people and community as a whole.

She gave Nina the short version about meeting on the yacht and sprinkled in plenty of her honest feelings for the man who’d become so important to her. As she did, she felt an ache deep in her chest. Pushing the hollow sensation aside, she reminded herself she’d have time to worry about how to get over him once this was actually over.

“I’m so happy for you,” Nina said. “It’s obvious the two of you will go the distance.”

If only. Lila smiled.

“A group of us go to Charleston periodically. To hang out and do girl stuff.

To meet people who haven't known us all our lives," she added with a short laugh. "Those of us who are still unattached, I mean." She picked at the label on the bottle. "I love to check out some of the newer bands too. Sometimes I can convince them to come out here to the Pelican."

"The music festival is gaining momentum. I heard Juliet talking about it with some friends while I was working on the yacht."

Nina's dark eyes went wide. "Oh, wow! That just made my day. You should come with us next time. But girls only."

Lila chuckled. "That would be wonderful." She meant it. Returning to Brookwell would mean taking the time with friends. And she'd definitely need some girlfriend therapy and a few fresh faces to get over Travis when the time came.

Although she wasn't sure getting over him was something she could achieve in this lifetime.

But that wasn't today's problem.

"Tell me about your current favorite band," Lila said.

Nina's face brightened and she launched into a full description of the sound, musicians, and latest performance of a band she'd been following. She pulled out her phone and sent Lila a link to their video. "They're really good. I have a playlist on repeat when I'm alone in the shop."

"I can't wait to give them a listen," Lila promised.

Her phone rang with a call from the bakery. Not recognizing the number, Lila let it go to voicemail and kept chatting. When the icon appeared a few minutes later, Lila checked the text display. Seeing it, her skin iced. "Nina, I'm sorry, but I need to go."

"Are you okay? It's not more bad news?"

"No." It was horrifying actually. "I'm fine," Lila bluffed. "Travis and Will just have a couple of questions for me."

Nina popped to her feet and gave Lila a quick hug. "Seriously, Lila. If you need anything, please give me a call."

"I will." Lila watched Nina walk out and then headed outside to call Travis.

Maybe this was finally the contact they'd been waiting for. The demand that would allow them to capture the thief behind this entire ordeal.

Chapter 13

Travis had rushed over as soon as Lila called. Standing with her now, under the soft shade of the pergola on the clinic patio, Travis hit replay, listening to the threatening message again and again, trying to pick up any details.

Tonight, Ms. Copeland. Take the last ferry to the Waterfront Park stop. Choose a swing and wait. Bring it all with you or I'll burn down your bakery and the whole damn block with it.

He swore and listened once more. "Connor should hear this."

Lila brushed his arm. "Isn't he monitoring my phone?"

"Yes. Yes," Travis repeated. He was supposed to be the calm professional here, but that message, with the voice distortion and threatening tone, sent him over the edge. Were they really dealing with an arsonist ready to escalate, or just a desperate, bluffing thief? Sending Lila to a meet without anything to trade? Not if he could help it.

"He's probably already pinning down where the call originated."

"Good," Lila said. "Do you think it's the woman? Does she have a partner?"

She must. She had some kind of network or a system, definitely. No single person could have accomplished this from making the drop on the yacht at the marina in Miami to the trouble here. "Doesn't matter to me as long as this ends."

Lila gazed up at him. "I agree." She swiped her hands on her jeans. "Tell me what you need."

Her. He needed her. "Pardon?"

"What should I wear or do? How do you want me to prepare for this meet? We don't have much time."

"No." The denial was instant, immediate. And absolutely necessary. "It can't be you." He wouldn't let her storm into harm's way. He loved her. Didn't matter that it wasn't practical. Didn't matter that it had happened too fast. It was real. Her welfare was suddenly his only focus, far more important than any job or case.

"I'll talk to Jess. We'll—"

"Me." She rested her hands on his chest, then reached up to stroke the muscle ticking in his jaw. "Let me do this," she said. "They expect it to be me anyway."

"But it's not you," he protested. "Neither of us has the loot they're after."

"They don't believe that. Someone on their end never actually accepted that." She stretched out an arm. "We can't give them a reason to come back for a repeat performance." Her lower lip quivered with a brief lapse in her self-control. "Or worse. This is my home and I'll step up to protect it."

"I know." Travis fumed. It would be easier to talk her out of participating, to lecture her into submission, if he could believe she wasn't taking this seriously. Easier to believe she was on some misguided tough-girl adventure trip.

But this town meant everything to Lila. Her grandmother, her fellow

business owners, meant everything to her. The break-in at the bakery had been awful. For all of them. He only wanted her happiness and damned if she didn't shine brighter than ever in this small island town. She might as well be president of the tourism association with her dedication.

He didn't disagree with her. Couldn't fault her devotion.

Somehow, he would keep her safe while they dropped the net over the thief.

"You're not trained for this kind of thing." He had to point it out, just in case she'd agree to stay out of the line of fire.

Her hands stroked over his shoulders, her strong fingertips pressing softly into his muscles. He needed to pull his mind out of the gutter but all he could think about was how great those hands felt on his body when they were in bed together.

"*You're* trained," she reminded him softly. "You are the expert and I trust you to have my back. I have to make the exchange. They aren't going to stop."

"I'll stop them," he vowed.

"Won't that be easier if I help you spring the trap?"

She had him there. "I'd rather catch them while you're far from the action."

"Me too," she confessed. Then she pressed up on her toes and kissed him. "But I can't let Gram come back with this threat hanging over us. And she won't stay away from the bakery forever."

"You shouldn't be involved in this takedown." He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. "This is bigger than a few shady grocers trying to make easy cash. I never meant to put their focus on you. I thought coming here, inserting myself into your life would be a deterrent."

"Well, I am certainly not protesting the way you inserted yourself into my life."

The wicked gleam in her eyes sent lightning streaking through his veins. He'd never stop wanting her. Once this was over he would find a way to give her the words churning in his heart. Even if he had to walk away, she should know how he felt about her.

"All right." Time to focus. It was the best way to keep her safe. "Give me a second." He called Connor, not at all surprised that he was picking apart the message. The tech expert was scrubbing the voice for any additional clues they could use.

He wasn't a fan of Lila's decision either, but neither of them would talk her

out of it. Best to accept it and move forward.

“Connor will coordinate with Jess and other protectors in the area so we have backup,” he explained when he finished the call. “Do you want someone to stay with Connie?”

“Jackie Parker will be here and Nina said her mother will come as well.” Her eyes sparked with a determined heat. “Let’s do this.”

He managed not to cringe. “If you insist.” He linked his hands with hers. “Let’s get to work. We only have a couple of hours and I want to run through some scenarios.”

Whatever it took, he’d make sure she was prepared and confident when they got on the ferry tonight. She wasn’t helpless, but this situation had unraveled around him.

Starting with the elusive thief who seemed to move around with impunity all the way to his undeniable feelings for Lila.

He was more than ready to reclaim control of the case and his feelings for the irrepressible woman in front of him.

Chapter 14

Lila had checked in with Gram, grateful that more visitors were keeping her distracted. As promised, Roxy had convinced Gram to head to Florida as soon as the doctor released her. It sounded like the Parkers were making plans to ensure Connie had plenty of time to relax and recharge.

