

A romantic scene of a man and a woman embracing on a beach. The man, with blonde hair, is seen from the back, his arms wrapped around the woman. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a light blue bikini top. They are standing on a sandy beach with gentle waves lapping at their feet. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue.

Second Chances



BRIA MARCHE

A SOUTHERN COMFORT NOVEL • BOOK ONE

SECOND CHANCES

A Southern Comfort Novel
Book One

Bria Marche

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Second Chances: Southern Comfort Series, Book 1

Life sails along smoothly on beautiful St. Thomas for Abby Melrose Bellavance, or so she thinks. That is, until her husband Remy steals her trust fund and disappears for parts unknown. Now, with five million reasons to write off men for good, she returns to Charleston, broke and groveling at her mother's feet.

Living again in the opulent mansion on South Battery, Abby is thrown another curve ball. Her mother passes away, leaving Abby with an enormous home but no money to support it.

Turning the mansion into a boardinghouse has its advantage—immediate cash—and disadvantage—two of the hottest men in Charleston are now Abby's tenants.

Abby wants love again, especially with hunky Erik, the handyman, and sexy Brandon, the prominent attorney, living in the mansion with her. They are so different, yet they're similar in one way she needs to avoid—they are men, and she should keep her distance.

As the southern summer blazes on, Abby's life becomes even more complicated. Personal secrets are revealed, and fate deals her one final blow. She wonders if she will ever be given a second chance at falling in love.

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Chapter One

Sleep eluded her again as it had every night for the past week. Abby lay in the dark, her piercing blue eyes fixated on the shadowy image of the spinning ceiling fan. She hoped staring at each rotating blade would help her doze off as counting sheep did—but it didn't. Remy was in her thoughts and in the pit of her stomach. Even after all he'd done, he still had a firm grip on her heart.

"I hate you... I hate you... I love you. Where are you, and why did you do this to me?"

Tears dampened the satin pillowcase under the unruly coils of black hair she had worn since she was a toddler. Anger and heartache had begun to feel the same to her. She tossed the lightweight blanket to the side of her bed and rose. In the darkened room, she felt for her robe at the foot of the bed and slipped it on. The balcony's sliding doors were only steps away, where she'd find fresh air, where she could sit and think. The sound of crashing waves in the distance used to soothe her but not anymore. The only calm she found came from a bottle of anti-anxiety pills in the medicine cabinet.

Chimes sounded from an antique grandfather clock in the foyer. She counted the strikes in her head—six o'clock, and the sun would soon rise. The automatic brew setting on the coffeemaker would have four cups of steaming Colombian roast waiting for her when she went downstairs.

She opened the double doors to the walk-in closet, accustomed to dressing nicely for Remy—something instilled in her by her mother—then reminded herself he was gone. A pair of shorts, a T-shirt, and flip-flops was all she needed anymore. With a cup of coffee in hand and twenty minutes before sunrise, she walked out with a beach towel slung over her shoulder and locked the door behind her. A path carved through the dense canopy would end at the sugar sand beach, where she could sit, watch the sunrise, and cry.

The sky lightened gradually until a burst of brilliance hit the horizon and began its ascent. The glowing orange ball cast rays upward and outward, illuminating the Caribbean, making the water dance and shimmer. Black-headed laughing gulls scurried about on the beach, looking for an early morning delectable morsel. She was sure by the sound of their call, they were indeed laughing at her foolishness, for putting her trust in someone like Remy Bellavance.

There on the beach at Magens Bay, she spread out her towel and sat. Other

than the sound of the gulls and the waves crashing against the rocks to her left, the beach was silent. The tourists never showed up before ten o'clock, and by then, she'd be home contemplating her future.

"Abby?"

She spun around, startled by the sound of a voice so early in the morning. He stood to her right with a beach rake in his hand. Abigail shielded her eyes with her hand, blocking the morning sun.

"Hi, John. What brings you out this early? The bar couldn't possibly be open yet, could it?" She wiped her tear-stained cheeks, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"Naw... it's Monday. The cruise ships are coming in. Gotta rake the beach and get the kayaks and sailboards set up. I've got to stock the bar, too. The real question is, why are you out here? It's barely daylight. Doesn't Remy think it's weird that you'd be here alone this early? Why didn't he come with you?"

"Remy left, almost a week ago today. I've been coming out here every morning before sunup to clear my head. The quiet helps most of the time. I'm usually back home by seven thirty."

"I didn't mean to disturb you, but as long as I'm here..." He gave her a raised-eyebrow stare, concern etched in his forehead as he sat on the sand next to her.

With a small branch from a turpentine tree gripped tightly in her hand, Abigail drew an infinity circle in the sand as they talked. Drawing that circle was a habit she and Remy had shared. The thought made her kick the circle with her foot, letting the tide reclaim the image.

"What do you mean, Remy left? Is he setting up gigs for the Island Guys? I hear the tourists like their music. Didn't they play at Beach Time on St. John a few weeks ago?"

"Yeah, they did. I should get going. I've got a lot of planning to do."

"Planning for what? Come on up to the bar. I'll make a pot of coffee."

"I thought you were busy. I can't tie up your morning with my problems."

"What are friends for? It seems like you need to get something off your chest. I'll give you thirty minutes," he joked. "After that, we'll have to meet at some clandestine location when I get off work to talk further."

Abby became acquainted with John after she moved to St. Thomas eighteen months ago and married Remy. A Nebraska transplant, John Richmond had been living on the island for fifteen years and had inside information about everything that went on throughout the islands. He gave her a heads-up when he heard about a beautiful two-bedroom bungalow up for sale and located just minutes from Magens Bay beach. Abby contacted the owners before they listed the house and bought it from them directly.

She sat at the bar on a well-worn rattan stool and cozied up to the rail. John poured two cups of coffee and handed her one.

“Okay, spill. What’s going on between you and Remy?”

“Remy is your friend. Do you really want to get involved?”

“I don’t have to be involved to listen.” He set out the cream and sugar then came around the bar to sit on the stool to her right.

“Okay, but don’t say I didn’t give you fair warning. You know me only as Abby Bellavance, Remy’s wife. I met Remy on a vacation two years ago in Charlotte Amalie. The Island Guys were playing at the Fat Turtle that night. Of course, Remy was doing his thing, handing out free drink vouchers to all the tourists getting off the cruise ships—me being one of them. He probably got a kickback from the bar to bring the crowds in. I was drawn to him like a moth to light, with his enormous smile, dark golden skin, and those crazy dreadlocks.” She laughed in hindsight as tears pooled in her eyes. “I don’t want to drag this explanation out, but the bottom line is, Remy emptied out the bank account, liquidated all my stocks, and sold the house and furnishings. I didn’t know anything was going on until I got a knock on my door last week from a contractor saying the new owners wanted an estimate to enlarge the balcony. Can you imagine my surprise when I heard that? My suspicions were right. I checked the bank account and my stocks, and they were cleaned out... vanished, just like Remy.”

“He’s a native, Abby, and quite the player. Women never could resist him, and he took advantage of that constantly. In the past, women have paid for everything and anything he wanted. Remy has a certain charisma, charm if you will, that works well for him. Good looks don’t hurt either. There’ve been plenty of ladies in his life that have come and gone, probably because he took them for everything they had. He wore that ability like a badge of honor. I really thought he’d changed when he asked you to marry him though. That’s a big step for him, to actually commit to someone.”

“Maybe the other women were filler until his ship came in... literally. The ship that would make Remy a rich man just happened to be the one I was on. I doubt it had anything to do with commitment, but it had everything to do with my last name.”

“Which was?”

“Melrose. A common name unless you do the research. I’m sure Remy did after meeting my mom and seeing our home in the nicest area of Charleston. My dad built his computer processor business from the ground up. I know it doesn’t sound sexy, but he got in at the right time and made a fortune. It was new money, and he earned it all on his own. My family was just the three of us—my dad, my

mom, and me—but my dad was killed in New York a few years ago in a random mugging.”

“I’m so sorry, Abby. That must have been heartbreaking.”

She traced the outline of her coffee mug and gave a wistful shrug. “Now it’s just my mom and me, unless she’s already disowned me. In hindsight, I wouldn’t blame her if she did. She was very protective, especially after my dad died, and Remy sent up every red flag possible. Mom threatened to cut me out of the will if I married him, which of course I did to spite her. I was a smart-ass then and called her bluff, yet I have no idea if she was actually bluffing or not. All I do know is the five million dollars I received from my trust fund when I turned twenty-five is completely gone. Obviously, Mom read Remy and his intentions much better than I did. I’m going home to see if I can fix things with her. She hasn’t spoken to me since I got married. I need to find a job and try to get on my feet, unless my mom reconsiders and welcomes me back into the fold.” Abby smiled wearily and sipped her tepid coffee.

“Need a warm-up?” John asked as he reached for the pot.

“Sure, thanks, but I think my thirty minutes is up. Anyway, I have to be out of the house in two weeks. I have a private investigator looking for Remy and my money, but who knows if anything will ever turn up. He’s probably drinking a piña colada on some remote island that doesn’t have extradition laws with the United States. Why didn’t I listen to my mom when she insisted I get a prenup?”

“It sounds like you were butting heads with her and trying to live your own life, especially with five million bucks in your pocket. Have you ever worked? What will you do to support yourself if you two can’t make amends?”

“Well, I did work before I got married just so I wouldn’t seem like a deadbeat daughter. Actually, I had my master’s degree and interned as a relationship counselor. What a joke, right? Only real life can be that ironic. It’s impossible to make up stuff like that.”

“Let’s talk some more before you go. I’m really sorry this happened, and I’m sorry Remy did this to you. He’s your husband, so I don’t know if he actually committed a crime or not, but I think he did. Someday, karma will come back and bite him in the butt. The world has a way of righting itself, and I hope everything eventually turns out right for you. You’re a great person, and you didn’t deserve this. Stop by for coffee before the crowds show up in the mornings. I’m always here by nine o’clock.”

“Thanks. I guess I needed to get that off my chest. I’ll stop by later this week.”

Abby shook the sand out of the towel and draped it over her forearm. She waved goodbye and followed the path through the mahogany and turpentine

trees that led to her house overlooking the bay.

Chapter Two

Thankful that she had a few thousand dollars stashed in the back of her closet, Abby checked the airline schedules and fares and prepared to leave the paradise she had known for two years and return to her home and the familiarity of Charleston, South Carolina. The cheapest flight she found left on a Thursday and had two connections. She tapped the “buy now” button on the screen and closed her laptop. With a fresh cup of coffee, she sat on the balcony with a pad of paper in hand and a pen lodged above her left ear. Remy was gone for good. It wasn’t a joke, he wouldn’t return, and it was time to start that to-do list. In two weeks, beautiful St. Thomas and the turquoise Caribbean would be history.

The ringing cell phone brought Abby out of her deep concentration. The caller was Melanie Davis, Abby’s dearest friend since childhood.

Do I feel like talking to Mel right now or not? Not wanting the drama but still needing her best friend, Abby picked up. “Hi, Mel. What’s up?” She stared out through the tree canopy to see the glorious, vibrant sea before her. Tears sprung to her eyes as she heard Mel’s familiar voice.

“Hey, Abby. How are you doing?”

“You know. Same thing, different day.”

“I think it would be a good idea if I flew down and helped you pack up everything you’re bringing home. What do you say?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. All I have are my clothes and a few personal belongings. I’m going to box everything up this week and ship it back home. Have you seen my mom recently?”

“I saw her last Friday night at the art walk on Broad Street. She made small talk with me, probably because there was a crowd. She didn’t look too happy. Have you heard from her since you told her what happened?”

“No, not a peep. After the scolding and the ‘I told you sos,’ she’s been keeping herself pretty scarce. I think she wants me to grovel. Unfortunately, that’s exactly what I’ll have to do until I get on my feet. This was really a rude awakening. I just wish it was a year from now and all of this was behind me. I guess I’ll find out where I stand after I get home.”

The list of friends and acquaintances to say goodbye to was short. It seemed as though Abby had spent the last year and a half keeping Remy happy and being his wife instead of making friends of her own. Most of the people she knew were through Remy and the Island Guys. John seemed like the only person

that wasn't one of their groupies.

The news of Remy's betrayal had spread through the island like the morning sun. Abby wanted to get away from the humiliation as soon as possible. Today, her intentions were to tie up loose ends, say goodbye to anyone she cared about, and reconnect with her mom before the flight out tomorrow morning. With a short stop in Puerto Rico and a two-hour layover in Miami, she'd have plenty of time to regroup and calm down before arriving in Charleston. Melanie offered to pick her up at the airport and take her home. Abby would enter through the wrought-iron gates of the pink Italianate mansion on South Battery. Charlotte Melrose, and Abby's fate, would be waiting on the other side of the door.

Her seat was near the tail of the airplane, a bumpy, noisy area next to the lavatories, and since the seat didn't recline, she would be sitting in a very uncomfortable, upright position until they reached Puerto Rico.

Life may be a lot different going forward. No more first class, at least for now, she thought as the plane lifted skyward. She looked out the window and stared down at the island she was leaving, the place she had called home for nearly two years. She wondered if she would ever return. Would the memories of Remy ruin any happiness of a future visit, or could she separate the two? Did she even dare to imagine being there again, sometime down the road, with a man that really loved her? *I guess time will tell. For now, goodbye, St. Thomas. I'll miss you.*

Abby took advantage of the two-and-a-half-hour flight between San Juan and Miami to catch a nap. She would be too amped up to rest on the flight to Charleston.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is the captain speaking. We'll be landing in Charleston right at the noon hour. The weather is a balmy eighty degrees with light winds and good visibility. Please return your seats to the upright position and lock your tray tables. The flight attendants will be by to collect any last-minute items you want to discard. Thank you, and have a great afternoon. We'll be on the ground in twenty minutes."

I should have ordered a stiff drink, she thought. Her heart was pounding at an alarming rate at the realization she was about to be back in Charleston. *I'll ask Melanie to stop somewhere before we get home. I definitely need a drink... or two.*

There Melanie stood, wearing that huge smile she was known for and waving as Abby walked up the concourse toward her. Melanie was happy, carefree, and

vibrant—the woman Abby had always wanted to be like. She lived life on her own terms and said to hell with anyone who tried to change anything about her. A single woman not looking for anyone to complete her, Mel was the most upbeat, positive person Abby knew. People gravitated toward her. Abby was certain Mel was self-medicating to always be in that good a mood.

“There you are! I’m so happy you’re home, safe and sound. We’re going to get you back on track, just like that.” Melanie snapped her fingers to emphasize how quickly Abby’s life would be back to normal. “Consider the last two years as nothing more than a small speed bump in your journey through time. It’s all good. Let’s get your luggage and go home.” Melanie grabbed the backpack off Abby’s shoulder and slung it across her back. She air-kissed Abby’s cheeks, European style, and took her by the hand before leading her down the escalator toward baggage claim.

“I’m glad there’s one person that’s happy I’m back. I can’t say I am since I’m scared to death, and my mom won’t answer the phone. I have no idea what I’m going to walk in to. You’re coming in to help break the ice, right?” The conveyor belt started, and Abby watched each piece of luggage drop onto the carousel. Her eyes scanned the multitude of suitcases as she looked for the monogrammed leather Louis Vuitton duffel bag she was so fond of.

“Sure, if you think it will help. I wouldn’t want to be that poor soul on the wrong side of your mom... she’s kind of scary.”

“Ya think? I know one thing for sure,” Abby said while struggling to grab the leather handles of the heavy duffel bag and pull it off the belt.

“We’re stopping somewhere for a drink first?”

“You’ve got that right. How about Crabby’s Shack on King Street?”

Melanie parked her 2011 Toyota Camry along the curb, and they entered the darkened establishment that had been their go-to place since they turned twenty-one. The food was great, and Louis Dillard wasn’t too bad either. He was gorgeous with a capital G, but happily married. Louis did make the best cocktails in Charleston though. Strong yet smooth, just like him. He was co-owner of Crabby’s and a good friend to anyone passing through the louvered front doors. The girls grabbed vinyl barstools and sat, waiting for him to notice Abby Melrose was back in town.

“Abby, I can’t believe you’re home! Are you staying for good this time?”

“It kind of looks that way. How have you been, Louis?” She reached for the drink menu, knowing she needed something strong.

“I’m great. We’re expecting our first baby in a month. It’s going to be a girl, and Diana is more than stoked. Pretty exciting stuff, right?”

The sincerity in his voice warmed Abby’s heart. She was happy for him. She

took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “That’s so cool. Congrats. I’ll have a Gypsy Girl, and make it strong.”

“I’ll have the same but weak. I’m driving.”

“Mel, it’s thirteen blocks to my house from here. That’s less than seven minutes by car,” Abby said, laughing at Melanie’s responsible yet fun-loving nature.

“Well, whatever... the streets are always full of tourists darting around. I wouldn’t want to hit anyone because I was wasted.”

“Really, on one weak drink? You’re nuts. You know that, right?”

She smiled at Abby with perfectly aligned sparkling-white teeth. “I know, but you love me anyway.”

“Who doesn’t?”

After two drinks each, they settled the tab and promised to be back soon.

“Are you ready for this?” Mel asked as they climbed into the car and belted themselves in.

“No, but I don’t have a choice. It’s time to face the music. I was wrong, and my mom was right. It’s really just that simple. All I need to know right now is if she’s going to welcome me home or not.”

Mel drove the twelve short blocks down King Street and turned left on South Battery. She pulled into the side driveway a half block up and killed the engine. The ornate iron gates that led to the inner courtyard with its enormous fountain were twenty feet to her left. Both women stared at the house, feeling as if they were being watched, and quickly did their yoga breathing exercises.

“Okay, there’s no sense in prolonging this anymore, but my heart is going a hundred miles an hour. Let’s go,” Abby said.

Mel popped the trunk then grabbed the backpack off the back seat. Abby pulled the duffel bag out of the trunk, closed it, and punched the code into the keypad on the gate, allowing them to pass through. The chandeliers in the parlor glowed as the women walked by the open window. Charlotte was home, and they saw her watch their arrival from her vantage point on the widow’s walk. With a solemn look on her face, Abby opened the front door. Mittens, the black cat with white feet, greeted the women as they entered. She meowed loudly, brushing against their legs with her tail held high. Abby dropped her bag on the walnut floor of the foyer and knelt to pet the cat. The sound of high heels clicking on the second-level hallway told Abby her mother was approaching. Charlotte Melrose descended the circular staircase, obviously expecting all eyes to be on her, and they were. She wore a hot pink Lilly Pulitzer knit shift with pale gold trim. Charlotte was a member of upper-class society and was perceived by many as older, but at only forty-nine, she was far too young to dress like a

stuffy socialite. She hadn't seen Abby for eighteen months, yet she offered no motherly embrace.

"Mom, you look good. How have you been?" Abby asked, trying to break the tension hanging heavily in the air.

"Hello, Mrs. Melrose. Nice to see you again," Melanie said as she followed Abby and her mother to the parlor, where tea and finger sandwiches waited on the Queen Anne table.

Charlotte Melrose wasn't snooty by nature. She was angry and hurt that Abby had gone against her by marrying Remy. Her intention was to protect her only daughter from that predator, yet Abby couldn't see it at the time. The marriage forced a permanent wedge between mother and daughter, ruining the close relationship they once had. They both knew it would take a lot of work to repair the damage.

"Melanie, thank you for picking up Abigail at the airport, I've been busy. Please, have some tea and a sandwich."

Charlotte was accustomed to wearing dresses every day. "One might have unexpected guests," she'd always say. Before the money, twenty years earlier, they were just another family living a common middle-class lifestyle far from the likes of the upper-crust families in Charleston, south of Broad Street. That was where the society people lived, a place common people only dreamed about. Charlotte used to take the city bus with Abigail and a stroller in tow. She would walk Meeting Street, Bay Street, and East and South Battery. She'd daydream about the people living there and what their important lives must be like. *Do they host parties with servants catering to their every need? Do they attend galas and art exhibits regularly?* Back then, those questions consumed her whenever she strolled past the gorgeous mansions, each more fabulous than the one before.

But today life was different. Charlotte was wealthy, and she wanted to protect that wealth, especially since Edward was gone. And because of Abby's bad judgment, Charlotte had five million reasons to be furious with her.

Melanie said goodbye and graciously left. Abby and Charlotte needed time alone to sort out what the future would bring. Abby wasn't due another withdrawal from her trust fund until she was thirty, and she still had three years to go.

"Abigail, let's sit in the drawing room, shall we? We have plenty to discuss."

Charlotte instructed Betsy, the maid, to bring a tray with coffee, cream, and sugar into the drawing room, along with pen and paper. Abby followed her mother like a scolded adolescent, waiting for the wrecking ball to drop.

The drawing room was always one of Abby's favorite places to sit and reflect. The walls wore a rich but subtle cream palette to ensure the paintings had

no competition. Antique Chippendale furniture filled the room, and a vibrant Persian rug with four-inch cream-colored fringe lay over the walnut floors. The crystal pendants hanging from brass sconces created brilliant colors that danced against the walls every time the lights were turned on. Two matching brocade wingback chairs beckoned them to sit.

Betsy placed the coffee tray on a table between the chairs. “Welcome home, Miss Abigail. May I get you anything else, Mrs. Melrose?” she asked as she stepped back toward the pocket doors.

“No, thank you. I think we’re fine for now. Please close the doors on your way out.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Is there any new information on your missing husband and money, Abigail?”

“No, Mom, there isn’t. I’m pretty sure I’ll never see either of them again. From what I’ve been told, it isn’t illegal for a spouse to withdraw as much money from a bank or stock account as they want.”

“But it was *your* money, not his.”

“After we got married, it belonged to both of us. I put his name on all the accounts to make life easier. I didn’t feel it was right to have my husband asking me for money every time he needed some.”

“So the con artist had no money of his own until you made life *easier* for him? I guess he’s living on easy street now, and you’re the one with nothing. I was certain you were smarter than that, but obviously I was wrong.”

“Thanks, Mom. Don’t you think I feel bad enough?”

“You do remember what I said when you threatened to marry that vagrant, don’t you?” Charlotte stiffened and sat upright. She held the porcelain cup in the Blue Magnolia pattern in her right hand, her pinkie finger pointing upward. She handed Abby the paper and pen. “Here, figure out your life. Tomorrow at breakfast, I want to see what you wrote. If it’s reasonable and makes financial sense, I’ll speak to my attorney. If not, you’re on your own. Breakfast is at eight o’clock sharp. I suggest you get to it.” Charlotte patted her mouth with the hemstitched linen napkin, stood, left the room, and closed the pocket doors behind her.

Abby stared at the blank sheet of paper, holding the fountain pen in her hand. “I hate these damn things.” She found her backpack, still lying in the foyer with her duffel bag, and brought it into the parlor. A dozen hotel pens were in the zipped side pocket. “Good enough.” After pouring another cup of coffee, she curled up on the chair and began to chart her future. Abby wondered if she could ever be in a relationship or trust men again after Remy. Did he ruin any chance

she might have had to fall in love with somebody else? At the moment, she had to focus on her immediate need. Men could wait. She'd check out job postings online, hopefully in the only field she knew—relationship counseling. If there weren't any jobs available working for somebody else, she'd start her own practice, somehow, somewhere.

This outline has to look sincere, like I put a lot of thought into it. I'll need to take some refresher courses and find out if my certification is still good. Maybe if I take this seriously, I'll be able to read people better.

After two hours of Internet searches and note taking, Abby had a viable plan of action to present her mother at breakfast. She rose from the chair, stretched, and rolled her neck. Popping sounds from her knotted muscles told her just how tense she really was. With a deep sigh, she opened the pocket doors and walked out of the drawing room. Her duffel bag still lay untouched in the quiet foyer. Seeing it lying there made her wince with anxiety and remorse. Her mother wasn't welcoming her home, and deep down, Abby knew reconnecting with her wouldn't be easy. Betsy normally would have taken her bag upstairs, but it was likely Charlotte had told her not to. Abby would have to earn back her place in her mother's home, even if it was temporary.

She wondered if they would ever be close again or if all chances of that were gone for good.

Chapter Three

She woke to an entirely different feeling—life had changed again. Gone were the tropical birdcalls and sounds of the surf crashing against the shoreline. She lay in the bed she had used while growing up, sleeping alone, just as she had then. Abby rolled over, rubbed her eyes, and checked the time on her cell phone. *Crap! I have to be dressed and at breakfast in forty minutes.* Luckily, her closet still held the clothes she'd left behind almost two years ago, and her suite had a private bath. She dove out of bed with no time to wake up slowly and lazily. With the shower running and the water heating, she rifled through the closet and picked out a simple peach-colored sheath. Abby pinned her mass of curls up with a hair clip and stepped into the blissfully hot water. She didn't have enough time to bother with her hair that morning. She had to prove to Charlotte that she was responsible by arriving in the breakfast room at eight o'clock sharp with dry hair and wearing a respectable dress in one of her mother's favorite colors.

Abby grabbed the outline she had prepared the night before, inhaled deeply, and descended the staircase. Her mother sat at the table in the breakfast room, waiting. Charlotte glanced at the antique mantel clock sitting on the sideboard and gave an approving nod when Abby walked through the French doors.

"Good morning, Abigail. I hope you slept well."

"Good morning, Mom. I slept fine, and the coffee smells great."

Abby sat across from Charlotte, with White Point Garden directly out the large window in front of her. Betsy poured coffee for both of them, placed a bowl of fruit and a plate of croissants on the table, and exited the room. Abby set her outline on the table, hoping her mother wouldn't want to see it quite yet. Her stomach growled, indicating food and coffee were necessary before anything else.

Once breakfast was over, Charlotte asked to see the outline. Abby nervously handed the paperwork to her mother, waiting to find out her fate. After lifting the reading glasses that hung from the beaded lanyard and perching them on her nose, Charlotte read the four-page outline. Abby already had her master's degree, but she would need to take continuing education courses and become a licensed counselor if she wanted to start her own practice in marriage, family, and relationship counseling. She had been disappointed that she couldn't find any job openings in an existing practice during her online search last night. She researched the cost and length of time it would take before she could open her

practice. She was sure her mother would find that a respectable occupation. All Abby needed was a loan from her mother to make it a reality.

"It looks like you're taking this seriously with all the work you've put into this outline," Charlotte said. "The only problem is, it will take a year to accomplish, and you want a twenty-thousand-dollar loan. What will you do in the meantime?"

"I'll find something to prove myself. I'll work in a daycare center or nursing home during the day and take my courses at night. All I need is a roof over my head, and I'm hoping it will be here. I'm truly sorry for all the grief I've caused these last few years. I'll even accompany you to the galas and art events. It can be like old times again."

"We did have fun, didn't we? All right, I'll give you another chance to do the right thing. I'll stop in at my attorney's office this afternoon and have him change the will back as it was before the Remy fiasco. I'm having lunch with the board members of my favorite charity anyway, so I'll be in the general neighborhood." Charlotte poured each of them another cup of coffee and bit into a chocolate croissant.

"So you really did change the will?" Abby was shocked but not surprised that her mother had lived up to her word.

"Of course I did, dear. You defied me. I had no choice. I want another outline tonight at dinner of the school you're going to enroll in and places you've contacted today for employment. After you get a job and start school, I'll loan you the money."

Abby felt the flush of anger prick the back of her neck. Her mother was a control freak, but there was nothing she could do about it yet. Sure, she could work for meager wages somewhere, but that income would be eaten up by rent and living expenses. For the time being, she'd have to conform to her mother's demands even though they infuriated her. Abby retreated to her bedroom to get started on her assignment. She felt like a schoolkid again, having to obey her mother. *This is such crap. I'll call Mel and see what she's up to. Hopefully, she has time to do lunch.*

At twenty-seven, Abby felt like an irresponsible child, not having much money or even a car to call her own.

"Mel, what are you doing today? I really need someone to talk to, and a few beers. I'll buy lunch if you're free, but you'll have to pick me up."

"Sure, no problem, do you want to go to Crabby's again?"

"Yeah, I like the vibe there. It isn't a tourist trap. Do they still offer the best Crab Louie Salad in town?"

"They sure do, and the largest choice of beers. Okay, I'll pick you up at

noon.”

Abby checked the time. She still had two hours to kill. She’d get to her mother’s demands later. Right then, she wanted to reconnect with the beautiful city she used to call home. She followed the sound of voices she heard from downstairs at the back of the house. Her mother might come looking for her, so it was best to be upfront and say she was going out to clear her mind. Abby found Charlotte and Betsy in the lush walled garden behind the house. Charlotte sat at the wrought-iron table, paging through the Meyer’s Nursery catalog. She was choosing the annuals she wanted delivered and planted. Betsy was in charge of contacting the local nursery and making Charlotte’s every wish a reality.

“Hi, Mom. I’m going for a short walk around the neighborhood to gather my thoughts. I’ll be back in a half hour.”

“All right. Just remember what you need to do later. Don’t disappoint me, dear.”

“I wouldn’t think of it. I’ll be back soon.”

Abby left, feeling more deflated than ever, wondering how long she could tolerate Charlotte’s stranglehold on her every movement. She walked up East Battery to Rainbow Row, trying to enjoy the moment. She had always loved the colorful homes and the beautiful private gardens behind each gate. She remembered coming to the neighborhood as a child and behaving the same way the tourists did, gasping with excitement and clicking cameras at every lovely home and historical monument they passed. That was long before her family moved there themselves. She turned west on Elliot Street and followed it to Meeting Street, where she went south. Abby stopped at Two Meeting Street and went inside the beautiful bed-and-breakfast to say hello to the proprietors. The owners were close friends of Charlotte’s—a welcoming couple who had been a mainstay in Charleston for years. On her way home, she stopped at White Point Garden and found an empty bench to sit on. She’d gone there often before she met Remy and moved to St. Thomas. She inhaled the ocean air deeply, thankful that nothing about the area had changed.

Back in her room before meeting Mel, Abby searched the job postings online and jotted down anything she thought might be a possibility. She caught sight of the flashing red light on her charging cell phone lying on the night table next to her bed. John at Magens Bay had left a message that said he’d heard through the grapevine that Remy was in Ecuador living it up. That was all John knew, except that Ecuador didn’t have an extradition treaty with the United States. He apologized again for Abby’s misfortune with Remy and assured her that she was missed by everyone in Magens Bay.

Abby was thankful Charlotte had left the house before Melanie arrived. The

last thing she wanted was to be interrogated by her mother in front of her best friend. Abby pulled the sheers back and watched from her bedroom window as Charlotte drove away in her black Mercedes sedan to meet with board members from one of her many charities. Charlotte was involved with a dozen organizations throughout Charleston. Abby wondered if her mother was really that philanthropic or if she just enjoyed the attention, inflating her already oversized ego. With a sigh, Abby plopped down on her antique mahogany bed, causing the springs to squeak, and began searching the online job sites. She found four possibilities she would check into after lunch. She bookmarked each site and powered down her laptop. Mel would be out front any minute. Abby grabbed her purse, checked her reflection in the gilded mirror hanging in the foyer, then went outside to sit on the columned, covered veranda to watch for Melanie.

“Seriously, are you really going to work at a fast-food joint for seven bucks an hour just to please your mom?” Mel asked. She slurped her clam chowder with fish crackers floating on top.

“No, I’m not going to those extremes, but I’ve saved four jobs I’m going to call about later this afternoon. Two of the jobs are in daycare centers, one is a hostess position in a downtown restaurant, and one is a job as a helper in a retirement center. I know none of them are going to pay well, but I need to prove to my mom that I’m making an effort. I have to do something while I’m going to school or she won’t loan me the money to open my practice.”

“So you really want to be a relationship counselor? That’s your desire in life, something you’ve always wanted to do?” Melanie chuckled and shook her head. After downing her first beer, she held up her mug to get the waitress’s attention. “Two more Bulls Bay Oyster Stouts, please.”

“No Louis today?” Abby noticed behind the bar several people she didn’t recognize.

“Naw... I guess he’s been remodeling one of their bedrooms into a cute pink nursery. Business is really good here, so he can take off whenever he wants to. Hey, why don’t you ask Louis for a job?”

“I don’t know about that, especially since he knows my mom has money. Don’t you think it would seem weird to him that I’m begging for a job? At least if I work in a place where nobody knows me, I won’t come off as pathetic.”

“I guess you’re right, but I can ask around, too. I know a lot of movers and shakers in the fashion industry, plus my job is actually fun.”

“True. I’d much rather work in some high-end fashion house than give old people sponge baths.”

Chapter Four

After she finished her Crab Louie and beer, Abby checked the time. "I better get home before my mom does. I don't really want her knowing I've been out. I'll get another lecture, and believe me, I've had enough for this week." Abby got the attention of the waitress and asked for the check.

"Abs, if it's really that bad, just move in with me. We can make it work."

"Thanks, but two people living in a one-bedroom apartment the size of my room at home is next to impossible. You barely have enough room for your own clothes, fashionista that you are. I'll deal with my mom for as long as I can."

The women left Crabby's and headed south on King Street. Several blocks down, a police officer stood in the street redirecting traffic. He motioned for them to turn left onto Tradd Street with the other cars ahead of them. They could catch Meeting Street from Tradd and continue to South Battery. They craned their necks, trying to look farther down King Street before they turned left. Sirens blared and lights flashed several blocks ahead as they tried to see what the commotion was about. An ambulance and two squad cars zoomed past before they made the turn.

"I remember hearing sirens while we were eating, don't you?" Abby squinted, trying to get a better look before they turned off King Street.

"Now that you mention it, yeah, I do. I wonder what the heck is going on."

They reached the home of Charlotte Melrose, and Abby got out. "I'd invite you in, but until I find employment for pay, I better lay low. Thanks for doing lunch with me and listening to my woes. I'll let you know how my job search is going."

"Don't forget, I'm going to work my magic on your behalf. Maybe I can find you something better than changing bedpans." Melanie laughed at the scowling expression Abby made.

"Thanks for that visual. Now I'll probably dream about it." Abby punched the code into the keypad and entered the courtyard. She waved to Mel and closed the heavy outer door behind her. Sitting on the bench in the foyer, Abby kicked off her shoes. The habit was long ago instilled in her because she was never allowed to wear outdoor shoes inside the house. Only high heels were allowed on the floors, and that was permitted only when exiting the home on the way to an elegant affair.

Betsy called out, "Miss Abigail, would you like some sweet tea?"

“That sounds delicious, but I’ll come and get it. No need to bring it up to my room.” Abby entered the kitchen and sat at the small table nestled in the bay window alcove. Sitting there brought back fond childhood memories. They had moved to the mansion on South Battery when Abby was ten years old. She remembered mornings with her dad at that very table. They would have toaster waffles swimming in thick maple syrup several times a week before he left for work. Those were the early days before Betsy, when Edward Melrose was on the fast track to becoming a millionaire. They had just purchased the pink mansion, still pinching themselves in disbelief that they could live in such an opulent home in the best neighborhood of Charleston. Back then, the thought of a maid or housekeeper hadn’t entered their minds. “Betsy, come and sit with me.”

“Oh, Miss Abigail, I should really start preparing dinner. Your mother said she wanted to eat at six o’clock sharp. She has a fund-raiser to go to at seven thirty tonight.” Betsy filled a cut-glass tumbler and carried it to the table, setting it down in front of Abby. Beads of condensation rolled down the glass to the linen napkin below.

“Please sit with me for just one glass of sweet tea. You’ll have plenty of time to make dinner. Did my mom say when she would be home?”

“No, ma’am, but I’d expect her back soon.” Betsy reached for another glass from the white upper cabinet. “I’ll sit for ten minutes.” She gave Abby a toothy grin and poured herself a glass of sweet tea.

“Would it bother you too much to just call me Abby? I’d rather be informal, at least when my mom isn’t here.”

“Yes, Miss Abigail, but I’ll have to practice being informal. It doesn’t come natural for me, being a maid most of my life. I’ll call you Miss Abby if you like. When your mother isn’t here, that is.”

“Thanks, I’d really like that. Let me pour us both another glass of tea.”

At three o’clock, Abby retreated to her room to begin making phone calls. She hoped to schedule at least two interviews before the weekend and more beginning the next week. She also wanted to research what was required to change her last name. That would mean involving Charlotte, though, something Abby dreaded. She didn’t want to be called Abby Bellavance anymore, yet she had serious reservations about going back to the Melrose name. There were too many predators out there, people that had one and only one intention—to take the money and run. Abby would be far smarter than that next time around, if there ever was a next time. She would consult with her mom, like it or not. Abby was seriously considering using her mother’s maiden name. Hopefully, with her mom’s blessing, she’d change her name to Abigail Marie Johnstone. If there was another marriage in her future, Abby would be prepared—with a different last

name and a prenup.

With one interview set up at Children's Hour Daycare Center for tomorrow at ten a.m. and another interview for a server position at The Wicked Hop Brewery at one thirty, Abby happily ran downstairs to grab another sweet tea. Surprised to find Charlotte hadn't yet returned at four o'clock, Abby sat in the backyard, feeling a little deflated. She was anxious to tell her mother she had interviews scheduled. They weren't overwhelming opportunities, but they were jobs nonetheless.

