



Hibiscus Heights (Crown Island #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Deb Whitaker was shocked to see Grant on Crown Island.

The grand reopening of the Majestic Hotel is the event of the season on Crown Island, and interior designer Deb Whitaker is at the center of it all.

After spending nearly a year restoring and redesigning the vintage landmark interiors, she's finally ready to celebrate. And she's not going alone. Matteo, charming and attentive, is the new man in her life.

But just as the champagne begins to flow, the past crashes back in.

Grant. The only man she ever truly loved. The one who vanished without a word. No one has ever measured up to him.

Deb has built a life on her own terms. She's fiercely independent, successful, and strong. But it's too late to start the family she once dreamed of.

When the man who broke her heart returns with secrets of his own, she's forced to ask, is it ever too late for a second chance at love, or should she keep the past buried?

Hibiscus Heights is the fourth book in the Crown Island series from USA Today bestselling author, Jan Moran.

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“ I can hardly believe my work is on the cover.” Deb touched the new issue of Coastal Design & Living with reverence, thrilled with the exposure. Page after page of the magazine featured her interior designs.

Seated next to her at a table on the Majestic Hotel’s sunny patio cafe, her friend April lifted her champagne glass. “To Crown Island’s most celebrated interior designer.”

April’s mother, Ella, raised her glass, too. “I’m so proud of you, dear. The career you’ve worked so hard for is now on an even higher upward trajectory. It must feel wonderful.”

Deb touched their glasses and sipped her well-deserved bubbly, courtesy of Ryan Kingston. “This project is my largest job and best work so far. I have to give Ryan credit for the publicity firm he engaged.”

As the new owner of the vintage Majestic Hotel, Ryan was determined to showcase his beloved hotel’s renovation through extensive publicity and advertising campaigns.

The glossy pages of the hotel’s transformation documented their team’s work with before-and-after photographs that captured their attention to detail. They had worked diligently to preserve the original character of the Victorian-era beach hotel.

Deb had refurbished or chosen every new piece, including the wrought-iron table where she sat under a marine-blue umbrella with her closest friends.

April was like a sister. Her mother, Ella, had been like an aunt to her. She’d known them all her life because her mother and Ella were friends.

Pride shimmered in Ella's eyes. "Would you ever leave us if an amazing opportunity came up?"

"I'll always come back to the island. I have plenty to do here." Deb appreciated their enthusiasm, but she enjoyed living and working here. Her entire family lived on Crown Island, just off the coast of Southern California.

She loved her boisterous older brothers, but when she was younger, they had intimidated and chased off every one of her boyfriends.

Although she usually beat them to it now.

Her brothers were inescapable on this island. Even now, she spied one of them across the patio with new clients and nodded at him. David was just a year older, and he worked as an architect. He grinned and lifted his hand in a brief wave.

"Who is that with David?" Ella asked.

"The Hunts," Deb replied, folding back the sleeves of her white linen shirt. The sun was warmer now, and the light breeze carried the fresh scent of the sea.

Deb went on, "They're here for the summer, and they've asked David to design a new beach house for them. I might bid on the interior design work."

A smile played on Ella's face, barely lined by her years. "You're a star now. You'll have to think like one."

Deb nodded, grateful for the opportunity she'd pursued.

"I haven't forgotten that Ryan took a risk hiring local talent.

Most developers would have brought in a New York designer, gutted the old beauty, and created a modern atmosphere.

Luxurious but generic, devoid of Crown Island personality or history. ”

Ella pressed her lips together. “That’s what the community fought against.”

“The Historical Society must help preserve the island charm,” April added, brushing her hair over her shoulder.

Fresh highlights, new yellow sundress, Deb noted, approving of April’s evolving look. Love looked good on her, and Deb was pleased for her.

She sipped her champagne as April and Ella perused the article. She counted herself lucky to have friends who were like a chosen family, not that she didn’t love the one she was born into.

As a retired nurse, Ella had been a beloved force in the community for decades.

Just last year, April had returned to her hometown after her divorce to start a new chapter in her life.

A historian and former university lecturer, she deserved every good thing that had recently come her way, from Ryan Kingston to the historical society she’d conceived and created.

Ella paused and looked up. “I’d like to read this at my leisure. Did you buy out Ace’s newsstand, or can I still find a copy of this edition?”

Grinning sheepishly, Deb said, “Actually, my mother bought them all, so Ace is trying to get more copies. But you can have this one.”

They flipped through the pages, pausing at a photograph of the lobby restoration.

The three-story rotunda was a masterpiece of original design, with a ceiling finished in white oak, cedar, and hemlock.

The vintage wooden panels had taken artisans weeks to restore, but the effect was breathtaking.

It was a beautiful balance of historic craftsmanship and casual beach elegance.

Now more than a century old, the beachside resort was an island landmark, known for movies filmed on the property and presidents who'd vacationed there.

Significant deliberations that changed the course of history had taken place at the Majestic.

The grand hotel was polished to perfection once again.

Deb turned the page to a photo of her with Ryan and Knox MacKenzie, who oversaw construction. To pull off the job before the high summer season, the three of them had worked many long days for months.

"That's a great photo of Ryan." April's cheeks colored slightly.

"Look at you." Deb nudged her friend's shoulder. "Practically glowing whenever you mention his name."

Laughing, April bumped her shoulder back. "I never thought I'd feel this way again."

Deb folded her arms and leaned in. "He's the lucky one. You chose well this time around."

April's husband had left her for a much younger woman with whom he'd had an affair, and her friend had been devastated. Now, to her credit, April was thriving again.

Ella fixed a gaze on Deb. "Which brings us to another question. Are you seeing anyone now?"

"I've hardly had a moment to spare this past year," Deb replied.

April traded a glance with her mother. "There must be someone out there for you."

Laughing, Deb said, "You're drunk on love and want everyone to share your happiness. But it's not that easy, especially at my age."

Ella shook her head. "You're at the peak of your career, my dear. You're brilliant, accomplished, and gorgeous. Never undersell yourself."

"I don't think she ever has, Mom." April grinned and wrinkled her nose at the champagne bubbles.

"I know what I'm worth. And I'm happy with my life.

Besides, I have Duke." Deb stretched her long legs beneath the table.

Now in her mid-fifties, she loved her work.

She had her freedom, earned good money, and still jogged daily on the beach with her dog.

Flipping up the collar of her shirt, she smiled, satisfied with her life.

“Don’t be so quick to give up.” Ella smoothed a hand over Deb’s.

“After five turns as mother-of-the-groom, Mom has finally accepted that she’ll never help plan a wedding for me. Still, the grandkids keep her busy.”

Ella studied her. “Are you sure you don’t have regrets?”

“I’m Auntie Deb to a slew of nieces and nephews. I’ve changed diapers, wiped tears, and thrown birthday parties. That’s enough family time for me.”

Deb had built her life by choice. She preferred to embrace what was rather than mourn what might have been. She’d been in love before and had received her share of marriage proposals, but she knew they weren’t quite right. Now, the chance for a family of her own was long past.

Eager to change the subject, Deb gestured toward the hotel. The sprawling wooden structure gleamed in the sunshine, its fresh white paint complemented by red-and-white cupolas and a new red roof. “The exterior is complete, but I still have more to tend to inside before the official debut party.”

April shielded her eyes from the sun as she gazed up. “This was a major achievement, and everyone will be impressed. What did your father have to say?”

Deb’s smile turned wry. “Dad finally admitted that he’s proud of my work.

Remember when I tried to join Whitaker Construction after graduation?

He told me everyone would assume I got the job because I was his daughter, not because I earned it.

The same could be said of my brothers, and believe me, I did.

But he didn't budge. Knowing my brothers had all started work there only made it worse. "

"That was typical of Wilt then," Ella said, shaking her head. "Making you prove yourself twice as much as anyone else."

Deb nodded. "Funny thing is that it worked."

"And to your advantage," April added. "You might not have built your business otherwise. You were determined to prove him wrong."

April was right. Deb was known for creating beautiful, livable interiors with meticulous attention to detail, whether the project was a hotel, a business, or a summer retreat. On an island of this size, she had to do it all.

And now, her work spoke for itself.

"You're in a good place in your life," Ella said, studying her. "You'll soon have more time to date."

Deb laughed and shook her head. "You're not letting go of that, are you?"

"And neither should you." April tapped the table for emphasis.

Ella leaned forward with a conspiratorial look.

"Several friends from my yoga class have met interesting men on dating apps they have on their phones. They swipe right or left if someone catches their fancy. I don't recall which is which, so that could be a problem if people are directionally challenged like me. "

“Not that you need to worry about that, Mom.” April inclined her head toward Whitley, the hotel’s distinguished manager, who was speaking to a pair of boys in swim trunks and T-shirts at a nearby table.

Must be brothers , Deb guessed, sizing up their freckled, sunburned faces. They had been wolfing down hamburgers and fries, and now they’d moved on to hot fudge sundaes.

Young as they were, every guest was a VIP at the Majestic.

Something about them seemed vaguely familiar. Probably because they reminded her of her nephews. They looked about eight and twelve years old.

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Wearing a vivid coral jacket today, Whitley approached their table with his usual impeccable bearing. He took Ella's hand in greeting. "Ladies, I trust everything meets with your approval today?"

Deb smiled at his formality, but that was Whitley. He'd upheld traditions at the Majestic for decades. "We're having a wonderful time. Except for these two matchmakers."

Ella lowered her voice. "Have any interesting men checked into the hotel?"

Whitley smiled at her. "You know I can't divulge that, my sweet."

"Maybe not in public," April said, lowering her voice.

Deb laughed. "You two are incorrigible. Really, that's enough. I can take care of myself."

And she had for many years. From an early age, she'd learned not to count on others, especially men.

"We haven't much time before the grand reopening party," Ella said with a pointed look.

While she and April talked about the event and what they planned to wear, an unbidden memory flashed to mind. Deb recalled waiting under the Majestic's porte-cochère entrance at the top of the wide front steps, wearing an ocean-blue organza dress she'd saved for from her summer job.

Her first serious boyfriend was one of the summer boys. Every year, their wealthy families descended on Crown Island like exotic birds on a migratory path, soaring higher than the locals.

Except that summer, she'd been soaring high, too. They'd met when she was chosen to be the Crown Island Princess in the annual island parade, and he was there with his friends. At the party later, he took her hand to dance and never let go. They were virtually inseparable all summer.

You can count on me, he often told her, and she lost her heart to him, imagining the future they would share.

But then, on the night of the summer's last dance party, he vanished. Swept up in the migration home without so much as a goodbye.

She'd waited hours in her new dress by the entrance, sure that he would come. Finally, she'd given up.

Embarrassed to go to the party alone and feeling broken-hearted, she raced to April's home to confide in her. Thankfully, her friend listened and held her, never judging her for the mistake of falling in love. After sobbing all night, Deb ripped off her new dress and never wore it again.

From then on, she decided who to date and when to call it off with her dignity intact. Being left behind was far too painful.

April's breakup had reminded her of that. If she had been the one to leave Calvin, her confidence wouldn't have been shattered.

April tried to make her marriage work for the sake of her daughters, which Deb respected. Good friends didn't judge. Good friends were there to listen and hold you

when your world fell apart.

As April had once done for her. Deb helped her recover after Calvin filed for divorce, but April could have been spared much of the trauma and heartache if she'd left her husband on her terms.

Whitley turned to Deb, pulling her from her thoughts. "Before I forget, another editor called. She asked if she could send her best writer to interview you and Ryan before the big event." Whitley named a popular travel columnist they all recognized.

"See, you're famous now," Ella said with a wink. "I wonder what he's like. Maybe you'll swipe on him."

When Whitley looked confused, Deb explained. "Your sweetheart just heard about a dating app. These two are trying to set me up."

Whitley's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I doubt you need any help."

"Only with an escape route," she said, grinning. Whitley knew how to read people, so they had formed an understanding and a special signal over the years. "You're always good for an urgent call for me at the front desk when I need it."

Whitley's eyes crinkled with amusement. "Simply protecting Crown Island's most distinguished jewel. None of them were worthy of you, princess."

Looking up at him, she smiled. "You still remember that?"

"The Majestic never forgets its royalty," Whitley replied. "Speaking of treats fit for a queen, might I suggest an assortment of the pastry chef's desserts? She's outdone herself today."

Ella beamed at him. “That sounds wonderful, darling.”

“I’ll send it right out.” After a charming, courtly kiss to Ella’s hand, Whitley left.

Deb watched him go. She suspected he had admired Ella for years, maybe even before her husband passed away. Not that he would have acted on impulse. That wasn’t Whitley’s style.

A few minutes later, a young, freckled-faced server appeared with a tray of desserts and fresh plates. “You’re getting the royal treatment today.”

“Thank you, Kelsey,” Deb said as the young woman placed the sweets in the center of the table. They each put a few small bites on their dessert plates.

Since she had been here almost every day for months, Deb knew most of the staff, and she was fond of Kelsey. In the fall, she would return to finish her degree in hospitality management at the University of San Diego. She had worked here every summer throughout school.

“What a heavenly celebration,” Ella said, swooning over a chocolate mousse.

While they continued chatting, Deb and April sampled a slice of cheesecake drizzled with mango sauce and a passionfruit crème brûlée.

As they were finishing their champagne and desserts, April’s eldest daughter arrived at the table.

Maileah eyed the empty champagne bottle and dessert spread. “This looks like a celebration. Did I miss someone’s birthday?”

“Deb’s work is featured in this month’s Coastal Design & Living.” April hugged her

daughter.

“What brings you here?” Deb asked.

“I’ve been taking photos of Junie’s shop for the new advertising campaign I’m starting for her.”

Deb had watched April’s two daughters grow up, so they were like family. Maileah handled advertising for Junie’s specialty boutique in the hotel, as well as for her growing online shop.

Maileah was dating Sailor, a local surfer, and it seemed like they were having fun together. Her sister Junie was seeing Knox MacKenzie, who’d bought the house next door to hers on Sunshine Avenue and worked for Ryan at the hotel.

When April and Ella broke into laughter at something between themselves, Maileah arched an eyebrow in amusement. “If you’re finished with your party, I can give you a ride home. If Blue were to stop you, I might have to post bail.”

At the mention of the local police officer, Ella took her hand. “You’re right, dear. I should leave the golf cart here. Unless Deb would like to take it.”

“I still have work to do.” Deb rose to say goodbye to her friends. “Thanks for joining me to celebrate my first magazine cover.”

After April and Ella left with Maileah, Deb sat again. A strong cup of coffee, and she’d be fine for her last tasks of the day.

Ella would soon forget about her matchmaking ideas, and Deb could cast her memories out to sea and go back to what really mattered.

Her work.

Still, as she gazed over the waves to the distant horizon, an old recollection nipped at the edges of her mind. Why she'd thought about that summer boy was beyond her. It had been years since she'd thought about that magical summer or the heartache that ensued.

Had to be the champagne , she thought, nodding to Kelsey again. Strange how the mind works .

She ordered, and Kelsey quickly returned with a small silver pot of coffee on her way to drop off the check for the two boys, who'd finished their sundaes.

Deb found the soft chatter across the outdoor cafe soothing. She sipped her coffee, making notes on the to-do list she kept on her phone while watching guests and locals on the beach.

Couples and families cycled lazily along the boardwalk on beach cruisers from the hotel bike concession. Children and their parents frolicked among shallow waves, and teenagers giggled in sun loungers by the pool, watching boys splash in the water.

She sighed happily. She loved living here and seeing visitors delight in what the locals enjoyed every day. Crown Island was a special, artsy community. Its assortment of brightly painted houses and murals was an island tradition.

Her home on Hibiscus Heights was splashed with purple and lavender, inspired by the lavender hibiscus flowers that had bloomed on the property for years, even before she'd bought it.

A local artist extended the floral theme on the fence that edged her garden, creating an oasis that bloomed year-round for her. A row of lavender grandiflora roses with

ruffled petals filled the area with their delicate scent.

Roses . Yet another memory sprang to mind, the scent of soft pink roses, the first she'd ever received from a boy.

She ran a hand over her forehead. It was strange how old memories she'd tried to forget were still lodged in her brain. And why were they taunting her today?

Even if that boy had changed how she lived her life.

Behind her, the two youngsters spoke in worried tones, and Kelsey turned back to her. "Is there anything else you'd like?"

"No, I have work to do before the big event." She signed the tab Kelsey gave her with a practiced flourish. Another furniture delivery was due shortly, so she rose to leave.

Kelsey swiveled back to the boys. As they dug into the pockets of their swim trunks, Kelsey asked, "Are you sure you don't have a room card?"

"We forgot it," the younger boy said, his wide blue eyes set off by his sun-bleached hair.

"How about the room number?"

The older one shook his head, looking embarrassed. "We can't remember it. That's why we're still out here."

The younger boy's eyes filled with tears. "I wish Mom were here."

"So do I, but you know she can't." The older brother put his arm around the other.

As Deb listened, her heart went out to them.

“What’s your parent’s name?” Kelsey held her pen aloft, ready to make a note.

“We’re staying here with my aunt,” the older boy replied.

“Okay, what’s her name?”

The younger brother wiped his tears. “Her name is Aunt Jen.”

Deb hid a smile at that. They were clearly part of the summer crowd.

Kelsey tried again. “That’s a pretty common name. What’s her last name?”

The older brother’s face turned even redder under the sunburn, and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“I don’t know. She just got married again, and she told me her new name, but I can’t remember it.

It’s Jennifer, if that helps. When she comes back, I can ask her and tell you. Maybe they’ll eat here tonight.”

Deb saw displeasure growing in Kelsey’s expression, even though she was clearly trying to be patient.

Feeling sorry for the boys, Deb took a step toward the server and said softly, “Put their order on my tab.”

Still, they heard her. The younger boy brightened, but the older one shook his head and lowered his eyes. “We can’t do that. Our dad wouldn’t like it.”

Deb tried again. “I respect that, but this woman’s shift will be over soon, and she’ll have to close her orders. She’ll get in trouble if the numbers don’t balance. What’s your name?”

The older boy stood awkwardly. “I’m Mason, and this is my brother Teddy. I’m really sorry about this.”

Deb smiled and waved off his concern. “It’s my pleasure, Mason. I work here. And your dad doesn’t need to know about this.”

While Mason wavered, Deb nodded at Kelsey to transfer the order to her account. She’d had signing privileges on a hotel account long before Ryan acquired the Majestic. Many of the locals did.

Looking relieved, Mason said, “Thank you, ma’am. We’ll pay you back. You can count on that. Our dad would insist.”

“He’d be really mad, and he’d beat us like this. Pow, pow.” Teddy made motions with his small fists.

Mason caught his hands in warning. “Don’t do that in public. Remember what Dad said.”

Teddy’s eyes widened. “People could take us for that.”

Deb was alarmed by the looks the two shared. “Really, it’s fine. I’m happy to do it.”

Mason seemed embarrassed, but not only about the lunch bill. “Don’t pay any attention to my brother. Thank you again.” He stuck out his hand.

While Deb shook his hand, Teddy flung his slender arms around her waist and looked

up at her. “I like you. You’re nice.”

She tapped his nose. “So are you. You two have fun today. And put on more sunscreen.” She reached into her bag, brought out a tube she always carried, and gave it to Mason.

She wiggled her fingers in a wave. “See you two around.”

“Bye,” Mason said shyly.

The two boys hurried off toward the beach. They were smiling now and looked like a huge weight had been lifted from their young shoulders.

“That was kind of you to do that,” Kelsey said.

“They’re just a couple of kids on vacation.” Deb was glad to help.

Still, thinking about the conversation, she drew her brow.

“Did you see the look on the older brother’s face?”

He seemed genuinely frightened. And the younger one with his punching motions was scary.

Who knows what their father might do if he were to find out.

Removing that worry for them is well worth it to me. ”

Kelsey pursed her lips. “That was a little shocking. I bet he’s a real ogre. You wouldn’t believe the parents I see here screaming at their kids. I know it’s tough to raise children, but some parents overreact to simple mistakes.”

“People come here because they need to unwind. Hopefully, they leave in better spirits.” Deb watched the boys on the beach, thinking about how embarrassed the older boy was. “I’ll bet Mason never forgets this.”

While Kelsey rang up a new charge, Deb wondered about their father. The more she thought about how the boys had reacted, the more disturbed she was.

She’d bet the parents were divorced, and the dad barely spent time with them. She’d known her share of men who paid little attention to their children.

That was always a huge red flag to her. She swiped them out of her life fast.

At least they had their aunt to look after them.

When Kelsey gave Deb the new bill to sign, she asked, “Out of curiosity, why did you think to do this? No one else was ready to step up to pay for a couple of kids.”

Deb signed for the charge. “I like to pay kindness forward. When they’re older, maybe they’ll remember and rescue someone else.”

Tucking the receipt away, Kelsey nodded. “I hope the universe works that way.”

“I like to think it does. Doing things for other people lifts my spirits, too. See you later.”

Deb glanced back at the boys and chuckled at their playful antics. She would keep an eye on them during their stay.

As she hurried through the hotel toward the delivery docks, she decided that if she ever met Mason and Teddy’s father, she’d have a few choice words for him.

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Duke rushed ahead, wagging his tail, and thumped down by the side door. He cocked his head quizzically as if wondering why Deb wore a dress with heels instead of the shorts and sneakers she should be wearing for their morning beach run.

She bent to scratch the large dog's neck. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I have an early meeting, boy. You'll have to amuse yourself with birds and squirrels until I return."

She let the shepherd-collie mix outside into the rear yard, where he immediately raced along the fence line, barking for her neighbor's dog to join in the fun.

A terrier wiggled through the doggie door, and the pair of them lunged toward an old tree that spread its boughs across both yards.

"Good boys," she said, smiling at their antics.

After locking the house and sliding on her sunglasses, she swung into the dusty silver Land Rover she used to haul items for her design business. She loved the old second-hand vehicle and how it kept running with minimal maintenance. As long as it did, it served her needs just fine.

Besides, who did she need to impress on Crown Island? Putting on airs here was a waste of energy.

When she arrived at the Majestic Hotel, she parked in the employee parking lot and hurried through the employee entrance and past the break room, saying quick greetings as she did.

Ryan was punctual, so she didn't stop to chat.

At five minutes to the hour in the executive office, most of the team was already there. Deb nodded at Whitley, Knox, Gianna, and Junie.

"Good morning, everyone." Leaning against a large mahogany desk, Ryan's voice focused the room's attention.

Ryan had an island executive look about him, with an open collar white shirt, trousers, and his favored Italian loafers.

His thick, dark hair was styled, and his eyes were alert, despite the early morning hour.

He was an effective leader, one who delegated and trusted his team, though he kept up with details.

In hospitality, especially at the luxury level, details were crucial. Having just acquired this hotel, Ryan paid close attention.

Deb sat in a leather chair beside Ryan's desk to catch the cool morning breeze drifting through open windows. This meeting for the Majestic's grand reopening was a weekly ritual, but with the official debut looming, a sense of urgency filled the room.

Ryan had planned an accelerated renovation schedule to take advantage of the summer demand, which she understood.

At one minute before the hour, Maileah rushed in. She wore a cotton sundress with a surfing print and carried her laptop and coffee thermos.

Deb knew Maileah was eager to make a good impression. This was the younger woman's first important job on the island. Deb hoped Maileah could deliver what she'd promised.

Maileah's eyes glittered with nervous excitement, and she blurted out, "I just checked the RSVP list, and it's exploding. I saw at least thirty confirmations after the magazine hit newsstands."

Ryan allowed a small smile. "Let's start with updates. Please continue."

Maileah opened her laptop. "We're over three hundred confirmed guests now. The PR company has delivered on celebrity appearances. Several Hollywood actors and musicians are confirmed, plus a couple of baseball players from the San Diego Padres."

Maileah paused before rattling off a few high-profile names before adding, "Sailor is in town. He'll be with me, of course."

Deb smiled as the younger woman's face flushed. Sailor was a champion surfer whose star was on the rise.

Maileah leaned forward in her eagerness. "The media also reported that a significant part of the ticket sales goes to aid local organizations, including the new Injured Athlete Foundation. Our charity total is six figures and climbing. The social media plan is also on track."

She handed out a printed update before sitting beside April.

Deb caught Maileah's eye and nodded her approval, relieved she was performing well.

“Good work. Thank you, Maileah.” Ryan smiled with satisfaction before turning to Whitley, whose sunshine-yellow jacket brightened the room.

The general manager cleared his throat. “All our VIP suites are fully booked. As for our celebrity guests, I have assigned a special concierge so we can take good care of them from the moment of their red-carpet welcome under the porte-cochère . Additional security will be stationed discreetly throughout the property.”

“A step-and-repeat backdrop will be installed in the grand lobby for event photography,” Maileah added. “We’ll also have an outdoor photo area with a backdrop of ocean sunset views.”

Ryan nodded approvingly. “Chef, how is your staff doing?”

Gianna leaned forward with enthusiasm. She wore a white chef’s jacket, with her dark hair slicked into a bun at the nape of her neck.

She passed a printed menu around. “Here’s the revised menu, which I’ll have printed on thick linen paper upon your approval. We’ll have new signature cocktails inspired by Crown Island’s history. Everything will be locally sourced when possible, and I’ll provide that information to the media.”

Gianna had transformed the Majestic’s dining program since arriving on Crown Island by focusing on quality ingredients and adding innovative flair.

“And the merchandise we discussed?” Ryan turned to Junie, who sat beside her mother.

Junie rose when she spoke. “As guests exit, each one will receive a Majestic Hotel canvas beach bag filled with high-quality hotel-branded items. We’ll fill the bags with water bottles, visors, sunscreen, beach towels, and Crown Island guidebooks.

The summer resort collection will debut in the boutique and online the day of the event. ”

Ryan asked, “Has all the merchandise arrived?”

“I picked up the final shipment at the port in Long Beach,” Junie replied. “I didn’t want to take any chances. I had to make one replacement with a better item. I’ll deliver a filled beach bag to your office this afternoon for your approval.”

Junie and her late husband had run a large online shop, so Deb was confident that Junie knew what she was doing. She had flourished here on Crown Island after returning. Seeing how Junie and Knox looked at each other with such admiration, she wondered if a wedding might be in their future.

“I look forward to that, Junie. Thank you.” Ryan shifted his attention to April. “Media interest in the historical preservation aspects of the renovation is high. I’d like to involve the Historical Society to address questions. Will you work with Knox on that, please?”

“I’ll be happy to do that,” April replied.

Deb watched the exchange with satisfaction. Seeing her friend happy again after her devastating divorce reminded Deb why love was worth the risk. For most people, anyway.

“Knox, where are we on construction?” Ryan asked.

“The final punch list is ninety percent complete.” Knox consulted his tablet. He had overseen a prior construction project for Ryan before arriving at the Majestic last year.

Deb figured Knox had already been on site for his early morning inspection. He was usually the first one there, followed by Whitley.

“Guest room renovations were nearly finished yesterday,” Knox said, scanning the list.

“How about 418?” Ryan asked.

At the mention of that room, Deb coughed, and everyone shifted uncomfortably.

Knox stroked his chin. “About that room, we still need to troubleshoot the electrical outlets and air conditioning.”

“Let me guess,” Ryan said. “The air becomes curiously cold in spots, the lights malfunction, and the outlets work sporadically.”

“That sums it up,” Knox said. “We’ve tested several times.”

Laughter swept around the room, and Deb said, “I told you that’s our resident ghost.”

“Don’t waste your time on troubleshooting,” Ryan said. “If someone specifically asks for that room, we’ll let them have it. Otherwise, it’s one of the last we fill, and we let guests know about the potential for paranormal activity.”

Knox raised his brow. “I’d heard some talk about that, but I didn’t know that was real.”

Whitley spoke up. “Over the years, we’ve ascertained that Princess Noelle doesn’t like to be disturbed unless someone appreciates her occasional presence and pranks.”

“I wasn’t kidding about that,” Deb said to Knox. She’d been working closely with

him for the last few months, and she was impressed with his skill and management style.

Ryan grinned and gestured to her. “Carry on, Deb.”

She rose to speak. “While we staged around incomplete areas for the magazine shoot, now everything must be camera-ready for the event. I’m coordinating furnishings and artwork right behind Knox.”

Ryan pinched the bridge of his nose. “I heard some items haven’t arrived. How can we be sure all rooms are ready for the event?”

“About that,” Deb said, her stomach tightening.

“Most pieces arrived on schedule, but we’re still waiting to receive final overseas shipments, which have been delayed in customs. I have an agent handling that and am confident she can deliver.

However, I have contingency plans to use local artisan pieces that will work beautifully in their place if needed.

I’ve got it all under control. The Majestic will look exquisite, so you can count on that. ”

Ryan nodded his approval. “So far, you all sound prepared.” Admiration was evident in his voice. “I don’t need to remind you that we’re on the critical path. If issues arise or a subcontractor doesn’t deliver even the smallest detail, you’ll need alternate plans in place. Keep that in mind.”

Deb appreciated his confidence in them, but the real test was still ahead. This was her largest and most high-profile project to date. The grand reopening event would attract

potential clients. Success here would cement her reputation beyond Crown Island.

“How is the current guest response?” Ryan asked.

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“Very good,” Whitley replied. “Several existing guests extended their reservations for the event. Others are booking additional nights specifically to attend.” Whitley flipped through his notes.

“Including the Hunt party in the oceanfront suite, the Kim family in the penthouse, and Jack and Jennifer Ambroz in another suite.”

Jennifer. Deb’s attention sharpened. Could that be the boys’ aunt? She wondered if their father would attend. However, she kept her expression neutral, filing away the information.

Whitley smiled as he held up a magazine. “Has everyone seen our recent media coverage in Coastal Design it was the foundation of who he’d become, representing the full circle of his journey.

Everyone gathered their materials and made their way from the executive offices looking confident, though Deb sensed an undercurrent of anxiety.

Even with the best plans, a lot could go wrong.

Once, right after she had finished a costly redesign project, a pipe burst, ruining her work before her clients arrived to see their new home.

Fortunately, they had insurance, but this was their second home, so that compounded the repair process.

Still, Deb had built her reputation on exceeding expectations under pressure. This

grand reopening would be no different.

April caught up with her in the corridor. “Who are you taking to the event?”

Deb gave a noncommittal shrug. “I hadn’t planned on taking a date. I want to be free to manage anything that might come up.”

“Then you should know, Whitley’s assistant has you down for a plus-one at our table. You’ll be with Ryan and me, Whitley and Ella. The mayor and her husband will also be there. Maileah and Junie will be at a nearby table with Sailor and Knox.”

Deb considered this. She used to take one of her brothers to events, but now they were all married and would be attending with their wives. And her nephews were far too young.

Deb replied, “Most of the men I used to know are married or moved to the mainland. That’s the problem with this age.”

“How about Adrian?” April suggested.

She and Sailor’s dad grew up together on Crown Island. “I think he’s dating that local artist. The one with the pottery studio near the marina.”

“Oh, that’s right. What about one of Blue’s friends?”

“They’re so young, I’d feel like I was babysitting. I’ll talk to Whitley’s assistant and have her seat another single person beside me. I don’t have time to think about this, and I’m not ready to risk a dating app.”

April raised an eyebrow. “Even for the social event of the summer?”

“Especially because of that. I’m there to work.”

“You should relax and have fun.”

Grinning, Deb nudged her. “I’m not dating the owner, so I have to shape up. Besides, I want to work the crowd. With all the out-of-towners and celebrities, I could land some interesting jobs.”

“Or meet someone?” April lifted her eyebrows and smiled.

“Please stop.”

April shook her head. “You’ll probably land a huge job that will take you away from Crown Island, and just as I’ve come back.”

“Took you long enough,” Deb said, grinning. “But you’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

“Not even if Mr. Right shows up?”

Deb laughed. “I think he took the last ferry out. Look, I’m happy with my life. Why in the world would I want to change it now?”

“I can think of a few reasons.” April fanned her face and grinned.

Deb tucked her arm into her friend’s. “I’m not dead, just taking a break.”

They parted ways, and Deb made her way toward a meeting room that Knox’s team had just finished and needed her attention for artwork.

