



# Christmas On Anchor Island

**Author:** *Terri Osburn*

**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** One woman lives her truth, while another hides hers away, but love and a little Christmas magic gives them both the courage to meet somewhere in the middle.

Henri Bloom makes her living writing romance, but she can't seem to find her own happily ever after. Back on Anchor Island for the holidays, she accepts that life doesn't always go as well as fiction. What's harder to accept is that the woman she loves can be so close, and yet so out of reach.

Mia Stamatis had been sharing her artistic talents on Anchor Island for three years now. What she hasn't shared is the truth about who she really is. Fear of disappointing the most important person in her life has kept her silent, but that fear had also kept her from embracing life, and the chance of finding a love of her own.

Reunited over Christmas, Henri and Mia find themselves caught in the same dance, but this time there's a new step. A step that brings them closer together instead of pulling them apart. With a little courage, and a nudge from an unexpected source, they just might find their happy ending after all.

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## Chapter One

Mia Stamatis had painted countless murals around Anchor Island, but none that included dinosaurs and Lego characters. Until today.

“Conner is going to love this,” said Callie Edwards, the client who had commissioned the mural. “Thank you for doing this on such short notice. Sam and I couldn’t figure out how to get him away from the house before now.”

Conner was Callie and Sam’s four-year-old son, and the work in progress was his Christmas present. The youngster had gotten twin siblings earlier in the year, and recently let his parents know that he was feeling neglected. To rectify the situation, among other things, Sam had taken Conner with him to pick up his grandmother from the airport in Norfolk. While they spent the weekend visiting Navy ships, and presumably extending the boy’s Lego collection, Callie brought Mia in to give the youngster’s room a personalized feature wall.

“I’m happy to do it,” Mia said, stepping back to survey her work. “Does the stegosaurus look proportional to you?”

Callie laughed. “I don’t even know which one that is. Which proves Conner is right. I haven’t spent nearly enough time with him lately. My son loves these things, and I can’t even name them.”

Mia checked her reference drawing and said, “I’m sure you’re doing the best you can. Twins are a lot of work, especially when they’re still so dependent on you.” Dropping the paintbrush into a cup of water, she pulled a finer point brush from her bag. “Once

they get a little older and he sees them as playmates instead of interlopers, things will even out.”

“Do you really think so?” she asked.

“I’m a younger sister, remember? From what I’ve heard, Nick wasn’t happy to have this chubby-cheeked little baby taking everyone’s attention when I first arrived. By the time I was two, he’d barely let anyone near me.” Mia dipped the brush in black paint. “I was his ligo delfi, which was his less-than-accurate way of saying little sister in Greek.”

“You two are close, aren’t you?”

Despite some changes in their relationship since Lauren Riley had entered her brother’s life, Mia still saw Nick as her best friend and closest ally. Though she’d found a few new allies lately, much to Mia’s surprise.

“We are. You don’t have any siblings, do you?” she asked.

“No, I’m an only child, but I have Henri. She’s more like a sister than a cousin, really.”

The mention of Callie’s cousin caused a small ping in Mia’s chest. In the spring, she and Henri Bloom, a successful romance author and one of the boldest, most interesting women she’d ever met, had gotten close. But factors in Mia’s life had driven a wedge between them. Henri lived her life loud and proud as a gay woman, while Mia was less open about her sexuality. Over the summer, she’d let a few friends in on her secret, including Callie, but knowing her grandmother wouldn’t approve kept her from being open publicly.

“How is Henri?” Mia asked.

When the writer had left the island back in June, she and Mia had not been on the best of terms. Not that she blamed her for being upset. Normally, Mia never crossed the line, since asking someone else to live as she did—shrouded in secrets—wasn't a fair thing to do. Henri had been her one exception. The way things had ended between them was a key reason Mia had taken baby steps out of her comfort zone in the months since.

Not because she expected Henri to ever give her a second chance, but in the hopes of one day having the courage to truly be herself. In private and in public.

“She’s good,” Callie replied as she slowly rocked Roxanne, one of the twins, back to sleep. “I invited her for the holiday, but you know Henri. She never sits still for long. The last we talked her plans were still up in the air. I miss her when she stays away this long.” After gently kissing the sleeping baby’s forehead, she asked, “Have you heard from her?”

Mia shook her head. “Not since she left.”

“I really thought she’d give in by now.”

“What do you mean?” Though Callie knew Mia was gay, she’d never mentioned her relationship with Henri.

The mother slowly rose from the rocker, careful not to wake the little one. “Henri isn’t normally the type to stay mad this long. She cares about you, and if she had any sense, she’d have gotten over this pout months ago.”

The brush nearly fell from Mia’s fingers. “You know about us?”

Callie bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I should have said something when you opened up last month, but responding with ‘I know’ didn’t feel right.”

Of course, she knew. As she'd said, she and Henri were like sisters. Mia had been an idiot to think she wouldn't know.

"Please don't be mad," Callie said. "I noticed how much time you two were spending together and nagged her until she told me."

"I'm not angry," she said, surprised by the truth of that statement. A year ago she'd been terrified of being found out, which was a ridiculous way to think of it. She hadn't robbed a bank, for heaven's sake. "I appreciate you keeping the knowledge to yourself."

The blond blushed. "About that..."

The old fear crept back in. "About what?" Mia mumbled, her chest tightening.

"We all knew before you told us," Callie blurted.

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Mia dropped onto her bottom, grateful Conner's bed was close enough to catch her. "All of you?"

With a half shrug, she said, "I knew because of Henri, and Roxie knew because of Alex." Alex Fielding was the island doctor, Mia's close friend, and Roxie Chandler's boyfriend. "Roxie told Beth, who told Sid, who told Will." After a weighted pause, she added, "Lauren knew because of Nick, but since you're going to be family soon that only makes sense."

Was there anyone who didn't know?

Joining her on the bed, Callie rested a hand on Mia's arm. "That's it, I swear. We would never dream of telling anyone outside of our circle. And Henri even swore me to secrecy. I was as surprised as you are when I found out the others already knew."

Mia felt like a fool. She'd spent years keeping these women at a distance despite their generous efforts to welcome her into their group. All because she hadn't trusted them to keep her secret, while they'd been doing just that.

"All this time..." she muttered.

"None of us meant any harm. We were just waiting for you to feel comfortable enough to tell us yourself." Baby Roxanne squirmed and Callie soothed her back to sleep. Lowering her voice, she said, "I hope you know that we all like you for who you are. Who you love doesn't change that."

Tears sprang to Mia's eyes as one thought echoed through her mind. I wish Grandma

felt that way.

“Don’t cry,” Callie said, swiping a thumb across Mia’s cheek. “We would never do anything to hurt you.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you sooner.”

“Nonsense. Sharing something so personal isn’t an easy thing to do.” Tucking the baby tight against her side, she leaned forward and gave Mia a hug. “You’re safe with us. Always know that.”

Careful not to squish the little one, she accepted the embrace, and a weight lifted from her shoulders. Safe. A simple word that meant so much. With her chin resting on Callie’s shoulder, Mia exhaled and opened her eyes to find they were no longer alone.

“Am I interrupting something?” drawled Henri from the bedroom doorway.

Callie leapt to her feet and ran to her cousin, startling Roxanne, who wailed with displeasure. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” she said, wrapping an arm around Henri’s neck.

Blue eyes locked with Mia’s as she said, “I thought I’d surprise you.” Brow arched, she added, “I guess I should have called.”

Surely she didn’t think...

“I’m so happy to see you I could cry.” Callie shook her head as Roxanne continued her protests, which triggered her sister down the hall to join in. “Oh, goodness. Now they’re both up.” Turning to Mia, she said, “It’s time for a break. Let’s all go downstairs and catch up.” Without warning, she slid Roxanne into Henri’s arms.

“You two go while I change Rachel’s diaper, then we’ll be right down.”

A second later the mother was gone, leaving Mia standing beside the small twin bed, paintbrush in hand. “Hi,” she said, unable to form a more intelligent sentence with Henri looking as beautiful as ever in the doorway. Her blond hair was cropped short above her collar, and even without a touch of makeup, her skin was flawless. The black turtleneck hugged her body beneath the maroon leather jacket.

Instead of returning the greeting, Henri said, “Do you know how to make this kid stop screaming?”

Tension broken, Mia plopped the paintbrush into a cup of water and circled the bed. A moment later, Roxanne was propped against her shoulder, softly murmuring as Mia patted her bottom in a steady rhythm.

Brows arched, Henri smiled and Mia’s brain misfired. “You’re good at that,” she murmured.

“I help out at the daycare now and then.”

“Then you’ve had more practice than I have.”

Wanting to reassure her, Mia said, “Once you’re around them for a while, you’ll get the hang of it.” This brought a question to mind. “How long do you plan to stay?”

Running the back of her finger down the baby’s soft head, Henri said, “Through New Year’s Eve.”

“Only two weeks?”

Eyes narrowed, she tilted her head. “I can’t tell if you think that’s too long or not long



enough.”

Heat crawled up Mia’s cheeks. “You haven’t been back for six months,” she said, her eyes dropping to the floor. “Callie would probably like for you to stay longer.”

“Would she?”

Meeting the woman’s gaze, Mia nodded. “I’m sure she would.”

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Silence settled around them as Henri stared without blinking and Mia held her breath. Finally, the visitor looked away. “We should go downstairs.”

Unsure what had just happened, Mia nodded. “Oh. Right.”

After another brief hesitation, Henri turned on her heel and headed toward the stairs. Mia followed with Roxanne tucked close against her shoulder. She couldn’t tell if Henri was still angry with her or not, but knowing the woman’s blunt ways, she would soon find out.

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“That was a touching scene up there,” Henri said once they each had a soda and were seated at the kitchen table. Mia had shifted Roxanne down to cradle her, and though the baby was awake, she cooed contentedly.

“I don’t know if Callie told you,” Mia began, “but I came out to her and the others this summer.”

When Henri left in June, Mia’s insistence on keeping her secret had been a seemingly unmovable obstacle between them, so she’d been surprised when Cal had shared this news. Not that anyone should be forced to come out before they were ready, but she’d cared about Mia more than she’d cared about anyone since Yvonne, and that had ended four years ago. Selfish and more vulnerable than she liked to admit, Henri had believed that if Mia felt the same, she’d break her silence so they could be together.

Not Henri's proudest moment, and one she'd come to regret in the months since. But before she could say as much, Mia continued.

"Right before you walked in, Callie confessed that they all knew the truth before I said anything."

Of course, they did. Anchor Island was barely a mile wide. If a ghost crab farted on one side, a sand crab would hear it on the other. It was a miracle Mia had managed to keep her secret for this long.

"How does it feel?" Henri asked.

Mia stared at the baby in her arms. "Good. Strange. Scary."

The baby wrapped her tiny hand around Mia's finger, and Henri fought the urge to slide around the table and do the same. "It gets easier."

Shaking her head, Mia looked up with a sigh. "I still can't tell my grandmother."

Henri's moment of hope faded. "You don't think she'd approve?"

"You've met Nota. She lives in a different time."

"She loves you, Mia. Give her a chance."

"We were watching the news back in June and they showed footage of a Pride parade. Grandma made a comment about how those people didn't have to be so public."

"Those people are strangers," Henri reminded her. "You're her family. Views tend to change when those people are suddenly your people."

Clearly uncomfortable, Mia rose from her chair. “I need to get back upstairs if I’m going to finish the mural before Conner gets home.” Without warning, she lowered Roxanne into Henri’s arms. “Callie is excited to have you back so I’ll let you two talk.”

“Mia, wait...”

The plea was ignored and she disappeared around the corner toward the stairway. A second later Callie appeared, baby in her arms and confusion on her face.

“What did you do to her?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Henri defended. Callie unleashed the look that made her the spitting image of her mother, one of Henri’s least favorite people. “Don’t look at me like that. She said you guys know the truth, but she still can’t tell her grandmother. I simply suggested that she should.”

“Like how you told our grandmother?”

Not the same thing.

“Old Mags would never have accepted the truth. On her deathbed she made me promise to marry a fine young doctor and give Mama lots of grandbabies.” Rolling her eyes, Henri added, “She once got the vapors because someone told her what The Birdcage was about. If I’d have come out to her, she’d have not only banished me from the family, but blamed Mama for making me gay because she let me cut my hair in third grade.”

Mags had still been lamenting that haircut at Henri’s college graduation, and when she’d realized that one side of her granddaughter’s head was shaved for the occasion, Mama had gotten yet another lecture about letting her daughter attend a school in the

uncivilized north.

“That still makes you a hypocrite,” Callie said, lowering Rachel into the playpen. “If Mia says she can’t tell Nota, then you should respect that.”

“What’s she going to do? Wait until the woman dies to live her life?” Mia was nearly thirty and if nothing had changed over the last six months, Nota Stamatis wouldn’t be meeting her maker for years to come.

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“Mia is living her life; she just isn’t living it the way you think she should. If you can’t see the irony in that, then I can’t help you.”

Henri opened her mouth to argue and then snapped it shut. Her cousin had a point. She’d lived life on her own terms for so long that maybe she’d forgotten how things had been before. Sure, times had changed, but not entirely. And not for everyone.

“I just know she’d be happier without having to pretend all the time.”

Callie straightened after loading toys into the playpen. “Probably, but that’s her call. Maybe if you stopped pushing and told her how you feel about her, she’d come to that conclusion on her own.”

Was this give Henri shit night?

“For your information, I told her how I feel before I left in June.”

“Which was a crappy thing to do.”

“Make up your mind. You just said I should tell her.”

“I’m talking about the leaving part.” Callie strolled around the table and lifted Roxanne into her arms. “What you did was give her an ultimatum, and when she didn’t choose you over her grandmother, you threw a fit and stormed off the island.” One brow arched, she added, “Very mature of you.”

There had been no ultimatum given. At least not out loud.

“If I remember correctly, you once broke up with Sam over email. You really want to play the mature game?”

Propping Roxanne on her hip, Callie stood her ground. “That was six years and three children ago. Meaning I’d have missed out on all of this had I not come to my senses. What if you end up missing out?”

Their situations were nothing alike. “Mia and I are complicated.”

Callie had the nerve to laugh. “That’s exactly what I told Sam in that email. That we were complicated.”

To be fair, years before they had both landed on Anchor Island, Callie’s husband and Sam’s wife had been sleeping together and while off on a lovers’ tryst, both died in a fiery crash. That definitely qualified as complicated.

“This still isn’t the same. Mia and I can’t exactly stroll off into a happily ever after if she wants her grandmother to keep thinking she’s straight. I’ve been mistaken for a lot of things, but a man isn’t one of them.”

Callie crossed to the kitchen counter and pulled two baby bottles from the cabinet. “You could always pull an Aunt Lucille.”

Now it was Henri’s turn to laugh. Lucille hadn’t technically been their aunt, since she was a distant cousin to their mothers, but they’d still referred to her as such their whole lives. The older woman never married, but she had a roommate named Donna. For fifty-seven years. As far as Henri knew, the whole family had either been clueless or chosen to pretend they were.

The two women never showed the slightest sign of physical affection for each other, but by the time Henri was ten she’d recognized the looks they’d exchange. She

couldn't have put a name to it back then, but she knew.

"That would only work if I wasn't out either."

Blue eyes met hers. "So you'd consider it if not for that?"

This was a pointless conversation. "Cal, I'm out. She isn't. And she isn't interested in changing that. You need to let this go."

Leaving the bottles on the counter, Callie shuffled to the playpen and set Roxanne down beside her sister, who was gnawing on a bunny teething ring. "I just don't think you should give up, that's all."

She couldn't give up something she never had in the first place, and two weeks of having this discussion—because she knew her cousin well enough to know this wouldn't be the end of it—was going to require something stronger than a soda.

"Please tell me you have wine."

Callie handed Roxanne a stuffed lamb. "The fridge is fully stocked, but I can't have more than one glass since Sam is out of town."

Leaping from her seat, Henri grabbed a glass from the cabinet before opening the small fridge tucked into the center island. "More for me." As she'd suspected, the stash included her favorite Riesling. "Do you want to hear the latest shenanigans your mother has been up to? Though you might want to have that one glass ready before hearing the story."

Properly distracted, as Henri knew she would be, Callie sighed. "She isn't still fighting with the neighbor over garden flags, is she?"



“No, they’ve formed a truce for now. This one involves the church ladies and a battle over supplying baked goods to the new choir director. The single, silver fox choir director.”

“Oh, God.”