The sound of the doorbell and voices in the foyer were enough to pique Abby's curiosity. She rose to go inside, but met Betsy and two uniformed police officers in the doorway. A quick look at Betsy told Abby something was terribly wrong. Tears streamed down Betsy's caramel-colored face. The officers wore somber expressions.

"Betsy, what's wrong? What's going on?"

"Miss Abby, it's your mother." Betsy took two steps and collapsed at the table on the patio with her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Ma'am, I'm Officer Rhine, and this is Officer Bouton." The older policeman pointed to the younger man beside him. "Is Charlotte Melrose your mother?"

"Yes." The quivering lower lip was involuntary, but Abby couldn't help herself. She knew bad news was coming. She sat next to Betsy and grabbed her hand. Tears sprang from her eyes as words she didn't want to hear were spoken. She knew they couldn't be taken back once they were said.

"Ma'am, we're sorry to inform you that your mother passed away in a car accident a few hours ago. The fire department had to use the Jaws of Life to pry open the car. That's why it took so long to identify her. Ma'am... Miss Melrose?"

"What? Are you sure... are you certain it was her? Could you be mistaken? This can't be happening. Not Mom, too." Tears stung Abby's eyes as they rolled down her chin and fell to her shirt. "What kind of car was it? Are you sure it was hers? Where was the accident?" The questions seemed irrelevant, but she had to be sure.

"It was a black 2014 Mercedes E-Class sedan. The accident happened on King Street and Price's Alley. A garbage truck broadsided her car as it came out of the alley. Apparently, the driver had a massive heart attack and died at the scene, too."

"No, it can't be. I was detoured away from that accident earlier today. I can't

believe it was my own mother.”

“We’re sorry for your loss, ma’am. Your mother’s remains were taken to the Coroner’s Office on Bridge View Drive in North Charleston.” Officer Rhine handed Abby his card and told her to call the police department to get the police report. “We’re right behind City Hall, Miss Melrose.” The officers shook Abby’s hand and left.

Shock and disbelief hung in the air like a heavy wool blanket. Abby stared into emptiness, her heart aching again for someone she had lost. She wasn’t particularly close to Charlotte, but she knew that in time, everything would have been okay. Suddenly, nothing was okay. She had nobody to call family other than distant relatives in other states. She’d lost touch with them years ago, and she was sure she didn’t have anyone’s contact information anymore. Abby turned toward Betsy, who was still crying with her head slumped to her chest.

“Betsy, what are we going to do, and who are we going to contact? I don’t have any of my mom’s legal or financial information. I’ve only been home a few days. I have no idea who to call. I’ll have to get hold of her attorney. Do you know what his name is?” Panic began to creep up Abby’s throat, squeezing her airway until she felt light-headed. “I feel like I’m going to faint.”

The backyard spun so fast Abby’s eyes couldn’t keep up. Darkness spread across her visual field. With her ears ringing and feeling a strong urge to vomit, she fell off the chair from dizziness and landed on the lawn. She woke up with Betsy kneeling over her. Blue sky and Betsy’s flowing tears were all she saw. It took a few seconds for her to realize what had happened. Abby sat up slowly, holding her temples.

“I don’t know Mom’s attorney’s name. I don’t even have a car, for Pete’s sake.” Abby wiped her eyes and rubbed the side of her head.

“Miss Abby, I don’t have a car either. Your mother said it wasn’t convenient to have two cars in the driveway.” Betsy held out her hand and helped Abby to her feet.

“We’ll have to go through my mom’s things to find out what we need to know. I have to call Melanie and tell her what happened. She’ll give me a ride to the coroner’s office. I want you to start going through paperwork in my mom’s room. Set aside anything that looks like a legal document. I have to know if she has a plot next to my dad’s... and there are so many other things we need to take care of. Will you do that for me?” Abby sounded exhausted. She had no clue how to proceed. *One thing at a time. Just get through today.*

“Ma’am, it feels wrong going through Miss Charlotte’s things. She would be so upset with me.”

“Please. I need your help, and I’m giving you permission. I have to get to the

coroner's office and figure out what to do next. Set any paperwork that looks important on her bed. We'll go through everything in more detail later."

"Yes, Miss Abby."

"I have to call Melanie right now." Abby's voice cracked as she held Betsy's hand.

Melanie's car screeched to a halt in the driveway. Abby waited on the veranda, sitting on a floral-cushioned chair. Alerted by the sound of the car, she got up and walked to the gate in a clouded fog, letting Melanie in.

"I'm so sorry, honey. I just can't believe this happened." Mel hugged Abby tightly. Words didn't seem adequate at the moment, but showing support did. "Anything you need, just let me know. I'm here for you, anytime, day or night."

"Right now, we need to go to the coroner's office. That's where the ambulance took Mom. I guess there wasn't any reason to take her to a hospital since she was already..."

"It's okay. I understand. I'll help you get through this. You're a strong woman, Abby Melrose. Don't ever forget that. Just get in the car and take a breath. I've got this."

When they arrived, Abby and Melanie walked into the lobby of the coroner's office and approached the overly-permed red-headed clerk behind the counter.

"I don't know if I can do this," Abby said, her voice wavering. She reached in her purse and handed Melanie her old driver's license. "They wanted me to bring proof of my identity. This is all I have."

"Okay, sit down. I'll take care of everything." Mel took the driver's license, patted Abby's shoulder, and pointed to the waiting area. "Hello, ma'am, I'm Melanie Davis, here with Abigail Melrose. We were told her mother, Charlotte Melrose, was transported here after a car accident earlier today. I don't have the slightest idea what to do, or ask, so please excuse our ignorance." She handed the license to the coroner's clerk.

"Of course, dear, and yes, Mrs. Melrose is here. The next of kin will have to identify her. Will that be Abigail?"

"Unfortunately, yes, but she's pretty shaken right now. Can you tell me what the protocol is?"

"Certainly. First, the body needs to be identified. After that, we can tell the next of kin what the cause of death was if they want to know. We'll also arrange transportation to the funeral home of choice and supply the next of kin with the necessary copies of the death certificate."

"I see." Melanie leaned over the counter and whispered to the clerk, "Will you keep her here until we figure out what funeral home and cemetery to have her transported to? We don't have all that information yet."

"Yes, we certainly will. Why don't you take a seat for a moment? I'll have the coroner come out and speak to both of you."

"Thank you." Melanie walked away, filled two Dixie cups with water, and sat down next to Abby. "Here, drink this. Do you need any antacids or aspirin? I have a whole pharmacy in my purse."

"I'm okay, but thanks. You'll stay with me today, won't you? I'm really going to need your help."

"Sure, I will. I'll call in a few days of vacation at work. They owe me plenty."

A middle-aged gentleman wearing a white lab coat came out from the double doors to their left. He wore thick bifocals and had graying temples. He approached Abby and Melanie, asking which of them was family of the deceased. Abby stood, her eyes swollen and bloodshot, and explained that she was Charlotte Melrose's daughter. The coroner sat next to Abby and introduced himself as Dr. David Harmon. He asked if Abby wanted her mother to have an autopsy but said that in his opinion, it wasn't necessary. Her body had extensive trauma caused by the collision. Nothing else was necessary to determine the cause of death.

"Will you be able to identify your mother, Miss Melrose? You can look through the window if you don't think you're capable of anything else. We have her personal effects in a locker to give you before you leave. Whenever you're ready, but please, take your time."

"Okay, I guess I'm ready. Mel, will you go with me? I'm only going to look through the window. I don't think I can do any more than that."

"Of course I will."

"All right, ladies, just follow me to the window. I'll go inside and prepare her. When I open the curtain, just nod your head, then I'll close it again. That's all you need to do."

Abby gave Mel a frightened look and held her hand as they followed Dr. Harmon. Abby's hand was shaking through the tight grip. The curtain opened, Abby gasped, nodded her head, and turned to face the wall. Within five seconds, it was over, and the curtain was closed once more.

Dr. Harmon came out and gave Abby a comforting embrace, then he explained the identification process. "All you have to do now is sign the form acknowledging you identified the deceased as your mother, tell us how many copies of the death certificate you need, and sign the consent form agreeing to keep her here until we release her to the funeral home. I'm very sorry for your

loss, Miss Melrose. Please follow me.”

Chapter Five

Abby signed all the papers, gathered her mother's belongings, and left with Melanie. Back at the house, she sat at the kitchen table with Melanie and Betsy, a stiff drink in front of each of them, and began scrolling through her mother's cell phone.

"I think this is the easiest and fastest way to find most of the people we'll need to contact. She told me she was going to her attorney's office today. I'm sure his phone number would be in her call list." Abby checked the calls her mother had made in the last two days, but surprisingly, the only calls were to the Historic Charleston Foundation and the Art Institute of Charleston. "I don't understand this. She said she was going to a board meeting luncheon today, then to her attorney's office after that. Mel, what time did we leave Crabby's?"

"I think it was around two o'clock. Why?" Mel took a sip of her single malt scotch and waited for Abby's reply.

"That's right, and my mom already had the accident by then. Betsy, I was home by two fifteen, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were, Miss Abby."

"That means my mom went to the luncheon but never stopped at her attorney's office. Either she changed her mind, or she was stopping at the house first for some reason. Either way, we'll never know. I'll have to look online for all the attorneys in Charleston and see if any of them match up with the names on her contact list. At least that's a start. I'm sure he would have copies of all my mom's legal documents and everything else important. Betsy, Mel and I are going to the police department to get a copy of the accident report and to the cemetery to see if there's a plot next to my dad's for my mom. You can start by printing out all the attorneys' names in Charleston and the surrounding areas. We'll be back in a few hours."

"Miss Abby?"

"Yes, Betsy?"

"I don't know how to use a computer. Miss Charlotte never let me near hers. I'm sorry."

"That's okay. Can you just compare the attorneys listed in the phone book to my mom's contact list on her phone?"

"Yes, ma'am, I can do that."

It took only ten minutes at the police department to pick up the accident report. Abby wasn't sure why she might need it, but she assumed it would be necessary for the car insurance claim. She and Melanie headed to Magnolia Cemetery next. Most of her ancestors on the Melrose side were buried in the beautiful old cemetery. Abby hoped there was a family plot, but it was something she and Charlotte had never discussed after Edward's death.

The girls entered the cemetery office and asked the exact location of Edward's grave and if there was indeed a Melrose family plot. Because the cemetery covered ninety-two acres, Abby needed directions to find her father's grave. They were told there was a Melrose family plot with four gravesites left but none next to Edward.

"I don't understand that, Mel. Wouldn't my mom be buried next to my dad?"

"If the plots were purchased many years ago, I guess it was first come, first served."

"That's a disgusting thing to say but probably true. I guess we can look at what's left and pick the one closest to my dad. Who's going to complain anyway?" Abby gave Mel a quick smile as she searched for her father's headstone.

Edward Melrose was buried next to an enormous live oak. Spanish moss hung from every limb, deeply shading the area yet giving it an eerie feeling.

"Here's my dad's grave. I barely remember the day he died even though it was only five years ago. I think my mom and I were both in shock." Abby brushed away the stray moss that clung to the headstone. She knelt next to the grave and said a silent prayer, telling her father how much she missed him. She placed a small round stone on the granite block, symbolizing that someone had come to visit Edward. "Let's find the nearest available plot and see what it looks like."

Melanie, who was one row to the right and three gravesites away from Edward's, said, "Do you think this spot is part of the Melrose plot?"

"I don't know, but I'll sketch out the location. I'm sure the cemetery superintendent has a map of all the vacant gravesites and knows if they're spoken for."

Back inside the building, Abby asked about the empty plot. The superintendent, Mr. LaRue, a portly man, showed her the four available gravesites on the map. The one Melanie found was in the Melrose plot and available. All were paid for many years earlier.

"My mom passed away this morning, and I'd like that spot for her. It's the

nearest to my dad, and it looks nice. Can I set up a memorial service here in the chapel?"

"Yes, indeed. How soon would you like the service? I have this coming Saturday and the following Friday available. Do you have someone in mind that will give the eulogy, or do you need to hire a professional speaker?"

"Oh my gosh, I don't know. I haven't thought that far ahead. Who would write the eulogy?"

"Normally, the family puts something together and gives it to the speaker. Many times, family members are too distraught to speak themselves. It's just an idea. Let me give you a brochure showing the services we offer."

"Thank you. I think I'll plan for the Friday after next. Please set that up for me, then I'll get back to you on the à la carte options."

"Very well, then. My condolences to your family, Miss Melrose, and I'll wait for your call."

The drive back to South Battery took a half hour. Abby stared out the side window, still in disbelief. That morning, Charlotte had been alive, sniping at Abby the same way she had since Abby had returned home a few days ago. Abby had complained about her mother to Melanie at lunch. If only she could take everything back and rewind the day. Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes.

Mel reached across the console and took Abby's hand. "I think we need another drink. Maybe Betsy has good news. She may have found out the attorney's name by now."

They entered through the gate at the back of the driveway. Since there wasn't a car at home any longer, Melanie could park her Toyota there. The walled garden behind the house was a private sanctuary, beautiful and lush with flowers and greenery. A small pond held koi and water lilies, and the fountain in the center bubbled a soothing, peaceful sound. Beautiful songbirds darted back and forth to all the feeders, perhaps hoping to grab the best seeds for themselves. Just as the ladies sat down in the garden to look over the progress Betsy had made, the house telephone rang. Betsy rose, smoothed her simple blue dress, and walked to the library with her sweet tea to answer it.

"Melrose residence, may I help you?"

"Yes, this is Attorney William Baron Lewis calling. I'm the attorney in charge of handling Charlotte Melrose's estate. May I ask who this is?"

"This is Betsy Stowe, the maid, but I think you should speak with Abigail, Charlotte's daughter. I'll get her. Please hold on." Abby and Melanie were going

through the attorney names that had been highlighted in the phone book when Betsy rushed to the garden. "Miss Abby, there's an attorney on the phone. He said he's the attorney for your mother's estate."

"What's his name?" Abby asked as she got up to retrieve Charlotte's phone. "It sounds like his name should be 'ambulance chaser.'"

"He said it's William Baron Lewis, ma'am, and he's waiting for you to come to the phone."

"Well, he can wait a little longer. I want to see if his name is on her contact list. If he really is Mom's estate attorney, his name will be there. Hmmm... there he is. Okay, I'll bite." Abby walked to the library with her drink and sat at the desk. A pad of paper and a small vase of pens were always at the ready. Abby pulled the pad closer and grabbed a pen as she made herself comfortable. "Hello. Abby Melrose Bellavance here. Whom am I speaking to?"

"Miss Melrose, this is Attorney William Baron Lewis, your mother's personal attorney. I handle all of her legal matters as well as her will. I'm sorry for your loss, ma'am."

"How did you hear about my mother's passing so quickly?" Abby was sizing the man up and decided she didn't like his air of superiority. "Mr. Lewis?" She took a sip of her scotch, swirled the ice cubes in the glass, and waited.

"It's *Attorney* William Baron Lewis, Miss Melrose."

"Right... and you heard of her passing, how?"

"Let's just say I have close contact with the Charleston emergency service department."

"So, you're an ambulance chaser... is that what you're saying?"

"Excuse me?" He sounded agitated. "Miss Melrose, I've been your mother's personal attorney for years. I've been instructed to execute her will as soon as possible upon her untimely parting. I'll have to meet with you and anyone else listed in the will in order to proceed."

"Mr. Lewis, my mother hasn't even been buried yet. I'll get back to you in a few weeks. Please respect our right to mourn." Abby hung up, grabbed the bottle of scotch, and returned to the garden.

Mel and Betsy sipped their drinks, anxious to hear what the attorney said to Abby.

"I can't believe that man. All he's looking for is his piece of the pie. I'll worry about the will after Mom has been put to rest. Now I have to figure out who to call that's related to us. Anyone in town will read about her death in the newspaper. Oh no, I have to come up with an obituary. Betsy, you've been by my mom's side for years. You know all the organizations she was a member of, and I think you can give me some favorable adjectives to use in describing her. You

must have seen the sweet side of her now and then, didn't you?"

"Of course, Miss Abby, I'll get started on that right away. Would you like dinner first, ma'am?"

"No, thanks. This stuff is more important to take care of than meals. It's time to let your hair down and stop worrying about serving us. Between you, Mel, and me, we'll get everything done correctly and thoroughly. Tonight, we're ordering pizza."

A smile crossed Betsy's face as she embraced Abby. Her gold-flecked eyes glistened with tears as Abby expressed her gratitude for Betsy's years of service in the Melrose household.

"From now on, this house is going to be less formal. Are you okay with that?"

"Yes, ma'am. What would you and Miss Melanie like on your pizza?"

"You decide. You're eating it, too. Make sure to order an extra-large for all of us. Who delivers the groceries?"

"It's a private company called At Your Service. I give them the list Mrs. Melrose draws up weekly, then they deliver the groceries from the natural foods store on Spring Street."

"Well, you can cancel their services. From now on, we're buying groceries at Publix, and we'll go together. I think it's time to trim the fat around here. I'm sure my mom spent thousands more a month than she needed to. We're going to make a lot of changes, beginning with my name. No more Miss Abby, it's just Abby. Okay? As far as I'm concerned, Betsy, you're family. You may be the housekeeper and cook, but starting now, in this house, we're going by first names only."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And no more calling anyone *ma'am* either." Abby laughed at the shocked expression on Betsy's face. "Don't get me wrong. I loved my mom. Over the last few years, we were estranged, but I'm sure you were aware of that. I certainly didn't wish any harm to her, and now her death is excruciating. There's so much I wish we could have changed or fixed, but it's too late. I'll have to live with that burden forever. But going forward, I want this huge old house to feel like a home, a welcoming, happy home, not a place where you have to tiptoe around for fear of being scolded. So starting today, I want you to let your guard down and feel just as much at home in this house as I do. The only difference is, you're the paid cook and housekeeper. And now, I'd really like to see your room."

"My room? Why would you want to see that? It's not in the best condition, Miss... I mean, Abby."

"Exactly, and that's about to change."

Charlotte always kept money in the house for incidentals. Abby knew that for a fact since many times, she had seen her mother come out of the bedroom with a wad of cash in her hand. Abby was sure it was hidden somewhere in the master suite.

“Okay, you guys, we’re going on a treasure hunt. Literally. My mom kept money in the house, probably in her bedroom. We need cash—and fast. I barely have any of my own, and Betsy, I bet you don’t either.”

Betsy stared at Abby with eyes the size of saucers. Mel rubbed her hands together so fast, they almost ignited in anticipation of the fun.

“On a serious note, I’ll have to come up with money for my mom’s funeral and memorial service. I have to support this household, pay utility bills, and buy groceries. We really need a car, so I’m sure you understand where I’m coming from. Oh my gosh, I just had an epiphany. Mel, how much do you pay for rent, and how big is your apartment?”

“Um...it’s probably eight hundred fifty square feet, not that big, Abs. You’ve seen it. I pay one thousand fifty dollars a month plus utilities. Why?”

“Move in with us. It’s the perfect idea. This house has nine bedrooms, for crying out loud. Each of the larger bedrooms has its own private bath, plus there are three other full baths and two powder rooms downstairs. Look how gigantic this house is, and it’s beautiful. All you’d have to do is pay your rent here instead, and kick in for the food. Please say yes. It’s meant to be.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m totally serious. This is my house now, and I can do whatever I want with it.”

“Who wants a drink?” Betsy asked with newfound joy in her voice. “We have to make a toast to new beginnings because I know Melanie is going to say yes. She’d be crazy not to.”

“Okay, you’ve got a deal. Betsy, is there any champagne in the house?”

“There sure is. Pizza and champagne sounds wonderful, doesn’t it?”

After dinner and once several flutes of champagne were toasted to Charlotte, the ladies went upstairs to begin the search. Living in a massive mansion with no money wasn’t an option. It would take months, Abby was sure, before her mother’s estate would be settled. For the time being, they had to find cash to live on. Abby’s stash of cash from St. Thomas was almost depleted. After the purchase of the airplane ticket back to the states, she was left with two thousand one hundred dollars to her name.

The three women searched the entire bedroom. By the time they reached the

closet, the suite looked as though the latest hurricane had ripped through with a fury.

“Nothing yet, damn it. The money must be in the closet. We’ll have to go through everything that has a pocket, and all the shoe boxes, too. Betsy, bring a pitcher of sweet tea up here, please. This closet is going to get stuffy.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.” The sound of Betsy’s shoes running down the staircase made Abby laugh. When Charlotte was alive, heaven forbid if the walnut floors got scuffed. Betsy would have had to polish the floor on her hands and knees if Charlotte had ever got wind of something like that. Betsy returned quickly with three glasses and a pitcher of icy sweet tea on a tray. She placed the tray carefully on the night table next to Charlotte’s bed and let out an involuntary snuffle mixed with a tiny sob.

Abby turned to see Betsy wipe her nose and cheeks with her forearm. “What’s wrong?”

“A memory, that’s all... I’m sorry.”

“Tell us about it, please.” Abby and Melanie came out of the closet and sat on the edge of the bed.

“It’s just going to be so different going forward. Everything I’ve been programmed to do or not do over the last fifteen years will change. I used to bring Miss Charlotte a tray with warm milk and cookies every evening, and I’d set it right here on this table. It makes me sad, that’s all. I guess it’s been a long day.”

“My mom had her sweet moments, didn’t she?”

“Yes, she did... but she could really get under my skin, too,” Betsy said with a laugh. “I would be honored to help write the eulogy.”

“Thanks, I’m counting on it. I really believe you knew her best. Now use that energy and think really hard. Where would my mom put that money?”

“Well... she was very particular about her shoes and always stored them in the shoe boxes. She was extremely fond of an ugly pair of knee-high boots. I never could figure out why. The box is on the top shelf over here.” Betsy led the women back into the closet and pointed to a large boot box on the far right top shelf. “I never understood why she kept that box up so high if she loved those boots so much. As short as she was, she had to get the step stool out every time she pulled it down.”

Mel gave Abby an encouraging grin. “Go for it, girl. You’re the tallest one in the bunch.”

Abby reached as high as she could and caught the edge of the box with her fingertips. She pulled it forward until it dropped into her arms. “Shall we have a look?”

The three sat on the bed and paused for a moment. “Do it, Abby. Open the lid,” Melanie said.

Abby apprehensively lifted the lid, afraid she’d be disappointed. Inside lay a pair of tan knee-high fashion boots with suede fringe and buckles along the side.

“Damn it, no money.”

The three exhaled the breaths they were holding with loud sighs. Abby pulled the boots out of the box to have a closer look.

“I see what you mean. These are hideous. What the...?”

“What?”

An enormous grin brightened Abby’s face. “Check it out!” She turned the boots upside down and hit the soles with her open hand. Stacks of money fell out of the shaft of each boot.

“Oh, heaven’s to...”

“Betsy?” Abby chuckled.

“Yes, that’s what I meant. I’ve never seen that much money in my entire life. Should I go downstairs and lock the doors?” Betsy asked.

Abby agreed and laughed with relief. “Sure, go ahead. We’ll wait for you and drink our tea. We’re counting this money together.”

Chapter Six

By eleven o'clock, all of the cash was counted and rubber banded. The ladies lay back on Charlotte's king-sized bed, relaxed and happy. In all, they counted seventeen thousand sixty-eight dollars.

"This will hold us over until after my mom's will is read and the estate is settled. Thank you, Mom, for setting this cash aside, even though I'm positive it wasn't meant for me. I appreciate it anyway. Tomorrow, I'm going to call Mr. LaRue and have him set the time for the service. I think I'll have a luncheon served, too. Betsy, we need to go through Mom's phone again and figure out which people on her contact list we need to notify, and tomorrow, your bedroom is getting an overhaul. Mel, pick out a room. I'm exhausted, so I'm going to bed. Good night."

Abby lay in bed with the pillows plumped behind her shoulders. Darkness filled the room, and the night was quiet. She could finally unwind and hopefully sleep. The low whirring sound of the ceiling fan brought back memories of St. Thomas and Remy. Would he have consoled Abby about her mother's tragedy if he were still in her life? Today had been a blur, too unbelievable, too busy, and too heart wrenching. She focused on the spinning blades. The only light came from the inch of space beneath the door. On the other side was the long hallway, the hallway Charlotte Melrose used to walk with her high-heeled shoes, always going somewhere special. For the first time that day, Abby felt absolutely, completely alone. Silent tears streamed down her face, pooling in her ears until they slid farther to hit the pillow bunched up underneath her head. In the short span of a month, Remy had gone, and now her mother was gone, too. As much as Abby wanted to hate Remy, she found it difficult. It wasn't in her to hate anyone. She thought about his golden skin and stunning green eyes. Those dreadlocks and his sleek, muscular body—along with his charismatic personality—were enough to have every tourist and island girl panting after him.

Why didn't I see the signs? He was bad news from the start. I felt it in my gut. I alienated Mom because of him, and now she's dead. I can't ever apologize to her. It's too late for us to be a family. I wasted two years of my life throwing myself and my money at this man who told me how much he loved me when I could have been spending that time with Mom. Maybe I do hate you after all, Remy... maybe I do.

After counting each rotating fan blade for an hour, Abby finally drifted off to

sleep.

Saturday arrived with dark, threatening skies and thunderstorms. Lightning strikes sounded in the distance but were closing in on Charleston. Every rumble made the windows shake and the women jump. They sat at the kitchen table together, each holding a mug of coffee and going over the finalized eulogy for Charlotte Melrose, Charleston socialite and philanthropist. The newspaper release and obituary went out two days ago, and the calls were pouring in. Betsy was in charge of handling telephone condolences and letting people know when to arrive at Magnolia Cemetery for the service and the luncheon being held afterward in the dining room next to the chapel. Abby had already contacted any relative that might care enough to attend. Most of Charlotte's family was envious of the good fortune bestowed on her over the past twenty years. Abby didn't care if they showed up or not since she hadn't seen any of them for years. She assumed most of the people that would attend the service were true friends of Charlotte's and likely members of the organizations she was involved in.

The doorbell rang, and Betsy ran to answer it. Even the rain couldn't ruin her excitement. The new furniture for her room had arrived. She instructed the delivery driver to back up under the driveway portico so nothing would get wet. They could unload the furniture there and bring it up to her new bedroom. Yesterday, Abby had instructed Betsy to take the last unused room on the third floor as her own. The worn-out furniture Betsy had lived with for the last fifteen years was given to a women's shelter, and the furniture in Betsy's new room was moved to the second floor, into her old room. Abby hoped that having a large bedroom with a private bath in her new accommodations would make Betsy feel like one of the family. Abby gave Melanie her old room, and she took over Charlotte's master suite.

The three women stood in the doorway and admired Betsy's new bedroom set after the delivery men left.

"Here's what I think," Abby said. "I think this room looks beautiful, fit for a beautiful woman such as yourself, Betsy. I also think it was way overdue, and I apologize for the condition your old room was in. Going forward, we're making a new family in this house. It's going to be a family created not by blood but by love... so here's to us." Abby lifted her cup of coffee and clinked it against Betsy's and Melanie's cups. "This beautiful mansion on South Battery is going to spring to life, a rebirth if you will, starting with us, her new residents. As long as there's nothing we can do outside today, let's box up everything in your

apartment, Mel, and start bringing your things here. You have a new zip code, girl.”

“Abby, there’s a phone call for you from Attorney Lewis. He says it’s urgent.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake... Fine, I guess I’ll take it. Hello, Mr. Lewis. What can I help you with on this rainy *Saturday*?” Abby paced back and forth in the library as she listened to the pushy attorney, aggravated that he called on a weekend.

“Yes, Miss Melrose, it’s *Attorney* Lewis calling. I’m wondering if your mother’s car insurance company has contacted you yet.”

“Nobody has contacted me other than you, Mr. Lewis.” Abby enjoyed irritating him since something about his demeanor annoyed her. “I don’t even know what car insurance company she used.”

“That’s my point. I think you should come in on Monday morning so we can have a sit-down. I have copies of your mother’s important documents, and I’m sure you’ll need them to wrap up legal matters for her estate. I’m quite certain there’s a lawsuit to be filed against the garbage company. Of course, it is unfortunate Mr. Hanson passed away in the accident as well, but I believe I can get you a very sizable settlement from City Waste and Recycling. We can discuss those details and everything else on Monday morning, let’s say nine a.m.?”

“I guess I can do that. Do you need a copy of my mother’s death certificate? Have you set up a date to read her will?”

“No, I haven’t yet. I’ll arrange that after her funeral, as per your request. And yes, I should have a copy of her death certificate. It appears as though there are four other people I’ll have to contact for the reading of the will.”

“Four others? Who on earth can they be?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Melrose. I can’t discuss the will until all parties are present for the reading. I can arrange it for the week after next if you like.”

“Okay then. I’ll see you Monday morning.” Abby hung up, more confused than ever. What Mr. Lewis had said about the will was beginning to make her nervous. “So are you two ready to go? We’ll pack up your stuff for a few hours, Mel, and then go out to lunch. Betsy, you aren’t going to wear your house dress, are you?”

Betsy hung her head. “Abby, I have blue house dresses for daytime and black, nicer ones for whenever your mom entertained. I don’t own much else.”

Abby shook her head in disbelief. “This is the twenty-first century, isn’t it? I’m just shocked, Betsy. It isn’t your fault. What size do you wear?”

“Size eight, I think.”

“Good. Go in my closet and pick out something casual to wear, something like we have on. We’re going shopping on King Street after lunch. Hopefully, this weather will break.”

By twelve thirty, every square inch of Melanie’s Toyota was packed full, and there wasn’t room left for a single knickknack. The unanimous choice for lunch was Southwest Grill, then they were off to Nina’s on King Street. Abby would do everything in her power to help Betsy feel like one of the girls. After all, the housekeeper was only thirty-five years old. Because she’d been a maid for the Melrose family since she was twenty, Betsy seemed much older.

“Abby, I want you to know how grateful I am for the outfits and the furniture. You’re truly a wonderful person,” Betsy said as she helped carry boxes upstairs to Melanie’s third-floor bedroom.

They were exhausted by the time they sat down for a break at four o’clock.

“I just want to let you both know I have an appointment with Attorney Lewis on Monday morning. He thinks I have a good chance of suing the garbage truck company for Mom’s death. The idea of it makes me feel kind of creepy.”

“Isn’t that bad karma? This is the South, Abby. Voodoo, spirit stuff, bad juju. Call it what you like, but anything can happen if you sue someone due to accidental deaths,” Betsy said.

“Do you know that for a fact?” Abby poured three glasses of wine and handed them out.

“No, not really,” Betsy said. “Just spooky stories our great-grandpappy used to tell us of bad luck folks had. His stories went back generations to the slave days. It was all that dark spiritual stuff like poking dolls with needles and such. He used to scare us to death.”

“Luckily, we live in more modern times, and I don’t believe in that hocus-pocus stuff,” Abby said. “Anyway, I’d still be interested to hear what Attorney Know-It-All has to say. If there’s a chance for a settlement of some kind, not laying blame on anyone, it would definitely help with expenses around here until I finish school and open my own practice.”

Mel asked, “Are you still planning to be a relationship counselor? I mean, why bother? You’ll likely get millions from your mom’s estate. You won’t have to work a day in your life if you invest right and avoid people like Remy. Sorry, girl. I couldn’t help myself, I just had to say that.”

“Gee, thanks, Mel. Anyway, I’ll think over all my options after the will is read. Apparently, there are four other people involved.”

“Huh? Like who?” Mel asked.

“I have absolutely no idea, but I’ll find out when I see who shows up for the reading. Attorney Lewis is setting it up for the week after Mom’s funeral.”

“Speaking of the funeral, I appreciate the nice dress you bought for me to wear to her services. She’d be appalled if I wore anything inappropriate,” Betsy said.

Abby patted Betsy’s hand. “You’re more than welcome. Maybe now would be a good time to finish the eulogy so I can give it to Mr. LaRue. I told him to go ahead and hire a non-denominational minister and a speaker.”

Chapter Seven

The gloom lingering in the air wasn't from the weather. As a matter of fact, the skies were the bluest blue Abby had ever seen beyond the Caribbean. The Friday of the funeral had arrived, and the mood in the house was dreary. Abby hadn't seen her mother since those few seconds at the morgue. Several days ago, she had met with Mr. LaRue to give him the eulogy she and Betsy had written, along with what Betsy said was one of her mother's favorite dresses. The dress was a simple sheath in a colorful floral pattern, something Charlotte would have picked out herself.

Abby checked the time on the antique mantel clock in the library. Only a minute or two alone was all she needed before they left for the cemetery. Abby prayed for guidance and composure to last her through the day. She had to remain calm and be pleasant and thankful to anyone that showed up, whether friend or foe, relative or stranger. She heard footsteps descending the staircase and looked at the clock again. It was time to go. Mel and Betsy entered the library, dressed impeccably, just as expected. Abby felt blessed to have the two women in her life. They were like sisters and her dearest friends.

When they arrived for the service, Mr. LaRue and his assistant greeted the women at the front door of the chapel. "Miss Melrose, please let me show you around. We would like your approval before the guests begin to arrive. If something doesn't suit your liking, there's still time to change things." The assistant, Miss Grimes, walked the visitation areas and the dining room with Abby, Mel, and Betsy. She showed them the floral arrangements and the guest book, then described the meal to be served and the refreshments. In the foyer was a memory board of Charlotte's life, and a large photograph of her was in front of the casket. For the moment, the closed casket was behind a curtain.

"Miss Melrose, would you like to see your mother before the guests arrive? That's the normal protocol, just to be sure she looks exactly how you want her to. Viewing her in advance will take away some of the initial shock you might have if you wait until later. It will also let you decide if you want an open or closed casket. I apologize for being so direct, ma'am. I know this is a difficult time for you."

"Thank you, but I'll wait for a few minutes. I need a little more courage first, then I'd like to see her alone, if that's okay."

"Whenever you're ready. We have a small family area with coffee if you

ladies want to sit in there for a bit.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Let’s go take some deep breaths,” Melanie said. She gave Betsy a look of concern because the tears welling up in Abby’s eyes indicated she was on the verge of a breakdown. “Come on, honey, let’s sit.”

Chimes rang out on the quarter hour. It was ten fifteen, and the guests would arrive soon.

“I guess I better do this before people arrive. Betsy, will you go find Miss Grimes, please?”

“Of course, I’ll be right back.”

Miss Grimes returned with Betsy, offering her arm for Abby to hold on to. “Are you ready, Miss Melrose?”

“Yes, I’m ready.” Abby smoothed her dress as she stood, brushed away the tears rolling down her cheeks, and walked toward the front of the chapel with her arm linked in Miss Grimes’s.

Melanie and Betsy stood and watched Abby go beyond the curtain with tears of their own.

“I’ll leave you alone with her, Miss Melrose. Take your time.”

Abby stood at the foot of the casket, staring at the floor, afraid to look at her mother. Guilt tore at her heart for the years lost, the rift between them that she didn’t have time to repair.

“Mom, I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I’ll never forgive myself for what I put you through. You were only looking out for my best interest, especially since Dad was gone. I wish I could rewind the last two weeks. I love you, Mom.” Abby finally looked up and approached the head of the casket. She stared at Charlotte, lying there as if she were sleeping. “You look beautiful, and I know you wouldn’t want anyone to see you if you didn’t look perfect.” She carefully touched Charlotte’s cheek. She slipped a family photo from years gone by under her mother’s hand, and alone, behind the velvet curtain, she wept. The chimes rang out again at ten thirty. Abby kissed her mother’s forehead then left for the ladies room to regain her composure.

The chapel was standing room only. Every seat was taken by Charlotte’s acquaintances from the many clubs and committees she belonged to. Fewer than ten chairs held family and lifelong friends. Abby didn’t remember ever meeting the four people claiming to be family, but Charlotte’s cousin, a second cousin, a great uncle, and her mother’s sister-in-law were in attendance, sitting in the family chairs. They were strangers accepting condolences, relatives Abby had never met, who just happened to appear for Charlotte’s funeral. Forcing a smile, Abby asked each one when they last saw Charlotte. Not one had visited Charlotte in the eighteen years she had lived on South Battery. “Too little, too

late,” Abby whispered under her breath.

The eulogist and minister did a fine job talking about the generous person Charlotte was to all her friends and family. She was a loving wife and a wonderful mother, too. Abby glanced in Betsy’s direction and raised her perfectly shaped eyebrows, knowing the eulogy was a little inflated, but she smiled anyway.

During the luncheon, Abby mingled with all the people in the dining hall. She learned of the many boards Charlotte was on and the charitable contributions she’d made. Her mother truly was a philanthropist. Abby felt better by the end of the day. At two thirty, the crowd dispersed, and Abby, Mel, and Betsy sat down on the chairs nearest the casket.

“She did look beautiful, Abby. I’m sure that was a relief for you. Would it be okay if I slip something in the casket?” Betsy asked.

“Of course, but what is it? I’m curious now.”

