

A photograph of a sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a golden glow across the sky and reflecting on the water. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of palm tree fronds are visible against the bright sky. The overall mood is serene and tropical.

Regina Hanel

a deeper  
blue

# *A Deeper Blue*

by

**Regina Hanel**

*Yellow Rose*  
*by Regal Crest*  
**Texas**

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Print ISBN 978-1-61929-258-1  
eBook ISBN 978-1-61929-259-8

First Printing 2015  
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**Cover design by Acorn Graphics**

Published by:

Regal Crest Enterprises, LLC  
229 Sheridan Loop  
Belton, TX 76513

Find us on the World Wide Web at <http://www.regalcrest.biz>

Published in the United States of America

## **Acknowledgments**

Many thanks to Cathy Bryerose and the Regal Crest Enterprises team for giving my story and the entire RCE lineup of stories the chance to be heard, and for their continued dedication in making each book a reality.

To my editor, Pat Cronin, I can't thank you enough for your invaluable comments, suggestions, and encouragement. Your words make me smile, laugh, re-evaluate, and most importantly, learn. I hope you will be my editor for a long time.

A multitude of thanks to my partner, Veronica, for giving me the time and encouragement to write, and for making me delve deeper into my characters to bring out sides to them that otherwise would have remained hidden.

Special thanks to the readers for their support and for taking the time to travel on the journey with my characters, adding their own imaginations to the mix. I appreciate all the support you've given and always welcome your comments. You can contact me through my website at [www.rhanel.com](http://www.rhanel.com).

## **Dedication**

To the marine mammals whose voices are not yet being fully heard.

# Chapter One

“WHAT THE HECK?” Alexandra Rey rolled over in a stupor and hit the snooze button on the alarm clock. The ringing continued unabated. She rubbed her eyes, stifled a yawn, and rose part way, resting on her right elbow. Slumbering neurons fired into motion before delivering additional signals to her brain—the phone. Who was calling at this hour? Why was she so disoriented, and why did her head hurt so? Had she been out last night? Alex cursed, remembering that she had. She reached for the receiver on the nightstand.

“Hello?” No answer. Right, the talk button, she reminded herself. “Hello?” she repeated, her tone elevated.

“Hey, stranger, I miss you,” a soft-spoken female voice replied.

“I wasn’t expecting your call until Monday.” Alex sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the mattress, her eyes half open. Since the day Alex quit H&M Aquarium, Jenna Conroy called the first of every month like clockwork, hoping to convince Alex to return to her job.

“Yeah, well, I’ve got news and I couldn’t wait,” Jenna said. Silence followed. “Aren’t you going to ask me what my news is?”

“I don’t think I need to, do I? I’m sure you’re going to tell me anyway.” Alex ran her fingers through her short, wavy, brown, mussed, hair. Although Jenna maintained a position higher than Alex had, they often worked together on projects and treated each other as equals. They generally complained about the same work related issues, which added to their bond.

“You’re right. I am. Yesterday Jeremy was fired and I got his job as department head. Will you come back now?”

“Nice try. No way I’m buying that line.” Even if Jeremy had been fired, Alex wouldn’t return because she surmised the troubles reached farther up the chain than him, and she had the distinct impression Jenna was toying with her. And by Jenna’s silence, she knew she was right. “Besides, there are still a couple of days before April fools, and even then I wouldn’t bite.”

“Screw you Alex,” Jenna spat, her tone playful. “Why do you have to ruin all the fun?”

“I didn’t realize we were having fun.”

“Stop being you for a minute and talk to me. Seriously, why won’t you consider coming back?”

“If you recall, I didn’t quit in an ‘I’m sorry, I found another job’ kind of way, but rather in an ‘I think you’re all a bunch of assholes’ kind of way. Not likely they’d take me back even if I wanted the job, which I don’t.”

Seconds passed before Jenna replied. “You never called anyone an asshole.”

“Not in so many words, but I’m sure Jeremy got the drift. Besides, he’s not the only problem. The overall situation there hasn’t changed. The aquarium’s policies are barbaric in certain areas and their actions are inexcusable. I can’t work under those heartless and unsympathetic conditions. I won’t.”

“They do a lot of good, too.”

“Yes, which is why I took the job in the first place, but in my mind, the bad doesn’t outweigh the good.” As the last words were spoken, Alex’s alarm sounded for real. She shut it off. “I’ve got to go. I’m taking my dad to the doctor this morning, before work.”

“What you’re doing now isn’t work.”

“It is work, and I’m—”

“Don’t say happy, because I wouldn’t believe you. The only time I saw a sparkle in your eyes and a zip to your step was when you were working in your element, with the—”

“Okay, enough. I know where this is headed. Look, I appreciate your recruiting effort, I do, and I’m flattered, but I can’t. And besides, you don’t need a downer like me hanging around. You’re better off without me.”

“That’s not true,” Jenna rebutted. “I never said you were a downer. I only meant that you could’ve been happier if you worked in your element and also—well—if you let people in once in a while.”

Alex sensed the conversation drifting in a direction she didn’t wish to traverse. As much as she liked Jenna as a coworker, and as alluring as she was, she wasn’t attracted to Jenna in romantic way. Plus, the last thing Alex wanted was a relationship, and Jenna was much too sweet for anything less. Alex couldn’t even recall the name of the woman she was with the night before. “It’s not who I am, you should know that by now.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Not dating me is your loss.”

“And your gain, trust me.”

“You are impossible. I’ll talk to you next month. Maybe Jeremy will have a sudden urge to move north by then.”

“Good-bye Jenna,” Alex said. After a few seconds, she returned the phone to its receiver and rose out of bed.

Alex showered and dressed in a faded pair of blue jeans and dark purple T-shirt before meandering into the kitchen. She stopped in front of the window by the sink of the two-bedroom cape she shared with her grandmother and listened to the coffee percolate. Outside, the orange globe of Florida sunshine broke the horizon for what promised to be another gorgeous, warm March day in Lee County. Alex wished she were headed straight for work. She dreaded the morning that lay ahead.

The clank of nails on the floor redirected her thoughts. A fawn colored, hundred and ten pound Great Dane galloped into the room and thrust his body against Alex’s leg, his tail wagging vigorously.

“Hey there buddy,” Alex said. She petted him on the head. “Do you need to go outside?”

Thunder pranced toward the door and watched Alex until she opened it for him. Then he bolted into the backyard.

When he returned, Alex handed him a biscuit and got his breakfast ready before preparing her own, which consisted of a bowl of cinnamon apple wheat squares mixed with O’s, drenched in milk. After she ate, she grabbed the keys to her grandmother’s Toyota Prius and stepped out the front door.

Fifteen minutes later, she steered the vehicle into the parking lot of the Westerfield Apartment Complex. The aging complex consisted of three, two story brick buildings arranged in a U-shape setting. With plenty of empty spaces to choose from, Alex selected a parking spot under the partial shade of a thirty foot Florida Elm. Before reaching a full stop, she tilted the moon roof open and closed the windows. She raked her hands through her hair, breathed deep, and exited the vehicle.

Alex towered over the Prius, which made her feel taller than her 5'8" height. She shut the car door and plodded along the familiar cracked cement walkway toward the well-maintained circular flower garden. A quarter of the way around the garden, she turned right and followed the last section of walkway into building number three hundred. By the front doors, she depressed the buzzer to apartment 304A. After receiving no response, she hit the buzzer again, this time with added force. A prolonged silence left Alex fingering for the key in her pocket, until she heard the crackle of the intercom.

"Who is it?" a garbled, gruff male voice answered.

"It's Alex, Dad." Upon hearing the buzzer, Alex opened the lobby door and walked along the dimly lit corridor leading to her dad's apartment. She straightened her back and then knocked on the door.

Christopher Rey stood on the opposite side, unshaven and in his pajamas. With his wavy brown hair disheveled and blue eyes bloodshot, he ushered Alex in.

"What's going on, Dad? Why aren't you dressed?"

Christopher trudged his medium build, six-foot, 160 pound frame toward the recliner and dropped into the seat. The apartment was no more than seven hundred square feet, but overall kept neat and simple. A large living room window allowed plenty of sunlight to flow in when the curtains weren't drawn. "I didn't see the need," he said.

"I'm supposed to take you to the doctor today, remember?"

"Considering you called last night to remind me, it'd be pretty difficult for me to forget. I'm tired though and don't feel like going."

"I'm tired too, but I'm here."

"No one forced you. Look, I haven't slept much the past couple of days. I think my damned neighbor took up playing the flute. God, I wish he worked nights. The bottom line is, I'm exhausted and I don't feel much like going," Christopher said.

"From the remnants of takeout food sprawled on the table, I'm guessing you haven't felt much like cooking either."

"No, I had a craving for junk food. Try not to read into everything."

"Right. Do you mind if I open the curtains?"

"Knock yourself out."

Alex let the sun's rays flood into the apartment, making her aware of her father's drawn complexion. She kept her line of sight away from the multitude of framed photos of her brother situated throughout the room. "Have you been taking your pills?"

"For the most part."

"For the most part isn't good enough, you know that. Did you take one today?"

"Not yet. I'm planning to though. That's another reason why I thought it best we didn't see the doctor today. I don't want a lecture from him." Christopher stood and walked to the narrow bookshelf next to the television.

"Not taking your pills gives you all the more reason to go."

Christopher lifted his son's baseball glove from the shelf. He held the glove close to his chest and stroked the leather as if petting a cat. "You remember how good Josh was out in right field?"

Alex stared at her dad. "Yeah, Dad, I remember."

"I don't think he ever dropped a ball during a game, not one ball. God, that kid was special. One of a kind, you know?"



“Yeah, Dad, I do. Why don’t you put the glove back, take your pill, and then shower and get dressed so we can get going. I’d rather not cancel your appointment. I’ll call the medical center and see if they can push us back a bit.”

Christopher set the glove on the bookshelf and stood motionless for several seconds before he spun abruptly around. “There he goes again, that damn fool!”

“There who goes?”

“My neighbor—the one I mentioned who’s playing the flute. It’s not bad enough he keeps me up all night. Now he’s playing during the day, too. Don’t you hear it?”

Alex listened, then she said, “I don’t, but I’m sure you do.”

“Of course, I do. I just told you I did. What’s wrong with you? You certainly didn’t get your mother’s smarts, did you?”

Alex swallowed hard. Arguing would only make matters worse, so she withheld comment, but her insides reeled. “Why don’t you forget about your neighbor for now, take your pill, shower, and then let’s go to the doctor. I’m sure the visit will do you a world of good.”

Christopher rubbed the side of his face. “You might be right. Are we taking that tiny, white death trap Emma calls a car?”

“The car’s not that small, Dad. It’s compact. Your choice was either Grams’ car or my motorcycle.”

“Right, how could I forget about your Harley? It’s not like you chose a normal form of transportation, but then you don’t conform in other ways either, do you?”

ALEX DROPPED HER grandmother’s car off at the house and rode her motorcycle to work. She hoped the ride would ease the built up tension from the time spent earlier with her dad. She remembered him so differently before the accident. He was caring and kind, much like her mother. She wondered if his changed personality stemmed in part from the side effects of his medication, were a redirection of anger or frustration with his condition, or something else. Either way, his attitude didn’t make caring for him any easier.

Alex wove through the residential side streets and onto the main highway. She reached the turnoff to the Sanibel Causeway five minutes sooner than anticipated, due to the lack of traffic at that hour. By the time she turned off of Sanibel-Captiva road and onto Canter Road, one of the several private roads that stretched through Oasis Sunrise Resort, she’d shaved eight minutes off her normal commute time.

Alex parked under a pair of twenty-five-foot Silver Buttonwood trees, next to her business partner Sean’s bright yellow Jeep Rubicon, and turned off the ignition. The parking lot butted up to the beach facing Pine Island Sound; the side of the island opposite the Gulf of Mexico.

Alex pushed the kickstand in place with her boot and dismounted. She leaned her hand against the leather seat and unlaced her riding boots, first pulling off the right boot, then the left, and then her socks, which she stuffed inside each respective boot. She tucked the boots into her saddlebag, then turned and made her way barefoot across the silky white sands of the island toward the Island Water Adventures building.

The wooden, one-story structure resembled a well-maintained shack more than an actual building. Painted gunmetal gray with turquoise trim and orange shutters, the business sported a tin roof and donned an Island Water Adventures sign that swung off two three-link chains that hung from the peak of the roof’s overhang. The sign, which her best friend Andre had designed,

included a painted lizard standing on the bow of a kayak, under a palm tree, on a tiny island. The business's location was perfect. More days than not, they were bathed in a steady flow of customers, thanks to the resort patrons taking advantage of the services they offered.

Alex swung open the wooden screen door. Inside, the compact five hundred square foot structure housed the main shop and rental area, along with an office and tiny bathroom at the rear. "Hey, Delilah, thanks for covering for me this morning."

Delilah stood in the center of the room, her petite frame rounded in all the right places. She was dressed in bright orange short-shorts and a white sleeveless T-shirt with the Island Water Adventures logo ironed on the front. At twenty-two, she hadn't yet settled into a career, and instead worked several part time jobs. She grabbed her straight, long black hair and twisted it into a ponytail. "Not a problem, I'm happy to get the work. Is everything okay? You look beat."

"I am beat, but everything's fine. I had a little trouble sleeping last night, that's all. Where's Sean?" Alex wiped the sand from the soles of her feet and slid into the pair of flip flops she left near the door each night.

"He took a few Jet Skiers on a tour over near Ding Darling. He should be back soon. Why? You got a little energy you'd like to burn in the meantime?" Delilah's line of sight surveyed Alex's body in a suggestive manner.

"A tempting offer, but I need to get the month end books in order. Are you planning on staying for a while?"

"I'm on until two o'clock today, no worries."

"Great, you're a peach," Alex said as she crossed the worn but polished oak wood floor to the rear office.

"So I've been told. You sure I can't interest you in a bite?"

Alex let the comment pass. She knew Delilah was merely teasing her, since neither mixed business with pleasure.

THE REMAINDER OF Alex's abridged work day sped by quickly. On her way out the door, Sean stopped her.

Sean was quiet and iron-like, much like Alex, though he stood a few inches taller than her. The T-shirts he wore were tight fitting and accentuated his powerful physique. He was clean shaven with light brown hair, warm brown eyes, and a model's angular jaw line. Women customers fawned over him, in equal numbers to those that fawned over Alex. "Do you have dinner plans tonight?" Sean asked.

"Not really, why?"

"I know how much you hate doing the books, so I thought I'd make it up to you by buying you dinner."

"One of these days I will stop bailing you out. You should be keeping the records for practice, not me. I'd rather have been out on the Jet Ski's today, too."

"Is that a yes? If so, I thought we could head over to O'Reilly's on Sanibel-Captiva."

"You win. Why not? I could go for a heart stopping, juicy cheeseburger, greasy fries, and a cold draft beer," Alex said.

"Great. Give me two seconds."

The majority of Sean and Alex's dinner conversation centered on work, but as they neared the end of the meal, Sean changed the topic to Andre, which Alex assumed was the real reason



for his asking her to join him for dinner in the first place. Alex knew Sean loved to talk about the good times he and Andre had shared as life partners, and as much as Alex enjoyed the stories too, they pained her at the same time. Alex cared for Sean, but Sean wasn't Andre. Andre was the consummate jokester. He found ways to see the good in people, no matter what, even during his rebellious years. On the flip side, he also had a flair for the dramatic, and wasn't shy in pretending to squeeze out a tear or two to get what he wanted from Sean. Andre was the perfect picture of the man Sean fantasized about, a thin, five-foot-seven inches, with tight curly jet black hair and hazel eyes, and Andre knew it, using that fact to his advantage.

"I remember Andre telling me about how you two met," Sean said.

"We met senior year in high school. I was quite the trouble maker back then."

"You and Andre both from what I heard, though I'm guessing for different reasons. He'd crack up every time he described the look on your face when the two of you ran into each other trying to rob the same house."

Alex shifted in her seat. "Yeah, well, not one of my more stellar moments, what can I say? And obviously not one of his either. I don't know what either of us was thinking. We probably weren't. In any case, and in my defense, he looked pretty freaked himself when he saw me." The memory lit a spark in Alex's eyes, and she cracked a smile.

"I bet. He was so happy the two of you ended up together in a juvenile holding cell for the night though."

"Yeah, can't say my grandmother felt the same way. That's the night I found out the two of us attended the same high school, and what a talker he was. No matter how many times I asked him to shut up, something else popped in his head that he felt the need to share. And share he did."

"Yup, that was Andre, to a tee," Sean said.

"In hindsight, I suppose trying to rob that house and getting caught was one of the best things that happened to me back then," Alex said. After that, an awkward silence filled the space between them, irrespective of the loud chatter and blaring music. Alex lifted her beer mug and drained the last sip. "Well, this was nice, Sean, but I better get going. Thanks for the meal. I'll see you tomorrow." Alex stood and pushed in her chair.

"What's the rush? Stay a while. I'll buy you another drink."

"I can't. I should go." Alex searched for an excuse. "I promised Grams I'd fix the gutter before the rain that's expected later tonight."

"All right, drive safe then."

"I will." Alex waved on her way out. She was thankful Sean didn't press the issue of her sudden exit and that the late March evening air had cooled. The air in O'Reilly's had felt increasingly warm and suffocating, and she welcomed the change in temperature outside. She rode home slow, wanting to be somewhere else, but not knowing where to go.

As soon as she entered the house, Thunder greeted her with his usual zest. She petted him for a few seconds and then walked into the living room where her grandmother was watching television. "Hi, Grams." Alex kissed her grandmother on the cheek.

"Hi, Alexandra. How'd it go with your dad this morning?"

Emma Weston was the only person Alex allowed to call her by her full first name. She wasn't quite sure why the utterance of Alexandra didn't bother her when her grandmother spoke it, but otherwise elicited a cringe that rose from deep within. In Alex's mind, the name Alexandra belonged to a person of elegance concerned with fashionable looks and economic stature, someone prim and proper, someone much unlike herself. "Not well. He went off his

medication. I'm guessing it was only for a couple of days, but it was enough to notice the set back."

"I'm sorry. I hope he gets himself on track soon," Emma said.

"He'd better, unless he wants to end up in the group home again. I'm sure he knows that too, which is why he finally agreed to take his pill and go to the doctor. Otherwise, I don't think he'd have given a damn."

"Don't let him get inside your head. I know he's your father, but there's only so much help you can give someone who doesn't want it. The best we can hope for is that he stays cooperative."

"I suppose. I can't talk about him anymore. I think I'll go workout for a while."

"All right, sweetie, have fun."

Alex retreated into the garage. She strengthened her upper body for about an hour, all the while thinking about her past, the accident that changed her life, her dad's condition, and Andre. She'd built a steady sweat, as if doing so would clear her mind, but she remained angry with her life and sad at the loss of those that mattered so much. Alex kept her sadness well hidden, but at the most unexpected times, and for the most disconnected reasons, it would bubble through and not leave her side.

Her energy sapped, she gave up on the workout. She sat erect on the padded bench, attempting to remain master of her emotions, but the tears within her eyes welled up and flowed down her cheeks. She let them fall until the pounding in her head forced her to push the memories of the loved ones she missed from her mind, the same way she'd done thousands of times before. And although the tears stopped, the hollow emptiness remained.

Alex showered and watched television with her grandmother for about an hour before heading to bed early, but sleep would not take her. Her mind churned and tormented her with visions of the past. Alex couldn't take much more. Once she was certain Emma was asleep, she dressed and snuck from the house. She straddled the Harley, put the key in the ignition, and rolled the motorcycle to the end of the driveway before revving the 1200cc engine, hoping not to wake her grandmother.

Alex rode to calm her mind, with no predetermined destination, but before long, she once again found herself in the parking lot of Slow Motion, the blare of dance music escaping through the walls and into the mild night air.

Inside, the lesbian bar was packed to capacity. On Thursdays, drinks were half price. Alex felt the vibrations of the pounding music reverberate in the soles of her boots. She scanned the bar for an empty seat. As she strode closer, a slim brunette bumped into her. Alex caught the woman by the arms and held her upright before letting go.

"I'm so sorry..." the woman began.

"No problem," Alex said. She now split her line of sight between the bar and the woman who stood before her dressed in designer slacks, high heels, and a far too snug fitting, three quarter length silk blouse.

The woman scanned the length of Alex's body and flashed a devilish grin. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure, thanks." Alex knew she'd hate herself later, but at this moment she didn't care. She needed company and release, and she'd planned on achieving both.

"My name's Carly, by the way."

"I'm Alex." Alex found two vacated stools at the bar and they sat down. After their drinks arrived, they talked only a few minutes before they maneuvered to the dance floor. One dance

led to another and one drink to another. When Carly excused herself to go to the ladies room, Alex followed.

Once behind the closed door Carly turned and pulled Alex toward her by the front of her shirt. She attempted to kiss Alex on the lips, but Alex shifted her head to the side and drove Carly against the wall. She thrust her hands under Carly's blouse and pressed her mouth against the side of Carly's neck, eliciting a moan. Carly grabbed Alex's buttocks and pulled her closer.

"Come with me," Carly said, her breath shallow.

Alex followed Carly out a rear exit and into the back seat of what she assumed was the woman's Lexus sport coupe. Their sex-craved romp continued in a heated whirl with less than gentle groping, kneading, and grinding. Carly moaned under Alex's skilled hands. When it was over, they parted with no words spoken.

Alex searched the parking lot for her motorcycle. Her head hurt, but not as much as her heart, which had nothing to do with Carly. "What is wrong with me?" she said aloud to herself, as if thinking she'd have an answer to that question when for all the years up until that point she did not. Two evenings of nameless sex in a row was a record, even for her.

When she located her Harley, she knew she shouldn't have gotten on it. She should have called a cab to take her home, but she didn't want to go home. She didn't want to go anywhere. She shouldn't be here. She shouldn't be alive.

Alex opened the throttle and cranked the engine. She revved the bike, put it in gear, and sped from the parking lot. The rear end of the bike slid on a patch of sand as she pulled away. Alex kept the bike upright as her boot tapped the ground. She held firm to the handles and straightened out before pulling onto the road. Once on the highway, she opened the throttle and wouldn't let up.

The wind whipped through her hair and pounded against her chest. She clung to the bike. Seventy, eight, ninety, one hundred miles per hour and higher, images from her past flashed through her mind. Images that marred a once normal life; the boating accident, her dad's inability to cope, the trouble she caused her grandmother afterward, and Andre's passing. All were in the mix. All weighed heavy.

Adrenaline coursed through Alex's veins as she sped along the empty highway. A far off overpass fast approached. No police in sight. She heaved to catch a breath, her skin pressed taut against her face. Alex pinpointed in her mind the optimal spot at which to make impact with the manmade structure as it neared. She was closer to easing her pain than any time before. This time she could do it. She wouldn't let up. Her mind would finally rest. She needed to rest. A few more seconds and it would all be over—and then?

A mental image of her grandmother's trembling body, surrounded by EMT's and firefighters, crying as she reached for Alex's mangled body, catapulted her to the present with only milliseconds to spare. She leaned her body right, away from the brick structure of the underpass. The motorcycle responded in an instant. The next several moments passed in a blur. Alex relaxed her hand on the throttle and exhaled.

## Chapter Two

THE TELEPHONE RANG, breaking Kailyn Montgomery's concentration for the second time that morning. Ruffled by the unexpected interruption, she let the answering machine pick up. Tapping the end of her pencil on the drawing table, she shifted her concentration to the view of the Gulf of Mexico through her workroom studio window. The hot Florida sun shone bright on the clear, blue water. Kailyn wished she was resting on the beach rather than pushing to meet the paper's deadline. She listened to her boss's voice on the machine for several seconds, then with reluctance, lifted the receiver.

"Hi, it's me. Yes, I can be there by two o'clock. What's going on?" Kailyn wasn't expecting an answer. Her boss seldom gave one. Today was no exception. "Right, see you at two then."

By the time she reached the Fort Myers satellite office of *The Floridian*, Kailyn wanted nothing more than to leave. She hated the confinement of office buildings. She found the atmosphere suffocating. She couldn't understand how her co-workers operated under such constraints. She was thankful she didn't have to.

Kailyn's three-inch high heels tapped prominently on the surface of the cream-colored, polished tile floor. At the front desk, she waved her badge at the guard as she passed. Once inside the elevator, she hit the button to the tenth floor. She ran her hand through her brown, windblown hair in an attempt to replace some semblance of order, and when the elevator doors opened, she exited and moved through the office with purpose.

"Nice of you to grace us with your presence Montgomery," a hidden male voice said.

"I can assure you my presence here is not by choice," Kailyn replied. She maintained her stride as she passed the cubicle from where the voice emanated, "though I sense you can't get enough of this place. Trouble staying away from the free donuts, Walsh?"

Kailyn was certain she heard a "hmmph" in reply from behind her, and smiled. Tim Walsh was too easy to manipulate. Her boss, on the other hand, was another matter.

"Come on in Kailyn. I'm glad you made it," her boss said. Jake Mackleroy was in his late forties and fit in relation to most other men his age, though no athlete. Specks of gray accentuated his short, thick black hair. A large frame and steely gray eyes made him more intimidating than he would otherwise be.

Kailyn sauntered into the well-lit room. One wall of windows overlooked the Gulf. With that view, she wouldn't have minded working in his office. The confinement of the cubicles is what gave her claustrophobia. "I wasn't aware I had a choice."

"You didn't. Please, shut the door and sit," he said, gesturing to the red cloth chair in front of his mahogany desk. "Coffee?"

"No, thanks. I drank a strawberry smoothie on my way over." Kailyn wished her boss would cut the small talk and get to the point. She was somewhat anxious as to why he called her into the office instead of telling her what he needed to over the phone. She hoped she wasn't going to be fired. He hadn't complained about her work, so she didn't think getting fired was her reason for being there, but then one never knew. Maybe the newspaper wasn't doing well. She knew

nothing of their finances, except that April was around the time they budgeted for the next fiscal year's activity.

Jake's line of vision shifted away from Kailyn's long, slender legs and well rounded calves, to her eyes. His ability to be discrete about what he desired wasn't one of his strong points; another reason Kailyn preferred working from home.

"I think we need to make a change," Jake said, his tone flat.

Kailyn kept her composure and forced herself not to jump to conclusions. "What kind of change?"

"I like your work, don't get me wrong," Jake began. He shook a mechanical pencil to and fro in his hands, "but I think it's time for diversification."

Kailyn knew how much her boss enjoyed toying with his employees, but she didn't take the bait. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "What sort of diversification?"

"I'm glad you asked. I'd like you to create a comic strip that speaks more directly to the common reader. Perhaps even to the tourists of our fine state."

"You do?"

"Yes, I do. Poking fun at the upper echelon, no matter how good you are at it, is fine, but it leaves many more potential readers untapped."

"It does? What exactly did you have in mind then?" Kailyn felt a twinge of annoyance creep up the back of her neck, but she kept her tone calm. "You want me to do away with my current work and come up with...something that resonates more with the everyday tourist or blue collar worker?"

"Yes, except I don't want you to do away with your current work. I'm offering you a second strip for the paper. *For the Love of Money* needs a partner."

Euphoria rose within Kailyn. The offer was certainly not what she'd expected. It meant her boss was not only happy with her work, but confident in her creative ability. To be given two comic strips with the same paper was a huge honor. She only remembered that happening to a co-worker one other time. She was uncertain what she'd create, but was more than happy and grateful to do it. The corners of her mouth rose as ideas popped into her head. "Of course, I'd be more than happy to develop a second comic strip. How much time do I have before you need the first submission from me? I could use some time for research."

"Great. There's no immediate rush. A few weeks or so is fine. I have confidence in you."

ALEX DRAGGED HER body out of bed and lingered in a hot shower, wishing the night before had been a bad dream, but knowing it wasn't. She dressed as if in a daze and ambled into the kitchen. She prepared the coffee maker and stood in her favorite spot in front of the window by the sink, lost in thought like she had so many mornings before.

The aroma of the steaming Columbian brew returned her thoughts to the present. Alex forced all negative thoughts aside. Regardless of what had or hadn't happened the night before, another day towered ahead and she needed to face it. She poured herself a cup of coffee and walked toward the kitchen table. She lifted her favorite mug to her lips and sipped the comforting liquid.

With reluctance, Alex glanced at the pile of mail on the corner of the table and flipped through the ominous stack. She made a mental note of each item addressed to her, most of which she tore in half for the recycling pile, and then she paused. As if at half speed, Alex singled out

one envelope from the rest. She read the return address twice, then pried it open with her index finger, extracted the letter, and began reading.

“Morning, Alexandra,” Emma interrupted.

Alex spun around. “Hey there, Grams, how come you’re up so early?”

“Seven o’clock isn’t much earlier than I normally get up,” Emma said, “though I did have a bad dream and couldn’t get back to sleep, so I figured I’d get up. Besides, I wanted to catch you before you left for work. What’s that you’re holding?”

“It’s a letter from Andre’s parents’ lawyer. I’m not sure what this is about, but my guess is, it’s not good.”

“What does it say?”

Alex held the high quality, textured parchment in her hand and continued reading. When she finished, she let her hand drop to her side. “I don’t believe this,” she mumbled. Frustration oozed from every pore. “Why now? Why would they do this now?”

“Do what, Alexandra?”

Alex didn’t meet her grandmother’s eyes. Instead she folded the letter up and placed it in its envelope. “Andre’s parents are contesting his will.”

“Why on earth would they choose to do that?” Emma replied, her voice raised an octave higher than usual. Emma moved closer to her granddaughter, pulled a chair out from under the oak table, and sat. “It’s been close to a year since Andre’s funeral, God bless his gentle soul. A funeral those heartless parents didn’t even have the decency to show up to.”

“They had a valid reason, remember? Their vacation in the French Riviera was more important than seeing their only son laid to rest,” Alex said in a tone filled with the venom from a bite that still stung. “I still can’t wrap my head around the blatant disregard they showed.” Alex strode toward the counter and yanked the coffee pot from its resting place. She grabbed Emma’s coffee cup and filled it, then set it hard on the table. “Here you go.”

“Easy with the cup; it’s not made of steel.”

“Sorry Grams.”

“That’s okay.” Emma picked up the warm vessel and held it with both hands. She appeared to be lost deep in thought as she raised the cup to her lips and sipped the heated brew. “It’s hard to fathom how anyone could be so cold.”

“And their timing’s uncanny.” Alex rested her hand on the back of the chair next to her grandmother’s. She handed Emma a cherry filled pastry that she’d purchased from the bakery on Cedar the day before, on her way to work. “Another month or so and probate would have closed. Another month or so and everything would have been settled.”

Emma shook her head. “Do you think they’re after Island Water Adventures?”

“I’m sure of it. What else could they want? What I can’t foresee is on what grounds they plan to contest. The will was perfectly legal, half of the business to me, and half to Sean. I guess we’ll find out soon enough though. They want to meet as soon as ‘agreeable’ to all parties. I’m going to have to talk to Sean. I’m sure he got a letter as well. I don’t think we should talk to anyone without getting a lawyer first ourselves.”

“I agree. I’m curious how they plan on pulling this off.”

“They must know something we don’t. I better get going, Grams. I don’t want to get stuck in traffic.” Alex grabbed a pastry and stuffed half in her mouth. Then she bent forward and kissed her grandmother on the cheek. “I’ll see you later. I love you, and don’t worry about me.”

“I love you, too, and please be careful.”

Alex contemplated her grandmother's words as she shut the front door behind her, wondering how much her grandmother sensed about the demons Alex fought off each day. After stuffing what remained of the cherry pastry in her mouth, she headed to work.

When she arrived, she parked, ran through the routine of taking off her boots and stowing them, and entered the rear office. She noticed straight off that Sean wasn't his usual cheery self. She didn't think their dinner conversation or her early exit was the reason why. Most days when she arrived she'd find him already outside, wiping down the equipment and humming an unfamiliar tune. But today, none of the craft were pulled out near the water, and Sean appeared dazed, as if lost deep in thought.

Alex was certain she knew why as her hand absently touched the back pocket of her jeans. In an attempt to lighten the mood, she said, "One of these days I *will* beat you in here, mister. That is, unless you sleep in this place, which I wouldn't put past you."

Sean lifted his feet off the end of the old wooden desk and placed his cup of coffee on top of several papers. "I'd laugh, but I've got bad news. I tried calling you last night after I got home from dinner, but every time I did, I was transferred straight to voicemail."

"I must have shut the cell off." The guilt associated with last night reared its demented head once again. She was lucky to be standing where she was. In hindsight, when she thought she'd had control over the situation at the start of her ride last night, she knew in her gut she wasn't holding the reins, her emotions were.

"I figured. I hate to say this, but you look like crap again," Sean said.

"I'm fine. Restless night is all." Alex unclipped the cell from her side, flipped it open, and turned it on.

"Are you ever going to get a real cell phone?"

"I'll buy one when I don't have to sell my body in order to pay for the data usage charges."

"You're being a bit extreme, don't you think?"

"Maybe, but you have to admit, the cost is outrageous. Besides, I don't have that many people I need to stay in touch with. This cell's fine. I don't need a phone that will one day profess to be smarter than I am." Alex returned the phone to its holster and pulled the envelope from her jeans. She shook open the parchment. "This letter, on the other hand, is far from fine. I'm assuming you got a copy too?"

"The will contest from Andre's parents' lawyer?" Sean inhaled a deep breath before he stood, his broad shoulders curved forward, reflecting his mood. "Yes, that's the bad news. I've read the letter over more times than I care to admit. They've got a hell of a nerve, Alex, a hell of a nerve. I can't believe they'd do this. His parents have pulled some crap in his lifetime, but to dishonor his dying wishes?"

"I know. Grams and I were discussing the same thing this morning," Alex said in support. "I think we have to meet with them, but I don't think we should meet them without a lawyer present. We'd be out of our league."

"I agree. I'll call my lawyer later when he gets in." Sean drank the last sip of his coffee and tossed the cup into the cylindrical garbage bin next to the desk. "I'm going to set up outside."

"I'll join you in a minute, as soon as I get out of these jeans and slip on a pair of shorts."

After Sean exited the office he turned. "Thanks again for dinner last night. I know it's tough sometimes, but talking about Andre helps me deal with not having him around."

"I know. It's fine."



THE DAY SPED by faster than Alex thought it would. In the morning she'd led a group of vacationers on a kayak tour south along the island toward Buck Key, and later in the day, took a group of Jet Skiers through the waterways between Cayo Costa and Cabbage Key. As her work day came to a close, she was happy to be heading home.

Alex cruised at a leisurely speed along Sanibel-Captiva Road. Though tired, she couldn't clear thoughts about the audacity of Andre's parents from her mind. Her anger didn't stem from the possibility she and Sean might lose the business. She never wanted or expected anything from Andre in the first place. Being given part ownership in Andre's business was as much a surprise to her as to the others at the reading of the will. Everyone but Andre's life partner Sean, that is. Sean brandished a broad smile when Alex discovered what Andre had done. What irked her now was the fact that not only did Andre's parents insult his memory by not attending his funeral, but they were also not planning on respecting his last dying wishes.

Alex's blood boiled. How could someone treat a family member with such disrespect? How did these people sleep at night? Andre was her best friend; her only friend. Andre was the only person she'd let get close to her since the accident, and his friendship was the biggest gift he could ever have given her. His foresight and thoughtfulness rescued her at a precarious time when she needed stability most. She wondered if that's why Andre included her in the will. That, and probably to keep Sean grounded and the business profitable, she mused.

Sean didn't have the same business sense Andre and Alex had. At first, Alex kept the books for the business after Andre's death, something for which Sean often expressed his gratitude. Then as time passed, she taught him what he needed to know about the administrative side of the business and drilled into him the importance of good record keeping. In turn, he provided her with knowledge of the waterways and watercraft that she lacked early on. In this way, they made a good pair. Both wanted to see Andre's dream business succeed, and both were drawn closer to Andre by working toward that end. But every now and again, like the day before, she'd step in to help Sean out.

Alex didn't know what the outcome of the possible will contest would be or what the future would bring, but she was determined not to let Andre's dream be destroyed by his heartless parents. Beyond that goal, her vision of the future didn't reach.

When Alex finally stepped in the door after work, Thunder pounced toward her with a ball in his mouth, tail wagging. "Not now, Thunder, I'm beat. Maybe later," Alex said as she petted him on the head and then tapped him on his side. She rubbed his ears for a few seconds and kissed the side of his head. "I missed you this morning. I'm not used to heading off to work without a smooch from you. You want a treat?" Alex walked into the kitchen, but not before Thunder beat her to the cookie jar. As she lifted the lid to the jar, she peeked out the window and saw Emma finish loosening the soil around the white gardenia.

A couple of minutes later, Emma entered the kitchen through the back door.

"You spoil him so," Emma said, replacing a loose strand of hair from where it had fallen into her face. "He gets plenty of treats during the day, believe me."

"Hi, Grams." A smile graced Alex's face. "I didn't get to see him this morning, so I'm making up for lost time." She bent toward her grandmother and kissed her on the cheek. "Besides, I don't spoil him more than you spoil me."

“Oh, get off with yourself now,” Emma replied. She waved her hands in a shooing motion. “Go wash up. Dinner will be ready soon. I just have to heat it up again.”

“Great, I’m starved. You don’t need to tell me twice.” Halfway down the hallway, Alex yelled, “Oh, and by the way, the garden looks nice.”

After dinner, Alex washed the dishes while her grandmother sat at the kitchen table and kept her company.

“How’d it go with Sean today?” Emma asked.

“He’s pretty much beside himself, Grams. We’re obviously going to get a lawyer. We can’t let them take the business out from under us.”

“No, you can’t. I know you like working there well enough, but have you given any thought to pursuing the career you went to school for?”

“You sound like Jenna. She’s after me every month like clockwork.”

“I’d say that’s a good thing then. I mean, you’re so smart, like your mom was.”

“That’s not what dad thinks.”

“I keep telling you not to listen to your dad. You have more patience for his nonsense than anyone I know. Your doctorate and certifications say otherwise. I’m not pushing, but I’d hate to see you waste too much time in a side job and then have trouble getting back to what you love.”

“I appreciate your concern, Grams, but I like what I’m doing now. I feel like Sean needs me.”

“He needed you in the beginning, but I think he would find a replacement for you if he had to, as long as you gave him enough advance notice,” Emma pressed.

“Maybe once we get through this legal issue I’ll consider it, unless by that time, I’ll have no other choice.”

“Being forced into change isn’t what I’m hoping for either. Besides, Andre deserved to see his dreams fulfilled. What are your plans for tonight?”

“I think I’ll take a shower and then go out for a while if I still feel like it by then. I shouldn’t be out too late though.”

## Chapter Three

“YOU LOOK LIKE shit again, I’m sorry to say,” Sean bellowed as Alex slunk past him on the beach. “Three days in a row is a record for you. Hanging out at that sleazy lesbian bar again?”

Alex couldn’t look Sean in the eye. She kept her head low. Sunglasses covered bloodshot eyes. “Two days is a record, but how’d you know it’s been three?”

“Lucky guess. The guilt was written all over your face yesterday and the day before, same as it is now.”

“And for the record, the bar’s not sleazy.”

“Maybe not sleazy, but it’s no four star establishment either.”

“Like any bar is?”

“Maybe it’s not the bar, but who you’re meeting inside. Seriously, Alex, why do you keep doing this to yourself?”

“Give me a break, would you? It was Friday night and I didn’t feel like being alone.”

“You deserve so much better.”

“Do I? I don’t know. I’m not even sure I want better. The more someone has, the more they can lose.”

Sean stood quiet for several seconds before he spoke. “That’s the worst logic I ever heard. People may leave your life Alex, but if they were special to you, then they’re never truly gone. A part of Andre will be with me always, and I know he’s with you, too. There’s not a day goes by that I don’t think about him, and no, that’s not easy. But I focus on the happier memories, on all the good times and laughs we shared. I’m glad I took that chance with him when I did. My life’s better for having known him. I have no regrets.”

Alex couldn’t speak. She could barely breathe. She nodded as the emptiness in her chest consumed her once more, knowing there were no words in response to what Sean had said. She managed to keep her feet moving, and once inside the wooden screen door of Island Water Adventures, inhaled deep, keeping the tears that pushed to the surface at bay. She rested the back of her head against the molding.

Alex recognized that except for having her grandmother and Thunder, her life was empty. She also understood that her lack of dealing with reality, and her own fears and insecurities were part of the reason her life remained that way. Sean was right, but she would not face her issues. She already had too many to deal with. Once again, she pushed the negative thoughts from her mind and pulled away from the wall.

She retreated to the rear office, changed into her shorts, and returned outside to take one of the ocean kayaks out for her morning exercise. She needed alone time to clear her head before she had to deal with their customers. People came to their establishment with the expectation of enjoying their time. Their customers deserved friendly service, and a smiling face would be what she’d deliver, one way or another.

After twenty minutes of rigorous paddling northward through the waters of Pine Island Sound, Alex felt the tension ease from her neck and shoulders. She'd also replenished her fluids with water, and sweat out some of the toxic effects of too much alcohol the night before. Her guilt and self-loathing, of having engaged in nameless sex yet again with a fresh young face at Slow Motion, was also wearing off. One thing she was glad about though. She never played games with any of the women she'd met at the bar. She was clear on the onset that she wasn't looking for a relationship, and the women she hooked up with were fine with that arrangement as well, and were likely looking for much the same. Otherwise, they wouldn't have engaged with her in the first place.

Alex put the past behind and headed north along North Captiva Island, rather than travel south along the bayous where she'd often watch for dolphins and log their activities. She wasn't in the mood for observing today. Today she wanted to clear her mind. If only for a while, she wished to be completely alone, and the water provided that serenity. The splash of the paddles as they dipped in and out of the water and the birds cawing as they flew overhead were all the company she needed at that moment.

Although she'd rather have stayed on the water a half-hour longer, Alex knew she needed to get back and help Sean set up for the day's activities. Alex paddled on one side until she had the kayak aimed in the direction she'd come. As she paddled and the kayak sliced through the water, she was temporarily immobilized by the faint, yet contagious laughter of another woman.

Alex pulled the two-sided paddle from the water and rested the horizontal bar across her lap. Her kayak floated to within a couple hundred feet from the end of a private dock near the southern most end of North Captiva Island. She'd never stepped foot on the island before. The only access was by ferry, private boat or private aircraft, and for the airstrip, one needed to be a member to use it.

At first, Alex was unable to pinpoint the origin of the energetic voice that captured her attention, but then a golden retriever bound across the dock. It was followed by a young man chasing a woman of similar stature. Long, dark brown hair was tussled as the man grasped the woman around the waist from behind. Her laughter stopped for a moment, and was replaced by a shriek when he lifted her off her feet, swung her around, and deposited her on the dock behind him.

The woman's laughter resumed when the man raced to the end of the dock, touched the boat, and raised his hands into the air. The woman must have spoken, though Alex couldn't hear what she was saying, because in response the man simply turned his palms upward and shrugged before he bent at the waist in a bow and then pet the rambunctious dog.

Alex couldn't ever remember hearing such pure and unfettered laughter emanate from any one individual. The wholesomeness and light-heartedness of the sound warmed her insides. Was such happiness possible? She watched the smiling woman tuck her hair behind her right ear, as the young man boarded the boat. Then the woman turned her attention to the waters in the Sound.

Alex knew she'd been seen. Her heart raced for reasons unknown to her and altogether foreign. She attributed the inexplicable sensations that coursed through her as guilt for having intruded on the couple. At that instant, she first realized she'd stopped paddling. For how long she had stopped she wasn't certain. But before she turned away from watchful eyes, and without realizing she had done it, she raised her hand and waved.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, Alex," she chided in a whisper as she dunked the right side of the paddle into the water and rowed. Her mind reeled over her voyeuristic actions while her body

wanted nothing more than to disappear from her current location as fast as possible. She sat like a target on the open water with no cover. What did she wave for? She didn't know the woman, who must now be wondering who was gawking at her. But before the paddle hit the water a third time, the woman on the dock returned her wave.

A flood of heat raced through Alex's body. Her cheeks flushed. What? The woman waved in return? Or had she swatted after a mosquito? No, that was no mosquito swat, Alex concluded. That was a distinct wave. But why would she wave back? Well, that would be the socially acceptable response, Alex thought. Alex's cheeks flushed the deepest of crimson red. Time to get out of here, she concluded.

Eyes focused forward, Alex increased the force behind her alternating strokes. She prayed the couple wouldn't head in her direction once they got on their boat, though there was a strong probability they might since the mainland was south of their current location. Alex took comfort in the fact that from their current distance apart, these people likely would not recognize her if they saw her again. As the hull of the kayak cut through the water, from behind her Alex heard the woman yell, "No, no, Sasha, you can't come with us. I'll be right back, Tommy." Tension flowed from Alex's muscles as she exhaled a cavernous breath. Her identity and integrity were safe, at least for now.

