



# Summer Nights (Sunrise Bay #5)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** I could give Ben the world. But theres a catch, and it could be a deal-breaker.

Winning my companys prestigious jewelry competition should be a dream come true, but Ben treats it like a life sentence. After countless unanswered emails and phone calls, I visit him in person. Despite all the background checks, nothing prepares me for the stunningly beautiful, blond-haired, brown-eyed man I meet in Sunrise Bay. His easy charm, focused determination, and out-of-this-world creativity leave me breathless. With gut-wrenching certainty, I know Ive met my match.

But Ben knows a secret that could destroy my company, and I cant live with someone who doesnt trust me. So, despite everything, I walk away from our happy-ever-after until one of life's unexpected twists brings us together. And well never be the same again.

**Total Pages (Source):** 67

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:01 am*

one

BEN

I ripped up the latest letter I'd received from Wilson Enterprises and threw it in the trash. For most jewelers, winning their prestigious award would be a dream come true. But not for me. One of my friends had entered me in their competition, thinking he was doing something wonderful for my career. But after three years of keeping a low profile, it was the last thing I needed.

Thinking about the award made me feel sick. What I needed to do was focus on my store and not worry about anyone discovering my true identity.

The display I'd nearly finished would be a welcome distraction. Opening the cabinet, I carefully placed a gold filigree necklace inside. When I was designing it, I'd imagined Colorado in the fall, the colors that rippled into life around the small town of Sunrise Bay.

As I'd sketched different ideas, the shape of a leaf kept reappearing on the page. That initial concept had become the simple oval pendant sitting inside my display case. It was everything I'd hoped to create and more.

The bell above the front door jingled. I looked up and smiled at my friend Jonathon. In a few minutes, two more friends would be arriving to discuss a fundraising auction they were organizing.

"Hi, Jonathon. I won't be long."

“Don’t rush. Kathleen was happy to close the candy store so I could get away early. Nice necklace.” Jonathon leaned over the display cabinet and studied my latest design. “Is it new?”

“It is. I finished it last night.”

“It’s beautiful. The gold looks like a spider’s web. How did you make it seem so delicate?”

I placed a silk scarf and two sets of earrings beside the necklace. “It took a lot of experience and more time than I thought, but I’m pleased with how it turned out. Were you busy today?”

“It was a little quieter in the store, but the online orders have gone crazy. Mom had to help me gift wrap more than twenty boxes of fudge.”

“Your website must be doing its job.”

The doorbell jingled again, and Dylan walked into the jewelry store.

“It’s all because of Dylan,” Jonathon said.

Dylan’s eyebrows rose. As well as being a good friend, he was a genius with computers. “What’s because of me?”

“The reason Candy Lane’s online store is so popular. You designed an incredible website.”

Dylan waved away the praise. “The website’s only as good as the product it’s promoting. Your customers are raving about your fudge because it tastes incredible. Is Paul here?”

I shook my head. “He has a meeting with Amy’s teacher. Once he’s finished, he’ll join us.”

“Do you want me to turn on the coffeepot?” Dylan asked.

Jonathon sent Dylan a relieved smile. “Sounds good to me. After our meeting, my wonderful fiancé wants to take me to a barn. Shane thinks it’ll make a great wedding venue.”

“Don’t worry,” Dylan said. “It’ll get better once you’ve settled on the menu, the guest list, the flowers, and your suits.”

I didn’t want to alarm Jonathon, but from what I’d seen, it wouldn’t get any easier until the day he married Shane. “I’ve met lots of people who are planning their wedding. My advice is not to sweat the small stuff.”

“I’ll second that,” Dylan said as he disappeared into the workroom.

Dylan was also getting married soon. He’d applied the same methodical process to planning his wedding as he did to the computer programs he developed. It seemed to have made everything a lot less stressful.

I moved to the front of the store. “Ask Dylan about the wedding program he’s using. It’s helped him.”

Jonathon picked up his bag. “It’d be even better if it booked everything for us.”

I turned the sign in the window to “Closed” and flicked the deadbolt. “Don’t worry. No matter what you choose, it’ll be an amazing day.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so. All you need is a little faith, a lot of love, and a great wedding planner.”

Jonathon smiled. “We’ve got two, possibly three covered, so I guess we’ll be fine.”

I hugged my friend. “Who knows, the barn might be the perfect venue. And if other people have used it, the owners might be able to recommend a catering company. That would be two big items confirmed in one day.”

“I should talk to you whenever I’m feeling stressed. I feel better already.”

I held open the workroom door. “That’s what friends are for.”

## Page 2

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two

DANIEL

I threw my pen onto my desk. “What’s wrong with him? Anyone would think I was asking for a million dollars.”

My brother, Owen, grinned at me. “This must be the first time someone doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

“He doesn’t have a choice. One of the conditions of entering the jewelry competition was to make yourself available for promotional opportunities. So far, the only communication Wilson Enterprises has had with B.J. Davis are four-sentence emails telling us he’s unavailable.”

“At least they were polite.”

My sharp glance wiped the smile off Owen’s face.

“It sounds like he doesn’t want to be found.”

“Six years at Yale, and that’s the best you can do?”

Owen crossed his arms in front of his chest. “I majored in behavioral psychology and, right now, your behavior’s more interesting than Mr. Davis’s.”

“That’s because we don’t know much about him.” In normal circumstances, I would

have left my staff to pursue B.J. Davis. But nothing about the jeweler made sense. Most up-and-coming jewelers would give their right arm to be promoted by my company. As CEO of one of the most influential online shopping networks, I knew the difference my endorsement could make to a person's career.

To make matters worse, Mr. Davis wasn't only ignoring my emails. He was now blocking all communication from my company.

Owen opened the folder I'd given him. "Where's Sunrise Bay?"

"Colorado. At the southern end of Willow Lake."

As my brother read the brief information we had about B.J. Davis, I clicked on a document on my computer. A series of photographs showing a gold heirloom necklace and matching earrings filled the screen. The deep rubies embedded in the design drew my eyes straight to the heart of the pendant. It was elegant, sophisticated, and would be an extremely desirable set for my clientele.

Owen rubbed his jaw. "Is it really that bad if he doesn't want to be part of your publicity machine? You could still run the story about the winner of the award. Your PR department could use the information in his application to make the story more?—"

"Compelling?"

"I was going to say interesting, but that's up to you. Besides, you've got more important things to worry about."

I stood and looked through the forty-second story window of my Manhattan office. From here the never-ending line of taxis looked like yellow bumblebees, moving in a coordinated pattern toward their queen. Or in this case, the Grand Central Terminal.

“You can’t ignore what’s happening,” Owen said in the same annoying tone he used when he knew he was right. “Granddad gave you five years to prove you were capable of running the company. It’s time to step up to the plate and show the board of directors who’s boss.”

“It’s not a baseball game.”

“Then prove it. Do something crazy. Blow their minds with an idea or product that sends shock waves through their stuffy heads.”

I placed the palm of one hand on the glass. “I’ve spent more time in this office than I have in my home. I’ve created a company out of nothing and increased our turnover to more than fifty million dollars a year. If that’s not enough proof that I’m the right person to lead the company, then I don’t know what is.”

“I told you this would happen.”

Sometimes, my brother was so predictable. “Since when does common sense mean I’ve burned myself out? I’ve proved my value to the company ten times over. If the board can’t see that, then they shouldn’t be involved in Wilson Enterprises.”

Owen stood beside me. “This company wouldn’t exist without your drive and determination. Granddad knows that. He also knows that no matter what, the money he invested into the company will be returned to him tenfold.”

“Then why is he insisting on a five-year review? If I could, I’d buy back his shares. But I’ve made the company too successful to be able to afford them.”

“Here’s a radical idea. Why don’t you go to Sunrise Bay and track down B.J. Davis? While you’re there, you can have the vacation you keep canceling.”



I frowned. “I can’t leave. If the board senses a weakness anywhere in the company they’ll blow it out of proportion and use it against me.”

Owen leaned against the window frame. “Then let me be your eyes and ears. I can be your proxy vote. If anything happens, I’ll call you immediately.”

“No.” I wasn’t leaving my business in my brother’s hands. Owen had a lot of good qualities, but dealing with a volatile board of directors wasn’t one of them.

“Running this company will kill you if you don’t get away.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

Owen’s eyes narrowed. “You’re thirty-eight years old. You haven’t had a vacation since you started the company. You sabotage any relationship you’re in by working sixteen-hour days and your blood pressure’s through the roof. Do you want me to keep going?”

“I work long hours because I enjoy my job.”

“You need to learn how to enjoy life. At the rate you’re going, you’ll be dead by the time you’re fifty.”

I didn’t say anything to my brother. Instead, I reached for B.J. Davis’s file. If he was half the jeweler I suspected he was, he could be my secret weapon. Winning the prestigious Wilson Award would only be the beginning of our association, especially if his work shook the board of directors out of their old-fashioned views.

I looked at the photo of Mr. Davis and frowned. The grainy black-and-white image looked as though it had been taken at night. The only distinguishing feature in the entire shot was his mop of blond hair. From his minimal biography, I knew he was

thirty years old, but the quality of his work hinted at someone who was much older.

Before I could change my mind, I picked up the phone and called my secretary. “Charlotte? Book the next available flight to Boulder, Colorado. I’m going to a town called Sunrise Bay.”

When she asked how long I’d be gone, I hesitated. If I could have said one weekend, I would have. But with my brother standing a few feet away, I wouldn’t get away with anything less than a week.

Owen grabbed the phone. “He’ll be gone for two weeks, Charlotte. And find somewhere for Daniel to rent. The closer to the lake, the better.”

Charlotte said something and Owen smiled. “Exactly. Good luck.”

I took the phone from my brother. “What was all that about?”

Owen pulled on his jacket. “Your secretary and I are on the same page when it comes to Sunrise Bay.”

“Where are you going?”

“The same place you should be. Home.”

I checked my watch. “It’s barely seven o’clock.”

“No kidding.” Owen took my jacket out of the closet. “Most people finished work two hours ago. Come on. I’ll buy takeout for dinner and help you pack.”

“I’m only going to Sunrise Bay for a few days.”

Owen's chin rose. "Two weeks but who's counting. And you can't wear your over-priced designer suits. You're taking jeans and T-shirts."

I glared at my brother. "I'm supposed to impress B.J. Davis. I can't do that if I look like a tourist."

Owen snorted. "He wants nothing to do with you. If you walk into his studio looking like a big city executive, he'll be even less likely to talk to you."

"I don't do jeans and T-shirts."

Owen shook his head. "I don't know who I'm more worried about—you or the mysterious B.J. Davis."

"You worry too much. If I can't convince him to come to New York City, I'll talk to the people who know him. There must be something that'll make him more inclined to appear in front of the media."

Owen shook his head. "You've been living here for too long. Sunrise Bay might be better for you than you think."

I doubted it. I had a job to do and nothing barring a category four hurricane would stop me.

## Page 3

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three

BEN

I opened my laptop and found the project plan for the auction I was helping to organize. The Welcome Center was the only place in Sunrise Bay where people could go who were homeless or needed help. With winter fast approaching, the center was desperate for warm blankets and food.

“Have we received any more donations?” I asked Dylan.

He took a piece of paper from a folder and handed it to me. “Jenny and Allan from the general store are donating a barbecue. The model and the manufacturer’s link are on that sheet of paper.”

“I spoke to Andrew yesterday,” Jonathon said. “He’s made two beautiful gift baskets full of homemade jams, pickles, and chutneys. He also wants to donate a photo of Willow Lake, but it won’t be ready for another week.”

Dylan nibbled on one of the cookies Jonathon had brought with him. “This is slightly off topic, but have you thought of asking Andrew to sing at your wedding? I know he doesn’t like being in the spotlight, but his voice is incredible.”

“I’ve already asked him. He thinks it’ll be okay, but he needs to make sure he’s available.”

A few years ago, Andrew had returned to Sunrise Bay after a hugely successful

career as a country music singer. There was a lot of speculation about why he'd suddenly left Nashville, but I was glad he'd come home. We had a lot in common and had become good friends.

“Did we add Paul’s cakes to the items to be auctioned?” Dylan asked.

I checked the list. “They’re here. Including his cakes, we have forty-five items. We should be able to raise a lot of money for the center.” I opened my email account. “I’ll send everyone the timetable of what’s happening on the night of the auction. Pastor Adam’s happy to decorate the main meeting room at the church. All I have to do is give him the decorations and a list of where everything goes.”

“What about ticket sales?” Jonathon reached for a cookie. “Paul advertised the auction in Amy’s school newsletter. If that doesn’t fill the meeting room, we could start advertising on Facebook.”

Clicking on another tab, I opened the spreadsheet I used to keep track of door sales. “We only have twenty seats left. If ticket sales remain strong, we should have a sold-out audience.”

That news made everyone smile.

I leaned forward, eager to tell my friends about the new project Pastor Adam had started. “What if we could do more than provide food and warm blankets for The Welcome Center?”

Dylan frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Boulder is creating a village of tiny houses for people who don’t have a home. There are shared laundry and cooking facilities, and larger recreational areas for everyone to enjoy. They’re even planning a shared community garden. We have the same

problem as Boulder—hardly any rental accommodation and a waiting list of people who desperately need somewhere to live.”

“But this isn’t Boulder,” Jonathon said. “We don’t have the same number of homeless people or the same population.”

“Everyone deserves a warm, safe place to live. Pastor Adam’s church looks after at least thirty people each night. Some of them have been living at The Welcome Center for more than a year. What if we could create a community housing project that gives people hope?”

Just thinking about what we could achieve gave me goosebumps. Pastor Adam had already completed a feasibility study with other community and social service groups, and talked to the County Planning Department. All he needed was a fundraising committee to begin the project.

I opened Boulder’s Housing First website. “The concept plans are amazing. Pastor Adam has talked to the agencies involved in Boulder’s tiny home village. A team of architectural students designed the homes and can come to Sunrise Bay to help build the first home.”

Dylan looked at the website. “How much does each house cost?”

“Fifteen thousand dollars. We wouldn’t be able to create an entire village right away, but we could keep fundraising until we had enough homes to make a difference.”

Jonathon sat back in his chair. “It’d take an enormous amount of time. We’d need some land and a lot of money to start building the homes.”

I wasn’t ready to give up at the first hurdle. “Pastor Adam runs a construction apprenticeship program at the church. He said his students could build the houses as

part of their training. We also have a lot of retired people living in Sunrise Bay. They might want to help.”

Dylan frowned. “You’re really excited about this idea, aren’t you?”

“I want it to be more than an idea. We all have successful careers that we’ve grown from nothing. We have different strengths we can bring to this project. Adam can’t do this on his own but, if we work together, I know we could make it happen.”

“Would Pastor Adam want us to help?” Jonathon asked.

“He’d love our help. The Welcome Center still needs food and blankets for the winter, but this could be a long-term project. The community’s always looking at ways to make people’s lives better. This would be an amazing opportunity for everyone.”

Jonathon sipped his coffee. “I’m in. People aren’t homeless by choice. If I can help someone else, I’ll do it.”

Dylan looked at his friends. “I’ll do whatever I can to help, too.”

“That’s awesome. I knew you’d want to be involved.”

“You’d better add Paul’s name to the committee,” Dylan said. “He’d disown us if we left him out.”

My cell phone beeped. I read the name of the person who’d sent the email and sighed.

“Bad news?” Dylan asked.

“It’s Wilson Enterprises again.” I deleted the message. “Hopefully, they’ll give up

and stop contacting me.”

Dylan sighed. “I’m sorry about entering you in the jewelry competition.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said quickly. “It would’ve been wonderful if I wanted the publicity.”

“But you don’t. Is there anything I can do?”

I shook my head. “I tried blocking their emails and phone calls. I don’t understand why they keep contacting me. I’ve already sent them enough information for the article they want to write. Besides, in a few months, no one will remember who won the award.” At least, I hoped so.

“Do they know the name you use as a jeweler is different from your legal name?” Jonathon asked.

“I don’t think so. The emails I’ve received are addressed to B.J. Davis and come through my website. As long as they don’t connect B.J. Davis with Ben Harper, I’ll be okay.” I typed some notes into my laptop. “I’ll tell Pastor Adam we want to help with the tiny home project. But in the meantime, we’ll focus on the auction for The Welcome Center. I’ll send everyone a list of what we have to do in the next two weeks.”

“And I’ll check your email settings,” Dylan said. “I can download a program that’ll block all emails from Wilson Enterprises, regardless of where the message comes from.”

As Dylan worked his magic on my laptop, my mind drifted to the jewelry award. In five weeks, a ceremony would be held in New York City, showcasing the best of the best in jewelry design. My necklace and earring set would be there, but I wouldn’t.



And for now, as much as I wanted to be recognized by my peers, that's the way it would have to stay.

## Page 4

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four

DANIEL

Three days after I'd decided to find B.J. Davis, I stepped out of my rented SUV and studied the stunning view of Willow Lake. Sunlight glistened off the clear blue water. The mountains on the opposite side of the bay rose to a formidable height, disappearing under a blanket of cloud.

Nestled against the shore of the lake was Sunrise Bay. The spire of a church marked one end of the small Colorado town. Other buildings lined both sides of the main shopping street. If I was searching for somewhere I could get lost in, this wasn't it.

The drive from Boulder Airport had been uneventful—if you discounted the moose grazing beside the road or the squirrels watching me from the grassy bank of the picnic area.

I took a deep breath. For most of my life, I'd lived in New York City. I was used to skyscrapers, traffic jams, and constant noise. Apart from the silence surrounding me, the grandeur of the scenery was incredible.

Pulling out my cell phone, I took a photo and emailed it to my brother. At least it proved I was here and hadn't canceled my flight.

Unfortunately, that wasn't an option. I needed to find B.J. Davis as much as I needed to breathe. Without his help, the board of directors would be even less likely to want to rebrand my company. And without repositioning the company's online presence,

our profit wouldn't continue to grow and my contract as chief executive could be over.

If I found myself out of a job, I might be moving to Sunrise Bay, too.

I returned to my SUV with a heavy heart. B.J. Davis was my last chance to prove I could lead Wilson Enterprises into the next decade. And, despite everything I'd done, I still didn't know if he'd speak to me.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:01 am*

five

BEN

On Monday afternoon I rushed into the guest cottage at the back of my property. Thankfully, I'd made the bed last night, added fresh towels to the small bathroom, and filled the refrigerator with milk, bread, and butter.

I placed a gift-wrapped basket of local produce on the dining room table and opened the French doors leading onto the deck. A gentle breeze drifted into the cottage, adding the scent of pine and spruce to the calm interior.

When I'd moved to Sunrise Bay, I'd looked for a property that could give me an income. I had big dreams on a tight budget and, at one stage, doubted whether I could afford to live here. But after five weeks of annoying the local realtor, I'd finally found the perfect property.

Honeysuckle Cottage was a cute, three-bedroom home on the outskirts of town. It had everything I wanted, including a second, smaller cottage sitting forlornly under an old oak tree.

Both cottages had spectacular views of Willow Lake and had the potential to become something special. It was the "potential" that had turned away most people. But I was used to hard work. After six weeks of remodeling, Honeysuckle Cottage looked incredible.

Armed with even more determination to make the second cottage a unique vacation

experience, I'd spent long days stripping drywall, plastering, painting, and replacing the kitchen.

After twice as much time as I thought I'd need, I was now the proud owner of two pretty cottages overlooking one of Colorado's best-kept secrets.

The house closest to the water had become Acorn Cottage and, to my surprise, I had bookings right through to Christmas. If it weren't for a last-minute cancellation, my next guest wouldn't have been able to stay.

With a final look around the living room, I walked outside and ran a critical eye over the yard. By the end of next week, I'd need to mow the lawns and give the hedge between the two cottages a trim. Hopefully, I could tidy the yard when my guest was fishing or visiting the towns dotted around Willow Lake. If he wanted to stay close to the cottage, I'd find a time that suited both of us.

The sound of a vehicle traveling over the gravel driveway made me frown. Mr. Devlin wasn't supposed to arrive for another two hours.

I looked at my baggy tracksuit pants, the T-shirt that had been a favorite for the last five years, and my paint-splattered sneakers. At this rate, my new guest would mistake me for the gardener.

Taking a deep breath, I straightened my shoulders. Regardless of what I was wearing, I was sure my latest guest would be impressed with the cottage.

Taking long, confident strides, I walked around the edge of my house. While Mr. Devlin parked his black SUV in the shade of the old oak tree, I silently rehearsed everything I needed to tell him.

Before my guests arrived, I usually asked them what activities they were interested in

doing. That way, I could have some options ready for them to explore. But this reservation had only been made three days ago and my request for more information had gone unanswered. Because of the timing of his booking, I'd assumed it was because he was traveling to Colorado and couldn't reply.

My eyebrows rose when Daniel Devlin stepped out of his vehicle. Of all the people I'd greeted, none of them had been wearing a crisp white business shirt and dark trousers. That wasn't to say he didn't look good, because he did. But it was unusual. I half expected him to reach into the back seat and pull on a tie and jacket.

Stepping forward, I held out my hand. "Welcome to Acorn Cottage, Mr. Devlin. I'm Ben Harper."

"It's nice to meet you." Warm brown eyes settled on my face. "You can call me Daniel. Do you own the cottage?"

"I do. How was your flight from New York City?" Crossing my fingers, I hoped he'd left from there. All I knew about Daniel was that he lived in Manhattan.

"It was what I expected." He turned and looked at the view of the lake. "You made a good decision when you purchased this property. You don't see views like this from many homes."

I followed his gaze. Willow Lake looked like a polished jewel against the clear, blue sky. "I'm lucky I found it. I hope you enjoy the next two weeks."

"So do I," Daniel muttered.

For someone who'd traveled a long way to be here, he didn't seem very excited. "If you're interested in fishing or spending time on Willow Lake, there are some great tours you can join. Or if you prefer to drive around the lake, I can give you

suggestions of places you might like to visit.”

“Thanks, but that won’t be necessary. I won’t be going far from Sunrise Bay.”

I wasn’t worried about what he wanted to do, as long as he enjoyed his vacation. “In that case, the folder of information on the coffee table will be helpful. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask. I live in Honeysuckle Cottage, the house you drove past to get here.”

I took a key out of my pocket and handed it to Daniel. “This is for your front door. I don’t usually use the security alarm, but if you’d like to use it, I can give you the code.”

Daniel nodded. “I’d appreciate that. I plan on catching up on some work while I’m here. I don’t want to worry about someone taking my laptop.”

I froze. “Were you planning on using the Internet?”

“It’s the only way I can look at my files.”

My heart sank. I couldn’t afford for him to leave. If the Internet was a big issue, I could end up with a two-week vacancy that would never get filled. “When you booked the cottage, I made it clear that it doesn’t have Internet access.”

Daniel’s eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything.

I had to come up with a solution before he jumped into his SUV and drove into town. “I have satellite Internet at my house. We could organize something, so you have access to the connection all the time.”

Daniel pulled out his phone and checked the screen. “Don’t worry. At least there’s

cell phone coverage. I can use my phone as a hot spot.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ve left a gift basket of locally grown produce on your dining room table and inside the refrigerator is milk and butter. If you need anything else, the general store’s a good place to visit. I’ll take your suitcase inside.”

Daniel grabbed the handle. “It’s okay. I’ll do it.”

I stepped away. A handsome, workaholic businessman whose life wasn’t complete without the Internet had just walked into my life. And, no doubt, he’d leave just as quickly if his cell phone stopped working.

“I’ll let you get settled. My cell phone number’s in the information pack. If you need anything, just ask.” I sent him what I hoped was a sincere smile before leaving him to unpack.

At least for now, he was staying. And hopefully, if he enjoyed his visit, he’d tell his friends about the pretty cottage beside Willow Lake.



## Page 6

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six

DANIEL

As soon as Ben left, I called my brother. Even though my secretary had made the booking, Owen would've had something to do with the lack of Internet access. He would have known it was unlikely I'd spend each day on the lake fishing or hiking on the mountain trails. My laptop was an extension of my brain. It went everywhere I went and, like most things in my life, required little to no maintenance.

"Hi, big brother. I got the photo."

I picked up my suitcase and carried it toward the front door. "The cottage Charlotte booked has no Internet connection."

"You're supposed to be on vacation, not working."

"The only reason I'm here is because of work," I reminded him. "Have your contacts uncovered any new information about B.J. Davis?"

"Nothing you haven't seen before. Most artists leave a trail of social media posts about previous exhibitions and what they've been doing. Not B.J. It's almost as if he suddenly appeared on the art scene this year."

I understood the frustration in Owen's voice. If it weren't for the award's application form, we wouldn't even know he lived in Sunrise Bay. "Keep hunting. Any scrap of information might help me convince him to come to New York City." leaving my

suitcase on the wooden veranda, I unlocked the door.

“I’ll let you know if we find anything.” Owen paused. “Are you staying in Acorn Cottage or heading into town?”

“I’m staying at the cottage. I’ll use my cell phone as a hot spot.”

Owen sighed. “I should have taken your phone off you before you left. Try to enjoy yourself. If you don’t find B.J., it’s not the end of the world.”

Enjoying myself hadn’t been a top priority in a long time. Being the chief executive of a multimillion-dollar online shopping company took hard work, perseverance, and a thick skin. My clients expected to purchase the best products in the world. It was my job to make sure that happened.

I stepped into the open-plan kitchen and living room, and was pleasantly surprised. It was light and spacious, and had uninterrupted views of Willow Lake. “Have you heard from Granddad?”

“He’s still in Switzerland speaking with our suppliers. Why don’t you give him a call?”

“He’ll be too busy to talk to me. I’ll see him when he gets home.” When most people were sitting back, enjoying their retirement, my grandfather was still keeping tabs on our company. At eighty-one years of age, Patrick Devlin was a force to be reckoned with. And for the last five years, that force had been aimed straight at me.

“Hang on a minute, Daniel. I need to order my dinner.”

Owen was allergic to kitchens. The only food he ate was from restaurants and cafés around the apartment building where he lived. Luckily for him, there were enough

healthy options to satisfy most people.

While Owen ordered his dinner, I carried my suitcase through to the master bedroom. Although the cottage wasn't the luxurious retreat I'd expected Charlotte to book, it was warm, welcoming, and comfortable. And for two weeks, all mine.

"Okay. I'm back," Owen said into the phone.

"Chinese, Vietnamese, or Thai?"

"Thai, but that's only because there weren't as many people waiting in the line."

"Has anything happened at work?"

Owen groaned. "You've only been gone for one day. The world doesn't come to an end just because you aren't here."

I wasn't interested in what the rest of the world was doing. All I cared about was Wilson Enterprises. "You haven't answered my question."

"That's because you're on vacation. But to save Charlotte from getting a phone call, no, nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Apart from not having the Internet, what's the cottage like?"

"It's clean, tidy, and has great views of the lake." I walked back into the living room. White-washed pine walls and pale gray sofas were a neutral background to the brightly colored cushions and rugs. The wooden floor anchored the room to its surroundings and gave the house character. "It reminds me of Mom and Dad's cottage."

"It's a long time since we've been there."

I heard the wistfulness in my brother's voice. Before our mom and dad died, we'd spent long, hot summers in their cottage on Shelter Island. We'd swum in the river and fished in the creeks. When we weren't pestering our dad to take us on his motorcycle, we'd hung out at the local ice cream parlor.

After our parents died, everything changed. We moved to Manhattan to live with our grandparents, went to a different school, and tried to fit into a different world. We'd gone back to the island a couple of times with our grandparents, but it was never the same.

I leaned against the window frame. "Have you ever thought of going back to Shelter Island?"

"Sometimes. I can't believe Mom and Dad have been gone for twenty-five years."

Neither could I. "Do you want to spend Christmas at their cottage?"

"Are you joking? Since when have you ever taken time off at Christmas."

"I'm not that bad," I muttered.

"Yes, you are. Last year you were in Los Angeles signing a contract with a new supplier. The year before you were somewhere in Europe, and the year before that?—"

"Okay. I get the idea." Maybe Owen was right. I had spent a lot of time away from home, but what did he expect would happen? Working when most people were spending time with their families came with the job. "Do you want to go to the cottage for Christmas or not?"

"I'll go, but I'm not that great with a hammer."

“We shouldn’t need to do anything,” I told him. “We’ve been paying someone to look after the property.”

“The cottage was built fifty years ago and none of the interior has been touched, but don’t worry about that now. You’re on vacation. Just promise me you won’t do any work while you’re in Sunrise Bay.”

Hell would freeze over before I cut myself off from my job. “I can’t do that, but I will call you as soon as I find the mysterious B.J. Davis.”

Owen sighed. “One day, you’ll realize what you’ve been missing. But until then, enjoy your time in Sunrise Bay.”

After I ended the call, I stayed where I was, looking across the lake. I’d always been quieter than Owen, less able to show anyone my true feelings. I shook my head. Some days I wondered if I had any feelings left to share.

The one relationship I thought would last forever had dive-bombed into a major disaster. Since then, I’d been too busy working to worry about personal relationships. As far as I was concerned, they were messy, complicated, and took me away from what I was born to do.

My life revolved around Wilson Enterprises. And right now, my goal was to find B.J. Davis and bring him back to Manhattan for the award ceremony.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:01 am*

seven

BEN

The next morning, I started my day with a smile. For the first time in months, I wasn't working on a Saturday morning. It was my birthday and, this year, I was going to pack a picnic and head into the mountains for a six-hour hike.

Just thinking about taking time off work seemed incredibly decadent. But I'd given my customers plenty of warning and left a closed sign on the front door. Since I'd moved my jewelry store to Main Street, the number of people coming through my door had tripled. It was great for business but didn't give me a lot of spare time.

I opened the kitchen window and smelled the calming scent of pine. Usually, I was so busy that I didn't get to appreciate what was around me. But not today. Today was all about celebrating the last twelve months and looking forward to the next.

My cell phone rang. I looked at the caller display before answering. "Hi, Dad."

"Happy birthday!"

The excitement in his voice made me laugh. "Anyone would think I've won the lottery."

"You've done a lot more than that," Tony Harper said proudly. "Look at what you've achieved. When I held you in my arms when you were a baby, I never thought my little boy would follow in his daddy's footsteps."

“Between you and Mom, I didn’t stand a chance of being anything other than a painter or a jeweler.” I’d spent many wonderful hours sitting in my parents’ studio, watching them create some of the most beautiful pieces of art I’d ever seen. As my mom added layers of paint to her latest canvas, my dad had woven fine strands of gold and silver into intricate pendants or bracelets. Even now, when I was creating my own jewelry, I could sometimes smell the faint aroma of my mom’s oils.

“It wouldn’t have mattered what you did,” my dad said. “Your mom and I would’ve been proud of you.”

My smile disappeared. My mom had died three and a half years ago. It had been a terrible time, not only because of her death but because of the accusations against my dad. Stealing another jeweler’s designs was one of the worst things you could do. The media had turned the trial into a reality TV show, making a mockery of being innocent unless proven guilty.

My mom didn’t believe the lies. But it still hurt knowing she couldn’t spend the last few months of her life peacefully at home.

Even though my dad couldn’t see me, I forced a smile. “Imagine if I’d wanted to be an accountant. You wouldn’t have known what to do with me.”

My dad’s response was immediate. “We would have loved you with all our hearts and then asked you for advice. Completing our taxes was never a favorite part of our lives.”

“It’s not mine, either. What are you doing today?”

“I’m working on a new spring collection. I have some rough ideas about where I want to go with the design, but the individual pieces need a little tweaking.”

Tony Harper might have been cleared of stealing another jeweler's designs, but it hadn't helped him find work. Before the accusations hit the media, he'd worked for a high-end jewelry company in Los Angeles. Afterward, the only job he could find was working for a small jewelry store in San Francisco.

The owner was a friend of my dad's and knew he wouldn't have stolen anything. But mud sticks and Dad had borne the brunt of every false lie and accusation hurled at him.

Throughout everything, Dad's friends stood had stood beside him, allowing him the dignity of grieving for his wife and rebuilding his career.

I opened a kitchen cupboard and took out a coffee cup. "If you get stuck, you can always send your drawings through to me, Dad. I'll have a look and tell you what I think of the design."

"You have enough work to do. Did you decide to close the store today?"

"I did. It feels strange to still be at home and not on my way into town."

My dad sighed. "You spend too much time in your jewelry store. Maybe this year you could try working forty-hour weeks."

I knew my dad worked just as many hours as I did. "I promise to be more aware of how many hours I'm working."

"I suppose that's better than nothing. Did you get the flowers I sent you?"

The bright yellow sunflowers sat in a vase in the center of my table. I touched one of the petals and smiled. "I did. Thank you, they're beautiful."



“They reminded me of the time we went camping with your mom. I wish I was there to celebrate your birthday.”

My eyes filled with tears. The price of clearing my dad’s name had cost him more than his job. The attorney’s bill had bankrupted him and flying to see me wasn’t something he could afford. “I thought I’d fly to San Francisco to see you,” I told him. “It won’t be for another three or four months, though.”

“I’ll look forward to it. Just let me know when you’ll be coming and I’ll take some time off work.”

“That sounds great.” A knot of grief stuck in my chest. “Have you been to the cemetery?”

Each year on my birthday, my dad and I left three roses on my mother’s grave. Mom loved birthdays and had always made a big deal of them. It was our way of making sure she was still part of the celebration, still part of our lives in whatever way we could manage.

The first rose represented the past, the wonderful time we’d had together. The second rose was for the here and now, the choices my dad and I were making to create a better life for ourselves and the people around us. The third rose represented the future, the hope that the next twelve months would bring happiness and joy into our lives.

“I’m driving to the cemetery soon,” Dad told me. “When you come to San Francisco, we’ll go back together.”

“Thank you. I’d like that.”

My dad sighed. “You don’t need to thank me, Ben. The roses help me, too. Are you

doing something special to celebrate your birthday?”

“I’m going hiking.” I could only imagine what my dad must be thinking. For someone who never did more than walk around the lake, hiking in the mountains was pushing my comfort level to the extreme. “Don’t worry. I’ve got a good map and all the safety gear I’ll need.”

“Remember to tell someone where you’re going and when you’ll be back. And call me when you arrive home. I don’t want to spend the day worrying about you.”

“I’ll be back around three o’clock. If you aren’t home, I’ll call your cell phone.” I checked my watch. “I have to go, Dad. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Make sure you remember to call me,” Tony said sternly. “I love you, baby boy.”

“Love you, too.” After I said goodbye, I stared through the kitchen window. Neither of our lives had been the same since my mom died. But somehow, we’d made every day count toward something amazing. And if it weren’t for the jewelry award, my life would be even better.

eight

DANIEL

I checked my watch. Without missing a step, I increased my speed, sprinting the last quarter mile around the lake.

Running was the only time I truly felt free. If I was stressed, tired, or had something on my mind, I'd change out of my suit and run through Central Park.

This morning, I wasn't stressed or tired, but I did have something on my mind. I'd never met B.J. Davis, never heard his voice, or looked at a clear photo of him. But his jewelry was distracting me from everything I needed to do.

Last night, I'd studied his website. It wasn't an exaggeration to say I was in awe of his latest collection. Each piece was exquisitely designed and beautifully made.

The sooner I tracked down the elusive artist, the quicker I could put my next plan into action. I'd make him the next Givenchy of the jewelry world. And no one, including an unknown jeweler from Colorado, would turn down the chance of becoming a household name in the lives of the rich and famous.

Dropping my chin to my chest, I dug deep for the last hundred yards. Sweat poured off my face and my breathing became more labored. I savored each stride, pushed myself a little harder until, with a relieved groan, I made it back to the cottage.

Resting my hands on my hips, I breathed deeply, sucking air into my oxygen-

deprived lungs. As my heart rate decreased, I focused on the water, absorbing the serenity of the lake. My mind emptied of everything, leaving me more relaxed than I'd been in a long time.

"Do you always run so fast?"

I jumped. I hadn't expected to see anyone, let alone Ben. "Are you always awake this early in the morning?"

He tilted his head and smiled. "I'm usually in Sunrise Bay by now, but it's my birthday. I've taken the day off work."

"Congratulations." Picking up the towel I'd left on the veranda, I wiped my face. "For most people, that'd be even more reason to sleep in."

"Not me. I hardly ever get time away from work, so I'm making the most of it."

I looked at the boots on his feet and the shorts and T-shirt hugging his lean hips and wide shoulders. "Are you going hiking?"

"Good guess. A friend told me about a trail twenty minutes northeast of Sunrise Bay. I thought I'd spend most of the day there, then come home and recover." He straightened his baseball cap and sent me a dazzling smile. "I forgot to tell you about the Saturday market in Sunrise Bay. If you need any fresh fruit or want to sample the local food, the market's the place to go."

"Thanks. I was going into town anyway, so I'll have a look."

"If you see a parking space, grab it fast. People come from all around Willow Lake to enjoy the market. Finding somewhere to park can be a real problem."

I hadn't noticed how brown Ben's eyes were. They reminded me of the color of chocolate. Sweet, addictive, and totally bad for me. "Do you need anything from the market?"

"No, I'm okay. I bought my groceries yesterday, so my pantry's full. Enjoy your day." Ben turned and walked toward his cottage.

I needed to find B.J. Davis, and Ben was the only person I knew in Sunrise Bay. If the jeweler wasn't in his store a little insider knowledge might help me find him. But I couldn't afford to be too obvious. B.J. lived in a small town. If he didn't want to be found, he might have asked his friends not to tell anyone where he lived.

I jogged after Ben. "Can I ask you a question?"

He stopped and turned around. "Sure."

"I want to buy a friend some jewelry. Is there a store in town you'd recommend?"

Ben's polite smile wavered. "It depends on your budget. The general store has some cute necklaces and bracelets made by local craftspeople. If you want something more expensive, there's a jewelry store on Main Street."

