



# Hidden Harbor

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**Category:** Romance, Adult

**Description:** Secrets stay buried if you keep your defenses up.

But when my past comes knocking, my best friend's broody brother won't let me handle it alone...

This was supposed to be my fresh start – new name, new business, new me. In my yoga studio, I can breathe, smile, and pretend I'm nothing but sunshine and serenity. Keep it light, keep my distance, and maybe I can believe I've left my past behind.

Until it comes looking for me.

When my estranged family resurfaces, threatening to drag me back into the life I barely escaped, I know I should handle it alone. It's what I've always done. But that's impossible with my best friend's grumpy older brother everywhere I turn. As a Search and Rescue leader, he's elevated protectiveness to an art form.

Drew Fenwick is gruff, broody, and so serious it hurts – everything I'm not. I should keep my walls up, ignore the way my pulse jumps when he's near.

But the more time we spend together, the more his steady presence makes me crave the one thing I never dared hope for – someone to claim as mine.

Hidden Harbor is book 1 in the Evergreen Rescue Series but can be read as a stand-alone.

**Total Pages (Source):** 77

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1 – Anya

Wind blew across the trail, whipping the grass and obscuring my vision of the winding dirt track beneath my feet. My left foot slipped on a patch of grass, shooting out from under me. A flash of panic tightened my chest as I wobbled dangerously close to the edge. The Salish Sea boiled beneath us, entirely too close. Wind frothed the waves into whitecaps, tossing a lone boat over the swells in the distance.

My friend Lucy grabbed me from behind, holding on to me by the hood of my sweatshirt. “You okay, Anya? I promise, I only dream of murdering you when you pick me up for these morning hikes. I’d never go through with it, no matter how often I fantasize about giving you a push when you pack herbal tea instead of coffee.” She shuddered. “Decaf.”

I laughed, the sound low and timid, as if the karmic imbalance from laughing at Mother Nature would make me slip again. My friend’s dark sense of humor was something I’d learned to brush off in my year on the island. In truth, she’d be the first to dangle from her ankles and pull me back over the cliff edge if I stumbled.

The dark blue water churned below, a silent testament to Mother Nature’s wrath. I shuddered. The islands were beautiful, but that didn’t make them safe.

Rae drew to a stop at the front of our group and turned to make a face at Lucy. “Luce, your jokes are only funny when you haven’t had to help carry a floater up from the cove.”

“Sorry, Rae. Let’s all just keep our eyes on the trail.”

“How much farther?” Violet asked, catching up.

The fourth member of our hiking group looked winded, her brown hair escaping its braid in wisps that whipped around her rosy cheeks. She adjusted her glasses, peering ahead.

“A half mile,” Rae said.

She was the most outdoorsy of our bunch, a member of the local search and rescue squad, and low maintenance enough to live on her sailboat in the harbor. She was the only one who’d truly dressed appropriately for the crisp spring morning on San Juan Island off the coast of Washington state.

Wind sliced through my clothing, my legs numb and tingling. My yoga pants and hoodie were no match for the cutting winds on the bluff.

“And then twenty minutes back to civilization and real coffee,” Lucy sounded almost worshipful. I tried not to take her disdain for my herbal teas personally.

Violet pushed her glasses up her nose, staring out to sea. In the distance, a container ship chugged across the waves.

Our hiking trail wrapped along the coastal bluffs toward the lighthouse at the south end of the island. It was steep in some places, but in early spring, not so wet that it was dangerous.

The motion of the water down below was disorienting, almost dizzying. I focused on the waves. Maybe if I was stationary for a minute, the seasick sensation would ease. Whitecaps lapped against the shore in the cove. The tide had gone out far enough to leave a sliver of beach. Something navy blue floated against the rocks.

I paused, squinting. It was difficult to make out. My stomach tossed against my ribcage as the debris settled into a recognizable shape.

I extended a shaking finger. “I think there’s someone floating in the cove.”

“Where?” Rae’s sharp question only made me tremble harder.

As much as I wanted to blame my imagination, it wasn’t my first dead body. “There.”

“I think I see it,” Lucy said grimly, like I’d offered her more chamomile tea.

“Me too. But maybe it’s just a tarp blown off a boat?”

The lump looked too human to write off as floating trash.

“Vi, call your brother,” Rae said. “I’ll call the sheriff. He’ll probably want the rest of the SAR team to meet us near the trailhead. We’ll need to send a crew down.”

Violet’s conversation with her brother was short. Impressively so. Most older brothers would have questions if their baby sister called claiming to have seen a dead body. It was either a testament to their sibling bond or a sign of Drew Fenwick’s abruptness that he didn’t ask any questions other than the obvious: where?

Rae’s conversation with the sheriff was slightly longer, and I let it flow over me, envisioning myself as a shell tossed against the beach by the surf. I shuddered, the image hitting too close to home, the person in the frigid waters below haunting me. No one expected a survivor.

We hiked back to the trailhead in silence. There was none of the easy chatter I’d come to treasure on our weekly treks. By the time we reached the parking lot, four familiar vehicles, including the sheriff’s SUV, were assembled.

The sheriff, identifiable from his uniform, kept speaking to the men around him as we joined the group. He nodded to Rae, acknowledging us with one economical gesture. The sheriff was on the short side, with a full silver mustache and a stern expression. He always made me think of Santa's long-lost cousin, focused more on naughty-list enforcement than gifting.

Drew Fenwick stood at his right shoulder, easily towering over the older man. Dark and stormy. Violet's brother could be his own cocktail. Tall, strong, and just a little bit spicy. Simple ingredients, but they packed a punch. That was Drew. Inky hair, broody brown eyes, and the serious nature that came with being the oldest brother in a sea of Fenwicks.

"You game to show them where? I know you probably don't have your gear with you," the sheriff addressed Rae, who nodded.

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“Of course, I’ll walk them back. I don’t have my stuff, but I can drive back into town if you need more hands.”

“No need,” Drew said.

Zach Fenwick, Violet’s other older brother, grinned, all dimples. Where Drew was the quiet one, Zach chatted up strangers and friends with the ease of long practice and a touch of natural good-natured arrogance.

“Yeah, Dawkins.” He puffed up his chest. “Leave it to us menfolk. You ladies head back to town and keep the home fires burning.”

Rae punched him in the arm, shaking her head when he scowled. “Fenwick, I have just as much search and rescue experience as you do. Can it.”

He rubbed at his shoulder, his pout not detracting from his handsome features. “Okay then, Dawkins. How about you open up Harbor Brews for me? Keep me from losing too much business on this fine Saturday morning?”

Her eyes narrowed, and he stepped back, out of range. “Fine. But you’re going to owe me one later,” she relented.

He sketched a quick salute. “I look forward to it.”

“And I don’t mean payment in caffeine,” Rae said.

Lucy stuck her hand up and chirped, “I’d take payment in caffeine. Especially today.”

I cast her a dark look. You bring herbal tea on time.

Rae smacked our friend on the shoulder, and Zach chuckled, shaking his head. “Luce, if I let you run my coffee shop with that sweet disposition of yours, I’d have no customers left.”

“I don’t see the problem. That just means more coffee for me.”

Drew slung an arm around his sister’s shoulders, giving her a brief side hug. “You okay?” I heard him ask, looking slightly less mulish after his sister nodded.

His piercing gaze swung to me. “What about you, Anya. You okay?”

I shook off the instinctual response to just say yes. Something about Drew made me feel that lying to him was a cardinal sin. Something he’d never forgive, no matter how small.

Maybe that was why I avoided him.

I inhaled, pausing when my lungs were full, and holding, just for a moment, before releasing my breath in one big rush. As much as I wanted to unsee what I’d seen, tragedy settled over the trail like an unwelcome shadow. Grief was likely to follow for one unsuspecting family. I tried to imagine what it was like to leave a hole behind, to be missed. It wasn’t the kind of love I was familiar with. To my family, I was a tool. Not someone to be mourned.

I forced a smile, covering the flash of fear that thinking about my parents inspired.

“I’m fine Drew, thanks for asking.”

His eyes narrowed, and my pulse took off, beating a frantic tattoo beneath my wrist. I

eased my breathing, focusing on the methods I'd learned from teaching to bring my body back to equilibrium.

"I'll come check on you later."

I shivered. The last thing I needed was more of Drew's attention. His oldest brother bullshit detector was too strong for comfort, and he guarded his sister as if she were precious. I'd buried too many secrets to give them up easily, and that meant keeping my distance.

He frowned. "I've got another jacket in the car. Just a sec."

Violet rolled her eyes, giving me a commiserating grin. "That's Drew for you. Gruff commands and overprotectiveness for days. Good thing his heart's in the right place."

He returned with a dark green jacket slung over one arm. He stepped closer, blocking the wind as he held his extra coat by the collar. I slid my right hand inside, the fleece lining easing the chill that had seeped in deep, until I felt it like an ache in my bones. Drew swayed to the side, helping me slide my left arm into his jacket as I turned to face him.

Big and bulky, he was both a grounding and reassuring force. All without saying a word. Mountain pose come to life. His heavy brows beetled in concern, all of his focus on tugging the collar up to cover the back of my neck. Like keeping me warm was the most important job in the world, consuming all his attention. That single-minded focus, especially when it was centered on caring for me, was impossibly hot. There was a new softness in his brown eyes. Maybe concern. His beard had a few hints of gray up close, reminding me that he was a few years older than Violet.

I hunched into the soft weight of his jacket, wanting to draw it closer like a security blanket. A piece of his mountain-man strength I could carry with me. The fleece



smelled like him: salty, with the hint of Madrone.

Drew's frown returned. Suddenly, I was self-conscious. He stood near enough that I could detect the hint of minty toothpaste on his breath. There was no hiding the subtle sniff I'd given his jacket.

He took his time snuggling me into the coat, ignoring the flush of embarrassment taking over my cheeks. With painstaking care, he pulled the hem straight, aligning the zipper and securing me snugly inside. Like a child. Somehow, that only made me more aware of him as a man. Maybe the way my breath sped up gave me away.

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He caught my gaze with a penetrating stare. His brown eyes seemed to see straight through my soul, ferreting out my secrets. The flare of unwanted attraction I couldn't quite hide. I couldn't break away. My breath quaked in my chest, seizing up at his thoughtful expression. Sure he knew he'd affected me and guessed the rest of my secrets with a single, sweeping glance.

"Honey, you've got to dress better for the bluffs. Get some hot tea in you and rest. I'll come check on you later."

Relief made me sink into his hands, slumping toward his chest. He wrapped me in his arms, holding me tight. My cheek snuggled into his broad chest like the spot was made for me. I should have been embarrassed by my moment of weakness, but his heat blasted me like a furnace. For the first time in an hour, I felt warm.

"You'll be fine," he grumbled softly, his tone throaty. "Let Vi drive you home."

My cheeks turned pink. He probably thought I was pathetically frail, thrown by the morning's discovery. But that was still better than him learning the truth: I was relieved he hadn't taken one look into my eyes and sussed out my past.

I took a shuddery breath, building my courage. Peeling back, I avoided his gaze, focusing instead on his mouth. "Thanks, Drew."

"Let's get this show on the road," Lucy called. "It's colder than Satan's heart out here. We don't all have handsome men keeping us warm."

Drew backed away, and I shifted, swinging toward Lucy, who stood impatiently by

my SUV.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist,” Vi chided gently.

“No, Lucy’s right. I’ve got to go help cover for Zach. Isa is probably drowning in orders all by herself if the ferry’s running late,” Rae said.

Drew turned toward the other members of the search and rescue team. I watched a beat too long as his stride ate up the distance between him and his crew. He’d shifted into work mode, hopefully forgetting all about me.

## Chapter 2 – Anya

We were silent on the drive back into town, consumed by our own thoughts. Our own worries. I could only hope we were wrong, that we’d spotted some misshapen debris, not human remains. But the navy bundle had looked eerily like a man in a rain jacket and jeans.

I shuddered. Mother Nature presented most of the dangers on the island: high winds bringing down trees, swift currents and shipping lanes, and all the perils that came with a semi-remote island. Every few years we had a boating accident or something similar that made headlines, but it was usually reckless tourists falling prey to Mother Nature’s wrath. Not locals. Not someone we might know.

Friday Harbor was sleepy, an easy drive with no streetlights. Our busy season hadn’t truly started. It’d be June before town filled with tourists eager to browse the island’s shops and explore its parks. I felt lucky to have found the small community last year. Island life suited me. The slow pace. The quiet. We were isolated. Not impossible to reach, but difficult. It made me feel safe.

I drove up the hill, past the hardware store and the moped rental place, parking in our

driveway. The house I shared with Violet was cozy and cute. We were only a few blocks from the heart of town, which made walking to the coffee shop better than fighting for parking. Especially if the ferries were loading or the overflow lots were full, the drive to the coffee shop could take an hour.

“Everyone want to come to Harbor Brews with me?” Rae asked.

Vi, Lucy, and I nodded. I snuggled deeper into Drew’s coat as we shuffled down the hill to the waterfront and Zach’s coffee shop. The faint whiff of his soap made me wonder how they were faring on the trail. I’d probably have to wait for an update until after my yoga class.

Harbor Brews & Beans had prime real estate overlooking the marina. The small storefront was part coffee shop, part bookstore and all cozy. Shelves crowded with every genre lined one wall, creating a kaleidoscope of color. Any time the mainland lost power, so did we. Zach did a brisk business selling books in winter months, and the tourist crowd kept him hopping during summer.

Isa, his barista, was battling her way through a line that stretched from the coffee counter to the door. A handful of locals carried their own to-go cups. The walk-on ferry riders were easy to spot with their luggage.

Rae beelined for the counter, slipping into a Harbor Brews apron. Isa shot her a grateful smile. Together, they made quick work of the line, dispensing lattes, bagels, and friendly chatter.

We placed our orders when we reached the front. A handful of couples had claimed tables inside and outside, but I snagged the last large table indoors while Rae and Isa worked on our drinks.

Rae settled into a deep blue velvet chair across from me, blowing gently on her mug

of coffee when she joined us. Vi lounged in the chair to her right, and Lucy had arranged herself artfully in her own seat. With her dark black hair and stocking cap, she epitomized the Pacific Northwest coffee shop vibe.

“Any news from Zach or Drew?” Lucy asked Rae.

Rae pulled her phone from her back pocket. “Text from Zach. Looks like it’s...” Her face leached of color, her eyes standing out in glittering contrast.

My chest seized. I’d been carefully not thinking about this morning. Pretending we were out on a normal coffee date.

“It’s my cousin.”

“Jordan?” Violet asked, her expression sympathetic. “I’m so sorry, Rae.”

Rae’s eyes welled with tears.

I wanted to reach through the phone and slap Zach for the casual cruelty of that text. Instead, I fumbled for Rae’s hand, gripping her fingers.

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“I’m sorry, Rae. Were you close?” I hadn’t been on island long enough to meet every resident, or even all of my friends’ extended family. But the name Jordan sounded familiar.

Rae sniffed, nodding. “Ye-ah. We grew up together. He runs one of the whale-watching companies out of the marina. He and his wife live on the edge of town. They’ve got two kids.”

There was no way in hell I was correcting her use of present tense. His death clearly shook her.

I felt horrible for Rae. I really hoped it would be a false alarm. Something we could laugh about later. Not a family tragedy that touched our group.

“Let us know if there’s something we can do, for your cousin’s wife or the kids.”

Hugging Rae probably made me feel better than her, but I hated seeing my friend so shaken. Rae was the pragmatist in our group. Incredibly down-to-earth and chill. She worked for her dad’s marine repair shop as a mechanic. She always smelled faintly of the sea and diesel, and today was no different. Reluctantly, I released her.

“How about I cancel my yoga class? We could hang out. Drink our weight in coffee and tea.”

Rae gave a watery chuckle. “As tempting as that sounds, I’ll be fine. I don’t want you to cancel on your students.” She swiped at her eyes. “Zach’s coming to give me a ride to Jia’s; otherwise, I might join you.”

“If you’re not going to let me cancel, then I have to get to the studio for my next class. How about coming over tonight for dinner?” I glanced at my roommate, taking Vi’s nod as consent. “I’ll throw together a big batch of pasta, if you want to invite your brothers and the other SAR volunteers,” I offered. “We can thank them for rolling out of bed early on a Saturday morning and find comfort in carbs.”

“I’ll text them,” Vi said.

I squeezed Rae’s hand one last time and nodded to Lucy. “I’ll see you all tonight then.”

It was difficult to focus on yoga after the morning’s tragedy, but back-to-back classes kept me busy for most of the afternoon. Flowing through the poses, putting my body through its paces, and guiding my students through a simple meditation helped release some of the stuck and stagnant energy collected from the morning.

Reinventing myself meant picking new hobbies. I’d walked past a studio near my no-tell motel in Rapid City, South Dakota, and found my calling when I stepped inside. Focusing only on what happened on my mat kept me centered and protected from my fears. For one precious hour, I’d been able to ignore my racing thoughts. I’d been convinced there was something sacred about those eleven square feet of floor. But with each randomstudio, I discovered the same calm. The same special magic. And I was hooked.

Serenity Yoga was my sanctuary. Purchasing the tiny studio on the edge of downtown was one of my best decisions. A yoga studio couldn’t betray you. I pushed away the bitter thought. Maybe it was destiny that I stumbled past that studio in Rapid City. My Dharma, or path, born from the ashes of my old life. I’d certainly landed on my feet, and for that I could be grateful.

“Goodnight, Anya. See you Tuesday.”

I waved to Merita Rodriguez, one of my regulars, and slowly went through my lockup procedures, checking windows. When I'd taken over Serenity, it was a functional space. Clean and crisp, but with all the personality of a corporate office building. In the last year, I'd painted my primary studio a soft lavender, adding artwork and small touches to make the space feel more like a high-end living room, albeit one without furniture. The outside space was given a similar makeover. The prior owner had mostly let it go to weeds, not interested in using the courtyard for classes.

I loved outdoor yoga, so my first spring project was to overhaul the yard, yanking out the existing vegetation and replanting with a low carpet of soft groundcover and a border of lavender and rosemary. When the weather cooperated, I offered outdoor classes. Locals didn't mind the ferry horn, and I loved the fresh air.

I checked the studio's back door, then locked the front on my way out and trudged up the hill. Our tiny house welcomed me, golden light shining from the windows. A giant oak spread across the driveway. The house itself was tiny, overshadowed by the large trees. It was sided in cedar shingles painted blue. Beds of roses and snowcap daisies bobbed beneath the windows in the summer, but the spring flowers were just beginning to sprout and bloom by our mailbox.

C Street overlooked downtown. Our neighbors included a mix of bed-and-breakfasts and small homes. We were close enough to hear the ferry, though trees and buildings obscured the harbor from view. Our island was slowly waking from its winter slumber, getting ready for the crawl of tourists. Soon, we'd have a steady flow of strangers trudging up the hill with us to their lodgings, lugging suitcases and grocery bags from the ferry.

Violet must have had her mom cover her shift at The Salty Pantry, the salt and spice shop her family owned, if she was home already. The Fenwick family was minor royalty on island, and Violet their princess. Which made Drew the heir and Zach the



spare, though Violet spoke fondly of her brother Cole, who'd moved away.

The Fenwicks controlled a miniature empire on San Juan: a sea-salt farm, a boutique, the coffee shop, and a string of rental properties across the island. They weren't rich-rich like some of the estates established by off-islanders with more money than time, but they had their fingers in a shocking number of pies for such a small community.

Violet looked up from her Kindle as I opened the sliding door, entering the house from the back porch. "Hey. How were classes today?"

I slipped off my shoes and joined her in the living room. "Difficult to focus on, but word hasn't spread yet about Jordan."

Violet snorted. "Says the woman who hasn't checked the What's New, Friday Harbor page today. The island watch picked up on Sheriff Walker and the search and rescue crew's presence almost immediately. There's been wild speculation all day, but no one spilled the tea."

"I imagine the sheriff is going to notify next of kin before putting out any kind of statement."

Vi nodded. "Rae's been with Jia, Jordan's wife, all afternoon, trying to entertain the kids. I can't imagine what she's going through."

"Any idea what he was doing near there? Did they find his boat?"

"No. Drew and Zach should have more information at dinner. You still up for cooking?"

"Um-hm." I'd worn Drew's jacket for the walk home. I should give it back to him, but something about the bulk and the hint of his scent comforted me.

“It’ll be Drew, Zach, Lee, and the park ranger who helped them with the search joining us tonight. I can run to the store if we don’t have enough to feed eight.”

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Quickly, I calculated the ingredients in the pantry. “Maybe a few loaves of French bread?”

Violet wrinkled her nose. “We’ll have to make do with what’s at the grocery store. The bakery is already closed.”

I waved a hand. “That’s okay, enough garlic butter and parmesan and no one will care. Thanks, Vi. I’ll get started on the rest.”

Throwing together a basic Bolognese with bacon and veggies from the crisper took most of my concentration. Cutting the carrot and celery was an almost meditative task. Something I’d done hundreds of times before.

Shoving away thoughts of my old life, I focused on what was good about the present: Vi, Lucy, and Rae had become my squad. The kind of friends I never dreamed of before. The small community of Friday Harbor had welcomed me, if not with open arms, at least with the open-mindedness of an island community that had seen it all. My tiny yoga studio turned a tidy profit, keeping me in pastries, coffee, and tea. I couldn’t ask for more. The only thing missing was the one thing I could live without. Men were more trouble than they were worth.

I silenced the nagging voice that dared to suggest my new name was just one of the many lies I clung to.

### Chapter 3 –Drew

The operation to retrieve Jordan’s body at Grandma’s Cove took all morning, turning

the rest of my day at the farm into a fire drill. Rushing wasn't my style, but there was no way I'd let down my distributor or my employees. Getting everything completed distracted me from my grim morning. We finished packing and pulling our shipping orders just in time for me to shower and shave for dinner.

If I took more trouble with my appearance, using the fancy beard oil Violet bought me for Christmas, it was only because I had a duty to my family to be presentable in public. It had nothing to do with Vi's roommate, Anya Rose. Even her name sounded like a song lyric. Beautiful. Did her parents know she'd be stunning when she was born? Near Vi's age, the thirty-something had stick-straight shoulder-length blonde hair and blue eyes the color of the Salish Sea on a sunny day.

My grandmother looked up from her crossword on the couch as I gathered my keys and wallet, taking in the bouquet of daffodils I'd gathered from the garden in one shrewd gaze. "Make bad choices."

I shook my head slowly, used to her provocation. Gran doled out her playful wisdom whether I was interested or not. "You do enough of that for both of us, Gran."

She blew a raspberry, the gentle "pphfft" oddly consistent with her pink spiky hair and outlandish track suit. To quote Gran, "Fuck subtle. I've earned the right to be loud."

"Live a little, Drew. I promise, it won't hurt you."

It might. Unwilling to argue, I waved, jogging out to my truck and driving the country roads into town. The sun had started its descent, just kissing the horizon. It was warm enough to roll down my window. Air that retained a crisp hint of spring filled my truck, the scent of tulips and daffodils traveling on the wind with the smell of fresh-cut grass.

I parked behind Vi's car and knocked gently on the sliding door before opening it.

Anya stuck her head around the corner from the kitchen as I was toeing off my shoes. "Oh, hi! Vi's not here. She ran to the store for bread." Anya gave me a smile that wavered at the edges. "Make yourself at home."

She probably meant for me to sit in their living room, but I followed her into the kitchen. Anya looked like a fantasy come to life—golden hair disheveled, barefoot, and in a slouchy sweatshirt that revealed one rounded shoulder.

"For you," I said, thrusting the flowers forward like a bashful kid.

A flash of surprise widened her eyes, slowly wrinkling at the corners as she smiled, accepting the flowers after a moment of hesitation. She always seemed so skittish, and though she masked it with a bubbly demeanor, something about it rang false. I couldn't tell if I made her nervous, or if that was the way she approached the world—like a wounded animal who'd already been hurt once. Who used cheerfulness to hide.

As much as her timid eyes irked me, they also had me scanning for the danger she sensed, hoping it wasn't me she was afraid of. Her body language gave her away every time. She often perched at the end of furniture like she might flit away as quickly as she landed, prepared to escape at a moment's notice. Like she was always looking for an exit.

Her blue eyes were gentle but wary as she glanced up from the flowers. She was beautiful, her shoulder-length blonde hair like sunshine, her toned body a testament to yoga and hiking. But something about the way she moved, keeping to the sidelines, almost as if she were afraid to take up space made me think someone had hurt her. And I just needed a minute alone with that person.

"Oh, thank you. You didn't have to do that, Drew, but they're beautiful." Her words

were soft, almost reluctant. She paused, stroking one of the petals, her finger tracing the rim of one bright yellow corona. “They’re always so bright and cheerful. Like sunshine. An instant mood-booster. Thank you.”

Telling her they made me think of her hair in sunlight might bring her skittish expression back.

“Mom always says never show up empty-handed when you’re a guest.” I didn’t feel the need to point out that I’d never brought flowers to Violet in the past. Anya made quick work of filling a vase and setting the bright yellow blooms in the center of their dining table.

“Is that going to be enough space for us?” I asked, avoiding talking about this morning or how pretty she looked with her hair down. Score one for restraint. Gran would be so disappointed.

Maybe I was rusty with women. Between the business and volunteering with search and rescue, I’d barely looked up since I took over Island Salts. But work hadn’t kept me from noticing Anya. My sister’s sweet roommate had intrigued me from day one, even if I’d been more ghost than solid presence in Vi’s life.

“We should have eight tonight, so it will be cramped.”

“I’ll grab the folding table and chairs from the garage.” Maybe I was using the chore to give myself some much-needed breathing space, but I didn’t care. It took all my self-control not to fantasize about nuzzling at the juncture between her neck and shoulder, finding out if she smelled as good as she looked. Gran’s advice was having a greater impact than I realized, gnawing away at my subconscious.

Gran would approve if I moved in for a sniff, but Anya would be within her rights to smack me on the nose like a naughty puppy. Or an overstepping asshole. While she

was bubbly and friendly with everyone she met, there was an invisible shield that kept anyone from getting too close. Serene and self-contained, she seemed perfectly untouchable.

Setting up the table and chairs gave me time to regain control. Hitting on my sister's best friend was the epitome of getting your nooky where you got your cookies. While Gran was predictably a fan of any kind of nooky you could get being A-OK, I owed it to Vi not to make things awkward.

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Anya hadn't dated anyone since landing on the island. She was too beautiful not to have been asked, which led me to believe she wasn't interested.

Zach stomped his feet, calling out his hello just as I finished my chore. Predictable.

"Hey." I extended my nod to include our friend Lee and Clay, the park ranger who'd answered the call with us this morning.

Lee dipped his chin in greeting. I could never figure out how the reclusive author and my very unserious brother became friends, but they'd been close since we were kids, making Lee almost like another brother to me.

I shook hands with Clay, hardly recognizing him out of his park ranger uniform. Without his hat, his long blond hair curled, making him look younger and less authoritative. "Good to see you again."

"Something smells good." Zach grinned at Anya. "Must be you."

I bristled, gritting my teeth.

She laughed easily. "Spaghetti Bolognese is on the menu. And on the stove. I'm afraid it's the allure of bacon you smell, not me."

He clutched at his chest, charming grin spreading across his face. "Don't go bacon my heart, Anya."

"Zach, knock it off and let her cook," I barked, immediately regretting my words



when Anya flinched. She could speak up for herself. Already had. Shame-faced, I shook my head in a silent apology. “Sorry. We’ll get out of your way, Anya.”

Lucy and Violet arrived, each carrying a loaf of bread. They shed their jackets and shoes at the door, the commotion of their arrival saving me from the awkward pause that followed my outburst.

Lucy Millen looked like Violet’s dark shadow. Perpetually clad in black, she’d embraced the stereotype of the antisocial artist when she moved to town. Violet’s colorful wardrobe reminded me of Gran. But saying that aloud was a one-way ticket to her shit list. My sister attracted all sorts, collecting island oddballs like a beachcomber picked up shells.

“Can I get anyone something to drink?” Violet asked.

Zach helped her pull sodas from the fridge and fill glasses with water. It gave him another excuse to loiter around Anya. He complimented her again about how good dinner smelled. A muscle ticked in my jaw. I had no business getting annoyed with Zach. He was doing what he always did: laying on the charm with an attractive woman. He obviously had no reservations about flirting with our sister’s roommate.

I approached Anya at the stove. Almost meditatively, she stirred a large pot of sauce. It smelled heavenly. Rosemary and bacon, with a top note of tomato.

“Can I get you something to drink?” I asked Anya, voice dropped low so as not to interrupt the conversation in the living room.

She flinched, and I regretted trying to be subtle. I didn’t mean to startle her. She smiled, as if to paper over the moment of skittishness.

“Thanks, Drew, but I grabbed a glass earlier. Lucky for you, I could use a taste-

tester.” She shifted to the side, holding her spoon over the pot. “Want to try the sauce? Tell me if it needs anything?”

I edged closer, keenly aware of her hip brushing mine. Gently, I guided her wrist, bringing the spoon toward my lips. My eyes locked on hers as I blew softly over the steaming bite. Holding as I took a taste.

Rich flavor burst across my tongue. Delicious. Instinctively, my focus dipped to her mouth.

Lips slightly open, soft and welcoming, she tempted me to steal another taste. But something flickered in her eyes. Fear? Desire? Either way, it wasn’t an invitation.

She remained frozen in place as I pulled back. Awkwardly, I shoved my hands in my back pockets.

“It’s perfect.” My voice sounded raw, the truth ripped from me.

Shewas perfect.

Anya must have picked up on my second meaning. Like a still painting springing to life, she shifted, avoiding my gaze as she cleared her throat. “If you want to help, maybe you can grab the loaves of bread and slice them down the middle?”

We worked in companionable silence. Preparing the bread only took a few minutes. Anya dropped the pasta into the boiling water.

Rae arrived, slipping out of her jacket and joining the rest of our group in the living room after greeting me and Anya.

“Let’s eat,” Anya called as I pulled the bubbling bread from the oven. The butter and

parmesan had mixed into a golden-brown crust. The kitchen swirled with the scents of garlic and rosemary, and my stomach rumbled. In my rush to finish work for the day, I'd forgotten lunch.

Everyone filtered into the kitchen, grabbing plates and dishing up in a matter of minutes.

"The cook doesn't go last." I handed Anya a plate, the brush of our fingers making me aware of how close we stood in the tiny kitchen. Clearing my throat, I stepped away, gesturing toward the stove. "After you."

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Her smile was wry. “You’re a guest.”

I crossed my arms. “Doesn’t matter. Eat.”

Zach was halfway through his dinner by the time I took the last chair at the table, a heaping pile of spaghetti on my plate. I’d also snagged the last of the garlic bread.

“This is great, Anya,” Zach mumbled around a full mouth.

I glared. “Manners, little brother.”

Zach rolled his eyes at me but turned an apologetic smile on Anya. “Excuse me, Anya. It really is delicious.”

Everyone around the table echoed his compliments, adding their own. She beamed at me, setting a low heat brewing in my belly. “Thanks for helping.”

Zach redeemed himself by jumping up to start on the dishes as we finished dinner. By unspoken agreement, we’d avoided any talk of the morning’s adventures while we ate, decamping to the living room after we finished cleaning up. Anya chose a spot next to me on the couch, her thigh a hairsbreadth from mine.

Lee leaned forward, his hands dangling between his knees, a frown darkening his features. “Does anyone else find Jordan’s death suspicious?”

Everyone in the room froze as if caught in a strobe flash.

A second too late, Zach laughed. “Trust the thriller writer to see a plot. Jordan was a good guy, but he also had a tendency to go out on the bluffs and sneak a drink when things got to be a bit much at home. He wouldn’t be the first islander to lose his footing on the cliffs.”

Rae frowned. “But he wasn’t careless. He knew the dangers. I spoke to Jia. She’s distraught. Says he told her he needed to do some maintenance on the boat and would be out late, but he never came home.”

“Is the boat in the harbor?” I asked.

Rae nodded. “It was in its usual slip when I got back to Sailor Swift this afternoon.”

“Was Brandon around?” Jordan and his second mate helped us with SAR operations sometimes. Their boat came in handy.

“No. I haven’t seen him.” She shrugged. “But I’ve also barely been home. I spent the rest of my morning at Harbor Brews and then had to head directly to the shipyard afterward.”

“I’m sure the Sheriff’s Office will investigate,” Clay piped up.

The big man had been mostly quiet, in the affable way of someone new to a group of people. He’d joined us this morning on behalf of the park service, helping us cart Jordan’s body back up the hill. He had the kind of solid presence that people found reassuring.

“True,” Lee said, frowning.

Anya yawned, and I glanced at my watch. “It’s getting late. I have to be up early tomorrow to make up for the time I missed today.”

Zach clapped me on the back. “Do what you need to do, old man.”

I glared. “I’m going to help Anya put away the table and chairs. Why don’t you make yourself useful and come help me?”

Zach followed me into the kitchen. He half-heartedly folded a chair, pausing with one clutched beneath his arm. “I think I’m going to stick around tonight. Get to know Anya better.”

“Don’t you have a coffee shop to open in the morning?”

Something flared in Zach’s eyes, the competitive light I’d struggled against most of my life. “So, it’s like that, huh?” He cast a quick look at Anya, who was occupied with Lee and Violet, oblivious to our quiet battle.

Zach used his charm like a weapon. My hands clenched.

“Violet deserves better from us than hitting on her roommate,” I bit out.

Zach snorted, shaking his head. He all but laughed in my face. “That’s where you’re wrong. You had the green light, and you missed the signal. It’s not my fault I’m not too proud to try where you failed.”

“What are you talking about?” I whispered furiously.

“I didn’t get a yoga gift certificate from Vi for my birthday.”

## Page 8

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“She was trolling me like she always does. The year before she bought me a Bigfoot hood ornament for the salt truck.”

“You underestimate our sister’s desire to see you happy.” Zach arched his brows, as if he couldn’t believe I was that thick.

“Vi said I needed to relax.”

“You do.”

“It wasn’t a green light.” I didn’t know why I was arguing. Maybe because I could never admit I was wrong. I put too damn much stock in being right. Doing things right the first time. The curse of the eldest child.

And then there were Anya’s yellow lights. Maybe red. She seemed to be warming to me, but tolerating her roommate’s brother and romantic interest weren’t the same thing.

While we’d been bickering quietly in the corner of the kitchen, everyone else had donned jackets. Rae and Lucy waited patiently for Zach to walk back to town with them. Lee and Clay carried the last few glasses to the sink and slipped into their shoes.

“You coming, Zach?” Rae asked. “Otherwise, I’ll walk Lucy home and see you tomorrow.”

“I’m coming.” Zach scrambled into his jacket, wiggling his brows suggestively.

“Maybe it’s time you used that yoga certificate, Drew. Goodnight, Vi. Thanks for dinner, Anya!” he called, ushering the women out. Lee and Clay called their goodbyes.

I bumped Anya gently with my hip, nudging her away from the last few dishes in the sink. Violet tidied up the counters, putting away the leftovers and unused utensils.

“I’ll wash. You cooked. Go sit. Rest.”

She sighed, avoiding my gaze. “Staying busy keeps me from thinking too much about this morning.”

I picked up a towel, holding out my hand to dry as she finished washing the pasta strainer. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

She shook her head ruefully. “I can’t complain. I didn’t have to hike down there and haul back a dead man like you did.” She covered her mouth with her hand. “I’m sorry. I keep forgetting he wasn’t a stranger to most of you. Did you know Jordan well?”

“We weren’t close. He was nearer our brother Cole’s age in school. But I feel for his family. For Rae.”

