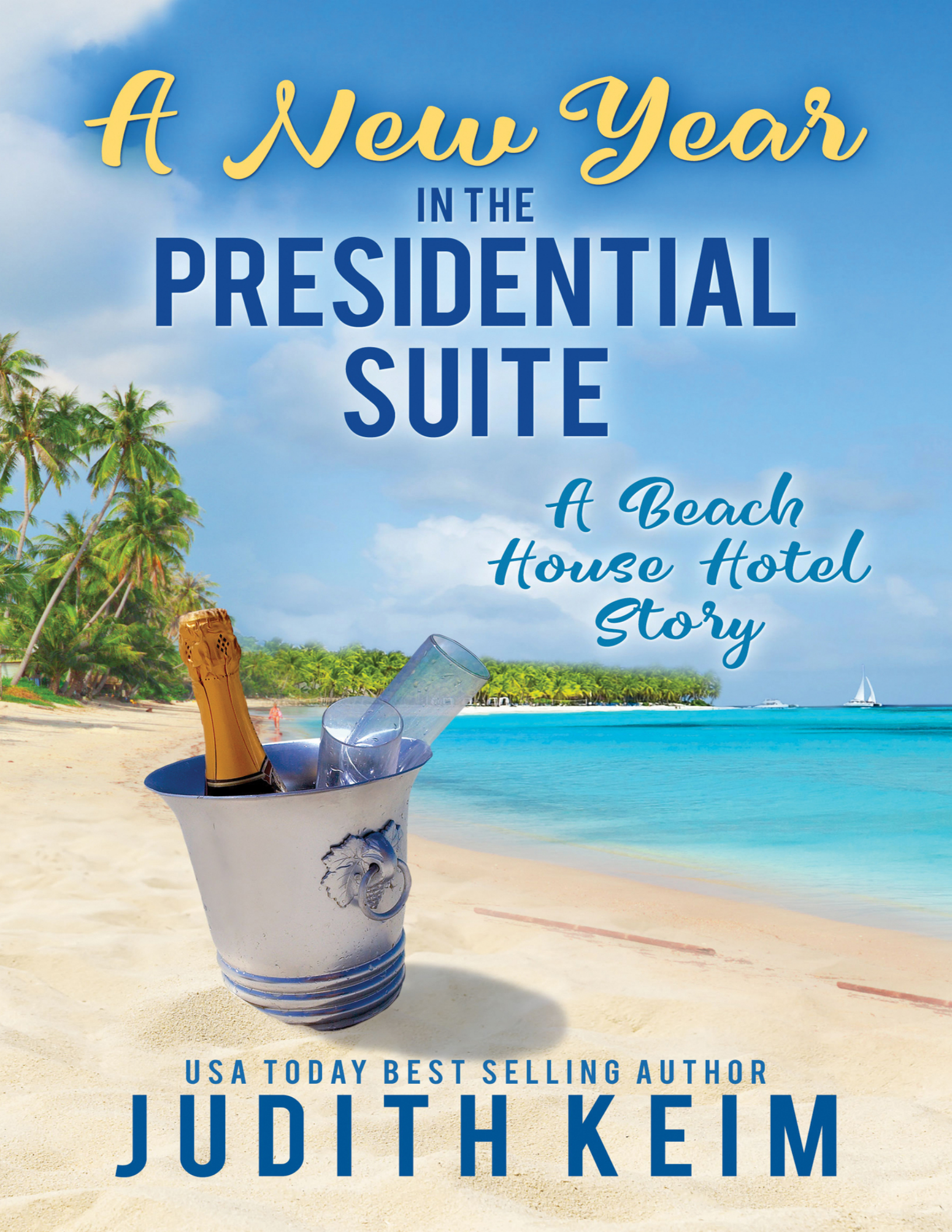
A New Year IN THE PRESIDENTIAL SUITE

A Beach House Hotel Story



USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

JUDITH KEIM

A New Year
In The Presidential Suite

A Beach House Hotel Story

by

Judith Keim

OceanofPDF.com

Table of Contents

BOOKS BY JUDITH KEIM

PRAISE FOR JUDITH KEIM'S NOVELS

Dedication

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CHAPTER THIRTY

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

CHAPTER FORTY

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

About the Author

Acknowledgments

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BOOKS BY JUDITH KEIM

THE HARTWELL WOMEN SERIES:

The Talking Tree – 1
Sweet Talk – 2
Straight Talk – 3
Baby Talk – 4

THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL SERIES:

Breakfast at The Beach House Hotel – 1
Lunch at The Beach House Hotel – 2
Dinner at The Beach House Hotel – 3
Christmas at The Beach House Hotel – 4
Margaritas at The Beach House Hotel – 5
Dessert at The Beach House Hotel – 6
Coffee at The Beach House Hotel – 7
High Tea at The Beach House Hotel – 8
Nightcaps at The Beach House Hotel – 9
Bubbles at The Beach House Hotel – 10
Canapes at The Beach House Hotel – 11 (2025)
Sea Breezes at The Beach House Hotel – 12 (2026)

THE FAT FRIDAYS GROUP:

Fat Fridays – 1
Sassy Saturdays – 2
Secret Sundays – 3

THE SALTY KEY INN SERIES:

Finding Me – 1
Finding My Way – 2
Finding Love – 3
Finding Family – 4
The Salty Key Inn Series – Boxed Set

SEASHELL COTTAGE BOOKS:

A Christmas Star
Change of Heart
A Summer of Surprises
A Road Trip to Remember
The Beach Babes

THE CHANDLER HILL INN SERIES:

Going Home – 1
Coming Home – 2
Home at Last – 3
The Chandler Hill Inn Series – Boxed Set

THE DESERT SAGE INN SERIES:

The Desert Flowers – Rose – 1
The Desert Flowers – Lily – 2
The Desert Flowers – Willow – 3
The Desert Flowers – Mistletoe & Holly – 4
The Desert Sage Inn Series – Boxed Set

SOUL SISTERS AT CEDAR MOUNTAIN LODGE:

Christmas Sisters – Anthology
Christmas Kisses
Christmas Castles
Christmas Stories – Soul Sisters Anthology
Christmas Joy

THE SANDERLING COVE INN SERIES:

Waves of Hope – 1
Sandy Wishes – 2
Salty Kisses – 3

THE LILAC LAKE INN SERIES:

Love by Design – 1
Love Between the Lines – 2
Love Under the Stars – 3

LILAC LAKE BOOKS:

Love's Cure
Love's Home Run
Love's Bloom
Love's Harvest
Love's Match – (2026)

OTHER BOOKS:

The ABCs of Living With a Dachshund
Trouble At The Winston Hotel… A Mouse Mystery
Holiday Hopes
The Winning Tickets

A New Year In The Presidential Suite… A Beach House Hotel Story
For more information: **www.judithkeim.com**

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PRAISE FOR JUDITH KEIM'S NOVELS

THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL SERIES – Books 1 – 12:

"*Love the characters in this series. This series was my first introduction to Judith Keim. She is now one of my favorites. Looking forward to reading more of her books."*

BREAKFAST AT THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL **– "***An easy, delightful read that offers romance, family relationships, and strong women learning to be stronger. Real life situations filter through the pages. Enjoy!"*

LUNCH AT THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL **– "***This series is such a joy to read. You feel you are actually living with them. Can't wait to read the latest one*."

DINNER AT THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL – "*A Terrific Read! As usual, Judith Keim did it again. Enjoyed immensely. Continue writing such pleasantly reading books for all of us readers."*

CHRISTMAS AT THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL – "*Not Just Another Christmas Novel. This is book number four in the series and my introduction to Judith Keim's writing. I wasn't disappointed. The characters are dimensional and engaging. The plot is well crafted and advances at a pleasing pace.*

MARGARITAS AT THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL – "Overall, Margaritas at the Beach House Hotel is another wonderful addition to the series. Judith Keim takes the reader on a journey told through the voices of these amazing characters we have all come to love through the years!

DESSERT AT THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL – "It is a heartwarming and beautiful women's fiction as only Judith Keim can do with her wonderful characters, amazing location. and family and friends whose daily lives circle around Ann and Rhonda and The Beach House Hotel.

COFFEE AT THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL – "Great story and characters! A hard to put down book. Lots of things happening, including a kidnapping of a young boy. The beach house hotel is a

wonderful hotel run by two women who are best friends. Highly recommend this book.