"Are you talking about Davis Jewelry?"

A blush worked its way over Ben's face. "Have you heard of them?"

"My brother came across their website a few weeks ago. They have some beautiful necklaces."

"They do. I don't think the store's open today, but you could always visit on Monday."

I studied Ben's face, wondering how he'd respond to my next question. "Do you know B.J. Davis?"

"I umm... I've met him a few times." He wiped his hands on his shorts and sent me a nervous smile. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," I replied, wondering what was on his mind.

"Where do you work?"

Ben's question surprised me. I'd assumed my secretary had put the booking under my company's name. "I work for Wilson Enterprises."

If I thought Ben was wary before, he was even more shocked now. He cleared his throat and plastered a smile on his face. "That's good to know. Enjoy seeing Sunrise Bay."

I frowned as Ben walked back to his cottage, instead of heading toward the lake. Something wasn't right, only I didn't know him well enough to understand what had just happened.

The only thing I did know was that I needed to head into town. Ben knew a lot more about Davis Jewelry than he'd told me. And if there was one area where I excelled, it was getting to the bottom of a problem and finding the answer.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:01 am*

nine

BEN

After talking to Daniel I needed to speak to my friends. I should have known he had something to do with Wilson Enterprises. After ignoring their emails and phone calls, it was too much of a coincidence that someone from New York City had booked into my cottage at the last moment.

I gripped the steering wheel. Anyone with half a brain would've put two and two together and come up with four. But not me. I'd thought my guest was here for the same reason most people came to Colorado. To enjoy the peace and tranquility of the wide-open spaces and to de-stress after leaving their hectic lifestyles.

I couldn't have been more wrong. Daniel wasn't exactly here under false pretenses, but he wasn't being totally honest, either. He'd come to Sunrise Bay to find B.J. Davis. What he didn't know was that he'd already found him.

As I stopped my SUV behind the jewelry store, I looked at the two vehicles parked behind Candy Lane. Thank goodness Paul and Jonathon were both working. If anyone could give me some good advice, it was them.

With a trembling hand I knocked on the back door. The last thing I wanted was to enter the building from Main Street. If Daniel was in town he might see me, and any chance of staying out of his way would be gone.

"Happy Birthday!" Jonathon said as he opened the door. "I'm glad you came to see

us. Paul and I were just talking about you.”

Paul pulled me inside and frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s here.”

My friends looked at each other.

“Who’s here?” Paul asked.

“Daniel Devlin. He’s staying in my cottage and looking for B.J. Davis. What should I do?”

Jonathon wrapped his arm around my waist. “The first thing you’re going to do is sit down.”

“I’ll make coffee,” Paul said as he hurried across the room.

As soon as I sat behind the large, stainless steel counter, I dropped my head into my hands. “I’ve been making jewelry in Sunrise Bay for three years. Only a few people have asked why the name on my store is different from the one I use. As soon as Daniel discovers I work there, he’ll see straight through what I’ve done.”

Paul placed a cup of coffee in front of me. “Who’s Daniel?”

I studied my friends’ faces. They didn’t know anything about Daniel’s booking or why he was in Sunrise Bay. “He’s a man who’s staying in Acorn Cottage for two weeks. As soon as he told me he works for Wilson Enterprises I looked at their website. He’s the chief executive.”

Jonathon looked as stunned as I was. “Did you tell him you own the jewelry store?”



“No, but it won’t take him long to figure it out. Especially if he goes into the general store.” Jenny Cook, one of the owners of the general store, was a lovely woman who also happened to be the center of town gossip. If Daniel wanted a blow-by-blow description of everything I’d done since I arrived in Sunrise Bay, Jenny was the person to see.

Paul leaned against the counter. “Is Wilson Enterprises the company who wants to give you the jewelry award?”

I nodded. “I haven’t opened any of their emails for weeks. After I spoke to Daniel this morning, I read their last message. They want me to go to the award ceremony.”

Jonathon leaned forward. “So, Daniel knows about Davis Jewelry, but not that Ben Harper is B.J. Davis?”

“It won’t take him long to discover I’m Tony Harper’s son.” I glanced at my friends, hoping they understood why I was so worried. “Dad’s name was dragged through the mud by every major media outlet in America. Jewelers he respected shunned him and no one would sell his jewelry.”

“But you aren’t your dad,” Paul insisted. “And besides, your father didn’t steal anything.”

“It doesn’t matter. Even after the court case, no one wanted Dad to work with them. If it weren’t for his friend in San Francisco, he never would have found another job. If anyone realizes Tony Harper’s son has won the Wilson Award, they might boycott Dad’s friend’s store and mine. It could be a disaster.”

“This might sound extreme,” Jonathon said, “but why don’t you tell Daniel who you are and why you’re living in Sunrise Bay? At least that way he gets the facts and not some harebrained story someone else might tell him.”

Paul nodded. “Jonathon’s right. You’ve already told Wilson Enterprises you don’t want the award. If there’s even a hint of a scandal, Daniel’s company won’t want anything to do with you.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re right. All I have to do is tell him who I am. After that, Daniel will go back to New York City and I’ll never hear from him again.”

Paul studied my face. “Do you want me to be there when you talk to him?”

“I’ll be okay. If I’d been with Dad when Daniel was at the trial, I would have recognized him. But Dad wanted me to stay away from everything that was happening.”

“It’ll be okay,” Jonathon assured me. “Do you still want us to come to your house for dinner?”

“Of course, I do.” I pushed aside my worries. I’d have enough time to think about Daniel while I was hiking. “The meat for the barbecue is marinating and I have enough ice cream to sink a battleship.”

“In that case,” Jonathon said with a grin. “We’ll be there at six o’clock to celebrate your birthday.”

Paul hugged me. “And don’t worry. It will all work out the way it’s supposed to.”

I hoped so because, right now, I didn’t know what would happen.

ten

DANIEL

I was glad Ben had told me to take the first parking space I saw. The traffic was every bit as chaotic as he'd said.

Yesterday, Sunrise Bay looked like any other small Colorado town. But today, vehicles drove bumper-to-bumper along Main Street. People zig-zagged between the traffic to cross the road, and the sidewalks were overflowing with eager shoppers.

While I was in town, I thought I'd take a look at what Sunrise Bay had to offer. Unlike a lot of places in America, this town had steered clear of the big box retailers. Boutique stores offered everything from hand-knitted jumpers to one-of-a-kind ball gowns. There were art galleries, antique stores, and flower shops. Everything was designed to give visitors a memorable experience of life in a small town.

And if someone could solve Sunrise Bay's parking issues, they'd double the number of people shopping in the stores.

After an hour of dodging screaming toddlers and people who thought the sidewalk belonged to them, I found somewhere I didn't mind waiting.

Candy Lane was halfway down Main Street and, in my humble opinion, one of the best candy stores I'd ever seen. The smell of rich, chocolate fudge had pulled me into the store, but it wasn't the only product that kept me there. The sample trays of other candy tantalized my taste buds and kept everyone busy as they stood in line, waiting

to purchase their candy.

Whoever owned the store had created a gold mine. Each piece of candy was delicious. The packaging and branding were what you'd expect from a high-end retail store. If anyone needed another enticement to buy the candy, all they needed to do was look at the prices. Compared to what I'd pay in Manhattan, it was ridiculously cheap.

I sent a quick email to my procurement team, then took another box of maple fudge off the counter. My brother had a mile-wide sweet tooth. If I ever needed Owen's help, a box or two of this fudge would give me a definite advantage.

By the time I made it to the front of the line, my arms were full.

The man behind the counter smiled as he helped me stack the boxes. "You'll enjoy this candy."

I returned his smile. "They aren't all for me. It was hard to choose which candy to take home."

"That's what everyone says. I think that's why most people become regular customers. Each time they visit the store or shop online, they can try something new." The man packed my candy and rang up my sale. "Do you like marshmallow?"

I nodded, not sure why he'd asked.

"I have something you might enjoy." He reached into the display case and placed a gift-wrapped cellophane bag on the counter. "We've just started making boysenberry ripple marshmallow dipped in dark chocolate. Try it and tell me what you think."

I was taken aback by his generosity. "I'm happy to pay for it."

He waved away my offer. “And I’m equally happy to give it to you. If you’re only in Sunrise Bay for the market, you can leave a review on our website. If you want to reorder anything, we mail candy around the world.”

“You’ve made it easy for people to become loyal customers.”

“It’s easy when you have a wonderful product. Enjoy your time in Sunrise Bay.”

“I will. Thanks for the marshmallow.” And before I was tempted to buy more candy, I left the store. I had one more thing to do before I walked to the market, and it was only a few steps away.

eleven

DANIEL

The people crowding the sidewalk outside Candy Lane almost hid my next destination. The small, red-brick building was the home of Davis Jewelers. Nothing about the exterior stood out as special. It could have been another art gallery or fashion boutique, but I knew better.

With my nose pressed against the large front window, I felt like I was seven years old, shopping for Christmas presents with my mom. The same sense of wonder, the same overwhelming need to touch everything I saw was bubbling inside me. Because, regardless of what the store looked like from the outside, Davis Jewelry had some of the most exquisite pendants, bracelets, and earrings I'd ever seen.

"The store isn't open today. It's the owner's birthday."

I looked at the woman standing beside me. "Do you know the owner?"

"Everyone knows Ben," the woman said with a smile. "I'm Jenny Cook. My husband and I own the general store."

I stilled. "Are you talking about Ben Harper?"

"That's right. He opened this store a few months ago. Ben's first jewelry store was a couple of blocks away. Aren't the necklaces lovely?"

They were more than lovely. If I had anything to do with it, women from around the world would be coveting a piece of jewelry from these collections. “I thought B.J. Davis owned the store.”

“Ben is B.J. Davis. I asked him why he called the store Davis Jewelry. He said Davis was his mother’s maiden name. If there’s something you want to buy, you could always call him. I’m sure he’d send the jewelry to you.”

No wonder Ben had been shocked. He was the person I was looking for. “That won’t be necessary. I’m staying at Acorn Cottage for a couple of weeks. I’ll talk to him when I get home.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. “What a coincidence! You should ask him to show you his studio. A friend’s granddaughter visited with a group of classmates. They were so excited that everyone returned to school wanting to be a jeweler.”

That didn’t surprise me. “He seems like a nice person.” A nice, private person who wanted to keep his real identity a secret.

“He’s a wonderful person,” Jenny added. “Did you know he’s organizing an auction to raise money for The Welcome Center? It’s an amazing facility where people can get budgeting advice, counseling, or a warm bed for the night. I don’t know what Pastor Adam would do without him.”

My parents would turn in their graves if they were listening to this conversation. I’d never enjoyed gossiping about someone, but I was on a mission to bring Ben back to Manhattan and I didn’t have much time.

“What else does he enjoy doing?”

Jenny tapped her chin. “Well, he always helps with any school fundraisers, and he

enjoys spending time with his friends.” Jenny pointed to my bags of candy. “His friend Jonathon owns the store you’ve just visited. They arrived in Sunrise Bay about the same time and have been friends ever since.”

I looked over Jenny’s shoulder. Guilt made my pulse leap in my throat. At a guess, I’d say Jonathon was the person who’d served me. It was time to go for a walk and think about what I’d do next. “Thanks for telling me about Ben. Do you know the quickest way to the market?”

Jenny gave me a detailed description of how to get to the main entrance. By the time I’d assured her I’d visit the general store before I left, my nerves were strung tight. Now that Ben knew who I was I might not be staying in the cottage for long.

I sighed. If I’d asked Owen to find B.J. Davis, I could have saved myself from sitting through a four-hour flight. Instead of holding boxes of candy, I’d be sitting behind my desk, reviewing contracts and reading strategic reports written by my senior staff.

As I crossed the road, I admired the colorful bunting decorating the stores. Baskets of flowers hung from the lampposts, and couples held hands as they enjoyed the warm Colorado sunshine.

For the first time in years, sitting forty-two stories above one of Manhattan’s busiest streets sounded incredibly soul-destroying.



twelve

BEN

After I left town, I'd returned to the lake and spent three hours on one of my favorite trails. But it hadn't done anything to clear my head. If anything, I was even more worried about Daniel.

If I'd known Daniel was the chief executive of Wilson Enterprises, I wouldn't have accepted his booking. He must have known I didn't want to see him, but he'd still come to Sunrise Bay looking for B.J. Davis.

Now that I'd met him, I was curious about who he was and why on earth he'd wanted to meet me. According to what I'd learned from the Internet, Daniel was thirty-eight years old, single, and gay. Unsurprisingly, the college he'd gone to would have bankrupted my family in the first year.

The only hint of a scandal was when his fiancé had left him four years ago. There were a few photos of the estranged couple after news of his fiancé's affair broke but, other than that, Daniel's private life hadn't hit mainstream media.

Unlike its CEO, Wilson Enterprises had made the most of its position in the lives of the rich and famous. Entire articles were dedicated to the jewelry, the furniture, and the art their high-profile customers had purchased. Just thinking about what some of the products must have cost made my eyes water.

As I made my way back to my cottage, I looked at the mountains behind my property

and smiled. Even if I had as much money as Daniel, I wouldn't change where I lived or what I did. But I would have changed what had brought me here.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel driveway behind me.

I turned and stared at Daniel. For someone who rarely made public appearances and valued his privacy, he didn't waste time when he wanted something. Even if I didn't understand why he was here, I had to give him credit for his perseverance.

He held a helium-filled balloon toward me. "I was hoping I'd see you."

My eyes widened. The colorful glitter inside the balloon sparkled in the afternoon sunshine.

"Happy Birthday. I hope you enjoyed your day in the mountains."

Despite my nerves, I smiled as I took the balloon. "Thanks. The scenery was amazing, but I had a lot on my mind."

Daniel nodded as if he understood what I meant. "I need to?—"

"I want—" I frowned. We'd both spoken at the same time. "You go first."

He pushed his hands into his pockets and took a deep breath. At some stage, he'd changed out of his running shorts and T-shirt and replaced them with navy trousers and a white business shirt.

"I came to Sunrise Bay to find B.J. Davis."

My heart sped out of control, but I tried hard not to show any reaction to his words.

“While I was in town, I bumped into Jenny Cook. She told me you own Davis Jewelry.”

I lifted my chin. “Davis was my mother’s maiden name.” I knew I wasn’t making the conversation any easier, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say. For three years, I’d been careful not to associate my professional name with my legal name. If Daniel had found me, then any of the reporters who’d ruthlessly covered my father’s court case could do the same thing.

“Why have you been ignoring the emails from Wilson Enterprises?”

I lowered my backpack to the ground. “I didn’t enter your jewelry award. My friend completed the application form without asking me. When your company contacted me, I thought it was a hoax. It wasn’t until I mentioned something to Eric that he told me what he’d done. He thought he was doing something wonderful for my career, but it was the last thing I needed.”

Daniel’s eyes narrowed as if he was trying to find a lie hidden in what I’d said. “You could have told us you wanted to withdraw your entry.”

“I did, but the person I spoke to said it was too late. I thought if I ignored your emails and phone calls, I wouldn’t have to go to the award dinner or be part of any publicity.”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

Daniel wasn’t impressed, but I didn’t care. If I had to choose between my dad and Wilson Enterprises, I’d choose my dad every time.

Daniel’s brown eyes settled on my face. “Why won’t you accept the award?”

I tightened my hold on the balloon. I didn't know him well enough to tell him everything. "I prefer to keep out of the spotlight. The person who wins the award won't have much privacy for a while."

"If you accept the award, it'll transform your life. Being associated with Wilson Enterprises' prestige store will open the door to opportunities you never thought were possible."

He didn't have to tell me what the award could do for my career. "I'm sorry, but I don't want all the attention. Can't you give the award to the person who came second?"

When Daniel didn't say anything, I picked up my backpack. "I won't change my mind. If you decide to go home, I'll refund the balance of the money you've paid for the cottage. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a meal to prepare."

Daniel caught up to me and reached out, stopping me from leaving. "I saw your latest collection in your store window. It was extraordinary. Marketing your jewelry to my clients would change your life."

I shrugged off his hand. "I want people to enjoy wearing my jewelry regardless of how much money they have. For me, a big part of creating a collection is knowing my customers will enjoy each piece when they wear it."

Daniel didn't look as though he believed me.

"It's true. There's more to life than having millions of dollars in your bank account."

"Not in my experience."

The sadness in his eyes made my breath catch. What kind of life did Daniel have that

reduced his happiness to how much he earned?

But he wasn't the only person who thought money was important. I used to think the same thing. It wasn't until my family lost everything that I realized just how superficial my life had been.

Having no money had built resilience, but it had also instilled a deep fear of not being able to look after myself. I never wanted to go back to where my family had been, to the dark hole of depression that had consumed my father.

No matter what I had to do, I'd never risk my dad being hurt again. He had a job he loved, a salary that enabled him to do whatever he wanted, and a past that still haunted him.

Gathering every scrap of courage inside me, I looked straight into Daniel's eyes. "I guess money means different things to each of us. Have a nice evening." As I walked toward my cottage, Daniel's gaze sent prickles of awareness down my spine.

He didn't know what to do with me, and I couldn't blame him. If I'd just offered someone the world and they'd turned me down, I'd be confused, too.

thirteen

BEN

Later that night, I sat on the sofa in my living room with my friends around me. I smiled at something Riley said to Dylan and Eric, then laughed when Paul and Liam rushed into the kitchen to rescue Amy from a bowl of whipped cream.

Amy was Paul's seven-year-old niece. When Paul's sister and parents died in a car accident, he'd become the little girl's legal guardian. Since then, they'd developed a close bond that was like any father-daughter relationship.

When Amy walked into the living room, I smiled. "Did you manage to lick the bowl clean before your uncle arrived?"

Amy sat on the sofa, gazing up at me with big, blue eyes. "I had lots and lots," she whispered. "Uncle Paul said I'll have a tummy ache."

"Is it sore now?"

"No. Maybe I didn't have enough."

The possibility of that was extremely low. Amy had been alone in the kitchen for more than ten minutes with the leftover dessert from my birthday dinner. A lot could happen in a little girl's life in that time. "You probably had just the right amount."

When Paul came back into the room, he was holding a huge birthday cake and

singing Happy Birthday . By the time everyone joined in there were tears in my eyes.

“Happy birthday, Ben,” Jonathon said as Paul placed the cake on the coffee table.

I gave my friend a hug before wiping my eyes. “Where did the cake come from?”

“I baked it today,” Paul said with a grin. “It was hidden in my truck. Happy Birthday.”

After more hugs and birthday wishes, I looked more closely at the cake. Candles sparkled from the top of the white frosting, and glittery gold stars cascaded down the sides. “It’s gorgeous. Thank you.”

Amy jumped up and down. “There’s twenty-one candles. I counted them for you.”

Paul grinned. “We thought thirty-one would be a fire hazard.”

Dylan waved his hand above the flames. “Talking about fires, you should blow out the candles before the smoke alarms start beeping.”

I looked at the excitement on my friends’ faces and sighed. There was so much love in the room that it made my heart swell with pride.

I knelt beside Amy. “Would you help me blow out the candles?”

“Yes, please!”

“We’ll count to three, then blow them out. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready,” Amy squealed.

“Okay. One...two...three!” I blew as hard as I could.

When Amy extinguished the last two stubborn flames, everyone clapped and cheered.

I enjoyed the moment. The last few years had been a roller coaster of ups and downs but, through it all, I’d had my dad and friends beside me. A person couldn’t ask for much more than that—especially when they only had twenty-one candles on their cake.



fourteen

DANIEL

Sitting on the veranda of Acorn Cottage, I listened to Ben's friends enjoying his birthday. The sixties soundtrack they were playing traveled well in the still evening air, especially when the only things around me were a glistening lake, acres of trees, and a sky full of stars.

Their laughter brought back memories of my family's birthdays on Shelter Island. My mom would bake a cake, smother it in frosting, and we'd all blow out the candles. Sometimes, Dad would even relight them so we could do it again.

A deep longing for the past filled me with sadness. After my parents died, birthdays were never the same. Granddad and Grandma tried their best, but the two most important people in my life were missing.

"Hello. Are you Daniel?"

I almost fell off my chair. A little girl stood at the edge of the veranda, holding a red-haired rag doll.

"I am. Who are you?"

"I'm Amy and this is Dolly. Did you hear us sing happy birthday to Ben?"

I looked over her shoulder, hoping her parents weren't far away. At least I knew she

was supposed to be at Ben's house and wasn't lost. "Yes, I heard you singing. Where are your Mom and Dad?"

Her smile faded. "My mommy died when I was a baby. Uncle Paul and Liam look after me now." She took a step closer and peered through the open French doors. "Where are your mommy and daddy?"

"They died too."

"Really? Who looks after you?"

I swallowed, a familiar ache tightening in my chest. "My grandparents looked after me when I was younger, but now I look after myself."

"Oh. Do you like looking after yourself?"

I rubbed my jaw, unsure of what to say. "It's okay. I have a brother named Owen. He spends a lot of time with me."

Amy grinned and skipped across to my chair. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Her big, blue eyes stared up at me, almost bursting with the information she wanted to share. I hadn't spent much time around children. Most of my friends had delayed having families, and my brother had enough trouble keeping a girlfriend happy, let alone thinking about becoming a dad.

"If your uncle wouldn't mind you telling me your secret, then that's all right."

Amy leaned against the arm of my chair. "I'm going to be a big sister," she whispered. "But don't tell anyone. Uncle Paul said it's a surprise."

My eyebrows rose. Her uncle would be even more surprised if he knew what Amy had told me. “That’s wonderful. I promise not to tell anyone.”

She held her little finger in the air. “Pinky promise?”

I almost smiled until I saw Amy’s worried frown. With a solemn nod, I touched my little finger to hers. “Pinky promise.”

The two words unleashed another dimpled grin from my pint-sized visitor.

“Why did you come to see me, Amy?”

“Ben wanted to invite you for cake, but he said he had to tidy his studio first. Then Uncle Paul and Jonathon started helping. So I thought I’d come and see you. Are you Ben’s boyfriend?”

Just when I thought I’d aced the conversation, Amy managed to leave me speechless. “Um...no. I’m giving Ben money to stay in this cottage.”

“Why?”

Telling a six or seven-year-old that I wanted Ben to come back to Manhattan would open a can of worms. So I stuck to the second reason I was here—the one that had as much chance of happening as the first. “I’m on vacation. My brother thought it would make me happy.”

“Have you been fishing?”

I shook my head.

“Jonathon’s friend has a boat. If you went fishing with him, you could bring a fish

home for Ben. Then you'd be his boyfriend and you wouldn't have to look after yourself all the time."

I had no idea how we'd gone from fishing to boyfriends. And even less of an idea about what to say to Amy. But I did know one thing. It was time to take her back to her uncle.

"Come on, Amy. I'll take you to Ben's house."

"Do you want to stay for cake?"

"Only if it's still okay with Ben."

Amy wrapped her hand around mine. "We could be friends, but you're a lot taller than me."

"That's because I'm an adult." As we walked toward Ben's cottage, Amy told me about the other adults who were her friends. She was a walking, talking, encyclopedia of information—and an adorable optimist who made me smile.

If I ever had children, I hoped they were just like Amy. Life could be unpredictable and, sometimes, all you needed was an excited child to remind you about what was important.

fifteen

BEN

I met Daniel and Amy a few feet from my cottage. “I thought I’d find the two of you together.”

Amy had a grin on her face. “Daniel heard us singing happy birthday. Did you know he has a goldfish called SpongeBob?”

“No, I didn’t. Why is he called SpongeBob?”

“Cos he’s yellow and swims in the water,” Amy said quickly. “Daniel likes cake, too.”

“I’m glad because we’ve got plenty.”

“That’s what I said, too. I’ll get everything ready.”

Amy rushed inside, leaving me with Daniel.

He cleared his throat. “I’m surprised you want to share your birthday cake with me.”

I shrugged. “It’s a nice cake. But, to be honest, I didn’t think you’d still be here.”

“I promised my brother I’d take a vacation. If I go back to work early, he’ll find an excuse to send me back to my apartment.”

“You work together?”

“Not usually, but a lot is happening at the moment. While I’m here, he’s making sure everything runs smoothly at work.”

I could imagine Daniel leading an organization. He seemed calm and unflappable, the type of person you could depend on in an emergency. “Does your brother like being in charge?”

“Most of the time. He travels a lot with the business he owns, so it’s a novelty to be in one place for longer than a week.”

“You both sound busy.”

Daniel sighed. “Which is why Owen suggested I come here. As well as searching for you, he thought spending some time away from the office would do me good.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry coming here was a waste of time.”

“Nothing’s ever a waste. Even though you’re not coming to Manhattan to accept the award, I’m enjoying Sunrise Bay. I found an amazing candy store and I’m meeting an artist tomorrow to talk about his paintings.”

A little of the guilt lifted from my shoulders. Before we went inside, I thought I’d better warn Daniel about my friends. “Paul, Eric, and Riley are amazing people, but I can’t guarantee they won’t be acting a little crazy. Dylan’s getting married in three weeks and Jonathon’s planning his own wedding. He owns Candy Lane, the store I think you were talking about.”

“I won’t hold any wedding conversation against them, especially if the owner of the candy store is here.”

I winced. If even half the media stories about his engagement were correct, Daniel wouldn't enjoy any conversation about people finding their happy-ever-after. "I'm sorry. I forgot about your engagement."

"How did you know..." Daniel's frown deepened. "You found the articles about Tom and me."

"I shouldn't have been snooping into your life, but I wanted to know who you were. Apart from the fundraising work your company does, your engagement was the only information I could find."

"I don't like discussing my personal life with the media."

He wasn't the only one.

Amy ran out of the cottage and pulled Daniel inside. "Come and see the living room. There are balloons and glitter and lots of flowers."

Daniel's serious face broke into a grin.

When he looked at me, my heart pounded.

"It looks as though I'm going to meet your friends. You'd better come with me in case I need back-up."

I followed him into the kitchen. For better or worse, Daniel Devlin was getting under my skin, and I wasn't sure what to do about it.

sixteen

DANIEL

After Ben's friends went home, I sat on his veranda, listening to the music playing on his sound system. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had so much fun. Ben's friends had kept me amused with stories about Sunrise Bay. None of them had been born here but, for different reasons, they'd made Colorado their home.

"Here you go." Ben handed me a cup of coffee. "Would you like another slice of cake?"

I shook my head. "If I have any more I'll have to run twice as far tomorrow. The cake was delicious."

"Paul's a great baker. I still can't believe it was Jonathon's candy store you visited."

"It's a small world. I'll make sure my procurement team calls him next week. A lot of people would enjoy his candy."

Ben sat in the chair beside me. "Does your brain ever switch off?"

I leaned back and stared up at the sky. "No."

Ben groaned. "You're a workaholic."

I smiled. "Probably. But my grandfather used to work twice as many hours and he



never called himself a workaholic.”

“What did your grandma think of him not being at home?”

“I never asked, but I think Owen and I helped fill the void.”

Ben frowned. “What happened?”

“My parents died when I was eleven and my brother was nine.” I closed my eyes and let the peacefulness of the evening wash through me. “Mom and Dad were on their way to a charity fundraiser when a drunk driver hit their car. Grandma and Granddad were looking after us.”

I didn’t remember much about that night or the days that followed. All I knew was that I’d missed my parents so much that I had a permanent stomach ache for years. I was always worried that something would happen to Owen or my grandparents and they’d never come home.

“Your grandparents must be proud of what you’ve done.”

I frowned. “Grandma was proud of us regardless of what we did. Granddad’s different.” I looked at Ben, wanting him to understand the man who’d raised us. “Granddad’s parents were Irish immigrants. He always felt as though he needed to prove something. Owen and I had to be the best at what we did. Coming second wasn’t an option.”

“That’s a lot of pressure.”

“I suppose it was, but at the time I thought it was the way everyone acted. It wasn’t until much later that I realized I didn’t have to be the best at everything. What about you? Why did you become a jeweler?”

Ben looked as though he was choosing his words carefully. “My dad was a jeweler and Mom was a painter. When I was little, I had my own desk in their studio. I’d sit for hours, drawing what I thought were the most amazing necklaces in the world.” He sent me a lopsided smile. “When Dad made his jewelry, he explained everything he was doing. I must’ve been the only five-year-old who’d used a soldering pick.”

I could imagine Ben sitting in his parents’ studio. He would have been absorbing their creativity like a dry sponge floating in a bowl of water.

“Is your dad still a jeweler?”

Ben nodded. “He’s a wonderful man, but he’s also a perfectionist. He won’t stop tweaking his designs until he has everything exactly how he wants them.”

“He sounds like someone I’m sitting beside.”

“Don’t tell anyone, but you might be right.”

Ben’s smile made my heart pound. He had an easy, genuine charm that drew me in and made me wonder what would have happened if we’d met each other under different circumstances. “So, tell me, Mr. Perfectionist, what’s a talented, beautiful man like yourself doing in Sunrise Bay?”

Ben bit his bottom lip.

I didn’t know why the question made him uncomfortable. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“It’s all right.” Ben looked down at his hands. “Some friends spent a few weeks in Boulder and loved the area. When I was searching for somewhere a little quieter to live, I decided to explore Willow Lake. As soon as I saw Sunrise Bay, I knew I

wanted to live here.”

I frowned. Something about his story wasn’t making sense. After Ben told me he was B.J. Davis, I’d called my brother and asked him to do a background check on Ben. Owen had found some interesting information.

After he left high school, Ben was a student at a creative design studio in Los Angeles. By the time he was twenty, he was holding successful exhibitions and making a name for himself. When he turned twenty-five, his jewelry featured in several high-profile magazines. Then, when he was twenty-seven, he moved to San Francisco and disappeared off everyone’s radar.

Last year, B.J. Davis hit the arts scene with a splash, showcasing his jewelry on the cover of a top women’s fashion magazine. And now, he’d won the prestigious Wilson Award.

I studied Ben’s face. “Wouldn’t a larger city have given you a lot more opportunity to grow your business?”

“Definitely, but living in a city is expensive. I wouldn’t have been able to afford my own store or buy a home. Sunrise Bay has everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“How did your family feel about you moving here?”

Ben sighed. “Dad understood why I needed to live somewhere else.”

I wanted to ask him a lot more questions, but the wariness on his face worried me. Perhaps he was right to be careful. I wanted him to accept the award, but that was only the beginning of what he could do for Wilson Enterprises.

I didn’t like manipulating anyone but, as chief executive, I’d done my fair share of

changing people's minds. Only this time, I wasn't playing for shareholder loyalty; I was fighting for my future.

I wanted to know what Ben was passionate about, why he wanted to stay in Sunrise Bay and not fast-track his career. "Your friends are excited about the auction for The Welcome Center. Why did you get involved?"

If anything, Ben became even more guarded. "I knew some homeless people. If it weren't for the kindness of strangers, they would have stayed on the street for a lot longer than they did. When I moved to Sunrise Bay, I read an article about The Welcome Center. The church helps people who need a safe, warm place to stay. I contacted Pastor Adam and began volunteering. Before I knew it, I was helping to organize different fundraising events, including the auction."

"Do you need more donations?"

"We wouldn't say no. Everything will sell no matter how big or small. If you want to donate something, all you need to do is take it into the church. Pastor Adam will make sure it's added to the list of items to be auctioned."

"I'll organize something tomorrow." I had to look away when Ben smiled. For the first time in years, I was finding it hard to justify what I was doing.

Ben trusted me, and I was doing everything I could to make him do something he didn't want to do.

seventeen

BEN

On Monday morning, as I was getting my jewelry store ready for the day, Paul knocked on the front door.

I flicked open the deadbolt and smiled. “You’re here early.”

“You didn’t tell me Daniel looks like an NBA basketball player. He’s gorgeous.”

The heat of a blush hit my face. “Looks aren’t everything,” I mumbled.

“Maybe not, but they don’t hurt. If he was offering me an all-expenses-paid flight to Manhattan, you wouldn’t be able to stop me.”

I opened a jewelry case and took out a necklace. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“I know you don’t want the publicity, but accepting the award could make a huge difference to your career.”

“I’m happy with how everything’s going.” I carefully placed the necklace in the front window. I knew Paul cared about me, but he didn’t know what had happened after my family went to Los Angeles. “Amy enjoyed meeting Daniel. She didn’t leave his side all evening.”

Paul grinned. “She asked questions that no one else would.”

I knew the tone in Paul's voice. "You don't need to tell me he's great with kids. When I saw them walking toward my cottage, they looked as though they were already best buddies."

"There must be something wrong with him."

My eyebrows rose. "Why?"

"He's thirty-eight years old and still single. I can't believe someone hasn't snapped him up and marched him down the aisle."

"Maybe he decided not to date anyone after his engagement ended. I can't say I blame him."

Paul took the glass cleaner and cloth out of my hand and wiped the counter. "Neither can I. But that was a few years ago. He needs to expand his social circle and date a jeweler from Sunrise Bay."

I burst out laughing. "Daniel lives in Manhattan. He works long hours and is more interested in acquiring new products for his company than dating. The chance of anything happening between us is practically zilch."

"Do you want something to happen between you?"

"I'm not sure." Last night, I'd tossed and turned, wondering the same thing. I was attracted to Daniel. He had a great sense of humor. He cared about his company and was determined to make it a success. But above everything else, he seemed like a really nice person.

Paul squirted glass cleaner on the display case. "He's staying here for two weeks, even though you won't accept the award. That must tell you something."

I smiled. “The only thing it tells me is that he desperately needs a vacation.”

Paul stopped cleaning. “Do you want me to ask Liam if he can investigate our New York executive?”

“He can’t do that,” I spluttered. “Liam works for the FBI. If he uses their databases to screen potential boyfriends for me, he’ll get fired.”

Paul pulled back his shoulders. “You’re right. There’s only one thing we can do.” He handed me the glass cleaner. “I’m going to bake Daniel a cake and we’ll take it to him. If he doesn’t answer our questions about why he’s single, we’ll know he’s a phony.”

“There’s only one problem with your idea. Daniel values his privacy as much as I do. Even your triple layer chocolate cake won’t make him talk.”

“It worked with Liam.”

“But he was already in love with you. He just didn’t know it.”

Paul glanced at his watch. “Maybe that’s Daniel’s problem, too. If I’m going to add another cake to today’s baking list, I’d better get back to work. Let me know if Daniel comes to see you.”

I sighed. “You’ve been married for a few months now. I thought it was supposed to be a calming influence on a person’s life?”

“I don’t know where you heard that.” Paul opened the front door and smiled at a person walking along the sidewalk. “Remember to lock the door behind me. I’ll give you a call once the cake’s ready.”

Before I could remind Paul about our meeting with Pastor Adam, he dashed next door to the candy shop.

I looked at the cuckoo clock on the wall and rushed into my workroom. One of my customers would be arriving soon to collect a necklace for his wife's birthday. If I didn't gift wrap it now, I wouldn't have time once the store opened.

Thinking about Daniel Devlin, his sexy brown eyes, and his boyish charm would have to wait—at least until Paul's cake was ready.



eighteen

BEN

Pastor Adam looked around the meeting room in awe. “I can’t believe how many items have been donated for the auction. You’ve done a wonderful job, Ben.”

Boxes and baskets in all shapes and sizes filled every available space. I smiled at my friends. None of this would’ve been possible without everyone doing their best to make the auction a success. “We sold the last auction ticket this afternoon. This could be one of the biggest fundraisers Sunrise Bay has ever seen.”

“Everyone has been great,” Jonathon said. “Especially Jenny. The community Facebook page is full of pictures of items that’ll be auctioned. She even organized a countdown for ticket sales.”

Dylan turned his laptop around. “Look at this. Her latest post has more than two thousand likes. A lot of people are supporting us, even if they don’t live here.”

Jonathon stared at the figures. “I should ask her if she wants to do some publicity for Candy Lane.”

A soft knock made everyone turn toward the door.

Daniel stood hesitantly in the door.

I looked at Jonathon, wondering if he’d invited him to the church. But he looked just

as surprised as everyone else.

“I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Jonathon waved away his concerns. “Come in. We were just saying how amazing the support has been for Saturday’s auction.”

Daniel looked around the room. “Are all these items being auctioned?”

Pastor Adam nodded. “These are only some of the donations. There’ll be at least another ten deliveries before auction day.” He held out his hand. “I’m Adam, the local pastor in Sunrise Bay.”

Daniel returned Adam’s handshake. “Daniel Devlin. I’m staying in Acorn Cottage.”

“You must be the chief executive of Wilson Enterprises.”

“News travels fast.”

“You’ve got no idea,” Adam said with a smile. “I was talking to Jenny and she mentioned she’d seen you.”

“I visited the market on Saturday but got sidetracked by Jonathon’s candy store. For such a small town, there’s plenty to see.”

“We try to provide something for everyone.”

“You’ve certainly done that. I came to tell you that Wilson Enterprises would like to donate some gifts for the auction, but they won’t arrive until Friday. Will that be a problem?”

Adam shook his head. “That’ll be fine. Ben’s created a master list of the items going under the hammer. Whether they arrive here or at one of our drop-off locations, the list will be updated right away. Are you coming to the auction?”

Daniel reached into his pocket and showed them a silver sheet of paper. “Jenny sold me the last ticket this afternoon. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Dylan winked at me. The mysterious executive from Manhattan had just gone up a notch or two in his books.

“We’re almost finished here.” Pastor Adam looked at me. “Why don’t you show Daniel The Welcome Center? It’ll give him an idea of what we need to keep everything running. You could even tell him about the tiny home project.”

Adam was every bit as savvy as Daniel when it came to gathering support for a project. He needed more than our community’s involvement if the tiny house project was to happen. And in Daniel, he could see a way to promote the concept of affordable community housing to the world.

