

SOPHIE BARTOW

*From Darkness
Into Love*



A SWAN HARBOR STORY

from darkness into love

A Swan Harbor Story

sophie bartow



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My street team;
The Wall-Giennie Wicks-Delaney,
Connector Inspector- Linda Hagerty
Reactor Inspector- Jami Fenton
Plot Crew – Maggie Grimes
Sign Crew- Kate Semenyuk

My family, who allow me to spend so much of my time in Swan Harbor.

Inspiration began,
when a lost girl fell for a lost boy

The Seasons of Love Books

From Darkness into Love

[The Memory of Love](#)

Book One of the Mountain View Lodge Trilogy

[The Innocence of Love](#)

Book Two of The Mountain View Lodge Trilogy

[The Forgiveness of Love](#)

Book Three of The Mountain View Lodge Trilogy


[The Power of Love](#) - preorder 9/29/22

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The book was updated and new content added April, 2022.

Cover Design by Kate Semenyuk

 [Created with Vellum](#)

some residents of swan harbor

Jessica Prince: She is a trained social worker and returns to town after two years away. Jessie is the sister to Dylan. Her parents and brother, James, were killed when she was fourteen.

Cameron Hunter: He is an architect with HCI. Cam has been in love with Jessie for years.

Mary Hunter: A Psychiatrist at Swan Harbor General Hospital. Married to **Clint Hunter** and mother to sons, **Cameron** and **Grayson**.

Clint Hunter: Owner of Hunter Construction, (HCI). Married to **Mary Hunter** and father to **Grayson** and **Cameron**.

Grayson Hunter: Engineer at Hunter Construction. His story is told in The Memory of Love. His story is told in [The Memory of Love](#).

Dylan Prince: He is a Deputy for the Swan Harbor Sheriff's Department Sheriff and married to **Molly Barnes Prince**. Dylan is the brother of **Jessie**. Their story is told in [The Innocence of Love](#)

Molly Barnes Prince: She teaches first grade at Swan Harbor Elementary School and is married to **Dylan Prince**.

Sadie Martin: She is an accountant and has been best friends with Jessie since they were in kindergarten. She lives and works in Augusta, Maine. But is in town for the summer.

Catherine Gold: She was Jessie's ice skating coach in the early years. Catherine also dated Dylan before he married Molly. She currently works at Swan Harbor General Hospital.

Eden Fowler: She has just finished her studies at Swan Harbor University and is dating Cameron. Eden is the daughter of Aaron, the Chief of Police. Her story is told in [The Forgiveness of Love](#).

Hayden Patterson: He came to live with Danny and Sally when he was eleven and his parents were killed. He just graduated from Swan Harbor High School.

Sally Miller Patterson: Owner of Sally's Diner, the place to see and be

seen in Swan Harbor. Sally is married to **Daniel Patterson** and mother to **Christian** and **Tracey**. Her story is told in [Welcome to Swan Harbor](#).

Danny Patterson: Married to Sally and the head of neurology at Swan Harbor General Hospital. He's the father to **Christian** and **Tracey**.

Welcome to Swan Harbor



A Haven of Hope for Lost Hearts

one



*QUICK NOTE: If you enjoy *From Darkness into Love*, be sure to check out my offer for more Jessie and Cameron at the end.*

With that, enjoy!



The Lighthouse Inn

June 4

7:00 p.m.

JESSIE'S JAW hurt from gritting her teeth to keep from making a sound. One that would let Cam know he still mattered.

Since returning home, she'd fought not to show what she was feeling. But then, she hadn't been sitting next to him on a raised platform in front of the town. However, for the past two hours every time he moved, his leg bumped

against hers, and electricity zipped from the point of impact. It brought everything full circle – something she wasn't sure she was ready to face.

"Jessie?" Cam's husky voice broke into her thoughts. "Refill?"

"Sure." That the word came out sounding like a squeak was something she chose to ignore. "Thank you."

Cam grinned, and her gaze was immediately drawn to his dimples, still so deep they created craters in his lean cheeks, "I'll be right back."

As soon as he was gone, Jessie grabbed the edge of the table. With her head spinning from Cam's cologne, and her hands shaking, she was a mess, and all she wanted to do was sink into the floor. Except that wasn't appropriate behavior for a bridesmaid.

Ryan, the groom, laid his hand on hers, "Are you okay?"

"I need some air."

"Go," he nodded toward the glass doors. "I'll cover for you."

Jessie stepped off the elevated stage, wound around a few tables and slipped out an open door. The bouquets of pink, white, yellow, and purple flowers still decorated the ceremony area, but her focus was on the cliff several yards beyond. She dropped her shoes on a chair and, bypassing the arch where Cassie and Ryan were pronounced husband and wife, she could finally breathe.

The wind whipped her long hair around her head and molded the periwinkle dress to her body. With the view spread out below, she could easily imagine living in another time. One where she might have been a Princess looking down upon her charges as they readied for battle.

A fanciful thought, yes. But somehow the analogy fit. It hadn't been easy to return home after two years away. However, it had been the *right* thing to do for Cassie, one of her best friends. Then, once committed, there'd been no running, especially when their other friend, Sadie, got involved. Since returning, Jessie had been forced to admit how much she'd missed them – and Swan Harbor. More even than she'd realized.

Laughter spilled from the ballroom and without even turning, she could feel his eyes. Cameron Hunter was six feet, two inches with shaggy blond hair, deep dimples, and eyes that undid her. Whether they sparkled with happiness or were dark green with desire, they'd always made her feel as if he could see inside her soul.

Cam had been a part of her life forever, seeing her at her worst and at her best. When her life had been torn apart, he'd given her strength, and helped chase the darkness away. She loved him, and at one time, he'd loved her. However, when she'd arrived in town, the sight of him locked in an embrace with another woman had left her reeling.

Her brother, Dylan, had shared the woman's identity. Eden Fowler was the only daughter of the Chief of Police, and several years her junior. But the scene of another woman in Cameron's arms forced her to be honest with herself. Something she'd been loath to do for years.

Cam had always been the one constant in her life, and she hadn't expected that to change. Somehow, the fantasy image of him meeting her at the town line had stuck inside her head. That their relationship had remained stagnant ... waiting for her to return.

However, the sight of him with another woman made her realize, it was time to *put up or shut up*. Except, that meant revealing why she'd stayed away for so long. Could she do that? After all this time, could she explain there'd been a reason why she'd left Swan Harbor?

She'd tried to ignore her feelings, when they'd been thrown together as members of the wedding party. A get-together at the arcade, a bonfire on the beach, other moments meant to celebrate Cassie and Ryan's upcoming nuptials. After every occasion, though, Jessie had taken refuge from her feelings of loss and escaped to Sonny's. Only on the ice had she been able to outrun the demons that never seemed to be far away.

Had it worked?

Maybe ... a little.

Except, while Cassie and Ryan had recited their vows, her eyes had been drawn to Cam's. When she'd caught him looking back, her heart had stuttered and some of those empty places began to fill.

Then, he'd turned away, and the moment had been broken. His attention had been pulled to Eden, which had caused an ache deep inside, she'd tried to ignore.

Eden was pretty and kind and devoted to Cameron. Everything he deserved, but

Since then, the words, *it should be me*, were on repeat inside her head. They had her wondering if she'd made a mistake in running, instead of staying to fight. It had her asking, if it was too late for the Princess to win the battle for her own happily ever after?

"Jessie?" Cam placed his tuxedo jacket around her shoulders. "Readying for war?"

She cut a side-eyed look at him and found his expression curious. It was watchful – almost as if he was trying to figure something out.

"Why would you say that?"

Cam shrugged, "I don't know. You just looked so ..."

"No war," Jessie replied. Then silently added, *yet*. Until she'd made up her

mind, she wanted to keep her options open.

“Well, that’s good,” Cam murmured. “I’d hate to see Swan Harbor without any of our favorite hangouts.”

Our hangouts?

Her breath caught at the implication, but she wasn’t brave enough to put the question out there. Instead, she took a step back to ask, “Did you need something?”

Cam was quiet for a second, and a part of her wished for him to say, ‘I missed you.’ She could hear the words so clearly, her heart picked up speed, and her hands tightened on the edges of his coat, still around her shoulders.

“It’s almost time for the dances.” His quiet reply and the rapid beating in her chest, had her wondering if she was ready for what came next.

“Alright.”

Jessie took one last fortifying breath before retrieving her shoes and returning inside. That Cam and she were being watched was a given, except she couldn’t make herself look around. Instead, her entire focus was on the bride and groom. The way they were looking at each other had tears rushing to her eyes.

“You ready?”

Cam took her hand, pulled her close and their movements immediately meshed. “There,” he murmured. “That’s not so bad, is it?”

What she’d both feared and desired happened, as the pieces she’d been searching for clicked into place. With him – she was home. Ignoring how she felt hadn’t worked. The question was, what was she going to do about it?

That answer wasn’t one that came easy, as she didn’t know. Because, what if, she put herself out there, and he rejected her. If that happened, she wasn’t sure how she’d feel. It made her nervous and want to take a step back ... away from his heat.

She kept trying to tell herself, this was Cam. Why was she tongue-tied? But the pep talks didn’t seem to do any good, and her heart rate wasn’t slowing down.

“You’re still light on your feet,” Jessie quipped. “I won’t have to worry about my toes.”

“No, Jess,” he whispered against her temple. “You don’t need to worry about your toes.”

His voice was low and dangerous. The unspoken message had her insides waking, wondering what was next. There was so much she wanted to say, but the subtle tightening of his palm on her lower back had her dropping her head against his shoulder. They would talk, she just wasn’t sure when the opportunity would arrive.

“Oh, Princess,” Cam sighed, almost as if it was an afterthought.

Jessie held her breath, waiting ... hoping, he would say more. However, when he didn't seem to know what else to say, she couldn't help but think maybe, for the first time in a long time, they were on the same page.



THE SECOND THE words were out, Cam wanted to call them back. Since Jessie had arrived in Swan Harbor, he'd made a point of weighing every word and watching his actions. He'd not wanted to give her any indication that he wasn't happy with his life. And he felt he'd succeeded ... mostly.

Until, he'd listened to the words spoken during the ceremony. Since then all the barriers he'd built around his emotions began to crumble. Plans and dreams he'd thought were behind him kept wanting to resurrect. He'd been constantly bombarded by the too intimate setting. And the longer he stayed, the harder it was for his heart to remain safe, away from the pain and loss he'd strived to forget.

He needed to step back and regain his equilibrium. Except when the music and dance partners changed, and he was looking down into the curious face of the bride, he had to wonder if his carefully constructed facade could be saved.

“You look beautiful today, Cassie,” Cam complimented, attempting to thwart the questions he was sure she was dying to ask.

“Thank you.” Cassie's knowing eyes met his. “But that won't work, you know?”

“No?” he grinned. “I thought women always enjoyed a compliment ... or two.”

She glanced around his shoulder at where he knew Jessie was dancing with her new husband, “When are you going to tell her how you feel?”

“Eden?” Cam let it hang in the air several seconds. “She knows how I feel.”

“Does she?” Cassie surprised him by asking. “Do you love her?”

“I lo—” he began, but couldn't make himself complete the word and settled on, “I care about her ... a lot.”

“Be careful, Cameron,” Cassie warned. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“And you don't think I know anything about heartbreak?” he snapped, not caring that he was being unfair.

“I know Jessie hurt you,” Cassie replied softly. “But isn't love worth fighting for?”

The question was barely out of her mouth before her new husband whisked

her away. It left Cam standing in the middle of the dance floor with much on his mind. Which had him heading away from Eden and toward the bar.

“Whiskey, neat,” he requested once he had the bartender’s attention.

While he waited for his drink, his gaze was drawn back to the dance floor. Jessie was laughing, and the words ‘*the heart wants what the heart wants*’ echoed inside his head. *Damn!* The ache in the center of his chest wasn’t what he’d hoped to feel.

Cam reached for his drink and tossed back the entire glass. The liquid burned when it hit the back of his throat. But it was a feeling he relished – as he needed something to distract from his inner turmoil.

“You’re drinking?” Eden’s accusatory tone set his teeth on edge. “You know I don’t like the taste of that stuff.”

“I didn’t ask you,” Cam barked, tearing his eyes away from the dance floor to the petite blonde. Her smile immediately fell, which made him feel like a heel. “I’m sorry. Dance?”

Eden’s face lit up, but instead of pleased he made her smile, he felt unsettled. When he led her onto the dance floor, the feeling didn’t disappear. It persisted, pushing him to give single word responses to her questions, until she gave up and leaned her head against his chest.

Cam tried to stay focused on the woman in his arms. But the memory of dancing with Jessie was still too fresh in his mind. He’d been told he had a ‘type’ by more than one of his friends. And except for height, he could see the similarities between the two women. Both were beautiful, with delicate features, strawberry blonde hair, and blue eyes. Eden’s were like the sky. However, it was Jessie’s turquoise ones that lived in his mind. They would twinkle one minute and darken the next, her moods and emotions on full display.

The heart wanted what the heart wanted was on repeat inside his head. But could he put his fear aside and risk everything? Was he ready for that emotional roller coaster again? Once the answer was out there, his life would no longer be under his control. Could he trust that this time, what he wanted, and what he got were the same things?



The Lighthouse Inn

June 4

10:00 p.m.

HOURS LATER, Jessie was tired of hearing, “I thought you and Cam would be

married by now,” and was happy to follow her friends into the bride’s dressing room. She knew she was in trouble when they were standing in front of a mirror and Cassie pinned her with a pointed stare, “How are you holding up?”

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” Jessie pushed Cassie’s hands aside to help with the wedding dress laces and sought to change the subject, “Did I tell you how beautiful you looked?”

“Oh, Jessie.” Sadie’s eyes met hers in the mirror. “Don’t you think it’s time to talk?”

“Talk about what?” Jessie looked from one to the other, but from the looks on their faces, she realized her running days were over.

“Well, duh,” Sadie arched one dark brow. “Let’s see ... Cam?”

“Cam,” Jessie sighed. “There’s not much to say. He has a new girlfriend, and they appear to be happy.”

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Cassie intoned, disappearing behind a screen.

“Eden seems very ... sweet,” Jessie hastened to defend the younger girl. “It’s just that ...”

“You want him for yourself,” Sadie finished quietly.

“Well, yeah,” Jessie agreed. “But, if he’s happy, then aren’t I supposed to be happy for him?”

“Cam’s being,” Cassie reappeared with her wedding dress over her arm, “safe. He doesn’t love her.”

“You asked?” Jessie exclaimed.

Cassie tossed her an impish grin, “I asked.”

“Wait, really?” Jessie fired back.

“Yes, really,” Cassie hummed. “Cam started to lie ...”

“But?” Jessie prodded.

Well,” Cassie went on. “He did admit he cared for the girl.”

“But that’s not love,” Sadie jumped in. “Which means you still have a chance. Isn’t he worth fighting for?”

Was he? Jessie wrapped her arms around her stomach and wandered to the window. Her thoughts went back to how she’d felt during the ceremony when the vows were read aloud. Of how every time Cam was near, her heart felt whole. And more importantly, of how when she’d been in his arms on the dance floor, she’d realized he was her home. Was she ready for that battle?

“But Eden’s...” she tried once more to walk away.

“Not you,” Sadie murmured.

“Well, of course she’s not me,” Jessie sighed.

“But since he couldn’t have you,” Cassie pointed out. “He picked someone

who resembled you.”

“No,” Jessie muttered.

“Come on,” Sadie argued. “Can’t you see it?”

Jessie still wasn’t ready to completely give in and threw out another comment. “Her hair’s blonder.”

Cassie rolled her eyes.

“Eden’s short,” Jessie continued.

“She’s also young,” Sadie added.

“Eden’s safe,” Cassie circled back to where she’d started. “He’s waiting for you.”

“Ha,” Jessie scoffed. “I’m not convinced he’s pining for me as much as you seem to think.”

“Well,” Cassie’s dark eyes twinkled with mischief. “When you catch my bouquet, let’s see how long he’ll be able to stay away.”

“Me?” Jessie laughed. “What about Sadie? She’s still single.”

“Oh, I know that.” Cassie exchanged conspiratorial looks with Sadie. “But she’s waiting for Gray to come to his senses and figures ...”

“If I’m with Cam,” Jessie chuckled at their devious minds. “I can put in a good word.”

“Exactly,” Sadie giggled. “Those Hunter men just need a little push.”

Jessie blinked several times to clear her vision, “I missed you guys,” she whispered. “Thanks for being my friends.”

“Hey,” Cassie sniffed. “Don’t make me cry and ruin my make-up.”

“Sorry,” Jessie’s grin was sheepish. “It’s been nice to be home.”

“We’re glad you’re home too,” Sadie and Cassie mumbled, wrapping her in a group hug.

“Now, remember,” Cassie reminded her. “I’m aiming for you.”

“And if someone gets in the way,” Sadie giggled, “knock them over.”

“Got it.”

It was a plan, Jessie thought. Except could she go through with it? Could she really put her heart out there one more time?



CAM HAD a hard time looking away, when Cassie, Jessie and Sadie returned to the room. Each woman was striking on her own, but there was something about the three together that reminded him of *Charlie’s Angels*. One was dark, one brunette and one light. They were strong, independent women whose bond had been forged years ago. Hurt one, you hurt them all, he had learned a time or two

in the past.

“Have you spoken to Jessie?” Ben, his friend, and the other groomsman asked as soon as Eden left for the bouquet toss.

“We danced,” Cam responded defensively, “and spoke briefly.”

“Chicken,” Ben declared.

Cam sighed. He knew his friend was right. But

“I need to,” he admitted. “I’m just not sure what to say.”

“You tell her she broke your heart.” Ben hesitated a beat, then pinned him with his icy courtroom stare. “You tell her you forgive her and want her back.”

“I’m dating Eden.”

“Dating,” Ben repeated quietly. “What if Eden catches the bouquet?”

“What about it?” Cam shrugged. “That won’t change anything.”

“Won’t it?” Ben came back. “You know Eden’s going to want more.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Eden graduated from college and is ready to start her career,” Ben reminded him. “Isn’t marriage the next step.”

“So?”

“So, what are you going to say to her then?”

Before Cam could answer, a squeal had him looking over his shoulder to see Eden push Jessie aside to grab the bouquet.

“Oh, shi ...” he barely got out before Eden launched her body into his arms and locked their lips together.

It took several seconds to regain his wits and create a little distance between them, “Whoa there, Sugar,” Cam drawled, his standard nickname tripping off his tongue. “Where’s the fire?”

Eden mumbled something, but his attention had drifted across the room to where Jessie stood, watching him. He gave her what he hoped was a ‘*we need to talk*’ look, but before he could move, she ran from the room. His surprised eyes sought Sadie’s but when she sent him an accusatory look, all he could think about was it was time to fix things.

“Eden, I,” he began, giving Ben a ‘*help-me-out*’ expression.

“What Cam’s trying to say,” Ben turned his blue-eyed charm on Eden, “is I’m taking you home tonight, while he takes care of a few things.”

Eden’s innocent expression should have left him feeling guilty. “What’s going on?”

“I ...” Cam searched for how to explain something he wasn’t sure how to answer.

Ben sent him a ‘*you so owe me*’ look, and uttered, “Cam needs to take care of something for Ryan,” as if he’d been rehearsing the words for hours instead of

seconds.

“Oh, okay.”

Eden’s smile dimmed and for a split-second, Cam felt guilty. Then, just as they had all night, the words ‘*the heart wants what the heart wants*’ floated through his mind. They reminded him of what was important. With little more than a buzz on her cheek, he went after what he wanted – a second chance.

As he’d expected, he found Jessie on the ice at Sonny’s. Illuminated by a single light, she skated to music only she could hear. Her movements weren’t as polished as when she had practiced daily. But as she transitioned from a split jump to an axel and then moved from a salchow to a sit spin, he realized she was lost in her memories.

Cam watched her for another minute. When he couldn’t stay away any longer, he dropped onto an old bench and slipped into his skates. He hadn’t worn them since the last time he’d been on the ice with Jessie. It hurt too much, making him think about what could have been. Instead, he’d tried to bury those feelings, living only in the what was and choosing safe company.

And, until four days ago, he’d been successful. Then, Jessie had walked into Randy’s, with Sadie on one side and Cassie on the other. She’d laughed and talked with her friends as if she’d never left.

Each laugh had been like a stab to his heart. Every word had caused a sick feeling in his gut. His solution hadn’t been to confront. Instead, he’d paid more attention to Eden. And while that had temporarily numbed his pain, the look on Jessie’s face had made him miserable.

There was a large part of him that hoped she’d finally come home ... to stay ... and to him. That she was ready to give him the chance he’d been waiting for since she was fourteen. Except, as had happened so often in the past, before he’d been able to talk to her, she’d disappeared. And, just like always, he’d followed, finding her on the ice at Sonny’s.

Those times, though, he’d stayed on the outside, looking in. Even when he’d placed his beat-up old skates in his trunk, he’d planned nothing specific.

Tonight felt different. It had taken watching two of his best friends pledge their lives to each other to realize safe wasn’t working. Cam wasn’t sure where things would go. He wasn’t sure how he’d be accepted. What he did know, was he had to try. As for everything else, there was always hope.

With that in mind, he stepped onto the ice. For, wherever Jessie was, he would find her.

two

Eleven Years Ago

Jessie's Home

December 27

2:00 p.m.

MOST FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRLS spent their Christmas break hanging with friends, talking on the phone, and dreaming about boys. Except Jessie no longer felt like a normal teenager. Her parents and brother, James, had been killed in a fiery car crash the previous February. Since then, nothing had been the same.

The holidays had been spent with the Hunters, their surrogate family. And while they had tried to create a 'normal' Christmas, Jessie had felt out of step – and not like celebrating. She'd been constantly bombarded by memories, both good and bad. Plus, the dreams she'd thought were behind her, had returned.

They followed her everywhere, unsettling her in many ways.

You're our little princess, her mother and father teased.

You're behaving like a princess, her big brothers cried when she'd followed them around.

Stop acting like you're a princess, kids at school would yell when she wanted her way.

Thanks to help from her grief counselor, she didn't dream often. However, if she was lonely, or it had been a highly emotional occasion, they returned. Christmas had been one of those times.

The dreams always began with a mashup of happy times. Inevitably, though, they morphed into those final moments with her parents.

JESSIE STOOD on the porch dressed in old sweats, while her mother gave her last minute instructions. The longer she stood there, the more the wind whipped through her thin clothing, causing a chill to race up her spine.

"Hurry, Ruth," her father honked the car horn. "We'll be late picking up James."

Her mother rolled her eyes, “Men,” she retorted. “I’d better go. Remember, we’ll be home late.”

“Okay, Mom,” Jessie shivered, impatient to get inside where it was warm. “Have a good trip.”

As her father backed the car out of the driveway, he rolled down his window, “We love you, Princess.”

JESSIE SLOWLY FOUGHT her way up through the grief, the memory of just waving at her parents and running inside weighing heavy on her mind. It was the same as every other time she had the dream. She was angry she hadn’t taken the few seconds to return the words.

When the dream appeared, though, it set the tone for the rest of the day. It brought the darkness, that only stayed away when she skated. She’d tried to fight it. Tried to get involved in listening to the new music she’d gotten for Christmas. And while it had helped for a short time, eventually; the darkness returned. Finally, she’d given up, grabbed her skates, and made her way to the frozen pond.

The darkness had chased her around the ice for longer than she cared to admit. Then, little by little, it had faded, becoming lighter and lighter, until finally relinquishing its hold. Once that happened, her skating became less hectic, – freer - allowing her to slow down and practice different moves.

Stopping, though, that wasn’t an option. Because when she did, there was always the possibility the darkness would return. Besides, if she went inside, there would be questions. Ones she got tired of answering.

Jessie could feel Dylan watching her. She glanced toward the house to see that she’d been right. Her brother had come outside and was standing on the porch ... waiting for her, just in case. While she appreciated he was there for her, it was easier when she was alone. Then she didn’t have to behave like things were fine. On the ice – she could follow her heart. Could listen to the feeling inside and just skate. Sometimes fast, other times slow, but always with no expectations. On the ice, she could just be



Jessie’s Home

December 27

4:00 p.m.

CAM CLIMBED into his old pick-up truck and started the drive toward the Prince

home. Their families had been friends long before he'd been born. Which meant, for most of his life, he'd grown up thinking of Jessie, two years younger, as just Jessie.

However, the summer she'd turned fourteen, that had changed, when he'd seen her in a bikini top. The tom-boy he'd always known had been replaced by a female. One whose legs seemed to go on forever, and who filled out her bikini, in all the right places. Suddenly, Jessie was the girl, who starred in his dreams. This time, though, in a much different capacity.

The summer and fall before her parents' death, he'd worked to win her heart. But no matter how much he flirted; she didn't see him as anything more than a friend. He was the boy she came to when she wanted to complain about school, her brothers, her friends, or even other boys. And once in the friend zone, he didn't know how to get out.

When her parents and brother had been killed, Jessie had stayed with his family for a few months. He'd gotten close to her, just not in the way he'd wanted ... nor expected. There had been nights when he'd been the one to hear her crying. Those were the times; he'd offered his shoulder for her to lean on. She trusted him – and there was no way, he'd ever violate that trust.

It was during one of those nights, he'd decided, Jessie needed to be the one to choose what capacity he would hold in her life. If they were destined to just be friends, he'd not push, but would honor her wishes. Since then, he'd stuck to his plan. He was there if she needed him ... whenever she needed him.

Cam hadn't seen her since Christmas Day. His parents had worked to make it a happy time. Yet, no matter how much they'd tried, there was still a feeling of loss in the air. There'd been no arguments over sports from their fathers, no pie competitions between their mother's, and for the first time in forever, no annual hockey game. The day had been quiet ... too quiet.

Finally, Jessie and Dylan had gone home, leaving the Hunter family alone. The atmosphere hadn't changed after they'd left, though. His parents had gone one way, his brother another, and he'd watched some mindless movie.

It had taken hearing how she'd been spending her days for him to figure out what to do. Especially with the knowledge Dylan was worried about her. They might only be friends, but she was still his princess. Which meant, whether she liked it or not, when she hurt – he hurt.

It hadn't been a tough choice to volunteer to spend time with her. He loved watching her move, both on the ice and off. Jessie was always graceful, but when she was skating, her beauty took his breath away. The way she glided across the ice mesmerized him, reminding him of a swan in motion. She was a joy to watch, and if they didn't talk much ... he was okay with that. As long as

she was happy, so was he.

When he climbed from his truck, Dylan was standing on the porch. Cam thought about stopping to talk. In the end, though, his attention was completely focused on Jessie. He grabbed his skates and traipsed through the snow toward the frozen pond.

Jessie slowed slightly, her eyes never leaving his. The look on her face said she wasn't upset he'd driven over. For that, he was grateful.

"Hey, Princess," Cam called teasingly. "May I join you?"

Jessie tilted her head one way, and then another, and he had to wonder what she was thinking. "Tired of reading?" she finally asked.

"Just couldn't concentrate," Cam opted for.

Her look was knowing, but she didn't push the issue. Instead, she inclined her head in that regal way of hers and nodded toward his skates. "Think you can keep up?"

"I guess we'll see, won't we?" He hesitated a beat. "If you'll allow me to skate, that is."

She rolled her eyes. "Put your skates on Hunter. And catch me if you can."

By the time Cam had pulled on his skates and stepped onto the ice, Jessie had zipped past him several times. He waited for her to get close, and then tossed a jaunty, "Race you!" over his shoulder before upping the pace. If she wanted speed, he'd give it to her.

With longer legs, he thought he had a distinct edge. However, his princess was hot on his heels, seemingly determined to overtake him. Yet, Jessie's attention was more on what was going on inside of her, as opposed to what was happening around them. Time passed, and her focus never wavered.

Even when his brother, Gray, arrived to pick up Dylan, she didn't notice. She had a mission and wasn't willing to be sidetracked. Which was okay with him. It gave him time to observe and be ready for what came next.

The first hour flew by, and he was okay. Halfway through the second hour, he was hanging in there. However, when the third hour rolled around, he'd nearly fallen more than once, and with the temperature lowering, it was getting damn cold.

Just a little longer, Cam thought, as he mindlessly skated around the frozen pond. He'd reached a point where only a part of him was focused on her. The other half was working to maintain his dignity on the unfamiliar ice. Especially since Jessie was still skating as if the hounds of hell were on her tail, which had him sticking close. If she fell, he wanted to be there to catch her.

Their conversation was minimal, only a word here or there, but finally her expression softened, and she grinned at him. Cam's shoulders relaxed, as he let

go of the breath he'd been holding. Somehow, it felt like a new beginning.

Another half hour and the combination of his legs turning to jelly and the lengthening shadows had him searching for a reprieve. The next time around, he pushed in front of her, and turned to skate backwards. "Want to rest?"

Jessie's eyes twinkled, telling him she was onto him. "What's the matter, Hunter? You a wuss?" She flipped her long hair over her shoulder and took off. "If you can catch me, we can rest."

The laughter in her voice had his heart doing several mini flips. "Not a problem, Princess."

Cam dug into his waning energy and skated past Jessie. He set up and executed a perfect hockey stop, throwing snow up around them.

She rolled her eyes, "Not bad."

"Not bad?" Cam huffed. "Did you see how high that snow flew?"

"I said it wasn't bad," Jessie grinned. "But let me show you how it's done." She gently patted him on the cheek, as she skated past.

Her hockey stop, as expected, was done with perfection. However, Cam wasn't ready to admit defeat. He winked as he sped by, and the glint in her eye distracted him for a split second.

Unfortunately, it happened in the spot on the ice that had threatened to trip him multiple times, and before he could catch himself, he face planted.

Jessie shrieked, "Watch out!" as he slid several feet before coming to a stop at the base of a mound of snow, knocking much of it loose.

The thought he should bounce to his feet as if nothing was wrong floated through his mind. Then, a handful of seconds later, his muddled brain registered she was near.

"Cam," Jessie dropped beside him. "Are you okay?"

He kept thinking perhaps he should roll over. Until her warm hand began gently pushing his hair back from his forehead. The feelings it created inside had just the opposite effect. And the thought he could stay there forever floated by.

"Please wake up," she whispered. "Cam, please wake up."

Her voice sounded different, more worried than when she'd initially called his name, and Cam wasn't willing to cause her any more pain. He groaned and rolled over. Then sent her a cheeky smile.

"Don't stop touching me, Princess." He wiggled his eyebrows teasingly. "I like it."

Jessie scanned his face for an extra minute. And something told him, she was looking for injuries.

"You're okay?" she asked. "Really?"

"I'm fine, but you appear to be just a little too ... dry," Cam quipped. He

took hold of her shoulders and tucked her underneath him in the middle of the wet snow.

“Cam?” she murmured, their eyes locking.

“Jessie?”

He tried to keep his eyes on hers, but as if he were powerless to resist, they dropped to her lips. Hers widened, and he wanted to close the distance between them. It was only the memory of why they were on the ice that had him changing his mind.

The breath he’d been holding fled. Then before he could second guess his actions, Cam grabbed a handful of snow and dropped it in the v of her jacket. “Gotcha.” He scrambled to his feet to give her space.

“Argh,” Jessie sputtered. She jumped up and tossed over her shoulder, “You’d better watch out Hunter. Paybacks can be a bitch.”



JESSIE SKATED AWAY, her thoughts unsettled. Whether that was because of something Cam had done ... or because of something he hadn’t, she couldn’t say. He’d always been that boy she’d watched from afar, never assuming they were destined to be anything more than what they were. Because of the history between their families, he’d always treated her the same as her brothers, like a sister.

Cam was a flirt. At one time or other, every girl at Swan Harbor High had been affected by his glib tongue, sexy green eyes, or dimpled smile. When the girls disappeared, as they’d always done, Jessie had decided, as his friend, he’d always be there. With that decision made, her crush had become easier to manage.

Then she’d turned fourteen. Cam had looked at her differently. He’d made her feel like a female. From that day on, whenever he was around, her traitorous heart had beaten a rapid pitter-pat.

It had only been the thought that he wanted what he couldn’t have that had helped her resist. However, it hadn’t stopped her heart from flipping when he flirted. Nor had it stopped the little buzz inside when he called her princess. There was something about the way he drawled the word that sent chills racing up her spine.

Jessie had tried to save her excitement for when she was alone in her room. She’d spent hours filling pages in her diary, where she practiced combining their names. One day, she hoped, that would be her.

The accident, though, had changed everything in her life. Cam seemed to

understand what she needed and always showed up when she least expected him. It was eerie but also made her feel special.

Even more so since her parents

With that one thought, the darkness that had been abated was back. It clawed at her, threatening to pull her down into its abyss, only letting her go when it covered her. Jessie's knees began to buckle, and the blackness continued its climb up her legs. She was going down ... and then ... strong arms wrapped around her, bringing her close to a warm male body.

Cam made her feel safe and secure as he held her, preventing the black hole from consuming her. She closed her eyes and burrowed her face into his shoulder, while she waited for the darkness to overwhelm her.

When it didn't immediately feel as if she'd been swallowed, she peered through her lashes. All she saw were the changing colors of the ice and snow as the sun began to set.

"I'm sorry." Jessie stepped backward a foot ... and then another.

He cupped her jaw and used his thumb to wipe away her tears. "Never apologize for missing your parents, Jess."

His quiet support took her breath and caused her heart to stutter. She wanted to let him know how much she appreciated his help, but the words thank you seemed too small. If she were braver, she'd kiss his lean cheek in a show of gratitude. She just wasn't that brave – yet.

Cam's green eyes darkened and pulled her closer to their fire. The words, if only he would ... had just taken up residence in her head, when he sent her a lopsided grin, causing her thoughts to scatter.

"Think there's an extra pair of gloves in the box in the gazebo?" he whispered.

It was then Jessie noticed his hands were bare. "Where are your gloves? What would your mother say? Come on," she fired off each question in rapid succession. Then, not giving him a chance to answer, skated off and expected him to follow.

"Geez, Jess," Cam mumbled. "They're just gloves. I was in a hurry, okay?"

"Males!" Jessie pushed Cam toward the bench seat, while she rifled through piles of colorful wool. It took several minutes before she located a pair near the bottom that had belonged to James, and handed them over.

Cam gave her another one of his lopsided grins, then started telling her about the last time he'd been on the ice with their brothers. While the story was funny and typical, that James would never again be a part of their escapades brought tears to her eyes.

"You alright?" He squeezed her fingers.

The confusion that was never far away, when he didn't behave as she expected, washed over her. "Why are you here?"

"Why are you?" Cam turned the tables on her, something she should have expected, but wasn't sure she was ready to answer.

The reasons she skated hadn't been something she'd discussed with many. Her counselor, Sadie, and Cassie, but with the way Cam had been supporting her, a part of her wanted ... needed to explain.

"Sometimes there's a black hole," Jessie began, "that threatens to engulf me, and I disappear." She bit her bottom lip and swallowed the tears that wanted to erupt before continuing, "I keep thinking if I skate fast enough, I can outrun the darkness. For a little while, anyway."

"Oh, Jessie," he murmured. "Does it work?"

"Sometimes ... but not always. Now, it's your turn. Why are you here, and not with Ben or Ryan? Or," Jessie smirked, "reading Persuasion?"

"You needed me."

The combination of his simple answer and dimples almost had her missing the look in his eyes.

"There's more," she prodded, pleased when she saw the slight flare in his green depths. "How would you know if you hadn't talked to Dylan?"

"I didn't talk to Dylan," Cam admitted. "But Gray made plans for your brother, so ..."

"Why didn't Dylan mention his plans?" Jessie wondered aloud. Then a light went off and the date blinked brightly in her head. "Ugh. Today is Dylan ... and would have been James' ... twenty-first birthday. I'm such a selfish – bimmmff." Cam's hand muffled the derogatory word. "Where are they?"

"Dylan and Gray are at Swan's Spirits,"

"He'll come home drunk, won't he?" Jessie grumbled, still annoyed she didn't remember Dylan's big day.

"Maybe," Cam paused a beat, and his grin grew, "Okay, probably. But I'll be here to help you get him into bed."

Jessie studied Cam for several minutes, "That would be nice." She frowned, trying to decide what to do. "I wonder if we have stuff to make a birthday cake before he gets back."

"Chocolate?"

"Of course," Jessie teased. "Is there any other choice?"

They exchanged skates for shoes before climbing the steps to the old house, "Can I lick the bowl?" Cam pleaded as she walked past him.

"Only if you help."

"I have to earn my keep?" he whined. "My mother doesn't make me help."

“Well, I’m not your mother, now, am I?” Jessie quipped.

She thought he said, ‘*thank goodness for that*’, but when she glanced his direction, he was washing his hands and ignoring her.

There was a smile on her face that threatened to bloom into a full-fledged grin. It made her realize, he’d done it again.

three

Ten Years Ago

Cam's Home

February 17

4:00 p.m.

CAM HAD BEEN REHEARSING how he planned to behave when Jessie arrived. He'd play it cool, they'd watch the Olympics and there would be no pressure ... on anyone.

Except, this was Jess, and he wanted to impress her. Since Dylan's birthday, he'd allowed her to set the pace for their friendship. Whether they were skating, watching movies, or just spending time with friends, being together made him happy. He knew she was still in a delicate state, but he wanted to think her more frequent smiles were because of him.

While he allowed her control, it hadn't stopped him from wanting more. There had been moments when he'd wanted to take her hand or kiss her. However, one look in her turquoise eyes and he'd backed off. Today, though, he hoped would be different. He'd not invited their friends, and with their brothers spending the day at Swan Harbor University, it would be just the two of them.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" Mary Hunter entered the kitchen from the laundry room. "You've been staring in the pantry for at least twenty minutes."

"Just snacks to have while watching the Olympics." Cam sent her a sheepish smile. "I didn't realize I'd been standing here so long."

Mary gave him that 'mom's eye-squint' that said she was trying to figure out what he was thinking, "Do you need some help?"

"No," he assured her. "I've got this."

"Well, okay." She placed a few folded towels in a drawer and picked up the basket. "I'd grab the Oreos, Cameron. You know how much Jessie loves those."

"What?" Cam sent her his best, *'I have no idea what you're talking about look'*. "Who said anything about Jessie?"

“You didn’t have to. Have fun.”

He watched her leave before turning back to the pantry. There were Sour Cream and Onion Chips, but they would give him bad breath, and what if

The doorbell rang before he could decide, and when he heard his mom yell, she’d get it, Cam rushed forward, nearly tripping over a backpack. “Who the hell left that there?”

Mary sent him a ‘*watch your mouth*’, look. “Hmm, that would be you,” she pointed out before opening the door. “Jessie, come on in. Are you alone?”

When Jess stepped inside, she looked so pretty, Cam’s breath caught in his throat. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold, and her sweater made her eyes look even bluer.

“Yes, I’m alone.” Jessie removed her boots and placed them next to the door. “Dylan was running late and dropped me off.”

Cam stood there for a few minutes, trying to figure out what to say. And then, Jessie smiled. His heart picked up speed, his breath stuttered, and he had to grab hold of the back of one of the chairs to keep his feet on the floor.

“Well, hello to you too.” She picked up his mother’s prized possession, a toy poodle called Buttons.

The puppy burrowed her nose into Jessie’s neck and when she giggled, he couldn’t help but wish he could be the dog for a minute or two.

“Cam,” his mother’s eyes twinkled. “Did you find what you were looking for in the kitchen?”

“Uh, no,” he grinned. “I thought I’d let Jess decide.”

“That’s a good idea.” Mary smiled at Jessie, “The Oreos are on the top shelf.”

“You bought Oreos?”

The light-hearted tone of the question had Cam’s eyes meeting his mother’s. The understanding in hers had him looking away quickly, annoyed, but at whom, he couldn’t say. Then a gurgle of laughter burst from Jess at the puppy’s antics, and Cameron’s eyes immediately sought his mother’s again.

See? he thought, I’m good for her.

A secretive smile crossed Mary’s face. One that was not unlike those he’d seen his parents exchange when they communicated without words.

“Enjoy the Olympics,” she replied, her voice huskier than usual. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“We will,” Cam acknowledged, feeling like he’d missed something.

“Cam?” Jess’ soft voice penetrated the fog in his head.

“Yeah?”

“Everything okay?”

“Perfect.” Cam grinned, making sure his dimples were on full display. “Let me show you the snacks.”



JESSIE HAD no difficulty locating the Oreos and, grabbing a bag of chips, she followed Cam down to the basement. “You cleaned!” she exclaimed when she realized that she could actually see the furniture.

“Hey,” Cam gave her a sheepish smile, “it wasn’t that bad.”

Jessie laughed, “It was bad.” She set the snacks on a table and dropped onto the sofa. “Who were you trying to impress?”

“I just ...” He glanced away quickly, then came back with, “My mother thought it was time.”

“Uh huh,” Jessie murmured.

“Really,” he pushed.

“Oh, well, it looks good.”

“Thanks.”

Cam smiled again, and the power behind it had her cramming a chip in her mouth. The combination of sour cream, onion, and salt sent a happy message straight to her brain.

“These are so good,” Jessie hummed. “Dylan hasn’t bought them since he’s been dating Catherine. He’s worried about his breath.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Jessie continued. “I don’t ...”

As soon as she realized the implications behind the comment, she swallowed the rest of the words. There was something going on between them. The question was, did Cam want the same thing?

“So,” she searched for a new topic and spotted his sketchbook across the room. “Did you finish your project for graphic design?”

Cam’s eyes lit up, and as he talked about his assignment, Jessie got lost in the expressions crossing his face. He was more animated than usual, even using his hands to gesture.

“What?” He studied her for a few minutes. “Did I say something wrong? Do I have Oreo on my face?”

“No,” she assured him. “You like that class a lot, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah,” Cam nodded. “But you knew I plan to major in architecture, didn’t you?”

“And then go to work with your dad and Gray, right?”

“I think so.” He tilted his head, his green eyes diving into hers, “What about

you? Any thoughts as to what you plan to study?"

"That seems so far away." Jessie wrinkled her nose. "I need to get through Chemistry first."

"Well, if you need help ..."

"I know, Cam." They shared a smile, one that was truly relaxed, the first since she'd arrived. "Thanks."

Jessie got lost in his gaze, and her thoughts faded. It caused her pulse to tick up a few notches. Then something inside whispered, *Is this it?* Except, when she licked her lips, she could still taste the chips. Worried about her breath, she let the moment go.

"So, who skates first?"

It was longer than a heartbeat before Cam replied, "Looks like the men."

He moved away to turn on the television, and Jessie's heart bumped a few times. Was it possible their thoughts had been traveling along the same path?

Then Cam settled on the sofa, and his heat reached out. It played havoc with her focus, causing a subtle shift in her priorities. She was paying attention to what was happening on the T.V. screen. However, most of it was on him, and what was going on around them.

But then, music from one of the performers captured her interest and sucked her into the world of figure skating. The athleticism and grace of the Olympic skaters mesmerized her. It wasn't long before she was searching for a piece of paper and making notes.

"Sorry." Jessie blew out a breath. "I tend to get lost in what's happening on the ice, wishing ..."

"You're good, Jess," Cam murmured.

"I'm okay," she willingly acknowledged. "Plus, working with Catherine has been amazing. It's just ..."

"You think you'd want to do that?" Cam nodded toward the screen where a pair skated.

Jessie glanced at the television where the male skater held his female partner above his head, and they were spinning around on the ice. The thought had her stomach tied in knots.

"You're joking, right?"

"Why would you say that?" Cam asked quietly. "I was serious."

Jessie let go of a light laugh. "I don't think I could trust someone enough."

"No?" He arched a brow in that way of his that often had her jumping, even when she wasn't completely sure she should.

"No!"

"Oh, come on, Princess." Cam hopped up and started tossing pillows on the

ground, his smile growing bigger by the minute. “You can trust me.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Jessie exclaimed.

“Hell yes,” his exaggerated response had her heart speeding up. “Let’s practice.”

“Well ...” Jessie looked around wildly, feeling slightly breathless. “We should move the table, though.”

A corner of his mouth curved up, but he followed her suggestion. Then stood in the center of the pillows and held out his hands. “Now, jump in my arms and spread out like a swan.”

There was a part of Jessie that wanted to giggle. However, the other part was excited, as the thought of his hands around her waist made her light-headed.

“Come on, Jess,” Cam encouraged.

“Here I come.”

Jessie took off and hopped into Cam’s arms. His hands clasped her waist, and he lifted her over his head.

“There you go, Princess,” he grunted.

Jessie felt his arms start to shake and quickly grabbed hold of his shoulders. Her hands had barely landed before his legs gave out, and they fell sprawling, a tangle of body parts.

“See,” she laughed, pushing up, to get caught in the fire of Cam’s green eyes. “Not trustworthy.”

“Hey,” he flipped them around, and his face hovered over hers, “say that again.”

Her heart was beating out of her chest, “Say what again?” Jessie whispered, fighting the need to giggle.

Cam sighed her name, and his breath blew across her mouth. She couldn’t look away as his lips drew closer. *Oh my gosh!* Her eyes drifted shut in anticipation.

Before their mouths touched, Cam grunted, “Buttons! What the ...?”

“Cameron.” Mary’s voice had them scrambling to their feet. “Dylan’s here to pick up Jessie.”



Sadie’s Home

March 15

9:00 p.m.

WHEN THE IDEA of attending the Spring Sleigh Ride as a group was casually

tossed out, the gang thought it was a good idea. After all, Cassie was already gaga over Ryan, and Sadie and Ben had been tap dancing around each other for weeks. Secretly, Jessie was thrilled. Especially since it meant spending more time with Cam. *Except* the plans had been made before their ‘almost kiss’.

Since *that* night, Jessie found herself caught in an emotional storm. One in which the words, *Will he? Won't he?* kept racing around inside her head. She was left unsure of what to say ... and how to behave.

“Jessie,” Sadie’s green eyes sparkled with excitement, “they’re here! Let’s go say hello.”

Jessie glanced across the field to where Cassie and Ryan had already paired off. Cam and Ben were nearby, and she couldn’t help but notice how good he looked.

“Did something happen between you two?” Sadie put her on the spot.

“No!”

Sadie’s expression quickly morphed into a knowing one. “Do you want it to?”

Did she? Jessie dropped her head, and her hair fell around her face. She thought she did. Except, she didn’t want to feel pressured.

“I think so.”

“You think so?” One of Sadie’s brows popped up. “Then take back control.”

“Take control?” Jessie frowned. “What does that mean?”

“My mama says,” Sadie grinned, “that boys are just as scared as we are. If you like someone, take control and regain the power.”

The scene across the field once again captured Jessie’s attention. “He is quite fine,” she sighed.

“Agreed,” Sadie hummed, “sexy and mussed.”

“Ben’s nice to look at too,” Jessie felt obligated to note.

“Yeah,” Sadie confirmed, “in that boy next door kind of way. But he’s not ...”

When her voice died before finishing her sentence, Jessie prompted, “He’s not ...?”

“Never mind,” Sadie groaned, “pipe dream.”

That Sadie had a crush on someone she assumed to be unattainable was something Jessie had long suspected.

“Take control,” she tossed the words right back.

The flirty twinkle sparked in Sadie’s eyes, “The Princess learns fast.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Jessie groaned.

“Come on, Jess,” Sadie cajoled. “Quit being a chicken. It’s just Cam.”

Just Cam was what caused her insides to ping pong all over the place, but

not in a bad way. *Could* he be as scared as she?

“Come on, Jessie,” Sadie continued to plead, “you know you want to.”

Helpless to resist, Jessie glanced his direction and when their eyes met, the words, ‘*run to him*’, kept playing over and over in her mind.

“*Carpe Diem*, right?” Jessie murmured.

“Exactly!” Sadie giggled.



CAM TRIED NOT to stare at Jessie, but time and again, his gaze was drawn across the field to where she was standing. Since *that* night, he’d felt like he was on a roller coaster. He’d asked himself a dozen times if he’d pressured her. Except, the answer was always the same – he didn’t know. Which left him even more confused.

His goal had always been to take care of Jessie’s heart, but no one had warned him about his own. It had been a month, yet he still didn’t know what to expect from her. One minute she seemed normal, the next aloof. Her walls were back up, and he was standing on the outside.

Their stalemate caused an ache in the center of his chest. One he’d not experienced, nor knew how to handle. Knowing his friends were just as clueless as he, when it came to girls, left him floundering alone.

After he’d flunked a test, his mom had stepped in with a lecture. On one hand, hearing what she had to say gave him hope. However, on the other, since he’d been told to be patient, and patience wasn’t one of his strong suits, the ache in his chest remained. He was left to deal with a whole one-foot-in-heaven-and-the-other-in-hell situation. Which frustrated him even more.

He’d needed an outlet for the buildup of energy and pulled out his Nintendo DS®. The game Mario Kart® allowed him to channel the tangle inside into his character. There was nothing more satisfying than being able to race as quickly as he desired, even if it meant crashing a time or two. The only problem seemed to be finding the right balance.

Cam fought off a yawn and wished, not for the first time, the sleigh ride would get underway. He was tired of waiting.

Ben side-eyed him. “Up late?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you stayed up too late playing Mario.”

“Maybe,” Cam grunted. “It’s just ...”

“What’s going on with you and Jessie,” Ben surprised him by asking.

“Nothing,” Cam shot back.

“Right.” Ben nudged Cam with his shoulder, forcing him to take a step. “Go talk to her, dickhead.”

Cam started toward Jessie, and as the distance between them narrowed, what to say ran over and over in his mind.

“Hi.” He gave her the smile he’d practiced in the mirror. “How are you?” That the question came out sounding somewhat normal allowed him to relax ... at least a little.

“Good.” Jessie’s eyes met his briefly, then lowered to the center of his chest.

For some reason, the way she’d looked at him had him panicking. Suddenly he blurted, “Ever played Mario Kart?”

“Mario Kart?” she repeated. “No, why?”

“It’s a great game.”

Cam spent the next few minutes explaining the rules and about a few of his matches. However, when they announced it was time to load the sleighs, he was more than ready.

He, Jessie, and their friends would ride in a smaller sleigh with a seat up front for two, and one behind for the other four.

“I’ll drive,” Cam volunteered, not wanting to be stuck next to or behind his friends.

The look on Ryan and Ben’s faces as they climbed up on the back seat and settled next to Sadie and Cassie had him groaning. Once they were seated, he took a fortifying breath and held his hand out to help Jessie into the front.

She climbed up, tucked the blanket around her leg and lifted the other side. “Coming?”

Cam’s lips twitched when he realized Jessie was more affected by his nearness than she wanted him to know. “Am I going to fit?” He indicated the small space.

“I don’t bite, Cam,” his princess snapped. “Just climb on the darn seat.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Her quick inhalation when he slipped in next to her, confirmed his suspicions. “Comfortable?” he asked mainly to try to defuse the tension.

“You seem to be the one having difficulty getting situated,” Jessie pointed out. “Just go.”

With the thought she was feeling something rolling around in his brain, Cam set the horses in motion. As the ride began, and he grew used to the gentle sway of the sleigh, he wondered what he should do ... or say. Did he sit back and let her come to him? Or did he drop the talk of Mario Kart and up his flirt game?

“Guard Jessie’s heart, Cameron,” he heard his mother say.

“Remember,” his mother’s voice continued, *“the heart wants what the heart wants.”*

Mario, it is, he decided, as the horse pulled their sleigh into the woods and the surrounding shadows grew longer.

Except for the jingling of the horse’s harnesses, and the soft sounds of the sleigh’s runners, it was quiet. And the farther they rode away from the starting line, the more Cam relaxed. He was convinced, if Jessie’s leg slid against his, he’d be fine.

That was, until there was a quick right bend in the trail, and she slid closer, her thigh aligning tightly to his. Cam bit his tongue, and the sharp pain served its purpose. It took his mind away from how it felt to have a part of her touching a piece of him. His heart raced, his body flamed, he needed

Mario ... banana peels ... blue shells ... was on repeat inside his head until his heart slowed, and his body cooled.

When they arrived at the finish line where a bonfire was already burning full force, Cam pulled the sleigh up into an open spot. The popping of the flames and the creaking of the leather seats served as a backdrop to the various conversations going on around them.

Initially, he was comfortable with the silence, until it became obvious that those in the back were communicating non-verbally. Jessie squirmed, her unease with the sighs, moans, and slurping noises from their friends as obvious as his.

Cam silently cursed the situation and wished he knew what to say to relax Jess. While it no longer felt right to talk to her about Mario, the time wasn’t right for anything more.

“Look.” He tugged off his glove and pulled his iPod Nano® from his pocket. *“Music?”*

Jessie studied him for an extra beat. Then, just when he opened his mouth to fill the silence, she whispered, *“You have any good songs on that thing?”*

“How about this?” Cam handed her one of his earbuds, then pushed play.

When a Bon Jovi song transitioned to Queen, she sent him an impish grin. *“You’ve been in your parent’s records again, haven’t you? I approve.”*

Her comments had a weight lifting off Cam’s chest that he hadn’t been aware was there. *“I’m happy to hear that ... Princess.”* The smile she sent him had his heart beating triple-time to match the rhythm of the song. *It’s a step,* he thought.

Cam leaned back and out of the corner of his eye watched Jessie. The light from the fire brought out the red in her hair, tempting him to touch. However, the relaxed look on her face had him backing away ... temporarily, at least. While it

might not be exactly what he'd hoped, after the last month, it was more than he'd expected. He was okay with that ... for now, anyway.

four

Ten Years Ago

Sonny's Skate & Bowl

April 25

3:00 p.m.

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, Jessie's life settled into a routine. While she had less time to spend with her friends, she was doing something she loved. She was on the ice skating, but Catherine's approach focused on preciseness and motor planning. Which meant there were times when she'd go over and over a move, until it was perfect. Monotonous, yes. However, it also gave her time to think – more often than not - about Cam.

Since the evening of the Spring Sleigh Ride, their friendship had changed. There were times when Cam would look at her a certain way. When that happened, the butterflies in her stomach would take off, her heart would race, her palms would sweat, and every thought would fly from her head. Inevitably she'd end up staring at his lips. She was fifteen, and wanted nothing more than for her first kiss to be with him.

However, there were other times when she overheard him talking about his college choices. Those reminded her of the very real possibility, he would leave her behind. Cam had been her constant since her parents' death. If he wasn't around, she'd have to rely on herself; something she wasn't sure she could do.

Jessie had tried to run from the emotions he caused. Tried to pull the walls he'd knocked down back into place. Tried to keep her heart sheltered, locked up tightly. Except, it hadn't worked. Cam had stayed close, and, once again, pushed the walls out of the way. The feelings he elicited, though, were scary. To offer love, she'd have to allow herself to be vulnerable. Could she do that? Did she want to do that?

Love was a word used by many for a variety of reasons. Sadie loved clothes. Cassie loved babies. Dylan loved Catherine. Except was love something that could be described? Or was it just a feeling? When she looked in Cam's

eyes, her heart flipped. Could that be love? Or was there more? Was she overthinking things?

Cam had never given her any indication he 'loved' her. Yet, sometimes when he looked her way, and his green eyes darkened, she had to wonder. Was what he felt for her love?

"Jessie," Catherine called. "Where'd you go?"

"What?" Jessie pulled her focus back to the ice.

Catherine smiled. "I asked, where you went."

"I just Then she realized, she didn't want to explain where she'd *gone*, mumbled, "Sorry," and took off around the ice. When she'd completed the spins and jumps, she'd just been taught, Jessie knew, she'd made progress.

"There you go." Catherine grinned. "Now, try this." She demonstrated a few complex arm and hand moves, that would accompany the spins.

"Okay." Jessie pushed off once again to round the ice. This time, though, all her focus was on what she was supposed to be doing. That allowed her muscle memory to kick in, and almost unconsciously, she performed the moves with her body and not with her mind.

"Excellent!" Catherine exclaimed. "I think you're ready to compete."

"Compete?" Jessie squeaked, her heart beginning to race. "As in, a competition against others?"