While she walked through the wide hallways, she took a mental inventory.

An antique bookshelf needed a repair, a palm tree should have a new pot, and a seascape could use a different frame.

As she approached the meeting room, her phone buzzed with a text from an unknown number. She tapped the screen.

Heard you might need a date for the big event. I'm available. Call me."

That sounded like someone she knew, but who? Pursing her lips, she tapped a message. Who is this? She stared at the screen, but there was no immediate reply.

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After spending the day arranging the meeting room artwork, following up with her suppliers, and reviewing her to-do list, Deb finally pulled into her driveway.

Duke raced to the gate and greeted her with excited yips. When she cracked the gate, he wriggled out and circled her, his tail whipping back and forth against her legs.

“Hey, buddy. I owe you some beach time, don’t I?”

She scratched behind his ears, feeling guilty for missing their usual morning routine. Preparing for Ryan’s meeting had taken priority, but Duke didn’t understand the importance of professional obligations.

She’d make it up to him right now. She had just enough time for a run and a shower before meeting her family for dinner.

Duke followed her into the house, his toenails clicking on the hardwood floors.

Deb kicked off her high heels and padded into the cool tiled kitchen, where she’d maintained the vintage beach house charm.

She’d exposed overhead beams, installed a deep farmhouse sink, and added colorful, hand-painted tiles from a local artisan on the backsplash.

A vase of tall purple gladioli from her garden brightened the room.

Her clients often requested sleek white, monochromatic interiors, but she loved living life in full color.

This was Crown Island, after all. The artist community was a pop of vivid color in an ever-changing sea of blue.

“Bet you’d like a treat, huh?”

At the word treat , Duke promptly dropped into a seated position, his tail slapping the floor. He fairly vibrated with expectation, and Deb chuckled. She tossed the doggie treat into the air, and he leapt for it.

Ten minutes later, dressed in running shorts and a tank top with Duke tugging at his leash, Deb headed for the beach. The late afternoon sun warmed her shoulders. With Duke trotting beside her, she quickly found her rhythm on the packed sand near the water’s edge.

She loved the simple pleasure of running on the beach. A heated volleyball game was going on in one direction, so she turned toward the Majestic.

Approaching the hotel’s wide strip of beach, she spotted two familiar figures tossing a bright orange frisbee. Mason and Teddy looked up.

“Hey, boys,” she called out.

Just then, Duke broke free and charged across the sand, leaping like an Olympian to snatch the frisbee in mid-air.

“What a show-off.” She laughed and raced after him.

Duke trotted to Mason, dropped the frisbee at his feet, and looked up expectantly.

Mason rubbed his neck. “Can we play with him?”

“Sure, I’ll take off his leash,” Deb replied. “Meet Duke. He’s friendly.”

Her dog was good about staying close and out of trouble.

Mason tossed the frisbee to Teddy. “Throw it to him.”

The younger boy did, and Duke plunged into the advancing waves to retrieve it. Dripping water, he charged back victorious with it in his mouth for another throw.

Deb laughed, but she wasn’t concerned. She’d run Duke through her outdoor shower when they returned. He loved that.

Mason turned to her. “I have something for you.”

With a serious expression, the boy shoved a hand into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled bill. “This is for lunch. Thanks a lot. Aunt Jen said they could have made us wash dishes all day.”

“Keep your money,” Deb said, trying not to laugh at his seriousness.

Mason shook his head firmly. “But Dad will?—”

“It was my treat, a gift.”

“Aunt Jen said we shouldn’t take money from people we don’t know.”

“I’m Deb Whitaker.” She put out her hand, holding it there until he shook it. “Now you know me. And you know where I work.” She closed his other hand around the bill.

The frisbee landed at Mason’s feet, sending a spray of sand up. Mason snatched it,

and Duke skidded to a stop, wagging his tail.

Teddy trotted behind the dog. “Did you give her the money?”

“She won’t take it.”

“But Aunt Jen said Dad won’t like this.” Teddy looked crestfallen over the dilemma. His lower lip wavered.

“Teddy slipped and told her when she asked what we had for lunch.” Mason’s voice sounded heavy.

Deb studied the boy’s expression. “If you really want to repay me, how about buying me an ice cream? But only if you have some, too.”

Guarded smiles spread across the boys’ faces, and Deb snapped the leash back on Duke’s collar. “Mint chocolate chip is one of my favorites. Or maybe honey lavender.”

Teddy did a little dance of joy. “I want chocolate.”

“What’s your favorite?” she asked Mason.

The older boy gave her a shy grin. “I like strawberry and orange sherbet. I had blueberry once. Have you ever tried that?”

“No, but I’d like to. We should hurry before the ice cream shop at the hotel closes. It’s been there since I was a little girl.”

They jogged back to the Majestic, and Deb waved at a few friends and servers as they made their way toward the entrance to the shopping corridor. The vintage ice cream

parlor was at the end and opened onto the beach.

During the renovation, Ryan insisted Crown Scoops maintain its original charm, and Deb was happy to oblige.

The shop was as people remembered it again, with black-and-white checkered floors and a white marble counter lined with red vinyl stools.

The sweet scent of waffle cones and vanilla whisked Deb back to childhood when she and April would bike here after school.

They'd saved their allowances for double scoops.

She'd also come here with someone else. Those memories carried a different weight, bittersweet and locked away. However, this small island held so many memories that she'd trained herself to reframe the bad ones by intentionally replacing them with better memories.

Like now.

She attached Duke's leash to a railing, and he flopped down to wait.

As they walked in, the lanky young girl behind the counter smiled and said hello to Deb.

"Hi, Wren. I've brought two VIPs with me today."

"I can see that. Single or double scoops for you?"

With a glance at the boys, Deb chuckled. "Do you even have to ask?"

Teddy pressed his nose to the glass case, having trouble deciding between the chocolate choices. “Can I really get whatever I want?”

Deb ruffled his sun-bleached hair. “Sure. How about one of each?”

His eyes flashing with excitement, Teddy pointed through the glass case. “I’ll have the Chocolate Fudge Brownie and Rocky Road on a waffle cone.”

“Those are great together.” Wren leaned over to scoop the ice cream. After handing the cone to Teddy, she turned to Mason. “Have you decided?”

“You should go first,” he said to Deb. “You’re our guest.”

Deb smiled at his manners. Mason was a nice kid, and someone had taught him well. Besides his father, that is. Probably his aunt or his mother.

She wondered why the boys didn’t live with their mother, but that wasn’t any of her business.

She wouldn’t judge another woman on what must have been a painful situation for her.

Their father sounded like one of those who grabbed the children out of spite and then fobbed them off on nannies and relatives.

She’d seen that before, too.

She could sure pick them. Her picker had been broken for a long time, but that no longer mattered.

Have fun and leave at the first hint of trouble . That was her motto now.

Mason smiled up at her, stealing her heart. “The mint chocolate chip looks good.”

Deb nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll have that. What flavors are calling you?”

“A lot of them. I want to try some new ones.” Mason spoke with the confidence of someone making major decisions. “Banana on the top and cherry on the bottom.”

The boy pulled out the crumpled bill and placed it on the counter. Looking up at Wren, he asked, “Will that cover it?”

Deb mouthed to Wren, Put the rest on my tab.

“That’s perfect,” Wren said to Mason. “And here’s an iced puppy cup for Duke. He’s a VIP around here. Or rather, a very important dog.”

They strolled out with their ice cream, made their way toward the beach, and sat on a low wall near the bike concession.

Deb opened the iced puppy cup for Duke, who steadied the paper cup between his paws and began to lick the cool treat.

“He loves that,” Mason said, watching Duke.

“That’s his special summer treat,” Deb said. “Do you have any pets?”

“Dad promised, but...” Mason shrugged.

She sighed. Poor kids. Was there anything good about their father?

Deb pointed to a spot where small waves broke on the beach. “I learned to surf right out there. I still ride my bike around town, too.”

“Could you teach us to surf?” Teddy asked, grinning with chocolate smears on his chin.

“I’d like that,” Deb replied, surprised by how much she meant it. “But I know some real pros who are great teachers. How long will you be here?”

“Aunt Jen wants to stay longer,” Teddy replied. “Maybe two weeks.”

“We can probably fit that in if she approves. I have a friend who teaches surfing here at the hotel, but you would need your aunt’s permission. And you must know how to swim. Or you could rent bikes right over there.”

Mason’s eyes brightened. “We know how to swim.”

“And we got new bikes for Christmas,” Teddy added.

As they enjoyed their ice cream, Teddy chattered about shells he’d found on the beach while Mason observed everything around them. Then, without warning, the little boy’s voice dropped.

“I wish Mom were here....” His voice trailed off as if he was suddenly aware of what he’d said.

Deb’s chest tightened, but she let the moment pass without questions. Some wounds were too deep to probe.

No wonder these boys seemed to carry such weight on their narrow shoulders. All they wanted was to see their mother. Their father must be keeping them from her.

“Thanks for the ice cream,” Deb said, shifting the conversation. “I need to give Duke his supper, so we should probably leave soon. I hope you’ll be hungry for dinner after

all that ice cream.”

Mason fished a room key from his pocket and grinned. “Aunt Jen’s new husband likes to eat later than we usually do, so we’ll be hungry. But we should go back to the room.”

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“Bye, Duke,” Teddy said, hugging the dog. “Thanks for letting us play with him.”

She smiled and squeezed their shoulders. “I’ll see you both around.”

Whistling to Duke, she turned away from the Majestic. The ice cream had filled her, but she still had time before her family dinner.

Before resuming her run, she paused to make sure the two boys went back inside the hotel. Despite claiming she was too busy for children, she genuinely enjoyed their company. Kids didn’t hide their feelings.

Except maybe their pain and sadness. She hoped Mason and Teddy would have grief counseling someday.

As she watched Mason put a protective arm over his brother’s shoulder, she wondered what kind of man would let his children suffer.

When they disappeared into the hotel, Deb turned toward home with Duke beside her.

After an invigorating run back, Deb sprayed salt water off Duke in the outdoor shower and toweled him dry. She still had half an hour.

Inside, her hot shower was a luxury after the beach run, washing away salt and sand as well as the unexpected emotions that had surfaced with Mason and Teddy.

Deb brushed her damp hair and slipped into a simple floral sundress. Family dinners were always casual. She brought her bike from the garage and started the short trip

from Hibiscus Heights.

The Whitaker family beach house sprawled along the coastline, its wraparound porches and multiple levels accommodating three generations when everyone was around. The original house had been small, and her father built more rooms as their family grew.

Tonight, judging by the collection of cars and bikes in the driveway, her brothers were already there.

“There she is,” her mother called out as Deb stepped onto the main deck where everyone was gathered. “My famous daughter.”

Deb groaned inwardly as her mother gestured to a stack of magazines. “Mom, you shouldn’t hoard those.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing that, darling. I bought enough for everyone to take one home, as well as some for friends.”

Her brother David grinned as he tossed Deb a bottle of water. “Mom has a lot of friends. She’s proud of you, that’s all.”

Their father strode onto the deck with a platter of hamburgers and began to place them on the grill. The flames licked up as he did.

“Did you get the three veggie burgers?” Bitsy asked.

“Right here in the front.” Wilt Whitaker glanced at his wife, who was a petite powerhouse. “Sweetheart, would you bring the spatula for the grill? I couldn’t find it in the kitchen.”

“That’s because I moved a few things around.” Bitsy picked up her newest grandchild and tucked the baby girl onto her hip. “Come on, Peanut. Let’s go find your grandpa’s grilling tools.”

Deb sat at a table beside David, eager to catch up with him about his new clients. His wife Rachel stepped outside with a good-natured grin. “I hope that nickname doesn’t stick.”

“Lot of nicknames in this family,” Wilt said, chuckling. “And some, like your mother, never outgrow them.”

“I heard that,” Bitsy called out.

A guilty look crossed her father’s face, and Deb laughed. “You should know better by now, Dad.”

David grinned. “Thank goodness I finally grew out of Drummer in high school.”

“You could really bang those pots and pans.” Deb sipped her water. “Nicknames aren’t so bad. When I hear Deborah Lynn, I know I’m in trouble.”

Moments later, their mother reemerged with a long-handled spatula, followed by her sons, Randy, Drew, and Jim. Wilt Whitaker Junior, known as Wills, brought up the rear.

“We brought the decorations from the attic,” Randy said to their mother. “Since we’re eating on the deck tonight, we left the boxes on the kitchen table to give you space to sort through them.”

“Thank you, my dears. The girls will help me tomorrow.”

Deb knew that meant a couple or all of her mother's daughters-in-law might volunteer, along with their children. After a few hours of unbridled chaos, they would have the entire deck and front yard decorated for their annual summer open house, a Whitaker family tradition.

The entire block was welcome, and neighbors dropped by with side dishes and desserts to add to the feast. Her father would be in grill heaven, turning out blackened fresh ocean catch and slow-roasted pork sliders with pineapple slices.

Deb and her sisters-in-law usually prepared side dishes of garden harvest salads, corn on the cob, and desserts of every sort, including lemon and blueberry pies.

This year, she would bring her lavender shortbread recipe, her mother's favorite.

Her brothers would help by managing the bar, setting up the tables, and doing the clean-up.

Rachel sat down beside Deb, pulling her from her thoughts. "So, are you seeing anyone? With all your success, your phone must be ringing. That was a great photo of you in the magazine. Wow, I'd kill for your legs."

"I'm too busy to think about dating," Deb replied. "And no one is calling, at least, not like that."

Rachel arched an eyebrow. "Are you sure you haven't heard from anyone? Maybe you should check your texts."

Suddenly, Deb remembered that strange message. She took out her phone and scrolled to find it buried among those of her friends and coworkers.

"That's what Deb always says," her brother Kenny chimed in from across the deck.

“Face it, Deb, you’re just picky. I think you’ve dated the entire local inventory.”

“Nothing wrong with having high standards,” their father said, flipping the hamburgers. “Better to be selective than settle.”

As the familiar teasing continued around her, Deb watched her mother coo over the various grandchildren scattered across the deck. Five daughters-in-law, a slew of grandchildren Deb could hardly keep up with, and more on the way.

Sometimes Deb felt like the family oddity. The successful career woman who had somehow missed the marriage-and-babies memo.

Lining up the right person at the right time proved more challenging than people thought.

Her father was right. She was selective, whether it was the perfect paint color or the right man for her.

Paint colors, though notoriously difficult to match, were far easier and much less complicated.

“Found it,” Deb said, showing Rachel the odd message.

Her sister-in-law was beaming. “That’s from Matteo. He owns vineyards in Argentina and Napa Valley. Imagine the life you could have with him, decorating his houses and tasting rooms. I met him on the ferry a few days ago. Didn’t you speak to him?”

“He sent a text. I figured it was a scammer.”

“Well, he might be a little younger than you. Everyone texts now. But he was

chatting with an older woman, so I thought you'd have a shot."

"Older?" Deb intoned. "Gee, thanks for that."

Did people think she was old now? Rachel wasn't that much younger than Deb, though she'd just given birth to her third child.

The thought unnerved her. Deb was athletic and took pride in staying in great shape. From a mental perspective, she didn't feel much older.

Wiser, she preferred to think.

Rachel was undeterred. "I didn't mean it like that. I just thought you might need a date for the big party."

Deb crossed her arms, thinking this sounded awfully familiar. "Did you talk to April?"

"I saw her at yoga," Rachel replied, blushing. "She asked if my brother might be in town, which he won't be. Anyway, Matteo is spending the summer here and has staff to manage his business. Sounds like a dreamy life. You could leave this place."

"But I like it here," Deb said, surprised. She supposed her family meant well. Still, there was always a catch. She'd bet he had women tucked away across the continents.

Was that cynical? Maybe, but it might be true.

"It only takes one." Rachel turned toward David and raised her voice. "Unless someone doesn't carry his share of the load, and then you might have to replace him with a new model."

Deb's father chuckled. "It's probably your turn to change diapers and make dinner, son."

"I'm not really looking for anything permanent," Deb said. "Relationships don't work that way in my world."

Rachel looked disappointed in her. "We all worry about you living on your own."

Deb couldn't help laughing. "Are you kidding? I have Duke, and I grew up with five older brothers. I love having my own space."

"Of course you do," Rachel said, squeezing her arm. "But a summer fling might lead to something more permanent."

Deb wondered why people who complained about their spouses were so eager to see others married. David and Rachel loved each other, but their relationship had always been tumultuous. Some people enjoyed the drama, she figured.

Not her.

Thankfully, her mother interrupted to talk about the upcoming gala, and then the hamburgers were ready, so Deb escaped the rest of Rachel's conversation.

She watched the children scramble for places at the outdoor tables. Again, she thought of Mason and Teddy and wondered if they had other cousins.

Her phone buzzed again in her pocket. Across the table, she caught Rachel's eye as she withdrew it and checked her text.

Hi again, this is Matteo. Enjoy the barbecue. Would you like to meet me at the Ferry Cafe for a drink afterward?

“Text him now.” Grinning, Rachel urgently tapped her fingers on her palm.

Deb sighed. She tapped a reply. Have to be at work early. Maybe another night.

There, that was done.

Her father brought his plate and sat next to Deb. “I heard an exclusive health spa is coming to the island. Their offer on a parcel of land was just accepted. You’re probably at the top of the designer list now. We’re bidding on the construction.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Dad.” She would find out more, but that sounded like another interesting project.

Across from them, David piled lettuce and tomatoes on his hamburger. “Over lunch, the Hunts asked me about meeting with you. The wife loves what you did at the hotel.”

“Have they signed on with you?”

“Not yet. I’ve submitted a bid for the architectural plan. They’re in a hurry and want to see your portfolio. Could you meet with us tomorrow?”

Deb hesitated. “Finalizing the Majestic interiors is taking most of my time now.”

“Sure, but once that job is done, you’ll want to move on to another project. The Hunts have serious money and very specific ideas about what they want.”

The practical side of her business brain kicked in. David was right. She’d need her next project lined up. “I’ll make time to meet with them. Lunch offsite would be best.”

Her brother's expression shifted. "Fair warning, though. They're an odd couple."

"What do you mean by that?"

David just grinned. "You'll find out. Good luck."

"Will I need it?" Deb asked, suddenly wary.

Her brother's grin widened. "Maybe."

She swatted him on the shoulder, and he laughed. David had always enjoyed teasing her, but it was all in the name of good-natured fun. As for her other brothers, at times they had crossed the line, especially with her dates. But that was mostly in the past.

Around them, the family dinner continued with the adults talking over each other and the children squealing.

Deb looked around, enjoying the chaos. If she ever moved away, she would miss this.

On second thought, maybe she was too focused on work. She pulled out her phone and opened her text.

One drink, she tapped to Matteo, although she might regret this. She didn't need to impress anyone, so he might as well see her as she was. She glanced down at her cotton dress and made a face. At least her hair had dried.

The reply came quickly. See you soon.

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“What’s in this box?” As Grant lifted a carton in his father’s study, he sneezed at the dust.

His mother glanced back at him and shook her head. “I have no idea,” Kitty replied, picking up a gold filigree earring that had tumbled to the floor.

Smudges stained his mother’s usually pristine starched shirt, and strands of silver hair had escaped her clasp.

All morning, they had been sorting items into piles. Small piles to keep or give away and a larger one to donate. She had already consigned more valuable items, so there were blank spaces throughout the house.

This box was heavier than Grant expected. When he opened it, he saw that it was filled with old photo albums and loose photographs in faded color and black and white. His father’s love of photography had inspired Grant’s career from a young age.

His childhood home now seemed cavernous. Decades ago, his parents had built this sprawling estate in Tiburon, just north of San Francisco. Now, their footsteps echoed in rooms that had once bustled with family gatherings.

“Jock kept everything,” Kitty said. Her voice held love but also a trace of exasperation.

More than a year after his death, she was still sorting through her husband’s personal effects.

Grant could see that determining what to keep for the next phase of her life was nearly overwhelming for her. Yet, she plodded through with her usual perseverance.

She held up a faded photograph and smiled. “Look at this one. What good times we had on Crown Island. I hope your sister is enjoying herself. She did so much to help me around here.”

“Hey, I remember when this photo was taken,” Grant said.

In the faded image, the four of them stood at the railing of a red ferry. He and his sister were just kids, grinning with excitement. Their parents stood behind them, looking young and glamorous, even in their beachwear.

Kitty perched on the edge of his father’s favorite leather club chair. “What magical times we had on Crown Island. Some of my fondest memories are there.”

She started to say something else but stopped.

“What’s up, Mom?”

Kitty sighed and shook her head. “This house and all the contents are so much more than I need. I want to make a real change.”

“Those condos you’ve been talking about seem right for you.”

Kitty shrugged. “Now that I think about it, a little square box of white walls will be awfully dull. Where would I put all your nature photographs?”

Grant made a good living doing what he loved. “You’ll make it your own. Should be easy to keep clean, though.”

His mother raised an eyebrow. “When was the last time you ever saw me clean a house? I plan to die without ever having to scrub a toilet or mop floors again. I did plenty of that when I was young.”

Grant’s parents had started their life together on a modest budget before Jock founded what became a successful company.

As Kitty rested, she traced the edge of the photograph. “We’d stay at the Majestic when we wanted to be pampered. Sometimes we’d rent a beach house near the marina when we wanted to feel like locals.”

“You mean, when you could find a housekeeper.” Grant grinned at his mother.

“Well, of course,” she said. “What’s a vacation if you’re the one washing and cleaning and working harder than you do at home?”

“You have a point.”

“And your father indulged me, thank goodness. I wasn’t naturally domestic.”

“You helped him build the business.” They’d built a toy manufacturing company before selling it.

Her eyes brightened at the memory. “What fun we had doing that. Long hours, hard work, but it sure paid off.”

Grant smiled at his mother. Even today, she had a housekeeper who dusted the same shelves every week. Kitty kept her on for company and planned to give her a generous retirement package when the house sold.

“You had fun along the way. I remember Dad teaching us how to sail in the harbor.

You made us wear life vests even when we thought we were too old for them.” Grant chuckled. “Now I do the same.”

His mother put a hand to her heart. “You two would tear around on bikes like demons, dive off the rocks, and surf when the waves were high.” Her smile grew wistful. “Then, when you were older, you stayed out late at beach bonfires.”

“I loved doing that.” Grant recalled lazy afternoons that stretched into nights studded with thousands of stars. Time moved at a different pace there.

“Your father always thought we’d return when you had children of your own.” Kitty’s voice cracked a little. “He looked forward to teaching his grandchildren to sail.”

Grant shook his head, remembering how illness overcame his father, robbing them of many good years. “We all thought we’d have more time with him.”

The silence stretched between them. He resumed packing, needing the distraction of physical activity to help him cope.

In the corner of the room, he spotted his father’s prized collection of vintage albums and 78 rpm records. Collectors would love those.

“What about Dad’s music collection?”

Kitty looked over. “Take whatever you want. He’d love to know you appreciated those old recordings. We haunted antique shops for years in search of those. He loved the chase.”

“I know how he felt. That’s like finding just the right vantage point and light.” Grant would chase the sun if he had to.

He ran his fingers along the album covers from bygone eras, recognizing the careful organization his father had maintained. Big band, swing, jazz, some classical. He pulled out a Glenn Miller record, the cover worn from years of handling.

“We loved that one,” Kitty said, standing to join him. “He played it constantly when we were first married. We’d dance in front of the fireplace for hours.”

On impulse, Grant changed his mind about getting rid of the old records. “Would you mind if I took this entire collection?”

“He would love knowing that. Jock always said music should be played, not just preserved. I haven’t listened to those in years.”

“Then let’s change that.”

Grant placed the record on the old turntable that still occupied a place of honor in a polished wooden cabinet. He turned it on, lifted the arm, and placed it on the grooves. The scratchy notes of “In the Mood” filled the room.

Suddenly, his mother was smiling again, and she extended her hands to him. “Your father never let a Glenn Miller song play without dancing. Come dance with me like you did when you were little.”

He chuckled at that memory. “I hope I’m a little better now.”

They swayed around the living room, Grant spinning his mother the way he’d watched his father do countless times. Kitty’s infectious laughter bubbled up until they were both laughing and crying together.

When the song ended, Grant held his mother close. “I’m sorry he’s gone, Mom.”

After hugging him, she pulled back and drew her hand along his cheek. “I wish you didn’t know how I feel.”

“Me, too. How about some tea?”

“I’ll make it,” she said, dabbing her eyes.

As she went to make tea, Grant pulled out another record. “I’ll Be Seeing You” by Billie Holiday.

He would listen to that one later when he was alone.

A few minutes later, the kettle whistled in the kitchen. Grant made his way there and carried the tea tray to the breakfast room.

They sat down, and he poured tea for his mother.

As he did, Kitty gazed at the high ceilings and expansive windows overlooking the bay. “Would you like to keep this house for your family?”

“You’ve asked me that before, Mom. It’s more house than I want to care for. The boys will be off to university in ten years, and I’ll be in your situation.”

“Not if you find another partner.”

He let the question hang in the air. With his work, Grant could be anywhere.

Geography wasn’t a constraint as long as the boys liked their school.

However, they’d had trouble adjusting these last few years.

On top of their grief, they had been bullied.

He'd been called to the school often to deal with the situation.

"Will you at least consider it?" she asked again.

This house held forty years of memories of holiday gatherings and birthday parties. It was hard for Grant to see it go, too.

"You and Dad entertained a lot, with people visiting for weeks on end."

Kitty sipped her tea, looking thoughtful. "We loved doing that. But our siblings are gone now, and your cousins live around the world. They're all too busy to visit."

"Times change," Grant said. How well he knew that.

Kitty put her cup down. "I've been thinking that we could surprise your sister on Crown Island and spread your father's ashes on the waves. He loved sailing those waters even more than the San Francisco Bay."

"But we have a lot to do here."

"All this can wait," Kitty said, waving her hand. "Jock was happiest on the island, with all of us together and hardly a care in the world."

Grant tried to imagine returning to Crown Island after all these years and saying goodbye to his father.

"It's been a long time," he said quietly.

"That's exactly why we should go." Kitty stared through the windows as if looking

into the future.

“Or we can look at some photos.” Grant rose to retrieve the photo album they’d been looking at from the desk. As he did, a small photo slipped out, and he bent to retrieve it.

He caught his breath at the image of someone he used to know. Quickly, he pocketed the photo.

While his mother gazed ahead, Grant looked back. A tiny spark he hadn’t felt in years flared within him.

Kitty pushed her cup away. “Let’s get out and have lunch at that cafe on Main Street you like so much.”

“Sounds good to me.”

After freshening up, they drove the short distance to the town center of Tiburon and past the impressive silver sails sculpture, Coming About .

“Would you stop over there first?” His mother motioned toward a private postal shop. “I’d like to pick up the mail while we’re here.”

“I’ll get that for you.” He pulled his SUV to the curb and stepped out onto the sidewalk of the charming village. His parents had traveled extensively, so they’d retained a private mailbox for mail delivery.

A woman at the counter looked up. “Good to see you, Grant. How’s your mother?”

“She’s feeling better, thanks for asking. We’re off to lunch at Sheri’s Cafe.”

“It’s a sweet day to sit outside. I just put mail in her box.”

Using the key his mother gave him, he opened a small door on a bank of brass mailboxes. He brought out a few pieces of mail and a couple of magazines.

One caught his eye. What a coincidence , he thought. He started back to the car and opened the door.

“Here’s your mail. And check out that magazine.”

Kitty picked up the glossy periodical and opened it. “The Majestic Hotel. Such a lovely place. This is another sign that we should visit.”

Grant grinned at her. Like the small, steady stream that cut its way through mountains, his mother would eventually have her way.

He touched the photo in his pocket like a talisman. “I’ll check airline tickets after lunch.”

His mother beamed with long overdue happiness. “Who knows what good trouble we’ll get into? I’ll pack Jock right away. He would be so pleased.”

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Deb stared at the mirror on her mother's vanity while raucous laughter floated inside. Her brothers were still telling stories on the deck. She'd heard most of them before, and Matteo was waiting for her at the Ferry Cafe.

So here she was, looking more than a little tousled. She'd planned to meet Matteo as she was—until she had a good look at herself. Quickly, she finger-combed her tangled, windblown hair and began braiding it over one shoulder.

Footsteps sounded on the wooden floor behind her.

Deb saw her mother's face reflected in the mirror. "I heard Rachel set you up with a date tonight."

"It's just a meet-up at the Ferry Cafe. Nothing fancy, Mom."

Bitsy put a hand on Deb's shoulder. "I can see that, and I mean that in the kindest way. Here, let me do that for you."

"I can manage."

"Of course you can. But I still like to look after you, so humor me. I went through five messy boys before I got to play dress-up with you. Sit down so I can reach you."

Bitsy picked up a brush and gestured toward her vanity chair with it.

Deb eased onto the chair, smiling at the memories. "I always felt it was you and me against a pack of wolves."

“They only teased you because they loved you. Boys often have trouble expressing their tender feelings.”

“It’s probably easier for them when they’re little.” Like Teddy , she thought.

While Deb watched her mother in the mirror, Bitsy deftly worked her blond hair into a thick braid with nimble fingers. A few gray hairs now mingled with Deb’s natural highlights. Watching their reflection, Deb realized the growing resemblance between her and her mother.

She took after her father in terms of her long limbs, but she and her mother looked strikingly similar. They were often mistaken for sisters.

Deb would be happy to age like her mother, who now played pickleball at the club, having given up the more demanding game of tennis.

Her mother secured the ends of her hair. “What do you think?”

“Much better.” Deb touched her mother’s hand.

Bitsy picked up a perfume bottle. “How about a spritz of this orange blossom parfum you gave me for Mother’s Day?”

Deb nodded and closed her eyes. The scent of heavenly white flowers filled the air. It reminded her of the citrus trees in her yard.

Bitsy tilted Deb’s chin up. “Now, you need some lipstick, and I have a sweater you can take. It’s chilly near the water.”

With a slip of pale pink on her lips and a matching cotton sweater around her shoulders, Deb was ready.

Her mother hugged her. “You look natural, not like you’re trying to impress him.”

Adjusting the cardigan, Deb grinned. “That’s because I’m not.”

“No, you never have,” her mother said thoughtfully. “Not since—” She stopped. “Sorry, that’s ancient history. I hope you have an enjoyable time this evening.”

Deb ignored her mother’s slip of the tongue. She knew she didn’t mean it.

After leaving the boisterous family dinner, Deb pedaled toward the ferry on her bike. She loved this time of the evening when moonlight shimmered on the waves and a light chill swept in from the sea.

Her bike tires hummed against the pavement as she cycled through the quiet, colorful streets of Crown Island, waving to neighbors out for an after-dinner stroll.

She’d have one glass of wine or sparkling water with Matteo. Rachel’s matchmaking attempts usually ended in disaster, but something in her sister-in-law’s voice when she mentioned Matteo had made Deb curious enough to agree.

Or it might have been her mention of vineyards.

She slowed as she approached the Ferry Cafe, its cherry-red exterior glowing under strings of fairy lights lining its outdoor patios.

Unlike the bustling daytime crowd of tourists waiting for the mainland ferry, the evening clientele at the cafe was more relaxed and discerning. The owner was a talented chef who had a loyal local following. The restaurant was more intimate after sunset.

Deb parked her bike and smoothed her sundress. With her mother’s assistance, she

felt more confident about her appearance. There was beach casual, and then there was beach grunge. Even on her morning beach runs, she liked to look fresh and somewhat coordinated.

Crown Island was a small town, and appearances were part of her job. Who would hire a disheveled, ill-kempt designer for their home or business?

Appearances mattered.

When Deb stepped inside, a familiar voice rang out.

“Look who’s gracing us with her presence. Hello, princess.” Didier, the cafe’s owner, looked up from his reservation book with a grin that creased the corners of his eyes.

His salt-and-pepper beard and easy manner made him a favorite among the island’s residents. He’d arrived from Switzerland to take surfing lessons and fell in love with the island.

“It’s good to see you,” she said, bestowing the customary double kisses on his cheeks, plus an extra one because they were old friends.