KAILYN SAT ACROSS from her brother, Tommy Montgomery, at their favorite diner in Fort Myers Beach. Like so many restaurants, the diner faced the Gulf and was accessible from the pier. Business boomed and they were fortunate another boat had pulled out from the docks when they pulled in. Inside, they lucked out as well with much sought-after window seats.

"One of these days I *will* beat you to that boat." Kailyn tucked a loose strand of her dark brown hair behind her ear and studied her brother. In so many ways he was a reflection of her, yet he possessed less direction. Kailyn knew he hadn't yet found what made him happy in life, and not that she had it all, but at least she loved her career, and that fulfilled her for now.

"And in what lifetime would that be?"

"Funny. If you hadn't grabbed me and lifted me off my feet, I would've gotten there first and you know it."

"Oh, puleeese! You wish. I merely held onto you so you wouldn't end up in the water when I sped past. Face it. You beating me is not happening, Sis. The last time you lost, you blamed the loss on Sasha—"

"In all fairness, she did run under my feet."

"Right, and the time before that...what was it...oh, yeah, someone had left their lifejacket on the dock and it got in your way, and then—"

"Fine, fine, whatever you say. So are you buying, or what? I wanna make sure I get my money's worth on this rare occasion, if you are." Kailyn smirked as she opened the menu.

"Yeah, I'm buying and you can eat all you like. You could stand to gain a few pounds anyway."

"I think not. I may look fit, but lately I've spent way too much time behind the desk and not enough time having fun. I'm struggling with that new comic strip Jake offered up."

"Coffee you two?" the waitress interrupted. "One regular, one decaf?"

"Yeah, thanks, Sue," Kailyn replied.

"No problem," the waitress said before she darted off.

“I have faith you’ll create something fantastic, Sis, you always do.” Tommy kept his eyes focused on the menu as his voice trailed off.

“Don’t sound too excited for me.”

Tommy glanced from behind the menu at Kailyn, but said nothing.

Kailyn read his expression. “I’m sorry. I doubt you invited me to breakfast to hear me ramble on about my work. How’s First Capital been treating you?”

Tommy was the accounting manager at First Capital Savings in Fort Myers. He was good at his job, but Kailyn knew he cut his potential short by working there. First Capital was the top competitor with Montgomery Savings & Loan, which their family owned. Tommy could easily have been controller or V.P. at their dad’s company, but he refused to work for his dad. Instead, he chose to work at a bank that seriously underpaid and undervalued him. Kailyn surmised he purposely picked the top rival bank to show his father he could succeed without him. How Tommy measured his own success though, Kailyn wasn’t sure. And although Kailyn didn’t follow in her dad’s footsteps either, the reason she didn’t do so wasn’t for the sole purpose of bucking him. The reason was that her creative side drove her in another direction.

Before Tommy could answer Kailyn’s question, the waitress returned with their coffee. “Ready to order?”

Kailyn folded her menu closed. “Yes, thanks. I’ll have the buttermilk pancakes, two eggs sunny side up, and a side of bacon. And that yogurt parfait with the fresh fruit sounds wonderful, too, but can you bring that out after I’ve eaten the pancakes?”

“Sure thing,” the waitress said. She winked at Kailyn, probably while wondering where she stored her food. “And you?” she said as she turned to Tommy, pencil held to her notepad.

“If there’s anything left in the kitchen after that order, I’ll have the Belgian Waffles.”

Kailyn slapped her brother on the forearm.

“What?” he said. “It’s true.”

“That’s it?” the waitress asked.

Tommy grinned. “Yup, that’s it.”

After the waitress left, Tommy cleared his throat. He fumbled with the fork next to his plate. “In response to your question about my job at First Capital, I was fired.”

“What?” Kailyn’s shocked voice carried farther than she’d intended. She set her coffee cup on its saucer with a clank, spilling some of its contents. She noticed several heads had turned in their direction. Eyes lowered, she dropped her voice several octaves before speaking again.

“When did this happen?”

“Last month, but don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I got a fair severance package that’ll hold me over for a while. In fact, I’ve already invested most of that money.”

Kailyn knew better than to suggest he ask their parents for money. That was something she didn’t enjoy doing either, and avoided at all costs. Besides, both she and her brother got lavish birthday and Christmas presents, which at times included money the equivalent to some people’s annual salaries, so money shouldn’t have been an issue. Then again, both she and Tommy spent decent amounts of money on eating out, golfing, expensive clothes, and the like too, so Kailyn wasn’t so sure Tommy didn’t need to worry. Thoughts drifting to shopping and the contents of her brother’s closet, surmising that Tommy had more designer shoes than she did, Kailyn laughed out loud.

“What’s so funny?” Tommy cut into the humungous pile of waffles with his fork.

Kailyn finished chewing the mouthful of pancake she'd packed in moments earlier. "I don't know what made me think about it at this moment, but I was envisioning your closet of loafers and shoes and thought you probably have more than I do, and nicer, too."

"I better have more than you do, or I'm losing it. And don't worry about me. Don't think for one second that this setback will stop me from shopping with you today. We're still going to celebrate the good news about your new comic strip, job or no job."

Love filled Kailyn's eyes. "You're the best, you know it?"

"I do."

"That place wasn't good for you anyway. They took advantage of you. Maybe a break to re-evaluate what you want to do with your life is for the best. You can start fresh and find a job more suited to you. You've got great fashion sense. Maybe that's the direction you should follow."

Tommy shrugged, but Kailyn couldn't read the expression on his face. To her it almost appeared as if he were ashamed. His eyes remained focused on the paper placemat in front of him.

"It'll all work out, I'm sure of it. You're resourceful," Kailyn continued.

This time, Tommy's expression appeared even more distraught, and he gazed out the window as boats sped past.

"Does Dad know?" Kailyn asked.

"What? Oh, about losing my job? No, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell him. I'd like to get back on my feet first. Besides, telling him I got fired won't help anything. He'll go on and on about how I don't have a proper work ethic, or how I'm not serious enough, or if I had applied myself more in college instead of chasing guys, yahda, yahda, yahda."

Kailyn wished her father would handle the situation of Tommy losing his job with greater tact than Tommy led on, but she knew better. Their father forever focused on the negative with Tommy, instead of the positive. "You're right. I wouldn't tell him either. There's no point. Once you get another job you can let him know you switched, on your own terms." Kailyn lifted the dessert spoon and set its end on the table. "What do you say you help me scoff down this yogurt dish, which was way bigger than I thought it would be, and then you and I get out of here and do some serious therapy shopping?"

"I say, done." Tommy reached across the table with his spoon, the corners of his mouth giving into a devilish grin.

RIDING THROUGH HER grandmother's neighborhood, making certain not to exceed the twenty-five mile per hour speed limit, Alex spotted old Mrs. Harrison at the end of her driveway, waving at her with arms crossed overhead. Now what? Alex thought, as if the day hadn't been taxing enough.

Mrs. Harrison was one of the women in her grandmother's reading group. Once a week a dozen women from the neighborhood would get together on a rotational basis and discuss the latest book on their long list of "must reads." Oprah's book club inspired the culmination of their group, and Oprah's suggested reads were the books they discussed. Once Oprah's show went off the air, the women were at first at a loss for material, but then soon enough amassed a list no mortal human could conquer in a lifetime.



Alex knew all of her grandmother's neighbors, or at least she thought she did, and liked most of them well enough. She'd caused many of them much grief when she was younger, and yet they still managed to embrace her. Although she spent her teen years and beyond growing up with her grandmother, she referred to the house she lived in as her grandmother's home and the neighborhood she grew up in as her grandmother's neighborhood. Why she did that, she wasn't certain. She had no other home, and her grandma made her feel as though the house belonged to them both equally. But Alex reserved the thought of home to the house she grew up in with her parents and siblings in Connecticut. She surmised their yearly trips to grandma's house during those younger years embedded the phrase "grandma's house" into her subconscious, where it remained.

Whatever the reason, it no longer mattered. Alex was thankful to have a place to live and glad she could help the neighbors from time to time. They caught on early to the fact that she was handy around the house, due no doubt in large part to a boasting grandmother who spread such news.

Alex's stomach growled. She wanted nothing more than to eat dinner and relax in front of the television, and for a moment thought about averting her attention to the other side of the street, as if she didn't see Mrs. Harrison, but instead slowed the Harley and turned into the driveway. Alex cut the engine and dismounted.

"Hello, Alex dear. I'm so glad I caught you," Mrs. Harrison said, hands clasped in front of her chest. "Thanks for stopping. I hope I'm not troubling you."

Mrs. Harrison was a frail, short woman with hunched shoulders, thin gray hair, and a kind heart. She always dressed neat and clean, and often wore colorful dresses cinched with a wrap around the middle and wore flat, tan, rubber soled walking shoes. She'd suffered a minor stroke after her husband died ten years earlier, and since then, relied on Alex to help her with odds and ends she couldn't handle around the house.

"No trouble at all, Mrs. Harrison. What is it this time? Juggernaut get caught in your palm tree again?" Juggernaut was Mrs. Harrison's favorite cat, but he was also the cat who got into the most trouble.

Mrs. Harrison's eyes widened. "Oh, no dear, thank goodness it's not about him today. No, I did a stupid thing and it's no one's fault but my own. I took my wedding ring off near the sink in the bathroom. I wanted to soak it in the jewelry cleaning solution for a spell. I hardly ever take it off, and when I do, I do so in the kitchen at the table. More light there anyway. I don't know what possessed me to take it off in the bathroom. I'm getting lazy I guess. Anyhow, when I put soap and water on my finger, to loosen the ring, the darn thing slipped from my hands and into the drain."

Alex figured out what the problem was as soon as Mrs. Harrison said, "I took off my wedding ring." She'd wished she could have fast-forwarded her through her lengthy story, but smiled all the same. "Okay. Did you stop running the water and not use the sink since then?"

"Oh, yes! Immediately I turned that water off! No, no. I knew better."

"That's good. Then we have a chance of recovering it. I'm going to give Grams a call so she'll know I'll be late, and then I'll go grab the tool box and give it look-see."

"No need to call your grandmother, dear. I did that before I came outside."

Alex's puzzled expression caused Mrs. Harrison to elaborate further.

"I told her that if she didn't see you on time, not to worry because I was going to try and flag you down on your way home, and that if I succeeded, you'd be late."

“That was thoughtful of you,” Alex said. She fought to hold in a laugh while she wiped the sweat that formed above her brow, the hot sun still packing power even late into the afternoon. Then she walked into Mrs. Harrison’s garage and snatched the tool box. She’d helped old Mrs. Harrison so many times that she could find the box in the dark if need be.

“Iced tea, dear?”

“Sure, that would be nice.”

Forty minutes and one stiff back later, Alex had retrieved the ring, much to Mrs. Harrison’s pleasure. Having accomplished her task, she was glad to get back on her bike and head home for dinner.

After dinner, Alex played a few rounds of cards with her grandmother. They talked about old Mrs. Harrison and her husband when he was alive. Her grandmother also commented on Alex’s parents and how Alex was much like her father, before the accident, in the way of being handy. She talked how Alex followed her dad around with a toy version of an electrician’s tool belt she got one Christmas, and how her mom had pretended one of grandma’s light switches was broken and needed fixing, and how Alex had “fixed” it for her.

Though she couldn’t remember much of the days gone past, listening to the memories were nice for Alex, even if hearing them was at the same time difficult. She was glad her grandmother was still alive and willing to share her memories with her.

“Hey Grams, do you know if Dad had any mental issues before the accident? Was he on medication then?”

“I don’t know. Your mom never mentioned anything to me if he was, but I never noticed anything unusual. You still can’t get any information from his psychiatrist?”

“No. Dad won’t sign the papers. I try to remember how it was back then, but lots of times I can’t. I remember some days he’d seek us out to play and other days he kept to himself. I even remember in those times, when one of us kids would ask him a question, he wouldn’t even answer us. He’d stare ahead as if we hadn’t even spoken. That could have been a sign of something wrong already.”

“It’s possible. Either way, we can’t change the past. We have only the future to work with now.”

Since the conversation managed to drag them both down, they changed the topic and began discussing their neighbor Victor’s obsessive, compulsive, daily window cleaning routine of the front and garage doors, which led to other equally funny stories about the neighbors.

By the end of the card game, Thunder had ended up with the lion’s share of their pretzel winnings. Alex and her grandmother had a good laugh about it. After saying their good nights, Alex showered and slid into bed. She was tired after a draining day and the comfort of a soft pillow called her name.

Alex fell asleep instantly, despite the pounding rain against her window, but her dreams were restless and filled with haunting memories of the boating accident, more turbulent than the weather outside.

## Chapter Four

ONE WEEK AFTER having met her boss at the office, fresh ideas for the new comic strip still escaped Kailyn. On top of that, her stomach growled fierce in protest for not having eaten breakfast or lunch, but she was determined to come up with an idea and not rest until she'd done so. Where had her inspiration gone? Sketching pencil in hand, she gazed onto the brilliant blue waters of the Gulf. She watched a kayaker paddle fifty feet out, parallel to the shoreline.

A smile lifted her cheeks as she recalled the odd encounter with the female kayaker in the Sound days earlier. She was certain she didn't know the woman, but there she'd been, floating past their dock, waving to her in greeting. The manner of the mystery onlooker's wave played in Kailyn's mind. The gesture was tentative, yet welcoming at the same time.

Sasha, Kailyn's five-year-old Golden Retriever, sprung up off the floor near Kailyn's feet and whined, disrupting Kailyn's wandering thoughts.

"Hey girl, what's up? You got any good ideas I could use for my comic strip, any ideas at all?"

Sasha tilted her head to the right. Her tail wagged. Then she ran out of Kailyn's study. She returned moments later with her favorite stuffed squirrel toy.

"You want me to draw squirrels?"

Sasha growled and shook her head with vigor. Had the squirrel been a living creature, she'd have knocked it senseless. Then Sasha spun in the direction of the door.

"Ohhh, I see. So what you're saying is, you don't care about my work and you only want to play. Did I get that right?"

Sasha barked and bolted out the door. She left claw marks in the rug as she exited the room and made her way down the hall toward the stairs.

Kailyn laughed at her dog's antics and decided play time might not be a bad idea. She'd been too wrapped up in her work the past few days and needed a break. She set her pencil down and turned off the lamp above her drawing table. Another growl from her stomach followed, but she guessed Sasha wouldn't give her time to grab a bite. She glanced once again to the kayaker outside. At the same time, Jake's words spoken to her in his office returned to her. *You need to create a comic strip that speaks more directly to the common reader. Maybe even to the tourists of our fine state.*

After wearing Sasha out, Kailyn ate lunch and researched kayaking rental businesses on line. She found that the one closest was also the most reasonably priced.

Although the rental business was located on the private Oasis Sunrise Resort, Kailyn had no trouble getting past the guard at the gate. Her well-known and respected family name allowed her access to most places without a flicker of delay.

She parked her car under the shade of a tree. Her muscled thighs carried her easily through the deep white sand to the little gunmetal gray shack of Island Water Adventures. She made her way to the open window below the sign and peered in. "Hello, is anyone there?"

"Hi. I'm Sean. Can I help you?"

Kailyn tucked her hair behind her ear. She was dressed in a teal colored pair of quick drying shorts and a white sleeveless cotton shirt. “I think so. I thought I might rent a kayak for an hour. Do you give guided tours?”

Sean was pleasant and friendly as he explained what they offered.

While he spoke, Kailyn’s gaze traveled along the beach. Squatted between two Jet Skis, she noticed a woman with short curly hair, strikingly similar to the woman she’d seen when she was on the dock with Tommy. It couldn’t be? Could it? Her breath caught. “On second thought, the Jet Skis look like fun too, though I’ve never ridden one. Do you give lessons on those?”

“We do, although lessons usually require an appointment.” Sean checked the appointment log. “Hang on a minute,” he said before he left the window opening and yelled out the rear screen door. “Hey Alex, do you have time for a Jet Ski lesson?”

“Sure, give me a few minutes,” Alex yelled over her shoulder.

Sean took Kailyn’s credit card, ran it through the card reader, and asked her to sign a waiver. Then he handed her a lifejacket and goggles. “Your instructor’s name is Alex. You can go ahead and meet her down the beach by the kayaks. The lifejacket’s not an option. Have fun!”

“Thanks,” she said, less certain her hair-brained idea of Jet Skiing was a good one, nor her idea of possibly meeting her onlooker from the week before. What would she say if it was her? What if it wasn’t? A twinge of disappointment reared its head. The feeling surprised her.

Kailyn sauntered toward Alex. When she reached her, she noticed her skin was pale in comparison to Alex’s. She also felt her heartbeat quicken as she stood silent and watched Alex from the side as she made adjustments to the engine of the Jet Ski. She admired Alex’s muscled arms and lean, toned, body. What she didn’t expect were the captivating cobalt blue eyes that stared back at her when Alex straightened and faced her.

Kailyn’s eyes locked on Alex’s; neither looked away. A rush of heat raced through Kailyn. The silence was uncomfortable and yet at the same time exciting. Kailyn couldn’t believe her body’s reaction to the complete stranger. Her mouth felt dry. She realized she’d been staring, yet somehow, couldn’t look away. She slowed her breathing, tucked a few loose strands of hair behind her ear, and extended her hand.

“Kailyn Montgomery,” she said in a controlled, even tone, which surprised her.

Alex took Kailyn’s hand. “Alex Rey,” she said, pausing between her first and last names.

The heat from Alex’s touch coursed through Kailyn. For a brief instant she wondered what was wrong with her and why her body tingled from head to toe and back again. No past boyfriend had ever made her body react in that way through a simple touch, nor had the touch of any other woman. Although she’d never dated a woman, she had experimented in college and once when she was younger. But intimate encounters with women were brief. She understood at a deeper level that kissing a woman wasn’t the way things were supposed to be, at least from what she’d been taught, and so she never thought much about romantic female interactions. When she’d grown up though, she’d never quite accepted her parent’s line of thinking either, especially once she discovered her twin brother was gay. For the first time in her life, she wondered if she might be gay as well. The possibility intrigued her.

“I believe we’ve met before,” Kailyn said.

Alex released her grip and eyed Kailyn. “I don’t think so, I’m certain I’d have remembered you.”

A twinge of annoyance rose within Kailyn at the implications of Alex’s reply, but at the same time, she oddly enjoyed the appreciation registering in Alex’s eyes as her line of sight traversed

Kailyn's body. "Is that right? So you weren't kayaking in the Sound last Saturday morning along North Captiva?"

Alex didn't answer immediately. Her cheeks reddened. "You wouldn't happen to be the woman on the dock that I waved to, would you?"

Kailyn registered Alex's discomfort, finding her response charming. "That would have been me."

"Well, this is embarrassing. I'm sorry about that day. I didn't mean to intrude on your privacy in any way. I just—"

"Please, don't apologize. I thought the gesture was sweet, even though you didn't know who we were. Most people are so busy with their own lives they don't pay much attention to anyone else. Anyway, when I watched you kayaking, and then saw another kayaker on the Gulf yesterday, I thought I'd give kayaking a shot."

"I thought Sean said you wanted a Jet Ski lesson?"

"I did. I changed my mind the last minute. Either or would work. I'm looking for something different that I can build a new comic strip around."

"You create comic strips?" Alex asked.

Kailyn nodded. "Among other things. I thought going kayaking or Jet Skiing would be good research for what tourists do for fun around here."

"Not only tourists Jet Ski or kayak," Alex said.

"Thank you for your illuminating insight."

Alex appeared as if she were about to speak, held her breath and then answered, "You're not a tourist?"

"No, we live here. Well, part of the year anyway."

"And you've never been on a Jet Ski?"

"Or kayak," Kailyn added. "There are lots of things I haven't done that I'd like to do."

AFTER DINNER, ALEX played football with Thunder for an hour or so in the yard, until they wore each other out. Thunder exacted a dozen more tackles on Alex than she on him, and his time of possession with the ball far outweighed hers, winning him a chicken stick treat from the cupboard, and Alex a long, relaxing shower.

After the shower, Alex retreated to her bedroom, Thunder close on her heels. She picked up her laptop and laid on the bed, watching Thunder scan the covers for an open spot as the computer booted up. "Oh, no you don't, mister. You are not hogging all my space again. Be a good boy and go lie in your own bed."

Thunder released a disapproving grunt, but did as he was told.

Alex read with disinterest through her e-mails. Her mind couldn't focus; instead it drifted to thoughts of Kailyn. The intensity and unfamiliarity of sensations that coursed through her when she'd met Kailyn unnerved her, as did the recall of Kailyn's amber eyes staring into hers, and the suspicion they bore into her soul. At that moment Alex remembered she thought she may have stopped breathing. She knew her heart hadn't stopped because it pounded loud and fast, the pulsing blood rushing to her ears and throughout her body, but all other thought and motion left her for that instant.

She recalled the odd mix of joy and jealousy that coursed through her when Kailyn responded that she lived in the area, but then also used the term "we" in her response. The "we"

could have meant anything, or it could have meant Kailyn and her husband, or significant other; the man she saw her with on the dock. Alex found it strange that two people so young could afford a home on North Captiva, and the fact they lived there only part of the year meant they must have a second home somewhere else. But then again, why should she care? She was no one to this woman, and the woman was no one to her.

Alex shut the computer down, closing the lid more firmly than she'd intended before setting it on the nightstand. She glanced at the pictures of her family on the dresser as if looking for guidance, but receiving none. She didn't even know why she left her father's picture with the rest; looking at it only surfaced negative feelings. After the accident he shut down completely. She had issues too, like survivor guilt, but what did he care? He didn't. No, he shut her and the world out. He gave up, and for a while, so had she. She fought in school and got herself into more trouble than she could remember, but thankfully, in the end, her grandmother was there to scold and ground her. Her grandmother was her rock. Still is, Alex thought with a faint smile.

Her sister Katherine was another matter. She managed to stay away from most of the turmoil. She'd stayed in Connecticut with their aunt, when she wasn't away at school, and right after graduation, married and had a child. She kept her distance from Alex and her father, physically and emotionally, as if both were at fault for her mom and Josh's death. The occasional phone call to one another was all either sister managed.

Alex glanced at her Bachelor and Masters Degrees hanging on the wall, and then at her mom's picture. She'd earned the degrees for her, to make her proud even though she knew she'd not hear words of praise or feel her mom's loving arms around her in congratulations. Her grandmother was proud though, and that Alex knew. Her father registered or acknowledged nothing.

She shook the memories from her mind, knowing that delving too far into the past would bring her further down and she needed to stay away from that spiral. She'd learned that little effort was required to spin out of control, while bounds of energy were needed to stay afloat. And what was she to think now regarding Kailyn?

Kailyn's voice held warmth, and her laugh, life. When their hands touched, Alex recalled the heat the connection generated. But what did it matter if she felt a connection? She'd already surmised Kailyn was likely straight, based on the fact she didn't live alone and the flirtatious way she acted around the man she'd seen her with by the dock. And although Kailyn's comment, about their being lots of things she hasn't done before that she'd like to do, would normally and rightfully be interpreted to have suggestive undertones coming from another woman, it couldn't have meant that coming from Kailyn, or could it? Perhaps her mind had wanted to hear more than the words imparted? Whatever the truth, Alex sensed she was treading in dangerous waters and knew she couldn't get dragged under. A part of her wished to see Kailyn again, and another part, her sensible side, hoped she wouldn't. As her eyes fought to stay open, Alex convinced herself that regardless of what she thought she had felt toward Kailyn, the last thing she needed in her life was another complication, and the last thing Kailyn needed was someone like Alex.

SATURDAY MORNING TURNED into a beautiful spring day. A few puffy white clouds traversed an otherwise clear blue sky, and the sun beat down on white sand and crystalline teal-blue water. The temperature had reached a mild seventy-six degrees by the time Alex made her way toward the water's edge. The Jet Skis for this mid-morning's group tour were fully gassed

and ready to go. They were a group of twelve people on eight Jet Skis, not including herself and the more powerful Jet Ski she'd be riding. The planned trip would take the group southeast through San Carlos Bay between Sanibel Island and the southern tip of Pine Island, north through Matlacha Pass and around the northern end of the island, with a short stop for lunch, and then onward south through Pine Island Sound to where they started.

Sean traipsed through the sand toward Alex and the others to assist getting the group situated on their watercraft and lined up and ready to go, but he didn't approach alone. "I've got a last minute addition Alex," he said far too cheerily for Alex's liking. His expression donned a devilish grin and Alex soon realized why. Stepping out from behind Sean appeared Kailyn.

Mixed emotions surfaced, but almost in an instant Alex's lips pursed. She nodded to Kailyn in recognition and then focused her anger on Sean. "We need to talk," she said. Alex led Sean by the forearm out of earshot. "What are you doing? We're full-up. I don't have room for another person."

"Sure you do," he said, then winked. "She can ride with you."

"What do you mean she can ride with me? You know I don't ride with anyone, and neither do you when you take people out. I am not riding with her. I can't. If you think it's such a good idea, you take her."

"No can do, partner. I'm waiting on a call from the lawyer. I'm trying to set us up with an appointment to meet with Andre's parents' lawyer regarding—"

"Don't think I don't see what you're doing here."

"As I started saying, I'm trying to get a meeting with Andre's parents' lawyer regarding their challenge of the will. And once I do that, I've got to line things up with Chappy and Delilah so they can fill in while we're gone."

"I know you heard me."

Sean ran his hand behind his head and neck. "I can't help it if you left such an indelible impression on Ms. Montgomery that she's returned twice in as many days. Perhaps a little less charm and a little more—"

"Oh, please." Alex rolled her eyes.

"Besides, she paid already," Sean continued, "so it looks like you're stuck with her. I can't refund her money now and we can use the business. And, if you recall, you rode with her yesterday."

"That was different. Yesterday was a lesson. Today is a guided tour." On a professional level, Alex knew her partner was right. No valid business reason existed that she couldn't take Kailyn on her Jet Ski, but the fact she'd have to spend several hours with her when she was trying to forget about her existence was not making her happy. "Fine, but I *will* pay you back—with interest." Alex stomped off toward the group. When she passed Kailyn, she glanced for the briefest of moments in her direction. "You're riding with me."

The mild air, bright sunshine, and calm waters of the Sound made for a perfect tour. As much as Alex tried to remain annoyed over having Kailyn ride with her, she was unable to convince herself the situation was intolerable. Even more difficult was denying that she derived pleasure from having Kailyn's arms wrapped around her waist. Alex wasn't one to let people close.

Annoyed or not, Alex remained a great tour guide. She'd periodically slow her Jet Ski, make certain the group remained with her, and point out key items of interest along the route. Each time she slowed, Alex registered Kailyn relaxed her grip, and as they sped up, her hold tightened.

Lunch was spent at Hungry Jake's Hot Dog Hut. Alex led the lunch crew line. Before ordering, she informed the cashier how many were in the party behind her. The workers merely



added the cost to Island Water Adventure's bill, which was sent to them every two weeks. After she ordered and picked up her food, Alex marched toward the long rectangular picnic table reserved for her group. She sat in the middle so she'd be in the best position to talk with the group and describe in greater detail what they'd seen. She'd led enough tours to know people had lots of questions on what they'd passed on their ride so far, and she'd also impart what they should look out for on the ride back.

"Mind if I sit next to you?" Kailyn asked. She held a basket of deep fried fish and chips with coleslaw in one hand and a bottle of root beer in the other.

Alex shrugged. "Nope, sit where you like." She grabbed the mustard bottle and streaked a generous amount of it on her already overloaded chili dog.

Kailyn set the basket on the table and lifted her leg over the bench. "That was an incredible ride. I had a great time. If I'd have known how much fun this was, I'd have tried it years ago."

Alex wiped the side of her mouth and swallowed. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself." When she'd led her first couple of tours, Alex would wait for everyone to gather around the table before she ate, but then found doing so left her less time to talk and interfered with eating, so now she ate first.

"Did you enjoy yourself? I mean—do you like your work? It's— well, kind of hard to read you," Kailyn said.

After a few seconds of silence, Alex responded. "I didn't realize I was being read. The job has its ups and downs, but I'm thankful for what I've been given, and I love being outdoors."

"Me, too." Kailyn's line of sight swept over the food line. "I was thinking that if you didn't mind, I'd like to talk with you more about what you do, as research for my comic strip. Would you be available for dinner one of these nights? My treat, of course."

"Not sure what humor you'd find in my job. Also, I don't do dinner."

"You don't do dinner? You mean you don't eat?"

"I don't go out with people I'm not friends with."

"I see. Okay, so how do I become friends with you then?"

"I don't do friends."

"Seriously? I can't believe we're having this conversation. Who doesn't do friends?"

"I don't."

"What's not to do?"

Before Alex could answer, four more members of the group joined them at the table and talked among themselves. Alex observed as they ate and chatted, leaving Kailyn's question unanswered. Yet the longer she remained silent, the more sweat droplets accumulated on her brow. She sensed amber eyes boring into her. "I just can't," Alex added.

"My father always said there's no such thing as I can't, and by the end of the day, I'll prove to you he was right."

## Chapter Five

ESCARONDA SUNSET GRILL was appropriately named for its breathtaking sunset views over the Gulf of Mexico. The rear of the restaurant overlooked the Gulf with floor to ceiling glass panels that provided a view of the outdoor deck built on the beach, fifty feet from the water. The popular establishment normally had ample parking, more than most restaurants on the island; a useful feature during an overwhelmingly busy spring season, but this night, most spaces had been filled.

Alex reached the restaurant on time at five minutes before nine o'clock. She circled the lot twice before she parked in a spot next to another Harley, leaving ample space between their bikes. She raked her fingers through her curly wind-blown hair and checked her appearance in the motorcycle's side mirror before advancing toward the front doors. The smell of charred fish and steak wafted through the air, releasing a growl from her hungry, butterfly-ridden stomach.

As Alex entered, a cheerful hostess edged her way over. "Welcome to Escaronda Sunset Grill. Table for one?"

Alex peered across the crowded room. Every table was filled, as was every stool at the bar. "Ugh, no, I'm meeting someone here."

"The party's name?"

"Kailyn Montgomery."

"This way please," the hostess said. She escorted Alex to a corner table at the back of the building, in front of the wall of windows. Dressed in black jeans and riding boots, Alex sensed eyes upon her as she made her way through the restaurant. She focused her attention on the view outside in an effort to remain calm. Tiki torches adorned the front corners of an outside deck which was also packed with patrons, while miniature white lights hung along the banisters, adding a romantic appeal. Beyond the deck, the moon shone off the now glistening pearl black waters of the Gulf. As Alex returned her gaze indoors, she spotted Kailyn, who brandished a smile from ear to ear.

Kailyn stood as Alex met her eyes. "I'm glad you decided to come."

Alex's breath caught for a second. "As if I had a choice," she responded. Against her wishes, Alex's cheeks flushed under Kailyn's beauty and radiant charm. She fought not to ogle Kailyn's exquisite figure this time, but every curve was accentuated in the form-fitting black dress Kailyn wore. "I'm not used to such underhanded tactics," Alex managed.

Kailyn feigned contempt. "I did nothing underhanded by inviting you to dinner, or when I did so, by having added the comment that whether you accepted or not, I'd be here at nine o'clock waiting for you. I can't help it that you happen to be a decent person who wouldn't let someone sit and wait for someone else who might never show up."

"And how did you know what type of person I am?"

"My sixth sense told me."

"I see. You're pretty sure of yourself. You may have me confused with someone else. A week ago I was certain I wasn't coming."

Kailyn gestured toward the chair. “Maybe you only thought you were certain. Please, sit. And for the record, I’m not that sure of myself, but I didn’t know another way to convince you to have dinner with me. You don’t do dinner, and don’t do friends. You confuse me, yet at the same time I get a good vibe from you. I wouldn’t have asked you here if I didn’t think you were a good person.”

Alex sat to the right of Kailyn.

“Something to drink ladies?” the waitress asked.

“I’ll have the house chardonnay,” Kailyn replied.

“Moosehead on tap for me.” Alex rolled up the sleeves of her white cotton, button down shirt. When the waitress left, Alex said to Kailyn, “I don’t know what to say to you in order to explain how I am. I’m not even sure why I’m here except that you guilted me into it. The only other person I ever knew as stubborn-headed as you and as sure of themselves, was my friend Andre.”

“I thought you said you didn’t do friends.”

“I don’t. Andre was a unique exception, and he was persistent. Not sure what he ever saw in me, but I’m thankful I got the chance to know him. He passed away last year. We were the same age.”

Kailyn reached across the table and covered Alex’s hand with her own. “I’m so sorry Alex.”

Alex nodded. She missed Andre. She wished he were around to tell her what to do and to be the support she still very much needed in her life. She wasn’t sure why she told Kailyn about him, but in a small way, she reminded her of him.

Before Alex could speak, the waitress brought their drinks. Kailyn removed her hand from Alex’s and they ordered their meal.

“I hope my asking you here didn’t bring back sad thoughts, but if you were willing to give us a chance, I’d like to get to know you better and have you get to know me better, on whatever level you’re comfortable with. We don’t have to be instant friends,” Kailyn said.

“I don’t know. I don’t think that’s a good idea. Against my wishes, I find I enjoy being around you. I think you probably already know that, since it’s difficult for me to hide, but it’s that very reason I know I shouldn’t be around you.”

Kailyn’s brows furrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I have time, and I’m a good listener.”

“I can’t. Let’s suffice it to say that I’m not a good person to hang around for any extended period of time.”

“Well, suffice it to say that I’m not so sure you’re not—a good person to hang around with. Besides, I’ve got my quirks too. My friends say I’m too high energy—drives them crazy sometimes. Why don’t you let me discover what I should or should not think of you on my own?”

“High energy, huh?” Alex said. “I would never have guessed.”

“Keep it up and you’ll be paying for your dinner and mine.”

MONDAY MORNING’S WERE difficult enough to muster the motivation to rise and go to work, but this Monday was worse than most for Alex, knowing what lie ahead. The Law Office of Michael P. Morris was located in Fort Myers at the end of a series of businesses in a strip mall

off Santa Maritza Blvd. The one-story brick building also housed three medical offices and a public accountant. The lawyer's office was the first inner door to the right. It opened into a carpeted waiting area that consisted of four black leather chairs, two on each side of the wall. The chairs were separated by end tables covered in neatly arranged magazines spread out like fans. A large rubber plant occupied the empty corner near the window, and a colorful modern art painting hung on the wall across from the entrance, above the one set of chairs.

Upon arrival, Sean and Alex didn't have time to sit. Michael Morris greeted them at the door and escorted them past his office, along a short hallway, into a conference room. Built-in bookshelves, packed with books from top to bottom, lined the conference room walls where they entered. A continuous row of window panes occupied the opposite wall and let in ample light and a view of the parking lot, with its palm trees and various indigenous plantings. A narrow credenza stood against the rear wall, and other than the oval, mahogany conference table and ten padded brown leather chairs, the room contained no other furniture.

Alex fidgeted as she sat next to Sean at the highly polished table and waited for Andre's parents' lawyer to appear. She alternately tapped her thumb and ring finger on the table. She worried about Chappy covering the morning for them, since he wasn't the most reliable of people. Waking up on time was his big issue, but other than that, he was a great asset. He loved the water and was excellent at what he did. If Chappy showed up late today, Alex hoped Delilah could handle things on her own for a while.

Alex also worried about what the Samson's lawyer wanted. She recalled the last time she was in Mr. Morris' office was for the reading of Andre's will. The atmosphere had been quite different that day. Sadness rather than apprehension filled the air. She remembered the shock of finding out Andre left her half his business and Sean the other half, at a time when she'd been aimlessly lost. Weeks prior to the reading, she'd quit her job at the aquarium and was plagued by early signs of depression. Andre saved her from slipping too far though, even after his death. But now his parents' lawyer would likely threaten to take what little she'd rebuilt in her life and defy her best friend's dying wishes.

Alex expected Andre's parents to appear with their lawyer, but instead, an expressionless tall blonde with piercing, cold blue eyes, strode in. She was dressed in a white shirt, tailored blue blazer, matching skirt, and high heels. She was accompanied by a young man carrying several thick folders under his arm and a briefcase.

"Sorry we're late," the woman snipped, as she extended her hand to Michael Morris, "but it couldn't be avoided. I'll spare you the details. My name is Justine Bails and I represent the law firm of Humphrey, Lawson, and Bails. I'm here to discuss the possible contest by Mr. and Mrs. Samson regarding their son Andre Samson's Last Will and Testament."

Alex glanced first to Sean and then to their lawyer who sat at the head of the table, unable to read either's expression. After introductions concluded, Michael Morris replied, "With all due respect, Ms. Bails, I'd like to know what the Samsons are contesting and the grounds of their contest, because as I'm certain you are aware, in the State of Florida, will challenges are extremely difficult to win, and to the best of our knowledge, the will we hold is valid in all respects and was executed in accordance with Florida statutory formalities."

"The Samsons do not argue whether the will was executed in accordance with statutory formalities. They contend their son was not of sound mind at the time of the signing, and they have an earlier will, signed before he became increasingly ill, which designated them as the beneficiary of all assets. However, rather than go through formal court proceedings, though we are certain we would prevail, they would like to avoid this protracted approach and come to an

amiable resolution among all parties. The Samsons are seeking ownership of Island Water Adventures. Other items of distribution they are not concerned with but will contest if a resolution cannot be reached and this matter goes to court.”

The statement stung, but by no means surprised her. Alex watched the ice cold delivery of the lawyer’s statement, during which time her assistant had handed her several documents. Ms. Bails placed the documents on the table in front of her, each equally spaced from the other and in a straight row.

“You are aware Andre’s will contained a no-contest clause?” Sean and Alex’s lawyer asked.  
“We are.”

Michael Morris continued. “For the benefit of my clients, I’d like to explain. A no-contest clause means that if a beneficiary contests the will after the testator’s death and loses the case, they would not be entitled to receive any of the assets previously willed to them. And as for being of ‘sound mind’, in 1953, the Florida Supreme Court held that to be of sound mind, the testator required the ability to generally understand the nature and extent of his property, the relationship of his heirs, and the practical effect of a will. A year later they lowered the standard by requiring one to be of testamentary capacity, which means that even a confirmed lunatic could have a valid will if he signed it when he had a lucid interval. In Florida, testamentary capacity is presumed, which makes challenging a will that much more difficult.”

“This is absurd,” Sean burst out as he rose from his seat, veins bulging on the side of his head. “Andre had AIDS, not a mental disorder. He knew exactly what he was doing every day, right up to the end when he lost consciousness. How dare his family paint him as someone who didn’t know what he was doing. I’m certain the will you have in front of you, if you can even prove Andre signed it, was created before he knew me, or certainly before we were committed to each other as life partners, and in no way represents his last wishes.”

Justine Bails tilted her head slightly to the right and raised an eyebrow ever so imperceptibly. As she did, hatred boiled inside Alex. She wanted to scream. She wanted to mirror Sean’s comments and add her own, but knew it wasn’t her place. Not yet.

“I assure you all that there is nothing absurd about the Samson’s claim. Perhaps you are unfamiliar with the term AIDS dementia. Among other things, we have eye witnesses who would testify if needed regarding the declining state of Andre’s health and his mental capacity prior to the signing of the will in question. We also have proof from a handwriting expert that the signature on the will we hold is indeed Andre Samson’s. We are willing to leave you with all the evidence we have, and once you’ve had a chance to look it over, the Samsons are hopeful we could all meet again and sign an agreement, protecting all from a perhaps ugly and unnecessary court battle. I have nothing left to say at this point. If you have no further questions, I’ll be on my way and expecting a call soon with your final decision.”

Alex’s lawyer stood. “We’ll review the documentation. I’ll call you when I’ve discussed this further with my clients. Good day.”

THE FOLLOWING DAY Alex tried not to obsess about the meeting with the lawyers. She knew their lawyer would need time to review the documentation the Bails woman left, but her worrisome side wished he’d already have called. The longer they didn’t hear from him, the worse she believed their chances of winning. Though she did her best to hide her foul mood at work, worry about what she and Sean would do if they lost the business remained an unwelcome

constant. Not even her grandmother's attempt to cheer her up in the morning had any positive effect, and Sean didn't fare much better.

"Hey Alex, hungry for lunch?" a voice hollered. "My treat."

Lost in thought while wiping the inside of a kayak dry, Alex sprang upright and turned 180 degrees. Kailyn stood before her in a pair of three-quarter length, gray cotton pants, a sleeveless fitted white T-shirt, sandals, dark sunglasses, and a grin from ear to ear.

"Sorry, I didn't scare you, did I?"

"Scare might be extreme. Startled is a better term. What are you doing here?" Alex said.

"Well, hello to you, too, and didn't you hear what I asked? I wanted to know if you wanted lunch. I'm buying."

"I already owe you for a dinner. You don't need to treat me to lunch. Besides, I'm busy."

Kailyn lifted an eyebrow and raised both hands palms up in defense. "Okay, okay. I see someone's in a bit of a foul mood. Fine, I accept your offer to take me to dinner in repayment at some time in the future—let's say not to exceed six months from now—so that frees you up to accept my lunch invitation. And before you remind me about how busy you are, I already cleared your schedule with Sean."

"What is it with you anyway? Why me? Need more research for work?"

"Ouch, that might have hurt if I knew you were serious, but no. I've actually got writer's block or creative inspiration block, whatever you want to call it, and I thought getting out for a while might free my mind. In effect, you'd be doing me a favor. Thus, my offer of a free lunch."

Alex wiped her hand on the rag she was holding. "I'm not going to win here, am I?"

"Nope."

"Fine, but I'll drive," Alex insisted. She twisted the rag into a tight ball and threw it next to the kayak. She had no idea what kind of car Kailyn owned, but it didn't matter. She'd be driving.

When they reached the parking lot, Kailyn's eyes widened. "Cool, you own a Jeep?"

"No. I own the motorcycle next to the Jeep. Still want to go to lunch?"

"Are you kidding? Absolutely. In fact, I'm even more excited to go now."

Alex rolled her eyes. "Perfect." She handed Kailyn a helmet. "Here, put this on. I never wear one anyway." Kailyn took the helmet and placed it on her head. "Why not?"

"It's a long story."

"Of course it is. I'm sure my two cents won't mean much to you, but I think you're a fool not to wear a helmet."

"Noted, but the law says I don't have to wear one, so I won't."

"What kind of bike is this? I like the tires."

"It's a 2010 Harley Sportster 1200cc Custom, with black, thirteen spoke alloy wheels."

"Nice color."

"It's Flame Blue Pearl."

"It matches your eyes."

Alex cleared her throat but said nothing. She grabbed her riding boots from the saddlebags, pulled the socks out from inside the boots, dusted off her feet and slipped into the socks and boots. She laced up the boots. When she straightened, she watched Kailyn struggle with the helmet strap. "Here, let me help you with that." Alex reached for the strap. When she got it through the loop and adjusted it properly, she snapped the fastener in place, aware of Kailyn's eyes on her, her proximity to Kailyn, and the unfamiliar warmth that rushed to her cheeks. "Have you ridden before?" Alex managed.

"No. Are you a good driver?"

“I like to think so. I’ve been riding since my teens and I haven’t gotten into any accidents, if that fact’s any consolation.”

“A safe record is comforting.”

“Good, so basically, once I’m on and have the bike sitting straight, go ahead and climb on behind me. Set your feet on the foot pegs. Hold onto my waist like you did on the Jet Ski. You don’t need to worry about leaning or anything. If you look over my shoulders in the direction of any turns, that’ll provide enough of a shift in weight so we can manage the turns easily.”

When they reached the restaurant, Alex parked the bike under the shade of a tree and shut the engine off.

“Oh my God, that was so much fun,” Kailyn said. She fumbled to remove the helmet. She couldn’t stop talking. “The freedom and speed…”

Alex swung her leg over the bike and took the key from the ignition. “I wasn’t going fast. I can show you speed though, if that’s what you want.”

“It’s a date,” Kailyn said. She handed Alex her helmet.

Alex shook her head. “You’re something else, you know that?” Alex set the helmet on the seat’s backrest, not sure whether to be infuriated at Kailyn’s persistence or charmed by it. She was hedging toward infuriated. She shouldn’t have accepted lunch with Kailyn, and the fact she let her emotions rule her decision rather than her brain, now taunted her.

Kailyn had chosen Veggie Delight as their lunch spot, located a few minutes along Captiva Road, outside the resort. The restaurant faced the Gulf, as so many did, and it had plenty of windows, giving it the openness she needed.

Kailyn ordered for both of them, since Alex had no idea what she wanted and was fine with leaving it up to her. When two plates of General Tao’s vegetarian chicken were set in front of them, Alex was surprised how much the dish resembled real General Tao’s chicken. Not that the food wasn’t real, but it wasn’t real chicken. “What do you suppose they make this chicken out of?” Alex asked.

“Probably fungus.”

“Fungus? Mmm, now that sounds appetizing.”