<u>HIGH TEA AT THE BEACH HOUSE HOTEL</u> – "What a lovely story! The Beach House Hotel series is always a great read. Each book in the series brings a new aspect to the saga of Ann and Rhonda."

THE HARTWELL WOMEN SERIES – Books 1 – 4:

"*This was an EXCELLENT series. When I discovered Judith Keim, I read all of her books back to back. I thoroughly enjoyed the women Keim has written about. They are believable and you want to just jump into their lives and be their friends! I can't wait for any upcoming books!"*

"I fell into Judith Keim's Hartwell Women series and have read & enjoyed all of her books in every series. Each centers around a strong & interesting woman character and their family interaction. Good reads that leave you wanting more."

THE FAT FRIDAYS GROUP – Books 1 – 3:

"Excellent story line for each character, and an insightful representation of situations which deal with some of the contemporary issues women are faced with today."

THE SALTY KEY INN SERIES – Books 1 – 4:

<u>FINDING ME</u> – "The characters are endearing with the same struggles we all encounter. The setting makes me feel like I am a guest at The Salty Key Inn...relaxed, happy & light-hearted! The men are yummy and the women strong. You can't get better than that! Happy Reading!"

<u>FINDING MY WAY</u>- "Loved the family dynamics as well as uncertain emotions of dating and falling in love. Appreciated the morals and strength of parenting throughout. Just couldn't put this book down."

<u>FINDING LOVE</u> – "Judith Keim always puts substance into her books. This book was no different, I learned about PTSD, accepting oneself, there are always going to be problems but stick it out and make it work.

FINDING FAMILY – "Completing this series is like eating the last chip. Love Judith's writing and her female characters are always smart, strong, vulnerable to life and love experiences."

"This was a refreshing book. Bringing the heart and soul of the family to us."

THE CHANDLER HILL INN SERIES – Books 1 – 3:

GOING HOME – "I was completely immersed in this book, with the beautiful descriptive writing, and the author's way of bringing her characters to life. I felt like I was right inside her story."

COMING HOME – "Coming Home was such a wonderful story. The author has such a gift for getting the reader right to the heart of things."

HOME AT LAST – "In this wonderful conclusion, to a heartfelt and emotional trilogy set in Oregon's stunning wine country, Judith Keim has tied up the Chandler Hill series with the perfect bow."

SEASHELL COTTAGE BOOKS:

A CHRISTMAS STAR – "Love, laughter, sadness, great food, and hope for the future, all in one book. It doesn't get any better than this stunning read."

CHANGE OF HEART – "CHANGE OF HEART is the summer read we've all been waiting for. Judith Keim is a master at creating fascinating characters that are simply irresistible. Her stories leave you with a big smile on your face and a heart bursting with love." ~Kellie Coates Gilbert, author of the popular Sun Valley Series

A SUMMER OF SURPRISES – "Ms. Keim uses this book as an amazing platform to show that with hard emotional work, belief in yourself, and love, the scars of abuse can be conquered. It in no way preaches, it's a lovely story with a happy ending."

A ROAD TRIP TO REMEMBER – "The characters are so real that they jump off the page. Such a fun, HAPPY book at the perfect time. It will lift your spirits and even remind you of your own grandmother. Spirited and hopeful Aggie gets a second chance at love and she takes the steering wheel and drives straight for it."

THE BEACH BABES – "Another winner at the pen of Judith Keim. I love the characters and the book just flows. It feels as though you are at the beach with them and are a part of you.

THE DESERT SAGE INN SERIES – Books 1 – 4:

THE DESERT FLOWERS – ROSE – "The Desert Flowers - Rose, "In this first of a series, we see each woman come into her own and view new beginnings even as they must take this tearful journey as they slowly lose a dear friend.

THE DESERT FLOWERS – LILY – "The second book in the Desert Flowers series is just as wonderful as the first. Judith Keim is a brilliant storyteller. Her characters are truly lovely and people that you want to be friends with as soon as you start reading. Judith Keim is not afraid to weave real-life conflict and loss into her stories.

THE DESERT FLOWERS – WILLOW – "The feelings of love, joy, happiness, friendship, family, and the pain of loss are deeply felt by Willow Sanchez and her two cohorts Rose and Lily. The Desert Flowers met because of their deep feelings for Alec Thurston, a man who touched their lives in different ways."

MISTLETOE AND HOLLY – "As always, the author never ceases to amaze me. She's able to take characters and bring them to life in such a way that you think you're actually among family. It's a great holiday read. You won't be disappointed."

THE SANDERLING COVE INN SERIES – Books 1 – 3:

WAVES OF HOPE – "Such a wonderful story about several families in a beautiful location in Florida. A grandmother requests her three granddaughters to help her by running the family's inn for the summer. Other grandmothers in the area played a part in this plan to find happiness for their grandsons and granddaughters."

SANDY WISHES – "Three cousins needing a change and a few of the neighborhood boys from when they were young are back visiting their grandmothers. It is an adventure, a summer of discoveries, and embracing the person they are becoming."

SALTY KISSES – "*I love this story, as well as the entire series because it's about family, friendship, and love. The meddling grandmothers have only the best intentions and want to see their grandchildren find love and happiness. What grandparent wouldn't want that?"*

THE LILAC LAKE INN SERIES – Books 1 – 3:

LOVE BY DESIGN –*"Genie Wittner is planning on selling her beloved Lilac Inn B&B, and keeping a cottage for her three granddaughters, Whitney, the movie star, Dani an architect, and Taylor a writer. A little mystery, a possible ghost, and romance all make this a great read and the start of a new series."*

LOVE BETWEEN THE LINES – *"Taylor is one of 3 sisters who have inherited a cottage in Lilac Lake from their grandmother. She is an accomplished author who is having some issues getting inspired for her next book. Things only get worse when she receives an email from her new editor with a harsh critique of her last book. She's still fuming when Cooper shows up in town, determined to work together on getting the book ready."*

LOVE UNDER THE STARS – *"Love Under the Stars is the third book in The Lilac Lake Inn Series by author Judith Keim. Judith beautifully weaves together the final story in this amazing series about the Gilford sisters and their grandmother, GG."*

THE LILAC LAKE BOOKS

LOVE'S CURE – *Welcome back to Lilac Lake with a new spin-off series from author Judith Keim. For fans of the author, you will be reunited with previous characters, as well as being introduced to new ones. Even though this book can be read as*

a stand-alone, I highly recommend reading the Lilac Lake Inn series to get introduced to all of these amazing characters.

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In The Presidential Suite

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Wild Quail Publishing

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Dedication

Happy New Year to all my readers, no matter the time of year.

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CHAPTER ONE

LORI

Loralie “Lori” Hamlin stared at the summer wardrobe lying atop her bed and wondered if these clothes would be suitable for the trip to Florida her family had planned for her as a Christmas present.

It was sweet of them to pool their money so she could start off the New Year at a luxurious hotel on the Gulf Coast of Florida. She’d read about The Beach House Hotel and the two dynamic women who owned it, but she’d never dreamed she would actually travel there from upstate New York. Her idea of a splurge was a two-scoop ice cream cone from Love’s Old Fashion Ice Cream Shoppe, a favorite of hers.

Her beloved husband, Nick, had died from cancer at thirty-two, leaving her without much. His life insurance had, thankfully, paid off the mortgage on her house. Beyond that, her income came from both her job as a preschool teacher and a side hustle as a Virtual Assistant helping two authors and three small businesses with marketing. She’d never heard of a VA until one of the other teachers at school mentioned it. Medical expenses had finally been paid off after two years, but it brought her no satisfaction. Nick was gone forever, and she knew in her heart no one could ever replace him, no matter what her two older sisters told her.

Lori held up a sundress and stood in front of the long mirror in her bedroom. Her gaze fell on her brown curly hair, which she found hard to tame. Nick had called it chocolate brown and had loved to tangle his fingers in it. With her hair now shorter, her sisters declared that it made her green eyes look bigger, and the pink floral dress was a perfect choice for her to take to Florida.

She turned away with a sigh. Her feelings were torn. She owed it to her family to go on this trip and try to have fun. But it would, in a way, mean a break from her past life with Nick, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to let that go.

A moment later, her sister, Aurelia, came into the room. “Sorry, I’m late. I had to drop Sara off at ballet class. But I’m here now to help with your wardrobe. We must send you off in grand style.” She handed Lori a gaily wrapped box. “Florence and I got this for you. Just in case.”

“Thanks,” Lori said, eying the familiar pink wrapping. “Do I dare open it?”