And when she returned, the bakery would be open for business and the trouble would be over. Lila had to believe what they were about to do would work or she might chicken out on this entire effort.

Travis insisted on making another stop on the way to the ferry and they

made it on board with less than two minutes to spare before the gate closed.

Nervous, her heart pounded in her chest, her pulse echoing in her ears loudly enough she was sure he could hear it. She reached out and caught Travis's hand. "I've loved this trip across the river for as long as I can remember."

His gaze flickered with sadness. "I'm sorry to ruin a happy memory for you."

"But you're not. I love this trip even today."

His eyebrows flexed as he studied her. "Why?"

She smiled, though she wasn't exactly happy with all the unknowns ahead. A lot of things could go wrong on this short trip to Charleston. She hoped she could be the partner he needed if the thieves made the move he anticipated.

"Because this trip marks the end of the entire mess," she explained. And ending this ordeal was a good outcome, even if doing so meant Travis would return to his regular life and his career protecting other people. It wouldn't be long before he'd be on another yacht or jetting over to Europe and back again. She could see him riding shotgun in a burly SUV, dark sunglasses in place, while a high-profile celeb relaxed in confident security in the backseat.

She told herself it was easy to envision all of that only because she'd worked with him on one of those luxe yachts and had been the beneficiary of his protective nature.

It only made sense that he pick up his career where he left off, doing things in the real world. Out there where she wasn't his girlfriend. Where they weren't in a relationship. Soon, she'd have to figure out how to navigate her new role on the island without the kind and handsome man who was always willing to help her with anything from heavy lifting to deterring persistent thieves.

His fingertips coasted over her cheek, tucking a wayward curl behind her ear. "I'm sorry that my decisions on the yacht put you in danger."

"That's silly. You don't need to apologize for doing your job. Without you, who knows what would have happened to me. I was about to check the serial number registrations. Can you imagine what they would've done?"

"Not anything good." He pulled her close and she would've sworn he trembled. "I can't think about that scenario," he confessed in a ragged whisper. "This group has proven to be much more resourceful and dangerous than I anticipated."

It was her turn to tremble. He spoke like a man who was doing more than

pretending to care about her wellbeing. Then again, she'd felt the sincerity in his words and touch whenever they were together. What had started as an act—and felt almost brittle that first time he'd introduced himself as her boyfriend—had turned into comforting affection and passion that filled her with remarkable confidence in herself as well as him. When Travis was around, she felt secure in more than her surroundings. She felt secure in who she was and what she wanted.

Back on the yacht, she'd known Brookwell was her place. Going home and running the bakery for Gram had been her sole focus. How was it that having Travis nearby added such a boost to her plans? With him beside her, her choices felt more real, more right. And the necessary decisions flowed easily whether she was debating which recipes to push to how to help her grandmother transition to retirement.

A happy retirement without risk of physical harm.

It didn't make much sense, but then, why should it? This was a weird situation, had been from the start. His being with her was an anomaly, one that would resolve itself when this was done.

Tears threatened with a prickle in the back of her throat. She swallowed, blinking quickly. "You believe the threat against the bakery was real."

"Shh." He slipped an arm around her waist and guided her closer to the midline of the ferry. "Please don't cry, Lila. We don't need to dwell on it. Especially not now that we have a better plan. There's no point in stressing out over what will never come to pass."

She hoped he was right about that. Odds were good since he'd been right about everything else. What if taking the ferry only gave the thieves more room to attack the bakery again? Anything like that would be a petty move at this point. The earlier search should've made it clear that the stolen items weren't in the bakery.

But thinking about the possibility made it impossible to shake off. What if this time their violent tantrum spilled over onto other business owners? She didn't want that on her conscience.

"I won't cry," she promised. She'd save that for later, when she grieved the loss of this closeness that had mysteriously blossomed between them. Was sticking to her goals worth it? Maybe she wasn't ready to settle on the island, after all. Except there was no guarantee she could follow where Travis's career led him. And if she tried, she'd be surrendering the bakery legacy she'd dreamed about for most of her life. "And I agree that dwelling on what-

ifs gets us nowhere. I choose to take the threats as a sign of desperation you'll use against the thieves."

"Smart woman." He rubbed a hand along her shoulders. "I did call Jess and have the agency put additional protection on the bakery tonight. No one will get close enough to do more damage."

Her gaze snapped up to meet his. This was the best news. "Thank you." She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him fiercely. "That's... That's just so reassuring." She would miss his thoroughness when he was gone. Along with everything else that made him so wonderful.

They stood in a pleasant silence for a few minutes. The breeze was cool but not enough to drive her inside quite yet. With Travis beside her she was always warm enough.

"Relax." He bumped her hip gently, just enough to encourage her to loosen the death-grip she had on the bag.

"Isn't being nervous more authentic to my situation?"

He chuckled. "I suppose you're right about that. Are you okay if I take a look around?"

She had an abrupt vision of the thieves cutting the bag off her shoulder and tossing her overboard. Unlikely, but possible. Still, he did need to handle the reconnaissance or whatever. "Of course." She flicked her fingers at him. "Run along."

"You're a lousy liar," he said, brushing a kiss to her temple.

"Pretty much." She tried to smile, to pretend they were talking about anything but facing off with a gang of high-end thieves. "I'll be okay. Go do your thing."

He leaned in close and his lips feathered over her ear. To an outsider it surely looked like a sweet affection between lovers. "I'm trying to give them room to do things here."

"Oh." Instruction disguised as affection. Giving the thieves room to close in on her wasn't a happy thought. Stressed as she was over the situation and unknowns, her nerves wound tighter. How long until she snapped? She hoped no one on this ferry had to find out.

"I won't be far," he promised.

Of course he couldn't go far. The ferry wasn't a large vessel. She kissed his cheek and gave his hand a squeeze, doing her part to pretend everything was fine. "You're the best," she reminded him.

Watching him go wasn't a trial. The man had a beautiful build and a great

butt. When they were done here, maybe he'd let her convince him to take another weekend with her at the beach before moving on to his next client. Brookwell had to be too small for a man of Travis's skills.

Once again, she lamented how unfortunate it was to fall in love with a guy who wasn't suited to small-town life. This melancholy mood would become a habit if she wasn't careful. Sure, Travis blended with the pace and people in town. He was friendly, interested and interesting, and always watchful. As he should be. Blending in was a significant part of his career.

If he stayed in Brookwell he'd be bored within a week. No way her quiet island could compare to a life of jet setting as Juliet Mason's bodyguard.

Polar opposite ends of that career spectrum.

As much as she'd enjoyed brushing elbows with the wealthy celebrity and her famous friends, part of Lila had always longed for home. Her heart needed the island and the bakery she had been raised in. The place where her grandmother had taught her the most important things in life. First and foremost, that love was the priceless secret ingredient in all the best recipes.

Lila wanted to pick up the Bread Basket legacy and run with it. In part to honor Gram, to thank her for everything she'd done to give Lila a firm and stable foundation. It was on the island that Lila learned about the commitment, where she met people who kept their word, even in the face of changing circumstances.