“Relax. You know—ground mushrooms and the sort. It’s healthier for you than real chicken, and what’s the difference?”

“I’ll tell you in a few minutes.” Alex’s first bite was tentative, but she enjoyed the food. What she grew not to enjoy was spending lunch tendering work related stories when she wasn’t in a mood to speak. After holding back saying something, she finally spoke up. “I think we’ve delved enough into me. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you like what you do? Is writing comic strips your only job? Is it what you’ve always done? Is there anything else you’d rather do?”

“Wow. Where’s this coming from? I’ve had to practically pry every answer to my questions from you and now you want to know all about what I do in one fell swoop? And spoken with such sincerity, I might add.”

“You don’t have to answer. Lunch was your idea.”

“Yes, it was, and now I’m not so sure it was a good one. Other than a brief minute after the food arrived, and I’m being generous here, you’ve been in a rotten mood. I’m beginning to think that maybe I should have listened to you at Escaronda’s and let you be. Maybe I did misread you.”



Rather than answer with the first thought that came to mind, which was “maybe you did,” Alex breathed deep and took a moment to compose her thoughts. She sensed she’d hurt Kailyn by her lack of sincerity and indifference. The strange thing was, she didn’t feel indifferent around Kailyn. Deep inside, she enjoyed her company. She just didn’t want to admit it or entertain thoughts of a friendship of any kind with her because she believed Kailyn had the power to destroy what ember for life remained within in her. But hurting Kailyn wasn’t her intention either. Alex fumbled with her utensils. Her eyes lifted and met Kailyn’s. She swallowed hard. “I’m sorry. You don’t deserve to be the brunt of my anger.”

“You’re right, I don’t.”

As Kailyn was about to stand, Alex took her hand. “Please don’t go. There’s more I’d like to say.”

Kailyn relaxed into her chair, yet appeared uncertain whether or not to remain. “You’ve got two minutes, and then I’m out of here.”

Alex released her grip. “Two minutes, huh?”

Kailyn raised her eyebrows in defiance.

“Okay. I’ve been having a bad day...a bad week actually. I told you when you asked if I wanted to go to lunch that I was busy, meaning I didn’t want to go, but you wouldn’t let up.”

“So now it’s my fault.”

“That’s not what I’m saying or what I meant. I haven’t finished. I knew I shouldn’t go, and the fact I did was my fault. I was mad at myself for giving in, and lashed out at you about it for no reason. Believe it or not, I actually do enjoy being around you.” Alex studied Kailyn’s confused expression. “And although I made it sound like I didn’t care, I honestly would like to know more about you and I am interested in what you do. A lot of times I can’t get out of my own way though. It’s like I’m fighting myself on the inside. I know that probably doesn’t make sense to you, but it’s the best way I can explain it right now. That’s why I made the comments I did at Escaronda. The truth is, in hindsight, I’d like to think you hadn’t misread me. I’m not saying I’m great friend material, or that I’m looking for a friendship, but to make up for today, maybe you’d let me take you kayaking one day? On Sunday maybe? It might break your creativity block, which I’m pretty certain I didn’t help undo today.”

“You’re right. You didn’t.” Kailyn pushed her hair behind her ear, then picked up a napkin and twisted the end. “Don’t you work on Sundays?”

“I’ll call Delilah to cover for me. I’ve been spending too much time at work anyway and she could use the money.”

After a few seconds of silence, Kailyn said, “It’s lucky for you I’m a good judge in character, even one that’s hidden in a deep, dark cavern.”

“Ouch. Is that your way of saying you’d like to go?”

“Like is a strong word in this circumstance. Let’s stick with at this time I accept your offer, but reserve the right to change my mind if I later choose.”

KAILYN SAT AT her drawing table, staring out the window, the end of her eraser tapping on blank paper, thoughts drifting to one tall, tan, incredibly fit and attractive, though equally aggravating, woman with short, wavy brown hair and eyes of blue the likes of which she’d never seen before and probably would never come across again. All week images of Alex flashed through her mind and in her dreams. The instant physical attraction she’d felt when they first met

had intrigued her from day one. She'd never experienced such a connection with other women or men, and sensed at a deep level that Alex felt the same, even if she wasn't showing it.

Kailyn was touched by the fact that Alex was so upset for hurting her feelings during lunch and that she was determined to make amends, and as much as she wanted to remain mad at Alex, she couldn't. Kailyn had already discerned Alex possessed a kindness that was lacking from partners in her past and recognized a buried intensity behind Alex's eyes that sent her heart spiraling.

The melodious and at the same time annoying ring of the door bell plucked Kailyn from her thoughts. As she stood from the chair, Sasha bolted out of the room in front of her and barreled from the top step of the stairs to the last in a flash, stopping by the front door. Kailyn followed and peered out the peep hole before opening the door.

"How's it going Kay? Mind if I come in?" Stewart asked.

Stewart Hollenbrook was a handsome, rich, eligible bachelor who her father loved and who Kailyn had on and off dated over the years. He was tall and muscular with thick, wavy dark hair, stunning gray eyes, and an angular jaw. He possessed a good sense of humor, played tennis and golf, and was the catch many young women in the area wanted to hook. Yet his heart remained set on Kailyn. She was the one he would marry—he was certain of it, regardless of who he dated in the interim.

"Hi, Stewart. It's going well. Come on in." Kailyn was peeved he'd shortened her name to Kay again, having lost track of how many times she'd asked him not to call her that, but not bothered enough today to correct him.

As Stewart stepped through the door, Sasha made her way into the living room and lay on the Persian rug near the foot of the sofa, apparently disinterested in his presence, not waiting to be petted by their visitor.

"So what's up?" Kailyn asked.

"I stopped by to take you to your favorite place for lunch. Britt and Ashley will be there too. None of us have been able to reach you in the last month. The girls complained to me, so I figured I'd fix it."

"Did you? Well, I've been busy with work. I've got a second comic strip to do and I signed on for illustrating another children's story book. Plus, I've been busy in general." Kailyn responded, her hands crossed in front of her chest.

"You could at least return your phone calls. Anyway, I'm not here to badger you, I'm here to get you out of this place to hang out with your best friends, and me of course. I've missed your company."

Kailyn contemplated the offer. She checked her watch which read eleven o'clock. She was getting hungry and the country club at the north end of the island employed the most spectacular chef. Her dishes could transport even the most fickle food critic to another planet. Plus, she did miss seeing her friends, and hadn't been able to write or draw anything worthwhile all day. She'd also probably get much needed fresh material for *For the Love of Money* observing patrons at the club. "Okay, fine, but let me change first. I'll be a few minutes."

"That's my girl," he shouted after her.

Kailyn rolled her eyes on her way upstairs. "Not in nearly forever mister—let it go," she whispered.

“WHERE ARE YOU going? You’re heading away from the harbor,” Kailyn pointed out the obvious.

“I know. Relax. We’ve got time to burn. I thought I’d take us on a little spin around one of the islands off Pine Island. I haven’t seen you in a while, and I thought a little quiet time might be nice. Just the two of us,” Stewart said, hands on the boat’s wheel, eyes focused forward.

Kailyn enjoyed the wind brushing against her face and the sun warming her body, but she did not want to be alone in that way with Stewart. Their relationship was never one of true love or passion; more of convenience, and it had ended months ago. She still liked Stewart, but not in a romantic way, especially after having met Alex, and she didn’t want to mislead him. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Let’s go to the club. We’ll have a drink and wait for the girls there.”

“There’s time for that. Besides, being alone together never bothered you before, even when we were broken up.”

Stewart’s statement was true, as much as Kailyn hated to admit it. He was an extremely attractive and attentive lover and they both knew they’d used each other purely for sexual release in the past. Although Kailyn’s hormones were in high gear after drifting to thoughts of Alex all week, her heart wasn’t in the same place with Stewart. Kailyn breathed deep, wondering how to delicately extricate herself from the situation she now unwillingly found herself in.

Before she had time to think about her options, Stewart shut off the engine in a private area between two uninhabited islands, and made his way toward Kailyn.

“I’ve missed you, baby,” he said. Stewart propped himself up on a cushion next to Kailyn. The boat rocked to and fro in the water. “I know we’ve had our troubles, but we always come back to each other. If our parents had their way, we’d be married already. And in another month or so, we’ll be together at your dad’s annual Fourth of July gala, so why stay apart? Your dad loves me, and you know it,” he added. Stewart reached for the top of Kailyn’s thigh and stroked in a circular motion, conscious of the effect it would have on her.

“That’s true, but luckily we’re the ones that make the decisions of who we want to be with, not our parents. This isn’t right,” Kailyn protested. She pushed his hand away and stood, then moved to a seat at the back of the boat.

“Maybe so, but you know you want this.”

As Kailyn watched Stewart approach and heard the words coming from his mouth, all she could envision was Alex standing before her, wanting her, the way Stewart clearly wanted her.

“You know you’ve missed me as much as I’ve missed you. I want to kiss you and touch you, and drive you over the edge. I want today to be the start of a life together. We’re perfect for each other.”

Stewart maneuvered closer. He leaned into Kailyn and pressed her against the seat padding, yet it was Alex’s hand on her thigh she felt, Alex’s words of endearment echoed into her ear, and Alex’s lips separating her own as tongues entwined in hungry, desperate need. Kailyn’s breathing quickened as hands cupped her breasts, driving the need deeper. A moan escaped her lips seconds before Stewart grabbed her hand and placed it strategically against his body. Suddenly she remembered where she was and who she was with. “Stop! We can’t do this. I won’t do this. I’m sorry Stewart, but this can’t happen.” Kailyn pushed against his chest, but he barely moved.

“I think the lady doth protest too much,” he said with a snicker. He gripped her arm and leaned in for another kiss.

Kailyn pushed him away with increased force. “I’m serious Stewart. Get—off—me. This is not happening. I’m in a different place now. I’m jelling with my work and I don’t want this. I

still want us to be friends, but our friendship will end this minute if you continue pushing yourself on me.”

Stewart retreated, his expression downtrodden. “I’m sorry Kay. You’re right. I’m way out of line. You should have slapped me on the head. I thought that maybe...you know...if we—”

“I understand, to a degree, and I’m not blaming you. I shouldn’t have let the advances get this far, but when I said get off, I meant it. We both need to move on in the relationship area with other people. We were always better friends than we ever were lovers.” Kailyn glanced at her watch. “Besides, it’s almost noon. I’m hungry, and I don’t want to have to explain to Britt and Ashley why we’re late, so let’s make a point not to be.”

Stewart apologized to Kailyn twice more on their ride to the clubhouse. He swore he’d behave in the future and tried to convince Kailyn that she could trust him. Kailyn accepted his apology, though in the back of her mind, the incident remained unsettling.

Overall though, lunch had gone better than anticipated. Brittany and Ashley updated Kailyn on the latest gossip and made her laugh often. Even Stewart had her in tears at one point. They’d asked about what she’d been up to as well, but besides talking about her work, Kailyn wasn’t ready to tell them about Alex. She hardly knew what Alex meant to her. The only thing she did know for sure was that she wanted to learn more.

Nearing the end of their boat ride home from the clubhouse, Kailyn spotted a small motor boat pulled alongside the private dock to her home, and moments later, watched as it drove away. The whole time near the dock, no one had gotten out of the boat and no one greeted whoever had pulled up to it. “That’s strange,” Kailyn said. “I wonder who that was at the dock.”

“Who knows? Maybe it was a tourist who found himself in the wrong place or wanted a photo of the house or something to show his wife, thinking it might be a rental. You know how crazy people can be these days.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Kailyn conceded. Yet she remembered Alex had commented about the amount of activity at their dock the day they had lunch and that comment now crossed her mind, making her wonder if there was more to what they’d seen and to what Alex had observed.

She waved goodbye until Stewart was out of sight. Then she knelt near the end of the dock and peered underneath. There, on a hook, next to several other hooks, was a rubber zipper pouch. Kailyn removed the pouch and tucked it under her arm. Then she proceeded inside in search of her brother.

THE EVENING NEWS echoed from the television. Alex watched the screen for a few moments on her way into the kitchen, her restlessness as evident as her somber mood.

“Spill it, Alexandra,” Emma said. She sat in her favorite recliner, legs extended in front of her. Thunder lay next to her on the floor, sound asleep, eyes twitching in doggie dream world.

Alex stopped when her grandmother spoke, hands tucked into the back pockets of her jeans. “I don’t know. Remember the woman Kailyn I’d mentioned to you?”

“Yes, she sounded delightful. What about her?”

“Well, I scheduled a day off work tomorrow and invited her to go kayaking with me.”

“That’s great, sweetie. So what’s the problem? Isn’t she able to go?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t heard from her saying she isn’t, so I guess she’s still set to go, but I’m not sure I should have asked in the first place. I was thinking about canceling, but at the same time, I don’t want to upset her.”

“Why cancel?”

“Because I think she may want more from me than I can give,” Alex said, defeat evident in her voice.

“How will you know if you never give the two of you a chance? And does your hesitance center more on what you are or aren’t willing to give, or more on what you’re afraid you’ll lose?”

“I can’t answer that, Grams, but I’ll think on it.”

“HEY, SIS,” A familiar voice echoed into the bedroom while Kailyn brushed her hair. She sat in front of a cherry make-up table with an oval cherry wood framed mirror. Her room was dimly lit by the light on the nightstand and the one on the make-up table. The space was nearly the size of the downstairs living room, and included a fireplace, queen-sized canopy bed, also made of cherry wood, a love seat for Sasha, and a reading area. The walls were painted a soft mint green and matched the checkered design of the bedspread.

“What’s up?” Kailyn asked. “I’m glad you stopped by. I was looking for you earlier.”

“Oh yeah, and why’s that?”

“Some guy was hovering around our dock this afternoon. I noticed him when Stewart brought me home from lunch. He was thin and had short dark hair. You wouldn’t happen to know who he was or what he wanted, would you?”

Tommy leaned his slender, toned body against the door frame but didn’t respond immediately.

Kailyn never knew Tommy to be one short on words; quite the opposite.

Looking past Kailyn, he said, “He’s a friend of mine. You don’t know him. He stopped by for a short visit while you were gone.”

Kailyn stopped brushing her hair and studied her brother. “We’ve never lied to each other before. Why start now?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do. The guy I was talking about pulled up to the dock, hung around for a minute or so, and then left. He wasn’t coming from the house.” Kailyn got up and walked to the night table next to her bed. “Oh, and I think he left this for you.” She handed Tommy the pouch.

He took it from her. “Did you open it?”

“I didn’t have to. What’s going on Thomas? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

Tommy let out a deep breath of air. “No, I’m not in trouble. The guy owed me money. Not a lot, but I didn’t want you to know about it because I won the money on a stupid bet and I know you don’t like when I gamble.”

“You’re right, I don’t.”

“That’s why I told you he was here with me when he wasn’t. I asked him to drop the money off. It’s all good though, honest. I’m sorry if I worried you.”

“I find it strange that there are even hooks under the dock, and that this guy left a money pouch hanging on one of them. Who does that? That’s completely bizarre.”

“Those hooks have been there forever. I used to hang my goggles and fins on them when we were younger. Don’t you remember?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I never liked getting water in my eyes. You know that. I didn’t want to talk to him and remembered the hooks were there, so I left a bag and told him to leave the money. He probably thought it was a weird request too, but it worked out fine.” Tommy shifted his weight to the opposite hip.

“You’d better be telling me the truth, or you’ll be sorry. I may be the younger sister by seconds, but I can pack a mean punch. You should take better care of who you hang around with.”

“Yes, Mom, now go to bed, it’s getting late.”

“Oh, yeah? Who’s being the mom now?”

## Chapter Six

KAILYN WOKE IN an exceptionally good mood on Sunday morning, not having realized at the time she accepted Alex's kayaking invitation that she'd be getting up so early, especially after having slept so little the night before. As she exited the bathroom in her robe, Tommy walked into the room and sat on the edge of Kailyn's bed. "I heard you roaming around, so I thought I'd come up. Sorry again about last night."

"Don't worry about it. I know I'm overprotective sometimes," Kailyn said.

"How come you're up so early? You back together with Stewie?"

"No. Yesterday was the first time I've seen him in months, and hopefully it'll be a long time before I see him again."

"I'm glad to hear it. I know Mom and Dad love the guy, but I've always thought he was self-centered and smug. So what's going on then? You have a glow to you." Tommy patted the spot on the bed next to him which his sister quickly filled. "Dish."

"Okay, but don't make more out of this than there is. I'm going kayaking today with a woman I met a few weeks ago. Her name's Alex. She's not like anyone I've ever met before. She's grounded and honest and I find I enjoy her company probably more than I should. She's reserved, complex, kind of intense, though not easy to read. You may have seen her. She works at Island Water Adventures on Captiva. She's been helping me with research for my new comic strip, though today's not about that."

"Well, well, well. My twin sister has finally discovered she's gay," Tommy said. He patted her on the leg. "It's about time."

"What? What do you mean it's about time? These past few weeks have been a complete eye opener for me, but how could you possibly have guessed I might be gay?"

"Not *might be*, sweetie, *are*. I just knew. You've never talked about Stewart with the glint in your eye that you talked about Alex with, or when you told me about any of the other guys you dated for that matter. You never voiced any excitement. Put two and two together, and easy-peasy."

"Easy-peasy, huh? Yeah, well, part of the puzzle may be solved, but getting close to Alex is going to be a whole other story."

Tommy placed his hand on Kailyn's shoulder. "I wouldn't worry about it, Sis. You're a great catch. She'd be lucky to have you. I just hope she's equally worthy of you." Then he got up and kissed his sister on the cheek. "I need a cup of coffee. Have fun today. I love you."

"Thanks. I love you, too."

Kailyn stared through the empty doorway. Why the idea of being gay hadn't crossed her mind for more than a flicker in the past, until she met Alex, she didn't know. Tommy was gay and studies had shown twins often share the gay gene, but Kailyn never gave it any serious thought. Whatever the reason, Kailyn knew in her heart and soul she'd found her true self. She closed her eyes and wondered what it might be like to kiss Alex's full, supple lips, and share in

the passion she sensed was buried deep inside Alex. She wanted to uncover all the complexities of Alex Rey, and wondered if this day would be the start of that discovery.

KAILYN PARKED NEXT to Alex's motorcycle. She stepped from the car carrying a cardboard cup holder with two cups of coffee and a bag containing steaming hot breakfast sandwiches.

No other cars were in the lot, not even Sean's. An early morning mist hung in the air. She scanned the beach but saw no sign of Alex. The only movement she noticed came from a pair of Black-bellied Plovers that hopped among foot high grass tufts near the end of the beach. The light was on inside Island Water Adventures, so she headed for the back door.

Alex stood behind the screen door and held it open with one hand. "Morning. What's this?" she said. "Don't tell me you brought breakfast, because if you keep up this pace, I'll never be able to repay you the meals I owe."

"That's the plan. I hope you didn't eat already."

"I did, but I'm sure I can find room to pack in a little more. Besides, the extra energy this'll provide will come in handy later."

"Hmm, I'm not sure I like the sound of needing all that energy," Kailyn said. She handed Alex her coffee and opened the bag containing the egg and cheese muffin sandwiches. "You're lucky I didn't eat them on the way over, because believe me, the thought was tempting."

"I'm sure it was. I packed us a lunch too, so we'll be set for the day." Alex held the coffee in her hand, pried open the top, and gingerly sipped the hot brew. "Mmm, thanks for this," she added.

"Glad I could oblige. You look beat. You sure you're up to doing this today?" Kailyn asked.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I had a little trouble sleeping last night, but I'll push past it."

"Funny coincidence, so did I."

Coffee was accompanied with an introductory lesson by Alex that included going over proper paddling techniques. Alex stressed the motions that maximized output and minimized effort and body strain. Then both women applied ample amounts of sunscreen and unscented bug spray, before dragging their kayaks in the water. The sun was cresting over the horizon in a deep orange hue. Alex had selected two highly visible lime-green ocean kayaks which she'd fitted with padded seats and touring paddles for their trip.

After a few strokes of the paddle, Kailyn said, "Aren't you going to get in trouble with your boss for taking these kayaks when no one's around?"

"Not likely, seeing as I'm part owner. Besides, I left Sean a note. We never use all the kayaks on the same day at the same time anyway. He'll be fine without them." Alex responded.

Kailyn glanced at Alex. "You own this business?"

"I'm part owner. Sean owns the other fifty percent. The business was originally Andre's. He was a once in a lifetime special friend. Saved my butt many times."

"He sounds special. He must have thought a great deal about you to give you half of his business."

"Yeah, and I thought the world of him, too."

After a few awkward moments of silence, Kailyn said, "So, where are we off to then?"



Alex set a steady paddling pace. “We’re heading south along The Great Calusa Blueway. We’ll follow Trail Marker 2 along the banks of Captiva and then over to Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge.”

“Holy smokes! Are you serious? I’m not sure I can paddle that far.”

“You’ll be fine. We’ll rest in between. But remember we have to paddle the same distance back, so if or when you feel you may have hit your halfway point, let me know. I don’t want to have to hitch you to my kayak and row back for the both of us.”

“Wish you’d have told me where we were going before we left. I might have rethought the coffee situation.”

A smile crossed Alex’s face and she didn’t feel the need to hold it back. Maybe being around Kailyn was good for her. She silently thanked her grandmother for setting her straight the night before. If her Grandmother hadn’t spoken with her, they likely wouldn’t be on the water now, especially after the restless night she’d had.

“I’ll take note to make sure we stop where we can access a public bathroom...not to worry.”

WITHIN HALF AN hour they reached a spacious bayou along Captiva which Alex angled her kayak into and Kailyn followed. They paddled near the red mangroves lining the far end of the enclosure, their reddish roots extending below tops full of shiny, elliptical, smooth-edged dark green leaves, their tops positioned above the brackish water as if on stilts. Behind the thick mass of mangroves lurked taller buttonwood trees, their pointier, leather-like leaves contrasting against the blue sky. Perched on the highest limb of one of the trees, a red-shouldered hawk peered down on them with piercing dark eyes, its feathery chest extended outward.

Alex pulled her paddle from the water and glided to a stop. Their kayaks were the only two vessels in the bayou. Kailyn followed suit, placing the two-sided paddle across her lap. “You see that hawk?” Kailyn asked.

“Yeah, I do. He’s gorgeous, isn’t he?”

“He is. I love his coloring, too. I can see why he likes resting here. The cove is nestled away from all the commotion and the water’s calm. I feel like I’m floating in the middle of the Amazon, with the abundance of lush plants and the way the tree roots intertwine above the waterline.”

“Yeah, and don’t forget about the gators.” Alex was unable to resist taking advantage of the opening Kailyn provided.

“Gators?” Kailyn pulled her hand from the water. “Where?” She twisted to the right and left, eyes open wide.

“I’m sorry,” Alex responded. “I didn’t mean I saw them this very minute. I merely wanted to point out that when they are around, they add to that Amazon experience.”

Kailyn’s eyes narrowed. “Great, next time you feel inclined to enlighten me regarding wildlife in the area that has razor sharp teeth, don’t. Unless you actually sighted the particular animal you’re telling me about.”

“I’ll try to honor your request.” Alex leaned into the padded backrest and closed her eyes, fighting to withhold the grin etching the corner of her mouth. A melody of bird calls drifted through the air as a light wind touched her skin. Alex tried to separate the sounds. Warblers, starling, and the crow of a distant blue jay stood out, as did the faint echo of a woodpecker tapping on a tree in the distance. For the briefest moment, her muscles relaxed. She couldn’t

remember when she'd last felt this calm. Even her mind felt free, which was not an experience she'd ever recalled having, not even in her sleep. Spooked, she opened her eyes and caught Kailyn watching her. Avoiding the awkward moment, Alex cleared her throat and said, "How are you holding up?"

"Fine so far, thanks. I've never been in the bayou before, off the main drag. Hey, are those dolphins?"

Alex followed Kailyn's stare. "They are." Alex sat up as she watched the animals glide above and under the surface, swimming in their direction. She pulled out a spiral note pad and pencil from a small waterproof duffle she had tied to the kayak. When their fins crested ten feet away, she said, "That's Stella and Finn. They're two bottlenose dolphins."

"Wow, they're so close. This is fantastic. Stella and Finn? You know who they are?"

"I named them." Alex scribbled notes onto the notepad.

"How can you tell them apart?"

"They're distinguishable from the notches on their fins. The patterns, shapes, and location of notches on a dolphin's fin are unique, similar in a way to human fingerprints. That's how you can recognize them."

"And you know this how?"

For a brief moment, Alex contemplated how much of her life she should share. Opening up to anyone about her life was not one of her strong points. "I used to work as an animal behaviorist at H&M Aquarium. That was over a year ago. Prior to that, I spent four years getting a B.S. in marine biology, four more locking in a PhD in behavioral science and several more months pursuing certification as an applied animal behaviorist. But then I quit—threw it all away—and now I use none of that knowledge in my job."

"What? Holy cow. You—an animal behaviorist? I had no idea."

"There'd be no way you could have known, though I have to say the shocked surprise in your voice worries me a little."

"I'm so sorry. I am surprised, but not the way you think. I didn't mean to imply by my tone of voice or startled expression that I thought you wouldn't...that you couldn't have pursued another career or that you weren't smart enough or...oh, forget it. I'm rambling."

"No, go on."

"What I'm trying to say is that I'm surprised that someone who would have invested what must have been a great deal of time, money, and effort into what sounds like an awesome career, is doing what you're doing now. Not that what you're doing isn't great too in a different way, but what made you quit?"

"It's a long story."

Kailyn raised an eyebrow. "Another one? You have lots of long stories. Are you looking to get back into that field?"

"I haven't, no." Alex rubbed the nape of her neck.

"Don't you miss working there?"

"I miss a few of the people and I miss working with the dolphins, but overall, being away from there is better for me. When I have time, I collect data on dolphin activity in the area. The information might be useful in the future, and I figure you never know what you might uncover, so why not keep records."

Kailyn stared at Alex. "That explains the notepad."

Alex grinned. "Yeah, I suppose it does. I've been drawn to dolphins ever since I lived in Florida. I'm not really sure what lured me to them. Maybe the fact they live a fragile existence,

like sea turtles and other wildlife that depend on clean water and safe places to live, both of which continue to disappear at alarming rates. Plus, they're special mammals. Although science teaches us not to humanize them or their actions, sometimes you can't help it. They're highly intelligent and complex creatures."

Almost as if on cue, Finn swam next to Kailyn's kayak, rolled on his side, and glanced up at her.

"I can't believe this," Kailyn said. "It's like he's studying me. That's Finn, right?" Kailyn waved to him.

Alex's grin widened. "Yeah, that's Finn. Like I said, there's more to a dolphin than meets the eye." She'd seen dolphins in the area behave in a similar fashion twice before, but only when she was alone. Alex turned when Stella surfaced with a fish held wiggling in her mouth. "That reminds me. We better get going. We've got another six miles to cover before we stop for lunch." Alex jotted her last notes on paper and replaced the notebook into the duffle bag.

"I hate leaving them," Kailyn said.

Finn let out a noisy chuff of air mixed with mucus, and disappeared under the water once again. He didn't go far though. Alex watched as he reemerged with Stella. Both swam next to Alex and Kailyn's kayaks in what appeared an effortless, gliding motion, inches under the surface. She noticed Kailyn reach her hand out as if she wanted to touch them, but just as quickly retract it, registering what Alex sensed was a respect for the dolphins. And when they exited the bayou, the dolphin pair propelled themselves forward with incredible force and speed, and were gone in a seconds. Both women watched them go until they were no longer visible.

Within the next two hours, Alex and Kailyn had spotted a couple of water snakes and a sting ray, as well as numerous white ibis, sandpipers, heron, and egrets. The majority of their ride was smooth, though on occasion a motorboat would speed past closer than they'd have liked, sending strong waves off its bow, rocking their kayaks.

When they reached the public beach with a restroom, Alex pulled the kayaks onto the sand and guarded them until Kailyn returned from making a pit stop. Then they traded places. Although most people were honest and wouldn't think about stealing the kayaks, Alex wasn't taking any chances. Sean would never let her live a theft like that down.

When Alex returned, she set their lunch on a beach towel within eyeshot of the kayaks. She'd made whole wheat wraps with breaded chicken strips, lettuce, and avocado, topped with a light sour cream, lemon juice, dill, pepper and mayo sauce. To drink they had bottled water. They sat cross legged, half-way facing each other, and half-way facing the water.

Kailyn took a bite of her wrap, pushing loose ends of lettuce into her mouth. "Mmm, this is wonderful. Did you make this yourself?"

"I did. I'm glad you like it. Of course, after a good workout, almost any food tastes good."

"No, I'm sure I'd have liked this, workout or not. Speaking of which, as much as I'm enjoying the day, were you planning on heading back after lunch, because I think I hit my half way point."

Alex took a long gulp of water. "I had planned on heading into Ding Darling next, which is about another half hour, but we don't have to go. We've actually seen most of what I wanted to show you already, and if you're feeling even a little bit tired in your arms, then its better we don't go the extra distance."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I also appreciate you taking me with you today and would have never imagined to have had the experience I had. When we left the bayou with Stella and Finn, I actually felt emptiness in my chest when they swam away. Strange, isn't it?"

Alex was touched by the sincerity and openness of Kailyn's comment. "That reaction isn't strange at all, though I doubt it's common. I feel the same way when I have to leave them. The Greek named dolphins hieros ichthys which means sacred fish and I think there's much to the name people should be aware of, but which I believe they're not."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because if they believed them to be sacred, they wouldn't carelessly destroy their environment, or cage them and make them do tricks for food. They also wouldn't eat their meat as an exotic food, or breed them against their will." Alex's tone escaped sharper than she'd intended. "I'm sorry, but there's so much injustice out there."

Kailyn laid the remnants of her chicken in the wrapper and crumpled it closed. "Yes, there is. That's why you left the aquarium, isn't it?"

Alex didn't respond.

"It sounds like they could use someone to even the odds for them."

ALEX CALLED EMMA at lunchtime on Wednesday and told her she wouldn't be home for dinner. A voice inside her head convinced her to stop by H&M Aquarium, though she wasn't certain what she'd do when she got there. Sean had cleared her to leave work an hour early, probably because he'd realized how distracted she'd been the past few days. Since her outing with Kailyn, two females at H&M weighed heavily on her mind.

Alex felt strange walking into the building she'd only ever entered as an employee, and now she was entering as a visitor like everyone else. Head lowered, she meandered along the main hallway which sloped downward and led into an expansive, circular chamber. The air was moist and the interior dimmed, with the primary source of light emanating from the display tanks and sunken in lights along the tile floor. Crystal clear blue water shone behind thick glass windows. Each window was filled with unique and varied undersea life. Walking through the area, Alex experienced the familiar sensation of being submersed, but without having to strap on scuba gear or get wet. One window displayed glowing gold jellyfish pulsing to and fro. Another held numerous multicolored striped and spotted fish, and in others, sea horses and abundant coral were visible. But the window Alex came to view was the one that lined the side of the dolphin enclosure.

Alex glanced briefly through the window and then sat on a five-by-two wooden bench, several feet from the window. Even though she couldn't see the dolphins, she sensed their presence, and thoughts of what transpired at the aquarium prior to her departure played over and over in her head.

Uncertain how long she'd been lost in thought, she stood when she spotted Sophie swim past the window. Alex moved toward the glass and placed her hand on the smooth surface. Seconds later, Sophie circled around and touched her nose to the glass in the spot where Alex held her hand. "Hey there poor girl, how've you been doing? I've missed you, you know. Are they finally leaving you alone, or has it been more of the same?" Staring into pearl black, searching eyes, Alex felt guilty for not having done more to help Sophie after she'd left, and the other dolphins like her.

"I'm sorry to say it's been more of the same," Jenna piped in from behind.

Alex spun around. Jenna stood before her in a fashionable navy blue pant suit with a white blouse open to reveal her ample cleavage. Her long, wavy, auburn hair flowed over her shoulders. Jenna tilted her head up and her chocolate brown eyes riveted on Alex.

Alex couldn't understand why she remained single. "Pretty sure that would have been Sophie's answer too, unfortunately," she said.

Jenna nodded. "I'm sorry if I intruded. I've only been watching you since you got up from the bench though. I couldn't help observe Sophie's interaction with you. But then there always existed an intangible aspect to you."

"What? No. And no need to be sorry. I was actually hoping I'd run into you today," Alex said, her right hand tucked into her back pocket.

Jenna smiled. "Really, I wasn't expecting that, though I'm glad to hear it, I think."

"How'd you know I was here?"

"Mike called me from the front desk when he saw you. Guess he wanted to make sure you weren't up to no-good."

"Please. Do I look like trouble? No, wait. Don't answer that. It's a good thing he didn't call Jeremy, or there may have been. I only stopped by because I knew you'd be phoning me in a couple of days anyway for your monthly check-in call and I thought I'd save myself some a.m. shuteye and beat you to it this month."

"Right, and I was dropped on my head as a baby and can't tell that you're full of—"

"Okay, okay, I get the drift. You got a minute?" Alex said.

"Sure." Jenna sat on the bench Alex had occupied earlier, hands joined in her lap.

Alex sat as well, after she glanced around to see if anyone was within earshot. In a near whisper she said, "I need a favor. I've done a lot of thinking these past few days, and I've come to the conclusion that rather than ignore the problem, maybe there's something we can do to help these dolphins."

"I like how you snuck the *we* into your statement."

"I knew you would."

"Help them in what way?"

"You know I'm totally against captive breeding, impregnating dolphins against their free will, and I know my efforts of changing that practice when I worked here fell on deaf ears, but I think there's a way we might be able to slow the process and get better management in place."

"There's that *we* word again. I'm all for replacing Jeremy, but isn't it better to artificially inseminate the females we have than to capture dolphins from the wild?"

"The way I see it, neither option is better. All animals should be given free choice, marine mammals included, and if they chose not to mate, then so be it. Whether they mate in captivity or not, and we do or don't maintain the needed dolphin populations to support the bottom line of aquariums and marine parks across the country, we shouldn't take them from the wild either," Alex said. She paused as if waiting for a comment.

"I don't disagree," Jenna said.

"When I first started here, I'd convinced myself that these facilities served a higher purpose, one that educated our youth and provided a path toward empathy for these mammals in hopes of protecting future generations. And that while the dolphins were here, we could improve their living conditions by reducing their stressors and make them happier mammals. But let's be honest. The dolphin's well being isn't in the forefront of the minds of people like Jeremy. They're too far up the management ladder. Making a profit is all that concerns them."

"Not everyone's like Jeremy," Jenna said.

“No, but enough people are. Either that or the right people don’t know or care enough to act. The real education that goes on here is minimal. What people observe isn’t reflective of a dolphin’s true life. Little if any positive change has been made over all these years of dolphin exploitation,” Alex said.

“You’re right, of course, but the practice isn’t something we can change,” Jenna reminded her.

“Maybe so, and maybe not. I’m not entirely convinced change isn’t possible. But in the meantime, I think we should at least try to improve upon the things we can. The aquarium’s required to maintain breeding logs, right?”

Jenna sat quiet as a young couple sauntered past. When they’d rounded the corner, she answered. “We have to maintain more than breeding logs. The Marine Mammal Protection Act requires anyone under NOAA Fisheries’ jurisdiction maintain inventory of their marine mammals held in permanent captivity. That includes whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals, and sea lions held for purposes of public display, scientific research, enhancement, and national defense. They have to report acquisitions and dispositions, meaning births, wild captures, and imports as well as deaths, escapes, and releases.”

“And who maintains the records for H&M?”

“That job belongs to Jeremy. It’s one of the few responsibilities he holds close and doesn’t pawn off on me. He maintains a log of all activity and submits data sheets to NOAA.”

“And what would happen if the data submitted was found to be false?” Alex said.

“I’d assume submitting false data would be in violation of the MMPA, and if that’s the case, then civil penalties of up to ten thousand dollars per violation could be assessed. The process could entail a hearing in a U.S. district court or worse. That amount could go up to twenty thousand per violation and imprisonment for up to a year if the violation was done knowingly. That’s the tangible impact. The intangible impact, if information leaked to the media, would be much worse.”

Alex cracked her knuckles. “If we found a log book that showed information that differed from what was provided on the data sheets, every false entry could be deemed a violation, couldn’t it?”

“I’d say so, but even if we found this nebulous log, what would we compare it to?”

“Since the Government maintains the records from the data sheets, I’m sure copies could be obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. I bet there are organizations out there that have already made that information public on the web. We’d probably only have to search for it.”

Jenna ran her fingers through her hair and let out a deep breath. “This whole idea is a stretch. You know I’d only do this for you, don’t you?”

Alex sprung from the bench. “You’re the greatest,” she said, then kissed Jenna on the cheek.

“Yeah, yeah, and if I pull this off, you know you’re going to owe me big, right?”

ON THURSDAY, ALEX woke wishing she could go straight to work rather than have to take her father to the doctor’s again. She couldn’t believe a month had already passed since his last appointment. She showered, dressed, and traipsed toward the kitchen, the smell of coffee strengthening with each step she took.

Thunder ran toward her and greeted her with a whining, tail wagging nudge that knocked her in reverse two steps.

“Hey there, Big Guy,” Alex said. She rubbed his head, then leaned forward and kissed him on top of his head. When she reached the kitchen, she saw her grandmother sitting at the table reading the paper. “Morning, Grams,” Alex said as gripped the handle of the coffee pot and poured herself a cup of coffee.

“Morning, Alexandra.”

“Find any good news in there Grams?”

Emma folded the paper. “Not much. You wouldn’t happen to have any, would you?”

“I’m not sure, but I might. When I stopped by the aquarium yesterday I had some time to think. I decided to try and do something about the captive breeding situation at the aquarium,” Alex began, and then filled in her grandmother about her theory and her discussion with Jenna.

“I’m proud of you for stepping up. If you believe Jeremy has twisted the truth and you can prove it, then more power to the both of you, and good for the dolphins then.”

Alex kissed Emma on the cheek. “Thanks Grams. I hope I’m right. Kailyn had a lot to do with it. Something she said on Sunday got me thinking.”

“I’m glad she did. She seems like a good person, from what little I know about her.”

“Yes, she does. Thanks again for setting me straight the other day. I’m glad I didn’t back out on our kayak outing. We had a nice time.” Alex stood in place a few minutes longer and cracked her knuckles. “In fact, I was thinking of maybe inviting her to dinner. Do you think it would be okay if I invited her on Saturday?”

A smile lit up Emma’s face. “Of course it’s okay. I’d love to meet the young lady. I was planning on making a pork roast anyway, so there’ll be plenty of food.”

“Thanks, Grams, you’re the best. I haven’t had a chance to talk to her, to see what her plans are, but I figured I’d call tonight.”

“That’s fine, and if she can’t make it, I’m sure you’ll find a day when she can,” Emma said. “You off to your dad’s place now?”

“Duty calls. I just hope he’s been taking his meds. I’m not in the mood for more drama. Would it be all right if I kept the car today? It’ll save me some time getting to work.”

“Of course, I don’t need it. The book club’s meeting here this week.”

Once Alex passed the Westerfield Apartment Complex sign and pulled into the parking lot, she prepared herself mentally for another meeting with her dad, since each visit was unpredictable. All she knew for certain was that she had to maintain the calm and avoid arguments.

When Christopher opened the door, he was dressed and clean shaven, which Alex took as a good sign, but he appeared tired. “I see Emma’s white death trap got you here again in one piece,” he said.

“Hi, Dad. Good to see you, too. I’m glad you’re ready to go.”

“And why wouldn’t I be?”

Alex breathed deep. “No reason. How have you been sleeping? Do you still hear your neighbor playing the flute?”

“Some nights, but he hasn’t been playing much the past couple of weeks. He probably got bored. I hear creaking now though.”

“What do you mean, like someone sneaking around?”

Christopher rubbed his face. “No, like the walls and ceiling might come down. I think the apartment complex might be sinking. I’ve seen a lot on the news lately about sink holes in the area.”

Alex glanced to the corners of the ceiling. “Have you seen any cracks in the ceiling or walls?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything.” He rubbed his face again.

“I can understand why you’re worried, but I don’t think you need to be. I didn’t see any damage outside or in the hallways,” Alex said in a reassuring tone.

“Is that right? And what would you know about it? What if we are sinking? I can’t go through that again. I’m the one who made the decision for us to go fishing, not you. Did you know your mother didn’t want to go?”

“Dad, what are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about. She didn’t like the water. Said it scared her. But did I listen? No. I rented that boat for Josh’s birthday and I steered us out on that water, and I’m the one responsible. Me! I’m the one!”

“Dad, please. Take a deep breath. It’s okay. That was a long time ago. What brought this on?”

“What do you mean what brought this on?”

“Why are you talking about the accident now, after all these years?”

“You’re the one who brought it up,” Christopher said as he walked toward the window.

“I don’t believe I did, but whatever you say is fine. You know what happened wasn’t anyone’s fault, right? Mom would never have gone if she really didn’t want to. She was independent and stubborn as anyone of us. Don’t do this to yourself.”

A long moment of silence followed. “I’m tired,” he said, then pulled Josh’s picture off the shelf. “Your mom...she’s not in this picture because I can’t face the guilt when I look into her eyes, none of you are, only Josh. Josh wanted to go out on the boat more than anyone and I wanted to make him happy on his birthday.”

“You did what any good father would do. You couldn’t control the weather. Is that why you don’t have any pictures of Mom up, or the rest of us?”

Christopher placed Josh’s picture back on the shelf. He cleared his throat. “We should go. I don’t want to be late for my appointment.”

“I think it’s good to finally talk about this, but we’ll go if that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want.”

When they reached the medical center, Alex said, “I think you should tell the doctor what you told me today, Dad.”

“And what good will my talking do? I can’t bring them back by talking, can I?” He opened the car door. “Talking hasn’t gotten me back to Connecticut and away from this damn humidity hole. I hate being here. You have no idea what it’s like being me. I can’t stand Florida. There’s nothing here for me.”

“No, I have no idea. I only lived through the accident like you did. Fine, you want to go back to Connecticut? Then Connecticut it’ll be. I’m done giving a damn. One step forward, ten damn steps back. You are the most miserable and ungrateful person I’ve ever met. You don’t deserve me.” Alex watched her father slam the car door shut and enter the building. She rested her head against the seat back and breathed deep. Anger mixed with sadness boiled inside but she held down the emotion. Then she flipped open her cell phone.

After several rings, a female voice answered. “Hello?”



“Hi, Katherine, it’s Alex.”

“Wow, what’s it been, little Sis? Two years? What dragged you to the phone?”

“Warm-hearted as ever I see. You have a phone too and know how to dial the numbers.”

“If you called to insult me, then I have better things to do, but if you called for a reason, then you should get to it,” Katherine said.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. How are Michael and the kids?”

“Fine, Alex. What’s going on?”

Alex inhaled a large breath. “Dad wants to go back to Connecticut. He does nothing but complain here, especially about the weather. I can’t handle this with him anymore. I need to know you’ll be there for him.”

“Like he was there for us?”

“He had a split from reality. I’m not sure there was anything he could have done to prevent that.”

“But you’re not sure there wasn’t either, are you?”

“That was a long time ago. He’s made a lot of progress since then,” Alex said as she stared out the car window.

“Come on Alex, who are you bullshitting? If he made so much progress, you wouldn’t be calling me now. Dad doesn’t care about anyone but himself and maybe Josh. He left us after the accident, physically and mentally. He could have tried harder. He knew he had responsibilities. He gave up, Alex. Face it. He gave up. He left us to deal with the consequences of what happened while he took a convenient siesta. There’s no way in hell I’m doing anything for that man. No way, Alex, I’m sorry. And if you were smart, you’d let him be as well. If he goes to the doctor, fine. If he doesn’t, fine. If he takes his meds, great, and if not, who gives a damn? He doesn’t. Stop fooling yourself.”

“I’m not fooled, but he’s still our father.”

“Not to me he’s not.”

“I could use the help,” Alex said.

“I heard you, but the answer remains no.”

FOUR DAYS HAD passed since her kayak outing with Alex, and in that time Kailyn spent most of it thinking about Alex and their day together, but as each day passed without hearing from Alex, Kailyn became more and more and more aggravated. When they’d returned to Island Water Adventures, Kailyn had given Alex her phone number. She’d casually mentioned Alex should feel free to call her in the event she wanted to talk or get together, or if she needed anything, but no call. A part of her wasn’t surprised, but she secretly hoped that the woman who’d crossed into her life unexpectedly felt something more for her than a need to alleviate the guilt of having hurt her feelings at an ill-timed lunch via the repayment of a kayak outing.

No sooner had she completed her thoughts on Alex’s apparent disinterest when the phone rang. Kailyn dropped her Faber-Castell Pitt Artist brush pen, which she used to put the final touches on the day’s cartoon for *For the Love of Money*, and sprang from her chair. In two long legged strides, she reached the nightstand and picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi, Kailyn, it’s Mackleroy,” the stern voice on the other end of the line replied.

