



Birdie By the Bay

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Category: Romance

Description: Harlow Wynn has returned to Mackinac Island's Wynn Harbor Inn, to heal from a serious car injury, with the love and support of her aunt and father.

Harlow's husband, although not directly helping with her healing and rehabilitation, is determined to make sure she upholds her end of a lucrative contract which means flying to Vancouver to start filming within weeks. Robert, never a "warm and fuzzy" person, keeps his distance, claiming he's busy and that his wife is better off without him "underfoot."

Her husband isn't the only person who is keeping their distance. Harlow is heartbroken when others she believed cared about her haven't reached out to check on her and find out how she's doing. At her aunt's prompting, she makes a few calls, only to discover there's a reason Harlow hasn't heard from her friends.

The more Harlow digs, the more her idyllic life starts to crumble. Fame and fortune are turning into a stumbling block, forcing her to reassess her life and everyone in it.

Despite the upheaval, she has found a silver-lining. Mackinac Island, the one place she vowed never to return to, becomes her refuge. Carving out a future on an island that time forgot might be exactly what Harlow Wynn so desperately needs.

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Chapter 1

Harlow sat quietly, her hands in her lap while her father wheeled her back to Wynn Harbor Inn's family cottage. A melancholy sense of loss settled in, an ache from missing her mother after visiting Ginger's gravesite, a visit which had been long overdue.

But there was something else. An inkling of unfinished business. The cause of the fire that had taken her mother's life had never been determined. She knew there were whispers amongst the islanders who believed David Wynn had been behind it.

For several years, Harlow suspected the same. But since her accident and return to Mackinac Island, she no longer believed her father had set the fire. To say her parents' marriage had been strained was putting it mildly. In fact, at the time of her death, they were no longer living under the same roof.

Harlow's father was living in the Victorian cottage, the family home. Meanwhile, Ginger had moved into the manager's unit inside the main structure of Wynn Harbor Inn.

It was a cozy space, having everything needed for day-to-day living, but on a smaller scale. Clerestory windows brought in natural light yet weren't functional, meaning they didn't open. According to the fire department, the fiery inferno had started somewhere near the apartment and quickly swept through several of the main floor hotel rooms.

All the inn's guests had escaped...everyone except for Harlow's mother, who had

been trapped in her unit.

Harlow would never forget that fateful night. The alarms. The sirens. The smoke. The heat. Frantically searching the crowd for signs of her mother. Her father had done the same.

Horrible moments turned into hours. Standing helplessly by as the flames licked their way up the walls. Harlow stood as close as the firefighters would allow her to, praying, pleading with God for a miracle.

After the fire died down, the fire chief sought them out. He found Harlow and her father, both numb and in shock. He hadn't said a word...hadn't needed to. Shoulders slumped, and head down, his expression was one of defeat. He confirmed what Harlow's father had already told her. Ginger had perished in the fire. "I'm sorry."

Harlow remembered stumbling back, desperate to get away from the scene, unable, unwilling to face the fact her mother was gone. She ran away from the inn, down the sidewalk, blindly running until she reached Ginger's beloved rose garden. She fell to her knees, sobbing uncontrollably as tears streamed down her cheeks.

David found his daughter there, face down on the ground. Just like he had a few minutes ago, he had picked her up and carried her home. Harlow remembered sitting on the porch. Just sitting. Barely breathing. In less than twenty-four hours, her entire world had collapsed.

The days following the fire passed by in a numbing haze. Ginger's body was eventually found in the kitchenette of her unit. The funeral. Her burial in the small plot on the property.

Harlow's heartbreak and pain slowly morphed into anger and bitterness, all directed at her father. It was his fault. If Harlow's parents had been living at the cottage and

under the same roof, Ginger would still be alive. He knew those windows wouldn't open. And then when the insurance company refused to pay after the reason for the fire was undetermined, combined with the report mentioning the possibility of an accelerant being used, Harlow's heart hardened.

Not long after, she left Mackinac Island and rented a small studio apartment on the outskirts of LA. She refused her father's calls, threw away every note, every letter, every card he sent her. Unopened. Right in the trash.

The strained relationship continued for years until Harlow's car accident. Without hesitation, her father, along with her best friend Eryn Marquette, had boarded a plane and flown to California. Renting a car, they drove straight to Malibu Memorial Hospital.

Of course, her husband Robert had been around but only when David Wynn and Eryn weren't there, mostly to assess the extent of his wife's injuries and remind her she needed to hurry up and get back on her feet before she started filming in Vancouver.

When it became clear Robert had no intention of caring for his wife, Harlow realized that, although she could easily afford twenty-four-hour care, the paparazzi would be camped out in front of her house with her trapped inside. Healing would be nearly impossible under their round-the-clock watchful eye.

Eryn and her father convinced her that returning home to Mackinac Island to recover was the only option. Every day, she thanked God she was away from prying eyes. Away from a husband who showed little concern for his wife's health.

Even Vic, her bodyguard and friend, had left Harlow in her time of need.

“...through the fields of highlands to the Irish Sea,

Farewell to my new friends,

To all we mean to be..."

The tantalizing aroma of bacon frying wafted through the cottage's screen door. Aunt Birdie's off-key singing grew louder.

David eased Harlow's wheelchair over the threshold. "What's all the racket?"

"What racket?"

Harlow grinned at the sight of her aunt, clad in hot pink yoga pants and a Bob Seger T-shirt. Flip-flops and thick wool socks completed her ensemble.

"There you are." Birdie's face softened when she spotted her niece. "Your dad and I were starting to worry about you."

"I didn't go far." Harlow explained she'd gone to visit her mother's grave.

"I stopped by to say hello to Ginger last night, after I finished setting up my RV. Your dad's kept her final resting place so peaceful and tranquil."

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“I noticed fresh flowers on her grave.”

“I put those there,” David said. “I don’t want Ginger to think we forgot about her.”

A wave of guilt washed over Harlow. While she had been gallivanting around the world, raking in big bucks, her father was here...home...trying to salvage what was left of his life, making sure the memorial to his wife was taken care of.

Her throat clogged. “I’m sorry, Dad. I should have been here.”

David looked away, but not before Harlow noticed his eyes filling with tears.

“We’re all here now to keep Ginger company.” Aunt Birdie waved the spatula in the air. “But first, we need sustenance.”

“I’ve never been much of a breakfast person, but since you went to all the trouble, I’ll happily help gobble up the goodies,” Harlow joked.

David and his sister finished whipping up a hearty breakfast. Along with bacon, there were eggs, sunny side up, blueberry pancakes and crispy croissants that Aunt Birdie had made a special trip to the local bakery to purchase.

While they worked on breakfast preparations, Harlow set the table, loading dishes on her lap to carry to the cozy bistro table overlooking the rear yard.

From the window, Harlow could see hints of yellow and gold dipping the tips of the leaves. Fall, in all its glory, was only weeks away.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” Aunt Birdie placed the platter of food in the center of the table and nudged her head toward the trees. “I have missed the changing of the seasons.”

“I haven’t kept tabs on you in a while now.” Harlow curiously eyed her aunt. “Where are you living these days? Hawaii? Tahiti? Some other tropical locale?”

“All of those plus more. I was living on a ship.”

Harlow’s eyes widened. “A ship?”

“One of those travel-around-the-world cruise ships. I hopped off in Montenegro and hopped on a plane as soon as I could. On my way here, I swung by an RV dealership to purchase Happy Camper, the name I picked out for my temporary home.” Birdie snapped her fingers. “And here I am.”

“You bought the RV just to come to Mackinac Island?” David placed glasses of orange juice on the table and helped Harlow into an empty seat.

“Yep. She’s a beaut, too. Happy has all the creature comforts.” Aunt Birdie rattled off a few of her temporary home’s features. “I’ll have to run it into town to the city’s pump station every couple of weeks to empty the tanks using the same horsepower that I used to get it here.”

Harlow studied her aunt’s face. “You’ve gone to a lot of trouble, and expense, just to be here to help me.”

“As I’ve already pointed out, I can take care of Harlow,” her father added.

“I’ll admit that maybe I’m being a little selfish. I haven’t seen Harlow, other than on the big screen, in ages. It’s nice to sit here at the table catching up. Maybe even spend time with my brother. You haven’t been in the mood for visitors since...” Birdie’s

voice faded.

Harlow knew what she was going to say. Since the fire and Ginger's death. The horrific tragedy had changed her father overnight. He'd gone from being a gracious, talkative, story-telling host who loved showing off his beloved Wynn Harbor Inn to being withdrawn, moody, even hostile at times, and that was before Harlow had hightailed it out of there.

"So." Birdie tapped the table, pinning her brother with a pointed stare. "I walked the property. What are your plans?"

"Plans?"

"To fix the place up. Do you need money? I can help with renovations."

"I have an investor lined up. Actually, two."

"Dad is partnering with Easton Holdings Company," Harlow explained.

"Not Easton Holdings, but Morgan Easton and her brother, Brett."

"Morgan Easton." Birdie tapped her chin. "I've heard the name before."

"She inherited properties from her mother. She also found the Shifting Sands Medallion, an artifact which went missing decades ago." David explained Morgan and her brother were using their own private funds to invest. "In fact, we'll start scheduling the construction crews as soon as Brett and I address the fines and secure the necessary permits."

"Wonderful. If you need another investor, I would be happy to throw some cash your way," Birdie said. "I wouldn't mind staking a claim in Mackinac Island's real estate."

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“It would be a nightmare,” David grumbled. “Having you as a sister is bad enough. I can’t imagine having you as a business partner.”

Birdie clenched her fist and playfully punched her brother in the arm. “Very funny.” She sobered. “I’m glad to hear this beautiful piece of property will be restored.”

“I am too.” Harlow scooped a spoonful of eggs onto her plate before passing the dish to her aunt. “Maybe there is a silver lining to my accident. It brought our little family back together again.”

“It did.” Birdie lifted her glass of orange juice. “I propose a toast.”

Harlow lifted her glass. Her father grudgingly lifted his.

“To fresh starts and moving forward.”

Harlow clinked glasses. “Moving forward,” she echoed. “No matter what obstacles life throws at us.”

Little did she know the sentiment would echo back to her over and over again. Obstacles and challenges, greater than anything Harlow had ever encountered, were heading her way.

Chapter 2

Harlow helped clear the dishes after breakfast, but with limited mobility she seemed to be more in the way than actually helping. Finally, her aunt shooed her out of the

kitchen.

Feeling restless, she grabbed her cell phone and wheeled herself out to the front porch. Thinking about her father's plans for Wynn Harbor Inn and curious to find out a little more about Morgan Easton, Harlow turned her phone on and typed the woman's name in the search bar.

The first story to pop up was about the medallion. Harlow began reading and soon became fascinated by how she'd tracked down the priceless artifact, hidden away at Locke Pointe, an inherited property owned by her mother's family.

She did some preliminary research about Easton Holdings and Brett Easton, in particular. Harlow clicked on his profile and enlarged the photo. He was a good-looking guy. Dark hair with bangs swept off to the side, a boyish grin and mischievous expression. Discovering he was single, Harlow suspected he had more than his share of women vying for his attention.

She opened a new tab, curious to find out if Morgan was married. Another story appeared, along with a snapshot of her smiling, looking off to the side toward someone beyond the camera's lens. Next to it was a photo of a man, maybe a year or two older than Harlow—Jason Greer, Easton's ex, who was serving time in prison.

"Wow."

"Wow, what?" Aunt Birdie slipped out onto the porch.

"I started doing some research about the Easton family. Morgan has an interesting past." Harlow told her aunt what she'd found.

"Your father mentioned Brett Easton. I'm sure you researched him as well."

“Yep.” Harlow turned her phone so her aunt could see the photo.

Birdie let out a flirty whistle. “He’s a hottie. Maybe after you ditch the loser you’re married to you can hook up with this fellow. He looks like a catch.”

“Aunt Birdie,” Harlow chided. “Robert isn’t...a loser.”

Her aunt pursed her lips. “From everything I’ve learned, he’s trying to force you back to work before you’re ready.”

“Robert is business oriented. He sees everything in black and white.”

“I guess this is the reason he isn’t here? Because he’s busy handling business?” Birdie arched her eyebrow.

Harlow looked away. “He can be hard to understand.”

“Don’t make excuses for him, Harlow. A loving husband would want to be with his wife, caring for her.”

Her aunt’s blunt words stung her to the core. Birdie wasn’t telling her anything she didn’t already know. Still, the reality of the situation was that a man she loved had all but abandoned her. Although he had shown up at Wynn Harbor Inn, attempting to bring her home. Not because he had a change of heart and wanted to take care of Harlow. He planned to dump her off at their place in Malibu to be looked after by a caregiver before leaving.

“Dad, and you, are both right. Robert is showing his true colors,” Harlow sighed.

“Better to find out now, before you have children.”

“Robert doesn’t want children.”

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“Color me shocked,” her aunt said sarcastically.

“There’s more. I also think.” Harlow hesitated.

“Think what?” Birdie prompted.

“He’s having an affair with his assistant.” She braced for her aunt’s rant, but Birdie’s expression remained stoic. “You’re not surprised.”

“I’ve sat on the sidelines watching you soar,” her aunt finally replied. “You have it all, Harlow. Fame, fortune. You’re young and beautiful, at the pinnacle of your career. Yet here I sit thinking you look sad and lonely, perhaps maybe even depressed.”

Harlow could feel the back of her eyes burn. Aunt Birdie saw it all. The hurt. The anger. Feelings of unworthiness. No one had reached out to check on her. Not Janice, her publicist. Not Selma, her housekeeper, a woman who had worked for the couple for years. The most heartbreaking was Vic, her friend, her confidant, who was also her bodyguard. Not a word, a telephone call or even a simple text.

A hot tear trailed down Harlow’s cheek at her aunt’s insight and uncanny accuracy at the miserable turn her life had taken. The only person she’d heard from was Robert, and that was because he wanted to make sure she upheld her end of the movie contract.

Since she’d signed, she hadn’t heard a peep, other than him reminding Harlow about the deadline for her to show up at the set.

“No one has even called to check on me.” Harlow absentmindedly clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms. “No one but Robert.”

Birdie sprang from her chair and knelt next to her niece. She grasped her hand, gently prying her fingers apart. “Remember when we talked about the silver lining, how your accident brought us back together?”

Harlow nodded.

“Think of this as a part of that silver lining. You find out fast who your real friends are when something like this happens. Maybe you need new friends.”

“Apparently so.” Harlow sniffled, swiping at her damp cheeks. “I guess all I am is a paycheck. All they care about is money.”

“Unless...” Her aunt slowly stood. “Do you think it’s possible Robert is keeping the others from contacting you?”

“On purpose?” Harlow blinked rapidly. “You think he told them not to call or text me?”

“It’s possible.”

“Why would he do such a thing?”

“To isolate you. I’ve never met the man, but based on what I’m learning, he’s accustomed to running the show, controlling every aspect of your life.”

“He is,” Harlow agreed. “But it goes with the territory of him being my manager.”

“Reading between the lines, if he can isolate you, keep you from the people you care

about and who care about you, he can control the current situation—your accident—to direct it in the way he sees fit.”

Her mind whirled. Was Aunt Birdie right? Was Robert telling everyone to leave her alone, using the excuse she needed to rest and heal?

“Perhaps you should be the one to reach out,” she suggested.

Harlow snatched her phone off the table and scrolled through her contact list. She clicked on Vic’s cell phone number and hit the call button. It went directly to voicemail. “Hey, Vic. It’s Harlow. I...uh...have settled in at my dad’s place. I’m not sure if you tried reaching me. Anyway, give me a call.”

Birdie waited until she finished. “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

Maybe her aunt was right and the line of communication had broken down. Harlow checked to make sure her cell phone’s volume was turned up before sliding it into her pocket. “Thanks, Aunt Birdie. I feel better already.”

“You’re welcome.” Birdie stepped off the porch and spun in a slow circle. “It’s a gorgeous day. I need to rent a PO box down at the post office. Why don’t you tag along with me?”

Harlow wrinkled her nose, warily eyeing her scooter. “I’m still a newbie at navigating this contraption.”

“Practice makes perfect. I’ll clear a path for you.” Birdie went inside to let David know they were running into town. She popped back out, her sling bag draped over her shoulder, and handed Harlow a bottle of water.

“Thanks. Are you sure you want to hoof it? We can always call for a horse and buggy

taxi.”

“It isn’t far. Besides, the fresh air will do us both good.” Reaching the front of the property, her aunt held the gate while Harlow “scooter’d” through.

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They meandered at a leisurely pace, all the while Aunt Birdie entertained her niece with stories about her travel adventures and most recently living on board a cruise ship.

“It sounds fascinating,” Harlow said. “Visiting all those exotic locations yet only having to unpack once. I bet you met a lot of interesting people.”

“A boatload, literally. But enough about me. I’m sure you’ve met quite a few people in your travels, living the high life,” her aunt teased.

“Not really.” When Harlow first got into the film and acting business, she was geeked at the thought of what she believed would be an amazing adventure. Traveling around the world, learning about other countries, other cultures. Granted, she had met oodles of interesting characters but under a controlled environment orchestrated by her handlers.

In many ways, she felt she’d lost touch with the real world. And now her aunt had driven home the point Robert oversaw almost every aspect of his wife’s life. It made sense. In a nutshell, Harlow lived in a bubble.

“To be honest, there are only a few people I trust,” Harlow confessed. “My publicist, my makeup artist, Selma our housekeeper, Vic, and Robert.”

“I find this incredibly sad.”

“I guess I’ve been so busy working and promoting my brand, Harlow Wynn, I forgot how to live.”

“We’re changing all of that,” Birdie vowed. “I’m so glad I came here. You need a dose of reality, and I’m going to help make sure you get it.”

A slow smile spread across Harlow’s face. She had no doubt her aunt was going to be exactly what the doctor ordered. “I can’t wait for a big dose of Aunt Birdie.”

“Both you and your dad. He needs a dose of Birdie too.”

“I don’t disagree.” Harlow changed the subject. “Why don’t you stay in one of the empty cottages instead of going to all the trouble and expense of buying an RV?”

“I have my reasons. The first one is because I purchased a plot of land on the other side of the island. I plan to build a small cottage to live in during the summer months, when I wrap up the rest of my travel adventures.”

“Live here?” Harlow clapped her hands. “I think it’s a wonderful idea. Have you told Dad?”

“Not yet. I figured it would be best to share my plans in small increments. I don’t want to give him a heart attack. Anyway, I figured I could work on lining up a contractor. It’s too late to start this fall, but maybe I could hit the ground running in the spring. Besides, one of those cottages is yours.”

It was true. David had filled one of the empty cottages with Harlow in mind, right down to the curtains. It was as if he’d decorated every square inch to suit her tastes in the hopes one day she would return.

“I won’t be around after I recover.”

“Where will you be?”

It was an excellent question. A relevant question. Yes, she had a career to consider. The upcoming job was what she'd worked so hard for. Other actors would give an arm and a leg for the role she'd snagged. To be honest, it would be heartbreaking if Harlow walked away.

On the other hand, she was beginning to see her life was empty and shallow, perhaps even meaningless on some levels.

"I'm not sure," Harlow answered honestly. "Fulfilling my contract is what I'm focusing on right now. I'll reassess to find out where I'm at when I get to that point." With or without Robert, she silently added.

"We're here." Birdie held the post office's door.

"I think I'll hang out on the sidewalk. If I remember correctly, there's not a lot of room to maneuver around inside."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." Harlow gave her a thumbs up. "I wouldn't mind doing a little people watching."

"Suit yourself. I'll be back in a jiffy." Her aunt dashed into the post office, leaving Harlow and her scooter parked near the bike rack, giving her a bird's-eye view of the action going on around her.

She lifted her leg, ignoring the sharp, shooting pain running down her spine. Harlow scooted forward. Lifting both arms over her head, she did a long and low stretch, reaching out to touch her toes.

"Harlow?"

She jerked upright. A young girl who looked to be around ten years old hovered nearby, a shy smile on her face.

“Hello.”

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“I...uh.” The freckle-faced girl glanced at the woman standing next to her. She nodded. “It’s okay.”

“I was wondering if I could take a picture of you.”

“Take a picturewithyou.” The woman patted her arm. “This is my daughter, Ava. She’s a huge fan of yours. We heard youwere back on the island. Ava has been keeping an eye out for you.”

“I would be honored,” Harlow graciously replied.

Ava cautiously stepped close to Harlow’s scooter. “I’m sorry you got hurt,” she whispered.

“Thank you. I’ll be walking again soon.” Harlow placed a light hand around Ava’s shoulders, both smiling, while her mother snapped a picture with her cell phone.

“I’ve been praying for you every night before I go to bed,” Ava said. “Will you be staying on Mackinac Island for very long?”

“I have a new movie to film, so I’ll be leaving soon to work on location,” Harlow said.

“Good luck.”

“Thank you, Ava.” Harlow gave her a small wave goodbye and watched mother and daughter walk away.

She thought about Vic and glanced at her phone, checking to make sure she hadn't missed his call. While she waited, she drafted a text and then promptly deleted it. Harlow didn't want to bother him, especially if he was working for someone else.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled. She could sense someone watching her. Slowly lifting her head, Harlow's eyes scanned the sidewalk, first to the left and then to the right, toward the community hall and fire department.

Sidestepping a couple heading in the opposite direction, a familiar figure, a man, strolled toward her, an unreadable look on his face.

Harlow's heart skipped a beat. She cast a frantic look toward the post office's front door. Still no sign of Aunt Birdie. She was stuck...stuck on the sidewalk, forced to face one of the few people she had hoped to avoid.

Chapter 3

Caleb Jackson...hot, hunky and even more handsome than the day he'd broken her heart, sauntered over. "Hello, Harlow."

"Hello." She forced a smile.

"I meant to tell you the last time I ran into you, I'm sorry about your accident. I heard it was a bad one."

"It was. I rolled my car and am lucky to be alive."

"Is the mobility scooter a..." Caleb's voice trailed off.

"Permanent? No. I have a physical therapist helping me get back on my feet."

“I’m glad to hear it.” He nodded toward the post office. “Is your dad around? I want to remind him about the water department flushing out the fire hydrants in front of his place on Monday.”

“I’m waiting for Aunt Birdie. She’s inside.”

His eyes grew round as saucers. “Your Aunt Birdie is here?”

“Yep.” Harlow chuckled.

“How is your dad taking it? I mean, the last time I heard the two were barely talking.”

“Oh, they’re talking,” Harlow said. “Aunt Birdie bought an RV and is camping out by the bay.”

“So I guess they’ve mended their fences.”

“In a roundabout way. The sparks are still flying.” Harlow explained her aunt was helping with her care.

“I haven’t seen Aunt Birdie in ages. If it’s okay with you, I’ll hang around and say hi.”

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“I’m sure she would like that.” Their eyes met. Harlow’s heart hammered so loudly she was sure he could hear it. “By the way, congrats on being promoted to fire chief.”

“Thanks. Congrats to you on making it to megastardom.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“I bet.” Caleb shifted his feet. “I’m not sure I would like to have every move I made photographed and broadcast to the entire world.”