Daniel smiled. He looked as though he knew what Adam was doing. “I’d love to hear more about the projects you’re involved in.”

I handed Dylan the project plan for the auction. “Would you be able to update the electronic copy of the plan?”

“No problem. I’ll send everyone on the committee a copy, too.” He looked over my shoulder at Daniel and grinned. “It’s great seeing you again.”

“You too, Dylan.”

Before everyone started reminiscing about my birthday dinner, I moved toward the

door. “We’d better have a look at The Welcome Center before they serve dinner.”

Daniel smiled at Pastor Adam. “It was nice meeting you. I’ll see everyone else later.”

“It could be sooner than you think,” Paul said cryptically.

I grabbed Daniel’s hand and pulled him out of the room. I wasn’t sure he would appreciate a freshly baked cake once he realized why Paul had made it.

“Is there something I should know?”

When we were halfway down the corridor, I let go of his hand, then looked behind us. “Paul baked you a cake, but it comes with a catch.”

“Let me guess. He wants to know more about me before I whisk you away to Manhattan?”

“Not quite,” I said with a smile. “He wants to know why you’re still single.”

Daniel laughed. “Tell him I’ve been waiting for the right person to come along. Do I still get the cake?”

“Only if you promise to share it with me.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

“And just so we’re clear, whisking me away to Manhattan isn’t going to happen.”

Daniel grinned and tapped the end of my nose. “We’ll see. I’ve still got more than a week to change your mind. Where’s The Welcome Center?”

“It’s this way.” Before he saw the heat building in my cheeks, I opened the door and strode across the yard.

I hoped he knew I was serious about not going to Manhattan. And I prayed I’d never have to tell him why.

nineteen

BEN

I opened a double set of bright blue doors. “This is it. Our very own Welcome Center.” I was incredibly proud of what Pastor Adam and the community had achieved in the red-brick building.

I waved at Antoinette, one of the volunteers who looked after the center from three in the afternoon until seven each evening. “This is our main reception area. When people arrive, Antoinette or one of the other volunteers welcomes them to the center and finds out what they need.”

“What do people usually want?” Daniel asked.

I shrugged. “It depends on their circumstances. Some families arrive with literally nothing. Other people need budgeting advice or some sort of counseling. We have a doctor who has a free clinic twice a week, and a dentist who comes once a week. If people need a food package, we send them to the kitchen. If they need somewhere to sleep, we provide them with a bed in one of our bunk rooms.”

Daniel looked surprised. “And it’s all free?”

“People pay what they can afford. If someone’s on a limited budget, we ask them to pay their kindness forward instead of giving us money. That’s how we painted the church.” I walked across to a row of meeting rooms. “Once we’ve met our guests’ immediate needs, we have another discussion with them in these rooms. This is

where we match them with people who can help in the long term.”

“It sounds like a big job.”

“It can be. No one wants to be homeless or unemployed or hungry. For one reason or another, their lives have taken a different path to what they expected. If they’re willing to work with us, we do everything we can to make their lives less stressful.”

“Ben!” Andrew walked toward me with a big grin on his face. “You aren’t supposed to be here for another two hours.”

“I’m showing Daniel around. Andrew Clarke, this is Daniel Nelson.”

Andrew held out his hand. “Welcome to The Welcome Center. I enjoy saying that.”

Daniel smiled. “It’s good to be here. Are you a volunteer?”

“I am. Tonight I’m on kitchen duty, so if you’d like a yummy beef casserole with new potatoes, carrots, and beans, come and see me.”

“I thought your meals would only be available to people who couldn’t afford to buy food.”

Andrew shook his head. “That’s where The Welcome Center’s different from a lot of other organizations. We’re here for all our community. The last thing we want is for people to feel as though they can’t enjoy a home-cooked meal.”

“And someone’s ability to pay for a meal might not be the issue,” I added. “For some people, having another person to talk to and laugh with is more important than all the money in the world.”

Andrew held up the bucket in his hand. “I’m going to the community garden to pick some beans. Do you want to come with me?”

I looked at Daniel. “Do you have the time?”

“All the time in the world.”

The warmth in his eyes made my toes curl. If this was Daniel in his interested mode, I’d love to see him when he was really trying to impress someone.

Andrew cleared his throat. “Let’s go. But be warned, Mr. Jeffries isn’t happy. A family of rabbits has been eating his carrots.”

“Mr. Jeffries is our head gardener,” I explained. “He used to own a ranch. When he retired, he moved to Sunrise Bay.”

Andrew held open a door. “He showed us how to grow our own vegetables. One thing led to another and, before we knew it, he’d created our first community garden. We grow enough fruit and vegetables for our kitchen as well as our food packages.”

This was my favorite part of The Welcome Center. In the evenings, after I finished my shift, I’d often come here and sit on a wooden bench to unwind. There was something therapeutic about being outside, away from the hustle and bustle of what was happening in the center.

A gray-haired man in his seventies hobbled toward us.

“What have you done to yourself, Mr. Jeffries?” I asked.

“Darn rabbits. I chased them across the garden and fell over a rake. There’s got to be some way of catching them.”



Daniel smiled. “My dad used to dip a carrot in honey and leave it in a hutch. If you put a self-closing hinge on the door, they won’t be able to get out.”

Mr. Jeffries scratched the side of his head. “I’ve never tried honey with a carrot. We used to poison the critters. But with all the little ones who come out here, I figured it wouldn’t be a good idea.”

I was relieved he’d come to that conclusion on his own. Sometimes he had a unique way of solving problems. “Do you have a hutch you can use?”

Mr. Jeffries nodded. “The woodworking group made me one last week, but the rabbits haven’t been eager to go inside. But honey…”

While he was contemplating the addition of honey to his rabbit-catching arsenal, Andrew held his bucket in the air.

“Is it okay if I pick some green beans for dinner?”

“Of course, it is. The beans in the first row are ready.” Mr. Jeffries ambled through the garden, followed by Andrew, Daniel, and me.

As we walked around the corner of the building, Daniel’s eyes widened. “The garden’s huge.”

“Mr. Jeffries doesn’t do things by halves.” I smiled when our head gardener grunted his approval. “He has a team of people who help him. Next year, we’ll hold a fundraiser for a greenhouse. With the right heating, we’ll be able to grow vegetables year-round.”

“What do you do at the moment?”

“When we can’t grow our own, we buy frozen vegetables.” I started picking beans.  
“How much do you need?” I asked Andrew.

“A full bucket. It looks as though we’ll have at least forty-five people for dinner tonight.”

I smiled when Daniel added more beans to the bucket. There wouldn’t be too many times when the chief executive of Wilson Enterprises picked fresh beans for his dinner.

And the funniest thing of all was that he seemed to be enjoying himself.

twenty

DANIEL

The Welcome Center's dining room was full of people eating, talking, and laughing. Even the people who were sitting quietly at the tables didn't seem to mind the excited chatter going on around them.

I placed a ladle of hot beef casserole on the plate of the last person in the line, then looked at Ben. He was scooping mashed potato out of a large pan, chatting easily with the people waiting for their dinner.

Pastor Adam handed me two empty dinner plates. "You did a great job. Why don't you get some dinner with Ben? I'll join you after I've taken the empty dishes into the kitchen."

"I'm happy to help."

"It's a okay. It won't take long." He picked up the ladle from the side of the pan and added some beef casserole to each plate. "Don't forget to try the beans."

"I won't." After our plates were full, Ben and I joined Andrew and some other guests at one of the tables. By the time I was halfway through my meal, I felt as though I'd been living here for months. No one cared about who I was or what I did. They were interested in hearing about my family and listening to what I thought about Sunrise Bay.

I refilled Ben's glass with water. "You haven't told me about the tiny home project."

His face shone with excitement. "Adam has been working with other organizations to see if we can build a village of tiny houses. Long-term rental accommodation in Sunrise Bay is almost nonexistent. What's here is too expensive for people on a limited budget. The tiny homes will provide an affordable housing option for a lot of people."

Pastor Adam joined the conversation. "A similar program is underway in Boulder. Some architecture students designed their tiny homes. They're happy for us to use the plans and they'll even send a team of students to help build the first house."

"Will the village be built beside The Welcome Center?"

Adam shook his head. "There isn't enough room. I'm looking for a plot of land, but it's proving more difficult than I thought."

Ben placed his knife and fork on his plate. "Each house will only cost fifteen thousand dollars to build. If we can attract sponsors and find a plot of land, construction could start before Christmas."

"Have you approached the local business owners to see if they can help?"

"They're very supportive," Adam said, "but there's only so much money to go around. That's why I thought we'd contact organizations from outside Sunrise Bay. If we can secure enough funding to pay for the land and materials, the community will build and furnish the tiny houses."

"Do you have a sponsorship program?"

Andrew leaned forward. "I'm working on one now. We were thinking of having three

funding tiers. That way, organizations can decide how much they want to invest in the project.”

I nodded. “If you need any help, my secretary can forward your questions to my marketing team. Ben has her email address. In the meantime, I’ll think about how Wilson Enterprises can spread the word about the project.”

Adam breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks. A lot of organizations will want to be involved, but the hardest part is finding creative ways to approach them.”

I smiled. “The casserole worked for me.”

Ben nudged my arm playfully. “I thought it was the green beans.”

I looked into his eyes, a warmth spread through my body, filling my heart with a sense of rightness, of knowing I was where I needed to be. When his lips curved into a soft smile, my pulse quickened. I felt a strong connection to Ben, an undeniable attraction that made my brain short circuit.

Andrew cleared his throat. “Tell us about New York City, Daniel. If I was going there for a vacation, where would I visit?”

I pulled my gaze away from Ben and focused on Andrew’s question. “Do you want my honest answer?”

Andrew nodded.

“I wouldn’t go there for a vacation. What you’ve got here is a hundred times better than New York City.” And for the first time since I’d arrived, I understood why Ben had chosen to live in Sunrise Bay.

twenty-one

BEN

By Saturday night, I was exhausted. For most of the week, when I wasn't in my store serving customers or creating jewelry, I was at Pastor Adam's church, making sure everything was ready for the auction.

In half an hour, the auctioneer would bang his gavel and take the opening bid for the first donated item. If the hum of anticipation in the audience was anything to go by, it would be a successful evening.

"Everyone seems excited to be here," a voice said behind me, making me jump.

Daniel had snuck up on me. And oh, boy...he looked amazing.

His charcoal gray suit hugged his broad shoulders and narrow hips as if it had been tailored especially for him. It wasn't as if it was the first time I'd seen a man in a suit, but Daniel managed to take my breath away. "You look very handsome."

Daniel glanced at his suit. "It's the best I could come up with at short notice. Do you like my tie?"

I stared at his chest.

He pulled back his shoulders and laughed.

I poked him in the ribs. “Behave yourself.”

“That’s not as much fun. They’re larks.”

For a moment, I had no idea what he was talking about. Then I remembered to look at his tie. Sitting along the edge of the blue stripes were rows of little birds.

“I went shopping at the general store. Jenny convinced me that this tie is a patriotic addition to my collection.”

“Because of the larks?”

Daniel grinned. “They’re the state bird of Colorado.”

“It’s perfect.” I laughed at the mischief in his eyes. Suddenly, I wasn’t quite as tired as when I’d arrived.

A few minutes later, Riley and Eric arrived with Dylan and Alex. While Riley introduced everyone, I studied Daniel.

I didn’t know anyone who took a suit on vacation with them, but Daniel wasn’t like most of the people who visited Sunrise Bay. I had to keep reminding myself that this part of Colorado would never be on his list of places to visit.

If I’d accepted the jewelry award, he wouldn’t even be here. We would’ve met in Manhattan at the presentation, shaken hands, smiled for the cameras, then gone back to our separate lives.

That thought alone was enough to bring me back to earth with a bump.

By the end of next week, Daniel wouldn’t be here. He’d be negotiating with his

company's suppliers and getting the best deal he could for his wealthy clients. I'd still be living in Sunrise Bay, creating jewelry, and making sure Acorn Cottage was ready for the next booking.

"There you are," Dylan said to me. "Adam's looking for you. The auctioneer hasn't arrived and he's worried."

I touched the sleeve of Daniel's jacket. "I have to go. Will you be all right with everyone else?"

"Of course, he will," Riley said. "As long as we choose our seats now, we'll be able to sit together."

"I'll be back as soon as I can," I assured Daniel. "Save a seat for me."

"I hope you find the auctioneer."

"So do I." I maneuvered around the people inside the large meeting room. If we couldn't find the auctioneer, we might not have a fundraising event. Unless Pastor Adam was prepared to try his hand with a gavel. And knowing Adam, nothing was impossible.



twenty-two

BEN

“Do I have five thousand dollars?” Pastor Adam’s voice boomed across the main meeting room of the New Life Church.

The auctioneer’s car had broken down somewhere north of Denver. Despite his best efforts to get his vehicle to a garage, it was unable to be driven. So, Adam had done the unthinkable and was standing at the front of the room, leading the auction process.

I had no idea if he was doing everything correctly, but it sounded impressive. And more importantly, everyone in the room was enjoying themselves.

Daniel stuck his hand in the air. “Ten thousand dollars.”

The excitement in the room had grown as Daniel and another man bidded against each other for Riley Murphy’s painting. But even I gasped this time. “Are you sure?” I whispered from beside Daniel. “That’s a lot of money.”

He looked over my shoulder and leaned in close. The other bidder was two rows behind us. “Riley’s paintings sell for more than forty thousand dollars in European galleries.”

My eyes widened.

The man behind us placed another bid.

Daniel stuck his hand in the air. “Twenty thousand dollars.”

Silence fell over the crowd. All eyes turned toward the other bidder.

“Twenty-eight thousand.”

The audience went wild. Claps and cheers rang out across the room. Even Pastor Adam looked as though he was astounded that anyone would buy a painting for that amount of money.

“Silence, please,” Adam yelled into the room. He looked at Daniel. “Do we have another bid?”

I bit my bottom lip, half-praying that Daniel shook his head. The oil painting was stunning, but paying more than twenty-eight thousand dollars was ridiculous. For most people, it was a down payment on a house, a new vehicle, or enough groceries for two years.

“Thirty-five thousand dollars.”

The roar from the crowd drowned out Adam’s response.

I dropped my chin to my chest. Oh, my Lord. That amount of money would pay The Welcome Center's utility, phone, and grocery bill for an entire year. They could buy new blankets and sheets and replace the washing machines and dryers.

Adam’s gavel was banging so hard against the desk that it sounded like a machine-gun spitting bullets across the room. “Quiet, please!”

No one was listening, except the man two rows behind us.

When most of the noise had died down, a deep voice yelled, “Thirty-seven thousand dollars.”

I grabbed hold of Daniel’s hand. “Don’t do it.” I looked at him, pleading with Daniel not to increase the bid. “It’s an incredible painting, but that amount of money?—”

“Is nothing compared to what I earn,” Daniel whispered in my ear.

I closed my eyes, scrunching them tight as I waited for what he’d do next.

“Forty thousand dollars,” he yelled.

Mass hysteria descended over the room. Adam tried to bring order to the chaos, but no one was paying him any attention.

Daniel squeezed my hand. “Breathe.”

“I can’t,” I yelled back. “It’s too much money.”

“Order! Order!” Adam’s voice boomed across the room.

I would have laughed if it weren’t Daniel who had placed an astronomical bid on the painting.

“Do we have any more bids?” Adam yelled.

The audience gradually calmed down, waiting to see what happened.

The man behind us remained silent.

My shoulders relaxed and I breathed a sigh of relief. At least Daniel wouldn't be spending any more money on?—

“Forty-five thousand dollars,” the man behind us yelled.

Pastor Adam's mouth dropped open. He looked at Daniel. “Do we have another bid?”

Daniel shook his head and I slumped in my chair. Thank goodness it was over.

“Sold to the man in the blue sweater,” Adam yelled. “Congratulations.”

Daniel leaned against my shoulder. “What's next?”

“Are you serious? You nearly spent forty thousand dollars, and you still want to bid on other things?”

“It's an auction. It's for a good cause.” Daniel plucked the program out of my hand.

“There's a barbecue in here somewhere that Jenny told me about.”

My eyes narrowed. “Have you cooked a meal on a barbecue in the last ten years?”

“Of course I have,” Daniel muttered.

If his nose could have grown, it would be as long as his arm.

I pointed to lot thirty-two. “It's there. If you win the barbecue, I want a picture of the first meal you cook on it.”

For some reason, Daniel looked incredibly smug. “Deal.”

Adam banged his gavel on the desk and the next item appeared on the stage. And

before I knew what was happening, I was in a bidding war for two baskets of preserved pickles and jams.

twenty-three

BEN

Pastor Adam banged his gavel to start the next auction. “Lot twenty-six consists of a beautiful piece of jewelry created by B.J. Davis. Ben’s lovely gold, pearl, and diamond necklace has graced the cover of Marie Claire. It’s also featured in an article about up-and-coming artists of the twenty-first century. I have a pre-auction bid for five thousand dollars. Do I have another bid in the room?”

My mouth dropped open. “Who would have placed a bid for?—”

“Six thousand,” Daniel yelled.

The room erupted in applause.

“No,” I hissed. “You can’t buy my jewelry.”

“Yes, I can.”

Pastor Adam looked at one of the volunteers. She had a cell phone to her ear, bidding on behalf of another person.

The volunteer stuck her hand in the air. “Six thousand five hundred.”

I turned back to Daniel. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Ten thousand.”

“Good grief,” I hissed. “That’s too much money.”

“Ten thousand five hundred.”

Daniel settled in for the long haul. “Eleven thousand.”

While the audience was clapping and cheering, I sent him a ferocious scowl. “This is ridiculous. I’ll make you another necklace. You can donate some money to The Welcome Center.”

“It’s my bid,” he reminded me, “and I don’t like losing.”

My gaze darted to the volunteer who was on the phone. “Think of it as a strategic retreat. But whatever you do, don’t go any higher.”

The volunteer’s hand rose. “Eleven thousand two hundred.”

Daniel looked at the picture of the necklace on the data projector. Two rows of cream pearls came together in an art deco clasp of polished gold. Small diamonds shone from the clasp and wound their way through another strand of smaller pearls, adding sparkle and drama, and something even more special to the design.

Whether I agreed with the bid or not, he wouldn’t be going home without it. “Fifteen thousand.”

I brought the auction program up to my face and hid behind it. “This can’t be happening.”

The people around us were hardly breathing, waiting for what would happen next.

The volunteer shook her head and Adam smiled.

“Going once...going twice...sold to the man in the gray suit. Congratulations, Daniel.”

Strangers reached out to shake Daniel’s hand, but his eyes kept coming back to me. I was getting swamped with people thanking me for donating the necklace, and it was overwhelming. Noticing my anxiety, he placed his hand along the back of my chair and moved closer. I felt safe and grounded, grateful for his steady presence beside me.

In that moment, I realized how much Daniel was starting to mean to me. And that was almost as scary as telling him about my dad.



twenty-four

BEN

After the auction, I helped Pastor Adam and my friends tidy the room. We'd raised more than ninety thousand dollars for The Welcome Center. Adam was thrilled, and so was the rest of the community.

"I can't believe what Daniel paid for your necklace," Riley said as he stacked one chair on top of another.

"Or the bid he placed on your painting," Jonathon added. "If it weren't for him, the sale price on those items wouldn't have gone nearly as high."

Apart from helping The Welcome Center, I had no idea why Daniel had spent so much money. As well as taking home my necklace, he was the proud owner of a fancy barbecue and a large box of Jonathon's fudge. He probably earned a lot of money, but what he'd spent tonight was crazy.

"Does anyone know who was bidding against Daniel for Ben's necklace?" Jonathon asked.

Pastor Adam placed the gavel in a wooden box. "Everyone who wanted to bid at the auction had to pre-register. We'll have the bidder's name on our database, but I can't tell you who it was."

"Could you send them a copy of Ben's latest catalog? They might decide to buy

another piece of jewelry.”

I appreciated Jonathon’s suggestion, but I wasn’t sure it was a good idea. “If they want another necklace, they’ll contact me. There must have been something about that piece of jewelry that drew them to it.”

“Maybe it was because a supermodel had worn it on the cover of a magazine,” Riley suggested.

Adam smiled. “Or they could like pearl necklaces.”

Jonathon carried two chairs across the room. “At least it was sold to someone Ben knows. I wonder why Daniel bought it?”

I was thinking the same thing. The necklace was an expensive piece of jewelry—the type you’d give to someone who meant a lot to you.

Daniel walked into the meeting room. “The kitchen’s ready for the café staff. Would you like a hand to stack the rest of the chairs?”

Before I could tell him we were okay, Adam handed him two chairs.

“Thanks. You can put these on the far side of the room. Normally, we would’ve left everything where it was, but we have a jumping jellybean program in here tomorrow.”

Daniel’s eyebrows rose. “Jumping jellybeans?”

“It’s like a junior gymnastics class,” Adam explained. “While the parents are enjoying church, a team of volunteers keep the preschoolers busy. You’ll have to come along one Sunday. The team is always looking for people who can help.”

The thought of Daniel helping little children do cartwheels and forward rolls made me smile.

Daniel didn't look as enthusiastic as Adam did. "Maybe on my next visit to Sunrise Bay."

As far as I knew, that wouldn't be happening any time soon.

"Congratulations on winning the necklace," Riley said. "Who's the lucky person who gets to wear it?"

A hot blush scorched my face. Thankfully, Daniel was too busy stacking the chairs on top of the others to notice.

"I didn't have anyone in mind when I bought it. I'm hoping Ben will change his mind and come to Manhattan. We could display it when I present him with the award he won."

Adam frowned. "You never told me about an award, Ben. Congratulations."

"It's not just any award, either," Jonathon said proudly. "It's the most sought-after jewelry award in America."

I picked up another chair. "I'm not going to the presentation."

Adam frowned. "Why not?"

"I like to keep a low profile. I'll pop this away, then head home. I've got a big day planned for tomorrow."

"Please tell me you're doing something exciting," Jonathon sighed.

“It is exciting,” I assured him. “I’m finishing a necklace I started three months ago.”

“That’s not exciting. Why don’t you take Daniel sightseeing? There’s a regatta on the lake tomorrow. There’ll be markets as well as the boat races.”

“Daniel has already been to a market. He won’t want to?—”

“It sounds like a great idea,” Daniel said. “It’s my brother’s birthday next week. Apart from some candy, I haven’t bought him anything. I might find something in one of the booths.”

Jonathon and Riley smiled at each other before turning to me.

If they had any romantic notions about me and Daniel, they’d be disappointed. In a few days, he was going back to New York City. And I was one hundred percent positive he wouldn’t be coming back.

“Well?” Jonathon asked me. “Is that a yes, no, or maybe to sightseeing?”

Daniel took the chair out of my hands. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Are you sure you want to go to another market?” I asked. “There are lots of other things to do.”

“I’d like to see the regatta. Besides, sightseeing is more fun when you’re with someone else. What time do you want to meet?”

I sighed. “Is eight o’clock too early?”

Daniel sent me a heart-melting smile. “Eight o’clock’s perfect. I’ll buy you lunch as a thank you.”

Before I could tell him it wasn't necessary, he took the chair to the other side of the room.

twenty-five

DANIEL

For the last four hours, I'd been watching the boat races with Ben and wandering through the market. The sun was warm on my skin, and despite the crowds, it had been a peaceful morning. We maneuvered around people enjoying the food and crafts, exchanging small talk that felt effortless, even natural.

Ben smiled as he tucked an apron into his bag. "I'll give this to Paul for one of his Christmas presents. What would you like to do next?"

I glanced at the time. "Lunch sounds like a good option."

"Do you want to grab something here and eat by the lake?"

"Sounds great." I held up a bag. "I've already bought some fresh bread. All we need is something to go inside it."

Ben nodded and led the way to a few of his favorite food stalls. Within half an hour, we were back at the lake, enjoying a simple picnic lunch under the shade of a large tree.

As Ben reached for his can of soda, he looked at me, a gleam of curiosity in his eyes. "What did you think of the regatta?"

"It was bigger than I expected. Where did all the boats come from?"

“Most of them belong to people who live around the lake,” Ben explained. “But some come from farther away. They stay for a few of the regattas around Willow Lake, then head home. As summer approaches, the number of boats increases.”

I was genuinely impressed. Between the boat races and the market stalls, there was something for everyone. “Does each town around the lake have a weekend market?”

Ben shook his head. “Not all of them. When there are other markets, they’re on different days so everyone has a chance to visit.”

I picked up my phone and took some photos of the lake to send to my brother. Then, on impulse, I turned to Ben. “Smile!”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Whatever you do, don’t post any photos of me on Facebook.”

I grinned. “You’re not wanted by the FBI, are you?”

“Not quite,” he muttered. “I just prefer to keep my personal life off social media.”

“You’ve mentioned that before. Why?”

Ben set his lunch down on a brown paper bag. “I’ve had a bad experience.”

I watched him carefully, sensing there was more to the story. “What happened?”

He hesitated, clearly weighing how much to share. “A friend of mine was accused of copying another artist’s work. He didn’t do it, but the rumors spread like wildfire. He had to sell his house and move to another city just to escape the gossip.”

“Is your friend okay now?”

Ben forced a smile, trying to lighten the mood. “His life changed, but he’s doing better. What happened made him realize that life’s too short to dwell on negative things.”

I nodded, thinking about the mess my life had been after Tom left. “I know what you mean. When my fiancé broke off our engagement, I was devastated. He spread lies online, and it took a long time for me to trust anyone again.”

Ben handed me a can of soda. “Well, you’ve come to the right place. Sunrise Bay is full of good people.”

I nodded, knowing how rare that was. “I’m used to people liking me because of my job, not for who I am. But your friends are different.”

Ben looked out over the lake, a faraway look in his eyes. “We all came here looking for something new. Before I moved to Colorado, I had a boyfriend, a great job, and a long list of things I wanted to accomplish. But living in a big city made me feel more isolated than ever, so I came to Sunrise Bay.”

Hearing Ben speak so openly about having a boyfriend made my heart pound. Now I understood why I felt such a strong connection to him. I wanted to reach out, to tell him I understood the need for a fresh start, but I was too scared that history would repeat itself. It was easier to push those feelings aside and focus on why I was here.

“I can relate to that. Is being by the lake better than working in your studio?”

Ben grinned, the tension in the air easing a little. “Much better. Dylan was right. I can finish the necklace tomorrow.”

“What’s it like?”



“It’s made from finely spun gold and tiny rubies. My dad calls it my bird’s nest creation.”

“What inspired you to make it?”

Ben’s face lit up with genuine excitement. “A bird’s nest. While I was remodeling Acorn Cottage, a bird nested in the oak tree outside. One day, I saw the baby chicks and knew I had to do something to celebrate their birth. So that night, I sketched the design. Making the necklace has been more challenging than I thought, but I’m almost finished.”

“Can I see it when we get back?”

“Wouldn’t you rather wait until it’s done?”

I shrugged, trying to ignore the sudden pang of sadness at the thought of leaving Sunrise Bay. “I might not be here.”

Ben hesitated, then smiled. “If you don’t mind stepping into my messy studio, you’re more than welcome to take a look.” His gaze lingered on me, and I felt a strange mix of emotions. “Why are you so interested in my jewelry?”

I picked up my lunch, trying to play it cool. “What do you mean?”

Ben’s eyes narrowed. “There are lots of talented jewelers in America. Why are you so interested in my work?”

“Because it’s unique,” I replied, meeting his gaze. “You create jewelry that complements rather than dominates the person who wears it.”

“How many pieces have you seen?”

I pulled out my phone and scrolled through the photos. When I found what I was looking for, I handed it to Ben. “I’ve only seen four in person, but I have photos of twenty-five pieces.”

He flicked through the images, his expression a mix of surprise and suspicion. “Have you been stalking me?”

I didn’t smile. “I have a proposition for you.”

Ben handed my phone back to me, his eyes guarded. “If it’s about coming to New York City for the award ceremony, my answer is still no.”

“You might change your mind after you hear what I have to say.”

“I doubt it.”

With so much at stake, I didn’t let Ben’s less than enthusiastic reply stop me. “I want exclusive rights to sell your jewelry for two years. During that time, Wilson Enterprises will commission three collections from you. We’ll feature them in our prestige gallery, where only the wealthiest and most influential clients shop. In return, we’ll provide branding and PR services free of charge. We’ll handle all sales and distribution, manage your client accounts, and ensure you earn more than you ever imagined.”

Ben’s mouth dropped open and, for a moment, I thought he’d say yes. But something in his expression changed.

“My answer is still the same as before. Thank you, but I’m perfectly happy with how I’m managing my business.”

“My offer is something most people only dream about,” I insisted, feeling my

frustration build.

“I know,” Ben said quietly, “but I’m not interested.”

I thought about everything I’d learned about Ben. My offer should have made him jump at the chance of working with Wilson Enterprises, but something was holding him back. “What more do you want?”

“I don’t want anything from you,” he said firmly, standing his ground.

I took a deep breath, trying to think of another angle. “Pastor Adam has been talking to the owners of five properties near the church. If they agree to sell, he’ll have enough space to create the tiny home village. If you sign an exclusive contract with my company, our trust will buy the properties and donate the land to the church.”

Ben’s eyes flashed with anger as he grabbed his lunch and stood up. “That’s blackmail,” he snapped. “You don’t care about helping homeless people. You just want the exclusive rights to sell my jewelry. I don’t know why you think you can manipulate people like that, but it stinks.”

I quickly gathered the rest of our food and caught up with him, my heart pounding. “Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Come on, Ben. Look, I’m sorry if I offended you, but this is important.”

He stopped abruptly, turning to face me. “You think money can get you everything you want. Well, I’m telling you right now—you’re wrong. If your trust wants to buy the land for the village, then buy it. But don’t use it as a bargaining chip to get what you want.”

“Fine,” I said, exasperated. “We’ll consider buying the properties regardless of what you decide to do.”

“You already know what I’m going to do,” Ben said coldly before turning away and walking away.

twenty-six

BEN

As soon as I arrived home, I changed my clothes and went into my studio. I was too upset to do anything except work on my necklace. I couldn't believe Daniel had tried to blackmail me. Using the tiny house village as leverage was terrible. He knew how much that project meant to me and Pastor Adam, but he hadn't hesitated to use it to get what he wanted.

From the small amount of information I'd found, Daniel seemed to care about the people he worked with and his organization. That in itself made his proposition even harder to understand.

He donated thousands of dollars each year to charities. Why would he stoop to bribery to make me change my mind about working with him?

Reaching for my pliers, I gently twisted a strand of gold wire through the pattern I was creating. I held my breath as the sparkle of a ruby caught the light. The precious gems added depth, color, and interest to the whimsical design. Hopefully, whoever bought the necklace would treasure it as much as I did.

A soft knock on the studio door made my heart race. I looked up and saw Daniel. He seemed every bit as uncomfortable as I felt.

As I rose from the chair, I wiped my hands on the side of my jeans. "Hi."

“I’m sorry if I’ve interrupted you. I wanted to let you know I’m going home. There’s a flight that leaves from Boulder in two hours.”

I wasn’t surprised, but I was disappointed. “Thanks for telling me. I’ll send you a refund for the balance of your accommodation.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Daniel looked over my shoulder. “Is that the bird’s nest necklace?”

“It is. Would you like to see it?”

Daniel’s wary glance made me feel as if I’d lost my best friend. He nodded and followed me across the room.

“I need to add a few more layers of gold wire to the base.”

Reaching out, he gently touched the edge of the necklace. “It’s beautiful.”

I took a deep breath. I hated knowing I’d upset someone, regardless of how it happened. If this was the last time I ever spoke to Daniel, I didn’t want him to leave without trying to explain why I was so annoyed.

“I know you don’t understand why I can’t sign a contract with your company. If my life was different, I would have enjoyed working with you. But I can’t.”

Daniel’s jaw tightened. “I’m disappointed, too. And I’m also sorry if I offended you. You’re a talented artist and it was a privilege meeting you.” His deep brown eyes were filled with regret. “If you change your mind about coming to the award ceremony, I’m only a phone call away.”

I took the business card he handed me, but it was a waste of time. I wouldn’t be going

anywhere near Manhattan.

Daniel stuck his hands in his pockets. “Good luck. I wish you all the best with your business.” And without a backward glance, he left me standing beside my workbench.

I didn’t move. Even after Daniel’s SUV disappeared, I stayed where I was, staring at the card in my hand.

Daniel was gone and I already missed him.

twenty-seven

DANIEL

Sitting behind my desk in Manhattan, I re-read the same report for the third time. I rubbed my eyes, trying to figure out what was wrong with me. For the last ten days I'd buried myself in work, pushing even harder than usual. But nothing I said or did could erase Ben from my mind. I wasn't sleeping, wasn't eating, and wasn't getting much of anything done.

My office door shot open and my brother strode into the room. He didn't usually look so stressed. "What's wrong?"

Owen dropped a folder onto my desk. "You had a lucky escape."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ben didn't tell you the entire story about why he won't accept the award. His father is Tony Harper."

I stared at my brother. Four years ago, Wilson Enterprises had asked a high-profile jewelry designer to create an exclusive collection for our company. After missing two crucial deadlines, Emanuel Ricardo had accused Tony Harper of stealing his designs. With Wilson Enterprises' financial backing, Emanuel had filed a lawsuit against Tony. The media coverage before and after the trial had been brutal.

Everything Ben had said about a friend being accused of stealing someone's jewelry



designs, and the need to distance himself from my company, now made sense.

Slowly, I opened the folder. Even before the trial started, television, newspaper, and social media personalities had decided Tony Harper was guilty. At its worst, it seemed as though every artistic prima donna had found their way in front of a camera, tearing Tony to shreds.

“What happened to Ben’s family after the trial?”

“You won’t like it.”

I lifted my gaze to my brother’s worried face.

“The cost of fighting the case made his family bankrupt. After the trial, they sold their house in Los Angeles and moved to San Francisco. Tony eventually found another job.” Owen hesitated. “There’s something else you should know. Ben’s mom was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer before the trial. She died a few months after their family moved to San Francisco.”

I closed my eyes and groaned. “I’ve made a huge mistake.”

“You did the right thing. If we’d sold Ben’s jewelry, his father’s reputation could have negatively impacted our corporate image.”

I nearly told my brother what he could do with our corporate image. But Owen hadn’t met Ben, hadn’t seen how hard he worked to raise money for the people who needed help. He hadn’t stood in his studio, enthralled by his creativity. And my brother hadn’t fallen a little in love with a man who had more secrets than either of us.

“Why didn’t Ben tell me?”

Owen shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. What I do know is that he saved our company from a PR disaster.”

“Forget the company. Ben must hate me for what I did.”

Owen frowned. “You went to trial because it was the only thing you could do. Knockoff jewelry was flooding the Internet. If we didn’t protect the intellectual property of our designers, who would?”

“Ben’s father was innocent. Emanuel should be in prison for the lies he told.” When the issue of who held copyright over a jewelry design raised its ugly head, I’d done everything I could to get a clear legal judgment. It wasn’t until the trial was nearly over that the attorneys discovered the level of Emanuel’s deceit.

My decision to prosecute Tony Harper would haunt me for the rest of my life. “How am I going to apologize to Ben?”

“His father won the case. You don’t need to apologize.”

“When did you become so hard-nosed? His family became bankrupt because of me.”

“You did what you had to do.”

I shook my head. “I’ve done more than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“The church in Sunrise Bay wants to build a village made from tiny homes. I told Ben our trust would purchase the land and gift it back to the church—as long as he agreed to work exclusively with us.”

Owen sunk into a chair. “Are you crazy?”

“I was desperate.”

“What you offered was not only illegal, it was stupid. If you thought Tony Harper’s trial was a circus, this could be worse.”

“Ben won’t take it any farther.”

“Don’t be too sure. You should call your legal team.”

“That won’t help.” I needed to apologize to Ben, but I couldn’t do it from Manhattan. Quickly, I slid the folder Owen had given me into my briefcase and unplugged my laptop. “I’m going to Sunrise Bay.”

“What for?”

“To talk to Ben.”

Owen crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Have you heard of the telephone?”

“You don’t think I should go?”

“Granddad’s getting involved in things he shouldn’t and the board of directors is after blood—and it isn’t mine. You can’t afford to leave.”

“If I fly out tonight, I’ll be back by Sunday.” I pulled on my jacket and looked at the work sitting on my desk. As long as I had my laptop, I could work through the electronic copies of the reports from anywhere.

Owen’s eyes narrowed. “This is the second time you’ve dropped everything to travel

to Sunrise Bay. What's going on?"

"Nothing you need to worry about." I picked up my phone and asked Charlotte to book a flight to Boulder. The meetings I couldn't miss would have to be held by teleconference because, regardless of what my brother thought, some things couldn't wait. And one of them was fixing the worst mistake of my life.

twenty-eight

BEN

I held up a dark gray suit jacket and studied the shape of the lapels and the hand stitching across the pockets. Searching “for the perfect suit for Dylan’s wedding wasn’t as easy as I’d imagined. “What do you think about this one?”

Dylan frowned, shaking his head. “It’s too formal. I want something more relaxed, something that feels like me.”

Paul, always on the lookout for the perfect fit, disappeared into the back of the store. “I think I saw something that might work. Give me a second.”

As Paul rummaged through the racks, I glanced around the store, feeling a bit out of place. “I hope Mrs. Bray doesn’t mind us going through her suits like this.”

Just as I said it, Mrs. Bray, the store owner, rushed past us with a determined look on her face. “I know exactly the suit Paul’s talking about. Don’t worry, I’m on it!”

Dylan smiled, his nerves easing a little. “It’s just as well Mrs. Bray’s used to us by now. It’s a shame Jonathon isn’t here—it would’ve felt like old times.”