"Sure," Catherine replied. "There's one in July that would be perfect."

"Have you discussed this with Dylan?" Jessie forced out breathlessly.

"Not yet." The banging of the gate signaled Dylan's arrival. "If you're interested, I can talk to him right now."

Jessie's thoughts were pinging all over the place. However, the possibility of skating in a competition had always been a dream. It had been something she'd discussed with her mother, as they watched the Olympics.

"Jessie," Catherine's voice brought her back to the present. "Well?"

"Yes," Jess nodded, slowly, then quicker as she got used to the idea. "Yes. If Dylan thinks it's a good idea, I want to do it."

"Perfect," Catherine squeezed her hands in support, "leave Dylan to me."

"Okay."

Catherine skated off the ice and into Dylan's arms. As they started toward the offices, there was a part of Jessie that wanted to follow. She wanted to know what her brother would say. However, she also wanted to grab her phone and call Sadie and Cassie, and to squeal with them. Mostly, though, she was waiting for Cam. He arrived every afternoon about the same time. Some days, he hid in the shadows and watched. Other days, he waited for her, and they talked. Those were the days she liked the best.



Cam's Home

April 25

5:30 p.m.

CAM GLANCED at the clock and hurried through the last few questions of his assignment. Jessie's practices finished at the same time each day, and he was hoping to get there before Dylan. Why he'd not asked to take her home, he wasn't sure. The possibility was there – and it wasn't like she'd never been in his truck. Somehow, though, that felt like he was pushing her – which wasn't what he wanted. Patience was the goal.

Jessie confused him, more than any other female he knew. Some days, she looked at him in such a way, Cam felt he could touch the moon. Yet, other times, he felt like he was bouncing his head against a wall. Just why her moods were so mercurial, he didn't understand. Nothing she did, though, changed the fact his heart wanted what his heart wanted.

As soon as he was done, Cam shut down his computer and grabbed his keys. "Mom, I'll be back in a little while," he called, halfway out the door.

"Hold it," Mary halted his escape. "Did you finish—?"

"Yes," Cam interrupted, knowing exactly what she would say. "Homework's done, the computer's turned off and I'm dropping this," he held up an envelope, "at the post office."

"Does that mean you signed?"

He'd been lucky to receive two good scholarship offers. Unfortunately, neither were in the state of Maine. One was in New York and the other in Texas. His professional dreams could be fulfilled by either program. The personal goals, though, that hadn't happened.

"I did." When he saw his mother's smile falter, he added, "It really was the best offer."

"I know." Mary sniffed. "Your father and I are proud of you. We just wish you were going to be closer."

"Like Gray. I know." Cam gave her a crooked smile. "It's what you get for having your smart son last."

"Oh, you," she laughed, allowing a bit of the guilt he was feeling to disappear. "When are you going to tell Jessie?"

"How am I going to tell Jessie, is more like it," he mumbled. "I don't know what she will say."

Mary stepped into the hallway, and there was a part of Cam that wished he

would have kept his mouth shut. If he wanted to get to Sonny's in time to watch any of Jessie's lesson, he needed to hurry.

"What are you worried about?"

"I don't know." Cam thought about the look on Jessie's face when college came up and shrugged, "I used to be able to read her, but lately ..."

"You could read her before," Mary noted, "because you were looking at her with different eyes. Now, you only see what she wants you to see."

"Which isn't much," he confessed.

Mary chuckled. "Nothing worth having is easy. Tell Jessie hello."

Cam just hoped he could come up with the right words to explain to Jessie why he had chosen a college so far away. She wouldn't like it. However, if he was lucky, she would understand.



Sonny's Skate & Bowl

April 25

6:00 p.m.

AS SOON AS she heard the outside door close, Jessie took off around the ice. Cam had arrived, and with him watching from the wings, she wanted to show off.

She'd been working on her triple axel, and since he hadn't seen it, she circled the ice twice. Her forward takeoff was perfect, followed by three and one-half revolutions. However, her timing was off for the landing. Instead of hitting the ice with just one foot, both hit simultaneously, which sent her sprawling across the ice.

"Damn."

"Need some help?"

Jessie lifted her head to see Cam standing above her. He held out his hand, and when she placed hers in his, the ever-present loneliness dissolved.

"Thank you." He helped her up, and the look on his face scattered her thoughts.

"I wondered if we could talk," he murmured.

"Talk?"

"Yes, please."

Jessie nodded. "Okay, sure, but I'm waiting on Dylan." The mention of her brother reminded her of her news. "Catherine wants me to enter a competition," rushed out.

"A competition? Really?" Cam picked her up and swung her around.

“That’s great, Jessie. I’m so ...”

Jessie’s arms circled his neck. Even when he wasn’t swinging her around, being near him made her dizzy. However, when he stopped moving, and she slid down his much larger frame, the feeling of being so close had her tongue adhering to the roof of her mouth.

“Cam,” she sighed.

“Jessie.” Dylan shattered the moment, causing her to jump backward. “Are you ready to go?”

“Coming.” Jessie swallowed the disappointment and gave Cam an apologetic smile. “Sorry.”

“Another time?” He walked with her across the ice.

Before she could respond, Dylan shouted, “Have you decided on a college yet?”

Cam’s eyes met hers. “UT-Austin,” he mumbled, frustration evident on his face.

“Nice. Gray thought that was the one you would choose. Let’s go, Jessie. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Congratulations, Jess.” Cam grinned. “You’ll do great.”

Philadelphia Skating Competition

July 15

4:00 p.m.

DURING THE MONTHS leading up to the competition, there were significant changes made to Jessie’s training. Longer practices replaced her flexible ones, forcing her to spend six or seven afternoons a week at Sonny’s. Catherine also put her on a healthier eating schedule, and added dancing and yoga several times a week. The possibilities excited her, but she couldn’t help but miss her friends.

However, since her feelings for Cam hadn’t been resolved, Jessie found it easier to be busy. It kept her from having to deal with her emotions regarding his going to college in Texas. She understood when he did, things between them would change. Except, that was something she tried not to dwell on. Instead, she told herself their time would come – she just had to be patient.

It hadn’t been easy, but she’d decided to stop looking to the future and focus on each day, and what it had to offer. Her family and friends were supportive, and the summer flew by. Then suddenly, it was July, and she was on the way to Philadelphia, with only Catherine by her side. But standing on the sidelines waiting for her turn on the ice, had her wishing Cam was watching. His

ability to always say the right things would have helped her not feel so alone.

“You okay, Jess?” Catherine whispered.

“I’m okay,” Jessie assured her.

Which was true, mostly. It wasn’t until they called her group to warm up, that she finally relaxed and was able to hit her jumps with ease. Her confidence lasted until she skated off the ice. Then, the butterflies inside took off.

“Jessie?” Catherine studied her carefully. “You look a little pale.”

“It’s not that big a deal,” Jessie grumbled. “My butterflies woke up at the same time.”

“Oh!” Catherine laughed. “I remember those days. Maybe they will help.” She pointed toward the stands.

When Jessie glanced up, tears sprang to her eyes. “You came!” She couldn’t believe how much better she felt knowing her brother was sitting next to Mary, her husband, Clint, and Cam’s brother, Gray. But where was

Cam’s warm hands landed on her shoulders, and what she was going to say flew away. “Miss me, Princess?”

“But ... how?” Jessie glanced from Cam to Catherine and back. “I thought you couldn’t come.”

“And miss your debut?” he winked, his dimples on full display. “Not a chance. Knock ‘em dead, Princess.”

“Ready, Jess?” Catherine asked softly.

The butterflies in Jessie’s stomach swirled, and her head swam. She handed her blade guards to Catherine, and her eyes locked with Cam’s.

“You’re ready,” he murmured. “Right?”

Her insides settled. “I’m ready.”

Cam pressed his cheek against the side of her head, and the smell of his cologne calmed her even more. “Have fun.”

Jessie nodded once, and when her name was called, pushed away from the wall and headed toward the center of the rink.

Once the music started, her body relaxed. She set her arms and feet and let the music flow through her, making her feel as if she were one with the ice.

A split jump.

Double axel into a double toe loop.

Sit spin.

A flip jump into a lutz.

A salchow jump into a sit spin.

Double toe loop, single toe loop.

Around the ice she skated, her excitement growing with every landed jump. She could see the crowd responding, clapping and cheering, the sounds making

her feel more powerful and confident. Someone who had defeated the darkness and who didn't worry it would return.

As the music reached its crescendo, Jessie threw herself into her last two jumps and transitioned into a Biellman spin. The roar of the crowd caused her heart to race, and she couldn't stop a smile from blooming on her face.

With one last push she lifted one leg behind her, stretched her arms wide and slowly undulated them up and down. Then, as the music slowed, she wrapped her arms around herself, as if they were a large pair of wings. When the last notes faded, Jessie skated to a stop and bowed her head.

The swan had come to a rest.

With the crowd's roars in her ears, she bowed and skated off the ice, into Cam's arms.



On Cam's boat

August 10

7:00 p.m.

WHEN THEY RETURNED FROM PHILADELPHIA, the days became a blur for Cam. Jessie had been approached before they'd left the arena and asked if she'd be interested in training in Boston. His feelings regarding her move were all over the place. Somehow, the idea of her waiting for him in Swan Harbor had taken root. The knowledge she wouldn't be, caused an ache in his chest. It forced him to face just how much their lives were going to change.

They had grown close the past few months, but he still caught himself heeding his mother's advice to guard Jessie's heart. She'd known too much loss, and he was determined its fragile state would never shatter because of him. He wanted her to fly free, knowing somehow that even though she reminded him of a beautiful swan, she was still a princess, not yet in full bloom.

Their last night together, Cam decided to take Jessie sailing. He wasn't sure exactly what they would say to each other. It was important to him, that she know he cared. And, he hoped, holding her once more would carry him through the next few months.

Cam sailed his small boat into the middle of the harbor and dropped anchor. There were millions of stars spread out above them. The water was calm, allowing only a gentle back-and-forth motion of the boat. Yet, his insides were racing.

"Lay with me, Princess." He leaned on the deck and clasped her hand in

his. “Well, how did I do?”

Jessie rolled toward him and propped her head on her hand. “You expect me to say you did a good job, because it’s not cloudy tonight, right?”

“Who? Me?”

“Please,” Jessie poked him in the side, “you’re pretty cocky, aren’t you?”

Her choice of vocabulary words created visions in his head. Instead of allowing them to simmer, he sought a safer topic.

“Are you excited about tomorrow?”

“A little,” she giggled, but then quickly amended, “okay, a lot. I’m worried about Dylan being alone, though. Think he’ll be okay?”

“Something tells me he’ll be fine.” Cam rolled onto his side and imitated her position. “Miss Gold will be there if he needs her.”

“True.”

Their eyes locked, and the longer he stared, the greater the sinking feeling inside. He was being pulled into their turquoise depths, the connection between them tightening.

Jessie’s hot breath blew across his lips. Her eyes drifted shut, and all he could think about was closing the distance and kissing her.

“Cam?” She cupped his jaw. “Don’t you want to kiss me?”

“Come on, Princess,” Cam groaned. “Don’t do this to me.”

“Do what?” Jessie asked innocently.

He rolled onto his back and pinched the bridge of his nose, hoping the pain would help him focus.

“I want to,” the words were torn from deep inside, “more than anything, but ...”

“Cam,” she suddenly filled his vision, “I’m sixteen—”

“And I’m eighteen,” he interrupted. “I’m supposed to be the ...”

Jessie put her finger over his mouth. “You’re supposed to what?” Her lips lightly touched his. “Teach me?” She placed an innocent kiss on his upper lip. “Show me?”

Cam tried to be strong, tried to resist, but she was too close, and she smelled too good. When her sharp teeth nipped at his earlobe, he couldn’t hold out any longer. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her lithe frame flush against his body.

“Open for me, Princess.”

His lips played with hers, but never stayed long in one place. Her mouth tasted exactly like he’d imagined, and he wanted to go on kissing her forever.

Then, Jessie opened, and let him in. Their tongues lazily mated, and Cam’s body heat skyrocketed, feeling as if it was on fire.

Just a few more, Cam decided, and dove back in. The kiss went on, and on, until he felt his self-control waning. It was then, he backed away.

“Don’t forget me, Jess.”

“Oh, Cam, never.” Jessie threw her arms around his neck. “I’ll miss you.”

“And I’ll miss you.”

Cam placed one last lingering kiss on her lips before turning away. The trip back to shore was quiet, and way too quickly, he walked her up the steps to her door.

“I hope you find everything you’ve been looking for, Princess.”

“You too, Cam.”

Jessie kissed him on the cheek, and he wanted to say, he already had. He wanted to tell her, that she was everything he wanted. However, before he could work up the nerve, Jessie ran into the house. Once again, he was left on the outside looking in.

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Present Day

Sonny's Skate & Bowl

June 4

11:00 p.m.

'I HOPE you find everything you've been looking for, Princess.'

That naïve girl hadn't found what she needed in Boston. Nor had she found it in Orono, Charlottesville, or the Philippines. At the time, she'd told herself she was doing what she had to do, but she wasn't that young girl any longer. She was a twenty-five-year-old, pragmatic woman.

At least that was what she tried to tell herself. If that was the case, though, why was she finding it so hard to talk to Cam?

However, with her thigh muscles beginning to protest, the decision to stop might not be by choice, but a necessity. Then what? *Put up or shut up*, floated through her mind as they made another circle around the ice, and what to say continued to evade her.

Since she'd returned to Swan Harbor, Jessie had escaped to Sonny's as a respite from seeing Cam with Eden. It had only taken a few minutes on the ice for the sounds of the rink to settle her. Except then, she'd been alone. This time, neither the soft shushing of her blades nor the creaking of the building could calm her insides. Somehow, though, she'd expected that. Their dance had changed everything

Isn't he worth fighting for?

Sadie's question had Jessie surreptitiously glancing at Cam. She didn't see a twenty-eight-year-old man. In her eyes, he was still the boy she'd been in love with her entire life. Even with his hair hanging in his face and his white shirt no longer crisp, her traitorous heart didn't care. Her heart wanted what her heart wanted. The question was, how did she go about getting it?

An image of Eden catching the bouquet and then kissing Cam floated by. When it felt as if she'd been stabbed in the heart, she knew she couldn't wait.

Jessie flipped around into a T-stop and pinned Cam with a hard stare. "Why are you here?" She hesitated a beat. "Instead of with your new girlfriend?"

A surprised look flitted across Cam's face as he adjusted the direction he was moving. "Why are you?" he tossed back, as he had all those years ago. Except then, they'd been close, and she'd wanted to share with him.

"I asked first," Jessie responded childishly, propping a hand on her hip.

Cam's eyes traveled up her body, and a dimple peeked out. "Well, lookee there," he drawled, "the princess is present."

He exasperated her just as he'd done in the past. "You're not in Kansas any longer, Cam. You can lose the lame accent."

"That's Texas, Princess," he winked. "Now, come sit down. You've busted my balls long enough." Then, not waiting for a response, he skated toward the benches.

Jessie opened and closed her mouth several times, but when she couldn't come up with a good retort, followed. At least, it was his idea to sit first.



CAM GRITTED his teeth to keep from groaning out loud as he stepped from the ice and dropped onto a bench. He wanted to take off his skates and free his feet and ankles, but if he knew his princess, she wasn't through running. One little misstep and she'd take off again. This time, though, he didn't plan on letting her get away.

"Come on, Jess," he encouraged when she hesitated, "it's time."

"What do you expect us to do, Cam?" Jessie wanted to know. "Should we sit around the campfire and sing Kumbaya?"

"It would be a start." Cam's eyes collided with hers. "Please." He stepped a little farther out on the limb, needing to rest for a few minutes.

When she muttered, "Okay," then sat next to him, his entire being relaxed. There were so many questions he wanted to ask. However, many of them would make her run. Instead, he decided to start with the simple, and move out from there.

"Tell me about Boston."

"Boston?" Jessie frowned. "You know what happened. I got hurt and came home."

"No, Jess," Cam grumbled. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Let's see," she retorted, in full princess voice. "I woke up at six, had breakfast, then went to ballet ..."

"Jessie," he interrupted, "your schedule wasn't what I had in mind."

She sat still for so long, it reminded him of when they were younger. Of her high walls and how he'd often felt as if he'd been on the outside looking in. His princess used them like a blanket. Each time she'd pulled them back out, she'd wrap them just a little tighter, and he'd have to chip them away bit by bit.

"When I arrived, I strutted in as if I owned the world," Jessie began.

The tenor of her voice had Cam leaning forward, as he strained to hear the soft words.

"I had to learn the pecking order." She gave him a wry smile. "It took getting knocked down a few times before I figured things out."

As Jessie continued her story, for the first time, Cam heard traces of emotions he'd not expected a sixteen-year-old to hide. Loneliness, anger, jealousy, and finally acceptance. The more she talked, the more he wondered if he didn't hold some responsibility for how she'd felt.

Cam tried to remember the feelings of his eighteen-year-old self. Then, he'd not wanted to cause her any pain. What Jessie wanted - she'd gotten. But was that where *he'd* gone wrong? Was that where *they'd* gone wrong? Had he and Dylan pushed her away too fast, because that had been easiest on them?

He'd been leaving for college and with Jessie in Boston, he could imagine her happy. Her brother's case was similar, but not really. Had Dylan thought, once she was gone, his job was complete?

Cam couldn't help but wonder if that were true. If so, it explained the distance that had developed between them during that first year apart. He'd been in the middle of meeting new people, studying, going to football games and parties. However, if he ever felt overwhelmed, he still had his family. For some reason, she'd chosen to keep her feelings bottled up inside.

Cam watched a tear track from the corner of Jessie's eye. Everything inside wanted to reach out and touch her. Would she allow that, though? The distance between them still felt too great.

"I finally learned," Jessie murmured, "that there would always be someone who had cleaner edges. Or someone able to jump higher or spin faster than I could. After all, while I'd been skating since I was four, that wasn't the same as training. If I was lucky, I might win a regional and get to skate in the sectionals, but it was unlikely. I'd never make the U.S. Championships or the Olympics. For a while, though, I was content."

"Except content isn't good enough for you," Cam claimed, barely holding on to his temper. "Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you tell Dylan or Catherine?"

"What were they supposed to do?" she exclaimed. "Besides, Catherine knew what training was like. It wasn't as if it had changed much since she'd

been in my shoes.”

“So, you pretended,” he guessed. “Or did you just not talk to them?” Like she’d done with him. He just wasn’t ready to put that much out there, yet, anyway.

“I did what I had to do.”

Cam wanted to take her in his arms and hold her, just like he’d wanted to do when she was fourteen, fifteen and sixteen. That hadn’t changed.

“Why, Jess,” he tightened his hand into a fist, “why didn’t you tell me?”

Jessie’s humorless laugh sent a cold feeling of dread down his spine, “I called you, once,” she spoke the words he hadn’t expected to hear.

He searched his memory for a time when she might have called. Except, he came up empty. “When?”

“December, your freshman year,” she murmured. “Some girl answered and said you were in the shower. I hung up.”

“Oh, Princess,” Cam whispered. “It wasn’t ...”

“Just forget it,” Jessie replied. “It’s not a big deal.”

While Cam couldn’t be sure who had answered his phone that December day, he knew the female hadn’t belonged to him. There had been no one for him but Jessie – until he’d gone home the summer after his freshman year.

He’d heard she’d been kissing a boy named Roger, and his heart had shattered. It had changed the way he’d behaved when he’d arrived in Austin for his sophomore year.

“Jessie,” Cam hesitated until she looked at him, “she was my roommate’s girlfriend. Not mine.”

“Really?” Jessie arched a brow in disbelief. “You expect me to believe you didn’t have girlfriends while you were in Texas?”

“No one serious,” he admitted. “But I didn’t go out with anyone until I’d heard about Roger.”

“Roger? Who’s Roger?”

“You tell me,” Cam tossed back. “You were kissing him in the movie theater.”

“I was kissing someone?” Jessie frowned. “When?”

The blank look on her face had Cam pushing up on his sore feet and walking several steps away. Was it possible he’d been wrong?



CAM WAS STANDING five feet away, yet Jessie could feel the tension radiating from him. And based on the question he’d asked, he was beating himself up over

something that may or may not have happened long ago. She still had no idea what he was talking about, but did it matter?

He turned back around and leaned against the half-wall with his arms crossed, “I’m sorry. I thought ...”

“Don’t!” Jessie took a step closer to him and put her fingers over his lips. “It’s done. Let it go.”

“But, I ...” Cam looked away, his eyes distressed. “Damn, I’m such an idiot.” He captured her fingers in his much larger hand.

The sight of their clasped hands brought tears to her eyes. In the past, even when she thought of him as just her friend, holding his hands had been a source of both comfort and excitement. But this time as she stared at them, she felt a keen sense of loss. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could continue reliving the past.

“Do we really need to air out everything tonight?”

“Jessie,” he tugged her back to their bench, “not just yes, but *hell* yes!”

Her bottom lip was tender from nibbling on it, but that didn’t stop her from continuing to worry it between her teeth. What were they doing?

“Why?”

Cam studied her for a heartbeat. Then another. But she wasn’t willing to back down. This time, she needed him to give her a good reason to lay herself bare, something she’d never been willing to do. His answer would help her decide, if she stayed – or left.

He cupped her jaw and angled her face toward his. As his lips slowly descended, Jessie’s breath stuttered, stopping completely when his soft mouth connected with hers. The kiss was gentle, hesitant, and lasted no more than several heartbeats. But the fine tremor of his hand as their lips separated gave her hope.

“Is that reason enough ... for now?”

Jessie nodded, when the tears that clogged her throat prevented her from explaining what she was feeling. He’d just given her the answer to what she needed to do to get what her heart wanted. Was she going to be able to handle it?

Seven Years Earlier

Boston

February 20

3:00 p.m.

WHEN JESSIE HAD DECIDED NOT to share her insecurities with Dylan, Catherine, or Cam, she'd considered it a mature choice. She'd thrown herself into everything she was offered, and while it had taken almost a year, her dreams and goals finally collided and became a reality. Ribbons and medals were won, except ... she'd never learned to love it. Her world grew smaller, and the darkness she'd conquered years before crept back, snaking around the edges of her consciousness.

As in the past, the only time Jessie could be free was when she was on the ice, away from the expectations surrounding her. For a while, escaping to someplace quiet and skating while lost in her memories worked. However, after spending the Christmas in Swan Harbor, she'd struggled. She was torn between her desire to please others and her need to escape. Plus, what motivated her to work hard at sixteen no longer held the same power at eighteen.

If she hadn't moved to Boston, she would have graduated from Swan Harbor High with her friends. There would have been parties and dances and laughing between classes. And while her mind had marched right up to the door of dating, she'd refused to allow it to walk through. Somehow, even with all the confusion surrounding her relationship with Cam, it didn't feel right.

It had taken her almost two months of being back in Boston to admit, she was jealous of the life Sadie and Cassie were leading. They were students at the University of Maine, and while there were some things they complained about, the sparkle in their eyes told another story.

While it was happening, she'd not paid much attention. However, lately, she'd realized that somewhere along the way, the people she'd grown up with had gone on without her. Not only her best friends, but even those closest to her – her brother and Cam.

Dylan had just returned from the police academy and was going to work for the Swan Harbor Sheriff's Department. Since he'd always wanted to be an attorney, the change of career was a bit disconcerting. It also fit the way she'd felt about Cam's behavior at Christmas.

Two years before, when she'd called his phone, and another female answered, a little piece of her had died. She'd survived by packing her emotions into an imaginary box. When she'd seen Cam over the holidays, though, a hole had appeared in it. Jessie was left wondering what was next. That made her realize, if she continued to pursue a life she didn't love, she would never know what might be waiting ahead.

"We leave in ten minutes!" their driver yelled, pushing her to dress faster. First, she needed to get through the large fundraising event Veronica Myers staged every February, and then she'd try to figure out what she wanted for the

future.

Several hours later, Jessie waited until her peers were on their way to their usual changing spot, before turning in the opposite direction. She'd discovered a smaller women's locker room, and was hoping to hide out in it for a bit. There were days when she didn't mind the constant noise, but today wasn't one of them. Her heavy thoughts of earlier still weighed on her mind, and if she had to listen to the constant chatter of some of her teammates, she was going to scream.

When she pushed open the door to her secret place, Jessie was relieved to discover it was empty. She ducked into one of the curtained cubicles, dropped her bag and sank onto the bench. Her entire body ached, and all she wanted to do was go back to her room and sleep, but the 'older' skaters had to smooze with the big donors.

Socializing with people she didn't know wasn't high on her list of likable tasks, and fending off drunken advances had definitely grown old. But Veronica had been good to her – which meant, she'd do what she had to do.

Jessie pulled off her costume and was digging through her bag when she heard the door open.

"Ugh, Addi," Jessie heard Natalie Harkness' nasally voice and wondered whom she was talking about this time. "Did you see that cow out there tonight?"

"Come on, Nat," Addison Simpson, Jessie's primary competition responded. "She's not that bad. In fact, she's pretty good."

"How can you defend her?" Nat grouched. "She took that solo from you."

"I know," Addi sighed.

They were talking about *her*, Jessie realized. While she'd never cared for Natalie, she'd thought Addi was her friend.

"I can't believe you're so calm about it," Nat groaned. "You should be the star, not her."

Jessie's jaw ached from gritting her teeth. She dug her nails into her palms at the hatred she heard in the other girl's voice. Didn't they know how hard she worked? Didn't they care?

"Natalie, let it go," Addi replied tiredly. "I've been watching Jessie skate. I don't think her heart's in it any longer. Maybe she'll quit."

Ah, oh. Experience had taught her that showing weakness could be disastrous. Which meant, she hadn't been careful enough to hide her emotions.

"And go back to that quaint little town she calls home?" asked Natalie.

However, the way she posed the question caused a little shiver to zip up Jessie's spine.

"I assume so," Addi replied. "Why does it matter, as long as she's gone?"

"Catherine won't like that," Natalie confided.

“What does Catherine have to do with it?” Addi replied.

“Oh, plenty.”

“Stop trying to be so clever,” snapped Addi. “It’s time to go.”

“Well, okay,” Natalie popped her gum a few times, “but what if I told you ...”

It was several minutes after the door shut before Jessie moved. What she’d overheard was difficult to process. *Was there any truth in it?*

She needed to think. Away from the crowds. Somewhere, she could just be.

Jessie quickly replaced her costume with leggings and an old sweatshirt. Then she ducked through a hidden doorway and down a long hallway, into a part of the facility rarely used.

Catherine won’t like that.

The words reverberated inside Jessie’s head, and the darkness, never far lately, drew closer.

Catherine’s why Jessie is here.

It had all been arranged, but not because she could skate. Because she was in the way.

A lot of money exchanged hands.

When Jessie stepped into the arena, there was a hush in the air. The room held a small rink that was surrounded by raised seating. While there wasn’t much space to outrun her demons, she was alone. That was what mattered.

What Catherine wants; Catherine gets.

The more the words played in her mind, the greater the darkness.

Catherine wanted Dylan and Jessie was in the way.

Jessie stepped on the ice, and her vision immediately cleared. It allowed her to relax and take in her surroundings. There were a few cables strung across a corner of the rink that led to what appeared to be a sound system. But other than that, it was fine. If she could only skate in circles, she didn’t care. What mattered was moving.

She pushed away the thought of the words she’d heard and focused on the one person who had been her champion. Cam. Just his name gave her a sense of peace and brought happiness to her heart.

It didn’t take many revolutions before bits and pieces of songs she’d skated to wound their way through her head. A triple loop from this melody, a double axel from another. When the music from her first competition took its turn, she had no choice but to allow the memories to carry her through the routine. She was one with the ice, gliding, jumping, and spinning. With every revolution around the rink, her cares and the darkness that had been threatening blew farther and farther away.

As she reached the end of the routine, a door opened, pulling her attention away from her location on the ice. It was only for a split second, but long enough for her skate to roll over the electrical cords she'd been avoiding.

Jessie fell, sliding headfirst across the ice toward the sound equipment. That she was going to crash zipped through her brain a second before impact, and her head bounced once ... twice.

"Jessie!" Someone screamed, just as the darkness claimed her.

six

Seven Years Ago

Boston General

February 23

5:00 p.m.

JESSIE FELT as if she was floating, and while her eyes refused to open, the sounds around her were familiar. She could hear the steady beep of the heart monitor, the periodic crackle of the intercom, and Dylan.

“Come on, Jessie,” Dylan cried in a husky voice. “It’s been three days. Come back to me. I can’t lose you too.”

It wasn’t long before what she thought were squeaky shoes entered the room. “Good evening, Dylan,” a gentle voice greeted. “Any change?”

“No,” Dylan murmured. “Why is it taking so long?”

There was a clicking sound, as if Ms. Squeaky Shoes was checking the beeping equipment next to the bed. Then a slight tug and cool fingers lifted Jessie’s left hand and smoothed it on top of a blanket.

“Her body needs time to heal,” the nurse answered. “Doctor Watts should be in to speak with you soon.”

“Thanks, Sheila,” Dylan replied. “I’ll be here.”

A few minutes later, the nurse’s footsteps faded. Shortly after she was gone, Dylan’s phone rang and, based on the tenor of his voice, he was talking to Catherine.

Catherine. What was she going to do about Catherine? She didn’t want to hurt Dylan, as he had been her hero for as long as she could remember.

Swan Harbor

Sixteen Years Earlier

“AGAIN!” four-year-old Jessie demanded. Dylan picked her up and tossed her into a huge pile of leaves. As soon as she landed, she rolled off the pile and ran

to her brother, James, "Your turn."

"Okay, Princess," James laughed. "Ready?" He tossed her into the leaves. Jessie giggled and hopped off the pile, just as her father drove up in his Sheriff's car. "Daddy's home!" she squealed, taking off.

Robert stepped out of his car, "How's my Princess?"

"Good, Daddy," Jessie laughed. "Come see me fly!"

"Princesses don't fly," her father teased.

"Oh, Daddy," she giggled. "Watch." Jessie took off running and jumped into the pile of leaves, sending them scattering everywhere. "Did you see?"

One look at her father's face and Jessie knew he was upset, but she didn't know why until he began to scold her brothers. "I thought I told you boys to have this done before I got home."

"Sorry, Dad," Dylan jumped in to take the blame. "We got sidetracked. We'll do it now."

IN HER DREAM-LIKE STATE, Jessie watched as her father and James faded, leaving behind her and Dylan. He was the brother who had always taken responsibility for everything, even if it wasn't his fault. And after all these years, she couldn't shatter his world anymore. If he was happy with Catherine, she would figure out a way to deal with his girlfriend's betrayal. Even if it meant staying in Boston and pretending, she knew nothing.

With that decision made, Jessie allowed the darkness to pull her under once again.



England

March 20

CAM KICKED off his cowboy boots, lay back on his bed, and stared at the new picture of him and Jessie. He'd been looking forward to completing a semester in England, at the University of Sheffield, since they'd accepted him. That is, until Christmas. After being in Swan Harbor with his princess, the time away hadn't been as exciting as he'd expected. As much as he'd tried to fight it, a part of him was still back in the states, with her.

Jessie was eighteen to his twenty. However, his feelings for her hadn't changed, since that moment six years ago when he'd first noticed her as a female. Their time spent together over the holidays, had given him new insights into their relationship. It was as his mother said, the heart wants what the heart

wants, and his heart was set on his princess.

He'd known that the large fundraising event for the Myers Stars had been the previous weekend. Since then, he'd been expecting a call with news of how she'd skated. However, she'd kept him waiting. Which gave him a feeling he didn't understand. It made being away from home that much more difficult.

When the phone rang, Cam pounced, knowing he'd been awaiting her call. "Hey there, Jessie." He exaggerated his drawl.

"Take off the boots, Cam," she responded in a frosty tone.

Normally Cam relished the moments when Jessie used her princess voice, but her acerbic tongue had him sitting up, "What's going on, Jess?"

"I ..." she hesitated briefly, then tossed out, "how are classes?"

His Jessie radar was firing, and he wanted nothing more than to push her for answers. Except experience told him if he did that, he'd lose some ground gained in December. With that decision made, he spent several minutes spinning a tale or two about his professors.

"It sounds nice," Jessie replied once he wound down.

"So far," Cam agreed. "How did you skate last weekend?"

"Last weekend?"

"The fundraiser," he reminded her.

"Oh," Jessie took a deep breath, "I skated fine, but ..."

When she didn't immediately continue, he grew even more nervous. "Come on, Jess," he moaned. "Tell me what's going on, because I'm imagining the worst."

"I'm okay," she assured him. "I just ... I had a silly accident."

"Jessie," Cam pushed a little harder. "What are you not saying?"

"It was nothing," Jessie laughed, but there was something about what she was saying that didn't ring true. "My skate rolled over a wire and I fell."

"You fell!" he exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," she assured him. "My ankle's sprained and I have a little glue on a head wound. I'm even home from the hospital."

"Home home?" Cam questioned. "Or Boston home?"

"I'm in Swan Harbor."

"How long will you be there?" he asked, knowing he'd be home in early June.

"How long will I be here?" Jessie repeated, something she'd always done if trying to avoid answering. What was he missing? "I'm not sure. I guess you'd need to ask my ankle," she tried to joke, but it came across sounding flat.

"Is that it?"

Jessie sighed, "What else could there be?"

"I don't know, Princess. You tell me." She was silent for a while, and he thought he heard Dylan say something in the background, but if so, the words were too quiet to understand.

"Cam," Jessie continued in a steady voice. "I'll be fine. You need to worry about making good grades. You wouldn't want Beau to have a better GPA, now, would you?"

"That was low, Jessie," Cam complained. "But you're right."

Beauregard Johnson had been his roommate since they were freshmen at UT. Competitive, by nature, they had thrown themselves into seeing who was the best ... at everything. Cam realized most were stupid things, like who could burp the loudest or the longest. But there were more serious competitions like who could eat the most BBQ ribs or jalapeños.

That there had been a time when they'd started to compete to see who could get the most women was not something he was proud of or shared with many. He'd decided it didn't feel right to kiss and tell. Grades were important, though, and since high marks meant keeping his scholarship. If Jessie thought that's all he and Beau cared about, well

"Of course, I'm right," she declared.

"And you're really okay?" Cam asked once more.

"I'm fine." Jessie replied. "Don't worry about me."

"If you say so." Except there was more going on than she was willing to share. That much was obvious.

"I do," she assured him again. "I'm feeling a little tired, so I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"You take care now ... Princess," he teased, before disconnecting.



Jessie's Home

March 20

AS SOON AS the line went dead, Jessie's arm dropped. Her hands were shaking so much, the phone fell with a clang onto the floor. "Crap." She clasped her hands together, hoping to still them.

"You didn't tell him the entire truth," Dylan accused.

"And?" Jessie knew she sounded petulant, but in her mind, she was still in the 'you do what you have to do mode'.

The sofa dipped and Dylan settled next to her. "Why didn't you tell him you were blind?"

“Temporarily blind,” she amended.

“Okay,” he acknowledged her correction. “Why didn’t you tell him you were *temporarily* blind?”

Jessie smirked at the underlying annoyance layered with patience in her brother’s voice. She could see his sky-blue eyes staring at her with their solemn expression while a tic pulsed on his jaw from where he’d been clenching his teeth. That is, *if* she could see.

“You know why. He’s almost as protective as you are, and would have been on the next plane home.”

“But what if he finds out from someone else?” Dylan continued to push.

“You won’t tell him.” Jessie hesitated a beat, “Will you?”

“No, Sis,” he assured her. “But there’s always Gray or Mary or ...”

His brother and mother wouldn’t tell him, would they? “Ugh,” she leaned her head against his shoulder, “will you ask them not to? Please?”

Jessie could feel Dylan studying her, even if she couldn’t see him. In the beginning, the darkness had been complete. It reminded her of being in a pitch-black room and no matter how wide she tried to open her eyes; it didn’t matter. Her worst nightmare had come to life. The darkness from the fringes swallowing her whole.

Thankfully, that wasn’t still the case. In the last few days, the darkness had given way to gray. Like being in a thick fog, but unable to see on the other side. Better, but

“I’ll ask,” he sighed. “If it lasts too much longer, though, you need to tell him.”

What he said made sense, but it didn’t mean she enjoyed hearing it. “I know,” she conceded. “I just need a little time.”



England

March 20

HOURS AFTER THEIR TALK, Cam still couldn’t shake the feeling that Jessie hadn’t given him the complete story. He’d tried studying, laundry, even playing pool, but the tone of her voice lingered, and it seemed to be telling him something else. Since jumping on a plane wasn’t an option, he pulled out his phone and dialed a familiar number.

“Cameron? Is everything alright?”

Somehow, just hearing her voice settled his nervous feelings. “Hi, Mom.

How are things at home?"

"We're all fine," Mary began, hesitantly. "How are you liking your classes?"

"Good." Then, because he knew his mother, he told her the same stories he'd shared with Jessie.

"It sounds wonderful," her voice softened. "Why did you call, Honey? Need money?"

"I never turn down money," Cam chuckled. "But can't I call ... just because?"

"Sure, you can." Mary paused a beat. "But that's not you. A text here and there. An email now and then. When you call, there's a problem. What's going on, Cam?"

"I'm that predictable?"

"I'm your mother," she murmured. "Moms know these things."

"Is it written in the mom's manual?" he teased.

"You got it," Mary laughed. "But Gray is the same way. And it's much better than a letter once a week, like when your father and I were dating. But," she circled back, "you didn't call to talk about your father's communication abilities, or lack thereof, did you?"

"No," Cam sighed. "It's Jessie."

His mother hummed, which could be an entire conversation alone. "I thought as much. Do you want to talk about it?"

The care and concern had him telling his mother everything he'd learned on the phone. He also tried to explain the things Jessie hadn't said. Or he attempted to anyway.

"Have you seen her ... or Dylan lately?"

"Jessie's here?" Mary questioned. "In Swan Harbor?"

"Apparently," Cam replied "Jessie said she's waiting for her ankle to heal before going back to Boston. Can you check on her ... please?"

"I'll try," Mary promised. "But remember your father and I are flying out tomorrow night, right?"

"You're going away?"

"Yes, Honey," she reminded him. "We're going down to Florida for a month, just like we have for the last few years. Your father will play golf, and I'll read, relax, and catch up with friends."

For a split-second annoyance flooded Cam's system. Luckily, the rational side of his brain showed up before he said anything too stupid. "Oh, that's right. Well," he hesitated, "if you have a chance, I'd appreciate it."

"I said I would try," Mary answered. "I'll let you know. In the meantime,

why not email? You're good at that."

Cam could think of a few choice words, but since it was his mother, he told her to have a good trip and hung up. When he couldn't come up with someone else to check on Jessie for him, he took his mother's advice and emailed. After all, what did he have to lose?



Swan Harbor General

April 20

2:00 p.m.

IT HAD BEEN two months since her accident and Jessie could admit, silently at least, she was scared. Every other appointment, she'd come away hoping by her next visit, things would be better. Until today.

According to the specialist there was no physical reason she shouldn't be able to see. The swelling in her brain was gone. Her problems weren't caused by diabetes, macular degeneration, cataracts, or any other diseases of the eye. She had low vision. Which meant, she could see ... a little.

Her gray had brightened, leaving behind clouds and tunnels, at least that's what it felt like. When she looked out at the world around her, it was hazy, indistinct, almost as if she was standing in the middle of fog. The edges of her vision resembled her dreams, and the layers of darkness never went away.

As soon as the car stopped, Jessie knew they weren't home. "We aren't at home, are we?"

"No," Dylan released his seatbelt, and the seat creaked as he turned toward her, "but it is where we're going next."

The noise of a siren drew Jessie's attention to the building in front of her. "The hospital?" She could read Swan Harbor General Hospital on a large sign.

Dylan sighed. "We have an appointment in thirty minutes."

Jessie's stomach clinched with the implications of what he'd said. She didn't want anyone in Swan Harbor knowing what was going on. If she went inside, then her secret wouldn't stay a secret. "I can't go in there," she cried, not caring how irrational she sounded. "Dylan, take me home, please."

"Jessie, it's time," Dylan pleaded. "The doctor in Portland recommended we see a psychiatrist—"

"I can't," Jessie interrupted. "Please don't make me."

"Jessie," Dylan muttered. "I just ..."

She could hear the frustration in his voice. Except, she couldn't give in.

Somehow, she had to convince him to take her to see someone else.

"I'll go see anyone you want me to ... in Portland. Anyone."

Tears were running down her face, and there was a touch of hysteria in her voice. However, if she went into the hospital, that would mean

"Jessie," Dylan snapped. "Stop it."

"But—"

"I can't!" he all but screamed. "I love you, and I'm trying to do everything in my power for you. But ..." Dylan's voice faded, and somehow, she knew he was brushing his hand through his hair. "I can't drive you to Portland several times a week for therapy. I have a job, and my boss isn't happy with all the time I've missed. I just ..."

Jessie's heart ached. She was at a loss. Being a burden to the only family she had left wasn't what she wanted. This time, she couldn't even blame Catherine. The fault lay squarely on her own shoulders. While her blindness wasn't because of something inside of her, she was the only one holding back.

Why? What could she do about it?

Go inside and see what happens, her inner voice whispered.

Except, what if they told her she'd never get her eyesight back? She would be in Swan Harbor caught between Dylan and Catherine.

There was also the possibility that if she went inside, her sight would automatically return. That would mean back to Boston, so her brother could be happy.

And you would be miserable.

True, but she couldn't continue behaving like a brat. This was for Dylan. Just as with Cam, she'd do what she had to do.

"Okay, you win," she conceded. "I'll go."

"Don't look at it like that, Sis," Dylan pleaded. "I want you to get better ... for you. Don't you miss your life in Boston? Friends?"

How did she tell him the truth about Boston? Even if she didn't mention what she'd overheard, and told him she didn't want to skate any longer, what would he say?

"I don't mean to cramp your style, Dylan," Jessie sighed. "I know it's hard having me under your feet. Sometimes, I don't even like myself."

"Jessie, I don't—"

"There I go again," she gave him a self-deprecating smile, "feeling sorry for myself."

"You have every right to be upset," Dylan assured her. "And, I love having you home."

"You do?"

“Of course, I do,” he confirmed. “But is this the life you want to live? That’s the question you must ask yourself, isn’t it?”

“You sound like a shrink.”

Except she’d been asking herself the same question for quite a few months. There was a part of her that knew the answer and what steps she should take, but fear was holding her back.

“Not hardly,” Dylan replied. “But right through those doors, I know a good one, and she’s waiting for us. Are you ready?”

“Yeah, let’s go.” Jessie didn’t wait for Dylan to open her door, but let herself out and met him by the rear of the car. If she was lucky, they’d go straight to her appointment and not run into anyone else she knew. If she wasn’t lucky

.....

seven

Swan Harbor General

April 10

3:00 p.m.

WHEN THE AUTOMATIC DOORS OPENED, Jessie's senses were immediately assaulted. The smell of the antiseptic, and the sounds from the overhead intercom, reminded her of waking up just after her accident. Except that hospital was in Boston, where she didn't care if she saw someone she knew. Entering Swan Harbor General was different. Everyone knew her family, which made hiding her condition more difficult.

At one time, Jessie had been given instructions on how to navigate unfamiliar environments. However, whether it was stubbornness or denial, she hadn't been willing to listen. Her steps faltered, feeling like they were mired in mud.

"It's okay, Sis," Dylan murmured. "Just hold on to me."

He hooked her arm around his, which made her feel more secure. It also helped with the strong self-preservation running rampant inside – as it was fighting to hide the fact she couldn't see well.

They made it through the lobby and down one hall without seeing anyone they knew. However, as soon as they started down a second hallway, the sounds of heels had Jessie holding her breath.

Oh, no! Please not

"Dylan?"

Her luck had run out.

"And Jessie?"

The muscles in Dylan's arm tightened, as they stopped and turned toward the newcomer. "Catherine, what brings you to this side of the hospital?"

Jessie schooled her features and looked the other woman square in her eyes - or at least she hoped so. "Hello, Catherine."

"Why, why are you here?"

"You heard about my little accident," Jessie responded, as if it wasn't any

big deal. “Right?”

“Well, yeah,” Catherine admitted. “I mean, I knew Dylan had gone to Boston to check on you. I just ...”

The underlying tone in the other woman’s voice had Jessie wondering what Dylan had told her. “My ankle’s as good as new. We just have one more appointment today and then ...” she shrugged, aiming for nonchalance.

Dylan squeezed her fingers and stepped far enough away to kiss Catherine on the cheek. “I’m sorry, I’ve not touched base lately, but with Jessie and work ...”

“It’s okay, Dylan,” Catherine assured him, the sugar in her voice making Jessie’s teeth hurt. “I’ve been busy with my new job and all.”

Don’t ask. Don’t ask, Jessie chanted internally. Except the manners her mom had encouraged over and over, snuck up, “What is it, you do?”

“You didn’t tell her?” Catherine questioned Dylan in a *‘how could you not have told her?’* voice.

“Well, I have been a little busy,” he began.

Only to have Catherine interrupt with, “I’m the assistant to the administrator. It’s a very important job, you know?”

Jessie had to bite her tongue to keep from asking if that was another description for a secretary or gopher, but in the end smiled and said, “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Catherine responded in her saccharine sweet voice. “Tell everyone in Boston hello when you get back there.”

While Catherine said goodbye to her brother, Jessie took a small step to her left and placed her hand on the wall. The strain of pretending was wearing thin, and if they couldn’t continue on their way in a minute, she might scream.

“You didn’t tell Catherine about your vision.” The censor in Dylan’s voice had her blinking back tears of frustration when they resumed walking.

“Sorry, I just ...” The words died, as what could she say that hadn’t been said before.

“We’re here.”

Dylan opened the door and as soon as Jessie stepped over the threshold, her heart rate skyrocketed. She closed her hands into fists so tightly her nails dug into her palms. But it was the only way to keep them from shaking.

She’d spent more days than she cared to remember in these offices, waiting to speak with her grief counselor. If she walked to the left, she’d happen upon Merlene’s office. And to the right

“Jessie,” her name whispered in that soothing voice settled her. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Even though she'd promised herself she wouldn't cry, tears instantly sprang to Jessie's eyes. "Hi, Mary." She brushed the wetness away. "Thank you for seeing me."

Doctor Mary Hunter, Psychiatrist, had been Ruth Prince's best friend. With her blonde hair, sparkling brown eyes, and infectious laugh, people were drawn to her. To Jessie and Dylan, she'd been their lifeboat when their world had fallen apart.

"Hey, Sweet Girl," Mary murmured. "Come sit so we can talk."

As Jessie walked into Mary's office, she tried to make sense of the multitude of feelings inside. There was relief, because she was talking to someone she knew and trusted. That was mixed with worry about what came next. And wrapped around them all was panic that her secret was out.

Once she was settled, Mary explained that the continued vision problems were psychosomatic. Which somehow didn't surprise Jessie. It only reiterated what she'd kind of figured out herself. That for some reason, *she* was causing the problem. And she was the one who needed to fix it.

Except how did she go about doing that? Was working with the woman she thought of as her second mother the answer? Could Mary help her understand the internal stress she was feeling?

A bright pattern on the carpet caught her attention, and an image of a small girl sitting on the floor flitted through her mind. She felt a silly smile cross her face.

"What are you thinking about?"

Mary's voice sounded far away, and it took Jessie several minutes to float up from the memory. "Did I ever play here when I was really young?"

"You remember that?" Mary asked sounding surprised.

"I think so." Jessie wrinkled her nose as the images began to play in her head. "I had my Polly Pocket dolls with me."

"And Cameron kept stealing them," Mary replied with a laugh.

"Cam was there?" Jessie dove back into the picture, searching until she located the scene. She was sitting on the floor playing with her dolls, and he had a pile of blocks in front of him. "He was building ... I think."

"Legos," Mary confirmed. "I should have known Cameron would grow up to be an architect. That boy was always carrying around a backpack full of those blocks. And even when you two were young, he always had a soft spot for you."

Jessie ducked her head, fighting not to let her smile fly free. "Speaking of Cam ..."

"You don't want him to know, do you?"

"No," Jessie admitted. "Cam would be on the first plane home."

"I hate keeping secrets from my family." Mary lightly touched the small scar on Jessie's forehead. "In here though, I'm your doctor. What we talk about stays between us."

It wasn't a matter of not trusting Cam's mother. Nor was it a matter of not trusting her doctor. It had more to do with the fact once something had been said out loud, then it had to be handled.

"Is that anything I say?"

"Anything," Mary confirmed.

"I, I think they may be right," Jessie admitted.

"Right about what?"

While Jessie couldn't see the tiny nuances of Mary's expression, she knew she was being studied. "I'm feeling internal stress." She took a deep breath and put the rest of it out there. "I don't want to be in Boston any longer."

Mary's quick inhalation said that hadn't been what she'd expected. "Do you want to stay here?"

"Oh, no," Jessie quickly pushed that idea away. "I want to go to the University of Maine with Sadie and Cassie."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Mary exclaimed. "But," she paused a beat, and Jessie knew just where the conversation would go. "SAT scores, applications, etcetera. It's long past admission dates for the fall."

"I know it's late," Jessie acknowledged. "And I understand it's a long shot. However, they have rolling admission, so maybe ..."

"You really want this, don't you?" There was a hint of something in Mary's voice that had Jessie relaxing.

"Yes, I do."

"Then I'm with you." Mary's happiness lightened Jessie's heart even more. "I think your mother would approve."

The feelings that rushed through Jessie with that statement were more than she'd expected. She understood that passing the exam might not be easy. However, she also understood that each problem needed to be taken a step at a time. First school, and then Catherine.

Six Weeks Later ...

Jessie's Home

June 10

7:00 a.m.

JESSIE PULLED one of Cam's old Swan Harbor High sweatshirts from a drawer and slipped it over her head. It was too big, and even though she'd not worn it for years, she could still smell him. Wearing it was comforting. The butterflies, however, were still busy in her stomach, and she couldn't stay still.

Her mind was spinning in multiple directions with everything that the last six weeks had brought. It had been a time full of growth and eye-opening situations. Some of them just okay, most of them, though, positive, giving her new insights into who she'd been, who she was, and who she wanted to be.

It hadn't happened overnight. Somehow, Jessie had gotten it in her head that as soon as she'd told her secret – her eyesight would magically appear. When that hadn't happened, she'd been left discouraged. Until she'd started studying for the SAT. Then, she'd felt as if she was on the right path.

However, even with a positive attitude, there were still pockets of fear inside. What if her scores on the SAT were low? Or if the University of Maine refused to admit her at such a late date? And what about Dylan and Catherine? How should she handle that? There was also the fear Cam would find out about her accident. If that happened, how would she explain?

Some days, the list of problems felt insurmountable. On those days the darkness that hung out on the fringes seemed to grow closer. However, at other times, she was able to follow Mary's advice and take the problems one at a time.

Her biggest obstacle so far had to do with taking the college admittance exam. Because of her low vision, Jessie had asked for several concessions. Special lighting, larger font, thicker paper, and nearby computers allowed her to complete the test alone. Once that was over, she'd felt a huge sense of accomplishment, and the possibility of independence had seemed real.

That had been the day Mary had taken her to lunch, and she'd met Hayden, Sally's eleven-year-old nephew. With his parents gone, he'd moved across the country to live with people he barely knew. One look at him, and Jessie had known what he was feeling. She'd decided, if he needed to talk – she would be there for him.

Somehow, though, helping him began to help *her*. She'd started to see how much she'd always depended on others. Her parents, Cam, and Dylan, and even the coaches in Boston. Sharing her story with Hayden had been liberating in many ways. It had shown her that helping others made her feel good.

Except the longer she felt like her life was in limbo, the more she worried about who knew her secrets ... and who didn't. While Cam still didn't know, his family did, as did Sally and Hayden, Dylan, and a few others. The longer her vision was distorted, the more the wagons circled around.

They'd done a good job of protecting her and Cam. Now, though, it was all

on her. When he arrived, she had to have the right words to explain everything. Maybe then, they could go forward – together.



Jessie's Home

June 10

7:30 a.m.

AFTER TRAVELING the better part of twenty-four hours, Cam had fallen into bed, assuming he'd be asleep before his head hit the pillow. Unfortunately, that hadn't happened. He'd wanted to blame it on the fact his internal clock was still on U.K. time. Instead, he'd finally acknowledged it all revolved around Jessie.

For two months, he'd known something was off. Yet, every time he'd said something – asked someone, he'd gotten the same answer. It's Jessie's story. She has to be the one to tell you. Except, what the hell did that mean?

Cam grunted with frustration and rolled over. His eyes drifted shut, and then – just like the other times, his mind clicked back on. Finally, he gave up. His heart was trying to tell him something, and it was time he listened. Especially, since his princess was in Swan Harbor, and he had no idea for how long.

He jumped from the bed and into an invigorating shower. With the cobwebs temporarily dispersed, Cam grabbed a bagel on his way out the door and headed toward the Prince home. There were questions that needed answering, and the faster that happened, the better.

The streets were quiet, and before he'd really formulated what he was going to say, Cam turned onto the Prince family drive. As soon as he did, he sensed things were off ... different. During the holidays, Jessie had hounded Dylan until he'd brought out all the decorations and strung lights from one side to the other. Any other year, those would have been removed not long after the first, but yet, six months later the lights still hung from the eaves.

"Oh, Princess." Cam climbed from the truck and jogged up the steps, his stomach tied in knots. "It's going to be bad, isn't it?" He knocked, and while he waited for the door to be opened, his palms started sweating.

"Yeah?!" Dylan bellowed. Then, as if he'd just registered who it was, relaxed slightly, "Oh, Cam. It's you."

The gruff voice of the man who opened the door was a shock, but not as surprising as his appearance. His clothes looked like he'd been wearing them for days. Dark blond stubble covered his face, and his hair was sticking up at odd

angles. What was most telling about his state of mind though, were his eyes. Dylan's eyes usually sparkled with life and light, but the ones looking back at him were bloodshot, as if he'd been drinking too much, several nights in a row.

"Dylan," Cam asked hesitantly, "what's going on?"

Was he prepared for what was going on inside the walls of the house? floated through his head as he stepped in the door. The same feelings of neglect and disarray he'd recognized from the outside continued inside the house. The air was stale, and there were piles of clutter and chaos everywhere. This wasn't the cozy Prince home he was used to seeing.

Cam stared at Jessie's brother, slouched half-asleep on the sofa. "What's going on, Dylan? You look horrible."

A yawn so large Cam heard Dylan's jaw pop kept him from answering immediately.

"Watch it, Kid," the other man slurred. "I'm tired. Been working extra shifts."

It was summer, so maybe that made sense, but Cam still got the feeling more was going on. "Where's Jessie? I heard she's been home for months."

Dylan stared at him so long, Cam wasn't sure he would get a response. Finally, he offered, "There was an accident."

"Well, hell, Dylan," Cam barked impatiently, "I know about the accident. But why is Jessie still here? She led me to believe she was fine."

"Jessie lied," Dylan's words had Cam stepping back in shock. "She's blind."

His blunt response had Cam clearing off a place to sit. "Why is this the first I've heard about it? What's being done?"

"It's Jessie's—"

"Don't give me the '*it's Jessie's story*' line," Cam snapped. "I need to know what's going on."

"Look," Dylan took a deep breath, and his voice came out stronger than when Cam had arrived. "Jessie is an adult. I might not have agreed with her decision not to share her disability, but it was *her* decision. Talk to her."

Which was all true, Cam decided. However, he still needed to know what to expect before he talked to her. "Jessie sees nothing?"

"Sorry," Dylan muttered. "I shouldn't have blurted out she's blind. I should have said she has low vision."

"Which means what exactly?" Cam scoffed, working to maintain his temper.

"She sees," Dylan sighed, "but not clearly. I'm sure she can explain it better."

Cam took a deep breath and relaxed back in his chair. "How's Jessie handling all this?"