“My career has some challenges,” Harlow admitted. “I guess the same could be said for every career, even yours.”

“Very true.”

Birdie hurried out of the post office. She came to an abrupt halt when she noticed Caleb. “Caleb Jackson.”

“Hey, Aunt Birdie.” He kissed her cheek. “You’re looking as stunning as ever.”

Birdie tugged on a strand of curly gray hair. “Flattery will get you everywhere,” she joked. “How are your parents?”

“Great. My father is getting ready to retire and pass the plumbing business baton to my brother. I was telling Harlow that I wanted to remind David the city workers will be by to flush out the hydrants Monday morning. I’ll be there, as well.”

“Monday?” Birdie’s eyes lit. “Maybe you could hang around and have lunch with us after you’re done. Harlow could use a friend.”

A mortified Harlow quickly cut her aunt off. “I-I’m sure Caleb has a lot to do. Besides. I have friends. I have Eryn.”

“Who is busy with her job.”

Caleb, sensing Harlow’s discomfort, crossed his arms, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Thanks for the invite, Aunt Birdie. I would love to swing by and have lunch. We’re scheduled to be at the inn around eleven or eleven thirty.”

“Which will work out perfectly.” Birdie clapped her hands. “Let’s plan on twelve thirty or one.”

“I thought the water department was in charge of flushing the hydrants,” Harlow interrupted.

“They are. We’ve had a few past issues at your dad’s place. I want to make sure things go smoothly,” Caleb explained.

“This will work out perfectly. Come by David’s cottage around twelve thirty-ish.”

“Sounds good,” he said. “It’s nice seeing you again, Aunt Birdie.”

“Same here, Caleb.” Her aunt waited for him to walk away. “That Caleb Jackson is such a good-looking guy and so sweet. I wonder why you two never got together,” she mused.

“We did. Caleb and I dated until he broke up with me to join the Air Force.”

“Oh...I guess I forgot.” Birdie waved dismissively. “It was so long ago.”

“We both moved on with our lives.”

“You two would’ve made such cute babies,” her aunt sighed. “Instead of being saddled to wretched Robert, you could’ve had a catch like Caleb. I’m sure he’s married.”

“He was. His wife died of cancer.”

“What a shame, about his wife’s death, I mean.”

“It is. I can only imagine what Caleb has gone through. As far as our relationship ending, he chose his path a long time ago. We both did.” Harlow made the statement, but the pitter patter she felt when the man she’d loved with reckless abandon was standing nearby told a different story. “You can host Caleb for lunch. I think I’ll make myself scarce.”

Back home, her aunt insisted on accompanying her to the cottage. They found David watering the flower baskets hanging on the front porch.

“How did it go?”

“My mail is being forwarded until further notice.”

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“How long is further notice?”

“Until I’m ready to leave.” Birdie folded her arms. “Are you already trying to get rid of me?”

“No, but I like to plan ahead.”

“Then plan on me being here until the snow flies...at least.”

Harlow covered her mouth to hide her grin. “Before I forget, Caleb Jackson asked me to remind you the city workers will be by around eleven on Monday morning to flush the hydrants.”

“And I invited him to lunch,” Birdie added.

David shot his daughter a puzzled look. “You want to have lunch with Caleb?”

“I don’t. Aunt Birdie does. I’ll be somewhere else.”

“He’ll be here around twelve thirty.”

Tink.Harlow snatched her cell phone from her lap. It was a message from Eryn, asking if she was interested in going downtown to listen to live music.

Harlow:Yes. Please.

Eryn:I’ll pop in around eight to get you.

Sounds good. She set her phone on her lap and followed her father and aunt inside.
“Eryn and I are heading downtown later tonight.”

“I’m glad you’re getting out of the house. It’s card night. Lottie will be here with a dinner dish and cards around seven.”

“You have a date with Lottie?” Harlow eyed her father with interest.

David’s face turned bright red. “I-it’s not a date. It’s card night.”

“Sounds like a date to me,” Birdie sing-songed.

“It also sounds like you need to mind your own business,” her brother snapped.

“Touchy-touchy,” she tsk-tsked.

“You’re trying to turn nothing into something.” Despite her father’s insistence it was a casual evening together, Harlow had sensed an inkling of interest between him and his quirky British gardening lady.

“We play poker, eat casserole and then, weather permitting, we wander around to check out the gardens.”

“I bet you do more than check out gardens,” Birdie muttered in a low voice.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I was going to invite myself to dinner, but I don’t want to be a third wheel.”

“We can eat sandwiches at your place,” Harlow said. “I mean, if you don’t mind.”

“Good idea. Why don’t you invite Eryn? I haven’t seen her in ages.”

“I will.” Harlow texted a quick message, extending the invitation.

Eryn promptly replied: I’ll be there.

Harlow tapped out a confirmation. “What time Aunt Birdie?”

“Let’s plan on around six thirty. It will give us plenty of time to make ourselves scarce before date night starts.”

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“It’s not a date night,” David grunted. “Both of you, all three of you, are free to join us.”

“No way. Female companionship is good for you. The last thing I want to do is interfere.” Birdie patted Harlow’s shoulder. “Do you want me to swing back by later, or can you make it on your own?”

“Eryn’s going to come by here first. We’ll head over together. I’m having groceries delivered today. What can I bring?”

“A salad sounds good.” Harlow and her aunt completed their dinner plans and Birdie left. The rear screen door slammed on her way out.

“That woman.” David threw his hands in the air. “She’s driving me nuts.”

“Aunt Birdie has a way of pushing your buttons.”

“Pushing my buttons with code red alerts, code black, you name it.”

“But she loves you. She loves us.”

“I know she does and I’m trying very hard to remember she could be enjoying her bucket list cruise around the world instead of slaving over a hot stove cooking breakfast in my kitchen.”

“Exactly.” Harlow excused herself and headed to her room. She took a nap and woke later, only to discover it was time to get ready for her physical therapy.

She threw on a pair of loose fitting shorts and a stretchy bright blue tank top before grabbing a pair of slip-on shoes on her way out.

Mort, her father's pup who had stopped by to check on her, nudged the door open and stood waiting for Harlow to catch up.

They found her father in front of the kitchen stove, the top filled with pots and pans. "What are you making?"

"Guess."

Harlow sniffed the air. "It smells delish, whatever it is."

"I used the leftover bacon from breakfast to whip up one of your favorite dishes."

"Chicken bacon ranch casserole," Harlow and her father said in unison.

She licked her lips. "I haven't had your casserole in years."

"Then I'm glad I made it."

"The dish isn't for Lottie and your potluck, poker game night?" Harlow teased.

"Lottie likes it too. You're just in time for a taste test." He removed the casserole from the oven, grabbed two small bowls, and added a large scoop to each. "Not to brag, but this might be one of my best casseroles ever."

I can't wait to sample it." Harlow watched her father carry the bowls to the table near the window.

The pup, who had been closely monitoring David's movements, parked himself in the

middle of the floor, hungrily eyeing the dish.

“I haven’t forgotten about you, Mort. I have a special treat.”

“Bacon?” Harlow asked.

“Mort can’t have bacon, but he can have this.” David sliced an apple and held out a piece. The pup promptly gobbled it up. He fed him a second slice and Harlow watched it disappear. “He’s the apple gobbler,” she joked.

“They’re one of his favorites.” David wagged his finger. “Enough for now. You can have another treat later.”

Mort ambled over to the table and plopped down a few feet away, waiting for Harlow and her father to have a seat.

“Mort is no dummy.”

“No, he’s not.” David grabbed a pitcher of tea and filled two glasses. “What time will your physical therapist be here?”

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“Any time now. She had a cancellation and squeezed me in. The sooner, the better.” Harlow thanked her father for the food and dug into the casserole, comfort food at its best. Creamy pasta with shredded chicken and a blend of cheeses.

“This is as yummy as I remember. The restaurant guests used to rave over your chicken bacon ranch casserole.” Harlow polished off the creamy pasta, savoring her last morsel.

“I could never make enough. We were always running out.” Her father made a move to refill her dish.

“As much as I love it, I have to stop.” She patted her hips. “I need to stay in tiptop shape for the upcoming movie.”

“I’m still on the fence about whether you should’ve agreed to the extension.”

“Something tells me I’m going to need money if Robert...” Harlow toyed with her tea. “If things don’t work out.”

“You’re better off without him.”

“We’ve had a great life and a lot of happy memories, but I’m beginning to wonder if our marriage is more of a business arrangement as opposed to two people who are in love and committed to each other. As long as the money keeps coming in and he’s able to maintain his lifestyle, Robert is happy as a clam.”

“With his assistant,” her father added.

“I shouldn’t have said anything. I don’t know for sure if he’s having an affair. She’s pretty, young, and with him almost 24/7. Maybe she was the one who pursued Robert.”

“He could have fired her if she started coming onto him.”

“True.” Much to Harlow’s relief, the doorbell rang, interrupting their conversation. “Kennedy’s here.”

While David cleared the table, Harlow steered her scooter through the living room. After a quick check to confirm it was her, she swung the door open. “Hello, Kennedy. You’re right on time.”

“I must warn you...I’m a stickler for punctuality, especially when I’m on a tight schedule.”

“Which suits me fine.” Harlow backed up, making room for her physical therapist. “I’m ready to get cracking.”

Kennedy held up a pair of yoga mats. “It’s such a nice day. I thought maybe we could work outside.”

“I like your way of thinking.” Harlow called out to her father, letting him know she and Kennedy were going out into the yard before easing her scooter over the threshold. Down the ramp and along the sidewalk they went.

“I noticed a gorgeous little garden on my way to the house,” Kennedy said. “I figured if you were in pain, at least you would have a pretty view.”

“If pain means gain, I’m all for it. I have less than a month to get back on my feet.” Harlow filled her in about her upcoming work schedule. “The studio has given me an

extension, but there is a deadline.”

“We can get you back on your feet,” Kennedy said. “I can’t believe the rumors swirling around on the internet about you.”

Harlow abruptly stopped. She had little doubt that the rumor mill was working overtime, clamoring for information and printing lies, just to have a story. “I’ve been avoiding the news.”

“Which might be best, at least for now.”

“Out of curiosity, what are they saying?”

Kennedy grimaced. “I’ll be perfectly honest, Harlow. I’m not sure you want to know.”

Chapter 4

“What you’ve read about me online is bad,” Harlow guessed.

Kennedy nodded.

“Really bad?”

“I’m not sure I would call it really bad, but most definitely incorrect.”

Harlow reached for her cell phone.

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Kennedy stopped her. “You need positive energy today to focus on your therapy. Reading the stories will not be conducive to healing.”

“Good point.” She handed her the phone. “Hang onto this for me.”

Kennedy slid it in the side of her bag and unrolled the mats. “Let’s work on getting you back on your feet.”

For the next hour, Harlow and her physical therapist went through the paces. By the time they finished, she felt every muscle in her body, but in a good way. The massage and gentle exercises meant healing.

Harlow’s aunt sashayed down the walkway, carrying a Thermos and a small stack of plastic cups. “I figured you might be ready for a break so I whipped up a batch of smoothies.” She rattled off the ingredients. “I read online avocado smoothies were excellent for promoting healing.”

Harlow grinned as her aunt drew closer, sporting a leopard print bandana, banana yellow leggings and a cropped top with Bob Seger’s face plastered across the front. “This is the second Bob Seger shirt I’ve seen you wearing. I didn’t know you were a fan.”

“I adore him. He’s a rock and roll legend, born and bred right here in Michigan. I know the words to every hit he ever released.” To prove her point, Birdie belted out the lyrics from one of his songs. “It’s a shame he doesn’t tour anymore.”

“I’m a big fan myself,” Kennedy said.

“A fellow Michigander with excellent taste.” Birdie placed the Thermos on top of the retaining wall and held out her hand. “You must be Kennedy. I’m Aunt Birdie.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” Kennedy shook her hand. “You have an interesting name.”

“Bonnie is my given name. My brother, Harlow’s father, nicknamed me Birdie years ago and it stuck.”

“Because she flits from place to place, never staying in one place for too long,” Harlow explained.

“Thank you for coming here to help Harlow,” her aunt said. “You’re a beautiful young woman with an old soul. I like you already.”

“Aunt Birdie is hanging around until I’m better. She left her cruise around the world to be with me.”

“You were on a world cruise?”

“I made it most of the way through before I found out about Harlow’s accident.” Birdie unscrewed the lid and began filling the plastic cups. “How is she doing?”

“Excellent. Having the right attitude is half the battle.”

“Harlow can do anything she sets her mind to.” Birdie handed each of them a smoothie. “My niece is a real go-getter. I’m not surprised.”

“The right mindset when people aren’t spreading vicious rumors,” Harlow sighed.

“Who is spreading rumors?”

“I don’t know. Kennedy mentioned seeing some news stories.”

“If you’re going to check it out, do it before our next session.” Kennedy handed Harlow her phone. She packed up her gear and chatted with the women while finishing her drink. “The smoothie was delicious.”

“And good for whatever ails you.” Birdie rattled off the ingredients. “All I did was throw in some frozen spinach, a ripe avocado, a banana, and coconut milk in the blender and voila!”

“I’ll have to try making my own.” Kennedy thanked her for the drink and headed out.

Aunt Birdie waited until she was gone. “How are you feeling?”

“A little sore, but otherwise great.” Harlow flexed her arm muscles. “I’m hoping after a couple more sessions I can ditch the scooter.”

“Doing too much too fast might backfire,” her aunt warned.

“True. What kind of salad do you want for dinner?” Harlow caught up with her aunt on the sidewalk. “Tossed, Greek or Mediterranean?”

“Surprise me.” Birdie slowed when they reached the cottage. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Why?”

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“I was thinking about what Kennedy said.”

“You mean about the rumors? It kind of goes with the territory.” Harlow shrugged. “You wouldn’t believe the garbage and lies floating around on the internet. Trash talk is big money.”

“I’m glad you’re not letting it get under your skin.” Her aunt glanced at her watch. “I’m going to head home and start prepping dinner. Bring your appetite.”

“That and my salad.” Harlow steered herself inside the empty house. She found a note from her father sitting on the counter, explaining he was out running an errand.

Mort, who had been napping in the hall, followed her into her bedroom, keeping a watchful eye on Harlow as she stripped off her sweaty workout clothes and navigated her way into the shower.

Her father, with a little resourceful rigging, had figured out a way to lower the sprayer’s nozzle, allowing Harlow to adjust it as needed.

While she scrubbed, she thought about what Kennedy had said. Clearly, whatever was circulating was bad enough for her to mention it. And bad enough for her to confiscate Harlow’s cell phone to keep her focused.

After finishing, she towel-dried her hair. Rummaging through her closet, Harlow found a fitted denim skirt trimmed in lace that went perfectly with a frilly white blouse. Red, white, and blue cowgirl boots completed her look.

Checking her reflection one last time, Harlow wheeled herself out of the bedroom. Clanging and banging echoed from the kitchen. She followed the noise and found her father filling a baking sheet with slice and bake cookies.

“Thanks for the grocery order. They dropped off so much food, I had a hard time figuring out where to put it all.” David waved a spatula in the air. “You remembered white chocolate macadamia cookies were my favorite.”

“Of course. I hope I didn’t miss anything important.”

“Miss anything? I think you ordered one of everything,” he joked.

“I figured better safe than sorry. You never know what you might need.” Harlow squeezed past him and opened the fridge. “I promised Aunt Birdie I would bring a salad for dinner.”

“You don’t have to leave.”

“I know I don’t.” Harlow flicked her hair from her face. “I think she’s looking forward to hosting. Besides, it will give you a break from babysitting me.”

“I don’t need a break from you. In fact, I can’t bear the thought of you leaving again.” David quickly turned, but not before Harlow noticed the sad look in his eyes.

“But I won’t be gone for long,” she said softly. “I’ll be back after I finish filming.”

“And then what?” He slid the cookie sheet into the oven and turned the timer on. “You have your own home...homes.”

“None of which I’m particularly attached to. In fact, Robert is the one who picked them out.”

“All of them? You didn’t have a say in where you live?” her father asked incredulously.

“Of course I had a say. It’s just...” Harlow struggled to explain it in a way that didn’t make her sound like a complete idiot for letting her husband be the one to make the couple’s financial decisions. “I work a lot of long hours and am sometimes on location for months at a time. He has more flexibility to research and find the right properties for us.”

“I see.”

Harlow could tell from her father’s tone he wasn’t buying it and now that she stood back and thought about it, she realized Robert had controlled a great deal of her life. In his defense, it had been easier for her to let him.

Something told her the dynamics of their marriage—if it survived—would need to change, regardless of what Robert thought.

Chapter 5

“I hope you don’t mind hamburgers and hotdogs.” Aunt Birdie carried the plate of meat down the steps and flipped open the lid on her gas grill. “I can’t remember the last time I grilled outdoors.”

“This is a pretty fancy piece of grilling equipment.” Eryn let out a low whistle. “You have all the creature comforts of a cozy home.”

“The RV guy was a slick salesman. He must’ve seen me coming from a mile away. And, as luck would have it, the RV store sold everything I needed to set up camp.”

“I bet Pops Wynn was surprised when you showed up on his doorstep.”

“More like shocked. I didn’t warn him, figuring he would try to stop me before I got here,” Birdie said. “But I think he’s coming around.”

“Where is Pops?” Eryn asked.

“Saturday is casserole and cards night with Lottie,” Harlow said.

“You’re right. I forgot. They’ve been getting together for cards and dinner for as long as Lottie has lived here.”

“Who is this mystery woman?” Aunt Birdie joked. “Her name keeps popping up.”

“Lottie Fletcher. She takes care of Wynn Harbor Inn’s gardens and also works part-time at the Grand Hotel.” Eryn glanced over her shoulder and lowered her voice. “To be honest, I think she’s in love with David. I mean, I can’t be positive, but I’ve sensed a certain vibe between them.”

“Me too,” Harlow said.

“She moved here from across the pond...the UK,” Eryn said. “I’m not sure how she found out about Mackinac Island. One day she waltzed over here, somehow convinced your dad he needed help with the gardens and then kind of stuck around.”

Birdie grinned. “I can only imagine the look on my brother’s face when she showed up and refused to leave.”

“Believe me, he grumbled and griped about it, but not to her face. Over time, I guess she kind of grew on him.”

“I can’t wait to meet her, but first.” Birdie flipped the burgers. “We eat.”

Eryn, not one to arrive empty-handed, set the bowl of homemade macaroni salad she'd brought on the table. She placed Harlow's tossed salad next to it before adding the condiments and packages of buns.

As soon as the burgers finished cooking, the trio feasted on the food, remarking about how wonderful the weather was...summer's last hurrah before fall came knocking on their door.

"How long are you hanging around, Aunt Birdie?" Eryn plucked a pickle from her burger and popped it into her mouth.

"Until Harlow has flown the coop."

"What if I don't fly the coop?"

Eryn made a choking sound. "You're moving back?"

Harlow hadn't meant to say that, had not even seriously considered the idea. But from the moment her father wheeled her off the ferryboat and onto the dock, Mackinac Island began working its magic, wiggling its way back into her heart.

It was like no other place on earth. Not her swanky digs in Palm Beach. Not her glitzy Malibu mansion. Not her trendy apartment in New York. All paled compared to the charming island, steeped in history...a step back in time.

"Maybe not moving here permanently, but who knows? I might be open to buying a small place of my own somewhere around here to escape the rat race."

"As I said before, I've never been one to mince words." Birdie hesitated, and Harlow could tell from the look on her face she was getting ready to speak her mind. She wasn't wrong.

“You blamed your father for your mother’s death. Have you had a change of heart?”

“I have. I don’t believe he set the fire that killed Mom, but someone did.”

Birdie cleared her throat. “And what do you intend to do about it?”

“About what?”

“Proving your father’s innocence. Proving to those who peer down their nose, having appointed themselves both judge and jury, who continue to insist David killed Ginger, that they’re wrong.”

“He’s been carrying the stigma for years,” Eryn said. “It’s aged him in so many ways.”

“What can I do?” Harlow asked.

“I offered to hire a private investigator to look into it,” Birdie said. “David flat out refused.”

“Why? Why wouldn’t he want to clear his name?” Harlow asked.

“Frankly, I have no idea. You would think he would be champing at the bit to get to the bottom of what happened.”

“I agree. Unless...”

“Unless what?” Eryn prompted.

“He’s hiding something.” Harlow blew air through thinned lips. “If it was me, I would’ve spent every last dime I had trying to find out how the fire started. Something isn’t adding up.”

“Perhaps if you offer to fund the investigation, he would be more receptive,” her aunt said.

“I will.” Harlow made a mental note to mention it to her father. Timing was key. David needed to be in the right mood to broach the subject.

The conversation shifted to talking about Harlow’s movie deal. She outlined the timeframe of when she was scheduled to show up on the set. “Robert will be on hand to make sure things go smoothly. Robert and a small army of staff, including Jillian.”

“What about your entourage?” Birdie asked. “You mentioned your bodyguard, Vic, who was also a close friend, the one you sent a message to. Have you heard from him yet?”

“Nope. Not a peep. I was also close to my publicist Janice. I haven’t heard from her either.” Harlow picked at what was left of her burger, suddenly losing her appetite at the thought the people she had considered friends had abandoned her.

“Why don’t you pick up the phone and call Janice?” Eryn asked.

“Now?”

“Sure.” Birdie drummed her fingers on the table. “Unless she’s on the other side of the world and it’s the middle of the night.”

“She’s in California. It’s Saturday, but Janice keeps her cell phone close by at all times, even on weekends.” Harlow toyed with her salad.

Birdie made a clicking sound with her teeth.

“What?”

“Call her.”

“Now?”

“There’s no time like the present.”

“Fine.” Harlow set her fork aside and reluctantly removed her cell phone from her pocket. She scrolled through the screen until finding Janice’s number. “She might not answer.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“You’re relentless,” Harlow teased.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” her aunt quipped.

“Here goes nothing.” Harlow sucked in a breath and pressed the call button.

Janice must’ve been sitting on her phone. She picked up almost immediately.

“Harlow. How are you?”

“Okay. I mean, I’m going to be all right.” Harlow told her she was in Michigan and working with a physical therapist.

“I’ve been worried about you.” The woman began rambling on about the accident, wondering how she was.

Finally, she took a breath and Harlow jumped in. “You could have called me.”

“Unfortunately, calling you wasn’t an option.”

Harlow began to feel lightheaded at what her publicist said next.

Chapter 6

“Robert gave me strict orders not to bother you.”

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Harlow repeated what Janice said. “Robert told you not to contact me?”

“Correct.”

She felt as if someone had sucked the air from her lungs. Her friends hadn’t abandoned her! Robert was keeping them away. He had gone behind her back, telling the people who cared about her, who were worried, not to bother her. “Did he give you a reason why?”

“Because you’re under extreme duress. I’ll be honest...and I hate to say this.” Janice hesitated.

“Say what?”

“He almost made it sound like perhaps you’re emotionally unstable.”