I nodded, remembering how just a few months ago, we were helping Paul find a suit, and now, here we were, getting Dylan ready for his big day.

I absentmindedly ran my hand along a rack of suits, letting the fabric slip through my

fingers. "Have your brothers had their final suit fitting yet?"

Dylan let out a deep sigh. "Almost. Steve's happy with what he chose, but Luke's making everyone stressed. If he hadn't called off his own wedding, maybe he wouldn't be so obsessed with mine."

With the wedding just two weeks away, I was amazed Dylan was holding it together. Luke had been relentless, calling daily to go over every minute detail of the wedding. I admired Dylan's patience, but I could see the strain it was putting on him.

"I don't know what's going on with Luke," Dylan admitted, shaking his head. "Did I tell you he's thinking of moving to Sunrise Bay?"

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really? I thought he liked living in Boulder."

"So did I," Dylan said, a little exasperated. "But after visiting me last month, he's decided that Willow Lake is the change he needs."

"How do you feel about him moving here?"

Dylan's expression said it all. "I'm not sure. Luke's great when he has a project to focus on, but right now, he's bored and seems to think I need rescuing."

"Give him a project then. Put him in charge of the church decorations or something. It'll keep him busy and out of your hair."

Dylan's face brightened. "That's actually a good idea. I'll give him a list of things to fix. That should keep him occupied for a while."

Before we could delve any deeper into the Luke situation, Paul's voice echoed from across the store. "Found it! And it's even better than I remembered!" He reappeared

with a light gray suit, complete with subtle pinstripes.

Dylan's eyes lit up. "I love it," he said, already reaching for the suit. "I'll try it on and see how it looks."

Mrs. Bray, always one step ahead, was already holding open the dressing room curtain. "Let me know if you need any help."

While Dylan disappeared into the changing room and Paul got busy inspecting more ties and shirts, I wandered over to the display of wedding rings and let my mind drift. I never imagined myself getting married. When my friends were dating, I was more interested in sketching jewelry designs. Even now, the thought of marriage felt foreign to me, like something other people did.

"Ben, what do you think?" Dylan's voice brought me back to the present.

Dylan was standing in front of the mirror, wearing the suit. Paul stood beside him, beaming with approval.

"It's perfect," Mrs. Bray said, stepping back to admire the fit.

I had to agree. The suit hugged Dylan's frame perfectly, giving him an air of effortless elegance. "You look fantastic."

Paul nodded in agreement. "All we need now is to find a shirt and tie and we're done."

I reached into my bag and pulled out a small velvet box. "A few months ago you said you wanted to give your mom something special on your wedding day. I made a necklace I think she'll like. I won't be offended if you don't want to give it to her."

Dylan sighed. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I wanted to.”

Dylan took the box from me and opened it. “Ben... this is beautiful.”

Paul peered over his shoulder. “It’s stunning.”

Seeing Dylan's reaction made every moment I’d spent creating the necklace worth it. The delicate gold chain cradled a teardrop-shaped pendant. Within it, I’d carefully woven three gemstones—each one set in gold—representing Dylan and his two brothers. Above everything else, I wanted the necklace to represent the unbreakable connection between Dylan’s mom and her children.

Dylan turned to me, his eyes shining with gratitude. “Mom will love it, but I have to pay you for it.”

My throat tightened. “No you don’t. Your mom’s a special person. I wanted to make something for her.”

Dylan hugged me. “In that case, thank you. Each time she wears it, she’ll remember this day and how much we love her.”

Before everyone started crying, Paul cleared his throat. “Speaking of love... I have some news too. Liam, Amy, and I are expecting a new addition to our family.”

I frowned, confused. “You’re getting a puppy?”

Paul laughed. “No, we’re adopting. Joseph is six months old. We can’t bring him home just yet, but it won’t be long.”



Dylan rushed over to hug Paul. “I don’t know how you managed to find a baby so quickly, but congratulations.”

“It was a surprise for us, too,” Paul said with a smile. “But we couldn’t be happier.”

I opened my arms and pulled Paul into a hug. “I’m so happy for you both.”

Paul sighed. “I should be saying the same thing to you. Please tell me you’ve reconsidered accepting the jewelry award.”

I shook my head. “I can’t do it. It would’ve been great to have the support of Wilson Enterprises, but I’m fine. New customers are finding me, and thanks to the website, each collection is getting noticed more and more.”

Paul looked at me closely, his gaze softening. “You seemed to enjoy Daniel’s company while he was here. Do you miss him?”

I hesitated, not ready to admit the truth. “He was only here for a week.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Paul said gently. “Your heart knows when you’ve found the right person.”

A knot tightened in my chest. I missed Daniel more than I wanted to admit. But he was gone, and there was no point in dwelling on what could never be. “Daniel sees the world differently from me. A relationship between us wouldn’t work. The sooner I move on, the better my life will be.”

“Are you sure?”

I forced a smile. “Of course, I am. All I need are my friends, my studio, and a few clients to make me happy.” And as long as I kept repeating those words, I might start

believing them.

twenty-nine

DANIEL

When I arrived in Sunrise Bay, I sat on Ben's veranda, waiting for him to come home. I checked my watch again, then went back to editing the report my board of directors was waiting for. It was nearly six o'clock in the evening. If Ben didn't show up in the next thirty minutes, I'd have to drive into town and find somewhere to stay for the night.

Unfortunately, I hadn't been able to leave New York City as quickly as I wanted. The earliest flight out of LaGuardia had left at nine o'clock this morning. To miss the rush-hour traffic, I'd left my apartment at the crack of dawn. As soon as I arrived at the airport, I found United's airport lounge and completed more work than I would have if I were sitting in Manhattan.

My phone rang and I glanced at the caller display. My heart sank. "Hi, Granddad."

"What are you doing in Sunrise Bay?" Patrick Devlin barked. "You're supposed to be getting ready for tomorrow's board meeting."

"The board has a copy of my initial report and they'll receive my second report soon. Owen has organized a teleconference meeting so that I can be part of the decision-making."

"You don't run a business by telephone. You should be here."

I knew my granddad was worried about the company, but I had anticipated as many issues as I could. “Owen will be at the meeting. I’ll be part of everything that happens.” Before I’d left the office yesterday, I’d checked my granddad’s schedule. He should have been overseas. “Aren’t you supposed to be in Australia?”

“I had a change of plans.”

“Is everything all right?”

Patrick didn’t reply.

With my heart pounding, I held the phone tight against my ear. “Did your doctor tell you not to go?”

“Darn fool man thinks he’s got a hotline to God. I keep telling him nothing will happen to me, but he won’t listen.”

“Why was he worried?”

“My blood pressure’s a little elevated. I told him a change of scenery would do wonders, but he didn’t agree. So here I am, stuck in New York City, twiddling my thumbs and looking for you.”

I doubted my grandfather would be doing nothing, but I understood his frustration. Patrick enjoyed traveling. It didn’t matter whether he was going to an exclusive resort in Italy or a mud hut in the Amazon rainforest. His sense of adventure was as strong as it had ever been.

“Who’s meeting with the suppliers in Sydney?”

“The manager of our Asia-Pacific marketing operation. When will you be back in the

office?”

“I’ve booked a seat on the Sunday morning flight out of Denver. If my flight’s on time, I’ll call in and see you on Sunday night. If it’s too late, I’ll meet you at work on Monday morning.”

“Owen told me you’re visiting the jeweler who won our award. I thought you saw him two weeks ago.”

“I did, but he didn’t want to come to the presentation.” My grandfather’s silence wasn’t reassuring. “Owen discovered more information about his life. It explains why he doesn’t want anything to do with our company.”

“Don’t worry about him. There are plenty of other jewelers who’ll sign the contract.”

“His father is Tony Harper.”

A heavy silence fell between us.

The trial had upset my grandfather almost as much as it had for me. “Ben creates some of the best jewelry I’ve ever seen. I want his collections to be the anchor products of the prestige store.”

“Does he know we paid Emanuel’s legal fees?”

“It’s not relevant.”

“Maybe not to you, but he might not agree.”

I sighed. I didn’t want to tell Ben because I knew what he’d say—and it would destroy everything I’d been working toward.

Granddad cleared his throat. “Have you told him about your plans?”

“Some of them.”

“And he isn’t interested.” The resignation in Patrick’s voice wasn’t lost on me.

“No, but I’m trying something different.”

“You don’t have a lot of time. The board wants a clear plan before they commit more money to rebranding the company. If you don’t get back to Manhattan soon, you might not have a job to come back to.”

My jaw clenched. “The board can’t fire me. I own fifty-one percent of the company.”

“Don’t put anything past them. No one’s indispensable.” And with those final, ominous words, my grandfather ended the call.

I wasn’t leaving the company I’d built without a fight. I wanted to sell products that no one would forget. And, if I had anything to do with it, Ben’s jewelry would provide the catalyst I needed to attract a new wave of clients.

thirty

BEN

I drove back to my cottage with a smile on my face. For the first time since Daniel had left, I felt happy. Dylan's wedding suit was perfect, and he loved the necklace I'd made for his mom.

I still couldn't believe Paul and Liam were adopting a baby. The new addition to their family would be loved beyond measure. Not only would it have two doting parents, but a very proud older sister. Amy would teach her new brother all the things she thought were important—like how to draw and what to do in the princess castle at the library.

I turned into my driveway and sighed. It was wonderful spending time with my friends, but I had a lot of work to do. With Dylan's wedding only a little over a week away, I needed to make sure I used every minute productively. Dylan's brothers were arriving tomorrow. As well as helping with any last-minute details, I had until Friday to finish three necklaces and a bracelet for different customers.

At some stage, I'd have to employ a part-time assistant. I couldn't serve in my store as well as create jewelry. My website orders were keeping me awake until after midnight, and I still had to complete all the invoicing and paperwork needed to run a business.

It was okay working long hours for a few months, but it couldn't continue.

I slowed and stared at the white SUV parked in front of my house. No one I knew had that type of vehicle, and my next guests weren't arriving at Acorn Cottage until after the weekend.

When a familiar figure rose from the veranda, my heart pounded. Daniel? What was he doing here?

He slowly walked toward me.

I caught my breath. After not seeing him for nearly two weeks, I should have been immune to his handsome face and broad shoulders. Unfortunately, I wasn't, and that worried me.

This time, instead of a suit, he was wearing jeans and a ski jacket. He could have been anyone about to start their vacation, but his grim expression told me he wasn't here to enjoy the scenery.

I parked my SUV and stood beside the driver's door.

Daniel stood a few feet away, his brown eyes filled with concern. "I should have called, but I was worried you wouldn't want to see me."

"Why have you come back?"

"There's something important I need to talk to you about."

I took a box of half-finished jewelry off the back seat. "If it's about the properties Pastor Adam wants to buy, you should have called him. I don't know anything about them."

"It's not about the houses. It's about you."



I held the box close to my chest. “We don’t have anything to discuss.”

“I shouldn’t have used the properties as a way of getting you to work with me. It was wrong.”

I closed the back-passenger door and fought the urge to tell Daniel it didn’t matter. “You could have called to apologize.”

“I wanted to say I was sorry in person.”

I wasn’t sure I believed him. In my books, anyone who tried to manipulate another person once would do it again. “I appreciate you coming all this way. Thanks for the apology but, if you’ll excuse me, I have at least four hours of work ahead of me.”

“I’m only staying in Sunrise Bay for two nights. While I’m here, I’d like to discuss something else with you. Would you have dinner with me tomorrow night? If you’ve already made plans, we could meet for coffee instead.”

I frowned. My traitorous body was telling me to take pity on the gorgeous man standing in front of me. “I’m busy tomorrow. I want to be in my studio by eight-thirty and I won’t be home until late. In the evening, I’m doing lots of wedding things with Dylan and his brothers.”

“What if I saw you before work? I could bring breakfast with me.”

I didn’t like the way my heart softened at the hopeful expression on his face. Daniel Devlin had stooped to bribery and corruption to make me change my mind about working with his company. I didn’t owe him anything, least of all my time.

“If breakfast won’t work, I could bring you lunch.”

I stepped onto my veranda. “I don’t have a lunch break.” Daniel must have been working while he was waiting for me. His laptop and a brown folder were sitting beside one of the wooden chairs. “How long have you been waiting?”

“About an hour.”

I frowned. Most people wouldn’t have stayed that long. Whatever was on his mind must be important. I placed the box of jewelry on another chair and picked up his laptop. “I don’t know what you want to talk...” I reached for the folder. Written on the outside, in bold letters, was my name. “What’s this?”

Daniel’s gaze dropped to my hands.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between us.

“I asked Owen to do a background check on you. The folder contains everything he found.”

I started to speak, but the words stuck in my throat. I returned the laptop and folder to the chair. “You had me investigated?”

Daniel crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Before I came to Sunrise Bay, we ran a background search on B.J. Davis. All we found was information about the jewelry you’d made in the last twelve months. When you told me your legal name, I asked Owen to learn more about you.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.” My voice shook with anger. “What’s happened in my life is no one’s business except mine.”

“Before Wilson Enterprises presented you with the award, I wanted to know everything about you.”

“Why?”

“I manage a high-profile company. Any surprises can have an impact on my company’s performance.”

I glanced at the folder. “What did Owen discover?”

Daniel ran his hand around the back of his neck. “You seemed to have a normal, happy childhood in Los Angeles. It wasn’t until your dad was accused of copying another jeweler’s designs that your life changed. Tony lost his job and the cost of going to trial made him bankrupt. After the trial, you moved to San Francisco with your parents.”

I waited for what came next.

“A few months later, your mom died.” Daniel paused. “I’m sorry, Ben. It must have been a difficult time.”

My eyes filled with tears, but I didn’t say anything.

Daniel picked up the folder. “You moved to Sunrise Bay about two years ago and opened your jewelry store six months later. A few months ago, you moved into a new store on Main Street and haven’t looked back.”

Relief swept through me, leaving my legs weak and shaky. Daniel’s brother hadn’t discovered my family was homeless, that we’d lived in shelters until we had enough money to pay rent.

Even though we’d had to rely on the kindness of strangers to survive, my mom didn’t have a bad word to say about anybody. She’d continued her chemotherapy regime and took large handfuls of drugs each day. When she died, my dad and my world had

fallen apart.

Daniel handed me the folder. “You can keep this.”

“I don’t want it. I never...” My voice broke. I wouldn’t cry, not when I had so much to lose.

Taking a deep breath, I thought carefully about what I wanted to say. “I never wanted to go to the award ceremony. I gave your secretary all the information she requested.”

“I want you to be there.”

“I can’t go. I can’t risk someone discovering who I am.” I took another deep breath. “If I stay away, there’s less chance anyone will link B.J. Davis with Ben Harper.”

“It doesn’t matter how low the risk might be,” Daniel said softly. “I need to make sure any individual or company who supplies products to my customers is beyond reproach.”

A wave of nausea rose in my throat. “You think I’m less worthy because of what happened to my father?”

Daniel’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t think any less of you, but my customers might. The artist who said his designs were copied never stopped pleading his case to the media.”

I picked up my box. “I’m not accepting your award, so you won’t have to worry about what your customers think. Goodbye, Daniel.” Holding my head high, I walked toward the front door, determined not to cry until I was safely inside.

“Ben, wait.” Daniel touched my shoulder.

I flinched. Embarrassment and fear brought me to a standstill. I didn't want anyone to know what my family had gone through, especially Daniel.

"I'm sorry. I didn't come here to upset you. I want to talk about how we can work together to fix your dad's reputation."

I blew my nose and turned around. "Nothing can change what happened. Dad's happy. Whatever you want to do could make everything worse."

"Will you at least listen to what I have to say? If you don't think it's a good idea, I won't do anything."

I studied the frown on Daniel's face. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't," he said sadly. "But I won't do anything you don't want me to."

Even as I opened the front door, I didn't know if I was doing the right thing. "You'd better come inside and tell me what you have in mind."

Daniel's plan would have to be foolproof. My dad had been persecuted by the media once, and I wouldn't let it happen again.

thirty-one

DANIEL

I sat on the opposite side of the table from Ben. He was breathtakingly handsome, but the dark rings under his eyes worried me. He'd told me he was working long hours. What he didn't need to tell me was that it was taking a toll on his health.

My unexpected arrival wasn't helping, either. I felt terrible about him seeing the folder. Not because of what was inside, but because of the way he'd found out about the report. In my world, peeling back the layers of a person's life was part of what made my company a success. It reduced the risk of failure and gave me confidence that our future employees could provide what they said they would.

It took a particular set of skills to navigate through the information most people didn't know existed about them. And there was no one I trusted more to do the job than my brother.

Ben lifted a cup of coffee to his mouth and took a sip. "Why do you want to help my father?"

I couldn't afford to tell him the truth. He'd think less of me, and at the moment, I needed him on my side. "Your dad's a talented jeweler. He deserves a break, and I'm in a position to offer him one."

"What do you mean?"

“My brother’s worried about my company’s reputation if anyone realizes you’re Tony Harper’s son. I want to stop any false stories before they hit the media. We’ll make sure our clients have the facts, not some half-baked lies they read in a magazine or newspaper.”

I opened my laptop and showed Ben the draft website my PR team was designing. “Wilson Enterprises is in the process of reinventing our online presence. That means new products, new niche markets, and a more diverse client base. I believe your father has the experience and skills to deliver high-quality products to our customers. His designs are completely different from yours, but they have the same timeless elegance our customers expect. None of our competitors have a father-son jewelry design team creating unique collections.”

“You want my dad to work with me?”

“It’ll make it easier for your father and create a point of difference for our clients.” I clicked on a tab at the top of the website. “We’ll showcase the work Tony has already created and promote the collections he’s designing with you. No one will refer to the trial again. If they do, my PR team will counter their information with press releases of our own.”

I leaned forward. If there was only one thing I wanted Ben to remember tonight, it was my next words. “By the time my PR team has finished, your father’s name will be on the lips of some of the biggest influencers on social media. Everyone will know Tony and Ben Harper. And, eventually, they’ll all want jewelry from your collections.”

Ben studied the page on the website. “Why are you doing this?”

I could have told him at least half a dozen reasons why I wanted Ben and his father working for me. But there was only one that mattered. “Because I like you. I’ve seen

how much you care about Sunrise Bay and the people who live here. I want to help you build your business and, at the same time, relaunch mine.”

“I’ve already told you how I feel about working with you.”

“Do you think your dad wants to be part of Wilson Enterprises?”

“Dad won’t risk his reputation again. He’s happy in San Francisco.”

“I could visit him and explain what I’d like to do.”

Ben leaned his elbows on the table and rubbed his temples. “I don’t think you realize how hard it was when Dad was accused of stealing someone else’s designs.”

I wanted to hold him in my arms and tell him everything would be okay. But I couldn’t. “This could change your lives. Let me help your dad rebuild his career.”

His gaze dropped to the website. “I’ll talk to him tonight.”

I let go of the breath I was holding. “If he has any questions, he can call me.”

Ben nodded. “Where are you staying?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll head into town and see what’s available.”

“There’s a big music festival in Boulder this weekend. You’ll be lucky to find a vacancy anywhere around here.”

I hadn’t thought to book my accommodation before I’d left New York. I’d assumed there’d be plenty of options available. “I’ll go online and call a few places.”



“If you don’t find anything, you could stay in Acorn Cottage. My next guests don’t arrive until Monday morning.”

There was nothing I’d like better than to stay close to Ben, but it might not be the best thing to do. “I’ll make some calls and let you know. Thanks for listening to me.”

Ben walked to the front door with me. When he lifted his gaze, his eyes were filled with concern. “I’ll call you as soon as I’ve spoken to Dad.”

I nodded and left his cottage. The next few hours could make or break my plans to dominate the exclusive jewelry market. If Ben and his father didn’t want to be part of the journey, I’d have to find another way to change their minds.

thirty-two

BEN

Not long after Daniel left, I called my dad. So far, the conversation had been nothing out of the ordinary, but that was about to change. “There’s something I want to ask you, Dad.”

“What is it?”

I could hear the smile in his voice, but it might not be there for long. “Daniel Devlin came back to see me. He’s the man who stayed at Acorn Cottage.”

“His name’s familiar. Did he leave something behind?”

“Not exactly. He’s the chief executive of Wilson Enterprises.”

Silence stretched between us.

I bit my bottom lip. “My friend Dylan entered me in a big jewelry competition that his company sponsors. I won.”

“You’re not talking about the Wilson Award, are you?”

“Yes.”

“Ben, that’s amazing. When did you find out?”

I scuffed the toe of my sneaker against the wooden floor. “A couple of months ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Dad sounded more confused than annoyed, but it was hard to tell when we were hundreds of miles apart. “I thought you wouldn’t want me to have anything to do with them.”

“Oh, baby boy. Wilson Enterprises didn’t accuse me of copying the designs. They were only doing what any other company would have done. They trusted Emanuel to tell the truth and he let them down.”

I was more upset than my dad. “But Mom?—”

“Your mom hated what happened, but she never hated Wilson Enterprises or Emanuel. At the time, I never understood how she could be so forgiving. She used to tell me there was no point holding all that anger inside. Even when we were living in the shelter, she was happy. Your mom cherished the time we had together, regardless of what was happening. She had the two people she loved the most in her life beside her. That’s more than a lot of people can say.”

Hot tears stung my eyes. Over the last few weeks, I’d missed my mom more than ever. I’d give anything to be able to hold her one more time, to tell her what was happening, and to listen to her gentle words of wisdom.

“Now tell me about the award. How did Dylan submit your entry without you knowing about it?”

I wiped my eyes and took a deep breath. “He took some photos of the ruby and gold necklace I made five months ago and filled out the online form. When I first heard I’d won, I thought it was a hoax. It turns out it wasn’t.”

“When do you receive the award?”

“There’s a presentation dinner in Manhattan soon. I’m not going.”

“Benjamin James Harper. You can’t be serious.”

Dad hadn’t called me by my full name for so long that it made me feel better.

“You’ve worked hard to rebuild your career. I was worried someone would link the two of us together and bring up the trial. I don’t want to risk your job for the sake of a few new clients.”

“You don’t need to worry. Stan’s a great boss. If anyone tries to derail my career, they’ll have to answer to both of us.”

“It might not be enough. I know you have a great working relationship, but some reporters are ruthless. I told Daniel two weeks ago that I’m not going.”

“If you’ve already told him, why did he come back to Sunrise Bay?”

I took a deep breath. “That’s what I want to talk to you about. He has an offer for both of us. Daniel wants us to design jewelry for his company.”

“Why does he want me to work for him?”

“He saw some of your jewelry and was impressed. He wants to promote us as the first father-son team to work with his company.”

“Exclusively?”

“I think so.”

“I can’t do it, Ben. Stan stood beside me through all the bad publicity. I can’t leave.”

“Are you sure?”

“I like living and working in San Francisco. But what about you? Just because I’m not interested, it doesn’t mean you can’t be part of Daniel’s company.”

“I’m happy working in Sunrise Bay.”

“You’ve worked so hard, Ben. If this man’s company is willing to pay you more than you would earn in your store, you should make the most of the opportunity.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

Dad sighed. “Five years ago, I would have agreed with you. Money might not be everything, but it’s important. Don’t throw away his offer because of me. I can look after myself.”

“I know you can. But I don’t want to go back to what it was like during the trial.”

“Nothing can be as bad as that.”

Remembering what had happened made me sad, so I forced myself to think about something else. “What have you been doing?”

While Dad told me about the Christmas pendants he was creating, I warmed a bowl of soup in the microwave. It wasn’t until we’d finished our call that I began to relax.

Living in Los Angeles and San Francisco had been harrowing. Even now, whenever I got stressed, I’d wake up in a cold sweat, reliving the nightmare our lives had become.

Before the trial, I'd never been scared of taking risks, of pushing the limits of what people expected from me. But now it was different. I needed to know I was safe, that I had enough money to pay my bills and live a comfortable life.

What Daniel was proposing could give me all those things or take everything away.

With a heavy heart, I buttered some toast. I could always ask Daniel about his offer. It didn't mean I'd say yes. It could work as long as we remembered that afterward we could go our separate ways and live perfectly happy lives. Or maybe not.

thirty-three

DANIEL

The next day, I walked into New Life Church, looking for Pastor Adam. The reception area looked completely different from when I'd last seen it. On the night of the auction, the large open space was filled with people looking forward to buying one of the donated items. Today, the only people I saw were a group of teenagers sitting on some overstuffed sofas. Their excited conversation and loud laughter made me feel a hundred years old. I couldn't remember a time when I was as happy and carefree as they were.

I glanced at my watch. I wasn't meeting Adam for another ten minutes. Instead of waiting in the reception area, I decided to head toward the café and buy my first cup of coffee for the day.

I'd spent the night in Acorn Cottage, grateful that Ben had been able to accommodate me. He was right about finding somewhere to sleep. People going to the Country Music Festival had booked every available bed along the eastern shore of Willow Lake. Not only had Ben given me the keys to the cottage, but he'd given me some hot soup and toast. Most people I knew would have told me to find somewhere else to stay, but not Ben. He was still disappointed I'd used the tiny home project as a bribe, but that didn't stop him from making sure I was all right.

It was his kindness that made me feel guilty. He wouldn't intentionally do anything to hurt someone, but I didn't know if I could say the same about myself. I wasn't proud of the choices I'd made, but they'd enabled me to build a successful company that

provided jobs for a lot of people. Hopefully, what I did today would make up for some of those decisions.

My footsteps slowed as I entered the café. It smelled divine, like the best combination of gingerbread and chocolate I could imagine. I took another deep breath and sighed. This was where I needed to be, even if my nerves were strung tight. Waiting for Ben's decision about whether he'd work with me wasn't easy and Pastor Adam would be a welcome distraction.

I looked around the room. A huge glass window separated the café from the commercial kitchen. Adam stood behind the kitchen counter, watching a group of teenagers bake something. For such a busy man, he was incredibly patient. He kept a careful eye on each student, watching what they were doing, and answering their questions.

Ben had mentioned something about Pastor Adam's hospitality classes. Being a pastor and a cook was a strange combination, but it looked as though it was working. The students were focused, engaged, and seemed to be enjoying what they were doing.

I wondered what had brought Adam to Sunrise Bay and, more importantly, why he stayed. There were plenty of cities that could benefit from his enthusiasm and drive, plenty of people who needed someone to make a difference in their lives. But Adam continued to live here, to use his limited resources to create a town people were proud to call home.

"He's wonderful with the students, isn't he?"

I turned and looked at the man standing beside me. It was Paul, Ben's friend. "They're listening to everything he says."



“Some of the teenagers don’t have father figures in their lives. If you want a role model, you couldn’t ask for better than Adam.” Paul frowned. “It’s good to see you, but why are you here? Ben said you’d gone back to New York City.”

“I did, but I needed to see Adam about something.” I didn’t know how much Ben had told Paul about me, but he couldn’t have told him everything. I was sure he’d be acting differently if he knew I’d tried to blackmail his friend.

“How long are you staying?” Paul asked.

“Until tomorrow.”

The students burst into laughter, then started clapping as Adam held up a cake.

Paul looked at the teenagers and sighed. “They’re great kids. I wish we had more job opportunities for them once they finish the program. Most young people end up leaving Sunrise Bay to find work in other towns.”

“It’s probably the same in most small communities.”

“It doesn’t need to be.” Paul glanced at his watch. “You’ll have to excuse me. I’m about to show everyone how to decorate a birthday cake. I’ll tell Adam you’re here.”

And before I could say thanks, Paul was halfway across the room, waving at the students who greeted him.

Five minutes later, I was shaking Pastor Adam’s hand. “I’m sorry if I interrupted your class.”

Adam’s smile was reassuring. “You’ve got perfect timing but, I must admit, I was surprised to hear from you.”

“It’s easier to talk in person about the tiny home village.”

“I’m happy you want to know more about it. Let’s grab some coffee before we go into my office. Did you get all the information I emailed through to you?”

“I did. Thanks for sending it so quickly.”

“It wasn’t a problem.” Instead of waiting in the line, Adam took me through a side door and into the kitchen. “Being able to make my own coffee is one of the perks of the job,” he whispered as Paul began his class. “It took me a week to master the commercial coffee maker, but it was worth the effort. What would you like?”

“Anything with cream and sugar would be great.”

Adam smiled. “I know just the thing.”

By the time we were sitting in Adam’s office, I was wondering what other skills the pastor of the New Life Church had mastered. It didn’t take long to realize that Adam knew his way around trust deeds, project plans, and construction schedules.

“Do you think the tiny home village is something your company’s trust would be interested in supporting?” Adam asked.

“It has a good chance of getting our financial backing. The whole concept is innovative and builds on the paying forward principle that the trust values. The feasibility report and the information from the planning department look positive. Is the land you want to purchase still available?”

“It is. If you want to look at it, it isn’t far from here.”

“That sounds like a great idea.”

After we finished our coffee, we walked to where the first tiny home would be built. I asked more questions about the project. Adam's answers made me even more impressed with what the church wanted to achieve. Considering their limited budget, Adam was hoping to provide services and facilities that were better than larger towns could deliver.

When we stopped to look at the land, my eyebrows rose. Adam wasn't exaggerating when he said it was close to the church. The first tiny home would be a five-minute walk from the main reception area.

As he opened a large sheet of paper, Adam pointed to a house partly hidden behind some trees. "Each piece of land has an existing house. We'll use the houses as communal spaces until we can afford something else. They'll provide the kitchen and meeting rooms for the tiny homes positioned around them. Some of the land will become communal gardens. The residents will grow their own fruit and vegetables. Anything left over will be used by The Welcome Center."

I studied the architect's drawings, then looked at the properties. I could see why Ben was so excited. I also knew the cost of developing the land could be substantial. Without financial assistance from public or private organizations, the village would never be built.

After we'd spent another hour discussing the development, I shook Adam's hand. "Thanks for showing me around. I'll talk to the trust and get back to you with any questions they might have. I should know in the next two weeks if the tiny home village is a project they want to sponsor."

"I hope they can see the benefit it'll bring to our community."

"I'm sure they will." After I said goodbye, I walked back to my SUV. What Adam didn't know was that I managed the trust alongside my brother and my grandfather.

If Owen and my granddad didn't want to support the village, I'd bring them to Sunrise Bay. Anyone who spent time with Adam and saw what he was doing would be crazy not to help. And, contrary to what I sometimes thought, my family was far from crazy.

thirty-four

DANIEL

After I saw Pastor Adam, I visited The Welcome Center to see what the volunteers were doing. My quick tour turned into two hours of working in the kitchen, peeling potatoes, and making sure the dining room was ready for the evening meal. After I left, I walked through town, eager to find out more about Sunrise Bay.

Jenny and Tim Evans had been happy to talk to me. Their general store seemed to be a meeting place for many of the locals and most tourists. I discovered more about the community in our hour-long discussion than I'd read about on the Internet.

Everything they said confirmed what I already suspected. The residents of Sunrise Bay wanted their community to retain the things that made it special. But they also wanted to provide more resources and facilities for people who were struggling.

And that, above everything else, was why Pastor Adam's latest project had a lot of support. News about the tiny home village was already spreading. Almost everyone Jenny and Tim had spoken to were looking forward to seeing the houses built.

After I left the general store, I went to the public library and used a small meeting room for my call with the board of directors. The meeting went better than anyone expected.

I wasn't sure whether they'd finally seen my point of view or if they were more selective in the battles they chose to fight. After working with the current board for

four years, I'd place my money on the second option.

With a weary sigh, I turned into Ben's driveway. As much as I appreciated the board's agreement to postpone the next phase of my plan, I still had to move fast. One way or another, I needed an answer from Ben and his dad. If they agreed to work with Wilson Enterprises, it would allow me to rebrand the company and take it to another level. Without their support, I'd be lucky to have a job.

I drove past Ben's home and frowned.

He stood in the middle of the yard between the two cottages with his arms extended, stepping backward as if he were...waltzing?

I parked my vehicle under a tree and watched what he was doing. It was definitely a waltz, but his half turns were tying his feet in knots and almost toppling him over. All he needed was to turn his hips farther around, and his center of gravity would do the rest.

After he tripped over his feet for the second time, he stopped moving, repositioned his body, and began again.

I didn't know if he'd appreciate my help, but it was worth a try.

My smile widened as I walked toward him.

Ben's blond hair was covered by an old baseball cap. He looked cute in a baggy red T-shirt that he'd tucked into a pair of faded jeans. Compared with the men I'd met in New York, he was completely different. There was something about him that made me want to stay close, to help him be successful and follow his dreams. And right now, teach him how to waltz.

With his eyes closed and earbuds silencing everything around him, he had no idea I was there.

I listened as he counted the beat, dipping and rising in the one, two, three rhythm I'd learned as a teenager.

Now that I was standing a few feet away, I wasn't sure how to interrupt him. Scaring him to death wasn't an option, so I cleared my throat. Loudly.

Ben kept dancing.

I waited until he was close, then reached out, pulled him against my hip, and led him across the grass. Well, that was the plan, anyway.

As soon as our hands touched, Ben's eyes flew open. His ear-piercing screech echoed around the lake, sending a flock of birds into a frenzy.

As I threw my hands over my ears, I smiled. Unfortunately, it didn't look as though Ben shared my sense of humor.

When he got over the shock of seeing me, he yanked out his earbuds. "Haven't you been told it's rude to sneak up on someone? Especially when they've got their eyes closed."

I winced at Ben's loud indignation. "I didn't want to interrupt what you were doing."

"You don't think grabbing me around the waist and pushing me across the grass is an interruption?"

I sighed. "I was trying to be helpful. Your basic waltz steps are fine, but your quarter and half turns need some work."

“You know how to dance?”

The surprise on Ben’s face gave me a faint glimmer of hope. A few seconds ago, I thought I’d be banished from the cottage and forced to sleep in my SUV. “Grandma taught me how to waltz, foxtrot, and two-step my way out of trouble.”

Ben bit his bottom lip. “How would you feel about teaching me to dance?”

I pretended to consider his request carefully. With raised eyebrows, I asked, “How long have we got until you need to be step-perfect?”

“A week.”

My eyes widened.

“I know,” Ben said miserably. “Dylan’s getting married next Saturday and I still don’t know how to waltz.”

My confidence took a nosedive. “Does your date know how to dance?”

Ben frowned. “I’m not going with anyone, but Dylan and Alex have been practicing for months. They kept warning me that there would be lots of waltzes, but I’ve been so busy?—”

“I’ll do it,” I said quickly.

Instead of looking relieved, Ben’s frown deepened. “That was fast. What’s the catch?”

“There’s no...” The words that would have come out of my mouth disappeared. Throughout most of my life, there’d always been catches. But not now. Not with Ben.



He banged the palm of his hand against his forehead. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Now you’re thinking of all the things you can weasel out of me as payback for the lessons.”

I hoped he was joking. “I don’t weasel things out of people. I use my superior negotiating skills and charming personality to encourage people to agree with me.”

“What’s your price, Daniel?”

I didn’t want to spoil Ben’s righteous indignation, but the piercing glare he aimed at me wasn’t intimidating. It was hot. My grandma would blush if she knew how useful her dancing lessons were about to become.

“I want to come to Dylan and Alex’s wedding with you.”

Ben’s mouth dropped open.

“It makes perfect sense. It’s much easier to dance with someone who knows how you move. And I won’t be insulted when you step on my toes.”

“Would that speech be part of your superior negotiating skills or charming personality?”

I grinned. Maybe Ben did share my sense of humor after all. “I’ll go for charm, but only because I’m saving my negotiating skills for another day.”

Ben didn’t smile. “You’re forgetting one important thing.”

My eyebrows rose. “I am?”

“You’re leaving on Sunday. That only gives us one day and a few hours to perfect

our technique.”

“I could stay in Sunrise Bay for a few more days.”

Ben seemed as surprised as I was by what I’d said. “You have to go back to Manhattan. You’re the chief executive.”

My grandfather’s voice boomed inside my head, agreeing with Ben. Not for the first time, I ignored it. “I can work from here almost as well as I can from my office.”

“You’ll get fired.”

I shrugged. “Possibly. But the board can’t do anything about it until our next meeting. That gives me a whole month to do what I want.”

Ben silently studied my face.

“Do we have a deal?” I held my hand toward him, hoping like crazy he’d accept my offer.

He shook my hand.

The flame of hope inside me rose a little higher.

“We have a deal,” Ben said. “Dancing lessons with no strings attached.”

I smiled. “I didn’t say there wouldn’t be any strings.”

His eyes connected with mine and a bolt of pure energy shot through my heart.

“Be careful what you wish for,” he murmured. “It might come true.”

My smile disappeared. That's what I was hoping.

thirty-five

BEN

I wondered whether I was plain crazy. Standing in the middle of my yard, dancing with a man who stopped at nothing to get what he wanted wasn't how I usually spent my Friday nights. Instead of sitting in front of my workbench, creating another client's order, I was learning the art of waltzing. And even though it pained me to admit it, Daniel was a great teacher.

"Back straight. There's no room for slouching in a waltz."

I pulled back my shoulders. "Are you telling me I've got bad posture?"

"How you stand when you're dancing is different from everyday life. My grandma told me a man who could dance was worth his weight in gold. And that pot of gold depends on your posture."

Daniel let go of my hand and took two steps backward. "Hold your arms like this..." He extended his arms as if he were dancing with me. "Lift your upper body like you have a string attached to your head, and use your hips to alter your direction. You can't go wrong."

I held my arms in the air, pulled in my stomach, pushed back my shoulders, and twisted my hips.

"Move your foot in the direction your hips are rotating. Left foot, left hip."

I tried again, quickly stepping away from Daniel and twisting my body like the hinge on a door.

“That’s better.”

I sagged in relief. “I thought waltzing was supposed to be fun?”