“Allegedly, that’s what Miss Dottie said when she took him a dozen of her special brownies, but she is neither confirming nor denying.”

Leaning her hands on the counter, Callie laughed. “I missed having you around. Promise not to stay gone so long the next time.”

Henri filled her glass before carrying it and the bottle to the table. “I’ll see what I can do.”

### Chapter Two

“What about April?” Lauren said, tapping a finger on the twelve-month calendar on the bar.

“That’s the Waterfowl Festival.” Nick pointed to the next month over. “How about May?”

His fiancée shook her head. “I’m already booked for three weddings. There has to be a month when we can make this work.”

Mia sat in silence, watching the pair struggle. It seemed that two chefs trying to find one week out of the year when they could both take off for a honeymoon was nearly impossible. Lauren ran Pilar’s, a new restaurant on the harbor with incredible views and even better food. Nick ran Dempsey’s Bar & Grill—where they were currently having this discussion—an island staple that took bar food to another level. Both had capable staffs who could easily run the operations, but that was the thing about chefs. They all believed they were impossible to replace, even for a week.

This conversation had been going for nearly half an hour and so far they’d ruled out every month for one reason or another. Mia decided to make a bold suggestion.

“Why don’t you just pick a date and make everyone else work around you?” The couple looked at her as if she’d suggested they serve TV dinners at their reception. “The alternative is not getting married at all,” she pointed out. “If that’s what you want...”

“We’re getting married,” Nick replied.

“Yes, we are,” Lauren confirmed with a nod. “We just have to find a time when we can both be away from the restaurants.”

Mia rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. Carl Oliver could run this place without you,” she said, pointing at Nick. “And Jackson Ming kept the Marina restaurant going for fifteen years before it was changed to Pilar’s. There’s no reason to think he couldn’t keep the place running for a week or two without you, Lauren.”

The couple sat in silence, absorbing the brutal dose of reality. Mia didn’t mean to hurt either of their feelings, but talk of postponing their own happiness for such a ridiculous reason irked her. Didn’t they know how lucky they were not only to have found each other, but to be able to start their life together anytime they wanted?

“What’s up with you today?” Nick said, leaning back on his stool.

Mia didn’t want to talk about what was up with her. This was about them.

“I’m just trying to help you out. You want to get married? Then get married. There’s nothing in your way.”

They stared in silence, surrounded by the muted sounds of diners enjoying their covered and smothered burgers.

“She has a point,” Lauren said.

Nick nodded. “She does, but this isn’t about us, is it?”

Mia tried to hold her brother’s gaze but failed. “Forget I said anything. You two do what you want.”

Before Nick could respond, Sid Dempsey charged up to the bar and climbed onto the stool beside Lauren. “Hey, guys. Did you hear the news? Henri is back.”

Mia tensed as Nick said, “Now I get it.”

“Get what?” Sid asked.

Lauren rolled up the calendar. “Nothing. I heard Beth hasn’t been feeling well lately. Is she okay?”

Beth was married to Joe Dempsey, while Sid was married to his brother, Lucas. Their family owned the bar and grill.

“She is, but Joe took the girls out for the day so she can get some rest. Lucas and Pilar went with them up to Hatteras, so I have a day off, too. What’s the calendar for?”

“Just planning some stuff for next year,” Nick said. Mia wasn’t aware they were keeping the wedding planning a secret. “You want to put in an order?”

“I’ll have some conch fritters and a Coke, thanks.” Sid propped her elbows on the bar. “It’s been so long since I had a day to myself, I’m not sure what to do. I called Will but she and Randy drove north this morning to do some last-minute Christmas shopping.”

Will Navarro owned several businesses on the island and was another member of Callie’s group. Randy was Sid’s brother, which also made Will her sister-in-law. Together, the Navarros had played a crucial role in increasing both tourism to the island and the quality of life for locals. They were like island royalty, though they downplayed their philanthropy as what anyone would do for their community.

“You can change my oil,” Lauren said with a laugh.

Sid was a boat mechanic, but she worked on just about anything with an engine.

“I can do that.”

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Lauren sobered. “Sid, I was kidding.”

“I’m not. Hand over the keys and I’ll have it back to you in an hour.”

“Eat your fritters first.” Nick turned and called the order in to the kitchen before grabbing a glass for her drink. “Mia, do you need a refill?”

Pushing her empty cup forward, she said, “No, thanks. I told Grandma I’d have the tree set up and ready to decorate before Olaf brings her home from church.”

“I want to help,” Lauren said.

Nick wasn’t the decorating type so she and Nota typically handled the tree by themselves. This was Lauren’s first Christmas on the island, and Mia realized she should have asked her to join them.

“You’re welcome to come, but it’ll mostly be Grandma sitting in a chair and telling me where to put things. If you don’t mind having to move every ornament at least six times until she’s happy, then by all means, come on over.”

“I’m game.” Lauren pulled a set of keys from her pocket and set them on the bar. “Do you mind bringing me back here for my car later so that Sid can change the oil?”

Mia hadn’t planned to go back out, but she didn’t mind. “Not a problem.”

Lauren leaned up and over the bar to give Nick a kiss. “See you later, handsome.”

Moments later the two women stepped into the sunshine and Mia said, “I’m sorry for being such a brat earlier. I should have kept my nose out of your planning.”

“Nonsense. You were right. Jackson could run the restaurant for six months if I needed him to, and the staff here could do the same for Nick. We chefs need someone to take us down a peg now and then, so thanks for the reminder.”

“I still should have been nicer about it.”

As they climbed into Mia’s VW Bug, Lauren said, “Have you seen Henri yet?”

Mia nodded. “I was at Callie’s house painting Conner’s mural when she showed up.”

Though she’d shared her secret with all the ladies in the group, Mia had shared more with Lauren. Each of them had a brother but no sisters, so it had been natural to form a bond beyond friendship. Lauren’s childhood had been difficult growing up poor outside of Boston. Though some might call Mia’s childhood idyllic, she’d always felt like an outsider, for obvious reasons. A feeling Lauren completely understood.

“Was she still mad?” Lauren asked.

Mad, no. Stubborn, yes.

“Let’s just say she still doesn’t agree with my choice not to tell Grandma.”

As Mia pulled out of the parking lot onto Highway 12, her passenger said, “Nick really believes she’d be okay with it.”

Jaw tight, Mia kept her eyes on the road. “Nick doesn’t spend as much time with Grandma as I do. Trust me, she wouldn’t.”

“You know her better than I do. I’m sorry.”

That came out of nowhere. “Sorry for what?”

“I know what you meant earlier. About nothing being in our way. I wish that was the case for you, too.”

There were far worse burdens to bear. “Ignore me. I’m happy for you guys. Whenever you choose to get married, it’s going to be gorgeous, and I’m going to be up front cheering you on. And probably crying like a baby, but they’ll be happy tears, I promise.”

“I’ve never been a crier, but I’m afraid I’ll be the same way. It’s hard to believe that this time last year I’d never even met you guys. Or been to this island. Now I can’t imagine not having all of this in my life.”

That Lauren never took anything for granted was one of the things Mia liked best about her.

“We’ll see if you still feel that way in an hour,” Mia teased. “I’m not kidding when I say Grandma is particular about her tree.”

“Outside of the kitchen, I don’t mind taking orders. But as an artist, being told how to decorate something must drive you nuts.”

It used to, until Mia found a solution.



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“The trick is to never let her know when I’m decorating my own tree. Every year she says she’ll help, and every year I accidentally forget to tell her when I’m doing it.”

Lauren laughed. “That’s a good plan. What she doesn’t know won’t hurt you.”

“Exactly.” And not just when it came to Christmas trees.

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“Aunt Henny is here!” exclaimed Conner as he bounded into Henri’s arms. “Where have you been? I missed you!”

Oh, how she loved this kid. “I missed you, too, buddy. Did you have a good time picking up Grandmama?”

“She smells funny,” he replied, wiggling out of her arms. Thankfully, the woman in question was too far away to hear the child’s assessment.

Conner hugged his mother, then he crossed to the playpen as if to see if the twins were still there. After touching both gently on the head, he jogged back to Callie. “Daddy took me to see a big boat.”

“The Battleship Wisconsin,” Sam said, setting his mother’s suitcases at the foot of the stairs before crossing to his daughters.

“The battleshit,” Conner repeated.

Callie lifted wide eyes to her husband, who was laughing. “I’ve corrected him every time, I swear.”

“I can attest to that,” said Eugenia Edwards, matriarch of the very wealthy and very southern Edwards family.

Upon first meeting, the older woman reminded Henri of a Hell’s Kitchen bouncer, only with pearls and a faux shearling coat. Like the Charleston version of Queen Elizabeth, but with a distinctly southern accent and better shoes. Eugenia possessed a cutting wit, a dark sense of humor, and had become one of Henri’s favorite human beings. Only partially due to the fact she was one of the few who could get Callie’s mother, Evelyn Henderson, to sit down and shut up.

“How are you, Henrietta?” Eugenia refused to use the shortened version of Henri’s name.

“I’m good. How are you?”

“As old and cranky as ever.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” Henri reached for the suitcases. “Your room is next to mine so I’ll carry these up for you.”

“I’ll do that,” Sam protested.

She waved him off. “I’ve got it. You keep cuddling your girls.”

The elder Edwards followed her up the stairs, and an hour later they were all gathered around the dinner table, finishing a meal Callie had ordered in from Pilar’s. Conner was sound asleep on his father’s shoulder, while Callie fed one twin and Eugenia fed the other. Both babies looked ready to join their brother in la-la land.

“Do you still have developer contacts in Charleston?” Henri asked Sam as she swirled the wine around her glass.

“I do,” he said, brows drawn, “but if you need to talk to one for some research, I could answer your questions.”

“This is research of a different kind.” Taking a deep breath, she said, “I’m thinking about buying my own place.”

Callie sat up straighter. “Are you serious? You haven’t even rented an apartment in ten years.”

Henri didn’t like to be tied to one place. When she wasn’t traveling for reader events or book research, she was at her parents’ place in Charleston or visiting Callie here on the island. But she would be thirty-five next month and recently felt the urge to establish a home base that was all her own.

“Reader events aren’t as frequent as they used to be, plus my next series will be set in Charleston so no travel required. It’s time to settle down.”

“Good for you,” said Eugenia.

“Why not settle down here?” Callie asked, as Henri knew she would.

“I didn’t say I would never travel at all. More than four hours from the nearest major airport is a deal breaker.”

Her cousin’s excitement waned. “But it would be so nice to have you around all the time.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:39 pm*

Spending more time with Callie and the little ones would be nice, and Anchor Island was the perfect place for a writer. Even during the height of tourist season, finding a peaceful corner of the village was always possible. But that tranquility would wear thin eventually. A little hustle and bustle was needed from time to time. As well as fast food, of which there was none on the island. Not that Henri didn't love a good Dempsey's burger, but there were nights at the end of a stressful deadline when a woman needed to hit a drive-thru for something absolutely unhealthy.

"I'm looking for a sleek, contemporary loft with lots of light and open space, plus a street full of food options outside my front door."

While Callie pouted, Sam said, "I'll give Belinda Knight a call in the morning. If anyone is running that kind of project, it'll be her."

"Thanks, Sam. I appreciate it."

Eugenia yawned as she set the empty baby bottle on the table. Rachel made a few puckering noises but was fast asleep. "It's time for this old bird to go to bed. Should I drop this one in her crib on the way?"

"Yes, please." Callie popped a matching bottle from Roxanne's lips. "This one is ready as well." Tucking the child on her shoulder, she rose from her chair. "I'll come back and clean up the dishes once she's down."

"Sam and I have this," Henri said.

The man cut her an arched-brow glance but didn't argue.

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t give ’em time to change their minds, honey.” Eugenia rose from her chair with the agility of a woman half her age. “Get out while the gettin’ is good.”

Callie reluctantly followed her mother-in-law from the room, but not without turning back to Henri, who waved her on.

“I assume you have something else to ask me?” Sam said once the other women were gone.

Henri stacked Callie and Eugenia’s plates on top of her own and carried all three to the counter. This was the hard part. “I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t mention what I’m about to tell you to Cal.”

He looked understandably uncomfortable. “I don’t like keeping secrets from my wife.”

“I wouldn’t ask you without a reason. I don’t want her to worry.”

Now she had his attention. “Are you sick?”

Thankfully, her health was not the issue. “No, I’m fine.” She returned to the table for more plates. “I’m just not as... financially sound as I used to be. Like everything else these days, the publishing industry has shifted and what worked before doesn’t work now. Sales are down, and I’m not having much luck getting them back to where they used to be.”

“Do you need money?” Sam asked.

Charity was not what she needed. “I’m not that bad off. Yet. I’m considering buying

a place that would serve as both a home base and an income property. A duplex, maybe. I know nothing about real estate so I'm hoping you can steer me in the right direction."

Sam visibly relaxed. "You had me worried there for a minute. What was all that about a sleek new condo?"

"A bluff," she said with a smile. "I'm serious about Callie staying in the dark on this. Once I find the right place, I'll tell her it was a deal I couldn't pass up."

Rubbing his bristle-covered chin, he stared at the table before him. "What you're describing might require some improvements and would likely be out of the area you're used to, but we can find you something."

"I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty, and a little distance from Mama wouldn't be a bad thing."

Rising to his feet, Sam shifted Conner to his other shoulder. "Let me see if Belinda has anything in the works. If not, I have a couple other contacts I can call."

Henri let out a breath as she lowered the door on the dishwasher. She'd been dreading this conversation, but she knew that Sam was the best person to ask. "I appreciate that."

"No problem. Now I'd better put this one to bed. I'll come back down to help finish up."

Henri carried the last of the empty glasses to the counter. "I've got this. We both know you're dying to go see your wife."

A grin split his chiseled features. "That I am." Crossing to drop a kiss on her

forehead, he said, “Thanks, Henri.”

“You’re welcome,” she said as he hustled toward the stairs.

In all the years she’d been visiting, Henri had never felt a ping of jealousy for what her cousin had here. The adoring husband. The tight-knit friends. The cute-as-a-button kiddos. But tonight there was a tinge of green in the air. Though she’d never admit as much, part of never getting her own place had been about not going home to an empty house every night. Even when spending a week in some hotel room, there were people around. Sounds in the hallway. A person a phone call away, ready with food or extra towels.

Being an only child, and nearly invisible to her parents, had turned Henri into an excellent writer. She’d spent years making up stories in her head long before committing words to the page. Random characters had kept her company on the lonely nights when her parents were schmoozing at dinner parties or charity events. But those nights had also embedded a deep aversion to being alone.

Solitude was good—beneficial even—in small doses. Continued silence was not. Not for Henri.

But she couldn’t avoid getting her own place forever, and if she had two places, with someone living next door, then she wouldn’t technically be alone. The need for extra income had not been a lie, but it was also not her only motivation to buy an investment property. A fact she would be keeping to herself.

### Chapter Three

“Move that paper stocking a little to the left,” Nota told Lauren. “But down one branch.”

Lauren had already moved the stocking three times, just as she had moved every other ornament she’d put on the tree per Grandma’s instructions. Mia had warned her this would happen and to her credit, she hadn’t so much as sighed in frustration.

“The stocking is the last one,” Mia said. “We’ve covered every inch at this point.”

“There’s still another box to go,” her grandmother replied. “What about the snowman Nick made in fourth grade?”

Stepping back from the tree, Lauren tilted her head. “I see a spot for one more, but after that I think Mia is right. These branches won’t hold another thing.”

Nota reluctantly agreed. “The snowman will have to be it then. Lauren, how does yours and Nick’s tree look?”

The chef cut a panicked look Mia’s way. “Um... Nick and I aren’t putting up a tree.”

The older woman gasped. “What do you mean? How can you not have a tree?”

“We just didn’t see the point since neither of us is home much. We’re both working over the holiday, and Christmas morning we’ll be here.”



This response did not appease the senior citizen. “That’s no excuse. How can it feel like the holiday without a tree to go with the other decorations?”

Lauren paled and Mia knew a tree wasn’t the only thing they were skipping.

“Not everyone has to have a tree, Grandma. Like she said, they’re never home. Both of the restaurants have trees, right?” She gave Lauren a lie-if-you-have-to look.

“Oh, yes. The one at Pilar’s is gorgeous with fun kitchen-related ornaments. Pots and pans and utensils. The one at Dempsey’s is covered in little festive crabs.” Her face scrunched in distaste. “I’m told that’s a long-standing tradition.”