“Emotionally unstable,” Harlow gasped.

“He didn’t come right out and call you unstable, but Robert definitely alluded to you having caused the accident. Hang on.”

Harlow could tell Janice was on the move. A door closed, and then her muffled voice grew clearer. “It’s all right to feel overwhelmed. All you had to do was reach out and ask for help. You know I would’ve been there.”

“Everyone deals with stress, but I can assure you I wasn’t stressed out enough to crash my Ferrari. It was an accident. I dropped my cell phone. I did a dumb thing and

looked down to grab it. All it took was a split second and my car crossed the center line. I jerked the wheel and lost control.”

“So...you’re not having a nervous breakdown?”

“No. But I might need bail money when I get my hands on my husband,” Harlow fumed. “Who else has Robert told this pack of lies to?”

“It’s mostly been kept hush-hush. You know the rumor mill around here. We can’t control that. I issued a formal press release based on what Robert wanted me to say not long after it happened. Do you want me to send you a copy?”

“Please. As soon as you get a chance.”

“Standby.” Janice’s voice grew muffled. “It’s on the way. I am so glad to hear from you, Harlow.”

“And I’m glad I called.”

Tink.

“It came through. Hang on.”

“I’m hanging.”

Harlow clicked on the message and opened the attachment. The press release was brief and to the point. It stated she’d been involved in a car accident, was expected to make a full recovery and all inquiries or correspondence were directed to Robert.

Harlow clicked away from the message. “Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“So...Robert cut you out. He’s handling everything for me.”

“In a nutshell. He didn’t fire me or my agency per se, but he made it crystal clear he’ll be handling your public releases until further notice.” Janice told her as soon as the press release was sent, he put her on hiatus.

“He never breathed a word to me.”

“Maybe because Robert believes you caused the accident and is trying to protect you.”

“More like he’s trying to control me,” Harlow said. “I’ve officially reinstated you.”

“I...are you sure? Do you want to run it by Robert first?”

“No. I don’t and I won’t. From here on out, you will only go through me. In fact, please don’t mention our conversation to him,” Harlow said. “I’ll handle Robert.”

“I hope I haven’t caused problems between you two,” Janice said.

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“You’ve done no such thing. For far too long, I’ve let him have control. It’s time for me to take some of it back.”

“I...”

Harlow could tell there was something else on Janice’s mind. “What were you going to say?”

“I’m thrilled to hear this, Harlow. We’re friends. At least, I always considered you to be my friend.”

“Me too, which is why I called and am glad I got to the bottom of what is going on.”

“Then I’ll go out on a limb and tell you I’m thrilled to hear you say you want to be more involved. This is a cutthroat business. The best person to handle the media and what information is released about you is you.”

“I agree, one hundred percent.” Harlow promised to be in touch again soon.

“Are you still doing the new deal, the new movie deal?”

“I am.” Harlow told her she’d signed an extension. “I have a few weeks before I’m scheduled to arrive on the set. Hopefully, I’ll be walking by then.”

Janice gasped. “You’re paralyzed?”

“I’m not paralyzed, but I have some leg injuries and am working with a physical

therapist. I might not be one hundred percent, but I plan on giving up my mobility scooter sooner rather than later. Robert didn't tell you?"

"No. He made it seem like you had some bumps and bruises, but were otherwise okay. I saw a photo of you being wheeled out of a restaurant up near Mackinac Island, but I thought maybe it was only a precaution."

"I'm beginning to think Robert believes I'm making it up and faking my injury."

"What about the doctor? I know you were hospitalized."

"The doctor, in no uncertain terms, told Robert it would take time for me to heal, to fully recover. Apparently, it went in one ear and out the other." Harlow bit back the rest of her rant. The last thing she wanted to do was drag her friend into it. "We'll talk again soon."

"Absolutely." Janice started to hang up. Harlow stopped her. "Hey. Before you go, have you heard from Vic?"

"Vic Stern, your bodyguard?"

"Yeah."

"No. I haven't."

"I left him a message. He hasn't replied and I'm wondering if maybe he didn't get it."

Rustling ensued on the other end of the line. "I have the number right here for the security agency he's contracted with. Would you like me to track him down?"

"Yes, but maybe in a roundabout way. I don't want to put him on the spot if

he's...busy."

Janice promised to check into it.

Harlow thanked her. She ended the call and waved her cell phone in the air. "Robert is telling people I'm mentally unstable and not to contact me."

Aunt Birdie cleared her throat. "This guy is a trip."

"More like a control freak. He's trying to isolate me from everyone."

Her aunt placed her hands on her hips. "I would like him to try it with me."

"Or me," Eryn chimed in. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get my ducks in a row and confront him. He doesn't know it yet, but he's done controlling Harlow Wynn."

Chapter 7

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 9:09 am

To describe David Wynn as furious when Harlow told him about her conversation with Janice was somewhat of an understatement. In fact, she had to beg him not to book a flight to California to track him down and knock some sense into him.

Instead, the two of them, along with Eryn and Aunt Birdie, gathered for an emergency family meeting at her aunt's place to do a little digging around.

Harlow mentally prepared herself for the worst and began scouring the internet, searching for stories about her accident. Knowledge was power. She needed all the information she could get her hands on to prepare herself for whatever Robert might be plotting.

She found story after story, most of them lies, insinuations about her mental health, her physical health, her going into seclusion. There was even a story about Wynn Harbor Inn's fire with the writer hinting perhaps Harlow's family was plagued with mental issues.

They dug up dirt, about the fire, about her mother and father. They even interviewed Madge Chalmers, the local cleaning lady her father occasionally hired, a woman who wasn't necessarily a fan of Harlow's.

To her credit, Madge pointed out the cause of the tragic fire was never determined and insisted the Wynn family was not responsible.

"I've read enough." Harlow closed the search screens and leaned back in her chair. "It's as bad as I figured it would be."

“Why would Robert do such a thing?” Aunt Birdie asked.

“In his defense, not all of this is his doing. Half of these writers spend their days sitting around making stuff up.” Harlow placed a light hand on the back of her neck.

“The only way to squash the rumors is for me to make more public appearances.”

“Which is the exact opposite of what Robert wants you to do,” Eryn pointed out.

David paced. “I don’t care what they say about me, but it makes me furious to hear what’s being said about my daughter.”

“Unfortunately, it goes with the territory.” Harlow and Robert needed to talk, to clear the air. Perhaps he wasn’t behind the rumors and figured if she kept a low profile, they would die down.

“You don’t think he’s trying to make you appear unstable to gain control of your assets, do you?” her aunt asked.

“It’s possible. Anything is possible at this point.” Harlow excused herself. She went outside and dialed Robert’s number. It was no surprise the call went directly to voicemail. “I spoke with Janice. She’ll be handling my press releases going forward. I’m sure you’ve seen the stories, the lies being printed about my instability. They need to stop. Janice is a pro. She and I will work together to handle squashing the rumors.” She told Robert he could contact her if he wanted to discuss it before ending the call.

Harlow returned inside. “I left Robert a message, letting him know Janice would handle the press releases.”

“Where is he?” her father asked.

“California, or maybe Palm Beach. He could be in New York at our apartment. To be honest, your guess is as good as mine.”

Eryn pressed her palms together. “Do you have iCloud on your iPhone?”

Harlow thought about it. “I think so.”

“I’m sure your account has a phone tracker app, using GPS to locate the phones associated with the account.” In less than a minute, with Harlow’s help Eryn had accessed her account. “I see a few phone numbers listed. Which one is Robert’s?”

She rattled his number off.

“I found it. Standby.” Eryn hummed under her breath, her fingers flying across the screen. “According to his phone, he’s in New York.”

Birdie clapped her hands. “I’m ready for a little spy mission.”

“You want to spy on my husband?”

“Why not? If he’s innocent, he has nothing to hide. Aren’t you at all curious about what he’s so busy doing that he can’t be with you?”

On the one hand, Harlow was very much interested in what Robert might be up to. On the other, she might not like what her aunt found. But then, if he was up to no good, working behind the scenes to take complete control of their assets and business, she needed to know ASAP. “I am.”

“Let me take a quick trip to the Big Apple and do a little poking around.” Aunt Birdie slipped her reading glasses on, studying her laptop screen. “I found some empty seats on an early morning flight. This would work out perfectly.”

“If anyone can find out what Robert is up to, it’s your snoopyp aunt. She’s the perfect person for the job,” David teased. “I had better get back home. I left Lottie at the house.”

“I’m sorry I dragged you away from your cards and casserole night,” Harlow apologized.

“You didn’t drag me away. It’s important for me to know what’s going on,” her father said. “So, I guess Birdie is heading to New York.”

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“Just as soon as I book a plane ticket,” she said. “It will make me feel like I’m helping.”

After her father left, Harlow jotted down the address to the apartment and handed it to her.

“I want to go,” Eryn said.

Aunt Birdie glanced at the paper. “Two sets of eyes are better than one.”

“What about me?” Harlow asked.

Her aunt tucked the paper in her pocket and knelt next to Harlow. “It will be difficult for Eryn and me to fly under the radar if you’re with us. News folks from here to Timbuktu are looking for you.”

“I’m sure they are.”

“Not to mention, traveling right now will be tricky,” Eryn chimed in. “Let Aunt Birdie and me handle this. If Robert is up to no good, we’ll find out.”

“I’ll pay for the plane tickets.”

“It’s not necessary.” Her aunt protested.

Harlow held up a hand, cutting her off. “I insist. I have a friend who manages a hotel close to the apartment and will book a room for as long as you need.”

Eryn started to put her phone away.

“Hang on.” Harlow stopped her. “The other numbers associated with our cell phone account...can you check the location of another one?”

“Sure.”

Harlow scrolled through her phone, tracked down Jillian’s number, and read the numbers aloud.

“The cell phone is also in New York right now,” Eryn said. “Whose is it?”

“Jillian’s, although I shouldn’t be surprised. They spend a lot of time together.”

“All the time?”

“More than they should,” Harlow bit her lower lip. “Something tells me I won’t like what you find.”

“We don’t have to go,” Eryn said. “Seriously, the decision is yours. Maybe it would be best to put it on the back burner for now.”

Harlow was on the fence. On the one hand, she was curious to know what Robert was up to. On the other, whatever they found could very well be the last straw, as far as her marriage was concerned. “If he’s handling business like he should be, there’s nothing for you to find.”

“Correct,” Birdie confirmed. “But Eryn is right. It’s up to you.”

“I say make the quick trip to New York. I want...I need to know what he’s doing.”

“A wise decision. And if he’s plotting and planning your harm?” Her aunt sprang to her feet. “We’re about to even the playing field.”

Chapter 8

Harlow spent the rest of the evening going back and forth, undecided about whether she should question her husband about her conversation with Janice.

She finally decided the discussion should be in person, face to face, instead of over the phone. But the conversation would have to wait. Harlow wisely decided she needed to pick her battles, opting to have firsthand information, to wait until Aunt Birdie and Eryn finished conducting a little intel.

No longer in the mood for a night on the town, Harlow headed home after hanging out long enough to make sure she didn’t interrupt what was left of Lottie and her father’s card and casserole night.

Back at the house, she gave her father a quick update. He wholeheartedly agreed a little closer investigation was in order. Despite her initial reservations, Harlow knew it was time to find out what her husband might be up to.

She went to bed not long after, tossing and turning, unable to fall asleep. When she finally did, Harlow’s sleep was filled with vivid dreams about her mother, along with an unrelated dream about Robert. Even Caleb Jackson made an appearance.

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She woke exhausted early the next morning. Flipping over to check the clock, a knot settled in the pit of her stomach. Aunt Birdie and Eryn were already on the mainland, driving south to the Detroit airport where they would catch a direct flight to New York City.

By the time she dressed and rolled out of her bedroom, her aunt had texted, letting her know they were on the plane, getting ready for takeoff.

The smell of fresh coffee lured her into the kitchen. Harlow poured a cup and went in search of her father. She found him in his usual spot on the front porch, the morning newspaper in hand.

“Good morning, Harlow.”

“Hey, Dad.”

“You’re up early.” He set the paper in his lap, giving her his full attention.

“I didn’t sleep well.”

“To be honest, neither did I. Have you mentally prepared yourself for what Birdie and Eryn might find?”

“Yes. I mean I’m trying.” During the long hours of the night, Harlow contemplated her marriage. She was beginning to realize it wasn’t a deep and lasting love, but more of a business arrangement.

She couldn't remember the last time Robert had told her he loved her or even complimented her. Their professional and personal lives revolved around their careers. Business deals, public appearances, scheduled promotional events and...spending money. Lots of money spent on a lavish lifestyle, to the point Harlow was almost embarrassed by the excess.

She absentmindedly checked her cell phone and noticed she'd missed a text message. It was from her credit card company, declining the charge for the hotel room she'd booked for Aunt Birdie and Eryn. "Now what?"

"Is something wrong?"

"The credit card charge for Aunt Birdie and Eryn's hotel room was declined." Harlow promptly dialed the number. She explained the situation to the company representative. "This is an American Express Gold Card with unlimited charging."

"Which has been cancelled."

Harlow could feel the color drain from her face. "My credit card has been cancelled?"

"Yes, ma'am. The only way to get it reinstated is to visit your local bank branch and reapply in person."

She thanked the person on the other end of the line and hit the end call button. "My card has been cancelled. Can you do me a favor and grab my purse? I need my wallet."

"Sure." David sprang from the chair and hurried inside. Returning moments later, he handed it to her.

Harlow flipped open her wallet and began placing calls to check her other credit

cards, only to find all but a small line of credit had been cancelled. “I have one small credit card still active.”

She set her purse on the table and tapped the screen. “I’m calling Robert to find out what’s going on.”

“Hold up.” Her father stopped her. “Do you think there’s a chance he may have put some sort of freeze on your bank accounts too?”

Harlow blinked rapidly. Would Robert do something so sneaky, so underhanded? “While I was awake last night, the thought had crossed my mind that maybe it was time for me to check out my...our finances. I haven’t done it in a while.”

“To make sure Robert hasn’t spent all of your hard-earned money?”

Harlow nodded. “I’m ashamed to admit he also controlled our bank accounts.”

“Because you were busy working,” her father pointed out. “I’ve heard horror stories about famous folks who turned their money over to a manager only to find out later it was all gone.”

“First things first. I’ll call the hotel and get the reservation straightened out.” Harlow promptly placed the call. Using another card, a card she kept for emergencies, she paid for the night’s stay. “I’m going to need my laptop.”

“The kitchen counter would work better. You can spread out.” Her father gathered up what she needed, including tracking down her laptop. “Do you need help reaching the barstool?”

“I want to try it on my own.”

Mort, who had trotted into the kitchen, worriedly watched her struggle to get from her wheelchair to the barstool. “I’m making Mort nervous,” she joked.

“He’s not the only one, although Mort’s a bit of a worrywart.”

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The dog stayed close by Harlow's side. He was almost always in her room when she woke in the morning. The pup followed her to the bathroom to keep an eye on her and even monitored her movements throughout the day, having become Harlow's self-appointed guard dog.

She let out a celebratory whoop when she successfully landed on the barstool. "I did it."

Woof. With tail wagging, Mort nudged her with his nose.

"Onward and upward, my furry friend." She ruffled his ears.

"Do you want me to hang around?"

"Thanks for the offer, but it's going to take some time to dig through what we have."

"I'll be on the porch. Just holler if you need help."

After her father left, Harlow began sifting through her emails, making sure Robert hadn't sent her a message with an explanation about why her credit cards had been canceled.

She quickly answered her most pressing messages. Halfway through, she found one from her husband, asking her to review a handful of potential projects he'd forwarded. She responded with brief and to the point replies.

He replied, thanking her. As an afterthought, he asked how she was feeling.

Getting better every day.

During the long, sleepless hours and late into the night, Harlow had done some serious soul-searching about Robert and their marriage. She loved her husband, but it wasn't the kind of love that made her heart race and her knees weak. No one had ever made her feel like jelly except for Caleb Jackson.

Stop! Harlow scolded herself. Caleb was a part of her past. So what if he was close by? He had chosen his path. She had chosen hers. To top it off, the two were not even on the same page about what they wanted out of life.

Pushing all thoughts of her high school sweetheart aside, Harlow grabbed a pad of paper and jotted down each of the bank accounts she knew of.

Starting at the top, she tracked down Coastal California Credit Union's site and logged in. Or at least she tried logging in. Twice, she got an error message informing her she had the incorrect password.

Harlow hit the button for "forgotten password." A second error popped up, stating the online account was unavailable and listed a number to call. "Great. This is getting better by the minute," she muttered under her breath.

The front door slammed. Her father appeared. "How's it going?"

"Not good. I'm locked out of our main bank account." Harlow grabbed her cell phone and dialed the number. After several transfers, she finally reached the regional assistant manager, who offered to look into it. "It appears some recent changes were made to your account."

Harlow's scalp tingled. "I haven't made any changes."

“Robert Barbetz is the designated account holder, along with Harlow Wynn.”

“Which is me. You’ve already verified my information.”

“The username and password were updated last week.”

Harlow’s mind whirled. “I need to access our account and would like to change it.”

“We can take care of it now.” Clicking on the other end of the line ensued.

Within minutes, she was able to give Harlow access. “Is there any way to put some sort of note on this account so the password isn’t changed again?”

“Unfortunately, as a safety measure, all customers are allowed to change their password and account information as often as needed.”

“I see.” Harlow thanked the woman for her help. She ended the call and immediately logged in. The main account page popped up.

She clutched her chest, staring at the screen in disbelief. “How can this be?”

Her father leaned in, peering over her shoulder. “What is it?”

“The main accounts have almost zero balances.”

Chapter 9

Harlow promptly logged out of the site and into another bank account she and Robert shared. Once again, the password had been changed and once again, Harlow was forced to contact a branch employee to gain access.

She logged in, relieved to find out the money was accounted for.

There was one final bank account, an account in Harlow's name alone, one she'd opened before marrying Robert and insisted on keeping. She logged into it and found the money untouched. In other words, her husband hadn't been able to get his hands on it.

Harlow stared glumly at the computer screen. Robert had emptied their main bank account. She briefly wondered what he'd done to the joint investment accounts. At least he couldn't touch her personal retirement account.

She snatched her phone off the counter, her hand trembling as she dialed her husband's cell phone number. It went directly to voicemail. Forcing her voice to remain calm, Harlow asked him to call her back immediately.

"He can't keep your money," David said after she hung up. "A judge will find out what he's done and make him split all assets."

"What is he thinking?" A terrifying thought crept into Harlow's head. Her conversation with Janice. Robert had cleaned out the bank account and canceled her credit cards. "What if he plans to petition for my guardianship, claiming I'm unstable

and no longer able to make decisions on my own?”

“He’s gonna have a hard time convincing a judge of that, especially when you’re functioning well enough to work.”

“True. Still, if he’s cleaned out our main bank account, I wouldn’t put it past him.” Harlow checked her retirement account, relieved to find it was intact. Nothing had been touched. At least that was something.

“I need to call an attorney. Unfortunately, the only ones I know are attorneys Robert hired.”

David shuffled through the pile of papers sitting on the counter. “I can recommend an attorney. I know for a fact the Eastons have also used him. He’s good. Probably one of the best in the area. You could try giving him a call.”

“What’s his name?”

“Nigel Beckworth. He has offices in Toronto and Michigan.”

Harlow promptly opened a new screen and typed the attorney’s name in the search bar. “Wow. This guy gets topnotch ratings and reviews. If he’s good enough for you and the Eastons, he’s good enough for me.”

She dialed the office number and left a brief message, asking Attorney Beckworth to return her call. “It’s Sunday. I’m sure I won’t hear from him today.” Harlow closed out of the screens and shut the lid on her laptop. “I could use some fresh air.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“Only if you want to listen to me vent,” she joked.

“I see nothing wrong with blowing off a little steam.” David glanced out the window. “It’s a beautiful day. Why don’t we take Winnie out for a spin?”

“You don’t need to ask me twice. I’ll go grab a jacket.” By the time Harlow found what she needed, Mort and her father were waiting on the porch. She swapped out her wheelchair for the scooter and off they went.

David did most of the talking, briefly sharing his vision of the renovations and repairs to Wynn Harbor Inn. “After visiting Easton Island and seeing Morgan’s setup at Locke Pointe, I decided it would be much more manageable and, best of all, less money to rebuild on a smaller, more intimate scale.”

“It makes sense. I can invest my money, too. If I have any money left.”

“Robert can’t keep it,” David said. “The sooner we get an attorney involved and put a stop to his antics, the better.”

They reached the boat dock. Harlow and Mort patiently waited for her father to check the lines and load the gear.

Aunt Birdie texted, reporting she and Eryn had arrived safely and promised to keep her in the loop.

Harlow thanked her. She didn’t mention the stunt her husband had pulled. It would take too long to explain.

With a little help from her father, Harlow was soon seated near the front of the sailboat. Lake Huron, with the bright sun shining down, sparkled like a million diamonds.

Within minutes they were gliding over the open water, skirting Mackinac Island’s

coastline. Mort snuggled up next to Harlow. He placed his paws on her lap and gazed out toward the shoreline, a look of pure joy on his furry face.

“Mort loves sailing.”

“He does. We haven’t gone out as often as we used to. I know he misses it. I do too.”

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Harlow smoothed her hair back. Adjusting her sunglasses, she tilted her head to let the sun's rays warm her skin. "You want to know what I miss? I miss the simple things."

"They've been here all along, waiting for you," her father said.

"It took an accident for me to see life has been passing me by." Harlow thought about it. "And it opened my eyes."

"I've always heard movie stars, athletes, famous people live in a bubble world. I guess it's true."

"The sad part is I didn't realize the bubble was closing in, getting smaller and suffocating me." The analogy summed up Harlow's life. She had been living in a bubble...a big beautiful bubble surrounded by a handpicked entourage. Sheltered from the real world.

"It's never too late, as long as you're still alive."

"I'm never going back to the bubble."

"I hope not." David intentionally kept the conversation light, sharing tidbits about some of the cliff-side homes and their owners, pointing out the bikers who were making their way around the island.

"As soon as I'm back on my feet, I'm going to bike all the way around," Harlow vowed.

They rounded the bend. Up ahead was Mackinac Island's downtown and the harbor district.

"Let's stop for lunch," David said.

"In town?"

"Sure. We'll ask for a table with a view." He expertly steered the sailboat alongside the dock and eased into an empty slip. A dockhand noticed them and ran over to help secure Winnie.

Harlow knew the exact moment the guy recognized her. It was a look she knew well. Slack jaw. Wide eyes. Staring. She pretended not to notice, instead watching her father maneuver her scooter onto the dock. "Let's go, Mort."

The pup scrambled along the gangway. He did a doggy shake, from the top of his head to the tip of his tail.

"Do you...uh...need help?" The dockhand stammered. "I can...uh...grab whatever you need off the boat."

"We're having lunch at the Dockside Grill," David explained. "We shouldn't be more than an hour or so if you don't mind keeping an eye on Winnie for us."

"No, sir. Not at all. I'll make sure no one messes with her."