Anya shivered. “It’s easy to forget how deadly the ocean is when I spend most of my time in town. It’s only when we’re hiking Turn Island or kayaking that I remember how brutal an accident can be here. And we have medical care. I can’t imagine living on one of the more remote islands.”

“We’re a resourceful lot,” I said.

“You are. Which makes me curious. How did you get involved in search and rescue?”



It isn't exactly the hobby I pictured for a salt farmer."

"My dad had us out in nature since we were little. We know every inch of this island and have a passing familiarity with the others in the county. He volunteered with SAR, and it was only natural that we joined him when we were old enough. Though I've gotta tell you, it's not all high-stakes rescues and glamor. It's mostly combing a grid for stray trash that might be evidence or searching for lost hikers."

"You always do that."

"Do what?"

"Downplay yourself. You make the rest of us mere mortals look like braggarts."

I snorted. "My ego is just fine, thank you. I'm very proud of everything we've built at Island Salts."

She grinned. "There you go again. We."

"What? It's a family business. I didn't even start it."

She laughed. "Clearly, you don't know how much Vi brags about her brilliant older brother and his business sense, diversifying and increasing distribution channels."

I dried the last dish, not sure what to say. Maybe there was something to Zach's claim that Vi wouldn't object if I asked Anya out. Speaking of my sister, I turned, expecting to see her snuggled on the couch reading or puttering around the kitchen behind us, but she was nowhere to be found.

Anya covered her mouth, but I caught the yawn she tried to hide.

“You’ve got to be exhausted. I’ll say goodnight.”

Anya’s gentle smile reached into my chest and squeezed. “Goodnight, Drew.”

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“Night Anya. Maybe I’ll see you around?”

“Bet.”

Out of things to say, I headed home, kicking myself for my vague invitation. My game was rusty at best. Criminally underwhelming at worst. And I was reading a hell of a lot into a gift certificate. If I asked Violet directly, she’d probably roast my balls into chestnuts. But if I made a move on Anya without her blessing, she could fill my shampoo bottle with Nair. My sister might be quiet, but we couldn’t grow up around Gran and not learn the fine art of revenge.

Worrying about payback took a backseat to the real question: was Anya even interested? Maybe the gift certificate would help me test the waters. At worst, it might make her more comfortable around me. She’d have all the power.

Once she saw me with my ass in the air, making a complete fool of myself, I might seem more approachable. Maybe then she’d see me differently. No longer Violet’s grouchy older brother, but her humble student, unable to touch his toes.

A light burned in the living room at the farm. I dropped my keys and wallet on the entry table quietly, hoping to sneak by without an interrogation. The joys of living at home in your thirties. All the responsibility and none of the privacy.

“Andrew Garrison Fenwick.”

Dashing upstairs as if I hadn’t heard her would be cowardly. And if I thought going bald was bad, evading Gran could mean something far worse.

“Hi, Gran. How was your evening?” She sat in the recliner, a crone on her throne, her crown of hot pink hair limning her in an aura of badassery.

“Boring.” She gave me a pitying look. “But not as bad as yours if you’re home this early.”

“Gran, it’s after nine,” I protested, not sure why I bothered.

She tutted. “You’ve been past the age of curfew for more than a decade. Live a little. Fulfill the promise of the Fenwick family motto.”

“Go big or go home? I’ll leave being larger than life to you. You do it so well.” I kissed her wrinkled cheek, trying to win her over with the smidge of charm I’d inherited from our dad.

“Nudus currere et loqui sordida.” She pronounced it as if I should know what it meant. “Go big or go home was for your brother. I’ve decided each of you need your own motto. Look it up. Thank me later.”

Done sharing her sage advice, she ignored me, returning to her book.

I trudged upstairs. To Google or not to Google? Last time Gran had given me something to look up, I’d gotten an eyeful of dicks for my obedience. No thank you.

## Chapter 4 – Anya

I’d expected to have nightmares, but I rolled out of bed Sunday after a restful night. Maybe it had something to do with chatting with Drew last night. It was the most we’d ever talked. Vi and I spent enough time hanging out at Harbor Brews that I was used to Zach’s easy charm. Drew was more of a mystery. Where Zach was an endearing tease, blond and dimpled, his older brother was a serious man. Almost

standoffish. Too busy with the farm and his business to swing by for coffee.

I'd run into him a handful of times when he made deliveries to Vi at her shop. He was always polite but distant. And I told myself I liked it that way. He was too perceptive by half. His deep brown gaze made me want to confess to crimes I hadn't even committed yet. It pulled an answering honesty and forthrightness from me that could spell death to my life here. Women with secrets didn't belong with men who could smell a lie at a hundred paces.

"Morning," Violet greeted me, her mug raised.

"You disappeared early last night. Everything okay?"

She smiled, a pitiful little attempt that made my heart clutch. "Just sad."

"Drew said he didn't know Jordan well. Were you friends?"

"No, but his wife and I went to school together. Jia's in the Coast Guard. Losing her husband would be devastating any time, but if she gets deployed... those poor kids."

"I can't imagine. Maybe we can make up some casseroles or a lasagna and take them out to her?"

Violet brightened. "That's a great idea. I think part of what I'm struggling with is the powerlessness. Taking food is at least one concrete way to help."

"I'll pick up ingredients after my last class. You're working a shift at the store today?"

She nodded. "Open to close. Mom covered for me yesterday, but she and Dad leave for a trip today, and I need to get back into my normal routine." Her expression

turned mischievous. “You and Drew looked cozy last night at the sink.”

“He was very helpful.” I said it as neutrally as possible. The last thing I needed to do was give Violet ideas. I’d steadfastly avoided dating since arriving in town. Breaking my solo streak with my roommate’s brother was a lousy way to keep myself safe. Even if his dark eyes made me want to spill my secrets and drop my delicates.

“Did you see we made the news?”

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My feet stalled, my chest seizing. I tried not to panic. “Oh? Were there pictures?”

Vi wrinkled her nose. “Not good ones.”

I sagged bonelessly into the kitchen chair with my coffee. Maybe that meant I wasn’t recognizable. The risk should be low this far from home, but low-risk and no-risk weren’t the same. She handed me her phone.

“See?”

Local hikers find human remains at popular San Juan beach.

The photo was blessedly grainy, a group shot of the search and rescue volunteers and our group milling around our cars in the parking lot. It wouldn’t win any journalism awards. Quickly, I scanned the article, relieved that I wasn’t mentioned by name. They’d quoted the sheriff, but that was it.

“Have you heard anything more than what’s in the article?” I asked.

Violet shook her head. “Even What’s New, Friday Harbor is only pure speculation and condolences for the Dawkins family. No one reports seeing him before the accident.”

The likelihood of anything nefarious happening was low in such a small community. But the lack of explanation for Jordan’s presence in the cove made me curious. And worried.

I taught my morning classes, then texted Lucy and Rae to meet me at our favorite

table at the park by the harbor for lunch. Spring could be hit or miss weather-wise, but we'd lucked into blue skies and a light wind. Being able to walk two blocks for a water view at lunch with my friends was one of the best perks of island living, and it made my step light as I walked through town.

"Everyone having a good day so far?" I asked as I slid onto the bench and unwrapped my turkey sandwich.

Lucy grunted. Used to her curt responses, I turned to Rae. "Working on anything interesting?"

Rae wrinkled her nose. "Eric Chancellor's engine replacement is giving me fits, but nothing I can't handle. Violet's at the shop today?"

"Yeah, Vanessa covered yesterday, so Vi is flying solo. Are you both coming to class tomorrow?"

Rae and Lucy nodded. I could usually count on my friends to attend at least a couple of classes each week. It was how we met.

"The weather looks promising for a hike Saturday." I said it tentatively. On one hand, I loved our weekly hikes. On the other, I was feeling skittish about cliffside trails.

"Sure," Lucy said.

From Lucy, that was a ringing endorsement. Maybe she needed a new hiking memory as much as I did.

"Maybe Young Hill this time," Rae offered.

I swiftly agreed. It was inland, so we could enjoy sweeping water views without



getting up close and personal with any cliffs over coves.

“Any news?” I finally asked Rae.

Maybe it was none of my business, but given the role we’d played in finding Jordan’s body, I hoped my interest didn’t come across as ghoulish.

“Sheriff Walker says the full autopsy may take a while. They should have the preliminary results pretty fast, but the tox screen will take longer.”

“For his wife’s sake, I hope we get some answers.”

Rae shook her head. “Jordan wasn’t always the most cautious guy. He occasionally drank up there on the cliffs and watched the sunset.”

“Wasn’t the weather kind of iffy for that on Friday night?”

Rae frowned. “Maybe.”

“It wouldn’t be a bad place to off somebody,” Lucy said.

She said it matter-of-factly. No emotion. As much as I wanted to chide her for not considering Rae’s feelings, Lucy wasn’t wrong. If you wanted to kill someone and make it look like an accident, those cliffs were a good spot. But how did a whale boat captain make that kind of enemy?

Chapter 5 – Drew

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Zach planted the seed, and it sprouted, growing roots and unfurling toward the sun with every passing minute. Had Vi's gift certificate for yoga been a gentle nudge, or a sisterly joke?

I patted my Bigfoot hood ornament on Briny, my salt truck, waiting for the tank to fill so I could transfer the 1600 gallons of salt water to the evaporation house for my next batch of sea salt. We ran sixteen evaporation houses on the farm, so I was always busy. It took a month and a half to take the brine from seawater to salt crystals before finally processing it into batches of custom salt blends.

I loved my job, but it gave me plenty of time to think and overthink about things, like whether or not I should ask Violet if she'd mind me asking Anya out. Once my brain settled on an idea, I had a hard time shaking it.

Something about Anya drew me. She was kind, but Vi tended to surround herself with good people. All of her friends were pretty easygoing. Anya was beautiful, but looks had never been enough to make me step outside my comfort zone. Something else pulled me toward her, but I couldn't put my finger on it. She'd awakened my protective instincts. And my possessive ones. Anya's role in my sister's life was the only thing holding me back.

Drew: Got a few minutes for me if I swing by at lunch?

Vi: Sure.

Taking action allowed me to focus on work. Stowing my hose, I scanned the horizon. Gentle waves rolled in on the private beach we used for harvesting. It was peaceful.

Only the wind whispered in my ears.

Something black caught my eye. Rectangular and plastic, it looked like a small suitcase. Each wave pushed it closer to shore, until it tossed against the rocks, scraping gently. I picked my way across the stones and sand, wary of slippery moss.

Frowning, I examined my find. It was a black plastic equipment case. The waterproof kind used on boats for storing valuables or documents that you didn't want wet or at the bottom of the ocean.

I scooped it up by the handle. The case was intact and heavy enough to suggest something inside. I tried the clasp, but, predictably, whoever it belonged to had locked it. Turning it over, I looked for markings or a name. J.D. was etched in the black plastic. For Jordan Dawkins?

My gut churned. Maybe it would offer his widow answers.

I carried the case back to my truck and reached for my SAR radio. It was probably nothing, but given that the cove where Violet and her friends found Jordan's body was only a quarter mile away, the sheriff might not want me to post it on What's New, Friday Harbor for pickup as a lost and found.

"Dispatch, this is Drew Fenwick. I just found a Pelican case on Orca Beach. Can you please check with Sheriff Walker? I'm wondering if he wants me to bring it in."

My radio crackled with static.

"Hey, Drew. Sue here. I'll check with him. Are you headed into town?"

"Yeah, later. I'm going to meet Vi for lunch."

“He’s in a meeting. I’ll talk to him and let you know. He’ll probably want you to drop it off after lunch. Over.”

“Out.”

It took another two hours to transfer the sea water to my evaporation house. I listened to an audiobook of Lee’s latest release to pass the time. His thrillers were often set in seaside towns, and my current read featured a couple finding a body on their beach walk. A little on the nose, but he had no way of knowing reality would match fiction.

I found parking in front of The Salty Pantry easily, a sure sign that tourist season hadn’t begun. Another couple of months, and the streets would fill with mopeds, pedestrians, and all the cars that could fit on a ferry.

The boutique was Vi’s baby. She’d taken over a small storefront just off Main Street in a white house with black trim. The inside echoed the exterior’s color motif, mostly white walls with black accents and artsy photos of the salt evaporation process.

She carried an eclectic mix of spices, tea, and specialty items from other craftspeople on the island. As a bonus, she offered hot tea and scones for sale. Her pastries drew a steady stream of tourists and locals.

Violet waved from behind the counter. She wore her typical shop uniform, a Salty Pantry t-shirt and jeans. Her hair was secured in a long braid down her back, but a few curly strands had escaped to frame her face and her glasses.

“Hey, Drew.”

“Hey. How’s business today?”

“Steady.” She grinned. “What did you bring me?”

I rolled my eyes. “Who says I brought you anything?”

“You don’t invite me to lunch and show up empty-handed.”

“Just because I don’t think a protein bar is enough to make a meal doesn’t mean I brought anything.”

“But did you?” she asked.

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“Yes.” I set a brown paper bag on the counter.

She clapped her hands together. “Please tell me Mom made chicken salad.”

“Yes. She made a big batch for me before they left.”

She squealed, pulling our sandwiches from the bag. “Meet me out back? I’ll hang my closed sign and be right there.”

I slipped out the back door and into the tiny yard. A small patio set served as Violet’s breakroom on nice days. Vi claimed the chair across from me and unwrapped her sandwich, making happy noises. I was glad I’d asked Mom to leave me lunch. Vi was easier to talk to when she was full, and she had a weakness for Mom’s chicken salad.

My sandwich disappeared in four big bites, making me wish I’d thought to pack more food. Vi gave me a knowing look. “You can grab a scone if you’re still hungry.”

“Thanks.”

I slipped inside, returning with a cherry almond scone that smelled amazing. Vi watched me steadily as I devoured it.

“Where does it all go?” she asked.

“I sweat it out in the evaporation houses.”

“Gross.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you something,” I blurted before I could second-guess myself.  
“Do you care if I ask Anya out?”

“Care? Yes. Object? Only if you’re going to be an asshole.”

“Since when am I ever an asshole?” I asked, hurt.

“You don’t mean to be.” She said it almost kindly, but it didn’t do much to soothe my ego. “She hasn’t said much, but I think she’s had her heart broken once already.” Her gaze was too direct, seeing deeper than I was comfortable with. “You have a tendency to hold women at arm’s length. Anya deserves better than that. If you’re going to date her, be sure you’re willing to show her the real you.”

“It’s all the real me,” I said.

“Spare me the innocent act.”

My sister meant well. I could respect that she was protective of her friend. But I also expected her to have more faith in me. It wasn’t like I ran around town, hitting on everything that moved like Zach. I didn’t have that kind of time. The farm and our family took up most of my energy. And maybe that was her point. I couldn’t start something with Anya and not give her my all.

“Thanks,” I said grudgingly.

“I love you, you big lug. I just happen to love her too. Don’t mess it up.”

On that positive note, I excused myself to drop off the case I’d found at the Sheriff’s Office.

“What case?” Vi asked.

“Just something I found on the beach this morning. It’s probably nothing. I’m going to drop it off on my way home.”

“Tell Sue I said hello.”

“Will do. And, Vi?” Her gaze met mine. “Thanks.”

Her brows arched. “Don’t thank me. I’m doing my best to live up to the motto Gran bestowed on me.”

“Some nonsense in Latin?” I asked.

“No. Mine’s in English: let the dragon breathe.”

“What was wrong with ‘go big or go home’?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Gran claims the rest of us haven’t quote-unquote ‘lived up to our potential’ and that we deserve new mottos to give us a kick in the ass.”



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“Is this her way of disowning us?”

Vi chuckled. “We can only hope.”

I waved goodbye to Vi and walked out to my truck. It was hot enough that I’d left the windows down. I spent enough time in baking temperatures, thanks to the evaporation houses. I didn’t need to turn my truck into an oven too. But maybe I’d assumed the safety of small-town living for too long.

The black case? It was missing.

### Chapter 6 – Anya

A shadowy figure lurked in the park across from Serenity Yoga on Tuesday morning, and I paused. He was large enough to be intimidating, even from a distance. Early mornings in this part of town were usually very quiet. Empty. None of the other businesses were open yet.

Scurrying back up the hill to safety would be the cautious choice. Instead, I thrust my shoulders back and gripped my keys in my fist.

The man stepped out of the shadows, crossing toward me. Tall and dark, I recognized him immediately, releasing the death grip on my makeshift weapon.

“Morning, Anya.” His voice was low and gruff, gravelly with early-morning rust. He moved with an easy grace that read as predatory from a distance, but up close became the ground-eating stride I associated with purpose.

“Drew. What are you doing here so early?”

He met me at Serenity’s front door, waiting patiently as I unlocked it and ushered him inside.

“Isn’t there a six o’clock class this morning?” He shifted from foot to foot, scrubbing a hand along the back of his neck.

“Yes, but it’s only five forty-five.” I flipped on the lights, rounding my small counter to turn on the tablet I used to check in students.

“I wasn’t sure how long it’d take to get me set up,” he mumbled.

I peered at him more carefully. Instead of his usual jeans and Island Salts shirt, he wore loose-fitting black joggers and an athletic tee. The bright blue shirt contrasted nicely against his tanned skin.

“Are you really taking a class?” I asked, bemused. He’d shown no interest before. Violet bought a gift certificate for his last birthday, but I fully expected him to pawn it off on his mother or grandmother. It’d been months, and I hadn’t seen him at the studio.

“Yes.”

I blinked. “Okay then, let me get you into the system. Have you taken a yoga class before?”

“Nope.”

“You’ll catch on quick, and I’m happy to bring you props or help you with the poses.”

“There are props?” His face blanched, and I bit back a grin.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, Fenwick. They’re mobility aids to help ease you into the poses in a way that works for your body.”

A few of my other regulars arrived, milling around while they waited for me to finish with Drew.

“I’m not convinced there’s any such thing as a pose that works for my body. I’d bet the last time I stretched was early this decade.” His shoulders slumped, and he shot me a sheepish grin. “Sorry, not sorry.”

I rolled my eyes, lip twitching into a half-smile. “It sounds like you’ve come to the right place then. Grab a mat and pick a spot. I need to check everyone else in.”

I greeted the class before turning up my music and settling into easy pose. Drew sat, front and center, on a baby pink mat. Bringing awareness to my own breath, I noted it was faster than usual, my heartbeat elevated. Taking another breath, I focused on relaxing. Ignoring the handsome elephant in the room.

The first part of class went smoothly, everyone settling into their breathing and the gentle stretches we used to warm up. Drew followed along without incident.

“Push into your hands and pull your hips back, moving into your first down dog of the morning.”

Drew peered at his classmates before pushing up into a version of the pose. I approached him.

“May I touch you?” I asked. “I’d like to help you make some adjustments.”

“Yes.” He sounded breathless.

We’d barely finished our warm-up. Slowly, I placed a hand on his left hip. “Pull back at the hips and bring your head between your forearms. Think of an inverted V.” He repositioned with my help, jutting his hips back. Firm muscle shifted beneath my fingertips. I recoiled hastily, too aware of his strength. “Good, good.”

He peeked between his arms to grin up at me, his smile endearing. I’d never noticed before, but one front tooth was twisted, just a hair, enough to keep his grin warm and real instead of Hollywood-perfect. Something about that crooked smile disarmed me, and my professional demeanor wavered as I noticed other tiny details about Drew. The way his back and arms rippled with muscles. The tiny mole near his elbow. How his firm glutes brushed my thigh. That casual contact shouldn’t have felt electric, but it did. And I had permission to touch him.

Hastily, I distanced myself. He was a student. Nothing more.

I led the class through a vinyasa, flowing from down dog to plank and seal. Drew followed, seeming to get more comfortable as class progressed. He lacked the flexibility of my other students, but he made up for it in pure masculine grace. Each arch and flex threatened to distract me from the next pose. I mixed up right and left, flushing when one of my regulars corrected me.

“Sorry, everybody.”

Drew lingered after class, taking his time wiping down his mat and returning his yoga blocks to the shelves as I wished the rest of my students goodbye.

“So, what did you think?” I braced myself for a less-than-stellar review.

There was no way he’d suddenly decided to try yoga without an ulterior motive. Even if it was just to get Violet off his back for not using his gift certificate.

“That was a great way to start my morning. Thank you.” His deep voice radiated sincerity. He did look more relaxed. The tiny frown lines that made his face appear so serious had eased.

Pleasantly surprised, I grinned. “You’re very welcome.”

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee as an apology for waiting so long to try?”

“There’s no need to apologize, but I wouldn’t mind a cup. Did you want to walk down to Harbor Brews? I have an hour before my next class.”

A flash of something I couldn’t read distorted his features before he nodded.

I locked the front door, snuggling further into my fleece. The sun was up, but it was hidden behind a bank of clouds. Drew put a hand to my elbow as we picked our way across a section of sidewalk where the roots of a large tree had created cracks.

The morning ferry line was full. Cars waited for the first boat from Anacortes to arrive, its passengers to disembark, and for those on island to start their journey to the mainland. The downtown eateries and coffee shops buzzed with activity as ferry riders grabbed a snack for the boat, and Harbor Brews was no different.

“Do you want a latte or a drip? How do you take your coffee?” Drew asked.

“Either is fine. I’m easy.”

He gave me a dark look. “Tell me what you want, Sunny Girl, so I can get it for you.”

I bit my bottom lip. He looked so serious. Like something as simple as my coffee preference mattered to him. Was this Drew’s idea of flirting? If so, it was surprisingly effective.

“A regular coffee with lots of cream and a sweetener sounds good this morning.”

“Grab a seat, and I’ll bring it to you.” He turned on his heel, striding for the counter, ignoring the lineup of people. He slid behind Zach and Isa, snagged two mugs and filled them from the carafe. He doctored each cup, returning with steaming mugs.

“I would have waited,” I said, feeling guilty he’d bypassed the line.

He shrugged, seeming immune to Zach’s glare and the handful of other patrons who’d raised brows when he acted like he owned the place. “It’s fine. Zach runs Harbor Brews. He’s family.”

I envied the way he took it for granted. That you could rely on family.

“What about everyone else waiting for their coffee?” I asked.

“When they’ve put up with Zach for thirty years, they can get free coffee too,” he promised, adding a broad grin.

The switch to playful from the usually serious man made me chuckle, shaking my head. “You seem to get along well.”

“Usually. So long as he keeps his flirting focused on his own dates.” He said it just as I sipped.

Coffee dribbled out of my mouth, my jaw slack. Hastily, I mopped the drops of dark liquid off my sweatshirt. Any shot I had at appearing cool had died, but I still put on a brave face. I arched a brow. “Is this a date?”

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I didn't know what I wanted the answer to be. Some of my wariness had faded, watching him flow through poses this morning. He was still too perceptive. But his earnestness was appealing. There was a solidness to Drew that was reassuring. Maybe it was the frowns. Trusting men who smiled was no longer my strong suit. But Drew's grouchy little brow furrows sent an unwilling flutter through my belly. And for the first time I wondered—what would it be like to let someone see behind the lies? What if, instead of turning away, he offered to help?

“Only if I'm doing it right.”

My pulse stuttered. I held his gaze, not letting the urge to smile betray me. “I'm not sure how swoony I find stealing coffee.”

“Meaning I need to steal something bigger to win you over?”

I rolled my eyes. What was it with men and size?

“I never took you as someone who embraced the criminal element, Mr. Search and Rescue.” That was part of his appeal. Drew seemed steady. Safe. But was a man ever really safe?

His dark eyes turned serious. “I know you're teasing, but it's less about that. Harbor Brews is as much mine as Island Salt is Zach's. I've pitched in at the counter more than once.”

I tried to imagine him taking coffee orders. Drew was downright verbose with me this morning. Usually, he was gruff to the point of basic hand gestures. I'd only heard his



voice once or twice before our hiking misadventure. It was difficult to reconcile the reclusive farmer with the dutiful brother who'd fake friendly to run the coffeehouse. But maybe duty was the key.

"I'll do anything for the people I care about. I know where the line is. And I know who I'll cross it for."

His words echoed my thoughts eerily. They also brought up past regrets. Past mistakes. I'd crossed a line. An unforgivable one.

"Anyone who asks you to violate your principles isn't showing you the same regard you show them."

He seemed to be considering my words, rolling them around. He drew out the moment, sipping on his coffee.

"Honey, the whole point is you won't need to ask." His voice was throaty, his brown eyes soft.

Drew's words felt eerily like a promise. I shifted in my seat, taking a large gulp of my coffee for strength. Something about his claim made me want to confess what had brought me to the island.

He exuded strength. Purpose. Stability. Things I craved like candy. But was I drawn to the man or what he represented? It wouldn't be fair to cling to him like a barnacle if, at the end of the day, I was using him. I'd been used, and he deserved better than that. Better than my craptastic past landing in his present.

"What did you think of your first yoga class?" I moved to a safer topic.

He gave me a boyish grin that stretched his cheeks. His dark beard bracketed the

smile, making his teeth blinding white in contrast. Damn it, even his smiles looked trustworthy.

“Surprisingly peaceful. Not sure why, but I expected more impossible feats of flexibility that would make me feel foolish. I’ve gotta admit, I feel good. Downright limber.”

“I’m glad.”

“But I might have to book with one of your other instructors in the future.”

“Why’s that?”

“You’re a beautiful woman. Distracting as hell. If I’m going to focus on the four corners of my mat and my own body and breath, it’ll be a thousand times easier without you in the room.”

I balled up my napkin and pelted him with it. Better than admitting I mixed up my right and left sides with him in class. He shrugged and held up his hands in surrender.

“Why did you have to make it weird? Bad news for you, my other instructor is drop-dead gorgeous.”

He ran a hand through his hair, giving me a shame-faced grin. “Not a problem, because she won’t be you.”

It was possibly the most awkward compliment of my life.

“I don’t even know what to do with that,” I admitted.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. I didn’t mean to make it awkward.

Sometimes I'm a little too honest, which is why I don't tend to talk much."

The honesty comment stung. I hadn't even been truthful about my name. While it might be easy to trust him with my secrets, he didn't deserve my mess. Even though part of me was aching to unburden myself, it wouldn't be fair to him.

Disappointment curdled my stomach, turning the coffee into a bitter stew. Wanting happiness and deserving it weren't the same thing. I couldn't drop my problems at Drew's door. Couldn't pretend they didn't lurk like a monster in the closet, ready to snatch at my ankles if I drifted too close. Drew wasn't part of my past. It was best to keep it that way. Which meant keeping him out of my present too.

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“I appreciate the coffee and the compliments, but maybe it’s best if we just stay friends.”

His eyes flashed with what I read as disappointment, but he held his lips in the semblance of a smile. “Of course. Whatever you want.”

I was lying to him. Lying to myself. Because what I really wanted was to crawl into his lap, find the shelter I’d beencraving, and spill my secrets. But if he knew the real me, he wouldn’t be impressed. And I couldn’t bear to have that spark of admiration die.

It was better to be his beautiful mystery than his up-close disaster.

### Chapter 7 – Drew

I’d opened my big fucking mouth and scared her off. Classic. I was either too much or too little. There was no in-between. No mute.

I debated sending Anya a text to apologize again, but that would likely only make things worse. She’d gulped her coffee as if her life depended on it, and I’d walked her back to the studio like a gentleman. Too bad my mouth didn’t get that message earlier.

The Sheriff’s Office was my next stop on my way to the farm. It seemed likely that an off-islander had grabbed the Pelican case through my open window, but Sue still wanted me to file an official theft report. It was damn odd. But maybe the case was too tempting, even without the key.

The sheriff came out of a meeting just as I was wrapping up and waved me down. “Hey, Drew. Is that your report?”

“Yeah, though I don’t know how much good it’ll do. I’m sorry, George.” I shrugged. “I’ve gotten too complacent. I should have at least rolled my windows up.”

He waved away my apology. “Don’t fret. It’s probably nothing exciting, just registration paperwork that fell off a random boat in the channel and floated in.”

“Still, the beach is awfully close to where we found Jordan. And the initials engraved on the case match his. Any news from the coroner?”

“You know I can’t talk about an ongoing investigation,” he chided gently.

“And you know as soon as you share the report with his family, it’ll be all over town. Maybe posted in What’s New, Friday Harbor.”

George gave a long-suffering sigh. “You’re not wrong. But it’ll be another few days before I get the preliminary and can review it with them. There was a major accident on I-5 over the weekend, and the coroner on the mainland is backed up.”

“In the meantime, has anyone reported seeing Jordan that night?”

I couldn’t help my curiosity. It didn’t sit right that Jordan had been up there in the first place. But there were scuff marks on the cliff over the beach where he’d been found. The theory that he’d had a few too many to drink and stumbled was plausible.

The sheriff shook his head. “Nah. Let me know if you hear of anyone who was up at the bluffs for sunset that night. I’d love to figure out how he got out there. His truck was parked downtown.”

“At the marina?” I asked.

George frowned. “No. Which makes things odder still. I’m wondering if he met someone who gave him a ride out there.”

“Were he and Jia having problems?” It felt disloyal to Rae to ask, prying into her family’s business, but I didn’t like the whole situation. A secret girlfriend would explain a lot.

“Not according to her. She seemed genuinely devastated when I went to notify her. I had my share of run-ins with Jordan, but they were minor. It’s a crying shame. She’s got two kids and a Coast Guard deployment scheduled for this summer. His death couldn’t come at a worse time for the family.”

George glanced at his watch. “I’ve got to get to a budget meeting with the commissioners. Keep an eye out and let me know if that case turns up?”

I nodded, sketching him a quick salute.

I spent the rest of the day working in the evaporation houses, which were built a lot like greenhouses. The sun provided the heat to distill the briny water, crystalizing it into a mix of salt and minerals. It was a hurry-up-and-wait kind of farming.

March’s batch was nearly ready to process, the top of the tanks looking like frozen ice, trapping brine beneath the surface. It was a lot of work for two hundred and fifty pounds of salt. When people pictured the glamor of running your own business, they probably didn’t picture me scraping away with my shovel at harvest.

Tired and dirty, I removed my shoes at the back door. “Hey, Gran. What are you up to tonight?”

She arched one white brow. “I’ve got a date.”

“On a Monday night?”

She waved a hand. “I’m retired; I can do whatever the hell I want.”

“True.”

She pointed at me. “You’re young. You should be doing whatever the hell you want too.”

“Minus that pesky working thing.”

“Quit using it as an excuse.”

I rubbed my chest. “Ouch, Gran. You’re hitting hard tonight.”

“You can take it.”

“And on that positive note, I’m going to make myself dinner. You sure you don’t want anything?”

“Nah. We’re getting hot dogs at the cocktail bar.”

“Just tell me it’s not with Mr. Reyes.”

“No comment.”

I guess if it meant an end to their feud, I’d take it, but I’d just as soon she didn’t date our neighbor. Somehow, I doubted Gran’s idea of courting rituals would work for me. Planting naked statuary in Anya’s lawn would probably only enhance my creep factor. Though maybe I should study Gran’s ways. If she managed to date her next-door enemy after her antics and smart mouth, there had to be hope for me.



First, I'd scared Anya this morning. She'd tried to hide it, but emerging from the park like a stalker had made her nervous. I didn't mean to alarm her, but that's what I did.

Class had been a gentle kind of torture. Trying to relax with her melodious voice in my ear, her touching me to make adjustments meant a constant battle to keep my sweatpants from revealing more than I intended about exactly how not relaxed I was. Asking her for coffee was my karmic attempt at an apology, and it'd backfired. Blurting out how beautiful she was seemed like a good idea, right until I vomited the words out.

She'd probably tell my sister. Blacklist me from future gatherings. Maybe it was good that I liked the hermit life. It was all I was good for. I opened my big mouth, and nonsense fell out.

My phone buzzed.

Zach: Let's grab dinner tonight.

Drew: So long as it's not at the cocktail bar, I'm in.

Lee: What did booze ever do to you?

Zach: Don't answer that.

Drew: Gran is at the cocktail bar.

Lee: The brewery it is.

Zach: I'm inviting Clay to join us.

I grunted and grabbed my keys. Trust my brother to destroy my plans to become a

loner. At least hanging out with the guys would keep me out of trouble. Next time I saw Anya, I'd do better. Lean into my meager helping of Fenwick family charm and smooth things over.

## Chapter 8 – Anya

Picking up my phone at the end of my last class was a mistake. If I'd thought my impromptu coffee date with Drew wouldn't get around, I'd underestimated the island grapevine. And Zach. Maybe he held a grudge against Drew for flouting his authority and coffee line. Maybe he just had a big mouth.

Rae: What's this I hear about you and Tall, Dark, and Broody (TDB) having a cozy coffee date this morning?

Vi: Rude. That's my brother you're talking about.

Lucy: I call him Tall, Dark, and Booty.

Rae: lol

Lucy: Who can blame me? That ASS. Who's rude now?

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Vi: You. Always you. I thought Rae was classier.

Rae: Sweet summer child...

Rae: I thought YOU accepted that TDB and CAD were top-notch island thirst traps by now?

Vi: I'm afraid to ask.

Lucy: Captain America's ...

Vi: Luce, if you say dick, I'm going to talk up your private glass blowing lessons to every annoying tourist who comes into the shop.

Vi: You'll owe Gran your firstborn by the time you buy enough weed gummies off her to keep your cool.

Rae: Get your mind out of the gutter.

Vi: MY mind???

Rae: DIMPLES – Captain America's Dimples

Maybe I shouldn't have given Drew a hard time this morning. My friends were just as thirsty and not shy about sharing it. I squirmed. Just because I hadn't used the nicknames didn't mean I hadn't heard them. At least the code name chat distracted them from any questions for me. But the minute they got me in person, I'd be toast.

Ignoring the whole exchange and pretending like I didn't see it was my best bet.

I walked home, my two-block commute one of the best things about the island. It was a far cry from the traffic I'd left behind.

"Hey," Violet greeted me, looking up from her book on the couch. "The gang suggested we meet up at the brewery for dinner tonight. Cheese curds are calling my name. Can you join us?"

I bit my lip. Avoiding an interrogation would be impossible if I walked into the lion's den, but: cheese curds.

"Sure, just let me change."

Slipping out of my yoga outfit and into a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved screen-printed tee of a kraken devouring a ferry took only a few seconds. I ran a brush through my hair and freshened my lip tint.

"Did you have a busy day?" I asked as we walked down the hill.

The brewery was a block beyond the ferry overflow lot. Close enough we could see it from the house.

Vi shrugged. "Good sales, considering it's not peak season yet. I'm experimenting with some new recipes using our salt blends for summer, so that's keeping me busy. What about you?"

"I'm grateful for so many regulars. I'm working on a promo for the marathon to try to attract a few runners for a pre-run class."

"Yeah, I don't think I can entice them with a pre-run scone." She rubbed her hands

together. “But afterward? They’re all mine.”

In June, the local market hosted a half-marathon. It brought a flood of runners to the island for the weekend and unofficially started the summer tourist season.

“Does the route still go by the farm?” I asked.

Vi smiled wryly. “Yep. And if your real question is if Gran is going to sit on a lawn chair in her truck bed with giant signs to heckle the runners, the answer is bet on it.”

Violet’s grandmother was a local legend for a reason. She’d founded the Fenwick family empire as a young widow, finding her way with grit and a sense of humor. Her strong personality and sense of self were something I admired.

“I want to be her when I grow up.”

My friend rolled her eyes. “Be careful what you wish for. I love her, but she’s a handful. If she hadn’t babysat the sheriff when he was a kid, I’m sure she wouldn’t get away with half the crap she does.”

The brewery was busy, and I was glad to see Rae had already arrived and staked out a table. A very large table.