“I want to return the first dollar Miss Charlotte ever gave me as her employee. I saved it all these years. I didn’t have a lot of my own these past fifteen years, Abby, but I did have a beautiful home to live in. And even though your mom was strict, she still treated me fairly. I appreciate the years I lived on South Battery.”

“That’s really a nice gesture. Thank you. If you need some privacy, Mel and I can go in the other room. When we’re done in here, the three of us—and those mysterious family members—are going to escort Mom to the gravesite. There will be a small prayer service, and we’ll lay roses on her casket. After that, we’ll each drop a shovelful of dirt on the casket as they’re lowering it. Are you guys okay with doing that?”

The ladies agreed and had a moment to share a group hug. Betsy spent five minutes alone with Charlotte, then they followed the hearse down the gravel road to the gravesite.

Five days had passed since the funeral. Abby felt relieved it was over, and other than any settlements that might or might not be forthcoming, the only thing left was the reading of the will.

She had already filled out the papers on Monday giving Attorney Lewis permission to go forward with a lawsuit against City Waste and Recycling. The reading of the will would take place tomorrow. Abby felt odd, wondering who the other four people were that would be sitting next to her in the attorney’s office. She obviously wasn’t close to the few relatives that conveniently showed

up at the funeral, yet she didn't know if Charlotte had kept in touch with them over the phone.

Thursday morning, after dropping Melanie off at work, Abby came home and dressed in a simple eggplant-colored pantsuit with a string of pearls around her neck, and matching earrings. The appointment was set for ten a.m., and she was nervous. *This could determine what I do with the rest of my life*, she thought as she applied her makeup with a cup of coffee sitting beside her on the bathroom countertop. Her hands shook as she thought about the next few hours. She tried to focus on her to-do list for the next few days. She certainly had to buy a car, needing her own set of wheels. *I'll look online later for a good used car. At least after the reading of the will, I'll know what I can afford.*

Attorney Lewis's office was on Calhoun Street in a stately Georgian-style red brick building. The cornerstone dated the structure to 1790. Abby, who loved old architecture, nodded with appreciation as she walked up the granite steps to the front door with a Palladian window above it. She entered and took the marble staircase to the second floor. Attorney Lewis's lavish office was the first door on the left at the top of the stairs. The receptionist, Adrienne, acknowledged Abby, asked her to take a seat, then disappeared through a door behind her desk. As Abby sat in the ornate waiting area, she took notice of the other people sitting there, too. She didn't recognize any of them.

The large mahogany double doors opened, and Attorney Lewis stood there, inviting everyone that sat in the waiting room into his office at the same time. Her nerves kicked in again, making Abby's stomach feel like a roller coaster doing steep climbs and free falls at an amusement park. After the usual pleasantries, Attorney Lewis introduced everyone, beginning with Abby. Following her were the presidents and CEOs of the Art Institute of Charleston, the Historic Charleston Foundation, and Charleston Animal Society, and the owner of At Your Service natural foods store. A lightheadedness came over Abby as she took a sip of water while they sat at the conference table with Attorney Lewis across from the five of them. Whatever was coming next probably wasn't in Abby's best interest. Since her mother never made it to the attorney's office to change the will before she died, Abby didn't know if Charlotte had even called Attorney Lewis to tell him of her plan. With four other people sitting there with her, she was sure her fate was doomed.

"Okay, shall we begin?" Attorney Lewis glanced at everyone, waiting for an affirmative nod. He informed them that Charlotte had left ten million dollars each to the art institute and the historic foundation. The animal society would receive five million dollars, and the owner of the natural foods store would receive two million dollars. Abby's trust fund was frozen until she turned forty,

at which time she would inherit the remainder of her mother's estate. For the time being, the house on South Battery was hers, free and clear but with one stipulation. She was *never* allowed to sell the home. It could only be passed down to future generations of the Melrose family. With the will read, the four others celebrated, and each signed the necessary paperwork and left. Sitting alone with Attorney Lewis, Abby was stunned with disbelief.

"May I read the will myself?" she asked, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Of course you may," he said, sliding a copy across the conference table.

Abby read it twice, slowly and carefully. "You never got a call from her to say she was coming in to change her will?"

"No, Abigail. I'm sorry, but I never received that call. The current will is the last version I have on record. She never asked me to amend it."

"How could she do this to me? I'm her only child. Do you have the slightest idea what the property taxes are on that mansion, let alone the general upkeep and flood insurance costs? I can't ever sell it, and I have to wait thirteen years before I can touch my trust fund. She never earned a penny of that fortune. It was all my dad's genius and hard work that made her rich. That *bitch*! I can't believe she would be this vindictive, this cruel to me. I made one lousy mistake with my *own* money, and this is my payback, while three organizations and a flipping food store get millions!"

"Abigail, don't forget we're trying for a wrongful death lawsuit. You could possibly walk away with millions right there."

"Yeah, and a lot of bad karma and voodoo juju, damn it! Keep me posted." Abby stormed out the door, slamming it extra hard. She drove to Melanie's workplace, calling her on the way. "Do you have time to take me home? I won't be able to pick you up after work."

"Sure, I can do that, but why?"

"Because I'm going to be drunk by then and incapable of driving," Abby said as she pulled up along the curb.

"Crap. It didn't go well at the attorney's office?"

"Not even close. I'm outside, by the way."

"Okay. I'll be down in five minutes."

Chapter Eight

The three women sat in the library after dinner, trying to come up with a plan to support the household. Abby nestled in, her feet scrunched up under her body on the antique wingback chair, while Betsy and Melanie got comfortable on the overstuffed sofa.

"I still can't believe what my mom did to me. I'm either going to break out in acne or get a stomach ulcer any minute now. I ran the numbers this afternoon, and it almost made me throw up. Do you guys realize the property taxes here are more than twenty-five thousand dollars a year? That's insane, and the flood insurance is ten thousand dollars annually. Household bills like electricity, natural gas, water, Internet, and cable are eight hundred fifty a month. Attorney Lewis gave me the tax and insurance statements this morning, then I made phone calls this afternoon to get all the bills transferred out of my mom's name and put into mine. I didn't even have time to get drunk because I was so busy reading over all this paperwork and getting pissed off."

Abby pressed her palms against her temples and shook her head.

"You guys, I'm seriously going to freak out with these expenses right now. I have to come up with something, and quick. Mom's funeral expenses were ten thousand dollars, so there isn't much left of the cash we found. After the regular bills I have to pay and then tacking on incidentals, it will come to fifty thousand dollars a year just to support this house, and the kicker is I'm not allowed to sell it. It's payback on Mom's part. I know it is. She wants me to prove I can be responsible and resourceful when I have absolutely no money. There's no way I can afford to go to school now or buy a car. Damn it, I do need a drink after all. Anyone care to join me?"

"I'll get it. Just stay put and breathe." Betsy pulled three rocks glasses out of the liquor cabinet and poured single malt scotch into each one. "I do have an idea," she said as she passed out the glasses.

"Throw it out there, sister. I'm game for anything," Abby said with a sip and a sigh.

"How about taking in boarders?"

"Huh? You mean like transient, homeless people, or drunks and drug addicts that are on a twelve-step program? That idea wouldn't go over very well in this neighborhood, if you know what I mean. I appreciate your suggestion though."

"No, Abby, that's not what I'm talking about. I mean regular folks. Look

what Mel was paying for an eight-hundred-fifty-square-foot apartment, and that didn't even include utilities. You don't have to pay me a wage anymore. I'm getting room and board in this beautiful mansion. The least I can do is keep it clean and cook the food I'm eating."

"Yeah, that goes for me, too. I was paying a thousand fifty dollars without utilities. The least I can do is pay the same I was paying in an apartment that was an eighth the size of this house. How many people can say their address is on East or South Battery? That in itself is worth the look on people's faces. Think about it. There are still six empty bedrooms in this house. Why waste them? Let's turn this mansion into the place everyone wants to call home. It can be like a permanent bed-and-breakfast. Betsy can be in charge of meals, which of course would be included in their rent. There's three more bedrooms the size of ours that have private baths and three smaller bedrooms that don't. We'll charge rent according to the size of the room and how many meals a day Betsy makes. It's actually doable, Abs." Melanie and Betsy were clearly excited by the possibilities.

"Wouldn't I have to have some kind of business license to do that? I doubt that this house, or street, is zoned to have any kind of commercial enterprise on it."

"That's where you're wrong, dear Abigail. There's three B-and-Bs right on East Battery."

"Okay, you're right, but I can't afford to go through the legalities needed to bring this house to whatever codes are required, like a second-story fire escape, and just the cost of a B-and-B license is probably astronomical. Anyway, we'd be trying to make this place an upscale boarding house, not a B-and-B. How are we going to accomplish that?"

Betsy gave Abby a sly grin and said, "Quietly."

"Okay, on a serious note, how could we really pull it off?"

"I know a lot of high rollers in the fashion industry, and I do have a degree in marketing. There wouldn't be any lowlifes trying to move in here. They couldn't afford it anyway. We'd have to come up with a cost per room, both with and without a private bath, and then the cost per meal. It has to be calculated logically, plus it has to be competitive with what people would spend anyway on meals and lodging. I can use myself as one example. I paid a thousand fifty dollars for eight hundred fifty square feet of space. That was for a cramped kitchen and living room combination, one bath, and a tiny bedroom. My utilities were two hundred fifty dollars a month for everything, and I had to pay for a parking spot, which was another hundred bucks. I spent two hundred a month on groceries but ate out a lot, too, which was an average of another two hundred.

Betsy, add all those numbers up, please.”

“That’s one thousand eight hundred dollars a month, Mel. You must make a good income.”

“I do, but look at the big picture here. I didn’t live in a stately mansion like this. I couldn’t wander around a six-thousand-eight-hundred-square-foot house and beautiful gardens like I can here. Nobody would have to cook their own meals, and look at the view. The park is right across the street and the ocean beyond that. What’s not to like? People will be banging the door down trying to be one of the lucky ones to live here.”

“I’m not too bad at reading people, for the most part anyway, having been a relationship counselor before. I’ll be in charge of interviewing potential tenants. We need a way to do a background check and verify their employment, too. I know there are programs you can subscribe to that do those types of things. It’s the same thing employers and rental agencies use. Right now, we have to figure out the room and meal cost that will make sense to anyone that rents. They have to see the benefit of living here over anywhere else. After that, we need to get these potential renters here for an interview without attracting attention from the neighbors.” Abby finally looked hopeful as she spoke. “No matter what, it will cost nearly five thousand dollars a month to support this place. Let’s figure out the cost per room and meals right now and see how it shakes out.”

Betsy disappeared into the kitchen while Mel and Abby worked on the room costs. Betsy would be the one to figure out food expenses for a houseful of people, day in and day out. Ten minutes later, she returned with a pitcher of sweet tea and an enormous turquoise melamine bowl full of popcorn. “I thought we might need a little snack to help us think. I’ve heard popcorn aids blood flow to the brain.”

“It does,” Abby said, “but not the buttery, salted type. I think our brains are in high gear already, but I love buttery popcorn, so thanks. Before we go to bed tonight, we’ll have a viable plan of action.”

With a half-hour break for popcorn and tea—and with a calculator clicking away beneath their greasy fingertips—the girls devised the perfect cost-effective scenario.

“This will make everyone feel like they’re getting more than their money’s worth while living in the best neighborhood of Charleston,” Mel said. “Abby, you’ll have plenty of money left at the end of the month to buy a car and save up for anything that can go wrong. With four people, including me, paying one

thousand two hundred dollars a month for the large bedrooms with the private bath, and three people paying eight hundred dollars for the small bedrooms with hallway baths, it comes to seven thousand two hundred dollars a month in income. Betsy, how much would it cost to feed nine people for a month?"

"If I make a lot of pasta dishes, casseroles, and salads for dinners, and eggs and toast for breakfasts, everyone could be fed well on one thousand five hundred dollars a month," Betsy said.

"Okay, so if we add two hundred dollars a month more to everyone's rent, which would include breakfast and dinner, we can't go wrong. They'll be jumping at the chance to live here. As long as we can rent all the rooms, there should be plenty of money coming in. Everyone will have to sign a one-year lease. Now, the question is, how do we start a buzz in Charleston without the neighbors finding out?" Melanie said.

"Let's sleep on it and come up with something tomorrow. I'm beat," Abby said. "Thanks, guys, for everything. This just might work out after all." Lying in bed, Abby felt excited about the possibilities. *Life might turn out okay as long as I'm very careful with the tenants I choose. Remy and Mom, I won't let either of you ruin my life. No pity parties for me anymore. I'm going to be in charge and live my life on my terms, bravely and passionately, with the best friends I've ever known. Thank you, Mel and Betsy, for being here for me. We can make this work.*

"I've got to change my last name," Abby announced as she walked into the breakfast room the next morning. The long, flowing robe looked beautiful on her tall, slender body.

She brought the carafe of coffee to the maple morning table and set it on a trivet. Betsy scooped the scrambled eggs into a bowl and served them family style. With a four-slice toaster, the toast was made and buttered in no time. Betsy stacked eight pieces on a plate and carried it to the table with a jar of peach jam. The girls helped themselves to breakfast.

"So what does that actually mean, and why would you do it?" Mel asked with a mouthful of perfectly prepared eggs.

"I've done the research, and it's as simple as going to the courthouse and standing before the judge. As long as you aren't a criminal trying to hide or you want to change your name to something really stupid, it goes through without a problem. I want to come across as the on-site property manager, so I don't want anyone to know I actually own the house. Plus it's a good way to never be used again for financial gain."

“That’s a great idea. Have you thought of a new last name yet?”

“Sort of, but I want to run it by you guys first. Originally, I wanted to use my mom’s maiden name, but not anymore after the crap she put me through. How about Taylor? It’s a basic, common name. It’s perfect, isn’t it?”

“I like it. Abigail Taylor, or Abby Taylor, has a nice ring to it. You look like you could be the granddaughter of Liz Taylor with your black hair and blue eyes,” Melanie said.

“Thanks, Mel. So it’s settled? You guys agree, Abby Taylor sounds okay?”

“It’s okay by me,” Betsy said as she cleared the table.

“Me, too. When are you going to do it?”

“I’ll have to call the courthouse and see when I can get in. Have either of you given the interview process any thought?”

“I think we should post an ad in every Starbucks south of Spring Street, plus I can spread the word at work. We have a bulletin board for employees in the cafeteria. A friend of mine at work can have her husband post an ad in the cafeteria at the hospital, too. There are young doctors and nurses working there that could easily afford to live here. We’re only interested in top quality applicants that will get along with us and each other.”

“Well, I know what I have to do before anyone moves in. I need to upgrade the water heater in the basement so there’s always hot water on demand, and I need to spruce up the hallway bathrooms a little. All the bedrooms we’re going to rent out need a fresh coat of paint, too. After that is complete, we can start the interview process. With the few thousand dollars I have left, I’m pretty sure I can find somebody to take care of those household issues pretty quickly. Today, Betsy, you and I are going to move furniture and pick out paint colors.”

Melanie had already left for work, and because it was such a beautiful day with low humidity, Abby and Betsy found a shaded spot outside to use as their work area. With the laptop wedged under her arm, a pencil lodged above her left ear, and a pad of paper in her hand, Abby sat down at the wrought-iron bistro set in the backyard. Betsy joined her with a fresh pot of coffee, two mugs, and two cinnamon rolls. Browsing through a website showing paint samples, Abby and Betsy made their selections. They could be more imaginative with the larger rooms, but the small bedrooms would need lighter colors to make them look bigger. Between the two of them, they chose a light blush for the small rooms and sage green for the larger rooms. Keeping the walls a gender-neutral color would help make them attractive to anyone. Abby found several ads online that offered handyman services. She set up appointments with three of them to compare rates and qualifications. By this time next week, they would be ready to open for business.

Chapter Nine

The flashing light on Abby's phone caught her attention. *Damn it, I missed a call.* She listened as the message from the county clerk told her what day and time to appear in front of the judge for her name change request. Abby was more than excited. It would truly be a new beginning for her, a do-over, and in a way, a second chance to get things right. Going forward, she would determine her own fate, good or bad. She would have nobody else to fall back on and nobody else to blame. Her future rested on her, and she liked it that way.

Today, three different handymen had appointments to give Abby a quote for the work she wanted. She said she would like to see their qualifications and read a few reviews of their work when they came by. The appointments were scheduled two hours apart, beginning at eleven a.m. The first man showed up fifteen minutes late. *Not the best first impression,* Abby thought when she welcomed him in. John Beck handed her his business card, mumbled something about hitting every red light in town, and followed her to the basement. He carried a clipboard with a pen, and he looked like a mild-mannered middle-aged handyman. Abby showed him the water heater that needed replacing.

"This doesn't look that old. Isn't it working right?"

"Well, yes, it works fine, but right now there are only three of us. I hope to fill this house up soon, and I don't think a forty-gallon water heater would be adequate."

He gave Abby a slow, deliberate once-over, lingering far too long on her ample chest. "So what makes you so smart? Aren't you the little lady of the house? I'd peg you to do more showing than thinking."

"What? Excuse me? I think I'll show you something, Mr. Beck. The door." Abby headed up the stairs, stomping a little harder than necessary.

"I thought you wanted me to see the bedrooms, too," he smirked.

"Not anymore. I think we're done."

She slammed the door behind him, hoping that wasn't an indication of what self-employed handymen were like. With John Beck's business card shredded and in the garbage can, Abby and Betsy had lunch on the veranda, enjoying the view of the park and people walking their dogs. "Can you believe my mom gave five million dollars to the Charleston Animal Society?" Abby stared at every size and breed of dog being walked up and down the neighboring sidewalks. "Don't get me wrong, I love animals, but holy cow, that's a lot of money. My mom

never owned a dog in her life. That's what blows my mind. Mittens is the only pet I ever remember having, and she's pretty self-sufficient. Did my mom ever feed her or change her litter box that you can recall?"

"Nope," Betsy said, "not as long as I've lived here."

"Well, whatever... I know the money is going to a good cause, but I sure could have used some of it."

Abby looked up as a panel van slowed down in front of the house, with a man craning his neck out the window, looking at addresses. He found a parking spot three houses down and slid his van in behind a Volvo. He checked himself in the side mirror when he got out and walked toward the Italianate mansion.

"That must be handyman number two," Abby said. A crumb of bread stuck to her lip as she spoke.

Betsy turned to respond and laughed. "If you think that guy is as hot as I do, then you better wipe the crumb off your mouth before he gets through the gate."

"Crap. Help me, hurry! Is it gone?"

"Yes, it's gone, and you look beautiful."

Abby adjusted her tank top and smoothed her shorts as she stood up. She met handyman number two at the gate and let him in.

"Hi, I'm Abby. You must be Erik Christiansen. Welcome to Melrose Mansion. It's nice to meet you."

He reached out and shook her hand. "Thanks. Nice to meet you, too."

They reached the veranda, and Abby introduced Erik to Betsy. With a firm grip, he shook her hand.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to give you a little personal background. Would it be okay if we sat for a few minutes?"

"Of course, please." Abby pointed to an empty chair while she took the seat next to Betsy.

"I don't feel I should take up your time and enter the privacy of your home until I show you my credentials. Here are a few business cards, just in case you know of anyone else who needs work done." He set down the worn leather satchel that was slung over his shoulder and reached in. He glanced up at Abby as he handed her the cards and showed his deep dimples when he smiled. He pulled out a sheet listing jobs he had worked in the past, as well as some very favorable reviews.

"It looks like you've done restoration work on some very historic buildings around Charleston. That's a relief. I want to feel confident about the people I hire. So, Mr. Christiansen, how long have you been in this line of work?"

"My father owned a remodeling company for over forty years. I worked side by side with him until he retired a few years back. Business slowed down a bit

during the recession of 2008, but things are picking up again. I guess I'd say I'm capable of doing just about anything."

I bet you are, she thought as she sat with her chin in her hands, smiling at the blond god that reminded her of Chris Hemsworth. Betsy kicked her leg under the table. "Oh... okay, would you like to see what I need done?"

"Sure, sounds great." Erik followed Abby to the basement.

She recited the same information she'd told boob-staring John Beck and waited for Erik's response.

"Makes perfect sense to me," he said. "Nobody wants cold water in the middle of their shower. I'll get you a quote for a seventy-five-gallon water heater. That should work fine for your needs."

So far, so good. "Shall we go upstairs?" Abby said.

"Sure, lead the way."

She wondered if he was staring at her butt as she walked upstairs in front of him. "Here we are. I've already picked out the colors I like for the rooms. I guess the bathrooms ought to match, too, don't you think?"

"Do you have the swatches?"

"No, sorry, they're on my computer. I pictured a light blush to make the small rooms look bigger and sage green for the larger rooms."

"Are you going to furnish the rooms yourself?"

"Yes, there's furniture already. I just moved it out of the way for now to make painting easier."

"Would you mind hearing my opinion?"

"Not at all. Please, let's sit." Abby led Erik to the sofa on the landing. A stained glass window behind the sofa illuminated the parquet floor with radiant slivers of color from the sun hitting the window just right.

"That's pretty," he commented, pointing to the rainbow of colors on the floor. "So here's my thought, if you don't mind. Everyone knows white is kind of boring, but ivory, on the other hand, is a soft, subtle, rich color. These days, the trend is to paint most of the walls the same color and then accent with eye-popping rugs, curtains, artwork, and throw pillows. You wouldn't believe how much you can change a room's appearance with accent pieces. And here's another thing that might interest you."

"Yes, what would that be?"

"Well... if all the walls were the same color, I could get the paint in bulk. That would save you a few hundred dollars."

"It would? Okay, I'd be interested in hearing your quote. I have one more handyman coming by, just to be honest with you. I was shopping for the best work and the best quotes. Can you get back to me tomorrow with the total cost

including labor and an estimate of how long the job would take?”

“Sure, that’s no problem.” Erik pulled up her number on his cell phone screen. “Is this the best number to reach you at?”

“Yes, it is. So, I’ll wait for your call before I make any decisions. Thank you, Mr. Christiansen.”

“Thank you, Abby...?”

“It’s Taylor, Abby Taylor. I’m the property manager for the Melrose house.”

“Liar,” Betsy whispered as they watched Erik walk back toward his van. “You’re still Abby Melrose until when?”

“Until next Tuesday. After that, I’ll legally be Abby Taylor, and nobody will know this house belongs to me. The next time I talk to Attorney Lewis, I’m going to tell him I want the house put into the Melrose Trust with the rest of my inheritance.”

“So what do you think of Erik Christiansen?”

“You mean, what do I think of his credentials?”

“Yeah, that’s it. We’re talking about his credentials, which are pretty amazing in my opinion.” Betsy smirked.

Abby shook her head at Betsy’s audacity. “You’re on a fast elevator to hell, and I’m right there next to you, but I agree. His credentials are fine, smokin’ hot fine.”

The last handyman showed up at three p.m. He seemed honest and hardworking, but their conversation didn’t flow well. Having just arrived from Guatemala, Jose Garcia was difficult to understand. As far as Abby could make out from their conversation, he had recently moved to South Carolina to help his brother, Manuel, work in the family remodeling business. Since Manuel was already booked through the summer, he had given the appointment to Jose. Abby showed Jose everything that needed to be done, and she thought he said he’d call back tomorrow with the quote. She sat in the backyard with a glass of sweet tea. Her mind was on Erik Christiansen, Remy, and Charlotte. Having been taken for a fool already, Abby was gun-shy and far from ready to get involved with any man again. She was still reeling with pain from the betrayal of her own husband and mother. *Next time, I’ll be wiser and much more cautious, if there ever is a next time.*

Startled by the back door opening, Abby jumped, returning to reality. Melanie cracked open a beer and sat down next to her. “I heard you had some menfolk stop by today,” she joked. “Betsy said you were salivating over one named Erik. Talk to me, girl.”

“Oh, stop it, for Pete’s sake. Betsy was the one salivating. Yes, he’s hot, and handsome, and nice, but he’s a guy, and guys aren’t to be trusted... yet.”

“You know you don’t mean that.”

“I do until my legal name change takes effect. Anyway, after dinner, will you help us move more of the furniture? Some of those antique pieces weigh a ton.”

“Sure thing. Do you know what we’re having for dinner? I’m starving.”

Betsy came outside with her own glass of tea, a dish towel slung over her shoulder, and sat down. “Here’s the menu for tonight. We’re having hot dogs sliced up in mac ’n cheese. Sorry, but that’s all I can whip together with the lack of food in this house. We need to go to the grocery store tonight after dinner, or there won’t be any food for tomorrow. With Mel having the only car, and no delivery service anymore, we’ll have to shop at least once a week to keep this place stocked with groceries.”

“Sorry, Betsy, I had no idea we were that low on food. How much did Mom used to spend on groceries? We’ll have to budget our food expenses until we get some renters in here to help pay for things.”

“Well, your mom was over the top. She’d spend five hundred dollars a week on food, but she did entertain a lot, too. If I make casseroles and pasta dishes, we can get by with fifty bucks a week for now.”

“That should work. Until I see where the quotes come in tomorrow, we’ll just get the necessities tonight.”

“I see... uh-huh. Okay, I’ll have to give that some thought and let you know, Mr. Christiansen. Thanks for getting back to me so quickly,” Abby said.

“Have the other quotes come in? I could always match them if you think my prices are too high. We are talking about six bedrooms and six bathrooms, plus the price of a seventy-five-gallon water heater and installation. I’ve discounted the paint since I can get it in bulk if we go with ivory for all the rooms. You said you’re the property manager for the home, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Nervousness kicked in since she wasn’t sure what he was going to say next. Abby wasn’t lying about being the property manager, but she was spinning the truth a little. Walking from room to room, she estimated the quantity of paint needed to completely overhaul the bedrooms and bathrooms. After all, every room had a twelve-foot ceiling.

“So what are the intentions? For the rooms, I mean?”

“Oh...well... the owners want them rented out. I guess they envision a B-and-B sort of, except with long-term leases instead.”

“So a more dignified version of a boardinghouse? That mansion is going to be turned into a boardinghouse?”

“Yes... I guess so, except with quality people. I have to interview the applicants myself, so I’m going to be very selective. I don’t want to alarm the neighbors with sketchy-looking characters coming and going. I’ve been given instructions to check everyone’s work history, income, and criminal activity. I’m sure it will be fine. It’s just the quote is a little higher than I expected.”

“Didn’t the owners give you a spending allowance for remodeling?”

“Yes, but only a certain amount for the painting and water heater. I think they’re bartering for some of the other work they want done.” *Why the heck did I just say that?* Words spewed out of Abby’s mouth that didn’t even make sense to her. She had no idea what she was saying at that point. All she cared about was protecting her identity and getting the work done as cheaply as possible.

“That’s interesting... they’re open to bartering. I’m doing some work right now in Charleston. Would you mind if I stopped over? I have an idea you might want to run by them. I could be there at lunchtime, say in twenty minutes?”

“I guess I’m free then. See you soon.”

Crap! “Betsy, I need your help. Hurry!” Abby’s screech echoed through the upstairs hallway.

“Where’s the fire? What’s going on? I just started making lunch. Today’s menu consists of peanut butter and peach jelly sandwiches, Miss Melrose. Would you care to dine alfresco or indoors, ma’am?” Betsy kidded.

“I don’t have time to eat. Wrap the sandwiches up for now so they don’t dry out. Erik Christiansen is stopping by in twenty minutes. I have to get ready. I need to take a shower. Go in my room and pick out something cute for me to wear. I don’t give a crap what it is. Just make sure it isn’t sexy.”

“Man, you’re boring as hell. Fine. Hurry up. I’ll lay shorts and a cute top out on your bed. Do I need to hide or something?”

“Yes, but first, put a pitcher of iced tea and two glasses on the veranda. It will make me look more professional.”

“Whatever... I’ll be watching TV in my room. Let me know when he leaves.”

Abby made it to the veranda and sat down just as she saw Erik’s van turn the corner off King Street. She took two deep cleansing breaths, exhaled on her hand, and took a whiff. *Good, my breath doesn’t stink.* She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, checking for perspiration, and took a quick gulp of the tea. *Here he comes. I thought Remy was gorgeous, but damn, Erik Christiansen makes my heart pound triple time.*

“Hello, Mr. Christiansen, it’s nice to see you again. Please, let me get the gate for you.”

Abby strolled down the brick sidewalk to the wrought-iron gate and released

the latch. He followed her up the five steps to the veranda and sat down after she did.

“There was something you wanted to discuss other than the quote?”

“Yes, but first, please call me Erik. I’m not used to being formal. I realize that’s part of the southern charm and all, but it actually makes me uncomfortable. I’m a laid-back kind of guy, other than work, I mean. I work hard and get the job done.”

She laughed nervously. “I bet you do, Erik.” *Why the hell did I just say that?* “I’m sorry. That didn’t come out right. Anyway, what’s on your mind?”

His incredible smile formed slowly and deliciously. She was fixated on his face. Abby stared at his gorgeousness. Her eyes nearly rolled back in her head, and her mouth hung open as if the hinges had snapped.

“Miss Taylor?”

“What? Oh... Erik, please call me Abby. I’m sort of informal myself. So you wanted to tell me something?”

“Well, I do have a suggestion that might work out perfectly for both of us.”

You’re going to make mad, passionate love to me right here on the veranda? “Really? Now you’ve piqued my curiosity. Go ahead.” She handed him a glass of sweet tea as he began.

“I don’t live in Charleston, but most of my work is done here since this is the largest city in the area. My home is in Orangeburg, about an hour and a half north, depending on traffic. My folks own a duplex there, and I live on one side of it. With them being on a fixed income since my dad retired, I’ve suggested many times that I should move out so they can rent the other side. What if I bartered my painting services for a place to stay for a few months? I can stay in one of the smaller bedrooms and get the work done pretty quickly since I’d be here anyway. It would help me out, too, saving me that long drive into Charleston every day. I’ll do all the painting we discussed and the water heater for three month’s room and board.”

Abby’s brain was trying to calculate the numbers as quickly as she could. That would come to only three thousand dollars in rent, but his quote was for five thousand dollars, which Abby couldn’t afford. “It sounds like you’d be getting the short end of the stick. Rent for one of the small rooms is one thousand dollars a month, which includes breakfast and dinner.”

“Okay then, how about I stay for five months? There wouldn’t be any out-of-pocket expenses for the owners, and if anything else did come up, well... I’m only a bedroom away.”

“I’d have to consult with them and let you know. I have a confession to make first.”

“What’s that?”

“I live here, too. Would that be a problem for you?” Her face blushed bright red.

“I assumed you did. Most property managers live on-site. But that isn’t a problem in my book.” He finished the glass of tea and glanced at the watch on his tanned left wrist. “I think my lunch break is over. So you’ll discuss my proposition with the owners and let me know?”

“Of course I will. How soon could you move in and begin the work?”

“I wouldn’t have any furniture to move since the rooms here are furnished. All I have to bring with me are my clothes and personal belongings. I could start by the weekend.”

“What will you do after five months? Won’t your folks have your side of the duplex rented out?”

“That’s my hope. They could use the extra money, and I’d get a lot more business if I lived in Charleston. It’s all good. I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it. So... I’ll talk to you soon.” He jammed his hands deep into the pockets of his already tight-fitting, worn-in-the-perfect-places Levi’s and left. He looked back as he crossed through the gate. “Thanks for the tea.”

Chapter Ten

“Betsy, what the hell do I do now?” Abby squealed as she lunged through the door to Betsy’s room and jumped on her bed. The bedsprings sang out their squeaky twang as she bounced a few times, trying to make herself comfortable.

“Geez, take it down a notch. What’s wrong?” Betsy gathered the remaining Cheetos that flew out of the bowl when Abby leaped on the bed.

“Are you holding out on me? Where did those Cheetos come from?”

“I was starving. Remember, we haven’t had lunch yet. Come on. Let’s go downstairs and eat. You can tell me what’s going on while I unwrap our sandwiches.”

Betsy trotted off to the kitchen, Abby taking up the rear and talking a mile a minute. “Erik wants to move in here.”

“You’re on a first-name basis already? Damn it, girl. You don’t waste any time.” Betsy placed two plates on the kitchen table with chargers underneath each one. She handed Abby a linen napkin.

“It’s peanut butter and jelly for Pete’s sake. I’ll eat it on a paper plate.”

“No you won’t. They cost money. So why does Erik want to move in here, besides the obvious reasons?”

“He wants to barter services with me.”

“I’ll bet he does. Did you really just say that?” Betsy burst out laughing at Abby’s accidental innuendo.

“Yes... I mean... no. Okay... breathe. His quote for the painting and water heater was five thousand dollars, which I totally don’t have. We need to get these rooms rented out as soon as possible, so he volunteered to live here rent-free in exchange for the painting and the water heater. I won’t charge him rent, and he won’t charge for the work I want him to do. It’s perfect. He said he’d take one of the small bedrooms. I’d rent it out anyway, but now I don’t have to come up with five thousand bucks in advance to get the rooms ready. He’ll have them done in no time if he’s living here. Plus, he’s only staying for five months, unless he wants to renew the lease terms as an actual tenant. I guess I’ll have to check his credit report and make sure he isn’t a felon, but I think it’s a great idea, don’t you?”

“Um... yeah, and it doesn’t hurt that he’s single and hot. He is Scandinavian, after all. You did notice that curly blond hair, green eyes, and gorgeous smile, didn’t you? Who wouldn’t want someone like that in a bedroom right down the

hall? We might even see him coming out of the bathroom after a shower. Accidents do happen, you know.”

“Right, but I’m starting things out with a lie. That doesn’t feel good to me. He doesn’t know I actually own the house.”

“Yeah, that was your intention, remember? You want people to like you for you, not your money, which, by the way, you don’t have any.”

“True,” Abby said as she was about to gobble down her sandwich. “Man, you make good peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Anyway, I have to tell him the owners agreed to his terms. Let’s see how things play out.”

“I wouldn’t actually call that a lie, Abby. You are the owner, and you’re agreeing to his terms.”

Not wanting to seem overly anxious, Abby waited two days before calling Erik back. She had to get the quote from Jose anyway before she could tell him she went with a different handyman. Finally mustering up her courage, she pulled the business card out of her pocket and called Erik Christiansen.

“Hello, Abby. I was looking forward to your call. I hope there’s good news.”

Flustered that he had already programmed her cell number into his phone, Abby was taken aback that he addressed her personally. “Oh, hi, Erik. I guess your calling me by name surprised me.”

“Sorry, you are a potential customer. I program everyone’s name into my phone so I don’t misplace their contact info. Actually, I asked if this was the best number to reach you at. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh... no, of course not, I just forgot, that’s all.” Embarrassment covered her neck and cheeks with a bright red glow. *Good thing he can’t see me.* “I spoke with the owners, and they agreed to your terms. You can move in whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m glad to hear that. This is going to work out fine for everyone.”

Yeah, especially me. “You can pick out any of the three smaller rooms for yourself since none of them are spoken for yet. If you painted your own room first, you could get settled in while you work on the others.”

“That’s a smart idea. I’ll order the paint and water heater today. It will only take me a day to gather everything of my own to bring over. How about Saturday? Will that work for you?”

“Saturday sounds fine. I’ll see you then.” Abby found Betsy in the backyard, going through the colorful annuals Meyer’s Nursery had just delivered. “Betsy, do you have a minute?”

“Sure. Excuse me, Mr. Meyer. I’ll be right back.” Betsy followed Abby into the kitchen. “What’s up?”

“We don’t have money to spend on flowers. What is Mr. Meyer doing here?”

“It’s okay. These are the flowers your mom ordered a few weeks ago. They’re already paid for. I was going to talk to you about them anyway. Either we can plant them ourselves or pay extra to have the nursery do it.”

“How much extra would it cost?” Abby chewed on her cuticles as she waited for Betsy to ask Mr. Meyer what the additional cost would be.

“He said it would be an extra hundred bucks. We can do it ourselves, right? It isn’t like we have renters to interview yet.”

“Yeah, we can have them all planted in a few days. We just need to buy some gardening gloves and a few spades. Tell him thanks, but we’ve got it covered. By the way, Erik is moving in Saturday.”

“No wonder you’re so jacked up,” Betsy said, smiling as she walked away.

Abby spent an hour after lunch going through the monthly bills. Everything was about to come due again since it had been nearly a month since Charlotte’s death. “This is ridiculous, Betsy. I’m sick of penny-pinching, and it’s only been a few weeks. I have to call Attorney Lewis and see what’s going on with the lawsuit.”

“I could look for a job. Every little bit helps, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does, but I’m going to need you here once the rooms are rented. We’ll have laundry, cleaning, and cooking to take care of. That’s probably too much work for one person, so I intend to help out. If we can get through one more month, I think we’ll be okay. Hopefully, we’ll get all the rooms rented out right away. As soon as Erik has one small room and one large room painted, I’m going to start advertising. But right now, I’m making that call.”

Abby retreated to the library where she could sit at the desk and take notes. She dialed the phone number, hoping Attorney Lewis was in. The receptionist, Adrienne, answered on the third ring.