"Thank you." Wynn strolled alongside his daughter, making their way toward shore. He waited until they were out of earshot. "That young fella was starstruck."

Harlow chuckled. "Poor guy. I thought he was going to trip on the ropes and tumble headfirst into the water."

“I bet it happens pretty often, the stares and gawking part.”

“You get used to it, although I’ve learned to watch out for the ones who can be a little.” She twirled her finger next to her forehead. “Obsessed.”

“I read about some guy who climbed over your privacy wall and made it to the front door.”

Harlow shivered involuntarily. “He had a stun gun, rope, mace, a knife, and duct tape with him. Thank God Vic saw him and took him down. We had a similar incident at our condo in Palm Beach.”

“You’ve mentioned Vic before. You two must have been close.”

“Like this.” Harlow twined her index and middle fingers. “He’s the best, right up there with Eryn as far as friends go.”

“Have you heard from him?”

“No. Janice, my publicist promised to track him down. Maybe he’s moved on.”

“He doesn’t sound like the kind of friend who would just move on without telling you goodbye.”

“I don’t think so either, but who knows? It seems like every time I turn around, I learn something new about the people I thought were my friends.” Harlow’s shoulders sagged. “It’s depressing. Let’s talk about something else. I haven’t been to the Dockside Grill in years.”

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“As far as I know, it hasn’t changed much. I’ve heard the food is delicious. The view is fantastic. Hopefully, they’ll find us a table by the water.”

David ushered his daughter inside and approached the hostess station, asking for outdoor seating on the main floor and a spot for Mort to hang out. The hostess did a double take. She stared at Harlow. “You’re here,” she whispered. “Oh my gosh. I heard you were on the island.”

Harlow held a finger to her lips. “You can tell all of your friends as soon as we’re done eating.”

“Okay. Yes. Of course. I’m sure you want to eat in peace. Follow me.” The woman fumbled for the menus. She scurried along the hall, nervously chattering the entire way.

As luck would have it, or perhaps because of Harlow, she seated them at a corner table, offering an expansive view of the harbor and Winnie, who was tied up nearby.

“I recommend the daily special—fish and chips. It’s delish.”

“Is it whitefish?” David asked.

“You bet. Freshly caught.” The hostess told them a server would be by shortly. The trio settled in, and Harlow began perusing the menu.

Moments later, their server arrived and rattled off the lunch specials. Gold star service was the only word to describe the staff. Drinks appeared within minutes,

along with a complimentary appetizer—the Dockside Grill’s famous smoked whitefish dip and a plate full of pita chips.

Harlow dug in, discovering she was famished. A server returned with a bowl of water and treats for Mort, who promptly licked her hand to show his gratitude.

Attentive but not intrusive was the theme of the meal. The staff was on hand but not hovering, something Harlow appreciated. They lingered over coffee and shared a decadent dessert, triple chocolate cheesecake.

“Thanks for taking me out for a spin in Winnie,” Harlow said. “I feel much better. Robert might have a legitimate reason for the accounts being emptied and just hasn’t bothered telling me why.”

“You should ask him about it,” David said. “It’s good for you to let him know you’re paying attention.”

“I agree. Hopefully, Mr. Beckworth will call back. If not, I’m sure I can find another competent attorney, one Robert doesn’t have in his pocket.” Harlow toyed with the last bite of cheesecake. “I feel like such a fool.”

“You’re not a fool. Robert is a master at manipulating and controlling. As I’ve said before, the car crash was a terrible accident, but perhaps a blessing in disguise.”

“Absolutely.” Harlow told him about the London apartment Robert was gung-ho to purchase. “I was having second thoughts about it. In fact, it was one of the last things he and I argued about. Looking back, God saved me from signing those papers.”

The serving staff, a trio of employees, returned with the check. They placed it on the table and then lingered. “I hope you enjoyed your lunch, Ms. Wynn.”

“Dad and I loved it. Thank you for the smoked whitefish dip. It was one of the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“If...uh...we were wondering if we could snap a selfie with you,” one young server asked.

“Of course. I’m sure Dad won’t mind snapping a picture for us.” Harlow posed with each of them individually and then as a group. The hostess appeared for another round of photos.

“Could you return the favor and take a picture of me, my dad and Mort?” Harlow asked.

“We would love to.”

David, with a look of pure pride on his face, made his way over. He leaned in, placing a light hand on his daughter’s shoulder. Mort, not to be left out, trotted over and parked himself at Harlow’s feet.

“This one is definitely frame-worthy,” the server proclaimed in her charming southern accent. “Y’all are super photogenic.”

With photos taken and the bill paid, Harlow, her father, and Mort exited the restaurant. Next door and only steps away was the visitors’ center.

“Do you mind if we pop into the visitors’ center?”

“Your wish is my command.” Entering through the front, David greeted the employee by name. While they chatted, Harlow and Mort circled the room. She grabbed a brochure about Fort Mackinac, a map of the island, and a few others that sounded interesting before catching up with him.

The woman leaned her elbows on the counter, a friendly smile lighting her face.
“Finally, a sighting of the elusive Harlow Wynn.”

“Maybe not elusive, but definitely reclusive,” Harlow joked.

Her father introduced them, mentioning they had eaten lunch at the Dockside Grill and were heading back out on Winnie.

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“Enjoy the rest of the day. You know how short our summer seasons are. Before you know it, the weather will change and fall will be upon us.”

Back on board the sailboat, they set off for the remainder of their journey around the island. All too soon, they pulled alongside Wynn Harbor Inn’s private dock.

David made quick work of securing Winnie. After finishing, father, daughter and Mort trekked back toward the cottage. As they neared the gate, Harlow’s heart skipped a beat when she noticed a large, hulking figure standing on the porch, cell phone in hand. “You’re here!”

The man shoved his phone in his pocket and strode toward her. “Harlow. I can’t believe it. I finally found you.”

Chapter 10

Tears welled up in Harlow’s eyes at the sight of her friend, Vic. “I left a message on your cell phone letting you know where I was.”

“I never got the message. Robert fired me not long after your accident. He took my cell phone, seeing how it was company property and all, and told me you wanted nothing to do with me. I was getting ready to track your father down when Janice called.”

Harlow’s stoic demeanor crumpled. Vic, her friend. Her trusted confidant was here. For her.

“I hope it’s okay for me to show up on your doorstep. Looking back, I guess I should’ve called first.”

“We’re glad you’re here.” David stepped forward and shook Vic’s hand. “My daughter speaks highly of you.”

“And I think the world of Harlow. Like I said, Robert told me she didn’t want me around any longer, that she had planned to have me replaced and now, with the accident, it was time for me to vamoose.”

“He’s lying. Robert lied to you.” Harlow rambled on about him taking money from their bank account, about him all but abandoning her. “He’s been hinting around to others that I’m emotionally unstable.”

Vic looked away.

“It’s true. He fed you the same lies.”

“He made an offhand comment about how you may have intentionally wrecked your car. Between you and me, I wouldn’t be surprised to hear he plans to petition for your guardianship.”

Harlow began to feel lightheaded. Vic had voiced her greatest fear. For all she knew, Robert was already putting the wheels in motion. But he would wait...he would wait for their big, fat lucrative movie deal to wrap up to collect the money, and then what? Call in his own mental health specialist to have her deemed unfit and put her in a mental institution?

Meanwhile, he had taken money from their bank accounts, maybe even already stashing it away in an offshore account. He wasn’t going to get away with it. Not by a longshot. “I’m beginning to think he wishes I would have died. It would have saved

him a lot of trouble.”

“I’m sorry, Harlow. Robert doesn’t have your best interests in mind,” Vic said.
“What happened that day?”

“I dropped my cell phone and reached down to grab it. When I looked back up, a big box truck was coming right toward me. I jerked the wheel. It’s the last thing I remember until I woke up in the hospital.”

“What about Robert?”

“He’s been around.”

Her father cleared his throat.

“To make sure I make it to the filming location in Vancouver,” she added.

Vic rubbed his thumb against his fingers. “It’s all about the money. I won’t mince words. You know how I feel about Robert.”

Harlow knew exactly how Vic Stern felt. The two had never hit it off. Vic refused to take any of Robert’s crap because he didn’t report to Robert. He worked solely for Harlow. Knowing what she knew now, he probably resented how close they were.

In fact, more than once, he’d accused her and Vic of having an affair. Harlow had laughed in his face. Vic was in love with Makena, a gorgeous woman with soft brown eyes, and a warm, infectious laugh.

The moment Harlow met her, she knew she had “the look” and had promptly called one of her contacts, a top modeling scout, to arrange for Makena and the scout to meet.

The introduction had helped set the groundwork for her career. Makena was fast becoming one of the most sought-after models in the industry.

“And your gut instinct this entire time has been spot on. Based on what I’m discovering, I’ll have to fight for every penny I’ve earned, fight to defend my reputation, you name it.”

“Did Robert mention he landed a movie role for Jillian?”

“No, but I’m not surprised.”

“It’s in A City of Glass.”

Harlow’s brows furrowed. “The movie I’m starring in?”

“It’s a small part. He bragged about it right before he fired me.”

“Great. Not only do I have to deal with Robert, but I’ll also have to put up with his girlfriend.”

Vic hung his head. “You...know?”

“About Jillian and Robert? I don’t have proof, but I would be an idiot not to see what’s going on right under my nose. We argued before my car accident. I told Robert that I wanted her gone.”

“I bet that went over like a lead balloon.”

“He told me she was staying. He stormed out of the house. I left not long after and that’s when I flipped my car.”

“During my day off,” Vic said. “I wish I had been there. It never would have happened.”

Harlow placed her head in her hands. Even Vic knew her husband and Jillian were having an affair. “So it’s true.”

“I caught them in a...shall we say...compromising situation right before Robert fired me.”

“Ah. It all makes sense. You caught him. He knew it would get back to me, so he fired you.”

“In a nutshell.” Vic glanced at his watch. “I should get going. I booked a room at a hotel near the docks.”

“You can stay here,” David suggested. “We have an empty cottage.”

Vic hesitated. “I don’t want to impose.”

“It’s not an imposition. I’m sure Harlow would love to have you nearby.”

“Please, Vic?” Harlow clasped her hands.

“I appreciate the offer. Money is kind of tight right now.” He patted his backpack. “I’m traveling light.”

“Has Robert paid you?”

“He still owes me my last paycheck.”

“As soon as I get some of the money moved back into the business’s bank account, I’ll get you caught up.”

“Thanks, Harlow. No worries. I know you’re good for it.” Vic knelt next to her. “We’re friends.”

“We are,” she confirmed.

“I’m gonna be a straight shooter with you.”

“You always have. I expect nothing less.”

“So you’ll be okay with me giving you some advice?”

“Of course.”

“You better hire the best lawyer you can afford and get rid of the money-grubbing, two-timing, thieving loser,” Vic said. “In the meantime, someone needs to keep an eye on the dude.”

“I’m working on hiring a lawyer,” Harlow said. “And I’ve already got boots on the ground, a couple of people who hopefully have Robert in their sights as we speak.”

Chapter 11

“So this is New York City.” Eryn spun in a slow circle, trying to take it all in. The sights. The sounds. Horns honking. A thick haze of fumes from the buses rumbling down the streets, filling the air.

And then there were the crowds. People rushing by, heads down, cell phones in hand. She began to feel slightly claustrophobic. “What on earth does Harlow see in this place?”

“I have no idea,” Aunt Birdie said. “Between you and me, this is not my cup of tea. Give me the high seas any day.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Eryn dug her phone from her pocket and clicked on the walking app. “We’re close to our hotel.”

“Don’t look now, but we’re standing right in front of it.” Birdie motioned to the nondescript brick high rise with the hotel’s name emblazoned on the front in gold lettering. “Let’s unload our bags and scope out the scene.”

Check in was quick. They dropped their carry-on bags in the room and headed back out. Using Eryn’s handy-dandy phone app, they quickly reached Harlow’s apartment, which was only a block away.

“Now what?” Eryn surveyed their surroundings.

“I noticed a quaint coffee shop next door. It has a bird’s-eye view of the sidewalk.

Let's head in."

Once inside, Birdie ordered two double shot tall lattes, along with pumpkin cream cheese muffins. "I'll sit on this side looking this way. You take the spot close to the window. What does Robert look like again?"

"I'll show you." Eryn typed Robert Barbetz into the search bar and pulled up several online photos of Harlow's husband. She handed the phone to Aunt Birdie.

"I think I've seen pictures of this clown before." She slipped her reading glasses on. "Yep. This is the guy. I feel bad for Harlow, being injured and having to deal with this mess."

"Me too." Despite having visited her friend several times over the years, traveling to Palm Beach and even California, Eryn had only met her bestie's husband once. During all other visits, he'd been "away" or "out of town."

She'd never made it to New York. Looking around, Eryn realized she wasn't missing much. She preferred the quiet island life over the hustle and bustle of the big city any day. What was the saying? The city that never sleeps. And how could they? People were everywhere.

During her sporadic visits, Eryn had noticed subtle changes in her best friend. Not necessarily Harlow becoming callous or uncaring, but having a harder edge. She chalked it up to Harlow being forced to build a barrier, to protect herself from those who wanted her time and attention...not to mention trying to take advantage of her.

Clearly, Robert couldn't care less about his wife. All she was to him was a meal ticket. A walking, talking pot of gold. And he was a gold digger.

The more Eryn thought about it, the angrier she became. Proof. What Harlow needed

was solid proof Robert was cheating on her.

She knew David Wynn would do whatever he could to protect his daughter, but eventually Harlow would be forced back into the spotlight. She'd signed up for the movie deal. In only a few short weeks, she would have to travel to Vancouver.

"A penny for your thoughts," Aunt Birdie said.

"I was thinking about Harlow's upcoming job in Vancouver and her having to deal with Robert by herself."

"Why would she be by herself?"

"Her bodyguard Vic is MIA. Other than Janice, I don't know anyone else Harlow trusts."

"She trusts us."

Eryn sipped her latte, eyeing Birdie over the rim of her cup. "To tag along on the movie set?"

"It's a great idea. I like it. I'm free as a bird. Shoot, David will probably be thrilled to have me out of his hair."

Eryn laughed out loud. "Nah. You're keeping him on his toes."

"He seems to have mellowed toward me a little."

"So, are you serious about traveling to Vancouver with Harlow?"

Birdie drummed her fingers on the table. "Sure. Why not? You could go too."

“I’m ...” Eryn had heard the stories about the movie crews, the gossip, the shenanigans that took place. Harlow made it sound like a scene right out of a soap opera. “I have some vacation time I haven’t used.”

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“Why don’t we make it a girl’s trip and hang out? I’ve never been on a movie set before.”

“Me either. Harlow might not want us in Vancouver.”

Aunt Birdie waved dismissively. “We’ll stay out of the way and on the sidelines. I think she would feel more comfortable knowing people who love her are close by.”

“So we can make sure Robert isn’t being a jerk.”

“Exactly.” Birdie’s head snapped to the side. “Six o’clock. Looks like wretched Robert.”

Eryn craned her neck. “Nope. Close. Robert has more of a rugged look, like a mountain man.”

“He certainly doesn’t match the Hollywood image. I wonder what’s lurking in his background, the skeletons hiding in his closet.”

“That’s an excellent question.”

Birdie changed the subject. “What’s the scoop with Caleb Jackson? Harlow and I ran into him in town yesterday. She seemed a little edgy around him.”

“You want my honest opinion?” Eryn asked.

“Of course.”

“They still have feelings for each other. At least Harlow does.”

“I sensed the same. In fact, if you’re free around twelve thirty tomorrow, you can swing by the cottage.” Aunt Birdie told Eryn about Caleb and the city workers who were coming by late morning to flush the hydrants. “I invited Caleb to lunch. Judging by the look on his face, he knew it made Harlow uncomfortable.”

“And he accepted,” Eryn guessed.

“Yep. So Caleb is coming by for lunch tomorrow if you want to join us.”

“I would love to. Unfortunately, I won’t be able to make it. I’ll need to get back to work.”

“I understand.” Aunt Birdie sent a quick text to Harlow, letting her know they’d checked into the hotel and were sitting in the coffee shop, staking out the apartment. “This is odd.”

“What?” Eryn leaned in.

“Harlow wanted to know if we had a problem at the front desk when we checked in. She said there was an issue with her credit card. She ended up putting the room charge on another card.”

“You don’t think.”

“Robert tinkered with Harlow’s credit cards.” Birdie finished her sentence. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“Based on how he’s acting, I wouldn’t be surprised if he cancelled them.”

Birdie set her coffee cup aside. “I’m sending her a message, suggesting she check out her bank accounts.”

Harlow texted back, letting her know she already had and that some of the money was gone. Or at least no longer available for her to access.

“This guy is the scum of the earth.” Birdie shook her head in disgust. “He’s going to go for guardianship. I can feel it in my bones.”

“Which makes proving he’s screwing around on Harlow even more important,” Eryn said.

“Money sure can bring out the worst in people.”

“Robert Barbetz wasn’t a good person to start with.”

The women grew quiet, mulling over the new information. Harlow needed to act and fast. If only they could catch Robert and Jillian together, not that the court would care, but for Harlow to confirm her suspicions once and for all.

“I think we need to move this operation to DEFCON 2 level,” Aunt Birdie said.

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Eryn wrinkled her nose. “DEFCON 2 level?”

“You bet.” Aunt Birdie finished her latte and sprang to her feet. “Let’s roll.”

Chapter 12

Aunt Birdie fired off a brief text to Harlow. We’re going in.

Harlow: Going in where?

Birdie: Your apartment. Do we need a code?

Harlow: You’ll need to get past the doorman. Renaldo should be on duty this time of the day.

Birdie: We might need a little assistance.

Harlow: Is Robert around?

Birdie: I have no idea. We’re about to find out. Standby.

“Let me do the talking.” With Eryn by her side, Harlow’s aunt strolled into the lobby of the prestigious Central Park Skyline apartment building and approached the security guard’s desk. “Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon.”

Aunt Birdie introduced herself and Eryn. “We’re here to pick up something from Harlow Wynn’s apartment. I’m her aunt.”

The man eyed them suspiciously and began flipping through his clipboard. “I don’t see either of your names on the list of approved visitors. I can’t let you beyond this point.”

“Is Mr. Barbetz, Harlow’s husband here? Perhaps you can ask him.”

“He left a few hours ago.”

Eryn glanced at the man’s nametag, Renaldo. “Renaldo. Harlow speaks very highly of you.”

“She does?” The security guard’s tone softened. “Ms. Harlow is a sweetheart. I heard about her accident. How is she doing?”

“She’s healing.” Aunt Birdie scrolled through the screen and showed Renaldo the picture she’d taken at the Happy Camper during dinner the previous night. “She’s in physical therapy and should be back on her feet soon.”

“Please...tell her I have been thinking about her and keeping her in my prayers,” he said.

“We certainly will.” Aunt Birdie shifted her feet. “About the special item Harlow needs. It should only take a minute for us to run up to her place and grab it.”

“What is it?”

“It’s...uh...a manuscript for an upcoming project she’s considering signing on for,” Eryn stammered. “She left the hard copy here and needs it.”

“She cannot get a copy from the studio?” Renaldo asked.

“I have no idea. Maybe the studio execs have some sort of policy about handing out scripts willy-nilly. All I know is she was hoping to work on it while recovering...to take her mind off her injuries.”

Aunt Birdie could see he was waffling. So close. They almost had one foot in the door. “Maybe if you talk to Harlow on the phone and she gives you her verbal approval,” she suggested.

“I have her number.” Renaldo tapped the keyboard. He reached for the desk phone and began dialing. “Hello. Is this Harlow Wynn?”

Birdie could only hear the security guard’s side of the conversation. Him asking about her health. Him wishing her well. “I have two women, one who is your aunt...”

“Aunt Birdie,” Birdie whispered.

“Your Aunt Birdie is standing in front of me. She’s here to get something from your apartment. Robert? No. He left early this morning.”

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Renaldo answered a few more questions and ended the call. “Harlow has given you permission to enter her unit and retrieve what you need.”

“So...how does this work?” Aunt Birdie leaned her elbow on the counter. “You escort us up to her apartment?”

“I’m not allowed to leave my post. Ms. Wynn’s unit is on the fifteenth floor. Unit 1512. You will need to take the center set of elevators.” Renaldo pointed in the general direction. “Once you reach her floor, I’ll buzz you in.”

“Fifteen twelve. Got it. Although Harlow told us where she thinks she left the manuscript, it might take a few minutes for us to track it down.” She grabbed Eryn’s arm, whisking her toward the gleaming brass and glass bank of elevators.

Pressing the “up” button, Eryn gave Renaldo a friendly wave and stepped inside. She waited for the doors to close and swiped her brow. “For a minute there, it was touch and go.”

“He was going to let us in. All we had to do was convince him to call Harlow.” Birdie’s expression grew mischievous. “Can you imagine the look on Robert’s face if Renaldo had let us in and we waltzed right into the apartment while he was here?”

“Something tells me he’d be livid. What would be even better is to catch him and his assistant together.”

“He’s no dummy. I hate to say it, but if he’s already canceling Harlow’s credit cards and emptying bank accounts, I can only imagine what else he has up his sleeve.”

“Which is why Harlow needs to get ahead of this.”

The women reached the fifteenth floor. Turning left, they strolled down the spacious corridor and stopped in front of her unit.

Eryn let out a low whistle. “Even the door looks expensive.”

Click.

As if by magic, the door unlocked.

“Something tells me we’re being watched.” Aunt Birdie grasped the handle and led the way inside the spacious marble foyer. “Let’s split up.”

“What are we looking for?” Eryn asked.

“Proof that Robert is the snake we know he is or proof he’s messing around with his assistant. Hopefully, we’ll find both.”

Splitting up, Aunt Birdie started on one side of the apartment while Eryn began searching the other. They tore through drawers and dug through closets, searching every nook and cranny.

Eryn was the first to finish. “The place is clean.”

Birdie gave a thumbs down. “Cleaner than a whistle. This might be tougher than I thought.”

“Check out the view.” Eryn slid the curtains aside, gazing out onto Central Park and the New York skyline. “I wonder how much an apartment like this costs.”

“A pretty penny to buy, to maintain, to furnish.” Aunt Birdie walked in a slow circle. “Maybe I don’t know my niece as well as I thought I did, but this doesn’t look like a place Harlow would call home.”

“I was thinking the same thing. This is too...” Eryn struggled to find the right description. “It’s too much.”

“Over the top.” Aunt Birdie opened the entertainment center door and peered inside. “Ten bucks says this apartment was Robert’s idea. I’ve visited Harlow but never been inside her homes. I wonder what her other places look like.”

“The Palm Beach condo is very nice. Her unit has a balcony overlooking the ocean, with white, sandy beaches only steps from her door. It’s beautiful. The Malibu home is stunning, but a little too fancy and formal for my tastes.” Eryn picked up a swirly blue vase and tipped it over. “Renaldo is going to wonder what happened to us.”

“The clock is ticking. I’m not ready to give up yet. There must be something.” Aunt Birdie snapped her fingers. “I haven’t checked the main bathroom.”