“Is it just us tonight?” I asked, suspiciously. Maybe I should have paid more attention to their text messages.

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“Zach’s joining us. I’m not sure about anyone else.”

I smelled a rat. Vi wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Hey, Rae.” I slid into a chair next to our friend. “Who all is joining us tonight?”

“Us and Lucy, Vi’s brothers, Lee, and that park ranger from dinner at your place.”

My shoulders relaxed. There would be plenty of people around. No need to have awkward conversation with Drew. We could just forget about our morning together and go on with life. I’d pretend I never found him attractive. Never considered giving up my self-imposed exile from the dating pool.

Drew paused at the host station, as if my thoughts had summoned him. Zach hovered behind him. Drew looked good. Too good. Freshly showered and shaved, his hair slicked back with moisture, he’d tossed on jeans and a navy hoodie. I squirmed, the flash of awareness making me wish the chair by me was already taken.

He ate up the ground between us in five large strides and claimed the seat next to me, one large paw clasping the chair back.

“May I?” Drew asked.

So polite. Denying him would be churlish. But having him sit so close would be torture. I was entirely too aware of him.

Zach slid into the chair his brother wanted with dimples flashing. The flair of

mischievous in his brown eyes told me he knew exactly what he was doing to his older brother.

“Hey, Anya. Good to see you.”

Drew hulked over his brother, glowering down at him. “That was my chair.”

Zach looked up at him, his expression angelic. “And this morning, it was my coffee and my business. All’s fair, brother dear.”

“I’ll remember this.” Drew kept his voice low, but the threat was clear. My lips twitched. Zach looked entirely too pleased with himself.

Clay and Lee arrived, clustering at the other end of the table with Drew. We ordered drinks and food before conversation turned to island gossip.

“Has anyone heard more about the investigation into Jordan’s accident?” Vi asked.

Questioning if we could confirm it was an accident danced on the tip of my tongue, but one look at the sorrow pinching Rae’s features made me pull back.

“I saw the sheriff yesterday. They may have a wait for the coroner’s report, then a longer wait for the tox screen. Something about a backlog at the lab,” Drew said.

“The rangers have been chatting up visitors at sunset, but no one reports seeing him that night,” Clay said.

“Has anyone talked to his business partner, Brandon?” Lee asked.

“He hasn’t been around the marina,” Rae reported. “Their boat is in its slip.”

“What about Jordan’s wife? Has she heard from Brandon? Wouldn’t he want to pay his respects?” I asked.

“Maybe he’s off island somewhere?” Vi suggested. “I think he has family in Bellingham.”

“It’s damned odd,” Lucy said.

“I hope none of you will go out to the bluffs alone to watch the sunset.” Drew looked at me, eyes hard, then at his sister. “Call one of us to go with you.”

His overbearing attitude should have made me bristle. I was my own woman. I’d survived hairier situations than he could probably imagine. But part of me relished feeling cared for. How long had it been since someone thought of my safety? Had they ever?

“I doubt there’s a killer pushing random islanders off the cliffs at sunset,” Violet admonished, shaking her head. “Drew, I love you, but you’re a bit much.”

“He’s got a point,” Lee said gruffly.

Vi rolled her eyes. “Don’t you start. Of course you see murderers behind every tree trunk. It’s practically in your job description.”

A muscle ticked in Lee’s jaw as he stared Violet down, something dark brewing in his gaze that I struggled to name. “Some of those trails get dicey. There’s nothing wrong with having a buddy along for safety. What if I like sunsets?”



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He should have known better than to argue with a woman who had three older brothers. Violet's face flushed, a sure sign she was about to let loose.

"A buddy system is always a good idea in the parks," Clay jumped in, his voice affable and calm. "There's all sorts of wildlife to be wary of, not just the human variety."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "I doubt one of our red foxes herded Jordan over a cliff."

"I've seen some weird shit in the parks service."

"Like what?" I asked, desperate to move beyond talk of killers and falls.

"A man stumbled out of the forest at my last post in half a Bigfoot costume."

"Was he looking to make a love connection?" Zach joked.

Clay arched a dark brow. "Forty minutes later, I kid you not, a woman trekked out in the other half."

"I'll take that as a yes," Zach said.

"And don't even get me started on the parks service Yelp and TripAdvisor reviews." Clay shook his head, expression rueful. "We read them all, and it's impossible to keep a straight face over some. Can you imagine saying you thought the park employees should train the wildlife to hang out near the parking lot for visitors? And for our favorite local national park:OK, Americans, Brits did better. Not that

interesting.” He chuckled. “I guess we can’t make everyone happy. We’re not tacos.”

Clay’s stories took some of the sting out of Lee and Violet’s sparring, but I was aware of Drew’s gaze on me. Sure, he’d called me beautiful. But would he still find me so attractive if he knew the truth? Keeping my distance was the best way to stay safe. And to keep him safe too.

## Chapter 9 – Drew

“I’ll walk you home.” I said it to Violet, but I meant it for Anya.

She’d looked disturbed by our earlier talk about safety on the cliffs. Granted, the most dangerous thing they might face on their three-block walk was an out-of-control moped driver, and that was unlikely since the rental place had closed for the day, but I wanted to see them safely home.

Zach opened his mouth, no doubt to offer to walk them too, and I glowered. Maybe I wasn’t fooling him, but if he interfered again, I’d make him regret it. Gran only thought she cornered the market on family pranks. Just because I didn’t engage often didn’t mean I didn’t follow through. I just never got caught.

Violet gestured to Lee. “Unless Lee drove, his path takes him right by the house too.”

Lee was smarter than Zach. “I’ll catch up with you later. I’m going to walk along the water for a few minutes before I head home. I have a plot point I’m wrestling with, and that usually helps me think.”

Was it my imagination that Vi looked disappointed? I peered more closely at my sister. I didn’t think she and Lee were close. Did she want to change that? They bickered just as much as we did. We didn’t hang out as much as we did when we were younger, but I still considered him like another brother. Frowning, I watched my

friend take off toward the harbor.

Clay offered Lucy, Rae, and Zach a ride, which they gladly accepted. A weak drizzle had started. Not enough to soak us, but enough to make us uncomfortably damp.

“Here,” I said, shrugging out of my hoodie and offering it to Anya.

“This is becoming a bad habit,” she said, but she accepted my fleece, shrugging into it and popping the hood up over her hair.

“If you offer me your shirt, I’m telling Mom on you,” Vi warned, laughing when I rolled my eyes.

“I’m not planning to walk through town half-naked.”

“And yet, if I were Anya, I still think you’d offer,” she mumbled.

I pretended not to hear her, charging up the hill toward their house. Vi and Anya scrambled to keep up with me, and I cut my pace.

Vi unlocked the back door.

“Lock it behind you.”

Vi rolled her eyes, shaking her head.

“Thanks for the jacket,” Anya said, handing it back. The misty drizzle had coated her lashes in tiny droplets, making me want to touch them. Wipe the moisture away. She swayed closer, and every sense went on alert.

“You’re welcome.” It came out more gruffly than I’d intended. “I meant what I said

earlier.”

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Her face scrunched in confusion. “About what?”

“If there’s somewhere you want to go. Hiking. Sunset watching. Whatever. I’ll take you.”

Her smile was soft. “That’s sweet, but unnecessary.”

“As friends of course.” I didn’t want her to think I’d ignored her earlier edict about our relationship. Maybe she wasn’t ready to date. Maybe she wasn’t interested in me. It didn’t matter. I still cared about her safety. I couldn’t explain the protective urge that drove me. Couldn’t put my finger on what was wrong, but something didn’t fit. She had no relationship with Jordan Dawkins that I knew of. So why did her finding his body have such an impact on me?

Was it the circumstances or the woman? There was an almost imperceptible undercurrent of fear running behind her blue eyes. Had it always been there, or had Saturday’s discovery sparked it? I didn’t know much about Anya’s past. She’d simply showed up on island a year ago, first as the new yoga instructor Vi raved about, then eventually as her roommate and the studio’s new owner.

“Thanks, Drew.”

It was a gentle dismissal, but a dismissal just the same. I ushered her under the shelter of the back porch, sliding open their back door. She stepped over the threshold, closing the door and toeing off her shoes.

“Lock the door, honey, so I don’t have to worry about you both.” I waited a beat,

supervising as she flipped the latch. Flimsy, but better than nothing. Tomorrow, I'd get a dowel from the hardware store and drop it off.

I sketched a salute, slipping into my hoodie for the walk back to my truck. The mix of petrichor and Anya's subtle floral perfume comforted me as I trudged through the mist.

Gran paused her show as I dropped my keys on the entry table. From experience, I knew better than to look at her screen. She seemed to delight in watching porn in the living room. I bought her a TV for her bedroom for Christmas, but it didn't matter. I think she liked scandalizing me almost as much as she liked the smut.

She took in my jeans and sweatshirt in one sweeping glance, shaking her head. "I may have to rethink your motto. Have you looked it up yet?"

"Nope."

She sighed. "And here I thought you were my favorite grandchild."

"Last week at family dinner you called Zach your favorite," I pointed out.

"Yes. Last week he was. He hooked me up with a new grow light for ... gardening."

I snorted gently. She'd banned me from her tool shed a decade ago. I left any "gardening" support to Zach.

"This week, it was gonna be all you. I thought you were finally going to embrace your destiny. Live a little. Word is you had coffee just yesterday with that sweet friend of your sister's, but do I see her here?" Gran snorted. "I do not." Her piercing gaze skewered me. "You live like a hermit. It's not healthy."

“I’m fine, Gran. Just busy.”

“You’ve taken on too much responsibility.”

I raised both brows, surprised she could say that with a straight face. “Like you should talk. Didn’t you start up the salt farm in your twenties?”

Her jaw tightened. “I had to. That was survival.” She gestured to me. “This? This is comfort zone. You need to get out of yours.” She drew herself up to her full height, expression serious. “It’s time for you to move out, Drew.”

My grandmother loved her pranks. They were legendary. This had to be one of them.

“Very funny, Gran. I need to be here for work.”

“No, you don’t. If anything, you work too much.”

“Mom and Dad are retired.”

“Yes, and it’s a blessing to have them travel and get out of my hair. But you’re not taking advantage of their absence to do any of the things young men do.”

“I’m in my thirties, Gran.”

“Exactly. Don’t let more time pass you by. *Nudus currere et loqui sordida.*”

I threw up my hands. “Fine. If I look up this so-called motto you want me to adopt, will you stop trying to throw me out of my house?”

Frustration filled me. Mostly at the realization that she could do it. Kick me out of my home. She owned the farmhouse. The surrounding land. Most of what we had was in

my grandmother's name. I could be homeless and jobless at her whim.



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She'd always been a tough cookie, but not with me. I was one of her treasured grandkids. Sure, she goofed around, but she loved me.

"Looking it up would be a good start. But I think it's going to take more than that. It's time for you to pack up your things, Drew. I'm evicting you. It's for your own good."

"Tonight?"

"Tomorrow," she relented. "Don't make me call the sheriff."

I couldn't believe she was serious. It had to be a joke.

"Why?" I asked. Her edict seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Because I love you."

Arguing with her when she got like this was pointless. I could only hope a good night's sleep would change her mind. Or a call with my folks. They'd chosen a fine time to hare off to Europe for three weeks. I wasn't sure what country they were in, let alone which time zone. Maybe my mom could talk Gran down from whatever plot she was trying to implement, kicking me out.

"Does this impact Island Salts?" I asked, trying to hide my hurt and confusion.

"Drew, honey, I just want more for you than this farm and the business. Keep working. But find a new place to live. You need space of your own. Hanging out with an old lady like me isn't good for your social life."

“Pitching a tent outside the evaporation houses isn’t going to do much for it either,” I pointed out.

“No, Drew. I want you off the property, not camping at work. Find a place in town, or out at Roche Harbor.”

“Gran, tourist season is just around the corner. Everything is already booked.”

She shrugged. “Then I guess you’re gonna have to get creative.”

She unpaused her show, and I stomped up the stairs. It was childish, but I couldn’t believe she was kicking me out. Maybe I’d been lazy, choosing to live at the farm, but it was conveniently close to work. And aside from a few years at school, it’d always been my home. I loved my parents. Loved my job. Never went through a rebellious phase like Zach. We were all relieved when he bought Nauti by Nature and moved out to the marina.

Real estate on island wasn’t cheap. I’d been saving for a while, probably enough for a down payment, but finding a place to buy didn’t just happen overnight. Rentals were rarer than hen’s teeth this time of year. Anything decent was already booked. I couldn’t kick one of our renters out of their home. That left me freeloading off other family, at least temporarily.

Zach lived on his sailboat. Unless I wanted to cuddle with him in his V-berth, that was a no-go. Even I wasn’t masochist enough to try to couch surf on his tiny galley bench. Cole lived too far away. Vi already had a roommate in Anya, but their couch might be my only option. I briefly considered asking Lee, but he didn’t have a guest room. Staying with him would be a major imposition. He guarded his privacy closely and worked wild hours.

Pride made it impossible to beg. Gran had a point. Other than the few years I’d gone

away for school, I'd lived at the farmhouse my whole life. It was time to step out on my own.

Crashing at Vi's place was my best option. And my worst. It wouldn't be a big deal, except I'd just agreed to friendship with Anya. Friends helped friends. Letting me couch surf fit the criteria. Classic friendship move. Except the part where I had feelings for her. Which made sharing the same walls, the same air, seeing her every morning and evening, not just friendly, but dangerous.

No matter how much I told myself I could keep my distance and stay detached, being so close to her would test every boundary we put in place. One slip, one moment of weakness, and I'd be over the line, making a fool of myself. Breaking my promises.

Keeping my distance was the only answer. I'd be the ghostly third roommate, up before dawn and out late. She didn't deserve to feel uncomfortable in her own home, and I couldn't afford to let her unravel me.

## Chapter 10 – Anya

Violet hung around after Wednesday's morning yoga class. Usually, she took off with a quick wave. She had a short turnaround from the end of class to opening The Salty Pantry for the day. Today, she lurked by the active wear, perusing black leggings I knew she didn't need.

"What's up?" I asked after my last student left.

"I did something you might not like."

"What?" I asked cautiously.

Violet was a stellar roommate. Clean. Quiet. We'd become fast friends. I'd forgive

her just about anything at this point. She'd taken me in when I showed up on the island and stumbled into her shop, asking about rentals close to the studio.

“Gran kicked Drew out.”

“Shewhat? What did he do?” I couldn’t imagine them fighting. Scratch that. I could, but not about Drew living at the farm. He practicallywasthe farm. I’d seen more of him in town the last couple days than I had the entire time I’d lived in Friday Harbor.

“He says she wants him to have more of a social life, but I called her, and she said he was cramping her style. Knowing Gran, both versions are true.”

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“She’d really kick him out for that?” I asked, aghast. I’d lost any illusions that Gran was a sweet little old lady the one time I’d come to visit with Vi and found her making prank calls to the bar downtown that had issued the twin insults of cutting her off and calling Drew to come cart her home. But turning out her own grandson?

Violet shrugged. “My folks are traveling for a few weeks. She may have seized her opportunity.”

“She wants to bring a man home that badly?” I asked. “She can’t just go to his place if she wants?”

Violet chuckled. “Honestly, I’m surprised Gran hasn’t been arrested for indecent exposure by now. I think she’s too much a free spirit to even need a bed. If I had to guess, this is about pushing Drew out of the nest while my mom is gone. They’d have a knock-down drag-out if she were home.”

“Huh.” I tried to imagine it and couldn’t. Gran was a character, but Vi’s mom had earned the nickname Hurricane Vanessa by rights. Both women scared me just a bit. The difference between them was that Gran didn’t hide what she was. She proudly announced that her field of fucks was barren at regular intervals. Vanessa still played the game, but I would never go against her given a choice. If anything, I was surprised Drew and his dad had survived as long as they had in a house they shared with two strong women.

“So... long story short, Drew’s crashing on the couch for a while. Bye!” Vi darted for the door.

“Wait, what?” I barely got the words out before the door swooshed shut behind her. She didn’t even pretend to care.

Back-to-back classes kept me busy the rest of the day. By the time I locked up the studio, I was pleasantly tired but dreading the night ahead.

Part of me was sympathetic to Drew’s plight. Not that long ago, I’d been the homeless urchin looking for a last-minute rental before the height of the season. But having him on our couch, even for a couple of days, was going to make ignoring him difficult. And I needed to keep my defenses up.

I could take myself out to dinner in town to avoid him, but that would be cowardly. Besides, Drew would probably work long hours and show up late. We’d barely see him.

My thoughts turned out to be more prophetic than I’d imagined. And somehow, that was so much worse. I kept looking at the clock, expecting Drew to show. Unable to focus on the K-drama *Vi* and I were bingeing.

“Relax. Drew texted me. He’s hanging out down at Harbor Brews. He asked me to leave extra bedding on the couch for him.”

I picked at the fringe on my blanket, avoiding *Vi*’s eyes. She already noticed too much.

He still hadn’t arrived by the time we turned off the TV. I frowned. Harbor Brews should have closed already.

“You can have the bathroom first. I’ll wait up for Drew.”

Why did I feel like a child being sent to bed early? My conflicting emotions were

enough to make me feel foolish. I'd told him I wanted friendship. So why the urge to stay up, make sure he got home okay?

Shaking off the impulsive need to argue, I brushed my teeth. Not exactly dawdling, but not speeding through my bedtime routine either. When I couldn't stall any longer, I called a quick goodnight to Vi and turned off my light.

So what if part of me listened for Drew, only relaxing when I heard his deep voice chatting with his sister in the living room?

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Thursday morning, I popped out of bed, tiptoeing to the bathroom. Vi slept like the dead, but I didn't want to wake Drew. Quietly, I got ready for work and slipped into the kitchen, peeking around the corner to the living room.

The couch was empty. The blankets neatly folded, a spare pillow resting on top. My palm slid over the pillow. Cool.

The pattern repeated itself all week. Under pain of death, I'd never admit I started setting my alarm five minutes earlier each day, trying to catch him. Somehow, he managed to appear for the night just after I went to bed and slip away before I awoke each day. Only the smell of his aftershave lingered in his wake.

It was maddening.

And confusing.

Because why was it irritating me so much?

We'd agreed to a simple friendship. I had no claim on his time. He should have been

the perfect third roommate, more apparition than man. But it felt like he was avoiding me. And that hurt.

Thursday night, I'd just slipped beneath the covers when I heard him moving around in the living room. I could pop out for a glass of water. Say hi. But just as I talked myself into it, the noises stopped.

Dammit.

It'd be rude to wake him. And what was I doing, stalking him?

He'd gotten so far under my skin, it felt like a thorn pushing from beneath my soft flesh every time I missed seeing him. At the same time, I was sleeping better than I had in months. Even if I didn't interact with Drew, his presence permeated the house without leaving any real trace of him behind. The toilet seat was always down. He tucked his stuff out of sight. The blankets were neatly folded each morning. He should have been easy to ignore. Maybe it was the way the kitchen trash and recycling were magically emptied every few days, or scent of fresh coffee when I woke up, but I felt cared for. Safe. Secure. Possibly for the first time ever.



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Slowly, I drifted off to sleep, the silence from the living room somehow echoing loudly in my mind.

### Chapter 11 – Drew

“You look like hell.”

I yawned. Zach wasn’t wrong. The last few weeks I hadn’t just been burning the candle at both ends, I’d set the whole fucking house on fire. Between working on the farm and helping Zach at Harbor Brews before and after work, it felt like a victory just to be upright.

“Thanks.”

“Not that I mind all the extra help, but I think it’s time you find something else to do with your evenings.” He gestured to the book in my hands. “At this rate, I’m not going to have any inventory left for customers.”

I set down the latest of Lee’s novels on the side table next to my chair, hiding a smile when Zach’s nose wrinkled. He hated it when I cracked the spines. Harbor Brews was technically closed for the night, but I’d taken to reading late before stumbling home to crash on Vi’s couch.

“Consider the books payment for all the evenings I covered last week so you could go sailing with Rae.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate it. The weather’s been too good to be stuck inside,

but you're killing yourself." He held my gaze. "Would it really be that bad if you spent just one evening at Vi and Anya's?"

Only pure stubbornness had kept me away this long. Gran and I had that in common. I thought if she learned I was couch-surfing with Vi and working every waking hour at Harbor Brews, she'd relent. At least until the busy season ended, and I could find a real rental option and move out for good.

Sleeping in such close proximity to Anya was torture.

"Why don't you make yourself useful there for a change? Make them your famous chili?" Zach suggested.

He was just trying to get rid of me. But his idea wasn't half-bad. I owed Vi and Anya dinner for putting up with me.

"Tomorrow," I promised.

Vi: We're going to bed. You coming home soon or should I lock up?

By tacit agreement, Vi let me know when she and Anya were done in the living room for the night. Maybe she sensed the tension every time she brought up Anya's name. I was doing my best to live up to my word. If avoiding time alone with Anya made me a coward, so be it.

Drew: Be there in 5.

"That's my cue. 'Night."

Zach shook his head slowly from side to side, the shadow of something that might have been pity in brown eyes the same shade as my own. I held back a gentle snort.

He should save those sorry eyes for himself. He lived next door to a woman who was perfect for him. And in a long-distance relationship with someone else.

My pace heading up the hill to Vi and Anya's was slower than usual, weariness dragging at my feet. Vi's couch wasn't the most comfortable to begin with. Sleeping on it was no picnic. I was nearly desperate enough to make a post on What's New, Friday Harbor and hope a local would take pity on me.

My own efforts to find a rental kept hitting snags. You'd think after living my whole damn life on the island, I'd make the ideal tenant, but the one rental application I put in was denied. Probably because our neighbor and Gran's on-again off-again arch nemesis owned the property. If her goal was to get me out from underfoot so she could play naked games with the old coot, I thought he could do his part by letting me lease his old house on the outskirts of town. But apparently, he didn't want a Fenwick living on his land.

Vi looked up from the couch as I took off my shoes at the back door, flipping the lock. "Hey. You look beat." She yawned. "I'm going to turn in."

"Thanks, Vi. I'm grateful you've let me stay."

She wrinkled her nose. "To be honest, if I didn't see you before bed, I wouldn't believe you really are staying here. You know you could spend an evening with us, right? You don't have to banish yourself to Harbor Brews or wherever you go every night."

"I know. I'm helping Zach. This is for the best."

She arched one brow. "Really? Are you helping Zach, or are you keeping Isa from enough hours to buy the car she's had her eye on?"

I grimaced. I hadn't thought about how volunteering at Harbor Brews might be impacting Zach's other staff. My shoulders slumped. No matter what I did, it was the wrong thing. Hang out here and risk crossing the line with Anya, or try to make myself useful at Harbor Brews, and Isa doesn't get all of her hours.

"Have dinner with us tomorrow." Vi smirked. "Consider it part of the rent you're not paying me."

I shot her the bird. She flipped me two in return, backing out of the living room with both brows raised.

"Later, Freeloader."

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My siblings' not-so-subtle urging to change course notwithstanding, they had a point. I needed to find some kind of middle ground with Anya. Something between total avoidance and hanging on her every word.

I brushed my teeth and pulled on my sleep pants, spreading the sheets and blankets across the couch in minutes. The lump in the second cushion welcomed me like an old friend, reminding me not to get too comfortable.

Straining to hear anything beyond the usual night sounds, my eyes gritty from lack of sleep, I slowly succumbed to the awkward peace I'd found on Vi's sofa.

It wasn't exactly home or comfortable, but it did let me ensure that she and Anya stayed safe. There was more than a flimsy lock keeping the world out. There was me.

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A bird chirping woke me from the first sound slumber I had all week.

"Fuuuuuck." The bird meant I was late. I usually tried to be out of the house by dawn. It had been a grueling few weeks, but worth it to keep my promise.

"Well, good morning to you too."

"Shit," I bit out. I didn't mean for Anya to hear that. Didn't mean for anyone to hear it.

"Here." She plunked a cup of coffee on the table beside the couch, the motion jerky. Like she was mad. Because I'd overstayed my welcome?

“Sorry,” I rumbled, my voice still scratchy with sleep. “Didn’t mean to still be here.”

She huffed and turned on her heel, flouncing toward the kitchen.

I sat up, gulping coffee, still groggy from my too-short night on the couch. Anya moved around the kitchen, dressed for work in black leggings and a pink tunic-length workout tank that left her toned arms bare. Each move was efficient as she pulled half-and-half from the fridge and doctored her own cup of coffee.

Brooding on the couch wouldn’t get me out of her hair. I clutched my mug to my chest and sidled into the kitchen with my duffel bag over one shoulder.

“Okay if I use the bathroom?” I asked, wary of her mood. “I’m sorry about earlier. Wasn’t quite awake yet. I’ve been trying to get up early so I stay out of your way.”

“I noticed.” Her face scrunched up in a cute frown. Like I’d offended her. Not my intention.

“How about I make it up to you? I’ll cook for you and Vi tonight.”

She looked up from her toast, her expression curious. “You cook?” Her gaze seemed to get stuck somewhere south of my neck, and I bit back a smile. Maybe I should have pulled on a tee shirt before approaching her in the kitchen. It would have been the gentlemanly thing to do. Fatigue was messing with my head. Making me take risks.

“Not as well as you and Vi, but I get by.”

She dragged her eyes back up to mine. “Okay.”

Since my version of “good morning” had been a string of curses, I took her cautious

acceptance as a win.

“I’m gonna get dressed and get to work. Text me if you need anything from the store. I’ll plan to swing by before dinner.”

Her second “okay” was more cheerful, more herself. Like maybe I’d wormed my way back into her good graces.

“Have a good day, honey.”

## Chapter 12 – Anya

Replaying my morning with Drew kept me from truly focusing on my classes. The distraction felt like I was betraying the very heart of what yoga was meant to be, mindful and present. Instead of thoughts passing like clouds across blue sky, visions of Drew, shirtless, kept getting stuck on repeat. Every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was him, reclined and shirtless, floating across my field of vision.

Oddly enough, my daydreams reminded me of the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling. Maybe with a little less naked peen and demonic-looking angels and more low-slung flannel pajama pants, but the vibes were still oddly horny and awe-inspiring.

Anyone who saw Drew’s broad chest and impressive shoulders, coupled with the sprinkle of chest hair that trailed down his abs and disappeared into his sleep pants, wouldn’t blame me. He’d looked positively yummy. And I was making that judgment as a friend.

I snorted. Right. Because friends absolutely thought of you in the same breath as celestial murals.

Drew’s truck was parked in our driveway when I got home.

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He looked up with a broad smile when I walked into the kitchen. “Hey, roomie.”

Well, crap. He stood in our kitchen, barefoot. Delicious smells wafted from whatever he was working on at the stove.

A half-naked Drew floated by in my mind, waving gently from his cloud. Something about the smug smile on his handsome face called me a fucking hypocrite without saying a word. Maybe I should have been more grateful for his ghost act. Drew in the flesh might be more than my horny little heart could handle. Fuck it.

“Hi,” I said faintly.

There was nothing sexier than a man cooking. His feet were braced hip-width apart, his jeans lovingly hugging the contours of his thighs. He stood tall, his shoulders relaxed and a crooked grin on his handsome face. Utterly at ease in our kitchen, as if he cooked for us every night. It was bewitching. My dad left all things kitchen to my mom and me. He’d acted like meal prep was beneath him. Not Drew. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen him look more peaceful.

“What are you making?” I asked.

“I picked up a few things at the market, and I’m cooking a big batch of chili as a thank you dinner. I appreciate you both taking me in.”

“Will you be with us much longer?”

Please say no. My fading willpower couldn’t take much more. He looked boyishly



charming, a faded black Imagine Dragons concert tee stretched across his broad shoulders.

He shook his head. I released the breath I'd been holding. Small mercies. Having him underfoot was going to test me. I'd been kidding myself, thinking the aftershave fumes and ghosting were worse. Drew, taking up space, seducing me without trying, was infinitely harder to resist.

"Here," he ushered me closer. "Taste." He held out a spoon, cupping one hand beneath so sauce didn't drip on our floor. He was solid and warm. Part of me wanted to sink closer. His forearm brushed my belly, sending a tumble of acrobats into backflips. All of me wanted to sink closer.

I nibbled delicately, testing the chili. It was rich and spicy, but not with so much heat that I'd regret it later.

"Delicious."

"Mm," he murmured, watching my mouth.

Self-consciously, I licked my bottom lip. He swayed closer, the faint scent I'd come to associate with him enveloping me. His gaze lingered on my mouth.

"Do I have chili on my face?"

He shook himself, backing off. "Nope. Go relax. Dinner will be ready when Vi gets home."

My usual routine was to shower on Wednesday nights. I had another early class on Thursdays and preferred to roll out of bed, brush my teeth, and head straight to the studio. Did I dare get naked with him only a few feet away? I swallowed. He'd turned

back to his pot of chili, stirring as if it were a magic potion he had to get just right.

I slipped into my room, gathering jeans and a sweater. While the day had been mostly sunny with puffy white clouds, the evening was already cooler.

Twisting on the shower, I let it warm, stripping out of my yoga gear. Stepping under the spray was a welcome distraction from the man in my kitchen. I focused on getting clean, but thoughts of Drew kept slipping in. Floating on his fucking cloud. Taunting me.

I could only hope he got tired of our couch soon.

But the truth was, it was nice coming home to someone for once. Violet's hours and mine overlapped, which I usually enjoyed. It meant I got some alone time but still had her companionship in the evenings. I liked that balance. But now, with Drew in the mix, it changed our dynamic. Our space wasn't just ours anymore.

I towed off, aware as I stroked the soft cotton across my skin, picking up stray droplets, that Drew was only a few feet away. Having him underfoot was going to challenge my ability to stay undiscovered. I'd made it almost a year without revealing the truth. In that time, I'd come to trust Vi and the others. But it didn't mean I was ready to tell them everything.

The way he looked at me, half admiration, half concern, kept me too wound up to focus on keeping my story straight. His dark gaze made me want to admit to sins I hadn't even committed yet. But how was I going to keep my distance when he'd given up on being a ghost? When he was living with us for real? Cooking for us?

His protective nature and SAR experience made him too eagle-eyed. Silently, I cursed Gran. Keeping my past under wraps and flying under the radar was how I stayed safe. She and her grandson were threatening everything I'd built. Everything I

was.

But part of me wanted to risk it all for one more smile from him.

## Chapter 13 – Drew

Chili was a terrible idea. Who needed more heat when I had Anya showering only a few feet away? One flimsy door separated us. I could hear the shower spray pounding against the floor of the tub.

I pulled open the fridge, enjoying the cool breeze as I pretended not to see the sour cream and cheese. I just needed a minute.

The shower shut off. Meaning Anya was naked. So close.

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Yep. Just another minute. I gritted my teeth. I'd already made it awkward with Anya. She wanted a friend. Telling myself I could be that friend and believing it were two entirely different hobbies. Especially now that I'd finally searched the motto Gran wanted me to adopt: RUN NAKED AND TALK DIRTY.

Subtle, Gran was not. And while I applauded her commitment to getting me laid, I wanted more than sex. Sleeping with women had never come easy to me. Men carried the reputation for wanting disposable, easy sex, but a lot of women were no different. I wasn't built that way. Trust took time. Intimacy tooktime. Which made it incredibly out of character that I'd tried to rush things with Anya.

The fridge beeped, reminding me I was driving up Violet and Anya's power bill with each dirty thought. I grabbed what I needed and bumped it closed, just in time for Anya to emerge from the bathroom on a cloud of steam. Like an angel. Of death. Or at least the death of my good intentions.

I forced a smile, trying to look casual and not like I'd been imagining her naked. Her slick skin. Rosy curves. My throat felt like sandpaper. I swallowed, trying to produce moisture instead of just imagining it on her body. Every muscle felt taut, ready to spring into action and live out my fantasies.

"You look refreshed."

Getting out the words with some pretense of cool should earn me an award. Brother of the Year. Roommate of the Decade. Friend of Anya.

"Thanks. Need any help?"

So much help. But not any she seemed interested in providing.

“Nope. Relax. Enjoy the couch before I take it over.”

She chuckled, the sound reaching into my chest and grabbing my guts in a vise. She was warm, soft, and oh-so-kissable right now. I shifted my gaze, aware I was staring at her mouth. Pink and lush, turned up in a gentle smile. It almost begged me to touch.

“You’re a glutton for punishment. Have you started looking for someplace else to live yet, or are you hoping your grandma will relent?”

Picturing Gran was the cold shower I needed to refocus.

“Honey, the only word to describe Gran is relentless. I have better odds of sprouting wings and nesting with the federally protected murder birds than I do of getting back into the farmhouse.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Federally protected murder birds?”

“The eagles. They’re always harassing my mom’s chickens.”

“The first time I ever saw one was here in Eagle Cove,” Anya said, her lips turning up at the corners. “They are majestic.”

“And mean. Kind of like Gran. To answer your question, yes, I started looking at listings. My luck would have been better if I started a few months ago.”

“Yeah. What kind of property or living situation are you looking for?”

“One that doesn’t rely on the whims of an octogenarian.”

Anya chuckled, the soft sound making me smile. “Are you going to rent or buy?”

“Probably rent at first. Assuming I can find anything.”

“I’ll put out some feelers with my students, see what they know.”

“Thanks, Anya.” I held up my pinched fingers. “I’m this close to putting up a post on What’s New, Friday Harbor begging.”

She giggled. “That’s a post I’d like to see.” She chortled. “That’s a post I’d like to write.”

I rolled my eyes. “Get in line. I’m sure Vi would like a shot at assassinating my character for the entire island to gloat over. I can see it now: thirty-something hermit seeking new rock to crawl under.”

“Aw, Drew. You’re too hard on yourself. I’m sure you’ll find something nice.”

“Before or after I wear out my welcome here?”

Her expression sobered. Her fingers fluttered at my wrist. Like she wanted to touch but wasn’t sure of her welcome.

“We wouldn’t kick you out.” She probably meant to be reassuring, but it sent my pulse galloping like a wild stallion.

“Speak for yourself.” Anya flinched. Vi’s words startled us both. I’d been too engrossed in Anya to hear her open the backdoor. Casually, I stepped away from Anya, meeting my sister’s assessing gaze.

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“Hey, sis. Dinner’s ready when you are.”

She trudged through the kitchen and dropped heavily into a chair at the table, melting over the chair back. “Feed me. I’m exhausted.”

“Tough day?” Anya asked.

“Not terrible. I had to listen to a ten-minute diatribe from a customer who didn’t have a ferry reservation and was shocked that they were stuck on island an extra night.” Vi shrugged. “I mean, I get it. It sucks. But you came to an island. Planning for the return trip is just as important as the trip out.”

“That’s why I just don’t leave,” I said officiously.

Anya chuckled. “Be careful or you’ll be right about that WNFH post.”

“I’m just a hermit in need of a rock.”

Violet glanced between us. “I don’t think anyone on the island would consider that news.”

I dished up chili, and Anya and I took spots at the kitchen table.

“This is delicious,” Anya complimented.

I was far too old for flushed cheeks and stammering, but it still took effort to respond placidly. “Thanks.”

My sister sighed, drawing out the sound theatrically. “I guess we’ll keep you if you’re cooking for us.”

“Thanks, sis.” My tone was wry. Her lip twitched.

She turned to Anya. “Having brothers is a blessing and a curse.”

Anya cast me a sideways glance from beneath her lashes, pursing her mouth. “I wouldn’t know.”

Vi waved a hand in the air. “I forget you’re an only child. Lucky duck. What’s it like not to have to share everything?”

“Not all it’s cracked up to be.”

