



Olive You to Death

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: In the coastal town of South Cove, June is tourist season—and wedding season. Unfortunately, Jill Gardner's own wedding has been delayed. But that just gives her more time to search for a missing bride—and a killer . . .

Things are looking up for the owner of Coffee, Books, and More—Jill's finally getting her MBA, and though her wedding to police detective Greg is postponed a few months, she still has plenty to celebrate. A girls' weekend in Santa Barbara is just the ticket. But back in South Cove, someone else's big day has become a big problem. Antiques dealer Josh Thomas and Mandy Jensen were planning a small private ceremony under an olive tree on the historic Jensen farm—until Mandy went missing . . .

Is this a case of a runaway bride—or a guilty groom? Greg zeroes in on Josh but finds him so annoying that he quietly asks Jill's help in keeping his number-one suspect distracted. She knows that Josh is searching for something else besides his fiancée—a bank robber's buried gold bullion. And when the professor he'd been discussing it with turns up dead, she can't help wondering if what looked like cold feet was actually cold-blooded murder . . .

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Chapter 1

The business-to-business meeting for May was stuffed with agenda items. The Memorial Day parade and the fireworks display on the beach still needed volunteers to make sure the festival ran smoothly. Darla Taylor, our marketing maven and owner/operator of the South Cove Winery, was wrangling as smoothly as a tenured politician for committee placements. It was too bad Mayor Baylor—or his wife, Tina—wasn't here to see the way community activism should be handled.

Since Darla was running the meeting, I'd been ignoring the discussion and quietly working on outlining my last paper, on community development, for my business ethics class. I was using South Cove's business-to-business group as my example of what happens when people work together for the greater good. Not having the town politicians here helped make my case that towns could be managed by a council of civic-minded business owners rather than elected officials. What? It was my fantasy, and no one but my professor would see the paper anyway.

If Mayor Baylor happened to read my paper, he'd think I was staging a revolution during my two-hour monthly meeting and would probably attend every meeting after he'd read it. That wouldn't be in my best interest, especially since I couldn't stand the guy.

Anyway, I had one more paper, and I'd have those three little letters after my name, Jill Gardner, MBA. Not as impressive as a PhD or even the JD I'd already earned after I finished my law degree, but I was running my dream business. I owned South Cove's only bookstore: Coffee, Books, and More. And better, I almost owned the brick building the store was housed in.

The building where our monthly meeting was still droning on. The coffee carafes were empty, and all the treats I'd put out at the beginning had been devoured. The mayor had decreased my treat budget last year, so I limited the amount I set out. I could buy the cookies cheaper at the grocery store in Bakerstown, but I wanted to continue to support Pies on the Fly, my friend Sadie's bakery. As it was, I didn't put any markup on the treats or the coffee from my bookstore, a decision my aunt didn't agree with. I told her it was my donation to the cause.

When Darla finally got the volunteers she needed, she moved to end the meeting.

Josh Thomas, owner of Antiques by Thomas, the upscale antique store that sat next to my coffee shop, stood and raised his hand. "I have one last agenda item."

There was a collective groan from the table. Josh's items were never quick. Nor were they usually important. But he was a council member.

"Then you have the floor." Darla looked at me, her question—What now?—clear on her face. I shrugged. Josh hadn't campaigned for any agenda item before the meeting. At least not to me. Everyone else looked as confused as I was or maybe just tired and ready to get out of the meeting.

Josh shuffled from foot to foot as he stood there. He wore a bright blue polo shirt and tan khakis, the typical uniform for a business owner in the central coastal section of California. However, it was a far cry from the black suit he'd worn on his then-oversize frame when I'd first moved here. Josh's dress code and even his appearance had done a complete one-eighty since he'd started dating Mandy Jensen. She ran the farmers market on the highway between my house and the beach. Well, on the other side of the road. And she was a cousin or something to the people who ran the olive farm in the hills above South Cove.

I'd never thought the relationship would gain traction. Mandy was light, Josh, dark.

Mandy was an extrovert, and Josh, an introvert. Mandy was young, and Josh was almost ten years older. He acted even older than that. Mandy liked being outside in the sun; Josh loved spending his free time digging through old buildings and garages for stock for his business. They were complete opposites. Mandy was human. Josh was probably a vampire.

Maybe that was a bit too far.

Josh cleared his throat. “I wanted to tell you that Mandy and me, I mean, Miss Jensen, Mandy Jensen and I are engaged. The wedding will be a small private ceremony next month, and we’ll be hosting a reception at the community hall on June 15. That’s all.” He sat back down, his cheeks flaming red.

No one said anything for a few minutes. Finally, Darla stood at the podium and smiled. “Well, isn’t that amazing news. Congratulations to Josh Thomas and Mandy Jensen on their upcoming nuptials. I suspect details will be forthcoming on the reception?”

Josh stood again. He had his hands crossed in front of him. “Yes. As I mentioned before, we will have a reception. Everyone’s invited to that, and it will be from two to six at the community hall on the fifteenth.”

He sat back down. Then he popped back up. “Gifts are optional.”

“Well, with that happy news, I’ll end the meeting, unless Jill has anything?” Darla looked at me to confirm, but I shook my head. “Okay, then see you all in June.”

Josh stood and nearly ran out of the shop. I saw him go past the window and toward his store. People called out best wishes and congrats as he passed by them, but I didn’t think he heard anyone. He was too focused on getting back to the shop and away from people and questions.

After most everyone had left, Darla and Amy Newman-Cross, South Cove city planner and my best friend, stayed behind to help me get the café back in order.

“Wow, Josh is getting married. Did you know?” Amy moved a table, then set chairs under it.

I shook my head. “Not a clue. I guess I’m glad Greg’s mom asked us to delay the wedding until fall now. Although I was a little put out by her request.”

“A little put out? Girl, I’d be furious. The woman never visits anyway, but then she asks you to change your wedding date because it interfered with elective surgery. That’s cold.” Amy washed another table. “Thank goodness I like Justin’s parents. They are super nice. His mom’s coming out next month to visit now that we have the new house ready.”

“You are still coming to Santa Barbara next weekend for our girls’ trip, right?” Amy had a habit of forgetting appointments and dates. I bought her a planner for Christmas after Greg had gotten me attached to mine.

“Not a problem. I’ve got it on my work calendar. Greg has already hired a temp to answer phones that weekend so both Esmeralda and I can get away.” Amy and I turned to Darla, who had been unusually quiet.

“Hey, I’m in. Don’t look at me that way. I’ve already got Matt and my day manager looped in. I told Matt he can’t take any gigs since he has to run the winery that weekend so I’m free. No emergencies. Besides, I’m excited to have the fitting for the bridesmaid dress. I’ve lost weight since we ordered them. It might be too big.” Darla glanced around the now back-to-normal dining room and grabbed her tote bag. “I’m out of here. We’ve got a beer delivery coming, and last time they shorted us two cases. I’m doing the counting this time, not Matt. He talks too much, and they get distracted.”

“Esmeralda has a reading at lunchtime, so I’ve got to be back to answer phones. I never thought that most of my work time would be spent playing phone dispatcher rather than actual city planning. Although, if I didn’t have to also work for the mayor, my job would be perfect.” Amy followed Darla out of the door. Esmeralda was Greg’s part-time police dispatcher and office secretary, and she also ran a fortune-telling shop out of her house, across the street from mine.

I glanced around the empty dining room. The rain had kept people from walking in during the meeting, which was good, since I’d been alone at the shop. Judith had asked for the day off. She needed to run to the city for her annual checkup. I would have asked Aunt Jackie to step in, but then she would have gone off on how irresponsible it was to schedule an appointment on a workday. My aunt didn’t like Judith.

Since my relief, Toby Killian, was due in at eleven, I finished my morning shift-change tasks. Then I grabbed a book and poured myself a cup of coffee. The book was a romance, and the fictional couple’s back-and-forth chatter brought me back to thinking about Josh and Mandy.

Maybe I should invite them to have dinner with Greg and me this week so we could commiserate on the pain of wedding planning. I liked Mandy. Josh, he was an acquired taste, but he’d gotten nicer since he started dating Mandy. There’s always at least one key for every lock. That was one of my aunt’s favorite sayings. Especially around relationships.

I grabbed my phone and called Greg. When he answered, I jumped right into my question. “Hey, you’re home Thursday for dinner, right?”

“Don’t you have class?” Greg reminded me.

“The professor has a thing, so the class got moved to earlier that day. So I’ll be home

in time. I was wondering if it would be okay for me to ask Josh and Mandy to dinner.”

There was no answer on the phone. I held it out to check to make sure we hadn’t been disconnected. “Greg?”

“I’m here. I’m just trying to process your question. You want to invite Josh Thomas to our house for dinner, intentionally?”

“I know, but Josh just dropped the bombshell that he and Mandy are getting married next month. I thought it would be nice to have dinner and talk to them about the wedding. Like Amy and Justin did for us.”

“We were already friends with Justin and Amy.” He paused, letting out a sigh. “But if you want to, I don’t care. You’ll owe me. I’m not quite sure what horrible thing Josh will say or do, but I know the man. He isn’t all sunshine and roses.”

“No, but he’s a good guy, deep down. I’ll keep dinner simple, maybe grilled pork chops, a pasta salad, and a cheesecake?”

“Now I’m hungry.” Greg smacked his lips like that frog on the commercial.

I laughed and then heard the bell over the door go off. “Got to go. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Call me when you get back from your run this afternoon, or text if you’re busy. I’d like to know that you’re home. Unless you’re not going because of the rain.”

“Okay, but why?” But then I realized Greg had already hung up. He hadn’t wanted to answer my question, so he had ended the call. Was something going on? Or did Greg just want me to check in?

Toby Killian dropped a picture of a little girl on the counter in front of me. “Sasha gave that to me last week. I thought you’d like to see a recent picture of Olivia.”

“She’s getting so big.” I picked up the photo to see her smiling face. She had her hair in cornrows with beads at the end. Olivia was the daughter of one of my former baristas. And that specific barista, Sasha, had dated Toby for a while before she went to the city to get a degree. She’d never come back to South Cove. “What grade is she in now?”

“She’ll be starting first grade in the fall. I went to the city for her kindergarten graduation last week. I took that at the park.” Toby washed his hands and put on an apron. “It was a nice trip.”

“So you and Sasha again?” I handed him the photo, but he waved it away.

“Keep it. I have another one. Or put it on the community board. I bet a lot of people would love to see how much Olivia has grown.” He moved the cups to where he liked them by the coffeemaker.

“You’re avoiding my question.” I leaned on the counter, watching him. He and Sasha had been a thing for a while years ago. To the point he had started saving for a house. Then she moved to go to school. And started dating someone else.

He stopped moving and then leaned against the counter. “Maybe. We don’t know. She broke up with that guy she’d been seeing. He wasn’t putting her or Olivia first. All he wanted was a ready-made family for his career. On the other hand, she has a good job in the city. I don’t want to leave South Cove, so right now, we’re just hanging out again. She might be coming into town to visit this weekend.”

“Well, I’d love to see her and Olivia.” I knew Toby still had a soft spot in his heart for Sasha. Once he committed to someone, they stayed with him, even after the

breakup. My newest employee was proof of that. Tessa and Toby had dated in high school, but then they'd broken up. Toby still had feelings for her. He was a hopeless romantic for a police officer and part-time barista. And he gave me hope for all men everywhere.

Walking home after my shift ended, I realized I hadn't stopped at the antique store to invite Josh and Mandy to dinner on Thursday. When I got to the house, Emma, my golden retriever, stared at her leash after I let her back inside. The rain had stopped hours ago.

"Give me a minute. I need to call Josh." I dialed the shop number and got his machine. I left a message, then went to get ready to run. I'd call again later if I didn't hear back.

When we were walking to the beach, I noticed Mandy's small red truck at the farmers market. We crossed the road, and I found her in the back, setting up trays for display. "Mandy, Josh told everyone the big news. Congratulations."

"Thanks. It's about time. I asked him to tell everyone last month, but he forgot." Mandy nodded to a metal folding chair. "Want to sit?"

"I've been sitting all day. So are you excited? Where is the ceremony going to be?" Emma sat near my foot, watching us talk.

"Under the oldest olive tree at the farm. I know, it hasn't been the happiest of places with all the history, but I want to change that. It's a lovely place. And a wedding is so filled with happiness and joy, it has to change the tree's karma, right?"

I didn't want to upset Mandy's plans, but the tree did have an infamous history. "I don't know, maybe."

“You sound like Josh. He wants to support me, but he really hates the idea of getting married at the tree. He’s a little bit superstitious.”

“It’s a beautiful spot, that’s for sure.” I didn’t want to get into the middle of this argument. “Anyway, do you and Josh want to come over for dinner on Thursday? We can compare notes about the pain of planning a wedding.”

“You’ve had a lot more time to plan.” Mandy laughed. “I’ll have to check with Josh, but we’d be happy to come. Can I bring anything? I’m hoping to have some Idaho huckleberries soon. I could make a crumble or a coffee cake.”

“Just yourselves. It will be very casual, as I’ve got a class in Bakerstown earlier that day. This will be fun.” I turned to go toward the highway, where we’d cross over to the beach parking lot. A line of eucalyptus trees went from the stand to the corner away from our road. “I didn’t realize these were here. Do you get monarchs in the winter?”

“Tons. They swarm the trees. I love watching them as they take off.” Mandy stood next to me and pointed toward the ocean. “And sometimes, I get to see whales out there. It’s such a blessing living here.”

“We’re surrounded by nature’s beauty, that’s for sure.” I tightened my hold on Emma’s leash. I always worried about her as we crossed the road to the beach. “See you Thursday.”

“Okay, maybe we’ll have a surprise to tell you when we come over.” Mandy waved as we crossed the road and headed over the empty parking lot toward the stairs to the beach.

I was already running before her words hit me. What surprise did she have that she wanted to share but couldn’t, so she half-shared that something was coming? It was

telling but not telling. Was Mandy pregnant? Was that why the quick wedding? I thought about the way she looked, and to me, she looked as skinny as ever. But some women didn't always show, especially not at first.

Josh Thomas with a wife and baby. My next thought was that the world might just be coming to an end.

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Chapter 2

I was determined to finish my coursework, including my final project before summer made my work schedule crazy with festivals. Like the one at the end of the month. I used to love Memorial Day weekend when I worked a real job as an attorney. It meant a long weekend where I didn't have to do anything. Of course, I typically took work home to complete during the long weekend, but at least I wasn't in the office. Now, long weekends meant more tourists and more tourists meant more money for our businesses. The joy of being self-employed, I guess. You just became your own bad boss.

After work on Wednesday, I headed straight to campus and the library. I needed to finish the research on my last project, and time was running out. My phone rang as I turned onto the Pacific Coast Highway toward Bakerstown. Checking the car display, I hit the button to answer. "Hey, Greg, what's going on?"

"I wanted to see if you were home yet. I'm feeling like grabbing lunch at Lille's. What's that noise?"

"The wind in my hair. Hold on a second." I rolled up the windows. "Is that better?"

"Much. But you're not in town, are you?"

Maybe I was imagining it, but I thought I heard disappointment in Greg's voice. It could have been that Tiny's stuffed meatloaf was Diamond Lille's special today. "No, sorry. I'm heading to the library to work on my project. I didn't even go home because I didn't want to see Emma's disappointed face. Can you stop in and let her

out on your way to lunch?”

“Who said I was going to lunch without you?” He chuckled. “Fine, I’ll run home first and let her out.”

“So is everything okay in South Cove? You seemed to be a little concerned with my run yesterday. And then you had that meeting last night.” Greg hadn’t come home for dinner. Instead, he’d met up with Bill Sullivan from the city council for a meeting.

“Nothing to worry about. Bill and I were just talking about ways to increase my payroll budget. The state has a grant program through the tourist division for festival assistance. I’m going to have to apply for every festival we have to keep the guys on full-time. And get some extra help from other departments.” He sighed. “Thank goodness I have Esmeralda here to help. I’m not sure I could run everything without her.”

“You need to tell her that. It’s nice to be appreciated.” I also knew that our neighbor and local fortune-teller was considering moving back home to New Orleans to marry her childhood sweetheart. It would kill Greg to lose her, but life happened, right? “Anyway, I’ll be home late, so you’re on your own for dinner. I’m grabbing something at the SUB.”

“Sure, abandon me for both meals.”

I laughed. “Dude, you lived for years as a bachelor. I’m sure you can feed yourself until the end of the month. I’ll just be glad to have this degree finished.”

“Maybe I’ll call your aunt and see what she and Harrold are doing for dinner.”

I knew it was an idle threat. Greg liked my aunt in small doses. “If you want her to go all Suzy Homemaker on me for leaving you hungry and defenseless, go for it.

Otherwise, I'll see you when I get home."

"I love you, Jill."

His tone made me smile as much as the words did. "I love you, too."

After hanging up, I rolled the windows back down and turned up the tunes. Greg and I were in a great spot. It had taken years for me to relax enough in our relationship to be able to say the three little words without freaking out just a bit. Now, they rolled off my tongue. I was growing up.

After pulling into the campus parking lot, I rolled up the windows, locked the Jeep, and got into student mode. I knew what I needed to finish by the end of the day. I just hoped my goals weren't too lofty. Otherwise, my project was going to roll into summer and be another to-do item on my already crammed list.

* * * *

Later that evening, I was in the library reading when I heard my name called. I looked up to see Professor Horace Wellborn coming toward me. I'd taken several of his California history classes for electives during my program. Probably more than I needed, but being well versed in the area's history was important for a bookseller. At least, that was my story. I just loved learning about local history.

"Professor Wellborn, nice to see you." I glanced around my section of the library, and besides one girl with earbuds over in the corner, the place was empty. That was one of the reasons I headed up to the fourth floor when I wanted to work.

"Nice to see you as well. I've been meaning to call you. I've been researching an amazing find in your little town. A local antique dealer found a journal that seems to have directions to a lost treasure." The enthusiasm beamed from his face. "It's

probably nothing, but I've found some corresponding material here that seems to corroborate the fact that this bank robber actually settled here in the area. Rumor was he died young, but his last bank heist was in gold bullion. Wouldn't that be amazing to find?"

"It would." I could only imagine that the local antique dealer had to be Josh. Maybe that was why he'd been silent for the last few meetings except for his engagement announcement. He'd been researching buried treasure and didn't want to share the information with anyone. This would make interesting dinner conversation tomorrow. "Are you working with Josh Thomas?"

"Yes, that's his name. He brought the journal in a few months ago for me to read. I was quite skeptical. You know how these things go. Everyone thinks they found pirate gold." He chuckled. "But the family lineage seems to match up with a Gabriel Santiago, who lived in this area when it was first settled."

"My shop is right next door to Josh's, so if you're ever in South Cove, be sure to stop by." I gave a pointed glance to my notebook.

"Oh, yes, well, I can see you're working. I'll be in South Cove on Friday, actually. I'll stop by your coffee shop." Professor Wellborn paused. "Please tell Mr. Thomas that he should be careful with the journal. There are people out there who would kill for it." Then he hurried off.

I watched him leave, stunned. Had Josh actually found a real treasure? The guy talked about antiques like they were all precious. I sat down, then realized I'd be leaving town around noon. Hopefully, the professor was an early bird, or he'd think I'd forgotten about my invitation. I stood and thought about following him to explain, but as I did, I saw him on the elevator through the stacks. The doors closed, and so did my opportunity to let him know. I'd have Deek Kerr, the barista who worked Fridays, give him a tour if he actually showed up. Deek liked people. Especially talking with

professors.

When I got home, a note was on the kitchen table. I picked it up as I let Emma out. Since it was still warm outside, I stepped out on the porch with her and read the note aloud. “Sorry, honey, I had a call out. If you’re still up, I’ll see you when I get back.”

Emma climbed the few steps from the lawn and sat down in front of me. I’m sure her message was It’s not really too late to run.

But this time, my dog was wrong. We were getting the last few rays of sunshine before the sun set. Then the beach would be dark, especially since it was a new moon. I rubbed her ears. “Sorry, girl. I only have a few more weeks of this.”

As we went inside to watch a movie while we waited for Greg, I wondered how she was going to take my weekend trip. All I could hope for was that it would rain while I was gone. Except it would rain on my parade as well since we were going to tourist our way through Santa Barbara after the fitting and checking in with the venue.

The next morning, I heard Greg talking to Emma downstairs. I never could hear the words as I got ready for my day, but the two of them seemed to have good conversations, especially when I wasn’t around. Or was I being paranoid?

I stumbled down the last three stairs, and both of them turned to watch as I pulled myself back to vertical.

“Maybe you should sleep a little longer,” Greg said as he poured me a cup of coffee. “What time did you stop reading last night?”

“Midnight. Or maybe twelve thirty. You were late.” I slipped into a chair and took the coffee, holding the cup with two hands like it was an elixir that would magically give me alertness and energy with just one sip. It was going to be a long day.

“Yeah. I wanted to talk to you about that.” He sat next to me. “Now, don’t get upset.”

“Aunt Jackie? No, you would have called. Not Harrold. Or one of my staff?” My mind raced through the names of people I cared about.

He held up his hand. “What kind of monster do you think I am? If it was your aunt or your uncle, I would have called. And the same with any of your staff. It’s just that we’re not sure yet if this person had run into foul play or just took off for a few days.”

“Okay, who is missing?” I took another sip of coffee. “Oh no. It’s not Darla, is it? She was acting so weird on Tuesday. Do I need to call her? Maybe she’ll pick up for me.”

“Jill, stop.” He took a breath. “Mandy Jensen’s missing.”

It took a minute for her name to register. “Mandy, like in Josh’s Mandy? She’s missing?”

He nodded. “You said you talked to her on Tuesday, right?”

I paused to make sure I was remembering right. When you’re involved with a police detective, it tends to change the way you answer some questions. Like this one. “Let me remember. Yes, it was right after I got off work, and I was taking Emma for a run. And I didn’t run her yesterday, as I was working at the library. So, yes, I talked with her Tuesday, about one?”

“Okay, Josh said she didn’t stop by the store before she went home, so you might be the last person to see her. Did she seem upset? Ready to run away?” Greg had taken out his small notebook he always carried and was making notes as I talked.

“No, she was excited that Josh had finally told the business council about the

wedding. We talked about getting together at dinner. I guess they aren't coming tonight?"

He shook his head. "Not unless she just went to a friend's house and didn't tell Josh. But that's not likely. He's going crazy. He stayed at the station yesterday while we did all the calling to the hospitals and such. Her truck is still at the farm stand, although it was locked. Either she went for a drink with someone who stopped by, or..."

"Poor Josh. He finally finds someone who likes him—well, loves him—and she disappears just before the wedding. That guy has no luck at all." I peeled a banana. "At least in love. Professor Wellborn said Josh found a valuable journal that may lead to buried treasure."

Greg's head snapped up. "What?"

"I ran into the professor at the library. He said he'd been working with someone from South Cove about a new find. He seemed quite excited about it." I polished off the banana and stood to get a carton of yogurt since I was still hungry. Greg had been on me to eat before I went to work so the cookies wouldn't call my name so loudly. It wasn't working.

"Funny, Josh didn't mention buried treasure. You don't think it was just an academic find, do you?"

I shut the fridge and turned back, grabbing a spoon from the drawer. "Oh, I forgot. Professor Wellborn said Josh should keep the journal close and not tell anyone about it. Of course, the professor is running his mouth about the find. Maybe I could be a bad guy."

This time, Greg laughed.

“What?” I stopped eating and stared at him. “It could happen.”

“Not in this lifetime, but sure.” He stood and kissed me. “I need to go talk to Josh about this buried treasure thing and see if he has gotten any ransom calls. At least it gives us a reason why Mandy might have been kidnapped.”

“Wait, I thought you believed she was just missing. Cold feet from the wedding.” I watched him grab his travel mug and head to the doorway.

“That was before you gave me a plausible kidnapping motive. I can’t believe how you are always in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Maybe I’m always in the right place at the right time,” I said to Emma, since Greg had already left the house.

I finished my yogurt, then got ready for work. Saying a quick prayer for Mandy’s safety, I added one for Josh’s sanity as I walked up the hill toward town. I had a busy day, but at least one thing was off my plate. Josh and Mandy wouldn’t be coming for dinner. Maybe Greg and I would do burgers, then. If he even came home. When he was in an investigation, he disappeared into his work.

I didn’t mind it really. I could entertain myself. All I needed was a good book. Of course, I also had the girls’ trip starting tomorrow. I knew it was bad to be happy when Josh and Mandy were having problems, but I couldn’t change what was happening to them.

The antique store was still closed when I walked by, but that wasn’t unusual. Josh opened about ten, where, since I was the premier coffee place in town, I had customers lining up at six. Today, though, no one stood at the door waiting or sat at any of the tables, so I hurried in to get set up before the first commuter arrived.

The walk-ins slowed down about ten, and of course, my cell phone rang right when I was thinking about finishing the book I'd been reading last night. "Hello?"

"Jill Gardner?" a female voice asked.

"This is Jill. Can I help you?" I hoped it wasn't a last, final offer for a car warranty on my Jeep.

"Yes, this is Martha Long at the Santa Barbara mission. I see you're scheduled for a wedding and a reception this October?"

"Yes. I'm so excited. I was coming by this weekend to see the site again. It's so beautiful."

"I just need your priest's name and parish for the wedding."

"Excuse me?"

"The church is part of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and therefore we only allow Catholic weddings on the grounds. If you're not affiliated, we can do a reception outside, but not the wedding either inside or out."

I felt sick. "That's not what George and I talked about when I booked the site. He said it wouldn't be a problem. We have our own minister from South Cove who's a friend who is going to officiate."

"I'm sorry, George is no longer working here. He was not following our guidelines. Do you want to keep your reservation? As you know, our mission is very popular for weddings. I'm sure I'll be able to get most of your deposit back."

The woman sounded so chipper as she ruined my carefully planned wedding. For a

second time. My soon-to-be mother-in-law had nixed our June wedding. Which would have probably slipped through Martha's strict rules. I felt like I was going to throw up. "I need some time to process this. So you're telling me that unless we join your church and have a priest do the wedding, we can't get married at the mission."

"Exactly. Although I'm not sure you could meet all the requirements to join by October." She paused. "Look, I know this is a shock, so I'll give you until Monday to make your decision. Will that work?"

"I think so." I tried to think of other ideas for the wedding venue, but we'd nixed so many in favor of the mission. "I'll pull out my planning folder and get back to you. What's your name and number again?"

After I hung up, I sank into the couch and closed my eyes. Now I had one more thing on my to-do list. And I'd been ready to send the invitations next week. I'd have to find a new venue, at least for the wedding, decide on the reception, then design new invites, and maybe they would get sent the following week.

My perfectly planned wedding was going down the tubes, again. Hopefully, the third time really was a charm.

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Chapter 3

Deek Kerr, one of my baristas, was late getting to the shop to replace me. I called him at eleven to remind him he'd agreed to come an hour early so I could get to my rescheduled class. I was watching the door when he stumbled in from upstairs. "Finally."

"Sorry, I was writing and got in a zone. And I'd forgotten about the time change. So I needed to get dressed." Deek was writing a book. Or actually, several. He'd written one and had an agent now. The first book was being shopped to publishers. While he was waiting, he was writing another one. The boy was hooked on the process. He washed his hands in the sink while I grabbed my tote. "Anything I should know?"

"Nothing, except Mandy Jensen seems to be missing, so if you see her, have her call Greg and Josh. Maybe Greg first." I turned toward the back door, where I'd parked my Jeep behind the building.

Deek dropped a roll of cups on the counter. "Wait, Mandy's missing? What happened?"

I grabbed a cookie from the display case. "All I know is she didn't go home on Tuesday night. Look, I've got to go. That's all I know."

"Don't worry about it. By the time you get back from class, Inspector Deek will have all the answers." He saluted me as I stepped away and into the back room.

"Bye, Deek," I called as I walked out.

“I’m not kidding,” was the response that came back.

I unlocked and relocked the back door as I pulled it closed. We didn’t have a lot of crime in South Cove, but if my shop got robbed just because I didn’t lock a door, Greg would never forgive me.

It’s hard being the fiancée of the local police detective.

The class was a waste of time. The professor’s attention was somewhere else, probably already thinking about his evening appointment. It was probably a date, the way he kept rubbing his hands on his pants. The guy was sweating bullets.

“The only good thing about that class was he let us out an hour early,” I said to Meg, a woman who seemed to be in all my classes this semester. She ran a quilt shop in Bakerstown and, like me, wanted to know more about the business of business. “Since my evening plans changed, I’m heading to the library. What about you?”

“I have to get back to the shop. My mom watches the front while I’m at class, but I don’t want to abuse her generosity.” Meg turned toward the parking lot. “I’ll see you next week. Have fun with your friends this weekend.”

“I didn’t tell you.” I stopped and turned toward her. “I have to find a new venue for the wedding. So if you have any ideas, let me know. It’s in...”

“October, I know. Let me think about it.” Meg waved, and we parted ways.

When I got to the library, I headed straight upstairs to my regular spot. Professor Wellborn sat at my table, books were stacked around him, and his glasses were on the top of his head.

“Professor Wellborn, it’s nice to see you again. Twice in a week. I’m surprised.” I

opened my bag and took out my laptop and notebook. I loved setting up for a few hours of work. It made me feel like I was a scholar, not a student. Someone who worked with words and thoughts all day long and came up with smart ideas they then wrote about in books that then were placed on the wooden bookshelves all around us. One person, one thought at a time. Then one book fed the discussion onward. I was beginning to understand Deek's original goal of being a perpetual student. Now that he'd found his love of writing, he still took classes.

But his mother had insisted he finally move out of her basement, and so Deek was renting the apartment above the shop. As he said, he was an adult.

Professor Wellborn looked up like he'd just noticed my existence. "Oh, Miss Gardner. I didn't hear you come up. I'm so excited about what I'm finding today. Did you know that there's a cove on the coast where outlaws and bank robbers used to hide from law enforcement? I found a local map, but it's not showing the cove. I guess it wouldn't, right?"

"I'm not sure." I actually wasn't keeping up with the professor's logic. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I just need to check something in my office." Professor Wellborn grabbed his laptop and notebook, stuffing them into his leather satchel. "It was nice to see you again."

I watched as he hurried off, running into a student as he crossed his path to the elevators.

"Dude," the man cried as his books went sprawling, but Professor Wellborn didn't stop. He hurried into an elevator, and as the doors closed, his gaze met mine. He looked scared.

I settled into my studies and made a note in my planner to check in on him next week when I got back into town. I know, too big of a to-do list, but this item was important. I was really worried about him.

My phone beeped out an alarm at six, and I realized I had stayed working longer than I'd planned. I bundled up my laptop, pleased with what I'd done for the day. If I kept this pace, I'd be finished before I knew it. I checked the phone to see if anyone had called. I'd missed three calls from Greg already. I tucked my phone into my pocket and hurried out of the building to where I'd parked my Jeep. I would call him from the road.

When I got into the Jeep, I called him back. "Hey, what's going on?"

"Where are you?" Greg said, his voice lowered.

"At school. Since dinner wasn't happening, I stayed to work. Why?" I turned onto the highway.

"Josh is here."

"What?" I rolled up the windows so I could hear him better. "Why is Josh there?"

"He came for dinner. And to see what progress I've been making on finding Mandy." Greg sighed. "Just get here. I'm grilling burgers, but I don't know if I can keep this up much longer."

"I'm on my way. Hey, tell him about me meeting Professor Wellborn. Maybe that will get him talking." I hung up and headed back to South Cove. Greg just needed to hold the fort for another thirty minutes or so, and I'd be home. Then I could ask Josh what he and the professor were messing with. And why they were both acting so strange.

Emma sat on the front porch waiting for me when I arrived home. She ran to greet me at the gate. I leaned down and gave her a hug. “Did you get banished?”

Emma stared at the door and whined.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll get you back inside.” I opened the door, and she followed me inside. “Hey, I’m home.”

“We’re in the kitchen making a salad,” Greg called back.

Josh wasn’t helping Greg make the salad. Instead, he was sitting at the table with a notebook and a pen. Josh was in his early forties, but since he’d lost weight and had started doing things outdoors with Mandy, he looked younger. His green eyes gazed over my appearance in the room. “Oh, and her cousin Grace lives in Santa Clara. Maybe she’s heard from her.”

“Hi, Josh. How are you doing? I can’t believe what’s going on with Mandy. Have you heard from her or anyone?” I put my bag on the floor in the living room. Emma stayed back by the couch, staring at Josh.

“Put that notebook away, Josh. We’re going to have dinner and not talk about where Mandy might be. You need to eat.” Greg went to take the notebook away from Josh.

Josh grabbed it and held it to his chest. “What are you talking about? I’m not doing anything else until Mandy’s back home. I love her.”

“We know you do, but Greg’s got everyone looking for her. All we can do now is wait for a break in the case. Hopefully, she’s just off on a trip and it was a miscommunication. Maybe she thought she left a message for you on one of your phones.” I went over and put my hand on Josh’s shoulder, meeting Greg’s gaze. We had to get him to calm down.

“Jill’s right. I bet she’s somewhere picking out a wedding dress with a friend or something. Maybe her phone died and she didn’t have her charger.” Greg set the salad aside and sat at the table with Josh. “I know you’re upset, and you have a right to be, but you have to be strong for Mandy. What if she needs you, and you can’t do something because you’re too weak from hunger.”

“I guess.” Josh deflated into his chair.

I took it as a good sign. “Hey, I ran into Professor Wellborn at the library twice this week. He said you two are working on finding a buried treasure. That has to be interesting.”

“He told you?” Josh’s face turned beet red. “We agreed we were keeping this quiet. Who knows who else is looking for the treasure?”

“He gave me a message for you. He said to keep the journal safe. He told me you were looking for a cove on the beach?” I grabbed an orange to peel. Dinner was going to be late, and I was starving.

“He needs to keep his mouth shut.” Josh stood up. “I’m sorry, I’m not in the mood for dinner or small talk. I’m going to the shop to check to see if Mandy left a message there. I’ll come to the station tomorrow morning.”

“I can call you if anything develops,” Greg offered, but Josh waved him off.

As he hurried out of the house, Emma followed him, stopping to watch him leave through the front door.

“I better go see if he wants a ride into town.” Greg stood and nodded to the salad. “Can you finish that for me, and I’ll put the hamburgers on when I get back?”

“Sure.” I stood and grabbed the bag of pre-cut carrots. I finished the salad while I thought about Josh’s behavior. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought that his concern when he left was not about Mandy but about whether he’d locked up the journal.

I needed to find out more about this journal and what kind of treasure he and Professor Wellborn were working on.

Greg came back in after just a few minutes.

“He didn’t want a ride?”

Greg shrugged. “He had already disappeared up the hill. I guess he ran. Tell me the story about this buried treasure. How crazy is that professor?”

* * * *

Friday morning, I was at the coffee shop early. I’d already packed my bag and had the Jeep parked behind the building. I’d called Amy last night and told her I needed to go try one more time to talk Martha out of booting our wedding ceremony from the mission chapel. I was leaving town early. Amy, Esmeralda, and Darla were gathering at five as soon as they got off work. Amy promised they’d be brainstorming wedding venue ideas as they drove down. I had the folder I’d made last year with all the places I’d considered and dropped once I found the mission. It was going to be a long weekend, but I hoped by the time we left Santa Barbara Sunday evening, I’d have a new wedding venue. At least for the ceremony.

“Earth to Jill, do you want to help me carry in the trays?” asked Sadie Michaels, baker and owner of Pies on the Fly. Sadie was the sole treat supplier for Coffee, Books, and More as well as Diamond Lille’s. She was also one of my best friends and now she was engaged to Pastor Bill from the local church.

“Oh, sorry, Sadie, I didn’t hear you come in.” I hurried to meet her at the door.

She studied me as she handed me a tray of cookies made into flower shapes. “You look upset. I guess you heard about Mandy. I didn’t know you were that close to her.”

“I wasn’t. I mean, yes, I heard about Mandy, but I’m kind of freaking out about the wedding. The mission says I can’t have the wedding there if I’m not part of their flock.” I took the tray and held the shop door open for Sadie.

“You could always have it at Bill’s church, then move the reception to the mission. Or have the ceremony on the beach near the mission. There’s a lot of options. And besides, it’s not until October. You have time.” Sadie carried two trays, and I followed her into the back room, where we stacked them on the prep table. “Don’t stress about the little things.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re having your wedding as well as the reception at Bill’s church. You have to.” I followed her out to the van for more desserts. Limited choices made planning so much easier.

“I don’t have to. But this is my second wedding. If I’d had my druthers, it would be a very small affair with just us and our friends. But since this is Bill’s first, and last as he says, he wants to include his family and every person he’s ever met since grade school.”

“Okay, so I guess you’re saying every wedding has its challenges?” I grabbed the last tray as Sadie shut the van door behind me.

“You got it. I guess one of my new responsibilities as the pastor’s wife is going to be counseling the brides if they get cold feet on the way to the altar. I just hope I don’t talk someone into a marriage that’s not in their best interest.” Sadie handed me the invoice for the delivery and then sat down at the counter. “Can I get a large coffee?”

My meeting with the deacons last night kept me up later than I wanted.”

“You couldn’t talk anyone into a bad marriage. You are the most insightful person I know.” I poured her a coffee and refilled my own, since it had gone cold.

“Yeah, but now I’ll be talking for God, not just stating my opinion.” Sadie sighed. “I love Bill so much, but I didn’t realize what I was getting myself into when I said yes. He doesn’t have a job; he has a lifestyle.”

“One that you’ve been a part of for years. You volunteer together. You have the same moral compass. I have no fear of what your counsel might be to a young, vulnerable bride. I have more concern about how mad the males in your venue might be when you speak your mind. You’re a good person. You’ll do fine.”

Sadie brightened as she thought about my words. “You give good counsel yourself.”

“Think of it as payback for talking me off the wedding-venue ledge a few minutes ago.” I laughed and sipped my coffee. “But back to Mandy, that’s so sad. Josh finally finds the one, his soulmate, and she disappears just before the wedding. I’m worried about him. He’s determined to find her.”

“Losing someone you love is hard. No matter when it happens.” Sadie rubbed her hand, where now a small engagement ring sat. For years, she’d worn her wedding ring from her first marriage. Her husband had been dead since I’d known her, and still she held his memory close. Love was hard.

“We’re a cheery bunch this morning, aren’t we?” I leaned back against the chair. “I guess you just have to find joy in each moment you have and let the future take care of itself.”

“Plan for the worst, expect the best?” Sadie smiled. “Speaking of love. I saw the

picture of Olivia on the bulletin board last time I was here. She's getting big."

"Sasha and Olivia are coming into town next weekend. At least I hope it's next weekend, since I'm taking off for Santa Barbara with the girls right after my shift. I wish you were coming with us."

"I've got a business to run. These cookies don't bake themselves." Sadie laughed. "Besides, my sleep schedule is so messed up with my baking, I wouldn't be awake when you girls were. I think I'm going to hire a baker when I marry Bill. I'll still do deliveries and manage the bakery, but I think it's time for me to get a bit of that life everyone talks about."