Eryn finished sifting through the living room bookcase and caught up with her. “What are you looking for?”

“Women’s toiletries. Check it out. La Cler.” Birdie grabbed a bottle of expensive looking facial moisturizer. “I bet Harlow is particular about her moisturizers.”

“She is,” Eryn confirmed. “All of those makeup sessions she endures means she’s picky about the products. Off the top of my head, I can’t remember the brand name but this isn’t it.”

“I’m almost positive these aren’t hers.” Birdie pulled her phone from her purse. She snapped a photo of the bottle before dropping it into her bag.

“What are you doing?”

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“Taking it to the hotel and dumping it in the trash. This little gem right here is five hundred bucks an ounce all day long.” She dumped the rest of the women’s cosmetics and creams inside. “Poor little Jillian is going to have to restock her skincare essentials.”

With a quick check to make sure there weren’t any other clues hinting at a woman’s presence, they swung by the kitchen.

The cupboards were bare except for an assortment of instant oatmeal packets and an unopened bag of expired rice cakes. The fridge was empty except for a six-pack of beer and a case of Diet Coke. A chilled bottle of Dom Perignon sat next to the sodas.

Birdie snagged it off the shelf and handed it to Eryn.

“We’re taking the champagne?”

“Sure. Why not? I want Robert to know someone was here. In fact, I hope Renaldo tells him we were inside the apartment. Maybe he’ll start sweating a little.”

Backtracking, Birdie and Eryn headed to the elevator. Reaching the main level, they stopped by the security desk to let the guard know they were on their way out.

“You did not find what you needed?”

“I...uh. We had trouble finding the script. We called Harlow and wouldn’t you know it? She remembers leaving it at her home in Malibu,” Eryn fibbed.

Renaldo's eyes grew round as saucers. "You will be traveling all the way to California to pick up the manuscript?"

Aunt Birdie glanced at her watch. "Maybe. I mean, the West Coast is three hours behind us. We could make it by early evening if we time it right."

The security guard shook his head in disbelief. "These actors and actresses. To me, this is crazy."

The women thanked him for letting them in and casually strolled out of the building. Finding the women's skincare products in the main bathroom might not have been a slam dunk, but at least they were on the right track.

Chapter 13

The first thing Aunt Birdie did when they reached the hotel room was check in with Harlow to let her know what they'd found. She lined the skincare products along the counter and set the expensive bottle of champagne next to it. After snapping a photo, she texted a copy to her niece.

"I have you on speaker and am standing next to Eryn. This is what we found."

"Those skincare products aren't mine and I don't drink champagne."

"I figured as much. It was in the fridge, along with a case of Diet Coke and some cans of beer. The skincare stuff was on the main bathroom counter."

"I don't use that brand of moisturizer," Harlow said. "What about other personal items, clothes, shoes, jewelry?"

"Nothing, other than a few items in your closet, wrapped in plastic," Eryn said. "I

know you keep your clothes in bags when you aren't around."

"I do," Harlow confirmed. "Robert has his own closet. Did you find his clothes inside?"

"His clothes and two suitcases, more like carry-on bags. We saw a few pairs of dress slacks and silks shirts," Eryn said. "From the looks of things, he doesn't plan on sticking around New York for long."

"He never does. Robert likes to keep moving," Harlow said. "As far as the skincare stuff, what will you do with it?"

"Toss it in the trash or maybe leave it for the hotel's housekeeping staff. Some of this stuff hasn't been opened." Birdie rattled off the name brand. "Ever heard of Clé de Peau Beauté?"

"I have. The brand costs over a thousand bucks an ounce," Harlow said.

"The glass jars are pretty, almost like works of art. Maybe we should toss the contents and keep the containers."

"Do whatever you want with it. So...what's the plan for the rest of your day?"

"Eryn and I are going to pop the top on the champagne and celebrate the success of our mission," Birdie joked.

"Robert will be furious."

"As furious as you are to find out he cancelled your credit cards and emptied one of your bank accounts?" she pointedly asked.

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“True. I don’t care if he knows I’m keeping tabs on him. It’ll be good for him to stew, knowing you were there.”

“I hate to say it, but I think you’re going to have your hands full,” her aunt predicted.

“Without a doubt. Which means I need to be as prepared as possible.” Harlow thanked them for making the trip. “What time are you flying back tomorrow?”

“Early morning. We’ll be arriving in Detroit at seven, which means we should be back on the island in time for me to make lunch for that cutie Caleb Jackson.”

Harlow made an unhappy sound. “I forgot all about Caleb coming by for lunch. I’ll be sure to make myself scarce.”

“What’s wrong with having lunch with an old friend?”

“He’s not an old friend. Caleb broke my heart.”

“People make mistakes. Maybe he regrets it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harlow said. “And don’t you dare play matchmaker. The last thing I need is another man to worry about.”

“Point taken. Back to Robert...something tells me you’re in for a battle.”

“I’ll be ready for it.” She changed the subject. “What are you doing for dinner?”

“I don’t know,” Eryn said. “Maybe we can find a decent burger joint around here.”

“No way. You deserve a nice dinner for all of your hard work.” Harlow rattled off the name of a five-star restaurant down the street from her apartment, insisting she was buying their evening meal. “What time do you want to eat? I’ll book the reservation.”

“We have a celebratory bottle of champagne to drink first, while we enjoy the city view and Eryn and I relive our adventure. How about seven?”

“Seven it is.” Harlow told her the reservation would be under her name.

“Thank you. I love you, dear, and I appreciate the offer, but I’ll be buying our dinner.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“I love you too, Aunt Birdie. Thank you for trying to help.”

“You’re welcome. I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Her aunt gave her one final warning that Robert would probably call, in a fit of rage, when he found out they had been inside the apartment.

After hanging up, Birdie walked into the kitchenette and removed the bottle of bubbly from the fridge. “Find some glasses, Eryn. We’re going to toast Robert’s fury with a glass of champagne, and then we’re dining at one of New York’s finest restaurants.”

Harlow stared at the photo Aunt Birdie had forwarded. Her bathroom counter filled

with skincare products and cosmetics belonging to another woman. Based on what her aunt and Eryn had said about Robert's bags, his trip to New York would be brief. It was his standard MO—stay for a few days and then move on to the next place.

Instead of taking his wife when he traveled, he was taking his young, gorgeous assistant, Jillian. Had Robert somehow worked his magic and landed Jillian a part in the upcoming movie?

“Hey.”

Harlow looked up, noticing Vic, who had left to unpack, standing on the cottage porch's bottom step. “This is a sweet place. I know it has a lot of bad memories, but I can't imagine never wanting to step foot on Mackinac Island again.”

“I've done a lot of thinking since the accident.” Harlow confided in Vic that she no longer believed her father was responsible for the fire. “Based on the original findings, someone intentionally set the fire but it wasn't my dad. When I finish handling the disaster my marriage has become, I'm going to do some digging around.”

“Good for you.” Vic eased into the empty rocking chair next to her. “This might sound weird, but the accident changed you in a good way.”

“Because I'm no longer Robert's little robot, obediently obeying every word that comes out of his mouth and blindly doing what I'm told?”

“By design, Robert made it easy. You did all the work. He pulled in all the money, handled the finances, kept you so busy you never had time to pay attention to what he was doing.”

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“Why didn’t you say something?”

Vic looked away. “Would you have wanted to hear your husband was taking advantage of you, chasing everything in a skirt while you were busting your butt?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” Harlow placed a light hand on her forehead. “I was already beginning to push back. Remember the apartment in London Robert was gung-ho to buy?”

“Yeah. Don’t tell me you signed the paperwork.”

“I didn’t. The London deal was another reason we argued the day of the accident. He was pressuring me to pull the trigger and get the ball rolling. I’m glad I didn’t.”

Harlow’s father appeared, offering to order pizza, something quick and easy for dinner.

“Pizza sounds great. Thanks, Dad.”

“Why don’t you show Vic around while we wait? Mort can tag along and be your tour guide.”

Vic fluffed Mort’s ears. “I bet he knows every square inch of the place.” The pup had taken to the newcomer almost immediately. The feeling was mutual.

“And then some.” All Harlow had to do was ask Mort if he wanted to take a walk. For the most part, the pup plodded along at a slow, steady pace, but not today. He

dashed to the end of the sidewalk, coming to an abrupt halt when he reached the gate.

“Hang on, buddy.”

Vic stood off to the side, watching while David tracked down Harlow’s scooter and helped her climb on. “It’s tough to see you like this. How long before you’re able to walk again?”

“My plan is to swap this out for a walker or maybe a cane after my next round of physical therapy,” Harlow said. “I signed an extension and need to be in Vancouver in a few weeks.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“You and me both. All I can do is try.” Harlow hit the gas and sped toward Mort. He scrambled out of the way, giving her the “crazy driver” look.

Vic laughed. “Mort thinks you’re a dangerous driver.”

Exiting through the gate, Harlow turned left, taking the road toward the front of the property. They passed by the cottages on their way to the lodge.

Harlow stopped, describing to Vic what the once-grand Wynn Harbor Inn had looked like. “Dad is partnering with investors, to fix the place up. If I had money, I would help.”

“Robert can’t keep the money. It belongs to both of you.”

“I have no idea what’s going through his mind. I’ll know more about what my next step needs to be as soon as I hear from the attorney.”

They continued through the gardens, circling around and reaching the path leading to the harbor. Harlow and Vic paused, waiting for bikers to pedal past before crossing to the other side.

“Your dad has a sailboat.”

“Winnie. We took her out earlier today. If you stick around, we’ll take you for a spin.” Harlow shifted. “Has the agency placed you with someone else?”

“They sent me an offer. I haven’t accepted it yet. I wanted to talk to you first.”

“Do you want to keep working for me?” Harlow asked in a soft voice.

“Of course. We’re a team.”

“But as of right this minute, the business account is kind of in limbo.”

Their eyes met.

“Money isn’t everything, Harlow. Yeah, I need a paycheck and you’ve always been more than generous, but I felt like it went beyond an employee / employer relationship.”

“You’ve been with me through some tough times, kept me from being kidnapped. Protected me. You’re like my guardian angel.” Harlow swallowed hard, struggling to keep her emotions in check. “To be honest, I need you now more than ever.”

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“Then I’m here for the long haul. My roommate can take care of the apartment while I’m gone,” Vic said. “All you have to do is give me the word.”

“Word. You’re officially rehired.”

He gave her a gentle hug. “Your focus now is to heal and get better.”

A tear leaked out of the corner of Harlow’s eye and trailed down her cheek. Her friends...her true friends were still there for her. Not for the money. Not for the prestige or the glitz and glam of Hollywood...but for their friend. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Vic knelt next to her, draping his arm across his knee. “We’ve got this, Harlow. Not employer and employee, but because we’re friends.”

“Like this.” Harlow twined her fingers together.

Her friend, confidant and protector crossed his fingers before tapping the top of hers. “Friends until the end.”

Harlow sucked in a breath. Her world was crumbling around her. Her career. Her marriage. Finding out Robert was canceling her credit cards and moving their money, but she had something even more valuable. She had family and friends rallying around.

Vic sprang to his feet. “Are you ready to continue with the tour?”

“You betcha.”

Backtracking, they passed by Aunt Birdie’s trailer. Harlow filled him in on her eccentric, quirky, yet totally supportive aunt. “I have almost everyone I need in place. You, Aunt Birdie, Dad, and Eryn.”

“Now that you’re figuring out what you’ll be up against with Robert, you can start planning your defense,” Vic said. “Don’t let him push you around.”

Ring...ring...ring.

Harlow’s cell phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket and glanced at the screen. “It’s Robert. He must’ve made it back to the apartment and discovered he had visitors.” She promptly pressed the ignore button.

Harlow started to set it down. It rang again. Once again, she hit the ignore button.

During the third round, she turned the volume all the way down. “I bet he’s fit to be tied.”

“He has a nasty temper when he’s ticked,” Vic said. “Based on the number of calls, he’s probably spitting bullets right about now.”

“I’m only just getting started. Robert hasn’t seen anything yet.” She glanced at the screen. He was calling yet again, determined to get her to answer. “By the time I’m done with him, he’ll regret the day he messed with Harlow Wynn.”

Chapter 14

Harlow lost count of the number of times Robert called and texted. She contemplated turning her cell phone off, and she would have if not for the fact she wanted to be

available in case Aunt Birdie or Eryn phoned.

Unsure of what he might do if he ran into Eryn and her aunt, she warned them to keep a low profile after dinner and avoid being in the vicinity of the apartment.

After Vic headed to his cottage and her father turned in for the night, Harlow logged onto the apartment's security cameras. She wasn't surprised to discover they'd been turned off.

She switched over to the condo in Palm Beach. Same thing. No surveillance cameras were recording. Up next was the house in Malibu. The interior cameras weren't on, but the exterior ones were in perfect working order, which could only mean one thing. Robert had manually turned them off.

He left several messages. Harlow refused to listen to a single one. She wasn't ready to deal with him, at least not yet.

Restless and unable to sleep, she threw on sweatpants and a shirt and slipped out of the house. Mort, who had crashed out in front of her bed, his favorite sleeping spot, trailed behind. Down the makeshift ramp her father had built, and along the sidewalk they went.

The moon was full and bright, giving off enough light for Harlow and the pup to navigate the property.

She meandered aimlessly, with no particular destination in mind. All the while, Harlow mentally berated herself. She'd been an idiot to let her marriage get this far into the weeds.

If she really thought about it, the signs were right before her eyes...had been there for years. Robert was all about Robert. Granted, he'd played an instrumental role in

helping Harlow advance her career. Although, in her defense, she'd been well on her way by the time they met.

Over the years, he had carefully crafted the Harlow Wynn brand. Her look. How she walked. How she talked. Polished, refined. Never a hint of scandal. She prided herself on being the best. All her years of hard work had paid off...in spades.

And now, because of one moment of stupidity on her part for not paying attention to the road, she was on sinking sand. Her husband had ripped the rug out from under her. If she couldn't fulfill her end of the contract and deliver, Harlow might never land another major movie deal.

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In other words, there was a good chance her career would come to a screeching halt. To top it all off, it was entirely possible Robert planned to have her declared mentally disabled and petition for guardianship. The thought made her want to throw up.

Perhaps that was why he had taken a chunk of their money. He realized Harlow might not be able to fulfill the contract and helped himself to what he thought should be his. There were still the properties in New York, Florida and California. As far as she knew, all still had mortgages.

Even making big bucks, bills needed to be paid—large, monthly payments. The bodyguards, her publicist, housekeepers, gardeners, maintenance and upkeep of the homes. Lots and lots of expenses. Luxury cars, you name it.

The list of expenses was mindboggling. Off the top of her head, she couldn't even begin to guesstimate what it was costing them each month. All she knew was it was a lot. She scolded herself for not becoming more involved in their finances. She had trusted Robert implicitly. Not anymore.

Despite having made it to the top of her field, no one in Hollywood stayed there. No one. Eventually, the deals would taper off. The coveted roles would be offered to younger, prettier, barely out of their teens women like Jillian.

Robert was already working on his next protégé, securing small roles for his assistant, which would transition into bigger roles.

Harlow, so caught up in her troubles, suddenly found herself at her mother's grave. If only Ginger was still alive, to give her daughter advice, comfort her and let her know

everything would work out.

A light breeze rustled through the trees. She could almost hear her mother's soft voice. You are home now, Harlow. Let the island heal you. Be strong.

Mort's ears perked up. He moved closer to her wheelchair and let out a low whimper. He had heard it too. "Y-you heard Mom," she stammered. "She's here, Mort."

Harlow lingered, hoping her mother would whisper to her heart again, but was met with a calm quiet.

She clasped her hands. "I'm going to find out what happened to you. As soon as I finish my project in Vancouver, I'm coming back. Dad and I are going to figure out how the fire started."

A gentle breeze tousled the tips of Harlow's hair, caressing her cheek. "I love you Mom." She blew a kiss into the air and slowly made her way out of the garden.

Back home, she and Mort returned to her room. Harlow drifted off to sleep almost immediately. For the first time in along time, she slept through the night. No dreams, no tossing and turning. Rest like she hadn't had in years.

She woke early the next morning to Mort licking her hand, his way of telling her it was time to get up. "I hear you. It's going to be a busy day."

Making her way to the bathroom, Harlow pulled herself from her wheelchair, almost bursting into tears when she could stand on both feet without being in excruciating pain. "Mort, I'm doing it," she said excitedly.

"Watch this." She took a tentative step sideways and then back to the center of the sink.

Thrilled with the thought she was truly on the mend, Harlow flew through her morning routine. The extra effort took its toll and by the time she finished, she sank back into the wheelchair. It was a start. Every step forward was a win.

The sound of voices echoed as she exited her bedroom. Vic and her father were in the kitchen sipping coffee and munching on donuts.

“There’s the sleepyhead,” her father teased.

“I could get used to this life of kicking back.” A slow smile spread across Harlow’s face. “Guess what?”

“Robert already called you this morning,” Vic guessed.

“No. I mean, maybe he has.” She pushed herself to a standing position. Despite her legs wobbling, it felt like a major victory. “Ta-da.”

Her father broke into a spontaneous round of applause. “Way to go, Harlow.”

“It won’t be long now,” she beamed.

“I’m proud of you. That’s my girl,” he said. “Vic and I were discussing breakfast. We have a few boxes of breakfast sandwiches. Why don’t we make something quick and easy?”

“Sounds good to me.” Harlow started to set her phone on the table when she realized her aunt had sent a text.

Eryn and I are on the road and should be home by eleven thirty, giving me enough time to whip up a special lunch for Caleb.

“Great,” Harlow groaned. “I forgot Caleb Jackson will be here for lunch.”

“Caleb’s a good guy. I think you need to cut him some slack.”

“I don’t need to cut him anything because I don’t plan on being here.” Harlow tapped Vic’s arm. “Let’s go into town. I’ll show you around.”

“Who is Caleb Jackson?”

“Harlow’s ex,” David said.

“Childhood sweetheart, who is no longer someone I care to associate with,” Harlow replied in her best “I’m-not-interested,” voice.

“Ah, so you dig this guy,” Vic teased.

“I do not.” Harlow rolled her eyes. “Please, do not encourage my father. Anyway, I plan to make myself scarce.”

Ring. Harlow’s cell phone rang.

Thinking it was Robert, she started to dismiss the call when she realized it wasn’t her husband, but Nigel Beckworth’s office. “It’s Attorney Beckworth’s office.”

She promptly answered. “Harlow Wynn speaking.”

“Hello, Ms. Wynn.” A loud, booming voice echoed. “My name is Nigel Beckworth. You left a message for me this weekend.”

“I did. My father, David Wynn, has used your firm in the past and suggested I call you. I’m hoping you can help.”

“I will certainly try. Before we get started, your name sounds familiar.”

Harlow told him who she was.

“My assistant will be absolutely ecstatic to discover she was right, and it was you who called,” he joked. “What sort of help do you need?”

Harlow explained her situation. She didn’t hold back, filling the man in on what she’d discovered. About her canceled credit cards and the empty main bank accounts. She even told him the home security cameras had been disabled. “To sum it up, it appears my husband, who is also my manager, is doing some shady stuff.”

“I see. The fact he’s your manager is cause for concern.”

“You’re telling me. Based on what I’ve learned from very reliable sources, he’s telling people I’m mentally unstable and hinting at the fact he thinks I caused my car accident.”

“To petition for guardianship,” Nigel said.

“That’s what we’re thinking.”

“Where are you now, Ms. Wynn?”

“At Wynn Harbor Inn, my father’s home on Mackinac Island. I need a topnotch attorney to help me sort through this, and I’m hoping to hire you.”

“I’ll need to do some preliminary work on my end,” Nigel said. “To get a grasp on what we’re up against. I’m assuming this means you’ll want to file for divorce.”

Divorce. The word made Harlow’s stomach churn. She had never married Robert, thinking someday they would part ways, but here they were. Not by choice, at least not on her end. However, her gut told her he already had one foot out the door and

was gearing up for the next phase of his life—without her.

She could be proactive or hang back and let him make the next move, although Robert had already made several moves, all without Harlow's knowledge. "It's looking that way. Our primary address is in California."

"I have a colleague who practices in California." Nigel gave her the name. Harlow wrote it down, making a mental note to check him out. "I can have him draw up the paperwork."

"Yes. Please."

"I'm sure you're aware that because of your high-profile career, it's possible you'll get dragged through the mud," Nigel warned.

"I wouldn't doubt it. On the plus side, I have a very lucrative movie project starting in a few weeks. Robert will want to keep the messy part on the down-low, at least for the time being."

"Which could work to our advantage."

Harlow could hear tapping on the other end of the line. "So, will you help me? I need to prepare for the worst-case scenario."

"It won't be cheap. Multiple issues need to be addressed."

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“I’m not looking for cheap. Although, I’m concerned about the money missing from the main account.”

“We can remedy that rather quickly,” Nigel said. “I’ll need your contact information along with the bank information. We’ll sign an agreement. A retainer will be required.”

Harlow mentally ran the figures through her head. She should have ample funds available for the retainer. “Send me the paperwork.”

Nigel promised to have it over by the end of the day.

Harlow had a hard time hearing what he said next. Another call was coming in. She glanced at the screen. It was Robert. “Robert keeps calling me. Should I talk to him?”

“It’s entirely up to you. What do you think he wants?”

“To give me an earful.”

“Do you want to listen to an earful?” Nigel asked.

“Not really.”

“Then don’t take his call. Unless you’re concerned he’ll show up on your doorstep.”

“He already has. Knowing Robert, he wouldn’t hesitate to do it again.”

“I suggest you not engage in verbal altercations. Perhaps communicating via text or email would be best,” the attorney suggested.

“Good idea.” Harlow thanked him. She ended the call and waved her phone in the air. “Nigel Beckworth and his team are going to help me sort through this mess.”

Her phone rang again. Robert was back at it. She sucked in a breath and typed out a text. Hello, Robert. What do you want?

Chapter 15

Robert’s reply was brief and to the point. Call me.

Why?

We need to talk.

About what? How concerned you are about my health? Harlow deleted the second question. She already knew how her husband felt. The only thing he cared about was money and her fulfilling her contractual agreement for A City of Glass.

She pressed send.

Her phone rang again. Against her better judgment and the advice of Nigel Beckworth, she answered. Foregoing the pleasantries, Harlow blurted out her question. “Why are you blowing my phone up?”

“What’s the big idea of sending some woman named Aunt Birdie and your friend to New York?”

“It was my aunt and Eryn. I asked them to get something for me.” Proof you’re

cheating.

“Get what?”

“It’s nothing you need to be concerned about,” Harlow coolly replied. “I gave them permission to enter the apartment.”

Robert let out a long string of expletives, peppered in with words “trespassing” and something about calling the police to report a robbery.

“Calm down. They were not trespassing. The apartment is as much mine as it is yours.” Before Harlow could stop herself, she added, “You don’t seem to have a problem inviting guests over.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Robert demanded.

“You tell me.”