Something about Anya’s guarded tone made me want to protect her from further questions. She’d folded, hunching in on herself with every word about family.

“Vi, what did you really have to share?” I scoffed gently. “You were the only girl.”

“The car. Mom and Dad’s attention.” She ticked off items on her fingers. “Gran.” She scowled down at her extended middle finger. “Maybe I’m grateful for that one. Sometimes less scrutiny from her is a good thing.”

I chuckled. She wasn’t wrong. I wouldn’t be in my current predicament if it weren’t for Gran’s tendency to butt into her grandchildren’s lives.

Anya seemed to relax as conversation turned away from family dynamics and toward garden-variety small-town gossip. Vi was convinced we were getting a new Chinese restaurant, but I argued that none of our general contractors could keep a secret worth beans, and I hadn’t heard anything about a new project. I’d believe it when I saw the



grand opening sign.

After dinner, Violet yawned. “I didn’t sleep well last night, so I’m going to go rot in my bed and turn in early. You good if I abandon you for cleanup?”

I nodded, and she slipped out of the kitchen. Anya helped me with the dishes, a peaceful silence settling between us. The sun was just drifting toward the horizon, the waning rays lighting the kitchen in a gentle glow as I put the last bowl away.

“I’m too restless for TV.” She glanced outside. “It’s not dark yet. Maybe I’ll get in a walk. Do you want to join me?”

It was impossible to gauge if her offer was sincere, or if she truly wanted to be alone. Their tiny house didn’t leave us a lot of options if we stayed indoors. But given recent events, I wasn’t wild about her wandering the road overlooking the bay at dusk on her own.

“Want to see if we can catch the sunset instead?” I asked. We should have just enough time to drive out to Lime Kiln or one of the other hot spots for sunset chasers.

“Ooh. Yes... That’s a great idea. It looks like it’s going to be a good one tonight. I haven’t been out to the lighthouse in forever.”

It was probably a bad time to tell Anya her eyes sparkled prettier than any sunset. I pushed down the impulse.

“I’ll just grab my keys.”

### Chapter 14 – Anya

Drew bundled me into his truck. For once, I remembered my own jacket. A good thing, since the wind had picked up. Dinner had been more relaxed than I'd expected. Having Drew in the house and in our tiny kitchen should have made things uncomfortable, but it hadn't.

Inviting him to join me for a walk had seemed like the friendly thing to do. Especially after he'd cooked us such a nice dinner. And maybe I didn't want to just disappear into my room.

He'd spent weeks dancing around me. Avoiding me and Vi. And for what? So I could miss him. It made no sense. It made no sense.

And suddenly, I just didn't care if there was any logic to it. Maybe it was reckless to want him. To even entertain starting a new relationship when my future was uncertain.

But part of me was dying to kiss him. Feel his scruff beneath my fingers, his soft beard scraping along my neck. Something about Drew had me longing for his touch. Even if he might see too much.

He played a rock station on the radio to fill the silence as we drove out to Lime Kiln, oblivious to the storm building inside me. The state park was the perfect place to watch the sunset. An easy trail led west, weaving through the madrona trees with their red bark and waxy green leaves.

Drew parked, and we strolled through the grass to the trailhead. I huddled into my jacket, glad for its warmth. Wind whipped off the sea, bringing the scent of seaweed and brine with it. Drew kept one palm at my back as we picked our way along the dirt trail toward a small grove of madrona trees with a view of the lighthouse. That one protective gesture only heightened my curiosity. My need.

Waves lapped against the rocks below, a gentle soundtrack for our trek. Sunlight glinted off the bark as we reached the cluster of trees sheltering the picnic tables, making the madrona look like they'd been set afire.

In the distance, Lime Kiln Lighthouse stood proud on the point, limned in orange as the sun sank behind the clouds and islands to the west. Seaweed floated in the cove, and an otter popped its head up before dipping back below the waves.

“Would you like to sit or walk to the lighthouse?” Drew asked.

Did he have any idea what his deep voice did to me? I shivered, fighting back the urge to touch.

“Let's sit.”

The only break from the wind on the point was the lighthouse itself. Here, we had a bit of cover from the hillside and the trees. I sat with my back to the picnic table, breathing in the salty air. Struggling for control. Drew's thigh brushed mine as he settled next to me, and I shivered, even that brief contact more stimulation than I'd had in a long time.

Leaving everything behind, learning to exist in survival mode, had cost me more than I realized. Trust had become a luxury, and with it, the small comforts I once took for granted. The quiet solace of a hug. The steady reassurance of a hand grazing mine. Those simple pleasures were stripped away when I walked away from my old life,

leaving me starved for connection in ways I hadn't dared to admit.

Was it Drew I longed for, or simply the warmth of human touch?

With an unintelligible grumble, Drew wrapped an arm around my shoulders, turning to shelter me from the wind with his body.

Him. Definitely, him.

"This okay?"

Heaven. Hell. Nothing so mild as okay, but I nodded.

Waves lapped against the shore, bringing me peace with their ceaseless rhythm. Inevitable and somehow soothing. Drew sighed next to me, the sound of burdens discarded. I snuggled into his shoulder in silent solidarity.

For the moment, I let it be enough.

Life's problems seemed less cumbersome when you could stare at the sea. Lose yourself. No matter how difficult our individual struggles, life went on. We would too. There was peace that came from watching the sunset here that was unlike anywhere else on earth. Fiery orange turned to purples and pinks as the sun sank beyond the horizon, leaving only the memory of its glow.

Leaning into his strength, I let the natural beauty around us and the shelter of his body soothe the frightened creature I'd become. Burrowing deeper, I sought out his warmth, buoyed by the firm muscle beneath my cheek.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I murmured, unable to tear my gaze away from the last blush on the water.

Drew nuzzled at my temple, dropping a gentle kiss on my forehead. It was so soft, I could have imagined it. But the touch-starved part of my psyche clocked it like parched earth drinking in the first rain.

“Gorgeous.”

Instinct made me look up, catching his stare.

“You’re not looking at the sunset at all,” I chided, uncomfortable with the intensity in his gaze. The hint that I wasn’t alone in my inappropriate thoughts.

“Not when my friend is so fucking beautiful.”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:47 am*

The adoration in his expression brought my world to a standstill, driving out all coherent thought. My heart melted, flowing like wax through my veins, slowing everything until the moment crystalized. His dark eyes. Soft mouth. The urge to taste him overwhelmed me.

Done. I was done resisting.

I leaned forward, dragging my lips across his in the softest of kisses. It was a sweet exploration. Delicate. He kissed me back just as carefully, as if he couldn't quite believe I'd started the exchange.

Slowly, our kiss deepened, his tongue licking at the seam of my lips, urging me to open for him. I lost track of time, running my hands across his chest, savoring his warmth and the steady beat of his heart beneath my palms. He felt strong and real. Like someone I could count on. A man made of iron, not clay.

He scooted me into his lap, dropping lingering kisses on my mouth and neck. Hitting the ticklish spot behind my ear. Awash in sensation, it was easy to forget where we were. Who we were.

His body was hard beneath me. I tilted, rocking against him, yearning for more.

Any sense of self-preservation had fled at the first touch of his lips to mine.

“Park's closing, folks. Time to move it along.”

The words invaded my consciousness slowly, still too drugged from Drew's kisses to

comprehend language. Drew broke away, running soothing hands down my sides as if I were a horse he needed to gentle.

Cold air drifted between us, snapping me out of my Drew-induced haze.

“Yes, sir. We just need a moment.”

Drew’s voice was raspy, making me feel better about the fact that he managed to speak when I was still breathless. His mouth turned up on one side, his eyes mischievous as he took in my red face and labored breathing.

“Well, friend, as soon as I can walk, we can hike to the truck.”

I was the one who’d set the friends boundary, then broken it almost as swiftly. But I had help.

I bit my lip. We were heading to the house we were temporarily sharing. Would he pressure me for more? That didn’t seem like Drew. Drawing another boundary I couldn’t keep would make me a hypocrite, but I didn’t have the capacity for a real relationship right now, even if our make-out session provided ample evidence to the contrary.

Drew clasped my hand, leading me toward the lighthouse and the path to the parking lot. Where earlier, the waves had soothed me, providing solace, now they mocked my lack of self-control. They rushed the shore, just like I’d rushed into Drew’s arms.

Hello, mixed messages.

Drew sketched a jaunty salute to the park ranger as we walked past. “Bob.”

Inside, I cringed. Of course Drew knew every ranger on the island. I could only hope

for the older man's discretion. If I thought the group chat had been bad after our coffee date, it was going to blow up over getting caught kissing.

Drew ushered me up into his truck, shutting the door gently behind me.

We were halfway back to town before I worked up the courage to speak. "I want to clear the air."

"What about, darlin'?"

"I think I've given you the wrong idea about me."

"And what's that?" he asked, glancing over.

He seemed utterly calm. Like nothing major had happened at the park. Could he compartmentalize that well?

"I'm not in a great place to start a relationship. But I also really wanted to kiss you."

He grinned at me. "It's like we're twins."

I groaned. "Drew...I don't want to lead you on."

"There's something you need to know about me, Anya." He paused, as if choosing his words carefully. "You know the story of the tortoise and the hare? I'm the tortoise. I don't move fast, and I've got all the time in the world. If this is your idea of the friend zone, then I'm content to hang out for a while."

He grinned good-naturedly. "After all, it took me more than thirty years to move out of my parents' house. A year to ask you out. Left to my own devices, it'd take me a few weeks to round first base." He shrugged. "We'll go at your pace. After all,



studies show that couples who are friends for at least a year first have the most satisfying sex lives.”

“What study?”

“The one I just made up.” He added a grin that dared me to scold him.

“So, we’re just friends,” I said, as if hearing it aloud would help convince me.

“You’re my beautiful friend who can kiss me whenever she feels like it. We don’t really need labels, do we?”

He was leaving everything in my control. It should have left me heady with power, but my gut swirled with uncertainty. Part of me wanted him to demand more from me. He was letting me off the hook too easily. If he’d come on strong, demanding more than I wanted to give, it would have been easy to push him away again. But his refusal to play out the script I’d chosen left me at a loss. He’d given me a no-strings way to test things out. But did that mean the lack of strings went both ways? A flash of possessiveness washed through me.

“Do you have similar situationships around the island?”

“Nope.” He said it easily, and I believed him.

“Why me?” I asked.

“Because I like being around you. Touching you. I don’t need more until you’re ready to give it.”

“You must be the most patient man alive.”

He chuckled, the sound raw. “Honey, only when it comes to you.”

If he wasn’t the most patient man, he might be the smartest. He was giving me what I said I wanted: the space to move at my pace.

He locked his truck and ushered me inside the house. He stepped toward the couch, and I hovered in the entryway to the kitchen.

“Goodnight, friend.” I waited a beat too long, and he reached for the hem of his shirt, stripping it off over his head in one smooth motion, revealing a broad chest. Tanned and firm. My fingers tingled with the urge to touch. He tilted his chin and winked at me. Busted.

“Goodnight, Drew.”

My voice sounded like gravel. His chuckle haunted me as I scurried toward the safety of my room. It wasn’t until I plugged in my phone to charge that I saw the message. My gut clenched, gripped by an invisible fist that threatened to crush. Sweat bloomed across my body, drenching me in an instant. My fingers shook, threatening to drop my phone as I stared down at the simple words, my mind spiraling, trapped in a never-ending loop of disbelief and panic.

Unknown Caller: How’s it going, Anne-Marie? Long time, no see.

He’d found me.

## Chapter 15 – Drew

Laying my cards on the table with Anya was either brilliance or madness. I’d all but admitted I was a fool for her. She’d been the one to set the friendship boundary, then break it. Then again, maybe I’d nudged it first, calling her gorgeous.

In the week that followed our kiss, I decided to make myself scarce, only showing up for dinner twice. Each time, Vi hung out with us to watch TV afterward, providing a welcome buffer. Under Vi's watchful eye, it was easier to laugh and chat like the friend I was trying so hard to be. Keeping things light and easy. But even then, something about Anya felt... off. I couldn't quite put my finger on what had changed. Other than her kissing me.

I wasn't impulsive, but once I made up my mind, I was a rock. Immovable as a barnacle. I came by my stubborn streak naturally. You only had to meet my mom or gran to see the family resemblance.

Since Gran kicked me out of the house, I needed a new place to live. As fun as it was hanging out with Vi and Anya, honoring my promise to her meant giving us some actual space. Something the couch couldn't offer.

My feelers for a rental hadn't paid off yet, but I'd had plenty of time to plan my revenge on Gran. If she was going to play dirty, so was I. She'd burned me, but she hadn't demanded my keys back. Her fatal mistake. Mom and Dad wouldn't be home for a few more weeks, leaving me enough time to implement my plan.

I flopped on my back, clasping my hands behind my head. Staring at the ceiling with its mottled bumps. The gentle sounds of the house settled around me. Vi or Anya softly closed the bathroom door. Headlights from a passing car filtered through the living room curtains. I closed my eyes, wishing myself back at Lime Kiln. Meditating on the memory of waves lapping. Of Anya, warm and sweet, in my arms.

I woke with a crick in my neck and a bad attitude.

"Hey, freeloader," Vi greeted me, hoisting her coffee mug. "I made coffee. You got any leads on an apartment yet?"

“Hmph.” I poured myself a cup, downing half of my coffee in a single, scorching swallow. The pain helped me wake up, and I blinked. Vi was already dressed for the shop. “Where’s Anya?”

My sister rolled her eyes. “She left hours ago, hotshot. Probably while you were snoring like a drunken sailor.”

“I was not.” I glowered.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:47 am*

“Before you get grumpy with me, you might ask yourself: who would Uncle Bob text if he caught you making out at the park last week?”

There it was. The fatal flaw in my plan to take it slow with Anya: my family. I covered my face with my hands. I thought since there were no immediate fireworks, Bob decided to let my transgression slide. I should have known he was just storing ammunition for greater impact.

“Does Anya know?”

Vi’s eyes sparkled. Dammit. She had only suspected who I’d been with. I’d confirmed it. I should have taken my coffee and escaped, instead of staying to trade barbs.

“Who did he tell?”

She patted my cheek. “Check your phone, hotshot. I’m heading to work. Something you should think about too.”

I took my coffee to the living room, pulling my phone off its charger and scrolling through my messages.

Uncle Bob: Vanessa, I thought you taught your kids better than to be sucking face at LK.

Uncle Bob: But you helped me win the Monthly Mayhem Pool at work. Cha-ching.

I groaned. My folks had been safely out of it thanks to their trip. But no way my mom was ignoring that message, international texting fees be damned.

Zach: Wasn't me. Your perfect angel was tucked up in bed.

Vi: Not it.

Gran: Wish it were me.

Mom: Drew?!?

Gran: My plan is working...

Mom: What plan?

Gran: Nunya.

Mom: Nunya what?

Gran: Nunya business.

How long before my mom calculated the time difference and called me? I pulled fresh clothes from my duffel, showered and changed for work. Turning off my phone was tempting, but I wanted to respond if Anya texted me.

I checked on the evaporation houses at the farm, then worked on processing my last batch of salt into our signature blends. We'd started out with only a few basic products: a plain sea salt, a madrona smoked, and a garlic blend, but we'd been experimenting with more and more varieties, including my newpersonal favorite, a dill pickle salt. Our partnerships with other local farms brought in any herbs and spices we didn't grow.

Gran was nowhere to be seen when I swung by the house to pick up more clothes. Probably out back smoking in the garden. Keeping my distance was the smart move until I was ready to enact my revenge. I'd paid for expedited shipping, which meant I had two to twenty business days before my purchase would arrive. Most carriers didn't deliver to the island, so we were subject to the gentle whims of our post office, bless their hearts.

Letting Anya come to me still seemed like the best approach, which meant avoiding Vi's house until she'd be home as buffer. Instead of driving to Vi and Anya's after work, I stopped off at Harbor Brews.

Zach shifted to his evening menu after four, which included a few local beers and ciders and fresh popcorn. He sold a ton of Island Salts because he used our popcorn blend with nutritional yeast. It sounded weird, but it was delicious, and once customers tried it, they were hooked.

He was busy with orders, so I scooped a paper boat full of popcorn, then helped myself to one of the island beers and a table overlooking the marina. I could just make out Zach's boat at the end of the dock, bobbing gently next to Rae's.

"I'm surprised to see you here, freeloader."

"What, did you and Vi brainstorm nicknames together?" I asked my brother, grimacing.

He shrugged, his charming smile making his dimples flash. I glanced around. Sure enough, there were a couple of twenty-somethings sipping drinks in the back corner. No way that grin was for me.

"The truth hurts, brother dear. Pay for your beer, and I'll stop."



“Pay for your popcorn topping, and maybe I will.”

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:47 am*

He flapped a hand, ignoring my jibe. “Uncle Bob says he caught you getting busy in the madronas last week. Is that your idea of a romantic date since you’re couch-surfing these days?”

Arguing that Anya was the one who kissed me, not the other way around, wouldn’t be very gentlemanly. And I’d take teasing from every town resident age two to two hundred if it meant she’d do it again, so I kept my mouth shut. Zach tsked, shaking his head slowly, his eyes dancing.

“How the mighty have fallen. You used to be Gran’s favorite. What did you do to fall from grace?”

“Nothing.”

He arched a brow. “Did she give you a new family motto?”

“How did you know?” I asked.

“She gave me one too. I thought the original Fenwick one was just fine, but she claimed I had more to learn before I could have that one. Mine is now wake up and open your eyes.”

I squinted at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Hell if I know. Eyeglasses keep showing up at the boat though. In the weirdest fucking places. Last week, she put a pair on the husky mascot perched over my microwave. Creepy as shit when I woke up to that sucker in the middle of the night.

It's gotta be her idea of a prank, implying that I need my eyes checked."

"At least she can't toss you off your boat."

"Speaking of which, have you found a new place to live yet?"

"Nope."

"And how hard are you looking, now that you've nestled in Anya's sweet arms?"

I grimaced. I'd hoped he missed the bulletin about who I was with at Lime Kiln.

"I'm not staying with Vi to hit on Anya," I grumbled. It was at least partially true. It might be a happy coincidence, but it wasn't my intent. "I've got feelers out for a new place."

Zach snorted. "I've met you. You take forever to make a decision. Have you even looked at any apartments yet?"

"No," I said sullenly.

"I don't think Gran's taking you back," Zach warned.

I threw up my hands. "And I don't want her to. I'm on board with moving out. I just need to find a decent rental. Do you have any ideas for me?"

Zach grinned. "Now that you mention it, yes."

"If you say a park bench, I'm going to smack you."

He held up his hands. "Calm down. I'm serious. I talked with Deb at the bed and

breakfast, and she said her caretaker had to move back to the mainland unexpectedly. She's got an apartment free, if you'll help out for the season."

"Deb at the Anchor?" I perked up. I hadn't planned on taking on more responsibility, but it might get me through the busy season.

Zach grinned triumphantly. "Yep. The Anchor. Across the street from Vi and Anya."

"Do you have her number?"

"For the price of your beer, yes, I do."

I fished out my wallet, grumbling about him being a hard-nosed businessman, but I wasn't mad. I took as much pride in my profit statements as he did, and the cost of a beer was a small price to pay for housing so close to town. I snorted. Sure. Town. I wasn't fooling anyone with that story.

Zach handed over Deb's number, and I called her on my way to my truck, planning to check out the apartment in the morning. I whistled as I parked in front of Vi and Anya's. Finding my own place was the first step to independence and giving Anya the space she needed. The second step was probably not getting caught kissing her in public places by stray relatives.

She seemed preoccupied the few times I'd seen her since she kissed me, her eyes shadowed by something I couldn't quite name. Whatever it was, it settled between us like an unwanted visitor. I'd chosen not to confront her. Maybe she was embarrassed. Or had regrets. Either way, I was moving forward in the best way I knew how — by moving out.

Chapter 16 – Anya

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:47 am*

I jumped at shadows all week, sure a threat was lurking around every corner. That I'd turn and he'd be there. The text message, as innocent as it appeared on the surface, brought my past rushing back. I hadn't been Anne-Marie in years. The only people who knew that name were associated with my old life. The one I wanted to forget.

By the time I got home Thursday, I was exhausted. If my family had truly found me, what did that mean? Did I go? Stay? I'd vowed never to get wrapped up with them again, but I didn't want to abandon my new life.

It was possible they were just testing the waters. Fishing. If I didn't respond, maybe I could continue my life as Anya Rose.

Vi arrived home not long after I did, and we fell into familiar patterns, chatting and making dinner together. It helped me pretend like things were normal.

Drew walked in just as we finished dinner. He smelled like a mix of popcorn and the sea, his hair covered with a ballcap that shadowed his eyes.

"Your timing is impeccable, Freeloader."

Drew grunted. "Not for much longer, Vi. I've got a line on a place. With any luck, I move off your couch tomorrow."

I felt a pang near my heart at his words. It was silly, really, but his presence last night had made me feel safe. I'd tossed and turned for hours after the anonymous text message, only falling asleep when I remembered no one was getting through Drew.

He turned to me, his dark eyes sincere. “I’ll miss you, but I’m not going far. Deb at the Anchor has an apartment for a live-in caretaker on her property. It sounds like I’ll be able to swap chores for a place to stay. She mostly wants someone she trusts there to keep guests from having large parties.”

Vi toasted him with her water glass. “No one does killjoy like you, Drew.”

I frowned. She wasn’t being fair. The way she and Zach teased Drew about being the oldest was starting to bother me.

“He’s just trustworthy,” I protested, realizing as I said the words that I meant them.

Violet smirked, arching her brows. “Huh. Looks like you have a fan, Drew. Maybe all this time, all you really needed was a party fortwo.” She waggled her brows, immune to my scowl. “Relax, Anya. You didn’t grow up with Mr. Starchy-pants here, scaring off your boyfriends. It’s a wonder I’m not still a virgin.”

Drew winced. “As far as I’m concerned, you are. I don’t need details about your sex life.”

“Thanks to you, Cole, and Zach, I barely have a sex life. Every man on this island is afraid of you. Tourist hookups are about all you’ve left me with.”

Drew clapped his hands over his ears. “Not listening.”

Violet scowled. I’d heard her complaints about her brothers’ overbearing behavior before, but I’d never seen it in person. The more I got to know Drew and Zach, the less likely it seemed. Zach was a giant goof ball, and Drew seemed too responsible. True, they cared about their sister, but I couldn’t imagine men in town being truly afraid of either of them.

Maybe she saw the doubt in my expression. Violet reached out, gripping her brother's nose between her knuckles, her expression fierce. "Admit what you did to Adam Knowles."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Drew's denial came out nasally, and I held back a grin. Violet twisted her fingers. "Ow."

"Tell her."

I watched, eyes wide. This was a side of my friend I'd never seen before. Drew avoided my gaze.

"We filled his truck with manure."

I tilted my head, confused.

"Thecabof his truck with manure," Vi clarified.

"You were sixteen, and he was twenty-five!"

Vi released her brother, brushing her shoulders as he rubbed his tender red nose.

"I didn't get asked out again for twoyears thanks to you, Cole, and Zach. Not by anybody. I skipped prom junior and senior years."

I cleared my throat, not sure what to do to relieve the tension. Vi held a mean grudge. While I didn't exactly agree with Drew's methods, the age gap made me think his instinct to protect his sister was solid. But there was no way I was taking sides.

"Who's hungry?" I finally asked.

Vi's anger seemed to fade as swiftly as it arose, and I breathed a sigh of relief. We dished up, devouring the meal. After dinner, Vi excused herself to read, leaving me alone with Drew.



*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:47 am*

The living room and couch loomed. Hanging out with Drew was too much temptation. The last thing I wanted after Vi's spat with him was for her to find us entwined on the couch. But I wasn't sure I could keep my hands to myself.

Getting fresh air would help me sleep.

"Want to go for a walk?" I asked.

"Sure." He seemed pleased by my suggestion.

It was overcast but not rainy. Drew ushered me outside, careful to lock the door behind us. A gust of wind cut south, and I shivered, huddling into my jacket.

"Was this a bad idea?" Drew asked. "Is it too cold?"

"No. We'll warm up as we walk."

"To town or along the lane toward Turn Point?"

"Let's head to Turn Point." That route had views of the water and wound through a quiet neighborhood.

We walked in silence, the trees swaying in the breeze. I could hear the ferry announcements in the distance. Custom homes lined the lane, cars parked tightly along the one-way street. We passed another couple huddled into jackets. They nodded in greeting, and I smiled.

Walking with Drew, it was easy to believe that my past, my family, was of no consequence. Life was simpler on the island. Beautiful. I didn't want them to intrude and ruin my sanctuary. But the text message I received from the anonymous number worried me.

"You're quiet tonight," Drew said.

"Just a lot on my mind."

"Like what?"

Did I tell him? Part of me wanted to. But I'd made it this far on my own.

"Any news from the sheriff?" I asked.

Drew shook his head, his brow furrowed. "No official statements."

"You haven't found more washed-up treasures at the beach?"

Drew smiled, just a tiny twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"Nah. It still bothers me that I let that case get stolen." He grunted. "Foolish."

"You didn't let anything happen. Don't be so hard on yourself."

"I wish I'd busted the lock now. I'm curious about what was in there, if anything. It'll serve the thief right if all they got for their trouble was an empty case."

"You'd think it would be odd, someone carrying a case like that through town. I can't believe no one remembered seeing someone with it."

“The case probably just looked like luggage for the ferry unless you’re a boater. They’re mostly used for carrying things you need to keep waterproof. Documents. Firearms. That kind of thing.”

I shivered, a gust of wind whipping my hair around my shoulders. We paused at the landing above the private marina, watching the boats bob at the dock.

“C’mere,” Drew offered, opening his arms.

I stepped into them without hesitation. He was warm at my back. Solid. I sighed, relaxing into his embrace. He dropped his chin on top of my head, wrapping his arms more tightly around me until I was wrapped in a Drew cocoon.

“This is nice,” I murmured.

“Mhmmh.” He hugged me.

We watched the boats nod in the breeze. It was the most peaceful I’d felt in forever. Drew was solid and steady. He made me feel safe. Something about his strength bolstered mine. Giving me courage.

*Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:47 am*

He'd been careful to offer me the space I asked for. To keep things friendly. And it was driving me freaking crazy. Even with the jumbled mess that was my life, I couldn't quite shake the idea that I should hold on to Drew Fenwick with both hands.

Starting something new with him while my past hung over my head was a terrible idea, but damned tempting. Simple moments like sharing our coffee or watching TV with Violet had become our norm. The fleeting, desperate hope that one touch – our one kiss - would ease the gnawing need inside me shattered the night our lips met. If anything, it had only made my yearning for him worse. One kiss could never be enough. I was fooling myself thinking I could just be his friend.

He deserved better. More than a woman whose past mistakes lurked in the shadows.

Just knowing he was out on the couch at night calmed my nerves more than I wanted to admit. The truth was, when he moved out, I'd miss him. The gentle teasing, the quiet moments when he said nothing, all of it. I was a mess of contradictions, too tangled to know up from down. But one thing was clear: I needed an excuse to see him once he was gone.

"Can we go out to dinner this week?" I blurted out.

"Sunny Girl, you just name the night. I'll make the reservation." I could hear the grin in his voice, the soft rumble of his pleasure rolling through his chest, sending an answering ripple of elation through me.

"Before we get too carried away, I'd better ask—can you promise Vi won't load my car with manure?"

He chuckled, the gentle vibrations sending a delicious thrill through me. I loved hearing him laugh. He was usually so serious, the stoic older brother. Pulling laughter from him filled me with pride.

“She wouldn’t dare,” he promised.

I snorted. “I’ve never seen her that mad. I had no idea Violet could get that mad.”

“My sister has a temper. She’s just slow to anger. But Adam absolutely deserved it. He was running his mouth about how he was going to get her alone.”

“And big brother stepped in?”

He shrugged, the move shifting me against his chest. “He was bad news.”

“Did it really kill her dating prospects?”

Drew shifted. “Cole, Zach, Lee, and I may not have been at our most mature back then. But we had help.”

I gasped. “Gran?”

“Where do you think we got the manure?”

“Did you get in trouble?”

He stepped away, grasping my hand as we wandered up the hill, back toward the house. “Vi suspected, but no one could prove it. You only get in trouble if you get caught.”

I wanted to marvel at the protectiveness the Fenwick men showed for their sister, but

part of me bristled at their interference. Vi wasn't weak. She could take care of herself. But it was nice that she didn't need to. A sliver of jealousy crept in. What would it be like to be protected like that? My family had all but turned me into cannon fodder.

It troubled me that Drew brushed off what they'd done because they hadn't gotten caught. I wanted someone who would do the right thing, regardless of who was watching. But I hadn't exactly lived up to that standard myself, so who was I to judge?

"If you had it to do all over again, would you?" I asked.

"I try to stay on the right side of the law. But when family is on the line? Sometimes things get blurry. I'm always going to take care of my own, even if there are consequences."

"Do you think you get that from your gran?"

His eyes flashed. "Bite your tongue, woman."

I grinned, a zip of excitement drilling through me at the teasing glint in his expression as he considered me.

"Or am I gonna have to do it for you?"

His playful threat made me laugh, and I swayed closer, tethered by our joined hands. He drew to a stop, pulling me into his arms. Like a flower turning toward the sun, I offered my mouth, sure only that I wanted him to kiss me.

Other thoughts fell away as his lips molded to mine. Gentle and playful turned into demanding in a flash. A car passed, its headlights illuminating us briefly, and we

broke apart, breathing hard. Drew's eyes glittered in the gathering gloom. His chest heaved. He clasped his hands behind his neck, pacing like a winded runner. He chuckled, shaking his head.

“What's so funny?” I asked.

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“Us. I keep trying to keep things casual and take things slow, picking public places, and it keeps backfiring in the best possible way.”

A warm rush filled me. He wanted me. Bad. And the feeling was mutual. Common sense warred with yearning as I relived our last kiss. Spending time with Drew was the best part of my day. My week. I couldn't regret any of it, even if it set the gossips' tongues wagging.

As if he sensed the direction of my thoughts, he arched one dark brow. “So. Dinner. It's a date?”

Slowly, I nodded, and he grinned, extending his hand for mine.

“Good.” He squeezed my palm, and we resumed our walk home.

I waited until I'd safely shut my bedroom door before I launched myself onto my bed, kicking my feet and smiling into my pillow.

I was developing a massive crush on Drew Fenwick. Protective. Sweet. Caring. He was everything I wanted in a man.

### Chapter 17 – Drew

Wishing Anya goodnight was difficult when all I wanted was to drag her closer. But the couch didn't exactly offer a lot of privacy. And taking things into her bedroom with Violet home and still angry from earlier didn't seem wise. I didn't need more temptation.



Slow was starting to look an awful lot like fast. Anya still seemed hesitant. Skittish. I didn't want to spook her, even if all I had in mind was holding her.

My phone pinged with an incoming text as I went to set my alarm. I opened the message from Gran. She'd sent a grainy photo of me and Anya that looked like it could be from a doorbell camera. I groaned as I recognized the car in the drive. Lee. The traitor. Trust my paranoid friend to have a camera aimed at the street. But why had he brought Gran into it?

Gran: Lookie, lookie, who's getting some nooky...

Gran: You're welcome.

Maybe I should have felt more sheepish about getting caught kissing Anya in public. Again. But I couldn't bring myself to care. If claiming her kept other men from sniffing around, I was all for it. But I was used to living under the island microscope. Used to my family. Anya might need more time to adjust to the idea of us. She hadn't talked much about her family or her life before Friday Harbor. My protective instincts rose.

Drew: Yes, we kissed.

Drew: Don't make a big deal about it. She's a private person.

Gran: Then she should stop smooching you in front of cameras.

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In the morning, I packed up my things and moved to Deb's. The caretaker apartment at The Anchor was small, but it had all the basics: bedroom, bathroom with shower, and a tiny kitchenette. Better yet: no Gran. The private entrance meant I could come

and go. It was nearly perfect, if not permanent.

I showered and shaved after finishing work, eager to pick up Anya for our dinner date.

Vi rolled her eyes when I knocked on the back door.

“Quit acting like you didn’t live here until this morning,” she admonished, letting me in.

“Hi, Drew.”

Anya said it almost shyly as she joined us in the living room on Friday night. She’d swept her blonde hair up and back from her face, with a few soft tendrils left to flirt with her cheekbones. Her bright red lip color emphasized the perfect bow of her mouth, distracting me from everything else. I had the impression of a long floaty dress in a blue floral print, but all I could think about was her mouth. How much I wanted to kiss her.

Stunned, I paused a beat too long.

“If you tell her she looks good enough to eat, I’m disowning you,” my sister warned, breaking into my trance.

Anya smirked. “That’s okay, I’ll say it. You look good enough to eat.”

Vi groaned, shaking her head woefully. “Go. Get.”

Grinning wolfishly, I offered Anya my arm. “Shall we?”

“Where are we going?”

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“Down to the waterfront, if that’s okay. I snagged a table at Nautilus.”

She looked up at me, eyes wide. “I’ve always wanted to eat there. I’ve heard it’s amazing, but they only have like two tables and one seating per night. How did you get in on such short notice?”

“Anthony owes me one. We loaned them capital to get the restaurant going last spring.”

Anya’s lips twitched. “Of course you did.”

It only took a few minutes to walk to the restaurant. Nautilus was unassuming from the outside, a simple storefront with ample windows and heavy glass doors, but on the inside, the restaurant welcomed guests with tasteful greenery, big black columns, and a sleek black and chrome open kitchen. Eight place settings rimmed the chef’s counter. One large table and two smaller tables took up the rest of the tiny floor. It looked like what it was – an exclusive enclave where the chef and waitstaff used phrases like “amuse-bouche” and “sous vide” as everyday conversation.

Anya’s eyes sparkled, her head swiveling as she took in every meticulous detail. The fresh bouquet of bright red poppies. The carefully folded black napkins.

Even the air smelled refined. I detected a hint of dill and capers.

Anthony welcomed us. The older man extended a broad grin to Anya as he pulled out her chair. “I’ve been hounding Drew to come visit us since we opened. I’m so glad you could pry him away from the farm for a night out.”

“The pleasure’s all mine. I’m dying to try your tasting menu.”

“You’re in for a treat.” Anthony collected our drink orders and scurried to the kitchen, returning with our wine glasses and first course. “Crab bisque with a compressed apple brown butter crumble.” He set the bowls down with a flourish.

Anya giggled. “What’s wrong, Drew?”

“I’m remembering why I haven’t been here before.”

“Too fancy?”

I smiled, just the barest twitch of my lips. “It’s not that. I just needed the right person to enjoy it with.” I tangled my fingers with hers on the white tablecloth. “Can you imagine me bringing Gran?” I shook my head. “I don’t think Anthony’s ego could take it. She calls cilantro ‘frou-frou crap.’ Eating something with micro greens might send her to the great beyond.”

“She’s one-of-a-kind. You know she’s trying to convince me to add a hot yoga class at the studio?”

“Really? That doesn’t sound like her.”

Anya’s eyes glittered with good humor. “I keep telling her I don’t have the equipment to heat the room up for it, and she keeps insisting the thermostat doesn’t have to go that high to get everyone naked.”

My shoulders shook. Newbie that I was, even I knew hot yoga didn’t mean clothing-optional.

“Your family is great. Even Gran. Are your parents enjoying their trip?”

Anya looked almost wistful as I spoke about my folks and their latest updates.

“What about your family? Are you close?”

Her eyes shadowed. “No.”

I wanted her to elaborate.

“What was it like, growing up as an only child?” I asked.

“Lonely. My parents were always working.”

