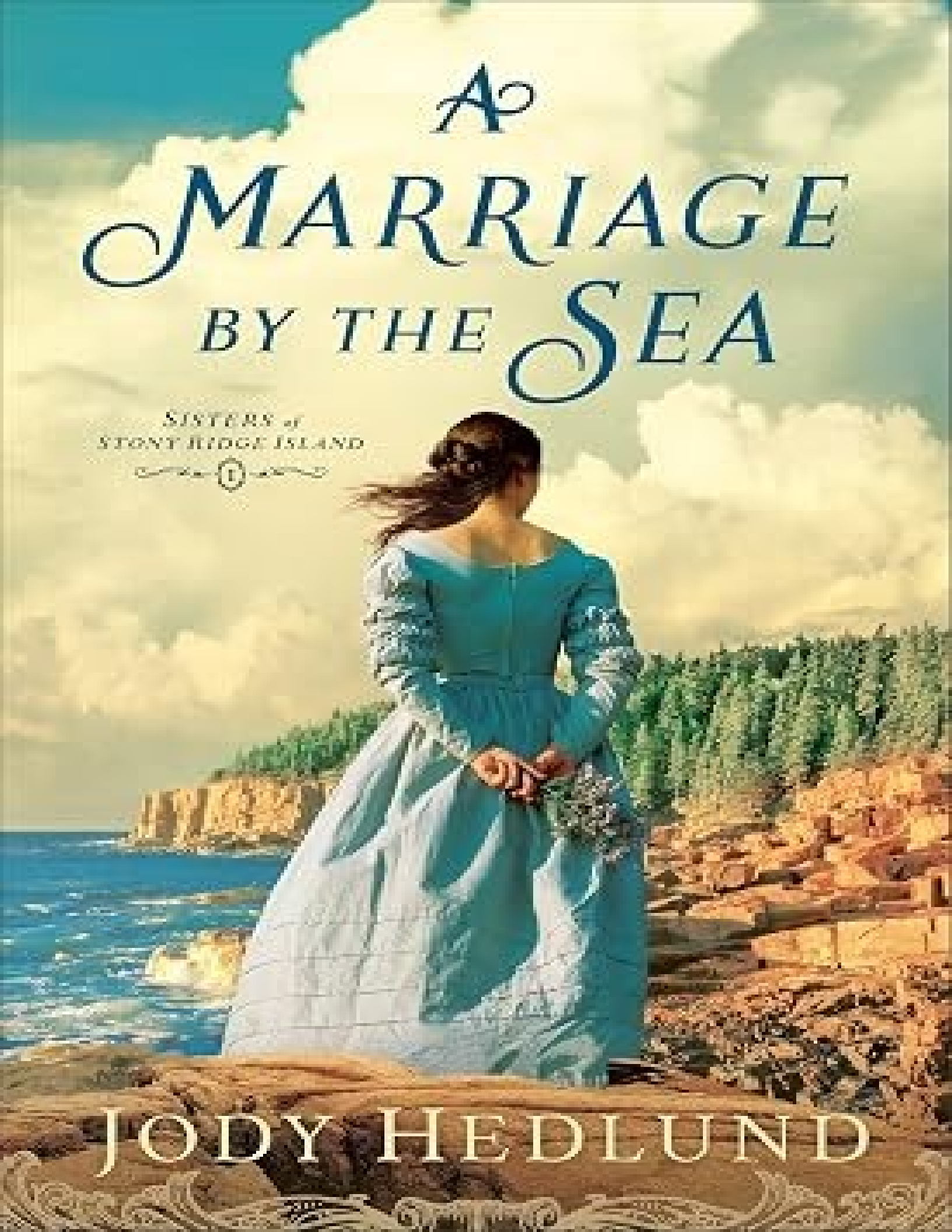
A Marriage by the Sea

Sisters of Stony Ridge Island

1



Jody Hedlund

Half Title Page

A Marriage by the Sea

Books by Jody Hedlund

Sisters of Stony Ridge Island

A Marriage by the Sea

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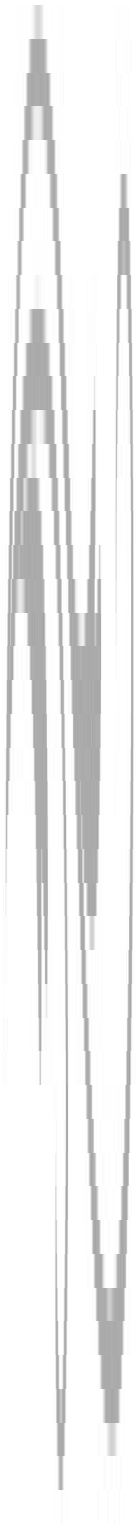
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The Preacher's Bride
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Unending Devotion
A Noble Groom

Rebellious Heart
Captured by Love

Title Page

SISTERS of
STONY RIDGE ISLAND



A MARRIAGE BY THE SEA

JODY HEDLUND



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CHAPTER 1

Stony Ridge Island, Maine
May 1852

"Hul-low!" a man called from the edge of the blueberry field a dozen paces away. "I'm looking for Marissa Axton, my soon-to-be wife."

In the middle of plucking a weed, Marissa Axton froze.

The stranger in simple calf-length breeches and a faded wool coat waved his arm above his head in a wide arch, a broad smile stretching from one side of his narrow face to the other. He wore a flatcap perched upon curly brown hair that was sprouting in all directions.

Who was this fellow? And why had he come out to Blueberry Hill on the drizzly early May morning claiming he was looking for her? To be his wife?

Kneeling in the dirt beside her, Victor paused his weeding too. With his long ebony braids hanging down his oiled slicker, the farm manager tilted up the brim of his bowler to reveal his bronze, leathery skin and piercing eyes.

"Are you Marissa?" The newcomer took a step toward her, then glanced at the wild, lowbush blueberries spreading out over the level field. Thankfully he halted, obviously having enough common sense not to tromp haphazardly on the plants that were just starting to flower with delicate bell-shaped blossoms.

She and Victor had burned the north five acres of bushes after the harvest last autumn. That part of the field would remain pruned for the upcoming season. This year, they would harvest the south five acres of blueberries—if they could keep unwanted critters out.

Not that this visitor was an unwanted critter. That was an uncharitable thought.

Marissa pushed up from the ground, wiping her hands on her woolen cloak that was now damp and musky. The hood shielded her face from the cold breeze coming off the ocean, but loose strands of her dark hair flapped across her cheeks, having escaped the knot at the back of her head.

She hesitated in answering the fellow, but as Victor rose to his lithe six-foot-three frame and braced himself in an imposing warrior-like stance, she mustered her courage and jutted out her chin. “I’m Marissa Axton. What can I do for you?” For now, it was best to ignore his odd comment about her being his soon-to-be wife.

The fellow swept his gaze over her, then whistled. “Guess everyone in town was right when they told me you were the prettiest woman on Stony Ridge Island even though you’re already twenty-four.”

“What a compliment for an old spinster like me with one foot in the grave.” Her sarcasm fell out before she could stop it.

He glanced at her sturdy leather work boots caked in mud, and his brows furrowed.

She held back a roll of her eyes. The townspeople weren’t wrong. She was on the older end of the eligible women on the island. And she’d been told she was pretty. Her eyes were a unique amber color—almost gold at times—and were framed by long lashes that matched her dark hair. She had full lips and cheeks as well as a petite button nose. She also had a slender but curvaceous figure that wasn’t visible now beneath the cloak.

Regardless of whether she was pretty or not, this fellow was boorish to hike up to the blueberry field and discuss her as if she were the first-place prize in the island’s yearly cod festival.

He was an unwanted critter after all.

“We’re busy here and need to get back to work.” She stiffened her shoulders, having learned men would take her more seriously if she gave off an air of confidence. “Is there something you need?”

“Absolutely.” His smile broadened—if that was possible. “I need to marry you right away.”

Victor snorted, which told her he didn’t consider the man much of a threat.

Blueberry Hill was bordered by granite cliffs overlooking the ocean on one side and a forest of spruce, fir, and pine on the other. She cocked her head in the direction of the forest path. “I don’t know who you are. But you best be getting on your way.”

The fellow didn't move except to look her over from head to toe for a second time. "I'm Percy Hinkley, and I arrived today on your father's schooner from Boston."

"Congratulations." She hadn't meant to be sarcastic again, but she couldn't seem to stop herself.

"My father is one of Herbert Axton's suppliers."

"And . . .?"

"Ira Hinkley?"

"As riveting as my father's business transactions are, I regret to say I'm unable to keep up with them." Even if she was being facetious, Father's fishing business really was one of the largest in Maine—mostly cod but also haddock and whiting. His two schooners carried the salted and dried fish to Boston and other big East Coast cities at least once a week and then brought back goods to sell at both Axtonville and Sunrise Cove, the two towns on Stony Ridge Island that gave the island a whopping year-round population of about five hundred.

"Ir-a. Hink-ley." Percy repeated the name with an exaggerated enunciation as if that would somehow help her recognize the name.

She shrugged. "Sorry. Don't know him."

"Mr. Axton made the arrangements with my father."

"Good for them—"

"For our marriage."

Well, that was just wonderful. Her father had been pestering her more often lately about needing to settle down. Since she was the oldest daughter, Father believed it was her duty to get married first, start a family, and set a good example for her three younger sisters.

But after canceling her engagement to Josiah Welch two years ago, she'd had no desire to court anyone else. Not that she was pining over Josiah, because she wasn't. They hadn't been right for each other from the start. She'd only agreed to the union because Josiah was someone her father had liked, someone he believed could run the farm as well as take over his other businesses someday.

Father had never considered giving the farm to her, his daughter, a female, a person of the weaker sex. He'd always denied her requests to take ownership. It didn't matter that she was the firstborn. It didn't matter that she was as strong and capable as any man, maybe even more so because she'd had to work ten times harder to be taken seriously as a woman. It

didn't matter that she was innovative and savvy in business like her father. He insisted he had to pass down his land and businesses to a man, and only a man. No doubt his biggest regret in life was that he'd sired all daughters.

Now, his hope rested on prospective sons-in-law, and if Percy Hinkley was any indication, Father was beyond tired of waiting on his daughters and was taking matters into his own hands.

Marissa blew out a raspy breath. She had half a mind to tell this smiling fellow that he could take his awful marriage proposal and toss it as far as he could into the deep sea. But it wasn't his fault he'd come all this way and failed at his mission. He was likely a pawn every bit as much as she was.

"I can see you're astounded by the arrangement." Percy waggled his eyebrows at her. "And I don't blame you. I am quite the catch."

"You're right that I'm astounded—astounded my father stooped to such measures without consulting me first."

"He had no need to consult you. He was able to tell right away that I am the man for you."

She bit back the words, *"My father would think any man is right for me."* Instead she made herself speak kindly—or at least not sarcastically. "I'm sorry, but there will be no wedding—"

"Oh yes there will be. The reverend is already waiting for us at the little chapel in town."

"That's just what I'd been hoping to hear."

"Excellent." Percy held out a hand toward her. "Then shall we get going?"

Her wry humor wasn't working on this fellow, and she needed to stick to being straightforward. "You'll have to send Reverend Reynolds home. Because the truth is, I'm not getting married, and my father knows it."

When she'd called things off with Josiah, she'd decided to stay single and prove to her father that she could manage the farm on her own. She'd been doing a fine job with Victor's help. She just wished Father would acknowledge that.

"Not getting married?" Percy's smile finally began to dim. "Of course you are. To me."

"To no one."

"The agreement is already laid out. I'll work alongside your father in all his businesses, and eventually, when he's ready, I'll take over."

It wasn't fair that her father was willing to give the businesses—including the farm—to a stranger but wasn't willing to give anything to her, his own daughter.

She huffed. "That man is impossible."

"I agree." Percy's smile fell back into place. "He's impossible not to like."

Her frustration toward her father had been festering for years. His stubbornness stemmed from his traditional beliefs about women's and men's roles. His views were why he'd never fully supported Mother starting a restaurant and thought her place was at home with the family. When the restaurant had done exactly as he'd feared and pulled Mother even farther from him and his daughters, he'd only become more adamant that women shouldn't have vocations.

In spite of Marissa's exasperation with Father for his narrow-mindedness, she did feel sorry that he'd lost his wife so tragically. He'd carried the heavy weight of his grief since the day Mother had rowed away and drowned during a storm—or so it was speculated. Since neither her body nor the boat had ever been recovered, no one knew for certain why Coral Axton left or what had become of her.

Except Marissa . . .

Well, she didn't know what had become of Mother. But she did have an idea of *why* Mother had left. The secret was one Marissa hadn't shared with anyone. It was better left unspoken. Especially now, after all these years.

Whatever the reasons Father had for not giving her the farm, she had hoped eventually he would change his mind. But he hadn't, which meant she needed to start her expansion plans. Since the market for Maine blueberries was growing, she wanted to capitalize on the increasing demand. Doing so would demonstrate to Father she was strategic and intuitive and driven. Once she expanded, surely that would prove to Father she was as good as—if not better than—any son. Maybe then he would finally let her have the farm in her own right without having a husband.

The trouble was that the large parcel of acreage she needed for the enlargement of the field belonged to the Larocks. And the Axton and the Larock families hated each other. In fact, in her family, saying the Larock name was akin to the sin of cursing.

At the moment, though, with Percy Hinkley standing on the edge of the field waiting to escort her to Axtonville's church and marry her, she would

go remind Father that she wasn't planning to get married and didn't need a husband to take care of the farm because she was perfectly capable of doing so herself.

She wiped her soil-covered hands on her wool cloak again and braced her shoulders.

It was also time to pay a visit to Mr. Larock and make her case for purchasing his land. She had saved some from the blueberry farm profits. It wouldn't be enough, but hopefully he would accept it as a down payment . . . if she could convince him to sell to an Axton. That would be the most challenging part of all.

CHAPTER 2

“We’re not good enough for you, are we?”

Felix Larock shook his head at his pa’s question. “That’s not what I said.”

In the back office of the lobster cannery, Felix sat forward in his chair, his body as rigid as it usually was whenever he had a conversation with his pa.

Pa sat on the opposite side of his battered old desk, his ledgers open in front of him. The windowless room held only a few pieces of furniture and was lit by a single oil lantern. The air was hazy with the smoke from Pa’s cigar, and the woodsy scent barely concealed the permanent odor of the lobsters that were cooked and canned on the premises every day.

Pa took another puff of his cigar, his dark blue eyes pinning Felix.

Felix shared his pa’s blue eyes and fair brown hair threaded with golden highlights from the sun. He also had the same muscular build and tan, leathery skin that most fishermen had from years of withstanding the wind and the waves. Of course, at twenty-four, Felix didn’t have as tough of a hide as his pa did at fifty.

“You don’t have to say anything, Felix.” His pa pointed his cigar at him. “I can see the dislike in your eyes.”

Felix tried to keep his expression impassive, but the anger toward his pa was hard to hide. “I came back to help with Collette. That’s all.”

His fourteen-year-old sister had broken her leg over the winter when she’d been ice-skating. She’d lain on the ice in the cold for hours until Daphne, their oldest sister, noticed she was missing and sent out a search party. By then Collette had been frozen and had nearly died from the cold.

Ever since the accident, she’d been weak and lethargic, and her leg still hadn’t healed. Daphne had written to Felix and asked him to come home, hoping his presence would help.

He hoped so too. He’d always had a special bond with his youngest sibling, and the moment he’d gotten the letter about her condition, he’d known he could no longer stay away from the island.

Pa was still studying him intently. “I tell ya, you don’t plan to stay.”

“Not forever. Just until Collette improves.”

“Because you think you’re better than us.”

“Because I want a different life than being in the lobster business.”

“What’s wrong with it?” His pa took another puff on his cigar, brow raised, his expression genuinely puzzled.

It wasn’t that Felix disliked fishing and lobstering—he couldn’t find fault with either. The Larock family business wasn’t what had driven him away from the island to California back in ’49 when gold had been discovered there.

Okay, so maybe his pa was a little bit right. Felix didn’t want to end up like his pa. That didn’t mean he thought he *was* better, only that he wanted to *do* better. There was a difference, wasn’t there?

Surely Pa could understand. Felix lived under the shadows of all that had happened a decade ago when the feud between Olivier Larock and Herbert Axton had rippled through their small community. Back when the two men had been in the fishing business together. Some people said the feud started when Herb betrayed Ollie by hiring a veteran canner from Scotland to come to Maine to design plans for a fish cannery, all without Ollie’s knowledge. Mostly, though, the story was that Ollie had stolen those plans to build his lobster cannery. At that point, after years of being partners, friends, and working together, the men had parted ways as enemies.

Whether the rumors about betrayal and stolen plans were true didn’t really matter because Felix knew the real reason the two men had become enemies, and yes, it had been Pa’s fault. Of course, neither Mr. Axton nor Pa realized Felix had witnessed their doings that long-ago night, that he’d been watching them and heard everything they’d said.

Ever since then, Felix had vowed to be a better person than his pa. To do that he had to make his own way.

“Listen, Pa.” Felix pushed up from his chair. “I came here today to ask you for a job for the summer. If that’s too much, then forget it.”

Pa exhaled an exasperated breath. “Jeezum crow, Felix. Sit back down, would you now?”

Felix was ashamed to admit he’d returned from the gold fields broker than broke. He’d used his last nickels and pennies on the passage home. And he’d spent the entire three-month voyage down the Pacific coast,

around the tip of South America, and up the Eastern coast trying to decide what to do once he got home.

With only two primary employers in Axtonville, his pa's lobster cannery and the Axtons' fishery, he didn't have many choices. Mr. Axton would never hire a Larock. Besides, Felix had no desire to work for Mr. Axton. Even if Pa had been the one to cause the problems that led to the rift between the two families, Mr. Axton was no saint either.

Felix had decided the best of options was to ask Pa to hire him. But maybe that had been a bad idea after all. He might be stuck going to Sunrise Cove and finding work there. Or to the mainland, which was only the cast of a fishing line away from Stony Ridge Island, and a solid bridge provided an easy way on and off the island for those who didn't want to row around the bulky terrain with all its peninsulas and inlets along the jagged, rocky shoreline.

The problem with going to the mainland was that he wouldn't be able to spend as much time with Collette.

"By gory, I'll give you a job." Pa nodded at Felix's chair. "You should know that."

Felix hesitated only another moment, then lowered himself to the chair. As much as he wished he could walk out of the office and never look back, he couldn't do that to Collette. He'd sat by her bedside last night and again this morning, telling her about his adventures and making her smile. Daphne had pulled him aside afterward and told him that already Collette seemed to be doing better.

Pa shoved his ledger away and rummaged through some papers. "I got all the captains and crew I need for my smacks."

Before leaving for the West, Felix had been a captain of one of his pa's smack boats, overseeing the crew and the route. The locals trapped and caged lobsters along the shore, and the smacks came around to collect them. With a special well built into the center of the boat, the smacks could keep the lobsters alive by immersing them in the ocean water until arriving back at the cannery.

"What about the cannery?" Felix didn't really want to work in the factory, but if he couldn't be a smack captain again, it might be his only other option.

"Got all the help I need there too."

Although mostly women and children picked the meat from the shells, the cannery still had plenty of positions for men—foremen, boilers, crackers and breakers, sealers, bathmen, and more.

Felix had worked most of the jobs in the cannery, pitching in whenever his pa was shorthanded. It was hot and tedious work, but canned lobster was growing in demand since fresh lobster was difficult to transport to faraway places. The canned lobster could go any distance to eastern cities, even to other countries.

"If not on the smack or in the cannery, what kind of job do you have for me to do?" Felix crossed his arms to keep himself from standing up and striding out.

Pa shuffled a few more papers, then seemed to find the one he was searching for. He silently read it before he set it down. He took a puff on his cigar, blew out the smoke, then met Felix's gaze directly. "I need more lobster."

Felix didn't quite know how to respond. "You want me to go out and start lobstering for you?"

His pa's lips quirked up into a lopsided half grin. "Naw. But I do want you to go out and use that charm of yours to get me more lobstermen."

Felix didn't immediately object. Instead, he relaxed his shoulders, ready to hear his pa out.

"I can't keep up with the demand from my customers anymore. Not even close'nuff." Pa waved a hand at the rest of the papers strewn out on the desk. "I can easily expand my operations here at the cannery, but I need more lobster first."

"So, you want to hire more lobstermen?"

"Ayuh. I need someone to not only recruit more but also retain them so they don't sell to anyone else."

Felix hesitated. Such a position would require a lot of traveling. "I want to stay as close to Stony Ridge as possible."

"There's lots of fishermen in the area who might be willing to switch to lobstering, especially if we offered the traps, lines, and any other gear they need."

Was he suggesting they lure fishermen away from Mr. Axton's fleets?

"Naw," Pa said, as if hearing his silent question. "I don't want you hiring anyone who works for Herb."

"Good, because I wasn't planning on it."

Pa began to restack the papers on his desk. “I could also use help with boat repairs. Our vessels are getting worn out, and it’s hard to keep up with the maintenance.”

Felix had always been handy with fixing the boats. In fact, he’d built a small dory of his own with input from both Mr. Axton and his pa in the days when the men had still been friends. Felix had used his dory for years until it had become so weathered that it had no longer been safe.

“Take the day to think about it, Felix. And then let me know tomorrow.”

“What’s the pay?”

At a knock on the outside door of the office, Pa stood and began to cross the room. “Maybe I’ll pay you based on how many new lobstermen you find me.”

That seemed fair. Felix rose from his chair too.

Pa opened the door, and a gust of cool air rushed into the stale room. A young woman stood on the stoop. Even with the hood of her wool coat pulled up and her head turned away from the office, Felix immediately recognized her even though he hadn’t seen her in three years. There was only one woman with such thick dark hair and the elegant profile of a sea goddess. Marissa Axton. His best friend from childhood.

His heart pinched sharply, and he took a couple of steps back to a spot where the open door and its shadow concealed him but where he could still partially see her.

His automatic reaction to stay out of sight probably came from the years of keeping their friendship from their warring families. They’d always been afraid that if anyone in their families discovered they had remained friends, they would be banned from spending time together. The only one who’d ever known about their friendship was Victor, and the Axtons’ farm manager had never made it an issue.

Maybe Felix’s hiding in the darkness behind the door also had to do with the fact that he’d argued with Marissa the day before he’d left for California, and they hadn’t communicated since—not one letter, not even one little note.

Of course he’d moved around a lot while in California, and he’d been busy doing construction once the gold fever had left him. Even as the excuses reared up, he knew he could have written to her. After all, he’d stayed in touch with Daphne.

“Good day, Mr. Larock.” Marissa shifted toward Pa. With her facing his direction, Felix could see her features in the waning afternoon—smooth, sun-kissed skin, sweetly rounded face, impish nose with a cute upturned tip, and full lips.

Felix sucked in a quick breath at just how beautiful she was. Yes, she’d always been stunning. But her face had developed a defined beauty that only made her all the more alluring.

The truth was, he hadn’t wanted to communicate with Marissa, not when she’d been engaged to another man. It hadn’t seemed right, especially since the fellow—Josiah—had been the topic of their parting argument.

No doubt she was married to him by now.

Felix gave a slight shake of his head. He didn’t want to think about Marissa being married, which was partly why he’d tried to put her far from his mind during his absence.

If he was honest, thoughts of her had crept in from time to time, especially when he’d missed having someone to talk to. She’d always been good at listening to him ramble on about everything and had never been afraid to tell him the truth. They’d had an honest and open relationship, one he’d never experienced with anyone else.

That honesty and openness had also led to the end of their relationship. . . .

Marissa looked at Pa directly without any hesitation, her expression earnest and her amber eyes almost a translucent gold, a color that was otherworldly and had always had the ability to mesmerize Felix.

Pa’s back visibly stiffened as he took in Marissa. “You’re one of Herbert Axton’s daughters.”

“I’m his oldest. Marissa.”

Pa glanced out beyond her, as if suddenly nervous. “You shouldn’t be here.” He began to shut the door.

“Wait.” Marissa held out a hand and braced it against the door.

Felix took a small step forward, the need to help her swelling so strongly that it took him by surprise. He pulled himself to a quick halt, still in the shadows behind the door, his reaction to Marissa baffling him. Surely after putting her from his mind for three years, he had worked her out of his system. But maybe not.

“Please.” Marissa’s tone held an urgency that Felix had never heard before. “I need just a moment of your time.”

Pa held the standoff with the door for another moment before he let go. "Yessah." His voice softened. "What do you need?"

"I'd like to speak to you about purchasing some land."

"What land?"

"On Blueberry Hill."

Pa didn't respond right away. Felix couldn't see his pa's face. Was he startled by the request? Angry? Interested?

If Marissa was asking to buy more land for her blueberry fields, that had to mean she was still involved in the affairs of the farm even though she was married.

Felix hadn't thought Josiah would allow her that freedom. The fellow had seemed too controlling, too stifling, too domineering for a woman of Marissa's independence and intelligence. Felix had told her that during their last conversation when he'd ruined their friendship. Maybe his instincts had been wrong. Maybe Josiah had been right for her after all.

Marissa squared her shoulders. "I'd like to purchase the ten acres of your land that borders my blueberry field."

Pa stood as still and unmoving as a boulder against the rising tide. Was he about to explode with indignation?

Felix held his breath. He wouldn't be able to hide in the shadows if Pa did or said anything rude to Marissa. He'd have to step forward and defend her.

"I have enough to give you a down payment," she continued. "I'll go to the bank and get a loan for the rest."

Wow. She was clearly doing well for herself. She was also bold and determined to offer this proposal to Pa.

Felix shouldn't have been surprised, since those were the same characteristics she'd displayed when they were children. But he was still unprepared for her showing such grit as an adult, especially because most women her age were having babies, taking care of toddlers, and tending to all the tasks that running a home entailed.

Pa was silent for another heartbeat. Finally he cleared his throat. "What does your father think of you doing business with me?"

Instead of backing off, Marissa straightened. "My father doesn't know."

Pa cocked his head, as if the news was unexpected. Everything about Marissa was turning out to be unexpected.

“I’m on my way to meet with him now.” She frowned in the direction of the street. Was she communicating with someone waiting there for her? Maybe Josiah?

“Are you now?”

Marissa turned her sincere and entirely too beautiful eyes back on Pa. “I’d be grateful if you’d consider selling to me.”

How could Pa resist her? Felix wouldn’t be able to if their roles had been reversed.

The silence dragged out.

Felix shifted and accidentally bumped against the bookshelf behind him, knocking his elbow into a bowl of shells. He quickly grasped the bowl to keep it from spilling. Even so, the commotion drew Marissa’s attention, and she peered past Pa.

Felix dodged farther behind the open door and immediately regretted it. He was being a coward in avoiding Marissa. But the fact was, he wasn’t able to face her yet. He wasn’t sure when he’d be ready. Maybe once he resigned himself to her being married and no longer his friend.

But when would that be? If he hadn’t accepted losing her yet, would he ever?

He gave himself a mental shake. Their friendship had been an important part of his past, but that’s where it had to stay. It was long over and needed to remain that way.

“Young lady,” Pa finally said, his tone gentler and more patient than usual. “I tell ya, you have a lot of pluck coming here and asking me. But I never do business with an Axton. Guess prob’ly you know that.”

She narrowed her eyes in a calculated way that Felix remembered all too well. “Would it help to know that you’d make my father angry if you agreed to sell to me?”

Pa chuckled.

Felix’s mouth dropped open. Pa found Marissa’s comment humorous? What was happening here?

Pa lifted his hand and rubbed the back of his neck. Then he shook his head. “I don’t know . . .”

“Thank you, Mr. Larock.” Marissa stepped down from the stoop. “I appreciate you thinking about it. I’ll return in three days to get your answer.”

She didn’t wait for his response but strode away, her step radiating confidence.

Marissa was indeed a plucky woman.

Pa leaned outside and called to one of his workers, clearly moving on to other matters.

Felix rolled his shoulders to release the tension there. After seeing Marissa again and hearing her voice and being reminded of all the qualities about her that he’d always liked, he had an overwhelming need to race after her and tell her hello and ask her how she’d been. He wanted to know if she was happy with her life, with Josiah, with the farm and her blueberry field. Did she have any children? How were her sisters? How was life going for them all?

What harm could come from catching up with her a little? Surely none. No one would have to know. Even if she did inform Josiah about their reunion, they could still keep it a secret from their families just as they had for years. Maybe tomorrow he’d go up to Blueberry Hill and see her for a few minutes.

A small thrill of excitement raced through him at the prospect. But just as quickly, he reined the thrill to a halt. He’d just told himself that their friendship had to stay in the past. He couldn’t resurrect it. There was no point. Not when he would be leaving again just as soon as Collette was on the mend.

He would be better off avoiding Marissa this summer, which would be easy to do if he was busy working for his pa and spending his free time with Collette. Yes, that’s what he would do. He would pretend Marissa no longer existed the same way he had when he’d left Axtonville. Even though it had been difficult, he could do it again.

CHAPTER 3

Marissa had hoped Percy would go on his way, but he'd followed her around from one side of the narrow bay that held the Larock industries to the other side that contained the Axtons' fishery with the town of Axtonville in the middle.

Now Percy plodded on the wharf by her side like a faithful hound. Not that he was a dog any more than he was a critter. He was actually a decent fellow and had told her more about himself during the hike down from Blueberry Hill and the mile or so walk to Axtonville.

He was the youngest son of Ira Hinkley, a prosperous merchant in Boston. Since Percy had two older brothers who were in the family business, he'd been eager to come to Axtonville and work with her father to learn about fishing. He'd already spent a couple of summers fishing off Cape Cod and liked it and had some knowledge of the industry. But now he was ready for more responsibility and leadership.

"Herb and my father have been talking for months about the possibility of our marriage," Percy said. "When Herb's letter arrived last month with the invitation to come and marry you, I packed my bags right away."

Marissa still didn't understand why Father hadn't mentioned the correspondence. Why surprise her like this?

She dragged in a lungful of air laden with the heavy scent of cod and lobster. With evening drawing nigh, the inlet was filling with boats of all sizes and shapes returning from the day away.

Seagulls swooped overhead, squawking and waiting for any stray fish guts to be scraped off the boats. Porpoises circled around the boats, too, hoping for an easy meal just like the gulls. They surfaced, flipped to their backs, and seemed to lounge leisurely in the water. But the moment any of the entrails were dumped out of the boats, they dove quickly after the fodder.

The fishermen, in their oiled slickers, paused to stare at her walking with Percy. Some were still in their vessels, lowering sails and cleaning decks. Others were unloading the crates of cod that would be delivered to the fish-curing yard her father owned.

In a community as small as theirs, she knew most of the fishermen, both old-timers and young alike. She'd grown up attending church and socials with them and had even gone to school with some of the younger fellows.

Percy nodded at a group of men on the wharf who'd stopped stacking crates and were now watching him warily. Did they know why he was there? That he might someday be in charge of the business?

Or had they heard he was there to marry the boss's oldest spinster daughter? That would certainly get tongues wagging.

What would get the tongues wagging faster was if anyone learned she'd stopped by the Larocks' lobster cannery and spoken with Mr. Larock. That would be the most unusual event of the day, of the week, maybe even of the year so far.

She'd made Percy wait near the street as she asked Mr. Larock about purchasing the acreage. She was hoping Percy didn't know about the rift between the Axtons and Larocks yet—the split in their business partnership that had happened when Mr. Larock had betrayed Father by stealing the plans for a canning factory.

Either way, she couldn't have Percy telling anyone about her visiting the cannery, especially her father.

The curing yard stood in a smooth stretch of the shore not far from the wharfs. The perimeter was surrounded by a tall wooden fence to keep out bears, racoons, foxes, and any other wild animals that liked to help themselves to fish. The area inside was filled with flakes—dozens of wooden racks on poles where the split, gutted, and cleaned fish were laid out to dry in the sun and wind.

The curing process was ongoing with freshly caught fish coming in every day and the dried fish going out to cargo schooners a couple of times a week to move the finished product to markets.

Her father usually didn't loiter at the wharfs or the curing yard. Instead, he could almost always be found in his shipyard, which was on a slope above the fishery, allowing for easily rolling the completed vessels down into the water.

More than anything else, Father loved crafting the ships that his fleet used, mostly the pinkys that were two-masted and less than forty tons. They weren't as big as the five-masted schooners that sailed along the Atlantic Coast going as far as the Deep South and even the sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

While not large, the pinkys were more spacious than the dories and sloops that some of the fishermen used, big enough to have a covered cabin in the bow. The pinkys were also sturdier and safer and capable of withstanding the elements better. At least that's what her father claimed.

She and Percy veered onto a rocky trail that led to the large warehouse-like building where most of the work was done on the boats. She passed by the covered stacks of oak, white pine, spruce, and tamarack that had been cut at the sawmill in town and would be used for different parts of the pinky.

Before she reached the side door, it opened and her father stepped out. His dark trousers, shirt, and vest were covered in sawdust, and his blond hair and beard were coated too, making them look gray.

A giant of a man, he towered a full head above most fellows. When he wore his top hat, which he almost always did whenever he was out, he added another foot to his height. His face was round and his features prominent, with a long nose and wide mouth.

As he wiped his hands on a rag, he met Marissa's gaze as directly as she knew he would. "Thought I might see you."

"If you knew I wouldn't be happy about"—she waved a hand in Percy's direction—"then why did you do it?"

"Because he's a good man." Father finished with the rag and stuffed it in his pocket. "One of the best I've been able to find."

The simmering anger inside began to boil a little hotter. She didn't need a man—good or otherwise—in order to make something of her life. But she couldn't speak impertinently to her father. She'd only done so a few times in her childhood to learn that he wouldn't tolerate it.

Percy took a step forward so he was standing beside Marissa. "Thank you for the kind words, Mr. Axton. I'll do my best to be that good man you expect of me. And I'll do my best to be a good husband to Marissa."

Her father didn't break his gaze from Marissa. "See, he'll be a good husband."

Wonderful. *Just what I always wanted. A good husband.* She pursed her lips and held back the sarcastic response.

Her father's eyes narrowed, almost as if he'd heard her remark even though she hadn't spoken it.

"I'm making plans to expand the blueberry field." She blurted the words before Father could make his argument for why she ought to get married.

He crossed his bulky arms and spread his feet as though preparing for battle.

She stiffened her spine, determined to fight hard and maybe even win. "The demand for our blueberries is growing. I want to prove to you that I can meet that demand by expanding the business."

"It's not a high-profit enterprise."

"The yearly visitors over in Sunrise Cove are buying the blueberries faster than Nana and Papa can offer. They're also buying all the blueberry-related products too."

Her mother's parents owned a store and an inn across the island in Sunrise Cove and had agreed to not only sell Marissa's blueberries, but also the soaps, jams, candles, towels, tablecloths, and other items she made.

"With everything else I have going on," Father replied, "I don't want to worry about the farm."

"You don't have to worry. I'll take care of everything. All I ask is that you give me a year or two to show you that I can do it, that I can make it into a successful and profitable business."

"I think I've built enough successful and profitable businesses to know what will or won't make a go of it. And there will never be enough money in blueberries."

He'd done well for himself. He was right about that. But he could hardly predict the future of blueberries.

Percy lifted a hand as though he wanted to say something but was asking permission first.

Father ignored him. "The blueberries are just like the rest of the produce on the farm, enough to feed our family and sell to others on the island, but that's it."

Was that really it? For several heartbeats, Marissa's determination wavered. The sounds of hammering from within the workshop wafted out the open door behind Father.

He nodded again. “The farm was never meant to be a business, not the way big farms are in other states. In fact, we don’t even need the farm anymore, and I’m considering selling it.”

“No.” The one word came out sharply.

He raised a brow, consternation forming a cloud in his eyes.

Her three sisters lived in their house in town with Father and Mrs. Emery, their housekeeper. They visited the farm from time to time, but they preferred being a part of the community and close to friends and activities.

Marissa was the only one who still had ties to the land and home where they’d lived as a happy family before everything started going wrong. Maybe she was clinging to the farm because she didn’t want to lose the memories of those better days. Somehow in preserving the house and the farm, she was keeping alive the way things had been during the simpler days when Mother had still enjoyed life and had filled their home with her infectious laughter and smiles.

“Please don’t sell the farm. Give it to me.” It didn’t hurt to ask for the hundredth time, did it? Maybe even beg?

“Marissa.” Father’s voice was low and exasperated. “You know how I feel about the matter.”

She was exasperated too. “So the only way you’ll ever let me have the farm is if I get married.”

“Yes, if you get married, I’ll give your husband the farm.”

Percy cleared his throat. “If I might interject?”

“Please don’t.” She didn’t care if the reply was rude. She didn’t want his opinion right now, not when this conversation about the farm was turning out to be as frustrating as every other conversation about it.

Percy continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “I would be happy to have the farm and allow Marissa to continue to pursue her blueberry hobby.”

“Hobby?” Her volume rose a notch. “My blueberries aren’t just a hobby.”

He blanched. “Forgive me if I misspoke. I assumed—based on your father’s comments—that the farm isn’t a priority.”

“It is a priority to me.” Her voice came out more impassioned than she intended.

Her father spoke before Percy could say more. “If you don’t get married this summer, I’ll sell the farm. That’s what I’ll do.”

Now that Father knew she was adamantly opposed to his selling the farm, he would use that information to manipulate her into doing what he wanted.

Arms still crossed, Father studied her face with a calculated look, almost as if he was doing one of his business deals.

Because that's all she meant to him. She was nothing more than a business deal.

She knew her impression wasn't fair. In reality, Father did care about her well-being and was just doing what he thought was right for her future. He wanted all his daughters to get married so they would be taken care of if anything ever happened to him. After all, most women couldn't manage without a husband to provide for them.

She understood his concerns. But could she really marry Percy as a way to keep the farm? It would be using him to get what she wanted. Then again, wasn't that what he was doing by coming here and marrying her? He was using her to gain her father's businesses.

"What if I don't want to marry Percy?"

Father shrugged. "I like Percy, but if he's not the man for you, he can marry one of the other girls."

Percy's eyes rounded. "I thought I was marrying Marissa."

"I don't care who Marissa marries, so long as she does so."

Percy opened his mouth, but no words came out.

Her father moved back into the workshop behind him, bringing the conversation to an end in his timing. It didn't matter if she had more to say. He was finished.

"Come on in, Percy." Father gestured toward the workshop. "I'll show you around the place."

Percy's wide grin made an appearance. "I would love that." Apparently, he wasn't too perturbed by the possibility of having to marry another one of Herb Axton's daughters. They were probably all the same to him—a means to build a life for himself.

The two stepped inside, leaving Marissa standing on the rocky trail. As Father swung the door to close it, he paused and looked at her. "Stay at the house in town tonight so you don't have to walk back to the farm alone."

"I'll be fine." She'd trekked to and from town hundreds of times by herself over the years. Besides, she had an hour or more until darkness fell.

Father gave a nod, as though he knew she was right. Then he finished closing the door.

Marissa stared at the door for a long moment. Why couldn't he realize she was right about the farm too? That she was just as capable there?

The whole way back, she wanted to remain angry at her father, but the anger switched to her mother. The problems in their family were her fault. If Mother hadn't been so selfish and unhappy, maybe they could have figured out a way to make the restaurant draw them all closer. But no, Mother had used the restaurant as a way to drift away even more from her family.

Why? What had been so wrong with Marissa and her sisters that Mother hadn't wanted to be with them as much anymore? As with all the other times Marissa had tried to figure out the answer to that question, the hurt inside—even after ten years—still pierced her chest.

Of course, Meredith, the peacemaker of the family, had stayed the closest to Mother and had helped in the restaurant. Marissa, on the other hand, had been more strong-willed and independent like Mother, and they had clashed at times.

In spite of sharing a similar temperament, Marissa had always loved and respected Mother, even in those last few years before she'd opened the restaurant when it had become obvious she was growing more melancholic. She'd been arguing with Father more often, accusing him of never being home and complaining that he didn't love her anymore.

One day after a particularly angry late-night argument that had wafted into the room Marissa shared with Meredith, Mother had offered to go with Marissa to the blueberry field. At the time Marissa had been twelve, almost thirteen, and had started taking an interest in the blueberries. The request had surprised her since Mother had been spending a great deal of time cooking and developing recipes in their farmhouse kitchen and hadn't been doing much of anything else.

Together they'd walked the path up to the blueberry field, which at the time had only been a few acres. Mother had helped Marissa prune some of the bushes, and as they worked they talked of all the things they could do with the blueberry field and the items they could make from berries. Mother had been excited about it and had many different ideas, and Marissa left the field that day just as excited and her mind filled with all kinds of aspirations.

That evening Father had come home early with the news that he'd purchased a spacious Victorian house in town for Mother to turn into her restaurant. There hadn't been any arguing between the two for the night,

and they'd seemed almost happy again as they'd been during those early years in Axtonville.

After that day, Mother never went to the blueberry field with Marissa again. Marissa had even invited her once, but Mother had claimed to be too busy with the restaurant.

The truth was, Mother hadn't had the time or desire for her before the blueberry field day, and Marissa shouldn't have gotten her hopes up that Mother had cared. Because she hadn't.

As the wagon path neared the farm, Marissa took the trail that led back to Blueberry Hill. The woods surrounded her, and she breathed in deeply the damp sea scent that permeated the air. Rusty pine needles cushioned the ground. Spiderwebs in the branches glistened with the mist.

Normally, the quiet and solace brought peace to her soul. But at the moment, the peace was charged with strange energy, like the calm that came before a storm.

She paused at the top of the trail, the plateau ahead.

Was it time to admit defeat? Time to accept that her father wouldn't change his mind? That giving in to Mother's whim to open the restaurant had soured him on every endeavor his daughter might have?

If having a husband was the only way she would be able to get the farm, could she do it?

At movement in the treetop nearby, she startled. Through the shadows of the growing darkness she caught sight of the old tree house Felix and Victor had built so long ago. Felix, always the daring friend, had wanted to play in the trees. But of course Victor, who had been charged with watching her while at the blueberry field, hadn't wanted her following Felix up into the canopies. So Victor had suggested building a tree house.

The project had taken Victor and Felix most of one summer to complete, usually in the late evenings and sometimes working into the night. But they'd done it, and the little shack on tall beams that was connected to the oak tree had become a wonderful childhood memory, one shared only with Felix, one she hadn't even told her sisters about.

Felix. Where was he now? What was he doing? Probably having a grand adventure somewhere new in the world just as he'd pretended when they'd played in the tree house.

A nostalgic smile tugged at her lips. He'd let her go on his imaginary escapades with him and broadened her world with his dreams and ideas and

adventures. She hoped he was getting everything he'd wanted from life. He deserved it.

Her only regret was that she'd never had the chance to apologize for getting angry with him before he'd left. He'd been a true friend in sharing what he hadn't liked about Josiah, telling her that Josiah wasn't right for her. At the time, she hadn't wanted to hear it and had marched away from Felix with bees in her bonnet.

It hadn't taken long for her to realize he'd been right. By then, he'd already set sail on a ship bound for California, according to Victor. She'd hoped maybe Felix would write to her or at least send a message to Victor. But Felix had probably been too busy having the time of his life to think about her.

A gust of wind raced through the woods and took hold of the tree house door. It swung open and banged against a branch.

She frowned. She checked the tree house from time to time to make sure the wild critters hadn't caused any damage. And she always latched the door securely to keep out those wily trespassers—mainly raccoons.

How had the latch come loose?

She stepped off the trail and began to make her way through the brush. Maybe it was time to let the tree house go. Was it one more thing from her past she'd been clinging to, trying to preserve, so she didn't have to face her future?

At the bottom of the trunk, she paused in front of the slats of the wood ladder nailed into the tree. In her mind's eye, she could see herself scrambling up after Felix, who'd rarely worn shoes, his bare feet brown on the bottom. He'd smiled down at her with one of his crooked grins, his dark blue eyes twinkling with stars, his brown hair almost blond from the time he spent out in the sun.

He'd always been so charming and sweet and kind to her from the moment they'd accidentally run into each other in the woods bordering Blueberry Hill. How old had they been? Maybe about nine?

They'd been living in Axtonville for about a year by that point, after their fathers had started their joint fishing business there. While she and Felix had already known each other because their fathers had been friends before moving to Axtonville, that had been the first time they'd played together.

They'd become good friends after that. Of course, Marissa had all the playmates she'd needed in her sisters. She and her sisters had been close

and enjoyed being together. But Felix had loved being outdoors as much as she had, and they'd easily bonded.

When she and Felix had been fourteen, their fathers had split ways after a falling-out, and their families had become enemies. That had also been the year her mother had drowned. Those last few months leading up to Mother's death had been tense, and Marissa had felt a shifting in her relationship with her sisters. It was as if their mother's unhappiness and death had affected them each so differently that they couldn't relate to each other in the same way anymore.

Of course their sisterly bond remained strong, and they continued to love each other dearly and support each other. However, Marissa had known things about Mother that she hadn't been able to share with them or anyone. In some ways that had created a barrier with her sisters that she'd never been able to overcome.

But with Felix . . . she'd found someone who listened and understood. Although she had never told him the worst secret about Mother, Marissa had been able to talk to him about many of her hurts and longings, and he'd proven to be a good listener.

Since no one in their families—except Victor—knew that they had remained friends, Marissa had met secretly with Felix. By that point, they'd been too grown up to play. But they'd still climbed up into the tree house to talk or commiserate about their problems. Sometimes he'd helped her in the blueberry field, or they'd hiked old trails, or explored a new part of the island where they'd never gone before.

They'd continued their friendship even after he'd started spending time with other women and she'd begun courting Josiah. At that point, she'd noticed that Felix hadn't been as comfortable with her anymore, and they hadn't been able to share quite as openly.

She supposed the changes had been inevitable. Childhood friendships usually never could stay the same.

Even so, she wanted to keep the tree house from going to ruin. It was all she had left of him, and she didn't want to lose it.

With a heave, she hoisted herself onto the ladder and climbed up, careful not to tangle her legs in her skirt. Victor had strengthened the ladder slats once in a while and had replaced a few of the rotting boards, even though she'd never asked him to. He'd clearly sensed how important the tree house

was to her, and she was grateful to him for the many ways he'd supported her over the years.

As she neared the top, a thud from inside halted her progress. Maybe the invading creature was still inside.

She stretched toward the nearest branch and broke off a dead piece. It wasn't much of a weapon, but at least she could swat the animal and hopefully scare it out.

She stealthily climbed the last of the distance. As she inched the door open farther, a creature loomed in the shadows—a creature much larger than any she'd faced before.

It started toward her.

Before it could attack, she raised her stick, swung hard, and connected it with the creature's torso.

CHAPTER 4

“Hey now!” Felix ducked as Marissa slapped him with the broken branch a second time. “I knew you wouldn’t be happy to see me, but I didn’t think you would want to kill me.”

She halted her third jab mid-swing. “Felix?”

“Who else did you think would be up here?” He reached out and grasped her arm, hoisting her into the tree house.

The five-by-six room with a shuttered window still had the bench he’d crafted against one wall and the simple stools against the other. A couple of maps that he and Marissa had drawn of the island and places they’d explored were still nailed up. An old pail tied to a rope sat in a corner—the pail they’d raised and lowered to send messages to each other.

The plank floor was dusty, and the ceiling had cobwebs, but otherwise the place was clean of animal droppings and dead leaves and nests.

“I thought a raccoon or squirrel was in here.” She sat back on her heels in front of the door, the fading day wafting in and giving him enough light to see her expressive face and her thick hair, which was coming loose from the knot at the back of her head. Underneath her cloak, her dress appeared to be damp and plastered to her body, revealing the womanly form he’d been all too aware of before he’d left for California.

Was it possible she was more beautiful now than she’d been a little while ago when he’d watched her from the shadows of Pa’s office?

She was taking him in, too, as he returned to the bench only a couple of feet away in the cramped area.

He probably hadn’t changed much either. Maybe had added a few muscles during the long hours of constructing houses and businesses. But otherwise, he was plain, boring Felix without anything remarkable to make him stand out in a crowd.

He’d removed his cap and now combed his fingers through his hair. “So you weren’t climbing up here to see me?”

“Yes, you’re right. I have climbed up here every evening of the past three years to see if you were around.” She spoke with the same sass he’d always liked. Although the lighting wasn’t bright, he could see the way her lips curled up just like they did when she got feisty.

“I figured you heard I was home.”

“No, I wasn’t aware.”

Why would she be aware when their two families never spoke to each other? “Got back yesterday.”

She was still studying him.

“What do you think?” He held out his arms to give her a better view. “As handsome as ever, aren’t I?”