After Sadie left, I felt a little better about not having a venue for the ceremony. I'd do my best to change Martha's mind today, but then I'd find somewhere else for Greg and me to tie the knot. He wanted me to have the wedding I'd wanted, but he was more like Sadie. He would have agreed to getting married at the county courthouse with a judge. Then a small party and spend the rest of the money on an amazing honeymoon. I wanted more. My first marriage had been rushed. I didn't get the dress or the trappings. Since this was the last one, I wanted the bride treatment. And the fun party afterward for our friends and family. Another reason I didn't complain when Greg's mom asked to change the date. She got one delay. This time it was happening. Even if we had to say "I do" on a beach during a hurricane.

When I got into the car, my phone rang. It was Greg. "Hey, I was just thinking about you."

"Are you on your way to Santa Barbara yet?"

"Just got on the highway. Why? Do I need to come back? I let Emma out before I left town." I glanced at my clock. I needed to be at the mission before three, or Martha would be gone for the weekend and I'd have to come back next week.

“No, it’s fine. I just wanted to tell you before someone else did.”

I paused, thinking about all the things it could have been. Finally, I went with Mandy.

“Did you find her?”

“Not yet. Although I’m thinking we need to look into this buried treasure idea you talked about last night. Your friend, Professor Wellborn? He was found dead in his office at the school last night.”

“Oh no. I had just seen him in the library. Was it a robbery?”

Greg answered my question with a question. “Did he have anything with him in the library?”

I thought about my last image of Professor Wellborn in the elevator. “He had a leather bag. He had a notebook in it that he was working with on Josh’s buried treasure mystery.”

“They didn’t find a bag. It looks like the professor was hit in the head with something heavy. The office is a mess.” Greg sighed. “Look, I need to get back to this meeting. I just didn’t want you to find out on the news.”

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Chapter 4

My visit with Martha didn't go quite as planned. I left her office on the mission grounds with a copy of the rental rules for the chapel and the grounds. She also issued a warning that if I didn't confirm the reception grounds by next Friday, she would cancel that as well. And she'd generously give me 80 percent of my deposit back. We weren't having my dream wedding in the historic chapel. Now I just needed to see what Greg wanted to do next.

Amy had called, and she and the others were at the hotel, waiting for me. Tonight, we were doing a bar crawl and dinner. Right now, I didn't want food, but a good margarita might take my mind off the wedding venue issues. Tomorrow was manicures, dress fittings, and massages. Then another dinner. If I fit into my dress by the end of the weekend, I'd be lucky.

I texted Greg and let him know about the chapel. Instead of texting back, he called me.

"Sorry about that. I know you wanted that setting."

I swallowed back the tears. "Thanks. I feel like I'm failing at this wedding-planning thing. Maybe I should have hired someone."

"You know I'd marry you tomorrow at Bill's church or Moonstone Beach or even the Castle. Heck, I bet we could pull off a wedding at the rec center. You find a place and give me the date and time, and I'll be there. And so will Mom and Jim."

“You’re amazing.” I brushed my cheeks and blinked away the tears. Crying and driving just didn’t work. “So any word about Mandy or Professor Wellborn?”

“Not that I’m telling you. I’ll give you an update on Sunday when you get home. For now, go have fun with your friends. No murder talk. And no worrying about the wedding.” He paused and said something to someone in the room with him. “Got to go. The Bakerstown detective just showed up. Love you.”

And that was it. Greg hated me getting involved in his investigations, but with Josh tangled up in this one, I didn’t think he would be able to keep me out of Mandy’s disappearance. I said a short prayer for her safety and took the exit that would take me to the hotel. Time to just chill.

Amy, Esmeralda, and Darla were all in the upscale hotel lobby, waiting for me. And they each had a smoothie in front of them. Darla waved me over. “Hurry up and check in. You’re already behind. They’re filled with energy shots to keep us going this weekend. What do you want? I’ll have it waiting for you.”

She gave me a hug, and after telling her to get me something strawberry and maybe with a more calming additive, I hurried to the front desk. The woman there smiled at me as I walked up to her. “I need to check in.”

“You must be the bride, Jill Gardner?” Leigh, the front desk clerk, at least from her name tag, grinned. “You’re already checked in. Your fiancé put it on his card. I just need a photo ID from you.”

“Greg paid for my room?” I felt the smile on my face. “That was sweet. He’s got a lot on his plate.”

“Yes, that woman with your group, she brought the card with her. I guess she works with him?”

“That would be Esmeralda. She’s his dispatcher.” I waved at the group, who were grinning at me. They must have already known. “They’re my best friends. We’re from South Cove.”

“I’ve heard the story.” Leigh grinned. “Your friends are very excited.”

“Well, I better get my suitcase upstairs and get down here before they drink my smoothie.” I took the key and grabbed my suitcase. “Thanks, Leigh.”

“No problem. We have another bride-to-be and her friends here this weekend. I’m sure you’ll run into them sometime.” Leigh smiled and picked up the ringing phone.

I was in the room before her words hit me. There was another bride-to-be here? It would be a total coincidence if that bride was Mandy. I decided to ask Leigh when I got back to the lobby.

I hurried downstairs and went directly to the front desk, where a man greeted me.

“May I help you?”

“Is Leigh still here?” I looked through the doorway that was open behind the lobby.

“Sorry, she stepped out. Is there something I can help you with?” He crossed his arms.

“Do you know the name of the other bride-to-be that’s having a party here? Leigh was saying there was another group like mine.”

He frowned and looked at a list. “Sorry, I don’t have that information, and I was off until today, so I haven’t heard. I can leave a note for Leigh to call you.”

“Thanks. That would be great.” I left my name and room number and hurried back over to the group.

Esmeralda frowned as I sat down. “Is everything okay?”

“Fine. I just needed more towels in the room.” I lied because if Esmeralda knew I was looking for Mandy, it would get back to Greg.

“Whatever. I’m not a snitch, Jill.” Esmeralda sipped her smoothie.

My eyes must have widened, because Amy laughed.

“Don’t try to hide something from a fortune-teller,” Amy said. She pointed to the drink in front of me. “Just catch up. We’re having fun this weekend if it kills us.”

We stopped talking about murders and missing people and weddings. Instead, we talked about gossip in South Cove. Including Sadie and Bill’s upcoming nuptials.

Darla sighed as she looked around at the group. “Everyone’s getting married. It feels like I’m going to be the only single girl in South Cove soon.”

“That’s not true.” Esmeralda held up her hand. “I’m going to stay single forever. Nic is too invested in his family and his business in New Orleans to even think about stepping away. And I’m not willing to jump into that mess. You think South Cove is gossip central, you should be in New Orleans.”

Darla gave Esmeralda a hug. “Single girls unite! Let’s go to the restaurant. I’m starving.”

* * * *

As we stayed out later than I'd expected, I was sure I wouldn't see Leigh at the front desk. And I was right. I hoped I had a message on my phone about the other bride, but when I got into the room, I didn't have any blinking light. I sent Greg a quick "back in the hotel" text, thanking him for paying for the room. It was something I should have done earlier, but I'd been distracted by the food and then karaoke at the bar down the street. After sending the text, I crashed. Even though I'd nursed my one drink while we were there, the atmosphere and the laughing had zapped me of any energy boosters the smoothie had attempted to provide.

My phone rang just as I was falling asleep. I reached for it, then squinted at the number. It was Greg. "Hey, I hope I didn't wake you with my text."

"No, I just got home. It's been a busy night. So did you have fun?"

I could hear Emma barking as he let her out.

"We did. Esmeralda talked us into karaoke at the bar near the hotel. She has a great singing voice." I curled up on the soft pillows, letting the phone sit on the bed. The comforter was so soft. I ran my hand over it as we talked.

"She's good. She's always singing around the office. Amy, on the other hand..."

"Stop. You're being mean." I defended my friend. "She tries."

He chuckled. "You're a good friend."

"I know. Hey, is there any chance that Mandy's off on a bachelorette trip like I am?" I adjusted the pillow behind me and sat up in bed.

"That's a pretty specific question. Why are you asking?" Now Greg had his cop voice on. "Don't tell me you're investigating. You're supposed to be relaxing."

“I am relaxing. I just heard that there was another party here and I thought maybe...”

“Stop thinking. Just relax. Now go to bed. I’ll talk to you on Sunday.”

After I hung up, I punched down the pillow and tried to go to sleep, but I kept thinking of Mandy out at one of the bars, singing karaoke, while Josh sat at home, worrying.

The next morning, I found I’d fallen asleep without getting under the covers. My mouth felt dry, and my phone was ringing. I reached around the bed and finally found it. “Hello?”

“Good morning, princess.” Amy’s voice sounded way too cheery. “We’ve got room service coming to your room. We’ll be there in ten.”

“Give me fifteen. I need to get in the shower.” I hung up and, through bleary eyes, looked around the room. I needed to charge my phone. I opened my suitcase and found a bottle of bubble bath packed with a note. I opened it and read, “Enjoy. Greg.”

“Man, I love that guy.” I set the bottle aside. The long bubble bath would have to wait. I found my phone charger and a change of clothes and headed to the bathroom. Time to get the day started.

Breakfast was fun, and thankfully, they’d brought up several pots of coffee to sweep away the cobwebs. The conversation ran toward South Cove gossip. When the discussion came around to Josh and Mandy, Esmeralda tried to change the subject.

“Let’s talk about today’s activities.” Esmeralda sipped her coffee and wouldn’t meet my gaze.

I challenged her. “Esmeralda, don’t tell me you’ve been tasked with keeping me from

investigating.”

She shrugged. “I just think we should be able to get through the weekend without talking about an open investigation.”

“I’m not saying I want to go off and investigate.” I grabbed a Danish. “I just feel bad for Josh. And now with Professor Wellborn’s death, I just think there’s something more going on.”

“Wait, who’s Professor Wellborn?” Amy looked between Esmeralda and me.

“He was killed in Bakerstown at his office on campus. He was an expert on California history. I took several classes from him over the years. I talked to him just before he was killed.” I put the Danish down and sipped my coffee. I hated the fact that he was gone. “Anyway, he was working with Josh on a mystery that he’d found in a journal.”

“Is that why Mandy disappeared?” Amy stared at me. “Over an old journal?”

“I don’t think that’s what Jill is saying,” Esmeralda interrupted.

Darla set her plate down. “I still think Mandy just figured out what a horrible decision she’d made in saying yes to Josh.”

“And just left her truck at the fruit stand?” I countered Darla’s theory.

Darla shook her head, her eyes on my uneaten Danish. “That’s not her truck. It’s owned by the farm. She owns a red convertible Mustang. We went up to San Francisco a few months ago for a concert together, and she drove. I still think she’s too good for Josh.”

“Sometimes people just click,” Esmeralda said.

“Does Greg know about the Mustang? Should I call him?” I tried to catch Esmeralda’s gaze.

“Jill, you know how he gets.” Esmeralda finally met my gaze, then sighed. “Let me text him. Then we need to get to the bridal shop. It’s almost noon.”

As we passed through the lobby a few minutes later, I looked for Leigh. I didn’t want to let Esmeralda see, so I didn’t stop. I would reach out later. I needed to realize there were probably more than two brides in the central coastal California area. Of course, there were probably hundreds, maybe thousands of women getting married soon. I was being silly thinking that it could be Mandy. But I was still holding out hope.

At the bridal shop, we were ushered into a private room where all our dresses were hung for us to see. The colors were beautiful. And the room looked like it was painted in white tulle. I had asked my bridesmaids to be in a watery blue, mostly to match the ocean. And now that we might be doing the wedding on the beach, the color made even more sense. My dress featured a sweetheart neckline and a poofy skirt. The wedding dress of my dreams.

Amy poured us all champagne from the bottle chilling on the coffee table. “To Jill and Greg. May you have many happy years together and never remodel a house.”

“Been there, done that,” I reminded her. I sipped the champagne. “Greg helped me remodel Miss Emily’s house after he moved in. But thanks for the well wishes.”

“I don’t know how you did it. The only thing keeping us from killing each other over bath fixtures is our marriage vows. I swear we’re putting up signs saying ‘For Better or Worse’ all over the house.” Amy downed her glass. “Maybe getting a house so soon was a mistake.”

“You’re just going through the change years. I hear when kids arrive, it makes it so much worse,” Esmeralda said as her phone rang. She pushed a button to deny the call.

“Spam?” I asked, and she shook her head.

Sunny, our bridal consultant, came into the room with a clipboard. “So who’s first to get their alterations?”

Esmeralda downed her champagne. “Better be me. That way I have a reason for not taking Greg’s call.”

After Esmeralda went into a dressing room, I stood up. Amy was watching me, so I smiled. “Just got to make sure the bill’s up to date. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, but this is your weekend, you know.” She turned back to Darla and started talking about Justin and his fear of towels being left on the floor.

I approached the front desk, but the woman was on the phone. She smiled and held up a finger. As I waited, I tried to see the calendar that she had open in front of her. I’m not the best at reading upside down. It showed a red no-show on Friday’s schedule. And I thought it said M. Jensen.

The woman hung up. “Good afternoon, Miss Gardner. How can I help you?”

I leaned forward. “This is a little embarrassing, but I’m supposed to help a friend with a wedding gown selection, or maybe it was a fitting. With my own wedding being so crazy right now, I’ve forgotten. But I’m sure she said she was working with you guys. Mandy? Mandy Jensen?”

I saw the emotion in her eyes. “Miss Jensen is one of our clients, but she missed her last fitting, and now we can’t reach her. If you hear from her, could you let her know

we can't hold a gown with only a partial payment for long?"

* * * *

At the nail salon, Greg finally called me back. I put him on speaker. "Hey, we're just getting pretty."

"Not out looking for a red Mustang?"

I laughed as Esmeralda's face pinked. "Nope. But if you need us to investigate something, we might be able to fit it in before we go to dinner. After that, all bets are off."

"I'm glad you asked. I do need you to do something. But not today. Josh is driving me crazy. I told him that you'd come over on Monday and try to figure out what Professor Wellborn had found out about his buried treasure escapade."

I jumped when the nail technician started massaging my feet. I was ticklish. "You usually don't want me to help with investigations."

"I'm not asking you to get involved, just keep Josh busy for a few hours. He's hanging out at the station and asks to see me every five minutes. I'm ready to arrest him just to get him off my back."

I chuckled at the image. "You wouldn't do that. Okay, I can take one for the team. But what if we find out something that either could have been why the professor was killed or leads us to Mandy?"

"One, you won't. People have been looking for that strongbox for years. And two, I don't think the two events are connected."

“Okay, but—”

Greg interrupted me. “Jill, just babysit him for a few hours. I have the DA coming over, and I need to be ready to present a logical theory. Without Josh interrupting.”

“Only because I love you and you paid for my room for the weekend.” I tried not to move my hands. My nails were still tacky. I ruined most manicures because I couldn’t sit still long enough. It was the same with lipstick. I rarely wore it, since I would inevitably touch it and smear it on my face like clown makeup. I wondered if I should tell him about Mandy’s missed fitting. I guess it meant she was really gone and not just ignoring Josh. Before I could decide, Greg responded.

“I love you too. Josh is coming. I’ve got to go.”

After Greg hung up, I glanced over at Amy. “I guess I’m not free for lunch Monday like I thought.”

“No worries. The mayor will probably need a stack of things done since I’m out of town this weekend. He’s so needy. One Saturday, he called to see if I could pick up his dry cleaning. After that, I started letting his calls go to voice mail when I’m off work. Otherwise, he thinks I should be available twenty-four seven.” Amy pointed to my color. “That’s nice, but you have a hair in the polish.”

Of course I did.

Chapter 5

At Guadalajara Cantina, we'd ordered and were digging into the chips and salsa. Esmeralda poured us all margaritas from the pitcher they'd delivered a few minutes ago on the house. I wore a T-shirt that announced my bride status. A tall man with a topknot and one side of his head shaved stopped at the table.

"Jill, you're getting married?" He pulled me up into a bear hug.

I could feel the stares of the other women. When he let me loose, I grinned. "Tank Harding. What on earth are you doing here? I thought you were working in South America?"

"I was, but then Professor Wellborn called me and asked me to make a stop here before I headed back to Peru. You remember him, right? Anyway, I've been on a Mexico dig for the last year, but I just got promoted to this new Inca site by my museum. Aztecs to Incas, I have to pinch myself every day just to make sure this isn't a dream." He nodded to the shirt. "So what else is going on with you besides the wedding? Are you still at that little bookstore?"

"I own that little bookstore, and yes, I'm still there." I pulled him aside, out of the way, as our dinners were arriving. "Hey, have you talked to Professor Wellborn lately?"

"No, but I just got in. I drove up from LAX this afternoon and stopped here to see a friend tonight. I figured I'd call him tomorrow when I got into Bakerstown." He cocked his head and looked at me. "Something's wrong, isn't it?"

“You could say that.” I decided to tell him. “Professor Wellborn was killed Thursday night at the college. I suspect someone’s going to be calling you to see why you were meeting him.”

“I don’t have anything to hide, if that’s what you’re worried about.” He sank against the wall and almost knocked a mariachi sombrero off the wall. “Wow, I didn’t expect this. I was so excited to hear from him when he called a couple of weeks ago. You know he wrote me a recommendation for the museum when I started there. He was a class act.”

“He was sweet. So when was the last time you heard from him?” I needed to get as much information from Tank before Esmeralda discovered what we were talking about and shut it down.

“I left the dig and had a message that he was looking forward to seeing me on Monday. He had a lot to tell me.” His phone buzzed and he checked the display. “Hey, that’s my ride. I’ll stop by the bookstore this week so we can catch up. I’m here for a while. Need to spend some time with the folks.”

Back at the table, my friends were all staring at me. After I sat, I took a sip of my drink. When no one still said anything, I asked, “What?”

“So who was the hottie?” Darla asked. When the other women laughed, she shook her head. “You all were thinking it.”

I picked up my fork. “Tank Harding. He’s the only reason I got through Professor Wellborn’s class. He was my study partner.”

“He looks like a Tibetan monk. But in a really good way,” Amy said as she watched him leave the restaurant.

“You should have seen him in school. He wore his hair down past his shoulders. It was very sexy on him.”

“Now, Jill, I didn’t realize you were into that type. Especially since Greg has a clean-cut boy-next-door look,” Darla commented as she forked shrimp and peppers onto a corn tortilla. The food had arrived while I was talking to Tank.

“You should have met my first boyfriend. Aunt Jackie hated his hair more than she hated him, I think.” I took a bite of my seafood enchiladas. “Which made me all the more determined to stay in the relationship, even though I wasn’t feeling it after a while.”

“Jill Gardner do something out of spite? That doesn’t seem like you,” Esmeralda added, and we all laughed.

As the evening continued, I couldn’t help but think about why Professor Wellborn had called Tank. I needed more information from Tank and Josh. I just didn’t know which one would be more likely to actually talk to me.

Without telling Greg.

* * * *

The next morning, I went downstairs to get coffee after soaking in a bubble bath. I felt almost human after our weekend in Santa Barbara. I was walking back through the lobby when I spotted Leigh again. I walked over to the front desk. “I’m glad I caught you. I was beginning to think we wouldn’t cross paths again.”

Leigh frowned. “Is there something I can help you with, Miss Gardner?”

“Yes, remember you talked about the other bachelorette party? Was the bride’s name

Mandy Jensen?” It was a long shot, and the bridal shop had already confirmed that Mandy wasn’t around, but I thought I’d tie up one more loose end.

“Yes, I remember our conversation.” Leigh looked at me like I was going out of my mind. Which I might have been. “But I told your friend on Friday night Mandy Jensen wasn’t the other bride’s name.”

“You told one of my friends?” I was beginning to see a pattern. “So that’s why you didn’t call me.”

She nodded. “I came back after break and ran into her going out for your celebration. She was the tall, dark-haired one. She told me she’d tell you.”

I tried really hard to control my facial reaction, since I hadn’t gotten Leigh’s message. “Oh, that’s right, she did mention it. I just forgot. Have a great Sunday. Do I need to do anything to check out?”

“Just let us know when so we can get housekeepers in sooner rather than later. Sometimes people just leave, and we have to wait for the checkout time to clean their rooms. But it doesn’t really matter. They have to be cleaned at one time or another, right?”

“Exactly.” I headed upstairs. Tall brunette only described one of my friends, Esmeralda. I wondered if she’d told Greg rather than me. And I started to wonder what else she’d told Greg. Worse, I was beginning to wonder if friend even was a term that described us.

We all met one more time for breakfast, but this time downstairs in the restaurant. The coffee flowed, and the chatting was slow. I think we were all feeling the effects of the weekend. After my third refill of coffee, I looked around the table. “I guess I’m not twenty-two anymore.”

“I don’t think I was ever twenty-two.” Darla groaned. “Even during college, I was working at the winery on weekends, so I saw what alcohol could do to someone’s initiative. I just never wanted to go there. All of my family drinks, but in moderation. It’s respect for the wine we create.”

“So you’re saying we’re a bad influence on you.” Amy hugged her. “Don’t worry. We just have to get through two more weddings after Jill’s, and one of them is yours.”

“Girl, if three drinks over the weekend is a bad influence, I don’t want you to meet some of my friends. Anyway, I don’t know if Matt and I are ever tying the knot. He’s not a fan of marriage.” Darla sighed as she pushed around the scrambled eggs on her plate. “Every time I think we’re getting close, he pivots.”

“He loves you to death,” Esmeralda said. “Just take it slow. You’ll get there.”

“Is that message from the other side and you just forgot to tell her earlier?” I asked, instantly regretting the snark in my voice.

Esmeralda frowned and stared at me. Then she dropped her gaze to her plate. “The other side is rarely concerned about when a message is delivered. Everything happens when it’s supposed to, no matter our own earthly schedules.”

“So you’re saying Jill had to wait to find Greg.” Amy sipped her coffee. “I thought Justin and I were the perfect couple, but we’re totally dysfunctional when you compare us to you and Greg.”

“That’s not true,” I protested. “The two of you are getting your marriage wings, like sea legs? Not everyone’s first year is perfect. And if it is, they’re lying to themselves.”

“So true. Besides, everyone has their own vision of what perfect is.” Esmeralda checked her watch. “I need to be back in South Cove by one for a reading. Who am I riding with?”

“I’m leaving now.” Darla raised her hand and stood. “I’m scared to find out what happened at the winery and how much stuff they left to do today.”

Amy stood as well. “Justin and I are going to the home improvement store as soon as I get back to pick out flowers. He’s making me a planter box.”

I glanced down at my plate. I wasn’t finished, since I’d been brooding about Esmeralda’s slight. “I can get this to go.”

“Stay here. I’ll get them back. Thanks for a great weekend, Jill.” Darla hugged me and then headed to the elevator. The other women followed. “Let’s go get our stuff and get out of here.”

A few minutes later, our waitress came by to refill my coffee. “I’ll take the check now.”

“Too late. Your friends paid it when they left. It’s so much fun to be surrounded by good friends.” She poured more coffee. “Too bad they had to leave early.”

I sat for a few more minutes, thinking about my weekend with my girls. And the fact that Mandy had missed her dress fitting. Did she have a group of friends like mine who had been going with her? Why hadn’t any of them canceled the appointment when she went missing? Or was Mandy trying to do this wedding all on her own?

I made a decision. If Mandy got out of whatever this was, I was going to ask her those questions and try to help her as much as possible. No one should have the stress of a wedding alone. My phone beeped. An event site I’d checked into on Friday had

just gotten back to me. And they were already booked for that weekend. I had ten more feelers out; then I had to decide between the beach and Bill's church. And if it was at Bill's church, was it even practical to do the reception at the mission? I finished my coffee and then mumbled, "I hate wedding planning."

* * * *

Emma was the only one at the house to greet me. Not even Toby was at home in the small painting shed we'd converted into an apartment out by the driveway. I guess the business of law enforcement must be busy for both Greg and Toby to be gone on a Sunday. It didn't matter, the most important family member was here. Emma went ballistic as I came in the door. "Who missed her mama?"

She did three circles, jumped on my legs, and whined just a little bit, a sign that she needed to go outside as well as being happy to see me. At least that was my explanation. Even if it wasn't true.

It wasn't quite three, so I got some fish out of the freezer to thaw for dinner. Greg might or might not be home, so if he wasn't, I'd grill both and then figure out what to do with the second piece later. I dumped my dirty clothes in the laundry room and stashed my suitcase. After all that, I went upstairs to get ready for a run. I needed the break. Running helped me think better, and besides, Emma probably hadn't gone since the last time I'd taken her.

As we walked down to the beach, I saw Esmeralda's client must still be in session. She lived right across the street from me in a house that mirrored my own. Her MINI Cooper was probably in the garage. She liked keeping it put away so the driveway could be free for her clients. Which meant you never knew if she was actually home or not.

The fruit stand was closed, and crime scene tape blocked the storage door. Mandy's

red pickup still sat in the parking lot. I walked over to check out the stand. It looked like the crime scene guys had gone through to fingerprint the wooden surfaces. I wondered how many different people had stopped at the stand over the last few weeks. I'm sure there were partials from months ago still on the wooden shelves.

The eucalyptus trees on the edge of the parking lot moved with the wind. A bunch of butterflies burst out of the grove. Mandy would have loved this. As they settled, I saw a flash of white at the bottom of the trees. I walked over and picked up a card. It was for Bakerstown Private Investigations. Phillip Marlow was listed as the investigator, with a phone number. That couldn't be his real name, right? Maybe these were joke cards. I tucked it in my pocket, planning on checking it out when I got home.

Emma whined at my feet, wondering why we were stopped at an obviously closed shop.

I reached down and rubbed her head. "I'm just thinking about your friend Mandy. She's missing, and we don't know where she went."

Feeling a little foolish for explaining myself to my dog, I stepped toward the crosswalk that the city had put in to try to control the crowds that flowed from South Cove over to Moonstone Beach. A flashing yellow light warned traffic to look for turning cars, but without a police officer, pedestrians just had to look both ways. Luckily, it was a slow Sunday afternoon, and Emma and I crossed without waiting. Down the road, Greg had to deal with the odd elephant seal slogging across the road, but that didn't happen often.

As we got down to the beach, I scanned the area for other people. Besides the seagulls looking for snacks, the beach appeared empty. I unclicked Emma's leash, and we started running.

Running eased my mind as well as my body. The worries of the weekend, including

those about Esmeralda's status as my friend or as a double agent for Greg and the missing Mandy, tended to slip away, at least for a few minutes. Professor Wellborn stayed stuck in my mind though. The sound of the waves and the feel of the sand under my feet couldn't push away the fact that he'd called in Tank to help with what had to be Josh's find. I needed to know more about this journal, and if I knew Josh, getting a look at it wouldn't be easy.

I was walking back to the beach parking lot cooling down when I saw Greg coming toward me. Emma saw him right after I did and took off, sprinting to him, joy shaking her body. He leaned down and gave her a pat while they waited for me to join them. When I did, he stood and kissed me.

"I thought I'd find you here." He took Emma's leash from me and clicked it on her collar. Then he put his arm around my waist, and we started walking toward the stairs leading up to the parking lot. "Did you have a fun weekend?"

I debated asking but decided that I didn't like keeping secrets. Besides, I could have been totally off base. "Did you ask Esmeralda to watch out for me this weekend?"

He didn't answer, so I stopped walking and turned back to stare at him.

"You totally did. How could you put her in that position?"

"I didn't mean to, but then Mandy disappeared, and your professor was killed, and it made me nervous about the four of you going out of town for a girls' weekend. Sue me that I care about you," Greg grumbled as we started walking again. "How did you figure it out?"

"She kept telling me that finding Mandy wasn't my job. She never limits me in what I should be thinking or even doing. She's more free spirit than that. Especially on a fun weekend." I rolled my shoulders forward, then backward as I walked, trying to banish

some of the stress from my body. “And she didn’t tell me something that someone asked her to pass on to me.”

“The other bridal party in the hotel,” Greg guessed and then nodded. “I should have known you wouldn’t give up that easy. It wasn’t Mandy in the hotel, although it was quite a coincidence.”

“I know, right?” We paused to let a white van speed by the intersection leading into South Cove. “Oh, did she tell you about Tank?”

He stared at the van’s plate as we crossed the road. He’d probably check the plate when he got back to the station. “It’s interesting that your professor would call back one of his favorite students to help him seek out Josh’s treasure. He must have thought it was the real thing. That story of a strongbox filled with gold bars has been a pain in my side since I started working for South Cove. Everyone has their own theory. It’s as bad as the D. B. Cooper legend.”

“Free money is always a draw,” I joked as we headed up the hill to our house. “So, are you home for the evening?”

“Unfortunately, no. I’m heading into Bakerstown for a joint task force on the murder tonight. There’s enough of a connection to Mandy’s disappearance that we want to make sure we don’t miss anything. But I brought home fried chicken from Lille’s. I have a little time to eat with you before I leave. I missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too. We need to talk about the wedding venue.” I sighed as we reached the gate. “I didn’t talk Martha into changing her mind.”

“I think she sees it as breaking the rules, not changing her mind. It’s fine. If you still want the reception there, we’ll make it work. I’ve told you I’d marry you in the middle of Main Street in shorts and flip-flops. You set the place, and I’ll be there.

Along with our friends and family.” He opened the gate and unclicked Emma’s leash. She ran to the front door.

“So no running off to Mexico to elope.” I followed Emma to the porch and unlocked the door. The smell of fried chicken met us.

“That’s the only rule I have. This is going to be a real wedding, because it’s my last one, and hopefully, yours as well.” He kissed me. “Come eat. You’re probably starving.”

“I didn’t eat lunch. We had a late breakfast before everyone took off, so an early dinner would be perfect. Then I can read and hopefully finish a book report for Deek before I go back to work Tuesday morning. He’s such a taskmaster for the newsletter.” I glanced at my watch. “Do I have time for a quick shower and change?”

“As long as you don’t want any biscuits. Emma and I are starving.” Greg nodded to the stairs. “Be quick about it, and I might save you one.”

I kissed him and ran upstairs. Ten minutes later, I was back in the kitchen and feeling human again. What is it about a shower that brings out your happy side? The table was set for dinner, and the food was out of the plastic containers and into real bowls. “This looks great.”

“I can be a little domestic at times. Other times, I can be trained.” He poured iced tea into glasses and set those on the table. “I want to thank you for babysitting Josh tomorrow.”

“Actually, I’m looking forward to learning more about this Santiago guy. He was a bank robber?” I dished up mashed potatoes, gravy, and Tiny’s special coleslaw that had hot peppers mixed in to give it a kick. Then I grabbed a piece of chicken and dug in.

“Yes. Legend says he and his gang robbed one last bank, stowed the gold, and then scattered to retire. They were supposed to come back ten years later to retrieve the gold, but none of them showed up in South Cove. They’d all died.” Greg took a bite out of a chicken leg. “Yum. Tiny is a genius. That’s all I have to say.”

“So Josh thinks he found this guy’s journal? I guess that’s one spot to write down where the gold is hidden, but it seems like his family would have already found it if that was true.” I wasn’t buying the ease with which this pot of gold was being found. A horrible idea hit me. “You think someone took Mandy as leverage against Josh? To make him hand over the journal.”

Greg set his fork down. “That’s the working theory. But Josh hasn’t received any messages from the kidnappers. Maybe Mandy knows where the gold’s hidden, and they’ve already gone there. I hope not.”

I could read between the lines. If that was the situation, Mandy might already be dead.

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Chapter 6

Monday morning before I went to meet Josh at his shop, I went to my bookstore. I had several books on local history in inventory. I scanned through them as I brewed coffee for us. Several had no mention of the missing gold, the bank robbery, or Santiago. But there were two that seemed to have a lot to say about the legend. I scanned the books and then charged them to my account, which would take them out of the inventory as well as remind me to order more next week.

I tucked the books into my tote and went out the front door with the coffee and a sack of cookies. As I locked the door, I saw Josh standing on the sidewalk by his front door, watching me. I walked over and handed him the bag of cookies. “Hi, Josh. I’m truly sorry about Mandy’s situation. I hope we get her back sooner rather than later.”

He blinked, took the bag, and then motioned for me to come inside the shop. “Thank you, Jill, that is very kind of you. Mandy’s my heart. I can’t imagine life without her.”

He wiped at his face, then pointed to a long table where a laptop, a map of the area, and a notebook were sitting. In the middle of the table was an old journal bound in leather and tied with a strap. “Come sit down.”

“I brought coffee too.” I followed him to the table and sat down. “I see you’ve been researching.”

“Mandy’s disappearance has to be part of this. I found the journal in a box from an estate sale I purchased last month. Then I talked to Professor Wellborn about

Santiago and the treasure. Then Mandy disappears, and he's killed. It can't be a coincidence." Josh pulled out a notebook. "Here's the timeline I made last night."

I scanned the information and saw Tank's name. "Did you meet Tank? Or did Professor Wellborn just call him?"

"Mr. Harding? He was called by the professor to try to authenticate the journal. I guess he's some sort of museum expert in the time period?" He frowned. "Do you know him?"

"I took a class with him a few years ago. He was just finishing up his master's in California history at the time." Now I was wondering about why he'd been in the class. He probably could have taught it. But maybe he was trying to get a reference from Professor Wellborn, so he took the class. I decided to think about that later. "I grabbed a couple of books from my stock on the area's history that might have some information too."

"That's smart of you." Josh looked at me like he couldn't believe I was actually being helpful.

"Thanks." I pointed to the journal. "Can I read that?"

"Yes, okay, but be careful." He looked at the coffee. "Maybe we should move that to a side table."

I followed his direction, then pulled the book on its paper wrapper closer to me. I opened it and took out a notebook and pen. Then I got lost in Gabriel Santiago's story.

By the time I was done, my coffee was gone and Josh had read and made notes on index cards about both books I'd brought over. He even put sticky notes on the parts

that were relevant. I guess I should be grateful he wasn't writing in the margins. Now he was studying the map.

"If this journal is real, Santiago was a huge influence on South Cove's history," I said as I set the book back in the middle of the table. Then I skimmed through the pages where Josh had slipped in index cards with relevant quotes written on them. I felt like I was back in Wellborn's class, reviewing sources for my research paper.

I looked up, ready to ask Josh a question, when I found him leaning back in his chair, his eyes closed. "Josh, are you all right?"

He nodded and wiped at his eyes. Then he looked at me. "I just miss her so much. What if she's gone forever? What do I do then?"

"We'll find her." I didn't want to be overly optimistic, but we both needed to have hope. Sometimes hope was all we had to hold on to. We went back to reading.

A few hours later, Josh stood and took the map back to hang on a whiteboard. "Jill, according to all the books, Santiago settled between here and Bakerstown. On the coast. What if he hid the gold near his house so he could watch over it? Maybe dip into it now and then."

I stared at the map. "This map doesn't show any caves along the coast. And I know there's at least one out at the end of Moonstone Beach. That kid got stuck there a few years ago."

"I think we need a different type of map." He stood. "Let's go talk to Scuba Steve and see if he has maps."

"Scuba Steve?" I asked as I followed him out to the front door. I thought I'd known all the businesses in South Cove.

“Everyone calls him that. He runs the scuba and swim shop down the street. He also sells surfboards. Haven’t you met him before?”

I hurried to follow him out. Kyle, his second-in-command, who was manning the front desk, waved as we left the shop.

“We’ll be back soon,” Josh said as we rushed by. “I have my cell.”

“Okay, good luck,” Kyle called back.

As we walked down the street, Josh greeted people. Some he obviously knew; others had to be tourists, since I didn’t know them. He’d changed a lot since I’d first moved here. Back then, he’d hated me and every other living thing in South Cove. Except maybe his customers. And I’d still bet he didn’t like them much either. Now he was greeting strangers on the street. We needed to find Mandy so she could keep this new, nice version of Josh Thomas in play.

When we got to the shop, Scuba Steve looked up and grinned widely. Apparently, he and Josh knew each other, because all of a sudden, Josh was pulled into a bro hug.

“Hey, man. I’m so sorry to hear about Mandy. I’m sure she’s fine, but we’re sending her name up to our higher power, just in case, you know.” He kept a hold of Josh’s arm like he was his life raft.

Josh introduced me. “Steve, this is Jill Gardner. She runs the bookstore.”

Steve’s eyes lit up, and he shook my hand. “I love your coffee. My Hope comes in every morning for our coffee and a treat.”

Now Hope, I knew. She was a quiet girl. I considered her one of my commuters, as she came at eight every morning we were open. She had bright blue eyes and straight

blond hair. She looked the part of a California surfer girl. “Thanks. Hope is fun to chat with. I hope she’s doing well.”

“Better than Mandy.” The response was out before Steve could moderate it. “Sorry, dude. I’m just worried about your girl.”

“We all are.” I met Josh’s gaze. He was holding on, but he would lose his cool soon. “Hey, Steve, do you have any maps or a book that shows the caves off the shore? The ones in the coves where the beach comes up?”

“Of course. This area is full of big and little caves. One of the houses on the hill some idiot built a few years ago just sank into a gigantic sink hole. If he’d ever read anything and built ten feet in either direction, he’d would have still been fine.” He looked at Josh, who was glaring at him. “Let me go get those books and maps.”

“You should try to not intimidate people who are trying to help us,” I whispered to Josh after Steve disappeared in the back room.

“I’m trying. Except it’s really hard not to lash out when people are being stupid.” He held up his hand. “I know, I’m just reacting to Mandy’s disappearance. Don’t try to shrink me, please, Miss Gardner.”

“I’ll try to keep my thoughts to myself.” I smiled as we waited for Steve to come back out front. Josh was trying. Mandy had uncovered the good man inside Josh, where the rest of us had just seen the curmudgeon. You had to give her credit for that.

I scanned the pictures on the wall and found one of Josh and Mandy standing on a boat, wearing scuba suits and holding masks in their hands. “Did you go diving with Mandy?”

He nodded. “It was fun.”

I was stunned. Not that Josh could scuba, but that he would scuba. The man I'd known didn't want to do anything that was dangerous. Now he was scuba diving? The world was full of surprises.

Steve brought out two books and three different maps. He spread a map out and pointed to where we were. "If I were you and were looking for caves, I'd rent a boat. That way you can skirt the coastline and ease into any coves you find that might have caves. Are you thinking Mandy might have gotten stuck in one of these? That's terrible. I hope she was stocked up. She'd need supplies if she got stuck. Some of these can only be accessed at low tide."

"Thanks, Steve. I appreciate all your help." I gathered the books and maps and handed him my credit card. I wanted to get Josh out of here before Steve really stuck his foot in his mouth. "By the way, you should come to the business-to-business meeting next month."

"I'm not much of a joiner. I like the sea because it's quiet." Steve shrugged. "Darla stops by and lets me know what I missed. She and Matt like to dive too."

Apparently, Greg and I were the only couple in South Cove that didn't frequent Steve's shop. Now I felt like an outsider, again. "Well, I'll stop by soon then. Thanks for all this."

I signed for my card as I tucked it and my receipt away in my wallet. Then I followed Josh out to the sidewalk. "So will these maps work?"

"Maybe. I think Steve's idea of renting a boat is the way to go. We could check out any caves we find on the maps." He glanced at his watch. "But probably not today. By the time we got the boat, it would start getting dark. Any chance you could go out with me tomorrow?"