“Good afternoon, Lewis Law Office. How may I direct your call?”

“Adrienne, Abby Melrose calling. Is Attorney Lewis available?”

“Hello, Abby, I’m sorry, but he isn’t. He’s away for six weeks on a personal sabbatical.”

“What in the world does that mean?” Abby felt like cursing, but she bit her knuckles to help maintain control over the escalating anger.

“He’s having liposuction, but you didn’t hear that from me. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Not unless you’re taking over his duties as an attorney. I need to know what’s going on with the lawsuit he started against City Waste and Recycling.”

“What’s the best number I can reach you at? I’ll look through your files and see if there’s anything I can find.”

“You can reach me at the number on your caller ID. I’ll be expecting to hear back from you by tomorrow.” Abby slammed down the house phone on the desk. “The only good thing about home phones is you can actually slam down the receiver. Damn it.”

Abby fumed while staring at the desk calendar, wondering what to do next. The bright red circle around tomorrow’s date caught her attention. “That’s right, tomorrow at ten a.m. is the appointment for my name change. At least something will go right... I hope.” She replayed the message she had saved from the clerk of court and wrote down everything she was instructed to bring to the courthouse. She gathered her birth certificate, her expired driver’s license, and her Social Security card and put them in her purse. After court, she would stop at the Social Security office and then go to the DMV to renew her license.

“Doesn’t pasta make you fat?” Melanie asked as she shoved another fork full of spaghetti into her wide-open mouth.

“You look like a baby bird waiting for its mother to jam worms down its throat,” Abby said, laughing at the look on Mel’s face. “Worms and spaghetti, get it? They’re kind of the same thing.”

“Thanks, Abs. I think I just lost my appetite with that image.”

“Then you don’t have to worry about getting fat. Anyway, yes, carbs will make you fat if you don’t do any type of exercise, but we’ll get plenty this weekend planting all those flowers outside.”

“We’re planting all of those flowers? There’s, like, thousands of them.”

“Actually, I have the invoice here, and there’s precisely two hundred, but that’s the same as thousands in my book,” Betsy said, correcting her.

“I’ll have to take you to work in the morning, Mel. Tomorrow is the big day. By dinnertime tomorrow, you can both address me as Miss Abigail Taylor. Cool, huh? No more Melrose, no more Bellavance. I’ll have my own name and my own identity... finally.”

Betsy jumped up from the table and ran downstairs.

“What is she doing?” Mel asked.

“No clue.”

Betsy returned, huffing but wearing a grin on her face. “We’ll have to celebrate. There’s plenty of champagne in the basement.”

Chapter Eleven

“Good luck, Abs. I hope there aren’t any glitches with the name change. I’ll see you at five.”

Abby was in high spirits. Today would be Day One of the rest of her life. A new name and a new lifestyle made her nervous, but it was exciting, too. “Bring it on,” she mumbled as she drove back home. With two hours to kill, she’d enjoy a leisurely breakfast with Betsy, then shower and dress nicely for the appearance in front of the judge.

Living on South Battery had its advantages. There wasn’t much in downtown Charleston that was more than a ten-minute drive away. With the courthouse located on Broad Street, Abby had a five-minute drive, but parking was always an issue. Leaving the house at nine thirty would give her plenty of time.

Abby and Betsy sat in the morning room having scrambled eggs and toast, facing the beautiful park across the street. “Are you nervous, Abby?”

“Kind of, but it’s probably because I don’t know what to expect. You can tag along if you want to.”

“Really?”

“Sure, why not? That way I won’t have to hang out by myself all day. I know it takes forever to get through the DMV.”

“Okay, cool. I’ll be ready in a half hour.” Betsy stacked the dishes, wiped off the table, and loaded the breakfast plates into the dishwasher.

“Betsy?”

“Uh-huh?”

“Do you miss my mom?”

Betsy turned around to face Abby, drying her hands in the process. Tears filled her eyes. “What brought that on? Your mom and I had a much different relationship than you and I do.”

“I know that, but you just teared up when I asked you. You must have cared about her after fifteen years of service.”

“I cared for your mom and was as faithful to her as any employee could be. She was kind to me, but we didn’t have a personal relationship, like friends. She was my employer, and I was her employee. You must remember some of it, don’t you?”

“Yeah... I do. I hope she never treated you badly. Please, don’t ever feel like you’re a servant here. You’re one of my dearest friends. I’m so thankful for you.

I was just remembering some of the fun times with my mom years ago. I guess I was hoping you had some memorable times with her, too. I'm sorry I'm being nostalgic, probably because I'm giving up the Melrose name like it never meant anything to me."

"That isn't true, Abby. You're just protecting yourself from predators like Remy. You have every right to be cautious with people. Your mom would understand that. Okay, I'm going upstairs to get ready. You have a judge and a new name waiting for you."

They found street parking only a block away from the courthouse. *So far, so good*, Abby thought as she parallel parked Melanie's Camry. She and Betsy entered the red brick building with the massive columns. The courtroom they were supposed to be in was on the second floor. They walked up the staircase with the beautiful cherry wood handrail and entered courtroom 2C. The room was small, with only five rows of seats on either side of the aisle that led to the judge's bench. Abby and Betsy took a seat in the gallery and waited for Abby's name to be called. The antique pendulum wall clock facing them showed it was nine forty-seven.

"Abby, I have to pee. I'll be right back," Betsy whispered.

"Okay, I'm not going anywhere." Abby waited, nervously wringing her hands and hoping for a speedy session without any hiccups. She had brought all the documents she needed and checked inside her purse for the fifth time.

"Abigail Melrose Bellavance," Judge Ann Simons called out, "approach and state your intentions."

Abby rose and walked to the plaintiff's table. "My name is Abigail Bellavance, and I'm here to change my last name, Your Honor."

"Have you committed any criminal acts to hide your identity, or do you intend to impersonate somebody else?"

"No, Your Honor."

Betsy slipped back into the gallery while Abby answered the judge's questions.

"Why do you want to change your last name, Miss Bellavance?"

"Your Honor, I don't want to be associated with my husband, who has conveniently gone missing after stealing all my money, and I no longer want to be associated with my maiden name either. I would like to have a last name that is actually of my own choosing."

"And that is?"

“Taylor. A simple name, not related to anyone I know, Your Honor.”

“Granted. Go downstairs and file your new name with the county clerk. Next case.”

The judge hit the gavel against the block, and it was over. Abby turned around with a smile to see Betsy giving her the thumbs-up.

“That was it? Easy peasy, right? It’s over. Now you’re Abby Taylor. Do you feel any different?”

“It’s only been three seconds.” Abby laughed as they linked arms and walked down the staircase to the county clerk’s office to file the papers.

“How many copies do you need, ma’am?” the clerk asked.

“I have no idea. Is there a typical amount people ask for?”

“Typically, I’d say ten copies, and we have to notarize them here. Carbon copies are not considered legal documents.”

“Okay then, I’ll take ten copies, too.”

“Step this way, ma’am. You have paperwork to sign.”

After lunch, they drove to the DMV to get Abby a new driver’s license. That alone took two hours. Getting a new Social Security card went much quicker.

At five o’clock, Abby and Betsy waited at the curb in front of Colette’s Closet fashion house. Melanie was still learning the tricks of the trade, but after working there for several years, she was on the fast track to becoming one of their best designers. She glanced out the third-floor window and saw her friends waiting across the street. “I’m outta here,” she told her colleagues. “The girls and I have some celebrating to do tonight. See you guys tomorrow.”

Melanie ran down three flights of stairs and out the front door. Many of the historic buildings didn’t have the room to install elevators or weren’t allowed to alter the buildings. Most people that worked downtown appreciated keeping the buildings as authentic-looking as possible and were used to taking the stairs.

“Hi, guys. So it’s all done? You don’t look any different,” she said, teasing Abby with her quick humor.

Luckily, Saturday was a perfect day, at least weather-wise. None of the girls had ever planted flowers in such quantities before. There were a few broken nails here and there, but at least they weren’t breaking a sweat. Abby heard a car door slam out front and walked around through the side gate to see if it was Erik. It was, and she blushed.

“Hi, Erik. Looks like moving day. Your van is really packed. I’d offer to help, but we’re pretty busy in the garden. Come on around. I don’t think you’ve met

Melanie yet. She's a good friend and our first paying tenant."

Erik followed Abby around to the backyard garden. "Wow, it's really gorgeous back here. Private, lush, and completely walled in. I like what you ladies are doing. Planting that many flowers is pretty ambitious."

"Mrs. Melrose ordered all of them weeks ago, but..."

"But we offered to plant them for her," Abby said, giving Betsy a "zip it" scowl.

"That's nice of you. I've always loved flower gardens. So as tenants, are we excluded from certain areas?" Erik helped himself to a seat in the shade next to Melanie. "I'm Erik Christiansen, by the way."

"I'm sorry, Erik. This is Melanie Davis, my dearest friend from childhood. You've met Betsy already. Betsy is the chief cook here, and my second in command. So if you don't like the food..." Abby laughed, her eyes twinkling playfully. "Just kidding. Actually, Betsy's a fabulous cook. Back to your question, yes, all common areas are open for everyone to enjoy. Give me a minute to wash up, then we'll go upstairs, and you can choose your room."

Erik waited in the garden with Mel and Betsy. He walked around, commenting on the hard work they'd put into the flower beds. "I can always lend a hand if you get tired. Planting flowers is a thankless job, but the end results are well worth it. Certain flowers attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Having a backyard like this is something to be proud of. It's a magical place."

"Wow. It sounds like you're really into nature," Mel said, admiring the newcomer already.

"Yeah, actually, my mom used to run a garden supply store in Orangeburg. I grew up learning to work with my hands from both parents. My dad had the remodeling business, so I guess enjoying indoor and outdoor things comes naturally to me."

Abby stood behind Erik, her shoulder leaning against the doorframe as she smiled at Mel, who was facing her. She enjoyed listening to Erik engage with the two women. "Ready?"

He turned to see Abby behind him. "Okay, lead the way. Nice talking to you, ladies. I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot of each other."

He followed Abby to the upstairs hallway where they turned right. Six bedrooms were on that floor, three large rooms with private baths and three smaller rooms with hallway baths.

"If it were up to me, I'd choose the smaller room down the left hallway."

"Why's that?" he asked, confused by the enormity of the second floor.

"Well... down the left hallway, there are two of the three larger rooms and only one of the small rooms with the hallway bath. The large rooms have their

own baths, so the small room would sort of have its own private bath, too. I mean, why would anyone else use it when it's at the end of a different hallway?"

"Wow. I don't know if I understood one word of what you just said." He chuckled.

"It's easy. Come with me, and I'll show you what I mean." They turned back and retraced the steps they had just taken. "See, there's only one small room at the end of this wing. The bath is directly across the hall. You'd have plenty of privacy other than the two large rooms in this wing. The door at the very end leads to the third floor. There's also a back stairway that opens on each floor. That was used back in the day by the servants."

"So what's on the third floor?" Erik asked.

"The last three large bedrooms with private baths are up there. That's where my room, Betsy's room, and Melanie's room are. There isn't any reason for anybody other than us to go up to the third floor. All the paying tenants will be on the second floor. It's handier for people moving in, too. It's also more convenient for us when we're cleaning and washing linens, stuff like that."

"So all the tenants will be on the second floor except Melanie, right?"

"Well... yeah, you got me there. She's a dear friend and has been here from the beginning. She got to pick her own room, Betsy too... okay, and me too." Abby laughed at the foolishness spewing from her mouth. *I definitely must have a crush on this guy. I'm rambling like a fifth grader.*

Erik laughed, too, but with apparent delight. "So, are you saying I should take this small room so you can pass by my door every night when you go upstairs to bed? Are you coming on to me, Miss Taylor?" Erik laughed so loudly it echoed throughout the second floor.

"Right now, I don't have the slightest idea what I'm saying except that you're embarrassing the hell out of me."

"I'm just giving you a hard time. Plus it's kind of cute to see you blush that much."

She smacked him hard on the arm. "You deserve a lot more than a smack, mister."

"I like the sound of that." He laughed again and gave her a wink.

She shook her head and unlocked the door, allowing Erik to check out his new digs. "Okay, smart-ass. Here it is. What do you think?"

"I like what I see, Abby."

"You aren't even looking at the room." Abby was becoming exasperated by his charm and innuendos.

"I know... and I still like what I see."

"I don't know what to do with you. You're smooth, I'll give you that."

“Would you like a response?” He stood casually against the door with his arms crossed, fully in charge of the situation.

Abby noticed those bulging biceps and caught her breath before speaking. “No... no response necessary. Anyway, that’s it, what you see is what you get. Ugh... never mind, I’ve got to get back to planting flowers. Here are the keys to your room and the front door. The gate code is 4-7-1-3.”

“You aren’t going to help me carry up boxes and unpack? You’re just going to leave me?”

“Yep, you’ll be fine. See you at dinner. We sit down to eat at six o’clock.” *Holy crap, I’ve got to back away from him. I’m letting this gorgeous guy suck me in just like Remy did. Didn’t I learn anything by losing five million bucks to a smooth talker?* Abby disappeared down the servant’s stairway, through the kitchen, and ended up in the backyard, where Mel and Betsy sat at the table sipping sweet tea. “What the heck? I was sure all the flowers would be planted by the time I got back.”

“Yeah, we’re on to you and your thoughts. That’s why we waited for you to return. What, no quickie?”

“You’re going to hell, Melanie Davis... I’m just saying. Anyway, I’ll have some of that tea, too. If we don’t finish the flowers today, there’s always tomorrow.”

“You mean when the sexy Scandinavian can help us?”

“Maybe.”

She rolled over four times in two minutes, pounded her pillow, jammed it under her neck, and rolled over again. *Damn it, why can’t I fall asleep?* Just the thought of Erik Christiansen below her, one floor down, sent shivers up and down her spine. *I wonder what he wears to bed... if anything. Oh. My. God. Does he sleep naked? I swear I’ll never doze off if I don’t stop picturing him in my mind. I wonder if he’s looking up at the ceiling, imagining me right above him. No... that’s impossible. He has no idea where the rooms are situated or which one is mine. I wonder what his bedtime routine is. Does he shower before bed? Of course, he must brush his teeth. They’re beautiful and bright white. Maybe they just look super white because he has that damn tan. Hmmm... does he snore, or is he as quiet as a baby? Man, would I like to be a fly on a wall in his room, or maybe a fly on his pillow or under the covers.* “Oh for Pete’s sake, get a grip!” Abby turned on her TV and set the volume on the lowest setting. An episode of *Mistresses* was playing. “Oh, whatever!” With the TV playing in the

background, she was fast asleep in ten minutes.

Abby woke to a typical lazy Sunday until she remembered Erik was in the house. “Crap! Now I have to look human before I can even go downstairs to grab a cup of coffee.” She scanned the bedroom until she found the perfect spot. “Yep... I’m buying a small coffeepot to put right there on the dresser. At least I can have my first cup of the morning while I’m getting dressed to face my tenants at breakfast. I have to start a new normal... beginning today.”

Breakfast was served at eight a.m. on weekends. If a tenant chose to sleep in, fresh fruit and rolls were always available on the kitchen counter. Betsy would make two hot meals a day, no exceptions. Abby wanted everyone to know in advance that hers was a home, *not* a restaurant.

She checked the time on her cell phone as she walked down the staircase, looking fresh and quite pretty at 7:52 a.m. *Perfect timing. I wonder if Erik will be downstairs. Stop thinking about him, geez, he’s just a tenant.* Abby entered the kitchen to see Betsy at the stove and Melanie at the table. Her heart sank for a minute as she looked around for Erik.

“Abby, you’re as obvious as a beacon in the harbor,” Betsy said.

Mel chuckled. “She looks like a forlorn little baby with puppy dog eyes. Don’t worry, hon, Mr. Hot Stuff just went outside to get the newspaper. Damn... you got it bad, girl.”

“I do not.”

“Do, too.”

“What do you have?” Erik rounded the corner and sat down next to Abby.

“She said I have to help finish planting the flowers today,” Abby said, coming up with a quick response.

Mel gave her a nod of approval.

“I’ll help. I don’t have anything else to do until the paint and new water heater arrive tomorrow. By the way, Abby, which do you want me to do first?”

“Let’s go with the water heater. The painting will take more time, so let’s just get the water heater out of the way.”

“You got it. Hey, thanks, Betsy, the eggs are great, and bacon? Man, it’s like I’ve died and gone to heaven just from the scent lingering in the air.”

“You’re welcome. Did you eat breakfast with your folks every morning before moving here?”

“Naw... I usually ate on the go. But now, I’m going to enjoy this. Anyway, Abby, I’m thinking it will take two weeks to get all the bedrooms and bathrooms painted. I’m holding off on taking any new business until I’m done here. If there’s anything else after the painting you’d like me to do, just let me know before I start setting up appointments.”

“Oh, there is for sure,” Mel said before Abby elbowed her in the side.
“Ouch... I’m just kidding, geez.”

Chapter Twelve

The house on South Battery was taking shape. With four of the six bedrooms painted, Abby realized how much the entire house needed freshening. *In due time*, she thought as she checked on Erik's progress. "So how soon will the paint smell disappear?"

"Well, I'm constantly painting, but I'm sure a few of the rooms are fine by now. How about posting your ads, then you can rent out the rooms in order of the ones I painted first."

"Yeah, that's a smart way to go. You know, Erik, over time, there might be a lot more work for you to do here. Either the owners can pay you or you can get free rent. It's your choice. That is, if you intend to stay in this area."

"Sure, I'm not going anywhere in the immediate future. I visit my folks often enough, and they're interviewing tenants themselves. Having a paying renter will really help their income as well. Everyone needs a little cushion or a nest egg, right?"

"Yes, a nest egg is always a good thing." *Except for idiots like me who let other people take it and disappear.*

"Abby?"

"I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

"Yeah, who actually owns this place? Why haven't I ever met them?"

"Oh, the house is in a trust that can't be touched for years. The owners aren't around, so they have an attorney that I go through for everything. It's sort of complicated. I guess you could call me the steward of the house."

"Well, you're a damn good steward. You treat the Melrose Mansion like it's your own. I bet the family is proud of your abilities."

"Thanks. That's a nice compliment. *Maybe Dad was proud of me, but I've never lived up to Mom's standards.* Okay, I'm going to post ads around the neighborhood. I'll be back later."

Abby left quickly before he noticed her voice begin to crack and her eyes well up. She hated lying to him, but the screwed-up life she had lived and the mistakes she had made were really none of Erik Christiansen's business. They had a deal. He worked on the house for free rent, nothing more. No explanations were necessary.

I need to call Attorney Lewis again and see when the heck he's going to be back at work. This house does need attention, and I need money. Hopefully, by

this time next week, I'll have interested people to interview, she thought.

"Hello, Lewis Law Office, Adrienne speaking. How may I direct your call?"

Abby laughed at Adrienne's phone introduction. "Really, Adrienne? Is there anyone you could actually direct my call to since Mr. Lewis is the only one working there? And is he back, by the way?"

"Oh, hi, Abby. That's pretty funny come to think of it. I don't know who I would direct the call to"—she giggled—"but it's what I was always told to say. And no, *Attorney* Lewis isn't back yet. Why do you say *Mr.* anyway? Is it just when you're pissed off?"

"Yeah, pretty much. He isn't acting like an attorney these days, just leaving me hanging out to dry like he did. Do you have any idea when he's coming back?"

"Actually, he's been doing some work from home. Should I tell him to call you?"

"Well... duh, of course have him call me. I need this lawsuit to go through like yesterday."

"Okay, I'll get on the horn. You should hear from him this week... I hope."

"Abby, I've got great news. My cousin Bobby said he met a guy on a flight into Charleston the other day. This guy said he was moving here from Chicago and was looking for a place to live. Bobby gave him your info. I hope that was okay," Melanie said.

"Of course it was okay, but what are the odds of someone actually following through with it from a casual conversation on an airplane?"

"Who knows, but it's a start. I posted your ad on the bulletin board at work, and Joanie gave some of the ads to her husband to post in the hospital cafeteria."

"Okay, those are good locations. I put ads in all the Starbucks south of Spring Street, too. I wish we could just advertise in the newspaper, but I don't want all the neighbors knowing what I'm up to. I can't afford to bring this place up to code right now. Hopefully, the ads will start drumming up phone calls."

By the following week, Abby's phone was ringing constantly. She had only five rooms to rent, three large and two small. With any luck, the interviews would go quickly, and so would filling up the empty spaces. Bringing in money was of the utmost importance. Abby compiled individual packets with pictures showing each room, small and large, along with the hallway bathrooms. Pictures also showed the front and back yards and the common areas, and a list detailed the benefits of renting from her. If the candidate was interested, Abby would

have them fill out an application, and if all of their information was true, she would set up another appointment with them to show the house. There was no way on God's green earth she intended to have a multitude of people coming in and out of the house out of mere curiosity. That would definitely attract too much attention in the neighborhood. Somebody might think she was running a drug house for heaven's sake. Meeting each applicant at the Starbucks on King Street just north of Market Street would be a good central location, plus Abby could indulge in one cup of wonderful coffee and read the paper between appointments. It would be a fifteen-dollar day since she would do the proper thing and buy each applicant a cup of plain coffee to drink while they talked. Today, she had three potential renters to interview, a nice way to start the week.

Abby called a cab to pick her up at eleven thirty for her first appointment, which was set for eleven forty-five. The Starbucks was close, only five minutes away by cab. The first person she would meet was a single woman on disability. *That doesn't sound very promising, but she does have a steady income every month*, Abby thought as she waited inside Starbucks for the woman to arrive. *I wonder what her disability is and if she can walk up and down stairs*. Abby had described herself to the woman, who was named Sharon, over the phone, saying she had curly black hair and would be wearing a yellow T-shirt and navy-blue shorts.

An extremely large woman with a heavy limp walked in the door at 11:50 a.m. Abby watched to see if she would make eye contact, and she did. Sharon headed in Abby's direction. Perspiration ran down her forehead, ending at the tip of her nose, and her cheeks were fire engine red.

"Hello. You must be Sharon," Abby said, taken aback by the woman's appearance. She reached out to shake Sharon's hand, which was cold and clammy. *Oh my God, what did I get myself into? How am I going to wash my hands now?* "It's nice to meet you. Here, have a seat. You look exhausted. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Yeah, water sounds good," Sharon said as she plunked down in the chair, causing the bistro table to wobble.

"Sure, I'll be right back." Abby ran to the ladies room to wash her hands. "Seriously, this is ridiculous," she mumbled as she squirted double amounts of soap into her hands, scrubbing them thoroughly. "At least I still have three bucks I didn't have to spend on coffee."

She returned with her own coffee and a water in hand and placed them on the table. Sharon gulped the plastic cup of water before Abby was even seated.

"More, please," Sharon said as she handed Abby the empty cup.

"Oh... okay, give me a second." Abby finally sat down with the second cup

of water and began the conversation. She didn't need to ask what the disability was because it was apparent that something was up with Sharon's leg. "You didn't walk here, did you? Where are you living now?"

"I live in a rooming house on Calhoun. I got here on my Rascal scooter. It's outside, parked on the sidewalk."

"Oh my word... are you able to go up and down stairs?"

"Of course not, don't you have a stair lift? What kind of boardinghouse do you run?"

"Apparently, I'm not running the right kind. I'm so sorry for not asking the proper questions over the phone. I didn't mean to waste your time. You can still fill out an application if you like."

"What's the point? Thanks for the water, but I gotta get back home. Jerry Springer reruns are starting soon."

Oh my God, I have no idea what I'm doing, Abby thought as she watched Sharon struggle out the door and leave. Thank God I have forty minutes to regroup before the next appointment. She glanced at her notes to see who she was interviewing next. *Okay, this one is Lisa Gannon, a twenty-year-old medical student. That sounds a little better, but I wonder how she'll pay the rent.*

A fresh-faced girl with short blond hair entered through the door at twelve thirty. *Right on time, that's a positive. Maybe she'll be right on time with the rent check, too.* Lisa scanned the coffee shop and waved as soon as she saw Abby. *Nice... she's friendly and outgoing,* Abby thought as she stood to shake Lisa's hand. "It's great to meet you, Lisa. I'm Abby, of course. Please sit. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"A coffee sounds good. Black works for me." Lisa sat, looking relaxed and confident.

Yay, finally, a potential renter. Maybe today will turn out okay after all. Abby walked back to the table with one black coffee and sat down. "So, Lisa, tell me a little about yourself and why you were interested in renting from me."

"Sure... I'm a full-time student at MUSC studying to be a pediatrician. I'm in my second year, and my studies and courses are really keeping me busy. I live with my folks in Moncks Corner, but the drive into Charleston every day is a nightmare. I don't have the most reliable car either, but if I lived near the university, I could ride my bike to school. My parents are giving me a one-thousand-five-hundred-dollar-a-month allowance to find a place to live while I finish my schooling."

"That sounds really nice. Congratulations. You seem to be very ambitious."

"Oh, I totally am. You won't be sorry to have me as a tenant. I'm quiet because I'm always studying, and I don't have time to party like most kids my

age.”

“Okay, let me show you what we offer, and if you like what you see, you can take the application home with you. I’ll need your parents’ work history, since they’re the ones who will pay your rent. Make sure you let them know that two hot meals a day are included. That should give them a sense of relief that you’re eating properly.”

Abby showed Lisa pictures of the rooms and the common areas and explained the breakdown of the rent charges.

“I’m sure a smaller room with the hallway bath would be perfect for me. This home is beautiful. May I take all of this with me to show my folks?”

“Of course, that’s what it’s for. Go ahead and fill out the application together with your parents and get back to me. My contact information is in the packet. If you want to go ahead, have your parents come along, too. I’d be happy to show all of you the house.”

“Thank you so much. I’m really excited about this, and I’ll get back to you in a few days. I better go. I don’t want to miss my next class.”

Lisa left, and Abby exhaled a deep sigh. “Okay... one down and one more to go for today. Lisa seems promising. I hope she actually moves in.”

The last interview for the day was with Charles, a city employee who had recently gotten divorced. He needed a place to call his own since he had been living with his sister for the last three months.

A man entered Starbucks alone and looked directly at Abby. A smile crossed his face as he walked toward her, held out his hand and shook Abby’s.

Abby stood and introduced herself. “Hello, you must be Charles. I’m Abby. May I get you a coffee?”

“Sure, sounds good. I take cream and sugar.”

Charles Duncan was an average-looking man in his midforties, as far as Abby could tell. He seemed clean cut and polite, almost meek. He fidgeted a bit while she asked him the typical questions.

“So, Charles, you’re looking for a place of your own. Is that right?”

“Yeah, sure am. I can’t live with my sis forever. She has a hubby and four kids in a three-bedroom house.”

“I see. That makes perfect sense. So you work for the city. What do you do?”

“I’m a garbage truck driver for City Waste and Recycling. I just got hired there a month back, but I was a garbage man in Augusta before that. My wife wanted to move here, but now I know it was because she had a boyfriend in Charleston. Now she up and divorced me, and they took off for parts unknown. I make good money, and I’m reliable. I can be in charge of taking out the garbage, too.”

“Oh... thank you, but that isn’t necessary. So you work for City Waste and Recycling?” Abby’s face turned pale, and perspiration popped up on her forehead upon hearing the company’s name. *I’m sure he got hired because of poor Mr. Hanson’s fatal heart attack. Will having him live with me screw up my chances for a settlement?* Abby’s mind was going a hundred miles a minute. “Okay, let me show you the photos of the common areas in the house, and the bedrooms. Here are the room prices, which include two hot meals every day. If you’d like to go ahead, you can fill out the application, and I’ll get back to you once I check everything out. If at that time you want to go forward, I’ll give you a tour of the place. How does that sound?”

“Real good, so I should fill this out now?”

“Yes, right now sounds wonderful.” *I seriously need to get home and have a drink.*

Charles left, and Abby decided to walk home. With a good half-hour walk ahead of her, she could fill that time with decisions. She had a lot of thinking to do.

Chapter Thirteen

Back home with a glass of chardonnay on the library desk, Abby went over the numbers. “Let me see... Charles will likely take a small room, and Lisa will, too. Actually, two potential renters out of three appointments aren’t too bad.”

Betsy walked in. “Do you always talk out loud to yourself? I thought I heard the front door open. How did it go?” She pulled up one of the wingback chairs and sat closer to the desk, resting her feet on the chair next to her. She grabbed Abby’s glass and took a sip. “Ooh, that’s good.” Betsy jumped off the cozy chair just long enough to open the mini-fridge at the wet bar and pour herself a glass of chardonnay. “Thank you, Charlotte, for always having a nice wine selection.”

“Where were you just now?”

“I was upstairs changing the bed linens. So did anyone bite?”

“We might get two out of three. That’s a positive start, isn’t it?”

“Heck yeah, so tell me about the one that was a no go.”

“Oh my gosh, she drove her Rascal to the interview,” Abby said, almost choking on her wine. “I mean, you can’t make this stuff up. I felt bad, but I think she would have been on to us in two seconds flat. She was handicapped, of course, but she asked why I was renting out rooms upstairs if I didn’t have a stair lift. Who would have thunk? That never even occurred to me. I’m going to have to do more of the initial interview over the phone and make sure everyone is capable of walking up to a second-floor room.”

“Yeah, that could have gotten us in trouble.”

“Oh, and get this... I swear truth is stranger than fiction. One of the other two potential tenants works at City Waste and Recycling. It scared the crap out of me when he said that. It looks like he could be a potentially good tenant, but is that just some more bad karma, voodoo, and juju?”

“Who the heck knows? That is so weird. What a day... and the third?”

“She was perfect, a medical student whose parents will pay one thousand five hundred dollars a month for her to live in Charleston. I’m sure that one will be fine.”

“Okay, then there’s two people, and they want a small or a large bedroom?”

“Most likely small, but it’s a start in the right direction.”

All of the bedrooms were ready. The ivory paint looked elegant and rich. Erik was right, and his choice of colors for the rooms was spot-on, and the paint was much cheaper in bulk. Abby added colorful pillows she found scattered throughout the house and used them in the bedrooms. She moved artwork and rugs from other rooms into the tenant rooms to add pops of color as well. She didn't mind getting by with less in her own room, and Mel and Betsy didn't either.

That Saturday was the perfect day to show Lisa and her parents, along with Charles, the house on South Battery. All the applications were properly filled out, and the credit checks and background histories came back in good order. With the quantity of tourists walking East and South Battery and checking out White Point Garden, nobody would notice a few people going in and out of Melrose Mansion. The visitors were scheduled to arrive at eleven a.m., the busiest time for tourists to stroll the neighborhood. For thirty minutes, Abby acted as a tour guide, showing the main floor, second floor, the available rooms, and the gardens outside. Erik was right again. Planting that great quantity of flowers had paid off in spades, and the backyard was breathtakingly beautiful. Butterflies fluttered about, and hummingbirds zoomed by like fairies on rocket launchers. Abby invited the group out to the back to sit and enjoy a glass of tea with her and Melanie, Betsy, and Erik.

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet Lisa, her parents, and Charles. Lisa and Charles are both potential tenants. For now, they're enjoying everything this house and neighborhood have to offer. You can't get any more prestigious or beautiful than a home on South Battery."

"I'll second that," Erik added. "I've lived here almost a month, and it's beautiful and peaceful, even with the tourists, and having the park across the street is really nice. Betsy is the best cook ever, and Abby and Mel are like house mothers. Anyone would be lucky to live here."

Abby shot a quick smile at Erik to show her appreciation for his comments.

"Mom, Dad, can I? I really love this place. We can go back upstairs and pick out a small room. There's only two left, and if Charles wants a small room, too, I'd have to decide now."

"Well, Don, what do you think?" Lisa's mother asked.

"I say sure, let's go back upstairs and pick a room."

"Well... I guess I will, too, then. Lisa, choose whichever one you want, then I'll take the other."

"Are you sure, Charles?"

"Yep, for sure. I wouldn't mind either of them."

By twelve thirty, pleasantries had been exchanged and hands gratefully

shaken. The deals were done, and there would be an additional two thousand dollars a month coming in, along with Melanie's one thousand four hundred dollars to help with the household expenses. Abby would take down the ads tomorrow and rewrite them. Three large bedrooms with private baths were all that remained in need of tenants.

"Abby, I'd be happy to drive you to the places you've posted your ads. I overheard you telling Mel you needed to write new ones offering just the three large bedrooms now."

"I couldn't impose on you like that, Erik, but I appreciate the offer."

"It isn't an imposition or I wouldn't have offered, but to be honest, I'm out of things to do around here, and I'm kind of going stir-crazy. How about it? I'd love to take you out for lunch afterward."

Abby's inner voice was telling her to keep her distance, at least until her life was back on track and her finances were in the black, but her heart told her something entirely different. Erik was just about the nicest, most sincere and polite man Abby had ever met, and she was secretly dying to go somewhere with him away from the house. *A little friendly interaction wouldn't hurt, would it? It would just be a friend offering to help another friend and then having lunch afterward. No different than what Mel and I do together.*

"Abby? What do you say?"

"Um... sure, why not? Give me a half hour to put myself together."

"Good, it will be fun. You can pick wherever you want to go for lunch."

The inner courtyard of Eliza's Secret Garden on Meeting Street was one of Abby's favorite places. The intimate antique brick outdoor cafe held only six tables and was a place unknown to tourists. Ivy climbed the walls, and ornate wrought-iron sconces lined the inner walkway leading to the garden seating area. She couldn't wait to show the city treasure to Erik.

"Wow..."

"No kidding, right?" Abby said, turning back to give him a smile as he followed her closely through the darkened walkway. The sconces were all that lighted the path.

"How did you know about this place? There aren't any signs along the sidewalk."

“You know,” she said with a laugh, “you have to be an insider. I grew up in Charleston. I know all the quirky and cool secluded eating establishments. I haven’t been here for a few years and almost forgot about it, but it’s still as beautiful as I remembered.”

A hostess greeted them as they entered the inner courtyard. She led them to a cozy corner table for two. A server waited with two glasses of ice water when they sat down.

“Talk about service. This place is amazing, and gorgeous. The name suits it perfectly. So if you love this place so much, why did it take a few years for you to come back?” Erik took a sip of water and waited for her response.

Abby thought carefully about how to answer. She didn’t want to talk about her private life, but not saying anything would make Erik even more curious. She fidgeted with the tablecloth as she tried to quickly come up with some logical reason.

“Is something wrong? You’re a closed book for sure, but I wasn’t trying to be nosy. I was just making friendly conversation.”

“I’m sorry... memories popping in my head, that’s all. I moved away for almost two years. Actually, I’ve only been back in Charleston for a few months.”

“Really? Where did you go?”

The waitress came by, welcomed them, and handed them menus. She recited the daily lunch special, took their drink order, and said she would be right back.

“I lived in the US Virgin Islands for close to two years. Something different but not different enough to need a passport, foreign currency, or a translator,” she said lightheartedly, hoping he wouldn’t dig deeper.

“That sounds awesome. I bet you had a great time living there. I’d love to travel more extensively than I have, but my job is my income. No work, no pay, and definitely no play.” He chuckled.

“Where would you like to go?” she asked, trying to redirect the conversation to him.

The waitress returned with their drinks and took their food order. “Would you like the umbrella raised? I see the sun is making its way in this direction.”

“Sure. Thank you,” Abby said.

“The last time I left the United States was for spring break in Cancun during college. I’d love to go to Spain or Italy. I should have said Sweden, right? That’s my native land anyway. Actually, the Caribbean sounds wonderful, and I don’t mean Cancun.”

“Yeah, it is pretty wonderful. There’s something to be said for a laid-back lifestyle, even if it isn’t forever.”

Erik could tell by the sadness in Abby’s eyes that her last sentence held more

meaning than she was letting on. He thought it best to let it go for the moment. “So do you have any siblings, and where do your folks live?”

Abby took a bite of her grilled grouper. “Nope, it’s just me, no siblings... or parents.”

Erik’s brows furrowed with concern. That news startled him. “I guess that wasn’t what I expected to hear. Do you have any family nearby? Are you close to any cousins?”

“No... I’m not really close to anyone other than Mel and Betsy, but how about you? I know your parents are in Orangeburg, but what about brothers or sisters?”

“Yeah, my family is pretty big, and we’re all within an hour of each other. I guess I’m fortunate, now that I think about it. We always get together for holidays, birthdays, barbecues, you know, that type of thing. You ought to come meet them sometime. My family isn’t rich, but we can put food on the table, and there’s a lot of love in our hearts.”

“That sounds really nice. How many siblings do you have?”

“I have two brothers and three sisters. It was actually perfect growing up. The girls helped out Mom, and we boys helped out Dad. We all had chores. You know, the typical things, but when we played sports, we had an entire team once the cousins showed up.” Erik laughed at the fond memories. “I’ll tell you some good stories sometime.”

She looked into his green eyes, holding his gaze for a few extra seconds before speaking. “I’d really like that,” she finally said.

“So how about walking through the park for a bit? We have to burn off these calories anyway.” Erik winked at her, making her heart thump faster.