Grandma’s expression matched Lauren’s. “The crabs are bad enough, but the string of hot sauce lights are beyond wrong.” She slid the lid back on the full box of ornaments. “Speaking of Pilar’s, what’s on the menu for the dinner on Saturday?”

Will and Randy Navarro were hosting a large Christmas Day gathering at the restaurant for family and friends. As the head chef, Lauren was in charge of the menu.

The chef’s eyes lit up. “I’m so excited for you to see the beautiful hard cider lamb chops, as well as a gorgeous loin in Parmesan risotto. There’s even oxtail and a hearty Italian vegetable stew. Will gave me an unlimited budget so I went for it.”

“I used to make hard cider lamb chops,” Grandma said with a soft smile.

“That’s what I heard. I doubt mine will be as good as yours, but Nick has given me lots of tips so I’ll hopefully get close.”

Pink crept up the older woman’s cheeks as she feigned humility. “Oh, go on. My food was never up to chef levels.”

Her son—Mia’s father—had run an authentic Greek restaurant until the day he’d died much too young. Though Nota would say she barely helped in the kitchen, Joseph Stamatis told anyone who would listen that she’d taught him everything he knew.

“Nick says otherwise.” Lauren hung the snowman between a glittering gold ball and a glass Greek flag. “We’re serving family style so once everything is out, the staff will get to join the party. I’ve never seen that happen, but Will insisted.”

“Sounds like something Will would do.” Mia packed the ornaments into the red storage tote and said, “Are you bringing Olaf, Grandma?”

Olaf Holgensmidt was Grandma’s unofficial life companion. She’d still claimed they were just friends as recently as last month, but when the sweet furniture maker had a mishap in his workshop that sent him to the emergency room two weeks ago, she’d rushed to his side and had insisted that he stay in bed for three days after returning home. An unnecessary requirement since the injury was a minor cut on his left thumb, but Olaf had obeyed her every order.

Mia was convinced that he’d enjoyed having her dote over him.

“No, his daughter will be in town. What about you, Mia?” Grandma said. “You should bring someone. What about Jeremy?”

Jeremy Butler was the hospital administrator at Edwards Medical Center. He was attractive, a few years older than Mia, and had become the central focus of Nota’s machinations to get her granddaughter married off. Unfortunately, instead of discouraging her not-so-subtle suggestions that he and Mia should go out, the man had shown clear interest in doing just that.

“I’m not asking Jeremy,” Mia said with finality. Letting Nota believe she was straight was one thing. Playing with someone else’s emotions to maintain her secret was

another.

“Why not?” Grandma asked, refusing to give up. “He’s a lovely boy and one of the few eligible bachelors on this island. You aren’t getting any younger, you know. Besides, you’ll be the only single person there.”

“No, she won’t,” Lauren cut in. “Henri will be there.”

## Page 10

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The crooked smile on her future sister-in-law's face struck fear in Mia's heart. The last thing she wanted was to bring up Henri.

"That writer friend of Callie Edwards?" Grandma asked.

"She's Callie's cousin," Mia corrected. "And yes. Henri is here for the holidays."

Sliding to the edge of her seat, Nota pushed herself up with the help of her cane. "I hope I get to talk to her. I read one of those books you left lying around this summer. The one about the girl trying to build a hotel in downtown Nashville."

Mia had wondered where that book went. "You read one of Henri's books?"

"Don't sound so surprised. I've enjoyed a romance or two in my day. The book was so good I felt as if I'd visited that city." She slowly made her way to the tree and moved a felt candy cane up one branch. "She's a wonderful writer."

"Yes, she is," Lauren agreed. "She'll be there alone so Mia will have someone to talk to and not feel left out."

"That will have to do, I guess." Leaning heavily on the cane, she said, "I think I might lie down for a bit. Thank you for helping with the tree, Lauren. I'm sure Mia warned you how difficult I am, but don't listen to a word she says. I'm particular, but that does not make me difficult."

As Mia rolled her eyes, Lauren placed a kiss on Nota's cheek. "Mia said no such thing."

“I don’t believe you.”

Lauren held up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

Eyes narrowed, Grandma assessed her expression. “You were never a Girl Scout, were you?”

The sassy blond came clean immediately. “I was not.”

“That’s what I thought.” With a wave, she shuffled toward her bedroom. “Thank you both for your help and for your patience. Lauren, I’ll see you Saturday if not before.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Once Nota’s bedroom door clicked shut, Lauren said, “Thanks for saving me on that tree thing. I didn’t realize not having one would be an issue.”

“Nick hasn’t put up a tree since we moved here. He just tells her he has one to keep her happy.”

“That would have been handy to know before she asked,” she said with a laugh. “Sid is probably finished with my car by now. Are you still okay taking me back to Dempsey’s?”

“Of course.”

Mia let Nota know she was leaving, and moments later they were in the car, headed across the island.

“How serious is this thing between Nota and Olaf?” Lauren asked.

“They’re definitely a couple,” Mia said. “He’s very sweet to her, and I think she appreciates the attention.”

“Do you think they’ll take the next step?”

The question threw Mia off. “What next step?” She turned her left blinker on and rolled up to the stop sign.

“Marriage.”

“Marriage? Grandma and Olaf?” What a crazy idea. “There’s no way she’d get married again. She’s been single longer than I’ve been alive. Longer than Nick’s been alive, for that matter.”

“Then don’t you hope she will?” Lauren asked. “That’s a long time to be alone.”

The possibility had never crossed Mia’s mind. “She isn’t alone. Nick and I are here.”

Lauren tugged on her seat belt. “No offense, but that isn’t the same thing.”

“Are you forgetting that she’s in her eighties?”

“You’re never too old to fall in love. Don’t you want her to be happy?”

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“Of course, I do.” Mia wasn’t a monster. “But she is happy. She has her cottage and her friends and us.”

“And Olaf. I for one hope they make it official.”

Not that Nota was knocking on death’s door, but starting a new marriage now? After more than forty years? Surely not.

But if—and that was a big if—she did, what would that mean for Mia? Would she suddenly be taking care of two people? Or would she not be needed at all? Other than the arthritis that slowed her down, Grandma was generally fit, which meant Mia’s primary job was to be her companion. A woman with a husband didn’t need another companion.

“I just don’t see it happening.”

Lauren tilted her head with a shrug. “You know her better than I do so maybe you’re right, but I’m still pulling for an Olaf proposal.”

Mia held her tongue as the idea rolled through her mind. Last week, Olaf had asked about their plans for Christmas. He’d asked questions like what time were we all going to be there? How did Grandma feel about surprises? Mia had assumed he’d built her a fancy rocking chair or something and would need help getting it into the house.

Maybe the gift wasn’t a rocker but a ring. And what if Grandma said yes? Of course, she’d be happy for them. Beyond happy. But Mia was suddenly thinking about her

own future. About a life beyond taking care of Nota. She'd never lived anywhere but back in New Jersey, where she grew up, and here on Anchor Island. Did she want to stay here? Did she want to go someplace new? The possibilities were both daunting and oddly liberating.

"Thanks again for letting me help decorate," Lauren said as they pulled into Dempsey's parking lot. "I need to go inside to get my keys. Are you coming in?"

Mia shook her head. "I'm going to head home, but thanks."

Her future sister-in-law climbed out. "No problem. See you Saturday."

"See you then."

Lauren waved before stepping inside, but Mia's mind was already elsewhere. Part of her said not to get too far ahead. The whole Olaf proposal thing was still only speculation. But another part was picturing a map of the world, imagining all the places she could go. All the art she could explore. Not that she had the budget for the whole world, but there were plenty of places in the US she had yet to see. And even if things stayed the same for now, Mia hadn't let herself dream about the future nearly enough.

A little dreaming never hurt anything.

\* \* \*

"How much sugar have these kids had?" Henri whispered to Callie, who bounced Rachel on her hip while Roxanne shoveled cereal oats into her mouth in the high chair between them.

Today was the holiday party at the island daycare center, and Cal had convinced



Henri to go with her. Within five minutes of arriving, Henri remembered why she could never work in a daycare center. Bless Helga Stepanovich, who'd provided this service for at least a generation of Anchor Island kids.

"My guess would be twice their weight," Callie replied.

They stood in the corner of the room watching a dozen three- and four-year-olds run around in a frenzy, playing what was supposed to be a game of pin the tail on the reindeer. A teenager in a makeshift deer costume was doing a terrible job of outrunning her attackers.

"Is that poor girl getting hazard pay?"

Callie laughed. "I doubt it, but I'm going to suggest Helga give her a holiday bonus if she isn't already."

Either the kid was no track star or she wanted to let the kids win, because nearly every little one had attached a tail to her backside, each with a painful-looking smack to get their Velcro to stick. As the last little girl added hers to the collection, the game ended and the reindeer was handed a cup of punch and a cookie as her reward. The group was then guided back to the large carpeted area where they each had a mat to sit on. The volume in the room instantly dropped.

"They did that to wear them out, didn't they?" Henri asked, catching on to Helga's genius ways.

"Yep." Callie slid Rachel into the high chair beside Roxanne's and loaded the tray with dry cereal. "This is not Helga's first rodeo."

As the kids worked on their juice boxes, a newcomer arrived with supplies in hand. Henri's heart skipped a beat when Mia walked in. She was still feeling guilty about

how she'd pushed her the other day. What had been the point of apologizing for being a jerk in June if, minutes later, she turned into a jerk all over again?

"Miss Mia is here," said Helga, causing all the children to spin on their mats. A cacophony of cheers and greetings followed, with one little girl bolting from her mat to charge across the room and wrap herself around Mia's legs. Mia set her teal-blue toolbox on the floor and hugged the little one back.

"You look positively smitten," Callie said, startling Henri, who'd forgotten for a second that the rest of the world existed.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She cleared her throat and feigned indifference. "I was just surprised to see her here."

Her cousin wasn't buying it. "You know that Mia does art with the kids, so don't pretend you weren't hoping she'd be here. You wouldn't have agreed to come otherwise."

How insulting. "I'm here for Conner, thank you very much."

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“You’re a terrible liar.” Callie lifted Roxanne from her chair. “Grab Rachel and let’s head out there. Santa will be here soon and I want a picture with all three of them together. Keep your fingers crossed the girls aren’t afraid of him like Conner is.”

Henri remembered Conner’s last encounter with jolly old Saint Nick. The poor boy had screamed as if they’d plopped him onto Freddy Krueger’s lap. Later the same day, Callie had had to remove the cardboard Santa they’d used as a decoration on their front door before Conner would walk into the house. Though young, the girls already showed very different personalities from their brother’s, so with luck, they’d be happy to see the man in the suit.

“Who wants their face painted?” Mia asked.

More cheers filled the room as tiny hands went up in the air, then she greeted each child by name and listened intently to their requests. When it was Conner’s turn, he asked for a dinosaur like the one she’d painted in his room. Several of the children were impressed that Miss Mia had created a special wall just for him.

Once the last child had her say, Helga gathered them back to the mats so that Mia could set up her paints. When she picked up her toolbox and turned their way, she stopped with wide eyes. “I didn’t realize you guys were here.”

“Knowing how Conner typically reacts to Santa Claus,” Callie said, “I thought it best to join the festivities.” Switching the baby to her other hip, she added, “I also want to get a picture with all three of them if I can.”

Mia nodded as her eyes kept darting Henri’s way.

“I tagged along,” Henri said. “Do you need help setting up?”

“No, I’m good, thanks.” She placed the case on the table beside them, then began removing small paint bottles and lining them up along the wall. As she continued to work, the front door swung open and Sid and Beth Dempsey rushed into the center. Or rather, Beth rushed in dragging Sid behind her.

“Curly, you’re pulling my arm out of the socket. I’m telling you, we aren’t late.”

“Did we miss the pictures?” Beth asked, glancing around the large room.

“Santa isn’t here yet,” Callie replied, waving the pair over. “Mia is about to do face painting while we wait.”

“Mommy!” called out a beautiful little girl with jet-black hair and wearing a jaunty elf hat. Pilar nearly tackled her mother before she’d taken two steps. “Santa is coming to see us.”

“That’s what I heard,” Sid said, “but you have to stay with the other kids until he gets here. You don’t want him to see you breaking the rules, do you?”

The toddler instantly realized her mistake. “Oh, no, no, no,” she said, running back to her seat.

A smaller child with big green eyes joined the newcomers next. Beth’s three-year-old daughter Daphne stood before her mother with arms held high above her head. “I want up.”

“You heard what Aunt Sid told Pilar. You have to stay with the other kids until Santa comes.”

Daphne was not swayed. “I want up.”

With a roll of her eyes, the mother conceded and swept the child off her feet. By the time the two women crossed the room, Daphne’s thumb was in her mouth and her forehead was tucked against her mother’s neck.

“I heard you were back,” Sid said. “How long are you staying this time?”

“Just through New Year’s,” Henri said.

Mia pointed to her table in the corner. “If you all want to join the fun, I can paint your faces, too.”

“Do you have a lot of green paint?” Callie asked. “If so, you can turn Henri into the Grinch that she is.”

“Being anti-tinsel does not make me a Grinch.”

“You can’t have a tree without tinsel,” Callie argued.

“I’m with Henri on this one.” Sid made a face like she’d tasted something gross. “That crap is ugly and gets everywhere.”

Beth joined team tinsel. “Don’t listen to them, Callie. I’m with you.”

“You don’t have it on your tree either,” Sid pointed out.

“Only because Dozer eats it.” Beth turned to Mia. “What do you think? Tinsel or no tinsel?”

Sending Callie an apologetic frown, she answered, “No tinsel.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:39 pm*

Relief filled Henri before she reminded herself that Mia's opinion on how to decorate a Christmas tree had nothing to do with her. It wasn't as if they'd ever be decorating a tree together. As much as she wished otherwise.

"That's three to two," Sid said. "We win."

"Everything is a competition with you."

"Not everything," the tiny mechanic defended.

Beth arched one chestnut brow. "Have you ever told Mia how you and Lucas got together?" When Sid didn't answer, she added, "They made a series of bets. By the time they were done, both of them were head over heels."

Ensuring the story was told accurately, Sid said, "I won the bets. Just so we're clear."

Mia smiled and Henri's brain went fuzzy. "That doesn't surprise me at all." Waving to Helga, she said, "I'm ready for my first client."

The ladies shifted to the side so the kids had a clear path to the table. The conversation then went from holiday plans to the weather, and eventually landed on the men in their lives. Henri struggled to pay attention as she couldn't resist watching Mia at work. The artist was a natural with the toddlers, and no matter the request, she met every child's expectation. From Conner's dinosaur to a little blond girl's unusually specific demand for a pink unicorn with flowing gold hair and purple pajamas.

Henri had never seen a unicorn in pajamas, but Mia hadn't even blinked. She simply got to work and turned out exactly what the child had described. When the last toddler was in the chair, the front door swung open once again, and this time it was the big man himself.

The ruckus that followed made Henri wonder how Helga did this day after day. Then she glanced over to Mia, who was smiling despite the noise, and suddenly the racket didn't seem quite so unbearable.

### Chapter Four

Oh no.

While the kids cheered, and even the moms displayed the proper level of enthusiasm for Santa's arrival, Mia felt quite the opposite. She recognized the jolly man's eyes right away. They belonged to Jeremy Baker. She didn't dislike the man, but the more Grandma pushed, the more Mia avoided him. She suspected that Nota had encouraged Jeremy to ask her out. Thankfully, he hadn't taken the older woman's suggestion—yet—but Mia feared the day would come so she made sure never to give the impression that she welcomed the invite.

With a giant bag slung over his shoulder, he greeted the children, offering handshakes and high fives, before taking his place in the large wingback chair placed between two cardboard pine trees decorated by the kids. Mia had helped them make the various ornaments the week before. Setting the bag beside the chair, Jeremy dropped onto the seat with a ho ho ho before adjusting what she assumed to be a round pillow beneath the wide black belt.

Mia had barely finished the Pooh bear on Phoebe's left cheek when she bolted from the chair. Santa took precedence over face painting any day. At least for Phoebe.

The kids were lined up to meet Santa, and Raina—one of the young workers who was adorably dressed as a reindeer—snapped pictures of each of them. Getting them to sit still was difficult, but the ones who were afraid to go near him were even tougher to manage. Conner Edwards fell into that category. Callie and Henri set the twins on the big guy's lap and attempted to have Conner squat between his knees. The boy was



having none of it, so Henri volunteered to sit on the floor in front of Santa so that Conner could sit on her lap instead.