“Are you meeting someone?” he asked.

“A man named Matteo. He’s not from here.”

Happi, the bartender, appeared beside Didier with a knowing smile. “Probably the wine guy.”

Happi’s auburn hair was twisted into a bun, and her short-sleeved blouse revealed intricate tattoos on one arm that chronicled her volunteer work through Central and South America.

Happi nodded toward a man on the patio. “He’s been nursing a fine glass of wine for a while. He was polite and slid a nice tip discreetly across the bar.” She paused. “Is this business or personal?”

“My sister-in-law set me up with him. She met him on the ferry.”

Didier stroked his beard. “Do you want me to keep an eye out for you?”

“I can handle myself, but thanks.” Deb appreciated their concern. “One drink, then I’m going home.”

“Sure you are.” Happi’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

Deb followed Happi through the restaurant, past tables of diners and a pianist playing off to one side where people were dancing. A man at a table on the patio stood as they approached, and Deb was pleasantly surprised.

Matteo’s effortless elegance suggested expensive tastes and a life of extensive travel, but he wore it lightly. His linen shirt was perfectly pressed but rolled at the sleeves, and his dark hair sparkled with threads of silver at his temples.

Happi introduced them, and when Deb extended her hand, he took it with care and held her gaze. “I’m honored you’ve joined me, and I apologize for my last-minute invitation.”

“And by text,” she added, teasing him. She detected a subtle, cultured Argentinian accent.

He touched his heart. “Again, my deepest regret. I’m afraid my children introduced me to the habit. With that generation, texting is the main way they communicate. Did I act too impetuously?”

She smiled at his explanation. “I’m here, aren’t I?” Matteo seemed genuine and certainly contrite enough.

“Rachel described you perfectly, though she failed to mention how lovely you are.” He pulled out a chair for her. “She said you are independent, accomplished, and sophisticated.”

Deb smiled to herself. He was certainly complimentary. Maybe a little too much.

Still, she eased into the chair, accepting his compliment with ease. When she was younger, she used to protest. Now, knowing how she worked to maintain her health, she felt she’d earned any compliment that came her way.

“What will you have to drink?” he asked.

She eyed his glass. “Happi tells me you’re having a very fine wine.”

“I’m glad she thinks so.” Matteo signaled Happi, who already had a glass of the same deep red wine poured for her. “This malbec is from my vineyard in Mendoza.”

“Rachel mentioned that.” She swirled the wine and breathed in the bouquet, pleased by its complexity. “Didier is known for his excellent wine selection.”

Watching her, he said, “You might pick up hints of blackberry, violet, and vanilla.”

Deb tasted the wine, noting its smooth finish. “I also detect black cherry and a smoky note.”

“Very impressive.” His eyes sparkled with approval. “Rachel told me you’re an interior designer. That must keep you busy in a place like this.”

“Busy enough.” Deb relaxed despite her earlier wariness. “Between vacation homes and a major hotel renovation, I rarely run out of projects. What brings you to Crown Island besides your wine?”

“Partly business, as I’m exploring distribution opportunities along the coast. And partly pleasure because I needed to relax on a sunny beach.” He gestured toward the ocean. “This seemed like the perfect place to decompress before I continue to Napa for the harvest.”

Deb thought about that. “Having vineyards in both regions means your harvests take place at different times of the year. That’s convenient. Where do you spend most of your time?”

“It’s fairly equal,” Matteo replied. “It’s a benefit to have vineyards in opposite hemispheres, so I split my time between Argentina for malbec harvests and Napa Valley for my cabernet sauvignon.

Add in two ex-wives and four children divided between the locations, and life gets complicated.

Still, we try to be one big happy family. Well, almost.”

“Almost?”

“You know how women are.”

The words slipped out casually, but Deb caught the assumption immediately. “Only some women,” she said, sharpening her tone like a warning. “Just like some men.”

Matteo’s eyes crinkled with amusement. “That was poorly phrased. I deserved that correction.”

His easy acceptance of the rebuke surprised her. Most men would have defended their position or changed the subject. “You did.”

“I’m sorry, but I like that you called me on it.” He leaned forward slightly. “I find intelligence and independence extremely attractive in a woman. Too many women say what they think men want to hear. I don’t. I want to know the real person.”

Deb recognized the subtext of the word independent, which she’d learned probably meant, I’m not looking for anything serious . That suited her just fine. “Honesty makes conversations more interesting,” she added.

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“I’m still learning and adjusting. As a man, I exist between two cultures with different customs, and both have changed a great deal in my lifetime. They’re still evolving. I learn from my children every day.”

“How old are they?”

“They’re all teenagers. Thirteen and fourteen, and eighteen and nineteen.”

“You were busy,” she said, slightly amused.

Embarrassment shadowed his face. “We make so many decisions when we’re young and inexperienced. Or older and foolish. But I love my children fiercely.”

She liked hearing that, yet she had no desire to be his third wife.

They talked easily as the evening progressed.

Matteo was an engaging storyteller with a sense of humor that kept their conversation light.

He described the harvest season in Argentina, the challenges of maintaining relationships across continents, and his children’s adaptation to their father’s nomadic lifestyle.

“They travel with me when they’re out of school, so all four children have grown up together. When they were young, their mothers came with them.”

Deb found that interesting and could imagine the stories and the fireworks. “And how do your ex-wives get along?”

He smoothed a hand across his forehead. “As you might imagine, the relationships were combative in the beginning. Only verbally, that is. I was very generous with them. After the second divorce, Veronica and Angie discovered they had much in common. Now they’re close friends, refer to each other as wives-in-law, and often gang up on me.

This situation humbles me, but I try to see the humor in it. ”

Deb smiled at his story. This wasn’t the first time she’d heard such a thing.

The conversation shifted to her work at the Majestic. “Rachel mentioned the grand opening event. I would be happy to escort you and meet Ryan Kingston, if you don’t mind.”

“For your wine?” she asked.

“Yes, of course. I will stock your cellar for an introduction.”

“If I had one, I’d accept that offer. Still, I’m happy to introduce you, and you’re welcome to attend the event,” Deb replied carefully.

“I should mention I’ll be working that night, so I won’t be available the entire evening.

It would be better if you attended on your own.

Contrary to what my sister-in-law believes, I’m not desperate for a date. ”

“I would never think you would be.” His smile suggested he appreciated her directness. “I’d still love to attend. Perhaps we could share a glass of wine during the evening if your schedule permits.”

“We’ll see.”

When Matteo excused himself, Happi appeared at Deb’s elbow with practiced timing. “Everything okay over here? He seems charming enough, but you know how I watch out for women.”

“He’s harmless,” Deb assured her. “Good manners, interesting conversation. Nothing complicated. This visit is just business for him.”

“Not the way he’s looking at you.” Happi refilled their water glasses. “Still, he has nice manners. I always notice that. So does Didier. We think Matteo passes the test.”

Deb smiled at their attentiveness. “There are other tests, too.”

When Matteo returned, he glanced at his watch. “You have an early morning. I don’t want to keep you too late.”

He had already paid the bill, so he walked with her outside. When she approached her bicycle, his reaction was immediate.

Concern etched his face. “You cannot ride home in the dark. How far do you have to go?”

“This is Crown Island. Nothing is very far, and I’ve been riding my bike around here since I was a child. It’s quite safe, and it’s good exercise.”

Without another word, Matteo lifted her bike and deposited it in the backseat of his

convertible with surprising ease.

He opened the passenger door with a slight bow. “I cannot in good conscience let you ride home alone. And I promise to leave you at your front door like a proper gentleman.”

The gesture was so unexpected and genuinely courteous that Deb slid into the passenger seat without protesting.

“I live on Hibiscus Heights. Take the first right, then follow my directions.”

The short drive passed in comfortable conversation about the island’s history and her family’s long ties to the community. True to his word, Matteo retrieved her bicycle when they reached her house and walked her to the front door.

“I won’t ask to come in.” He took her hand and feathered his lips across her knuckles in a charming gesture. “May I call you again soon?”

His tone was hopeful but not presumptuous, interesting yet transparent in his business desire. That made her reconsider her usual deflection tactics and agree.

He waited until she’d unlocked her front door.

As his taillights disappeared down the street, Deb stood in her doorway wrestling with familiar doubts.

Should she invest time into someone she knew had no intention of staying?

This was a well-defined pattern in her romantic life.

She’d had plenty of temporary connections with men whose lives inevitably pulled

them elsewhere.

Maybe temporary didn't have to be meaningless. Perhaps she was overthinking what had been a pleasant evening with an interesting man who understood the situation as well as she did.

No one would fool the other.

The house was quiet except for the flap of the doggie door. Duke sniffed her hands while she greeted him, sensing Matteo.

"Don't worry, he's no match for you."

As if relieved, Duke happily licked her face.

She drew fresh water for him from the faucet. As the water ran, she watched the distant lighthouse on the far, dark cliffside of the island flashing its distinctive light characteristics, warning mariners of the rocky point.

Her internal warning system was just as well-honed and modulated.

Whether anything would come of her meeting with Matteo remained to be seen, but for the first time in months, Deb had enjoyed a man's company without calculating exit strategies or managing expectations.

That was progress enough for one evening. Tomorrow would be another day and another challenge, according to her brother.

Lunch with the Hunts. She wondered why David had warned her.

Just then, her phone vibrated, and she glanced down. A text message from Rachel

floated across the screen.

It read, So, how did it go? Will you be the next Mrs. Matteo?

Deb laughed to herself as she tapped out a reply. You know me...we might elope this weekend!

She wondered how far that bit of gossip would go. Maybe that would slow the well-meaning people in her life. She loved them, but she was tired of people asking why she'd never married or had children.

As if those were solely her decisions. For one of her friends, being child-free was a conscious choice Deb respected, though her situation was different.

Feeling exhausted, she patted her thigh for Duke to follow her to the bedroom.

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“Special delivery,” Deb called out.

Balancing an iced mocha java for April and trying not to spill it on her white dress, she opened the back door to the Crown Island Historical Society.

April looked up and smiled. She was with a customer.

The new Historical Society occupied a former dance hall on the hotel’s property. Every time Deb visited, April had added or changed the decor or merchandise mix. This time, Deb noticed crystal-accented ceiling fans circulating the ocean breeze from open windows.

Deb was impressed with how April had taken advantage of a favorable lease rate negotiated before Ryan acquired the hotel. She’d also raised donations for the renovation, which Deb had overseen for her. Her friend was living the life she’d dreamed of now.

Deb’s heeled sandals tapped on the original wood floor as she made her way toward April and a woman who was making a purchase.

She placed the iced coffee on the table behind April.

“Don’t go anywhere,” April said. “We need to talk.”

Deb had a little time before she had to meet David and their potential new clients, so she waited, gazing around the welcoming space.

The enlarged windows she'd selected for April flooded the space with sunshine.

New artwork by local artists lined the walls.

April had added walking tours with audio recordings, available to rent for a modest donation, as well as other locally crafted gifts and souvenirs.

Deb's favorites were the fresh beach candles and fringed patio umbrellas. April had placed one over a table and chairs on the walkway in front with a sign that read, Handcrafted Umbrellas Now on Sale!

Smart display , Deb thought.

When April finished ringing up the customer's purchase of a Crown Island historical guide, she picked up the cool beverage, her face shining with excitement.

"Thanks for the coffee. Rachel told me your date was incredible last night. What's this about eloping?"

"I was only joking about that," Deb replied, surprised that her sister-in-law was already spreading the word. She told April about Matteo's ex-wives and children and how he split his time.

Looking surprised, April sipped her coffee. "Sounds complicated."

"I'm used to it. At our age, everyone has a past."

"Guess that applies to me, too."

"You were always a prize," Deb said. "I'm sure our meeting was more of a business deal to him. He wants to pitch his wine to Ryan, and he saw an opportunity. I can't

fault him for that because his wine is excellent, and he believes in it. Plus, he has a lot of people to support.”

April sighed in disappointment. “What makes you think that’s all it was?”

“Because that’s essentially what he said. But he was interesting, good looking, and very well mannered.”

“Since when don’t you like that?” April expelled a puff of air. “Remember when you told me to update my style and go for my dreams?”

“You were starting a new chapter in your life. I’m hardly in the same situation. In my case, I just keep writing the same chapter, and I know how it ends, all too well.” That reminded Deb of one of her favorite songs. She hummed as she picked up a candle.

April shook her head. “When did you become so cynical?”

“Ouch.” That comment hit Deb hard, especially from her closest friend.

“I call it being practical. I’ve seen a lot more than you have.

And frankly, I’m happy on my own. I don’t know why you and Rachel are so concerned about my personal life.

And that goes for Ella, too, although I know she has good intentions. ”

April arched an eyebrow. “If you’re so happy by yourself, why are you still agreeing to meet men for a glass of wine after dinner?”

Good question , Deb thought. “You know how persistent Rachel can be.”

April just shook her head, clearly seeing through that excuse.

Deb let out a breath. The real reason she agreed?

There was still an infinitesimal chance that someday she might meet her soulmate, which sounded so juvenile for a woman her age that she couldn't even say it. She longed for that experience and those feelings again. That's why dating apps were filled with people over forty.

"With all your experience, you think you know people," April said, tidying the counter. "What if Matteo is just a nice guy who made a couple of mistakes when he was younger and is now trying to do his best for everyone involved?"

"He probably is." Deb picked up a shell and turned it over.

"So what if Matteo wants to meet Ryan? I'm happy to introduce them if he has something to offer the Majestic. Are you still afraid of getting hurt?"

"That's not fair," Deb replied. "That was a long time ago."

"I don't understand you. It sounds like this guy has a fabulous lifestyle. You'd love that."

Deb picked up a spiral conch shell and held it to her ear. "As kids, we thought we could hear the ocean inside. But then I learned this shape acts as a natural amplifier, particularly for low-range ambient sounds. See? I know too much now. The magic is gone."

"You're stalling," April said, taking the shell from her. "Come on, what's the matter with you?"

“Here’s what’s wrong,” Deb said slowly. “Do you know that warm feeling you get when you look at Ryan? When he touches your hand or surprises you?”

“Of course, that’s called love.”

“Well, I don’t feel it. Matteo is nice, but I don’t feel the thrill like you do. I see how your eyes brighten and your face flushes. Those are physiological reactions, and I simply don’t have them.”

“Ever?” April’s lips parted with curiosity, and she seemed perplexed. “There are different types of love, like those that grow from friendship.”

Deb shook her head, ignoring April’s initial question. “Love is like choosing the right design elements for a room. You instinctively know when it’s right. I don’t need a friendly roommate. I have Duke, and he makes me happy enough.”

“But if?—”

Deb clasped April’s hands. “Do we have to talk about this? Honestly, it’s a little painful, and I wish people would think before asking me personal questions to satisfy their selfish curiosity. I don’t mean you,” she added quickly. “I know your concern comes from a genuine place of love.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you.” April bit her lip.

Deb squeezed her hands in reassurance. “It wasn’t only you. But can you understand why I was upset?”

April nodded. “You said that I’m in love with love. Maybe a little, but I only want to share that magic with those I love most.”

“Whether I want someone in my life or not is my choice and my decision,” Deb said. “I’ve worked hard and earned the right to treat myself well. I don’t need to compromise my standards for anyone. Surely you can understand that.”

April sipped her mocha java. “I love Ryan, and he’s also my best friend.

It’s more than that, though.” Her eyes shimmered with happiness.

“We’re better together because we raise each other to better versions of ourselves.

We’re committed, and I know he’s the one for me.

So, I understand what you mean about instinctively knowing. ”

Deb was surprised; she’d never heard April talk about her first husband like that. “Are you sure you’re not moving too fast?”

“I’ve considered that,” April admitted. “But we’re so in sync with each other. We’re planning for our future and creating it together. Ryan respects my responsibilities to my family, and he encourages my dreams. I never thought I’d say this, but in retrospect, Calvin did me a huge favor.”

Deb saw something shift in April’s expression. “Wait a minute, are you engaged?”

April only smiled. “We’re going in that direction, but I don’t know if we’ll formalize it like that. I’ll let you know.”

Realizing this was a massive step for her friend, Deb embraced her. “Maybe you’re the one eloping. If you do, you have my blessing. I only want what’s best for you.”

“And that’s what I want for you,” April said, sipping her coffee.

“That’s why I’m being honest with you. You’ve never held back on pursuing your career dreams. And you’ve always wanted a real connection with someone.

Now that I have that, I can see what was missing all along.

Don’t hold yourself back because you expect men to let you down. Not all of them do.”

Deb was quiet for a moment, considering this. “There are some good guys out there, and Matteo might be one of them. But you said yourself that besides respect and shared goals, there must be an element of magic, a spark of love. That’s not easy to find, especially at my age.”

“You’re an amazing woman at any age.”

“I know that, but the fact that we qualify that statement shows how we’re conditioned.

” Deb shook her head. “It’s not just me.

The single-male inventory level is lower in our age bracket.

Here on the island, it’s even lower for me.

I’ve known most of the guys around here for years, and there’s never been any unrequited love.

I don’t need a marriage of convenience. I have?—”

“Duke, I know.” April chuckled. “Just try to be open to possibilities. The universe can bring people and relationships together in the most unexpected ways. I never

thought I'd ever return to Crown Island or find love here. What if your destiny comes cloaked in coincidence?"

"It would have to be," Deb said, laughing. "But you and your mother must promise me that if I don't find a man to share my life with, you'll let this go and respect my decision."

April started to speak. "You can't just give up."

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“I mean it,” Deb said, her deepest feelings rising to the surface.

“Being happily independent is also a choice. Plenty of people live great lives on their own, not by default, but because they choose to. My friends and family—as irritating as they might be at times—are part of what makes me happy to be alive. But when you and your mother dwell on my finding Mr. Right, what I hear is that I’m incomplete or inadequate unless I’m coupled up.

That’s cultural conditioning, and we’re way too smart for that now. ”

There, she’d said it. Everything she’d been holding back. Deb pressed her lips together.

Taking this in, April nodded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think about how you might interpret what we said, but I understand now. I’ll talk to Mom, and we’ll respect whatever decisions you make.”

Deb hugged her again. “I love you for that. Now, if only I could get through to Rachel.”

At lunchtime, Deb pulled into the parking area at the sushi restaurant on the beach.

As she got out and tucked her portfolio under her arm, she took a moment to appreciate the Rockin’ Roll’s flamingo-pink exterior, a vibrant splash of color she’d helped the owner choose.

Next to the rich blue shades of the sea and sky, the restaurant stood out.

The converted beach house restaurant buzzed with locals and tourists. The owner, Kaito, greeted her with his characteristic grin and held out his arms to her.

She greeted him warmly and asked, “Has my brother David arrived yet?”

Kaito nodded toward the deck. “He’s with some important-looking folks at your favorite table.”

After saying hello to several friends and clients at the restaurant, she saw David on the deck with a couple about her age.

David stood as she approached and introduced her to Rob and Ellen Hunt. “We’re discussing their vision for their beach house.”

“We’ve heard such wonderful things about your work,” Ellen said, extending her hand to Deb. Heavy gold and diamond-encrusted bracelets encircled her wrists. “I love your approach at the Majestic. The way you incorporated the original antique furnishings and fixtures was pure genius.”

“Thank you,” Deb said, greeting her. “What brings you to Crown Island?”

Rob replied, “Friends have homes here.”

“Will you use the home in the summer, or are you snowbirds?”

“Both, I hope,” Ellen replied. “I’m from the Bay Area, and my family spent summers here when I was growing up.

I’ve always wanted to return. Now that our friends are here, it will be a lot of fun.

And since we live in Chicago now, we also need a place to escape the dead of winter.

We can be summer people as well as snowbirds. ”

“Don’t get it in your head that we’re leaving Chicago,” Rob replied with a sharp edge to his words.

“Of course not,” Ellen replied lightly, taking his hand as if to appease him.

Deb tried to place her among the summer families she remembered from her youth but couldn’t. Then again, she didn’t want to think too much about that. Second homeowners on the island had different priorities than locals.

Still, Deb made most of her living from them.

“Tell me about your vision for the house.” She opened her portfolio on the table.

“We want something impressive yet comfortable for entertaining by the beach,” Ellen began, her voice animated.

“I love an airy coastal feel with gardens that are an extension of the home. I want to incorporate antiques and pieces we’ve found on our travels.

This home should tell a story. Like the Majestic does. I love what you did there.”

David nodded with approval as he listened. “My sister excels at that.”

Deb appreciated her brother’s recognition of her skills. “I specialize in creating elements of surprise that reflect your personality. Most people have cherished pieces they want to retain or showcase.”

“We prefer clean, modern lines,” Rob interrupted. “None of that cluttered shabby-chic junk.”

The tension at the table shifted immediately. Ellen's smile tightened. "Our primary home is quite spare. Lots of concrete on the floors and walls. Rob, we discussed this?—"

"Doesn't mean I agreed to turn our home into a flea market."

As the couple's fundamental disagreement emerged, Deb darted a glance at her brother.

"You promised I could decorate this one," Ellen said.

"And you like modern lines," Rob shot back. "Or so you said when we met."

Ellen's face reddened. "That was then. I want something more relaxing now."

"Are you saying I need to relax?" Rob jabbed a finger at her. "You're the one who's on medication for anxiety."

David lowered his eyes.

This is what he meant, she thought, struggling to maintain her professional composure while the couple argued. She'd worked with challenging clients before, but this level of opposition would make any project a nightmare.

Those two needed a marriage counselor. Pity the person who took them on.

"Perhaps we could find a middle ground," Deb suggested diplomatically. "Modern architecture with carefully curated vintage pieces?—"

"See? She understands," Ellen said triumphantly.

David quickly nodded. “We can work with that vision.”

“I’m the one writing the check, so what I say goes.” Rob’s expression remained set. “We want to move quickly on this. Can you start right away?”

“I’m committed to the Majestic Hotel renovation until after the opening,” Deb replied. “But I could work up an estimate and preliminary designs.”

Ellen perked up. “We heard about the big fundraising event. Can you get us in? We’d love to be part of that scene.”

“I’m sure you’d be welcome,” Deb said. “It’s a community fundraiser.”

Rob’s enthusiasm dimmed. “Look, we want to check this box while we’re here, and you’re David’s sister. That counts for something. Interior designers are notoriously fickle. Usually bored housewives, am I right?”

Beside her, David coughed. “That’s not the case with Deb.”

“Which is why we’re here,” Ellen said, shooting a look at her husband.

Rob’s dismissive manner irritated Deb. She’d majored in design and took classes in drafting and construction management, but she’d heard that opinion before.

She leaned back in her chair and met David’s uncomfortable gaze. A year ago, she might have jumped at any high-end residential project. Now, with her business thriving and opportunities on the horizon, she had choices.

“I’ll consider the project,” she said evenly. “But I’ll be honest with you. I don’t take on jobs where couples have fundamentally incompatible visions. It never ends well for anyone.”

The Hunts exchanged a look of surprise. Deb closed her portfolio, grateful that she could be selective. The event was drawing near, and she wanted to keep her schedule open in case the right opportunity presented itself.

Some clients weren't worth the headaches, no matter how impressive the number on the check.

She didn't envy David this job, though she understood that he had a family to support. She would speak to him later, but for now, her business here was finished. Fortunately, they hadn't ordered yet. She reached for her purse.

Rob noticed this. "What are you doing?"

Deb rose from her chair. "I have another meeting, but I'm glad we had a chance to talk."

Before her brother could say anything—and he would say plenty later—she escaped through the restaurant and headed to her car.

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“ I always loved the approach to Crown Island,” Kitty said, her eyes sparkling. She smoothed her silver hair against the ocean breeze and shivered.

The wind off the water was chilly, even in the summer. Grant draped his lightweight jacket around her shoulders. “Would you be more comfortable inside?”

“I would be. You stay out here, though. It’s a mesmerizing sight.”

The ferry’s engine hummed beneath Grant’s feet as Crown Island emerged through the morning haze. He leaned against the railing, enjoying the salt spray mist on his face.

As they cleared the marine layer, the island spread before him in a kaleidoscope of colors.

Sherbet-painted houses climbed the hillsides, palm trees swayed against the bluest of skies, and rising above it all, the Majestic Hotel.

Even from this distance, the Victorian-era structure commanded attention with its red-tiled roof and white clapboard siding gleaming in the California sun.

His camera bag sat at his feet, but he resisted the urge to start shooting, even though a gallery in Miami had already expressed interest in an island-themed collection. First, he wanted to see the place where his father had spent his happiest years.

And many of his, too.

Sometimes, Grant wondered why he'd never returned. He knew the answer, though.

Beside him, a young couple were taking photos. They seemed excited about visiting Crown Island.

"First visit?" he asked.

They nodded. "It's our honeymoon," the young woman said.

Grant gestured to her mobile phone. "Would you like a photo?"

"We'd love that, thanks." She handed him her phone and posed with her beaming husband.

Grant adjusted a couple of settings in the camera app and framed the pair with the hotel visible in the background. Nature photography was his specialty, but he liked to see people smile, and they usually did for photographs.

After snapping a few shots, he said, "That's great. Now turn slightly toward each other and dip your chins." He took a few more before handing the phone back to the young woman.

She opened the photos and stared with delight. "Wow, these look professional."

Grant grinned at that. "They should," he added with a wink. "Have a great time on the island. It's a special place."

He cut through the crowd to the cabin. His mother sat beside a window seat, staring out.

A woman's voice rang out behind him. "Why, Grant Emerson, what are you doing

here? Ellen Hunt, in case you forgot.”

He looked up, surprised to see her. She had remarried and moved to Chicago a few years ago. But here she was, looking like she’d just stepped from a salon. Not a hair was out of place on a sea-going ferry. She must use industrial-strength hairspray.

He stood to offer her his seat. “We needed a break and thought we’d spend it here with family like we used to. You remember my mother?”

“Of course.” She raised her voice. “How are you?”

Grant winced at Ellen’s assumption that his mother was hard of hearing.

Nevertheless, Kitty graciously extended her hand. “Healthy enough to travel, thank goodness. And my hearing is fine, dear. What brings you here?”

“Rob and I decided to build a beach house on the island. He says it’s a good investment, and honestly, we need a change of scenery. I was on the mainland looking for interior designers. My husband doesn’t have time for that sort of thing.” Ellen turned to Grant. “Is your sister joining you?”

“She’s already here,” he replied.

“And the boys?”

“They’re with her as well.”

A trace of sadness filled Ellen’s face. Before she could say anything, Grant asked, “How is the building process?”

She waved a diamond-studded hand. “Slower than Rob would like. He’s impossibly

difficult about every detail, and we're not really in sync. On the design, I mean."

"Of course," Kitty said, inclining her head.

Grant remembered Rob as controlling and dismissive. Ellen was a genuinely nice person, but he thought she'd married on the rebound after her divorce. "I'm sure it will come together for you. The island is a beautiful place to build."

"Oh, it is. Though finding the right team to do it has been a nightmare."

"Until your beach house is ready, where are you staying?" Kitty asked.

"We're at the Majestic. And you?"

"We are as well," Kitty replied.

"I could give you a ride," Ellen said. "I left my rental car by the ferry ramp."

Grant glanced at his mother, who nodded. "We'd planned on taking a taxi, but we would appreciate that."

Grant gathered their bags and stepped from the ferry. The island had changed little, and memories rushed back. The Ferry Cafe still stood nearby, although it now looked more upscale with enlarged patios.

They got into the car, and Ellen continued talking as they drove toward the village. To one side was a trail that led to a steep hill where he remembered many people hiked and biked. He imagined he could get some good shots of the vivid neighborhoods from that vantage point.

Suddenly, he remembered. Locals called that hill the Queen's Flight.

Continuing, they passed a retro diner now called Cuppa Jo's. He used to take a special date there. Recalling those good times, he wondered if they still had live music.

"That's a good place for breakfast and burgers," Ellen said, gesturing to the diner. "Not in the same league as Tiburon or Sausalito, but decent in its way."

His mother glanced at him but said nothing. Did she remember, too? Or was she amused by Ellen?

A few minutes later, Ellen pulled under the Majestic's porte-cochère entry. "They've just renovated it, and I had lunch with the interior designer. Well, sort of."

Kitty raised her brow at that but made no comment.

Grant gazed around. The hotel rose before them in all its vintage glory, with intricate gingerbread trim and wide verandas wrapping around multiple stories. Bougainvillea cascaded from planters, and tropical landscaping softened the grandeur without diminishing it.

"The hotel is spectacular now, isn't it?" Ellen picked up her expensive designer purse. "I love what the interior designer did inside, although Rob hates the antiques. Still, we spoke to her about our beach house."

"Might you hire her for your project?" Kitty asked, looking interested.

Ellen seemed dejected. "Sadly, I don't think so. She's terribly busy, and we don't have time to wait."

"I can imagine," Kitty said.

Grant could hardly wait to go in. “Thank you for the ride. Give our best to Rob.”

“We should have dinner while you’re here,” Ellen said as she handed the keys to the valet attendant. “I’m running late, and Rob will be upset, but I’ll call you.”

Another attendant opened the door for his mother, and Grant swung out to assist her with her carry-on bag. He waited as Ellen hurried away.

“Sounds like her marriage is already in trouble,” his mother said under her breath.

As much as Grant didn’t like to judge, he added, “I don’t think she knew him long enough. Maybe they’re still adjusting.”

“Or maybe she made a mistake.” She patted his hand. “I’m glad you didn’t rush into anything afterward.”

Sometimes, he wished he had met someone. Would that have lessened the pain he’d gone through? Probably not, and he’d had no interest in replacing his beloved wife. Even now, when well-meaning friends broached the subject, citing his children’s need for a mother, he changed the subject.

Many women managed children on their own. Why did people think a man couldn’t? Yet, being a single parent wasn’t easy for women or men.

A robust gentleman of his mother’s age greeted them at the door. His bright tangerine jacket and broad smile were impossible to miss.

“Welcome to the Majestic. First time visiting with us?”

“First time in many years,” Kitty replied. “Although we used to come every summer. Whitley, isn’t it?”

His eyes lit. “Yes, ma’am. I’m the general manager. Welcome back.”

“We’re eager to see your changes,” Grant said.

“We have many improvements,” Whitley said. “However, I think you’ll find the ambiance just as relaxing as it’s always been.”

Grant could see that.

The soaring entry and lobby area featured the original wood paneling, now restored to warm honey tones that brought out the natural wood grains he found so intriguing. He’d once shot an entire series on the California redwood forests. That collection was immensely popular.

The bronze caged elevator Grant recalled looked like it had been polished and restored, although a red velvet rope indicated it was no longer in use. His gaze traveled up to the coffered ceiling and clerestory windows that flooded the space with sunlight and cast fascinating shadows.

“Oh, my,” Kitty breathed, taking in the Persian rugs and mahogany reception desk. “This is even lovelier than the photographs I saw in the magazine.”

“Coastal Design & Living ?” Whitley asked.

“That’s the one,” Kitty replied. “It came in the mail just yesterday.”

Grant noted the fresh orchids and tropical plants arranged throughout the space.

Someone knew just where to place them. Through the lobby’s far windows, Grant could see a sunny courtyard where guests sipped drinks at wrought-iron tables.

Beyond that, the Pacific Ocean's sun-dappled waves stretched to the horizon.

Kitty's eyes danced with happiness. "I don't know why we waited so long to return."

Grant could think of a few reasons, but he only smiled. Why dwell on the past? He put his arm around his mother's shoulders. "It's good to be back. I'm glad you insisted."

"We shouldn't wait to do what we love," she said. "We both know that all too well."

Whitley chatted about the hotel's services as he escorted them to the front desk. "We can send your luggage up for you if you'd like to go to the cafe or the beach."

"We would appreciate that," Grant said.

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While a front desk clerk checked them in, a woman entering through the courtyard doors drew Grant's attention.

Tall and blond-haired, she strode across the lobby, her cream linen dress flowing around her toned calves.

Something about her bearing and confidence was familiar. She seemed to belong here.

The desk clerk held out their key cards. "You're in rooms 320 and 322, adjoining suites on the third floor."