Kailyn cringed, wishing she had let voicemail kick in. Her boss only referred to himself by his last name when he was unhappy about something. “Hello Jake. What can I do for you?”

“I know I said I was in no rush for your new comic strip when you were in my office last month, but I said that to give you some freedom, and in order not stifle your artistic talent. In truth, I thought I’d have something by now. Do you even have a name for it yet?”

Kailyn did not appreciate the stiffness with which Jake had asked the question, but at the same time, she recognized he had every right to be upset. By now she should have solidified her ideas and moved forward, but she had not. She was close to finalizing the characters and knew where she wanted to go with the comic strip, but an unknown force was holding her back. “I’m close Jake, real close. Give me the weekend, and I’ll have an outline and draft of the first strip to you by Monday.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Great news. I’m glad we had this chat. Keep up the good work and I’ll be waiting on that outline and draft on Monday,” he said before the phone clicked dead.

“Yeah, great news,” Kailyn mimicked, nervous she’d committed to more than she’d be able to produce come Monday.

By the evening, Kailyn was even more aggravated having wasted the remainder of the day wondering why Alex hadn’t called, instead of spending that valuable time working on her new comic strip. Determined not to waste another minute, she dialed Alex’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Alex, it’s Kailyn. I’m not bothering you, am I?” she said, her tone holding a touch of sarcasm.

“Hi, no, I’m glad you called. I was going to call you tonight anyway.”

“Right, I’m sure you were. It’s only been...what, four days since we got together and not a peep? I had a nice time on Sunday. I thought you did too.”

“I did have a good time. Why are you acting this way? I was busy this week. I’ve got a lot going on. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize my not calling you would upset you this much and I was about to call you, only you beat me to it. You’ll probably say no now, but I was going to ask you if you’d have dinner with me on Saturday.” A long silence followed. “Hello? Are you still there?”

“I’m here. Are you sure you’re not asking me to dinner only because I called?”

“No, why would I do that? Don’t answer. I’ll pick you up by Tollerson’s Saturday after work, around 6:30 and wear something casual.”

## Chapter Seven

“HEY, HANG ON a minute before you go Alex,” Sean said as he shut down the computer in their office. “I haven’t had a chance to talk to you all day.”

Alex stopped, spun around, and faced her business partner. “I know. What’s up?”

“Our lawyer called. We can’t delay the Samsons much longer. They want to meet with us again and get our final decision.”

“Whenever you need me, you know I’ll be there. Just tell me when. What are our chances if we decline their offer?”

“After looking through the paperwork and affidavits, Michael thinks they have a better chance of winning if they took us to court than he originally thought, but an equal chance of losing. He thinks it would depend on which judge we’d get,” Sean explained.

“I don’t like the sound of that. I was hoping for better odds.”

“It’ll be up to us to turn the odds in our favor. What I need to figure out is how.” As Sean sauntered next to Alex he added, “Come on, let’s get out of here. What are you up to tonight? Feel like going for a drink? I know I could sure as heck use one.”

Alex felt her cheeks warm, uncertain how to respond. “Thanks for the invite, but I’m picking up Kailyn for dinner tonight.”

“Hmm, let me think...Kailyn...Kailyn...oh yeah, isn’t she that woman I forced you to take on the group Jet Ski ride a couple of weeks back, and isn’t she the woman you went to lunch with a few days later...oooh, and didn’t you go kayaking together last weekend? That Kailyn?” he said, goading her.

Alex narrowed her eyes, but remained quiet.

Sean patted her on the back. “I’m kidding. I think it’s great the two of you are getting along. She seems really nice.”

“Our getting together is no big deal, it’s just dinner.”

“Right...no big deal. Hey, don’t forget I’m off tomorrow. Delilah and Chappy will be here with you.”

“Thanks for the reminder, I did forget. You’re going fishing with your dad, right?” Alex said.

“I am. I’m looking forward to it. It gives us time to connect. Did you ever think about going with your dad again, now that he’s getting better than he was?”

“I’m not sure getting better is the best way to describe him. It’s a nice thought, but I’m not sure there’s any hope for us reconnecting. When I picked him up for the doctor’s on Thursday, he opened up for the first time since the accident and for a brief second I almost wanted to hug him, but then the old Christopher Rey returned, and just being near him was difficult.”

“That’s a shame. I’m sorry, Alex.”

“I appreciate it, but there’s nothing to be sorry about. It is what it is. He still hates it here and wants to get back to Connecticut, and after Thursday, I resolved to let him go. I figured, why not make it easier on myself? The problem is Katherine’s not having any of it.”

“That’s too bad. Maybe one of these days he’ll surprise you. Until then, forget about him and don’t let him ruin your evening. Believe me, things aren’t perfect between my dad and me either, but we both make the effort, which is what you need for any relationship to work. You can’t mend a hole with a needle and no string.”

Alex laughed. “You’re right. You definitely can’t.”

KAILYN STOOD NEAR the front door of Tollerson’s Lighthouse Café and Marina dressed in her favorite form fitting jeans and short sleeved blouse. A light jacket hung over her arm and she held a bottle of wine. She picked at the bottle’s top, her nerves prickling with the anticipation of seeing Alex again. But she didn’t need to wait long. The thunderous rumble of a motorcycle grew in intensity as it neared. She watched Alex pull into the parking lot, her wavy hair rippling in the breeze. The short sleeve cotton polo she wore revealed well defined muscles that flexed with every move. When Alex waved, electric shivers shot up Kailyn’s arms and throughout her body. She waved back, her heart pounding loud.

Kailyn’s eyes didn’t leave Alex for a second as Alex slowed the bike, parked near the front entrance, and left the engine running.

“Hi, I hope you didn’t have to wait too long,” Alex said.

Kailyn quickly regained her composure. “No, not at all, I’ve only been standing here a couple of minutes. Thanks for picking me up, but if you had told me where we were going, I could have driven and met you.”

“I know, but I was only a few miles down the road anyway and I don’t like the idea that at the end of the night you’d have to drive all the way out here alone and then park and take your boat across the Pass alone.”

“You really didn’t need to worry. The security’s good here.”

“I don’t mind. You look nice, by the way,” Alex said.

“Thank you. You look nice, too. Oh, and this is for you.” Kailyn handed Alex the bottle of wine. “Since I didn’t know where we were going, I thought I’d come prepared in case the place was a BYOB.”

“That was thoughtful, thanks. This wine will be perfect.”

“You’re still not going to tell me where we’re going, are you?” Kailyn set her jacket on the seat of the Harley, her gaze fixed once again on Alex’s sinew body as Alex placed the wine bottle in the saddlebag.

“Nope,” Alex said as she straightened. Her glance met Kailyn’s. Alex’s cheeks reddened. She lifted the helmet off the backrest and handed it to Kailyn. “Shall we go?”

Kailyn smiled, aware she’d flustered Alex and happy she had that affect.

Forty minutes later, they were off the main highway, riding through the side streets of a residential development, and being flagged down by a short elderly woman wearing a stylish red blouse, navy skirt, and tan, rubber soled shoes.

Kailyn’s confusion was evident when Alex stopped the bike at the end of the woman’s driveway. Kailyn flipped up the helmet’s visor, undid the chin clasp, and pulled it off, setting it on her leg. She noticed the woman’s two story home was larger than the other homes in the area, but blended in with the architecture in other ways, and appeared well kept.

“Thanks for stopping Alex dear. I wanted to talk to you for a second. Who’s the lovely lady riding with you today?” Mrs. Harrison said.

Alex remained on the motorcycle. “Hi, Mrs. Harrison, this is a friend of mine, Kailyn Montgomery. Kailyn, this is my neighbor Mrs. Harrison.”

Mrs. Harrison extended her hand to Kailyn. “Pleasure to meet you, dear. You wouldn’t happen to be the daughter of James Montgomery, President of Montgomery Savings and Loan, would you?”

Kailyn was visibly confused. “Yes, I am, but how did you—”

“Because I know your father, and you are the spitting image of him. Please tell him Tess Harrison says hello when you see him. He knows who I am.”

“I will, thank you,” Kailyn said.

Now Alex donned the confused expression. “Is Juggernaut okay, Mrs. Harrison?”

“Oh yes, he’s fine dear.” Mrs. Harrison shifted her attention to Kailyn. “Juggernaut’s my adventurous cat who enjoys hiding in high places. Alex has helped me retrieve him from out of the tree many times. She’s saved the fireman many a trip. She helps with repair work too. She’s quite handy.” Returning her attention to Alex, she added, “I don’t want to hold you up. I know you’re on your way to your grandmother’s for dinner, but she told me about your visit to the aquarium. She mentioned your suspicions regarding the possible existence of false inventory records related to the mismanaged breeding of the female dolphins.”

“How nice of her to share, without my knowledge,” Alex said.

“She only told me because she thought I could help and because we’re both avid animal lovers. If you find out anything, please let me know. I know a great lawyer who’d love to take a case like this on and he won’t charge me.”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Harrison. The whole thing might turn out to be nothing.”

“Listen to me Alex. If you think the dolphins in the aquarium are being mistreated or mismanaged, then I’d venture to bet your intuition is more than nothing. And if your intuition is right, I not only want to help, but I also know for a fact that I can help. Promise me you’ll stop by with any information you might uncover. Discovering the truth is important to me.”

“Okay, okay, I promise. The last thing I need is both you and Grams on my case at the same time.”

“That’s right, and don’t forget it. Now the two of you go have a nice dinner.”

A few minutes later, Alex made a right hand turn into her grandmother’s driveway while Kailyn took in her surroundings. At the end of the driveway encircling the light post, a mound of smaller plants and two foot high leafy palms flanked the entrance. Red gravel covered the soil. Against the garage, red, flowering Rangoon Creeper vines with their crisp, bright green elongated leaves clung to trellises on both sides of the garage door and met at the arch in the center. The front lawn was green and recently cut. Tall palm trees stood on the right side of the property near the house, and one palm tree stood a few feet from the front, surrounded by two smaller palms and well maintained shrubs, including two Sweet Acacia with their brilliant yellow flowers in bloom.

After Kailyn got off the bike, Alex got off. She took the helmet from Kailyn and hung it over the backrest. “I had no idea your dad owned Montgomery Savings and Loan.”

Kailyn regarded Alex’s comment. “You never asked what my parents did for a living.”

“You’re right, I didn’t.”

“Does it matter?”

“No, of course not. I’m surprised, that’s all. You caught me off guard.”

“I’m sure there’s a lot we don’t know about each other, but then, learning’s half the fun.”

The nervousness Kailyn had felt during their short ride from Tess Harrison's to Alex's house, having learned she was going to meet Alex's grandmother, disappeared within minutes upon shaking Emma Weston's hand and being introduced to Thunder. Kailyn perceived Emma as kind and gracious, and she reminded her of her own grandmother. She marveled at how large Thunder was. She estimated he was nearly twice as tall as Sasha, but found him to be equally as sweet. He even let her kiss him on the head.

"Kailyn, you and Grams relax in the living room. I'm going to finish dinner. I won't be long. There's not much left to do. Can I get you both a glass of wine?" Alex asked.

"Yes, thanks," Kailyn responded.

"Half a glass for me," Emma said.

After Alex disappeared into the kitchen, Emma followed to retrieve the wine. She set the wine glasses on the table and suggested Kailyn help herself to snacks. "Alexandra made the snack platter last night. I merely took it out of the fridge," Emma said. "She was so adamant about cooking the meal on her own, I dared not interfere. All she allowed me to do was put the meat in the oven."

"That was nice of her. Alexandra's such a pretty name, but she doesn't use her full name, does she?"

"No. She'd only let her mother call her Alexandra and now me. Her mother, my daughter, was a history teacher. She named her Alexandra because she knew it was a strong name, one of a defender and helper."

"Alexandra is a strong name, and fits her well, at least from what I've gathered to this point and what I've discerned from Mrs. Harrison, who I met on our way over. Alex is trying to help the dolphins, isn't she?" Kailyn placed several crackers on a paper plate along with a couple apple wedges covered in blue cheese slices.

"Yes, though it's been a long time since she's shown interest in anything to do with that part of her life. I have to think your outing last weekend may have renewed her concern."

"I don't know. It would be nice to think that it did, but Alex is difficult to read. Most of the information I get out of her I have to practically pull from her. I enjoy her company, and I think she enjoys mine, but she doesn't open up much." Kailyn took a sip of wine, then set the glass on the wooden table. "She almost seems like she doesn't want to allow herself to have a good time. Once or twice I saw her smile or I caught a glimpse of who she is, but then she shuts me out again."

"You've done better than most. Alex carries a deep-seated sadness with her...a deeper blue. Sometimes she has it under control and sometimes not so much. She thinks I don't know about her struggle, but I do. Has she told you about her parents and brother?"

"No, she hasn't mentioned them."

"I'll leave that to her then. When she's comfortable, I'm sure she'll fill you in. I think it's clear though that she does enjoy your company, even if she won't admit it to herself yet. That's how Alex is. She's a wonderful person though and from what I know of you so far, I think you're good for her."

Kailyn felt her cheeks turn red. "Thank you. There's something special about her, that I know."

"Sometimes I think she cares too much about too many things, to her own detriment. But she is who she is, and if nothing else, she keeps life interesting around here. I don't know what I'd do without her, and Thunder adores her."

"He is one massive dog. How'd he get the name Thunder?"

Before Emma could answer, Alex popped through the swinging door to the kitchen with a handful of plates and utensils. “A few more minutes and we’ll be ready to eat.”

“Can I help you set the table?” Kailyn asked.

“Thanks, but I’ve got it.” Alex rattled the dishes and made plenty of noise removing the silverware from on top of the plates.

“Sorry, Mrs. Weston, please continue,” Kailyn said.

“We named him Thunder because Alex found him in the backyard during a thunderstorm. He couldn’t have been more than eight weeks old. I have no idea how that tiny thing ended up displaced here, but he sure picked the right house.”

“Are you two talking about me? I heard my name.”

“Quiet in there,” Emma Weston scolded in jest. “We’re talking about Thunder.” Then she redirected her attention to Kailyn. “At any rate, she wanted to keep that dog more than anything. She was convinced the dog was either a bull terrier or terrier lab mix that she swore wouldn’t grow to be more than forty pounds.”

Kailyn laughed at the exact moment Alex walked into the living room.

“Okay, what’s going on? Are you telling embarrassing stories about me Grams?”

“Not yet, Alexandra, but I’ll get to it, don’t worry about that. No, I was telling Kailyn about how you swore Thunder was some type of terrier when we first got him.”

“Yeah, well, how was I to know he’d end up making a huge liar out of me?”

ALEX CARRIED THE food to the table while Kailyn refilled everyone’s wine glasses.

“The food smells wonderful, Alex. I haven’t had a good home cooked meal in a while.”

“I hope it tastes at least half as good as it looks,” Alex said, “but I’m no great chef, that’s for sure.” Alex cut into the juicy, steaming, toasted brown pork roast. In addition to the roast, she made potato dumplings and grilled asparagus tips with olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Dinner conversation moved effortlessly between the three women. Emma told stories about Alex as a child, and Alex learned more about Kailyn through her grandmother’s inquiries. Alex enjoyed the music of Kailyn’s warm laughter in response to her grandmother’s tales. Kailyn’s laugh was what drew her attention to her that first day by the dock, and arrested her ever since.

“Alex told me you write a daily comic strip for *The Floridian*, but I’ve not seen it,” Emma said.

Kailyn swallowed her last forkful of asparagus. “That’s because I write under the alias of Lisa James. Although the comic strip is mainly fiction based, I derive my inspiration from the circles of influential and well off people I interact with, and I wouldn’t want to upset anyone who might take my humor in the wrong light. The alias protects my father and allows people to interact freely around me. That’s important.”

“Yes, I suppose it would be. Do you enjoy what you do?” Emma asked.

“I do. I love drawing comics and making people laugh. I’ve been sketching since I was a kid and always try to find the humor in things. I think leaning on humor helps people deal with life. The only obstacle is that my work up until this point has been superficial, at least I think so. I’d like to produce something more meaningful, which is the direction I’m trying to move toward now. I also don’t want to hide behind an alias with the new comic strip I’m creating.”

Alex finished her meal and set her knife on top of her plate. “If you feel strongly about going in another direction, then that’s what you should do. There have been comic strips in the past that

were funny and yet powerful at the same time. Some were politically based or dealt with pressing issues of the times. Did you know you could win a Pulitzer Prize in editorial cartooning?”

“I know the category exists, but the chances of anyone winning, especially in a smaller publication like the one I work for, are slim. A Pulitzer has never been my goal, regardless of how amazing it would be to win and what a huge honor it would be. I think I’ll take your advice though and follow my gut on my new comic strip,” Kailyn said.

“I look forward to reading it,” Emma said, “and in the meantime, I can catch up on your other one, now that I know who to look for.” Emma stood and gathered her and Kailyn’s plates. “Why don’t you two take Thunder for a walk while I clean up the table and then we’ll have dessert. He looks like he needs to go out.”

Alex glanced toward Kailyn who nodded in agreement.

When they reached the end of the driveway, Alex turned left, but Thunder turned right. “Is this how it’s going to be tonight? Fine. You’ll get no argument out of me. I know you’re just showing off in front of our guest,” Alex said as they crossed the street.

Kailyn laughed. “I wouldn’t argue with him either, but then again, I wouldn’t stand much chance in directing him where to go.”

“Don’t fool yourself. I’m sure if you went left, he’d have gone left too.” Alex slowed to let Thunder sniff a bush, then continued on. She was enjoying Kailyn’s company again, more than she thought possible. She worried her feelings for her were growing, and remained uncertain what to do about them. She was treading in unfamiliar territory and probably somewhere she shouldn’t be, yet being near Kailyn felt right. And she had questions she wanted to ask, but didn’t know how. She glanced at Kailyn, but when Kailyn turned to meet her stare, Alex’s mind froze. All she could think to say was, “Was dinner okay?”

The corners of Kailyn’s mouth turned upward. “Dinner was more than okay. It was great. This walk will do me some good, considering I ate way too much. But, to be honest, I’m enjoying the company even more.”

Alex hesitated, then added, “I am too.”

“You say that as if it worries you. Does it?”

“No. Maybe...I don’t know.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way, with only an occasional comment about the scenery made by Kailyn.

Dessert consisted of chocolate cheesecake with strawberries and whipped cream on top, and coffee.

“I think I’ve gained five pounds at least at dinner tonight, after factoring in that incredible cake.” Kailyn patted her belly after she’d finished the last bite of her oversized slice of cheesecake.

“That’s a good thing,” Emma said. “The two of you could stand to gain a few pounds.” Then to Alex she said, “Have you or Sean heard anything else about the will contest? Is that over now, or still an issue?”

Alex knew she’d told Kailyn about Andre and his leaving Alex and Sean the business, but she hadn’t mentioned the will contest, so she filled Kailyn in on the missing details first and then answered her grandmother. “Sean told me today that he thinks we’ll have to make a date to meet with the Samsons and their lawyer soon, because they want a final decision from us. Originally, our lawyer thought they didn’t have a chance of winning, but after looking at the affidavits confirming Andre’s diminished mental capacity and other documentation they’d left supporting



the validity an earlier will, he's now only giving us a fifty-fifty chance of winning in court. I'd like better odds."

After a few moments of silence, Kailyn spoke up. "There must be something you can do to push the pendulum in your direction. Isn't there anything Andre wrote or evidence of work he did around the time the newer will was signed to show he still had his mental capacity intact? How he fared mentally later than that time wouldn't matter, right?"

"For that specific purpose, no, that's true," Alex said. "You may have found us a solution."

ALEX STOOD NEAR the front of her Harley in the parking lot of Tollerson's Lighthouse Café and Marina and watched Kailyn flip her hair after removing the helmet. In a delayed response, Alex took the helmet from Kailyn when she extended it to her. Bugs circled the lampposts illuminating the area. Alex heard an occasional ping as the larger insects hit into the glass.

"I had a wonderful evening," Kailyn said. "You really are a great cook."

Alex fumbled with the helmet strap. "Thanks for saying so, but 'great' is a stretch. I do what I can. Grams taught me what I know. Her cooking is phenomenal though. Everything she makes puts my attempt at cooking to shame. She used to bake too, but not since the arthritis in her hands made it too difficult for her."

"I see you love your grandmother a great deal. That's nice. I'm glad you thought enough about me to want me to meet her. She's a sweet lady."

"She is. She means more to me than I can put into words, and I gathered she thinks highly of you, too. I worried at first you might be uncomfortable, but I'm glad you weren't and that you enjoyed yourself."

"I did. Very much."

"I had a good time, too, especially listening to the two of you laugh." Alex scuffed her boot against the pebbles under her feet as several awkward seconds passed. She watched the light reflect off Kailyn's hair and noticed Kailyn studying her with a grin. "I'm sorry about what I said on the walk earlier. About not knowing if the fact that I enjoying being around you worries me or not. I shouldn't have said that."

"You have a right to your feelings."

"I know, but I just...I—"

"What is it?"

"Would it be okay if I asked you a personal question?" Alex finally said, mustering the courage that had escaped her all evening. "You don't have to answer if you don't want, I was just curious—"

"You can ask me whatever you like. I don't have anything to hide from you and I'll do my best to answer."

Amber eyes held Alex hostage. She swallowed hard. She'd thought about the question on and off since they'd met, not certain why the answer was so important, but deep down acknowledged that it was. She rested the helmet on the handlebar and played with the grip, realizing she couldn't avoid finding out the truth any longer. The warm, inviting face opposite her quelled her fears, allowing her to speak. "The man you were on the dock with the first day I saw you, was he your boyfriend or husband? Do you live together?"

Kailyn's grin morphed into a full smile. "That's two questions, but I'm happy to answer both. He's neither. The person you saw me with was my twin brother Tommy. We both still live there though, yes. It's my parents' house."

Relief flowed through Alex. She was surprised how interested she was in Kailyn's life. No one in the past, other than Andre, had evoked interest. "Thanks for answering."

"My pleasure," Kailyn said in a drawn out, sultry tone as she took another step toward Alex, "though I'm surprised you didn't already know the answer."

Alex swallowed hard once again, the heat within her rising as Kailyn stood inches from her. Alex surmised that if Kailyn didn't say goodnight and move away from her soon, she might melt into the pavement in the exact spot where she stood.

But Kailyn didn't move away. Instead, she stepped forward, her hand brushing against the side of Alex's leg.

Alex's heart pounded, certain it skipped a beat. Her breath caught. But in that moment's hesitation where she contemplated what might happen next, a loud, obnoxious, rowdy group of young adults exited the restaurant and headed in their direction. Alex held Kailyn's stare for a moment longer, but when the group didn't separate, she stepped back. She glanced their way, then back at Kailyn, who'd also retreated a step.

"I guess I should get going," Kailyn said.

Alex nodded, disappointed she'd let the moment pass. She knew saying goodbye was the right thing to do, but somehow separating felt all wrong. She watched Kailyn walk safely to her boat and travel to the other side of Redfish Pass, sensing the emptiness expand the farther the distance between them.

## Chapter Eight

“I’VE GOT TO pull this together, Sasha, or Jake will have my butt in a sling,” Kailyn said as she paced in her home office.

Sasha lifted her head and followed her mistress’ movement for several strides, then grunted and placed her head between her front paws and returned to her nap.

“Great, I can see you’re going to be a big help today,” Kailyn teased.

Realizing that pacing around the room was getting her nowhere, she walked over to the drawing table, picked up her pencil and sat, recalling dinner at Alex’s, and wondering if she would call soon, or if she’d wait as long as she did the last time they got together. She pushed the negative thoughts from her mind and instead focused on the nice time she had at dinner.

They’d discussed her work and the new comic strip, and why she was concerned about being able to pull it together. She’d mentioned wanting to go in a different direction; something more serious. Granted, she hadn’t disclosed what her comic strip would be about, but she clearly remembered Alex saying that if she felt strongly about going in another direction, then that’s what she should do. Indecision no longer an issue, Kailyn put pencil to paper and started the first edition of *Chloe and Finn*.

ALEX SAT NEXT to Sean, near the head of the table, in the law office of Michael P. Morris for the third time in the past year, and hoped this meeting would be their last. Her back to the windows, she scanned the bookshelves to see if she could find something other than law books, but from where she sat, she couldn’t discern much. Her nerves had been rattled for days, since Sean told her about the meeting on Monday morning. In a way, she was glad the day she knew was coming finally arrived, so she’d have one less obstacle to worry about. She picked at the corner of her coffee cup, while Sean and Michael discussed their case, and knew she should pay attention, but her thoughts ultimately drifted to Kailyn.

She wondered if Kailyn had pulled together the comic strip she’d promised her boss. She’d wanted to call Monday night, but in the end, didn’t. She wondered why being around Kailyn made her nervous and jumbled logical thought. She recalled the sensation coursing through her body on Saturday night in the parking lot, when Kailyn stepped dangerously close before saying goodnight. Blood flowed through Alex’s veins and throbbed in her ears. Shivers ran up her spine as the intensity of Kailyn’s glare made her light headed. Were they about to kiss? Should they have? Would a kiss have made their budding friendship awkward? Or was the group of people that disrupted their moment a sign that they shouldn’t cross into those waters? Alex didn’t know the answers. After they’d waved goodbye to one another, once Kailyn reached her dock, Alex got on her Harley and rode home, unable to clear Kailyn from her thoughts, wishing she hadn’t stepped away when she did, and on the other hand, left with a gnawing feeling that maybe she allowed herself to get too close.

“Alex, do you agree?” Sean said.

Alex released hold on the coffee cup and turned to face Sean and the lawyer. “Uh...I’m sorry. What was that?”

Sean gave a knowing smirk. “I said I don’t care what happens in the end. If push comes to shove, I’d rather go to court than give up the business. Do you agree?”

Alex cracked the knuckles in her left hand. “I do. We both know how much the place meant to Andre. If we have to fight in court to keep his wishes alive, we will.”

“Good, it’s settled then. We’re not giving the business away without a fight,” Sean said.

Moments later, Michael Morris’ secretary, who arrived a few minutes after Sean and Alex, escorted the Samsons into the conference room, along with their lawyer, Justine Bails.

Alex found it especially irritating that the Samsons were late once again, the same way their lawyer was late at their last encounter. What she found even more irritating was that Ms. Bails pointed out during introductions that handshakes were neither necessary nor desired. Alex wondered how a woman with her limited scruples was able to look at herself in the mirror each morning and not cringe at the reflection staring back. Alex thought it a shame that a woman so beautiful on the outside could be so cold on the inside, but understood why Dorothy and Clive Samson had chosen her.

Justine Bails held the agreement to turn over Island Water Adventures in her hand as she continued speaking. She had matched her gray suit with her disposition and her blue pin-striped blouse with her eye color. “I assume you’ve all had a chance to look over the agreement and the evidence supporting our well founded assertion that Mr. and Mrs. Samson’s son did not have the legal capacity to sign the will in question, thereby making the previous will in the Samson’s possession the last binding legal document regarding their son’s wishes. The resolution to the situation is more than clear-cut, so unless anyone has something to add, I’d like to proceed with the signing of the agreement so we can all move along with our day.”

Michael Morris appeared as though he were about to speak, but Sean motioned him to wait and spoke in his place. “Although your attempt at making us believe you would prevail in a will contest in court was expected and well presented, I’d venture to guess everyone sitting at this table knows the resolution isn’t that clear cut, or we wouldn’t be here. Regardless of what your facts and paperwork say, Andre wanted Alex and I to take over the business for him and he wanted to see it succeed. He knew what he was doing when he signed the later will.”

“Our documentation proves contrary with regard to his mental capacity,” Justine Bails countered. “However, feel free to enlighten us with evidence showing otherwise.”

Sean glanced at Alex and then addressed his opponents at the table. “Andre was a private person. He never wanted to upset anyone. He’d rather suffer than see someone else suffer in his place.” With his line of sight focused on Dorothy and Clive Samson, he continued. “Andre made me promise never to tell the two of you this, but I’m breaking that promise now on his behalf, because I think the hatred you hold for our lifestyle and for what you think happened to Andre has made you bitter and clouded your perception of reality.”

“How dare you!” Dorothy Samson shouted.

“No disrespect ma’am, but I’m asking you to remain quiet and let me finish what I have to say. We listened to your lawyer and now it’s time for you to listen to me, whether you like what you hear or not. You’re the ones who asked for this meeting.” Sean paused for a second and then continued. “Andre and I had the most wonderful, loving relationship two people could have. I would have done anything for him and he’d have done the same for me. I didn’t give Andre AIDS, and he didn’t contract AIDS through frivolous, unprotected sex. Andre contracted AIDS during the Safari to Botswana the two of you took him on for his twentieth birthday.”

“This is outrageous, blaming the consequence of your immoral lifestyle on us,” Dorothy spouted. “How dare you make such an accusation?”

Clive Samson reached over and placed his hand on top of his wife’s. “Please, Dorothy, let him finish.”

“Andre told me that he’d gotten violently sick a couple of days into the trip, suffering from severe diarrhea, muscle aches, and fever. Because of the remote location you were in, and because you didn’t have medical evacuation coverage to fly him to a city hospital, he was taken to a medical facility in the nearest village and treated with antibiotics. They believed he contracted a parasite.”

“And he was cured! Parasitic infection is hardly AIDS,” Dorothy interjected.

“Not quite. They administered the antibiotics with a needle, and according to Andre’s doctor here in the States, he strongly believes, based on all other facts and evidence, that Andre contracted the disease through a contaminated needle.”

Alex watched as Sean closed his eyes for a moment, as if he were holding back tears or maybe apologizing to Andre for breaking his promise. Alex was as surprised as the Samsons appeared dumbfounded.

Dorothy Samson’s right hand straightened her blouse collar which didn’t need straightening. “That can’t be true. I won’t believe it,” she said, before locking on Alex. “Did you know about this? Is that what Andre told you, too?”

Alex breathed deep. “I knew Andre had AIDS, but no, he never told me how he got it, and I never saw the need to ask. I accepted Andre for who he was from the first day I met him, the same way he accepted me. Nothing else mattered.”

Justine Bails lifted the papers she’d set in front of her off the table and tapped the bottom edge to the table several times as if straightening them. “That’s a tragic story, if true, however, the events in no way prove Andre was mentally coherent at the time he signed the will in question. I don’t need to remind you he had AIDS dementia near the end and we have eye witnesses with regard to Andre’s declining health and mental capacity around the time prior to the signing of that will who have agreed to testify if needed.”

Alex rested her hand on Sean’s arm and gave him a gentle squeeze. Hearing the lawyer talk about Andre as she did was difficult on her, but she could only imagine the pain searing through Sean. “I have proof Andre knew what he was doing and exactly what he wanted when he signed the will,” Alex said in a confident tone. She pulled a card from the envelope in front of her. Her heart raced, but she took a few, slow, deep breaths as she unfolded a piece of paper inside the card and glanced at it before continuing. “Andre sent me a birthday card—this card—on my birthday, eight months before he passed away, and as it turns out, two weeks after he signed the most recent will. Inside, he typed out a letter that reads as follows:

“‘Dear Alli,’ Andre called me Alli which was short for Alley Cat. When we first met, he kind of saw me as a tough stray wandering through life and gave me that name. He wasn’t far off. The letter goes on to say, ‘For the next four months you will officially be older than me, and although it’s your birthday, that thought gives me great joy. I’ll have four wonderful months to rub it in. No, seriously, we made it another year, you and I, and I couldn’t be more thankful for having you in my life. You’re the best friend I could have ever asked for. I wish you a fabulous birthday and many, many more. Take care of yourself and your health my friend; it’s nothing to take for granted. I thank God every day for him having given me you and Sean in my life. I hope you both remain a part of each other’s lives. I know down the road he’ll need help with the business. He’s great with everything, but isn’t much into the numbers and record keeping side of it. This

business has been my greatest accomplishment and I hope it thrives even when I'm gone, not that I'm planning on going anywhere soon, but I understand reality as well. Don't ever change who you are, and let the light within you shine on other people the way you let it shine on me. I love you Alli and will be with you always. Your best friend, and most good looking one, Andre.'" "

Alex wiped the tears that formed in the corner of her eyes. She glanced across the table at Andre's father, who also wiped a tear and then at his mother, who appeared as cold and stoic as she had the moment she'd entered the room.

"This is bull," Dorothy said, although in a lower tone than the one she'd spoken in previously. "Anyone could have typed that letter. That doesn't prove anything."

"You're wrong," Alex managed as she turned the paper around. "Andre signed and dated the letter in his own handwriting. I wonder now if he had foresight for doing that, but I can't tell you how glad I am he did."

"We'll need that signature verified by an expert," Justine Bails said.

Michael Morris stood. "As far as I'm concerned, this meeting is over. My clients have been through enough. We'll have a handwriting expert verify the signature and you will be provided the results. I think we've more than substantially proven Andre was not only of sound mind and understood the nature and extent of his property, the relationship of his heirs, and the practical effect of his will, but also that at a minimum he met the standard of testamentary capacity. Since testamentary capacity is presumed in Florida, and the evidence we have is dated after the will signing and yours is before, I think you'll find it extremely difficult to convince a judge Andre was not lucid when he signed the will. With that being said, if you still wish to go to court, know that our clients are willing to do so."

Justine Bails stood. "Our decision will be forthcoming shortly, but not until we receive confirmation from the handwriting expert the signature on the letter is that of Andre Samson."

ALEX LAY ON her bed. She held her cell phone in her hand and listened to the unanswered ring tones, becoming more nervous with each passing jingle until she heard a familiar voice on the other end of the line.

"Hello?" a groggy voice answered.

"Hi, Kailyn, it's Alex, did I wake you?"

"Hey there. No, I'm not sleeping yet. This is an unexpected surprise. When I hadn't heard from you the last couple of days again, I thought I might have scared you off the other night."

"I'm not big on talking on the phone."

"I noticed. What's up?"

"I wanted to say thanks for pointing me in the right direction with regard to defending Andre's will. I did a little digging and found the last birthday card he sent me. My birthday was a couple of weeks after he signed the will. He'd inserted a letter with it which was more than coherently written. I brought them with me when we met with Andre's parents and their lawyer today."

"I didn't realize the meeting was today. How'd it go?"

"I think the letter will be what saves us," Alex said.

"That's great news. I'm so happy for you both."

“I wouldn’t have thought of using the card if you hadn’t said what you did at dinner. Thanks again for your input.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I’m glad I was able to help. I care about you.”

Alex let the soft, warm words envelope her. She lay on the covers, certain the air had gotten warmer. “I, uh...I care about you, too.” Alex rolled her eyes as the last words came out shaky. She meant what she said, but wanted to speak with greater conviction than she had. She wiped her forehead, picturing Kailyn on the other end of the phone.

“Since Saturday night I’ve wanted to pick up the phone and call you,” Kailyn said, “but I wasn’t sure if I should, so I didn’t. I guess I was hoping you’d call. Maybe I even wanted to see how long it would take you.”

“I could’ve called sooner, but like I said, I’m not a big phone person and I had a lot on my mind.”

“I admit, I stewed a bit when I didn’t hear from you again at first, but then I got wrapped up working on the new comic strip—”

“Oh yeah, how’s that going? Did you meet your boss’s deadline?”

“I did. I’m so excited about this one. In fact, I’ve got so many ideas that I might end up building a backlog of them.”

“That’s fantastic. I’m happy for you.” Alex paused, uncertain what to say next. She wanted to see Kailyn again, but wasn’t certain she should, and at the same didn’t know how to approach her to ask. She’d never had this problem because she’d never felt a connection to anyone before.

“Hey, are you still there?” Kailyn said.

“Oh uh, yeah, I’m here,” Alex responded.

“Good, I wouldn’t have wanted to lose you.”

Alex swallowed hard. The sound of Kailyn’s voice and the tone with which she spoke unraveled her, regardless of the words that came out. This fact made coherent thought and speech much more difficult. “I don’t foresee that happening anytime soon.”

“But you’re not ruling it out, either, are you?”

“I didn’t say that. We’re getting off track. I’m planning on taking a charter boat into the Gulf on Friday afternoon and wondered if you’d like to come with me...I mean, if you’re not busy. I know the captain. She came across a new dolphin pod that she thought I needed to see. I try to get out there once a month and document dolphin activities and their locations further out than where I normally could on the kayak. I thought maybe you could use the trip to get material for your work.”

“Use the trip to get material for my work, huh? I don’t know. Sounds interesting, but is that the only reason you’re inviting me?”

Alex knew should have known better than to think Kailyn wouldn’t call her out on skirting around her invitation. “No. The main reason I asked was because I wanted to see you, but I’m guessing you knew that already, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did, and yes...I’d love to come.”

KAILYN MET ALEX in the parking lot of Island Water Adventures on Friday afternoon and followed Alex in her brother’s car to Sanibel Island and the parking lot of Captain Ann’s Paradise Tours. She wished she and Alex had ridden together, but it wouldn’t have made sense

for Alex to have to drive in the opposite direction from her home, past the turn-off for Island Water Adventures to Tollerson's, and then have to pass by the location again to get home.

The weather was a sunny, warm, eighty-two degrees, a few degrees above average for the month of May, especially this early in the month. The parking lot of the charter boat business butted up to sand and palm trees, a few steps beyond which a small building that served as the sales office was situated.

Kailyn exited her brother's car wearing a baseball cap, sunglasses, a tight fitting light orange sleeveless T-shirt over a sports bra, semi-short shorts, and comfortable sandals. Alex's glances toward Kailyn didn't go unnoticed as they made their way to the office, making Kailyn's satisfaction in that knowledge all the more difficult to conceal.

After Alex introduced Kailyn to Ann, the three women walked along the wooden boardwalk to the dock where the tour boat awaited. The boat was three quarters of the way full.

"We're waiting for two more," Ann said, "and then we're off."

An elegant Great Egret stood on the end post of a neighboring dock, spread its wings, and flew further along the shoreline, its thin, long legs dangling under its body. Visible in the water near the dock lounged two manatees, both light gray in color and both scarred, likely the unfortunate tattoos from past run-ins with motor boats. Both manatees donned significant algae growth on their backs as well.

Kailyn paused and watched their black, pearl-like eyes stare at her from sad looking faces. Rounded nostrils surfaced for air atop broad pocked and feathery whiskered snouts which fanned out square-like near the ends. "Look at these sweet creatures. It's nice to watch them up close, but wouldn't it be safer for them if they didn't hang around the dock?"

"It would, but people compound the problem because even though most know they shouldn't feed them and give them tap water, they do anyway. That keeps the manatees close and in constant danger of getting injured," Ann said.

"That's a shame," Kailyn said.

"It is," Ann agreed. Then more to Alex she added, "I'm glad you came today. I think this new pod of dolphin I encountered may have traveled here from the Louisiana or Alabama coasts."

"Why do you say that?"

"I saw several with peeling skin lesions."

"Still? You think those injuries are related to the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill?" Alex asked.

"I think it's more related to the company's use of corexit afterward. We've been shielded from a lot of the horrible affects of the spill here, but the marine life and people in Louisiana and Alabama haven't fared as well."

"You have first-hand knowledge of this?"

"My cousin runs a charter operation in Louisiana. He helped BP out during the crisis. He didn't have much choice. He needed income. He's suffering now from eye and kidney issues. He was healthy prior to the spill."

"I'm sorry, Ann."

"That's terrible," Kailyn added.

Ann nodded. "I've also heard a number of people developed similar lesions to the ones surfacing on the dolphins and that these people continue getting sicker, some coughing up blood and worse, but you never hear about those stories on the news. My cousin's friend owned a shrimp boat. He said he'd pulled in hundreds of shrimp with no eyes and that he's seen crabs



with no eyes or claws. And now he's ill, to the point he can't work anymore. The doctors won't lay blame because I'd guess they don't want to get sued by BP, but the locals know what's going on."

"I knew the oil spill was terrible for marine life, but I had no idea people were suffering so," Alex said.

"I'm sure we don't even know the half of it." When Ann finished speaking, the couple they were waiting for pushed past. "Looks like everyone's on board," she continued. "We better get moving."

Alex ambled up the plank, following Kailyn. They found a spot alone by the rail near the bow.

"You okay?" Kailyn asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Alex whispered. "I just thought the problems with the dolphins, after the spill, were over. But from what Ann says now, that doesn't appear to be the case."

"Because of the side effects of the corexit?"

"Yeah. Use of that chemical was and still is illegal. It causes oil to disperse into small globules throughout the water column, making it virtually unrecoverable, but at the same time it gives the appearance of reducing the size of a spill. Most of those globules now sit at the bottom of the Gulf. In my opinion, BP was more worried about cleaning up their image and the impact of the incident on their bottom line than they were about the negative environmental and human toll they had to have known using the chemical would take."

"Maybe more of this type of information should be made public. Education's sometimes the only way to keep shameless acts of self preservation at the expense of others from happening in the future." Kailyn let the wind cool her body as the boat picked up speed.

"I agree."

"You think we'll see any dolphins today?"

"I hope so." Alex leaned on the rail. She clutched her binoculars and held them steady. As if in hind sight she added, "You applied sunscreen before you left, right?"

"Of course. Did you?"

"Yeah, I'm covered."

"Good. We don't need to turn into lobsters." Kailyn watched the shoreline slowly disappear. The farther out they traveled, the more relaxed she felt. She allowed her thoughts to drift. She wanted to place her hand on Alex's back and stroke her body. Even more so, she wanted Alex to take her in her arms and kiss her like she'd never been kissed before. She wanted to know what it felt like to have her body rest against Alex's and linger in her embrace.

"Hey, two dolphins starboard," Alex yelled.

Captain Ann must have seen them as well. She immediately maneuvered the boat closer. Alex had signaled to her, and Kailyn watched the Captain nod.

"What was that gesture for?" Kailyn asked.

"That's my way of letting her know to record the latitude and longitude readings for me, so I can include them later with my other observations," Alex said as she placed the binoculars to her eyes. Several seconds passed. "I've seen these two before. No lesions on these guys." Alex handed Kailyn the binoculars. "Would you like to take a look?"

"Of course, thanks." Kailyn took the binoculars from Alex. As she did, their fingers touched and an electric charge passed through her body. She glanced at Alex and saw what she thought was a longing similar to her own, but then Alex broke eye contact, opened her notepad and started writing.

You're going to be a tough nut to crack, Kailyn thought.

When the tour was over, Alex and Kailyn had not seen the pod of dolphins Captain Ann had mentioned, but they did encounter another grouping of five dolphins, all of whom appeared healthy. Alex told Ann she'd be back again soon and thanked her for taking both of them on the ride.

Kailyn walked more slowly than normal back to the parking lot, not wanting the day to end. "Are you working tomorrow?"

"I was planning on it, why?" Alex said.

"I thought that maybe if you had the afternoon off, you might want to join me in a game of basketball. We're one person short for a two on two. Do you play?"

"I can play, though it's been a while, but I've kind of taken a lot of time off lately. I'm not sure Sean will be too happy about me asking for more. Saturday is typically our busiest day."

Kailyn pulled out her car keys. "If you can swing it with him, I'd love for you to come. You can let me know. I'll be working from home in the morning tomorrow. If not, I'll have to cancel, and I didn't really want to do that. I probably should've asked you sooner."

"You don't have anyone else who can play?"

"I don't have anyone else I'd rather play with."

Alex wiped her forehead. "I see." She glanced at the sun. "Jeez, it's gotten considerably hotter out since we left, hasn't it?"

"It certainly has," Kailyn said, unable to wipe the smile from her face. "Unseasonably so, and it feels like it's getting hotter every minute."

Alex swallowed hard. "Right, well, I better get going. I'll talk to Sean and let you know. It'll probably depend on how busy we are."

"I hate to chase away customers for you, but I hope tomorrow's a slow day then," Kailyn said as she opened the car door. "And don't forget to call."

## Chapter Nine

ALEX GOT HOME from work around two o'clock in the afternoon, showered and changed, and spent half an hour playing with Thunder in the backyard. When she walked in the kitchen, Emma was sitting at the table sipping a cup of tea.

"Thanks for tiring out our little monster before you go," Emma said. "Hopefully he'll sleep a little this afternoon."

"We can only hope."

"By any chance, have you read Kailyn's new comic strip yet?"

"No, not yet Grams. I haven't had the time. I will though."

"Do you think you'll be home for dinner later?"

"I should be." Alex kissed Emma on the cheek. "I'll see you later," she added, then walked out the front door.

Alex sat on the front stoop dressed in knee length khaki shorts, a white Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation sea turtle research T-shirt, and white sneakers. She held a water bottle by the cap and swung it between her legs, waiting for Kailyn. Five minutes later she spotted a racing green metallic Jaguar in the distance roll closer and turn into the driveway. Behind the wheel of the tan interior, two-door convertible sat Kailyn, hair pulled into a ponytail, wearing the light gray baseball cap and sunglasses she'd worn the day before.