The plan worked and Callie looked ecstatic to get the picture she wanted. Or something as close to it as possible. Once they'd gotten the shot, Santa pulled a present from his bag with Conner's name on it. Helga had asked every parent to provide a gift, and for the few who struggled to do so, Will and Randy Navarro had covered the expense. Though the Navarros had no children of their own, they donated to any program that benefited local kids. From providing books for the library, to their annual fall drive that provided every student in the Anchor Island schools with a new backpack, lunch box, and all the school supplies they needed.

"That was nice of you," Mia whispered to Henri once Conner was back with the other kids.

The slender blond glanced over her shoulder. "You want to know a secret?"

Mia nodded.

"I was the same way when I was his age. Drove my mother nuts. She'd get me all dolled up in a pretty red dress with a head full of bright-white sausage curls, and the minute I came within five feet of Santa, I'd burst into tears."

"I can't imagine you being afraid of anything. Even as a kid."

Henri's grin faded. "I guess I just blew your image of me then."

"No," Mia said. "Having a few soft spots makes you more attractive."

Turning her back to the rest of the group, Henri lowered her voice. "You find me attractive, huh?"

Heat danced up Mia's neck. "You know the answer to that." Despite the facade she maintained for the rest of the world, Mia had never been able to lie to this woman. "I think you're beautiful, inside and out."

Her expression softened. "I think the same about you."

Mia's eyes dropped to Henri's full lips, and the heat in her cheeks had nothing to do with embarrassment. "That's nice to hear."

Seconds passed in which Mia nearly forgot they were standing in a room full of people. She was abruptly snapped back to her senses when the tall man in the bright-red suit stepped up beside her.

"Ho ho ho, Merry Christmas, ladies."

Mia tensed and turned to pack up her paints.

"Hey, Santa," Henri said. "Your belly is sitting a little low there. Maybe you should go adjust it."

Did she recognize the man behind the costume? Mia assumed so since Sam threw occasional fundraisers for the medical center, and Henri had attended many of them over the years. As the hospital administrator, Jeremy always played a role in the events.

"I thought one belt would keep it in place," he said, shifting the stuffing inside the suit. "I was wrong. When did you get in, Henri?"

"A few days ago. When did you get roped into this?" she asked, clearly knowing it was Jeremy.

He nodded. “Probably about the same day you got here. Bernie Matheson was supposed to do it, but he came down with a cold, so I was asked to step in.” Turning to Mia, he said, “It’s nice to see you. How’s Nota?”

Mia tossed the last bottle into her toolbox. “She’s good, thanks for asking.”

“Of course. I’m still dreaming about that baklava she brought me last month. She said you made it.”

Not wholly accurate. “I helped, that’s all.”

“It’s clear your brother isn’t the only amazing cook in the family. I’m a bit of an amateur cook myself. Maybe you could teach me how to make it sometime.”

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The question cut way too close to asking her on a date. “I just follow Grandma’s recipe. I’ll have her make you a copy and drop it by your office the next time she’s at the hospital.”

Disappointment was clear in his eyes. “That would be great. I’ll let you know when I try it so you can have a taste and see how I did.”

Checking Henri’s expression, Mia could tell by the tightening of her jaw that she knew what was happening. Mia wanted to tell Jeremy he was barking up the wrong tree, but she didn’t want to hurt his feelings, nor was she willing to tell him the truth.

“You should probably get back to the kids, Santa,” Mia said, nodding to the three-foot-tall crowd coming their way.

Jeremy patted his belly with a smile barely visible through the fake beard. “Right. That is why I’m here.” Turning to the children, he said, “Ho ho ho, do you all like your presents?”

They all answered at once, dragging him back to his chair, where they each insisted on showing him every toy and book and bit of sports equipment they’d opened.

Noticing the twitch in Henri’s jaw, Mia said, “It was nice of him to step in for Bernie.”

“Has he asked you out yet?” she said, ignoring the comment.

Mia sighed. “No, but I think Grandma keeps encouraging him while I’m doing my

best not to.”

Blue eyes cut to Santa. “She must see him as the perfect match for you. Tall. Handsome.” Meeting Mia’s gaze, she added, “Male.”

“That isn’t fair. You know I’m not interested in Jeremy, but what am I supposed to do?”

“Letting him keep hitting on you instead of telling him the truth is only going to make him feel like more of a fool when he finds out.”

Which was why he could never find out. “If he comes out and asks me on a date, I’ll let him know I don’t see him that way. He’ll never have to know the truth.”

Henri lowered her voice and moved closer. “Never is a long time, Mia. You’re really going to live this lie forever?”

Her heart rate sped up as Henri’s honeysuckle scent filled her senses. “I didn’t say that. I’m just saying that Jeremy doesn’t have to know about me in order for him to know that he and I are never going on a date.”

“No, I guess he doesn’t,” she conceded. “I’d better help Callie get the twins ready to go. I’ll see you around.”

Mia watched Henri disappear into the baby room, wishing with all her heart that things could be different. But wishing got her nowhere. Mia had spun a web around herself and now she had to live with it. Maybe someday she would be brave like Henri, but something told her that by then, it would be too late.

\* \* \*

“I didn’t realize how much of a production this had become.” Henri held a squirming Rachel on her left hip and carried a diaper bag heavy enough to contain a dead body with her right. “What the hell do you have in here?”

“Enough supplies to get a toddler and two babies through an apocalypse.” Callie pulled a lock of her hair out of Roxanne’s mouth and nodded at the hostess. “Three adults and three high chairs, please.”

“For Edwards?” the teenager asked.

“That’s right. Is it a long wait?”

“Just a couple of minutes,” the girl replied. “Have a seat and I’ll call you when the table is ready.”

They did as ordered and Henri was relieved to be able to put the bag down. Conner was with Sam, who was parking the car after dropping them at the door. Eugenia was still suffering from the headache that had kept her away from the daycare party earlier and had opted to stay home.

“How do you do this when I’m not here?” Henri asked.

“We don’t.”

“You what?”

Callie caught Roxanne’s pacifier a foot before it hit the floor. Popping it back into the girl’s mouth, she said, “We don’t go out unless we have a babysitter or someone tagging along to help.”

She had to be making that up. “Is this your way of trying to convince me to move

here?”

Her cousin shook her head with a fierce mama bear glint in her eye. “When the girls were six months old, we went out to eat as a family. While Sam and I were juggling the twins, Conner ran after a cat, which darted across the road. My heart stops just thinking about how close he came to getting hit by a car.” Smoothing back her daughter’s soft brown hair, she said, “Now we don’t go out unless there’s an adult for each child.”

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Henri felt queasy herself thinking about her sweet nephew getting hurt like that. “Is that why you were looking for a nanny?”

“Partly. Even if we hired one, they couldn’t be with us around the clock, which would also be the case if you moved here. We thought that if Conner was with the twins all day that he’d grow more attached to them. I know he’s going to be a great big brother, but he still treats them like two goldfish we brought home instead of his baby sisters.”

Henri had an outside perspective on this budding family, and she’d been observing them for nearly a week. There were many times that Conner checked on the twins, just as he had the day they’d returned from picking up his grandmother in Norfolk. He may not ask to hold them or even take the time to play with them, but he always knew where they were. Callie clearly hadn’t noticed the look of concern that crossed her son’s face whenever one of the girls cried.

Though Conner was happy to hug those he loved, he wasn’t an effusive kid. He wasn’t touchy-feely or overly affectionate even with his parents. In her line of work, Henri had studied—and written—every aspect of body language and physical cues. The little boy cared about his sisters. He just didn’t show it in the obvious ways.

“Did you notice how he checked on them when he and Sam came back with Eugenia?” Henri asked.

“Yes,” Cal said with a sigh. “He barely even looked at them.”

Catching Rachel’s chubby little hand before it wrapped around her necklace, Henri



said, “The point isn’t howlong he checked on them, it’s that he did it. He needed to know they were still there and that they were okay, then he could go about his business. Conner cares about the girls, Cal. He’s attached to them more than you think.”

“Then why doesn’t he talk to them or play with them?”

Henri had never been a parent, but the answer seemed obvious to her. “He’s four. What is a four-year-old interested in dinosaurs and building Lego forts going to do with two nine-month-olds?”

Callie touched her forehead to Roxanne’s. “I guess you’re right. They’d try to eat the bricks, and then we’d really be in trouble.”

“Welcome to Dempsey’s,” said the hostess, and Henri glanced up to find Mia and Nota just inside the doors.

“Hello, Ivy,” Mia said. “Can we get a table for two, please?”

Before the girl could answer, Nota said, “There’s Henri.” The excitement in her voice was both childlike and unexpected. “I need to talk to her.”

Sam breezed in the door behind them as the older woman shuffled toward the bench. Conner sprinted around her, nearly knocking her over and forcing Henri to leap to her feet to steady her, which wasn’t easy with Rachel in her arms. Luckily, Sam was quicker and kept the older woman upright.

“Are you okay?” he said once the danger had passed. “I’m so sorry.”

“Conner, you nearly knocked Ms. Nota over,” Callie scolded. “You can’t run by people like that, honey.”

“I’m fine,” Nota said. “Just not as steady as I used to be. Henri... can I call you Henri?”

They’d met, at least casually, on more than one occasion, so the question took her by surprise. “That’s my name, so sure.”

“Since I’m talking to you as a fan, I thought maybe I should call you Henrietta. Or Ms. Bloom.”

A fan? “You’ve read my books?”

Nota’s smile widened. “I have. Mia left one at my house this summer and I loved it. I found a few more in her cottage and read those, too.”

“You took books from my cottage?” Mia said, stepping up beside her.

“Not now, Mia. I’m talking to Henri. That one with the young woman trying to build a hotel in downtown Nashville was so good I felt like I was right there with her. I didn’t like that man you gave her at first, but he won me over by the end.”

“Thank you,” Henri said, genuinely flattered. Description wasn’t her greatest strength so she appreciated such comments. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. If I’d known, I’d have brought you some signed books. I’ll ship you some when I get home.”

“That would be lovely,” Nota said.

“Mr. Edwards, your table is ready,” said the hostess.

“Why don’t we all eat together?” Callie suggested. To the teenager, she said, “Can you switch us to a table for five adults instead of three?”

Ivy looked at her table chart and then around the room. “We can do that. Let me grab two more menus.”

“We don’t want to impose,” Mia said.

“Nonsense.” Callie rose to her feet while Sam collected the hundred-pound diaper bag. “We’re all here together anyway, so why not?”

Mia looked as if she wanted to argue further, but she couldn’t exactly say they didn’t want to eat with them. Not without being rude or making Nota question her objection. The older woman looked quite happy to join them, sticking close to Henri as they followed the young girl to their table.

When they each took a seat, Nota chose the one beside Henri, and Mia ended up on the other side of the table. There was panic in her eyes, striking a protective chord in Henri’s chest. She may not have agreed with her decision to keep her grandmother in the dark, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t maintain the facade on her behalf.

At the same time, this might be an opportunity to test the waters. Nothing that would expose Mia in any way. Just a little reconnaissance to see how Nota really felt about those people, as she once called them. With luck, she’d prove to be more open-minded than Mia thought.

### Chapter Five

Mia felt as if she were sitting on a bed of nails. She had no fear that Henri would say the wrong thing or reveal her secret. The fear was about herself. Mia's acting went only so far. Keeping Grandma in the dark had been easy enough because she was only hiding her identity, not her feelings.

Never dating a woman meant not having to hide her actions. Not that she and Henri were dating, but they would be if Mia had more guts. She longed for this person. She wanted to be able to hold hands and kiss her in public. Not doing so was one thing. Not showing that she wanted to do so was another.

"What other books have you read?" Henri asked once the kids were settled and the waitress had taken their drink orders.

Nota looked to Mia. "I don't remember the names of them. What are they, dear?"

Pointing out her grandmother's burglar-y ways, she said, "I couldn't say since I don't know which ones you stole."

"You make me sound like a criminal."

"I know what to do." Henri whipped out her phone. A few swipes later, she set it on the table between herself and Nota. "Do you recognize the covers?"

Grandma pulled out her reading glasses and held the phone at a distance. "The pink one looks familiar. And the one with the smiling blond woman."

“The one with the mechanic hero?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “I wanted to hug him the whole time.”

Henri nodded. “I felt the same way while writing him. How about this one?” She pointed to a spot on the screen.

Brows drawn, Grandma said, “I don’t think so. What’s that one about?”

“It’s the story of two women who fall in love when they meet while on vacation.”

“Oh.” Grandma put the phone on the table as if it had burned her. “I don’t know that I’d like that one.”

“It’s a beautiful story,” Callie cut in. “Very empowering with all sorts of sweet, romantic moments.”

Grandma did not look convinced. “Two women though...”

“Love is love,” Sam said, getting in on the act.

Mia knew what they were doing, and she was touched by the support, but they were wasting their time.

“That is true.” Wait. Did her grandmother just say that? “Is there... you know?” she asked.

With infinite patience, Henri shook her head. “Not in that one. There are a few kisses though.”

Holding her breath, Mia waited for her to say she wasn’t interested, but instead,

Grandma nodded. “Okay, then if you send that with the others, I’ll read it, too.”

“I’ll send the message off to my assistant right now.” Henri clicked away on her phone as Callie cut Mia a knowing smile.

What had just happened? And when did Grandma become so open-minded?

“We should start a Henrietta Bloom book club,” Callie suggested.

“That would be wonderful,” Grandma said. “Count me in.”

As Mia processed her grandmother’s change in attitude, the waiter arrived to take their order. Since they’d all eaten at Dempsey’s countless times, none of them had to look at the menu. The conversation throughout the meal bounced from holiday traditions to the twins’ first Christmas and on to Conner talking passionately about all of the Lego sets he was hoping Santa would bring him. All the while, Henri showered Grandma with her boundless charisma to the point that Mia couldn’t help but love her even more.

The thought nearly short-circuited her brain. She liked Henri. A lot. She wanted to date her and get to know her and... do other things with her. But love was something else entirely. She wasn’t in love with Henri Bloom. Was she?

Watching her charm Grandma into fits of childlike giggles gave Mia her answer. Holy crap.

She loved this woman.

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“Are you busy tomorrow?” Henri asked, jerking Mia out of her earth-shattering discovery.

“Me?” she said.

“Yes. I’m toying with ideas for the covers for the new series and would love to get an artist’s take on them.”

“Oh, Mia is the perfect person to help you,” Nota said. “You have to go, hon.”

The turn of events was almost too much for Mia to process. “I’d be happy to help.”

“Good. Meet me at Hava Java around eleven then?”

A slew of emotions flooded Mia’s system, and she didn’t know whether to laugh or pinch herself. Not that she’d be revealing the truth to Grandma because of one conversation about a fictional love story, but at least she could spend some time with Henri and not feel as if they had to hide or sneak around. Even this minor freedom felt like a joyful liberation.

“I’ll be there,” she said, trying to contain her excitement.

Conversation again turned to mundane topics while Mia floated several inches above her seat for the rest of the meal. Maybe their coffee date was just to talk about covers and artwork, but it was a date nonetheless and she would take what she could get.

\* \* \*

For the first time in longer than she could remember, Henri was nervous. Though the claim about getting Mia's opinion on new covers had been true, that wasn't why she'd asked to meet her. Moving the needle a bit on Nota's ideas on homosexuality in no way meant Mia would suddenly tell her grandmother the truth about who she was. But Henri still wanted Mia in her life. She'd realized that during her months away, which was the real reason for this coffee date.

"Hey there," Mia said, joining her at a corner table. "Sorry I'm late. I got held up by some geese crossing the road."

Henri held up a hand as she reached for her phone, and Mia took a seat while she typed the note. Once finished, she set the cell back on the table and said, "I have to put that line in a book. Thanks for meeting me."

"Of course," Mia replied, removing her scarf and hanging her purse on the back of the chair. Unbuttoning her coat, she said, "Anytime. I'm anxious to see these covers. I've never designed one before, but I'm happy to offer whatever feedback I can."

Time to confess.

"That isn't really why I asked you here. I mean, I do have covers I want your opinion on, but what I really want is to apologize. Again."

Brown eyes narrowed. "Apologize for what?"

"For being a jerk right after I apologized for being a jerk." Leaning forward, Henri braced her elbows on the table and slid her clasped hands forward until they were almost touching Mia's.