Dylan ran a hand through his already mussed hair. "Initially, while it kept her off the ice, Jessie treated it like she expected to wake up one day and she could see again. Then days turned into weeks, which turned into months. One minute, she was anxious, the next introspective. She did a lot of thinking and not much sharing."

"Thinking," Cam grouched, "about what?"

"No idea," Dylan admitted. "Jessie has been spending time on the computer, and with your mom. Since she didn't seem unhappy, I didn't push."

The knowledge she'd been with his mom and on the computer was a bit disconcerting. He'd sent Jessie several emails, but her responses had been brief, making him feel like the internet hadn't been a priority. What could she have been doing?

"My mom said nothing."

"Doctor-patient thing," Dylan pointed out.

"Maybe," Cam mumbled. "It still doesn't explain why she didn't tell me. We're friends. I could have helped."

"Jessie knows that, Cam," Dylan assured him. "She was worried you would drop everything and run home."

Which was true, Cam thought. Something Jessie had known, as well. That didn't make it any easier. He'd helped her after her parents' death, and there was a piece of him that was pissed she hadn't told him the entire truth ... no matter what. The thought of her having to go through something like this alone was tearing him up inside, and he wasn't sure how to handle the feeling.

Except she wasn't alone. She had your mother.

Which was another part of the entire situation that annoyed him. Cam hated being left out of the loop.

"Will she see me?"

"I don't know," Dylan sighed. "Jessie's upstairs, if you want to try. I'm tired, and heading to bed for a few hours before I have to be back at work. Good luck!" He smirked just before he disappeared down the hallway. "You'll need it."

Of that, Cam had no doubt. Jessie was stubborn and fiercely independent, but for her to hold something this serious back from him, felt unnatural and a little unsettling.

But why shouldn't she?

Where that thought came from, he wouldn't explore. As far as he was concerned, they were a team. He just had to convince Jessie of that.

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Jessie's Home

June 10

7:45 a.m.

CAM TOOK the stairs two at a time, fighting not to focus on his own emotions. Anger, hurt, and what felt a little like betrayal were at war inside his head. But this wasn't about him. This was about Jessie.

When he reached the landing, the same feeling of neglect he'd noticed downstairs remained. There was a burned-out bulb on one end of the hall, and the only door opened was the one belonging to the bath. The rest were closed, blocking out any light from the outside.

As if being pulled by a string, Cam headed toward her door, and couldn't help but think, it was quiet ... almost too quiet. There was no music nor voices from the television. Which at any other time would have meant no one was home. In fact, it was so quiet, he wondered if Jessie had run, her walls once again back in place.

Her bedroom door was ajar, and with a soft push, it swung open. Jessie was lying in the middle of her bed, wrapped in one of his old sweatshirts. Headphones covered her ears, and her hands tapped the beat of the music on her flat stomach.

Seeing her lightened the worry he'd been carrying since talking with Dylan. But frustration at the situation had him holding tight to the door-facing to keep from rushing to her side.

Cam tore his gaze from her delicate frame and quickly scanned her room. The same purple walls he and his brother had been coerced into helping, Dylan and James, paint for Jessie's fourteenth birthday. The same old posters which provided bits of insight into her childhood passions. And the same stuffed animals were in a pile in a corner.

The same, yet not the same, Cam thought, as a prickle of awareness had him turning his attention back to the bed. He could have sworn her eyes lit up when they connected with his.

“Cam?”

Hearing her soft voice propelled him across the room. “Hey there, Sugar.” He picked her up and settled her on his lap.

“Sugar?” Jessie rolled her eyes. “I don’t think so.”

She curled against him, and he couldn’t help but tighten his arms around her. Nor could he stop from burying his face in her sweet-smelling hair.

“You win ... Princess.” But that wasn’t anything new. Jessie always won. Cam sat there for a few more minutes before his impatience had the question, “Why didn’t you tell me?” bursting forth.

“Why?” There was a touch of uncertainty in her voice making him wonder if he would get the run around. “You can’t tell me you’ve never made decisions for my own good.”

“Well, hell, Princess, that’s—”

“Don’t tell me that’s different,” she snapped, her old fire rearing its head. “My inclination was to make sure you didn’t ignore what you were supposed to be doing.” Jessie scrambled from his lap to pace around the room, “Besides, it’s over, a moot point. You finished your semester, and I did what I needed to do.”

“And what was that?” Cam fired back, already angry to be put on the defensive.

“Things,” she replied, absently stacking the books on her desk. “Just things.” Jessie turned back toward the bed, her body language defiant.

“Things?” he mocked, sauntering closer. “Dylan didn’t mention taking you to Sonny’s to skate, just that you spent time with my mom. What was that about anyway?”

Jessie arched a thin brow. “Who are you to question what I do?”

A part of him knew she was pushing his buttons. However, it didn’t stop him from closing the distance between them. “I’m the man who ...” his words died as his green eyes clashed with her turquoise ones. They weren’t vacant as he’d thought they’d be. Nor had they lost any of their power to tear him apart.

Cam took one more step, cupped her elbows, and pulled her against his chest. There was a moment of satisfaction when her eyes widened, but then her gaze dropped to his lips.

“This.” He dropped a feather-light kiss on her mouth. “This.” Cam repeated the movement, this time a little harder. “This right here gives me rights to worry.”

His lips covered hers in a kiss he tried to control, but couldn’t. He was feeling too much, and all that was inside came pouring out.

Her hands tangled in his hair, tugging him closer to her fire. It was a contest of wills as their lips, teeth and tongues fought for superiority. The sound of their

breathing echoed in the room, chasing the anger away, leaving behind want and need.

Cam wrenched his mouth from hers. "Wait."



"WAIT?" Jessie's fog-filled brain wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. "But, I like." And she did. She loved kissing Cam. Plus, as long as his mouth was busy, she wouldn't have to worry about those questions she might not be ready to answer.

"I like too, Princess." Cam kissed her again. "But we need to ta—"

Jessie cut off his words, locking their mouths together. It had been so long since he'd held her, she needed to be in his arms just a little longer. His kisses had always been like a drug, enticing her to take a little more, to stay a little longer. He tasted like flavored coffee, smelled like his cologne, and felt like home.

Cam wrapped his hand around her hair, holding her head still. "Jessie, not that I don't ... love ... what we're doing, but I will not allow you to distract me."

She dropped her head against his chest. "What do you want to know?"

Talking about everything wasn't high on her list – but she might as well get it over with. She knew Cam, and he wouldn't let it go. In the meantime, there were things she'd share, and other things that, well

Jessie fought to maintain eye contact as Cam studied her, making her feel as if he were trying to read her mind. The longer he stared, the more she wanted to be able to *see* him. Then, she'd be able to read his expressions, which would give her some idea of what types of questions to expect.

"Come sit." Cam settled her on the bed next to him. "Tell me what happened."

"I told you," Jessie huffed. "I skated over a wire and fell."

"Come on, Princess," Cam taunted. "You can do better than that. Where were you? Why was the wire there?"

Question after question came pouring out. Ones she'd expected him to ask but had done everything in her power to ignore. Jessie leaned into him, worrying her bottom lip, a habit that had gotten worse since her accident.

"It was," she began, "just before the party, and I was stalling ..."

"You didn't want to go?"

"Hardly," she admitted with a humorless laugh. "I learned to hate those parties."

"Why?"

What could she say that wouldn't have him wanting to take someone on to

defend her honor? “It all felt,” she shrugged, “pretentious. Besides, I was tired.”

There were things she held back, such as Catherine’s part in everything, but the rest, she shared. Even the fact she’d decided she didn’t want to skate any longer came pouring out. She heard Cam’s breath hitch when she told him her vision issues were psychosomatic and that was why she’d initially ended up in his mother’s office.

“What can you see?”

“It’s hazy.” Jessie tilted her face toward his, “Kind of like looking through a window that has some condensation on it. Except ...”

“Except?” Cam pushed her to continue.

“You know how when you look through a tube?”

“And can only see straight ahead?”

“Yes,” Jessie hummed. “Now, that’s how I see.”

“Now?”

“Now,” she repeated. “It’s gotten better. Now, though, I’ve lost my peripheral vision. Except, the colors are more gray than black.”

“It’s gotten better?”

“A little.” Jessie cupped his jaw. “I can see this.”

Cam’s hand covered hers where it rubbed back and forth over his scruff. “It’s fairly new,” he murmured. “I thought it made me look sexy.”

“Hmm, I like it.” She wasn’t going to tell him he looked sexy with it, as his ego was big enough without her help.

“You didn’t think it was too rough?” he asked, the tenor of his voice low and sexy.

Jessie felt her cheeks heat because when he’d kissed her, she’d been so lost in the moment, she hadn’t even noticed. “No.” She rubbed her cheek against his beard. “It makes you look very mature.”

“Really?” Cam yawned, quickly covering his mouth. “Sorry. I couldn’t sleep until I saw you.”

“Well,” Jessie replied. “You’ve seen me, so go home and sleep.”

“Oh, Princess,” he breathed, “are you trying to get rid of me?”

His nearness had Jessie’s heart racing, and she wanted nothing more than to spend a few hours in his arms. However, there were still a few things she’d yet to share, such as her plans. Which, thankfully, his tired brain had yet to process.

“Come on,” she tugged on his hand, “you can come back later.”

Cam didn’t argue and followed almost docilely down the stairs. “Now, Jessie,” he looped his arm around her and pulled her close. “If I come back later, what did you have in mind?”

The sexy timbre of his voice sent a thrill through her system, but he was

making her head spin. "I thought you could take me skating."

A frown came and went on his face so fast she thought she imagined it. "Jessie," he placed his hands on his hips, "did I miss something?"

"It depen—"

Except Cam forged ahead, not giving her any chance to argue. "You fell and hit your head, right?"

"Yes."

Cam stepped closer, then held his arms up on each side of her, two fingers on one hand and three on the other. "You can't see how many fingers I'm holding up, right?"

"Well, no," she snapped. "I told you that."

"So, how do you expect to see where you are on the ice?"

Jessie stared at him a handful of heartbeats, hoping her vision would clear and she could see the subtle expressions on his face. His voice sounded curious, but she wondered his intent. Without those cues, she couldn't be sure.

"You'll be my eyes, Silly," she tossed at him playfully. "Now, go sleep."

Cam took her hand and lightly nuzzled her temple. "But, Jessie," he whispered, in a tone meant to wheedle information from her. "Are you sure skating is a good idea?"

The longer she was with him, the more her resolve weakened. It would be so easy to step into his arms. He'd only been back a day and already so much had changed. Plus, he was confusing her.

"Trust me." Jessie pushed up on her toes, kissed his cheek and somehow manipulated him out the door before he could offer any more arguments.

When he was gone, she couldn't keep the silly grin off her face. The box she'd closed her feelings for Cam in had just crumbled, and she had no clue what she was supposed to do.

Good thing Sadie and Cassie were coming home, because she needed some pointers ... sooner rather than later.



Cam's Home

June 10

10:00 a.m.

CAM WAS STILL in a daze when he arrived home. He'd gone over to Jessie's expecting a kitten and ended up finding a fox. But the memory of how she'd defended her decision, when compared to the woman who'd curled against him,

had him backtracking. She was a fox with a smattering of kitten and a slice of lioness.

Somewhere, though, he was missing a piece of information. He just wasn't sure what it was. Except, his Jessie radar told him, if he didn't catch up soon, she'd run off and leave him. That wasn't something he was willing to risk.

He tossed his keys on the table and followed his nose to the kitchen. "Mom?" Cam called over the noise of the mixer.

"Cameron!" Mary stopped what she was doing to give him a hug. "Welcome home."

"You're not at work," he noted with surprise.

"Still as observant as ever," she teased. "I thought I would make you breakfast, and we'd catch up."

"But ... you don't cook," Cam frowned. "Is something wrong?"

Mary laughed. "Can't a mother cook for her wayward son if she wants?"

"Well, sure." Cam thought longingly of his comfortable mattress upstairs. "I was just going up to bed."

His mother's brown eyes met his. "Sit down and have a few pancakes." She continued stirring for several minutes before adding quietly, "Please."

"Can I help?"

"Sit."

While she poured pancake batter on the griddle and checked on the bacon in the microwave, Mary filled him in on what had happened in town. Except, every time, he thought she might 'fill him in' on Jessie, she'd skip to another topic.

Finally, she set a plate on the table in front of him and gave him the opening he'd been waiting on.

"Did you just come back from seeing Jessie?"

"Yes," Cam grumbled. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, it wasn't—"

"Don't say it was Jessie's story," Cam jumped in. "You said that when I was in England. Hell, even Dylan told me the same thing, but ..." He bit off the rest of what he'd been going to say. It was too late to change the story. "It would have been nice to be warned, though."

"What could you have done that wasn't being done?" she asked, in her too reasonable mom voice.

"I could have ..." Except his mother was only speaking the truth. Even if he'd come back early, there wasn't anything he could have done. "You're right," he admitted. "I just ..."

"I understand," Mary conceded. "But this is Jessie's fight. And she's come

a long way.”

“Jessie said her vision problems are because she’s having internal stress,” Cam murmured. “Do you know what that is?”

“She’s shared,” Mary replied. “However, I don’t think I know all of it.”

“Walls,” he sighed. “Jessie is good at building walls.”

The possibility of having to once again scale those walls frustrated him. Except, the woman he’d held ... kissed ... those walls were different than the Jessie of the past. Would it be easier for him to get around them this time?

“You know, Cam,” Mary carried their breakfast dishes to the sink, “I don’t think you need to worry about Jessie. She’s going to be just fine.”

“Then what should I do?”

“What do you think you should do?” she turned the question back at him.

Kiss her some more was the first thing that popped into his head, but he wasn’t so sure that was the appropriate thing to say.

“Be her friend,” Cam finally responded, knowing that’s what his mother expected him to say.

“That’s a start.”

The look on her face made him think his mom knew more about his feelings than she’d let on. But with lethargy suddenly weighing him down, he opted not to follow up.

“I think I’ll head to bed now. I’ve lost count of the hours I’ve been awake.”

“Do you think you have enough energy to unpack first?” Mary closed the dishwasher and followed him from the room. “I’ll do your laundry while you’re sleeping ... that is, if you brought home dirty clothes.”

“Oh, just a few,” he quipped.

“That’s what I thought.” At the top of the stairs, she turned in the opposite direction. “Just drop them in the bathroom.”

“Sweet. Oh, and Mom,” what he was going to ask came back around, “Jessie wants me to take her skating. Do you think that’s a good idea?”

A huge smile crossed Mary’s face, “I think Jessie is getting to know Jessie,” she responded in her cryptic way. “Let her spread her wings.”

Cam nodded absently, but as he unpacked, he had the feeling there was more to that message than he understood.



Jessie’s Home

June 10

6:30 p.m.

JESSIE'S DAY had been productive. She'd received good news in the mail. Then spent several hours on the phone planning her future. Once that had been taken care of, it had been difficult keeping her excitement to herself. Except, she still had one hurdle to jump ... and that involved explaining what she could to Dylan.

That she hadn't told him she was studying for the SAT and wanted to go to college gave her slight pause. She'd convinced herself it was because she'd not wanted to hear the disappointment in his voice if she failed. With the results in, though, she couldn't delay any longer.

Dylan sauntered from his room, buttoning his uniform shirt. "Is everything okay, Sis?"

"Yeah, why?" She wiped her palms on her pants and took two glasses from the cabinet.

"Well, you said you needed to talk to me." Dylan moved in sync with her, anticipating what had to be done, and placing food on their plates. "Here, let me." He reached for the glass she was filling with ice.

"I can do it." Jessie jerked the glass away, and the quick movement almost had it slipping from her hand. "Damn!" Except, she didn't like how irrational she'd sounded and relented, "Sorry."

Dylan was quiet while he helped her get dinner on the table, before asking in his calm way, "Why don't you tell me what's got you so riled up. Was it seeing Cameron?"

"No," she muttered. "I just need to tell you something, and I'm afraid you're going to be mad."

"Come on, Jess," Dylan cajoled. "You're my sister and you can tell me anything."

His comment had tears rushing to her eyes. "Can we eat and then talk?" she asked, needing to wait a bit longer.

"Sure, Sis," he agreed, which settled her butterflies ... slightly.

Thirty minutes later, Jessie picked up the letters and sat on a sofa across from Dylan. "I need to know something before I go any farther." She kept twisting her fingers together, trying to keep her hands steady.

"What is it, Jess?" Dylan sounded tired, but again, without being able to see the little nuances of his expression, she was left to guess ... or be quiet.

"Why didn't you tell Catherine about my injuries?"

That one question had been swimming around inside her head since April. If it was because they had broken up, that could change what she would say, but if not ...

While Jessie couldn't see clearly, she could tell Dylan was running his hand through his hair. Finally, he leaned forward and clasped his hands together.

“Honestly, I thought I had.”

“What?” Several scenarios rushed through Jessie’s mind. “How could you *think* you told her?”

He didn’t immediately offer an answer, and her mind’s eye filled in the blanks from memory. While he worked through what he wanted to say, he would shift his body from leaning forward to leaning back in the chair. And then, if he was still at a loss, he’d nibble on his left thumb cuticle.

“Dylan?”

He hesitated a second before offering, “Catherine was out of town on hospital business when I got the call. You were the only thing I was focusing on.”

Which was part of the problem, Jessie thought. Especially since Catherine wanted her out of the way so she could have Dylan to herself.

“Then for three days,” he continued in a husky voice. “You were in a coma, and all I thought about was I couldn’t lose you too. It was a horrible time.”

Jessie blinked, remembering him talking to her while she was in the hospital. But the only thing that really stuck out in her memory was the emotion in his voice and not the words.

“What about when I woke up?”

“You were still my primary focus,” Dylan answered.

There was a part of her that felt like she could take everything Dylan said at face value. Especially since he’d never been a person who overly shared. Except it didn’t fit with the hospital visit. At that time, he’d been waiting for her to tell Catherine about her vision issues. Which made her wonder if both of them were guilty of holding back.

Was Dylan aware Catherine was jealous and feeling the need to protect his sister?

“Are you still dating?” Jessie blurted. “She hasn’t been around.”

“You didn’t want anyone to know about your vision issues,” he reminded her. “No one has visited until Cameron. Even your sessions with Mary were away from the house.”

When Dylan didn’t pursue that line of conversation any further, she let out the breath she was holding, “Is Catherine the one?”

He let go of a laugh. “You don’t ask the easy ones, do you, Jess?”

“Well?”

Dylan fidgeted for a handful of seconds, “I want what mom and dad had ... or what Mary and Clint have, and ... I’m not sure if—”

“If Catherine is the one,” Jessie filled in the blanks.

“Maybe,” he replied absently. “Anyway, was Catherine what you wanted to

talk to me about?”

Jessie pulled the letters out from under her legs. “Kind of. Here.”

She shoved them toward him, fighting to sit still. While he was reading, her bottom lip found its way between her teeth, and she kept playing with her fingers, trying to steady her nerves. Dylan looked up a few times, and she was sure his expression was a mixture of delight and surprise.

“Well?” Jessie pushed, once he was done reading but still hadn’t said anything. “Are you okay with my decision?”

“Am I okay?” he repeated quietly. “Oh, Jess.”

Jessie squeaked when he jumped up and pulled her into his arms.

“I’m very okay with it! And Jess,” Dylan stepped back far enough so she had to tilt her head up slightly, “I’m very proud of you.”

“Thanks.” She buried her head against his shoulder. “I’m kind of proud of me too.”

“You should be,” Dylan congratulated her again. “I have a few questions though.”

Jessie stepped out of his arms, “Okay. Have time for some ice cream?”

When he chuckled, a layer of guilt for keeping things from him slid away, lightening her load, and somehow, she knew everything would be okay.

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Jessie's Home

June 11

11:00 a.m.

THE NEXT DAY, Cam was still trying to process everything he'd learned. Jessie, not wanting to skate any longer, wasn't a big deal. In fact, if he were honest with himself, it was very good, because it meant they could be together. Except, if she'd stopped enjoying skating prior to the accident, why hadn't she said something? That was a question he wanted answered.

"Let her spread her wings," his mother said. Except, what did that mean? Especially if Jessie really didn't want to go back to Boston. That his princess had given him bits of information and then distracted him on purpose, had him curious. He had a question or two for her before he took her to Sonny's.

"My vision issues are psychosomatic," Jessie explained.

"She's shared a little," his mother replied.

"Sometimes there's a black hole that threatens to engulf me, and I disappear," Jessie had told him right after her parents' death.

Was that why she wanted to go to Sonny's? Would skating blow the darkness away and clear her vision?

"I think Jessie will be just fine." Mary promised.

Of that, he knew – as he planned to do everything in his power to assure it.

Cam stepped from his truck, ready with his list of questions. Except, Jessie wasn't waiting for him in the manner he'd expected. He found her pacing from one end of the porch to the other.

"Jess," he called several times before she'd acknowledged his presence.

"Oh, hi," Jessie responded nervously.

Her top teeth holding her full bottom lip captive caught his attention. "Is that all?"

"What?" she frowned. "Should I have said, 'Oh, hello, Cam?' Or were you expecting me to ask where you'd been?"

The comments spouted in such a waspish manner shouldn't have turned

him on, but they did. “No, Sugar,” he grinned, knowing she’d have a thing or two to say about his use of that word. “I was thinking, you forgot something.” He tapped his bottom lip and waited with bated breath.

Jessie’s gaze traveled to where his finger rested, and he saw indecision come and go. Suddenly, she jumped, and tugged his mouth down to meet hers.

The kiss was everything he remembered. This time, he took advantage of what she offered.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it back last night.” After every word or so, Cam dove back in, taking whatever she was willing to give.

“I spoke to your mom,” Jessie admitted.

In the past, that might have surprised him. However, considering their recent relationship, he should have expected it.

“Do you still want to go, or ...?” The minute he’d opened his mouth, he could have kicked his own behind. There were questions that needed answers, and there was no time like the present.

“In a minute,” she took a step back, “sit with me?”

Cam stared into her blue eyes, cloudy but not from her vision issues. There was something going on she wanted to talk about.

“Of course.”



JESSIE WASN’T sure why she was so nervous. Cam would be happy for her. Of that, she was sure. However, once he knew, everything became real. Which meant the feelings they’d been tap-dancing around for years would need to be addressed.

“Here.” She handed him her acceptance letter. “I know after our talk yesterday, you have questions. This should answer them.”

Cam’s eyes darkened with concern. Then, he took the envelope and slid the paper out. While he was reading, it was impossible to look away. She was hoping for a sign. Happiness, anger, excitement, something to give her an idea of what he was thinking.

“Well?” Jessie pushed when he remained quiet, after he’d refolded the letter.

“Congratulations, Jess.” Cam appeared happy. He also sounded confused, which had her preparing for his questions. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Do you need to know everything?” Jessie pushed up from the swing and put a little distance between them.

“I ...” he tilted his head, studying her, and she swore she wouldn’t be the

first to break. “No, not everything ... but this is big.”

Stop it, Jess, her internal voice scolded. *Listen!*

“I’m sorry,” Jessie sat back down and angled toward him. “No one knew, not even Dylan,” she explained, hoping to take away a little of the sting. “This was for me. And you know what? It feels amazing.”

Cam cupped her jaw, and his thumb settled in the center of her chin. “I’m proud of you, Princess.” Then, he kissed her, one so tender, her senses came alive. Her breath stuck in her throat, her heart raced, and goosebumps rushed from the point of impact. “So ...” he murmured against her mouth, “we have the summer together?”

The huskiness of his voice had her wanting to crawl into his lap and wrap herself around him. However, the way he was making her head swim, had her tightening her butt muscles to stay firmly planted.

“Yes,” barely escaped before he kissed her again, this one just as electric.

“Good,” he whispered. “I’m sure we can find some things to do.”

He angled her head just enough for him to lock their mouths together and deepen the kiss. Jessie gave him whatever he wanted. She took whatever he was willing to give. And it wasn’t long before Cam scooped her up and lifted her onto his lap.

After years of imagining what being in his arms felt like, she realized her dreams were nothing like the reality. The way he brushed his hand up and down her back, the heat from his chest, and the way his body hardened against her hip made her skin come alive. She wanted closer ... but was unsure how to get there.

Time lost all meaning, until a car door slammed, penetrating the fog surrounding her.

“Dylan!” Jessie jumped off Cam’s lap ready to face her brother. Until she realized her mouth probably looked well-kissed.

“I’ll get my skates,” she suddenly blurted before running into the house, leaving Cam to fend on his own.



CAM’S THOUGHTS WERE SLUGGISH, but he had the wherewithal to fold one leg over the other just as Jessie’s brother ran up the steps.

“Isn’t that great about Jessie?” he offered. “I bet you’re happy she’ll be close. I must admit I was a little taken aback when she told me, but...” When he saw the *‘what the hell’s got into you’* look on the other man’s face, Cam bit off the rest of what he was going to say. After all, he’d been rambling.

“What’s going on?” Dylan asked, instead of answering the multiple

questions he'd been tossed.

Hell would need to do the proverbial freeze before he would share exactly what had been going on, Cam decided. He took a breath and started again. "I came to take Jessie skating." His answer was the safest. "My mom thought it would be a good idea."

Dylan was watching him, but Cam couldn't make himself maintain eye contact too long. Something told him if he did, his feelings for Jessie were there for all to see.

"Mary thought it would be safe?" Dylan asked softly.

"Mom suggested I let Jessie spread her wings." Which Cam thought an interesting analogy, considering what his princess reminded him of every time she skated.

"Seems our Jessie is spreading her wings," Dylan hesitated a beat, "in more ways than one. Take care of her," he quipped on his way inside.

Cam had to work to keep his mouth closed as he processed the double meaning behind the words. However, before he could consider them any further, Jessie returned, with her skate bag slung over her shoulder and her eyes shining.

"Ready?" She headed toward his car, her eagerness evident in every step.

"Are you in a hurry, Princess?" he teased.

Jessie tossed a sexy smile over her shoulder and climbed into his truck. It made him think about being alone and helping himself to more kisses. And that thought had him turning right out of her driveway, instead of left.

"Where are we going?" she asked suspiciously.

"To Sonny's."

"Okay," Jessie stretched out the word. "Why are we going the long way?"

Cam snatched her hand and interlocked their fingers. "What if I say, I'd like a little more time alone with you?"

Her quick inhalation, and the tightening of her fingers around his told him the idea wasn't all bad. However, since he couldn't take her where he wanted ... yet ... he opted for a drive by instead.

"I thought I'd show you something."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

With Lover's Cove up ahead, Cam slowed down and wondered what Jessie would say if he pulled into the parking lot. No, they weren't ready for the commitment the Cove promised. Someday, though, he'd take her there.

"The ship looks lonely," Jessie murmured, referring to the seventeenth century Spanish galleon that had been a staple in Swan Harbor forever.

"Lonely?" Cam questioned. "She has Jonesy."

Jessie giggled. "True."

"Can you see him?"

"Jonesy?"

"Yes."

"His shape," Jessie whispered.

Jonesy was a white, mute swan that had shown up sometime in the 1970s. He arrived every spring, never straying far from the ship, recently turned into a restaurant. Jack, the owner of Captain Jack's Fine Dining, proclaimed Swan Harbor's hope revolved around the duo. However, everyone knew Jack was eccentric and mostly paid him no mind. But it didn't stop Cam from thinking if the whole hope thing were true – it would explain some of the oddities that occurred in his hometown.

"Soon," he promised Jessie. "Soon, you'll be able to see Jonesy's white feathers."

She gave him an impish grin. "I hope you're right."

"I know I'm right." Cam winked. "I'm always right."

Jessie rolled her eyes but since they'd just driven into Sonny's parking lot, she didn't say anything. She was too excited.

Cam climbed from the truck and hoped his nerves would settle. While his mother might think Jessie needed to, '*spread her wings*,' he was on the verge of hyperventilating.

"Are you ready?"

"I'm ready. Come on."

He took her hand, grabbed both pairs of skates, and led her into the building. Memories immediately bombarded him, and he couldn't help but wonder if the same had happened to Jessie.

"Are you sure?" Cam asked once more.

Jessie squeezed his hand. "Let's go."

She took off toward their usual bench, which gave him a few minutes to admire the fit of the leggings and tight tank she was wearing. By the time he'd sat down, she'd already slipped into one of her skates.

"Let me help." Cam reached for the laces on her skates.

Jessie pushed his hands away. "I've got this."

"Well, okay." He went to work on his own laces, understanding her need, but not liking it. Jessie was finished with the first skate and had moved onto the second before she glanced up at him.

"It never changes, does it?"

"What?" The abrupt topic shift had him running to catch up. "Your skates? Sonny's?"

“Sonny’s.” Jessie leaned her head against his shoulder. “The smells, the sounds. I’m hoping the feel of the ice, too. Ready?”

“Lead and I’ll follow.”

Cam took her hand and they stepped onto the ice. Her smile lit up the room and heaven help him. He thought her kisses were potent, but what he’d felt as an eighteen-year-old was nothing compared to what he felt now.



Sonny’s Skate & Bowl

June 11

2:00 p.m.

AFTER BEING off the ice since February, it took a few steps before her natural affinity returned and Jessie could relax.

“How’s it feel?” Cam murmured, allowing her to set the pace and direction.

“Good,” she hummed, “but different too.”

Cam’s voice, and the fact he was holding her hand, had a calming effect on her. She’d worried when she stepped on the ice, she’d only think about her fall. When that wasn’t the case, she felt as if she’d been given a gift.

“How’s your vision?”

“My vision is ...” Until he’d asked, she hadn’t notice, that her tunnel was wider. “Better,” Jessie replied, excited the edges seemed lighter. “How close to the side are we?”

Cam hesitated, making her wonder if he planned to ignore the question. “About five feet.” His reluctant response had her lips threatening to lift. It didn’t, however, deter the direction her thoughts were traveling.

As long as she kept looking from side to side, Jessie could figure out where she was on the ice. Once they reached their bench, she started counting her steps, working to get a handle on the timing. Things felt familiar and the more they skated, the greater her confidence.

“Let me go, Cam.”

“Let you go? Why?” He tightened his hold on her.

“Let me skate.” Jessie released his hand, “I can do it. Please, let me try.”

“Well hell, Princess,” Cam sputtered. “You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

Jessie ignored him and focused only on what she wanted to do; a sit spin. Once she set up, she threw her leg in the air and landed on one foot, intending to spin around.

She could feel the ice beneath her skate and, just as she thought, *I've got this*, floated through her mind, her concentration broke – causing her to fall. *Nice move, Prince.*

“Jessie!” Cam shouted, and she knew he was on his way to where she’d fallen.

“I’m okay!” Jessie brushed off her hands.

“Are you sure?” he whispered.

“Positive.” She grinned. “I fell when my vision was perfect.”

“Don’t scare me, Princess.” Cam skated around her, “You’re going to try it again, aren’t you?”

“I’m going to try a jump.”

Jessie skated off, her entire focus on the steps. Then, she set up and executed a single axel, and landed it perfectly.

“Whoop, Jessie!” Cam swung her around. “That was amazing!”

“It was only a single, but thanks,” she replied quietly. Except, she couldn’t deny that it had helped her confidence, almost as much as he did.

“All right, Miss Prince, what’s next?”

“Watch.” Jessie skated away to set up another jump. When she landed a double axel, triple lutz, she couldn’t keep the squeal of excitement from escaping.

Cam was there and pulled her into his arms. “You take my breath away, Jessie,” he whispered against the side of her head.

She tilted her chin up. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

He tightened his arms around her, pressing her flush against his hard body. “A very good thing.” Their lips met in a kiss so hot she was sure the ice was melting around them.

“Jessie!” Her name being squealed broke through the fog Cam’s lips caused. “Jessie!”

She pushed out of Cam’s arms. “It’s Sadie and Cassie! They’re home.”

“That they are.” Cam nodded toward where they were standing. “And brought Ryan and Ben with them.”

“Race you!” she tossed out with an impish grin.

Jessie took off, with Cam’s, “Hey no fair!” ringing in her ears.

She won, but knew it was because he’d let her. He made her feel so much more than she’d ever allowed. How was she going to keep her heart safe? Or better yet, did she even want to?



Randy's Arcade

July 15

7:00 p.m.

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, Cam spent as much time with Jessie as possible. It had been three years since they'd been in the same place for longer than a few days, and the only word he could find to describe how he felt was liberated. He'd harbored feelings for her for years, but being able to act on them was more than he'd ever imagined.

For the first time, he felt free to think of her as more than 'just a friend'. She was his girlfriend, and he was determined to experience all the 'date like' activities with her possible. Movies, walks, dinners, bonfires – all ending with the traditional date night activity, kissing. Lots and lots of kissing.

Cam loved kissing her, and partook in said kisses whenever possible. Unfortunately, his wayward body and the way it hardened when she was near had caused a few uncomfortable situations. Being caught sporting a hard-on in front of the entire town was not his idea of a good time. Nor did he enjoy holding objects in front of his lap, hiding behind tables and chairs, or wearing a long jacket. Plus, tighty-whities should be outlawed.

At one time Mario Kart had worked to prevent embarrassment, but bigger problems needed bigger distractions. He'd come up with three ideas and so far, there'd been success with two. The first was used when he should have been working on something at the office. Instead, he'd gotten lost in a memory of the evening before, and his body had immediately stood up to salute.

His trick had been the recitation of building codes, which had effectively deflated the problem. It had been a close call too as his dad and Gray walked into the room, and he had to think fast.

The second time had been at home, and he'd been lounging on the patio talking on the phone. Jessie's voice had turned him on and the memory of how she'd looked in her bikini had his flag flying high within seconds. That time, he'd heard his mother coming and silently repeated the rules to be a successful architect. He'd been saved from embarrassment when his flag had fallen.

However, Cam knew the real test would be when he and Jessie were in the same room. He'd met the boys at Randy's, the local arcade. Normally, he would have enjoyed hanging with Ben and Ryan, while playing pool, but the entire time he'd been there, he'd been distracted. His mind had been on Jessie.

As the evening had gone on, his patience for even making small talk was running low. Ben wouldn't stop chattering about his job at a private law firm in Portland, and Ryan complained nonstop about Cassie. If only, he could ...

“So, what did you do to make Jessie so happy?” Ben suddenly changed topics. “She’s practically glowing.”

“What?” Cam ran to catch up.

“Jessie.” Ben nodded toward the door.

Cam heard her laugh before he saw her, and when he did, he was struck dumb. Jessie sparkled with more light and life than he’d seen from her since her parents’ death. She was wearing a short skirt that showcased her long legs. Her tank top was the same color as her eyes, and her strawberry gold hair hung down her back. His blood rushed south, and he had to grab the edges of the seat to keep from running to her.

“Did you finally give her the old vavoom?”

Ben’s crude comment had Cam wanting to punch him. “Cut it out, Matthews,” he snapped. “It’s not like that with Jessie.”

“Oh?” Ben leaned across the table. “How is it exactly?”

It was something, that much Cam knew. But how did you give words to a feeling you’d never experienced? One that consumed your entire being and filled you up, making you think it might explode out of you any moment?

“Jessie’s different,” Cam replied, hoping he’d appeased his friend.

“She’s hot,” Ben kept pushing. “Look at those legs.”

“Did you see Cassie?” Ryan jumped in, which saved Cam from having to respond.

“Of course.” Ben took a drink of his beer. “She’s looking quite fine too. Why don’t you go talk to her, Romeo?”

“Alone?” Ryan squeaked. “What if she ignores me?”

“Just go talk to her,” Cam sighed. “You never know until you try.”

“I remember saying those same words to you some time ago.” Ben laughed. “I’ve got an idea. Let’s all go.”

Cam hesitated. Jessie had been excited to reconnect with her friends. Did he want to get in the middle of that?

“Come on.” Ryan took one more drink. “Let’s go.”

“I think the girls wanted to be alone,” Cam warned them. “This might not be the best time to try to make up with Cassie.”

“Come on.” Ryan nudged Cam forward. “It will be okay.”

“Well, I guess,” Cam capitulated. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The girls met them halfway, and when Jessie kissed him, the Pythagorean Theorem popped into his mind. It was the only thing that might save him, as all his blood was hanging out down south.



“CAM.” Jessie wiped her lipstick off his mouth and took a step back. “Hi.”

“Hi yourself.” Cam grinned, and his dimples popped. “Coral isn’t my color?”

“No,” she playfully touched a place on his shirt, “maybe a nice pink, to match those little dots.”

“I’ll remember that.” His eyes twinkled, and he looked like he wanted to say something more, but their attention was pulled toward their friends.

“I told you,” Cassie’s dark eyes sparked. “I’m not ready to talk to you yet. Maybe never.”

“But, Cassie,” Ryan cajoled. “I’m sorry. Can’t we talk ... outside?”

Jessie’s eyes met Cassie’s and in them she spotted satisfaction at winning whatever battle she was having with Ryan.

“Fine,” Cassie fired back, her voice clipped. “I’ll give you ten minutes.”

“Any idea what that’s about?” Cam whispered, and his hot breath sent tingles racing down her spine.

“No clue,” Jessie glanced at her other friend, “but I’d better go, or someone will drag Sadie onto the dance floor.”

Cam pulled her into a hug, “Just remember you’re spoken for,” he reminded her, before kissing her quite thoroughly in front of everyone.

He’d not done that before, which threw her off a little. “Wow.” Jessie watched him until he was out of sight, all the while admiring his fine ass.

“I believe you’ve been holding out on me,” Sadie linked their arms and guided her toward a table. “Now, I know why you suggested Randy’s.”

That wasn’t,” Jessie began.

“Sure, it wasn’t,” Sadie disregarded her comment. “Now, sit down and spill.”

Jessie worked her lip over several seconds while what to say, and how much to say sorted itself out. “Okay,” she admitted. “There is something bothering me.”

“Do tell.” Sadie’s green eyes sparkled. “What’s Cam done?”

“Well,” Jessie sighed, feeling a little like an idiot. “It’s not so much what he’s done, per se,” she shrugged, “it’s more what he’s not done.”

Sadie frowned, and then as if a light went off in her head, her brows rose sky high. “He’s not done anything?”

“Well, we’ve kissed,” Jessie hurried to assure her friend. “A lot. Just anything else ... nope.”

“Hasn’t even tried, huh?” Sadie toyed with the straw in her glass for a heartbeat or two. “Who made the first move?” she finally asked, still deep in thought.

“I kissed him first.” Jessie glanced around to make sure they weren’t being heard, “But that was three years ago. This summer? Him. I *have* attempted to push his buttons a few times, though,” she admitted with a wicked smile. “It just hasn’t gotten me very far.”

“Well,” Sadie stated matter-of-factly. “It appears you need to do more button pushing.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Jessie felt her cheeks grow warm. “Like what?”

A devilish smile settled on Sadie’s face as she leaned in. “First, I would ...”

ten

Jessie's Home

August 12

8:30 a.m.

JESSIE WAS in that space halfway between being asleep and fully awake. She could hear the whirring of the fan, but wasn't so aware she couldn't manipulate a dream or two. With the combination of Cam, kisses, and Sadie's suggestions merging, there was a lot of deliciousness going on.

Since it was the last day they'd get to spend together until Thanksgiving break, Cam had promised to make it a memorable one. What he didn't know was she had a few ideas of her own. The question was – would she be successful with her additions?

Her phone buzzed and before even looking at the screen, her heart began to race. "Lo," she mumbled, her voice still thick with sleep.

"Good morning, Princess," Cam greeted in his sexy voice. "You're awake, right?"

"Maybe. Why?" she giggled. "Did we have plans?"

"You have fifteen minutes to get ready," he responded, not even bothering to tease, wheedle or engage in any sexy talk. "Wear jeans, and bring your swimsuit."

"Fifteen minutes?" Jessie squeaked. "That's not long enough!"

"Be quick," Cam warned. "Don't make me drag you from your bed."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

She could hear the dare in his voice and had to admit a part of her wanted to do just that. "You're not very nice." Jessie pushed her hair out of her eyes and sat up. "You could have warned me you'd be here so early."

"Now, Princess," Cam's husky voice had a shiver racing up her spine. "Don't be testy. I'll see you in thirteen minutes."

Jessie huffed but, because she was secretly happy he'd shown up so early, grabbed her clothes and ran to the shower. After all, she had some memories to

make.



CAM CHUCKLED at how fast the water started after he'd hung up. "And you didn't think I could get her out of bed."

Dylan grinned. "My sister's stubborn."

"Agreed."

"But," Dylan continued, "you've been good for her this summer. When I saw her lying in that hospital bed, I thought ..."

Regret that he'd not been there rushed through Cam. The same as it did every time the accident was brought up. "Jessie wouldn't want you dwelling on that image."

"I know." A series of expressions crossed Dylan's face. "So," he folded his arms over his chest, "what's on the agenda today?"

Just as it had a few times over the summer, Dylan's protective dad mode had appeared. Which, for some reason, had Cam wanting to push the older man's buttons.

"A little of this, a little of that," he quipped, earning the expected frown.

"Hey," Dylan snapped. "That's my sister."

"You've reminded me of that several times this summer," Cam pointed out. "I'm not likely to forget it."

"See that you don't," Dylan added.

"How can I," Cam laughed, "when you take every opportunity to remind me." He hesitated a beat, then to decrease some of the tension offered quietly, "You don't need to worry," and launched into the list of activities he'd planned for the day.

"I made it!" Jessie ran into the room with a bag slung over her shoulder.

"I knew you would," Cam murmured.

She kissed him good morning, then looked from him to Dylan and back. "What? Is everything okay?"

"It's fine, Jess." Cam kissed her temple. "I was just promising Dylan, I'd take care of you today."

Jessie slipped her arm around his waist and slid her hand into his back pocket. She dug her fingers into his ass, and the look in her turquoise eyes said she was daring him to say something.

The challenge on her face caused Cam's balls to tingle. His blood heated, and he wondered if he was going to have to resort to reciting the Pythagorean Theorem. Getting a hard-on in front of Jessie's brother certainly wouldn't endear

him to the other man.

"Well, of course Cam will take care of me." Jessie stepped out of his arms, allowing his body to cool. "Dylan knows that, don't you?"

"I know that," Dylan assured them. "I'm just tired. Have fun." He disappeared down the hall, leaving them alone.

"Sorry." Cam pulled Jessie back into his arms. "I was pushing his buttons, and I guess it got a little out of hand."

"Pushing his buttons?" One red-gold brow popped up. "About what?"

"You," his lips hovered over hers briefly, before settling in for a taste. "But you're worth whatever he wants to throw at me."

"Maybe I should tell you I'm sorry," she gave him a wry smile. "I didn't realize my big brother was being so ... well ... fatherly."

"Dylan doesn't want you to get hurt," Cam offered on the way to his truck. "Don't worry about it. Everything will be okay."

He opened the driver's side door and waited for Jessie to slide in. Instead, she turned and studied him carefully. The longer she looked up at him, the harder it was to maintain his neutral expression. Because, while he didn't plan on hurting her, his feelings for Jessie were not completely pure. In fact, if he were being truthful, he'd have to admit more often than not, they were anything but.

Except, what Dylan didn't know was the power of Mary Hunter's words. Her advice all those years ago about guarding Jessie's heart still had the ability to affect his decisions. Add that to his mother's suggestion they take things slowly, and once again his heart and his body were often on different paths.

However, while he'd been fighting his baser instincts, it seemed Jessie was hell-bent on pushing his control. So far, he'd been relatively successful in listening to his heart and ignoring his body. Lately, though, he'd found his self-control teetering. If his princess wanted ... he didn't think he could say no. Could that be what had Dylan worried?

"I trust you." Jessie slid her hands around his neck. "You would never hurt me."

Cam closed his arms around her and nuzzled her temple. "You have no idea what you do to me."

"Oh, I think I have some idea," she purred.

"Jessie," Cam groaned. The need to dive in was strong. However, the thought of her brother watching them from a window served as the douse of cold water he needed. Reluctantly, he settled for a quick peck on her nose and stepped back. "We should go ... or we'll miss our reservations."

"Spoilsport." Jessie tossed a sexy grin over her shoulder and climbed inside the cab, settling in the center.

“No name calling,” Cam gave her a hard but way too brief kiss, “or you won’t get your present.”

“Present?” She laid her hand on his thigh. “What is it?”

Cam closed his fingers around hers to stop them from wandering. “Patience, Princess. We’ll get there.”



JESSIE MASHED her lips together to stop them from twitching. Cam had become too good at maintaining control. She’d tried several of Sadie’s suggestions, but each time, he’d maneuvered out of the situation. His skittishness reminded her of when she’d been sixteen and wanted that first kiss. It had taken weeks until persistence had finally paid off. Now, she thoroughly enjoyed them whenever possible. Kisses were freely offered, but when it came to anything more, he slammed on the brakes.

“Here we are.” Cam pulled into Buck’s Flying Steeds.

“Horseback riding?” Jessie sent him a quick grin, “Hence the jeans.”

“You’re quick, Princess,” he teased. “Come here.”

Jessie slid off the seat into Cam’s arms. His heat reached out and wrapped around her. Then, just as she thought he was going to kiss her, he took a deep breath and stepped back.

“Are you okay with this?”

“Why?” She sent him a flirty smile. “Did you think I was expecting something else?”

Cam’s eyes twinkled, but whatever was running through his mind, he didn’t share. It made her think of her secret and of how when she shared, his upper hand would fall by the wayside. Of that, she had no doubt.

Buck arrived, and after Jessie climbed onto Buttercup – a pretty sorrel mare – and Cam got onto Atari, a black gelding, they followed the path around toward the trail. Atari took the lead, leaving Jessie and Buttercup to follow.

The narrow path took them up and around a small mountain. Cam sat tall and straight in the saddle, much more comfortable on a horse than she. His blond hair fell over his forehead, his t-shirt fit snug against his torso, and suddenly she wanted nothing more than for him to hold her.

We’ll get there, he’d promised, and she knew that to be true. It was just sometimes, his timetable didn’t mesh with her own. When that happened, a little push was often necessary.



THICK TREES LINED the trail as they climbed toward a plateau that allowed a picturesque view of Swan Harbor. In one direction, a church where his parents were married. In another, a covered bridge that connected the town roads to the county ones. And lastly, a view of the new park they were building.

It was an area made for a little memory making, but when they reached it, Atari had his own agenda. The horse pranced from one observation area to the other, never staying long enough for Cam to dismount.

"Damn horse," he muttered.

"Atari has other plans," Jessie offered with a laugh.

"He's not the only one," Cam popped off, not thinking about the way it sounded.

"Oh?" she practically purred. "Should I be nervous?"

Cam winked, charmed when her cheeks sported bright pink spots. "What do you think?"

"That I can't wait," were the words he'd not expected as she rode on, leaving him struggling to think of something to say.

His horse didn't like that Buttercup was in front, which meant as soon as the path widened, Atari regained the lead. Cam gave the horse free rein and before much time, the trail led them onto the beach.

"Jessie," he began. Except, as soon as he looked over his shoulder, his thoughts scattered with the wind and his blood rushed south.

Her laughter rang clear. "Cat got your tongue, Cam?" Jessie kicked her horse into a trot.

It took several seconds for his reflexes to wake up. When they did, he took off after her. His horse was larger, its stride longer, and it didn't take much for him to pass them and stop several feet away.

As she had so many times before, Jessie stole his breath. She was wearing jeans that molded her thighs, and her strawberry and gold hair was flying around her shoulders. Which was plenty to distract a man. However, she'd added a minuscule bikini top that barely covered her torso. Just looking at her set his blood to boil.

"Jessie ..."

Her name was pulled from deep inside and carried along on the wind. Seconds later, she brought Buttercup to a halt and watched him with expectant eyes.

Cam stalked toward her horse, and in one move, helped her down and tugged her against his body. "Feel that?" he growled. "Feel what you do to me?"

Jessie's bright eyes locked with his, and a slight blush crawled across her cheekbones. "Are you complaining?"

“Hell, no!” Cam nuzzled her temple, pleased to hear her breath catch, “but what’s going on?”

She ducked her chin and glanced up through her lashes. “I’m ... I’m giving you,” there was a slight hesitation before she continued, “some memories you won’t forget.”

Cam bit his lip, thinking the pain would clear the lust from his brain for a few seconds. “Princess,” he trailed his finger from the top of her bikini up under her chin and tilted it. “Everything we do is memorable. But this,” he kissed one corner of her mouth, “this is playing with fire.”

His lips settled on hers, and when she grabbed hold of his hair and opened for him, he nearly exploded. He lost track of how long they stood there next to the water, immersed in each other. Communicating only with lips, tongues, and hands. As his body temperature skyrocketed, he could think of nothing more than to have Jessie’s legs wrapped around his waist, her much softer body aligned with his hardness.

“Wait!” Cam wrenched his mouth away. “We can’t.”

“No?” Her smile was mischievous. “You don’t like?”

“You know damn good and well I like.” He turned them back toward the corral and looped his arm around her. “However, our time’s about up, and besides, there’s more.”

“More kisses ...” Jessie wagged her eyebrows, “or more activities?”

“Both,” Cam promised.

On the way back to the truck, though, he had to wonder if the next part of his plan was a good idea.



Swan Harbor Docks

August 12

4:30 p.m.

WHEN THEY DROVE into the dock parking area, Jessie’s heart took off at the possibilities. “We’re going sailing?” Her words came out much breathier than she’d expected.

Cam sent her a sheepish smile, and his voice dropped an octave, “I want you to myself, but after that display on the beach, I’m wondering if this is a good idea.”

“Oh?”

He smiled, but there were still questions in his eyes she couldn’t decipher.

“Are you okay with this?”

“I trust you.” Jessie soothed her hand over the little frown line between his brows, wanting to assure him.

“Maybe you shouldn’t, Princess.” Cam brought the truck to a stop. “I’m Wait! You saw the Catalina!” He cupped her face. “Can you see me ... clearly?”

Jessie’s eyes filled with tears. “It hadn’t registered until you said something.” She sniffed, “But now that I think about it, I could see you clearly when my horse ran by yours on the beach. The darkness is gone, Cam.”

“Oh, Jessie.” Cam pulled her across his lap and covered her lips in a kiss full of fire.

She couldn’t get close enough, but the longer he kissed her the faster her insides flew.

“Princess,” he groaned, “you’re killing me here.”

“Sorry.” Jessie’s only thought was getting him alone. She jumped from the truck, grabbed her bag and on her way toward the boat, tossed out, “Race you!”

He was coming, she could hear him. However, she didn’t realize how close he was until he’d picked her up and carried her on board.

“I’ve got you, Princess.”

“No,” Jessie wrapped her arms around his neck, “I’ve got you.”

Their kiss was much quicker than she wanted, but the faster they sailed, the better. Cam gave out concise instructions, and within minutes they were headed out to sea.

“I can handle this,” he called above the rush of the wind. “Why don’t you go put on your suit?”

Jessie didn’t have to be told twice, and, taking her bag slipped below deck into the head. It was small, barely big enough for her to turn around. When she pulled off her jeans and dropped her shirt, her eyes immediately went to the mirror, which showcased her barely-there bikini.

The suit was royal blue and hugged her curves in all the right places. It was made up of only two sets of twin triangles, one set covered her breasts and the other below. They fastened with matching ties, and the material was so thin, she anticipated all would be revealed when wet. She never would have had the nerve to wear the suit at the local beach. However, for Cam ... when it was just the two of them ... well a girl had to do what she had to do.

Since the boat was still skimming across the water, Jessie looked for something to keep her busy. She wanted Cam’s first look of her new suit to be when he could focus on ... just her.

Something had her sliding one side of the mirrored cabinet open. It held your typical items; toothpaste, several wrapped toothbrushes, mouthwash, dental

floss, and a box of “Oh my.”

The box was in her hand before she'd made a conscious decision to pick it up.

Well, isn't this what you wanted? her inner voice whispered.

Jessie stared at herself in the mirror. It was what she wanted, wasn't it? She was nervous, but where had they come from? And the box? Whose was it? Had Cam put it there? Or did it belong to Gray? Should she take a couple up onto the deck ... just in case?

What would Sadie do?

Take the whole box up on deck.

But *what* should Jessie do?



SINCE JESSIE HAD DISAPPEARED below deck, Cam both feared and anticipated her return. If just seeing her in jeans and a tiny blue top had drained all of the blood from his head, how would he feel seeing her in the entire suit? She would bring him to his knees, of that he had no doubt.

He dropped anchor and put away the mainsail, anticipating the moment she would appear. Then, he turned his attention to the ladder. As soon as he'd unfolded it into the water, the air around him changed. It vibrated, charged with the connection between him and his princess.

“Cam?”

The hesitancy in Jessie's voice made him feel like an idiot for taking so long. He whirled around, not willing to make her wait any longer.

She was standing less than five feet away, with the sun painting a halo around her slender frame. Her bare feet sported blue polish. One of her knees was bent, showcasing her long legs, and he couldn't stop the thought of how they'd feel wrapped around him. His blood rushed to his balls, stealing his breath, and anticipation zipped along his skin.

“Jessie?” In three strides, he'd invaded her space. Cam skimmed his hands down her arms and tugged her against his chest. “This wasn't what I was expecting.”

Jessie ducked her head. “I hope you don't mind.” She was wearing one of his flannel shirts. It swallowed her, its tails hung mid-thigh, and the sleeves were folded over several times.

“Well,” he fingered the points of the collar, “the blue plaid matches the little top you were wearing earlier. Were you cold?”

“A little.”

Jessie snuggled against him and laid her head over his heart. Cam tightened his arms around her and brushed a kiss on the side of her head. There was more going on with his princess than being cold, but he'd let her set the pace. She always did anyway.

"My shirt looks better on you than it ever did on me."

"Good," she giggled. "I might steal it."

"Are you hungry?" He tried to ignore the touch of disappointment that Jessie, the siren, had been tucked away. "My mom packed us a picnic."

"Mary knew what you'd planned for today?" Jessie asked, surprise evident in her voice.

"Well, she knew *some* of what I'd planned," he told her, directing her to where he'd placed the picnic.

"I am a little hungry."

Jessie began searching through the offerings, leaving Cam content to just watch and allow her to take him where she wanted. As the meal progressed, it grew easier. On both of them. She laughed more and her natural gestures became smoother, less erratic.

For the next few hours, Cam managed to keep his eyes where they belonged, but just barely. Especially when the buttons on the shirt started to open.

First it was the bottom ones, which exposed her silky thighs. Then, when he turned to deposit the remnants of their meal into the basket and pull her gift from under a nearby pillow, the top ones proved slippery. His heart raced, and he was sure the only way he'd not embarrass himself was to take a cold shower ... or to jump in the cold Maine water.

Except he wasn't quite there yet. He'd been repeating calculus theorems off and on since Jessie had reappeared. So far, they were still successful. However, he had doubts they'd continue to be for long.

Cam handed her the small box he'd intended to give to her for her birthday in July. At the last minute, though, he'd chickened out. He'd worried it was too much. But with them going separate directions, he needed her to know how he felt.

"I hope you like it."

"You're nervous ..." Jessie studied him for an extra second. "Why?"

"What if you don't like it?" He leaned away from her, trying to act nonchalant. "What if it's too much?"

"Don't you know it doesn't matter?" she murmured. "What matters is, it's from you."

Cam kissed her. "Open it."

Jessie tossed the wrapping paper in the basket, then lifted the lid. Her turquoise eyes met his. "It's beautiful." She held up the necklace, a heart-shaped diamond pendant dangling from her hand. "I can't believe you gave me a diamond heart."

Cam cupped her hand with both of his and brought it close to his chest. "It's not the first heart I've given you."

"No?"

"No." He kissed their entwined hands. "You've held mine far longer than I can remember." Then he paused a heartbeat, and added, "I love you, Jessie," words he'd never spoken to any other besides family.

"I love you, too," she whispered. "Will you put it on me?"

It took a few tries before he could get it opened, but once it was fastened around her neck, it lay against her breastbone. Their eyes locked, and the only word he could think was, "Beautiful."

Any ideas on where we should go from here?" Her suggestive comment was given softly ... hesitantly, as if she wasn't sure how receptive he'd be.