Daniel’s grin made my heart pound.

“It is once you know how to dodge everyone else.”

“It’s just as well you’re my partner. You can maneuver your way around the dance floor and all I have to do is follow.”

Daniel took hold of my hand and pulled me close. “As long as you remember who’s in charge, we’ll be fine.”

“I can’t help it if I’m naturally assertive,” I muttered as Daniel settled me against his hip.

“You can be assertive off the dance floor. I can’t lead if you refuse to move your feet.”

My traitorous body almost whimpered when he wrapped his arms around my shoulders. “What are you doing?”

“Unless you want to sing as we dance, I need to untangle your earbuds so we can both listen to the music.”

While Daniel fiddled with the twisted wires, I practiced standing tall. I visualized our dance steps, doing everything I could to distract myself from the sight and smell of

the six-foot-two heartthrob standing within kissing distance of my mouth.

“Nearly there.” Daniel’s breath whispered along my skin, sending shivers down my spine.

This wasn’t what I was thinking when I’d asked him to help me. I was utterly and hopelessly attracted to Daniel, but I didn’t have time for a boyfriend. Or friend, or whatever our relationship was becoming. He worked in Manhattan and had a life that didn’t involve me.

He also had a brother he’d asked to do a background check on me, and when I refused to work with Daniel, he’d tried to blackmail me.

But his grandma had taught him how to dance, so he wasn’t all bad.

Daniel brushed a strand of hair away from my face and handed me an earbud. “Cue the music, Ben.”

Next time I was in town, I was buying a portable speaker or wireless earbuds. Dancing with Daniel was dangerous enough without being connected to him with a thin, plastic-covered wire.

I found the music app on my phone and pushed “Play.” As the first notes of an Anne Murray song drifted into my ear, Daniel tapped the beat against my shoulder. “Should I ask Dylan what songs they’re playing at the wedding? We could practice dancing to that music, too.”

“Focus, Mr. Harper.”

I sighed. I’d unleashed a monster when I’d asked Daniel for dancing lessons.

“One, two, three...”

Daniel’s muscles tensed a moment before he stepped forward.

Automatically, my body moved backward, matching his long, graceful stride. My sneakers brushed against the grass as each step became easier, each turn a little less awkward. I forgot about Daniel’s rock-hard body pressed against mine, the way we moved together like long-lost lovers. I simply enjoyed the moment, lost myself in the music, and fell a little in love with the man in my arms.

My eyes widened as we completed our first flawless circuit of the backyard. “We did it,” I whispered.

Daniel dropped his hand to my waist and sighed. “We did. But where do we go from here?”

I searched his face, trying to decide if he was still talking about dancing. “I guess we go back the way we came.” It was the coward’s way out of his question, but I didn’t care. I still hadn’t told Daniel whether I’d work for him. And until that was settled, I wouldn’t be getting any closer to him, even if Anne Murray was asking if she could have this dance for the rest of her life.

thirty-six

DANIEL

I turned over the steak on the barbecue. After we'd finished dancing, Ben had invited me for dinner. We could have been any other couple, anywhere in the world, enjoying each other's company. Except we weren't a couple. We weren't friends. We were something in between that didn't make a whole lot of sense.

"Would you like Dijon, ranch, or honey mustard dressing on the salad?" Ben's voice floated from the kitchen.

For a moment, I forgot what he'd asked and soaked in his beauty. While I was on the veranda, he'd changed into a white T-shirt and a pair of denim shorts. He looked like the guy next door, the man anyone would be mad not to marry.

"Daniel?"

I cleared my throat and tried to remember the options he'd given me. "Sorry. Ranch would be great."

Ben smiled and turned toward the living room.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." His smile dimmed but didn't completely disappear.



“Have you and your dad decided whether you’ll work for Wilson Enterprises?”

“I…” He took a deep breath and focused on the table between us. “I was going to talk to you about that after dinner.”

“Is there a reason we can’t talk about it now?”

His chin lifted to meet my gaze. “Dad doesn’t want to work with you. He’s happy where he is.”

I rubbed my temple. “Would it help if I talked to him? I could explain?—”

“He knows what could happen if we created jewelry for your company. But he wants to keep working with his friend. Stan was one of the few people who believed him when he said he didn’t steal the designs.”

“Loyalty won’t make him rich or famous.”

Ben winced. “None of that matters.”

I’d said the wrong thing. Disappointment blazed from Ben’s face and left me feeling less than the man I knew I was. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Ben sent me a sad smile. “When I was younger, Dad told me you can’t expect loyalty from people if you don’t give it. If you haven’t learned that by now, Daniel, you never will.”

There was a wariness in his gaze, an inevitability that made my heart clench tight. If I stood any chance of rebuilding my relationship with him, I had to let him see who I really was.

Letting someone close had only happened once. Tom had spent time with my family, been privy to information no one else knew. He'd used that information against me, almost destroying my relationship with my grandparents and bringing me to breaking point. But I had more faith in Ben. He wouldn't use what I told him against me, wouldn't pretend to be anything other than himself.

I sat on the edge of a wooden seat. "Six years ago, I was engaged to a man I thought I loved. But he told a competitor about a major acquisition my grandfather was about to make. Our competitor made an offer for the same company and bought it for a ridiculous price. They immediately stopped supplying our core product and nearly bankrupted Granddad's business."

I looked across the lake, drawing on its stillness to keep me centered. "What my fiancé did was wrong, but what it did to my grandparents was worse. The stable family we'd built was almost destroyed. Granddad was scrambling to raise money to keep his business operating. Grandma was so stressed she had a heart attack. After my parents died, I swore I'd keep my grandparents and brother safe. By letting Tom into my life, I didn't do that."

"You weren't responsible for what happened."

"I shared information with Tom that no one else knew."

Ben studied my face. "He must have known what he was doing was wrong."

"He knew the person who bought the company. He said it was an honest mistake."

"But you didn't believe him?"

"No. Tom didn't make mistakes like that."

“Did you start your own company to help your grandparents?”

I nodded. “By the time everything was settled, they were exhausted. Granddad sold his business and invested in mine. What happened made me wary of trusting anyone.”

“I can understand that. Is your Grandma okay now?”

I gripped the tongs so tightly that my knuckles turned white. “She died two years ago. The damage from the heart attack permanently weakened the muscles in her heart. She passed away peacefully in her sleep.”

“I’m sorry.” Ben reached out and touched my arm.

The warmth of his hand centered me, gave me the courage to continue. “Working for Wilson Enterprises could take your career to a different level. At least promise me you’ll think about it.”

He started to say something, then frowned at the barbecue. “Do you want me to check the steak? It smells as though it’s burning.”

I spun around, flipped the meat, and switched off the grill. When I turned back, Ben was gone.

I just hoped he didn’t feel the same way as his father. Because, regardless of what his dad thought, money made a big difference in your life.

thirty-seven

BEN

I wiped down the outdoor table, my mind lingering on everything Daniel had shared over dinner. Hearing more about his fiancé and his life with his grandparents made me see him in a different light.

Growing up without his parents must have been difficult, especially when they sounded like amazing people. My childhood was almost the polar opposite of Daniel's. From what he'd said, his family vacations on Shelter Island were the closest to my everyday life. My mom and dad were different, and looking back, I felt blessed to live a simple life.

"Would you like me to clean the barbecue now or in the morning?" Daniel asked, breaking into my thoughts.

I looked at him and smiled. "Neither. You've already done enough for one night."

Daniel slung the dish towel over his shoulder. "I'm grateful you took pity on me and invited me to dinner."

"I couldn't leave you to fend for yourself when I had enough steak for two people. I've got something else you might like, too."

"If it's a letter of intent to work with Wilson Enterprises, I'll be thrilled," he said with a dramatic sigh.

“It’s better than that.” I laughed. “I bought one of Paul’s strawberry ripple cheesecakes this afternoon. Would you like a slice?”

“That sounds like the perfect way to end the evening. How’s Paul?”

“He’s great. Did you know Paul and Liam are adopting a little boy?”

Daniel nodded. “Amy told me she was getting a baby brother or sister when she was here for your birthday.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“I swore on a pinky promise that I wouldn’t tell anyone. Besides, it would have spoiled the surprise when Paul told you.” Daniel followed me into the kitchen, sat on a kitchen stool, and watched me take the cheesecake out of the refrigerator. “It must be the time of the year for people to become parents. My secretary’s baby is due in December.”

“I think it’s got more to do with our age. Most of my friends are either getting married or having children.”

Daniel rested his arms on the counter. “Do you want to get married and have children?”

“One day, but I haven’t got the best track record when it comes to men. At the moment I’m too busy creating jewelry. What about you?”

“I’m not sure anyone would want to marry me.”

I almost smiled, until I saw the serious expression on his face. “Why do you say that?”

He shrugged, but I saw the hurt he was hiding. “I’m thirty-eight years old. I work long hours and hardly take any time off work. Even if I did find someone, I’m not sure I could give them the happy ever after they’d want.”

I slid a piece of cheesecake onto a plate. “Have you ever considered that being yourself would be enough? Happy ever after doesn’t have to come gift-wrapped with a sparkly red bow.”

Daniel’s lips twitched. “Are you telling me I’m a brown bag kind of guy?”

I grinned. “I bet your grandma told you it’s not what’s on the outside that’s important, but what’s inside.” I handed him a spoon and a slice of the cheesecake. “Having said that, there’s no way you’re a brown bag kind of guy. You’re tall, handsome, and live in New York City. You also have a great sense of humor and you’re kind. If you told everyone you’re looking for a partner, you’d have men lining up to meet you.”

“I should be grateful I didn’t tell Jenny I’d like someone special in my life.”

I was surprised he remembered the owner of the general store. Jenny was a sweetie, but she was also an incurable gossip. “Sunrise Bay doesn’t have the same number of single men as Manhattan, but Jenny has a gift for finding the unexpected. It’s probably just as well you don’t live here. She’d make your happiness her number one priority.”

Daniel pulled out the stool beside him. “Enjoy your cheesecake with me. If you were looking for someone special, what would he be like?”

I thought about my ideal man, but the only person who kept popping into my mind was Daniel. “I’m not sure. I guess he’d have a good sense of humor and love children and dogs.”

“You don’t have a dog.”

“But I’d like one.”

Daniel’s eyebrows rose. “Big or small?”

“Medium.”

“Short or long-haired?”

“Short.”

“Black, white, red, or brown?”

I grinned. “I don’t mind. If he’s adorable and likes lots of cuddles, he’d fit into my life perfectly.”

“What if I...” Daniel clamped his mouth shut.

I waited for him to continue, but he remained silent. “What were you going to say?”

“It doesn’t matter. The cheesecake’s amazing.” Daniel ate another spoonful of the sweet dessert.

The last thing I’d been talking about was my future canine buddy. My eyes widened. Daniel was definitely adorable. Maybe he liked lots of cuddles, too?

I scooped some dessert into my mouth, just thinking about cuddling Daniel made my temperature soar.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked.

I swallowed the cheesecake and pretended my cheeks weren't burning. It was time to show Daniel my new designs. "I'm working in my store until midday, then starting a new collection. Would you like to see my drawings?"

"I'd love to."

Daniel followed me into the living room. I'd left my sketchpad in the middle of the coffee table and surrounded it with the things I'd used as inspiration.

"It looks as though you've found someone's treasure chest."

My heart pounded. At least he was close to the theme I'd chosen. "I've been collecting costume jewelry for years. The tiara was a present from Dad. The other brooches and necklaces are from estate sales and second-hand stores. The jewelry was a starting point for my designs."

I sat on the edge of the sofa and handed Daniel my sketchpad. "This is my royal collection. I've created each piece as a tribute to different members of the royal family. Past and present."

Daniel opened the book and smiled. "Queen Victoria would have been impressed."

The drawing of the onyx necklace was one of my favorites. "Black stones are a symbol of self-control and resilience. I thought that was appropriate given Victoria's unhappy childhood and the amount of social and technological change in her reign." I leaned forward and pointed to the diamonds clustered around each stone. "Albert was the love of her life. I wanted to capture his influence on Victoria's life, so I added melee diamonds to lighten the feel of the onyx and balance the design."

Daniel turned the page.



His low, drawn-out whistle made me smile. “Do you like it?”

“It’s incredible.”

I’d thought about the Princess Diana necklace for days. Regardless of what had happened in her personal life, Diana had changed the world’s perception of the royal family.

I wanted to design something that represented her simple yet elegant fashion style, the way she could captivate the world with a single smile. “Her eyes were a beautiful shade of blue, so I chose a stunning sapphire for the pendant. Thirty-six diamonds will be woven through the chain, representing each year of her life. The silver setting is more delicate than the Victoria necklace, but that’s because I wanted the gemstones to be the showstopper, not the setting.”

Daniel studied the drawing. “This collection is more expensive than some of your other pieces.”

I nodded. “It is. But, for the right people, it will be irresistible.”

Daniel looked at the next four pages.

When he lifted his gaze, I knew he was hooked.

“Where have you been hiding?”

I grinned at the disbelief on his face. “In a little town called Sunrise Bay.”

“You need to work for me.”

“I know.”

“If you want to create jewelry for your store, we could...” His eyes widened. “You know?”

“I’ve known for the last week, but I had to think about how it could work.”

“You wouldn’t need to live in New York City.”

“Good, because I’m staying here. But I’m happy to visit whoever I’m working with to discuss my designs.”

Daniel closed the sketchpad. “We could debut your work with this collection.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. Wait here.” I rushed into the kitchen and took a bottle of apple cider out of the refrigerator. With two glasses in my hands, I returned to the living room. “It isn’t champagne, but it’s bubbly.”

Daniel’s face relaxed into a smile. “It’s perfect.”

I poured the cider and raised my glass toward Daniel’s. “To new beginnings and a successful partnership.”

He tapped his glass against mine. “And to happy endings.”

I looked into his eyes and hoped our toast came true. I was putting my career and my life in Daniel’s hands.

And whether he knew it or not, one wrong decision could have terrible consequences. For everyone.

thirty-eight

BEN

I walked into Dylan's living room and smiled at the organized chaos. With three days left until the wedding, Dylan and his brothers were here to create centerpieces for each of the reception tables.

Luke was super-organized and trying to run the evening like a military exercise. Steve was more relaxed. He kept rolling his eyes when Luke opened his laptop and studied Dylan's wedding planner.

"I have some chocolate chip cookies if anyone's interested." I grinned at Dylan's grateful sigh. "There's hot coffee, too."

"You're a lifesaver." Dylan hauled himself to his feet. "I've got pins and needles from kneeling on the floor for so long."

Steve jumped to his feet. "Not me. The cookies look delicious. Who baked them?"

"My friend Paul. He shares Jonathon's kitchen at Candy Lane."

"Is he making the wedding cake, too?"

Luke nibbled on a cookie while he consulted the wedding planner. "He is. I can't wait to see what it looks like."

Dylan's face broke into a smile. "It's gorgeous. I'll take you to Candy Lane tomorrow and you can have a look."

While Dylan and his brothers ate cookies, I returned to the kitchen. For the last hour, they'd been placing artificial roses and foliage into vases, then finishing each design with a strand of fairy lights. Even though no one had made the small posies before, they were gorgeous.

I poured four cups of coffee and carefully placed them on a tray. Dylan and his brothers were all so different, but it was obvious they loved each other. When I was younger, I'd dreamed about having a younger brother or sister, someone to share the ups and downs of life with, but it hadn't happened.

"There you are," Dylan said from the doorway. "I thought I'd give you a hand to bring out the coffee."

"You didn't have to do that. I found a tray in the cupboard."

"I'll carry it through to the living room. I hope Luke's not too bossy. He has a habit of wanting to take over."

I smiled. "He's fine. It's good to have another person around who likes to cross things off a list. At least that way we won't forget anything."

"That's one advantage," Dylan said with a sigh. "Have you heard from Daniel?"

"He's called me each day. If everything goes to plan, he'll catch a flight to Boulder on Friday morning." I walked toward the living room. Daniel hadn't been able to stay for the entire week. He'd returned to New York City on Tuesday afternoon with a briefcase full of my sketches.

“Did he tell you how long it’ll take for your new collection to be approved?”

“It could take three or four weeks. The design team wants to find the perfect gemstones and calculate the full price before they decide whether to approve everything. In the meantime, I’ve started another project. Between that and my commissions, I don’t have a lot of time to think about what’s happening in Manhattan.”

Which, as far as I was concerned, was a good thing. It wasn’t only the new collection that was making me nervous. Daniel had made more of an impact on my life than I thought. He’d stayed in my spare bedroom on Monday night, leaving Acorn Cottage for the new guests. It had been wonderful having someone to talk to after dinner, even if it meant not doing as much work in my studio.

I opened the living room door a little wider for Dylan. “How’s Alex?”

“Better than I am. He’s finished all the pre-wedding jobs he was supposed to do. Why is it so much easier for him?”

“Probably because Paul helped him.”

Dylan sighed. “Wait until Mom and Dad arrive. Anything that isn’t ready will be whipped into shape faster than I can blink.”

I’d met Dylan’s parents and I loved them. They were the type of people who would do anything for you. “Your Mom and Dad are amazing.”

“They have their moments. You’d better bring Daniel to the wedding rehearsal and dinner on Friday night. I’ll need all the support I can get.”

“Why do you need more support?”

Steve met us halfway across the room and took the tray out of Dylan's hands. "Because Mom's already had one son who hasn't made it beyond the wedding rehearsal dinner. She doesn't want the same thing happening to Dylan."

Luke groaned. "I wish everyone would move on and forget I almost got married. Besides, I don't know what Mom's worried about. Alex and Dylan don't like being separated for more than a day. There's no way they aren't getting married."

Dylan sat beside Luke. "One day you'll find the right man. It just takes time."

Luke poked a red rose in a vase. "I don't think I'll ever find the right person. I've resigned myself to being able to do what I want and enjoying lots of overseas travel. I might even move to Sunrise Bay."

Steve handed everyone a cup of coffee. "I could join you. Imagine all of us living within walking distance of each other. It'd be perfect."

I smiled at the stunned expression on Dylan's face.

"I thought you were joking when you told me you're thinking of moving here." Dylan frowned at his brother. "Or are you throwing an idea into the universe to see what happens?"

Luke grinned. "I'm serious. I like Sunrise Bay and my job in Boulder is getting boring. It'd be nice to have a change."

"I think so, too," Steve added. "But what about Mom and Dad? They'll be devastated if we all move here."

Dylan sighed. "We could visit them or they could come here. Alex and I will have an extra bedroom."

I had a feeling Dylan's parents might do more than visit, but that might be too much for everyone to consider. As Dylan and his brothers talked about being closer to each other, I thought about Daniel.

There was no way he'd ever move to Colorado. If there was any hope for us, I'd have to consider leaving Sunrise Bay. But after living in two big cities, Manhattan was the last place I wanted to be.

My cell phone rang. With my mind still on Daniel, I answered the call. "Ben speaking."

"It's Adam. I've got great news." The excitement in Pastor Adam's voice vibrated down the phone.

"Is it about the tiny home project?" I held my breath, waiting for his answer.

"I had a call from the chairperson of the Wilson Enterprise Trust. They're purchasing the properties! By the end of next week, we'll have the start of our tiny home village."

I grinned. "That's wonderful. I can't believe they made their decision so quickly."

"Neither can I, but I'm thrilled. Once the offer has gone unconditional, Daniel's grandfather will transfer ownership of the land to the New Life Church. By next April, our first homes could be available."

"That's the best news I've had all week. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not at the moment. I'll call everyone on the fundraising committee and let them know the good news. We can discuss our project plan at the next meeting."

“That sounds great. I’ll see you on Friday at the wedding rehearsal.” After I ended the call, I looked at Dylan and his brothers. “Guess what?”

Dylan smiled. “Daniel’s trust bought the properties?”

I nodded. “It’s really going to happen.”

“That’s amazing. Congratulations.”

“What’s the tiny home village?” Steve asked.

I sighed. “It’ll be the best building project Sunrise Bay has ever seen.”



thirty-nine

DANIEL

Two days later, I opened the door to Ben's jewelry store. Even though he knew I was coming, he looked surprised to see me. The warmth in his eyes made me feel like a love-struck teenager instead of a seasoned CEO.

"Close your eyes," I said with a smile.

He leaned against the sales counter, a mix of curiosity and apprehension on his face.

"I promise not to drop a hairy black spider on you," I teased, trying to ease his nerves.

Ben chuckled and reluctantly closed his eyes. "This better be good."

"It won't take long," I assured him as I pulled a Macy's bag from behind my back. "You can open your eyes now."

Ben's gaze dropped to the counter and his eyes widened when he saw the bag. "What's this?"

"I saw it yesterday and thought of you," I said, pushing the bag closer to him.

He picked it up and squeezed it, feeling the softness inside. "I can't imagine you shopping in a department store," he remarked, eyebrows raised.

“Why not?” I asked, genuinely curious.

He pointed to my suit. “Most of the time you wear custom-made suits and designer shoes. Hunting through racks of clothes doesn’t fit your corporate image.”

I laughed. “My image is evolving. I now own at least two pairs of jeans and four T-shirts.”

“Did you or your brother buy them?” Ben’s skeptical smile made me grin.

“Owen might have had something to do with them. What do you think of your surprise?”

Ben pulled a black T-shirt out of the bag and grinned. Across the front, in big, sparkly writing, were the words “Waltzing Queen.”

“Thanks, although I couldn’t have mastered the steps without your help,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

“We’re a good team,” I replied, feeling a warmth spread through me.

I handed him an envelope next. “I’ve got something else for you. I hope it meets your expectations.”

Daniel frowned as he opened the envelope and pulled out the sheets of paper. His eyes widened again when he turned to the last page of the contract. “It’s too much.”

“Two years isn’t that long,” I assured him. “We want to build brand loyalty, and that takes time.”

Ben shook his head. “I’m not talking about the length of the contract. It’s the money.

It's far too much for what you want me to do."

I leaned against the counter, meeting his gaze. "Do you know why a lot of people fail in business?"

"They have too much debt?"

"Yes, but there's another reason. They undervalue what they do. Perception is everything in business. If you give products away for next to nothing, you'd better have a good reason."

"But this is ridiculous," Ben insisted, looking at the contract again. "Does that mean your company's prepared to pay more?"

"If that's what you want, you can negotiate the contract price."

"No, that won't be necessary. I still think it's too high, but I appreciate the offer." Ben kept reading, then paused. "I'd need to come to Manhattan for the award ceremony?"

I nodded. "We'll market your jewelry as a B.J. Davis collection, but we need people to recognize you."

"Why?"

"Because your face, as much as anything else, will sell the collections you create."

He hesitated, but kept reading. "Are you sure you only want me to design three collections?"

"It's all about quality, not quantity. I want my customers waiting in anticipation for

your next collection.”

“I hope I don’t disappoint anyone.”

“You couldn’t do that if you tried.”

Ben sighed. After looking around the room for five minutes, he found a pen and turned to the last page of the contract.

“You should ask a lawyer to read the document before you sign it,” I said quickly, wanting him to feel secure.

“I don’t need a lawyer. I trust you.” And with a flourish, he added his signature to the bottom of the contract.

For better or worse, I was now his boss.

forty

BEN

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear, just as I'd hoped. Today was Dylan and Alex's wedding, and everything needed to be perfect. I'd been up since five-thirty, working in my studio. The quiet hours before the world wakes up have always been my favorite time to create.

When Daniel brought me a cup of coffee, I barely looked up, grunting my thanks as I soldered two pieces of silver together. I was so focused that I didn't even notice when he slipped out for a run. By the time he returned, sweat-drenched and glowing, I'd finished the bracelet and was already deep into crafting an engagement ring.

We had a late breakfast together, something we'd fallen into the habit of doing. It was comfortable, easy—something I hadn't felt with anyone in a long time. After breakfast, we relaxed for a while, just enjoying each other's company before getting ready for the wedding.

As we sat in the church, waiting for the ceremony to begin, Daniel was happy and relaxed. It was like he belonged here, in my world, where there were no pretenses, no expectations. Just us, being ourselves. It was a rare feeling, and I found myself wondering if life could always be this simple with him.

"Do you like the flowers and ribbons at the end of each row?" I whispered, trying to read his expression.

He glanced at the decorations and nodded. “They look great.”

“Amy picked the daisies from Mr. Jeffries’s garden at The Welcome Center.”

“I didn’t see any flowers when we were there.”

“They’re behind a hedge. I think he’s growing them as an extra revenue stream.”

Daniel chuckled. “How do you think Pastor Adam would feel about a commercial flower-growing business in his backyard?”

I shrugged. “I’ve got no idea, but it could provide a few jobs for people.”

I liked the way Daniel’s mind worked. He wasn’t just someone who breezed through life without noticing the details. He saw the bigger picture, and it made me admire him even more.

The music inside the church changed and everyone stood up. When Dylan and his parents walked down the aisle, I couldn’t help it—my bottom lip quivered. “Dylan’s mom and dad look so proud,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion.

Daniel leaned closer, his gaze focused on Dylan’s mom. “Is that one of your necklaces?”

I smiled at the surprise in his voice. “It is. I made it for the wedding.”

“It’s incredible.”

“Thank you.”

As the ceremony continued, I lost myself in each detail Dylan and Alex had included.

This wasn't the first wedding I'd attended, but there was something different about this one. Maybe it was the simplicity of the vows, the way Dylan and Alex spoke from the heart. Or maybe it was the presence of Daniel beside me, making everything feel more significant.

"Dylan's mom hasn't stopped crying," I whispered to Daniel. "She's so happy."

"She isn't the only one," Daniel said softly, lifting his hand to wipe a tear from my cheek. By the time Dylan and Alex were pronounced husband and wife, I'd used all the tissues I had on me.

"It was a lovely wedding," I said with a sigh. "If I ever get married, I want it to be here, surrounded by my family and friends."

Daniel turned to look at me, and in that moment, something shifted in his eyes. It was like he was seeing me for the first time, really seeing me. And in that gaze, I could see the possibilities, the life we might share. It made my heart race and my mind whirl with what-ifs.

But then, just as quickly, Daniel's expression changed. A shadow passed over his face, and I wondered if I'd said something wrong.

"Are you all right?" I asked, touching his arm gently. "If you need some fresh air, we can step outside."

Daniel closed his eyes and took a deep breath, as if grounding himself. When he opened them again, there was something new in his gaze—something I couldn't quite read. "I'm fine," he said, though his voice didn't quite match his words. "Do you know where Andrew's taking the bridal party for their wedding photos?"

"A friend of Alex's owns a big house not far from Sunrise Bay. It has an incredible

view of Willow Lake and is surrounded by pine and spruce trees. Andrew thought it would make a wonderful location for the photos.”

“It sounds perfect,” Daniel murmured, though his thoughts seemed to be elsewhere.

I studied his face, concerned. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

He nodded, but I could tell something was bothering him. He looked around the church, his gaze lingering on the stained-glass windows and the high-pitched ceiling. There was a timeless quality to the building, something that spoke of generations of love and commitment. It was a place where lives were changed, where promises were made.

He turned back to me, his expression more serious than I’d ever seen it. “I need to tell you something.”

A flicker of worry crossed my mind. What could he possibly need to say that looked so heavy on his shoulders? “What is it?” I asked, my heart pounding.

He hesitated, the words seemingly stuck in his throat. For a moment, I thought he might confess something—maybe how he felt about me. But then he shook his head, brushing it off. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll tell you later.”

“Are you sure?” I pressed, not wanting him to keep whatever it was bottled up.

He glanced away. “Dylan’s brothers seem to be enjoying themselves,” he said, changing the subject.

I followed his gaze to Steve and Luke, who were laughing at something Alex had said. “They’re probably feeling a lot better now that Dylan’s married. They were worried about their mom before the ceremony. She was so stressed they thought she



might faint.”

“Because Luke decided not to get married at the last moment?”

“Exactly. She was convinced the same thing would happen to Dylan.”

I could see the understanding in Daniel’s eyes. He knew what it was like to have your life upended, to have your heart broken. And in that moment, I realized that despite the pain he’d been through, he was still open to love. Still willing to take that risk.

But there was something else in his expression—something that told me he was holding back. And I couldn’t help but wonder if it was because of me.

When the ceremony ended, everyone began filing out of the church. Daniel stayed close to me, his hand brushing against mine as we walked down the aisle. And though he didn’t say it, I could feel the shift between us. Something had changed, and I wasn’t sure what it meant.

But I knew one thing for certain—Daniel had become an important part of my life, and I wasn’t ready to let him go. Despite everything, I’d fallen in love with him. And now, I just had to figure out if he felt the same way.

forty-one

BEN

“May I have this dance?”

I looked across the crowded dance floor, then into Daniel’s warm brown eyes. “Are you sure you don’t want another drink? I could get you a cup of coffee or a glass of wine.”

Daniel grinned. “I know what you’re up to, Ben, and it won’t work. It’s time to put into action what we’ve been practicing.”

I looked at the dance floor. “What if we wait a few minutes? There isn’t much room to move.”

“There’s more than enough. Come on, you’ll feel better once we’re dancing.” Daniel held out his hand.

Taking a deep breath, I placed my hand in his and rose from the table. “I’ll try not to step on your toes.”

“I have complete faith in you.”

It was just as well Daniel was feeling confident because I wasn’t. Dancing on the grass in my sneakers was completely different from being on a wooden floor. And then there was the audience factor. Our friends knew Daniel had been teaching me to

dance. They were expecting great things, only I didn't know if I was ready to show them what I'd learned.

Daniel moved closer to the dance floor. "Dylan wasn't exaggerating when he said his family knows how to waltz."

I bit my bottom lip. Even Alex's friends were dancing like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

"Don't be intimidated," Daniel told me. "You're a good dancer."

"At least there isn't much room for half and quarter turns."

Daniel held me in his arms, ready for our first step. "You'd be surprised."

And before I could ask him what he meant, we were dancing. I gripped his hand and shoulder, praying I didn't step on the foot of an unsuspecting wedding guest.

Daniel's mouth curved into a smile. "This isn't so bad, is it?"

"It's terrifying. I don't want to bang into anyone."

"I won't let that happen." He dropped his hand to my waist and pulled me closer. "You're doing great. Tell me about Dylan's brothers. Luke said he's thinking about moving to Sunrise Bay."

I knew he was trying to take my mind off my feet, but I didn't want to make a mess of what he'd shown me. "He's already started looking for a job. I don't know how easy it'll be but, if anyone can make the move, he can."

"What sort of job is he looking for?"

With a heartfelt sigh, I decided to place my trust in the sexiest man in the room. I did my best to relax, to let the music wash across my terrified brain and push all thoughts of disaster out of my head. “Luke’s an accountant, but he’s happy to try something new. Dylan told him to start his own business.”

Daniel maneuvered us around two couples having a conversation in the middle of the dance floor. “That’s not a bad idea. There are a lot of small businesses in Sunrise Bay and most of them would need financial advice.”

“That’s what I thought, too. I have to drive to Boulder to see my accountant. If Luke started a business from here, I’d become his client right away.”

“You didn’t notice, did you?”

I looked into his smiling face. “What do you mean?”

“We just completed our first set of quarter turns.”

I looked either side of us and grinned. “I didn’t trip or step on anyone.”

“All the practice has paid off.”

“I wouldn’t be on the dance floor if it weren’t for you.”

Daniel laughed. “Are you thanking me for coming to the wedding or helping you with your quarter turns?”

“Both.” I smiled. Daniel made me happy. He laughed with me about the silly things that happened and commiserated when things didn’t go to plan. Even when we sat on my veranda after dinner, not saying or doing very much, the world was a better place.

I leaned into Daniel's shoulder and sighed. As soon as the wedding was over, he would go back to Manhattan. We'd speak occasionally, maybe even text each other. But it wouldn't be the same.

"Hi, guys. Are you ready to have your photo taken?" Andrew stood beside us with his camera poised.

I squinted as the flash blinded me.

"Thanks. I'll see you later."

Daniel laughed. "Were you smiling?"

"I don't know. The last thing I remember is being blinded by the flash."

"Me, too." He changed direction, spinning us to the right. "Andrew's busy."

"He knows what he's doing. The photos he took for Paul's wedding were beautiful. I'll call him on Monday and ask him to send me a copy of the photo. I could forward it onto you."

Daniel pulled me closer. "That would be great. I'll send it to my brother. He'll be happy I haven't been working."

"Let me guess," I said. "He thinks you're a workaholic."

"How did you know?"

"Dad says the same thing about me."

Daniel's dry chuckle sent goosebumps skittering along my skin. "I'm glad I found

you.”

My heart pounded. I half expected Daniel’s mouth to be tilted into a teasing smile, but it wasn’t.

He studied my face with a longing so strong and sure that it shook me from the inside out. I wanted Daniel with an intensity that stunned me. He’d crept into my life and marked my heart with a thousand love-struck arrows.

His hand gently brushed my cheek. “Before I came to Sunrise Bay, I thought my business couldn’t do without me. But while I was here nothing burned down, there were no emergencies, and my house plants didn’t die.”

The huskiness in his voice made me sigh. “You’ll have to come to Sunrise Bay more often.”

Daniel’s hand rested on my waist. “I’d like to visit you. Manhattan isn’t too far away.”

“It’s a four-hour flight.”

“I can work on the plane.”

I looked into his eyes and sighed. “You’re my boss. It won’t work.”

Instead of looking disappointed, Daniel smiled. “Everything will be okay. I’ve got a plan.”

I hoped it was better than mine. I’d done a lot of foolish things in my life, but falling in love with a man who lived thousands of miles away was one of the worst.

forty-two

BEN

Nearly two hours later, I stared through the windshield of the SUV Daniel had rented. With sweaty palms and a heart that was beating out of control, I knew I had to tell Daniel how I felt about him. But how do you start a conversation that could change your life forever?

Daniel looked in the rearview mirror. “I’m surprised I recognized so many people at Dylan and Alex’s wedding.”

My friends would have called me a scaredy cat, but it was a relief to talk about something that didn’t involve our hearts. “Between Pastor Adam’s church, the general store, and Candy Lane, you’ll see most people who live here. Did you enjoy Jonathon’s fudge?”

Daniel smiled. “I did. It was a great idea putting it inside the table favors.”

“We did something similar for Paul’s wedding. Jonathon wants to use raspberry marshmallow inside his table favors, but we think it’ll be too sticky.”

“When is he getting married?”

“In March of next year. Thanks for coming back to Sunrise Bay. You probably had a million other things to do.”

“Nothing that couldn’t wait. Besides, I was looking forward to seeing you and catching up with Pastor Adam.” Daniel turned into my driveway. “I’m beginning to feel more at home here than in Manhattan.”

I bit my bottom lip. If I was going to tell Daniel how I felt about him, I wouldn’t get a better time. “Is that a good thing?”

“I hope so.”

I took a deep breath. “I hope so, too. I think I’m falling in love with you and I don’t know what to do about it.”

Daniel’s foot slammed against the brake.

I lunged forward. My seat belt dug into my chest and left me breathless.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine.” I unclipped the tight seat belt and turned toward Daniel. “I’m sorry I blurted out how I feel, but I didn’t know what else to do. You’re going home soon and?—”

Daniel released his seat belt and lifted his hands to either side of my face. “I’m falling in love with you, too, Ben.”

As Daniel’s lips met mine, all thoughts of what would happen next disappeared. I wanted to be part of his life, to find a way to make what was happening between us stronger and more real.

His lips teased and cajoled, taking me as high as the stars shining in the sky. In one crazy, heartfelt moment, I knew I’d remember this kiss for the rest of my life.



With trembling hands, I pulled Daniel close, desperate to feel the heat of his body pressed against mine. His deep groan made me bolder, more willing to put my heart on the line and be part of his life.

Daniel pulled away. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Before I could work out what he was doing, Daniel jumped out of the SUV and rushed around the vehicle. Opening the door, he pulled me into his arms and pressed me between his body and the SUV.

With a contented sigh, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and kissed him until I was breathless.

I had no idea how long we stayed locked in each other’s arms, but there would never be enough time to show Daniel how much he meant to me.

The sound of an engine cut through the still night air.

I buried my head in Daniel’s shoulder as the headlights of another vehicle found us. I had no idea what my guests in Acorn Cottage would think but, for the first time in my life, I didn’t care.

After they’d gone, I rubbed my nose along Daniel’s jaw, grinning at his sharp, in-drawn breath. “I feel like I’m in high school,” I whispered.

Daniel wrapped his arms around my waist and smiled. “It’s just as well we aren’t. Granddad would have grounded me for life if I’d kissed someone like that.”

I looked up. “When did you realize you were gay?”

Daniel brushed his hand along my jaw. “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know

I was gay. My family accepted my life in the same way they did Owen's. I think it was harder on Owen than me."

"In what way?"

"The kids in high school weren't exactly open-minded. When I didn't stand up for myself, Owen made sure they knew it wasn't okay to pick on me."

Looking at the man in my arms, it was hard to believe anyone could be cruel to him. "I'm glad Owen was there to look after you."

"The worst thing about my little brother is that he takes more care of everyone else than himself. His last girlfriend walked all over him and scarred him for life. Have you dated many people?"

I leaned against the SUV. "I didn't date anyone until I was twenty-one. My first boyfriend was Robert and he'd just graduated from the Otis College of Art and Design. I thought he was amazing."

Daniel's eyebrows rose. "What happened to him?"

"He decided he liked accounting graduates better than art students." I returned Daniel's smile. "Breaking up with him was the best thing that ever happened to me. I created a new jewelry collection based around my broken heart."

"Do you always look for the silver linings?"

I thought about Daniel's question, about the choices I'd made in my life. "I guess I do. Life's too short to focus on negative things." I rested my head against Daniel's. "What do we do next?"

Daniel gently stroked the side of my face. “I know what I’d like to do, but it isn’t a good idea.”