"I'm just going to say this," she continued. "I like you, and I want to be with you. I want to take you out to eat and learn all your favorite foods. I want to hate-watch



movies on the couch together, making snarky comments, and walk along the beach holding your hand. And because I have a tendency to be selfish, wanting all of that turns me into an idiot about you and your grandmother. Not my best trait, for obvious reasons. So I'm sorry. I'll take having you in my life however that has to happen. If it means we stop at being friends, then that's better than not having you in my life at all." Sliding an envelope across the table, she added, "This is my peace offering. Merry Christmas, Mia."

The woman across the table sat in silence, her eyes darting between the envelope and Henri's face. "I'm not sure what to say."

Not the response she'd been hoping for. Ignoring the pain in her chest, Henri pushed the envelope closer. "You don't have to say anything. Just open it."

Mia rolled her eyes. "I can't not reply to that. And I don't have a present for you."

"You didn't even know I would be here. I'm not looking for anything in return."

Like a child, Mia held the envelope up to the sunlight, trying to see inside. "What is it?"

"You'll know once you open it."

Ripping through the paper, she said, "All right, all right, I'm getting there." She finally pulled the ticket from inside, and Henri waited for the question she knew was coming. "What is this?"

"A ticket to the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston. There's a French Impressionism exhibit running through next summer. I thought you might want to come see it."

“In Charleston?” Mia looked down at the ticket. “I’m not sure. I mean...”

“Before you say anything else, I want to tell you some news.”

She froze as if afraid of what would come next. “Okay.”

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Henri ran a finger around the lid of her coffee. “I’m getting my own place.”

“You’re what? You said you didn’t want to do that.”

A true statement at the time. “Things change. I’m not doing as many events as I used to, and at this point I can write a book set in any kind of town without having to visit one specifically. I’ll be thirty-five next month, and I’m still living part-time in the bedroom I’ve had since I was ten. It’s time to grow up and put down some roots of my own.”

“That’s... great. Wait. Are you buying a place here?”

“No, in Charleston. That’s the second part of the ticket.” Henri took a deep breath and said, “When I get settled, I’d like you to come visit. We can hit the museum, and I can take you to all the best restaurants in town. Nothing beats Low Country food.”

Mia leaned away from the table. “I appreciate the offer but—”

“There’s nothing wrong with visiting a friend, right?” she cut in. “I’m not asking you to move in with me, Mia. Or to tell Nota anything more than that you’re going away for a girls’ weekend. It’s an invite to Charleston for some art and food and hanging out. Nothing more.”

Unless you want it to be, she almost added.

Clearly uncomfortable, Mia slid the ticket back across the table. “I’ll think about it, but I can’t promise anything so keep this for now. I don’t want you to waste it.”

Henri pushed it back. “That ticket is yours whether you use it or not. I hope you will, even if you come to Charleston with someone else.” That was a lie, but she couldn’t make Mia feel something she didn’t. Rising from her chair, she added, “There are no strings, Mia. I just wanted to give you something that I thought you’d like. I promised Cal I’d watch the kids while she gets some wrapping done so I need to go. The offer to visit is always open if you decide to come. Think about it, and let me know.”

The look in Mia’s eye didn’t give Henri much hope, but she’d learned that the younger woman had to come to things in her own time. No more pushing.

“I do appreciate the thought,” Mia said, turning the ticket over in her hands. “Will I see you at Pilar’s on Saturday?”

Hiding her disappointment, she said, “I’ll be there.”

“Good.” Mia relaxed. “Thanks again.” She held the ticket up. “I really will think about this.”

That was all Henri could ask. “See you Saturday, Mia.”

“See you.”

Henri was numb enough on the walk to her car that she didn’t even feel the cold air whipping around her. Once in the driver’s seat, she tried not to feel like a fool, but at least Mia could never claim she didn’t know where Henri stood.

At least now she knew where Mia stood as well. Henri should have known better than to get her hopes up. So much for second chances.

\* \* \*

“She said all of that, and you didn’t say anything back?” Lauren asked as she continued to break down a chicken. “Are you kidding me?”

Mia leaned on the stainless steel counter, attempting to stay out of the way as the Pilar kitchen staff prepped for evening service. “What was I supposed to say? I walked into Hava Java thinking I was going to get a coffee and consult on some book covers. I was completely unprepared.”

She tossed a drumstick into a steel bowl. “You knew that meetup wasn’t about covers, and you were supposed to say you want all of those things, too.”

If only those words had come. A voice in her head had screamed tell her! while her heart had done a happy dance in her chest. But wanting all the same things didn’t mean she could have them. Or that she’d even know what to do if she could. Locking that part of herself away came with more consequences than living in fear of being found out. Mia had virtually no relationship experience. She’d buried her sexuality so deep for so long that she sometimes felt as if she had no feelings at all.

Until Henri entered a room, and then a fire ignited in her gut that scared Mia half to death. Like putting her hand into a flame, her reaction was to pull away.

“I can’t do that. It isn’t fair to her.”

Lauren rolled her eyes hard enough to pull a muscle. “You think what you’ve been doing is fair? It isn’t. Not to you or to her. This isn’t the first time Henri has told you how she feels. The fact that she’s willing to settle for friendship just to spend time with you proves how much she cares. Tell her you feel the same way already.”

It wasn’t that easy. “And then what?” Mia asked. “She’s leaving after New Year’s, and I’m stuck here.”

The knife froze as blue eyes met hers. “Is that how you feel? Like you’re stuck here?”

Guilt washed over her. “No, of course not. I love this island and being here with Grandma.”

Lauren set the knife down and tugged off her latex gloves before stepping around the prep station. “Tell me the truth. Do you feel stuck?”

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“Only sometimes,” she admitted. “I always wanted to travel and see other places, but I have plenty of time to do that after...” Her words trailed off.

“After Nota dies?”

An awful thought. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

Taking her hands, Lauren said, “Listen to me, Mia. You’re young and you deserve to have a life. Other than a little arthritis and terrible driving skills, there’s nothing wrong with Nota that requires a constant caretaker. She has Nick and me and Olaf, and countless other people on this island to take care of her. If there’s something out there you want to do, then you need to go do it.”

Vigorously shaking her head, Mia rejected any notion of leaving Anchor Island. “I won’t leave her. She lost Grandpa, and then she lost Daddy. She isn’t going to lose me, too.”

“You moving away is not her losing you. It’s you having a life of your own. There’s no way in hell you could convince me that Nota wouldn’t want that for you.” Lauren crossed her arms. “This has nothing to do with you being gay or straight. You’re playing the martyr and using Nota as an excuse to hide away here on Anchor. That isn’t cool. Take it from me, Mia, making choices based on a lie you’ve told yourself is the best way to end up unhappy and alone. I lived that way for years and I can tell you, it sucked.”

Having her reality so brutally summed up and tossed in her face felt like being gutted.

“Just because you chose to be a loner doesn’t mean you know anything about my life. Taking care of my grandmother is not being a martyr. It’s being a family. Something you know nothing about.”

Lauren flinched at the reminder of her past, but Mia was too busy drowning in hurt and anger to worry about her future sister-in-law’s feelings. Shoving away from the counter, she stormed out of the kitchen and slammed through the restaurant entrance, ignoring the incoming patrons she nearly plowed down in the process.



### Chapter Six

Mia was still sulking when the knock came at her door that evening. Knowing exactly who was on the other side, she considered not answering. And then she remembered he had a key, and she didn't trust him not to use it.

"I'm not in the mood," she said after swinging the door open.

"Get in the mood," Nick said, charging past her.

In another day or two, Mia would feel bad about what she'd said to Lauren. She'd been hurt and fired a hit below the belt. Tonight, she was still mad and didn't feel like listening to the scolding her brother was about to deliver.

"Do you really feel trapped here?" he said as she closed the door. Not the question she thought he'd start with.

"No, I don't," she ground out between clenched teeth.

"Don't lie to me, Mia. That's what you said to Lauren."

"I said a lot of things to Lauren, and she said a lot of things back." Returning to the couch, she picked up her glass of wine and took a gulp.

"We'll get to the rest of what you said in a minute." Nick took the glass from her hand and carried it to the kitchen, where he dumped it down the sink.

“Hey!” She bolted to her feet. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Nick countered. “Moving to Anchor Island was your idea. I thought you liked it here.”

Mia pulled the hood of her sweatshirt up over her head and slammed her hands into the pocket. “I do like it here. Just sometimes I miss stuff like movie theaters and concerts. We grew up outside New York City. Don’t you ever miss... stuff?”

Nick shook his head. “No, I don’t. If you aren’t happy here, you should have said something.”

“What does happy have to do with anything? Grandma is here. You’re here. This is where I need to be.”

“Says who?”

He could not be serious. “Are you saying you don’t remember why we moved here?”

“To take care of Nota,” he replied. “But she’s getting around better than ever now that Alex has her arthritis under control. If you go, she’ll still have Lauren and me, plus Olaf.”

Mia scoffed. “Two workaholic chefs, and an old man who nearly cut his thumb off recently. That’s so reassuring.”

Leaning on the counter, he stared at her for several seconds. “What’s really going on, Mia? You aren’t the mean type, but you went too far with Lauren today. She said she deserved it, but that still isn’t like you.”

What exactly was like her? Mia Stamatis was the kind one. The quiet one. The one

who blended into the background and spoke only when spoken to. She never drew attention to herself. She never said what she was really thinking. Or feeling.

According to Lauren, Mia was a martyr using her grandmother to hide from the world. After the three glasses of wine she'd downed before Nick so rudely poured out the fourth, she'd come to a depressing conclusion.

Lauren was right.

"Do you know how many job offers I've had in the last year?" she asked.

His dark brow furrowed. "You do like ten jobs a month around here. I have no idea."

"Not commissions. Jobs."

"I don't know."

She held up four fingers. "Two in New Jersey, one in Virginia, and one in New York City."

Nick straightened. "You've been applying for jobs?"

"No." Mia crossed to the kitchen and filled her empty glass. "They all came from people who visited the island, saw my work, then offered me a job." As she filled the glass, she said, "I turned them all down."

“Why?”

The last drops from the bottle created ripples on the surface of the wine. “I told myself it was because Grandma needs me. Because I have a life here and people who depend on me. Who would teach the classes at Lola’s? Who would do art with the kids at the daycare every Wednesday? Do you know what I realized today?”

“I have an idea,” he mumbled.

“That’s right. Anyone.” She lifted her glass in salute. “Anyone could do those things. And as your girlfriend so succinctly pointed out, Grandma doesn’t need me either. The truth is, I’m a coward hiding on this secluded little island where I don’t have to take any chances, and I don’t have to face the truth that I have no idea who the hell I am.”

This was the moment when Nick would tell her to stop being so dramatic and to grow up.

Instead, he said, “I know who you are.”

Mia was far enough into the wine to play the bratty little sister. “Please, enlighten me.”

Her brother once again removed the glass from her hand, though this time he set it on the counter without dumping it out. After leading her to the sofa, he forced her to sit before settling onto the ottoman in front of her.

“First of all, you aren’t a coward.”

She gave him an arched-brow look that said she didn’t believe him.

“Okay, maybe you are, but you’re also loyal, dependable, and the first to help someone in need.”

Leaning back, she dropped her arms at her sides. “So I’m a Saint Bernard.”

Nick had the audacity to laugh. “That is how you’d describe one, isn’t it?”

“Leave me alone with my wine.”

Mia tried to jump to her feet but he pushed her back down. “Let’s try this again. When you were twelve, you showed me a picture from the Louvre and said you were going to go there someday. Then you told Mom the same thing, and she told you to get your head out of the clouds.”

She remembered that day. “I never talked about going to Paris again.”

“When you were fourteen,” he continued, “you won that art contest at school. Do you remember?”

A vague memory came to mind. “The one for the black-and-white print?”

He nodded. “That’s right. We went out to eat after the award ceremony, and Mom said that if you gave as much effort to your real classes as you did to art, then you might get into a good college.”

That night had ended with Mia crying herself to sleep.

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that you stuck with the art. You got into a good college, and you make a living doing something you love. Something you were told over and over again wasn’t worth pursuing. But you stuck with it. Why?”

Without thinking, she said, “Because this is who I am.”

Looking like a man who’d just won a great victory, Nick sat in silence, a wide grin splitting his scruff-covered cheeks.

“That isn’t what I mean,” she mumbled.

“Yes, it is. Mia, no one is just one thing. Against the odds, you embraced a part of yourself that felt as natural as breathing. Art was part of you. All you have to do now is embrace the other parts. Ignore the voices that tell you that it’s wrong, just like you ignored Mom. You can do that here, in New York, in Virginia, or in Paris for that matter.” Leaning forward, he dropped his hands onto her knees. “Go wherever you want to go.”

Mia pictured the ticket Henri had given her, and what seemed impossible an hour ago suddenly felt like a real option.

“You make it sound so easy.”

Nick gave her a tap on the leg. “I’m not saying that. The world is always going to be littered with assholes, and as much as I’m willing to do it, I can’t beat them all up for you. But I know someone else who probably knows a thing or two about dealing with them, and she’d likely throw a punch on your behalf if needed.”

As Nick rose, Mia followed suit. “What about Grandma?”

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“I’ve told you before,” he said, crossing to the door, “you need to give her more credit. She loves you. She might not totally understand it, but she’d want you to be happy. Give her a chance. I think she’ll surprise you.”

Mia wasn’t convinced, but she wasn’t as adamantly against it either. “I’ll think about it.” That was the second time she’d used that phrase today. Maybe it was time to stop thinking and start acting.

“By the way,” Nick said, “you owe Lauren an apology.”

“Yes, I do. I’ll stop in to see her tomorrow.”

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “You do that.” He lifted her chin with one finger. “There’s nothing wrong with you. You know that, right?”

Without the buzz from the wine, that might have brought a tear to her eye. “Not always, but hearing it helps.”

Nick gently kissed her nose. “You’re perfect just the way you are. Hardheaded and bratty, but still perfect.”

Warm fuzzies mixed with the effects of the wine, and Mia smiled for the first time in hours. “Thanks, big brother.”

“Anytime.”

\* \* \*

“This thing has a hundred pieces,” Henri said, reading the Lego box Conner had viciously unwrapped less than an hour before. “For a four-year-old?”

While Henri sat among the presents beneath the tree, Callie was stuffing shredded holiday paper into a large garbage bag. “You’d be amazed how those things hold his attention. He’ll sit and build them for an hour, with Sam’s help, of course. We’re convinced he’s going to start his own construction business someday.”

She glanced around at all the dinosaur toys beneath the tree. “I won’t be surprised if he puts those building skills into creating his own Jurassic Park.” Creatures with tiny arms and giant heads were strewn about. Blue ones and green ones and brown ones with big teeth. Conner had insisted on taking the giant stuffed one with him for his nap.

“Is it too much?” Callie asked. “We don’t mean to spoil him, but with the twins and what he told us about feeling like we don’t see him anymore, we wanted to make him feel special.”

Henri had opinions on many things, but parenting she left to the experts. “I’d assume there’s nothing wrong with making them feel special so long as you also keep their feet on the ground at the same time. The mutual fund from Eugenia should serve that purpose.”

Blue eyes cut to the stairwell as her cousin tried not to laugh. “Be quiet or she’ll hear you.”

“I’m not knocking it. That’s a practical gift. Just not one a four-year-old is going to get excited about.” Henri gathered all the discarded wrapping paper around her and added it to the bag that Callie held open. “What time is this Pilar’s thing?”

“Three o’clock. Will asked Sid, Beth, and me what would be a good time and we all



said after naps.” Pressing the paper down into the bag, she pulled the drawstrings and tied them in a knot. “You never told me how things went with Mia the other day. Did you give her the ticket?”

“I did.” And Henri had felt like a fool ever since. “I also took your advice.”

Straightening, she said, “Remind me what that was.”

Baby brain was real, even nine months later. “You said I should tell her how I feel.”

“And you did?”

“Like an idiot, yes, I did.”

“So?” Callie dropped into a chair. “What did she say?”

Henri cringed at the memory. “Nothing.”

The excitement on Callie’s face fell away. “What? What do you mean?”

“Her exact words were ‘I’m not sure what to say,’ which is a pretty clear answer.” Henri had spent two days wishing she’d just given her the ticket and been done with it. A friendly offering. Instead, she’d laid her heart on the table and gotten her ass kicked for it.

Ever the optimist, Callie waved the words away. “You took her by surprise, that’s all. And you were at the coffee shop, right? You know how self-conscious she is, especially in public. Give her some time.”