Except there was nothing for her to worry about. Cam hooked a finger in the one remaining button and tugged her closer. "I do have a few."

"I bet you do." Jessie pushed his finger aside, popped the last button, and dropped her shoulder, allowing the shirt to fall away.

Cam almost forgot to breathe as he took in the way the tiny scraps of her top barely covered her nipples, and with one tug, her bottoms would only be a memory. He wanted nothing more than to bury himself in her softness.

"Come here." He lay back on the deck, wrapped his arms around her, and captured her lips.

eleven

THE TINGLE JESSIE always felt when in Cam's arms had panicked and run earlier, but it was back and threatened to become a storm. His lips teased, caressed and slid against hers until she felt in danger of losing track of whom she was. All she could focus on was the feelings he was pulling from deep within.

His fingers barely touched, as he slid them down her sides to cup her butt cheeks. A multitude of emotions raced through her, stealing her thoughts. She wanted more ... needed to be closer.

Cam rolled them over and with one tug, her top fell away, just like in the romance book she'd read. When his thumb glided over her raised nipple, it caused her breath to hitch. *More, more*, she thought as the pressure grew.

One rough palm captured a firm peak and sparks zipped straight to her core. Her skin was covered with goosebumps, stemming for wherever they touched. She couldn't get enough and wanted it to go on forever.

"Jessie." Cam cupped her breast, and his thumb slid back and forth over her nipple.

She was floating, the tension inside growing as his hands skimmed over her body, learning all those places she'd dreamed of him touching. Then quick movements replaced his slow tender touches.

Stop, she wanted to say, but felt too awkward, too embarrassed.

He squeezed her breast, a touch that should have had her body softening, and the excitement inside growing. Instead, the urge to giggle acted like a dash of water, snuffing the flame.

Slow down, she tried to encourage, but Cam's hands moved faster, and his breathing became more erratic.

"So good." Cam kissed her, slowly, and as their lips met and mated, the fire inside was stoked back to life once again. "So soft."

His hand drifted over her flat stomach, and the tie to her bottoms fell open. *Finally*, she thought, when his fingers softly stroked between her thighs. The gentle touch caused sparks to gather, and she stilled, waiting for the heart racing, blood pumping experience.

But when he moved too fast, she couldn't help but tense and wrapped her

fingers around his wrist. She wasn't sure what she needed, but knew she needed to regain some control.

"My turn."

"But ..."

"My turn," Jessie repeated.

She laid her hand on Cam's stomach and tugged on the ties of his board shorts, then slipped her fingers below his waistband. Hard, yet very soft floated through her mind.

Cam's body jerked against her. "Can't wait. Need ..."

Jessie plucked a foil packet from the pocket of the plaid shirt and pushed Cam's hands away. Surprisingly, he lay back seemingly to allow her to touch, but the second she did, he took over.

"Kiss me," she begged, hoping to bring the fire back.

His lips were soft and as their tongues dueled, the buzz inside once again took hold. Cam rolled over on top of her and hiked her left leg up over his hip.

Oh my, oh my, oh my, zipped through her head and her heart galloped, lodging in her throat.

"I love you," Cam murmured.

Their eyes locked and as he moved, Jessie stopped breathing. What she saw was too much, overwhelming her with its intensity.

Her eyes slid shut, and she opened her senses, wanting to remember everything about the night. She could hear the waves as they bounced against the hull. Smell the saltwater in the air. Even feel the gentle sway of the boat.

Cam hovered above her, and she thought, maybe, and peeked through her lashes. The tendons in his neck stuck out as he struggled for control. Then, with a shout, he was done, and she was left waiting for the fireworks described in her romance books.

It took her a few seconds to understand he was waiting for her and not knowing what else to do, she shuddered. His groan, and the way he rolled them on to their sides, said she'd done the right thing.

Except, she couldn't help but think there should be more.

Focus on what you have, not on what you think you should have, the voice inside whispered.

Which was easy, as Cam was holding her, making her feel loved.

"I'm not ready to let you go," she murmured against his neck.

"Don't, Princess." He kissed her tenderly. "Don't ever let me go."

Sonny's Skate & Bowl

June 4

11:30 p.m.

"DID YOU REGRET WHAT WE DID?" Cam's question pulled her back to the present.

"What did you say?"

"Did you regret giving yourself to me that night?" he repeated.

"What do you think?" Jessie snapped. Then needing some distance, she skated away.



CAM SIGHED, as every glide of her skates showcased her inner turmoil. He'd expected her to run but hadn't thought that question to be the catalyst. At least she'd waited until he was rested.

He called her name a few times, but she was either ignoring him or couldn't hear. If he had to guess, he'd say the former. Which had him skating in front of her and performing a messy hockey stop, throwing snow on both.

"Jessie," he laughed at her exasperated expression, "answer my question."

Her blue eyes shot sparks. "Oh, please, Cam, I didn't give myself to you like some maiden from the 1800s. I was there because I wanted to be."

Some of the tension he'd been carrying dissipated. "I owe you an apology," he blurted without preamble. "I'm sorry I was a selfish jerk that night."

She lifted a brow and tilted her head in that regal manner of hers. "Yes you were. Feel better now?"

He didn't, which annoyed him as she wasn't making it easy. "Is that why we never did it again?"

"Did it?" Jessie barked out a laugh. "What? Are we still in high school?"

"Well," Cam huffed, "was it?"

"There are other ways to be intimate," she quipped. "Don't worry so much. Over the next few years, you more than made up for being," Jessie made air quotes, "a selfish jerk. I always wondered who taught you so much. Who was she?"

Her voice had gone from flirty to flinty in thirty seconds, once again making Cam's lips threaten to curve. "No she," he admitted with a sheepish grin. "I read article after article on the internet."

Her eyes twinkled. "For some reason that makes me feel better." Jessie patted him on the chest and took off again.

She continued to keep him off balance, and was back to busting his balls on

the ice. “Jessie.” Cam took off after her. Would he always need to chase her?

“What?” Jessie performed a stop behind him, and as usual, it was much neater than his. “More questions?”

She’d stopped under a light that acted like a beacon, drawing him closer. Her features still captivated him, but there was a maturity there that hadn’t been present the last time he’d seen her. Was that because it had been two years, or was there more going on in her life he didn’t know?

His gaze drifted around her face, cataloging the differences. Her hair was more red than gold, and shorter, her curls laying on her shoulders instead of half-way down her back. She was still thin, but her curves were more rounded, making him cram his hands into his pockets to keep from reaching for her.

“Cam,” Jessie tossed a curl over her shoulder, and the light captured the sheen of gold circling her neck.

Cam didn’t ask, and wasn’t sure he could have stopped if he had, but he lifted the chain with his heart out from under her dress. “You still wear it,” he whispered, almost reverently.

The smile that crossed her face was a little shy and a little sad. “It’s still my favorite piece of jewelry,” she conceded just as quietly.

Why he’d never been able to give his heart to anyone else suddenly made sense. Jessie still held it and always would.

“I’m glad.” His answer was simple, but inside he couldn’t stop the thought there had been a time when he’d planned on giving her another piece of jewelry. Was there more to the story he didn’t know? Plausible, yes, especially after everything he’d just learned about Catherine. Was it possible, though?

“There’s more to your story, isn’t there?” Her eyes skittered away from his, confirming his suspicions. “Finish it?”

This time, just like he had so many times before, he held out his hand and waited for her to decide. He needed her to show him she was ready to meet him in the middle.

“You’re right.” Jessie placed her hand in his and his heart rate took off.

They skated halfway around the rink and while her hand remained in his, she didn’t go on with her story.

“Can we sit?” he asked quietly, wanting to be able to look at her while she spoke.



THERE WAS a part of Jessie that had known she wouldn’t get away with half the story, but the other part had hoped it wouldn’t matter. That they could start over

again from this moment. Unrealistic, maybe. But easier.

Cam was lagging, using her to carry him along. “You’re tired, aren’t you?” she accused when she noticed he was breathing quicker than usual.

“What makes you say that?” Cam retorted, busy massaging his quads.

“You weren’t keeping up out there.”

“Since when have I ever kept up with you, Princess?”

His response took her aback for a second, causing her to study him a little closer. Same shaggy hair, tall, lean frame, and sexy dimples. His eyes, though. They were different.

“If it was such a chore,” Jessie grumbled. “Why continue?”

“Now, Princess,” Cam grinned, and his dimples popped in his lean cheeks, “you know the answer to that as well as you know your name.” His gaze lighted on her heart pendant, causing hers to flip a few times. “The story ...”

Jessie rolled her eyes, unwilling to allow the little flips her heart was engaging in to cause her to do ... or say ... anything irrational. “You know the story.”

Their romance and her life had grown into everything she’d ever wanted over the next six years. He’d graduated with his architecture degree when he was twenty-three, and received a full ride to the three-year Master’s program at Yale. Closer to her, yet still so far away.

She’d started college a year behind her friends but, determined to graduate with them, she’d worked extra hard. There had been heavier schedules in the fall and spring, and classes over the summer. However, when she’d graduated at twenty-two, Cam had driven from Connecticut to Maine for the ceremony. Everything in her life had been falling into place.

“I was so proud of you that day.” He squeezed her fingers, lost in the memory. “While it disappointed me you hadn’t chosen a graduate school closer to Yale, I understood. A full scholarship to the University of Virginia isn’t something people turn down.”

“True,” Jessie agreed.

“And then what happened?”

If he was trying to hide the pain he’d felt, he wasn’t doing a very good job, but Jessie knew a thing or two about pain. “Then came grad school,” she murmured. “We both had two more years of school. Life was busy.”

“Just stop it,” Cam snapped. “You’re trying to make me think we fell apart because of the distance between us. That’s a damn lie.”

Jessie dropped her head, hoping he couldn’t read what was in her eyes. “What does it matter, Cam? You apparently made peace with it. I have to say after two years away, I wasn’t expecting to see you and some girl engaging in

PDA as soon as I drove across the town line.”

The minute the words were out of her mouth, she wished she could call them back. She’d sounded like a jealous shrew and not a twenty-five-year-old pragmatic woman.



CAM WINCED, wishing he could take much of the past four days’ behavior back, but, he liked knowing his princess still had claws.

“Jealous?”

“No,” she spit out, too quickly for him to believe her.

“What do you want to know, Jess?” He studied her, wondering why she diverged from the timeline and what she was after.

“Did you wait until I was gone before you started seeing her?” Jessie reached for the heart necklace and slid it back and forth on its chain. “Eden seems quite young.”

Cam refused to tell her about his lowest point, because it no longer mattered. “If you really want to know ...”

It had been about a year after Jessie had disappeared from his life, and his parents were home from their six months in Florida. Mary told him if it was meant to be, it would be, but if Jessie drove back into town the next day, how would he feel? Would he like the man he’d become?

“I cleaned up my act, and a few days later was in Sally’s waiting on Hayden —”

“You stayed connected to Hayden, even after I left?” she interrupted to ask.

“Of course.” It annoyed him it was something she questioned, “Hayden was hoping you’d make it back for his graduation.”

“I tried.” Jessie winced, and if he hadn’t been looking at her so closely, he would have missed it. “I couldn’t get a flight.”

“Hayden’s a whiz on computers.” Cam smiled at the memory of some of the stories. “I heard he’d broken into the school mainframe and changed a few grades, but no one could prove it was true.”

“Sounds like him.” The arch of her brow told him she was still waiting for an answer.

“I thought she was you,” he admitted how he’d met Eden. “I was at Sally’s ...”

He’d seen a flash of strawberry blonde hair walking by the windows and ran after her, yelling Jessie’s name. When she’d turned around, his heart had fallen, landing right there at his feet.

Eden was sweet and kind, but at the time she'd still been in college, studying to be a teacher. Therefore, she'd been safe.

"And the kiss?" Jessie pushed him a little more, "You looked quite involved, and she caught Cassie's bouquet, so ... should I expect an announcement sometime soon?"

"Just because she caught the bouquet," Cam argued, "it means nothing."

"Have you taken her to Lover's Cave?"

"What would it matter?" he shot back without answering the question.

"Well, you know the legend," she continued to prod, except he finally got what she was asking. Legend had couples getting engaged if they'd made love in Lover's Cave.

"No," Cam answered part of her question. "I've never been to the Cave with Eden."

"Oh," Jessie's voice was small and hesitant. Some things, though, didn't need to be dissected. Especially, when your goal was to see if there was a chance.

"You're stalling, Jess." He took her hand and held it between his. Hers was ice cold, which scared him. "Let's finish this."



FOR A SPLIT SECOND, Jessie thought his words held another meaning - that he wanted to be done with her. However, one look in his eyes and she knew she'd misunderstood.

The memory of his kiss, and the rightness of her hand in his gave her the courage to continue. "After spending a few weeks visiting Cassie in Washington, D.C and Sadie in Augusta, I was excited to get home."

"To me?" Cam squeezed her hands a little tighter.

Jessie smiled, took a deep breath, and plunged forward

Two Years Earlier

Jessie's Home

June 10

3:00 p.m.

JESSIE STEPPED from her car just as Catherine stormed out, leaving the door to slam behind her.

"This is your fault," Catherine snapped. "You're like that bunny that keeps coming back."

"What are you talking about?" Jessie popped her trunk, not having any idea what was going on. "I just got back into town. Whatever problems you're having, they're yours."

"Dylan was mine ... until you," Catherine made air quotes, "hurt yourself. After that everything changed."

"Did Dylan finally get wise to your ways?" Jessie sneered. "Because if so, it's about freaking time. I didn't tell him you paid to have me sent away. If I had, he would have kicked your ass out of his life long ago."

Catherine reared back as if she'd been slapped, "You knew about that?"

"That you paid to get me out of town?" Jessie couldn't believe how controlled she sounded. "Hell yes, I knew. You managed to lose him all on your own. How'd that happen, anyway?"

"It wasn't my fault," Catherine grumbled. "I just found him in bed with someone he called Molly. He said, 'his heart wanted what his heart wanted' or some other trivial statement."

"Way to go, Bro," Jessie quipped. "I knew he was smart."

"Oh, I'm not giving up," Catherine moved closer, forcing Jessie to take a step back. "I always get what I want. This isn't the last your family has heard from me."

She stormed to her car and, with a squeal of the tires, roared off. When the dust settled, it was then, the unfamiliar car parked next to Dylan's was noticed.

"The infamous Molly must still be present." *Catherine said she caught Dylan in bed, which meant* Jessie slammed the trunk, and got back into her car.



THE NEWS JESSIE was in the building reached Cam before she did, which allowed him to be waiting for her when she stepped off the elevator.

"Princess!" His lips covered hers, in a short but very thorough kiss.

"Well, that was nice." Jessie slid her arms around his neck. "Will you greet me like that every time I come visit?"

"Just as often as you'll let me." Cam manipulated them into his office. "Are we still on for dinner tonight?" he asked, punctuating each word with a kiss.

"We are," she confirmed. "I understand Dylan has some news to share with me first."

Cam chuckled. "Would that be about Molly?"

“Yes.” Jessie playfully punched his arm. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Not my news.”

Jessie stuck her tongue out. “That’s not very nice.”

“Oh, I can be nice.” Cam kissed her, one of those soul-wrenching kisses that ratcheted up his need and made him wonder if he could leave work early.

Several loud raps on the door had them jumping apart. “Cameron,” Gray smirked, “the meeting starts in five.”

Cam’s head dropped onto Jessie’s shoulder while he tried to get his breathing and his body under control. “I’m sorry,” he sighed. “I’ll see you about seven.”

“Okay,” she kissed him again. “I’ll be waiting.”

He watched her as she walked down the hall, and saw her look at her phone as she stepped into the elevator. The evening couldn’t come fast enough to please him. His plans involved a special piece of jewelry for his princess.



Present Day

Sonny’s Skate & Bowl

June 4

11:45 p.m.

EVEN AFTER TWO YEARS, the memory of the text message she’d received as she’d stepped onto the elevator stood out sharp in Jessie’s mind. But she hadn’t been willing to risk any harm coming to anyone she loved, and with barely a word to Dylan, left.

Except that was then, and now ... Dylan and Molly were married

“How could you have just left, Jess?”

The pain in Cam’s voice was killing her, and she wanted nothing more than to fall into his arms. If that happened, though, it had to be with only part of the truth.

“You left me!” Jessie took several steps away.

This time, he didn’t give her any space, but stalked toward her. “Your memory seems to be faulty, Princess,” Cam taunted. “I’ve been right here for the past two years. You’re the one who left.”

Her heart was pounding so loudly, she could swear the entire town could hear it. “But you didn’t come after me,” she cried, her eyes filling with tears. “For the first time, you didn’t come after me.”

Before the last word was out of her mouth, Cam had cupped her elbows and tugged her against his hard body.

"I'm here now, Princess." He kissed her lightly. "This time, I'm not going anywhere."

Jessie couldn't breathe, couldn't think, could only feel. He was holding her as if she were precious and had no desire to ever let her go again. How had she thought she could live without him?

Their lips reluctantly parted when the door to Sonny's opened.

"I'm not ready to let you go," Cam murmured when she tried to see who had come in.

"But ..."

"Jessie."

Cam tucked her against his side, and together they faced Dylan.

"You've been crying." Dylan sent a warning look Cam's direction. "Are you okay, Jess?"

Cam's fingers dug into her waist and without thinking, Jessie dropped her head against his shoulder.

"I will be," she smiled up at Cam. "I think anyway."

"You will be." Cam kissed her nose. "I'll call you tomorrow?"

Jessie nodded, and with another brief kiss, Cam tugged off his ice skates and left her alone with Dylan. Suddenly, the weight of the burden she'd been carrying weakened her knees, and she dropped back onto the bench.

"How'd you know where I was?"

"Let's see," Dylan hummed. "It started when Sadie sent a text to Molly ..."

"Who sent you searching?" Jessie guessed.

"Wasn't hard." His blue eyes took on that fatherly look. "Don't you think it's time to fill me in?"

Her phone rang, saving her from having to respond immediately. *Cam!*

Jessie swiped her finger across the screen, and the message sucked her back in time.

"No!" Her phone fell to the floor.

"Jessie?" Dylan's eyes grew wide when he got a look at the message. "Damn, Sis. We're going home and calling Cameron. You shouldn't have to carry this alone."

Maybe, she thought, just maybe, her heart would win.

twelve

Cam's Home

June 5

12:45 a.m.

CAM GLANCED BACK at Sonny's one more time before climbing into his car. Now that he'd found Jessie again, he was afraid to leave. Worried once he drove out of the parking lot, the events of the evening would turn out to be a dream. One like so many he'd had since she'd left.

He stuck the key into the ignition but couldn't make himself turn it. Instead, he checked his messages.

One from Ben letting him know Eden was asking questions.

Another from Eden, wondering if he was home.

A third from his mother, which was the only one he cared about. She'd called to see how he and Jessie were. Somehow, she'd known he and Eden weren't a lifetime couple. That spot in his life was reserved for a certain strawberry-blond, turquoise-eyed siren who had captured his attention when they were kids. Now that she was back, he was going to do everything possible to make sure she stayed.

Slow down, and guard your own heart, he could hear his inner voice say.

Except, it was too late. He was hooked, and all he needed to do was break it off with Eden.

On the drive home, Cam's thoughts were on the conversation he hoped Jessie was having with Dylan. She needed to come clean with him. After all, it had been his life she'd been trying to protect.

Whatever she decided, he would support her; something he should have done two years ago. Her comment about him not going after her stung. When he looked back on that time, he had to wonder what he'd been thinking. Evidently, he hadn't, as evidenced by his drunken binge.

He found Gray in the den, holding a highball glass and staring out into the night. Cam poured a splash of whiskey and slid into the chair opposite him.

"I didn't expect you home until tomorrow. You and Tia have a fight?"

“We decided we’re better off as friends.” Gray stared down at the ice in his glass for several seconds before taking a drink. “What about you? How was the wedding?”

“Eye opening,” Cam surprised himself by admitting. “I’ve been with Jessie the last few hours.”

“It’s about damn time,” Gray barked out a laugh. “You’ve been stalking her since she returned.”

Cam’s mouth dropped open. “What do you mean?”

His brother gave him an *‘I’m not stupid’* look, “Come on, Little Brother,” Gray chided. “It’s been years since you’ve stepped on the ice, yet the second Jessie was back in town, out came your skates. What happened?”

Cam tossed back the rest of his whiskey and tried to decide how to answer. Finally, he offered, “You’re right. I did pull them out when she returned.”

“Why?”

“I knew she was returning to Swan Harbor for the wedding, but wasn’t sure when,” Cam began. “Then, there she was, sauntering into Randy’s. She had Sadie on one side and Cassie on the other, and she was so beautiful, I wanted to run to her.”

His thoughts traveled back to the feeling that zipped through him when he looked up and saw her for the first time in two years. “I panicked,” he continued, not proud of what happened next. “I flaunted my relationship with Eden. And I think a part of me wanted to hurt Jessie as much as she hurt me.”

“But sometime that night,” Gray guessed, “Jessie ended up at Sonny’s. And you followed.”

“Yeah,” Cam remembered. He’d been talking to Ben and suddenly, it felt as if he couldn’t breathe any longer. As if all the air had been sucked out of the room. It wasn’t long after, he’d made excuses, dropped Eden at home and gone searching for Jess.

“She was at Sonny’s, as I’d expected. Except I couldn’t make myself open the door, and like so many other times, just watched her skate.” The man on the outside, looking in. A place he’d inhabited quite often.

A corner of Gray’s mouth lifted. “So, your heart was trying to tell you something long before you listened.”

“Seems so.” His quiet response had Gray arching a brow. “After the bonfire, I followed Jess to Sonny’s again. This time, I even had my skates, yet I couldn’t make myself open the door. I was still lying to myself about my real feelings.”

“Something happened at the wedding,” Gray guessed. “Am I right?”

“There were several epiphanies tonight,” Cam admitted. “Did you know

Catherine has a vindictive streak, and comes from money ... big money?"

"Catherine from money?" Gray tilted his head in thought, "I guess that makes sense, but she's never flaunted it. How'd it come up?"

The story of Catherine's attempts to get Jessie out of the picture seemed more surreal when he replayed it. "It's like a movie." Cam shook his head, "But in the end she lost, and Jessie won."

"Does Dylan know?"

"He showed up at Sonny's." While it was a good thing the secrets were exposed, Dylan really needed to work on his timing.

"Take it slowly, Cam," Gray cautioned. "I don't want to see you hurt like last time."

"I know." Cam's phone buzzed, and when he swiped across the screen, there was a message from Dylan. "We've been asked to come to the Prince home tomorrow."

"Why?"

"I've no idea." Cam frowned. "That's all the message says."

"I guess we'll find out tomorrow," Gray mumbled around a yawn. "I'm going to bed. I'll see you in the morning."

"Night." Cam's thoughts were spinning. What could Dylan want. Was it something having to do with Catherine, or Jessie ... or even Molly?

He and Gray had been living in the house they'd grown up in since their parents had retired to Florida. Cam checked the doors and set the alarm. Then he climbed the stairs to his old room. Perhaps it was time for him to think about a home of his own. A place where he and Jess could live ... together.



Jessie's Home

June 5

8:00 a.m.

JESSIE HEARD birds and for the first time in a long time, her eyes popped open and immediately went to the top of her dresser. The picture of her and Cam, looking so much in love, was right where she'd place it the night before.

It had been taken one summer and traveled to and from the Philippines with her. However, after she'd seen Cam with Eden, it had been shoved in a drawer. Seeing it every morning, and knowing he didn't belong to her any longer, had only reiterated what was missing in her life. Now, though, there was hope her heart was on the right track.

She still had to get through telling Dylan about Catherine. Except, there'd been something in the tone of his voice that said he knew more than she thought. At least, Catherine hadn't gotten her hooks in him for good. For that, she had Molly to thank.

Her brother had met Molly shortly before that infamous situation. A visit to The Beachside Inn, a chance encounter, and true love was born. Dylan's heart had wanted, and the rest was history. They were a sign happily-ever-afters were possible.

"Jessie," Dylan knocked and stuck his head in her room, "Cameron and Gray will be here in a couple of hours."

"Okay," Jessie glanced at the clock, "I'll just shower and be right down."

"Molly's making pancakes." His face lit up with the dopey grin he always wore when talking about his wife. "She wants to know how many you want."

"It depends," Jessie muttered tongue-in-cheek. "Are they better than yours?"

"Hey, take that back," Dylan groused. "But yes, my wife can cook."

"Then I'll have a couple, thanks."

As soon as the door shut, Jessie rolled over, and her gaze once again drifted to the picture. If things were different, she'd send Cam a text telling him good morning. Until he knew the entire story, though, she couldn't help but feel as if she were walking on eggshells.

What to say and how to explain remained at the front of her mind as she showered and dressed. Dylan had forwarded the information from her phone and was printing a copy, which meant all she really needed to do was fill in the blanks.

"Easy peasy, right?" Jessie fastened her heart pendant around her neck, and her friends' words came back to her, "*Love is worth fighting for.*" Was the happy ending she wanted with Cam still waiting for her?

There's only one way to find out. Fight for what you want.

For years, she'd thought that was what she'd been doing. Fighting to protect those she loved. But just as Dylan said during that long ago talk, he was looking for what their parents or the Hunter's had. So was she. And now, he had Molly. *She* wanted that with Cam.

Jessie pulled her hair back into a ponytail, grabbed a file from her suitcase and stepped into the hall, her mouth watering for homemade pancakes.

Except, there was no buttery goodness wafting up the stairs like her brother had promised. Just a scorched, 'someone burned something' odor that had her running to the kitchen.

"What's that—?" Jessie immediately whirled around. "Oh!"

“Jessie!”

“Sis!” Molly and Dylan shouted simultaneously.

“We are so sorry!” Molly apologized, and Jessie could hear scrambling behind her as they worked to put their clothes right.

“No, I’m sorry,” Jessie replied, her back still turned. “You’re used to having the house to yourselves, so ...” She was just glad they still had their clothes on ... or at least mostly. “I should have made more noise.”

“Coast is clear.” Dylan breezed by her. “I’ll just go make those copies.”

“*Chicken*,” Molly muttered.

“I’m sorry you’re embarrassed,” Jessie laughed. “It’s just so nice to walk in on him after all those times he did the same to me.”

“You and Cameron?” Molly glanced up, then right back down, her cheeks sporting bright pink patches.

“Yes,” Jessie laughed, as the memory was funny now. “One time, Dylan came home and Cam and I were ...”

While they mixed up some fresh pancakes, Jessie entertained Molly with silly stories. Thirty minutes later, Dylan returned, just as they’d placed the plates on the table.

“Sorry about that, Sis.” He kissed the top of her head before sliding into an adjacent seat. “Now I know how you felt.”

“It feels good being on this side for once,” Jessie snickered. “Paybacks are so fun.”

Dylan glanced up, and his blue eyes locked with hers. “We will get to the bottom of this.”

Jessie studied his expression; serious, determined, and worried. “You think?”

“I know,” he promised.

She couldn’t help but hope, he was right. Working with the orphanage in the Philippines was rewarding, but she wanted to be in Swan Harbor. With her family ... and with Cam.

Thankfully, Molly jumped in and they spent several minutes discussing the town, the summer crowds, and the fact her brother was running for Sheriff. The position that had once been held by her father and grandfather.

“Dad would have approved,” Jessie smiled. “He used to grumble and say he didn’t understand why you wanted to be a lawyer. Thought you’d make a damn fine deputy.”

Dylan laughed. “That sounds like dad.”

The conversation went on around her for several minutes, but she didn’t feel the need to take part until she heard Molly mention picking something up.

“Wait,” Jessie looked back and forth between the two, “you’re getting a dog?”

“Yes,” they answered simultaneously.

“When, what kind, why?” There had always been a dog or cat in their home before her parents’ accident. Afterward, though, Dylan thought it was too much work. But apparently, her brother had changed his mind.

“Molly wanted one,” Dylan sent her a sheepish smile. “He’s an English Shepard, six-weeks old, and we haven’t decided on a name.”

“Show her his picture, Honey,” Molly encouraged. Then, to Jessie’s surprise, Dylan pulled out his phone to show off the puppy’s photo.

“He’s adorable.” Jessie exchanged conspiratorial grins with Molly, “Is he with a breeder?”

“No,” Molly hurried to explain. “Maggie ... one of the teachers I know adopted the mother and ...”

“You couldn’t resist,” Jessie guessed.

“Something like that.” Molly exchanged a look with Dylan, making her feel as if she’d stepped into a private moment.

When she glanced down and realized the syrup on her plate was congealing, Jessie knew it was time. “We need to talk about Boston.”

“Boston?” Dylan’s eyes narrowed. “What about Boston?”

“About why you were never asked for money.”

“I never thought about it,” he shrugged. “Until one day someone at Sally’s asked how I could afford it.”

That was curious. Jessie couldn’t help but wonder who had asked. “What did you say?”

“I told them you were on a scholarship,” Dylan replied. “Why?”

“A scholarship?” she echoed. “Who told you that?”

“Catherine.” His succinct reply wasn’t a surprise, as that’s what she’d expected. “Why are you bringing this up now?”

Jessie glanced from her brother, to Molly, to the clock and back again. “Because,” she took a breath, “there’s something I need to tell you before Cam and Gray arrive.”



Cam’s Home

June 5

9:00 a.m.

AFTER A NIGHT of dreams interwoven with memories of what-might-have-beens and what was, Cam woke feeling logy. Which made it difficult not to dwell on the negative.

To keep from falling down that well, he turned his focus on figuring out what he needed to do to get the future he wanted. It had been two years since those dreams and plans he'd made had been snatched away. If he wanted them back, he needed to focus on taking things one step at a time.

A long, hot, then cold shower helped blast a few cobwebs away. Then he'd dug through his drawer and pulled out the diamond ring he'd bought. The shine was still on it, and when he held it in his hand, he could still imagine slipping it onto Jessie's finger.

Someday. Cam returned the ring to the box and set it on his nightstand. Someday, he was going to put it where it belonged ... on Jessie's hand.

Cam found Gray in the kitchen perusing the contents of a pink box. "When did you go to Paula's?"

"While you were in the shower," Gray mumbled. "There's no food in the house."

"Sorry," Cam answered around the bite he'd just taken. "With the wedding and all, I've not been home much."

Gray's grunt had him making a mental note to go shopping. He liked the idea of taking Jessie. Except he needed to break things off with Eden first. That was not a task he relished.

"Let's go." Cam tossed his napkin in the trash. "The quicker we find out what's up, the faster I can get to my future."

"Aren't you impatient?" Gray helped himself to a third doughnut before heading toward the door. "Remember what I said about being careful?"

"Careful-smareful."

Cam reached for his keys and couldn't help but notice his hand was shaking. He was excited. However, there was a part of him that was also nervous. Until everything was out in the open, he couldn't help but worry that something would stand in the way of the happily-ever-after he wanted with Jessie.

"You're acting more nervous than when you were a teenager," Gray snickered.

"Matters more now," Cam fired back.

Which couldn't be more true. Somehow, he understood that whatever happened once they walked through the door was important ... very important.

"Well, let's go, Romeo," Gray quipped. "Your future's waiting."

On the drive over, they talked about the pier project Hunter Construction

had recently undertaken. The entire dock area had been remodeled, and they were in the process of building shops, restaurants, and arcades. One end would be anchored by the Spanish galleon, and the other by Siren's Song, a nightclub he was working to design.

"We need an office manager," Cam grunted, thinking about the pile of files stacked on the conference room table.

"I know," Gray acknowledged. "But you know how dad feels about that."

"That was a long time ago, though," Cam pointed out. "We should ask him again."

"Go right ahead," Gray laughed. "The last time I did, dad ignored me."

A situation with an office manager years ago had soured their father on giving someone that much control. However, since it was Cam and Gray running the office, perhaps it was time.

"Maybe when they come back from Florida," Cam offered.

He pulled into the Prince family home driveway and couldn't help but notice how different the house looked from that long ago summer. Molly had been good for Dylan ... and for the old house. The feeling of neglect was missing, leaving behind nothing but happiness and hope.

Molly opened the door to their knock and for a split second, Cam felt a sense of panic. "Morning, Molly," he buzzed the petite brunette's cheek, "you're looking well."

"Cameron," she greeted him before moving to his brother, "Grayson, come on inside. Dylan and Jessie are—"

"—Leaving you to do all the work," Cam grinned, unable to take his eyes off Jessie's face, as she entered from the kitchen.

"Exactly," Molly's green eyes twinkled. "You know, I did hear some interesting stories about you and Jessie this morning. I'm surprised Dylan didn't shoot you."

"Oh, shmmph," the word was cut off when suddenly his lips were occupied in a much more enjoyable activity.

"Sugar," Jess laughingly finished when she stepped back.

"Definitely, sugar." Cam kissed her again. "Morning, Princess. Did you talk with Dylan?"

"I did." Jessie nodded. "But there's more."

Their eyes met and, while he wasn't sure what he was seeing, his heart sank straight to his toes. In his arms was where he wanted her to stay.

"Jessie?"

"Come sit," Jessie whispered. "I'll explain everything."

Cam settled next to Gray on one of the sofas. When Jessie exchanged

serious looks with Dylan, his heart rate spiked, and the knots in his stomach tightened.

“What’s going on, Prince?” Gray groused. “Cam filled me in on Catherine’s behavior, but I’m not sure how that affects me.”

“There’s more to the story, Gray.”

Cam couldn’t help but notice, whatever they were going to say made Dylan angry. It was obvious he was hanging onto his temper by a thread.

“Just spit it out,” he finally snapped. “Catherine’s out of the picture ...”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Jessie’s quiet voice had his heart triple-timing. “But it’s not just our family being targeted.”

“Come on, Princess,” Cam stood up, “spill.”

“It’s you too, Cam.” Jessie’s chin began to quiver. “The threat involves your whole family.”

“Our whole family?” Gray barked. “How?”

“Healthcare fraud,” Jessie replied.

Cam’s thoughts spun off into multiple directions, and feeling sucker-punched, he dropped back onto the sofa.

thirteen

Jessie's Home

June 5

11:00 a.m.

THERE WAS silence for about thirty seconds, then all hell broke loose, and everyone started talking at once. Jessie's heart raced and, as the noise grew louder, the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach churned faster. Her breath caught in her throat and the darkness she'd kept at bay for years peeked out.

No! She slammed it back down, and her eyes sought Cam's. *Isn't love worth fighting for?*

There was no longer any doubt about that answer. Yes, of course it was! This time, though, she would fight ... with him ... beside him. This time, she wouldn't allow anyone to have power over their happiness.

To gain control, Jessie put two fingers in her mouth and whistled. The shrill pitch broke through the white noise the voices had become until, once again, silence reigned.

"I know you have questions." She looked slowly from person to person before settling on Cam. "Let me get the story out, and then you can ask, okay?"

"Sorry about that, Princess," he murmured. "But fraud? Come on."

Jessie picked up the folder she'd been carrying with her for the last two years. "Everyone knows about my confrontation with Catherine, right?"

At the acknowledgment of the four others in the room, she continued, "When Catherine told me she wasn't giving up, I thought nothing about it. That's when I drove to HCI."

"That was the night we were to meet later," Cam replied. "It was the night you never showed."

The look on his face and the sound of his voice told her she'd hurt him. However, this wasn't the time to get into that. Jessie sent him an apologetic smile and went on, "As I was leaving HCI, a text message arrived. It was from an unknown sender and said:

You have two hours to get out of town, or this will be on the front page of

the Swan Harbor News tomorrow. Imagine how many lives you'll ruin then.

It was accompanied by two attachments—”

“Jess,” Dylan’s ‘*I can’t believe you didn’t tell me*’ voice interrupted.

“I’m sorry,” she cut him off. “All I can say is, I thought I was doing what was right.”

“Show me,” Cam commanded.

Instead of giving him the folder, Jessie removed two pieces of paper and read,

“Local Doctor Investigated for Fraud

An anonymous source has reported that Doctor Mary Hunter is being investigated for several cases of healthcare fraud. She has been a practicing psychiatrist at Swan Harbor General for many years and the implications could be devastating to her career as well as that of her husband’s business, Hunter Construction.

We will keep you apprised of this case as we learn more information.”

When Jessie finished reading the short article, she handed it to Cam so he could see the picture attached. It showed Mary sitting at her desk, surrounded by files. The expression on her face said she was upset about something.

“There was also this

Jessica,

An audit of hospital records can turn up so many skeletons.

**False Billing*

**Improper Diagnosis*

**Mishandling of Medications*

And many other ‘secrets’, leading to Malpractice.

There goes her license. There goes her career.

When they’re finished auditing her records, do you know what happens next? They’ll go after the books of Hunter Construction, Inc. (HCI). That means your precious Cameron will be out of a job, along with his pain in the ass father, and brother.”

Gray growled, “Hey what did I do?” earning a laugh from Cam when she read the last line. For some reason, the fact they’d been able to laugh in the middle of such a serious situation filled her with hope. Was it possible that love really could conquer evil?

“It ended with,

“You’ll enjoy where you’re going. A one-way ticket is waiting for you at Logan International. Once you arrive in San Francisco, someone will meet you and prepare you for the rest of your journey.

You’re not needed in Swan Harbor, but the children in the Philippines do

need you. See, I'm not so bad."

"Was it from Catherine?" Cam snapped. "I have a few things I'd like to say to her."

"It's unsigned," Jessie explained.

"Still," Cam's brow furrowed, "there's no way any of what you read is true. Plus, it happened two years ago. Surely, it's no longer relevant."

"I wish that were true." Dylan handed Jessie another folder. "But after you left Sonny's the other night, another message arrived."

"Not ..." Cam began.

"I'm afraid so," Jessie admitted.

"What this time?" Cam asked.

Jessie dropped into the chair adjacent to where he was sitting and linked their fingers. "It's bad."

Cam's green eyes darkened. "How bad?"

She pulled several photos from the folder and handed them to him. "These were attached."

He looked down at the pictures, and his stare grew hard. One photo was of Mary Hunter behind bars, wearing an orange jumpsuit. A second showed her being removed from her office in handcuffs, and a third was of her mug shot.

"Damn!" Cam snapped. "But these aren't real." He passed the photos to Gray. "My mother has never been arrested."

Before Jessie could come up with what to say, Dylan jumped in, "We know that. However, unless we figure out what's going on, no one, from either of our families will be safe."

"Is that it?" Cam asked when it had been quiet for a handful of seconds.

"Almost." Jessie took another piece of paper from the folder. "There's another 'article.'"

"Read it," Cam barked impatiently.

Jessie tried not to take offense at Cam's tone of voice. Especially since his anger was completely normal. It was just that somehow, she couldn't stop feeling that she was responsible – even knowing how irrational that sounded.

"Local Doctor Indicted," Jessie read.

"Doctor Mary Hunter was indicted and charged with multiple counts of healthcare fraud, including falsifying claims, writing phony prescriptions, and ordering medical tests not needed. She is facing fraud allegations of over one million dollars.

This reporter has also learned several counts of embezzlement are pending that involve HCI, her husband's business.

Doctor Hunter has been a practicing psychiatrist for over thirty-five years

with medical privileges at Swan Harbor General. If found guilty, she could face up to ten years in prison."

Jessie passed the article and a few pages with columns of numbers on them to Cam and turned to the short letter.

"Jessica,

You can remain in Swan Harbor, but there's no happy ending for you and Cameron. Stay away from him or else."

When she finished reading, Jessie tossed the note on the table angrily, "Great choices, huh?" Restless energy had her pushing up to pace.

Her choices sucked. She could leave Swan Harbor and be miserable away from her family ... and Cam. Or she could stay and be miserable ... so close yet so far away. Had she been born under a black cloud? It seemed every time happiness was close, something beyond her control snatched it away.

"Jessie," Cam pulled her into the safety of his arms, "we're going to fix this."

"How?" Jessie could feel the darkness rising. "It all feels so ..." The word hopeless almost tripped off her tongue, but wasn't that how she should have felt after her fall? Yet, somehow, with Cam's help, she'd conquered it.

The gentle murmur of Dylan and Molly comforting each other had Jessie taking a step back and tangling her fingers in Cam's shirt. His green eyes mesmerized her, their message of love promising her the world. *He's worth fighting for!* Anger took hold and pushed the darkness away.

"We can't let whoever is doing this win."

Cam cupped her face. "We want the same things, right? A life ... together."

"Of course." Jessie kissed him, and the anger and love inside merged. They gave her strength for what came next. "It will be a fight."

"One we're going to win," Cam promised. "But how?"

"Hell," Dylan's smile turned dark, "that's easy. We investigate. Which I do very well."

"No!" Molly and Jessie both shouted.

"But, it's what I do." Dylan crossed his arms over his chest defensively. "Why no?"

Jessie moved to her brother's side. "You're running for Sheriff. You're the law. I kept secrets so you could have your happy ending, and now that you have it, I won't let you throw it away."

"But I'm the investigator," Dylan all but shouted.

Jessie took his hand, hoping he understood why she was so adamant he stayed out of it. "I remember dad saying you could solve any crime if you had all the pieces. We just need to find them."

Dylan looked like he was going to argue. Except, she could tell he knew she was right. He just didn't want to admit it.

"Face it, Prince," Gray joined the argument. "You've been bested. While you might be the one with the badge, sometimes we're all investigators."

"He's right, Dylan," Jessie took over. "I'm a therapist, and every time I get a new case, I investigate to try to help the person find a solution."

"And Gray and I search for the weaknesses in what we're building or designing." Cam slipped his arm around Jessie in a sign of solidarity.

"You have to allow us to do this," Jessie replied softly. "You know that I'm right."

"Fine," Dylan barked, "but on several conditions."

"Whatever," Gray sighed. "Say your piece, then take your pretty wife for a Sunday stroll."

"Number 1," Dylan looked at Jessie before turning his gaze to Cam, "you two can't be seen together."

"What!?" they shouted.

"Think about it," Dylan went on. "The letter states Jessie needs to stay away from you or else. Aren't you worried about what that means?"

"But ..." Cam's arm tightened around her back.

"He's right." Jessie forced herself to take a step away from Cam's heat. "I was in town for a few days before the wedding, and there were no texts."

"Then I followed you to Sonny's," Cam whispered.

"And as soon as you left," Jessie answered, "a new message arrived."

"Damn!" Cam stalked across the room, anger radiating off of him in waves.



CAM MEASURED the distance between where he was standing and Jessie. He was tempted to carry her away and let their brothers fight this battle. Except, she deserved more. *They* deserved more. Which meant if they wanted a life ... together. Then, they needed to fight together. Something they should have done two years ago.

"Okay," he acquiesced. "What else?"

"You won't like this either," Dylan warned. "But, to Swan Harbor, nothing must appear different."

"You're not saying?" Cam blew out a frustrated breath. "Are you sure this is necessary?"

"I am," Dylan nodded. "Until we know more ..."

Cam cut a quick glance in Jessie's direction, prepared for her to put up a

fight. Instead, she surprised him.

"Eden did catch the bouquet," Jessie pointed out. "How would it look if you suddenly dumped her?"

"I don't care how it would look," Cam blurted. "Eden's not the one I want to marry."

One of Jessie's red gold brows flew up. "I should hope not."

"I'm sorry," Dylan sighed. "But you need to continue dating Eden. For the time being, anyway."

"Except this time," Jessie sauntered toward him, "there *will* be a few conditions."

The touch of jealousy added a layer, Cam hadn't anticipated.

"Oh?"

"Yes!" Jessie tilted her chin up a notch. "Got a problem with that?"

Problem? Certainly not!

"We'll talk about it later." Cam tucked her against his side, then turned his attention back to Dylan. "What else?"

Dylan separated the pieces of paper into several piles. "Like Jessie said, you need to solve the puzzle. These," he pointed to the pictures, "are either real or ones that have been cropped or photo-shopped. You need to figure out a time frame and see if you can differentiate them from the originals."

"Can we ask mom when they were taken?" Cam was pretty sure he knew the answer, but

"Not just yet," Dylan replied. "There's no need to upset her." He separated two sheets from the rest, "These look like ledger sheets of some kind. Find an accountant you trust and see if they can make sense of them."

"An accountant?" Jessie grinned. "I know just the person."

"Sadie?" Cam teased.

"Long legs and ponytails," Gray recalled with a smile.

Jessie snickered, causing Cam to send her a questioning glance.

"Later." Her eyes were twinkling with some sort of devilish merriment, making him wonder what he was missing.

"And last," Dylan hesitated an extra beat, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but you need someone who's computer savvy."

That was an easy one, Cam couldn't help but think. Even if it might not be looked on in a favorable way if it were to get out.

"Just be careful," Dylan warned them. "If this ..."

"It will be fine." Cam pulled his princess a little closer to his side. "I'll take care of Jessie."

"We'll take care of each other," Jessie clarified, her sign to him he wouldn't

be going rogue on this mission.

“Together,” Cam echoed.

“Be careful.” Dylan slowly looked around the room before his gaze landed on Jessie. “Don’t make me worry about you.”

When she walked away to talk to Dylan, Cam pulled out the photos one more time. There was something familiar about bits and pieces of a couple. Overall, though, he couldn’t explain why he thought that to be true.

Gray pointed to the one of Mary in a prison cell. “Why do I feel as if I’ve seen this before?”

“I had the same thought,” Cam admitted. He took out the one of Mary sitting at her desk. “This one seems familiar, as well.”

Jessie was suddenly there, looking over his shoulder at the photo, “I ... I’ve seen that before. Or at least a picture that look similar to this one. I’m just not sure where.”

“Mom was at the hospital when it was taken,” Gray noted a framed photo in the background. “That’s been there for years.”

“That picture was taken when my mother was pregnant with me.” Jessie’s smiled. “They were celebrating.”

“Hot fudge and ice cream at Sally’s,” Gray noted. “My kind of celebration.”

“Once we get the dirt on Catherine, you can buy,” Cam quipped.

“Gladly. I’ll dig around mom’s pictures.” Gray took the folder. “Jess, you’ll ask Legs about the accounting, right?”

Jessie nodded. Her turquoise eyes sparkling once again. “Won’t be a problem.”

“And I’ll check with Hayden regarding computer hacking,” Cam added.

“Alright,” Gray glanced around, “Dylan left?”

“Took his pretty wife for a stroll,” laughed Jessie.

“Good for him,” Gray murmured. “I think we’ve got a good plan. We’ll reconvene in a few days ... covertly and make Dylan proud. Now, it’s time to go eat.”

Cam nodded, “Okay. Give us a few, will you?”

“Make it quick,” Gray advised. “Your car’s been here long enough.”

As soon as the door shut, Cam tugged Jessie into his arms. “I hate this.”



JESSIE ALLOWED HERSELF TO RELAX, the feeling of home she got when in Cam’s arms just as strong as ever. This time, though, there was another kernel of something inside. Hope, maybe.

Cam buried his face in her neck. She could feel a slight tremor in his body, and she wished, she could make it better.

“Are you okay?”

“I hate this,” he repeated. “The last few days, I’ve been a jerk. To you *and* to Eden.”

“To both of us?” Jessie took a step back and forced him to look her in the eyes. “Why do you think to both of us?” He dropped his arms, and the look on his face scared her. “Come on Cam,” she goaded, “spit it out. Did you sleep with her and pretend it was me? Is she pregnant?”

When all the color drained from his face, her knees almost buckled. *Where had that question come from?* He’d pretty much said he hadn’t slept with Eden. Besides, this was Cam, and she trusted him.

“No!” He shouted, the indignation on his face causing her to wince. “You know I never...”

“I know!” Jessie brazenly grabbed his waistband and pulled him close. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have Just your behavior around her was ...”

“I wanted to ...” Cam wrapped his arms around her waist loosely. His voice lowered, and the look on his face caused her heart to flutter. “I know it wasn’t easy seeing me with her.”

“Why do you say that?”

He kissed her once, twice, never holding it long enough for her to get comfortable. “Because if our roles were reversed, and I saw you in the same situation,” this time the kiss was longer, drawn out, threatening to suck the very breath from her lungs, “I’d want to kill him.”

His choice of words was so anti-Cam Jessie almost laughed, until she got a good look at his expression.

“I know you don’t mean that literally,” she repeated the way he’d been kissing her. Smaller kisses leading toward a deep, dark, dangerous one that stole her breath and had her holding on.

Jessie thought she’d remembered how his kisses made her feel, but the swooping, swirling way her insides were moving was new. She wanted to drag him upstairs and get reacquainted with other parts of him too. The knowledge she couldn’t, though, at least yet, had her stepping back.

“I love you,” she said the words that had only been insinuated. “I just want you to know ... in case ... you know.”

“I know.” He smiled, one so big and ... so sexy, it took her breath.

“You know?” Jessie huffed, “It’s customary when someone says they love you, you say it back.”

“Oh, it is?” Cam’s green eyes glittered, causing her heart to flip flop.

“Okay, Princess,” he drawled, “you win, as usual.”

Jessie held her breath, waiting to hear the words, she’d been dreaming of for years. He hesitated, one, two, she counted, but at ten when he still hadn’t said anything, she nipped the bottom of his chin. “Well?”

“There’s that frosty princess voice, I ...” Cam’s whispered words sent chills zipping down her spine. “I love you, Jessica Marie Prince. I always have, and I always will.”

Tears filled her eyes, so much so, she was once again looking at Cam through a foggy lens.

Cam cupped her face. “Don’t cry.” He gently swept the wetness away. “It kills me when you do.”

“These are good tears,” Jessie sighed. “Very, very good tears.”

“Really?” His lips lingered on hers. “I’m glad, because I do ... I love you.”

“Show me,” Jessie begged, not ready to let him leave. “Give me something to tide me over.”

“You’re killing me, Princess,” Cam groaned. “But I never have been able to resist you.”

He kissed her, one of those soul-stealing kisses that turned her thoughts into mush, and weakened her knees. Jessie tangled her hands in Cam’s shirt and held on. If she was lucky, she’d survive to see another day ... and to get another kiss.

fourteen

Hunter Construction, Inc.

June 10

5:00 p.m.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, Cam found his focus drifting in directions it shouldn't more often than not. He needed to attend to the building he was designing for the pier, except the plans weren't coming together. Instead, he spent his days waiting for Hayden to find something to help them with their case, and his evenings on the phone with Jessie.

His princess was the bright spot in his life. While he couldn't be with her physically, it hadn't stopped them from reconnecting. After spending long hours with her on the phone, he once again felt as if his heart was whole. He'd met the Jessie she'd become and was realizing how, in some ways, she'd changed. What he'd learned only gave him more reasons to love her. Which made being apart even more difficult.

When she'd asked what the last two years had looked like in his life, he'd willingly shared with her. Just not all. There were feelings and emotions he'd bottled up that hurt too much to revisit. The loneliness, sadness, anger, jealousy, and emptiness were ones he didn't readily offer. Since the questions had gone unasked, he was able to keep them buried. At least, so far, anyway.

In many ways, the woman she'd become surprised him. This one spoke her mind and seemed much more comfortable fighting for what she wanted. She challenged him one second, then the next said something that made him love her more. The pull between them was stronger than ever and seemed to strengthen each day.

Jessie had spent time asking subtle questions about his relationship with Eden. That she was jealous was obvious. Her emotions, though, caused him to feel like he was on a roller coaster.

One minute, he was on top of the world, she cared enough to not want to share. Then, the next, he would crash, because if they weren't in this predicament, she wouldn't have to. Although, in his eyes, there was no real

‘sharing’ being done. His heart was Jessie’s – always had - always would.

She’d taken the comment regarding her conditions to his ‘pretend’ dating to heart. For the past four days, she’d sent a morning and an afternoon text, listing them.

From her first one,

Jessie: *Condition #1. No tongue when kissing.*

To her tenth,

Jessie: *Condition #10. No whispering sweet words in Eden’s ears.*

Cam relished them, as they were a tangible reminder she was back in his life. It had been five days, and he’d received ten comments.

However, after she’d learned he was taking Eden to Randy’s. Her conditions began coming faster and more often. Some of them made him chuckle. Others, though, made him happy their roles weren’t reversed. The never knowing kept him on his toes and hyper-aware of his phone. To the point that as soon as it buzzed, he gave up the pretense he was working.

Jessie: *Condition #25. No loving nicknames. You may call her Sugar. After all, it’s what you use when you can’t remember a female’s name.*

“News from Hayden?”

Cam glanced up to see his brother standing in the doorway. “What?”

“News from Hayden?” Gray repeated.

“No, it’s from Jessie.” Cam tossed his phone on his desk and leaned back. “I’m shocked she could read me so well ... and,” he blew out a breath, “a little embarrassed at my behavior.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Gray shut the door and slid into a chair on the other side of the desk.

“I can’t decide,” Cam frowned. “Just one more item on the list to deal with when this is over.” He shoved the thought away for later and turned to business. “If you’re here about the building, I’m not done.”

“I’m not,” Gray retorted. “But why the hell not?”

“Can’t get it right,” Cam confessed. “Now, why are you here?”

“I found one of the pictures.” Gray flipped open a magazine and laid it on the desk, separating the pages, so the pictures were side by side.

Cam studied his brother for an extra second before glancing down. As soon as he saw what Gray had discovered, a sharp whistle escaped before he could stop it. “Damn, Bro. You hit the jackpot.”

Doctor Mary Hunter had been featured in a two page glossy layout, in a prominent *Psychiatry* magazine. She was seated behind her desk, and there were files stacked high around her. In the original, she was leaning forward with her arms resting on the folders, and her expression was one of pride and excitement.

There was a stark contrast to the one Jessie had received.

"Photoshop," Cam spit out in disgust. "Why would someone go to all this trouble?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Gray retorted. "It's a good thing Sadie spotted a copy of the magazine in the picture, or—"

"Wait, what?" Cam interrupted. "Sadie was with you last night?"

"Uhh," Gray stood so fast, he knocked over the chair. "So, what if she was?" His petulant voice reminded Cam of when they'd gotten in trouble as boys. "Got a problem with it?"

"Now, I'm going to give you a warning," Cam tossed his brother's words back. "Take it slow. Sadie is a lovely person, but with men, she's a ball buster."

His brother's eyes hardened so much, Cam had to blink several times to make sure he was seeing what he thought.

"Speaking from experience?" Gray snapped, jealousy dripping from every word.

"Not hardly!" Cam laughed. "My heart has always belonged to Jessie. But hurt one—"

"—Hurt them all," Gray acknowledged. "Already got the lecture."

"Jessie?" Cam guessed.

"Yes," Gray's sigh was long-suffering. "She was texting threats."

Cam smiled, but gave his brother a break and went back to studying the pictures. "So, if the expression was changed to convey mom was upset about something, where did the person find that picture?" He closed the magazine and pushed it across his desk.

"No idea," Gray grumbled. "But this isn't the end."

"Good luck." Cam folded the plans on his desk and shoved them in a drawer. "I'm taking off. I've got a date."

"Sounds like you're the one needing the luck," Gray teased. "All those conditions and all."

Cam couldn't help but think there was some measure of truth in the statement. His *date* wasn't going to be just a simple evening out. Feelings were going to have to be considered. Not only Eden's, but Jessie's, as well.

Once again, he was guarding hearts, leaving him to wonder if he also needed to worry about his own.



Jessie's Home

June 10

6:00 p.m.

JESSIE HAD BEEN STARING at the pictures of Mary Hunter for hours. Partly, trying to see if she could pick up on where the photo-shopping occurred. Primarily, though, she needed to keep busy. If she didn't, she wallowed in the fact Cam was going on a date ... and it wasn't with her.

"Find anything?" Molly peered over her shoulder. "You've been sitting there for hours."

"We found out where this came from." Jessie pointed to the picture of Mary sitting at her desk. "But nothing new on the rest." She lined up the other three images, in order of arrest, mug shot, and behind bars. "I just can't shake the feeling that I'm missing something."

Molly slid into a chair and picked up the photo of Mary behind bars across the table. "You know, there's something familiar about this one. Let me think on it a little more. Maybe the pieces floating around in my head will eventually come together."