"Thank you." Grant pocketed the key cards, still watching the woman as she approached the reception desk.

"Ms. Whitaker," the desk clerk said, handing her a pink message slip.

Whitaker . Grant's pulse quickened as the name summoned memories. He touched the old photo still in his pocket.

Could it be her?

But before he could get a better look, the woman hurried away and disappeared behind a door.

His mother didn't seem to notice. Did she remember?

“Someone will bring your luggage up shortly,” the desk clerk said.

“Ask them to take special care with the canvas tote bag,” Grant said, concerned it could be misplaced. “It contains someone—or something—very important to us.”

“Jock always hated getting lost,” Kitty said with a smile.

The desk clerk immediately understood. “We look after all our guests.”

Grant nodded in appreciation. His father’s ashes were traveling in a custom urn tucked inside Jock’s monogrammed canvas bag he often took sailing. It had seemed fitting to them. His Dad had been adamant about not being put in the ground. He’d always loved sailing with the wind.

“One more thing,” Grant added. “We’re looking for some family members who are already here.”

“Are they expecting you?”

“We thought we’d surprise them.” Grant gave his sister’s name. “Can you give us their room number?”

The clerk looked apologetic. “I’m sorry, but we can’t give out that information due to privacy reasons. I can take a message, or you can call them on their personal phone.”

“That’s alright. We’ll do that.”

Once assured their bags would be safely transported to the room, Kitty said, “We should find your sister. Shall I call her?”

Grant grinned as he thought how surprised they’d all be. “Let’s look around first. It’s

lunchtime. Maybe we should start at the cafe and the beach.”

He’d spoken to his kids this morning before leaving for the airport, and it didn’t seem like they had any plans today. He suspected they’d be somewhere on site, and he knew they were always hungry.

They walked through the wide hallway leading to the cafe, which opened onto the beach.

“One moment, please.” Kitty paused and reached into her bag for the sun hat she’d packed. “I must protect my skin these days. So should you.”

“Doctor’s orders, I know.” His mother’s dermatologist had removed a few suspicious spots from her face last year, but fortunately, they weren’t of grave concern. Still, he understood her need for protection.

Once she’d secured her hat, they stepped outside onto the sunny patio.

“There they are.” Grant broke into a broad grin and touched his mother’s arm, nodding toward a table.

Two boys sat hunched over enormous burgers and a shared plate of fries. The older one was clearly in charge, while the younger one with shaggy sun-bleached hair bounced in his chair.

Grant’s heart filled with love. He crossed the space in long strides until he stood beside their table, barely able to contain himself.

Both boys looked up, and their faces transformed with joy. “Dad!” they shouted in unison, scrambling from their chairs and throwing their arms around him.

Grant laughed and swept them into a fierce hug, bursting with emotion. His sons smelled of sweet sunshine and sea water.

Grinning, Grant said, “Hey, boys. Your grandmother and I thought we’d surprise you.”

Teddy launched himself at his grandmother with equal enthusiasm.

“Look how tall you’ve become,” Kitty marveled, holding both boys at arm’s length. “I swear you’ve grown in the last week. Must be all the hamburgers and fries.”

Before they could sit down, Whitley stopped to introduce them to the chef. While Kitty and Chef Gianna discussed the new menu, Grant sat down and pulled Teddy onto his lap.

“Where’s your Aunt Jen?”

“Getting a massage,” Teddy replied.

“She tells us to order whatever we want for lunch as long as we have the room card,” Mason added.

Teddy turned a wide-eyed look to his brother. “We can’t forget that.”

Grant wondered what that was about, but he didn’t care. He’d take care of their bill with his sister.

He’d missed all of this. The easy chatter, the way Teddy leaned into him, and Mason’s natural leadership—all the small details about his boys that made up the daily routine of being their father.

If only their mother could see them now.

He smiled to himself. He liked to think maybe Nicole could.

Movement in his peripheral vision made him glance to the entry, where the woman he'd seen reappeared. As quickly as she spotted her, she moved on.

His curiosity kicked in. Could it be her?

He remembered the Whitaker family was full of boys, so there had to be quite a few with that name on the island. She was probably one of the brothers' wives, he decided, tempering his thoughts.

When his mother joined them at the table, Grant stood to pull out her chair, just as his father always had.

Once Kitty sat down, he turned his attention back to his sons. "Tell me everything. How's the island? Has your aunt arranged any lessons for you?" He'd asked her to, but Jen could be forgetful. She was in new-marriage bliss.

Mason spoke between bites of his fries. "We have surfing lessons after lunch."

Teddy bounced in his chair. "We've been riding bikes on the beach and playing frisbee with Deb's dog. We got ice cream, too."

"Your father used to do all that as well," Kitty said, smiling. "I'm glad you're making friends."

Grant relaxed, letting their voices wash over him. For the first time in months, the tight knot in his chest began to loosen. Here, with his boys on the island his family loved, his perspective was already shifting.

This was just the beginning for him. He needed to get out among people and start doing the things he used to love. Even though the boys kept him busy, being on his own felt lonely.

Grant tousled Teddy's hair. "Who's up for sailing in a few days?"

Mason grinned and nodded while Teddy wiggled with excitement.

"Looks like that's settled," Kitty said, laughing. "We also have another important excursion on a yacht planned. I'll tell you all about it later."

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“Are you sure there’s no way to get my shipment any sooner?” Sitting in an extra room in the executive offices, Deb clutched the phone. Her stomach growled so loud she hit mute while her contact spoke.

She needed these vintage surfboards to arrive for the grand reopening.

They had belonged to famous early surfers who’d stayed at the Majestic and ridden the waves around the island.

The boards were part of the hotel’s history, so she had tracked them to a collector in the South Pacific.

He’d recently passed away, and his daughter had been eager to sell them.

The surfboards would serve as part of her visual collection celebrating the history of the Majestic Hotel.

Editors, writers, and photographers from surfing magazines and websites would be at the event.

Maileah planned to auction one board at the event, much like the successful broken boards fundraiser she’d held a few months ago.

Surfing events hosted on the island drew large crowds to the hotel.

The shipping manager paused. “Are you still there?”

Deb unmuted the phone. “I’m here.”

“The package is on its way, but the problem will be getting it through your customs.”

“I’ll see what I can do on my side. I know this was short notice, so I appreciate you working with me.”

The surfboards were important, but so were many other things.

A local artist, working on a custom seascape painting that was to be an essential focal piece, had been rear-ended by a texting tourist. She’d suffered a whiplash and injury to her wrists.

When she was finally able to work again, her progress slowed due to the excruciating pain.

Deb didn’t want to push the artist, but she had to put a temporary piece in that spot that would look good without breaking her budget.

Deb drummed her fingers on the desk. She also needed to resolve issues with the new spa decor.

Standing, she peered from the window. She spotted Mason and Teddy on surfboards, paddling in the small waves with an instructor. They looked so adorable trying to stay on their boards. After they’d talked about surfing, she’d given them the name of an instructor Sailor recommended.

It seemed their aunt approved of the lessons. Deb smiled at their antics.

Mason had been following Sailor and his surfing career, so he was thrilled to learn to surf. Sailor promised he’d drop by and surprise them.

A man walked to the water's edge and waved at the boys. She'd seen him earlier with the boys when she passed by the terrace cafe on her way back to the office. Presumably, this was their father.

The ogre. Watching him, she folded her arms in disgust.

She recalled how worried the boys were about their father discovering their mistakes. There had to be an explanation behind that.

However, it wasn't her place to step in unless she saw a dangerous situation. She would keep her eyes open.

After what she'd gleaned about him, she had no desire to meet the man. Maybe she'd see the boys on their own around the hotel. She wondered how long they would stay now.

She would miss Teddy and Mason when they left. Still, they were part of the summer crowd, and Deb understood the limitations to continuing friendships.

When she was younger, many of her friends had their hearts broken after their summer romances ended without a word.

Ghosted , as Maileah and Junie would say.

She ran her hands over her forehead, dispelling the memories.

Her stomach growled again, and she remembered she'd skipped breakfast to meet a man who specialized in antique refurbishment. Some of the original chairs were unstable, and while they wanted to keep them, they couldn't risk a guest injury if a chair collapsed.

But she had to eat.

Deb picked up the phone again. “Hi, Kelsey. I want to place a lunch order, but I don’t need a table.”

“Would you like that delivered, or will you pick it up?”

Delivery was tempting, but she needed to step away from her desk. “Make it to-go, please.”

Walking to the cafe would help her shake off her frustration about the delays in surfboards, artwork, and furniture. If she cleared her mind, she could focus on solutions.

But not on an empty stomach.

Deb picked up her purse and left the executive offices. The hotel corridors were quiet this time of day, with most guests either eating, enjoying the beach, or exploring the island.

She’d been so caught up in the renovation details she’d barely taken time for herself lately. She missed her run with Duke again today, and he’d let her know he wasn’t happy about it.

As she approached the ladies’ room on the lower level near the cafe, lounge, and ballroom, Deb decided to freshen up. Her food probably wasn’t ready yet.

Inside, she found the lounge empty. She’d designed this space like a luxurious living room with a grouping of marine-blue chairs and blue-and-white striped sofas. Fresh tropical plants were thriving under dedicated grow lights.

She put her purse down, enjoying the respite she'd created here.

In keeping with the original design, she'd chosen new marble vanities and countertops, along with soft lighting that wasn't too harsh but still bright enough.

In front of the large mirrors, a tray of complimentary items included hairspray, miniature sewing kits, and other personal care items. Women could touch up their makeup, make emergency clothing repairs, or nurse their babies in private.

She also suggested converting a neighboring supply closet during the renovation to add more women's bathroom stalls. That had sparked an initial battle with Ryan.

This is a luxury resort for all guests , she argued.

Knox and Whitley supported her on the idea. And thankfully, when several women complained on social media about endless bathroom lines at a wedding reception, Ryan agreed.

Now, the marketing department touted these high-end features in their marketing for weddings and parties. To Ryan's surprise, they'd won some bookings with their attention to detail for women. Magazines showcased the luxuriously decorated lounge and celebrated the extra facilities.

Deb knew small details often created a point of difference in the luxury hotel market.

Satisfied with how the lounge had turned out, she opened her purse and leaned toward the mirror, studying her reflection. Faint shadows appeared under her eyes. The stress of the grand opening preparations was wearing on her.

Deb dabbed on concealer and brushed her hair.

Just then, the door swung open behind her.

A woman entered, carrying herself with poise. Over her arm hung a canvas beach bag with a sun hat folded into it. Her brightly printed floral shift and turquoise jewelry looked well made.

The woman paused, smiling at Deb in surprise. "Hello, there."

"Are you enjoying yourself today?" Deb asked, making pleasant conversation.

"It's hard not to at the Majestic." Large sunglasses obscured the woman's face. She removed them as she approached the mirror.

She seemed vaguely familiar, but Deb saw many guests every day. She offered a polite nod.

"You're Deb Whitaker, aren't you?"

Deb turned, surprised. "Yes, I am."

"I thought so." The woman's smile widened. "I saw the article about the Majestic in Coastal Design & Living . Your design work is quite impressive."

"Thank you. I'm glad you're enjoying it." A slight flush of pride filled her. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

The woman gave her an enigmatic smile. "Call me Kitty."

Deb balked at the name. It couldn't be , she thought. Yet, there was something about the woman that tugged at her memory. She'd met so many people here over the years.

Kitty leaned toward the mirror, brushing her thick silver hair into soft waves.

“Your hair is so lovely,” Deb said, continuing the polite conversation.

“It’s natural. I finally decided to embrace the inevitable.” Kitty’s eyes lingered on Deb with interest. “What I admire most is how you retained the original ambiance.”

Kitty’s engaging manner put Deb at ease. “Maintaining the character of a hotel so many people love was important. I wanted to honor the hotel’s history while bringing in modern comforts.”

“From what I’ve seen, you’ve succeeded admirably.” Kitty opened a compact and dabbed powder on her nose and cheeks. “What’s next after this?”

“This project has been all consuming, so I haven’t had a chance to line up my next engagement.” She didn’t count David’s clients.

After touching up her lipstick, Kitty dropped the golden tube into her purse. “The article mentioned you also work with high-end residences.”

“I’ve done a lot of work here on the island.”

Kitty raised an eyebrow. “I might have a project for you. Are you having lunch in the cafe today?”

When Deb hesitated, Kitty added, “You’re welcome to join us at our table. I’d love to hear more about your work.”

“That’s very kind, but I have work to do. I’m picking up a to-go order.”

“Of course, I understand.” Kitty tucked her compact away. “Is there a place in the

hotel you might recommend for a glass of wine later today?"

"The Library Bar is exquisite," Deb replied. "They have a wonderful selection, and the original mahogany bar is magnificent." She was particularly proud of how that restoration turned out.

Kitty's eyes brightened. "What a good idea. Why not join me at five today?"

Deb inclined her head, thinking about Duke. But this woman was the type she needed to meet for her business. Kitty seemed much more agreeable than the Hunts.

"I'll see you then," Deb replied, smiling.

Kitty beamed at her. "Wonderful. I look forward to it."

Deb's curiosity was piqued. As she headed toward the cafe to pick up her shrimp salad, Deb thought how meeting someone new who appreciated her work was just what she needed.

She lingered at the patio entry, taking care to avoid the man watching his sons on the beach from a table. Kelsey saw her and hurried to her with her order.

"I've already put it on your tab."

"Did you add a tip?"

Kelsey made a face. "This one's on me."

Deb paused and whispered, "How's the boys' father?"

"That's not my table, but I'll let you know if I learn anything. I have my eye on that

one.”

Deb hurried away without detection and made her way toward the spa. Beneath palm trees was a quiet flower-filled patio where she could dine in peace and think through her project challenges. Occasionally, guests were there, but not today.

Relaxing to the peaceful sound of water trickling over smooth river rocks, she opened her lunch and began to eat.

Deb hated to avoid Mason and Teddy, but she didn't trust herself around their father.

She was only halfway through her salad when a guest in a white terrycloth bathrobe wandered out in a blissful state.

“What a relaxing massage,” the woman said as she eased onto a lounge.

Deb put her salad away so the guest could relax. “The therapists are highly trained. Enjoy yourself.”

When she turned a corner, she saw the back of the boys' father again, so she whipped around in another direction. With the way she felt about his behavior with the boys, she couldn't risk running into him.

Whitley frowned on the staff imposing themselves on guests, and if she were ever alone with that man, she'd have a few choice words for him.

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At five o'clock, Deb arrived to find Kitty already seated in the busy bar. The other woman wiggled her fingers in a small wave, looking pleased to see her. Even at Kitty's age, she was attracting her share of attention.

Looking forward to their conversation, Deb started toward her.

The Library Bar at the Majestic was a masterpiece of restoration and one of Deb's favorite historical parts in the hotel. Knox's construction team had taken care to restore the mahogany shelving that lined the walls. The shelves housed leather-bound classics and contemporary bestsellers.

The late afternoon sun sparkled through vintage leaded glass panels, painstakingly restored. She had furnished the bar with chic, comfortable pieces in navy, cream, and ocean blue.

When Deb joined Kitty, the other woman's face lit up. "The work you've done here is remarkable. I've been enjoying all the fascinating details."

"You're very observant," Deb said, smiling at Kitty's perception. She enjoyed working with clients like this. She hoped she'd have the chance.

The bartender, Maxine, nodded at Deb. "It's good to see you again. What will you have?"

"I'm having the signature Majestic cocktail," Kitty said. "Champagne cocktails are my favorites."

“That’s a special one, but I’ll have the mocktail version without alcohol. I still plan to run on the beach with my dog before sunset.”

“Smart choice,” Kitty said. “You’re very disciplined.”

Maxine filled a glass with a blend of juices and fizzy water before adding a twist of lime for Deb. “Enjoy, ladies.”

Kitty raised her glass. “Here’s to living life to the fullest.”

Deb tapped her glass to Kitty’s. “And to new acquaintances.”

They chatted easily, with Kitty asking thoughtful questions about the hotel renovation and Deb’s design philosophy. Deb appreciated Kitty’s genuine interest and lack of pretense.

“What brings you back to Crown Island?” Deb asked.

“I’m considering my options,” Kitty replied. “My husband passed away, and with the children gone, the family home in Tiburon suddenly seems terribly empty.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Deb said sincerely.

Kitty nodded, her silver hair catching the light.

“Thank you. It’s been an adjustment. With all our dinner parties and entertaining, my husband and I lived a big life for many years.

But people live differently now. Neither of my children want the house.

It’s too large, and the cost of upkeep and taxes would be quite high.

I don't want them to feel burdened to carry on our dusty memories. They'll make their own."

Deb heard similar stories from other clients. "Do your children live near you?" she asked.

"They have for many years. However, my daughter just married, and I think they have other plans. My son's children are young, but they will grow up faster than he realizes."

Deb waited a beat for the usual question of whether she had children, but Kitty refrained. She appreciated that.

"Tiburon is a lovely community," Deb said.

"It is, and I want to keep a townhome there to be close to my grandchildren. I'd also love a beach house here. They can spend their summers on the island if they want."

"I can't imagine they wouldn't." Still, Deb wondered what her grandchildren were like.

Kitty gestured toward the window and the ocean beyond. "I'd love a house with plenty of bedrooms for guests. And near the beach so I can walk and hear the ocean waves at night."

"That's what I enjoy," Deb said.

"Do you know a good real estate agent? I'd rather not build again. At this stage of my life, I want instant gratification." Kitty laughed. "I would also love to hire you to help me make it my own."

Deb was interested. "I can recommend several excellent agents. Crown Island has some beautiful homes that would—" She stopped mid-sentence as Kitty's gaze shifted to someone approaching behind Deb.

"Why, here's my son," Kitty said, standing. "Perfect timing. If you'll excuse me for a moment, I'm afraid I must visit the ladies' room. Please, do get acquainted with each other."

What could Deb say? She hoped she wasn't being set up but dismissed the thought. She'd only just met Kitty.

As the older woman hurried away, pausing only for a moment to direct her son, Deb turned to greet him.

Instantly, she froze. Standing before her was the man she'd seen with Mason and Teddy.

Their dreadful father. She'd had no idea that Kitty was related to them.

The man wore sunglasses, but he looked equally surprised to see her, his easy smile shifting from pleasant to wary in a split second.

"I'm Deb," she said coolly. The tension between them was immediate.

He seemed taken aback by the unexpected encounter. "How long have you been talking to my mother?"

That question struck her as odd. Her tone remained deliberately distant. "We've only just met."

He appeared to be processing the situation. Finally, he asked, "Do you have a dog

named Duke?”

“I do.” She wasn’t sure where this was going.

“My boys told me they’ve been playing with someone named Deb and her dog. I thought they meant another child. That’s you?”

Slowly, she nodded. This was an uncomfortable situation.

Kitty would return soon, and she didn’t want to spend any more time with a man who didn’t even have the decency to remove his sunglasses, whether he was Kitty’s son or not.

He was probably good looking behind the dark shades—and used to getting his way.

But he needed to hear the truth about his boys.

“I don’t usually say this to people I’ve just met,” Deb began, leaning forward slightly. “But there’s something you should know. Your sons seem frightened about what you think of them.”

Furrowing his brow, he drew back.

But before he could respond, Deb said, “The other day at the cafe, they forgot their money. They were terrified that you’d find out and would be disappointed in them.

” Deb watched his face closely. “Since you and your wife are divorced, you probably don’t see much of them, but you might want to work on your relationship with them before it’s too late. ”

His expression shifted from confusion to disbelief. “Look, you have no idea what

you're talking about."

"I'm just an observer." Deb pressed on, speaking over him. "They're wonderful boys who only want your approval. Whatever happened between you and their mother shouldn't affect your relationship with them."

Deb snatched her purse. "I have to go," she said abruptly, rising from her chair. "Tell your mother I couldn't wait." She'd probably just lost a job with Kitty, but she cared more about those two young boys.

She could feel his gaze on her as she strode away. And to her dismay, Kitty came around the corner, and she nearly collided with her.

"Leaving so soon?" Kitty asked, clearly sensing the tension.

"It was lovely seeing you again," Deb said, her words edged with remorse. "I'll leave real estate agent recommendations with the concierge for you."

Kitty flicked a glance in her son's direction, looking perplexed. "Did you meet my son?"

"We spoke, but I have to leave." Deb nodded politely, inching away toward the exit.

"Let's see each other again soon," Kitty called after her, charging down the hallway toward an exit.

A fresh breeze off the ocean cooled her heated face as she stepped outside, not far from the employee parking area. She paused by the steps to catch her breath.

The beach run she'd planned with Duke now felt essential. She needed to outpace her discomfort and clear her head.

She'd likely offended both Kitty and her son with her opinions, but those boys had seemed genuinely afraid of disappointing their father. She couldn't ignore that.

She could have said even more, but if Ryan and Whitley heard about this, she'd lose her job.

If speaking up meant losing a potential client, so be it. First the Hunts, now Kitty. Yet, she could choose who she wanted to do business with, now more than ever.

The door opened behind her, and a male voice growled out a comment that sounded more like an accusation. "You're Deb Whitaker."

She whirled around to face the offensive man-child. "All my life."

"It's Grant. Grant Emerson." He took off his sunglasses and held up his hands. "I should have introduced myself when we met, but when I saw you and realized who you were, I was stunned."

The shock of recognition left her reeling.

Deb sucked in a breath as a torrent of memories flooded her.

He'd changed, and she tried to reconcile this man with the younger version she recalled.

His once smooth skin now bore lines around his eyes and forehead, though instead of diminishing his looks, they only made him more attractive.

The sprinkle of gray hair at his temples added an air of experience and wisdom.

This isn't fair, she thought. "Why did you follow me?"

“Look, you’ve got me all wrong. You know me.”

“No, I knew you. People change, and not always for the better.”

She crossed her arms, shielding herself, and lifted her chin. He couldn’t hurt her now. She wasn’t a lovesick teenager anymore. But his kids were another matter.

“First, I’m not divorced.” Grant’s voice was heavy and halting. “My wife died three years ago in a freak accident on a ski slope. We were devastated... Nothing has been the same since then.”

Seeing the raw grief on his face, Deb was acutely embarrassed for what she’d incorrectly assumed.

His voice cracked, and he added, “That’s why the boys don’t want to disappoint me, but they never could. I swear to you, they’re my life. I would never mistreat them.”

Her original assessment was rapidly waning. “Then why did you send them here with their aunt?”

Grant’s hazel eyes shone as bright as they always had, unnerving her.

“This is their summer holiday. My sister has been helping my mother sort through the house. I took over to give Jen a break, and she invited the boys so I could work uninterrupted.”

That made sense, but Deb wasn’t quite ready to concede defeat.

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Neither was Grant. “Did my mother tell you our father died? She needs a fresh start, but it’s taken a long time to wind down my father’s affairs.”

Deb bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I remember your father. He was an admirable man.” Even if he had been distant to her, but why bring that up now?

A nostalgic smile crossed his face. “They both loved coming here. Maybe you remember the parties my parents used to have.”

Slowly, the decades rolled away, and an old memory of his mother formed. Katherine Emerson, but friends called her Kitty.

Deb knew her as Mrs. Emerson. Decades ago, Kitty had thick, wavy brown hair and wore bright Lily Pulitzer dresses. “Everyone admired your parents. They were so glamorous and full of life.”

Grant nodded. “Mom still is.”

With her anger-fueled adrenaline fading, Deb brought a hand to her heart. “She used to crank up the music at the beach house and dance with all of us.”

“Now you remember.” He stared at her, the same smile she recalled tugging his lips. “I noticed you the moment I walked into the hotel, but I didn’t recognize you at first. It looks like life has been very good to you.”

She dipped her chin. Grant sounded as earnest as he always had.

Yet, he'd left without a word. He'd broken her heart and impacted her life.

Still, that was years ago, and now she'd misread his relationship with Mason and Teddy.

She should rise above the past and give him the courtesy of an apology for that.

"I'm sorry I misinterpreted the situation with your sons."

Grant took a step closer. "Would you come back to the bar with me? My mother is disturbed about our misunderstanding."

She shook her head. "Tell your mother you just missed me. Mason and Teddy are sweet kids, and I've enjoyed talking to them. But you and I have too much history."

She turned away. She was no longer a lovesick teenager but a woman in charge of her emotions.

Grant touched her arm. "Wait. I shouldn't ask, but I would like to know. Why didn't you ever call me back?"

Slowly, she turned around, heat rising again in her chest. "You have the nerve to ask me that? You're the one who left without a word and never called."

He furrowed his brow, looking confused. "I went back to the beach house to get ready for our date, but when I arrived, our suitcases were packed. My father insisted we leave right away. His mother had an emergency, so we rushed to the airport. Didn't your brothers tell you I called?"

"No. I never heard anything." She drew a hand over her forehead, realizing what happened. The hurt in his eyes now mirrored her own.

Taking another step toward her, he pressed his hands together, pleading with her.

“I must have called more than ten times and spoken to at least two of them. Randy and David, as I recall. I gave up because I figured you were hiding behind them. I thought you were angry at me, and I never wanted to hurt you. Losing you ripped my heart to shreds. Please believe me.”

Deb could feel the heat of his body, but she couldn't step away. She was quiet for a moment, considering these new details. Her heart ached as the truth came to light.

She knew what her older brothers were capable of. They'd meddled with her boyfriends for as long as she could remember. Maybe they didn't realize that Grant was her first love. Or if they had, they never let on.

Because she never would have forgiven them.

“Actually, that make sense,” she said, nodding at last.

Grant stretched his hand to her shoulder but stopped short, clenching his fist and bringing it to his mouth.

“I wish we hadn't ended that way. You were my first love, and your silence destroyed me.

I figured you'd met someone who wasn't just a tourist, someone who lived here and was part of your world.

I thought it might be that guy who played the guitar, Adrian.

You were everyone's golden girl, and I was just the summer interloper. ”

She passed a hand over her eyes, trying to imagine Grant being envious of Adrian. Memories swirled in her mind as this alternate version suddenly seemed plausible.

With a small, tentative movement, Grant brushed a finger against hers. “Can we put all that behind us?”

Her chest tightened, and she lowered her eyes, tempted for a moment before she brought her hand back, clutching it as if to shield herself from the magnetism of his touch.

Still unable to meet his gaze, she said, “I can’t.”

As if he’d misread her cues, Grant stepped back. “Please forgive me. You probably have someone in your life. I didn’t think to ask if you were married.”

His words sliced through her heart. She couldn’t have this conversation with him, of all people. “I’m not, but I have plans. I have to go.”

This time, he grasped her hand. “I’m glad we talked. We’ve needed this for a long time.”

Shaken by his sudden touch, she stepped away from him, flushed, the heat of his flesh sizzling her skin. “Thanks for letting me know all that.”

When she turned, she dared not look back. Something about Kitty had been tugging at her memory since they’d met in the ladies’ room. Now, as she replayed the encounter, everything clicked into place. Kitty had not given her last name.

Perhaps on purpose.

Yet, something still seemed missing in Grant’s story. Her determined footsteps

faltered as she neared her vehicle.

After getting into her Land Rover, she drove out the farthest exit so she wouldn't have to go past Grant again. In her review mirror, she saw him watching her.

With her emotions in a tangled mess, she glanced at the time. On impulse, she jerked the wheel in the opposite direction from home. As she replayed Grant's words, a fresh wave of fury rose within her.

Duke would be getting antsy, but she had to know the truth.

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Minutes later, Deb pulled into the exclusive Crown Island Country Club. Nodding to an attendant she knew, she left her car at the curb. By now, her father and three of her brothers would have finished their regular Wednesday afternoon golf game.

She took a shortcut through the side entrance past throngs of members chatting. Quickly, she spied her family members sitting at a table having drinks in their golf attire. She strode toward the table and stopped, her hands on her hips.

Her father looked up, startled to see her. “Deb, has something happened?”

She was so angry she spat out her words. “Which one of you talked to Grant Emerson—and didn’t give me his messages?”

Randy held up his hands, deflecting her anger. “Whoa, who’s Grant Emerson?”

A guilty look crossed David’s face. “The summer guy Deb fell for a long time ago. You remember.”

“That’s been years ago,” her father said, looking perplexed. “Why bring it up now?”

“Grant is back,” Deb said. “After he had to leave so suddenly, he tried to call me at least ten times. Grant said he talked to you—” she swatted David on the shoulder, “and you,” she finished, grabbing Randy by the collar. He was the largest of her brothers, but he didn’t scare her.

“Hey, hey,” Randy said, shrinking away from her. “I probably forgot. Geez, what does it matter now?”

David glared at his brother. “You didn’t forget anything. You threatened me if I ever told her. This is all on you, big brother.”

She whipped back to David. “What are you, a wimp? You’re not getting out of this either. Why would you do everything Randy told you to do?”

“I don’t,” David replied, sputtering. “Not anymore.”

“Listen to yourselves,” their father said with disgust. “Bickering like you’re still kids.”

Deb wasn’t backing down; she wouldn’t give her brothers any leeway. “I didn’t start this, Dad. They cost me the love of my life, and for what, a joke? It wasn’t funny.”

“Now, Deb, don’t be so dramatic,” Randy began, but she cut him off.

“Don’t you start with me,” she said, shaking her finger at him.

“I missed so many chances with other nice guys for years because you thought sabotaging my relationships was a sport, and you were all keeping score. No one stood a chance against a pack of wild animals. Every guy married another woman, and half of them are members of this club, so I have to see them every week.”

Two men at an adjacent table nodded. “She’s right about that,” one of them said. “Remember Seth?”

Their father quieted the two men with a stern glance before turning a withering glare on his sons. “Deb has a point. Your mother and I warned you about your behavior many, many times.”

Infuriated, Deb flung out her arms. “Every time someone asks me why I’m not

married, it's because of all of you. Well, I'm not playing this game anymore."

"Hey, what about this new guy—" Randy snapped his fingers. "Matteo, right? We'll call him and make it right with him."

Deb smacked her forehead. "Oh, you didn't."

"We just ran into him," Randy said.

"Here at the club for lunch," David finished. "It was business. He's trying to sell his wine here."

Their father nodded. "But your sister's name came up, right?"

Randy blew out a breath. "I'll talk to him and set him straight."

Deb jabbed a finger at Randy's chest. "You. Will. Not. You're a big, inconsiderate oaf." She sliced the air with her hands. "I'm finished with all of you."

She turned on her heel and stormed out, disregarding the curious looks of other club members.

Besides, they all knew her brothers.

A man near the entry called out to her. "I should've tried harder," he began, his voice a quiet apology. "Your brothers just ganged up on me."

"Too late, Seth." Deb kept marching. The man was married with three children.

Still furious, she swung into her car. More than ever, she needed that run with Duke, but she also needed to vent. She punched April's number.

“Can you meet me now?” she asked when her friend answered. “It’s important.”

“Of course, I’m just leaving the Historical Society,” April replied, concern evident in her voice. “You sound upset.”

“Oh, it’s way beyond that,” Deb said in a tight voice. “I’ll meet you on the sand at the end of Beach View Lane in twenty minutes. I need to get Duke first.”

She drove home in a haze of rage, resentment, and disappointment, her mind spinning with long-buried memories and thoughts of what might have been.

By the time Deb pulled into her driveway, Duke was frantically pacing and whining at the fence as if sensing her distress. She rushed to open the gate and gathered him in her arms.

“I’m upset, but not with you, buddy. We’ll run this off.”

With his tail wagging, he licked her face, and Deb buried her head in his fur to hide her angry tears. His loyalty and uncomplicated joy were exactly what she needed.

Quickly, she changed into her running gear, clipped on his leash, and headed toward the beach.

The late afternoon breeze was cool against her flushed skin as she and Duke made their way toward the beach. April wasn’t there yet, so she ran some sprints on the wet, hard-packed sand with Duke to let off steam. The tide was coming in with waves crashing against the shore, matching her turmoil.

Suddenly, Duke stopped, looked back, and tugged his lead. April had arrived. They trotted toward her.

“My gosh, what’s happened?” April asked.

Deb unclipped Duke’s leash to let him play in the water. “You remember that woman I told you I met in the ladies’ room today?”