I had to work, but other than that, I didn't have anything pressing, besides finding my new wedding venue. "I can after Deek gets to the shop. About eleven?"

"That will have to do." He handed me two books and two of the maps. "I'll take the others and see what we can find. I'll meet you at Bakerstown Pier at eleven."

"That would be great. We're going to find Mandy, Josh, I know it." I watched as he turned away from me. I wasn't sure he'd heard me, but I saw his hand shoot up and give me a wave. He must have.

I turned to go back home. Emma and I still had time to run, and apparently, I had homework to finish before our boat trip tomorrow.

Greg found me sitting on the couch, looking at maps, when he came home. He came over and kissed me. "Thank you."

"For?" I looked up at him, confused.

"Keeping Josh out of my hair. He called about five and asked if there were any new developments, but that was it. You must have kept him busy all day." Greg moved the map and stared at it. "What's this?"

"What Josh has been occupied with. We're looking for the cave where Santiago hid his money. The journal seems to indicate that he had a cave nearby." I rolled my shoulders. "Steve sold me books and maps that could lead us to the right cave."

"Steve's knowledgeable about those coastal caves." Greg set the map on the table. "Any of that chicken left?"

"Yep. I haven't eaten either. I'll help." I stood and stretched out my back. "I'm going out with Josh tomorrow on a boat to see if we can find the cave."

“You and Josh are taking a boat out on the ocean?” He followed me into the kitchen and opened the fridge as I got out plates. “Say hi to the sharks.”

“Stop teasing. It will be fine.” Now I was worried about the sharks. “Did you talk to Tank Harding?”

“No, but someone from Bakerstown was going to reach out to him. Any way he’s a closeted serial killer?” Greg looked hopeful.

I burst out laughing. “Tank? I don’t think so. But it’s been a while since I’ve seen him.”

“Well, a cop could wish.” Greg set the food out on the counter. “Do you mind heating up dinner while I go change and store my weapon?”

“Go turn into Greg.” I kissed him. “The little woman will be in the kitchen getting the evening meal ready.”

“As it should be,” Greg said, then ducked the towel I’d sent flying his way. “Just kidding. I’ll be right back.”

I turned the oven on and put the chicken on a baking sheet and put it inside. Emma was standing by the door, so I let her out. A coyote howled from the hills. Emma growled, and I followed her outside with a flashlight. I couldn’t see all of our yard, but she wouldn’t go far, especially after hearing our visitor. I swept the light around and thought I saw movement, back where Greg wanted to set up a barbeque pit. I moved the light back and slowed it down, but there wasn’t anything I could see.

Emma was over on the other side of the yard, so I hurried and finished a sweep of my light, then shined it over where she was sniffing the fence.

“Something wrong?” Greg asked quietly behind me.

I turned to look at him, shining my light where I’d seen movement before. “I don’t think so. But I swear I saw something right out there.”

“Hand me the flashlight and take Emma inside if she’s done.” He stepped off the porch and reached for the flashlight. Emma ran up to the deck and sat by the stairs.

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” I didn’t want Greg to have to go check something I might have seen. A flock of birds flew up from where the light was shining. “See, just birds.”

“Birds don’t leave their roost unless something disturbs them. Especially at night. Go inside and lock the door. I’ll knock.”

Emma and I went inside, and I stood looking out the window until he came back into view. I opened the door, and he came inside. “Well?”

“Nothing I could see. Just a feeling.” He put the flashlight up and closed the door behind him. “I’ll go out and check again tomorrow morning when it’s light. We may want to add some security cameras in the back. Just for safety reasons.”

I turned back to the food on the counter. Trying to change the mood, I asked, “Warm up the mashed potatoes in a pan or microwave?”

“Gravy on the stove, potatoes in the microwave.” Greg took a pan out as well as a whisk. “Give me the gravy. How long will it take for the chicken to warm up?”

We got dinner ready, but I could tell he was on edge. Greg didn’t need another thing to worry about. Not with Mandy’s disappearance and the professor’s death. Why did everyone have to mess with my house?

I knew the reasons. We were out on the highway. People broke down all the time and tried to hike to the nearest town over rough ground rather than staying on the roads. Kids liked hanging out in the hills, drinking beer and hiding from authorities. But with Mandy disappearing less than five hundred feet from the house, the location of my house was messing with my head even more.

Chapter 7

Tuesday morning, I arrived at the shop early. I wanted to make sure there wasn't another reference book that mentioned Gabriel Santiago or the history of South Cove in my stock. It would be pretty embarrassing to find out that I'd had the answer all along, just waiting for me to open the book. I did find one more South Cove history book, and I set it by the register so I'd remember to purchase it before I left.

Darla came in after my commuters had left. She climbed on a stool and ordered a tall dark black with a caramel shot. "That was quite a weekend, huh."

"I had fun." It had been nice to get away and forget about the investigation and the wedding venue issue and just chill with my friends. I still wasn't sure how I felt about Esmeralda, but I knew her actions were more of a Greg issue. He wanted me to stay out of the investigation.

"You seem preoccupied. Is it the venue? I can send you a list of the most popular wedding chapels in the area. My newspaper had me do an article on it last June. Maybe there are some places you haven't considered yet." Darla made a note in her phone, then set it down. "So this thing with Mandy, huh."

"I don't know anything more than you do." I was being pumped for information from the reporter side of my friend.

"I'm sure that's not true." Darla looked back at the doorway. "I hear you and Josh spent the day together looking up information. Do you think Mandy's disappearance is related to your professor's death? Or maybe to your friend's appearance in town?"

What was his name again?"

"Tank Harding. And all I know about him is the professor asked him to come and look at something. I don't know that it has anything to do with Mandy. I was kind of hoping that she was just off on a girls' weekend that maybe Josh didn't know about." I finished making Darla's coffee and handed it to her in a to-go cup.

"Oh, so that's why you were talking to the hotel registration people. I didn't know what was going on." Darla sipped her coffee. "I never saw the other group. Did you?"

"No. I guess we were out when they came in or we were in before they came back." I refilled my coffee and sat next to Darla. "I just feel so bad for Josh. Mandy really loves the guy. I asked them over for dinner last week, and she was over the moon about getting to talk about the wedding. I can't see her just ghosting him."

"You never know what goes on behind closed doors. Maybe they got in a fight, and Josh isn't mentioning it because it makes him look bad." Darla's eyes widened. "You don't think he killed her, do you?"

"No. Josh wouldn't hurt a fly. He couldn't have killed anyone." Josh could be mean and dismissive, but he wasn't a killer.

Darla looked at me, her face serious. "That's what they said about Ted Bundy and the rest of the serial killers."

"Darla, we're talking about Josh here." And just then, the door opened, and Josh Thomas walked into the shop.

Today he wore a light burgundy shirt and tan pants. He looked at Darla and me, then cleared his throat. "Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude. I just wanted to let you know that the boat and captain will be waiting for us at eleven thirty. I'm going to Bakerstown

now, and I'll meet you there. I want to chat with the police there to see if there has been any movement on Professor Wellborn's death."

"Do you think his death is related to Mandy's disappearance?" Darla asked.

I sent her a sharp look. No matter what, Josh was deeply concerned about Mandy, and Darla didn't have the right to exploit that emotion. Not even for her article.

"Ms. Taylor, I'm beginning to think I have no idea what's going on at all." He nodded to us. "Miss Gardner, I'll see you later."

It wasn't a question, but a statement. And his lack of answer to Darla had made her mad. Darla huffed as she set out money for her coffee. "I can't believe he's still treating this like Mandy went to her mom's house for the weekend."

"He's hurting. I can see it." I watched through the café window as he made his way back to his shop.

"You're going out on a boat ride with him?" Darla stood and adjusted the strap on her large tote. Did anyone carry a purse anymore?

"We're looking to see if we can find Santiago's cave." I figured telling the truth was better than lying. Especially to a reporter. "Greg wants my help in keeping Josh busy so Greg can actually investigate Mandy's disappearance."

Darla nodded. "That makes sense. I didn't mean to be insensitive before. Josh can be infuriating at times, but I know he loves Mandy. He must be going crazy."

That was an understatement. I said goodbye and went back to my reading nook to lose myself in a few chapters of the new women's fiction book I'd picked up off the ARC table. I loved anything by the author Barbara O'Neal, and I needed to get Deek

a book recommendation review by the end of the week for our newsletter. By picking an author I loved, I knew I'd get through the reading and write the review by my deadline. Something that didn't happen a lot. Especially now that I was juggling so many projects both at work and at home. And now, Greg had assigned me the task of being Josh's babysitter.

Tomorrow afternoon, I'd spend the day and evening at the library. Greg would have to entertain Josh on his own or find someone else to play with him. I had classes to finish. Otherwise, I'd be doing makeup classes this summer. If they were available.

I settled into the couch and got lost in the story. I probably could have passed the review off to someone else to do this month, but it was my bookstore. After a few more months, and after the wedding, things would calm down. They had to, right?

I got off lucky and didn't have any customers for the rest of the morning before Deek arrived at ten. Of course, my aunt would have expected me to do other work things besides reading in my spare time, but the review was part of my job. I felt only a twinge of guilt when Deek walked through the door.

"Slow morning?" He glanced around the empty shop as he came out of the back office. Deek had a key to the shop because he lived upstairs in the apartment. "Do you want me to check in later? I could use another hour or so of words. This second book is killing me. Too high of expectations, I guess."

"No, I need to get going, so you're on the clock now." I tucked the book under my arm and took it and the rest of my cold coffee to the bar. I put the cup in the sink and ran a quick shift-closing statement. I initialed the printout and stapled it to my shift sheet. Another step my aunt had added to the open and close process. I think she needed more to do outside of managing the bookstore. I'd have to talk to Harrold and see if I could convince him they needed a vacation. "Sorry I didn't get my closing chores done, but you need this review, and I decided reading was more important."

“You don’t have to explain to me, but I’m not covering for you if your aunt asks why I signed off on your chore list.” He grinned at me as he moved the to-go cups. “Being an adult has its privileges.”

“You’re a pain.” I waved and headed out through the back door, where my Jeep was parked. I climbed inside and glanced at the back seat. I had a jacket and boots, just in case it got cold on the boat. Then I plugged in my phone and called Greg.

“What’s going on? I really can’t get away for lunch.” He didn’t even say hello. We’d been together too long.

“Good morning to you too,” I added just to make him feel guilty. “Anyway, I know you’re busy, so I just wanted to tell you that I’m going to Bakerstown to meet Josh. Remember, we’re taking a boat out to see if we can find the Santiago cave.”

“I remember. Besides, Darla came to grill me about Mandy’s disappearance and asked if the gold legend had anything to do with it, since the two of you were heading there. Way to keep it on the down-low.”

“That was Josh’s doing, not mine. He told Darla we were boating together. And to save my reputation, I had to explain to her that we were legend hunting and not dating.” I pulled out of the alley and onto Main Street. Diamond Lille’s parking lot was full, and the delicious aroma of smoked meats filled my Jeep as I drove by. “Tiny must be doing pulled pork sandwiches for lunch.”

“I can smell it all the way at the station. I’m sending Esmeralda down to grab us lunch.” He paused, then lowered his voice. “Hey, are you and Esmeralda okay? She seems a little upset.”

“I guess. I mean, I felt like she was spying for you all weekend and not part of the gang.” There, I’d said it. Of course, I hadn’t meant to tell him.

He sighed. “That’s my fault, not hers. I did ask her to try to steer you away from any Mandy searches. I should have realized it might affect your relationship.”

“You need to apologize to her, too. I’ll give you both this one, since I know you just worry about me. But in the future—” I didn’t get the words out.

“Keep your friends out of my insecurities.” He ended the statement for me.

“Not exactly what I was going to say, but yes. Tell Esmeralda I’m sorry about being mad. I’ll see her Sunday for brunch, I hope.” The sun sparkled off a stretch of the ocean as I drove by. Living here wasn’t bad at all. Even with the drought. And now the rivers of rain. Days like today made it all worth it.

I pulled the Jeep into the parking lot for the marina and parked, locking it up as I pulled on my jacket and switched into my boots. I tucked my flats into my tote to take with me. Dressing in layers would allow me to deal with all sorts of weather. If I was lucky, I might get down to shorts and a tank and actually get a little sun on my too-white legs. Except for my runs and walking to and from work, I’d been mostly inside this spring. Which hadn’t given me time to build up more than just a base tan. Of course, the SPF 30 sunscreen I always slathered on before any sun exposure had something to do with it as well. I had a full bottle in my tote. Josh would probably need to use some.

Walking out to the marina, I saw Josh standing by a boat, watching for me. He waved until I held up my hand, indicating I’d seen him; then he climbed on board a boat and watched me walk to him. Just in case I’d gotten lost in the last five minutes and forgotten where he was. Sometimes I wondered.

As I stepped on the boat, a hand reached out to steady me. I looked up and saw Tank Harding had joined our adventure. Josh pointed to the cabin. “You can put your bag in there if you want.”

As he went into the cabin to talk to the captain, I put my tote away and then went to sit by Tank. “What are you doing here?”

“I met your friend Josh at the police station. I was just finishing my interview when he came in. Did he really find Santiago’s journal?” Tank wore an open button-down shirt, cargo shorts, and deck shoes. A camera hung around his neck.

“That’s what he said.” For some reason, I was holding back the part about reading it yesterday.

Tank leaned back and ran his hand through his hair. He had it down from the topknot today. “That’s like the holy grail of South Cove history. Gabriel Santiago was a real person, not just a legend. He still has descendants in the area. I did a paper on him when I was an undergraduate. It was that class that made me want to work for a museum and preserve our history. Do you know how many things we’ve just lost over the years?”

Tank was passionate about the subject of history, that was for sure. I watched as a young man untied the boat from its moorings and called out an all clear to the captain.

I grabbed hold of a railing as the engine sputtered to life, and we eased out of the harbor and onto open water. It wasn’t that I was afraid of being on a boat; it was just this boat was really tiny compared to the ocean. And I’d seen *The Perfect Storm*. The movie scared me to death. I wasn’t much for too real-life movies. Give me a rom-com any day. I turned back to Tank, and he was grinning at me. “Maybe we’ll get lucky then today.”

He cocked his eyebrow and nodded. “The boat is totally safe. We’ll be hugging the shore pretty closely to try to spot any caves. Did you bring binoculars?”

I shook my head. I should have thought of that. I pulled my hat farther down on my head. The wind from the boat's movement was strong.

"Don't worry, I have an extra set." He stood and went into the cabin. When he came out, he had two pairs of binoculars. Josh had followed him out of the cabin with his own and a notebook.

"I'm going to note where we are when we see something, so we can hike or swim back to the place easier. From the journal, the cave is somewhere between South Cove and Bakerstown, but I've asked the captain to start five miles out of the other side of Bakerstown. Just in case modern-day city limits weren't the same back then." Josh sat across from me. "As soon as we're there, he'll slow down, and we'll all have to scan the cliff wall, if any."

"Sounds like a plan." Tank used his binoculars to scan the open ocean. "Maybe if we get lucky, we might see some whales as well."

Josh frowned. "This isn't a sightseeing trip. We need to find that cave."

Tank sat down and studied Josh. "Man, every day we're on this earth is a sightseeing trip. You just need to open your eyes to the magic."

The boat was quiet for a moment after that.

Finally, Josh nodded. "You're right. Mandy always says the same thing. I'll try to enjoy today. If not for me, for Mandy."

We didn't see any whales, but when we got to the starting point, there were some dolphins playing in the water. Josh wrote down our coordinates and a landmark on shore we could use to orient ourselves later.

“The captain is going to run the boat slowly, we all watch the shore, and if anyone sees anything that looks like a cave, yell. He’ll stop the boat and see if we can get closer.” Josh met both my and Tank’s gaze. “Any questions?”

“No, I’m ready to start.” Tank positioned himself so he could see the shore better.

I did the same and met Josh’s gaze. “We’re going to find her.”

He blinked, then nodded. “I know we are.”

Three hours later, we were back in South Cove and finishing the stretch Josh had requested. We’d found nothing. We hadn’t even seen the cave on Moonstone Beach that I’d known was there since I’d had a kid get stuck there before. My shoulders ached, and I was starving. Josh had brought water, but no one had brought food on our journey. I set my binoculars down. “Just because we can’t find it now doesn’t mean it didn’t exist before. It might be covered in water by now.”

Josh looked devastated. He sank back and put away his notebook. “I guess that’s possible.”

Tank slapped his head. “We should have taken that into consideration. We may be looking for a submerged cave. Or at least one where the entrance is submerged. Maybe we should do this again tomorrow.”

“Can’t tomorrow. The boat has been chartered for the day,” the young man said as we started heading back to the harbor. “But next Monday is completely free if you want to go online and book.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Josh said. He must have seen my reaction, because he added, “You don’t have to come with me. Maybe Mr. Harding is free that day.”

“I am. I’m here until they find Professor Wellborn’s killer. I’ve committed. Besides, I have a ton of books in my library at my parents’ house that we can skim through that talk about South Cove history.” Tank turned and stretched, and I couldn’t help but notice two of the six-pack abs he had hidden under that shirt.

Josh coughed, and I realized I was still staring. What did the men on television say? I’m engaged but not dead? I didn’t think Josh would see the humor.

Chapter 8

Greg had already left for work when I got home, so I hurried out the door as well, hoping that Emma wouldn't notice that I picked up my laptop and put it into my tote. When she heard the Jeep start, she'd know that running was probably off our to-do list for the day. If I got my research done today, I'd take her tomorrow before I started working on my paper. Otherwise, I was going to owe my dog a lot of beach runs before this degree was finished.

At the shop, I had a note on the counter from my aunt. Great, I was being disciplined for not following her procedures. In my shop. At least I believed, and the bank agreed, that it was my shop. I ignored the envelope and got the shop ready for my commuters. Once that was done, people started coming in for coffee.

Since Toby was on duty, I didn't have anything else to do except read her note. I opened the envelope and saw it was her retirement plan. I scanned the pages and noted that she had listed out payouts to her retirement account based on sales and even a training plan for me to take over the items she was currently handling.

I set the plan aside and read the note she'd attached.

Dear Jill, I think it's time for me to really retire. Harrold and I have discussed this in detail. He in turn will be transferring his shop over to his nephew. His son doesn't want to take over the Train Station. Anyway, since you started the business, I'm just looking to step out gracefully with a few dollars to pay me for my enhancements to the shop as well as training you in the systems I've set up. We'll start your training the month following your graduation. That way, you don't have one more thing on

your plate.

I'm looking forward to spending my golden years with your uncle and traveling to the places I've always wanted to see. I hope this doesn't come as a shock, but I know you're well equipped now to run the business on your own.

Much love,

Aunt Jackie

I read the note a second time. As much as I grumbled about my aunt bothering me at work and setting up unnecessary procedures for such a small shop, I'd come to rely on her to watch my back. I could run the first shift and not worry about our bottom line except for once a month when we reviewed the books. Aunt Jackie would sound the alarm if we were in trouble. Now she wanted to leave and travel?

I took a breath and called Greg. I needed someone else to hear this and tell me what I should be feeling, because right now, I had too many emotions to count.

I got his voice mail. I left him a message asking him to call, then did what I always did when I didn't know how to deal with the real world.

I pulled out the book I'd started yesterday and read until a customer came into the shop. My shift ended at noon, and by that time, only four customers broke my reading time. I should be able to finish this book tomorrow and write a review during my shift, emailing it to Deek. I'd be two days early.

That never happened.

But as I watched Toby work, I guessed I needed to rethink some of my processes. I could still run the morning shift and do the tasks my aunt did during slow times. If it

got too much, I'd have to hire for my shift. Or spread the time around to my staff. Deek and Evie were already full-time on the sales floor after my aunt went to full-time management. Toby had a real job and just wanted extra hours to pad his savings plan. I wasn't sure how many more, if any, hours Judith wanted. Tilly, my newest employee, would take all the hours I'd give her. Even with adding hours to the current staff, I still needed someone in the wings to fill in gaps.

So hiring another part-time person needed to go on the list. Right after I graduated and finished Aunt Jackie's School for Coffee House Management. Or at least right after I graduated. I didn't need one more thing on my list now.

I put the book away in my tote and pulled out my shift-closing checklist. As I worked through the items, Toby watched me. Finally, he grabbed the broom I'd just finished using to sweep the shop. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

I sagged and sat on one of the stools. "I guess it shows, huh? Aunt Jackie's retiring. They want to travel more."

Toby's face lit up. "That's exciting. I know Harrold has a bucket list that he keeps in a notebook. Every time he hears of a new place, he writes it down. They've crossed off several since their marriage."

"He does?" How come I didn't know about this notebook?

Toby laughed as he took a cheesecake and cut it into servings to put into the display case. "I told him they'll have to live to a hundred or more to visit all those places. I guess they've decided it's time to kick it into gear."

Now I felt like a jerk, since all I'd thought about was how my aunt was deserting me. "Aunt Jackie wanted to live on cruise ships when she retired the first time. Before she lost her first retirement stash."

“Scammers prey on the elderly. It’s not fair, but I guess sometimes it’s easy. I think people like that should rot in hell.” He grinned as he put the cheesecake away. “And not after they die, but before.”

“Spoken like a true member of the local law enforcement community.” I rolled my shoulders, forcing off the bad mood. “Speaking of, where’s your boss? I want to see if he wants to grab something at Lille’s.”

“He’s in Bakerstown for some big powwow with the college on this professor’s death. The administration wants to make sure campus is safe.” He glanced at his watch. “He should be back around five. Of course, I don’t know what’s on the rest of his schedule. You could call Esmeralda to find out.”

“Waiting until five won’t work. Anyway, I need to go to campus and work on my paper.” I handed him the clipboard with my closing list. Then I put yesterday’s forgotten book in my tote. “And I’m out of here. Say hi to Judith when she comes in.”

I accidentally went out the front door by habit, but instead of going back inside the shop, where Toby would probably have some sort of snide comment about my Swiss cheese memory, I headed to the walkway between my shop and the antique store. It led directly behind the two buildings, and as I walked, I heard voices ahead.

The man who was talking, I knew, but couldn’t place the voice.

“I’m telling you it’s going to be a major find, I know it.” His voice raised a bit, and I thought I could hear some anger or excitement. Was he talking about the caves?

As I came out of the narrow walkway, I saw Tank sitting at the picnic table behind Josh’s shop. He was on the phone. When he saw me, he waved and ended his call.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your conversation.” I stepped closer. “I’m heading

over to the university to work. I'm getting the work for this degree finished this month if it kills me."

"I had to just plow through. I knew if I took off a semester or just did part-time, I'd never get done." He tucked his phone into his jeans.

"Well, you can see I took the long way. I'm determined to get this done." I kept walking.

"No worries, I was just talking to my new boss about my actual start date. He's anxious to get me there." Tank stood and headed to the antique store. "I'm spending the rest of the day with Josh, trying to figure out the cave location. Are you sure you don't want to stay here and work with us?"

"Don't tempt me. I've had too many 'fun' days lately. Right now, I've got to focus on school and my business." I didn't remember Tank being so pushy. But maybe I was just overreacting. I hadn't gotten much sleep last night, worrying about Mandy. "Maybe we can do dinner before you leave. I'd love for you to meet Greg outside of the police station."

"I'm sure he'd love to hear us talk about California history all night." Tank shrugged. "But if you really want to, just let me know. I'm staying at the Castle. Or I'll probably be here, hanging out with Josh and trying to decipher the journal."

"I'll check with Greg. I know he's busy right now with Mandy missing, but we might be able to carve out a night." I unlocked my Jeep and climbed in, watching him go through the narrow passageway to Main Street. What was his plan? Was he just here like he said as a student of history? I was seeing plot holes and twists in my real life now. I didn't trust anyone. Especially an old friend who just happened to show up after a disappearance and a murder.

I decided to put my investigator hat away and work on my paper. I had a lot left to write, but I wanted my conclusions to be solid, so I wanted a few more studies or interviews to cite, so I needed more library time. It was the part I always put off, since it meant driving to the university. I probably could have signed up for some online research tool through the school, but it frustrated me to read on the laptop instead of on paper. I tended to skim rather than sink into the material. The inherent issue with owning a bookstore. I loved reading in print. Deek had set us up an online book sales page. It was bringing in money, and we could highlight our local charm books. The books that talked about coastal California history or novels that were set in the area. I loved the way he'd made a South Cove page, highlighting those books. And it seemed to work. Even some of my commuters asked about books they'd found on the website, but they wanted to buy in person.

Bookselling was a changing profession, but the best thing I could do was to stay current with my stock.

As I drove, I thought about Aunt Jackie's letter. My aunt had retired early before and had come back to work after her savings had been lost. Now she was in her early sixties and deserved to be traveling like she'd always wanted to do. I was the problem. I hadn't called her because I didn't know what to say. I didn't want her to disappear from my life. And right now, with our planning meetings and staff discussions, I saw her at least twice a week. But as I thought about it, I hadn't seen her for over a week. She'd been starting to ease out for a few weeks now. Maybe to get me ready to take over? Whatever her plan had been, I didn't like it.

I'd call her tonight and schedule a meeting where we could talk about this. Maybe I could talk her into just decreasing her hours. I didn't want it to be all about the money or the plan she'd set in place. I needed her at the bookstore. She was the bumper rails for my wild ideas. And I hated to think she might not be there when I needed her.

I felt better as I got out of the Jeep and locked the doors. Heading to the library, I

realized I didn't recognize most of the students walking through campus. They had transitioned to a new younger crop while I'd been inching my way to my degree. Deek would disagree with me, but it was time for me to be an adult and step away from campus life.

The library was quiet. Even with so many students milling around the quad area, the library was still almost empty. Maybe it was the time of year, or more likely, everyone else had done their research earlier than me. I emptied out my laptop and notebook on my favorite table and went to work.

As I did one last peruse of the stacks that held the history of the area, looking for business co-ops from the past, I found a book that had been put in the wrong section. It was a slim book, and as I pulled it out, pages fell from it. Picking them up, I realized they were notebook sheets, with tight handwriting I recognized from my prior classes. Professor Wellborn had left his notes in the book when it got reshelfed.

He didn't need them now. I took the book and the loose pages and set them and the other books I'd gathered on my table.

Four hours later, my stomach growled, and I realized I'd been reading and working straight through. I hadn't even taken a potty break. I saved my document, a habit I'd learned the hard way after losing several thousand words one day. Then I moved the books I'd finished with into a pile and tucked the others into my bag. When I got downstairs, I'd check them out and work from home until I needed more material. But I thought I was close.

I hurried to the bathroom, then to the checkout line, and finally, out to the Jeep. The sun was beginning to set, and I'd have a lovely drive home. Checking my watch, I saw it was after five. The library closed at six on Wednesday, so I'd almost gotten kicked out. The librarians did a callout on the speakers at a quarter till, which usually got me moving. But there had been times when I'd had someone tap on my shoulder,

actually kicking me out.

I told the Jeep to call Greg, and it did. The surprising thing was he answered.

“Hey, where are you?” I asked.

“Me? I’m home making dinner. Are you with Josh and Tank looking for lost treasure?” Greg’s voice was warm like hot chocolate syrup over ice cream. He could make me smile over the simplest statements.

“No, I was at the library. I’m heading home, so can you make some extra dinner for me?” I was at a stoplight and took the time to pull my hair up into a clip. My green eyes looked tired in the rearview mirror, but I felt accomplished. Looking at myself reminded me of Aunt Jackie’s announcement. “I need to talk to you if you’re going to be around.”

“I’m home for the evening. Unless something happens. You know the drill. But yes, I think we can carve out some talking time. Anything urgent?”

“No, I just need your take on something before I respond. You always seem to have good advice.” I turned the Jeep onto the highway and headed home.

“That’s me, Advisor to the Stars. Or maybe that’s Esmeralda. Are you sure you don’t need any advice from the other side? Maybe you should ask her.”

I laughed a little. “No, this is normal, everyday world questions. Not where Santiago stored his gold. Although Josh might want to take advantage of Esmeralda’s gifts.”

Greg groaned. “Believe me, he’s tried. Esmeralda told him that Mandy wasn’t on the other side, so there wasn’t anyone she could talk to about her disappearance.”

“At least he got that.” Seagulls floated over the shore as I drove home. The waves were crashing on the beach in places, and the people had abandoned the beaches for the night. The ocean was alone, and I thought maybe it liked it that way.

“Yeah, I just hope she’s not wrong.” He paused a moment, and I could feel that we both were worrying about Mandy. “Anyway, I pulled out some cod for you, and I’m making an Italian pasta salad, if that will work. I’m having a steak.”

“Honey, you could make tuna casserole, and I’d be happy.” I heard his phone click. Someone was trying to call. “I’ll see you in twenty. Love you.”

“Love you more.” Greg hung up and must have taken the incoming call. My audiobook came back on, and I spent the rest of the drive thinking about book banning in the World War II era.

When I pulled up, his truck was still in the driveway, but Toby’s truck was gone. I’d expected since he’d worked a shift for me this afternoon that he wouldn’t be working for Greg tonight, but who knew? Toby liked stacking Benjamins. He was always trying to save more money.

I grabbed my tote, locked my Jeep, and headed to the porch, where Emma burst out of the front door when Greg opened it for her. She gave me an excited puppy hug, then ran down to the yard to do her business.

Greg gave me a kiss and handed me a beer. “I waited for you so we could sit and talk before dinner. I’m only having one tonight, just in case I get called out.”

Greg didn’t drink a lot, but when he was in the middle of an investigation, he limited it even more. Like he said, just in case.

“So you didn’t get called in?” I took the beer and put my laptop bag on the coffee

table. “Do you want to sit out on the front porch and watch the sunset?”

“I already put the meat on the grill, so it’s back porch relaxing.” He snapped his fingers, and Emma came inside. He shut and locked the door. He’d trained me to lock my doors after he’d moved in. Mostly out of habit, but he also didn’t like how close the house was to a major highway. Like he always said, you never knew.

After we got settled, he turned toward me, focusing all his time and energy just on me. “So what do you need to say? We’re not getting married?”

“No, what?” I reached for his hand. “Look, I have no idea where we’re getting married in October, but I know we are. I wanted to talk about something Aunt Jackie did.”

I told him about the retirement plan and the letter. I told him my fears about her leaving, then I stared into his eyes and asked, “So what do you think I should do?”

He surprised me by leaning into me and kissing me. Then he stood up and went to check the grill.

I watched him, confused. “Greg? What do you think?”

He finished checking dinner, then sat back down and smiled at me. “I think your aunt wants to retire. We should throw her a party.”

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Chapter 9

Wednesday morning at the shop, I got a call from Martha. Groaning, I put my book down that I'd been reading and answered. "Good morning, this is Jill."

"Miss Gardner, I haven't heard from you yet. Have you found a new site for your wedding and reception, or will you be using the grounds for your reception? I need to know, as I've got another wedding waiting for your answer."

Martha didn't mess around. She got right to the point.

I decided to make the decision. "We'll be having the reception on the grounds. We had the entire mission from ten to six. Now, we'll just need the grounds from one to six. We'll have the caterers on-site at noon."

"Okay then. That will be fine. I'll deduct the time and wedding venue from your final bill. I'll need a full payment by the end of September, and that will finalize your date. Of course, it will be much less since you put a deposit down." Martha seemed happy to have the decision made. Maybe she was more like me than I'd given her credit for. She just wanted to get the plan in place. "But if you find a place where you could have both, I'd understand if you need to cancel."

Now I just needed to find a place to have the wedding that was at least close to the mission so guests wouldn't be driving far. Maybe I'd luck out and be able to talk to Greg tonight as well.

Then I felt guilty about Mandy. If Greg had time to talk to me, that would mean

Mandy was still missing.

“Miss Gardner, are you still there?” Martha asked.

I’d been lost in my planning. “Sorry, yes. I’m excited to celebrate my wedding at the mission.”

“I am deeply sorry I had to disappoint you on the ceremony, but you have to understand, rules are rules.” Martha said goodbye as I pulled out the planner Greg had bought me last year.

I made a list of things I needed to do. Find a chapel. Finish the announcements and send them. Talk to Aunt Jackie. Plan a retirement party. Finish my degree. Oh, and keep Josh busy so Greg could try to find Mandy and maybe help with the professor’s murder investigation.

I didn’t want to think about restructuring the bookstore to cover my aunt’s retirement. I was acting like this was my problem instead of celebrating her next chapter in life. I looked around the bookstore and took in the fact that I was going to be totally responsible for it. Again.

Except I wasn’t. When my aunt joined my “team” of then one—me—I’d been trying to do it all on my own. Now I had other people who loved the bookstore as much as I did. We were a big family, and we could survive when my aunt retired.

I was almost sure of it.

Instead of wallowing in my fear of being alone, I pulled out my laptop and the books I’d checked out and started working again. I had one or two customers wander in and buy coffee or a book, but mostly, I had alone time. And my project was shaping up. Just a few more days, maybe a week, and I’d hit my deadline. I had classes this week,

so I needed to drive to Bakerstown tonight and tomorrow, then again next week. And I'd be done. Unless I needed to turn my paper in late. And I'd promised myself that wasn't going to happen.

Deek came down at eleven and started setting up for his shift. He refilled my cup. "I expected you to be reading. Are you writing my review?"

I shook my head and added the item to my to-do list. I'd added several items as the ideas came to me. It was thrilling not to have to stop and worry. I just added it to the list, and I'd handle it another time. Tonight, I needed to prioritize the list and put tomorrow's to-do list on the next page.

One day, one task at a time.

At noon, I packed up my laptop and called Greg. "Hey, I'm going to Diamond Lille's for lunch since I have class tonight. Do you want to join me?"

"Sorry, I have a working lunch meeting with the DA and the Bakerstown chief. We've already ordered, and Esmeralda's on her way down to pick it up. If you hurry, you can walk with her."

I sighed and stood. "I'll see you tonight then."

"Wait, don't tell me you and Esmeralda haven't talked yet. You really need to fix whatever happened between the two of you. If I need to broker this peace, it might be a week or so before I can scrape up the time. I've told both of you this was my fault, so just make up already."

"Yes, sir, whatever you say, sir." I tried to make it sound like I was joking, but I didn't feel like laughing.

“Jill, you’ll be sorry if you let this simmer. Just fix it. I’ve got to go.”

As I walked down the street toward Lille’s, I could see Esmeralda ahead of me. I could be the bigger person, hurrying to meet up with her and apologizing for my attitude, but I didn’t feel like this was my fault.

And from what I’d heard from Greg, I didn’t think she thought she’d done anything wrong either. So instead of going straight to Diamond Lille’s, I tucked into the scuba shop. Steve was at the counter, looking at a catalogue. “Good morning, I’m Jill. I’m the bookstore owner.”

“I remember you.” He closed the catalogue. “What can I do for you this morning? Maybe some scuba lessons for you and your boyfriend for the upcoming nuptials?”

Now I felt like an idiot. Just because I hadn’t known him didn’t mean he didn’t know me. I smiled and shook my head. “I’m not much of a swimmer. I like to run the beach, not swim under the water. But Mandy and Josh? They were taking lessons?”

“Josh more than Mandy. I didn’t want to tell him, but Mandy’s scuba’d all her life. She’s a natural. She used to work for the shop before she started dating Josh. I guess she didn’t want him to feel like he was behind.” He nodded to a picture on the counter. “Although I probably should have put that away. He’s never noticed it that I’ve seen, but that’s Mandy and the crew I had working here a few years ago. We’d travel together.”

I picked up the picture. Mandy’s grin was infectious. And next to her, with flowered swim trunks, was what looked to be a younger Tank Harding. I pointed to the man next to Mandy. “Steve, is that Tank Harding?”

“Theodore Harding, but yeah, he started going by Tank a few years ago when he got out of school and went to college. He’s a local boy. He and Mandy were close for

years. Then he went away for that Mexico dig and broke up with her. Broke Mandy's heart, but then she met your friend Josh." Steve took the picture. "I always thought those two would end up together. Now, she's missing, and he's back in town, trying to play the hero. As usual."

"You think he's looking for her?" I saw Esmeralda leave Diamond Lille's with two big bags of food. I didn't need to hide anymore. But Steve's trip down memory lane was interesting.

"I wouldn't put it past him. Like I said, the two of them were close. Tank wanted her life to be perfect. He'd do anything for the girl."

I thought about Tank and Mandy as I walked over and found a booth at the diner. The hostess stand had a sign that instructed customers to seat themselves, which meant that Lille was out of the building. Lille was the owner and a good friend to my new uncle Harrold. She even loved my aunt Jackie. Me? She treated me like I was a plague carrier. I wasn't sure exactly what I'd done to earn a spot on Lille's Most Annoying Persons list, but I had been there since I'd moved to South Cove.

Carrie, my favorite waitress and probably the person who kept me off Lille's banned customer list, handed me a menu as she stopped by. "Water, tea, or milkshake?"

"Since I'm eating alone and heading to class after this, milkshake." I took the menu. "What's on Tiny's special list today?"

"California cobb salad, clam chowder, and your man's favorite, stuffed meatloaf." She pulled out her notepad. "Do you need a minute?"

I shook my head and handed her back the menu. "California cobb and the vanilla shake. That should confuse my body enough for the day."

“I like how you think, girl.” She tucked her notebook away. “Doc’s newest visitor. Was he one of your professors?”

“A few years ago, but yes. Professor Wellborn was such a nice guy. I can’t believe someone would kill him. I think he had five suit jackets. One for each day. They were all threadbare.”

“According to Doc, they don’t think the motive was a robbery. He still had a hundred dollars cash in his wallet. Although his leather satchel was taken. I guess I thought you knew that from Greg.” She glanced around the almost empty café. “If he asks, you didn’t hear it from me. Doc’s trying to keep me from blabbing all the time about his cases. But it’s his own fault if he tells me something, right?”

“Mum’s the word.” I pulled out the book I was almost finished with. I could write a review now, but the story was so good, I needed to know the end. I’d write the review during my shift tomorrow.

My milkshake was delivered by a new girl. Her name tag said Teresa, but I was pretty sure that was the name tag Lille gave all the new hires until they’d stayed for at least ninety days. Which wasn’t a lot of them. Lille was a hard taskmaster. I never knew their real names. I thanked her and went back to reading.

By the time my salad and milkshake were consumed, I’d finished the book as well. Carrie took my plate and nodded to the milkshake. “Do you want one to go?”

I shook my head. “No, I need to get going. Emma will want a run before I head to class, and two milkshakes won’t settle well with running.”

“For me, that would mean I’d have to give up running, not a milkshake.” She took my card and ran it through her machine. “I’m sorry about your professor. And this thing with Mandy? Josh is looking haunted lately.”

“I know. I feel so bad for him.” I thought about the olive tree that Mandy had wanted to get married under. If she’d gone out there to measure something and fallen, maybe she was still there. Of course, I wasn’t sure how she would have gotten there—her work truck was at the fruit stand, or was when I drove by yesterday. Greg had found her Mustang at her residence. But it was a possibility, right? The olive tree was up in the hills, past the Castle. The road came out into Bakerstown, but I rarely used it, since the Pacific Coast Highway was faster and mostly ran right next to the ocean, where I could watch the waves.