Lila wanted to feed the island regulars and treat the tourists who visited Brookwell in ever-increasing numbers. Strange as it was, she was eager for the Chamber of Commerce meetings, the crunch time before big community events, and all the other responsibilities that came with owning a business on Central.

In a perfect world, she'd get to do all that and have Travis too.

Dusk was falling as the ferry motored across the water toward Charleston. Lost in the possibilities, she eyed the horizon, hoping to see the first evening star to make a wish. A wish that the danger would pass and everything would be fine once the thieves were caught. Cars on the new bridge were a distant hum, muted by the water and wind. The water churned and foamed behind the ferry, then melted away. It was a soothing lullaby and a counter to the stress that plagued her.

"Watching for dolphins?"

Lila turned, facing the woman who had chatted her up a little over a week ago on the crossing to the island. At the time, that conversation had been a

friendly, chance encounter. Tonight the ugly intent was obvious. The woman wasn't even pretending to be nice. "No." Lila stared at her. "I'm keeping watch for something far more predatory." The woman's hair was scraped back into a severe ponytail and Lila noticed a scar on her neck. The faint white line trailed up from her collarbone to her ear. There were bruises as well, as if someone had tried to choke her recently. Evidence of survival—and a hard way of life.

Lila ruthlessly quashed the swell of sympathy. If she gave an inch, the woman would take everything. "What's your name?"

"Irrelevant." The other woman's lips twitched. "You're not giving dolphins enough credit. They're quite predatory when they want to be."

"I don't believe you're here to chat about nature."

She shook her head and the ponytail swung side to side. "I hope *you* are here to set things right."

Lila swallowed the scream of frustration building in the back of her throat. "Why won't you believe me?" This was *not* going according to Travis's plan. The exchange was supposed to happen at the swings. Lila wasn't sure how to improvise, but she needed to stall. Her fallback was honesty, if only to provoke an argument that would buy some time. "I don't have the things *you* stole. I don't—"

A hard fist connected with her ribs and left Lila gasping. This thief had a violent streak and a mean punch. Lila's eyes watered as she tried to sip air in through her nose.

"Lower your voice." The thief's hard gaze glittered with warning, then scanned the ferry. No one was close enough to overhear them. "Your accusations are meaningless. Now." She tugged her jacket and smoothed a hand down the zipper. "Give me the bag."

"No." Lila gripped the railing firmly in one hand, the other clutched the bag's strap. "I was told to hand over this bag at the swings in Waterfront Park."

The woman leaned in. "Hand it over and I won't cut up your boyfriend's handsome face." Her voice, low and fierce, was almost as frightening as the knife she pulled from her pocket. Light flashed on the blade, there and gone, before she tucked it away once more. "The bag."

"You're cutting out your partner," Lila accused as the logical conclusion dawned on her.

"I am *here*, you nosy bitch, to retrieve my property."

“Not yours.” Lila shook her head. “I did a search on the serial numbers on the watches. They’re registered to addresses around the world. Places you’ve probably never even heard of.”

“Don’t pretend to know me.” The woman grabbed for the bag, but Lila twisted away and shrugged her off, praying she didn’t pull that knife again. Where was Travis? He wouldn’t leave her alone if she was in serious trouble. Remembering that, she decided she could be brave, keep stalling. This woman wasn’t a killer, she was a thief desperate for her payday.

Lila ignored the niggling voice that insisted she was in trouble and Travis wasn’t here because he was in trouble too.

“I’m not handing this over.”

“How messed up are you?” The woman closed in. “Toeing the line gets you nowhere.” She tossed her head on an incredulous bark of laughter. “You’d be shocked by what I know. To know where I’ve been. And to know where I could send you.” She aimed a pointed look down at the dark river below.

Fear slid down Lila’s spine. She couldn’t suppress the shiver of dread that followed.

“Do I finally have your attention?” the woman taunted. “Hand over the bag.”

“Not happening.” Lila wasn’t sure how long she could hold up to the woman’s blatant menace, but she had to try. Had to do her damndest not to be the weak link out here tonight. She wanted to put an end to all of this. For her grandmother. For Travis. For herself and the future she dreamed of on the island.

Maybe there was no partner. Maybe the thief would make good on the promise to burn down the bakery if Lila didn’t cooperate. Then again, if it was just Lila up against the criminal in front of her, the bakery was probably safe. “We planned an exchange at the swings.”

The woman snorted. “As if you don’t have cops waiting for me there.”

Lila held her ground. The thief couldn’t know about that. Not for sure. Unless she had a partner watching the area. Or maybe she had some wireless camera in place. Lila would leave any guesses on tech to the experts.

“There are cops here on the ferry,” Lila bluffed. In her opinion, Travis and the Guardian Agency protectors were better than a police presence. And to a man, they would be reliable witnesses against this horrible woman. “As soon as I give you this bag, they’ll swarm you. You might have a chance to escape

at the swings.”

The woman folded her arms, and tilted her head, considering. “I’m supposed to believe you want me to get away with the haul?”

“Believe this.” Lila glared at her. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get you out of my life. For good.”

The truth of that statement seemed to sink in. The woman’s icy demeanor slipped, giving Lila the opening she needed. She lurched forward, faking a slip, and managed to shove the other woman down to the deck. There wasn’t much room on the small ferry, and virtually nowhere to hide, so she hurried toward the covered area where they would have more witnesses in case the woman tried to retaliate.

No need to shout or cause more of a scene, Travis had to be close by. He’d probably seen the whole conversation. He and whoever was backing him up would take down the thief. Any second now.

Before she reached the sheltered seating area, she smacked hard into a sturdy body. The man was tall and bulky and the glower on his face would make children—or a fleeing woman—cry on sight. Heavy eyebrows shaded dark, beady eyes. He glared at her down the length of his blade-like nose. “Going somewhere, Lila?”

No. No way. Instinct tried to deny it, but that was the voice from her nightmares.

Dan Copeland. Even after all this time, she cringed at the ever-present disappointment in his tone. She stared up into her father’s weathered face as emotions swamped her. He’d changed. Decades of hard living were etched into his skin. Angry and hurt, she tried to make sense of seeing him here and now.

Her father had wrecked the bakery. He’d harassed his own mother. Why? Her parents had made their choices long ago. She’d worked to overcome their mistakes. She forced herself to take a good look. His long beard, more gray than brown, muddled the features she remembered. In her memory, he was always skinny with a farmer’s tan and a carefree laugh.

Until he got mad.

Questions and accusations whirled through her mind, but her throat was too dry to speak. He turned her roughly and marched her back toward the bow of the ferry. Was there any way to get out of this without revealing his connection to her? She dreaded the moment when Travis came face to face with the real identity of the thieves.

She dug in her heels. “Where’s Mom?” Why was Dan working with someone new? Someone who looked young enough to be Lila’s sister.

“As if you care.” Soundlessly, the bag slipped away. He’d sliced through the strap.

She tried to shake him off, to catch the loose strap of the bag, but he outmaneuvered her. “You’re nuts to do this here. The ferry is too small.” Too small for her to hide or escape. Too small to keep him away from Travis. “I should’ve known it was you all along.”