“Kitty,” April said, falling into step beside her. “Did you meet her in the Library Bar?”

Deb nodded. “You’ll never believe who she is. Do you remember that glamorous couple from years ago, Jock and Kitty Emerson?”

“Do you mean Grant’s parents?” April’s eyes widened. “Oh, my gosh. Did you talk about him?”

“Worse. He’s here. I didn’t recognize him at first behind the dark sunglasses. It’s been more than thirty years.”

“And how does he look? Paunchy, bald, and poorly dressed, I hope.”

“Unfortunately, no. Full head of hair, slightly gray at the temples, and looks like he works out. Probably still sails, and he’d look good in whatever he wore.”

April shook her head. “That’s truly terrible.”

“But there’s more. Remember Mason and Teddy?”

When April nodded, Deb went on to tell her about the encounter, explaining that the boys were his sons and that her brothers were at fault for the breakup, which dredged up a fresh round of rage.

Wiping hot tears of anger from her face, Deb added, “My brothers broke my heart for

their amusement. I don't know how I can ever look at them again."

April smoothed a hand over Deb's arm. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. I wouldn't have dreamed your brothers would do that."

"Well, they did. This changes everything."

After a moment, April slid a glance toward her. "Besides that, how did it feel to see Grant again?"

A flood of conflicting emotions filled her. "It was an emotional rollercoaster, but the young man I'd loved was still behind those mesmerizing hazel eyes. When I looked at him again, it all rushed back—not that I let him know. But the sound of his voice and his touch of his hand...he's still got it."

"Would you go there again?"

Deb sliced the air with her hand. "Never."

"Do you think Kitty knew you were here?"

"She mentioned that she'd just read the magazine interview I gave. The way she approached me in the bathroom, asking about my work, inviting me for a drink—it was too much of a coincidence. She remembered me. And then she tried to stick me with Grant."

"To what end, I wonder?"

Deb kicked the sand. "I don't know, and I don't care."

April tried again. "Let's think about this. I know you were utterly devastated at the

time, but in hindsight, what do you think would have happened between you two?”

Deb drew a deep breath, trying to steady herself. “He was the one. If he’d returned to Crown Island, we probably would have become engaged, gone to the university together, married, and had a family. Instead, he chose someone else.”

“All these years, you wondered what happened to him, why he left so suddenly.”

“His father had a family situation,” Deb said, explaining. As she spoke, she regained a measure of control. “In retrospect, I probably shouldn’t have said those things about his parenting.”

April chuckled. “Speaking your mind has always been your superpower. People know where they stand with you.”

Before Deb could answer, her phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket and looked at the screen. “Perfect timing. It’s Matteo.”

April raised an eyebrow. “Mr. Argentina?”

“The perfect distraction.” Deb’s finger hovered over the answer button.

“Are you sure?” April asked. “Do you want to see where things go with Grant?”

“That’s going nowhere because he’ll leave, just like before. This time, I’m rewriting the story.”

With renewed determination, she answered the call, forcing a cheerful tone. After listening to what he had to say, she said, “Tomorrow would be perfect. You know where I live.”

As Deb made plans to meet Matteo right after work the next day, Duke returned to her side, pressing against her leg as if sensing her need for comfort. She stroked his head while talking.

When she ended the call, April gave her a questioning look. “Don’t use Matteo to avoid dealing with Grant.”

Deb pushed that from her mind. “I’m not avoiding him, and we dealt with whatever we had years ago. I’m moving forward, just as I always have.”

April lifted a shoulder and let it fall. “Grant is here now. Sounds like there might be some warm embers.”

“Whatever fire we had is stone cold, and that only happens in fairy tales. He moved on a long time ago.”

“You loved each other once,” April said. “Could it be time for a fresh start?”

While April had a point, Deb was too wise to court a potential rejection. She shook her head.

“Even though my brothers blocked Grant’s calls, he could have returned if he cared enough. It’s not as if I’d fallen into the sea. But I built a great life for myself. As for dating, I’m starting fresh, just not with him.”

She bumped April’s shoulder. “Just wait until you meet Matteo.”

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As Deb was getting ready, Matteo's number lit up her phone. She tapped it from the edge of her bathtub and answered.

His voice rang out over the speaker. "I forgot to tell you to dress casually. Be sure to wear something you can move in."

Deb was curious now. "Are we playing tennis or sailing?"

Matteo said, "It's a surprise, but what I have in mind won't be rigorous. Not for you, anyway."

After hanging up, she stepped from the tub and wrapped herself in a light cotton robe. Peering into her closet, she wondered what would be suitable. She'd hardly had time to wash clothes lately.

She reached for a white sundress she hadn't worn in a long time and put it to one side.

A surprise, he'd said. She would have to trust his good taste, but she wasn't worried.

At the window, Duke rested his chin on the sill, watching every movement outside.

"Hey boy, tell me when Matteo arrives, would you?"

Duke pricked his ears and turned back to her as if to acknowledge her request.

She sat on a velvet chair beside her vanity. As she smoothed on her skincare and

sunscreen, she thought of the past week and how busy it had been.

After the drama of yesterday with Grant and her brothers, Deb had tried not to dwell on it. All day, she'd taken the service elevators and stairs to avoid running into Grant or Kitty.

However, she missed Mason and Teddy. They were good kids, but they were summer kids. She knew she shouldn't become attached to them. Their father was here now, so they didn't need her anymore.

She'd arrived early at the hotel and spent her day coordinating with Knox, calling suppliers, and making alternate arrangements.

Painters had mistakenly used an incorrect paint color in one meeting room, and artwork was delayed for another.

Despite the challenges of her work, she loved what she did.

Guests would see the finished look and hardly give a thought as to what it took to conceive and manage a job of this size. That was the point. They should appreciate the ambiance, not the effort. She thought of her work as a theater production: whatever happened backstage, the show must go on.

Holding up the white dress in front of her mirror, she shook her head. "Too sheer, too flirty."

Duke dipped his head in agreement.

Hastily, she decided on a coral tank top and matching skorts, paired with a white linen overshirt and sparkly white sneakers she'd bought at Babe's shop in the village. She changed and glanced at herself in the mirror.

This will do , she thought. It's not a date.

As she snapped on a silver bracelet, Duke whined from his perch.

Looking out, she saw Matteo walking to the front door. "Thanks, Duke. I want you to be nice when you meet Matteo." She shook out her hands and drew in a deep breath, expelling a bit of anxiety as she released it.

As if sensing her nervous energy, Duke trotted beside her.

Deb rubbed his furry neck. "Nothing to get worked up about."

After her unsettling encounter with Grant, Deb agreed to Matteo's invitation as a distraction. Yet, she's spent a restless night replaying old memories. Even her morning run with Duke hadn't sufficiently cleared her head.

Maybe April had a point about Grant.

Matteo knocked on the door, and she opened it. He wore loose, crinkled cotton trousers and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

"How's this?" she asked, gesturing to her outfit.

"It's perfect, and you look gorgeous."

He greeted her with a light kiss on each cheek. As he did, she detected a fresh, woody citrus scent on his skin and recognized it as one a local perfumer made.

"You've gone full island," she said.

"I went shopping today." He gestured to his impossibly white sneakers, then held out

his hand to Duke.

That's a nice gesture , she thought.

Duke sniffed his hand and, after a few moments, bestowed his approval with a lick. The dog nudged his way between them, demanding attention.

Matteo laughed and knelt. "The true man of the house," he said, scratching Duke behind the ears.

After Duke received his due attention, Matteo looked up. "Hope you're ready for fun."

"Should I be worried?" Deb asked, picking up her purse.

"Never," Matteo replied, grinning. "Only intrigued, I hope."

As they approached his car, Deb noticed a backpack on the rear seat. "Are we hiking somewhere?"

Matteo opened the passenger door for her. "Not hiking, but we'll be active. I hope you don't mind a slight change from the traditional dinner date."

"I'm fascinated," Deb said, sliding into the seat.

They drove through town, chatting easily about the island and Matteo's vineyards.

He told her that in Argentina, he tended the vines his father and grandfather had planted and married before he turned twenty.

Years later, after his divorce, he'd taken a soul-searching trip to Napa Valley.

There, he'd stumbled upon a neglected vineyard and bought it on impulse.

Deb enjoyed hearing about his past. "Is that where you met your second wife?"

He nodded as he drove. "I want to be transparent with you. I'm human, so I make mistakes, but I try to learn from them."

"Good advice," she said, trying not to think about Grant. "Where are we headed?"

"Have a little patience," Matteo replied with a playful smile.

A few minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot beside Regal Bikes.

"A bike ride?" she asked, pleasantly surprised.

"This island is so rich with beauty, it would be a shame not to take advantage of it. We'll enjoy the sunset from a special place."

He opened the door for her and grabbed his backpack.

Inside the shop, Adrian Marino was making an adjustment on a bicycle. His salt-and-pepper hair was pulled back in his usual ponytail, and his hands moved with precision. Classic rock music played in the background.

Adrian greeted Matteo with a firm handshake and gestured to a pair of shiny bikes. "You're ready to go. Best in the fleet for you and your princess."

Deb grinned and greeted Adrian. She'd grown up with him, so he was like another brother, though far less annoying.

The bell over the door jingled, and Adrian's son strolled in, his sun-bleached hair still

damp. Sailor stopped when he saw Deb. “You’re renting these?”

“Matteo is taking me on a mystery bike ride,” she said, introducing them.

While Sailor and Matteo shook hands, Adrian added, “Sailor is heading to Huntington Beach tomorrow for the U.S. Open of Surfing.”

“That’s impressive,” Matteo said. “You must be pretty good.”

Sailor shrugged with modesty. “I do my best.”

Deb was proud of one of the island’s own. “Sailor has been surfing since before he could walk. Now he’s a champion.”

The younger man grinned. “This will be Maileah’s first time attending the U.S. Open. We’re expecting big waves.”

“Maileah is my best friend’s daughter,” she said to Matteo, who seemed to take all the island connections in stride. “Many of us grew up together, so we’re practically related. Adrian and I have known each other forever.”

“I can relate to that,” Matteo replied without a hint of jealousy. “Reminds me of my home in Mendoza. Many of our families are as entwined as the vines.”

After wishing Sailor well, Deb and Matteo wheeled their bikes outside. The late summer sun was heading toward the horizon, though they still had an easy hour before sunset.

“Which way?” Deb asked as they mounted their bikes.

Matteo gestured to one side. “Adrian told me there’s a secluded beach this way.”

They turned away from the main beach, pedaling along the coastal road.

They rode side by side where they could, chatting easily.

The pathway curved around rocky outcroppings and through patches of wind-sculpted pines, offering impressive views of the Pacific.

This part of the island was natural and preserved from development.

After about twenty minutes, Deb gestured to a narrower trail that led toward a small, sheltered cove. “The locals call this Lover’s Beach.”

“This is the one Adrian mentioned,” Matteo said.

They dismounted their bikes and walked the rest of the way.

Deb removed her helmet. “Few tourists come here because it’s hard to find. Except for those who want some privacy. Mostly teenagers, but they come later.”

“It’s perfect,” Matteo said, taking in the view.

The small crescent of pink sand looked deserted, framed by rock formations that created a natural sense of privacy. The sun edged toward the horizon, but they still had time.

He retrieved his backpack and took Deb’s hand, leading her to the sand.

As they walked, Deb enjoyed the feeling of his hand solidly in hers. Though his touch lacked the magnetic attraction she’d felt touching Grant’s hand, it was sure and trustworthy.

Matteo stopped and dropped his pack. “This looks like a good spot.”

From the backpack, he produced a lightweight blanket, which he spread on the sand, followed by a paper bag and a bottle of wine. He brought out two shatterproof wine goblets and a corkscrew.

“This one is from my California vineyard. Would you open the bag while I pour the wine?”

Deb brought out a loaf of crusty sourdough bread, along with a container that held a selection of grapes, berries, cheeses, and sausages. She recognized the label from a gourmet shop in town.

She appreciated his effort and his excellent taste. “You thought of everything.”

“I enjoy elegant simplicity.” He poured two glasses of wine and handed one to her. “To unexpected journeys.”

They clinked glasses and settled onto the blanket, watching waves race to shore. The setting sun brushed the sky with rosy tendrils. Deb sipped her wine and sighed, truly relaxing for the first time since her encounter with Grant.

She had to get him out of her mind.

“This has always been my favorite time of day,” Matteo said, watching the sun sink lower. “At home, my family would gather on the terrace at the vineyard at this time. My grandfather used to say that even the most ordinary day deserves a beautiful ending.”

Deb smiled, touched by the sentiment. “Your grandfather sounds like a wise man.”

“He taught me everything about wine and quite a bit about life.”

Their conversation flowed easily from Deb’s design work to Matteo’s travels, from island gossip to childhood memories. As they ate and chatted, deeper streaks appeared in the sky.

“There goes the sun,” Deb said. She loved this time of day.

Matteo put his arm around her, and she leaned easily into the warmth of his embrace. As the last sliver of sun disappeared beneath the horizon, he turned to her. His eyes sparkled in the waning light, and she could feel his breath. Feeling curious, she tilted her face to his.

“I’ve been wanting to do this since we met,” he murmured.

Deb hesitated as thoughts of Grant flashed unbidden through her mind. But as her lips met Matteo’s, those thoughts receded. His kiss was tender and inquisitive. She slid her hand against his chest, then let her fingers linger on his cheek. This togetherness was pleasant, and she felt safe with him.

After a moment, he pulled back slightly, studying her.

“I’ve been looking for a woman like you. Smart and adventurous, who knows how to enjoy the fine things in life.” He paused to kiss her again. “I’d like to be alone with you. Will you take a trip with me soon?”

As handsome and intriguing as he was, a wave of uncertainty filled her. She knew what he was suggesting. “I’d like to know you better.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “We don’t have to rush. I have the summer.”

Relief washed over her. She nodded toward the trail. “This part of the path isn’t lit, so we should start back soon.”

He rose and helped her to her feet. After gathering the remains of their picnic, they made their way back to their bikes.

Once they’d left the rural area behind, the island’s lamp lights flickered on in the gathering dusk, guiding their way. They returned to Regal Bikes, now closed for the evening, and locked up the bikes as Adrian had asked.

“It’s still early,” Matteo said. “Would you like to listen to the pianist at the Ferry Cafe and have dessert?”

“That sounds nice, but I have an early meeting.” For now, this was all she wanted.

As they drove back to her house, Matteo reached for her hand. The gesture was comfortable. At her door, he kissed her once more.

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” Deb said.

“The first of many more to come, I hope,” Matteo replied.

As he got into his car, Deb watched, trying to envision a future of summers with him. Or, if he asked, would she leave the island for him? He was certainly interesting and pleasant enough.

He waited for her to go in, so she stepped inside.

Leaning against the door, she thought about their kisses. The unbridled passion might not be there with Matteo, but the depth of what she’d felt with Grant scared her. Matteo was a safer choice, one in which she could control her feelings.

Duke charged from the bedroom to greet her, his legs nearly sliding out from under him in his excitement to see her. He wagged his tail madly, pawing at her as if for reassurance.

Deb knelt to hug him. “Don’t worry. It’s still just us, boy.”

Another thought formed in her mind. If there was room in her life for someone new, Matteo might be the perfect antidote to Grant.

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At the Crown Island marina, boats of all sizes languished in their slips. Grant checked his watch. They were right on schedule, but his stomach was still knotted with anticipation.

Today, his mother was hosting a celebration of his father's life. His father had only wanted the best for him, but what Jock had in mind didn't always match Grant's desires.

Deb's accusations still rang in his ears. As a parent, was he guilty of that, too? Maybe he should have come with his sons instead of sending them with Jen and Daniel.

"Wow, look at that boat." Teddy pointed toward a sleek yacht, the largest one in the marina. It was moored at the far end due to its sheer size.

"That's a beauty." Grant ruffled his younger son's hair. He knew that yacht. A San Francisco venture capitalist who often sailed the Bay Area owned it. He'd seen it during a charity fundraiser one year and admired it, too.

Mason scanned the boat slips. "Which one are we going on?"

"Should be just ahead," Grant replied.

As the three of them walked along the dock, Grant thought about his sons.

Teddy had his mother's irrepressible energy, while Mason had inherited his thoughtful expression and cautious nature.

They both shared Nicole's curiosity and willingness to try new things.

Seeing her features in them was a constant reminder of the love they'd shared.

Just when he'd never thought he could love again after Deb had turned silent, Grant began working for Nicole's father and started to see more of her.

Their fathers were friends, and their parents encouraged the relationship.

Wounded as he was, he was comfortable with Nicole as their friendship developed.

Eventually, he fell in love again.

He thought his feelings for Deb had dimmed, yet when they spoke, it was as if he were drawn back in time to all the passion they'd once shared.

They were older now, and life had changed them. Any feelings he had today were surely a result of nostalgia or a longing for reconnection.

That must explain it.

"Look, they're already here," Teddy said, waving.

Just ahead, he saw his mother aboard a gleaming yacht.

Kitty exuded her usual air of effortless sophistication with white cotton trousers, a navy blouse, and deck shoes.

She'd specifically forbidden any shade of black, saying they'd already done that at the funeral.

Beside her stood Jen, dressed in a vibrant yellow sundress, and her new husband, Daniel, who wore a Hawaiian print shirt.

Grant had followed suit with a light blue knit shirt his father had given him.

“Who’s ready to go?” Kitty opened her arms as Grant lifted Teddy onto the craft.

Mason climbed aboard and met with another heartfelt hug.

Today, with the sunshine overhead and the sea as blue as he’d recalled, they were gathered to release Jock Emerson, a man they’d all loved.

To Mason and Teddy, Jock had been the doting grandfather, a man who’d mellowed in his later years. Family had been their anchor after Nicole’s death, so losing their grandfather a few short years later was rough on the boys.

Although Grant and his father had their differences, especially about Deb, Grant respected him. His father only wanted to see him succeed in life.

Shielding his eyes from the sun, Grant admired the vessel’s pristine white hull and teak accents. The name, “Crowned One,” was painted in flowing script on the stern.

“Your father would have loved this,” Kitty said as he boarded.

Immediately, Grant noticed the monogrammed canvas tote his mother held close. His father had loved Crown Island, so it seemed fitting to return him to the waters he’d cherished.

Along with his father, maybe Grant could set Nicole’s spirit free as well.

His sister hugged him, and Daniel did the same. Jen managed a wistful smile. “Are

you ready for this?”

“It’s what Mom wants,” Grant replied.

He understood. It had been important to him to have Nicole buried where the boys could visit her, but as it turned out, seeing her gravesite was so utterly heart wrenching for the boys that he limited their visits to once a year.

At first, he’d often stopped by Nicole’s gravesite to talk while the boys were in school, but that was before he’d realized he could communicate with her anytime in his heart.

A rugged, middle-aged man approached, wearing a captain’s hat and a crisp white shirt with naval-style epaulets. His weathered face creased with a smile.

“Welcome aboard, I’m Captain Craig. Would you like a tour before we get underway?”

Mason and Teddy beamed at that, and Grant nodded.

“This way,” the captain said, gesturing for them to follow.

The cabin area was spacious, featuring polished teakwood paneling, comfortable seating, and a small but well-appointed galley. An assortment of refreshments and light fare beckoned, and the captain encouraged them to help themselves. Two well-appointed cabins were below.

After exploring, they climbed the stairs to the helm. An array of gauges captured Mason’s attention, while the captain offered a brief explanation.

“May I sit in the captain’s chair?” Teddy asked in a shy voice.

“Why, sure.” Captain Craig lifted the boy into the seat. “Take as many photos as you’d like.”

“With you and Mason, too,” Jen said, motioning for the captain and his older son to join in.

After they were finished, Captain Craig reviewed the safety instructions and distributed life vests to the boys, making sure they fit properly. “The island tour will be underway soon. Please make yourselves at home.”

As they all moved onto the open deck, Grant joined his mother at the stern, where she stood looking out at the water, her hand still resting on the tote bag.

Grant put his arm around her shoulders. “Dad would appreciate this.”

Kitty smiled up at him. “Moving on doesn’t mean forgetting those we loved.”

Grant understood she wasn’t just talking about his father. “I know,” he said quietly.

“The boys seem happy here,” his mother said, leaning on the railing. “They’ve been talking about Deb. Isn’t it strange that of all the people they might meet on the beach and become friends with, it would be her? It’s as if we have invisible magnets attracting us to others we’re meant to know.”

Grant inclined his head. “That’s an interesting thing for you to say.”

“I want you to know that I always liked her,” Kitty said as if making a point. “Your father thought you were very young, that’s all.”

Grant didn’t ask for elaboration. Today wasn’t a day for finding fault but for celebrating a life. Parents did the best they could at the time. He knew that now.

“And you?” Her gaze was penetrating. “How do you feel about seeing Deb?”

“We’ve only just met. Again, that is.”

“Give it time.”

“Mom, I don’t know what you’re up to—”

“Hey, Dad,” Teddy called out. “Can we invite Deb to come on a boat with us? I bet she’d love it.”

Grant exchanged a look with his mother. “That’s sweet of you to think of her, Teddy, but this is our family holiday.”

Teddy wasn’t giving up. “But she knows all about the island, and she said she likes being on the water. Can we take her with us? You said you wanted us to make friends.”

“Maybe some other time.” Grant noted another look that passed between his mother and sister.

“Why not?” Jen interjected. “It’s a great idea.”

Grant shook his head. “It’s complicated.”

Jen took Teddy by the hand. “Let’s see if we can spot some dolphins. Daniel brought binoculars.”

Mason followed. “Can I look through them?”

“Sure, bud.” Daniel looped a strap around his neck and showed him how to adjust the

binoculars.

As the captain prepared to cast off, Grant turned back to his mother. He sensed there was more she wasn't saying. "What did you mean about the invisible magnets?"

"Maybe some people are meant to be in our lives. What if we get second chances?"

A sudden thought occurred to him. Maybe he didn't know his mother as well as he thought. "Have you reconnected with someone?"

"Me? Heavens, no." Kitty placed a hand on his forearm.

"I'm talking about you. This time, we don't have to rush home.

At the rate you were going with Deb, your father thought you might have proposed by Christmas.

"She pressed a hand to his cheek. "Let's stay until school begins. I owe you that much."

Before he could follow that comment with a question, the engine rumbled to life, and the boys raced back to join him.

Soon, they were gliding away from the marina. As they headed toward open water, breezes whipped their hair and cast out worries.

Grant folded his arms and leaned against the railing, watching the waves. The captain kept a steady hand on the rudder.

Grant's mind reeled back to that last summer on Crown Island. They'd left quickly, but by the time they returned, his grandmother had made an amazing recovery.

With only four weeks left in the summer, Jock had called him into his study and told him Nicole's father had offered him an internship at his publishing house. His father insisted he take it before returning to school, saying it would be a good experience.

Feeling heartbroken, Grant had gone along with the plan to take his mind off Deb. He was assigned to photography, and Nicole was in the editorial department, so they often took their breaks together. They were friends throughout college before their relationship developed into something more.

Grant thought about what his mother just said. Something didn't add up. Internships usually spanned the summer months. He hadn't thought about that then, but now he wondered if his father had orchestrated that for him. Likely so, he decided, exhaling at the realization.

That was a long, long time ago.

He turned his attention back to the boys and joined them. Mason was training the binoculars on a tall structure on a point.

Mason asked, "Does that lighthouse still work?"

"Sure does," the captain replied. "That rocky outcropping claimed its share of vessels before the lighthouse was built."

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Grant pointed to an inlet beside it. “That’s a sweet private little beach there.”

Jen laughed. “Everyone called it Lover’s Beach.”

When Mason looked surprised, Grant said, “Ask your aunt how she knows that.”

“You went there, too.” His sister swatted him, and Daniel looked amused.

Kitty put her arms over the boys’ shoulders, pointing out landmarks as they passed.

His sister joined him at the rail. “I wonder when Mom is going to scatter Dad’s ashes?”

“Soon, I suppose.”

Jen rested her head on his shoulder. “The boys are in better spirits than I’ve seen them in a long time. You’re thinking about Nicole, aren’t you?”

Grant nodded. “Hard not to. I see her in them every day.”

“The boys are so much like her, each in their way. You gave Nicole your whole heart. She knew that.”

His gaze landed on the canvas bag that sat on a bench near their mother. “Mom said letting go doesn’t mean forgetting.”

“Maybe it’s time for a new chapter. Look at me.” She wiggled her ring finger, and the

diamond sparkled in the sunshine.

“What a rock that is. Is Daniel still treating you well?”

Jen smiled, her face lighting with happiness. “Best decision I’ve ever made. Don’t be afraid to take a chance again.”

After about an hour of cruising along the coastline, Captain Craig slowed the engine, and Kitty nodded her approval.

“This is where we used to drop anchor,” Kitty said, her eyes misting.

They overlooked a pristine stretch of coastline at the far end of the reserve. The water here was a deep, clear blue, with the cliffs of Crown Island rising dramatically in the distance.

The captain glanced around. “This is a good spot. The currents here will carry far from this point.”

With the wind to their backs, Grant and his family gathered on the deck.

Captain Craig cut the engine, and the boat drifted, bobbing in the ocean. Waves lapped against the hull, and seagulls squawked overhead, just as Jock would have liked it.

Kitty opened the bag and withdrew the bronze urn. “Who would like to offer a few words of remembrance before I turn him loose?”

Her voice was steady despite the emotion in her eyes.

Jen cleared her throat. “Dad, you taught me to find beauty in nature and look for the

story in everything. That gift made me who I am.” She paused, her lip quivering. “I’m writing a new play set on an island. I think you would have liked this one.”

Daniel went next, speaking of Jock’s acceptance of him and the friendship they’d forged. After Jock was too ill to take his sailboat out, Daniel and Grant would take him out when they could.

Then Mason, hesitant at first, spoke up. “Hey, Gramps. I’ll always remember fishing with you. You showed me how to be patient.” He reached for Teddy’s hand.

With a solemn expression, Teddy took his turn. “You could fix anything I broke, and you always made me laugh.”

Grant thought of the formidable man who had shaped his life.

“You pushed me hard, Dad. Sometimes in directions I wouldn’t have chosen.

But you always believed I could succeed, and with your support, I did.

Now, I’m trying to be the kind of father to my boys who gives them the will to soar, just as you did. ”

Jen rubbed his shoulder in solidarity. He put his arm around her, and they leaned together for a few moments.

“It’s time to set him free.” Kitty nodded at Grant, and he helped her lift the urn to the railing.

His mother’s last words were private, whispered before she tipped the vessel. Jock’s final remains lifted on the ocean breeze and drifted onto the waves, quickly disappearing into the sea he’d loved.

Grant closed his eyes and tipped his head back, setting Nicole free in his heart as well. A few moments later, he felt Teddy's hand slip into his. When he opened his eyes, he saw Mason on his other side.

Teddy looked up to him. "I think Grandpa sees Mom."

"She's not out there," Mason said. "I sort of wish she were. She'd like to be free."

Feeling Nicole's spirit surrounding and reassuring them, Grant wrapped his arms around his sons. "Her spirit is free, and I believe she and Grandpa are looking out for you two. Let's send them our love and say a silent prayer."

Nodding her approval, Kitty put her arm around Mason. After a few moments of silence, she nodded at the captain.

When the engine started again, a sense of lightness filled Grant. Mason and Teddy also wore peaceful expressions. It was as if Nicole had urged them on to live their lives. Perhaps it was time, although they would never forget her.

Kitty raised her face to the breeze and smiled. "I've made a decision you should all know about."

"What's that?" Jen asked.

"I'm buying a beach house here. I met with a real estate agent this morning, and she showed me a perfect place. It's move-in ready, even though the furnishings are desperately outdated. I signed a contract right there."

Jen looked stunned. "You're moving to Crown Island?"

Kitty shook her hair back. "I needed a fresh start in a place I've always loved. I hope

you'll want to spend summers and holidays here. There's room for all of you. I'll keep a small condo or townhome in Tiburon to be close to these two." She put her arms around Mason and Teddy.

Grant was surprised but pleased for her. She needed a change. "When do you close the deal?"

"In ten days. We'll have such fun and make such lovely memories." Kitty smiled and hugged each one.

As they cruised around the island, Kitty pointed out landmarks and shared stories from their past. "Jen, you learned to ride a bike on that boardwalk. And Grant, that's where we used to swim."

As she spoke with renewed excitement in her voice, he considered his mother's words. A fresh start. Maybe that's what he needed, too.

This holiday had already been good for the boys, taking them away from the daily reminders of what they had lost. Here on the island, they seemed carefree, more like the children they should be.

If only the boys could be like that at home in Tiburon again.

Between the mother they missed and the bullies that cast shadows over their school days, Grant suddenly questioned their environment.

It had once seemed so important to him for everything to remain exactly as it had been when their mother was alive.

That had been soothing to all of them in the first years after her death.

But now? The fresh glow on his mother's face was genuine. He hadn't seen that in a long time.

Teddy had been talking about Deb frequently, and even Mason seemed to have formed an attachment to her. His kids were perceptive; they recognized kindness.

As they watched the boys lean over the rail, trying to spot dolphins, Kitty asked, "Will you and the boys stay with me for the rest of the summer? There's plenty of sights on Crown Island for you to shoot."

That was true, and he'd planned on doing that. "What about the house in Tiburon?"

"I don't need to finish the sorting and packing right away. Everything will still be there when the boys return for school."

He gazed out over the sparkling water toward the colorful neighborhoods with their murals and artist colony vibe. There was plenty here he could photograph.

Nodding, he said, "We could all use some island time. I'll help you get settled."

A smile touched his mother's lips. "I have just the project for you."

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Deb compared a handful of paint swatches against the rug in the meeting room.

The final decor was progressing well, but details mattered enormously to her.

The exact shade of blue would make all the difference between coastal elegance and a tacky beach theme.

Every color changed in the light, compounding the problem.

“This one is better,” she said to the head of the painting crew, pointing to a swatch that matched elements in the rug and other furnishings. She held out a sample.

The painter nodded, making a note on his clipboard. “We’ll get that mixed and tested this afternoon.”

Deb’s phone buzzed in her pocket, and she checked the message. Knox had a question about custom light fixtures she’d ordered for the main hallway. She tapped a response and returned to her color deliberations.

A hotel staff member stepped inside the door. The young woman said, “Excuse me, but you have visitors at the front desk.”

Hating to step away, Deb frowned. “Can you put them through on the phone?”

“They asked to see you in person.”

With a sigh, Deb gathered her notes and swatches. “I’ll be back in twenty minutes, so

please take a break. We have another room to sort out, too.”

As she made her way through the hotel’s grand corridors, Deb admired the work Knox’s crews had already completed. The restored crown moldings gleamed against freshly painted walls, and new carpet runners over the refinished hardwood floors muffled her footsteps.

When she reached the lobby, Whitley stood behind the reception desk, his bright banana-yellow jacket standing out like a beacon. He smiled when he saw her, then nodded discreetly toward two familiar figures seated in the lobby’s seating area.

Mason and Teddy.

Her heart leapt at the sight of the boys. They spotted her and jumped to their feet, breaking into broad grins.

“What are you two doing here?” Deb glanced around. “And where’s your father?”

The boys exchanged a quick look that aroused her suspicion.

“He’s taking a nap,” Mason said. “We were bored in the hotel room.”

“So, you just wandered off?” Deb raised an eyebrow.

Teddy nodded eagerly. “We left a note. And we know the hotel pretty well now.”

Whitley joined the conversation. “I’ve been assisting our young guests. They asked if I could help them find you.”

“We wanted to ask you something,” Teddy blurted out. “Will you have dinner with us tonight? Dad said we’re eating at the cafe, so we thought it would be fun if you came,

too.”

“Since you’re already here,” Mason added.

A flutter of unease filled Deb. “Does your father know about this plan?”

The brothers exchanged an uncomfortable look.

Mason’s face flushed. “I don’t think he’ll mind. Aunt Jen said he used to like you a lot.”

“He still does,” Teddy added. “Can you bring Duke to the beach? We saw some people with dogs there.”