I tucked the book away and said goodbye to Carrie, reassuring her again, I wouldn’t tell Greg I’d heard anything from her. Then I hurried home. I couldn’t deprive Emma of a run based on a wild goose chase, but it would be shorter than normal. Then I’d shower, get ready for class, and take off. I could grab a bite before class at the school and call it dinner. Maybe a pastry and coffee or something.

At worst, I’d have gone the long way to class tonight. And the idea of Mandy sitting on the ground in front of that tree would stop going through my head.

* * * *

When I got to the tree, another vehicle was there. My heart started racing. Had I been right? I hurried over, just to see Josh walking toward me up the hill on the other side of the tree. He waved.

“You better stay up there. The hillside is rocky,” he called up to me, so I stayed where I was and watched him climb.

“Josh, what are you doing here?” I asked when he was in talking range.

He wiped the sweat off his forehead with a rag he’d had in his pocket. “Probably the same thing as you. I thought maybe she’d come up here to check on something. She

told you that she wanted the wedding here. I thought maybe she'd just be sitting here, maybe a broken ankle or something, and mad as a hornet that no one had driven by yet."

I rubbed his arm. "You're right. I had the same thought. Why were you down the hill?"

"There's a creek down there. Mostly dry now, but in the spring, it runs pretty fast. I got to the tree, and she wasn't here. So I thought maybe she'd been taking pictures and slipped. But no, she's not there either. And there's nothing proving she was even here. You think I'm an idiot."

It wasn't a question. "No, I don't. And if you are, I am too, because I'm here thinking the same thing. We'll find her, Josh. We just have to keep looking. Keep the faith."

He stared at me. Then he trudged to his van. "I don't know how much longer I can."

I looked around a little longer after Josh drove off. Mandy wasn't here. I could feel the emptiness of the area. But now that I'd checked, I wondered if there were other places she might have been and had an accident. Like the community hall in South Cove. It didn't have any full-time staff there. Maybe she'd fallen in the gym area and no one had checked lately.

I tried to call Greg to have him check, but there was no cell service. So I got in my car and drove to class. The road up here was two lanes, but even with South Cove being out of the mainstream, driving here felt like I was on the surface of the moon. No cars were ahead of or behind me. As I came into Bakerstown, I started to see people, but even then, it wasn't busy, not like the coastal side of the town was. This was more a farming area, and I'd seen tractors out in the middle of fields, just waiting to be started up again so they could finish their tasks.

Mandy loved the area. I felt like I was totally alone out here. And not in a clear-your-head sort of way. I'd never liked crowds, but being alone like that, it felt dangerous. Like there was something waiting for me to make a mistake.

I turned toward the university, and my phone rang. I jumped out of my skin, or would have if the seatbelt hadn't held me in my seat. I answered the call. It was Greg.

"Hey, sorry I missed lunch today. I'll be glad when classes are over. Especially during investigations. I feel like as soon as I have a free minute, you're gone." He was crunching on something. "Oh, and Emma says she misses you too."

"Just don't let her tell you we didn't go running. I took her right after lunch." I told him about running into Josh at the olive tree.

"Jill, I wish you wouldn't do things like that. That isn't a safe area for a woman alone. What if it hadn't been Josh who was coming up the hill? Did you even think about that? What if a rattlesnake had bitten you? Then I wouldn't even know you'd gone a different way to class."

"Treating me like a child doesn't make me feel bad about what I did." I pulled the Jeep into a parking spot and shut the engine off. Of course, it did, but he didn't need to know that. "I've got to go."

I terminated the call and grabbed my laptop bag. I normally would have spent more time with him before class, just talking about our days, but right now, I was afraid of what I'd say. I tended to be a "shoot first and ask forgiveness later" type. And since Greg was already deep into investigation mode, pointing out the flaws in his logic wouldn't go over well.

By the time I'd get home tonight, he'd be asleep or back at the station. We'd talk tomorrow and clear this up. But for now, I just wanted to be mad and right. There

would be time to apologize later.

I started walking to the library to work. And I realized I hadn't mentioned my theory that Mandy might be hurt at the community center. Glancing at my watch, I didn't have time to drive to South Cove and then back. And we had a test tonight. One that couldn't be rescheduled. I texted Josh and told him to meet me at the bookstore tonight at ten thirty.

Greg couldn't gripe if I had someone with me to fight off the bad guys and the rattlesnakes, right? And I'd be ten minutes away from home. I could yell, and he'd hear me at the station.

I figured it was a good compromise. I didn't know what Greg would think. But right now, Mandy's life was more important.

Chapter 10

Josh sat outside the front of my shop, dressed in all black. I barely saw him in the dim light. He needed to have a smoking habit so at least the tip of a cigarette would glow. He must have seen me come around the shop from the back parking area, because he asked, “So what are we doing?”

“Checking out the community center. After I left the olive tree, I wondered where else Mandy might go to check out the setting for the wedding. We both visited the wedding site, so next is the reception site. I’d probably do the same thing. Especially with the wedding less than a month away.” I gave him a flashlight. “And as the business-to-business council administrator, I have a key to the community center.”

“You think she might have gone in there? How would she get inside?” He stood and took the flashlight.

“That I don’t know, unless someone gave her a key when she applied for a use permit for the reception. Amy could have done it and not thought anything of it when Mandy disappeared.” It was my working theory. I hadn’t gotten ahold of Amy yet, but I’d left her a message when I had a break from class. I didn’t get a lot out of the class, as I was thinking about finding Mandy most of the time. At least after I took the test.

We walked in silence to the community center. The only noises I heard as I was walking were the ocean waves and the jukebox at the bar across the street. Chip’s bar didn’t have a lot of customers. It mostly catered to the tourist trade. The locals went to the winery. Mostly because Darla was nicer than Chip, who ran the bar. And she didn’t water down the drinks like he did.

Josh looked over at me. “Thank you for doing this. I didn’t even think to check here. I thought about the olive tree this morning. It felt like she was calling me there.”

“Yeah, I wondered about the tree, too. I’m still nailing down our wedding site, so maybe that’s why I thought of it.” I wondered if Greg was even going to want to marry me after tonight. I’d hung up on him, and now, I was doing exactly what he hated for me to do. Conducting my own investigation. But at least I had Josh for backup, just in case.

“I really mean it. I appreciate what you’re doing. I know we haven’t been friends since you moved here.” He sighed. “Mandy says I alienate people before they can hurt me. She might be right about that.”

We walked in silence for a while. Finally, as we arrived at the community center, I spoke. “Josh, you’re not a bad person. If I made you feel alienated from the community or even just the business-to-business meeting, I’m sorry.”

“That’s very nice of you.” He turned to me. “I know I’m pushy and no one likes my ideas. But I love South Cove and my antique store. I want us all to succeed. That’s all. Well, and to find my fiancée.”

“Then let’s check the community center. At least we’re doing something.” I took out my keys and shined the flashlight on them as I found the right one. I slipped it into the lock, and the door popped open. A smell hit us as soon as the door opened. Sweet. I gagged as I swung my light around the large open gym and found the source of the smell.

I covered my mouth and nose. The cleaners apparently hadn’t been here this week.

Josh started crying and turned back to the door. “I can’t do this.”

“Josh, it’s not Mandy.” I stepped closer and bathed the object in light. It was a small animal. A squirrel had gotten in through a window and died in the middle of the gym floor. And with the building being closed up and the hot temperatures this week, the little guy hadn’t had a chance.

Josh turned toward me and nodded. He stopped where he was, not coming any farther into the building. “Can we just go?”

“I’m going to check the bathrooms, just in case.” There was also a large kitchen I’d also walk through before we left. No stone unturned, right?

As I came out of the bathroom, I saw a car with flashing lights pull up through the still-open door. A bright light made Josh look like he was wearing white.

“Put your hands up,” a familiar voice said as a man got out of the police car, a gun drawn and pointed at Josh. “Don’t move. Are you alone?”

Instead of checking out the kitchen, I moved to the front door and into the light. “No, I’m with him.”

A groan came from the police officer as Greg dropped the light and the gun. “Jill, what are you doing besides making my life harder?”

* * * *

I still smelled like a dead squirrel as we sat in the conference room at the police station. Greg was talking to Josh about the trip to the olive tree and the incident at the community center.

“You realize both of those places are private property. You could have been prosecuted or shot for trespassing.” Greg pounded a finger on the table for emphasis.

“Technically, we were on public property at the community center, and I have a key, so we didn’t enter illegally,” I reminded him.

He turned toward me, fire in his eyes. “And that makes it better?”

“Yes. We went looking for Mandy. Her fiancé and a concerned neighbor.” I didn’t use the word friend; it would have been overkill and untrue. “And if you’d already checked there, the squirrel might have lived. Did you think about that?”

Greg blinked his eyes at me, unsure of where to go next. I had that effect on men. They never won an argument with me. A skill I’d learned in law school and had continued to hone against my aunt. She really had the gift. “Jill, you can go home. Toby will drive you.”

“Did you check the rest of the community center?” I asked, standing up but not crossing the room to join Toby, who stood at the door, grinning. He loved watching us fight. It was like his own soap opera.

“Yes, we did. Then we locked it up again and disposed of the dead squirrel. So please, no more night raids.” Greg turned away.

“The only reason we did it tonight was I didn’t want Mandy sitting there in pain after falling and breaking her leg or something worse.”

“Breaking a leg’s pretty bad,” Toby clarified.

Greg shot him a look, and Toby held up his hand.

“Sorry, just clarifying Jill’s statement.” Toby grinned at me.

“Anyway, I was going to ask you to come check it out, but then you yelled at me

about visiting the olive tree, so I thought it was better that I just handle the problem myself.” I spoke quickly, hoping to get my reasonings out before he threw me in jail.

Greg leaned back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. “Both of you, just leave. Please. I’ve got paperwork to complete, and I have no idea how to write this up.”

“Simple,” I said as I walked to the door to meet Toby. “Just say that the business-to-business liaison was showing around a local business owner, and the caller had wrongly assumed the place was being robbed. Who did call it in, by the way?”

“Chip at the bar. He was catching a smoke outside and saw you go in. Josh’s all-black outfit made him suspicious.” Greg nodded to Josh as he stood up. “Next time you’re not robbing a place late at night, maybe a different outfit might be in order.”

I had to agree there. Josh did look like a cat burglar. Or a spy. Or even a common thief. But really, it was the uniform of a brokenhearted man. We needed to find Mandy. I followed Toby out of the station to the sidewalk.

“Where’s the Jeep?” He nodded at the bookstore across the street.

“Home. I dropped it off and walked up to meet Josh. I’ve been either in the car or sitting at the library all day besides my shift. I needed to stretch my legs.” I paused as we reached the sidewalk. Josh crossed the street. He still lived over the antique store, but I’d heard rumors that after the wedding, he and Mandy would be looking for a house. A wedding that might not ever come now. “He’s in pain.”

“He is a pain,” Toby corrected, then held up his hands. “I know, bad joke. I do feel for the guy. To have happiness so close and have it snatched away. Do you really think Mandy might have been kidnapped?”

I looked at him. Typically, I was the one asking Toby to spill official police investigation secrets, but tonight, he looked as confused as I felt. “I don’t know. I was hoping she was just out and about and got lost. Either a weekend away, which has now extended to over a week, or she got hurt somewhere remote. Which is why I visited the tree and the community center. Kidnapping seems extreme. What does Josh have that anyone would want that bad?”

“Now that is a good question.” Toby pointed down the sidewalk toward my house. “Let’s walk. Greg will go on any calls, and I can do an up close and personal look around town as we stroll.”

“I can find my way home,” I said, but I knew what the answer would be. Toby was nothing but loyal, both to Greg and me, as his bosses. He followed orders.

When he only chuckled in response, I sighed and started walking.

“I’m still dealing with the fact that Aunt Jackie wants to retire,” I told him after we’d gone a block. The Train Station, Uncle Harrold’s model train store, was up ahead, just after Diamond Lille’s. The café was still open but mostly empty. Townies were eating late dinners and enjoying some dessert before heading home.

“She’s been part of the shop since I started working there.” Toby stopped walking, and I had to turn to see his face. He nodded, then started walking again. “Honestly, I didn’t think she would ever retire. At least not until she met Harrold. She hired me on a whim that first day. I’d come in for a coffee and a paper, since I was looking for a part-time job. My rent was killing me, even working for Greg full-time. I joked that I could sell coffee and books, and your aunt looked at me. I mean, really looked. Then she went back into the office, and when she came out, she had a W-4 and an employment form. It’s not the one we use now. I think she pulled it off the internet. We hammered out my first two weeks of shifts, and I put on an apron.”

“I’ve never heard that story before. All I knew was I came back from dealing with Miss Emily’s funeral and you were my new employee. Actually, Aunt Jackie called me one day, and I thought the shop was quiet. She was upstairs in the apartment.” I smiled in the darkness. I’d been upset with my aunt for taking over after I’d just asked her to help out with running the place for a week. I didn’t know that she needed me at that time as much as I’d needed her.

“So why are you worried?” he asked as we strolled past the Train Station.

I didn’t look in. Instead, I looked across the street. Steve’s Scuba Shop was still open. I didn’t know why he’d keep open this late, but maybe he liked hanging out at the store. Like I did at mine.

“I’m not worried as much as conflicted. I’ve told myself I’m not thinking about it until my class project and the degree requirements are done. One major life change at a time, right?” I reminded myself to take the tote out of the Jeep when I got home. Leaving my laptop out in the car overnight was just begging for it to stop working. Especially since I hadn’t emailed myself a copy or saved the project somewhere else. “Oh, and I’ve got Deek’s book review/recommendation still to write. But I’ll have that done by Friday.”

“Deek’s fit into the team really well. I wasn’t sure what to think when he joined. Especially since he replaced Sasha, but I like the kid,” Toby admitted.

“He’s not that much younger than you are,” I reminded him.

“Maybe not in years, but he’s been living in his mom’s basement for too long and hanging out at campus. He needs some bumps in his road to help him grow up. Even this book thing is going well for him. Some people just live a stress-free life.”

We were out of town proper now, and between my house and here were just homes

and art galleries that also doubled as the artist's home and studio. We were a creative bunch here in South Cove. At least some of the residents. I was someone who loved books enough to make selling them my life.

When I retired, or when Greg and I retired, I'd need to sell the bookstore or close it down. Would there even be bookstores then? Not a question I wanted to think about. "I'm going to miss having Aunt Jackie around. Even though I know she's still right here in town, it won't be the same."

"I know."

We walked in silence the rest of the way to my house.

"Jill." Toby paused at the gate. "You're going to be okay running the bookstore without Jackie. I know you're worried about that, but you know what you're doing."

"I know I can do it. The question is, do I want to do it alone?" I smiled at the shocked look he gave me. "Don't get all worked up. I'm not closing the store. Running it without my aunt around is just going to be an adjustment. The funny thing is when she came, I couldn't wait for her to leave. Now? I don't want her to leave ever. Beside the fact that right now? I've got all the change in my life I need."

A light went on over Esmeralda's front porch, and I saw her open the door and look over toward the house. I waved, but either she didn't see me or she was still upset over our tiff. She shut the door, quickly.

"You and Esmeralda need to talk. She misses you. I can tell." Toby opened the gate for me and watched as I walked up to the porch. "Sometimes you have to take people as they are, and not what you want them to be."

"I'm not mad at her. I'm frustrated that she told Greg she'd watch out for me. I've got

enough of you guys watching my every move. I don't need my friends to do it as well." I opened the door and let Emma run out to greet Toby. He was her unofficial babysitter when Greg and I went out of town. She loved her Toby. Mostly because he let her do ride-alongs when he was working. Greg said it was fine, but honestly, it made me a little nervous about my girl's safety.

He rubbed Emma's head and took a treat out of his uniform pocket. She snatched it up and came back to lie on the front porch while we talked. Emma didn't like dirt. "I better get back."

"Thanks for showing me the way home. I'm quite certain I couldn't have found my way without you." I stepped toward the doorway.

"Thanks for taking Josh with you tonight. I bet he's crawling the walls at night trying to figure out what happened to Mandy." Toby reached up and tipped his brimmed hat to me.

I unlocked the door and snapped my fingers at Emma to come inside. "Don't let Greg hear you say that. I don't think he's very happy with me right now."

"Maybe on the outside, but I bet he worries about Josh as well. I don't think Josh has many friends, unless you count Kyle, and he works for Josh." Toby took off toward the sidewalk and jogged out of sight. The guy was in great shape. I walked that hill all the time, but jogging it? Uphill? At night? That took more energy than I had. Especially without Emma to help drag me forward.

I turned on the lights as I went through the house. I let Emma outside to the backyard and grabbed a beer as I did.

Then I remembered I needed to retrieve my tote from the Jeep. I went back inside, leaving Emma in the backyard. She couldn't get out; Greg had made sure the fence

all around the property was dogproof, even though some of it had been chicken wire and other sections barbed wire. It had cost an arm and a leg, but the entire property was securely fenced now. I'd bought the materials, and Greg had done the work. I wasn't much into gardening or landscaping like Greg was.

I went back inside and grabbed my keys, unlocking the Jeep as I walked. Emma came over and sat near the back fence where she could watch me. Even my dog watched out for my personal safety. It was no wonder I was beginning to get a bit of a hangup about it. I grabbed my tote, and a coyote howled from a distant mountain. The sound made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Emma started barking in the direction of the sound.

I locked the Jeep and hurried into the house. A coyote wouldn't attack me directly, or at least, that was what I'd been told, but I didn't want to take any chances. As I shut the door, I saw Esmeralda standing on her porch, watching me. This time when I waved, she lifted a hand. Then she went inside.

Weird.

Back inside the house, with the front door locked, I let Emma inside and made some hot cocoa. I didn't know if Greg would be home soon or not, or what kind of mood he'd be in, so I pulled out my laptop, planning on working on my paper.

As I did, the book and pages I'd found from Professor Wellborn fell out of the tote too. I picked up the book and realized it was on Old Mexico. The library had told me it wasn't in their system and that it must be one of the professor's own books. I'd kept it, planning on giving it to Greg.

I set it aside and glanced at the papers. Most of the notes talked about the life of Gabriel Santiago and his family. I saw the professor's questions listed in the text but highlighted. Had Gabriel spent the gang's ill-gotten loot?

And if he had, was that the reason he'd wound up dead just five years after the robbery? I could tell that the professor had more questions than answers. And definitely not enough answers for someone to kill him for the information.

The more I learned, the further away solving Mandy's missing status seemed. I felt like I'd been part of a treasure hunt. With mean boys who liked sneering at you instead of asking a direct question.

Maybe keeping out of this investigation like Greg had asked of me was a good idea. I just needed some time to be sure about what I was seeing.

The smell from the community center was still on my clothes. Death smell stayed with fabric. Even if the only one dead had been an unlucky squirrel.

Chapter 11

After taking a quick shower and throwing my clothes into the washer, I worked on my paper. I'd given up on talking to Greg tonight. He was either avoiding me or busy. I'd give him the benefit of the doubt. When I woke the next morning, Emma had her head on the mattress, staring at me.

I reached over and rubbed the top of her head. "Ready to go outside?"

She barked her answer. Groggily, I followed her downstairs and let her out. The kitchen looked like I'd left it last night. Greg hadn't come home at all. He couldn't stand to have the table covered with anything, including a project, so he would have at least put my papers in tight little stacks. I'd left the pile on the table for one reason. I needed him to look at what the professor had written in his book. Or on the pages and tucked into his book.

I made coffee as I waited for Emma to come inside. I was so tired. I'd call off, but sadly, this was my business. If I called anyone, it would be to tell the staff that I was changing their hours, not to let them know I was tired.

I could whine to my aunt, but not my staff.

I got ready to go to work. Emma followed me around like I'd sent away her best friend and couldn't figure out why. Finally, I sat down and pulled her into a hug. "Look, he'll be home tonight for you to cuddle with. Right now, he's busy working, and I need to get to my own job. Then I'm going to the library to work before class. We ran yesterday, so today's your rest day."

She growled at me and stomped over to her kitchen bed where she flopped down, her face turned so she couldn't see me. If dogs could serve out all this guilt, what would having kids be like?

I headed into South Cove and noticed the lights on in my aunt's apartment above the Train Station. I took a chance that she'd pick up and dialed her cell.

"What's wrong? Why can't you work?"

I glanced up and saw her looking down at me from what I thought was her office window. "Who said I couldn't work?"

"Why else would you be calling at this hour? You don't look sick," she said as she stared at me.

I shook my head and kept walking. "Hi, Aunt Jackie. I'm fine, thanks for asking. And how are you this morning?"

A tortured sigh, long and loud, came over the speaker. I didn't have my headphones in.

"Sorry I jumped to conclusions. How are you today, Jill?" My aunt's voice was calmer. "How can I help you?"

I wanted to ask if she was out of her mind by retiring, but instead, I let it slide. "I got your note. If you're serious and this is what you want, we'll figure it out. I need to read your plan first, and I can't right now, not with finishing classes and my paper and helping Josh deal with Mandy's absence."

"Poor Josh. He's really quite a good man. I feel bad that he was hurt when I met Harrold. But what are you going to do when Cupid's arrow hits, right?"

“I think ducking would be your best choice.”

To my surprise, my aunt chuckled. “Probably not a bad idea. I know you’re busy, but I told Harrold I’d approach you with this. I think he believed that I didn’t want to spend time with him.”

That hit the guilt spot straight on. “I know you and Harrold deserve this time together. I just need to get past my graduation and figure out where we’re getting married and get the announcements sent.”

“Wait, I thought you’d settled on that mission?”

“Long story. Maybe we can get together on Monday? We haven’t talked in forever. I can’t promise that I’ll have read and understood the proposal yet, but maybe we could just talk in general provisions.” I crossed the street and dug out the keys to open my shop.

“Of course. Monday will be fine. I’ll buy lunch at the place down the road that looks over the beach. We haven’t been there in forever. It used to be one of your favorites.”

I was surprised my aunt had remembered. I’d loved watching the waves as we ate. “I’ll pick you up at one then. Do you want to make reservations and call me if there’s a problem?”

“I’ll do that. Jill, I love you.”

And then she hung up on me. No goodbyes, no more conversation. She was done talking, so the connection was severed.

That description was a lot like the way my aunt treated everyone. Except Harrold. She adored my new uncle. And I was glad they’d found each other after a lifetime

without even knowing the other person existed.

Commuters started showing up early. I could tell when the workweek was going on a little longer than someone wanted. People who usually came in on Friday showed up a day earlier, needing coffee. I remembered those types of weeks when I used to work in family law. Especially if I had court those days.

I offered a double chocolate chip cookie to one of my regulars, and she jumped on the upsell.

“How do you always know when I need an extra hit of sugar for my day?” Charlotte asked as she set down a new romance to purchase and pulled out her wallet.

“When things are calm, you read time management and business books. When you’re stressed, you go back to the feel-good romances.” I rang up her purchase and went to make her coffee. “I did the same thing before I moved here and changed my life.”

“I suppose a second bookstore in South Cove wouldn’t be appropriate, right?” Charlotte winked at me as she signed the charge slip and tucked the book into her Michael Kors bag.

“I think we’d have trouble keeping both of them busy, but hey, if you’re feeling froggy, jump.” I handed her a to-go cup and a bag with her cookie. “I’d have to beg my sweets supplier not to sell to you. A lot of times, I sell more cookies than books.”

“I’m too corporate to quit. I’m on the partner track, although I think it’s more of a hamster wheel at this point. Someday, I’ll have everything I want, and I’ll call you from my beach house in Boca to gloat.” She smiled and held up her hand. “Thanks, Jill. I appreciate you.”

“And I’ll send you a book to read.”

Charlotte was right. I wasn't going to have a tidy nest egg at the end of this rainbow. But on the other hand, one of the tasks on my to-do list today was to write a book review. Charlotte probably had to try a murder case or something. I'd take my life over hers any day.

Josh walked into the bookstore, and I immediately regretted even thinking those words. He looked haggard, and I wondered how much sleep he was getting. "Good morning, can I get you some coffee?"

"Please." He glanced around the dining room that was empty now that Charlotte had left. "I wanted to talk with you. Ask you a question."

"Okay." I went to get his coffee. He took it large and black. One habit he hadn't changed when he started dating Mandy. He'd been dating my aunt before she met Harrold, but he'd been more attached than Aunt Jackie had been. Especially due to the age difference between Josh and my aunt. He was an old soul, but then he'd met Mandy. She'd woke up the younger side of Josh I'd never seen him enjoy. I wasn't sure what question he might have today, probably about the day I stopped at the farm stand to chat with Mandy. I put his to-go cup in front of him and refilled my own. Then I nodded to a table that was close by. "Let's go sit."

We sat at the table, and Josh sipped his coffee. After over five minutes of nothing—I'd been watching the hands on the clock on the wall move—I couldn't take the quiet. "So, what did you want to ask me?"

He bit his lip, then pulled out a notebook. He flipped to an empty page. He picked up his pen, then set it down again. Finally, he met my gaze. "Did you see the picture at Steve's shop? The one of Mandy as a teenager?"

Oh no. I'd been hoping he hadn't seen it. Especially after Steve had told me about Mandy and Tank's history. "I did. I'm sure it doesn't mean anything."

He made a short note. “That’s the problem. It does mean something. Mandy told me about a guy she’d been crazy about after high school. Ted. She’d called him Ted. But I think her Ted is really this Tank person. The guy who’s been helping me find the treasure.”

“I know. I saw the picture too, and Steve confirmed it. But he was coming to town because the professor called him. Not for Mandy.”

“What if he’s the one who kidnapped her? He wants credit for the find if we do happen on Santiago’s treasure. He’s always talking about how much status it would give him at his museum job. And probably a book deal. People do crazy things to get their book published.” Josh leaned back into his chair. “Tell me I’m imagining things. That he’s just here to find the treasure because he wants to honor his favorite professor.”

“I wish I could.” I figured Bakerstown police were checking out Tank’s alibi, but it didn’t mean that I couldn’t do some social media investigations. If he documented his travels, we’d know when he arrived in town and would be able to possibly rule him out in the kidnapping. Unless he’d hired it out.

My brain hurt.

“So Tank is Ted. I guess the fairy tale had to come crashing down sometime.” He wrote down something else in his notebook. “He’s here to save the girl, unless he’s the one we need to save her from.”

“Let’s just find out more about Tank. I met him in class about three years ago. He was the professor’s teacher assistant, but since he hadn’t taken that class yet in his undergrad degree, Professor Wellborn made him audit the class. He was my study partner that semester. He joked that since we were older than most of the students, we were the only ones who really understood history.” I stood and went over to grab my

laptop. I'd look him up while we talked.

"Did he hit on you?"

Josh's question was out of the blue, but then I figured out that he was trying to determine if Tank could even have a friendship with a woman. For some men, especially men who looked like Tank, women fell into a different category than friends. Josh wanted to know if Tank was a player. I thought about our encounters, then shook my head. "No. He was fun. Easy to talk to. I even invited him over to the house for dinner one night, but I think he called off at the last minute. He was just a study partner. Then he worked with Professor Wellborn for a few years while he finished his graduate studies. The last I heard of him was an article in the school paper on how he was using his degrees and love of history to build a career. It was one of those 'see what a degree can do for you' pieces."

Josh nodded. "He does know a lot about history. He helped me classify a statue I'd had around for years that was part of the Catholic missionary development in this area. If they'd put more effort into the settlement process back then, we'd all be speaking Spanish and be under Spain's rule."

"Maybe." History tended to tell the story of the winners in the fight. But sometimes, what happened was what was supposed to happen. I found Tank's Facebook page and started scrolling. "The last post he made was when he was on his way to Peru. He said he'd been called home for a bit and would be back online soon. That was a week ago. From this, he wasn't in town on Wednesday when Mandy disappeared."

"Okay then. I hoped he wouldn't be the bad guy in this." Josh stood and pulled out a five from his pocket. "I need to go open the store. Kyle had an appointment with his wife this morning. Thank you for your help in sorting out this Tank thing."

"Josh, just because someone posts something doesn't make it real." I closed my

laptop and stood as well. I was going to say more, but then a couple walked into the shop and made a beeline to the coffee stand. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“We’re going out on Monday again with the boat if you want to come. Eleven at the dock again.” Josh waited for a response.

“Sorry, I already have an appointment.” I didn’t want to tell him about my aunt’s business. Especially since it would feel like I was rubbing his nose in her happiness.

He nodded at the couple and hurried out the door.

I picked up my laptop, the money, and my cup. I’d go wipe the table later. I smiled at the older couple. “Are you guys staying the week or just day visitors?”

“We’re at South Cove Bed and Breakfast for the week. How did you know?” The woman smiled at me. “I need more coffee. This one dragged me out of bed too early so we could go watch the day start on the beach.”

“It’s the best way to learn about a new place, Betsy.” He glanced around at the bookshelves nearby. “Although, I need to refill my Tbr pile, so you get us some coffee while I find a book or two for the flight home.”

“Oh, no, you’re not getting books without me getting some.” Betsy smiled and handed me her credit card. “Two large coffees, black. And two of those cinnamon rolls. We’ll be back in a few to ring up the books.”

The two disappeared into the stacks. I set down their credit card and made the coffees in to-go cups but then put the cinnamon rolls on plates with silverware. I set everything on a tray while I watched them stroll through the bookshelves, stopping when something caught their eye. Soon they were back with two books each and excited chatter about the books they’d left behind. As I rang up their purchases, I held

up the store's bookmark.

"If you get home and want to buy one of those other books, I ship within the continental US." I handed a couple of bookmarks to them with the card and receipt. "Ordering is easy on our website."

"We might just do that." Betsy tucked the card and receipt away, then took the tray. "Okay if we take this outside to those tables?"

"Of course. And there's free refills on the coffee, so just let me know." I grabbed my washcloth and spray and headed over to clean the table I'd left.

They headed outside, then sat at one of the sidewalk tables and ate their rolls. I loved watching couples like that. Out in the world and exploring new places. I hoped Greg and I would continue to carve out time to just be us after we walked down the aisle. It was sweet.

Deek came in from the front and saw that I was watching. "Do you know them?"

I shook my head and headed back to the coffee bar, straightening a basket of napkins as I did. "No, just seeing my future."

He did a double take of the customers, then met my gaze. "I think that's your aunt's future, not yours. Or if it's yours, it's years down the road."

I started to say something, then realized he was right. Betsy and her husband reminded me of Aunt Jackie and Uncle Harrold. I'd thought I'd been drawn to evidence of the number of years in the relationship, but maybe, it was just the couple's comfort level with each other. "You're right. And I've got some news to share."

I told him about my aunt's plan to retire. "So if you have any friends who want a good part-time job, I think we can add one or two more people."

"Are you giving up your morning shift?" He pulled out his laptop on a table and then went to grab some coffee. He had a couple of hours until his shift, and depending on how the writing had been going, he either came down from the apartment or worked upstairs. I think he liked the noise, even though it was quiet, of the café to write in.

"I might cut down a few shifts." My mind was spinning about all the manager things I'd need to take over again.

"There are some things your aunt did that you could assign out."

I looked at him hopefully.

He laughed and shook his head. "I'm your author whisperer and the newsletter/website guy. I wasn't thinking me. I was thinking Evie. She's getting a business degree, right? Maybe you two could talk about her role changing to an assistant manager."

I blinked. Once, twice. Then I grabbed my book I needed to finish so I could write the review.

"What, is it such a bad idea?" Deek called after me.

I turned back, grinning. "No. You just made me realize that this might not be all on me. I'm going to talk to Aunt Jackie next week, but I think having an assistant manager is a great idea."

I settled into the couch in the back and waited for the next customer. I'd finished the book yesterday, but I needed to remind myself of a few plot points. If the store stayed

quiet, I could finish looking it over and start the review before I went home to run with Emma before my class.

My worry list was decreasing, even if just a little.

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Chapter 12

I arrived early that night at the university building where my class was held. My last class for the degree. Now I just had to finish my paper and turn it in by Friday of next week. With Deek's brilliant idea, I felt like the upheaval of my life was finally slowing down to at least a workable amount of stress. I saw a light at the end of the tunnel. I just hoped it wasn't a train.

I grabbed a coffee at the cart in the lobby as well as a premade cheese and potato burrito that wasn't horrible. Then I claimed one of the comfortable chairs and went through my bag to find something to read, or at worst, I'd grab my laptop and make some notes for next week's meeting with Aunt Jackie.

A book caught my eye first. It was the one I'd found in the stacks that Professor Wellborn must have accidentally left, thinking he was shelving a library book. The bookplate in the front of the cover confirmed that it was from the professor's own library. It was about the origins of this area, including the mission that was rumored to be on my property, as well as a full chapter on Gabriel Santiago.

I finished my on-the-go dinner, then curled up with the book, setting an alarm on my phone so I wouldn't miss class if I got engrossed in reading.

By the time my alarm had gone off, I'd read the chapter and Professor Wellborn's notes. From what this author had found, Santiago had been generous with both his time and his money in developing the area. He'd founded a school for kids that had been the start of this very university. And he'd died of old age, at his home just off the coast, which I thought had to be located just outside of South Cove. He hadn't

died five years after he moved here. Or one of the records was wrong. The description of the old house built of stones he'd had brought down from the surrounding mountains reminded me of an abandoned house I'd seen every time I'd driven up to Bakerstown.

Could it be that simple? The former bank robber had turned into a community developer? Educating kids and building a home for himself and his family? Had the money that everyone had thought stayed hidden been used to develop the area?

I set the book down and texted Josh. I wanted to read the journal again. I'd skimmed it earlier when he'd shown it to me, but now, armed with this new knowledge, I wanted to compare what we thought were Santiago's own thoughts with this author's take on his life.

The treasure might already be gone. Which meant Professor Wellborn had died for nothing.

"Hey, Jill, are you coming to class? I'll wait for you, and we can walk up together." A girl who'd sat next to me for the semester, Sandra, stopped in the hall, her own cup of coffee in her hands. "I can't believe it's our last night. I'm so looking forward to having the summer off."

Chasing down a treasure would have to wait. I had responsibilities to check off my list. Including those I'd promised to myself. Like finishing my degree. This week. The important had moved into the urgent quadrant on my ever-growing list of things to complete.

I turned off my phone after checking to see that Josh hadn't returned my text yet. And then I tucked everything into my tote. "I know. It seems like it flew by."

"Well, for you. I've still got another year to complete. How's that cute little

bookstore of yours doing? If I owned a store, I'd shelve this degree and just live my life." She turned, and we fell into step together, taking the open stairway near the building's windows.

"No, you should finish this before life gets in the way. Believe me, you won't regret it. Unless you don't finish. Then you will." I was glad the classroom was only on the second floor. Even though I ran with Emma often, stairs drained my energy. Especially at this time of night, when I'd been up since five and then gone right to work at the bookstore.

We headed into the classroom, and I put away all my problems and just enjoyed the here and now. Deek would have been proud of me.

When I got out of class, I turned down an offer to join the group for a celebratory drink at a local college bar down the street. The place would be noisy and rowdy, even on a Thursday night. Especially now, with classes starting to wind up for the semester. On campus, students would be having one more night out before packing up and heading home to their parents for the summer.

I didn't need that kind of energy in my night. I got into the Jeep and plugged my phone in so I could listen to a podcast for my drive home. I needed to wind down.

A message beeped on the Jeep's display. I pushed the button to let it play. "Jill, where are you? I went to find the journal so I could give it to you tomorrow morning, but it's gone. It was in my meeting room, where I was working on finding Mandy, and it's gone. Call me when you get this."

I called Josh. "The journal's gone?"

"Yes. Greg was here a few minutes ago, but I don't think he took me seriously. You've got to tell him, it's not just an old book. It might have the clue we need to

find Mandy.”

I didn’t want to tell him that I thought the treasure was gone, and he wasn’t focused on that anyway. “Josh, come over for coffee tomorrow about nine. My commuters will have been in for coffee and left by then, and we can talk.”

“But you’ll talk to Greg. Let him know that finding the journal’s important too?” He paused. “Of course, not as important as finding Mandy. I just can’t believe what a mess my life is right now.”

Join the club. I told Josh not to worry and hung up to call Greg. My call went straight to voice mail. “Hey, on my way home from my last class. Hoped to have a glass of sparkling wine to celebrate with you when I get there, but I know, the investigation. Oh, and Josh wants you to know, the book...”

I got cut off. I’d have to tell him when I saw him, or I could call back and continue the message. I tried, but I was in a dead zone. The mountains blocked the signals on this stretch of road. Luckily, my podcast had already downloaded, so as I drove, I listened to an author talk about her inspirations for her book.

I had a review due tomorrow. I just realized I’d told Josh to come at nine. Maybe I should call him back and tell him to show up at the end of my shift instead.

Or I could write the review tonight, since it looked like the celebration was going to be just me and Emma. And Emma didn’t hold her liquor very well. Okay, fine, she didn’t drink at all. I wasn’t a horrible dog mom.

When I got home, the house was dark. Emma was waiting for me at the door. The dog knew the sound of my Jeep and Greg’s and Toby’s trucks. I’d watched her as she’d hear the vehicle pull in, and she’d move from where she was sleeping to the front door, where she’d be ready to greet whoever arrived. It made me feel better that

she wasn't just hanging out at the front door the whole time we were gone.

"Hey, girl, I finished my class tonight. So I won't be leaving you alone as much." I leaned down to kiss her on the top of the head.

Emma wiggled and let out a little bark that meant, I'm so glad. Can you get me outside, please?

I laughed and set my tote on the coffee table after locking the front door. Both Emma and Greg had me well trained.

We were back in the house, curled up on the couch with a bowl of vanilla ice cream, when a knock came at the front door. It was after ten. Emma ran to the door and sat, patiently waiting for me.

"So not a stranger, huh?" I set my ice cream on the table by the door and glanced out the side window. A woman in a cloak stood on my stoop. I opened the door to find Esmeralda. She was in her fortune-telling uniform with a Little Red Riding Hood cloak over the top. "Esmeralda, come in."

She handed me a box. "Sorry, I've got one last client coming any minute. I just wanted to give you this to celebrate finishing your degree."

"Not quite finished yet, as I've got to turn in my paper next week, but I'm close." I opened the box, and the smell of chocolate cake hit my senses. "That looks amazing."

"It's one of my favorites. Kind of chocolate-on-chocolate type of cake." Esmeralda smiled at me. "I'm sorry we've been at odds this week."

"I'm sorry I put you in a bad position. I know it was Greg." I closed the lid on the box. The intense chocolate smell was making me a little woozy. Maybe I should have

eaten something more substantial since I hadn't eaten lunch. Or breakfast, for that matter.

"No, I should have told him no. Right up front. I know he worries about you, but that shouldn't come in between our friendship. For a long time, I've only had my friend, Rory. So having more friends, I didn't understand the rules. I do now. You can trust me."

A car turned off the highway and into Esmeralda's driveway. The black BMW looked expensive even with the dim light and at this distance. "I do trust you."

She sighed deeply. "Thank you. That's been weighing on me all week. I need to go."

"I know. Are you coming to brunch Sunday?"

Esmeralda put her hood back up as she turned to walk home. "I wouldn't miss it."