As Kailyn waved, Alex stood and waved back. She walked in front of the vehicle to the passenger side door and got in. Supple leather seats cradled her body. The solid thud of the door as she pulled it closed sounded in her ears. "Hi. Nice ride."

"Hi. Thanks, and thanks so much for coming," Kailyn said.

"No problem. Everything worked out great. Apparently Delilah had called Sean to get extra hours anyway."

"Oh, good, I don't feel so bad now for dragging you away."

"What happened to your other car, the one you were driving yesterday?"

"That was Tommy's car. Mine was in the shop yesterday for a tune up. He was nice enough to let me borrow his for the afternoon. This is the only car I own." Kailyn lifted her sunglasses off the bridge of her nose. "Really though, thanks again for coming on such short notice. I'm glad you were able to work out getting the time off with Sean."

Alex shifted in the seat and touched her hand to the leather. She avoided eye contact with Kailyn. "I'm glad too. I've been looking forward to seeing you. Of course, had I known you owned this car three weeks ago, I'd have let you drive us to lunch when you offered."

Kailyn pursed her lips. "Hmm, somehow I don't think you would have accepted my offer, nice car or not."

Alex relaxed and laughed. "You're right, I probably still wouldn't have let you drive. What can I say? I can be moody at times. I'm working on that issue though, among other things. So where's this game at?"

“You’ll see.” Kailyn placed the sunglasses back on. She revved the engine, threw the car in reverse, and pulled out of the driveway.

Alex enjoyed the rush of warm wind whipping through her hair and the way the car hugged the road. To her surprise, she reveled in the fact she didn’t have to think about where they were going or focus on the road and the drivers around her. The occasion of being a passenger in any vehicle was rare for Alex, due to her unwillingness to relinquish control. Yet she felt comfortable with Kailyn behind the wheel, and in an odd way, taken care of.

On the radio, Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin” rang from the speakers. Kailyn turned up the volume. “I love this eighties song,” she shouted. “I went to see *Rock of Ages* on Broadway a few years ago, and this was the closing number. The musical wasn’t my typical choice for a Broadway show, but I ended up liking it.”

Alex let the beat of the music wash through her. “I’ve never been to Broadway and I don’t listen to much music, but when I do, I do like some of the older stuff myself.” Songs on the radio often saddened Alex and reminded her of the people missing from her life, so she mostly avoided it, but listening with Kailyn, and seeing how the music made her smile, lightened Alex’s mood. She wished the two of them were heading off for a day alone on the beach, rather than to a basketball match with friends of Kailyn’s she didn’t know and wasn’t in the mood to meet. The hope for rain was another option out of the planned meeting, though showers weren’t expected until later in the evening. For now, the weather was a pleasant eighty degrees with full sunshine, leaving plenty of time to play ball.

They exited the highway and headed south, then traveled east along a tree laden road through the town of Nesoklee. Alex was unfamiliar with the area, though she estimated they were only about twenty minutes from the aquarium. Her thoughts shifted momentarily, wondering if Jenna had any luck with the document search in Jeremy’s office, but surmised that if she had, Alex would have heard from her partner in crime by now.

As they passed an open field of wild grass, Alex noted Kailyn turned down the volume on the radio. The car slowed and they pulled into a long, narrow driveway, lined thick with trees. At the entrance, the sign read Gulf Coast Children’s Home, Est. 1972.

A puzzled expression crossed Alex’s face. “Is this where we’re headed?”

“Sort of. This is where we’re picking up our two other teammates. You’ll like them, I’m sure of it.” Kailyn pulled up to the curb nearest what appeared to be the main building. Several other cottage-like homes were visible as well, but no one was outside. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Thankfully, Kailyn had parked in the shade, because once the vehicle stopped, the touch of humidity against Alex’s skin was immediate. She exited the car and stood behind the open car door. She stretched, breathing in the poignant smell of fresh cut grass. Alex assumed the people Kailyn was picking up were friends of Kailyn’s who worked at the home, which did nothing to alleviate her nerves, but when she saw two young boys accompany Kailyn to the car, she relaxed.

Kailyn smiled when Alex’s eyes met hers. “Alex, this is Luke and Cole, two very good friends of mine. Luke and Cole, this is my friend Alex. Alex offered to be our fourth player today, so now we can have a real two on two instead of the usual two of you ganging up against one of me.”

Both boys nodded and appeared to muster the beginning of a smile, but both appeared shy. Then they both said hi almost in unison.

“Luke’s ten and Cole’s eleven,” Kailyn added.

Alex eyed the boys. Both had dirty blond hair and short haircuts, shaven on the sides and longer on top. Luke's hair stood spiked in the middle and was an inch longer than the rest of the hair on his head, and Cole's hair in the center was combed forward. Both had rounded noses and handsome round faces with hazel colored eyes and long black eye lashes. Luke wore a polo shirt with blue and white stripes, and Cole wore a white Miami Heat T-shirt with a flaming basketball on the front going through a hoop. Both had shorts and sneakers on. "Hi, guys," Alex responded. "It's nice to meet you both. You look a lot alike. Are you brothers?"

"Uh huh, we are," Luke spurted out.

"I thought so," Alex said. She bent forward, released the front seat lever and pushed the seat forward. The kids scrambled into the rear seats in silence. The seats were snug-like racing seats similar to those in the front, and individual roll bars stuck out over the headrests. Alex watched them buckle in before she pushed her seat into its upright position and climbed in.

Their short ride was spent in quiet, broken up by one or two of Kailyn's unanswered attempts to get the boys to talk.

AS SOON AS Kailyn parked the car at the elementary school, she popped the trunk and the kids jumped out. Cole grabbed the basketball from the trunk and ran to the nearest court, bouncing the ball and playing keep away from his brother.

"How do you know these two?" Alex asked as she watched the boys play.

Kailyn rounded the rear of the car and shut the trunk on her way toward Alex. "I met them a couple of years ago at a fundraiser our church sponsored, one that my mom was in charge of. The church is affiliated with the children's home. The home doesn't get any state or federal aid, so they rely on word of mouth for donations, and fundraisers. All their support comes from donations and the work of volunteers. It's one of the organizations my mom's been involved with over the years and I've helped out on and off."

"That's nice that you give up your time to help."

"I could do more, but at least it's something. After a while, I found out Cole liked watching basketball, but didn't know how to play. One day I asked if he wanted me to stop by and teach him and his brother how to play and he was thrilled. The rest is history. I don't come on a schedule, because I don't want them getting used to me being around, and then if I can't make it, have them be disappointed, so I come when I can and we always have fun. You wouldn't know it from our car ride, but Cole is actually the chatty one."

"How'd they end up in the home?"

"Their parents died in a car crash. The father was a drunk. They have extended family but none that have much money or who wanted them. One uncle's in jail and the other one is without a steady job. It's sad they have no support structure to fall back on. They're such good kids. Granted they've got anger issues, but considering what they've been through, who can blame them?"

Alex rubbed the nape of her neck. "No one, but hopefully when they find a loving home, the anger will pass. I can relate to them. I had similar issues as a child growing up and put my Grams through a lot. The woman is a saint."

Before Kailyn could delve deeper into Alex's comment, Cole shouted, "Are you two coming, or what?"

“Hey, don’t be so fresh,” Kailyn shouted as she and Alex quickened their pace toward the kids. “And be careful what you ask for,” she added. When they reached the court, Kailyn bent forward and rested her hands on her knees. “This is how we’re going to line up, since Alex will need all the help she can get—”

“Hey, wait a minute. I resent that implication,” Alex said. “I’m no slouch on the court.”

Kailyn straightened. “Oh, yeah? Well, I guess we’ll see about that, won’t we? So it’ll be Alex and Cole against Luke and me. Half court. We’ll play best of three games to eleven points, win by two. Loser buys ice cream.”

“Pretty confident for someone I’ve got about four inches on, aren’t you?” Alex said.

“Let’s just say I’ve been known to play a mean game of ball,” Kailyn responded.

“Don’t worry Alex,” Cole piped in, bouncing the basketball in place. “I’ve got a few secret plays up my sleeve, even though she is really, really, good.”

“Yeah, like Chris Bosh good,” Luke said, retying the laces on his right sneaker.

“Or like Dwayne Wade good,” Kailyn said, stealing the ball from Cole. “Oh, no she didn’t! Let’s go guys. Daylight’s a-wasting and I’ve got a Reese’s Pieces Blizzard calling my name.”

“Game on,” Alex said.

After the second game ended, Alex and Kailyn strolled toward the bench, while Jake and Cole rested only long enough to rehydrate, then they were goofing off on the blacktop once again.

“I envy their energy,” Alex said. She gulped a long sip from the water bottle.

“I know, right? They never seem to run out of it. By the way, nice comeback you guys had in the second game. I’m impressed.”

“Thanks, but I have a feeling we’ll not be as lucky in the final game. Is there something you forgot to mention earlier, before you laid out the stakes?”

“Oh, you mean like the fact that I played both high school and college ball?”

“Yeah, that bit of information would have been useful,” Alex said in jest.

“But it wouldn’t have provided nearly half the fun I had watching your expression, every time I scored.”

“I suppose not, from your perspective.”

They sat in silence several moments longer. “You okay?” Kailyn asked. “You look as though you’re a thousand miles away.”

A multitude of emotions flowed through Alex, many encompassing Kailyn, but also some making her take stock of herself. “No, I’m fine. It’s a nice thing you’re doing with these kids. You can see how much they like being around you.”

“Yeah, they’re great. As much as I hope every day they get adopted, I know I’ll miss these times with them. They give more to me than I could ever give to them.”

“I’m not so sure about that. I think they appreciate you more than you know. It’s strange how some people go through life so focused on their own problems that they don’t see the struggles in others around them.” Alex paused for a moment, debating how much of her past to reveal to Kailyn. She’d never confided in anyone but Andre before, but then she never trusted anyone but him before. “I know they appreciate the time you spend with them because in some ways, I’m like them. My mom died when I was twelve, along with my younger brother who was ten. My dad wasn’t there to take care of me either.”

Kailyn rested her hand on Alex’s thigh. “Oh my God, Alex, I’m so sorry.”

Alex felt the warmth from Kailyn radiate through her and embraced the comfort of Kailyn’s touch. “Thank you. My parents were very loving towards us kids, and instilled good values in us.

We spent a lot of quality time together as a family. The day my mom and brother died we were here in Florida visiting my grandmother. We lived in Connecticut at the time. My dad had rented a boat, and took us out fishing in the Gulf. Grams stayed home. We weren't on the water long when the weather turned nasty. The sky darkened and so did the water. I'll never forget the blackness of it. The wind and waves rocked us as if we were toys. The boat took on water. My parents and brother were washed overboard. They didn't have their lifejackets secured. I tried to save them, but couldn't, and then the boat capsized with me on it. I don't remember much between the time the boat flipped and being rescued, but my dad and I were the only ones who survived. My dad shut down after that and was admitted into the hospital. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia. From there he went into a home. He's somewhat better now, when he stays on his meds, but he'll never be the same as he was."

"That's so sad, Alex. I'm so glad you survived though."

"How or why I did, I'll never know. What I do remember is my anger afterward. The slow burn consumed most of my days and nights. I think that loss is why I never wanted to connect with anyone. At any rate, Grams took me in, but I didn't deal well. I got into fights and messed around with drugs until she straightened me out as best she could. That one day still plagues me though. I've felt both cheated all my life and guilty at the same time for having survived. Then I look at these kids and think—that could have been me. I was fortunate to have my grandmother in my life to love me and take care of me, even in the shadow of all that we lost. My situation could have been much worse. It's good the boys have each other, and it's nice that they've chosen to let other people in. I think their openness will make a big difference in their lives."

A moment of silence followed. "I'm sure sharing that part of you with me wasn't easy, but it means a lot to me that you did. I wish for your sake things had turned out differently, but as you said, there are still things to be thankful for. You can always hold onto the fact that your mom and brother loved you for the time they were with you and that they didn't choose to leave."

"Yes, that's true," Alex said.

"And you never know, maybe one day your dad will surprise you and rebound," Kailyn said.

"I don't think so."

"Did he have mental issues before the accident?"

"Not that I know of or can remember. He seemed fine. But he won't authorize the release of his medical records to me, and that makes me wonder."

"Could you legally obtain them?" Kailyn asked.

"I could try, but I don't want to jeopardize the thin line of communication I've established with him. He can be difficult on a good day. It's fine though. We're managing."

"I know I can't in any way compare my situation to yours, but my brother and I were left alone a lot when we were kids too, even though my parents were alive and well. My dad's business kept him away from us most of the time, and still does, and my mom's been involved with so many organizations, charities, and clubs that I hardly ever saw her growing up. I thought my nanny was my mother until I was old enough to know better. I know my parents loved me, I'm not saying that they didn't, but it would have been nice to spend more quality time together. You can't get that time back. I guess that's part of the reason why I connect so well with these kids."

Alex placed her hand on top of Kailyn's. "Nothing's perfect, is it? I guess we have to make the most of what we're given." Alex glanced over to Cole who was staring back at them, basketball under one arm, head tilted. "I think we better get back on the court so you can finish us off before Cole blows a fuse. I get the funny suspicion he's tired of waiting."

“Patience is a virtue. It’s good for him to learn that early in life,” Kailyn said as she stood. “As for the two of you, Luke and I will be showing no mercy in this game. It’s time to cash in on that ice cream and bragging rights.”

“Both of which I’m sure you already know are not far away,” Alex said.

EMMA STOOD NEAR the side of the garage, pruning shears in hand, as Kailyn pulled into the driveway. She smiled and waved at Kailyn, and Kailyn returned an enthusiastic wave before turning her attention to Alex. “Thanks again for coming with me today and for buying us all ice cream, though you know I wasn’t holding you to following through on that bet,” Kailyn said.

“I know, but I wanted to, and besides, a bet’s a bet. I’m lucky I got off that easy and you didn’t bet anything else.”

“Hmm, and I’m sorry I didn’t bet more,” Kailyn said, her tone suggestive.

Before Alex could formulate a response, her cell phone rang. She released the cell from the holder clipped to her shorts and glanced at the face. “It’s Jenna...from the aquarium...I should probably—”

“Go ahead and answer it. It’s okay. I should get going anyway. I’ll call you during the week,” Kailyn finished, her amber eyes fixed on Alex.

Alex stepped from the car, shut the door, and waved goodbye to Kailyn. She watched her back out of the driveway. “Hey, Jenna, what’s up?” Alex said. She rounded the side of the house where her grandmother was trimming flowers.

“Are you okay, you sound kind of distracted?” Jenna said.

“Ah, no, I’m fine. What’s the scoop? You got good news?” Alex slowed her steps and kissed her grandmother on the cheek as she passed. She indicated with hand gestures that she’d talk to her later.

“I do, and you owe me big time sister. I got the proof, but it wasn’t easy. Besides practically suffering a heart attack, I was half a second away from getting canned. Jeremy didn’t leave any paperwork in his office. I worked late last Friday already, waiting on an opportunity. After he went home I checked his book shelf, desk drawers, and cabinet for those inventory logs but came up empty handed. The ordeal was nerve wracking, thinking any moment maintenance or security would see me and ask me what I was doing. After that I figured the data must be on his computer, and it was. Getting access long enough, with him out of the way though, was no small task. I felt like a common criminal stealing from his laptop and for all I know, what I did may have been illegal, so I’m not sure how we’re going to get around that issue, but the good thing is, I got the proof and didn’t get caught.”

“Whoa, slow down and take a breath,” Alex said as she stepped into the backyard. As soon as she did, Thunder sprung up from his afternoon nap and ran toward her, picking up a tennis ball along the way.

“Easy for you to say. Your butt wasn’t on the line. Twice.”

Alex held the phone against her leg and petted Thunder. “Hey there buddy,” she said, before returning the phone to her ear. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say, I’m so thrilled we were right and even more thrilled you got the proof. I owe you big time.” Alex took the tennis ball from Thunder and threw it into the corner of the yard.

“You do, and I will cash in, believe me. I managed to download the files yesterday afternoon, and spent the morning going through them to see what we got. Jeremy kept two sets of records



on the dolphins, as we suspected. In numerous instances he omitted reporting on the deaths of baby dolphins and also on the number of times the females were forcibly inseminated by the staff. Now I have to see if the falsified NOAA data sheets were actually submitted. I'll also need to match the data to what might be available on the web."

"That's fantastic, Jenna. You did a brave and good thing finding that information. The dolphins will thank you," Alex said. Once again she picked up the tennis ball left at her feet and threw it into the corner of the yard.

"Assuming we can do anything with the information we have. Facts alone aren't going to change the situation."

"No, but I think I can take care of that on my end. My neighbor said she knows a lawyer who could help us with this and he won't charge her for his services. Maybe he owes her one too."

"Maybe. I'm not crazy about involving too many people, but I have no clue where to go from here and at least her lawyer's free, so that's one less thing we have to worry about," Jenna said.

"Agreed. How do you want to transfer the files to me? Can you e-mail them?"

"I could, but the NOAA forms are large. They're all pdf's with electronic signatures close to two megs each. I'd have to send a bunch of separate e-mails then."

Alex caught the hesitation in Jenna's voice. "You know what? It's probably not at good idea to send them electronically anyway. I'm not doing anything later. If you're not busy, why don't I swing by your house and get them?"

"That'd be great. I'll give you directions."

Alex took the phone from her ear. Staring into expecting eyes, she bent over and picked up the now slobber filled ball at her feet. "This is it, Thunder, last throw. After that you'll have to bug Grams." Then she went inside and wrote down Jenna's directions.

After dinner, Alex rode to Jenna's at a leisurely pace. Her mind was on Kailyn and the day they had together. Being apart was becoming more and more difficult, something she'd not anticipated.

"Did you have any trouble finding the place?" Jenna said as she invited Alex in.

Alex glanced around the stylish, modern appointed apartment. The living room had two large book shelves, what Alex assumed was a HD or Ultra HD TV, a rectangular fish tank, wet bar, red sofa and matching love seat. A piano was angled in one corner and not far from it on the right was a gas fireplace. Alex's boots sunk into a low, white shag. To her left, the living room opened into a spacious, well-appointed kitchen. "Nope, none at all. This is a nice complex. I like the place. It suits you."

"Thanks. I paid a little extra for the corner unit, but it's worth it. Can I get you a drink?"

"A beer sounds good." She undid her boots, not wanting to soil the carpet. "I didn't know you played piano."

Jenna laughed. She grabbed two beers from the fridge and popped the tops. "Yeah, I don't, but I've always wanted to learn. I guess I figured if I bought one I'd eventually get lessons, but I haven't yet." She handed Alex a beer, then motioned for her to sit. "You didn't have to take off your boots. The carpet looks difficult to keep after, but it's not so bad."

"No big deal. Looks like you're halfway there then," Alex said. She settled into the one corner of the larger sofa.

"Halfway there?"

"Yeah, with playing the piano," Alex said, registering Jenna's puzzled gaze.

"Oh. I suppose you can look at it that way."

"You need to find a teacher who'll inspire you. The rest will be easy."

“You don’t play, do you?” Jenna held her beer in both hands and rotated the bottle.

“No, not at all, but I wish I had that kind of talent. So, tell me all the details of the heist you pulled off. You’ve kept me waiting long enough.”

“There’s not a whole lot more to tell,” Jenna said as she sat on the loveseat. “Once I figured out the information was likely on his computer, the big problem was finding a time while he had it on when he also wasn’t around and no one would see me. Then the other day I caught a huge break.”

“Jeremy suddenly got ill and had to leave the room?”

“Not quite, but almost as good. I was sitting in his office discussing a grant proposal with him when the program manager in charge of biomedical research needed him in the lab. Jeremy asked if it could wait but I heard the manager say it couldn’t.”

“Great break.”

“You’re not kidding. As soon as Jeremy excused himself, I jumped up and scanned the C-drive on his computer. I have to be honest though, for every minute that passed and I couldn’t find anything, I silently cursed you under my breath.”

“I bet. And in all fairness, I’m sure I deserved it.”

“Not really, but I felt the noose tighten around my neck and cursing you turned into a good distraction. And then all of a sudden I saw it. A NOAA sub folder located under a Status Report folder. There were several files including numerous NOAA FORM 89-882’s with various dates. He also had word docs titled Inventory A and Inventory J. My hands shook when I tried to get the memory stick out of my pocket and plugged into the USB port.”

“It’s great you had the forethought to have the memory stick with you.”

“It was. I highlighted all the files in the NOAA folder and copied them over, but then heard Jeremy’s voice and panicked. I jumped out of his chair and made it back into mine without him noticing, but left the memory stick in the port.”

Alex set the beer on a coaster. “Oh, crap.”

“I know, right? That’s where I nearly had the heart attack. I was certain I was an instant away from being caught and for some reason literally froze. My eyes were focused on the computer, but I couldn’t move. Just before Jeremy walked back in, he stopped to say a few last words to the program manager, and while his back was towards me, I felt a sudden flash of life pulse into my veins. I arched backward, grabbed the stick from the USB port, returned it to my pocket, and collapsed in the chair across from his desk. And I think I did it all without taking a breath. I figured for sure he’d see the guilt written all over my face when he walked in, so I turned to you for support again. I focused on what evil ways I was going to kill you the next time I saw you.”

“Understandable. And you came up with what? Death by beer?”

“Smart-ass.”

KAILYN LET THE phone ring several times, but got no answer. She decided not to leave a message. She didn’t have much to say anyway, she just wanted to hear Alex’s voice, thank her again for taking off to spend time with her and the kids, and wish her a good night. The way they parted felt awkward, similar to their parting by the marina the week before. She’d replayed the moment at the marina over and over countless times in her mind and in her dreams. Except in her dreams, she ignored the part where the rowdy group of people exited the restaurant. In her recreation, she stepped toward Alex, her breath quickening in harmony with her pulse, and

kissed Alex slow and full on the lips until Alex returned the kiss with tenderness, full of searing emotion, all of which coursed through Kailyn, dizzying her and making her want more.

Since that night, she'd somehow wanted to mention to Alex that she wished the restaurant goers hadn't interrupted their goodbye and wondered how Alex felt about it, but she hadn't found the right moment. She sensed Alex cared for her on a deeper level, certain the heat she felt between them was mutual, but every time they got close to a potentially intimate moment, Alex would shy away. Kailyn was fairly certain she'd given Alex enough clues to let her know how she felt toward her, but so far she only received hesitation in return. Only on that one night at the marina did it appear to Kailyn that if she had actually kissed Alex, Alex would have kissed her in return, and for that reason, the thoughts of that evening wouldn't shake free.

But the fact that Alex never called back after their meetings, or didn't call until days later, gave her worry. Even now, she wondered where Alex was, and if a greater connection existed between Alex and Jenna than Alex led her to believe.

# Chapter Ten

“HEY STRANGER, GUESS who?” Alex said into the receiver as she sat on the corner of her bed. She missed Kailyn’s presence to the point where she thought about her every day, wondered at various times what she might be doing, and worried if she was okay. Alex chastised herself for placing such intense focus on one person, but that didn’t alter her ability to push Kailyn from her mind and ultimately give in and call her.

“You’re kidding right? I thought four days not hearing from you was bad, but a week?” Kailyn said.

“What? Why do you have to make such a big deal about my calling you? No one’s stopping you from calling.”

“I tried calling you last Saturday night after your abrupt exit from my car, but you didn’t answer.”

Alex registered a tone more subdued than she’d heard from Kailyn before. “You did? I must have been with Jenna. She found the proof we needed to hopefully nail the science and education department head at the aquarium for falsifying records. If we’re lucky, this find might eventually lead to some much needed changes there.” Alex paused, waiting for a comment from Kailyn, but received none, so she continued. “Then on Wednesday night after work I stopped by Mrs. Harrison’s. We had a long chat about what we found and other things too. She’s a smart lady. She and I think alike on a lot of issues. I had no idea. She sounded eager to help, too.”

“That’s good news. I’m happy for you. Listen, I’m kind of in the middle of something, so I’m going to go.”

“But you haven’t let me get to the reason for my call yet. I did call you, remember?”

After a short silence, Kailyn responded. “Yes, you did. Go on.”

Alex let a smile escape. “I’d like to invite you and Luke and Cole for a morning at the aquarium tomorrow, if that works for you. I’d have to meet you there though, because although I have the morning off, I’ll have to work the rest of the day. I thought the kids might especially like it.”

“That was thoughtful, but short notice. I do have a life you know.”

“Yeah, of course, forget it then.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to go.”

“You don’t sound too enthused.”

“It’s a sweet offer, but it would have been nice to find out about it sooner. I’ll have to check with the home and make sure they don’t have anything planned for the kids, but if not, I’d like to go. I’ve never been to the aquarium, and knowing that’s where you used to work, makes me want to go see it more.”

“Seriously?”

“Of course I’m serious. You don’t catch on to things too quickly sometimes, do you?”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked.

“Never mind, suffice it to say that I’d love to see it with you. Cole’s a nature nut, so I’m sure he’ll be excited too. He’s always coming up with tons of questions for me about plants and animals, most of which I can’t answer. You’d probably know a lot more than I do because of your background. I end up looking a lot of this stuff up online after the fact, because once his question is stuck in my head, I have to find out the answer. I do better with Luke. He likes to draw, so that’s right up my alley.”

“And you’re great at basketball.”

“Yeah, I do okay, but my basketball prowess is the result of lots of years of practice.”

“Maybe, but you have to have the talent for it too, which you do. Too bad I didn’t know you in college. I’d have come to your games and rooted you on,” Alex said.

“Is that so? I’m not so sure I believe you, but thanks for saying so. Besides, it’s probably better you didn’t. You’d have been a huge distraction for me...even if in a good way.”

ALEX SPOTTED KAILYN and the kids outside the front doors of H&M Aquarium the same time Kailyn appeared to have spotted her. Alex parked her Harley near the front of the building in one of several spaces designated for motorcycles. Before she’d swung her leg over the seat to dismount, she saw the kids and Kailyn running toward her.

“Awesome!” Cole yelled, jumping up and down. “Can I go for a ride?”

Alex glanced at Kailyn, who rolled her eyes skyward and shook her head to indicate a no, though at the same time donned a half grin.

“First of all young man, I think you should say hello to Alex first, don’t you?” Kailyn said.

“Ah...oh, yeah. Hey, Alex. Sorry about that,” Cole said.

Luke waved. “Hi Alex, thanks for inviting us.”

“Hi guys, that’s okay. I get excited every time I get to ride too, so I know how you feel. But I don’t think we’ll have time for the bike today, and probably going for a ride’s not such a good idea anyway. Motorcycles aren’t all that safe. A lot of drivers on the road don’t pay attention to them and that makes driving a risk.”

“But you ride, and you don’t even wear a helmet,” Cole said.

“Can’t argue with that logic, now can you?” Kailyn added.

“Right, smart guys. But before all three of you gang up on me, I think we should go inside. Hopefully what you see in there’ll make you forget about my bike.”

Alex wasn’t sure if she should laugh or cry, but after having survived a half an hour of being barraged by questions, she now understood what Kailyn meant about Cole’s curiosity for nature, and Luke didn’t fall far behind in that regard.

“How come the dolphins are always smiling?” Luke said, watching the dolphins through the glass enclosure from below.

“Cause they like it here, dummy,” Cole responded.

“Not true. Luke posed a smart question,” Alex said. “Many people think that dolphins enjoy living in aquariums because they appear perpetually smiling, but that’s a big misconception. Dolphins are born with that smile and unlike us they can’t move their facial muscles to communicate their feelings the way we can. So even if they’re hurt or sick, they’ll still appear as though they’re smiling.”

“Jeez, that’s awful. I had no idea. I wouldn’t want to be them then,” Cole said.

“I wouldn’t want to be a dolphin in captivity either,” Alex said, “but in the wild, it doesn’t matter if they look like they’re smiling or not. They don’t communicate with each other in that way. In fact, the aquarium makes us want to believe that the dolphin’s life in the wild is similar to life in the aquarium, but it’s much different. Let’s go take a look at them from above and I’ll explain more.” Alex led Kailyn and the kids up the ramp and through the double doors into the viewing arena.

Rows of bleachers blanketed them to their right and left. The water in the tank reflected a sparkling clear blue, a tempting allure for anyone to want to swim in. Trees and greenery lined the far side of the enclosure. High above their heads, a dome structure added to the expansive feeling of the relatively small space. The floor to ceiling windows on their right that overlooked the Gulf added to the size deception and provided ample light, though artificial light was also used.

“Are we watching one of the dolphin shows?” Luke asked. “There’s one scheduled in a half hour.”

“I hadn’t planned on it. I’d feel like I was supporting the exploitation of the dolphins, but you can decide in a little if you’d like to watch or not.” Alex turned to Kailyn. “Where’d you like to sit?”

“It doesn’t matter. Will they let us stay here if we don’t pay for the show?”

“No one saw us come in, but if the kids decide they want to watch, I’ll buy tickets.”

“Anywhere’s fine then,” Kailyn said.

Alex stepped a few rows up so the kids could see the entire tank. “Okay, so who can tell me what’s different between this tank and the ocean?”

A few moments of silence followed and then Luke said, “Except for the dolphins, I don’t see any other fish.”

“That’s right, and in the wild, dolphin catch and eat smaller fish. Hunting for their own food is part of what they do in a normal day, but here, they’re fed dead fish. They’re also kept hungry enough so that the trainers make sure they perform. If you watch the dolphins when a trainer walks along the tank with their fish bucket, the dolphins aren’t watching the trainer, which is what most people think, they’re watching the bucket.”

“How do you know all this, Alex?” Cole said.

“Alex used to work here as an animal behaviorist. Part of her job was studying the dolphins and making their lives better,” Kailyn said.

“The problem was, I came to the conclusion the only way to make their life better was to let them live free, like we do. I couldn’t imagine being kept captive, say in one room every day of my life. I’d go crazy,” Alex said.

“Me, too!” Luke and Cole said at the same time.

“Anything else you see?” Alex asked.

“The dolphin tank’s a lot smaller than the ocean,” Cole said.

“That’s right. Oceans are vast. And see how these dolphins swim in circles?”

“Yeah. Seems boring,” Cole said.

“It is boring. Dolphins in the wild swim over forty or fifty miles a day, and they dive hundreds of feet deep. They reach incredible speeds. They meet up with dolphins from other pods and have all kinds of interactions, whereas here, they can’t swim far or fast or deep. They’re trapped. They can’t choose the dolphins they interact with, and then to make matters worse, they have to perform like circus animals for food,” Alex finished.

“That’s not fair,” Cole said. “I’m glad we didn’t buy tickets.”

“Me, too,” Luke said.

“And me. I never really thought much about the lives of these mammals in the aquarium. When you see how polluted our oceans and waterways are and what goes on out there, you’d think the dolphins were better off in here, but I guess that’s not the right way to think about it,” Kailyn said.

“It’s tricky sometimes to know what’s right, and it’s nice to be able to see these creatures close up, but they could be observed and filmed in their own habitat. That’s not to say the aquarium has no value, it does. They help sick animals and do critical research and educate the public, but not nearly enough. Many of the people who run aquariums don’t value intelligent, higher life forms to the extent they should. If they did, they’d rescue animals, rehabilitate them, and then set them free,” Alex said before standing. “Okay, mini-lecture’s over. I’ve talked enough for a while. Who wants to see the sharks?”

ALEX POUNDED THE snooze button twice before crawling out of bed. The week had dragged on, making Wednesday feel like a Friday. She hadn’t heard from Kailyn since their visit to the aquarium, and she had no plans to see her this weekend, which may have added to the crawl of each passing day. She showered, got dressed, and headed down the hall.

“Mmm, is that coffee I smell?” Alex said as she entered the kitchen.

“Yup, fresh ground, hazelnut blend. Help yourself. I took out the cinnamon buns too. You have to stop feeding me all these goodies or I’ll turn fat as a house.” Emma sat at the table reading the newspaper, cinnamon bun in hand, while Thunder lay near her feet.

“Nonsense, you have an overactive metabolism like mine. You can handle a pastry here or there. How come you’re up so early?” Before her grandmother answered, Alex turned to Thunder and said, “And you should not be begging.”

Thunder let out a mix of whine and growl, got up, and repositioned himself outside the kitchen entrance before lying down, head propped between his front paws.

“Good boy.” Alex reached for a dog biscuit from Thunder’s cookie jar and handed him a treat.

Emma waited until Alex finished rewarding Thunder. “I wanted to find out if you heard anything yet regarding the will. It’s been a couple of weeks since your visit with the Samsons’ lawyer.”

Alex filled a mug with coffee, sauntered next to her grandmother, pulled out a chair, and sat. She grabbed a cinnamon bun and took a large bite. “No, we haven’t heard anything yet, but believe me, you’ll be the first to know.”

“You should probably think about lining something up, in the event this falls through for you guys. I know it looks to you like you might win this, but you never know. If they’re taking this long to respond, they may have something else up their sleeves. Plus, I think you’d be happier doing what you went to school to do,” Emma said, tapping her granddaughter on the leg.

“I know, Grams, and I appreciate your concern, but until I know in my gut that I need to do something different, I’m staying where I am. Now, I better get moving.” Alex grabbed Thunder around the neck and kissed him on the head. “Watch out for Grams while I’m gone, mister.”

“Wait, wait,” Emma said as rolled closed the pastry bag with the remaining cinnamon buns. “Take these to work. I’m sure Sean will appreciate a treat, and it wouldn’t hurt you to have another.”

“Okay, Grams, twist my arm if you must.” Alex accepted the bag, placed another peck on her grandmother’s cheek, and exited the house in a whirl.

She made good time getting to work, but had a busy morning right from the start. Two back-to-back Jet Ski lessons were followed-up with her taking a group of five kayakers out on a two hour mini-tour south along The Great Calusa Blueway. The trip reminded her of her day kayaking on the water with Kailyn, those remembrances making her miss Kailyn that much more. As difficult as it was in one way to feel such a strong connection to someone for fear of losing them or being hurt by them, she thought more and more that maybe Sean was right. Maybe the happiness of sharing and growing with someone offset the risks intertwined with that relationship.

Alex stepped from her kayak after returning with her tour group and pulled it up onto the shore. Then she assisted the others who needed help doing the same and dragged the rest of the kayaks onto the beach. Once the customers left, she wiped down the kayaks and secured the paddles, her stomach grumbling loudly. “Time for lunch,” she said to herself as she traipsed up the beach. She decided to check in with Sean and then figured she’d walk across the parking lot to one of the resort’s convenience stores and order a chicken sandwich, a cold ginger-ale, and whatever Sean wanted.

As she neared the Island Water Adventure’s building, Alex heard voices emanating from inside, not a usual occurrence unless one of the part-time help had stopped by. She slowed her pace and then heard the unmistakable laugh that captured her attention from day one. She smiled and pushed open the screen door. Before her stood Sean, Kailyn, and a man she assumed was her brother Tommy, around a make-shift lunch table filled with drinks, bags of various chips, and sandwich wraps.

Kailyn caught Alex’s eye immediately. “Hi. I hope your okay with us stopping by. I wanted to thank you for taking me and the kids to the aquarium the other day, so I brought lunch.”

“You didn’t need to do that. I was happy to take you.”

“I know, but I wanted to. Also, I’d like you to meet my brother, Tommy. Tommy, this is Alex.”

Alex extended her hand to a male version of Kailyn. He had similar facial features and his eyes were amber like his sister’s. Tommy wore a tight navy blue tank top with white shorts that had two blue stripes along each leg which extended to above the knee. Alex could tell straight away the siblings were twins. “Nice to meet you,” Alex said.

“A pleasure. Kailyn’s told me a lot of nice things about you,” Tommy said.

Alex’s blush deepened.

“Tommy’s been bugging me to go Jet Skiing with him, now that I sort of know what I’m doing,” Kailyn said.

“That’s great, and we can always use the extra business,” Alex said.

“I don’t mean to be the guy rushing us along, but this food looks too good to let it sit any longer. We should take advantage while we’re not busy and have at it,” Sean said.

“Yes, let’s eat,” Kailyn said.

Alex clasped a whole wheat wrap with both hands. “You’re timing was great. I was about to head over to the deli because my stomach was growling something fierce.”

“Is that the sound I heard before you walked through the door?” Kailyn said. “I thought a hungry puma was lurking out there.”

“Funny. Yeah, that was me.”



Sean swallowed his first bite. “These are really great. Thanks again, Kailyn. After lunch I’ll take care of the paperwork for you and Tommy and then get you guys set up on our best Jet Skis.”

Alex watched Sean focus his attention more than once in Tommy’s direction. “I can take care of that for you Sean. Don’t you have bills to pay or something else you need to do instead?”

Sean’s eyes narrowed. “Now that you mention it, I wasn’t able to balance our bank statement for last month and thought you could take a look while I get Kailyn and Tommy started, assuming you don’t mind.”

“Oh, no, I don’t mind. Anything for you, Sean.”

When they finished eating and Kailyn and Tommy had signed the waivers, Tommy followed Sean out the door. Before Kailyn left with them, she stopped in front of Alex and placed her hand on Alex’s arm. “Thanks once more for taking us to the aquarium. We had a great time.”

The clean, fresh smell of soap intertwined with coconut scented sun screen and citrus tickled Alex’s nostrils and jumbled her thoughts, as did the touch of Kailyn’s hand on her arm. Alex felt the heat between them, and swallowed hard. She wondered if Kailyn felt it too. Wanting to move closer and stroke Kailyn’s arm and feel what she imagined was her soft and supple skin, she instead stepped to the side. “I’m glad. I had a nice time, too. Have fun out there today.”

ALEX SAT IN the living room with her grandmother and Thunder on Friday night, relaxing after a long and busy day at work. Since her grandmother had cooked dinner and fed Thunder, Alex washed the dishes and took Thunder for a walk before settling into the sofa. She hadn’t been sitting for more than five minutes when the phone rang. “I’ll get it Grams,” Alex said, as she stood and hurried into the kitchen. “Hello,” Alex said into the receiver.

“Hi, Alex, it’s Jenna. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“You know that favor you owe me?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Well, I’m calling it in. Jeremy and I have been asked to attend a Fourth of July event at the Markston Hotel in Fort Myers to represent H&M Aquarium. It’s some sort of thank you event between our lender and their key clients. Personally, I think it’s more of a public relations stunt than anything else. At any rate, Jeremy wanted us, and in us I’m referring to him and I, to attend together, but I told him I couldn’t because I already had a date,” Jenna said.

“Great. Good for you. And this involves me how?”

“I told him I had a date, but I didn’t. That’s where you come in.”

“I don’t think I like where this is heading.” Alex pulled out a chair from under the kitchen table and sat.

“Come on Alex. This is a one night event and it’s not a date date, but there’s no way in heck I’m spending an evening with Jeremy by myself. Besides, you owe me big time.”

A few seconds of silence followed. “You know how much I detest formal functions, and on top of it, the timing is really, really bad.”

“And why’s that? Because you have a girlfriend now? You can’t bear to spend a few hours away from her?”

“What? No, I mean...not exactly...we’re friends, that’s all, but how do you know about Kailyn?”

“I didn’t know who she was, but I worked a couple hours on Saturday at the aquarium to clear away paperwork stacked up on my desk, because as we both know, besides doing my own job, I end up doing half of Jeremy’s as well. Anyway, on my way out, I saw you talking to a woman with long, dark brown hair, and the expression on both of your faces was a dead giveaway,” Jenna said.

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

“Well maybe you don’t, but I’m sure she would.”

Alex crinkled her brow. Her tone subdued she said, “Kailyn isn’t the reason I’m not thrilled about going, the timing is bad. The Fourth of July weekend isn’t a weekend that holds good memories for me.”

“I’m sorry Alex, but I didn’t choose the date, and besides, if that’s the case, then maybe it’s time to add new memories. Better ones. It’s one evening, free food, good company if I do say so myself...”

Alex relaxed for a moment, realizing that regardless of whether she wanted to go or not, she did owe Jenna in a huge way. She’d risked her job and possibly career for her and to help the dolphins. Plus, she did enjoy her humor and company, and as Jenna has said, it was only one night. “Okay, fine. You win. But then we’re even.”

“I’ll concede to even.”

# Chapter Eleven

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH you today? Do I sense trouble in paradise? Did you have a fight with Kailyn last night?” Sean asked as Alex slunk past the office toward the bathroom to change into shorts.

She stopped and took two steps back, peering into the office. “No, there is no trouble in paradise and no, we did not have a fight. I didn’t even see Kailyn last night. I got a call from a previous co-worker at H&M. She did me a favor and now she’s calling the favor in. I have to attend some high-nosed function with her so she doesn’t get stuck going as her boss’s date.”

“Tough one when you can’t wear jeans or shorts. Sort of like going to a wedding,” Sean mocked.

“Attending a formal business function is nothing like going to a wedding. When you go to a wedding you know at least some of the people there, you’re going to support two people you care about, you’ll be with the person you care about, and you won’t have to sit with someone who you know to be a jerk. Not Jenna, her boss,” Alex said.

“And how do you really feel?”

“Knock it off and stop gloating already,” Alex said before she continued into the bathroom and changed into her shorts. Passing the office on her way out, Sean stopped her once again.

“Hang on a minute. What did you think of Kailyn’s brother Tommy?” Sean said.

“He seems nice enough, but then I don’t know much about him. I only met him the other day, same as you.”

“Yeah, he does seem nice, doesn’t he? He was incredibly good on a Jet Ski. He must either own one or ride often. He’s a natural with people. When he and Kailyn had finished their ride, he pulled both their Jet Skis out of the water and helped another couple off of theirs.”

“Wow, handsome, gay, and watercraft talented. What more could anyone ask for?” Alex jibed.

“Yeah, okay, smarty pants. You had your payback, now get out of here.”

Not twenty minutes had passed since their conversation when Sean yelled out the rear door of Island Water Adventures, waving Alex over.

As she approached, he motioned toward the office. “Kailyn’s on the line for you. She was talking really fast and choppy. It sounds like something’s very wrong,” Sean said.

Alex’s adrenaline raced as she picked up the phone. “Hello, Kailyn? Are you okay?”

The voice on the other end of the line shook and sounded strained. “Hi Alex, I’m sorry to bother you, but I didn’t know who else to call. Luke and Cole are missing from the children’s home.”

“What? When did this happen?”

“I found out a few minutes ago. One of the women who works there, who knows me and my connection to the kids, called to ask if they were with me. They have no idea where they are, but they said the kids weren’t in their beds this morning when everyone else got up. They had dinner together and they think they slept there, but now...”

Alex placed her elbow on the desk and rubbed her forehead as Sean stood outside the office door glancing in. “They think they slept there? Shouldn’t they know whether or not they did and have someone watching over them?”

“Yes, of course. I don’t know. Oh, God, I hope they’re not hurt.”

“Okay, try and stay calm. What do you need from me? What can I do?”

“I don’t know. I’m heading over there now to see what’s going on and if I can help in any way. I thought maybe you could go with me.”

“Tell you what. You head over and I’ll see what I can do to get someone to cover for me and I’ll meet you there as soon as I can,” Alex said, eyes focused on Sean.

“Thanks Alex, this means a lot to me. I’ll see you later.”

“Please, drive careful. Try to concentrate on the road.”

“I will, thanks.”

Alex set the phone onto the receiver. “The two kids from the children’s home that Kailyn sometimes takes out to play basketball with, the kids I met, they’re missing as of sometime this morning. I don’t know any other details, but Kailyn’s heading over there and asked if I could meet her. I’m sorry about this Sean. I know I’ve been absent a lot lately, but I had planned on working all day today. I’ll stay if we can’t get coverage.”

“I could tell by Kailyn’s voice she was shaken. See if you can get Delilah to come in. We’ve probably got a better shot of her getting here quicker than Chappy.”

Alex nodded as she picked up the receiver. “Thanks, I owe you one.”

ALEX KEPT THE speed on her Harley to between five and seven miles above the speed limit, not wanting to get pulled over, but feeling a sense of urgency. She’d Googled the home’s address on the work computer and printed out directions in case she needed them, but once she recognized the overpass not far from the home, she remembered the rest of the way on her own. Alex pulled into the driveway of Gulf Coast Children’s Home and spotted Kailyn’s car almost immediately. She parked behind Kailyn along the side of the driveway. A police car pulled away from the curb across from the front steps, maneuvered around the circular flower bed in the drive, and passed Alex as she dismounted. She waved and hoped the reason he was leaving was because the kids had already turned up. On her way toward the front of the building, she ran her hands through her hair, then mounted the steps two at a time before she entered the front door.

The main building was constructed as a two floor Victorian style home. Wooden floors adorned the entranceway and the hallways in both directions. A small reception area separated by a dark oak counter faced Alex, and a woman in her seventies with a round face, tiny eyes, and short blond hair sat behind the counter. A faint musty smell made its way to Alex’s nostrils.