Aurelia winked. “It might put you in the mood for this trip.”

“Uh-oh. What have the two of you done now?” Lori asked. She removed the mauve silk ribbon and tore the paper off. She knew the store and could well imagine the slinky nightgown inside.

“It’s sexy but classic,” said Aurelia, beaming at Lori.

Holding it up before her, Lori realized how sheer the red fabric was and held back another sigh. Her sisters had such high hopes for her. Aurelia was six years older, happily married to a successful doctor in town, and the mother of two adorable girls. Florence, “Flo,” was three years older than Lori and was married to the high school principal in the next town. They had a three-year-old boy and a baby on the way. Lori was the last of the three to get married and had thought her life would be full of loving Nick and the three children they wanted together.

Flo arrived looking flustered. Together, the three of them went through Lori’s wardrobe and selected the best choices for the trip. Lori had read about The Beach House Hotel and knew that though it was small, it was upscale and unique, exactly like the two women who owned it had envisioned. The fact that she would be among the kind of guests the hotel attracted was both thrilling and terrifying.

Aurelia gave her a steady look. “I can see those tiny little worry lines start to form, Lori. Stop it. You’ll be fine and have fun. It’s good for you to get away and not have to worry about Mom trying to fix you up with someone totally unsuitable just so she can say all her chicks are happily settled.”

Hearing the way Aurelia talked about her mother, Lori glanced at Flo, and they burst out laughing. It was true. Their mother was desperate to have Lori paired off with someone. This compulsion was done out of love, of course, but Lori would wait until she found someone she truly loved as much as she’d loved Nick. The possibility that it might never happen didn’t frighten her.

“Okay, that’s it. I think you’re ready,” said Aurelia, standing back and giving her a nod of satisfaction.

Lori held up a checklist. “I’ve had a mani-pedi, shaved my legs, and washed my hair. Anything else?”

“No, honey. You look beautiful,” said Flo. “That bikini mom gave you

will be striking on you." Flo patted her round stomach. "I hope I'll look more like you come summer."

"You will," said Aurelia. "Remember how well you did to get back in shape after having Hudson."

"I guess," said Flo. "But I have to admit, as excited as I am about this baby, I'm envious of the trip Lori is taking. Just think. No snow and ice. Instead, palm trees and sandy beaches."

Aurelia gave Lori an encouraging smile. "Hopefully, all that warmth and beauty will work its magic on you and help you make some changes in your life."

Lori shook her head. "Now that the medical bills are settled, I'll have to begin work on fixing up this house like Nick and I planned. I'm moving ahead regardless of what happens in Florida."

"Okay," said Aurelia. "I'll pick you up tomorrow morning to drive you to the airport for your flight."

"Are you sure you want to do that? My flight is so early," said Lori, then laughed when she saw the look of determination on Aurelia's face. When her eldest sister decided something, it was pretty much a done deal. "Okay, thanks. And thank you both for helping me pack. I have plenty of clothes for the trip. I'll be gone only a week."

"A lot can happen in a week," said Flo, grinning and wiggling her eyebrows playfully.

"You two. let your imaginations go wild while I relax on the beach alone," said Lori, laughing. But inside, she wondered what would happen if she met someone interesting. She'd probably turn tail and run. In the last year, every time someone "found" her a date, it had been a disaster. She doubted dating would ever work out. Her soulmate had died, leaving her to live alone for the rest of her life. Like a female swan.

###

The next morning, Aurelia helped Lori get her suitcase and carry-on bag into the back of her SUV. It might seem like too much luggage for such a short time, but Lori wanted to be dressed properly at such a luxurious hotel.

Later, when Aurelia dropped her off at the terminal at the Westchester County Airport, the realization hit Lori that she was actually leaving. Nervous twinges raced through her body. She hated flying, was fighting the

thought of this being her last day alive, and told herself she should call an Uber and return home.

A man held the terminal door open for her, and sighing deeply, Lori rolled her suitcases into the lobby. She couldn't disappoint her family. They'd been so supportive during Nick's illness and, afterwards, his death. Now, they wanted this for her.

After checking in and taking a seat in the boarding area, Lori decided to fake it, pretend she was a sophisticated traveler, and enjoy the ride.

And later, aboard the plane, she sat in her seat and gazed out the window, reminding herself to relax.

The plane swept up into the sky.

Lori leaned back and closed her eyes, trying not to worry about the week ahead. She didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until she was awakened by the announcement they were approaching Tampa International Airport.

She followed the crowd out of the plane, onto the tram to the main terminal, and down to the baggage claim area to search for someone holding a sign with her name on it. Her parents had arranged for a hotel limousine driver to pick her up.

A pleasant-looking young man smiled at her when she headed toward him. "Are you Lori Hamlin?"

"Yes, I am," she replied.

"I'm Joe Sanchez. I'll be driving you to the hotel, and I'll take care of getting your luggage. Please give me your baggage claim stub, and I'll get your suitcases. What color are the bags?"

"I have only one bag checked and it's brown," she said. Her sisters had warned her not to buy black because everyone else seemed to have that color.

"Okay," he said. "I'll be right back."

As she waited for Joe to bring her suitcase, she studied the people around her and tried to imagine where they were headed.

Joe returned and led her to a white limousine with a green and pink logo on the door indicating The Beach House Hotel. With a flourish, he opened the door and helped her inside, quickly loaded the suitcases in the trunk, and slid behind the wheel.

"There's a bottle of chilled water for you. Is this your first time at The Beach House Hotel?" he asked politely as they drove out of the airport.

"Yes. I've heard of it, of course, and seen pictures of it. Such a

beautiful place," she said, feeling a thread of excitement weave through her.

"It's everything you could want in an upscale hotel," said Joe. "Wait until you taste the food. Be sure to start your day with a warm cinnamon roll. My grandmother makes them."

Lori's stomach growled. She realized she hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch. A snack at the airport didn't count.

Soft music played on the car's audio system, and Lori felt the tension of the trip leave her shoulders. This was a time for her to have some fun, to meet people, enjoy excellent food, and forget about her worries back home. She gazed out of the tinted windows, thrilled to see palm trees. She and Nick had planned a tropical trip before he got sick.

When the limousine pulled through the gates of the hotel, Lori's breath caught as she stared at the pink stucco building. Pictures hadn't done justice to the way the building appeared, looking like a stunning sandcastle come to life. The landscaping around the building softened its edges and added color to the surroundings.

As Joe pulled up to the front entrance, two women whom Lori recognized as Ann Sanders and Rhonda Grayson walked down the stairs to meet them.

Joe parked the car, ran around, opened her door, and then helped her onto the pavement.

"Welcome to The Beach House Hotel," said the blonde. "I'm Rhonda Grayson, one of the owners of the hotel."

"And I'm Ann Sanders," said the other woman. "We hope you enjoy your time here. Please let us know if there's anything we can do to make your stay more enjoyable."

They turned as another limousine pulled up in front of the hotel.

A man got out of the vehicle and bobbed his head as the owners greeted him.

Lori headed up the stairs and was soon joined by the man.

She turned to him but said nothing, feeling too shy and uncertain to do more than acknowledge him.

At the reception desk, she couldn't help overhearing a clerk say to him, "Griffin Sawyer, yes, the Presidential Suite is all set for you. You're traveling alone. Is that correct?"

"Unfortunately, yes," he replied and cleared his throat, obviously embarrassed.

Lori turned away to give him privacy. She knew the difficulty of being a “single” in places meant for couples. Griffin Sawyer left the area, and Lori checked in.

The female staff member who led her to her room said, “You’ll love being on the ground floor. From your room, you can walk directly outside to the beach or go to the pool area.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” said Lori. “The temperature was in the low forties this morning in New York State.”

“The weather at this time of year can sometimes seem chilly, but most afternoons, it’s pleasant unless a storm front has come down from the north. I’m sure you’ll enjoy your stay.”

Her suitcase was already in her room when they arrived. “Can I help you with your luggage?” the woman asked. “Or do anything else? The ice bucket has been filled. The fruit and cookies are yours to enjoy, along with the bottled water.”

“Thank you,” Lori said, trying not to gush at such service. She had a feeling one of her sisters had ordered the fruit basket.

Left alone in the room, Lori went to the sliding glass door, opened it, and stepped out into the salty, seventy-degree air. Drawing in a deep breath, Lori felt as if she’d stepped into another life and couldn’t help the giggle of delight that escaped her.