I closed the door and took the cake into the kitchen along with my bowl of ice cream. It might not be the healthiest of dinners, but it was a celebration. Even if it was just me and Emma.

The relationships in South Cove were intertwined. Deek was Rory's son and Esmeralda's godson as well as my barista. Esmeralda was our neighbor as well as working for Greg. Toby, well, the connections went on and on. So when one person was out of sorts, the rest felt the disconnect.

Who had Mandy been attached to besides Josh and Tank? What ripples was her being missing causing? The questions kept me from enjoying my ice cream.

* * * *

The next morning, the smell of bacon frying pulled me out of a really nice dream about Greg and me sitting at a table, drinking mai tais, reading books, and eating bacon. Emma rested at my feet, with a large-brimmed flowered hat tied to her head. The beach was steps away. Even in my dreams, I envision vacationing at tropical beaches surrounded by books, Greg, and Emma. Maybe not in that order.

I quickly got dressed and headed downstairs. A plate of bacon, eggs, and a buttered English muffin sat at my place at the table. The box with the cake was gone. “Don’t tell me you ate all the cake last night. Or worse, Emma got into it.”

“She’s fine. And the cake’s fine. I had a slice when I got home. Sorry I couldn’t be there to help you celebrate, but I had another lead on Mandy’s location. I’m getting worried about that girl.” Greg nodded to the plate. “Now eat something healthy before you fall into a sugar coma.”

“Esmeralda brought the cake last night.” I sat down and picked up a strip of bacon with my fingers. Just crunchy enough. I ate it, then ate half of the English muffin. Finally, I made an open top sandwich out of the leftovers. “We talked, and everything’s fine.”

“Glad to hear it. You both were miserable being mad at the other.” Greg stepped over to the stove and filled a plate for himself.

“I don’t know why she would have been mad at me,” I grumbled, then I saw Greg’s face. “Sorry, I don’t even want to go there. I hear you know about the journal disappearing. Josh thinks you’re not as concerned as you should be.”

“He also thinks that since I haven’t called in the National Guard, I don’t believe Mandy is missing.” He sat down and took a bite of eggs. “I feel for the guy. I’d be a mess if you disappeared without a trace. Which is one of the reasons I try to keep you out of the fray with these investigations.”

“I know.” I ate the last of my eggs, then smeared strawberry jam on what was left of my English muffin. From the emptiness of my plate, I’d been hungry. “I try really hard not to get in harm’s way.”

“Darling, you are always at the wrong place at the wrong time. You could stay totally out of the investigation, and it would find you. I’ve almost given up on keeping you out.” He set his fork down. “I’m sorry if I got between Esmeralda’s and your friendship. That wasn’t my intention.”

I wanted to say it was okay, but it wasn’t. And I didn’t want to just acknowledge his part. So instead, I picked up my plate and took it to the sink to wash it. “Thanks for breakfast.”

He stood and put his arms around me. He kissed my neck. “I love you, Jill Gardner.”

I leaned into him, smelling his cologne and just his Greg smell. “I love you too. Now if we could only figure out where we’re getting married.”

He groaned and stepped away. “Sorry, I’ve got a meeting this morning in Bakerstown. I can’t talk about this now.”

I turned back and picked up his empty plate. “I know, but we do need some time to weigh the options. I don’t want to make this decision, again, by myself.”

“I know, and I agree with you.” He glanced at his watch. “I’ll get the dishes when I get home.”

“No worries, I’ve got some time. I’ll do them now.” I kissed him goodbye. “And remember I told you that the journal is important. Especially if Josh asks. Or when Josh runs you down to ask.”

He laughed. “So noted. I’ll see you tonight. I’m coming home early even if the town blows up between now and seven tonight.”

“That’s specific.” I rinsed the plates and put them into the dishwasher, followed by the glasses and Greg’s cup. I was still drinking coffee. I washed the pans by hand and set them into the dish holder to dry. I sat down at the table and opened my laptop. Mandy, where could she be? I wondered what people at the farm were saying and if her friends would talk to me.

It was Friday, so I had the full afternoon free. Especially since I’d finished the review and sent it off at eleven last night, just before I went to bed. Deek would edit it and make it look cohesive, if I’d been rambling due to lack of sleep. Josh would be at the shop at nine, and I had commuters showing up any time. I tucked my laptop into my tote and put my cup into the dishwasher and started it. With Greg saying he would be home, I wanted to have dinner at least ready to be made, just in case he actually showed.

And the town didn’t blow up.

I told Emma goodbye and told her I’d come home and run with her after work. Maybe I could send Josh to the farm to chat with Mandy’s family and coworkers. Or maybe not. Josh didn’t have the best social skills when he was in a good mood. Now, he was slowly deteriorating into the grump I’d met years ago.

My commuters were happy and in a buying mood. Not only did I have to refill the treat case in the middle of the rush, I’d sold more books this morning than I had all week. As the rush started to calm down, I totaled up the number of books I’d sold and thought Aunt Jackie would be happy. But then I stopped. No, she wouldn’t. Because after a few months, she wouldn’t be here to be happy with or disappointed in my performance. Was that what I was grieving? A chance to prove to my aunt, who’d taken in a teenager so devastated by her mother’s leaving that she could barely

function, that I was a real adult now?

I pushed the less-than-positive version of me out of my head. I had to admit, I was an overachiever at times. But buying the bookstore had slowed down that need to be first, to be the best. Now, I enjoyed my life and the people in it. I was just going to miss having my aunt in my life on a day-to-day basis.

Although, as I thought about it, Aunt Jackie hadn't been in the store during my shift for months. The only time she worked a shift was during festivals. Then she took on keeping the shop open if there were people in town as well as on the beach for the festivities. Like the Memorial Day weekend. We'd already set up the schedule for the food truck and the shop, and Aunt Jackie was part of that.

Now I was wondering when she wanted to implement this new "retirement" plan. I was just about to go into the back to grab the letter and her plan out of my desk when the bell over the door rang, and Josh came into the shop.

He looked horrible. Ragged, like he hadn't slept in days. His polo looked like it had been worn for several days. And his hair stuck up all over his head. Tank followed him into the shop.

"Can I get you coffee?" I asked, already pouring a large black to-go for Josh.

Tank nodded and pointed Josh to a table. He came up to the counter and gave me his coffee order. Which was surprisingly complex for a man who'd been living in the jungle. I gave him Josh's coffee and started Tank's while he walked it over to the table where Josh sat, his shoulders sagging.

Tank came back and watched me finish up his large mocha with salted caramel syrup and whipped cream. He smiled as I handed it to him. "I know, it's a froufrou drink, but when in Rome, right? Besides, when I get to the Peru dig, I'll be stuck with black

and sometimes sugar.”

“I don’t judge coffee orders. I just serve them.” Even though I totally had judged it. I nodded toward Josh. “I’m worried about him.”

Tank blew out a breath. “Me too. I wish I could just get him to sleep for a few hours. The brain can’t function without sleep.”

I refilled my coffee cup and walked over to the table. “So what’s the word on the journal? Did you find it?”

Josh looked at me, his eyes bloodshot. His voice got louder with each word. “Miss Gardner, I did not lose the journal. It was stolen from the shop.”

The coffee shop was empty, so his voice reverberated.

Tank held up his hand. “Josh, that’s not true.”

Chapter 13

Josh whirled on Tank. He held a finger out like a spear. “You can’t talk to me like that. You were in love with Mandy. You probably still are, and now you want to make me look crazy.”

Tank shook his head. “Josh, you’re right. I was in love with Mandy. Was. Years ago, when we were kids. Yes, I still care about her, but I’m not in love with her. And more important, she’s not in love with me.”

Tears filled Josh’s eyes. “I don’t believe you. Where are you hiding Mandy?”

He ran into the table as he tried to reach Tank. Tank moved so that he kept something between them. This wasn’t going to turn out well.

Moving out of the range of fire, I ran to the counter and my phone, but before I could dial for help, Toby walked in the front door. He quickly assessed the problem, since Josh was still yelling at Tank, and he ran over and grabbed Josh’s arms, pinning them behind him. He glanced at me. “Call Greg now. We’ve got to get him calmed down.”

When Greg and an ambulance arrived, Josh was tied to a gurney, and the EMTs had given him something to calm him down. He was still talking about Mandy as the EMTs pushed the gurney out to the ambulance. The third came up to Greg.

“We’ll take him to the Bakerstown hospital. They’ll assess him.” He was writing on a clipboard. “Is he prone to these outbursts?”

“No. He hasn’t been sleeping, and his fiancée is missing. He’s just overwhelmed,” I said, not waiting for Greg to answer.

The EMT frowned at the clipboard. This time when he looked up, he focused his gaze and his questions toward Greg. “Is he a suspect in her disappearance? Should we keep restraints on him?”

Greg sighed and took off his baseball cap. “I don’t believe Josh hurt Mandy, but this, well, I didn’t think he’d do this either. I’ll call Bakerstown and ask them to put a guard on his room. Maybe if we can get him some sleep, he’ll be more rational in a few days.”

“Okay. We’ll let the hospital know he’s coming.” The EMT looked over at me. “Does he have any next of kin we can call?”

I shrugged. “I really don’t know him that well. I bet Amy might have that information.”

“We’ll get the hospital something,” Greg said to the waiting EMT, who nodded and headed out to the ambulance. Greg waved Toby over. “Get your coffee, then head over to the station. I need you to call Royce in Bakerstown and ask for the officer. We’ll chip in for the cost. And ask Amy to pull his business license. Maybe it has something on it.”

“I’ll talk to Kyle too. We should keep the store running, right?” I looked from Greg to Toby. “I guess I’m not sure what to tell him.”

“I’ll stop in after I talk to the two of you.” Greg met Toby’s gaze and sat down at the table. Toby went back to the coffee bar to pour himself a large coffee to go. “Hey, get me one while you’re back there. If that’s okay with Jill.”

“Of course.” I sank back into the chair at the table. “Wow. I’ve never seen Josh act like that. He’s been cold before. Odd. But never violent. I’m not sure what he would have done if he’d gotten ahold of Tank.”

“According to Kyle, he hasn’t slept in days.” Tank ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t want to press charges or anything. The guy needs help and sleep, not legal troubles.”

“That’s kind of you.” Greg met my gaze, then dropped it quickly. “So what were you guys talking about when Josh went off?”

“Mandy. Oh, and the missing journal.” I picked up my coffee and took a drink. It was cold. I nodded toward Tank. “Josh had found out that Tank and Mandy had dated in high school. Or was it college?”

Tank shifted in his chair. “Both. I dated her until I left for Mexico. I asked her to come with me, she said no, and we broke up. End of story.”

Greg pushed on. “Then your professor asked you to come back and look at Josh’s journal?”

“Yeah. I didn’t know that Mandy would be involved. Frankly, I thought she’d be married by now with kids. That’s why we broke up; she wanted the house and sheepdog life. I wanted to be free to travel from one dig to the next until I made my name. Then I could write books about the find forever.” Tank drank some of his coffee, grimaced, then drank more. “I was in love with her. I just couldn’t give up my work to hang around here.”

Greg kept his eyes on his notebook. “And the missing journal? Have you read it?”

Tank leaned forward. “I have. It’s definitely from the right time frame. And it has

Gabriel Santiago's name in the book. We'd have to have the paper and ink tested to be sure, but in my opinion, the book's legit."

"And now it's missing?" Greg pushed.

Tank shrugged. "I think Josh misplaced it in all that antique stuff. You should see the room we were working in. It was filled with junk. Some good stuff, but a lot of junk too."

Greg closed his notebook. "Thanks for your input. You're free to go."

Tank stood, looked at me, then took his cold mocha and left the table. He paused at the counter and dropped a ten. Then he headed out the door without another word.

Greg watched him, then turned back to me after he left the building. Toby had left after dropping off Greg's coffee, so it was just the two of us. Greg tucked his notebook into his pocket and sipped his coffee. "This is exactly what I meant earlier. You can just be sitting in your store, and the case explodes all over your dining room."

"I think Josh is just exhausted." I stood and dumped my cold coffee and poured myself a fresh cup. I came back to the table. "On the other hand, I don't know what to think about Tank. I thought he was one thing, and he keeps surprising me."

"So you didn't know about him dating Mandy?"

I tried to think about when I had found that out. "Steve from the scuba shop told me. He said Tank and Mandy were supposed to get married; then Tank left for Mexico and broke her heart."

"When were you in the scuba shop?" Greg sipped more of his coffee.

I blushed. “Once with Josh, the day you asked me to babysit him. He wanted to rent a boat, and we went there to talk to Steve.”

“That’s the only time?”

I rolled my shoulders. “No, I was there a second time when I was avoiding Esmeralda at the diner. Not my finest hour, but I stepped inside to hide and noticed the picture with Tank, Mandy, and Steve. They were close in the day.”

Greg rubbed his face, then stood. He kissed me. “I’ll see you later at home.”

“That’s it?” I stood and followed him toward the door. “No lecture?”

“Not today.” He waved as he stepped out of the shop. He held the door open for Deek, and as the men greeted each other, I wandered back to the coffee bar.

“I was coming back up from Diamond Lille’s and saw the ambulance leave. Do you know what happened?” Deek leaned against the coffee bar, waiting for an answer.

“Josh almost attacked Tank.” I watched the street to see if any of the town people were watching the store. Nothing happened in town that everyone didn’t know about immediately. I felt bad for Josh.

Deek grinned. “No, really, what happened?”

“I told you. Josh was upset about Mandy and Tank’s prior relationship and the missing Santiago journal, and he went after Tank. Nothing big, but I guess Josh hasn’t been sleeping, so they took him in for observation.”

“Wow, I didn’t think the guy had it in him.” Deek reached over and filled a cup with coffee.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, I mean, it’s awful that Josh would break like that. Kyle’s been worried about him for days, but to go after someone? I didn’t think Josh had it in him.” Deek glanced at the clock. “I’m going to run upstairs and grab my laptop so I can write until my shift starts. Are you okay?”

“What, you think I’m freaked out about Josh?” I waved Deek away with two fingers. “Go get your laptop. I can’t read a book that hasn’t been finished.”

“I love your confidence in my publishing future.” He went around the coffee bar and back to the office, where he’d go upstairs to his apartment.

After he left, I took a deep breath and leaned against the wall. Josh’s emotions had swamped me, and I hadn’t been able to do anything to help Tank out. Of course, I wasn’t in the shape Tank was in, so I probably would have gotten in the way and put Tank in peril.

I didn’t like fighting, especially not this up close and personal. I didn’t even like to watch boxing matches on television. Luckily, boxing wasn’t Greg’s favorite sport either. I needed to calm down and think about what had happened. Was Tank right about Josh losing the journal in the antique store? With his lack of sleep, not remembering where he’d left the book was a possibility.

I decided to talk to Kyle right after my shift ended on my way home to run Emma. Then I thought I’d take a trip up to the farm to talk to some of Mandy’s family and friends.

Josh’s heart was breaking along with his mind. He needed closure so he could focus on other things. Like his business and the wild goose chase this journal was sending him and Tank on as they searched for Santiago’s gold bars.

* * * *

Kyle was helping a customer when I came in, but he waved at me and excused himself to come and greet me. “What a morning, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess Greg told you to keep the store open?” I looked around at the neatly arranged furniture gleaming in the sunlight from the large picture windows.

“He and I talked about my role here and what I’ve done in the past for Josh. I think it’s best that we keep things going as normally as possible. Then when he comes back, he doesn’t have to dig out from under money issues from having a closed shop. I want to help out. He’s done a lot for me.” Kyle smiled and held his hand up at the customers, letting them know he’d be right back. “He gave me the money for my down payment on the house when my girl got pregnant. He’s a good man.”

“I know he is. Hey, can I look around the shop and the room where he and Tank were working? He’s lost a journal.”

Kyle took a couple of steps backward, toward the couple who seemed to have decided on a midcentury dining room set. “Yes, please. He was frantic about the book. I hope it’s just sitting somewhere and not stolen. That’s going to break Josh’s heart.”

“I’ll be careful and hopeful.” I pointed toward the back. “Is the conference room this way?”

“Down the hall at the end of the showroom and to the left. The door is open.” He started to walk away but stopped. “Greg said I could tell Tank he couldn’t work in there anymore. I don’t think he was happy, but at least he left. I don’t like that guy.”

Neither did Josh. I smiled and headed in the direction of the conference room. I

needed to find that journal. Because if it had been stolen, there was a lot more going on here than we thought.

When I opened the door, I took a deep breath. Tank had been right about one thing: the conference room was a disaster. So different from the neat and tidy showrooms that made up most of the store. Here, boxes and piles of papers were thrown all over the room. On a bulletin board, a picture of Mandy and all the places Josh must have already checked were posted on the board. Along with several questions. Who picked her up at the farm stand? Why would she get into a car without knowing the person? The answer was written next to that question. She wouldn't. Then a list of names, including Tank's, were written below that.

Josh had been considering Tank a suspect in Mandy's disappearance for a while. But if Tank was here, in the room, why would he continue to work with Josh after seeing this?

I peeked around the other side of the board and saw a mirror image. The subject of this board was focused instead on the missing treasure and partially on the murder of the professor. Maybe that was the side that was visible when Tank was there. "Smart trick, Josh."

I took a picture of both sides of the board, then continued to look around the room. I didn't find the book. And I had a feeling I knew why. Tank had the book. It was the only explanation. Josh was too detailed in his work to lose track of it. Especially one so valuable.

I texted Greg. Any chance you could look at Tank's hotel room for the missing journal?

The response came back quickly. No. But I'll reach out to the Bakerstown PD and see if they are interested.

Or I could...I was still typing when the answer came back. Greg knew what I was thinking.

I can't condone it, but he'll be here filling out paperwork for the next hour or so. He's staying at the Castle.

Now I just had to figure out how to get into Tank's room without anyone discovering me. This was stupid.

"He's been sleeping in here," Kyle said, behind me.

I almost dropped my phone. I tucked it into my jeans as I turned around. "You're worried about Josh."

"Aren't you? I know Josh can be a pill, but he's a nice guy and he loves Mandy. Having her gone is killing him. I'm afraid what he might do." Kyle picked up trash around the room and put it into a sack. "And that Tank guy, Josh is worse after that guy leaves. He locks the door and stays in here for hours."

"He thinks Tank knows where Mandy is."

Kyle's head jerked up, and he stared at me. "I think he does too. The guy literally smirks as he leaves the room. Like he knows something Josh doesn't. I really don't like him."

"I'm beginning to feel the same way." I took my phone out and snapped a picture of the map Josh had been working on. There were five spots circled. Two, Josh had drawn an X through. The olive tree and the South Cove Community Center. I glanced at the time. If I was going to get to the Castle, figure out a way to get into Josh's room, and get out before he got back, I needed to move.

The thought of this being considered breaking and entering haunted me as I drove up to the Castle. I knew the manager, casually. We'd planned Aunt Jackie's engagement party here, before it had turned into Amy's party. Long story. But convincing someone to let me into a guest's room—that was tricky.

When I entered the hotel lobby, a young man was at the desk. He smiled as he greeted me. "Miss Gardner, how can I help you today?"

Okay, so he knew me. Great. I saw a name tag and breathed out. "Thomas, how are you? I didn't know you were working here."

"I started when I went to school. It's part-time so I can finish my degree. Deek tells me all the time how lucky I am to find a job in my field this close." He leaned back on the table behind him. "What can I do for you today?"

Deek's friend? No, he was part of the writing group Deek held at the bookstore. I'd met him there last month when I came in to talk about the bookselling side of the author job.

"Actually, she's with me." We both turned to the front door.

Esmeralda swept into the lobby area and up to the reception desk. "You have a guest by the name of Theodore Tank Harding? We need to see his room."

"I'm sorry, miss, I don't know if I can allow you access." He glanced to the back. "The manager, he's gone for the day."

"I have a letter of permission from Mr. Harding. He's down at the station now, and he claims not to be involved in the disappearance of Mandy Jensen. Now the only way we can prove his story is to check his room. Detective King would have come himself, but he's a little busy trying to save Miss Jensen's life. So please give us a

key.” Esmeralda held up the letter on South Cove Police Department letterhead.

Thomas glanced at the letter, then reached for a master key. “He’s in 302. Drop this off at the desk when you leave.”

As we walked to the elevator, the key in my hand, I leaned into Esmeralda. “Tank gave his permission?”

She side-eyed me and shook her head. “We appreciate your help with this investigation, Jill.”

I got the message. Stop talking. Our adventure was off the books. I felt like I was a secret agent or spy. I knew that I was way over the line here. And my friend Esmeralda was jumping into the unknown with me. I guess I shouldn’t have questioned her loyalty.

Chapter 14

We were inside the room when Esmeralda shut the door and turned to me. “Tank thought he was signing a letter of assistance, which would allow us to feed him lunch. He thinks he’s helping to find Mandy. Lucky for us, the front desk guy didn’t look closely at the document. All they see is the letterhead, and they think it’s official.”

“You’re tricky.” I pulled out my phone and took several shots of the room. No Mandy tied up on the bed, but maybe there was something here that might lead us to her.

“I can’t believe he let me get away with that letter.” Esmeralda went over to the closet and started looking through Tank’s clothes. He didn’t have much hung up. One suit and a couple of dress shirts with two ties. “He brought a suit for the funeral.”

“That’s odd. He didn’t know that Professor Wellborn was dead when he packed.” I opened the desk drawer and didn’t find anything. A bag sat on the floor. I picked it up and found a notebook and a laptop. I checked the laptop first. It had a password-protection screen. I didn’t know Tank well enough to even start to guess his password, so I set it aside. I opened the notebook and started paging through it. Pages of finances. What he owed, what he had in savings. And what the new job would pay. It looked like his budget.

The new job paid more, but not a lot. And, I noticed, he didn’t pay for lodging. Was that part of his contract? I kept turning pages. Some of it looked like he was writing a book. A fiction story about an archaeologist who got involved in finding a lost Aztec treasure.

But then, he started writing about Gabriel Santiago. The first name had been crossed out, but from what I could see, he hadn't renamed the real man into his fictional character. Was this why he was here? To get background so he could write a book about it? I waved Esmeralda over. "He's writing a book, a novel, about Santiago. I think that's why he's been helping Josh. To get ideas for his novel."

"He's handwriting it?" She glanced at the page where he'd made notes about the lost treasure.

"No, I think this is some sort of outline. I know Deek carries around a notebook, and when he gets an idea, he writes it down. Then when he goes back to writing, he doesn't have to remember it; the new twist is in the notebook." I pointed to the laptop. "The story is in there, but I don't know his password."

"Let me try." Esmeralda hit a few keys, then sank onto the bed with the laptop. "I'm in."

"You knew his password?" I walked over to sit by her. "Did the spirits tell you?"

"I tried the most popular password—the numbers one, two, three, and four. Didn't you attend Greg's cyber protection talk at the rec center last month?" She opened his mail program and started scanning. "Okay, here's the email from Professor Wellborn. He promised Tank a percentage of the take if he came to help."

"That jibes with what he told us. Well, he didn't mention the payday for him, but I'd assumed there was some financial reward. Especially for someone on such a tight budget." I thought about his careful budget in the notebook. "Anything else that's interesting?"

"He has an email chain from Mandy."

My heart sank. Josh was going to be heartbroken if Mandy was part of this plan to find Santiago's money. If she was betraying him, it was a long game. "Anything damning?"

"No, just a friendly exchange. She told him about her upcoming nuptials and invited him to the reception. She says she hopes he gets a chance to meet Josh." Esmeralda kept scanning. "For his part, he's happy for her. He talks about their past and the diving they did. Summers on the beach. Et cetera."

"Did he tell Greg he knew Mandy?"

Esmeralda shrugged as she checked his internet history. "That's a good question. There's nothing here besides him looking up places in the area. And people. Like Santiago and Josh."

"Nothing unexpected." My shoulders dropped. I had to admit, I thought Tank had been part of Mandy's disappearance.

"Not that I can see." Esmeralda returned the laptop to the bag and nodded at the notebook. "Are you done with that?"

"Yeah. There's nothing I can see." I handed it to Esmeralda.

She opened the back cover and looked at the last few pages.

I pointed out the obvious. "The notebook wasn't full."

Esmeralda paused on a page. "Sometimes people put stuff they want to keep track of at the back. It makes it easier to find. Like these spots, he drew on this page."

I gasped as I looked at the crude drawing of South Cove's shoreline. It had the

Moonstone Beach cave marked, circled, and crossed out. There were three other spots on the map. I took out my phone and opened the photo app. Josh's map was better drawn but had these three spots marked. "Maybe we do have something. I don't know if they're looking for Mandy or the treasure, but I think we have a few places we could explore."

"I've got tomorrow off if that works." Esmeralda laid out the notebook on the bed so the map was showing. "Get a picture of this map too. That way we don't have to make up a new story to get back in here."

As we were walking out of the Castle, I turned to Esmeralda. "Thanks for coming today. I know you didn't have to."

"I'm not here as Greg's spy, if you're wondering. I heard him telling Toby what you were doing, and he was concerned. I volunteered to come help. Besides, many hands make light work." Esmeralda stood beside her MINI Cooper that she'd parked next to the Jeep. "And I worry about you."

"Thank you? I think?" I smiled as I got into the Jeep. The windows were already down. "Whatever it takes to find Mandy, right?"

"She doesn't deserve what's happening to her." Esmeralda leaned on the passenger door. "Being held against your will gives you PTSD. And that's the best-case scenario for ending this."

"Mandy's strong. If Tank didn't kidnap her, then we've got other issues. But for now, we're staying positive on this wild goose chase. No matter what happens." I glanced at the picture. "I'm heading over to the farm to talk to her family and coworkers. Are you coming with me?"

She checked her watch. "Sorry, I have a reading in thirty minutes. Call and leave a

message when you get to the farm and when you're coming back home. I'll be watching for the calls."

"Okay." I didn't think I'd run into any issues, but you never knew. And like Greg always said, I typically walked into danger zones without even being aware of it. "Thanks again."

"See you at Sunday brunch. Is Amy going to be there?" Esmeralda opened her door.

I shrugged. Lately, Amy had been a hit or miss on Sunday brunch attendance. I blamed the new house. She loved that thing, but she treated it like a new boyfriend or husband. She was re-creating it in the image she wanted, one room at a time. "I didn't hear otherwise."

"Okay then, I'll see you Sunday. Don't forget to call when you get home. I'd hate to have to put an APB out on you just because you stopped for groceries on the way." Esmeralda smiled and waved as she drove off.

I wasn't fooled. She'd do it if I didn't call. The woman was brutal. I turned on the music and headed up the farm road that would take me behind the Castle and out to the open range. Where anything could happen. I started formulating my questions as I drove up the mountain. I wasn't a professional investigator, but maybe I'd see or hear something that was off. Or maybe Mandy would arrive and have an amazing story of how she went to visit relatives and just forgot to tell anyone.

A girl could hope.

When I got to the farm, I pulled up at the barn where the office was located. I didn't want to barge into the family home. I hoped they would let me wander through Mandy's apartment, or room at least.

I walked up to a front desk and small vegetable stand outside the large red barn with Jensen Farms painted in white on the side. A young woman greeted me, her hair up in a pony, and she looked a lot like Mandy. A cousin? Or sibling? “Good morning.”

“Hi, can I help you? We’ve got a great selection of early summer vegetables. Typically, we don’t have this much available at the farm, but the South Cove stand is temporarily closed.”

I couldn’t help myself. We needed groceries, and the ones on the stand looked tasty. “I’d love a couple of pounds of tomatoes, a few onions, and maybe some hot peppers? Not too hot. Or maybe one hot and the others medium so I can make two types?”

“Salsa, huh? You’ll also need some cilantro.” The woman started bagging up items. “How about two jalapenos and four green chilies? That should do it. Anything else?”

I pointed out some strawberries and blueberries and then ingredients for a salad. Since I was here, I might as well kill two birds with one stone. I’d still have to visit the grocery store, but this would be most of my shopping. As the woman—her name tag said Heidi—packed, I watched. “So you have a farm stand in South Cove? That’s closer to me. What happened there?”

Heidi took a deep breath as she put the fruits and vegetables into bags. “My cousin, Mandy, she runs the stand. And she’s disappeared. Everyone’s really worried. It’s not like her at all to just take off. And both of her cars are here. Well, one was at the farm stand. So where did she go? I’m worried she went down to the beach to swim and something happened.”

I blinked. That hadn’t been one of my theories. “Did she often swim after work?”

Heidi sighed as she finished bagging the groceries. “No, and she liked swimming laps

in the pool, but what else could have happened? She wouldn't leave with someone she didn't know."

"Did she live nearby? Maybe she walked back home if her car wouldn't start." I got out cash for the food and handed it to Heidi.

"She was staying in town a lot with her fiancé, Josh. They were going to get married next month. So her apartment here is all packed up. The movers were supposed to move everything tomorrow, but my dad put them on hold. Mandy only has us. Her parents died a few years ago in a car crash, so we're her family. Our grandparents have been gone a while too. And I don't think Mandy's mom had any relations. It's sad, really. The Jensens used to be a huge family. I remember when Grandma and Grandpa Jensen ran the farm. We'd have Sunday dinners at the big house."

A man walked up to the stand, breaking her monologue. "Heidi, it's time for your break. Do you need me to finish this up?"

"No, Dad, we're done. I didn't realize you were back from Idaho yet." Heidi gave me my change. "Sorry about venting all over you. Have a great day."

"No worries." I tucked the money back into my tote and picked up the bags. Heidi had already stepped away and was heading toward the house. "She told me about your niece, Mandy."

"Heidi's really worried about her. The girls were as close as sisters." He nodded to the bags. "Looks like you've got enough for a few dinners there."

"Dinners and some fresh salsa. I love the stuff." I started to step away. "I'm really sorry about your niece. I hope you hear good news soon."

His eyes filled with tears. "Our Mandy is a special girl. She's already been through so

much, and she was just beginning to find happiness. She will come home. I feel it in my heart.”

I called Esmeralda as soon as I got in the car, since I’d forgotten when I got to the farm. So much for having someone to watch my back. When I got her voice mail, I started talking. “Sorry I missed the first call. Anyway, the family doesn’t know where Mandy is, at least that’s my impression. I bought vegetables and fruits, and the cousin, she says Mandy lost her parents. I don’t know if that’s relevant, but also, she thinks maybe Mandy went swimming. The uncle is devastated. He said Mandy found happiness with Josh. I wonder if that’s a comment about how they felt about Tank. Steve thought they were going to get married.”

The phone beeped at me before I finished my message, but mostly, I was just thinking aloud. All roads led back to Tank. But according to him, he wasn’t even in the area when Mandy disappeared. He was someone she’d get into a car with though.

Maybe Greg would find an inconsistency with Tank’s story and he’d confess where he was hiding Mandy. Although kidnapping someone long enough for them to fall in love with them was a trick I’d expect Josh to do, not Tank. He was, at least on the outside, a perfect mate. Tall, well built, and handsome. I didn’t think he had a problem getting dates. Especially with his charisma. But maybe that was an act. Or Mandy was an obsession.

I decided to stop at the scuba shop again to see if I could talk to Steve. He knew them both when they were kids. Maybe he knew more about what broke them up than he was saying. I honked at Esmeralda, who was outside talking to her client as I drove past her house. Now I wouldn’t have anyone watching out for me, so I’d have some time to really talk to Steve.

When I drove past the shop, I glanced in the window. The Closed sign was up. That was odd for a Friday afternoon. Even on non-festival weekends, we got a lot of traffic

from Friday through Monday with tourists making a long weekend of it. But maybe it was still too chilly for scuba right now. Or Steve had gotten sick.

I made a U-turn in the middle of the street and headed back home to put my fresh veggies away and start on the salsa. If Greg came home, I wanted to have it done for an appetizer with chips before dinner. I thought I had an unopened bag in the cabinet. If not, I'd run down to the convenience store a few miles south on Highway One and grab a couple of bags. I'd need enough chips to get me through the batches of salsa I was about to make.

I hadn't made much progress on Mandy's disappearance, but I'd also hit a dead end. Esmeralda wanted to go with me tomorrow, so I'd leave the next stop on my list, Professor Wellborn's office, until then.

I set out all the stuff for salsa and put the rest away. Then I grabbed Emma's leash. I could at least look for any signs that Mandy might have gone to the beach that evening. I knew I was too late. That any refuse or towel or anything would have already been washed away by the tide. But sometimes, lost items showed back up. What the sea took, it often gave back. Just not at the same place at times.

Emma jogged by my side, glancing over at Esmeralda's as we passed, then at the farm stand. Not seeing either of her friends, she kept going. Emma loved to stop, greet her friends, and meet new people. My dog was an extrovert. I, on the other hand, wasn't.

We got down to the beach, and I glanced inside the two trash barrels by the parking lot steps. They'd been emptied earlier that day. I started running, keeping my eyes out for anything unusual or a bright color in the sand. I went out to the cave opening where I'd found a little boy trapped by the tide years ago. I paused there, kneeling by the opening. "Mandy?" I called out as the ocean pulled back a wave. "Mandy, are you in there?"

Emma and I sat quietly, listening, but the only response we got was the waves on the beach. If she was in the cave, she was unconscious or unable to respond. I wondered if Greg had thought to send a diving team down to check the cave. Just in case. I pulled out my phone and texted him the question.

His response was quick and short. Yes.

Standing, I brushed sand off my running pants. “This is a dead end, Emma. Mandy’s not here.”

She looked at me, confused. Then she turned toward the parking lot and the beach access stairs and barked. I interpreted her barking to mean, Mandy’s at the farm stand, idiot.

Of course, Emma wouldn’t add the last word. I was the one who questioned my skills and talent. Not my dog.

We ran back to the road and crossed over to the sidewalk leading up to my house. I had salsa to make, and I thought better when I was doing something. Maybe today I’d think of somewhere else Mandy could be.

Like I’d said earlier, a girl could hope.

Chapter 15

Greg hadn't come home for dinner, so I used the salsa, cooked hamburger taco meat, and made nachos for my dinner. It was an easy dinner to eat in the living room, watching television, and Greg could heat up what he wanted when he got home.

I was on the couch, topping off the nachos with a small bowl of ice cream, when he came inside.

He put his gun away in the office, then came and gave me a kiss, taking the bowl and spoon away from me. "Tell me this wasn't your dinner."

"Nope, I had nachos. The stuff is all in the fridge if you want some. I made homemade salsa and, yours is extra hot."

"You made salsa? This I've got to try." He stood and headed into the kitchen, finishing what was left of my ice cream as he walked.

I paused the show I was watching and followed him. "It's really good. At least mine is, I didn't taste yours."

"You need to learn to like hot things. We have amazing peppers that grow locally that we could use to season meats or even casseroles." He took both plastic containers with the salsa out. I'd written HIS and HERS on the top of the lids. He laughed and opened both. I handed him the bag of chips I'd opened earlier. "Thanks."

"No problem. Tell me what you think. I got the recipe off the internet, so I'm not

invested.”

He took a bite of the mild salsa first. He nodded, pointing to it with a chip. “This is good. A little spicier than I expected for you.”

“I like a little spice. I just like to be able to feel my lips after I eat.” I poured some into a small bowl and surrounded it with chips after setting it on a plate. “There’s a couple of beers in there too if you want one.”

“I’ll have one if you are.” He glanced at the clock. “I’ve already eaten dinner, and I know it’s late.”

“Not too late.” I went to the fridge and took out the beers, and as I did, I updated him on what my afternoon had been like. He’d probably already heard about most of it from Esmeralda, but I added in my visit to the farm and my thoughts when I was running. “Her cousin, Heidi, thinks she might have gone swimming and drowned.”

“We’ve been keeping an eye out at the beach, but I don’t think that’s the answer.” He took a big bite of salsa on his chip. Then his eyes started to water as he hurried to eat it. “This is hot.”

“I told you.” I smiled, happy I hit the right heat level. “I love fresh salsa. I don’t know why I don’t make it more often.”

“Probably because you’re always running around getting involved in my investigations.” He took his plate over to the table and sat down.

“What? You asked me to go to Tank’s room.” I was glad I hadn’t just taken a sip of beer. I set the bottle down. “And you asked me to babysit Josh. You invited me into this case. Don’t you forget it.”

He held up his hand. “Truce. You’re right. I’m starting to depend on your viewpoints a little too much in my work. So after this, we’re taking a break.”

My hand stilled over the chips. I guessed that would solve my issue with finding a venue. “You don’t want to get married?”

He set down his beer bottle. “What are you talking about?”

“You said you wanted to take a break.” I swallowed hard, and my heart was pounding.

Greg came over and pulled me from my chair into a standing hug. “I meant from me inviting you into my investigations. Not us. Never us. We’re getting married. Even if my mom can’t come to the wedding. Or we can’t find somewhere else to do the ceremony. We have options. Like Bill’s church or the beach. We’re getting married. That’s the end of the discussion.”

I realized I could breathe, and the tears that had been brewing had fallen during the hug. “I’m glad.”

“Glad is such an overwhelming emotion.” He chuckled as he wiped my cheeks. “I’m pleasantly happy as well.”

I hit him lightly in the chest. “You know what I mean.”

“And now we’re back to grade school.” He kissed me. “Nothing is ever going to pull us apart as a couple. Now, as an investigation team, we’re doomed.”

“You’re just saying that so I won’t cry.” I leaned my head on his chest.

He rubbed my back. “I’d do almost anything to keep you from crying. I even said

Mandy and Josh could come to dinner, remember? That alone should tell you that I love you to the moon and back.”

We sat back down with our late-night snack. “I think Mandy’s disappearance is getting to me. Her uncle said she was finally happy now, with Josh.”

“Funny, Tank said they were happy together until her uncle wanted her to postpone the wedding until after she graduated. Tank blamed their breakup on that.” Greg leaned back and rolled his eyes. “See, I did it again. I can’t help but talk to you about this case. Next murder or disappearance that happens in South Cove, I’m moving into a motel until it’s finished. Just don’t expect to see me until I solve the mystery.”

I giggled. “I don’t see you very much now. I don’t know how you could make it any less. Anyway, Kyle thinks that Tank’s hiding something from Josh.”

“And you think it’s Mandy?”

“It would explain why she’d go with him. She probably thought they were going for a drink or two, and now she’s locked up in a storage center somewhere inland.”

“Maybe.” He held up a chip with a pile of salsa on top. “Thank you for making this, it’s terrific.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, turning what I knew around in my head. “Esmeralda says she’ll go searching with me for Mandy tomorrow. Did she tell you?”

“She mentioned it.” He finished his beer, then dumped the bottle in the recycling. He got a soda out of the fridge and sat back down. “You need to be careful.”

“I will.” I tapped my fingers on the table, thinking. I saw Greg watching me, so I smiled and put away the thoughts about Mandy’s whereabouts. “Sorry, let’s talk

about something else. I have the wedding venue file if you want to go over that. If we find a place, I can visit it tomorrow or Monday and get it booked. We're running out of time."

Greg scratched his head and nodded. "Go get the file. We might not find another slot of time for a while where we can do this."

I went to the kitchen desk and opened the file. Our time to find the right wedding venue was running out. For Mandy, it was just time.