Her tone was clipped. She was clearly uncomfortable. Gone was the half-smile that always seemed to brighten her features. The stubborn part of me wanted to dig deeper, but I’d intended tonight to be fun. A chance to get to know each other without the pressure of living together. Grilling her about her childhood was the opposite of that.

“If you’re not taking Gran up on her brilliant idea for nude hot yoga, do you have other promotional plans for the summer season?”

Anya lit up as she spoke about her ideas for a paddle board yoga class. “I just need a place to host it.”

“I can introduce you to Eric at the private marina off Wabass if you like.”

A tiny smile flirted with her lips. “Let me guess – he owes you a favor?”

“Maybe.”

As each course arrived, Anya relaxed more, letting me see the woman behind the relentless positivity. The beauty of Nautilus’s one-seating format was that we weren’t in a hurry. We talked about everything and nothing, from what it was like growing up on a tiny island to how she got into yoga.

I was careful not to ask too many questions about her life before San Juan Island. Every time I skirted a topic that hinted at her past, she tensed, a shadow falling across her features. She clearly wasn’t ready to talk about what really brought her to our island. And I chose not to push.

She shook her head ruefully, sipping on an after-dinner cappuccino. “I still can’t believe Gran helped you paper mâché a shark fin so you could swim Eagle Cove and scare away all the tourists.”

“Honey, she didn’t just help. She planned the whole damn thing. We wanted the beach to ourselves for once. We were pretty easy to convince. Cole filmed and posted it.” I winced, face contorting into an exaggerated grimace. “Of course, then we learned she wanted everyone gone so she could go skinny-dipping and not get arrested. I’d pay to erase some of my family memories.”

Anya’s shoulders shook with laughter, her eyes streaming with tears. “Every time I feel like I’ve got a handle on you and your family, I realize I’ve underestimated you all.”

I grinned, unrepentant. “We’re a rowdy bunch, but we grow on you.”

She toyed with the rim of her cup, her lashes sweeping down to hide her eyes from me, her lips pursing in a secretive smile. “Yeah, you do.” She smirked. “So... haveyouever gone skinny-dipping?” Her gaze dropped to my chest, dragging down my body. Like she was most definitely imagining me naked.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tease her that I wasn’t a piece of meat. But her admiring glance was enough to stop me. I shifted in my chair, spreading my legs, brushing her knee under the table. Something fired in her blue eyes, a flicker of heat. I nudged her thigh gently again, turning it into a slow stroke, pleased when her thigh tilted closer to maintain contact.

“Have you?”

I blinked. What was her question?

“Gone naked?” she prompted.

“You bet.” My voice sounded like I’d scraped it from the bottom of a well. Trust Anya to reduce me to near incoherence with a simple question. I grabbed for my water, downing half the glass in a single swallow.

Her foot started a slow slide around my ankle. I slugged down more water. Walking out of the restaurant with a visible erection was sure to come up in the family group chat.

“You’ll have to show me where you go sometime.” Her grin was playful, soft color flowing into her cheeks. “It’s always been on my fucket list.”

I choked, coughing, as water cascaded down my windpipe. Hacking and struggling to breathe, I hunched over the table.

“Are you okay?” She stood to rub my back as I continued to fight for my life. And to my claim that I could be the tortoise. Anya at her most playful was deadly to my self-restraint.

I finally caught my breath, and she sat down.

“Sorry about that.” I scraped my hand over my head, pushing back my hair. “Tell me more about this fucket list.”

She trailed a delicate fingertip down the condensation on her glass, avoiding my gaze. Watching her finger slip through the moisture, sending droplets cascading to the table as inevitably as rain threatened to rekindle my group chat problem.

“It’s silly.”

“No, it’s not. I really want to know.”

She arched one brow. “Because it involves me getting naked?”

“I mean, I’m not mad about that part, but I’m curious about the rest. Skinny-dipping and...”

“Ride in a hot air balloon. Move to a new city. Go kayaking on a bioluminescent night. Own a business.”

“Pretty sure you’ve already completed a few of those, but if you’re interested in a partner, I’m game. We could absolutely knock off the rest together.”

Her grin turned mischievous. “You just want to see me naked.”

“Absolutely.” I pointed a finger at her. “But don’t deny you were just imagining me



shirtless before I did my impression of a faulty water fountain. I'm not the only hornball at this table."

Anya's lips twisted in the tiniest smile. "Guilty."

When we were mellow and almost too full to move, I paid our check and extended my hand. "Want to walk a bit before I take you home?"

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“Sure.” Her hand felt delicate in mine, and I was careful not to crush the bones as I led her out to the street. “Thanks for dinner, Drew.”

“Anytime, honey.”

And I meant it. I’d dress up and eat fancy food seven nights a week if she’d be there across the table from me. I’d grown so used to life on the farm, to the daily grind of the business, that I hadn’t realized what I was missing: a life. Even the simple things, like a walk in the moonlight with Anya, brought more color to my day than I’d had in an age.

When had I become so stuck in a rut? So alone? Had I been going through the motions for so long, I forgot what happy felt like? Being with Anya was different. She made me slow down and take notice of the world around me. Notice her. Mostly her.

A quiet chemistry simmered between the surface with us. There, but not demanding. More of a slow burn than immediate ignition. Not a wildfire, but an ember, steady and enduring, meant to burn for years. Decades. A lifetime.

We were slowly peeling away the outer layers, getting to know each other as we shed the personas we adopted around others. The masks. I wasn’t just the grumpy farmer, obsessed with his business when I was with her. She wasn’t just the bright and friendly studio owner, welcoming to all. We had secrets. Obsessions. Good days and bad.

But I sensed more under the surface. Truths she wasn’t telling me yet. The hesitation

when I asked her about her family worried me. Not everyone was close to their parents, but the way her eyes shadowed when I mentioned hers troubled me.

The breeze picked up, and Anya shivered. I shrugged out of my jacket, wrapping it around her. She leaned onto my shoulder.

“I feel like you’re constantly giving me your coat.”

“Funny enough, I’m always plenty warm around you. But it is getting chillier. Want to head home and sit with me out back at your firepit?”

“Sounds lovely.” Her voice was a gentle purr, the vibrations stroking my internal cat.

I turned on the firepit when we arrived, brushing off the bench seat. Anya settled in next to me, feet extended toward the fire. The flames flickered and danced, casting a gentle glow on her cheeks and red mouth. I extended my arm in invitation, wrapping it tightly around her shoulders when she snuggled closer. Her warm weight settled against me, the mix of her shampoo and lotion enclosing me in a floral haze that was uniquely Anya.

Her breast pushed against my chest, round and full. It made me painfully aware of the swell of her hip pressed against mine. Tendrils of longing snaked through me. I stroked a gentle finger along her right shoulder, tracing the arches and hollows.

She nuzzled into the crook of my neck, sending a lightning bolt to jolt me to attention. The slow slide of her lips along my collarbone sent blood rushing into my groin like she’d flipped a switch.

She smiled against my neck. She knew exactly what she was doing to me.

In one swift move, I scooped her up, dropping her across my lap so we were face to

face.

Her blue eyes glittered down at me, her red mouth tempting me forward. She surged, rolling her hips into mine as I captured her mouth.

I let my hands run wild, molding her hips and the sweet curve of her ass, massaging as we indulged in a kiss that was slow and deep, full of promises for later. It went on and on, a siren song that beckoned me closer, encouraging me to wallow in her scent. Her taste.

She melted against my chest, breathing hard when we finally broke apart. I dropped a kiss on top of her head. “I should get going.”

“Should you?” She leaned back and arched a brow.

“If I come inside, I’m going to want to come inside. I’m not sure we’re ready for that yet.”

“That makes one of us.”

I peered at her. “When we make love, it’s going to mean something to me. There’ll be no going back. I want to wait until it means something to you too.”

Her mouth opened and closed, as if I’d surprised her with my honesty.

I kissed her tenderly. “Goodnight, Anya. Sweet dreams.” I helped her up. “I’ll see you to the door.”

Her lips twitched. “All five feet?”

I wrapped her in a hug, squeezing tight. Kissing her for real was more than my self-

control could stomach. Instead, I dropped a kiss on her forehead. “Lock up, honey. I want to know you’re safe before I leave.”

She slid the door closed, crossing her eyes from behind the glass as she flipped the lock. She fingered her collar, sliding her fingers along the vee of her neckline. It was a taunt. And almost more than my willpower could endure.

I sketched a salute and turned on my heel, scurrying away from temptation. Ignoring the internal voice that urged me to take her up on her silent offer. It whispered that she might change her mind if I waited too long. But I wanted things to be perfect. No barriers between us. And that meant waiting until we were both truly ready. Until she trusted me enough to share it all.

Chapter 18 – Anya

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My phone pinged just as I closed my bedroom door after my date with Drew. Any thoughts of a sexy message from him fled at the caller ID: unknown caller.

My chest seized, my breath resuming as I focused on my inhales and exhales, consciously filling my lungs all the way to the bottom. Yoga breathing for the win. While I could achieve a measure of calm, my breathing regimen couldn't turn back time. Couldn't make me unsee the message.

Unknown Caller: Meet me tomorrow night at the marina park, 7 pm.

Unknown Caller: You know I hate it when you're late.

I paced my room, any good vibes from my night with Drew gone, the raw edge of panic driving each step. Any time I dropped focus, my breathing seized, locking stale air in my lungs. Only moving, step by step, kept me from trembling until I fell apart.

Not only had they found me, but he was on island. I rushed to the front door, checking again that I'd locked both doors before testing the windows. Vi was likely fast asleep. There was no reason to alarm her. I hated that I'd brought my troubles to her doorstep. I could only hope they hadn't discovered exactly where I lived. Who my friends were.

I wrapped my arms around myself. My dad was nothing if not thorough. If they'd found me, there was little doubt they'd done their homework.

I bit back tears as the fear took hold, a serrated blade that punched me viciously with each memory. I'd worked so hard. Built a life. Made friends. Found a man I could fall

in love with. But I couldn't jeopardize their safety.

My illusions about my family went up in smoke when I fled. The question stacked up: what did they want? And did I have enough leverage to make drop them their demand if it wasn't something I wanted to give?

My only choice was to meet him at the park. I shivered. I'd hoped to be done with Owen when I found out what he really was. Who he really was. But tonight's text message was proof positive that the past wouldn't stay buried.

The fantasy that I could reinvent myself had been shattered. The only real question left was how much damage there'd be in the aftermath.

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I slept fitfully, tossing and turning as snatches of the past invaded my dreams. The dark circles beneath my eyes as I looked in the mirror the next morning hinted at my restless night. Applying extra makeup helped hide the worst of the damage, but there was no concealing the faint tremble in my mouth and hands.

Vi looked at me over her coffee cup. "Honey, you look awful. I don't really want to know, but was that bad? Do I need to apologize for ever introducing you?"

"Drew is lovely. I just had a rough night."

"Yeah, and not the good kind. What's wrong?"

"Just some news from home. Nothing to worry about."

"Liar," Vi said. "That's not me talking; it's those dark bruises under your eyes." She frowned. "You know, if you need help, we're here for you, right?"

I smiled, love for my friend making my chest feel lighter than it had in the hours since the text messages. “Yeah. You’re the best, Vi. I appreciate you, you know that, right?”

She pointed at me. “Don’t let my sweet façade fool you. I can also be the worst when I need to be. And I’m happy to be my worst for you. You didn’t hear this from me, but after the manure caper, my brothers suffered an unfortunate number of mild food poisoning episodes and stomach bugs. I know my way around laxatives.”

I giggled, picturing it. Sixteen-year-old Violet, vindictive as hell, but sneaky about it.

But I needed more than pranks to get me through a confrontation with my family’s representative.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I promised, pouring myself a cup of coffee. “What time are we meeting at the trailhead?”

Violet glanced at her fitness tracker. “Lucy and Rae said nine.”

“So, nine-fifteen?” I asked with a grin.

She rolled her eyes. Our tardy friends rarely showed up fewer than twenty minutes late. “Yup.”

Drew: Want to get together later tonight? Maybe a drink at the brewery?

A flash of giddy pleasure warmed me, beating back the icy dread that made my muscles feel locked and stiff. I enjoyed the sensation for a precious moment before I remembered the othertexts, worrying my lip. I didn’t want to blow him off, but I had to put my past behind me before I could plan the future. Before I could count on evenhavinga future here.



Anya: I've got an errand this evening. How about tomorrow?

Drew: It's a date.

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My friends seemed as preoccupied as I was on our hike. Maybe because we discovered a body last time. No one wanted to broach the topic, but I could tell it weighed heavily on everyone's minds. I felt guilty for being annoyed that it had ruined our morning. Obviously, what we'd found was much worse for Jordan and his family. It wasn't like he chose to go over the cliff. They'd found scuff marks at the top, making it likely that he'd just slipped. But it was curious that no one could figure out how he got out there or what he was doing. No truck. No boat. No one admitted to seeing him. The whole thing was odd.

Rae had packed lunch for us all, and we settled at the picnic table at the summit to enjoy it. The sun beat down, making everything painfully bright, but the wind blowing off the water kept me from taking off my light jacket.

"I might have to skip our weekly hikes this summer." Rae popped a grape into her mouth. "I'm going to move out to Jia's house while she's deployed with the Coast Guard. The kids need someone at home while she's gone."

"You're giving up the boat for the summer? That's really generous of you," Vi said.

Rae lifted one shoulder. "They're family. Losing Jordan has been difficult enough. Jia has her orders and has to be gone for a few months. I was the easiest to uproot. Besides, I won't be parenting alone."

"Is your sister going to help?" I asked.

"Nope. Zach."

Vi gasped, inhaling a bite of cracker. She coughed, hacking to clear her airway. Her eyes watered. A few sips of water, and she croaked, “MybrotherZach?”

“Yup.”

Violet’s eyes were wide. “How didthathappen?”

“He volunteered when he heard I was going to move in for the summer.”

Violet blinked as if she couldn’t quite compute her brother and Rae taking care of a couple of kids together.

“So you’re both abandoning your sailboats for prime sailing season?”

“I’ll be at the marina every day for work. I can check up on them. The kids have day camp, so Zach and I have worked it out so I’ll bring them into town, and he’ll take them home.”

“Huh.”

“Were Zach and Jordan close?” I asked, made curious by Vi’s response.

“Not particularly. That’s why I’m surprised,” Vi said.

“He’s helping me out,” Rae said it mildly, as if it were no big deal.

Lucy, Vi, and I exchanged glances. Zach was charming, but not the first guy you’d run to when you needed a favor. He was good at extricating himself from sticky situations. Uprooting his entire life for a family he barely knew didn’t seem like him at all. I could only hope Rae wouldn’t be too disappointed if he bailed.

Lucy cleared her throat. “Speaking of Jordan, any news?”

“The sheriff had us comb the cliff and the cove one last time, along with the beach where Drew harvests to see if anything new might wash up, though he’s pretty sure Jordan went over the cliff close to where we spotted his body.”

“He definitely drowned?” Lucy asked.

Rae shook her head. “Killed in the fall.”

I tucked my chin, hunching my shoulders. If Rae could remain composed while she shared the news, I could hide my revulsion.

“Was he drinking?” Vi asked.

“I don’t have access to the coroner’s report. The sheriff keeps things pretty close. But our SAR team found a few beer cans under the bench nearby. We bagged them for the Sheriff’s Office. No idea if there are fingerprints on them or not.”

Lingering questions filled the air, but none of us had the answers. Eventually, conversation moved on to lighter topics, and we packed up the remains of our lunch and headed back to the car.

The afternoon with my friends had been a lovely distraction, but the anonymous summons loomed over the rest of my day. I filled my time with mundane chores, keeping busy to avoid thinking too hard about the night ahead. Cold dread settled in the pit of my stomach with each passing hour, making it impossible to eat.

Vi left for dinner at the farmhouse with her Gran at six, leaving me alone to stare vacantly at the television, my knee bouncing and anxious lip nibbling at odds with the cozy makeover show I’d turned on. Every few seconds, I glanced at the clock. At six

forty-five, I started down the hill, fear making every step heavy. My leaden feet still made good time to the park. The sun wouldn't fully set for another forty minutes, and I took comfort in the remaining daylight.

Boats bobbed at the marina, mocking me. I picked a bench beneath a tree, knitting and unknitting my fingers, pulling at my knuckles.

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“You still play with your hands when you’re nervous. At least some things haven’t changed.”

Even though I was expecting him, I recoiled. It was an instinctual reaction, but one I regretted. Lifting my chin, I thrust my shoulders back. “Owen.”

He stood to my right, arms spread wide. “What, no hug for me, even after I came such a long way to visit?” He tsked, dark eyes mocking. “Anne-Marie Genter, I know your dad taught you more manners than that. First, you take off without so much as a goodbye, and now you don’t welcome me, even though we used to do way more than hug.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, squeezing. “Enough, Owen. What do you want? Why are you here?”

He tucked his hands in his jeans pockets, a dark brown leather jacket hanging open over his black shirt. He wore boots that made me think of riding behind him on his motorcycle, back when I hadn’t known what he was. Who he really was. That knowledge colored how I viewed him now. He used to take my breath away – all dark brooding eyes and wicked grins. Now he just turned my stomach.

“Trust you to bail on your family and still land in clover, Princess. I hear your new island is a hotbed of activity from across the border.”

“I have no part of that,” I said tightly.

“You sure about that, Princess? Word is you’re quite connected locally. And it’s a

small island, baby girl.”

“I’m doing you the courtesy of hearing you out. State your business or leave. Preferably the latter.” The words came out serrated, forced through gritted teeth. My hands clenched in my lap.

He knew exactly how to get under my skin. But I couldn’t afford to do anything foolish.

“It’s cute, you know. How you thought you could hide from us.”

I tensed. Had they really known where I was the entire time? I’d been so careful. Changing my identity took time. I really thought I’d covered my tracks, leaving Anne-Marie Genter and all of her mistakes behind.

“I’ll admit we weren’t sure until that body dropped at the cove. Did you know it made regional news? You weren’t named, but like I said, the family’s been keeping its eye on this place. Detroit always needs new routes between us and the Great White North.” He gave me his plastic smile, the one I used to think was sincere. “I bet you know some boat captains you can introduce me to, hm?”

“I don’t.” I forced a smile. It probably looked as fake as his. “I stay off the water these days.”

“Too bad. We used to have some fun out on the lake. Not gonna lie, Princess. You were my favorite cover.”

I shuddered. I hated that he’d used me. That my family had used me.

“There’s nothing for you here, Owen.”

“Aw, that’s not true. Your dad sent me scouting. Figured you’d know the best spots, since this is your new home. I don’t need much. Just an introduction.”

“The last thing I want is to get one of my friends involved in your mess.” I let the disgust drip from every word. Now that I didn’t have to pretend not to know the score, there was no reason to spare his feelings.

Owen lifted a shoulder. “Give me an enemy then. I’m not picky.”

“What I’ll do is give the sheriff a hot tip.”

His smile turned ugly. “Now, I wouldn’t do that, Princess. He’d be mighty interested to know more about your past. You’re not the only one with a cell phone and a local law enforcement number.” He spread his arms wide. “But I’m a reasonable guy. I’ll give you a little time to think about it. Pick the perfect patsy.”

He faded into the night, my lingering sense of disgust the only sign he’d ever been there.

I stumbled back up the hill, barely aware of the cars or people around me. The world had become hazy. I’d escaped my family once, but it had taken nearly everything I had. The idea of disappearing again, after all the work I’d put into my new life made tears well until my eyes were glossy and everything around me blurred.

Hot, stinging tears fell as I approached our driveway. I stumbled to the cold firepit, collapsing into one of the chairs, and let the sobs come.

Big, racking, choking breaths shook me. I didn’t want to leave the island. My friends. Drew. I’d found something that was good and mine. It was supposed to be free of my family’s taint. They’d polluted every memory of my former life. I could never be sure who was friend and foe back in Detroit. Not after they used me.



I'd been their sweet little Princess on her sailboat, taking day trips into Canada with her boyfriend.

Had my mother known they were using me to transport drugs? Surely, my father knew. He employed Owen. I'd been barely out of school, eager to help with the family shipping business. Dad had given me a low-level accounting job in the office.

My life had been perfect. Until I learned the truth.

Did they even know how far I'd taken my revenge? I bit my lip, worrying the tender flesh. I'd been too scared to search for headlines, wary of triggering any countermeasures they had in place to find me.

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Owen's presence proved my bid for freedom had failed. My sobs trailed off in a bitter laugh that tasted like acid and bile on my tongue. Even after I'd wrapped the evidence in a bow.

"What's wrong?"

I gasped, my heart racing until I registered Drew's deep voice. He emerged from the shadows. I swiped at my eyes, trying to remove the traces of my crying jag.

"Anya, what's wrong?"

"Just having a moment." My voice wavered, my chest still too tight to breathe properly. I cleared my throat, trying again. "I'm okay, Drew."

### Chapter 19 – Drew

My lips pursed. I probably looked like a petulant child, but there was no way I was buying her lame answer. The remnants of tears smudged her cheeks, and her breath came in tiny pants, like she was still catching her breath and trying not to sob. She looked utterly devastated, like her world had crumbled to ashes beneath her feet.

"You look a long ways from my definition of 'okay.' What happened?"

My words came out harsher than I intended. Her chin tilted up, regaining the regalness I associated with her usual posture. Anya had never struck me as the cowering type. She had more the kill-them-with-kindness vibe. Seeing her look so defeated shook me.

I'd been making my nighttime rounds at The Anchor, ensuring everything was locked up tight for the night, when I spotted movement in Vi and Anya's backyard. While a raccoon had been the most likely culprit, I still couldn't go to sleep without checking it out.

Anya's huddled form sobbing in one of the firepit chairs was the last thing I'd expected.

I inched closer, encouraged when she didn't draw away.

She attempted a laugh, but it choked off on a short half-sob. That tortured sound cut my knees from beneath me. I sank onto the bench beside her. She melted into my shoulder. I took it as a sign she needed comfort, so I scooped her into my lap.

Every second she delayed answering, my fears mushroomed, growing inside my chest until my ribs felt like they would crack. She was hot to the touch and damp from tears. She burrowed deeper, as if she could absorb me like armor. It was a role I'd gladly claim, if it kept her from crying anymore.

"Honey, I can't bear to see you so upset. Please, tell me what happened."

Maybe it was the pure desperation in my voice, but she finally scooted back enough to see my face. Her blue eyes were liquid with tears, her eyelids angry and red. She swiped at her runny nose, and I dug a handkerchief from my pocket, offering it to her.

"Thanks." She gave me a smile that wavered at the corners. "I'm sorry to blubber all over you. I just had a shock tonight. Someone from my family reached out."

"I'm guessing you're not close from things you've said, but is everyone okay?" I asked.

“My family’s not like yours.” Her smile turned wry. “Even if your gran can be a lot, she still loves you.”

“I’m sure your family loves you too,” I said.

She gave me a dark look. “They used me.” She said it with such bitterness, it was clear the pain was still fresh, the memories sharp.

I had no words. Questions crowded forward, begging to be asked, but she was wrung out. Her lower lip trembled, tugging at my heartstrings. Anya deserved to have a family who loved her, not one who left her sobbing in the dark.

I wrapped her in a bear hug, crowding her into my chest until her cheek lay against my heart. She sank into my arms, relaxing with a deep sigh. That tiny gust roiled me in a fresh wash of emotion. Slowly, I stroked her head, running my palm over her sleek hair to her back, making small circles between her shoulder blades. It was meant to be soothing, and I was rewarded when her shoulders relaxed, her body melting into mine.

I lost track of how long we sat like that. At first, my blood rushed in my ears, my pulse heavy and fast. Gradually, the rhythm eased, slowing until it matched the gusts of wind blowing off the water. Night sounds took over, crickets and frogs serenading us with their evening ballads. She stirred, sighing reluctantly as she leaned back to look up at me.

Her blue eyes were dull with something too close to despair for me to leave it alone.

“Do you need protection?”

“I want to say no. But honestly? Maybe. Vi’s here, but she’s probably already in bed.”

My breath caught, mind swirling with the implications. “Is this get-the-sheriff trouble, or the kind we can handle ourselves?”

She wrinkled her nose. Her scrunched face would be adorable in other circumstances. “Too soon to tell.”

“Do you want me to stay over tonight?” I asked, not sure who I was asking for. There was no way in hell I was getting any sleep if I couldn’t be sure she was safe. “Let me rephrase. Where would you like me to sleep tonight? Your choices are this bench or your couch.”

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“Not my bedroom?”

“If you need me close, I’ll be there. I can make a pallet on the floor.”

“What if I just need you?”

The vulnerability in her voice ripped at my heart. “Honey, sex isn’t going to solve our problems.”

“How can you be sure unless we try?”

A hint of her normal sparkle returned, glittering in her blue eyes. Her teasing reassured me that all wasn’t lost. She just needed some recovery time. Space to process whatever had happened. In the morning, I’d press her for more details.

“Tell you what. Ask me again when you haven’t been crying, and we’ll see what happens. For tonight, I’m more interested in being your friend than your hookup.”

“Drew, you’re more than a hookup.” Her protest was soft but sincere.

“Good. Then you won’t mind waiting until I’m in a place to romance you properly. If I’m gonna do a thing, I’m going to do it right.”

“Doing the right thing is really important to you.”

“It is.”

She ringed her arms around my neck, expression solemn. “I can only hope you’ll still want me when you realize I’m only human.”

“First, I’ll always want you. Second, if your feelings for me are based on the assumption that I’m infallible, I’m going to disappoint you in two seconds flat. Please don’t put me on a pedestal, Anya. I promise, I’m just a man. A man who wants you desperately, but you only have to look at how I ran my mouth on our first date to see I make mistakes. I’m no saint.”

Her breath was shaky, and her mouth trembled at the edges, but it was a smile. I’d take it.

I led her inside. “Where do you want me?” I asked, my voice husky.

She arched both brows.

“Floor or couch?”

“You’re not going to get anything approaching real rest on the floor.” Vulnerability bled into her soft blue eyes. “And the couch is awfully far away... Stay with me?”

Her voice faltered on the last word, eviscerating my heart in one shaky syllable. Everything compressed, taking my ribcage and tightening it until I was sure I couldn’t breathe without her.

“If that’s what you want, I’m there.”

She did whatever women did in the bathroom before bed, returning in soft peachy-pink pajamas. It took a moment for me to resolve the intricate pattern into its component parts. From a distance, they looked almost floral. Up close? Not so much.

“Cute,” I murmured, holding back a grin. “Do I want to know how or why you have penis pajamas?”

Anya lifted one rounded shoulder, eyes glittering with humor. “It’s as close as I could get to a chastity belt on short notice.”

I widened my eyes, blinking slowly. Twice.

She grinned in the face of my disbelief, and I shook my head, dropping my chin.

“Yeah, I think someone failed history. Those might be the first urban legend. The second might be that you could come up with anything that would make me not want you. You look fucking adorable, even covered in dicks.”

## Chapter 20 – Anya

Wearing the pajamas Lucy gave me in our gift exchange was an inspired choice, even if it mostly inspired Drew’s laughter.

Being with him kept me distracted from the conversation with Owen. I’d danced around the details, but I couldn’t do that forever. Owen made that clear. He wasn’t above outing me to my friends if I didn’t take the reins and outmaneuver him. While he wouldn’t let me hide, I wouldn’t let him manipulate me into working for the family again. Not now that I knew the truth.

My friends needed to know about Owen before he approached them so they could be on guard. I’d never forgive myself if he threatened or harmed one of them to get to me.



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“Which side of the bed would you like?”

Drew still wore his jeans and flannel. A suspicious dark spot on his shoulder reminded me of my crying jag, and I frowned. “You don’t want to change first?”

“I’d hate to undo all your hard work.” He gestured toward my pajamas, a hint of mischief in his eyes.

“I snotted all over your shirt. I don’t have anything else in your size, but surely you prefer not to sleep in it if it’s still damp?”

“There you go again, trying to seduce me.”

“If I were seducing you, believe me, you’d know,” I promised wryly.

Slowly, he reached for the button at his waist, flicking it open. My mouth went dry. He moved to the next button. I held my breath. Nimble fingers worked that button free, revealing a few inches of soft gray tee beneath his flannel. It wasn’t even skin, and I was panting like I’d spotted a cool lake in the desert.

He peeled the green flannel away from his shoulders, leaving him in just the tight tee shirt. My tears had soaked the fabric. He arched one brow, daring me to stop him, before reaching for his hem and rucking up the soft cotton, exposing firm abs. The air crackled with tension. He was daring me.

I’d spouted big words earlier about restraint. Turns out I had none. I dug my nails into my palms to keep from reaching for him.

He folded his discarded clothing neatly, setting it atop my dresser before turning back to me with an arched brow. “Jeans too?”

I swallowed. Acres of smooth tanned skin were already on display. Could I really handle more? I licked my lips, trying to restore moisture to my parched mouth.

“Maybe keep the jeans.”

My voice came out rustier than I intended. Drew pressed his teeth into his bottom lip, fighting back the grin threatening to break free.

I was admitting defeat, but I didn’t care. Pouncing on him after he’d already turned me down wouldn’t be a good look, even if he was teasing me now.

“Now which side of the bed do you prefer, honey?”

“It’s been so long since I shared that I’m used to the entire thing.”

His slow grin, growing to take up his entire face, lit a fresh fire in my belly.

“Good.”

“Me being a bed hog is good?”

His lip twitched. “If it means I get you all to myself, then yes.”

I slid into bed, tugging the covers tight around me. Drew flipped the light switch, and the bed dipped as he joined me. We lay there, letting the quiet take over. Slowly, my breathing became easier. I snaked one hand across the comforter, seeking Drew out. He shifted, gathering me into his arms until my head tucked beneath his chin.

As I settled, Owen's threats kept circling. He wanted a connection on the island. To expand the family business. I'd done everything I could to shed my past. But it kept haunting me. How did I break free?

"I can hear you thinking. How can I help you sleep?" His soft question startled me, and I burrowed closer.

"Just tell me everything's gonna be okay, even if it's a lie."

He wrapped me more tightly in his arms. "Sunny Girl, I'm going to protect you. Anyone who wants to hurt you will have to go through me first. And not to brag, but I'm hella strong. My family is also connected as shit on this island."

I let out a watery chuckle. "And so modest, too."

"I've got you, honey. You're safe with me. I'm not gonna let anything happen to you."

He kept murmuring, repeating the words almost like a mantra as I faded into sleep.

A sliver of sun filtered through the gap in my shades, tickling at my closed lids. Judging from the angle of the sun, I'd overslept, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Drew was still wrapped around me protectively, his hand at my hip. His fingertips spread across my abdomen, sending trickles of heat radiating. His silent show of possession turned me on more than it ought to, all things considered. His breath puffed softly at my ear, steady and reassuring.

He grumbled softly, tugging me closer when I squirmed.

“Drew. You awake?”

“Mmph.”

“I’ve got to get to the studio soon,” I said regretfully.

As much as I wanted to play hooky, I couldn’t afford to flake on my students.

He hugged me closer. “Mmph.”

The hand on my hip slowly slid down my quad, and I stilled, holding my breath. Would he snake that hand between my legs? Slip beneath the drawstring on my pajama bottoms? I clenched my thighs. It did nothing to fill the aching void there. His palm traced back up my thigh to my waist, the leisurely move leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

“Drew.”

Maybe it was the urgency in my tone he responded to. “Baby... what’s wrong?” He sounded drowsy and still half-asleep.

“I need... to get ready for work.”

Drew released me, rolling onto his back and extending his arms overhead in one big stretch. The move showcased every dip and valley from his waist to his impressive shoulders. Never had I wished more that I only had to play a responsible adult on TV, instead of paying my very real bills.

“Morning, honey.”

Two endearments before breakfast? Be still my heart.

“Good morning.”

He blinked sleepily at me, dark eyes drawing me in. They swirled with a tenderness that made my heart stop, pausing like a frightened doe before bounding ahead. He yawned, the kind accompanied by a full-body stretch that seemed to go on forever. Not moving, I stared at him like I'd never seen another human being before. He covered another yawn with one muscled forearm.

“Didn't you say you have class?”

I sprang from bed, cursing softly. A glance at my smart watch reassured me that I still had time to make my first session, but it'd be tight.

“Sorry you have to rush off. I like waking up with you.”

His sweet smile made me want to crawl right back into bed. Damn adult responsibilities.

I gathered a fresh set of clothes from my drawers. I owed him way more than easy sex. He'd been kind enough not to pry last night, but he deserved answers.

Drew met me in the kitchen after I'd dressed, extending a mug. “Your coffee. I thought you could drink it while I walk you down the hill.”

“Thanks.” I inhaled deeply, the smell enough to get a few more brain synapses firing.

“The neighbors are going to talk if you walk me to work in last night's clothes.”

“Let ‘em. You’re not going alone.”

The brisk morning wind stung my face as we walked toward the studio, and I huddled into my jacket, glad of the mug to warm my hands. Drew ambled beside me, seeming impervious to the cold morning in just his flannel from last night.

“What time are you done for the day?” he asked.

“Four.”

He slouched against the wall beside me as I unlocked the studio, giving me a charming grin. “I’ll be back to walk you home then.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I protested, flustered. I hadn’t meant to make him feel responsible for me. It reeked of emotional manipulation, and I’d had more than enough of that from my family. “You have your own work and things to do. I’ll be fine.”

“But I won’t be.”

Any thoughts of reasserting my independence faded. His dark gaze drilled into me, the sincerity plain on his face.

“Tonight, then.”

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He leaned in, looming close until our mouths barely brushed. Our kiss was over before the full weight settled, and I tilted forward, chasing more.

“Tonight,” he murmured.

The promise in his eyes sent a whole-body shiver rippling from my neck to my toes, leaving an aching yearning in its place.

It was foolish to level up things with Drew when Owen lurked in the shadows like a bad imitation of a vampire, sucking the joy out of my new life. Banishing the ghosts of relationships past meant devising a plan. I’d tried running. Tried hiding. Those strategies were wise when I was alone. But now? The same things I feared losing were my greatest strengths. My family would realize I had resources. Friends. Drew. I wasn’t easy pickings anymore.

I’d grown stronger since I cut ties with my family. Striking out on my own, I’d become surer of myself, my worth. Choosing independence and making a new life were hard, but I’d done it.

I had my studio. A life I was proud of. There was no going back under my family’s thumb. I wouldn’t jeopardize my future for my past. But part of truly being Anya Rose meant owning Anne-Marie, at least to those closest to me. Bolstered by my decision, I dashed off a text message to Vi before my first class.

Anya: I’d like to host a dinner party tomorrow. That okay with you?

Maybe it was an odd choice, but spending one last night laughing with my friends

before laying my past bare would give me a memory to hold on to if my lies were too much for them to forgive.

## Chapter 21 – Drew

I hung around the corner until I spotted Merita Rodriguez opening the door to Anya's studio. Once Anya was safe, I walked back to the Anchor, unlocking my apartment and grabbing a quick shower before I picked my phone off the charger and drove to the farm.

Scraping out one of the salt houses took my entire morning. A quick protein bar fueled me through my afternoon. I kept one eye on the clock, unwilling to miss my window to go pick up Anya.

Gran ambled into my office ten minutes before I was due to leave. She was dressed for distress in an eye-searing shade of magenta. Today she'd styled her short pink hair in a mohawk. The gravity-defying style suited her.

"Hey, Gran. How's it going?" I asked absently, trying not to lose my place.

"I hear you're finally taking my advice." Her tone was smug, and no doubt her expression matched.

"What advice is that?" I was unwilling to pull my gaze off the invoice matching I needed to finish before I could leave.

"Make bad choices," she said with relish.