“As arrogant as ever.”

He grinned. “That too.”

When her lips curved into a full smile, relief coursed through him. If she was still mad at him for the way they’d parted, at least she wasn’t overly so. “I’m sorry for the things I said before I left. I spoke too freely and crossed a line I shouldn’t have.” He might as well get his apology out in the open right away.

She shrugged one shoulder. “You were just being honest, and I shouldn’t have gotten angry with you about it.”

“Then you’re not still sore with me?”

“Maybe a little . . .” Her smile disappeared.

His heart took a rapid dive. “I’m sorry.”

“You should have written to me at least once or twice.”

“Really?” His downward spiral of thoughts halted abruptly. “You wanted to hear from me?”

“At the very least you could have let me know you were still alive.”

She’d been concerned about him? “I thought about sending a letter . . . and I thought about you. Does that count?”

“No.” Her expression softened. “Maybe.”

After the long months of only imagining her, he almost pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. Here she was, only a few feet away, so real, so vibrant, so extraordinary.

How had he gone so long without seeing her and talking to her? Being this near to her made him feel alive in a way he hadn’t in a very long time. Like he was stepping into the sunshine after months of living in a dungeon.

He'd always felt his bond with her was special and different, that they'd had the kind of friendship that rarely came along. But after their disagreement over Josiah, Felix had decided that maybe what they had wasn't lasting after all.

What if he'd been wrong? Maybe he still needed her friendship. Maybe he always would.

But what would Josiah think about his wife having a friendship with another man? Felix had never known Josiah Welch well. The fellow had been a few years older, around the age of Gabe, Felix's oldest brother.

The Welches owned the sawmill in town as well as a lumber camp on the mainland. Mr. Axton utilized the Welch lumber and their mill for his boat building. The union between Marissa and Josiah had made sense and had probably been profitable for both families.

From the little Felix knew, Josiah was a good man—hardworking and honest. He would have a lot of wealth at some point, if not already, to provide well for Marissa.

Felix gave himself a stern inner shake. He had to stay out of Marissa's life now. Friendships with married women didn't end well.

"I heard you went to California," she said, watching him expectantly.

"Yes, I'd hoped to find gold, but all I found was hardship."

"Hardship?"

"It wasn't easy camping in the wilderness, sluicing for gold in the rivers day after day. I quickly ran out of money and was always hungry." And dirty and tired.

She settled onto the opposite end of the bench now, as if she intended to stay and talk with him for longer than a quick hello. "So you didn't return with a bag of gold?"

"I returned with nothing but holes in my socks and patches on my trousers."

She smiled.

He sat back farther, leaning against the slabs of wood he'd carried up and hammered together that long-ago summer. When he'd first sought out the old fort, he'd expected it to be just a shell of what it had once been—boards missing, the roof half off, and maybe even the ladder mostly gone. He'd been surprised to find it had been kept in good repair and guessed Victor had been the one to maintain it.

“I lost my gold fever and realized I preferred doing productive work rather than hoping I’d be one of the lucky fellows to strike it rich. So I lived in San Francisco and did construction work.”

“I’m sure you enjoyed that.”

“I did.” He’d always loved building things and had learned a lot during the past few years.

For a short while he told her about the company he’d worked for in San Francisco and some of the grand homes and businesses he’d helped build. Then he asked her about her blueberry business and how the farm was doing. He was tempted to ask her about the expansion project and her offer to purchase Larock land, but then he would have to admit overhearing her conversation with his pa earlier.

“Well,” she finally said, “I should get home before Victor comes searching for me.”

“So, Victor and Janie are still living on the farm?” He supposed that made sense, even with Josiah now being there. For a reason Felix didn’t quite understand, he wasn’t ready to ask her about Josiah and her marriage.

“Victor’s been a big help with the blueberry fields now that the demand is growing. And, of course, I kept Janie on as the housekeeper, although her basket weaving is taking up a lot more of her time.”

“I always knew the visitors to the island would like her baskets and that she wouldn’t be able to keep up with making them.”

The Wabanaki had a long history of basket weaving, utilizing the brown ash as well as the sweet grass that grew in wet meadows and marshes. Before Felix had left, Janie had started selling them, particularly over in Sunrise Cove, where more and more wealthy visitors from big East Coast cities arrived every summer to enjoy the beauty of the island and of Maine.

Marissa nodded. “I told Victor and Janie they could move into the house with me and have more space, but they wanted to stay in their cabin.”

Felix guessed Josiah had encouraged them to remain in their cabin. Felix would have if Marissa had married him. He would have wanted her alone, all by himself, for as long as possible before having children.

As soon as the thought sifted through his mind, a strange heat pierced him. Was it jealousy? Hopefully not.

He shifted uncomfortably. He didn’t want to think about Marissa as a desirable woman like he had those last months before he’d left for the West when he’d been plagued with sensual thoughts about her—ones in which

he'd contemplated what it would be like to kiss her, run his hands over her, and pull her flush.

Just the remembrance of such thoughts caused the heat inside him to flare hotter. The truth was, somewhere along the way as they'd grown up, he hadn't been able to keep from noticing that she was changing into a woman. The more she'd changed, the more he noticed, no matter how hard he'd tried not to.

When she'd started courting Josiah, Felix had hoped he could finally bury his wayward thoughts about her. Even then, he'd struggled not to think about how much he wanted to be the one to wrap his arms around her.

It had been for the best to leave back then. A warning rang inside him: It would be best for him to leave now, too, and avoid her while he was on the island the way he'd planned.

The interior of the tree house was growing dark. Through the cracks in the window shutter and door, he could see it was getting late. In addition to Victor being worried, her husband would be wondering where she was and wouldn't be happy to learn she'd been sitting in a tiny old tree house with a man, especially a Larock.

He pushed up from his spot on the bench. "I hate to bring our time to a close, but I need to get home to Collette."

"I'm sorry about her accident." Marissa stood too, and moved toward the door. "I've heard she hasn't healed."

"I'm hoping while I'm home over the summer I can cheer her up."

Marissa was already on the top ladder rung. "You'll cheer her in no time. You always were good at that."

Daphne claimed melancholy was keeping Collette from walking, eating enough, or doing anything to get better. He could only hope his presence really would help and that he hadn't come home too late.

When reaching the bottom of the ladder, Marissa effortlessly hopped down. As he landed, she was already taking several steps away. "It was nice seeing you again, Felix. I hope you have a good summer back."

He swept his gaze over the dense woodland and the open field beyond, hoping Victor or even Josiah might be waiting for her nearby. But from what he could tell, he and Marissa were the only two on Blueberry Hill at the moment.

The isolation, the privacy, the simplicity of the place had made it an ideal getaway. Victor Pooler had been a steady and wise mentor, and Marissa had

been a kind and accepting friend. Maybe that's why he'd returned tonight. Because he'd needed the peace that came from this place.

Whatever the reason, it was past time for him to be on his way too. Even so, he didn't like the fact that Marissa was out gallivanting alone. "I can't let you walk back to the farm by yourself."

She released a scoffing laugh. "Oh that's right. I need an escort after making this trek by myself without problems for years."

"There's always a first for everything."

"Not for me." She waved a dismissive hand. "Good night, Felix."

Her steps were firm and long as she began descending the path. He watched her take only a few more strides before jogging after her. "I'll accompany you home."

"I don't need anyone to accompany me home."

"Probably not. But it would make me feel better."

"Suit yourself." She shrugged as she hurried along. "If you will rest easier tonight knowing I got home without being attacked by greedy pirates or cave monsters, then who am I to stop you?"

He smiled at her references to their childhood play. "Not that you wouldn't be able to fend off the pirates or monsters by yourself. But two swords are always better than one."

"Oh, so we have swords tonight, do we? I always favored when we used our pretend bows and arrows."

For the rest of the descent, they bantered about the way they used to play. When they reached the coastline at the bottom, she paused in an area of large granite slabs that had been worn smooth by the waves and the wind.

The stretch of the stony shoreline—for which the island had been named—was filled with more of the enormous flat boulders. When he'd been a boy, he'd always liked hearing Victor's Wabanaki stories about how the stones had been formed. Felix's favorite had been the one where a giant arrowhead had sliced through a mountain at the center of the island, and the shattered rocks had flown everywhere.

Farther inland, the area south of town was more isolated, with large swaths of fertile land that weren't too sandy or rocky for farming. Both his family and the Axtons had claimed adjacent farm acreage when they'd first moved to the area. Although his pa had raised livestock on their property for a few years, they'd never lived there, had always resided in town.

The Axtons, however, had done more with their land. According to Marissa, her father had built the pretty home in the country mainly for his wife, Coral. She'd wanted a big house overlooking the sea, so Mr. Axton had located the ideal spot for it outside of town.

Once Coral was gone, Felix had expected Mr. Axton to sell the place, especially after moving into town with his younger daughters. But he'd held on to the farm and land, and Felix was glad that he had, mainly because of how much Marissa loved the place.

The shadows of night were lengthening, and the fog was rolling in from the Atlantic, cloaking everything in a mist of white tinged with purple. In spite of that, the rocky trail leading to the Axton farm was still visible in the waning light. The tide was low, but even then, the waves crashed against the stones—more gently than at high tide, but the repetitive sound of the waves, whether soft or loud, was something Felix had missed during his time away.

Through the light layer of fog, he could make out the dark outline of the several smaller islands that bordered Stony Ridge Island to the south and provided a buffer against some of the harsh elements. To the north, the lights of the residences in town winked in the growing darkness, with fishing vessels tied to the wharves or anchored in the bay.

"Truly, Felix." Marissa started down the path along the shore. "I'll be fine. You don't need to walk me home."

He followed, inhaling the dampness of the sea and letting it fill him. "If you think being seen with me will cause problems, I can walk you to the curve ahead and then go back."

She hiked as quickly as always, never one to waste a minute if it could be helped. "Who's going to see us together at this late hour?" She motioned toward the water, not a soul in sight. "Besides, I think it's past time for our families to put their feuding ways behind them."

"Agreed." He understood more than anyone else why the feud between their fathers would never end. But he'd never tell her. The secret was too terrible.

"If my father says something about it, I'll tell him I don't care anymore." Her tone contained a distinct edge of frustration. At her father? For what?

As they rounded the bend, the Axton house came into view on a ledge that was high enough and back far enough from the water to remain safe from flooding but still close to the water so that almost every window had a

clear view of the ocean. The few tamaracks surrounding the home were craggy and weathered, but they added a layer of protection from the storms.

Several windows were lit, showcasing the two stories, painted white with dark shutters, and the wide front porch. It wasn't a mansion, but it was still spacious. And someday soon, she would fill it with her own family.

"I wasn't worried about our fathers getting upset about us walking together." He paused to battle that irrational jealousy toward Josiah that was surfacing all too easily. "I was thinking more about your . . . about the . . ."

"Victor and Janie will be happy to see you."

"But I doubt Josiah will be."

She halted abruptly, causing him to pull up short. She stared at him with raised brows. "Josiah?"

"You know. Josiah Welch. Your husband."

She was silent for a heartbeat. "You were right about Josiah."

"I was?"

"Yes, he was wrong for me."

"I was arrogant to say so."

"No, you were being truthful and just trying to keep a friend from making a poor decision."

His pulse gave a hop. What was she saying?

"I didn't marry Josiah."

"Then you're not married?"

"Not yet."

A weight loosened in his chest, almost as if chains had been unlocked and now fell away. He wasn't sure how long he'd felt such heaviness inside, but the relief was immense.

She blew out an exaggerated breath. "But I have to get married soon. My father gave me an ultimatum today. He said I have until the end of the summer, or he'll sell the farm."

Felix shook his head, his own exasperation rising. This was the same pressure Mr. Axton had exerted three years ago when he'd been insistent that she court Josiah and get married.

It was understandable that Mr. Axton wanted his daughters to find husbands who would be interested in taking over his businesses one day. But he was taking it too far. "So he's trying to coerce you into marriage again?"

“Yes, he’s manipulating me.” She stared ahead at the farmhouse on the ledge. It was picturesque in the fading daylight.

“He sent away for a groom without telling me. The fellow arrived today, came up to the blueberry patch, and told me Reverend Reynolds was already waiting at the church for the wedding ceremony.”

“Really?”

“Really. Percy Hinkley from Boston.”

What kind of man would do that? Maybe someone desperate? “Why the hurry?”

“I’m honestly not sure. I just thought Percy was eager to seal the arrangement and secure his future with my father. But maybe there’s more to him than he’s revealed.”

“Sounds like the fellow is hiding something.” What if he had deep, dark secrets? Secrets that could end up hurting Marissa if she ever found out. Like Felix’s secrets would. “How well does your father know him?”

“Not well. Father said I don’t have to marry Percy, that he doesn’t care who the fellow is as long as I get married.”

“Then don’t do it. He sounds strange.”

Marissa released a huff, then started on her way. “Thank you for the advice. It means so much coming from a friend who hasn’t bothered to be involved in my life for three long years.”

“I’m sorry.” Felix fell into step beside her since the path had grown wider. “I have no right to tell you what to do.”

“Absolutely no right.”

“But you know me. I say things anyway.”

She walked rapidly for several more paces before halting and facing him. “I have no other option, Felix.”

He had a strange sense they were having a repeat of the conversation they’d had about Josiah. It had gone a little differently, but it was basically the same. Her father pressuring her into getting married. Her telling Felix she had no choice. And his insisting she shouldn’t do it.

He couldn’t make the same mistake this time and drive a wedge between them, not when they’d just reunited. If he stubbornly stuck to his gut that was telling him she shouldn’t marry this new fellow, then he would ruin their friendship all over again. And next time he apologized, she might not be as forgiving.

“I suppose you have a better idea?” Although her voice contained sarcasm, it also held a note of hope.

Did he have any ideas?

One popped into his head. A crazy one. A really crazy one. “He said you have to get married this summer?”

“Yes.”

“But he doesn’t care who you choose?”

“As long as he gets his son-in-law, then no, he really doesn’t care who I marry.”

Did he dare suggest what he was thinking? It was outlandish, preposterous, and wild.

Before he could rationalize the idea or come up with excuses for not suggesting it, he made himself say it. “Marry me.”

CHAPTER 5

Had Felix just asked her to marry him?

Through the falling darkness of evening, she stared at him.

Was he serious? He couldn't be.

But his blue eyes were solemn and his expression, which was usually lighthearted, was now grave, his brow creased and his mouth set firmly.

She'd been more than a little taken aback to find him in the tree house. However, a small part of her had suspected he would eventually return to the island when he learned about Collette's accident. With their mother having died giving birth to her, Daphne and Felix had raised their younger sister, and she was really special to him.

In the fading shadows, Marissa was struck at how mature he'd grown in the few years he'd been gone. His face was still tan from being out in the sun so often, and his brown hair had the same golden highlights. But the lines in his face were sharper and his features more defined.

He'd always been a sturdy fellow with the muscles and brawn that came from fishing and lobstering. And his charm had made him especially winsome. But something about him now made him more attractive than when he'd been living here before. What was it?

He watched her back with an uncharacteristic intensity. "Marry me, and I'll give you the farm."

The pattering of her heart came to an abrupt halt. "You'll give it to me?"

"I'll sign the deed over to you. It'll be yours through and through."

"Why would you do such a thing for me?"

"Because you deserve it, and your father's a fool for not seeing that."

"True on both accounts." Her pulse started up again, this time racing at the possibility of having the farm. Was this really a valid means of getting it? She'd always wanted it in her own right and not just because of her husband. But Father didn't care about the hard work she'd put into the

blueberry farm because it wasn't as lucrative as his other businesses. He didn't even care about the expansion plans she'd shared with him earlier.

The farm was expendable to him. He didn't love it the way she did, not if he could consider selling it so easily.

The truth was, she'd failed to prove herself to her father. If she hadn't done it by now, would she ever be able to? Was it time to stop trying and take the farm this way that Felix was suggesting?

"What's in it for you?" What was she doing in asking him that? She ought to protest Felix's suggestion, not encourage it.

He lifted his hat, dragged his fingers through his overlong hair. "Maybe the chance to irritate my pa and yours."

"Our marrying would certainly do that. But even if I were to consider your idea, it would never work."

"Sure it would."

"You know as well as I do that my father wouldn't approve of me marrying a Larock. Not even in a hundred years."

"Remind him that he said he didn't care who you married this summer just as long as you got married."

"So you think I should marry a Larock to spite him? To show him that he might think he can control me, but he can't?"

"I suppose you could put it that way. But the reality is that he hasn't cared about what you want or what's important to you. So why should you care about what's important to him?"

Felix was right. Why should she stop to consider how her marriage might make her father feel?

"But marry a Larock?"

"My family and I—we're his enemy, not yours."

"I know that. Even so, wouldn't that be taking the disagreement over the farm too far?"

"He already did that. Now you're giving him your answer." Felix spoke calmly and matter-of-factly, probably convinced that her father would cooperate.

But she knew her father all too well, and he would never accept her marrying Felix. "If I marry you, he won't give you the farm."

"That's why you have to insist that he gives you the original deed to the farm first."

"How do I do that?"

“Put the pressure back on him. Tell him that the day he places that deed in your hands is the day you’ll get married.”

A couple of years ago, she’d been curious about how the transfer of property worked and had secretly spoken to an attorney about it. “Even if Father gives me the deed informally, eventually he’ll need to make a legal transfer—to you, to my husband—at the county clerk’s office with his signature and witnesses.”

“We’ll make sure everyone knows about his deal with you so he won’t be able to go back on his word and try to take the deed away before it’s signed over to me.”

Would that work? Father did pride himself on being a man of his word. But he could end up angry enough at the deception that he might refuse to sign the official transfer. In that case, they would have a legal battle. Did she want to go that route?

She sighed. As angry as she was with her father, this plan didn’t seem right. “It feels like an underhanded way to get what I want.” Because Father would never expect her to marry a Larock. He would probably assume she’d seek out Josiah, since he was still single.

Felix nodded solemnly. “Maybe it is underhanded. But he’s been underhanded with you, sending away for this Percy fellow without telling you.”

“He was very sneaky about it.”

“Besides, it’s not our problem that our two fathers hate each other. They can’t expect us to do the same.”

“True.” The one time she’d asked her father to repair things with the Larocks, he’d gotten angry and told her she was naive and didn’t know what she was talking about.

She met Felix’s gaze, letting his steadfastness and confidence flow into her. His eyes were still serious, more so than she’d ever seen them. She’d always loved the changing shades of blue, and at the moment they were dark, like a ripe blueberry ready to be plucked.

“I’ll think about it,” she said, then started onward toward the house, which was as beautiful as always on its regal perch on the rugged cliff above the ocean. They couldn’t see the barn from the shoreline trail, since it had been built on the lee side of the house so the scent of livestock wouldn’t be bothersome in the living quarters. The large fenced-in vegetable garden

was near the barn, and the fields of wheat and rye were farther inland beyond the barn.

A moment ago, she'd glimpsed Victor on the ledge, probably waiting for her. But he was no longer there. No doubt he'd seen her coming and had also seen Felix and was confident that she was fine.

Because with Felix she really was in good hands. She always had been.

Would she be in good hands with Felix if she married him? Maybe he wasn't the ambitious, determined, and purposeful type of man she'd thought she'd marry. But he'd always treated her kindly and had been a caring friend. At least they would have a marriage based on camaraderie—one where they got along, enjoyed spending time together, and talked well.

She could do much worse than Felix Larock for a husband. In fact, he would be the best husband she would find, because he was probably the only man who would be willing to let her have her name on the deed to the farm. Of everyone, he'd always understood how much the farm meant to her, and he still did.

Behind her, his footsteps crunched on the damp rocks and broken mussel shells. "If it helps your decision, we can have a marriage in name only."

Once again, she stopped abruptly, a rush of embarrassment heating her neck. She knew what he was referring to—the part of marriage that was sacred and reserved for the bedroom.

For several heartbeats, she couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't think. The distant honking of geese returning from the south wafted on the quiet breeze along with the ding of a fishing boat bell.

Felix cleared his throat. Was he uncomfortable with the direction their conversation was taking too? He was usually so bold about everything, never getting easily embarrassed. Was this a first?

She couldn't keep from turning to gauge his expression.

He was peering at the shore at a couple of gulls scurrying through the low-tide water, their long beaks at the ready for any sea creatures left behind.

"I'm not staying in Axtonville past the end of the summer . . . just until Collette gets better."

He'd alluded to that already in the tree house, but hearing him say it outright sent a strange pang through her chest. "Where are you planning to go next?"

He was still watching the seagulls. "I hadn't thought that far ahead."

That was so like Felix. Impulsive, never making plans, and living day by day. And it was so unlike her. Their differences were part of the reason why she'd never considered Felix as a potential marriage partner back when her father had first started pressuring her to get married and had presented Josiah as an option.

Josiah had been decisive, organized, and had goals for his future. At first, she'd thought those things mattered, had believed they would develop an attraction along with friendship. But they'd been too much alike, both stubborn and set in their ways, and she'd realized she couldn't marry him because of their similarities. Had she been wrong to disqualify Felix for their differences?

Besides, back then he'd never mentioned he was interested in more. She hadn't wanted to suggest anything, had been afraid he would laugh in her face at the idea of getting married.

Now, after all this time, he'd been the one to bring it up. But was he thinking it would only be temporary?

"So, what does that mean?" she asked. "You would only want to stay married until the end of summer and then get an annulment?"

"An annulment wouldn't be hard to obtain." His expression was still serious and his eyes narrowed and focused ahead.

She wished she could see inside his mind to what he was really thinking and feeling, but she was having a hard time reading him.

Was a temporary arrangement what she wanted? What would her father do if she didn't stay married? Insist that she give him back the deed of the farm—that is, if he actually went through with signing it over to Felix?

She supposed she couldn't worry that far ahead. For now, Felix was giving her a way to get the farm. It was actually really decent of him to make such an offer. He didn't have to do anything. But like the good friend he'd always been, he was sacrificing for her.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Thank you for trying to help me out, Felix."

He glanced down at her hand. His jaw tightened, then he peered out into the mist cloaking the sea.

She dropped her hand from him. "Something's wrong."

He was quiet for a heartbeat, then gave her an easy smile. "Nope. Everything's grand."

She hesitated. "Looks like I'm not the only one who needs to think about this plan."

“I wouldn’t have mentioned it if I wasn’t willing to go through with it.”

“Either way, let’s both take the night to think on it, then we can meet tomorrow and decide what to do then.”

“I don’t need the night. But all right.”

They continued on their way the last of the distance to the house. Victor met them as they finished climbing the wooden steps that led up from the shore to the ledge, and the two men caught up for a short while before Felix said his good-byes.

As she stood beside Victor in the yard and watched Felix stride away, a strange quiver of excitement palpitated in her chest. She didn’t want to acknowledge the feeling, but it was there, nonetheless. Was she merely happy about Felix being back? Or was her thrill more than that? She wasn’t actually excited about his plan to get married, was she?

Felix paused at the top of the steps, looked over his shoulder, and waved at them—or maybe just at her. She couldn’t really tell, but it felt directed her way.

She lifted a hand in good-bye.

Then he started down the stairs and disappeared into the darkness of the night.

Even when he was gone, she didn’t move.

“You’re happy he’s back,” Victor said quietly.

“Yes.” There was no sense in denying it. Victor would see right past any facade she tried to put up anyway.

“He is happy to be with you too.”

“Do you think so?” The light glowing from the kitchen window behind them illuminated the tenderness in Victor’s dark eyes.

“I have always thought he would be back for you.”

“No, he came back to be with Collette.”

Victor didn’t respond. Rather, he peered in the direction of his cabin a short distance beyond the barn. His windows were lit up too, which meant Janie was waiting for him.

Marissa wasn’t sure about their ages. She guessed they were in their fifties, about the same age as her own parents. Father had hired Victor that long-ago day when he’d shown up while they’d been building the farmhouse and asked if Father needed help.

She’d always wondered why Victor and Janie didn’t have any children of their own. Maybe they’d once hoped for them but never had been able to

conceive.

Even so, Victor and Janie had always treated her and her sisters like their children. Maybe taking care of them had been enough. They'd shouldered even more responsibility after Mother's death when Father had been consumed with grief and had lost himself in his work.

What would happen to the dear couple if Father sold the farm? He probably hadn't considered that his loyal manager would become homeless. It was always possible Victor could find employment elsewhere because he was hardworking and had an intuition about farming and the land that most people didn't.

On the other hand, many people remembered the conflicts from a decade ago and still didn't want anything to do with the Natives. Mabye Victor and Janie would have to go back to one of the reservations. The couple had never shared much about what life had been like on their Penobscot reservation at Indian Island, but Marissa had heard the talk about the poverty and illness and the state trying to control their lives.

"Go." Marissa cocked her head toward the cabin. "I'll be fine."

"She left dinner warming on the stove for you."

"Tell Janie thank you."

Victor nodded but hesitated. "The talk with Mr. Larock. You learned he will not sell you land to expand."

"He's thinking about it." Technically he hadn't made any promises, but she still planned to follow up with him in a few days.

"And the talk with your father. It did not go well?"

She released the tightness in her chest. "Not at all."

"Then you will marry the man he sent?"

"No." Should she mention Felix's proposal? She wasn't sure if she was ready to tell anyone yet. It had come about so hastily, and she hadn't had time yet to process it. On the other hand, Victor was always so wise and levelheaded. Maybe he could advise her on what to do.

Victor watched her quietly, waiting for her to say more.

"Felix . . . well, he . . ."

"He offered to marry you."

She straightened. "How did you know? Did you hear us talking?"

"I had no need to. It is obvious once he learned you were not married yet, he decided he would marry you so he does not lose you again."

She released a soft scoff. "That's not true."

“He might not realize it yet, and you also might not see it.” Victor’s expression remained stoic. “But this is true that he would have you for a wife if you would let him.”

She’d long ago learned she couldn’t argue with Victor, that he would always win. But this time, he was wrong. “He said the marriage would be in name only and that he plans to leave at the end of the summer.”

“He will stay.”

“No, he intends to leave.”

“Not if he knows you want him.”

She gave an adamant shake of her head. “I don’t want Felix. Not romantically, if that’s what you’re implying. He’s just a friend.”

“The friendship can turn into more.”

Could it? And should she let it? Whatever the case was, she had to decide if she wanted to go through with the plan. “What about my father? He’ll never allow me to marry a Larock.”

“Once the act is done, he will have no choice.”

“He’ll be angry and might never speak to me again. He might cut me off from the rest of the family.”

“He is a proud man, but he will eventually see that Felix has a good heart.”

She hoped that was so. Because as hurt as she was by her father’s rigidness with not giving her the farm, she still loved him and her sisters. She didn’t want to lose her family any more than she wanted to lose the farm.

Victor nodded. “You and Felix. You belong together. Here. I have always known that.”

“You have?”

“Your spirits go together.”

How could Victor be so certain when she was so confused? “Thank you for your advice, Victor. I value it.”

“But you will not heed it.”

“I’ll consider it. But in the end, I have to do what I think is right.”

“Remember, what is right is usually the path that is the most difficult.” With that, Victor started across the yard toward his little home and wife.

She wanted to call out that she would do as he heeded. That she would marry Felix and somehow let their friendship turn into more. But even as the words formed at the tip of her tongue, she swallowed them.

She couldn’t promise Victor anything at this point. Especially anything regarding Felix Larock.

CHAPTER 6

Marry Marissa. Make her his wife.

The thought had rolled around Felix's head in a steady rhythm the whole time he'd been with Collette.

He sat back in the chair beside his sister's bed, the wooden seat and spindles having become uncomfortable after the past hours of playing checkers with her. When she'd grown too weary to sit up, he'd told her stories about his adventures in the West. He'd been reading to her when her eyes had closed, and her breathing had turned slow and steady with the rhythm of sleep.

She was so pale, her skin a bluish white in the dim light of the lantern on the dresser behind him. Her blond hair was thin and brittle, her body emaciated, and her cheeks sunken.

When he'd seen her for the first time last night after arriving home, he'd been shocked at her poor condition. Daphne had told him about it in her letters and had warned him as he'd made his way into the bedroom at the back of the house—the tiny closet-like room meant for the maid that Collette was now using so she didn't have to climb the stairs on the rare occasions she got out of bed.

His chest ached at seeing her decline and from wishing there was more he could do for her. But what was left? The physician from Sunrise Cove had come over several times, had suggested many things and offered different medicines. Daphne had even tried herbal remedies the Natives used.

But nothing had helped Collette.

Felix quietly shut the volume of *Swiss Family Robinson* and placed the worn copy on the bedside table. It had been his first choice when picking a book to read to Collette, and she hadn't minded. He'd loved the tale as a boy, and the adventurous story had been the inspiration behind building the house in the trees for himself and Marissa.

It also brought back memories of his ma reading the story to him. She'd been such a good woman, and her goodness had been the bedrock of their family. When she died, it was as though that goodness had been buried in the grave with her.

"Thank you," came Daphne's whisper from the door.

He shifted to find his older sister leaning against the doorframe. For a moment, he could almost picture his ma there. Even though her image had begun to fade in his mind, Daphne, with her wispy fair hair, brown eyes, and petite frame, reminded him of Ma.

Daphne had aged at least ten years—if not more—since Felix had last seen her. She had a haggardness in her expression and a tired droop of her mouth and eyes. Her weariness was to be expected with having two little children of her own, running the home, helping her husband, Rufus, as well as Pa, and taking care of Collette.

After getting married, Daphne and Rufus had decided to live at the family home in order to be there for both Pa and Collette. Daphne probably hadn't realized just how much work she'd put upon herself by remaining there, mainly because Pa also relied upon her to knit lobster trap heads and bait bags.

A basket of sisal sat against the wall alongside a nearly finished net. The funnel-shaped net went on either side of the trap for the lobster to crawl through to reach the bait bag. Once the creature moved through the net and reached the bait, it wasn't able to get out and would become trapped in the cage.

The nets, although dipped in hot coal tar for preservation, still didn't last long and constantly had to be replaced. Of course the lobstermen and their families provided most of their own supplies, including the trap heads and bait bags. But Pa had always made a point of helping with the supplies when he could. If Felix accepted the job his pa was offering, it wouldn't be too difficult to recruit more lobstermen because the Larocks had a reputation of taking care of their employees.

Regardless, Daphne had too much responsibility. After the short time of watching her try to handle everything, Felix was beginning to think she ought to move out into a home of her own and take better care of herself so she didn't end up dying early.

Daphne smiled tenderly at Collette's sleeping form. "Every time you're with her, she seems to gain a little color and energy."

“That’s to be expected.”

Daphne’s smile widened.

With a grin, Felix pushed up from the chair. If he married Marissa, he wouldn’t be able to spend quite as much time with Collette or helping Daphne, but he could still do a fair share, especially because his marriage wouldn’t be real and Marissa wouldn’t expect him to spend hours with her. In fact, she would probably be glad if he kept busy and was away for most of the time.

“I saved a bowl of clam chowder for you.” Daphne cocked her head in the direction of the kitchen. “It’s in the warmer.”

“I appreciate it.” His stomach had been growling, but he’d gotten used to that over recent months.

At the sudden crying of one of her children from the front of the house, she sighed and pushed away from the door. “I need to get the little ones to bed, so help yourself.”

“I will.”

She drew in another breath as though gathering the energy for the task ahead. As she stepped away, she smiled at him again. “It’s good to have you home, Felix.”

That sliver of guilt pricked him just as it had for months—the guilt that told him he’d been selfish to leave her here alone. Of course she had Pa. She also had their two brothers Gabriel and Liam, who both had wives and homes nearby. But from what Felix had heard, they were busy with their growing families and lobstering work for Pa.

Felix watched Daphne shuffle away. Would he be selfish again to pursue marrying Marissa? She’d asked him what he would get out of it. Yes, he wouldn’t mind angering both of their fathers, but was that reason enough to go through with the plan?

As Felix made his way into the kitchen, Rufus lumbered through the back door wearing thigh-high wading boots, a knitted cap, and his oiled slicker. He was carrying three different types of digging hoes in one hand and an assortment of pails in the other.

“Just the man I was looking for.” Rufus’s gravelly voice operated at one decibel: loud. His loud voice fit well with his burly body. With his underbite, fleshy cheeks, and a flatter-than-average nose, Rufus reminded Felix of a bulldog. His head was bald and shiny beneath his cap. But what

he lacked in hair on the top of his head, he made up for in his long, scraggly beard.

"You clamming?" Felix asked.

"Naw. We're digging up bloodworms tonight."

"That right?"

"Over off Sea Serpent Island in the gut at low water."

"Who's going?"

"Me and Gabe and Liam. And you." Rufus held up the hoes and buckets. "Let's go."

Felix had never been especially close to his brothers, didn't have much in common with them. But he wouldn't mind catching up since he'd yet to see them since coming home.

Even so, he was hungry and had a lot on his mind with how to handle the situation with Marissa.

Rufus was watching him carefully. "We're making good profits on the worms. Ten cents on a dozen. We figured you might need the money."

"What made you figure that?"

Rufus raised one of his bushy brows. "Why else would you be going to Ollie for a job?"

In a small town like Axtonville, he supposed everyone had heard by now that he had asked his pa for employment.

It wouldn't hurt to go out with the fellows tonight and dig for worms, especially since he wouldn't mind earning a little cash.

He quickly ate the bowl of chowder then donned his gear. He met his brothers at the Larock wharf, and they took a dory and rowed out of the bay, navigating through the rocks and marsh exposed at low tide.

Sea Serpent Island was one of the islands south of Stony Ridge. It was uninhabited but had earned its name because a group of sailors had long ago been shipwrecked on the island and claimed an enormous serpent had been the cause of the ship's demise.

There the tide had fallen twenty feet or more, exposing the bottom of the bays around the island that were good spots to find the worms—although bloodworms were known to move around a lot, so sometimes the digging netted them a low count.

They rowed as far as they could to the island, then waded the rest of the way until finally their boots sank into the mud, which in some places went all the way to their knees. The soft clink of their hoes soon filled the air as

they chopped through the mud, turning it up several inches. Most turns brought up the worms. The slimy creatures didn't like the air, so the tricky part was snatching them up before they bored back into the ooze.

The fog made the work even more difficult, but they were used to digging for worms in all seasons and all weather, day or night. Felix was no stranger to sifting through the silt, grabbing the slippery worms, and tossing them into the bucket all in one motion. Most of the bloodworms were small—maybe four to six inches in length. But they'd found some big ones in the past, some up to twenty inches or longer.

After about an hour, as the water slowly made its way back toward the island, Gabe and Liam took the dory and rowed to an inlet on the southern side to search for more bloodworms. Felix and Rufus continued to work their way along the shore in that direction, planning to meet there as the tide pushed them farther inland.

Felix couldn't put his finger on what was different tonight from past diggings. His brothers had been welcoming, had asked him questions about his time out West, and had filled him in on their lives. He'd gained a couple more nieces and nephews while he'd been gone, which he already knew since Daphne had kept him apprised of family news.

Felix paused and leaned against his hoe, attempting to peer through the low fog to the southern bend of the island, hoping to spot the dory there waiting for them.

Maybe the problem was that his brothers had been too friendly, too talkative, too accepting. Because normally they were busy with their own lives and had never cared much about his. Maybe something didn't feel right about their leaving him and Rufus so soon after arriving. Or maybe he was just distracted with the possible marriage to Marissa.

Whatever it was, he was growing more wary as he and Rufus neared the bend of the island with their pails and hoes, and there was no sight of the dory through the fog and darkness. For all their eagerness to collect the worms, his brothers hadn't done much digging.

"What's taking them so long?" Felix halted.

His pails had both grown heavy and were nearly full of the slimy, slithering creatures. If he was going to keep worming, he needed the fresh pails that were in the dory. Rufus's buckets were overflowing too.

"With the fog, they're moving slower." Rufus had set his containers down and was holding their lantern up while scanning the darkness.

“They’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Rufus seemed unruffled, as if he was used to the delay.

What were his brothers up to?

The wariness only mounted while the minutes ticked by. When the stern of the dory finally emerged, it was difficult to see through the fog because his brothers had extinguished their lantern. As the dory veered toward them, Rufus snuffed out their lantern, too, and began to wade in the returning tidewater in the direction they’d seen the boat.

“What’s going on?” Felix demanded. “Why are we turning out our lights?”

“So that no one sees us.”

“Obviously. But why don’t we want to be seen?”

“You flatlander, you.” Rufus’s gravelly voice held irritation. “What do you think?”

Felix’s mind spun with a dozen possibilities and then landed on the only one that made sense. “Are you rum-running?”

“Did you really think we were out for the worms?”

“That’s typically what we’ve done in the past.”

Rufus chortled. “That was before Prohibition came to Maine.”

Felix trudged forward, his boots sloshing and sucking in the mud with each step. The sliver of moonlight behind the clouds provided only the barest of light that allowed him to see Rufus’s outline in front of him. Of course he’d heard about the new Maine law that had gone into effect last year, which outlawed liquor from being manufactured and sold in the state.

He’d also heard many people had been upset about the law, that they thought it infringed on their personal liberties. Some of the fellows on the ship back to the East Coast had complained that the new Portland mayor had pushed Prohibition since he was heavily involved in the Temperance movement. They’d decided not to venture to Maine because of the ban and ended their journey in Boston.

The prohibition hadn’t bothered Felix. He wasn’t a drinker. Not that he was opposed to liquor. He’d just never seen a need for it the way some men did.

Regardless, alcohol was now illegal in Maine except for medicinal, mechanical, and manufacturing purposes. And Felix didn’t want to be a part of breaking the law.

“You should have told me,” he said to his brothers as he and Rufus reached the boat.

“Told you what?” Gabe relieved him of one of the worm pails. As the stockiest of the Larock men, Gabe had grown a long, scraggly beard similar to Rufus’s and wore his knitted cap low over his light brown hair. When he wasn’t captaining one of Pa’s smacks, he was helping people on the island with doctoring needs. Even though he didn’t have a lot of medical training, he was the closest thing Axtonville had to a physician.

Apparently now he could add rumrunner to his list of occupations.

“You’re rum-running.” Felix had heard of the ships located in the international waters about three miles off the coast, waiting for couriers to come out and unload their cargo of rum.

Gabe and Liam hadn’t had time to row all the way to the ships. That meant his brothers were part of a drop-off—probably someplace on Sea Serpent Island—where the liquor would be delivered to the locals who would then distribute it to their channels.

“You gonna go cry like a baby now to all the womenfolk?” Liam took Rufus’s pail, then Rufus began to climb into the dory.

Two years younger than Felix, Liam was easily the handsomest of them. He was taller by an inch or two and had slender facial features with a broad mustache.

“Does Pa know?” Felix ignored Liam and addressed Gabe.

Gabe took the hoes from Felix. “If he does, he hasn’t said anything. And it better stay that way.”

At the threat, Felix straightened his shoulders and faced Gabe directly. “What you do isn’t my concern . . . except when it involves bringing me into it without my consent.”

“No one forced you to come out worming.”

“This isn’t really worming, and you know it.”

“That’s exactly what this is.” Gabe’s voice was stern. “And if anyone asks or approaches, that’s what you’ll tell them or you’ll find yourself in some nice mess.”

Felix had never been confrontational and preferred to avoid conflict when possible. Although he didn’t approve of what his brothers and Rufus were doing, he had no desire to lecture them or argue about it. “Fine. But don’t involve me in your *worming* again.”

Rufus snorted from where he was positioning the buckets and tools in front of a couple of gunnysacks under the middle seat. Felix didn't have to ask what was in the bags—the liquor bottles cushioned with hay or sawdust.

Reluctantly, Felix hopped into the boat. He had no choice, not if he didn't want to be stranded on Sea Serpent Island. Even if he could flag down a boat in the morning and make it back home, he didn't want the hassle and didn't want to worry Daphne.

Besides, tomorrow he had to make a decision on how to proceed with Marissa. She hadn't seemed keen on the idea of marrying him. And he didn't blame her. He wasn't exactly the world's greatest catch.

Should he just walk away again—this time for good—before he fell for her too hard? Because one thing was certain: If he married her, it wouldn't be easy to leave her.

Another thing was certain too: Tonight's activities with his brothers confirmed that he didn't want to live in Axtonville forever, near his family, and have them drag him down at every turn. Instead, he wanted to be free from the Larocks and make his own way in life—a way that was different and better.

Felix released a sigh. Whatever he chose, it wouldn't be easy.

CHAPTER 7

As Marissa stepped up to the front door of her family home, she paused with her hand on the knob, her fingers trembling. Was this really what she wanted? Had she made the right decision?

Before leaving for the short walk into town, she'd informed Victor where she was going. She hadn't needed to explain why. His nod told her he knew what she'd decided. She was getting married today.

Maybe Victor had assumed she'd chosen Felix. But the truth was, after pondering the plan throughout the early morning as she'd tended the chickens, milked the cow, and fed and watered the goats and horses, she'd realized she didn't want to trap Felix into a marriage he would have to end.

"He decided he would marry you so he does not lose you again."

Victor's words had echoed through Marissa's head, but she couldn't quite make herself believe them. Felix had been pretty direct about his plan to only stay for the summer, after which they'd go their separate ways.

His intention wasn't that of a man who didn't want to lose her. No, it was that of a man helping a friend while giving himself an escape. He expected to leave again, wouldn't like the permanence of a farm, and wouldn't wish to be domesticated by a wife.

He also wouldn't want to settle down near his family. He'd always been honest with her that he didn't respect his pa for how he'd lived his life. Felix hoped to go someplace where people didn't associate him with the feud between their families.

As nice as Felix's offer to marry her had been last evening, she couldn't hold him to it. She didn't want him to feel obligated to her, didn't want him to stay for her sake or to give up his freedom in order to help her.

After all, during those last couple of years he lived on the island, he'd been a womanizer—enjoyed spending his evenings with different women, or at least those were the rumors she'd heard at the time. He'd probably

done the same while in California. And if he married her, he would have to put a halt to it.

Besides, she wasn't sure she ought to cause any more strife in her family. She and Father had experienced enough tension over recent years with her calling off her engagement to Josiah and her desire to own the farm. Marrying a Larock would only make things worse—much worse.

Since it looked like she had no choice but to get married, she might as well choose someone Father approved of. If this Percy Hinkley was at the top of Father's list, then why not get to know him better?

On her way into town, she'd stopped by the shipyard first and learned Percy was staying with her family and that neither Percy nor Father had arrived to work yet at the early hour, which was unusual for Father since he labored most days from dawn until well after dusk—if not at the shipyard then at one of his other businesses.

Which room had Father given Percy?

She glanced up to the little windows of the steeply gabled roof of the one-and-a-half-story house. The front of the house had white clapboard, but the sides were covered in weathered shingles that matched the roof.

It was a spacious and lovely home on a wide grassy knoll with big pots of flowers that Meredith had planted and took care of. The buoys tied together on the lamppost, the anchor in the yard, and the large decorative rocks were also Meredith's handiwork.

At twenty-two and closest in age, Meredith was the quietest and most levelheaded of the sisters and loved being home and taking care of everything. She'd decorated the inside of the house, too, and had made it beautiful and homey. Her gentle touch was everywhere.

The two youngest Axton sisters, Misty and Morgan, were twenty-one and nineteen. Misty was the outgoing and adventurous one who loved to write and act. Morgan was insightful and smart and was more concerned about fashion and beauty than the rest of them combined.

While growing up, they'd secretly lamented that Mother had named them all after the sea. *Marissa* meant "of the sea." *Meredith* meant "protector of the sea." Misty's name was exactly what it was—"misty," just like most Maine mornings. And *Morgan* meant "sea born."

Marissa had always thought naming four daughters with the letter *M* made it more confusing for friends and acquaintances to keep them straight.

But Mother, with the name Coral, had been a romantic at heart and had loved the ocean and living on the water.

She'd grown up in Sunrise Cove on the western side of Stony Ridge Island, and most of her family still lived there. She'd met Father when he'd worked in Sunrise Cove as a fisherman, and she'd married him after he'd had an accident and lived at her family's inn for a few months as he recovered.

That fateful day ten years ago that Mother had rowed away from Axtonville, everyone had assumed she'd headed to Sunrise Cove to visit her family and hadn't made it because of a fierce storm that had blown in.

Since no one had found her boat, Marissa had her own theories about where Mother had gone. But she'd never spoken of her speculations to her sisters. They'd been upset enough after they learned Mother had likely drowned.

Marissa could still vividly remember the evening when Father had sailed back from Sunrise Cove with the news. The four of them had been waiting for his return, hoping to see Mother by his side. But when he stepped into the kitchen with his shoulders sagging and his features etched with agony, they'd known without him saying anything that Mother wasn't coming back.

He delivered the news anyway and then left, probably to grieve in private. The rest of that night, Marissa had huddled with her three sisters on one of their beds while they cried and talked and grieved over Mother.

Marissa had squeezed her sisters' hands. "Let's make a promise to each other," she whispered in the dark, with only a lone candle to illuminate the rainy night.

Three pairs of eyes peered back at her, filled with heartache but also such trust.

Marissa silently vowed that she would never tell her sisters—or anyone else—the truth about Mother, but would uphold her memory. It was the least she could do for them.

"What kind of promise?" Misty asked, her dark brown hair, the same as Marissa's, in contrast to Meredith and Morgan, who both had blond hair and pale skin. Regardless of their differences, it was easy to tell they were sisters since they all shared the family trait of lovely, rounded faces with full cheeks and wide eyes surrounded by thick lashes.

Marissa loved these sweet girls. But they were on the cusp of becoming women, and soon their relationships would change. Even so, she didn't want to lose her sisters, not after losing Mother. "A promise that we four sisters will always be here for each other."

"We'll always be here for each other," Meredith echoed.

Misty shook her head. "Oh please. We can do better than that for our vow."

"What do you suggest?" Marissa asked.

Misty glanced around the dark room, the raindrops pattering against the window. "If someone has a pin, we can prick our fingers and use blood—"

"Absolutely not." Morgan's whisper contained horror since she was always the first to avoid pain or hardship, if possible.

"I'm sure you can think of something else," Meredith encouraged Misty softly.

Misty looked around again, then with a flare of inspiration she placed her hand in the middle of the bed between them. "Everyone put your hand in."

Marissa laid hers on top of Misty's. Meredith put hers in next. And Morgan only did so reluctantly.

"Repeat after me," Misty said in a theatrical voice. "I do solemnly swear that I will always be here for my sisters through both the joys and the travails that life brings, that we will always love and help one another, and always stay close."

They repeated the words solemnly.

"Now we are forevermore the sisters of Stony Ridge Island," Misty said happily as they wrapped their arms around each other in a hug.

Even though they were now growing up and making lives for themselves, Marissa was still determined to fulfill that long-ago vow, which was all the more reason not to do anything to cause conflict with Father and her family.

Straightening her shoulders, she swung open the door of their home and stepped inside but stopped short at the sight of Percy holding Meredith's hand and beaming at her with his wide grin. Without his hat, his curly brown hair sprang in every direction, untamed and frizzy. Aside from the wild hair, Percy had fine features and seemed like a pleasant fellow.

But why was he holding Meredith's hand?

As the tallest of the four Axton sisters, Meredith at five feet nine inches took after their father the most in appearance. She'd lamented over her height, saying it would prevent her from finding a husband.

Marissa had told her sister that was a ridiculous thing to say since many men were taller. But now standing next to Percy, Meredith rose above him by an inch or so.

Father stood in the front hallway too. Attired in his usual trousers, white shirt, and vest, he had donned his top hat and towered over them all.

At the sight of Marissa, their conversation came to a halt. Meredith's smile fell away, and she dropped her gaze to the floor with its blue-and-white-striped rug that matched the nautical theme of the rest of the downstairs.

In the silence, Marissa could hear her other two sisters in the kitchen at the back of the house. Although Father had hired an older widow, Mrs. Emery, to live there and supervise the household, Misty and Morgan usually did what they wanted.

Marissa closed the door and gave a pointed look at Percy's and Meredith's joined hands. "What's going on?"

Percy's smile didn't falter. "I just asked Meredith to marry me, and she agreed."

"Yesterday you were proposing marriage to me, and today you're ready to marry Meredith?"

"Unfortunately, she won't do it today." Percy patted Meredith's arm. "But she has agreed to wed me in one month."

"How nice." Marissa's tone dripped with sarcasm.

Meredith slipped her hand out of Percy's and took a step away from him. Of course, Meredith was too kind to do anything that might cause conflict. If she sensed any ill feelings, she would call the whole thing off.