Jessie closed her eyes and tried to push away the pity party tears. "Unlike some people, I've nowhere else to be."

"Oh, Jessie," Molly sympathized. "I can't imagine how difficult it is to know he's close, yet you can't claim him as yours."

"It's harder than I thought it would be," Jessie admitted. "Cam's going out with Eden tonight, and I just want to scratch her eyes out."

Molly laughed. "I'm afraid I'd want to do more than that. But is there any reason ..."

Jessie glanced in her sister-in-law's direction. Her eyes were alight with mischievousness.

"Are you thinking I should ...?"

"I am," Molly chuckled. "Randy's has so many nooks and crannies, you never know whom you might run into."

Several possibilities ran through Jessie's mind. She had to admit, Molly was right. Randy's had multiple floors and hidden closets. There was even a storage room that, when they were younger, she used to sneak into with Cam.

"Thanks, Molly." Jessie hugged the other woman. "You've been a big help."

"Knock him dead, Jess." Molly smiled. "I'll let you know if I have any further thoughts on the picture."

"Thanks." Jessie grabbed her phone and punched a button. "I'll talk to you later."



Randy's Arcade

June 10

6:30 p.m.

CAM PARKED his car in a lot, not too far from Randy's Arcade. When Eden had suggested it, he'd thought it a good idea. Especially, when he heard they were meeting her friends. The music and someone for her to talk with would keep her occupied, taking some pressure off of him.

Except then he'd found out 'why' they were meeting her friends.

"I was so surprised when Abby showed me her ring," Eden prattled on. "Luke pulled out all the stops. Isn't that nice?" She linked her arm through his and pressed her breast against his as they walked.

"Very nice." Cam made a mental note to kick his own ass several times when all this was over. Yes, Eden was pretty. Except had she always gone on ad nauseam, without saying much?

"You've been quiet." Eden pressed even closer. "Is there something going on?"

Cam tried to put a little distance between his bicep and her anatomy. Had she behaved like that before, and he hadn't minded? Or had she behaved like that before, and he hadn't noticed?

"It's just a work thing." He tucked his hands in his pockets, hoping to create more space between their bodies.

Eden said the appropriate things, but then her voice faltered, and her steps slowed at the same time. "Oh, Cameron!" Her sugary voice warned him not to turn around. "Isn't that the most beautiful ring?"

He could feel the blood drain from his face. *What had he been thinking?* Since Randy's lot had been full, he'd parked in the closest city one. That it happened to be right next to Joanne's Gems, hadn't been considered.

The possibility it wasn't what he thought raced through his mind. Then he looked at the store display. There was a part of him that wanted to laugh. Eden had chosen a ring similar to the one he'd purchased for Jessie. Except explaining his laughter, well

"Wouldn't it look wonderful on my finger?" she continued to gush.

It would look wonderful on a finger all right, just not yours, he wanted to shout.

"Eden," Cam took a deep breath.

"Yes, Honey?" When she looked at him, there was a dreamy look in her

eyes. It had him searching for what to say, so he could escape the situation gracefully.

“We’ve only been dating a few months ...”

“I know.” Eden batted her eyes. “Sometimes, though, that’s all it takes.”

Which Cam understood. Once he’d started seeing Jessie as a female, that was all it took. After that, no one else stood a chance.

“You’re so young,” he tried a different tactic. “You have your whole life ahead.” Then he forcibly directed her away from the window and toward Randy’s.

“And I want to spend it all with you.” Eden slipped one arm around his waist and her hand into his back pocket.

Cam couldn’t help but think how prophetic Ben’s words from the wedding had been. Since Eden had caught the bouquet, she’d become more territorial. Or had that behavior started when Jessie had returned to Swan Harbor?

He couldn’t deny there were multiple questions piling up. Many of which wouldn’t be answered until everything was over. It left a bitter taste in his mouth and reminded him of his delicate situation.

When Cam opened the door of Randy’s, he was immediately bombarded by memories. The arcade had been a fixture in Swan Harbor since before he’d been born. There were three floors, with multiple spaces that seemed to evolve as often as the town.

The first-floor housed video games; everything from old fashioned pinball machines to the latest combat ones. There was a large staircase in the center of the room, and as they moved toward the second floor, the bells from the electronic games gave way to the quieter clacking of balls from the pool tables.

Eden stopped and caught him unawares. When he ran into her, she tossed him a sultry smile.

“What?” He couldn’t help but wonder what was going on inside her head.

“Oh nothing.” She wiggled her ass against his stomach. Then with a wink, proceeded up the stairs, adding a pronounced sway to her hips.

Cam was sure one, or maybe two, of Jessie’s conditions had been broken. Determined not to break another, he looked away quickly. Especially since condition number thirteen was *‘no staring at Eden’s butt.’*

On the third floor, they were greeted by a large group of Eden’s friends, who had come to celebrate Abby and Luke’s engagement. Several tables had been crammed together and once they were seated, Cam found his chair was on the edge.

Everyone was paired off – and young, making him feel old, older even than the six years separating him from most. Which was even more glaring when the

waitress arrived with their drinks. A glass of whiskey for him, glasses of champagne for Eden and a few others, and lemonade for the rest. It had him wondering if the nondrinkers were even legal.

Which was another ‘*what were you thinking?*’ moment, like so many he’d had over the past week.

He wanted to put the last two years aside and move on with the future. And even though Hayden kept saying he was ‘working on it,’ those words weren’t much of a consolation prize.

Cam stretched his long legs under the table and relaxed, placing his arm along the back of Eden’s chair. Her hair flirted with his wrist, and before, he might have fingered the strands. Except Jessie’s condition number four said, ‘*no playing with her hair,*’ kept running around in his head.

The thought had a corner of his mouth lifting as he picked up his glass and swirled the amber liquid. When he tossed back a drink of the alcohol, he could feel Eden’s displeasure.

“Must you drink that stuff?” she complained. “The smell and the taste is just so ...”

“Well then, Sugar,” Cam quipped. “It’s a good thing I didn’t offer you a drink now, isn’t it?” Eden humphed, and his eyes met the laughing ones of the guy sitting across the table.

“Are you two engaged?”

“No!” he blurted.

At the same time, Eden responded, “Not yet, Bart.”

Bart, Cam learned, was engaged to the pretty redhead sitting next to him. “I’ll give you six months.” The younger man picked up his Fiancée’s hand and rubbed his thumb over the small diamond on her finger.

Cam thought he heard Eden mutter something about it not taking that long, but before he could say anything, their meals were delivered. However, with the devil inside of him cackling with glee over the expected comments he’d get over his meal, he let it go.

He didn’t expect the smell of spicy hot wings and beer would be much to her liking. Which proved true as he ate, pointedly ignoring the dirty looks Eden repeatedly tossed his way.

Once finished, he wadded up his napkin and dropped it on his plate. Then, just like every other time he’d eaten the wings, he felt a large burp welling up inside. In deference to his company, he bit back the need to ‘let it rip.’ Instead, he turned his head away and met the mischievous eyes of his princess.

When Jessie sashayed by wearing a straight, black miniskirt, a tiny green top, and strapped sandals that showcased her long legs, he fought the need to run

after her. Especially when he realized she was on her way to dance, followed by Ben, Sadie, and an overly muscled blond.

Cam told himself he was looking out for his brother's best interests, and asked Eden to dance. However, once they were on the floor, it wasn't Sadie and her partner that captured his attention. Jessie was laughing at something Ben said, and even though he knew how she felt, he couldn't stop the tiny kernel of jealousy that sparked to life.

As they danced, Eden lightly rested her cheek against his chest. Except, after only a dozen steps, her head popped back up.

"Eww," she wrinkled her nose delicately, "you smell like beer and hot wings.

His devil peeked back out, and he knew his mama wouldn't approve, but a guy had to do what he had to do. Cam swallowed a little air, produced burp, and blew it into Eden's ear. "It was delicious too."

When he looked over her shoulder, it was into Jessie's twinkling eyes. The thought that he was dancing with the wrong woman, and how to rectify it, had just begun to form when Eden helped him out.

"Benji!"

Cam was dancing with Eden one second, then Jessie the next. It had occurred in such a smooth manner, he had to wonder if perhaps the manipulations hadn't been all one-sided.

"This is where you're meant to be."

"And don't you forget it," Jessie tossed back.

Cam took advantage of the dark dance floor, and with some subtle movements, manipulated them away from the others and into a corner. He pressed her hips into the cradle of his, and when her breasts flattened against his chest, a shiver of pleasure zipped straight up his spine.

"Oh, Jess," he breathed into her ear. "I must be breaking a few conditions."

"Not nearly enough," she whispered against his throat.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

Their eyes met and everything she was feeling was there. He wanted to tell her he was sorry. Wanted to tell her, she was always on his mind. Except before any of that could happen, the song began to fade.

Cam nuzzled her temple, then brushed his lips across her cheek. "I love you."

Her hand slowly slipped from his as he walked away, leaving a little piece of his heart behind.



JESSIE WASN'T sure how long she floated inside a fog, reliving how it felt to be in Cam's arms. Minutes later she imagined she could still feel the touch of his hand and his hot breath as he whispered love words in her ear.

She'd come to Randy's hoping to see him, but anything more she hadn't expected. Dancing with him had been wonderful ... amazing.

When she returned to the table and Sadie didn't immediately jump in with questions, Jessie knew something was going on. "Did you get a love note from Gray?"

"What?" Sadie looked up and, for a second, there was a blank expression on her face.

"Your phone," Jessie nodded toward the device, "did you get a love note from Gray?"

"Oh," a sly smile crawled across Sadie's face. "I wish, but no." She leaned closer and lowered her voice, "They're from Hayden."

"Oh?" Jessie's word came out louder than she'd expected. "Anything interesting?"

"They're ledger sheets." Sadie turned her phone so both could see the screen. "Here's the person's name, and over here," she slid the form so it moved to the left, "there are amounts. But these letter and number combinations, I don't know what they mean."

"I63.9, F33.1," Jessie read and understood immediately. "Those are diagnosis codes."

Sadie frowned. "How do you know that?"

"I'm a social worker," Jessie reminded her. "I had to do clinicals, and we used these for billing."

She took the phone and slid her thumb around to see all the columns. "A patient comes in, you give them a diagnosis, or reason for your service. Then," Jessie pointed to another code, "depending on what the person needs, there's one or more codes billed to the insurance company."

"Okay, that makes sense." Sadie sent a quick text, then grabbed her wrap and purse. "Hayden is printing these out for me to study. Wish me luck."

Jessie knew it was a long shot, but couldn't help but feel a little excited. "I'll walk out with you."

As they started down the stairs, Jessie looked back over her shoulder, hoping to make eye contact with Cam, but his table was blocked. She'd have to send him a text and hope he took his date home early.

"Sadie, go on ahead," Jessie suddenly decided. "I'm going to stop at the ladies' room and let Cam know what's up."

"Okay." Sadie's green eyes shone with excitement. "I'll see you in a bit."

Jessie stopped by the ladies' room and sent Cam a quick text. When she walked out, she was staring at her phone when she realized she was no longer alone. Before she could say anything, someone clamped one hand over her mouth and dragged her through an open door, slamming it closed behind her.

fifteen

Randy's Arcade

June 10

9:30 p.m.

HER PULSE IMMEDIATELY SPIKED, only to race even faster when her body recognized her captor.

"Cam." Jessie wrapped her arms around his neck and attached her mouth to his.

The kiss was one of those toe-curling ones where you can't get close enough. Her heart raced, her mind went blank and all she could do was feel.

Cam tangled one hand in her hair and slid the other under her skirt. He cupped her butt and pressed her closer to his heat. His tongue swept across hers, and their lips fought for dominance, with neither willing to let go of the other.

"Wait," Jessie tore her mouth away, "where's ... you know?" She couldn't make herself say the other woman's name. *This was her time with Cam. It was their special moment.*

"Forget about her." Cam backed her against a shelf. "*This is more important.*"

He palmed her ass and pushed her skirt up enough to tug her leg up over his hip. "Doesn't this feel good?" Cam established a steady back-and-forth motion, each forward move, causing his hardness to press against her much softer body.

Damn, Jessie thought. After two years apart, he still had the power to send her need skyrocketing. Except was this what she wanted?

Yes, her body answered when he sucked on a sensitive spot just below her ear. His hand skimmed up her side, then his lips whispered across her cheek.

"Are you aiming to break all those conditions?" Jessie tongued the notch at the base of his throat.

"Is that a problem, Princess?" He swooped back in for another taste.

If he hadn't been holding her between the shelf and his hard body, she would have melted into the floor. "Oh, Cam." Jessie's eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Do you know how often I've dreamed of this over the past two years?"

“Every single damn day.” Each word was punctuated with a kiss. One that was just a little harder, lasted just a little longer than the one before.

“Me too,” she confessed, pushing closer, needing more.

“Princess.” Cam cupped her face, and his thumbs swept over her cheekbones. “Tears?”

Jessie wanted to tuck herself against him and for a few hours let the world go on without them. “We should leave,” she lowered her leg, not answering the question. “At least we had one dance, right?”

“I want a lifetime of dances, though,” he murmured against her lips.

His kisses were like a drug, sending her flying one second and begging for more the next. And every time he spoke of wanting a future with her, the feeling was so enormous, she felt as if her insides might burst.

The door to their private space was suddenly yanked open, causing her heart to sink.

“What the hell is going on in here?”

Cam pushed her to the side and shielded her. “Ben, what the hell?”

Jessie peered around Cam’s shoulder into Ben’s curious eyes. “Nothing.” She scrambled to make sure her skirt was down, and her top was straight. “Nothing’s going on.”

“Uh, yeah,” he smirked. “Lover boy here is wearing your lipstick, and probably sporting a rather painful hard—”

“Shut up,” Cam snapped. “It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“Oh, really?” Ben lifted a brow. “Then what is it?”

“It’s ...” Jessie’s panicked look met Cam’s annoyed one. They needed to tell him something. The question was what.

“You’d better hurry and come up with what to say,” Ben pushed. “Young Eden is already looking for you,” he nodded toward Cam.

“We can’t tell you,” Jessie sighed. “You’re an attorney, and we don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Give me a dollar.” Ben held out his hand.

“A dollar?” Jessie questioned. “Why?”

“Because if I’m your attorney then whatever you say is attorney-client privileged.”

“It’s not just us though,” Cam admitted. “Plus, it’s big.”

“I’m on your side,” Ben crossed his arms over his chest, “both of your sides.”

Cam’s groan was barely audible as he pulled Jessie close and nuzzled her temple. “Take him to meet the others. I’ll get there as fast as possible.”

Jessie nodded and smiled at him, knowing it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I

suggest you look in the mirror before you find your, girlfriend.” She tried to lighten the mood by rubbing at the lipstick on his mouth.

Cam sent her an understanding look. “Go on,” he whispered.

She squeezed his hand and stepped out of the closet.

“We’ll see you in a few,” Ben assured Cam.

“Take care of her,” Cam called as they walked away.

“Sure thing.” Ben placed his arm around Jessie’s waist and purposefully planted his hand on her butt cheek.

“He won’t like that,” Jessie muttered.

“True,” Ben agreed. “But now, he has other problems. Eden at one o’clock.”

“Crap,” Jessie groaned. “I was hoping I’d get out of here without having to talk to her.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Ben replied. “She’s too busy looking for her date.”

They’d almost made it to the staircase when Eden called out, “Did you find him, Benji? I’ve looked everywhere.”

“Oh, I found him,” Ben snickered so softly, Jessie thought she’d imagined it. “He’s in the men’s room. I think those wings gave him the runs.”

Jessie couldn’t stop the giggle that snuck out. “That was mean,” she laughed. “But I loved it.”



AS SOON AS they were out of sight, Cam ducked into the men’s room. Ben’s familiarity with Jessie had stoked a spark of jealousy he hadn’t expected. It made him realize just how difficult seeing him with Eden had to be for his princess. Something he’d known, but hadn’t really understood. Which made him even more anxious for everything to be out in the open.

Cam swiped at the lipstick stains a few more times, then studied his face in the mirror. To his untrained eye, his lips looked a little puffier than normal, and the scruff hairs around his mouth were tinted. Other than that, all traces of his make-out session with Jessie were gone. And since he didn’t plan on allowing Eden close enough to study him carefully, he thought he’d be fine.

“There you are.” Eden pounced as soon as he stepped into the hallway. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Why?” His succinct reply earned him a frown.

“Are you okay?” She studied him, a little more carefully than he was comfortable with, causing him to press his lips together. “Ben said you were sick.”

“Oh, he did?” Cam took her elbow with the intention of getting her to leave. “He did,” Eden nodded. “Ben blamed it on your dinner.” “Well, you know how it is, sometimes,” he replied in a noncommittal way. “I know,” Eden whined. “The gang is going to Sonny’s, and I was hoping ...”

“Sonny’s, with you?” Cam bit off what he really wanted to say. Which was there was no way in hell he’d go to Sonny’s with her. Instead, he hummed, “I probably should just go home.”

“Home?” She looked at her new gold watch. “It’s not even 10:00. And it’s Friday.”

“Go with your friends,” Cam encouraged. “I don’t mind.”

“But ...” Eden frowned. “I’d be alone.”

No, he wanted to say, you’ll be with your friends. Except before he could hustle her out, she smiled, making him worry what she was cooking up.

“I’ll come take care of you.”

“You’ll what?”

“Take care of you,” Eden repeated.

“No,” Cam barked. “I don’t think so.”

“But why?” she continued to push. “Don’t you like to be taken care of?”

“I’m a grown man,” he retorted. “I’ll probably just sleep. So, would you like me to take you home?”

Eden sighed, one of those long-suffering ones, making him worry what was next. “Fine, I’ll just go home. We should go say goodbye.”

Cam glanced up the staircase, and the thought of going back to the third floor and Jessie not being there made him a little nauseous.

“If you don’t mind,” he rubbed his stomach for good measure, “I’ll get the car and meet you out front.”

Eden glanced up, and there was an innocence in her blue eyes that should have made him feel guilty. Instead, it just made him anxious.

“You do look a little pale,” she murmured.

“I’m feeling a little weak, as well.” Cam added another symptom.

“Go get the car. I’ll be right out.”

She reached to lay her hand on his chest. Unconsciously, Cam stepped back. The look on her face woke him up enough to realize what he’d done. He squeezed her fingers, then nudged her up the stairs.

“I’ll see you out front.”

Cam retrieved the car, and as soon as Eden was seated, headed toward her home. He could feel her watching him on the drive, almost as if she knew something was different, but wasn’t sure what. Thankfully, though, she didn’t

push, and it wasn't long before he pulled up in front of the house she shared with three others.

"Now that you've graduated, are you going to move?"

Eden smiled, and suddenly, warning signs began flashing in his head.

"It depends."

"On?"

"You, Silly. Us."

"Us?" His brows flew north. "What do *we* have to do with it?"

"Well ..." The warning signs in his head stopped flashing. Instead, they glowed bright red, telling him he shouldn't have pushed. "On when I move in with you."

Her answer caused him to rear back. "With me? I didn't—"

"We'll talk about it when you're feeling better," she cut him off.

Cam wanted to tell her it was a moot issue. To get her out of the car, though, he let it go. "Let me walk you to your door."

"That's okay. You should go rest." Eden placed her hand on his thigh and leaned in for a kiss.

"What?" He assumed she was annoyed by the peck – which didn't break any conditions.

"You smell like perfume," she frowned, "and it's not mine."

"Get over it," Cam snapped. "You've forgotten you're the one who switched dance partners."

"Whatever. Go home. You're mean when you don't feel well." Eden scrambled from the car and slammed the door.

When he drove off, he glanced in the rear-view mirror and noticed Eden hadn't moved. There was a game going on in her head, and he didn't know the rules. It just added one more reason to kick his own butt.



Above Sally's Diner

June 10

10:30 p.m.

JESSIE PACED in front of the door, waiting for Cam to arrive. She'd done her job – meaning bring Ben to the diner. However, waiting for her *boyfriend* to take his *girlfriend* home was making her antsy. Especially after spending time in his arms. While it had been wonderful, it had just reminded her of what she was missing.

She'd already annoyed Sadie and Hayden one too many times. And since she couldn't answer any of Ben's questions, she'd left him to wait alone. Which had her hanging out by the door, watching the clock.

Their meeting place – an abandoned apartment above Sally's – gave them the perfect opportunity to 'hide in plain sight.' Especially since the diner was always busy. They'd only needed to add a whiteboard and a corkboard, as there were scattered pieces of discarded furniture laying around.

Jessie checked the time once again. It was five minutes later, and her anxiety had risen another notch. She should have given Cam more conditions. Or put a tracking device on him. Something, so she'd know ...

Suddenly, the door flew open. Jessie's muscles tightened as she prepared to jump into Cam's arms. Then she realized, it wasn't the Hunter man she was waiting on.

"Oh, it's you."

"Well, it's nice to see you too, Little Sis," Gray drawled, sounding both sincere and mocking at the same time.

Jessie thumbed over her shoulder. "Sadie's in the back with Hayden. So, behave."

"Thanks." Gray winked on his way by.

Grayson Hunter was a good-looking man, and had never been shy about using those looks if he needed something. He was slightly shorter than Cam, with light brown hair, blue eyes, and a lean frame that had drawn female attention for as long as she could remember.

Which was what worried her about his relationship with her best friend. Less than a week ago it was Sadie hoping for an 'in' with Gray. However, since the first night the 'group' had met, they had been inseparable. Which had Jessie feeling like she was the one who needed the 'in.' At least they could be seen together in public, and no one would care.

"What's put that pucker right here?" Cam caused her to jump when he rubbed his thumb between her brows. "You were so focused, you didn't even hear the door open."

His pout made Jessie want to laugh, because if anyone should pout, it wasn't him. "I'm worried about Sadie," she admitted. "I don't want her to get hurt."

Cam nodded. "I've had the same thoughts about not wanting my brother to get hurt."

"Really?" Jessie frowned up at him, "I can't see that. Sadie has wanted Gray for years."

"They're adults, Princess. Now greet me appropriately." He tugged her

closer and puckered his lips expectantly.

Jessie leaned forward, just enough so her lips hovered close to his. She could smell the spices from his earlier meal and feel the heat from his breath. Sinking against him would be so easy.

“First,” she placed her finger in the center of his chin, “how many of those conditions did you break tonight?”

Cam grinned, causing his dimples to pop. “Do you really want to know?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

“There’s that princess voice I love so much.”

“Cam,” Jessie warned.

“I broke several,” he whispered, “with you.”

“Are you sure—”

Cam cut off her question with his mouth, but she wasn’t going to complain. Instead, she tangled her fingers in his shirt and enjoyed the kiss. It was wonderful, but they were both holding back. That much was obvious.

“Where’s Ben?” Cam rested his forehead against hers.

“He’s waiting across the hall,” Jessie murmured. “But we need to explain to the others first.”

They found Gray and Hayden looking over Sadie’s shoulder, all three of them sporting somber expressions.

“What?” Jessie tightened her hold on Cam’s hand.

“In a minute,” Gray grunted. “Why the hell is Ben here? He’s a lawyer—”

“Just hold on,” Cam interrupted before his brother’s mad grew too far out of control. “He caught Jess and I—”

“What!” Gray snapped. “You know what could happen if you’re seen together.”

Sadie grabbed his hand. “Gray, look at me.”

When he looked down, and Jessie saw the tenderness for her friend on his face, her fear over their relationship dissolved.

“Let them talk,” Sadie murmured.

“Ben’s on our side,” Jessie explained as soon as she could. “More importantly, though, if there’s trouble for Hayden ... or Mary, we might need him.”

“But,” Gray tried again.

“We hire him,” Cam replied in anticipation of the next question. “Shall we?”



CAM FOUND Ben scrolling through his Twitter feed, looking bored. "Are you sure, you want to hear this?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" his friend sighed. "Now what's going on?"

"We want to hire you." Cam handed three one-dollar bills to Ben. "Are we good?"

"Just so you know," Ben quipped, "that might buy you a minute."

"Let's hope we don't need it," Cam muttered.

"What's this about, Hunter?"

"Come with us." Cam led Ben into the other room and nodded toward the work area, "Someone is threatening my mother, if Jessie and I are together."

"We're trying to find out who," Jessie continued. "It's why I stayed away for so long."

Ben propped his hands on his hips, his blue-eyed stare almost making Cam uncomfortable.

"I don't want to know all the 'how'," he replied, "but what do you have so far?"

"Not much," Cam answered.

"I found something," Sadie interrupted. She spread several sheets of paper on the table and pointed to the first one. "Hayden sent me these earlier. They're ledger sheets, from an accounting program that 'appears' to be from Mary Hunter's private practice."

Cam frowned down at the pages. "You're saying those are payments for patient visits, right?"

"We think so," Sadie replied.

"And how do you know they're mom's?" Cam followed up.

"I used the passwords you gave me," Hayden explained. "They opened her office's billing program."

"Mom works for the hospital, though," Gray questioned. "Why would she have her own billing program?"

"That's not something I can explain," Sadie sighed. "I can just tell you what these papers say. And, 'if' they're true, quite a few dollars were billed over the last ten years or so."

"Can you tell where the money came from?" Jessie wanted to know. "Or where it was deposited?"

"Hayden?" Sadie tossed it back to the younger man. "He was working on that when Gray showed up."

They turned their attention to Hayden's monitors. One of them showed the ledgers. The other one, though, had Cam questioning his decision to bring in the younger man.

“Wait, Hayden,” he commanded. “Don’t tell me you’re breaking into the bank computers.”

“Okay,” a cheeky smile crossed Hayden’s face, “I won’t, but look ...”

Hayden explained while the accounting program didn’t have a person’s name on it, there was a routing and an account number. He’d tracked the routing number to Swan Harbor Trust, one of the oldest and most respected banks in town.

When Cam saw how easily the younger man had broken into the bank’s computer system, he had second and third thoughts about the whole process. He tugged Jessie closer, thinking he should have listened to his inner voice and taken her and run.

“It’ll be okay.” Jessie squeezed his hand.

Cam wanted to look away from what was happening in front of him. Except he couldn’t. He’d tried. Yet, each time, he was immediately pulled back to the numbers flashing by on the screen.

“I found the account.” Hayden traced his finger along the line to an amount. “Holy mackerel, there’s almost a million dollars in there.”

“Whose account, is it?” Cam asked, even though he wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Oh ...” Hayden’s voice faded. “Maybe, I’m wrong.” He reached to erase the entire program.

“Stop!” Cam placed his hand on Hayden’s shoulder. “Pull it up.”

Jessie’s nails dug into his arm as they watched the account information appear on the screen.

“Oh, my.” She buried her face against his chest.

“Account holder: Mary Evans,” Cam murmured. “And it was opened in 1986.”

“Why would mom open a savings account, in her maiden name, after she was married?” mused Gray.

Which was something Cam wondered about, as well.

“Hiding something,” Ben intoned.

“Ben!” Jessie shouted. “That’s awful.”

“Sorry,” he shrugged. “Just joking. Who opened the account?”

“Hmm,” Hayden tapped a few more keys, “Looks like someone named Colleen Richards. Do you know her?”

“Richards?” Cam searched his memories for the name.

“Could Colleen be Belle Richards’ mom?” asked Sadie. “Wasn’t she in your class?”

“Miss Richards?” Hayden muttered. “The librarian?”

“That’s her.” Ben dropped onto a nearby chair. “Belle’s grandmother raised her. Her mom disappeared when she was young. Five or six, I think.”

“How do you know this?” Cam frowned. “I don’t remember you ever dating her.”

“We went out a few times the summer before law school,” Ben replied. “It was nothing.”

“So now what?” Jessie mumbled.

“Let me dig around a little more,” Hayden responded. “Maybe I can find something else that will help.”

“Okay,” Cam tightened his arms around Jessie, “call me if you find something.”

“Will do. Night,” Hayden waved them off, but never looked back up.

Cam let Gray, Sadie, and Ben leave first, as he wanted a few minutes alone with Jessie.

“I want to be the one to take you home.”

“I want that too.” She kissed him, but it wasn’t nearly enough. “Since Sadie drove to Randy’s, Ben offered to take me home. Will you be okay?”

“Do I have a choice?” Cam kissed her again, not giving her a chance to answer. “I’ll be fine. However, tell Ben to keep his hands off your butt.” He palmed her ass cheeks and pressed them against his hips. “That’s my condition number one.”

“Ha!” Jessie laughed. “I told him you wouldn’t like that.”

“Not one bit.”

It took several more kisses before his insides settled and he could let her go. As soon as he was sure she was gone, he made his way to his car ... alone.

His evening had been full of the unexpected. There had been a discussion about rings and living together. Just not with the right woman. Then, a bank account in his mother’s name, with an excessive amount of money, had been uncovered. Somehow, he knew the discoveries weren’t over.

Cam gunned his car and the powerful engine roared to life. The need to spend the night wrapped in Jessie’s warmth burned deep in his gut. Except something told him, Dylan wouldn’t allow him inside their home.

Which left him with only one option – the gym.

He pulled out of Sally’s parking lot, just as Dylan parked in front of the Sheriff’s department. His car fishtailed, and Cam glanced in his rear-view mirror. Something told him he might be seeing the Deputy later. The question was in what capacity – as a sparring partner or writing him a ticket.

sixteen

Jessie's Home

June 14

3:00 p.m.

JESSIE'S WEEKEND had been spent at Sonny's, mulling over the puzzle they were trying to piece together. She'd come from a family of law enforcement individuals, but that had never been her calling. However, with the most recent finding pointing to Mary, she wasn't willing to sit back and allow Sadie and Hayden to do all the work.

She'd wanted to talk to Cam, except he'd been no help. Their weekend conversations hadn't been as easy-going as she'd come to expect. He was hurting, she understood that. She also understood his need to get away. However, when she'd refused to go sailing with him, he'd taken off on his own. It had been two days, and she was still waiting.

Was she wrong? Should she have insisted they talk? Should she have gone with him?

She didn't think so. Cam was a grown man, who claimed he wanted a life with her. However, if that was the case, they needed to be equally responsible for making that happen. *Right?*

"Jessie!" Molly burst through the door, and the look on her face said she'd found something. "Remember the picture I said looked familiar?"

"Yeah,"

"While I was volunteering at the hospital, look what I found!"

Jessie stared at the picture on Molly's phone, and a little spark of hope rekindled. "Oh wow, where did you find this?"

Molly's green eyes sparkled. "At the hospital. I finally remembered seeing a similar photo and voilà," she pointed to her phone. "I give you Doctor Arthur Dean, the psychologist whose office isn't far from Mary's."

"I think you're right" Jessie exclaimed. She rushed to find the envelope with Mary's photos, then held them side by side.

Each person had on an orange jumpsuit and was behind bars. Except, in

Arthur's photo, he was holding a sign that said: ***'Bail me out and help us meet our goal for the new hospital wing.'***

"Molly," Jessie blinked several times to keep her eyes from filling, "this is amazing. It's the same, but Mary's sign has been erased."

"Yep," Molly nodded proudly, "I did good, didn't I?"

"Yes, my dear sister, you did very well. Now, if we can find the picture of Mary ..."

"Sorry, Jess," Molly sighed. "I ran out of time, or I would have looked more."

"You found one of the photos." Jessie waved away Molly's concerns. "We only need one more. Besides, this gives me something to do. I've been feeling rather helpless."

"You still haven't heard from Cameron?" Molly murmured.

"No," Jessie nibbled on her bottom lip, "not yet."

"Hang in there." Molly replied. "He'll call."

"Oh, I know," Jessie hummed. "It's just ..."

"Jessie," Molly grinned. "If you tell Dylan I said this, I'll deny it."

"Oh?" Jessie pretended to zip her lips. "Tell him what?"

"Males pretend to be tough but deep down, they're just as scared as females."

"So, what you're saying is, I need to 'take back the power?'"

"Exactly," Molly nodded. "It sounds like my work is done."

"I'll think about what you said." Jessie shoved the photos back into a folder. "I'm going to go poke around the hospital some more. After all, in the last photo, Mary has on the same jumpsuit."

"Which has to mean something," Molly murmured.

"I think so too."

"Just be careful, Jess," Molly warned. "You know who works there."

"I'm not likely to forget."

Jessie forced herself to take the shortest route possible to Swan Harbor General. When the doors whooshed open, and she stepped over the threshold, memories washed over her. The all-consuming grief after her parents' and brother's death. Her fear over the possibility of her vision issues being discovered before she'd told Cam. However, those were in juxtaposition with the sense of accomplishment when she'd walked in to tell Mary about her high SAT scores. There had been a lot of trials in her life but coming out on the other side had helped her become who she was.

Somehow, that thought gave her confidence as she made her way to the mental healthcare wing. Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Social Workers,

Counselors, and Therapists all had offices along the great hallway. Photos lined the walls, but she didn't find what she was looking for until she almost reached the end. She found multiple pictures of Arthur and other doctors, there were none of Mary.

"Jessie? What brings you by the hospital?"

Oh, crap! Oh, crap! Oh, crap! was on repeat inside her head.

Jessie slowly turned around and pasted on a fake smile. "Catherine." *There! I sounded normal, haughty even.* "I just stopped by to say hi to Merlene and noticed these pictures."

"Aren't they great?" Catherine smiled. "I found stacks of these left behind in my office and thought they'd look nice on the wall."

"How old are they?" That the conversation sounded normal was a miracle. However, if she was able to find the answers, then ...

"Hmm," Catherine tapped her nail on her cheek, "nine or ten years, I think? It was a fund drive, around Halloween. It raised a lot of money too."

"Where's the ones of Mary?" Jessie blurted, before she'd decided that might not have been the best thing to say.

"Mary?" Catherine glanced over the collage. "I'm not sure. Maybe they're in her office."

That was strange, Jessie couldn't help but think. If it's Catherine who is after us, why would she send me to Mary's office?

"Uhh, thanks. I'll ask," she responded hesitantly.

"Good luck." Catherine took several steps, before turning back, "How's Dylan ... and Molly?"

"They're fine," Jessie replied, wondering where Catherine was leading. "Just fine."

What could have been a sheepish expression flitted across Catherine's face. "I know this is awkward, but everything worked out. He's going to be the next sheriff. You're back in Swan Harbor, and with Cam, and I'm—"

"No, I'm not," Jessie corrected, worried Catherine was fishing. "I'm not with Cam. He's with Eden," she forced out.

"Oh? I just thought ... anyway, good luck with your search."

Catherine hadn't gotten far when she answered her phone, with, what could only be called, a flirtatious smile on her face.

What was that all about? Jessie couldn't help but wonder. *Was there more going on than they knew?*



Out at Sea

June 15

5:00 a.m.

CAM TOOK the few steps up onto the deck, a cup of coffee in one hand, and his phone in the other. The sun had just peeked up over the horizon. It reminded him, not only how early it was, but that another day had passed. Yet, he still hadn't spoken to Jessie.

He could admit he'd been wrong. And he could admit he was behaving like a dick. It was how to make it all better where he stumbled. Especially when he wasn't able to look into Jessie's beautiful turquoise eyes, and tell her he was sorry.

She'd tried to be there for him. Tried to get him to see that his feelings mattered to her. Yet, he'd behaved like a child. Where had that come from?

Ben's familiarity with Jessie had set his teeth on edge. However, it had helped him understand what was going on inside his princess a little better. Except – after learning the news about the bank account, his emotions had overwhelmed him. He'd slinked off like a coward, instead of supporting the woman who held his heart. How was he to fix where he'd screwed up?

Three days alone at sea had given him a new perspective on his life. The steady breeze had blown the cobwebs away, which gave room to his creative juices. He'd completed the plans for the club he'd been working on. Then, he'd turned his thoughts to Jessie and a long-time dream had finally come to life. One, he hoped, would show her how much he loved her. If he was lucky, it would also show her where she stood in his life. Would show her what kind of future he wanted; one with her.

Were pictures really worth a thousand words?

"There's only one way to find out," Cam mumbled. "It's time to man-up."

When he reached for his phone and message after message appeared, he thought seriously about tossing it in the ocean. Both voice and text messages from Gray, Jessie, Hayden, his mother, Eden, and Ben. Most he glossed over, others he ignored. Right then, only Jessie mattered.

He snapped a picture of his drawing and attached it to a text,

Cameron: *I'm sorry, Princess. I do want a future with you, and promise to fight for it...and for you. I love you.*

Once it was winging its way through space, Cam pulled up Hayden's message. The excited tone in the boy's voice propelled him into action.

After a quick shower, Cam sailed back to shore. He docked the boat and was on his way to Sally's without stopping by the house first. Sadie and Gray's

togetherness wasn't something he relished, especially so early in the day.

Cam found Hayden in the workroom, hunched over his computer. "It's about time you showed up," the younger man snapped. "You've missed a lot of stuff."

"It sounds like it." Cam looked over Hayden's shoulder. "What's got you so bent out of shape?"

"You," Hayden's short reply took him aback.

"Me? Why?"

"Jessie."

The word felt like a slap, something he probably deserved. "I hurt her," Cam admitted. "I was a jerk, and plan to make it up to her. Shouldn't she be the one yelling at me, though?"

"Oh, don't worry," Hayden retorted dryly. "She will."

"And I deserve it."

"Agreed," Hayden retorted. "You deserve whatever Jessie throws at you."

That should have been you, Cam's inner voice whispered. *You should be the one championing Jessie.*

"I *will* talk to Jessie," Cam promised. "But tell me what has you so excited?"

Hayden pointed at the cork board. "With a little help from Molly ... and Catherine, Jessie found three of the pictures." He upended an envelope and spread them out on the table.

Cam noted, there were multiple photos of his mother, all dressed in the orange jumpsuit. The first three: one of her being arrested by the Chief of Police, her mugshot, and in a jail cell holding a sign that said, '**Bail me out and help us meet our goal for the new hospital wing,**' were on top.

"So, it was something for the hospital?" Cam sifted through the rest, most showing behind-the-scenes activities. "And she was 'arrested' by Eden's father. But why didn't he say he knew my mother?"

"Maybe he doesn't," Hayden replied absently, already back on his computer. "Maybe the police just arrested the docs or something."

"Could be," Cam agreed. "When did Jessie bring these by?"

"Yesterday."

"I'm sorry. I screwed up," Cam murmured. "I know it's no excuse, it's just been a lot ..."

Hayden glanced up and pinned Cam with the most serious expression he'd seen on the boy's face in years. "We all have difficulties. But you're behaving like a douche. I know I was a kid when we first met, but I also know Jessie let you help her when she was hurt. Trust her. Don't blow it."

Cam's head dropped at the enormity of those words. Even more so, since they'd come from Hayden - someone he'd always considered a kid. "I'll do my best."

Hayden's eyes locked with his for another second, making Cam fight to stand still. Finally, as if he'd decided something, he turned away and pointed to his computer. "Now, let me show you what else I found."



Swan Harbor Beach

June 15

10:00 a.m.

JESSIE HAD BEEN SITTING on the beach for hours. Unable to sleep, she'd arrived early, ostensibly to watch the sunrise. However, she knew that was a lie. She'd needed a place to think. A place to try to make sense of the last few days. Cam's behavior had thrown her.

She didn't know the man who'd gone out on his boat alone. Nor did she know how to handle him. The Cam Hunter she remembered was kind, caring and patient. He was always there when she needed him. Ready to take her skating one minute – and the next to dance with her at Randy's. A man who turned her inside out with his kisses, and who made her feel special. Except – had he ever *needed* her? Did he *need* her?

Emotionally, she didn't think so. Certainly, not in the same way she'd needed him after her parents' death, and her accident. Which had her asking – had she depended on him too much? Or did he not think he could depend on her? And if so, had he always felt that way? Or had that started because she'd left?

He'd said one thing. His actions said another.

Then there was the photo he'd sent. Was that saying what she thought? Or was she reading it all wrong?

Cam had drawn a picture of a house with a snow-covered yard. She was next to him on the porch, and they were watching a young girl skate. But if that was the future he wanted, why had he run?

"Whatcha looking at?" Sadie looked over her shoulder. "A house?"

"Cam sent it." Jessie handed over the device. "I'm trying to figure out what it means."

"Oh, poo." Sadie grinned. "That's easy. He wants that life with you."

"He has a funny way of showing it," Jessie grumbled.

"Cam's a man."

“True. I just wish they weren’t so confusing.”

“Remember what my mama always says,” Sadie intoned.

“I know, I know,” Jessie laughed. “Take back the power. Molly already gave me that lecture.”

One of Sadie’s brows popped up. “Then why are you down here?”

“Because the man I have a beef with is out there somewhere.” Jessie waved out to sea.

“No, he’s not.”

“He’s not?”

“Cam is at HCI.”

“Are you sure?”

“Cam was at Sally’s when I arrived,” Sadie explained. “He said he was on the way to work.”

“At work?” Jessie murmured. “Really?”

That he hadn’t tried to find her, bothered her more than she wanted to admit.

You can’t be seen together, though!

Didn’t make it any easier.

“Jess,” Sadie whispered. “It will work out.”

Jessie glanced sideways at Sadie. Her friend’s green eyes were twinkling, and her skin was glowing. She was happy – thanks to Gray. However, that was a conversation for another time.

“I’m sorry.” She gave Sadie her full attention. “Did you need something? Is that why you’re down here?”

“My eyes were crossing from staring at numbers,” Sadie admitted. “However, I did find out the names on the ledgers that lead to the bank account aren’t real people.”

“False names?” Jessie hesitated a beat. “What does that mean?”

“I think it means the money in the bank didn’t come from insurance companies,” Sadie murmured. “Where it came from, though, I don’t know.”

“And Hayden’s working on it?”

“He is.”

“Now what?”

Sadie held up her hand. “Interested in a manicure and pedicure at the Foxy Lady? I could use some pampering.”

“Only if we can get ice cream afterward,” Jessie replied. “I need a treat.”

“Well, duh.” Sadie linked their arms. “We can also check in with Hayden. Maybe he has some news.”



Hunter Corporation, Inc.

June 15

3:00 p.m.

HOURS AFTER TALKING TO HAYDEN, Cam was still trying to wrap his head around everything he'd just learned. To say it was mind-boggling was an understatement.

What he'd been told was that, when Mary's password had been put in, instead of going into the hospital computers, Hayden had been kicked into another server. It was inside that server, where he'd found the ledgers, which led him to the bank account.

However, that seemed to lead to even more questions. Sadie claimed the names listed on the ledgers weren't real. If that was so, where had they come from? Plus, what about the money? *It* was real, and there had been a lot of it. Why was this happening? Who was going to so much trouble to keep him and Jessie apart? Was it really Catherine as they suspected?

Cam stared down at the plans for the club he'd been tinkering with all morning. He'd reached a point where he couldn't do anything more until he'd met with the owner. Which meant, he could move onto the next project – an ice cream store. Except, until some of his questions were answered, he knew his concentration would be off.

He found Hayden in the same position as earlier, focused on his computer screen.

"Find anything new?"

"Another accounting program for your mom's office," Hayden mumbled. "But this time, I know they're real."

"How?" Cam tossed back.

"I was able to trace some of the names to other departments within the hospital system," Hayden replied. "I even got into the hospital banking records. Need a few bucks?"

"Don't even tease about that," Cam warned.

Hayden laughed. "Man, you need to relax."

"Sorry," Cam murmured. "I just want this all to be over."

"I get that." Hayden hesitated a beat. "Have you talked to Jessie?"

"No." And he hadn't heard from her either. Had she not liked his picture? "But I will. I told you that."

"You did," Hayden conceded. "For now, though, go away and let me work."

I'll send you a text if I find something."

"Fine, fine," Cam sighed. However, as soon as he stepped outside, his heart sunk. He grabbed at the door to sneak back in. Unfortunately, he'd been seen.

"Cameron." Eden shoved her phone back into her pocket. "I was just leaving you a message ... again. We need to talk."

There were quite a few people he needed to talk to, Cam thought. And Eden wasn't at the top of his list.

"What is it, Eden?" he offered tiredly.

"Where have you been all week?"

The tone of her voice had him clenching his jaw to keep from saying what he really wanted to say. Instead, he grunted, "Working."

"Working?" Eden repeated. "Really?"

"Really," Cam answered impatiently. "I was just going to grab a bite to eat. If you want to talk, you can join me." He took Eden's elbow and started toward the front of Sally's.

"Wait," Eden pushed back. "I've already eaten."

"I thought you wanted to talk."

"Fine." Eden pulled her arm free, marched ahead of him, and chose a table in the center of the room.

Cam put in his order, then followed her at a much slower pace. He should have given her a little more information about his time away. If he had, there was the possibility she would have been satisfied. However, Eden wasn't his primary concern. That was Jessie.

"You wanted to talk, so talk."

"One of my friends saw you at the gym on Friday," she retorted. "I thought you were sick."

Inwardly, Cam groaned and what to say rolled around inside his head. "I took something for my stomach," he settled on. "Decided I wanted to hit the gym."

"Why didn't you call me?" she grumbled. "I wanted to go to Sonny's. I've told you how much I love it there, yet we've never gone."

"And we never will," he snapped, without thinking.

"What?"

The hushed, hurt sound of her voice penetrated the annoyance he was feeling enough for him to realize what he'd said. "I just mean, Sonny's holds a lot of memories I'd rather—"

"—Not relive."

The word was far from what he'd been thinking, but instead of going there, he went with it. "That works."

“Still,” Eden continued to whine, “you could have called.”

“I didn’t.” Cam shrugged. “Get over it.”

When he looked away, he caught sight of Jessie. She was standing just outside the front door talking to Sadie. His heart picked up speed, and he had to fight to stay in his seat.

“What are you looking at?” Eden glanced over her shoulder, just as Jessie jumped out of sight.

What the hell?

“Cameron?” Eden laid her hand on his arm. “What’s going on?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Thankfully, Eden didn’t push, and he was allowed to continue to stare. It wasn’t long before Jessie stepped back into sight, this time, though, she wasn’t alone. As soon as he saw who she was with, his head began to swim, and he had to hold onto the table to remain in his chair.

“No!”

“Cameron?” Eden tightened her fingers around his wrist. “Who is it?”

“Roger.” His chest tightened, and his heart felt as if it shattered into a million pieces, then fell at his feet.

seventeen

Sally's Diner

June 15

4:30 p.m.

BY THE TIME Cam had gathered his thoughts, Jessie, Sadie ... and Roger were gone. Were they out front?

"I just remembered a meeting." He tossed some bills on the table and rushed out the door before Eden could slow him down. Except, Jessie was nowhere to be seen.

"Damn!" Cam raced to the sidewalk and perused up and down the street. When he didn't see them, he ran across the road and headed away from his office, thinking he'd go toward another eating establishment.

The image of her greeting Roger was burned in his brain, almost to the point it made him nauseous. Had she not liked his picture? Or did she not understand it? The possibility of his screw up having permanent damage, caused him to run a little faster. He'd skirted several buildings when he finally caught sight of Jessie's shiny hair. Seeing that the trio – had become a duo had him grabbing the side of the closest building for support.

"What the hell?!"

They stopped in front of Swan Harbor's Spirits and Wine, and he had to jump in a doorway when Jessie glanced over her shoulder. That's all he needed, was for her to see him skulking around in her wake.

Once they'd disappeared inside, Cam sprinted across the street. The honking horns should have caused concern. Except, he couldn't be bothered and pressed his face against the window, trying to see where they were sitting.

Unfortunately, the tinting was too dark for him to see much. Which left him with few options.

He could storm inside and demand answers.

But if he did that, it would open too many cans of worms.

He could wait and watch.

Except then he risked being seen and having to answer questions.

Instead, Cam ran back to the office, happy it was after hours, as he slammed the door so hard it bounced against the hinges.

Jessie's comments about Roger floated through his head,

"...I didn't go out with anyone until I heard about Roger."

"Roger?" she frowned. "Who's Roger?"

"You tell me," Cam shrugged, "you were kissing him in the movie theater."

"I was kissing someone?"

Had he been wrong? Was the man's name not Roger? If that was so, who was it? And what did he do now?

Talk to her?

Cam glanced wildly around the room, searching for what, he wasn't sure. Air. He needed air. Which had him heading toward the door.

"Cam?" Gray stepped out of his office. "What's going on?"

"Plenty!" Cam pushed the door open so hard, it bounced off the wall.

"Hold on!" his brother yelled.

"You want to talk," Cam barked. "You'd better keep up."



Swan's Spirits

June 15

5:30 p.m.

JESSIE AND TYLER had been sitting in Swan's Spirits less than an hour when Sadie rushed in with several shopping bags hanging from her arms.

"Oh, these are my favorites." She helped herself to a shrimp puff. "I'm sorry I took so long. There were just so many things I liked."

"Oh?" Jessie hummed. "Did you buy out the store?"

"Not hardly," Sadie giggled. "But I think Gray will approve."

"You could show me," Tyler teased, "just in case you need a guy's opinion."

"Nice try," Sadie laughed. "Now, finish filling us in."

Jessie had been pleasantly surprised, when they'd run into an old friend from college in front of Sally's. Tyler James was tall, dark, and handsome, with a Tennessee drawl few females could resist. His singing voice was like melted butter and turned every female in the room to mush.

Except her. To Jessie, Tyler wasn't Cam. Which had made it easy to be his friend. Then, they'd graduated and gone their separate ways. She'd heard he'd gotten married and nothing else until ...

Jessie fought not to get lost in the memories. Fought to take a step back to see how running into Tyler on the fateful day two years previous had changed her thinking.

She'd received the threatening text and raced to Logan International, where she'd run into Tyler and his three-month-old daughter, Bethany. It was then she'd learned his wife had died during childbirth. Finding that out had somehow shoved her grief aside, making her problems seem less important. That had been the catalyst for her to let go of her anger and give her future up to fate and hope. If the heart truly did want what the heart truly wanted, then somehow – if she was meant to be with Cam – they would be.

"You're awfully quiet, Jessie." Tyler tapped the back of her hand lightly. "Did I put you to sleep?"

"Sorry." Jessie swam away from the memories. "I think my early morning is catching up with me."

Before he could respond, a stranger slid into the empty chair at their table. "Are you Tyler James? I saw you in concert in ..."

Jessie exchanged looks with Sadie. "I'm gonna go." She hurried from the table and stopped by the bar to cash out.

"Here you go, Sugar," Krystal, the owner of the bar, handed her a receipt. "It's nice to put a face with someone I've heard so much about."

"You've heard about me?" Jessie questioned, assuming it had something to do with her ice skating days.

"Definitely." Krystal popped her gum several times. "There was one night when Cameron was in here. He had quite a few things to say."

"Cam," Jessie swallowed hard, "talked about me? When was that?"

"Hmm," Krystal worked over her gum a few more seconds, "it has to be a couple of years ago now."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, honey ..." Krystal leaned closer. "That boy was ..."



Cam's Home

June 15

9:30 p.m.

CAM HAD to hand it to his brother. Gray had gone with him to the gym and run a few miles along the beach. After they'd come home, a shot of whiskey and his brother were waiting when he'd come back downstairs.

He tossed back the drink and weighed the heaviness of the glass in his hand.

"I wouldn't do that with mom's crystal," Gray warned.

"The satisfaction might be worth her ire," Cam's toneless reply had Gray lifting a brow. "Okay. Let me get something."

He ran to the basement, dug through a drawer in the desk and unearthed a wrinkled envelope. There had been several times when he'd thought about tossing it, but he hadn't, keeping it around almost as some sort of punishment.

It's the day of reckoning.

"Here," Cam tossed the envelope onto Gray's lap. "This might explain a few things."

Gray opened the flap and pulled out the two photos. "Where did you get these pictures of Tyler and Jessie?"

"Who the hell's Tyler?" Cam snapped. "That's Roger. Look on the back."

Gray flipped over one picture, an 8x10 photo of Jessie hugging the man she'd been with outside of Sally's.

"Jessie quickly replaced you, didn't she? His name is Roger. Remember him?" he read. "Where did this come from?"

"Read the other one," Cam indicated the second image which showed Jessie and the same man looking down at a baby girl.

"Jessie has moved on, so should you. Some memories only bring us pain." Gray slipped the photos back into the envelope and tossed them on the table. "Who gave you these?" he repeated.

"I don't know," Cam shrugged. "I'm wondering if they're from Catherine. After all, she wanted Jess out of town."

"She'd succeeded, though." Gray tossed the envelope on the table. "What would she have gained by using those photos?"

"To keep me from going after Jessie?" Cam offered, not really buying the possibility.

"Maybe," Gray conceded. "Did they arrive at the same time?"

"No," Cam sighed. "I found the first one waiting for me in my car the night Jessie left."

The pain that rippled through his body with the admission surprised him. He'd thought he'd dealt with those ghosts, if not before Jessie returned then, when they talked at Sonny's.

"And the second?"

"The next summer," Cam replied. "I was with Ben, and had decided to fly to the Philippines and bring Jessie home. When I got in my car—"

"—The second picture was waiting."

“Yeah.”

“Where were you when you said you were flying to the Philippines?”

“Sally’s, why?”

“Someone had to have heard you were leaving.”

“Which means, they put the picture in to stop me,” Cam muttered. “And it worked!” He stomped to the window and stared out into the darkness, calling himself several colorful names.

If he started making a list of all the ‘should haves’ since things had gone south, he’d fill up a page.

“How do you know his name’s not Roger?” Cam suddenly realized he hadn’t asked.

“Sadie,” Gray’s simple answer made sense. “They went to college together. In fact ...”

The pregnant pause had Cam turning back toward his brother. “What are you not telling me?”

“Tyler, as in Tyler *James*,” Gray emphasized, “is our client.”

Ahh, damn!” Cam had spent weeks thinking about Tyler’s club and now

“Have you talked to Jessie?”

“Not yet. I just...”

“Sit.” Gray pushed Cam into a chair. “I’m only saying what mom and dad would say if they were here.”

“I don’t want—”

“Tough,” Gray snapped. “You’ve been acting like an ass and I’m tired of it.”

An ass, a dick, neither words very flattering and not something he enjoyed. Cam wanted a way out. It was just

“Look, Cam,” Gray asserted. “Your whole life, you’ve been the golden child. You made the grades, got the girls, excelled at sports, etc. We have two parents, who’ve been married for many years.”

“And?”

“Your whole life, there’s only been one thing you haven’t had control over,” Gray paused for emphasis, “and that’s Jessie. I suggest you talk to her. Don’t throw away the best thing that’s happened to you.”

“But ...”

“No buts,” Gray snarled. “Just do it.”

Except that was easier said than done when you couldn’t be seen together. Which meant, if he was going to grovel, he needed to be creative. Could he do it? Could he come up with a way to tell his princess he was sorry?



Jessie's Home

June 15

11:45 p.m.

WHAT SOUNDED like the buzzing of a fly kept Jessie from sinking deeper into sleep. When it buzzed again, she swung out and knocked it to the floor. It was then, she realized the noise had come from her phone.

“Crap!” She wrenched her eyes open and peered over the side of the bed in time to see the screen light up. When Cam’s picture flashed on the screen, it kicked her heart rate into high gear.

Cameron: Can we talk?

They needed to talk. Was she ready? Especially when they couldn’t be seen together.

Jessie: It’s kind of late.

Cameron: Look out your window.

His quick response gave her pause. *Should* she say no?

Cameron: Please, Princess. I need you.

Words, that for some reason, she’d wanted to hear.

The same text buzzed once more. This time, she couldn’t resist.

Jessie tossed the blankets aside and padded to the window. Cam was standing just below, using a flashlight to highlight the large pieces of paper he was holding.

Princess,

I was an ass.

Let’s talk, please.

Should she go down?

Jessie: What if we’re seen?

A quick look passed over his face when he read her text she couldn’t decipher.

Cameron: We won’t be. Trust me.

Did she trust him?

When she looked inside her head and heart, there was no question.

Jessie: Give me a few minutes.

She slipped on shoes and pulled a sweatshirt over her pajamas. Then she quietly made her way downstairs. The closer to seeing him, the faster her feet seemed to move.

As soon as she’d opened the door, Cam was there to wrap her in his arms.