“Damn right. Baking turned your brain to mush.”

Of course he would’ve kept tabs on her. Even after all this time, he would think of her as an asset to be used. She was suddenly grateful Travis hadn’t shown up. It gave her precious seconds to pretend this might all work out, that he could rescue her and overlook the bad apples that were her parents.

“Says the fool trying to rob me.”

“You robbed *me*,” Dan said, lip curling. “Bad time to use your sticky fingers. *I’m* the victim.”

Lila swore. The victim card was the litany of his entire life. Dan always demanded the best be handed over to him. From Gram, his wife, even his only daughter. Strangers were a money buffet to Dan. He assessed people based on the value of what he could take from them.

“You’re a bully!” She inched back, ready to scream for help. But when he reached for the zipper on the bag, she panicked. He couldn’t discover the ruse yet. “You’re a bully and a thug,” she shouted in an effort to distract him. “Thief!”

Naturally, her father ignored her. For a moment he was too preoccupied with the realization that she hadn’t brought his loot. She glanced around, hoping for someone to get curious. The delay cost her. Before she could dart away, he seized her, his fingers digging into her upper arm above her elbow. She winced, curling into him to alleviate the pain.

“Let me go!”

He shook her, same as when she’d been a little girl. Pinning her body to the rail with his, he leaned in close, his breath hot on her face. “You won’t get away with this. I told you what I’d do.”

“You told me? *You*? No way.” It was her last show of defiance, fueled by a fear for Travis. He’d be here if he could. Two thieves—her father and his accomplice—meant big trouble, but surely Travis and whatever backup he’d put in place could overcome the unexpected twist. “Why couldn’t you wait

for me at the swings?”

“I call the shots,” Dan said. “Where’s my stuff?”

“Your partner, the woman, took it already.” She reached for the bag when he glanced around the ferry. The deck wasn’t brightly lit and the shadows were long now that the sun had set.

Dan jerked the bag away from her. “Don’t you lie to me!”

“Me? You’re the one with a truth allergy.” She shoved at his chest. “Go work this out with your partner. You never should’ve dragged me into this.”

“Stop bullshitting me.”

He held her jaw in a punishing grip. Her eyes watered and she struggled to remember she was an adult. She tried to fight back, but couldn’t get any leverage.

“I don’t have a partner. Where’s my stuff?”

“She never had it.”

Travis. Her entire body sagged with relief. His voice was all the strength and comfort she needed. But when she glanced beyond Dan, she saw Travis looking positively murderous. That fierce, protective expression made her warm all over. It was a delicious moment, until she went cold knowing rejection was imminent.

“Let her go,” Travis demanded.

“Not a chance. She has my property.”

“You’re wrong,” Travis said firmly. “She turned the stolen goods over to me the minute she found them. And I turned every last item over to the insurance company when we reached Charleston.”

Dan’s grip tightened on Lila.

“It’s over,” Travis declared. “Let. Her. Go.”

His order was met with a silence that seemed to stretch and swell. The only movement was the wind teasing her hair, the only sound the churning engines resonating through the decking under their feet.

A heartbeat later, everything was in motion. Dan tried to drag her off, away from Travis and safety. She resisted, fighting with all she had. It wasn’t enough. She was being bodily removed from the only man she wanted. The man who embodied safety and hope. Shouting voices carried all over the ferry. Lila caught a glimpse of men wearing the ferry’s uniform guiding people away from the fight.

She focused on Travis, standing calm in the midst of chaos.

A crash behind him distracted her and Lila saw the woman who’d flashed

the knife landing hard on the deck underneath a man she hoped was part of Travis's backup team. She tried to shout, to warn Travis, but Dan hooked his elbow around her throat. She clawed at his sleeve, desperate to relieve the pressure so she could breathe.

She felt something hard digging into her side, too close to the bruise rising after the earlier punch. She was scared, twisting away from her father and the pain, as dark spots danced across her vision.

"Back off or I'll end her," Dan said.

She shoved hard, got enough room to suck in a breath. "Air," she rasped.

"Let her go," Travis demanded, raising his hands.

Empty hands. Where was his gun?

"Give me what I came for," Dan countered.

"It's gone," Lila rasped. She leaned back, pressing him into the railing. "Gone."

"That's a shame." The pressure in her side eased, but it only made things worse for Lila as Dan aimed a gun at Travis.

This was not happening. Surely Travis was armed, though it would be impossible for him to reach any weapon without obvious intent.

"Don't do this." A stranger stepped closer to Travis, but not quite in front of him. He was tall, with thick dark hair and a square jaw highlighted by a trim beard. "Let her go and we'll sort this out."

Her father swore again. He pressed the gun to her temple, then stretched his arm to put Travis in his sights once more. Dan was panicking. He didn't see a way out, but Lila did.

An eerie calm drifted over her. A quiet surrounded her, separating her from the unthinkable scene. She knew what had to happen. She knew how to ensure no one else got hurt.

She shoved hard, propelling all her weight up and back, letting the momentum carry her and Dan over the railing and into the dark water of the Cooper River. The drop was short, and still Dan's flailing arms caught her as they hit the water. As the cold river swallowed her, a small voice in her head cheered her success.

She surfaced, alone, and immediately started treading water, breathing as steadily as she could manage. The ferry gave off enough light for her to spot her father surfacing as well. He thrashed a bit, fighting with his jacket. She didn't see the gun. Assumed he'd lost it during the fall. She watched, keeping as still as possible, as his jacket floated away on the current and he started

swimming in the opposite direction, aiming for the Charleston shore.

Lila didn't move. The safest option, the fastest way out of the water was to hold her position. Her father should know that too. Already the ferry was circling back and she could see people at the rail, pointing toward her and preparing for rescue.

"Lila!"

Travis's shout carried over the sounds of the engines, wind, and water. She waved her arms overhead. "Here!"

A bright searchlight hit her and she squinted against the glare. A few seconds later, a life preserver hit the water with a slap. In two quick swim strokes she reached the device and the team on the boat reeled her in.

Over the many voices and fragments of conversation she could hear from the people on the ferry, she caught Travis muttering about how he was going to kill her if she survived.

It was such an absurd and relatable complaint, she was laughing as they helped her up the ladder and onto the deck.

"Is this hysteria?" he demanded.

"N-n-no." Her teeth were chattering and she suspected hypothermia was a better diagnosis.

He wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, pulling it closed right over her heart. Covering her head with a towel, he started rubbing her all over to get her warm.

She snuggled in close despite his obvious temper. He was mad and that was unfortunate. She did feel bad about upsetting him. Felt worse about having a desperate criminal for a father. But she was so glad he was here, without any bullet holes, to be angry at her. "I'm sorry."

He glared down at her and she figured he understood that her apology was for pissing him off, not for taking the required action.

Behind them, rescue boats raced in, their search lights sweeping the water.

"I can't believe you did that," he accused. "What were you thinking?"

She didn't want to explain she'd been trying to keep her dad from killing him. This wasn't the place to discuss her unpleasant family ties. The worry and temper in his gaze told her he wouldn't appreciate her logic no matter how many solid reasons she gave. "They're off course," she said instead.