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CHAPTER TWO

GRIFFIN

Griffin Sawyer was relieved when the bellman left after showing him to his suite and fussing over him, making sure he had everything he wanted. He appreciated the attention but wanted nothing more than to be left alone so he could mope in private.

He pulled a cold beer from the refrigerator and sat on the balcony watching the waves roll onto shore and pull away again. The sound of it was soothing. He took a deep swallow of the beer and let out a long breath that spoke of a combination of hurt, humiliation, relief, and anger.

Damn! What a screwed-up mess his supposed wedding day had been, less than forty-eight hours ago. While he hadn't been certain about marrying Cassandra Welles, his grandfather was becoming frail and needed to know that his life's work in the winery would continue under Griff's direction and that his family would continue to own it. But Griff should've been more realistic. The daughter of a movie star, Cassandra was spoiled, rich, beautiful, and a damn liar. He should've understood that she wanted only the glamor of owning a vineyard but none of the work. When she realized what her life would actually be like if they married, Cassandra had bolted just before walking down the aisle, leaving him to explain that the wedding was off. Permanently.

He drank another cold sip of beer and shook his head. He'd been hoodwinked by her from the beginning. He should've recognized she was addicted to attention, fancy parties, and showing off her assets. Letting out a snort, he said softly, "Never again."

He rose and decided to go for a run on the beach to relieve his stress. Cassandra had thought she'd be the one staying here in the Presidential Suite with her new beau, a man she said she couldn't live without. But that was going way too far. He'd paid for the room, and by damn he was going to enjoy it.

After changing into a pair of running shorts and a tank top, Griff headed out to the beach. A run along the sand would ease his anger and humiliation. Other women who'd come to the church for the ceremony had smothered him with offers to help him get over the trauma, but he had zero

interest in having anything to do with the opposite sex.

Griff stepped onto the sand and inhaled the salty air. The sun washed over his body, and he sighed with satisfaction. He'd make this 'honeymoon' of his a time of relaxation just for him, away from the vineyard his grandfather owned and ran. Away from lying, cheating, women.

He trotted onto the sand and took off along the edge of the water, noticing the tiny footprints of the shore birds who'd left their marks in the sand behind them.

In the distance, he noticed a man talking to the woman who'd checked into the hotel at the same time as he. There was something about the way the man was standing very close to her and her rigid posture that struck him as wrong.

Griff jogged up to them and saw a look of relief flash across the woman's face. When the man turned to face him, she mouthed the words "Help me."

Instantly alert, he said, " 'Afternoon. What's up?"

The man straightened and held out his hand, giving him a cheesy smile. "I'm Brock Goodwin, the president of the Neighborhood Association. I was just telling Lori that I'm available to show her around if she'd like a personal tour."

Lori shook her head slightly, letting Griff know how uninterested she was.

"That's real neighborly of you, Brock," said Griff, feigning friendliness. "But I'll be showing Lori around on my own."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were together," said Brock. "See you later."

After Brock trotted off, Griff and Lori stared at one another.

"Thank you for rescuing me," said Lori. "I'm Loralie Hamlin. That man was unbearable. I'm glad I didn't meet up with him in a less public place. He scared me."

"Yeah, I got that impression. I'm Griffin Sawyer. Friends call me Griff. Are you here alone?"

She sighed audibly and nodded. "My family sent me here to recover and have some fun. My sisters think I'll meet a man, and my life will change completely. What they don't know is that I have no desire to date or see anyone else. My husband died over two years ago, and I'm not interested in starting over again with someone new."

She lowered herself onto the sand. “Sorry for dumping all of that on you. But it feels like such a relief to say it.” She stared out at the water and went quiet.

Seeing her distress, Griff sat beside her. “I know what you mean. I’m supposed to be on my honeymoon.”

Her eyes widened. “I’m sorry.”

“In hindsight, it wasn’t a sustainable match. We should never have tried to go through with it. She’s with someone else, and I am here on my own.” Griff couldn’t believe he’d told a stranger his humiliating situation. But while Lori seemed sympathetic, she didn’t try to smooth it over. That made him feel better.

They smiled at one another before Lori got to her feet. “Again, I’m sorry, but it sounds like you might have dodged even more trouble. Thanks for your help.”

Griff watched her walk away, relieved she had no desire to hunt for a man. If he was interested in a relationship with someone new, he’d put her at the top of his list. With her curly brown hair and that hot little body of hers, she was a winner.

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CHAPTER THREE

LORI

Lori walked away from one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen. Rugged facial features, butterscotch-colored hair, a wiry body with broad shoulders and a tight ass, he was delectable. Too bad she wasn't interested in anything more than friendship with anyone of the opposite sex. Thank God, he'd come along to save her from the jackass who'd been overly friendly. Creepy, actually. The man looked old enough to be a grandfather.

She went back to her room and stretched out on a deck chair on her patio where she'd have privacy. Tonight, she had dinner reservations in the hotel restaurant and was looking forward to a delicious meal in an elegant setting. It might seem odd to be there alone, but she didn't care.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back and allowed herself to relax in the sun.

Sometime later, Lori awoke and realized she'd been asleep in her chair for a couple of hours. She tenderly touched her cheek. Though she'd put on sun lotion, she had the awful feeling that freckles had appeared on her face.

Lori went inside to check on her skin and to take a shower. She intended to do as her family asked and enjoy all aspects of staying in such a luxurious hotel. She'd already made restaurant reservations and was going to check out the cocktail lounge before dinner. By now, she was accustomed to being alone in social situations and would always take her phone with her.

After drying herself off from her shower, Lori tried to fuss with her hair and realized that with the humidity in Florida, she should go for a naturally curly look. It was what it was.

She used eyeliner, shadow, and mascara, and felt better about herself. If nothing else, her eyes were attractive. She gave her reflection in the mirror a nod of satisfaction and turned away. At home, she almost never wore makeup. But then, she spent most of her days with toddlers who didn't care.

Feeling special, she left her room and walked to the lobby lounge to begin her evening. As she walked in, she saw the obnoxious man from the beach sitting at the bar and quickly headed in the opposite direction.

Griff was sitting alone at a small table, saw her, and waved her over. “It’s pretty crowded. You’re welcome to sit here.”

Lori gazed around and saw that Griff was right. “Thanks. I didn’t want to sit at the bar where the creepy guy is.”

Griff turned and looked at Brock Goodwin. “No,” he said. “You’re better off away from him. What’ll you have? I have a glass of wine on the way. Testing our competitors.”

“Really? You’re in the wine business?” Lori said, taking a seat at the table while Griff assisted her.

“Yes. My grandfather, Samuel Sawyer, owns a boutique winery in Napa Valley. Maybe you’ve heard of Adeline Hills Winery?”

There was a note of pride in Griff’s voice that Lori recognized. She added, “Everyone who loves food and wine has heard of it. Though I’ve never had a taste of it, I’m sure it’s special. Do they sell it here?”

“No, but I’m going to talk to the owners about it. Most of our wines are reserved ahead, which is why you won’t find them everywhere. But this hotel is prestigious enough to be well-suited to our wines. Something my grandfather insists upon.”

“What are you drinking?” Lori asked.

“I’ve chosen an Oregon pinot noir,” Griff answered. “They have their own distinctive taste, and I wanted to sample it. Would you like to try it with me?” At Lori’s nod, he signaled the waitress and asked for a second glass of wine to be sent.

Moments later, the waitress delivered the wine to their table, along with a bowl of small, simple crackers.

Griff offered her a cracker. “This will help cleanse our palate so we can get a true taste of the wine.”

Lori took a cracker and ate it. Then, at Griff’s suggestion, she lifted the glass. She watched as Griff swirled the wine in the glass, then inhaled the bouquet, and with a nod of satisfaction, took a sip, letting it sit in his mouth for a moment before swallowing it.

When she sniffed the wine, Griff said, “What do you smell?”

“I think I smell berries and something else. Would it be crazy to say grass?”

Griff smiled. “Not at all. You have a talented nose for the subtleties of wine.”

“Special, unexpected occasions like this call for it,” Lori said. “But, in

truth, I don't drink much wine."

Griff pretended to clutch his heart. "Your words wound me. A glass of wine is healthy for the body and soul."

Lori took another sip and allowed the wine to slide easily down her throat. Maybe Griff was right. It was a way to relax. But after dating an alcoholic more than one time, she knew she'd never go overboard. Life was too precious.

Griff took a small notebook out of his pocket and made a few notes. "If I'm going to write off some of the trip as a business expense, I have to do some work."