“May I help you?” the woman said, eyeing Alex from head to toe.

“Yes, my name’s Alex Rey. I’m looking for Kailyn Montgomery. Do you know where she is?”

“She’s in a meeting two doors down the hall to your right. You can go ahead in.”

“Thank you. Have Luke and Cole turned up yet?”

The woman shook her head.

Alex’s boots thudded on the hardwood floor. The door to the second room on the right was ajar. She peeked in and saw Kailyn sitting in a chair along the wall, and a group of people sitting at an oval table in the center of the room. A marbled design throw rug covered the floor and

matching drapes hung from the ceiling to the floor over two large windows. The drapes were pushed aside. Alex entered the room quietly and sat next to Kailyn after Kailyn motioned for her to enter.

Kailyn leaned toward Alex and whispered, "Thanks for coming. They're still trying to pull together a timeline of when the boys might have wandered off and if anyone knows anything. That's Pastor Thomas K. Wilkinson at the end of the table and one of the house parents from each of the cottages. The other house parent is talking to their respective kids. The home filed a missing persons report and provided the police with as much information as they could, but no one saw what they were wearing this morning, so that doesn't help."

"I saw the officer leave when I got here," Alex said, keeping her tone low.

"The home's contacted the church and they're trying to get parishioners over here to help with a search of the neighborhood."

"Are you sure they left of their own accord and weren't taken?"

"The police don't think so. There's no sign of forced entry."

"I wonder why they took off then? Have they done anything like this before?"

"No. They checked their room too, and from what the house parents reported, they hadn't noticed any clues as to why they ran off and it didn't appear they packed any clothes, so they're hopeful they just went on a short excursion and hadn't gotten lost. I can't stand sitting here though and feeling like I'm doing nothing."

"We should check by the playground and then canvas the streets nearby. They couldn't have gotten far." "As soon as this meeting's over, that's exactly what I plan to do."

KAILYN AND ALEX spent the next several hours on foot searching the playground at the elementary school and the surrounding neighborhood, talking to everyone they met, but their efforts turned up nothing. They handed out one page flyers the home had put together, which had a black and white photo of each of the kids at the top, their general description below each photo, and the home's name and phone number along the bottom.

Standing near their vehicles, Alex said, "We should probably get something to eat and then continue the search."

"I can't eat. My stomach's a mess. What if someone took them? It's ironic really. They've been in that home a couple of years already and no one's wanted them and now you have to worry that someone abducted them," Kailyn said.

"You can't think like that. We have to stay positive. These kids are clever and smart. Don't underestimate them. They got out of the home unnoticed and if they don't want to be found right now, they probably won't. But everyone gets hungry and tired at some point, and whatever may have seemed like fun or an adventure at first, will quickly lose its shine under less than optimal circumstances. We'll find them, I can sense it, and my intuition hasn't betrayed me before. It's when I don't listen to it that I get in trouble."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry, but if you're not going to eat anything, then at a minimum, we need to get something to drink," Alex insisted.

LUKE AND COLE meandered along less traveled side streets and backyards. They stayed near the main highway heading south, yet far enough away to remain out of sight. They'd walked nonstop for several hours. The sun beat on their shoulders and backs. Sweat ran down the sides of their faces. Each held a long, white, rolled up tube of poster-board.

"How much longer do you think it'll be until we get there?" Luke asked. He stopped near a tall, manicured hedge. "I'm thirsty and my legs are tired. Are you sure we're going the right way?"

Cole stopped, turned around to face his brother, and rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'm sure we're going the right way. I'll try to get us something to drink, but let me do the talking, okay?"

Luke nodded, then followed his brother for a half-hour longer before Cole slowed and stopped. A fluttering light green and white welcome flag, painted with flowers and birds, hung off a white pole that stretched from a porch beam near the home's front steps. The white, two-story structure appeared to be well maintained. On the porch sat a woman in a wicker chair. Cole ambled along the walkway, then stopped midway. "Excuse me ma'am, but my little brother's real thirsty. Can he have some water?"

The lady was old and reminded Cole of his grandma. She was nice so he figured this lady would be nice, too, even if she was a stranger.

She smiled at them. "Hi, boys, of course you can. Come on up here and take a seat in the shade." She waited until they reached the top of the steps, then asked, "How about some iced tea instead?"

"Iced tea'd be great," Cole said. He placed his hands in his pockets.

"I'll be right back," the woman said as she opened the screen door. When she returned, she held out three tall glasses of tea and a snack-sized plate of chocolate chip cookies. "Help yourselves boys."

Luke was the first to grab a glass of the iced tea and emptied half the contents at one time. Then he took a couple cookies off the plate and munched on those. By that time, Cole had taken a few sips of his tea as well and a bite from one of the cookies. "Thanks for your kindness, ma'am. The tea is great and so are the cookies."

"You're very welcome. You can call me Miss Sally if you like. What are your names?"

"I'm Cole and that's my brother Luke."

"Well Cole and Luke, are you boys from around here? I don't remember seeing you in the neighborhood."

"Not really. We're on a mission," Luke said.

Cole shot his brother an icy glare. "We live about a half hour from here. We're not on a mission exactly, we're on our way to see a friend of ours from school, but Luke's bike got a flat tire, so we got stuck walking."

"Are you're sure you only live a half hour away? You boys look pretty tired for a half hour walk," the woman said in a gentle tone, taking a cookie from the tray.

"Yeah. It's just that after we left the bikes, we ended up in someone's yard who had a mean bulldog and the dog chased us for a long time."

"Yeah, for like forever," Luke added.

"We kinda got lost, but we know where we are now," Cole said.

Miss Sally laughed. "Well that's awful what you boys have been through already today. Are you hungry? I know its past lunch-time, but I haven't eaten yet and I sure wouldn't mind a bit of company, if you have the time."

"Yes ma'am! We sure would like to join you," Luke belted out.

Cole glanced at his brother before he nodded in agreement.

Not long after, Miss Sally returned with paper plates and a tray filled with toasted whole grain sandwiches cut into triangles. A couple of the sandwiches were made with turkey, lettuce, and tomato, others with baloney and lettuce, and still more with peanut butter and jelly.

After Miss Sally set the tray on the round wooden table, she handed Luke and Cole plates. She went back inside and came back with a glass pitcher and refilled their glasses. She sat at the table and watched as water droplets ran alongside the glass pitcher, due to the high humidity. "Help yourselves to whatever you like. I made plenty," she said.

Luke and Cole ate several sandwich halves each. Luke favored the baloney and lettuce sandwich, while Cole opted for peanut butter and jelly. By the time they finished eating, the boys had learned Miss Sally was a widow and that her sons lived far away in other states with her grandkids, though they did visit once in a while, and that Miss Sally liked to talk.

After lunch, Luke and Cole thanked her, picked up their posters, and walked down the porch steps with renewed energy.

"Good luck on your school project and stop by anytime. You boys are always welcome," Miss Sally said.

Cole hesitated for a moment, glanced at the rolled up posters in his hand and yelled, "Thank you...if we can, we will."

"You sure you all know where you're going now?" Miss Sally called after them.

"Yes ma'am," Cole said and threw in a wave of his hand for good measure.

DUSK QUICKLY APPROACHED with still no sign of the boys. After they'd scoured the park, Alex and Kailyn returned to the children's home to give and get updates. They were then assigned new sections of roadway to canvas and given flyers to post. An Amber Alert had also been posted. Leaving Alex's motorcycle behind this time, they took Kailyn's car. All afternoon they drove through the streets calling the boy's names, stopped to talk to anyone who'd listen, and handed out flyers. With each passing hour, their anxiety heightened. Even Alex showed signs of worry.

"As much as I'd hate to say this, there's not much point in continuing the search tonight. Soon, we won't be able to see anything. We should eat something. I'm starving and you must be too. We won't be any good to anyone if we don't keep our energy up," Alex said.

"You're right. We need to get food in us," Kailyn said.

Within five minutes they'd found a diner and were seated in a booth. The diner was crowded and noisy, which was a good sign the food would be decent.

Kailyn glanced across the table at an obviously tired Alex, certain she didn't look much better. "What a day this has turned out to be. I never thought the boys would have run away. I was floored when I got the call from the home."

"I can't believe it either. Don't worry though, everything will be okay. We'll start out again first thing tomorrow morning, if they don't turn up before then. Someone's bound to see them. They're not invisible."

"Seems like they are," Kailyn said.

After dinner, Kailyn dropped Alex off by her motorcycle. "Thanks again for helping. I'll pick you up tomorrow morning, seven o'clock, at your house. You sure Sean's going to be okay without you tomorrow?"

“Yeah, Delilah’s more than happy to cover for me.”

“Great. I hope we get some sleep tonight.”

“I hope so too, but I doubt it.”

SUNDAY MORNING WAS thankfully turning into a replica of the prior day weather-wise. Although a chance of showers loomed, it hadn’t rained and the sky was clearing into a brilliant blue. After being handed their street assignments, Kailyn and Alex were off on the search once more. At ten o’clock, Kailyn’s cell phone rang. She pulled over and picked it up.

Alex listened to one half of the conversation, which at times appeared as though it might be positive news, and then it appeared as if it might not be. As soon as Kailyn disconnected the call, Alex said, “What’s going on?”

“An elderly woman called the children’s home a few minutes ago after seeing the story of the boys on the news. She said Luke and Cole had stopped by her house around one-thirty or so yesterday afternoon asking for a glass of water. She said they were meeting a friend a few blocks away for a school project.”

“School project? Well, that can’t be true,” Alex said.

“Right. She said they were each carrying long white rolls of poster board though, so she didn’t think anything of it.”

“Poster board? That’s weird. Where’s her house located in relation to the home?”

“Marie told me she’s twelve miles south on the same side of the interstate,” Kailyn said.

“Holy cow! Twelve miles! What the heck are those two up to?”

“I don’t know. The police are on their way over to talk to the woman now.”

Alex stared out the side of the car. “Two kids carrying posters...heading south along the highway...where are they going and why?” Suddenly, Alex turned and faced Kailyn. “Call the home back and ask them if the kids had been drawing any pictures or posters over the past week, and if they were, ask them what they were drawing.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything. Luke loves to draw. He’s always drawing things,” Kailyn said.

“Please, humor me and call.”

Seconds later, Kailyn glanced at Alex and said, “Luke was drawing pictures of dolphins.”

“LOOK, THERE IT is,” Cole said, pointing at the horizon. “I can see the dome from here. We made it.”

“We’re not there yet. There’s a lot of highway between us and there. How are we going to get over there without getting killed?” Luke said.

Before Cole could answer, a white van with lettering pulled up onto the shoulder and parked ten feet from them, its flasher’s blinking. A lean young man in his mid twenties, with shoulder length brown hair dressed in a white T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers exited the vehicle. “Hey, you boys okay? Are you lost? Do you need a ride?”

Cole grabbed Luke by the arm and pulled him close as he stepped part way in front of him. “We’re fine, thanks.”

The man eyed the two with skepticism. “You don’t look fine. Where are your parents?”



Luke stepped from behind Cole and said, "Our parents are dead. We live in a home with other kids like us, but we can't go back there yet. We're tired and hot and would like to go back, but we can't. We're on a mission, and right about now we could use some help."

"Quiet, Luke!" Cole scolded. "You don't know anything about this person."

"And you didn't know anything about Miss Sally, but she was super nice."

"It's smart for you to be cautious," the young man said. His eyes roved between the boys and the passing cars, "but I promise I won't hurt you. I'll call the police for you if you want and we can wait together until they arrive. I can't leave you be though. It's not safe for the two of you out here alone."

"No police, we have to get to the aquarium first. We have to free the dolphins," Luke said.

"Is that so? Free the dolphins, huh? And how do you think you're going to do that?"

"Cole and I made lots of signs saying so. People will see them and help us. If enough people want the dolphins freed, the aquarium people will have to listen," Luke said.

"Sounds like the two of you've got the right idea. So you guys need a ride there, is that it?"

Luke glanced at Cole and nodded in the affirmative.

The young man stood as if debating what to do. Finally he said, "Well, Luke and Cole, I give you both a lot a credit for your guts and determination, and as luck would have it, I'm a huge animal activist myself. My name's Mike. Come on, I'll take you to the aquarium, but then you have to promise to listen to me when we get there and let me take you back to the home when we're done. Promise?"

"We promise," Cole and Luke said in unison.

Mike moved toward the passenger side door and let the boys climb into the front seat. Then he hurried to the driver's side and got in. Before he pulled onto the highway, he texted on his phone.

"What are you doing?" Cole asked.

"I'm getting in touch with a few friends of mine who can help us out once we get to the aquarium."

"I DON'T THINK speeding will help the situation," Alex said. "What if in our hurry, we miss them on our way, or we end up with a ticket and get delayed even longer?"

Kailyn slowed the Jaguar. "You're right. I'm sorry, but I'm so worried about them. It's hard to imagine they would have walked all the way to the aquarium on their own. It must be a good twenty-five miles from the home."

"You know how stubborn kids are when they get their minds set on something. I hope to God that's where they are going and that we find them. I kind of feel responsible," Alex said. She fixed her glare out the side of the car and searched the streets. At least now they and the police knew what the boys were wearing, thanks to the elderly woman who'd fed them lunch.

"What do you mean, you feel like it's your fault? That's silly."

"I'm the one who suggested taking them to the aquarium, and I'm the one who filled their heads with nonsense about what it's like for dolphins to be trapped and used for the sake of making a buck. If I hadn't told them all that stuff, none of this would've happened," Alex said.

"That's crazy talk. What you told them wasn't nonsense. You only wanted to share with them something that was important to you, and I love that you did that. You told them the truth, and the truth can never be a bad thing."

“This time it is.”

“No, it’s not. What the boys did, they did on their own. You were right yesterday. The home should have kept a better eye on them. They should have talked to Luke about his drawings. Heck, they should have mentioned the fact he had been drawing to us earlier too. The home is entrusted with protecting those kids Alex, not us. I’m sure they’re going to have to change a few rules going forward, and I’m not sure if that’s going to be such a good thing or not, but that’s their issue, not ours. All we can do now is help find the kids and get them back safely.”

The last few minutes of the ride were spent in silence. As Kailyn and Alex pulled into the parking lot of the aquarium, they saw about a hundred people standing in front of the entrance holding posters and signs, some with pictures of dolphins clearly visible. People were rushing from news vans with cameras and another van pulled past them before Kailyn could bring the car to a halt.

Kailyn parked haphazardly at an angle between two spaces. As soon as they were parked, both women rushed from the vehicle in the direction of the crowd, yelling for Luke and Cole. They stayed together, pushing their way through the yelling mass of activists, eyes straining to find the boys.

At last, Kailyn spotted Luke holding up a large poster, chanting to free the dolphins. She ran forward and grabbed him. “Oh, God, Luke, I’m so glad you’re okay. Do you know how worried everyone was about you? Where’s Cole?”

“Can I help you?” Mike said.

Police sirens that sounded in the distance grew louder. Kailyn glanced toward one of the entrances as the police pulled in. “No, you can’t help me and who the heck are you anyway?”

“Luke, where’s your brother?” Alex repeated.

Luke pointed up.

Alex backed up until she could see to the roof of the aquarium. Standing to the side of the dome and near the front of the building was Cole, holding a sign above his head. Alex ran past Kailyn and Luke toward the entrance yelling, “Cole’s on the roof. Stay here with Luke...I’ll get him.” Alex rushed past the security guard who yelled after her.

“Oh my God,” Kailyn said to Luke. “Is Cole crazy? What’s he doing up there? He could get dizzy and fall or trip or...”

“Step aside people,” the police yelled. Two officers made their way past Kailyn, separating the crowd as they marched through the front of the building. The guard pointed in the direction Alex had run.

Alex wound her way down hallways and past displays toward a rear fire exit door. She slammed the door open and entered a stairwell. Another door led outside. Alex grabbed the railing on her right and mounted the steps two at a time. Her heart and lungs pounded, more from fear than physical strain, her mind only able to picture Cole precariously close to the edge. As she rounded the top of the last few steps, she slammed her body against the door. A blast of hot, humid air and the smell of tar assaulted her. She scanned the roof and quickly saw Cole. “Hey, Cole,” she yelled in his direction. “It’s Alex...come on over hear a minute,” she said as she made her way toward him.

Cole turned. “Hi, Alex! It’s so great you came! Look at all the people here to help us,” he said, lowering his sign and taking a few steps from the front of the building.

Alex rushed to him and swept him up in her arms. “We were so worried about you. I’m proud of you two, but please don’t ever do anything like this again. You could have fallen. Kailyn and your brother are waiting downstairs for you.”

Seconds later, the police burst through the door. “Put the kid down!” an officer yelled, gun extended. “Get your hands in the air!”

Alex set Cole down and extended one hand in the air, but held Cole’s hand with the other. “It’s okay, officer, I’m a friend. Alexandra Rey. We’ve been searching for Cole and his brother for two days now. I know Pastor Wilkinson from the Gulf Coast Children’s Home where he’s from. His brother Luke’s downstairs with a friend of mine. I’ll take you to them.”

The one officer said, “It’s okay McKinley. I recognize her. I saw her outside the home yesterday.”

The officer holding the gun lowered it and secured it back into its holster. He waited for Alex and Cole to pass in front of them, then followed them and his partner off the hot roof.

## Chapter Twelve

AFTER EATING A late dinner with Emma, Alex washed and dried the dishes and then slunk into her bedroom. She turned on a small lamp on the nightstand next to her bed, then sat on the edge of the mattress, flopped onto her back, and closed her eyes. She let out a deep breath as she listened to voices coming from the television in the living room and her grandmother's recliner click as she envisioned her grandmother extending the footrest.

Even though Emma agreed with Kailyn that Luke and Cole's excursion wasn't Alex's fault, Alex still shouldered the burden. She couldn't shake the thought that she should have chosen her words to the boys more carefully during their visit to the aquarium, rather than having had filled their young impressionable minds with the injustices that troubled her. At the same time, a part of her agreed with the two most important women in her life, that shadowing the truth wouldn't have been the aboveboard way to approach the kids either. As conflicting thoughts traveled back and forth in her mind and fought against one another, Alex's breathing slowed. The emotional strain of the past two days had caught up to her, and although she battled to stay awake and come to terms with her struggle, consciousness slowly slipped from her grasp.

ALEX WOKE TO the ringing of the telephone. She sat up slowly, her lower back stiff as her heavy boots still hung on her feet. The room was dark as evening had set in. She felt for the lamp on the nightstand, turned it on, and lifted the receiver. "Hello," she said, undoing the laces on her right boot.

"Hi, Alex, it's Kailyn. Did I wake you?"

"I dozed off for a few minutes, so it's good you called. I haven't taken a shower yet and the position I fell asleep on, on the bed, wasn't the greatest...or so my back tells me," Alex said, as one boot clunked to the floor.

"Maybe a soaking hot bath might do you better tonight...with your back and all."

Alex reached for her other boot. "That sounds like a perfect idea. I think that's exactly what I'm going to do."

A few seconds of silence followed before Kailyn responded. "I wish I could help—I mean, I'm glad I could help."

Alex cleared her throat, "So, what's up? Are you relieved the kids are safe and life's returning to normal?" Alex pushed her left boot off with her right foot and pulled both feet up under her and sat cross-legged.

"The kids are part of the reason why I called. I wanted to thank you again for your help the past two days and for your quick thinking up on the roof with Cole today. I'm not sure what I'd have done. My body froze when I saw him. I couldn't catch my breath." Kailyn said.

"You don't have to thank me. If I wasn't there, I'm sure you'd have done the same thing. The bad part is, I grapple with the guilt. I still feel like it's my fault they ran off in the first place,

even though I know you and Grams don't agree with me. On the flip side, I'm glad everything worked out."

"Me, too, only I wish you'd stop beating yourself up about their actions. The only person you can control is yourself. I wish we could've spent some time together today, afterward, and that you didn't have to go straight to work. I know you've taken so much time off already because of me...I mean, that is why you had to leave earlier, right?" Kailyn asked.

A smile pushed up Alex's cheeks. "Of course that's the reason I had to go. I know I'm not the easiest to read, but I do enjoy spending time with you, regardless of what we're doing. Being around you makes me happy, which is not a familiar emotion for me." Alex turned her head and glanced at the photos of her mom and brother on her dresser.

"I'm glad, I really am," Kailyn said. "On that note, I'd like to take you to dinner Saturday night, to celebrate...just the two of us."

Alex's heart beat firm in her chest. She swallowed hard. "Are you asking me on a date?"

"Very perceptive Ms. Rey...yes, I'm asking you on a date. Do you accept?"

After a short pause, Alex said, "Yes, I'd love to go to dinner with you."

"Great, a date it is then. I'll call you during the week and we can iron out the details."

"Sounds like a plan. Talk to you then," Alex said before she hung up with Kailyn. No sooner had she set the phone down when it rang again. "Hi, did you forget something?"

"What?" Jenna said on the other end of the line.

"Oh, hi, Jenna, I'm sorry, I thought you were Kailyn. She just hung up with me. What's up?"

"What's up? Are you kidding me? What were you doing on the roof of the aquarium with that kid this morning? I thought I wasn't seeing right at first, but then they zoomed in and sure enough it was you. They're calling you a hero on the news."

"Hardly, more like instigator to the problem," Alex said, and then explained what had happened and who Luke and Cole were.

"I've gotta hand it to you Alex, there's no shortage of excitement where you're concerned. I should be happy though. At least our little escapade in document search and retrieval didn't end up on the news."

"No, but keep it up and you might make headlines yet."

ALEX SHUFFLED ALONG the walkway of Westerfield Apartment Complex Thursday morning, eyeing the buildings and walkways for any sign of cracks. Although she knew the creaking sounds her father was hearing were no different from other sounds and voices that existed only in his head, she didn't want to dismiss his concerns. She headed right at the circular flower garden and followed the last section of walkway into her dad's building. Before ringing the bell she ran her hands along the front of her jeans and took a deep breath. The last meeting with her dad hadn't gone well, to the point of her trying to get Katherine to take him back to Connecticut. She wondered how she'd fare today.

She depressed the buzzer and waited, realizing her teeth were clenched.

The intercom crackled. "Is that you, Alex?" Christopher asked.

"Yeah, Dad, it's me," Alex said before the buzzer sounded.

When her father opened the door, she slid past and scanned the apartment as she always did, searching for indicators of her dad's well being. The curtains were open and the apartment appeared neat, but something didn't seem right. Alex couldn't put her finger on what it was, and

then it hit her. Most of the pictures of Josh were gone, except for two, from what she could discern. Also on the bookshelf stood a five by seven photo of the family, taken not long before the accident. Alex felt a lump in her throat. She glanced at her dad.

Christopher smiled at her, probably for the first time in seventeen years. "Have a seat for a minute."

Alex sat but said nothing.

"I did a little redecorating in here. You like it?" he asked.

Alex had to be cautious not to get too emotional or place too much emphasis on what her father had done, but her heart swelled none the less. "Yeah, Dad, I like it a lot."

"I know I got a little nasty at our last visit and said a few things about going back to Connecticut and such, but I didn't mean it. I know I don't show it, but I'm okay living here and I appreciate what you do for me. You were right. I don't deserve you."

"I don't know what to say, Dad."

"Don't say anything. Let's see how I do going forward. One day at a time. My doctor was thrilled to hear me talk about the accident though."

"I'm glad you did. You didn't sound like you wanted to," Alex said, her eyes focused on the family picture.

"I didn't. It's not easy, but I know it's necessary. And I've done a lot of thinking this past month, part of which led to my redecorating. It's a lot easier to stay mad at myself for what happened and block out the world, but there are other people I hurt by doing that. I see that now. I'm sure your mother hasn't been happy with me, and until the other day, I didn't care. Or at least I told myself I didn't care. I know I've got issues. I know I hear things other people don't, and that doesn't help bolster my energy, but I'm at least going to try and make an effort. That's all I can say for now."

"Thanks for sharing, Dad. I hope you succeed."

"Thanks, I hope so too. Also, I signed the paperwork making my medical records available to you."

"You didn't have to do that."

"No, I think I did. You should know about my history. Your mom knew. I should have given you access years ago."

Hearing her dad mention her mom nearly brought tears to Alex's eyes.

"Hey," Christopher continued. "I saw you on the news Sunday night. I'm proud of you, kiddo. They're calling you a hero."

Alex's father hadn't called her kiddo since she was twelve. The name brought back a flood of good memories; memories from a happier time. Tears welled in her eyes, but she looked away and redirected her thoughts so none would fall. Caution grabbed the reins. "Thanks, Dad, but I was hardly a hero. The media tend to blow things out of proportion. I knew the kids, actually. It's a long story."

"I'd like to hear about it some time."

Alex stood. "Sure, Dad, we'll see. Let's get you to your appointment. We don't want to be late."

SATURDAY ROLLED AROUND quickly. Work was hectic, but not enough to quell Alex's nerves over her date with Kailyn. They were never on an official date before. Whenever Alex let

thoughts of their looming date creep into her consciousness, her heart rate increased and she envisioned anything that could go wrong, would go wrong. Kailyn had called Thursday night saying that she'd meet her at in the parking lot of Tollerson's Marina after work. To save Alex time and another trip home and back, she offered for Alex to shower and change in her house first if she wanted, but Alex declined. The thought of taking Kailyn up on that offer when she'd never been to her house, or met her parents, was far too unsettling. Now, at the end of her workday, she was even more thankful that she had rejected the offer. She knew the motorcycle ride home, and later to the marina, would help calm her pre-date jitters, and she could use all the help she could get.

Alex kissed her Grams goodbye, straddled her Harley, and soon cruised along the highway and the main drag through Sanibel and Captiva Islands. The ride delivered the calm she hoped it would, and quelled the butterflies in her stomach. Her heart beat at a slower pace as well, which bolstered her confidence with each passing mile. Joy, and the anticipation of spending more time with Kailyn, replaced earlier unfounded fears. In their place, Alex envisioned Kailyn's understanding eyes and warm and approachable demeanor, and the way she smiled and laughed, each vision increasing her desire to revel in her presence.

When Alex pulled into Tollerson's, she spotted Kailyn standing near the carport in front of her car, waving her over. As she rode closer, Kailyn motioned Alex into the empty spot next to her car. Alex pulled in, stopped, turned off the bike, and put the kickstand down. She took the key from the ignition and swung her leg over the bike. She wore a deep plum colored polo shirt over cream colored pants and black riding boots, which were more stylish than her usual work boots. "Hi," Alex said as she stared into Kailyn's eyes.

"Hi. You're right on time." Kailyn stepped toward Alex and took her hand. Then she leaned forward and kissed Alex on the cheek. "You look great."

"Thanks, so do you." Alex swallowed hard. Heat flowed through her body from the warmth of Kailyn's lips on her cheek. The softness of Kailyn's touch sent a chill rippling along Alex's spine. Alex hadn't even noticed if anyone else was around, and at that point, she didn't care. She sensed Kailyn didn't care whether they were alone or not either.

"Are you hungry? I'm starving," Kailyn said, not waiting for an answer.

"I could eat."

"Good, let's go then. Your bike'll be safe here. My dad keeps an extra parking space for visitors and the security's good."

"I'm not worried...about the bike," Alex said. She followed Kailyn down the steps that led to the dock where Kailyn's boat was moored.

The boat ride along North Captiva on the bay side lasted about five minutes. Warm breezes caressed the evening air. Oranges and yellows mixed among wispy clouds that staggered across the horizon, as the water below darkened with the setting sun. Alex watched Kailyn maneuver into the harbor at the northern end of the island like a seasoned seaman. Alex's eyes were drawn to Kailyn, to her slim, well-rounded figure, a figure accentuated in the snug fitting pair of black slacks she wore and equally snug white knit sleeveless shirt. As the boat drifted to a halt, the faint smell of Kailyn's perfume wafted through the air, making it difficult for Alex to concentrate on anything other than the woman standing before her.

After Kailyn tipped the dockhand, they sauntered along a cobbled walkway lit by the soft glow of pathway lighting. Within a couple of minutes, they reached Ty's Restaurant. Inside, chatter filled the room, as did the smell of fresh seafood, garlic, and grilled meats. Straw-colored

walls laced in ecru trim, soft instrumental music, and dimmed recessed lighting set a romantic stage.

Alex's stomach growled.

"There's that panther again," Kailyn said, "but trust me, I'm just as hungry."

"Good to know," Alex said.

Moments later they were seated at a table Kailyn reserved that overlooked the harbor. A small candle flickered in a frosted round globe in the center of the table, flanked by two miniature vases, each holding a large, flat yet round, bright red, star-like flower in each.

Alex picked up the folded cloth napkin in front of her and placed it on her lap as the waiter handed them menus. "This place is really nice."

"I don't come here often, even though it's one of my favorite places to eat. The restaurant belongs to the clubhouse that our family's a member of. My dad knows the chef. The food's fantastic," Kailyn said.

"It certainly smells good," Alex replied as she perused the menu.

Kailyn did the same. "I think I'm going to order the parmesan crusted black scallops over asparagus as an appetizer. See anything you like?"

"I'm not big on scallops. I think I'll try the stuffed mushrooms on toasted artichoke hearts, though I'm finding I can hardly speak without drooling," Alex said.

The corners of Kailyn's mouth turned upward. When the waiter returned, Kailyn ordered their appetizers and then ordered their meals.

Alex glanced out the window. "It's kind of weird knowing you're on an island with no connection to the mainland, especially when you're not in control of your own transportation. It's sort of like being stranded," Alex said.

"It is, right? You can almost imagine the time when pirates roamed the seas and used the island as a safe harbor to fix their boats and scrape the barnacles off. They even held women captive here that they'd abducted."

"Is that how the island got its name?"

"Yeah, that's what I read. This part of the island was once connected to Captiva, but in 1921 a hurricane washed away a section of the island where Redfish Pass is now, which separated North Captiva from the rest of the island."

"Interesting." Alex watched the flame from the candle reflect in Kailyn's eyes as she spoke. She didn't notice the waiter open the champagne that had been chilling in a cooler stand next to their table, until the pop of the cork caught her attention.

"I thought so," Kailyn said with a devilish tone.

Alex raised an eyebrow at Kailyn as the one waiter poured the champagne and another moved the candle and flowers to the side and set the appetizers between them. When both waiters moved away, Alex said, "Champagne, too?"

"Sure, why not? We may as well celebrate properly." Kailyn raised her glass. "A toast to your being there for me when I needed you most with Luke and Cole, and to that story ending happy, and to the future, whatever it may bring."

Alex lifted her glass and clanked it gently against Kailyn's before sipping the dry, bubbly liquid. "To the future. You know, I'm thankful we found Luke and Cole, and they're back at the home safe and sound again, but I can't shake feeling responsible, no matter how much I try to convince myself otherwise."

"After you hear what I have to say, you might feel different. I've been dying to tell you this for the past two days now, but I thought waiting for the right moment would be better. As it turns



out, if you were in some way responsible, then you should also take the credit for the fact that people have been calling the home and inquiring about adopting Luke and Cole, and not adopting them separately either, like they had in the past, but together.”

Alex raised her eyebrows as she twisted the champagne glass between her fingers. “Are you serious?”

“I’m completely serious. It appears that the media coverage they attracted brought attention not only to the plight of the dolphins, but also to that of Luke and Cole and the other kids in the home as well. Pastor Wilkinson called to let me know they’ve been inundated with interested couples inquiring about adoptions.”

“That’s great news,” Alex said at first. She studied her dinner partner. “But what about you? You’ll miss the boys if they get adopted, won’t you?”

Kailyn lowered her eyes for a second. “I will, because I’ll probably get to see them a whole lot less, and maybe not at all depending on where they end up living. But either way, I am going to try and stay in touch with them. The important thing is they find a loving home. They need an environment that will heal the hurt they’ve been dealt in their lives.”

“I agree,” Alex said, as a sense of peace flowed through her.

“Now let’s eat before this incredible food gets cold,” Kailyn said.

ALEX LET KAILYN borrow her jean jacket for the ride home. As they neared Kailyn’s house on the southern end of North Captiva, Kailyn slowed the boat. She turned and faced Alex. The moonlight glimmered off the water. “Would you like to come in for a while, or did you want to get going right away?” Kailyn said.

“If you’d like me to...I’d like to come in, but it is kind of late...will your parents get upset?”

“No chance of that happening. They’re away as usual. New York this time—work related.” Kailyn’s voice deepened. “And I’d more than like for you to come in.”

“I’m sorry I won’t get a chance to meet your parents and see which one you most resemble and take after,” Alex said.

Kailyn cut the engine and secured the boat. “I’m not sure Tommy or I take after either one of my parents, actually. Tommy has the business sense my father has, but otherwise, the two are quite different. My parents aren’t that open minded about everything, which has made things difficult for Tommy and as it turns out, not that easy for me now either.”

As they traversed the wooden walkway from the dock to the house, Alex remained silent, uncertain exactly how far reaching Kailyn’s words regarding her parent’s lack of open-mindedness were meant to be taken. She decided the best move was to leave well enough alone. For now.

At the rear door of the house, Kailyn said. “Don’t be startled if Sasha’s waiting at the door and comes tearing out at us. She hates being left alone.”

“No worries. If I can handle Thunder, Sasha shouldn’t be a problem. Besides, I love dogs. All animals, really,” Alex said.

Kailyn pushed the door open. “Yeah, that’s one of the many things I like about you.”

Alex was grateful Sasha bolted out at Kailyn and then at her, making the need for a reply unnecessary. The compliment made her uneasy. She wasn’t used to kind words being directed at her, except for the praise she received from her grandmother, although her father’s comments this week surprised her.

Alex laughed as Sasha ran circles around her and Kailyn. The dog clearly wanted attention from both her human counterparts but appeared torn with whom to stay nearest to first. After a few minutes, Sasha stopped racing between them and remained close to Kailyn's side.

They entered the house into a mud room. From there a hallway led into an open, modern kitchen with white cabinets, tile flooring, and a counter in the center which included a grill.

"I don't know why Sasha gets so crazy. You'd think I was gone days the way she reacts." Kailyn grabbed a dog biscuit from a cookie jar and handed it to Sasha, petting her on the head as Sasha chewed.

"It seems like being even five minutes away, to a dog, is the equivalent of us being away from them for days. It's kind of nice in a way—to be missed that much though," Alex said.

"Yes, it is," Kailyn agreed. "Can I get you something to eat or drink? Maybe a beer, or a glass of wine?"

"I don't think I could squeeze in another ounce of food if I tried, but a glass of wine sounds good."

"I'm with you. Would you mind going into the basement with me to get it? I hate going down there alone."

"This house has a basement? That's unusual, considering where you're located."

"I know, but my dad had his mind set on having a traditional wine cellar, so a wine cellar he has. He probably spent a small fortune having the basement waterproofed. We've never had a problem yet, so I guess his investment paid off."

Kailyn made her way past Alex and down the hallway they'd traversed moments before. She opened the basement door and turned on the lights. As they descended the polished wooden stairs, they entered a large game room with recessed lighting. At one end of the room stood a ping pong table and on the other end, a pool table. A wooden pool stick rack hung from the wall near the pool table, over a matching wooden cabinet set beneath.

On the left side of the room, Alex noticed an impressive solid square mahogany door with a lacquered chestnut finish and wrought iron handle, and on the opposite side, mahogany French doors in a matching chestnut lacquered finish, which Alex guessed led to where the wine was kept. The French doors contained arched half glass on the upper portion, and a matching door knob centered on an intricately etched wrought iron plate.

Inside the French doors, wooden wine racks filled with bottles covered most of the visible wall surface, with a few sections revealing light gray brick. The ceiling was made of wooden raised panels, and the floor of ceramic tile with a grape-vine design depicted in several pieces. Two brown leather chairs in the center of the room completed a warm, inviting atmosphere. "I can see now why your dad splurged on this room," Alex said. "It's fantastic. Makes you want to pick up a book, commandeer a chair and a fine glass of wine, and relax right here."

"That's funny. No one's ever suggested reading a book down here, but the room is quite cozy." After making a wine selection, Kailyn shut the doors behind them. "You play pool?"

"No. I'm probably one of the few lesbians that doesn't. You?"

"No. I think Tommy plays though. He hangs out down here sometimes. I prefer table tennis, except no one wants to play me," Kailyn said.

"Why's that? Are you too good?"

"Hardly. No one has time."

"Well, if ever you feel like playing one day, give me a call and I'll be happy to play with you."

Kailyn grinned and appeared as if she was going to speak, but didn't.

“What? What’d I say?”

“Nothing. Come on, let’s go.” Kailyn took several steps toward the stairs, and then stopped. “Do you hear anything?”

“Like what?” Alex asked.

“I’m not sure. I thought I heard a muffled scratching noise coming from somewhere.”

Alex made her way next to Kailyn, “Like from a cat?”

“No, not exactly. Wait, there it is again. It’s coming from behind that door.”

“I hear it now too,” Alex said. “What’s in there?”

Kailyn reached for the door knob. “Storage and junk, the last time I checked.” She twisted the knob and pushed. “Hmm, that’s odd. The door’s locked. Do you see a key anywhere?”

As they searched, they heard what sounded like a scratch against glass or metal.

“I can’t find a key. I think I’ll go take a look outside,” Alex said.

“I’ll come with you.”

“I’d feel better if you stayed inside. Do you have a flood light you can turn on out there?”

“No. There are lights outside the garage, the front and back door lights, the ones around the patio, and the ones along the walkway from the dock, but they’re rather dim. I’ve got a flashlight you could use though,” Kailyn said. Her voice held a tremble.

They mounted the stairs. “Great, I’ll take the flashlight. The banging’s probably nothing—maybe a small animal or something trying to get in.”

Alex opened the back door slowly while Kailyn held Sasha by the collar. Alex stood outside and listened. At first she heard nothing, then a tapping noise. The moonlight was sufficient to see by, so she carried the flashlight with her but didn’t turn it on. Alex tiptoed across the patio toward the right corner of the house and peered around the corner. “What the hell?” she said aloud. “Who the hell are you?”

A white man in his mid-forties sprang up from a crouched position near the side of the house, the blade of a hunting knife glistening in the moonlight. “I’m looking for Tommy. Where the hell’s he been, and who the fuck are you, his dyke sister?”

“It’s none of your business who I am. You’re trespassing. I think you should go.”

“Is that right? Problem is, I don’t give a damn what you think.”

“No one’s looking for any trouble here. What’s your name? I’ll tell Tommy you stopped by.” Alex tried not to stare at the knife, but her eyes kept finding their way to the blade as her heartbeat quickened.

“Screw that. He owes me a delivery. Let me in and I’ll fucking get it myself.”

Adrenaline coursed through Alex’s veins. She sensed the man’s agitation and recognized the signs of what was causing it. At one time, she lived that life. “That’s not going to happen. You need to go...now, before I call the police, and next time if you want to see Tommy, you should call first.”

“Fucking dyke. Who the fuck do you think you are, huh? You’re gonna call the police and then what? You think I’m gonna let you get to your fucking phone?” The man let out an evil chuckle. “I think you need a lesson in manners...that and maybe a piece of a real man to knock the cockiness out of your dyke self,” he added, grabbing his manhood.

“I’m only going to ask you to leave nicely one more time,” Alex said, her tone sharp, harsh, and unwavering.

“Like hell,” the man said before he lunged toward Alex, knife held in front of him.

On instinct, Alex raised up the hand that held the flashlight and at the same time stepped to the side. The shaft of the blade connected with the flashlight, almost jolting the object from her

grip, but she held on and maintained her balance. Before the man could react, she slammed her right foot backward into the man's leg behind the knee.

The man muffled a scream as he dropped to his knees. "Fucking...bitch!"

Before the man could gather himself up, Alex positioned herself behind him, kicked him hard in the middle of his back, which dropped him flat on the ground. Then she knelt on his back, gripped the hand holding the knife, and twisted it behind his back until he let the weapon go. "I told you I didn't want any trouble. What you got, you brought upon yourself. All I want is for you to leave. If I let you go, will you do that?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, just let go of my arm."

Alex released some of the pressure, but not all.

"Where the hell did you learn to fight like that?" the man said.

"Let's say I got in with a rough crowd when I was younger, and leave it at that." Alex released man's arm, reached for the knife, and stood up off his back.

With labored slowness, the man rose to his feet and stepped away from Alex. "Tell Tommy to give Raven a call when he gets in," he said, eyes filled with anger. Then he turned and walked off toward the dock, muttering "fucking dyke" under his breath.

"OH MY GOD, what happened out there? You're bleeding," Kailyn said. She reached for Alex's hand and walked her inside the house toward the bathroom.

Alex glanced at her hand, not realizing she'd been cut until that moment. "It's nothing, but I think you need to have a talk with Tommy. Some guy who calls himself Raven was out there looking for him, trying to pry his way into the basement window with this knife."

"Jesus, that's a hunting knife. He could have killed you," Kailyn said. She pulled Alex's hand closer to the light and placed it over the sink.

Alex set the knife on the counter. "Nah, the guy was seriously stoned. He thought he was all that, but he didn't get a hand on me."

"Except for this cut. Lucky for you it's not deep. Here, lean over so I can clean this out with soap and water first and make sure we get the sand out of it."

Alex stood sideways against the sink. She faced Kailyn as Kailyn ran water over her cut. Kailyn's mild perfume tickled Alex's senses. The urge to lean into Kailyn, touch her hair, and move it to the side to reveal her neck and kiss the length of it, overwhelmed Alex. She cleared her throat. "At any rate, I'm pretty sure he won't be back. He mentioned Tommy owed him a delivery though. What's going on with him, Kailyn? Is Tommy into drugs or something?"

Kailyn dried Alex's hand. "Sit on the toilet seat cover for a minute while I put peroxide and Neosporin on this cut. No, Tommy would never do drugs, but something shady must be going on. This is the second time now someone's come here to either drop something off or try and get something from him. Tommy said the last guy owed him money from a bet they had, but I don't know."

While Kailyn ransacked the bathroom cabinet for medical supplies, Alex sat holding several tissues on her cut, hand held upright in the air. "I've got my thoughts on the subject, and unfortunately, they're not good. I think you'll find your answer in that locked room in the basement. Whatever he's into though, he needs to stop. He's putting you and your family at risk."

Kailyn turned and faced Alex. Amber eyes staring into hers held Alex captive, though she registered Kailyn's nod of agreement. She also noticed Kailyn hadn't moved for several seconds after their eyes met. Then, as if remembering she was holding a bottle of peroxide and a cotton ball, she continued caring for Alex's hand.

Alex felt the heat radiate between their hands and the blood course through her veins. She watched Kailyn steal glances at her while placing the last pieces of white tape over the gauze bandage along the side of her hand.

"Let's worry about Tommy later," Kailyn said. She left the first aid supplies on the counter, and proceeded from the bathroom into the living room. Alex followed.

The living room was situated next to the kitchen, separated only by an eat-in counter. The recessed lighting was dimmed and soft music played. A gas fireplace surrounded in gray brick was built into the wall opposite the leather sofa and was surrounded by light oak floor to ceiling shelving. A soft, muted green rug with a wide gray border covered the polished wooden floor, and visually connected the sofa, loveseat, and single leather recliner. Curled into a ball at the base of the loveseat lay Sasha, sleeping. The bottle of wine they'd gotten from the basement sat on a wooden glass top table, flanked by two wine glasses already filled.

"I see you were busy while I was outside."

"I was, but had I known what was happening, I'd have been out there helping you."

"I'm fine. This home is really beautiful," Alex said, the butterflies in her stomach once again taking flight.

"Thank you on behalf of my parents and the interior decorator they hired."

"Oh, stop. I'm sure your influences are in the house too."

Kailyn motioned for Alex to have a seat, which she did. "Yeah, a little I guess, but I can't wait to own my own place. I mean, I like it here, don't get me wrong, Tommy and I have plenty of privacy, but it's still my parent's house."

Alex leaned into the sofa cushions. "When you do move, are you planning on staying in Florida?"

Kailyn reached for the wine glasses. She handed Alex one and sat on the sofa next to her. "I hadn't given it much thought. Most of my time's consumed in my work, but at this point in time, I don't see myself going anywhere. My family's here...and you are too."

Alex's cheeks flushed in response to Kailyn's subtle yet seductive tone. Unable to formulate a meaningful response, Alex kept her eyes diverted and touched her thumb to her bandage.

"Are you okay? You look a tad flushed."

Alex swallowed hard. "No, I'm fine. The cut throbs a little, but no big deal. You did a nice job on the bandage. I'm not used to someone taking care of me in that way."

"I'm glad I could help. Besides, it's my fault you got hurt in the first place. Probably the best thing to do to stop the throbbing is to keep your mind off the wound."

Alex sensed Kailyn's eyes on her and the unspoken intensity of the feelings swirling between them. The sensation was new and tugged on Alex's waning resolve not to get involved beyond friendship. Then again, here she was on a date, wasn't she? Alex swooshed the wine in the glass three or four times and sniffed the dark cherry aroma of the cabernet. "The wine smells wonderful."