“Okay, and thanks for lunch.”

“Thanks for introducing me to this beautiful place. Let’s do it again sometime.” Erik got up and pulled out her chair.

He’s gorgeous and a gentleman? How did I get so lucky? “Erik, do you think it’s possible to turn the backyard into something this gorgeous? I mean, if I got permission.”

He looked around before they headed back through the walkway, envisioning the backyard at the mansion looking more like the beautiful secret garden before them. “Yeah, I think we can. All I’d have to do is build a pergola off the kitchen, add more water features, larger plants, and some garden art. Having outdoor lights strung through the pergola and glowing at night would really add a magical touch. I could start on it right away—if you got permission, that is. Otherwise, I’ll start taking in other jobs in the area.”

“That’s fair. I’ll let you know.”

They parked a block off South Battery. In that area, it was first come, first served for parking. As large as the homes were, to even have room for a driveway was a bonus. Walking White Point Garden was nothing new for Abby. She had done it every day for more than fifteen years growing up. She loved to watch the beautiful yellow-crowned night herons nest high in the trees. They stayed in the park all year long, caring for their young as they grew. As Abby and Erik strolled the pathways, she pointed out the birds to him. The live oaks were as magnificent as always, just one more reason Abby loved everything about Charleston.

Chapter Fourteen

That night, alone in her room, Abby went over the finances. With the two new tenants paying the first month's rent in advance, along with a small security deposit, Abby thought she could afford to have Erik start improving the backyard. She didn't want to admit it, but she enjoyed seeing his happy face every day at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Sure, he lived there, but if he had an outside job, she would see far less of him. She lay in bed and imagined him kissing her with his full lips. His mouth would search hers, lingering on her lips and tasting everything she had to offer. His hands would find the perfect spots to caress. He had that sun-streaked wavy blond hair that barely brushed his shoulders, and a manly scent that took her breath away. Erik was everything she wanted in a man, but he didn't know her past or that she was still married and would someday inherit the Melrose fortune. She worried about being vulnerable again only to be blindsided and humiliated once more. She was torn between letting go of her insecurities and keeping up her invisible wall. One thing Abby knew for sure was that she liked Erik Christiansen a lot, and he seemed to like her, too.

Monday afternoon, she sat in Starbucks again to meet with three more potential tenants for the large bedrooms. *Please, God, let them work out. Having all the rooms filled would solve my financial problems. Hopefully, the lawsuit will go forward, but if it doesn't, I'd still be able to get by.*

The first appointment was with a professional woman with beautiful ebony skin and large eyes. She wore a glistening white smile, and Abby liked her instantly. Her name was Lucille Moore, age thirty-eight, and she earned a good income. She was recently transferred from New York City to Charleston for work, a promotion in a company that made computer processors. It was a job close to Abby's heart and one she was familiar with because of her father's success. Lucille filled out the application immediately, telling Abby she had been renting a hotel room for two hundred dollars a night. It was a godsend, she said, when she read the ad Abby had posted in Starbucks. As far as Abby was concerned, it was a no-brainer, yet she took the application and told Lucille she would contact her in two days if everything looked fine. At that time, they could

set up an appointment to tour the Melrose Mansion.

The second appointment, after Abby had a much-needed cup of coffee, was with a young Charleston artist, Adam Jorgenson. His pottery was on consignment in the best galleries in town, and Abby was very familiar with his name and work. He had recently moved out of a house he shared with three other guys that partied too often and too hard for his liking. He was also a great potential tenant. Adam was excited by the photos Abby showed him and filled out the application as they drank coffee and shared their love of art with each other.

The final applicant strolled through the door of Starbucks at three o'clock. Abby watched the man enter and scan the café. He wore dark jeans and a T-shirt featuring the Chicago skyline. She was sure it was the man she was supposed to meet, but she waited for eye contact before standing up to offer a handshake. He looked an awful lot like Channing Tatum—hot, hot, and hotter.

“Hi, I’m Abby Taylor. You must be”—she quickly looked down at her notes—“Brandon Luck.”

“That’s me in the flesh,” he said, a little cocky but friendly nonetheless.

They shook hands, and Abby offered to buy him a coffee.

“No thanks, but I’d be happy to buy one for each of us.”

“That’s very nice of you,” she said, surprised by his generosity. “Okay, I’ll have a regular coffee with cream.”

“No problem. I’ll be right back.”

Abby took the opportunity to quickly check her notes. Brandon Luck, attorney, sounded ambitious, had just moved to town from Chicago, and was single, thirty-one years old. *Crap! I’m going to be in so much trouble with two gorgeous guys under one roof.*

He returned to the table and sat across from Abby, handing her a medium-sized coffee with cream. “Here you go. It’s nice to meet you, Abby. I’m glad I took that guy up on his recommendation.”

“What guy was that?”

“A guy I met on the flight from Chicago. Bobby Davis, I think. He told me to contact you for a place to live.”

“Wow, I’m surprised that actually panned out. His cousin, Melanie, is my closest friend and one of the tenants at the house. You’ll meet her if you decide to move in.”

“Okay, that’s cool. So is it true what they say about southern hospitality?”

“In what way?” she asked, engaging with his off-the-cuff humor.

“I don’t know. You look like you’d be a lot of fun. Maybe you could show me around town. That is, unless you’re spoken for and don’t want to ruffle any

feathers.”

“Well, for one, I’m not spoken for, and even if I were, I do make my own decisions.”

“Good for you. So how about having dinner with me then?” He grinned at her, almost daring her to say yes.

She laughed. “You’re pretty bold, aren’t you? Why don’t we get through this application process while I give your invitation some thought?”

“All right, you’re the boss lady. What would you like to know?”

“Anything that might be relevant to having your application accepted. What kind of law do you practice, and how long have you been employed?”

“Sure, okay. I’m a defense attorney who works with insurance companies, usually in wrongful death claims. I’ve been gainfully employed for seven years, and I shower every day.” He chuckled, playfully teasing her as he spoke. “Anything else you want to know?”

“Yes, why did you move to Charleston from Chicago?”

“That’s easy, for the weather. Have you ever wintered in Chicago or anywhere in the Midwest for that matter?”

“I can truthfully say I haven’t.”

“Well, there you go. I was offered a partnership in a well-established law firm here in the city. It was too tempting to pass up. I’m just a lucky guy.” He laughed at his own clever comeback. “Anyway, what’s your favorite dinner restaurant in Charleston?”

“I’m not telling you until we’re finished. You still have to fill out the application and let me go through my presentation.”

“Really... you’re going to do a presentation?”

“Well, of course,” she said, blushing. “This is serious to me. I don’t want to rent to somebody irresponsible just because they can afford it. There are other tenants I need to be considerate of. Anyway, please give me your attention.”

Abby opened her butter-soft calfskin briefcase and pulled out the folder she had prepared for Brandon. “Here are the photos of the available rooms and common areas, and this is the monthly room cost. Breakfast and dinner are included in the rent.”

“Okay, I’ll be serious for a few minutes.” He grinned as he opened the folder and paged through the photos. “I’ll admit, it’s a beautiful home. I love antiques and quality architecture. Do you know what year this house was built and in what style?”

“Actually, I do. It’s an Italianate mansion and was built in 1853. The neighborhood is beautiful and safe, and there’s a park right across the street.”

“It sounds pretty nice. Okay, I’ll fill out the application. I’m sure, Miss

Taylor, you'll find all my credentials are in order," he joked again. "Anyway, when do I get to check out the new digs in person?"

"When I review your application and determine you aren't a flight risk."

"I like that. You've got a quick wit. Have you decided where we're going to have dinner yet?"

Brandon Luck was a tough man to turn down. Abby liked everything about him, from his good looks to his cocky sense of humor. He was outgoing and funny, even though he was somewhat full of himself.

"Fine then, if you want to have dinner with me, meet me at Josh's Grill on King Street at seven sharp. Thanks for the coffee." Abby stood and reached out to shake his hand. He took hers and gave it a soft kiss instead. She blushed, that time a fiery red, and shook her head with a laugh as she walked out. *Holy crap, I'm going to get myself in hot water with this guy. He'll be hitting on all of us, but if I do accept him as a tenant, the house will finally be full, and I can start to relax.*

"Where's Abby? Why isn't she eating dinner with us?" Erik asked anyone who might know the answer to his question.

"I think she's going out to eat tonight," Melanie responded as she passed the plate of lasagna around the table.

"That's unusual. Who is she going out with?" Erik's expression changed from happy-go-lucky to disappointment in two seconds flat.

"She didn't say, but she's still upstairs getting ready. I think she's leaving in about a half hour. Maybe she'll come down and say goodbye before she leaves."

The fun-loving group at the table carried on their usual evening conversation without missing a beat. Laughter echoed throughout the dining room from everyone except Erik. He sat solemnly eating his dinner in silence. Melanie inconspicuously looked in his direction and saw how let down he was. *Man, he has it bad for her. I have to find out tomorrow what she's up to and with whom.*

The sound of hard-soled shoes running down the staircase alerted the diners that Abby was dressed and ready to leave. She peeked around the corner of the dining room door and said good night to everyone. "That lasagna smells great, Betsy. See you guys in the morning."

With that, and no time for anyone to respond, Abby was out the door and climbing into the back of the waiting taxi. She felt bad, as if she were doing something wrong, after seeing the look in Erik's eyes. She left quickly, a deliberate act so nobody would ask questions, especially Erik. *What the heck am*

I doing, and why do I feel guilty? I like Erik, but Brandon is nice, too. I don't intend to get involved with either of them, especially if they both live in the same house with me. It's only dinner with a new guy in town. Southern hospitality, that's all.

Chapter Fifteen

Brandon waited outside the entrance to Josh's Grill. The cab pulled up to the curb just five feet from him. Even through the cab's tinted windows, Abby could see how sexy he looked. Brandon knocked on the driver's window and handed him a twenty, then opened the back door for Abby. He reached in and, with a warm smile, helped her out.

"You didn't have to pay my cab fare. Thank you, but it wasn't necessary."

"Well, since I couldn't pick you up like a proper date, the least I could do was pay the cabbie."

"Is this what we're doing, having a proper date? We just met this afternoon." Abby laughed and relaxed as they walked through the door.

"This is a pretty upscale place, very similar to Gibson's in Chicago. I like it, great choice. I hope the food is good."

"Oh, the food is delicious, and I did want you to feel at home. I've heard Chicago has exceptional restaurants."

The hostess greeted them at the podium, "Good evening, table for two?"

"Yes, we have reservations for Luck."

"Certainly. Follow me, please."

Brandon let Abby lead while he rested his hand at the back of her waist. He pulled the chair out for her to sit and pushed it in when she did. The hostess handed them each a menu and left.

"You look gorgeous tonight. That turquoise dress matches your eyes perfectly." He neatly spread the cloth napkin across his lap and gave her an approving smile.

Man, he's smooth. How did I get two seemingly decent guys to like me within one month when I couldn't even hang on to my husband? "Thank you. You look really nice, too."

The server announced the evening specials, and they ordered, including a bottle of wine.

"So why are you interested in renting a room rather than an apartment or a house?"

"Your friend's cousin did a really good job pitching the place. He said the price was right, the neighborhood was wonderful, and the woman in charge was gorgeous. I guess that's all the convincing I needed."

"You're lying!" Abby gasped with a discreet smack on his hand from across

the table.

"I am not," he said with a laugh. "I swear that's what he said. I had to see if he was telling the truth or not. You know, from a curiosity standpoint, if nothing else."

Their steaks and baked potatoes arrived, each with a side salad.

"Everything looks great, and the steaks look pretty good, too."

Abby shook her head and rolled her eyes. "You really know how to schmooze the ladies, don't you?"

The cab slowed to a stop in front of the house on South Battery at eleven thirty. Erik was still awake, lying in bed, thinking about Abby. He heard a car door close and looked out the window behind his bed. Abby walked to the iron gate, punched in the code, and entered the house. He listened for her footsteps walking the hallway, but the loud sound of heels never came up the stairs, past his door, and up to the third floor.

She must have taken off her shoes. Abby is considerate, after all. The floorboards squeaked as she passed his door and took the stairs up to her third-floor bedroom. Erik listened closer and realized the squeaks ended above his head. *Her bedroom is right above mine.* He heard the sound of her closet door open and close, then the twang of her bedsprings as she lay down to sleep.

Erik slept lightly, restless because of Abby. He wanted to become closer to her, not just casual friends. She was keeping something deep inside all to herself, something unspoken, and he could sense it. He wanted Abby to trust and confide in him, to tell him her secrets and to fall in love with him. Her absence tonight weighed heavily on his mind. Was she on a date or just meeting a casual friend for dinner? He rolled over and punched the pillow, finally drifting off to sleep.

"Good morning, everyone," Abby said as she sat down for breakfast. She looked around the table and noticed all eyes were on her. "What? Why is everybody staring at me?"

"Just curious," Mel said quickly before Erik did. She wanted to save Erik from the question he was obviously about to ask. She didn't want him to appear jealous in Abby's eyes.

"You're curious about what?" Abby laughed, knowing exactly what her friend was getting at. She grabbed a piece of toast from the plate in the center of

the table and spread it with peach jam. "I was interviewing a potential tenant yesterday, and they asked if I wanted to join them for dinner, that's all."

"Funny how you said 'they' instead of 'he' or 'she,'" Mel said, picking up on Abby's innocuous description.

"Whatever. Are there any scrambled eggs left, Betsy?"

"Sure. Hand me your plate." Betsy walked over to the stove top and plopped a large spoonful of scrambled eggs onto Abby's plate. "Want some cantaloupe, too, while I'm near the fridge?"

"Yes, please." Abby glanced toward Erik and smiled.

He was already staring at her as he fidgeted with the food on his plate, pushing it from one side to the other. "So have you approved this potential tenant's application yet?" he asked.

"No, but I should know enough today to make a decision. It will be really nice to fill all the rooms. Everyone seems like they're a really good fit for this home, and each other, as far as friendships go."

"I'll second that. I like everybody," Lisa said enthusiastically. "And I love being this close to school."

"I'm happy it's working out so well for you, Lisa. I hope all of you enjoy living here."

"When you're done eating, Abby, I'd like to have a word with you. No rush," Erik said as he got up and cleared his plate from the table. With the water running, he scraped the leftovers into the sink and hit the switch for the garbage disposal. He opened the dishwasher when Betsy came up behind him.

"Hey, doing dishes isn't in your job description, mister. Come on now, beat it. I'm in charge of the kitchen duties." She gave him a quick grin and a swat with the dish towel.

Erik excused himself and walked out to the backyard. He sat on a bench in the shade of a palmetto tree at the far corner of the yard. Within twenty minutes Abby came out carrying two cups of coffee. She sat down next to him on the bench and handed him a cup.

"Thanks. You're thoughtful."

"Is something wrong? You seem on edge." She took a sip of her steaming drink and looked around the backyard. "I really love this place. It's peaceful back here, you know?"

"It sure is. I was contemplating how the pergola should look and how to situate it off the kitchen."

"Is that what you wanted to talk about? I thought something was wrong." Relief swept across Abby's face as she realized Erik wasn't going to bombard her with questions about last night. He would find out soon enough when she

approved Brandon's rental application. At that point, he would clearly realize she had gone to dinner with a man she had just met. She laughed, pointing to a ruby-throated hummingbird darting around the rhododendron bush just ten feet away. "Aren't they precious?" she asked, reaching over and squeezing Erik's left hand. It felt so natural to her that she hadn't given it any thought.

Erik responded by kissing her tanned shoulder. "I really like you. Can we just see how this plays out?"

"There's a lot you don't know about me. I have a walk-in closet full of skeletons. Wouldn't that scare you away?" she asked.

"Not a bit. When you're ready to talk, I'll be here to listen." He kissed the back of her hand. Her fingers were still intertwined with his. "Okay, so how about that pergola... are we going ahead with it?"

"We certainly are. How beautiful the backyard looks is entirely up to you. I trust your judgment completely, and you'll have a three-thousand-dollar budget to work with. Do it proud."

"That sounds doable. I'll start measuring and sketching things out today. By this time tomorrow, I should have a pretty good landscape and hardscape diagram to show you."

She stood to go inside, her fingers wrapped around the coffee cup. "To answer your question from before, I'd like that. Let's just live in this wonderful home and take things one day at a time. It will work out if it's meant to. Anyway, I can't wait to see what you do with the backyard. Are you coming in?"

"Naw... not yet, I've got some thinking to do."

"Okay, see you later." Abby headed toward the house, but turned back just before opening the screen door. She playfully waved at him. Erik shook his head and laughed.

With a glass of water, Abby retreated to the library and opened her laptop. She needed to do a background check and employment history on Brandon Luck so she could contact him and set up a time for a tour of the house. She had only one large bedroom left, so he wouldn't have a decision to make other than saying yes or no to living there. The background check software she had bought last month, while pricey, was a godsend, and everyone had signed a yearlong lease. She justified the expense because she would likely use the software again in the future when the tenants' leases were up. *I wonder what my life will be like in a year. Will my finances be on track so I can go back to school? Will I be happy and find someone to fall in love with? Do I even want that?*

Forty-five minutes and two glasses of water later, Abby was on the phone with Brandon.

“Hey, Abby, it’s good to hear your voice again. Did I pass your stringent background check?”

“Did you have any doubt?” She chuckled and relaxed in the leather chair with her bare feet resting on the desk.

“Not really. As an attorney, I can’t be too irresponsible, as you put it. I do have an image to uphold.”

“Thanks. I bet I won’t live that comment down. Anyway, when do you want to check out the digs? That is, if you want to go ahead with the lease.”

“Would this afternoon work? I’m just hanging out at the hotel pool... nothing too exciting going on here anyway. I start my new job next Monday, so getting moved in would really help. I won’t have to live out of a suitcase. I don’t have a ton of things to move since my apartment in Chicago was a corporate-furnished bachelor pad.” He laughed again and joked about the parties that had gone on in that apartment.

“Okay, let’s plan for two o’clock. See you then.” Abby gave him the address and hung up. *Today, Erik is going to meet Brandon. I’ll have two completely different guys—both hotter than heck and with far too much testosterone—living in the same house. This is going to be interesting.*

At one thirty, Erik headed out the front door. A small notepad was jammed in the back pocket of his nicely fitting worn jeans, and a pencil rested above his left ear.

“Hey, where are you going?”

Erik turned to see Abby sitting on the veranda, the latest romance novel propped on her lap and a pair of aqua readers with rhinestone accents hanging from the bridge of her nose. Her flawless tanned legs rested on the chair across from her, and a glass of chilled white wine was on the table.

“Well, don’t you look comfortable? It appears you have everything you need within arm’s reach. A glass of wine and a steamy book... what more could a young lady such as yourself ever need?”

“I’ll let you know when the time is right. Would you like a glass of wine? I’ll even read to you.” Her eyes twinkled as she stared at him.

“Yeah... I’ll pass. These days, I read more DIY magazines than anything else.”

“Where are you off to?”

“I’m heading to the nearest lumberyard to buy the wood. I’m starting the pergola in the morning. Do you want to take a look at the design?”

“I sure do.” Abby put the book down, placing a bookmark between the pages

she had just finished reading. She sat up, removed her glasses, and offered Erik the chair her feet were on.

He pulled the notepad from his pocket before sitting. "Here you go. What do you think?" He opened to the page that had a pencil drawing and a lot of measurements next to each post and plank. The drawing showed the pergola spanning the width of the current patio and several feet beyond, going forward into the yard. "I'll put large posts at each end on the yard side and cover them in the same Italianate style as the house so nothing looks new and modern. I assume the owners would want everything to match in color, right?"

"They definitely would. This looks wonderful. You really have an eye for this stuff."

"Well, I'm just a carpenter, a do-it-yourselfer and a handyman, but it pays the bills."

"Why are you cutting yourself down? You're a skilled tradesman. There's no shame in that. You have an artistic nature and an eye for beautiful things. You and Adam should get together and create yard art. You know he's Scandinavian, too, right? You guys already have something in common."

Abby was taken aback when Erik leaned in and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. "You're a wonderful woman. Now I better get going before they run out of lumber."

"You're a funny guy, Erik Christiansen."

He looked back when he latched the gate and called out, "And you're beautiful, Abby Taylor."

She stared at him as he ran down the street toward his van. A quick check of the time told her it was almost two o'clock. She craned her neck to look down South Battery and noticed a car waiting for the parking spot Erik was pulling out of. Brandon pulled in and parked as soon as Erik left. *That was close*, she thought, as she saw him get out and start walking up the street. *I hope he doesn't stay long. Erik is in such a good mood today, I'd hate to ruin that for him.*

Abby introduced Brandon to everyone that was in the house, which was all of two people. Betsy and Adam were sitting at the kitchen table playing cribbage, and everyone else was either at work, buying lumber, or at summer school.

"Brandon, this is Betsy, our chef and my second in command, and Adam, a very talented local artist. Betsy and Adam, this is Brandon Luck, a recent transplant from Chicago and an attorney. He will be the last tenant moving into the Melrose Mansion. I believe he's moving in over the weekend. Isn't that right, Brandon?"

"Yes, you're absolutely correct. So how about that tour?" he asked cheerfully.

"Of course. Let's start upstairs and work our way down."

At the top of the stairs on the second floor, they turned right. The last available room was at the far end of the hallway. "Well, this is it," Abby said as she unlocked the door and allowed Brandon to pass through. "Actually, other than the location of the rooms, they're all pretty similar in size and decor. The bathroom is attached and pretty large."

He walked through the room, admiring the antique furnishings. He sat on the bed and bounced up and down a few times.

"What are you doing?" she asked, surprised by his actions.

"Just checking how noisy the bed is, being an antique and all."

"And that matters why?" With her hands on her hips, Abby cocked her head to the right.

"I don't know. I guess a man has to be aware of things like that. I have to be considerate of the other housemates, right?" He grinned at Abby as he patted the bed and indicated for her to sit down.

"Not on your life, mister." She chuckled. "Come on. Let me show you the common areas."

"That sounds dull. My idea is far more interesting."

"Well, it sucks for you right now. Let's go."

After spending a half hour downstairs and in the back garden with Brandon, Abby was becoming fidgety. She was ready for him to leave. "I have a ton of things to do, so I'll see you Saturday, okay?"

"Oh, sure, I guess. Thanks for the tour. The place is really nice. See you Saturday."

She walked to the gate with Brandon and latched it behind him. He was only thirty feet down the sidewalk when Abby saw Erik approaching slowly in his van. He looked long and hard at Brandon, then he appeared to notice Abby standing at the gate. He turned into the driveway and parked, exited the van, and began to unload the lumber he had just purchased. "Hey, Abby, so that's the newest tenant, huh?" he asked. His eyes squinted toward the end of the street as he watched Brandon climb into a late model BMW sedan and drive away.

"Yeah, no biggie. So you got all the lumber before they ran out, huh?" She tried to make light of an awkward situation by changing the subject altogether. "Can I help you carry the boards around the house?"

"What? Oh, no thanks, I don't want you to get any splinters in your arms."

"Nonsense, I'm not a wimp. I'm helping anyway."

"Okay, suit yourself."

They unloaded the van and stacked all the boards on the sidewalk in the backyard. Abby hoped the subject of Brandon was dead for the time being.

"So who is he, and when is he moving in?" Erik asked.

“Seriously? He’s just a guy, a tenant like everyone else.”

“Ouch... I’ve been reduced to *just a tenant*.” He smiled, obviously teasing her. “You didn’t go out to dinner with me the first day we met.”

“I might have if you would have asked,” she responded with a tiny grin on her face.

“Touché. I guess I deserved that. Okay, muscles, we’ve got more stuff to unload.” Erik took her by the hand as they walked back to the van.

Chapter Sixteen

Abby picked up on the third ring. Attorney Lewis had finally taken it upon himself to return her call.

“Hello, Melrose Mansion, Abby Taylor speaking.”

“Abigail? It’s Attorney Lewis. Why are you calling yourself Abby Taylor, and why are you answering the phone the way you did?”

“Hello to you, too,” she responded in a snarky voice. “Are you really wondering why I changed my last name after the crap my husband and mom pulled? I don’t want to be associated with either of them anymore. I’ve created my own identity, and to be honest, I like it *a lot*. And I answered the phone the way I did because I’ve been reduced to renting out half my home, you know, for *income*. I thought you were going to pursue a wrongful death lawsuit for me.”

“I am, dear. That’s why I’m calling. I’ve already sent the paperwork to City Waste and Recycling saying we’re filing a suit against them, or their insurance company, for the untimely death of your dearly departed mother.”

“Cut the crap, Mr. Lewis. You were supposed to have those papers sent out a month ago. Instead, you took a personal leave of absence and left me to figure out what to do for income. And as far as my mother, she was nothing more than a paycheck to you. Is there actually something you want?”

“Well, yes, there is. I need a deposit from you for the lawsuit I filed on your behalf. I also need you to sign the legal documents stating that you’re now in charge of the ongoing account your mother started so many wonderful years ago.”

“How much money do you need from me right now?” Abby asked, becoming more irate as the minutes ticked by.

“Two thousand dollars should suffice for now.”

“I don’t have two thousand dollars to give you. Since you disappeared for a month at my expense to have liposuction—yes, Adrienne told me—I’ll give you a thousand dollars. You’ll get your cut anyway if we win the lawsuit. I’ll be there in an hour with the money. Is there anything else you want?”

“I believe that’s all for now, Abigail. I may have to amend the suit since you changed your legal name.”

“I don’t believe that’s necessary, and I don’t have time for your shenanigans. There is plenty of documentation to prove who I am. I’ll be there shortly.”

Abby slammed the phone down and stomped into the kitchen. She sat at the

table and stewed.

"A penny for your thoughts," Erik said as he leaned against the doorframe between the patio and the kitchen.

Abby jumped, not realizing he was there. "You startled me. Sorry, I'm just in a lousy mood. Actually, it's more of an angry mood." She stared at him standing in the doorway wearing nothing but a pair of work jeans. His rock-hard abs glistened with beads of sweat from the hours of labor he had already performed.

"Is there anything I can do to put you in a better state of mind?" He gave her that sexy grin that made her heart pound and her knees wobble.

Abby laughed and got up to pour two iced teas. "I guess you just did. Thanks. It worked. Sit down and take a break with me." *I need a minute to get my pulse back to normal.*

"I have a better idea. Come outside and tell me what you think of the pergola so far." Erik took both glasses of tea and walked ahead of her. "Watch your step. It's a mess out here."

She followed him closely, stepping over boards, posts, nail guns, and saws. Finally, once they were both standing in the middle of the yard and looking back toward the house, Abby could see the vision Erik had drawn on paper last week. She gasped with excitement because her garden would soon have the vibe she loved at Eliza's Secret Garden.

"It's gorgeous. You're so talented."

"Well, with some more bushes and garden art, I think we can turn this backyard into Melrose's Secret Garden. So you like it?"

"I love it, and..." She caught herself before she said more. The words were on the tip of her tongue. "Anyway, I have to run out for an hour or so. The cab should be here soon. I just have to clean up a bit."

"You should have said something, Abby. I could have given you a lift, unless it's a lunch date." He gave her a wink as he wiped his brow.

"It isn't a lunch date. Far from it, actually. See you later."

She entered the Georgian brick building on Calhoun Street, took the stairs to the second floor, and opened the double mahogany doors leading to Lewis Law Office. Adrianne sat behind the counter, scowling at Abby when she saw her.

"What?" Abby said without remorse.

"I just got chewed out by Attorney Lewis. Thanks, Abby, for shooting your mouth off."

"Well... you know what they say about loose lips."

"Actually, I don't," Adrianne said, pouting.

"That's apparent."

"Abigail, come in please. Adrianne, hold my calls for thirty minutes, no

exceptions.”

Abby followed Attorney Lewis into his office, quickly noticing his weight loss. She had to bite her lip from blurting out something hurtful, but that was the kind of mood she was in.

“Sit down. These documents have to be signed and dated.” He handed her a dozen sheets of paper to sign.

“What name should I use to sign them?”

“Unless you want me to have new documents drafted, you’ll have to sign them as Abigail Melrose, the way they’re drawn up. Your signature has to match the typed name below it.”

“Fine. May I read them first?”

He glanced at his watch and huffed, shuffling in his oversized office chair. “Go ahead, but I do have another appointment in thirty minutes.”

“I’m a quick reader,” she huffed back. “What’s the protocol for the lawsuit anyway?” She scanned the documents and signed each one at the bottom.

“I’ve already informed City Waste and Recycling that there’s a wrongful death suit being filed against them. They hand everything off to their insurance company, which either has its own lawyers in-house or has a law firm on retainer. We’ll likely hear directly from the insurance company after they go over the suit with their attorneys. That’s when you get a payout, we fold, or we fight back.”

“Great. There’s more money going out and no guarantees of any coming in.” She sighed and slid the documents back across the desk, all signed and dated.

“Welcome to the world of legal haggling. Now all I need to do is collect the thousand dollars, and you can be on your way.”

Abby reached in her purse and pulled out the check, sliding that across his desk, too. “Right. We don’t want to forget the most important reason I’m here, do we?”

He stood and escorted her to the door. “I’ll be in touch.”

“You better be,” she replied without looking back.

Saturday morning, Abby woke with her stomach doing flip-flops. Brandon was moving in today. *Maybe I can get him to focus on Melanie. He hasn’t met her yet, and she is quite the beauty. She’s fun, too, and would probably love to go out with a hunk like him. That’s it. She can take one for the team.* Abby took a quick shower and rushed down the third-floor staircase. The smell of bacon wafting up to the second floor was heavenly, causing everyone to make their way to the

kitchen for breakfast. Abby loved mealtime. Everyone shared stories, both good and bad, happy and sad. Laughter usually rang out among the eight of them, all friends already and without any animosity between them. That might change. Abby needed to pull Mel aside after breakfast and have a talk with her.

“So what does everyone think of the pergola going up over the patio?” Abby asked, starting the morning conversation.

“It’s gorgeous!” Lisa said, the first to speak up.

“I’ll go along with that. Do you need any garden art? I can probably find something in my studio to bring over.”

“I couldn’t possibly ask you to set something up in the yard that you could be selling, Adam, but thank you for offering,” Abby said.

“You didn’t ask, and I have plenty of seconds that I can’t sell, but they’d look pretty rad in the backyard.”

“Seriously, you’d do that?”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll bring something over this afternoon. I might need your help, Erik, if you don’t mind. Some of those cement statues I make are pretty heavy. You’d be doing me a favor, Abby. I really could use the extra space in my studio.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your generosity. Now I’m excited to see what you’ll bring. Will someone pass the bacon, please?”

Abby asked Melanie to join her on the veranda after breakfast. Abby carried out a small carafe of coffee and two cups.

“What’s up, and why are we sneaking away?” Melanie asked, waiting for some juicy gossip to cross Abby’s lips. She got comfy on the floral-cushioned chair, twisting her feet up under her body like a pretzel. She pulled the cup of coffee close to her on the table so she wouldn’t have to rearrange her position to reach it.

“Brandon is moving in today, and it’s making me nervous. He’s hot, and I mean really hot.”

“Okay, I like what I’m hearing. So far, so good. What’s the problem?” Mel blew on her coffee and took a sip.

“Up to this point, the house has settled into a nice routine with everyone getting along. Charles even takes out the garbage on Friday mornings, for Pete’s sake. How sweet is that? The problem is having two hot guys in one house.”

“Not in my book. I don’t get it. What are you really saying?”

“I’m saying there’s going to be tension in the house, and that’s the last thing I want. I don’t need another vacant room because Erik and Brandon can’t get along.”

“Who says they won’t?”

“Me.”

“Isn’t that being a little egotistical? Do you have some indication that they’re going to be dueling over you?”

“Okay, it’s like this. I already know Erik likes me, and I think Brandon does, too. I mean, why would he ask me out to dinner on the first day I met him?”

“Maybe he wanted to make a new friend. You said he’s from Chicago. I haven’t met the guy, so I can’t form an opinion yet.”

“Right, but that’s where you come in. I want you to flirt with him so his focus will be on you. You’re gorgeous and outgoing, and you would make a perfect couple.”

“Cool... so now instead of arranged marriages, we’re starting a new trend... arranged dating? You’re nuts, Abs. If he likes me, he likes me, and vice-versa. Maybe I’ll think he sucks. I’m not doing it.”

“Fine, but you’ll be sorry as soon as you see how gorgeous he is.”

“I have a great idea. How about not worrying about it? He’s a tenant, and so is Erik. This isn’t two guys fighting to the death over a damsel in distress. Geez, you’re going off the deep end over this.”

Abby’s forehead exposed furrows of anxiety as she pondered Mel’s statement. “Maybe you’re right. I’m sorry. I’m overthinking everything.”

“That’s right, so let’s just sit here, enjoy the morning, and drink our coffee.”

Abby’s cell phone, buried deep in the pocket of her cargo shorts, rang out just after lunchtime. She had been relaxing on the lawn under the palmetto tree, having a beer with Erik, Adam, Mel, and Betsy. Lisa, who was only twenty, was indulging in a root beer. Lucille had a lunch date with a coworker, and Charles had gone for a walk to explore the neighborhood.

“Excuse me,” she said when she recognized the number as Brandon’s. She walked to the side yard to speak. “Hello, Brandon.”

“Hi, Abby. I just wanted to let you know I’m on my way. I’ve already checked out of the hotel, and I’ll be there in ten minutes. Is there room in the driveway for me to pull in? I have five boxes and a lot of clothes to unload.”

“Um... hang on, I’ll look.” Abby walked to the other side of the yard and peered over the side gate to see Mel and Adam’s cars squeezed tightly in the driveway. “I think you’ll be okay. Your car might hang over the sidewalk right now, but as long as you move it later, you should be fine.”

“Okay, see you in a few.”

Within ten minutes, a voice called out to Abby over the gate.

“Looks like your new tenant has arrived,” Erik said in a somber tone.

Abby got up and gave Erik a pensive look before trotting off to open the side gate for Brandon. The rest of the group remained lounging in the backyard and saw Brandon give Abby a hug as he passed through the gate.

“That’s awesome,” Erik said. He took a large swig of his beer and looked away.

Mel glanced at Erik and watched as the muscles tensed in his jaw.

“I’ll grab a few more beers. Everyone stay put.” Betsy ran off to the kitchen and returned a few minutes later as Abby was making the introductions.

“Everybody, this is Brandon Luck.”

Abby heard a small snicker from Erik’s direction.

“Brandon, you know Betsy and Adam already, and here are a few more people from the house. This is Erik, Melanie, and Lisa. There are two more tenants that I’ll introduce you to later when they get home. How about a beer? You can unload your car in a little bit.”

“Yeah, a beer sounds great. So what do all of you people do for a living?”

Melanie spoke up. “I work in a fashion design house downtown, Adam is a very talented artist who’s well known in Charleston, Betsy is our awesome chef, Erik is our highly skilled in-house tradesman, and sweet Lisa is a college student studying to be a pediatrician. The two missing people are Lucille, a professional who works in a computer processor company, and Charles, a city garbage truck driver.”

“Wow... quite a diverse crowd you’ve got here, Abby. An in-house handyman and a garbage man, that’s impressive.” Brandon shot a glance at Erik as he made the statement and chuckled.

“Yeah, do you have a problem with that?” Erik sat upright, stared directly at Brandon, and took another gulp of his beer. “You don’t need to bother unloading your car if you do. We’ll all be fine just the way things are.”

“Hey, down, boy.” Brandon smirked. “Just calling it as I see it.”

“So what do you do, hotshot?”

The air was thick with tension. Abby offered Brandon a seat on the bench, trying to keep him and Erik from having eye contact.

“To answer your question... what’s your name again?”

“It’s Erik.”

“Right... well, Erik, I’m a defense attorney from Chicago. I was just offered the position as a partner in a well-known law firm here in Charleston. Of course I couldn’t pass up such a great, high-paying position as partner at my age. I’ll admit Chicago winters are brutal, too. This will be an exciting change for me. I’m looking forward to learning more about Charleston and the beautiful people

I've met here."

Abby quickly looked away before Brandon locked eyes with her. She knew full well who he was talking about, and she also knew that he was trying to push Erik's buttons.

"If you're done with your beer, Brandon, we can get your stuff upstairs so you can move your car."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. I think I've temporarily worn out my welcome."

"Why do you need to help him move in, Abby?" Erik asked.

"Erik, please... I just need to unlock the bedroom door and give him his keys. I'll be back out in a few minutes."

"So what do you guys think of Mr. Hotshot?" Erik asked as they watched Abby and Brandon walk away together toward the side gate.

"At first glance, I think he's kind of arrogant," Melanie said. "Not the sort of guy I'd be interested in, even though he's hot."

"He is hot," Lisa agreed, "but yeah, I can tell he's full of himself."

"Did I go too far?" Erik asked, shaking his head and angry with himself for putting Abby in the middle of the testosterone takedown.

"Sort of, dude. You need to dial it back a little," Adam said.