Father frowned at Marissa. "You made it clear you didn't want to marry Percy. I offered him Meredith, and he is agreeable to it. They both are."

"That's fine." Had she made it clear? Whether she had or not, she couldn't object now.

Meredith peeked up tentatively. "Are you sure, Marissa? Because if you want to marry Percy, you can—"

"No," Father interrupted. "She told me she would find a different fellow to marry this summer."

Marissa was sure she hadn't said that either. Had she implied it? "Yes, I'll find someone."

Father turned to the hallway mirror and adjusted his hat. "It's past time for you to marry that *someone*."

Irritation flared to life inside her. She'd been right. He assumed she was interested in Josiah again. That just showed how little he knew about her and what she wanted or needed in marriage and in life. Was that what her mother had felt? That Father hadn't really known what she wanted or needed? Especially that last year when she'd tried to run her restaurant? Had his inability to listen and understand led Mother to do what she'd done?

Marissa had always believed Mother just hadn't tried hard enough. But maybe Father was the one who'd been callous and uncaring.

Because that's how he was being with her.

She fisted her hands on her hips. "I vow I'll get married today if you give me the deed to the farm right now." The words rushed out with all her frustration.

Father adjusted his hat as if her declaration hadn't surprised him in the least. "Once you show me your marriage certificate, I'll give the deed to your husband."

Marissa shook her head. "I won't do it unless I have it in hand."

Father faced her, his brows furrowed. "You know I'm a man of my word. If I tell you I'll give your husband the deed, you know I will."

"And I keep my word too. If you give me the deed now, I vow I'll be married before the day is over, or I'll bring it back." Why had she just made that agreement?

"You'll really get married today?" Father's tone was hopeful.

She hesitated. Should she switch it to a week?

Percy and Meredith were both watching the exchange with widening eyes.

If she waited, what would stop Father from changing his mind about the farm and giving it to Percy and Meredith now that they were engaged? Maybe it was for the best to get married as soon as possible to Felix. Then she would finally have the farm and wouldn't have to worry about Father's fickleness with it.

"Yes. I'll get married today."

"Really?" he asked again.

"That's my plan." No, marrying Felix today technically hadn't been her plan. But now she would have to track him down and go through with his idea to have a marriage that would be in name only and have an end date.

Father hesitated. Then he clomped down the hallway to his office, leaving Marissa standing awkwardly with Percy and Meredith.

"I'm really sorry, Marissa," Meredith whispered, her face flushed with embarrassment and her green eyes filled with remorse. "I had no idea Percy proposed to you yesterday."

"You're the one I really want, Meredith," he said quickly and earnestly. "I vow it with my whole heart."

Marissa forced herself not to roll her eyes. "How can you say that? You barely know either of us."

Percy opened his mouth as though trying to find the words.

"Here it is." Father's voice boomed from his office. A moment later, he stepped out and stalked down the hallway toward them. "Very well, Marissa. You may take the deed and give it to your soon-to-be husband. But if you don't follow through with marrying him, you've given me your word you'll return it."

Bitterness burned in her throat. She hadn't wanted to marry Felix because she didn't want to cause strife. But maybe Father deserved the strife. Maybe he deserved her deception. Maybe he deserved to lose the farm to the son of his worst enemy.

Father held out an envelope.

Meeting his gaze, she took it.

He didn't immediately release it. "Remember, you've given me your word."

"And you've given me yours."

He nodded and let go of the envelope.

She nodded back. Then without another word, she opened the door and stepped outside. As she closed the door behind her, she could no longer ignore the hurt pulsing through her. If this was how her father wanted to be, then he'd left her with no choice but to fight back the only way she knew how.

CHAPTER 8

As Felix hefted a stack of lobster traps onto the wharf, the cash in his pocket seemed to burn through the wool of his trousers.

A part of him wanted to toss the money into the sea, the money Gabe had given him this morning when he'd arrived at the cannery to accept the position Pa had offered yesterday.

Felix had told Gabe he didn't want the money. But Gabe had shoved it against his chest, claiming he'd earned it.

The amount had been more than what the bloodworms were worth, which meant Gabe had given him a cut of the rum-running profit—the illegal profit. Even if Felix had helped them row to Seal Beach and stash the spirits in the caves there, he hadn't wanted to be a part of the operations.

Now as he readied his sloop with supplies to recruit more fishermen willing to add lobstering to their seasonal work, he wished he'd shoved the money right back at Gabe. The trouble was, he wasn't quite so direct or forceful when it came to things like that.

With a sigh, Felix stood back from the lobster traps. The morning sunshine had made an appearance as the fog from the previous night faded away. Even though the breeze coming off the sea was cool, the warmth of the sunshine promised a fair-weather day.

He ran a hand over the spruce slats that formed four-feet-tall and two-feet-wide lath traps with flat bottoms and rounded tops. The pots, as they were called by lobstermen, weren't heavy since the ends were covered in netting instead of slats. The lobstermen would eventually put buoys on them, which were hand-carved spindles painted with specific designs or colors so the lobstermen could easily distinguish their pots among all the others.

In addition to the traps, Felix was also taking out netting, hooks, and bait. His crew, a couple of youths Pa had hired to help him, were in the process

of loading what they intended to hand out today as they sailed along the mainland to the remote areas and tiny harbors.

"Felix?" a woman called.

Felix's pulse sped. He would recognize the voice anywhere even without seeing the woman. Marissa. And she was searching for him.

He stepped away from the stack of lobster traps, making his presence known. She was striding down the wharf toward him, her head bare of a hat, as though she couldn't be bothered to wear one. As a result, the sunlight glistened on her dark hair so it shone like polished walnut. It hung loosely this morning in long waves that fluttered in the wind.

As her sights landed on him, she increased her pace, her stride purposeful. Her lips were pursed and her eyes flashed with determination. She was just as pretty today as she'd been yesterday. In fact, she was even more stunning in the daylight. Her features were somehow more defined, revealing a beauty that was so eye-catching, for a moment he forgot to breathe as he watched her.

"Felix," she said again as she neared him. "I was hoping I would find you here."

She'd been hoping to find him? What did that mean? That she was planning to marry him, or that she'd reject him all over again?

All over again? Where had that come from? When she'd chosen Josiah, had he taken it as rejection? Felix hadn't thought so, but maybe deep down that's what had happened.

He pushed aside the strange feelings and offered her a welcoming smile. "You've found me. What do you plan to do with me?" Even though his words were meant to be teasing, somehow they sounded far too seductive.

She halted, and panic flitted across her face—or at least it seemed like panic.

Inwardly he smacked himself, but outwardly he tried to remain nonchalant. "Are you marching me up to the church, or are you pushing me into the sea?"

The two boys on the sloop had stopped their loading to stare at Marissa. No doubt they were wondering what an Axton was doing talking to a Larock.

She opened her mouth to respond to his questions, glanced at the boys behind him, then peered around the wharf as if searching for a private place to carry on their conversation.

Did that mean she was going to tell him *no* and wanted to spare him the public humiliation?

His heart dove within his chest. He didn't understand his reaction because last night hadn't he prepared himself for her turning down the offer?

Either way, he would be better off talking with her alone. He surveyed the wharf, and his gaze landed upon the large shed where the extra lobstering equipment was kept. "Come on." He took hold of her arm and guided her away from his crew.

She didn't resist and trailed him to the shed.

As he stepped inside, he pushed aside another set of lobster traps to make room for both of them, then he closed the door halfway to allow them some solitude but not to enclose them in darkness.

"So?" He faced her, the mustiness of the shed heavy in the air.

She thrust an envelope at him. "I did it."

"Did what?"

"I got the deed to the farm."

He stared at the envelope, his pulse thudding. "That's great—"

"I have to get married today. If not, I promised I'd bring it back."

The thudding picked up pace. So, was she here to marry him after all? "Today?"

She hesitated. "If today is a problem for you, I could go ask Josiah. That's who Father is expecting me to marry."

Could she really consider marrying Josiah? After realizing he wasn't right for her before, why would she change her mind now?

Felix studied her face—the worried lines in her forehead, the uncertainty in her wide eyes, the tightness of her jaw. She had to be desperate if she was contemplating marrying him or Josiah.

"You've changed your mind, haven't you?" Her shoulders suddenly slumped.

Could he really go through with this? What choice did he have? He couldn't let her marry Josiah.

"It's all right." She backed up a step, bumping into a crate full of extra buoys. She grabbed the wooden box to keep it from toppling. "I don't want to force you into something you don't want to do."

"You're not forcing me."

“I can tell you don’t really want to do this, that you just made the offer last night to be nice.” She pivoted toward the door.

He latched on to her arm and halted her. “You’re wrong.”

She stared straight ahead at the opening in the door.

“I didn’t do it just to be nice.” If he was honest, he’d suggested it because he’d been selfish and wanted the chance to be near her. Yes, he might as well admit it to himself. Should he also admit it to her? He stalled only a moment longer, then shrugged. Why not tell her? “If you want to know the truth, I did it because I thought it might be a fun way to get to spend some time with you.”

Her arm relaxed under his hold, and she turned slightly as though gauging his sincerity. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.” He had the strange urge to caress a line down her arm to her hand.

He shook off the desire and squeezed gently before he released her. She was still watching him, probably trying to read how he was really feeling. He prayed she hadn’t just seen that desire in him. If any more of it reared up, he would have to squash it quickly or do his best to hide it. Because one glimpse of his longings would scare her, make things awkward between them, and cause them to have a long few months of trying to avoid each other—or her trying to avoid him.

“I would never want you to do this,” she said, “if you’re having any second thoughts or doubts.”

“I’m not having second thoughts or doubts.” Was that a lie? Because he had been vacillating on what to do all night. Even this morning, he hadn’t known what was right. But he wasn’t having any doubts now. That was honest, and he tried to make his expression reflect that.

She didn’t move for several long seconds.

“I have to warn you that I’ll be gone a lot.”

Her brows puckered. “If we’re married, you can’t be out visiting other women.”

Did her voice contain indignance? Jealousy? He couldn’t hold back a smile. “Not even Collette?”

“Only Collette.”

“Deal.”

“You’re sure being married won’t hamper your being a womanizer?”

“I’m not a womanizer.”

“Yes, you are. I heard the tales of you flirting with every girl on the island as well as all of Maine.”

“All of Maine?” That was an exaggeration if he ever heard one. However, he couldn’t deny that those last couple of years of living on the island he had spent time with more women. “A man can change.”

“And have you changed?”

He wanted to say that he’d only ever cared about one woman—her. But again, he wasn’t sure where the thought came from and why it had formed now. Instead, he nodded slowly. “I’m not the same man I was when I left three years ago. I hope I can prove that to you.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me, Felix. I like you just the way you are.”

“Clearly you didn’t like all my flirting.” Was it possible he’d started seeking out women because he’d wanted to prove to himself he didn’t care about Marissa being with Josiah?

“You were free to live as you please when you were single.” She leveled a stern look at him. “But once we’re married, I don’t want everyone gossiping about us and wondering why you’re running around with different women.”

“I’m not intending to.”

“Good. Because we will have to make my father and family believe our marriage is somewhat real. I can’t have him questioning the authenticity of my marriage and realizing that it was in name only.”

“Of course.” He quirked an eyebrow in an attempt to lighten their conversation. “So what do you have in mind for showing them that our marriage is *somewhat real*? Are we going to hold hands and kiss and call each other pet names?”

She pulled a face, just as he knew she would. “No to all of that.”

“You don’t want me calling you *sweet gumdrop*?”

“Only if you want me calling you *sweet sugarplum.*”

He chuckled. He wasn’t opposed to a little physical affection with her. Over the years, he’d thought about what it would be like to kiss her more than he should have, especially in those last days before leaving for California. But it was best if they kept things platonic now. “What will we do to convince your father we’re in love?”

“Do you think we have to act like we’re in love? Can’t we just like each other? I mean, he was ready to marry me off to a stranger. So love can’t be

too important to him, can it?"

"Liking each other should work. Since we do like each other. At least I like you."

"Of course. We like each other as friends."

He did still like her as *a friend*. That was true. But did he like her as more? Since he was being honest with himself, he might as well also be honest that he was attracted beyond friendship and probably had been for years. Now that he'd seen her again, there was no way he'd be able to ignore his attraction. Not with how he was reacting every time he saw her.

She stared beyond him, seemed to be thinking. "No, I already risk Father refusing to validate the marriage because I'm marrying a Larock. If he realizes this is a pretend marriage, he'll refuse to officially sign over the deed and try to take the farm away from me."

"What should we do? I'm game for a little pretending if you are."

She nodded and met his gaze, the amber of her eyes dark in the shadows of the shed. "Maybe we should pretend we've had a relationship for a while? That we tried to deny our feelings because of our families' discord, and that's why I courted Josiah and you left?"

Was all of that pretend? A part of him suspected that it was, the way things had happened on his end if not on hers. But he didn't want to think about that right now. He had to focus on what she wanted to do next. That was most important.

"We'll admit to my father that we've been friends for a long time." Her voice gained momentum as her plan took shape. "I'll tell Father that he can ask Victor to confirm it. Victor never lies, and Father knows it."

"Would the admission get Victor in trouble?" Felix didn't want that to happen.

"I hope not. Father respects Victor."

Felix let himself digest the full scope of her scheme. "So some pretending around your father, but that's it?"

"And around my siblings and your family."

"What about with Victor?"

"He already has an idea of what we're planning. I told him last night."

That was probably wise since Victor would be able to see past their charade anyway.

She brushed at a spiderweb hanging from a nearby lobster trap. "I know you're busy and have to work, but the sooner we get married, the better."

“What? Do you want to drag me to the church right now?”

“Yes,” she said dryly. “I’m that excited. I can’t wait another minute.”

“That’s what I thought.” He smiled. “Then let’s go.”

She hesitated. “You’ll have to move into the farmhouse today.”

Move into the farmhouse? Really? “I can tonight, when I get back from my work.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with this plan?” Her expression held sincerity. All sarcasm was gone.

“If you are.” He was already late in leaving for the day. It wouldn’t hurt to delay another hour or two, would it? Besides, while he was gone all day, he didn’t want her running off and finding another man to help her.

She stepped out of the door. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Me too.” He followed her out into the dampness of the morning and the remaining fog that hovered above the water.

He gave instructions to his crew to finish organizing the supplies on board the sloop and said he’d be back just as soon as he could. Then he and Marissa hurried away from the wharf and into town in the direction of the church.

They garnered curious gazes as they walked side by side along Main Street. An Axton and a Larock together was an unusual sight, especially when they hadn’t been seen together by anyone except Victor and Janie in the past ten years.

When they passed by the general store, Felix slowed his steps. If he was really going to marry her, he needed a ring. His fingers brushed against the cash in his pocket that had been taunting him. It wouldn’t hurt to use a little of the money on a wedding band, would it?

Besides, if they wanted Mr. Axton to follow through on signing the deed over, they needed everyone to know about the agreement and that he’d given Marissa his word. There was no better way to start gossip than to mention something to Thaddeus Berry, the proprietor of the general store, who was known for being the town newspaper since he always knew the goings-on of everyone.

Felix halted.

Marissa walked two more steps before stopping and raising her brow at him.

“Wait out here for a second. I’ll be right back.” Without giving her the chance to question him, he stepped inside the dimly lit store with only a few

men standing around and talking at the back.

The waft of familiar scents washed over Felix—withered onions, pickles in vinegar, spilled kerosene, and musty newspapers. The strongest of all was the fish for sale. But he was used to the odor of fish and lobster and any other sea creature. Those scents hung over the town all the time, sometimes embedded into fabric and skin.

Thaddeus was watching out the window with wide eyes behind his wire-rimmed spectacles, his long gray mustache twitching. “Felix Larock,” he whispered, “what on earth are you doing with that gal, son? If her father catches you together . . . ooh-wee, you’ll wish you never came back to the island.”

“I need your best ring, Thaddeus. The cost doesn’t matter.”

“Ring?” Thaddeus’s eyes rounded even more.

“You do have jewelry for sale, don’t you?”

“Ayuh. That I do.” Thaddeus made his way around a glass display that appeared to be full of trinkets, ceramic decorations, colorful vases, and even a gilded hairbrush and matching mirror. “A ring? Is it for someone special?” He glanced back out at Marissa.

Felix knew this was their chance to start the gossip in the community and trap Mr. Axton into following through on his word. “Marissa’s father promised to let her have the farm if she got married today.”

In the process of opening the door of the display from the back, Thaddeus froze. “Did he now?”

The other men loitering in the store had grown silent as well.

“He did.” Felix spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear. “And I offered to do the honor since I’ve cared about her for a long time.”

“A long time?”

“I’ve cared about her practically forever, which is why I had to leave when she got engaged to Josiah. Lucky for me, though, she didn’t go through with marrying him.” Even though Felix was only trying to stir up the town gossip, he was struck again by the possibility that his words might be true.

For a moment, Thaddeus could only stare at Felix, his eyes filled with utter astonishment.

“I am in a bit of a hurry.” Felix motioned toward the display.

“Yessah, yessah.” Thaddeus turned his attention back to the items in the display case. “I’d be too if I was in your straits, son.”

Thaddeus was referencing the long-standing conflict between their families, which was why everyone needed to know exactly what Mr. Axton had told Marissa. “Mr. Axton said he didn’t care who Marissa married, so long as she chose someone.”

“Well, I’ll be jeezly. That’s something else.” Thaddeus pulled out the ornate jewelry box. He set the item on the display top and opened the lid. “Let’s see what we have here . . .” He fingered through an assortment of chains and bracelets and pins. All of them appeared used, probably from customers who’d paid off their store tabs with family heirlooms.

“This here is a fine little ring.” Thaddeus held up a thin gold band with a braid of leaves. It wasn’t fancy, but it also wasn’t gaudy.

“I’ll take it.” Felix pulled out a handful of cash and coins. In his haste, some of the coins fell to the floor. He swiped them up and stuffed them back into his pocket. “How much do I owe you?”

Thaddeus was staring at the money in Felix’s hand, a look of wonder on his face.

There was nothing wonderful about the money, not when it had come from illegal means. Felix tossed some of the one-dollar coins on the counter. “How’s that?”

“Seems fair enough.” Thaddeus handed Felix the ring.

“Thank you.” Felix stuffed the remaining money back into one pocket, then tucked the ring into the other. Through the dusty window, he could see Marissa peering up the street, her expression anxious.

The urgency from before swelled in Felix’s chest. Now that people knew about their plans, he had to hurry before word reached Mr. Axton. Because there was no doubt about it. It wasn’t a matter of *if* word would reach Mr. Axton. It was only a matter of *when*. And Felix wanted to be good and married before that happened.

With a nod to Thaddeus, Felix spun and strode to the door. He stepped out and smiled at Marissa. “Ready?”

“Am *I* ready?” She snorted and began walking again. “If I were to total up all the time I’ve spent waiting for you over the years, I don’t think I could count all the hours.”

“Hours?” He hastened after her. “Maybe a few seconds here and there.”

“Weeks. Years, even.” She offered him a smile, which softened her words. Then she picked up her pace, leaving him to trail her, just as she always did.

He didn’t mind. He never had. She had so much determination and purpose. She was proficient at carrying out her plans and making things happen, and she worked so hard. He loved all those things about her.

His pulse rushed forward as though the wind had just filled his sails. Being with her always seemed to bring him life, move him forward, and give him purpose too.

He could do nothing less than relish every moment of having her in his life again, because all too soon the time with her would come to an end, leaving him listless and lifeless once again.

CHAPTER 9

She was really doing this. She was getting married in order to gain the farm.

Marissa fought against a wave of dizziness as she stood beside Felix at the front of the simple one-room church while Reverend Reynolds read through the marriage ceremony. Felix had tucked her hand into the crook of his arm when the reverend had started, and now she was glad to have him to hold on to.

A voice inside screamed that she was crazy for thinking she could pull this off. This wasn't like her to act so rashly. This was something Felix was good at. From the way he stood so nonchalantly, he obviously was having an easier time than she was.

Maybe he was able to be so casual about it because he knew it wouldn't last forever. He would be able to go on his merry way in a few short months and escape the gossip and criticism. He didn't have quite as much at stake as she did.

He was also naturally a calmer person, not letting much ruffle him.

Whatever the case—whether right or wrong—they were going through with this marriage. When they'd left the shed on the wharf a short while ago, they'd walked up Main Street together, drawing all kinds of looks, mostly curious ones from the townspeople who'd never expected to see an Axton get along with a Larock.

She and Felix had gone to the Reynolds' parsonage next to the church, and the middle-aged reverend, the same as everyone else, had been confused to see her with Felix. In addition, the reverend had been even more confused that yesterday Percy had knocked on his door and claimed he was marrying Marissa Axton but today Felix was marrying her.

Marissa had given the simple explanation they'd decided upon—that she'd reunited with Felix yesterday evening and they'd been secret friends for a long time. She also told the reverend about her father's agreement to

pass along the farm if she got married, so Felix had proposed, she had accepted, and here they were.

Mrs. Reynolds sat in the first pew with her two teenage children as witnesses to the marriage. The reverend had sent one of his children to the shoe shop nearby and asked the cobbler to come over, and now he was also here in his leather apron, his tools tucked in his belt, and his hands already dirty from his work. He was acting as a fourth witness, even though only two were required.

Marissa had no doubt the reverend was making doubly sure no one could question that the marriage took place, because people would definitely disbelieve the news of the union when they heard it.

Reverend Reynolds finished his sermon, then studied his open prayer book. With his crooked front tooth protruding, his mouth never really closed. He swallowed nervously, then began reading from the open page. "Felix, wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, and honor her in sickness and in health? And forsaking all others, keep thee only to her, so long as you both shall live? If so, say *I will*."

"I will." Felix pressed his hand over hers as though to assure her that everything would be all right.

She breathed in and tried to steady herself. Everything would be all right. Felix would make it that way. He always did.

The reverend shifted to face her. "Marissa, wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey and serve him, and love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health? And forsaking all others, keep thee only to him, so long as you both shall live? If so, say *I will*."

"I will." She somehow managed to keep the tremble from her voice.

Felix's blue eyes were filled with concern and questions. She could sense that he was asking her if she really wanted to go through with this or if she needed a minute more.

She squeezed his hand back, grateful for his understanding and his kindness in this moment. Here he was, sacrificing for her. That's the kind of person he'd always been.

"Are you okay?" she whispered, making sure *he* still wanted to go through with it and didn't need more time.

His mouth curved up into a small smile, one that showed the mature hard lines of his face that hadn't been there when they'd been younger. "I'm okay."

The reverend glanced down the aisle past the dozen or so rows of pews to the double doors that led to Main Street. Was he worried that one of their fathers would burst inside and try to put an end to the ceremony?

Marissa supposed it was a legitimate concern.

"Shall I continue?" He turned worried eyes upon them.

"Just think, Reverend," Felix said smoothly. "Today you're being instrumental in bringing an end to a decade-long conflict and assisting two warring families to finally come together in forgiveness."

"Or come together with guns blasting." Marissa couldn't keep back the sarcastic remark.

Reverend Reynolds blanched. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"No need to be afraid, Reverend." Felix spoke amiably. "If anyone will get killed, it'll probably be me by Mr. Axton."

Marissa shook her head. "He might tar and feather you. But he won't kill you."

"Good to know." Felix's tone held humor. "He may even cover me with honey and leave me for the bears."

"Let us proceed with all haste," the reverend interjected.

"Let's." Felix schooled his face into a serious expression, but the mirth still shone in his eyes.

She had to fight back a chuckle, grateful again for Felix and his ability to make the stressful ceremony into one she could endure.

The reverend led them quickly through the rest of their vows. He also rushed them through the giving of the ring that Felix had purchased on the way to the church.

"I pronounce that they be man and wife together. In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

She was married. Had she done the right thing?

The reverend's tight expression finally relaxed. "May I now present Mr. and Mrs. Felix Larock—"

The church doors swung open with a whoosh and banged against the walls.

The reverend's proclamation ended abruptly, and all eyes flew to the entrance.

There, outlined in the morning sunlight, stood a giant of a man who looked like he was ready to commit murder. Her father. His eyes were frantic, his face red, and his top hat askew. “What’s going on?” His question thundered through the small building.

“Your next line, Reverend,” Felix whispered, his eyes riveted to Father. “Tell me that I may now kiss my bride.”

The reverend was frozen in place.

“Say it,” Felix said more forcefully.

“You may now kiss your bride,” the reverend said in a half whisper.

“Louder.” Felix’s jaw flexed.

The reverend straightened. “You may now kiss your bride.”

Felix swung Marissa around, slipped both arms behind her back, and then dragged her against his body all in one move.

She didn’t have time to react or to protest because in the next instant, he dropped his mouth onto hers. In spite of his rush, the pressure was warm and soft and tender. And surprisingly sweet and pleasant—not at all bland the way Josiah’s kisses had been.

No, Felix was much more controlled and deliberate, probably because he’d had practice and expertise in kissing. Of course he did, and the thought unsettled her, although she wasn’t sure why.

Now wasn’t the time to analyze her reactions to his kiss. Rather, she had to help him put on a show for her father, to prove she cared about Felix enough to marry him.

She tilted into the kiss so her mouth fit more securely with his, and then she kissed him back, following his lead and moving her mouth just as softly as his.

In response, his arms tightened, and his hand at her lower back splayed almost possessively.

Heat sparked inside her. She wanted to revel in the new sizzling sensation, but she had to remember this was only a show for her father.

“No!” Father shouted.

Felix shifted away, his lips leaving hers for an instant. Then before she could back up, he pressed in again, this time more fully, his rhythm turning more forceful.

The kiss was like nothing she’d felt before, causing an incredible wave to crash against her, cascade through her, and carry her out to sea. For a long second as his lips meshed powerfully with hers, she was sinking into an

oblivion from which she might never want to come up. She was drowning in his kiss and clung to him, twisting her fingers into his shirt and holding him as if he were the very life that could save her.

In the next instant, she could feel strong hands on her shoulders—Father's, and he was wrenching her away from Felix. "Don't touch my daughter!"

Felix spun nimbly and at the same time positioned her behind his back so that he stood between her and Father. "She's my wife." Felix's voice was just as hard as Father's. "And I can touch her whenever I want."

"If you touch her again, I'll kill you." Father spat the words with such vehemence that Marissa trembled, half believing he would follow through with his threat.

The cobbler and the reverend each grabbed on to Father's arms while Mrs. Reynolds hustled her two children to a side aisle.

"Come now, Herb." The old cobbler grunted as he tugged Father back several steps, no easy task with so large a man. "Your fight is with Ollie and not with Felix."

Father glared at Felix with such hatred, Marissa could almost believe he thought Ollie was the one in front of him and not Felix. "The Larocks are all the same to me."

"Even if they are"—the reverend spoke falteringly while still holding Father—"God is giving you this opportunity to let go of the past and learn to forgive."

Father shook his head, his top hat wobbling and then toppling from his head to the aisle. Without the shadow of his hat, his eyes were even wilder. "I swore I'd never forgive Ollie for what he did, and I don't plan to change that."

The reverend whispered what seemed to be a prayer, then drew in a breath and straightened his spine. "Jesus taught his followers that they should forgive seventy times seven, which isn't a literal number but a symbolic way of saying we should be willing to forgive without limits."

"That low-life scum doesn't deserve to be forgiven!"

"Actually, none of us do," the reverend continued.

"Ollie deserves to rot in Hades." Father was still struggling to free himself from the reverend and the cobbler.

Enough was enough. Marissa pushed Felix aside and stepped toward her father. "I'm married to Felix, and you're not changing it."

Father's nostrils flared. "Once I get my hands on him, you'll soon be a widow."

Marissa scoffed. "If you want to kill someone, then it'll have to be me. I'm the one who convinced Felix to come here to the church and marry me this morning."

"You're in trouble too. I plan to send you away to family in Sunrise Cove just as soon as we're done here."

"I won't go."

"Oh yes you will."

"I'm married and no longer your concern."

Her father held her gaze, the anger and frustration coiling in his eyes like a serpent ready to strike. "You may have the deed, but I'll never sign it over to him."

"You gave me your word that if I got married today, you would give the farm to my husband."

"You tricked me."

"You told me that you didn't care who I married so long as I did."

He paused as though realizing he had said that.

Felix slid his hand into hers, a bold move considering Father's threat to kill him if he touched her again. Even though she feared for Felix, his fingers wrapped around hers gave her the assurance that she wasn't fighting the battle alone, that he was here fighting it with her.

Father narrowed his gaze on their joined hands. "You knew I wouldn't want you marrying a Larock."

"You didn't give me any specifications."

"I thought you knew me well enough to know that I wouldn't approve of . . . him." Father practically sneered the last word as he cocked his head at Felix.

"Well then, we're in the same position. Because I thought you knew I was capable enough to take over the farm without requiring me to get married first. But here we are." She spoke more boldly and belligerently than she usually did to Father.

Maybe being next to Felix gave her more courage. Or maybe knowing that she'd already defied Father gave her the audacity to speak her mind. Either way, she'd started down a path she couldn't come back from. The only way was to push forward. "What I've realized is that I'll never be capable enough because I'm a daughter and not a son."

Father didn't respond, and he seemed to stop resisting so much. Or, at the very least, the cobbler and the reverend weren't working quite so hard to restrain him.

"I'm sorry all you got were daughters." The words tumbled out now that they'd been set loose. "I've tried hard to be like a son, but even that hasn't been good enough for you."

Father stared at her silently for another long heartbeat, then grabbed on to the nearest pew and sank into it. "So, you married the son of my worst enemy to get back at me? That's decent of you."

That's not why she'd married Felix. She'd done it so Father wouldn't sell the farm or give it to someone else. Okay, maybe part of marrying Felix stemmed from her frustration with Father. But mostly it was a means to have the farm. "You were willing to thrust a complete stranger upon me, so who are you to speak of decency?"

"I told you that you didn't have to marry Percy if you didn't like him and to find someone you did like."

"I did as you said and found someone I liked." She stepped closer to Felix, holding his hand more firmly. "Felix and I have been friends for many years, since childhood."

Father's brow dipped into another scowl. "So you've been going behind my back and betraying me all this time?"

"There was nothing wrong with two children being friends. Just because our fathers were fighting didn't mean we had to."

"So, all these years you've been spending time together?" His voice rose a notch. "Alone?"

Felix stiffened at the implied insult. "Victor supervised us."

Well, not all the time, especially as they'd grown older and more independent. But Father didn't need to know that.

His expression turned stormy again. "Victor knew you were associating with a Larock, and he didn't try to stop you?"

She huffed. "Victor doesn't show partiality, and you know it."

Father huffed louder. "I thought he was loyal to me. I guess I was wrong."

Had she said too much about Victor? She didn't want him to come to any harm—although, she couldn't forget that if Father sold the farm, Victor would likely be homeless. "He is loyal. He just doesn't have any reason to hold a grudge against the Larocks, especially Felix."

“He knows full well how I feel.”

“You can talk to him. Last night he told me Felix and I belong together on the farm, that our spirits go together.”

Father released an exasperated growl.

Felix glanced down at her with startled eyes. “Did he really say that?”

“Yes, he thinks you wanted to marry me so you don’t lose me again.”

Felix opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

Was she hoping he would elaborate more, maybe confirm it? It didn’t matter. What mattered was that Father accepted their marriage. She faced him again. “Go talk to Victor. He’ll tell you the truth. He always does.”

Father hesitated.

“Felix and I reconnected last night.” She hurried to explain. “When he heard about the need for me to get married to have the farm, he offered to help, because that’s just the way he is.”

Felix drew her into his side a little closer. “I offered to help because I care about Marissa. She’s a beautiful, smart, and industrious woman. Any man would be lucky to have her.” His blue eyes filled with admiration.

Either he really meant what he was saying, or he was good at acting. Whatever the case, she had to go along with him. She couldn’t hesitate and cause her father to have doubts. So she lifted her free hand to Felix’s chest and laid it over his heart. “I’m lucky to have Felix. He’s kind, giving, selfless, and still my best friend.”

He offered her a smile, one that was intimate and genuine. “Thank you.” With that, he bent in and placed a tender kiss upon her forehead.

At the brush of his lips, her mind flew back to their kiss from a moment ago. The one that had started sweet but had very quickly become passionate in such a stirring way her insides were still sizzling with sparks.

If that’s what kissing him would be like and how it would make her feel, then she would certainly enjoy the acting they would have to do. Maybe their short time together would be fun after all.

No, she couldn’t kiss him again. Felix had only initiated it in order to keep Father from charging forward and strangling him. Now that they’d been seen kissing by Father and their witnesses, word would spread, and they wouldn’t need any more kisses.

“Mr. Axton,” Felix said. “You should know that I’ve vowed I won’t be anything like my father, that I’m aiming to be a different man.”

Father studied Felix, his scowl still in place. “The apple never falls far from the tree.”

“I’ve learned from his mistakes and don’t plan to make them for myself.”

The reverend and cobbler had released Father and now only hovered near him. The reverend’s wife and children had slipped out at some point and were no longer here.

Was it time for her and Felix to go too?

What was holding her back? Was she waiting for Father to agree to the union? To give them his blessing? It would probably never happen. Should they just excuse themselves and say good-bye?

“We’re leaving.” She began to tug Felix down the aisle. He didn’t resist but followed along with a light step.

She expected Father to stand up and halt them, to at least protest the marriage again, or to demand that she give him back the deed to the farm. But he was strangely silent. Maybe he was contemplating his next move and how he could break their agreement.

The future was uncertain. At least for today she had Felix and the farm. But for how long would she have either?

CHAPTER 10

Felix's heart thudded with dread as he stepped off the wharf and headed down the planked path that led to the cannery.

He should have told his pa about the marriage to Marissa before leaving on the sloop for the day of recruiting more lobstermen. But he'd taken the coward's way out after leaving the church, and he'd gone directly back to his boat and had set sail straightaway.

Now with the setting sun streaking the sky, he was left with no choice but to deliver the news to his family that he was not only a married man, but he was wedded to an Axton.

And he'd kissed her.

His pulse gave an extra thump just as it had all day at the thought of kissing Marissa at the wedding. Of course in the past whenever he'd imagined kissing her, he'd known it would be good. But he'd never expected it to be like that.

His gut clenched hard at the memory of their lips tangling as their bodies pressed together. He could still feel the imprint of her, a combination of soft and smooth and sleek that was enough to drive a man wild.

But he couldn't let it drive him wild. He had to forget about the kiss and the desire that kept flaring inside him.

If only he could . . .

Behind him on the bay, the fleet of smacks were returning from collecting the lobsters. A couple of the smacks were already unloading their cargo, the crew shoveling lobsters from the wells at the centers of their boats and loading the clapping and clawing creatures onto stretchers that would be carried into the cannery.

There, they would be cooked for about twenty minutes and then spread out on sorting tables to cool overnight. In the morning, a few of the male workers would crack open the lobsters' tough shells with cleavers. After

that, an assembly line of women and children would pick the meat out with little forks or even with their fingers.

It took at least four lobsters to fill each one-pound can, and that meant the need for the lobsters—and more lobstermen—remained high.

Thankfully he'd had a productive day recruiting fishermen on the mainland. At his last stop, he'd unloaded the remainder of the supplies and promised the men he'd be back tomorrow with more.

For now, though, he couldn't put off telling Pa about the marriage to Marissa any longer. He didn't think his pa would be as murderous as Mr. Axton had been. But Pa wouldn't be happy about the union—not in the least.

Felix veered past the main cannery door toward his pa's office in the back. He passed an oxcart overflowing with the lobster shells that had turned the typical red during the cooking. Some of the refuse was used by local farmers as fertilizer, the rest was hauled off and dumped into the sea.

"You looking for your pa?" One of the old foremen, a stoop-shouldered fisherman who no longer had the stamina for the sea, paused in his sweeping of shells out the side door of the cannery.

Felix nodded. "Is he in his office?"

The older man cocked his head to the inside of the cannery. "He's right out straight helping to unload."

Felix retraced his steps and ducked past the foreman into the large building. The heat and steam from the vats hit him first, then the overpowering scent of cooking lobsters.

He squinted through the swirls of steam at the few men—his pa among them—manning the big copper pots. Pa had discarded his coat and vest and had his shirt sleeves rolled up. Even then, the white dress shirt was damp with perspiration. His fair brown hair stuck to his head. And his muscles strained as he shoveled another load of lobsters into the boiling water.

Felix couldn't tell if his pa was short on help or if he was just pitching in as he did from time to time so he could stay connected to the factory.

Felix grabbed a discarded shovel and approached the stretcher filled with the mottled brown lobsters with their antennae twitching back and forth, their large front claws grasping at the air, and the long back tails swinging at nothing.

The armored creatures each had twenty pairs of appendages, which Felix knew because he'd once counted them. Some were for walking and others

for swimming. With their bug-like appearance, the lobsters were ugly. But the meat was tender and moist and delicious.

Felix thrust his shovel into the midst of the mass of moving parts, then lifted several of the creatures into the closest vat.

Pa shot him a look. “What are you doing here? Thought you’d be home with the new wife.”

“So you heard?”

“Ayuh. Who hasn’t?”

Felix guessed the whole town had relentlessly gossiped about the wedding all day. That was part of the reason he’d been more than eager to get off the island.

Pa dumped his load of lobsters into the vat, lowered his shovel to the floor, then narrowed his gaze on Felix. “Jeezum crow, Felix. What in the name of Poseidon made you decide to marry that gal?”

Felix tossed his shovel of lobsters into the boiling water. “I like her.”

“And you wanted the farm?”

“No.” Clearly everyone had also heard about Mr. Axton’s agreement to give Marissa’s husband the farm in exchange for her getting married. It appeared that Thaddeus Berry had been busy spreading the news just the way Felix had hoped he would. “I don’t want a farm. I did it for her.”

Pa was watching him carefully through the steam, perspiration running down his temples and cheeks and into his collar.

The perspiration had started trickling down Felix’s face too. He scooped up another shovelful of lobsters.

“I can see why you like her,” Pa said. “The girl is pretty.”

Pretty didn’t accurately describe Marissa. No, she was incredibly beautiful and always had been. But of course Felix couldn’t say that here and now. Not with two other fellows watching and listening as they shoveled lobsters.

“And she has spirit,” Pa added.

That she did. What other woman would come get Felix at the wharf and march up to the church without caring what anyone in town thought? Not anyone but Marissa.

Pa’s brow was still furrowed. “You do know the marriage is gonna be a hook in Herb’s side?”

“It already has been.” Felix thrust his shovel into the lobsters again.

“Heard tell he wanted to kill you.”

“He did, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he still tries.”

“Guess prob’ly he will with the way he hates me.”

Felix added the next load into the vat, then rested his shovel against the floor. He didn’t know how to respond. A part of him wanted to tell his pa that Mr. Axton had every right to despise the Larocks. But saying that would mean admitting he’d been at Seal Beach that night when Mr. Axton and Pa had fought, and Felix had listened to them arguing.

“Word is that Herb told everyone I still deserve to rot in Hades.” Pa’s shoulders slumped a little.

Did Pa deserve to rot in Hades for his transgression? “Maybe if you took the time to apologize sincerely to Mr. Axton—”

“You don’t think I’ve already tried that?” Pa scoffed. “Many times.”

Felix hadn’t known. But maybe the betrayal between the two men was truly unforgiveable. No matter what Reverend Reynolds had said about forgiveness, were there times when some things just couldn’t be forgiven, and the angst was bound to remain forever?

If he’d been in Mr. Axton’s position, Felix wasn’t sure he would have been able to forgive Pa either.

“Does this mean you’re sticking around?” Did Pa’s voice contain hope or merely curiosity?

“Probably will for a while.” Felix couldn’t say anything about his agreement with Marissa to separate at the end of the summer.

If she still wanted the annulment at that point, he’d give her one. But if doing so would be too risky for her to keep the farm, he could always take an offshore fishing job, which would take him away for months at a time. Offshore fishing was a hard life, one of little sleep and a whole lot of exposure to the elements and danger. But at least he wouldn’t be stuck in Axtonville.

In the meantime, he had a short time to make sure she was secure and happy. That meant he had to do all he could to help her get everything she wanted, including Mr. Axton’s signature on the deed to the farm for an official transfer of ownership. And the expansion she wanted for her blueberry field.

“I’d like you to sell her the land she asked for.”

“By gory, Felix.” Pa’s voice rose. “You really do want Herb to hate me.”

“You would be helping his daughter enlarge her blueberry farm. How could he hate that?”

“Herb told me never to speak with him or any of his family, that I’m dead to him.”

Those words hadn’t been part of the exchange on the beach Felix had overheard between the two. Maybe Mr. Axton had said that during one of Pa’s attempts to apologize. “You know selling to Marissa is the right thing to do. It might even be a way to show Mr. Axton you’re trying to put the past behind you.”

“I doubt that. From the sounds of things today, Herb will never put the past behind him.”

“Then at least do your part to make amends for what you did.”

Pa’s brow lifted.

Unable to meet the man’s gaze, Felix peered through the steam and out the door. Had he spoken with too much passion? Or disgust? “If nothing else, sell it to her as a wedding gift to me.”

“I’ll think about it.” Pa didn’t sound too convinced, but at least he hadn’t immediately said no. “How did your day of recruiting go? Any new lobstermen?”

Apparently, Pa’s interest in the hasty marriage was over. They talked for a few more minutes about Felix’s successes with the recruiting. He’d had a good day meeting new people, talking with them, hearing their stories and concerns about the fishing industry, and then offering them work as lobstermen. He’d always had an easy time making conversation, listening well, and showing interest in others. So the job was a perfect fit for him, and his pa had known it.

Felix didn’t linger at the cannery but headed to the house only a block away from the wharf. Daphne met him at the door with a scowl and a scolding. She’d heard about the wedding, and even though she’d been surprised like everyone else that he’d married an Axton, she’d been more upset that she hadn’t been invited to the ceremony.

“Is it true you’re married, Felix?” Collette pushed up from her pillows as he stepped into her tiny room. Even though her blue eyes held an uncharacteristic excitement, her pale face was sunken with dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was listless and stringy. And her body was much too thin.

“Yes, you’re looking at a married man now.”

Collette offered him a rare smile. “And it’s true that you married an Axton?”

“I married Marissa.”

“I always knew you liked her.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did. I saw the way your gaze trailed after her whenever you saw her around town. She’s so beautiful, it’s no wonder.”

Leave it to Collette to be the one person in his family who knew him best. He reached over and tweaked her hair. “You’re observant, you know that?”

“Tell me more about her.”

“I’ll only tell you more if you agree to sit outside with me.” He had to believe the fresh air and sunlight—even in the evening—would be good for Colette. “And if you agree to eat everything Daphne has prepared for supper.”

“I’m too tired to go out.” She sank back into the pillows with her usual excuse.

“Then I’m too tired to tell you anything.”

“Fe-lix,” she chided.

“Just a little trip outside. It doesn’t have to be long.”

Collette sighed, then nodded.

He carried her down the flagstone path through the woods that opened up to a boardwalk that overlooked the bay. He situated her on a bench there and sat beside her, helping her eat her dinner while he answered all of her questions about the wedding.

Thankfully, she ate everything and stayed out longer. By the time he carried her back, she had some color to her face and was yawning. He hugged her good night, then packed his knapsack with his few belongings and started on his way to the farm.

He moved slowly along the shoreline path, letting the cool night breeze and the lapping waves ease the anxiety that had been building inside him all evening.

He wasn’t sure why he was anxious. It wasn’t like he’d married a stranger. He knew Marissa was a woman of integrity and kindness and would do her best to make their awkward in-name-only marriage work.

Maybe that was part of the issue. After kissing her at the wedding, he wasn’t so sure he could stick with just an in-name-only marriage—or even if he wanted to. Not when his attraction to her hadn’t gone away the way

he'd hoped during his absence. No, it was still living inside him with a desire that was bursting to be set free.

He was afraid the next time he was faced with an opportunity to kiss or touch her, he wouldn't be able to resist and would instead find excuses to pull her into his arms every moment he could.

If he did that, he would definitely alienate her. Even if she had kissed him back at the wedding, she hadn't bargained with him for a real marriage. She hadn't wanted marriage at all and had only gone through with it to get the farm—which should have been hers without having to gain a husband.

As he rounded the bend, the house with its lit windows came into view on the ledge ahead. He paused and inhaled a steadying breath of the familiar scent of seagrass and wet sand. He could do this. He would go there tonight, treat her like a friend, and sacrifice his own desires—just like he'd always done.

Just friends. Just friends. Just friends.

He mentally chanted the words as he continued forward. He was still on the trail when she began to descend the steps from the ledge to the shore. Even though the darkness of night covered everything, enough light from the house and the moon illuminated her, and he could see her rushing eagerly toward him. Or maybe he was just wishing she was eager to see him.

There was no doubt he was eager to see her. He hastened his steps, all the worry from moments ago slipping away.

By the time she made it down the long staircase, he'd reached the bottom. "Hey," he greeted. "Sorry I'm so late."

She halted on the last step, putting herself at eye level with him. The moonlight glistened off her hatless head and her dark hair, still hanging loosely about her shoulders. "I was beginning to think you sailed off."

"You won't get that lucky."

She playfully slapped him on the shoulder. "So I didn't scare you away?"

"That's impossible."

The wind picked up strands of her hair and swirled them around her face. She captured the runaway tresses and tucked them behind her ears. "I also imagined that your family was holding you hostage until I released you from the commitment."

"They all took the news better than I expected."

"So, no one else threatened to murder you?"

“They weren’t thrilled, but I’m still alive and well.”

She gave him a quick inspection, her gaze stalling for an instant on his mouth.

Desire tightened his gut. Was she thinking about their kiss from earlier too?

She quickly glanced away. “What did Collette say about you getting married?”

“She was actually really happy for me.”

“She was?”

“She said that you’re the most beautiful woman she’s ever seen.”

A slight smile quirked the corners of Marissa’s mouth. “Did she really?”

“She really did. And I agreed with her.”

Marissa’s smile blossomed. “Stop. We don’t have anyone to playact for out here on the beach.”

“I’m not playacting. No other woman compares to you.” There was nothing wrong with a little flattery, was there?

“You didn’t say all those nice things about me at the wedding for my father’s sake?”

“You said nice things about me too.” Her words had touched him deeply. Not only had she claimed he was kind, giving, and selfless, but she’d also stated she was lucky to have him. “Did *you* say all of that because of your father?”

“No, of course not. I was being as honest as possible.”

“So was I.” A strand of her hair was blowing across her face again, and he gently fastened it behind her ear. “I’ll always try to be honest with you.”

“Then I’ll do the same.”

“Good. Then we won’t have any secrets between us.”

“Thank you, Felix.” Her eyes were dark tonight and sincere. “That makes me feel better.”

Of course he couldn’t be honest about how he really felt about her. But he would do his best to be honest about everything else. Well, there was that secret regarding their fathers that no one was supposed to know about, not even him. He’d never told her that secret and never would.

She shivered and wrapped her arms across her chest. The night air in May could either bite like it did in winter or nibble like it did in summer. Tonight it was biting, and Marissa wasn’t wearing a cloak, only the same pretty skirt and blouse she’d worn to their wedding.

He situated his knapsack over his shoulder. Then he motioned toward the steps. “We should get you inside and out of the cold.”

As they made their way up to the edge, she told him about stopping by the house in town and telling her sisters about her marriage. They’d been stunned, but they hadn’t been upset either. Before she’d left, they had hugged her and wished her well.

Marissa also assured him that Victor and Janie hadn’t been surprised and had seemed happy with the news. Janie had made sea moss pudding for them as a wedding present.

The rusty-brown, treelike weeds known as sea moss grew on rocks deep in the ocean. When rough storms hit, the plants would wash ashore, sometimes in big piles. The Natives had always collected, dried, and used the moss for many purposes but primarily as a fertilizer.

It was also milled and turned into a flour-like substance that served as a thickener in food. Janie boiled the milled moss flour with milk until it was thick and creamy. Once it was cool, it made a delicious pudding, one of Felix’s favorites that he hadn’t had since leaving Maine.

As they reached the house, Felix expected to see Victor and was curious about the comments he’d made—spirits going together, belonging to each other, and all of that. But Victor wasn’t around as Felix followed Marissa into the house.

He’d never been inside before. In the past, he’d always stayed hidden in the woods nearby or the barn or some other place where no one else in the Axton family could see him.

After so many years of keeping his friendship with Marissa a secret from both of their families, it felt strange to walk in the farmhouse and have no one question his right to be there. Even as he sat on a stool at the worktable in the kitchen and watched Marissa scoop pudding into bowls, he shifted, unable to calm the rocky waves in his stomach.