The corners of Kailyn's mouth turned upward as she swirled the wine within her own glass, taking in the fragrant bouquet. Then she raised her glass toward Alex and said, "It does, doesn't it. Cheers."

Alex clanked her glass to Kailyn's. "Cheers," she said before taking a sip. The warm liquid slithered down her throat and warmed her insides. "The wine tastes even better than it smells. It's quite fantastic."

"You're right, it is, isn't it? I'd say we picked a winner." Kailyn took another sip and relaxed into the sofa. Her body angled toward Alex, she tucked her left leg up under her. After a few seconds of silence, she said, "I'm glad to be here alone with you...and I have a confession to make."

Alex eyed Kailyn with a mixed nervous and confused expression. "What is it?"

"At dinner, when I made the toast, I wanted to say more to you, but I chickened out. I wanted to tell you how I felt about...about how you make my heart race when I'm near you and about how I can't seem to think clearly around you, and for allowing me to discover a part of myself I didn't know existed until I met you."

Intense heat shot through Alex. Her eyes read the honesty and desire in Kailyn's eyes. "I don't know what to say. I'm flattered and I'm also not used to being in this position. I've struggled with myself because in one way, I think you'd be better off without me, and in another, I can't stop thinking about you either. When I'm away from you, all I want to do is be close, but you deserve someone so much better."

"How so? I think you're pretty terrific."

"That's because you don't know everything about me or my past."

"I know enough, and maybe more than you think. I'm not blind. I'm also sure you've had plenty of girlfriends before, and if that's what's bothering you, I don't care. I have a past too. All I care about is the future."

"That's part of the problem. I didn't do girlfriends, but I wasn't celibate either. Far from it," Alex admitted. "I'm not proud of that part of me either."

"With your looks and appeal, that's hardly a surprise to me. I don't care about who you used to be or how many women you were with. I care about who you are now. And unless my intuition is completely messed up, I know you care about me as well, at least enough to give us a chance."

"I do care, more than I can put into words. I knew I was in trouble the first day I heard your laugh and saw you smile. The problem was, I didn't know what to do about it, and I still don't."

Kailyn took the wine glass from Alex's hand and set it on the table with her own. She inched closer on the sofa to Alex and stroked the side of her face slow and gentle with her finger, her eyes dropping to view Alex's lips. "I know what to do," she said, her tone deep. She held Alex's face between her hands and touched her lips to Alex's, soft and gentle.

Alex savored the tenderness of Kailyn's lips. She'd had plenty of sexual encounters with women, but had never kissed another woman before or let a woman kiss her. She never wanted that deep a bond with anyone before now. Alex's heart felt as though it would pound out of her chest. When they separated, Kailyn's gaze held Alex's. "I've never felt about anyone the way I feel with you. I can't explain what you're doing to me, but I don't want you to stop," Alex said.

"I don't want to stop either, and whatever affect I'm having on you...believe me, I'm experiencing the same in return, ten-fold. I ache for you," Kailyn said, then dropped into another fevered kiss.

When they separated the second time, Kailyn lay back against the sofa. "I think I have to take a breather. My head is swimming suddenly."

Alex watched as Kailyn placed her hand to her forehead. "Are you okay? You look a little pale, even in this light."

“I was fine a few minutes ago, but I do feel really warm. I’m pretty sure I have you to blame for most of that.” Kailyn etched out a smile.

In the distance, Alex heard the faint propeller-like ripple of a helicopter in the air. “If I didn’t get the sense there was more to your sudden light-headedness than me, I’d say thanks, but I have my doubts, as I’m sure you do.” Alex touched Kailyn’s hand. “Your hand feels cool and damp.”

“Well, this is embarrassing. I hope I’m not going to be sick.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. These things happen. Try and relax. Maybe the wine didn’t sit right with you,” Alex said as the helicopter noise intensified and remained steady overhead. Then the phone in the house rang, followed a second later by Kailyn’s cell phone, which she’d left on the kitchen counter earlier, when Alex was outside.

Kailyn sat up, appeared to rethink standing, and rested her head once again on the sofa. “What the heck’s going on?” she said. As if in reply, the answering machine picked up and the voice of the Sanibel-Captiva police chief in a reverse 9-1-1 call relayed a message neither Alex nor Kailyn could ever have imagined, or wanted to hear. North Captiva Island was under quarantine, effective immediately.

# Chapter Thirteen

KAILYN AND ALEX sat speechless. Seconds passed which felt more like minutes as they tried to absorb what they'd heard. Then Kailyn's cell phone rang again.

"Stay, I'll get it." When Alex returned, she handed the phone to Kailyn. "I'm going to call Grams and Sean so they don't worry while you answer that."

Kailyn nodded. She took the phone from Alex. A shiver ran through her as Alex's fingers touched her palm. When their eyes met, Kailyn held Alex's glare through eyes that conveyed concern and sadness. She watched as Alex turned and walked away, before she answered the cell.

When Alex returned, Kailyn said, "How'd it go?"

"Okay I guess. I told them not to worry, though I know that'll be easier said than done, and that I'd keep them posted. How about you? Who called?"

"First my parents—I talked to my dad—and then Tommy. They all got the reverse 9-1-1 calls on their cells too. They were hoping I wasn't home, but of course that didn't happen. Had we known...anyway, I told Tommy you were here with me and told my parents that I was here with a friend and they all sounded relieved to know I wasn't alone. My dad thinks the powers that be are blowing the whole thing out of proportion though, and that if we stay put, we should be fine. I didn't tell them I'm not feeling well."

Alex read the uncertainty in Kailyn's eyes. "It's better you didn't. They can't help anyway and he's right that it's probably nothing. People panic. That's human nature. You probably ate something that didn't agree with you. The rest is likely a coincidence." Alex glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's almost eleven. Maybe we should turn on the news."

"Good idea."

"Can I get you a seltzer or something?"

"No, not right now. Thanks though. I'm working on keeping down what I ate right at this moment. I'm thankful you're here with me though." Kailyn reached for the remote.

Above the fireplace, a sixty inch flat screen ultra HD television came to life and displayed the words BREAKING NEWS across the screen as familiar music sounded in the background. Alex leaned against the sofa and held Kailyn's hand.

The news anchor began, "In an unprecedented move by the Florida State Board of Health, in consultation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the island of North Captiva has been placed under temporary quarantine to prevent persons who were potentially exposed to the SARS virus from spreading it further." Kailyn absently tightened her grip on Alex's hand. "The CDC has tracked down and removed an infected foreign traveler from the island earlier today and is closely monitoring this individual under isolation. However, numerous individuals dispersed throughout the island have become ill with fever and SARS-like symptoms, prompting the precautionary measures. Ferry service to the island has been suspended until further notice as has air travel. Residents are being told to remain in their homes and call the number on the screen below if they develop a flu-like fever or experience difficulty breathing."

"Great," Kailyn said. "They certainly know how to keep people calm."



At that point, pictures of the island from the air, a dark mass with glowing lights surrounded by orange buoys and several police boats flashed across the screen. A news reporter in the helicopter continued. "The picture from the air is surreal. Measures are in place to prevent the accidental excursion to and from the island. The CDC has set up two monitoring stations on the island, one near the harbor, and one closer to the southern end. From here, anyone on the island short on food, water, or medical supplies can find relief. Back to Bill in the studio."

The anchor on the screen nodded. "Thank you Senjay. The CDC disclosed the SARS carrier is a chef from Beijing who recently visited family in the Guangdong province of China before coming to the United States. He had started a planned tour of top restaurants. Passengers on his flights have been contacted, fitted with electronic wristbands, and told to stay within their homes and monitor their temperatures a minimum of every six hours. At least seventy other individuals have been contacted by the CDC and are under watch as well. The duration of the quarantine is unknown at this time, though expected to be anywhere from two to ten days."

"Two to ten days! Are they crazy?" Kailyn interrupted.

"Officials want to stress that the virus is not easily spread from human to human, being more commonly spread from contact with infected food or surfaces, making the likelihood of infection low, but because humans have little to no immune protection against this virus, quarantine measures have been temporarily put in place until further information becomes known."

Kailyn clicked off the television. "I've seen enough. They don't want to worry anyone. That's a laugh. It's funny how when you're detached from a situation, seeing it over the television, the story really means nothing to you, but when you're in the middle of it, the impact of every word resonates so much deeper. I mean, two to ten days...that's an awfully long span, isn't it? You'd think they could narrow it down."

"Why? You don't think you'll be able to put up with me for that long?" Alex giped.

"Nice try. If only I could have swept you away under other circumstances for that long," Kailyn said. She sat up and held her stomach. "Considering our current situation though, you probably shouldn't get too close to me."

"I'm not worried, plus, I think it might be a little late for that now."

"But I'm worried for you." Kailyn barely got the words out before she placed her hand in front of her mouth and bolted toward the bathroom.

AFTER TWO FLUSHES and fifteen minutes later, Alex knocked gently on the bathroom door. "You okay in there?"

"I'm managing I guess. I think I might be done for now, but I'm leery about getting up. My head feels funny."

"Can I come in?"

"Oh, God, I don't want you to see me like this. I don't think that's a good idea."

"Kailyn, please. Don't be silly. Everyone gets sick now and then, and I've had more than my share of experiences hugging the porcelain throne growing up. Granted, most of that was on account of my own fault, but regardless, it's no big deal. Please let me in," Alex said, then rested her head against the door.

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you. It's not pretty in here."

Alex opened the door to a pale and shivering Kailyn who was perched on the bathroom rug holding onto the rim of the toilet bowl. She placed a towel over Kailyn's shoulders and rubbed

the middle of her back. After several minutes of only watching Kailyn dry heave, Alex said, “We need to get you out of here and into bed.”

Kailyn’s eyes lifted slowly. “Not exactly how I pictured those words coming from your lips.”

“No, me neither. The fact you can still joke is a good sign though.”

“I’m not sure I can stand. I might throw up again.”

“I’ll help you up and I’ll take the bathroom garbage can with us just in case.”

Alex held Kailyn secure around the waist with one hand and held the garbage can in the other. They walked slowly around the corner, along the hallway, through the living room, and up the stairs. At the top they rested. Kailyn directed Alex to her room, Sasha close behind.

“I think Sasha needs to go out,” Kailyn said.

“I’ll take her in a few minutes. I want to get you settled in first.” Alex turned on the light and took in her surroundings.

Kailyn’s bedroom was twice the size of her own and had its own bathroom. The faint scent of lemongrass mixed with vanilla hung in the air as Alex stepped onto low, tan, shag carpeting. A queen-sized canopy bed made of cherry wood surrounded by two end tables faced out toward the center of the room with a dresser nearby, a fireplace was built into the wall opposite the window, surrounded by what appeared to be a reading area and entrance to a closet, and across from the bed sat a love seat, a cherry table with an oval cherry wood framed mirror, and another dresser. Candles stood on top of the dressers along with framed family photos. Before Alex could stop her, Sasha hopped onto the loveseat. “No Sasha!” Alex said.

Kailyn leaned against the bed. “It’s okay, that’s her bed. I know, don’t even say it. She’s spoiled.”

“She’s one lucky dog is what she is.” After retrieving Kailyn’s pajamas from the dresser, Alex took Sasha outside. When they returned, she gave her a cookie. Sasha took it and sprinted upstairs. By the time Alex entered Kailyn’s bedroom, Sasha lay curled into a ball on the loveseat, with no sign of the cookie left.

The fireplace had been turned on. Alex set a glass of water on the nightstand next to Kailyn’s bed. “It’s hotter than Hades up here.”

“I know, I’m sorry, but I was so cold.”

“That’s okay. Take a sip of water here and there if you can. You’ll need it even more now with the heat in here.”

“Thanks, Alex.”

“Sure.” Alex disappeared into the bathroom and then reappeared holding a warm washcloth in her hands. She laid the washcloth over Kailyn’s face.

Kailyn moaned. “God, that’s so relaxing. Please, don’t stop.”

Several rounds of washcloth treatment followed before Alex brought Kailyn a tooth brush and bowl which she placed in front of her on a towel over the bed sheets.

“Thanks, for all of this. I feel somewhat human again.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you let me help.”

“You got your bandage wet,” Kailyn said, reaching a shaking hand toward Alex’s.

Alex shrugged off the concern. “That’s okay. I’ll put on a new one before I hit the hay. Are you warming up?”

“Yeah, a little.”

“Good. Remember to try and stay hydrated. Speaking of hitting the hay, if you don’t need me, I think I’ll sleep on the sofa downstairs. I’m pretty beat.”

“You don’t need to sleep downstairs, there’s a spare bedroom next to mine. The sheets are fresh.”

“That would be great, thank you, and good night then,” Alex said. Before she left, she placed a kiss on Kailyn’s forehead.

“Night. Oh, and Alex?”

“Yeah?”

“Despite everything, I had a wonderful night.”

“I did, too.”

THE EVENING HAD been restless and filled with several more trips to the bathroom for Kailyn, this time dealing with diarrhea. Kailyn was thankful Alex had left a night light on in the bathroom for her, and that she’d taken Alex’s advice and drank water in between. At least she was able to hold the water in, even though she felt her battery hit empty.

Kailyn sat upright and swung her feet from under the covers. Sasha was gone. The clock read eleven-thirty. “Shoot, it’s nearly lunch time,” Kailyn murmured, after which the thought of eating nearly made her sick again. She snatched the garbage can from the side of the bed and held it close to her mouth. She dry heaved several times. At this point she didn’t know what was worse, throwing up or dry heaving. Aggravated she wasn’t feeling better, she slid her feet into her slippers and grabbed the bathrobe from the end of the bed. At that moment, she smiled, knowing Alex must have placed the bathrobe there earlier and that she’d be somewhere in the house. The thought of Alex’s presence comforted Kailyn.

As Kailyn slunk down the stairs and across the living room floor, she spotted Alex in the kitchen with Sasha close by. “Morning you two,” she said, after which Sasha bounded to her side.

“Hey, I’m surprised to see you up. How are you feeling?” Alex placed a letter she’d been reading on the counter.

“Like I was rolled over by a truck and left on the side of the road to rot,” Kailyn said.

“Hmm, so tell me what you’re really thinking. No, seriously. I’m sorry you’re not doing better.”

“I am too.” Kailyn eyed the countertop strewn with papers and two bottles of fruit juice. “What’s all this stuff?”

“The CDC and health department folks made their rounds. They handed out these informational notices. A guy dressed in a hooded white suit and mask, covered from head to toe, delivered it and asked a few questions like who else was in the house, if we needed any supplies, and if either of us was sick or had a fever.”

“Wow, these guys aren’t taking any chances, are they?”

“No. He asked if we went out to eat last night, and if we did, where and what we ate. He asked if we traveled to a foreign country within the past two weeks, and if we did, to which one. I filled him in as best I could.”

“What did he say? Did he tell us if we were at risk or not?”

“No, he said he couldn’t say anything at this moment, that they were compiling notes which they’d analyze later.”

“Great. There’s nothing like keeping us in the loop.” Kailyn tucked the robe around her tighter.

“They probably don’t want to worry people any more than they might already be. After he took notes though, he handed me a bag with medical supplies. Then he got the fruit juice out of the back of his golf cart.”

“They must have sequestered the carts from the club.”

“I suppose so. It’s not like anyone will be using them for a while. The juice is for you, to get your electrolytes up. He said if your temperature goes over 102 degrees, we should call the number on the notice immediately. I can’t say the visit was comforting, but I’m glad they’re keeping us somewhat informed and that we know where to go if we need anything.”

“I suppose,” Kailyn said.

“Seems like a large undertaking though. How many homes are there on the island?”

“I’d say somewhere between four and five hundred. They’re grouped closer on the northern end though, so I’d imagine they’d be able to go house to house there quicker.”

“While you’re up, let’s take your temperature and see if you can hold down the fruit juice. If you can, you think you’d be up for some plain toast?”

“I’d like to try. I feel so weak, and I am hungry, even though the thought of food isn’t appealing right now. I did sip some water last night though.”

“Good, that’s a start.” Alex grabbed the juice bottle nearest her and gave a firm shake. “Why don’t you have a seat in the living room? Take the thermometer with you, and I’ll make lunch.”

“I will, thanks.”

A few minutes later, Alex joined Kailyn. The television was turned on to the local news station. Alex took the thermometer from Kailyn. “You’re at 99.4, four tenths higher than last night, but not terrible. I think you should head back to bed after lunch though.”

“Yes, doc.”

“And before you do, I’m going to strip your bed and put on clean sheets. That was one of the suggestions in the notice. I’ll do the laundry too, and add in the clothes I’m wearing, but you’ll need to tell me where everything is. Also, do you have clothes I can borrow in the meantime?”

“Of course I’ve got stuff you can wear, but Alex, please. You don’t need to do all this. I feel terrible enough as is. It’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me. If you weren’t here, I wouldn’t be able to do all that cleaning either,” Kailyn protested.

“But I am here, so you may as well get the most out of me.”

Kailyn raised an eyebrow. If only she weren’t sick, she thought, Alex would be in serious trouble and in need of more than a few electrolytes herself.

BY THE TIME evening rolled around, Kailyn remained pale and appeared tired. Alex managed to get her to eat another slice of bread and drink a cup of herbal tea. The tea was a mixture of mint, raspberry, blackberry, chamomile, and honey. Alex stayed with her until she finished all her tea, then left her to nap in peace.

She then headed downstairs and worked hard, following the directions given to her in the CDC notice. She didn’t go to the extreme of wearing the disposable masks and gloves that were provided in her supply bag, or wear an apron over her clothes, in part because she felt the precautions were unnecessary and in part because she didn’t want to worry Kailyn. But each time she washed her hands, she did so for at least twenty seconds with soap. She used rubbing alcohol to disinfect her hands, and was careful not to get her own bandage wet on her injured hand. She kept the towels, bedding, and their clothing clean, rubbed down surfaces they touched with

bleach, and placed their garbage directly in plastic bags. If the actions she took to keep everything clean would help Kailyn recover, she was determined to persist in carrying out those tasks to the best of her ability.

Dinner consisted of clear chicken broth with saltine crackers for Kailyn and a hearty minestrone soup with buttered bread for Alex. For dessert, Alex prepared a raspberry gelatin with sliced bananas.

“The tea you made earlier helped a lot with my cramps,” Kailyn said. She raised the soup spoon to her mouth and sipped the steaming liquid.

“I’m glad. I’ll make more after dinner. I hope you can keep this meal in.”

“So do I. At least I can look at the food now without wanting to gag. That’s a step in the right direction. Any change regarding the quarantine situation or any updates? Something that might indicate this is all a bad dream?”

“I wish, but unfortunately no.” Alex bit off a piece of bread while allowing the soup on her spoon to cool. After swallowing the bread and emptying the contents of the spoon, she added, “While I was waiting for the laundry to finish, I decided to play a little table tennis. When I lifted the end of the table up and clicked it in place, a key fell to the floor.” Alex pulled the key from her borrowed sweats and laid it on the table. “I’m assuming it’s to the locked door, but I didn’t open it.”

Kailyn set the spoon against the rim of the bowl with a clank. “That is what the key’s for. I talked to Tommy today, between naps. He told me the truth of what was going on and where he hid the key. He apologized profusely for the run in with Raven. He told me to tell you ‘thanks’ and that he ‘owes you one’ regarding your protecting me and that he’ll make it right. He’s growing marijuana, but you knew that already, didn’t you?”

“I did, though I can’t believe he needed to resort to that.”

“Tommy lost his job a while back and he’s too stubborn and proud to ask my dad for money. There’s more to it than that, but you get the idea. We have to pray that no one searches the house. With all the police and health department people nosing around, that’s all we need.”

“Don’t worry about that now. You need to focus on getting food in you and getting your strength back. If you want me to, at some point I can take a look for you and see what he’s got down there and what we might be able to do to with it,” Alex said.

“I may take you up on that offer. I’m embarrassed for Tommy. He’s such a great guy and this isn’t like him. He tried to convince himself what he was doing wasn’t so bad, since some states sell marijuana for medicinal purposes and it’s legal in two states now, but I blasted him on that logic.”

“He does seem like a nice guy otherwise,” Alex said.

“He’s a sweetheart. He asked for my understanding and forgiveness. I told him the latter might take time, but that it would only happen if he promised things would change in the future. He said he’d destroy the plants as soon as he was allowed home again. I suppose everyone makes mistakes in their life. As long as he learns a lesson from this and moves forward I think I can forgive him.”

“I agree. God knows I’ve made my share of mistakes. I hope he does straighten himself out though because I think Sean took a special liking to him.”

Kailyn finished her broth. “Really? Because now that you mention it, Tommy went on and on about Sean too on our ride home after Jet Skiing.”

Alex and Kailyn glanced at each other and smiled a knowing smile. Then Alex pushed out her chair and stood. “Okay, enough speculating on our parts. Why don’t you turn on the news and see what’s going on and I’ll clean up dinner and bring in the dessert.”

“You made dessert?”

“Of course, you have to end the meal with something sweet.”

Kailyn glanced at Alex. Her eyes narrowed and a devilish grin etched its way along the right side of her face.

“What? Don’t worry. You’ll like it and it’ll be good for you.”

“Oh, I’m not worried,” Kailyn said as she retreated into the living room, her grin widening. Under her breath she murmured, “But I’ve got a feeling we’re not talking about the same ‘something sweet’.”

THE NEWS REVEALED no significant changes and no new information on when the quarantine would end. Alex wondered if the media wasn’t providing additional details in order not to evoke panic, or if in fact no significant newsworthy items had surfaced. Alex prayed for the latter.

Dessert was a hit. Alex was glad Kailyn was able to eat her raspberry gelatin with bananas and Alex enjoyed the dessert as well. She placed their empty glass bowls on the table in front of the sofa and inched closer to Kailyn, taking her hand.

Kailyn’s eyes met Alex’s. “Do you think holding my hand’s a good idea?”

“I don’t think it’s a bad one.”

“You are impossible,” Kailyn said.

“So I’ve been told, but for different reasons.” Alex watched the remainder of the news in silence, thankful she was there with Kailyn and not at home worrying about her without being able to help. At least she was doing something, even if that effort was small and at present, not producing the results she had hoped for. She was glad Kailyn kept her food in, but concerned her temperature hadn’t dropped.

During a commercial break, Kailyn asked, “Have you heard anything yet from the lawyers regarding Andre’s will?”

“No, unfortunately we haven’t, and the fact we haven’t worries me a little. The handwriting expert confirmed Andre signed the note, so I don’t know what the hold-up is.”

“If this doesn’t work out, and you have to give up the business, have you thought about what you might do next?”

Alex let go of Kailyn’s hand. “No, not yet, but I hope I don’t need to worry about it.” As Alex was about to stand, a BP commercial scrolled onto the screen, touting the work and money BP had poured into the Gulf. The commercial ended with a phrase about BP being committed to the Gulf.

Alex stood. “You know, these guys kill me, they really do. They take a horrible situation, make it ten times worse, and then act like they’re the good guys.”

“I know, it’s aggravating, but now they need to do damage control,” Kailyn said.

“When dolphins first turned up sick and dying, BP blamed their deaths on a cold snap the Gulf was experiencing. And when people got sick, BP pushed that under the rug too. None of the effects of this spill are over, not by a long shot.” Alex redirected her glare from the television to Kailyn. “I forgot to tell you this, but about a week after we went out with Captain Ann on her

boat, I went out with her again and we spotted that dolphin pod she told us about and I'm sorry I saw them. Their skin was discolored and peeling in patches, and their eyes conveyed a sense of recognition that they were dying." A lump formed in Alex's throat. "I'm sorry I'm being a downer. I'm not helping the situation."

Kailyn reached for Alex's hand and squeezed it. "Don't say that. If more people shared your passion, the world might become a better place. I think getting honest information out there is an important step in instituting change though," Kailyn said, letting Alex's hand go. "Change doesn't happen on its own. People have to fight for it."

Alex let Kailyn's words sink in. "Yeah, I guess they do, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Thanks for the words of advice and for putting up with my outburst."

"Not a problem, I'll leave a copy of my bill in your jean jacket pocket."

"Oh, yeah? You mean the bill that will pale in comparison to the one you'll get from me for my doctor services? Speaking of which—it's time to take your temperature. You still feel hot."

Three beeps later on the digital thermometer, Alex read the display. "Not good, 101.3 degrees. We need to get you back to bed," Alex said, her concern rising.

After Alex helped Kailyn to bed, she fed Sasha, took her out for a short walk, and prepared an ice bucket, which she carried upstairs and placed on a chair next to Kailyn's bed. Wash rag in hand, Alex said, "I know you're not going to like this, but we've got to grab this bull by the horns. Enough is enough. I'm not calling that number the CDC gave us and have them cart you off to who knows where."

"I don't want to go either. I don't understand why this temperature won't give."

"Your body's been fighting off something, that's obvious, and that effort burns energy, not a lot of which you have right now, so you're kind of like a carburetor overheating."

"So I've turned into a washed out carburetor?"

"So to speak, now brace yourself." Alex took the cold, soaking wash cloth from the bucket, wrung it out, and placed it on Kailyn's forehead.

"That doesn't feel half bad, actually," Kailyn said.

Alex continued the process of refreshing the washcloth until all the ice cubes melted.

"I know I shouldn't ask you to get too close to me, but now I can't stop shivering. Would you crawl into bed and hold me for a couple of minutes until I get warm?"

"Sure, hang on a minute and I'll be right back." Alex took the bucket of water into the bathroom and emptied it in the tub. She rounded the far side of the bed, slipped off her borrowed shorts and T-shirt and crawled under the covers. Kailyn lay on her side, facing the doorway. Alex snuggled up behind her and wrapped her arm around Kailyn's middle. Her body felt hot, but her feet and hands were ice cold. Alex held Kailyn tight while the shivers subsided. She asked God to grant her a favor and not take Kailyn from her life. She prayed until she fell sound asleep.

## Chapter Fourteen

KAILYN WRAPPED HER arms around her flailing bedmate who lie drenched in sweat, shaking her. “Alex? Alex? It’s okay. Wake up. It’s okay. You’re having a bad dream. Wake up.”

Alex sprang forward into a sitting position as if flung from a sling shot, nearly hitting her head into Kailyn’s had Kailyn not backed off as quickly as she did. “What? Where am I?”

“It’s okay,” Kailyn said in a soft, reassuring tone. “You must have fallen asleep next to me last night. You had a bad dream, that’s all. Lie down and relax.” Kailyn gently placed her hand against Alex’s chest until Alex rested her head on the pillow. She waited for a few seconds. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

Alex rubbed her face. She tucked her arm under the covers. “I dreamt about the boating accident. Sometimes the memories grab me in my sleep.”

“You were thrashing around quite a bit.”

“I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“Don’t be. You can’t control what happens in your sleep. Do you want to tell me about it?” Kailyn asked.

Alex sat still for several seconds before speaking. “Remember when we were playing basketball and I told you I lost my mom and Josh—that they didn’t have their lifejackets on?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t tell you everything.” Alex paused.

“I’m listening. It’s okay.”

“When the waves got rough, my mom yelled for me to take Josh into the cabin and get our lifejackets on. It wasn’t easy. Water poured in and we kept getting thrown around from one side of the cabin to another. I remember hearing the engine die and my dad curse. When I’d finally gotten my lifejacket secured and was about to zip up Josh’s, a huge wave crashed into the boat. I held onto Josh and steadied him and at the same time watched, as if in slow motion, my mom bump her head on the windshield of the boat and fall to the deck. The lifejackets she held for her and my dad slipped from her hands. Josh wriggled free and bolted from the cabin. I reached for him and yelled for him to stop, but he didn’t stop. I remember my fingers grazing the slick material of his lifejacket, but I couldn’t grab hold. And before I could get on deck, another wave, one that towered several feet above the boat, washed over it, taking everyone but me with it. I remember screaming into the pitch-darkness when I’d realized they were gone. I held onto the rail and reached over the edge hoping someone would grab my hand, but no one did, and then the boat leaned on its side and everything went black. It was my job to secure Josh’s lifejacket and I failed. He died because of me.”

“Alex, I’m so sorry. That’s terrifying, but it’s not your fault what happened to Josh. It’s no one’s fault.”

“I should have secured his lifejacket before my own.”



“That’s crazy. Under those circumstances, who can even think? You didn’t expect him to run off. You couldn’t have known. You need to forgive yourself. You were a victim that day too. You were only a child. You could have died. I thank God you didn’t.”

“I wish the dreams would stop. Each time this happens, I remember every detail up until the boat capsizes, but then I don’t remember anything after that. Everything goes dark and not until later do I wake up on the rescue boat. I don’t ever remember the part about being rescued though. And I hear what you’re saying, but sometimes I wish I hadn’t regained consciousness.”

“Please don’t think that. You keep having the dreams because you haven’t let go of the guilt. You didn’t have the power to control that day. We all like to think we’re in charge of our lives, but I often think there’s very little we are in charge of. Fate controls a lot. I’m sure your mom is grateful you’re alive and your grandmother is too,” Kailyn said, propped up on her right elbow, facing Alex, the early morning sun filtering through the window.

“I’m here today because of my grandmother, but I never thought about how my mom would feel,” Alex said.

“And I’m sure your brother wouldn’t want you to feel guilty.”

“No, I suppose he wouldn’t. I wish they were still with us. I know I can’t change what happened, but I wish I could.”

“I wish it for you too, but your family will always be with you in your heart. No one can take them from you.”

A half-smile made its way across Alex’s face. “You’re right. It’s weird that in these dreams I can remember everything so clearly, except the rescue part. In this one though, I had a split second sensation of being pushed from under the water to the surface...then it went dark again. That’s the first time I got a glimpse into anything after the boat capsized.”

“Did you see who pushed you?”

“No.”

“Do you think it could have been your dad?”

“I don’t know, but I didn’t see him being rescued with me in that brief glimpse I got. He never talked about the accident until the other day. Thinking he might have helped save me wasn’t something I ever contemplated. He was probably in worse shape than I was. At least I had a lifejacket on.”

“This may sound completely crazy, but do you think a dolphin could have saved you, and maybe your dad, too?”

“Wow. Anything is possible, I guess, but I think the likelihood would be extremely slim,” Alex said.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. You’re the one who told me dolphins are called hieros ichthys or sacred fish by the Greeks, right? So who knows? It would explain your otherwise inexplicable connection to dolphins.”

“True, and it’s a nice thought, but more likely than not whoever saw us from that rescue boat and pulled us in is the reason we survived,” Alex said.

“But you’ll never know for sure.”

Alex smiled fully. “No, you’re right. I won’t.”

“I’m surprised that after everything that happened, you’re not afraid of the water—your job and all,” Kailyn said.

“You’d think that’d be the case, but the opposite’s true. Living and working here near the water makes me feel closer to my mom and Josh. Their bodies were never recovered.”

Kailyn reached her left hand to the top of Alex's forehead and slowly ran her fingers through Alex's damp, curly hair. "I'm so sorry. There's not much of a silver lining, is there? The day at the playground when you first told me what happened, I wanted to reach out and hold you, with the hope of somehow lessening your pain, but I wasn't sure you'd let me. I want you to know from now on that I'm here for you whenever you need me."

Alex met Kailyn's eyes. "Your support means more to me than I can tell you. I'm sorry I filled your head with my troubles, but in a way, I'm glad I could share that part of my life with you. And as far as the day at the playground goes, I probably would have let you...hold me, that is."

The right corner of Kailyn's mouth turned upward. "Is that so?"

"Yes." Alex took Kailyn's hand and held it to the side of her face, then kissed the center of her palm. Her eyes opened wide and she sat up. "Shoot! I completely forgot. Your hand—"

"What's the matter?" Kailyn sat up as well.

Alex placed her hand on Kailyn's forehead. "You're not burning up anymore! Wait here." Alex sprang out of bed and dashed into the bathroom. Her sudden movement woke Sasha, who followed on her heels. Alex petted Sasha on the head. "It's okay girl, I think your mom's broken that fever."

When Kailyn withdrew the thermometer, four eyes were razor focused on her, two blue eyes staring down on her and two brown eyes peering up. She first glanced at Alex, registering her hopefulness, and then at Sasha before she read the result which displayed 98.6. "You're right, the fever broke."

After the initial shock of relief kicked in, Kailyn hugged Alex, then backed off. "I shouldn't have done that again. I might still be sick or contagious."

Sasha barked and jumped on the bed.

"Sasha doesn't seem to think so," Alex said.

"No, she doesn't, but that doesn't make it so." Kailyn glanced into Alex's loving eyes a second longer, then squeezed her hand before letting it go. She transferred her attention to her misbehaving dog. "Oh no you don't, you little scoundrel," Kailyn said as she scratched Sasha around the neck and wrestled her to her side. Then she shushed her off the bed. "And don't be so jealous." Then to Alex she added, "I better take her out."

"Why don't you let me take her and you enjoy a hot shower instead. God knows after what you've been through, you deserve it."

"I will gladly take you up on that offer."

After both women had showered, they ate breakfast and watched the news. The quarantine remained in place, though scattered through the news reports were indications it might be lifted sooner than first thought. Taking no chances, Alex once again stripped the beds, did laundry, and disinfected all the surfaces they'd touched from the day before. Kailyn prepared sandwiches for lunch, having to sit and rest in between, but determined to finish on her own, though Alex had offered to help. Her thoughts of Alex today, however, were constantly interrupted by the worry of having Tommy's marijuana plants in the basement. She couldn't fathom how Tommy slept at night, knowing that at any moment he might get caught and end up in jail or worse. Kailyn tucked her hair behind her ear, then grabbed the key to the locked basement door and drifted downstairs.

Kailyn stood in front of the locked door, key in hand, undecided whether or not she should enter the room. She heard Alex's footsteps coming down the stairs and nearing from behind.

"Would you like some company?" Alex said.

“I would.” Kailyn handed Alex the key. “It’s still difficult imagining my brother wrapped up in all of this. I want to open the door and see nothing inside, but I realize that’s not going to happen.”

“I know, but your disappointment in him will pass in time,” Alex said, placing the key in the door. “I promise.”

On the other side, a well-lit room containing hanging florescent grow lights and rows of thriving marijuana plants in pots awaited them. The space had transformed into a mini jungle. The plant’s familiar fanned, serrated leaves reached out in all directions. “Wow, that’s a lot of green. More than I imagined he’d have. This is not going to be easy to get rid of,” Alex said.

“We probably can’t risk bagging it and throwing it out with the garbage, right?” Kailyn asked.

“Yeah, I definitely wouldn’t do that, and you can’t burn it either, for obvious reasons.” Alex pondered the options. “If it were me, I’d uproot these as soon as possible and get them dried out. Once they dried, you could break the plant up in a food processor and then use it as compost in a vegetable garden or spread it out under shrubbery in an area that’s not well traveled and let it completely decompose.”

“We don’t have a vegetable garden.”

“You could build one. You’ve got plenty of soil. You could construct several four-by-eight foot beds. I’d leave a good foot between them so you can weed and water easier. You’d dig out a few inches of sand, line the edges in rock, or brick, or use the wood you’ve got down here. The key is to raise the beds about a foot or foot and a half above the ground. Then you fill the bottom with the chopped-up plant material and cover it with the soil. That way you not only get rid of the plants, but some of these other materials too. You’ve got a big piece of property with plenty of sun, and who doesn’t like a garden?”

“I love the idea. It’s perfect, and having a garden would be nice, but I think what you’re proposing is beyond my skill set. And if it’s past mine, I doubt Tommy will have a clue either, trust me.”

“I could help. Framing a garden’s not that difficult. I’ve built lots of flower beds for Grams.”

“I appreciate the offer Alex, but I don’t want Tommy’s problem to become your problem.”

“I don’t mind helping. I know this is bothering you. If Tommy was serious about putting an end to all this, then we could pull the plants for him now and at least start the drying process. Or I could pull them if you’re not up to it yet and I could at least get the garden beds set up.”

Kailyn began to relax.

“It shouldn’t take that long, and besides, it doesn’t look like we’re going anywhere soon, so we may as well do something constructive,” Alex said.

“You are too much. Okay, but only if I can help. I feel bad enough as it is dragging you into this. I’ll pull up the plants if you don’t mind working on the garden part.”

“Okay, but don’t overdo it.” As soon as the words left Alex’s mouth, the doorbell rang.

“Oh, great. Who could that be? I hope it’s not the police. I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Alex.”

“Don’t worry. You’re panicking because you know the stuff’s down here. If you didn’t know anything about it, that ring would sound like any other. I doubt it’s the police. I’m guessing they’re busy making sure no one gets on or off the island whose not supposed to. You should see who’s there though. I’ll come with you.”

Kailyn glanced out of one of the glass panels surrounding the front door. A monitor from the health department stood outside in a hooded white suit. "Good afternoon, ladies," he said when Kailyn opened the door.

"Afternoon. Can I help you?" Kailyn asked.

"I'm making my rounds updating temperature logs...if you ladies don't mind."

"No, of course not," Kailyn said. "Would you like to come in?"

"Thanks, but that wouldn't be wise. I can take readings from here. Just stand still and relax. This won't even touch you." The man held up a black, toy looking, gun-like device with a digital monitor and short, stubby barrel three inches from Kailyn's neck. After registering Kailyn's temperature, he did the same with Alex. Then he took another measurement from each. "Both your readings are normal, which is good news. How are you both feeling otherwise?"

"Fine," Alex interjected.

"Do you know how much longer the quarantine will be in effect?" Kailyn asked.

"I can't say for sure, but indications are strong that a definitive date should be given soon. How are you on supplies?"

"Fine for now. Thank you," Kailyn said.

"Great. Thanks for your time."

AFTER LUNCH, ALEX picked up their plates and set them in the sink. "Don't move. I'll take care of this," she said. "You made lunch. I'll clean up."

"If you insist. I won't stop you." Kailyn watched Alex as she cleared the table, thankful and relieved she was with her during this ordeal. "I think I'll give Tommy a call again to see how serious he truly is about getting rid of those plants."

"Okay. Give me a couple of minutes and I'll give you some privacy. I want to take a look outside anyway and see where we might put a garden, if you decide to go that route."

"You don't have to go."

"No. You should talk to him with no one around. I don't mind," Alex said.

Kailyn was relieved Alex insisted she call Tommy in private, because until she got on the phone with him, she hadn't realized the true depth of her disappointment and anger. "Swear to me you'll never lie to me again or do anything this reckless and stupid," she continued.

"Sis, I swear. Please, how many more ways can I say I'm sorry? I'm an idiot. I get it."

"I'm not sure you do. You put us all in danger. If I'd have been here by myself when Raven came, who knows what could have happened to me. And trying to hide this under Mom and Dad's noses? Are you insane?"

"They're hardly ever here, and clearly, they hadn't noticed."

"Don't give me that crap. That's irrelevant."

"I know. I swear to you the first chance I get, I'll get rid of the plants."

"It's not going to be that easy. Have you thought of how you're going to do it? You've practically got a jungle growing in that room."

"No, I hadn't. You're right. This could be a bigger problem than I thought," Tommy said.

"Alex had a good idea, if you want to hear it, and she's been gracious enough to offer to lend a hand. I'm so uncomfortable having this stuff in the house, with all the police and media around, I can't even tell you. I think she knows how it's affecting me, too."

"She must hate me now. Is this going to ruin things between you two?"

“Surprisingly, she seems to be more understanding about your poor judgment than I am, but then you are my brother, and someone has to set you straight,” Kailyn chided.

“Very true, Sis. And believe me, I appreciate everything. I honestly don’t know what I was thinking. Whatever you come up with or whatever you think we should do, I’m with you one hundred percent. I owe you and Alex big time. Dinner on me wherever you want to go, once I get a new job.”

“Anywhere but Ty’s.”

“What? You love that place.”

“Yeah, not so much anymore.”

“Everything still okay over there? I’m worried about you.”

“Everything’s fine,” she said, then glanced out the window at Alex. “Correction. As crazy as this whole situation is, things are actually much better than fine, and looking better and better as we speak.”

“And that wouldn’t be due to one tall, gorgeous female being there with you, would it?”

“I’ll never tell. Gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“How’d it go?” Alex asked as Kailyn approached.

“Good. He’d be more than grateful for any of our help. He feels awful, and rightfully so,” Kailyn said.

“So you want to go with drying out the plants and the garden approach?” Alex asked.

“I do. What about putting the garden on this side of the house, here, where you’re standing?”

“That was my thought, too. If you’re good with it, I’ll grab what I need and get started.”

“I can’t thank you enough for everything.”

“No thanks necessary.”

“Not true.”

A short while later, Kailyn retreated into the basement, once Alex extracted what she needed, and started pulling out the marijuana plants from their pots. She shook the dirt from the root balls, and laid them out to dry in the basement. She found the task much easier than she’d thought it would be, the plants coming loose with ease. She didn’t care what kind of mess she made; she’d let Tommy clean that up on another day. She felt good, but didn’t want to overdo it either. When she finished, she stepped outside and checked on Alex.

Holding a glass of juice in her hand, Kailyn’s eyes roamed over Alex’s toned body, the sight quickening her pulse. As she drew nearer, she saw the sunlight radiate off the beads of sweat on Alex’s skin. She wondered if Alex had any idea how alluring she was.

“Is that for me?” Alex said.

“What?” Kailyn said. She glanced at the glass in her hand. “Oh, yeah, I figured you hadn’t gone inside and gotten yourself anything to drink. You need to stay hydrated.”

Alex reached for the glass. “You figured right, thanks. The air’s pretty humid today. It got hot quick.” Before taking a long, slow sip, she wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her arm.

“More like scorching hot,” Kailyn heard herself say. When Alex glanced over, Kailyn averted her stare. “You did a fantastic job out here. Are you finished?”

“Yup. That’s about all I can do at this point. Now it’s a matter of waiting for the plants to dry.”

“Believe me, that can’t happen soon enough.”

“A couple of weeks should do it. I’m so hot I’m tempted to take a dip in the Gulf to cool off. You want to join me?” Alex said.

“Dressed in our clothes?”

“Why not? They’re ready for the wash anyway, at least I know these are.” Alex pulled at the front of her damp T-shirt. “But only if you feel okay.”

“I feel fine. Do you think the police will let us?”

“It’s your property. As long as we don’t swim too far out, I don’t think anyone will chase us. Besides, I’m sure they realize we’d never make it across Redfish Pass by swimming anyway, not with the undertow there.”

“What about your hand?”

Alex glanced at the dirtied gauze pad. “It’ll be fine. Salt water’s good for healing wounds.”

“If you’re up for it, I’ll come with you, but I don’t know if I’ll go in the water.” Kailyn extended Alex her hand and walked with her through the front yard, toward the crystal blue waters of the Gulf. When they reached the beach, she kicked off her sandals and sat in the sand, digging her feet into the warm granules, letting the gentle breeze blow against her skin. Alex did the same. Kailyn watched the water melt the underlying tension of their unusual situation away, blocking out the meaning of the bright buoys that bobbed in the water and the visible police boats. “It’s strange to see boats way out on the water past the buoys and police boats and people on Captiva living life as if nothing were going on while were trapped here.”

“Nothing *is* going on for them, but soon everything here will be back to normal too. You’re already feeling better. We need to wait it out and in the meantime focus on the bright side. For instance, there’s nothing keeping us from having some fun, is there?”

“What are you proposing?”

“A race into the water of course, though I know I’ll beat you,” Alex boasted in jest.

“Is that so? I think not,” Kailyn said. She pushed Alex into the sand, shrieked, and bolted for the water.

Alex was fast on Kailyn’s heels. She ran down the beach and lifted her legs high as she stomped into the refreshing wetness. Several strides in and now chest deep, she lunged for Kailyn and caught her.

Kailyn went under with Alex. When they resurfaced, they gasped for air, wiped their hands over their faces and hair, and laughed.

“Gotcha,” Alex said.

Kailyn kicked her feet. She turned in the water and faced Alex. “You did, but not before I beat you in,” she managed, her breaths short.

“That’s because you cheated,” Alex countered.

“You brought the cheater out in me then,” Kailyn said. Her eyes held Alex’s stare, filling her with desire and want. As Kailyn contemplated Alex’s lips and recalled their tenderness, her heart raced at the thought of feeling and tasting them again. Face flushed, she swam closer to Alex. As Alex’s arms pulled her close, a grunt of pleasure escaped Kailyn’s mouth, the embrace sending a shiver through her. “I can’t tell you how much I want to kiss you right now.”

“I won’t stop you.”

“But what if I’m still—”

Before Kailyn finished, Alex placed her lips on top of Kailyn’s and kissed her deeply.

Kailyn returned the kiss with the passion and lust that burned from within, ignited from the moment she first met Alex. Arms wrapped around Alex’s neck, she yearned to get closer, to feel Alex’s hands on her body. The sensations Alex evoked sent hot shivers through her. Just as she thought she might explode from need, the blare of a megaphone broke her connection with Alex and shocked her into reality once more.