"What?" His brow puckered.

"The rescue boats." Her teeth were chattering, making each word an effort, but she persisted. "They need to move downstream. He surfaced and started

swimming for Charleston,” she added.

Travis immediately relayed her information to the ferry captain who got the message to the rescue teams on the river. Within minutes, she could hear the boats changing course and the lights sweeping the search area adjusted accordingly.

The man with dark hair spoke to Travis. “We’re clear to move downstairs. Logan is waiting.”

Travis nodded. “Lila, this is Brett Robinson. He and Logan Harris are with the Guardian Agency.”

“Your backup,” she murmured.

“Backing up both of you,” Brett interjected with a smile radiating warmth. “Excellent work on neutralizing the threat, Lila. You’re a hero.”

Neutralizing her father, she thought glumly.

“Thanks.” She didn’t agree, not even a little bit, but it seemed rude to argue. “You stepped in and protected Travis.” Overcome, she shifted out of the blanket and gave him a hug, recalling too late that her clothes were soaked. “Sorry. But really thanks.”

Brett nodded briskly. “Let’s get downstairs. It’s warmer.”

Travis draped the blanket over her shoulders and led the way into a crew-only access area. Brett followed right behind her. The engines were noisier down here, but it was definitely warmer.

The three of them squeezed into a cramped room, joining a plain-clothes detective with a badge hanging around his neck and the man who’d tackled the woman on deck. Between them, the woman sat, sullen and grim, staring at her handcuffs.

“She had a knife,” Lila remembered.

“We’ve got it,” the detective assured her. “Detective Bradley,” he introduced himself.

“Lila Copeland,” she replied. She turned to the other man. “You must be Logan?”

He smiled, extending his hand. “That’s right. Helluva move out there. Glad you’re all right.”

“Thanks.” She avoided Travis’s gaze. “Calculated effort.”

“Travis said you grew up around here.” Logan seemed to be fighting a smile, though his voice was pure Carolina Lowcountry charm, smooth and warm and familiar. At her nod, a wide grin broke free. “Figured. I told Travis a local girl would know what she was doing.”

The detective cleared his throat as if he was smothering a chuckle. “If we could focus, please? I need preliminary statements.”

Lila had never been through anything like this, but the detective was polite and efficient. She’d expected to be separated from the woman as well as Travis and his backup team, but they were allowed to stay together in the tiny room as they discussed the events up on deck. Whenever the woman tried to interrupt or protest, Detective Bradley subdued her with a sharp look and a reminder that she’d get her chance to speak.

Lila hoped she didn’t have to stick around that long. She didn’t want to know about extenuating circumstances or connections to Dan or hear any excuses the woman might offer up. She wanted off this ferry at the earliest opportunity.

At some point she was going to have to give her father’s name, but she was avoiding it. Nearly done giving her account, she was interrupted by the detective’s radio crackling. A voice on the other end reported that the thief had been pulled out of the river and was in Coast Guard custody.

“Finally,” Travis muttered.

The woman shrunk down in her seat, looking miserable and defeated.

A minute later, the horn blared from the deck, announcing the ferry’s arrival at the Waterfront Park dock. Travis exchanged a glance with the detective.

“Y’all can go,” Bradley said. “I’ll be reaching out for follow-up.”

The men assured him they’d be available for further questions and Lila nodded along. She wanted off this boat. Couldn’t happen soon enough. Would there be a penalty for not mentioning her connection to the thief?

That was a problem for later.

Right now, her priorities were simple. Off the boat, back to the island, get a shower and into clean clothes. Then she could call her grandmother and tell her the ordeal was over and done. She hoped to spare Gram from Dan’s extensive list of misdeeds.

When Travis took her hand, guiding her up on deck and toward the dock, that list of priorities shifted. She’d miss this easy familiarity when he left and she wanted some time alone with him to sort out everything. To thank him.

To say goodbye.

After that, she would have to come up with some plausible explanation for Gram. That wouldn’t be easy. Her grandmother was almost as smitten with Travis as Lila was and she was likely to be upset with him for leaving. And

with Lila for letting him go.

Lila didn't want anything to tarnish Gram's view of Travis. Somehow she would make it clear that Travis was one of the best men around. A hero in island-casual clothing. Gram would be perturbed with the ruse, but it had been necessary.

Eventually, they'd laugh about the whole mess.

At the moment, walking away from the ferry, surrounded by Travis's heat and strength, that eventuality seemed a long way off.

Chapter 15

Travis was grateful for the support from Brett and Logan. Especially while concern for Lila consumed him. She had to be struggling, coming face to face with her dad like that. He didn't blame her for holding back that detail. He figured in time she'd call the detective and set the record straight.

If she didn't, he would, once he had assurances that it wouldn't blow back on her.

Thankfully, she was in one piece and, bit by bit, she seemed to be recovering. If only his heart believed it. His chest continued to ache with the

shock of her going over that railing and splashing into the black water.

Another reason to be grateful for the assistance Jess had arranged. The other two protectors created a good buffer while Travis worked to regain his composure. He was fighting twin urges to shake her and hold her close. One minute he was swallowing the demand for an explanation. What had she been thinking with that stunt? A few heartbeats later his only desire was to tell her he loved her. Not for show, but for real.

In short, he was a wreck and he wasn't sure how long *his* recovery would take.

Seeing her go over the side, he'd nearly gone right after her. Logan had grabbed him, held firm until she surfaced. Logan had made assurances, Brett too, once he'd notified the Coast Guard about the people in the water.

"There's a car waiting for us on the street," Travis said. "I hate to ask it, but the insurance company would like to speak with us tonight."

"All of us?" Brett asked.

Travis nodded. "I know it's a hassle." Beside him Lila hunched a little deeper into the blanket.

"Not at all," Brett disagreed. "Give me one second." His thumbs moved as he sent a text message. "What's the address?"

Travis relayed it and then glanced at Logan, but the man only shrugged. "His wife worries."

Brett snorted. "Like yours doesn't," he said without looking up from his message.

Minutes later, passing the swings and a tour group setting out for a ghost walk through Charleston, they reached the sleek black limousine idling at the curb. When they were settled inside, he reached over and cranked up the heat for Lila's seat, hoping it would help her warm up and dry off.

"We'll be home soon," he murmured for her ears alone. "The debrief won't take long."

She tipped up her face, a question shimmering in her gorgeous eyes. He nearly kissed her. It was that or tell her about all of these feelings he was struggling with—some welcome, others not so much. Instead, he shoved it all aside for later and rubbed her arms briskly through the blanket.

She tucked in close to his shoulder, her face hidden. Over her head Logan gave him a sympathetic nod.

The island *did* feel like home. Mentally, he added that shock to the growing pile of personal issues to handle later. Somewhere along the line, between his

military career and trekking around protecting clients, home had turned into an elusive concept.

One they might have in common, considering how Lila's parents had messed up her early years. Without her grandparents, who knew where she'd be now? The next time he saw Connie, he'd give that woman a big hug. Assuming there was a next time.

It wasn't just up to him. He and Lila had a great many things to discuss and Travis had to believe they could work it out.