Marissa, however, seemed completely at ease, as if it wasn’t a momentous occasion for a Larock to be in the Axton home. She seemed to accept his presence there just as she’d always accepted his presence in her life—as normal and natural.

When they finished second helpings of the pudding, Marissa suggested they move to the casual sitting room, where the furniture was well worn, the rugs faded, and the shelves filled with books and games and knickknacks. She’d already set up backgammon, one of the games they’d played in the

tree house on rainy days, and they fell into their bantering ways as they challenged each other to game after game.

After the grandfather clock in the corner struck midnight, Marissa began yawning with more regularity.

He pushed away from the table and the half-finished game. He hadn't wanted to end their time together because he loved being with her, but dawn would arrive much too soon. "I say we call it a night. What do you think?"

"I think so." She stood from her chair and stretched her arms above her head. "I'm ready for bed."

Her clothing molded to her body, giving him a view of the full length of her long legs, curved hips, generous bust, and graceful neck. She'd tied her hair back while eating the pudding, but it had come loose again in a cascade of dark waves.

How had he ended up with this beautiful and desirable woman? Him, plain old Felix? "I'm ready for bed too." His voice came out huskier than he'd intended.

Her eyes widened, then she dropped her arms, a flush tinting her cheeks. "What are we doing about the marriage bed?"

The marriage bed. The sparks low in his gut that he'd been trying to dampen flared to life. He'd assumed they wouldn't share a bed, that they would refrain from intimacies. But did she want more?

CHAPTER 11

Why in heaven's name had she just asked Felix about the marriage bed?

Marissa hadn't meant for the question to slip out. Yes, she'd been thinking about bed, but mostly because she'd been contemplating the sleeping arrangements and which room he should stay in.

Earlier, before his arrival, she'd considered having him stay in the room her two younger sisters had shared. But the room was just the way they'd left it, feminine and lacy, with a pale pink quilt on the double bed and rose-patterned paper on the walls. Even though he wouldn't fuss about it, she didn't feel right relegating him to that room.

She most certainly didn't want him sleeping in Meredith's twin bed across from hers. Even if she and Felix were still just friends, sharing her room would be entirely too awkward.

She'd considered the possibility of having him slumber on a sofa in the sitting room or even one in the front parlor. But none would be truly comfortable. Besides, when they had so many free beds in the house, he ought to be able to use one.

The final option was to put him in Father and Mother's old room. Marissa kept the bed made up for the rare times Father came out to the farm and stayed overnight. But she felt strange offering Felix the room and bed meant for a real married couple and not a fake one.

In all her mental shuffling of him from room to room, she hadn't been able to stop the curiosity or the desire that kept surfacing. What would it be like to share a bed with him, kiss him again, curl up and sleep against him, and then wake up in the morning beside him?

Even now, the thoughts sifted through her head, and more of that same desire emerged from within her, like a part of her was coming out of hibernation and was ready for whatever came next.

But of course there wouldn't be any sharing of a bed. They absolutely couldn't allow for intimacies. Not if they were planning to get an

annulment.

"So?" Felix raised his brow, revealing the blue of his eyes that was darker than usual. The slightly narrowed, heavy-lidded look sent her stomach tumbling.

"I didn't mean to say marriage bed." She swallowed her embarrassment. "I know we're not having a real marriage bed."

He shrugged nonchalantly, as if talking about it didn't bother him. "I suggested an in-name marriage because I thought that's what would appeal to you."

"That's fine."

"Fine? I mean, if you want more, who am I to oppose you?"

The heat of embarrassment came rushing back, this time in full force. "Felix." She spoke sternly. "You're too much sometimes, you know that?"

His lips twitched with a grin. "Am I now?" He lifted his glass of water and took a sip.

She'd never backed down to any of his challenges, and this felt strangely like a challenge. "So, are you telling me you want to have intimate relations with me? That I just have to be willing?"

Still in the process of drinking, he coughed, spit out a mouthful of water, then began choking.

She smiled, glad she'd gotten a reaction from him. "Well?"

He finished coughing. "Now who's too much?"

He was the one with the history of intimate relations, not her. She only had to think about the day he'd come to her and confronted her about Josiah not being right for her, that she wouldn't be happy with him. They'd had a sharp exchange, and she'd said things she'd regretted.

With the weight of her words heavy on her heart, she'd sneaked out of the farmhouse and walked into town after dark, needing to talk to Felix again. She'd sensed something different with him, that their relationship was changing, and she'd wanted to talk to him about it and see if he felt it too.

As she'd waited in the shadows for him to step out of the tavern where he'd gone for drinks, he'd finally made his appearance, clinging to another woman. He'd had his arm around her and had been kissing her neck. Then he'd stopped on the street and kissed her quite passionately on her mouth.

Marissa had been nearly sick to her stomach. She'd spun and walked away and hadn't seen him since that night.

Now as she faced him in the sitting room, the doubts came rushing back. Even though he'd reassured her he would remain faithful to their marriage, how could she know for sure he would? Especially when their marriage wasn't real? What incentive did he have?

As much as the attraction to him had sprung to life, she didn't want to end up as his summer dalliance. She couldn't forget that what they had wasn't lasting, that ultimately Felix was like a ship at sea—happy to visit many ports and experience the unique interests at each one, but never ready to settle down and make a home.

Straightening her shoulders, she took up the lantern and started toward the steps. "Don't flatter yourself, Felix. I refuse to join the ranks of women inviting you into their beds."

"Hold on." He sprang up from his chair, knocking it backward into a bookshelf. "That's not what I meant."

She didn't stop but hurried up the stairs.

"Marissa." His footsteps echoed behind her. "Wait."

When she reached the hallway at the top, she halted and fisted a hand on her hip.

As he finished ascending, she could see that his expression had lost all humor. His eyes were serious, and a line creased his forehead. "I'm sorry." His apology was soft.

"Sorry for what?" He probably had no idea what was bothering her.

"Sorry for making light of marital intimacy. I shouldn't have joked about it."

She was used to him joking. That wasn't the issue. The real issue was his faithfulness. "I said it once, and I'll say it again. I don't want you being a womanizer while we're married."

"There are no other women. I'm all yours." He held his arms wide.

She scowled back at him. "You're making light of it again."

"I know I have plenty of flaws, but there's one thing I'll never do, and that's be unfaithful to the woman I married."

She wanted to believe him and knew that deep down he was a man of integrity. But she'd always believed her mother was a woman of integrity, too, one who would never be unfaithful to Father. Yet it had happened. Marissa had been only fourteen and had been looking out the tree house window that summer morning when she caught sight of her mother locked in a passionate kiss with a man who hadn't been Father.

Mother had been too far away in the woods and had been embracing the fellow too tightly and fully to distinguish who he was. But the size had been smaller than her giant of a father. That had been clear enough.

The two had started to undress each other, and Marissa had been mortified enough that she'd ducked out of sight in the tree house. She'd counted several long minutes, the anger burning inside of her. Finally unable to hold back her indignation, she'd peeked out the window again with every intention of calling to her mother. But there had been no sign of Mother and her lover, almost as if they'd never existed.

But the trouble was, Marissa had seen Mother, had seen the passion in her embrace. She had been no innocent.

Thankfully Marissa had been alone that day. She hadn't wanted anyone else to know of Mother's indiscretions, not even Felix and especially not Father or her sisters. She didn't think Victor had seen Mother even though he'd been nearby in the blueberry field working. If he had witnessed Mother's adultery, he'd never said anything.

After that, Marissa hadn't been able to be near her mother, had avoided her, and had stopped talking to her. But Mother hadn't noticed Marissa's coldness. She'd been too busy at her restaurant—or so she'd said.

Only a month later, Mother sailed away.

It was possible Mother had died in the storm the way everyone believed. But what if Mother had met up with her lover and the two had run away someplace together, maybe to the Midwest or even to California?

Whatever might or might not have happened, Marissa had never forgiven Mother and never would. She supposed that's why she hadn't been in a hurry to get married herself. After witnessing Mother's unfaithfulness, she could admit she was skeptical of love and marriage.

As if reading her skepticism, Felix's expression turned earnest. "I promise it, Marissa. As long as we're married, I will remain faithful to our vows."

Most people didn't enter into marriage thinking they would one day commit adultery. No, most people thought they would have a happy marriage, or at least make the best of what they'd been given.

But obviously, at some point, Mother must have grown discontent with her life. Even the new restaurant venture hadn't been enough to satisfy her.

For just a moment, Marissa wished she could see her mother again and ask her if she was happy with her new man, ask her if leaving her family

had been worth it. Because what kind of mother could leave her daughters to run off with another man?

Marissa shook her head, needing to put off the bitter thoughts before she let them consume her.

"Please believe me." Felix was watching her face. Could he see her doubts? "I would never do anything to hurt you."

He already had when he'd fallen into the arms of that other woman the night of their argument and then left for California without saying goodbye. But that was in the past, and it no longer mattered. She'd told him she'd forgiven him, and she had.

She heaved an exasperated sigh at herself. "I'll be fine, Felix. And I'm sure everything will work out the way it's supposed to."

He opened his mouth as if he wanted to continue the discussion. Then he closed it and nodded.

She cocked her head toward her parents' bedroom. "You can stay in there. And I'll sleep in my room as usual."

His eyes locked on hers. Something in the dark blue made her pulse tap a little faster. It was an intensity she rarely saw there, an intensity she didn't understand, an intensity that made her wonder if maybe they could have more.

Victor had told her their relationship had the potential to turn into more if she let it. And that Felix would stay if she showed him she wanted him to. What exactly did that mean? How did she let their relationship change? Were there things she could do to facilitate romance? Did she even want to?

Felix stepped next to her parents' bedroom door and peered inside. The lantern she was holding shed some light on the tidy room with light oak furniture, a pale blue bedspread, and white curtains. "I know it probably feels odd to have me stay in your parents' bed."

She'd forgotten how well Felix could understand her. "It does, but someone has to do it. It might as well be you."

"Thank you." His voice turned soft.

"I should be the one thanking you for going through with the crazy plan to marry me so I can have the farm. Instead, I've been busy giving you a hard time."

"I'm glad I was here and could be the one to help you."

"I'm glad it was you too." She really was. There was no better man than Felix. He was the kindest man on earth. She'd known that for years, which

was why she'd dared to keep her relationship with him in spite of their fathers despising each other.

He lifted a hand to her shoulder and squeezed it. "We'll focus on our friendship, and everything will be all right."

She let her body relax. "Good idea."

"We'll talk and have fun, and it will feel like old times."

"I would like that very much." Why, then, did a tiny needle of disappointment prick her? Maybe because she didn't want old times anymore? Maybe because she wanted something different—although she wasn't sure what.

He rubbed a hand over the scruff on his face and down his jaw, weariness forming creases at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"You're tired." She took a step toward her bedroom. "You should get to sleep."

"You too." He shifted so he was leaning against the doorframe, as if settling in for a while. His shirt stretched tightly across his shoulders, and his arms flexed against his sleeves, highlighting his strength. He held himself with that new air of maturity she liked, one that had confidence and wisdom and even a humility that hadn't been there previously.

He was still as easy to like as always.

"Or," he said with a teasing smile, "we can stand here in the hallway and stare at each other all night."

"Is that a challenge? Because you know I'm the staring champion."

"Not anymore." He fixed unblinking eyes upon her. "I've been practicing and could beat you any day."

"Because I suppose staring is such an important skill to perfect."

"It is. Or at least staring at you is."

What did that mean? That he liked looking at her? No, he couldn't be saying that. She forced a chuckle, then swatted at him and spun away toward her room. "Good night, Felix."

"Good night, Marissa." His voice rumbled low.

Her stomach flipped even though she didn't want it to. She entered her room and closed the door. Then she rested against it, shut her eyes, and released a breath.

If she was having this much trouble with her feelings on day one of marriage with Felix, how would she be able to survive three months of living with him in such close quarters?

She would have to do as he'd suggested and focus on their friendship. That meant she had to ignore this new and interesting attraction. It was the only way they could make their fake marriage work.

CHAPTER 12

Felix's chest was tight with the need to return to the farm. He stepped outside his family's home into the darkness of the night and closed the front door. Guilt pricked him just a little that he'd cut short his time with Collette. But she'd sensed his distraction and had practically pushed him out the door of her room, smiling at him to go be with his new wife.

At least she was smiling. That was progress, according to Daphne.

Even so, Felix felt bad about wanting to be with Marissa more than his sick sister. He'd told himself that once he was married to Marissa, he wouldn't change anything about his visiting with Collette, but after only two days of being married, he was already leaving earlier.

It wasn't like Marissa would be waiting for him with open arms when he arrived at the farm. But he hoped this evening would be as fun as the previous couple with playing games and talking and teasing each other late into the night. In fact, he wanted as many of those nights as possible to store up in his memory before he left per their agreement.

Breathing in the scent of the sea, he started down the flagstone path that wound through shrubs and trees toward the shore. The Larocks' simple two-story clapboard home wasn't on the ocean and had never been fancy, not like the more elaborate homes the Axtons had built. No, Ollie Larock was a practical man, and his home and his businesses reflected that.

After a few minutes, the path opened up to the boardwalk that ran the length of the shore and led to the Larock wharf. Felix could travel the route in complete blackness if necessary, but tonight, even with a mist shrouding the moon, an ethereal glow guided his way.

The ocean was silent with the low tide, which only seemed to make the birdcalls all the louder. The whippoorwills' songs were echoing in the woodland that sat closely to the water, and the kestrels with their short *kip* calls came from above the tide pools.

He could admit he'd missed the rugged beauty of Stony Ridge Island and the rhythms of the ocean that defined so much of the life here. The past few

days of being out on the sloop had reminded him of just how beautiful Maine was with her majestic rocky coast bordered by dense forests that covered the mountainous land all the way up into Canada.

The small communities that had sprung up along the coast were similar to Axtonville and consisted mostly of subsistence farms and fishing operations. The people were hardworking and industrious in order to survive the cooler climate as well as the wind and rain and storms the ocean often unleashed.

Maybe he would eventually accept living in the East and fishing even though he'd never pictured himself doing so. Time had a way of bringing life into perspective. And maybe marriage did too.

He really was married. To Marissa.

If she'd been any other woman, he probably would have been panicking by now, wondering what he'd done, second-guessing himself, and trying to figure out how to undo his rash decision. But with Marissa, he was doing the opposite and searching for ways to stay closer to her.

"I was just coming to get you." Rufus's loud voice came from near one of the boathouses that belonged to the Larocks.

Rufus stepped out from the open doors of the boathouse holding shovels in one hand, a rake in the other, and wearing his wading boots. Although the brim of his cap shadowed his face, there was no hiding the long, scraggly beard and the determined set to his expression. He nodded toward a dory tied up to the wharf close to the mouth of the river.

Felix didn't have to look to know that Gabe and Liam were on the wharf readying the dory. And he didn't need Rufus to say anything for him to know what was going on again tonight. It wouldn't be long before thicker clouds covered the moon and made the night darker—dark enough for rumrunners to escape notice as they brought their illegal liquor ashore.

Felix started to slip past Rufus and the open boathouse. "Not interested."

Rufus thrust out the clamming rake and blocked his path.

Felix was tempted to shove the rake aside and continue on his way, but he suspected Rufus would just stop him again, and probably not as nicely the next time.

Rufus nodded at the stack of bushel baskets by the boathouse door—wire on cedar frames that allowed for easy washing of clams. "We need an extra pair of hands in clamming."

"Oh, so it's clamming tonight and not worming?"

"Ayuh. Clamming."

"Still not interested."

“Gabe wants you to come.”

“You’ll get along fine without me.”

“He’s pretty sure we need a fourth man tonight.”

Felix glanced to where his brother was standing, listening to their conversation.

Felix just shook his head at Gabe, then shifted his attention back to his brother-in-law. “Listen, Rufus. If I didn’t make it clear already, let me do that now. I’m not interested in being a part of your activities.”

Rufus rubbed a hand down his long beard, tugging at his jaw. “Paid you good money for last time, didn’t we?”

“I didn’t want the money.”

“That didn’t stop you from pulling out that cash in front of Thaddeus when you bought a wedding ring. He thinks you struck it rich with gold. That’s what he’s been telling everyone. He don’t know the real place that money came from.”

Felix sighed. He should have been more careful when purchasing Marissa’s ring. Because in addition to spreading the news about Mr. Axton’s agreement with Marissa, Thaddeus had obviously told the whole town about the money.

At least Felix had informed Marissa he hadn’t found gold. But if she eventually heard the rumor, would she wonder where he’d gotten the money?

“Guess the new wife wouldn’t be too happy to learn you bought her wedding ring with illegal money.” Rufus’s tone turned hard.

Marissa had never been a part of the Temperance movement, but she was a law-abiding person and wouldn’t approve of the rum-running. She would probably tell him that he should have waited on the ring, that getting her one wasn’t all that important, especially not one gained through dishonest means. And she would be right.

“You gotta be careful, Felix.” Rufus leaned in closer, the scent of rum on his breath. His family operated the local tavern, so no doubt they were paying him well to bring them liquor to sell to customers who still wanted it. “It would be a shame if Thaddeus found out the real reason you had all that money.”

Felix’s spine prickled. “If you try to get me in trouble, you’ll just make trouble for yourselves too.”

“We’ve been earning extra money from clamming and shrimping and worming for a while now. Everyone knows it. No one will question what

we're up to. But you?" He raised a bushy brow. "Who's gonna trust your word against ours?"

Felix didn't put it past Rufus or his brothers to let him take the blame for the rum-running if they got caught. All the more reason not to get involved. He shook his head. "I need to go. Marissa's expecting me."

"Tonight's a big shipment, and we need all the hands we can get to haul the cargo up Seal Beach into the caves."

"You've managed this far without my help."

At a whistle from Liam, Rufus called over at them. "We're coming." He thrust the shovels toward Felix. "Let's go."

Felix didn't take them.

"You shouldn't have married her." Gabe had started toward them, his expression hard, almost menacing in the faint moonlight.

Felix wasn't surprised by his brother's disapproval. He'd actually expected more of the same from his family by now. "I can marry whoever I want. I don't need your permission."

Gabe halted a dozen paces away and crossed his bulky arms, his wool peacoat straining at his shoulders. "The Axtons have always looked down on us. Guess you'll fit right in with them."

Felix wasn't sure how to respond. His pa had said something similar earlier in the week. Was that what his whole family believed about him? That he didn't like them?

"I have half a mind to make you regret your decision to marry an Axton." Gabe's voice held a taunt.

"Like I said, it's not your business, so stay out of it."

"Then maybe we'll make her regret her decision to marry you."

Felix fisted a hand. "Don't go near her."

"Or what?"

Felix met his brother's gaze squarely, a tremor winding through his stomach and twisting it into knots. "If you have a problem, take it up with me, not her."

"Then prove that you're not siding with them and you're still with your family."

"By what? Going with you tonight?"

"Yep." Gabe's gaze held a warning. He wouldn't follow through on his threat to make Marissa regret the marriage, would he?

Felix fisted his other hand, more than a little tempted to take a swing at his brother.

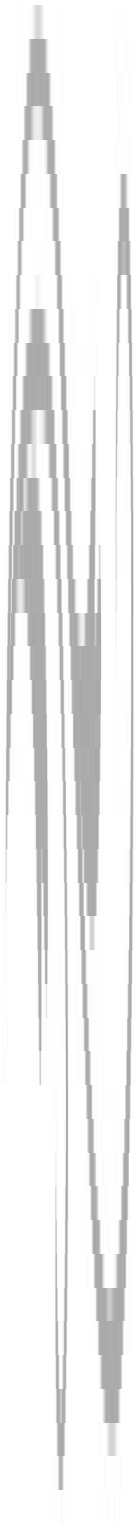
Behind Gabe, Liam was watching from the dory, and Rufus had tensed beside Felix.

Felix didn't want to fight his brothers. But he would if they bothered Marissa. Would it be best if he placated them tonight? Showed them he didn't think he was better than them?

"Fine." He took the shovels from Rufus and lifted them to his shoulder. "I'll go one more time. But then that's it. You guys leave me out of this in the future."

Without a word, Gabe spun and strode down the wharf toward the waiting dory. Rufus hefted up the clamming baskets and started after Gabe.

Felix hesitated only a moment more before heading toward the boat, frustration rippling through him.



In the darkness, Marissa paced across her bedroom, her bare feet slapping against the thin rug that covered the hardwood. Her heart was pounding even

harder and had been getting louder with each passing hour that Felix was gone.

Just a short while ago, she'd heard the grandfather clock downstairs chime midnight. That was well past the time Felix had returned the previous two nights after visiting with Collette, which had been around nine o'clock.

What had happened? And why hadn't he come home?

Of course she'd been imagining the worst happening—him in the arms of another woman.

She'd had to remind herself multiple times that he'd vowed he wouldn't be unfaithful to her. He'd promised he wouldn't hurt her. He'd come right out and declared: *"As long as we're married, I will remain faithful to our vows."*

That meant he wasn't off doing something he shouldn't be. No, he'd just gotten caught up in being with Collette.

Marissa halted in the middle of the room between the twin beds. Why was she having such a difficult time believing that's where he was? Why couldn't she trust him?

Was it because she'd once trusted her mother only to be betrayed? Mother had claimed she was busy at the restaurant and working late. Everyone had assumed she was passionate about what she was doing, so much so that Father had believed the restaurant was taking Mother away from their family.

It had turned out that her mother had been lying about where she was going, that instead she'd been meeting with her lover and the affair had taken her from the family.

Felix wouldn't lie to her. He was an honest man. When he got home, he would have a good explanation for why he was so late.

She paced to one bed and back to the other. At the creak of the back door, she expelled a tight breath.

He was home. Finally.

Hugging her robe closed, she tiptoed to the open door of her room and waited. Should she reveal that she was still awake and ask him where he'd been? Would that come across as too paranoid?

Footsteps ascended the stairway. Softly and slowly. Was he trying to sneak in? Was he trying to hide something?

Her heart pinched.

As he reached the top and started down the hallway, she stepped farther into the doorway.

Even though it was dark, he saw her and stopped.

She could sense frustration radiating from him. Something had happened.

“Felix?” She hated that her whisper came out weak and trembly, but she couldn’t help it.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered in return. “My brothers needed help with clamming and wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“So you’ve been clamming?”

He hesitated. “Yes.”

Why had he hesitated? “There’s more to it, isn’t there?”

“Nothing to worry about.”

Usually when someone said there was nothing to worry about, that meant the opposite. “I’m trying to believe you meant what you said about being faithful to our marriage vows.”

“Of course I meant it. I promise you, tonight I was with my brothers and Rufus clamming. I came here as fast as I could when we finished.”

She wanted to feel relieved, but he still seemed frustrated.

He reached out and caressed her cheek before he broke the contact and dropped his hand. “I’m sorry if I worried you. I told them I didn’t want to go and that I wouldn’t go again.”

“It’s okay if you do.” She didn’t want him to think she was controlling him and monitoring where he was.

“They stopped me on my way out of the house after visiting with Collette. They made a big deal about my marriage to an Axton and told me to prove I’m still loyal to the Larocks.”

“I would have been surprised if no one in your family was upset.”

“I just wanted to spend the evening with you. I’d been looking forward to it all day.”

The revelation eased the ache in her chest. “I was looking forward to spending the evening with you too.”

“Not more than I was with you.”

“Then are you hungry for a snack?”

His body seemed to relax. “Only if you’ll have a snack with me.”

She slipped past him into the hallway and moved toward the stairs. “I helped Janie make cottage cheese today. It’s fresh and cold and delicious.”

“Sounds perfect.” His footsteps padded after her.

She’d worried for nothing, just as she’d known she had. Felix Larock was a good man and would never do anything to hurt her. He’d promised her that, and she had to believe him.

CHAPTER 13

“Are you sure we should go?” Marissa asked for at least the tenth time since they’d walked into town.

Felix paused with his hand on the church door. The singing inside meant the service had already started. But that was okay because she’d told him she wanted to sneak in late and avoid talking to anyone.

“We have every right to be there.” At least that’s what he’d been telling himself while praying that their showing up today wouldn’t cause any problems. There was no worry about running into his family since they’d stopped going to church after the falling-out with the Axtons.

But Marissa’s family still went regularly, and her father would be present this morning. Even though he’d kept his distance over the past week since the wedding, Felix wasn’t so sure Marissa’s father would welcome him here. The rumors were still raging around town about how Mr. Axton wanted to get his hands on Felix and strangle him for marrying his daughter.

Marissa straightened her silk bonnet with its puff of ribbon on one side. The beige material, with a pattern of swirls, matched her cloak, which was open to reveal the gown underneath—a blue dress Felix had never seen her wear before, one she must have gotten after he’d left for California.

It was stunning on her. She was stunning. She was beyond stunning.

When she’d walked downstairs into the kitchen a short while ago, he’d nearly spilled the mug of coffee he’d been sipping. The fitted length had showcased her beautiful figure with all of her amazing curves, and the color had highlighted her eyes and skin.

Even now as he stood in front of the church with her, he was tempted to stare at her as he’d done in the kitchen.

Who was he fooling? Since living under the same roof as her, he’d been tempted to stare at her every single day that she’d come down from her

bedroom. It hadn't mattered what she'd worn because she looked good in every garment and at every moment.

They'd fallen into an easy routine of having coffee together in the mornings before going their separate ways. Then after he returned at night, they spent time talking about their days and playing a game of backgammon or two before heading up to their bedrooms. It was almost as if three years hadn't passed.

Except for the night he'd been out late with his brothers . . . He didn't want to think about the illegal activity they'd lured him into twice or how he'd deceived Marissa about it. He hated that now he had even more secrets he had to keep from her.

When Rufus had given him another wad of cash the next night, Felix had thrust it right back at him and told him he didn't want it. Rufus had insisted he take the money, but Felix knew that keeping any profits from the so-called clamming would ensnare him even further into their schemes. The best thing to do was walk away now and stay away.

He loved getting to see Marissa as the first and last part of his days. But he was finding he was never fully satisfied with the amount of time he got to spend with her. It went too fast and left him wanting to be with her longer.

Last night when she'd suggested they go to church, he hadn't stopped to think about the implications of being there. He'd only seen it as one more way to be with her.

"I don't know, Felix," she whispered now as she stared at the double doors. "Maybe we should skip a week." She'd packed a simple lunch in her bag for afterward so they could have a picnic, and he anticipated that too.

He shrugged. "It's your choice. But we'll face the same scrutiny next week. We may as well get it over with."

"True." She sighed. Then she placed her hand over his on the handle and opened one of the doors slowly.

The pastor's wife was playing the piano at the front, and the congregation was standing and singing from hymnals.

At the squeal of the door, several people in the back pews glanced their way and stopped singing to stare.

Marissa started tiptoeing toward the closest pew with space enough for both of them.

Felix closed the door, trying to keep it from squealing again, but it did. Louder. Or maybe fewer people were singing.

As he followed after Marissa, he could feel even more eyes upon them, and the singing faded to just a handful of voices. By the time they sidled into the pew, the singing had stopped altogether—except for Reverend Reynolds standing near the altar. His voice boomed out the words in time with the piano, which was falling silent too.

He continued singing for two if not three more measures before realizing no one was joining him. His brow furrowed as he halted and scanned the room. “Is something wrong?”

Felix expected Mr. Axton to turn around, point at him and Marissa, and tell the reverend that yes, something was wrong, that they were wrong, their marriage was wrong, and everything about Felix was wrong because he was a Larock.

But Mr. Axton stood unmoving near the front with his daughters, housekeeper, and the new fellow who’d come to town—Percy. In fact, Mr. Axton was the only one in the entire church who hadn’t turned around to gawk.

As Reverend Reynolds’s gaze shifted to the back of the sanctuary, Marissa edged closer to Felix. Even though she was a strong woman, this interest from everyone all at once was intimidating. Felix could feel his body stiffening like a schooner’s main mast.

He mentally repeated what he’d just told Marissa. They had every right to be there, and they might as well get the scrutiny over with.

He also wanted to prove they had nothing to be ashamed of, that they’d done nothing wrong. He didn’t want Marissa to live in disgrace or be ostracized for being married to him, especially after he was gone from Axtonville. He wanted her to be as respected and well liked as she’d always been.

That meant they had to weather this initial curiosity and spurning from the townspeople and their families.

He slipped an arm around her waist and drew her against his side. At the same time, he leaned in and kissed her temple. There. He might as well add fuel to the gossip and let everyone talk about how smitten he was with his new wife. Because it was true. He didn’t have to playact.

For a few long seconds, the reverend didn’t say anything. Then he smiled. “I would like to welcome the new Mr. and Mrs. Felix Larock this

morning to the service—”

“No.” Mr. Axton tossed his hymnal onto the pew with a clatter, shook his head in obvious disgust, then glared at his daughters and housekeeper along with Percy. “We will be leaving now.”

The reverend’s smile dimmed. “This is God’s house, and we ought to welcome everyone—”

“If you welcome the *new* Larocks,” Mr. Axton called over his shoulder as he stomped down the aisle, “then I will not be donating another cent to this church.”

Murmurs and gasps filled the air. The reverend exchanged a grave look with his wife, who was still at the piano. And Marissa’s sisters cast apologetic glances around, clearly embarrassed by their father’s outburst.

Marissa’s eyes had rounded at the sight of her father. But he stormed past her and out the church doors without the barest flicker of attention her way.

The rest of her family exited rapidly behind him. Before the doors could close, Marissa slipped out of the pew and raced after them.

“Wait!” she called as she stepped outside.

Her sisters halted, turning to face her, their eyes filled with worry. Marissa had visited with her sisters several times during the past week, and they’d continued to support her marriage.

Her father, though, had already started walking down the street away from the church with his extra-long stride with his extra-long legs. Only Percy managed to stay on his trail.

“Father, please!” Marissa called, scurrying down the steps, hurrying past her sisters, and half running after her father.

Felix stood in the doorway for a moment as the congregation and the reverend gaped at the unfolding drama. Then he stepped out and closed the doors behind him. Whatever else happened this morning, the whole town didn’t need to witness it. They’d already gotten enough of a show to keep them busy gossiping all week.

Marissa passed Percy and grabbed her father’s arm. “Don’t do this. Don’t cut me out of the family.”

Mr. Axton kept going. “I’m not cutting you out. You chose to leave.”

She hastened to walk alongside him. “Just because I married someone you don’t approve of doesn’t mean I chose to leave.”

Felix jogged toward Marissa, trying to catch up with her. His heart pounded, dread increasing with each step he took.

Mr. Axton shook off Marissa's grasp like she was nothing more than a pesky gnat. "You betrayed and deceived me, and now you are no longer my daughter."

At her father's harsh words, she stumbled.

Felix reached her just as she sank back, almost as if the words had punched her in the stomach and knocked the wind from her. He slid an arm around her waist and steadied her.

"You are not welcome anywhere in my house or in my businesses, and you may not contact your sisters again either." Mr. Axton's words rang out in the morning air. "You connived me into giving you the farm, but you will not get anything else ever again."

At the harsh declaration, Marissa's mouth fell open. She stared at him for several heartbeats, then anger flashed in her eyes. "No wonder she left you."

Mr. Axton halted abruptly.

Close behind, Percy almost bumped into the man but pulled himself to a quick stop. Walking slowly away from the church, the sisters and the housekeeper froze.

Marissa's cheeks were now flushed. "If you treated her the way you've treated me, then you didn't deserve to have her."

Felix had always wondered how much Marissa knew about her mother's disappearance and all that had happened. Perhaps she knew more than she'd revealed, clearly enough to suspect her mother had been unhappy in her marriage.

Mr. Axton pivoted slowly.

Marissa trembled underneath Felix's hold. Even though she was standing her ground, this obviously wasn't easy for her. Felix suspected it had never been easy for her to speak the truth to her father. It wasn't easy for Felix to confront his either. The two patriarchs were both strongheaded men. Their strength had enabled them to start a community that had survived and thrived in the wilds of Maine. But that strength was also overpowering at times, like now.

In all honesty, Mr. Axton was being beastly to her. He wasn't treating her with any kindness. No matter how much he might dislike the Larocks, Marissa didn't deserve his spite.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mr. Axton." Felix could no longer stay silent. "You have a beautiful daughter who loves you and has worked

to earn your respect. Instead of trying to understand her needs, you've treated her with contempt."

Mr. Larock had shifted to scowl at him.

Before the man could say anything, Felix began to guide her away from her father in the opposite direction. "Come on. Let's go."

Thankfully she didn't resist and walked blindly alongside him, as if she didn't care where they were going.

They passed several other businesses that were closed on Sunday. The street was quiet with most people in church. Even those who didn't make a habit of going to church still mostly rested on the Sabbath, taking the one day off from working.

At the corner, Felix turned north, leading her down a path that took them away from town and toward the center of the island, the place they'd explored as children, sometimes drawing maps to chart their adventures as they pretended to be pirates or Natives or even early explorers to the New World.

His memories of those days were fond. They'd always found ways to spend time together—sometimes in the evenings and quite often on Sunday afternoons when everyone else was resting.

The cleared land that surrounded the town gave way to forests. As he led her deeper into the thick growth, he kept holding her hand, and she clung to it as if it were the rope that was keeping her from sinking down into the depths. She also didn't say a word. But she didn't have to for him to know that she was deeply upset by the interaction with her father.

Every time he glanced over his shoulder and glimpsed her taut expression and pain-filled eyes, his frustration toward Mr. Axton pressed harder against his chest. Why didn't her father care that he was hurting her?

Gradually the terrain became steeper and rockier. The trail was nearly imperceptible amidst the rocks, but his feet carried him upward, exactly as they had for so many years, almost as if he'd never left and had just walked the trail yesterday.

They were both breathing heavily as they ascended the last dozen paces. Upon cresting the pinnacle, flat granite rocks spread out around them, interspersed with tall weeds and brush. The sky and clouds seemed to hang close enough that they could jump up and touch them—although he'd tried doing that as a child and had failed.

They'd arrived at the tallest point on the island—or at least it seemed that way to them when they were children. As far as he knew, no one had ever measured the height of Mount Boyton, named after the first man to climb to the top.

Every direction they turned, they could see different parts of the island. To the north, the largest lake on the island, Lover's Lake, was visible with its perfect blue waters, so calm and glassy that they reflected the hills and forests that rose on both sides. Although the name of the lake sounded romantic, it was called that because two lovers, escaping the British during the war, had drowned there. Ever since, people believed the lake brought bad luck.

A rocky range on the east side of Dark Ryder River separated Axtonville from Sunrise Cove, making it easier to row around the island than to cross by foot.

To the west, the flatter marshes led to a rugged coastline filled with caves and dangerous rocks jutting out of the water.

Axtonville was situated on Larock Bay to the south. The little town spread out at the top of the bay and was nestled at the mouth of the Dark Ryder River. Filled with cozy homes and weathered businesses, Axtonville was picturesque, almost idyllic. But life was usually not as perfect as it seemed. Underneath that peaceful village were ugly wounds that had festered for too long.

Felix stood beside Marissa, their hands still folded together. He was prepared to let her hold his hand forever if it helped to ease her pain.

She shuddered and her lips trembled.

"Are you cold?" He tugged her closer, intending to shelter her from the cool breeze. As he drew her in, she stepped up against him, wrapped her arms around his waist, and pressed her face into his chest, shuddering again.

Was she crying?

In all the years he'd known her, though tears had come to her eyes and turned them glassy, she'd never actually cried.

Now, she was shaking and sniffling and most definitely crying.

He hated that she was hurting, hated that her father had done this to her, hated his own part in bringing about this hurt.

Would they be better off nullifying their marriage? Would she be happier marrying Josiah Welch after all?

A burning protest swelled inside Felix, and he drew her in more securely. Now that he had her, he couldn't relinquish her. In fact, how would he ever be able to leave her?

Maybe he didn't need to leave.

Even as the thought came, he pushed it aside. He would have to go as they'd planned, because the truth was, if he stayed married to her, at some point he would be bound to tell her the dark secret about their fathers. And when that happened, she would hate him and send him away anyway.

Yes, it would be better to part ways as friends rather than as enemies.

CHAPTER 14

She'd destroyed her family.

Marissa couldn't hold back the tears. They were leaking out faster and faster, dampening Felix's suit coat. She hadn't planned on crying, but somehow that was the only thing she seemed capable of doing.

"You are no longer my daughter, and you are no longer welcome in this family."

Since she and Felix had left town, her father's words had been echoing in her head and pulsing in her blood, sending shards of pain throughout her body. She had tried for so many years to show him she was worthy of his love and his acceptance. But in the end, it hadn't mattered. She hadn't mattered. He was throwing her away like a fisherman tossing a worthless catch overboard.

She hadn't wanted to gain the farm and lose her family. But that's exactly what had happened.

At the moment, she felt helpless and angry and hurt all at once. The pressure was almost too much to bear, and the sobs clawed at her chest. She held them inside as best she could, but her body shook with the effort.

Felix's arms had surrounded her, and he pressed her in closely, tucking her head under his chin. He didn't say anything, didn't offer any consolation, and didn't try to make the situation better. He knew her well enough to understand that nothing would take away her anguish.

For a long while she just stood there in his arms and let herself cry until there were no more tears. Even then, she rested against him with her eyes closed, her breathing shallow, and her heart still aching.

She'd hoped her father's silence over the past few days meant he was resigning himself to her marriage to Felix. But this morning had shown her how wrong she'd been and that he was a bitter and spiteful man.

She didn't regret bringing up Mother's leaving him. She only regretted she'd been careful of his feelings for so long when he hadn't cared about

hers.

Inhaling deeply, she drew in the faint muskiness of Felix's shaving tonic. He'd been supportive to stand up to her father. He'd also been kind to hurry her out of town and take her somewhere private.

"Thank you, Felix." She didn't try to pull back, wasn't ready to leave his arms and the security and strength he was lending her.

He didn't loosen his hold. "We'll get through this together. I promise."

She nodded, not wanting to remind him that he would eventually leave her behind to deal with the mess of her life all on her own. For now, she didn't want to think about that, just wanted to take the comfort he was offering so freely.

"Why are you always so good to me?" she murmured against his chest.

"Because you always let me win in backgammon?" His tone was light and playful.

She chuckled. "I don't *always* let you win."

"Most of the time."

"What would I do without you?"

He didn't respond. He probably wished she hadn't said anything, hadn't revealed her need for him. Because that's what she'd done. She loved his presence in her life. She always had.

Maybe she'd adjusted to being without him, but she hadn't liked his absence. She'd tried to ignore that void inside, tried to keep from thinking about him, tried to manage without him. But now that he was back, she could see just how bleak her life had been without him there. It was like the mist had lifted and the sun had returned, bringing color to everything.

"Your life would probably be a lot easier right now if not for me," he finally said softly. "You probably would have married Josiah Welch the way your father wanted."

She tightened her arms around Felix's waist. "Not true."

"If it would make things easier, we can put an end to our marriage now."

She shook her head. "I don't want to give in to my father. At least if we get the annulment later in the summer like we originally planned, then my father won't think he won."

Felix was still resting his chin lightly against her head and was quiet for several moments. "We don't have to get an annulment." His voice contained a note of vulnerability.

What was he saying? Did he want to stay married to her?

“I was thinking about joining an offshore mackerel or cod fleet.”

If he did that, the commercial fishing vessels would take him away for many months at a time, far out to the Gulf of Maine or even off the coast of eastern Canada to the rougher waters of the North Atlantic archway where the fishing ground was most productive. “But you don’t like fishing.”

“I don’t hate it.”

“When we were younger, you always said you wouldn’t become a fisherman when you grew up.” He’d never had a passion for it, had always wanted to do something else.

He gave a slight shrug. “What do we know when we’re young? We have dreams that are too big for our britches.”

“It’s not wrong to dream.”

“No, but when we become adults, we realize dreams don’t put food on the table.”

She pulled back enough to study his face. “There’s other work you can do beside fishing to put food on the table.”

He was peering off at the parallel mountain range. “Fishing would give me someplace to go, let me seek out adventures, and it would also allow us to remain respectably married.”

The more he unveiled his plan, the less she liked it. “I don’t want you to remain *respectably* married to me out of obligation.”

“It wouldn’t be like that.”

“Yes, it would, Felix. You deserve to go your separate way so you can live your life. We can’t change that now because of my father.”

“I was considering the fishing even before this morning, and now it seems to make more sense.”

He’d already sacrificed enough for her by going through with the marriage. She couldn’t let him sacrifice again by giving up his desire to travel and have adventures. If and when he stayed, he needed to choose it because that’s what *he* wanted, not because he felt duty bound to her.

“You can’t do it for me.”

The muscles in his jaw and cheeks flexed as he stared off into the distance. He actually had really nice features, had turned into a very good-looking fellow as an adult. Not that he hadn’t been good-looking when they’d been younger. She’d just never paid attention to his physique.

Now that she was standing in the fold of his arms with his face only inches away, she couldn’t keep from noticing. “Felix. Look at me.”

He glanced at her and then away again. That was his way of avoiding the difficult discussion they needed to have.

She reached out and placed both of her hands on his cheeks and bent his head so he was forced to peer down at her.

His blue eyes were the color of wind-tossed waves, and the tumult that had always been inside of him was still there.

"If you sign up to fish so you can keep helping me, eventually you'll regret it and resent me as a result."

"No, I won't—"

She pressed a finger to his lips and cut him off. "Yes, you will. And I care about our friendship too much to let that happen."

His breath was warm against her finger, and she dropped both hands before she could allow herself to dwell on the firmness of his lips and how they'd felt on their wedding day.

His gaze skimmed her face, making her feel suddenly winded in a way she didn't understand. "I care about you too much to leave you to deal with all the gossip that will come as a result of an annulment."

He was sensitive and understanding, so different from Father. Maybe that's why she'd always been drawn to Felix. "How about if we see how the summer goes and then decide in August?"

"Maybe. It's possible by then your father will have cooled off, and everyone will have accepted our marriage."

"So that you're free to go?"

"What are you saying, Marissa?" Felix's voice took on a teasing note. "Are you telling me that you don't want me to leave at all?"

Victor had told her that Felix would stay if he knew that she wanted him. The truth was, she did want Felix to be a part of her life even though she'd tried to deny it. They could make a good life together, couldn't they? Their first week had already been filled with laughter and fun and late nights with long discussions. He was easy to be with and kept things from being dull. And she knew and trusted him more than anyone else besides her sisters.

How would she ever find another man who would be a better husband than Felix?

Should she stand up on her toes, press her mouth to Felix's, and kiss him until they were both breathless? If she kissed him every day and showed him she cared, would he eventually care for her enough in return?

Without giving herself the chance to talk herself out of the resolution, she slid her hands up his chest and wrapped them around his neck.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"Nothing."

The beginning of a grin tugged at his lips. "Then why are you staring at my mouth?"

"Because of this . . ." She covered his lips with hers. She was being brazen, but if they could develop more between them—maybe even love—would he want to stay and make a life with her here? She didn't know, but she was willing to try and find out.

She intertwined her fingers into his hair at the back of his neck and dragged him down closer. Her lips plied at his, wanting this kiss more than anything else. In fact, the wanting was so strong it burned through her veins.

Felix seemed stunned by her initiating the kiss and was standing against her taut and unmoving. Maybe he hadn't been quite as moved by their wedding kiss as she had been.

Of course not, because it had been for show.

What was she doing now being so forward with him?

With mortification chasing away her desire, she began to pull back, trying to think of something to say to explain why she'd kissed him.

Before her lips could fully leave his, his arms tightened around her and his mouth clung to hers, as though he couldn't bear to part ways. In the next instant, he rushed into the kiss with a force like that of a nor'easter gale sweeping in and capsizing her.

The power of his kiss was so incredible that she released a soft sound. Was it a whimper? She wasn't sure because she suddenly couldn't think a coherent thought with his mouth against hers and the taste and feel of him. He was delicious, but he was also forbidden, wasn't he?

Maybe she had to rethink her newest strategy to kiss him every day. It would probably leave her more shaken than it would him.

She broke away from the kiss and pushed against him.

Thankfully, he released his hold. His eyes smoldered, but he didn't say anything as he watched her.

She pivoted and began to hike across the rocky mountaintop, needing to put some distance between them. She definitely shouldn't have kissed him. She thought she would show him she wanted him and cared about him, but

it felt like she was luring him with this physical attraction that was building between them.

If he decided to stay, it couldn't be because she'd coerced, seduced, or persuaded him. No, he had to make up his own mind.

The wind at the top of the mountain blew at her as if to chastise her. She'd been trying her whole life to get her father to love her for who she was, and that hadn't worked. Why did she think getting Felix to love her would work any better?

She reached a ledge and was forced to stop. Behind her, she could hear Felix's footsteps slapping against the stone, following her. As he came to a halt beside her, he peered at the landscape spread out below, the Dark Ryder River flowing swiftly toward the sea. The rocky crags on either side were dotted with some pine trees and brush but were mostly barren with the sunlight showcasing the dark threads running through them.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about?" Felix was way too calm, as if he was talking about the hike up the mountain instead of the kiss they'd just shared.

She couldn't tell him she was hoping to convince him not to go away. So what could she tell him? "I was just thanking you for everything." The excuse was terrible, but it was the first that came to mind.

He chuckled. "Remind me to do something nice for you every day."

She snorted. "That was a one-time thank-you. Don't expect any more."

"I won't expect more. But I won't complain if you decide to reward me with a kiss like that again."

"Reward?" This time she scoffed. "Says the man who's been kissed by dozens of women."

He burst out with a laugh.

She eyed him sideways. "I don't think your kissing history is a laughing matter."

"I haven't kissed *dozens* of women, Marissa." His voice was laced with humor.

"This isn't funny, *Felix*."

"It is funny to see you get worked up about it."

"I'm not worked up." But she kind of was.

"I just never thought I'd see the day when you cared about how many women I may or may not have kissed."

Why *was* she so concerned over it? He'd never had any obligation to her back then. It had been within his right to pursue other women just like she'd courted Josiah.

"It was only a handful," he said softly. "And none of those kisses compare with the two we've shared."

"Of course they don't." She tried to make herself sound nonchalant, but she couldn't keep her lips from curling into a smile.

"In fact, I think it's safe to say that those two kisses will top everything else in life. Unless you want to try again and see if the next kiss is even better."

"Nice try." With a widening smile, she bumped her shoulder against his arm. "But no. We're just friends. And friends don't go around kissing each other like that." As tempting as the thought of sharing another kiss with him was, she had to be careful. Kissing him would probably only lead to frustration and heartache.

Even so, she couldn't deny she was happy their kissing was special and different and that he'd liked it. If nothing else, the kiss and all the talk about kissing was making her forget about the problems with her father. At least the kissing was good for something.

"What about you?" He bumped her gently back with his hip. "How many men have you kissed?"

"Just Josiah."

"You kissed Josiah?"

Did his voice contain surprise or something else? Surely not jealousy.

His brow furrowed. "I'm surprised your father let you be alone with the fellow."

"After we were engaged, Father allowed us some unchaperoned time."

Felix fell silent, the wind the only sound as it gusted across the mountaintop and tussled with her cloak and skirt. It tried to knock her bonnet askew, but the ribbon tied under her chin kept it in place.

Felix placed a hand on his hat to keep it on. But then he swiped it off and raked his fingers through his hair while he expelled a tense breath.

She smoothed back a lock of his hair that was now sticking up. She liked the softness and fingered a lighter, almost-blond strand amidst the rest of the sandy brown.

His jaw flexed, showcasing the strong lines in his chin. All the humor from moments ago was gone.

“What’s wrong?” She dropped her hand away.

He caught her fingers and brought them back up, this time to his lips. Holding her gaze, he pressed a kiss to her hand. The dark blue held flickering flames of a lighter shade—the low, hot flames that could ignite an entire fire if fanned enough.

The craving she’d felt during the kiss came rushing back.

What did such desire mean? And why was she feeling it for Felix now? She’d never wanted to kiss him before he left for California. She’d never wanted his hands on her. And she’d never wanted to so brazenly touch him, almost as if she couldn’t get enough of him.

Yes, it was true that they’d both finished growing up, had changed, had matured. Maybe the absence was making them both appreciate each other more. Maybe having gone through the act of getting married was giving them a new boldness. Whatever it was, being with him was stirring longings inside her she’d never known she had.

CHAPTER 15

He was reacting to the news of her kissing Josiah with irrational anger and jealousy. But he couldn't help himself.

Felix kissed her fingers again, this time harder so that her eyes widened—her incredibly beautiful golden eyes that had always been so perceptive and direct.