That’s all Henri had given Mia. Time. And a heartfelt declaration that she wanted to be with her. What she’d gotten in return were excuses, resistance, and I’ll think about

its. At some point she had to face the truth. Mia didn't feel the same way. It wasn't the first time Henri had been rejected, and it wasn't likely to be the last.

The embarrassingly stupid part was that the last real heartbreak in Henri's life had happened on this island. And here she was, doing it all over again. Callie and the others in her circle of friends had all come here and found love. Beth, Sid, Will, Roxie, and Lauren. Technically, Sid had already lived here, but she'd been a transplant so it still counted. Each had strolled onto the Anchor Island shores for one reason or another and found their happily ever after.

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Henri had not been so lucky.

“Don’t give up on her,” Callie said when Henri remained silent. “You know better than anyone that a happy ending is possible.”

“That’s in fiction,” she replied. “Real life doesn’t always work that way.”

“Maybe not for everyone, but I still believe it’ll happen. After all, there’s proof of it all around you.”

Henri flicked a bulb hanging on the tree. “This island isn’t magical. You know that, right?”

One slender blond brow arched high. “Maybe not, but there’s always the chance of a Christmas miracle. Have a little faith, cuz. If something is meant to be, it’ll happen.”

Hopping up, Callie carried the bag of discarded paper into the kitchen, leaving Henri to consider this Christmas miracle idea. She’d never been much for religion, but if some higher power wanted to send her a little help, she wasn’t going to turn them down.

\* \* \*

The Stamatis Christmasmorning had not qualified as exciting, or even jovial, in years. Three adults exchanging maybe two presents each that often included gift cards simply did not incite the same kind of frenzy that came with little ones anxious to see what Santa had brought them. Mia didn’t have much experience outside of her own,

but she assumed this was the case no matter what holiday a family celebrated this time of year. Children just made things more fun.

This year, she learned that you don't need children around to get that level of joy.

This was their first Christmas with Lauren, and her brother, Knox came in on leave from the military the night before. Thanks to their tumultuous childhoods, this was their first real family Christmas in many years, if not the first one ever.

All of this added up to a Christmas morning full of laughter, delighted squeals, and genuine gratitude. For each other. For their good fortune. And for the future that offered so much more. There had even been baking, which despite having to be in her restaurant kitchen in a matter of hours, Lauren fully embraced. They made traditional melomakarona and kourambiethes cookies, which resulted in sticky counters and powdered sugar covered aprons.

Nick even whipped up his Christopsomo bread, dragging Knox into the process by declaring him a sous chef for the day and then tossing orders at him that involved chopping nuts and buttering the pan.

By the time Lauren and Nick headed off to Pilar's to start prepping for the midafternoon meal, Mia's cheeks had hurt from smiling, and she noticed a little extra pink in her grandmother's cheeks as well.

"That was fun," she said as they stood at the counter washing the last of the baking pans. Knox had gone back to Lauren and Nick's place to change, though Mia was certain he'd hurried off to get out of KP duty. "It was nice to see Lauren so excited to open gifts."

Grandma rinsed a cookie sheet and passed it over. "We've been missing that sort of wide-eyed wonder for far too long." Pulling a spatula from the soapy water, she

added, “Imagine what the holiday will be like when I have great-grandbabies running around.”

Mia knew that the couple had no plans to start a family anytime soon. Lauren loved being a chef, but she also knew that the hours the job required were not conducive to raising children. Not that chefs didn’t have families, but as she’d explained, her personality was the type that she did things all the way or not at all. Splitting herself between being a chef and being a mom would likely result in failing at one or the other, if not both, and Mia admired her for having that level of personal understanding.

Women received so much constant messaging about doing it all and doing it well that having the guts to say I can’t do it all was brave in itself.

“Don’t start pressuring them about kids.” Mia slid the dried cookie sheet into the cabinet. “They aren’t even married yet.”

Grandma scoffed. “Who said I was talking about them?”

She’d stepped right into that one. “Don’t be looking at me, either.”

“Who else am I going to look at?” She rung out the dishrag and draped it over the faucet. “When I was your age, your father was already in the third grade. You need to get started soon.”

Mia reminded herself that Nota came from a different generation. After counting to ten, she said, “I haven’t decided if I even want to have kids.”

The older woman gasped. “What are you talking about? Of course, you’ll have children.”

If Mia ever found a life partner, there would be one crucial baby-making ingredient missing. She loved children, but did she want one badly enough to endure the extra steps required for her to have one? And what if her partner didn't want to be a parent?

Since her talk with Lauren, and the visit from her brother, Mia had spent hours thinking about her future. Something she hadn't done since moving to Anchor Island. But even before the move, she hadn't really been living. She'd been breathing, sleeping, eating. Moving like a robot from one day to the next, completely out of touch with herself. With her thoughts and dreams. There were moments when she felt ready to jump in the car and go, then the voice of reason would pluck her back to earth, and she'd be grounded once more.

Being grounded wasn't the worst thing in the world, but Mia wanted to fly.

"How is Olaf?" she said, changing the subject. "I'm surprised he wasn't here this morning."

"We aren't done talking about babies," Grandma replied. "And his daughter came in from Raleigh, remember? I'll see them this evening."

Trying to create an opening, Mia said, "Would you call him your... companion?"

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Nota busied herself wiping down the already spotless countertop. “We’re friends.”

Mia wasn’t the only one pretending around here. “You’re more than friends, Grandma. There’s nothing wrong with admitting the truth.” The irony of that statement passing her lips was not lost on Mia. “You like him, and I know he likes you. It’s nice that you have someone like that.”

“You make it sound as if we’re dating.” She reached for her cane and shuffled into the living room. “I’m too old for that.”

“No, you aren’t,” Mia said, leaving the towel on the counter and following behind her. “I think it’s cute how he dotes on you all the time.”

Grandma eased into her favorite recliner. “Olaf doesn’t dote on me.”

The woman was too stubborn for her own good. And for Mia’s. “You like having him around. Admit it.”

“He doesn’t talk too much. I like that.”

Not the highest compliment, but still progress. Time to get to the point.

“What if Olaf lived next door instead of me?”

Reaching for the remote control, she said, “Now you’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m really asking. What if I didn’t live next door anymore?”

The question earned her Grandma's full attention. "Did you find another cottage on the island?"

Mia perched on the edge of the sofa, shaking her head. "I haven't found anything yet, but I'm thinking about moving off of Anchor Island."

Brown eyes widened. "Why?"

"For a change. For a little adventure." Even Mia didn't know where that one came from, but it was the truth. "I'd like to explore new places and see what's out there. For me. For my work. Like you keep saying, I'm not getting any younger." Chest tight, she asked, "What do you think of me moving away?"

Shoulders dropping, Nota seemed to melt into the chair. "If you aren't happy here..."

Pushing off the couch, Mia knelt before her grandmother. "I'm not unhappy. I'm just... considering the possibilities. You're doing great, and you'd still have Nick and Lauren and Olaf and Alex." Clasp ing her soft hands, she said, "You don't need me here, Grandma. I love you and I love being with you, but it might be time for me to see what's out there."

"I would hate to see you go, but if leaving feels right, then that's what you should do." Cupping Mia's cheeks, she added, "I'll expect lots of visits, though."

Tearing up, Mia nodded. "I can do that."



### Chapter Seven

Even with all thecons Henri could list about living on Anchor Island, there were a few pros, and gatherings like these were high on the list. When the four of them, plus the three little ones, arrived at Pilar's, the place was already buzzing. There were familiar faces in every direction, and Henri was struck by how much history she'd accumulated here over the last six years. There was heartbreak for her, but there was also family and friendships.

"More babies," Will said, greeting them not far from the entrance and stealing Roxanne from Callie's arms. "How are you, Mr. Conner?" she asked. "Did you have a good morning?"

"I got a T-Rex," he replied, holding his new plushie high in the air. "Grrrrr..."

Will jumped back in mock horror. "He's so scary."

Conner tucked him close to his chest. "He not scary. That was me."

"Well, you're really good at that then." Bending to his level, she said, "Pilar has been asking about you. I bet she'd like to meet Mr. T-Rex."

The little boy glanced around as if checking for danger. "Where is she?"

Will pointed to a table on their right. "Over there." Looking up to Sam and Callie, she said, "Is it okay if he goes to see her?"

“I’ll go with him,” Sam said, handing the diaper bag off to Henri, who braced herself for the weight.

As the pair walked away, Will said, “I’ve got the high chairs all set up for you.” She led them to a table not far from where Conner was showing Pilar his new toy. “Is this okay?”

“Of course,” Callie said, taking Rachel from Eugenia and sliding her into a high chair. Will did the same with Roxanne as Callie pulled two teething rings from the diaper bag. “How has your holiday been so far?”

“Good. The Jimenez wedding went beautifully this morning. In fact, seeing them tie the knot under that gazebo made me think of your wedding.”

“I remember that day,” Sid said, stepping up next to Callie.

“You should,” Henri replied. “You went into labor before we could finish taking pictures.”

“That was Pilar’s fault, not mine.” Squatting in front of Roxanne’s high chair, she tapped the baby’s pudgy hand. “Hey there, cutie-pie. How are you today?”

Will sent the ladies a watch this look. “Don’t you want another one, Sid?”

The shorter woman bolted upright. “Nope. One is enough.”

“I hear Lucas doesn’t agree,” chirped Callie.

“When he can carry one, he can have another one. This shop is closed.”

Henri didn’t blame her. Sid wasn’t far over five feet and carrying Pilar had been a

struggle. If she recalled correctly, the morning sickness had been all day and lasted most of the pregnancy. Then there'd been the months of back pain, water weight, and the overall adjustment to being a mother. Sid's mom had died when she was young, and she'd spent most of her life surrounded by men. Though she was a great mom as far as Henri had witnessed, Sid had not been a natural at it from the start.

"Speaking of," Sid said, "are we doing announcements before or after the food?"

Since when did a holiday dinner come with announcements?

"Please say before," Callie replied. "I can't wait until after."

"What are you guys talking about?" Henri asked. "What can't you wait for?"

Before anyone could explain, the front door swung open, filling the room with a cold gust of air off the water. All three ladies rushed toward the newcomers, descending on Beth Dempsey like seagulls on a French fry. Henri watched the show, confused at first, until she replayed what had just happened in her mind. Talk of having another baby. The mention of an announcement. Now she got it.

As the Dempseys—including Roxie and Alex—shuffled in, Mia, Nota, and Lauren's brother Knox entered behind them. Henri's heart slammed against her rib cage as her eyes locked on Mia. She wore a red velvet dress beneath a bulky sweater that draped off one shoulder when she removed her coat. Her dark hair was pulled up in a clip on the back of her head, and there was something different about her smile. A freedom she didn't usually display.

When they'd spent time together back in the spring, Mia had been a different person when they were alone. In a crowd, she came across as timid. Like a country mouse trying not to be noticed. But when no one else was around, she relaxed. Many on the island probably had no idea how funny she was. Or how much she could light up a

room by just walking into it.

Henri knew.

“You get the chef’s table,” Will was saying as she led them through the dining room.  
“The meal will be served family style so once it’s all out, Nick and Lauren and the rest of the skeleton crew putting this together will be joining us.”

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“Thank you, Will,” said Nota, taking their hostess’s hand. “You were so sweet to include us.”

The taller woman waved the words away. “Don’t be silly. You’re Lauren’s family, and that makes you mine as well.”

Lauren and Will were cousins, though they hadn’t known each other until the talented chef landed on the island. Henri didn’t know all the details, but she did know that Will grew up with money, and Lauren did not. In fact, Lauren hadn’t even known who her father was until Will had revealed his identity earlier in the year. Sometimes life really was crazier than fiction.

“Hi,” Mia said to Henri once Nota had taken a seat. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you.”

“You look good,” Mia said with a shy smile.

“Not as good as you.” Henri wore her typical jeans, lace-up boots, and black turtleneck under a blue leather jacket. She’d had no idea there would be a fancy dinner when she’d packed for the trip. “You look... happy.”

With a sparkle in her eyes, Mia nodded. “It’s been a good day. I talked to Grandma earlier.”

Henri tensed. “Did you...”

Mia shook her head. “No, but I did tell her—”

“All right, everyone,” Will called from the front of the room. “It’s time to take your seats. The food is coming out in just a minute and we have some announcements first.”

“Hurry,” Callie said, tugging Henri toward her chair. “We need to sit down so this can start.” To Mia, she said, “You look very pretty today. Did you do something different with your hair?”

Mia touched her clip. “I just pulled it up.”

“Let’s get this show on the road,” Sid yelled, earning a poke in the ribs from her sister-in-law.

“Can you not embarrass me?”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Mia gave Henri a hold that thought smile before spinning to take her seat.

What did she tell Nota?

Another tug from Callie dragged Henri to her chair. This announcement thing needed to move along so she could get back to their conversation.

“First off,” Randy Navarro, who stood beside his wife looking like the mountain of a man that he was, said, “thank you all for coming today. We’re so proud of Pilar’s and what a great job Lauren has done to make this place one of the best restaurants in the Outer Banks. We couldn’t think of a better way to celebrate than with the people who have been with us from the beginning.”

“It’s been a great six months so far,” Will added, “and we look forward to more of the same going forward. On that note, our first announcement is that Pilar’s fantastically talented chef, Lauren Riley, will be featured in the February edition of Food & Fare magazine as one of the up-and-coming chefs to watch on the East Coast.”

Cheers went up all around as Lauren lingered near the kitchen, a wide grin on her face. Nick stood behind her, yelling, “That’s right, baby.”

Henri had never written a chef hero or heroine. This pair made her want to try her hand at both.

“We’re also happy that Lauren’s brother Knox was able to join us this year.” Turning to Mia’s table, Randy said, “Thank you for your service.”

The tall man with the buzz cut blushed to the tips of his ears. “Thanks. I’m happy to be here.”

Those gathered applauded for the soldier, and then Will said, “There’s just one more piece of news before we finally get to the food. I’ll let Beth and Joe handle this one.”

Almost as one, the room turned in their chairs to face the Dempseys’ table. Joe rose first, then Beth slowly did the same and wrapped her arms around her husband’s torso. “We know you all want to eat so I’ll keep this brief.” Joe smiled down at his wife in a way that made even Henri want to swoon. “Beth and I are happy to share the news that in six months, there’s going to be another little Dempsey running around, and this time it’s going to be a boy.”

The room erupted in cheers, though the Stamatis family and the kitchen staff might have been the only ones who hadn’t already known. Backs were patted, hugs were exchanged, and the expectant parents beamed with excitement. During dinner, Henri

learned that they'd only told their daughters, Mary Ann and Daphne, that morning as a Christmas surprise. Since they hadn't expected either to keep the baby a secret, making the announcement before they had the chance to blab had seemed like the best plan.

It wasn't until the dessert course that folks started moving around, giving Henri the chance to check back in with Mia. Unfortunately, a latecomer had taken the seat beside her, and with Nota on the other side, Henri couldn't exactly pick up the conversation where they'd left off. Watching Jeremy talk Mia's ear off made Henri want to step in and save her, but she couldn't blame him for his efforts. Mia was beautiful all the time, but she looked exceptionally stunning today.

What had she told Nota? Henri needed an excuse to interrupt their conversation and ask.



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“Are you going to eat that cake?” Conner said, climbing onto the chair beside his aunt.

“Haven’t you had a piece already?” she said, certain Cal didn’t want him having any more sugar.

He held two fingers close together. “Just that much.”

Henri pulled the boy onto her lap. “How about we share then?”

Conner picked up the fork. “I go first.”

With her nephew on her lap, Henri couldn’t turn to keep an eye on Mia, but she could still hear Jeremy prattling away about who knew what. Once dessert was over, she’d slide in between them. Until then, she’d try to keep Conner from sending himself into a sugar coma.

\* \* \*

When Jeremy worked his way into the seat beside Mia, Grandma hadn’t so much as smiled in his direction. It hadn’t taken Mia long to figure out why. Announcing her intention to leave the island had led to the choice of a new man.

Which was how Mia ended up showing Knox the mural she’d painted in the restaurant shortly before it had opened earlier in the year. What Grandma didn’t know was that Knox was well aware of Mia’s leanings, but he played along and was a good sport about the obvious matchmaking.

“When do you have to go back?” she asked, checking on Henri for the fourth time since they’d moved to the far side of the restaurant.

“My leave goes through the twenty-seventh,” Knox replied. “Why don’t you go talk to her?”

“What?” Mia said, straightening. “Go talk to who?”

He gestured toward Henri with a lift of his chin. “You know who. Mingling is allowed at stuff like this, right? So go mingle.”