He understood now why his pal Max had opted out of the celebrity personal protection detail. He was still involved with the Guardian Agency, but like Jess, he'd found a new way to contribute. A way that perfectly suited him and his wife, Ilsa, down in Key West.

Travis glanced at the other men. Brett and Logan were married and still handling cases. Local cases at least. It gave him hope that he could find balance and have a life that was more than a twenty-four-seven dedication to the job.

And marriage was a big assumption, despite the pretending he'd been doing. After everything they'd been through, he wouldn't be surprised if Lila told him to hit the road. Once she'd warmed up.

The limo stopped and Travis embraced the reprieve from his swirling thoughts. For the next few minutes, he needed to focus solely on the case and the two thieves they'd apprehended.

Inside the foyer of the building, the security guard at the information desk looked up and smiled. "You must be Lila Copeland."

Lila stopped short and Travis braced for trouble. He didn't need another curveball tonight.

"Yes," she replied without moving.

"A package just arrived for you." He set a large shopping bag on the high counter.

Brett strode forward. "I've got this. Thanks, man," he said, taking the bag. "I asked my wife to drop off some clothes for you."

Lila seemed to be frozen in place. Travis could sympathize all too well. "Is there a place where she can change?"

"Sure." The guard motioned her toward the hallway. "Restroom is the second door on the left."

"Take your time," Travis urged her.

Her eyes were wide in a pale face. Maybe what she'd done was starting to

sink in. The moment she was out of sight, he turned to Brett. “Thank you.”

He shrugged. “No worries. Nikki likes to help out.”

Travis turned to Logan. “Thanks to you too.”

“For keeping you out of the river?”

“That too,” Travis replied, sheepishly. “When she did that—”

“To save you,” Logan stated, keeping his voice low. “She did it to save you.”

“I was fine,” Travis protested. He scrubbed at the back of his neck. He’d been concerned the detective would accuse her of trying to help Copeland escape, but Bradley must’ve accepted Logan’s brief explanation. One more favor Travis owed.

“She doesn’t need to do crap like that for me.” He was an expert in security and protection. She was a baker. The best damned baker he knew. Wasn’t she the best bodyguard she knew? “I had it under control.”

“Of course you did,” Brett said. “The guy with the gun wouldn’t have pulled the trigger.”

Travis started to argue, but Logan cut him off again. “If you ask me, it’s a brave woman who takes a situation in hand.” He glanced at Brett. “Agreed?”

Brett’s mouth twitched. “Brave. Sure. Love takes some thought adjustment, I suppose.”

Love? Travis was speechless. Was he in love? He’d certainly been surrounded with romance lately, protecting the newlyweds and pretending with Lila.

That may have been where the idea had sprouted, but pretending didn’t fit anything he felt for her now. Was that due to adrenaline or the real deal? How could he know? And when the hell would he have a minute to figure it out?

“I think you’ve broken him.” Logan barked out a laugh, sobering quickly when he spotted Lila returning. “Feel better?” he asked before Travis could.

“Yes.” She turned to Brett. “Tell your wife thanks so much. She thought of everything.” Lila had gathered up her damp hair into a ponytail, barely taming those wild red curls. She wore dark leggings and ballet flats and a pale green sweater that hugged her curves. “I feel human again.”

Brett smiled. “I’ll let her know.”

Travis reached out and took the bag with the wet things from her hands. Seeing her safe and feeling better, made him impatient to talk to her about everything else, but they had to take it one step at a time. “Let’s get this over with.”

As much as he'd hoped for a quick and easy update followed by closure of this entire situation, the insurance investigator had dozens of questions, many of which Travis deferred to Detective Bradley.

At last, they were clear to leave. In the elevator, Lila's stomach rumbled loudly. "Anyone else hungry?" she asked.

Logan suggested a couple of places that would still be open at this late hour. When he mentioned a place on King Street that specialized in enormous burritos, she jumped on the idea. "Have you been there, Travis?"

He shook his head. "Sounds like I will be in a few minutes." He slid his arm around her as they walked out of the building. "Do we walk?"

"I can drive," Brett offered. "My car's right there." He lifted his chin toward a glossy luxury SUV. "My wife and Logan's dropped it for us."

"We are damned lucky." Logan grinned.

"True enough." Brett turned to Travis. "Jess sent me a text to drop you two at the Ellington. She booked a room for y'all tonight."

"Seriously?" Lila stared up at Travis.

She tempted him beyond reason. "You haven't noticed how the Guardian Agency takes care of its people?" he teased.

"Well." She pressed her lips together. "I've noticed how you take care of your clients..." Her voice trailed off.

He guessed by the blush in her cheeks that she was thinking of other ways they'd taken care of each other in recent days. He wouldn't mind the privacy of a hotel room for the night. No distractions or interruptions. Just the two of them and time to recover from this mess. Time to discuss what might be next.

"So is it the restaurant or the hotel?" Brett asked. "You can always get those burritos delivered."

"I like that idea," Lila admitted. "I'm kind of peopled out."

"Delivery gets my vote," Travis agreed. He opened the back door for her and slid in beside her, with Logan sitting up front with Brett.

Though they were in separate seats, she reached out and rested a hand on his thigh. He covered it with his own.

"I can't believe how perfectly everything fits, Brett. Tell your wife she's remarkable," Lila said. "You need to let me know how to get it all back to her."

"The clothes are yours," Brett said. Stopped at a traffic light, he glanced over his shoulder. "Seriously. She has some mysterious female magic that she can look at a photo and know the correct sizes. Enjoy in good health."

“Okay.” She aimed a helpless glance at Travis.

He just smiled, anticipating her next question.

“Your wife is?” she queried.

Brett’s smile was full of pride and love. “Nikki Weston.”

“Seriously? N-Nikki Weston,” Lila stammered. She smacked Travis. “You knew?”

He nodded, smothering a laugh. “I’m surprised you didn’t.” Then again, the last time Nikki and Brett had hung out with Juliet Mason had been a few weeks before Lila had joined the crew on the yacht.

Juliet was mega-famous and popular the world over and Nikki was Hollywood royalty, from a family that had practically invented film and blockbuster movies. The women were great friends despite being polar opposites with Julia’s boundless outgoing nature and Nikki’s shy reserve.

He laced his fingers through hers. “Breathe through it,” he teased. “The shock passes.”

She pretended to snarl at him. “Not cool.”

He squeezed her hand. “Come on. You’ve cooked for nearly every other headliner Juliet knows.”

“True. I did enjoy meeting Daniel Craig.”

“Touché.” He laughed.

Logan groaned. “It’s the accent.”

As the others chatted about celebrity encounters, Travis’s mind wandered again.

This was exactly where he most wanted to be. With her. If Brett and Logan could make their relationships work, surely he and Lila could figure it out.

First, he needed to make sure Lila wanted him sticking around. Then he could sort out the details about how to set up a career that would support and empower her goals as a business owner. He was determined to give her the best life possible.

She meant everything to him.

As wild as it was and totally unexpected, it felt completely natural to think of her as his. To be in love with her and everything she represented. Not just within her community but within himself. She was more than a client in need of protection. She was the keeper of his heart. The woman who made all the difference in his outlook. Knowing her, being with her, loving her had changed him for the better. South Carolina was her home but *Lila* was the place he wanted to come home to.