“Your aunt and friend stole stuff.”

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“Stole what?” Harlow asked, knowing perfectly well what her husband was referring to.

“Merchandise.”

“Skincare products. They figured they belonged to me and I would want them,” Harlow fibbed.

“You’re very picky about your skincare products.”

“They didn’t know that. So...we both know the stuff didn’t belong to me. I know it wasn’t yours. Who did the skincare products sitting on my bathroom counter belong to?”

“How do you know it wasn’t mine?” Robert answered her question with one of his own.

“Whatever. They made a mistake. If it’s so important to you, I’m sure the cosmetics can be replaced.”

“What about the champagne? They took it right out of the fridge.”

“Maybe they were thirsty.”

“Very funny.”

Harlow, figuring she’d gone this far, kept going. “By the way, thank you for

cancelling my credit cards,” she said sarcastically.

Robert ignored the comment. “Where are you?”

“Why? Are you afraid I might pop in and surprise you? Maybe I’m around the corner. Maybe I’m down the street.”

He swore under his breath. “Don’t antagonize me, Harlow. I’m in no mood for your antics.”

“You’re in no mood for my antics? I wasn’t the one who cleaned out our main bank accounts. You need to put the money back immediately.”

“You knew we were switching the main business and personal accounts to another bank,” Robert said. “I told you about it when I opened the new accounts online last month.”

Harlow felt a hot heat creep up her neck. He was right. Robert had mentioned moving the money to a different bank, one with better terms. “I forgot. You should have reminded me.”

“Why? You’ve never been worried about it before. It’s because of me, you have money.”

Harlow gritted her teeth. “Who was the one who put in those twelve-hour days on movie sets for weeks on end?”

“Sweetheart deals that you never would’ve gotten without me. You would still be starring in B-list movies.”

“I earned the money,” she snapped. “Send me the information on the new bank and

accounts today.”

“I will. Is there anything else you want to air your grievances over?”

“Why were my credit cards cancelled?”

“They were tied to the old bank account you’re so concerned about. New cards are on the way. I’ll have them overnighted to you.”

“And you wouldn’t be concerned if you were me?” Harlow shot back. “I’ve contacted an attorney. You had better not try any funny stuff.”

“What funny stuff?”

“Moving more money, canceling the new credit cards.” Ruining my reputation, she silently added.

“You’re such a b-.”

Harlow cut him off. “Am I? You haven’t seen anything yet.” Her hand shook as she hung up on Robert. Gone were the days she could throw her phone against the wall. Which brought up another concerning issue. She needed to switch her cell phone to another provider before Robert came up with the bright idea to turn her phone off.

“That went over well.” David patted his daughter’s shoulder.

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“I blew it.”

“I disagree. You made it perfectly clear he had better let you know where the money went.”

“Where’s the nearest cell phone store? I need to put my phone in a new account before Robert shuts it off.”

“You’re in luck. We have a phone store downtown.” David told her how to get there. “Don’t blink or you’ll go right past it. I would go with you, but I want to be here to keep an eye on the workers when they flush the hydrants.”

“And Caleb shows up. Aunt Birdie should be here in time to whip up his lunch,” Harlow said.

“You’ll be back by then.”

“I’m not having lunch with Caleb Jackson.”

“He’ll be disappointed.”

“I think you’re wrong. He’ll probably be thrilled,” Harlow said.

Vic, who stood silently listening to the exchange, chuckled. “I wouldn’t mind meeting this mystery guy who has Harlow in a tizzy.”

“I’m not in a tizzy.” She heaved a heavy sigh. “I just prefer to avoid certain people.

He happens to be one of them.”

“What time is lunch?”

“Twelve thirty-ish.”

“It’ll give us plenty of time to get Harlow’s new account.” Vic clasped his hands. “I can’t wait to check the island out.”

Despite the heated exchange with Robert, Harlow was in good spirits as she and Vic made their way toward town. She took them on a small detour up the hill and past the Grand Hotel.

“This place is super cool,” Vic said. “I kinda dig not having to dodge vehicles.”

“The only dodging you’ll do on Mackinac Island is to avoid bikes, carriages, horse-drawn taxis and piles of poo,” Harlow joked.

Circling back around, they passed the fire station and community hall. Cutting down a side street, they quickly reached the main drag. If not for Harlow’s walking app letting them know they’d reached their destination, they would have gone right past the cell phone store.

Once inside, she switched the phone over to a new plan but kept her old number. Transferring her information and contacts was quick and easy, and soon she and Vic were back on the sidewalk.

“Where to, boss lady?” He spun around in a slow circle.

Harlow shaded her eyes and studied the skies. “It looks like rain, but the clouds are moving fast. I think it’s going to blow over. If you’re not in a hurry, I wouldn’t mind

walking to the end of the block before heading home.”

“Not at all.”

While they walked, she pointed out various landmarks, places which had long been a part of the island’s history. “When I’m back on my feet, I want to visit Fort Mackinac.”

“That’s a pretty steep hill.” He let out a low whistle, commenting on the lush lawns and lack of high-rise buildings. “This is about as far away from Hollywood as you can get.”

“Right?” She closed her eyes and breathed in the island air. “I forgot how much I loved this place. It’s magical.”

They avoided a tandem bike threatening to wobble out of control and narrowly missed being hit by a kid who wasn’t watching where he was going seconds later.

Vic instinctively stepped closer to shield Harlow. “Instead of keeping an eye out for crazed fans, I’m going to have to keep an eye out for wild two-wheelers.”

A family with a pull-behind bike carrier cruised past. “What about renting an adult carrier? I could haul you around the island.”

Harlow tilted her head, curiously eyeing her friend. “When’s the last time you rode a bike?”

“Years. Decades. So long ago that I can’t remember.”

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“And you want me to trust you?” she playfully asked.

“True. I suppose I should practice first.”

“I’m going to be back on my feet soon. My goal is to bicycle all the way around the island by myself,” Harlow said. “Let’s do it together.”

“It’s a deal.”

The journey back to Wynn Harbor Inn flew by. Harlow’s upside down world was starting to right itself. Her father, not to mention the prestigious Easton family, trusted Attorney Beckworth. Doing her own due diligence, she was completely confident he would help her handle whatever Robert threw her way.

But Harlow wasn’t kidding herself. She could very well be facing the fight of her life. Although Robert Barbetz was a shrewd businessman, he had one thing working against him...underestimating his wife. Harlow would do everything in her power to keep what belonged to her, to hang onto her fair share.

Admittedly, her husband had been key in landing some of the major movie deals. But he wouldn’t have a dime without her. She was the star. She was the brand. Harlow Wynn was what sold. Not Robert Barbetz.

The niggling concern over him spreading rumors about her instability would have to be addressed. One crisis at a time, Harlow.

Taking the scenic route, she showed Vic some of the Victorian beauties and majestic

cottages along the way. Meticulously manicured lawns, cozy courtyards, and quaint gardens. Late summer flowers in full bloom.

Mackinac Island was a picture-perfect postcard. Michigan in all its glory, showing its best to guests and islanders alike.

“The more I see, the more I like,” Vic said. “Makena would dig this place.”

“Invite her to come visit.”

He brightened. “Visit us here?”

“Sure.” Harlow warmed to the idea. “Dad is letting you stay in the cottage. We have plenty of room for Makena. Besides, I haven’t seen her in ages. It would be fun to catch up. Find out when she has a break.”

Vic promptly texted his girlfriend, extending the invitation. “Would next week be too soon?”

“Not at all.”

“Cool. She’s in New York. It would be a hop, skip, and a jump for her.”

Rounding the corner, they reached the pristine picket fence surrounding Wynn Harbor Inn. Streams of water flowed down the side of the street. An array of city vehicles sat parked alongside the curb.

As they drew closer, Harlow noticed another vehicle, a truck with “Mackinac Island Fire Department” emblazoned on the side.

“Great,” Harlow grimaced. “I guess running into Caleb is a bullet I won’t be

dodging.”

Chapter 16

Harlow motioned Vic around the back of the fire truck, steering her scooter toward the double gates, a set of gates her father rarely used and only opened when equipment or deliveries were too big to fit through the smaller main gate. “They look busy. I hate to bother them. We’ll take the side gate to get back in.”

Scrunching down, Harlow “scooter’d” onto the curb. Vic, no stranger in helping the star avoid people—mostly ardent and overzealous fans or paparazzi, stealthily followed close behind.

They reached the double gate without incident, only to discover it was padlocked.

“Crud.”

“Now what?” Vic scratched the stubble on his chin and scoped out their surroundings. “I could lift you up and toss you over the fence.”

“It’s a thought.”

“I was joking.”

“No. Seriously.” Gripping the handlebars, Harlow pulled herself to a standing position. “Help me over to the fence. It’s lower in this one spot.”

“But...”

“Please.”

“Fine.” Vic reluctantly slipped his arm around Harlow’s waist. The burly bodyguard easily lifted her up and carried her to the fence before gently setting her down.

Grabbing hold with both hands, Harlow clung to the pickets. “This will work.”

“Now what?”

“Do you think you can haul the scooter up and over?”

“Yeah. No problem.” Vic was built like a bodybuilder. Her bodyguard, a former pro wrestler, who worked out faithfully every single day, was in top physical condition. He didn’t have an ounce of fat on him—just solid muscle.

“You want me to... Never mind. I recognize the look on your face.” Grabbing both ends, Vic lifted the scooter. “I can get it up and over, but there’s no guarantee the condition it will be in if I drop it on the other side.”

Harlow pursed her lips. “I don’t see any other way in unless...we leave the scooter hidden behind the bushes and come back for it later.”

“You’re not worried someone might steal it?”

Harlow giggled. “Mackinac Island is as close to Mayberry as you’ll ever get.”

“Mayberry?”

“You know. Mayberry from The Andy Griffith Show.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s a fictitious town, a place where crimes never happen. It’s so safe that locals leave their windows open at night.”

“Sounds like my kind of place.” Vic studied the fence.

Male voices echoed from the other side of the bushes.

“Great. I think they’re working their way toward us. Let’s hightail it out of here.”

“I know the drill.” He leapt over the fence, easily clearing it. Helping Harlow up and over was an entirely different story. She was deadweight, unable to assist in the “up and over” part.

“What have you been eating?” Vic groaned, tugging on her arms and struggling to get her to the other side without hurting her. “You weigh a ton.”

“Cheeseburgers, my dad’s delicious chicken bacon casserole. All the foods Robert would throw a fit about if he knew.”

“I was teasing about you gaining weight. I doubt you’ve gained an ounce.” Vic dusted his hands. “Even if I’m able to get you over, what’s the plan? If the goal is to avoid your ex, we need to find somewhere to hide...er...hang out.”

“My Aunt Birdie’s RV is down by the bay. We can stay at her place until they’re gone.”

He took a step back to assess the situation. “I have an idea. I’m going to stand on this

boulder over here, which should give me some leverage. On the count of three, I'll lift you up and then toss you over my shoulder. With any luck, we'll clear the fence and you won't end up with a face full of slivers."

"Or dive headfirst into the rock and crack my skull." Harlow swept her hair out of her eyes. "I trust you, Vic. We can do this."

"The things you get me into," he muttered under his breath.

"You wouldn't have it any other way."

"I suppose not. Save the glowing praise until we pull this stunt off."

Harlow leaned against the fence panel and wrapped her arms around Vic's neck, clinging tightly. "If carrying me all the way to Aunt Birdie's place is too far, we can hang out in the bushes."

"We'll worry about it when we get you over the fence." Vic adjusted his grip. "On the count of three. One...two..."

Heavy steps echoed on the pavement. Caleb and a city worker appeared at the precise moment Vic gained momentum, lifting her up.

“What in the...”

He faltered for a fraction of a second. That half second was all it took for Harlow to lose her grip. She started to fall backward.

Her bodyguard lunged forward. He frantically tried grabbing hold of her arm.

Out of the corner of her eye, Harlow caught a flash of movement. Strong arms wrapped around her waist, catching her before she hit the ground.

“Are you okay?”

The voice, low and husky in her ear sent tingles down Harlow’s spine. She didn’t need to look to see who had caught her. “Y-yes. I’m fine.” She pulled away, grabbing hold of the fence, which was thankfully close enough for her to reach.

“What are you doing?”

“We...uh. Vic and I didn’t want to bother you so we decided to take the side gate instead,” Harlow said.

Caleb frowned, tapping the lock. “The gate is locked.”

“We figured that out, which is why we were hopping the fence.”

Vic climbed back over the gate. He swiped at his jeans, a sheepish smile on his face.

“Thank you for catching Harlow.”

She introduced them. “Vic Stern, meet Caleb Jackson, Mackinac Island’s fire chief. Vic is my bodyguard and good friend.”

“Nice to meet you.” Caleb shook his hand. “Knowing Harlow, I bet she keeps you on your toes.”

“You have no idea.” A wide smile spread across Vic’s face. “Caleb Jackson. Harlow has had nothing but good things to say about you.”

Caleb shot her a suspicious side glance. “What kind of good things?”

“I...uh. Well, you’re a great guy. Solid, you know.” Vic shook his fist. “The best.”

“I would’ve thought she had other things to say, but I’ll take what I can get where Harlow is concerned.”

She squared her shoulders, mustering up an indignant expression. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I get the vibe you’re not a huge fan of mine.” Caleb wisely changed the subject. “We’re finishing up. Feel free to use the main entrance.”

“Thank you.” Harlow, with her shoulders back, slid onto the seat of her scooter and took off.

Meanwhile, Vic, Caleb and the city worker strolled behind at a leisurely pace, casually chatting while they walked.

Harlow reached the gate, patiently waiting for the men to catch up. “Thanks again for breaking my fall. Aunt Birdie texted earlier. She’s at Dad’s place, working on lunch.”

“We’re going to clean up and will swing by in a few,” Caleb said.

“I’ll let her know.”

Before he could reply, Harlow hit the gas and took off, moving so fast Vic was forced to jog to keep up. “Where’s the fire?”

“I want to stop by the house and be out of there before Caleb shows up.”

“You really don’t like the guy? He seems like a cool dude.”

“We have some unpleasant history.”

“So, he broke your heart and joined the Air Force. You can’t hold something that happened years ago against him.”

“He came back and married someone else,” Harlow said.

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“While you were here waiting for him?”

“No. I was working on my career.”

“Ah. You wanted him to wait on you,” Vic said.

Harlow abruptly stopped. “It got complicated. Whose side are you on?”

“Yours. Always yours. Listen, it’s none of my business, except when you decide you want to avoid the man at all costs and convince me to haul your butt over a fence.”

“We’ve been through worse. We’re home,” she announced.

Vic held the door and waited for Harlow to cruise inside.

They found Aunt Birdie in the kitchen, buzzing back and forth.

“Hey, Aunt Birdie.” Harlow looked around. “Where’s Eryn?”

“She had to go to work.” Her aunt wiped her hands on her apron, curiously eyeing Vic. “Hello.”

“Aunt Birdie, meet Vic.”

Her aunt beamed. “It’s nice to meet you. David mentioned Harlow’s friend was here. You’re the one who keeps my niece out of trouble.”

“Yes, or at least I try to, when she’s not insisting that I drag her over a fence.”

“Drag her over a fence?”

“It’s a long story,” Harlow said. “Where’s Dad?”

“Picking berries for dessert,” her aunt said. “Before Eryn left, your father filled us in on Robert’s call.”

“He’s ticked.”

“I bet. I would’ve loved to have seen the look on his face when he found out we helped ourselves to his bottle of champagne.”

“And took his girlfriend’s skincare products.”

David appeared in the doorway. “I thought I heard voices.” He held up a bowl of raspberries. “You made it back in time for lunch.”

“I’m not eating lunch with your guests,” Harlow said.

“You’re seriously not sticking around?” Aunt Birdie asked. “Your dad made another chicken bacon ranch casserole, and I whipped up a grilled vegetable medley.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass,” Harlow said. “I’m going to make myself scarce.”

“You sure you don’t want to have lunch?” Vic hungrily eyed the counter filled with casserole and the vegetables along with a loaf of crusty bread.

“You can stay. I’m not.” Harlow, determined not to run into Caleb, literally or figuratively, a second time, sped straight through the living room and out the front

door.

Mort started to follow her but changed his mind. The thought of missing out on a snack was too big a risk, and he plopped back down.

“You can stay, Vic,” David said.

“I appreciate the offer but my job is to keep an eye on Harlow. Although I wouldn’t mind eating leftovers,” he hinted.

“We’ll have plenty left.”

By the time Vic left the house, Harlow was long gone. He finally tracked her down, hiding out under Aunt Birdie’s awning. “This is a cool camping spot.”

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“My aunt snagged a primo location. I nicknamed it Birdie on the Bay,” Harlow said. “Dad picked this spot because it was far enough away from his place.”

“Your aunt and dad seem to get along pretty good.”

“They’ve had their moments. Dad knows it’s only temporary, unless Aunt Birdie follows through with her plan to build on the vacant lot she bought.”

“I’m sorry I lost my grip on you earlier,” he apologized.

“It was my fault. I was the one who lost my grip. I would have almost rather fallen flat on my face than have Caleb catch me,” Harlow sighed.

“Seriously? He seems like a decent guy.”

“He must’ve wondered what the heck was going on.” Harlow grinned at how they must have looked. Her holding onto Vic’s neck for dear life. Him trying to lift her up and over the fence.

He patted his pocket. “I want to give Makena a call. You gonna be okay for a few minutes while I take a walk?”

“Absolutely. Take your time.” After Vic left, Harlow pulled her cell phone from her pocket. She scrolled through her email messages and found one tagged confidential. Curious to find out who it was from, Harlow clicked on the link, her heart plummeting.

Chapter 17

Harlow's anonymous message was brief and to the point: "Harlow Wynn is a has-been." A laughing emoji at the end made it clear the sender wanted her to know they thought she was no longer relevant.

She clicked out of the email and tapped on the sender's information. It was transmitted through a third-party service with no information other than it being a site to send anonymous emails.

"Clown." Harlow tried brushing it off. She was no stranger to spam messages, weird ramblings, and sometimes frightening notes that had triggered calls to local law enforcement. Over the years, she and Robert had gotten pretty good at figuring out which ones were a legitimate threat.

This was different. The sender knew her personal email address. Harlow was still trying to figure out who had sent it when Vic reappeared.

"Makena said to tell you hi."

"How's she doing?"

"Busy. She's geeked about visiting, although she'll only have a couple days."

"Like two ships passing in the night," Harlow joked.

"Thanks for extending the invite." Vic settled into the seat next to her. "What's with the serious look?"

"This." Harlow pulled up the email and handed him her phone.

His face grew grim. “Has-been, huh?”

“Only a handful of people have my personal email address.”

“You think it’s from Robert?”

“Robert or Jillian.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.” He handed her phone back.

“I’m not. If I had a dollar for every crackpot message I got, I could retire.”

“I met the British gardening lady while I was walking around,” Vic said.

“Lottie Fletcher.”

“She was singing to the flowers.”

“Lottie is a one of a kind. I think my dad likes her,” Harlow confided. “They have a weekly casserole and cards night.”

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“It seems to me it would be important to have friends,” Vic said. “As beautiful as this place is, it’s also a little isolated.”

“Which is perfect for someone trying to avoid paparazzi, fans, curiosity-seekers,” Harlow said.

“I’ve been thinking about your accident. Is it possible someone tampered with your car?”

“Tampered with my Ferrari?” Harlow stared at him. “I...reached for my phone. When I looked up, I was in the other lane and a big box truck was coming toward me. I jerked the wheel. The car seemed to be running fine before I crossed the center line.”

“It was just a thought. You never know.” Vic hadn’t come right out and said it, but the implication was clear. Was Robert desperate to get rid of his wife...so desperate he may have considered tampering with her car?

The suggestion chilled her to the bone. “Getting rid of me would solve all of Robert’s problems.” The fact he’d snagged Jillian a part in the upcoming movie meant her husband was moving on to his next big client / partner.

If she was out of the picture, he would get everything. The money, the movie residuals for past work, their properties. The whole enchilada. In other words, Harlow could be worth more dead than alive. “I wonder where the towing company took my car.”

“It’s a place off Sunset Strip in West Hollywood. Got a friend of a friend who works there. Let me see what I can find out.” Vic placed the call and was routed to another person.

On the third try, he reached someone who knew about Harlow’s car. Unable to hear what was being said, she quietly listened to the one-sided conversation. Vic thanked the person and ended the call. “The car was totaled.”

“I heard.” Harlow shivered involuntarily, reliving the moment. “Was it checked over? Is it still at the shop?”

“Nope. Robert signed off on it after the insurance adjuster met him to inspect the damage. They towed it to a local junkyard so it could be sold for scrap. We have no way of telling if the car had been tampered with. I’m sure it’s in a million pieces by now.”

“Thanks for trying. Although, again, the accident was my fault. I doubt we would have found anything, anyway.”

“You’re welcome.”

Harlow finished scrolling through her messages. She found one from Nigel Beckworth. It included an attachment. Pages and pages of the agreement with a note at the end. He was meeting another client on the island and asked if it would be possible to meet with her while he was there.

She quickly replied she was available. After some back and forth, Nigel confirmed the anticipated timeframe.

Harlow started to reply. She had a question, one that had been nagging at her. She dialed Nigel’s number. He picked up right away. “Hello, Harlow.”

“Hello, Mr. Beckworth. I figured I would give you a quick call. I have a question.” Harlow explained how her aunt and friend had gone to the apartment and helped themselves to certain items. “It probably wasn’t the smartest thing to do. I talked to Robert and told him to put the money back into our accounts. He reminded me he planned to move it. I forgot.”

“So the bank accounts are in good standing?”

“As soon as he sends me the information on the updated account. Despite me being relieved he wasn’t trying something funny, things are deteriorating pretty quickly between me and my husband,” Harlow said. “He’s spreading rumors about me, alluding to the fact I may have intentionally wrecked my car.”

“You mentioned it during our previous conversation,” Nigel said. “He has no proof. It’s his word against yours.”

“I am concerned about him showing up on my doorstep and causing trouble.” Harlow thought about mentioning the anonymous email but decided against it. It could be totally unrelated.

“We can petition for a restraining order if you think it’s necessary.”

“Not yet, but I might consider it down the road,” Harlow said. “If you give me your travel schedule, Dad and I will make sure we’re home to meet with you.”

“Wonderful.” Nigel promised to forward it as soon as his assistant had everything in order and ended the call.

Harlow started to put her cell phone away when she noticed a text from Aunt Birdie. The coast is clear.

“We can head home. Caleb is gone.” During the return to the cottage, Harlow shared her concerns. Robert would not back down. Not one iota, but neither would she. In other words, it was going to get ugly fast.

As promised, the leftovers sat on the counter. While she and Vic ate, Harlow filled them in. “At least I have a cell phone that works and I don’t have to worry about it getting turned off.”

“What about your bank accounts? Do you think Robert will give you the new account information?”

“He said he would.” After finishing her food, Harlow wheeled her way to her room, grabbed her laptop, and returned to the table. Robert had sent a message giving her the new account information and access codes.