"Lucky you have work like this," teased Lori with a mischievous grin.

Griff shook his head. "Most people don't realize that owning and working on a vineyard makes someone a farmer, nothing more glamorous than that. Until it's time to schmooze with the customers. Then we want owning a vineyard to appear as delightful as our wines."

Lori noticed the calluses on Griff's broad hands and realized he meant what he said. They were farmers' hands.

They talked easily with one another. Knowing Griff wasn't interested in dating, and for a very understandable reason, Lori let herself relax with him. He told her more about his work with the winery, and when pressed, she told him about the day-care center where she worked.

"Guess you have to like children a lot to work with them every day," Griff said.

"I do. I've always thought I would have children of my own. My husband, Nick, and I were planning to start a family when he was diagnosed with cancer. We'd talked about having three children." Her voice faded as the memory came back of hearing about his death sentence—a maximum of twelve months to live. He died ten months later.

"Hey, I'm sorry," said Griff. "I didn't mean to bring up sensitive things."

"It's all right," said Lori. She drew her lips in a straight line. "I'm still angry about it, though. It was so unfair. Nick was an outstanding man, too young to die. At home, I try not to show how I feel. My family is worried about me. That's why they gave me this trip."

Griff studied her. "I'm glad you could tell me the truth. I get it. My case is very different, but I'm pissed off by what happened to me, even though I know it's for the best."

“No one wants to be stood up before a wedding,” said Lori. “No matter what.” She finished the last of her wine.

“Care for another?” he asked. “A different pinot noir? You can tell me which you like better.”

“That sounds lovely,” said Lori, pleased he wanted her opinion.

After their drinks came, Griff cautioned her to take another cracker before sampling the wine.

They followed the earlier procedure of inhaling the bouquet and letting the wine roll around in their mouths to experience its flavor before swallowing.

“Well? What do you think?” Griff asked.

“I don’t like it as much. It’s got a harsher taste to me,” Lori said.

“It has a lot more tannins, for sure,” said Griff. “Let’s let it air a bit.”

“Do you drink a lot of wine?” Lori asked and then felt her cheeks turn pink.

He grinned and shook his head. “No. When sampling wine, one should follow our example and then, after tasting the wine, spit it out. Otherwise, you’d have a real drinking problem. Visitors to the winery don’t do that, which is why a lot of them get hammered on wine tours.”

Lori was relieved he wasn’t going to get drunk. She hoped they could spend some time together. It was a relief to sit with a man and know neither of them was ready for anything more.

“What are your dinner plans?” Griff asked her.

“I have reservations in another twenty minutes,” she said, checking her watch.

“Me, too. Want to sit together?”

“I’d like that,” she said. “Not a date. Just sharing a table.”

“Exactly,” Griff said. “You know what my situation is. And I know yours.”

“That works for me,” said Lori, meaning it.

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CHAPTER FOUR

GRIFF

When Griff walked into the dining room with Lori on his arm, he was aware of the looks other men gave them. Women, too. But all he could think of was how glad he was not to be alone. His confidence was at an all-time low.

Damn Cassandra! Couldn't she have been honest with him from the beginning? She'd used him as a pawn in a game to deceive her parents. While she and Griff had been making plans for a wedding, she was seeing someone else. Someone her parents didn't approve of. He should've known. But he'd been hell bent on pleasing his grandfather, who wanted to know that his vineyard would go to his grandson and his grandson's future family.

After speaking with the hostess, Griff and Lori were seated together at a table along the wall, where they could have some privacy.

"I've heard about the excellent food here at the hotel," said Lori. "I can't wait to try it."

"Me, too. I read an article about the hotel, which is why we chose it as our honeymoon destination. We wanted to escape California and its responsibilities. It turned out to be a wise choice for me."

"I can imagine," said Lori. "Let's see what's on the menu." While they studied the menu, water was served, and then a wine steward arrived to see about a selection for their meal.

"What do you think you're going to have?" Griff asked her.

"Seafood for sure," she said. "I think I'll have the grilled red snapper."

"Excellent choice," the steward assured her.

"Okay, let's order a rosé," said Griff. "Something not sweet."

Lori studied Griff while he talked to the wine steward and realized he enjoyed his job. The little he'd told her about wine tasting was very interesting. Perhaps because he made it so.

She took a moment to gaze around the dining room. Its dark turquoise walls and rich walnut chair rail paneling gave it a classic look that celebrated its surroundings with colorful, tropical flowers at each table.

"Thank you," said the wine steward to Griff. He left, and Griff turned to her.

"I think you're going to enjoy what we've chosen. The wine should be

light on the palate but with enough body to make it interesting."

Lori chuckled. "I'm sure I'd be delighted by anything you chose. I can't remember an evening like this. Even when Nick and I were both working, we didn't have the ability to celebrate like this, because we were saving our money to put into remodeling our house."

"You're very easy company," said Griff. "Thanks." He leaned forward. "Have you definitely decided on the snapper?"

They looked up as a waitress approached their table. "Good evening. We're so happy to have you here. Would you care for bubbling or still water?"

"No, thanks," said Lori. "I'm fine with your regular water."

"We have a bottle of wine coming," Griff explained.

They each ordered their dinner. Lori stuck with her choice of grilled red snapper, and Griff opted for grilled pompano with citrus and olive oil.

The wine steward arrived and opened the bottle of wine Griff had selected. After tasting and giving it a nod of approval, Lori watched the pink, bubbly liquid being poured into her wine glass.

After pouring Griff's serving, the wine steward left.

Griff lifted his glass. "Here's to a surprising visit at one of the most luxurious hotels in Florida. I'm glad I came, after all."

"Thanks," said Lori, holding up her glass. "You've made my first day here fun."

They took sips of their wine and grinned at one another.

"Yum," said Lori. "This is delicious."

"I thought you'd like it," Griff said with a satisfied smile.

Their conversation was easy as they talked about their jobs.

"How did you get involved with a preschool?" Griff asked her.

"I have a degree in primary education. I believe it's essential to help toddlers learn about themselves and their world, as well as the importance of feeling both safe and stimulated. They're awfully cute at that age."

Griff chuckled. "I don't have any experience with kids. They seem scary with all their demands."

"My job as a Virtual Assistant is a nice complement to my work at the school," said Lori. "You said earlier you live and work with your grandfather at the vineyard. No other family?"

He shook his head. "No. My parents were killed in a freak automobile accident when I was just four. My other grandparents were deceased, and

neither parent had siblings. So, it's just me and Grandad."

"Still, it sounds like a pretty lonely childhood," said Lori.

"Not really. Grandad hired a couple to live on the farm. Sarita, my grandfather's housekeeper, took on the role of mothering me while raising her own son, Pete, who's my best friend. Pete's father, Carlos, is still the foreman. We all work closely together."

"How old is the vineyard?" asked Lori.

"Grandad bought the land in 1965. In 1968, America's first agricultural preserve was established in the valley, marking a significant milestone that announced to the world that agriculture was the highest and best use of the land. And when the Paris Tasting of 1976 gave awards to Napa Valley wines, things took off. By that time, my grandfather's vineyard was established. Because it has been in operation for so long, we've been able to take advantage of the changes that have occurred in the industry. The demand for outstanding wine is always present, though there are occasional ups and downs. Recently, the overall consumption of wine has decreased. But Adeline Hills wine is exceptional and is still in demand."

"Yes, true wine drinkers want an excellent wine," said Lori, taking another sip from her glass.

"We produce a limited amount each year, and each vintage is often sold ahead of harvest. My grandad is excellent at what he does, or perhaps I should say has done. He's more than ready to retire now. Pete and I are assuming more and more of the responsibilities. Though I'll own the vineyard one day, Pete will have a share of the business. It's a lot of work. Too much for one person."

"I like that you and your long-time friend are working together," said Lori.

"He's family, really," said Griff. "How about you? What family do you have?"

"I have two older sisters, and we are close. My parents are happily married. My father is an accountant in town, and my mother is a librarian. They're kind, loving people. I'm lucky."

"Do you all live in the same town?" he asked.

"My middle sister lives one town over. The rest of us live in Ellenton, New York," Lori said. "It's a convenient place to live. We're away from the city but can get there a reasonable number of times if we want to make the two-hour trip."

“It sounds like a perfect setup,” said Griff, sitting back and studying her. “I’m curious about your name. Loralie is unusual.”

“She was a character in a book my mother loved. My sisters are Aurelia and Florence. Two more names my mother loved in books that she read.”