Deb narrowed her eyes, growing increasingly suspicious of their motives. As the boys launched into an animated discussion about what games they could play with Duke on the beach, Whitley leaned closer to her, and she stepped aside.

“If I may add some context,” he whispered, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “I believe they’re undertaking some innocent matchmaking efforts.”

Heat rose in Deb’s cheeks. “They have no idea about the history between their father and me.” Whitney had been there when Grant stood her up years ago.

“That makes their instincts all the more remarkable, doesn’t it?”

Before Deb could respond, Teddy tugged at her sleeve. “Will you come? We could have ice cream for dessert.”

Her heart twisted at his hopeful expression. These boys seemed to want maternal warmth in their lives, and they’d latched onto her. It was touching yet concerning.

“That’s very sweet of you to invite me, but I?—”

“There you are.” A woman’s voice interrupted.

Deb turned to see an attractive woman about her age. There was something in her features that reminded her of Grant.

Mason ducked his head. “Aunt Jen. I didn’t know you were here.”

“Obviously,” Jen said, her gaze assessing Deb with undisguised curiosity. “I’ve seen you around the hotel. At the spa, I think. You’re the designer with the dog, right?”

Mason beamed. “We told her about you.”

“I’m Jen, their aunt. I was supposed to be watching these two while my brother napped, but they slipped away while I was on the phone.”

“We asked Deb to dinner,” Teddy said, clearly proud of his efforts.

Jen’s eyebrows rose with interest. “Did you now?”

“I’m afraid I have to decline,” Deb said to the boys. “I have quite a lot of work to do here at the hotel, and I promised Duke a run on the beach later.”

“Can we come?” Teddy asked.

Jen raised her brow in a warning look. “We talked about this. Adults need some alone time. Besides, I bet she’s tough to keep up with.”

Disappointment clouded their faces, and a pang of guilt struck Deb.

Jen turned back to Deb. “I heard you’re the one to beat in the annual marathon.”

“Maybe in my age category.” Sailor beat her last year.

Jen had a curious smile on her face. “I think you should join us later. My mom told me about you.”

That intrigued Deb, but just then, a familiar voice called her name.

Matteo strode across the lobby to her. He was impeccably dressed in tailored slacks and a crisp shirt. A wine carrier was slung over his shoulder, and he greeted her with kisses to both cheeks. “I hoped I’d see you here.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Teddy’s eye bulge, and he slapped a hand to his mouth. Mason nudged him to be quiet.

Deb was surprised. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I have an appointment with Ryan and the director of food and beverage about my wines.” He nodded at Jen and the boys. “Forgive me if I’m interrupting.”

Deb noticed Jen’s gaze flicking between her and Matteo with interest. “This is Mason and Teddy. And Jen, their aunt.”

“A pleasure,” Matteo said, smiling warmly.

The boys, however, seemed less enthusiastic about this new arrival. Teddy’s lower lip jutted out slightly while Mason studied Matteo with poorly concealed suspicion.

Mason tugged at his brother’s sleeve. “Let’s go back to the room before Dad wakes up.”

Jen nodded. “It was nice to meet you finally, Deb. I hope we’ll see you around the hotel. And thanks for making sure the boys didn’t have to wash dishes in exchange for their lunch.”

“I was happy to do it.” Deb smiled, recalling how they met.

As Jen led the boys away, Deb noticed Teddy looking back at her, his little mouth turned down with disappointment. She gave him a little wave of encouragement.

Whitley, who had been keenly observing the entire exchange as if watching a play, cleared his throat. “Mr. Kingston is waiting for you. Shall I show you to the executive offices?”

Matteo turned to Deb. “Would you like to join us?”

“I need to meet with the painters. Good luck with your meeting.” Deb was eager to escape this sudden tangle of relationships surrounding her.

She hurried toward the meeting room, her chest tightening. The boys’ attachment to her was touching but troubling. Jen’s curiosity made Deb wonder if Grant had confided in her their history that she had worked so hard to forget. And Matteo’s appearance had only complicated matters.

Deb drew back her shoulders. She was at work, this was her profession, and with the official reopening event looming, she had little time for personal drama.

While her heart ached for those motherless little boys, Grant and Matteo were distractions.

And in her experience, the men would be fleeting at best.

Still, as she thought of Mason and Teddy, an image of what might have been lodged deep within her.

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Deb set out along the beach, and Duke trotted beside her. With deliberation, she steered away from the Majestic Hotel and its complications. The tide was low, exposing a wide stretch of packed sand perfect for running.

“Come on, Duke,” she called, picking up her pace. She was eager to burn off the stress of the past few days.

Despite her best intentions, she’d spent a restless night, her dreams filled with memories of a younger Grant, and the love they’d shared.

Those images juxtaposed with the present—Mason and Teddy’s hopeful faces, Matteo’s easy invitations, and Grant’s complicated reemergence.

Pushing harder, her legs burned. Breathe in, breathe out. Life had a rhythm.

Duke raced ahead as the beach curved toward a series of rock formations marking the boundary of a small cove. Few tourists ventured this far from the main beach, which was why Deb had chosen this route.

Only Kaito’s Rockin’ Roll restaurant loomed ahead. Most people drove there and parked.

As she rounded the bend, memories surged to mind. She and Grant walking this stretch of beach, hands clasped, talking about dreams for their future. His arm wrapped around her shoulders, watching a sunset from those very rocks. The nervous flutter the first time he’d kissed her.

Deb shook her head and blinked again.

Duke circled back, whining when he saw her heated face.

She slowed, catching her breath. "I'm okay, boy."

Moments later, she stopped. With her hands on her hips, she stared out at the ocean, chastising herself again. This was ridiculous. She was a grown woman with a successful career and a full life. She never let men encroach on her head space. Why was she letting old feelings with Grant resurface?

Nothing would come of them.

But they never really went away, a quiet voice in her mind answered.

She scrubbed her hands over her inflamed cheeks. Whatever she might have imagined years ago wasn't to be, then or now. Because a relationship took two people, and one had already proven himself adept at fleeing the scene.

Deb whistled to Duke to resume her run.

A few minutes later, from the corner of her eye, she caught sight of three figures. One waved his arms and called out.

Her heart lurched as she recognized Mason's voice. Slowing again, she saw him waving with Teddy beside him. And there, just behind them, stood Grant, watching her.

They were leaving Kaito's, of all places.

Duke barked at the sight of the boys and bounded toward them before Deb could stop

him.

“Duke!” Teddy cried with delight as her dog yelped, tail wagging with wild abandon.

There was no avoiding them now. Catching her breath, Deb strolled to where they stood despite her discomfort.

“Dad took us for sushi and rolls,” Teddy said. “It was great.”

Mason knelt to hug Duke. “We’re walking back to the hotel.”

Grant came up behind them, looking at Deb with interest. “How’s your run?”

“Always feels good when you finish.” Deb was acutely aware of how she must look. Hot and sweaty, dressed in running shorts and a faded tank top.

“It’s great that you’re still running.”

His voice carried a smoky warmth that made her pulse quicken, just as it always had.

“I’m hardly ancient. Did you stop?”

He shrugged. “A few years ago.”

Instantly, Deb wondered if Grant and his wife ran together before she died.

An awkward silence fell between them, filled only by the sound of waves and the boy’s chatter with Duke.

Mason looked up. “Can he come back to the hotel so we can get the frisbee? He likes that a lot.”

Deb knew he did, but she couldn't prolong this interaction. "I'm afraid not."

Teddy's face lit up with an idea. "Can we walk Duke for you sometime?"

Before Deb could respond, Mason picked up a piece of driftwood and hurled it down the beach. Duke immediately gave chase, barking joyfully. The boys exchanged a glance, then took off after the dog, leaving Deb and Grant standing alone.

The deliberateness of their actions wasn't lost on Deb. She whistled for Duke to return, but the boys were all over him now. Although her dog wriggled to break free, he finally succumbed to the fun.

Grant chuckled. "They're not subtle, are they?"

His laugh triggered another cascade of memories in her. "About as subtle as a tsunami."

"I'm sorry about their efforts."

"It's kind of sweet." Deb ran her hands over her hair, tucking windblown strands under her bandana headband. As she did, she caught his gaze lingering on her legs.

Grant turned to her. "Look, I know things are awkward between us. Would you have dinner with me tomorrow? Just the two of us, so we can put the past to rest and act normally."

The directness of his question caught her off guard. "Why do you think we need to do that?"

"I'd like for us to start over." His voice had dropped a note and sounded more intimate.

“What do you mean by that?”

When he reached for her hand, the unexpected contact sent a jolt through her.

His eyes were bright with emotion. “Something is drawing us all together. You, me, the boys. I can’t be the only one who feels it.”

Grant’s hand blazed in hers, sending her heart racing as if she was still running.

“Tell me you don’t feel anything, and I’ll back off.”

“Grant, I...” Suddenly, her throat closed, and she couldn’t get words out.

“Have dinner with me. No pressure, no expectations. Just old friends. My mother has bought a beach house here, so we’re staying for the rest of the summer. Don’t make it awkward, at least not for the boys.”

His request was reasonable. “Nothing fancy.”

Grant’s smile was immediate. “I would have suggested dinner at the Majestic, but with my family there, it might get crowded.”

“Cuppa Jo’s will be better,” Deb said.

Before they could confirm a time, a shriek rang out from down the beach. They whipped around to see Teddy on the ground, crying and holding his foot. Duke was licking his face.

“Oh, my gosh,” Grant cried. He dropped Deb’s hand and sprinted toward his son.

Deb raced right beside him.

Grant skidded to a stop beside Teddy, who clutched his foot, rocking with pain. Tears streamed down his face, and blood seeped from beneath his fingers.

Mason looked up, his eyes grave with concern. "He slipped on the wet rocks."

"Let me see, little guy." Grant moved Teddy's hands away. An open cut sliced across the boy's heel.

Deb leaned in to inspect the injury. "That might need stitches. We need to stop the bleeding."

Quickly, she untied her bandana and wrapped it around Teddy's heel to cover the wound and stem the flow of blood.

Grant cradled the boy. "Thanks, that was smart thinking."

Duke whined, drawing her attention to the rock.

"What do you have there?" Deb stooped beside him. She spied a broken bottle that had washed up onto the shore and wedged by a rock. "Good boy." She plucked it from the crevice so it wouldn't harm another person.

Grant hugged Teddy close. "Where's the nearest emergency clinic?"

"It's farther down the island. But we're near Beach View Lane. April's mother was an emergency room nurse. She can assess the severity." Deb smoothed a hand over Teddy's hot forehead, wishing she could alleviate his pain.

"I remember," Grant said quietly.

Teddy clutched Deb's hand, his fingers feeling so small in her palm. "Don't leave,"

he pleaded, his face streaked with tears and sand.

“I won’t.” Deb’s heart clenched at his distress. She pulled her phone from her armband and called. April answered on the first ring, and Deb explained the situation.

When she hung up, she smiled at Teddy. “We’re in luck. Let’s go.”

Grant scooped Teddy into his arms.

With Grant carrying Teddy and Mason staying close to his brother’s side, they made their way off the beach toward the neighborhood street. Duke trotted beside Grant as if to look out for the boy.

“It’s not far,” Deb said, still holding Teddy’s hand. “Ella Raines was the best nurse on the island for decades. She’ll know what to do.”

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“Y ou’re a brave young man,” Ella said to Teddy.

The boy sat with his leg extended at her kitchen table. Deb stood on one side of him and Grant on the other, each holding a hand. Mason fidgeted at the table, petting Duke as he watched the process.

Ella brought a bottle of sterile saline wound cleanser from her emergency bag. Peering through magnifiers perched on her nose, she cleansed Teddy’s wound with care.

Deb and Grant tried to distract him by talking about Duke and fun things to do on Crown Island.

Deb smiled as she watched Ella. April’s mother had tended to plenty of minor injuries when they were young.

Deb had spent her share of time right where Teddy sat now.

She still bore the scars of their escapades, but what fun they’d had tearing around the island.

They’d learned how to be independent and think for themselves, skills that served them well.

“Do you think that cut needs stitches?” Grant asked.

Ella worked methodically. “It’s long, but it’s a clean, shallow cut, and the bleeding

has stopped. I have steri-strips. Those butterfly bandages will hold the skin together sufficiently to heal, so he shouldn't need further treatment."

"You got lucky," Grant said to Teddy.

Ella held up a finger to Teddy. "However, you'll need to keep that wound dry, my little man. No swimming until it heals. While salt water might be healing, the ocean can have bacteria that we don't want in that cut."

"Do you hear that, son?" Grant rubbed his hand across Teddy's shoulder while Ella tended to him. Catching Deb's eye, he mouthed, Thank you .

Deb's heart tightened at that simple gesture. She looked up to see April watching from the doorway, taking in the scene. Her friend would surely have comments later.

"There, that's it," Ella said, removing her glasses.

Grant breathed out in relief. "Thank you for tending to him."

Ella smiled and gestured to Deb and April. "I've done that countless times on these two and their friends. They were fearless, so they sometimes got into trouble."

Teddy and Mason grinned and looked at Deb for verification.

Deb nodded at that. "It's true. But we also figured out how to get out of trouble."

Teddy grinned with pride. "You weren't afraid of anything?"

"Maybe at first, but we pushed each other. Like tearing down the Queen's Flight on our bikes without hands."

April laughed. “We still do that.”

When Teddy looked interested, April quickly added, “It’s a little dangerous, but Deb knows other places she can take you.”

“What are you afraid of now?” Mason asked.

Deb was surprised at that. “Not much anymore.” Yet, that wasn’t quite true. As she looked into Grant’s eyes, the emotion she saw there was plenty scary.

Smiling, Grant added, “Deb was the most adventurous girl I’d ever met.”

Ella studied Grant as if trying to place him.

Mason cocked his head. “Dad, I thought you just met her.”

Grant coughed into his hand. “Didn’t I say?”

“Say what?” Teddy stared at him with a quizzical expression.

While Deb waited for Grant to recover, the two boys looked at their father with renewed interest.

Mason asked, “Is that true that you’ve met before?”

With Grant’s face turning red, Deb spoke up lest he choke on the truth. “Oh, my goodness, that was such a long time ago. I can hardly remember.”

That was general enough, she figured. Whatever their father wanted to tell them was fine with her, but that was up to him. She wasn’t going to change whatever narrative he had going.

“Does anyone here like chocolate chip cookies?” April asked. “We made some this afternoon, and we can’t eat all of these.” She turned to Grant before giving one to Teddy. “Is it okay if the boys have some?”

“Sure. They haven’t had homemade cookies in a while.”

“Not since Mom—” Mason cut himself off and threw a look at Teddy, who was already biting into his cookie. “Thank you,” he added, ducking his head.

Deb’s heart went out to the boys. Not that Grant couldn’t take care of them. Since she’d gotten over her initial misguided impression, she’d discovered that he was quite a good father. The boys adored him, and he doted on them.

April filled the silence. “I make them without nuts in case anyone has allergies.” She gave them each a cookie and put a few more in a bag for them to take to the hotel.

Ella tidied the area and washed her hands. “Now, you’ll need transportation back to the Majestic, won’t you?”

“I could carry him,” Grant began.

“Nonsense,” Ella said. “April can drive you back in the golf cart. And Deb, I presume you were out for a run.”

“Duke and I will head home.”

As Ella watched Teddy try to hop on one foot, she put a finger to her chin. “I think I have something that will help you.” She opened a storage closet nearby and withdrew a pair of small crutches.

Teddy’s eyes widened, and he grinned. “Cool.”

Ella handed them to the boy. "One of my granddaughters needed these a few summers ago, so you can use them until you can put pressure on that foot again. Only for a few days, I imagine."

"I'll adjust those for him." Grant did and gave them to Teddy, who was thrilled to have something new to experiment with.

Teddy tucked them under his arms and swung his lean body over them. "Hey, this is fun."

Grant chuckled. "Glad you feel that way about them." Shoving his hands into his pockets, he turned to Deb. "Can we drop you off at your house?"

Deb scratched Duke's head. "Thanks, but that's a small golf cart. I live close, and Duke looks like he wants to finish our run."

"Then we should go. It's been a full day, and they're tired." Grant's face brightened. "Cuppa Jo's tomorrow?"

He suggested a time, and Deb agreed. Why not, she thought. A fresh start to a nice friendship. That's all this was. They were adults now.

April picked up the cookies and motioned to the boys. "Come on, you two. I'll show you the golf cart."

"Cool." Mason offered his brother an arm for support. "I'll spot you on the crutches."

"I can do it by myself," Teddy said, grinning.

While the boys followed April to the garage, Ella turned to Grant. "You seem very familiar. Did you visit Crown Island often?"

“My family came every summer.”

A slow smile spread on Ella’s face. “Why, of course. You and Deb?—”

“We were friends,” Deb said, downplaying their relationship. She and Grant used to visit April. They played music and danced in the backyard while Ella made sandwiches or treats for them.

“I remember visiting here,” Grant said, looking around. “You were our safe place when we wanted to hide from our parents.”

“Hey, my parents were terrific,” Deb said, jumping to their defense.

“I wasn’t talking about yours,” Grant said.

Ella inclined her head. “What about your parents?”

“Wait, let me clarify,” Grant looked slightly flustered. “My parents only wanted the best for us. But my sister and I didn’t always agree with their assessment.”

Deb arched an eyebrow at Ella, who caught her meaning. Most of the locals weren’t considered good enough for the summer people. She folded her arms, considering that.

However, that was a long time ago. Deb didn’t need to prove herself to anyone now.

Certainly not Grant.

“See you at Cuppa Jo’s tomorrow,” Grant said with a note of hopefulness in his voice.

“See you then.”

After Grant left and the garage door closed, Ella motioned for Deb to sit down.

“Before you run home, do you want to tell me what’s going on between you two?”

“Absolutely nothing,” Deb replied, petting Duke.

Ella brushed her hands and sat across from Deb. “That’s the biggest bit of nothing I’ve ever seen. The way he looks at you, why, that man is still sweet on you. But you’re still hurt from way back when.”

Deb couldn’t keep reliving those feelings. She had to put this memory behind her.

“We dated a little, but it didn’t mean much.”

Ella shook her head. “I remember it very clearly. He never showed up at the dance, and you spent the night here, utterly devastated. I even wept for you, dear girl. You were both in love.”

“Maybe so, but I got over him.”

Ella laced her hands and leaned forward. “He’s not wearing a ring.”

“His wife passed away a few years ago.”

Ella was like an aunt to her, and this is the conversation Deb’s mother would have with her if she knew Grant was back.

“So, what’s this about Cuppa Jo’s? Is it a date?”

“We’re meeting there to talk and call a truce. And that’s all there is to it. I have a good life. A great if slightly annoying family, the career and recognition I always

wanted, a fabulous home decorated just for me, and the best dog in the world. What more do I need?"

"First, let's make a distinction between need and want," Ella said, tapping the table. "It's okay to want it all in life."

Deb felt her face flush. "I realize that."

Ella rested her chin on her hand and peered at Deb as if looking into her soul. "Second chances don't come around every day. At my age, finding love again was the farthest thing from my mind."

"You had a wonderful life with Dr. August."

"We did it all," Ella said, nodding. "We built a hospital for the community, and though it seemed we would never have a family, April was delivered to us. And she gave us two beautiful granddaughters in Junie and Maileah, who are as different as they can be. No, I couldn't have asked for more in life."

But I'm not foolish enough to turn down a second chance on principle. "

Deb smiled at her. "Meaning Whitley, of course."

"August and I had known him for years and always thought highly of him. My husband would approve now, I'm sure. Why shouldn't I have another chance to care for someone who also cares for me?"

"It's not the same," Deb said. "Those boys need a mother."

"Their mother is gone. They need people who'll simply love them."

She'd already lost her heart to them, but it was more complicated than that. Deb pushed her chair back and stood.

"I don't know why we're even talking about this. They're leaving soon. Grant has his life in Tiburon. Maybe a girlfriend, for all I know."

Ella folded her arms. "You don't want to get hurt again."

"No one hurts me anymore. And certainly not Grant." Deb snapped her fingers toward her dog. "Come on, Duke. Let's finish that run."

After hugging Ella, Deb hurried out, sprinting as far as she could away from the thought that there might be a future with Grant.

There never was, and there never would be.

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Grant opened the door to Cuppa Jo's, a vintage diner that was clearly the place to be. Laughter, chatter, and the aroma of hamburgers and fries spilled out. He remembered coming here with Deb years ago, although it looked different now.

A younger woman with short dark hair greeted him. "Welcome to Cuppa Jo's. I'm Jo. How many?"

"Table for two." Feeling nervous about tonight, he'd arrived fifteen minutes early. "I'm meeting someone here soon. Maybe you know Deb Whitaker?"

"Everyone on the island knows Deb," Jo said, grinning. "I'll seat you in my best booth." She led the way through the crowd.

Cuppa Jo's buzzed with the excitement of a Friday night. People in animated conversations packed the red vinyl booths.

Adrian, the owner of Regal Bikes, played guitar on a small stage area. As he strummed Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville" song, Adrian recognized him and nodded.

Grant had rented bikes from him for the boys a few days ago at Regal Bikes. Adrian hadn't remembered him from years ago, and Grant didn't remind him. Now that his mother was buying a beach house, he would see Adrian about purchasing bikes for all of them.

Jo stopped beside a semi-circular booth and tapped a young guy who looked barely twenty on the shoulder. "Hey, would you guys sit at the bar? Deb is coming in. It's

worth a banana split to you.”

“Cool, let’s go.” He grabbed his girlfriend’s hand and slid out.

“You didn’t need to kick them out,” Grant said.

“Oh, yes, I did.” Jo laughed. “Deb’s a VIP around here. Besides, that’s my kid brother.”

Grant smiled at the small-town vibe going on here. “In that case, put their desserts on me.”

Jo put a hand on her hip, appraising him. “I like your style. What’s your name? I want to remember you.”

After introducing himself, Grant slid into the booth, facing the entrance so he could see Deb enter. A familiar discomfort tightened his shoulders. Even after three years, he felt awkward being alone in social situations.

It was hard to fit in when half of you was missing.

A server wearing a red-and-white striped shirt with a name tag placed two glasses of water on the table. “I’m Candy, and I’ll be taking care of you and Deb tonight. Do you need a menu?”

“Sure do,” Grant replied.

Candy handed one to him. “Thought so. You’re new around here, aren’t you?”

He didn’t want to bore her with his history, so he simply nodded. “We’ll be here for the rest of the summer.”

“Who’s we ?”

“I have two boys. You’ll probably see them here. They have big appetites.”

“We’re known for the best burgers and fries on the island.

Deb likes the avocado burger and the sweet potato fries.

Our fresh fish and chips, chili-cheese fries, and ice cream shakes are good, too.

Or if you’re health conscious, we serve green smoothies, salads with local produce, and vegan burgers. ”

Grant thanked her and studied the menu for a few moments, which gave him something to do. With Jen’s encouragement, he was starting to go out again, but it still felt odd to be on his own. He hoped Deb would arrive soon.

A few minutes later when she did, Grant caught his breath.

Deb paused in the doorway, scanning the crowd for him. He rose to meet her, but she saw him and cut through the crowd. She moved with the same easy confidence that had initially impressed him.

And it still did. His pulse quickened at the sight of her, just as it always had.

She was dressed casually in a pink knit top, white golf skirt, and sneakers.

She wasn’t trying to impress him. While her outfit wasn’t date wear, the short skirt showcased her long, toned legs.

After seeing her running on the beach, he’d thought about taking up running again.

Feeling a little self-conscious, he sucked in his abs.

The right woman will do that to you , he thought, mentally ordering new running shoes.

His khaki trousers, blue collared shirt, and loafers suddenly seemed a little overdressed. He blew out a breath to calm his nerves.

Sliding from the booth to meet her, he knocked over a glass. As water seeped across the table, he quickly grabbed the napkins Candy had left to sop it up. He already had one strike against him for clumsiness.

Feeling embarrassed, he said, “Oh, hi. You look well.”

Inwardly, he winced. How lame , he thought. He’d be talking about the weather next if he wasn’t careful. He needed to do better, especially if he was competing against the worldly Matteo.

Grant couldn’t begin to match the other man’s sophisticated accent. Jen told him about meeting Matteo. A little later that day, they were at the Library Bar when Matteo came in with Ryan Kingston to talk to the bartender about Matteo’s wines.

“Good to see you.” Deb slid into the opposite side, maintaining a distance between them.

“This place is packed tonight. Looks like a Friday night tradition.” He gestured toward Adrian. “The live music is nice.”

“Adrian has been playing here for years. Jo treats the local musicians well.” She motioned at Candy. “Where are the boys tonight?”

“They’re with my mom.” He paused, trying to read her noncommittal body language.

Definitely not a date. His shoulders sagged a little.

She laced her fingers and leaned forward. “How is Teddy doing on those crutches?”

Grant warmed to the genuine interest in her voice. “He’s fine, and I think he enjoys the attention. Looks like the wound will close well, just as Ella said. I sure appreciate your quick thinking.”

“I was glad to do it.” Deb started to say something, but she held back.

“April’s mother is as kind as I remember.”

“I was surprised you did.”

“I remember everything. Even this place.” His heart tightened, and he longed to reach for her hand.

“So do I,” she said, looking down. Her forehead furrowed slightly.

Before she could bring up his failure to contact her again, he leaned forward, taking a chance. “The boys talk a lot about you. You’ve made quite an impression on them.”

Deb’s expression softened in a way that surprised him. “They’re wonderful kids. Smart, curious, funny, well mannered. I know I didn’t think so at first, but you’re doing something right.”

He chuckled at that memory. “At times, I wonder if I’m enough for them. Kids don’t come with an owner’s manual.”

“I guess everyone makes it up as they go. But you’re their father, so that counts for a lot.”

Candy whisked to their table with another glass of water and a stack of napkins. Without commenting, she swept the soggy ones away, much to Grant’s relief.

Deb smiled at that. “Candy keeps this place running with Jo.”

“I can see that, and she gave me some recommendations.”

Candy’s smile was quick. “What can I get you two tonight?”

Deb didn’t hesitate. “A hamburger with Monterey Jack cheese, grilled Anaheim chiles, and extra avocado. And sweet potato fries with that garlic aioli Jo makes.”

Grant put down the menu. “Sounds good. I’ll have the same.”

After Candy left, Deb grinned. “You used to tease me about my big appetite.”

“I liked that about you.”

“Jo’s food is too good to pass up.” Deb’s laugh was easy for the first time since she’d arrived. “Remember when we used to hit that fish taco stand after surfing?”

“Those were the best. Is that place still around?”

“Sure is, and people still dance on the beach there. You should take Teddy and Mason there.”

The memories came more easily for him now, tinged with warmth rather than pain.

Grant relaxed in Deb's presence while Adrian transitioned to a bluesy ballad.

This might be a good night, after all.

They fell into comfortable conversation about old times, talking about their friends' beach parties where they'd roasted marshmallows over driftwood fires.

They reminisced about days spent surfing and exploring the nature reserve.

That summer they sailed around the island every chance they got and trained to run a marathon to raise funds for charity.

Deb sipped her water. "Running together was fun."

"Maybe for you. You always won."

"I was used to competing against older brothers."

When their food arrived, Grant watched Deb attack her burger with the same enthusiasm he remembered. Nothing delicate or self-conscious about it. She was simply enjoying her meal.

People relaxed here. That's what he remembered most about Crown Island.

Deb grinned at him. "You should bring the boys here for breakfast sometime. Although I promised them before their dad showed up."

Grant had to know more about the intervening years. "You never wanted to have children of your own?"

Deb's hand stilled halfway to her mouth, and she put her burger down. A pained

expression flickered across her face.

“That’s not a question you should ask. You, of all people.”

He quickly realized his mistake, but now he was in deep. “I’m sorry. Did you ever marry?”

She shook her head. “Never got the timing right.”

“I didn’t mean?—”

“Look, I love kids. Never having children doesn’t mean not wanting them.” Her voice was steady, but Grant caught the underlying tension. “It’s not always a choice, but even if it is, you should respect that.”

Heat gathered around his neck. He wasn’t a caveman, so why was he acting like one? Nerves . “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...”

“It’s fine.” She met his gaze. “I’ve made peace with it. I’m close to April’s daughters, Junie and Maileah.”

The revelation hit him with unexpected force. If he’d called her, they might have married. They might have had children of their own.

This glimpse into her private heartache reminded him how much time had passed and how much life had happened between then and now.

“I had no idea,” he said quietly. “That was my fault, wasn’t it?”

“Don’t flatter yourself that you were the only man interested in me. I had other opportunities I could have taken advantage of.” She punctuated her words with a

sweet potato fry, signaling the end of that conversation.

But he couldn't let it go. "That was presumptuous of me, wasn't it?"

"At least you realize that." She shook her head. "Still, Mason and Teddy are lucky to have you."

Their easy conversation stalled, and a fresh concern took root in him.

"The boys will miss you when they leave for school. I know that's a few weeks off, but would you send them a postcard afterward?"

Just to let them know you're thinking of them.

It would mean the world to them, and I worry that leaving will be tough on them.

They haven't had anyone like you in their lives in a long time. "

Grant let his words trail off, hesitant to voice his fear. He could see the love for Deb in their eyes and knew another loss would hurt them.

Deb seemed to weigh that request. Finally, she said, "Our friendship doesn't have to end when you leave. We can stay in touch. I know the boys would like that."

At once, Grant sensed that she was protecting herself. He brushed his fingers against hers. "Maybe we all need each other a little right now."

"We can make it a good summer for them."

When she responded to his touch by linking a finger with his, Grant thought his heart would explode. This was enough of a beginning for him.

Adrian picked up the beat with an old Beach Boys song, “California Girls,” and the crowded diner burst into the chorus.

Relieved at the interruption in this emotionally charged conversation, Grant joined in, and Deb followed, snapping her fingers and swaying to the music like they had years ago.

When the song ended, their conversation drifted to lighter topics. After finishing their meal, Grant walked her outside.

Deb stopped by a row of colorful beach cruisers.

“Still riding around the island?” he asked.

“It’s easy, and I like it.”

Grant lifted her bike out for her, not that she couldn’t have done that. “I thought I’d buy bikes for the boys from Regal Bikes. For myself and my mother, too.”

Deb faced him with a thoughtful look in her eyes. “Then I’ll be seeing you around, I imagine.”

In the balmy night air filled with the sound of waves, Grant felt the weight of everything unsaid pressing between them.

“Thanks for meeting me,” he said. “I hope things are better between us now.”

She traced the bike’s handlebars. “It’s always good to catch up with old friends.”

A question sprang to mind and slipped out before he could stop himself. “Do you ever think about what might have happened if we’d managed to connect back then?”

Deb shook her head. “We were too young to have known what we wanted.”

“But we’re older now.” He placed his hand over hers.

Her fingers stilled under his touch. For a heartbeat, she didn’t pull away.

The old spark between them was growing stronger, though now it was tempered by experience. They had a chance. He could feel it.

Deb pulled back. “I should go.”

The rejection stung, but he understood the wisdom in it.

And then, on impulse, she stepped forward to give him a friendly hug. “Thanks for dinner.”

At the sudden touch of her skin, his heart nearly stopped.

Her arms lingered around him a little longer than necessary, her careful words and actions at odds.

He brought his arms around her waist and breathed in the sweet scent of her hair.

She still cares.

Finally, Deb pulled away and swung her leg over the bike. “Take care of yourself, Grant. And those sweet kids.”

He watched her cycle away, feeling more attracted to her than ever. The woman she’d become was everything he’d once glimpsed in her, now fully realized. Intelligent, strong, independent, compassionate.

And those legs, those lips...

He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. Was the distance between them too far to bridge?
She was right about his leaving. Already, he cared too much to hurt her again.

Was a month long enough to change their lives? Wondering about that, he watched
her figure disappear into the night.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:52 am

O n Saturday morning, Deb arrived at the address Kitty had given her and stepped from her vintage Corvette convertible. She'd brought that instead of her SUV today. After last night with Grant at Cuppa Jo's, she needed to feel a brisk ocean breeze on her face.