She wanted to do more than mingle with Henri Bloom, but this was not the place nor the time for that.

“I don’t want to leave you on your own.”

He shook his head. “I can take care of myself. Go on over.”

Offering a grateful smile, she said, “I think I will.”

Unfortunately, Mia didn’t move fast enough as Patty Dempsey cut her off along the way. Joe and Lucas’s mom had been one of Mia’s first customers on the island. She’d also talked her up enough to keep her busy for several months after.

“You look especially pretty today,” Patty said with a smile. “I’ve been meaning to tell you that backdrop you painted for the Santa pictures was beautiful. You capture the spirit of this island in every piece you do.”

Mia had interpreted Anchor Island as a winter wonderland for the Santa pictures backdrop, an idea she’d been playing with for a couple of years.

“Thank you. I had fun doing that one.”

“I sent a picture of it to a friend of mine in Raleigh and she asked if you ever travel for commissions. She’s been looking for someone to create a one-of-a-kind wall for her first grandchild’s nursery. I told her I’d ask, but that I didn’t know of you ever leaving the island for something like that.”

Days ago, she’d never have considered doing such a thing, but today the idea made Mia itch to pack a bag. “I’d love to talk to her about it. Will you give her my email and let her know I’m interested?”

“I can certainly do that,” Patty replied. “She’s going to be so excited.”

“I’m excited, too.”

With a gentle touch on her arm, Patty said, “Merry Christmas, Mia.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too.”

The older woman headed back to her family and Mia looked around for Henri, who was no longer at her table. She found her playing hide and seek with Conner around the hostess stand. Though they’d never talked about kids, Henri was so good with the toddler. Patient and always willing to play whatever game the little boy came up with.

She’d probably argue the thought, but Henri would make a great mom.

Mia took two steps in their direction when Jeremy stepped in front of her. “Can we talk for a minute?” he asked.

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Who knew it could be this difficult to cross a dining room? Not wanting to be rude, she said, “For just a minute, sure.”

A second later they were alone at an empty table away from everyone else. Mia sensed what might be coming and was already formulating as gentle of a rejection as she could. The man really was nice, and it wasn’t his fault that Grandma had picked him as Mia’s potential love interest. Plus, there was the fact that Mia had never outright told him she wasn’t interested. A mistake she’d made in order to keep her secret, but she should have been clear from the beginning.

Before Mia had the chance, Jeremy said, “I realize you’re probably tired of me dancing around the subject of asking you out.”

“I’m not—”

“You don’t have to lie to spare my feelings. The fact is, I’ve been a coward. I should have come right out and asked.”

“No, you—”

“If you’ve set your sights on Knox, I’ll understand, but...”

So the possibility of having a competitor had given him courage? Why couldn’t Grandma have taken one day off from matchmaking?

“I just want you to know that I really like you,” he continued, “and I’d like the chance to take you out.” As if he’d completed some difficult feat, Jeremy leaned back from

the table with a nod. “I hope you’ll still give me a chance.”

At first, Mia couldn’t think of what to say. No, obviously, but she couldn’t flat-out reject him. Not when he looked as if he might crawl out the door if she turned him down.

“Jeremy, I appreciate the offer, I really do, but I’m afraid—”

“I knew it,” he cut in. “I’m too late.”

“It isn’t that.”

He shook his head. “It’s my own fault.”

Why she felt the need to soothe his feelings Mia didn’t know. She just hated for anyone to feel bad. “Listen, please. You aren’t too late.”

His face perked up. “You mean there’s still a chance?”

“I’m not saying that. It’s just...” It was just what? She couldn’t say she didn’t like him. He was a nice guy. Any number of other women would jump at this chance. She simply wasn’t one of them. But how did she tell him that? Part of her said she wasn’t obligated to give him a reason at all, and yet...

“Be straight with me, Mia.”

She almost burst out laughing at that statement.

“We wouldn’t make a good match, that’s all.”

“How do you know that when we haven’t even been on a date?”

“Trust me,” she said. “I know.”

Jeremy crossed his arms and scowled. “I should at least get the chance to change your mind.”

Now she was getting annoyed. “There are other single women on this island, you know. It isn’t as if I’m your only option.”

Like a child told to pick another toy, he said, “I’m asking you because I like you. I don’t ask just any woman on a date because she’s single and available.”

Funny how those two always went hand in hand. Being single did not automatically make a person available.

“I’m flattered, Jeremy. I really am. But I can’t go out with you.”

He leaned forward, hands clasped on the table. “Is it my approach?”

“No, that’s—”

“I clearly did something wrong.”

“You didn’t—”

“Maybe if I—”

Mia ran out of patience. “Jeremy, for heaven’s sake, I’m gay.”

The room went deadly silent and the reality of what she’d just done hit Mia like a train at full speed. Everyone looked at her with varying expressions of surprise, but only one set of eyes mattered. Grandma slowly rose to her feet, the scrape of her chair across the floor echoing in the silence.

“What did you say?”

Leaping to her feet, Mia tried to respond but words failed her.

“Mia, I asked you a question,” she repeated. “What did you just say?”

“Please, Grandma, I didn’t—”

“You didn’t what?” she snapped. Glancing around, she studied every face in the room before looking at Mia once more. “They all know. All of these people know this while you’ve been lying to me all this time.” Before Mia could answer, Grandma turned to Nick. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It wasn’t my place. Not a, let Mia—”

“Let her what? Humiliate me even more?” Shuffling toward the door at an impressive

rate, she said, “Take me home, Nickolai. Take me home right now.”

As Mia dropped into her chair and pressed her face into her hands, she heard Nick say, “You need to listen to her.”

The thud of a cane pounding on the floor was like a series of punches to Mia’s chest.

“Drive me home or I’ll walk on my own. Either way, I’m leaving. I’ve been humiliated enough.”

“You’ve been humiliated?” Mia heard Henri say. “What do you think you’re doing to Mia right now?”

Bolting up, Mia said, “Henri, don’t.”

Ice-blue eyes met hers, silently demanding that Mia stand up for herself. But what was she supposed to say? Grandma was right. Nearly every person in this restaurant knew the truth, while she’d lied to the most important person in her life. Mia would be humiliated too. This was her fault. This was the price of her cowardice.

“Grandma, I’m sorry,” was all she could think to say. “I never meant to hurt you.”

The older woman paused for the length of a breath before continuing her march to the door. Without another word, she left the building, letting the door slam behind her. Nick turned to Mia, and she nodded toward the exit.

“Go,” she said. “I’ll be okay.”

Lauren handed Nick both his and Nota’s coats, and then she sent Mia a sympathetic look. Mia crossed to retrieve her own coat from the back of her chair and walked over to Will and Randy as tension filled the silence like a suffocating fog.



“I’m really sorry,” she said and turned toward the door.

“Are you going to be okay?” Will asked.

Mia kept walking, the shame and guilt filling her lungs making it impossible to respond. She stepped outside as Nick’s truck pulled out of the parking lot. The icy wind off the harbor cut through her sweater and she slipped on her coat. She was moving on autopilot, not sure where she was going. Mia only knew she had to get away. From the restaurant. From the people. From the mess she’d made.

As she walked, head down and body numb, tears rolled down her cheeks and a new truth settled over her. No matter what she did now, Mia’s life would never be the same again.

### Chapter Eight

Henri would be damned if she'd sit back and let Mia handle this alone.

As the gathering sat in silence, still processing what had happened, Henri pushed back her chair and headed for the exit.

"Where's she goin'?" she heard Conner say, but she was out the door before anyone had a chance to answer him.

Stopping outside the restaurant entrance, she checked to see which way Mia had gone. There was no one over toward the water, so she stepped out to the end of the parking lot and spotted Mia about to cross over to the narrow lane that led back to her house.

"Mia, wait," she called, hustling to catch up. The other woman turned, but as Henri approached, she didn't look happy to see her. "It's cold out here. Let me drive you home." With all the car seats plus Eugenia, there hadn't been enough room for the Edwards clan to all ride in one vehicle, so she'd driven herself.

"Henri, go back inside."

"I'm not letting you walk home."

Mia pulled the collar of her coat tighter. "I've ruined the holiday enough. Go back and be with your family."

“You didn’t ruin anything.”

She laughed, a soulless, empty sound. “You clearly weren’t paying attention.”

“Come on. If anyone owes people an apology, it’s your grandmother. And she should start with you.”

Brown eyes snapped with anger as Mia turned on her. “None of that was Grandma’s fault. She’s right. I’ve been lying to her, the most important woman in my life, while almost everyone else in that room knew the truth. She has every right to be upset.”

“You had a good reason for not being honest with her,” Henri pointed out.

“Now you support my decision not to tell her? Really?”

Reminding herself that Mia was hurt, she ignored the question. “If you don’t want to go home, I’ll take you someplace else. Just come back and get in the car.”

“I don’t need rescuing, Henri. Go back to the dinner.”

“Screw the dinner. You shouldn’t be alone right now.”

The wind whipped around them, tugging Mia’s hair from her clip and making it difficult for Henri to feel her cheeks. After a long silence, when Henri thought for sure Mia would give in, the other woman stared at the ground and said, “Alone is exactly what I need to be right now. At least when I’m alone I can’t hurt anyone.”

Gripping her upper arms, Henri gave Mia a gentle shake. “You are not the villain here. So that wasn’t the greatest way for Nota to find out. Okay, fine. She still shouldn’t have made that about herself. Instead of playing the victim, she should have asked why she was the only one who didn’t know. Why you didn’t feel comfortable

enough to tell her the truth.”

Mia continued to blame herself. “There’s no excuse for putting her in that situation. In the last couple of months, I told all those other people. I told Beth and Sid and Will and Roxie.” She ticked each person off on her fingers. “Alex has known almost since I moved here. Hell, even Lauren’s brother knows. Yet, I kept my own grandmother in the dark. How could I possibly blame her for reacting that way?”

Changing tactics, Henri said, “Okay, then. Let’s say she has a right to be pissed. That doesn’t mean you should have to walk home in the cold. Let me take you.”

“I can’t do that.”

Jaw set, she spun and marched off down the lane, and Henri hustled after her. “What do you mean, you can’t do that?”

“Not now.”

“Not now, what?” Henri asked, an unknown panic rising in her chest.

“Everything is different now. We can’t see each other.”

Mia was walking fast enough to force Henri into a jog. “Will you slow down? What the hell are you talking about?”

“I definitely can’t move to Charleston now.”

She was moving to Charleston?

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“Hold up. You were going to move?”

“That’s what I talked to Grandma about today. I mean, I didn’t mention Charleston specifically, and I hadn’t even decided that was for sure where I was going, but leaving is out of the question now.”

Henri felt as if she’d been handed her dream and had it snatched away at the same time. “Why not now? If anything, now seems like the perfect time to go.”

Mia stopped so abruptly, Henri walked past her and had to come back. “For one,” she said, “if I leave now, everyone will think that I’m running away because they know the truth.”

“No, they won’t.”

“And for two,” she continued as if Henri hadn’t spoken, “I can’t leave Grandma like this. I can’t hurt her and then walk away.”

“Yes, she’s hurt right now, but you can talk to her. You can make her see why you didn’t tell her.” Taking her hand, she added, “Don’t give up your entire future over this. Mia, you deserve to have a life.”

“You mean a life with you,” she said, jerking her hand away.

“No. I mean, yeah, that would be great. That’s what I want more than anything. But this is about what you want. If that isn’t Charleston, then I’ll accept that, Mia. Just don’t stay here out of some twisted family obligation.”

Color high in her cheeks, Mia looked off in the distance. “Not everyone is like you, Henri.”

Her tone made clear the statement wasn’t a compliment. “What does that mean?”

“You do whatever you want. You go wherever you want. Life is simple for you. No ties. No anchors. Not everyone has that kind of freedom to do what they want.”

Jaw tight, Henri thought of the endless obligations that dictated her life. The deadlines. The pressure to deliver the next good book. To be original and creative, while being a businesswoman and a marketing expert and everything from her own shipping clerk to an accountant and contract negotiator.

Simple? Nothing in Henri’s life was simple.

“You aren’t the only one who keeps certain parts of your life hidden. We’re all out here struggling, Mia. Some of us may make it look easier, but that doesn’t mean we aren’t treading water like everyone else.” Stepping back, she added, “If you want to talk, I’ll be around for another week. If not, that’s your choice.”

Henri returned to the restaurant, walking slowly at first in hopes that Mia would stop her. Instead, she heard footsteps going in the opposite direction. Though her heart said to turn around and follow, the next move had to be Mia’s. If that move was to give up on them ever having a future, then Henri would survive.

She’d done it before and she’d do it again. Only this time was going to leave a much bigger mark.

\* \* \*

Mia burned through her anger in less than half a mile. First, she blamed Jeremy and

then Grandma before remembering that she had no one to blame but herself. As the adrenaline ebbed, she played back the conversation with Henri and added one more person to the list of those she'd hurt.

If anyone knew what Mia was going through, it was Henri. She just made it look so easy. Be yourself. Live your truth. Henri embodied those philosophies, yet getting there couldn't have been easy. A reality Mia failed to consider. Shoulders tight against the cold, she struggled not to drown in the guilt rising up like the tide.

Legs tired and mind weary, Mia took a seat on a bench along the lane. How was she going to fix this? When was she going to grow up and stop being afraid of everything? Afraid of disappointing people. Of taking a risk. Of not being enough.

When it came to creating art, she could look at a canvas or a piece of clay and trust that whatever she turned them into would be beautiful. Her work would say something and invoke an emotional reaction. If only she had that level of confidence in herself. In who she was.

Another gust of cold air sliced through her thin coat, and Mia's eyes watered as she started to sniffle. Walking had not been her best idea, but then she couldn't remember the last time any of her ideas had been good ones. Rising to her feet, she steeled herself against the cold, but before she could start her trek again, a familiar vehicle appeared in the distance.

As he pulled up beside her, the window lowered and Jeremy said, "The least I can do is give you a ride."

Mia's first instinct was to refuse, but she really was cold, and the issue of him asking her out was clearly off the table. With a nod, she hurried around the BMW and climbed in.

“Thank you.”

“No problem,” he replied, setting the car into motion. “I’m really sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for.” Mia kept her eyes on the scene ahead. “I should have been honest with you from the beginning.”

“That would have helped, but you never encouraged me either. I realize that now.”

Too bad he couldn’t have realized that an hour ago. “I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.”



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“Hey,” he said, and Mia turned his way. “That scene back there was my fault. I’m worried more about your feelings than about mine right now.”

She thought they’d already established the issue. “If I hadn’t been trying to keep my secret, none of that would have happened.”

“Mia, your sexuality is your own business. You aren’t obligated to tell me or anyone else.”

“Grandma wouldn’t agree with you.”

He flipped on the blinker to make a right at the stop sign. “Maybe she’s one person you could have told, but that doesn’t justify her determination to find you a date. She told me you were interested, but too shy to let me know yourself. It’s safe to assume that was a stretch on her part.”

“She told you that?”

Jeremy nodded. “She did. She said you just needed a little nudge, and that’s why I kept hinting at us getting together but not outright asking you on a date. I figured at some point you’d give me a sign. What I missed was that you were giving me signs all along, and I failed to read them.”

This explained so much.

“I can’t believe she lied like that.”

“She didn’t lie to hurt you, just like you weren’t trying to hurt her either. Now that everything is out in the open, this could be a good thing. This is the time of year for new beginnings, right?”

Yes. Yes, it was.

As the car came to a stop before her cottage, Mia unhooked her seat belt. “I’m sorry, Jeremy.”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

“Yes, I do. You’re a really good guy, and I hope you find someone who deserves you.”

Dark eyes sparkled as he flashed a crooked grin. “The dating pool isn’t all that deep on this island, and now the prettiest girl is no longer an option. My hopes aren’t high.”

Leaning over the console, Mia kissed his cheek. “Never give up hope. Merry Christmas, Jeremy.”

“Merry Christmas, Mia.”

Ready for a long overdue conversation, she climbed out of the car and hurried onto her porch, turning to give Jeremy a wave as he drove off. Olaf’s truck sat in front of Grandma’s house, and she had no intention of having this conversation with an audience. She would have to wait, but this was happening tonight no matter what.

\* \* \*

“You didn’t come back to the dinner,” Callie said as she crept into Henri’s dark room.

She'd been sitting in front of the window watching the waves until it had grown too dark to see them. The never-ending sound of water crashing on the sand echoed across the beach, and Henri felt like those waves were a metaphor for her life.