"Sorry, guys, my bad. I'll be cordial to Mr. Luck from now on. What a stupid name, right? I'll get some more beverages. Betsy, do you care if I bring out a bag of chips, too?"

"Not at all, go ahead."

"Guess I didn't make a very good impression with the stud outside, did I?" Brandon said. "What's his problem anyway?"

"Erik doesn't have a problem. You tell me. Is this some kind of male dominance thing?"

"Got me... anyway, how about dinner tonight?"

"Sure, around the table with everyone else. That's one of my house rules here. First night is always at home with the newest person meeting all the other tenants. It's a good way to introduce yourself in a more civil manner and meet the people who aren't home from work yet."

"Then how about one night next week?" He showed her his pleading puppy dog eyes.

"Okay, I'll think about it... maybe Wednesday."

Chapter Seventeen

Erik promised to keep his distance from Brandon for Abby's sake. The two men rarely crossed paths anyway except at dinner, and they sat at opposite ends of the table. The work in the backyard was nearly complete, and only a few plants needed to be added. The pergola was finished, and other than adding miscellaneous garden art—courtesy of Adam's talent—there wasn't much left to do.

"Abby, do you want to tag along to the garden center? I think we need to fill in a few spots with large plants and, of course, something that will grow fast and climb the pergola. What do you think of American wisteria? It's less invasive than Chinese wisteria and grows quickly. It can cover the pergola within a year. Do you want to take a look?"

"I love wisteria. You mean the lavender kind, right?"

"Yeah, it's really pretty and has a sweet fragrance. I'll get the van. It's a block down the street. Maybe I'll even get lucky enough to have you join me for lunch."

"It depends."

"Really, on what?" He grinned at her with his arms folded across his muscular chest.

"On how good you are at finding some gorgeous wisteria. I'll be ready in a second. Just honk when you're out front."

Abby oohed and aahed at the colorful flowers and shrubs once they arrived at the garden center. She found several sets of wind chimes whose melodies sounded beautiful in the breeze. She pictured the chimes hanging from the new pergola.

"Erik, if I bought a few of these, would you hang them on the pergola for me?"

He lightly brushed the hair from her eyes. The wind was strong today. "Of course I would, but hand them over, they're my treat."

"No way, you've done enough."

"With you, it's never enough. Come on. Put those in a basket, and let's find the wisteria." He laughed when she punched his arm.

They talked to a garden specialist who directed them to the shrubs and climbing plants.

"Here they are. What do you think?" Erik led Abby to an arbor loaded with

wisteria hanging down like clusters of grapes.

“Oh my gosh, they’re beautiful. How many can we plant?”

“Let’s get three for each side of the pergola. I’m pretty sure they’ll fill in quickly.”

Erik paid for the plants and loaded everything into the van. They left to find someplace to eat.

“The garden center was fun,” Abby said as Erik drove through town looking for a place to have lunch. “It made me feel like we’re a couple shopping together.” She looked at him with an enormous smile before she realized what she’d just said.

“We could be. All you have to do is say the word.” Erik’s serious tone told her he felt a lot more than just friendship toward her.

“Oh... sorry, I wasn’t trying to imply anything. I guess it was the excitement over the wisteria. Let’s eat here. This place looks interesting.”

Erik pulled into the parking lot of a small diner. “Are you sure? This place looks like a dive.”

“Exactly. What fun, right?”

They sat in a booth and asked for iced tea as they browsed the menus. Each ordered a turkey club with a side of fries.

Erik reached across the table and took Abby’s hand. “You aren’t going to make life easy for me, are you?”

“What does that mean?” she asked, beginning to squirm on the cracked vinyl seat.

“We could have something special together. I can feel it in my heart. You’re holding out on me, and believe me when I say Brandon is going to keep pushing. He can afford to live anywhere, so why would he put up with a houseful of people when he doesn’t need to? It’s all about winning you over, and we both know it. I don’t have a good feeling about him. Are you actually interested in Brandon?”

“Going out to dinner with him now and then doesn’t hurt.” She paused while the hostess set their food down and topped off their glasses with iced tea.

“What do you see in him? You know he isn’t genuine. It’s the game he’s interested in. So you *are* going out with him again?”

“Whatever...so you’re saying I don’t have enough good qualities of my own to have somebody want to go out with me without an agenda? Gee, thanks. What is it with men? Why does everything revolve around them? Anyway, it’s complicated. I don’t know if I’m ready to be in a relationship with anyone right now.”

“I’m sorry, and I should shut up, but you sound like someone who’s had a bad

experience. Is that what's wrong?"

"Let's just say I have trust issues. I'm living in the moment. That's the best I can do. Maybe someday, I'll tell you a little more about myself, but today isn't that day."

"I don't mean to be a downer. I just want you to know one thing."

"What's that?"

"I'll never lie to you, and you can trust me with your life. That, Abby, you can take to the bank."

What irony, she thought as she bit into her sandwich. "Thank you, Erik. That's a nice thing to say. I really appreciate you, but I need time to think."

Abby set the five-gallon pots in place along the pergola while Erik cut through the soil with a posthole digger, dumping the dirt into a wheelbarrow.

"What's going on out here?" The familiar voice was just five feet away. Brandon stood outside in his thousand-dollar suit, guzzling a beer as he watched, clearly amused. "Abby, don't you think manual labor should be left to the help? I mean, he's getting room and board to do the work, isn't he?"

"Hi, Brandon. Actually, I'm having fun. I like gardening. You should try it sometime."

"Yeah, I don't think so. What would clients think if they saw me with dirt under my nails?"

"They might think you're a real man instead of a coddled city boy," Erik snarled in Brandon's direction.

"Right... that's a good comment coming from the handyman who has to barter services for his room because he can't afford to pay rent."

Before Abby even realized what happened, a blur whizzed by her, and Erik was on top of Brandon, punching him in the face.

"Erik, stop! What are you doing? Somebody help me, please!" she yelled toward the house.

Erik and Brandon, equally matched, rolled through the yard, throwing wild punches that occasionally connected. Charles and Adam ran outside to see what the commotion was. Betsy took up the rear with the garden hose in hand. She twisted the brass nozzle to the strongest stream and let both men have it with ice-cold water. "You want to fight like dogs, you're going to get hosed down like dogs," she yelled.

They sputtered and swore at each other as Abby squeezed her body between them, trying to separate the two. "Knock it off, for Pete's sake. What in the

world is wrong with you, Erik?”

“Now I’m to blame? That jerk has been taunting me for the last week, and I haven’t said a word. Do you have any idea how hard it is not to kick his teeth in, Abby?”

“Yeah, come on, Neanderthal. Show me what you’ve got.” Brandon brushed the back of his hand across his bloody nose.

“Stop it, both of you!”

“You’re paying for this suit, asshole, and I’m filing battery charges against you. Did you forget I’m an attorney?”

“That’s pretty hard to forget since you remind us of it daily, you jerk. You know what it means when people have to constantly build up their own ego, don’t you?”

Betsy whispered into Adam’s ear, “What does it mean?”

“It’s a sign of insecurity. He probably has a small package.” Adam grinned at Betsy’s wide-eyed expression.

“Both of you go your separate ways, please. I don’t want to talk to either of you right now.” Abby sat on the bench with her face in her hands and cried.

Betsy scooted in next to her after Brandon marched into the house, and Erik grabbed the posthole digger, pounding it into the dirt. Betsy put her arm around Abby’s shoulder and held her close.

“Betsy, this means one of them is going to have to move out. I can’t afford to have trouble between them. The neighbors probably heard the commotion. I don’t even have permits to run a boardinghouse. Somebody has to go before I end up paying fines.”

Silence filled the air at dinnertime. Abby spoke up since nobody else was talking. She had already told Melanie, Lisa, and Lucille what happened between Brandon and Erik so the women wouldn’t be surprised to hear what she was going to say. “One of you has to go. I’m trying to run a peaceful household and give the image of serenity and friendship between all my tenants, and for some reason, you two can’t seem to get over yourselves. I thought everyone living here would behave like adults, but I was wrong. It’s between the two of you to decide, and I’ll be expecting an answer at breakfast.”

“You don’t have to wait that long. I’m leaving tonight,” Erik said, storming out of the dining room.

“Cool... that takes care of our problems. Melanie, would you please pass the pork chops?” Brandon said.

Abby got up and prepared two plates of food. “Betsy, please bring a bottle of wine to my room and two glasses. My hands are kind of full.” Abby walked out of the dining room, carrying a plate in each hand.

“Humph... that didn’t go the way I thought it would.” Brandon smirked as he sawed through his pork chop.

“Yeah, if you didn’t act like such an ass, none of this would be happening right now,” Melanie said, scowling at him.

“What do you know? You weren’t even here.”

“Best friends confide in each other, Brandon. Do you know what a best friend is?”

Erik heard footsteps pass by his room. He listened to each step as Abby took the stairs to her room above him. *Great. Now I made her lose her appetite.* He heard another set of footsteps pass by, going to the third floor, and then two sets coming back down. A knock sounded on his door. The other footsteps got fainter as the sound faded down the hallway.

“Erik, may I come in?”

“I’m not in the mood for company, Abby, and I have to pack.”

“I’m coming in anyway so please don’t be naked.” She opened the door and peeked her head in. “Damn it, I could only hope.”

He laughed. “Come in,” he said with a sigh as he plopped down on the edge of his bed.

“I have a better idea. Come with me.” She took his hand and led him to the third floor.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to enjoy dinner privately, without any drama or Brandon’s smart mouth. I know he does everything he can to insult you, and frankly, I’m tired of listening to him. You and I are going to have some alone time where it’s quiet and peaceful.”

“I’ve never been in your room. Are you sure?”

“Of course I am. You aren’t the boogeyman.” She opened the door to her enormous bedroom, the room that used to be Charlotte’s master suite. Two plates and a bottle of red wine were sitting on the large table overlooking White Point Garden and the Ashley River.

Erik looked from side to side, appearing to be in awe of the immense room. A red brick fireplace stood majestically in the center of the far west wall. The marble mantel above it held treasured family photos and mementos. To his left

was a door leading to a bathroom the size of his entire room downstairs. To his right was a walk-in closet just as big. Straight ahead, centered in the room was a king-sized bed.

She laughed at his expression. "Do you want to eat before our food gets cold? You can browse later."

"Oh... okay. This room is just really intense. I guess this is part of the perks of being the house steward, right?"

"Come over here and sit. The view is beautiful."

He pulled a chair out for Abby, and she sat. He faced her from across the table and poured wine for both of them. "I feel like I'm in a fancy restaurant."

She smiled at him. "Erik, please don't go, I want you to stay. I was upset earlier, but I don't want drama in the house either. The last thing I need is the neighbors complaining to the owners about fighting and yelling going on here. It's so out of the norm for this street. People are private and genteel here. I can't afford the backlash."

"I understand, and I'm really not going out of my way to get under Brandon's skin. He's just so damn arrogant, it's hard not to beat the crap out of him."

Abby laughed. "I know what you mean, but if you recall, you *did* beat the crap out of him. You know, he might press charges against you."

"Whatever... it's worth it to take his ego down a few notches."

They ate dinner and laughed, just two people enjoying each other. The rest of the world was downstairs, two stories below, and right then, neither of them cared.

Abby reached for the bottle and filled each wine glass. "Follow me. I want to show you something." She handed the glasses to Erik and opened a door that led to another staircase. "You'll like this," she said, turning back to see his expression.

At the top of the stairs, she opened the final door. They were on the rooftop of the mansion, the widow's walk, outdoors and under the stars.

"Holy cow... this is amazing."

"Isn't it? I come up here sometimes when I just want to reflect. It shows me how insignificant we really are compared to the expanse out there. The stars above us and the ocean straight ahead put me in my place every time I sit up here. Come over here."

Abby led Erik to the lounge chairs. She sat on one and motioned for Erik to sit on the other. A small glass topped wrought-iron table was nestled between them. He placed the wine glasses on the table and looked at the ocean.

"You can see the lights at Fort Sumter from here."

"You sure can. Isn't it beautiful and peaceful? I try to convince myself that if

I look just a little bit harder, I'll see St. Thomas."

"Well, you'd have to have pretty good vision for that. Has anyone else ever been up here with you?"

"Only Mel and Betsy. This place is too special to share with just anybody."

"I feel privileged. Thank you for bringing me up here. It really means a lot."

Erik got up from the lounge chair and reached for her hand. It felt as soft as silk. She stood face-to-face with him, just inches apart. He leaned in and kissed her. At first it was a gentle brush across her lips, then more, with a passion that had been building for a month. Her surprise turned into eagerness. Erik held her face in his hands, kissing her eyes, her cheeks, her neck, and her lips once more. He inhaled the scent of her hair. It was as sweet as southern jasmine. Abby moaned with a deep longing to be loved, but not by anyone, only Erik Christiansen, the man who took her breath away.

Back in her room, on that king-sized bed, with soft music playing and candles creating a warm ambience, they made love with a passion that couldn't be denied. Abby was in a different world. The people downstairs and the problems stirred up that afternoon no longer mattered. She was in the moment, and the moment was too important to take lightly. Even though she knew better, even though she was legally married to Remy, and even though her life was more than complicated, she was falling hard, and falling in love with her wonderful Scandinavian handyman.

"You'll stay, right?" she asked, snuggling close to his warm body.

"I'll stay, but what about Brandon? It's hard to deal with him. If he'd just mind his own business instead of throwing out the constant jabs, I could ignore him and keep my distance."

"I'll talk to him and ask him to lay off the insults. All I want is peace in this house."

"Really, that's all you want?" he asked as he kissed her forehead.

"Not exactly," she said. "Come closer, and I'll give you a hint."

Chapter Eighteen

Abby woke up at seven o'clock. The open window allowed a fresh summer breeze to waft through the room. Distant gulls cried forlornly over the open water beyond the park. Erik lay next to her in bed with the blankets pulled up to his chin, sound asleep. She smiled at him and studied his perfectly symmetrical face. *I wonder if this could be the real thing, real trusting love that could last forever.* She rose quietly and put on the long satin robe whose hemline skimmed the glossy wooden floor. She prepared two cups of coffee in the small coffeemaker on the dresser. She heard Erik stir and turned around to see the gorgeous man smiling at her.

"Good morning, beautiful."

She carried the two cups of coffee to bed and climbed in. "Good morning. I hope you slept well."

"Not to make you feel bad, Miss Taylor, but I do believe your mattress is of far higher quality than my own." He grinned and gave her a lingering kiss.

"Sorry... maybe you should spend a little more time in mine, for your back's sake, you know?"

"You mean to avoid a visit to the doctor and filing a worker's compensation claim?"

"Yeah... that's what I meant," she said, winking at him.

"So, we're going to have to face some bulging eyes when we go downstairs. Are you prepared for a snarky comment from Brandon?"

"He isn't running this house, I am, and I can do whatever I want. The only thing anyone knows for sure is that we had dinner upstairs together, nothing more."

"Okay, babe, I'm leaving it up to you. I'm going to my room to shower, but I'll see you at breakfast." He gave her a soft kiss, moaned, and dressed, taking the back stairs to his own room.

Abby showered and dressed for the day. She clasped her watch and checked the time: 7:55 a.m. *Okay, here we go.* She carried the plates from last night into the kitchen. Luckily, everyone was already in the dining room, including Erik.

A subtle kick under the table from Melanie told Abby in no uncertain terms that she wanted to hear everything later when there was an opportunity. Abby smiled discreetly and filled her plate with a scoop of the steaming egg-and-potato breakfast casserole. "Where's Brandon?" she asked after noticing his

chair was empty.

Betsy spoke up. "He grabbed a cup of coffee for the road when I was making breakfast. He said he had a new case with an insurance company a half hour away and had to get an early start."

Thank God. No drama this morning. We can all enjoy breakfast in peace.
"Oh, okay. Great breakfast casserole, Betsy. It's delicious."

Abby could have set her watch according to the time the mailman arrived every day. At 12:05 p.m., he dropped the letters into the slot of the built-in mailbox on the pillar attached to the front gate. With her keys in hand, Abby walked down the sidewalk, twisted the key in the keyhole, and opened the box from the back side of the pillar. She carried the four envelopes into the house, glancing at each one as she walked. The one that caught her attention had a return address from the State of South Carolina. *What the heck is this?* She headed directly into the library, closed the pocket doors behind her, and sat down at the mahogany desk. Today was the day she paid the monthly bills anyway, but she needed to see what was in that envelope first. She opened it apprehensively, knowing that once she saw the contents, she'd have to address the issue.

"Oh no... how can the property tax be due in July?" She rubbed her forehead, feeling a headache coming on as she read through the document. The letter acknowledged that she, Abby Melrose Bellavance, was the legal owner of the Melrose house on South Battery. Since the home had been deeded to her, she was currently the party responsible for paying the property tax. In the past, the tax had been paid in January and July, so the state took it upon themselves to continue with the same process. The payment address was provided, along with a phone number for any questions she had. She looked at the second page, afraid to see the total due. "Oh my God, how in the world am I going to pay this?" The numbers shocked her, making her head spin with worry. For half the year, a bill for twelve thousand seven hundred forty-six dollars was enclosed, due in three weeks. She took a deep breath and tried to think of a way to pay the enormous bill. *Okay, I don't have much cash left, and now I certainly can't afford to have Brandon move out. Everyone will have to get along or at least fight quietly.*

Abby took the stairs to the third floor, two by two, and closed the bedroom door behind her. She opened a shoebox in the closet, following her mother's example, and counted the money that was paper clipped in thousand-dollar stacks. There were three stacks and four hundred fifty-one dollars in an envelope. Her checking account balance was one thousand two hundred seventy-

two dollars, but that was earmarked for household bills. *If I start selling off antiques from the house, it will raise too much attention. I'm only the manager as far as everyone other than Mel and Betsy knows.* Abby stared at her mother's jewelry box on the dresser, feeling that she would surely die a painful death in hell if she sold any of Charlotte Melrose's prized jewels. *Too bad, Mom, it was you who put me in this damn position anyway. The jewelry is getting listed on eBay today.* Abby yelled downstairs for Betsy to join her with a bottle of wine and two glasses. She peeked out the back window of her third-floor bedroom and saw Erik puttering around in the backyard. *Good. He'll be busy until dinnertime for sure.* With the oversized box of jewelry and two glasses of wine, Abby and Betsy sat on the bed and began sorting Charlotte's treasures.

"Something doesn't seem right," Abby said. "None of these pieces look familiar now that I'm actually studying them. Where the heck is the good stuff?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I swear this isn't my mom's fine jewelry. Don't you remember my parents' twentieth wedding anniversary and that diamond necklace my dad surprised Mom with? That puppy cost him over seventy-five thousand dollars. Everything is thrown in here like it means nothing. Mom took care of the expensive pieces, and everything had its place. I know exactly what this is."

"What is it?"

"Bait. Haven't you ever seen that on TV? The homeowner puts insignificant jewelry out in the open in case the house is ever burglarized. Damn it. Where would she have put the real pieces? She had over two hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewelry."

"How thoroughly have you gone through this room?"

"Not very well, but I haven't found anything in what I would consider the obvious places. I'm sure there's something in here I can sell, though. Let's separate the gold from the costume jewelry and see what we come up with. Anything that might have value, I'll list on eBay. We'll divide everything into two piles, one for costume jewelry and one for gold or silver."

Betsy stared at her as if she were speaking a foreign language.

"Now what's wrong?"

"Are you actually saying your mom had costume jewelry?"

Abby pondered that question for a second. "Crazy, huh?" She smirked. "She probably kept the fake baubles she had before my dad got rich, but some of them might have value since they're considered vintage now. Don't worry. As *the* Charlotte Melrose, she never wore any of it, I can guarantee you. I'll get started if you don't mind running downstairs and offering Erik a beer or something. Make small talk with him for five minutes. That should hold him over for at least

another hour.”

“Got it, I’ll be right back.”

An hour later, all of Charlotte’s junk jewelry and semi-precious gemstone jewelry was divided into two piles.

“What do you think this is worth?”

“First, I’m not going to feel guilty, because selling these pieces will tide me over for a few weeks while I try to find the real stuff. It’s going to take a full day to take pictures, check out eBay’s completed listings to know the value, and list this junk, but even after all the fees, there’s at least a thousand dollars’ worth of jewelry sitting here. Maybe I can find some other things in the room to sell. Nobody will know the difference since they aren’t allowed up here anyway.”

“Except Erik.” Betsy grinned.

Abby stammered with a bright red blush, “It was that obvious, huh? Okay, your job is to keep him busy so he doesn’t wonder what I’m up to, at least for a day or two. It’s okay if Mel knows, but nobody else. I’ll bring my laptop up here and get busy starting first thing in the morning.

After breakfast the next morning, Abby locked herself in her room and began the tedious process of listing items on eBay. She typed the descriptions with a fury and found a sunny area near the street-side window to take good pictures. She wanted even the semi-precious stones to dazzle in the sunlight, and with the professional quality camera she had brought back with her from St. Thomas, she was successful. At noon, she took a much-needed break and went downstairs for lunch.

Erik slowly walked around the patio, inspecting the pergola he had recently completed. The wind chimes hung in front of him, swirling in the breeze and singing out a beautiful melody while glimpses of sunlight danced off each individual crystal.

Abby joined him with a glass of tea. “We’re going to have lunch in about twenty minutes. Betsy is making grilled cheese sandwiches and pasta salad. Does that sound okay to you?” She glanced around for peering eyes before giving him a quick kiss.

“I haven’t seen much of you since yesterday. Is everything all right? You don’t have regrets about us, do you?”

“Oh, Lord no. I’ve been swamped with a project for the family, that’s all. I should be done in a day or two. I’m really happy about us. No worries.”

“I am, too, and I’m sorry about the other day. I’m not going to let Brandon

get under my skin anymore. He's just a highly paid moron on an ego trip. I'll deal with him by avoidance. That should drive him crazy."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

Erik scanned the backyard. "I think I ran out of projects here unless you can come up with something else. Do you mind if I start working on paying projects? And I don't mean that in a bad way. Room and board is no different than pay in my opinion."

"Of course not. You need to do what you need to do. I'll miss seeing your face around the house though. It's just going to be Betsy and me from now on during the day, unless Adam and Lisa are home." She gave him one more lingering kiss and took his hand. "Come on, lunch is ready."

Erik followed Abby into the kitchen and sat down to eat. Betsy had already placed a platter of grilled cheese sandwiches and a bowl of pasta salad on the table.

After eating, Abby wiped her mouth with the cloth napkin and excused herself. She had about an hour of work left to complete before the jewelry listings would be live. She planned to go through Charlotte's old bedroom suite methodically in hopes of finding the expensive jewelry. Meanwhile, any artwork or antiques in the room were fair game. During the day, if Erik was actually out on a paying job, Abby would glean smaller items from downstairs that nobody would miss and post them on eBay, too.

This desperation is going to get the best of me. I have to find something to sell that has real value. Then Abby had an epiphany. *Damn it, I never even followed up on Mom's car insurance claim. I didn't know who her agency was and forgot to ask Attorney Stupid Lewis that first day I met him.* With Lewis Law Office already on her contact list, Abby hit the green call button next to his name.

"Lewis Law Office, Adrienne speaking. How may I direct your call?"

"Hey, Adrienne, it's Abby. Is Attorney Lewis in?"

"Yes, please hold."

Abby snickered. *Obviously, she's still pissed at me.*

"Hello, Abigail. I was just going to call you."

"Right... anyway, what have you heard from my mom's car insurance company? There ought to be a check for me since her car was a total loss, right?"

"Of course, but it's been held up because of her death. They obviously couldn't make the check out to your dearly departed mother, you know."

"Cut the crap. Am I getting the check or not?"

"Yes, dear, because you're the only next of kin stated in her will. The

monetary gifts have all been paid, leaving the home and assets to you. Since the car was an asset, you rightfully own it. Keep in mind, Abigail, everything else is being held in trust until you're forty."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm well aware of that. So when will I get the check, and how much is it for?"

"Just one moment, I have to see if they've contacted me about it yet."

Abby was put on hold and listened to elevator music for what seemed like an eternity before Attorney Lewis picked up again. "Abigail?"

"Yes, I'm still waiting." She impatiently tapped her fingers on the table in her bedroom overlooking the park.

"All right, dear, I have everything in front of me, and yes, the check is in the mail. Since your mother's car was a V-8 Twin-turbo E-Class Mercedes sedan with low miles and—"

"Attorney Lewis, I don't care about the description. The car is a wreck now anyway. How much is the check?"

"Of course. The check was cut in the amount of fifty-nine thousand seven hundred eighty-nine dollars and forty-one cents. So there you go, almost sixty thousand dollars. That seems like a low number in my opinion. Would you like me to dispute the claim?"

"Oh, thank you, sweet baby Jesus. What? No, I don't want you to dispute it." Abby exhaled a deep sigh of relief. "Okay, originally you said you were going to call me. What about?"

"That's right. I wanted to let you know I received notification of the wrongful death claim. Apparently, City Waste and Recycling plans to fight us. The claim is in the hands of their insurance company, and they've hired a law firm already. We should be hearing more very soon. I'm quite sure they'll deny the claim."

"Then what happens?" Abby looked out the window, thankful for the beauty just beyond the glass. The third-floor bedroom gave her quite an advantage with gorgeous views every time she peered out. A tear of relief slid down her cheek as she stared out at the bluest skies that side of the Caribbean.

"Then we fight it. That's what you hired me to do, didn't you, Abigail?"

"Yes, I did. Please keep me posted. Thank you, and goodbye." Abby hung up and lay across the bed. The stress she had felt for the past two days temporarily subsided. She stared at the ceiling fan and watched the blades turn as she had in St. Thomas. Too many memories flooded her mind at that moment. If only she could go back in time before that cruise, before she ever laid eyes on Remy Bellavance, maybe then everything could have turned out differently. She lay alone in her mother's old bedroom with her regrets, memories, and temporary relief as she cried herself to sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Nine people sat at the dining room table for dinner. Tonight's menu consisted of black bean soup, corn bread, a fresh garden salad, still water, and iced tea. Conversation flowed effortlessly among the group of friends. Brandon usually directed his comments toward Abby, dismissing—or at least trying to dismiss—everyone else in the room, especially Erik. His boastful self-praise was evident when he announced he was the lead defense attorney on a new insurance case. He didn't have all the information yet, but he was certain it would be a slam dunk in the insurance company's favor.

"Evidently, somebody is trying to soak money out of the insurance company I represent, stating it's a wrongful death claim. I can probably have this case wrapped up in no time," he joked. "I swear, people salivate at the thought of an insurance payout. They wait on the sidelines with their greedy little paws out for an insurance company to drop wads of cash into their hands. Obviously, there's a new lawyer in town that's going to shut them down in no time, and that lawyer would be me."

Abby's heart seized in her chest as she choked on her iced tea. She excused herself from the table and ran down the hallway to the nearest bathroom on the first floor.

"What was *that* about?" Brandon asked, smirking. He buttered a piece of corn bread and looked around the table.

"Maybe she's just tired of your self-praise, Brandon. It does get old," Melanie said. She got up, tossed her napkin on the chair, and followed Abby down the hall. "Abby," Melanie called out as she knocked on the bathroom door, "can I come in?" Mel heard the sound of sniffles through the door as she waited on the other side.

"Are you alone?" Abby said behind the door.

"I'm alone. Let me in, Abs."

The door creaked open, and Abby peered out before allowing Melanie in. "Mel, what if Brandon has my case? How am I going to find out? This isn't something I want to discuss around the dinner table. Poor Charles works for City Waste and Recycling, I'm suing the company, and Brandon might be the one contesting my case. Everything is going to hell. I thought now that the car insurance company is sending a check, I'd be able to breathe again for a few months. Brandon makes it sound like anyone who files an insurance claim is a

pariah. Plus if he actually has my case, he'll learn everything about me, starting with the fact that I'm married and own this house. My private life is none of his business, and he has the biggest mouth in Charleston. I know he'll contest my claim just to prove a point."

"That's his job as a defense attorney, to contest claims. It doesn't necessarily mean it's personal. I just wonder how good he is at his job since you can't believe everything he says. He's over-the-top full of himself."

"You're right, but do you think Attorney Lewis would know who City Waste and Recycling's insurance company hired to represent them?"

"Probably. Call him in the morning. The sooner the better, so you don't go off the deep end over this."

"Lewis Law Office, Adrienne speaking. How may—"

Abby interrupted. "It's Abby. Is Attorney Lewis in?"

"One moment, please."

"Whatever." Abby listened to that god-awful elevator music again for what felt like forever until he picked up.

"Abigail, what can I do for you?"

"Hello, Attorney Lewis. I need some information."

"Yes, dear?"

"Do you know what law firm City Waste and Recycling's insurance company retained?"

"Why would that matter one way or another?"

"I'm curious, that's all. Do you have that information?"

"Hold on, please, while I check through your file."

Abby walked to the kitchen with the phone jammed between her shoulder and the crook of her neck, a pad of paper and pen in her hand. Betsy was just starting lunch preparations. A kettle of water boiled on the stove as Betsy dumped in a bag of bow tie pasta. She stood by the sink and chopped tomatoes and cilantro. Abby sat down at the table and whispered to Betsy, asking for a glass of iced tea. "Yes, Attorney Lewis, I'm still waiting." Abby rolled her eyes at Betsy as she doodled on the paper. "Yes, okay... you said it's the office of Andrews, Moore, and Luck? Yep, that's all I needed. Thank you. I'll be waiting to hear from you soon."

"What's wrong?" Betsy asked as she sat at the table next to Abby.

Abby held her head in her hands, pressing on her temples as she stared down at the patterned tablecloth. "I think everything is going to come unraveled. Damn

it, why did I rent out rooms to guys with an agenda? Erik wants me as a girlfriend, and Brandon just wants to win. I don't know what the heck to do. Brandon will be upset if I don't go out with him, Erik will be upset if I do, and now I find out Brandon is the attorney who's going to contest my wrongful death suit. He's also going to find out I'm Abigail Melrose, as in Melrose Mansion, the damn house he's living in. I can see it already. No wrongful death claim, plus everyone will think I'm nothing but a greedy liar."

"Okay, what you're really worried about is Erik, right? I mean, Mel and I know the truth, and nobody else matters, do they?"

"No, but somehow I have to stay on Brandon's good side without alienating Erik. Even if I don't win the lawsuit, I don't want him to tell everyone at dinner what a lying weirdo I am."

"Yeah, good luck with that. One thing I know for sure is that Brandon loves to talk."

"I need some fresh air. I'm going over to the park for a while to think."

"Abby?" Betsy reached in the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water. "Here. It's hot outside. Sit in the shade."

Abby took the bottle and embraced Betsy. "You and Mel are like the sisters I never had. I really love you both."

"Back at ya. Look both ways before you cross the street," Betsy said, giving Abby a wide, glowing smile.

The years she spent growing up on South Battery had made Abby very fond of White Point Garden. She enjoyed the convenience of a small, beautiful park right across the street and the water beyond that was the perfect place to cry, reflect, be joyful, or just ponder. Growing up, Abby had done all those things. She took the path to the gazebo and sat on the cement step. That shaded spot was far cooler than the benches near the cannons overlooking the water. Too many tourists flooded that area anyway. *Should I just come clean with Erik and get all of this shame and deceit off my chest? Am I that invested in him to think we have a future? Maybe I should wait it out and see what happens with Brandon and the lawsuit.* Abby sat in the park for at least an hour, watching the yellow-crowned night herons sitting in the treetops. They always made her smile, especially as a youngster. Abby checked the time. It was half past noon. *Lunch is probably ready. No wonder my stomach is growling.* She began the trek back home, waiting for traffic to pass before stepping off the curb when she saw Brandon's car. He found a spot, parking only fifteen feet away from her.

He waved as he got out of the car and hit the lock button on his key fob. The horn on the silver BMW sedan beeped twice. "Hi, Abby, funny meeting you here." He laughed at what he thought was a clever comment.

“Hi, Brandon. Why are you home at lunchtime?”

“I left some notes in my room that I need later. I have an appointment this afternoon with that insurance company about the new wrongful death claim. How about joining me for dinner tonight, just you and me somewhere intimate?”

“Um... okay, sure. What time will you be done with work? I can just meet you somewhere.”

“That’s crazy. Did you forget we live in the same house? We’ll drive together like a real date. Be ready at six o’clock and wear something nice.”

Just the thought of Brandon telling her to wear something nice irritated Abby. She felt like a child being told what to do. Brandon was in charge, and Abby had to let it go. Getting information from him was more important. “Yeah, no problem,” she said as they crossed the street and walked through the gate together. “Okay, see you later. I’m going to have lunch with Betsy on the patio.”

At five o’clock, after confiding in Melanie and Betsy, Abby went upstairs to shower and dress nicely, as Brandon had said, for their dinner date. She stared into the oval antique floor mirror. *I look nice. Pretty, but not overly sexy. I don’t want to give Brandon the wrong idea that there’s actually something between us or that I have any interest in him. Yeah, right. Like that’s going to enter his mind. He has enough interest in himself for both of us, and I am going out with him... damn it.* She hoped Erik wasn’t back yet from his second day of working just a few blocks away. He had a full month of interior repairs to make for a home restoration on Atlantic Street. As she came down the staircase and opened the door to the second floor, she literally ran into Erik. He wore a blue bandanna across his forehead, tied at the nape of his neck. Sprouts of blond hair poked out around the bandanna and framed his face. Faded blue jeans and a sleeveless muscle shirt were his work attire. Covered in sawdust and sweat, he seemed to be sneaking off to his room to shower and change before dinner.

“Abby, sorry, I didn’t.... are you going somewhere? You look amazing.” Embarrassed, he tried to brush away the sawdust from his clothes.

“You’re the one that looks amazing,” she responded, longing for Erik no matter what condition he was in.

He laughed and waited for her answer.

“Erik, if you don’t ask, I won’t have to answer.” Sadness filled her eyes as she softly kissed his cheek and continued down the hallway to the staircase leading to the first floor.

He stared at her, waiting for her to look back, but she didn’t. The hair on the

back of his neck prickled since he knew too well what was going on.

At dinner, two empty chairs were pushed in, and seven people sat at the table. Lisa spoke up, unaware of the tension in the air. "That's weird. Abby and Brandon are both gone tonight." She glanced around the table expecting someone to add their two cents to her comment, but nobody did. "Sorry... me and my big mouth." She stole a quick glance at Erik, feeling the tension in the room double because of what she'd just said. "Um... the chicken Marsala is really good, Betsy."

"Thanks, Lisa. I'm glad you like it. There's plenty more, everyone. Help yourself. Erik?"

"Naw... I've had enough, and I'm kind of beat. I think I'll just call it a night. See you in the morning." Erik wiped his hands on the napkin and stood to leave the dining room. "Dinner was great, Betsy. Good night." With defeat written across his face, he turned and walked upstairs.

"That sucks," Adam said. "I think Erik really has a thing for Abby. I was under the impression she thought Brandon was kind of a jerk."

"Well, it's their business. Abby is an adult. She'll figure it out," Melanie said as she cleared the table and scraped the plates.

"This is a beautiful restaurant, Brandon. I've never been here." Abby scanned the interior as they walked through the door.

"Yeah, I was impressed by the star rating and reviews online. This restaurant is fairly new, but it seems to be the happening place to go lately." Brandon checked in with the hostess, and she led them to a quiet alcove with intimate seating.

"Great choice, I like it." Abby looked around the room, admiring the antique red brick walls and ironwork accents. A brief history of the restaurant was written on the menu insert. The building was originally a carriage house for a prominent Charleston family in 1861. Over time, the home was sold separately, and the carriage house had been used as different establishments. Abby made a mental note to keep the restaurant in mind for a future date with Erik. The quaint furnishings and ambience made it seem warm and welcoming.

"So how did your meeting go today?" Abby asked after they ordered dinner and a bottle of Barolo Brunate. She wanted to keep one step ahead of Brandon and find out exactly how much he knew. The only way she could do that, even though she cringed at the thought, was to ask.

"It's nice to know you have an interest in my work."

I don't give a crap about your work, Brandon. It's all about self-preservation. “Well, of course I do. Being an attorney seems very interesting to me.” She took a huge gulp of wine and estimated the cost of the bottle. A second one might be needed. *Hmmm... each gulp I take costs him six bucks.*

“I had a lot on my plate today and didn't have time to review the entire case. The only thing I know so far is the insurance company we're working with is representing City Waste and Recycling. I guess they're the main garbage company in Charleston. Anyway, some poor schmuck had a heart attack right in the truck while he was on the job and ran into the side of some hotshot lady's car. They both died on the scene. Evidently, this woman's family is pushing for a wrongful death claim against the garbage company. They must have some idiot for an attorney, otherwise they'd know they can sue the dead guy's personal automobile insurance company, too. I'm sure I can find some flaw in this suit to shut it down right away.”

Abby took two more gulps of wine. “How would somebody sue an automobile insurance company if their client died, too?”

“As long as the insurance policy is paid and up to date, the policy is still in force and liable for paying the lawsuit even if their client is dead, too.”