Harlow promptly logged in. With a quick click to view transactions, she confirmed every penny was accounted for. “I have access to the new accounts. The money is there.”

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“Woo-hoo!” Aunt Birdie applauded. “We’ll take every small win we can get.”

“I’m going to pay Vic.” Using Venmo, Harlow paid him his overdue salary and prepaid him a month in advance.

“Thank you, Harlow. I know you’re good for it.”

“I’m good for it but Robert might not be, considering he wanted to get rid of you.” Harlow went through their other accounts to make sure he hadn’t tried pulling a fast one.

Their emergency fund was last. She started to click away when a small voice told her to take a closer look at recent transactions.

She skimmed through the list. They were few and far between, which wasn’t surprising considering the account was the designated “cash on hand” emergency account. It was one Robert made deposits into every few months, building the balance over time.

She did a quick check of the money market and savings accounts and then turned her attention to their personal checking account. It listed the usual transactions: mortgage payments, car payments, credit card payments.

Aunt Birdie tiptoed in behind her and leaned over her shoulder. She let out a loud gasp. “Dear heavens.”

“What? What do you see?” Harlow asked.

“A lot of zeroes. What on earth are you paying for?”

“Some pricey real estate. Robert has expensive taste. You should see what our business accounts look like.”

“These kinds of bills would keep me up at night.” Her aunt tsk-tsked. “At the risk of not minding my own business, how often do you use these properties?”

Harlow thought about it. “Not enough to get our money’s worth. For grins and giggles, I’m going to run some reports to see how much money we spend on our lavish lifestyle.”

“It’s a good thing you’re sitting down. No wonder you’re on a hamster wheel.”

“I’m seriously thinking about jumping off,” Harlow said. “Or at the very least, scaling back on non-essentials. I don’t have time to enjoy what we have.”

“Less can sometimes be more,” her father said.

“Here, here,” Vic chimed in. “Harlow is the hardest working woman in show business, and I mean it.”

“She would have to be to keep up with all of this,” her aunt said. “Didn’t I hear you mention something about Robert wanting to buy an apartment in London?”

“He did. In fact, the papers are probably still sitting on the kitchen counter.”

“Thank God you didn’t sign them.”

Harlow closed out of the personal account and logged into their business checking account. Going back ninety days, she studied each transaction. Hairdresser, makeup

artist, Janice the publicist, dinners at “the club,” Robert’s monthly gold club fees, Rodeo Drive store purchases. Everything to cultivate their image and Harlow’s brand.

Working her way down, she kept noticing a specific dollar amount being deducted on the 29th of each month. Not astronomical, but substantial enough to catch Harlow’s eye. “I wonder what this is.”

“What?” Her father slipped his reading glasses on.

“This \$6,500 payment.” Harlow dialed the bank’s main number and asked to be transferred to someone who could give her details about a specific transaction.

“Ciara speaking. How can I help you?”

“Hello, Ciara.” Harlow briefly explained the reason for her call. “I’m reviewing transactions and wondering about one in particular. It doesn’t look familiar.”

Ciara jotted down the information and asked Harlow to hold. She returned a short time later. “I was able to pull up the payment details. Do you have a pen handy?”

“I do.” Harlow grabbed a pen and notepad. “I’m ready.”

The bank representative rattled off the information, and Harlow nearly fell out of her chair.

Chapter 18

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“It’s a monthly payment for the last six months to Malibu Hills.”

“Malibu Hills is a swanky townhouse community.” Harlow thanked the bank representative and ended the call.

Before logging out of the business checking account, she took a screenshot and forwarded it to her email. Jillian lived in Malibu Hills. She’d even bragged about it, showing Harlow and Robert pictures of her new home right after she moved in.

With a few quick clicks, Harlow confirmed her suspicions. She and Robert were paying for Jillian’s townhome. “Good news, everyone,” she said sarcastically. “It looks like Robert and I are paying for Jillian’s swanky Malibu Hills townhome.”

She glanced at the calendar. Based on the entries, it was almost time for another rent payment. Harlow grabbed her phone and dialed the bank’s number again. Within minutes, she had stopped payment for the next month’s rent.

“I wish I could see the look on Robert’s face when he realizes Jillian’s rent wasn’t paid.” Harlow pressed her hand to her forehead. “I’m such a fool.”

“You trusted your husband,” Aunt Birdie said. “Like any normal married person would do.”

“I almost hate to keep digging. My gut tells me there’s more. Tomorrow can’t get here soon enough,” Harlow said. “The sooner Attorney Beckworth’s associate in California can get the ball rolling and papers filed, the better.”

Harlow spent the rest of her day gathering pertinent information. She'd already assembled the details on their assets—accounts, properties, retirement information, anything she could think of.

Sifting through the years of their marriage saddened Harlow. It made her sad but also angry. Robert had used her, and he would do the same to Jillian.

He would keep her around until the next big star arrived on scene and then it would be wash, rinse, repeat. Along the way, he would trample over the women he professed to love.

Although Harlow's marriage was ending, she'd gained something in return. Rebuilding her relationship with her father, along with finding out who she could count on during the tough times. Eryn, her dad, Aunt Birdie, Vic and even Janice, her publicist. Perhaps there were others. For all Harlow knew, Robert had let them go and warned them not to contact her.

"Hey." Her father stuck his head around the corner. "Someone is here to see you. Are you at a good stopping point?"

"I finished getting everything Nigel asked for." Harlow tidied up the papers and set them off to the side. "Who is it?"

"You'll have to come with me to find out." Her father waited by the bedroom door for Harlow to join him. "You've been working hard. It's time for you to take a break."

Reaching the front door, she found Lottie standing on the porch, holding a bouquet of fresh flowers. "Hello, Harlow."

“Hey, Lottie.”

“Your father mentioned you were a little down in the dumps. These are for you.” She held out the bouquet.

“How thoughtful. Thank you.” Harlow could barely wrap her hands around the bountiful arrangement—orange Asiatic lilies, pink carnations, butterscotch daisies, yellow roses and orange berries. “They’re beautiful. You picked these from the gardens?”

“Only a few.” Lottie pinched her thumb and index fingers together. “I have a friend who helped me with the arrangement.”

Harlow admired the base, a pink porcelain teapot. “It’s adorable. Please thank her for me.”

“Why don’t you thank her yourself? It’s our girl’s night out—more of an arts and crafts get-together. I’m hoping you’ll join us.”

“To make something creative?” Harlow asked. “I’m all thumbs, not to mention I have a broken thumb.”

“Talent is not a requirement, only a willingness to have fun.”

“Lottie has a close-knit group of friends,” her father explained.

Harlow hesitated. On the one hand, she desperately needed a mental break. “Unfortunately, I tend to be a disruption. I would hate to ruin your night.”

“Disruption, smuption.” Lottie flicked her wrist. “Come with me just this once. If it’s not your thing, I’ll never bug you to go again.”

“You’re not bugging me now. Thank you for thinking of me.” Harlow wheeled her way to her room, grabbed a jacket, and caught up with Lottie on the sidewalk.

Vic emerged from the cottage when he saw the women. “It’s a girl’s night out. Feel free to hang out with Dad.”

“He loves to play cards,” Lottie said.

“So does Vic,” Harlow said.

“Do you need me to go with you?”

Lottie shook her head. “I have a horse and buggy waiting for us at the curb.”

“Fancy,” Harlow teased.

“David doesn’t like me wandering around the streets alone at night, even though I’m sure I would be perfectly safe.”

Vic patted his pocket. “I’ll have my phone handy if you need me.”

The women reached the front gate where Lottie introduced Harlow to their driver.

“This is Marty. He’s my go-to guy for craft night.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Wynn.”

She held out her hand. “Please call me Harlow.”

“Harlow.” He helped her into the seat before making quick work of folding her wheelchair and stowing it in the back.

“Cards and casserole night with Dad, craft night with the girls,” Harlow said. “You stay busy.”

“Very. When I moved here, I didn’t know a soul. I’m a little chatty and made friends fairly easily.”

“Lucky you.”

Lottie’s brows knitted. “You don’t have friends?”

“I have Eryn. Other than Vic, she’s the only one I would consider a true friend. The rest are acquaintances or colleagues. Hollywood isn’t known for fostering friendships.”

“You mean Hollyweird?” Lottie curled her lip. “I’m sorry, but Hollywood is not a place I would want to live.”

“It has its disadvantages.” During the trip Harlow was content to let Lottie do the talking. She shared stories about living in England, growing up in the countryside, and her eventual move to the States.

Harlow interrupted. “If you don’t mind me asking, why did you move all the way over here?”

“Love. I fell in love with an American. He swept me off my feet.” Lottie’s expression grew distant. “We never had children. He died years ago. Unfortunately, neither of us was good at handling money. To put it bluntly, I found myself flat broke.”

“Here in Michigan?”

“Not Michigan. We lived in Indiana.” Lottie told her she saw an ad for a job on the island. “The Grand Hotel was looking for a gardener. Of course, when I researched Mackinac Island and learned about the grand and glorious hotel, I couldn’t resist. The rest is history.”

“Do you still work at the hotel?”

“I work at the hotel and at Wynn Harbor Inn helping your father. Both jobs give me enough to pay the bills.”

“Have you ever considered returning home to England?”

“The thought crossed my mind a few years ago, but everyone is gone now. I have no family to speak of. Mackinac Island is home. My friends, David, they’re my family. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

“Dad could use a few friends,” Harlow joked. “I’ve heard he’s a recluse.”

“Tragedies tend to cause people to react, one way or another. Your father chose to internalize everything.”

Lottie had hit the nail on the head. David Wynn had always been an enthusiastic, jovial host. He loved guests, loved sharing Wynn Harbor Inn with others. It was his pride and joy. He went from being an outgoing, larger-than-life personality to sour and distant. The fire had affected him in so many ways. Destroyed so many dreams. Created so much heartbreak.

“I’m trying to get him out of his funk. It’s a slow go, though. He’s stubborn as a mule.”

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“You’re a great friend, Lottie Fletcher,” Harlow said. “Thank you for sticking with Dad.”

“You’re welcome. He might be stubborn, but he’s a good man. There aren’t too many like him around anymore.”

“They broke the mold when they made him.” Harlow shot Lottie a sly side glance. “He might never admit it, but he likes you a lot.”

“You think so? Because sometimes I get the feeling he only tolerates me for my gardening expertise.”

“He may appreciate your expertise, but he’s also fond of you.”

“Enough about me.” Lottie tugged at the collar of her blouse, clearly uncomfortable at the direction their conversation had taken. “What’s a typical day in the life of the famous Harlow Wynn like?”

“Not particularly exciting. It starts at six. I eat a light breakfast and head to my home gym for an hour of cardio mixed with weights.”

“What kind of light breakfast? You’re thin as a rail. I bet you hardly eat anything.”

“My go to is a plant-based protein shake, a boiled egg or maybe a cup of yogurt.”

Lottie grimaced. “Plant-based protein shake? What’s in it?”

“Pea, soy, hemp and a little rice.”

“Gross.” She made a gagging sound. “I bet it tastes nasty.”

“It isn’t very pleasant,” Harlow admitted. “I try to sprinkle in a little cinnamon or mint to make it more palatable.”

“I would need a lot more.”

“After my workout, I shower. Depending on my schedule, my makeup artist and hairstylist come by to get me ready for whatever. Robert usually makes an appearance by then and we go over the day.”

Lottie interrupted. “Makes an appearance?”

“He...has his own bedroom suite. We tried sleeping in the same room. I snore and it keeps him awake.”

“Hmmm.” Lottie made a clicking sound with her teeth. “Have you been tested for sleep apnea?”

“I have.”

“And?”

“They couldn’t replicate the problem,” Harlow said.

“Meaning you don’t have a snoring problem.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I see. You’re going to find out one thing quickly about me, Harlow. I don’t sugarcoat my views on things.”

“I appreciate honesty. It’s rare in my line of work. Fire away.”

“Your dad told me a little about what’s going on with your husband pressuring you and how he’s basically MIA. He sounds like a real jerk. Top-notch, top tier, top of the heap, loser.”

“You sound like Aunt Birdie.”

“We’re here, Lottie.” Marty hopped down. He grabbed Harlow’s wheelchair and set it on the sidewalk.

“What a cute shop,” Harlow gushed. “Vic and I must’ve walked right past it earlier.”

Marty made a move to help her, and she waved him away. “Thanks for the offer, but I would like to try getting down on my own.” Keeping a firm grip on the sides of the wagon, she gingerly slid to the ground.

Lottie swooped in and took her arm.

Moving at a snail's pace, they finally reached the sidewalk, and not a moment too soon. Harlow started to falter, half falling, half diving into the wheelchair. She let out a low groan. "I made it."

"Barely," Lottie said.

"Tomorrow is another day."

"Do you need me to stick around?" Marty asked.

"It won't be necessary. Come back to pick us up at the usual time."

"Ten it is. Don't forget your dish. The Mackies will chase me down if you walk in empty-handed."

"The Mackies?" Harlow echoed.

"It's the name we gave our little group. The official title is the Magnificent Mackies." Lottie took the dish. "Thanks, Marty. I'll save you a plate of food."

He scrambled back up the steps and eased onto the wooden bench seat. "Have fun." Giving the reins a gentle nudge, he and his team of horses clip-clopped off.

Harlow spun around and studied the name etched on the glass. Noelle's Flower Shop. Bountiful bouquets filled the front window's flower boxes. A vibrant striped pink and

white awning covered the rustic wooden door. A pale gray floral mat greeted visitors.

“Remember me mentioning my friend Noelle, who helped with your arrangement? This is her flower shop.”

“It’s adorable.”

“If you think the outside is cute, wait until you see what Noelle has done with the inside.” Lottie hurried to the door and gave it a light rap.

A shadow flitted past the curtain-covered glass panel. The door opened. Light spilled out onto the sidewalk, casting a warm glow and welcoming them.

Harlow hesitated for a fraction of a second before following Lottie over the threshold. What greeted her on the other side stopped her in her tracks.

Chapter 19

“Welcome, Harlow!” A chorus of enthusiastic voices greeted her as she stepped inside Noelle’s Flower Shop.

She gazed around the room at the smiling faces with one familiar face beaming the brightest.

Harlow wagged her finger at her bestie, Eryn. “You. Did you do this?”

“I’m only partially responsible,” she laughed. “Lottie, Noelle, Abby, Meg, our little group of Magnificent Mackies came up with the idea to throw you a welcome home party.”

Noelle darted over. “Let me be the first to officially welcome you back to Mackinac

Island.”

“It’s nice to meet you Noelle…”

“Noelle Alanson. My husband is upstairs hiding out in our apartment. He avoids the Mackies’ craft night as much as possible.”

“What exactly is a Mackie?”

“It’s us, plus a couple more,” Noelle said. “Lottie was the one who came up with the name. Basically, we’re islanders who try to get together once a week to hang out, work on craft projects and catch up. I’m sure you haven’t forgotten how cold and isolating winters up here can be. We started meeting during the winter months and had so much fun we do it year ‘round now.”

Two women, both with long brown hair and hazel eyes, quietly made their way over.

Harlow offered them a shy smile. “Hello.”

“Welcome back, Harlow.” The taller of the two pointed to herself. “I’m Abby. This is my sister, Meg. Our parents own the Mackinac Island Hotel.”

“Where Eryn works? It’s nice to meet you.”

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“Same here, although I’ll be the first to admit I might be a smidgen starstruck.” Abby motioned toward the table behind her, filled with snacks and sweet treats. “Are you hungry? We have plenty of munchies.”

“Now that you mention it, I am kind of hungry.”

“I whipped up a batch of sausage wellingtons.” Lottie cleared a spot on the table and set her dish down.

“Yummy.” Noelle rubbed her palms together. “I can’t wait to try your British dish.”

Lottie made a couple more introductions, and Harlow knew there was no way she could keep track of their names. What she did know is she felt at ease, and genuinely welcomed by the others.

The Mackies and Harlow gathered around, watching Lottie uncover the platter. “Now, don’t get too excited. It’s nothing fancy...basically pastry wrapped sausages.”

The women grabbed plates and began filling them with food...a ton of food. Piles of pinwheels, a platter of bruschetta, a tray of deviled eggs, veggies and dip, mozzarella sticks and Lottie’s sausage pastries. Tucked away near the back were decadent brownies, vanilla cupcakes with cream cheese frosting, and chocolate chip cookies.

“I feel bad about not bringing a dish,” Harlow said.

“This party is for you,” Meg reminded her. “You can contribute to our next get-together.”

Harlow couldn't remember the last time she'd made anything in the kitchen. Even if she did, Robert wasn't around half the time to share a meal with her. When he was, he preferred takeout or, better yet, to hire a chef to come in and cook a gourmet meal.

"I'm afraid I'm a little...a lot rusty at cooking," she confessed. "It might not be edible."

"Do you know how to turn an oven on?" Abby asked. "We've had plenty of 'buy and bake' dishes, especially when life gets hectic and we don't have time for made-from-scratch."

"I think I can manage heating a dish." Harlow dipped her mozzarella stick in marinara sauce and took a big bite. She could almost hear Robert's voice whispering in her ear. Deep-fried foods will pack on the pounds.

She ignored the voice and polished off the rest before reaching for her sausage Wellington. While they munched, the women chatted. It was an easy conversation about work, Noelle's flower shop, Lottie's gardens, Eryn's job at the hotel.

"Peyton isn't here," Abby said. "You'll meet her at our next Mackies night."

"Who is Peyton?"

"Peyton Dyson," Lottie said. "She owns The Fudge Shop."

"That's what I've been missing," Harlow joked. "Fudge."

"Peyton's is the best. She'll be home tomorrow." Noelle explained she and her mother, who helped run the shop, left the island to handle a minor family emergency on the mainland.

“I can’t wait to meet them.” Harlow gazed around the room, glad she’d taken Lottie up on her thoughtful offer.

It felt good to be a part of a normal conversation...one that didn’t involve money, wheeling and dealing, what excessive and extravagant gown to wear to the next award show, the next major purchase. It was simply friends catching up, offering advice, cheering each other on, and Harlow could feel her throat clog.

“Hey.” Eryn nudged her. “Are you okay?”

Harlow nodded, blinking back the sudden tears. This was everything...everything she was missing in life. Women supporting women. Friends uplifting friends.

“I was thinking about how nice it is to sit here and listen to conversations about the price of groceries. Decorating for the holidays. Advice about how to get a pizza sauce stain out of your favorite blouse.” Her lower lip started to tremble and Harlow looked away. Her life was nothing like this. Not by a longshot.

“Attention everyone.” Noelle tapped the side of her glass. “As soon as you’re done feasting, we’ll head over to the craft corner. With summer winding down, it’s time to focus on fall.”

Lottie ran around refilling drinks while the Mackies gathered at the table. Glitter and paints, markers and brushes. Beads and baubles, leaves and twigs. Styrofoam pumpkins, ready to be transformed into works of art, lined the center.

Harlow grabbed a paintbrush, a jar of orange paint and got to work, quietly listening while the friends bantered back and forth.

She marveled at how the women didn’t care who she was. Or if they did, they were doing an excellent job of pretending not to. Here, with the Magnificent Mackies, she

was simply Harlow.

An hour in, they took a break and refilled their beverages, sparkling soda and apple cider.

Noelle's husband, Leif, made an appearance. The women tried convincing him to join in the craft project, to which he politely yet adamantly refused. He did, however, fill a plate with food before escaping back upstairs.

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During part two of the craft session, Noelle asked each of them to share one good thing that had happened since their last girl's get-together. Abby got an unexpected raise at work. Meg found a lost puppy and reunited the pup with her owner. Lottie beat David at cards. Eryn's good thing was Harlow returning to Mackinac Island. One by one, they shared their news.

Finally, it was Harlow's turn. "I...to be honest, this hasn't been a very good week for me. Actually, the last couple of weeks have been a bummer." She sucked in a breath, wondering if she could go on because she was starting to become emotional. "All of that changed tonight. Meeting each of you has been the best thing to happen to me in a very long time."

Lottie, who was sitting next to Harlow, squeezed her hand.

"Thank you for making me feel welcome," she whispered. "You have no idea how much this means to me."

The women sprang from their chairs and gathered around Harlow, hugging her, telling her to hang in there, offering words of encouragement, enveloping their new friend with unwavering support and nothing but love.

Tears streamed down Harlow's cheeks, pent-up emotions from all she'd been dealing with, feeling the weight of her failed marriage and Robert's heartless actions.

Despite all she'd gone through recently, Harlow could feel her spirits being lifted. This party was much more than a welcome. It was a homecoming. Harlow Wynn had finally come home and been greeted with open arms.

Chapter 20

“You’re one of us now.” Noelle gave Harlow a warm hug. “Officially a Magnificent Mackie, if you want to join our little group.”

Harlow pressed her hand to her chest. “It would be an honor, although you might change your mind after you sample the dish I bring to the next get-together.”

“No way.” Meg shook her head. “Once you’re a member, it’s impossible to get booted out,” she joked. “Our group is open to whoever wants to join.”

“Except for Cheyenne,” Abby said.

“Cheyenne?” Harlow echoed.

“Cheyenne Clifton.” Eryn wrinkled her nose. “She’s as snooty and self-centered as they come. We invited her a while back and she started acting like a jerk.”

“By telling everyone we’re nothing but a bunch of hicks and how most of us couldn’t get a date even if we paid a guy,” Abby said.

“I like to think I can get along with everyone. Believe me, I tried befriending her.” Lottie lifted both hands, signaling defeat. “It appears Cheyenne is the exception.”

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Harlow said sarcastically. “She sounds like a real gem.”

“Her parents own Clifton Manor.” Noelle lifted her chin. “It’s where all the mega rich people stay when they come to the island.”

The Mackie craft party ended all too soon. Before Harlow knew it, she and Lottie were on the curb waiting for Marty to pick them up and take them home.

Lottie had fixed a big plate of food, leaving the few leftover sausage Wellingtons for Noelle and Leif, who had come down when the party was wrapping up to thank the Mackies for the delicious dishes.

“Well?” She waited until they were settled in the wagon and on their way. “Did you enjoy your first Mackie party?”

“I loved it. Everyone was warm and welcoming. It felt like...” Harlow struggled to find the right words, not wanting to sound like an absolute dope.

“Like you were home.” Lottie finished her sentence.

“Exactly. Does it sound weird?”

“No. Perhaps despite all the hustle and bustle of your superstar world, Mackinac Island hasn’t lost its magic, its sparkle and ability to draw you in.” She patted her arm. “I noticed the look on your face when you talked about what was going on in your life and shared your good thing. The island is drawing you back.”

Harlow grew quiet, mulling over Lottie’s statement. It was true. She’d felt it more than once. The whisper of the wind in the trees. The gentle breeze caressing her face when she was on board Winnie. Even the soothing clip-clop of the horses’ hooves. Comforting. Peaceful.

“It is, Lottie. Unfortunately, I can’t stay.”

“Why not?”

“I have contracts. Deadlines. A career.”