She rolled onto this island and back off again, getting nothing but sand in her shoes and another hole in her heart.

"I wasn't feeling very festive," she replied.

Callie sat down on the bed. "Did you catch her?"

Henri nodded but stayed silent.

"Was she okay?"

"She was angry and embarrassed and not interested in my help whatsoever."

A gentle hand squeezed Henri's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I thought you were the one person she'd turn to."

"Nope." Still bothered by Mia's words, she said, "Do you think I'm selfish?"

"What? Where would you get that idea?"

"I come and go as I please. When deciding what I want to do, I don't consider anyone but myself."

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Her cousin crossed to the door and flipped on the light. “Henrietta Bloom, being independent doesn’t make you selfish. You’re one of the most generous people I know. Who put this idea in your head?”

Not wanting to throw Mia under the bus, she said, “I’ve just been thinking.”

“Well, stop thinking like that. You aren’t selfish. You give everything for your readers. You’ve let Aunt Olivia drag you into countless charity events when we both know you hate those things. And you spent months here earlier this year when I was on bed rest with the twins, and even after, to help once they were born.” Returning to the bed, she flopped down and tugged Henri’s chair until they were face-to-face. “You are not selfish. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you.” And she did. But regardless of her cousin’s reassurance, what Mia thought still mattered.

Henri had pushed her to come out so that they could be together. Then she’d walked away when Mia refused. After months of silence, she returned and once again gave her a hard time, then proceeded to take an emotional dump in Mia’s lap when she knew nothing had changed.

Since falling for Mia, Henri had not only been selfish, but self-centered and self-righteous. No wonder the woman wanted nothing to do with her. Henri and relationships simply didn’t mix. Ironical considering her line of work.

“Will you be upset if I leave early?” Henri asked.

Callie's shoulders fell. "I figured you might after today. We'll miss you, but I understand."

"I need to go."

"I know." Leaning over the chair, she kissed Henri's forehead. "We're taking the kids to see Mama next month. Maybe I can help you do a little house hunting while I'm there."

She remembered the plan about the income property. "That would be nice, but I have a confession to make."

"Did you change your mind about getting a place?"

"No, but that bit about the contemporary loft was a bluff. The truth is, sales are down so I asked Sam to hook me up with someone who could find me an income property. An option where I could live in one part and rent out the other."

Callie pulled a pillow into her lap. "Then I have a confession, too."

Henri should have known. "He told you, didn't he?"

"He did."

"I'm not surprised. Anyway, he gave me a name and number, and I've already been in touch with the woman. I was going to wait until January, but now that I'm going back early, I'll see if I can take a look next week at the three she sent me."

There was one in particular she had her eye on. A large older home that offered the perfect office space and a high-end apartment on the top floor. The real attraction had been the outbuilding. The second she saw the picture, Henri knew it would make the

perfect art studio.

A ridiculous idea that she needed to let go of.

“Send me lots of pictures,” Callie said. “Or better yet, call me and I’ll go through them with you via video. It’ll be like I’m right there.”

“I can do that.”

Hugging the pillow, she said, “Are you going to be okay?”

It wasn’t as if Henri had a choice. “Aren’t I always?”

“You’d like people to think so, but I know the real you, remember?” She set the pillow back in its place and rose to her feet. “You’re a ball of mush under that hard exterior.”

Henri laughed. “Keep that to yourself. I have a rep to protect.”

“I’ll keep your secret. Part of the reason I came up here is because Conner keeps asking about you. I don’t suppose you’d come down and help him build his new block set?”

With a sigh, she rolled to her feet. “That sounds like a perfect way to spend the evening.”

### Chapter Nine

Mia waited until Olaf's truck pulled away before walking over to Grandma's. She had no idea what to expect. Would she be willing to listen, or would she refuse to talk at all? They'd never had a disagreement like this before. Without knocking, Mia opened the door and peeked inside. The rocker recliner was empty, which meant Grandma was most likely sitting at the kitchen table playing solitaire.

As she closed the door and crossed the living room, the snap of cards said her guess was right.

"Hi," Mia said, stepping into the bright kitchen.

Grandma didn't look up or acknowledge the greeting.

"Are you winning?"

Without a word, the older woman ended the game, gathered the cards, then set them aside. "It's late, Mia."

The clock said otherwise. "It isn't even seven o'clock."

"It's been a long day."

Yes, it had, but Mia had been putting this conversation off for far too long already. "Grandma, we need to talk." She didn't respond, but she didn't leave the room either so Mia plowed ahead. "I'm sorry that you had to find out that way, and I'm sorry that

I didn't tell you the truth about me sooner."

Eyes on the cards, she said, "Why didn't you?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't approve."

She finally looked up. "I would never disapprove of you."

"Grandma, you've made your feelings about homosexuality very clear."

"What does that have to do with this?"

Mia crossed the room and leaned her hands on the table. "That has everything to do with this. You heard what I said today. I'm gay, Grandma. I like women. You don't agree with that kind of lifestyle."

"I don't care about a lifestyle. I care about you. How could you keep something like this from me?"

"I thought you'd be disappointed. That you'd see me differently. Defective somehow." As the words crossed her lips, Mia was forced to admit her real fear. "I was afraid you wouldn't want me in your life anymore."

"Oh, Mia." Grandma rose from her chair and rounded the table to cup her granddaughter's face in her hands. "I would never do that. I love you, no matter what you are or who you love. I can't pretend I understand it, but all I've ever wanted is for you to be happy."

"Is that why you lied to Jeremy?"

She straightened and plopped her hands on her hips. "I didn't lie."



“You said I liked him but that I was too shy to say so.”

“I thought that was true,” she defended. “You never dated anyone so I figured you needed some help.”

That didn’t answer the question. “It’s obvious now why I didn’t date, but what gave you the impression I liked Jeremy?”

“You always talk to him.”

“I talk to him because he follows me around, and he follows me around because of what you told him.” This was getting them nowhere. “Forget about Jeremy. I came here tonight to say I’m sorry and to tell you the whole truth.”

Hand on her chest, she said, “There’s more?”

Mia rose and escorted Nota back to her seat. “There is. This morning I said I want to move off the island to see what’s out there.” She returned to her own seat. “That isn’t the only reason. There is someone I like. Someone I want to be with.”

“A woman?”

“Yes.” Though in that moment Mia had no idea if Henri would forgive her for being a jerk earlier, but her own feelings hadn’t changed. “It’s Henri.”

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Grandma looked confused. “Henry who?”

“Henri Bloom. Callie’s cousin.”

Brown eyes went wide. “She’s gay, too?”

It never occurred to Mia that this would come as a surprise. “Yes, she is. I thought you knew that.”

“How would I know that?”

Good question. Though Henri was open about her sexuality, it wasn’t as if it was tattooed on her forehead or came up in everyday conversation. “I guess maybe you wouldn’t.”

With a look of concern, she asked, “Does Henri know?”

“That she’s gay?”

“No, that you like her.”

Mia hadn’t shared her feelings the same way Henri had, but surely she knew. Didn’t she?

“I think so.”

“Have you told her?”

“Not in so many words...”

Asking the reasonable next question, Grandma said, “Then how could she know?”

Even if Henri believed there’d been something between them, Mia had told her they couldn’t see each other now. What a stupid thing to say. “I need to tell her.”

“Of course, you do.”

Mia rose from her chair, then hesitated. “Maybe I should wait until tomorrow.”

Hands flat on the table, she said, “Mia, my darling, haven’t you waited long enough?”

Rushing around the table, she planted a loud kiss on her grandmother’s cheek. “I love you so much.”

“And I love you. Now go!”

\* \* \*

The text message came in as Henri was cleaning up the blocks scattered across the floor. It turned out that Conner didn’t only like putting things together, but he also liked breaking them apart. Her heart had nearly broken when they finally put the last piece in the dinosaur’s head only for the tiny tyrant to smash it to smithereens.

“What’s that?” Callie asked as she fetched her son for his bath.

“A message from Mia.” Henri read the text for the third time. “She’s asking me to meet her at Lola’s.”

Lola’s Island Arts & Crafts was an Anchor staple full of artisan pieces created by

artists up and down the Outer Banks.

“The store wouldn’t be open now,” Callie pointed out.

“I know, but that’s where she wants me to go.”

Bracing Conner on her hip, she said, “Wait. I think Mia has a workshop over there. I bet she has a key.” Callie checked the phone over Henri’s shoulder. “Are you going to go?”

Was she? Though she’d told Mia she’d be around to talk, Henri hadn’t actually expected to hear from her. “I’m not sure.”

“I am. Get your butt in the car.”

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Henri had given this woman enough chances to break her heart. “What if she wants to tell me to stay out of her life?”

“She wouldn’t have you drive halfway across the island for that,” Callie said. “Go see what she wants. You’re leaving tomorrow anyway, right? If nothing else, take this chance to tell her goodbye.”

Seven minutes later, Henri was pulling up to the dark storefront, as requested. A figure stepped around the side of the building, hands in her pockets as she stepped into the moonlight. Taking a deep breath, Henri stepped out of the car and braced for what was to come. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so vulnerable and fully expected this to be a gently delivered farewell.

“Thanks for coming,” Mia said as Henri approached. “I know it’s late.”

Henri wanted to get this over with. “Why am I here?”

Mia held out her open hand. “You gave me a present. Now I want to give one to you.”

This was a change from earlier in the day. “Did you talk to Nota?”

“I promise, I’ll tell you everything.” Hand still open, she said, “Just come inside.”

Surrendering—for now—she took the offering and let Mia lead her around the side of the building. “Is this where you kill me and turn me into fish food?”

“You have a vivid imagination,” she said, which didn’t really answer the question.

“Writer’s curse.”

They reached a door on the side of the building that Henri had never noticed before.

“What is this?”

“My workshop. Lola knew I needed a place to work on projects I couldn’t do at home, and she offered me a room here.”

Mia used the light on her phone to see to unlock the door, and once inside, she flipped a switch off to the right. The light was nearly blinding after being outside in the dark.

“Sorry, I should have warned you. I work at night a lot so I had extra fixtures added.”

“Did you steal them from an airport runway?” Henri asked, holding her free hand up to block the glare.

She tossed the keys on a long wooden table. “You’ll get used to it.” With a tug, she said, “Your present is over here.”

The room wasn’t big, but the soaring ceiling made it feel larger than it was. Paint cans, easels, and stained rags covered the table with the keys and another against the left wall. Mia dragged her to the far corner, to an impressive-sized piece hidden beneath a gray cloth.

“I finished this last month, but I wasn’t sure what to do with it,” she said, running a hand along the covering.

“Then you didn’t make it specifically for me?”

Mia met her gaze. “You were the inspiration, but I didn’t know if I’d see you again. Or if you’d want anything from me when you did come back.”

“I’ll always want something from you,” Henri admitted, and she wasn’t talking about a Christmas gift.

The other woman blushed and turned away. “That’s good to know.” Gripping the material, she said, “Here we go.”

The gray cloth was whipped away to reveal a navy-blue statue that took Henri’s breath away. More than a foot tall, the sculpture featured two female figures entwined, heads thrown back in ecstasy, their eyes closed. The movement of the piece made it appear as if their long hair was blowing in the wind, and Henri wouldn’t have been surprised to see the figure come alive and move.

“Mia, it’s gorgeous.”

“Do you think so?” she asked, self-doubt clear in her tone. “I thought maybe I should have gone with a different color.”

“No,” Henri assured her. “This blue is perfect.” She leaned closer, taking in the tiny details. A dimple in one woman’s cheek. The curve of a hip. “Can I turn it?”

“Go ahead.”

With careful movements, she examined the piece from every angle. Then she saw it. “Is that...”

“The quill tattoo on your right shoulder,” Mia answered. “Yeah.”

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Tears sprang to Henri's eyes. "Mia, I don't know what to say."

In a quiet tone, she said, "Now I know how you felt at the coffee shop."

The memory flashed through her mind and Henri realized that Mia might not be able to tell her how she felt, but she was showing her.

Fighting the urge to pull the woman into her arms, she said, "How did things go with Nota?"

"Better than I expected."

Unwilling to let her guard down without all the facts, Henri shoved her hands into her pockets. "What all did you tell her?"

Mia closed the distance between them, stopping close enough for Henri to feel her breath on her cheek. "That I like women, and that there's one in particular that I want to be with."

The room suddenly got hotter. "Who is that?"

"Who do you think?"

"I can't think with you standing so close."

Sliding her arms around Henri's torso, Mia said, "I'm sorry it's taken me so long to get here. And I'm sorry I didn't tell you how I feel that day at the coffee shop."



Throat tight, she said, “How do you feel?”

“Like if you don’t kiss me soon I might combust.”

Henri slid a hand along her delicate neck and rubbed her thumb across Mia’s perfect lips. “That tells me what you want, but how do you feel, Mia? About me.”

Eyes nearly black with desire, she whispered, “I love you, Henri.”

Relief, joy, and raw lust nearly took her to her knees. “I love you, too.”

The moment their lips met, Henri could only describe the feeling as coming home. Wherever this woman was would be her home. For now and forever.

\* \* \*

“I’m telling you,” Nick said, “you can’t get one more thing in this car.”

“Watch me,” Henri said.

Mia watched the love of her life prove her brother wrong, and the bag of art supplies slid neatly between a box of oil paints and her new rainbow suitcase. Nick did not look happy, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

A month had passed since Christmas night, and the day had finally come for Mia to make the permanent move to Charleston. She’d spent the last four weeks finding replacements for all the roles she fulfilled around the island, while Henri had handled finding them a place to live. Thankfully, Belinda Knight, one of Sam’s former business associates, had the perfect property.

A small historic home loaded with charm that included a small but adequate third

floor apartment. Henri had explained her reasoning for going with an option that offered residual income, and since Mia had spent years as a starving artist, she'd wholeheartedly agreed. The first two floors were more than enough, including an office for Henri with the perfect day-dreaming bay window and a brightly lit outbuilding that would make an excellent art studio.

"Don't forget the sandwiches," Grandma called from her porch. She'd filled the small cooler at her feet with enough food for a cross-country trip, which would be more than enough for their nine-hour drive.

"That is definitely not going to fit," Nick mumbled.

"There's room on the floor behind the passenger seat," Mia assured him.

Instead of driving, Henri had flown in four days before to help with the final packing so that Mia didn't have to make the trip alone. She'd taken the time to visit with Nota, who'd already begun suggesting that there were lots of ways to have a baby these days.

The woman was relentless in her quest for great-grandbabies.

"Are you ready?" Henri said as Nick wedged the cooler into the car. Mia glanced back at her tiny cottage, then over to her grandmother. "There's still time to change your mind."

She wouldn't be changing her mind. "I'm ready."

“You’re sure?”

“I’m starting to think you don’t want me to come.”

Henri dropped a heated kiss on her lips before pulling away and whispering, “I’ve never wanted anything more.”

Walking past them, Nick mumbled, “Get a room,” which earned him a playful smack from his sister.

To Henri, she said, “I still can’t believe I get to kiss you whenever I want.”

“Believe it, because I’m going to be kissing you every chance I get.”

Mia was counting on that. Stepping back, she turned and rushed over to Nota. “I’m going to miss you.”

The older woman leaned on her cane and said, “I’m going to miss you, too, but I’m glad that you’re finally finding the happiness you’ve always deserved.”

“Nick promised to bring you for a visit in the spring. And I’ll be back for the wedding, if not before. Are you sure you’re going to be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. Go on, now. You have a long drive ahead of you.”

Heart aching, Mia engulfed her grandmother in a goodbye hug. “If you need me, I’m only a phone call away.” Pulling back, she caught a tear as it rolled down the older

woman's cheek. "I love you, Grandma."

"I love you, too, my darling."

As Mia pulled away, Henri stepped up and gave Nota a hug, whispering something in the woman's ear that Mia couldn't hear. Grandma nodded as the tears continued to fall, and said, "You take good care of my girl."

"I will," Henri replied.

Moments later, they were buckled up and Mia put the car in gear. With one last wave, she pulled onto the narrow lane, and Henri squeezed her hand. "You okay?"

Dabbing her damp cheeks on her sleeve, she nodded. "So long as I have you, I am."

Henri kissed the back of her hand. "You have me. You always had me."

Happier than she ever thought possible, Mia dried the last of her tears and drove across the island that had brought this woman into her life. It might not have been her forever home, but she would never forget her time here. The natives often talked about the magic of their little island. Now, Mia understood what they meant.

\* \* \*