“Why?” I looked into Daniel’s eyes. In their depths I saw the calm, focused strength of a man who knew what he wanted. And right now, he wanted me.

“Not that long ago I signed a contract for my company to work with you. I need to keep my personal and professional life separate, at least for now.”

“I’m confused. How will we do that if we’re in a relationship?”

“With great difficulty.” Daniel held my hands. “I can’t be your contact person at Wilson Enterprises, Ben. I have a manager called Jacqueline. She has a lot of experience in the jewelry industry and will be able to help you more than I can.”

A heavy weight settled in my stomach. “Does that mean you won’t call me as often as you were?”

“It means when we call each other, I won’t be reminding you about deadlines and all the other things that go into producing a collection. I promise I’ll do everything I can to make what’s happening between us work. I love you.”

I hugged him close. I didn’t know what the future held for us but, as long as we loved each other, it didn’t matter.

forty-three

DANIEL

The following day, I stood on the edge of what would be the tiny home village. I was proud of the decision my company's trust had made, but it was only the beginning of what needed to happen if the village was to be built.

When I met with Pastor Adam, we went over the events the fundraising committee was planning. But even the country music festival wouldn't give them the capital they'd need to complete the project.

The only thing that would provide a fully functioning village was corporate sponsorship. My company's trust couldn't invest more money in the project, but we could help Andrew with the proposal he was putting together.

This morning, Andrew was taking photos of the site. Wilson Enterprises' marketing team would take those images and add the architects' vision of the tiny homes. Prospective funders would see exactly what the village would look like and how their money would be spent.

"What do you think of this angle?" Andrew asked.

I smiled as Ben studied the video on Andrew's laptop. With his worn jeans and a blue sweatshirt wrapped around his waist, he could have been anyone enjoying a Sunday morning walk. But he wasn't anyone. He was Ben—a talented jeweler and the man I loved.

“It makes the property look huge. Using a drone was a great idea.” Ben looked at Andrew. “Are the images usually so clear?”

“I use a high-definition lens in my camera. As long as the weather cooperates, the quality of the images is as good as any film crew could create.” Andrew moved the lever on the remote control panel a little to the right. “If Daniel’s staff use the photos and video in the marketing package, it’ll attract a lot of new sponsors.”

I looked over Ben’s shoulder at the video. “That’s what I’m hoping, too. Where did you find the drone?”

Andrew’s quick smile made me think there was a whole lot more to him than what he’d told me. “I used it for a client who wanted photos of the wildlife in Yellowstone National Park. I still use it, but usually when I’m away from people and their property.” He brought the drone closer and landed it at our feet. “That should be enough video for now. I’ll take a few more photos and then email everything to Wilson Enterprises. If there’s anything else you need, let me know.”

“I’ll do that.” I picked up the drone and slipped it into its case. “Do you want me to take this back to your truck?”

“That’d be great.”

Ben closed the laptop. “I’ll take this. We’ll wait for you by the picnic tables.”

Andrew smiled and handed Ben his keys. “I won’t be too long.”

I watched Andrew stride toward one of the properties. He was a good example of the type of person I’d least expect to be living here. Andrew could have lived anywhere in the world but, for some reason, he’d chosen to live in a small town on the edge of Willow Lake.

“What is it about Sunrise Bay that draws people to it?” I asked Ben.

He shrugged. “For some people, it’s the scenery. For others, it’s the quiet, peaceful lifestyle. Then you’ve got people like me who are starting over and don’t want to live in a big city.”

I looked into his eyes. “Would you ever live in a big city again?” I held my breath while he considered my question.

“Maybe, but I’d have to find a way of balancing city life with what I have here.”

“There aren’t many places that could give you even half the things you’ve found in Sunrise Bay.”

“That’s why I’d have to think about it carefully.” Ben slid the laptop into its case. “One day, I want to have children. But I can’t imagine raising them in a city like New York. It’s too noisy and polluted.”

“Living in a city gives you opportunities you won’t find anywhere else.”

“Probably, but life is what you make of it. Those opportunities will always be there, no matter where you live. What about you?” he asked. “Would you ever consider living anywhere apart from Manhattan?”

I knew Ben would be disappointed with my answer, but it was the truth. “I need to be close to work.”

“What about when you have a family? Would you still stay in New York City?”

“If I had a choice, I wouldn’t want my children growing up in a big city. But sometimes, you don’t get a choice.”

“You always have a choice.” Ben placed the strap of the laptop bag over his shoulder.

I touched his arm. “Once I’ve achieved what I need to do with Wilson Enterprises, we could live somewhere else.”

“You’re assuming I’ll move.”

I frowned. “I have to live in Manhattan, Ben.”

Ben looked into my eyes and sighed. “I know. It’s just...”

“What?” I asked softly.

“I’ve seen what big cities can do to people. It’s too easy to get lost in the crowds and lose sight of what’s important. I want my life to be more than that. I want to make a difference.”

“You could make a difference in New York City.”

Ben’s eyes filled with regret. “I want to help people in Sunrise Bay.”

I let go of his arm. “Can’t you do both?”

“Maybe, but it won’t be easy.” Ben looked across the yard. “We’d better take this equipment back to Andrew’s truck. He’ll be finished soon.”

I hesitated. If I didn’t make some kind of compromise, Ben would never move to Manhattan. “What if we could divide our time between New York and Colorado for twelve months? After that, we can talk about moving back here or to another town.”

Ben seemed surprised by my offer. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I love you.”

With a smile that melted my heart, he said, “I’ll have to find an apartment with a studio.”

I wrapped my arm around Ben’s waist, hoping with all my heart that he’d want to stay with me. “I know somewhere that’s perfect. The only downside is that you’ll have to share with a roommate, and he isn’t the world’s greatest cook.”

Ben grinned. “As long as he has a good sense of humor and likes spicy food, he’ll be perfect.”

“Did I tell you my favorite takeout is beef curry?”

“I never would have guessed.”

Ben leaned forward and kissed me so tenderly that I didn’t want to let him go. I deepened the kiss, needing to show him how much he meant to me. How much I was looking forward to sharing my life with him. How much I didn’t want to leave.



forty-four

DANIEL

Four days later, I was in my office, overseeing the marketing campaign for the tiny home village as well as running my company.

Owen sat opposite me, reading the proposal my team had put together. “It’s a big project. Do you think four homes will be built by April of next year?”

I knew Pastor Adam was working to a tight time frame. The total project included twenty-five new homes as well as remodeling the four existing houses. “As soon as the church has permission to build the village, the drains and other groundwork will start. Each house only takes six weeks to build, so it should be achievable.”

“What about the weather? When it starts snowing it won’t give the construction teams much time to complete the houses.”

That was one of the issues I’d raised with Pastor Adam. “There’s an abandoned building on the edge of town. It used to be a steamboat museum, but no one’s used it for at least fifteen years. Pastor Adam spoke with the owner and they’re happy for him to lease it for the project. The tiny homes will be built inside the old museum and transported to the village.”

I pointed to the document Owen was holding. “Do you think other companies will be interested in sponsoring the project?”

“I can’t see why not. The photos alone will sell the village.”

That’s what I hoped Owen would say. I was impressed with the images Andrew had supplied and what my company had been able to do. But the proposal contained more information than what the project would look like and cost. Ben, Jonathon, and Paul had interviewed the people who regularly stayed at The Welcome Center. Anyone with half a heart would see what a difference the tiny village would make in their lives.

Owen placed the proposal on the edge of my desk. “Granddad said you were working until after midnight last night. You’ll burn yourself out.”

“You’ve told me that before and I’m still here.”

“One day you’ll listen to me. I know this project is a worthy cause, but why are you helping? You’ve got enough work to keep you busy without adding the village to your schedule.”

“I want to help.” I didn’t need to see the expression on my brother’s face to know Owen didn’t believe me.

“Is it the project that’s keeping you interested or Ben?”

I frowned. For the first time in my life, I felt torn between two very different worlds. I missed spending time with Ben. He had a way of filling the darkest spaces in my life and making the impossible seem as though it was only one step away.

Since I’d returned from Sunrise Bay, the days had been long and the evenings longer. Even though I’d spoken to Ben, it wasn’t the same as seeing him. “I enjoy working on the tiny home project. Ben’s different.”

“How different?”

“I love him.”

Owen’s eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

“Surer than I’ve been about anything. He’s different from anyone I’ve ever met.”

“I hope so. Have you told Granddad?”

I shook my head. “I’ll tell him soon. Thanks for looking after Ben before we present him with the award.”

“That’s okay. I’m shocked no one has leaked his name to the media.”

“Keeping anything confidential is difficult. I just hope no one discovers that B.J. Davis and Ben are the same person. At least until after the presentation.”

Owen leaned forward. “What are you doing about his father?”

“The only thing I can do is make sure any negative publicity is squashed as soon as it appears.”

“Have you told Ben about the board of directors?”

“I don’t need to. They’ve approved the rebrand of the company and no one seems eager to get rid of me.”

Owen snorted. “That’s because the last quarter’s financial results have been released. The shareholders received their biggest dividend payment yet. If the board removes you from the chief executive role, they’ll be fired.”

“I’m not taking anyone’s loyalty for granted.” I could have said a lot more, but it wasn’t worth it. Owen had his own problems and didn’t need to hear about mine.

“That sounds like something Granddad would say.” Owen rose from the chair. “What time do we need to be at the Rockefeller Center?”

“Seven o’clock, but bring Granddad to my apartment at six. That way, you and Granddad can spend some time with Ben before you leave.”

“Sounds good.” Owen looked uncertainly at me before picking up his briefcase. “Ben is probably a good person, but be careful. If your relationship with him ends, you’ve got more to lose than most people.”

I didn’t need to be reminded about the contract Ben had signed. He didn’t know it yet, but he was the new face of my company. If he left, the rebranding of my Wilson Enterprises would be a disaster and I’d be lucky to keep my job.

“I know what I’m doing.”

Owen’s eyebrows rose. “You said the same thing before you asked Tom to marry you.”

And we both knew how that had ended.

forty-five

BEN

I lifted my suitcase off the carousel at LaGuardia Airport. The presentation of the award from Wilson Enterprises was tonight and, for the last week, I'd worked hard, completing as many jewelry orders as I could.

Two hours into my flight, I realized how difficult it would be for anyone to divide their time between Manhattan and Sunrise Bay. It wasn't only the physical distance that'd be an issue.

A man with two children clinging to his trousers reached for a large bag. I pushed my own suitcase to one side. "I'll get that for you."

He sent me a relieved smile. "Thanks. It's not easy traveling with my children."

I looked at the little boy and girl, smiling when the little boy hid behind his dad's legs. He was the same height as his sister and had the same curly red hair and bright blue eyes. They couldn't have been more than five years old and they were definitely twins.

"Your children are adorable. Do you have any more luggage?"

"There should be another three bags coming through." The man lifted the suitcase onto an airport cart. "I can get them. I don't want to hold you up."

“It’s okay. My boyfriend won’t be here for another half hour.”

“You don’t know how much I appreciate your help. I’m Elijah and this is Eddie and Molly.”

I smiled at the two children and shook their dad’s hand. I was sure I’d seen Elijah before, but I didn’t know where it would have been. “It’s nice to meet you. Are the other suitcases the same size and color as this one?”

“They are. Look for the red bows on the handles.”

Between the two of us, we wrestled the bags off the carousel and loaded them onto the cart. It turned out Elijah lived in Sunrise Bay. He’d moved there last year. Like me, he’d started his own business, creating websites for clients and managing their social media accounts. Elijah had come to New York to spend time with his parents.

As we walked into the arrivals area, I held Molly and Eddie’s hands. Their tiny fingers curled around mine, trusting that I wouldn’t lead them astray.

When I saw Daniel standing beside a metal rail, I smiled. Confidence, intelligence, and kindness surrounded him like an invisible cloak, and made me wish we didn’t live so far apart.

He met me halfway across the walkway and hugged me tight. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” I felt a gentle tug on the leg of my pants and smiled. “Daniel, this is Molly and Eddie, and their dad, Elijah. We met by the luggage carousel.”

Elijah shook Daniel’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you. I don’t know what I would have done without Ben’s help.”

Daniel looked at his luggage. “You’ve got a few suitcases. Ben and I are heading into Manhattan. Would you like a ride?”

Elijah shook his head. “Thanks for the offer, but my dad will be here soon to collect us.”

I knelt on the floor beside Molly and Eddie. “It was lovely meeting you both, but I have to go now.”

“Are you staying with your granddad, too?” Molly asked.

“No. I’m going to a party with Daniel.”

Elijah must have seen the way his daughter’s face lit up. “No, we can’t go to Ben and Daniel’s party. But we will visit Ben when we go home.”

Molly’s big blue eyes looked up at me. “Bye, Ben. See you soon.”

I had no idea whether a five-year-old had any concept of time, but it didn’t matter. Molly’s sweet smile reminded me of all the good things there were in the world. “See you soon, Molly.”

While I said goodbye to Eddie and Elijah, Daniel took my suitcase off the cart. Before too long we were heading toward the parking lot, moving around people who had even more luggage than Elijah.

“I thought I knew most of the people in Sunrise Bay,” I murmured. “I can’t believe I haven’t met Elijah and his children before now.”

“You’ve been busy in your store and he’s probably been busy looking after his children. That doesn’t leave either of you with a lot of free time.”

“That’s true. It sounds as though his business is doing really well.” A woman rushed toward me with a bag clutched to her chest. I stepped out of her way, hoping she hadn’t missed her final boarding call.

Pulling my gaze away from the stranger, I focused on Daniel. “Is everything organized for tonight’s presentation?”

He held my hand. “It is. Are you ready to accept the award?”

I grimaced. “As ready as I’ll ever be. Paul and Jonathon listened to my speech last night and enjoyed it. I just hope everyone else does.”

“I’m sure they will.”

Daniel’s reassuring smile calmed some of the butterflies in my stomach. Accepting the award was a big step. Bigger than anyone except my dad realized.

Over the last few years, I’d gone from being homeless to owning my own jewelry store. At times, the journey to where I was today had been incredibly difficult. But through all the sleepless nights, the bank loan that still gave me nightmares, and the times I’d almost given up, I’d made it.

Daniel pointed to the next row of vehicles. “My SUV’s over there.”

I looked around us. Walking through the parking lot was like being in a different world. The distant sound of engines and honking horns reminded me of a giant intergalactic spaceship. All they needed was a platoon of little green men marching down the ramps and the scene would be set for a fantastic movie.

Daniel’s eyebrows rose. “Why do I get the impression you like parking buildings?”



“I used to be terrified of them. When I was little, I got lost in one in Los Angeles. Dad helped me get over my fear by telling me parking buildings are really landing pads for alien spaceships.”

Daniel smiled. “That’s an unusual way to make you feel better.”

“I was fascinated by UFOs and anything to do with the solar system. For a while, I wanted to be an astronaut.”

“You would have made a great astronaut but, for my company’s sake, I’m glad you became a jeweler.” Daniel pointed his keys at a black SUV. The red taillights flashed and a high-pitched beep echoed against the concrete walls. “This isn’t a spacecraft, but it’ll take us to my apartment. We should be there in about half an hour.”

I stood back while Daniel lifted my suitcase into the SUV. “Can you walk from your apartment to where you work?”

“If I want to, but it’s easier to take the elevator.”

My mouth dropped open. “It’s in the same building as your office?”

Daniel nodded. “My brother thinks I’m mad, but my commute time is fantastic.” He closed the back door and hugged me tight. “I’m glad you’re here.”

I relaxed against his body, enjoying the feel of his arms wrapped around my shoulders. “So am I.”

And after tonight’s presentation was over, I’d be even happier.

forty-six

DANIEL

I glanced at my watch, then strode into the master bedroom. My grandfather and brother would be here in twenty minutes. If I didn't get a move on, I'd still be hunting for my cufflinks when they arrived.

Ben was getting ready in the spare bedroom. It was a big night for everyone, but especially for him. Over the last fortnight, my secretary and PR team had spent a lot of time replying to emails and calls about the award. With some of the top names in the jewelry industry making the final round of judging, most people had taken B.J. Davis out of the running. No one in their right mind thought an unknown jeweler from Colorado would win the award.

But they couldn't have been more wrong. Ben's jewelry had scored higher than the other finalists on creativity, execution, and design. His necklace and earring set had captivated the judges, and Ben had captivated me.

I opened my bedside drawer, looking for the silver cufflinks that were a graduation gift from my grandparents. If they weren't here, I didn't know where they could have gone. When I saw their small black box underneath some papers, I breathed a sigh of relief.

As I pushed the first cufflink through a buttonhole, I looked at the sheet of paper my secretary had given me. A contingent of high-profile reporters, bloggers, and social media influencers would be at the Rockefeller Center, wanting to interview anyone

directly involved in the award. It was my job to know who they were and where they'd be seated.

Once the second cufflink was in place, I pulled on my dinner jacket and stepped into the living room. Ben stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, staring at the Manhattan skyline. His black dinner jacket hugged his wide shoulders and lean hips. My heart pounded and everything inside of me stilled.

I didn't believe in fairy tales or happily ever after, but I did believe in Ben. He was the most important person in my life. I loved him and would do everything I could to protect him.

I cleared my throat, letting him know I was in the room. "You look fantastic."

He turned and smiled. "So do you."

"How are you feeling?"

His smile dimmed. "I don't know whether I'm more nervous about meeting your family or about the presentation."

I walked across the room and held his hands. "It'll be okay. I guarantee Granddad and Owen will like you. And the award ceremony will be a breeze. If you can organize a charity auction, you can accept a trophy from me."

Genuine fear darkened Ben's eyes. "What if I forget my speech or trip over my feet?"

I squeezed his hands. "Just be yourself. That's all anyone expects from you."

"It's not that simple."

I knew what he meant. From the moment the judging panel had chosen him as the winner, nothing had been simple. And if I was completely honest, it never would be again.

The doorbell rang. “That’ll be Granddad and Owen. Are you ready to meet them?”

Despite his nerves, Ben nodded. “Is your brother like you?”

Wrapping my hand around his elbow, I led him across to the front door. “Not really. He’s more handsome and less grumpy.”

He bit his bottom lip. “You’re saying that to make me feel better.”

I grinned. “Is it working?”

He sent me a grateful smile. “Yes. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I gently kissed him. “I’m sorry I can’t spend more time with you before the presentation, but we don’t want anyone to know who won the award until it’s presented. When you arrive at the Rockefeller Center, Granddad and Owen will look after you. Afterward, I’ll be right beside you.”

Ben’s hand tightened on my arm. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

I brushed my hand along his jaw. “You’re special, Ben. Even if I hadn’t fallen in love with you, my company would still be presenting you with the award. None of this would be possible without your creativity and determination. You design incredible pieces of jewelry and Wilson Enterprises is proud to be associated with you.”

Ben took a deep, shaky breath. “We’re a great team.”

“We are.” When I opened the door, I stared into my grandfather’s deep brown eyes. All I could do now was pray that everything worked out the way it was supposed to.

forty-seven

BEN

Even before I walked into the room where the award ceremony was taking place, I was overwhelmed with all the glitz and glamour of the Rockefeller Center. Talk about the country bumpkin coming to the city. Everything about New York was beyond anything I'd expected. And the Rainbow Room was no exception.

A huge chandelier, dripping with crystals, hung above the dance floor. The design on the parquet floor reminded me of a compass or an enormous star. Vases of red orchids decorated every table, and linen, as fine as anything I'd ever seen, covered each of the round tables.

Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, Manhattan spread around us like a sprawling sea of buildings. I'd never felt intimidated by anything, but the opulent setting was almost too much.

Patrick, Daniel's grandfather, touched my arm. "Are you okay?"

"I feel like I've stepped into a royal palace." Even when I'd lived in Los Angeles, my parents deliberately chose to lead a simple life. Extravagant parties in exotic locations weren't part of their lives, even for special occasions.

I looked across the room. Daniel, on the other hand, didn't look out of place in the shimmering ballroom. He smiled and chatted with the guests, clearly comfortable in the role of chief executive.

“Don’t worry about all this,” Patrick said as he waved his hand around the ballroom. “It’s all window dressing. Take away the fancy lights and flowers, and you’re left with a big room on the top of a tall building.”

I smiled. “You have to admit that it’s an impressive building.”

“Bricks and mortar,” Patrick whispered. “But don’t tell the owners of the Rockefeller Center I said that. Let’s find the finalists’ table, then chat with a few people I know.”

I was glad Patrick and Owen were with me. In a lot of ways, Daniel’s granddad reminded me of my grandfather. They shared the same brisk, no-nonsense bravado that hid a heart of gold, and the same sense of humor that disarmed the prickliest situation.

“I’ve seen the seating plan,” Owen said. “Our table’s to the right of the dance floor. Follow me.”

As we walked across the room, I admired the jewelry being worn by the other guests. Knowing how much some of the pieces must have cost made my mouth go dry. The people here weren’t your run of the mill shoppers. They had lots of money and weren’t afraid to show it.

“Here we are.” Owen pulled a chair away from the table.

I smiled at the other guests who were already seated. When Patrick introduced me to Diana Fraser, my eyes widened. Diana was a celebrity jewelry designer, creating exclusive collections for her Rodeo Drive showroom and private commissions for clients. She’d built her brand as a powerful symbol of celebrity, and I was in awe of such an accomplishment.

It was just as well Owen and his grandfather were with me. It’d be embarrassing to

have a fanboy moment, especially when Diana was telling everyone about her inspiration for the stunning diamond pendant she was wearing.

While Owen and Patrick chatted with the people on either side of them, I looked across the dance floor. Daniel walked between the tables, greeting each of the guests.

This was a side of him I'd never seen. I could see why he didn't want to leave Manhattan. His apartment was luxurious, he had a successful business, his staff was exceptional, and his brother and grandfather lived in the same city.

Daniel thrived on everything I'd turned away from. Being part of the hustle and bustle of the city gave him energy and focus. For me, it drained the joy from my life.

"Would you like a glass of champagne?" Owen asked.

I shook my head and smiled. "No, thanks. I'd prefer water."

"Wise choice."

As Owen filled my glass with mineral water, I looked back at Daniel. He was talking to a famous actor I'd seen on TV last week. "Is that Francis Jonas?"

Owen followed the direction of my gaze. "It is. The woman beside him is?—"

"His wife, Gabriella Manderas," I whispered. "Last year, she won an Oscar for one of my all-time favorite movies."

"You should ask Daniel to introduce you."

"I couldn't. They're here to enjoy themselves, not talk to a stranger."



Owen raised his eyebrows. “After tonight, you won’t be a stranger to anyone. If Daniel has his way, you’ll be as much of a celebrity as anyone in the room.”

That was the last thing I wanted, and Daniel knew it. “No one will recognize me from the photo beside my jewelry.” I studied Owen’s face, not liking what I saw. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“I must have misunderstood what Daniel said,” he muttered.

“What did he say?”

Owen looked across at his brother and frowned. “It doesn’t matter. Have you been to the Rockefeller Center before?”

I shook my head. Whatever Owen heard must be important. I hadn’t spoken to a lawyer before I signed the contract with Wilson Enterprises because I didn’t think it was necessary. I’d read most of the clauses, and they seemed okay. Daniel knew what I was prepared to do and what I wasn’t.

But from the look on Owen’s face, I might have trusted his brother a little too much. “What’s in the contract that I might not like?”

“Probably nothing.”

“But you said?—”

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Daniel’s voice filled the room. He stood on a platform, holding a microphone. “Would you please be seated as we celebrate the work of the Wilson Award finalists.”

My gaze shot back to Owen, but he was staring at the large screen behind his brother.

I nudged his leg under the table and sent him a questioning frown.

Owen pointed to the data show and held his finger to his lips.

I looked at Patrick, but his attention was also focused on the pictures flashing across the screen.

When I could, I'd ask Daniel what Owen had meant. But for now, I'd sit back, enjoy the photos, and pray I didn't make a mess of my speech.

forty-eight

BEN

Near the end of my speech, I looked up and smiled at the audience. More than two hundred people were staring back at me, still shocked, I imagined, from hearing my name announced as the winner of the Wilson Award.

For the first time since I'd stepped into the Rainbow Room, I wasn't worried about anyone knowing about my father. B. J. Davis was a mystery to almost everyone here and, as long as I had anything to say about it, that's the way it would stay.

"And finally," I said to the audience, "I would like to thank my family and friends for their support. Without them, I wouldn't be standing here today."

As I stepped away from the microphone, I shook Daniel's hand. I smiled when the photographer took a picture of us and acknowledged the clapping audience with a nod of my head.

My smile became more forced when I thought about my dad. I'd invited him to the presentation, but he didn't want to come. Too many people knew him and he didn't want to spoil my night.

"You're doing great," Daniel whispered from beside me. "Once the photographer's finished you can enjoy the rest of the evening."

I moved the heavy trophy to my other arm. I didn't know if I would have described

tonight as enjoyable. Being the center of attention had never come easily to me. If I had a choice, I would have preferred to be in Sunrise Bay, working on my next project.

After Daniel thanked everyone for coming and announced dessert was ready to be served, he escorted me back to my chair.

Owen shook my hand. "Congratulations. Your jewelry's beautiful."

Daniel's granddad opened his arms and hugged me. "Well done. I'm looking forward to seeing your new designs."

I glanced across the table as Daniel sat down. "I thought you would have seen the sketches of my new collection."

"I'm not as involved in the company as I used to be. Daniel and Owen keep telling me I should retire, but even thinking about it gives me nightmares. I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

I smiled and nodded. "My dad has a few years to go before he retires, but it's been on his mind, too. It isn't easy making such a big change in your life."

Patrick studied my face. "I think you understand better than most how it feels. Moving to Sunrise Bay couldn't have been an easy decision to make."

I carefully thought about my answer. "It wasn't. Dad and I are incredibly close, but I needed a fresh start."

"It happens to most of us at some point. Your dad must be proud of you."

I nodded. "He was sorry he couldn't be here tonight." Regardless of what Patrick

might have been told, I wanted him to know my dad was a good man. “My dad’s a jeweler, too. When I was little, he made me a set of tools I could use in his workshop. He didn’t mind if I made a mess or wasted some of the materials. All he cared about was allowing me to be creative and find my own feet in the world.”

“You were fortunate. A lot of children don’t get the same opportunity.” Patrick looked at each of his grandsons. “Before Daniel and Owen’s parents died, we spent a lot of time on Shelter Island. Their mom and dad took them to the beach each morning. They spent hours making sandcastles. When it was too hot to be outside, their grandma and I took them to Peggy Anne’s Ice Cream Shop. Staying at the cottage gave everyone a chance to be themselves and enjoy each other’s company.”

After what happened to Daniel’s parents, those memories must be even more special. “Daniel told me about Shelter Island. Do you still go there?”

“I haven’t been back in years. Daniel’s talking about returning for Christmas, but I don’t know if it’ll happen.” He leaned sideways as a waiter placed his dessert in front of him. “I wasn’t the best grandfather in the world. After Daniel’s parents died, I spent most of my time at work. Mary, my wife, was their rock.”

I looked into Patrick’s sad face. “Everyone handles grief differently. Sometimes, the hardest part is learning how to let go.”

One of the finalists sitting at our table tapped a spoon against a crystal glass. “I’d like to propose a toast. To B.J. Davis. Congratulations on winning the award. May you have a long and successful career.”

As everyone around the table raised their glass, I forced a smile. After tonight, I’d slip back into the background, create beautiful jewelry, and make my dad even more proud.

forty-nine

BEN

“Excuse me.”

My shoulders slumped forward. I was hoping to leave the ballroom unnoticed, but everyone wanted to talk to me.

A woman who’d been sitting at the table opposite ours smiled. “Hi. I’m Amanda. Congratulations on winning the Wilson Award.”

“Thank you. It was a big surprise.” I kept walking toward the terrace.

“I was wondering if I could ask you some questions about being a jeweler.”

I looked longingly through Bar SixtyFive and onto the large terrace. I’d told Daniel’s granddad I was going to the bathroom, but all I wanted was a few minutes alone.

Most of the people at the award ceremony wanted to know everything about me. It didn’t matter what I said, I was constantly on edge, worried I’d say something I might regret.

I glanced at my watch, hoping Amanda took the hint. “I was going outside to make a phone call. I could meet you back at your table in ten minutes?”

Amanda didn’t move. “I spoke to someone who knows your dad. Did his trial have

anything to do with your decision to enter the award?"

My heart pounded. My worst nightmare was coming true and there wasn't a thing I could do about it. "I don't know what you mean."

Amanda's eyes narrowed. "Your legal name is Ben Harper. Your father was accused of stealing a design from Emanuel Ricardo's new collection. Did you enter the award to prove your jewelry is as good as those of the other designers? Or did you want people to know you don't hold a grudge against Wilson Enterprises?"

I was genuinely confused. "My father didn't steal anyone's designs. And as for Wilson Enterprises, I don't know what you're talking about."

"The person who accused your father of stealing his designs was working for Wilson Enterprises. Doesn't that worry you?"

My head was spinning. Emanuel Ricardo was an independent designer. He created jewelry for high-end department stores in London as well as making individual pieces for private clients. "Emanuel worked with three companies. He was a contractor, not an employee."

"I have a source close to Wilson Enterprises who told me Daniel Devlin paid Emanuel's legal expenses. Your new boss believed the design was stolen and he wanted to make an example of your father. What would you like to say to the people who thought your father was guilty?"

My stomach churned. If what the woman said was true, Daniel was no better than the people who'd condemned my dad before hearing the facts. I thought he was better than that, better than the shoddy reporting that almost broke my family.

"Daniel wouldn't have paid Emanuel's legal fees," I choked out. "If he did, Emanuel

would still be working for his company. As far as I'm aware, his contract was terminated after the trial."

Amanda's amused smile was even more upsetting than her questions. "Daniel Devlin made a mistake. After the judgment against Emanuel was made public, Wilson Enterprises wanted nothing to do with him, and neither did anyone else."

I still didn't believe her. But if there was the slightest chance she was right, how did she uncover the information?

"My source also told me that Daniel Devlin's working through a crisis with his board of directors. After the bungled trial, they don't have confidence in his ability to manage the company. How do you feel about being used to bolster his performance as chief executive?"

My eyes widened. "I don't know what you're talking about. If you'll excuse me, I need to?—"

"I'll be blunt. You're the ideal boy-next-door. To most of the world, you'll be seen as an overnight sensation. Daniel's making the most of the story his PR team's spinning. While you're boosting his image, profits will soar, and the board of directors won't fire him."

Daniel wouldn't use me to save his job. He had more integrity in his little finger than the woman asking me questions. "Who do you work for?"

Amanda pulled a business card out of her pocket. "The New York Times. You don't realize what you've gotten into, do you?"

"You don't care what I think. All you want is a headline for your story. Daniel isn't using me. You are."



Amanda pulled a sheet of paper from her pocket. “This is an article that will appear in tomorrow’s edition of The New York Times .”

A photo of me standing outside my jewelry store filled a third of the page. Andrew had taken the photo for Daniel before he’d left Sunrise Bay. It was only supposed to be used on the prestige website, not in a newspaper. Beside the photo was an article that talked about my life before I won the award and what working with Wilson Enterprises could do for my career. It made my life sound like a rags-to-riches fairytale.

“I didn’t mention your father in this story, but he’ll be in the next one.” Amanda took a notebook out of her bag. “Tell me about Tony Harper.”

“I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“And what about the chief executive of Wilson Enterprises? Will he keep his job?”

I knew how easily words could be twisted. If I answered any of Amanda’s questions, it could make everything worse. So instead of giving the reporter what she wanted, I took a deep breath and pulled back my shoulders. “If you have any questions involving Mr. Devlin, I’d suggest you ask him. Good night.” And with my head held high, I walked out of the ballroom.

fifty

DANIEL

I looked across the table at my grandfather and frowned. I didn't know where Ben had gone, but I'd promised I wouldn't leave him on his own.

For most of the night, he'd stayed at the table, talking to the guests who came to congratulate him. But fifteen minutes ago, he'd left and hadn't returned.

"...and then the police were called. Well, you can imagine my surprise when a detective knocked on my front door." Mrs. Parker, looking regal in her Cartier diamond and pearl necklace, was telling me about the latest drama in her apartment building. "The detective was so nice. He gave me his business card and told me to call him if I remember seeing anyone."

"Mr. Nelson?" The maître d' stood beside me. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have an urgent matter that needs your attention."

I glanced across the table at my brother. Had he noticed my desperation to get away from Mrs. Parker, or was there really something I needed to fix?

But Owen was busy talking to our grandfather, not watching me.

With an apologetic smile, I turned to Mrs. Parker. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"No need to rush. I want to chat with your grandfather, anyway."

As I followed the ma?tre d' out of the Rainbow Room, I almost felt sorry for my granddad. Mrs. Parker was a lovely lady, even if she was the most eccentric person I knew.

“This way, sir.” The ma?tre d' wove between the guests, heading toward the opposite side of the building.

I'd been to the top of the Rockefeller Center before, so I knew where we were going. Bar SixtyFive was a popular venue for tourists and locals. Apart from an award-winning restaurant and bar, it overlooked some of the most famous landmarks of New York City.

We walked through the seating area and into a semi-enclosed terrace. Ben stood down one end, staring across the Manhattan skyline.

“Mr. Harper would like to speak to you. If there's anything else you need, please don't hesitate to ask.”

I nodded and studied the rigid line of Ben's body. Something had happened and it wasn't good. Cautiously, I moved forward, not wanting to make matters worse by startling him. “Hi, Ben. Is everything all right?”

He turned toward me and my heart sank. His eyes were filled with so much sadness that I thought something must have happened to his dad.

“Why didn't you tell me about Emanuel Ricardo?”

For a brief moment, my mind went blank. Then I remembered who he was talking about. Deep, dark fear rose inside of me, making it hard to breathe. “The person who accused your father of copying his design?”

Ben nodded.

The hurt expression on his face made me feel ashamed. If I could have traveled back in time, I would have told him everything when I first met him.

“Why didn’t you tell me he was working for you?”

“I didn’t know you were Tony Harper’s son until Owen completed your background check.”

“Your company believed Emanuel. You paid his legal fees.”

I ran my hand around the back of my neck. “We had no reason not to believe him. Emanuel worked with other high-profile companies. No one had a bad word to say about him.”

“You spread lies about my father.” Ben’s voice shook. “You didn’t have any proof that copyright had been infringed, but you still went ahead with the trial. Your attorneys must have told you the chance of winning was low, but you didn’t care. All you wanted was to blame my dad for something he didn’t do.”

“It wasn’t as straightforward as that.”

“It should have been. Do you know how difficult it was for my family? My mom was struggling with her chemotherapy. Dad lost his job and no one wanted to employ him.”

“I’m sorry. I should have?—”

“You should have listened to your attorneys.” Ben wiped tears off his face. “You could have stopped the case from going to trial, but you didn’t. Your attorneys kept

pushing and pushing until Dad had nothing left to give.”

I stepped toward him. “We had to go to court. There was more at stake than your father’s guilt or innocence. Regardless of whether we were right or wrong, we needed clarification on who owns the copyright on a design before it’s been manufactured.”

Ben’s mouth dropped open. “Do you know how terrible that sounds? You left my father penniless and ruined his career to prove a point. Is that all another person’s life means to you?”

“You know me better than that.” My voice shook as I tried to control the panic racing through me. I loved Ben, but our relationship was falling apart and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

“I thought I knew you.” Ben wrapped his arms around his waist. “Before we met, I didn’t want to accept your award. I thought your customers would boycott your company if they discovered I was Tony Harper’s son. I was willing to give up everything to protect my dad and your company.”

I wanted so badly to hold Ben in my arms, to tell him I loved him and that everything would be okay. But right at this moment, that was the worst thing I could do. “You don’t need to protect anyone. My PR team will stop the media from making false accusations about you or your dad.”

“It’s too late.”

My heart pounded. “What do you mean?”

“The New York Times is publishing an article about Dad, the award, and Emanuel Ricardo. The reporter asked me questions about your company and how I feel about what happened.”

No wonder Ben was upset. If the reporter was like the other journalists who'd covered the story, they would have been ruthless. "When did you talk to the reporter?"

"A few minutes ago. Her name is Amanda Cooke." With a trembling hand, he gave me a business card. "Her contact details are on here."

"Ben—"

"She said the only reason you asked me to work for you was because the board of directors wants to fire you. Is that true?"

I swallowed the knot in my throat. "I wanted to rebrand our prestige store. The board of directors didn't want to invest the amount of money it would take to reach a new audience. I wanted you and your jewelry to be the new face of Wilson Enterprises."

"I told you I don't like being the center of attention. I only let Andrew take my photo because you wanted an up-to-date image for tonight."

It broke my heart to see Ben so upset. "I did what I had to do."

His jaw clenched tight. "What would have happened if I'd decided I didn't want to work with you?"

"The money my company has invested in getting ready for the rebrand would be wasted."

"And your contract as chief executive?"

"It wouldn't be renewed."

Ben's eyes widened. "So what the reporter said was true?"

"I wasn't using you to keep my job. Not in the way you mean. I love you, Ben. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you."

He took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. "I'm not sure you know what love is." His softly spoken words brought tears to my eyes. "I'm flying back to Colorado tonight. I'll take a taxi to your apartment and collect my suitcase. Before I go, I'll leave the spare key on the kitchen counter."

"Don't go. We need to talk about what's happened."

His bottom lip trembled. "I need time to think. I'll work on your jewelry collection from Sunrise Bay."

I held Ben's hand. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Emanuel."

"So am I." He pulled his hand away. "I'll call you in a couple of weeks."

As he walked across the terrace, my heart began to break. And I didn't know if it would ever be whole again.

fifty-one

BEN

“Ben! Wait.”