“Jess ...”

“... sorry ...”

“I

“... love ...”

Their kisses were slow and languorous, interspersed with loving words. Jessie’s heart raced, and she tangled her hands in his collar, tugging him closer. It would be so easy to allow the heat between them to spin out of control. Except both seemed to be aware of just that and were fighting to not allow their passion to burn too hot.

“Jess,” Cam whispered against her lips, “we need to ...” He dove in for another hard kiss.

“We do.” Jessie took a half-step back and noticed she’d inadvertently crushed the flowers Cam had brought. “Oops, sorry about that.”

Cam chuckled, and the sound was so sexy, it caused a zip of electricity to race up her spine. “I’m sorry, Princess.” He gave her a yellow rose. “I love you.” A red rose was next. “I behaved like an ass.”

“You did.” Jessie laughed at the look of consternation her agreement caused to flash across Cam’s face. “However, the flowers are a nice touch.”

“It pays to know people.”

“You got Charley out of bed?”

“Oh, no,” Cam snickered. “I got Ben out of bed. He’s the one who woke up his father.”

“What are you going to owe him?”

“Who knows? You’re worth whatever the cost.”

“Oh, Cam.”

He tucked her against his side, “Are you ready to talk?”

“If you are.”

Jessie could tell Cam was nervous. His arm still encircled her waist, and his fingers were never still. Plus, the way he was looking at her made her wonder if thought she might disappear.

“Oh,” she exclaimed when they reached the gazebo. “You’ve been busy.”

He’d placed a camping light in front of the bench seats, which he’d covered with several blankets. In the center was a large envelope.

“It’s not much.” Cam nodded toward the bench seat. “Warm enough?”

“I’m fine.” Jessie patted the spot next to her. “Will you sit by me?”

Cam hesitated for another few seconds before sitting next to her and laced their fingers. If she hadn’t already known he was nervous, his hand would have been a tell. It was sweaty, and she could feel a slight tremor.

“Cam?” Jessie murmured. “Just say it.”

He ran his hand through his hair, then suddenly jumped up and moved to the far side of the gazebo.

When he started talking and his gaze bounced all over the place, never meeting hers for long, Jessie melted. He was adorable in his shy, awkward way, a side of him she'd not seen often.

"I'll admit my life has been easy," Cam veered in a direction she hadn't expected. "I did well in school, had plenty of friends, and was okay in sports."

"Plus, all the girls swooned over you," Jessie quipped.

Cam ducked his head, as if he was embarrassed. It was several minutes before he continued. "My parents were always there for me, and when it was time for college, I was fortunate. With all that said, though, there was always one thing I couldn't completely make mine."

"What?"

"You."

His quiet reply caused her heart to flip a little. "People aren't possessions, Cam."

"Oh, I know," he sighed. "I just meant there were times, when, I needed you to choose me."

"I did," Jessie jumped in to respond. "Every time I came home from school, I chose you."

"Did you, Jess?" his eyes bore into hers. "Or did I choose you?"

"But Cam," Jessie whispered. "Didn't we choose each other?"



"I THOUGHT SO," Cam answered. "Until I heard you'd been kissing Roger."

"But I told you, I didn't," Jessie jumped in.

"I know that now," he sighed. "My only excuse is, I was a nineteen-year-old idiot, and when I went back to school in the fall ..."

"Oh? Are you going to tell me the story about competing with your roommate? What was his name?"

"Beau."

"Yeah, that's it," she grinned. "Is that when you and Beau competed for girls?"

Cam had to fight to keep the shocked expression off of his face. How had she known? "I'm so—"

"Don't apologize," Jessie cut him off. "Go on."

The relief he felt she didn't want to relive his sophomore year was only minimal, as there was more he needed to confess. "That wasn't the last time I'd

heard about you and Roger.”

“I don’t know a Roger,” she repeated.

“You accused me of not coming after you when you left,” Cam powered on as if she hadn’t said anything. “This was why I didn’t.” He handed her a photo.

Jessie glanced down at the picture and then back up. “Because I was hugging Tyler?” she whispered in a husky voice.

“Flip it over.” His heart pounded as she did so.

“Oh, Cam,” Jessie cried after she’d read the back. “You thought I’d run off with another man?”

“I ...” The words stuck in his throat.

“But you knew I loved you,” Jessie cried. “Didn’t you?”

“I was a mess that night, Jess.”

“I know”

“You know?” Cam frowned. “How?”

“Krystal from Swan’s Spirits told me,” Jessie explained. “She said your mom and Gray had to take you home.

“Yeah, it wasn’t pretty.” His days during that time had been dark. So dark, that even knowing they were behind him, they still caused a bad taste in his mouth. “Once I was sober, my mom sat me down and told me in a good relationship, both parties have equal power.”

“Your mom is a wise woman.”

“She is,” Cam sighed. “However, it was a while before I listened enough to clean up my act. That’s when I told Ben I was going after you.”

“But you didn’t.”

He gave her the second picture, and Jessie quickly flipped it over to read the inscription. “I still feel like I’m missing something. When did you know this picture wasn’t the truth?”

“I overheard Dylan and Molly talking,” Cam admitted. “They’d just gotten back from their honeymoon, and I heard them mention your name.

“But they didn’t say anything about a child?” Jessie guessed.

“No,” Cam sighed. “That’s when I decided it was all an elaborate hoax. I’d hoped when you came home for Christmas ...”

“Except I didn’t, which was when you ‘mistook,’” Jessie put the word in air quotes, “Eden for me.”

“I was a fool, Jessie,” he whispered. “There’s only one you, Princess.”

“I’m glad you know that.” Her haughty voice had returned, and even though they had to hash out the rest, his lips twitched. “Now sit down,” Jessie continued in her bossy way, “and let me tell you about Tyler.

“Your princess voice turns me on.” Cam scooped her up and settled her on

his lap. "But you know that, don't you?"

"Everything turns you on."

"When it comes to you." He gave her a hard kiss that was all too short for his liking, then waited until she was ready.

Jessie brushed her fingers down his cheek. "Shall I start?"

Just tell me, Jess," Cam instructed. "Secrets don't work."

"Well, okay." She skipped over the part of the story he knew and went straight to when she'd run into Tyler at Logan International.

"I don't think he noticed I was crying," she murmured. "Because when he hugged me, Bethany was squished between us."

Suddenly, Jessie jumped and reached for the pictures. "Bethany ..."

"What about her?" Cam looked down at the picture she was holding, but there was no sign of a baby.

"Tyler was holding her." Jessie's eyes met his. "Bethany was photo-shopped out."

"Damn," Cam snapped. "Someone was at the airport, and sent the pictures to Swan Harbor."

"To Catherine?"

"Who else?" he asserted. "It has to be. Hopefully Hayden can help us prove it."

Jessie leaned her forehead against his. "I can't believe someone would go to this much trouble to keep us apart."

"I can't either," Cam hummed. "Now, tell me about Tyler."

The story of Tyler's wife giving birth to a healthy baby girl and then hemorrhaging to death, had Cam holding Jessie a little closer. He wasn't sure how the other man had gone on with his life, but guessed it had been for his daughter.

"My heart was breaking," Jessie continued. "I had to leave you to save your mother and was feeling pretty miserable. Then, I heard Tyler's story. It was one of love, loss, and life, and I realized something."

"What?"

"I realized that twice in my life, I'd suffered," she explained. "Each time, you were there for me. That was when I decided if we were meant to be, somehow, it would happen."

"Oh, Jess." Cam brushed away her tears, then buried his face in her neck. "I'm so sorry I never came."

"We both have regrets, Cam," Jessie whispered.

"We do," he agreed. "It doesn't make it any easier, though."

"No. But you know what?" She went on, as if not expecting a response.

“When Cassie asked me to be in her wedding, I thought maybe it was some sort of sign. I was scared to get on the plane.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Jessie hummed. “Maybe I was worried my dreams weren’t going to come true.”

“And which dream is that, Princess?”

Jessie cupped his face. “The one where I can do this,” she kissed him, “whenever I want.”

“Feel free to do just that.”

“Yeah, right,” Jessie retorted. “Most of the time I have to stand in line behind your girlfriend.”

Cam was back to kicking his own ass for behaving like a dick. For the time being, he ignored her comment and moved on.

“Why didn’t you come see me?”

“You know why,” her princess voice was back. “As soon as I drove into town, there you were, getting hot and heavy with another woman. “Jessie winced. “Eden jumped into your arms, and you appeared to be gobbling her right up.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he apologized. “Eden had just passed her exams and ...” Secretly, though, he loved that Jessie was jealous.

“Hmm, well,” she grumbled. “It looks like I need to add that to my conditions.”

“Don’t worry, Princess,” Cam kissed her hand, “no gobbling on Eden.”

“I feel like I’m living in some bad fairy-tale,” Jessie complained. “It doesn’t seem right.”

“No fairy-tale, Jess,” he nuzzled her temple, “this is real life, and we will get our happy ever after. I promise you that.”

Jessie’s silky hair slid through his fingers as she twisted around and straddled his lap. “Isn’t this where we seal the promise with a kiss?”

Cam’s body jumped from half-mast to full throttle and a million ideas rushed through his mind. “You’re killing me here, Jess.”

She pushed against his hardness and ratcheted up his need – which he hadn’t thought possible. “But what a way to go ... right?”

For that, he had no argument.

eighteen

Jessie's Home

June 16

1:00 a.m.

JESSIE WAS LOST in a sensual haze when her lone functioning brain cell began yelling mayday. She tried to ignore it, but when she did, it yelled louder.

"Cam." She pushed back slightly.

"Hmm ..." He latched onto a sensitive place on her neck, causing the goosebumps to dance along her skin.

"We can't." Jessie hopped off his lap and moved several feet away. Then her eyes met his, and the look in them had her grabbing hold of the railing. If she hadn't, she would have jumped back into his arms.

With his blond hair in disarray, puffy lips and his shirt unbuttoned, he looked like a model. Her eyes lazily drifted over his smooth chest and flat stomach, but when she reached his unbuttoned jeans, she slammed on the brakes.

Oh man! Jessie stepped out of the gazebo and away from temptation. What had they been thinking?

You weren't.

Which was the truth. They weren't thinking, but only feeling. She had to believe their time would come. After all, they'd sealed it with a kiss.

Cam came up behind her and linked their hands. "Wait for it."

"Wait for what?" was barely out of her mouth before she saw one ... and another ... and then another. "Lightning bugs!" Her heart fluttered, memories of catching them with her dad and brothers filtered through her mind.

"How did I do?" He swept their linked hands in front of them.

"You want me to think you created this, don't you?" Jessie side-eyed him, and the cheeky smile on his face reminded her of the night of their first kiss. "Okay, you win." However, instead of his grin growing bigger, it faded, and it was once again time to talk. This time, though, the confession would be hers.

"Come, sit." Jessie waited until he was sitting on the bench. She leaned against the railing, took a deep breath, then began, "Cam ... my time in the

Philippines taught me a lot ... about life ... about myself.”

“Really?” He hesitated. “Like what?”

“I finally admitted to myself that I was a spoiled brat,” she murmured. “Sometimes, I look back and wonder why people put up with me.”

“You weren’t—”

“Stop,” she cut off his denial. “I had my parents, your parents, my brothers, Gray, and you, allowing me to do whatever I wanted. Come on ... don’t tell me it didn’t annoy you, that I always got my way.”

The guilty look that crossed his face had her pushing on. “Mary told you partners should be equal, right?” At his nod, she continued, “That means both must give and take. You always gave, I always took. Our balance was way out of whack.”

“I didn’t mind,” he tried to insist.

“Bull,” she called his bluff. “The fact you believed the stories about Roger tells me something was going on.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Then why did you run away and not talk to me for three days?” Jessie whispered. “Why weren’t you sure I’d chosen you?”



CAM’S EYES met hers briefly before skittering away to watch the fireflies. “You’ve changed,” he hesitated a beat, finally meeting her gaze head on. “I’m only realizing how much.”

“I grew up,” Jessie replied. “It’s about time, don’t you think?”

“I thought you were perfect.”

“Ha!” she laughed. “A perfect brat, maybe.”

“But I loved that brat.” He smiled, using the one that showed off his dimples. “However, the woman you’ve become,” Cam’s voice dropped an octave, “she takes my breath away.”

“Is that a good thing?” Jessie nibbled on her bottom lip. “Or is that why you ran?”

Cam adjusted on the bench, tired of his nuts feeling like they were in a vice. “Jessie, I ran because, for the first time, I needed you ... and while you were there, I couldn’t have you.”

“What?”

“You were right, about the power between us being out of whack,” he sighed. “When we were young, you needed, and I was there. I liked being needed. Then as we grew older, and our relationship changed, when we’d come

home, you were the first thing on my mind.”

“I ...”

Cam shook his head, needing to finish what he was trying to say. “Fast forward to ‘that night ...’” He leaned on his knees and dropped his head.

“Tell me.” Jessie cupped his jaw and forced him to look at her.

“I had a ring that night.” Her quick intake of air told him she hadn’t expected him to say that. “Hours after my mom and Gray put me to bed, I sobered up enough to find the ring and took it out onto the patio. I almost threw it into the ocean.”

“Oh, Cam.” She dropped on the bench next to him and leaned against his shoulder. “You didn’t?”

“No.” He kissed the top of her head. “My mother stopped me. Said she’d hold it for me until it was time for me to give it to you.”

“Sounds about right.” Jessie rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, and it felt so good, he almost purred.

“The last time they were in Swan Harbor, she left it on my dresser,” he admitted. “I want to marry you, Jessica Marie Prince. But between the news about the bank account, and you not letting me spirit you away I just needed some time to think. I’m sorry.”

“I get that,” she murmured. “Except I wasn’t rejecting you. You just need to rely on me, like I rely on you.”

“I love you.” Cam leaned in for a kiss.

However, before he reached his destination, Jessie placed her finger on his chin to stop him. “Changes and all?”

“Of course.” He kissed her. “That’s why I sent you that drawing. It was my promise to you.”

“The house?”

“Our house,” Cam reiterated. “My dad gave Gray and I some land, and someday ... I want to live there with you.”

“I want that too.” Jessie kissed him. “You didn’t just choose me, and I didn’t just choose you.” She kissed one cheek, and then the other. “We chose each other.”

Her last kiss melted the rest of his insecurities, and Cam took full advantage of her offering.



Jessie’s House

June 16

7:00 a.m.

JESSIE WANDERED into the kitchen in search of caffeine. It had been late – or very early – when Cam had kissed her goodnight. Then her dreams had been disturbed by an early morning phone call to meet at Sally's.

"Rough night?" Dylan hummed.

You don't know the half of it, she thought. The hours spent in Cam's arms had morphed into graphic dreams. When she woke up, and realized they were only dreams, frustration had taken root. A cold shower had helped ... just not completely dispelled.

"Not particularly, why?"

"Late night?" Dylan came back with. However, his 'dad-look' said he knew exactly how late she'd come in.

"We had a lot of things to talk through."

"And did you?"

"I think so," she sighed. "I'm just ready for everything to be over."

"Has there been any progress made?"

Jessie refilled her coffee cup and thought about talking to Dylan, but ...

"Some. It's just—"

"—Better if I don't know what it is," Dylan guessed.

"Something like that," Jessie agreed.

"Just be careful," he warned. "You are, aren't you?"

"We're being careful," she assured him. "And as soon as I can, I'll fill you in."

Dylan studied her for a few more minutes before washing his cup and sticking it in the dishwasher. "Do you need a ride?"

"No, I'm going to drive. Thanks."

She watched him go, and with a few minutes to spare, let the memory of Cam's words float through her head.

"Jessie, I ran because, for the first time, I needed you ... and while you were there, I couldn't have you."

Was that Cam's way of saying he wanted her – just as much as she wanted him? That if he had his way, he'd spirit her someplace and spend the night wrapped around her?

Goosebumps raced up her spine at the thought. In a way, he'd shown her. His desire had been evident in every kiss, every touch, and every look. She'd wanted to see how far she could push him. Unfortunately, pushing his buttons, triggered her own as well.

Her phone buzzed and without looking, she knew it was him.

Cameron: Are you on your way?

Jessie: Thinking about it.

Cameron: Thinking about it? What else are you thinking about?

Jessie: Wouldn't you like to know?

Cameron: I bet I can guess.

Jessie: You think?

Cameron: I know.

Jessie: I wouldn't be too sure if I were you.

Cameron: You can show me when you get here.

"Oh!" She lifted her coffee cup, wanting to hide the smile that threatened to break free.

Jessie: I'm on my way.

Cameron: I expect a kiss when I see you.

Jessie: Oh? Are you sure that's not playing with fire?

When a text didn't immediately arrive, Jessie put her cup away. She grabbed her keys and bag and had just climbed into the car when her phone buzzed once again.

Cameron: Honey, there are ways to keep my balls from turning blue. You know, we could

Jessie's face heated at where that text had taken her active imagination. They could. However, they weren't going to – not as long as she lived with Dylan and Molly.

Jessie: Cam!

Cameron: Is that a maybe?

A little zip of excitement slid along her skin and more memories of their heavy petting session threatened to distract her even more.

Jessie: I call uncle. I'm on my way.

The roads were fairly open until she was closer to the center of town. Once there, the streets were busier, a testament the summer beach crowds were still around. When Jessie drove into Sally's parking lot, Ben and Cam appeared to be having a serious conversation.

She climbed from her car, disappointed to see just Ben sauntering toward her.

"Right on time," Ben quipped. "I like that in a woman."

Jessie sent a confused look from Ben to Cam, then back. "What are—?"

He grabbed her shoulders and acted as if he were going to kiss her on the cheek. Instead, he whispered, "We're being watched."

"What?" Again, her gaze flew from Ben's to Cam's and back. "Where?"

"Across the street." Ben wrapped his arm around her and started toward the

front of Sally's. "The diner's packed. Would pastries from Paula's be alright?"

Jessie climbed into Ben's car and waited for him to run around. "Do we *really* need to drive?"

Ben grinned, almost as if he were enjoying the cloak and dagger behavior. "I'm banking on the person following you, so Cam can slip into Sally's without being seen."

"That makes sense," Jessie replied. "What about Sadie and Gray?"

"They should arrive in the next few minutes." Ben parked in a parallel spot not far from Paula's. "We're just taking a tiny detour."

Jessie followed him into Paula's, where they bought a dozen donuts. From there, Ben led her next door to his father's flower store, then into a back room.

"Now what?" She looked through the small window, wondering if they'd been followed.

Ten minutes later, Ben led the way into the alley, that ran behind the shops. "The coast is clear. Let's go."

There were several times as she followed him toward Sally's, Jessie felt like giggling. She wasn't sure if he was being silly, or doing it as a precaution, but periodically, he'd dart behind a dumpster. When they had to cross between buildings, he'd sneak a look around the corner before racing to the next one.

"Here we are." Ben ushered her into Sally's and up the stairs.

Cam was waiting for them at the top. "It's about time," he grouched.

"We brought donuts," Ben quipped. "That should make up for the delay."

There was something about Cam's possessiveness that gave Jessie a little thrill. It didn't stop her from wishing things were different, though.

"We'll be right there, Ben."

As soon as they were alone, Cam pulled her into his arms. "What did I tell you I wanted as soon as you were here?"

She thought about teasing him, instead, offered her lips.

"Sugar." He kissed her again.

"You've forgotten my name already?"

"Haha."

"Just making sure," Jessie snickered.

"Never, Princess. But just so you know," Cam nuzzled her temple, "no one whispers sweet nothings into your ear except me. That's my condition number two."

"You didn't like that?"

"Hell no." He kissed her again.



Sally's Diner

June 16

8:30 a.m.

WHEN THEY WALKED into the workroom, Cam was loath to let Jessie get too far away. Yes, he was feeling possessive. However, for the time being, it was only when they were 'working,' he could touch her the way he wanted. Sad state to be in – he just hoped it wouldn't be much longer. The idea someone was watching her ... watching them, made him nervous.

"Okay, we're all here," Cam grumbled. "What did you find?"

"You go first," Hayden mumbled around the bite of donut he'd just taken.

"Ben was right," Cam glanced from Jessie to Gray, "someone was across the street watching Sally's."

"And you couldn't see who it was?" asked Gray.

"Not before they disappeared into the city building."

"Were they watching me or were they watching Sally's?" questioned Jessie.

"Just be careful," Ben reminded everyone. "We don't know who we're dealing with."

"And I really don't want any blowback on Dylan," Jessie murmured.

"Or our parents," added Gray.

"There's more." Cam pulled the pictures and quickly explained when and where he'd gotten them. "We figured out the photos were taken at the same time, at Logan International."

"But the baby was photo-shopped out," explained Jessie.

"Which means someone followed, or was waiting for you at the airport," Ben surmised.

"And either sent or brought the picture back to Swan Harbor," finished Gray.

"It had to be sent electronically," Hayden argued. "Especially if it was photo-shopped and put into your car that same night."

Ben was quiet for several moments, while he moved around the room. It had Cam feeling like his friend was about to give a summation, hoping to convince a jury.

"Jessie," he began. "You think Catherine's father paid for your time in Boston, right?"

"I think so," Jessie nodded. "I don't know where else she would have gotten that much money. I just heard, '*what Catherine wants, Catherine gets*', and then something about money exchanging hands. No names though."

"What do you know about Catherine's father?" Ben prodded.

“Nothing much. Catherine only talked about her mother. She gave me the impression her father wasn’t in the picture.”

“Let’s see,” Hayden’s fingers flew across the keyboard. “Richard Gold has been divorced once, and Catherine is his only child.”

“What does Daddy Gold do?” Cam was still trying to figure out why his family ... and Jessie’s, had been targeted.

Hayden continued reading, “Looks like he manages hedge funds, and dabbles in commercial real estate.”

“Are there any noticeable ties to Swan Harbor?” Ben suggested another possibility.

“He donated a million dollars several years ago to Swan Harbor General,” Hayden replied.

“I’d bet that’s the same time those pictures of Mary were taken,” mused Jessie.

“Dates match,” Hayden confirmed. “And it looks like he’s donated to several local elections, including Dylan’s opponent.”

“So, it involves daddy somehow,” Gray offered. “But why? I still don’t see why she’d target my family.”

Cam didn’t either, and fought with himself daily to keep from driving by Catherine’s office and forcing her to tell him.

“My turn.” Sadie nodded to Hayden, who opened a file on his computer. “These are the fake ledgers we first found, and to the best of my knowledge, these people; Sandy Swan, Polly Dee, Frieda Driver, Sunny Iceland, Liberty Freeze, and all the other names in this program are not real.”

“None of them?” Jessie frowned. “Going how far back?”

“Ten years or so,” Sadie shrugged. “It’s the same names repeated, just different amounts.”

“No pattern?” asked Ben.

“No,” Sadie confirmed. “And before you ask, we don’t know where the money came from.”

“I’m working on it,” Hayden offered. “But ...”

“Hayden did find his way into the real books for Mary’s department,” Sadie was quick to jump to the boy’s defense.

“And?” Cam pushed. “Is there *any* good news?”

Jessie rubbed her hand back and forth over the tight muscles in his back. It had him thinking about what she’d said the night before – about relying on each other. He had to admit he kind of liked it.

“We know these are real people,” Sadie explained, “because Hayden could track them through other hospital departments. I really hate this, as I feel like

I'm invading someone's private life. Mary saw a lot of people she knew."

"But nothing that tells us who is doing this?" Cam spit out, and only Jessie's hand in his kept him from saying more.

"Not yet," Hayden's smile grew into a 'child who found the cookie jar' one. "But, I discovered someone snuck an event-program into the hospital's computer system."

"Meaning?" There was something in Hayden's expression that caused a little glitter of hope to light inside Cam.

"Event-programming means when something happens, it triggers another, which triggers another, etc," Hayden explained.

"Like a Rube Goldberg machine," Cam remembered from a long ago class.

"Similar," Hayden agreed. "It's like a domino effect ... but let me show you."

He grabbed a couple of whiteboard markers and drew a large rectangle in the center of the board. Inside that, he drew several small squares. Then, on the outside of the large rectangle, he drew four sets; and each set contained, a square, a circle, and a triangle.

"Okay." Hayden pointed to the larger rectangle in the center, and in full professorial mode continued, "This is the hospital. Its computer system is a mainframe, basically a large system capable of running many programs at once."

Hayden then drew a set of arrows that formed a circle around all the squares within the big rectangle. "The event-program was circling around inside the network, waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Cam studied the drawing and then, as if a light clicked on, he answered, "The passwords."

"Seems so," Hayden replied.

"So, you broke into the mainframe, added those passwords we gave you and," Cam made quotation marks with his fingers, "an event was triggered?"

"That's what I'm saying." Hayden drew a quick stick figure above the large rectangle. "I broke into the mainframe and hit the program, asking for passwords. Entered those, expecting to be sent deeper into the mainframe—"

"However, those passwords kicked you somewhere else." Sadie indicated one of the smaller squares on the outside of the large rectangle.

"Yeah." Hayden pointed to the same square as Sadie. "The ledgers were here. We traced them," he noted a circle, "to the bank. The question is what's next?"

"Does the money stay in the bank," Sadie indicated the circle, "or go somewhere else?" Her finger landed on the triangle. "You've only found one set of books, right?" When Hayden nodded, she continued, "Then why do you have

these other three options?”

“Mr. Fowler used to say, ‘*why program only one event when you can take on the whole party?*’”

“What did you just say?” Cam’s attention was pulled from the diagram.

“Mr. Fowler,” Hayden repeated. “My AP Computer teacher.”

Cam’s eyes darted to Jessie’s. “Damn.” He ran his hand through his hair. “That’s Eden’s older brother. You don’t think ...?”

“That Eden’s involved in this?” Jessie questioned.

“Is there any way to determine how long the program has been waiting?” Cam wondered. He didn’t like what he was thinking, but if Eden was involved

“That doesn’t explain the bank records,” Sadie noted. “Those go back ten years or more.”

“True.” Cam paced across the floor and replayed the last few months with Eden. Her father was quite a bit older than her mother, and had been married before. His conversations with Aaron Fowler had been brief. “Makes about as much sense as Catherine doing all of this.”

“When solving a mystery,” Jessie added in a soft voice, “it’s often right in front of your face.”

“Now what?” Cam sighed.

“It’s a tedious process,” Hayden explained. “But I’m looking into several things. First, I’m trying to find where the money came from. And second, I’m trying to find out who set up the programming. I’m also trolling Catherine’s computer.”

“We’re running out of time,” Jessie murmured. “I have to leave in a month or so.”

She’d told him about having to fly back to the Philippines the previous night. “But she’d only be gone for six weeks.” Cam tugged her into his arms and hugged her.

“If we can’t be together, though ...” she whispered.

“I’m not going to lose you, Princess.” Cam couldn’t quite hide his fear. “We won’t stop fighting.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” He only hoped that was one promise he’d never have to break.

nineteen

Fiona's Fashions

July 9

3:00 p.m.

JESSIE RAN her hand along the rack of colorful clothes. Since finding out about her 'surprise party', she'd had to pinch herself several times. Twenty-three of her twenty-five birthdays had been spent with Cam, and he'd always made them special.

Which was why she'd convinced Molly to go shopping with her. She was on a hunt for an outfit to remind him, no matter what, he was always in her head and in her heart.

When she'd been young, she'd always loved her birthday. Her mother would bake her a princess cake. There would be streamers and balloons everywhere, thanks to her brothers and father. And on her head, would be a pink princess birthday crown.

As she'd grown older, the theme varied, but the sentiment had remained. They'd treated her like a princess. Which might explain part of why she'd often behaved like she was the only one that mattered.

Her fourteenth birthday, though, would often replay in her head. Not only was it the last time she'd shared her birthday with her parents and James. It had also been the first time, Cam had looked at her as a girl.

Her birthday had been mid-week that year, and she'd been suspicious when her mom rushed her out of the house to go shopping with Cassie and Sadie. Even more so when her dad hadn't gone to work, and both of her brothers were up before noon.

Then, as her mother had backed out of their driveway, she'd heard a familiar but unexpected sound. When she'd looked over her shoulder, and saw the entire Hunter family in their beat-up old truck, heading to her house, it had sealed the deal. A surprise was being planned, and it had to be big.

There had been numerous times while shopping, she'd wanted to ask what was going on. Except, every time she'd opened her mouth, something would

change her mind. She'd lasted through lunch and several hours on the beach. However, once they'd dropped her friends at home, her curiosity had gotten the best of her.

"What's my birthday surprise, Mom?"

Ruth jerked the wheel of the car just a little too hard and side-eyed her. "Birthday surprise? We went shopping, had lunch, and you and your friends spent a few hours at the beach. And," she glanced down at Jessie's bare stomach, "you got a new bikini."

"I did." Jessie lightly touched the emerald green bandeau top, still a little in shock her mother had bought it for her. "I certainly don't look like a nerd in this."

Ruth laughed. "No, my darling daughter, you do not."

"But that doesn't answer my question," Jessie tried again. "What could the Hunters, Dad, Dylan, and James be doing without us?"

"Picked up on that, did you?" Ruth shook her head. "I'm surprised you haven't figured it out long before now."

"So," Jessie thought back over the last few weeks, but couldn't think of anything out of place, "it's something you've been planning for a while?"

"Maybe," Ruth teased. "After all, you're not a little girl any longer."

"My room!" Jessie shrieked.

"Shh," Ruth placed her finger on her lips and winked, "you didn't hear anything from me."

As soon as the car rolled to a stop, Jessie yanked her seatbelt off and ran inside, her mother's "Wait for me so I can take pictures," trailing in her wake.

She raced up the stairs, the smell of paint growing stronger the closer she got to her room.

"Happy Birthday, Sweet Girl." Mary was standing in the hallway, holding her old bedding. "I hope you like it."

"Thanks, Mary!" Jessie didn't wait for an invitation and raced into her bedroom.

The room was just like she'd told her mother she'd wanted. There were posters of Michelle Kwan, Sasha Cohen, and Kelly Clarkson hanging on the purple walls. Her stuffed animals had been organized in the corner. It was almost too much for her to take in.

"Oh, Cam! You helped too?"

She couldn't contain her excitement and twirled around twice, fighting the need to giggle with happiness. When, after a few minutes, Cam hadn't said anything, she glanced back at him. He was standing in front of the window, staring at her. However, the look on his face was unlike any other time.

His eyes grew wide and raked down her body. Jessie's thoughts scattered as numerous things raced through her head. She felt pretty, sexy, powerful, female
....



CAM'S GAZE slid down Jessie's body, from her emerald green bikini top, to her bare midriff, and low riding denim shorts, only to move back to her top.

'She has ... boobs', bounced through his head at the same time his adolescent body stood up and took notice.

"Did you help paint?" Jessie brushed her hand across his cheek. "Purple looks good on you."

His face tingled from where she'd touched it, but he couldn't get his brain to signal his mouth to move.

'This is Jessie', he kept trying to tell his body, but then 'She has boobs!' would echo in his head.

"How do you like it, Jessie?" his mother stepped into the room, her knowing eyes taking in everything before he could turn away. "Ruth is on her way with her camera."

Cam glanced at his mother then down at the packaging he was holding. "I, I," he swallowed and tried again. "I'll just go throw this away." Then, before anything else could be said, he rushed out the door.

The memory of feeling as if he'd been punched in the gut when he saw her that day twelve years ago, was just as fresh as if it had happened yesterday.

Then again, Jessie took his breath away every time he looked at her. He was counting down the days, until he could tell the whole world.

A door slammed somewhere in the house, reminding Cam he'd been lost in the past for too long. He closed the ring box he'd been holding and set it on his nightstand, on top of his proposal plans. Then, with a last look in the mirror, he was on his way to Sally's.

*When he arrived, the diner looked the same as any other Friday night, except for the **Closed for a Private Event** sign that hung on the door. The tables had been removed for dancing, and the counter was lined with food. There were multicolored spotlights, balloons, and streamers floating everywhere. No longer did it resemble just a diner. It was a party place fit for his princess.*

A party, yes, but a small party with only a few select people invited. In addition, Eden was in Rhode Island helping her friend Abby with wedding plans, which meant he was a free man.

That thought added an extra bounce to his step, but also earned him more

than his share of gripes every time he got in the way.

"You need to relax," Ben scolded him, when yet again Sadie showed her teeth and growled.

"I know," Cam agreed. "I'm just looking forward to spending an evening with friends."

"And not having to walk that fine line," Ben added.

"You said it."

It had been a tough week. He'd taken Eden on a few 'dates,' making him more aware than ever of Jessie's conditions. Not so much because he had to worry about himself, but because he knew how it made his princess feel. Especially when he'd been confronted with the fact she'd spent time with Tyler. Their lists were growing, and until everything was over, he couldn't see that changing anytime soon.

"You're okay with Tyler being here?" Ben gave a subtle nod toward the door.

Cam glanced over in time to see Sadie hugging Tyler, not surprised when Gray was hovering close by. "Yeah. He's actually a nice guy," he hesitated a beat, "as long as he stays away from my girl."

"Which one?" Ben laughed.

Cam swallowed his response when someone shouted, "Everyone be quiet! Jessie's here."

The door opened, Jessie stepped in, and Cam's eyes immediately locked with hers. Amid the shouts of *Happy Birthday!* their gazes remained focused only on each other.

Her long-sleeved, emerald green top was the same color as her bikini all those years ago. Instead of denim shorts, though, she was wearing a tiny black skirt that showcased her legs. How was he expected to keep his eyes off of her?

When the song, *I Knew I Loved You*, began to play, Cam made his way across the room. "Dance?" He pulled her into his arms and encountered nothing but skin. "You're trying to kill me, right?"

"Moi?" Jessie's turquoise eyes glittered under the colored lights. "But look at you," she ran her hand across his shoulder, "purple looks good on you."

"You always look beautiful, Princess." His voice dropped an octave, "However, there's just something about you in this color of green ..."

"I bought it for you," she whispered.

Cam nuzzled her temple. "And I thank you for it." He pressed her hips closer to his, where his body was having a hard time behaving. Engaging in a little frottage with Jessie wasn't something new. With her, he was used to having one foot in heaven, and the other in hell.



Sally's Diner

July 9

7:30 p.m.

JESSIE TUCKED her nose against Cam's throat. He smelled so good, her knees threatened to buckle. And every time, he rubbed against her, and she could feel his body's reaction, her insides jumped up and screamed, *Here I am! Here I am!* How was this fair?

"The party wasn't a surprise, was it?" His gentle question served as the catalyst needed to break their bubble.

Jessie leaned back enough to meet his eyes, "How did you know?"

"Come on, Princess." Cam glanced down, then right back up. "I know this isn't your usual Sally's wear."

"True," she laughed. "And you're right. I tricked Molly into spilling."

"Poor Molly," he chuckled. "I'm surprised she didn't catch on. I mean, she does teach first grade."

His teasing tone had Jessie automatically sticking her tongue out. Desire flashed in Cam's eyes, making her realize what she'd done. Later, they promised. Thankfully, before she could embarrass herself, the song ended, and Cam left her with Sadie.

"Happy Birthday, Jess!" Sadie hugged her. "You're shaking. Are you okay?"

"I will be." Jessie took several deep breaths. "I think my outfit backfired, that's all."

Sadie stepped back, "Well, if it's any consolation, Cam's wrecked too. I wouldn't be surprised if he's looking for a way to climb into Sally's freezer."

"Thanks." Jessie laughed. "That image helped."

Sadie linked their arms. "Hey, what are best friends for? Let's mingle."

Jessie found if she kept her eyes on Sadie or the person she was talking to, she was okay. It was when the conversation lagged or she was moving toward the next group, she always searched for Cam. Then, just like when they were kids, the words, '*run to him*', played loudly in her head.

"Come." Dylan drew her out onto the dance floor.

"Afraid I might get myself in trouble?" she teased.

"Not you," Dylan chuckled. "Cam."

"Cam?" Jessie glanced around, until she found him dancing with Molly. "What did he do?"

“His feelings for you are written all over his face,” Dylan whispered. “I just want you two to be careful.”

“I’m sorry.” Jessie’s head dropped against Dylan’s chest. “I probably should have put a stop to the party. It’s just ...”

“The heart wants what the heart wants,” Dylan murmured.

“And you know something about that, don’t you?”

Dylan’s face turned red. “Why do you think I stepped in?” he surprised her by saying.

“So, I should thank you for saving us?” she quipped.

Before Dylan could respond, the diner door opened, and several people entered at once. “It’s Tia,” Jessie grinned. “And Her voice faded and a funny feeling worked its way through her system.

“Do you want me to get rid of her?” Dylan spit through clenched teeth.

Jessie thought about it. However, if she said yes, it might cause more issues than if she kept quiet. “Not unless there’s a problem. Just keep Cam away from her.”

“Okay,” he sighed. “Be careful.”

“Yes, Dad,” Jessie giggled. “I’m always careful.”

As she walked away, she thought she heard him mutter, “*except when it comes to Cam*”, but with determined steps made her way toward her high school friend.

“Jessie!” Tia Patterson hugged her. “I’m so sorry about Catherine. She showed up with Belle, and I didn’t know how to get rid of her.”

“That’s okay.” Jessie watched Catherine and Belle take drinks, then melt back into a corner. “Dylan is married to Molly, so it doesn’t matter.”

“If you say so,” Tia grunted.

“I’m fine,” Jessie assured her. “What are you doing these days?”

“Just managing The Beachside Inn,” Tia shrugged, as if to say, nothing much.

“Nana Patterson retired?” Except, with only a few words out there, Jessie read Tia’s facial expressions. The news wasn’t going to be good.

“I wish,” Tia’s lower lip trembled, “it’s only been a few months, but I still miss her.”

“I remember her brownies,” Jessie confessed. “Remember when we ...” Her voice faded when she realized, she’d lost her audience. Not wanting to be rude, she introduced Tyler.

“Do you mind if I steal Tia for a dance, Jess?”

“That’s not up to me,” Jessie began. However, when she got a look at Tia’s face, she knew it was a moot point. “Have fun you two.”

Jessie started in search of Sadie, only to be waylaid by Hayden.
“I think I found something,” he whispered.
“Really?” Jessie covered her mouth, worried she’d been heard. “What?”
“I’ve been watching for abnormal activity and something pinged today,” Hayden explained. “If there’s more, I’ll get a signal and disappear.”
“If I don’t see you,” Jessie repeated. “That’s a good thing?”
“That’s a good thing,” Hayden confirmed.
“Is it with—?” Jessie began.
“Catherine,” Hayden interrupted. “Miss Richards, what do you think of the party?”
Jessie felt as if all the color drained from her face. “Excuse me, I was on my way to the ladies’ room.”



Sally’s Diner

July 9

9:30 p.m.

CAM WATCHED Hayden come back into the main room with Catherine and Belle. However, Jessie was nowhere in sight. “What the hell?” He took a step, only to have his arm grabbed.

“You can’t,” Gray hissed. “Let Sadie check on her. We have other problems right now.”

“What?” Cam couldn’t imagine anything more pressing than Jessie, and then Gray nodded toward the door. “Did you ...?”

“Invite them?” Gray grumbled. “No. But here they come.”

“Can tonight get any worse?” Cam caught sight of another new arrival. “Well, damn!”

“Cameron,” Mary hugged him hello, “it’s so good to see you. Where’s Jessie?”

“Mom, Dad,” Cam sent his brother a panicky look, “I thought you were staying in Florida.”

“We were,” Clint slipped his arm around Mary’s neck, “but your mother ...”

“I just had to see my girl,” Mary exclaimed. “Where are you hiding her?”

“I ...”

“Cameron!” Eden, the other uninvited guest, threw her arms around his neck. “I missed you.”

Every coherent thought fled as he disentangled Eden's arms. "You're supposed to be in Rhode Island," he retorted.

"Oh, we finished everything early," she leaned in as if expecting a kiss, "and I just had to be here to wish Jessie happy birthday."

"That's uh, well, nice," Cam stammered. *How could he get rid of her?* He was saved when Tyler happened by, "Could you please entertain the lovely Eden here, while Gray and I get our parents settled?"

"Mary? Clint?" Jessie's excited tone was the only thing that could have calmed him right then. "You're here!"

"Happy Birthday, Sweet Girl." Mary grabbed onto Jessie as if she was a lifeline. "Oh, how I've missed you."

When Jessie broke down in his mother's arms, Cam exchanged concerned looks with Gray. His mother would not let things go.

"Have you been keeping my boy in line?" Mary hugged Jessie with one arm and slipped the other around Cam. "He's missed you so much. Do you know, I've prayed daily for you to come home ... where you belong?"

The look on Jessie's face said *'help'*. Except he wasn't sure what to do.

"I've loved being home," she sighed. "I didn't realize how much I'd missed it until I got here."

Jessie glanced his direction, and Cam fought not to get lost in her turquoise eyes. It was as if his heart was reaching for hers and took every ounce of his strength not to tug her into his arms.

"Dad, why don't you dance with my," Cam caught himself and corrected to, "Jess."

"Come on, Princess." Clint sent him a pointed dad stare. "Dance with this old man."

"Do you have something to say, Cameron Clint Hunter?" Mary addressed the elephant.

When you're twenty-eight and the evoking of your middle name makes your knees quake, it's bad. Cam led his mom onto the dance floor. "Welcome home," he opted for buttering up, "we've missed you."

"Nice try," Mary glanced toward where Clint had Jessie laughing about something. "You might as well say it. I'll find out, eventually."

Not if I have anything to do with it. "Mom," he whispered. "Things are complicated with Jess."

Mary's brown eyes dove into his. "Do you love her?"

"I," unerringly his gaze found Jessie, and the thought he could lie flew away. "More than life itself. But ... I'm with Eden tonight. Just trust me."

"Oh, Cam," she sighed. "What have you gotten involved in?"

“What makes you think ...” Her lifted eyebrow had the words dying.

“Switch partners?” Clint smoothly traded Jessie for his mother.

Jessie’s hand settled on his shoulder, and her thumb brushed the side of his neck. “Are you okay?”

“Better with you in my arms.” Cam pulled her a little closer. “What about you, though? Tell me about earlier.”

“Nothing much,” she replied. However, something told him she was only giving him part of the story. “Hayden was just telling me something.”

“About the case?” Cam looked around the room but couldn’t see the boy anywhere. “Where’d he go?”



“HE’S GONE?” Jessie’s heart sped up, and that little kernel of hope sparked to life.

“I don’t see him, why?”

“Hayden thinks he found something. He said if he left, it was a good thing.” Jessie slowly scanned the room, until the sight of an uninvited guest stopped her in her tracks. “Why is your girlfriend here?”

Cam dropped his head against hers. “Eden said she came back to wish you a happy birthday.”

“Ha!” Jessie snorted. “Eden’s trying to protect her property ... you.”

“People are not possessions, Princess.” He tossed her words back.

“You don’t belong to me?” she asked innocently.

His eyes twinkled, his dimples peeked out, and his lips whispered across the rim of her ear. “I belong to you, just as you belong to me,” he promised in a husky voice.

“Just so you remember that.” Jessie wanted to say more, but the song ended and before she could gather her wits, Eden appeared.

“Happy Birthday, Jessie.” Eden linked her arm through Cam’s. “This is a great party.”

While there was definitely a territorial glint in Eden’s eyes, Jessie couldn’t see anything vindictive.

“Thank you.” Except she couldn’t stand there and make small talk. Instead, she excused herself and walked away without looking back. However, the heat from Cam’s stare followed her across the room.

Jessie tried to return her attention to the party. Except the wild feeling inside refused to settle. Especially when she felt like her every move was being watched. She ducked into the ladies’ room and locked the door, hoping for a small respite.

Even that didn't last long, though, when Sadie knocked. "Are you okay?"

Jessie pushed open the door and stepped out. "I'm fine."

"Cam said Hayden found something," Sadie whispered. "What?"

"I don't know," Jessie shrugged. "He said if there were signs of movement, he'd leave."

When they thought they heard someone coming, Jessie waved her friend toward the main room. "Go on. I'll follow in a bit."

As soon as Sadie walked away, Jessie spotted the alley door. If only she could escape to Sonny's. Except she couldn't do that to her family. They'd done something special for her, and while she appreciated it, she only wanted one thing.

"However, a little cool air, won't hurt." Jessie stepped outside and a gust of wind whipped her hair around her head.

twenty

Sally's Diner

July 9

10:30 p.m.

WHEN SADIE RETURNED from the back alone, Cam's worry meter jumped up a notch. "You didn't find her?"

"I found her," Sadie replied. "But we thought someone was coming, so—"

"— She sent you out first?"

"She did," Sadie hummed. "Don't worry. Jessie said she'd be right out."

A shard of fear zipped through Cam. "Then where is she?" His eyes clashed with Gray's, the fact they'd been spied on, still on their minds. "Shouldn't she be here by now?"

"I'm sure she's fine, Cam," Gray murmured. "There are extenuating circumstances, as to why you can't keep watch on her all the time."

"Don't you think I'm aware of that?" Cam snapped.

"Calm down." Sadie placed a hand on his arm. "I'm sure Jessie just needed a little downtime. She probably went back into the bathroom."

Cam looked from Sadie to Gray, then back to Sadie, "You thought you heard someone coming?"

"Right." Sadie drew out the syllable longer than needed. "We were talking about Hayden."

"What's that boy done now?" Mary stepped off the dance floor into their circle.

"Hayden's getting excited about going away to college," Sadie jumped in.

The look on his mother's face said she wasn't buying their attempts to side-track her. Which meant, he'd do what he could do.

"I'm a little worried about Jessie," Cam admitted.

Mary studied him with dark eyes that saw way too much. "Is she okay?"

"I'm sure she's fine." Sadie waved her hand toward the room at large. "Jessie's probably just hiding out for a little peace and quiet."

"And miss Y.M.C.A.?" Mary answered, tongue-in-cheek.

The response had Cam letting go of the breath he was holding. His mother was telling them she'd forgo the questions ... at least temporarily.

"We're going to dance." Clint sent him, then Gray, a pointed look. "We won't be long."

"Get the feeling we're screwed?" Cam watched his parents for a few minutes. "Any second now the questions are going to start."

"I feel like I got caught sneaking out of the house," Gray grumbled.

"Or helped yourself to dad's bourbon."

"That wasn't me," Gray chuckled. "It was Dylan."

"Watch it," Dylan warned. "You wouldn't want to spread rumors about the future Sheriff."

"Rumors?" Gray hummed. "Let's see. What about the time we ...?"

Cam ignored Dylan's and Gray's attempts to one up each other and went back to searching for Jessie. He was tempted to go looking for her. Except there was still the little complication of Eden and Catherine

"Why is Catherine still here?" He nodded toward the back of the diner. "And what's going on between her and Belle?"

"Who cares," Dylan snapped. "Why Catherine thought it was okay to just barge into the party, I don't know."

"Catherine and Belle are arguing about something," Molly answered.

Dylan side-eyed his wife. "Why do you say that?"

She sent Dylan a look, causing Cam to bite his lip to keep from laughing. "It's perfectly obvious. Look at how they're standing. Look at how their hands are positioned. Look at their angry expressions."

Cam had to admit there was something to what Molly had just explained. Especially when a few seconds later, Catherine flounced across the floor and said something to Tia. Shortly afterward, she ran from the diner, with Belle not far behind.

"Well, that was interesting," Dylan quipped.

"Cameron," Eden materialized by his side. "I'm going to leave."

"Everything okay?" he felt obligated to ask.

"I'm just tired," Eden sighed. "I'll see you later." Then, she ran out the door.

For half a second, Cam wondered what had happened. However, his anxiousness over Jessie pushed everything else away and sent him on a search.

She wasn't in the back hallway, nor did he find her in the bathroom. When he pushed the stall doors open, and there was still no sign of her, his heart beat a little harder ... a little faster.

He searched the kitchen and looked in Sally's office. Then he took the stairs

to their work area. However, as soon as he hit the top step, he knew she wasn't up there. That was something he could feel.

"Hayden," Cam stuck his head in their office area, "have you seen Jessie?"

"I saw her earlier this evening. Why?"

"I can't find her and ..."

Hayden frowned, "Do you want me to help you look?"

Cam thought about it, but then decided, if Hayden was on the trail of something that could help them, that was more important.

"No, that's okay. You keep working."

"Okay, let me know."

"Will do." Cam ran back downstairs and slid into the front room. "Jessie's missing!"

"We'll look at Sonny's." Dylan and Molly ran out the front door. Then Gray and Sadie left to check the parking lot.

"I'm sure she's fine." Mary squeezed his arm in a show of support. "Let me double check in the bathroom. It's possible you just missed her."

Cam followed her into the hallway, and the way the wind whistled through a crack, caused the hairs on the back of his neck to stand up. He glanced around and finally noticed the alley door wasn't completely closed. When he reached to shut it, something had him pushing instead, opening it wider. What he saw on the other side, caused his heart to stop, and a chill to race through his body.

"I found her!"

Jessie was laying at the base of the stairs in a tangle of arms and legs. There was blood on one side of her face. Her stillness though, that scared him the most.

"Princess," he whispered. "Open your eyes for me."

"Cam!" Mary exclaimed. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Cam snapped. "But I'm not leaving her." He pulled his polo shirt off and applied the cotton to Jessie's wound.

"Cam ..."

"Shush, Princess." He smoothed his other hand over her cheek. "You've got a nasty cut. We're taking you to the hospital."

"I'll go have your father bring the car around," Mary replied. "You'll be okay?"

"I'm fine, Mom. Just go." He readjusted the cloth and gave Jessie his full attention. "Can you hold this in place so I can carry you?"

Jessie laid her hand on his, then lifted the cloth slightly. "Your purple shirt is ruined."

"I can get another shirt. You though," Cam picked her up, "there's only one of you."

“Cam.”

“Just hold on,” he whispered. “Just hold on to me.”



Swan Harbor General

July 9

11:00 p.m.

JESSIE DROPPED her head against Cam’s shoulder. She wanted to focus on his bare chest and musky scent. However, her pounding head and spinning stomach kept pulling her attention to them.

“We’ll be there shortly.” Cam kissed the side of her head. “You scared me to death.

“Sorry.” She swallowed the bile that threatened to rise. “It wasn’t on purpose.”

He chuckled, but he never stopped what he was doing. One minute, he was slowly smoothing his hand across her back, the next he was massaging her muscles. His touch, though, that was what mattered. Cam comforted her in a way no other person could.

“I’m okay,” Jessie assured him. “But did someone call my brother? He might flip.”

“Already taken care of,” Mary tossed over the back seat. “Dylan will meet us at the hospital.”

It wasn’t long after that, they arrived. When the car jerked to a stop, Jessie had to clamp her molars together to keep from throwing up.

“Let me get your door.” Mary jumped from the car to help.

Cam kept his arms around her and turned toward the opened door. However, the touch of the cool breeze on her behind had her yelling, “Wait!”

Her panicked cry stopped Cam’s movements, so he was half in, half out of the car. “What?”

“My skirt.”

“What about it?”

“I don’t think she wants to flash the entire hospital, Cam,” Mary explained, coming to her rescue.

“Oh.”

Jessie wanted to laugh at his sheepish reply, but didn’t have the energy. Thankfully, Cam got her inside with her dignity intact. Then, all she had to worry about was her spinning stomach.

While Jessie waited for the nurse, Mary disappeared, leaving her alone with Cam. He couldn't settle and paced around the room like a caged lion. The combination of his frenetic movements and the bright lights caused her head to pound harder. Finally, she gave in and let her eyes drift shut.

"Here, Cam," Mary returned and tossed him a scrub shirt, "put this on."

A few minutes later, the door opened again, and a nurse rushed in. "Hi, I'm Audrey. How are you feeling?"

"Like I was hit by a truck."

For the next several hours, Jessie was poked and prodded, as they moved her from one department to another. With each new person she met, she complained about her head. However, they all said the same, *'You have a concussion and need to be watched. We can't give you anything, because you have alcohol in your system.'*

That didn't help her head. Nor did it put her in a good frame of mind. Especially when she ended up being tucked into a hospital bed and not sent home, as she wanted.

Cam hovered close by and asked the same question over and over, "Are you comfortable?"

"Stop it," Jessie growled, irritated by the entire situation. "My head hurts, otherwise, I'm fine."

He brushed her hair back, then kissed her softly. "I wish I could crawl in next to you and hold you."

"Me too."

The door banged against the wall and Dylan rushed in. "Are you okay?"

"It's just a little cut," Jessie explained. "I didn't even need stitches."

Dylan propped his hands on his hips, and his 'dad look' flashed across his face. "That's it?"

"That's it," Jessie began.

Then Cam jumped in to help. "She's telling you the truth, Dylan."

"Good." Dylan's smile relaxed. "Feel like answering a few questions?"

"Questions?"

"Yeah, like what happened?"

"I cut my head," Jessie grumbled. "What else do you need to know?"

The look on Dylan's face, and the tone of his voice, caused Jessie's heart to tick up a few beats. However, when that happened, it increased the intensity of her headache.

"Jessie," Cam's soft voice settled her, "why were you in the alley?"

She thought back to the last thing she remembered at Sally's. "It's no big deal. Between Catherine and Eden showing up, I needed some air."

“And that’s when you opened the alley door?” asked Cam.

“Yeah. It was windy when I pushed the door open. Then, I stepped outside ...” Jessie’s voice faded, as the rest of what she remembered made no sense.

“What happened then, Princess?” Cam prompted. “Did you fall? Hear or see anything ... anyone?”

His question had her breath coming faster. She closed her eyes and tried to put herself back in the alley. “I heard something. It sounded like a shoe scraping. Then, somehow, I lost my balance and fell.”

“Anything else?” Dylan pushed a little more. Except all that did was cause her head to pound again.

“No,” Jessie rubbed her temple, “I need to stop thinking right now, though. My head hurts.”

“Okay, Sis.” Dylan kissed her on the forehead. “Mary’s going to stay with you tonight.”

“But ...” Jessie looked to Cam for help.

“Not a good idea, and you know it,” Dylan reminded her. “In fact, he needs to leave ... now. Let’s talk.” He looked pointedly at Cam, then walked out, she was sure, expecting to be obeyed.

“I’ll talk to him, Princess.” Cam kissed her softly. “Maybe I can stay instead of my mom.”

“You know that won’t happen.” Mary returned to the room from wherever she’d gone.

Cam winked, kissed her again and whispered, “We’ll see,” before disappearing out the door.



AS SOON AS Cam walked out of Jessie’s room, Dylan hauled him into an empty one. “Just what in the hell have you gotten my sister involved with?”

“What are you *talking* about?” Cam yanked his arm out of Dylan’s hands. “You know exactly what we’re working on.”

Dylan stared at him for several seconds before stalking across the room. “Right. Jessie said there have been some developments, but she wouldn’t tell me what.”

“There have.” Cam offered minimal information.

“Is there something I should know?” Dylan subtly changed the question.

“Just say it,” Cam finally barked. “You’re obviously tiptoeing around *something*.”

“Yeah, okay.” Dylan ran his hand through his hair. “There was a piece of

plastic pipe not far from where Jess was found. Rusty, my partner is looking into it.”

Cam’s breath caught, and he had to grab hold of the closest thing to keep from running back into Jessie’s room.

“Do you think someone was out there and hit her?”

“It can’t be ruled out,” Dylan admitted. “Now, *has* anything happened?”

“Someone was watching Jessie last week and then followed her away from Sally’s,” Cam explained. “We thought, maybe ...”

“What?!” Dylan yelled. “Why are you just now saying something about this?”

“You know why,” Cam sighed. “Jessie doesn’t want you involved. We’re still hopeful we can do this on our own.”

“What have you found?” Dylan came back with.

There were a few ways Cam could answer, that might get him in trouble. However, if the roles were reversed ...

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“No,” Dylan immediately answered. “But this is my sister.”

“We’ve found a web of things that make no sense,” Cam explained. “Unfortunately, none of them allow us to pin everything on Catherine.”

“Well, damn.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Cam agreed. “Hayden was working on something earlier tonight, so I’m hopeful. In fact, I could use a ride back there. I want to give Jess her birthday gift.”