“A soon-to-be ex-husband.” Lottie shifted. “Let me ask you this. I know it’s none of

my business, but how much money do you have?”

“Right now?”

“This very minute. I’m not talking about real estate or future earnings. I’m talking about cold, hard cash in the bank.”

Harlow threw out a number, what she’d found while going over the various accounts to make sure Robert hadn’t cleaned them out.

“Do you know a hundred people could live off this amount for the rest of their lives?”

“A hundred people?”

“Okay. Maybe not a hundred people, but you for sure.”

“I also have a ton of debt.”

“Sell it. Sell the cars, the expensive homes. Get rid of it all, take stock and find out what’s truly important.” Lottie snapped her fingers. “No one is immune to being replaced. The fact of the matter is if...or when you decide to call it quits, you’ll be replaced in the blink of an eye by someone shiny and new. Have you ever heard of the band, the Eagles?”

“Almost everyone on the planet has heard of them.”

“They wrote a song about being washed up and fading away. Even the Eagles knew they would someday be replaced. Although no one is as great as the Eagles.”

“Dad loves them too,” Harlow said. “But I get what you’re saying. I have an incredible amount of pressure, both self-inflicted and from my husband, to stay on top.”

“No one can decide but you, Harlow. All I’m saying is you’re able to make changes if you choose to do so.”

“We’re at your place, Lottie,” Marty announced.

“Already?” She grabbed her purse and hopped down. “Marty will drop you off at home and make sure you get to the house safe and sound.” She turned to go.

Harlow stopped her. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart. You don’t know how much tonight meant to me.”

Lottie leaned in and hugged her. “I do, dear. I could see it in your eyes. A little peace. A little joy. A little of Mackinac Island’s charm.”

Marty waited until Lottie was inside. She flicked the porch light, giving him the all clear signal before continuing on.

Only a block away was Wynn Harbor Inn’s gate. Marty hopped down. He set Harlow’s wheelchair in place and then stood at the ready to help her ease onto the seat. Because of her earlier exertion and overdoing it a bit, her legs were rubbery, and she gratefully accepted his help.

“Thank you, Marty. You’re the best.”

He hung his head, a sheepish look on his face. “I hope it’s okay to ask. My little sister found out I gave you a ride and is bugging me about getting your autograph.”

Harlow patted her pockets. “I would be happy to give you one but I’m fresh out of pens and paper.”

“I have a clipboard.” Marty handed her his clipboard. She slid the pen from the top and flipped through the pages until she found a clean sheet of paper. “What’s your sister’s name?”

“Lilly.”

“Lilly. To Lilly. You have the best brother in the world. Harlow.” She drew a heart and a smiley face.

Marty laughed out loud. “This is hilarious. Every time she starts annoying me, I’m going to remind her about what you said.”

“Because you are.” Harlow spun her wheelchair around. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Would you like me to walk you the rest of the way?”

“There’s no need.”

“Are you sure?” Marty held the gate, watching as she wheeled herself through.

“Thank you for the offer, but I’ll be fine.”

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“You’re welcome. Are you planning on hanging out with the Mackies again next week?”

“I hope so.” Harlow tilted her head. “I take that back. Yes. I’ll be going.”

“Then I’ll stop by and pick you up.”

“It’s a date.” Harlow waited for Marty and his horse-drawn wagon to pull away before making her way toward home. She thought about Caleb Jackson and him breaking her fall. His arms around her. Strong. Powerful. The feel of him holding her close.

Stop! Harlow forced the thought of Caleb from her mind. She had enough on her plate without throwing him into the mix. More than enough.

Rustle. Thud.

She came to a quick stop. The hair on her arms stood straight up, the feeling she got when she was being watched. “Hello?”

Silence.

“Mort, is that you?”

Regretting not taking Marty up on his offer, Harlow raced along the roadway, picking up speed when she cleared the bushes. She didn’t slow until the family cottage was in sight.

“Harlow.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Vic stepping off his porch. “I was getting ready to send a text to check on you. How did it go?”

“It was great. Actually, I had an awesome evening. What about you?”

“Your dad is a card shark. He took thirty bucks from me playing blackjack.” Vic squinted his eyes. “Lottie isn’t with you?”

“Marty, the driver, dropped her off at home.” Harlow told Vic what had happened, how she’d heard noises and sensed she was being watched. “Maybe it was my imagination.”

“I’ll check it out.” He ran inside and grabbed his gun. Moving at a quick clip, Vic disappeared into the dark night.

The minutes dragged past. Harlow glanced at her watch, her concern ticking up a notch when he didn’t return right away.

She pulled her phone from her pocket, getting ready to call him when he reappeared. “Did you see anyone?”

“No, but I heard rustling. I shined my cell phone’s flashlight into the bushes, but didn’t see anyone. I gotta say, your dad has a lot of landscaping around here.”

“Tons, which means there are plenty of hiding spots,” Harlow said.

Vic shifted his feet. “I’m not getting a warm and fuzzy feeling. I would be more comfortable staying close by you tonight.”

“All I can offer you is Dad’s couch.”

“I’ve slept on worse.” Unwilling to leave Harlow alone, even for a second, Vic wheeled her into his cottage, where he tossed his toothbrush and clean clothes into his backpack.

After packing up, they cut through the yard, reaching David’s cottage in only a few steps.

Mort met them at the door, his tail wagging and excited to see them.

“Hey, buddy.” Harlow scratched his ears, nudging him back into the house.

But Mort had a different idea. He broke free and bolted across the porch before Harlow or Vic could stop him.

“Mort,” Harlow hissed. “Get back here.”

Ignoring the command, the pup promptly lifted his leg and watered a bush. With his nose to the ground, he began sniffing around.

“I’ll go grab him.”

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Harlow waited on the porch, watching Vic jog down the sidewalk, calling Mort's name.

The pup's head shot up. He stared straight out toward the road and let out a warning growl.

"Mort must hear something." Vic opened the gate.

The dog took off at a dead run, moving faster than Harlow had ever seen him move. Woof. Woof.

A flash of black and white skittered under the streetlight. The critter must've seen Mort barreling down on him and promptly scrambled up a nearby tree.

Puffing up in a menacing stance, Mort stood at the base, barking his head off.

Vic shook his head. "Are you sure Mort isn't a hunting dog?"

"I have to say, this is the fastest I've ever seen him move. I'm not sure if he's after a raccoon or a skunk."

"I don't think we want to find out." Vic jogged over to the tree. He grabbed hold of Mort's collar and coaxed him back home. "You don't want to mess with whatever is in the tree."

"Maybe that's what I heard rustling in the bushes."

“Could be. I’ll still feel better hanging out on the couch.”

Harlow’s father appeared at the bottom of the stairs, half asleep and wondering what the commotion was.

“We thought we heard something,” Harlow said. “It ended up being a raccoon or skunk. Vic’s gonna sleep on the couch, just in case.”

“You’ll find blankets in the closet.” David returned upstairs while Vic made quick work of setting up his makeshift bed.

“It was probably nothing. Are you sure you want to sleep here?” Harlow asked.

“Absolutely. Better safe than sorry.” He kicked his shoes off. “Get some rest.”

“Thanks, Vic. I don’t know what I would do without you.” Mort followed Harlow to her room, waiting for her to get ready before settling in at the foot of her bed.

She lay flat on her back, staring at the ceiling for a long time and thinking about the Magnificent Mackies. Abby, Meg, Noelle, Eryn, Lottie and the other women.

Friends through thick and thin. Women you could confide in. Lottie was right. Harlow had more than enough money to live on if she chose to step away from the rat race.

It was a thought. But not now, at least not yet. Too many loose threads needed to be addressed. Handling those threads would begin tomorrow.

Nigel Beckworth’s arrival would set the wheels in motion for changes...big changes in Harlow’s life, whether she was ready for them or not.

Chapter 21

Harlow sat on the porch waiting for Nigel Beckworth, who arrived promptly at noon the following day. As he drew closer, she realized the attorney was exactly what she'd envisioned. Tall and trim, as if he spent time in the gym. Not old, but mature.

He was all business in his tailored silk suit. Bald, except for sparse locks of hair curving around his ears. The attorney's eyes were warm and crinkled up, which meant he smiled a lot.

"Harlow Wynn?"

"That's me."

Nigel extended his hand. "It's my pleasure to meet you."

"Same here."

"I'll be quite honest. I've been reading a few of the tattling tabloids, curious to find out about your accident. Some said you were severely hurt, while others claim you're faking an injury. How are you doing?"

"Recovering." Harlow briefly filled him in, explaining she was working with a physical therapist and hoped to be back on her feet soon. "I have less than a month to be on set in Vancouver."

“Do you think you’ll be ready?”

“I hope so.”

Harlow’s father appeared. He and Nigel shook hands, chatting briefly about the flight from Toronto. He offered their guest something to drink, to which the attorney politely declined.

“I have paperwork to go over.” He patted his briefcase. “I’ll need a spot for us to spread out.”

“In here.” David wheeled Harlow into the house. Mort, who had trotted out to greet their visitor, and Nigel followed behind.

“Thank you for making house calls, Mr. Beckworth,” Harlow said.

“Nigel. Please call me Nigel. As I mentioned before, I met with another client this morning, so I figured I might as well swing by.”

“And you can call me Harlow.” She paid him the retainer fee and then handed him the list of assets she’d assembled. “As I mentioned on the phone, there was a misunderstanding about the business bank accounts. The credit cards were tied to the old accounts and the new ones are on the way.”

“Splendid. It will be one less issue for us to tackle.” Nigel peered at her over the rim of his reading glasses. “You’ve asked me to have the papers drawn up. Are you ready to file?”

“I was thinking of maybe starting with a legal separation. Remain married for the sake of...my career.”

“And then what? Eventually you’ll file for divorce?”

To be honest, Harlow never envisioned her marriage ending. Divorce seemed so final. She wasn’t sure she was ready for such a serious step, or being the one to make the first move.

“It’s your call.” Nigel reviewed what Harlow had given him. “Unfortunately, splitting assets and liabilities during separation can get sticky.”

“The bills. How would they be split?” Harlow thought about Jillian’s Malibu townhometheyhad been paying for.

“The division would have to be agreed upon by both parties and by order of the court,” Nigel explained. “If you go that route, because assets and liabilities would already be divided, a divorce will go much more quickly, if you eventually ended the marriage.”

“None of this is going to go smoothly,” Harlow predicted.

The attorney shuffled through the papers. “I see no mention of children.”

“We don’t have any.”

“I see. This will enable the process to move more expeditiously. We won’t have to concern ourselves with a custody battle. Still, considering your assets and other factors, this may take some time.”

Harlow blew air through thinned lips. “Maybe I should bite the bullet and file for

divorce instead of dragging it out.”

He cleared his throat. “Clearly, you’re struggling with the finality of this decision. Until you are a hundred percent certain about what direction you want to take, I suggest you hold off. Sleep on it. Give it some thought.”

“I am conflicted. You’re right. On the other hand, I’m not keen about going through this twice.”

“It’s something to consider. In the meantime, I’ll have my team on standby. When you’re ready to pull the trigger, give me a call.” Nigel gathered up the papers and placed them inside his briefcase. “It’s been quite some time since I visited Mackinac Island. I was thinking about having lunch in town. Would you care to join me? It will be off the clock.”

“Off the clock? Then you have yourself a lunch date.” Harlow headed to her room to grab her jacket and swap out her wheelchair for the scooter. She caught up with Nigel and her father, who stood chatting on the porch. “Why don’t you have lunch with us, Dad?”

“Yes. Please join us, David. I spoke with Morgan Easton the other day on the phone. She reminded me she and Brett were partnering with you to restore Wynn Harbor Inn.”

“We are. On a smaller scale with renovations that will be much more manageable.”

“Morgan is excited about the project.” Nigel turned to Harlow. “Have you met Ms. Easton?”

“Not yet. I’ve done a little digging of my own,” Harlow said. “She’s had an interesting life.”

“I think you two would get along splendidly. She’s a lovely person. Warm, thoughtful, down-to-earth. She has a great deal of spunk and is a go-getter.”

“I’m sure we will,” Harlow said. “At least I hope I’m around long enough.”

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“If I have my way,” David said. “Now that you’re home, I’m not letting you get away,” he joked.

The trio reached downtown and David picked the restaurant, choosing a café one block back from the busy strip.

They were promptly seated. A server appeared. She gave Harlow, who was sporting a pink ball cap and sunglasses, a second look but didn’t question who she was.

While they ate, Harlow shared stories about life on the set. Actors and actresses that she’d worked with over the years. Exotic locations she’d traveled to. The more she shared, the more it seemed as if she was talking about someone else’s life—not hers. It was the complete opposite of Mackinac Island’s laid-back lifestyle.

The meal ended, and Harlow and her father directed the driver to the airport to drop Nigel off for his return flight to Toronto. Before leaving, she promised to decide the following day and get back to him.

David escorted Nigel inside, leaving Harlow waiting in the carriage. She got the same feeling she had the previous night of being watched. She shaded her eyes and studied their surroundings.

People were coming and going. A carriage pulled in next to the wagon, picking up a large group who had just arrived.

David returned a short time later. “Now that you’ve met Nigel, what are your thoughts?”

“He’s exactly the kind of person I was looking for. He answered all my questions. I felt very comfortable with him.”

“He’s the best around,” David said. “Nigel will be worth every penny.”

Back at Wynn Harbor Inn, Harlow and her father swung by Aunt Birdie’s place. As they drew closer, they found her aunt and Lottie seated at the picnic table, chatting like old friends.

“Oh boy,” David playfully grumbled. “Double trouble.”

“I figured seeing how you weren’t in any hurry to introduce me to your sister, I would do it myself,” Lottie said.

“We’ve been comparing notes.”

“Comparing notes?”

“About you. We’ve both agreed you’re stubborn as a mule but have a heart of gold.”

“I’ll take being stubborn as a compliment.”

“Because it is.” Lottie tapped Birdie’s hand. “I invited Birdie to join us for our next Mackie night out.”

“We had a ball,” Harlow said. “It’s a great group of women.”

“I can’t wait.” Her aunt changed the subject. “Vic just left. He was wondering where you were.”

“I should go check in with him so he doesn’t worry.”

Her father started to follow. Harlow stopped him. “There’s no need to rush off. You can hang out with Aunt Birdie and Lottie.”

“Birdie has an excellent idea about what we should do about sprucing up the landscaping down here by the bay. We want to run it by you.”

“Great.” David rolled his eyes. “Here we go.”

Harlow told them goodbye and steered her scooter onto the roadway. Instead of heading straight home, she took the long way past the meandering gardens. She found herself on the path leading to her mother’s gravesite.

Harlow told Ginger about Nigel’s visit and asked her what she should do about Robert.

“I wish you were here,” she sighed. “Aunt Birdie has been great and you would love Lottie. I’m making friends and was even invited to be a Magnificent Mackie. I never thought it would happen after all these years, but the island is working its magic.”

A light breeze tossed Harlow’s hair. She quickly smoothed it back. “Dad and I are going to find out what happened the night of the fire. I have to leave, but I’m coming back as soon as the filming wraps up.”

A flit of movement caught Harlow’s eye. Her scalp tingled again, a sure sign she was being watched.

She swung the scooter around and hit the gas. Moving at a brisk clip, she didn’t slow until she reached her father’s cottage.

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Vic must've been watching for her. He called out and caught up with her near the road. "Hey, Harlow. You sneaked out on me this morning."

"Nigel and I went over the paperwork and then he invited Dad and me to lunch." Harlow cast a wary glance over her shoulder. "I think I saw someone over by my mom's gravesite."

"After last night, I figured it wouldn't hurt to search the area first thing this morning," he said. "I noticed one of the fence pickets was broken, a few feet away from where I tried hauling you over the other day."

Harlow's eyes widened. "We busted Dad's fencepost?"

"It was in the general vicinity of the gate, but not the exact spot, so I know we didn't break it." Vic motioned to a camera mounted in the corner of the porch. "I noticed your dad has surveillance cameras and was wondering if I could take a look at the recent recordings."

"Great idea." Harlow led him inside and to her father's computer. It wasn't high-tech or high-speed, but it did the job.

Vic accessed the recordings from the previous night, around the time Harlow had heard the noises.

Sure enough, a figure clad in dark clothing appeared. Harlow cruised by in her wheelchair with the trespasser following at a safe distance.

Switching cameras, he tracked down the porch's camera directed toward the road.

Vic appeared. Harlow joined him and began motioning. "This is when I told you I thought I saw someone."

Mort dashed past, running in the direction the person had gone.

Harlow briefly closed her eyes. "I knew it. Someone was following me."

"I want to look at the other recordings, the camera covering the area where you saw someone just now."

It took a minute for them to locate the right one. Both grew quiet. Harlow appeared next to her mother's gravesite. Moments later, her head shot up. "Right there."

Vic zoomed in. A person wearing a gray hoodie and denim jeans ran behind the bushes. "They have something around their neck." He hit the arrow button, zooming in for an even closer look.

Harlow's heart plummeted. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

"Yep," Vic grimly replied. "This confirms someone is definitely after you."

Chapter 22

"The person is wearing a camera strap. I'm almost certain of it." Harlow promptly dialed 911, reporting a trespasser at Wynn Harbor Inn. Her next call was to her father, letting him know what was going on and warning him and the others to hang out at Aunt Birdie's until the police had finished searching the property.

Things moved fast. Squad cars arrived within minutes. The officers split up, each of

them heading in different directions.

“I hope they catch whoever it is.”

“Me too,” Harlow said. “I plan to press charges, or at least Dad will.”

Vic stayed close by her side near the front door, keeping his hand in his jacket pocket, the one she knew held a handgun.

One...two...five...ten minutes dragged by.

Tink.Harlow snatched her phone from her lap. It was a text from her father.The police stopped at Aunt Birdie’s place and asked us to stay put until they give us the all clear.

Same here,she texted back.

More tense moments passed. Harlow was beginning to suspect that the trespasser had somehow managed to escape. “It had to be a reporter,” she finally said. “Because of the camera strap and how he was hiding.”

Had the paparazzi become desperate enough to travel to Mackinac Island to snap photos of her? Depending on the circumstances, some photographs were worth big bucks and sold for thousands of dollars. Harlow was a hot commodity and her recent accident put her at the top of the “most wanted” list.

“One, two, three, four.” Vic counted heads. “The entire Mackinac Island police force must be here.”

“The more the better. The trespasser’s first mistake was stepping foot on the property. Wynn Harbor Inn is wrapped up pretty tight. The only way they’ll be able to escape

is by hopping over the fence or jumping in the lake.”

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A trio of officers dashed past.

“I think they’re closing in,” Vic said.

“I hope so.”

A commotion off to the side caught their attention. A cluster of cops appeared, escorting the man they’d caught on the surveillance footage toward the exit.

“They got him.” Harlow lifted her hand, giving Vic a high five. “One down. Who knows how many more to go.”

An officer crossed the street and made his way to the cottage. “Ms. Wynn?”

“Yes?”

“I’m Officer Tate. I wanted to let you know we apprehended the trespasser. It appears there was only one.”

“Thank you,” Harlow said. “I’m almost positive he’s a professional photographer. I was wondering if you could question him, to find out who he’s working for.”

“Sure.” Tate put his fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly. The escorting officers and suspect came to an abrupt halt, waiting for the cop to make his way over.

Harlow watched as Tate began motioning toward them.

The trespasser shook his head.

“Do you recognize him?” she asked.

Vic squinted his eyes. “No. Never seen him before in my life.”

“Me either. He doesn’t look happy.”

“The cops are taking his phone,” Vic whooped. “I’m liking these local cops.”

The man jerked his arm, watching while the officer tapped the top.

Officer Tate held the phone up.

The man shook his head.

David, Lottie and Aunt Birdie appeared.

“What’s going on?” her father asked. “I thought they had already hauled the guy off to jail.”

“I asked Officer Tate to find out who he’s working for.” Harlow craned her neck.
“He’s after something.”

Finally, the escorting officers and intruder left, disappearing around the corner as they made their way toward the road.

After they were gone, Tate returned to the porch.

“We noticed you checking his cell phone,” Vic said.

“I asked him who he was working for. He refused to answer me, which got me wondering what he was trying to hide.”

“It had to be one of the larger tabloids,” Harlow said. “They’re the only ones who would pay to send a photographer to Mackinac Island to hunt me down.”

“It wasn’t a news organization.” Tate flipped open his notepad. “It was a person. The man told me Robert Barbetz hired him to take pictures.”

Harlow’s jaw dropped. She stared at the officer in disbelief. “My husband hired him?”

“He claims he was working on a special project and needed photos of...”

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“Of me doing something Robert could use against me.” Harlow’s eyes flashed with anger. “I want to press charges.”

“So do I.” David placed a light hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Throw the book at him. What’s the guy’s name?”

“Dwight Skinner.”

Furious, Harlow sped into the house and made a beeline for her room where she promptly dialed Robert’s cell phone number.

As expected, the call went directly to voicemail. “Hello, Robert. Dwight Skinner was caught trespassing on my father’s property and is being taken down to the Mackinac Island police department to be booked. Good luck getting those photos of me you wanted.”

Harlow could feel a hot heat creep up her neck. He had done it. Robert had pushed her over the edge. “The next time you hear from me will be through my attorney.”

She ended the call and promptly dialed Nigel’s cell phone number.

“Hello, Harlow.”

“Hello, Mr. Beckworth. I hope I’m not bothering you.”

“Not at all. I’m getting ready to board my plane. Did you forget something?”

“Robert hired someone to snoop on me and take pictures.”

“He thinks you’re lying about your injury?”

“Maybe. Who knows with him. The police caught a man Robert hired trespassing here at Wynn Harbor Inn. I’ve made my decision. I would like to file for divorce.”

“I see. I’ll have my associate’s office in California proceed with the paperwork.”

Harlow thanked him. She ended the call and tossed her phone on the bed.

Knock. Knock. “Hey, Harlow. Are you okay?” Her father’s concerned voice echoed from the other side of the closed door.

She crossed the room and opened it. David, Vic, Lottie and Aunt Birdie stood on the other side, their faces all mirroring the same somber expression.

“I’m livid, but otherwise fine.”

“Are you sure?” Aunt Birdie asked.

“Positive. For a minute, I thought maybe...I thought maybe Robert and I could go in for marriage counseling to figure out what went wrong. But now...can you believe it? He’s spying on me, digging up dirt so he can try to take me to the cleaners.”

“I don’t know your husband,” Lottie said. “But I know you. You’re a good person, Harlow Wynn. Unfortunately, good people tend to get taken advantage of.”

“As Harlow knows, I’m not a fan of Robert Barbetz. I never have been, not from the moment I met him,” Vic said. “I hate to say it, but he’s been using you. Now that he has a new up-and-coming star under his wing, he’s gearing up and getting ready to move on.”

She briefly closed her eyes. “Deep down I’ve known things weren’t right between us. Him sending in a spy is the last straw.”

“This too shall pass,” Aunt Birdie said. “Your father, Lottie, Eryn, Vic...we’re all here to help you weather this storm.”

David hugged his daughter. “You can count on it.”

The end.