Despite her resolution to part as friends, she and Grant spent the evening rolling back the years. She found herself yearning to feel his lips on hers. The heat building between them was almost too much for her. All night, she'd ached to stroke his face and chest as she once had.

She fanned herself. What was it in Grant's touch that Matteo lacked?

Last night, she'd hardly slept at all, trying to make sense of it. Finally, she realized it wasn't the memories of their young love that attracted her; it was the man he was now.

She opened her car door, shaking off thoughts of Grant. Would Kitty be able to tell?

Pausing in the driveway, Deb shifted into her professional mode to organize her thoughts. She would think about Grant later.

Deb took in the exterior view of the beach house Kitty had under contract. Soft turquoise splashed the exterior. Balconies jutted toward the sea, offering front-row seats to spectacular sunsets.

She could certainly work with this.

Kitty stood at the entry wearing a vivid Pucci-style summer dress. Her real estate agent was also with her, though she looked a little harried.

Deb greeted Kitty, adding, “And Mariella, how are you? I haven’t seen you much this summer.”

“I’ve been busy with clients,” the real estate agent replied. “In fact, I have another showing. Would you mind locking up when you’ve finished?”

“Happy to,” Deb said.

“I’m glad you could come on such short notice,” Kitty said. “You’re probably busy since that magazine article came out.”

“I’ve had several inquiries.”

Deb stepped through the entrance of the beach house, following the clicks of Kitty’s low-heeled sandals.

Kitty paused in the central entertaining room with her arms spread wide and her eyes bright with delight. “Don’t you love it? In a few days, it’s all mine.”

Deb walked around with a critical eye. Sunlight streamed through salt-stained windows, casting whimsical patterns across her path. The furnishings were rattan, serviceable, but dated and worn. “You sure acted fast.”

Kitty turned in a slow circle. “Sometimes you just know, don’t you?”

Deb nodded, though her chest tightened. She knew that feeling, the certainty that seized you before common sense ruined it.

Like her evening with Grant. Was her emotion still etched on her face?

“Let’s see the rest of it,” Deb said.

“This way.” Kitty gestured for her to follow.

They walked through the kitchen, which had been renovated only a few years ago with weathered, white-washed wooden planks. A large, white enameled stove anchored the work area, and a rustic table and fireplace added warmth to the space.

Gazing around, Kitty clasped her hands. “I love the kitchen’s brightness and simplicity. I can’t imagine changing much, although I’d like to make it my own.”

“We can do that. What sort of style do you have in mind?”

“Relaxed ease. I want a beach house my grandchildren can play in.”

They moved through the rest of the house on that level, where a large bedroom opened to a private patio and spa area with a pool.

Kitty swept her hand across the area. “This will need patio furniture and lots of plants.”

“I can transform this into a lush, restful oasis for you,” Deb said, making mental notes.

Next, they climbed the stairs to the second level, where more bedrooms opened off a central hallway. They chatted about the furnishings needed for each guest room.

“I’d like one room decorated for Jen and her husband when they come to stay. And these two for Grant and the boys. Unless I can talk them into staying,” she added

airily. “Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Deb could only nod, wondering what Kitty had in mind.

The other woman started up another flight. “The crow’s nest is my favorite part.”

The top level was full of windows and light, offering a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean. Deb stood by the railing, watching waves roll toward the shoreline in endless repetition.

Not unlike her dating life.

“What would you suggest up here?” Kitty asked.

Deb turned from the windows. “I can imagine small gatherings with groups of comfortable lounging chairs for sunsets and whale-watching. Or we go with sisal rugs and Adirondack chairs.”

Kitty inclined her head and smiled. “I like that last idea.”

“Structurally, it’s sound,” Deb said. “The layout works well for entertaining.” She paused, studying Kitty’s face. “Aside from style and appearance, how do you want your home to feel? How will you live in it?”

Kitty turned her gaze toward the ocean. “My other home is more formal. Heavy furniture, antiques, photos from Jock’s family.

It’s beautiful, but it no longer suits my taste.

I want a home that’s comfortable and easy to care for.

One that feels welcoming, even when I'm alone.

It should be bright and happy for my new phase of life.

I can hardly wait to invite friends to stay. ”

Deb knew what she meant. “And you probably want it ready fairly soon.”

“New beds and fresh linens, of course. Grant and the boys and I can make do with what's here for the rest of the summer. But I'd love to have the new look ready by the winter holidays for my family and snowbird friends to visit.”

Deb walked to another window, this one facing in the opposite direction toward the Majestic Hotel. The red roof was a beacon in the distance.

She turned back to the ocean. “If you want to keep the soft turquoise exterior, then with this ocean view, I'd bring those colors inside. Use turquoise and white as your base shades, with pops of pink and daffodil yellow.”

Kitty's eyes lit. “That will be so cheerful and uplifting. Like the bright prints I've always worn here.”

“That's what I had in mind,” Deb said.

“You're very observant. I feel like I'm in excellent hands with you.”

“I can show you some ideas in a few days.”

As they descended the main staircase, Kitty said, “Crown Island has always been a wonderful place for kids. I wanted Teddy and Mason to experience it. Thank you for helping me do that.”

“It’s my pleasure. I love to see families making memories here.”

Kitty looked at her with a curious expression. “It’s a sweet place to raise children, I imagine. Insulated enough to feel safe, but close enough to the mainland for shopping and cultural activities.”

“That’s what we all enjoy here.”

“The last few years have been difficult for Grant and the boys,” Kitty said, confiding in her. “What with Nicole’s death and then the school bullies, it’s been hard for them.”

Deb was surprised and saddened by this. “That’s terrible. I hope this coming school year is better for Teddy and Mason.”

They walked through the remaining rooms, with Kitty pointing out features she loved and changes she envisioned. “I can just imagine filling this home with friends old and new.”

Kitty and Jock had been known for their summer parties. “I remember how much you enjoyed entertaining.”

“We loved having interesting people around.” After clearing the last step, Kitty turned to her. “And what about you? Are you seeing anyone special?”

The question caught Deb off guard. She’d been admiring the curve of the banister, imagining it draped with garland for the holidays. Just when she’d finally gotten her mind off Grant, last night came rushing back to her. But she couldn’t tell Kitty that.

Deb blinked, forcing a smile. “I have many good friends here on Crown Island.”

“I’m sure you do, but are you dating someone?” Kitty’s tone was warm but probing. “I know it’s personal, but Grant mentioned you were unattached, and I thought perhaps I might know of someone for you.”

Deb didn’t want to sound lonely or needy, not that it was any of Kitty’s business, though she was persistent. “Actually, I am seeing someone new.”

“How exciting for you.” Kitty continued her friendly line of questioning. “Is he a local? Who is he, and what does he do?”

“Matteo. He owns vineyards in Napa and Argentina.”

“How intriguing. And will Matteo attend the grand reopening with you?”

Deb told Kitty he would. That wasn’t entirely a lie. She’d planned on going solo to be free to circulate for business connections, but Matteo would be seated next to her at dinner.

A thought struck her. If Kitty mentioned this conversation to Grant, and he thought she was unavailable, maybe he’d stop looking at her with a longing she found increasingly hard to resist. He was leaving soon, after all. His life was elsewhere.

“I’ve heard it’s going to be the party of the summer,” Kitty said.

“That’s the plan. Ryan Kingston has poured millions into the renovation, and he’s sparing nothing for the grand reopening.”

They finished the tour on one of the lower patios, where doors opened to a deck that needed new railings but offered splendid ocean views.

Shading her eyes, Kitty asked, “What do you really think of the house?”

“I knew the former owners, and I’ve always loved it. Almost every room has an ocean view. The house should lend itself beautifully to your vision.”

Kitty smiled broadly. “Does that mean you’ll take the job?”

Deb bit her lip in hesitation. Working for Grant’s mother might also involve him and the boys. But then she thought of the Hunts, the couple that was so far apart on their aesthetic preference that one of them was bound to hate the outcome.

No matter what she did, it was a sure plan for disaster.

Deb didn’t have any other jobs lined up yet, and Kitty could use her help. She thought how much Teddy and Mason would enjoy spending the rest of their summer in this house. The idea filled her with happiness.

“I’d love to work with you, Kitty.”

“Wonderful.” The other woman clapped her hands. “After Grant and the boys leave, we’ll have plenty of time to focus without distractions.”

Why did hearing that feel like losing a piece of her life she’d just rediscovered?

“I’ll draw up a proposal with preliminary ideas for you,” Deb replied, careful to keep her voice steady despite the cold wave of reality.

“Perfect. And please work with Grant on the placement of his photography. I want his nature works prominently featured.”

Deb wasn’t expecting that. “I have someone I usually work with to hang artwork.”

“I’d still like to have Grant’s input. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Not at all,” Deb replied, concealing her surprise.

“Then that’s settled.” Kitty walked ahead toward the entrance.

Deb followed, trying to sort out her thoughts.

She had designed plenty of rooms around children’s artwork, prized antiques, or travel souvenirs.

Personal mementos brought character to homes.

Her designs weren’t meant to be picture-perfect settings devoid of personality, especially in a beach house built for relaxation.

Many galleries showcased Grant’s nature photography, so incorporating it into a beach house shouldn’t pose a challenge.

That’s not what disturbed her.

At the door, Kitty extended her hand. “I know this new house will be exactly what we all need.”

Deb shook her hand, acknowledging their intent. It occurred to her that Grant might not know what Kitty had proposed. He hadn’t mentioned it last night.

Still, Deb would make it work.

She was a professional, and she was already mentally calculating a timeline and determining the necessary furnishings. Work was her refuge when relationships became complicated.

Only work made sense when emotions failed. She would not let Grant derail her design job for Kitty.

As she walked toward her car, Deb told herself that designing Kitty's bright, happy new beginning was exactly what she needed.

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Deb turned the ignition in her car, still reeling from Kitty's announcement about Grant's involvement in her beach house interiors. She'd thought she could be friends with him, but unless she could harness her feelings, she'd be lurching toward heartache again.

As she turned on the main road, her phone rang. She glanced at the screen and saw her friend Babe's name. This was a call she'd been waiting for. Quickly, she tapped a control to answer it.

"Guess what just arrived at my shop," Babe said, sounding excited. Without waiting, she added, "The new dresses for the grand event at the Majestic. I received several in your size that I think you'll like, and you get first choice."

"Thank goodness. I've run out of options."

With so much work to do before the party, Deb couldn't spare another day.

She'd already spent a day in San Diego trying to find something suitable, and the thought of dedicating another day to shopping in Orange County or Los Angeles didn't fill her with joy.

This season, most of what she'd tried on was too sexy or too dowdy, with little in between.

"These will go fast. How soon can you get here?"

Glancing at the time, Deb replied, "On my way now."

A few minutes later, she pulled to the curb in front of Beach Babes. A motion from the adjoining cafe's patio caught her attention.

Matteo waved at her. "What a surprise to see you here. Come have lunch with me."

A few women at nearby tables looked at her with envy. With the latest designer sunglasses and a summer-weight sweater casually tied around his shoulders, Matteo looked like a cover model for a yachting magazine.

Deb hesitated at the offer. "I'm here to pick up a dress at Babe's."

Matteo removed his sunglasses and reached out to her, his eyes sparkling. "I've brought a bottle of wine that goes well with their fresh catch. Let's enjoy the day together."

Deb was tempted. Matteo was easy to spend time with, but she needed to check on her projects at the Majestic, even though it was the weekend.

"I can't. After this, I'm going back to work."

"What a shame," Matteo said, taking her hand. "Can the dress wait?"

Deb shook her head. "It's for the big party. Babe is giving me the first choice of her new inventory before she calls other clients."

"Would you like my opinion? I'm told I have excellent taste. I used to choose most of my former wives' clothes." He gestured toward the boutique. "I miss shopping for beautiful women. Besides, I need something to do."

Deb laughed at his confession of boredom. She saw that a lot here. Executives on forced vacations, filling every moment to avoid relaxing and clearing their minds. But

Matteo was different; he was living his passion. “You miss your vineyards, don’t you?”

Matteo dipped his head in agreement. “Even when I’m on holiday, I’m thinking about the vines, tracking the weather, or planning for harvest. Perfection is elusive, but I try to get as close as I can.”

Deb also understood that obsession with detail. “How did your meeting with Ryan go?”

“Very productive. My wines will soon be available at the Majestic. And what will you do after you finish that job?”

“Now that I have some exposure from this project, I’d like to work on larger ones. That’s why this event is so important. There will be a lot of VIPs there. In the meantime, I’m starting a beach house job soon.”

Matteo studied her. “We think alike, don’t we? When you love what you do, it doesn’t feel like work.”

“Will you return to Napa soon?” she asked, wondering what his life was like.

“Why? Will you miss me? Or you could join me.”

She laughed because she’d heard that before. “I’m not planning my life around you if that’s what you think.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw another woman’s face light up at the perceived opportunity. And that would be fine with her, she realized with surprise.

“Men like a challenge.” Matteo squeezed her hand. “As for my plans, I’ll fly out after

the event to see my children. Or I might convince them to visit Crown Island for a while.”

“You should.”

Matteo’s voice dropped a notch. “Would you like to meet them?”

Deb knew that was a critical step in a relationship and not one to be rushed. While Matteo looked like Mr. Perfect on paper, the romantic attraction wasn’t there. When they rode bikes to the beach, she’d tried, but it felt like she was trying too hard. She liked him fine, but only as a friend.

“Matteo, we should talk about that. I don’t want to mislead your children.”

Immediately, she thought of Teddy and Mason. Had she become too close to them?

He put a hand on her shoulder. “We could have an easy, happy life together. We don’t need expectations of anything more. Let’s just enjoy each other’s company for a while.”

“That’s quite an offer.”

He held her gaze, willing an answer.

Deb wasn’t sure if she could ever fall in love with Matteo, but it sounded like that didn’t matter to him.

Or maybe he had plenty of love to go around.

His two ex-wives were still very much in the picture with their children.

This sounded like a cozy harem, although she was not interested in being number three.

Or number whatever, for all she knew.

Right now, the grand reopening demanded a high level of execution, from the right menu and ambiance to the right dress. And she didn't have much time left.

"I'll let you know," she said, withdrawing her hand from his velvet grip.

She hurried into her friend's shop. Babe called to her from beside a rack that had what looked like a curtain panel thrown over it.

"You're just in time," Babe said, her eyes widening with relief. "There was a woman your size pawing through the silks and lace. I had to tell her these were all reserved. I grabbed a dressing room drapery in case other people tried to snatch an evening gown."

Deb hugged her. "You're the best, thanks. Now, show me what you have."

Babe unveiled the rack of shimmering evening gowns. "I thought of you when I unpacked these. Aren't they glamorous? You'd look fabulous in any of these."

Even though she spent a lot of time in casual clothes, Deb loved exquisite styles and fabrics.

"There's nothing like these on the island.

You should work out a deal with the hotel to bring in fine evening, cocktail, and resort wear.

There's a need for that here, especially for the hotel's upscale clientele. ”

Babe's face brightened. “April is coming in soon. Maybe she'll put in a good word for me with Ryan. Now, let me show you what I put aside for you.”

Babe held up each dress in turn. “This slim ivory silk will go with your hair. The peach chiffon with a Grecian drape is marvelous. And this airy cerulean-blue silk gown will flow with your movements.” She held up other options.

A voice interrupted them.

“Try on the ivory and the blue. Those are my favorites for you.” Matteo stood behind them, studying each option with the seriousness of a connoisseur.

“You're persistent,” Deb said, grinning.

Oddly, she didn't mind Matteo being there. Maybe because she wasn't trying to impress him. When she introduced him, Babe seemed instantly enamored.

“Welcome to Beach Babes. I'm Babe.” She smiled at his outfit. “I love your style. Aren't you the vintner everyone's talking about?”

He inclined his head modestly. “I suppose word travels fast on an island.”

Deb watched the immediate ease between them. Babe's natural charm drew people in, making them feel like friends. Matteo also had that effect on people.

“Try on these.” Babe scooped a few dresses over her arm and bustled toward the fitting room. “I want to see how they fit. We still have time to make alterations.”

In the changing area, Deb tried on the first dress, but with its plunging neckline, it

was too revealing for her purposes.

Babe peeked in. “Wow, that’s hot. You really rock that one.”

“Too sexy for the grand reopening,” Deb said, shaking her head. “This is business. Any man’s wife would immediately look for another designer, and I wouldn’t blame them.”

“Okay, I understand. Smart, stylish, successful. Try on the blue dress. And let us see it on you.” Babe unzipped her and took two items back.

Deb slipped into the cerulean-blue dress. It was a little more modest, and the bright color deepened her eyes.

Possibly a contender.

She stepped out to find Matteo and Babe talking about gifts for his children. Babe had chosen several T-shirts and handmade bracelets from local artisans for him.

Matteo looked up, and his expression brightened. “Wow. What a vivid color. Turn around.”

She did, while he and Babe consulted each other.

Their banter was fascinating. “I feel like I have a pair of stylists.”

Babe spoke up. “We’ve decided the color is fabulous, and it really stands out, but maybe too much.”

Matteo concurred with a nod. “Gorgeous, but more of a Las Vegas look. Try the other one I liked.”

She returned to the fitting room, hearing their voices continue, occasionally punctuated with laughter.

Deb slid into the ivory silk dress. The fabric was cool against her skin. When she turned to the mirror, she was pleasantly surprised that it checked all her requirements. While it didn't look like much on the hanger, it was transformative.

She emerged from the fitting room, and her audience's reaction was immediate.

Babe gave her two thumbs up. "You're a goddess in that. It's sophisticated, elegant, and just modest enough. That one gets my vote."

"She's right," Matteo said. "That rich shade brings out the highlights in your hair, and the style is striking in its simplicity. Very tasteful."

While Babe turned to attend to another customer, Matteo took Deb's hand and spun her around. "The man you're in love with won't be able to resist you."

"I don't think we're there yet." Heat rose in Deb's cheeks.

"I'm not talking about myself." Matteo looked at her with compassion. "Adrian invited me to the diner. I saw you outside with another man. You were leaving on your bike again."

Deb was unsure of how to respond.

He touched her lips with a finger. "We could enjoy ourselves, but I know you're longing for love, for magic. And you deserve that."

This wasn't the conversation she'd thought they would have. "Matteo, you're a wonderful man. I just don't know you well enough yet."

“Never apologize for love.” He cradled her face in his hands. “Love either exists, or it doesn’t. That spark, that fire—that’s what makes life worth living. Everyone should know it at least once in life.”

His directness left her speechless. She’d always prided herself on being in control, on being the one who steered the relationship. The thought that her feelings were so visible was unsettling.

“Matteo, I?—”

“No apologies needed.” He kissed her forehead. “Love doesn’t come around very often, but that doesn’t mean you have to be lonely. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll be here for you. I can wait.”

Deb blinked back a rush of emotion, of appreciation for his understanding. She returned to the dressing room to change. Again, she could hear Matteo and Babe chatting easily as she rang up his purchase.

A thought struck her.

After dressing, Deb stepped out. “I’ll take the ivory dress.”

“Great choice. I’ll ring that up for you.” Babe handed Matteo his package.

“Will you be at the party?” Matteo asked.

Babe shook her head. “I wasn’t planning on it. The tickets are a little pricey for me right now.”

“She’ll be there,” Deb said quickly. “As my guest.”

While Babe looked surprised, Matteo smiled at Deb. They had an understanding now.

“I’ll meet you at the Majestic,” Deb said.

After he left, Babe turned to her with excitement. “That was unexpected. And very generous. Are you sure?”

“I want you to come. Matteo and I are in the friend zone now, so you’ll have someone to dance with. And don’t forget to talk to April. I think there’s a vacancy in the shopping corridor.”

Babe looked thoughtful as she slid a protective covering over Deb’s dress. “I’ve thought about branching out but wasn’t sure how. I’d love to cater to the hotel’s guests.”

Deb signed the credit card receipt. “You should. Your eye for upscale, effortless style is exactly what the Majestic’s clientele would like.”

Babe handed her the dress. “Thank you. For the invitation, for the advice, and for believing I belong in that world.”

“You do.” Deb smiled. “Matteo might think so, too.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:52 am

T onight will be spectacular , Deb thought with satisfaction. Yet, even with her experience, her nerves still fluttered with excitement.

She stood by the front door of the Majestic Hotel with Maileah, surveying the pre-event scene. They both wore clothes they could move in but still looked professional. Soon, they would need to change for the event.

A red carpet stretched beneath the Majestic Hotel's porte-cochère , where photographers were planning their angles. Flowering trees and opulent floral arrangements delivered earlier lined the area.

“Do we have photos of this entry yet?” she asked. They needed to commemorate every detail.

“The photographer has been working in the ballroom,” Maileah replied. “This area is next on her list.”

Everyone on Ryan's team and the staff had pitched in to ensure the event's success. The adrenaline level was running high, with everyone on guard against any disaster that might strike.

Ryan had engaged a local meteorologist to monitor the weather after strong monsoon gusts and rain had disrupted a VIP event the previous year.

Knox ensured the backup generators were standing by, while Chef Gianna added extra staff and triple-checked every appliance in the kitchen.

Whitley spent the last week preparing staff members to cater to VIP guests. Tonight, everyone was a VIP.

Deb also found another local artist whose artwork she acquired as a replacement. Every contingency plan had worked out.

Next to Deb, a smartly attired bell captain polished a bronze plaque that gleamed in the late afternoon sunshine. The Majestic Hotel, 1889.

Deb turned to him. “Everything looks spotless, Ethan. Thanks for helping us rearrange the hibiscus trees.” The red and white flowers complemented the hotel’s exterior color scheme.

The bell captain puffed out his chest with pride.

“We know how important first impressions are. Few people outside of the hotel know this, but some of the first things Mr. Ryan did when he gained control of the hotel were to supply new uniforms for us here at the front and fill this entryway with flowering plants.”

“This hotel means a lot to him.” Deb hadn’t heard that particular story, but there were many others.

Ryan’s former business partner had invested little into the hotel while withdrawing as much cash as he could get away with. Though Ryan had worked in the upper echelons of finance and investments, he was a humble man at heart. For him, the hotel wasn’t just an investment; it was personal.

Standing beside her, Maileah tapped a pencil on her clipboard, which held a checklist. “Is there anything else you can think of?”

“This area looks ready now,” Deb replied. “Your marketing and event team has done an amazing job. Let’s do a final check of the ballroom before we change for the party.”

“We’ll have to hurry,” Maileah said, tapping her pencil again.

Deb touched her hand, quieting Maileah’s nervous action. “We have plenty of time. The makeup artist and hair stylist haven’t arrived yet.”

“Which room will we be in?”

Deb hesitated. “We’ll meet in room 418 in about an hour.”

Maileah looked at her in disbelief. “You took that room?”

“The hotel is sold out. We needed a place to change, and that room was the only one still available. Everything we brought will be waiting for us there.”

“Isn’t that the one Knox’s crew had trouble with?” Maileah lowered her voice to a whisper. “The one that’s haunted?”

Deb darted a glance around to see if they’d been overheard. “People like to imagine things. We’ll be fine. We’re together.”

Since they all planned to work today in preparation, Deb suggested that Maileah, Junie, and April bring their evening wear for the party to the hotel.

She engaged her hairdresser and a local makeup artist to pamper them.

Tonight, there would be photography, and Deb wanted her colleagues to look their best.

Whitley had given her the only room available. The men would use the spacious lounge in the executive offices, but that room was adjacent to Ryan's office and adjoined the men's restrooms.

In contrast, the old secretarial facilities designed for women were cramped and dimly lit.

They still were. The executive offices were last on the list for renovation due to funds required elsewhere.

Deb and Maileah walked through the hotel, conducting a final inspection of the corridors, terraces, patios, and other common areas. Artwork and photography chronicled the hotel's history, adding warmth and personality.

The photographs made Deb think of Grant, though she tried not to think about how right his arms around her felt.

He would be here tonight with his family. Deb wasn't sure which way tonight would go. For that matter, did she need to torture herself just to be friends with Grant? If it weren't for the boys, she would cut off this lunacy.

At the cafe, Deb spoke to Kelsey, who would be serving this evening, and in the Library Bar, she said hello to the bartender, Maxine. Everyone was in high spirits, anticipating the evening ahead.

At the entry to the ballroom, Deb paused.

The overall effect was one of relaxed beachside elegance.

The focus was on quality and natural beauty with an abundance of fresh flowers, driftwood, and other treasures of the sea.

The food and service would be impeccable.

This was the new Majestic Hotel, a resort where anyone could relax and recharge.

Deb loved the look. “What an impressive job you’ve done.”

“You gave me the vision,” Maileah replied.

“And you pulled it off.”

“I just know what people like.” Maileah raised a shoulder. “I wasn’t trained for this. I studied marketing.”

Deb made a face. “Don’t minimize your talents. Your instinct for making an impact is genius. Everything is marketing. Now, let’s test the lighting.”

The lighting crew adjusted the lights for them, subtly illuminating focal points inside and on the adjoining veranda and terraces.

“I love that,” Deb said, envisioning the effect. She approved the lighting and scheduling.

Maileah crossed off this item on her clipboard list. “Looks like we’re ready.”

“I’ll second that,” Whitley said, joining them.

Maileah looked up from her list. “Next is the pre-event cocktail party with the media. We’re meeting in the Sunset Room.”

“Are our special guests confirmed?” he asked.

“Sailor is coming with three other champion surfers. We have several sports players from San Diego and Los Angeles teams, and a few actors from Hollywood.” She rattled off the high-profile names.

“The press and social media influencers will have plenty of opportunities to chat with them and take photos on the property.”

Whitley looked impressed. “You’ve delivered all you said you would and more.”

Deb was proud of how Maileah had stepped up for this job. She moved onto the terrace, where tables dressed in crisp linens awaited guests. Local flowers—bird of paradise, red anthurium, and pink ginger—bloomed with simple elegance against the blue of the sea beyond.

The silent auction section showcased local island-inspired art alongside vintage surfboards that had been expedited and arrived just in time.

“Excuse me,” Whitley said, stepping out to join her. “I just received word that your style team has arrived. They are setting up in the room now. The housekeeping staff also left your steamed eveningwear there. It’s nearly showtime. For all of us.”

Room 418 sat at the end of the hall, its brass numbers gleaming despite the corridor’s dim lighting. Deb turned the key and stepped inside to find the hair stylist and makeup artist setting up their stations. Deb had asked that the room be rearranged to accommodate them.

A fruit platter, bottles of sparkling water, and two silver pots of coffee also awaited them. Tonight would be a long night, so they needed to pace themselves.

Carmela, the best stylist on the island, had worked in New York and Paris before opting for a simpler life on Crown Island. Her friend Desiree still worked on

Hollywood sets during filming. Both women wore chic black knitwear.

Deb greeted them warmly. “Thanks for accommodating our unusual venue.”

Carmela looked up from arranging her tools. “No problem at all. Though I have to say, it’s freezing in here. We turned off the air conditioner and tried to open a window but couldn’t budge it.”

“It’s still chilly,” Desiree added, rubbing her hands together before opening her makeup case.

Deb checked the thermostat. According to the temperature set, it shouldn’t be anywhere near this cold. Her pulse quickened with suspicion, though she wouldn’t let on for fear of losing Carmela and Desiree. Many people were uncomfortable around the resident spirits.

Princess Noelle, Deb suspected. She’d checked in nearly a hundred years ago.

“Faulty air conditioning, most likely. I’ll have the maintenance staff check it out.”

Strange occurrences had transpired here over the years. Did the past somehow seep into today? Did different timelines coexist and occasionally overlap? Deb didn’t know how that might work, but she knew enough to have concerns.

“Cold might be okay,” Deb replied, knowing there wasn’t much they could do. “We’ll all be on edge tonight, so this temperature will keep us sharp. But I can have the staff bring up heaters and more robes for us. I’ll check that window, too.”

“Good luck,” Carmella said, shaking her head.

Deb noticed the evening gowns lined up in the closet, along with their bags and

accessories placed on a bank of shelves. Everything looked ready.

At the window, Deb braced herself to push up the window. To her surprise, it slid easily. Carmela and Desiree shook their heads. “Guess I have the magic touch.”

Maybe the princess was more used to her.

The door opened, and April stepped inside. “How fancy. I’m so glad you arranged this because the hotel salon is completely booked today.”

Junie and Maileah arrived moments later.

“Let’s get this party started,” Maileah said. She turned on some pop music, snapped her fingers, and swayed to the beat.

Deb joined her, glad to let off some stress, and soon they were all dancing, including Carmela and Desiree.

When the song ended, they all laughed.

“We needed that.” Deb handed out bottled water to everyone. “A chance to decompress before the main event.”

“That was a good way to warm up,” Carmela added.

Soon, the room buzzed with activity as they all freshened up and changed into plush Majestic robes. Each woman took turns for hair and makeup.

While Desiree was giving April a natural makeup style with an understated touch of glam, Maileah snapped behind-the-scenes photos, capturing the preparation ritual that would become part of the evening’s story, including one of Junie with her face

slathered with a moisturizing mask.

Grinning, Maileah said, “These will be perfect for the hotel’s social media.”

Junie looked horrified. “Oh, my gosh, not without our approval. Girl, you know better.”

“And you know people love authenticity.” Maileah winked. “Just kidding.”

“You’re still a brat.”

“And you’re still too worried about what people think. Love you, though.”

Deb and April traded smiles as they listened to the sisters’ good-natured bickering.

Within a short time, their transformations began to take shape. Carmela created a soft French twist for Deb and a sleek, sophisticated updo for April. Maileah and Junie wore their hair loose and curled in the latest style.

As they worked, Deb noticed the room warmed to a normal temperature.

April’s ice blue evening gown flattered her figure beautifully. Junie opted for a hydrangea blue dress that brightened her complexion, while Maileah decided on a vibrant shade of sapphire that suited her personality.

The color wave was an accident, but the photos would be lovely.

At last, Deb slipped into the ivory evening dress she’d bought from Babe—simple yet elegant with clean lines that flattered her figure. She reached onto a shelf for her bag containing her shoes and accessories.

As she brought the bag down, a small box tumbled off with it.

She picked up a vintage jewelry case from the floor. “What’s this?”

A delicate, ecru-colored card peeked from the edge. She slid it out. It bore a familiar name in fancy script.

Miss Deborah Rose Whitaker.

Yet, the name mystified her.

She opened the faded red leather case and gasped in surprise.

Inside lay the most exquisite earrings she’d ever seen. The chandelier style was rendered in white gold or platinum, featuring diamonds, tiny pearls, and sapphires in the color of the sea, crafted with magnificent artistry and fit for royalty.

“Those are incredible,” April said, looking over her shoulder. “Where did they come from?”

Deb turned over the card, but it was blank. “I have no idea. Matteo or Grant? Or maybe my parents. Someone must have asked Whitley to put them in here with my bag.”

“They got your name wrong,” April said. “The middle name should be Lynn, not Rose.”

“I was named after my grandmother, whose middle name was Rose. She led a charmed life.”

April sucked in a breath. “This is too much of a coincidence. We are in room 418.”

“Shh.” Deb inclined her head toward Carmela and Desiree. “These must be from my father. Maybe they belonged to his mother, but I never saw her wear anything like this. I would have remembered.”

“Are you going to wear them tonight?”

“I suppose I should. They’re dazzling.”

“Wow,” Junie said, overhearing the last part of the conversation. “Those are from Grandpa? You have to wear them. They’re meant for tonight.”

When Deb held them to her earlobes in front of the mirror, the effect was striking. They framed her face and complemented her dress far better than the simple pearl studs she’d planned to wear.

Maileah snapped a photo as Deb held them up. “They’re perfect with that dress. Put them on.”

Deb fastened the jewels to her earlobes. “They’re so elegant. Truly of a different era.”

“You look stunning,” April said softly, leaning into the mirror beside her. “I feel like I’ve seen those before. But they’re magical on you.”

Deb put her arm around her dearest friend. “We all look gorgeous tonight.”

April and Maileah crowded in, and Deb gazed at their images, admiring their collective transformation. “Tonight is for all of us.”