"I think my choices are excellent, thank you very much. And I'm not sure your advice is my wisest course of action. I still remember the sheriff showing up last month after one too many complaints from Mr. Reyes."



Gran cackled. “But he couldn’t find my shotgun, could he?”

“Just because he didn’t search the house doesn’t mean everyone doesn’t know it was you, shooting out Mr. Reyes’s yard lights.”

“Those crude boobie lights were butt-ugly. Who puts well-endowed statues with LEDs for breasts on their front lawn? I was doing community service, putting his lawn porn out of its misery.”

Sure, she said that now. The day he’d placed them out front of his farm, Zach and I had made bets on whether Gran would buy her own. Maybe not half-lit ladies, but it probably didn’t take much of a web search to find a well-hung male statue with a light saber to ward off the dark side of good taste.

I was half-convinced Mr. Reyes had put the yard decorations up just to provoke my grandmother. The old man was a cantankerous son of a bitch who was too stubborn to die, even after two heart attacks. Just her type.

Zach’s money had been on waking up to vulgar displays on the front lawn for months. It’d be just like Gran to steal the ladies she disdained and use them in her own pornographic version of a nativity scene. Honestly, so long as it wasn’t a lewd display of Mr. Reyes humping Gran in the front lawn, I didn’t care.

“Have you warned your new lady-friend that I’m an excellent shot?”

I narrowed my eyes. Gran smiled angelically. Too bad her personality and decades of personal experience ruined the effect. “I thought Dad took your shotgun away after the incident with the sheriff?”

She leaned across my desk, patting my cheek gently with one papery palm, her serene expression at odds with her bright pink hair.

“Don’t you worry, child. Call me if you need backup. Gran’s always got your back.”

Rolling my eyes would be disrespectful. But mouthing off felt just right.

“Is it having my back when you eject me from the house I’ve lived in for more than thirty years?” I groused, unable to keep the sarcastic edge from my tone.

“That was for your own good,” she snapped back. “You’ve been stuck, Andrew Fenwick. Too comfortable living out here on the edge of the goings-on, never joining in. All the sweet young things are in town. You need to be where the action is if you’re ever going to get any. Not living out here with us old farts.”

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Arguing with her would get me nowhere. Gran was stubborn AF. And not totally wrong. But damned if I'd admit it. I had places to be.

"Gotta go, Gran. Lock up for me?" I grabbed my wallet and dropped a kiss on her wrinkled cheek.

She smirked, eyes dancing. "Where are you running off to, lover boy?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I parried, striding toward my truck.

"Child, give me five minutes, and I'll know everything about her, down to her shoe size."

"She's a ten," I called back over my shoulder, grinning to myself as I drove into town.

Gran might be a pain in the ass, but I wouldn't trade her for anything. She either hadn't made it to the upstairs bathrooms since I implemented step one in my revenge, or she'd been smart enough not to admit it.

I slipped into my apartment at the Anchor and snipped a few daffodils from the grounds before walking down to Anya's studio before four. Maybe it was silly, but the bright flowers made me think of her, always sunny and cheerful. I wanted to make her happy. Or at least help her forget what had made her sad last night for a moment.

Watching her cry and being unable to do more than hold her had nearly gutted me.

She still hadn't trusted me with the whole story, but she was close. Dinner might give her the time and space she needed to come out with all of it. Unless she wanted a one-man security detail shadowing her every day, I needed answers.

Anya looked up from the front desk. Her blonde hair was swept up away from her face. Her white teeth clenched around a pencil, as if worrying the fine wood comforted her as she stared down at her tablet. The glimpse of her studious side made me instantly hard. Inconvenient but unavoidable.

Her serious expression morphed into a welcome that made the small ball of anxiety I carried with me when we were apart ease. She was fine. Nothing to worry about. I smiled, extending my bouquet.

"For you."

She clutched them close. "You're so sweet. Thank you, Drew." She slid one bloom from the bouquet, extending it to me. "You're always keeping me warm and bringing me gifts. But you deserve some sunshine in your life too."

My fingers grazed hers as I accepted the flower. "Sunny Girl, you already bring the light to my life. Flowers are just me trying to keep up. Ready to pack up for the day?"

"Sure." She wrinkled her nose. "Quarterly tax filings will wait to plague me another day."

"You do your own?" I shook my head. "That was one of the first things I outsourced. Numbers and I are not friends. I'm grateful Mom took it on when she retired."

A shadow flickered in her eyes. "It's important to have an accountant you trust."

"Mmhm," I agreed, entwining her fingers.

She locked up, and we walked up the hill, one arm full of flowers, and the other hand held tightly in mine, swinging between us.

She unlocked her back door, and I trailed her into the kitchen. Anya pulled a vase from beneath the sink and arranged our flowers, placing them on the kitchen table. I filled two glasses with water and joined her on the couch, getting as close as I could without sitting in her lap. She snuggled into my shoulder with a tiny smile, like she knew I was craving her.

“Can you come to dinner tomorrow night?” Anya asked.

“Sure. I plan to be your shadow until you tell me you’re tired of me.”

She laughed like I was joking.

“What do you feel like for dinner tonight?” I asked.

“Not cooking.”

“Done. Is it a sexy grilled cheese kinda night, or would you prefer to go out?”

She arched a delicate brow. “Sexygrilled cheese? Do you use fancy cheddar or something? What makes it a ‘sexy’ grilled cheese?”

“It’s sexy ‘cause I made it.”

She giggled. “What, like cooking is the sexiest thing a man can do for a woman?”

“No,” I said officiously. “I have many sexy qualities.”

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“Of that I have no doubt.” Her eyes danced. “But just so I’m clear what’s on offer here, why don’t you tell me more?”

“Ack.Stop.” Vi walked into the living room, rubbing her eyes. “I do not want to hear this listing of virtues. There are some things a sister doesn’t need to know.”

“Sorry, Vi. We didn’t know you were here.”

“Obviously.”

“What are you doing home so soon?” I asked.

Violet winced. “Migraine. I got Marni to cover for me at the shop so I could come home and try to nap.”

“Ouch. Sorry,” Anya said, exchanging a glance with me. “How do you feel about grilled cheese for dinner?”

“I’m too nauseated to eat. You guys go ahead, and I’ll grab something later.”

She spoke softly, like even the volume in her head was too painful to manage. Anya and I exchanged another silent communication.

“Do you want us to bring you takeout from the brewery?” I asked. When she lived at home, she used to crave spicy foods after a migraine.

“Pizza?” She perked up, smiling at me. “Extra pepperoni, please.”

“Sure thing, Vi. We’ll get out of your hair. I hope you feel better.” I wrapped one arm around my sister in a gentle hug. “Text me if you need anything else.” She nestled against my shoulder for a moment.

“Thanks.” She winked at Anya. “He’s very caring. It’s one of his many sexy qualities.” She patted my cheek. What was it with the Fenwick women treating me like I was ten? “Go on, have a good dinner. I’m going to grab an ice pack and chill.”

Anya changed into jeans and a sweater, and we walked down the hill, lucky enough to snag a table at the brewery without a wait.

Dinner was hot and filling, and the glass of wine Anya chose seemed to help her relax. Faint shadows shaded the delicate skin beneath her eyes. Her graceful features were too beautiful to look haggard, but the worry was taking its toll.

Her phone buzzed as we finished our meal, and she reached for it. Color leached from her expression. A fine tremble started in her hand.

I wanted to reach through the phone and deck whoever made her flinch like that. My fists clenched in my lap. Just one well-aimed punch was all it would take.

“What is it?” I was careful to keep my tone calm.

She set her phone down with a sigh, bringing her gaze to meet mine. “I’d rather talk in private.”

Concerned, I nodded. “Let me put in Vi’s order and pay our tab.”

Whatever the text message said, things wouldn’t get worse in the few minutes it took to take care of our bill and walk pizza up to Violet. A muscle ticked in my jaw. Every move felt stiff as we walked back to the house. I gripped Anya’s hand. Holding her

anchored me in the present, a silent message to my nervous system that she was safe.

My mind raced with possibilities, but I couldn't land on one that seemed likely. Nothing to draw the fear that lurked in her expression every time I snuck a glance at her face. Some people came to San Juan Island to hide. Clearly, Anya was one of them. But what was she hiding from?

While we might joke that Sal at the sub shop was in witness protection because he stuck out like a sore thumb in our tiny town with his East Coast accent and directness, it was just that: a joke. Sal was part of the island, just like Anya. We protected our own.

"Nightcap?" Anya asked as we reached the house. "I've got a bottle of wine."

"Sure." She seemed to need a drink, even if I didn't. "I'll drop off Vi's dinner. Do you want me to turn on the firepit so we can talk out back?"

"Yes, please."

Vi accepted her dinner with a wan smile and retreated behind her bedroom door. I slipped outside and turned on the propane before lighting the gas logs. Brushing off the bench took another few seconds. Too fidgety to sit, I adjusted the other chairs in the circle around the firepit.

"I hope pinot noir is okay." Anya extended a stemless glass to me.

"I'm not picky. Thanks."

She sat gingerly next to me, her glass balanced on her knee, and stared into the fire. Night settled around us, a shawl of darkness encircling our shoulders beyond the reach of the flames. Frogs croaked, providing a gentle melody that should have been



soothing. I sipped my wine, letting the tart tannins roll across my tongue. Giving Anya time. Space. Whatever she needed, even though I was becoming more desperate for the truth with every passing moment.

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Somewhere, a twig snapped, and Anya flinched. Frowning, I wrapped my arm around her. “I don’t like seeing you like this.”

“I’m not exactly your sunny girl right now,” she acknowledged, grimacing softly.

“Nobody expects you to be.” I hugged her closer, counting to ten. When she didn’t speak, I finally said, “Can you tell me what’s bothering you?”

She twitched under my arm. Not shrugging me off, not exactly. But not settling in either. I tried not to take it as rejection. But the moment stretched, the silence between us lingering. I sipped my wine, not sure what to do next. I didn’t want to push her away. But I needed her to tell me what was wrong.

“I...”

I held my breath, silently urging her to continue.

“I’m here under false pretenses, Drew.”

Her admission came out almost too quietly for me to hear over my pounding heart.

“What do you mean?”

“Anya’s not my real name.” She shook her head, letting out a rueful laugh that broke in the middle. “Well, it is now. But it wasn’t always.”

That broken laugh killed me. Sent me straight to hell. Almost overshadowing the

bomb she'd dropped. I'd suspected a toxic family. But changing your identity was extreme.

She worried a string on the hem of her sweater, picking at it until she unraveled the edge, bit by bit. I captured her fingers in mine, threading our hands together.

"Names aren't that important to me, but can you tell me why you changed it?" I held my breath, not sure what I expected her answer to be.

She laughed again, the jagged sound slashing at my heart. "I didn't want anything to do with my family anymore. Or my ex-boyfriend."

I stilled, watching her carefully. She stared into the fire, as if the dancing flames with their hypnotic qualities could soothe whatever hurt she didn't want to speak about. She kept telling mewhatshe'd done, notwhy. And it was the why that mattered.

"You changed your name to disown your family. That's a pretty big step, and I'm sure it was hard." I kept my tone neutral, nonjudgmental. But I desperately wanted to know what they'd done. How was I supposed to help, to fix it, if she didn't tell me everything? She perched next to me like she might fly away, as if the slightest breeze might send her running. But I needed her to trust me enough to stay. To let me help.

"They made a fool of me." She said it with such bitterness, I didn't know how to respond, other than to wait. Now that she'd started, she seemed intent on letting the whole story spill out. "They ran—no—run a shipping company. Lots of traffic across the border between Canada and the United States. I used to work for them in the accounting department." She laughed, the sound mirthless.

My chest hollowed out at the self-derision in her words. The guilt.

"I was so proud to be part of the family business. My mother was the CFO, my dad

the CEO. I even met my ex through work. He was some kind of hotshot chief of staff for my dad. I had no idea what that meant. Then,” she looked at me, a wealth of misery in her eyes, “I found out they were really smugglers.” She tossed back the last of her wine. “And they made me an unwitting part of it. They used me and my boat. I was fucking disposable to them. If I’d gotten caught, I’d be in prison right now.”

White-hot anger jabbed me like a sword through the stomach, but I kept a lid on it. She’d given me something precious – her trust. I wouldn’t abuse it by making her confession about me. Anya didn’t need me going off, even if I wanted nothing more than to give her my list of top five places to bury a body.

She wiped a stray tear. I reached for her hand, squeezing. Striving for control over my racing heart.

“I’m so sorry.” I didn’t know what else to say. The level of betrayal she’d experienced was incomprehensible. My family was far from perfect, but they’d never misled me like hers had. I set our glasses aside and pulled her into my lap, wrapping my arms tightly around her. Holding her helped me duct-tape back the rage that wanted to leak out in a toxic stew.

“I discovered the real reason my ex always wanted to sail to Canada on a day trip to Windsor. A cache of drugs in my gear locker. He always sent me off to shop or pick up snacks, something to get me out of the way. He must have been doing shady deals behind my back since the beginning, but I didn’t see it. Didn’t suspect.”

“How did you connect your family to the drugs?” I asked, focusing on the facts she presented instead of how much I wanted to rip her ex limb from limb. “Couldn’t it have just been this asshole’s side hustle?”

“I hoped that was all it was.” She hung her head. “I figured I didn’t really know what was going on. Pretended I had seen nothing. Instead of taking my time on our next

trip, I sped through my grocery run and doubled back to the boat. I watched him make the exchange. There was no denying what he was then. But my dad? My mom? I had no idea they were involved.

“I broke it off with Owen without telling him why. But my parents pestered me incessantly about taking him back. Talked about how he was just lost without me.” She shook her head. “They’d lost. Lost their mule into Canada. Then Mom gave me a ‘special account’ at work. The one they used to reconcile their illicit activities, to wash out the payments to Owen. It didn’t take me long to match the payments to him with our boat trips.” She shuddered. “They were part of it. Behind it. And they used me.”

“Honey, I’m so sorry. Did you confront them?” I asked, unwillingly fascinated by her tale. Cold rage settled over my shoulders like a mantle. Part of me wanted to stop probing, avoid causing her more pain. But now that she’d started, maybe excising the wound was best. And I needed to know what I was up against. How deep the rot went.

Anya shook her head. “No. I started planning. Copying whatever evidence I could get my hands on and downloading files. Taking out small amounts of cash until I could fund my escape. My mom took me out to lunch on my last day. She could tell something was wrong, but she made one last attempt at getting me to reconcile with Owen.”

She snorted. “My mom said he was such a ‘good man.’ I knew then they didn’t really love me. Not if they’d set me up with that monster. By then I’d found evidence of more than just the pharmaceutical scam. Drew,” her blue eyes were luminous with tears. “I think they had at least one border guard killed.”

My heart stilled. She was dead serious.

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“There were pictures,” she whispered.

The name change made sense. The secrecy. Fuck.

I’d stack my family and our resources against most foes without flinching. But murder?

Ideas flickered as I considered and discarded each potential defense. Short of blowing up the ferry fleet, I didn’t know how to protect her. And there were always planes. No countermeasure seemed like enough to keep her safe. And that terrified me.

Short of scooping her up and hiding her away, I didn’t know what to do. And she’d never tolerate that. Anya had the strength to walk away from her family once. She’d been fearless when she needed to be. I had to respect that. Follow her lead.

“I’m so, so sorry, Anya.” I paused. “Do you still want me to call you Anya?”

Her smile trembled. God, that lip quiver. “Yes. That’s who I am now. I amassed as much evidence as I could, then dropped it in the mail to the local FBI field office and fled. Changed my name. Started a new life. I thought I’d escaped.”

The heartbreak in her voice knotted my gut. I hugged her tight, as much to reassure myself as to comfort her. She had made it out. I’d keep her out.

“He’s here,” she whispered finally.

I glanced at my sweet sunny girl, her eyes red from crying. “Your dad?”

“My ex. Owen.”

A thousand reactions crowded forward. Anger. Relief. Satisfaction. If he was here, we could confront him. End him. Or at least end his hold on Anya. Friday Harbor was our turf. I wouldn't let him terrorize her.

“What does he want?” I asked. If it were money, that'd be easy. But I doubted it would be that simple. And my sense of justice wouldn't find a payoff satisfying. Anyone who touched my sweet Anya, made her hurt like he had, deserved far worse than a golden parachute. A shove out of a sea plane into the big, wide ocean would better suit the situation. That might calm some of the toxic stew roiling in my chest at the thought of her in danger.

“Help setting up a new shipping lane between here and Victoria, I think. He's pushing me to introduce him to a local boat captain.” She dipped her chin. “And he's threatening to tell the sheriff about my past if I don't help him.”

Our sheriff wasn't that gullible. But Anya seemed to buy the threat.

“What can he possibly accomplish with a call to the sheriff? So you changed your name, so what? If he implicates you in anything else, doesn't he implicate himself?”

She looked doubtful. I hated the fear in her eyes. “He'll find a way to ruin things for me here. It's what he does.”

“Protecting the people I care about is what I do.” It was my stake in the ground, my promise. My refusal to back down. But all I wanted to do was shove a stake straight through Owen's heart. Wasn't that how you dealt with vampires? You didn't reason with them. Didn't bribe. You ended them.

“I don't want to bring you into my mess.”

I lifted her chin, wanting her to see the sincerity in my eyes. “There’s nothing we can’t handle together. If it takes a thousand Owens to prove that to you, I will.”

And I’d fucking relish doing it. She’d trusted me enough to let me in.

“I don’t deserve you.” The self-doubt, the recrimination in her voice, gutted me.

“Not true. You deserve so much better than you’ve had.”

I ached to show her she was precious. Should have been treated as such.

She cupped my chin, stroking the stubble on my neck, the slow scrape turning the tide, electrifying the air. I let my lingering anger at her family and ex smolder into something else, something warmer. A fire that burned, not with rage but with the desire to show her I adored her. That she deserved everything.

Closing the distance between us came as naturally as breathing, our kiss made of flickering fire and honeyed sweetness. I deepened the kiss, and she answered in kind, welcoming my gentle assault. Kissing her felt like heaven, like coming home. I wanted to bask in her, soaking up the heat we generated between us.

Slowly, I drew a palm along her ribcage, tracing the valley at her waist, slipping a hand beneath her soft shirt to the even softer skin beneath. The urge to strip and worship her beneath the moonlight had me grabbing her hem in both hands, slowly rucking up the cotton, exposing her skin to the cool night air.

She arched against my chest, murmuring, “I want you.”

Something kindled in her eyes. A heat I didn’t expect. Maybe it was sheer relief, now that she’d unburdened herself, but I didn’t want her to have regrets.



“You sure, honey?”

### Chapter 22 – Anya

“One hundred percent sure.”

After all the emotional turmoil, one thing remained steady: Drew. He hadn't flinched or faltered. He was loyal in a way that called to my soul, demanding equal faith in return.

Whatever happened with my family, with Owen didn't matter, not now that I'd told Drew. The last barrier between us fell away, leaving me free to do what I really wanted to: make him mine. There were no more secrets between us. Nothing to fear. Every muscle eased at once, leaving me near boneless. A gentle euphoria rushed in, filling the crevices with a liquid warmth.

Hungry for him, I pounced, climbing across his lap, my thighs bracketing his as I rocked against the growing bulge at the front of his jeans. I kissed him with all the pent-up desire and fear that had been churning inside me since my ex first texted me, exorcising his demon by immersing myself wholly in Drew.

Our kiss grew more passionate as I let go, giving myself over to his gentle domination. I arched, exposing my throat and chest,unaware that I was leaning perilously close to the open flame behind me.

“Anya.” Drew's voice was rough but urgent as he tugged me back, smoothing a hand over my hair. “I'm burning for you, but you are already hot. Let's not singe your beautiful hair.”

I chuckled, feeling sheepish that I'd forgotten the danger behind me.

"Shall we take this inside? To my place?" he asked.

"Yes, but I'm not sure I can walk. You've turned my knees to Jello."

"Not a problem," he said confidently. He turned off the firepit with a flick of his wrist, his dark eyes glittering in the moonlight. In one smooth move, he scooped me up into his arms, cradling me close to his chest. "I am a full-service boyfriend."

He carried me easily past my car and across the street. I dropped kisses along his strong jaw, laughing when he jiggled me threateningly. "Stop that. I've got to focus, woman." He paused at his front door.

"You could set me down."

His eyes gleamed. "What would be the fun in that?" His smirk was my only warning. I couldn't explain how he did it, but he tossed me in the air, scooping me onto his shoulder in a fireman's carry that sent blood rushing to my head.

"Drew!"

He smacked my ass playfully. "Quiet. We can't wake the guests." He dug in his pocket, and I heard the jingle of keys behind me. In three big strides, he crossed what I assumed to be a small living area and ducked into a room dominated by a queen bed.

I tensed, anticipating that he'd unceremoniously drop me onto the mattress. What he did instead was much worse.

He stood by the bed, his hands stroking my ass, kneading gently. The pressure ground

my groin into his shoulder. Gravity sent blood rushing to my head, making me dizzy, even as his touch sent my circulatory system into war with itself, calling heat to my center.

I half expected him to split me on his shoulder, holding me at his mercy while he peeled my jeans off and delved between my thighs. But even Drew couldn't quite manage those logistics. Instead, he pulled my thighs across his chest, letting me slip down until my legs wrapped around his waist, my arms around his neck, bringing us face-to-face.

"Hello." His deep voice rumbled, ricocheting through my chest. I squirmed against him, pressing closer.

"Hi." My breathless greeting would have embarrassed me on the street. But in private, it became a gentle welcome.

"Honey, I need your help."

"Anything," I promised, clenching my thighs tighter.

Fire flickered in his dark eyes.

"I told you I'd take things slow, but I'm not sure I can keep that promise."

"I don't mind," I said guilelessly.

"But I do. That's why I need you to talk to me."

"About what?"

"Tell me what feels good for you."

He gazed at me with such intensity, it was clear he was serious. He helped me stand on the bed. The extra height put my waist within easy reach. He flicked open my fly, drawing my zipper down tooth by tooth. The soft zip echoed in the sensation already drawing my muscles tight.

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My jeans lost the battle with gravity, slowly pooling at my ankles, and I stepped out of them, kicking them off the bed. Drew's admiring gaze traced the curves of my thighs and calves.

"Do you want an itemized list?" I asked.

"Complete with debits and credits."

I chuckled, the sound low and raw. "Strip me, touch me, and make me yours."

He tugged me forward, a promise in his dark gaze that sent tendrils of heat snaking through me. His hands stroked me from hip to calves, a slow, dragging caress that snagged my socks. His next pass took my shirt, leaving me in a bra and underwear.

"You're overdressed," I challenged.

Three quick motions, and he stood before me, nearly naked, erection barely hidden behind flimsy cotton.

"Now I'm the one with too many clothes."

His prowling advance sent a rush of moisture between my thighs. His nostrils flared, as if he could scent my desire. I perched on the bed, tall thanks to the mattress beneath my feet. Drew gripped my thighs, urging me to widen my stance as he nuzzled at the crease at my hip, sliding his nose along the delicate skin. Unable to hide my shiver, I let my head fall back, spearing my fingers through his hair.

“You smell like sin and sunshine.”

His words reverberated against my pussy as he mouthed them against the soft cotton that covered my center, dampening it with his tongue. I arched, offering myself silently.

I expected him to strip my underwear off. Leave me bare. Instead, he toyed with the fabric, alternately nuzzling and using his fingers to tease. Slipping beneath the cotton, sliding close to where I wanted, then fading away until I whimpered, gripping his head and holding him where I needed him. My knees melted as he slipped my panties aside, tonguing my clit in a delicious swirl. He let me fold, following me down onto the bed until he hovered over me, his wicked smile my only warning.

His mouth was hot, his tongue persistent. I squirmed beneath him, offering silent assistance, helping him find the right spot. His hold on my underwear drew the fabric taut, making it cut into my hip, but I didn't care. It gave him the access I wanted. Needed. His strokes dipped and thrust until I clenched beneath him, bowing off the bed, eager for more of the sweet torture he offered.

“Damn,” he murmured, his muttered words, the soft puff from his breath nearly sending me over the edge. “I forgot your original instructions. Got too eager. Sorry, my Sunny Girl.” He pulled away, dropping his hold on my underwear, and I cried out, balanced on the edge of orgasm.

Roughly, he yanked the scrap of cotton over my thighs, scraping it down and tugging it off my ankles, leaving me bare. His eyes glittered. “I was supposed to strip you first.”

He army-crawled up my body, his erection nudging my center as he let his hips settle over mine, his forearms to either side of my head as he held my gaze. I arched beneath him, more than ready to feel him inside me, rubbing against his still-hidden

erection.

His jaw drew taut. “Honey,” he gritted out. “Don’t go skipping steps now. I don’t even have you fully naked yet.”

Rocking my hips forward made him clench his teeth, and I smirked. “Then get naked, Fenwick.”

I rocked again, enjoying the way his dark eyes nearly crossed. He played like he was having no trouble holding back, but he was rock-hard between my thighs. He flexed, every muscle clenching. He kept the movement measured, deliberate, but the heat in his gaze made a liar of him.

“No latex allergies we need to worry about?”

“The only thing making me itchy right now is not having you inside me. Come scratch my itch, Fenwick.” My words came out in between panting breaths, but I didn’t care how much they betrayed me. I wanted him. Letting him know was part of the game.

“Ah-ah-ah, honey. I’m still working on step one here. I warned you I like to take things slow.”

His gentle threat had me retorting, “Much slower, and I’m finishing without you.”

His nostrils flared. His next moves were slow. Deliberate. Taunting me. He sat back on his heels, his weight holding me down. His eyes glittered, and I considered how I must look. Spread wantonly beneath him, bare except for a lacy little bra. Nothing to hide behind. But with Drew? I didn’t need to hide.

As if he sensed my capitulation, he reached for the clasp of my bra, drawing it away.



I took ruthless advantage of his interest in my breasts, arching my chest and sliding my hands across the bed in my best imitation of a sexy snow angel.

Hastily, he dropped my bra to the floor, stripping his underwear away and scooping a condom from the bedside table.

Sure I was about to get my way, I relaxed against his comforter, letting the bubbles of anticipation build. I wanted to be full to bursting with Drew. Have him deep inside me until I couldn't think. Couldn't do anything but feel.

He dropped to perch over me again, his erection nudging my slick opening. I let my thighs fall open, arching up to meet him. He was going to give me what I wanted. What I needed.

He kissed me, the slow slide of our mouths, the dip of his tongue a parody of what I really wanted from him. The scrape of his beard was deliciously soft. He nuzzled the delicate spot behind my right ear, sending a cascade of sensation shivering down my spine. I thrust against him again, nearly senseless with my need to be impaled, to grip him between my thighs.

Instead, he traced a path down my chest, cupping my breasts and sipping at the delicate peaks. It was delicious, but not what I wanted.

“More,” I demanded breathily.

His clever fingers found my slit, exploring delicately, slicking my moisture around my clit. Still, it wasn’t enough.

Done with patience, I reached for his cock. He hissed as my grip tightened. “Too much?”

“Never enough. I want to be inside you. But not before you come.”

“I’m close. I never took you for a tease, Fenwick.”

“Honey, that’s where you’re wrong. I could go on like this forever. Tasting you. Touching you.” He stroked, swirling and pressing ruthlessly at my clit.

“Even the tortoise finishes, Drew,” I burst out, hanging on to the last vestiges of my control.

“Come for me.” His soft demand, accompanied by this delicate touch sent me over the edge, cascading lights flashing behind my lids as I sank into my orgasm, relishing every shudder. When my body quieted, I reached for him, twining my hands around his neck.

“Come for me.”

He thrust forward, the force of his penetration shoving me forward, tilting my pelvis until our groins connected, applying fresh pressure to my clit. Heat pooled, every

muscle tightening like razor wire as Drew pinned me to the bed, his hips working furiously in time with mine to take us both to the edge.

He held my gaze, our hands clasped above my head as he pushed home one final time, my heart melting at the flash of tenderness that contorted his features. The primitive need to claim and be claimed rushed over me, wrenching another orgasm from my body as his guttural shout of satisfaction announced his own release. My inner muscles rippled in the aftermath. Like I didn't want to let him go.

A fissure opened in my chest. Drew would be within his rights to gloat after tonight. He'd darn near made me forget all my names. But he slipped to the bed beside me, gathering me close, raining tiny kisses across my face and shoulders.

"Honey, you're always beautiful, but right now you are the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen."

Puffy mouth. Messy hair. Flushed cheeks. Sure, I was gorgeous.

As if he could read my thoughts, his eyes glittered. "Mine."

The raw possessiveness in his tone sent an answering primitive greed flooding me. "Just so you know, that goes both ways," I warned.

He smirked, one dark brow raised rakishly. "Just the way I like it." He dropped a kiss on my shoulder. "You'll stay?"

I held his gaze, aware he was asking something else. Something I had no right to commit to, given Owen's return.

"I'll stay."

“Perfect.” He gathered me into his arms, arranging us into an imitation of our positions the first time we’d slept together. “I may be an oldest sibling, but I’m not meant to share.”

Having him stake his claim so openly should have worried me. I didn’t want to drag Drew into my mess. But I was coming to rely on him. And a sneaky voice whispered that it was already far worse than that.

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“Good morning.” Drew’s sleepy murmur roused me.

I surrendered to a deep exhale, stretching long, my thigh sliding between his. The sprinkle of hair on his shin rubbed gently over my calf as I extended, toes pointed, melting against his chest when he banded his arms around me.

A few muscles twinged, but overall, I felt blissfully relaxed. Good sleep will do that for you. Ditto good orgasms.

I’d never doubted Drew was good with his hands, but holy hell. The way he said “come for me” was going to give me thrills everytime I remembered last night. He took everything seriously. I shouldn’t have doubted my pleasure would be tops on his list.

“What’s got that cute little smile twisting up your mouth?” he asked, the honey in his tone making me think he already suspected.

“Carnal thoughts of you, to be honest.”

His soft growl, followed by his muttered, “that’s the way I like it,” sent fresh shivers cascading down my spine. “At least I’m not the only one with a one-track mind in

this bed.”

“You can mark yourself safe from being called the only hornball in the room,” I teased.

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He dropped a kiss on my forehead. “I’m going to start coffee.” He unwound himself, tucking the blankets back around me. I dozed a few more minutes, only really waking up when he returned with a mug in each hand.

“Thanks.” I pushed up to sit against the headboard. His eyes glittered as he handed me a mug, gaze affixed to my bare shoulder.

“Did you sleep okay?”

I laughed, my breath sending small waves across the surface of my coffee. “I can’t believe you can ask that with a straight face.” He looked like a little boy holding his first fish: all teeth and pride. Cute as hell.

“Do you have any classes today?”

“Just two. Do you have to work?”

He shook his head. “I have a few chores to take care of, then I’m free.”

“I’ve invited everyone over for dinner tonight at the house. I’m ready to tell them everything. About Owen, my family, all of it. You can join us?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” His thumb brushed over my knuckles, deliberate and warm. “They’ll understand, honey.” A slow grin tugged at his lips. “Besides, I have plans for you later.” He held my gaze when I said it. The promise there made my heart race, memories from last night rushing forward.

He leaned in, capturing my mouth in a gentle kiss. I tingled down to my toes with remembered pleasure. The soft brush of our lips wasn't nearly enough to satisfy me. But I couldn't bury my past with sex. At least not permanently. And for Drew and I to have a shot at a real future together, I had to lay Anne-Marie to rest.

Reluctantly, I sat back. "Owen is pushing me to meet him tonight. That was his text last night. I'm going to delay, but I can't put him off forever."

Drew's eyes flickered, but his expression remained calm. "Let's talk it through with the gang tonight. I have a few ideas. If we put our heads together, we can figure out a plan to keep you safe. Do you want me to pick up anything for dinner or help you cook?"

"I've got it covered." The meal was easy. Spilling the truth to my friends? That was the part I dreaded.

## Chapter 23 – Drew

Fighting back my natural instinct to root out Anya's ex and forcibly put him on the ferry out of town took all my willpower. Dealing with him in her own way was important to her. Even if it felt like I should ask Zach to handcuff me to the farm to keep me from interfering, I couldn't do it. He'd enjoy it too damn much.

But stopping by the Sheriff's Office to snoop a bit under the guise of asking about the case stolen from my truck didn't seem out of bounds. I painted on my most charming grin for Sue at the front desk. She'd tucked her salt-and-pepper bob back from her gently lined face with a couple of blue star-embossed barrettes, but somehow they worked with her SJSO navy polo shirt.

"Hey, the sheriff in today?" I asked, knowing full well he wouldn't be.

“Sorry, Drew. The sheriff’s in some meeting with bigwigs from the DEA. Jacob’s on duty here, and we’ve got a deputy out on patrol. Can I help you with something?”

“Just checking up on that theft from my truck. Any news?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, honey. You know better than to leave your windows down.”

I grimaced. “Yeah, I feel foolish about that. Still no leads?”

“Nope.”

“I remembered after I filed my report that there was a strange man in the vicinity. Thirties with a beard, dark hair and a leather jacket. Any reports of loiterers in town fitting that description?”

It was a longshot, but it didn’t hurt to get Anya’s ex on their radar. I’d pressed her for details so I could spot him if I ran into him in town.

“It’s been pretty quiet, but I’ve jotted down the description and will pass it to the deputies.”

“Thanks, Sue.”

I ran out to the farm and picked up a few more things I needed. Gran’s car was in the driveway, but she was nowhere to be found. I peeked into the guest bathroom. I’d slipped a full-size cutout of Beetlejuice into the tub behind the curtain. My petty revenge for Gran kicking me out. I hunted through my room, finding the creepy cutout in my closet. It took only moments to slip into my grandmother’s room and tuck him behind her door.



Chores accomplished, I drove back into town. Zach was behind the counter at Harbor Brews when I approached him.

“Hey. I just saw the group text. Are you coming to dinner at Vi’s tonight?” Zach asked.

“Yep. Anya and I are going to start cooking at five.”

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Zach arched one brow. “How domestic of you.”

“You’re just jealous.”

He snorted. “Fat chance. I like my life just fine, thanks. Now, are you going to order, or are you just here to hold up my line?”

I ordered a ham and cheese panini and grabbed a water from the cooler. A few minutes later, Zach joined me with his own sandwich, Isa taking over for him at the counter.

“How are things at The Anchor?”

“Good.”

“Mom and Dad come home in, what, a week? You know Mom will invite you back home once she can talk Gran down. Are you going to move back to the farm when the dust settles?”

“Nope. I’ve decided it’s a change for the better.” I wrinkled my nose. “Plus, I think Gran’s going to be dug in on me moving out.”

“I dunno. My money’s on Hurricane Vanessa, but it might be a battle.”

Once Mom caught sight of Beetlejuice, it was likely to be a short discussion. The efficiency appealed to me, both revenge and subtle nod that I’d moved on. Pranking Gran in close quarters was a recipe for food poisoning. She didn’t pull any punches.

“I’m happy where I’m at.”

Zach leaned back, examining me. Slowly, a grin spread across his face. “You and Anya hooked up, didn’t you? Look at you, old man. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

I glowered. My first instinct was to protest the hookup part. We were more than that. I didn’t treat my dick like a hobby.

“Ooh, your face right now. I should take a picture,” Zach teased, dimple flashing. “Settle down. I didn’t mean anything by it. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks,” I said grudgingly. “Have you seen a guy around, mid-thirties, dark hair and short beard, bomber jacket, Midwest accent?”

Zach’s nose wrinkled. “So many people come through here. It’s not ringing any bells.”

“Keep your eyes open.”

“Why?”