Of course she'd sensed something was wrong. How could he explain his feelings to her without giving away the fact that was becoming clearer with each passing day? He was falling in love with her.

Had he always been in love with her? Maybe he had been and just hadn't acknowledged it. Maybe he'd tried to pretend it was only friendship. Maybe he'd denied it because he'd been afraid she would push him away if she knew.

But now, after the way she'd just kissed him? She had to feel something, too, that went beyond friendship. It might not be love for her yet, but she couldn't have faked the passion in that kiss if she hadn't experienced the power of their connection the way he had.

Her whimper.

His body liquified just thinking about it, and his muscles went taut with the need to have her back in his arms.

She was letting him hold her gaze captive, and she hadn't pulled her fingers from his grasp. That had to mean something too.

Yet he had to be careful how he proceeded. It would be selfish of him to allow the physical side of their relationship to gain momentum, for them to develop a deeper bond, only to later end their relationship.

He grazed her fingers one last time, then he lowered her hand.

She drew in a shuddering breath, as if she were dizzy and trying to get her bearings.

Yes, she was feeling a draw to him. With the pull between them, it would be all too easy to get carried away. He couldn't let that happen though, had

to remain strong enough to resist a dalliance with her because she was worth so much more than that.

"So?" she asked softly, persistently. "Are you going to tell me what's wrong or not?"

He had to give her some semblance of the truth. "The only thing wrong is that I enjoy kissing you too much."

"You do?"

"Far too much."

Her lips quirked with a smug smile.

His comment had obviously been what she'd needed to hear. He might as well say more. "You're a desirable woman."

"Do you really think so?"

"Believe me. I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it."

Her smile crept higher. "If you were hoping to make me feel better after all my father said, it worked."

"Good. Then I guess I should keep going."

"Yes, you should."

It was his turn to smile. He loved their bantering. "With how beautiful you are in that dress, you're rendering me useless."

"Rendering you useless, am I?"

"And I can't think a coherent thought whenever I look at you."

"Coherent? When have you ever thought coherently?" She poked him.

He tickled her in the side, and soon she was laughing.

As they climbed back down Mount Boyton, their conversation shifted to their buried treasures from childhood. They teased each other about what they'd chosen to bury. He couldn't remember half the stuff he'd placed inside the small chest. But when they reached the marked tree along the river, it was fun to dig it up and discover what had been important when they'd been younger.

He noticed a common theme among his buried items—they all related to Marissa. He'd kept one of her hair ribbons, a piece of sea glass the color of her eyes, and a heart-shaped rock she'd found and given to him. Apparently, he'd been smitten then, too, but hadn't realized what his feelings were.

Her items were more related to their friendship—a map they'd created together, a small animal he'd carved, and matching bracelets made from beads Janie had given them.

Sore from hiking in their Sunday shoes, they bared their feet and dipped them in the river at a spot where they'd often waded and cooled off. They shared the lunch Marissa had packed, then they lay back in the tall grass and sandy riverbank, reminiscing about their adventures.

As the sun grew warmer, they agreed to close their eyes for a short rest. By the time they both awoke, the afternoon was mostly spent. They finished the remains of their lunch and then meandered in the direction of the farm, going inland instead of along the coast.

Finally, by the time they entered the periphery of the farmhouse, Felix exhaled an almost blissful sigh. Considering how things had started with the confrontation with Mr. Axton, the day had redeemed itself. When was the last time he'd had such a perfect day? Probably the last full day he'd spent with Marissa.

Why did he always feel so content when he was with her—like he was safely ashore after being adrift on wind-tossed waves?

They stopped and talked with Janie, who was sitting outside her cabin weaving one of her beautifully designed baskets. Then, as they passed by the barn, Victor stepped out of the shadows of the open door, his expression grave. "You have a guest."

Felix halted, his gut tightening. "Who?"

"Meredith. She is upset."

Marissa's eyes filled with worry as she glanced at the house that was aglow with rays of the setting sun. "What happened?"

"You should talk with her for yourself." Victor's dark eyes remained kind, but his voice was firm.

Marissa nodded, then strode toward the house, her shoulders back, her chin lifted, her body as beautiful as ever.

Felix could only stare after her, wishing he hadn't been born a Larock, that instead he'd been a part of a family worthy of her.

When she entered the house, he shifted his attention to Victor, who was watching him with knowing eyes.

"You love her."

Of course it was a statement and not a question. It always was with Victor.

It wouldn't do any good to deny it. "I admit it. I'm falling in love with her."

"You fell in love with her long ago."

Felix grinned. “Maybe I did.”

Victor waved away the pesky midges hovering in the dusk air. “Then you will stay on the farm with her.”

“I’m heading out to visit with Collette—”

“Stay forever.”

Stay forever. The words sent a chill over Felix, one that had nothing to do with the drop in the temperature along the waterfront at sunset. “You know I’ve always wanted to leave Axtonville.”

“You ran off like Jonah.”

“Like Jonah?”

“In the Bible. Jonah was scared and ran the opposite direction from where God wanted him to go.”

“How do you know California was the opposite of where God wanted me to be?”

“We can try to run away from the past, but no matter where we go, it follows us.”

It had followed him. Victor was right about that.

“Now God brought you back so you could face your past.”

“I made the decision to come home for Collette.”

“And He brought you back for Marissa.”

Victor’s family had become Catholic when the Jesuit priests had lived in Maine. He had a blend of Native spirituality alongside the Catholicism, and he was one of the wisest men Felix had ever met and walked closely with God.

But Felix hadn’t come back for Marissa. During the years of his absence, he’d assumed she was married, possibly even had children. It hadn’t been until he’d already arrived home that he’d realized she’d never married Josiah.

Yet how could he explain all that to Victor? How could he also explain the deep fear that taunted him? Mr. Axton had said, *“The apple never falls far from the tree.”* It was true, but Felix was hoping that in his case the apple could fall a great distance from the tree so he didn’t end up a bad apple.

Besides, Marissa didn’t really want him to stay. Did she? They’d discussed it earlier on the mountaintop, and she’d told him he needed to go, that she didn’t want him to remain out of obligation or because of the gossip or anything else.

Felix palmed the back of his neck. “I’m not ready to be back in Axtonville, and she knows it.”

“One cannot be ready to blaze a new trail if one is stuck in the mire.”

“That’s why I’m trying to move on from here, so I’m not stuck.”

“We must shake off the burdens weighing us down first before we can climb out of the pit.”

But Victor didn’t know the secrets that Felix did—secrets too shameful to tell anyone.

“If she asks you to stay, you will.” Victor pierced him with his dark eyes.

Felix was tempted to look away, but he held the man’s gaze. “She won’t ask.” But if she did, what would he do then? Could he stay if he knew she loved him and wanted to be with him in the same way he did with her? What about the dark secrets that could eventually come to light and destroy everything between them?

Before Victor could respond with another old saying or word of wisdom, Felix shrugged. “She doesn’t love me the same way, Victor.”

“Love blooms where there is nurturing—”

“She might have some attraction, but that’s not the same as love. She still sees me as just a friend.”

“Friendship makes the strongest foundation for a loving marriage.”

Their marriage and the issues were too complicated to be solved by one-line proverbs. “Marissa and I will work this out in our own way.”

Victor nodded, then turned into the barn, his long braids swishing across his back.

Felix wasn’t sure how he and Marissa would work it out, but somehow they would. As he made his way to the house, the bliss from the day with her was gone, and in its place was a cloud.

Victor just wanted what was best for Felix and Marissa, but there were no easy answers to their relationship. It had always been complicated and probably always would be.

When Felix stepped into the house a moment later, he followed the lantern light and the sound of voices to the sitting room where Marissa was hugging her sister Meredith, who was softly crying.

At his appearance, Meredith pulled back, wiped at her cheeks, and sniffled loudly. Her pale hair was in disarray and her normally put-together appearance was rumpled.

Marissa squeezed her sister's hand, then crossed to Felix, guiding him back into the darkened hallway. Her brow furrowed above sad eyes. "She was trying to discuss my marriage with Father this afternoon, trying to be the peacemaker as usual. But Father wouldn't listen to her and told her that if she persisted in supporting me, she would have to leave."

"So she left?" Felix peeked back into the sitting room. Meredith had lowered herself into one of the comfortable armchairs and buried her face into her hands. He shook his head as he met Marissa's gaze again.

"She said she didn't want to go," Marissa whispered, tugging him farther down the hallway, away from the sitting room. "But Father was yelling at her."

"For trying to be a peacemaker?"

She nodded. "Meredith is the sweetest and gentlest woman you'll ever meet. If Father can't get along with her, then who can he get along with?"

"No one." It was one thing for Mr. Axton to be angry toward the Larocks for what had happened long ago. It was another for him to allow his bitterness destroy his family. Because that's what was happening—he'd let the anger fester for so long that now he'd become a bitter man even toward his own daughters.

"I told Meredith she can stay here as long as she needs to. I'm hoping Father will realize he was too hard on her, that none of this is her fault. Maybe he'll relent and allow her back."

"Of course we'll do whatever we can for your sister, even if it makes our marriage a little more complicated."

Marissa pressed her lips together and was silent for a moment. She obviously hadn't thought about how to carry out their fake marriage with Meredith there.

"Should we tell Meredith the truth?" he offered. "Maybe she'll understand that we had to pretend so you can have the farm."

"No." Marissa gave a quick shake of her head and glanced in the direction of the sitting room, clearly not wanting Meredith to overhear them. "She stood up to my father defending our marriage."

A part of him warned against taking their pretending too far. But if that's what Marissa wanted to do, he wouldn't oppose her.

"I'm sure she won't be here long," Marissa whispered. "We can act like a married couple for a day or two, can't we?"

“Of course we can.” He gave what he hoped was a nonchalant shrug. “That won’t hurt us.”

“That’s what I’m thinking too.”

“I’m not here that much anyway.”

She hesitated. “And one of us can sleep on the floor.”

That’s right. They would have to share her parents’ bedroom, otherwise Meredith would know for sure their marriage wasn’t real. “I don’t mind the floor.”

“Are you sure?” Marissa’s voice held chagrin.

“It’s no trouble. I’ve gotten used to going without a bed over the past few years.”

“See, it’ll be easy.” Marissa tried for a confident smile. “We’ll keep our arrangement our little secret.”

He offered her what he hoped was a reassuring smile back. “You’re right. It’ll be no problem.” He’d already had a hard enough time over the past week keeping his thoughts from straying to her lying in her bed across the hallway. He doubted he’d be able to sleep well with her only an arm’s length away.

But when it came to Marissa, he’d always had to fight his desires. This would be no different. He’d make himself resist her once again.

CHAPTER 16

“You do not know how relieved my heart is to learn that you have no feelings for Percy,” Meredith said from where she sat against the iron headboard of the bed, already in her nightclothes and the coverlet pulled up to her shoulders. Her voice was soft and gentle, soothing Marissa’s guilt from having to pretend to be happily married to Felix.

“No feelings at all for Percy.” Marissa sat on the end of Meredith’s bed in their old bedroom. She was also attired in her nightgown and a robe with her hair unbound and bare feet tucked underneath her. “The only one I care about is Felix.” She did care for Felix as a friend. That much was true.

After Felix left to go visit his sister, she and Meredith had spent the past couple of hours talking in the sitting room. Finally, after Meredith could no longer hold back her yawns, Marissa had suggested they get ready for bed.

“I know Percy isn’t exciting or even handsome enough for you.” Meredith’s cheeks were flushed.

Marissa made a sound of protest at the back of her throat. “I wasn’t searching for exciting or handsome.”

Meredith’s pretty green eyes held admiration. “Felix is both. I have always thought so but have never been brave enough to admit it.”

Felix was exciting. There was no doubt about that. He’d always added an element of fun and spontaneity and adventure to their friendship in the past, and he was doing so again. She’d had an incredible day with him, hiking and talking and just being together.

Marissa pictured Felix as they’d stood on Mount Boyton with his suit coat unbuttoned, his shirt so white against his tanned skin, his wavy brown hair combed into submission. And yes, he was handsome. Meredith was right on that account too.

Meredith was peeking at her shyly, as though trying to understand the newlywed relationship. Did her sister sense something was amiss? Marissa

needed to get the focus off herself and back onto Meredith. “Will you be happy with Percy?”

“I think so,” Meredith responded slowly. “He is a very kind fellow, and he seems happy with our arrangement.”

“How could he not be happy? You would make any man a wonderful wife. You’re beautiful and sweet and talented in so many things.”

Meredith’s flush spread. “You’re saying so because we’re sisters.”

“It’s the truth.”

“If I’m all those things, then why hasn’t any man paid me attention yet?” Meredith’s voice turned earnest, soulful.

“They do pay you attention, and you just don’t realize it.”

“Stop flattering me, Marissa. Men don’t pay me any attention with you around.”

“That’s not true—”

“Every man has always sought you out first and hardly given me a second glance.”

Was she right? Had Meredith lived in her shadow? “Well, you aren’t as outgoing as I am, and you’re more reserved.”

“I’m too tall. That’s probably the real issue. So I’m grateful at least one man is interested and that I won’t end up an old spinster.”

Marissa reached for her sister’s leg beneath the cover and squeezed it. “You were never bound to be a spinster. If anyone was destined to remain single, that was me.”

“Only because you had no affection for any man other than Felix. As I told Father, Felix’s return is providential. And if God has destined you to be together, then who are we to try to separate you?”

Marissa released Meredith, then stood up from the bed, guilt again prodding her. Being deceptive with her sister was much harder than she’d expected. A part of her wanted to just tell Meredith the truth the way Felix had suggested, but another part of her cautioned against it because of more fury that would be unleashed.

“I told Father I could never be a part of any plotting or planning to ruin your marriage.”

Marissa’s spine stiffened. “He wants to ruin my marriage to Felix?”

Meredith’s eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry. It’s terrible of him.” She had inherited all the tears in the family, crying easily in almost every situation.

“I won’t let him interfere.”

“I won’t either.” Meredith swiped at the tears now spilling over.

Marissa crossed to the window that faced the front of the house and the ocean. A chilly breeze blew in through the partially opened window, rustling the lacy curtain and bringing with it the scent of the sea. She heaved a sigh. “How have we gotten to this point, Meredith? Where our family is broken and fighting?”

“I don’t know,” came her sister’s soft reply.

“Maybe I was wrong—”

“No.” Meredith spoke firmly. “You weren’t wrong to marry Felix. Father did tell you that you could marry anyone. I heard him and so did Misty and Morgan.”

“But with Father’s hatred for the Larocks—”

“That has nothing to do with Felix.” Meredith’s words held a certainty, as if she knew what the real issue was for Father’s hatred. Maybe she did. Maybe she had secrets too, like Marissa.

“Felix is innocent and so are you,” Meredith stated.

They weren’t entirely innocent. Even so, Marissa swallowed her protest. She only had to keep up a charade for a few days before her sister would find a way to make peace with Father and move back into town.

“I appreciate you standing up for me, Meredith.”

“I couldn’t do otherwise. You know that. And Misty and Morgan feel the same way I do.”

“I’m surprised Father didn’t boot them out too.”

“He threatened to, but I begged him to send me away and not them.”

Marissa could only imagine the scene and shook her head.

“I’m happy that Felix supports you having the farm and the blueberry field.”

“Me too.”

“I think Percy will support me with my inn, or at least he indicated he wouldn’t be opposed to it.”

“That’s wonderful.” Marissa turned away from the window and gave Meredith her full attention. “I hope he’ll help you find a way to purchase a place.”

For the past few years, Meredith had been dreaming of opening an inn, similar to the one her grandparents owned. But Meredith was aware, like Marissa, how difficult it was to make their dreams come true, especially without husbands to help them.

The kitchen door opened downstairs.

"That must be Felix," she said. "Home after visiting with Collette."

"That's so sweet of him to spend time with his sister."

"He goes every night." Marissa stood unmoving by the window, suddenly uncertain where she ought to be or what she should be doing.

A moment later, his footsteps echoed as he bounded up the stairs.

How would a newly married couple act?

She wasn't quite sure, but it was time to put on some kind of show with Felix so Meredith didn't have any regrets about standing up to their father and leaving home.

As Felix's footsteps thudded down the hallway and drew closer to the bedroom, Marissa curved her lips up into a welcoming smile and tried to project enthusiasm at seeing him again.

When he stepped into the doorway a moment later, she was ready. "Hi," she said breathlessly.

His gaze bypassed Meredith and went directly to her. He skimmed her from her loose hair and flowing white nightgown down to her toes and ankles showing at the hem. He didn't look away as any other man would do under the circumstances. Instead, he locked in on her bare feet and stared, his eyes suddenly darkening with desire.

Her heartbeat tripped over itself. Was he in acting mode for Meredith? Or was this real? Either way, his attraction was very much alive and warmed her.

"How was Collette?" She remained in her spot in front of the window, needing another breeze to blow inside and cool her.

"She was in a happy mood tonight."

"That's good. Let's hope that means she's getting better."

"Daphne thinks she's getting stronger every day." Felix finally pulled his gaze from Marissa's feet, only to travel up her nightgown, slowing at her hips and then at her bust before lingering over her bare neck.

Meredith was watching Felix with widening eyes.

"I see you're ready for bed." Felix's tone was filled with insinuation.

Marissa narrowed her eyes on him and cocked her head toward Meredith, trying to communicate that he needed to tame his fake ardor. He was laying it on too strong.

Felix took in her frown, but then his lips curled into a crooked smile, one that was playful and devious and meant he was up to no good.

He began to cross toward her with calculated steps. “Meredith, I hope you don’t mind if I take my wife away for the night.”

“Of course not.” Meredith pulled her coverlet up higher and stared at it unblinking, her cheeks turning a shade redder.

“Fe-lix.” Marissa tried to infuse her tone with warning.

As he reached her, his gaze filled with even more mischief. “I’ve been thinking about you the whole time I’ve been gone.”

Marissa hesitated. She wanted to punch Felix in the arm for his brazenness. But doing so would probably give away their marriage sham. So she wrapped her arms around him in a fake hug while tilting her head up toward his ear. “Tone it back, Romeo,” she whispered.

His arms snaked around her in return. “What was that? You can’t wait to get me alone?”

From the bed, Meredith gasped softly and then coughed.

Marissa pinched Felix from behind and then patted his chest, forcing a smile. “Actually, I was planning to spend a little more time with Meredith. You go on to bed by yourself since I know you’re so tired.”

“I’m never too tired for you, my dearest.” Felix dropped a quick but hard kiss on her forehead.

Even if his passion was for show, the kiss still ignited something inside her, like a match touching a lantern wick and a flame springing to life.

“Well, *dearest*,” she said in return, pretending to pout, “Meredith needs me tonight. So you’re in luck. You’ll get to stare at the portrait you had made of me instead.”

Meredith coughed again, this time choking.

Felix’s eyes crinkled at the corners with humor. “I do love that portrait. But after getting to stare at the real you, I can’t ever go back.”

“You could always sing those love songs about me that you wrote. I know how much singing them soothes you.”

His grin widened. “I want to sing them to you again, if that’s okay.”

She should have known he would be good at playing this game of wits. He always had been fun to spar with.

“I can’t wait to hear the songs . . . and more of the poems.” She tossed Meredith a smile. “I didn’t realize Felix was such a poet until he showed me the book of love poems he wrote about me.”

Meredith was staring at them with rounded eyes. Sweet Meredith, of course, was believing every word of their silly exchange.

Marissa glanced away before she laughed. “Would you mind sharing one of the poems with Meredith right now, *my dearest*?” She patted Felix’s chest again for good measure.

Still grinning, he pressed another kiss to her forehead. “I don’t mind sharing them, even if they are a little private. Are you okay if I recite the poem about your fingernails and toenails? That’s probably my favorite.”

“Or what about the poem about how you thought my hair was as soft as seaweed? That was such a special poem.” She began to run her fingers through his hair. She loved the feel of him—of his hair, of his body, of his mouth. And the pretending was fun, almost exhilarating. Leave it to Felix to make it that way.

“‘Ode to Marissa’s Seaweed Hair’?” He quirked a brow, as if deep in thought. “That one?”

“Yes, your poetry talent is really on display in that particular poem.”

“Sure.” He cleared his throat. “Hair, hair, hair. Everywhere . . .”

A bubble of laughter tickled Marissa’s throat. It started to come out, and she finally had to let go of his hair, cup a hand over her mouth, and bury her face in his shirt.

He took a breath as though preparing to recite more but then paused. “Are you laughing at me, dearest?”

“No,” she managed. “I’m just overcome with emotion. That’s all.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet of you.” He gentled his voice. “I’m glad my poems make you happy.”

“Oh, more than you could ever know.” This time when she pulled back, she patted his cheek.

Before she could think of her next move, he bent for another kiss. She expected him to place it on her forehead, like he already had. But this time, he dipped lower, and his lips connected with hers.

At the touch, the flame inside her went from a flicker to full burning light all in one burst. It was a powerful connection, like what had happened when they’d kissed on the top of Mount Boyton. Somehow it was as if their souls were meshing along with their mouths. Was that what happened when two people had a deep friendship first? Did that inner bond make the physical bond all the more passionate?

She lifted onto her toes and mingled her lips with his. Oh he felt so good, so soft and warm and perfect. And she was suddenly eager for more of him,

more kissing, more of this intense spiritual and physical bond that they seemed to share.

It didn't matter that they'd agreed on no more kissing. Or maybe they hadn't agreed to that. At the moment, she couldn't remember their resolution from earlier in the day, and she didn't care.

Except that Meredith was here watching them . . . and that was awkward and taking their pretending in front of her too far. Marissa couldn't do that to her sister.

Marissa broke the kiss and hid her face in Felix's shirt.

"Should I find another room to sleep in?" Meredith asked sincerely.

"Of course not." Marissa tried to keep her voice from sounding breathless as she shifted back and slipped a hand over Felix's mouth to prevent him from saying more. "No, Meredith. Stay right where you are." As she met Felix's gaze and tried to chastise him for his boldness, he kissed her palm that was over his mouth.

At the unexpected kiss, she shivered with pleasure then dropped her hand away.

"The fact is"—Marissa had to think quickly—"Felix is actually afraid to sleep alone, and he'll tremble uncontrollably if he doesn't have someone in the bed with him."

A loud guffaw burst from him.

Marissa tried to smile innocently, but she knew she had the upper hand in their sparring, especially if she was making him laugh. Before she could declare herself the winner in their battle of wits, he was scooping her up off her feet and into his arms.

"Fe-lix!" Her squeal came out louder than she intended.

"Yes, dearest?" He situated her against his chest so her head rested on his shoulder.

"Since you hurt your arm last time you picked me up, you shouldn't try again tonight." She glanced at Meredith and pulled a face. "He has really puny muscles in his arms."

"It's no problem." He hefted her higher, his thick muscles straining against his shirtsleeves and proving that he did not have puny muscles. Not in the least.

He started toward the bedroom door. "In fact, I love carrying you so much—even injured—that I plan to do it every chance I can get from now on."

“Of course you won’t. We wouldn’t want you severely injuring the rest of your body from the effort and strain.”

“I’d prefer to die a cripple and have the pleasure of holding you than to be whole and to refrain.”

Thankfully they’d reached the hallway, and she could let her smile bloom. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had so much fun.

“Good night, Meredith.” She tried to sound serious as she called out.

“Good night,” came Meredith’s tentative reply.

Felix closed the door of Meredith’s room and then crossed the hallway. He entered the bedroom, shut the door with a decisive thud, then stepped toward the double bed in the center of the room with a wide dresser on one side and a nightstand on the other where Marissa had left a lamp burning.

The silence that fell between them felt suddenly charged as he held her in his arms.

His breathing was heavy, almost ragged now. And his face was near hers, his lips close, his eyes intense. “Do you think we convinced her we’re a real married couple?” he asked softly.

“She is usually pretty easy to convince.” Meredith always had been the most naive and trusting of her sisters, and a part of Marissa still felt guilty for deceiving her. But what else could they have done?

“Would you like me to sing you a song before bed?” Felix spoke solemnly. “Or recite a poem?”

She grinned. “You choose.”

He chuckled.

She loved that she could make him laugh, that they could share humor, even in the difficult situation they found themselves in. Even so, they had to be more careful around Meredith not to take their fake relationship too far. “With your playacting so well developed, you have a career waiting for you in the theater when you leave Stony Ridge Island.”

“Who says I was playacting?” His voice was rumbly, and his gaze caressed her face.

Her rapid heartbeat halted. What was he saying? That some of his feelings were real? She shook her head. Even if they were real, he wasn’t the type of man who was made for settling down. He’d made that clear enough.

She wiggled to free herself, pushing against his chest as anger welled up inside her.

He gently set her feet on the floor.

As she stepped away from him, she fisted her hands on her hips, not sure why all of a sudden she was angry with him. “You were acting, Felix. Let’s be clear on that. And next time, please use more restraint.”

“I can’t guarantee that.” He was wearing that same mischievous grin from before.

“Try.” She pinned him with a serious look.

“I say we have fun with it.”

“We can have fun, but no more physical contact.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets as if that would keep him from reaching for her. “If you want to convince her, then we have to have a little contact.”

It was too hard to resist him when he was touching her, but she couldn’t admit that to him. It would only puff up his ego. “Okay, you can hold my hand, maybe put your arm around my waist once in a while. But that’s it.”

“You don’t think she’ll grow suspicious if we never kiss?”

Marissa paused. Was he right?

“How about a short kiss once in a while?” He seemed casual, as if a short kiss didn’t mean a whole lot to him.

“Define *short*. And *once in a while*.”

“Less than thirty seconds, one time a day.”

Her stomach cinched with a need for thirty-second kisses one time a day with Felix. But she could see such kissing only leading to problems.

His blue eyes remained alight with humor. Was this all still fun and games to him?

Maybe she was simply taking everything too seriously.

She heaved what she hoped was an exasperated sigh. “Fine.”

“I know it will be a chore for you,” he teased. “But I promise I’ll try to make it worth your while.”

She swatted him playfully, then she started toward the bed. “You’re sure you’ll be all right on the floor?”

“Do I have a choice?” His tone was still light.

“No.” This sharing of a room with him was strangely thrilling.

She turned off the bedside lantern. As darkness fell over the room, she shed her robe and slid into bed.

CHAPTER 17

Felix stood in the middle of the bedroom, frozen in place. Apparently the sound of Marissa shifting in bed had the power to immobilize him. In fact, the mere thought of her lying only half-a-dozen steps away turned him into a granite statue that would never be able to move again.

"Are you going to stand there all night?" she whispered. "Or do you think you'll sleep on the floor?"

His whole body was ablaze from not only the proximity but also from kissing her a moment ago and then holding her in his arms as he'd carried her.

The combination of her in the bed so close and the feel of her so fresh in his mind made him want to gather her into his arms and fall asleep with her against him. There would be nothing wrong with doing so, would there?

Maybe he could convince her to let him at least lie beside her. He'd assure her that he would remain on his side of the bed and keep his hands to himself. If they accidentally brushed against one another once in a while, what harm could come from that? Especially since they were married and technically had every right to be with each other.

Fire raced through his blood again at the idea of being with Marissa.

"Well, *my dearest*?" she prodded, the teasing back in her voice.

"I'm still debating where to sleep." He opened his eyes and tried to view the room in the darkness. "Since I lost the portrait of you that I stare at every night, I think I might need to be in the bed with the real you."

She snorted.

The moonlight coming through the window allowed him to see the folded blankets at the end of the bed. He swiped them up to use for his bedroll. "Especially since I tremble uncontrollably when I don't have someone to sleep with."

A pillow thudded against him, then landed on the floor, followed by her soft laughter. "Hug a pillow."

He lowered the blankets to the floor, swiped up the pillow, and gently bopped her with it.

"Hey!" Her voice contained mock indignation, and she pushed up to her knees. She picked up the other pillow from the bed and swung it at him. It barely touched him.

He took aim at her with his pillow again, this time a little harder.

She immediately hit him back. "Oh, so we're having a pillow fight now, are we?"

He pretended to stumble around. "My puny muscles can't compete with yours."

She laughed louder this time as she climbed off the bed and came after him, raising her pillow.

"'Ode to the Pillow,'" he called out as he dodged one of her swings. "That's one of my favorite poems."

"How does that one go?" She swatted his torso.

"O Pillow, I love thee."

She laughed and smacked him harder.

He held his pillow above his head. "You are so soft and cuddly."

She was racing around him like a beautiful moth in the night. Her brown hair was wild and flowing, her nightgown tangling in her legs, and her face alight with life.

If only he could stop time and capture this moment forever.

His heart swelled almost painfully with all his affection for her. She was the only one he could ever truly be himself with. What other woman would chase him around a bedroom with a pillow, laughing at him while he spouted terrible poetry?

Only Marissa. It had only ever been her. Because, yes, he'd only ever loved her.

Oh, how he'd tried to love others, to shift his devotion. But it never budged from her. Maybe he finally had to admit that's why he'd really left the island in the first place, because he'd had to get away from loving her. It hadn't really been about having adventures or seeing the world or whatever other excuses he'd given everyone. No, he hadn't known what to do about his feelings for her.

He still didn't.

He grabbed on to her pillow and didn't let go.

"Hey, no fair," she said, with another laugh.

“Time for me to sing you one of my songs.”

“Is it now? I can’t wait for that.”

He dragged her closer until only the pillow separated them, their heavy breathing now the only sound.

He had the overwhelming urge to bend in and crush her lips with his.

What was she thinking? Was she feeling the same pull toward him? Was that why she’d said they could have fun but that they had to limit their physical contact?

She jerked her pillow out of his grasp, then spun and crossed to the bed, tossing the pillow into its place. As she climbed in and pulled the covers up, he could only watch, his longing for her like a living presence in the room with him.

What good would it do to act on how he was feeling?

Victor’s words from earlier in the evening were still sifting through his mind. *“We must shake off the burdens weighing us down first before we can climb out of the pit.”*

As much as he wanted to shake off the burdens weighing him down, he would never be able to shake off the burden of his pa’s transgression. It was his to bear alone, one he couldn’t share with Marissa. She would finally hate him for being a Larock like her father did, and she wouldn’t want to be with him anymore. She would despise their friendship, and she most certainly would despise their marriage.

Felix was stuck in the pit and had been for years. That was why he had to be careful with their relationship and couldn’t let any attraction get out of hand. He couldn’t love her and then leave her. That wouldn’t be fair to her.

No, it was best if he helped her as much as he could over the summer but then went on his way, just as he had before. He would keep their in-name-only marriage for as long as she wanted, as long as it benefitted her.

He blew out a tense breath and tried to relieve the pressure from the tangle of emotions. But as he bent and retrieved the blankets from the floor, the tension remained inside him—a tension so tight, he wasn’t sure how he’d get a moment of sleep.

As he spread out the blankets, the same pressure that had built inside him three years ago was building again—the need to get away from her before she pushed him away. Because she would push him away. It was only a matter of time.

He lowered himself and sprawled out on the blankets, then crossed his arms behind his head while staring at the ceiling.

For long moments the quiet of the house seemed to magnify the rhythm of the waves crashing against the nearby rocky ledge. The tide had returned, and the waves were choppy tonight.

"What's wrong, Felix?" Marissa's soft question cut right to the heart of the matter.

"Just thinking."

"About what?"

She'd asked that a dozen times over the years, and he'd never told her the truth about what was bothering him. He'd agonized many times over whether to divulge it all to her, and always he came back to the fact that he was selfish and didn't want to ruin their relationship.

He had to change the topic, had to think of something else to talk about so she didn't pry deeper and try to figure out what was really wrong and had been all these years.

"Well?" she persisted.

"I was just thinking what a great friend you are and how much fun we always have had together." That was true even if it wasn't the entire truth.

"This isn't the first time we've had to spend the night together. Remember when we found the caves near Lover's Lake and had to stay there because of the storm that blew in?"

How could he forget? They'd only been fifteen. They'd passed the hours talking and trying to stay warm. It had also been when he started to see her as the attractive young woman she was becoming, and he'd spent half the night fantasizing about kissing her. When they'd headed home in the morning, they'd decided the best thing to do was tell their families that they'd been alone but had been fine.

"You told me horrible ghost stories," she said with a chuckle. "And I had nightmares for days afterward."

"Would you like me to tell you more ghost stories tonight?" Maine legends were full of the supernatural.

"Tell me happy stories. Those are the only ones I want to hear right now."

He tried to situate himself more comfortably on the hard floor. Would tonight be a repeat of the night in the caves, his lying awake and fantasizing about her?

Probably. Because he wouldn't be able to stop thinking about how incredibly beautiful she'd been standing in her nightgown. About how funny she'd been in making up all of those things about him. About how resilient she'd been today in handling her father.

She shifted so she was closer to the edge of the bed and was peering down at him. "You don't have to tell me any stories if you're too tired."

"Me? Tired?" He tried to keep his voice light so she didn't probe him for the truth of his feelings. "I'm never too tired to tell you stories."

She flipped onto her back, the bed squeaking as she moved.

His muscles tightened with need, but he clenched his hands into fists. Maybe it would be for the best if Meredith didn't stay long and Marissa could return to her own bedroom. Because one thing was certain—sleeping this close to Marissa was a form of torture he wasn't sure he could endure for long.

CHAPTER 18

“You don’t need to help me with the weeding.” Marissa stirred the pot of gruel on the stove.

Meredith was sitting on one of the stools at the worktable and sipping a mug of coffee. “I want to.”

“We’re almost done. Really.” In spite of all the changes in Marissa’s life recently, she and Victor had kept up with weeding the blueberry field and had also been eliminating the spanworms as much as possible by finding and destroying the larvae and egg masses. “Today or tomorrow, we’ll move the beehives to the field now that the buds are breaking.”

“I want to help with something,” Meredith insisted. Her blond hair was smoothed back into a neat chignon, not a strand out of place. Her practical skirt and blouse were spotless and unwrinkled, even though they’d been folded in the bag she’d brought out to the farm. The only things that showed her distress were the splotchy redness in her face and the puffiness around her eyes—the signs that she’d been crying.

Marissa paused in stirring the gruel, trying to find words of comfort for her sister. The situation with Father was still just as awful at dawn as it had been yesterday. Nothing had changed yet, but hopefully Father would come to his senses today.

Marissa reached for one of the bowls she’d placed on the edge of the stove. “If you want to be useful, you could help keep an eye on the twin lambs born last week. One isn’t nursing well.”

“I can do that.” Meredith took another sip of her coffee. “What else?”

Marissa scooped the gruel into the bowl. The mixture of oats and barley boiled in equal parts milk and water with a pinch of salt and nutmeg was their staple meal to start the day. She handed the bowl and a spoon to her sister.

“Thank you.” Meredith blew on the gruel, the steam rising from it. “How about the wool? Anything I can do to help with that?”

Marissa turned back to the stove and filled another bowl. “There’s always work to be done with the wool.” She and Victor had sheared their small flock of sheep in April before lambing. The wool had already been skirted, washed, and dried to remove the debris along with the natural lanolin oil the sheep produced. “You could begin carding it. But only if you want to.”

“Of course. I’ve always enjoyed that.”

“And Janie might appreciate help with the churning today.” Marissa placed a second bowl of gruel on the table at the spot next to Meredith.

“I’d love to help her in any way.” Meredith blew again, attempting to cool the thick mixture. Or maybe she had no appetite.

At footsteps descending on the stairs, Meredith paused and watched the doorway. A moment later, Felix appeared, yawning and drawing one of his suspenders over his shoulder. Half of his shirt was untucked. His hair was tousled and stuck up in some places. He was in his stocking feet and was carrying his boots in his other hand.

Even as disheveled as he looked, Marissa’s pulse hopped at the sight of him. Every day, he seemed more handsome than the last. More than that, he was kind and good to her. He’d humored her with stories for hours last night, entertaining her as well as distracting her from thinking about all that had happened with Father’s rejection.

The hardest moment in sharing the room had been when Felix had undressed at one point. He’d done so with hardly a sound. But she’d been aware of each of his movements, even in the dark—his kicking off his boots, sliding down his suspenders, and slipping out of his trousers and shirt so he was wearing only his underdrawers.

For a short while after that, her thoughts had kept straying to him lying there so bare. She’d had to remind herself that even if they were legally married and technically had every right to be in the same room, they were married in name only and really shouldn’t have been in such close quarters while only partially clad.

Regardless, they’d made the best of the situation, and at some point, she’d fallen asleep during one of his tales. When she’d awoken a little bit ago, she’d gathered her clothing and had slipped from the room, trying not to disturb him. She’d gotten ready in her younger sisters’ room and had hurried down to the kitchen to start breakfast.

Each day that they’d been married so far, she’d made him coffee and gruel, and they always spent a few minutes chatting about their days before

he left to walk into town and be at the wharf shortly after dawn, when most of the fishermen arrived.

"Good morning," he said in a gravelly voice full of sleep.

The sound of it spread strange warmth through her.

"Good morning," Meredith replied shyly.

Marissa nodded at the table. "There's a bowl of gruel for you." She poured him a cup of coffee. As she turned to hand it to him, he came to a halt by the stove.

He took the mug from her outstretched hand, but instead of raising it for a drink, he set it down on a shelf on the cupboard beside the stove. Then with a lazy grin, he reached for her.

The warmth already flowing through her body heated several degrees.

He circled his hands around her, his gaze sweeping over her. Her hair was plaited into a long braid, and she was attired in her usual blue skirt with the matching bodice. She'd even donned her stockings and work boots. Even so, Felix's gaze somehow made her feel as though she was back in her nightgown, and she couldn't keep from shivering with a delectable pleasure.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He tugged her toward him. "Just saying good morning to my lovely wife."

She braced her hands on his chest and would have shoved him away, but from the corner of her eye she could see Meredith watching them with wide eyes.

His grin quirked up higher on one side. He obviously sensed Meredith's scrutiny and was ready to put on another show for her.

Show or not, they'd agreed to limit their physical contact. Marissa had to follow through with that, or she would find herself falling too hard for him. "Remember what we talked about last night?" she hissed.

"Oh I remember." He didn't bother with a whisper as he lifted a hand and grazed her cheek, then her neck, and finished down half of her arm.

"Then what are you doing?" She wasn't sure why she was whispering since Meredith was only a few feet away and could hear them whether they whispered or not.

"We said we would *limit* our affection around your sister," he said calmly. "We didn't say we wouldn't have any."

What did he have in mind?

He bent his head closer to Marissa's, his gaze shifting to her mouth, his eyes darkening.

Her insides trembled with sudden need. Why was she fighting this attraction? Or him? Why not see where it would lead? It wasn't as if *she* was manipulating him into the contact. No, he was initiating it. It was what *he* wanted, and if he liked it enough, maybe it would change his mind, and he would stay with her. After all, she had agreed to one kiss a day, so it wasn't like she could protest, could she?

In the next instant when his mouth landed upon hers, she was ready. She let her lips fuse to his. In that moment, she felt as if she'd been waiting for this since the last time they'd kissed, and now she was right where she wanted to be.

She barely had time to wrap her arms around his neck and taste him and savor the hard feel of his mouth when he pulled away.

He shifted her back just a little and bent toward her ear. "We agreed to one kiss a day," he whispered. "Just let me know if you want to change it to two."

She almost reminded him that they'd agreed on the kiss being thirty seconds and protested that it hadn't been anywhere near that. But he was already releasing her and picking up his cup of coffee.

He took a sip, but not before she caught sight of his smug grin.

Leave it to Felix to make every aspect of their life together interesting and exciting.

He lowered himself onto a stool at the table and took a bite of the gruel she'd placed there, then gave her an innocent look. "Dearest wife, you're so sweet to have this ready for me every morning. Don't you think it's delicious, Meredith?"

"Oh yes." Meredith hadn't taken a bite of it. Instead, she was staring at it and stirring it, her cheeks rosy.

Felix ate another spoonful and then paused to smile at Marissa again. "I'll miss you today, my dearest."

If he wanted to keep playing this game with her, she could never turn down a challenge. Curving her lips into what she hoped was a sultry smile, she sauntered toward him. "I'll miss you too, dearest."

When she reached him, she lowered herself onto his lap and combed her fingers through his hair. "It's a good thing I do this for you every morning."

He leaned his head into her touch. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

He was good at this. Too good.

She had to find a way to make him squirm. Pursing her lips with determination, she clasped his shirt. “It’s also a good thing I do this for you too.” She fastened the undone buttons, brushing against his chest as she did so.

She was being way too bold. She knew it. But she met his gaze directly and dared him to make her stop.

If she’d thought the blue of his eyes was already dark, she was wrong. They had turned darker still, the color of a midnight storm.

She was going beyond what they’d agreed upon last night for physical contact, but it was his fault for inciting her. Wasn’t it?

His gaze dropped to her mouth again, his nostrils flared, then he began to stand. At the same time, he gently shifted her from his lap and placed her on his stool. “I’m running late,” he said softly. “I’ll see you tonight.”

With that, he picked up his coffee and bowl. While walking to the sink, he took several more bites of gruel. As he halted, he gulped a large mouthful of coffee before he placed his bowl and cup in the basin. Then, grabbing his coat and hat from the hooks by the door, he exited without a glance back.

As the door closed, Marissa sat weakly on the stool and exhaled. She’d won that round, hadn’t she? She’d made him so aware of their physical attraction that he’d practically run from the room.

Meredith was still fiddling with her spoon. “I wish Father could see the two of you together. Maybe then he would realize how happy you are.”

Marissa pressed her hands to her chest to ease the hard pattering there. “Felix does make me happy.”

“It’s obvious you two are madly in love.”

Madly in love? Of course they loved each other as friends, but did Felix love her as more than that? He’d never said that he did.

“Be careful though, Marissa.” Meredith finally lifted her gaze, and her pretty green eyes held a warning. “You’re both very emotional right now and clearly feel passionate about each other, but I don’t want you to get hurt when that passion fades.”

Marissa paused. Her sister’s caution was odd, almost as if she was speaking from personal experience. But that couldn’t be since Meredith had never had a courtship before Percy’s.

The truth was, Marissa knew she needed to be careful, but not because of getting hurt as a result of fading passion. No, she had to be careful because she risked getting hurt as a result of Felix's going away. Because one way or another, he would end up leaving. And when he did, she couldn't let him take her heart with him.

CHAPTER 19

Felix ignored Gabe's smack sailing closer and focused on his two fishing lines over the rail of the sloop. Even if he hadn't been jigging and hauling in his lines hand over hand as fast as he could, he was in no mood to talk to Gabe. He hadn't talked with his brothers since they'd forced him to go "clamming" last week. In fact, he'd avoided them as much as he could.

With the shadows starting to lengthen, it was nearly time to head back to shore. But the school of cod were still swallowing the hooks as quickly as he and his crew could get them back in the water.

He'd taken a break from his lobstermen recruitment to do boat repairs over the past couple of days. The knowledge he'd gained when he was younger had come back easily, and he'd relished having wood and tools in his hands again.

When his pa had told him that morning that the lobstermen were running short on bait, Felix had offered to restock the cod and haddock heads that were preferred. It had taken some time to locate the school. But they'd trolled with bits of menhaden, and when the fish had started biting, they'd been busy ever since.

Hoisting his line higher, the glistening cod broke the surface of the water. Felix grabbed the line close to the fish to keep it from hitting the side of the boat and falling off and getting away. With a swift jerk, he lifted it and slipped the hook out of the open mouth. Then he tossed the cod into the nearby barrel.

Without wasting any time, he threw the jig back out and at the same time started tugging in his second line. Even with the sea breeze cooling his face, the sun had been warm all day, and he was tired and damp and hot. But he hadn't minded the fishing, had actually enjoyed the thrill of the catch. He'd been surprised at how natural it had felt after three years.

They had a couple more hours of work ahead of them when they got back to the wharf. Even though they only needed the heads for the bait, they

wouldn't let the rest of the fish go to waste. That meant they would have to dress the cod—cut open the fish, take out the entrails, break off the head, remove the backbone, then salt it just right in order to preserve it.

Even though the Larocks were no longer involved in the original fishing business that had brought their family and the Axtons to the south end of the island, they still had plenty of equipment for not only the fishing but also the drying.

Gabe's smack was nearly upon them now, sailing through the school of fish and scaring them away.

Felix stifled a sigh.

The smack was riding low in the water, the well at the center probably filled to capacity with lobsters. As Gabe directed the vessel starboard of the sloop and only an arm's length away, Felix had no choice but to draw in his lines, especially when Gabe's crew released the sails so that the wind no longer filled them.

"Looks like you had a good haul today," Gabe called from the helm, a soggy cigar hanging from his mouth. He had his shirt off, revealing a muscular and tanned torso. The couple of men who made up his crew were also shirtless as they heaved to with the rigging.

"It was decent." Felix had never been the kind of man to hold grudges. Maybe after witnessing the grudges of his pa and Marissa's father, he didn't want to have any of his own. That meant he had to let go of his frustration with Gabe, Liam, and Rufus and move on.

Gabe peered beyond the sloop to Sea Serpent Island and the peninsula and bay that led to Axtonville. "This area is usually all fished out."

"Guess I got lucky today to find a fishing spot so close to home."

"Guess so." Gabe shifted to scan the ocean that went on endlessly to the horizon with only a few low clouds. Another schooner was approaching Larock Bay, and several fishing dories were heading toward town too.

"Good thing I was close to finishing up." Felix wound up his line.

"Yeah, good thing." Gabe shifted his cigar to the opposite side of his mouth. "Because I'm gonna need your help tonight with clamming."

Felix shook his head, prickles of irritation forming. "Told you last time that I wasn't going to do any more *clamming* with you guys."

"Is that the way you treat family when they need help?"

"Come on, Gabe"—Felix glanced around at both his crew and Gabe's, who were watching them with interest and obviously listening to every

word—“I’m done with that kind of helping.”

“That’s too bad.”

Felix probably sounded like a callous cad to the crew, thanks to his brother.

“Family sticks together and takes care of family.” Gabe’s voice turned hard. “But I can tell you don’t want anything to do with us anymore.”

“You and I both know that’s not what the clamming is about.”

“That’s exactly what it’s about.” Gabe’s cigar moved with each word he spoke. “You’ve always despised us. Admit it.”

Felix expelled an exasperated sigh. Maybe he wasn’t ready to drop the grudge against Gabe quite yet.

Gabe shifted the tiller, allowing the smack to drift away from Felix’s sloop. “Too bad you aren’t willing to help us anymore. Maybe next time *you* need help, we won’t be so willing to lend a hand.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” Felix hoped he wouldn’t need assistance. Even if he did, he probably wouldn’t turn to his family.

Gabe nodded at his crew who adjusted the sails so the wind could fill them. “It would be a shame if that new pretty wife of yours needed help.”

“What does that mean?” It sounded like another threat.

“Means that everyone round town’s heard how infatuated you are with her.”

They had? How? Had Meredith said something recently? Maybe to her sisters yesterday when she’d gone into town to get a few more of her belongings while her father was at his shipyard.

He and Marissa had been keeping up their charade pretty well. Usually Meredith was already in her room in bed when he got home from being with Collette. So he and Marissa didn’t have to pretend to be a happily married, in-love couple at night. Not that he minded pretending. In fact, he almost wished Meredith were awake when he walked in so he could sneak in a hug or a handhold or even press a kiss to Marissa’s head.

Of course he was trying not to take the pretend affection too far in the kitchen over breakfast. He’d kept to just one short kiss like he had that first morning. But even one short kiss seared him all the way through each time.

“Leave my wife out of this, Gabe.” Felix’s voice came out hard.

“Just saying,” Gabe called as his smack drifted farther away. “You wouldn’t want her getting into trouble and having none of us to help you.”

What kind of trouble was Gabe talking about? “There better not be any problems for her.”

Gabe shrugged. “You change your mind, you know where to find us tonight.”

Felix’s gut tightened. Was he planning to do something to her blueberry fields? Or was he going to keep Pa from selling more land to her?

He stared after Gabe, the trepidation growing. Should he join in the clamming tonight after all?

No. That’s what Gabe wanted—to make him afraid and worried enough about Marissa that he would give in and participate in the illegal activities. Felix cupped his hands around his mouth, then shouted, “Leave my wife alone!”

If Gabe heard, he didn’t acknowledge it. He turned the tiller even more, allowing the wind to pick up the sails.

Felix’s mind spun as he steered the sloop back to Axtonville not far behind Gabe.

At this point, he didn’t care if his brothers or Rufus slandered his name and accused him of the illegal activities. He didn’t even mind if they spread the news that he’d purchased Marissa’s wedding band with the rum-running money. He just didn’t want anything bad happening to her. That was the most important thing.