“You are nearing the buoy line. Please back away and return to shore,” were the words echoed at them from the police boat, now forty yards from shore.

Alex laughed. She waved at the police. “Come on, we should go before we get ourselves arrested.”

“My thoughts could get me arrested,” Kailyn whispered.

# Chapter Fifteen

KAILYN LED ALEX upstairs into her bedroom. The afternoon sunlight shone through the window, sending a warm glow cascading throughout the room. Kailyn lit a candle. She took Alex's hands into her own before gazing up into pools of cobalt blue. "I'm so glad you found your way into my life," Kailyn said. She placed both of Alex's hands against her chest, close to her heart. "That first day you waved to me, and I waved back, I felt a connection to you, but didn't know why. I only knew I had to see you again. What I didn't know then was how special you were and that I'd fall so quick and hard for you. I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be right now than here with you."

"I feel the same way. As stubborn and as thickheaded as I was in the beginning, you touched me that first day I heard you laugh. You've been in my heart from day one and deep down I've never let you go. Thinking I might lose you was..."

Kailyn let go of Alex's hands and placed her hands against Alex's cheeks, cradling them. "It'd take a lot for you to lose me, and even then I won't let go." With that, Kailyn kissed Alex soft on the lips. She pressed her body against Alex's as the heat between them intensified and their kisses deepened.

Wanting desperately to feel Alex's body next to hers, Kailyn lifted Alex's wet T-shirt over her head. Her hands roved across Alex's heated back and toward her buttocks, kisses ever deepening and intensifying. She undid the button on Alex's shorts and slid them off her body, shedding her own clothes just as quickly. Kailyn's heart beat fast and her breathing quickened to the sounds of Alex's moans and to the sight of the rise and fall of her chest. "God, you don't know how much I want you right now," Kailyn said, removing the last bit of clothing between them.

"Believe me," Alex gasped, "the feeling is more than mutual."

Kailyn's line of vision traversed Alex's body with pleasure. She took Alex's hand and pulled her under the covers. As Kailyn settled gently over Alex and their skin touched, Kailyn's breath caught. She gazed into Alex's eyes, lost in the flames beneath. Her body ached with the intensity of what she perceived as Alex's equal desire.

Kailyn rolled to the side and pulled Alex onto her, kisses deepening once again. A muffled groan escaped her lips as Alex slid her thigh between Kailyn's parted legs and kissed the side of Kailyn's neck. Kailyn pressed against Alex's heat and glided against her. Her moan deepened as Alex's lips descended to Kailyn's breasts and her hands slid along Kailyn's thighs, caressing along the way.

Kailyn writhed from beneath, the pleasure excruciating. She grasped Alex's shoulders and pushed against her. "Please, Alex, I don't know how much more I can take. I need you now."

Alex responded, filling Kailyn's every need until Kailyn's body surrendered in a flash of unbridled ecstasy followed by pulsating release.



KAILYN LAY ON Alex's arm, wrapped tight against her body. Her head rested near her lover's chest as it rose and fell under her. "I want to give you the kind of pleasure you've given me," Kailyn whispered. She ran her index finger slowly between Alex's breasts.

"You've already given me more than I could ever have dreamed of," Alex said.

"I have so much more I need to share with you." Kailyn maneuvered her body over Alex's and dropped her mouth to Alex's small, yet firm breast. Head lowered, she took Alex's nipple into her mouth and sucked as it hardened beneath her tongue. At the same time, she molded Alex's other breast within her hand, the nipple already firm.

Alex groaned with pleasure as Kailyn kissed Alex along the center of her chest and over her stomach while hands continued to explore and caress. The scent of lemongrass mixed with vanilla floated through the air. "Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?" Alex breathed.

"Mmm, I think so," Kailyn said as her hands traveled slow up Alex's inner thighs and her tongue circled, tormented, and teased until Alex lost control.

Alex clutched Kailyn against her, the mounted tension beyond anything she'd ever felt. She held onto the fringes of reality as she soared high above a wide open plain, rising ever higher into the clouds and over the ocean, sun-drenched waves glimmering off the surface. She rose and fell like the waves, then rose once more until shockwaves tore through her, claiming release, lifting her toward the soft, warm sands along the shore that cradled her body.

Kailyn slid along Alex's side and rested as their breathing slowed. "Are you okay?"

Alex couldn't speak at first. Then she whispered, "Never been better." Alex pulled Kailyn in and wrapped herself around her. Within minutes, both drifted to sleep.

When Kailyn awoke, she did so to the touch of Alex's hand moving a strand of her hair off her face.

"Mmm, it's so nice to wake up and see you here with me," Kailyn said. "I want this day to last forever." Then she pulled Alex into another scorching kiss.

ALEX WALKED INTO the kitchen in a pair of borrowed shorts and a navy blue T-shirt that accentuated the blue in her eyes, her hair still damp. The vent fan above the oven was on, so she spoke a little louder. "That shower felt good."

"I know something that felt even better," Kailyn said. Kailyn's hair was almost dry. She was dressed in a sleeveless white T-shirt that hugged her torso, tan shorts, and sandals.

Alex blushed. "Oh, no you don't. You can't say anything suggestive or look at me in that way you do until after we've eaten. I'm famished."

"I wonder why?" Kailyn teased. "No, I'm starving too."

"Can I help with dinner?" Alex reached over and pet Sasha, who'd wandered by her side.

"No, thanks, I've got it covered. Having had to be catered to the past couple of days, I'm rather enjoying cooking for a change."

"What are you making? It smells good in here, like lemon."

Kailyn stood next to the stove, chopping cucumbers on the cutting board. "I'm making a brown rice tabbouleh with blackened chicken on the grill. And yes, there's lemon in the tabbouleh."

“What’s tabbouleh?”

“You’ve never had tabbouleh?”

“Nope.”

“Then you’re in for a treat. It’s a Mid Eastern salad usually made with bulgur, which I didn’t have so I’m substituting brown rice instead. It’s got chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, green onions, garlic, lemon juice, olive oil, parsley, and pepper.” Kailyn pushed the cucumber off the cutting board and into a large glass bowl with her knife. “I figured the rice and chicken would be fairly neutral foods, in case my stomach wasn’t quite up to par yet.”

“Good idea. You want to take it easy on your system.” Alex maneuvered behind Kailyn and wrapped her arms around her waist. Then she kissed her on the nape of her neck.

“Hey, you’re not playing fair. Your no suggestive talking or staring comment goes for touching then too, or we’ll never eat.”

Alex stepped back, hands held in the air. “Okay, okay, you win. I’ll leave you to it then. If you want me to do anything, let me know. Otherwise, I’ll go see if the news is on.”

“Good idea.”

Twenty minutes later, Alex walked into the kitchen as Kailyn lifted the last piece of chicken off the grill.

“Perfect timing,” Kailyn said. “We can eat.”

“I’d hoped as much. The chicken smells great.” Alex carried the water glasses to the table and watched Kailyn plate the dishes. “I’ve got an update on the quarantine. They said on the news it’s expected to be lifted tomorrow at noon.”

“Really? So it’s over? There was no SARS?”

“No, unfortunately there was. The chef who they had in isolation died last night. So did three of his family members back in China.”

Kailyn clasped her hand over her heart. “My God, that’s awful. I feel terrible for him and his family. There’s too much sadness everywhere. Sometimes it’s overwhelming.”

“I know. The good news is, apparently no one else he came in contact with contracted the virus. One person still has a fever, and that’s why the CDC’s being cautious, but everyone else’s sickness on the island traced back to Ty’s restaurant where we ate Friday night, and to the scallops.”

“I knew I should’ve picked a different appetizer. I’m pretty sure scallops won’t be in my future diet for some time.”

“Yeah, getting sick on a certain food, or drink, has a way of doing that to you,” Alex said.

“I’m just thankful this whole ordeal is finally over and more people weren’t infected. My worst fear was risking getting you sick, thinking I might have contracted the virus. At the beach...and after...I should never have gotten so close. I shouldn’t have let you kiss me, even though the fever broke, without knowing for sure. It’s bad enough I dragged you here and—”

“And nothing,” Alex said. She placed the water glasses to the table. “You hardly dragged me. The night started as a date, remember? I wanted to go to dinner with you. I couldn’t wait to see you and I’d do it all over again, regardless of the outcome regarding the SARS. I’d have gone crazy at home if I knew you were sick and I couldn’t help you. You mean too much to me.”

Kailyn stared into Alex’s eyes, took her cheeks in her hands, and kissed her on the lips, soft at first, and then with all the depth of feeling she carried inside her for Alex. Pulling away she said, “I’m glad, because I don’t know what I would have done without you. You are more special to me than I can put into words, and as soon as I get a little food in me and I regain my energy,

I'm going to show you again how much. I've still got you all to myself until noon tomorrow, and I don't plan on wasting a second of that time."

## Chapter Sixteen

ALEX SAUNTERED INTO the kitchen after work and was immediately assaulted by Thunder. “Hey, Thunder,” she said as she ruffled his ears. Then she walked toward her grandmother, who stood by the sink washing lettuce, and kissed her on the cheek. “Hi, Grams.”

“Hi, Alexandra. How was work?”

“Busy. One of the Jet Skis broke down and I couldn’t fix it, so I had to bring it to the shop after spending an hour on it. What a time drain.”

Emma turned off the water and set the lettuce leaves she held into the colander. “Hopefully the experts will have a better go at it. Are you okay? You sound kind of down,” she said as she dried her hands.

“I don’t know. I’m okay I guess. I haven’t heard from Kailyn much since the whole SARS thing. I mean we talked the other night, but since her parents got back, she hasn’t made an effort to see me.”

“Have you asked to see her?”

“Well,” Alex said before a long pause. She glanced at her grandmother and a grin etched itself across her face. “Not exactly,” she continued.

“There you have it. A relationship is a two-way street. You can’t expect her to chase after you all the time.”

“Yeah, but she’s usually the one who—”

“She’s the one who nothing. If you miss her and want to see her, then you need to make your feelings clear. I’m sure she’ll find a way to see you. Maybe her parents have been a tad smothering right now, and you can’t blame them. I feel like holding on to you and never letting go either, but I know protecting you twenty-four-seven’s not possible.”

Alex felt a tug on her heart. “I love you Grams.”

“I love you, too. Now cheer up and hold that thought.” Emma walked over to the kitchen table, picked up an envelope, and handed it to her. “This came for you today. It’s from that Bails lawyer.”

Alex took the envelope in her hand and breathed deep. The return address read The Law Offices of Humphrey, Lawson, and Bails. She peered at her grandmother, who provided a reassuring nod, and opened the envelope. As Alex read the words in print, relief flowed through her limbs and she sprang in the air several times, holding the letter above her head. “We did it! We did it, Grams. We won! They’re letting the will contest drop!” Then she hugged her grandmother.

“Easy, sweetie,” Emma managed to whisper. “Leave a little air in my old lungs.”

“Oh, stop,” Alex said. She released her grip.

Thunder ran in from the living room and nearly knocked both Alex and Emma off their feet.

“Whoa, Thunder. Everything’s okay. Mama got some good news, that’s all,” she said as she steadied herself and made sure her grandmother was okay. Then she petted Thunder on the head.

“Thank goodness this craziness is finally over. I’m so happy for you and Sean. Do you think he got the letter already, too?”

“He may not be home yet. I’m sure he’ll call if he does, and if not, I’ll call him later. I can’t wait to see him. I should call Kailyn, too. A part of this win belongs to her.”

“See? Now this gives you the perfect excuse.”

“Yes it does,” Alex said.

As soon as dinner was over, Alex went to her room to call Kailyn. Before she dialed, another call came in. Alex answered the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey, kiddo, it’s Dad.”

Alex was shocked her dad had called. She couldn’t remember the last time he that happened. “Hey, Dad. This is a surprise. What’s up? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. I was wondering if maybe you wanted to stop by on Saturday for dinner and watch the ball game.”

Alex wasn’t sure what to say at first. After a slight hesitation, she said, “That sounds nice, but I’ll still need to check my calendar and get back to you for certain.”

“That’ll be fine. How’s Emma?”

“She’s good.”

“That’s good. Okay, I’ll wait to hear from you then. You take care,” Christopher said before he hung up the phone.

At that moment, Alex wasn’t sure if she was angry with him for having waited so long to reach out, glad he was trying to rebuild their relationship, or worried she’d put her heart out there again only to have it broken once more.

The heart broken part brought her back to thoughts about Kailyn. Her heart ached away from Kailyn, a condition she wasn’t used to experiencing. She picked up the phone, and dialed. A nervous uneasiness roamed in her stomach as she listened to the unanswered rings. She wondered if something had scared Kailyn off, though she couldn’t think what that something might be. They’d spent the most wonderful time together before the quarantine was lifted. To Alex, every hour apart now seemed like a day, and a day like a week. What if Kailyn got what she thought she wanted, but now wasn’t really sure if a relationship with Alex, or any woman, was right for her? Alex didn’t read any hint of uncertainty in Kailyn’s voice the last time they spoke, but that was days ago. She swallowed hard as Kailyn said “Hello.”

“Hi, Kailyn, it’s Alex.”

“Hey, it’s good to hear your voice. I miss you,” Kailyn said.

“You do?”

“Of course I do. Why would you think I wouldn’t?”

“You’ve been kind of distant,” Alex said.

“I admit I’ve been busy the past couple of days catching up with my work, trying to ease my parents’ worries, and keeping them occupied so they stay out of the basement. I can’t tell you how unsettling the knowledge of what’s down there now is, sitting right under our noses. But believe me, I can’t stop thinking about you. How could I not?”

“I guess.”

“You guess? Sounds like I’m going to have to do something to change that uncertainty. Of course, no one was stopping you from calling me, were they?”

“You sound like my grandmother,” Alex whispered. “She said the same thing to me.”

“She’s a wise woman,” Kailyn said. “I care deeply about you. You have to know that. Things have been up in the air here, that’s all.”

“I do know. I feel the same way, too, which is why I did call. Also, I’ve got great news.”

“The will contest?” Kailyn said.

“Yes, how’d you know?”

“I figured they’d have to make a decision eventually.”

“The Samsons conceded. They won’t contest. They finally realized they had no leg to stand on.”

“Alex, that’s great! I’m so happy for you and Sean. I wish I could hug you right now.”

“I wish the same thing.”

“I know how much keeping the business in Andre’s memory means to both you and Sean, and how important this victory with the lawyer is,” Kailyn said.

“A huge part of the reason we won is because of you. The birthday card he wrote to me sealed the deal, so I wanted to thank you again.”

“I’m glad I could help, but the credit belongs to you and Sean. We have to celebrate. How about dinner Saturday? My folks are headed back to New York for a few days.”

Alex hesitated. “Dinner sounds great, but believe it or not, my dad called before and invited me to dinner Saturday, and to watch the ball game with him. I’m still in shock, I think. I’m not sure if going is a good idea, I’m kind of aggravated with him, but calling had to be a huge step for him.”

“I agree, and I think it’s great he called. We can find another day to celebrate, but I think you should take your dad up on his offer. He’s throwing out an olive branch. Maybe it’s time to forgive him, for both your sakes.”

“Maybe, but I’m not sure I’m ready for that yet.”

“Think on it. I’m sure you’ll make the right decision. But since I know I’m not going to last a whole week without seeing you, how about lunch later this week? Will you be able to break free?”

“I will, and as far as I’m concerned, tomorrow’s not soon enough.”

“Great, tomorrow it is then. I’m crazy about you, and don’t you ever forget it,” Kailyn said.

“I won’t.”

DROPLETS OF SWEAT cascaded between Alex’s breasts as she trudged through the humid evening air to the front door of her dad’s apartment building. She swatted at a mosquito with her free hand after she rang the bell, a lemon meringue pie held in the other. Receiving no answer, Alex rang the bell again, hoping that this evening’s visit was not going to be a mistake. After waiting a few seconds, she fumbled for the keys in her jeans and unlocked the door.

Inside, she strode to her dad’s apartment and knocked. No answer. She knocked again. “Dad, it’s me, Alex. Are you okay?” Alex waited, then unlocked the apartment door. A light shone in the kitchen and the television was on, but her father wasn’t in the room. “Dad? Where are you?”

Alex heard a faint “Over here.” She hurried toward the bedroom and saw her dad sitting crouched under the doorframe from the bathroom, his back against the frame. “What happened, are you okay?”

“Get under the doorway with me. It’s not safe. This place could crumble any minute.”

“What do you mean? Everything looks fine,” Alex said.

“No, the walls are cracking.”

Alex glanced around the ceiling of the apartment. She saw no cracks. She breathed deep. “Hang on a second, Dad. Let me go put this pie down and I’ll be right back.” Alex turned and walked into the kitchen. The smell of baked potato wafted past, causing her stomach to growl. On the counter were two completed salads, hamburger buns, and four hamburger patties, waiting to be grilled. Alex smiled both a happy and sad smile. After a few moments, she returned to the bathroom.

“I checked out the place, Dad, there are no cracks anywhere. It’s safe. You can get up. I called your neighbor too, to see if he heard anything. He told me a work crew from the energy company was here about a half an hour ago, a couple of units away, but other than that, it’s been quiet. Let me help you.” Alex grabbed his arm and was surprised he let her help him up. “It’s good you found a safe place though, because you never know.”

“Yeah, that’s what they said to do on the television program I watched a while back. Pain in the neck this is though, never knowing,” Christopher said.

“I know. I’ll call the town first thing Monday morning to make sure everything’s okay, but I really think you should stop worrying about it. That program on the sink holes was probably the worst thing you could have watched. They make everyone paranoid.” Alex walked her dad to the sofa. “Sit here and relax for a few minutes and I’ll finish dinner. The food looks great so far.”

“Thanks, kiddo. I tried.”

“I know, Dad, and I appreciate it. I can’t wait to watch the game, too. I heard our rivals are talking a lot of smack.”

“Yeah, they love to talk big, but let’s see how they fare against McMillan on the mound today.”

“HEY JENNA, WHAT’S up? Did you call to tell me we don’t have to go to the Fourth of July event for H&M tomorrow anymore, and thereby make my day?” Alex said.

“You wish. No, I’m calling to make sure you’re still going and aren’t backing out.”

“That’s cruel. I may be many things, but I’ve never broken a promise. I may not be thrilled about going, but that has nothing to do with the company and more to do about the stuffiness of those events. I’ve told you this time of the year is tough for me, but I’d never back out.” Alex rested against the pillows on her bed.

“I know, and I’m thankful you’re going. I’ve got big news for you, too, but I’m saving it for tomorrow,” Jenna said.

“Great. I hope the suspense doesn’t keep me up all night.”

“Smart ass. I’ll swing by tomorrow night at seven.”

“Can’t wait,” Alex said as she hung up the phone. Then to Thunder she added, “How do I get myself into these situations Thunder, huh? Tell me.”

Thunder lifted his head, tilted it to the side, and grunted.

Alex laughed. “Never mind, you’re a good boy. Go back to sleep,” she said and turned off the light.

Alex lay in bed for a long time unable to sleep. She recalled all the crazy twists and turns her life had taken and how close she’d come to ending it, glad now that she hadn’t. She missed her mom and Josh terribly and not a day went by where she didn’t think about them, but on this eve of the anniversary of their passing, for the first time, she recalled the good times they spent together when they were alive, rather than focus on what was missing with them gone.

Alex thanked God for her grandmother and for Kailyn, and for the progress her dad was making, even if the road was bumpy. Kailyn had been right. She was glad she'd taken him up on his dinner offer, and although their conversation was limited, it was a start. Alex would be the one who'd need to reach out next. Alex was thankful to have Kailyn in her life. She could hardly believe a month had passed since the quarantine and that somehow they'd grown even closer in that time. She didn't think it possible. The magnitude of how much she cared for her was the only thing that scared her now.



## Chapter Seventeen

BANDS OF WELL dressed men and women flowed steady into the lobby of the Fort Myers Markston Hotel, some making their way to the bar, others to Ballroom A where the gathering Jenna needed to attend was being held.

Alex had to admit Jenna looked amazing in a charcoal, long-sleeve, crystal-embellished evening dress with matching high-heeled, cross strap sandals, and that if she weren't smitten with Kailyn, she'd have admired her outfit even more.

On the other hand, Alex wore a solid black two-button closure tuxedo with a notched lapel and charcoal gray handkerchief that peeked from the chest welt pocket and matched her bow-tie. Under the tuxedo she wore a steel gray shirt, and black leather dress shoes. Alex tugged on the shirt collar. "I know I haven't been away from H&M that long, but I don't recognize any of these people."

"That's because most of them have nothing to do with H&M," Jenna responded, entering the ballroom. "I thought I mentioned the lender was who they all had in common."

"I don't recall, but then it doesn't matter much, though now I do see various company names on the tables," Alex said as she glanced around the room. Twenty white clad tables seating eight people per table were situated throughout. Each table, covered in cream tablecloths, held centerpieces of red, white, and blue flowers. A live band played classical music near the front right corner of the room, not far from the bar that was set up along the right hand wall. On the left hand side of the room, in the front, stood a wooden podium and microphone.

"I see our table," Jenna said. She made her way around several people that had stopped between tables to chat with one another.

"It looks like we're the first ones from our table here. Where did you want to sit?" Alex asked.

"I'd like to face the front. That way, we won't have to keep craning our necks for the speakers."

"Good idea." Alex pulled a chair out for Jenna and slid it under her, then she sat next to her. "I'll tell you, I'm not thrilled about being here, but in one way I'm flattered you asked me. I'm thinking it's a big deal to be invited to one of these events. Is this your first?"

"Yeah, it's my first and from what I hear, the host doesn't spare much in the way of expenses. I'm not quite sure why I was invited, but I certainly couldn't say no. I'm glad you agreed to come with me though."

"Like I had a choice?"

Jenna chuckled. "True. You did owe me."

"And I'll consider myself fully paid up after having to sit through an evening with Jeremy and whoever he's bringing."

"Actually, you won't have to sit with him." Jenna glanced around as if to see if anyone was within earshot. Then she whispered, "Jeremy was let go last week."

"Uh, huh, and this is where you ask me to come back to work with you again, right?"

“Alex, I’m serious. I don’t know what happened, and I don’t think he had any idea, because around nine o’clock Tuesday morning, security waltzed in and escorted him out. He didn’t have time to take anything except his personal belongings.”

“Holy cow, are you kidding?”

“Nope.”

“You must have been dying! I don’t like to wallow in another person’s misfortune, but I’d have given anything to be there and see his face. He deserves everything he gets.”

“I know. In the meantime, I’ve been temporarily promoted into his position. On top of that, new policies and procedures have been implemented, all for the positive as far as I’m concerned, including a temporary halt on artificially inseminating the dolphins, and I hear word there are more changes to come.”

“That’s fantastic,” Alex said.

“I know. I have to think this has something to do with the files you handed your neighbor for the attorney, because I’ve also been instructed by the president of the company, via a sealed letter, to correct the erroneous filings of the breeding log data to NOAA and I’ve been instructed to discuss this with no one. I’m guessing voluntary disclosure will save our butts.”

“The attorney must have contacted the company president. I hope it all works out. Finally, we see justice in action. I wonder what Jeremy will do now.”

“Honestly, I don’t care,” Jenna said. “I only hope he doesn’t wreck havoc somewhere else. So that being said, would you consider coming back now?”

“I don’t know. It’s tempting, but I don’t think so. I mean I’m glad changes for the better are taking place, but I think I’d still struggle with the fact these smart creatures are being held captive and exploited for money. Besides, I’ve grown to enjoy what I’m doing now,” Alex said. She took a sip of water.

“Well, don’t expect me to stop pestering you.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t dare dream that big.”

IT DIDN’T TAKE much longer for the room to fill up, for people to be seated, and for the food to begin being served. The H&M table was full, but for one spot. Alex wondered if Jeremy’s spot was the seat that remained empty, or if someone else was missing from their table. However, thoughts of Jeremy soon faded as the aroma of crisp roast duck over garlic creamed potatoes, sprinkled in a dark plum sauce and a side of garlic sautéed spinach tickled Alex’s olfactory senses. “The night is looking up,” Alex said, as her stomach growled in anticipation of the first mouthwatering bite.

“I agree,” Jenna said. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, whatever happened to those runaway kids and the one you rescued off the roof of the aquarium? The media’s been quiet about it, especially after the SARS scare and the quarantine. The quarantine’s all they’ve been focusing on.”

“Believe it or not, I can weigh in on a personal level on the quarantine too, but first the kids.”

Jenna crinkled her forehead and held her fork inches from her mouth. “Why am I not surprised by that comment?”

Alex shrugged. A grin presented itself. “I have no idea. At any rate, all the time I thought I’d done a bad thing by filling the boys’ heads with crazy thoughts about the dolphins, it turns out the end result was positive. With all the media attention, Luke and Cole were both adopted,

together, and several other children got adopted as well.” Alex placed another generous fork full of roast duck dipped in plum sauce in her mouth.

“That’s fantastic,” Jenna said. “But how did the adoption affect Kailyn? She won’t be able to see them now, will she? Is she okay with that?”

Alex swallowed. “They’ll only be a half an hour away, and the couple that adopted them was fine with them having visitors and apparently even encouraged Kailyn to visit. They seem to have the kids’ best interests at heart and want their transition to be as least disruptive as possible.”

“That’s great. Everyone wins. Now what about the SARS quarantine? I can’t wait to hear about this.”

Before Alex could speak, a tapping noise over the speakers, followed by a tall, imposing man’s voice at the podium, saved her the need to relay that story.

“Good evening everyone and welcome. I’m glad you could all come. For the people who don’t know me, though I’m guessing you’re not many in number, my name is James Thomas Montgomery, President of Montgomery Savings and Loan,” James said as he scanned the crowd.

“I don’t believe this,” Alex whispered to Jenna.

“What?”

“That’s Kailyn’s father.”

Before Jenna could respond, James continued. “Each year I like to hold an event for our valued clients who have been kind enough to remain in business with us, even when perhaps a deal that appeared on the surface to be slightly better than the arrangement they have with us came their way. The sole purpose of this event is to thank each and every one of you for your business and for the relationships we’ve forged along the way. I’d like you to do nothing else this evening but enjoy the music, food, and good company, as well as the fireworks, which we’ll be able to view from these windows later on.”

Jenna whispered to Alex, “The Kailyn you’re seeing is Kailyn Montgomery?”

Alex nodded.

“I don’t believe it. Is she here?”

“I don’t think so. She told me she had a family function to attend tonight, but then I’m not sure why her father would be here.” Alex broke off another tender piece of duck and dabbed it in the plum sauce. She added several spinach leaves to the end of her fork and placed the food in her mouth.

After taking a sip of water, James continued. “Also, since I’m certain no one wants to hear me talk all night, I’d like to turn the microphone over to others who’ve specifically asked for time to speak. With that, I’d like to start us off with a few words from a dear old friend of mine, Mrs. Tess Harrison, President of Harrison and Morganfield Aquarium, better known to most as H&M Aquarium.”

Alex nearly choked on her food. Amidst the clapping, she coughed until her throat cleared.

“Are you okay?” Jenna asked.

Alex clutched the glass of water in front of her, took a generous gulp, and swallowed. Then she whispered, “This just keeps getting better. Mrs. Harrison’s my neighbor...the woman I gave our dolphin files to. I had no idea she was president of H&M.”

“Oh my God,” Jenna exclaimed in the most quiet tone she could muster, though a few heads from their table turned their way. “Well, that explains a lot.”

Alex didn’t respond. With so many thoughts now suddenly rummaging through her brain, she didn’t know what to say. She watched as if frozen in time as Mrs. Harrison made her way

behind the podium, one small hunched step at a time. Now she wondered if the empty seat at their table was for Mrs. Harrison.

Mrs. Harrison's tiny frame gazed upon the audience as she laid prepared notes in front of her. "Thank you, James for that kind introduction, and thank you all for letting me say a few words. It's under unusual circumstances that I'm even standing here before you tonight. Up until ten years ago when my husband passed away, he ran H&M Aquarium with Miles Morganfield. He and Miles were childhood friends. They had a vision to build this aquarium and a drive that never accepted no for an answer or defeat in any way. They also had the good fortune of running into Mr. Montgomery early on in their endeavor, who provided the financing they needed when others would not. The aquarium did not start out nearly as big as it has ended up today. There have been several expansions along the way, each financed through James. We couldn't have done what we did without his support, and now, once again backed by Montgomery Savings and Loan, H&M Aquarium is embarking on a new venture. Miles and I are not getting any younger, and before we pass, we'd like to leave this world in a slightly better place than when we entered it. We're instituting what we believe to be positive change within our walls, some of which has already taken place, and much of which is yet to come."

"I guess the silent partner in H&M isn't silent any longer," Jenna interjected.

"I guess not," Alex said.

Tess Harrison took a sip of water before she continued. "A good friend of mine, who used to work at H&M but left for noble reasons, opened my eyes to much needed change. She shed light on the mental and physical suffering whales and intelligent social creatures such as dolphins face in a confined, regimented environment, one that's established to appear as though it's there for the wellbeing of our marine life, when in fact, the overriding truth is, aquariums exploit marine life for money. This young woman said to me that if the aquarium was truly established for the well being of sea life, then it would rescue dolphins and orcas and other mammals, treat them, and set them free—a marine mammal rescue center as it were. At first, I rejected her words, but then realized their truth. Miles and I have agreed to a complete revamp of the aquarium. We conducted market research and estimate that we can still run the aquarium as a for profit entity, but instead of charging admission for orchestrated dolphin and orca shows that inform us little of these mammals' true lives, we'll charge admission into a real life rescue and rehabilitation facility which will include training classes for college students, and a revolutionary new IMAX theatre with footage of underwater photography, sound, and motion, so that those entering will feel as though they're swimming with the dolphins and moving among them. H&M is looking forward to the changes, and we hope you'll all support us in our newest endeavor. We hope our success will change the future of what aquariums in our country will look like going forward. Thank you all for your time." When Tess Harrison finished, a roaring standing ovation of applause followed.

"Holy cow, I don't believe it," Alex said.

"That's you, Alex. Tess Harrison was talking about you. You did it. You changed the lives of these dolphins. I can't believe this is happening," she said, then hugged Alex.

Alex smiled. "I did bring up a few of issues when I talked to her, but I had no idea who she was at the time. Wow, this is mind blowing. I think I need to have a conversation with my grandmother later. I have a strong suspicion she knows exactly who Tess Harrison is."

After the crowd quieted and several other short speeches were made, James Montgomery thanked everyone again for their attendance and invited them to dance as the music from the band kicked in once more.

“I don’t know about you,” Alex said, “but I could use a drink right about now.”

“I’m all for that. We need to celebrate. Maybe now you’ll come back to work with us?” Jenna asked.

“I don’t even know what to say right now except that this night can’t possibly get any better. Hold that thought. I’ll be right back with our drinks.” As Alex meandered her way around several tables and across an already crowded dance floor toward the bar, she sensed someone looking at her. She turned and scanned the crowd. Her eyes met Kailyn’s at the other end of the dance floor, and her heartbeat quickened. All coherent thought escaped as she was lost in Kailyn’s beauty.

Kailyn was dressed in a stunning navy, strapless, A-line, pleated evening gown. The elegant material crossed in a smooth pattern over her bodice. The appliqué on the one side drew attention to her neckline and feminine shoulders. Alex’s breath caught. She hadn’t even formulated why Kailyn was there when her thoughts were interrupted.

“So, you must be Chloe, from *Chloe and Finn*,” a man’s voice said.

Alex lost eye contact with Kailyn and studied the man who intercepted her mid-way across the dance floor. “Excuse me, what?”

“I said, you must be Chloe, from *Chloe and Finn*. You’re a dolphin rescuer or animal behaviorist or whatever, right?”

Alex peered around the man to locate Kailyn. “I don’t know who you are or what you’re talking about, but my name’s not Chloe.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. How rude of me. You’re right. I haven’t introduced myself properly. My name’s Stewart Hollenbrook, long time friend of the Montgomery family. I’m Kailyn’s boyfriend—I’m sorry—her date for the evening.” He paused and drank from the champagne glass he was holding. “What? She didn’t tell you about me? I’m not surprised. There’s lots Kailyn doesn’t reveal. Like for instance the fact that she thinks no one knows her comic strip about the rich and not so famous is about people like myself or better yet, that you’re the star in her new *Chloe and Finn* comic strip. Her dad loves me you know. Did I mention that?”

“Stewart, what’s going on here?” Kailyn interrupted.

Alex shot Kailyn a look filled with confusion.

“Nothing, baby, I was just chatting with Chloe here, that’s all. No big deal. Oh, yeah, sorry about your brother and mother—the boating accident—if that’s even true—”

“Stewart, shut up. You’re drunk,” Kailyn said. “Alex, I’m so sorry. Don’t listen to him. I can’t believe what Tess Harrison said. That was all you. I’m so proud of you.” Kailyn placed her hand on Alex’s arm.

Alex pulled away.

“There you are,” Jenna said. “What’s going on? I’ve been waiting forever for that drink.”

Alex’s eyes remained focused on Kailyn as she spoke. “I’m sorry Jenna. You’ll have to get that drink on your own. I’m leaving. I can’t breathe. I had a virtual knife plunged into my back by someone who I thought loved me. Don’t worry about me getting home. I’ll take a cab.” Alex stormed from the room. She pushed past angry faces of the people she bumped along the way. Outside the hotel, she gasped for air, thankful she hadn’t punched Stewart when every muscle in her body willed her to do so. When she finally hailed a cab, fireworks exploded over the water and lit the sky. “Happy Fourth,” she said.

“WHAT ARE *YOU* doing home so early,” Emma asked.

“It’s a long story Grams, and one I’d rather not get into right now. I’m beat. I’m going to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Alex said. She kissed her grandmother on the cheek.

“Did you eat something? I’ve got leftovers.”

“I ate. Thanks. Does Thunder still need to go outside?” Alex asked as she petted him on the head.

“He does, but don’t worry about him. I’ll let him out in a bit.”

“Thanks, Grams.” Alex gave Thunder a slight push, then walked to her room and shut the door. She set her jacket over the chair and undid her tie before plopping on the bed, tears streaming from her cheeks onto the bedspread.

In her mind, Alex berated herself for being foolish enough to think Kailyn actually loved her. Instead Kailyn used her. She held her hands to her head and pressed against her temples, trying to quell the pounding ache and troubling thoughts. Part of her wanted to straddle her Harley and tear down highway pavement as fast as her bike could carry her and then have mad, angry sex with any woman who’d have her at the club. The other part of her wished the knife had been real, so she wouldn’t feel the pain she was feeling now. She closed her eyes.

The house phone rang. Alex heard the muffled voice of her grandmother speak. She guessed the caller was Kailyn. Alex had shut her cell phone off in the taxi, after it rang several times on her ride home. She didn’t want to speak with anyone, least of all Kailyn. The ride home hadn’t changed her bullheadedness. She turned off her light. When Emma knocked on the door, she pretended not to hear.

“I’m sorry dear,” Alex heard Emma say from behind the door. “I think she’s asleep. I’ll tell her you called in the morning.”

THE NEXT MORNING Alex grabbed a cup of coffee and was about to retreat into her room when she saw her grandmother in the hallway.

“Morning, Alexandra.”

“Morning, Grams.”

“How come you’re not dressed yet? Shouldn’t you be at work already?” Emma asked.

“I’m not going today. I left Sean a message.”

“Are you feeling okay? Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t think talking will help, Grams, but thanks,” Alex said.

“Kailyn called for you last night. I told her I’d let you know.”

“Thanks. I’m going back to bed.”

By lunchtime though, Emma Weston won the battle and spoke with her granddaughter. Alex told her what happened, and then asked they let it drop.

“You should at least talk to her, Alexandra. She’s called several times again this morning,” Emma said.

“And she can call from now until her cell battery goes dead for all I care. It’s done. There’s nothing to say. She betrayed me with that comic strip.”

“Have you read it? I think you’re making a big mistake.”

“Why would I read it? The fact she put my private life out there for her own personal gain is enough reason not to. This is over Grams. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Besides, the problem isn’t only the comic strip. There’s a whole part of her life I know nothing about. Like

the date she brought to her father's Gala and the fact I didn't even know she was going or that her father was sponsoring that event," Alex said.

"You don't know for certain he was her date. You said he was drunk."

"Yeah, so? What about the other lies? Forget it, it's over. Without trust, there's nothing."

Alex left her sandwich on the plate and returned to her bedroom.

Later that evening, Emma knocked on Alex's door. "Alexandra, Kailyn's here to see you."

"Please tell her I'm busy."

"I won't do that."

"Then tell her I don't want to speak with her," Alex said.

"Alexandra Jean Rey. I think your mother and I raised you better than to turn a cold shoulder on someone who's gone out of their way to see you. You come out here this instant and talk with Kailyn like the two adults you supposedly are instead of acting like a hurt child. Why are you so stubborn? You're exactly like your mother."

Alex glanced at the picture of her mother on the dresser. Seconds later, the door opened.

"Fine, you win, but this discussion won't take long. Where is she?"

"She's in the living room."

Alex hated the fact her heart raced without control at the sight of Kailyn. She hated the fact she'd disclosed so much of her life to her and that she'd allowed herself to be so vulnerable. She even wanted to hate Kailyn, but when she saw pain etched in her amber eyes, she couldn't. "Hi," Alex said. She stood in her shorts and T-shirt, hands in her pockets.

Kailyn rubbed her previously intertwined hands together and cracked a knuckle. "Alex, hi. I know you don't want me here, but I couldn't leave things the way they were between us. You don't pick up your cell and you won't take my calls."

"I wonder why."

"You don't understand. Stewart was drunk. He didn't know what he was saying."

"Was he your date?"

"Yes and no. I mean, he's not my boyfriend or anything, but my dad, he's not that understanding. I couldn't have asked you to go—"

"You could have, but you chose not to," Alex said.

"That's not true. There's no one I'd have rather been there with. I should have asked you. Taking the easy way out was wrong. I need to stand up to my dad, but at the time I made the decision, I hadn't thought it all the way through. I'm sorry. I'm not proud of the fact I caved, but you have to believe me that there is nothing between Stewart and me. We did date, but that was a long time ago, and I've made it perfectly clear to him that he and I will never be. You're the one I love. You have to know that Alex."

Alex breathed deep and averted her glower from Kailyn. "Love includes trust and honesty and implies a lack of betrayal. You took my private life and splattered it in a comic strip for your own gain without asking me. I can't even tell you how much that hurts in here," Alex said. She lifted her hand to her heart.

"I never told you exactly what was in *Chloe and Finn*, because I thought you'd read it once it came out. I can tell by what you're saying you haven't. The fact you haven't hurts me, too, but this isn't about me now. Yes, you are the Chloe in *Chloe and Finn*, but it's not your life the comic strip is about. I meshed part of your life with my own and made this about us Alex. And in a way I did ask you if I should write the comic strip or not. You're the one who told me I could dig deeper and write something of substance, worthy of a Pulitzer. Well that's what I finally did. I wrote something close to me that I thought might make a change for the better. I wrote about

the person I care most about in this life. I never meant to hurt you. I'm not sorry I wrote it either, I'm only sorry the story's not turning out as I had hoped."

"I'm sorry, too," Alex said. "Thanks for stopping by."

Kailyn stared at Alex. As she turned to leave, Emma popped her head out from the kitchen. "Goodbye Mrs. Weston." Kailyn said. "I'm sorry for any trouble I caused."

Alex said nothing to her grandmother. Shoulders slumped, head down, she walked back into her room.

An hour later, Emma knocked on her granddaughter's door. "I brought you dinner since you won't come out and eat."

Alex opened the door and took the dinner tray. "Thanks, Grams."

"You're welcome." Emma held a fabric covered binder in her hand that she'd carried under the tray. She walked past Alex and placed the binder at the foot of her bed. "When you find some time, I think you should read this."

"What is it?"

"It's a gift from me to you. When Kailyn's comic strip first came out, I asked you if you'd read it and you said you hadn't. You've been so busy. I knew you never got the time or would make the time. Now you have no excuse. I saved all the strips from the beginning, and there are empty pages yet to be filled, but I made the book for you and want you to have it now."

"That was thoughtful of you Grams, but I'm not going to read this."

"You can do what you want with it, except throw it away. Now eat your dinner before it gets cold."

AFTER DINNER, ALEX eyed the binder on her bed. She picked it up, turned it over in her hands, and placed it on her nightstand. "A lot of work for nothing, Grams," she said to herself and then turned on the television. A couple of hours later, she turned off the light and went to sleep.

Alex tossed and turned for hours, in and out of sleep. She woke around two in the morning, her night shirt damp with sweat. She turned on the light on and sat up. Thunder lifted his head and fixed his gaze on her.

"What are you doing here? Grams must have let you in, huh?" Alex reached toward the foot of the bed and petted Thunder. "No wonder I couldn't sleep. You've hogged half the bed, not to mention most of the sheets. Alex pulled the sheets up over her, wide awake but slightly chilled. She checked the clock on the nightstand. "Looks like this is going to be a long night, mister," she said. Her line of sight traveled from the clock to the binder. She sat for a moment, wanting both to burn it and read it at the same time. "Darn you, Grams," she said.

Alex picked up the album-like book and placed it on her lap. Then she placed her pillow behind her back and slowly opened the cover.

THE NEXT MORNING, breakfast waited on the kitchen table for Emma. A vase held a single flower from her garden. "What's all this for?" Emma asked.

"Hi, Grams. I wanted to thank you for the gift. I read it early this morning. I was an idiot. I'm sorry."



“I’m not the one you need to apologize to,” Emma said.

“I know. I called Kailyn this morning and asked if she’d meet me at Tollerson’s so we could talk. She said yes.”

“That’s my girl,” Emma said. “I’m glad. You and Kailyn are two wonderful people and you deserve to be happy. You deserve each other.”

“Thanks, Grams. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Alexandra.”

When Alex pulled into the parking lot of Tollerson’s Lighthouse Café and Marina, Kailyn stood waiting for her near the front steps of the restaurant, and upon seeing her pull into a parking space, made her way toward Alex.

Alex parked the Harley, pulled off her helmet and set it on the seat. With no words exchanged at first, she met Kailyn in a long, heated embrace and kiss. Then Alex said, “I’m so sorry I doubted you. I’m ashamed at myself for thinking the things I did. In my heart I knew you loved me, which made the pain that much worse.”

“Ssh, it’s okay. We both made mistakes.”

“But I should have talked to you instead of hide from you. *Chloe and Finn* is a wonderful story, Kailyn. I should have read it sooner. My Grams was right. I’m touched that you chose me to be Chloe and I think getting our story out might help move things in the right direction as far as saving the oceans and the marine life in it.”

“A deeper blue,” Kailyn said, realizing the irony of those words, and the recast of their meaning. “I hope so. I also hope you’re contemplating going back to work at the aquarium, or rescue and rehabilitation center, or whatever name they’re eventually going to call it. I think Tess Harrison wanted to talk to you about it after her speech, but then you were gone. Besides, I think Tommy wants your old job.”

Alex laughed. “He does, does he? I’m not surprised. I’m sure Sean will be happy about that.”

“I’m sure he will, too.”

“I can’t tell you how thankful I am that you’re a part of my life. You reminded me not to give up and to effect the change I hope to see. You pushed me with my dad, and you made me see life in a different light— a brighter light.”

“I’m glad. Love has that power,” Kailyn said.

“Yes, I suppose it does.” Alex paused for a second and scuffed her boot against the ground, suddenly feeling the need to change the conversation. “Are you hungry? I haven’t eaten yet. I thought maybe we could go inside, grab a bite, and talk some more.”

“Of course. My parents are already inside waiting.”

“Your parents? Waiting?”

“Yeah. I wanted them to meet you.”

“For real?”

“Yes. You opened my eyes to a few things too. Wait a minute! You rode up with a helmet on, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“What’s up with that?”

“Nothing, it’s those crazy drivers out there. You can never be too careful anymore,” Alex said.

Kailyn smiled. “Uh, huh. Those crazy drivers, huh?”

Alex nodded.

“Thank you.” Kailyn touched the side of Alex’s face and kissed her on the lips. She moved her body close to Alex’s. “I love you, Alexandra Rey.”  
Alex’s eyes held a glimmer. “I love you, too.”

## About the Author

Regina lives in the mountainous suburbs of Northern New Jersey with her partner of fourteen years, Veronica. Regina has earned Bachelors' degrees majoring in accounting and biology, with a minor in German. She's also a Certified Public Accountant and works for the Federal Government protecting the taxpayer's interests. In addition to writing fiction, she loves the outdoors and enjoys hiking, kayaking, reading, watching football, and trying out new vegetarian recipes. *A Deeper Blue* is Regina's third novel. Her first novel, *Love Another Day*, won a 2012 Alice B. Readers' Lavender Award certificate and was followed by the sequel, *White Dragon*.  
[www.rhanel.com](http://www.rhanel.com)

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