“It’s Anya’s story to tell, but he’s bad news. Call me if you see him?”

Zach dipped his chin, expression serious. “You got it.”

Taking care of the handful of maintenance jobs at The Anchor took up the rest of my afternoon. I showered and changed, eager to see Anya. I’d found myself pausing throughout the day, flashes of our night together running through my mind. Getting a semi while snaking a drain left me feeling a little gross, but it was a testament to Anya’s pull on me. I forgot where I was and what I was doing when I thought of her.

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She looked up from chopping fresh rosemary at the counter as I stepped into the kitchen. “Hey, handsome.”

Her warm greeting hit me hard. I wrapped her in my arms, encouraging her to drop the knife and penguin-walked her toward her room, kissing her cheeks, her forehead, her nose. Burying her in affection with every step, until I finally settled on her mouth. She smiled into our kiss, opening easily as we tangled in an exploration that seemed to go on forever. My breath came in rough gasps as I fumbled with her clothing. We crossed the threshold to her room, and I kicked her door shut behind us.

“Vi home?”

“Nope.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Dinner can be late.”

She’d slipped into a flowy skirt and shirt for dinner, giving me easy access to her smooth thighs. Flipping her skirt up and ripping her panties down took only a breath. I urged her back, tipping her onto her bed, legs akimbo. Gripping her ankles and forcing them wide left her open to my gaze.

Her eyes flashed. The challenge there drove me to my knees. I inched forward, taking my time to trace her right leg from ankle to inner thigh, smiling into her soft skin when she squirmed beneath me. I skipped over her slit, nuzzling her left thigh, pausing to drop a kiss on the inside of her knee. Her soft whimper urged me on, but I resisted, slowing my pace, making the travel from knee to ankle take a lifetime.

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“Mm, I take it back. I need a snack before dinner.”

Playfully, I tugged her forward until I knelt above her sweet pussy. Her lids dropped halfway over her blue eyes, shadowing them. I stroked across her thighs, holding her open for my attention and leaned in, nuzzling at her sweet nectar. Her fingers clawed into the mattress as my tongue traced her folds, stopping at her clit, and I smiled.

She was wet and puffy, pouting for my attention. Easing into her slick heat and retreating, finding the rhythm that made her clench and arch off the bed became my only mission in life. Taste and retreat. Stroke and seek.

Anya hit the mattress like she was tapping out, and I chuckled against her sweet flesh.

“Drew!” Her voice was rough and demanding.

“You want me to stop?”

“Yes.No.” She scowled, the fierce expression somewhat softened by the way she lay splayed beneath me.

“Which is it, honey?”

“Condom.Now.”

Doing as she bid only took a moment. Our coupling was fast and furious, more an expression of pent-up lust than anything else. Rocking into her, losing myself again and again as she gripped my cock with her internal muscles threatened my ability to

breathe. It was wild what she did to me. I'd had her only a few hours ago. But I couldn't get enough of her taste. Her smell. Her softness.

Each thrust only made me want her more. Want to root my cock into her and never leave. The punishing pace of our lovemaking sent delicious thrills of friction radiating from my base to my spine, and I closed my eyes, grunting gently as I came.

I dropped to the bed, my sides heaving as I tried to catch my breath. "Shit, sorry Sunny Girl. That hit me faster than I expected." I shook my head ruefully. "The things you do to me. I should apologize for making you come only once before I did."

She held up two fingers.

"I guess you took dinner being late as a personal challenge," she said, cracking a smile that was a gorgeous mix between exhaustion and satisfaction.

Anya lay spread beneath me, shirt rucked up, underwear hanging off one ankle. She was a mess. And I loved it. Enough that it shook me.

I took care of my condom and zipped my fly. Our friends would probably guess what we'd been doing, but I'd wear my mussed hair and wrinkled clothing as a badge of honor if it meant Anya and I were together. Nothing else mattered.

Her lazy smile reached into my chest and squeezed. I was already standing on the edge of something dangerous, the line between for now and forever blurring with every breath. She made me feel like I could conquer the world. Or burn it down for her—whatever kept her safe.

I dropped a tender kiss on her mouth, pulling away reluctantly. "How can I help with dinner?"

She giggled, the lighthearted sound making me grin. She smoothed her hair down and tugged her clothing back into order.

“Not ravishing me in the kitchen was a good first step. Thankfully, the oven wasn’t on. C’mon, lover boy. You can help me finish now that you’ve helped me finish.”

Anya sang along to the pop music playing as she worked. She looked light and carefree. Maybe a little wrinkled, but not like a woman whose ex was threatening her, and I wanted to give her more moments just like this.

I poured glasses of wine, passing one to Anya before dropping a kiss on her neck.

Vi slid the back door open, toeing off her shoes as she took in my presence in her kitchen. “Don’t you two look cozy.”

“Hey. How’s the migraine?” I asked.

“Better. Rae texted that she and Luce are on their way. Not sure about the guys. Lee has a tendency to get wrapped up in his writing and lose track of time. Someone might need to go pry him out of his writing cave.”

“Let me guess—you volunteer as tribute?” I teased. Lee seemed oblivious, but Vi didn’t take baked goods to any of my other friends when they were sick. Just Lee.

She shrugged. “If I need to. I could use the walk. We were busy at the shop today. Do you guys need any help?”

“Nah, we have it covered. Go relax,” Anya said.

“Have I told you lately that you’re the best?”

“Thanks,” I answered.



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Vi glowered. “I wasn’t talking about you.”

### Chapter 24 – Anya

Violet and Drew’s gentle bickering was the shot of normalcy I needed. Between my anxiety over talking about Owen, and Drew sending me over the edge earlier, my nervous system was fried. The lights were too bright. Music too loud. Every move felt jerky. Unnatural. I tried to cover the pressure buildup by finishing dinner, going through the motions and letting my activity relieve some of the kinetic energy that wanted to lock me in place.

Drew had accepted my past with grace. But my friends had wildly different personalities. It was difficult to predict how they’d react.

Lucy and Rae arrived first, Clay and Zach stomping in a few minutes behind them. Violet poured everyone drinks, all of them chatting like it was a regular Saturday night. Vi returned with Lee in tow. Our tiny living room was full to bursting, and I felt ready to pop.

Hovering at the threshold between the kitchen and living room, I felt like a runner at the starting line, one foot poised for escape. Except I wasn’t sure if I should bolt for the finish or back out entirely. Drew settled his hands on my shoulders, kneading the tense muscles there. His touch helped ground me. Telling my friends the truth was the price of belonging, the only way to turn the life I’d fabricated for myself into something lasting. I had to prove I deserved it.

“It’s okay, honey. Everything will be fine.”

I soaked up his confidence, absorbing it into every pore as if it could paper over the anxious poison that wanted to seep from beneath my skin. The sinister voices whispering they'd turn away. The whispers that I was disposable, the throwaway child my parents had been willing to sacrifice for their ambition.

"I don't think I can wait," I admitted softly, watching our friends talk and laugh. "I hate to ruin this, but I'm going to explode."

Drew wrapped around me, settling his hands on my hips. "Hey, everyone. Before dinner, we want to talk."

"Is it about Jordan?" Lucy asked, her expression suspicious.

"No, it's about me," I admitted, pausing to work past the lump obstructing my throat. "I'm not who you think I am."

Drew squeezed me in a silent show of support, his hands on my hips all that kept me tethered.

"I came to the island looking for a new life because I was escaping a bad situation at home."

Lucy and Rae exchanged knowing glances. Zach, Clay, and Lee sobered, as if bracing for whatever came next.

"My family can be dangerous, and my ex has come to Friday Harbor to see me."

"How dangerous are we talking about?" Clay asked.

"What does your ex want?" Vi asked.

There was nothing to do but say it as plainly as possible. I took a deep breath.

“My family was involved in organized crime. Smuggling, mostly. My ex works for them.” My lip trembled. “He wants me to help him set up shop in Friday Harbor.”

“Why would he think you’d ever agree to that?” Rae asked, brow wrinkled.

“Because I know what he’s capable of if I cross him.”

“Do you think he could be involved in Jordan’s death?” Clay asked.

“What makes you ask that?” Drew asked.

Clay’s brow furrowed. “The DEA has been nosing around. There are rumors of a new group smuggling out of Canada. The DEA have hit up the park rangers and local law enforcement. We’re supposed to report any unusual boat traffic or goings-on. Jordan’s death was unexpected, and as far as I know, the sheriff still hasn’t established how he got out to the cliffs.”

“Car is the easiest answer,” Drew said.

Clay’s gaze met his. “But a boat isn’t off the table.”

“I don’t think Owen has any local connections yet,” I said. “That’s why he says he needs me.”

“Or he murdered his minion and needs to replace him,” Lee pointed out.

“That’s my cousin you’re talking about,” Rae chided. “I find it hard to believe Jordan would be involved in smuggling.”

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“But you wondered where he got the money for his new truck. The whale watching business is good, but it’s not that good,” Zach said.

“He probably got a loan.”

“Then why has his second mate been MIA? The whole thing is weird if you ask me,” Zach said.

“My cousin’s wife said his co-captain, Brandon, reached out not long after Jordan’s accident with condolences. He’s been in Bellingham taking care of his mom. Apparently, he’s been off-island since before the accident. He didn’t hear about it until the memorial post on WNFH.”

“We’re straying from the point,” Drew chided. “Anya’s ex is hanging around, stirring up trouble.”

Violet rolled her eyes. “Let me guess: you’d like him on the next ferry out of town. Ideally, with a passenger seat full of manure as a souvenir of his trip.”

“That or feeding the fish at the bottom of North Bay,” Zach offered.

Drew grinned at his siblings. “You know me well. But I’d settle for off the island and away from Anya forever.”

Vi’s gaze met mine across the room. “How can we help?”

I melted against Drew, drooping like overcooked spaghetti. As easy as that. No

recriminations. No blame. Just “how can we help?” If I didn’t love my friends before, I was ride or die now.

“Thank you.” I sniffed, tearful. Drew ran his hands along my forearms, his touch gentle. “I never imagined you’d accept this so easily. Accept me.”

Lucy snorted, shaking her head. “If we judged each other based on our exes, Zach would be banished to Turn Island to live with the other trash pandas.”

“Hey,” Zach protested, rubbing his chest. “I thought you were more feminist than that.”

Lucy reached across Rae, patting his cheek. “Oh, honey, I am. I’m not judging them. I’m judging you. Sex is fine. Sex with you is probably fine. I have no interest in finding out. But the way you hit it and quit it is gross. You have the staying power of a popsicle under a heat lamp.”

Clay looked at her as if seeing Lucy for the first time. “You’re mean, and I like it.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line. “I don’t need another man in my life with a shame kink.”

“We’ve veered off track,” Drew said.

“It’s not always about you, pretty boy,” Lucy said with gentle scorn.

Clay clutched his heart, turning fully to face Lucy. “Marry me.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. Vi shook her head. “You’ll never get her that way, Clay. Drew’s right. Focus, people.”

“We need a plan,” Lee pronounced.

“What the quiet one said,” Lucy agreed.

Slowly, all gazes turned toward me.

“What are you guys thinking?” Zach asked. “Can’t you file a restraining order?”

“I wish. No, I think Owen will take more convincing than that,” I said. “He’s threatened to implicate me to the sheriff if I don’t cooperate.” I bit my lip. “Once upon a time, I trusted him. He’s smart enough to have prepared for this, kept something from my former life as insurance. A restraining order isn’t good enough.”

“I’m happy to introduce him to ‘convincing’ and ‘argument,’” Drew offered, clenching each of his fists in turn.

His offer was tempting. In a fair fight, Drew would win. But Owen didn’t play fair. And I wouldn’t risk Drew for anything.

“She wants less drama, not more,” Lucy chided.

“Has she met us?” Zach joked, glancing around our assembled group.

Each of my friends had a big heart and a big mouth. Even Lee, once you got him going. Three out of eight were related to Grandma Fenwick, which should be indictment enough all on its own. The woman was a local legend for a reason.

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“What, exactly, did Owen say he wanted?” Rae asked.

“Introduction to a boat captain. I assume he’ll use my introduction to weasel his way into making that person work for him. He’s a master at finding weak spots.”

Clay tugged on his lip, expression thoughtful. “What if we give him exactly what he wants?”

“How?” I asked.

“I mentioned my contact in the DEA. He’d kill for a lead like this. Let me call him. If they don’t already have someone with boots on the ground in Friday Harbor, they can probably get someone in place quickly with a boat.”

“I take it back. I’ll marry you,” Lucy said matter-of-factly.

“What changed your mind?” Clay asked.

“Your devious side. It’s sexy.”

“Too bad. I’ve reconsidered.”

Lucy threw her hands up. “Typical man. Always changing their minds. If it weren’t for bad ideas, you’d have no ideas at all.”

“But this is a good one,” Rae protested, eyes lit. “If your DEA friend can’t get a boat here in time, they can pretend Sailor Swift is theirs. I’m happy to offer her up, if it

gets this jerk off the streets and out of Anya's hair."

"Thank you all," I said, unable to hide the tremble that made my voice shake. I leaned into Drew's side. "I couldn't ask for better friends." I sniffed.

"You could, but they probably already have people. We're okay," Lucy said.

Clay stepped outside to make his phone call, returning a few minutes later. "We're a go. They'll have an agent here in the morning to meet with you, Anya."

"Easy as that?" I asked, overwhelmed by their support.

Drew gripped my hand, squeezing tight. "You're one of us now."

My battle against letting the tears flow freely failed, liquid leaking from my eyes and snot dripping from my nose as I turned into Drew's chest with a sob. I felt weak for crying, but the relief was overwhelming. The weight of my secret had been slowly growing, every half-truth about my life before Friday Harbor making me feel heavier with shame. Knowing I didn't have to hide anymore left me feeling like I could float away.

Only Drew's touch kept me tethered to the ground. His hands stroked my arms. He murmured comforting nonsense in my ear. No discernable words made it past my tears, but even his tone helped soothe me. His solid support was just another reason I was falling for him.

Even in my head, I couldn't quite say "love." Last time I'd thought I was in love, I'd learned that word could be a trap. Family love. Romantic love. Loving and trusting the wrong people had gotten me into this mess.

"I brought cookies home from the shop. Who wants dessert before dinner?" Vi



announced brightly, giving me a moment to collect myself.

I swiped at my eyes, removing the offending moisture. I slowly brought my breathing back under control as Drew rubbed my back.

“Don’t worry, I’ll stop soon,” I promised, rubbing at another tear.

“You do what you need to, honey. No one’s judging.”

“I’m judging,” Lucy piped up. “But only because you’re missing out on Vi’s sea salt cookies. Wrap it up, Rose. You’ve got dessert to demolish.”

Her no-nonsense pep talk made me chuckle, and I borrowed Drew’s signature salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

Vi handed me a cookie, eyes soft. “It’ll be okay, you know.”

My smile wavered around the corners. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe her. It was that I was so grateful for all I had. A few days ago, I’d thought my life in Friday Harbor was over. That I’d have to abandon all I’d built and flee, leaving my friends behind. It never occurred to me that they’d stand by me. Why would they? My own family hadn’t. But Violet, Lucy, and Rae had become the sisters I never had, bound to me by something deeper than blood. And while my feelings for Drew were anything but brotherly, Zach, Clay, and Lee stepped in without hesitation, content to be the brothers I always needed.

Maybe the family I’d been born into hadn’t had my best interests at heart, but my chosen family did. I wasn’t an afterthought or an obligation. Not a pawn. I was theirs to love and protect. And for the first time in a long time, I wasn’t hiding. Wasn’t just surviving – I was home.

## Chapter 25 – Drew

Sunday morning, Anya and I ambled down to the docks to meet up with Clay's contact. The grizzled older man looked like the comic book version of a boat captain, complete with a pipe gripped in strong, yellowed teeth.

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Once we reached privacy below deck, his demeanor shifted, all the small-town affability replaced by cool confidence. “I’m Agent Nick Harris, or Captain Nick if I’m undercover. Nice to meet you.”

We exchanged handshakes. The other man’s calluses were enough to sell the fiction that he was a real boat captain. For all I knew, maybe he was. DEA agents probably had hobbies, right?

“Do you have any recent photos of your ex?” Agent Harris asked.

Anya shook her head. “I haven’t seen him since I left home, except for here on the island.”

“Can I ask, why is this creep still wandering around free? Anya tells me she dropped a care package at the local FBI office before leaving Detroit.”

“I can’t comment on an open investigation,” Agent Harris said coolly. He smiled at Anya. “But we appreciate your cooperation and the introduction.”

“I just want to be done with him.”

“You’ll be one step closer after you introduce us. Have you set up a meet yet?”

Anya shook her head. “I’ve been telling him I didn’t have anyone. The last thing I want to do is bring a friend into my mess.”

Agent Harris grinned. “Then it’s a good thing you knew to call in the professionals.

I'm here at your disposal. When you set up the meet, set it for here, aboard The Codfather."

"It's wired?" I asked.

Agent Harris nodded. "Audio and video."

"What happens after I introduce you? What if he doesn't do anything you can arrest him for?"

"Don't get your hopes up. Building a case takes time. Best I can do is get him off your back, get his focus on me."

"That was not the deal. I don't want Anya at risk," I protested.

Agent Harris shrugged. "Once he gets what he wants, he'll probably head back home, like a good little fixer."

"What if he doesn't?" I asked sharply.

"Then we'll move to Plan B."

"Which is?"

"We wait."

"Not good enough," I forced the words through clenched teeth.

"You need to be realistic," Agent Harris cautioned. "I doubt he'll hang around. If he does, I'll keep an eye on him." He smiled for Anya's sake. "We won't let anything happen to you."

I gritted my teeth, giving him a steely glare. He smiled at me. “She doesn’t need us. She has you.”

He was a canny bastard. She absolutely had me. I wouldn’t argue to the contrary. But that didn’t ease my fear that I wouldn’t be enough. Now that her family knew where she was, nothing guaranteed this would be Owen’s last ask.

Anything short of him behind bars, of her parents locked up, left Anya exposed. And I didn’t like it.

In an impossibly short time, she’d become everything. Sweet and funny, caring and beautiful, inside and out. She deserved better than to be constantly looking over her shoulder.

“Thanks for everything, Agent Harris. I appreciate your help. I’ll text you when I have details,” Anya said smoothly, maybe picking up on my instinct to argue.

Grudgingly, I dipped my chin at the other man. “Please. Anything you can do to protect her, I’d appreciate it.”

Agent Harris kept his expression solemn, but he nodded. It was probably the best I’d get. He had a job to do. And it wasn’t to keep Anya safe. That was my job now.

I hopped to the dock first, holding out a hand to steady Anya. She frowned at my hand but grabbed it anyway.

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“What?” I asked, sensing her annoyance.

“Agent Harris is helping me. You didn’t have to give him a hard time.”

I touched her wrist. She turned to face me, her body rigid. “I can’t lose you.” I infused the words with everything I couldn’t quite say, the desperation that made me feel like my organs were melting out of my skin. The fear that rode me, forcing me to face truths I wasn’t ready for.

She looked heart-wrenchingly beautiful, sun glinting off her yellow hair. Water glittered around us, lapping gently against the dock. The wind blew a strand of hair across her mouth, and she wiped it away impatiently.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, sounding exasperated. “I know Owen. He won’t hurt me.”

“No, honey, you’re not hearing me. I can’t lose you.” My chest constricted. I forced the words out anyway. “I’m usually the reasonable one. The calm one. But I can’t be that when it comes to you. If he hurts you, if he touches you—I can’t even think about it without seeing red. I need you to be okay.”

“I will be.”

Her eyes were soft, but I could tell she didn’t get it.

“Even if your feelings for me aren’t as strong, it doesn’t matter. Anya, I’m yours. Your shield. Your sword. Damn the consequences. I need you to be okay like I need to breathe. Anything less is unacceptable.”

I held her gaze. “You’re it for me.”

I couldn’t bring myself to regret my words. They were the truth. I could only hope my honesty wouldn’t scare her away. She hovered, indecision fluttering across her expressive face as she processed my impassioned little speech. Fight or flight might as well be floating above her head in a thought bubble, her dilemma was so apparent. She changed her stance, coming off the balls of her feet and settling more fully until the sole of each foot made contact with the dock. That small sign that she was rooted, standing in her version of mountain, eased some of the tension gripping me. Maybe I hadn’t ruined it all by pushing her too fast.

“Andrew Fenwick, I love you, and the only consequences I’m willing to accept are us living happily ever after once we get Owen out of our lives.”

After “love you,” everything short-circuited, her words swimming past me like fish darting through a murky sea. Total system collapse. I’d been steeling myself for rejection. For her to bail. And fuck if she didn’t do the exact opposite.

A laugh burst from my chest. Half relief, half exultation. All rusty emotion. In that moment, if sheer will could kill, Owen would be six feet under. I wouldn’t let anyone come between me and Anya.

“I’m going to hold you to that, you know,” I warned.

Her blue eyes glittered with unshed tears. She swiped angrily at her eyes, burying the emotion with a choked-off laugh.

“I feel like Owen is the modern-day equivalent of Rumpelstiltskin, here to ruin my future by holding me accountable for the mistakes in my past.”

“We have his name, and we have his number.” I tilted her chin up until she looked

me in the eye. “There’s nothing in your past to be ashamed of, no matter how he tries to twist things.” Her shoulders relaxed. Just a bit, but that tiny victory made me tease, “And there’s no way in hell I’m letting him get his hands on you or our first-born child.”

Anya held up a palm, eyes flashing even as she hid a smile. “Slow down there, Fenwick. No one said anything about children...”

I wrapped her in my arms, grinning down at her. “Aw, honey. You’d look so cute round with my baby in happy baby pose.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re a nut.”

“But I’m your nut. All of my nuts are yours.”

Her head tilted. “I don’t know how to respond to that, Fenwick. You’ve managed to be both sweet and salty.”

I dropped a quick kiss on her mouth, smiling against her lips when she stood on tiptoes to follow me as I drew away. “We’re the perfect combination.”

Hand in hand, we stepped into Harbor Brews, our fingers laced together like a silent promise. Zach’s eyes flickered to our entwined hands. His dimple flashed. “What can I get you fine folks this morning?”

I checked behind me to make sure he was talking to us.

“Two regular coffees please,” Anya said.

“Everything go okay with your morning meeting?” Zach asked quietly as he poured our cups.



“Mr. Bull in China Shop here wanted to rock the boat, but we’re good.”

Zach squinted at her but didn’t argue with her mixing of metaphors. He turned to me.

“Let us know if you need anything.”

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We'd just settled with our coffee when Anya's phone buzzed. Her grim expression told me all I needed to know.

"He's watching us."

I scowled, glancing around Harbor Brews.

"Not now, but this morning. He saw us meet with Captain Nick. I'm going to confirm a meet time for this afternoon."

"The sooner we can put this behind us, the better." I squeezed her hand. "Then we can start our future. Together."

### Chapter 26 – Anya

Owen's message read: looks like you've found our man. When can I meet him?

The idea of him watching me at the docks made me sick to my stomach. It also meant he'd probably spotted Drew. Fear flickered. Owen had always been too pragmatic for jealousy. Maybe because he'd been using me. But if he thought he could manipulate me by threatening Drew, he would.

Owen had been smart enough not to claim to love me or mention our unofficial breakup when we spoke before. I figured disappearing and changing my name sent a clear message. But if he watched me meet with Agent Harris this morning at the docks, he had to have noticed I'd replaced him with an upgrade. Drew was everything Owen was not: honest. Trustworthy.

I set the meet for seven and texted Agent Harris the details. Now, all we had to do was wait and hope Owen took the bait.

“What do you want to do today?” Drew asked.

We needed a distraction. Something to keep me from stewing about introducing Owen and Agent Harris.

“How about you show me the farm? I’ve always wanted a tour.”

“You have?” Drew seemed surprised by my suggestion.

“You’re kind of a big deal around here. I’ve always been curious.”

His slow smile of pleasure sent my heart flipping in my chest. “Sure. I can run you through the process this morning.”

I’d been to the farm before with Violet, but only for brief visits. Mostly when she needed to drop off something for her mom or pick up stock for the shop.

The Fenwick family homestead glowed like a beacon under the spring sky. Lights shone from the dormer lights above the broad front porch. The overall impression was of natural cedar shingles and glass, the multi-story family home warm and welcoming. The large house would look out of place in town, but nestled among the rolling hills of the inner island, it fit perfectly.

Drew drove past the main house, parking in front of the administrative building next to the evaporation houses. We walked through each greenhouse, Drew showing me the crystallization process as we toured houses with older batches of saltwater. He explained how he harvested hundreds of gallons of saltwater, depositing the briny liquid in shallow pools in the evaporation houses, then let time and sunlight do the

heavy lifting. Over weeks, the water evaporated, leaving mineral-rich sea salt ready for harvest. The crystals were stunning, intricate patterns and shapes more beautiful than I'd imagined glistening on the top of the water. The surface in the final house looked like frozen ice.

"There's still a bit of brine beneath the surface, but this batch is ready for processing." Drew's pride in his operation was well-earned.

"It's beautiful."

I could sense his gaze on me. "Mmhm." He extended his hand. "Come on, I'll show you where we create the blends." He walked me through the rest of their production process and packaging. Boxes of Island Salts lined the shelves in their small warehouse.

"How much of this gets sold through Vi's shop in town?" I asked.

"She'll go through at least a case a month of each blend and two cases of our signature sea salt. The rest is for online orders or local distribution. We run a weekly truck to the mainland to serve those customers."

His passion shone, animating his voice as he spoke in more detail about the blending process and packaging design. I loved seeing him nerd out. It was adorable.

"You really enjoy the salt business, don't you?" I asked.

"I do. I have dreams for expansion, but I'm proud of what we've accomplished."

"You should be."

He checked his watch. "Want to grab lunch? I bet Gran has something good in the

fridge.”

“Now I see why your family calls you a freeloader,” I teased.

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He shrugged. “Unless she finished everything already, I dropped off a casserole and some cheese board stuff earlier in the week. Her idea of cooking when my folks are gone is a glass of whiskey and a handful of crackers.”

“I take it back. You’re pretty sweet, Fenwick.”

Drew pushed open the back door to the house without hesitation. “Gran, you around? I’ve got Anya here with me,” he called out. “You only have to walk in on her naked once to announce yourself,” he muttered.

I snickered. Here I thought he was being considerate. And I guess he was. To my eyeballs.

When she didn’t answer, he shrugged. “She might be out for a walk.”

I followed him to the kitchen, taking a seat on an island stool. Drew ducked into the fridge. I turned toward the door to the living room and froze, unable to hold back my squeak. It took me a moment to recognize the large male figure for what it was: a cardboard cutout of Beetlejuice.

“Drew. Why is Beetlejuice hanging out in your kitchen?” I kept my tone carefully neutral.

“Oh, shit. Sorry about that.” He smiled sheepishly. “Our family has some creative traditions. Petty revenge is one of them.”

I guess if he could accept that Anya Rose wasn’t my real name, and that my family

was likely to end up in prison, then I could roll with a few pranks.

“This is how you got back at your grandmother for kicking you out?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah-ha!” Gran jumped out from around the door to the living room. “Caught you!” My heart stuttered, my hands clammy and cold. Her appearance shocked me more than the zombie man in the striped suit. “Iknewit was you.”

“How do you know I didn’t give old Mr. Reyes a key?” Drew asked calmly, seeming unbothered by his grandmother’s sudden appearance.

I glanced between them. They acted like all of this was entirely normal. Again, I marveled at the differences between our families. If I tried a prank like this at home, my dad would have filled the cutout full of bullet holes.

“That old coot wouldn’t know a joke if it bit him in the ass.”

Drew squinted at his grandmother, his expression suspicious. “Are we going to get another visit from the sheriff?”

“We’re not talking about that joyless stiff.” His grandmother turned her attention to me. “Hello, dear.” Her sly grin was my only warning. She launched herself at me, wrapping me in a wiryhug that was surprisingly strong for a woman who had to be in her eighties.

“Hello, Mrs. Fenwick.”

“Gran to you now.”

A little in awe of the older woman, I sat back down. Drew pulled ingredients for lunch from the fridge. “Want some cheese and crackers with us, Gran?”

“Sure. Beats cooking for myself.”

“Are you getting enough to eat?” Drew asked, pulling the lid off a baking dish. “It doesn’t look like you’ve touched this casserole I brought.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I poked at it. You put canned tuna in it.”

“You need the protein. You should eat it.”

“It’s an abomination. Besides, you know I only take orders from men when I’m naked.”

“Being wildly inappropriate is not how you win every argument,” Drew groused, frowning.

Gran slid a sly glance my way. “Don’t listen to him. I’ve got decades of victory under my belt.”

Watching their banter was fascinating. My memories of my grandmother were hazy at best, but mostly filled with tea sets and starched dresses. This side of Drew was at once surprising and totally entrancing. It figured he’d try to take care of his grandmother, ever the responsible oldest son. But the pranks were something else. His sense of fair play and justice melded with his sense of humor in a quirky and unexpected way.

We enjoyed a low-key lunch with Gran, nibbling on cheese and crackers while she regaled me with stories from Drew’s childhood. She seemed to delight in telling me how he couldn’t be convinced to keep his pants on as a toddler, and I chuckled at the



image of a chubby little Drew, his tiny baby tush disappearing as he ran giggling from his grandmother.

“Thanks for lunch,” I said, hugging the wiry woman as we said our goodbyes.

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“You’ll have to come back when my Vanessa and Gary return and join us for family dinner.”

“That sounds nice,” I said. “Thank you.”

“What do you want to do with the rest of the afternoon?” I asked Drew, sliding into the truck.

Drew pretended to think. “Well, we could go to my place and make out. Or, we could go to your place and make out. If neither of those sound good, I’d also be game to drive out to Cattle Point and make out. You choose,” he said generously.

“I’m sensing a theme here.”

He gave me a boyish grin. “You are one smart lady.”

After an afternoon in his apartment at The Anchor that went way beyond making out, I felt like I could face the evening ahead with a semblance of calm. No matter what happened with Owen, I’d be fine. We’d be fine.

Drew insisted on coming with me to the meeting with Owen. After thinking it over, I’d agreed. I didn’t want to face him alone. Maybe that was cowardly, or maybe it was smart. I needed to show Owen I wasn’t easy pickings anymore.

Chapter 27 – Drew

Anya’s ex smirked as we approached him in the park above the marina. He stood

about five-ten, but he had the burly shoulders of a bulldog. On the surface, he looked like any other tourist. It was the subtle sneer when he noticed our joined hands that gave him away.

“Princess, you couldn’t quite face me alone, huh?”

I wanted to wipe the cocky grin off his face and take some skin with it, but Anya’s restraining hand on my wrist reminded me why we were here. Owen would cook his own goose. So long as he kept his hands to himself, he walked away. Something about the taunting gleam in his eyes made me think that was unlikely.

“Let’s get this over with,” Anya said, each syllable clipped. She stalked ahead, leading the way down the dock toward The Codfather.

“Hey, Captain Nick. Now still a good time?” Anya called as we reached the fishing boat bobbing gently against the pylons. Agent Harris emerged from below. His salt-and-pepper curls were covered by a fisherman’s cap pulled low. He spit into a cup, the rank odor of chewing tobacco floating on the breeze.

“Sure. Come aboard.” He extended a hand for Anya, helping her across. I stepped easily onto the deck, Owen following me.

“Owen,” he introduced himself as he and Agent Harris shook hands.

“Captain Nick.”

“You’re a fisherman?” Owen asked.

The grizzled captain shrugged. “I do this and that. Whatever I need to make the payments on The Codfather.”

Owen cast an assessing gaze across the deck, taking in the worn furnishings and aging electronics. “You catch much lately? I’ve heard this is cod and halibut country.”

Nick lifted a shoulder. “That and salmon. I run occasional charters near Victoria. We catch our limit.”

“Nice,” Owen said.

“But I’m open to other kinds of charters too,” Nick said.

Owen’s face stretched in a grin, all razor-sharp teeth. “Just what I like to hear.” He pulled a bottle from his jacket pocket. “Can we talk below over a glass of bourbon?”

Owen flicked a dismissive hand to Anya and me. “You can go. The grownups have business to discuss.” His predatory smile returned, his teeth flashing white in the gloom. “I’ll be in touch.”

“That’s not the deal.” I enunciated each syllable carefully so he couldn’t misunderstand me. “You’re not to contact her ever again.” I stared him down, pleased when he looked away.

“Owen, we were through long before I left Detroit. I’ve granted you this final favor, for old times’ sake, but those times are over. I’ve moved on. You should too.”

I was proud of Anya for sticking up for herself.

“And if you need any extra incentive to leave the island, I’m happy to give it to you,” I said mildly, forcing a pleasant expression through gritted teeth. The muscle ticking in my jaw beat with my pulse.

Owen held my gaze. I imbued my expression with every ounce of pain I wanted to cause him. Every threat I couldn't share aloud. His eyes flickered. Owen gave Anya a dismissive smile.

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“Whatever. Princess, call your dad. He misses you.” He turned on his heel, following Captain Nick below.

“Come on,” I urged, tugging Anya back toward the dock. I stepped over, catching her as she threw herself toward me as if she couldn’t escape. The Codfather fast enough.

I hugged her close, rocking her in my arms. She trembled, the fine tremor making me wish I could have done more to discourage Owen.

“Let’s go home.”

We walked across the dock. With every step away from the boat, the tightness in Anya’s shoulders eased, until she was all but melted against me at the crosswalk.

“Would you rather stop at Harbor Brews for a drink first?” I asked.

“Yes, please.”

Violet and the gang were clustered around a table near the door when we arrived.

“You still up for this?” I whispered.

She nodded, and I placed our drink orders with Isa at the counter while she joined our friends.

Anya patted the couch next to her as I approached with a pint glass in each hand. She accepted her glass with a grateful smile. Already, I could see the lines of tension

easing from her face. Sitting with her plastered against my side helped me relax.

The threat was over. For now.

Leaving things in Agent Harris's control left me feeling antsy, but there was nothing more for us to do. And keeping Anya as far away as possible from Owen was the smart move.

"Everything go okay tonight?" Vi asked.

Anya nodded.

"That's gotta be a relief," Rae said.

Lucy raised her glass. "To taking out the trash."

"Hear, hear," Zach said, tapping his glass to hers.

"To the best friends a girl could ask for," Anya said softly, raising her glass. I clinked gently with her and she added, "and the best boyfriend."

As good as it felt to hear her say it, it wasn't enough. But there was time for more. Time for us now that we could place Owen in the rearview mirror.

"To connections," Lee said, nodding to Clay.

"And to the women we want to marry," Clay added, winking at Lucy.

"No." Her denial was swift, but I noticed she still sipped at her drink.

"I'll drink to that," I said, holding Anya's gaze. She let a tiny smile peek through,

nipping a bit from her cider.

Zach made a face. Lee drank without comment. Vi looked sad for a moment, her gaze on Anya, but she drank, a grin slowly overtaking her features.

“Have you had any more search and rescue calls?” Lucy asked, maybe trying to avoid more proposals from the overeager park ranger.

“Nah, it’s been quiet,” Zach said.

“Usually, we start to get more calls as the busy season heats up,” I added.

Lucy looked thoughtful. “WNFH hasn’t had any news on Jordan. Has the medical examiner issued a ruling on his death?”

“Preliminary report is for an accidental death, but the final toxicology report is still a few weeks out,” Rae said. “I was able to swing by and check on Jia today.”



“How are she and the kids doing?” Anya asked.

“They’re coping, but it’s hard. Jia’s done everything she could to change or move her deployment, but her command isn’t budging. I’ll be moving into the house to watch the kids in another few weeks.”