Upon arriving at the wharf, Felix and his two young crew members spent the rest of the evening dressing the cod. As with the fishing itself, Felix was surprised at how easily the tasks came back to him—tasks he’d done many times during his childhood.

It was dark by the time they finished laying the split and salted cod out on the flakes. Not only was Felix grimy from the day of fishing, but he was also filthy from fish blood and guts. The stench of the cod covered him from head to foot, was embedded in his skin and hair and clothing.

Even so, he headed to the family house to say hello to Collette. He made sure to avoid the wharf, circling around the back way and entering the rear entrance.

She was sitting up in bed when he stepped into the room. The lantern on her bedside table was on. And she was reading.

His heart warmed at the sight. She’d had no interest in any activities when he’d first arrived home. But here she was actually doing something. Her face wasn’t as pale—probably because he’d been carrying her outside

every chance he had. Her eyes were brighter and less sunken, and she seemed to have more energy.

He was relieved at the small improvements. Hopefully she would continue to gain strength and stamina. But what would happen when he left? Would her melancholy return?

He hated that thought. But Daphne didn't have extra time to spend with Collette. Father was absent as always and had been since Ma's death. His unavailability had only gotten worse after the falling-out with Mr. Axton.

Maybe Felix needed to stay on the island not only for Marissa but also for Collette. Yet how could he when he needed to get away from the deep, dark secret that had the power to drown him?

Collette glanced up at him, then put down her book and covered it with a blanket, but not before he'd glimpsed the cover.

He released a fake gasp. "How dare you read *Swiss Family Robinson* without me."

She gave him a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry."

He grinned. "I'm teasing. It's great to see you reading."

"You're sure?" She pulled the book back out.

"Of course. I'm just sorry that I haven't been able to stay as long."

"It's okay. I understand. You want to be with Marissa."

"I want to be with you too."

Collette's eyes took on a gleam. "Daphne told me the gossip going on around town about how in love you and Marissa are."

He bit back a sigh. Yes, Meredith must have said something when she'd come to town, probably to her sisters. Her sisters had most likely shared the news with their friends. And now everybody was talking about how much he craved his wife.

"Is it true?" Collette asked with a grin.

It was true on his end. He loved Marissa more every passing day. But Collette was a little young to be talking about it with him. He gave what he hoped was a nonchalant shrug. "Marissa is a very special woman."

She had been and always would be the most special woman he knew. Now that he had her back in his life, he couldn't fathom losing her. But was the loss inevitable whether he stayed or left?

A sharp pang pierced through his chest, so sharp he almost pressed a hand to his heart.

Collette wrinkled her nose at him. “I suggest that you go take a bath before seeing her. You smell and look so awful.”

“So awful?” He cocked a brow.

“Terribly awful. No kissing her tonight, not until you bathe.”

“I don’t think we should be talking about my kissing Marissa, all right?”

Collette laughed lightly, her eyes turning bright. “I’m fourteen, Felix. Not four.”

He loved making her laugh. The laughter was good for her too. Even so, maybe he had to tone back his ardor toward Marissa since it appeared their business was everybody’s.

Felix hiked up Dark Ryder River a short way and then veered off to a freshwater pond that locals sometimes used for bathing. In May, the water was frigid. He made a quick work of washing up with the soap Daphne had kindly given him along with a clean shirt.

On his way back through town, he steered well away from the shoreline to avoid a run-in with his brothers and Rufus. He kept to the side streets and stayed in the shadows so he wouldn’t be seen.

As he neared the Axton wharf area, Felix sensed someone watching him and glanced over his shoulder. He was startled to find a giant of a man, Mr. Axton, standing in the light of a streetlamp and staring at him with arms crossed.

Even though Mr. Axton was wearing his top hat and the brim shadowed his face, it was easy enough to see that he was glowering. No doubt he was wondering what Felix was doing sneaking around.

Felix guessed he appeared suspicious, like he was up to no good. He had half a mind to call out that he was on his way back to the farm and was trying to avoid his brothers and that’s why he was acting so strange. But anything he said would probably sound like an excuse, and Mr. Axton wouldn’t believe him.

Felix tipped his hat toward Marissa’s father but continued without stopping or speaking to him. If the tale Meredith had brought back to the farm was true, then Mr. Axton was still bitterly angry, and he hadn’t forgiven Marissa or Meredith for what he considered betrayal.

Over the past couple of days, the pressure inside Felix had been building with the need to go to Mr. Axton and have a candid conversation with him about how he was treating his sweet daughters, that he would end up losing them—maybe eventually lose his whole family—if he wasn’t more careful.

But aside from disliking confrontation, Felix suspected that even if he did confront Mr. Axton, things wouldn't go well, might even turn violent. And the same was true tonight.

As much as Felix wanted to turn around and call out to the fellow to cherish his daughters better, he forced his feet forward. He made it to the end of the street and was about to round the corner when Mr. Axton's loud voice echoed in the night. "She deserves someone better than you."

The words jabbed into Felix like a wayward fishing hook. His steps slowed to a halt. Then he pivoted, his muscles rigid.

Mr. Axton was still standing under the streetlamp and had peeled aside his suit coat to reveal his hand on his revolver.

Felix's blood turned cold. He was tempted to take a step back or to duck into the nearby shed, but he stood unmoving.

Mr. Axton wouldn't really shoot him, would he?

Felix braced his shoulders. "Go ahead," he called. "If it makes you feel better to kill me for my pa's mistakes, then do it."

Mr. Axton's fingers on his gun seemed to tighten.

Felix waited. He'd faced plenty of danger in the wild and lawless West. There had even been a time or two when he'd feared for his life. He'd expected that out there. But here? In a quaint fishing town? He'd never imagined he'd be shot on the street.

Staring with an unwavering glare, Mr. Axton didn't move.

Felix held himself motionless too. "I'm not your enemy any more than your daughters are." Felix forced the words out. "But if you have to treat someone as the enemy, make it me and not them." With that, he turned and started forward again. He took one step, then two, his spine rigid as he waited for a shot.

None came.

He turned the corner, and only then did he allow himself a breath. As he headed down a dirt path that led toward the shore, he picked up his pace until he was jogging. When he reached a secluded section of the shore away from town, he finally stopped, bent over at the waist, and tried to draw air into his lungs.

Maybe he'd overreacted. Maybe Mr. Axton had never intended to shoot him. Maybe Marissa's father had only been trying to scare him.

Even so, the incident was chilling.

Was Mr. Axton right? Did Marissa deserve someone better than him?

Look at him. He was sneaking around in the dark like a thief or a thug. Even if he was neither of those things, he still wasn't worthy of Marissa, and she did deserve someone better.

Should he put aside his idea to join a fishing fleet and go back to the original plan to end the marriage? Perhaps the sooner, the better. If he gave her the annulment, then his brothers would hopefully leave her out of their issues. And she and Meredith could reconcile with their father and family.

He had to admit to himself—and to her—that it probably had been a mistake to get married. Because he would never be able to live with himself if something happened to her or the farm because of him. He only wanted the best for her, and had thought he was helping her when he'd offered to marry her. But it was turning out that their marriage was putting her in danger.

Besides, her father would probably never go to the county clerk for the official transfer of the farm. That meant the ownership would always be in dispute.

She needed to be free to choose someone else eventually—someone her father liked and who didn't represent everything wrong with their families.

Felix straightened and forced himself to move forward. The moon was behind the clouds of a coming storm, which probably made it a good night for rum-running. No doubt, Gabe had sensed the change in the weather and the storm that was coming.

One way or another, a storm was on the horizon.

Felix wasn't sure what to do about his marriage or his brother's threats or even Mr. Axton's threat. But for tonight, he would put the worries aside and relish one more evening spent with Marissa, because he had the feeling he didn't have too many left.

CHAPTER 20

Marissa stepped out of the bank with several banknotes tucked in her reticule. It was beyond time to approach Mr. Larock again about buying the land to expand the blueberry field.

She strode down the street in the direction that led to the Larock wharf. She just prayed she would find Mr. Larock in his office at the cannery at this late-afternoon hour.

She'd chosen to come to town at a later time of day because she'd hoped the streets wouldn't be as busy and she wouldn't draw the inquisitive glances like she had last Sunday when she and Felix had gone to church. But she felt like she was walking the gauntlet as she passed by storefronts and businesses with people staring out at her.

Maybe she should've taken Meredith's offer to accompany her.

Marissa gave a quick shake of her head, straightened her bonnet bow beneath her chin, then drew her cloak about her more securely to fight against the wind and mist the previous night's storm had left in its wake. No, she was strong enough for this task.

After working in the blueberry field in the morning and then helping with the spinning of the yarn in the early afternoon, she'd changed out of her work clothing into a pretty turquoise dress patterned with tiny flowers. She wanted to appear professional and responsible when she met with Mr. Larock.

He was her father-in-law now. That was strange to think about. She hardly knew him beyond the negative things Felix had told her over the years, mainly because Felix blamed his pa for the rift between their two families.

However, after meeting Mr. Larock at his office last time, and from what she had witnessed at a distance, he seemed to be an easygoing and jolly fellow, similar to Felix. It was just too bad he had stolen the plans for the cannery and had gone behind Father's back and opened it by himself.

Of course Mr. Larock had given Father the fishery without asking for his share in the business. And, according to Felix, his pa had struggled for many years to grow his lobster-canning business and to regain the trust of the community.

Even now, some people still disliked Mr. Larock and refused to do business with him. Overall, however, most of the old-timers in the community had moved on from what had happened.

If only her father would move on . . .

Whatever the case, she'd given Mr. Larock plenty of time to think about her offer. It had been close to two weeks. Whether he'd decided yes or no, she was still determined to convince him to sell to her.

Of course she wanted the land in her own right the same way she'd wanted the farm. She hoped Mr. Larock wouldn't hold being a woman against her the way Father had. But if he did, she wasn't above acquiring the land by using her connection with Felix.

Ah, sweet Felix.

She paused at the part of Main Street that gave the perfect view into the bay and the ocean beyond. She wouldn't be able to catch sight of his sloop because he was off to other places today and wasn't fishing for bait like he was yesterday. But she couldn't keep from hoping for a glimpse of him.

She loved getting to see him every night. He brought so much joy and fun and laughter to her life. He had a depth that was new, but he was still lighthearted and simple and easy to please. Perhaps she'd once believed those characteristics were perfect for a friend and not in a husband. But now, she realized that he balanced out her serious nature and helped her to slow down and savor life.

"Looking for your husband?" came a man's voice from a nearby business.

She tore her gaze from the water and shifted around to find Thaddeus Berry, the general store owner, standing in the open doorway under an awning.

With his broom in hand, the older man was now staring off at the ocean, his eyes exceptionally round behind his spectacles. "Heard tell he's out near Trenton today, trying to scrounge up more lobstermen for his pa."

"He's doing his best to help expand the business."

"Ayuh. He's doing a fine job of it. Gonna have most of the Downeast fishermen switching to lobstering by month's end."

Felix had told her he was enjoying his work. But if he was already recruiting so many lobstermen, how much longer would his pa need him?

Thaddeus slid her a glance. "'Course, one never knows exactly what far-flung doings the young'uns are up to these days."

"Oh?" What was the store owner alluding to? That Felix wasn't just recruiting?

"Heard tell he's got lots of connections. If you get my meaning."

She hesitated. Thaddeus knew everything about everyone. If he had information about Felix, she might as well hear it. "Is something going on with Felix that I should know about?"

"By jeezly." Thaddeus switched his broom from one hand to the other, then back. "You're an awful direct young lady, aren't you?"

A sarcastic response pushed to the tip of her tongue, but she bit it back. "No need to mince words with me, Mr. Berry. Just go ahead and say what you came out here to tell me."

His long gray mustache was twitching, probably from his need to speak whatever gossip had been rustling around inside him. He took a step closer, glanced around to see if anyone was nearby, then dipped his head toward her. "Rumor has it that Felix has been doing a dite more than smooth-talking the fishermen into lobstering. He's getting them involved in the rum-running drop-offs."

She snorted. "Not Felix. He's at home every night with me. He's not out rum-running."

Thaddeus was now studying her expression, as though he made a profession of reading people's emotions—maybe he did. "Has he claimed he's gone clamming? Or worming?"

"Why?" Her chest was tightening.

"Apparently that's a common cover for rumrummers. They go out in groups, and then some of them leave to meet up with those who are transporting the illegal liquor while the others stay and keep up a front of working."

Why would Felix join in such an endeavor?

Thaddeus chuckled. "Yessah, I admit when Felix came in with all that money to buy your wedding ring, I thought it was because he struck it rich from gold."

Felix had told her he'd returned with nothing but holes in his socks and patches on his trousers. So where had he gotten the money to buy her ring?

Perhaps he'd earned an advance in pay from his pa. But even as she tried to make excuses for Felix, the sinking in her gut told her exactly where he'd gotten the money. He'd earned it from rum-running.

She had the sudden urge to slip off her gloves and twist the ring until it came off and then throw it at Thaddeus.

Of course it wasn't the store owner's fault Felix had purchased the ring with illegal money. Thaddeus might be a busybody and a gossip, but he wasn't malicious, and she couldn't take out her frustration on him.

No, if anyone deserved her frustration, it was Felix. For lying to her.

Maybe *lying* wasn't exactly the right word to describe what he was doing. It was more like holding back information and keeping things from her.

Either way, she would have to talk to him tonight. And give the ring back. Because it felt stolen and dirty now. He should know her well enough to realize she wouldn't want a ring—even for their temporary marriage—that he'd purchased through illegal means.

Loud shouting—that sounded too much like her father's—came from down on the bridge that spanned the Dark Ryder River and separated the Larock wharf from the Axton wharf. Almost a week had passed since she'd seen her father last Sunday. Now, there he was in his usual top hat and suit, standing on the Axton side of the bridge yelling at someone on the Larock side.

As she took in the leathery, weathered fisherman her father was yelling at, she gasped. It was Mr. Larock. He wore a flat-brimmed cap over his sun-burnished brown hair that was so much like Felix's. His medium height and stocky muscular build were similar to Felix's too.

Why were the two men having an altercation this afternoon?

She quieted her thoughts to listen to what they were saying.

"You're sending him out and stealing all my fishermen!" Father's voice boomed with the accusation.

"He's not taking any of your regulars. I told him not to hire them."

"I'll bet you told him to hire them all." Father was rigid.

"By gory, you never want to believe anyone, do you Herb? You always have to be right."

"That's because I *am* right."

"Because you're so proud. If only you had just an ounce of humility—"

“What good would that do? It won’t bring back the fishermen I’m losing to your lobstering.”

Around Marissa, more people were exiting the businesses and coming out to stand in the street and witness Herb Axton and Ollie Larock fight.

She’d heard of spats the two had gotten into over the years when they’d crossed paths. But she’d never witnessed one for herself.

A strange trepidation shimmied through her that this conflict was somehow different, that it wouldn’t end well.

Squaring her shoulders, she began to make her way down the street. She didn’t know how she might be able to intervene, not when her father despised her and wasn’t speaking to her. But she had to at least make her presence known. Maybe her being there would distract the men, and they would continue on their ways and return to their usual silence and pretending the other didn’t exist.

“Tell your son to stop stealing my fishermen.”

“He’s your son now too, Herb. No matter how much you hate it.”

“He’ll never be my son,” Father spat out.

She was gaining ground, growing close enough to see that Father’s face was contorted with fury. He was filled with so much anger and bitterness. How had that happened?

She didn’t recollect him being that way when they’d first moved to the area. In fact, he’d been excited and positive and happy. He’d seemed to love Mother and love each of his daughters, treating them all with tenderness and sweetness. Where had that love gone?

Maybe he’d gotten so consumed in building his business empire that he’d gradually stopped spending time with his family. She’d been too young to remember a whole lot. But she did recall his increasing absence, his tiredness when he was home, and his lack of attention to them.

Had Mother gotten lonely? Had she drifted away from him because he hadn’t been there for her?

Marissa still couldn’t make sense of why her mother had betrayed Father and their marriage. But with all that had happened recently with Father, Marissa was beginning to see the bigger picture of what might have gone wrong.

“Like it or not, we’re related.” Mr. Larock had stuffed both hands into his trouser pockets almost casually and seemed unruffled by her father’s outburst.

“We’ll never be related!” Father, on the other hand, was like a snarling dog straining against a chain. If let loose, he would charge forward and tear Mr. Larock apart. “Your son stole my daughter, just like he’s stealing my fishermen.”

“Nobody is stealing anything—”

“Just like you didn’t steal from me?” Father’s question rose above everything.

For a few seconds, silence fell over the waterfront. The gulls stopped their cawing, the waves seemed to cease lapping, the few fishermen returning early halted their conversations. Even the town on the incline behind her seemed to be holding its collective breath.

Mr. Larock finally released a sigh. “We’ve been over this a thousand times, Herb. I told you I shouldn’t have done it, that I’m sorry, and that if I could go back and do things over, I would do it all differently.”

“And I’ve heard your excuses a thousand times. But you were never really sorry. If you were, you wouldn’t be stealing from me again.”

“Your daughter chose to marry Felix.”

“That’s not true.”

“Just ask anyone.” Mr. Larock waved his hand toward the town, his gaze landing on Marissa, now only a dozen or so paces from the bridge. “In fact, why don’t you ask her yourself.”

Her father’s head swung her way.

She halted.

His gaze swept over her, like that of one stranger assessing another. His eyes held no welcome or warmth, only coldness.

A part of her heart shriveled—the part that had been secretly hoping he would realize how harsh he was being and would love her enough to try to reconcile. But hadn’t she just acknowledged that his love had evaporated? There was nothing left inside him toward her, not even fondness.

She lifted her chin at him. “Felix didn’t steal me. I married him willingly.”

Father glared at her. “You should know I caught him sneaking around town last night.”

Sneaking around? Why? Because he was up to his illegal rum-running again? A small knot of dread cinched in her stomach.

Felix had made no mention of anything being amiss last night when he’d walked into the house. He’d only talked about his fishing for the day. He

claimed that he'd been late because he had to gut and salt the cod before leaving for the night. He even said he hadn't visited long with Collette because of how time-consuming work had been.

What if everything had all been a lie?

"Yes, he was sneaking around." Father repeated the words louder so everyone could hear them.

She wanted to speak up, to defend Felix. But if the rumors were already circulating about this rum-running, then what could she possibly say?

"That's because the old saying is true. Like father, like son." Father glared at Mr. Larock.

"Felix is a good boy—"

"He's just like you." Father dropped his voice to a harsh whisper so Marissa almost couldn't hear him. "A seducer and a womanizer."

Without waiting for Mr. Larock's denial, Father spun, his footsteps slapping loudly in the silence as he headed away down the Axton wharf.

A seducer and a womanizer? What was that all about? Marissa watched her father's proud back for a moment before shifting her attention to Mr. Larock.

He'd been peering after Father too. As though sensing her questioning gaze upon him, he glanced at her with sad eyes.

She waited for him to offer some sort of explanation, some assurance, even some denial. But he stood silently, his shoulders bent and his chin hanging low.

Her pulse started up again, this time racing with a strange fear. Had Felix been seeing other women after all? Even though he'd vowed he would remain faithful to her as long as they were married? Or was Father referring to something else? An incident that had happened between him and Mr. Larock?

"Don't worry," Mr. Larock said quietly. "Felix is doing his best not to turn out like me."

"In what way?" Her question came out wobbly. Only then did she realize her legs were trembling. A part of her didn't want Mr. Larock to answer, but the other part needed to know the truth about all that had happened.

"I meant what I said to your father." Mr. Larock's expression turned ragged, like that of a weary sailor after days at sea. "Felix is a good boy and is made of stronger stuff than me. He'll stay faithful to you."

Why? Because Mr. Larock hadn't stayed faithful to his wife?

Mrs. Larock had died giving birth to Collette fourteen long years ago—maybe it was even closer to fifteen years now. If Mr. Larock had been a womanizer and a seducer before his wife's death, what did that have to do with Father? And why was he upset about it to this day?

Unless the seducing and womanizing had been after Mr. Larock's wife had died . . .

Maybe Mr. Larock had taken to visiting the taverns and associating with women of ill-repute to ease his grief. That wouldn't be noble of him, but grieving people sometimes did foolish things. Certainly Father would understand that and forgive his business partner for seeking comfort in the arms of another woman. Unless that woman was someone Father had known . . .

Mr. Larock was studying her face.

Yes, that had to be the reason. Father had known the woman and hadn't approved.

Mr. Larock's blue eyes, so deep and passionate, so much like Felix's, seemed to be apologizing and held a remorse she didn't understand.

Unless she did understand.

A sudden sick feeling swelled in her stomach. Father had talked of Mr. Larock stealing from him like Felix had. She'd assumed that meant Mr. Larock had stolen the plans for the cannery. Everyone had assumed that's what had happened.

But what if the stealing had been something else? Something more important? Something that would cause Father to be unable to forgive Mr. Larock? Something truly unforgiveable? Like stealing Father's wife?

She cupped a hand over her mouth and spun away, fearing the rising nausea would force its way out in front of Mr. Larock and the townspeople. Blindly she stumbled down the wharf, needing to get away, needing to find a private place where she could empty the contents of her stomach and let her shock and horror manifest itself.

She swerved off the wharf onto a trail that led toward the fishery's drying racks. She managed to make it out of sight of onlookers before she bent and was sick. She retched several times before she stood and grasped the tall fence surrounding the flakes with a shaky hand.

Drawing in a breath, she tried to quell the roiling that was still going on inside her. The day in the tree house when she'd seen Mother passionately kissing a man—that had been Mr. Larock.

The nauseousness swelled once more, and she quickly gasped in air to keep from being sick again. It was simply too much to imagine that Felix's pa had been the one Mother had been with. But now Father's bitterness made sense. His absolute hatred for Mr. Larock and his unwillingness to forgive weren't just because he'd lost money or a business. No, he'd lost his marriage and his wife.

Even if Mr. Larock had been grieving and lonely and seeking comfort, he shouldn't have gone to his partner's wife. Not for any reason. It was the ultimate betrayal.

Of course, Mother had played a role in the affair too. No matter how unhappy she had been in her marriage, she'd had no excuse for letting herself share affection and be intimate with another man while married to someone else. Mother should have walked away from Mr. Larock—should have run away, actually—and made it obvious she wasn't interested in having an affair with her husband's best friend and business partner.

Marissa shook her head, trying to clear her mind and ease the pounding of dread. But her thoughts remained muddled, and the throbbing only increased in tempo as more questions arose.

Was it possible Mother left the day Father had discovered the affair? Why had Father kept the affair a secret? Why hadn't he told everyone and destroyed Mr. Larock's reputation even more? Maybe the two had come to an agreement not to say anything in order to protect Mother.

Marissa leaned against the fence. She needed answers, but where could she go to get them? Certainly not to Father. Not with how angry he was with her.

Could she approach Mr. Larock? He'd seemed remorseful, probably was ashamed and filled with regrets. But would he be willing to talk about it?

More importantly, what would she tell Felix?

A heaviness descended onto her heart. She already had to confront Felix about the rum-running and his deception with her. How could she bring up this as well?

He would be sick to his stomach too. He already had a tenuous relationship with his father, and this news would make things even worse.

She didn't want to hurt him with the awful revelation. Maybe it was for the best if she didn't say anything about it at all.

CHAPTER 21

Marissa wanted to pace the length of the sitting room as she waited for Felix to get home. Instead, she forced herself to sit in the wingback chair and focus on stitching the ruffle to the gingham towel she'd already crafted.

The checkered dark blue was the same color as ripe blueberries and would make a nice addition to the blueberry-themed products she sold with her blueberries in her grandparents' store in Sunrise Cove. The visitors to the island loved the items, which meant she spent her free time during the winter and spring getting everything ready before the boarders arrived by steamboat in the summer.

She already had crates of items to deliver to the store soon. She hadn't really needed one more towel. But it was keeping her hands busy, even if it hadn't kept her mind from circling around the affair between Mother and Mr. Larock.

Meredith had gone up to bed early, which was probably for the best. She'd sensed something was wrong and had asked Marissa several times what was bothering her. Marissa had started to tell her sister about what she'd discovered but had made herself stop. Of all her sisters, Meredith had taken Mother's death the hardest, probably because she'd always had the closest relationship with Mother and had helped in the restaurant.

That day in the tree house when Marissa had first witnessed the adultery, she'd decided that if her sisters—especially Meredith—ever found out about Mother's indiscretion, it would devastate them.

Maybe Father had kept the secret from them for the same reason. Maybe he hadn't wanted to taint their perception or memories of Mother. Maybe he wanted to keep them from thinking too badly of her.

Whatever the case, Marissa knew it was best if she didn't say anything to Meredith about any of it.

She'd continued to debate whether she should tell Felix. She was afraid revealing the terrible news about his pa would drive him from the island

even faster, that he would be all the more eager to get away from his pa. But how could she keep this from Felix? He was even more perceptive of her than Meredith, and he would know something was wrong.

Of course when she'd witnessed the kissing from the tree house ten years earlier, he'd realized something was troubling her. He'd asked her, and she'd considered telling him. But every time she'd started, she'd been filled with such embarrassment about what she'd seen that she hadn't been able to bring herself to voice it.

At the sound of the back door opening, she halted her sewing. Felix was home.

She set aside the towel on the end table and laid her needle and thread on it. Then she stood and wiped her hands on her skirt, the turquoise one she'd worn into town and hadn't changed out of.

She'd put the Larock land out of her mind for now. She was too determined to expand her blueberry farm to delay the purchase forever, but after the revelation, she wouldn't be able to face Mr. Larock for a while.

Felix's footsteps crossed through the kitchen.

She normally waited for him there and dished up bowls of pudding or pie or cookies or something sweet for them to snack on before moving into the sitting room. But tonight, she had no appetite.

She waited by the side of her chair, trying to formulate what she would say.

His footsteps hesitated in the hallway but then drew nearer to the sitting room. As he appeared in the doorway, her heart tumbled over itself, not only from nervousness, but also because, in spite of everything, she liked the sight of him.

Without his hat, his sandy hair was unruly, as though he'd been raking his fingers through it, or maybe he'd let the wind ruffle it on his walk to the farm. His face with its end-of-the-day stubble was even more sun-browned after his days out on the sloop. The weathered look made his eyes bluer and brighter.

As he sought her out, his eyes were guarded and serious, somehow knowing her absence in the kitchen to greet him was monumental.

He heaved back his shoulders, bracing himself for whatever was wrong.

As her gaze strayed to his shoulders and then to his chest, her mind went back to earlier in the day when he'd approached her in the kitchen just as he did every morning with a playful gleam in his eyes.

This morning, he'd twirled her around several times as he'd hummed a song and smiled down at her. She'd smiled back and placed her hands on those shoulders. They'd been so solid and strong, and she'd relished the feel of them. Then he'd pulled her into an embrace against his chest, which was turning out to be one of her favorite places to be.

He'd held her tightly for a few heartbeats before he leaned back, kissed the tip of her nose, then dropped a sweet kiss onto her lips. It had all been so quick, it was over before she could blink. She'd been embarrassed to admit that, had they been alone, she would have wrapped her arms around his neck, dragged him down, and kissed him long and hard.

The interaction had left her breathless. But she'd reminded herself that they had to be careful not to get carried away with what felt less and less like pretending and more and more real.

Now, with him standing in the doorway, she could feel the pull toward him. Not as a friend, although the friendship was still there. This was a raw tug of her body, a physical awareness of him as a man, and the need to have more of him and of them together.

She'd never experienced such a need before. She especially felt it at night when they each were in their respective places—her on the bed and him on the floor nearby. A longing ache formed inside her belly, a tightness that wouldn't ease as they lay in the dark and talked. His low voice, his rustling, his breathing—it all only made the desire more intense.

She'd begun to wonder how long she could go before eventually reaching out for him and dragging him into bed with her.

"What's going on?" He was the first to speak.

She shoved aside her brazen thoughts and brought herself back to the present confrontation that was brewing. She started to cross the room toward him. "I don't think you've been honest with me about everything."

He remained rigid in the doorway without moving or answering her.

That was her answer. He *had* been deceptive with the rum-running.

She halted in front of him. Then she reached for his hand and pressed something into his palm. "Would you like to tell me how you paid for this?"

She took a step away and met his gaze directly.

He didn't glance down at what she'd put in his hand. But he closed his fingers around it until his hand formed a tight fist. "I should have waited. I realize that now."

“You told me you came back from California with nothing. But apparently you suddenly have a whole lot of money.”

“It’s from rum-running with my brothers.” His voice held a note of frustration.

At least he wasn’t denying what she’d learned from Thaddeus.

“The first time they invited me to go worming, I thought that’s really what we were doing. Just worming.” He released an exasperated sigh. “But it turned out they needed me to help provide cover for their real reason for going out—to help with the rum drop-off.”

“You didn’t learn about it until after they paid you?”

He shook his head, his expression edged with guilt. “No, I knew that night. And I told them I didn’t want the pay.”

“But you accepted it anyway?”

“I have no excuse for taking it and then using it on the ring. That was really dumb of me.”

“It was completely stupid and foolish. I would rather have a ring made out of a fishhook than one gotten through underhanded means.”

“I realize that,” he said earnestly. “I made a rash decision, and I regret it.”

She could see the sincerity in his eyes, and she knew he was truly sorry. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I made it clear to them that I didn’t want to do it again, but the next time with the clamming, they made some threats.”

“So you let them scare you into doing it again?”

“Maybe I did.” He straightened a little. “But I didn’t accept money.”

“I’m not sure that makes it any better.”

“Probably not. But yesterday when Gabe pressured me again, I refused. Told him I was done being badgered into their illegal activities.”

“Good.”

“And he made more threats.”

“Let him. What can he do to hurt you?”

“Well, since you found out about it, he’s obviously now telling people that I’m involved in rum-running, probably even lying and saying I’m the ringleader or something like that.”

“You’ll explain the truth to others just like you did to me.”

Felix stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Not sure how many people will believe me, but I guess it’ll be my word against my brothers’.”

She wanted to trust he was relaying the whole story, that he'd admitted everything. But how could she know he was telling her the truth and wasn't holding information back like her father had insinuated earlier? "My father said today that he saw you sneaking around last night."

"I was trying to avoid my brothers." Felix pushed away from the doorframe and entered the room. He strode past her and went directly to the window that overlooked the bay.

"That's all?" She wanted to believe him. But Father's words echoed in her mind: *"Like father, like son."* Was Felix like his pa?

Felix pivoted to face the large room where they'd shared many evenings lately at the table playing games or sitting on the sofas talking and teasing. The cozy room had brought them good memories over the past two weeks, and she longed for many more evenings with Felix there. If she was really and truly honest with herself, then she had to admit she wanted forever with him.

But what did he want?

As if reading her mistrust, his brows pinched together. "I thought I already made it clear that I would remain faithful to our marriage vows for as long as we have our marriage."

"But you've already kept the rum-running from me. How do I know you're telling me everything now?"

He hesitated and glanced out the window.

"See, you're still holding back from me." Was she being hypocritical by concealing the information she'd learned about his pa today? The truth was, she'd hidden her mother's affair from everyone for years too.

As he peered outside into the darkness, he sighed. "There are some things better left unsaid."

"I thought we had a good enough relationship that we could always tell each other everything." She wasn't sure why his statement bothered her. Maybe because it meant he wasn't sharing all that had happened with the rum-running.

From where he was standing, she could see his profile. His features were hard and his jaw flexed.

"I can handle whatever you tell me. I'm not a weak woman."

"I know that."

"Then stop treating me like I am." She was tired of the men in her life minimizing her strengths and assuming she couldn't handle things because

she was a female.

He took a step toward her, then stopped. “Will you please trust me when I say there are just some things that I’d rather protect you from knowing?”

“Trust is something earned, Felix. And you haven’t exactly proven yourself to be trustworthy so far during this short marriage of ours.”

His eyes flashed. “Maybe if you hadn’t already decided from the start that I would fail, we might be able to have more trust.”

“From the start? That you’d fail?” She considered herself a level-headed person most of the time, but after everything she’d learned today, she couldn’t keep her emotions from quickly intensifying. “I’m not the one who’s been waiting to put an end to our marriage as soon as an excuse presents itself.”

He glanced toward the door and then to the ceiling to the upstairs. He probably wanted to make sure their conversation was private and Meredith wasn’t able to overhear it. With the rising tension and their escalating voices, that was wise of him.

When he spoke next, he half whispered. “I wasn’t going to bring this up tonight, but maybe this is the best time to tell you.”

“Bring what up?”

“The annulment.”

“What about it?” Her legs felt suddenly weak, and she reached for the nearest chair and lowered herself.

He sucked in a breath, as though fortifying himself to say bad news. “I think I should give you the annulment and leave the island as soon as we can arrange it.”

A strange emptiness seeped into her chest. “I thought you’d decided to join a fishing fleet at the end of the summer.”

“It’s still a possibility. But I’d rather leave before my brothers carry through on their threats.”

She stared at him and tried to comprehend what he was saying. “What kind of threats?” She was pressing him again, but she needed to know.

“Threats that could possibly bring danger to you.”

Danger to her? What did that mean?

Remorse filled his eyes. “I’m sorry, Marissa. I probably never should have married you to begin with. I’ve just made the situation worse for you and now Meredith. And I don’t want anything else to happen because of your connection to me.”

He was leaving her. And she had the feeling nothing she could say or do would change his mind. It was just as she'd said. He was looking for a way to put an end to their marriage and had been since the day he'd suggested it.

The question was—why? Why was he so eager to get away from her again? Their relationship had always been positive and encouraging, and it still was. In addition to friendship, something more had been developing between them—the attraction that had been undeniable and strong and exciting. He'd felt it too. She knew he had from the way he'd reacted to their kisses and touches.

Clearly whatever they had wasn't enough to keep him there. She wasn't enough. She'd never been enough for her father. And now she wasn't enough for Felix either.

"Fine." The word came out harshly, echoing the hurt inside. "Since you're leaving so soon, I might as well tell you my secret."

With his shoulders now slumped, he was fiddling with the ring in his pocket. "What secret?"

After the revelation today, he needed to know the truth. She had to tell him before he left. "One time when I was in the tree house, I saw my mother kissing a man. Today I learned that the man was . . . your pa." There. The words were out with no taking them back.

Felix didn't react to her statement.

Was he so shocked that he couldn't move? Couldn't formulate anything to say? Was the news wounding him so deeply that he couldn't even think?

Guilt quickly rushed in. Maybe she should have waited or at least figured out a more delicate way to tell him. "I heard our fathers arguing about it today. I'm sorry—"

"I've known for years."

CHAPTER 22

Felix held back a shudder. The day he'd dreaded had finally come—the day when Marissa learned the truth about the ruination of her family and rejected him because of it.

Her eyes flew to him and pinned him with a directness that gave him no other option but to be as direct back with her.

"You've known for years?" she asked.

"Yes. I was on the beach when your father and my pa found the dory without her in it. They didn't know I was there, and I've never told them."

"They found her boat?"

"The day she left. Before the storm hit."

"What? I don't understand."

His mind spun back to the afternoon when his pa had sneaked out of the house with a gunnysack packed full of his clothing and other possessions. Felix had been worried and suspected his pa was up to no good. So he'd followed him out of town only to find him hurrying along Seal Beach south of the Axton farm.

Mr. Axton had always kept a small dory near the beach, one that Felix and Marissa had used once in a while for excursions. Maybe Pa had planned to meet Mrs. Axton and run away with her. Or maybe he'd just intended to say good-bye to her before leaving by himself.

Whatever the case, Pa hadn't found Mrs. Axton there, had only found the capsized boat floating in the low tide. Pa had waded out and pulled the boat ashore. Then he'd rushed into town and found Mr. Axton. The two had gone back to the beach, and Felix hovered nearby and pieced together all that had transpired earlier in the day, which hadn't been hard to do since the men had been yelling at each other.

"From what I gathered, your father had discovered the affair between your mother and my pa that morning. Mr. Axton pulled out his gun and would have shot my pa, but your mother intervened."

The blood seemed to be draining from Marissa's face, and he was glad she was sitting down already.

Felix removed his hand from his pocket and rubbed the back of his neck. "Apparently my pa offered to move away from the island. Maybe that's why he went to Seal Beach. But that's when he found the dory abandoned there in the low tide."

"Where did she go?"

Felix couldn't meet her gaze. He didn't want to say the worst of what had probably happened. But there was no getting out of it this time. "Your father said his best rope and an anchor were missing."

"That could only mean one thing." Horror had begun to etch Marissa's pretty features.

Felix knew she'd figured out what had happened, that her mother had likely rowed out someplace nearby, tied the anchor to her body, and thrown herself overboard to ensure she would never wash ashore and only the dory would.

He was silent for several long heartbeats, wishing he could find something to say that would make the news easier to bear but knowing nothing could take away the sting. "I watched our fathers dismantle the boat, burn it, and bury the ashes and all the remains."

"So that's why her boat was never found."

He nodded. "When they finished, they agreed never to speak of what had happened again in order to preserve her reputation as much as they could."

At least the two men had agreed on that. Felix supposed that afternoon they'd put aside their differences in order to do what was best for the woman they'd both cared about. Of course, Mr. Axton had been angry and devastated the whole time they'd worked together, and Pa had apologized at least a dozen times.

But obviously, his apology hadn't been enough to make up for stealing away another man's wife. Nothing could make up for that. Even if Mrs. Axton hadn't been happy for a long time—according to one of the claims his pa had made.

"Later, when the storm blew in, it provided the excuse they needed for your mother's death."

Marissa was staring straight ahead, obviously trying to digest the news.

He wanted to draw her into an embrace and comfort her over the tragedy, the loss, and the horrible end to her beautiful mother's life.

“Are you okay?” he asked gently, taking a step toward her then stopping. He had no right to go to her, not when he’d basically just told her that he had to end their marriage. What choice did he have with his brothers leveling threats against her as a result of their union?

In fact, the sooner he could leave the island, the better off she would be. If he was gone, his brothers wouldn’t have any motivation for doing anything to her land or farm.

“So did your pa steal the cannery plans too?” she asked quietly. “Or was that just a story to tell everyone for why they hated each other and no longer wanted to work together?”

“Your father told him to take the cannery and never speak to him again. I think my pa made up the stealing part to put the blame for everything on his shoulders.” It had been noble of Pa, but it didn’t take away the shame and guilt of the transgression with Mrs. Axton. It was shame and guilt that now Felix carried too.

Marissa straightened and turned sad eyes upon him. The usual golden amber had shifted into a murky brown full of a grief so boundless that it rivaled the depths of the ocean.

His insides twisted. He hated that she was feeling such pain now that she knew about her mother’s suicide.

She was studying his face, probably searching for more answers. “If you knew all this time, why didn’t you tell me?”

“For this very reason. Because I wanted to spare you the heartache of knowing about the adultery and how she died. But maybe I should have told you—”

“Maybe?” Her voice rose. She would wake up Meredith if she wasn’t careful, and all the sordid details weren’t something Meredith needed to learn about—at least not like this.

“Should we go outside to talk?” He glanced to the ceiling, hoping to communicate with her to be discreet.

“I’m going out, but not with you.” She pushed up from the chair and hastily crossed the room. When she reached the door, she glanced back at him. “At the very least, you could have told me they’d found her boat. I would have known she died instead of always wondering what had become of her.”

He had considered telling her many times, especially in those early years when she'd lamented about the boat never being found and that maybe her mother hadn't died but had abandoned them.

Eventually he'd decided it was too late to bring up all he knew, that it would only hurt her more and wouldn't accomplish much.

In the end, he'd hurt her anyway.

She started down the hallway toward the kitchen, and he trailed after her. The lantern she'd left burning in the kitchen provided some illumination, but the shadows were long, and the air was damp. She hurried to the back door and swiped up her cloak from the hook.

He halted in the center of the kitchen. "Where are you going?"

"I need to be alone right now." She tossed the garment around her shoulders.

Of course she needed time away from him as well as some space to think. He understood that completely. "Please don't go far—"

"Stop." She held up a hand. "Don't pretend to worry about me. If you didn't care enough about me all those years to be honest about something so important in my life, then you certainly don't care now either."

"That's not fair, Marissa. You know I care." More than she realized.

"If you care, then why are you leaving me again?" The words came out in a ragged, angry whisper. She didn't wait for his answer as she opened the door, stepped out, and closed it firmly.

He stared at the door. Why was he leaving her *again*?

What did she mean by that? Was she referring back to when he'd left three years ago? He hadn't specifically left *her* then, just as he wasn't specifically leaving her this time. It had been his plan all along to move on. He'd always been up-front that he didn't intend to stay on Stony Ridge Island.

So why was she insinuating that he was going away on purpose to get away from her? That wasn't true, was it?

He lowered himself to the nearest stool at the worktable. After she'd learned about her mother and his pa, he'd expected her to understand even more why he needed to leave, why he wanted to get away. Add to that the rum-running, and she ought to be pushing him to go.

But she hadn't. And she hadn't said she hated him. Instead, she'd acted as though she was hurt by his suggestion of separating, giving her the annulment early, and leaving the island as soon as possible.

Maybe once she had more time to think about everything he'd revealed and how bad his family really was, she would agree it was for the best that he stayed far away from her. As Mr. Axton had said, she deserved someone better than him. Someone far better.

CHAPTER 23

Marissa made her way briskly toward the stairs that led down to the shore. With each step, her mind reeled. There was too much information to process from her conversation with Felix.

Without the moon or stars, which were hidden behind clouds, the darkness was thick and pervasive. But she made it to the bottom and started down the shoreline path, knowing it well enough that she didn't need a light.

Her feet led her south of the house, opposite of town, away from everyone and everything that was wrong in her life. The soft lapping of the waves against the rocks was the only sound beyond her heavy breathing. She wasn't crying, but her chest was tight, and each lungful of air was loud and filled with all the emotion that had built throughout the day.

Felix had known about her mother's death and had kept it from her. For years. What kind of friend did that?

Even as she condemned him, she knew she was being unfair because she hadn't told him about witnessing her mother kissing another man. Even so, he'd known how hard her mother's disappearance had been, and he could have eased her heartache just a little.

He'd also deceived her about his recent late-night activities. He'd only confessed to the rum-running after she'd brought it up. If she hadn't, would he have kept it from her forever?

She huffed out her frustration. Yes, she cared about Felix deeply—maybe even loved him—but she couldn't be with a man who wasn't trustworthy.

"Let him give me the annulment and leave," she whispered into the night. "I don't care." But even as the wind whipped the statement away, she knew the words weren't true.

She picked up her pace, suddenly wishing she could run away or find a place to hide where he wouldn't be able to find her and give her the annulment. It was a childish thought, because she wouldn't be able to hide

forever. She would have to face him again eventually. She just wanted to put off that moment for as long as possible.

As she came to the end of the shoreline that ran south of Larock Bay, she rounded the gnarled trees that bordered the sea—trees that were weathered and shaped and battered by the wind and water.

Ahead, the area opened up into Seal Beach, a rare sandy stretch she and her sisters had used for swimming many times while growing up. It was also a place—in addition to Blueberry Hill—she went to once in a while when she needed to get away and think.

As she hastened the last few steps on the rocky trail, she slipped on a smooth stone and in the next instant lost her balance. Before she could catch herself, her foot slid even farther, this time into a crevice, and it stuck there.

With her momentum, her body continued moving but her ankle twisted sharply. She cried out and at the same time fell forward. She held out her hands to brace herself, but her knees landed first. Even with her skirt and petticoat helping to soften the blow, the edge of the rock sliced into her knee.

Pain shot through her, and she inhaled a sharp breath.

"That was very graceful of you, Marissa," she said. She tried to lift her foot free, but it throbbed and wouldn't budge.

A warm trickle ran down her shin. Her knee was bleeding already, and the sting probably meant the laceration was deep and would need stitches. She'd witnessed others cut themselves by slipping on rocks, and such wounds were never life-threatening, only painful.

She needed to staunch the flow of blood by pressing against the wound, which meant she would have to walk back to the house holding her knee. If she could walk . . .

With a grimace, she tried loosening her foot from the crack in the rocks again. But as she shifted, it seemed to slip deeper. The pressure of the two rocks against her foot and ankle pinched harder, and she gasped at the pain.

The darkness and the layers of her garments prevented her from seeing her foot. But she reached down as best as she could and felt around. From what she could tell, the crack was between two large stones and was only a couple of inches wide. Her foot was stuck up to her ankle, and she couldn't get her fingers into the area to wiggle herself free.

She heaved against one of the stones, hoping to shift it just enough that she could widen the opening and lift her foot out. But it didn't move. She leaned into the other stone, pushing it with all her might. But again her effort was in vain.

For several long minutes she did everything she could to hoist the rocks, unwilling to give up. The only thing she managed to do was scrape her skin raw around her ankle. And maybe cause her knee to bleed more. At the very least, she could feel her skirt growing slicker with blood.

She had to free herself. If her foot went into the crack between the two rocks, then surely it could come out.

With mounting frustration, she grunted as she gave her largest effort, pushing both of the stones at the same time. But the rocks seemed to press all the more against her ankle, and a scream of agony ripped from her throat, rose into the dark night, and echoed in the air.

Dizziness swept over her, and she felt like she was in a swift current and couldn't break away. She was close to passing out. She could sense it, and she forced herself to take several deep breaths.

As she blinked, she felt a strange surge of panic. She wasn't in a good situation. If she didn't free herself, she would be stuck here for some time.

After telling Felix not to come out with her, he would respect her and give her space for a while. Eventually he would search for her because that's just the kind of fellow he was.

But when would that be? An hour? Two? Three? How long could she stand here with the pain and bleeding before she actually fainted?

She lowered her head. Why, oh why, hadn't she been more careful? She should have been paying better attention to where she was going.

There was a shout in the distance, and her pulse hopped with anticipation. Someone was on the beach or maybe in the ocean nearby.

She straightened as best she could and called out, "Help! Please help!"

Another shout seemed to respond. It was too dark for her to see anything or anyone, and the voice was too far away for her to hear clearly. But at least someone was out there. If she could just direct the person toward her . . .

"Help!" she shouted again. "I need help!"

A light bobbled in the distance—a lantern. She couldn't tell if the light was coming from the sea or the shore. Was it drawing closer?

“Hey!” She tried to project her voice toward the light. But with even the slightest movement, the pain was too much against her ankle, probably because it was swelling. She could feel her mind wavering again, and she fought against the blackness. But it was coming all too quickly.

“Hello?” The query came from the beach this time, and it was definitely nearer.

“Help!” Her voice was growing weak, but she somehow summoned the needed stamina. “I’m on the rocks.”

The light shone brighter.

“Over here!” She waved, not sure if the person could see her yet. “I’m here.”

The lantern glow finally fell over her, and she glimpsed the outline of the person carrying it. A burly man with a long scruffy beard and a cap over a bald head.

“What’s going on?” he bellowed as he continued to wade through the sand toward her.

“My foot is stuck. I need help getting it out.”

As the fellow reached her, he held the lantern up and assessed the situation.

From behind him came the call of another fellow. “Who is it?”

The man peered down at her. His leathery face was familiar with its pronounced jaw and jutting chin. Was this one of Felix’s brothers?

No, it was his brother-in-law, Daphne’s husband. Although Marissa hadn’t ever talked to Felix’s sister or her husband, she’d seen them often enough to know his name was Rufus.

She could make out two other men slogging through the sand toward her. Were they Felix’s brothers? She couldn’t tell for sure, but she had the feeling that’s most likely who they were.

She also had the feeling they were up to no good being out on the beach tonight, probably involved in rum-running.

Regardless of why they were here, she needed their assistance to get her foot free.

“Who are you?” Rufus asked, his voice loud and filled with accusation. “And what are you doing out here?”

“I’m Marissa Ax—” No, she wasn’t an Axton anymore. She was technically a Larock, at least for a little while longer until Felix filed for an annulment. “I’m Felix’s wife.”

Rufus glanced over his shoulder toward the other men. “It’s Felix’s wife.”

“Felix’s wife?” one of them responded. “Why’s she here?”

Were they worried she was spying on them and would report their rum-running to the sheriff? Of course, they didn’t have a sheriff in Axtonville. The closest one was over on the mainland in Ellsworth, which was a day’s journey away and not anything she would attempt. She hoped they realized that. “I was out walking and my foot slipped in between the rocks. It’s swollen, and I can’t get it out.” She lifted the edge of her skirt so he could see her foot better.

Rufus bent in and eyed the situation. “It’s wedged in there pretty tight.”