“Isn't that interesting? How long do you think this case will drag out?”

“I don't know. It depends on if the family suing fights back after I contest the claim. It will cost them money, but it sounds like they have plenty anyway.”

The wine almost shot out of Abby's nose at that comment. “Oh... excuse me.” She coughed several times to clear her throat. “I must have swallowed wrong.”

“Anyway, I'll know more this week. How's your salmon?”

“It's really delicious and moist. I'm having a great time tonight. Thank you, Brandon.”

Abby couldn't wait to get home. All she wanted to do was lie in the comfort of her bed and plan for the worst-case scenario. *What is the worst thing that can go wrong? I won't win the lawsuit, I'll lose Erik forever, and I'll be broke until I'm forty. Is that something I can live with? If I have to, I'll sell everything in the house and sleep on a cot, but I don't want to lose Erik's friendship.*

Chapter Twenty

Abby and Betsy entered through the side gate after getting groceries. The sight of Brandon and Charles sitting on the patio and enjoying a beer made Abby more than nervous. As they passed, she overheard Brandon talking about the case he was working on.

As long as he's only bragging about himself, I don't care what he says, she thought as she and Betsy excused themselves and walked into the kitchen.

Abby kept her distance from the men of the house and opted to help Betsy with dinner. It seemed like a safer place to be. Erik had been snarky the last few days, and Brandon was just being Brandon, self-absorbed, as though he was the only person in the house who had anything interesting to say. Melanie, Lucille, and Lisa joined in, helping them peel potatoes and shuck corn. Tonight's menu consisted of fried chicken, potato wedges, corn on the cob, and a green salad.

At dinner, with Brandon on one end of the table and Erik at the other, Abby felt doomed sitting between them. *Why didn't I make this a women-only boardinghouse? There would be much less drama. Erik won't look at me, and Brandon is playing that for all it's worth.*

Brandon started the conversation and aimed his comments at Abby. "I just learned today that Charles works at City Waste and Recycling. It's odd how you never mentioned that at dinner the other night when I brought up the name."

"Oh... well... you knew Charles was a garbage collector, I just assumed..."

"Assumed what? That I knew where he worked?"

"Yes, I suppose. Why does it matter where Charles works?"

"Because, Abigail, I live in the same house as somebody whose company I'm representing in a lawsuit. It could be awkward for me."

"Sorry. You knew what everyone here does for a living. It isn't my place to disclose where they work, and it's none of your business anyway."

Brandon raised his voice and leaned in closer to Abby to make his point, "It is my business if it *affects* my business."

"Hey, back off," Erik shouted across the table. He was already on edge, his jaws clenched, and the slightest provocation could set him off.

"Or what, tough guy?" Brandon laughed in response. "You're overdue for some etiquette classes, Neanderthal."

"Stop it, both of you. First off, Brandon, I don't report to you, and Erik, thanks, but I can take care of myself. I think I've lost my appetite. Good night."

Abby grabbed a bottle of wine and a glass from the wet bar in the library and took the stairs to the widow's walk. With the lower door between the second and third floor locked, Abby was alone, exactly as she wanted. Dusk was setting in, and the sun dipping beneath the horizon caused the water to glow a reddish purple. The sky held a palette of colors from brilliant orange at the water's edge to a deep indigo blue near the stars. She sank the corkscrew into the cork and, with a twist of the handle, pulled it out with a pop. A half glass was enough while she watched the sun fall into the ocean and the darkness of night blanket the sky. She was over it, over the secrecy and lies. Full disclosure was the way to go. At that point, she didn't care anymore. *I screwed up, I'm ashamed and humiliated, and I started this stupid boardinghouse idea with a lie. It wasn't intentional. I just wanted people to know me as someone other than Abby Melrose or Abby Bellavance. Tomorrow night at dinner, I'll come clean to everyone.*

Brandon sat in a private office of the insurance company, reviewing the paperwork for the wrongful death claim. He was the new guy in town and wanted to prove his worth at the prestigious law firm he had joined as a partner. As far as he was concerned, City Waste and Recycling wasn't responsible to pay anyone. The claim couldn't be blamed on negligence, faulty brakes, or anything specifically related to the garbage company. Mr. Hanson's death was unavoidable no matter what he had been driving at the time. His personal insurance policy should pay, if anyone's, but not Brandon's client. He studied the paperwork again, still irritated by the fact that he and Charles lived in the same house. The suit was filed by Attorney William Baron Lewis for the Melrose Estate.

"That's interesting," Brandon said, his eyes darting across the documents for the tenth time. "How did I miss this before? I know Abby called the house the Melrose Mansion when she welcomed me as a tenant." He flipped through the pages, trying to find an address, but the paperwork kept referring back to the attorney who filed it. "The woman that died in the accident must be listed by name somewhere in these documents." Brandon was becoming frantic, scattering pages and pages across the conference table. He finally found what he was looking for. Most of the documents stated the claim was on behalf of the Melrose Estate and Trust, but he needed a name, and finally found it. A copy of the death certificate for Charlotte Melrose was buried among the paperwork. Brandon did an online search for her and found more information than he ever

expected. She was a well-known philanthropist in Charleston, always involved in fund-raisers, foundations, and the like. She donated to charities, belonged to committees, and sat on the boards of the art institute and the historical society.

“Wow, this lady was impressive. Too bad she had to die.” Before he forgot why he was even doing a search on her, he looked up her address. His suspicions were correct, and the address was exactly the same as the house he lived in on South Battery. *Okay... so Abby is the property manager for the estate. No surprise there. Now there are two people I live with on a case I’m fighting, damn it.* With even more curiosity, Brandon continued to read. There were numerous pages from his Internet search about the Melrose family. “What’s this one?” He found an intriguing post titled “Melrose Family Tragedy” and clicked on it. The post told the story of the Melrose family beginning with Edward and his road to fortune in 1995 in the computer processor industry. The beautiful Italianate mansion on South Battery was purchased in 1997. The post went on to say that Edward had been killed in 2010 in a random mugging, and just recently, Charlotte had lost her life in a collision with a garbage truck, leaving the Melrose estate to their only child, Abigail.

What the hell? Brandon leaned in, his elbows planted on the desk and eyebrows furrowed as he read the post again from the beginning. His wheels turned, grinding in his head, as he put two and two together. *Abby is the owner of the house. The Melrose estate belongs to her, the only heir, and she’s the one who filed this lawsuit. Son of a bitch! I’m going to have to pull myself off this case as a conflict of interest. My address is listed with the firm. They’ll see the connection immediately and investigate it. Abby’s attorney will have me thrown off the case as soon as it comes out that I live there. It will look like I’m hiding information if I press on. There’s no way I’ll be humiliated like that. I have to disclose everything and give this case to someone else.* Brandon was more than angry. He pounded his fist on the desk, realizing that Abby had been fishing for information the other night at dinner when she asked questions about the case. *She doesn’t care one way or another about me or my job. She only wanted to see how much I knew, the bitch. She’s been playing me all along, and she has more money than I’ll ever earn in my lifetime.*

Furious, Brandon headed back to Charleston to have a discussion with the other partners at Andrews, Moore, and Luck. Right then, he wasn’t feeling all that lucky. He was embarrassed to present the situation to his partners, making himself look incompetent by working on the case for over a week without realizing it was a conflict of interest.

He sat at the conference table, a pitcher of water in the center and both partners facing him. He poured a glass of water for himself, knowing he would

need it. His mouth already felt parched, and his stomach was doing somersaults. He had to admit to his partners that he'd messed up on the very first case he'd been given. Brandon opened his briefcase and pulled out the folder containing all of the documents up to that point about the Melrose wrongful death lawsuit. He handed it to Bob Andrews, who was officially taking over the case. The expressions of regret on the men's faces were evident as Brandon backpedaled, explaining to his doubtful-looking partners that an error like that would never happen again.

Brandon drove home with an agenda. He wasn't about to let Abby get away with her deception, acting as if she were nothing more than a property manager at the Melrose Mansion. He laughed at the thought of her saying every project around the house needed to be cleared with the owners before she could have Erik do the work. *She's making a fool out of him, too. I bet he won't be too happy when he hears that. The poor handyman thinking he has a chance with this rich bitch? That's hysterical, and I'm going to let him know it at dinner tonight. Blindsiding her is going to be a real treat.*

Abby sat in her room, staring at the clock. In an hour, at dinner, she would come clean with everyone about who she really was. Her life and predicament weren't anyone else's business, but getting that secret out into the open would be like removing a heavy weight from her chest. Nobody had a right to judge her. She owned the house, and they were tenants. No harm, no foul. Erik's opinion was the only one that mattered to her anyway, and with the explanation she had prepared in her head, she assumed the end result would be okay. Still, she felt agitated and nervous about going downstairs, sitting at the table, and telling her story.

A hot shower would help calm her anxieties, but first, she needed to tell Betsy what to expect at dinner. Betsy could pass the information on to Melanie as soon as she got home from work. Abby called the house phone from her cell.

"Hello."

"Betsy, it's me. Is anyone home yet?"

"Just Lisa. Her summer classes are over with. Why?"

"Okay, can you come to my room for a few minutes?"

"Sure, I'll be right up. I just have to turn off the stove. Give me a few

minutes.” Betsy turned the burner off and covered the kettle with a lid. The spaghetti sauce would be fine. She washed her hands, then she dried them with the towel hanging over the oven door.

Abby heard footsteps from the second-floor hallway. The door latch turned, then footsteps sounded again, coming up the last flight of stairs. There was a knock on her door, then Betsy called out, “Abby, can I come in?”

Abby opened the door and allowed Betsy in.

“What’s up?” Betsy asked. A concerned look crossed her face, accentuating the small crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes.

“Sit down with me for a few minutes. I have something to tell you.”

Abby led the way to the table by the window. They both sat as she explained to Betsy what to expect during the dinner conversation.

“Are you sure you want to spill your guts to everyone? I mean, why is your life anybody’s business?”

“I don’t trust Brandon. He’s the attorney handling the lawsuit I filed against City Waste and Recycling.” Abby tapped her fingers nervously on the tabletop.

“Right... so what?”

“I’d rather say something before he does. Even though I haven’t really done anything wrong except lie to everyone, I can at least soften the blow by admitting my mistakes. I think I know my life and my reasons far better than he does.”

“That’s true. So in forty-five minutes, you’re going to explain all this over dinner?”

“That’s the plan. I’m going to shower, take a few cleansing breaths, and come down for dinner. If you catch Mel before I come downstairs, let her in on it.”

“Got it. Everything is going to be fine. Mel and I will always have your back.”

Chapter Twenty-One

One by one, the nine housemates congregated in the dining room, each at their usual spot around the dinner table. Betsy was always the last to sit, and on the closest chair to the kitchen. She placed some tongs and a pot of spaghetti noodles in the center of the table, a heaping bowl of sauce and meatballs next to it, and a salad and a loaf of warm French bread off to the side. The dinnerware and crystal water glasses glistened like new. Betsy had been taught years ago to take pride in her work, and she kept everything in pristine condition. After plates were filled and bread was passed around, Abby took a gulp of water, ready to begin.

With his eyes on her, Brandon studied Abby's gestures, noticing she seemed a little tense. *Here's my chance to expose her for the liar she really is.* "So, I had an interesting day," he said before she had a chance to speak up.

Lucille, always engaging, welcomed dinner conversation and loved to join in. "Oh, please, Brandon, tell us all about it."

"Thanks, that's just what I intend to do. I'm sure everyone is well aware of the wrongful death lawsuit I've taken on. Proving my worth in this new law firm is important to me, and winning this case would show my partners they could trust in my abilities. Don't you agree, Abby?"

"Oh... of course, that makes sense." Abby glanced at each person sitting across the table, then at Erik. Everyone was staring at her. She felt the heat climb up the back of her neck. She took another gulp of water and filled her glass one more time.

"Anyway, I've encountered a few speed bumps these last few days. First, it turns out that Charles works at City Waste and Recycling. That isn't good for me since it creates a conflict of interest. Charles, were you aware that the position you filled was originally Mr. Hanson's job?"

"Sorry, Brandon, but I don't know who Mr. Hanson is," he replied, apparently as confused as everyone else at the table except Abby, Melanie, and Betsy.

Abby was beginning to feel lightheaded as Brandon continued. "Oh... let me explain it to all of you then. Mr. Hanson is the poor soul who died of a heart attack while he was on his garbage route. Because Mr. Hanson died instantly, his truck crashed into another poor soul's car and killed her, too."

"Oh no, that's terrible," Lisa said.

Abby's back stiffened in her chair. She felt waves of nausea coming while beads of sweat popped up on her forehead.

"Right... it turns out that the poor lady who passed away was named Charlotte Melrose, as in Melrose Mansion, the very home we all live in. What a horrible day that was for her only child, the sole heir to the Melrose fortune. Isn't that right, Abby?"

"Huh... what?" Abby wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

"Abigail Melrose, I asked you a question."

"Brandon, leave her alone," Melanie hissed.

The chatter began, and everyone was talking at the same time, asking questions and making comments. They stared at Abby.

"Not on your life, Mel. See, this woman, this imposter that calls herself Abby Taylor, is actually Abigail Melrose, a very well-off young lady *and* owner, not manager, of this enormous mansion. The funny thing is, I had to excuse myself from this case since I live in the very same home as the person who's suing the company I represent. What a great way to impress my partners, especially on my very first case. That little tidbit of missing information just made me look like a horse's ass in their eyes. This bitch sitting among us has lied since day one, pretending to be a common person just like us, laughing behind our backs, even acting like she has to pinch pennies and exchange room and board for the handyman's work. What a joke, right, Erik? The Melrose fortune is worth multimillions, yet she filed a wrongful death lawsuit that could very well go after Mr. Hanson's family. I'll tell you one thing, Abigail Melrose, you aren't going to see a cent from City Waste and Recycling's insurance company. I'll make sure of it."

"Abby, is all of this true?" Erik asked, anguish on his face.

She couldn't face Erik or anyone else. Abby pushed her chair back and ran out of the dining room.

"There's your answer, Mr. Handyman. She played all of us but especially you and me. My job might be in the shitter, and I'll have to pull myself back out, but I know one thing for sure. I'm leaving Ms. Crazy and Melrose Mansion first thing in the morning."

"Go to hell, Brandon, and don't let the door hit you in the ass," Betsy said as she pulled his plate away from him, took it to the kitchen, and scraped the spaghetti into the garbage disposal.

The door to the roof was locked from her side. She couldn't face anybody

anyway. She had deliberately left her cell phone in her bedroom. Only silence and the view would give her peace right then. She thought back to the night she had brought Erik to the widow's walk, showing him what she treasured most as a child. Drinking wine under the stars with him, making love in her bed, sleeping with him all night—it all might never be more than a memory. The evening sky faded into darkness, the tourists dispersed, and she fell asleep on the widow's walk after tears rolled down her cheeks through most of the night.

A familiar sound startled her awake. The sun lingered on her left cheek as it warmed her face. She squinted, knowing it was morning, but she needed to see the light for herself. She recognized the sound that woke her. It belonged to the wrought-iron entry gate below. Her eyes were on fire from lack of sleep and too many tears. With her curled fists, she gently rubbed her eyes and got up from the chaise. Standing at the edge of the decorative grillwork, she looked down, hoping to see Brandon leaving for the last time. Craning her neck to the left and right, she finally saw Erik, a block down the street with a suitcase in each hand. He threw the bags in the back of his van, made a U-turn, and sped away.

Oh no... how am I ever going to fix this? I haven't been able to explain anything to anyone. All they know is the garbage Brandon was spewing last night. Now I have to face everybody downstairs. Abby checked the time on her watch. Breakfast wasn't for another hour. *I guess Erik didn't want to run into me this morning. I hope he just needs time to cool off. I've got to take a hot shower to clear my head.*

Abby quietly walked barefoot down the stairs to her third-floor bedroom. The flashing light on her phone indicated there were messages. She reached out and grabbed it off the Queen Anne dresser to see who had called. She had missed four text messages, all from Mel and Betsy late last night. Her feet felt like lead as she walked into the bathroom and turned the shower handle to the hottest setting. In that old house, it took a while for hot water to make its way from the basement through all the pipework and give her a steamy, relaxing spray of water in the shower stall. Within a half hour, she was dressed and ready to present herself to anybody that had questions.

Betsy sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee with Melanie. Nobody else had come downstairs yet. Abby entered, looking drained and with bloodshot eyes. She wore no makeup today, and she didn't care. Whatever energy she had that morning wouldn't be wasted on something as insignificant as makeup. Erik wasn't there anyway, and he was the person she usually tried to look good for. Betsy pulled out a chair for her, poured an oversized mug of coffee, and placed it on the table before her.

"How are you this morning, Abs?" Mel asked. "We were worried about you."

"I'm fine. I saw Erik leave earlier. Did he say anything to either of you?"

"Yeah... he gave me a hug and said goodbye. It sounded like a real goodbye," Betsy said sadly.

"He didn't say where he was going or if he was coming back?" She blew on her coffee and took a much-needed sip.

"Sorry no, but he had suitcases with him."

"I know, I saw that, too. I slept on the widow's walk last night and heard him leave. I looked over the railing and saw him walking down the street. He must think I'm some kind of a nutcase and a liar. He has to be humiliated, thinking I was playing him, but I wasn't."

Betsy got up and started to make breakfast. She opened the lower cabinet next to the stove and pulled out a large cast-iron skillet. The morning's meal consisted of an egg-and-cheese baked casserole, sausage, and fresh fruit. "I bet he went back to his folks' house in Orangeburg."

"Just let him cool off for a while, Abs. I can see your wheels turning already. I'm sure he left stuff in his room. He'll be back for it," Mel said.

Footsteps sounded coming down the staircase, and then several sets more. The breakfast clan usually came down a half hour early for coffee and conversation.

"I guess the firing squad is approaching," Abby said reluctantly.

"Good morning, ladies." Lucille smiled as she walked through the door and bent down to give Abby a hug. "Sweetheart, we don't live your life, and the good Lord knows it isn't our place to judge. You've given me a beautiful home to live in, food in my stomach, and friendship. That's all I need."

As each person entered the kitchen, where the group had congregated for coffee, Abby realized that not one person standing there held any animosity toward her or thought she owed them an explanation. The obvious two people missing were Erik and Brandon.

"Has anybody seen Brandon this morning? Has he left already?" Abby could only hope she wouldn't have to endure his wrath again.

"He's in his room slamming things around. It sounds like he's packing. Drawers are opening and closing, and so is the closet," Adam said as he squeezed into the mix of friends standing in the kitchen. Betsy passed a cup of coffee down to him.

"Thank you all for being here. I know you don't understand what's going on, and maybe none of you care. I think I'm giving everyone a nice room to call their own, and Betsy has provided wonderful meals. The rent is very reasonable. What I'm saying is, I'd like all of you to stay, but you do deserve an explanation."

“That isn’t necessary, Abby,” Charles said, speaking up for the group.

“I think it is, and I’ll give you the condensed version. Yes, my parents were wealthy. My dad was killed five years ago in a horrible mugging in New York, so it was just my mom and me. I’ll admit, I had a trust fund. I guess many kids coming from wealthy families do. I was naive two years ago and married a man from St. Thomas that my mom didn’t trust. She threatened to cut me out of the will if I married him, but I thought she was bluffing. Her instincts told her he was after my money, and she was right. Just a few months back, he took everything I had and disappeared.”

Betsy filled all the coffee cups and started a fresh pot as Abby continued speaking.

“Anyway, I came back to Charleston just recently because I was broke. My mom and I were making amends when she was killed. I had no idea she changed her will until the attorney in charge of the estate read it in front of me and four other people. Apparently, she left everything to these other four organizations. What she left me was this beautiful, expensive-to-maintain house but not a dime to pay the monthly bills. In thirteen years, when I turn forty, I can have the rest of my inheritance, whatever that is. Because this place cost a fortune in property tax, insurance, and the like, I had to do something. That’s where all of you came in. With Betsy’s insight and Mel’s help, we put the rooms up for rent. There were no other options since my mom also stated in the will that I could never sell the house.” Abby held her cup out for a refill. “The only reason I filed the wrongful death lawsuit was to have some money in reserves. I don’t even own a car, and I’d like to go back to school. So that’s it. Now you know the real truth instead of Brandon’s version. Thanks for listening.”

They heard the front door slam. Adam walked down the hall and peered out the parlor window. Brandon was loading the trunk of his car.

“Yep, looks like he’s leaving,” Adam said when he returned to the kitchen. “That will be a nice change. Maybe someone else will have a chance to talk at dinnertime.”

The remaining residents sat down to breakfast, laughed at lighthearted conversation, and appeared to accept Abby’s story without question. They were there to stay.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Two days had passed, and there was no word from either Erik or Brandon. Abby tried the doorknobs on both of their rooms, but they were locked. She had no idea how much of their belongings remained, but she did know that if Brandon didn't send the key back within a week, she would have a locksmith open the door so she could empty the room. Whatever was left would be shipped to Andrews, Moore, and Luck. Abby would keep his security deposit for breaking the lease and prepare the room for a new tenant. As far as Erik was concerned, she just wanted him back. Without a physical job location, he would be more difficult to track down. His business card with the Orangeburg address written across it sat on her dresser. She'd let him make the first move. He'd come back for one of two reasons, either to pack the rest of his belongings or to talk. She hoped it would be the latter.

She was sitting on the veranda with Betsy when the mailman called out. A certified letter had arrived, and Abby needed to sign for it. The mailman expressed his usual courtesies and handed her the digital signature device through the gate. Abby signed her name and accepted the mail.

"What do you think that is?" Betsy asked.

"I hope it's the insurance check for my mom's car. I don't know what else it could be." Abby tore open the envelope and exhaled a sigh of relief. "Thank God. I needed this check so badly. At least I have some breathing space for a while. I can pay the property tax now, and the rest can go in the bank."

"You should buy a car for yourself. It doesn't have to be brand new. I bet you can find something reliable for ten thousand bucks."

"That's a lot of cab rides, Betsy. There's hardly anywhere to park another car on this street."

"Then how are you going to get to Orangeburg to check on Erik?" She smiled, knowing that would make Abby laugh.

"Real funny, dork... I'm not going to chase him. If he wants the truth, he knows where I live. I swear, men are way too much trouble anyway. I might need a few years of only girlfriend time before I get serious again."

"Right... and who are you going to gawk at, now that the hot men are gone?"

"Adam?" Abby said with a laugh.

"Okay, crazy girl, are you ready for lunch?"

"Sure." The ringing phone in her hand made Abby pause. "I'll be there in a

minute. I've got to take this call." The screen showed it was John Richmond calling from Magens Bay. "Hi, John. How have you been?"

"Hey, Abs, I've been well. How are you holding up in Charleston? Are you able to get by now that you've settled in with tenants?"

"It's going okay. The insurance check for my mom's car actually showed up today. That will help for the time being."

"Glad to hear it. I just wanted to update you with the island chatter going around."

"Really? What's happening?" Abby sat back down on the veranda, crossing her legs on the chair next to her.

"Well, it sounds like Remy has reappeared. People have seen and talked to him in St. Croix. Didn't you hire a private investigator a few months back?"

"Yeah, but once the will was read and I realized I was more than broke, I had to let him go."

"Yeah, I understand that. Anyway, people say they've seen him buzzing around in quite the expensive-looking speedboat. I guess he's been showing it off and throwing wild booze parties. Sorry. It has to be hard to hear, but I thought you ought to know."

"Thanks, John. I'll talk to my attorney and find out if I have any legal grounds against him, especially if he actually is in a US territory. I appreciate the call. Take care."

Abby helped Betsy prepare grilled cheese sandwiches, chips, and dill pickles for lunch. Adam and Lisa were home today, so the four of them ate in the backyard under the pergola.

"The wisteria is growing fast. Isn't it beautiful?" Lisa looked up, and everyone's eyes followed hers. The vines were spreading across the top, creating a nice, shady canopy. Small clusters of lavender flowers were beginning to show up. "Next year, they'll really look beautiful."

Abby thought about next year and wondered what life would be like. With no idea of what her future held, she ate her sandwich in silence.

By the weekend, Abby still hadn't received the key from Brandon. Saturday morning at nine o'clock, a locksmith was upstairs popping the door lock for Abby. She had him install a new lock while he was there. She entered the room and was surprised to find it relatively empty. Brandon must have started packing that fateful night after dinner. Only a few odds and ends remained, nothing that looked important, but Abby didn't want him to have any reason to accuse her of

keeping his property. She boxed up everything that was left in the room and set it aside to give to the mailman tomorrow. She would send it to the law firm with signature confirmation for her own protection.

Betsy joined her in the room and began stripping the bed. “Have you heard anything from Erik?”

“Nope, but I guess his room will be next. I’ll give him a few extra days. I’m really surprised he hasn’t come around. I’m sure plenty of his tools are still sitting in the basement. Don’t you think he needs them?”

“I would think so.” Betsy shook the clean top sheet, and with a snap of her wrists, it draped perfectly across the bed. She removed the dirty towels and bedding and said she would be right back with the vacuum cleaner.

Abby went back to her own room to strip the bed. She wanted to stay busy to keep from thinking of Erik every few minutes. She reminded herself to charge her phone while she cleaned the room. As she plugged in her phone, she discovered a text message Erik had sent an hour ago. Her heart pounded triple time as she sat on the edge of the bed to read his message. He asked if he could stop by tomorrow to pick up the rest of his belongings. He would return his room key then. Abby read the message four times. She had to think before responding. *Tomorrow, everybody will be home, and he knows that. He wants to avoid having a serious talk with me in front of everyone.*

She typed out a response. “Meet me tomorrow at Eliza’s Secret Garden at noon. Let’s talk.” Abby had no idea if he would respond or not, but she felt it was worth a try.

Within seconds, a text came in. Erik wrote, “Fine, but only for one beer, then I’m picking up my things.”

She smiled at his written words and responded, “Okay.” *I’m not letting you off that easy, mister. You’re going to hear me out first,* she thought as she continued to clean her room.

Her mood improved throughout the day. She was certain the explanation she’d give Erik tomorrow would smooth things over. Everyone else in the house seemed to understand. *He’ll move back in after he hears the truth. Maybe there is hope for us after all.*

She sat in the courtyard of Eliza’s Secret Garden, gazing at the beautiful lush greenery in every direction. *Man, this little cafe is just the most gorgeous place in Charleston.* Smiling at every exotic flower and vine, Abby found herself snapping picture after picture with her cell phone. She remembered Erik’s

expression when she introduced him to the secret treasure right in town. *In a few years, the backyard at home might be this beautiful, too.*

A tap on her shoulder brought her back to reality. Erik stood next to her chair and said hello.

“Erik, I’m glad you agreed to come. I was just remembering when we...”

“Can we skip the stroll down memory lane for now and get to the point?”

She wasn’t used to that attitude coming from someone as sweet and kind as Erik. It was a side of him she’d never seen before.

“Sorry. Would you mind sitting down? You make me nervous just standing like that.”

Erik glanced around and, with a wave of his hand, caught the attention of the bartender. He sat across from Abby and waited for the bartender to take his order. Abby already had a tall glass of sweet tea in front of her.

“I’ll take a Black IPA,” Erik said as he made himself comfortable.

“Erik, can I explain this mix-up to you? You don’t understand what’s going on.”

“That’s right, I don’t understand.”

The bartender delivered Erik’s beer and two glasses of water to the table. “Is there anything else I can get for you?”

“No, thanks, this should do it,” Erik said. “Here’s what I want to know, Abby. Why would you care about a grunt like me when you could be with someone closer to your own social status and income? You know, somebody like Brandon. You enjoyed going out with him, didn’t you? I mean, what’s not to like? He’s a decent-looking guy, has a nice car, loads of money, and took you to upscale restaurants. I bet it killed you to turn him down as often as you did just to keep me hanging on. What the hell is your game anyway? Tell me something. Was our romantic night in your bedroom nothing more than pity sex? You know, this was a mistake. I’m going to get my things and leave the key on the dresser. Please have the courtesy to give me a half hour. I don’t want to have this conversation with you again.”

“But, Erik... I never got a chance to say anything. I want to explain my life to you.”

“Save it for some rich guy.” Erik threw a twenty on the table and stormed away.

She heard the squeal of tires heading down Meeting Street. In five minutes, he would be at Melrose Mansion, removing everything in the house that belonged to him. He would vanish into thin air, just as Remy Bellavance did months ago.

She sat by herself at the table meant for two, watching couples enjoy each

other, holding hands and sneaking quick kisses, oblivious to her stares. It didn't matter. Young or old, they were together, but she was alone. Her loneliness felt the same as when Remy deserted her. Then, when she'd sit on the beach at Magens Bay alone, it was only the gulls mocking her and having the last laugh.

Walking home would do her good. It would also allow Erik plenty of time to gather his things and be gone by the time she got there. Normally, she enjoyed the distractions when she strolled the historic district. Beautiful homes in every style and color always gave her a reason to smile, but today she felt sad. Still, the courtyards and hidden gardens, the ironwork and history of Charleston were among the reasons she loved the city. South Carolina was home, always was and always would be. Charleston was her heartbeat, and St. Thomas was the vital air she needed to breathe.

She arrived at the intersection of Meeting Street and South Battery. Abby made a quick stop at Two Meeting Street, the beautiful inn on the corner, to say hi, then continued on. A look straight down South Battery on both sides would tell her if Erik was still loading his van. If he hadn't left yet, she would wait in the park until he did. She could easily blend in with the tourists, and he'd have no idea she was there. But he was gone. She punched in the code and opened the creaky gate. As she passed through, she made a mental note to squirt WD-40 on the hinges. The house was quiet. Abby peeked around the corner of the kitchen, through the screen door, and saw everyone sitting on the patio. She smiled and went upstairs, and she had to pass Erik's room to go to her own. His door was ajar, and she stopped to look in. The key lay on the dresser just where he said it would be. And the room stood empty. No clothes in the dresser or the closet, no indication that a man, a wonderful Scandinavian handyman, had slept there. Abby sat on the bed, her hand on his pillow. She lay down, squeezing the pillow in her arms, inhaling it and hoping to catch his scent. None remained. He hadn't slept there for a week.

The clock in the library chimed on the half hour that Wednesday afternoon. Abby glanced up as she was signing checks for the monthly bills. *It's four thirty already? Geez, where did the day go?* Her cell phone rang out. Attorney Lewis was calling.

"Hello, Attorney Lewis."

"Abigail. I just received a letter in the mail stating the insurance claim we filed has been denied."

"I'm not surprised," she said as she rubbed her temples. "Do we have any

other options, and is this a contingency fee case, or do I have to pay you an hourly fee?”

“Well, that’s the other reason I called. Since they denied the suit instead of settling it, I’ll have to begin charging you if we go forward to fight it. There’s a lot of work I’ll have to put in with no guarantees of success.”

“What is your hourly rate?” she asked as she inserted the check and statement in the envelope for the electric bill. She attached a stamp that read *Celebrate* across it. *Humph. What do I have to celebrate?*

“Well, my dear, it’s three hundred fifty dollars an hour.”

“What about suing Mr. Hanson’s personal auto insurance company instead? Would we have a better chance at winning a claim?”

“We probably would, Abigail. Of course, you aren’t looking at millions of dollars like you would be with a wrongful death suit.”

“Right, but you don’t sound very encouraging about the outcome on that. What could I possibly expect with an automobile insurance claim?”

“It depends on Mr. Hanson’s policy, but the average death claim is normally settled for around three hundred thousand dollars. If I represented you on contingency, I’d get a third of the settlement.”

“Seriously, how do attorneys sleep at night? Whatever... let’s go in that direction instead. I can’t afford to pay you three hundred fifty dollars an hour with no guarantees of success.”

“Very well, I’ll get the ball rolling immediately. I’ll be in touch.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dinner was in the slow cooker. Abby had convinced Melanie and Betsy to go out tonight, just the three of them to Beaufort for dinner. Everyone else could help themselves to pork roast, potatoes, and carrots whenever they were hungry. Abby made reservations at Petrie's overlooking the Harbor River for seven o'clock. If they felt like it, they might even stay overnight. Melanie left work early and didn't have to work tomorrow anyway since it was Saturday. Beaufort was one of Abby's favorite small towns with its genteel residents and beautiful river walk. She could dial life back to a slower pace there and relax. The urge to get away and spend a little money just that once gnawed at her. She had been pinching pennies for months.

She and Betsy waited outside, their overnight bags packed, just in case, watching for Melanie to pull up. The plan was to leave right away since it was an hour-and-a-half drive. Three bottles of iced tea and a bag of trail mix sat on the table between the women as they waited.

After Melanie got home and they headed off, they arrived in Beaufort at five thirty. They pulled into a downtown parking lot so they wouldn't have to feed the meter every hour. They strolled Bay Street, checking out all the shops and galleries. Abby bought a Beaufort refrigerator magnet to add to the collection she had started as a child when her family traveled extensively.

At Petrie's, they chose to dine on the outdoor deck facing the river. They were given the last available table since four couples and two families were seated outside, filling the close, intimate space. Each group struck up conversations with the other, another aspect Abby found charming about the South. People were friendly and engaging. The current conversation revolved around an older couple who were spending the weekend in Beaufort for their fortieth wedding anniversary. They were clearly in love and enjoying the limelight. The waitress brought a small chocolate cake lit with two candles, a bottle of Cabernet, and two wine glasses after their dinner. The cluster of diners around them clapped as they blew out the candles and embraced.

Wow, you can't get much sweeter than that, Abby thought as she joined everyone else in congratulating the happy couple. "I love Beaufort. Are you locals?" Abby asked after the three women settled in and ordered their dinner and drinks.

"We love it, too, and come here every year for our anniversary, but no, we

live in Orangeburg, about an hour and a half away. Have you heard of it?"

Abby choked on her wine, wiping the tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes with her linen napkin. "Sorry, I swallowed wrong."

"Are you all right, dear? Maybe you need a drink of water."

Abby coughed a few times before she could speak clearly. Melanie and Betsy shot concerned glances her way. "No, I'm fine, really. Actually, we traveled about the same distance, but from Charleston, and yes, I am familiar with Orangeburg, even though I've never been there. A friend of mine comes from Orangeburg. That's where his family lives."

"Really? It's a small town, about the same size as Beaufort. We know everyone since we've lived there forever. What's your friend's name?"

Abby felt she'd said too much, and a red blush coated her face, but she had to answer their question. "Oh... his name is Erik Christiansen."

The couple laughed, then the wife responded, "I'm sorry, we're Bob and Lynn Madison. Anyway, it's nice to meet you, and it's just so crazy what a small world it really is."

"Why is that?"

"Rose and Tom Christiansen live just a block down the street from us. Rose and I play bridge every week. The guys get together for horseshoes now and then. They are the nicest family in town, and a large one, too. Just this spring, Erik and his brother Dan rebuilt the wooden steps coming up to our front porch."

"Isn't that nice?" Betsy chimed in as she took a sip of her wine.

"What's your name, dear? We have to tell Tom and Rose we ran into someone that knows Erik. What a coincidence, right?"

"It sure is. My name is Abby, Abby Taylor, but his folks don't know me."

"That's okay. They won't care. Any friend of their kids is a friend of theirs. You should have Erik introduce you to his family. They're so hospitable, they'd make you feel like one of their own. They have a lot of barbecues, and the entire family shows up. They'd welcome you with open arms."

"They sound like great people. I'll keep that in mind."

"Well, Bob, let's burn these calories off. I think it's time for a stroll," Lynn said as she winked at the girls. "It was so nice to meet you ladies. Have a great evening."

"Thank you." Abby stood and gave Lynn and Bob an embrace. Betsy and Melanie followed suit. "Happy anniversary!"

They watched the happy couple walk away, hand in hand, toward the riverfront.

"Well?"

"Well what?" Abby asked, staring at Melanie as she chomped on her salad.

“Isn’t that what you want for your life someday? You need to fix this thing with Erik. Think about it. You have no family of your own except us. It sounds like Erik’s family is large and welcoming. You’ve got a thing for him, and he’s gorgeous. What’s wrong with that picture?”

“Nothing, other than he hates the sight of me. I met up with him the other day to tell him the truth, but I didn’t get a word in edgewise. He was too busy yelling at me. It’s hopeless.”

“You can’t say something is hopeless with one wimpy try. You have to go after him, Abs, if he’s what you really want. Is he?”

“I think so,” Abby replied, staring off at the marina, “but I’m afraid.”

“That’s a lame answer. Either you want him, or you don’t. You know his address in Orangeburg, don’t you?”

“He doesn’t live there anymore. It’s a duplex his folks own. They live on one side, and he lived on the other.”

“And his folks moved, too?”

“No.” Abby looked down at her plate and pouted.

“Exactly... now grow a pair and do something about it.”

“Won’t I seem pathetic if I chase him?”

“No... you’ll seem like someone who’s in love. There has to be a reason, bigger than all of us, that we came here tonight and met Lynn and Bob. It’s fate, Abby. Accept it and run with it.