“I like it. They’re old-fashioned names. My grandmother was Adeline.” Griff stopped speaking as his features softened with regret. His childhood wasn’t as happy as he’d made it seem. He’d missed his parents, his mother especially.

“Being orphaned at four years of age would be tough for any child,” Lori said softly, tuned into his feelings.

He was relieved she hadn’t impulsively reached over and squeezed his hand.

Their food came, and Lori settled down to enjoy her meal. No doubt about it. The food was as delicious as she’d heard.

For dessert, they each had a delicate orange and raspberry sherbet.

After they left the restaurant, they paused together in the lobby.

“Would you like a nightcap?” Griff asked. “We could sit outside, or you could come to the Presidential Suite, where I’m staying.”

Lori felt heat rise in her cheeks. *Had he changed his mind? Did he want to get involved?*

Griff placed a hand on her shoulder. “Friends. Remember?”

She let out a sigh of relief, and they both chuckled at the awkwardness they’d felt.

“Well, as long as we understand one another, I’d love to see the Presidential Suite,” Lori said. “I bet it’s beautiful.”

He held out his arm to her, and she looped hers through it.

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CHAPTER FIVE

LORI

Lori followed Griff up the winding stairway to the second floor to carved, wooden double doors. Griff swiped his room key card against the entry pad and then swung open a door.

"Come in. I promise to be a gentleman," he said with a teasing grin.

She laughed and walked into the entry, which contained a center table holding a huge vase of fresh flowers. From that spot, she could look into the living room. A beautiful Oriental rug in shades of cream and blue covered the floor.

He took her arm. "There's a balcony overlooking the garden. We can sit there if you'd like."

"That sounds lovely. But may I tour the suite?" she asked. "I've never been in a Presidential Suite before."

"Sure. While you do that, I'll fix a nightcap for us. What would you like?"

"Something very light and citrusy," she said, eyeing the kitchen, which from a distance appeared shiny and modern.

She went into the kitchen. Seeing how beautiful it was, how easy to work in, Lori couldn't help sighing. Her kitchen at home needed upgrading. It was a project she and Nick were going to work on together.

From the kitchen, she made her way down a hallway, past a powder room to a guest room with a private bathroom. Already impressed, she went to the master suite.

It was a lovely room with another small balcony overlooking the hotel grounds and the Gulf waters beyond. When she stepped into the master bath, she stared at the gold fixtures at the dual sinks. She glanced at the toilet and bidet in a separate small room, noticed the deep soaking tub, then walked over to the double-sized shower with multiple showerheads.

"What do you think?" asked Griff, joining her.

"I've never seen anything like it. Talk about ritzy. This is amazing."

"Yeah," agreed Griff. "And the shower is refreshing. Reminds me of a waterfall when I'm standing there."

They left the bedroom and went back to the kitchen.

“Would you like to sit inside or out?” he asked, handing her a glass with a lime-topped drink.

“It’s still pleasant outside. Let’s sit on the balcony as you suggested,” said Lori.

Griff led her to the balcony overlooking the garden and held a chair for her at a small table. Then he took a seat opposite her.

“Thanks for joining me for dinner. Are you going to the New Year’s Eve party tomorrow night?” Griff asked her.

She shook her head. “No, I don’t have a ticket for it.”

“I do. Care to join me? It’s supposed to be a very special affair. I even brought my tux.” He grinned. “Pure defiance, I know.”

Lori laughed. She liked the fact that he was so honest with her.

“Well?”

“Okay. I’ll do it. I didn’t bring anything too fancy, but I have something that will do,” she said, silently thanking her sisters for insisting she bring her black cocktail dress.

“You’ll be fine. I’m just glad I won’t waste the tickets,” he said.

They smiled at one another, and Lori realized she was completely relaxed with him.

Her cell phone rang. *Aurelia.* She glanced at Griff.

“Go ahead and take it,” he said.

“Hi, Aurelia,” Lori said and listened. “Thanks. It’s lovely so far. I’m having a great time. Yes. Everyone is so kind.” She listened and laughed. “What I mean by everyone is a new friend I’ve made.” She glanced at Griff. “He’s in his seventies. A sweet man who’s agreed to have dinner with me.”

Griff raised his eyebrows, and Lori held back a laugh. “Okay, sis. I’ll talk to you later.”

“What’s this about me being an old man?” Griff asked.

“You don’t know my family. They’ll have us married in no time. “

He grimaced. “I get it. Thanks for helping me.”

“No one needs to know the truth. That might get us both into trouble with our families,” said Lori. “Now, we’ll have to find some unsuspecting older man who’d be willing to let me take a photo of him.”

Griff chuckled. “Like I said, I get it. I’m considered a fair catch back home.”

Lori took a sip of her drink and was quiet. With his looks, his job, and the fact that he was likeable, there was every reason for him to be at the top

of any woman's wish list. It helped her understand why he had no interest in any relationship now or in the future. He was hurting from humiliation.

He proved how right she was when he wished her goodnight a little later without even trying to kiss her.

###

The next morning, Lori awoke early and lay in bed thinking about her friendship with Griff. It would be tempting to change her feelings for him, but she knew he didn't want that. And neither did she. Not with someone like him. His life in California would be a major obstacle for them. Why start something that was never going to work?

Satisfied with her honest evaluation of the situation, she decided to get up and go for a walk on the beach. She loved being in this warm weather, especially knowing that back home, there was snow on the ground.

Lori pulled on the comfortable shorts and T-shirt she'd brought, laced up her worn sneakers and headed out. Though there was a chill in the air, she knew it would warm up.

She bypassed the pool area and walked through the beach to the hardpacked sand by the water's edge. Though she jogged outside at home on the weekends whenever she could, she wasn't consistent enough to be a real enthusiast. Still, as she began to move, she felt her muscles begin to loosen and loved the onshore breeze in her hair.

Lori wasn't sure how far she'd traveled before finally stopping to catch her breath. She looked up to see Griff trotting easily toward her. Her pulse raced. By the time he approached her, the pace of her heartbeat was under better control.

"Good morning. I didn't know you were a runner."

"Actually, more like a weekend slow jogger," she said. "But I love being outdoors. It's a beautiful day and a lovely spot. What could be better than this?"

"Nothing," he said. "Uh-oh. That man you don't like is approaching from behind you."

"Quick. Let's go," she said.

"Too late," he said.

As she turned around to face Brock Goodwin, Griff took hold of her hand and pulled her closer so there would be no mistaking that they were together.

Lori gave him a grateful look.

“ ’Morning, neighbors,” Brock said, giving them a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Are you enjoying your stay at The Beach House Hotel? I bet the place is bustling with important people.”

“Hello,” said Griff. “We’re having an awesome time.”

Lori remained quiet. She’d signed a confidentiality agreement and wasn’t about to talk about other guests. Especially not the famous star she’d noticed in the restaurant last night.

“Oh, well, I guess I’d better be on my way. I’m trying to keep in shape so I can enjoy the New Year’s Eve party at the hotel tonight. As president of the Neighborhood Association, I should always attend. Hope to see you there.” He rested his gaze on Lori.

Lori clutched Griff’s hand, loving the feel of his protective fingers around her palm.

“We’ll be there. Together,” said Griff.

They watched Brock trot away from them and turned to one another.

“That man gives me the shivers,” said Lori. “I’m glad you were here with me.”

“Yeah. He’s a pompous ass,” said Griff. He gave her hand another squeeze before releasing it. “Do you have any plans for the day?”

“I thought I’d go downtown and look in some shop windows,” she said. “I’ve read that Sabal is full of cute shops and excellent restaurants.”

“Want company?” asked Griff. “I don’t know how many shops I’m willing to go in. But I would like to see the town.”

“I’d like the company, and I wouldn’t ask a seventy-year-old man to do much shopping with me,” she said.

He laughed. “We still need to find a willing person to take a picture with you. I’ll make that my task when we go to town.”

“He has to have a friendly face,” she said, chuckling at the idea.

“Got it,” said Griff. “Why don’t I meet you in the lobby before lunch and we can eat downtown?”

“That sounds wonderful. It’ll give me a chance to relax and read,” Lori said.

As Griff took off in the opposite direction, Lori headed back to the hotel. She’d been shy about telling Griff that she had a morning appointment at the spa for a facial.

###

After a light breakfast of coffee and the best cinnamon roll she'd ever eaten, Lori headed to the spa to enjoy a treat from her mother.

The minute she walked inside the spa she inhaled a mixture of citrus and lavender.