My footsteps slowed as Owen raced toward me.

“Where are you going?”

I didn’t want to have a conversation with Daniel’s brother, but he was standing in front of me. “Back to Daniel’s apartment.”

“Are you all right?”

I bit my bottom lip. The kindness in Owen’s face made me want to cry. “I’ll be okay. I just need a taxi or an Uber.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“It’s okay. I can find my own way back.”

Owen stuck his hands in his pockets. “I don’t know what’s happened, and I don’t need to. But I’m worried about you. It’s not safe to walk anywhere at this time of the night. Especially when you’re on your own.”

“I’ll be fine. I lived in Los Angeles for most of my life.”



“My car isn’t far away.”

I glanced at the crowded sidewalk and the cars traveling along the busy road. After living in Sunrise Bay, the traffic in Manhattan was as bad as an IndyCar race. Vehicles filled each lane, honking their horns and competing for the lead position at the traffic lights.

With a resigned sigh, I turned to Owen. “Thank you. I’d appreciate a ride.”

“Thank goodness. I was worried I’d have to bribe you with the best hot chocolate in town to get you to the parking building.”

Owen was trying to make me feel better, but it wasn’t working. I followed him along the sidewalk, lost in thoughts that only made me feel more miserable. “Did Daniel ask you to drive me back to his apartment?”

“Was I that obvious?”

“Only a little.”

Owen sighed. “I don’t think ‘ask’ is the word I would have used. He told me to find you or he wouldn’t be going to Shelter Island.”

“Why is it important you all go there?”

“This Christmas it’ll be twenty-five years since Mom and Dad died. We used to spend a lot of time at the Island but, after they died, we hardly went back. Daniel thought it was time we resurrected a family tradition.”

I shivered as a cold gust of wind raced along the street. “Why don’t you go sooner?”

“This way.” Owen pointed to the left-hand side of the parking building. “We’d like to, but our schedules fill up too fast.”

As we walked behind the parked vehicles, I frowned. “Did Daniel tell you I’m going home?”

“I think he was hoping you’d eventually call Manhattan home.”

Owen’s softly spoken words brought more tears to my eyes. “I don’t know how I feel about anything at the moment.”

“It happens to all of us.” Owen unlocked his car and opened the front passenger door. “We wouldn’t be human if someone didn’t let us down every once in a while.”

I sat in the sports car and pulled on my seat belt. “You should write a column for the newspaper.”

“I can see the headline now. ‘A single person’s guide to love and all its pitfalls.’”

Owen’s grin was so much like Daniel’s that my breath caught.

“Who knows, a wonderful woman might read the article and ask me on a date.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend?”

“Not at the moment.” Owen reversed out of the parking space. “I’m too busy running my own business and making sure my brother’s okay. Daniel enjoyed staying with you.”

Despite feeling as though my heart was breaking, I smiled. “He taught me how to dance.”

“That would have made Grandma’s day. She spent hours with Daniel, teaching him the difference between his left and right foot.”

My eyebrows rose. “But he’s such a good dancer. I thought he must have been born with a natural rhythm.”

“Don’t let his confidence fool you. Daniel spent hours perfecting each step.” Owen glanced at me. “Some people look at my brother and think his life has been easy. But he’s worked hard for everything he’s achieved. When Daniel started Wilson Enterprises, he didn’t have enough capital to grow the business into what it is today. Granddad became his majority shareholder, but that investment involved a lot of high expectations.”

“Wilson Enterprises has one of the best online retail stores in the world. Your grandfather must be happy with what Daniel’s done.”

Owen shrugged. “It’s hard to tell with Granddad. Daniel’s contract as chief executive is up for renewal. Even though you’re working with Wilson Enterprises, Daniel could still be out of a job.”

“Do you think that will happen?”

“I hope not, but if Granddad agrees, they can do just about anything. Can I give you some advice?”

I sighed. “Do I have a choice?”

His lips twitched. “Not really, but I thought it was polite to ask.”

“In that case, how can I say no?”

Owen smiled. "I'm beginning to see why Daniel has fallen in love with you."

Hot tears filled my eyes. "He has a funny way of showing it."

The smile on Owen's face disappeared. "Daniel wouldn't have meant to hurt you. After Mom and Dad died, he locked away his feelings. Even Tom, his ex-fiancé, didn't make him as happy as he's been over the last few weeks. When you're thinking about what happened tonight, don't underestimate how much he loves you. He wants to be part of your life."

I pulled a bunch of tissues out of my pocket and blew my nose. Being part of my life wasn't enough. I needed to trust Daniel, and I didn't know if I ever could again.

fifty-two

BEN

I was soldering a silver ring when someone knocked on my cottage's front door. Turning off the butane torch, I checked my watch. Jonathon and Paul weren't supposed to be here for another hour and the guests staying in Acorn Cottage wouldn't be back until later tonight. If the person standing on my veranda wanted to sell me something, they'd be disappointed.

For the last two weeks, I'd spent all my time in my studio, trying to keep up with the orders that had flooded in after the award ceremony. Elijah Lewis, the woman I'd met at LaGuardia Airport, was working in my jewelry store. Without having to go into town, I'd been able to get through a lot more work. Unfortunately, that meant I hadn't spent a lot of time with my friends.

The person knocked again, and I sighed. Taking off my safety glasses, I quickly walked through the living room and opened the front door. "Dylan?"

"That's me."

Dylan's wide grin made me smile. I hugged my friend tight. "It's good to see you, but you weren't supposed to arrive home until tomorrow. Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine. One of Alex's friends called a couple of days ago and asked if Alex could help with an IT issue. We'd had a great honeymoon and were ready to come home, anyway. So we packed our bags and here I am."

“Come inside. Do you have time for a cup of coffee?”

“I’d love one. Paris was amazing, but I couldn’t find decent coffee anywhere. What have you been doing while I was away?”

I took two cups out of a cupboard. “I’m not sure where to begin.”

“I saw Jonathon before I came here. He told me you went to Manhattan to accept the Wilson Award. When did you decide to go?”

“After your wedding, Daniel asked if I’d create an exclusive range of jewelry for his company. One of the conditions of the contract was that I attend the awards ceremony.”

Dylan’s eyes widened. “You’re working for Wilson Enterprises? That’s fantastic! It’ll make a huge difference to your career.” He studied my face and frowned. “Or maybe not. Has something else happened?”

“The man who accused Dad of stealing his designs was working for Daniel when he made the complaint. Wilson Enterprises paid his legal expenses even though they knew the chance of winning the case was remote.”

Dylan sat on a kitchen stool. “How did you find that out?”

“A reporter asked me some questions at the awards ceremony. The only reason Daniel employed me was because he felt guilty about what happened to Dad.”

“Did he tell you that?”

I handed Dylan a cup of coffee. “No, but he might as well have. He’s rebranding his company. He wanted to use my face and jewelry to attract different people to his

online store.”

“That happens all the time.”

“Except you usually tell the person what you’re doing. He knew I didn’t want to have my photo everywhere. Even going to the award ceremony as B.J. Davis was a big risk.”

“Because of your dad?”

I nodded.

“You said a reporter was asking you questions. What did they do with the information?”

“She was going to publish a story, but nothing has appeared in the paper or online.”

“Have you spoken to Daniel?”

“There’s no point.” I hadn’t seen or spoken to him since the award night. I thought he was the man I could have spent the rest of my life with. But I couldn’t trust him and no amount of talking would change that.

“Daniel seemed like a nice person. Look at what he did for the tiny home village. Without his company’s support, the church wouldn’t have anywhere to build the houses. And he spent a fortune at the auction for The Welcome Center. You don’t do things like that unless you want to make a difference.”

“He has lots of money and he knew both projects are important to me. Daniel probably thought he would have a better chance of working with me if he showed an interest in what I was doing.”

Dylan frowned. “That doesn’t sound like the man I met. Are you sure you aren’t overreacting?”

“I wish I was.” Daniel’s enthusiasm for both projects didn’t make sense unless he had an ulterior motive. I just hoped he knew what a difference his company was making in Sunrise Bay. “Tell me about your honeymoon. Did you go to the top of the Eiffel Tower and eat baguettes filled with French cheese on the Champs-élysées?”

The worry on Dylan’s face was replaced with a smile. “We did. You should have seen our honeymoon suite. It was huge and filled with beautiful furniture and the biggest bed I’ve ever seen.”

“It sounds wonderful.”

“It was, but the best thing was spending time with Alex. He’s a wonderful man. And in case you need reminding, so is Daniel.”

I shook my head. “I thought he was, but I was wrong.”

“Before you write him off completely, talk to Pastor Adam. I think you might be surprised by what he has to say.”

“When did you see Adam?”

“He was on the same flight as Alex and me. For the last couple of days, he’s been in New York City, talking to investors about the tiny home village.”

“Did he say how it went?”

“Talk to Adam. He’ll have the answers to the questions I can see buzzing around in your head.”



I did have questions, but they all involved one man. And it wasn't Pastor Adam.

fifty-three

DANIEL

“You look like death warmed over,” Patrick Devlin said from the doorway. “When was the last time you had a decent meal?”

I looked up from my computer. “Have you been speaking to Owen?”

“It’s just as well I have.” Patrick placed a bag of takeout in the middle of my desk. “It doesn’t look as good as your grandmother’s Sunday roast, but it should taste all right.”

As usual, Granddad was understating the obvious. The logo on the bag belonged to one of the top restaurants in Manhattan. If it were anything other than a five-star meal, I’d be shocked.

I opened the bag and sniffed. “Roast beef, Parmesan-coated roast potatoes, and, if I’m not mistaken, something seasoned with garlic and fresh mint.”

Patrick grunted. “At least your Ivy League education wasn’t wasted.” He placed a picnic basket on the chair and took out two plates and a pile of cutlery. “It’s after eight o’clock, and I haven’t had anything to eat, either. You can serve.”

Granddad never came to the office with dinner. “What did Owen tell you?”

“Enough to know you’re not taking care of yourself. Did the board renew your

contract?”

“I thought you would have been the first to know.”

“That’s not how it works.” Patrick handed me a plate. “I’ll have two potatoes.”

I opened the first container. The garlic crust on the thick, juicy slices of beef made my stomach rumble. “My contract was renewed for another five years.”

“Congratulations.”

I glanced at Granddad before opening the container of roast potatoes. “You don’t sound surprised.”

“They would’ve been crazy to let you go.”

“That’s not what you’ve been telling me for the last six months.”

Patrick sighed. “I made a mistake.”

My eyebrows rose. That was the first time Granddad had admitted he wasn’t always right. I should have been angry or, at the very least, annoyed at the stress he and the board had created, but I wasn’t.

After spending the last two weeks knowing I’d destroyed any chance of a relationship with Ben, all I felt was numb. My job, my life, and even my future didn’t matter if he wasn’t part of it.

With a heavy heart, I handed Granddad the dinner plate. “Help yourself to the vegetables.”

Patrick sent me a concerned look but didn't say anything.

I chose what I wanted for dinner and sat in one of the comfy sofas opposite my desk.

"Is Owen joining us?"

"Not tonight. He's searching for a teenage girl who was reported missing last night."

If I needed another reason not to eat anything, that would do it. My brother owned a company called Lost and Found. Some of the cases they handled were heartbreaking.

Before Granddad sat down, he reached into another bag and handed me a takeout cup.

"This is for you. It comes highly recommended."

I took off the lid. "Hot chocolate?"

"It was your grandma's cure-all for when you were worried or sad about something. It looks as though you need it."

My hand trembled as I placed the cup on the table. Pressing my lips together, I tried to stem the flow of hot tears building in my eyes. Grandma had meant the world to all of us, and, right now, I desperately needed one of her hugs.

Patrick cleared his throat. "This isn't about work, is it?"

Using the heel of my hands, I wiped my eyes. "I'm exhausted, that's all. I haven't had much sleep."

Granddad patted my shoulder. "When did you last talk to Ben?"

"Two weeks ago. I tried calling him, but he's either not home or not answering his phone."

“Has he pulled out of the contract?”

I shook my head. “He’s still working on the collection. The person I asked to be his liaison is impressed with what he’s done. The marketing team will start promoting his first collection in January.”

“They’ll catch the Valentine’s Day market.”

“That was the plan.”

Patrick studied my face before picking up his cutlery. “Owen told me you’d made other plans, too.”

I didn’t know what my brother had told Granddad but, at a guess, I’d say he’d told him everything. “I told Ben I love him, that I’d like him to be my boyfriend.”

“What happened?”

“A reporter told him about Emanuel. She also told Ben about our decision to make him the face of our prestige store.”

“I’m assuming he wasn’t happy?”

“Ben told me I’d betrayed his trust, that he couldn’t forgive me for what I’d done to his father.”

Patrick’s knife and fork froze above his dinner. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It doesn’t matter. I was the chief executive. I decided to go ahead with the trial.”

“No one knew what would happen once the media got hold of the story. Ben seems

like a level-headed person. Surely he realizes you weren't responsible for the fallout from the charges."

"His family was left with nothing."

"And his mom died not long after they moved to San Francisco." Patrick left his dinner, untouched, on the table. "I don't know what to say."

I handed Granddad the cup of hot chocolate. "Have a drink. I've heard it helps you feel better."

"Did it help you?"

"No, but having you here does. Thanks for coming, Granddad."

With a heartfelt sigh, Patrick stood and wrapped me in a hug. "I'm not as good as your grandma at showing you how I feel, but I love you."

"I know you do." I closed my eyes and memorized the feel of Granddad's arms wrapped around me. The last time we'd hugged each other was at Grandma's funeral.

When we separated, Patrick had tears in his eyes. "Mary used to tell me I had the roar of a lion and the heart of an angel. Your grandma saw through my gruffness when a lot of people couldn't. I might be eighty-five years old, but it's time I changed."

The determination on Granddad's face worried me. "You're not going skydiving, are you?"

"Skydiving? Good grief, no. I might be ready to turn over a new leaf, but I'm not crazy. I'm going on a vacation."

I waited for Granddad to say something else, but he sat in his chair, looking incredibly pleased with himself. “A vacation?”

Patrick picked up his knife and fork. “That’s right. I’ve heard it’s the best way to get in touch with your feelings. I’m not combining it with any business meetings or market research. For one week, I’ll go somewhere I’ve never been and have fun.”

My eyebrows nearly shot off the top of my head. It sounded as though Granddad was going through a midlife crisis. Except he was about thirty years too late. “Where are you going?”

“I’ve got no idea, but I’ll think of something before Sunday.”

I cut a slice of beef and pushed it onto my fork. Granddad was never spontaneous. Everything, right down to what day of the week he went grocery shopping, was planned with military precision. “You do know it’s Friday.”

“Of course I know what day of the week it is. Now tell me about Ben. How are you going to woo him back?”

I nearly choked. Granddad had never asked about any of my boyfriends.

“Well?” Patrick asked. “You must have one or two ideas you want to try.”

“I’m not sure Ben wants to be wooed.”

“Nonsense. Everyone wants to feel special, and Ben’s no exception. He’s a bright, intelligent, and beautiful young man. If you don’t do something, he’ll fall in love with someone else.”

My heart sank. “Does Owen know you’re getting in touch with your feelings?”

“Not yet, but I’ll make sure I see him before I leave Manhattan. Someone needs to talk with him before he turns into a replica of you and me.”

“I turned out all right.”

Patrick’s smile was full of pride. “Of course you did. You’re a chip off the old block.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Thank goodness Granddad had Owen on his radar. That would give him something to focus on while I concentrated on Ben.

Because Granddad was right. Ben would fall in love with someone else if I didn’t show him he could trust me.



fifty-four

BEN

On Sunday night, I opened my front door. When I saw who was standing on my veranda, my mouth dropped open. “Mr. Devlin? What are you doing here?”

Daniel’s grandfather smiled. “I believe you’ve received a booking for Acorn Cottage for the next seven days. I’m your new guest.”

“Are you sure? The only reservation that came through was for a Mr. Potts.”

Patrick shrugged. “Daniel told me he hasn’t spoken to you for a couple of weeks. I was worried you wouldn’t accept my booking if you knew it was me. In my haste to get here, I borrowed the name of my neighbor’s cat.”

Despite my shock at seeing Patrick, I smiled. “I would’ve been more concerned if Daniel was standing in front of me.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that.”

I studied the innocent expression on Patrick’s face. “Daniel said you worked long hours and never took time off.”

“That was the old me. From now on, I’m going to enjoy life. And it starts with a relaxing vacation.” He turned toward Willow Lake and took a deep breath. “This is a beautiful place to call home.”

“It is.” I still wasn’t convinced Patrick’s intentions were entirely honorable, but he’d come a long way and I wasn’t going to turn him away. “I’ll take you across to the cottage. There’s an information pack in the cottage with lots of ideas about things you can do while you’re here. I can book any tours you want to do.”

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to seeing some of the things Daniel told me about.”

“If there’s anything he did that you can’t find, just let me know.” Taking a set of keys off the hall table, I stepped outside. Patrick’s car was parked by the cottage, so I didn’t have to worry about carrying his suitcases across the grass. “There’s a basket of local food on the dining room table and fresh milk, bread, and butter in the refrigerator. If you need anything else, I’ll be happy to bring it across.”

“Do you treat all of your guests so well?”

I smiled. “You’re extra special.” I slowed my pace to make it easier for Patrick to walk beside me. Coming all the way from Manhattan was tiring for anyone, but for a man in his mid-eighties, it would be worse. “Have you had dinner?”

Patrick stopped and caught his breath. “I bought a sandwich at the airport in Boulder.”

“Would you like to share some of my soup? I made it this afternoon and, if I do say so myself, it’s delicious.”

The twinkle in Patrick’s eyes was good to see. “Homemade soup sounds wonderful. Did I tell you that Daniel’s grandma loved making soup? Mary had a favorite recipe for each season.”

I smiled at Patrick. “No, you didn’t. Which one did you like the best?”

As he told me about the pumpkin soup that was better than anything he'd ever tasted, I sighed. Regardless of why he was here, I'd make sure Daniel's granddad enjoyed every moment of his stay. I just hoped he hadn't told Daniel where he'd gone. One Devlin male was enough to handle. Two would be impossible.

fifty-five

BEN

Two days later, I handed Paul some pillowcases and half a dozen sheets. For the last hour, we had been volunteering at The Welcome Center. Making the beds and replacing the towels was a big job, especially when all the rooms were being used.

“How long is Daniel’s granddad staying at the cottage?” Paul asked.

“He leaves on Sunday morning. I wonder if he told Daniel he was coming to Sunrise Bay.”

Paul shrugged. “I don’t know. If you’re worried about him, maybe you should call Daniel and ask if everything’s all right.”

That was the last thing I wanted to do. “Patrick’s fine. He went fishing on Willow Lake yesterday and brought home a huge brown trout. He was incredibly proud of himself.”

“I bet he was.” Paul picked up four towels. “If he enjoys fishing, he’ll probably spend more time on the lake.”

“That’s what I thought. Although he seems to be enjoying his time at the center, too.” I took some more sheets out of the cupboard and walked down the hallway.

When I was getting ready to come into town, I’d met Patrick as he returned from a

walk. After I'd told him about The Welcome Center, he'd offered to come and help with whatever needed doing. Not long after we arrived, we'd met Mr. Jeffries, the center's gardener. He'd taken one look at Patrick and asked if he wanted to help in the vegetable garden.

Before I knew what was happening, Patrick was picking cherry tomatoes off the vine and chatting with Mr. Jeffries. Anyone who saw them would think they'd been buddies their entire lives.

"Has Daniel tried calling you again?"

I pulled out a bed from the wall. "Apart from the message he left on my phone, I haven't heard from him."

"Maybe you should call him. If nothing else, he's your boss."

"I can't call him." I flicked open a bottom sheet and tucked it under the mattress. "After what I said, he must think I'm a terrible person."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. He told you he loves you. Daniel doesn't seem like the type of person who'd say that to many people."

He wasn't the only one. I kept my feelings to myself, especially when it meant I could get hurt. I missed Daniel dreadfully and wished I hadn't been quite so quick to judge him. But no amount of regret could change what had happened.

Paul added a top sheet to the bed he was making. "At some point you'll have to talk to him. The longer you leave it, the harder it'll be."

"What if I make an idiot of myself? For all I know, he could be dating someone else by now."

“That’s why you should call him.” Paul looked around the room and smiled. “Have you ever noticed how everything looks so much better when the beds have clean sheets on them?”

I tucked the corner of the blanket under the mattress. “Only a person who’s addicted to housework would agree with you.”

“It’s an occupational hazard when you have a seven-year-old in the house. You wouldn’t believe the treasures Amy finds in the garden. Last week she brought a container of worms and bugs inside. Goodness knows what’s going to happen after our new baby arrives.”

“It will be the same, only better. How’s Joseph?”

“He’s as cute as ever. Liam and I can’t wait to bring him home. Now let’s get this room finished before Pastor Adam finds us. He’s probably come up with another twenty ideas about how we can raise money for the tiny home village.”

I moved to the next bed. “He should have worked in marketing instead of becoming a pastor. He has a lot of great ideas.”

The man in question stuck his head around the door frame. “But then I wouldn’t have met my two favorite fundraising committee members,” Adam said with a grin. “And you’re right. I do have a few ideas I want to discuss before our next meeting.”

I handed him a set of sheets. “I’ve heard multitasking is one of your strengths. You can tell us your ideas while you help make the beds.”

Adam looked at me. “Is it my imagination or have you become bossier since you returned from Manhattan?”

“That’s what big cities do to you,” I said with a grin. “But living in Sunrise Bay has made me more relaxed.”

Adam moved a pillow off one of the beds. “Talking about being relaxed, have either of you seen Jonathon recently?”

“I saw him this morning,” Paul said. “Has something happened?”

“Someone from Wilson Enterprises called him. They like his fudge and want to sell it on the prestige website.”

My eyes widened. “That’s wonderful. Is he excited?”

Adam nodded. “He is, and so am I. Jonathon told them he wants to donate two dollars from each sale to the tiny home project. Wilson Enterprises has decided to match his donation up to thirty thousand dollars.”

Paul sat on a bed. “That’s amazing. Thirty thousand dollars will build three houses.”

“Only if Jonathon sells that much candy,” Adam reminded them. “But I have a cunning plan to make that happen.”

I laughed. “I thought you might. Tell us what you’re thinking.”

As we worked our way around the room, Adam told us about his simple idea. Everyone loved Jonathon’s fudge. By tapping into the family and friends of the people of Sunrise Bay, they had a readymade market for the candy. Then if they multiplied that market with the number of social media friends each person had, they should be able to sell a huge amount of fudge. Combined with the extra publicity Wilson Enterprises was planning, everyone would be happy.

Paul smiled at Adam. “It’s the perfect win-win solution.”

“I hope so. I have other ideas, too.”

I laughed. “I thought you might.”

By the time Adam told us about his other plans, we’d finished the next room. After promising to email me with an outline of each idea, he returned to the church for another meeting.

If I ever moved away from Sunrise Bay, I’d miss the sense of family Adam had created in the church and the community. By working together, we were making a difference, building a brighter future for the whole town.

I didn’t know if I’d ever find the same sense of fulfillment in New York City. But that might not matter. If I didn’t call Daniel, I wouldn’t have to worry about going anywhere.



fifty-six

DANIEL

I was in the middle of a meeting with my digital manager when my cell phone vibrated. I glanced at the caller display and frowned. My granddad wouldn't contact me during work hours unless it was important.

"I'm sorry, Charles. I need to take this call." My manager nodded and I walked out of the room. "I hope this isn't about work, Granddad."

"Can't a man speak to his grandson when he feels like it?"

"Not when his grandson is the chief executive of the company he co-owns. How is your vacation?"

"Getting better each day. Did I tell you about the brown trout I caught?"

I smiled. "Only about ten times. I got the photo, too. Are you ready to tell me where you're staying?" My grandfather had refused to tell me where he'd gone. The photo of the fish hadn't helped pinpoint his location and neither had any of the other information he'd accidentally shared.

"You aren't going to like it."

"Is this a polite way of telling me you're fishing naked off the coast of Costa Rica?"

“I’m eighty-five years old. If I was going to be naked, it wouldn’t be while I was fishing.”

I choked back a laugh. “Tell me where you are. I promise not to join you.”

“It’s funny you should say that. I was hoping you might do the opposite. We haven’t had a vacation together in years.”

“Are you at Mom and Dad’s cottage?”

“Nope. Not even close.”

I checked my watch. If I didn’t get back to the meeting, the issues with the prestige store’s website wouldn’t get fixed. “I’m too busy to take time off work.”

“You should never be too busy to have quality time with your family. I’m in Sunrise Bay.”

For once in my life, I was speechless.

“I thought that might surprise you.”

I dropped my head to my chest. “Why did you go there?”

“To see Ben. Don’t worry. He was as surprised as you are.”

I could only imagine what Ben had thought when my granddad had arrived. I dreaded asking the next question, but I had to know. “Where are you staying?”

“At Acorn Cottage.”

“Why did you go there?” I growled. “You could have stayed in town.”

“I wouldn’t have gotten to know Ben if I’d stayed somewhere else. I had dinner with him last night.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “You’re meddling in things you know nothing about.”

A dry chuckle echoed down the phone. “Your grandmother and I were married for fifty-seven years. We had more than our fair share of disagreements, and some of them were doozies. Would you like to know what I learned?”

“No, but you’re going to tell me, anyway.”

“You can’t fix a broken wheel from hundreds of miles away. If you love Ben, get on a plane and ask for his forgiveness. Grovel if you have to. Believe me, what you’re feeling now is nothing compared with how you’ll feel if he walks away from you.”

My hand tightened around the phone. “He doesn’t want to speak to me.”

“You left one message.”

“I asked him to call me when he’s ready to talk. He hasn’t called.”

“When was the last time you waited for someone to get back to you?” Granddad growled.

I looked for somewhere more private to discuss my nonexistent love life. If any of my staff overheard the conversation, the gossip mill would be churning for weeks. “Our relationship isn’t a business transaction. I don’t want to push Ben for an answer. What if he tells me to leave him alone?”

“At least you can say you tried. The trout I caught had more spunk than you’re showing.”

“Spunk?”

“Courage. Determination. All the things you used to have.”

My mouth slammed shut. It was better than saying something I’d regret.

“If you want to make your relationship with Ben work, get on a plane. I have to go. Gordon needs some potatoes dug out of the garden for dinner.”

I frowned. “Who’s Gordon?”

“Come to Sunrise Bay before Sunday and you’ll find out.”

With those final words ringing in my ears, my granddad ended the call.

What on earth was happening in Sunrise Bay? It was bad enough that my grandfather had gone to see Ben. But fishing and digging potatoes?

Before I returned to my meeting, I called my brother. If there was something wrong with our grandfather, Owen would know.

fifty-seven

BEN

Three days later, I stood inside the entrance of the old steamboat museum. It was a relief to be here, to know the tiny home village would soon become a reality. With the preliminary work Pastor Adam had already done, the planning department had approved the development in record time. Now, it was time to start building.

At seven-thirty this morning, the students from Colorado State University and the apprentices from Pastor Adam's construction program started the first tiny home.

Patrick was with them. When he was at The Welcome Center, he'd talked to Pastor Adam about the project, explaining that he'd worked in the construction industry for more than twenty years. He'd offered his expertise and was now mentoring a team of apprentices as they tackled the first house.

I quickly realized that even though Patrick was in his eighties, nothing, except a little arthritis in his knees, would slow him down.

I opened a door on the far side of the entrance and smiled. Paul was working with four other volunteers, measuring and cutting the fabric that would become curtains for each house.

Amy sat at a small table, reading a book to her dolly.

I walked across to my friend. "It looks like Aladdin's cave in here." Four tables,

clustered around the volunteers' work area, held large rolls of fabric in a multitude of colors.

Paul unwound a few yards of dark blue material. "Isn't it wonderful? I can't believe the store in Great Falls donated so much fabric."

"Neither can I. It's amazing how generous they've been. Will you make the curtains here?"

Amy came over to the worktable. "We're making them at our house."

Paul smiled. "Just some of them. We decided it'd be easier if we sew the curtains from each of our homes. That way, we can make them in our own time instead of having to drive here each day."

"That makes sense. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"You can hold the fabric while I cut it."

"Sure." While Paul sliced through the fabric with a sharp pair of scissors, I looked around the room. "When did you arrive?"

"About an hour ago after school finished. Amy and I met Daniel's granddad. He seems like a nice person."

"How did you?—"

"I didn't go out of my way to say hello. When we arrived, he was sitting outside, having a cup of coffee."

Amy leaned against my legs. "Do you want me to tell you about the book I'm

reading? It's about dragons and princesses, and a small frog called Peter."

"As long as Paul can spare me for a few minutes, I'd love to hear about your book."

Amy's big blue eyes settled on her uncle. "Would that be okay? We won't be very long."

Paul folded the piece of fabric she'd cut. "Of course, it's okay."

Amy looked behind me and smiled. "I just read a story to Dolly about a frog."

"That sounds like fun."

My mouth dropped open. As I turned around, my heart pounded. "Daniel? What are you doing here?"

"Saying sorry to you."

I didn't know what to say.

Amy grinned. "Daniel knows lots of funny jokes."

"You remember him?" I was surprised when she nodded.

"I told Daniel if he caught you a fish, you might want him to stay."

I wished our relationship could be fixed so easily. "Daniel and I are friends."

"Uncle Paul says boyfriends are like friends, only better."

While Amy pulled me across to a table and showed me her book, Paul said something

to Daniel. Even in a gray T-shirt and jeans Daniel stood out from everyone else. He was easily the most handsome man I'd ever met, but there was more to him than his looks. There was something about the way he moved, the way he spoke, and the things that were important to him that made my heart melt.

Why had he traveled all the way to Sunrise Bay? Patrick said Daniel was busy. If he wanted to apologize, he could have called me. Taking time out of his schedule wouldn't make his workload any easier.

Maybe he was worried about his grandfather. If Patrick told him he was working on the tiny home project, he might be concerned he was doing too much. Or maybe, just maybe, Daniel wanted to know how I felt about him.

"Here's my favorite picture," Amy said proudly. "It was above chapter ten." She shoved the book under my nose. "Do you like it?"

I smiled at the pink, frilly dress the princess was wearing. "It's lovely. Why do you like it?"

"Cos Peter is there. Can you see him?"

It took me a few seconds to remember that Peter was a frog. I looked closely at the picture. "There he is." I pointed at a little green frog sitting beside the princess. "He's cute."

Amy leaned into me. "Peter isn't a frog for the whole story," she whispered. "He turns into a dragon. When he breathes on people, their wishes come true."

"That's amazing."

"And guess what?"



I smiled. “What?”

“When Peter breathes on the princess, he thinks she’ll wish for a handsome prince. But that’s not what she wants.”

“What does she want?”

Amy leaned even closer. “The princess knows Peter’s lonely ’cos he’s the only dragon in the kingdom. She wishes for more dragons so he can be happy.”

“Does her wish come true?”

“Yes,” Amy said excitedly. “Peter finds seven dragons. It makes him really happy. Do you want to know how I remembered the number of dragons?”

I laughed as Amy jumped up and down. “How did you remember?”

“It was easy. I’m seven!”

Paul looked over my shoulder. “Amy must be telling you about Peter.”

I smiled. “She is. He’s the happiest dragon in the kingdom.” My smile disappeared when I looked at Daniel. “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you, too.”

When I looked into Daniel’s eyes, I forgot what I was going to say. I’d missed him so much.

Paul touched my arm. “I’m taking Amy to the kitchen for a cookie and something to drink. Do you want to come with us?”

I rose from the chair, grateful that my friend was looking out for me. “I’ll be okay.”

Amy grinned. “Do you want to come with us, Daniel? Pastor Adam makes yummy cookies.”

“Thanks, but I’ll stay here. I want to talk to Ben.”

“Okay.” Before she left, Amy tugged Daniel’s hand.

He smiled and knelt on the floor. “Yes?”

“Remember to catch a fish while you’re here,” she whispered.

My cheeks burned red hot.

“I’ll remember,” he whispered back. “Enjoy your cookie.”

“I will.” And with a quick wave, Amy skipped out of the room.

Daniel stood and cleared his throat. “Do you think a fish will help us?”

Tears stung my eyes. “It can’t hurt. How have you been?”

“Terrible. How about you?”

“About the same.” Taking a step closer, I searched his face, looking for anything that would tell me what he was thinking. “Are we still friends?”

Daniel held my hand. “I hope so. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the whole truth about Emanuel when I had the chance.”

“And I’m sorry I didn’t listen when you explained everything.”

“Do you think there’s a chance we can be more than friends?”

I wiped the tears off my face. “It’s a definite possibility, but you’ll have to catch an amazing fish.”

“Better than Granddad’s?”

“How did you know?—?”

“He sent me a photo. I’m confident my fish will impress you.”

The teasing note in Daniel’s voice made me smile. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Anything’s possible, Ben Harper. You just have to believe it will happen.”

I sighed. “I’m open to other suggestions.”

Daniel pulled me close. “My barbecue ribs are pretty good. How does dinner with Granddad and me at six-thirty sound?”

“Like a great compromise. I’ll bring dessert.”

“I’m already looking forward to it.”

I leaned forward and gently kissed Daniel’s lips. “So am I.”

fifty-eight

DANIEL

I added a tablespoon of apple cider vinegar to the sauce I was making. So far, so good. The ribs I'd bought from the local butcher had been marinating for nearly an hour. In a few minutes, I'd wrap them in foil and grill them for the next ninety minutes. By the time Ben arrived, they'd be tender, juicy, and hopefully finger-lickin' good.

"You could go on one of those TV shows you like watching." Patrick stood on the other side of the kitchen counter, sniffing the peppery scent of the sauce.

I sent him a sheepish grin. My brother and granddad were the only two people in the world who knew I was a closet BBQ Pitmaster fan. "It takes a lot more than a good sauce to get through the elimination rounds."

"Doesn't mean you can't try. What time is Ben arriving?"

"Six-thirty."

"Hmm."

I glanced at my granddad before covering the ribs with a sheet of foil. "What does that mean?"

Patrick picked up his glass of wine. "Nothing."

“Hmm isn’t nothing.”

“Sure it is, especially where Ben’s concerned. What are your intentions?”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “My intentions depend on what Ben wants.”

“What he wants is a man he can trust. You have to tell him what happened.”

“It doesn’t matter. It was four years ago.”

Patrick shook his head. “You can be as stubborn as an old cantankerous mule.”

I picked up my beer. “Didn’t you say I was a chip off the old block?”

“I should have listened to your grandma. She warned me about Emanuel Ricardo, but I didn’t listen.”

“It wasn’t your fault. No one knew what was going to happen.”

Granddad grunted. “Your grandma was a shrewd judge of character. All Emanuel wanted was his moment in the spotlight. Well, he got it, but not in the way he expected.”

“Nothing turned out the way we thought. Even grandma was shocked by what happened.”

“Talking about your grandma...” Patrick looked around the cottage. “We need flowers.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“It’s good luck. You can’t romance a man without giving him flowers.”

If my granddad was trying to make me less stressed, it wasn’t working. “I’m not romancing Ben. We’re having dinner. With you.”

“On my first date with your grandma, I gave her a bouquet of daisies. From that moment forward, we never left each other’s side.” Patrick’s eyes shone with unshed tears. “You deserve a man who loves you like there’s no one else in the world. Someone who gives you the best of who he is and doesn’t expect anything other than the best of who you are. If Ben is that man, give him flowers.”

I looked at the pride on my granddad’s face, the love for his wife that would never die. My grandparents had found a once-in-a-lifetime love that changed their lives. It had given their son a glimpse of what could be, and their grandsons a life filled with joy.

With tears in my own eyes, I walked around the counter. I hugged my granddad and wondered where the years had gone. “Grandma loved you and so do I. I’ll find some flowers for Ben.”

Patrick’s arms tightened around me. “Good boy. I’ll make the salad.”

With the story of my grandparents’ courtship ringing in my ears, I headed outside. If there were any flowers around Willow Lake, I’d find them. If there weren’t, I’d have to be a little creative.

fifty-nine

BEN

I held the cake box and took a deep breath. I was having dinner with Daniel and his granddad. We'd share some food and talk about what we were doing. After dessert, I'd come home and spend a few minutes staring at the stars before going to bed.

If tonight was going to be so straightforward, why was I nervous? I'd tried on three pairs of jeans, four shirts, and all three of my sweaters before I'd settled on what to wear. My blue jeans and cream shirt weren't new, but they were comfortable.

At least Daniel's dinner would be better than the frozen meal I would have eaten. The smell wafting across the yard from Acorn Cottage had sent my taste buds to heaven and back. I was a sucker for a good barbecue, and Daniel's smelled divine.

As I was about to leave my house, my cell phone rang. Rushing across the kitchen, I answered the call. "Ben speaking."

"You sound like you've run a marathon."

"Dad! It's good to hear from you."

"That's better than the last time we talked. How's the new collection coming along?"

I looked at the door to my studio. "It's great. I've finished the Victoria necklace. I'm working on some of my own pieces while I wait for the gemstones for the Elizabeth

necklace. They should arrive in the next few days.”

“Are you sure you’ll be safe? I don’t like you having so many valuable gemstones in your studio.”

From the moment my dad saw the draft sketches of the royal collection, he’d been concerned. He was worried someone would break in and steal the gemstones and possibly hurt me. “The new security system has been installed and I keep everything in my safe. As soon as each piece is finished, a security company from Boulder collects it and takes it to Manhattan. Besides, no one apart from you, Daniel’s family, and my friends know B.J. Davis lives here.”

“I’d still prefer you to work from your jewelry store.”