Saturday night in the comfort of her bed, Abby thought about the best way to approach Erik again. Face to face didn’t work, but his hurt was still raw then. Two weeks had passed, and she hadn’t heard a word from him. *I never will if I don’t make the first move. Am I willing to let this wonderful man, who had no idea I was a Melrose, slip through my fingers? He didn’t have an agenda as Remy did. Erik is honest and pure. He wanted to be with me even though he thought I was just the rental manager. Maybe a letter to break the ice is the way to go. I can follow up with a phone call or text after that.* Abby checked the hallways before running down to the library in her pajamas. She pulled a pad of paper, a pen, and the book of stamps out of the top desk drawer, grabbed a glass and the corked half bottle of Cabernet from the wet bar, then headed back to her room. Erik’s business card sat on her dresser where it had been for the last month. She picked it up as she passed by. With cautious optimism, she poured a glass of wine, got comfortable on the bed, and began writing the letter. Sending it to his parents’ house, but addressed to Erik, should get it into his hands

somehow.

Four days went by, and Abby was ready to give up. She was edgy and withdrawn, convinced she was meant to be alone forever. Sitting on the patio with Lisa, Abby bit her fingernails and spit the remnants into the flowerbed. A lot was on her mind, mainly Erik Christiansen. Adam came bounding through the kitchen door and plopped down on the closest empty chair next to Abby. “Hey, guess what?”

“What?” Lisa asked, excited to have a third party in attendance. She sat upright, hoping somebody would breathe life into the backyard boredom.

“Guess who came into my studio today?”

“I don’t know... the president?” she said, hoping to make Abby laugh.

“Even better than that.” He stared at Abby, waiting for her to look up and join in with the guessing game.

“Fine, I’ll bite. Who was it?”

“You have to make a guess, too, then I’ll tell both of you,” he said, taunting her to try to have fun.

“Okay... um... Reese Witherspoon.”

“Why the hell would you say that?” he asked.

“I read she has a home here. Just tell us already.” Abby rearranged her legs, which had fallen asleep after she’d been sitting on them for a half hour. They felt like lifeless tree limbs.

“Erik stopped by. Cool, huh?”

“What? Erik... as in our Erik? Why did he stop at your studio?”

“I guess he’s remodeling a home on Atlantic Street. He’s been working there for almost a month, Abs. I thought you knew that. It’s only a block from my studio. He just wanted to say hi.”

“I did know that, but I forgot. I’m having a brain dead week. It happens to the best of us. Anyway, thanks for the 4-1-1. I’m going inside.”

Abby took the stairs, two at a time, and dove into the bathroom once she got past the threshold of her room. With the shower running, she flipped through the clothes in her closet looking for something appropriate but sexy to wear. She didn’t want to think too hard, or she’d talk herself out of what she was about to do. *Don’t overthink this. Just go with your gut, chickenshit. Like Mel said, it’s fate.*

Within fifteen minutes, she looked good enough to venture out in public. Her hair would dry in the sun on her speed walk to Atlantic Street. Abby was sure she’d know which house Erik was working on by the likelihood of a dumpster sitting along the curb. If the home was a full remodel, there would definitely be a dumpster in front of it. She walked down the block and was five houses along

when she saw an enormous green steel container. Nervousness kicked in. She didn't want Erik to think of her as a stalker, but he had to have known Adam would mention seeing him. Abby crept forward, staring at the front door and each window as she approached the house. The sound of the door opening unnerved her. She crouched down on the street side of the dumpster. She needed to muster up the nerve to bang on the front door and face him eyeball to eyeball. She needed to ease into it. The loud whack of two paint cans hitting the side of the dumpster just a few inches away made her shriek. She didn't know *that* was coming.

"What the...?" Erik stepped down from the porch after tossing the cans into the container and walked around the dumpster. "Excuse me?" he said in almost a laugh. "Abby... what the hell are you doing here?" He could only see her from behind as she crouched low, her head nearly tucked to her knees.

She turned slowly and stood up, slapping the street dust off the palms of her hands. "Busted, right?"

"Sort of looks that way." He smiled with his arms crossed in front of him.

Those damn biceps. That gorgeous face. His sexy smile. I'm toast.

"I think you have some explaining to do, Ms. Taylor. Is this a random stalking or a planned one?"

"Planned?" She looked at him pleadingly, hoping he would find that amusing.

"That's what I thought. Are you here for another tongue lashing?"

"Depends on how it feels."

They both laughed.

"You're a fast thinker, Abby, I'll give you that. Come on. I'm ready for a break anyway. Let's sit on the porch and talk."

He reached for her hand, and she eagerly gave it. His was the hand she wanted to hold for the rest of her life. She was certain of it, and there was no going back. Abby was in love with Erik Christiansen.

"I read your letter, and to be honest, I was going to come by this week and apologize for my behavior. I had no right to say the things I did. I'm sorry, and I feel bad for the way your life has turned out. You didn't ask for a husband that conned you and stole all your money, and you didn't ask for a mother that took you out of her will. You were just trying to get by and make ends meet having tenants in the house. Actually, it was a genius idea."

"I can thank Betsy for coming up with that one."

"Well, I understand everything now, even why you changed your last name. I'd have trust issues with people, too, after what you went through. I'm sure I'd do exactly what you did. How about dinner tonight? We'll talk some more and figure this thing out between us. I've been staying at the Overnight Inn. I'll clean

up and swing by to get you. How about six o'clock?"

"Six o'clock sounds wonderful. I'm looking forward to it." She stood to walk away. He held her hand a few seconds longer, then he stood, too. Erik leaned in and kissed her lips. His kisses told her how much he'd missed her. She was hungry for his kisses, his touch, and his body making love with hers. She shuddered with lust and love for him.

"Okay, I better get the living room painted. I'll see you in a few hours. Abby?"

"Yes?"

"I really missed you."

She smiled then said, "I missed you, too."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Abby casually walked to the end of Atlantic Street and turned the corner onto Meeting Street before she ran full out, just in case Erik was watching. The distance home was only six blocks, and she was a fast runner. *Okay, so I'll need another shower, but I'm too excited to care.* She charged into the front door and ran through the house, ending at the back door off the kitchen. Adam, Lisa, and Betsy sat on the patio playing Go Fish. Abby plowed through the screen door, leaned over, kissed each one, took a gulp of Betsy's iced tea, and ran back inside.

"Would anyone care to tell me what that was about?" Betsy asked.

"Who knows, but whatever it was, it looked good on her," Adam said. "Now go fish."

Once more, Abby dove into the shower and scrubbed every inch of her body. She shaved her legs and smoothed vitamin-rich creamy lotion all over them after drying off. *What the hell?* She coated her entire body with the vanilla-scented cream. She dabbed Chanel on every erogenous zone she could think of. *Thanks, Mom, for leaving a full bottle of Chanel behind. Lord knows I can't afford to buy it myself.* Tonight was special. She would wear something seductively sexy—but nothing over-the-top slutty. As a proper southern girl, she didn't own the latter anyway. She browsed through her closet, looking for the above-the-knee summer sundress with spaghetti straps, a dress that would show barely a hint of cleavage. She had worn such dresses often in St. Thomas, and she had the perfect dress in mind. It had a cute boho vibe in a gypsy-like pattern with three shades of blue. *This dress is perfect. It will accentuate my baby blue eyes.*

Abby sat on the veranda, waiting for the white work van to appear around the corner. Even though she would appear less anxious by waiting indoors, she was kind enough not to expect Erik to look for a parking spot just to come inside and pick her up. She craned her neck in both directions since South Battery was a two-way street. She wasn't quite sure where the Overnight Inn was, so he could be coming down either Meeting or King Street.

She had already passed inspection by everyone in the house, so the only person left to impress would be Erik, and she had all intentions of doing a great job. Abby felt a giddiness she had never experienced before, not even when she met Remy or brought him to Charleston to meet her mother. Erik didn't have that well-honed charisma Remy had, but Abby also knew where that had gotten her. Erik was truthful, honest, and sincere, not to mention white-hot sexy. Abby sat

on her hands while she waited, an effort to keep from chewing her fingernails off from pure excitement.

The white van rounded the corner off King Street and headed in Abby's direction. *Yay! Here he comes!* Abby jumped off the chair and headed down the sidewalk, through the gate, and out to the street. She walked toward the van. Erik got out, gave her a kiss, and opened the passenger door, helping her in.

Six sets of eyes peered out the parlor window as the van pulled away. "That's what I'm talking about," Betsy said as everyone dispersed back to the kitchen. "It's about time that girl got her happily ever after."

"So are you going to keep me in suspense forever?" she asked, still wondering where they were going to dine.

"Nope, and it isn't very far. We're going to The Fig Tree. Is that okay?"

"How in the world did you get a reservation? They're usually booked weeks in advance."

"It helps when the house I'm remodeling belongs to the owners of the restaurant," he said, chuckling.

"I always knew you were a crafty guy."

He reached across the seat and took her left hand. He brought it to his face and kissed each finger. "I love you, Abby. Everything is going to be okay."

They laughed when they learned the valet would be parking Erik's work van, but tonight, the only thing that mattered was reconnecting and going forward. Dining in one of the finest restaurants in Charleston wasn't Erik's norm, but he wanted Abby to know he was capable of being much more than a common handyman. He had class and style, too.

The restaurant was small, intimate, and beautiful. Candlelit tables sat alongside tan brick walls covered in historic black-and-white photos of Charleston. Soft music played in the background, and the wait staff was courteous and prompt. Erik started by ordering a bottle of their finest white wine. Crusty warm bread and dipping oil was placed on the table for them to enjoy before dinner.

By night's end, the air was cleared, and all questions were answered. Erik said he truly didn't care that Abby was broke, and he had no agenda except to love her. "Whatever happens going forward, we will figure it out together."

"Thank you. That means so much to me. As long as we're being up-front and honest, I do have something I need to say." Abby leaned forward across the white linen tablecloth and took his hands in hers.

“Go ahead. Say what’s on your mind.”

“Well, I am honestly running a boardinghouse, you know. I guess I’m not *honestly* running it, since nobody except the tenants knows what I’m doing. But the point is, you and I had an agreement. You were supposed to have five months of free rent for the work you did for me. You still have several months due you. I’m not one to go back on my word. The least you could do is make me feel good and honor our contract.” She gave him an innocent smile.

“I see. So what you’re saying is, I should check out of the Overnight Inn and move back into my old bedroom?”

“Or mine.”

“Uh-huh... so to honor our contract, I should move into your room?”

“That sounds reasonable to me. Looking at it from a business perspective, I could offer your old room for rent along with Brandon’s.”

He laughed and gave her a wide smile. His eyes twinkled. “Whatever happened to that jerk, anyway?”

“I have no idea. The wrongful death lawsuit was denied anyway, but it was filed by a different partner. He obviously got pulled off that case. Maybe he tucked his tail and went back to Chicago.”

“I could only hope. Anyway, what if I gathered my things tonight? I sort of liked living on South Battery.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. Let’s go.”

The facade was dark when they finally returned to Melrose Mansion. Only the street lamps along the sidewalk next to the park illuminated the opulent home.

“Either everyone is tucked away for the night, or they’re out back,” Abby said as they crossed through the gate.

They entered the darkened house. Erik dropped his necessities in the foyer, at the foot of the staircase. He said he would get the rest of his things out of the van tomorrow. They turned toward the voices echoing down the hallway, coming from beyond the kitchen. Abby smiled and led the way, holding Erik’s hand. The kitchen light was on, but the group sat outside on the patio, under the twinkling lights strung through the pergola.

“Hey, guys, you’re still up? It’s after eleven o’clock. Look who I found at The Fig Tree.”

Everyone around the table laughed, and Charles motioned for Abby and Erik to join them.

“Pretty swanky place, The Fig Tree. Nice job, dude,” Adam said.

“So what’s the deal?” Mel asked. Her eyes sparkled.

“The deal is I have to live up to my bartering agreement with Erik. I still owe him two months’ room and board, except I’m going to rent out his room and Brandon’s.”

“That, my dear girl, is a smart business move. Speaking of moving, I’m off to bed. Good night everyone, and welcome back, Erik,” Betsy said before giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Everyone else followed suit in calling it a night, leaving Erik and Abby sitting outside alone.

“You did a wonderful job out here. Look how beautiful this yard is at night.”

“It is nice, isn’t it? Are you ready for bed, Abby?”

“I’ve been ready for two weeks.”

They laughed together at her comment, turned off the patio lights, and went to Abby’s third-floor bedroom to get reacquainted. Together, in Abby’s king-sized bed, they made love for the second time with even more passion than the first. That night was a new beginning for both of them. Abby had a second chance at love.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Erik had already left for work, and Abby was on cloud nine. Life was good. She felt it and trusted in it. After her shower, she joined everyone downstairs for breakfast. Questions shot at her from both ends of the kitchen table.

“Geez, guys, slow down. I need my coffee before I get interrogated.”

“Coming right up.” Betsy jumped off her chair and filled a mug with the rich brew for Abby.

“Thanks, Betsy,” Abby said after taking a sip of coffee. “Okay, we’re officially a couple. Would that be again or the first time?”

“I think it’s the first time. Before, you were just practicing.” Mel smirked.

“Well, in my opinion, there’s nobody that deserves happiness more than you and Erik. I’m really excited for you, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Lucille. I’m pretty excited, too.”

A phone call came while Abby was helping Betsy clean up the kitchen. Everyone else left for the day.

“Weird. It’s only eight o’clock. I wonder who’s calling this early.” Abby dried her hands and looked at the ringing phone. “It’s Attorney Lewis,” she told Betsy, and then she answered, “Hello, Abby speaking.”

“Hello, Abigail. I’m sorry to be calling this early, but I’m sure you’ll be delighted with the news I have. The claim we filed against Mr. Hanson’s personal car insurance was accepted for the full amount. A check for three hundred thousand dollars is being processed as we speak.”

“Oh my God, I can’t believe it. And it’s only against the insurance company, right? There’s nothing that’s been taken from his family?”

“That is correct, dear. The check should arrive by courier tomorrow. I’ll have one of my company checks cut for you for two thirds of the total. You can pick it up on Thursday.”

“Thank you so much, Attorney Lewis. Wow... things are starting to turn around for me. I’ll see you on Thursday.”

Abby turned to her friend to share the good news. “Betsy, the settlement went through! I’m going to get two hundred thousand dollars from Mr. Hanson’s car insurance company. With that and the money for my mom’s car, I’ll have close to two hundred fifty thousand dollars in the bank in a few days. That makes me feel a whole lot better. You know, a friend of mine told me something after the Remy fiasco that has stuck with me during these hard months.”

“What’s that?” Betsy carried two fresh cups of coffee to the kitchen table, pulled out a chair, and sat.

“He said, ‘The world has a way of righting itself, and I hope everything eventually turns out right for you.’ I really believe that is going to happen. I don’t know when exactly, but it’s off to a nice start.”

“He sounds like a smart man and a good friend.”

Five days of searching the waters around St. Croix produced nothing. The Coast Guard, catamaran crews taking tourists out for the day, and even the ferry captains kept a close watch on the ocean and beaches, but nobody found a trace of Remy Bellavance. His speedboat, *Abby’s Folly*, had been sighted, floating out in open water a few days back. Nobody was onboard, but plenty of booze bottles lay scattered about. No distress calls had been documented coming in to the Coast Guard or the St. Croix police department from that boat. Remy was gone, disappeared again into thin air. The boat was taken to Green Cay Marina where it still sat with nobody to claim it.

John called Abby to tell her the bad news, since there were no sightings of Remy anywhere on any of the islands. Remy was considered missing and lost at sea.

“Hi, Abs, It’s John.” He told her he was at the bar at Magens Bay, and she pictured him looking out over the turquoise water while drinking his cup of coffee.

“Hey, dude. Where’s the latest Remy Bellavance sighting? Did he buy a helicopter now?” she asked jokingly.

“Abby, I have something serious to tell you. Are you sitting down?”

“Well, no... should I be? What’s wrong?”

“It isn’t my place to call you, but you’re my friend, and I wanted to give you a heads-up. You might be getting a phone call from the police in St. Croix.”

“What for?” Abby sat on the veranda, her hands already trembling. Whatever happened was bad. She could tell by the tone of John’s voice.

“Remy went missing. It’s been five days of searching the water and beaches around all the islands. His speedboat was found abandoned out in open water. A lot of empty booze bottles were lying on the floor of the boat, but no Remy. Everybody knows him, so word would have come in if he was sighted anywhere. The Coast Guard is considering him dead. They’ve given up the search. Nobody knows how long his boat was floating out there, but after five days of looking, the search went from a rescue to a recovery mission, then it was canceled

altogether. The boat wasn't disabled, so the Coast Guard took it to Green Cay Marina. It's sitting in a slip there now, waiting for someone to claim it. Abby, it's your boat. It's your money. You need to come down here and take back what is rightfully yours. Fly into St. Croix. I'll meet you there and help you out with the boat and the legalities."

Silence filled the other end of the phone line. Abby needed a minute to process the information before she was able to speak. Her voice cracked as she responded, "You know I never wanted harm to come to him. I thought he was a horrible person who did me wrong, but this?"

"Abby, it's the world's way of balancing good and bad. You know it's true. Do you want to know what Remy named his boat?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does if it will help ease your pain. He named it *Abby's Folly*. That's downright mean, Abs. Don't feel too bad about anything. Karma comes in good and bad forms. Remy's time was up. He was way overdue for some bad luck. Let me know when to expect you. I'll help you with everything I can."

Abby went upstairs to the widow's walk for some solitude. She felt the need to be close to the ocean, to see the bigger picture, something larger than everyday life. She had to be alone to think. After an hour of soul searching and insight, she went downstairs to the library and bought an airline ticket to St. Croix.

Over dinner, Abby explained to everyone the news she had received earlier. Condolences were given, even though Abby didn't feel they should be directed toward her. *I guess legally I am still his wife, and they don't know what else to say.* She explained her plans for the next week or so and said she was leaving first thing in the morning to tie up loose ends, find out if Remy's family had been notified, and talk to the local police. John would help her with everything, especially trying to track her money. When all was said and done, after the house on Magens Bay was sold—and Remy took that money, too—he still had nearly five million dollars in assets and cash left.

Five a.m. came early. Abby's flight to St. Croix was scheduled to leave at seven o'clock with a short connection in Miami. John promised to meet her at the marina at noon. They'd have lunch, check out the boat and its contents, then find out how Abby could legally claim it. John told her to bring all the documentation she had from the day she and Remy got married. She would probably need all of it.

Erik said goodbye as he dropped her off at the departures terminal. "Take care, honey, and be safe. Trust in John and his help. He sounds like one of the good guys. I'll be waiting for your nighttime calls, and I'll keep the bed warm for you. I love you, Abby."

"I love you, too. I hope I can have everything wrapped up in a week, but they are on island time down there. I'll let you know as soon as I know, and I'll call you tonight." Abby kissed Erik and gave him a long embrace. "Life will be normal soon," she said. "I promise."

The flights were uneventful and on time. Abby was thankful for that. She landed at Henry E. Rohlsen airport and took a cab to Green Cay Marina on the north side of the island. She saw John waiting at the bar and rushed up to give him a hug. "John, it's so good to see you. I appreciate everything you've done on my behalf. Have you seen the boat yet?"

"Yeah, it's one hell of a cruiser. It's sitting in the last slip on the right. Let's have a beer, then I'll take you over to it. I'll have to get the security guard to let us through the gate so we can board. I've already talked to the police, and they know you're here. They gave us permission to board once the security guard checks your ID. They want to talk to you sometime tomorrow."

"But I don't know anything."

"Yeah, I know. It's probably just a formality, but you may have to declare Remy dead and sign papers. I really don't know how any of this works, Abs."

They each had a beer then walked down the sunbaked wooden pier. A guard shack sat next to the locked gate. John explained that Abby was the legal owner of the speedboat in the last slip. She showed the guard her ID and waited. He made the mandatory call then cleared her entry through the gate. Abby and John walked past eight catamarans and fishing boats before they came upon Abby's *Folly* at the end of the pier.

"Holy shit, John, this boat is enormous, and it has two engines."

"Yeah, I don't know a lot about racing boats, but I've been told it's forty feet long and has 520 HP twin Mercury racing engines. Rough estimate, I've been told, is almost three hundred thousand dollars."

"That's insane! I have no idea what to do with a boat like this."

"Don't worry about that. You're in the Caribbean. It will be easy to sell. The problem is, there's still a lot of your money unaccounted for. What we need to do is find out where Remy lived. There might be some clues at his house."

John joined Abby the following day at the police department in Christiansted.

They sat in a private office with Captain Jeremy Parrish. Abby opened a manila folder and spread every document she had relating to Remy across the large mahogany desk. The evidence was undeniable that Abby and Remy were husband and wife. She showed the captain their marriage license, all of her bank statements, and the stock portfolio she had. She even showed him copies of her mortgage and deed to the house on Magens Bay.

“Sir, do you have an address for Remy? Last I heard, he was living here on St. Croix.” She cracked open both plastic bottles of water she had been given when they sat down and handed one to John.

“Just one moment, Mrs. Bellavance.”

That title made Abby cringe. She glanced toward John and frowned. He squeezed her shoulder.

The captain paged through the documents they had collected over the last week. “Yes, here it is. It appears that Mr. Bellavance was leasing a condo overlooking Cane Bay. Here’s the address. Feel free to check it out, ma’am, but you may have to get permission from the property manager to enter the home. Here is the telephone number for the leasing agency.”

Abby and John left the police department and headed back to the marina. “These guys will know how to sell a boat fast. You might as well get a head start on things while you’re here.”

“Good plan. Do we need to have it appraised first?” she asked as they climbed into the rental car and drove to the marina. The drive was a short five minutes.

“Yeah, we should. We’ll clean it out and spiff it up a bit, then it can go on the market. Are you willing to negotiate to get rid of it faster?”

“Yeah, the sooner that beast is gone, the better. I hope the new owners change the name, too.”

They entered the marina’s main office and spoke to the man at the counter. He knew several people that might be interested in the boat. He also did appraisals himself. “So, you’re talking about that speedboat that was just brought in a few days ago, *Abby’s Folly*?”

“That’s the one,” John answered. Abby was happy to let John do the talking since she didn’t know anything about boats.

“Okay, let’s take a look. I was about to take a half-hour break anyway.”

After the appraisal, they were told the boat could fetch a quick two hundred fifty thousand dollars if they were willing to price it that low. “This boat just needs a quick cleaning, and she’ll be good to go. It’s last year’s model and in great condition,” the man said, looking around, “other than the mess.”

“Okay, that’s easy enough to take care of. Can you list her right away? We’ll

get started on the cleanup.”

“Sure, Mr. Richmond. I’ll get the word out and let you know what I come up with. All I need is a phone number.”

Abby and John spent the day with buckets, scrub brushes, and garbage cans, courtesy of the marina cleaning crew. By late afternoon, *Abby’s Folly* looked like a brand-new boat. She glistened in the sunlight as she waited for a new owner to snatch her up at a deeply discounted price.

John followed the directions to Remy’s condo using the navigation system on his phone. He turned into a long gravel driveway and took it almost to the water’s edge. Four condos and a shared boat dock were in the bay. He parked the car and noticed someone exiting a black Ford Focus.

“That must be the leasing agent with the key,” he said to Abby.

The woman introduced herself as Marie Jamison, leasing agent for Cane Bay condos. “How long do you think you’ll be?” she asked as she looked at the gold watch on her wrist.

“I don’t know, maybe all day,” Abby responded.

“That’s fine. Just give me a call when you’re finished. I’ll come back and lock up later.”

“What happens to all of the furniture in here?”

“Oh, no worries, dear, the condo came furnished. The only things inside belonging to Mr. Bellavance were his personal items.”

“Thank God for that,” Abby said with a sigh of relief.

They waited until Mrs. Jamison drove away before talking openly.

“Well, Abs, I guess the most important thing to do is look for cash and any type of bank statement or investment document,” John said.

“Do you think Remy was savvy enough to invest the money?”

“I don’t know, Abs, but he sure was savvy enough to steal it.”

They went through the condo methodically, putting everything they had already looked at off to the side. Luckily, it was only a one-bedroom unit. If anything was there, they would eventually find it.

“Chances are, if Remy invested money, he would have documentation in his emails. There has to be someone on the island that can access email accounts. I mean, detectives do it on TV all the time when they’re checking into criminals’ Internet activity.”

“Wait a minute. I just thought of something. I wonder if it can really be this simple.”

“What’s that?” John sat down next to Abby at the desk as she opened the laptop.

“We both used to use the word *infinity* for our password and then add a few numbers after it for our own personal passwords. Mine was the last four digits of my Social Security number. I’m going to mess around with this for a bit and see if I can come up with the right password. It could be his birthdate, or middle name. I’ll give it an hour, and if nothing pops, we’ll take it with us to the police station.”

“Okay, I’ll keep searching,” John said as he headed off and started on the master bedroom.

Abby sat at the computer and rubbed her temples in deep concentration. Each password she typed in that didn’t work gave her even more of a headache.

“Abby, come here. Look what I found!” The excitement in John’s voice told Abby it was something good.

She rounded the corner into the bedroom and found John sitting on the bed. In his hands was a wooden shoe shine box. Rather than tins of shoe polish inside, there were stacks of cash instead. There was also a note from Caribe Bank and Trust showing the PIN for his checking account.

“Oh my gosh, this really is important. Now we know where he banks. Let’s count this cash and see what we have.”

John locked the doors just to feel more secure as they counted the cash they’d found. In all, there was seventy-two thousand four hundred dollars in one-hundred-dollar bills. Abby went back to the computer to try to log on. Figuring out the password would tell them how much money he had in Caribe Bank and Trust—and anywhere else. Almost at the point of finally giving up, Abby tried one last combination. She typed *infinity82413*. The screen came alive, and she was in.

“John, I did it!” she yelled. “That bastard had our wedding date as the numbers after infinity. I guess he figured once we were married, he’d have it made for life. Our wedding date was likely the most important set of numbers to him.”

John took a look at the screen. “Yep, you’re right. I remember that day well, August 24. You guys got married right on the beach. I guess it’s time to see what Remy has been up to.”

Abby scrolled through Remy’s emails and found a treasure trove of information. His bank accounts at the Island National Bank and the Caribe Bank and Trust came up. Between both banks, his accounts totaled four million six hundred thirty thousand two hundred twenty-five dollars in checking and savings accounts.

“Oh, thank God, he didn’t put anything into the stock market. This should be a piece of cake moving the money back to me, the rightful owner. What do we do now?” Abby asked with a grin she couldn’t have erased even if she’d wanted to.

“Normally, it takes seven years in the United States to declare someone dead, but with all the documentation you have, I think you can at least get your money back. I guess the only reason you would care if he was dead or alive was if you wanted to remarry. Let’s go to the banks and see what we can do. I think we should take a police officer with us, just to expedite the process.”

After five more days of efforts and explanations, as well as showing every piece of legal documentation she had, Abby finally recovered all of the money that was remaining and rightfully hers, and she sold the boat, too. She opened her own bank account at Caribe Bank and Trust and Island National Bank, just to keep them happy. She took a sea plane back to St. Thomas with John, relieved and finally able to relax.

That night at the Inn on the Bay, Abby called Erik at seven o’clock as she had all the nights before. Tonight, she had good news to share. Everything was back on track, and life was only going to get better. She declared her love for him and how much she missed him. “I have a really great idea, and I hope you’ll go along with it.” She lay across the bed in the beachfront hotel, listening to the waves slap against the shoreline. An icy Red Stripe beer sat on the night table next to her. A ring of condensation lay at the bottle’s base.

“Yeah, what’s your idea?” he asked with a curious laugh.

“Come and meet me in St. Thomas. You’re finished with the house on Atlantic Street, aren’t you? And you don’t have anything else lined up yet, right?”

He chuckled into the phone, not sure if she was serious or not. “You’re crazy, Abs.”

“I sure am, crazy in love. I dare you to come.”

“You’re really daring me to take a vacation?” Now he laughed, a full, out-loud belly laugh. “Okay, Ms. Taylor, I’m calling your dare.”

“Awesome... be here in two days. I’ll pick you up at the airport. Tell Mel and Betsy to hold down the fort until we get back.”

“This is for real? You’ll pick me up at the airport in St. Thomas day after tomorrow?”

“Yep... be there or be square. I love you, Mr. Christiansen. I can’t wait to see you in two days.” Abby hung up, elated with life and with the man she hoped to marry someday. She had a busy day planned tomorrow, and falling asleep tonight would be difficult.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Abby's eyes opened, and a smile spread across her face. She was back at her second favorite place on earth, Magens Bay. She started the coffee and slipped on a pair of cutoffs and a tank top. Her unit had a small balcony overlooking the bay. She sat with her coffee and looked out across the water. Memories flooded her mind, and a tear slid down her cheek. She brushed it away with the back of her hand. *No more sorrow and sadness. This is a new day and a new beginning with the man I love and the bay I call my second home.* With the cup of coffee in her hand, she strolled down the beach, her feet splashing in the sea foam. Habit took her to the bar on the beach and John's friendly face looking out over the water with his own cup of coffee.

"Morning, neighbor," she called out happily.

"Morning, Abs. How do you like the Inn on the Bay? It's a decent place, don't you think?"

"Oh yeah, it's great. Just listening to the waves break again is like heaven on earth."

"I heard some very interesting news this morning from the locals."

Abby got comfortable on one of the rattan barstools while John topped off her coffee from the carafe he had just filled. "Yeah, what did you hear?"

"Just that the people who bought your old house got divorced, and it's on the market again. Apparently, it's vacant, and both of them moved back to San Francisco. I haven't walked by, but I guess the sign just went up yesterday."

"Oh my God, oh my God, I'll be right back."

John laughed as he watched Abby run through the dense turpentine and mahogany trees, up the sandy path to the property where her old house stood. She stopped in her tracks and stared. The balcony was larger, and the house had been spruced up a bit. *It's even more beautiful than I remember.* Abby ran to the front entrance where the sign was planted firmly in the sandy soil. She called the number and asked for a showing, and it had to be today. The realtor agreed to meet her at the house at one o'clock. Peering through the windows, she laughed at everything inside. All of her furniture was there, exactly as she'd left it, even down to the knickknacks. She ran back down the path, through the tree canopy, and jumped on the barstool.

"I'm buying my house back, and I'm doing it today," she said, her eyes bulging out of her head.

"I think you need a drink," John said, chuckling as he poured a shot of whiskey in her coffee. "Are you really serious?"

"Damn straight. It's fate. What else could it be? It would be wrong not to accept fate and go with it. I'm not going to turn my back on something that's meant to be, ever again." The happiness on Abby's face outshined the sun in that moment.

"You go, girl. I'm really happy to have you as a neighbor again. Magens Bay missed you while you were gone."

After lunch with John at the bar, Abby ran through the trees to meet with the realtor. She paced up and down the porch, watching for a car to pull into the driveway. A blue sedan finally arrived, five minutes late but there nonetheless. A pleasant-looking middle-aged woman approached Abby with her hand extended.

"Hello, Ms. Taylor. I'm Linda Finley, the realtor. So it sounds like you're very interested in this home. I can tell you a little about it as we do our walk-through."

"No need." As soon as Linda punched the code into the lock and swung the door open, Abby barged inside.

"Excuse me?"

"This was my house prior to the last owners. I know everything about it."

"And you want to buy it back? That's unusual."

"I know, but it's a long story. What's the price?"

"Oh... well... because it's a divorce, the owners are willing to negotiate to make a quick sale. They're both in San Francisco, so it's complicated."

"They must have told you their bargain basement price, didn't they?" Abby stood and stared eye to eye with the realtor, suddenly making the woman nervous.

"Um... actually, yes, they did."

"And?"

"They'll let the house go for seven hundred fifty thousand dollars as is, with all the wonderful furniture included."

"Actually, that was my furniture anyway." Abby thought back to the price she had paid for the home almost two years earlier. The current asking price was fifty thousand dollars more, but the balcony had been enlarged, the house was fully furnished, and she had to consider appreciation.

"Okay, you've got a deal. This is going to be a cash transaction today, no loan needed. Can you get the process started, and may I have the keys?"

“Are you serious?”

“I’m dead serious. The money can be wired from my bank today. Please, just start the process. I want to freshen up everything and air out the house.”

“Of course. I’ll call you in an hour to set up the wire transfer,” Linda said, still perplexed.

“Is something wrong?” Abby asked.

“No... not at all. I’ve just never in my entire career had somebody buy a house cash on the same day I showed it.”

“Well, lucky you... right?” Abby said with a grin wide enough to hit her ears and her hand outstretched for the keys. “You can take the combo lock off the door. We aren’t going to need that anymore.”

Linda drove away, and Abby opened all the doors and windows. She stripped the beds and put clean sheets on the mattresses while the old ones went through the hot cycle on the washing machine. The vacuum cleaner was in the closet off the kitchen, and plenty of cleaning products were on the shelf. By late afternoon, the house was in pristine condition, and Abby met with the realtor at the St. Thomas branch of Caribe Bank and Trust. Within thirty minutes and after the wire transfer confirmation, the house again belonged to Abby.

She lay in bed that night alone and happy as she stared at the spinning blades of the ceiling fan. The old memories were gone, and new ones would begin tomorrow when Erik got off the airplane in St. Thomas. She fell asleep to the sound of the waves breaking on the white beach sand of Magens Bay.

“We’ll be back soon, John. Thanks for loaning me your car. I can’t wait to introduce you to Erik. He really is the one for me. I finally got this right. I’m getting my second chance.”

“Okay, drive carefully. You know these crazy roads.”

Cyril E. King Airport at the west end of Charlotte Amalie, the main city in St. Thomas, was a thirty-minute drive from Magens Bay. Abby couldn’t wait to see Erik again. Ten days had passed since she left Charleston, and she missed him more than she’d ever thought possible. After parking and walking through the doors at the airport, she checked the arrivals board. Erik’s flight had just landed. Abby waited at the arrivals area, hoping to see his smiling face any second. Vacationers, families, and locals came up the concourse, backpacks slung over their shoulders, looking every which way for a familiar face. She watched as each person passed, and then finally, she saw him. A smile spread across both their faces as they waved from a distance. He reached Abby and dropped his

carry-on while he embraced her. They kissed, hugged, and laughed. They kissed some more as they told each other how much they were missed. With hands tightly held, they walked together to the baggage claim area, gathered Erik's luggage, and left Charlotte Amalie for Magens Bay. Switchback roads led the way over the mountain to the north side of the island. Abby parked the car near the bar on the beach.

"It's time you met John. I know you guys will become fast friends. He's lived on the island for fifteen years, but he's originally from Nebraska."

"Hey, Abs, you're back. I guess this guy would be Erik. How's it going, man? It's nice to finally meet you. Abby can't stop talking about you, but it's all good, I promise. How about a beer?"

"A beer sounds perfect right now. So this is Magens Bay, huh? I'll admit, it looks pretty sweet."

"Yeah, this place can grow on you. Watch out, man, you might end up staying." John smiled at Abby and gave her a wink.

"Want to walk?"

"Sure, that sounds great."

They walked the length of the sugar sand beach, then came back through ankle-deep water.

"Let's sit for a while," Abby said.

They snuggled closely on the beach, looking out over the turquoise sea. The breeze swirled through Abby's hair. Black-headed laughing gulls ran along the edge of the water, hoping for a treat and laughing when they found one.

"Man, it sure is gorgeous here, and this is where you used to live? I don't know how you ever left."

"Yeah... it is beautiful. I'll show you my old house later if you want. It's just up the path through the trees."

"Why St. Thomas? Why Magens Bay?"

"I know why I came, and I know why I left, but during the time I lived here, I fell in love. Magens Bay called out to me and pulled me in. It feels as much like home to me as Charleston does. I belong here." She drew an infinity circle in the sand with a turpentine tree limb. "I guess I love the South. I'm drawn to it."

"This isn't typically what people call the South, Abby."

"I know, but it's just about the farthest south you can get in the northern hemisphere." She looked to her right and smiled at him.

"I can't argue with that." He reached for the stick Abby was holding and drew a second infinity circle within hers.

Silent tears streamed down Abby's cheeks and rolled down her neck to mingle with the cloth of her T-shirt. "Do you believe in karma, Erik?"

“Sort of... yeah, actually, I do. Is this karma, honey? Is this the life you’re meant to have? Do you want to live here again at Magens Bay?”

“To be honest, I think I had to go through the bad karma to find the good. But eventually, good karma found me, found us, and brought us together. Life has a way of righting itself, bringing things back into balance. With South Battery as our main home and doing really well, I think we can afford a second home here.”

“Are you serious?”

She smiled at the double infinity circle in the sand. That time, she didn’t want the tide to reclaim it, to wash it away. She wanted their love to last forever.

“Erik, I have someplace to show you, and yes, I am completely serious. I think together, our lives are going to turn out just fine.”

THE END

Thank you!

Thanks for reading *Second Chances*, Book 1 in The Southern Comfort Series. I hope you enjoyed it!

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