“How long is this going to take?” Dylan asked. “I want my sister safe.”

“And you don’t think I want the same thing?” Cam blew out a frustrated breath. “You don’t think it’s killing me not to be with her every day? I love her, Dylan and want, hell, have wanted to marry her for years. Having her here and not being with her is worse than when she was gone.”

“The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“It seems so.” Cam hesitated a beat. “Now, about that ride.”

“Fine, you can give her your gift.” Dylan led the way out of the room. “But just so you know, you’re still not staying with her tonight.”



Swan Harbor General

July 9

11:30 p.m.

JESSIE WOKE FROM A SHORT NAP, to find Mary sitting next to her, with questions in her eyes. "What do you want to know?"

"You can read me that well?"

"Maybe." Jessie shrugged. "Or maybe I've just been waiting for them."

The look on Mary's face grew melancholy. However, she didn't start talking right away. Instead, she moved to the window and stared out for several minutes.

"Tell me about the last two years?" she surprised Jessie by asking. "When you left, Cameron was devastated."

Jessie ducked her head, to hide her tears. She wasn't hearing anything new however, that didn't lessen the pain.

"There were reasons," she paused a beat, not knowing what else to say. "I'm sorry."

"Jess," Mary crossed the room, and this time, sat directly on the bed. "I know some of your secrets. When you're ready, I'd like to know the rest. For now, though, tell me about your work while you were away."

"I grew up." Jessie's laugh felt uncomfortable. "While I was there, I worked with children displaced by the Typhoon."

"That must have been tough."

"It was," Jessie murmured. "Those children, though, they needed me. They'd lost everything. Yet, a kind word, a gentle touch or a smile brightened their day."

"Children are very resilient," Mary replied. "Just like you were. Am I right?"

"I see what you did there."

"You do?"

"You pulled the conversation back to my well-being." Jessie raised a brow. "Didn't you?"

"Guilty," Mary admitted. "Am I wrong, though?"

"No, you're not wrong." Jessie smiled. "You always told me behind every cloud there was a little sun. It took a while, but you were right."

"I'm a mother." Mary grinned, as if that was the answer to everything.

"When my parents and James were killed," Jessie went on. "I was fortunate. I had Dylan and your family—"

"We're your family too," Mary interrupted. "Always have been ... always will be."

"Told you I was lucky." Jessie blinked several times. "During my time in the Philippines, I learned the world didn't revolve around me. That to be truly happy, I needed to be strong enough to take an active part in my happiness."

"Is that what you're doing now?" Mary's expression said, *I'll know if you*

lie’.

“I’m trying.”

“And Eden?” Mary tossed the other girl into the mix like a professional.

“You’re quite good at that, aren’t you?”

“What?” Mary’s smile was innocent.

“Getting the information you’re after,” Jessie replied.

“I’m a mother of two boys,” a corner of Mary’s mouth lifted, and her eyes twinkled, “and a psychiatrist, so ... yes. I usually get what I’m after.”

Jessie was tempted to share the burden she’d carried for years. However, they were no longer just hers.

“Why aren’t you mad at how I treated Cam?” she asked instead.

“I see what you did there,” Mary chuckled.

Jessie grinned. “I learned from the best. You didn’t answer the question, though.”

“The heart wants what the heart wants,” Mary murmured. “And your heart and Cam’s have always wanted each other’s. When it’s time, you’ll find your way.”

“Because things happen in Swan Harbor when they’re meant to happen?”

“Because love has its own timetable. Also,” Mary’s eyes twinkled, “because things happen when they’re meant to happen.”

“I hope you’re right,” Jessie whispered. “I love ...”

The man of her dreams walked into the room, stealing her words, and making her want so much.



“YOU LOVE?” Cam prompted.

“Well,” Jessie’s eyes sparkled, “I love ice cream.”

“And if I brought you some?” Cam ambled toward her. “What will you give me?”

He knew what he wanted but with his mother in the room, would he get it? Or could he get his mom to give them a few?

“How about ...?” She glanced around the room, then finally, their eyes locked. “What do you want?”

Cam’s heart picked up speed, his balls tingled, and he wanted. “Mom, will you give us fifteen minutes ... please? I’d like to give Jessie her gift.”

“Sure, Honey.” Mary whispered something in Jessie’s ear that caused her cheeks to blush. “I’ll be back in fifteen.”

He waited until his mother had closed the door before sauntering close

enough to touch. "What did she say to make you turn so red?"

"She told me to give you what you want. So ... Cam," Jessie's voice lowered, "what is it you want?"

"You, Princess." Cam cupped her jaw. "I just want you."

"That's it? There's nothing else?"

"What else is there?"

Jessie tapped her bottom lip like he'd been wont to do a time or two. "Come here."

Cam leaned close enough, and his mouth hovered over hers. He could feel her breath every time she exhaled. It took all of his willpower, not to dive in. "Here?"

"Closer."

He hesitated a beat, and then another. However, he couldn't resist and locked their lips together.

She moaned in approval, which gave him the opening he needed. Their tongues danced, lighting the fire that was never completely dormant when it came to her. The hotter the kiss grew, the faster his head spun, the more his heart raced and the harder his All he wanted was to climb into the bed and never let her go.

"Sorry about that." Cam backed up several steps. "There are some things that shouldn't happen in a hospital."

The shell-shocked expression she wore, probably mirrored his own.

"Rain check?"

"Oh, Princess," Cam sighed.

Instead of taking that line of conversation where he wanted, he held the ice cream he'd brought up with one hand, and her birthday gift with the other. "Your choice."

"How about I open the gift," she smiled, "and we share the ice cream?"

"A woman after my heart," he quipped.

"I thought I already had your heart."

"Always." Cam handed her the flat box and watched as she peeled the paper apart. She wasn't any quicker opening gifts at twenty-six than she'd been at nineteen. "Just rip it open."

Her grin was mischievous, as she knew exactly what she was doing to him. His heart sank to the pit of his stomach, his hands closed into fists until ... finally.

"Oh, Cam," Jessie's turquoise eyes met his, "how could you?"

Cam took the box and gently removed the silver bracelet. "How could I not? It's us." He pointed to the three hearts, a larger silver one, rimming a gold

one, and inside of those, a diamond encrusted, solid one. “Three hearts, representing our love yesterday, today and tomorrow.”

“It’s beautiful.” She held her arm aloft, and he fastened it for her. “Thank you. Now, come here.”

He kissed her, but as much as he wanted to sink into her, he tempered his response. *Soon. Very soon.*

“Ice cream?”

Jessie’s sigh was just as long-suffering as he felt. She took a bite and swirled her tongue around the spoon, giving him ideas he should not be having with his mother on the way back.

“You’re not behaving, Princess.”

“No?”

“No.” Cam lowered his voice. “I told you there were —”

Jessie shoved a spoonful of ice cream in his mouth effectively shutting him up. However, he hadn’t given up hope that someday

twenty-one

Sally's Diner

July 12

12:30 p.m.

ONCE JESSIE RETURNED HOME from the hospital, with her new bracelet on her arm, she'd thought she'd be riding a high. Instead, just the opposite seemed to occur. Her focus was gone, and her insides refused to settle. Since she couldn't be with Cam, she'd grabbed her skates and arrived at her home away from home, just as Sonny climbed off the Zamboni.

The ice, the sounds, her movements: they were all familiar. Yet, no matter how many times she circled the rink, her thoughts refused to settle. It reminded her of when she'd first arrived in Swan Harbor.

She'd finally ended up at Sally's, ordered a plate of fries, a strawberry milkshake and mulled. That was when she'd finally admitted what was going on. There was too much uncertainty surrounding her. Much, of which, she had no control.

Hayden was still searching. Catherine still held the upper hand. It was time to leave Swan Harbor. And Cam – as far as the town was concerned – still belonged to Eden.

Sadie had been no help. Her response had been, '*don't worry, Cam loves you.*' Yet, that didn't erase the memory of Eden in his arms. If she wasn't here to remind him of his conditions, did that give the other woman an upper hand?

Even Molly's reminder that '*the heart wants what the heart wants*' hadn't made her feel better. With her trip imminent, she was left to wonder. Did absence really make the heart grow fonder? Or was it out of sight, out of mind? One way she won, the other she lost ... again.

"Jessie?"

"Hi, Mary."

"Am I late?" Mary slid into the booth and nodded toward the half-eaten plate of fries. "I thought I was going to be early."

"No, you're fine." Jessie pushed the plate away. "It's just been one of those

—”

“Abby, where were you?”

Jessie glanced up in time to see several girls converge on a booth behind Mary. When she recognized them as being the friends Eden - and - Cam had been with at Randy’s, her stomach churned.

“Did you hear?” One of the girls went on. “Cameron will be so surprised!”

“My Cam?” Jessie mouthed.

Mary shrugged, as the girls continued.

“What did Eden do?” asked Abby.

“Oh my gosh,” another girl cried. “It’s so ...” she drew out the vowel, “*romantic*. We’re picking up something for her.”

As one, they moved to the counter, retrieved a large basket of food, and in a giggling group disappeared out the door.

Mary laid a motherly hand on Jessie’s. “What’s going on, Sweet Girl?”

“What do you mean?” Jessie shot back.

“Okay,” Mary backed away. “What’s got you so down?”

“I’m not ready to leave.” Jessie wrapped her fingers around her new bracelet. The look on Cam’s face when he’d fastened it lingered in her mind. Except, apparently

“It’s just

“Are you worried about Eden?” Mary put her on the spot.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” Jessie quipped.

“Oh Jessie,” Mary smiled. “Remember what I’ve always said.”

“The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“And my son’s heart recognized your heart as its mate long ago,” Mary replied in a husky voice.

“What?”

“It was your fourteenth birthday,” Mary began. “Your mother planned that day for weeks. In fact, she ordered the bedding you wanted and had it delivered to my house.”

“I was wondering how she kept it a secret,” Jessie laughed. “I’d been scouting catalogs for months and dropping hints. I didn’t think she’d paid attention.”

“Oh, she paid attention,” Mary assured her. “Ruth also fretted, as she worried everything wouldn’t go as planned.”

“How did you convince the boys to help?”

“Bribery. What else?” Mary chuckled. “Except Cameron. He willingly volunteered.”

“Cam was still there when I returned from the shopping trip,” Jessie

grinned. "The way he looked at me that day was ..."

"Like a man whose heart had just found its mate," Mary circled back to her earlier comment.

He had purple paint on his cheek," Jessie whispered. "Just like the shirt he wore at my party."

"I'm sure that was on purpose."

Which was the same reason she'd scoured the stores for a certain emerald-green blouse. To remind him of what he meant to her. "You think?"

"I know." Mary tapped her new bracelet. "Try not to worry about Eden and Cameron. You hold his heart."

"I'll try," Jessie sighed. "It's just ..." Her phone rang, throwing off her thoughts. It was only the possibility it was Cam that had her listening to her voice mail.

"Jessie, what is it?"

"They canceled my flight."

"Does that mean you don't have to go?"

"No," Jessie glanced at the text she'd just received. "They put me on tonight's red-eye."

"Cameron will want to see you before you leave."

Jessie had to bite her tongue to keep from saying, *'if he's not out with Eden.'* "I want to see him too. I'll try to call him after I finish packing."

"He was meeting with a friend of yours today," Mary frowned. "I think he said his name was Tyler."

"Cam's designing Tyler's club," Jessie explained. "It's going to be opposite the Spanish galleon on the pier."

"Oh," Mary smiled. "I wondered what would go there."

"Cam and Gray have big plans for the pier, don't they?"

"They got that from their father," Mary laughed. "Don't get them started on it, especially if you're in a hurry."

"Speaking of ..."

"Cam won't be happy, if he misses you."

"Hopefully, he won't. I guess I'll have to skip lunch." Jessie scooted out of the booth. "I'll see you when I get back."

"Just remember, Jessie. Cam's heart has chosen."

"Thanks, Mary," Jessie grinned. "I'll see you later."

Where was Cam, though? And would she see *him* later?



Lover's Cove

July 12

6:30 p.m.

AS SOON AS Cam was parked, he read the note one more time,

Cameron,

Meet me at Lover's Cave tonight at 6:30. It's time we make all our dreams come true.

Your True Love

He couldn't help but think, there was something off about the note. Jessie was the only person he'd ever invited to Lover's Cave, and that was the night she'd left. Except if she'd written the note, why hadn't she signed it princess?

Lover's Cave's legend stated if a couple made love there, they'd be betrothed before the year's end. He'd always planned on proposing to Jessie in this little romantic spot. Why, he wasn't sure. Somehow, he felt if he did, their union would be blessed. And since the road to their happily ever after hadn't been smooth, they needed all the help they could get.

Cam hurried around the large boulders that guarded the entrance and was greeted by a faint glow from inside the shallow cave. His heart began to race, and the closer he got, the faster he wanted to move.

"Jessie."

When Cam stepped into the cave, several things registered at once.

Candles had been strategically placed, just like he'd written on his list.

There was a basket from Sally's, with a bottle of champagne chilling nearby, just like he'd written on his list.

The cave was also alive with music. Which, if he had to guess, were songs he'd written on his list.

Except, while the decorations didn't trigger an alert. The person waiting for him in the center of the cave certainly did. A huge warning sign in his head started flashing '*mayday, mayday.*'

She was wearing nothing but a bright green bow.

She was holding a diamond ring.

Except, she wasn't Jessie!

"Eden!" he snapped. "Put some clothes on!"

Cam tossed a blanket in her direction, then quickly turned away and waited for her to get dressed.

"I'm covered," Eden replied sullenly.

He turned back to face her, pleased to see she was indeed, covered. "What's going on here?"

“Gee, Cameron,” she retorted, her little spark of temper surprising him. “Can’t you tell?”

“But ...” Cam was at a loss as to what to say. Finally, he walked away to stare out at the waves. It took several minutes before he even knew where to start.

“When have I ever given you any indication I was going to propose? And,” he added, “how did you find the ring and my list?”

“I thought you loved me,” Eden snapped. “I’ll admit, I was a little concerned when I heard Jessie was coming back to town. Except, when you saw her - *you* kissed *me*. *You* invited *me* to the festivities, *and* to the wedding. Then when I caught the bouquet, I *thought* you wanted *me*.”

“I told you at Randy’s the other night we weren’t there yet,” Cam reminded her. “Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Yeah,” she shrugged, “but I just thought you wanted to surprise me. After all, this ring is like the ones I showed you at Joanne’s.”

Cam’s phone buzzed, but he decided everything needed to be out in the open. “Eden, I take full responsibility for behaving like a jerk.” He hesitated for a heartbeat, trying to decide how much to say.

“What’s the matter, Cameron? Cat got your tongue?”

“I shouldn’t have acted like I did after Jessie came back to town,” he admitted. “I was running from the truth.”

“Jessie?”

“Yeah.”

“And this ring?”

Cam took the ring from her and wished with everything inside he could slip it onto Jessie’s finger. “I bought this ring for her two years ago.”

Eden’s breath hitched. “Two -years ago?”

“Yeah.” Cam wanted to say more. Except with everything still up in the air, he wasn’t sure he could completely trust her.

“Jessie still loves you.”

“What?”

“Jessie still loves you.”

I know that, but how do you?

“I overheard it at the party the other night,” Eden admitted.

“Who?” Cam fired back. “When?”

“Catherine,” Eden replied, “and her friend that works at the library.”

“Belle?”

“I guess.” She looked away and an embarrassed look crossed her face. “I was getting a drink, and they were in the hallway. I didn’t know who was talking

until they'd come back into the front room."

"What did they say?"

"One of them said, *'wait, I thought they were broken up'*. Then the other said, *'I don't think so. Have you seen how they look at each other?'*"

Catherine had been keeping her eye on them all evening, he realized. Was she also responsible for Jessie being hurt?

"I'm sorry, I wasn't honest," he opted for partial truth. "I've tried to stay away from her."

"I thought Jessie was coming to meet you, the other morning at Sally's," Eden told him. His mind rifled through when that could have been. "But then I saw her get into Ben's car."

"You were spying on us?"

"No," she quickly denied. "I'd just finished having breakfast with my father, and there you were."

Cam wanted to ask if she'd followed Ben and Jessie, but didn't want to sound too paranoid.

"And the ring and list, Eden?" Cam prodded. "How did you get those?"

"I dropped by your house, to give you back your sweater, and Gray let me in and there they were."

"On my nightstand," he cried. "Why'd you go up to my bedroom, anyway?"

"I don't know. I just ..."

"Where's the list?"

"I'll get it."

While Eden was getting the list, Cam surreptitiously checked to see who'd called. The knowledge it was Jessie had him wanting to grab his things and run. However, his mama had raised him better than that.

"Here." She shoved the paper toward him. Except when he took it, he couldn't help but feel like it had been tainted.

"Thank you. Do you need help cleaning this stuff?"

"No. I can do it." Eden's lower lip trembled, making him feel like a bigger heel.

Cam took a handful of steps toward the entrance, then looked back over his shoulder, "I really am sorry."

"Yeah, me too."

He had his finger ready to replay Jessie's message before he'd even reached his car.

"Cam, it's me. Uh, Jessie. I know I'm supposed to leave tomorrow, but my flight was canceled, and they put me on one tonight."

Tonight? No!

"I'm on the red-eye to San Francisco out of Logan International, so I'm leaving now. I'll, I guess I'll see you in August."

Cam checked the time and without thinking, jumped in his car and revved the engine. There was no way he was waiting six-weeks to see her.



Swan Harbor

July 12

6:45 p.m.

JESSIE LOADED her suitcase and slammed the trunk. She'd spent the last few hours watching the new parents play with their puppy, Wilby. Except, she couldn't wait any longer. It was too hard ... too lonely.

"I'd better go."

"It's not even 7:00 p.m.," Dylan pointed out. "You still have several hours before you need to be at the airport."

"I know," Jessie sighed. "It's just ..."

"You didn't get to talk to Cameron?"

"He had a date," she replied, not trying to hide the bitterness in her voice.

"I'm sorry, Sis." Dylan pulled her into his arms. "I know this has been hard on you."

"Stop," Jessie interrupted, not wanting her brother to shoulder the blame. "You just suggested what you thought was right. It still didn't make it any easier. I mean, how would you like watching Molly go out with some other guy?"

"Not going to happen," he growled.

"Maybe not," Jessie conceded. "It just sucks to be kept apart from the person you love. Especially if it isn't by your choice."

"I get that."

"Of course," Jessie went on with a smile. "When Catherine caught you and Molly, you just used, the heart wants, excuse. I bet that came across sounding quite sincere with you in the buff."

Dylan blushed, which tickled her. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't tease you."

"It's not very nice," he agreed. Then swiftly changed the subject. "You'll be back in six weeks?"

"That's the plan."

With one last hug, Jessie climbed into the car and backed out. She thought about driving past Cam's house. Thought about driving past the docks. Even

thought about driving through town, thinking maybe she'd be able to find where Eden had planned his surprise, that was so ... romantic.

Except when that idea caused her stomach acid to churn a little more, Jessie knew she couldn't do it. Instead, she turned in the direction of the Cove Highway loop. It would take her the long way around town, and not through it, thereby decreasing the chances she'd spot Cam and Eden in a lip lock.

What about those conditions? Does he even remember those?

"Lovely thought, Jessie," she muttered.

As soon as she reached where the Cove loop joined with Cove Highway, her heart felt heavy. Even more so, when she drove past the sign **Leaving Swan Harbor**. Jessie's vision grew blurry, and she gripped the steering wheel tightly, determined not to fall apart.

She rounded the bend, where the forked roads met, and a flash in her rear-view mirror caught her eye. There was a car from the Sheriff's department, with its lights flashing and horn blaring, closing in fast.

Jessie pulled to the side of the road, and climbed from her car, just as the cruiser slid to a stop behind her. "What happened?" she yelled, its headlights blinding her.

A car door opened and slammed, then a tall frame came into view. "Going somewhere, Princess? And without saying goodbye too." Cam tsked as he sauntered closer.

The sound of his voice caused Jessie's heart to race, and the look on his face, made her knees weak. However, after what he'd put her through – whether intentionally or not – she didn't plan on making things easy for him.

"I wasn't the one who was busy," she blurted. "Did you have a good time with your girlfriend?"



Cove Highway

July 12

7:30 p.m.

CAM'S LIPS TWITCHED. "Heard about that, did you?"

"I think the entire town has heard about it. '*It's sooo,*'" Jessie mimicked the girl's exaggerated speech, "'romantic. Cameron is just going to love it'. So did you?" she snapped. "Love it?"

He took several more steps toward her but stopped a foot away. "If that's true, then I wonder what they're saying now?"

“Why?” she hummed. “What happened?”

Cam pulled the ring out of his pocket. When Jessie’s eyes widened, and the pulse at the base of her throat sped up, a little zip of electricity raced through him. “Eden found this, and assumed it was for her.”

“Oh.” Jessie’s mouth formed a perfect circle, that called to him.

“Yes, oh,” he repeated. “She set up a proposal, using my list—”

“Wait,” Jessie interrupted, “you have a list?”

“Princess,” Cam took the last step, wrapped his hand around her waist and tugged her hips against his, “I’ve been making a list for years.”

“Oh.” Her eyes kept darting to the ring and back to his.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “I didn’t say yes.”

“I should hope not.” That princess voice of hers caused his balls to tingle, and before he could stop himself, he swooped in for a hard, but very thorough kiss.

“Proposing to you on the side of the road, wasn’t on my list.” *Was that disappointment in her eyes?* “Once all this mess is over, though, watch out.”

“Are you sending a warning?” Jessie’s hand slid up his chest to curl around his neck. “Or a promise?”

Her hot breath whispered across his lips, practically short-circuiting his brain. “Both.”

The word was barely out of his mouth before his lips were on hers. Again and again, he dove back in, each kiss growing a little hotter, lasting a little longer.

Cam dug his fingers into her back muscles, and tugged her hips into the cradle of his, showing her exactly what she did to him. She was his heart – always had been – always would be.

“It’s killing me to let you go.”

“It’s killing me to go.”

“We’ll Skype?”

“I’d like that,” Jessie whispered.

“Maybe, we can ...” Cam wiggled his brows suggestively.

“Cam!”

“Hey, you said not as long as you’re living with Dylan and Molly,” he reminded her. “You won’t be living with them.”

“No, but I do have a roommate,” she pointed out.

“But do you have your own room,” Cam nuzzled her temple, “and a door with a lock?”

Jessie ducked her head and a slight blush crawled across her cheekbones. “Maybe.”

Cam chuckled. "What would it take for me to raise that maybe to a definite?"

He kissed her again, but this time, their kiss was different. This time, it was a kiss full of promises. A kiss to show her there was no need to worry.

"Can I come visit you in a few weeks?" Until he'd voiced it, he hadn't known how much he wanted it to happen.

"Maybe," she teased. "We'll talk about it once I'm there."

"Can I drive you?" Cam offered, just as his car was parked behind Dylan's cruiser.

"I wish," Jessie sighed. "However, I think you have some explaining to do."

Cam glanced over his shoulder to see Dylan sauntering toward them. "You think?"

Jessie giggled. "Dylan looks like he has a few questions."

"Yes," Dylan retorted. "I do. Like why you had to steal my car to track down my sister?"

Cam thought of and discarded several choice words. However, he went with the easiest, "It's all perfectly innocent."

Dylan side-eyed him, then kissed Jessie on the cheek. "Drive safely, Jess. Let me know when you arrive."

"Yes, Dad," she giggled. "Can you give us a few?"

When Dylan was gone, Cam hugged Jessie a little tighter. "I love you, Princess. Come back to me."

"I love you too." She smoothed her fingers over his cheek. "Don't forget me."

"Impossible."

Cam kissed her once more, then settled her in her rental car. When she drove off, she took a little piece of him with her. Slowly, he made his way back to where Dylan was leaning against his cruiser.

"What do you want to make this go away?"

Dylan's brows flew up. "You're trying to bribe an officer of the law?"

"Oh, no, no," Cam clarified. "I'm trying to bribe my future brother-in-law."

"Get in the car." Dylan thumbed over his shoulder. "*Your* car. And give me my keys."

"They're in *your* car," Cam replied. "Thanks, Dylan. I'll talk to you later."

On the drive home, he worked over in his mind what he planned to say to Gray for allowing Eden into his room. If he hadn't, maybe that whole debacle could have been avoided.

Except you'd still be with Eden, his subconscious whispered. So, perhaps it had been one of those blessings in disguise.

Cam skipped into the house and tossed his keys on the table. He was happy, probably happier than he'd been for years. And even though Jessie wouldn't be back in Swan Harbor until the middle of August, they would communicate, and maybe

"Is that you, Cameron?" his mother called from the living room.

He was tempted to make a wise-ass response, instead yelled, "I was just going to get a snack. Can I get you something?"

"Could you come in here for a minute first?" Mary pushed.

As soon as he walked into the front room, and Gray was sitting across from his parents, several colorful words flew through his head. Cam fought to maintain a neutral expression. "What's up?"

"Your father and I have a few questions," she began.

"And we're expecting answers," Clint added.

Cam glanced at his brother, and read '*we're screwed*' on his face. "Sure, if I can," he prefaced, hoping that allowed him to hold back certain information.

"You can start by explaining these." Mary laid out the damning pictures.

"Then move on to this." Clint laid out the bank account print out.

"I'm sure Gray can explain these much better than I," Cam tossed his brother under the bus.

"Don't look at me," Gray held both hands up in surrender, "it was his girlfriend's secret."

"Jessie?" Mary murmured.

"Yeah, mom," Cam admitted. "We recently found out that Jessie left – and stayed away -to protect you ... and dad. We've been trying to find out who's doing this. We think perhaps, Catherine, but what does she have against you?"

His parents exchanged a look. One that seemed to be an entire conversation. "I can tell you why," Mary surprised him by saying. "First, though, I need you to start at the beginning."

twenty-two

Hunter Construction, Inc.

August 20

10:00 a.m.

CAM PUSHED FAR ENOUGH AWAY to prop his feet on the conference room table. Instead of the plans in front of him, he kept replaying his earlier conversation with his mother. She had something on her mind, he just couldn't figure out what.

"Son," Clint strolled in and dropped a pile of folders on the desk, "you shouldn't be daydreaming at work."

"Sorry."

"Jessie?" Clint guessed.

"No, mom," Cam corrected.

Clint sobered. "What's your mother done now?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Cam grumbled.

"I didn't notice anything different." Clint shrugged. However, there was something about his father's tone, that had Cam paying closer attention. "You'll have to give me more information."

Cam sighed. "I don't know how to explain it. Except, today she seemed different. Almost as if she has something on her mind ... or up her sleeve." He hesitated a beat. "You're saying you've not noticed anything?"

Clint's eyes twinkled. "What I have noticed is that she wants her boys to be happy. And since Jessie has been away, and Sadie went back to Augusta, you've both been quiet."

"I know that," Cam hummed. "But she, or you for that matter, aren't planning to get in the middle of things, right?"

"Why would you think that?" Clint came back with, just a little too quickly.

"You said you wouldn't interfere."

"And I'm not," Clint jumped in, "interfering, that is."

"You said you would let Gray, Jessie, and I see things through," Cam reminded his father.

“Am I stopping you?” Clint put him on the spot. “Have I asked you how things are going?”

“Well, no,” Cam hedged. “So, you’re saying what exactly?”

“Just like I promised,” Clint replied. “I’m not interfering with what *you* started. Nor am I asking you to stop.”

He was up to something. However, getting his father to spill wasn’t an easy task.

“Now, the reason why I’m in here,” Clint circled back. “I’m looking for the Fisher proposal.”

Cam pulled a folder from the pile he’d been working on and slid it across the table. “Anything else?”

“How are the plans for the new French bakery coming?”

“They’re done.” Cam pushed around several folders, until he found what he wanted. “Is that it?”

“You know ...” Clint glanced around the room. “You boys should hire an office manager.”

Cam’s brows shot up, surprised his father had even brought up the subject. “Isn’t that a dirty word, as far as you’re concerned?”

“This isn’t about me,” Clint replied. “It’s about you and Gray and what you need. With all the work the pier project will bring, you guys need someone to keep you organized.”

“It would make things easier,” Cam admitted.

“As much as I hate to admit this,” Clint added. “It would make things easier for me, as well. Since I’m only in the office for certain projects, it would be nice if I didn’t have to spend so much time looking for them.”

“You’re just used to someone picking up behind you,” Cam teased. “It’s a shame you couldn’t talk Nancy into staying.”

“That’s what I get for retiring before I was ready,” Clint sighed. “Nancy is now living the high life at Sunset Cliff Retirement Village.”

“Would you and mom ever consider moving into a retirement facility like that?”

“Cameron!” Clint brushed his hand through his salt and pepper hair. “Just because there’s snow on the roof doesn’t mean there’s not fire inside.” He winked, then sauntered from the room whistling.

Cam sat there for a few seconds, with his mouth hanging open. He couldn’t help but think, that there were just some things, children shouldn’t have to hear.



Sally's Diner

August 20

12:30 p.m.

JESSIE PARKED in an out-of-the-way spot next to Sally's and bounded up the stairs two at a time. As far as everyone knew, she wasn't due back for three days. However, while she'd been away, she'd made a decision. She was done running. *This* time, she was going to confront the problems head-on. Her happily-ever-after with Cam was waiting for her. And *this* time, she was going to fight for it.

When she reached the second floor, Jessie wrapped her fingers around her bracelet and murmured, "It's a fight I'm going to win." Then, with a fortifying breath, she marched into their work area.

"Mary?" Jessie exclaimed. "What's, uh, what's going on?"

Hayden sent her a sympathetic smile, "She knows Jess." He angrily hit his knuckle against the board. "It's too late, though."

"Too late?" Jessie looked back and forth between the two. "What do you mean, it's too late?"

"The money is gone," Hayden sighed.

"The money is gone?" Jessie echoed. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. Plus, all traces of the event-driven program has been wiped," he went on to explain.

"How? When?"

Hayden opened a file and sorted through several pages. "Before you left, I told you something was going on, remember?"

"Yes. What was it?"

"Suddenly, there were several things happening at once." Hayden handed her a list. "Money started disappearing from the bank account in Mary's name, only to appear in another. There were various amounts, and they occurred at random times. Sometimes, I could follow the money, other times, I couldn't."

"Do," do you think *whoever* opened those accounts, "Jessie waved toward the ledgers, "is on to us?"

"I don't know," Hayden sighed. "Maybe the transfers are part of the event."

"Was there a pattern?"

"Pattern?" Hayden frowned. "I didn't see one."

"Why don't you show her what you found?" Mary encouraged. "It helped me understand everything better."

Understand better? How had Mary found out, anyway?

Hayden recreated the drawing he'd made at the beginning; a large rectangle with several small squares inside. "Remember these?" He drew four sets of a

square, a circle, and a triangle, around the large rectangle.

“Those are the fake ledgers, and the bank account in Mary’s name,” Jessie replied.

“Like I said,” he went on, “the money from ‘Mary’s account’ started moving. Sometimes, it ended up in another account in the same bank.” Hayden pointed to the triangle in the first set. “Other times, it left that bank, only to end up somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else?” Jessie mused. “I’m assuming that’s what those other sets represent.”

“That’s right.” Hayden indicated the three sets outside the large rectangle. “Money traveled into these four accounts and,” he pointed to a square inside the rectangle, “into this one—”

“Wait!” Mary broke in. “That’s inside the hospital. What kind of hospital account allows transfers from just anyone?”

“I think,” Hayden hesitated, “it’s the account used when they were raising money for the hospital wing.”

“But that was ten years ago!” Mary exclaimed. “Why wasn’t that account closed? And why now? Has this been going on for all that time?”

“It fits the time frame,” Jessie replied. “For both, when the pictures were taken and when the fake ledgers were created. As to why now? I guess because I came back.”

“Did all of this happen at once?” Mary turned to Hayden. “A little at a time? Or what?”

“It started ten years ago or so,” Hayden supplied. “Money would go into the account for a few months, stop, then start again.”

“What happened ten years ago?” Mary murmured.

“Why do you ask?” asked Jessie.

“What changed ten years ago that caused someone to come after me?” Mary questioned. “It doesn’t fit.”

Jessie knew there was a history between Mary, Clint, and Catherine’s mother. Except, that hadn’t happened ten years ago, more like twenty-five.

“It was when I moved to Boston,” Jessie whispered. “If Catherine is behind it, maybe she thought it would help her get Dylan.”

Mary shook her head. “It still doesn’t make any sense, but go on. What happened to the money once it was moved?”

Hayden drew a diamond on the edge of the board. “Money from those five accounts ended up here.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to only worry about one or two extra accounts?” Jessie frowned. “Or even send it directly from the account in Mary’s

name to the offsite one?”

“Easier yes,” Mary observed. “But not as simple to hide.”

“And even with five,” Hayden replied, “they saw quite a bit of action.”

“Saw?” Jessie repeated. “That’s what you meant by the money being gone, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he winced. “If the money was local, I would have been able to track it.”

“But because it’s offsite,” Jessie snapped, “it’s ‘gone.’”

“Yeah.”

“Gone, where?” Mary asked. “Maybe ...”

“It’s in the Cayman Islands,” Hayden scoffed. “If you know someone who could break into those banks, well ...”

Jessie’s stomach plummeted, and for a second, she thought she might throw up. “We were so close.”

“I said the money is gone.” Hayden’s smile turned wicked. “I didn’t say all hope was lost.”

“No?” Jessie’s heart ticked up several notches. “Tell me.”

“These accounts,” Hayden indicated the four ‘accounts’ the money had flowed in and out of, “are in Catherine’s name.”

“Really?” Jessie’s breath caught. “Are they really in Catherine’s name?”

“Yeah.” Hayden flipped open a folder. “In 1987, Brenda Smith opened the oldest account at Swan Harbor Trust. And then eight years ago, Sharon Gold opened one at The People’s Credit Union.”

“Catherine’s mother,” Mary murmured.

“The other accounts were opened two and three years ago, respectively,” Hayden continued. “One at SHB by Ellen Weiss and the other at First Bank by Jan Atkins.”

“Nothing like hiding in plain sight.” Jessie muttered.

“You were the one who said the answer is often the easiest.” Hayden grabbed two more files. “Also, I found Photoshop on Catherine’s computer.”

“Any chance there were copies of the photos on her computer?”

“No.”

“But couldn’t she have photoshop on another computer?” Jessie pushed. “One at home that you couldn’t get into.”

“She could,” he conceded.

Jessie’s thoughts were pinging all over the place. To fight and have a chance to win, she needed proof. She also needed to understand the sequences.

“So, let me see if I have this straight.” Jessie used the board’s visuals. “The money was transferred from Mary’s account into four accounts, each in different

banks, that were Catherine's, and to the 'wing' account in the hospital?"

"Yes."

"And then to the account in the Cayman Islands, right?"

"Yes."

"So how come we can't show all of this to the police?"

"The easy reason," Hayden pointed out, "is because the accounts in Catherine's name are empty, and the event-driven program has been removed. There's no evidence."

"Are there other reasons?" Jessie was thinking if Hayden could locate the information, surely someone with more experience could do it.

"Because if you turned all this in, you'd have to tell where it came from," Mary pointed out. "Which would—"

"Get all of us in a lot of trouble," Jessie sighed. Which meant, it all circled back to Dylan, and why she hadn't wanted him involved.

"Yes," Mary glanced at Hayden, then back to Jessie, "some have more to lose than others."

Jessie refused to let the little kernel of hope die. Refused to think that there wasn't a way for her to have the happy ending she desired. Sadie always said to '*take back the power.*' Was there a way to do that when it came to Catherine?

A chill raced through her. "I need to take back the power." With the words out in the open, a sense of peace washed over her. In order to 'save' Dylan, Hayden, and the others, she had to deal. Before she could second guess her decision, Jessie gathered the folders and ran down the stairs.

"Jessie, wait!" Mary followed her down, "There are some things you need to know before you confront Catherine."



Hunter Construction, Inc.

August 20

1:30 p.m.

CAM LEFT the stack of folders on his desk and went looking for Gray. With Jessie moving back home, he was anxious to start the search for an office manager. Not only would it make his life easier at work. It would also decrease the hours he needed to spend in the office – which gave him time for other, more enjoyable activities.

The night he'd explained everything to his parents, they had given the reason why Catherine hated his family – and it involved her mother, Sharon

Michaels-Gold.

She had married Richard Gold, a slightly older man, when she wasn't much over eighteen. They'd moved to Boston and quickly had Catherine. However, Sharon hadn't lasted in that environment and returned to Swan Harbor.

In 1987, Clint had hired Sharon as his office manager. She ran the office, leaving his father free to pursue other things. Everything worked well for over three years, and then, she made the mistake of thinking there was more between them.

Sharon began leaving Clint notes, calling his house late at night, and dressing provocatively. That had escalated into erasing phone messages, stuffing hotel receipts in his pockets, and making comments suggesting Mary was seeing other men.

Then Mary found 'nude' photos in Clint's briefcase. After they'd confronted Sharon, she'd had a breakdown and ended up hospitalized. Catherine had been sent to live with her father.

When Catherine had been eighteen, she'd moved back to Swan Harbor to attend the University. That was when she'd reconnected with her mother. Because of all the time apart, the assumption was, she'd put the blame on Mary and Clint.

Cam couldn't say he agreed. However, he couldn't say, he didn't either. What he did know, was it was time for it to stop.

He found his brother staring out the window, seeing what, only he knew. "Gray?"

"What?" Gray's voice was flat and when he turned around, he looked as if his focus was on something other than work.

"Are you okay?" Cam shut the door and slid into a chair. "You look tired."

"I am," Gray sighed. "I was just remembering something."

"What?"

"After Jessie left, and you fell apart," Gray began. "I used to wonder how you could have allowed her to have so much control over your happiness."

"I'm sorry, Gray. I told you Sadie could—"

"Don't say it," Gray snapped.

The vehemence in his brother's voice had Cam taking a step back. "Okay, then tell me what Sadie did."

"Besides, go back to Augusta?" Gray let go of a dry laugh. "Isn't that enough?"

Sadie had spent the month of June in Swan Harbor – which had worked well with their investigation. However, as soon as Jessie had left, she'd gone back to Augusta. For the past six weeks, Gray had driven to her apartment every

weekend, and returned home every Monday morning.

"It's Friday," Cam noted. "Aren't you usually on the road by this time?"

"Usually, yes."

"But not this week?"

"No," Gray retorted. "Sadie has to go away with her boss, to do an audit."

"Away?" Cam's brows arched. "Overnight?"

"Apparently."

"When are you going to ask her to move home?"

"For what?" Gray barked. "She works for the top accounting firm in Augusta, lives in a fancy apartment, wears nice clothes and drives an expensive sports car. What is there in Swan Harbor?"

"You." Gray's blue eyes clashed with his green. "Do you love her?"

"How can I love her?" Gray sighed. "We dated three weeks before she left, and six weeks long-distance."

"The heart wants what the heart wants," Cam murmured.

"I'll think about it," Gray agreed. "Now, why are you here?"

Cam thought about shooting off at the mouth, but decided his brother was dealing with some powerful emotions. "We need to advertise for an office manager."

"Did dad—?"

"Yes," Cam interrupted. "Let's make a list."



Swan Harbor General

August 20

2:30 p.m.

ARMED with the knowledge of why Catherine hated the Hunters, Jessie rushed into the hospital. She was halfway across the lobby when Mary caught up with her.

"You don't have to do this alone. Your family is right there with you."

Jessie tried to gather her thoughts. There were things she needed to say – and do – even if they weren't easy.

"While Catherine's initial hate may have been toward you and Clint," she began. "I'm the one to blame for the past two years. If I had trusted in Cam ... trusted in what we had – we wouldn't be in this situation."

"Okay, Sweet Girl," Mary whispered. "I'll wait right here."

"Thank you."

When she walked into the administrative offices, Catherine's secretary was on the phone. Jessie breezed by, locked the door behind her, and turned to face her 'dragon.'

"Jessie?" Catherine glanced up from what she was doing. "I didn't know you were back."

"Stop with the Miss Innocent act," Jessie snapped. "I know."

"Just what do you think you know?" Catherine asked curiously.

"I know what's you've done to keep me away from Swan Harbor," Jessie tossed out. "What you've done to ensure I'd not get my happy ending."

"Jessie," Catherine began. "I—"

"Oh, stop it!" Jessie cut her off. "You know damn well what I'm talking about. The pictures, the fraud, the threats."

"Threats?" Catherine echoed.

"Yes," Jessie hissed. "Even after everything you've done to make my life miserable, I still have a hard time believing you could be so selfish."

"Selfish?" Catherine questioned. "How was I selfish? You wanted to train, and I gave you the opportunity. You should thank me."

Jessie mentally took a step back, as there was something about Catherine's tone that sounded reasonable. Even to the point where *she* was feeling as if she should have been grateful.

"I worked hard," Jessie replied, "and earned everything I was given. You, on the other hand, went way too far, just because you wanted Dylan. I find that rather pathetic."

Catherine let loose of a dry laugh. "Whatever. It's over, and you look no worse for wear. I think we're done."

She turned back to her computer, leaving Jessie slightly unsettled. What was she missing? How could she get Catherine to stop denying her actions?

Jessie dropped the pile of folders on Catherine's desk, and the light bounced off her new bracelet.

"I loved you yesterday. I love you today, and I'll love you tomorrow. I'm going to marry you, Jessica Marie Prince. We will get our happy ending."

Take back the power.

"What is it then?" Catherine sighed, as if she was bored.

Jessie's fingers itched with a need to hit something – or someone. Instead, she spread the copies of the articles, the texts, letter, and photos on the desk.

"Now, try to deny you weren't responsible for keeping Cam and me apart."

Catherine took her time looking over the pages, one by one, then stacking them in a neat pile. Every time she moved onto the next one, Jessie expected her to gloat.

“Where did you say you got these?”

“You know where!” Jessie cried. “You’re looking at why I stayed away for two years.”

“And you think I sent these?” Catherine stuck the pages in a folder and set them aside. “Is this it?”

While the question might have been odd, it fit Catherine’s need to deny, until she couldn’t deny any longer.

“I know you sent them. There’s more, though.”

“By all means.” Catherine waved her hand over the pile of folders. “It’s obvious you’re not leaving until you’ve laid it all out. So, give it to me.”

Jessie systematically retold the story, from the articles to the pictures, using the folders she’d brought with her as visuals.

“So, this was why you were looking for Mary’s pictures,” Catherine murmured. “Did you find them?”

“Of course.” Jessie hesitated a beat before tossing out, “You made copies, and then photo-shopped them.”

“I didn’t,” Catherine denied.

“Then you must have found someone gullible enough to help.” Jessie frowned, “Was it Belle ... or Eden ... or some other flunky daddy dearest found for you?”

Catherine barked out a laugh., “If I’d done this, I wouldn’t need help.”

Jessie filed that information away for later and dropped the pictures where she was with Tyler.

“Looks like you weren’t too lonely.” Catherine tapped Tyler’s picture. “He’s quite the catch.”

“He’s a friend,” Jessie responded defensively. Then pivoted to take back the power. “I told you, I know it’s you.”

“Well, you need to do better than you’ve done.” Catherine interlocked her fingers and rested them on the desk. “So far, you’ve got nothing.”

“This isn’t nothing.” Jessie laid the printouts for the five accounts on the desk, each account showing the two-hundred thousand dollars going in and out. “Looks like a nice bit of change. “

“What the hell?” Catherine tensed, and immediately started flipping through the checking account printouts. “I don’t see any money.”

“True,” Jessie nodded. “You know that, though, don’t you? It’s off in the Cayman Islands just waiting for you.”

“Oh?” Catherine quipped. “I guess it’s vacation time.”

“Why are you pretending ignorance?” Jessie questioned. “That’s not like you to give someone else the credit for your misdeeds. Especially if you’ve had

some success toward your ultimate goal.

“And what would my ultimate goal be?” Catherine tossed out.

“To make the Hunters pay for the way they treated your mom,” Jessie replied. “To make me miserable because you think it’s my fault you lost Dylan.” She shrugged. “Take your pick.”

“What is it, you want exactly?” Catherine’s voice had grown soft and kind of scary. “What will make you go away?”

“Just admit your part in this,” Jessie searched for a word, but finally settled on, “misery.”

“That’s all you want?” Catherine hummed. “For me to admit my part in making sure you were miserable?”

“Yes,” Jessie sighed, “Why? Why would you do something like this to someone?”

What could only be described as a transformation crossed Catherine’s face. It morphed from one of confusion, to one of vindictiveness and reminded Jessie of that afternoon Dylan had been caught with Molly.

“Oh, come on,” Catherine snapped. “Why wouldn’t I? Look at you, perfect little Jessie ... with her handsome brother. She loses her mommy, daddy and a duplicate brother, yet she still comes out on top.”

“Don’t say that!” Jessie screamed. “I was fourteen!”

“Well, la ti da,” Catherine laughed. “I was five when your precious Mary and Clint attacked my mother. What do you have to say about that?”

“They didn’t attack her,” Jessie countered. “They confronted her. Her mind wasn’t right, and she got sick. That’s not my fault.”

“Oh, right,” Catherine hissed. “Nothing is Little Jessie the Princess’ fault. You were supposed to fail in Boston. But no, you did fine. Then, your successes continued in college. But me? Did I get what I wanted?”

“The heart wants what the heart wants,” Jessie murmured.

“And did yours get what it wants?” asked Catherine. “From where I’m sitting, it appears you’re still waiting to be rescued.”

“Excuse me?” Jessie cried. “Where did that come from?”

“The whole town knows you’ve been mooning after Cameron for years,” Catherine taunted. “Except I don’t see a ring on your finger. If you really wanted to be together,” she paused a beat, “nothing would get between you. Not even these.”

When the pictures of Tyler landed on top of the folders, Jessie’s own words played again, *“I’m the one to blame for the past two years. If I had trusted in Cam ... trusted in what we had, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”*

“You’re right,” Jessie cried. “I should have fought harder. But you know

what? That's on me! That's my sin. Why did you find it necessary to go after Cam's family? Was hurting someone that important to you?"

"Yes!" Catherine shouted. "I wanted you and every bleeping member of the Hunter family to be miserable."

"How could you have been so vindictive?"

"You made it easy," Catherine snapped. "I just had to follow you to Boston, then click, click, and was back in Swan Harbor before I was missed. It's like I said, in a small town, if you listen, you learn things."

Jessie wanted to kick herself for letting her guard down, because sadly, what Catherine said rang true. She hadn't paid attention to her surroundings. Nor had she fought for what she wanted. But no more.

"You're a selfish, pathetic woman. As long as you hate yourself, you'll always be alone. The woman you are now is unlovable."

"Oh, I have plenty who love me."

"That's sex. You wouldn't know love if it hit you over the head." Jessie took the few steps to reach the door, "Leave my family alone, or we'll go to the police. That million dollars would be a bear to explain."

She rushed from Catherine's office, leaving a huge weight behind. Mary was waiting exactly as she'd promised.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm," Jessie paused, "I'm free – and a little sad, mad, and every emotion in between."

"Why would you say that?" However, the look in Mary's dark eyes said, she understood – perhaps more than Jessie did herself.

"Catherine admitted her part, but she also said that I helped her."

"Because you didn't tell Cameron everything?" Mary guessed.

"Yeah," Jessie sighed. "Stupid, huh?"

"Oh, Sweet Girl," Mary put a comforting arm around her shoulder as they walked toward the car, "I was young and in love once."

"Except you talked to Clint."

"Not at first," Mary admitted. "Then your mother had a few choice words for me and well ..."

"Really?" Jessie laughed, feeling lighter with every step she took. "I never knew that."

"There are many stories you've not heard," Mary grinned. "Now that you've slain the dragon, we have all the time in the world."

twenty-three

Hunter Construction, Inc.

August 20

6:40 p.m.

CAM UPLOADED the ad for office manager, then made note of a few things he wanted to deal with the following week. He shut down his computer and fought not to feel sorry for himself.

Sadie had called with changed plans, and Gray had raced out to be with her. Then, his father had left earlier than expected. Which left him alone – with no reason to rush anywhere, especially home.

If only

His cell buzzed, and when the screen flashed his princess' face, Cam's heart ticked up a few beats.

"Is everything okay?"

"Fine, why?"

"You called on my cell," he murmured.

"I did." Jessie paused, then came back with, "That's okay, though, right?"

"You know it is. But what's going on, Jessie?"

"I have a surprise for you."

This time it wasn't her princess voice that turned him on. It was the husky tenor that had him feeling like he was being promised the world.

"Oh?" Cam hummed. "Does this mean we can finally—?"

"Cam!" she cut him off with a giggle. "Stop."

"Spoilsport."

"Well, if you don't want your surprise," she teased.

"I want it. I want it," Cam assured her. "I love surprises."

"You do?"

"I do," he whispered. "I especially love the kind that involve just you and me."

"Then I think you'll like this one," Jessie purred.

His blood rushed south. "Is clothing optional?"

“Maybe.”

“Princess,” he pleaded. “It’s not nice getting a man all worked up when his girl is over eight thousand miles away. Especially if we can’t—”

“Who said I’m eight thousand miles away?” she interrupted.

Cam’s heart raced. Could she mean ...?

“Jessie?”

“I’ll send you a picture. You have twenty minutes.”

By the time the text arrived, his hands were shaking so much he almost dropped his phone. Minutes later, he was on his way to his destination.

The parking lot closest to Lover’s Cave was empty, much like it had been the last time he’d taken the same journey. This time, he had zero doubts. Jessie’s note was the exact one he’d sent to her all those years ago. They’d gotten it wrong then. Now, though, their happy ending was waiting.

Princess,

The legend guides a heart so true,

To find its mate before the year is through.

At 7:00 tonight, my heart will wait for you,

Come to me, if yours waits too.

There were so many emotions running through Cam’s system, he was hard-pressed to name just one. He tossed his phone onto the console and hurried toward the big boulders guarding the entrance.

The glow from several candles led his way into the small cavern. “Jessie?” he whispered.

When she stepped out of the shadows, his heart stopped. Why though? Why was this time any different?

Was it the way the candlelight highlighted the gold strands in her hair? Was it the way the dress outlined her figure? Or was it because the moment was so huge?

“You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

Her response had been just as soft as his. Was she nervous? Or did the moment feel as big to her, as it did to him?

Cam’s heart raced, and he wanted to run to her. Except, he held back – temporarily, anyway.

“You were right about not being eight-thousand miles away.”

“One should never assume,” she teased.

“It seems so. You’re home early.”

“That’s a very astute observation, Mr. Hunter.”

There was a relaxed tone in her voice that had been missing for a long time.

Something had happened.

“Why didn’t you let me know?”

“I told you,” she reminded him. “I have a surprise for you.”

“You did say that.” Cam grinned. “Although, you know, when I arrived for my last surprise, she was naked.”

Jessie’s turquoise eyes flashed. “Should I call her?”

“Why?” Cam gave her a cheeky smile, knowing it showed off his dimples. “When it’s a princess I want.” He took a couple of steps closer to where she was standing, never once looking away. “I missed you.”

“You’re sure you missed me?” she retorted. “And not ... the naked one?”

“Come over here,” Cam crooked a finger, “and I’ll show you just how much.”

Jessie hesitated as several expressions crossed her face. Then, she smiled, and the next heartbeat was in his arms where she belonged.

He locked their mouths together, and within seconds, the kiss had zipped from tepid to steamy. What she did to him, he hadn’t ever been able to describe. She undid him, then put him back together with just a look.

His balls tingled, his dick hardened, and his need skyrocketed. It had taken no time for their passion to spin out of control, and there was only one thing on his mind. Spiriting Jessie away and getting reacquainted – in all the ways that counted.

“When?” Cam managed before her lips once again latched onto his.

“Ten,” was what he thought he heard. However, with her mouth being offered so freely, talking wasn’t high on his list of priorities.

Jessie nipped his earlobe, and his knees almost buckled. Hadn’t he seen a pile of blankets laid out somewhere?

“You’re killing me.” Cam skimmed his hands down her side, and a shiver raced through her. “Why don’t we—?”

Jessie’s hand landed in the middle of his chest. “We need to talk.”

“Don’t you think talking is highly overrated?” He nuzzled her temple, hoping to tempt her to see things his way.

“Cam,” she stepped out of his arms, “I really want to say something.”

He gave her a long-suffering sigh. “Fine, Princess. Have at it.”

Her eyes dove into his for a second. Then she offered. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” Cam repeated, feeling like he’d missed something. “What are you sorry for?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t trust in you enough two years ago. That I didn’t come to you when the first message arrived.”

“You’re sorry?” he replied. “The mess we made isn’t only your fault. A

relationship runs two ways.”

“I get that.” She tilted her head slightly and was back to studying him. “Do you think we’ve learned from our mistakes?”

Cam nodded. “Of course, we’ve learned. Life is messy, though.”

“And we aren’t perfect,” Jessie added. “So, we’ll make mistakes.”

“Probably.”

“I promise not to keep things from you,” she murmured. “I don’t think I could—”

He kissed her, swallowing the rest of what she was going to say. “We’ve learned the power of communication, Princess. That will carry us forward.”

“Do you think so?”

“I know so.”

Her ring was on his nightstand, instead of in his pocket. If only he’d known she was on her way home.

“Jessie, I ...”



JESSIE PLACED a finger on his lips. “I’m not done, yet.”

“No?”

“No. Walk with me.” She led him to the back of the cave, where she had laid out a few items that meant something to them ... as a couple. “When I returned in June, I’m not sure what I expected. However, I know it wasn’t a walk through our past.”

“The past makes us who we are,” Cam murmured.

“I’m only realizing just how true that is,” Jessie replied. “It can also show us where we went wrong ... or where *I* went wrong.”

“We’ve both made mistakes in the past.” Cam brushed his fingers across her bracelet. “It didn’t stop me from falling in love with you. I loved you then, I love you now, and I’ll love you tomorrow.”

“The past, the present—”

“—And the future.”

“Before we go there,” Jessie grinned. “I’m not quite ready to leave the past behind.”

“We had some good times.”

“We had a lot of good times.” She pointed to a dried flower and a ticket stub that lay next to their skates. “Those are from our first date.”

“Mission Impossible III?” Cam smiled, causing his dimples to pop. “I’m curious, though. Why did you consider that our first date?”

“That night, there were a few differences,” Jessie explained. “You gave me a flower and held my hand. I spent the entire evening anticipating our first kiss.”

“I chickened out.” A sheepish smile crossed his face. “I didn’t want you to feel rushed.”

“It’s a good thing I took the initiative,” she quipped, “or I might still be waiting.”

“Not hardly.” He tugged her close for a hard, hot kiss.

“You think not?” Jessie looked pointedly at the blue-plaid shirt she’d appropriated, after the night they’d first made love. “There was another step I had to encourage, as well”

“Yeah, and it was so bad we never did it again,” he mumbled.

She bit her tongue to keep from saying, ‘*we talked about this.*’ Then she got a look at his expression. That it was something he still fretted over, touched her deep inside. It was an outward sign, that he truly cared.

“Cam.” Jessie cupped his face. “It’s why there are do-overs. You get to fix what you didn’t like.”

“There’s quite a bit to fix,” he groaned.

“It wasn’t perfect,” she conceded. “But that didn’t change how I felt about that night.”

Cam’s green eyes darkened. He closed her hands in his. “It doesn’t?”

“No. I gave a piece of myself to you that night. The feelings were very, very powerful.”

“I felt the same way,” he admitted. Then, a wry smile crossed his face. “Well, when I wasn’t beating myself up for my behavior.”

“I think we can put that behind us,” she assured him. “There have been many things you’ve shown me through the years, that have curled my toes and made my insides scream for mercy.”

His grin started small, then blossomed. “You enjoyed those things?”

“I look forward to when I can remind you of just how much.”

“Can we start,” he leaned toward her, “now?”

“We’ll get there.” Jessie handed Cam her diary. “It all started on my fourteenth birthday.”