Jacqueline, my liaison person with Wilson Enterprises, had said the same thing. “It’s only for a few more days. The person who’s looking after my store starts a teaching job next week. When she leaves, I’ll be working from town.”

“Will you be able to meet your deadline with Wilson Enterprises?”

“I hope so.”

Dad must have heard the uncertainty in my voice. “If you need me to look after your store, I can take some time off work.”

I leaned against the kitchen counter. “You’re as busy as I am.”

“I don’t want you to miss this opportunity. If I need to move to Sunrise Bay for a couple of months, I’ll do it.”

“Thanks, Dad, but I think I’ll be okay. I’m well ahead of schedule.” I glanced at my



watch. “Can I give you a call in the morning? Daniel and his granddad have invited me to dinner. They’re staying in Acorn Cottage.”

There were a few seconds of silence before Dad spoke. “Daniel and his grandfather are there? When did that happen?”

“Patrick arrived last Sunday. Daniel came today.”

“How do you feel about seeing Daniel again?”

I looked through my kitchen window. “I thought I’d be upset but, when I saw him, I realized how much I’ve misjudged him.”

“But?”

Dad had a habit of knowing when I wasn’t telling the whole truth. “I’m still upset he paid Emanuel’s legal expenses. It’s not right that Emanuel walked away with no debt, but you lost everything.”

“Once the case went to trial, no one could have stopped it. If Wilson Enterprises knew Emanuel was lying, do you think they would have kept going?”

I rubbed my forehead. “No.”

“The trial had an impact on everyone. If there’s anything your mom’s death taught me, it was that life’s too short to hold a grudge against someone. Sometimes you have to let it go and move on with your life. If you don’t, it eats you up and leaves you less than what you were.”

“Have you been able to let it go?”

“It took a while but, yes, I’ve let go of the anger and resentment. So, when am I going to meet Daniel?”

“I don’t know. We’re still working out what’s happening between us.”

“Do you love him?”

I held the phone tight. “Yes.”

“And how does Daniel feel about you?”

“I think he loves me.”

Tony sighed. “It sounds as though I need to meet him sooner rather than later.”

“He’s a good man, Dad.”

“So are a lot of people. But it doesn’t mean they’re good enough for you.”

I smiled. “I’m a grown up now, Dad.”

“Not in my eyes. Be careful, Ben. You’ve been through a lot over the last few years.”

“I will. I love you, Dad.”

“Love you, too. Tell Daniel and his grandfather I said hello.”

“I’ll tell them. Bye.” I ended the call and picked up the cake box. Tonight didn’t have to be about my relationship with Daniel. It could simply be dinner with two people whose company I enjoyed.

With that thought in my mind, I closed the front door and walked across to Acorn Cottage.

sixty

DANIEL

I wiped my hands on my apron and took the oven-baked fries out of the oven. So far, so good. Granddad was keeping Ben entertained with stories about his vacation adventures, and dinner was ready to be served.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Ben asked.

The tray of fries landed on the counter, knocking over the ketchup and spraying the wall with thick, red sauce.

“Oops, sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” Ben reached for the dishcloth, mopping up the worst of the mess while I rescued the fries.

“It’s okay. I should have been paying closer attention to what I was doing. Did you enjoy Granddad’s story about Alaska?”

Ben smiled. “I did. I thought he was going to tell me the whale swallowed him whole.”

“That would’ve been a little too close for comfort. At least the fishing boat made it back to shore before everyone fell overboard.”

While Ben rinsed the cloth, I took the dinner plates out of the cupboard. “You put a lot of thought into what’s in the cottage. Your guests must enjoy staying here.”

“I wasn’t sure what people would expect, so I included everything I’d want in a vacation home. There’s probably a little too much, but I thought it was better than forgetting something.”

“I agree.” I scooped the fries into a large bowl and placed them on top of the dinner plates. “If you could take this outside, I’ll grab the sweetcorn and salad.”

“And I’ll find the butter,” Granddad said from the kitchen doorway. He looked at the corn and smiled. “Gordon was right. The vegetables we picked today look fresher and better than those we get in New York.”

“Mr. Jeffries is biased, but he knows what he’s talking about.” Ben handed Granddad the butter. “I never thought organic vegetables tasted any different from other vegetables until I tried the food he grows.”

“Did he tell you he wants to build a greenhouse?”

Ben nodded. “It’s on our list of improvements. I think Pastor Adam wants to leave it until the tiny home village is completely finished.”

Granddad followed Ben and me outside. “That’ll be months away.”

“It’s probably closer to two years,” Ben said sadly. “There’s only so much money to go around.”

“Hmm,” Granddad said thoughtfully.

I studied his face. “You can’t build a greenhouse for The Welcome Center.”

“I wouldn’t do anything without speaking to Pastor Adam first.”

My eyebrows rose. “That’s not like you.”

Instead of looking insulted, Granddad smiled. “I’ve mellowed in my old age.”

“Really?” I looked at Ben. “Don’t believe anything he says. He’s still as determined as he was thirty years ago.”

With a heavy sigh, Granddad dropped onto one of the wooden chairs. “Forget determination. I’d settle for having my fifty-year-old body back. It would solve a lot of my problems.”

My eyes narrowed. “Is there something you haven’t told me?” Granddad hated going to the doctor. If it weren’t for Owen and my constant reminders, I doubted he’d even go to his annual checkup.

“There’s nothing you don’t already know. Now get those ribs off the barbecue before I help myself.”

I wouldn’t put it past Granddad to do exactly that. “You might be just as determined, but you’ve got less patience.”

Ben handed me a pair of tongs. “They smell divine.”

“It’s Owen’s recipe.” I lifted the ribs onto a plate and hoped they tasted as good as they smelled.

When I turned around, Granddad had a napkin tucked in the front of his shirt. “Ben will think you don’t get fed.”

“Nonsense,” Granddad said as he rubbed his hands together. “Ben’s just as keen as I am to taste your ribs. You’ve been tantalizing our taste buds with the smell all

evening.”

Ben helped himself to a corncob. “It’s true. The smell was driving me crazy.”

My heart leaped. If I’d known driving him crazy was as easy as cooking ribs, I’d have done it weeks ago.

I placed the plate of ribs on the table. “Help yourselves. I need to get something from the cottage.”

“I’ve got plenty of soda, juice, and wine at my house if you need some more,” Ben offered.

I shook my head. “We’ve got plenty. I’ll be back soon.”

Granddad picked up a fork. “Come on, Ben. Let’s start. It would be a shame if the ribs got cold.”

I hurried inside. I was glad Granddad was here. Without his ability to smooth over the awkwardness of seeing Ben again, I didn’t know whether the evening would be going quite so well. I just hoped the flowers I’d picked made Ben realize how much I cared about him. If they didn’t, I’d have no choice but to send him barbecue spare ribs each week.

sixty-one

BEN

I glanced at Acorn Cottage, wondering why Daniel had gone inside. Hopefully, it wasn't to reply to a phone message he'd forgotten or to answer a work email.

"Don't worry about my grandson," Patrick said. "Tell me about the land where the tiny home village will be built. It looks as though the groundbreaking is about to start."

"It is. On the weekend, a team of volunteers are removing the last of the fences between the properties. The bulldozers arrive on Monday. Did you like helping the apprentices?"

Patrick handed me the salad. "It brought back a lot of good memories. We had an apprenticeship program when I started my first construction company. I'd forgotten how rewarding it is to help young builders."

I'd spent some time watching what was happening in the construction area. The students from Colorado State University enjoyed seeing their plans come to life. And from the looks of things, the apprentices welcomed the challenge of creating a tiny home.

"I feel the same way when I'm showing students around my studio. It doesn't matter whether they're nine or nineteen years old, it makes you feel proud of what you've achieved."



Patrick's eyes twinkled. "I enjoyed the tour of your studio the other night, and I'm a little older than the students. The judges couldn't have chosen a more deserving recipient of the Wilson Award."

"Thank you." I bit into a spare rib and sighed. "This is incredible."

"Daniel has hidden talents." He looked over my shoulder and smiled. "And talking about my grandson..."

I turned around and stared at the huge bouquet in Daniel's arms. Daisies, roses, snapdragons, and lilies were a rainbow of color and texture against his white shirt.

He sat beside me and handed me the flowers. "These are for you. I want you to know how much you mean to me. Will you give me another chance to show you how wonderful our lives could be together?"

I held the flowers against my chest and inhaled their sweet fragrance. "They're lovely." The uncertain frown on Daniel's face made my heart squeeze tight. "You don't need another chance, because I've never stopped loving you."

Daniel's eyes filled with tears. "I thought you'd given up on me."

I shook my head. "I wanted to call you, but I didn't know what to say. When I saw you this afternoon, I realized I want our relationship to work. It wasn't fair that I held you responsible for what happened."

Patrick cleared his throat. "There's something Daniel hasn't told you."

"No, Granddad."

I looked at Daniel, then at Patrick. "What is it?"

Daniel scowled at his grandfather. “It won’t make any difference.”

“It will make me feel better,” Patrick said stubbornly. “Besides, there have been enough secrets between us. If you and Ben are starting a new life together, he needs to know what happened before the trial.”

I had no idea what Patrick was talking about. I’d talked to my dad, reread the trial notes, and devoured all the articles and social media posts about the court case. If there was anything left to uncover, I didn’t know what it could be.

Patrick pulled the napkin out of his shirt. “Daniel wasn’t the person who made the attorneys press charges against your father. I was.” He held up his hand when Daniel started to speak. “I told Daniel we needed to make an example of your father. Too many designers were breaking copyright and reproducing jewelry using cheaper materials. Something had to be done. The board of directors agreed with me. Daniel couldn’t have done anything to stop what happened.”

I turned to Daniel. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m responsible for the decisions my board makes. It doesn’t matter whether I agree or disagree with them.”

“What did you want to do?”

Daniel glanced at his grandfather. “Emanuel wasn’t meeting the targets we expected from him. When he told my staff someone had copied his designs, they believed him. I wanted an independent panel to assess the two designers’ work. If they could prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that your dad had copied his designs, I was happy to take the matter further.”

“Did you appoint a panel to look at the designs?”

“I did. The designs were similar, but there was a discrepancy in the timeline Emanuel gave the panel. They couldn’t verify who had created the designs first.”

I dropped the flowers to my lap. “Emanuel copied Dad’s designs, but he couldn’t prove it. By the time the case went to trial, everyone assumed my father was guilty.”

“Emanuel knew how to use the media to his advantage.” Daniel shook his head. “Even well-respected jewelers were fooled by his bravado.”

Patrick leaned forward. “We didn’t know Emanuel was lying until we were nearly at the end of the trial.”

“You could have apologized after it finished.”

“I didn’t think your dad would want to talk to anyone from Wilson Enterprises,” Patrick said. “There were too many stories appearing in the newspapers. When they stopped, I tried to find your dad, but you’d left Los Angeles. I kept searching for you, but it was like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“We didn’t do that intentionally,” I told Patrick. “After Dad paid the attorney, we had no money. Mom was struggling with her treatment, and we needed to find somewhere quieter to live.”

“Why did you go to San Francisco?”

“Dad was offered a job. The salary wasn’t large, but it included a small apartment above the jewelry store. When the owner realized my father was the person everyone was talking about, he didn’t want anything to do with him.” I looked at Daniel, unsure about his reaction to what I’d say next. “We could only afford to stay in a hostel for a couple of weeks. After that, we didn’t have anywhere to live. We were homeless for six months.”

I studied Daniel's face. His mouth was set in a grim line, but at least he didn't look too appalled.

Patrick sat silently on the other side of the table, waiting for me to continue.

"By that stage, Mom was really sick. Dad looked after her while I worked. Even with two part-time jobs, we couldn't live on the money I earned. We relied on food donations from the local church and the kindness of strangers to survive. It was worse after Mom died. If it weren't for Steve, Dad's friend, I don't know what would have happened to us."

Daniel's hand trembled as he held mine. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

I thought about Mom and my eyes filled with tears. "That's why I volunteer at The Welcome Center. I know what it's like to struggle to find money for food, to not be able to pay rent or buy clothes. It messes with your mind and makes you think you're less worthy than everyone else."

Patrick wiped the tears from his eyes. "I'm sorry, Ben. If I'd known what was happening, I would have helped."

I took a deep breath. "I know you would have. I'm just glad I went home to look after Mom during the trial. At least we were together when all this was happening."

"You shouldn't have gone through any of it." Daniel's voice shook as his gaze shot to his grandfather. "The board assured me Tony's family was okay."

I squeezed his hand. "It's not Patrick's fault. We're okay now. Dad enjoys working with Steve, and my jewelry store is doing better than ever."

"I'm surprised you spoke to me," Daniel said with more control. "I'm not sure I

would have been as forgiving.”

“I didn’t know who you were when I first met you.” Forcing a smile, I looked at the food on the table. “It’s easy to take what you have for granted. I’m looking forward to spending more time with both of you and enjoying the yummy dinner you’ve cooked.”

Patrick picked up his glass of wine and raised it in a toast. “To good friends, new loves, and open hearts.”

I touched the rim of my glass to Patrick and Daniel’s. “To good friends.”

sixty-two

DANIEL

I stood at the back of the old steamboat museum with Pastor Adam. Seeing the tiny homes being constructed indoors, then transported to the property, was impressive. It would definately speed up the project timeline.

The first tiny home was coming together more quickly than I imagined. Yesterday, the subfloor was constructed and the timber framing was partly assembled.

“Your grandfather enjoys being here,” Adam said, looking at the progress.

I glanced across the room. Granddad was listening intently to one of the students as they studied the house plans. “He regretted having to sell his construction company. You’ve made him very happy.”

“It’s great having someone with his experience working alongside the apprentices. Do you like being back in Sunrise Bay?”

“I’m not here for long. Granddad and I are flying back to Manhattan tomorrow afternoon.”

Adam’s eyebrows rose. “Why so soon?”

“I need to be in my office on Monday. We’re in the middle of rebranding our prestige store and promoting a lot of new products.”

“Ben will be disappointed.”

He wouldn't be the only one. For the first time since I'd started my company, I wanted something different. Manhattan wasn't the same when Ben wasn't there. I was ready to settle down, but the restlessness inside me was unsettling.

“I'll be back as soon as I can.”

“Well, if you know anyone who wants a job, I'm looking for a Community Outreach Coordinator. The Welcome Center and the tiny home village are taking too much of my time.”

I frowned. “It would be a good job for anyone wanting to give back to the community.”

“That's what I'm hoping someone will think. We can't afford the salary most people earn in a city, but there are a lot of advantages to living here. I'll send you a copy of the job description. Feel free to give it to your friends.”

“I'm not sure it would do much good. Most of my friends aren't planning on moving from New York.”

Adam shrugged. “You never know. Stepping away from the stress of big city living can be good for the soul. Besides, it wouldn't have to be forever. It could be the type of job someone does for a couple of years before trying something else.”

Granddad joined us. “What do you think of the progress we've made?”

“I'm impressed,” I said. “It looks as though the walls could be going up later today.”

“If we stick to the schedule, they will.” He nodded at Adam. “It was a good idea to

use the building apprentices on the project.”

“It couldn’t have worked out better.” Adam turned as someone called his name. “I have to go. My ten o’clock appointment must have arrived.” He shook our hands. “Have a safe journey home. Make sure you come and see me when you’re next here.”

“We will,” I said. “Good luck with the projects.”

“I’ll need it if I can’t find a coordinator,” Adam muttered. He headed across the room, smiling at the woman waiting for him.

“Why do you think Adam became a pastor?” Granddad asked.

I looked at him and frowned. “I’ve got no idea. He can’t be much older than I am.”

“He’s forty-one.”

“You asked him?”

“Of course I asked him. That’s what you do when you want to get to know someone. Have you seen Ben this morning?”

“I saw him for a few minutes before he came into town,” I said softly. “He enjoyed having dinner with us.”

“I ruined his family’s life.”

I touched Granddad’s arm. I knew how much he was hurting because I felt it too. “Ben would disagree with you.”

“Maybe.” Granddad took off his tool belt. “I’m heading to the kitchen for coffee. Do



you want to join me?”

“Sure. The only thing I have to do after this is buy Owen some fudge and meet Ben for lunch.”

“That gives us plenty of time. After we’ve had coffee, you can help us lift the timber framing into place.”

“I haven’t picked up a hammer in years.” The last time I’d done any construction was when I was at college. Granddad had given me a job over the summer break. It had been long, hot days, but I’d enjoyed every minute.

“It’s like riding a bicycle. Once you know how, you never forget.”

“I don’t know if the person in charge would agree with you.”

Granddad cleared his throat. “He’s a flexible guy.”

I looked closely at him. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“Coffee first, then we talk. I’m still recovering from last night.”

I couldn’t blame him. Even after walking Ben home, the knowledge of what had happened to his family weighed heavily on my mind. But, one way or another, I vowed to make it up to Ben and his dad. Even if it meant doing the one thing I never thought I would.

sixty-three

BEN

I locked a glass cabinet in my jewelry store and studied the display. The copper necklaces looked lovely against the deep red velvet I'd found at the market. With the photos I'd uploaded onto my website, they shouldn't take long to sell.

After spending a lot of time working on the royal collection, it was nice to add something different to my catalog.

The doorbell chimed and Jonathon rushed into the store. "You're not going to believe what's happened."

"You're smiling, so it can't be too bad."

Jonathon did a happy dance. "It's so awesome that I don't know where to begin. The person in charge of the marketing team at Wilson Enterprises received my first shipment of fudge. She was so impressed with the taste and the packaging that she's featuring it on the landing page of the prestige website."

"That sounds great."

Jonathon threw his hands in the air. "It's more than great. It's mind-blowing. Wilson Enterprises wants me to send them another two thousand bags of fudge. Two thousand! I'll have to employ more staff and order a lot more ingredients."

My eyes widened. “When do they want the fudge?”

“By the end of the month. I know. It’s not far away. But it’s totally doable. Kathleen and Daniella are going to work more hours, and I’ve offered the students in the church hospitality program a job. I can’t believe this has happened—and it’s all because of you.” Jonathon rushed across the store and hugged me tight. “If Daniel hadn’t come here to find you, and he didn’t find my store, none of this would have happened.”

“I’m really happy for you. But what about your wedding? You still have a few things to organize.”

“We’ve booked all the main things. As long as we don’t make any changes, we’ll be okay.”

I hoped everything went according to plan. “If you need an extra pair of hands to help, just ask.”

“You’re even busier than I am,” Jonathon said. “I can’t wait to see your new collection.”

“I’m sending each necklace to Manhattan as soon as it’s finished, but I’ll call you before the next one leaves my studio.”

“That’d be great.” Jonathon checked his watch. “I’d better get back to the store. Kathleen will want a lunch break soon.”

The doorbell jingled and Jonathon looked over his shoulder. “Daniel! It’s good to see you. Thanks for everything your company has done for me.”

Daniel smiled as Jonathon gave him a big hug. “I should come to Sunrise Bay more

often.”

“You can come as often as you like,” Jonathon told him. “Make sure you visit my store before four o’clock. I’ve made a special box of fudge for you.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I did. I’ve got to go. Bye, Ben.”

“Bye.” As soon as Jonathon left, I flicked the “Open” sign to “Closed” and locked the door. When I turned to Daniel, he was grinning like a cat who’d found a tasty bowl of cream.

“I like your friends.”

I smiled. “So do I. A hug can change the way you look at the world.”

Daniel’s grin faded. “Has it changed the way you look at me?”

The huskiness in his voice was almost my unraveling. After Daniel left my cottage last night, I hadn’t done much of anything except think about him, about the way my life had changed since I’d met him. How I had changed.

I placed my hands on either side of his face and stared into his eyes. “Everything about the last month has changed the way I look at you. You’re a good man. You care about the people around you, and you want to make a difference.”

I rose on tiptoes and kissed him. “But the biggest change is what has happened to me. Before I met you, I was angry. Angry at how Dad was treated, angry at the way the media destroyed his life. I was hiding in Sunrise Bay, embarrassed to be Tony Harper’s son. Then you came along and made me confront all the things I feared.

Because of you, I've found the real me."

The wariness in Daniel's gaze was replaced with a trust so true that it brought tears to my eyes.

"I love you, Ben. I've always wanted to live a happy and courageous life with someone who loves me as much as I love him. You're that person. I can't imagine my life without you." He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight.

I relaxed against his chest and breathed in the essence of the man who'd become the most important person in my life. "What will I do when you leave?"

"Probably the same thing I'll be doing—thinking about you all the time and looking forward to our next weekend together." He kissed the top of my head. "But you might be seeing more of my family than you realize."

My eyebrows rose. "Is your brother coming to Sunrise Bay?"

"Not yet, but I wouldn't be surprised if you see him soon. Granddad's decided to stay in Sunrise Bay for another two weeks. The foreman of the tiny village project is going to Montana for a family emergency. Pastor Adam asked Granddad if he'd keep the project on track."

"That's a big commitment. Was Patrick happy to stay here?"

"More than happy. Since he sold his company he's felt lost. Working with Adam and the apprentices has given Granddad a new lease on life. I'm helping him move his suitcases into the foreman's home after lunch."

I knew how addictive living in a small town could become. "Do you think he'll want to go home afterward?"

“I’m not sure.”

A gentle tapping on the window made us both turn around.

I smiled. Patrick was holding a bag of Jonathon’s fudge in his hand and pointing to his watch. “I think your granddad wants to have lunch with us.”

Daniel sighed. “I think you’re right. Is that okay?”

“It’s more than okay. Who wouldn’t want two of the most handsome men in town sitting beside them?”

Daniel laughed. “Have I told you how much I love you?”

I unlocked the front door. “A few times, but I’m not complaining.”

sixty-four

DANIEL

The following weekend, I took a deep breath and knocked on a gray wooden door. Sweat trickled down my spine as I focused on what I wanted to say to Ben's father. For the last few weeks, I'd thought about calling Tony and apologizing for what had happened. After last weekend, I didn't have a choice.

When Ben told me his family had been homeless, I felt ashamed of what I'd done. Apologizing to Ben's father would never make up for all the hurt and humiliation my company had caused, but it was the only way I could try to make amends.

But how did you apologize to a man whose life you'd destroyed?

The door opened, and I stared into the face of the man who'd lost so much. For a split second, all I could do was stare into a pair of eyes that were almost identical to Ben's.

I cleared my throat and held out my hand. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Mr. Harper."

"It's been a long time." Tony shook my hand. "Come in. Did you have a good flight?"

"I did." I followed Tony into a spacious living room. Sunlight poured through the large picture windows overlooking the backyard. "You have a lovely home."

“Ben helped me find it last year. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to interrupt your weekend for too long.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose. “A cup of coffee won’t keep me away from much. Would you like cream and sugar?”

“Cream with no sugar would be great.”

“Have a seat. I’ll be back soon.”

While Tony made the coffee, I stood in front of one of the windows lost in thought. I’d never spoken to Ben’s dad, but I’d seen him at the trial. At the time, I’d been surprised at how calm he seemed. It wasn’t until near the end, when the media reports became vicious, that Tony had broken down.

No one, including the attorneys representing Emanuel, knew that Tony’s wife had cancer. Not having any family present at the trial had made Tony more of a target. What person, the media argued, would go through an entire trial without the support of at least one family member? The media had used Ben and his mom’s absence as a way of belittling Tony’s character. I could only imagine how that must have felt.

I picked up a framed picture of Ben and a woman who must have been his mom. With their arms wrapped around each other, it was easy to see how much alike they were. They had the same oval-shaped face, the same pixie nose, and similar mischievous smiles that would light a room.

“Ben was fifteen when we took that photo,” Tony said from the doorway. “Ruth wanted to do something special for Ben’s birthday, so we went to San Francisco for the weekend.”



The noose around my neck tightened. I took the cup Tony handed me and sat on the edge of a chair. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You’ve come a long way to see me.”

I nodded. “I want to apologize for what happened four years ago. The allegations against you should never have gone to trial.”

Tony placed his cup on a table. “I foolishly thought the case would be dismissed. I’d never met Emanuel Ricardo, let alone visited his studio. I was extremely lucky the jury saw through his lies.” Tony sent me a piercing stare. “Why are you apologizing now? As you said, it’s been four years since the trial.”

“I didn’t realize the impact it had on your life. Ben told me about being homeless and losing everything.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed. “It was a difficult time.”

That was the understatement of the year. My heart pounded. Nothing I’d ever done had been as hard as sitting here, trying to find a way to make up for everything Ben’s dad had lost.

“Ben also told me about your wife. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Tony glanced at the photo I’d been holding. “We had a wonderful life together. She was incredibly proud of Ben.”

Sweat beaded on my forehead. “Has Ben told you anything about us?”

“He said you’d visited Sunrise Bay a few times.”

There was no flicker of emotion, nothing that told me how much Ben had said. My heart plummeted. What if he hadn't told his dad he loved me? What if the most he'd said was that I'd rented Acorn Cottage?

With a trembling hand, I left my coffee beside Tony's. "While I was in Sunrise Bay, Ben and I became friends, and then I fell in love with him."

"That was quick."

I frowned. Of all the things Ben's dad could have said, that wasn't what I was expecting. "I've never loved anyone as much as I love Ben. I want to spend the rest of my life with him. But I also know how much you mean to him." Now the hard part, the words that could strip away everything I felt and wanted. "I'd never hurt Ben or stand between the two of you. If you have any concerns about my relationship with him, I'd appreciate hearing them now."

"What would happen if I said I don't want Ben to have anything to do with you?"

I thought I was going to be sick. "I'd walk away." Just saying the words brought tears to my eyes. "It's the last thing I want to do, but Ben would be miserable without you in his life."

"I have a feeling he'd be worse if you left."

A flicker of hope rose in my chest. "Are you telling me you're happy for Ben to be part of my life?"

"It depends on the type of relationship you have in mind."

I wiped my palms on the legs of my trousers. "I was going to ask..." I took a deep breath. "Mr. Harper, I'd like to ask your permission to marry Ben. I know this is

unexpected and you probably think I'm completely crazy. And I am. I'm crazily in love with him. I want to spend the rest of my life showing him how much he means to me."

Tony leaned forward. "Ben has already told me he loves you. I wouldn't stand in the way of him finding happiness, not when his mom and I had a wonderful life together." Tears filled his eyes. "Just promise me you'll always take care of him. That no matter what, you'll be his soft place to fall."

Relief swept through me, leaving me light-headed. "I can do that, Mr. Harper."

"And Daniel?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You can call me Tony. 'Mr. Harper' and 'sir' make me feel ancient."

"Thank you. I'll do my best to make Ben happy."

"You already have," Tony said as he shook my hand. "Welcome to our family."

"I still have to ask Ben."

Tony smiled. "I don't think he'll say no."

With all my heart, I hoped not.

sixty-five

BEN

I handed Paul a piece of maple fudge. “Does this taste all right to you?”

He nibbled one edge. “It’s fine. What are you worried about?”

“I thought it was a little sugary.”

“If you’re worried, check with Jonathon. But for me, it’s perfect.”

“Thanks. Just to be safe, I will ask.” For the last week, everyone had been pitching in to help Jonathon make the limited-edition boxes of fudge for Wilson Enterprises. I hadn’t been able to help as much as I wanted, but with my jewelry store closed on Sundays, I could finally lend a hand.

Throughout the week, Jonathon had divided his time between the commercial kitchen at the church and his own kitchen in his candy store. So far, even with five times the number of people helping, the quality had met all his expectations. And with more than eight hundred boxes already in Manhattan, they were heading toward the halfway mark.

As soon as I opened the doors into the retail part of the store, I knew no one was there. The lights were off and the only glow came from the streetlights outside. I walked back through the kitchen and into the storage area, but Jonathon wasn’t there, either. Hopefully, he hadn’t gone back to Pastor Adam’s church. It was after eight

o'clock at night and the church's commercial kitchen should have closed two hours ago.

"Has anyone seen Jonathon?"

Kathleen looked up from the stainless steel counter. "Someone called him about fifteen minutes ago. He had to collect something, but he should be back soon."

I made my way across to the tray of maple fudge. Instead of cutting it and hoping for the best, I'd leave it on the counter for Jonathon to inspect. In the meantime, I'd make another batch and hope it tasted better than the last.

Paul pushed a pumpkin-shaped cookie cutter into some spicy orange fudge. "What did you decide to do?"

"I'll leave it on the counter until Jonathon gets back."

"It might pay to place a note beside it. Everyone's working so hard that it'd be easy to pick it up by mistake."

"Good idea." I patted my pockets and found a pen.

"There's a pile of paper beside the telephone," Paul said helpfully.

"Thanks. I'll be back in a minute."

I quickly scribbled a message on the paper and tucked it under the edge of the tray. Before I made it back to the counter, my cell phone rang.

I looked at the caller display and smiled. "Hi, Daniel. How are you?"

“Tired, but glad to be in Sunrise Bay.”

I stopped walking. “You’re here?”

“I thought I’d surprise you.”

“It’s a wonderful surprise, but is everything okay? You weren’t supposed to be here for another week.”

“Everything’s fine. I missed you, that’s all.”

I smiled. “I’ve missed you, too. I’ll be home in about fifteen minutes.”

“Don’t rush. I know you’re busy making fudge.”

“No one will notice if I leave a few minutes early. Is there anything you need?”

“Just you.”

My smile widened. “That’s easy. I’ll see you soon.”

sixty-six

DANIEL

“Is he here?” Ben’s dad asked.

I peeked through the lace curtains. “I don’t think so. I haven’t seen his headlights.”

Tony checked his watch. “He shouldn’t be too far away. Do you want to make sure the fairy lights are working?”

“It’s too late. If we put them on now, he’ll see them from the road.” I took a deep breath. “Is everyone ready in Acorn Cottage?”

“As ready as they’ll ever be.”

“And the food and drink?”

“Jonathon’s got that sorted.” Tony studied my face. “It’ll be okay. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“He could say no.”

“That’s true.”

A beam of light cut across the room.

Tony leaped away from the window. “He’s here!”

My blood pressure plummeted. “I’m going to faint.”

“No, you’re not. I’ll be inside, ready to turn on the lights.” Tony sent me a worried frown. “If you feel like vomiting, do it in the garden.”

“Are they the best words of wisdom you’ve got?”

Tony chuckled. “Believe me. This is the easy part.”

I didn’t think anything could be as nerve-wracking as tonight. After ten days of planning, I was finally going to ask Ben to marry me. And if I made it outside without vomiting, I’d die a happy man.



sixty-seven

BEN

As I stepped out of my car, a cold gust of wind cut through me, making me shiver. I pulled my jacket tighter and hurried toward my cottage. But all thoughts of the cold vanished the moment I saw Daniel standing at the front door, a smile spreading across his face as I approached.

It had only been two weeks since I'd last seen him, but it felt like an eternity. My eyes couldn't help but trace the lines of his tailored trousers and jacket. "Have I told you how handsome you look in a suit?"

He grinned, pulling me into his arms. "I wore it especially for you." His lips found mine, and he kissed me until I was breathless. When I snuggled into his chest, he chuckled, a sound that warmed me more than any jacket could. "I thought you'd ask if I'd forgotten to pack my jeans."

"You don't forget much," I teased, feeling a familiar comfort wash over me.

"Not usually," he said, his tone shifting slightly. "Come with me." He took my hand and led me around the corner of the house.

Another gust of wind tore across the yard, and I pulled my jacket even closer. "Isn't it too cold to be going for a walk?"

"We're not going far," he promised.

“That’s what you said last time we went for a hike,” I said with a laugh, glancing around the backyard. The garden would need some attention soon, but if we didn’t go inside, we’d both end up with a nasty cold.

“Okay, Daniel, where are we going, and why aren’t you busy negotiating that big contract you told me about?”

He looked at me with a hint of mischief in his eyes. “We’re walking to the middle of the backyard. And I have staff who can handle the negotiations.”

I reached up and placed a hand on his forehead, feigning concern. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Not at the moment, but hopefully I will be in the next few minutes. Close your eyes, Ben.”

“Are you going to show me the constellations?” I asked, a bit puzzled by his sudden seriousness.

“Not tonight. The only one I remember is Taurus, and I doubt we’d see it with all these clouds. Just close your eyes.”

Reluctantly, I closed them. “You say the strangest things sometimes.”

“It’ll make sense soon,” he reassured me.

I stood there, eyes closed, feeling him move beside me, wondering what on earth he was up to. “What’s happening?”

“Turn away from the cottage,” he instructed. “You can open your eyes now, but don’t look over your shoulder.”

I couldn't help but pretend to turn around, just to tease him a little.

"Ben," he growled playfully.

"Okay, okay," I laughed. "I promise to behave." As I turned toward him, a flash of light illuminated the backyard. The steady glow allowed me to see Daniel's face clearly, but I still had no idea what he was up to. "Can you please show me why you brought me out here before we freeze?"

Daniel didn't say a word. Instead, he lowered himself onto one knee.

My heart skipped a beat. "What are you?—"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, rectangular jewelry case.

"I don't understand," I whispered, feeling a mix of confusion and anticipation.

He cleared his throat, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that took my breath away. "I love you, Ben. My life wouldn't be the same without you. When you smile, the whole world seems brighter. When I'm with you, the problems that weigh on my mind seem to fade away, and the dreams I've kept hidden suddenly feel possible. Benjamin Harper, will you marry me?"

For a moment, I was stunned into silence. The words I wanted to say caught in my throat, and all I could do was stare at him.

Daniel's face paled, his usual confidence wavering. "That's not a no, is it?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

I quickly took his hands and pulled him to his feet. "No, it's not a no."

"Does that mean it's a yes?" he asked, his voice tinged with hope.

I reached up, cupping the side of his face, and nodded, my heart swelling with love. “Yes, Daniel. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. My answer is a great big yes.”

Tears glistened in Daniel’s eyes as he let out a breath he must have been holding. “I didn’t buy a ring because I want you to choose something you love. But what’s in this box is special.” He held it out to me with trembling hands.

Carefully, I opened the lid. Inside was the gold, pearl, and diamond necklace I’d made for The Welcome Center’s auction. My mouth dropped open. “This... this is the necklace I made. I thought you bought it for the prestige store.”

Daniel smiled. “I did, but not for the store. I bought it for you.”

My breath caught as I looked at him. “But why? It was meant to raise money for The Welcome Center.”

“And it did,” he said gently. “But I bought it because it represents so much more. When you created this piece, you poured your heart into it. You were thinking of others, of giving back to the community, and that’s what I love most about you. This necklace is a symbol of everything that makes you who you are—your kindness, your generosity, your incredible talent. I couldn’t let it go to just anyone. It belongs with you.”

Tears welled in my eyes as I stared at the necklace, and then back at Daniel. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Daniel whispered, pulling me close. “Put it somewhere safe and know that it’s a reminder of how much you mean to me.”

I nodded, too emotional to speak. He kissed me softly, and when we pulled apart, he gestured toward the cottage. “Do you want to see the lights?”

I nodded and turned around. “Oh, my goodness. That’s incredible.” The back of my cottage was covered in strands of white fairy lights, twinkling like stars. In the middle of the roof were two glowing Christmas trees.

“I couldn’t find a bride and groom, so I bought the trees,” Daniel said, his voice full of warmth.

“They’re perfect.” I couldn’t take my eyes off the display. “It must have taken hours to set all this up. When did you do it?”

“I flew into Boulder yesterday and stayed with Pastor Adam last night. After you left for work, we started decorating the cottage. But we had help.” Daniel raised his hand and gently turned me around.

To my surprise, a crowd of people emerged from Acorn Cottage. But they weren’t strangers—they were my friends. Pastor Adam, Liam, Alex and Dylan, and Shane and Jonathon. My breath caught in my throat when I saw Riley and Eric among them. “Riley! I thought you were overseas?”

“He got back last night,” Daniel explained. “Paul and everyone who’s still at the candy store will be here soon.”

Patrick came out last, a wide grin on his face.

I wiped at the tears streaming down my face. “I can’t believe everyone helped with this.”

“They all love you, Ben. But there’s someone else who wanted to be here.” Daniel gently turned me toward Honeysuckle Cottage.

My eyes widened when I saw a familiar figure walking toward me. “Dad!” I ran toward my father and threw my arms around him, holding on tight. “It’s so good to

see you.”

“It’s wonderful to see you too, Ben. But watch your step—you don’t want to hurt your little buddy.”

I frowned, confused. “What are you talking about?”

My dad pointed behind me, and I turned to see Daniel crouching down to pick up a small, black-and-white puppy. Big brown eyes stared up at me, melting my heart instantly. “Ben, meet Louis. He’s a four-month-old Cavoodle.”

I reached out, gently stroking his soft fur. “He’s adorable.”

“Louis and I will be going on lots of walks around the lake. Before you know it, he’ll be chasing the ducks.”

“But what about your job in Manhattan?” I asked, still trying to process everything.

Daniel shook his head, smiling. “Not anymore. I’ve decided to keep my shares but leave the running of the company to the chief financial officer. Pastor Adam offered me a job at the church, and I’ve accepted.”

Tears filled my eyes again. “Are you sure? I know you love your work?—”

Daniel leaned in and kissed me, cutting off my words. “I love you more. And with your granddad working permanently on the tiny homes, you’ll have to get used to both of us being around every day.”

“That will be the easiest thing in the world to do.” I turned to Patrick, who was beaming at us. “Did you know about this?”

“Most of it,” he admitted with a grin. “But this little fellow is a surprise.” He bent

down to scratch Louis under the chin. “If you ever need someone to look after your puppy, I’ll take him to the steamboat museum with me. Louis can be my little shadow.”

As our friends gathered around to congratulate us, I leaned into Daniel’s chest, sighing contentedly. There was nothing sweeter in life than being surrounded by the people you love. And tonight, as I began this new chapter with Daniel, it felt like the most magical moment of all.

Thank you for reading Summer Nights!