Carmela captured the final group photos for them. As they gathered their satin and beaded bags and prepared to head downstairs, Deb felt a slight chill brush past her shoulder. Yet, it didn’t seem threatening.

Quite the opposite.

Deb shook her head, and the earrings tinkled against her neck. “Time for the Sunset Room. Let’s make an entrance, ladies.”

The light flickered on their way out.

Deb grinned at April. Perhaps Princess Noelle had enjoyed having them there after all.

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Deb paused with her friends at the entry to the Sunset Room, which was aptly named.

A bank of glass doors and floor-to-ceiling windows framed a breathtaking view of the sun setting over the ocean.

Countless marriages had been performed here at sunset.

While it was still early, the sun's waning rays bathed the room in a golden glow.

Deb and Maileah had specifically planned the burnished bronze and sapphire theme around this time of day.

A pianist played off to one side, but instead of classical music, they'd agreed on upbeat contemporary songs.

The familiar pre-event energy was building. The next few hours would dictate their measure of success, and Deb was ready for it. The cocktail hour was purely professional, and she felt at ease in this role. At some point in the evening, she would undoubtedly see Grant.

That would be a different matter.

Ryan greeted them at the entry, impeccably attired in a dark evening suit. "You're all right on time. Everything here is outstanding, and people are just arriving."

Deb nodded toward a photographer, who motioned for them to gather for photos.

These were important for marketing and social media purposes, so Deb and the others readily complied as Maileah orchestrated the shots.

The mayor arrived with her husband, and invited media and celebrities began to drift in. The photographer captured the growing crowd against the backdrop of the restored Victorian architecture.

Deb moved through the gathering, greeting guests and fielding questions about the design choices. A travel writer from San Francisco asked about the original fixtures they'd preserved, while a lifestyle blogger from Los Angeles wanted details about the color palette employed.

A journalist from a home and garden magazine spoke up. "Did preserving the historical design elements prove challenging?"

"At times," Deb replied. "The key was respecting the hotel's heritage while creating spaces that would be fresh and inviting. In addition, we sourced antique pieces that could have been original to the building, then balanced them with contemporary comfort."

"And the historical accuracy?" asked a woman Deb recognized as a preservation specialist.

Deb brought April into the conversation. "April Raines is head of the Crown Island Historical Society, and she worked closely with us to ensure authenticity."

April nodded. "Together, we researched important pieces, old logs, and photography, highlighting vintage pieces while also meeting modern guest expectations."

The woman nodded her approval. "It's rare to see this level of attention to historical detail in a commercial renovation."

“Ryan Kingston insisted on that, and I was happy to oblige,” Deb said.

The woman inclined her head. “I heard you insisted on the preservation of historical elements, such as those in the Library Bar.”

Deb smiled. “That’s true. I was born on the island, and the Majestic Hotel holds special significance for those who live here.

Ryan tasked us with preserving it for future generations.

The renovation was a labor of love, not only for Ryan but for the entire team.

Be sure to talk to him as well and call on April for any historical details. ”

After the interviews concluded, Deb turned to April. “You’re very good at speaking to the media. I’m impressed.”

April’s cheeks flushed with excitement. “I was nervous at first, but it’s like teaching a history class. That comes naturally to me.”

After the press event, people moved into the main ballroom and spilled onto the veranda, greeting friends. Servers circulated with champagne and appetizers, and the noise level escalated as people exclaimed over the hotel’s new look.

Deb made her way to the delectable display of hors d’oeuvres. Seafood offerings were brimming with Dungeness crab legs, jumbo shrimp, ahi tuna ceviche, and caviar, all artistically displayed alongside floral arrangements and ice sculptures.

Chef Gianna was overseeing her team beside a carving station. The Hawaiian pulled pork made with pineapples and brown sugar smelled so good that Deb’s stomach growled. She pressed a hand against her abdomen.

Gianna's eyes widened with alarm. "Oh, my goodness. I heard that. Have you had anything to eat today?"

"I nibbled on some fruit as I was changing."

"That's not enough for a metabolism accustomed to eating and exercising like you do. You must eat. And be sure to try the yellowtail jalapeno and black cod bites."

Gianna motioned to a server to put together a plate for her.

Deb was grateful for Gianna's insistence.

Guests had pulled her between conversations with hardly a chance to catch her breath in between.

A couple from New York had seen the magazine article and expressed interest in hiring her for their beach house.

A developer from San Diego wanted to discuss a boutique hotel project.

Another woman who owned a luxury spa took her card for a renovation project she was contemplating.

Each interaction held potential, but she was starving.

Gianna passed a plate to her. "Sliced Wagyu beef, grilled baby artichokes, broiled oysters, and lobster truffle tempura, along with my new specialties. I'll send the servers your way, but this should help hold you over until dinner."

"You've rescued me from certain starvation," Deb said, smiling.

“Someone has to. And be careful with that gorgeous dress,” Gianna added, giving her a large cloth napkin. “Can you sit down for five minutes?”

“I’ll try,” Deb replied, glancing around. “This looks delicious, and I’d rather eat it than wear it.”

Five minutes. That’s all she needed. She found a table on the veranda and sat by herself. However, her solitude didn’t last long.

Maileah approached her, holding up her phone. “You’ve got to see this. Our social media engagement is blazing hot. The Majestic is trending, thanks to the influencers who are here. People love the work you’ve done. Maybe you’ll get a book deal next.”

“That was fast,” Deb said, her head spinning.

“Everything moves at warp speed online. You’re a star tonight.”

The validation seemed surreal. A year ago, Deb had been a local designer with big dreams. Tonight, she was being recognized for her part in the restoration of a beloved landmark.

Maileah peered at Deb’s plate. “I should get something to eat. Sailor has a mob around him, and he’s signing autographs. I’m trying to get used to that. Hold a seat for me, will you?”

“If you’re fast. I need to get back out there, too.”

Maileah hurried toward the sumptuous spread of delicacies. Glancing around, Deb spotted Kitty, looking elegant in a navy-blue silk sheath that showcased her diamond starfish necklace. Jen and Daniel were with her, so Grant couldn’t be far away.

She didn't have to wait long to find him.

Grant touched her shoulder. "Everyone agrees that you've created something magical here."

Deb looked up, and her heart skipped. He wore a formal suit well, and the sincerity in his voice caught her off guard.

"It's been a team effort from the beginning. Where are the boys?"

"At the kid's beach party. That was a great idea, and they needed that." He hesitated for a moment. "Teddy has been pretty upset."

Deb was instantly alarmed. "About what?"

"It's an old problem, but I need to address it again.

A classmate posted a comment about the poor kid online.

Mason saw it because I won't allow Teddy online anymore.

It's too painful for him. However, it seems he overheard Mason telling my sister about it.

" He sighed and shook his head. "At least they're having fun tonight. I'll pick them up later."

"Credit April and Junie with that one." The children's activities coordinator organized a supper and activities for the guests' children this evening. Still, Deb was concerned about Teddy and Mason and hoped they were having a good time now.

Admiration filled his eyes as he stared at her. “You look sensational tonight. You’ve outdone every woman here. And the earrings are sublime.”

She waited, but he didn’t say anything else. “They were a surprise from my father, I think. Did you know anything about them?”

Grant shook his head, seemingly puzzled.

“My parents should be here, but I haven’t seen them yet. They’ll be seated at a table next to mine.” Her parents would likely want to invite him to their summer open house.

“I’d like to meet them again, but we need to talk first.” Grant’s gaze lingered on her as if he wanted to say something but couldn’t. “Is there anything I can get for you?”

She wondered what was so urgent, but it would have to wait. “I’m dying for a glass of water.”

“I’ll be right back.”

However, before Grant could return, Matteo appeared with two flutes of champagne. He looked distinguished in a perfectly tailored suit.

“The evening is a triumph,” he said, offering her a glass. “I’ve been speaking with potential distributors for my wine. What a party. And your dress is extraordinary.”

She waited a beat, but he didn’t comment on her earrings. “Notice anything else?”

“Your jewelry is superb. Family heirlooms?”

“You don’t know?”

“I’m sorry. Know what?”

“Never mind. I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

“You should, too. This is your night as much as Ryan’s. I overheard a couple talking about how they wanted you to decorate their Hamptons beach house. You’ll be jetting all over soon. This is what you wanted, right?”

“It’s what I’ve worked for.” She’d yearned for this recognition for as long as she could remember. But was it all she wanted now?

As if reading her mind, Matteo said, “You always have the freedom to choose.”

“Excuse me,” Whitley said. “Dinner service begins soon. Would you take your seat so that others will follow?”

“Of course,” Deb replied, glancing around for Grant, but he had disappeared.

Matteo held his hand to her. “Let’s find our seats now.”

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Moments later, Deb and Matteo sat at a large round table among her cherished friends and colleagues. April and Ryan were seated next to her, with his parents on the other side. Junie and Knox were there, as well as Whitley and Ella.

When Deb saw her parents at the adjacent table with old friends, she excused herself to visit them. Her brothers and their spouses were seated at other tables.

Bitsy Whitaker clasped her hands when she saw her. “Why, you’re a vision. I’m so proud of you, darling. Wilt, isn’t she lovely?”

Her father put his arm around her. “Don’t tell your brothers, but I think you’ve surpassed them.”

“Certainly in the class department.” Still, his words meant a lot to her, even if they weren’t quite true.

She touched her earrings. “Thank you for these. That was such a surprise.”

Wilt turned to Bitsy. “Did we give Deb a gift?”

“Oh, my,” her mother said, leaning in for a closer look. “You must have a serious admirer.”

“These aren’t from you?” Deb drew the card from her purse and showed it to them. “Did they belong to my grandmother?”

“Not that I know of.” Wilt stroked his chin. “Could have been your great-

grandmother, too. They shared the same name, as you know. Both were real spitfires in their day.”

“That card looks quite old,” her mother said. “But you wear them well. I’m sure one of your admirers will speak up. Are you sure it’s not that handsome man seated beside you?”

“It wasn’t Matteo. We’ve agreed to be friends.” None of this made sense to Deb. “Let’s talk later.”

She returned to the table and slid into her chair just as Whitley made his way to the podium. He welcomed everyone and introduced Ryan.

Deb noticed how proud Ryan’s parents looked. Their eyes shimmered with love as they watched him speak. She could only imagine how much they had sacrificed. They had navigated a new country and culture to give their son a better life. He stood before them now as the successful man he’d become.

The crowd quieted as Ryan spoke. “Thank you all for coming as we celebrate our past and look forward to the next century at the newly renovated Majestic Hotel. More than a hundred years ago, visionaries built this hotel as a beacon of hospitality and elegance. Since then, thousands of people have cared for this hotel and its guests, and among them, my parents.”

While his parents dabbed their eyes, Ryan continued, “Tonight, we honor this legacy while launching the next chapter of the Majestic’s story.

This renovation succeeded because of the dedication of every person who contributed their skills and passion.

But most of all, it succeeded because we never forgot that hospitality is about

bringing people together.

This evening, and this entire renovation, is a testament to collaboration. ”

The applause was thunderous. Pride swelled in Deb’s chest for being part of this group effort.

When the applause died down, Ryan spoke again. “I would like for everyone to help me recognize those who shared a vision and brought it to life.”

He called on each member of the team, and Deb stood when he called on her. The applause was immediate, and she acknowledged it with a dip of her head, her mysterious earrings brushing her neck.

Ryan extended his hands to his parents. “And to my parents, who instilled within me the understanding of service and the love of this fine hotel at an early age. Please welcome the heart of the Majestic family, my father, Patrick Finley, and my mother, Mary Kingston Finley.”

Tears welled in his parents’ eyes, and the applause for them from guests and staff alike was thunderous. April clasped their hands, and Deb smiled, feeling their pride and elation. The Majestic Hotel was family, and she was fortunate to share in that.

Just beyond Patrick and Mary, Deb spied Grant seated beside his mother. He caught Deb’s glance and smiled, lifting a glass to her.

She raised her hands. What could she do? He’d disappeared. And with the boys starting school soon, he would again. Could she handle seeing him only in the summer and maybe once during the winter holidays?

This can’t possibly work. Deb’s heart sank at the realization. Grant wasn’t just

another one of the men she dated; he had stolen her heart once again.

During dinner, the conversation flowed smoothly with discussions about the island's history, the challenges of historical preservation, and the economic impact of tourism. Deb relaxed next to Matteo. She didn't have to impress him.

They began with grilled peach, prosciutto, and burrata. Next was a choice of fresh macadamia nut-encrusted mahi mahi, duck confit, filet mignon, or vegan handmade pasta. Everyone exclaimed over the charred Brussels sprouts with sweet Maui onions.

A selection of desserts was also served, including passionfruit cheesecake, miniature chocolate souffles, and hand-churned ice cream.

While people ate, Maileah took the microphone to announce the results of the hotly contested silent auction treasures. "Tonight's auction winners benefit the island's injured athlete fund and our local arts program. Every donation benefits the Crown Island community."

As expected, the vintage surfboards had drawn spirited bidding, while the local artwork also attracted attention. Deb had bid successfully on a watercolor garden scene for her living room. She wanted a memento of this special evening and achievement.

After announcing the winners, Maileah said, "We invite you to dance, and be sure to stay for the fireworks."

When the music began, couples moved onto the dance floor. Deb saw Junie and Knox swaying together, wholly absorbed in each other.

Matteo turned to her. "Let's not be left out."

She took his hand, and he guided her to the dance floor. Matteo's rhythm was admirable, and she enjoyed herself.

When the song ended, he kissed her forehead. "Would you mind if I ask Babe to dance?"

Deb appreciated that he was concerned about her. "Please do. She would love that. I want you both to have a good time."

Watching them together made her smile. Maybe something would develop between them, or maybe not, but they were enjoying each other's company.

Babe's ravishing evening dress, a form-fitting gown perfect for her, was catching its share of attention. Earlier, Babe told Deb that Ryan had asked her to make an appointment to discuss supplying high-end fashion in the Majestic's shopping corridor.

Deb looked up to see David and Rachel.

"I sure am proud of my baby sister," David said to her.

"You're lucky that I can't stay angry at you." Deb smiled at her brother, grateful for his support despite their recent confrontation about Grant. "Did the Hunts accept your offer?"

"I withdrew it this afternoon," David replied.

"They wanted a complete redesign to create a statement house that would far outshine their neighbors. When I explained the zoning-restricted heights on Crown Island, he insisted that I'd concealed that from him and wasted his time. So I pulled out of the design."

Relief for him flooded through her. “I truly dreaded that project.”

“Quality of life over prestige,” Rachel added, echoing their father’s frequent advice.

David kissed his wife on the cheek. “Speaking of quality of life, Rachel doesn’t dance much anymore. She claims her husband stepped on her feet too many times. Would you be brave enough to risk it?” He held his hand to Deb.

Rachel laughed. “Go on. I’ll be watching and judging your technique.”

Before Deb could protest, David led her onto the dance floor. They’d grown up dancing at family celebrations.

“So what’s this really about?” Deb asked.

“I owe you an apology that’s about twenty years overdue,” David replied. “I regret anything I’ve ever done to upset you. Rachel reminded me how unbalanced our family is.”

Deb thought his apology was touching. “I appreciate that.”

David’s voice grew serious. “Randy was wrong to intercept Grant’s calls, and I was a coward to go along with him.”

“You were young, too,” Deb said with forgiveness in her voice.

“That’s kind of you to say, but I realize now how much we hurt you. Not only then but over the years. To think we ruined your chances for a family of your own has destroyed me.”

The anguish in his voice was real. Tears pricked her eyes, and she blinked them

away. “All that was a long time ago. Look at me now.”

“That doesn’t excuse our bad choices,” David said. “And if you’ll let me, I want to make up for it.”

Before she could ask what he meant, David spun her around and into another man’s arms. She looked up to find Grant standing there, his hands at her waist.

“Those two planned this,” she said, surprised but also a little impressed at what they’d pulled off.

David was now dancing with Rachel. They looked back with mischievous grins.

“I’m as guilty as they are,” Grant said, drawing her closer as a love song continued. “I wasn’t sure you’d say yes. What happened to your date?”

“He’s dancing with a friend.”

Deb relaxed in his warm embrace. They fell into a familiar rhythm, and the years they’d been apart seemed to dissolve.

“You look radiant tonight,” he whispered, sending warmth through her entire body.

“Grant—”

“Let me say this first,” he said softly. “I never stopped loving you, Deb. I was just too young to fight for us. I let my disappointment cloud my judgment instead of fighting for what mattered most.”

She pulled back to meet his gaze, seeing the regret in his expression. “When I pieced together what happened, I confronted my brothers about their interference.”

“Please forgive them,” Grant said, touching her cheek. “They probably thought they were protecting you. Men don’t always get it right—myself included.”

She leaned into him, enjoying his warmth. “We were different people then. You had dreams that were larger than this island.”

“That wasn’t it. It was something else.” His expression immediately closed off.

Something in his voice set off an alarm in her mind. “Another secret?”

He shook his head. “It’s complicated.”

As his gaze shifted to one side, Deb felt as if she’d been shut out.

He didn’t speak again.

A chill coursed through her, and she realized not all was as it seemed. When the music ended, Deb dropped his hand. “I don’t like secrets.”

She left him on the dance floor without looking back. Because if she had, he would have seen tears welling in her eyes.

Years ago, Deb had promised herself she would never be hurt again. Even if others didn’t keep their promises to her, she did. And she was too old for this nonsense.

Deb picked up her purse at the table. Holding her head high, she hurried from the ballroom, heading toward the only place she knew she would be alone. She needed a few minutes by herself to collect her thoughts before returning.

When the elevator door opened, Deb rushed inside, blinking back her emotions.

“Well, if it isn’t Deb Whitaker,” an elderly man said.

He was dressed in a Majestic Hotel uniform and seated on a stool beside the elevator buttons. A hat covered most of his white hair, which looked trim and tidy.

“Hello, Stafford.” Deb was surprised to see the retired elevator operator in uniform. He looked spiffy with polished shoes and manicured nails. She dabbed her eyes surreptitiously. “Did Ryan put you back to work?”

“Only for the evening. My suggestion. I would have preferred the old elevator, but it’s no longer up to safety standards. I might dust it daily, but we’ve both aged out of work.” His eyes twinkled as he spoke. “Not out of fun, though. And tonight, I get to relive my glory days.”

“I’m glad,” she said, kissing his cheek. “It’s good to see you here.”

Ryan had given Stafford a room to live out his years, and the employees doted on him.

The older man had worked at the hotel and run the elevator for decades; he was the hotel’s oldest living employee.

Just last year, Ryan had thrown him a party for his centennial year.

Even now, Stafford still turned on the lights every Christmas season and reported daily to his table at the cafe to greet returning guests and regale them with stories of yesteryear.

Deb adored him, and she’d known him since childhood. He was a calming presence, and she needed that right now.

Stafford welcomed more guests into the elevator. “What floors, please?”

Deb watched as he pressed the buttons they had requested.

“Two, three. And Miss Whitaker?”

Glancing up, Deb saw Kitty approach the elevator entrance. Usually, she would hold the elevator, but with her nerves raw, she only replied, “Fourth floor, please.”

The doors slid shut.

Deb let out a breath. The ascent was slow as the elevator stopped at every floor, and Stafford chatted pleasantly with each guest. After the third floor, they were alone.

“The fourth floor is next,” Stafford said. “Everything alright with you tonight?”

Deb sniffed. “Just a few allergies.”

“You should take care of that. You’re one of the special ones.” Stafford winked, and the doors slid open.

Deb stepped out and turned toward her room.

Behind her, a voice called out. “Deb, I’d like a moment with you.”

Having signed an agreement, Kitty was her client now. Or maybe she would call off the job after speaking to her son. Slowly, Deb turned around.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Kitty said, her brow furrowed.

Deb needed to end this conversation. She gestured toward two original wingback chairs she’d refurbished and recovered in a creamy brocade that featured a small navy-colored anchor design.

“Please sit down.” Deb figured she might as well face whatever bad news Kitty had for her and get it over with.

“As I said, what happened here years ago wasn’t Grant’s fault.”

“He must have told you about my brothers.”

Kitty waved a hand. “No, not that. By then, the damage had already been inflicted. And sadly, I became a party to it. Jock was a force to contend with. I loved him, but he wasn’t perfect. None of us are.”

Deb pressed her fingers to her throbbing temple. “I’m not following this.”

Kitty continued, “I imagined you waiting in a pretty dress at the dance for Grant, probably heartbroken when he never arrived. He was, too, I assure you.”

Deb could hardly believe what Kitty was saying, but it was too little, far too late. She wouldn’t let on how devastated she’d been. Deb merely shrugged. “I haven’t thought about that in years.”

Kitty leveled a gaze at her, clearly seeing through her flimsy excuse. “Just after it

happened, I called your mother and apologized. I doubt if she ever told you. Since the relationship was over, she thought it best to let you heal.”

“You spoke to my mother? She never told me.” Deb was shocked. She didn’t think they had secrets between them. “Why should I believe this?”

Kitty sighed. “Mothers naturally want to shield their children when they see them in pain.”

With some reluctance, Deb allowed that within the realm of possibilities.

“Grant left to pick up the boys and put them to bed, so we have time to talk.” Kitty leaned forward. “You see, once Jock made his decision, he packed our suitcases. I had been playing tennis and didn’t even have time to change. I knew nothing until I walked in the door. Neither did Grant.”

“I’m not sure why you’re telling me this.”

“Because Grant wanted to be with you at the dance. He looked forward to seeing you and was devastated when he couldn’t.”

“As I said, that was so long ago.” Deb couldn’t listen to much more. She began to stand.

Kitty grabbed Deb’s wrist with surprising strength. “Just a few moments more, please.”

“Does Grant know you’re here, and that you’re making excuses for him?”

“Not at all. He’s too proud to let me do that, but I’m old enough not to care what people think anymore. Even my children. This will only take a few minutes. Will you

listen?”

Deb sank back into the chair, resigned to the older woman’s request. “Go on.”

“Jock thought Grant was too young to make such a commitment.”

When Deb started to protest, Kitty quelled her with a glance.

“We could see that the two of you were in love. The irony was that Jock and I were about the same age when we married. Obviously, he didn’t see it that way.”

Deb hadn’t heard this side of the story. Although she told herself it didn’t matter, she was intrigued. “What did you do?”

“We argued, but he stood firm in his decision. Maybe I should have stayed and kept Grant and Jen with me. Yet, as charming and charismatic as my husband was, he also had a thundering temper he rarely showed. If I had stood up to Jock, your lives would have been different. I also thought his mother was truly ill, but he’d concocted that story so that I would leave right away with him. ”

Deb considered this new information. “Thanks for telling me. But I’m over all that.”

Kitty patted her hand. “I also want you to know that Nicole was a sweet girl. She and Grant were friends for years before they married, and those little boys are like sunshine in my life. Grant is a good man, a good father, and he means well.” Kitty hesitated.

“I suspect he never stopped loving you.”

“Kitty, I don’t mean any disrespect, but I don’t need to resurrect the past. Why do you feel the need to share this with me? It’s not as if Grant went out of his way to

come here. His sister had already brought Mason and Teddy with her.”

A sheepish look filled Kitty’s face. “I suggested that. And I also booked our flights when I saw the article about you in that magazine. The boys aren’t happy in their school, and I thought about how much Grant loved coming here.

I did, too. Maybe I meddled a little, but I only want to see my family happy.

I hoped you and Grant might meet again and have a second chance at happiness. ”

“Did you suggest this hotel, rather than a beach house, to Jen?”

Kitty nodded. “This was my favorite hotel, and the trip was my gift to them for helping me sort out my home.”

Deb tried to piece together Kitty’s actions in order. “So you didn’t entirely orchestrate the coincidences.”

“No, not until I saw the article. The moment I read it, I felt compelled to give providence a little push so the two of you might have another chance. For Grant, because I want to see him happy, and for you, because you were wronged without even knowing it. I thought you should know the whole story, even after all these years.”

Deb drew a breath, not sure what to think about the extent to which Kitty had gone.

“Did Grant know this?”

“Not at the time, of course. I called Bitsy, and I told Grant, but then he told me you didn’t want to see him. Now, we know why that happened. After all that, it seemed too late.”

“I’ll have to think about this,” Deb said.

“I hope we can still work together on the house, but I will understand if it’s uncomfortable for you,” Kitty said, placing a hand on Deb’s arm.

Deb rose from the chair, feeling the underpinnings of her world shaken. Or rather, the truth as she had known it. Isn’t that ultimately what she valued?

“I imagine it took a lot for you to share these details, and I appreciate that.” The other woman had always been kind to her.

On impulse, Deb reached out to Kitty and hugged her. “I hope you’ll be happy here on Crown Island. I’ll think about what you’ve said.”

Deb left Kitty and took the stairs down, pausing on a side terrace to drink in the fresh air. She was feeling better now.

When she returned to the ballroom, April joined her before Deb could return to the table.

April frowned with concern. “You’ve been gone a while. Is everything okay?”

“I’m not sure.” Deb told her about Kitty and their talk.

After listening, April nodded. “I won’t tell you what to do, but what she said makes a lot of sense.”

“I thought so, too. I never felt like I had the whole story.”

“What will you do?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

For a moment, April stared at her, and then her expression shifted. “Wait a minute. In this light...”

“What?” Deb asked, perplexed at April’s reaction.

“I’ve seen those earrings before. I’m sure of it now.” April held up her phone and snapped a close-up of one.

“Where?” Deb asked.

“Remember that old photograph of Princess Noelle on the other side of the ballroom? Junie found the pendant necklace she wore in that painting in the gift shop storeroom. I suspect these might be the earrings. I read once that the princess wore certain pieces for luck and strength, and I seem to recall that she once gave or lent her favorite earrings to a dear friend who’d helped her.

There was more that I can’t remember, but I’ll comb through my historical research. Did you find out who gave them to you?”

“No one knows anything about them. Except you, it seems.” As Deb touched the earrings, a renewed sense of certainty surged within her.

“Well, it was room 418,” April said, her eyes glittering.

Deb smiled at the thought. The room had never frightened her. Perhaps whatever spirit had spilled over into the present day sensed that. The room simply was, and she’d accepted that.

Another thought occurred to her. “Could one of my ancestors have been her friend?

That might explain the middle name that we thought was in error.”

“We’ll find out,” April said.

Deb considered this. “If these earrings match those in the photo, I’ll donate them to the historical collection.”

For a moment, she considered that the case might have been placed in her room by accident.

She’d speak with Whitley about that, but judging from the card inside, she thought April’s explanation made more sense, even though that room had been renovated.

A vintage jewelry case couldn’t have been overlooked.

And yet, at the Majestic Hotel she had learned that some occurrences were inexplicable and beyond comprehension.

Much like love.

Just then, Whitley interrupted with an announcement. “Ladies and gentlemen, please join us on the veranda and terraces for a thoroughly majestic fireworks celebration. The dancing will continue after that.”

April hugged her. “Maybe those gems will bring you luck tonight. I should find Ryan now. Want to come with us?”

“I’m alright. Maybe I’ll find Matteo. See you later.”

Something shifted within Deb. The event had gone well, and she had accomplished what she’d set out to do this evening, but it was more than that.

She strolled toward the edge of the terrace, not looking for Matteo but enjoying a moment to herself. The night air off the ocean was growing cooler, alleviating the heat of the day. It felt good.

Seconds later, the first fireworks burst over the ocean. A brilliant kaleidoscope of sparkles cascaded onto the waves.

Not far from where she stood, a young boy's voice bubbled with excitement. "Wow, did you see that?"

Deb turned, spotting Teddy on a patio. He saw her at the same time and began waving wildly.

"It's Deb," he called out, sounding even more excited. "Watch the fireworks with us."

Mason poked his head around the corner, grinning and waving, too.

They looked thrilled to see her, and she felt the same. She couldn't ignore them, so she began walking toward the patio of the lower-level, beach-view suite.

"Hi, boys. Here I come."

As she approached, Grant appeared behind them. He'd shed his jacket and tie and was folding back his sleeves.

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For a moment, neither of them seemed to know what to do. But when Grant's gaze met hers and he swung open the gate, his hand outstretched, her hesitation and fears evaporated.

At the steps to the patio, she lifted the hem of her dress. He clasped her hand and guided her onto the patio.

"I didn't know if I'd ever see you again," he whispered. "I'm sorry I didn't know how to express myself. It's been a long time."

Deb touched his cheek. "Maybe I've had a change of heart."

"I hope so. This is a welcome surprise. It's just me and the boys, and they wanted to see the fireworks before going to bed. Will you stay and watch them with us?"

Maybe it was what Kitty had said, the earnestness in Grant's eyes, or the warmth of his hand in hers. Whatever it was, she suddenly knew what she wanted.

"Let's get comfortable." She kissed Grant on the cheek and then opened her arms to Teddy and Mason, who threw their arms around her.

In the happy tangle of limbs, joy flooded her heart, which seemed to crack open with an outpouring of love. At once, she realized there was no turning back now, even if there were obstacles ahead.

Grant rearranged the patio furniture to make room for her, and they eased into a double lounge chair for couples behind the boys.

“There goes another one,” Mason yelled, pointing out the streak in the sky to Teddy.

As that rocket burst overhead in a shower of shimmering colors, Grant turned to face her. The explosion reflected in his eyes, and the ocean breeze ruffled his hair. A distant memory of another night like this sprang to mind.

Grant took her hand and kissed it. “I have some news for you. The boys and I have decided to stay on Crown Island. They want to start school here, so I’ll stay with my mother until I find a home for us.”

Deb thought the boys seemed more joyful tonight. “I think that will be good for them.”

“Maybe for us, too.” Grant’s voice was barely audible over the crowd’s cheers and the thunder of fireworks. He leaned closer to her. “Would you be willing to try again? Not as the people we were, but as who we are now.”

“We’ve changed, and yet...” She paused, recalling the moment she’d first seen him again, and her physiological reaction. It was as if her heart had recognized his in an instant, despite the chasm between them.

He traced her hand. “And yet?”

“My feelings for you haven’t changed.” She kissed him softly and felt him respond.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Mason nudge Teddy and glance back at them. Teddy giggled, and two boys bent their heads together, clearly elated.

Grant caught that, too. He wrapped his arms around her and said, “Boys, you’re going to see a lot more of Deb around. I hope that’s okay with you.”

Teddy broke into a broad grin. “What about Duke?”

“Absolutely,” Deb replied as joyful laughter bubbled up in her.

The boys clambered onto them, and they all hugged each other while fireworks lit the night sky.

Watching the spectacular show snuggled in Grant’s strong, familiar embrace, Deb thought of the years that had lapsed between them.

The hurt and healing they’d experienced on their paths had given them the advantage of wisdom.

And Grant looked at her as if she were the only woman in the world for him.

She felt the same now.

Nearby, guests exclaimed over the fireworks, and the sweet smell of smoke drifted in the air.

With his sons’ attention glued to the sky, Grant kissed her lightly. “At our age now, we are who we are.”

“And our future is what we make it.” Deb had built the career she’d dreamed of and enjoyed her success. Grant had loved and lost and become a father. Now it was their turn to come together.

Building to a grand finale, fireworks popped in rapid succession, lighting the sky with sparkling cascades of color.

“Let’s get closer.” Mason took Teddy’s hand, and they rushed to the edge of the patio, craning their necks with delight.

Cradling her face, Grant kissed her again, soft and sure.

The crowd cheered for the spectacle overhead, but Deb knew the real magic was happening right here.

When they finally broke apart, she spied Matteo watching them from a few feet away, a satisfied smile on his face. He raised his champagne glass in a silent toast before turning back to Babe.

Grant stroked her shoulder. “I loved you the first time I saw you as the Crown Island Princess, but I’ve fallen in love with you all over again.”

Deb had longed to hear these words. This was the man she’d measured all others against. She smiled at him with mischief. “I suppose I’ve always loved you, even when I didn’t like you very much. I’ll admit, you’ve earned your way back into my heart.”

Grant laughed, and their lips met again in the sweetest of kisses.

High overhead, the last fireworks burst with gold and silver, showering them with the magic of a second chance at love.

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