I smiled at my brother. “Did I hear right that you’re playing uncle to Rae’s auntie?”

He shrugged, like hanging out with someone else’s kids for the summer was no big deal. Interesting. I glanced between him and Rae. Last I heard, she was still dating Simon, a friend of theirs from high school. Their situationship seemed odd to me, more long-distance waiting game than romance, but I couldn’t really judge. If it were Anya, I’d be prepared to wait.

I looked at Rae with new eyes. Long, dark hair with a tendency to curl, a petite but athletic figure and a steadiness that implied maturity beyond her thirty years. She and Zach had been close for years. But she’d always been taken. Simon had bounced between stations in Florida and Connecticut as he moved up the chain of command. Rae had seemed content with their relationship, and I’d seen no reason to pry. But now that she and Zach were playing house? I had questions.

We were full of beer and good cheer by the time we left Harbor Brews. Only to stop short when we spotted Owen propped against the wall, watching the exit.

“We’re done with you,” I growled, advancing on the other man.

“Too bad I’m not finished with you.” His gaze slipped to Anya, making me want to

step in front of her, shield her from his lazy perusal. He had no rights there anymore.

“No. We’re done,” Anya reiterated, her voice strong and sure.

Pride filled me. For all his posturing, Owen couldn’t scare her anymore. Not now that she had us.

“Are you sure about that, Princess? I still have some very interesting pictures. Bet the sheriff would love to see them.” He ended his sentence on a playful lilt, the underlying menace curdling below the surface.

I stepped forward, crowding him. His eyes flickered. He thrust back his shoulders, using his full brawn to seem bigger. But a small man will always be small where it counts. And a man who’d use a woman he professed to love had to be the smallest man who ever lived.

Owen wagged his phone at Anya, his smile ugly.

I plucked the phone from his fingers with a growl. “Fuck that.”

Owen reached for it, but I was faster. I slapped a palm to his chest, shoving. He tripped and fell on his ass. Anya gasped behind me. Thank god for gangly Fenwick arms. They’d beefed up over the years, and all the work in the salt houses helped. It’d take more than an asshole like Owen to best me.

He struggled to his feet, foul language flowing, red-faced with anger. His hand shot out, reaching again for the phone. “That’s mine.”

“Maybe, but she’s not. She’s mine to protect now. You need to accept that.”

Owen’s lip curled. “You have no idea what you’re getting yourself involved in, island

boy.” His eyes flickered, choreographing the right hook before he moved, making the punch easy to block. Easy to counter with a jab of my own. Owen stumbled back again, falling to the concrete.

I shook out my right hand. Anya stepped to my side, soothing her fingers over my bruised knuckles.

“I said we were done, Owen. You should have listened,” Anya said, her voice hard.

“You think just because you found a homegrown fuck boy, you’re protected?”

I hated the sneer in Owen’s voice. The confidence.

“Yeah, Owen. I’ve found my people. My place. I’m not Anne-Marie Genter anymore. You and my parents need to accept that. I’m out for good.”

The rest of our party emerged from Harbor Brews, Lee and Clay rushing to flank me. Each grabbed one of Owen’s arms, effectively immobilizing him.

The other man spit out a fresh stream of invective, cursing out me, Anya and our ancestors. “Let me go. You can’t do this,” he blustered, spittle flying from the corner of his mouth as he became more agitated.

“Less talking, more deleting,” I growled, holding the camera up to his face so it unlocked. “Where are these pictures you keep bragging about?”

“They’re not even on there,” Owen said sullenly, resisting Lee and Clay’s hold.

“No. He’d keep them close. Hand it here.” Anya extended her palm, and I gave her the phone. She scrolled the folders with a frown.

“When we were dating, you used to love your clever hiding spots and nicknames. Remember?” She flicked a dismissive gaze to her ex. “Let’s see. We did a lot of sailing together. Does that make my blackmail folder Yacht Club?” She touched the folder, her expression triumphant. A few taps and she grinned, slipping his phone into his jacket breast pocket. Careful not to touch him. “Not very creative of you, Owen.”

The ferry whistle blew, announcing the boat’s arrival in the harbor. Owen jerked his shoulders. Lee and Clay eased their grips, releasing him.

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“Perfect timing,” I crowed, giving him a saccharine-sweet smile. “That’s your boat, Owen.”

“The rest of my shit is still at my hotel,” he blustered.

“Too bad. I hope you travel light. Call Lost and Found tomorrow. You’re getting on that ferry.”

“Make me.”

I shook my head slowly, tutting quietly. “Oh, Owen. You were home-free. So long as you didn’t fuck with Anya. But what did he do?” I asked, looking to Lee and Clay.

“Fuck with Anya,” they responded like an obedient little choir.

“Exactly.” I smoothed the lapels on Owen’s jacket. “So, your time here is forfeit.”

“You can’t make me leave,” Owen insisted.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’ve known most of the ferry workers my whole life. Call it the benefit of being a homegrown fuck boy. They will tie you to a chair if I ask. But even if I have to knock you unconscious and stuff you in Anya’s trunk to get you on board, you’re leaving. My only question is, do you want to go under your own power, or get a little rug burn from the carpet fibers in the trunk as a bonus souvenir? Your choice,” I added magnanimously.

Watching Drew force Owen onto the ferry left me feeling floaty. Not in an I'd-had-too-much way, but in a cloudy, not-sure-this-is-real-life kind of way. I'd met with Owen, and the world hadn't collapsed. Sure, he'd been a dick and taken a swing at Drew, but what else was new? I hadn't let it get to me. And Drew was great. Not that it was surprising, but his need to protect the people he loved shone through.

The second confrontation with Owen outside Harbor Brews came out of nowhere. Having Drew and the guys rush to my defense left me feeling emotional. Loved. And a little grateful there hadn't been too many witnesses.

Did I believe Owen would truly slink away and leave me alone forever? Not really. But for the first time in days, I could fill my lungs without feeling constricted by fear.

Drew squeezed my hand, smiling down at me as we walked up the hill. Reminding me that my feelings for him were anything but sisterly. Big and sure, he was more than a safe port in the storm.

"Your place or mine?" he asked as we reached the corner between The Anchor and my place.

The floating sensation magnified. "Yours. I don't want to scandalize your sister."

"What, Vi? Pretty sure she knows we're having sex at this point."

He stopped on the sidewalk, gathering me close. I huddled into his warmth, my hands on his broad chest. The strong muscle beneath my fingers made me want to explore.

"Yeah, but I already feel like a bad roommate. It's one thing to fall for her brother; it's another to rub her nose in it. You know she thinks she's cursed, right?"

"She can't help it if she has older brothers who are too hot to stay single."

His faux-modesty was endearing, but it didn't stop me from rolling my eyes. "It's not all about you, handsome. Her last three roommates moved out when they coupled up."

A broad grin stretched across his face. "So you're saying we might find a place together when my commitment at The Anchor is up?"

It was a giant leap forward, but it felt right. "Something like that," I said cagily, wanting to give him space if I'd overstepped.

He squeezed me tight. "Nothing would make me happier," he rumbled in my ear, his deep voice sending a delicious shiver down my spine and gooseflesh pebbling across my arms and chest. "I meant what I said earlier. Sword. Shield. I just want to be with you."

I turned toward him like a flower to the sun, soaking up the heat in his gaze. His full lower lip drew me forward, and I leaned into him, arching for his kiss. The first graze was sweet. Chaste. He groaned, deepening our kiss, leaving me out of breath when we finally broke apart.

I followed Drew into his apartment. He locked the door and backed me up against it. The cool wood at my back grounded me. He crowded forward, his hips pressing until I could feel how much he wanted me. Every place he touched burned with fire, leaving a trail of destruction in its path. My focus was wholly on him, which was my only excuse for not seeing it sooner.

"Aack!"

My involuntary scream spun Drew around, his fists at the ready. He swung a microsecond before I realized exactly who or what the man behind us in the kitchen was: the cardboard cutout from the farm. The force of Drew's blow decapitated the

cardboard Beetlejuice, sending Michael Keaton's head flying across the counter and into the sink.

My knees gave way, and I sank toward the floor, laughing. It sounded a little manic, even to my own ears. My pulse raced, a rushing in my ears that made it difficult to think straight. Drew turned back toward me, smile sheepish.

"I guess I showed him."



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“Ha. Yeah.” My voice was faint.

He pulled me from the floor, wrapping me in his arms, hugging me tight. “Welcome to the Fenwick Family,” he murmured in my ear, a smiling apology in his tone like he was inviting me into the dentist’s chair.

Slowly, my breathing eased, my heartbeat slowing to a more normal rhythm. “Where the family motto is: I will remember and repay, not forgive and forget?”

Drew chuckled. “Not quite. Can I interest you in my personal motto?”

“What is it?”

“Nudus currere et loqui sordida.”

“Is that a fancy way to say I get even?” I asked wryly.

“No, but I like it. I think you’ll like this motto even better. It’s run naked and talk dirty.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“Most definitely. Just let me check my bedroom for more surprises first.”

“You don’t want to decapitate any other cardboard cutouts tonight, huh?”

“Nope. I’m all done with fight, flight, or freeze for the night. It’s time to embrace the

last 'F.'”

“Classy, Fenwick.”

He ducked into his room, returning a moment later. “All clear.” His eyes rounded as he realized I stood in front of him, naked. My discarded clothing pooled at my feet.

“Sunny Girl, that motto was meant for you.”

Stripping myself bare was easier than talking about the drama with Owen. For a few hours, all I wanted to do was forget. Lose myself in pleasure.

“Now I have to catch up.” Drew stripped away his shirt, dropping his jeans to the floor. He stood in front of me, gloriously naked.

I should have felt vulnerable, every physical imperfection on display. The ugly mole on my hip. My wonky second toe. But his gaze was so clearly adoring in the way it swept over my body, I focused instead on how he made me feel: loved. Treasured. Like the only woman in the world. A power to be reckoned with.

“I’m down with the dirty talk, but not so sure about the running part,” I teased.

“That’s okay, honey. I’d rather take things slow. I’m the tortoise, remember?”

I chuckled. “I’m not sure you can claim that anymore. We happened pretty fast.”

“Bite your tongue, woman. I’ve been into you for over a year. Don’t you remember the study about friends, yadda-yadda?”

“The one you made up?” I pointed out dryly.

“I remembered another one,” he said, ignoring my question. “Studies also show that couples who fall in love after traumatic events are bonded for life.” He interlaced his fingers, his expression earnest. “Inseparable.”

My pulse took flight. Did he even recognize what he’d just said? He stood before me naked, erection proudly announcing his future plans, and proceeded to get more naked.

He’d made himself so vulnerable to me. I could only respect that kind of bravery. Even if I was too emotionally exhausted to reciprocate aloud in the moment, a flutter of answering emotion beat in my chest. The liquid warmth grew and expanded, like a chemical reaction that threatened to burst from beneath my skin.

Drew Fenwick was one in a billion. Green flags for days. What would it be like to keep him forever? Heaven. It’d be heaven.

I drifted toward him, step by careful step until our bodies brushed. He cupped my hips in his massive hands, capturing my mouth in a gentle kiss. The brush turned into a deep, seeking exploration. Still soft, but driving toward a destination.

He took over every sense. All I could feel was Drew. The reverent way he stroked my skin, inciting an answering electricity beneath the surface. All I could hear was Drew, whispering how much he adored me. My body. My mind. My heart.

All I could smell was the subtle musk that clung to his skin, a hint of sweat and the sea, reminding me that he’d protected me without hesitation. All I could see was Drew, naked skin for days, the hard muscular planes of his body pressed against my softness. And all I could taste was him, the urgency and delight clear in the way he kissed me.

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“Make love to me, Drew,” I pleaded, aware it was an answer of sorts.

Sex with Drew had been playful. Fun. Erotic. But the light in his eyes as he touched me was loving. Meaningful. Like the sealing of a promise.

He sipped my sighs, latching on to every moan with an urgency that fed my own.

We fumbled our way to the bedroom, kissing, stroking and teasing every few steps, turning the journey into a dance of seduction. I tumbled back on the bed, pulling him with me. He followed without breaking our kiss. I smiled against his mouth.

“What’s so funny?” he asked when we finally broke apart to catch our breath.

“I love us,” I panted out.

He froze, his brown eyes darkening. “Us? Any particular part of us?” he asked with a fake casualness as thin as rice paper.

I reached for his dick, encircling his girth. His eyes went hazy and unfocused. I landed him with a teasing smile. “I mean, if we’re picking favorites, I’ve got to admit this is a favorite bit.”

“What are you calling abit?” he gritted out.

He surged in my hand, seeming intent on proving there was nothing bitty about him.

“Drew, you’re distracting me, and I’m trying to compliment you,” I admonished.

“The fact that I’m distracting you is a compliment.” He grinned. “Let me do it some more.”

He dove forward, subjecting me to a rain of kisses that swiftly turned from teasing to slow. As if he needed the deliberate tempo to make his point. Each drag of his mouth against mine sent me deeper into the meditative space where I separated from my body, mingling my essence with his. Feeling us swirl together as our bodies continued to writhe, stroke and tempt.

Gasping in oxygen broke the spell enough for me to settle into my skin, aware of the burning heat between my thighs and how much I needed him inside me. I stroked him, his heavy girth filling my hands. He ground against me, back arched, leaving me feeling all-powerful. A sorceress with her thrall.

“I want to fill you until you scream my name,” he rasped.

I released my hold on him. “Touch me.”

His fingers dug into my hips. One heartbeat. Two. He pried his hands away, shifting to explore my body more fully, filling his hands with my breasts. Sucking at my nipples. Tracing a path of fire along my body. Gently prying my thighs apart, not that it took much effort. I practically split myself in half, eager for his attention. Slick with moisture even before he touched me. He petted my mound at first, watching me for my reaction. I shifted restlessly under the soft touch.

“More.”

His thumbs traced my slit, parting my folds for his tongue. I arched beneath him, pulsing forward for the pressure I needed.

He mumbled something against my pussy. The words didn’t matter. The gentle

rumble was enough to send me near the edge.

“I want you inside me.”

I gripped his hair, tugging gently when he seemed like he might ignore my demand. Seconds later, he perched above me, condom in place and a forearm to either side of me, holding my gaze. He probed my entrance, and I tilted, eager to take him.

My eyelids fluttered as he thrust forward, impaling me until I felt full to bursting with his length. Deliciously tight. So close. As if he sensed I needed it, he moved, shifting his weight and pulling away before pushing forward again. Rubbing just the right spot. I clawed the sheets beneath me, adding my hip thrusts to his. Tension gathered, making every muscle rigid as I drew closer to the edge.

“Mine,” he grunted.

His claim, his raw hunger, pushed me over the edge.

My orgasm came in a cascading rush, washing over me in undulating waves that drew me under, tumbled by sensation. My paroxysms pulled Drew in my wake. He grunted, collapsing half on top of me, his low purr of pleasure filling my ears.

Gingerly, he pulled back. Before I could fully register the loss, he swooped to kiss me, the tender brush enough to make me eager for round two.

He held my gaze, his features relaxed in something approaching awe. “For the record? I love you, Anya Rose. More than I thought possible.”

Anya Rose. The love and acceptance there shook me. But it shouldn’t have. Another man might have held my past against me. Made snide remarks. But Drew just embraced me. It was a rare and wonderful gift. One of the many things I loved about

my oh-so-responsible, protective boyfriend.

“And also for the record? I love you, Drew Fenwick. But I always knew it was possible. That’s what made me so scared.”

“I won’t hurt you.”

He’d never been less than truthful. I believed he meant it. But it raised the specter of the man who had.

I traced a hand from his shoulder to his chest, lingering over his heart. Drew cupped my hand there, holding it steady. Letting me feel the strong rhythm pounding there. He was different from Owen in every way.

“I’m grateful you helped me with Owen tonight. But that’s not why I love you.”

“Is it because of my incredible sense of humor and biceps that won’t quit?” He flexed, making his biceps pop.

I chuckled. “Only partially. You were patient with me when I needed it. Didn’t push.”

“That just makes me a decent human being.”

I pursed my lips. “You let me love you, Drew. On my own terms and in my own time. You’re honorable in a way I didn’t think existed anymore. Caring when you could be cruel. Responsible when you could be selfish. You make me feel like the most beautiful, precious woman in the world. Complete and whole in my own right, without the taint of my past. Separate from my family, even though yours is inextricably linked with who you are. I love you for that. For seeing me as me.”

He kissed me, slow and tender, as if to seal the words I shared between us. Immortalize them in a kiss that bloomed with the power and presence of our love for



each other.

His eyes glittered as he drew away. A subtle change in his expression warned me.

“Just so we’ve got our stories straight, please tell my brother that my biceps sealed the deal.”

I giggled, letting the laughter wash away the last of the stress and worry from dealing with Owen. From admitting my feelings to Drew. I loved him so much. Biceps and all.

## Chapter 29 – Anya

Cool wind caressed my cheeks through the open windows as Drew drove us out to Jackson Beach. After weeks without a hint of Owen, I finally felt like I could breathe. There’d been no word from my parents, making me wonder if Owen had revealed my location to them or squirreled that away for leverage later. It would be just like him to use it as currency.

Every time I asked Clay for any news about Agent Harris, he just gave me a tight-lipped shake of his head. They wouldn’t jeopardize an investigation by sharing details, even if I had been the one to bring them their lead.

That left me in limbo, using the studio, my friends, and Drew to keep me anchored in the present. And with Drew’s open affection, it was easier than I’d ever imagined.

Anne-Marie Genter was gone.

Tonight, Drew and I would make it official. I clutched the envelope of documents from my old life to my chest. Maybe burning it was symbolic. It was probably silly to destroy the proof, but I didn’t care. Part of yoga philosophy included the practice of

letting go to create space for becoming more engaged and connected with your present, your inner wisdom, and truth.

Everything that mattered was in my present. The past had no hold on me now.

Drew parked the truck, and we picked our way toward the picnic shelter and firepit. The park usually closed at dusk, but he'd called in a favor with his uncle to get us access.

Drew crouched over the iron ring, carefully placing the bundle of kindling he'd brought. Touching a match to the dry wood. It smoked, crackling as the tinder caught fire.

The flickering light bloomed in the darkness, highlighting the hollows of Drew's cheeks, his strong jaw and firm chin. Slowly, he extended to his full height, wrapping one arm around my shoulders as we stared down into the flames.

"You sure about this?" he asked.

I dipped my chin. "I want to be free of the past."

"I'll never let it touch you."

His soft words were a promise, reaching into my chest and squeezing. Drew had already proven he'd stand by me. It was why I could let go.

"I know." I leaned into his side, resting my head on his shoulder. "I'm choosing to swim with the tide of my life. The one that brought me to you. I'm not Anne-Marie Genter anymore."

He dropped a kiss on my forehead, his lips lingering for a moment in a gentle

blessing. “Then the fire is ready when you are, Sunny Girl.”

I extracted the last vestiges of my old life, my driver’s license and birth certificate, from the envelope and dropped them one by one into the fire. Flames licked at my birth certificate, turning it to ash. My ID took longer, the plastic slowly melting and withering as it turned brown, melting into a blob of blackened trash.

“Goodbye, Anne-Marie.”

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Drew stepped behind me, drawing me into his arms, his chin on my shoulder as we watched the last bits of my old life turn to cinders.

I thought I'd feel vindicated. Powerful. But all I really felt was peace. And I let it be enough.

We stood like that for what felt like an hour but was likely only a few minutes as the fire burned down.

"Ready for me to put the coals out?" he murmured when the blackened mess in the pit was unrecognizable.

"Yes."

The coals sizzled as he doused them in saltwater, ensuring the fire was cold before we went home.

I was quiet on the drive back to the house. Drew kept the windows down, the brackish air cleansing the lingering stench of my burning driver's license from our nostrils.

Clay's truck was in the driveway at the house, so Drew parked on the street.

"Clay's here?" I asked.

"The entire gang should be inside. I hope that's okay. They wanted to celebrate with you." Drew grimaced comically, the big contortion of his handsome face night and

day from the stoic man who first offered me his jacket at the bluffs. “Well, maybe Zach just wants cake. But also, probably the celebration bit.”

“And we’re celebrating because...”

“It’s a birthday of sorts.” He grinned like a pleased little boy.

It was adorable.

“Drew, you shouldn’t have.”

“We wanted to.” He drifted closer, brushing his mouth against mine. I tilted into the kiss. “Let’s go inside. Everyone’s waiting.”

Hand in hand, we approached the back door.

“Happy birthday to you...” Clay belted out as we slid the door open and toed off our shoes. “Happy birthday—”

Lucy clapped her hands over her ears. “Please, for the love of god, stop.”

Vi popped off the couch and approached me with open arms. I stepped into her embrace, letting her wrap me close. My throat tightened with emotion. She’d always been like a sister to me, supportive and encouraging. Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised that she and Drew conspired to make today special and celebratory instead of just a ritual for closure.

“Hey, Anya,” Zach called from his spot on the couch next to Rae. He grinned, his dimples flashing. “I hope you don’t like chocolate.”

I narrowed my eyes. Heathen.

Rae smacked him on the shoulder. “Fenwick, who doesn’t like chocolate?”

“Lots of people.”

“We bought dessert for her, fool. Why don’t you want her to like it?”

“Duh, more cake for me.” He smiled.

Rae shook her head, mouthing “sorry” to me across the living room. I chuckled, loving my friends more than I thought possible in that moment.

“I love chocolate.” My gaze settled on each of my friends in turn, trying to communicate without words how deeply I appreciated the gesture. “Thank you all.” I sniffed, on the edge of losing it. They’d never know how much their support meant to me. Drew squeezed my shoulders, the silent show of support helping me stay in control.

Lee emerged from the kitchen, a decadent-looking chocolate cake balanced carefully on his palms. Vi brought out plates, forks, and napkins, and Lee offered me a knife.

“To new names and new beginnings,” Vi said.

For a moment, I hesitated, knife hovering. Cutting the cake meant saying yes to all of it, to them, to Drew, to the life I never thought I’d have.

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I sliced down into the chocolate frosting and let the sweetness be my answer. There wasn't a birth certificate in the world that could prove it, but I was home.

### Chapter 30 – Drew

Gran beamed at me from her lawn chair in Vi and Anya's front yard. She'd given up any pretense at modesty and donned a sparkly tiara that glittered in her pink hair. She'd gone for a more subtle look on bottom, wearing an eye-shattering muumuu in a swirling rainbow print. If her aim was for moped traffic to see her from a distance: mission accomplished.

Anya blew me a kiss from the lawn chair next to Gran, her hazy smile alerting me to the likelihood that their margarita glasses were indeed fully leaded. Her tiara had blue stones that matched her eyes. It slid dangerously to the side, threatening to cover one eye. Gran must have broken out her full closet of colorful robe-like dresses, because a muumuu flowed around Anya's curves in shades of blue and green.

Vi made up the last of their triumvirate in bright purple, matching the others in both tiara and dress style.

The throaty cough of a moped coming up the hill echoed behind me, and I stepped to the side. Josie's Moped Rentals were a staple of summer on the island. Every new crop of ferrypassengers disgorged eager riders. Josie made them pass a basic test before heading out on the forty-eight-mile loop around the island. To pass, renters had to make it to the three-way intersection Vi and Anya's house overlooked, make the turn, and head back safely downtown under Josie's watchful eye.

The driver arced into the turn with confidence, and Gran, Anya, and Vi cheered from their seats, holding score signs: six, nine, and eight, respectively.

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Gran, what do they have to do to get a good score from you?”

“Easy. Not drive a moped on my island. Damned things are annoying.” She blew a raspberry. “Who heard of something that can only go thirty miles an hour? Anyone who rides one of these is a punk.”

Used to her bitching, I let the comments go. They were rhetorical anyway.

“And how are you lovely ladies this afternoon?” I asked.

After a beat, each held up a sign: eight, nine, nine.

Chuckling, I leaned down, dropping a quick kiss on Anya’s mouth. Sure enough, tequila and lime flavored her lips.

“Are you ready for another round, or shall I start dinner?” I asked, hiding my smile.

At least they were having fun, even if it was at the tourists’ expense.

“Dinner sounds lovely,” Anya said, her expression dreamy.

I fired up the grill and made a quick round of hot dogs for my queens. We dished up inside but decided to eat at the patio table.

“Gran, what brings you into town today?” I asked.

“I barely see you anymore.”



“Whose fault is that?”

“Your girlfriend’s.” She slid a sly smile Anya’s way. “That’s why I had to come and hang out. Get to know her better.”

I gave her a knowing look. “Is Mom on another health kick?”

Gran rolled her eyes. “Why that woman thinks I need to eat more cauliflower at my age is a mystery.”

“Maybe because she loves you and wants you to live forever,” Anya offered generously.

“Sweet summer child.” Gran patted Anya’s cheek. “It’s cute how you think that could be true. I’m sure she’s just doing it to annoy me.” She tilted her head. “Or to get more alone time with Gary. Since they discovered the little blue pills, it’s been a twenty-four-seven boink-fest at home.”

Vi and I exchanged horrified glances. I turned to Anya. “We’re all going to pretend we didn’t hear that.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your parents having a healthy sex life,” Anya chided me.

“There’s not,” I said.

“It’s all fun and games until they end up in the ER,” Violet muttered.

“Yeah, that’s my move,” Gran complained, taking a healthy swallow from her margarita glass before grinning across at Anya, egging her on.

“Your move?”

Gran cackled. “Five times this year. I get ‘em up, I keep ‘em up.”

I drained my glass. She was conveniently ignoring the role high-grade pharmaceuticals played in that feat. And was it really a victory if it involved a trip to the emergency room?

Anya seemed at a loss for words, and I couldn’t blame her.

“You seemed to be celebrating this afternoon. Anything in particular got you feeling festive?” I asked, pointedly excluding Gran from the question. A Margarita Monday wasn’t out of the norm for her, but dragging Anya and Vi into it was new.

Anya’s cheeks creased, her face breaking into a beautiful smile, the mix of relief and joy almost painful to watch.

“You must not have checked your text messages yet. I heard from Agent Harris today. They arrested Owen.”

Relief washed through me, making me giddy. Suddenly, the tequila-fueled lawn celebration made sense.

“Finally.”

Anya raised her glass in a silent toast. “It’s a start.”

There was a long way between arrest and conviction, but Owen's legal troubles made it unlikely that he'd try to terrorize Anya again. Now if only the authorities would scoop up her parents next.

## Chapter 31 – Anya

The last of the leaves were falling in the yard as Drew carried the final box out to his truck. We'd lucked into a dry weekend for our move.

Zach honked, waving as he pulled out of the drive, heading toward our new house with Rae and Vi next to him on the bench seat. Lucy, Clay, and Lee had taken an earlier trip and waited for us at the house.

I locked the back door, pausing for a moment. The house I'd shared with Vi had given me sanctuary when I needed it most. She'd welcomed me into her life and ultimately into her family, helping me make friends I'd treasure forever.

"Ready?"

I turned, smiling up at Drew. He was my anchor, guiding me through the deep waters as I navigated my past to my future. To him.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I stretched up, catching his mouth in a soft kiss. "I'm excited to start our life together."

"Me too." He extended a hand, helping me into his truck before rounding the hood and driving us out to the house we'd rented.

We'd found a beautiful place near Westcott Bay. It was tiny, but ours. My favorite thing about the cottage was the back deck. It'd be perfect for early morning yoga. Drew liked the open floor plan and the proximity to the farm.

We spent the afternoon unloading boxes, finally relaxing in the evening with burgers and hot dogs on the deck. Everyone seemed mellow in the fading light, devouring dinner in record time.

“Thanks for your help today,” I said. “We really appreciate it.”

“I’m going to miss you,” Vi admitted.

“You’ll still see me all the time, but I know it won’t be the same. I’ll miss you too.”

“Mom has already issued the invite for family dinner next weekend. You’ll be there?” Vi asked.

“We wouldn’t miss it.”

The sky lit with oranges, pinks and finally purples as the sun set. Lucy emptied the last of her beer before pushing to her feet. “Who’s taking me home tonight?”

Clay’s hand shot up, and she glowered. “I didn’t mean it that way, Robertson.”

Zach chuckled. “The Fenwick family bus for Friday Harbor leaves in ten. We’ll drop you and Lee off.” He tutted at Clay. “Sorry, man. You’re on your own. Not enough seatbelts.”

Clay opened his mouth. Lucy held up her hand, forestalling him. “If you say I can sit on your lap, I’m going to punch you.”

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Drew and I put away the last traces of dinner after our friends had gone.

Quiet settled around us. One that felt like peace. It struck me that all of my choices, even the flawed ones, had led me to him. Any regrets I had about my past were drowned out by the hope I had for the future and the joy I had in the present. Without my family, Anya Rose wouldn't exist. Without Anya Rose, there'd be no Serenity Studio and Vi as a housemate. And without Vi, I would never have met the reclusive older brother who kept to himself at the farm.

Every choice. Every mistake. It'd all led to a life I wouldn't give up for a thousand clean slates.

"I got you something," Drew said, dark gaze heated.

"Is it something in your pants? Because I could be very interested in that..."

He chuckled. "That too, but I was referring to this." He slipped a wrapped package out of the coat closet, carrying it to the kitchen island.

For half a breath, I thought it might be a ring, but the package was too large. Measuring at least three feet across and wrapped in floral paper, it had to be something for the house. I tore off the wrapping paper, revealing a smooth wood sign beneath. Flipping it over, I read the inscription: The Fenwicks—nudus currere et loqui sordida.

Chuckling, I traced the letters. They'd been carved into the sanded madrona wood. "I love it." I glanced up, catching his gaze on me. "Did you make it?" He nodded.

I held my breath, heart racing. “It’s beautiful. There’s just one problem: I’m not a Fenwick.”

“You say problem; I say opportunity.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, his expression earnest. “Anya, will you marry me? I can’t imagine my life without you, and I want us to officially become a family.”

My stomach tumbled in a mix of jittery excitement and honeyed warmth, like drunken little butterflies had invaded, flooding me with happiness. With our love as a foundation, we could build a home. A family. A life.

“Yes. I want that more than anything.”

He pulled me into a hug, lifting me and swinging me around the living room until I was dizzy with laughter. Slowly, he let me slide to my feet. I was aware of every contour of his body against mine, my blood buzzing with need.

He stroked my cheek. “Welcome to the family, future Mrs. Fenwick.”

I stretched up on my toes, brushing his mouth with mine. “Welcome to our home, future Mr. Fenwick.”

Giddy with a mix of desire and love, I stepped away, extending a palm to lead him toward our bedroom.

He groaned softly, eyes alight with love. “Tactical error—there are no sheets on our bed.”

“Then we’ll just have to improvise. We picked a house with a shower large enough for two.”

“Future Mrs. Fenwick, have I told you that I love the way you think?”

I could only hope he’d still say that after he saw my housewarming gift for him. His was adorable and thoughtful. Mine was... not.

\*\*\* Drew \*\*\*

“What the—”

I flinched, taking a moment to register what I was seeing. Laughter overtook surprise, my quiet chuckle turning into a full-belly laugh as I put it all together. Anya was claiming her spot in the Fenwick family on her own terms, and I couldn’t love her more.

The cardboard cutout of Gran illustrated her in all her glory: pink hair, rude smile, and, thank everything, fully clothed in a rainbow muumuu. Anya had positioned her behind my recliner in the living room.

“Game on, honey.” I grinned. Life with Anya would never be boring.

Epilogue – 1 Year Later

Drew steadied our kayak at the dock, helping me step inside before pushing away. Water lapped at our boat, the gentle slap of waves a peaceful soundtrack. I inhaled, dragging the sea scents deep into my lungs, letting the embrace of nightfall calm the frenetic energy from our day. We’d taken all the wedding photos Drew and I could handle earlier, leaving tonight for just us, dressed comfortably for our adventure.

The rest of our wedding party launched a few minutes later, joining us on the water. Drew’s parents shared a kayak, paddling with the ease of experience. Their synchronized strokes made it easy to picture Drew and me, decades from now. Our

friends ranged around us in a fleet of singles and double kayaks. Gran and her boyfriend, Ollie, bickered quietly about who should sit in front, launching last. Predictably, Gran got her way.

I hid a smile. We'd done everything just a little bit backwards, but I wouldn't change a minute of it. From waking in Drew's arms at our house, to a garden party reception at the farm, the entire day had been glorious—full of laughter and fun.

A sunset toast at Lime Kiln to our new life together had capped a brilliant wedding day. But the best was yet to come.



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We dipped our paddles, slicing through the water, the moon and stars our only light. The wind blew gently, giving us a tiny push toward our destination. Beneath us, the Salish Sea was pure magic, glittering with bioluminescent plankton, a carpet of stardust welcoming us into our future. Brilliant blue light scattered beneath us, arcing in flashing waves as the plankton rolled toward shore like the tiniest of surfers.

Awe kept me quiet. I felt full to bursting, happiness making me giddy. Of all the gifts the wedding universe could give us, a bioluminescent ceremony topped my list. Drew and I had built a new life together over the last year, finding our rhythm as a couple. The shimmering, watery celebration felt like the universe's final blessing.

Whispers and laughter accompanied our journey, along with a few choice cusswords when Gran's craft collided with Zach and Rae's.

We paddled around the point, waves of brilliant blue pushing us toward the protected bay.

Drew and I paddled in sync, riding the waves. A light breeze and the briny scents of the sea welcomed us.

When we reached the protected shallows, Drew stowed his paddle, swiveling his seat so we could face each other. Gentle waves pushed our kayaks together. Our small fleet rafted up, tossing lines to keep us from floating apart.

From the kayak next to us, Drew's dad cleared his throat. The ripples of our family and friends' chatter faded away, all attention turning to us.

“Tonight, I have the pleasure of officiating as Andrew Garrison Fenwick and Anya Phoenix Rose officially unite in marriage.”

Drew’s hands gripped mine, our fingers intertwined. The glow from the water below and the stars above cast a soft light over his handsome features. What I saw there nearly stopped my heart.

The love.

The acceptance.

My future.

Drew was my everything. Day by day, minute by minute, he was the man I wanted by my side. My love.

“Do you, Drew Fenwick, take Anya Rose to be your lawful wife? To love and honor her, in sickness and health, through all the challenges you may face in your lives together?”

“I do.”

Drew said it with his full chest. Deep and powerful, as if daring anyone to object.

We’d already faced my worst nightmares and triumphed. Nothing floating in the bay with us tonight could come close to what we’d already overcome together.

Gary turned his gentle smile on me, soft approval shining in dark eyes so like his son’s. “And do you, Anya Rose, take Drew Fenwick as your husband? To love and honor him, in sickness and in health, through all the challenges you may face in your lives together?”

“I do.” My voice rang clear and true, strong with conviction.

“Then I am pleased to pronounce you husband and wife.”

A cheer went up from our friends.

Drew leaned across the distance between us, eyes twinkling. “I love you, Mrs. Fenwick.” His mouth grazed mine, butterfly-soft, before we melted together in a kiss that deepened with every missed breath.

“Nudus currere et loqui sordida! Nudus currere et loqui sordida!” Gran’s chant started off quiet, but built steam as our friends picked up the cry, tapping their oars against the side of their kayaks in time with each syllable. “Nudus currere et loqui sordida!”

Drew’s lips tilted to one side in a rakish grin as we parted, the twinkle in his eyes my only warning. “You did say you wanted to go skinny-dipping...” he trailed off.

“Nice try, Fenwick. Let’s save the running naked and talking dirty for when we get home.”

He brushed my mouth in a kiss that was gentle, hinting at banked heat. “If you say so, Mrs. Fenwick.”