* * * *

The shop was busy for a Saturday morning. The commuters slowed a bit, coming in later than normal and in fewer numbers, but tourist and local traffic picked up since it was a weekend. Today, a group of women who were visiting all the art galleries in town and were staying at the Castle this weekend had found the shop. They were wandering through the store, a latte or mocha in one hand and a basket for books in the other.

Aunt Jackie was going to be happy with our book sales today. My heart sank a little as I realized again that soon, she wouldn't care. I could still tell her, but she wouldn't have a vested interest in whether or not I sold one book on my shift or one hundred. I needed to focus on my paper, get that done, and then have the meeting with my aunt. Oh, and help find Mandy in between. All in a day's work, right?

Today, Esmeralda was picking me up after my shift, and she'd drive us to the university to see what we could find in Professor Wellborn's office. If the school would even let us in there. I was hoping since it was Saturday, we'd find the door open or at least have access to an unwittingly helpful janitor whose master key we could use. Investigating on the sly was beginning to be our thing.

Darla Taylor came in, looked around, and found me cleaning a recently vacated table. All the shop's tables were busy. Some with writers with their laptops, thanks to Deek's writer group that met on Thursday nights, and some were just looking for a place to enjoy the sunny morning. Like the couple waiting for me to finish cleaning this table. I straightened the napkin holder, then pointed Darla to the coffee bar. "Do you want your regular?"

She followed me to the bar and waited for me to drop the cups into the dishwasher and wash my hands. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about Josh. Is it true he's in a mental hospital?"

Great, the town gossip mill had done its job and got the story wrong. "No, he's not in a mental ward. He's just exhausted. He's been going nonstop, looking for clues on where Mandy could be. He's really worried."

Darla climbed on a stool as I helped a customer with a coffee order and two romance beach reads. It was my best-selling category, and Evie and Deek kept the inventory fresh for our whale readers. Seriously, I didn't make up the word. Deek said it was industry terminology for people who read several books a week. "I think we have the full series for that one." I pointed to the first-in-series book she'd purchased.

"Oh, you do. And since I'm here for the week, I'm sure I'll be back for the rest. I like to pace my book buying so my husband doesn't notice the credit card charge. If I get one or two a day, he thinks it's just coffee and meals." She took the bag and the coffee. "And I'm off to the beach. Thanks for being open this early."

"Thanks for stopping in, and have a lovely vacation." I fixed Darla a coffee before I went around to sit by her. I refilled my own cup. "So please tell me you're not writing a story on Josh going crazy."

"No, I wouldn't do that. My editor has already done a small piece in the police callout

section, but he was discreet. I just wanted to find out what was going on. I am writing a piece on Mandy's disappearance, though. Did you know she traveled when she was young with a group of scuba divers? They called themselves Treasure Seekers. I just can't see her settling down with Josh. He's so different."

"Maybe she was just fitting in with the group she hung out with back then. I talked with Mandy before she disappeared, and she was really happy about the upcoming wedding." I kept an eye out to make sure everyone in the shop was doing okay as I took a short break with Darla.

"I've met women like that. Whatever their current love interest is involved in, they go full force into that too. Then they drop it when they move on to the next guy and his hobbies." Darla sipped her coffee. "I could never fake interest in something like that."

"Maybe she wasn't faking, but then it just grew to be too much for her." I was thinking about my first husband. He was deep into politics. Saving the world from the demons who were running for the other party. It was black or white for him. I helped out with a campaign, but I never made it my entire life like he did. I wondered what he was doing now. I saw Darla watching me over the rim of her cup. "Don't judge. I've been there at least once in my life."

"I can't see it with you. You know who you are, and Greg still loves you." She glanced around the bookstore. "You created all this."

"No, my aunt and I created this. And all my staff. I never imagined the store to be part of the community like it is. Deek's brought in writers, and we're busier than we've ever been. I just wanted a quiet place to read that would provide me enough income to live." I stood and helped another customer. "Are you ready to check out?"

By the time I was done, Darla had finished her coffee. She laid a five on the counter. "Well, I think you've found your niche. And South Cove is better with you here."

I laughed as I rang up her coffee. “Don’t let the mayor hear you saying that. He’s still waiting for me to move so his developer friends can buy my house.”

“He’s going to have to wait a long time,” Greg said from behind Darla. “Good morning, Darla. How’s the winery going? Toby tells me your bartenders are cutting people off at just the right time to keep down the DUIs.”

“Well, we aim to please.” She grinned as she took the change. “I think the fact that we have a dedicated Uber driver for the area now helps more. Caroline’s loving her business. She goes to school during the day, so she’s perfect for the job. I just hope we can find someone else when she gets a real job.”

“Whatever is happening, our streets are safer. Chip’s been a little less open to managing his customers’ intake.” Greg pointedly looked across the street at the small bar. “Maybe we should close the town to traffic at sunset.”

“Tell me you’re joking.” Darla turned to me. “He’s joking, right?”

Greg winked at her. “You’ll never know.”

“He’d have to get it past the city council. I don’t think Bill Sullivan would agree, since a lot of his traffic comes in late on Friday night.” I handed Greg a large coffee in a to-go cup. “Why are you here messing with Darla? Just bored?”

“Actually, I thought we might have some time to talk, but you’re busy.” He took the coffee and waved goodbye to Darla as she scurried out of the shop. “And keeping her on the defensive gives her less time to grill me about Mandy’s disappearance and the murder.”

“True. She did ask me about Josh’s current whereabouts, but she seemed concerned, not journalistic.” I took Darla’s cup and wiped the counter area as we talked.

“You never know what she’s thinking.” Greg sipped his coffee. “I just wanted to ask you to be careful today.”

I looked around the coffee bar. “I haven’t burned myself on a hot coffee machine all week.”

That wasn’t quite true, but Greg didn’t need to know that.

He reached for my arm and turned it to show the recent burn. “I’m not talking about here, and you know it.”

“Okay, fine, I did burn my arm on Tuesday, but I wasn’t quite awake.” I grabbed a sleeve of travel cups and refilled the counter area. When he didn’t say anything else, I met his gaze. “I’ll be careful at the college with Esmeralda.”

“Thank you. And I appreciate the fact that you’re not doing this all ‘Lone Ranger’ style.” He pointed to a lemon drop cookie. “Give me a dozen of those, and I’ll take them back to the station. Toby’s grumpy about having dispatch duty today.”

I boxed up the cookies and handed them to him. “I’ll put it on the station’s bill. And the Lone Ranger wasn’t alone. He had Tonto to keep him out of trouble. I don’t even know why they called him the Lone Ranger when he had someone with him all the time. And his horse, Silver. He was smarter than the average horse.”

“That’s Yogi Bear’s tag line.” He leaned over and kissed me. “Just take care of my Jill.”

“Yes, sir,” I said as he sauntered over to the doorway. He tipped his hat to a group of women who were watching us.

As one came up to pay for her books and get a second coffee, she grinned at me. “I

think I should come here more often if you grow them out here like that.”

“That one’s taken, but I’m sure there’s someone for you.” I made the coffee, then rang up the purchase. “There’s a key for every lock, as my aunt always says.”

The woman laughed as she took the coffee cup. “Your aunt sounds like a wise woman.”

“Oh, she is very wise,” Deek said as he came in from the back office with a cherry cheesecake to put into the case.

“A local legend then.” The woman winked at me after grinning at Deek. “I tell you, there must be something in the water around here.”

As she left to join her friends, Deek looked over at me from the cheesecake he was dividing up. “Did I miss something in that discussion?”

“Definitely.” I laughed as I checked the time. “I didn’t realize it was so late. It’s been crazy busy.”

“Judith’s on her way. She texted me that there was a slowdown on the freeway. I can’t believe she drives an hour to get here.” He looked around the room. “I can probably hold the fort until she arrives.”

“I’ll need to leave when Esmeralda arrives. She’s my ride to Bakerstown.” I grabbed a rag and went to clean another table. Deek followed me with a bin.

“Are you working on your final paper?” He put the dirty dishes in the bin.

The thing about Deek was he listened. He always asked questions about what was going on with my degree and classes. So he knew what I’d been working on. I

couldn't just blow it off. "Not today. She's helping me with something for Greg."

"You're looking for Mandy, then." He leaned over to the table next to us and asked if the man was done with his plate. "You think she's in Bakerstown?"

"I don't know. I'm actually trying to see if we can check Professor Wellborn's office for any clues." I shook my head. It sounded totally stupid when I said it aloud. It was a crime scene. No one would just let me in to look for clues.

"He kept a key on top of the doorframe," Deek said, picking the bin up and holding it out in front of him, watching me.

"How do you know that?" I stared at him as I sprayed the table.

"Perpetual student, remember? I dated his TA one year."

Chapter 16

I didn't think Esmeralda knew there was a speed limit on the highway. Actually, I didn't know a MINI Cooper could go that fast. Especially around corners. My fingers gripped the armrest on my right side, and my feet pressed against the floorboard, trying to slow down the car with my mental powers. Which I didn't have, even if Esmeralda believed I was gifted.

"I'm scaring you, sorry." She glanced over at me and lifted her foot off the gas pedal. "I'm not used to having company when I drive to Bakerstown. I just love watching the ocean as I drive by."

"I'm not sure how you can even see it." I flushed, feeling the heat on my face. "Sorry, I shouldn't complain. Thank you for driving and for going with me. Deek gave us a gift though."

"What's that? Cookies for the road?" Esmeralda glanced into the back seat, and the car swerved into the oncoming lane.

"No, not cookies." I stared at the road. No one was in the lane, thank goodness, but I would feel much more comfortable once we were in Bakerstown. And I might ask Greg to come pick me up. I could have used working on my paper as an excuse if I'd thought ahead and brought my computer. No, I was stuck riding there and back with the speed demon. I just hoped we made it. "He told me where the professor hid a key to his office."

"That's great. We don't have to break in or make up a story and hope."

“We weren’t really going to break in, right?” I turned to look at her and saw she was laughing. “You’re messing with me.”

“I am. Greg had the idea. I guess he wants you to think twice before asking me to be your Watson.” She slowed the car a little. “Sorry, I thought it might be funny.”

“You’re awful.” I slapped her arm. “Now I’m glad I didn’t bring cookies. You don’t deserve any.”

“I already ate two at the station while I was waiting for your shift to end.” She tapped her bloodred nails on the steering wheel. “I wonder how many other people know that trick about the professor’s key?”

“I don’t know. Deek said he dated one of the professor’s teaching assistants. So maybe a few. Like prior ones.”

Esmeralda’s fingers stopped tapping. “Like Tank Harding?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I watched her face. “Is Greg thinking Tank was involved in the professor’s death?”

Esmeralda’s face froze. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. You have a tell. Anytime I’m close to guessing something, your face goes still. Like porcelain.” I leaned back in my seat. “But that doesn’t make sense. Tank didn’t come until after the professor died.”

“Really?” The finger tapping started again. “Well, there you go. And my face doesn’t freeze.”

“Too late. You already let the cat out of the bag. I’m hoping the office isn’t an active

crime scene. Greg would have looked at that, right? It's probably a long shot that the police haven't cleaned out the office. If there were any clues there, they'll be long gone." I pointed to the upcoming ramp. "That's the exit. This one will take us right to the history department building. If you take the one after, we'll have to park in the admin building lot. This has a parking lot just a few buildings away from where we want to be."

Esmeralda turned on her blinker. "It's good to have a perpetual student on our side. I haven't been on campus since I took that self-defense class two years ago."

"I'm just an amateur compared to Deek." I pointed to the next road. "Turn right here, and it will be your next left. I hope we didn't make a trip for nothing."

"Time will tell," Esmeralda said in true fortune-teller generality.

Esmeralda followed my directions, and soon we were parked and walking through the campus. "The history department is in the liberal arts building. The English department used to be housed here too, but they got moved to a new building next to the library after the school got an endowment from a local author. I can't remember his name. He wrote spy novels."

"Tom Clancy?" Esmeralda was keeping up with me.

I glanced her way. "Not sure. I should have listened more when my Business Communications professor was telling us the story. The business department was all up in arms because they thought they were getting the next new building. But the tech guy didn't come through with the funds."

"His stock must have tanked." Esmeralda scanned the almost-empty campus. "Or his company went belly up."

“Positive thinking.” I climbed the large steps in front of the building. “Let’s be a little more upbeat for the office key.”

“I didn’t realize you were a believer in the Just Be Happy mantra.” She smiled at me and met me at the large glass doors that led into the lobby.

“I live in sunny California. I took an oath when I got my driver’s license.” I held the door open for her. “Didn’t you?”

She shook her head. “I lived on the grift for too long to not know a con when I hear it. If you’re happy all the time, it means you don’t look at anything critically. Your relationships, your job, your purpose in life. Bowling league is the opiate of the masses.”

“I thought that was religion.” I paused in front of the building directory. The campus must not have updated news, because the directory listed Professor Wellborn’s office on the fourth floor.

“Bowling works too. Or dart league. Or basketball. Whatever keeps you from really examining your life.” Esmeralda pushed the elevator button. “For Deek, it was school. Until Rory kicked him out and he had to find his life. Working for you is the best thing that has happened to that kid in years.”

I entered the elevator after a short boy and taller girl got out. They had book bags but looked about ten years too young to be taking college classes. I pointed them out to Esmeralda.

She shrugged. “Old souls. They must be on some sort of enrichment program for their school. You got to keep kids involved or bad things happen.”

I didn’t think much of it until we reached the fourth floor. I hadn’t seen a lot of kids

here either during the week or on weekends. “Did you know them?”

“Who?”

“The kids that got off the elevator?”

Esmeralda paused at room 401. The door had a name tag on the varnished wood that read: Professor Horace Wellborn. A bouquet of flowers sat on the floor by the door. I reached up for the key and found it easily. I kind of hoped this wasn't the key to the futuristic lab. There was no crime scene tape, but I could see the residue of fingerprint dust. The police must have released the office back to the university. I should have known that Greg wouldn't have sanctioned the trip if the scene was still in processing.

“No, I didn't know the kids. I think the reason you find so many clues is that you look at everything as a possible one. Like the kids.” Esmeralda took the key and put it in the lock. “Let's see what we can find.”

She pushed open the door and found a room in chaos. Books were all over the floor. The file cabinets were open, and files were everywhere. Paper covered the floor tiles where books weren't.

“What on earth?” Esmeralda looked around at the mess.

I stepped gingerly into the room. “I don't think we'd even notice if anything was missing.” I started picking up the books.

“What are you doing? Your fingerprints are going to be on the books.” Esmeralda gasped as I piled them on the desktop.

“Call Greg. Tell him we found the door cracked open. Put the key back up top and

wipe it.” I continued to look through the books.

“Okay, but what are you looking for?”

I set the next stack of books by the first. “The book the guy who did this didn’t know to take.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Esmeralda watched me and then took out her phone. “I’m calling Greg, but I’m telling him I told you to stop messing up the crime scene.”

“If it was still a crime scene, there would be tape.” Which was true, but my theory had the killer coming back to the scene, after the office had been processed. Like we had. So I guess it was a crime scene again, although I didn’t think the killer had found what he was looking for the second time. Maybe that was why the professor had been killed the first time. Maybe he’d found the killer in his office, looking for a book.

By the time Esmeralda came back, I’d found what I’d been looking for. It was the sister book for the one I already had in my tote. I’d found it referenced in the professor’s notes. I started to step out of the mess but noticed a file on the desk. It was the professor’s file for the California history class I’d taken years ago. This one had a listing of current students and their midterm grades. I scanned down the list and saw that two students were failing. Could it be that simple? Had a student attacked the professor to slow down his grade posting? It was a commonly known fact that the professor kept everything on paper and had his teaching assistants do the computer work at the end of the semester.

I pulled out my phone and took a photo of the class list. I hoped I wasn’t right. As I walked out of the room, a large man in a uniform stood in the doorway.

“Campus police, ma’am. Did you call in the break-in?” He looked around the room and whistled. “Someone did a number on this office. Looks like the frat house after

finals.”

“Actually, I’m Jill Gardner. I had my friend”—I nodded to Esmeralda, who was in the hallway, watching me talk to the guard with that look on her face, like I told you so—“call Greg King over at South Cove. I was just walking by and found the door open.”

“You shouldn’t have gone inside.” He waved me out of the room. “Someone might have still been in here.”

My eyes widened, and I saw Esmeralda smirk at my actress skills. “Oh my. I didn’t think of that. I came in because I thought someone might be hurt. Heart attacks and strokes seem to be on the rise lately. Especially among older workers. It’s all the stress from their jobs. I read about it in a recent journal.”

He watched as I stepped around him. “You thought all this damage was done by someone who was having a heart attack?”

“On television people walk around bumping into things.” I shrugged, playing dumb. “It could have happened. Then I saw all those poor books on the floor, open and their bindings being stretched. I didn’t want them to be ruined. I own the bookstore in South Cove. Books can be damaged easily. Especially older books like these. I picked up a few and put them on the desk so they’d be safe. People could have stepped on them.”

The look on the guard’s face was priceless, and Esmeralda had to cover her mouth with her hand and pretend she was coughing and not laughing at my performance.

“Ma’am. Please just give me your name and contact information. Then you can leave. We’ll call you for your statement.” He pulled out his notebook and handed it to me.

I wrote down Esmeralda's and my names and phone numbers, then handed it back.
"So we can go?"

"Please." He tucked the notebook back in his pocket.

"Great, because we're going to a lecture on campus today that starts in a few minutes. You might have heard about it? Local mysteries based on historical legends?"

He nodded to the elevator. "I haven't, sorry. Please find your way off the floor. We're going to have to block this area off."

"Oh, that's exciting. I'm so glad we came early, aren't you, Esmeralda?" I took her arm as we strolled toward the elevator.

"Is there even a lecture today?" Esmeralda asked after the elevator doors closed.

I shook my head. "It was canceled after the main speaker was killed. It just cemented our reason for being up on that floor."

"But if they check that closely, they're going to know Greg told you about the professor dying."

"Yeah, but maybe I thought someone else was going to speak instead. A lot of times, the professor's teaching assistants do the lectures. Especially if the professor isn't a people person." I watched the elevator lights chart our way down. "I don't think Professor Wellborn has done his own community education lectures in years. Tank did it when he worked for him."

"You seem to have covered all your bases with this lie." Esmeralda leaned against the elevator wall. "So this was a wasted trip."

“Not really. I think we need to find out more about the professor’s teaching assistant and the people who were failing his classes. We’ve assumed that his murder was about Josh’s journal and the missing treasure. Maybe it was just bad luck.” I stepped into the lobby and pulled out my phone. “Hey, Deek? Can you give me the name of your girlfriend who used to work for Wellborn? Does she know who had that position this year?”

The café noise behind him told me that the bookstore was busy. I quickly added, “You can do this after your shift.”

Deek laughed. “If I wait, I’ll forget to get it for you. Hold on, I’ll text you her name and number. I don’t know who was working for the prof this semester, but Rachel might.”

“Thanks, Deek. Everything okay there? Do you need me to come back?”

“No, we’re handling it. Evie just came in, so we’ll be fine. Do you want me to call Jackie if we need overtime approved?”

I’d forgotten my aunt had started that policy a few months ago. I tended to trust the staff to do what they needed to do to keep the shop going. My aunt had a more hands-on management style. “No, I’ll approve it now. Just make a note on the shift change sheet that you talked to me and when. That should work.”

“Perfect. I’m walking into the back to do that and get Rachel’s info. You’ll have it in five minutes, at the most.”

I left the phone out and sat down on one of the benches. “So what’s next?”

“Do you want to talk to Deek’s friend before we leave town? Or should we just leave that to the professionals?” Esmeralda sank into the bench next to me. “Hanging out

with you is exhausting.”

I grinned at her. “You’re not having fun?”

“We just got chased out of a crime scene. I thought we were going to be arrested. What part of that is the fun part?” She sat up as an alert hit my phone.

I read Deek’s text, then hit the button to call the number he’d given me. As it rang, I looked at Esmeralda. “The part where we figure out the puzzle. That’s the fun part.”

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Chapter 17

Rachel wasn't very talkative. She kept asking who I was and why I wanted to know about her time working with the professor. The third time she asked for my name, I took a deep breath. "Rachel, did something happen between you and the professor that you don't want to talk about?"

"I don't know what you mean," she sputtered.

"You seem a little wary of giving out basic information about the guy. You weren't involved in his death, were you?"

"No! I loved Professor Wellborn. I mean, I respected him. He was nice, and kind, and he treated me like a colleague, not like a lot of the other professors treat their graduate assistants."

"I'm glad. I thought he was an amazing guy too. I took his California history class a few years ago. He had so much knowledge on the subject." I tried to calm her down a little.

"He was writing a book about the area. That's why he was so excited when he heard about the journal being found. He said it was his way out of academia. Or at least worrying about tenure." She paused. "I don't know if this is important, but he called me a few weeks ago. He said he needed me to work for him on the book. He was bringing in a few of his old assistants to help out, and he'd get back to me. The money he offered would have paid my rent for the next year. It's not often you get a job like that you can do in your free time."

Okay, now I wondered if I'd even guessed correctly earlier. "So was his current assistant part of the team?"

"Heck no. Eugene was worthless. He only got the fellowship because his mom works at the university. Eugene Bell. That's the name of his current teaching assistant. I didn't want to tell you because his mom is in the financial aid department, and I have one more semester to go. I didn't want her to think I didn't like him."

"Do you know who else the professor called about helping him with the book?"

Rachel gave me Eugene's information and his mother's. "I don't know who the other two were that he called. We were supposed to meet everyone this Tuesday at the professor's home."

I started to say goodbye, but then I paused. "Rachel, do you think the Santiago treasure is real?"

The silence on the other end of the line went on for a while. I checked the phone to see if she'd already hung up. Finally, she said, "I do. I don't know why anyone would kill Professor Wellborn unless they thought the treasure was real and they wanted it for themselves."

"Thanks for talking with me. I'm going to give your name and number to Greg King at the South Cove Police station. He might have more questions."

"That's fine. I should have called someone when I heard the professor had been killed, but I thought it might just be random. You know, a coincidence or just bad luck."

As I put my phone away, I wondered if this was all about the money. Most times, violent acts like that were caused by our base needs. Envy, jealousy, fear. And money

hit all of those buttons. Even if the treasure was just a legend.

I turned to Esmeralda. “I guess we’re done here. We need to know who Professor Wellborn invited into his writing group about the treasure besides Tank and Rachel.”

“I wonder who could tell us that.” She stood and held out her hand. “Let’s go back to South Cove before the real police get here and realize the campus guy let us walk away.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I fell in step as we headed outdoors. “Do you want to grab some lunch at that new place out by Highway One?”

* * * *

When I got home, Emma waited at the door. She’d taken her leash down and was walking around with it in her mouth. I guess she figured if I wasn’t going to take her on a walk, she’d do it herself.

I took the leash from her and set it on the table. “Give me a few minutes to get changed, and we’ll go.”

After letting her outside, I ran upstairs and got ready. While I was changing, I thought about my to-do list for the rest of the day, probably the weekend. My paper was due on Wednesday. I needed to spend some quality time with it. I felt almost guilty about taking the time to run, but Emma needed her exercise as much as I did. Besides, my head would be clearer after running. Maybe I’d be able to think about something besides Mandy and Professor Wellborn.

I texted Greg my intentions and got a quick thanks response. Normally I didn’t keep him apprised of my every move, but since there was an investigation going on, I knew he liked to know if Emma and I went running. Being part of a couple

sometimes meant including the other person's feelings in my decisions. A habit it had taken me a few years to get used to or even understand.

Emma and I took off for the beach, and again, the sight of Mandy's empty farm stand made my stomach twist a bit. We took the stairs down from the parking lot, and we both stretched. Emma had started doing it when I did a few years ago. I thought it was adorable and probably praised her for stretching before her run. Which likely made her do it more. Or my dog was a genius. Which I totally believed anyway.

When we got back to the house, I cleaned up and drank a glass of water. Seeing Mandy's farm stand reminded me of the card I'd found for Bakerstown Investigations. I pulled it out of my jacket and called the number. It had been disconnected. I set the card on the table to remind me to give it to Greg. Then I pulled out my laptop and started working.

I was still at the table when Greg showed up with a bag from Diamond Lille's for dinner. I could smell Tiny's fish-and-chips as soon as he walked in the door. "Hey, I thought I'd find you here. Although I got nervous when you didn't answer my text asking what you wanted for dinner. I took a chance and ordered the fish. Carrie said you hadn't been in for a while."

"I think I was there a few days ago, but my concept of time has been warping a bit with trying to finish up the project and classes." I saved my work and put the computer away. "Professor Wellborn's office was a bust for clues, but I did find out that he'd called three of his students to help him with Josh's journal. Tank, Rachel, the teaching assistant that Deek dated, and someone else. Here's the girl's name and number, I told her you'd probably be calling. Oh, and here's a card I found at the farm stand the other day. The number's disconnected."

"You've been busy. We just spent the day checking out abandoned sites that callers from the community tip line are sure Mandy's being kept at. Mostly, we just found

some homeless guys. I hate not having affordable housing in the area.” He glanced at the card and put it away in his pocket. He pulled plates from the counter and set up the takeout from Lille’s. “Oh, I saw Harrold at the diner. He says they’ve scheduled an Alaskan cruise for July. I didn’t realize she’d be taking off that soon.”

I sighed as I moved the laptop off the table and filled glasses with iced tea. “Neither did I. It’s fine. We’ll make it work. I’ve just been realizing how much I’ve depended on her and how much I’m going to miss her.”

“She’s not moving away. She just won’t be working in the business anymore. We should invite them for Sunday dinner next week, if I’m able to put away the investigation by then. After so long, I just have to face the fact that we might not find Mandy.” He set up his meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and gravy on a plate and dumped the salad into a bowl. Lille was trying the less-energy-wasting paper containers for takeout, but they didn’t stand up to actually using them to eat out of. So we always transferred the food to real dinnerware.

The seriousness of his words cut into my thoughts. “You don’t think she’s alive.”

The silence at the other end of the table answered my question. He finally looked up and met my gaze. “Mandy’s been gone over a week. No one has reached out with any kind of a ransom demand. Unless she left Josh and he didn’t get the memo, she’d be back by now. And you know how many people disappear off of the highway. My current working theory is she was picked up as she closed the stand and taken somewhere.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think she’s dead. I just have a feeling.”

“Well, I haven’t given up hope, yet. But it’s close. Josh is going to hate me.” Greg pushed his salad around in his bowl. “I hate it when it’s so close to someone in town. It makes it personal.”

We ate our dinner in silence, and I sent up a prayer of protection for the missing Mandy. Greg was right, if she was gone or dead, Josh wouldn't recover. He had made Mandy his entire life.

As we were cleaning up the kitchen after dinner, Greg asked, "How's your paper going? Are you going to meet your deadline?"

"Yeah, I'll have it done by Monday and will be able to edit it for a few days before I hit Send. But I need to change my meeting with Aunt Jackie. The good news is the beginning is perfect, since I've gone over it so many times. I don't know how Deek does this. I'd go over and over the story until I'd taken out all the fun and questioned myself on everything. I'd still be on my first book." I put the plates in the dishwasher after Greg rinsed them.

"I don't think so. You're a lot like Deek. You like things finished, and then you're ready to move on to the next thing." He glanced around the kitchen. "We're done here. Do you want to go out and sit on the back deck for a while?"

"I'd like that." I watched as Emma stretched and then waited for us at the back door. Greg opened the door and handed me a blanket.

"It's a little chilly tonight."

As we sat down on the swing and watched Emma police the yard, I turned toward him. "You really don't think Mandy's coming back?"

He didn't look at me. Instead, he looked up into the sky. "This one's going to take a miracle."

* * * *

As I walked to the shop on Sunday morning, I spied Bill's church down the side street. I sent up a prayer again for Mandy. If she was going to come home, we needed all the help we could get.

At the shop, the first hour was usually slow, so I pulled out my paper and reread the section I'd worked on yesterday. All I needed to do was write the conclusion and make sure all the footnotes were appropriate and correct. I had the header for the summary but nothing below. I thought I'd proven my points, but I'd need to go through them one by one again.

Writing this paper was a lot like investigating. You thought you were going one way, then you read something or find something that made you question the path you'd been following. I knew that business-focused community development and management could work, in a perfect world. It was when you added the wild card of real people into the mix that the model had issues holding up. But there were some good examples of working models that I could use for the paper.

Mandy had been gone for almost a week and a half as of today. Her family didn't know where she was. At least the cousin I talked to at the farm didn't. But Mandy's uncle had cut short our conversation. Taking over and basically getting me out of there. Was he trying to spare his daughter's feelings about losing Mandy? Or was there something else?

I saved the changes I'd made on my paper and went to scroll through Mandy's Facebook page. I'd found what I was looking for last week. An old picture. The same one that was in the scuba shop. On the post, Mandy had written the following: Blast from the past. I heard from my high school sweetheart today. The only man my family has approved of me dating, before or after. Great time catching up over a long lunch.

I checked the date. Tank had been in town a full week before he'd claimed and

Mandy had disappeared. I called Greg and told him what I'd found.

"Hold on a second."

I heard the file cabinets rattling in his office. He typically didn't work on Sunday unless I opened the shop, like today, or he was on an investigation. Today was both. I was working until eleven, when Evie would take over for a few more hours.

I would have to expand Sunday hours during the summer, but for now, we were just here for the stragglers who were in town for the day.

"Tank said he came the weekend you had your girls' thing in the city. Mandy was already missing by then."

"According to this Facebook post, he lied. Another thing, Mandy's uncle was acting weird when I saw him. I thought it was grief, not wanting to talk, but there may be more." I didn't want Greg to harass the family, but maybe they might have information they didn't realize was important.

"It's a stretch, Jill," Greg warned. "But the Facebook post gives me a reason to interview Tank and Mandy's uncle again. So if it was Tank, and Mandy is alive, where would he keep her that she wouldn't be able to talk to Josh?"

"In a mountain cabin with no internet or phone service," I said. I drove past tons of mountains and hills that divided our coastal community from the farmland farther inland. "Maybe she thinks they're going to dinner. Then he presents her with one last getaway before she gets married. But by now, she has to be questioning it."

"And she didn't walk out with Tank being in town for all this time? Don't answer that. I've never hoped one of your crazy ideas was right as much as I do this one. Let me do some research. Maybe his family has property in the mountains." Greg

sounded hopeful. And that made me feel the same emotion. Hope. It was a wonderful thing. Especially since last night I'd been sure I'd have to just accept she was gone. "Jill, right now, it is just a crazy idea. Don't get too committed to it."

"So don't get my hopes up?" I laughed. "I think it's way too late for that. I'm going to be bathing you and Mandy in positive thoughts until you break my heart again with reality."

After I hung up, Deek showed up to write. I loved that my staff loved the bookstore enough to be here even when they weren't on shift. I took him a coffee and a cookie as he set up his writing station.

"Thanks. I hope you don't mind, but the muse loves me writing here. I can usually get twice as much done in a day if I spend some focused time here. Diamond Lille's works too, but only if Lille's not there. She doesn't like me tying up a table that long, even when it's quiet." He bit into the cookie. "Sugar rush. Now some caffeine and I'll be ready to write the great American novel. Or something like that."

"You do you." The bell rang, and I saw Evie come inside the front door. "Hey, you're early."

"I know, but I'm finished with classes for the semester and summer hasn't started yet, so I needed some reading material anyway."

Deek laughed as he sipped his coffee. "It's the comfort of having a schedule. When you lose that, it's hard to not just work because you can. Of course, when I started writing, I felt the void. I could write something for class with a deadline, but when I didn't have one, I was afloat in a sea of endless time."

"Well, I don't have endless time, since I'm older," Evie said as she stepped toward the bookshelves. "Give me a few minutes to browse, and I'll be ready to take over the

shop. I figured there would be more people popping in from all the traffic outside.”

“Sometimes it takes a while. Most people might think we’re not open, since we were closed on Sunday for years.” I stepped back to the coffee bar and pulled out the morning shift-closing list. “I’ll get ready to hand over the reins.”

Esmeralda, Amy, and I had brunch plans, but I wanted to outline a timeline of Mandy’s disappearance and put Tank’s arrival on the line as well. And if the scuba shop was open, I had a few questions to ask Steve about the couple’s history. Maybe Tank had come home just in time to save Mandy from marrying Josh. Whether she wanted to be saved or not.

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Chapter 18

The scuba shop was closed, and from the look of the place, it hadn't reopened all weekend, or at least since I'd walked by on Friday. Notes were shoved under the door, and another note, written in red and taped on the glass, just said, Where are you? I took a picture of the door and texted it to Greg.

He called a few minutes later. "What am I looking at?"

"Steve hasn't opened the scuba shop for a few days. Isn't that strange?" I sat down on a bench that had been placed in front of the shop and watched people walk to Diamond Lille's for breakfast. The Train Station, Harrold's model train store, was closed on Sundays, as were most of the other businesses.

"Maybe he's on vacation or something?" I could hear him rustling papers as he talked.

I glanced back at the shop. "Wouldn't he have put up a sign?"

"Honey, this is South Cove. You never know when someone's going to take off. Especially surfers. There might be a great wave happening somewhere."

"I think it's called something else, but okay, I'll give you that." I watched as Amy pulled into Diamond Lille's parking lot. Esmeralda climbed out of the car and waved at me. They must have seen me as they drove by. I headed across the empty street. "I've got to go. Amy and Esmeralda are here."

“Sounds good. I’ll probably be home before you are. I’m out of leads to follow in Mandy’s disappearance, and Bakerstown is a little put out that you were moving books at their crime scene yesterday.”

“It’s not like I moved a dead body,” I grumbled. I heard his chuckle. “You’re just happy that it’s their case. Admit it.”

“Actually, I am. Lorenzo would like you to stop by on Monday for a little chat.”

“I’d say I was too busy, but I will be in town. I’ve already postponed my lunch with Aunt Jackie so I can work at the library. Tell him he can find me on the fourth floor of the library if he wants to talk to me before I head home. Otherwise, I’ll stop by on my way out on Monday. I really need to finish my paper.” I gave Amy and Esmeralda a quick hug. They’d waited for me outside the main door. “I’ve really got to go.”

“Tell Greg we said hi.” Amy grinned as she held the door.

“I heard that. Go have fun with your friends. Oh, and I think I have the wedding venue site solved. We can talk this evening.”

“Wait, what?” I asked, but Greg had already hung up. “Just like him,” I muttered.

“Uh-oh. Trouble in paradise?” Esmeralda pointed to our regular booth, and Carrie nodded. Lille was nowhere to be seen.

I shook my head as I followed them. As we got settled, Carrie dropped off silverware and menus. “No, he just has this thing he does. He says something important; then he hangs up. So it leaves me not knowing what he’s talking about. I can’t ask any questions. And if I call him back, he won’t pick up.”

“He’s tricky like that.” Amy grinned as she held out a cup for coffee from Carrie,

who had returned with three waters, three cups, and a pot of coffee. “Justin just tells me everything. There’s never a surprise or a mystery. I’m not sure I’ll be able to stand living fifty or more years with him. I know everything now.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.” Esmeralda grinned. “But that’s why Nic’s and my relationship works so well. We see each other maybe every other month, so there’s always something new happening in one of our lives. His kid sister moved back to New Orleans and started up a design shop. So of course, he’s super worried about her. He’s sure that she’s going to run into trouble, so he assigned a security guard to her.”

“I’d hate that. Greg would know everything I was doing.” I sipped my coffee and pushed away the menu. I knew what I was having. A Denver omelet, hash browns, and wheat toast. Yes, I had a Sunday brunch favorite as well.

“Actually, I think she’s enjoying having someone around. They seem compatible.” Esmeralda ordered a large stack of pancakes with strawberries for the top.

“So you’re matchmaking.” Amy grinned and then gave Carrie her order. Amy still ate like she surfed every weekend. Biscuits and gravy, three eggs, bacon, and a large orange juice. “Like in that movie where she had an acting career and fell in love with her bodyguard.”

“I didn’t see that one, but I think she was a singer. Besides, I’m not the one who assigned Bubba to watch her. That was Nic.” Esmeralda glanced over at me. “Did you tell Amy what we did yesterday?”

“You don’t have to. The mayor got a call from the Bakerstown police chief right afterward. Lorenzo thinks Greg sent you to mess with his case.”

“I would never do that.” I stirred some sugar into my coffee. “So he’s thinking Josh

had something to do with the murder.”

“How did you get that from what I said?” Amy stared at me. Her mouth hung wide open in surprise.

“Why would he care, and the only person I’d be protecting would be Josh,” I answered. “And close your mouth. You’re attracting flies.”

“My mother used to say that all the time, but I had no idea what it meant.” Esmeralda sipped her coffee. “I don’t think Josh killed anyone. I don’t think Josh had anything to do with Mandy’s disappearance, either. I think he’s just really sad and worried.”

“We should go visit him.” I sat up, ready to make plans, when Amy groaned. “What? He’s part of South Cove.”

“He’s also already out of the hospital. His doctor said he was sleep deprived, so as soon as they got him to sleep a couple of nights, he became more rational. I guess he’s embarrassed about trying to hit Tank.” Esmeralda leaned back so Carrie could drop off her plates of food.

“I don’t think he was wrong.” I explained what Rachel had said about the professor getting a team together. “Tank lied about when he came to town. I don’t know who the third person is, but as soon as I can figure that out, I’m sure we’ll find out that Tank was involved in at least the professor’s death, and maybe he knows where Mandy is being held.”

“You think she’s still alive.” Amy set her fork down. “You know the odds are against her.”

“I know, but I just have this feeling.” I turned to Esmeralda. “Has she appeared to you from the other side?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean much.”

“Seriously? If I’m killed, you’re the first person I’m going to come chat with. Everyone in town knows you have a red phone line to the other side. Anyone who dies here is going to try to get your attention. Especially if they need closure, like finding their killer.” I cut into my omelet. Tiny, Lille’s chef, was a food god.

Esmeralda stared at me, then nodded. She focused on her plate. “Good point.”

When I got home, Greg was there, mowing the backyard. We were changing over the front yard to low-water plants due to the drought, but we were keeping grass in the back. At least, if the rains actually arrived. Emma liked the green area, and it brought in bunnies and other wild creatures.

I poured us both glasses of iced tea and took my computer out to the back porch to watch him as I worked. When he finished up and put the mower away, he came up on the deck to sit with me. “Thanks for the tea.”

“So tell me what you meant by having the wedding venue.” I saved my work so I wouldn’t lose it. I’d done that too many times before.

“Leave next Wednesday night open.” He sipped his tea.

“And...” I prodded.

He shrugged. “I guess you’re going to have to wait. Just don’t set up anything until we talk. I think you’re going to love it.”

“You’re not going to tell me?” I couldn’t believe Greg was holding something back. Typically, he dropped birthday and Christmas gifts on the table when he bought them. He wasn’t much for the surprise factor.

“Nope. So how’s your paper going?” He changed the subject, sipping his tea.

“Okay, fine. I’ll play.” I opened my laptop to look at the work, like seeing it would help me explain my progress. “I need to tie up some of my ideas. As I’ve gone back through this, I’ve realized I’ve let some threads drop.”