“My heart chose you that day.” His smile turned devilish. “It was the day I realized you’d developed boobs.”

“You’re such a romantic.”

“What can I say?” Cam shrugged. “I’m a guy.”

“I noticed something a little different that day. See?”

Cam read her loopy script,

“*Dear Diary,*”

"Today I turned 14."

"Skip to there." Jessie pointed to the bottom of the page.

"Cam looked at me differently today. He made me feel like a female. My heart raced, my mouth dried, and I wanted to ask him what he was thinking. Except then Mary came into the room and the moment passed. I've decided that someday, he's the man I'm going to marry. Jessica Prince Hunter has a nice ring to it."

He looked up and their eyes locked. "I couldn't agree more."

The huskiness in his voice caused her insides to tingle. It sent a chill racing across her skin. Her nipples tightened, and her breath caught in her throat.

She took her diary, tossed it aside, then grabbed hold of his hands. They acted as an anchor and calmed her insides. "I love you, Cameron Clint Hunter."

"And I love you."

"Good." Jessie swallowed the lump lodged in her throat. "We've overcome everything life has thrown at us. And – for the most part – we've done it together."

"We always will," he murmured.

The idea that maybe she should have explained what had happened with Catherine floated by. Except she didn't want to bring up anything that might mess with the moment. This time was theirs, only theirs.

"Cam ..."

"Princess," he teased.

"Will you marry me?"

"Aren't I supposed to ask you that question?"

"I wanted you to know," Jessie confessed, "that I was choosing you." She took the ring box from behind a rock. "Your mom gave this to me."

"Seems I need to have a talk with my mom." He removed the ring from the box and immediately dropped down on one knee. Jessie's heart rate took off and her legs shook. *Her dreams were coming true.* "Will you marry me?"

"Oh, Cam." From his too-long blond hair, to his dimples that were so large she could fit several fingers in, he was adorable. That he was the man of her dreams and wanted to marry her, still had the power to surprise her. "I love you."

"So, will you ... marry me?"

"In a heartbeat."

Cam slid the diamond solitaire onto her finger. He whispered a kiss across it, then in one smooth motion, stood, tugged her against his chest, and covered her mouth.

Jessie's thoughts scattered, leaving her only to feel. It had been seven years since they'd made love and being in his arms was causing her insides to stand up

and dance with glee.

“Oh, Jessie,” Cam sighed. “Do you know what you do to me?” He latched onto a sensitive spot on her neck. Her senses went haywire, and she had to grab his sides to keep them steady.

“Probably, the same thing you do to me.” Jessie pulled his shirt from his pants and spread her hands across the smooth skin of his back.

Want.

Need.

Mine.

Simple words, that when used in conjunction with her feelings for Cam, became very, very complex. She wanted everything with him.

“More.”

He palmed her butt and pressed her softness against the hard ridge behind his zipper. “More?”

“Yes, please.”



CAM SWUNG JESSIE into his arms and, in three long steps, stopped next to the pallet of blankets she'd prepared. “Are you sure about this?” He lowered her legs but kept her tight against his torso. “Are you sure you wouldn't rather make love on a bed?”

“What's the problem?” she teased, and her hot breath sent a shiver up his spine. “Are you getting too old for a pallet?”

“I'll show you old,” he murmured against her mouth.

There was an impatience in their kiss. Almost as if they couldn't get close enough, fast enough. A part of Cam wanted to slow down and enjoy their coming together. However, his body was saying, *‘there's no way in hell you're going any slower.’* His balls had been on the verge of blue a time or two or three in the last two months and were already screaming.

He tugged her dress over her head and tossed it aside. She pushed his shirt up, and everywhere she touched, little sparks zipped across his skin.

Jessie reached for the button on his pants and just the thought of her touch had him sucking in his breath. “Let me.”

“Spoilsport.” She threw his word back at him.

“Oh, Princess, you have it all wrong,” Cam warned. “If you touched me, my dick would take control – thereby spoiling it for both of us. We wouldn't want that to happen – now, would we?”

“We definitely wouldn't want that.” Jessie slid her hand up the back of his

leg, sidetracking him long enough he forgot to remove his shoes first. “Do you need some help?” she laughed.

He glanced down into her twinkling eyes. “Are you worried I might fall on my ass?”

Jessie’s hot gaze landed on his crotch, and the way she was staring, heated his body even more.

“I just don’t want anything ... broken,” she whispered.

Cam groaned, but somehow managed to sit down without falling. He sent her a cheeky smile. “There, nothing’s broken.”

“That’s good.” Jessie began a foray, dropping a kiss here, a kiss there. “Now, where was I?”

She slid her small hand over his chest muscles and lightly trailed her fingers down toward his belly button. His body jumped, and his boxer briefs tightened even more.

“Uh, Princess,” he covered her hand with his, “you’re making this awfully hard.”

“That’s the point, Cam,” she giggled. “I thought you knew that.”

He glanced over his shoulder as she lay back, and the sight of her in her satin bra and barely-there panties took his breath away. The image was almost enough to clear any other thoughts from his head.

Except, he still couldn’t completely shed the memory of their first time. He wanted to give Jessie the night he’d been dreaming of forever. With the statement, ‘*it’s not a race ... it’s an excursion*’, playing over in his brain, Cam verified he’d brought protection and rolled toward her.

“Now, where was I?”

“Here?” Jessie walked her fingers down his stomach, then brushed them across that place he both wanted – but didn’t want – yet. He thrust against her hand, and it felt so good, he knew if she continued touching much longer, he wouldn’t last.

Cam captured one arm and leisurely kissed the inside of her wrist, before placing it up next to her head. “It’s an excursion, Princess,”

“What?”

“Making love.” He pressed his mouth to hers, and settled in for a nice slow taste. She hummed with pleasure, giving him the opportunity to sweep his tongue inside and turn up the heat. “Jessie.”

“Sometimes, you encounter obstacles.” Cam dropped kisses along her shoulder until he reached her bra strap. “Then you have to remove them.” With nimble fingers, he slid the straps off and popped the front clasp. “No matter how difficult ... or how simple.”

“You’re quite good at that,” Jessie sighed. “Have you been practicing?”

“I *am* an artist,” Cam reminded her gently.

“So noted.”

“Now, where was I?” He kissed her again, pouring everything he could into their kisses. With only one goal in mind, it wasn’t difficult to stay focused and give all of his energy to one task. That of having Jessie fall apart in his arms. First, it was all about her – and then, he would move on.

The friction generated wherever they touched, stoked that kernel in his gut, and turned it into a full-fledged flame.

“Watch it, Princess.” Cam brushed feather-light fingers across her breasts, over her flat stomach, then pushed her panties out of the way. She was so soft, he had a momentary worry, his hands were too rough. But then, she shivered delicately, and goosebumps broke out across her skin. That told him, what he was doing, was exactly what needed to be done.

“When on an excursion,” He sucked one tight peak into his mouth, “you can travel in a horizontal line.” Cam whispered kisses across her chest to latch onto the other peak. “Then other times, a vertical path is needed.”

He lazily made his way from her sternum to her navel, tasting, testing, tempting. “Sometimes, you might need to take a round-a-bout road.” A kiss was dropped on one hip bone. Another on her stomach. He nipped her breast. Then worshipped her lips.

“No rules?” Jessie muttered when he lifted his head slightly.

The sound floated across Cam’s skin, and every nerve-ending took note. “No rules,” he confirmed, continuing his assault on her senses. “There’s a time for soft and slow ... and a time for hard and fast.”

With each description, he showed her exactly what he meant. Her moans and sighs were music to his ears as he listened and memorized each one.

Drugging kisses.

Feathering touches.

He brought her up, then backed away, only to repeat, until her movements grew frenetic, and she came apart in his arms. Cam wanted to savor the moment, but his control was teetering on the edge, waiting.

Protection was donned, and as he rolled toward her, words from long ago reminded him to take his time.

It’s not just inserting Tab A into Slot B, but all about hitting the right spot.

There had been more, except the feel of her wrapped around him took away his ability to think. He could only feel as their bodies meshed and melded. This time was different, he realized staring deeply into her eyes. They were in the same place, each ready for what came next. And, as it should be, their excursion

was ending - together.

"Cam." Jessie's body tightened around him, and with very little choice, he met her at the top. Then, they crashed over the edge, as one.



JESSIE FLOATED, her skin so sensitive, it felt as if a million small electric currents were firing at once.

"That was ..." Cam's breath caught and knowing he was worried, the imp inside had her stretching out her response, "well put together."

"That's it?" he grumbled. "That it was well put together."

"What should I have said?" She hesitated a beat. "Should I have said it was amazing? Or would you have preferred terrific?"

"That would be a start." Cam propped his head up, so he was looking down at her. "Well put together ... what does that even mean?"

"It means," Jessie tugged his head down and kissed his cheek, "from your kisses," she dropped one on his lips, "to your touches," her fingers danced down his side, "to the way we connected, was ... perfect."

"Really?" The joy in that one word would have made her heart melt if she hadn't already been a puddle of goo.

"From the way I reacted," she whispered, "did you have any doubt?" In the soft light of their hideaway, she read the answer in his eyes. Pleasing her had been a priority. "Oh, Cam," Jessie wrapped her arms around him. "Maybe we can do it again, and I'll show you just how much ..."

A noise just beyond the mouth of the cave caused Jessie to panic. Before she could move, Cam grabbed a blanket and tossed it over them. It had barely fluttered down, when the beam of a flashlight hit them directly in the eyes.

twenty-four

Lover's Cave

August 20

9:30 p.m.

"MOVE THE DAMN LIGHT," Cam snapped. "You're blinding us."

It took several seconds for her eyes to adjust, which gave the little spark of fear inside time to grow. Who was behind the flashlight? Was it Catherine, come to exact her revenge? Was it Eden, come to try to get Cam back? Was it ...?

Jessie glanced over Cam's shoulder, relieved, and not completely surprised to see their visitor was Dylan. The look on his face reminded her of the times he'd caught them in embarrassing situations in the past. Except, this time, there was something different.

"Sorry," he replied sheepishly when their eyes met.

"Sorry? That's all you have to say?"

"I, uh, I hope I didn't come at a bad time."

Jessie buried her head in Cam's chest and hoped Dylan would go away. "Think he'll leave if we ignore him?"

"I have my instructions," Dylan grumbled. "Otherwise, there's no way in hell, I would have come down here."

"Instructions?" Jessie peered back around Cam's shoulder. "Who sent you?"

"Molly."

"Molly?" Jessie frowned. "How does Molly know where we are? I haven't seen her since I've been back."

"I'd bet it was the Swan Harbor gossip line, Princess," Cam murmured. "Have you forgotten how busy it can be?"

"It's nice to know some things never change," she giggled. "Think they're up to date?"

"If they're not, I'd be happy to shout it from the rooftops," Cam offered.

"Just get dressed first, Hunter," Dylan retorted. "I'd hate to have to arrest you for indecent exposure."

“Dylan, why are you here?” Jessie grumbled.

“You’re late.”

“Late? What are we late for?”

“The family is waiting to congratulate you,” he finally revealed. “And I want to hear what went on at the hospital.”

“Hospital?” Cam murmured. “When were you at the hospital?”

“According to the gossip line, earlier today,” Dylan responded before she could. “Jessie was with Mary.”

“You were with my mother?” Cam frowned. “Is that when she gave you the ring?”

“Yes and no.” Jessie glanced from Cam to Dylan, then back. “I’ll explain everything – later. I promise.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, Sis.” Dylan suddenly chuckled. “You know, there’s one good thing that came out of this.”

“Agreed,” Jessie grinned. “We’re engaged – finally.”

“Well, that too. But I was referring to the fact that now, when you bug me about Catherine catching me—”

“Go away, Dylan. We’ll see you in a little bit.”

“Just remember,” Dylan reminded them, “a bit isn’t that long.”

“Jessie, what ...?” Cam began, as soon as they were alone.

“I know you have questions,” Jessie cut him off. “I was going to tell you, but ...”

“There were more important things to talk about?”

“Partly, I think.”

“Just not completely?”

“Not completely, no.” She soothed her hand down his lean cheek, and the diamond on her finger caught her eye. “I didn’t want to share. For a few hours, anyway, I just wanted it to be about us. Does that make sense?”

“I get that, Princess.” Cam slid his hand up her side and palmed her breast. “I for one am very grateful.” His thumb glided over her nipple, and a little charge rushed along her skin. “In fact, I’ve got an idea.”

“You do?” Except it was a rhetorical question, as his body was letting her know what he wanted. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, it goes a little like this.” Cam pushed her over onto her back, his artist’s fingers never still. They feathered, stroked and glided across her torso, each move a little bolder than the one before. “You don’t really think Dylan would come back after us, do you?” he whispered against her mouth.

Jessie couldn’t pull her thoughts together. Everywhere he touched, her skin came alive, and all she wanted to do was focus on that feeling.

“I, I, I’m not sure.”

Cam sucked one of her earlobes into his mouth. “Well, then, we’d better get busy. I need a few more memories to tide me over.”

“Show me.”

“My pleasure.”

His lips met hers, and for that moment in time, everything else ceased to matter.



Cam’s Home

August 20

10:30 p.m.

CAM STEPPED out onto the patio, and the sound of the waves immediately lowered his frustration level. He’d wanted to hear about Jessie’s conversation with Catherine. However, now that he had, there was a war going on inside of him. One side was proud of her for being strong, the other half though, ... that side was floundering.

“Here, Son.” Clint handed him a high-ball glass. “I thought you could use this.”

“How’d you know?”

“I’ve been in your shoes.”

“With mom?”

“Who else?” Clint chuckled. “Take the situation with Catherine’s mother, for instance.”

“Mom said you confronted her together,” Cam replied.

“Except, I don’t quite remember it that way,” Clint laughed. “It was my morning to take Gray to school and, in my rush, I forgot my briefcase.”

“And you asked mom to bring it to you,” Cam surmised.

“That’s what happened,” Clint nodded. “In the meantime, your mother discovered the photos. When she arrived at the office, she was spitting mad and spoiling for a fight.”

“Just not with you?”

“No, thank goodness. Mary trusted me.”

“So, what happened?”

“I heard her yelling at Sharon from down the hall.” Clint let go of a light laugh. “When I walked in, I wasn’t sure who needed to be rescued. If your mother’s faith in me hadn’t been so unwavering, I don’t know what would have

happened.”

“That’s where Jessie and I went wrong,” Cam sighed, “or at least partly. We didn’t trust each other enough.”

“Trust and communication are the foundations of a good relationship,” Clint murmured. “It’s also the first things that can break down.”

Which was something that he and Jessie had learned – the hard way.

Cam leaned back on the railing and watched his fiancée showing off her ring to Sadie and Molly. His body still buzzed from their time together. And he wanted more. The question was where?

With his parents back in town, the house was just a little too crowded for what he had in mind. Could he convince Jessie to move into an apartment with him? Was that what they needed to do to be together? They had been apart for too long. Now that she was his – he needed her close. Would she agree?

“Cameron,” Clint pulled his attention back. “We all spoiled Jessie when she was young. She was the only girl between our families. However, in the last two years, she’s grown into a fine young woman. I’m happy you’ve found your way back to each other. And look at her. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen her so happy.”

That his father had called Jessie spoiled wasn’t anything Cam hadn’t heard before – most recently from Jessie herself. His father’s assessment of the woman he was going to marry, though, was spot on. Her smile was bigger, and he had never seen her look more beautiful.

“To be honest,” Cam circled back. “I can’t decide if I’m more annoyed about Jessie confronting Catherine alone. Or if it’s the fact there won’t be any repercussions for messing with our lives.”

“Who said Catherine wouldn’t suffer?” Clint retorted, and there was something dark and dangerous in his voice, Cam hadn’t heard before.

“Dad,” Cam warned. “You said—”

Clint held up his hand. “I know what I told you. And I didn’t interfere with what *you* were doing.”

“You just did something on your own?”

“Well,” Clint paused a beat. “*I* didn’t do anything.”

“But someone did?”

“Yes.”

“And?” Cam prodded. “What was it?”

“It wasn’t much,” Clint hedged.

“Dad.”

“I asked Blake, in IT, to make sure nothing was left behind that could blow back on you all ... especially Hayden. While I understand why you thought you needed to take care of it on your own—”

“We did it to protect you, mom, and Dylan,” Cam cut in.

“I’m aware of that,” Clint nodded. “And I don’t mean to sound like I’m in any way belittling your abilities, but sometimes experience does pay off.”

“Meaning, you think if we would have talked to you and mom earlier, things wouldn’t have gotten this far?”

Clint shrugged, which was essentially a non-response. It had Cam wondering if there was more to his father’s cryptic comments.

“And repercussions?” he questioned. “Without where the information came from, how can any of this lead back to Catherine?”

Clint’s blue eyes twinkled. “Unfortunately, Blake can’t just offer up the financial records – even if he were to discover something. It would open too many cans of worms. However, that doesn’t mean that he won’t *‘do what he can do,’* and keep the information safe – for whenever it’s needed.”

“You mean *if* it’s needed,” Cam corrected.

“No, I mean *when* it’s needed,” Clint reiterated. “There’s too much money flowing in and out of those accounts for it not to be missing from ‘somewhere.’ And someday, when Swan Harbor deems it’s time, we’ll find out.”

“Because things happen in Swan Harbor when they’re meant to happen,” Cam replied.

“Exactly. As for Catherine,” Clint chuckled, “her personal life is about to get a little sticky.”

“What did you do?”

“Oh, not much. Your mother’s devious mind helped with this one.”

“Dad.”

“Oh, okay. Blake ...”



JESSIE GLANCED out the window to see Cam throw his head back and laugh at something his father said. Since she’d shared her story, he’d not said much. Which had her wondering was he upset or just happy it was all over?

“I told you everything was going to work out,” Sadie grinned. “Eden never stood a chance.”

“You did say that. I just wish ...”

“Don’t go there, Jess,” Sadie scolded. “Be happy. You and Cam have waited a long time for this.”

“Speaking of waiting,” Jessie sent Sadie an impish smile, “what’s going on with you and Gray?”

Sadie’s eyes twinkled. “Do you really want to know?”

“Not that,” Jessie sputtered. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“I love him,” Sadie whispered. “I want to be with him. But ...”

“What’s keeping you apart?”

“Besides distance, you mean?”

“Well, yeah.”

“A commitment,” Sadie admitted. Which were words Jessie had never heard her friend say.

“Wow!”

“You’re telling me,” Sadie sighed. “Gray and his college girlfriend dated for years, and that went nowhere. What if he’s not the type to commit to one woman forever?”

“She didn’t hold his heart,” Jessie replied. “I think his heart was just waiting for you.”

“Don’t I wish. I’ve wanted ...”

“The heart wants what the heart wants,” Jessie recited. “Remember that.”

“I know,” Sadie sighed. “And my heart wants Gray. But does he want me?”

“Cam told Gray to ask you to move back to Swan Harbor.”

Sadie’s breath caught. “Really? When?”

“I think it was earlier today.”

“And what did Gray say?”

“Gray’s not sure he’s enough of a reason,” Jessie hummed. “He used the whole ‘she has a good job, nice apartment,’ excuse.”

“So, I just need to convince him he’s enough,” Sadie glanced over her shoulder to where Gray was talking to Dylan. “I love his parents, but when they returned to town, it put a damper on certain activities.”

Jessie snickered. “I was just thinking the same thing on the way over here. Maybe it’s time for the Hunter boys to give the house back to their parents and —”

“—Take up residence somewhere else,” Sadie agreed. “I should suggest that.”

“You know,” Jessie glanced back out the window, and her eyes locked with Cam’s, “maybe I should suggest the same thing. I’m going to go talk to my fiancé.”

Sadie squeezed her hand. “Good luck.”

“Good luck to you too, Sadie,” Jessie grinned. “Maybe someday, instead of just best friends, we can be sisters.”

“That would be ... amazing,” Sadie replied. “Definitely a long-time dream come true.”

“Look at this,” Jessie flashed her ring, “dreams really do come true.”

“Fingers crossed,” Sadie giggled, “and toes too.”

Jessie watched her friend walk toward Gray, and something told her she didn’t need to worry. The way he looked at Sadie told a story all of its own. The question of how it played out, though, that was still up in the air.

In the meantime, she had an agenda to discuss with Cam. One she thought would be advantageous to both.

She found him on the patio, laughing at something Clint had said. They turned toward her with identical expressions, pushing her to ask. “Who are you plotting against?”

“Who, us?” Clint shrugged. “No one special.”

“Uh huh,” Jessie hummed.

“Really. It’s no one special,” he reiterated. “Ask Cam, he’ll back me up.”

Jessie laughed. “Now, I see where Cam and Gray get their ‘ability to dance around tough answers’ behavior.”

Clint gave her a look that said, ‘who, me?’ But the smile on his face told a different story. “I’m going to go see what Mary is up to.” On the way inside, he kissed Jessie on the side of the head. “You two behave.”

She fought to keep her mouth from dropping open, but should have expected it

“Do I want to know?”

Cam tugged her into his arms and buzzed a kiss across her forehead. “It depends on the question.”

“Do I want to know what you and Clint were discussing?”

“You know how you found my mother with Hayden, when you got to town?”

“Yeah,” Jessie nodded. “I was surprised, but with everything going on, never asked how come. I thought your parents promised to stay out of it.”

“They didn’t stay out of it,” Cam laughed. “They stayed out of what we were doing.”

“Ah, they used semantics to get around their promise,” she realized. “So, what did they do?”

Cam explained what the IT guy was doing, which mostly went over Jessie’s head. What she found interesting was what was going to happen with Catherine.”

“You’re saying Blake is going to leave some crumbs, so the hospital has to audit their departments?”

“Supposedly.”

“And that Catherine used her work computer – and work funds – to buy sexy lingerie?”

“She did,” Cam hummed. “You know that’s a no-no.”

“And that’s it?”

“Oh, no. There were other expenses that the hospital shouldn’t have been charged for, as well,” he replied. “Unfortunately, nothing that will get her thrown in jail. However, I can’t say the same about her job.”

“Do you think she’ll get fired?”

Cam shrugged. “I guess it depends on who Catherine is buying that lingerie for. If it’s her boss ...”

“Who happens to be the hospital administrator,” Jessie groaned, “nothing will come of it.”

“If it’s not, though,” Cam went on, “that’s something at least. After everything she’s done, she needs to be knocked back a few steps. But ...”

“We shouldn’t dwell on her. We’re happy, and together. That’s what’s important.”

“I know.” Their eyes locked, and in his, she saw the same regrets she was sure were in hers. There was also desire simmering just below the surface. And since they couldn’t explore how deep it went, Jessie circled back. “Whose idea was it to go looking for fancy lingerie?”

“Princess,” he nuzzled his nose against hers, “there are just some things you don’t discuss with your parents.”

“I get that.”

“Was there something else you needed to ask me?” Cam questioned. “Or did you miss me? Miss this?”

He kissed her, one of those open-mouth kisses, that sucked out her soul and ratcheted up her desire as quickly as a heartbeat. It had her thinking about stripping him bare and seeing how far she could push him. Then letting him do the same to her. There was nothing she wanted more than to spend the night wrapped

“Stop.” Jessie pushed him back a step. “We can’t.”

Cam dropped his head against her shoulder, and little by little his breathing slowed. When he glanced up, his eyes were a dark moss green. Her lipstick was smeared across his mouth, and his body was primed and ready to go.



HE TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND, while on one hand, he didn’t want to bring up her hospital visit. On the other, he knew he had to. Everything needed to be out in the open.

“You’re right, we can’t.”

Jessie's turquoise eyes dug into him, as if she was trying to read his mind. "Cam, why don't—?"

"Wait." He kissed her, a quick, hard one, and cut her off. "I need to say something first."

"It's about my going to talk to Catherine, right?" she sighed. "Are you going to yell at me?"

A corner of Cam's mouth curved. "Do you think you need to be yelled at?"

Her eyes flashed, and she took a step back. The woman in front of him was the one he'd only just met. She'd taken him by surprise, but the more he got to know her, the more she mesmerized him.

"I told you why I felt like I needed—"

"Jessie," Cam kissed her again, "just listen."

She grinned. "If I don't listen, will you keep kissing me?"

He laced his fingers together loosely behind her back and waited for her eyes to meet his. "I'm proud of you. Yes, initially, I had a little trouble processing the fact you'd gone after her alone. Especially after you'd made a point of not wanting me to do the same."

"I know," Jessie sighed. "I just ..."

"Let me finish, please. Then we can put it behind us, okay?"

"Okay."

"You were right on a couple of fronts when it came to Catherine."

"Of course, I was." She frowned. "But how do you think I was right?"

"It all started with you," Cam replied. "It all started when she arranged for you to leave Swan Harbor. From there, it snowballed. Catherine blamed you and Molly, and wanted both of you out of the picture. But—"

"Molly wouldn't have been as easy to manipulate as I was," Jessie jumped in. "Like I said earlier, I inadvertently helped Catherine."

"We helped her," Cam emphasized. "Just no more. Our future is just that, *our* future."

"I love you, Cam."

"That's good to know, Princess." He leaned in to kiss her, and just as she'd done in June, she put her finger on his chin and stopped his descent.

"What have I told you about that?" she retorted, her princess voice on full display.

"About what?" he teased.

"When someone says they love you, what are you supposed to say back?"

"Oh, that." Cam grinned. "I love you, Princess. Is that it?"

"That's it." She toyed with the button on his shirt for a heartbeat, then glanced up under her brows. "Is that it about Catherine? Can we really put it

behind us?”

“Do I think Catherine will stay out of our lives?” he asked. “I think so. Her plan to take our happy ending failed. She’ll move on.”

“I hope you’re right. Now that’s all taken care of, there’s something else I wanted to say.” Jessie hesitated. “Or should we go inside and talk about it later?”

“We should probably go inside,” Cam answered. “However, before we do, I want to run something by you.”

Jessie held up her ring. “Does it have something to do with a wedding date? You know as soon as we go inside, they’re going to want to know.”

“Can we get married tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow!” Jessie exclaimed. “No.”

“Next week? Next month?” When she didn’t say anything, Cam’s heart ticked up a notch, “I’m not waiting until next year to marry you, Jessica Marie Prince!”

“I didn’t say you had to,” she assured him. “However, I do have an idea.”

“When?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute. Your turn first.

“If I move into an apartment, will you move in with me?” he asked, then held his breath, waiting to see what she’d say.

“You’re not afraid Dylan will come after you with a loaded pistol, are you?”

“He didn’t come after me with one when I stole his cruiser,” Cam reminded her. “And, he didn’t point one at me earlier. So, I think I’m safe. Yes, we have our entire lives ahead of us, but ...”

“We need to make up for lost time.” Jessie nuzzled the underside of his chin. “Don’t you think so?”

“I do,” he agreed. “But more importantly, I want you to be the first thing I see each morning, and the last I see at night.”

“I want that too.” She slid her arms around his neck. “So, how fast do you think you can move out?”

“With any luck, soon. Now that I’ve had you, I don’t want to wait years to love you again.”

Jessie’s eyes flared. “No, Cam, I don’t want that either.”

He pushed her hips against his and kissed her. Just like always, the spark of desire burned bright and threatened to run away. When he didn’t think he could control it any longer, Cam released her mouth and hugged her. It was then, he saw his mother holding the champagne bottle and tapping her watch. “I think we’re being summoned,” he sighed.

Jessie giggled. “I knew it wouldn’t be long. We’re lucky we got this much time alone.”

“That we are, Jess.”

Cam kissed her once more and led the way into the noisy house. His father handed them champagne glasses, then tapped on his to get everyone’s attention.

“Mary and I want to take this moment to wish Jessie and Cameron congratulations. It’s taken you two a while to get to this point, but as I always say, it’s not how fast something happens, but the journey you take to get there. And now that you’re here ...”

“Love each other,” Mary took over. “Listen to each other. And learn from each other. As long as you do that, everything else will fall into place. Welcome to the family, Jessie.”

Cam clinked his glass against Jessie’s and took a sip, his eyes never leaving hers. “I love you,” he whispered. “Yesterday, today, and forever.”

“Good.” Her eyes twinkled up at him. “That’s very good.”

He arched a brow, however before he could say anything, his mother jumped in, “Have you set a date? I can’t wait to help plan the wedding,” Mary paused a beat, “you are going to let me help, aren’t you?”

“Of course, Mary,” Jessie exclaimed. “I don’t think I could do it without you.”

“And a date?”

“New Year’s Eve.” Jessie’s eyes met his. “I thought it would be the perfect way to end one year and begin another.”

“Oh, Jess,” Mary murmured. “The date your parents were married. I think Ruth and Robert would approve.”

“What about you, Cam?” she whispered. “Do you approve?”

“Try to keep me away,” he barely got out before they were surrounded by their family and friends, and the well-wishes started.

twenty-five

You are cordially invited to ...

Key West, Florida

December 31

8:00 a.m.

JESSIE'S PHONE buzzed and when the text tone happened to be the wedding march, she couldn't stop the giggle. Cam had 'borrowed' her phone the night before. However, he hadn't been forthcoming with why he'd needed it.

Cameron: Good morning, Princess. I missed holding you last night.

Jessie: I missed being held. But it was only for one night.

Cameron: One night is too long.

Jessie: I didn't want to deal with any of those superstitions. We've had enough bad luck.

Cameron: Our bad luck is behind us, and in a few hours, you will become my wife.

Jessie: I can't wait.

Cameron: Me either, Jessie. I love you.

Jessie: I love you too.

Cameron: Did you like your gift?

Jessie: My text tone? It was a nice way to wake up.

Cameron: I bet you're going to like the way I wake you tomorrow better.

Jessie: I bet I will. I'll see you at sunset.

Jessie tossed her phone aside and rolled over. They had decided on a small wedding with family and friends – just not in Swan Harbor but in Key West, Florida. She'd wanted something different and unique. Somehow, a wedding at sunset fit. Plus, this way they were able to keep the ceremony intimate – like they'd wanted. Once they were home – then, they'd have a large party.

Life since they'd gotten engaged had been a whirlwind. They'd moved into an apartment at the Harbor Towers Apartments, Dylan had been elected Sheriff, and Catherine had finally gotten her comeuppance. While she'd not been

arrested, she'd been fired from her job at the hospital, and pretty much dropped out of sight. The future seemed to be what they wanted it to be. If you were patient - and fought - dreams really could come true.

Jessie splayed her fingers and studied her engagement ring. Soon, it would be accompanied by a wedding band, bringing one more wish from the past to the present. She would be Jessica Marie Hunter, just as she'd been dreaming about since her fourteenth birthday.

The last few months had also given her a new insight into her past. There had been two times in her life, when her world had shattered around her. Both of those times, the darkness had threatened to consume her, overwhelming her, and making her feel lost and alone.

As an adult, she understood her darkness was really depression. She could also admit there were times, when she might have benefited from medication. However, she'd been fortunate. Her family had been there for her. Cam had been there for her. In her eyes, it had been their love that had saved her.

Clint's words, *"...it's not how fast something happens, but the journey you take to get there,"* resonated. The sentiment had merit. Over the last few years, she'd changed, grown. Her past hadn't been easy, but those experiences had turned her into the person she'd become. Someone who wouldn't run, the next time life was hard.

Three sharp knocks on her door caused her heart rate to skyrocket. "You'd better not be Cam."

"Open the door, Sis," Dylan replied. "I have something for you."

Curiosity had her inviting him inside. He was carrying a tray with coffee and some fresh fruit.

"You brought caffeine. Nice."

"That's very observant of you," Dylan teased.

"Well, I did come from a family of law enforcement officers, Sheriff," she tossed back. "Mom and dad would have been proud."

"I like to think so. In fact," he handed her a wrinkled envelope, "mom and dad are who I wanted to talk to you about."

Jessie looked down at the envelope, and tears sprang to her eyes. Written on the front were the words ...

For Jessie...

To be opened on your wedding day.

"That's mom's writing, isn't it?" she whispered.

"Yeah. After Molly moved in, I found a box of letters in the closet."

"What kind of letters?"

"Letters our parents wrote to each other when they were in college. Plus,

some cards we'd given her." Dylan shrugged. "Most of them I left in the box, but ..."

"But what, Dylan?"

"There was that one," he indicated the envelope she was holding, "plus one for me and one for James."

Jessie's breath caught. "Did you read James'?"

"No. It felt wrong. I just read mine."

"Should I read it now?"

"That's up to you, Sis." Dylan hugged her. "I'll see you downstairs."

Once he'd left, Jessie looked down at the envelope. The seal hadn't lasted, and when she brought it close, she imagined she could still smell her mother's perfume. With trembling hands, she removed the letter and a blue feminine handkerchief.

She slowly unfolded the pages, and a million things flew through her mind.

Ruth had worn Estée Lauder perfume.

Her mother's handwriting was much neater than she'd remembered.

Why did the thought of reading the words scare her?

Jessie took the letter out onto the balcony. She stared up at the blue sky and imagined her mother looking down at her. With the breeze blowing softly, she took a deep breath and read.

DEAR JESSIE,

You are but a few hours old as I write this. But with my pen hovering above the paper, I'm wondering what one should say to a newborn. Please remember as you read this, you were born a week after your due date, and I was in labor for twelve long hours. So, if I make little sense, it's because I'm tired, but happier than you can even imagine.

I love your brothers, but from the moment I knew I was expecting, I hoped you would be a little girl. On the day we found out my wish had come true, I cried tears of joy. There are so many hopes and dreams I have for you, really too many to name.

Except there is something very important for me to say, Princess. Please never doubt that I loved you.

Through the sleepless nights and the tantrums of toddler years, I loved you.

Through your sassy times and stubborn times, I loved you.

And through those teen years when I didn't like you very much, I still loved you.

Make the most of every day, because no matter how much you may want to,

you can't turn back time. Learn from your past, and look toward the future.

As you read this on your wedding day, I can only hope you've found a man worthy of your love. One who lifts you when you're down, celebrates your successes, and allows you to be everything you are meant to be. (If not, I'm sure your daddy, Dylan, and James will have a word ... or two, with him.)

I pray your husband makes you every bit as happy as your father has made me. Marriage isn't easy. It takes hard work, lots of love, and laughter. Trust him with your secrets, and communicate your concerns. (Especially, if you inherited your father's stubborn gene.) And never forget we are your family and will always be there to catch you, in case you fall.

Although, I'm a little late to the party, I'm hoping if you've not chosen your something old and blue, you'll carry the enclosed handkerchief. Your grandmother Roberts carried it at her wedding, I carried it at mine, and now it's your turn.

Enjoy the day. It's your time to shine. Your father and I will be with you every step of the way.

*Love,
Mom*

JESSIE STARED at the crumpled ball of blue cloth in her hand and tried to hold back the need to fall apart. How was she supposed to handle all of the emotions racing through her body?

"Jessie?" Mary came out onto the balcony. "What's wrong?"

Jessie held up the crumpled envelope. "It's from my mom."

"Oh, Sweet Girl." Mary held out her arms and Jessie fell into them, her tears coming fast and free.

She lost track of how long she cried. More than once she'd thought, she was done. But then, another fresh wave of despair would rush over her.

"I knew Ruth wrote these," Mary whispered. "I just didn't know what happened to them."

Jessie grabbed a napkin and blew her nose. "Dylan found them. She fingered the blue cloth, "Mom wanted me to carry this today."

"Perfect." Mary's smile turned melancholy. "You know that picture of Ruth and I in my office?"

"The one where you're eating ice cream?" Jessie grinned. "You two looked like you were conspiring."

"Oh, we were," Mary hummed. "That was just after she'd found out you were going to be a girl. She was over the moon. While we were enjoying our ice

cream, Ruth said, *‘wouldn’t it be wonderful if someday your Cameron and my Jessie fell in love?’*”

Jessie blinked rapidly several time. “Mom would have been happy.”

“Ruth would have been ecstatic,” Mary laughed. “Then she would have gloated.

“You’re probably right.” Jessie sniffed.

“Are you feeling better?”

Jessie tilted her chin, just enough the warm breeze dried her face. “I’m okay, now. My face, though, is all puffy.”

“Just a little.” Mary ushered her inside to where Molly, Sadie, and Cassie waited. “We have some work to do, ladies.”



Casa de la Esperanza

December 31

4:00 p.m.

CAM RACED up the stairs of the Casa de la Esperanza, the Bed & Breakfast where he and Jessie were going to spend the next week. When he’d discovered it, and learned the meaning of its name, he’d decided it was meant to be. Hope was what had kept him pushing forward through the bleak times.

“Welcome,” a bubbly brunette, who appeared ageless, greeted him. “I’m Vivi. And you must be Mr. Hunter.”

“Cam, please. Your home is lovely.”

“Thank you. We love it.” She glanced behind her, where a wall of windows showcased her tropical paradise. “Plus, the view isn’t so bad.”

The area beyond the walls was lush with green foliage that gave way to the beach and a small dock. There were a couple of boats tied up, but the beach appeared empty – peaceful.

“It’s beautiful. I think Jessie is going to love it.”

“Congratulations on your marriage,” Vivi grinned. “I recommend it. My husband and I are going strong, even after forty years.”

“It sounds like I should be the one congratulating you.”

“Marriage isn’t always easy,” Vivi replied. “However, it is very much worth it. Now let’s get the pesky paperwork out of the way.”

She had him sign several forms and then led him upstairs to a corner room. It was furnished with a kingsize bed, its own bathroom – complete with an oversize tub, and a view of the water.

“Does this work?” she asked hopefully.

“It’s perfect.”

“Good.” Vivi smiled. “The champagne you ordered will be left next to the table. Would you like me to turn down the bed?”

“No,” Cam shook his head, “I’ve got that taken care of.”

She gave him a secretive smile, as if she could read his mind. “Just stop by the desk for your keys.”

“Thanks, Vivi,” he murmured. “I’ll be right there.”

As soon as she was gone, Cam left the suitcases in a corner and went to work. He spread rose petals on the bed, set candles in the bathroom and next to the bed, and left a Bluetooth speaker on the nightstand. The scene was set. Now, all he needed was the girl.

When he got back to the hotel, Gray was pacing in front of the lobby door.

“It’s about damn time you made it back,” he grouched. “Mom has been fretting, and you know what that means.”

“Dad’s getting grumpy,” Cam sighed. “Sorry, I had to take care of a few things.”

“Did you forget something?”

“Forget something? Like what?”

“Protection?” Gray tossed out.

“Why the hell would you ask me that?” Cam grumbled.

“Well,” snickered Gray. “It was the only reason I could think of that would cause you to run off so close to the ceremony time.”

“If you must know. I had to check on the hotel.”

“Where was it you said you were staying again?” Gray asked. “I don’t remember the name.”

“That’s because I didn’t say,” Cam pointed out. “It’s a secret – until we get back home.”

Gray barked out a laugh. “Were you worried Dylan would follow?”

“Hardly,” Cam scoffed. “I wanted to sweep Jessie away someplace that’s just for us. Does that make sense?”

A far off look crossed Gray’s face. “Yeah, I’m beginning to see the beauty of that.”

“Ready to ask Sadie to move home?”

“Thinking about it.”

However, Gray didn’t offer any more information. Then, by the time they reached his room, it was time to get dressed. Cam grabbed the bowtie, and for the first time noticed it wasn’t tied. Which meant he’d have to tie it. Except, how was that done with shaking hands?

“Hey,” Cam grumbled. “Whose idea was it to get a bowtie that wasn’t already tied?”

“I believe that was you, Cameron.” His mother’s eyes met his in the bathroom mirror. “Do you need some help?”

He glanced down at the offending garment, then held his hands up to see if they were still shaking. “I guess.”

“It’s not the end of the world,” Mary assured him. “I’ve tied your bowtie plenty of times.”

“Sure you have, mom. When I was a kid.”

Mary turned him toward the mirror and straightened the tie a few times. Once again, their eyes met. This time, though, hers were glassy.

“You’ll always be my ‘kid,’ Cameron,” she whispered. “Always.”

“That’s what you always say.”

“Just wait. Someday, when you have a child, you’ll understand.”

“One step at a time,” he replied. “One step at a time.”

“Aren’t you glad, I stopped you from throwing that ring in the ocean,” Mary teased. “That would have been such a waste.”

“Damn straight.” Cam shook his head at the close call. “That was the only good thing that came out of that night.”

“You know how it is. Things happen when they’re meant to happen in Swan Harbor.”

“Is that your way of saying, ‘I told you so?’” he laughed.

“Would I say that?” She hugged him, holding a bit longer than she usually did. “Be happy, Son. Take care of each other.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I learned from the best.”

Mary blinked several times, then put on her ‘professional’ face, as he called it. “I don’t want to have red eyes for the photos. We were able to help Jessie with her puffiness. But at my age ...”

It took a minute for what she’d said to register. “Wait, what was that? Is Jessie, okay?”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Mary frowned. “Jessie didn’t want you to know about the tears.”

“Let’s get a move on.” Clint stuck his head in the bathroom, holding Cam’s jacket. “You don’t want to be late to the altar.”

“Wait, Mom.”

“It’s a non-worry.” Mary pushed him out of the bathroom to fix her makeup. Unfortunately, it didn’t answer his questions.

“Do you know what’s going on with Jessie?” he asked his father.

“I know your bride-to-be is ready, beautiful, and waiting for you,” Clint

answered. "Isn't that enough?"

"Mom, what's going on?" Cam asked again, when she opened the door.

"It's nothing," Mary assured him. "Ruth wrote Jessie a letter to be read today, and there were a few tears. But," she gave him a conspiratorial smile. "I told her that Ruth and I had planned for you and Jessie to fall in love before she was even born."

"Huh," Cam hummed. Somehow, though, that fit. They'd danced to the song *I Knew I Loved You* at his graduation party. From that night on, *that* had been their song. Finally, he understood why. Jessie had been chosen for him from the very beginning.

He straightened his jacket once more, then patted his pockets to make sure he had everything. "Ring!" Cam looked wildly around the room. "Where's Jessie's ring?"

"Calm down, Cam." Gray held up the diamond and gold band. "I've got it right here."

"I'm okay. I'm okay," Cam mumbled. Which, when he looked at his hands again, he realized he was. His happy ending was waiting. Nerves were not allowed.

They made their way to the first floor. Then out onto the beach, where he would wait for his bride to be. With each step he took closer to the arch, the calmer he grew. He was where he was meant to be.

The music started, and everything was so perfect, Cam felt as if he were living in a dream world. He wanted to take everything in at once. Instead, he forced himself to focus on one thing at a time. Jessie's beauty as she walked toward him. How soft her hand was when she placed it in his. Her radiant smile.

Surrounded by family and friends, their ceremony began. They were serenaded by the rolling waves and the calling birds. The sun shielded them from darkness. As it touched the top of the Atlantic Ocean, and painted the world around them, they pledged their lives to each other.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Words he felt as if he'd waited his entire life to hear. Cam savored the moment, and instead of pouncing, as he really wanted to do, he slowly lowered his head. One inch at a time. Jessie's eyes flared, then drifted shut. Their mouths connected and a surge of completeness rushed through him. At long last, he'd found his home.

epilogue

Main Street

February 16

3:30 p.m.

KILLIAN STEPPED out into the snowy, tree-lined main street of Swan Harbor. The low-rising shops and restaurants up and down each side were quaint and much different from what he'd expected. But not as contrasting as the muted sounds. Horns, sirens, and the buzz of conversation were in short supply.

His attention was drawn to a woman as she stepped from the diner across the way.

"Bloody hell," he whistled. Her strawberry-gold hair and emerald coat stood out against the white of the snow and, unconsciously, he turned in her direction.

She was speaking to someone on the phone and based on the smile on her face, it was someone she knew well. He was surprised but pleased when she bypassed the parking lot and continued on, her footfalls sure and steady.

With his black hair, bright blue eyes and square jaw sporting a hint of scruff, he was used to drawing more than his share of female admiration. The thought perhaps the lovely lass would be interested in helping him celebrate his new job quickened his feet. Before he could catch her though, she turned a corner and disappeared.

It didn't take long for him to reach the last spot he'd seen her and, as expected, she was nowhere in sight. However, with a little luck from the snow and his investigative skills, she wasn't missing for long.

"Sonny's." He pulled open the door, and the loud music had him second-guessing his decision to enter.

Until his attention was drawn to the large ice-skating rink in the center of the barn-like structure, and something tugged at him. Children were gathered around the lass, almost as if she was a princess giving instructions to her charges. There was a brief moment when he wondered what she was doing, but then she started skating.

“Bloody hell, she’s beautiful.”

“That’s my wife you’re referring to.” The male voice brought Killian’s head around quickly.

He studied the man, a blond and several inches taller, who didn’t look happy someone had appreciated his wife.

“Sorry, Mate,” Killian grinned. “Didn’t mean to encroach.”

The man stood a little taller, his goal to intimidate.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

With everything he’d been through the past year, Killian’s radar fired. “What gave me away?” he snapped. “I bet it’s the accent, right?”

“It’s a small town.” The man’s eyes began to twinkle, as if he was privy to a private joke, “And, it helps, Dylan is my brother-in-law.”

Killian relaxed, somehow pleased with the town’s gossip line. “He seems like a good guy.”

“Dylan has his moments.” He held out his hand, “Cameron Hunter. Welcome to Swan Harbor.”

“Killian Reade, and thank you. Seems like a nice place.” He looked back to the ice where the children were working to imitate the woman’s movements. There was something about the way they watched her that caused his chest to tighten. However, before traveling too far down memory lane, he turned away and dropped onto a nearby bench. “I need to find a place to live. Any recommendation? I was going to ask Dylan, but ...”

“Dylan and his wife just moved across the hall from us,” Cam explained. “Leaky roof. Would you consider subletting a furnished place?”

“Whose?” The possibility aroused Killian’s interest, as he’d only brought two bags with him and didn’t relish having to furnish an apartment.

“Mine,” Cam glanced toward the ice, “ours. My wife has this need to help others, and wants to work with a not-for-profit outside of the country for a year or so.”

“Commendable.”

Cam shrugged. “I want her happy.”

“You must be newlyweds.” Killian laughed. In his experience time wasn’t always kind to marriages.

“Is it that obvious?” Cam’s eyes once again sought his wife.

Killian grinned. “Your ring still has the new on it.”

“We’ve only been married for a couple of months,” Cam offered. “But I think I decided I was going to marry her twelve years ago.”

“Amazing,” Killian whistled. “That’s a long time to love one person.”

“Our happy ending wasn’t without complications,” a corner of Cam’s

mouth curved up “but that’s a long story. Anyway, since Jessie’s almost done, let me introduce you and we can show you the apartment. We’re living at the Harbor Towers, just on the edge of town. You’ll be doing us a favor.”

“It sounds good.” Killian winced, “But how’s living across from family working for you?”

“Timing stinks.”

That, Killian could imagine, as he wouldn’t relish living so close to Liam. “When would you be leaving?”

“This weekend.”

“I’ll be okay at The Beachside for a few days,” Killian assured him.

“Good.” Cam stood. “Let me get my wife, but I should warn you, Dylan’s wife, Molly, might feel the need to ‘fix you up.’”

“No need.”

At Killian’s succinct reply, Cam quipped, “A woman back home?”

“No,” Killian stood and moved closer to the wall, “my heart’s fine.”

He wasn’t sure he’d been heard, as Cam took several steps out onto the ice, before turning back, “Beware, Killian Reade. This is Swan Harbor, where the heart wants what the heart wants.”

Killian watched the lass, Jessie, skate into her husband’s arms and when they kissed, he found he needed to look away. Public displays, of any kind, rarely affected him, but watching the couple on the ice had him feeling, dare he say envious?

But envious of what? Cam; because he’d seen the beautiful woman first? Or was he envious of the obvious love and affection between them?

Had to be the first, as, after what he’d been through, his heart was immune to feelings.

“The heart wants what the heart wants,” he scoffed. “Right.”

“Killian,” Cam slipped across the ice toward him, “I’d like you to meet my wife.”

Jessie smiled, her face alight with happiness, “Welcome to Swan Harbor, Killian.”



QUICK AUTHOR’S NOTE:

As with most things, practice makes perfect. Or at least in the case of being a writer, practice makes better.

From Darkness into Love was originally published in March 2020. As I wrote more books and got better, the rougher the original story looked. Since I

plan to write in this world for years, I decided there was only one option – an overhaul!

In April 2022, I peeled apart the book and began the process. My first task was to bring the Swan Harbor I've created over the last fifteen books into ***From Darkness into Love***. Then I tore apart each chapter – rearranged, took out, added, and put back together.

The version you just read is 75% new material with the other 25% smoothed out. It is also 15% longer. I'm not going to say the book is perfect (because what book is – which is hard for my perfectionist soul), I do believe it is stronger. Obviously, I can't go back and rewrite everything I'm not crazy about– especially since there are new stories yelling to be written – but this was a Must Do!

Honestly, it was a decision that Jessie and Cameron made for me, and I can say, I do like the story much better. Plus, there's some bonus material for you.

As I mentioned above, Swan Harbor is a world I plan on writing in for years. It's the reason why I chose to write small town romance – I never have to say goodbye, as the characters weave in and out.

From this book – Gray & Sadie's (Book 7) is Part 1 of the Mountain View Lodge Trilogy. Dylan & Molly's (Book 8) is Part 2 of the Trilogy and Eden's (Book 9) is Part 3.

The characters feel like they are my neighbors. My hope is that you feel the same.

Moving right along ...

If you enjoyed reading this ~~short~~, okay, long author's note, (because why wouldn't you?) then you're going to love what I have to offer. If you sign up for my SPAM FREE newsletter – it costs you nothing – I promise.

My newsletters are sent on the 5th and 20th of each month and includes a lot of tidbits. Anything from book sales, teasers, new releases, early releases, and a chance to win a prize. I've even been known to toss in one of my favorite recipes, and a picture of my cat or dog. (You might also hear me complain or gush about whatever I'm watching on television at that time.)

Sign up for my newsletter by clicking **Happy Anniversary** link below and receive the FREE Jessie and Cameron scene. It's their anniversary, and there is some special news. (In the Swan Harbor timeline, this extra scene takes place the December before Book 6).

[Happy Anniversary](#)

Thanks for hanging with me this long.
Until next time,
Sophie

P.S.

From the epilogue, you learned that Jessie & Cameron are off to help others. Killian Reade is the new man in town, and he's always had women throwing themselves at him. However, what you see isn't necessarily what you get – which just happens to be the 'overarching theme' in the book. That we all wear masks and hide our true selves. It's going to take a special woman to remove his mask and see the real man beneath.

Read on for a preview of
[Kittens, Puppies & Love](#)

SOPHIE BARTOW

*Kittens,
Puppies &
Love*



A SWAN HARBOR STORY

kittens, puppies & love blurb



Would you expose your heart for love?

Veterinarian Emma Foster arrives in Swan Harbor with one thing on her mind, making business a success. But she didn't anticipate the lure of the small town or the pull of a man's magnetic blue eyes. Their potent combination threatens to derail her well-ordered plans.

Investigator Killian Reade has used his good looks to layer masks over his true self. Until a flash of yellow peels off one. Then the people of Swan Harbor add crack in another. When Emma looks through him, though, he's forced to take a journey. One that has him searching for the man he's meant to be.

As their barriers fade, Emma makes an off-hand comment, leading Killian to uncover a disturbing behavior in their small town. When all is revealed, will they wrap the layers tighter or allow love in and set their hearts free?

Read an excerpt, watch the trailer, or download a copy of
[Kittens, Puppies & Love](#)

Read on for a preview of Kittens ...

kittens, puppies & love preview



Killian took a deep breath, wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans, and sauntered across the diner toward his partner.

Be cool, Reade. You're just here for lunch.

"Who's the lovely lass?" he asked without preamble.

"Well, hello to you too," Rusty quipped.

Killian gave him a dirty look and nonchalantly leaned against the counter. "Very funny. Hello. Now," he tried again in a slightly friendlier voice. "Who's the lovely lass?"

Rusty pointed over his shoulder. "That lovely lass?"

"Bloody hell, Rusty!" Killian pushed his friend's hand down. "Are you in high school?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Rusty pointed out. "After all, you *are* the

town Lothario. Go introduce yourself.”

Killian glanced around the diner, unwilling to admit the label embarrassed him. While it might have fit the man before he’d move to Swan Harbor, since – not so much. However, Rusty was right. He’d never had difficulty talking to women before. Was this woman any different?

“Shoo,” Rusty grouched, interrupting Killian’s thoughts. “I’d like to eat in peace.”

“You’re sure grouchy,” Killian retorted. “Problems at home?”

Rusty swallowed first, making him wait before he answered, “Rene and Roland are still out of town. Now,” he made a dismissive motion with his hand, “go meet the girl.”

Killian stood a little taller and pulled his shoulders back. “I think I will.”

He took several steps toward her table before the bravado he’d been feeling disappeared. Then, as if being pulled by an invisible string, he detoured toward where Dylan and his wife, Molly, were sitting.

“I think Emma needs to meet Killian,” he heard Dylan say. “Don’t you agree?”

Killian didn’t wait to hear Molly’s thoughts but jumped in, “I couldn’t agree more.” He blessed her with the smile he used when he needed to coerce members of the opposite sex to do his bidding.

“Killian,” she cautioned, “Emma might not ...”

“Emma.” He repeated the name several times, liking the way it felt on his tongue. “What could it hurt?” Then, when Molly seemed to be weakening pushed a little more, “Even Dylan thinks it’s a good idea.”

“Okay. Come with me,” Molly sighed. “We were just leaving, anyway.”

As he followed his friends toward the elusive Emma, Killian found his steps slowing and his heart rate beating faster. What was it about this woman that made him hesitate? When no answer was forthcoming, he pushed aside his feelings of self-doubt and did as he’d done in the past. He added a little extra swagger to his walk and effectively cloaked his insecurity.

“Emma,” Molly nodded his direction, “I’d like you to meet Killian Reade. He’s an investigator at the sheriff’s department with my husband. Killian, meet Emma Foster.”

He gave her the smile that never failed to get one in return. “I’d be happy to tune your engine any time.”

“Killian!” Molly exclaimed.

When Killian got a look at Emma’s expression, he automatically took a step back. It wasn’t adoring, indulgent, or one that spoke of intrigue. Instead, she appeared aggravated, annoyed, and bothered. Once again, he found she’d thrown

him off his game. It left him confused and unsure about his next step.

“Er, I’m sorry, Lass,” he began. “You drove by me the other day and your yellow car was rattling. I ...”

“Thought to impress me with your witty repartee?” Emma snapped, effectively dismissing him.

He ducked his head and looked up at her under his brow. “Oh, you’re a tough lass, I see.”

“Some would say so.”

Killian studied the woman standing in front of him. She might look angelic. However, the words coming from her mouth were anything but. Why was that? Was she trying to hide something?

“Just who are you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Emma whispered. She turned her back on him to speak with Molly.

He thought she was going to ignore him and leave, but then, as if unable to resist, she looked back. “It was nice to meet you.” While her lips curled into the semblance of a smile, it never reached her eyes.

“You too, Ms. Foster.”

“It’s Doctor,” she corrected. “Doctor Foster. I took over for Doc Thatcher.” Then, with a wave to Molly and Dylan, she was gone.

Killian stared at her retreating figure. He’d never met a woman who hadn’t behaved as he’d expected. Usually, they fell all over him, almost too easily. Did he care enough to try to change what Emma thought of him? Or did he move on to the next challenge?

Read an excerpt, watch the trailer, or download a copy of
[Kittens, Puppies & Love](#)

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THE MEMORY OF LOVE

THE INNOCENCE OF LOVE

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(1983) FINDING HER LOST HEART

(1995) GUIDED BY A KISS

about the author

Sophie is a married mother of four who has spent the last 30+ years as a Speech/Language Pathologist working with adult post-stroke patients. Now that her youngest are in college, she's set out on a new journey.

She lives in Florida with her husband, 1 cat and 1 dog. When she's not writing, she loves to read, travel, and plot her next book while and watching T.V. Contact her via her website.

SophieBartow.com



sophie's heart

Sophie's Heart