A pretty girl behind the desk said, "Welcome. How may I help you?"

"I have an appointment for a facial. The name is Loralie Hamlin."

"Oh, yes. We've been expecting you. Anna will be taking care of you. Please come this way, and I'll direct you to the dressing area."

Lori was led to a locker room.

"After changing into a robe, please make yourself comfortable. Anna will be with you shortly," said the receptionist.

Lori took off her outer clothes and put on a white terrycloth robe, then slipped into the spa slippers provided for her.

In an area off the locker room, comfortable chairs were placed in a seating area. A clear glass pitcher of water containing a few cucumber slices sat on a table in the middle of the circle of chairs. Pretty cut-glass goblets sat beside it.

Lori sat, gazed around at the potted plants, and noticed how spotless everything was. A woman sitting across the circle smiled at her. "Is this your first time here?"

"Yes," said Lori. "It looks inviting."

"It's one of the best," said the woman. "I come here as often as I can to feel refreshed and healthy."

Lori couldn't guess her age. She didn't look old enough to have gray hair.

A tall, broad shouldered woman entered the room. "Loralie?"

Lori stood. "That's me."

"I'm Anna," the woman said. "I'll be taking care of you today. Please come with me."

Lori followed her to a private room where a massage table covered with sheets awaited her. Scented, lit candles emitted an aroma of lavender in the dimly lit room. Soft, soothing music filled the air.

"I will be massaging your neck and shoulders. You might want to remove your bra if you're wearing one under the robe," said Anna. "It's up to you. In any case, I want you to remove the robe, slip under the sheet and blanket, and lie on your back. I'll leave the room while you do that."

Lori did as she was asked and waited for Anna to return.

Moments later, Anna quietly slid into the room. “I’ll begin by rubbing a cleansing lotion on your face. You can relax and close your eyes. Listen to the music and allow the tension to leave you as I begin my work. Many times, my clients fall asleep. Feel free to do that.”

As strong as Anna appeared, her hands were as gentle as feathers on Lori’s skin.

Thinking of the past couple of years, Lori closed her eyes and told herself to let go.

She didn’t realize tears had slipped onto her cheeks until she felt Anna gently pat them off with a soft cloth.

“It’s okay,” Anna whispered when Lori started to apologize. “Relax.”

Lori closed her eyes and felt her mind drift back to the day she’d married Nick. It was such a happy time. Nick adored her, and she loved him just as much. He made her feel treasured, beautiful, and smart. They were a team facing the world. Little did they know how cruel that world would become.

As Anna continued rubbing her skin with oils, massaging her neck and shoulders, Lori let out a sigh. When he knew he didn’t have much longer to live, Nick remained as sweet and kind as ever. Keeping him company, assuring he was as comfortable as possible, she’d helped maintain a sense of peace and love for him, though she raged inside at the injustice of such an illness at his young age. When it was over, including the funeral and all that went with it, Lori felt as if she’d never laugh or be happy again. It was the children at the school who’d helped her past that stage. Though she wasn’t ready for a new relationship, she’d always known she wanted children of her own.

“We’re finished,” said Anna softly. “I’ll leave the room, and you can put on your robe. When I come back, I’ll bring you some water. It’s important for you to drink it.”

Lori blinked with surprise, wondering where the time had gone. She lifted her hands and touched her cheeks, feeling their softness.

Alone in the room, Lori put on her robe and waited for Anna to return.

A few minutes later, Anna arrived with a glass of water. She handed it to Lori, and then Anna wrapped her arms around her. “Whatever is troubling you, it will be all right.”

Lori looked up into her kind eyes. “Thank you.”

Anna opened the door. “You might want to sit for a while before

getting dressed and leaving. I hope to see you again. You're lovely."

Lori bit back tears, feeling like a new person in many ways.

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CHAPTER SIX

GRIFF

Standing in the lobby, Griff waited for Lori to appear. He was surprised by the pleasure he felt anticipating meeting her for lunch and a walk through town. He was beginning to feel a sense of relief that the wedding hadn't gone through. He should have been more honest with himself and Cassandra, and for thinking that a wedding would improve their relationship. He loved Grandad but would never put himself in the position of trying that hard to please him again. Now, knowing he had no reason to believe this arrangement with Lori was anything more than friends helping friends pass the time, he felt a sense of freedom. Back home, several families were interested in him making a match with one of their daughters. It was an archaic idea, but the wine industry could be a breeding ground for competition and ambition for some. His grandfather had worked and scraped money together to expand the winery for as long as Griff could remember. Grandad now thought of his vineyard and winery as a kind of "kingdom" to leave to his heir.

Griff looked up as Lori walked into the lobby. Unaware he was watching her, she greeted other guests, bringing a light to their faces. He could well imagine how the children at her preschool must love her.

Lori noticed him and gave him a little wave before heading over. He thought she was … well, adorable. Not like the stunning beauty, Cassandra, who, he knew, spent a lot of time and money to help achieve that look. Lori was down-to-earth and had a natural beauty that didn't depend on chemicals to enhance her appearance.

"Hi," Griff said. "Ready to hit the town?"

"Yes." She patted the small purse she was carrying. "I want to get a few thank-you gifts for members of my family. I promise not to drag you into shops with me."

"Good," he said, "because I want to check out the restaurants and see what they offer on their wine lists."

"We don't want to be gone too late. I'm looking forward to the New Year's Eve party," said Lori. "Thanks again for inviting me." Her green eyes sparkled with excitement.

Stunned by the effect of her smile, he said, “Thanks for agreeing to go with me.”

“Shall we walk?” Lori asked him. “It’s only a couple of blocks to the main street.”

“Okay,” said Griff. “Let’s go. I’m hungry.”

“Lunch is your choice, my treat,” said Lori. “You’ve already done a lot for me.”

“Deal,” said Griff, relieved she didn’t expect him to pay for everything like many others.

They walked to the center of town, admiring homes along the beach on the way.

“I overheard one of the hotel groundskeepers talking about hamburgers at a place called Ken’s,” said Griff. “That sounds perfect for me. Would that be okay for you?”

“I’m sure I can find something there to eat, and if a local suggested it, you know it must be good,” said Lori.

“I looked it up. It’s toward the harbor at the end of the main street.”

Lori grinned. “That means we have to pass the shops to get to it.”

Griff laughed. “How about we walk slowly and don’t stop? After lunch, you can do your thing, and I’ll do mine.”

“Okay,” said Lori. “Actually, I’m hungry too.”

###

Ken’s turned out to be a neighborhood bar, very different from the upscale restaurants in the area. The pine paneling on the walls, the booths with red plastic-covered benches and the wooden tables and chairs all spoke of comfort. The staff was friendly, and the other diners acknowledged them pleasantly.

Lori noticed a white-haired man sitting at the bar chatting with the bartender. He wore a golf shirt and khakis and seemed to know everyone.

Standing in the entryway, Lori tugged on Griff’s arm and indicated the man.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Griff asked her with a playful grin.

She nodded. “I’m going to ask him.”

Lori walked over to the man and stood by his side until he noticed her.

“Hi, there,” the man said smiling at her. His blue eyes showed his

curiosity.

"This is going to sound strange, but I promise you there's a reason for it. Would you mind having my picture taken with you?"

He grinned. "Mind? It would be my honor. I'm Vinnie, by the way. Vinnie Russo."

"Oh, I should've introduced myself. I'm Lori Hamlin."

"Okay, what's the story?" asked Vinnie.

"I told my family I met a nice older man on my vacation so they wouldn't bother me about having dinner with him," she said, indicating Griff.

Vinnie looked from her to Griff and burst out laughing. "A cover-up, heh? Okay, glad to help a lady out."

Lori handed Griff her cell, and he took several photos of Lori and Vinnie before handing her phone back to her.

"Thank you very much," said Lori. "That's going to help a lot."

"C'mon. Have a seat at the bar and lunch is on me," said Vinnie. "Where are you two visiting from?"

Lori and Griff looked at one another and then Griff said, "I'm Griffin Sawyer from California," and took a seat next to Vinnie.

"And I'm from upstate New York," said Lori. She sat on the empty stool on Vinnie's other side.

"Hey, Ken," Vinnie called. "See what my friends want for lunch. My treat."

Ken, a man who looked to be in his fifties, approached them and handed them menus. "Our special thing is hamburgers, and we have a variety of beer on tap and cocktails."