“It has a flashy title though. ‘City Managers, Mayors, or Business Councils: What Form Is Best To Run a Small Town?’” He read my title.

“I hate it. It feels stilted. And it’s like it’s an all-or-nothing proposal. I wanted to focus on a peer- or business-run city management. There’s just not a lot of actual cities that are run that way.”

“Maybe you are defining it too closely. I think a city council and a business council could be the same thing. Like a legislative branch. And city manager or mayor is the administrative branch of the city.” He rubbed Emma’s head as he talked.

“You’ve been reading my books.” I shook my head. How was it so easy for him?

He laughed as he stood. “No. I’ve just worked with too many towns, so I know the way they work. I took a few public administration classes in my day.”

I stared at my first page. Was that the reason I was having trouble finishing? My definitions were wrong?

“I’d ask what’s for dinner, but with that look on your face, I think I’ll just leave you alone and grill some chops. Anything special you want?” He picked up my tea glass.

“Just food.” I looked up at him. “Thanks for this. Sometimes you just know the right thing to say.”

“It’s my secret power. I’m a Jill whisperer.” He held up the glass. “I’ll bring you out a refill in a few minutes.”

I nodded and refocused on my paper. I needed to change a few things and get a few more references if possible, tomorrow, but I thought I had my new premise. I started writing and cutting as I went.

* * * *

Monday morning, Greg was gone when I woke, but he’d left a plate of bacon and eggs in the microwave with a big sign on the front telling me how long to reheat the plate.

I let Emma out and poured coffee. I’d work for a few hours at home, then drive to Bakerstown so I could be in the library working no later than nine. Finding the right resources was going to be the focus today, then tomorrow after work, I’d tighten up the paper and send it off to my professor before the deadline. Or I could hold on to it and question my findings until then.

Wednesday night, Greg and I would do his surprise thing. And the next day, I’d see if my aunt had time for lunch to talk about her retirement. Everything was falling into place. As long as I finished my paper.

When I drove into Bakerstown and headed upstairs to the table where I liked to work, a man in a suit sat there, waiting for me. So much for getting to work early this morning. I was glad I’d spent some time at home.

“Miss Jill Gardner?” The man stood and set down a book on economic theory that someone had left on the table.

“Yes, are you Lorenzo?” I set my bag on the table and held out a hand. “Sorry I’m a

little late. My dog found a bunny in our yard and didn't want to come into the house this morning."

He blinked.

I guess he hadn't heard that excuse before. He shook my hand, and we sat down.

"So, what can I help you with?"

"You and Esmeralda DeClair were at Professor Wellborn's office on Saturday?"

Apparently, this wasn't going to be a quick conversation, since he already knew that. "Yes, we were. Esmeralda called Greg when we found his office had been ransacked. I assume Greg called your office, but that's just hearsay."

He waited for me to go on, but I'd learned one thing from being involved in so many investigations. Keep your answers short and about what you had actually seen. I'd already broken that part by saying Greg must have called him. When he realized I wasn't saying anything else, he asked another question. "Why were you there?"

The why question was tricky. I didn't want to give away too much. But I didn't want to lie either. "I thought maybe the professor's office would hold some clue to where Mandy Jensen was located. With Josh working with him on the Santiago journal, I thought maybe there was a connection."

Again, I stopped talking, and he looked up from his writing. "That's it?"

I nodded. "We're all worried about Mandy. It's not like her to just disappear."

He waited again. "Okay, you're worried about Mandy and knew about the lost treasure. Why would that lead you to search Professor Wellborn's office?"

“Professor Wellborn was working with Josh on the Santiago treasure. He told me that himself when I saw him here in the library. I took his California history class a few years ago. If there is a lost treasure, as you called it, and if someone thought Josh knew where it was, taking Mandy might be a bargaining chip.” I thought that part had been obvious, but apparently, he wanted me to say it aloud.

He didn’t look up from his writing before asking, “Do you think there is a treasure?”

Now that was a good question. I knew that the California coast had been settled with the help of the church and Spain trying to hold on to their claim to the area. My own house had some “buried” treasure we’d found when I’d inherited it. “I’m not sure. It’s possible. Not likely after all these years, but possible.”

He nodded. “I agree. I think there’s a lot of people who just want to find the treasure so it’s an easy payday, but it’s been years since the treasure was hidden. The journal is an interesting development though.”

“Have you read it?” I wondered if this was why Josh thought it had disappeared. If the police had taken it in as evidence. “Well, before it was lost?”

“It’s not lost. Greg has it secured in South Cove. I came over yesterday morning and read through it. For Gabriel starting out life as a bank robber, he sure did a lot of charitable things for his community.” He relaxed, and I wondered if my breaking and entering had been forgiven. “But that’s another conversation, right?”

I shrugged. “In my experience, things are more tied together than you think.” I leaned forward. “Did Greg tell you I talked to Rachel, one of Wellborn’s teaching assistants? According to her, Professor Wellborn called three people to help him study the journal. I only knew about Tank until Saturday. But now, I’m wondering if the third person might be the person who kidnapped Mandy and killed the professor.”

“The third person no one knows about, but you and this girl.” Lorenzo looked at me. “You were one of Professor Wellborn’s students, too.”

“Yes, but as I said, I took one class from him. An elective I thought would be fun because it was about California. Man, I was wrong. Besides, I never worked for him. He has history graduate students. I have a job, so I didn’t go the graduate-assistant-fellowship way when I started my MBA. According to Rachel, the third person was a teaching assistant.” I thought the interview was about to end and not in a good way.

“That’s good to know. Good luck on your paper. Greg tells me this is your last class to complete your master’s.” To my surprise, Lorenzo stood, pushing the chair back under the table as he paused.

I glanced at the tote, where my laptop was still sitting. “If I ever get this paper done.”

“I’m sure you’ll find time. At least you might if you stop getting involved in my case.” He nodded. “Good day, Miss Gardner.”

He sounded like Greg. I watched him walk out of the area and through the stacks just like Professor Wellborn had done that day he’d stopped by to chat. The professor had been so excited. I frowned, thinking about that day. He’d been over the moon with Josh’s journal find, or had his excitement been because of the treasure? Or just the fact that an original document from that era had survived? Was he looking for the treasure or just clues on what history hadn’t told us yet? I think Rachel’s explanation about writing the new book was probably the right answer, but dead men tell no tales, as the pirates said.

Something about that day was bugging me, but I didn’t have time to think about it. Not now. I needed to focus on my paper. Talking to Greg last night had given me a new angle to focus on, and I’d sketched out an outline, using what I already knew. Now, I just needed to fill in the holes. Before Wednesday.

I was the little engine that could. Or at least I hoped I was. I pulled up the online directory and started looking for sources while I muttered, “I think I can, I think I can.”

Chapter 19

I had a productive day at the library, but when I glanced at my watch, it was already after five. I saved my document, gathered up my notes, and jammed them into my tote. Time to get home and take Emma for a run. And maybe throw in a load of laundry.

I could make it with clean clothes until after Wednesday, but doing laundry soothed me. And the routine chore gave me time to think about what my paper was missing. As did the drive home from Bakerstown. I didn't think I'd need to visit the library again, but I still had some time, if I needed to during my final edit.

That was the good thing about being at least a little early on the project. Okay, maybe I wasn't early. I had classmates who had already turned in their projects, but I hadn't been at the point where I was ready to write. I had still been researching. And thinking. And for me, that was my process. I didn't want to give that time away, but on the other hand, the paper had to be done by Friday.

As I drove, I thought about the paper, and my thoughts went to Josh and his return from the hospital. Lorenzo hadn't said that Josh was his primary suspect, but from Greg's comments, I thought I could read between the lines.

The problem was Josh, for all his grumpiness and odd behavior, wouldn't hurt a fly. He talked a good game, but when tattooed Kyle had come to work for him, he'd found it in his heart to support the kid, not just focus on his outside. Josh was a hard crust with a soft middle inside, kind of like those candies that had the baking soda fillings that exploded in your mouth. I wondered if they still made those. And there I

went, chasing a squirrel.

By the time Greg arrived home, I'd had a productive evening to match my day. Emma was happily recovering from her run in her kitchen bed with a chewy toy. A couple of chicken breasts were slow-cooking in salsa to shred later for tacos or burritos. I'd finished all the laundry, including folding and putting it away, and I was now back on my computer. I was editing the first part of my paper. Again.

"The kitchen smells like heaven. Don't tell me you cooked." Greg came up behind me and gave me a hug and a kiss on the neck.

"Let's say I started dinner. The chicken still needs to be shredded, but we can make tacos if you want to chop some veggies to go with it." I finished the page I was on, then made a note of it in my notebook so I would know where to start tomorrow. My eyes were already burning, and as I checked the clock, I knew why. It was almost nine. My stomach growled. "Did you already eat?"

"No, I've been driving for most of the day, looking at the list of potential holding sites for Mandy. I talked to Josh, and he had several he hadn't checked yet." Greg took out the tomatoes and lettuce from the fridge. "He's almost given up. I don't know if this is better than his frantic search at the beginning or not. He looks so sad."

I took the chicken out of the slow cooker and started shredding it. "Mandy was his world."

Greg leaned over and kissed my shoulder. "I understand what he's feeling. I would be a mess if anything happened to you."

"Back atcha." I put the shredded chicken back into the broth/salsa mix so it wouldn't dry out. I had turned off the slow cooker, but it would stay warm long enough for us to make our dinner.

“That’s almost sweet,” Greg teased. “How is the paper going?”

“Almost done. I can’t believe I’m here. When I started the MBA, I didn’t think I’d ever complete it. Now, I just have to cross this finish line, and I’ll be done. Totally.” I felt pride over my achievement, even if it was coming at a bad time for Josh and Mandy. “Oh, Lorenzo came to visit me at the library. He thinks I’m an idiot.”

“Actually, he didn’t think that at all. He called me after the two of you talked and told me to reinforce the message of you staying out of his investigation. He seemed convinced about your argument that Professor Wellborn might have been killed by one of his special teaching assistant study group members.” Greg got out the tortilla shells and the cheese. “Or at least, it’s a new lead that doesn’t put Josh as the killer.”

“My theory was that Mandy was kidnapped by one of them. But I guess it works for the professor’s murder too. I bet Josh wishes he’d never found that book.” I moved my laptop and notebook off the table. “Oh, I forgot. Josh was going to take the boat out to see if he could find a cave today. Well, he and Tank were going. I suppose that outing got canceled?”

Greg chuckled. “Yeah, Tank and Josh aren’t on the best of terms right now. But I think Josh is looking at a different set of caves. He said he was going to call the park system and see if he could get a special pass, since the cave is closed right now. I don’t think Josh’s curiosity is going to be enough, since the bats are breeding right now. Or birthing, I can’t remember which.”

“Well, if the treasure was hidden in a closed cave, that might be why it hasn’t been found over the years.” I shuddered. “Bat caves are gross.”

He paused as he handed me a plate. “You’re saying you don’t like caving? I might have to change our plans for Wednesday night.”

“You’re not seriously thinking of taking me to a cave.” I took the plate and made two soft tacos. “Not in the evening. What if we don’t get out before it gets dark?”

“We’ll be fine.” Greg filled his plate with four tacos. “You stress too much.”

“Greg,” I started, but he shook his head.

“We’re not talking about Wednesday’s outing. So stop trying to change my mind.” He sat at the table and took a sip from his water. “What else can we talk about? Have you talked to your aunt lately about her plans?”

“No, but I asked her to meet me for lunch on Thursday to talk. I haven’t even read her proposal, but I’m sure it’s reasonable. I want to be mad at her for leaving, but I get it. Life’s short.” I took a bite of my taco, then set it on my plate. “She deserves to be happy, but I’m going to miss her. A lot.”

“You’ll see her. She’s not moving out of town,” Greg reminded me.

I shrugged as I took another bite. I was hungry, but this conversation was making me less and less so. “I won’t have anyone to bounce shop things off of.”

“Maybe you should think of making someone an assistant manager.” Greg polished off another taco. “I liked having the freedom of taking a few days without you worrying or closing the shop.”

“Actually, Deek brought up that idea.” I sipped my water. Now my appetite had totally disappeared. If I didn’t eat more, I’d break into the ice cream carton as soon as dinner was over. “But right now, it’s a problem. Toby has a real job. Deek wants to be an author. Evie’s still going to school. And Judith and Tilly are too new.”

Greg pointed to my plate, and I picked up my taco again and took a bite. “If I were

you, I'd talk to Deek and Evie together. See what they say. Maybe they could share the 'assistant' manager position. Or maybe you're right and one of them doesn't want it now."

"I do need to talk to them. Although Deek wasn't too excited about picking up more responsibility." I took a second bite as I thought about changing the staff structure. "I mentioned the fact that I would be hiring another part-time person and upping everyone's hours to Deek and maybe Toby, I forget. I'll talk to Aunt Jackie Thursday and schedule a staff meeting for next Monday. They can help me fill the holes."

"I bet they can." Greg smiled and stood. He put his plate into the sink and reached for mine.

I was about to tell him I wasn't done, when I looked down and saw my plate was empty. He'd distracted me enough for my automatic feeding process to click in. I would never starve. My body took care of itself, even when my mind had to be entertained. "Thanks for helping me talk this through. Maybe you can be my replacement Aunt Jackie."

"I don't think I have it in me. Besides, you need to talk to your staff. They'll keep you in line." He rinsed plates and put everything in the dishwasher. As he was doing that, I put away the leftovers. I'd have enough for lunch this week for at least one day, if not several.

As we finished up, our conversation turned to what to do for the rest of the evening. Greg wanted to go out and watch the stars. I suggested we try to finish a television series we'd been watching. The night was turning chilly, and I didn't want to freeze as we sat there.

"You'd never make it living in Alaska." Greg dried his hands on a bright blue kitchen towel that proclaimed South Cove as the Number 1 Tourist Trap on the Pacific Coast

Highway. I was proud of the marketing that Darla had started up last year.

I took the towel and wiped my own hands, then hung it on the stove. We walked arm in arm into the living room. “I never said I wanted to move there, either.”

* * * *

Tuesday morning, Josh was sitting outside my shop when I arrived to open it for the day. He stood as I came up, and I was relieved to see that he’d not only changed clothes that morning, but he also appeared to have recently showered and shaved. Maybe he was on the mend from his grief, even though if Mandy was gone, he had a long path to being totally well. If he ever got over her. “Josh, good morning. I meant to stop by, but I have my last paper due tomorrow, so I’m a little slammed with school stuff.”

His eyes looked a tiny bit glazed, and I wondered what, if any, drugs his doctors had put him on to repair his emotional state. “It’s fine. I don’t expect you to drop everything to come see me. Especially since you were there when I went off on Tank. He said the two of you were friends. Are you still?”

“Friends is kind of a broad word. We had a class together, years ago. I consider you a much closer friend than I am with Tank. Why do you ask?” I unlocked the door and turned on the light. Then I headed to the coffee bar. “A large black?”

“That will work.” Josh followed me inside. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just wondering who I can trust. I thought since Mandy and Tank had been friends that I could trust him as well.”

I looked up as I poured his coffee. “But now you don’t think that’s true?”

He shrugged as I handed him his travel mug. “I don’t know. He’s lying to me. I

caught him in several lies already. What if he's lying about not knowing where Mandy is?"

"He could be. I barely know him, and he doesn't have many family members and friends in the area." Honestly, I was doubting what I knew about Tank at this point as well. "Hey, did Professor Wellborn tell you who he was bringing in to help with the research on the journal?"

Josh nodded. "He talked about Tank a lot. And his last teaching assistant, Rachel. I guess he really trusted her. And one more guy, but I can't remember his name. I didn't really pay attention. I had the wedding planning and Mandy. The journal just seemed like a good distraction."

I started another pot of coffee as we talked. Then I poured a cup for me and sat next to Josh on a stool. "Greg said you were trying to research a new cave."

"It's closed due to bat babies. I guess they're endangered and people going inside the cave upsets them." He sighed and pushed his cup around the table with one finger. "I don't know what else to do to find Mandy."

I set my cup on the counter. "Josh, how did Mandy's family feel about the wedding?"

He snorted. "Her uncle hated me. Said I was too old for her. There's ten years between us."

"I thought you were older than me." I frowned, trying to do the math. Josh had dated my aunt for a while. At least he thought they were dating. I think my aunt was just passing time until she met my now uncle, Harrold.

"I'm five years older than you are. That's one of the reasons your aunt told me there could never be anything between us. I really thought if I just kept trying, but then she

broke it off and started dating Harrold. He's a good guy, and she deserves him. I was never going to be the one for her. I have to admit that when Mandy started hanging around, I thought she was playing me. I was way too old for her." He smiled as he remembered their beginnings.

"But ten years isn't that much of a difference." Greg was at least five years older than me, but it really didn't matter. We liked the same things.

"I thought she was younger than she was when we first met. Finally, she told me I was being stupid and acting like I was an old fart." He laughed when he said it. "She was right, as usual. Why?"

I thought about my visit to the farm. Was there something Mandy's uncle was hiding? I'd already told Greg about my suspicions. Maybe I should go to the farm again. Just to make sure. "I was just wondering."

My regular commuters started coming in, and while I was helping them, Josh left. He'd tucked a five under his cup and left when I was in the back, getting out more cookies for a customer.

Judith had the next shift, so when she arrived, I was ready to get home and get working on my paper. After Emma's run, of course. Sometimes my dog's needs fell ahead of my own, and this was one of those days. Besides, I'd think better if I worked out before I sat down again.

Judith had colored half her hair bright purple, and the other half was left her natural gray. She looked like she was the fun aunt or grandmother. Bookselling was her second career, and she loved having time off to explore the world.

As she came in, the shop was quiet. So as we cleared up the items on the close-of-shift and open-of-shift worksheets, I asked her about what she wanted out of the job.

Fear came into her eyes. “Please don’t tell me you’re cutting hours. I’m halfway to saving for a two-week biking trip in Europe next summer.”

“Actually, just the opposite. Do you want more hours? Maybe go to full-time with a liberal time-off policy?” I was making it up as I talked, but hey, I was the boss now.

“Interesting. We’re going into the busy season anyway, and I was expecting to work mostly full-time until fall. But you’re talking a full-time position forever?” She set the last piece of cheesecake on a plate and then put the tray on the counter to be washed before putting it with the others for Sadie to pick up at her next delivery.

“Or as long as you want it. I know you like to travel, so if you need more time off than I can give you paid, we can work something out.” I paused, then told her about my aunt’s retirement. “I need to do some restructuring and would rather make sure my current employees have what they need before hiring someone else.”

She blinked and then leaned on the counter. “You realize how different that is than when I worked at a corporate job. They hated any request that wasn’t their normal nine-to-five. Even if I agreed to take leave without pay.”

“I’m not very corporate. Although, if I get this paper done, I’ll be one of those MBA types that you used to work for.” I glanced at the clock. I needed to get home.

“Jill, you’ll never be like those suits I used to work for. You care too much.” She waved me off. “Get out of here. Let me look at my calendar and see what’s going on, but as of right now, I’d love to go full-time.”

“We’ll have a staff meeting next week, so just have your plan together by then.” I grabbed my tote and checked to make sure I had my laptop and notebook. Driving back here to get it would cost me time I didn’t have.

As I walked home, I was thinking about the shop and changing up shifts. I paused as I got to Diamond Lille's, taking in the smell of hand-cut French fries rolling out of the building. I turned and noticed that Steve's Scuba Shop was still closed. The notes were still taped on his door. I grabbed my phone, but instead of calling Greg, I dialed Amy's number.

"South Cove Township, Mayor Baylor's office. This is Amy. Can I help you?" Amy's rote delivery of her opening lines seemed especially long today.

"Amy, this is Jill. I was wondering..."

Amy cut me off. "Sorry, I can't do lunch today. Justin's getting freaked out about how many days a week we eat out. And we have reservations for that new steak house Friday night, so I don't want to jeopardize it. Jill, he's making spreadsheets on how we're spending our money. It's driving me crazy."

"I'm not asking you to lunch. Do you have a contact person for Steve at the scuba shop? Maybe his girlfriend, Hope?" I held my breath. Maybe he was visiting family and hadn't put up a sign. That way, Amy could just laugh at me, and we'd be done. "His store has been closed since Friday, and I'm beginning to worry."

"Hold on, let me check." She paused for a minute. "I just looked up the list of vacationers from Greg's database. He makes a list of all the residents who are on vacation so he can watch out for their homes and buildings. And there's nothing here about Steve being out of town."

"Do you have a contact number?" I heard papers rustling and voices as I waited.

"Let me dig into this, and I'll call you back." Amy hung up on me. Mayor Baylor or his wife must be causing problems in Amy's office. I tucked the phone away and hurried home.

Was Mandy not the only missing person in South Cove?

Chapter 20

Amy still hadn't called back when Emma was ready to run, so we headed down to the beach. A truck was parked at the farm stand loaded with fresh fruits and vegetables to restock. I crossed the road and tried to find the person in charge. It was Heidi, Mandy's cousin. She smiled as I walked up. "You're the bookshop lady."

"Yes, I'm Jill. Good memory. Are you reopening the stand?" I glanced around at the shelves that were beginning to fill with strawberries, blueberries, and other fruits and vegetables.

"We are. Dad thinks it's time. He won't tell me, but I'm guessing he's heard from Mandy. He said I'd have to man the stand for a few days, then he'd have someone to replace me." She pushed aside the few strands of blond hair that had escaped her tight ponytail.

"That's wonderful news." I wasn't sure how to ask this or if the woman even knew. "So why do you think he's heard from Mandy?"

She looked up from unboxing strawberries. "It makes sense, right? Why would he reopen this stand if she's not coming home? Having a place in South Cove was always Mandy's dream. I hate driving this far just to do the exact same job I could do steps from my house."

"Oh, well, that does make sense." I still didn't have Heidi's optimism of this being a sign that Mandy was coming home, but who was I to burst her bubble? "I'm glad the stand's reopening. I've missed having fresh fruits just steps from the house."

“See!” She grinned as she picked up another box. “You get it. Location is everything.”

Emma whined from where she sat next to my leg, reminding me of our true mission. Get over to the beach so she could run.

“Sorry, I’m being called into action.” When Heidi frowned, I clarified, “Emma wants to go running. See you later.”

“I’ll tell Mandy you stopped by.” She turned and directed a young man with another box in his hands.

I headed to the beach and wondered if it could be that easy. Mandy had left on an unannounced trip and would be back in a few days? As we got down the stairs and surveyed the empty beach, I rubbed Emma’s head. “We’ll just think good thoughts for our friend Mandy, okay?”

Emma barked a response and pulled on the leash. She wanted action, not thinking. I agreed with her. At least about the run. My mind would clear, and my body would thank me, after we were done. All I had to do was take the first step. Nature would do the rest of the work.

When I got home, I called Greg and, after getting his answering machine, told him about my strange conversation. I had just put down the phone when Amy called. “Hey, what did you find out?”

“Well, after I explained why we might be worried about Steve, his sister, who is his emergency contact person, just laughed. According to her, he’s a flake. He’s always disappearing for the next big wave.” Amy paused. “She doesn’t like Hope either. Then she said she doesn’t know how his business is still going. I guess he’s got a lot of bills that he’s struggling with.”

“Huh.” I was beginning to wonder exactly how reliable anything was that Steve had told me. He had the picture of Mandy and Tank. I wish I could ask Mandy about her side of the breakup. “Well, thanks for checking on him. I guess I won’t worry about it. I mean, if his sister thinks he’s all right, I guess I should back off. But something just feels weird.”

Amy’s voice dropped. “The mayor just walked in. I’ve got to go. Good luck with planning your South Cove adventure.”

I laughed as I hung up. The last sentence hadn’t been aimed at me. Instead, it had been for the mayor’s benefit. He thought his secretary taking any personal phone calls was bad for the town. Except he didn’t put the same rule on his own phone usage. Mostly, I think he just wanted to be the center of attention wherever he was.

I put my phone aside and opened my laptop. The paper had to be done today or tomorrow. Today would be best, since Greg was taking me on that secret adventure tomorrow night. I’d hate to cancel a wedding planning date. It seemed to send the wrong message.

Emma barked and then went to curl up on her kitchen bed. Even she agreed that the paper needed to be finished. I stared at the document on my screen. I only hoped it was good enough to finish my MBA. Otherwise, I’d be retaking the class again next semester.

I needed to believe. I took a deep breath and dived into the editing process.

* * * *

Wednesday morning, I hit Send on the email to my professor that had my paper attached. If it was accepted, I’d complete the program. If not, well, I’d cross that bridge if it happened. I wasn’t going to worry. Not about that.

I ate a bowl of strawberries covered with whipped cream for my breakfast. Greg had come and gone already. He'd cooked omelets last night when he got home and saw I was still working. The man had a sixth sense for when I needed to be fed. Or maybe he'd just been hungry too. I think I'd thanked him, or at least grunted to acknowledge his presence. I'd been in a writing zone, so I wasn't sure. I was just sure the paper was done. I thought it was good.

I cleaned out my tote and took out any papers that I'd scribbled notes or thoughts about the paper on. I found the book Professor Wellborn had misfiled in the library and his notes. And the one I'd taken from his office. I kept that in my tote. I should have time to read on my shift today. Or at least scan the information. I didn't read a lot of memoir or nonfiction books. At least not books that hadn't been assigned in a class.

I filled my travel cup with coffee, said goodbye to Emma, and headed to work. I needed to call my aunt and set up lunch tomorrow. My life was going to change, one way or the other, so I might as well be on top of it. I'd posted a notice on the employee board that we were having a full staff meeting on Monday. I wasn't going into this new situation alone. I had friends.

When I got to the shop, Josh was sitting outside waiting. He still looked rested, but I could feel the edginess flowing off him in waves. Mandy had been gone too long for it to be anything but bad news. Yet her family thought she'd be home any day. Something was off with that.

"Good morning, Miss Gardner." Josh closed his book and stood. "I wanted to show you this. It's another journal that appears to be from Santiago. I hadn't gone through all the boxes from the estate sale yet. This one seems to be written after the first. He's older, and he's talking about the process of building what's now known as South Cove."

“That’s amazing.” I unlocked the front door and turned on the lights. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Please. I was up late after I found this. I wish I had Professor Wellborn to talk to or to show this book to. Not everyone’s interested in the history of the area. They all just want to tear down and rebuild, focusing on a more modern lifestyle.” He sat on one of my stools. “Maybe that’s my calling. I should write a book about the history of this area. Maybe through the development of furniture and home décor?”

“That sounds like a great idea.” I wanted Josh to focus on anything but Mandy. And he did have an extensive collection of local antique furniture. As far as him selling the book, he’d need to chat with Deek to help him start that process. I might not be the best advisor or customer for that type of book. I poured his coffee and focused on my opening tasks.

Josh kept talking. “Did you know that Santiago started an orphanage for local kids whose parents had died? It was the first one in the area. Before that, kids were just on their own on the streets.”

Now that was something I didn’t know. “Is that true? Where was the orphanage?”

“I’m not sure yet, but if you’re interested, I’ll let you know after I finish reading this book. He spent a lot of money on supporting the orphans.” Josh glanced at his watch. “I’ve got to go and look at another estate that’s going to auction this weekend.”

“Have fun.” I regretted the words as soon as they came out of my mouth.

He gave me a five as his sad eyes met my gaze. Then he turned toward the door. “Nothing’s fun right now.”

I wondered if I should mention the reopening of the farm stand, but then put the

information away. If Josh was leaving town, he'd see it, and he could make his own inferences. I didn't want to give him false hope when it looked like he was trying to jumpstart his life.

Before I could change my mind, a commuter came into the shop and started talking about the sequel to a book she'd just finished. I helped her find the next one in the series, and by the time I was done, Josh was long gone and a line of commuters getting their Friday reward coffees were in the shop chatting about books and their weekend plans.

As much as I liked my tourist crowds, I loved my locals who came into the shop to support me and the local South Cove businesses. They knew that keeping local businesses healthy meant more jobs as well as a thriving community. Things I'd stressed in the paper that was now in my professor's hands.

I might have come at it with an ultra-positive view of businesses and their role in the community, but I'd had good luck with my own experiences, so why not focus on the good and not the bad.

As I served the coffee-seeking horde, I sent a prayer of hope to both Josh and Mandy. We had to be ready for whatever came our way.

The tourist traffic didn't hit that morning. I didn't know if the buses weren't scheduled for a South Cove stop or if the bed-and-breakfast crowds were still getting settled for their upcoming weeks. They'd arrive, I was sure of it, but since the shop was slow, I called my aunt and made plans for lunch tomorrow. "Diamond Lille's at one?"

"Are we talking about the plan I proposed?" My aunt got straight to the point, as usual.

I tried to keep the sigh from being heard. “Yes, we need to talk about implementation. And I have a staff meeting on Monday I need you at to say your goodbyes.”

“You’re really ready?” I thought I heard surprise in her voice.

“Not in the least. But if this is what you want, I’ll honor your wishes. And if you decide to come back, you know you’re always welcome.” I wrote the meeting down in my planner with an emoji of a broken heart.

Losing my aunt at the shop meant losing her yin to my yang. She always brought me back to earth when I was overcommitting, or overplanning. She was my voice of reason. As I started to drown in those regrets, she spoke.

“You’re ready for this. Don’t ever doubt it. I was just here to help out, remember?” My aunt wasn’t known for her pep talks.

I started laughing. “I invited you for a week. And now, you’ve been here for years.”

“You and the store were my lifeline when I needed it. Thank you.” She paused for a minute after her voice cracked.

“You’re not crying, are you?”

She responded quickly. “No, I have allergies. I need to go. I’ll see you tomorrow and bring the plan and contract. I want to go over it line by line so you understand what you’re saying yes to.”

Then she hung up.

Smiling, I pulled out the professor’s book and set the papers aside. I started reading the section he’d flagged with stickies. It was about Gabriel Santiago and the

orphanage I'd just learned about from Josh. This second journal may actually be from Santiago. I needed to show this to Josh. That journal and the one Greg had in evidence might be worth something. Or at least a part of California history that needed to be preserved.

I went back to thinking about the first journal. Had Josh forgotten that Greg had taken it for evidence, or had Greg snuck it out of Josh's war room? I didn't want to imagine the second one, and Josh had been a little out of it a few days ago. Would he have even remembered if Greg had told him he was taking the journal? Probably not.

As I read, I got lost in the world of missions and what I always thought of as the Old West. Here, the children played in the ocean rather than the Rio Grande. But the images that Santiago used felt real and made me want to keep reading.

When I finished the section on Santiago, I shut the book.

"That book must be great," Deek said from the chair across from me. I hadn't heard him come in. I wondered if I'd missed a customer or two. "I've been here for more than ten minutes, and you haven't looked up once."

"It's really good. I want to read the entire book. The author makes the past feel like a story rather than just the facts. I don't think I've enjoyed history so much, ever." I picked up the papers that the professor had tucked inside the book. "I hope I didn't ignore a customer."

"We have the bell on the counter for a reason." He smiled as he watched me gather my things. "What's all the paper?"

"I'm not sure. Notes maybe? This was Professor Wellborn's book." I handed the book and papers to Deek. "I guess I'll head home. Greg's taking me somewhere tonight, so I need to get Emma's run in as well as a shower. I finished my paper and

turned it in this morning.”

Deek hadn't said anything. I turned back and saw he was reading the notes from the professor.

“What? Does it have something there?” I stepped over so I could read over his shoulder. The loose papers were a research plan for a grant to study Gabriel Santiago and the missing treasure. The book project. He'd started his opening paragraph and had listed off the assistants for the project as well as an annual salary for them. Listed were Tank Harding, Rachel Jones, and Steve Brother. I went on to read the biographies he'd started for each. Tank's credentials I knew. But Rachel and Steve had shorter bios. “This is Scuba Steve?”

Steve had been the third teaching assistant that Professor Wellborn had recruited for his research. And now the professor was dead and Steve was missing.

“Unless there's another Steve Brother in the area, which is doubtful.” Deek started to gather the papers. “I should have known he was into California history. He's always talking about the area and the Spanish influence.”

I took back the papers and books and grabbed my tote. I knew this was important, and I'd had it all along, just sitting in my tote. “I've got to get these to Greg.”

“I'll hold down the fort,” he said as I was heading out the door.

I waved back at him. Thank goodness for Deek. And all my staff. They kept the lights on while I ran around chasing mysterious dust bunnies. I just hoped this didn't mean Steve had also kidnapped Mandy to get Josh to hand over the book. But if Steve was involved, he would have sent a ransom note.

My head was filled with bad images and what-ifs by the time I got to the station. I

glanced in Greg's office, but he wasn't sitting at his desk.

"You just missed him. He's off to find a garden gnome. I don't know why she keeps putting it out front when she knows the college frat boys are going to steal it as part of their initiation," Esmeralda said from her desk.

"Old habits die hard." I held up the book and papers. "He needs to see this. Does anyone go into his office? Can I just leave this on his desk?"

Esmeralda stood and walked over to me. "Sometimes it's a zoo in here. Let's put it into his filing cabinet."

I watched as she opened the third drawer and put the book and papers on the bottom of it. Then she arranged files over them.

"That should do it. He'll be back soon. Do you want me to have him call you?" Esmeralda asked as we walked back into the main lobby.

I nodded. "Please. I'm going home and then running with Emma. But if he doesn't reach me before I take her, have him leave a message. I'll call him back as soon as I get to the house."

"You think this is important to the case?" She was watching me closely.

I turned and headed back to the entrance. "I think at least it's a missing piece."

As I walked home, I passed by the still-closed scuba shop. I thought about Steve and what he'd told us. That Mandy and Tank were soulmates. He'd known that Josh had found the journal, yet he hadn't said anything about the professor asking him to help research it.

Had the professor not asked him yet? Maybe Steve was just a possible assistant. I could be putting all kinds of actions on him that he didn't deserve.

But then again, where was he?

Chapter 21

Greg didn't call while I was walking home or when I ran with Emma. As I got out of the shower, I checked my phone again. The Garden Gnome Caper must be keeping him busy this afternoon. I debated calling him, but he'd promised to be home by four anyway, so I just went downstairs and pulled up my aunt's plan for her retirement.

As I went through it step by step, I made notes about things I wanted to question or to add to. She'd talked about a transition period, but I wanted more. I wanted a clause saying I could ask for advice beyond this period. I'd be happy to pay her for it, but if things went sideways, I wanted at least the option of running the problem and my solution by her.

Emma jumped up off the couch where I was working and went and sat at the doorway. A few minutes later, I heard Greg's truck pull in the driveway. Emma must have heard it coming on the road.

I made a note where I left off and set the laptop and notebook on the table, where I could finish it either tonight when we got back or in the morning. I was killing this get-stuff-off-my-list thing. After tomorrow, I'd have to refocus on the wedding though.

I met him at the door. "You didn't call me."

"I've been busy." He kissed me. "Let me get changed, and we can talk while we drive."

“Where are we going?” I glanced at my capris and sleeveless shirt. “Do I need to change?”

He looked me over. “No, you’re good. I found the perfect place to walk Emma. Put on your hiking shoes, and you’ll be fine. Oh, and bring some water, Emma’s bag, and your phone.”

“Emma’s going with us?” I was totally confused. I’d assumed we were visiting a wedding venue he’d found. Now it sounded like we were hiking.

“She’s part of the family,” he said from the office, where he was locking his service pistol in its case. Then he ran up the stairs before I could ask him any more questions. When he came back down, he had on jeans and a T-shirt from our trip to Solvang. He grabbed Emma’s bag and took the leash off the hook. “Are you ready?”

“I guess. I put two water bottles into her bag. Do we need more?”

He hefted it over his shoulder. “No, two is heavy enough. Emma, want to go for a ride?”

I followed my guy and my dog as they hurried out to get into his truck. Emma stuck her head out the window in the back seat, watching me. Her doggy grin was infectious.

“I’m coming,” I said as I locked the door and shut the gate behind me. I climbed into the truck.

As we headed down Pacific Highway, he turned to me. “So where did you get those books and the notes? From the professor’s office?”

“Yes and no. I was in the library researching for my paper. I found the book misfiled

in the library stacks. He must have grabbed the wrong one when he put it on the shelf. I think it happened the last day I saw him in the library. He walked out to the elevator through that area between the two shelves.” I paused, then admitted, “The second book was in his office library. I took it the day Esmeralda and I went to Bakerstown.”

“Do you think he meant for you to find it? Or do you think he was hiding it from someone?”

Greg’s questions surprised me. “I don’t know who he’d be hiding it from.”

The silence in the cab almost echoed my words. I turned to him.

“You think there’s something there that either points to the treasure or the killer.”

He nodded. “I’m not sure yet which one it is, but I think it’s a clue. And we’ve needed a new one for a while.”

I didn’t disagree. “I think it’s interesting that Steve was one of the professor’s teaching assistants. And that he asked him to be part of the research grant.”

“I do as well. And I wasn’t able to reach Steve. His sister said Amy called her yesterday about her brother’s whereabouts. Now with two calls, she’s worried he’s lost.” Greg didn’t turn to look at me.

“Don’t even. I told you what I found out.” I knew he thought I’d overstepped in the case. “Besides, Steve might have been in danger.”

“I’m not doubting that or you.” He pulled off on an exit and then yielded for a car as he got to the crossing. “We’ve talked about this. You’re always finding the right clue at the wrong time. What if someone had found out you had this book? You should have turned it over as soon as you found it.”

“I was a little busy.” I didn’t want to admit I’d forgotten I’d even found the book until last night. “So where are we going?”

“To take Emma for a hike. I thought that was obvious.” He pulled into the parking lot of the La Purisima Mission. He got out and paid for a parking pass and then parked the truck by the exit. Climbing out, he turned to me. “I’m locking the truck but tuck your purse down under the seat just in case. And don’t forget your phone.”

I followed his directions, then turned to see the visitor center on the right of the parking lot. “I didn’t realize they had walking trails here. I came in fourth grade on a school trip, but I don’t think that building was here.”

“They’ve done some renovations.” He walked up and stood by me as we surveyed our surroundings.

The area was huge. “I guess we start there?”

He pulled a map out of his pocket and pointed down a dirt path. “Let’s go this way.”

I took a flyer from a display near the path. “This says there are twenty-five acres of hiking trails. We should come here more often.”

“That’s the plan.” He smiled but didn’t say anything more.

Greg had to be tired from the investigation. Maybe this was just his way of getting us away from the daily grind and out into nature. We walked by two longhorn cows or bulls; I wasn’t sure which. We also walked by pens filled with horses and a few sheep that desperately needed sheered. I could feel my stress level dropping as we walked by a small stream, the sound of the water splashing on the rocks. “I wonder what the visitor center is like. Emma probably can’t go in there.”

“I think you’re right.” He pointed to a left turn where the path branched. “Let’s go that way.”

I fell into step beside him, letting the beauty and quiet of the place seep into my pores. It felt good to be outside and just walking. We stopped in front of a large fountain by a cistern. Several rows of white chairs were set in front of a stone altar with flowers growing up the arch behind it.

Someone had just had or was having a wedding here. I took in the area from all vantage points. It was spectacular. Finally, I understood why he’d brought us here. “You want to have the wedding here.”