The larger of Felix’s two brothers—the one she believed went by Gabe—pushed Rufus aside and knelt beside her. He’d always intimidated her a little, maybe because of his size or his gruffness.

Now as he examined her ankle and motioned impatiently at Rufus to bring the lantern closer, she whispered a prayer that she hadn’t gotten herself into worse trouble by running into these three men who’d recently been threatening Felix.

What was it Felix had said? That their threats could possibly bring danger to her? The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. What did they intend to do?

Gabe skimmed the stone near her ankle. Even the slightest touch was too much, and she gasped.

Gabe paused and shifted his gaze to her face. Even though his expression was hard and his face was much scruffier than Felix’s, she could see the family resemblance in the strong lines and in the eyes—wide blue eyes.

“How long have you been stuck?” His voice was surprisingly gentle, and his eyes didn’t seem to be filled with hate.

“Five minutes, maybe a little longer.”

He returned his attention to the rocks and her foot. This time he fingered one side of the rock and then the other. “Liam, you and Rufus each take a side and pull back at the same time while I free her foot.”

The other two circled around her, then bent and took hold of the stones.

Gabe glanced at her. “Ready?” This time his eyes were kind.

She let go of the tension that had been building inside her that Felix’s brothers would harm her. They might be rough and dangerous, but they were willing to help her in this moment. And that’s all that really mattered.

“It’s gonna hurt a little,” Gabe said.

Just a little? She bit back her sarcasm and nodded. “I’m ready.”

He slid his fingers around her calf. “On the count of three.” Gabe tightened his grip. “One, two, three.”

The pressure of the rocks eased for a second, but as Gabe tugged at her leg, the pain radiated once again. It was so piercing that she screamed. This time blackness engulfed her and took her away.

CHAPTER 24

Felix paced the length of the hallway and then back into the kitchen. Marissa had been gone for close to two hours. Why hadn't she come back yet? Even if they had exchanged angry words, she wasn't the type of person who would stay out purposefully to agitate him. She would realize two hours was a long time and that he would worry about her. Wouldn't she?

"If you didn't care enough about me all those years to be honest about something so important in my life, then you certainly don't care now either." Her words from their argument haunted him. She didn't think he cared about her. But the truth was, he'd cared about her so much that he'd tried to protect her. Or at least that's what he'd thought.

Maybe the real truth was that he'd been trying to protect himself from being rejected, losing their friendship, and having to give her up forever.

Ultimately, he'd been selfish. Long ago, he should have figured out a gentle way to tell her the truth about her mother's affair and suicide regardless of the consequences. Marissa was a strong woman and probably could have handled the difficult news. Or at least eventually she would have worked through it.

Regardless of what her reaction might have been and regardless of how scared he'd been—and still was—of losing her, he should have been more honest with her from the start.

But now, he'd not only proven that his pa was less of a man, but he'd shown he was too.

Like father, like son. In so many ways.

Felix sighed.

Peering out the kitchen window, he crossed to the door. It was much too dark outside to see anything. But he was still hoping for a glimpse of her returning to the house.

Why would she come back? As angry and hurt as she'd been, perhaps she'd decided to go someplace else for the night. Maybe into town. Maybe

to sneak into her family home and stay with Misty and Morgan.

He wouldn't blame her if she didn't want to see him tonight. Actually, he wouldn't blame her if she never wanted to see him again.

He paced again into the hallway. Should he go up and wake Meredith and inform her Marissa was gone? He could let her know they'd had an argument and that she'd left the house angry at him and rightly so. Or should he head out and check around for her first?

Yes, that's what he'd do. He'd given Marissa plenty of time to think, and if he encountered her, he'd tell her he didn't want to bother her, only to make sure she was safe.

With his mind made up, he headed quietly out the kitchen door. He wasn't sure which direction to look for her. So he started up to Blueberry Hill first, suspecting she might find solace there.

As he climbed the trail, his chest pounded with the emptiness of losing her again. Not that he'd really gained her back. Maybe a part of him had been holding out hope that somehow through their hasty marriage she would fall in love with him and that her love would be strong enough to overcome all the obstacles that stood between them.

Yes, they'd shared some physical attraction. That was probably to be expected in a situation like theirs where they were living together and pretending to be happily married. But just because they'd exchanged some amazing kisses didn't mean she was wanting their relationship to develop into more.

Not with a man like him with a family like his.

Holding his lantern up to illuminate the blueberry field, he scanned the area, seeing her touch in every low bush. But he didn't spot her anywhere as he walked the perimeter and then headed to the cliff's edge that bordered the ocean.

The place felt strangely barren without her there. And lonely.

If he was already missing her after only two hours, what would it be like to be apart from her for days, weeks, and months again? He didn't want to think about that, but the reality of it crowded in around him and gripped his chest.

She'd accused him of looking for excuses to leave their marriage, to leave her again. He still hadn't worked out what she meant by it. Maybe she hadn't wanted him to leave three years ago. Maybe she'd taken it harder than she'd admitted. And maybe she'd missed him while he'd been gone.

Could it also mean she didn't want him to go away this time?

As before, he didn't see how that was possible after the revelation about his pa ruining her family and contributing to her mother's death. Now that Marissa knew the whole ugly truth, it was only a matter of time before she hated him and sent him away.

As he headed back down the trail, he halted at the tree house, climbed up, and peeked inside, half expecting to find her there the way he had when they'd been growing up. They'd both used the tree house as an escape from the pressures in their families—their fathers mostly. She'd always felt like she'd disappointed hers, and Felix had always felt the opposite—as though his pa had always disappointed him.

Unfortunately, she wasn't in the tree house, and she wasn't in any of the other usual spots she liked to race off to—the barn, the cow pasture, the south beach, and even the smooth rocks on the coast to the north. In fact, the more he searched for her, the more a sense of foreboding pounded inside him.

After at least an hour or more of seeking her out, he returned home, hoping to see her in the kitchen or even the bedroom. But her cloak wasn't on the hook by the door, and her boots were still gone too.

He stood in the kitchen in front of the window. He wouldn't sleep until he discovered where she'd gone. But where else was she if not in town with her sisters? Maybe she'd even gone to her father and admitted she'd made a mistake in marrying a Larock, that now she wished she'd never even been friends with Felix.

He wouldn't fault her if she hated the Larocks as much as her father did. If their roles had been reversed, he would have been even more resentful of his pa than he already was. He still didn't understand how his pa allowed himself to fall in love with Coral—Mrs. Axton—the way he'd claimed that afternoon on the beach when he'd been burning the boat with Mr. Axton.

Even if pa had developed feelings for Mrs. Axton, he shouldn't have acted on them or encouraged an affair. Instead, he should have respected his business partner enough to make sure nothing happened.

But no, Pa had allowed his passion to get the best of him. In the process, he'd destroyed lives, split apart families, broken up businesses, and caused tension to exist in town for the past decade. Worse, Felix had never felt the freedom to pursue the woman he loved and had known that the best thing

for both of their families was if he left with all his secrets and never came back.

If only he hadn't missed Marissa so much. If only he hadn't been dying for just one look at her.

If he'd listened to all the warnings and had stayed away from the island, or at least stayed away from her, then he wouldn't have stirred up the strife between their two families and maybe he wouldn't have ended up hurting Marissa.

This time when he went away, he would leave a shipwreck of a mess behind. Because no matter how much he'd tried to be a better man, he was ending up like his father, causing mayhem and hurting the ones he loved.

CHAPTER 25

Marissa awoke feeling groggy. As a sharp pain pierced her leg, she cried out.

"Give her more whiskey," came a gruff voice nearby.

In the next instant, the rim of a glass bottle was pressed against her mouth, forcing her lips apart. Liquid trickled in and seared her throat, making her choke.

Her eyes flew open to shadowed darkness and a low ceiling, one that looked like stone. Was she in a cave? If so, why was she there, and what was happening?

Kneeling beside her and holding the bottle against her mouth was a man with a long, scraggly beard, a bald head, and small eyes.

For a moment she tried to remember how she knew him and where she'd last seen him. Then everything came rushing back. How she'd left the house after arguing with Felix. How she'd been hurrying along the trail to Seal Beach when her foot had gotten stuck. How she'd fallen and hurt her knee. How Felix's brothers had come to her rescue.

She must have passed out when they'd freed her foot.

More pain stung her knee. Was someone giving her stitches from where she'd gouged open her flesh?

She tried pushing up on her elbows.

"Come on. Hold her still, Rufus." The gruff voice, now laced with irritation, belonged to Felix's older brother Gabe.

"I'm awake." She shifted again, this time using her feet to propel her. The agony in her ankle ricocheted through her body, and she had to quickly bite back a yelp.

Hovering over her knee, Gabe's gaze darted her way. "You feeling the needle?"

"Yes, I can feel it." Or at least she thought that's what the sting had been a moment ago.

“Have her drink more.” Gabe tossed the command to Rufus, then held out a hand toward Liam, who was on the opposite side holding a lantern and a few supplies.

Rufus tipped the bottle against her mouth, and this time she took a sip, knowing the whiskey would dull the pain—or at least she hoped it would.

Gabe had apprenticed for a short time with a physician over in Rockland and gained some training and experience, though not enough to be considered a real doctor. Some people in Axtonville called on him for occasional—and urgent—doctoring needs since the closest physician lived in Sunrise Cove and couldn’t always be relied upon to get to Axtonville in a timely manner.

“How bad is the cut?” She managed to get the question out before Rufus poured more of the burning liquid into her mouth.

“It’s bad. Went down to the bone.” Gabe took the bottle Liam handed him then tipped it over her knee.

The liquid stung enough to bring tears to her eyes, but she guessed he was cleaning out the blood and maybe even bits of dirt and sand or threads from her dress.

As if sensing her discomfort, Gabe tossed a sympathetic glance her way. “I’ll try to finish fast.”

“I’ll be okay.” At least she hoped she would. “How’s my ankle?”

“Don’t think it’s broken.” Gabe dabbed what appeared to be a piece of her petticoat against her knee. “But you won’t be walking on it for a while.”

She nodded. That was to be expected. She honestly couldn’t complain if a sprain was the worst that had happened.

“You need to drink more,” Gabe instructed. “Then I’ll finish.”

This time Rufus lifted her head, and she swallowed several more sips, each one easier to get down than the previous. The spirits were strong, and she could already feel herself getting dizzy and drowsy. She’d never had alcohol before and didn’t see the point in consuming something so powerful under regular circumstances.

As Rufus lowered her head to the ground, the stone ceiling above seemed to be spinning. She closed her eyes to help ground herself. “I’m surprised you’re helping me after making threats to Felix about hurting me.”

“We’d never hurt you,” Gabe said.

“Well, I wish you would stop pressuring Felix.” She cracked open her eyes to find all three staring at her. “He’s a good man, and he’s just trying to

live an upright life."

No one responded.

She rested her head and closed her eyes again. "After how many times he told me he didn't want to become like your pa, now I finally understand why. Even if your pa is sorry for stealing my mother and having an affair with her, it haunts Felix, and he wants to do better."

Everyone was still silent, but that was okay. She didn't mind.

She waited a moment for Gabe to start sewing her knee again. But maybe he was giving the liquor a little more time to affect her. Should she tell him it already was? Maybe if she held off a little longer, she'd pass out again and wouldn't have to feel him doing any of the stitching.

"I guess I need to tell Felix that it's not all his pa's fault the affair happened. I should let him know how unhappy my mother was for a long time with my pa. That's probably why she started her restaurant. And she probably was looking for someone to love her when your pa came along."

Marissa tried to nod. That's what she needed to do when she next saw Felix. She had to explain that her mother had been at fault for the affair too.

"Besides," she continued, her voice slurring, her tongue seeming to get tangled. "Just because our parents make poor choices doesn't mean we're destined to. We can be different, can't we? We just have to be conscious of the need to change and do better."

At the continued silence, she pried open her eyes again. The men's eyes were rounded and their mouths open.

"Do you think if I tell Felix I love him, he'll stay on the island? Because even if we don't have a real marriage, I do love him. There's no doubt about that." But how could she hang on to him if getting away from his pa and family would make him happy? "It would help if you stopped lying about his rum-running and threatening him. That's pushing him away too."

Her head was starting to throb, and she dragged in a breath.

Felix's brothers didn't answer her. But part of her didn't expect them to. She'd probably said too much. No doubt the liquor had loosened her tongue.

Letting her lashes fall, she could feel the darkness begin to crowd into her mind again. In the next instant, she let herself fall into a deep sleep and escape the world with all its pain and troubles.

CHAPTER 26

Felix knocked on the Axtons' front door, then took a large step away. It wasn't dawn yet, but he hadn't been able to wait any longer. After hours of Marissa's absence, he was going mad with not knowing where she was. He hadn't been able to hold himself back from walking into town to determine if she was with her sisters.

Beside him, Victor stood stoically. He'd been awake when Felix came out of the house a short while ago. Maybe he'd seen Felix searching earlier. Or maybe he'd noticed Marissa leave and was worried about her too. When he'd realized where Felix was going, he'd insisted on coming with.

Felix surveyed the front of the Axton home in the darkness, which was broken only by the small lantern Victor had brought along. The windows were dark all throughout the house. Not even the servants had awoken yet to start their duties.

Felix shifted back another step. Maybe it had been premature to come so early. He could have waited a couple more hours for first light. But with the way he was feeling, he would have lost his mind if he'd paced the kitchen any longer.

He stepped up to the door and pounded on it again, this time louder. "Mr. Axton, it's me. Felix Larock."

At the bark of a dog from down the street, Felix knew he ought to keep his voice down, or he'd wake the whole neighborhood. But something inside him was growing too desperate to care. He needed to find Marissa and talk to her.

He wasn't sure if an apology would suffice for keeping the news of her mother's death from her. But he'd give her one anyway and tell her he never meant to hurt her, that he'd only ever wanted her to be happy.

There probably was nothing he could say to take away the humiliation and heartache she must be feeling. She would still despise him and put an end to their relationship the way he'd always feared. But he couldn't part

ways with her without telling her he was sorry, not only for his cowardice in hiding the information from her, but also for his family's role in hurting hers.

"Marissa," he shouted at door, "if you're there, please come out! I need to apologize."

A light flickered to life in one of the upstairs windows. After hearing her name, was she coming down?

"I'm sorry for hurting you!"

More lights seemed to glow behind the windows, and voices came from inside. Or maybe they were from the neighbors who were now peering out their windows from behind curtains.

He was making a scene. Hopefully that would spur her to hurry down to put an end to his disturbance sooner rather than later.

Footsteps thudded inside the house. Thankfully, someone was finally coming. The housekeeper? Or maybe Marissa herself, which wouldn't surprise him with how independent and strong-willed she was.

The lock clicked on the other side, and the handle rattled.

Felix swiped off his hat, raked his fingers through his hair to make it presentable, then braced his shoulders.

The door swung wide, revealing Mr. Axton in a billowing nightshirt and a dangling nightcap. He held his revolver in his large hand, and it was pointed at them. With his long nose and wide mouth and thick beard, he was as severe looking as always.

"I knew you'd hurt her. That it was only a matter of time." He lifted his gun and pointed it at Felix.

Felix's pulse stumbled to a halt. The other night he'd walked away from Mr. Axton alive. Tonight he might not be so lucky.

"Father, no!" called Misty as she grabbed on to Mr. Axton's arm.

Victor quickly set down the lantern and wrenched on Felix's coat, jerking him backward.

Mr. Axton began wrestling to free himself from his daughter's hold. In the process his hand bumped against the doorpost, and the gun discharged. The bang echoed as though it were the blast of a cannon.

At the same time, Victor lunged in front of Felix, threw out both arms to shield him, then staggered.

Was Mr. Axton really shooting this time? And had he hit Victor?

“Father, stop!” Misty, in her nightgown and bathrobe, had latched on to her father and wasn’t letting go. But Mr. Axton had stilled himself and was staring at his gun with wide eyes.

Felix tried to drag Victor out of harm’s way, but Victor only thrust Felix behind him.

Felix wrestled back, having no intention of cowering behind another man as he faced Marissa’s father. His grip on Victor’s arm turned slick with warm liquid. “Victor, you’re injured!”

“Did I shoot Victor?” Mr. Axton called. “I didn’t mean to shoot you, Victor! I only meant to scare Felix away. I wasn’t intending to shoot him either.”

“I told you not to pull out your gun,” Misty said, her voice radiating with distress.

Morgan, holding a lantern, hovered in the hallway a short distance away, clutching her robe closed over her nightgown. Percy was yawning and stumbling down the stairs, his wiry hair sticking on end.

Marissa was nowhere to be seen.

Felix knew her well enough to realize that if she’d been here, she wouldn’t have hidden away in the shadows. She would have been the first to answer the door and probably would have told him to go home and back to bed until a decent hour of the day.

Clearly she wasn’t here. Then where was she?

Before he could continue his search for her, he had to tend to Victor.

Victor had picked up the lantern and was examining his arm. The wool coat was ripped on the edge and was turning a dark gray from the blood oozing into the fabric.

Mr. Axton glimpsed the blood, grimaced, then dropped his revolver to the ground. “What have I done?”

“You missed Felix and shot another man instead.” Percy, carrying a lantern, halted beside Mr. Axton and was obviously taking his future father-in-law literally.

“I’m so sorry, Victor.” Mr. Axton stepped outside, but he wobbled and reached for the doorframe, his face blanching.

More lights were starting to glow in the windows of the houses around them, and people were trickling onto the street.

“I didn’t mean to do it.” Mr. Axton’s forehead furrowed, and his eyes filled with concern.

“Of course you didn’t mean to hurt this *Victor* fellow.” Percy followed Mr. Axton outside. He was also wearing a nightshirt, but his was much too short and revealed his spindly, pale legs. “No, you distinctly shouted out that you were going to kill *Felix*. All of us in the house heard it. I wouldn’t doubt most people on the street heard it too.”

Mr. Axton glanced around as though seeing for the first time the crowd they were drawing.

Percy was incriminating his future father-in-law all too easily for an attempt at murder. Such an accusation stated so publicly wouldn’t look good for Mr. Axton.

“How badly are you hurt, Victor?” Mr. Axton finally asked.

Victor held himself rigidly. “I am fine. I believe the bullet only grazed my arm.”

“We should still send for the physician over in Sunset Cove.” Mr. Axton patted Percy’s arm. “Percy, you go. Take one of the dories and row over there.”

Percy nodded gravely. “Yes, sir.” He started down the street in the direction of the wharf, his slippers pattering loudly.

“Young man,” Mr. Axton called out with a frown. “Properly attire yourself first.”

Percy halted mid-stride and peered down at his nightshirt. “Good advice, sir.” With that, he turned and strode back to the house without meeting anyone’s gaze, as if pretending no one was there could somehow make the moment less embarrassing.

Felix tugged gently at Victor’s coat. “Let’s see how badly you’re injured.”

Victor shrugged him off. “I will have Janie doctor me.”

“Come into the house.” Mr. Axton motioned toward the open door. “And wait there until the physician arrives.”

“We have no time for that.” Victor straightened his coat. “Marissa has disappeared, and we need to find her.”

Mr. Axton took a rapid step back. “Disappeared?”

“Hours ago,” Victor continued.

Mr. Axton’s face seemed to turn even paler. Then with a growl, he shifted toward Felix. “What did you do?”

Before Felix could react, Mr. Axton clasped Felix by the collar and jerked him close.

Gasps and even a startled scream from one of his daughters filled the air.

Felix struggled to breathe as he rushed to explain the situation. “She figured out what happened with her mother.” He spoke in a whisper, not wanting the whole crowd and Marissa’s sisters to learn the truth about the past this way.

“Figured out what?” Mr. Axton’s voice turned low and menacing.

“She overheard you earlier today with my pa and put the facts together.” Felix met Mr. Axton’s gaze directly. “She knows everything. She even knows how her mother died. And she ran off because she was upset with me for keeping it all from her.”

Mr. Axton’s grip loosened, and the anger in his eyes lasted only another moment before sadness rushed in to take its place along with something else. Was it defeat?

Whatever it was, the man’s shoulders sagged, and his face turned haggard.

“Felix has been out searching for her,” Victor said. “She is nowhere to be found.”

Mr. Axton lowered his head and shook it. “It’s happening again. I’m losing another woman I love because of . . .”

Because of a Larock.

Mr. Axton didn’t say the last part. But it was obvious that’s what he would have said if they’d been alone without half the town watching.

Victor shook his head. “Mr. Axton, you are the one to blame for losing her.”

Felix opened his mouth to contradict Victor, ready to shoulder the responsibility for what had happened with Marissa.

“I was outside that day you argued,” Victor whispered before Felix could speak. “I heard you tell her to go away and never come back.” Victor held Mr. Axton’s gaze with such intensity that somehow Felix knew they were no longer talking about Marissa.

Felix expected Mr. Axton to defend himself or to at least tell Victor not to interfere. But he only stood there silently.

“If you had loved her the way she needed, she might have kept loving you back. But you refused to listen to her and respect her.” Victor’s words were soft but powerful.

If anyone could hear Victor, they would probably think he was referencing Marissa. Almost everything could apply to both women. Maybe

that's what Victor intended—to show Mr. Axton the parallel between how he'd once treated his wife and what he was now doing to his daughter.

Felix hadn't known about the argument between Mr. Axton and his wife. But he suspected it had happened shortly after Mr. Axton learned about the affair. He'd probably reacted out of his hurt and anger. But if he had told Coral to leave and never come back, then maybe that's why she'd gotten in the boat and killed herself—because she'd felt so helpless and ashamed.

Victor was watching Mr. Axton's face. "If you really do love Marissa the way you claim, then you will not make the same mistakes."

The words, although directed to Mr. Axton, pierced Felix again, probably the way Victor meant them to. Felix had made mistakes in the past with how he'd handled his relationship with Marissa. If he really loved her, then he couldn't keep making those same mistakes. He had to be different this time.

But how?

"First we need to find her." Felix couldn't keep from interjecting into the conversation as the sense of urgency resurfaced.

Mr. Axton expelled a long breath, then straightened his shoulders. "Did she take out a boat?"

"She should know better than to do that." Especially after what had happened to her mother.

Mr. Axton's brows furrowed as he swept his gaze over the bay that spread out beyond the town. "But if she was upset about all she learned, maybe she wasn't thinking clearly."

"Herb Axton!" came a shout from down the street. "I heard you're trying to murder my son!"

"I'm all right, Pa," Felix shouted back, hoping to halt his pa—and probably his brothers—from starting a brawl in the street with Mr. Axton. "I didn't get hurt."

His pa was hiking up the hill toward them, his footsteps hurried and his rifle slung over his shoulder. His brothers were nowhere to be seen, but several men who worked in the cannery marched beside Pa and were carrying an arsenal of weapons—a knife, a hoe, an ax, and another gun.

"Herb," Pa called again, "by gory, you've taken things too far this time."

Yes, a war was about to commence if Felix didn't do something to curb it.

“Now, Pa, hold on.” Felix was tired and stressed and worried about Marissa. He didn’t want to deal with more danger and drama. Or more injuries.

But his pa was stomping hard, frustration evident in every step. “Herbert Axton, whatever issues you have, they’re with me and not my son. You can fight me, but leave him out of it.”

“Nobody is fighting anybody tonight.” Felix was surprised at how commanding he sounded. Maybe the panic over Marissa was giving him the stamina and courage to rise up and do anything.

Pa didn’t halt, though. He just kept coming.

“Pa, please.” Felix stepped in front of Mr. Axton, blocking Pa’s way. “Marissa has disappeared, and instead of fighting, we need to work together to find her.”

“Marissa disappeared?” Pa came to an abrupt halt only a dozen paces away, and the men with him stumbled to a stop.

“She left home hours ago, and I haven’t seen her since.” The words echoed in the silence that had descended. “It’s not like her to go off and stay out purposefully. She wouldn’t do that and worry us.”

Pa was quiet for a moment, his expression growing serious. “You think something happened to her?”

“Yes, I think she got into trouble.” If she had taken out a boat, what if she’d hit a rough patch that had carried her out to sea? Or maybe she’d fallen asleep and drifted into a hidden cove.

Pa lowered his rifle. “Do you have any ideas of where she went?”

“I’ve checked everywhere on the island I think she may have gone, but I didn’t see a trace of her.”

Behind him, Mr. Axton cleared his throat. “She hasn’t been here to the house.”

Only then did Felix realize he’d spread his arms to shield Marissa’s father from Pa. Hopefully Pa would settle down and understand that handling the situation with violence wouldn’t bring about peace but would only create more turmoil.

Felix lowered his arms and stuffed his hands into his pockets. “The best thing to do is form a couple of search parties.”

“I’ll lead one,” Pa said quickly. “Right out straight.”

“I can lead the other.” Mr. Axton’s tone was different, softer, less antagonistic.

“I’ll go,” called a neighbor.

“I will too,” said another man nearby. Within seconds more people were chorusing their willingness to join the search.

Many had to return to their homes to don clothing and gather lanterns. While Felix waited, he insisted that Victor leave and return to the farm so Janie could tend to his wound. The older man reluctantly agreed and promised to get word into town if Marissa returned. At any point if she was found, someone would ring the church bell to alert the search parties that she was accounted for.

When the volunteers finally returned, Felix organized the men into two search parties. One would set out in dories and scour the waterways just in case she’d taken a boat, while the other—led by Mr. Axton—would spread out and comb the area that formed the perimeter of the farm and widen their scope as they searched.

As Felix and the others in his group reached the waterfront and started to load into the boats, his gaze snagged on an empty place on the wharf where Gabe’s dory was usually tied up.

It was gone.

His chest tightened, and he froze. Gabe’s threats from yesterday rushed back into Felix’s head. *“You wouldn’t want her getting into trouble and having none of us to help you.”*

They weren’t around to look for Marissa. Why was that?

The answer was all too clear. . . . They’d taken her.

CHAPTER 27

“I know what happened to Marissa!” Felix yelled.

The men in the dory with him and those in another down the wharf quieted.

Across the bay, Mr. Axton and his party were still making their way across his wharf and heading toward the farm. But at Felix’s call, the giant of a man halted, causing everyone around him to stop too.

All eyes turned on Felix.

“My brothers kidnapped her.”

Sitting at the center bench with a paddle already in hand, Pa scoffed. “They wouldn’t do that—”

“Gabe made threats yesterday about Marissa because I told him I wouldn’t help him with his *clamming*.”

Pa’s mouth stayed open for several seconds before he closed it. Did Pa already suspect what his other sons were doing? That they were up to no good?

The brim of Pa’s hat shielded his eyes, as did the darkness of the early morning, but the low light from one of the men’s lanterns revealed the severity in his expression.

“Do you know where they might be holding her?” The call came from Mr. Axton across the waterway.

What if his brothers had been out to make a few deliveries to the tavern owners who’d needed the spirits, and they’d spotted her out walking along the shore and then grabbed her? “My guess is they’re keeping her in a cave.”

“Do you know what caves they use for—for their—?” Pa paused. Was he trying to decide how much to disclose about his sons’ nefarious activities? Maybe he didn’t want to get them in trouble and was trying to be as discreet as possible in how much he revealed.

But the truth was, no matter how hard one might try to contain a secret, it always seemed to get out eventually. By that point, the secret was usually worse and more detrimental than if it had been shared in the first place.

Felix met his pa's gaze. "I don't know what caves they use for storing the liquor. But I do know that both times they coerced me into helping them, we landed on Seal Beach."

None of the men reacted to Felix's statement with surprise or outrage or even concern. Maybe most of them were already aware of the rum-running his brothers were doing. Or it was possible many of them didn't support the new prohibition law.

Either way, Felix pushed forward with speaking the truth. "They made a drop-off recently and were probably making deliveries tonight. So it's possible they saw Marissa and captured her to get back at me for refusing to help them."

"Do you have any idea which cave?" The call came from Mr. Axton, who was too far away to have heard the conversation Felix had just had with his pa.

"Let's check Seal Beach first," Felix called back. "We'll meet you there."

Mr. Axton gave a curt nod and then continued on his way, lengthening his already long stride. The men with him had to jog to keep up, their lanterns bobbing and reflecting on the water.

Felix wasted no time either. He unwound the mooring line and pushed the boat off. Then he took the spot on the bench opposite Pa and began rowing. He didn't say anything more, and thankfully Pa didn't speak to him either. In fact, his pa seemed resigned, as though he'd known this day was coming.

What would have happened if Pa and Mr. Axton had been honest about their falling-out? Maybe the two would have been able to work through their anger and grief without so much bitterness festering.

It was possible even with honesty their families would have remained enemies. At least then, Felix would have respected Pa for taking responsibility. Maybe Felix wouldn't have felt driven to get away from Pa and the island. He certainly wouldn't have felt the need to avoid Marissa.

Maybe Victor had been right—that Felix had been like Jonah, running away from God because of his shame and guilt over his family and his pa's transgression. He hadn't considered himself worthy of anything or anybody —especially not God.

But what would running away again accomplish? Felix certainly wouldn't be able to run from God forever. No one ever could. Jonah had tried but had been cast into the sea and swallowed by a fish.

As the sandy coastline of Seal Beach loomed ahead, Felix pulled harder on the oar. Was it time to finally stop trying to escape from his past, his family, and his secrets, and face with courage whatever the future brought?

A moment later, the bow brushed against the sand, and Felix and his pa climbed out, hopped into the water, and dragged the boat onto solid ground. The other dory wasn't far behind. To the north along the rocky part of the shore, Felix could see the lanterns from Mr. Axton and his search party drawing near as well.

As a child, Felix had explored many of the caves in the area. Along the rocky ledges, about a hundred feet from the beach, he knew of two caves that his brothers used for storing liquor.

Although his brothers' dory wasn't in sight, that didn't mean they weren't here. It was possible they'd stowed the vessel in a hidden cove to make any search for Marissa more difficult.

Half of the party decided to row around the peninsula and see if they could spot the dory anywhere else. The rest of them discussed the best ways to approach the nearby caves without putting Marissa into more danger if she was there.

Felix didn't think Gabe, Liam, or Rufus would physically hurt her. But if they felt cornered and pressured by the search party, there was no telling how they might react. Victor's injury was already one more than they needed.

"So, what do you think we should do, Felix?" Pa spoke solemnly as he stood beside Felix, peering up at the cliffs and crags.

The second group on foot, led by Mr. Axton, had arrived and now waited a short distance away. Although Pa and Mr. Axton hadn't spoken to each other, at least they were standing on the same beach without fighting. That was no small miracle, and Felix hoped they would remain civil to each other.

Felix studied the ledges ahead too. He'd hoped for some sign that his brothers were there—a glow of light, campfire smoke, or even footprints in the sand leading toward the caves.

But with the tide having returned, it had probably covered any evidence left behind.

“Well?” Mr. Axton’s tone had an impatient ring. “Are we just going to stand around, or are we going to do something?”

Felix braced his shoulders. “I’ll be the one doing something. I’m going up there. By myself.”

Pa shook his head. “No, Felix—”

“She’s my best friend, Pa. I love her.” He might as well admit it to everyone since they could probably already tell. “And I’d do anything for her.” Anything. He wasn’t exaggerating. He’d even married her so that he could help her gain the farm she’d deserved.

The conversations around him came to a halt. The wind had picked up, and now the waves were slapping the shore with more force. To the east, the sky was beginning to turn a blueish purple with the coming of dawn.

“I’m going to offer myself for her.” Felix spoke again and hoped no one would try to stop him. As long as he made sure Marissa was safe, he didn’t care what his brothers decided to do to him. Most likely they would tell him that from now on he had to take their threats more seriously. And he would. He didn’t want them bothering Marissa again.

The men exchanged glances, their expressions wary.

“You all know it’s the best way,” Felix added. “If they’re up there and see a group of people coming, they’ll feel threatened, and who knows what could happen. But if I go alone, they’ll be more likely to bargain with me.”

Some of the men began to protest, and Mr. Axton’s voice rose above all the others. “I’ll go.”

Silence fell again and was as complete as if the world had gone mute.

For once Mr. Axton’s head was bare of his top hat. He’d probably been in such a hurry to leave that he’d forgotten it. “It’s because of me and my mistakes that she’s in such danger.”

What was Mr. Axton saying? Was the possibility of losing his daughter waking him up to the reality that he needed to change?

Mr. Axton’s body was rigid, the confession clearly not easy for him. “I have to stop blaming everyone else for my problems and start taking responsibility for hurting the people I love.”

No one said anything. What could they say? Most people believed the feud between the Larocks and the Axtons had gone on too long. Of course they didn’t know the real reason for the rift, but if they did, maybe they would understand why the hatred was so strong.

When Mr. Axton glanced at Pa and then at Felix, the seriousness in his eyes was so intense that Felix could hardly breathe.

Mr. Axton wasn't apologizing, and he wasn't making peace, but this was a start. And Felix would take it.

Even so, he wasn't letting the man walk up to the caves by himself. "I appreciate your willingness to negotiate for Marissa. But the conflict with my brothers is with me, not you. So I'll be the one going up to bargain with them."

Without waiting for anyone to try to convince him otherwise, Felix strode off across the grassy area in front of the rocky ledges. He didn't know if his brothers were there or not. But regardless of what might happen, he had to get her back.

As he reached the gravelly trail that led upward into the rocky cliffs, he paused at the bottom. "Gabe!" he shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth to project his voice. "I'm here to get back my wife!"

He listened a moment and didn't hear anything.

"Come out and deal with me man to man," Felix continued, "and leave my wife out of our issues."

More silence met him.

Maybe they'd taken her someplace else. But where?

At the crunch of rocks, he glanced over to find Mr. Axton next to him staring up at the stony ridges.

"I've never forgiven myself for how I pushed away my wife . . ." Mr. Axton's whisper was barely audible. "And now too late I've realized I've pushed away my daughter the same way."

The truth was Felix had been pushing her away too. He'd wanted to deny her accusation that he was trying to end their marriage before it started, but she'd been right. He'd been so afraid of losing her over their parents' secrets that he'd rejected her before she could reject him.

In doing so, he'd been a fool. He was ruining the best thing he'd ever had —their relationship.

"We need to find her, Felix." Mr. Axton shook his head sadly. "Now that I'm faced with losing her, I can't possibly think why it ever mattered that she was a girl and not a boy."

"We won't lose her." Felix's muscles turned rigid with determination. "I'll find her. And whether she returns my love or not, I have to let her know how much I care."

He started to pivot toward the shore, but the flicker of a light in the rocks above drew his attention back. “Someone’s there,” he whispered, stepping in front of Mr. Axton to keep him from being shot.

“That’s the second time tonight that you’ve made an effort to protect me from danger,” Mr. Axton whispered in return. “I can’t say I would have done the same for you, so it would seem you’re a better man than me.”

“Not at all, sir.” Felix tensed, waiting for a gunshot or a voice or something. “I believe you’re a good man too. But it looks like we both need to apologize to Marissa and make things right with her.”

Mr. Axton didn’t immediately reply.

That was okay. Sometimes a person needed time to think on things and get their thoughts in order. Felix wasn’t like that. All he knew was that he’d made too many mistakes in how he’d handled all his secrets. It was past time to stop being stuck in the web of deceit and move on into the future with honesty and integrity.

The light in the rocky ledge grew brighter, and Gabe’s burly frame appeared in the crevice in front of the larger of the two caves.

So his brothers were there.

“Do you have my wife?” *My wife.* He hadn’t said the words often since getting married. But he could get used to it—wanted to get used to it with her.

“Yes.” Gabe held the lantern up, probably trying to gauge how many people Felix had brought with him.

“You shouldn’t have kidnapped her!” Anger pumped through Felix, and he wanted to rip Gabe up and toss him into the sea as fish bait. “Whatever issues you have are with me and not her.”

“I didn’t kidnap her.” Gabe’s voice rang out loud enough that the men on the beach could hear. “She injured herself on the rocks—”

“Injured?” Felix’s heart gave a painful kick. “How bad?”

“Sprained ankle and a deep gash in her knee. I stitched it a couple hours ago, and she’s been asleep since.”

“And you didn’t come to get me?” Felix had already started the climb up the trail. The slippery rocks prevented him from sprinting, but he scrambled up as rapidly as he could.

She was injured because of him. In fact, this whole incident, the whole night, everything—it was all his fault. She’d run from the house after their argument because he hadn’t been honest with her about his true feelings. He

should have told her he could never leave her, that he was in love with her and always had been, and that the past three years without her had been miserable.

Even if she would have responded that she hated him and couldn't forgive him and didn't want to be with him, he could have insisted that he wasn't going anywhere, that he wanted to fight for their friendship, for them, for all that they could have together. The past couple of weeks had shown him what he'd already known—that they were perfect for each other and that they could have a fulfilling and good life together.

He couldn't give that up—wouldn't give her up—without a fight.

As he finished climbing the last rock and reached the area near the caves, his breathing was labored. He straightened and dragged air into his burning lungs.

Gabe had set down the lantern on a low ledge and had his arms folded across his chest. Liam and Rufus stood back a short distance near the mouth of the cavern.

Felix wanted to charge at Gabe but instead glared at him. "You should have sent Rufus to come get me."

"I was busy stitching up her knee. I didn't think about it."

"I've been searching everywhere for hours. And now we have half the town out looking for her, and all you can say is you didn't think about it?"

"The stitching took me a while. I was trying to do a good job." Gabe's voice didn't hold remorse, but he seemed sincere.

Felix paused. "You probably wanted me to think you kidnapped her. In fact, after your threats the other day, I have no doubt you were trying to worry me."

Gabe was studying him now, as though seeing him for the first time.

Felix just shook his head and started forward. "I want to see my wife."

"So, Pa had an affair with Mrs. Axton?" Gabe's question seemed to come from out of nowhere.

Only a couple of feet away from Gabe, Felix halted. He hadn't thought any of his siblings knew. How had Gabe found out?

"So she was right," Gabe whispered.

Marissa must have said something. But why?

"She was inebriated from the pain," Gabe replied, as though sensing his question. "She obviously said stuff she shouldn't have."

"Like what else?"

“Like you didn’t want to become like Pa, so that’s why you left.”

She must have been really inebriated to share all that. But what did it matter if Gabe knew the truth about everything? “I thought I could run away from what happened, but I realize I can’t.”

“And here I was believing you left because you thought you were better than everybody else. Figured you deserved a lesson or two to bring you down.”

“Well, you gave me a lesson. Hope you’re happy.”

“She also said your marriage isn’t real and you’re planning to leave.”

“Whose marriage isn’t real?” came another winded voice behind them. Mr. Axton’s.

Felix didn’t want to answer the question. Maybe it had started out in name only, as a way to help Marissa get the farm. But it wasn’t fake for him anymore. He didn’t want their marriage to end, wanted it to be real, wanted to be with her forever.

Yet, after having one foot in the marriage and one foot ready to run, she probably wouldn’t believe him. He would have a lot of work to do to convince her he was sincere about it.

“Did you find her?” The second question was from Pa. Had he come up too?

As Gabe lifted the lantern, light illuminated the two men climbing the last few rocks, once friends and partners turned into bitter enemies. They seemed to be working together over Marissa’s disappearance. Was there any hope that the dire circumstances would lead to more reconciliation?

Doing so would still take a lot of time and much healing, but maybe it was finally possible they could move on the same way Felix hoped he could.

“She’s in the cave.” Gabe nodded at the entrance a few feet away. “And she’s resting fine.”

“What happened?” Mr. Axton stumbled to the level ledge.

Felix didn’t wait to hear Gabe’s answer. Instead, he finished crossing to the cave, stepped past Liam and Rufus, then ducked through the low opening.

The cavern wasn’t tall enough for anyone to stand straight, and Felix had to hunch over at his shoulders. But it was spacious and wide with a low fire burning in a center pit, putting off enough light that he could see Marissa

lying on the ground to one side. She was motionless, one of her knees bandaged and one of her feet elevated on a crate.

As he reached her side, he dropped beside her and clasped her hand. His chest ached with all that he felt for her, along with the relief of finding her.

Her lashes rested against her cheeks. Her dark hair was loose and tangled around her face. Her cute nose had a smudge of sand on it, as did her chin. Even so, she'd never been more beautiful. She was the kind of woman who could knock a fellow to his backside with just one look. That's what she'd been doing to him every day since he'd met her.

He couldn't stop himself from bending down and pressing a tender kiss to her forehead.

Behind him, footsteps scuffed into the cave. "If your marriage isn't real, and you're planning to leave"—Mr. Axton's voice rumbled with tension —"then why are you kissing my daughter?"

CHAPTER 28

Marriage not real? Planning to leave?

Marissa's eyes flew open to find Felix kneeling beside her. The firelight cast flickers across his face that was haggard and taut with frustration. Behind him, her father was bent over and peering down at her, his eyes full of concern.

How had her father learned about their pretend marriage and that Felix intended to leave? That was what Father had said just a moment ago, wasn't it?

Felix was holding her hand. With his other hand, he brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. "How are you feeling?"

She flexed her toes and sharp pain shot through her ankle and up her leg. She couldn't hold back a wince. "Like a giant lobster got a hold of me."

Felix gave her a ghost of a smile. "Gabe said your ankle and your knee are hurt."

It felt like her whole body had been pinched and poked and clawed at. But she nodded. "Yes. Your brothers found me and freed my foot."

"I thought maybe they'd kidnapped you to get back at me." Felix's eyes were the dark blue she loved, the color that reminded her of ripe blueberries. He was studying her face as though he couldn't get enough of her.

She wanted to believe that was true. But something deep inside told her she'd never be enough for him.

Felix combed another strand of her hair back.

More people were crowding into the cave. Felix's brothers had returned. And was that Mr. Larock standing just inside the entrance? What was he doing here? For that matter, why was her father here looking concerned? After the past couple of weeks of living with his censure, he was the last person she'd expected to see.

She supposed if Felix believed his brothers had kidnapped her, then he might have gone into town to alert others and gather help for getting her back.

Father was scowling at Felix. “Please refrain from touching Marissa. It’s entirely inappropriate since you’re not really married to her.”

“Our marriage is legal—” Felix started.

“It’s a sham, and now we all know it.” Father spoke as directly as always. “It’s time for the nonsense to stop.”

Father was without his top hat, and his blond hair was tousled and his beard in need of a trim. As he peered down at her, his eyes seemed different. The hard edge of anger that had glinted in them was gone, and his gaze was softer, maybe even kinder.

“I’m sorry,” he said, meeting her gaze. “I’ve let my frustrations with the past consume me for so long that I’ve become a man I hardly recognize.”

“I don’t know you anymore either.” She was grateful for his apology, but she wouldn’t tell him everything was all right or that he was okay or that she was fine. Because he’d had a part in all that had happened with Mother —a large part, and Marissa couldn’t ignore it.

He stepped closer, forcing Felix to back up. “I’ve realized that it’s because of me that I’m losing the women in my life that I love. I didn’t love your mother the way I should have. And now I’m making the same mistake with you and Meredith.”

“You don’t have to lose us.” If he was willing to be a family again, she was more than willing to be reunited.

He lowered himself to one knee, his eyes welling with tears.

She couldn’t remember if she’d ever seen Father cry. She released Felix’s hand and reached for her father’s. As they clasped hands, tears ran down his cheeks.

He swiped them away with his other hand, then sniffed. “I want to do a better job cherishing the family God’s given me. I know I won’t be perfect at it, and I’ll need to make some changes, but if you give me another chance, I promise that I’ll try.”

“Of course.” She didn’t know what their future looked like. But she had to give him a chance. And maybe she had to give herself a chance to appreciate her worth as a woman and stop trying to be like a son.

That wouldn’t change the fact that she wanted to invest in the blueberry farm and see it succeed, but she had to do it for herself and not to prove

anything to her father. Could she do that?

Felix was still kneeling nearby silently watching the exchange. He was the one person who knew how much she'd longed for this openness with her father. He would understand how momentous this was. She wanted to share a smile with him or reach for his hand again. But her father began speaking.

"I blamed the restaurant for taking your mother from me. And I believed the farm would distract you from a chance at marriage and family." He swallowed hard. "But I have to finally be honest and take responsibility upon myself."

Emotion welled into her throat. "I understand your concerns."

"Even so, I shouldn't have made you get married to have the farm. It forced you to enter into a pretense of a marriage with Felix."

"It did. But Felix and I have been friends for a long time, so he was willing to do it."

"It placed you in an awkward position of having to act like a couple. You've been living together—"

"We've been chaste." Except for the incredible kisses they'd shared. But she wouldn't admit to that with all the people in the cave. Somehow more men had shown up and crowded in—friends and coworkers of her father and also friends and coworkers of the Larocks.

How many people were here and had heard about her pretend marriage? Half the town?

Her father cleared his throat and glanced away, clearly embarrassed by the nature of their conversation. "Regardless, I'll make sure the community knows my stubbornness led to the sham marriage."

Felix leaned forward as though he wanted to interject into the conversation.

But Father held out an arm to block him. "You will move out of the farmhouse immediately and not step foot into it again, not unless Marissa has a chaperone present."

Felix's forehead furrowed. "Sir, I would like to speak with Marissa privately about the matter before we make any decisions about the future."

Father shook his head. "She no longer needs your help, Felix."

Marissa wanted to object to her father's instructions. Deep inside, she wasn't ready to let go of Felix. She didn't want to give up their arrangement, the quiet evenings, the long nights, and the early mornings

together. She loved being with him, loved having him near, loved talking and bantering with him.

But she couldn't protest here and now. Not after everyone knew the marriage wasn't real.

Felix took off his hat, revealing even more earnestness in his expression. "I would still like to talk to Marissa about it—"

"I'm giving Marissa the farm without having to be married."

Marissa's heart jumped inside her chest. "What? Really?"

"Really." Father met Felix's gaze, pinning him hard. Was there a challenge in his eyes?

She was at a loss for words. "Thank you, Father." That was all she could manage. Apparently he was serious about making changes in how he viewed her.

"And I will sell Marissa the land she's been asking for." Mr. Larock's declaration came from somewhere near the door.

"Thank you." She couldn't see him past the crowd. "I'll bring the money by soon."

"Ayuh. It's yours whenever you're ready. I should have sold it to you the first day you asked."

She waited for Father to shout at Mr. Larock to leave. But Father didn't move. He didn't even scowl.

What was going on? Where was the anger and bitterness and rage her father normally exhibited around Mr. Larock?

She raised an eyebrow at Felix, hoping he could explain. But he'd shifted and was peering through the crowd, probably at his father, his expression filled with surprise.

Marissa was relieved that her father and Mr. Larock weren't fighting, that they'd somehow come to a truce. She didn't know how long it would last. She hoped at least until they went their separate ways.

"Do you feel up to heading back home?" Father asked her gently.

She pushed up on her elbows and fought a wave of dizziness as a hammer seemed to thud inside her head. She'd had quite a bit to drink in order to dull the pain of Gabe's stitching, and now she was paying for it.

She wanted to flop back and fall asleep again, but with everyone here to help her, she had to be strong. "I'm fine. But I do feel bad for dragging everyone out to search for me."

Her father patted her hand. “We’re just glad we found you and that you’re okay.”

“Let’s get home.” She forced herself to sit.

Father met Felix’s gaze. “My men will help me carry Marissa to the farm. If you go ahead of us, you can be out before we get there.”

“If that’s what Marissa wants.” Felix spoke hesitantly.

“Is that what you want, Marissa?” Father asked.

No, it wasn’t what she wanted, but what choice did she have? If Felix had told everyone he was planning to leave, then he really was serious about it. What was the point in him staying with her any longer? “I think it’s best if we have some space, Felix.”

Did his shoulders sag just a little? “I understand.” His tone sounded resigned.

She lost track of Felix during the hike out of the cave. Even though the group of men carried her on a makeshift stretcher, she nearly passed out from the pain in her ankle caused by the jolting.

When they arrived at the house and she was finally in her room, she didn’t resist when Meredith helped her into bed and gave her a sip of the opium tincture from the medicine cabinet.

Marissa was hoping she’d see Felix to let him know she wanted to talk again before he left the island. But she didn’t glimpse him among the people coming and going, and it wasn’t long before the medicine put her to sleep.

She wasn’t sure how long she slumbered, but when she awoke later, sunlight was streaming into the bedroom. The windows were open, letting in a warm breeze that contained the briny scent of the sea—one she loved and would never get tired of.

As she tried to sit up, someone in the chair beside the bed halted her with a touch to her arm.

“Felix?” His name fell out before she could stop it.

The hand fell away. “No, it’s me, Meredith.”

“Oh.” Marissa shifted to find Meredith watching her.

The green of her sister’s eyes was bright with curiosity. She was still knitting a sweater for Percy with the thick yarn she’d recently helped to spin. “I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

“Why would you disappoint me?”