He had no idea what he would do if she didn't reciprocate. Probably hop on the nearest yacht headed for Europe and pretend he could remember how to protect someone other than Lila.

Her rejection, if it came, would crush him. Yet sitting here, holding just her hand, he knew telling her was worth any fallout. He just couldn't hold all of these feelings inside, couldn't hold himself apart from her any longer.

Because if she did love him too, if she felt everything between them as deeply as he did, their future together would be incredible.

Chapter 16

In the luxury suite of the Ellington hotel in downtown Charleston, Lila felt detached. The view that visitors raved about was lost on her. Of course she'd been spending her nights with Travis, but this felt different. The danger was over, the threat gone. Her grandmother's legacy and her future were safe. The purpose that brought Travis into her life, the reason they'd been posing as an inseparable couple, was done.

Mission accomplished.

Why didn't she feel better about that?

Her father. She half-expected Detective Bradley to storm in and arrest her for withholding evidence or conspiracy or something. Sure, she'd explained the basics to Travis, but had he figured out that Dan had been on the ferry? Did Travis understand the full scope of her father's lousy, unforgivable behavior?

Here they were, together as survivors. Well, she was a survivor because of him. His efforts, his plans. Which only underscored the awkwardness. He'd come in, protected her, rescued her, and now... Well, now the case was closed.

Almost.

"Can I borrow your phone?" she asked. "I remembered something the police will want to know."

He pulled his phone from his pocket, but didn't offer it to her. "If you're referring to the identity of the man on the ferry, they know it was Dan Copeland."

"You knew?"

"Let's say I wasn't surprised." Travis sighed. "The Guardian Agency is second to none when it comes to research. Connor pieced it together after you confided in me. He's been combing through every bit of data to connect Copeland to all the incidents so he goes down for all his crimes against your family."

She reveled in the way he phrased that. As if she wasn't tied to Copeland by anything more than a strand of DNA.

"Lila, no one will hold his crimes against you."

She rested in that for a moment. "And what about the woman?" she asked. "Was he playing me when he said he didn't have a partner? Were they working together?"

"I don't think so. Connor and the police are unraveling that. From the bits and pieces I've heard, the prevailing theory is she caught wind of the grocer scheme and was trying to beat Copeland at his own game. She has a rap sheet a mile long. If you'd skipped the galley inventory, she might've gotten away with the takeover."

Lila resisted the sense that she could've been that woman. Scarred, bruised, and bitter from a life of crime. Without her grandparents, she might've been dragged down by her parents.

"Lila." Travis pulled her away from the uncomfortable thoughts. "You're not her. You made different choices."

“Right. I know.”

“Liar.” But he said it gently, almost lovingly.

She cleared her throat. “It’s sad. When he denied a partner,” she explained. “That was probably the first honest thing Dan ever said to me.” What a pitiful admission, but instead of an ache, the pressure in her chest eased.

Travis set his phone aside and wrapped her in a hug. She could’ve been happy, right here in his arms, for the rest of her days.

“Do you want to know about your mom?” he asked.

Did she? Not for herself, but for Gram. If another threat was imminent, she wanted to be prepared. “What do you know?”

“She passed away a year ago. In prison. She was convicted of grand theft in Georgia.”

“She didn’t turn on my dad.”

“Guess not.”

Typical. The two of them had always been a unit, strange and warped as it was. And as she’d told Travis, she’d never fit in with them. Had only ever wanted to escape their schemes.

“It’s really over, Lila.”

What a feeling. She cuddled up against him, resting her cheek over his heart. She was safe. He could leave.

And he should. He should walk away. Go back to his life. She’d seen how much he enjoyed jetting and yachting around the world, protecting celebrities and elite clients.

For that matter, she could walk away. Tell him thanks and wish him well. It would be the smart move. One phone call and a rideshare driver could take her back to the island and the shiny new life as a bakery owner she’d longed for.

She didn’t budge, snuggled against him while she wrestled with churning emotions that left her stomach knotted and her heart aching.

A knock sounded at the door and she stepped out of his embrace so Travis could deal with the interruption. At least she didn’t need to worry that it was the cops with handcuffs and an arrest warrant for her.

Lila swiped at an errant tear. She could cry later. The situation required an attitude adjustment. She would look at tonight as a going away party. This could be her last night with him. Better to make it a special memory than fraught with potential regrets. If all they had was tonight, she wanted to celebrate the amazing goodness he’d brought into her world.

“Check this out,” Travis said. “They sent up a gift basket.”

She gawked at the massive basket filling his arms. He set it on the table and motioned her closer. He flipped open the card and together they read the thank you note from Gamble and Swann, the lawyers who managed the Guardian Agency.

“This is a lot,” she observed.

He reached for the bottle of sparkling wine. “It’s chilled.” He chuckled. “I shouldn’t be surprised.”

She looked up at him then and he opened his arms. “Come here.”

Eager, she returned to his embrace, grateful for his warmth and strength. “You feel so good. Is it awful that I could fall asleep right here?” Listening to his steady heartbeat, lulled by the soft rise and fall of his breathing. “A month might be enough to feel like myself again.”

To feel able to go on without him.

If only.

“Stay as long as you like.” He kissed the top of her head.

Wrapping her arms around his trim waist, she let herself hang on a little too tightly. Only until her heart settled. Until she could believe the worst was over.

But she wasn’t convinced that was true. Her biggest fear was that the worst was still to come. When he left, she was going to hurt like never before.

Eventually she drummed up the courage to meet his gaze. It was impossible to hide her feelings and she was done holding back. He’d become so essential to her life. Travis was everything she could’ve dreamed up for a lover, as a partner, and as a friend. She had to tell him.

She smiled, felt her lips wobble, and willed the expression to hold. “Wherever your next assignment takes you, I want you to know that I love you. I love you, Travis.”

His eyes went wide, his mouth opened and snapped shut. She felt his breath shudder. “Lila.”

She waited a beat, but he only stared at her. So she filled the gap. “For me, it was lust on the yacht. I admit you were easy to crush on. Probably because I didn’t see any future so there was no risk.” But here she was, feeling all the risk now. “It grew.” She rested her fingers over her heart. “It grew and turned to love. Truly.” She bit her lip. “I think it was somewhere over a tropical chocolate croissant.”

“Who makes those?” He bent his head and his lips feathered across hers.

“They sound decadent,” he murmured.

He was such a boost to her ego and confidence. Easing back, she smiled. “I love you.” His hands slid to her hips and she curled her fingers around his wrists. Saying goodbye was awful. “Carry that with you, all right?” She reached up and patted his chest. “Wherever you go, know that you’re loved.”

“Lila.”

Her heart cracked, just a little, over how he said her name. Maybe she didn’t have the wherewithal for a passionate night of closure after all.

“What if I don’t go?”

After a stuttering breath, her heart leaped, taking flight. She wanted him to mean that so badly. She wasn’t sure she hadn’t imagined his reply. “You... you want to stay?”

He nodded, the spark of happiness in his gaze warming her all the way to her toes. “Brookwell Island is a little small for a protector as big as you.” Why was she arguing?