“It’s a mission. Not fancy with stained glass like the other one, but we’re not allowed to have the wedding there, just the reception. We can have both here; I already checked. It’s close to South Cove, and our friends would love it.” He pulled me into his arms. “And the best news, it’s available for the second weekend in October. What do you think?”

I kissed him. “I think you should be in charge of all the wedding decisions. This is perfect, and I didn’t even think about it.”

“I know it’s not upscale, but you were talking about doing the ceremony on the beach. This way, we don’t have to travel in between the reception and the wedding.” He was watching my face to see if I really liked it or if I was just caving.

“I love it. I loved the idea of the other mission, not because of how fancy it was but for its history. This place checks off all the boxes. Although if it rains, we’ll be back to Bill’s church and the South Cove Community Center. But for now, I can get my invitations out next week. Although I am going to have to call Martha back. The date’s really available?” I could imagine us standing under the stone archway, pledging our lives to each other. Emma sat at my feet and wagged her tail. She liked

the site as well.

“That’s a relief. Yes, I had them put a hold on it for us. I was wondering if I was totally off base with this spot or not. Tim told me that he and his wife looked at it, but she thought it was too rustic for their wedding.” His phone buzzed. “And there goes our evening.”

“Go ahead, answer it.” I wandered around the area as he talked, taking pictures of the different viewpoints with my phone. The mission was nestled in the foothills a few miles away from the coast. The parking lot had seemed adequate. The trails to the area were dirt but well worn. I’d seen a golf cart near the visitor center, if we had anyone who couldn’t walk to the ceremony area. My breathing eased as I sat down in one of the white chairs to wait for Greg to finish his call.

This was perfect. We were actually getting married. Emma nudged my hand, and I reached over to pet her. “You can come to the ceremony here. That’s a bonus, isn’t it? Do you want to be the ring bearer or the flower girl?”

She barked, which made me laugh, but then I realized Greg was coming up to meet us, having finished his conversation. He was grinning.

“Now don’t be all ‘I saved the wedding’ just because you found us a new site. If your mom hadn’t insisted on a fall wedding, George would have gotten us into the first mission site without Martha finding out.” I patted the chair next to me.

Instead of sitting, he reached for my hand and pulled me up. “We need to go. I’m not sure what you were talking about just now, but you’re the wedding queen, not me. I just helped.”

I stood and followed as he hurried us back to the parking lot, where we got into his truck. Emma grinned and stuck her head out the window as we pulled back onto the

road to head north to South Cove.

As we drove, I sent Amy pictures of the mission. She responded with several hearts. I put my phone away and settled in for the drive. “Amy thinks it will be perfect.”

“I’m so glad Amy’s on board.” Greg grinned as he turned onto the freeway. He rolled Emma’s window up a little in the back seat while she sat and watched out the window for bunnies or other wildlife as we drove.

Greg looked over at me. “You’re not even going to ask?”

Now I was confused. “Ask what?”

“Why we had to leave the mission so quickly?” He passed a slower car, then got back into the right lane. “I’ll call them tomorrow and make the payment for the site if you’re still on board in the morning.”

“I will be.” I turned toward him. “I just got a lecture on the way out here about staying out of what’s going on at the station. But now you want me to ask? You’re making my head spin.”

“Fine, don’t ask. But I think you should come with me after we drop off Emma at the house.” He didn’t look at me.

“Why would you want me to come to the station?” My mind flew through the possibilities. Then my heart sank. There was only one reason Greg would need my presence at the station. “You want me there as a Josh whisperer. Is Mandy...”

He didn’t let me finish the question. “No. She’s fine. Actually, she’s at the station. And yes, I want you there for support for Josh. This might be a little overwhelming for him.”

“Where has she been for over two weeks?”

Josh was going to be livid if she’s been off on a cruise or something.

“Her family had her stashed in a remote cabin in northern Idaho.” Greg looked over at me. “They were trying to deprogram her from marrying Josh.”

“Wait, what?” Now I sat up and stared at him. “They thought Josh was in a cult or something?”

“Well, I guess they didn’t believe that Mandy truly loved him. So when the wedding announcement came, they asked Tank to come and try to talk her out of it. He’s been in on her disappearance the entire time. I want to press charges, but Mandy’s trying to calm things down. I guess having your uncle in jail makes it hard for him to walk you down the aisle.”

“Why did they let her go?” This was too crazy. They should make a Lifetime movie out of the situation.

“She finally convinced them that she wasn’t under any spell or compulsion. That she loved Josh for the man he is, and if they couldn’t accept that, she was going to walk away from the family. And she had two tubs of huckleberries she’d picked that she wanted to sell at the farm stand.”

We turned onto the road that would take us to South Cove and then parked in our driveway. Greg grabbed the keys to unlock the house. “I’ll be right back.”

I watched as he let Emma out the back door of the truck and opened the house door for her. He hadn’t put her on a leash, so when he shut the front door again, I knew she’d probably go find water and take a nap. It was her go-to activity after a long walk and a car ride. I wish I could nap as much as my dog did.

As we made our way into town, I felt my anxiety rising. I was happy that Mandy was back, but not sure how Josh was going to take the news that his soon-to-be in-laws had made his life miserable for the last few weeks.

“So Mandy’s disappearance wasn’t about the journal or Professor Wellborn’s death at all.” I had been trying to put the two cases together. But maybe there wasn’t a tie-in, except for Josh and Tank. They had both been involved in both investigations. Josh had been the victim in both. Had Tank been the villain? Or was he just a concerned friend? “I told you that something was going on with her family. They were reopening the farm stand again.”

“Which is why I went out to talk to the uncle yesterday, after we found the cabin. Thanks for letting us know about his recent trip to Idaho. It was hard enough for Esmeralda to do a title search through two states. If we hadn’t known to pinpoint it, the search would have taken longer.” He pulled the truck into the parking lot for the station. “I’m sorry about tonight. I didn’t think Mandy would arrive before tomorrow morning. But I guess they flew her and her cousin home.”

“And the professor’s death?” I had liked Mandy’s uncle. I hoped he wasn’t a killer as well as a kidnapper.

“On the surface, it doesn’t look like the two cases are connected. I’m not sure what your friend Tank’s role is in both cases, so we’re going to have a little talk. Do you mind walking home after we get Mandy and Josh settled?” He glanced over at me. “I could ask Toby to drive you if you want.”

“I can walk. As long as it’s not too dark.” I climbed out of the truck. “I’m not fond of coyotes.”

When Greg opened the door to the station, the lobby was filled with people. Toby came over to greet us. “I’ve got Mandy in your office. Josh is in the conference room,

pacing. Tank's in one interview room, and Mr. Jensen, Mandy's uncle, is in the other. And the cousin, Eric, is in the jail cell. We ran out of interview rooms."

Greg looked around the lobby. "And these people?"

"Mandy's relatives. They're all upset about what happened to her, and some want to punch Eric a few times to wake him up. At least that's what they keep saying." Toby took my arm. "You're going in with Josh. You need to calm him down before he has a stroke or heart attack."

Greg walked with us and gave me a kiss at the door. "Tell Josh I'll get Mandy in here as soon as I take her statement."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to hold him off that long." I took a breath and went into the conference room. I heard the door lock behind me. Josh was at the other side of the table, his back to me. A box of cookies and a carafe of coffee sat on the table. The box was unopened, and I didn't see any used coffee cups. "Do you want some coffee? Greg says it's going to be a bit before Mandy will join us."

"Miss Gardner." His voice broke as he turned, and I noticed tears flowing down his face. He came over and sat down at the table.

I handed him the cup I'd just filled and then filled my own. Then I handed him a napkin. "She's back. She didn't leave you. Everything's going to be okay."

Now he sobbed into the paper napkin I'd given him. Finally, he came up for a breath. I gave him more napkins, and he wiped his face, stood, and threw the wad of wet paper away. He took a long breath, drank most of the coffee, then focused on me. "Thank you for being here. I know you're here to 'calm me down,' since I can get a little wound up, but I appreciate it. I know we're not friends, but you need to know how much having you here means."

“Josh, you were just worried about Mandy. That would make anyone a little crazy.” I smiled and patted his arm. “Besides, we are friends.”

“Thank you for that. I consider you a friend as well. And well, when you’re like me, a little crazy is terrifying to others. I can be a bit obsessive.” He smiled as he saw the reaction on my face. “Yes, I am acutely aware of how I appear to others. I’m afraid it’s who I am. The good thing is Mandy still loves me for all my faults.”

“Well, it’s a wonderful thing she’s back from her trip then.” I opened the box. “Do you want a cookie?”

“I’m starving. I’m not sure I’ve eaten since I left the hospital. They told me if I didn’t eat, I couldn’t leave, so I ate there. When I got home, all I wanted to do was find Mandy.” He took the cookie and ate it.

I handed him a second one. “Well, we found her.”

“Toby said you found out about the Idaho cabin. Thank you.” He ate the second cookie as well. “Well, our guest list might have just dropped for the wedding and the reception. I don’t know if Mandy is going to want her uncle or cousin there.”

“Let her make the decision.” I knew how important sharing the wedding with family was. Greg’s mom had told everyone she was having elective surgery. The truth was she’d been going through chemo treatments and didn’t want to have to wear a wig at his wedding. She’d sent us a picture of her new hairdo last week, and it was growing back nicely. “Sometimes you forgive a lot when it comes to family.”

Chapter 22

Now that Mandy was home, Greg's part of the investigation was over. But I still wondered about who killed Professor Wellborn. And as I walked back to the house after spending some quality time with Josh and Mandy, Steve's Scuba Shop was still closed. According to Greg, Mandy's uncle had asked Tank to pick Mandy up at the farm stand to take her to dinner. Then they drugged her, and Eric drove her to the Idaho cabin outside St. Maries.

They tried to change her mind about Josh. Mandy had been furious when she woke up, and tried to leave several times, but the cabin was deep in the woods and she couldn't find a road to town. After Eric had returned her to the cabin a fifth time, he called his uncle for help. That was when he'd gone up to talk to her and realized she wasn't going to change her mind.

They'd been planning on bringing her home today, but the local sheriff had shown up at the cabin door yesterday. Mandy was mad, but not willing to charge Tank, her uncle, or her cousin with kidnapping. Josh, on the other hand, would have sent them all to prison for the rest of their lives. Especially Tank.

Emma greeted me as I opened the front door, and I followed her outside into the backyard as she did her business. The night was cool, so I pulled a blanket around me as I sat on the swing. My phone rang. "Hi, Aunt Jackie."

"I saw you walking home just now. I went downstairs to catch you, but I didn't make it. Why were you out so late by yourself? Everything okay with you and Greg?" My aunt peppered me with questions.

“I was coming from the police station. Mandy’s home. I was sitting with Josh while they got everything settled. Greg had to stay for a while, so I walked home.” I felt like a kid explaining why I’d missed curfew. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, dear. Looking forward to lunch tomorrow.” She paused. “I’m glad Mandy’s back. She’s good for that boy. And it was nice of you to help him get through this mess. He looks up to you.”

This time I laughed. “Josh hates me. He always has. Even when the two of you were friends.” I didn’t say dating because having Josh as my uncle was a bridge too far. Even in my wildest imagination.

“I know you didn’t approve of our friendship, but Josh was good for me. He taught me how to open up after your uncle died and got me ready to meet Harrold. People come into your life for all kinds of reasons. And Josh does respect and admire you. I think you also scare him a little bit.” She paused for a minute to let that sink in. “Anyway, I need to go. Harrold and I are watching a show on BritBox. I have to be there and focused; otherwise, I miss the clues and he figures it out first. I hate that.”

I hung up and curled tighter under my blanket. Mandy was home. And Josh had a second journal from Gabriel Santiago. I wondered what it said about the hidden treasure. I needed to remember to ask Greg when he was returning the first journal. I pushed thoughts of lost treasure away and went inside and opened my planner. I made a note about the journal and another to finish the announcements and reach out to Martha to cancel the reception at the Santa Barbara mission. I didn’t know if she’d be happy or put out. I’d go with the latter. I didn’t think Martha liked anything that messed with her carefully planned life. Although she did say she had a waiting list for our wedding day. Some other couple would get married there at the same time we were saying “I do” at a mission a little north of that one.

The world would keep turning. I took out Aunt Jackie’s retirement plan and my notes

and dug in. I had a lot on my plate tomorrow to get done. And now that I wasn't actively seeking out Mandy's whereabouts or babysitting Josh, I had the time to do it.

* * * *

Just before my shift ended the next day, Josh came into the shop. He had a card in his hand that he tossed at me. "That's your invitation to the wedding and the reception. Mandy thinks that since you and Greg were so involved in getting her home, you should come to the ceremony. It's at that dead tree she loves so much."

"I don't think the olive tree is dead. I think it's dormant. And now with all the rains we got this spring, it might even pop out of it." I tried to remember what the tree had looked like when I found Josh there last week. As I did, I realized he might be right. The tree might be dead. "Well, the views are breathtaking there."

He actually smiled. "Good save."

"How's Mandy doing?" When I'd left the station last night, she was holding on to Josh's hand like he might disappear.

"Good. A little shook up. She knew she wasn't in danger, but she worried about me." He shook his head in disbelief. "She's the one that was kidnapped, but she was worried about me. I only wish I'd actually got ahold of Tank that night. Maybe he would have told us then what was going on."

"That was wrong of him to be part of Mandy's disappearance." I still thought Tank had been hanging out with Josh to find the treasure. Or to see if he went postal because of Mandy's disappearance. "Did you finish the other journal?"

He pulled it out of his coat pocket. "I did. From what I've read, I think Santiago spent the money on building the orphanage. There's a lot of record-keeping in here about

the costs, and besides bank robbing, he didn't seem to have a lot of income."

"Can I read it?" It was official. I was a California history geek. "I'll be careful."

"I trust you." He handed me the book and met my eyes. I think his words meant more than just trusting me with the book.

"I'm having lunch with Jackie, and I'll start reading it after that. Now that I'm done with school, I need some educational reading added back into my to-be-read pile." I took the book and set it under the counter by my tote. "I'll get it back to you probably tomorrow."

"Anytime. Mandy's going out to the farm to talk to her family later, so I'm going to the shop and tearing down all the research in the conference room. Treasure or not, I'm done wasting my time with it. I've got other priorities." He reached into his coat again. "I'm not sure Jackie will accept, but Mandy and I would love it if she and Harrold came to the wedding and reception. Can you give her the invite when you see her?"

I took it and put it with mine where I'd stashed the book. "I'll be glad to. Can I get you some coffee?"

He shook his head. "Mandy says I'm not drinking enough water. So I have a bottle at the shop, waiting for me."

I watched as he walked out. Deek had just come in from the back, and he watched with me for a bit. "He's a lot better. His aura was gray for a while. I was really worried. I'd never seen one that color before, except for when my grandfather passed away at home. He went from bright blue to that same gray."

"I think Josh is on the mend. What color is his aura usually?" Now Deek had me

convinced about auras and his ability to see them. At least he thought I was convinced.

“Josh is bright yellow. Which is odd, since I didn’t think he was capable of the joy that usually accompanies people with that color.” He smiled at the couple that just walked in. “These guys need some books. Let me help them, and you get ready to go have lunch with your aunt.”

“Sometimes you worry me,” I said as he headed out around the counter to meet the newcomers. Deek just seemed to know what a customer was looking for. In books or at the coffee bar. He must have heard me tell Josh I was having lunch with Jackie.

He winked at me. “A magician never explains his tricks.”

Or maybe I wrote it on the calendar in the back or the online calendar that my staff had access to. We put our vacations and out-of-office times, as well as shift assignments, on the networked calendar that was on our website on an employee-only page. Either way, my staff typically knew where I was most of the day. Small town or psychic abilities, it didn’t matter. What mattered was we were there for each other. Good and bad.

I got ready to leave and tucked everything, including my notes for the meeting, into my tote. Then I stopped and packed a dozen cookies into the box. It wasn’t a cake, but it was a celebration. Greg mentioned a party. Maybe I should plan it for her last day. Invite people she’d met as part of Coffee, Books, and More. Something special to show how much we appreciated her and how much we would miss her. How much I would miss her.

Aunt Jackie was already sitting at a booth when I arrived at Diamond Lille’s. She had ordered vanilla milkshakes, and mine was waiting as well. I smiled at Carrie, who had been chatting with her. “Traffic’s slow.”

“Thursdays are usually slow unless a tour bus comes in. Now, tomorrow, my feet are going to be screaming at me by this time, as we’re going to be packed. With next weekend being Memorial Day, I might as well just put up a cot in the back room.” Carrie tucked her pad into her pocket. “I’ll get the order into the kitchen.”

I kissed my aunt on the cheek. “Milkshakes? It’s not my birthday.”

“No, it’s my second retirement, and this time, I’m celebrating every step.” She nodded toward Carrie. “I ordered us both fish-and-chips, so if you want something else, you better grab Carrie.”

“No, that will be great.” I handed her the cookies. “Great minds think alike. Here are some cookies for you to share with Harrold.”

“That was sweet of you.” She set the box on the seat beside her and picked up the envelope that I’d put in front of her. “What’s this?”

“Josh asked me to give you your invitation to the wedding and reception. You and Harrold can ride with us to the wedding if you want. It’s on the Jensen farm, if she doesn’t change her mind. She’s not happy with her uncle right now.” I’d put the wedding and reception on our calendar on the fridge. Greg would just have to deal with it, since we were going.

“I’ll talk to Harrold and let you know.” She tucked the envelope into her purse without opening it. “I do need to go to town to buy them a gift. Does it say where they’re registered?”

I hadn’t thought about that. My unease must have shown on my face. “I’m not sure. I can look.”

“That look tells me you and Greg haven’t registered anywhere either.” My aunt put a

hand on mine as I reached for my tote. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll check it later, but you and Greg need to register soon so people can determine what you need.”

“We don’t need anything,” I countered, but I knew I wasn’t going to win this argument. “I’ll talk to Greg tonight. And good news, we have a venue.”

As we drank our milkshakes, I told her about the mission and its grounds. I braced for a liturgy of all the reasons it was a bad choice.

“That sounds lovely.” She pulled out a folder. “Should we start going over the plan before our food gets here?”

I nodded and pulled out my copy of the plan and my notes. I’d made stars by the items I needed either more clarification on or had a different opinion of. Mostly, I agreed with her points. When we got to the payouts, I held up a hand. “I don’t think these are right.”

“Jill, I’ve tried to be fair with the payments. I don’t want to drain your business accounts, but I need a specific severance package.” Aunt Jackie started to explain, but I interrupted.

“I think they’re too low. This is my counterproposal.” I handed her a restructuring of the payouts with higher amounts.

She shook her head and pushed the paper back. “You forget I do your books. You can’t afford this.”

“I can if I supplement it with Miss Emily money.” I had an inheritance that I’d received years ago that I’d kept separate and used as my slush fund. It paid for trips and contributions to staff and the community when the need arose. This seemed to be one of those times. “Look, this money is just sitting there, growing. If I don’t give it

away, it's going to continue to grow until I buy an island or something stupid. Let me help you as you helped me all these years."

"I wouldn't need this money if I hadn't gotten scammed before." She let me hand her back the new payout listing.

"And you wouldn't have come to live here in South Cove. You'd still be traveling, and you wouldn't have met Harrold." I tapped my pen on the contract. "Now can we get back to reality and what we do have today? I have a few more questions."

After we agreed to the final plan with my last change of being able to use her as a sounding board for the rest of my life, we both signed one of the copies. "I'll make you a copy when I get back to the office and put this one in the safe."

My aunt glanced at her watch. "I need to go. Harrold's taking me to dinner to celebrate our future. Thank you for everything."

"No, thank you. I'm not sure Coffee, Books, and More would have survived this long without your firm hand."

"You would have gone bankrupt in less than a year." My aunt rose and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "But you're fine now."

I sat in the booth for a while longer. Having my aunt retire a second time was a big deal. For her and Harrold and for me. I wondered if the party should be expanded to allow more people to come and celebrate. I pulled my planner out of my tote and started making notes. We'd have to fit it in around the Memorial Day festivities and Mandy and Josh's wedding.

As I glanced through the available dates, I saw Toby come into the diner. He waved at me and then paused by my table. "Hey, are you going to be able to make it on

Monday to talk about restructuring?”

He nodded. “With Mandy home, I think I should be fine. Greg already sent me home today. Deek was a star picking up some of my shifts these last two weeks. Make sure you tell him he’s appreciated.”

“I’m sure he appreciated the extra hours.” I closed my planner. “Did I miss Sasha and Olivia the other weekend? With trying to finish my project and helping out Josh, I’ve been swamped.”

“Actually, we postponed her visit. I didn’t feel comfortable with her coming into town and me working all the time. And of course, with Mandy missing, well, we just thought it would be better to delay. She’s coming for Memorial Day weekend. I’m still going to be working a lot, but at least I have my nights free, and there’s lots for her and Olivia to do.”

“Make sure she pops by the food truck that weekend. I’m pretty sure I’ll be working there.” I stood and walked out of the diner. Life was beginning to slow down again. Which was good, since it would allow me to add throwing my aunt’s retirement party to the list.

Exiting the diner, I saw Josh leaning into the glass of one of the windows, looking into the diner. I walked up beside him. “Mandy’s not in there, if that’s who you’re looking for.”

He jumped and tripped over a bush next to him. He pulled himself up and dusted off his jeans. “Miss Gardner, don’t scare me like that. Anyway, I’m not looking for Mandy. I was looking for you.”

“You know you can just walk in the diner and see if someone’s there. They don’t charge you unless you order food,” I teased as I watched him.

“I know. I saw Toby go in, and I didn’t want this to get back to Greg.” He nodded to his van. “I think I found Santiago’s cave. Can you come with me?”

“Tell me it’s not the bat cave.” When he laughed and shook his head no, I still hesitated to answer.

I needed to get home and take Emma running. I hadn’t even considered what we were having for dinner. And the invitations needed to be ordered. My to-do list was full for the afternoon. I started to say no but realized that besides Mandy, Josh didn’t have many friends.

Maybe I was that friend he needed.

“How long is this going to take?”

Chapter 23

The cave where Josh thought the treasure might be stashed was now in a state park, just under an hour from South Cove. When I stopped by the house to grab some water bottles and granola bars, I texted Greg and let him know where I was going. I knew Josh didn't want Greg to be mad, but I'd promised him full disclosure, so I wasn't going to keep him in the dark. Besides, I needed to let Emma out and receive the guilt trip from her about not running today.

I rubbed her head when she came back inside. "I promise I'll take you as soon as I get home." I took steaks out of the freezer and put them into the refrigerator to thaw. Hopefully we'd be back long before Greg got home from work. He knew how to cook dinner, but I liked to get it started on most days. Especially since I only worked half days, or at least I did now. When my aunt retired, I'd probably have to start working longer hours.

"Today's not that day, and I'm not going to feel guilty about spending some time with Josh," I said as I stood at the doorway with Emma. I stopped in my tracks on the way out of the house. Man, I never thought I'd say something like that.

Josh beeped the horn, and I waved at him, turning back to lock the door. "Just a second."

As I hurried to the van, now I remembered why this was a bad idea. Josh could be a jerk. I put water bottles in the van's cupholders and held up the treats I'd tucked in my tote. "If we get hungry."

He shook his head and started to back out of the driveway, but suddenly he stopped short of the road. Turning to me, he said, “Thank you for the water and treats. It was kind of you.”

I laughed and buckled my seatbelt. “I swear, Mandy has transformed you into someone I don’t even know. I like this new version.”

He grinned and continued to back out of the driveway. “I have to admit, I like this version of myself better as well.”

We talked on the way to the park, and at one point, my phone dinged with a text. It was from Greg. Several question marks filled the screen. I sent back a heart emoji and put the phone away.

“How’s Greg?” Josh asked as we turned off the highway and onto the road that would take us to the park and the cave.

“He’s fine. Just checking in to see when we’ll be back for dinner,” I lied.

“I hope you didn’t have plans. I was just so excited to share this with someone, and Mandy is at the farm, talking to her uncle and cousin. I didn’t want to wait.” He turned into the park entrance, slowing the van. “Besides, you’ve been on this adventure with me since almost the beginning. I thought you might want to see the end.”

“You know we might not find the treasure. It’s been a long time.” I tried to temper his expectations. I watched a gray van pull onto the road to the park, following us. It must be Visit the Park in a Van day. Greg and I always made up names for fake holidays like Take Your Beat-Up Car to Work day or Take Your Tractor on a Ride day, depending on what we saw on the road when we were driving somewhere. I guess two vans didn’t make a trend, but maybe there would be a few more vans in the

parking lot.

Josh paid the parking fee, and we headed toward the end of the lot, away from the restrooms. “The map said it was at the end of this section of mountains.”

“You found a map?”

“It was in a third journal I found in the box. Most of the journal talked about his new family. Santiago married a woman who had a kid. She’d almost been to the point of giving him up to the orphanage, as she was working long hours and still not making enough to keep a roof over the son’s head. Santiago met her at a church where she’d gone to pray about the decision. He said he fell in love with her at first sight. Then when he found out about the child, well, he took her in, and they were quickly married. He told the community that the child was his and that Maria had been waiting for him to return from his stint in the Mexican army.”

My eyes were tearing up. “That’s so sweet.”

“He didn’t want anyone to speak ill of her or the child. If they were to blame someone, the blame should fall on him.” Josh got out of the van and put the water bottles in his backpack. “Hand me the treats. I’ll carry this so you can leave your tote in the van. Tuck it under the seat.”

“I’m beginning to think Gabriel Santiago was more than just a bank robber. Maybe someone should tell his story in a book about the area.” I wondered if Deek would want to take on the project.

“Professor Wellborn thought the same thing. But he didn’t know Santiago’s full story. Let’s go see if we can find the gold.” He locked the van remotely, and we started hiking up the mountain pass to where the cave was located.

When we reached the cave entrance, a sign was posted. Cuyama Caves had been made part of the state park and was protected from damage. No littering or digging allowed. I saw the small shovel in Josh's backpack and pointed to the sign.

He shrugged. "I hope we won't need to use it."

Hoping wasn't exactly following the rules, so I prepared my explanation to Greg when he had to come bail us out of state park prison. We entered the cave, and Josh took out the journal. "Santiago said the gold was hidden in the third tunnel from the left."

We walked over to the area. The tunnel was small. I'd have to duck to walk through it. Josh would have to really crouch. I stepped back and with my flashlight checked around the cave to make sure there wasn't another tunnel. When I was sure this was the third tunnel, I pointed to it. "Who goes first?"

"You can, and I'll follow you." He met my gaze. Some of the bravado about finding the gold had worn off, and I could see Josh was scared. "Keep your head down."

I nodded. I wasn't going to call out his fear. We were just starting to get along. I bent down and started walking. Our footsteps echoed in the empty cavern. Finally, the tunnel opened up into a large cavern. It was well lit from a skylight near the top. I turned my flashlight off and stepped to the left, to let Josh out of the tunnel.

As he checked the book, I took in the cave. People had written their names on the cavern walls. No one famous, at least not that I recognized. The cavern was big enough to camp in if you didn't mind sleeping underground. I heard water splashing in the distance. The air smelled damp but it wasn't a moldy odor.

He pointed to a faded arrow that had been carved into the wall. "The book says the gold is under the arrow."

I went over and knelt under the arrow. The floor felt hard packed. I wondered if digging here would do any good. The ground felt like solid rock.

The scuff of boot on gravel made me turn around. Steve Brother stood behind us, blocking the escape tunnel. “Good morning, thank you so much for leading me here. I’ve been looking for this gold since I was a kid.”

Josh turned around and frowned. “Steve? What are you doing here?”

“When Professor Wellborn invited me to be part of the team to investigate and eventually write a book about Santiago, I had to be part of it. But I wasn’t there for the academic discovery. The professor was thinking too small. I knew if we had Santiago’s journal, we’d find the treasure. He told me if that happened, we’d turn it over to the state. Like they would actually use the money for good. All they’d do would be to give it away or make more stupid laws to restrict our water usage. They use our tax money on stupid stuff and just keep asking for more. This gold should have been divided up between the people who found it.” Steve’s eyes were bloodshot. “I told Hope the same thing, and she got mad and left me. She thought the professor was right.”

“I’m sorry about Hope,” Josh said, trying to calm Steve down. “I’m sure she’ll come back.”

Steve shook his head and pulled a gun from his belt. “Hope’s not coming back. Not this time. I’m not going to have a happy ever after. And I guess you two aren’t either.”

Josh stepped in front of me. “Steve, think about this. You can’t get away with killing us and getting the gold out of here.”

“Actually, I think I can. My boat’s tied up in Bakerstown. I’ve been living off it for a

few days now. You'll dig up the treasure, then help me carry it out to the van. We'll come back here, and then you'll be free of your mortal coil. I'll be on my boat heading to Mexico before they find your bodies."

"Mexico has an extradition treaty with the US. They'll just bring you back for trial." I didn't know if that was true, but it sounded good. And I'd heard it on television. Standing behind Josh where Steve couldn't see me, I reached behind me and tried to use my phone to call Greg. He wouldn't have time to get to us, but maybe another police department was closer. Or the state park had rangers. I pulled the phone out and hit the button to call him. The phone tried to dial out, but the call ended. I had no service underground.

We were going to die. I put my phone away in my back pocket, trying to keep Steve from seeing me.

"I don't think that's true. And if it is, I'll keep going south until I find a country that doesn't like the American legal system. Money does a lot to grease the wheels of a small town. Someone will take me in. Then I'll send Hope a postcard and tell her that I didn't wish she was there." He giggled, and I realized that like Josh a few days ago, Steve was sleep deprived. Or just bananas. I didn't care which it was unless the diagnosis got us out of here safely.

"You really loved Hope." I tried to steer the conversation away from the idea of killing us.

"Doesn't matter now, does it?" He shrugged and looked up at the arrow. "So what did the journal say? Is this arrow the clue or just the starting point? Santiago could be a little tricky with his hiding places. That's why the gang chose him to keep the money. He was brilliant, and he didn't have any family to distract him."

"But he did have a family," I corrected him. When his eyes lit red, I realized my

mistake. Poking a bear with a gun wasn't smart. "It's true, the journal talks about his wife and her child."

Steve paced as he thought about the new information. Josh and I locked gazes. We needed to do something, or Steve would follow his plan and we'd be dead in this cave. Finally, he made a decision and stopped. The gun continued to point at us.

"That doesn't matter. And I don't care." He nodded to the place. "Dig for my gold."

Josh knelt and put his backpack on the cave floor next to him. The handle of the shovel was sticking out, and the backpack was open at the top where he'd gotten out the journal. He met my gaze and then looked at the handle.

We had a plan. He'd distract Steve, and I'd hit him with the shovel. I just hoped it would work. And that the plan I thought of was the one Josh was trying to tell me. I nodded and tensed to grab the shovel.

"We're not supposed to dig in here," Josh said as he moved dirt by the wall. "But I don't think we'll need to. If you'd just come down here and help me pull out this stone, I think we'll be in Santiago's storage area. There seems to be metal here. Probably a box."

Steve dropped to his knees and set the gun on the cave floor. "It can't be that easy. I thought..."

I never found out what Steve was thinking, because as soon as he dropped the gun, I grabbed the shovel and stepped toward him, swinging it as hard as I could and aiming for his head. I also kicked the gun over to the other side of the cave.

He cried out, then fell over on the floor. Josh stood up and went for the gun. He yelled at me. "Get out of here. Go call the police."

I didn't look back. I didn't know if Steve was moving or not. He could be up and wrestling Josh for the gun. All I needed to do was get to the cave entrance and call for help.

When I reached it, I pulled out my phone. Still no signal. So I ran down the trail, praying I wouldn't trip. I couldn't hear footsteps behind me. I didn't get a signal until I was at the parking lot. I called Greg, who patched me in to the park rangers. While we were still talking, I watched as two cars came flying toward me and the vans. The rangers got out and ran toward me. One paused to talk to me, but the other three ran up the trail.

"Jill, are you all right?" Greg asked in my ear as I held the phone up. "Jill?"

I put him on speaker. "I'm fine. Officer Sanchez is with me."

"Ranger Sanchez, ma'am. Do you mind ending your call?" He took the phone from me. "Detective King? I need to move her to a safe place. We have rangers heading up to the cave now. I'll have her call you when we get to the station."

He hung up the phone and took my arm, leading me to one of the cars that had come speeding toward me.

At the station, after I told him why we were there, he left me in an interview room with a cup of coffee. He still had my phone. My hands were shaking, and I kept hoping Josh was all right. Mandy would be furious if she'd gone through all this with her family just to have Josh killed on some treasure hunt. Maybe I should have told him no when he asked me to go on his adventure.

Finally, the door opened, and Greg came into the room. I stood and ran to him, just wanting him to hold me and tell me that everyone was okay. He stroked my hair as I started to shake again.

“Josh?” I asked, finally.

“He’s fine. He’s giving the ranger a statement. Steve is in a cell. The doctor has cleared him, but I think he’s still going to have to go get a brain scan. He was out for a while.” Greg led me out of the room. “We’re heading home.”

“But what about the treasure?”

Greg laughed as he pulled me closer. He had my tote that had been in Josh’s van. “There is no treasure. The hiding place was empty.”

I leaned into his shoulder as we walked out into the lobby. “That seems anticlimactic.”

* * * *

Someone must have turned off my alarm on the phone, because when I finally woke, it was almost eleven. I jumped out of bed and startled Greg, who was sitting in a chair near the bed, working on his laptop. “I’m late opening the shop.”

“I asked your aunt to open the bookstore for you. You had a bit of a shock yesterday, and I wanted you to sleep a little longer. Especially since we didn’t get home until nearly midnight.” He closed his laptop and set it on his chair as he walked over to me. “Everything’s fine. Josh is home with Mandy, and Steve is in a hospital on a psychic hold. I think when he killed the professor, something just broke.”

“Steve was the third name on the paperwork that Professor Wellborn had. Well, it was Stephen. He must have been older when he worked for the professor.” I’d known about his involvement, but I didn’t think he’d go that far to find a treasure. Especially something like killing me and Josh.”

“Esmeralda had just matched his name to the list of graduate students that worked with the professor. With that and the fact that his shop was still closed, we thought he might either be dead like the professor or our killer.” Greg rubbed my arm. “I should have told you to stay home until we had him in custody. I never thought he’d be following Josh.”

“Should have, could have, would have.” I grinned at Greg’s confused look. “Just something Aunt Jackie used to say when I’d start questioning something I did.”

“Okay. We talked to Hope, who was staying with her mom. She said Steve was talking about crazy stuff, so she moved out. She never thought he would have acted on the things he was saying.” Greg paused. “On his boat, we found the sculpture Steve used to kill Professor Wellborn. They’re testing the blood on it, but we’re pretty sure it’s the murder weapon. So you solved Mandy’s disappearance, but not the murder this time.”

“And Jeffrey Dahmer was such a nice neighbor.” I sat on the bed. “Why is it always all about money? And I did point out the fact that Steve was missing. Which was weird. It was like he put a spotlight on himself by taking off like that.”

“I’m not sure he was thinking clearly at the end. Sometimes, it’s about jealousy or anger or hate.” Greg sat next to me. “But you’re right, a lot of times, it’s about the money. Finding the treasure from an Old West bank robbery is every kid’s fantasy.”

“And some kids never grow up.” I leaned my head on his shoulder. I needed a vacation.

Chapter 24

Instead of a vacation, I had a store to restructure, the Memorial Day holiday festival to deal with, as well as a visit from Sasha and Olivia. Seeing them boosted my spirits as I crossed things off my to-do list. They were staying with Evie at her new house, so I got a lot of time with Olivia and Evie's dog, Homer, that week.

By the time we were driving to the farm for Josh and Mandy's wedding, I'd even talked Greg into registering with a department store in Bakerstown. We'd picked out a list of items that if given to us would increase our satisfaction with our lives. Like the Belgian waffle maker that I'd always wanted.

"Just think, in four months, we'll be doing this wedding thing." He took my hand and squeezed it. We'd taken the Jeep instead of his truck, since I was in a sundress and he had on his nice suit.

"Doing this wedding thing? What about pledging our lives to one another? Or taking our vows?" I turned to watch his reaction. "Are you sure you really want to marry me?"

"As sure as I am the sun is going to rise tomorrow morning. I've been waiting to marry you for years. Now, it's finally happening." He pulled my hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Nice save, buddy." I squeezed his hand, then pulled away as my phone rang. "It's my aunt."

When I answered, I knew what she was going to ask. And she didn't disappoint me.

"Jill, did you remember to take my and Harrold's gift with you to the wedding?" Aunt Jackie asked.

"It's in the back seat next to ours. But they aren't taking gifts until we reach the reception." I pointed to my phone while Greg grinned.

"I know, but I just wanted to make sure they get it. Josh can be sensitive if he thinks there's an issue. And I don't want him or Mandy to think I hold any bad feelings for the two of them. We should have rescheduled this cruise to Greece."

"No. You got a great deal on that." Someone Lille knew had bowed out of the cruise, so my aunt and Harrold had gotten in for a steal. Or Lille had told them that and paid part of the cost herself. You never knew what the truth was with that woman. "How's it been?"

"It's lovely. You and Greg should come next time we go to Greece. You'd love it."

I probably would, but traveling with my aunt, that was a little too close for my tastes. "We'll consider it. You know Greg's work schedule is unpredictable."

"Well, whatever you think. But the water is such a beautiful blue." The phone started to crackle. "Jill, I've got to go. We're losing the connection."

And with that, she was gone. I put the phone away. "Aunt Jackie thinks we should go on a cruise to Greece..."

"That would be lovely." He pulled off on the road to the farm.

"With her and Harrold." I finished my statement.

“I might be busy that week.” He laughed as we pulled the Jeep off into a field where a man in a tuxedo was directing traffic. After we got out and he took my arm to walk the rest of the way, he said, “I’m just kidding. If you want to go on a cruise with your aunt, I’ll take one for the team.”

“It wouldn’t be that bad. But we still haven’t decided on where we’re going on our honeymoon.”

Greg smiled as he turned his head.

“Or have we?” I tried to watch his face. He had a tell when he lied.

He shook his head. “It’s a surprise. And you have four months to try to figure it out.”

I greeted Darla and Matt, who were sitting on the groom’s side, as well as several other couples from South Cove. The bride’s side was filled with her family. Josh had told me that her uncle was giving her away. Whatever she’d said to her family that day we were almost killed must have worked, since it looked like everyone was there.

The rest of South Cove would be at the reception. Josh and Kyle, his best man, were walking up to the altar with Bill, Sadie’s pastor boyfriend, who was officiating the ceremony. Behind them, the old olive tree that had been the sight of so many tragedies in the past was leafing out against the blue sky. It wasn’t dead. Mandy had been right. The tree had just needed a reason to live.

Like many of us. I looked over at Amy and Justin, who sat in the same row as us. She waved at me, and as the music started, I settled in for the ceremony. Life was filled with beautiful moments like this one. And weddings were the best part. As long as I didn’t have to do the planning. My wedding in four months was the last wedding I was ever planning. Greg was just stuck with me.

I didn’t think that was a bad bargain at all.