Meredith offered her a small smile. “Because I’m not your husband.”

“About that.” Marissa needed to tell her sister the truth about Felix before she found out from someone else. “My marriage to Felix wasn’t real. It was in name only so I could get the farm.”

Meredith laid the knitting project in her lap. “I already heard.”

Of course she had. Who had told her? Had Father? Maybe Felix when he’d come to pack his things? Or one of the other men who’d helped carry her?

No doubt the news would be all over town before midday. She prayed that the information about Mother and Mr. Axton would remain a secret, especially for the sake of her sisters. If they heard, she could only imagine how much heartache it would cause them.

She stilled. She’d made that excuse before, actually many times. But it was the same reason Felix had given for why he hadn’t told her about Mother.

Meredith cocked her head as she regarded Marissa. “Are you sure it wasn’t real? That it was *all* pretend?”

Marissa started to protest again, then stopped. What was the point in denying how much she cared about Felix, that she’d always cared about him, and that she had fallen in love with him?

“I saw the way he looks at you,” Meredith insisted. “Like the whole universe revolves around you.”

“I don’t know, Meredith.” Marissa stared up at the ceiling. “If that’s true, wouldn’t he want to stay on the island and be with me regardless of anything else?”

“Who says he doesn’t want to stay?”

“That night I hurt myself on the rocks, he came home and told me he was giving me the annulment and leaving the island as soon as it could be arranged.”

Meredith sat forward, her knitting project sliding off her lap onto the floor. “What? Why?”

“I think he has all kinds of excuses for why he wants to go. But none of them really matter. If I was truly important to him, he wouldn’t be able to leave me so easily, would he?”

Meredith’s pretty brow crinkled. “I thought he was different. I thought what the two of you had was different. But I guess not.”

“Maybe not.” The cry of a lone gull wafted in the window. Its cry echoed the sorrow in Marissa’s heart.

“That’s why I’m getting married to someone I don’t love.” Meredith spoke adamantly, as if she’d made her decision long ago and couldn’t be swayed.

That would account for her easy acquiescence to marrying Percy.

Apparently Percy had rowed to Sunrise Cove to fetch the doctor for Victor. Thankfully, Victor’s wound hadn’t been severe. Father had asked the doctor to look over Marissa, too, and he’d examined her stitches and ankle and hadn’t found any issues with Gabe’s work.

“I’m avoiding all those messy feelings,” Meredith continued. “They’re unnecessary.”

“The feelings are messy.” But wasn’t love worth the messy feelings and problems?

Meredith picked up her knitting. “A marriage based on a mutual agreement is so much easier than one based on emotions that change all of the time.”

Well, that was a lovely view on marriage. “I didn’t realize you felt that way.”

Meredith paused in winding the yarn through her fingers, a flush moving into her cheeks. “I’ve never been much of a romantic person.”

“So, you don’t hope for love to eventually develop with Percy?” Meredith’s view seemed so bleak and hopeless.

“I honestly think our marriage will be better if we develop qualities like loyalty and commitment.”

The couple of times Meredith had gone into town, Percy hadn’t been home and had been at the fishery. He also hadn’t come out to the farm to visit Meredith during her stay there, probably because Father had forbidden it.

Meredith hadn’t seemed to mind being away from her fiancé, hadn’t pined after him. And now that made sense since apparently she had no intention of ever letting feelings grow.

“Does Percy agree with you?” Marissa hadn’t imagined him being so cold about love.

Meredith gave a noncommittal shrug. “He’s a kind and caring fellow. But he’ll be just like Father and devote himself to his work.”

Something in Meredith’s tone made Marissa’s rolling thoughts come to a halt, and she studied her sister for a long moment as she bent over her knitting, her fingers flying with each clack of the needles.

Did Merdith know about Mother and Father's failed marriage and even Mother's unfaithfulness? After all, Meredith had been with Mother the most during her last months working at the restaurant.

No, it wasn't possible. Surely if Meredith had known, she wouldn't have been so sad or grieved so much after learning of Mother's death.

Marissa had the vague recollection she might have said something to Felix's brothers about the whole sordid affair while she was in the cave. She hoped she hadn't. After all this time, she didn't want to cause more problems for their families. But she was afraid she might have said too much.

"Don't worry about me and Percy," Meredith said. "Unless you're thinking you want him back?" Her eyes rounded, and she halted her knitting.

"Of course not." Not in a hundred years. In fact, Marissa couldn't imagine having any man except Felix. But were they simply destined to live separate lives?

"Maybe it's for the best that you and Felix part ways now," Meredith offered, as if sensing her unspoken words.

"Maybe it is." She hated to admit defeat, but wasn't parting ways what Felix had wanted on their last night together?

"At least you'll get to do what you love here on the farm."

Marissa shifted in bed, then winced as pain shot through her leg.

Meredith set down her knitting. "Time for more medicine. I'll be back in a moment with the herbal drink Janie made for you."

Before Marissa could pursue the conversation any further, Meredith stood and exited the room.

Marissa pinched her eyes closed. She'd finally gotten all that she'd been asking for—the farm from her father and the land to expand her blueberry field. More than that, she'd made peace with her father and gained his understanding.

She was grateful for those blessings. But suddenly her future felt too open and empty and even meaningless. Because what would it matter if she gained everything only to lose the man she cared most about?

CHAPTER 29

Felix's back burned from the afternoon sun beating down on him as he finished the last of the repairs on the smack. He gave a final thud of the mallet against the new plank he'd installed in the keel, then rubbed a hand over the smooth spruce.

With a small measure of satisfaction, he sat back on his heels on the overturned vessel with his tools spread out around him—auger, handsaw, adzes, slick, and more.

For the past week, he hadn't had the heart to go out and do more recruiting—not that they needed more lobstermen after all he'd signed on. So he'd spent hours on the boats, making repairs.

The precise labor that involved measuring and sawing and sanding and using his hands had brought him much needed solace over the days of being without Marissa.

Marissa.

His heart pricked painfully as it did every time he thought about her. Which was most of the time, and why his chest never seemed to stop aching.

He hadn't seen her all week, not since she'd hurt herself after their argument. When returning from the caves, it hadn't taken him long to pack his knapsack. He'd done it as the men had carried her inside. From the hallway, he'd watched them put her on the bed, and he'd wanted to go in and make sure she was comfortable.

But Mr. Axton had leveled a stern look at him and cocked his head toward the stairway. Felix had the overwhelming urge to defy the man and go visit Marissa anyway. But Meredith had been hovering around the bed, and Marissa had needed to rest.

He'd walked back to town, and when he'd stumbled into his family's house a short while later, Daphne had met him without a word and handed him a cup of coffee. He'd stayed there in his old room ever since.

Thankfully, no one in his family had questioned him about Marissa, his marriage, and the fact that he'd left her.

Of course, he'd been barraged with questions from people around town who'd heard all the rumors and were curious about the pretense of marriage he'd arranged with Marissa to help her get the farm.

He supposed that was another reason why he'd loved spending every moment making the boat repairs in the workshop yard adjacent to the wharf. Here he didn't have to face the townspeople speculating that he loved Marissa but she'd spurned him.

They weren't far from the truth. He did love her. And she had told him to leave. The trouble was that he hadn't been able to walk away yet—or sail away. He hadn't started the annulment process either. He couldn't make himself do anything but get up and work on the boats during the daylight and visit with Collette when darkness fell. Even then, he'd struggled to stay connected without his mind wandering to Marissa.

Collette had urged him each night to go talk with Marissa. And he knew he needed to do that before leaving the island—if he left. He didn't want to run away again, but what remained for him here if he couldn't have Marissa?

Of course he'd walked out to the farm every evening to check on her, although he hadn't gone in the house and had only talked with Victor. The first time he'd brought a crutch he'd fashioned after staying up all night. The next visit he'd delivered a pie Daphne had made for her. He'd taken out fresh lobster another time. And last night he'd carried out the hoes he'd sharpened for Victor.

What excuse could he scrounge up this evening?

Even if she didn't invite him in when he was there, he felt better being close to her and getting an update on how she was doing. According to Victor her ankle was still swollen but was less painful to walk on every day.

"That's fine workmanship." A voice from the shore startled Felix.

He pivoted to find Mr. Axton standing on the grassy knoll nearby in his suit and top hat. On the Larock side of the bay.

Felix glanced quickly down the wharf toward the cannery, hoping Pa wasn't outside to see Mr. Axton in the wrong area. Even though the two men hadn't fought since finding Marissa, they certainly weren't best friends again and hadn't spoken to each other.

Mr. Axton had apologized again to Victor, who wasn't upset about the incident because he knew Mr. Axton hadn't intended to hurt anyone. Felix hadn't wanted to make an issue out of the shooting either, and Pa had easily dropped the matter.

From what Felix could tell, the secret about Coral and Pa hadn't spread beyond the family. With Gabe and Liam and Rufus having discovered the truth, Felix had expected the news to spread like a wildfire—jumping from person to person uncontrollably.

But so far, no one had talked about the affair, and Felix could only assume that his brothers were too ashamed to speak publicly about it.

"I've been watching you all week." Mr. Axton nodded toward the smack. "And you have a natural talent. I have to say that you're better than some of my carpenters."

Mr. Axton's boatbuilding workshop had gained a reputation for its quality vessels. No doubt he had hired only the best carpenters to work there, which meant his compliment was high praise.

"Thank you, sir. I learned a lot from you back when I was building that dory of mine."

"Oh yes. I wish I could say those were the good years, but I have too many regrets to say so."

"Is that right?" Felix tugged a bandana from his pocket, lifted his hat, and wiped his forehead, waiting for Mr. Axton to say more.

"I was so determined at that point in my life to build my business and succeed that I put far more energy and time into work than into my family."

"Regardless, your daughters have turned out to be very lovely."

"In spite of that, yes, they are all lovely." Mr. Axton tipped up the brim of his top hat as he glanced in the direction of the farm.

They couldn't see the house from where they were standing, but Felix had felt the internal tug to be there all week.

"The truth is," Mr. Axton continued, "I have a long way to go in asking for forgiveness as well as learning to forgive the way God requires. For too long I've let bitterness keep me from that."

"It's understandable after what happened."

"Maybe it's time for both of us to let go of the bitterness we have toward your pa." Mr. Axton spoke the words quietly, resignedly.

Apparently Mr. Axton realized Felix had despised his pa for his transgressions. Maybe Marissa had told him, or maybe he'd figured it out

that night Marissa had gone missing.

Usually Felix was quick to forgive and forget. But was Mr. Axton right?

"Bitterness is as slippery and sneaky as a bloodworm." Mr. Axton was now staring at the cannery. "It burrowed deep inside me, spawning, eating, and getting bigger until it was leeching the very life from my soul, keeping me from being able to love wholeheartedly."

Felix swallowed hard. "Maybe I have held on to more bitterness toward my pa than I realized."

"It's easy to do."

"I need to learn how to forgive too."

Mr. Axton had always come across as a proud man, but in the moment, he had a humility that was inspiring. "I think learning to forgive is the first step in dealing with our own mistakes. Then we have to make amends as best we can."

"I suppose in the end, all that matters is making amends."

Mr. Axton removed his top hat, giving Felix a glimpse of the reprimand in his eyes. "Is that what you're doing, son? Making amends? Or are you letting your mistakes get the best of you?"

Felix glanced at the cannery. Perhaps he needed to go over after he was done putting away all the repair supplies and have a good talk with his pa. He hadn't spoken to him about everything that had happened, and Pa hadn't sought him out either, was too embarrassed to even look at him when they passed each other at the house.

Yes, it was past time to stop letting bitterness toward Pa fester. Felix didn't want it to suck the life from him.

He froze.

He already had ended up like Mr. Axton. He'd let bitterness spawn inside him, expanding and taking over so he hadn't been able to love Marissa wholeheartedly, the way she needed him to.

As if seeing Felix's revelation, Mr. Axton nodded. "She's a forgiving woman."

There was no need to ask who he was referring to. "I don't know if she'll be able to forgive me this time."

"I think she will if you show her you're making amends and are serious about putting her first above everything else."

Felix could only stare at Mr. Axton. Not many weeks ago, the fellow had wanted to kill him for marrying his daughter. Today, here he was

encouraging him to reconcile with her.

Mr. Axton slipped his hat back on. “You’re a good man, Felix. Not only did you intervene to save my life twice last week, but I don’t know of anyone else who would have done for Marissa all that you did without expecting anything in return.”

“Thank you—”

“Go win her back and then spend your life without any regrets.”

“Yes, sir.”

A spark of hope sprang to life inside of Felix, the first hope he’d felt all week. Was there still a chance he could work things out with Marissa, that he could be with her after all?

Mr. Axton faced the cannery and steeled his shoulders. “I’m on my way to talk to your pa to see if he’ll let me hire you on as an apprentice for my boatbuilding.”

Felix opened his mouth to answer but couldn’t find any words. Not only was it unheard of for Mr. Axton to go talk to his pa, it was just as shocking that he wanted to hire a Larock.

“If your pa allows it, I hope you would be agreeable to coming to work for me. I’d hate to see your talent wasted.”

Felix scrambled to find a response that was coherent. “I’ll certainly consider it, sir.” Actually, the prospect of using his carpentry skills and learning a trade like building boats was more than he could have hoped for.

Mr. Axton tipped the brim of his hat in farewell and continued down the Larock wharf toward the cannery.

With fresh energy charging through him, Felix hopped down from the boat and gathered up his tools. He obviously couldn’t visit his pa at the moment, not if Mr. Axton was heading there.

He placed the tools back into the bin that held an assortment of other equipment. No, his reconciliation with his pa would have to wait for later. His first priority was going straight to Marissa and doing his best to convince her that he loved her and wanted to win her back and never let her go again.

To do so, he had to release his bitterness and make peace with his past. Maybe that would be an ongoing process that would happen over time—for many weeks, even many years. But he could get started today.

“God,” he whispered as he picked up the bin of tools, “I don’t want bitterness to rule inside me any longer. Help me to let go of it, to dig it out,

and to stop letting it control my life."

Now that he recognized the bitterness inside him, it was time to start worming it out.

"Help me to forgive my pa the way the reverend said we need to forgive," he prayed. "Help me to forgive my brothers too. I want to be able to live a life of forgiveness."

As he started toward the shed, he swiped up a stray fishhook from the ground. He didn't know how things would go with Marissa, but he did know he was tired of sitting back and doing nothing.

It was time to win her heart and love. He just prayed he could.

CHAPTER 30

Marissa sat among the blueberry bushes and breathed in their wild and heady scent. The blossoms were falling away from most of the plants, and now that pollination was mostly completed, the fruit would soon develop. But the sweetness of their flowers still lingered in the air.

With a bee veil over his head, Victor stood near the log hives, swinging the smoker to calm the bees so he could get inside and extract the honey.

Soon they would relocate the hives closer to the farm where they could tend them better. But they'd decided to keep them near the bushes for a few more days, until the beginning of June.

"We will need to weed again soon," she said as she plucked several more nearby weeds.

"I will weed. You will rest." Victor glanced over his shoulder, probably to make sure she was still sitting.

She sighed. She'd assured him her ankle was feeling better and that she could start hobbling around on it. The gash in her knee was healing too. Gabe had come out to check on her one late afternoon and said he would be by in a few days to remove the stitches.

Even though she was progressing, Victor had only agreed to let her accompany him to the field if she promised she would stay off her ankle. She'd enthusiastically complied, so he'd saddled her mare, carried her out to it, and led her up to the field.

At least when they'd arrived, he'd given in to her plea to let her sit in the field and had gently deposited her among the bushes she loved so much and had missed over the past week of being bedridden.

She hadn't missed the blueberries as much as she'd missed Felix, however. Even though he'd come out to the farm each evening for one reason or another, he hadn't stepped inside the house to talk to her.

She'd thought about asking Meredith to help her go outside to see him. But the hurt inside had held her back—the hurt that he'd given up on their

relationship so easily again.

Maybe that was why she'd been so distressed before he'd left the first time, because he'd given up on their relationship then too. Yes, he'd opposed her getting engaged to Josiah, but he hadn't offered himself, hadn't fought for her, hadn't made any effort to claim her.

Instead, he'd gone off with another woman and then had left the island altogether . . .

She blew out an exasperated breath.

Victor paused his swinging of the smoker and pivoted to face her. "That is the fourth time you have sighed since arriving. I thought you would be happier out here."

"I am happy."

Although the veil shielded his face, she could tell he was frowning.

She sighed again. "Fine. I'm miserable."

"I have been able to see it all week, and it is obvious why."

"And why is that?" She couldn't contain the note of sarcasm.

"If you make the biggest catch of your lifetime, why would you throw the fish back into the ocean instead of keeping it?"

"I didn't throw Felix back. He threw me away."

"If the hare is running away from the badger, the badger must find a way to ease the hare's fears."

"And how does a badger ease the fears of a hare?" Her voice was edged with even more sarcasm.

"The badger uses her strength and tenacity to go after what she really wants, even when it seems impossible."

"*He* is impossible."

"She has used her sharp claws to go after other things she wants and has succeeded. She can do it once more."

Could she, though? Should she try to wrestle Felix into staying? She'd wanted him to be the one to offer. But if he wasn't going to, should she try to do more?

"You don't have to drag him, but you can lead him." Victor always seemed to sense what she was thinking.

"And how can I do that?"

"Invite him in tonight when he visits."

"But what if he rejects me again?" That was the ultimate question, wasn't it? The one she'd struggled with all along. If she allowed herself to love

him, would he leave her anyway?

Victor was studying her face. “Now that you know everything about your mother, you will need to make peace with her rejection, or it will keep you from trusting Felix.”

She peered at her friend who’d been with her through every season of her life. She hadn’t shared the revelations about her mother with Victor, but she wouldn’t be surprised if he knew everything that had happened, including Mother’s suicide.

Over the past few days, Marissa had thought a lot about the recent revelation that Mother had given up on life and thrown herself into the ocean. And Victor was right. Marissa did feel rejected, like Mother hadn’t cared enough about her daughters to fight to live.

Not only had Marissa lived with rejection from her mother, but in some ways, she’d also felt it from her father too. She’d fallen short with both of them and perhaps feared she’d fall short with Felix too.

Was it time to forgive her parents for that rejection? She’d already begun to forgive her father for some things. That was easier to do since he’d apologized and was making an effort to be different. But her mother could never apologize or make it up to her.

Marissa hadn’t wanted to let go of her anger toward her mother, hadn’t ever wanted to forgive her. But if she clung to the hurt forever and didn’t make peace with her past, she might not be able to make peace with Felix either.

Victor swung the smoker again. “God’s great forgiveness to us gives us the power to forgive even when it seems impossible.”

She flopped onto her back and peered up into the sky filled with fluffy clouds. She’d made plenty of her own mistakes. She’d been far from perfect. And she was grateful that God so easily forgave, that His mercy was like morning sunshine that came out every day in spite of the mist or the clouds.

If God could forgive her so readily, then how could she keep harboring hurt from her past?

It was time to let it go.

“Victor?” A man’s voice came from the edge of the field, a man’s voice that made her heart leap.

Felix was here.

“I’m looking for Marissa. When I stopped by the house, Meredith and Janie told me you brought her up here.”

Marissa held her breath. The blueberry bushes were concealing her. A part of her wanted to stay hidden—the part that was afraid of his rejection again. But the other part—the one that was miserable and wanted to be with him more than anything—tugged at her hard.

She loved Felix. More than she’d ever thought possible. Even if Felix didn’t love her in return or decided not to stay on the island, at least she could live with the confidence that she hadn’t let fear of hurt and rejection hold her back any longer.

Slowly she pushed up until she was sitting.

His gaze locked in on her almost right away, and he started forward again, his attention unwavering. And it was intense, as though he’d come to tell her something serious.

Victor had stepped away from the beehives and was walking away in the opposite direction, lifting his veil.

Marissa was tempted to call him back, to insist that he stay, just in case she needed to get away from Felix. Because what if he was coming to give her the annulment and to tell her he was leaving?

As the panic began to bubble inside her, she dug her fingers into the soil to ground herself. Victor had told her she was strong and tenacious and to go after what she wanted. And she wanted Felix. She couldn’t stay silent any longer and just let him leave. She still didn’t want to coerce him into staying, but she could tell him how she was feeling and let him make the choice.

“Stop right there, Felix.” She held out a hand, hoping he would listen.

But no, he kept striding toward her. His face was scruffy as if he hadn’t shaved all week. His eyes had dark circles under them from lack of sleep, his jaw was rigid, and his lips were pursed.

“Don’t come one step closer.”

His steps didn’t falter. He was clearly determined to say his piece.

But she was just as determined, if not more. After all, she was the badger—at least in Victor’s analogy. She pushed up even higher, straightening her shoulders and spine. “Felix Larock, whatever you decide to do with your life and future, you should know that I love you.”

His footsteps finally stumbled, and he came to halt.

“And not as just a friend either. Although I do love you as a friend too. But even more than that, I love you as a wife does her husband.”

His eyes rounded, revealing the dark blue that had a soft glow. “What did you say?” He sounded winded. Had he run all the way up from the farmhouse?

“You heard me.”

“I don’t think I did.”

She narrowed her eyes on him.

“I need to get closer so I can hear you better.” His voice held a teasing note as he started toward her again, and his lips turned up with a faint smile.

Her heart pattered with an extra beat. What did that mean? Whatever it was, she had to keep going now that she’d started. “I’m sorry for holding secrets from you, but I don’t want to do that anymore. I want us to live honestly and openly with each other, no matter how painful the truth may be at times.”

He nodded, drawing closer. “I agree.”

“Good. And I want us to remain married, even if you go away. Which I hope you won’t, but it has to be your decision to stay.”

“I agree with that too.” He stopped and towered above her in all his tanned, brawny glory. His hat was askew, revealing his brown hair that was even more sun-bleached now after the past few weeks of living by the sea. His features were rugged and taut, and she had the urge to run her fingers around them and over his chest and down his arms and across his abdomen.

As if seeing the train of her thoughts, his lips curled higher.

She glared up at him, more to hide her desire than to show irritation. “Now that we know we have such jolly agreement, why don’t you tell me what you came to say.”

The humor disappeared from his countenance and was replaced by a severity that sent skitters of fear prickling across her skin. Oh no. He was planning to deliver bad news, and she’d just made the moment more awkward.

He heaved in a breath as if gaining courage. “I came to tell you that I’m sorry for everything—for keeping secrets from you, for making excuses to end our marriage, for pushing you away.”

“I forgive you.”

He hesitated.

She closed her eyes. Here it came. His decision to leave.

“I can’t promise that I won’t make mistakes again . . .” His fingers caressed her cheek.

Her eyes flew open to find him watching her tenderly.

“I will fail at times, and I may not always love unselfishly or forgive right away. But I do promise I will work on those things, so that maybe someday I’ll be worthy of your love.”

Her heart picked up its pace and began to race. “You don’t have to wait for someday. You’re already worthy.”

“I’m not, but I will work on it every day for the rest of my life, if you’ll let me.”

She peered up at him, the sincerity in his eyes leaving her suddenly breathless.

He lowered himself to one knee before her and reached for her hand. “I love you, Marissa. I always have, and I always will.”

Her body sagged as relief fell over her. He loved her. That was all that really mattered, wasn’t it?

“If you’re willing to put up with an imperfect man like me, then I would be honored if you would stay married to me and be my wife for always.”

“No more pretend marriage with an end date?”

“Absolutely no pretenses or end dates. Only the real thing and forever.”

“Then okay.”

“Okay?” His expression was filled with hope. “Simple as that?”

“Yes, okay. Simple as that.”

“We can take our time in making it really real.” His tone dropped. “We don’t have to rush anything.”

She had some idea of what he was referencing, and a need for him cascaded through her—that same need from moments ago to let her hands roam over his chest and his arms and his body. Truthfully, she wanted to start kissing him whenever she felt the urge. Like now . . .

She grabbed a fistful of his shirt and yanked him toward her. Sparing her injured knee and ankle, he half tumbled on top of her and lowered them to the ground, which was fine with her. She aimed her mouth for his and wasted no time in pressing her lips to his. And she wasted no time in demanding that he kiss her back.

Thankfully he complied. He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her against his body more fully and making her conscious of the muscular length of him, the taut sinews, the hard ridges, the warm solidness. This

closeness, this meshing, this feel of him—this was what she'd been wanting and waiting for.

A soft moan slipped out between kisses.

"Your little noises when we kiss," he whispered huskily, "make me only want to kiss you more."

"They do?" She wrapped her arms around his neck, tossed aside his hat, and dug her fingers into his hair.

"Yes." His lips were brushing hers.

She smiled against him. "I'm not stopping you—"

Before she could finish, his mouth crashed against hers like waves pummeling the stony shoreline, eroding the rocks with their force. The tempo and strength of his kiss immobilized her and stirred heat deep inside.

Oh heaven-sent bliss. She loved this man, loved him beyond what she could fathom. And she wanted to spend the rest of the day in the blueberry field kissing him. Maybe she would.

She started to arch up into him, her body keening for a closer connection.

In the next instant, he broke the kiss and pulled back.

She almost groaned her protest, but at the hesitation in his expression, she dampened her desires. "Was that *really real* enough for you?"

His gaze dropped to her mouth. "I don't know. I think you'll have to show me again. Probably many times."

"I can do that. Easily."

"Before you do, I have something I want to give you. I know we don't need to have another wedding. But I need to give you a different ring to make it official."

"What? I adored that rum-running ring." She couldn't keep from teasing him.

"I thought you had your heart set on having a fishhook for a ring." He sat back and dug his hand into his pocket, then pulled out a silver object. It was a fishhook that had been bent and shaped into a circle, the sharp edge now blunt.

She laughed and offered him her hand.

With a wide grin, he slid the fishhook down, adjusting the tightness a little so it fit her finger.

As she held out her hand and looked at the token, she realized that this was exactly the kind of ring she wanted to wear—something that would always remind her of how she'd made the biggest catch of her life with

Felix. In spite of the struggle to reel him in, she hadn't given up. She'd persevered, and she would continue to do so for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER 31

“If you came to tell me you’re taking the job with Herb, I already know.” Pa was shoveling the broken pieces of lobster shells into the cart at the side yard of the cannery. The scent of cooked shells and lobster meat was heavy in the evening air.

“That’s not why I came.” Felix grabbed the closest shovel and dug it into the mound.

“Herb came a while ago to ask my permission.” Pa’s voice wobbled.

“He told me he would.” Lifting a shovelful of shell pieces, Felix glanced at his pa.

A tear slipped out and ran down Pa’s cheek.

Felix halted. If it made his pa upset enough to shed tears, should he wait to accept Mr. Axton’s offer? Felix wanted to keep the peace, didn’t want to stir up conflict. But he also had to do what was best for himself and Marissa.

After their blissful time together in the blueberry field, he almost hadn’t wanted to leave her and return to town. But he’d needed to go get his bag of belongings from the house, so he’d decided the sooner he could talk to his pa, the freer he would be to start a new course without the burden of bitterness weighing him down.

His pa swiped at the trail on his cheek.

“Listen, Pa.” Felix emptied a shovelful of shells into the cart. “I’m sorry if my taking the job with Mr. Axton is hard—”

“I’m thrilled for you.” Again his pa’s voice broke, and more tears slid out.

Felix stopped and now faced his pa. “You’re thrilled?”

“Ayuh.” Pa wiped both cheeks this time. “By gory, I never thought I’d see the far-flung day when Herb would talk to me again.”

“I didn’t expect him to talk to me earlier today either.”

“It looks like your marriage to Marissa might not only result in a job building boats but also in building bridges.”

“Bridges?”

“Between our two families. Not that I deserve a bridge, not after the mess I made.”

“About that.” Felix cleared his throat.

“I tell ya, Felix.” Pa resumed shoveling. “I understand now why you’ve despised me. I should have guessed that you knew about my terrible mistake. You have every right to think I’m worse than pond scum.”

Felix twisted at his shovel. “Actually, I’m not holding on to my anger and bitterness toward you any longer. That’s why I came here, because I want you to know that I’m letting it go.”

“You don’t have to—”

“But I do.” Felix met his pa’s gaze finally. “I’m sorry for judging you all these years. The truth is, I’m flawed too and have a lot of work to do just like everyone else.”

Pa’s eyes were still damp with tears. He opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

“It may take some time for us to learn how to relate again, but I want to try better.”

Pa swallowed hard. “I appreciate that.” His voice was husky with emotion. “And I want to try better too.”

Felix guessed he also owed his brothers an apology—or at least a conversation like this one. But tonight he was in too much of a hurry to get back to the farm and to Marissa. After their week apart, he was famished for her. In fact, he was so hungry and eager that he could hardly think straight as he shoveled another load of lobster shells into the cart.

“Marissa is taking me back. So I’ll be moving out there again.”

“Good.” Pa began shoveling again too. “Knew it would only be a matter of time.”

“You did, did you?”

“Anyone with eyes can see that you belong with her.”

“That right?”

“Just surprised you were able to keep your love for her a secret for so long.”

Felix supposed it was a miracle that no one had found out sooner. Well maybe not *no one*. Victor had figured it out. “I think we should all be done

keeping secrets from one another."

"Ayuh." Pa paused in lifting the shells. "I'd like that."

What had Marissa said up on Blueberry Hill? Something like living honestly and openly with each other, no matter how painful the truth might be. Yes, living honestly and openly was sometimes the harder way, but it was the right way and would lead to a more fulfilling life.

Pa held out a hand for a shake. "Thank you for coming by, Felix."

He shook his pa's hand.

"You've turned out to be a man of integrity. I'm proud of you."

A lump formed in Felix's throat, and he managed a nod.

"Now get on with you." Pa took the shovel out of Felix's hand and gave him a good-natured push. "Go home to that wife of yours. I can tell that's the only place you want to be tonight."

Tonight and always.

Felix went to the house and made quick work of gathering and packing up his knapsack. Then he said good-bye to Collette and Daphne. With Collette's continued improvement, she even walked outside with him as he readied to leave. Although she limped with her crutches, she was getting stronger physically. More importantly, her spirits were lifting, she was smiling often, and she seemed eager to rejoin life.

He wasn't sure if his presence had brought about her changes, but he did know that over the past week, Pa had started spending more time with her too.

Was it possible that Pa's shame had kept him from being able to be truly present in the life of his family? Maybe now after all that had happened, Pa was letting go of his mistakes. And maybe forgiving oneself brought freedom too.

Whatever the case, Felix was on his way to the farm before darkness fell, and with each step closer, his heart swelled with gratitude. God had been gracious to him. Maybe He hadn't sent a fish to swallow Felix up and spit him out on dry ground like Jonah, but He had brought him back where He'd wanted him and had somehow used him to bring about changes in all of them.

As Felix reached the back door of the farmhouse, he nodded at Victor, who stepped out of the barn into the fading beams of the setting sun.

Victor nodded back before heading in the direction of his cabin.

Felix paused another moment, then slowly opened the door.

Meredith, who was at the worktable rolling out biscuit dough, caught sight of him first.

Marissa was standing at the stove stirring the contents of a large pot. The scent of clam wafted around the room, which meant the women had made clam chowder for supper. Marissa had her back to the door and was talking about how she needed to add more fertilizer to the blueberry fields.

As Meredith watched him, Felix pressed a finger to his lips, warning her to keep silent. Then he crept quietly the few steps to the stove. Marissa must have sensed his presence because before he could reach her, she shifted and looked over her shoulder.

As she took him in, a smile blossomed on her beautiful face, and her eyes were a warm copper. “That was fast.”

He dropped his knapsack to the floor, then lifted her off her feet and into his arms. “It’s a good thing it was, because I caught you in the act of standing and working.”

“Oh my. Yes, I guess you did catch me being naughty.” The copper in her eyes turned a burnished brown with heat. “I guess that means you’ll need to keep a closer eye on me.”

The sparks of desire inside him fanned quickly into hot flames. “How close?”

She wound one hand around his neck, and she pressed the other against his heart. And then she tilted her face toward his so their lips were only inches apart.

With her body against his and her mouth so near, heat surged through him like a strong current that he couldn’t fight—didn’t want to fight—any longer.

“However close you want.” Her voice turned sultry.

“Like this?” He bent down and took her lips captive with a powerful kiss, one that came from deep within him, one that contained all the love he felt for her.

Across the room, Meredith coughed. “I think I’ll be moving home tonight __”

“No.” Marissa broke the kiss and glanced at her sister. “You don’t have to do that.”

Meredith was smiling at them. “Father invited me to return home. I planned to remain here to help you until you recover, but I fear I will just be in the way.”

Felix hesitated. He could agree that Meredith might be in the way, especially because he was ready to stop pretending with Marissa and to love her in every possible way without holding back. But, of course, he didn't want Marissa to be on her own during the days while he was gone. He wanted her to still have the help.

Marissa hadn't answered her sister either. She was probably about to tell her sister to go, that she'd be fine without her.

"Don't worry." Meredith rose from the table and brushed her hands on her apron. "I'll be back during the days to keep an eye on Marissa for as long as it takes her ankle to heal."

Before either of them could say anything, she slipped from the kitchen.

She was barely out of the room when Marissa's hand behind his neck dragged him down. "Now where were we?" she whispered as her lips brushed his.

He released an inward sigh of satisfaction. He was right where he wanted to be. It was the only place he'd ever wanted to be. With the woman he loved.

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read on for an excerpt from

Calling on the Matchmaker

When a St. Louis Irish matchmaker pairs a shy young woman who spends her time caring for immigrants with a wealthy, flirtatious man

whose father wants him to settle down, they can't imagine a more opposite pairing. But as they work together to protect the neighborhood from an epidemic, all they know about love and sacrifice is tested.

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CHAPTER 1

St. Louis, Missouri
January 1849

"Nip along with you now, Finola." Madigan bounded onto Broadway, dodging an omnibus that was slogging through the thick mud. "The matchmaker is waiting."

"Have patience." Finola Shanahan followed her younger brother and tiptoed into the mire. She bunched up the black habit the Sisters of Charity had so graciously provided for her to wear whenever she accompanied them for charity work. "I'm going as fast as I can."

"Mam and Da are done putting up with your impertinence." Madigan shot her a warning look. The sixteen-year-old was already a handsome fellow with his big blue eyes and brown hair, turning the heads of the local lasses wherever he went.

Of the six Shanahan children, everyone claimed she and Madigan resembled each other the most. And aye, she had the same blue eyes and brown hair. But when God had been doling out the freckles, He'd forgotten to spread them out between her and Madigan. She'd ended up with them all.

The winter wind rustled against her hood and sent a chill down her back. "I'm a dutiful daughter."

Madigan released a snort. "And I'm the pope."

Guilt nudged at Finola. She *was* a dutiful daughter in almost every way except one. . . . She wasn't cooperating with her parents' efforts to find her a husband.

Madigan leapt over a half-frozen puddle. "They're just trying to make a good impression on the matchmaker, dontcha know."

"I'm well aware, to be sure." They might want to impress Oscar McKenna, the local Irish matchmaker. But she wanted to frustrate Oscar

enough that he'd refuse to help her parents. And being late for the meeting was a good start to that effort.

As she took another tentative step into the busy thoroughfare, the mud sucked at her lace-up ankle boots.

A faded yellow hackney rumbled down the street toward her. The coachman sat slouched, his head down, the brim of his top hat pulled low. He didn't seem to be looking where he was going. Rather, he held the reins loosely, as if the team of horses knew the route well and didn't need his directing.

Finola forced her feet to move more swiftly after Madigan. In the late afternoon of the dreary January day, the St. Louis traffic was heavy, especially on Washington at Broadway so close to the riverfront where factories, warehouses, and stores crowded the mostly unpaved streets. Apparently now that the gray skies had finished spitting a mixture of rain and sleet, everyone had come out to finish the day's work.

As a beer delivery wagon filled with casks lumbered from the other direction, she paused. The driver wasn't paying attention to her any more than the hackney. A dray from the levee followed, piled high with boxes of merchandise and hogsheads of tobacco.

Madigan was already on the opposite side, and as he spun to check on her progress, his eyes widened. "Holy thundering mother, Finola! Get out of the street before you get run over." He waved his arms, motioning her back, his gaze darting to the hackney coach that wasn't slowing—not even a fraction.

It was less than two dozen paces away from her, and the driver's head remained down, the reins still loose, the horses trotting forward with no intention of stopping for a lone woman standing in their path.

"Hurry, Finola!" Madigan's voice took on an urgency that prodded her pulse into a gallop. She tried to make her feet follow suit, but as she spun, one of her boots snagged in a rut. In the next instant, she felt herself going down.

She braced her fall with her hands and knees, the layer of mud cushioning the impact. But at the nearing rattle of harnesses and the creak of wheels, she scrambled to push herself up.

Horse hooves pounded closer.

She clawed at the mud, slipping and sliding and attempting to find footing.

Several shouts—including Madigan's—advised her with increasing fervor. But her heart was suddenly beating too hard to hear anything clearly . . . except the toll of the death bell.

She was going to die. And there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." The words clogged in her throat, the rest of the plea for mercy drowned in a frustrated cry as she tried to wrench herself free.

But with each move she made, the mud coated her more, seeming to lock her in place.

"Lie flat!" A deep voice penetrated her panic.

Even as she began to brace herself for the impact of the horses and carriage, a man slammed into her and rolled her to her back, throwing himself over her and covering her body with his just as the horses passed by her on either side. Their hooves slapped so close, she held herself stiffly.

The man shielding her also held himself rigidly, clearly intending to take the brunt of the harm from the horses. He ducked his head next to hers, near enough that his cheek bumped against her bonnet and his heavy breathing echoed in her ear.

She cringed, waiting for a hoof to hit him, but only mud splattered against them.

A moment later the horses were gone, and the green hackney wheels were rolling past. The low underbelly of the vehicle box slipped over them, brushing close to her rescuer's back so that he flattened himself against her even further.

Thankfully she had a slender frame and was on the smaller size of the average woman. Even so, she did her part to mold against the street, attempting to keep the man from getting hurt.

As the shadows of the hackney gave way to the cloudy day above them, the man lifted his head and scanned the street as though gauging whether he needed to protect her from any other oncoming traffic.

Apparently seeing no immediate threat, his body relaxed against hers, and he returned his attention to her. "How do you fare?"

Finola found herself peering up into blue eyes so dark they were almost black. Deep set, they crinkled at the corners with concern, and his fair brows bunched together above a fine, narrow nose. His hat had been knocked off, and his toasted blond hair fell across his forehead in disarray.

His gaze held hers intently, as though he wouldn't be satisfied until she reassured him she was fine. She did a quick mental assessment of her limbs, wiggling her fingers and toes simultaneously. Nothing seemed to be missing or broken. "I think I'm alright."

He glanced again over his shoulder and then down the street in the opposite direction. The wagons all around them had come to a standstill.

Too little, too late.

As if thinking the same, her rescuer homed in on the hackney, the only vehicle still in motion, slogging away at the same careless pace, as if it made an everyday occurrence of running over pedestrians.

He frowned, his square jaw hardening. The angular edges were covered in a light brown layer of stubble. Though his expression was serious, she was suddenly aware of just how handsome he was.

"Saint Riley to the rescue again!" someone shouted.

Saint Riley? Riley Rafferty hailed as Saint Riley of the Kerry Patch?

She'd never personally met him. But the Irish community in St. Louis had always been small enough—at least until recent years—that she knew of almost everyone, saw almost everyone at one point or another at a parade or mass or a wedding or a funeral. So of course she'd seen Riley Rafferty from time to time over her twenty-three years.

But he was several years older and wasn't in any of her family's social groups. She'd never given him a second thought until last autumn when she'd witnessed him dive into the Mississippi and rescue a drowning steamboat deckhand.

Over the past four months since that rescue, she'd observed him on occasion from a distance and had marveled like everyone else over his daring deeds.

And now, here he was.

Her breath snagged in her chest, this time not out of fear of being crushed by an oncoming conveyance. No, this time, she was breathless because the heroic Riley Rafferty had saved her life.

Her body awoke to the realization that his full length was covering her—a broad chest, muscular torso, thick arms, and long legs. She knew from watching his dripping-wet body emerge from the river that he was a strong man with muscles in every conceivable place. He had the kind of body that could make a nun blush.

Even so, his presence wasn't heavy or suffocating. Instead, she felt safe, as though the world had stopped and nothing or no one could hurt her, not as long as Riley was with her. The feeling of security was odd, one she hadn't felt in many years.

"Finola Shanahan!" The next shout was Madigan's from above her. "What am I going to do with you?"

At the mention of her name, Riley's brows arched, and his eyes lightened a wee bit to a midnight blue. Did he recognize her?

More likely he recognized her family's name. Her da was one of the most prominent men of St. Louis. And one of the wealthiest.

Riley seemed to study her more carefully, his gaze slowing as he passed over the freckles on her nose and cheeks.

Of course, there were other Irish Shanahans in St. Louis, and he might not realize she was the oldest daughter of the iron magnate James Shanahan, sole owner of Shanahan Iron Works.

"You're sure you're not hurt, Sister?" Riley's eyes, full of questions, met hers.

Sister? Did he think she was a nun? She supposed the confusion was only natural since she was clothed in the habit. Should she correct him?

"Come on with you now, Finola." Madigan thrust a hand toward her.

A part of her wanted to clear up Riley's mistake in thinking she was a nun. But what was the point in doing so? She had every intention of joining the Sisters of Charity . . . just as soon as she could convince her parents to allow it.

First, she had to thwart their newest plan to use the matchmaker to arrange her marriage. Once she foiled their efforts, they'd surely agree that after so many failed matches, the only bride she was suited to become was a bride of Christ.

At the sight of Madigan's outstretched hand, Riley started to push away. She had the urge to grab him and prevent him from leaving her. The need was completely irrational. This man was a stranger. And she couldn't remain in the middle of busy Broadway any longer than she already had.

As Riley gingerly crawled off her and stood, the watching crowd cheered and clapped.

Madigan bent down and began to help her to her feet. All the while, she couldn't tear her sights from Riley.

A young lad hustled toward Riley and reverently handed him his hat. Riley squeezed the boy's shoulder in thanks before he situated the work-worn felt hat on his head. He waved and grinned at the onlookers as if he'd just finished putting on a theater production he'd been rehearsing for weeks.

Although Riley's breeches and woolen stockings were heavily splattered with mud, his coat and the linen shirt underneath were fairly mud free. Unlike her clothing . . .

She didn't need to glance down to know she resembled a sow who'd just had a grand time flopping around in a pigsty. Not only was her front caked in mud, but her backside was too. She could even feel splotches on her cheeks and forehead.

No doubt, Riley thought she looked a fright.

As if hearing her silent assessment, he swung his attention back to her. The seriousness was gone from his expression. Instead, mirth added faint stars to his eyes, and his lips quirked at the corners, as if they weren't comfortable anyplace other than in a smile.

Was he finding humor in how she looked?

She started to swipe at one of the splotches on her cheek but then stopped herself. It didn't matter what Riley Rafferty thought about her. It didn't matter what any man thought about her. Not now. Not any time.

She pulled herself up to all of her five-feet-three inches. "Thank you for saving my life, young lad."

Riley's brows rose. "My pleasure."

Absolutely no one in her right mind could mistake Riley as being anything other than a full-grown man. But treating her suitors as though she were sixty years older than them always seemed to douse any growing sparks. Not that Riley was a suitor. And not that he had any growing sparks. But it was best if he knew she harbored no attraction toward him. None.

"You're quite the boy." She reached up and pinched one of his cheeks just like a grandmother would do. "Keep up the good work."

With that, she slipped her arm into Madigan's and tried to nudge him on his way.

When Madigan didn't budge and continued to stare at Riley with wide-eyed admiration, she jabbed her elbow into his ribs harder.

He released a low *oof* before stumbling forward and leading her the rest of the way across the street. Fortunately he'd been the one carrying her bag

with her change of clothing and shoes, and it had survived the escapade intact.

As they made their way down Broadway, he didn't release his grasp of her arm, retelling every detail of the rescue from his perspective, as if the brush with death wasn't already clear enough in her mind.

On the next block, she dragged Madigan past a printing shop until she reached the alley behind it.

Her brother didn't resist but followed along warily, likely having had enough drama for one afternoon. "What are you doing now, Finola?"

She nodded to the back of the livery stable on the opposite side of the alley. "I'm needing to change before I go home."

Madigan's lips curled up into one of his irresistible grins. "I'll not be arguing with you there."

"Good." She crossed to the livery door and peeked inside to find it was as deserted as always at the late-afternoon hour. She'd have no trouble finding an empty horse stall and putting back on her garments like she had on previous occasions.

She always changed out of the robe lest she cast suspicion upon herself. Yes, her parents knew she was heavily involved in charity work with the Sisters of Charity. But they believed she'd given up her aspirations for becoming a nun, as they'd suggested, and didn't know she still held the desire very dear to her heart.

They also didn't know that she'd purposefully driven away all her previous suitors so she could enter into service. Of course, after she'd recently sent her last suitor running into the arms of another woman, she'd hoped her parents would finally resign themselves to her being single and might even suggest that she become a nun. She hadn't guessed they'd be desperate enough to enlist the help of the matchmaker.

"Get along with you now, Madigan." She shooed him away.

"I can't show up without you—"

"You know as well as I do, we'll both fare better if you nip ahead and let everyone know I'll be there in a wee minute." Maybe in addition to her tardiness, she could earn another demerit if she arrived looking like a swamp monster. Doing so would certainly give Oscar McKenna pause and make him think twice about arranging a marriage for her. More likely that strategy would backfire, and Oscar would decide she needed to marry a man who also looked like a swamp monster.

Whatever the case, she didn't want to mortify her mam and da. She might be full of shenanigans, but she wouldn't intentionally hurt or embarrass her parents.

Finola shook the habit but couldn't dislodge the mud.

Seeing her futile efforts, Madigan heaved a sigh and handed over her bag. "Fine. But mind you, no more dawdling, or you'll get me in trouble for sure."

"I'll hurry, so I will." She was already ducking inside the livery's back entrance and heading for the closest stall. Low voices wafted from the front of the establishment, but from what she could tell, the rest of the building was deserted. Only the scent of damp hay and horseflesh greeted her.

The shutters in a window above one of the stalls were open, providing enough light that she could see well enough. She slipped into the stall made of planks rather than split railing. The door, too, was solid, giving her the privacy she needed to change.

She dropped her bag and started to work her way out of the habit. The loose-fitting garment was easy to divest. Her boots and stockings took a little more effort to shed. When she reached her damp chemise and drawers, she crossed her arms and shivered.

She hadn't thought to bring a change of undergarments. Though she was daring, she wasn't daring enough to go without them. She'd have to make do.

With cold fingers, she fumbled with her bag, wrestling to remove her bodice and skirt.

The sudden crunch of hay and gravel under footsteps entering through the livery's backdoor brought her to a halt. As the steps drew nearer, she held herself motionless and ceased breathing lest she draw unwanted attention.

The crunching paused near her stall. Then a moment later, the latch began to lift.

Her heart jumped into her throat. She cast around for a place to hide. But with only a trough built into the wall and a smattering of grooming equipment hanging from pegs, she had no place to go.

The door inched open.

Ach. She'd done it again. She'd gotten herself into another predicament.

About the Author

Jody Hedlund is the bestselling author of over seventy novels and is the winner of numerous awards. Jody lives in Michigan with her husband, busy family, and five spoiled cats. She writes sweet romances with plenty of sizzle. Visit her at JodyHedlund.com

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Back Cover

THE ONLY THING STANDING BETWEEN MARISSA AND HER FAMILY'S SEASIDE FARM IS A RING—AND THE ONE MAN SHE WAS NEVER SUPPOSED TO LOVE.

As the oldest of four sisters, Marissa Axton has spent her life trying to prove to her father that, even though she was not born a son, she can capably manage the family farm and blueberry business on Maine's Stony Ridge Island. Regardless of her success, her father insists she marry before he will give her the deed to the farm.

Despite the years he has spent away from the island, Felix Larock can't deny that he still has feelings for Marissa, his childhood best friend. Their friendship has been a secret since their fathers' long-standing feud began years ago. However, when he learns that Marissa needs a husband, he rashly proposes a marriage of convenience. But their feelings for each other are far from pretend, and their relationship begins to blossom—until family secrets unravel and threaten to tear them apart.



Jody Hedlund's over seventy novels have sold more than one million copies and have won numerous awards. Jody lives in Michigan with her husband, busy family, and five spoiled cats. She writes sweet historical romances with plenty of sizzle. Visit her at JodyHedlund.com.

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