Because it had to be his choice for the right reasons. She didn’t want him to stick around out of misplaced obligation. “Gram will understand if I tell her it didn’t work out.”

He snorted. “She’d hunt me down for sullyng your reputation.”

He wasn’t wrong.

Tipping up her chin, he caught her full attention. “Small island or not, I have other skills. I’ve spoken with the agency. Personal protection isn’t the only option. There are short-term assignments and special teams. Heck, the Inn has bigwigs coming through all the time. Consulting is also an option. And training. The list goes on.”

“Does it?”

He kissed her lightly and she swayed closer, wanting more.

“Worse comes to worse,” he continued. “I’ll go back to construction. The hours would line up closer to your bakery hours.”

“No. No, don’t do that.”

“Why not?” He scowled. “You don’t think I’m any good at building?”

“I think you’re amazing at everything you do, but my heart can’t take any more muscles.” Indulging herself, she squeezed his biceps. “Just thinking about you sweating through your shirt? Oh, my.” She fanned her face.

He picked her up and spun her in a circle. Setting her gently on her feet, he nuzzled her neck. “You do realize that promising reaction only makes me want to go into construction. *Immediately.*”

“I can think of projects you can tackle around the bakery. Or Gram’s house.” The house that would be hers most of the time once her grandmother made good on her promise to travel more.

His grin was wicked. “I would be honored to do any and all manual labor for you.”

She wanted to dance with the potential of it. He’d given her a lot to think about. A lot to process. Even if he hadn’t professed his love.

It didn’t seem right to point that out. There had to be some rule about getting needy after a rescue. Besides, if he did stay, maybe love would come along in time. She could be happy with heat and desire and this unique bond that was so much more than friends with benefits.

“You would really stay?”

“Sweetheart, I only ever want to be where you are,” he said.

“Brookwell is rarely busy or glamorous.” She paced back over to the window. “We have special events, but that’s about it. Celebs show up.” Usually with bodyguards like him. “And then they...go.”

Like he should do. That was the crux. She loved him enough to insist he think of himself first. Put his needs ahead of hers. She was the worst for hoping that he’d stick around in her small world. She gave a start when his hands brushed her shoulders.

“Lila.” Turning her around, he swept his thumbs over her cheeks. “Why are you pushing me away?”

“I’m not. It’s the opposite.” She had to say it. Had to confess all the longing weighing on her. “I want you to stay.” Strange, the admission didn’t relieve any of the pressure. So she kept talking, letting it all tumble out. “I’m selfish to say that. To want that. To hope that you will.”

“Shh. Easy now.”

But she couldn’t keep quiet. There was nothing easy about this.

“Staying with me would be such a blow to your career. That’s not fair. Not even a little bit. For me to have everything? My own bakery, the hometown I adore, *and* you? That’s all too much happiness for one life. Probably. I’m trying to do the right thing. For you, Travis.”

“What about for us?” he countered.

Us? She had no idea how to respond. How would she even begin to compromise for him? And life, partnership, love was all about compromise. But after getting out there and seeing the world at Gram’s insistence, she was ready to sink deep roots on the island. To be home. Home had been the pot of

gold waiting for her at the end of her exploration rainbow. Falling for Travis hadn't been part of the plan.

Or maybe she was confused and overwhelmed. Her mind was spinning and her heart was aching and she was rambling out of control. "You're probably wondering, and rightly so, how I could love you and not be willing to drop everything and follow you."

"You're wrong."

"Of course I am," she said. "That's my entire point. I'm wrong for you because I can't leave. Not now. Maybe not ever. You need to go because I need to stay." It was just the wrong time for them. They were star-crossed or whatever. "Maybe—"

He pulled her into his arms and silenced her with a soft, patient kiss. "Can I interrupt?" he asked against her lips.

He just had, in the best possible way. She nodded.

He rocked a little and she felt herself melting into him. Her entire being relaxed under his soothing presence. Her thoughts calmed, her heartbeat stopped galloping. All those frayed and sharp edges after the ordeal on the ferry smoothed out, one by one.

"Lila, I've had two demanding careers. First military and then the agency. I was satisfied with the demands and the friends I made in and around those jobs. What I didn't expect to find was love. I didn't think that was in the cards.

"Then there was you." His chest rose and fell on a deep breath. "I want love, now that I've found you. Now that I know what that means. I want to build a life *with* you." He gave her a tender squeeze. "Nothing sounds better to me than coming home to a place that's ours. Creating that place on Brookwell Island sounds better than perfect. Day by day, year by year. You are everything I want, Lila. I love *you*."

Her heart swelled and happiness cascaded through her, a gentle wash of warmth and light and hope. So much hope. "I love you, too," she whispered.

"Whatever I do next, it will be for us. I want to make those decisions together. I want to pursue whatever it is that will keep us close."

"Day by day, year by year," she echoed.

He nodded. "Exactly." His hands traveled up and down her back and she felt his love more with each moment. "It's so obvious this is where you belong. That makes it the place where I want to belong. With you."

Joyful tears blurred her vision and she blinked them away, determined to

see him clearly through all of this. “I never expected this. Or you. On the yacht I had a crush. Maybe it was more and I was falling for you the whole time.” She paused, peering up at him. “What if you don’t love me, just the pastry?” she teased.

He laughed. “If it was that simple, I’d put in a lifetime order right here and go on with protection work. It’s not that simple, but it is definitely that real. I love you, Lila. That’s as certain as the sunrise.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

“Well, you make the sweetest things.” He grinned. “Don’t make me settle for pastry. Please keep me around. Put me to work. Whatever you need, I’m in. I’m all yours. That’s what I want to be for you.”

“I just need you to be Travis.” She snuggled close once more, reveling in the way his strong arms banded around her. He would always be her safe place. “You’re my sunrise, my hope and my anchor.”

“Same goes.” He tipped up her face and kissed her tenderly. “It’s an honor to be all of that for you and it’s a comfort to know through everything, you hold my heart safe.”

“Always will.” She looked up and seeing love shining in his eyes was the best view ever. “Do you think you might want to get married someday?”

“To you?” He kissed her before she could protest his teasing. “I’m good with tomorrow, if you don’t have plans.”

Her heart fluttered with excitement. “Tomorrow might be a little too fast. I’m sure Gram will want to weigh in on the wedding plans. Particularly the cake.”

“Mm. We can have a groom’s cake, right?”

“I knew it,” she accused lightly. “You are in it for the pastry.”

He lifted her hands to his lips, his gaze turning serious. “That’s only a bonus, my love. Whatever suits your schedule, I’ll be there.”

She understood it was a declaration for life, not just the wedding day. Down deep in her heart, she held it as close as a secret that Travis would be with her forever. From this day forward, they’d face any joy or challenge together, side by side.

It was going to be an incredible journey. Which was perfect considering she had found an incredible love.

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About the Author

Regan Black, a USA Today and internationally bestselling author, writes award-winning, action-packed romances featuring kick-butt heroines and the sexy heroes who fall in love with them. Raised in the Midwest and California, she and her husband enjoy an empty-nest life in the South Carolina Lowcountry where the rich blend of legend, romance, and history fuels her imagination.

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