"How about wine? Do you offer that?" asked Griff, sending a look of surprise to Ken's face. "As a matter of fact, we have some California wines. I visited the Napa region recently and have some exceptional Sawyer Adeline Hills wines."

Griff gave him a thumbs up. "Good to hear."

"Wait a minute. Griffin Sawyer? You're from that winery?" asked Ken.

Griff smiled. "My grandfather owns and runs it."

"With your help," Lori interjected.

"Yes. With the help of many," said Griff. "Which wine and vintage?"

"The Griffin, 2023," said Ken, shaking his head and laughing. "I can't believe I even got some. You have to order well ahead."

“And now you have an inside friend,” said Griff. “I’ll have an IPA. It sounds refreshing after a walk. Save the Adeline Hills wine for a special occasion. It’s that exceptional.”

Following Griff’s suggestion, Lori ordered a beer. Instead of a hamburger, she ordered a salad. “I know what’s ahead for dinner,” she told him.

Seeing how relaxed she was, how easy she was with strangers, Griff felt an unexpected pride. Cassandra would’ve pouted to be seen in such a casual place where people didn’t care about the latest fashions or fussed about how they looked.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

LORI

After lunch, which Lori thoroughly enjoyed, she and Griff went their separate ways. She intended to find small gifts for family members, and he, as he'd stated earlier, was going to check out some of the restaurants to see what wines they carried.

She loved being on her own, able to take her time in shops finding the perfect gifts for everyone. They weren't expensive, just items like special alligator hair clips and bands for her nieces and a wooden alligator toy for Hudson, Flo's three-year-old. In addition to some spa products that she'd already bought for her sisters, she chose T-shirts with palm trees and the sayings "Let It Snow and "No To Snow." For her mother, she chose a lovely summer sweater in blue that matched the water outside The Beach House Hotel. Her father had a sweet tooth, so Lori picked out a variety of tropical candy from a cute little shop between two upscale clothing stores. Nothing fancy, just little reminders of her thanks.

Lori carried her packages back to the hotel, glad to have time to rest before getting ready for the party. She'd thought about buying a fancy dress for it then decided it would be a waste of money. There was no reason to have something like that back home. Her black one would have to do. She had the string of pearls her parents had given her for her wedding to wear with it.

She entered her room, set down the packages, and went to her patio to lie down for a while. It felt wonderful to be in the warm air and to lie still to hear the sound of the waves kissing the shore. She let out a sigh of happiness and realized she hadn't been this relaxed in years.

Sometime later, as the sun was going down, Lori awoke and went inside to further pamper herself before dressing for the party.

After a shower, Lori rubbed spa lotion all over herself and studied her image in the mirror. Her newly washed hair, the color of chocolate, had a shine to it from the oil that had been rubbed into it at the spa. Her face had a healthy glow. The few freckles that showed up on her face made her look like a person who enjoyed the outdoors.

Lori put on eye makeup and tousled her hair into a suitable style and

then went to put on her dress. Any wrinkles had been smoothed by hanging the dress in the bathroom while she took a steamy shower.

The dress fit perfectly, Lori thought, as she twirled in front of the mirror. Flo had helped her pick it out, and it had been a wise choice. She checked her watch. Griff had said he'd pick her up at her room. He was due any minute.

A sudden feeling of nervousness made her rub her hands together. This wasn't an actual date, was it? It was simply two people who had a friend to do things with. That's what they'd agreed.

She heard a knock at the door and knew it was too late to change her mind. Putting aside her anxiety, she opened the door.

Griff's eyes widened as he studied her. "Wow! You look great!"

"Thank you," she said. "I'm looking forward to the party."

"Me, too," he said and held out his arm. "Ready to go and knock them dead?"

She laughed. "I'm ready for a good time, that's all."

###

The dining room, which had been attractive before, now looked dazzling. Small, white, twinkling lights hung everywhere on the ceiling, and tables of varying sizes were covered in silver linen cloths. In the middle of the tables, crystal vases held white orchids and greenery. A dance floor had been set up at one end of the room. Staff members were taking orders of drinks, passing out tulips of champagne, and offering hors d'oeuvres and canapes.

Lori remained at the entrance taking it all in. "This is stunning!"

"Very attractive," said Griff as a staff member approached, took his name, and led them to a table for two along the exterior wall.

After Lori was seated, she turned to Griff. "This is perfect. We can see everything from here."

A server approached and offered them tulip glasses of champagne. "Happy New Year."

She and Griff each took one and then he lifted his glass. "Here's to friends."

"Yes!" said Lori. "Thank you for inviting me. This trip has been special thanks to having a friend to share it with."

He grinned. "For me, too. Let's enjoy the evening."

She gazed at the stage beside the dance floor. She'd read that a jazz band would be playing later. Now, people were milling around, greeting others they knew.

Lori was surprised when the two women she recognized as the owners approached their table.

"Happy New Year," said Ann Sanders.

"Are you two dating now?" Rhonda Grayson asked, beaming at them.

"No," Lori said as Griff shook his head. "We're just friends who've met here."

"Oh, well, I love it when couples come together at the hotel," said Rhonda, clasping her hands.

"We hope you have a lovely evening," said Ann, taking Rhonda's arm and leading her away.

"I hope that didn't embarrass you," Lori said.

Griff shrugged. "They thought we were together. That's all."

Lori didn't say more but she got the feeling that Rhonda liked the idea of matchmaking among her guests. Too bad it wouldn't work this time.

Later, she noticed several women looking their way and realized they were focusing on Griff. He looked handsome in a tux. No wonder he was sought after at home. More important than his appearance, he was kind, attentive, and easy to get along with.

A man got up and introduced himself as Bernhard Bruner, the hotel's general manager, as the first course of shrimp cocktail was being served. He welcomed them, thanked the staff, talked a bit about the philosophy of the hotel, and then invited everyone to enjoy the meal prepared by the chef, Jean-Luc Rodin and his staff.

Lori loved how everyone working at the hotel was appreciated and understood why the hotel had little turnover, as the GM had mentioned.

While Griff and Lori ate, they talked about their favorite foods growing up. With Sarita as housekeeper, Griff had learned to love Mexican food early on. Lori's mother was a simple cook, but she loved food, and even her meatloaf was the family's favorite.

"Do you cook?" Griff asked her.

Lori hesitated. "I used to, but now it's just me, and I tend to keep things simple and easy. I guess I lost my appetite for food."

"Mama Sarita made sure I learned how to use the kitchen," said Griff. "I make a mean variety of enchiladas."

“If we weren’t eating this meal, I’d try to find a Mexican restaurant here in town,” said Lori.

“Maybe tomorrow,” said Griff, clearly pleased.

The leisurely meal was mouthwatering. Lori and Griff each chose Boeuf Wellington for their main course, followed by a light salad, then a lemon pastry for dessert.

After dinner, an announcement was made that for the rest of the evening, drinks, coffee and tea would be offered along with more sweets before the group would be served a midnight champagne drink for a toast.

The jazz group of musicians arrived, and after they began playing, some people got up to dance.

Griff watched them and turned to her. “Care to dance?”

Lori bit her lip. “Yes, if you don’t mind getting stepped on.”

“I’ll take my chances,” said Griff. “C’mon. My grandfather made sure I knew how to dance like this because we host social events at the winery, and he wanted me to be able to step in to help keep the guests happy.”

Griff stood and held out his arm.

Lori got to her feet and took it, hoping she wouldn’t make a fool of herself.

Griff led her to the dance floor and took hold of her hand. His other hand curved around her back.

Lori’s head was shoulder height on him, and as she looked up at him, he smiled down at her.

“Ready?” he asked.

She told herself to relax.

After taking a few steps, Lori knew she didn’t have to worry. Griff expertly guided her around the floor making it easy for her to follow along.

She laid her head on his shoulder and let the music carry her away. Even when the music stopped and another slow song began, she remained secure in his arms.

When they finally stopped dancing, Lori and Griff gazed at one another.

“That wasn’t bad, was it?” Griff asked.

“No,” Lori managed to say, though never in her life had she felt this relaxed or natural in another man’s arms. Not since Nick. Jarred by the thought, Lori realized she hadn’t thought of her husband this entire evening.

Back at the table, Griff ordered a beer for himself and a lemonade for

Lori. Sitting comfortably, catching their breaths, Lori let out a sigh of happiness. “Thanks. That was fun. You really do know how to dance.”

“You stepped on my toes only once,” teased Griff.

Lori laughed but couldn’t help wondering if Griff had experienced the same sense of peace as she had while they danced.

They were enjoying the party atmosphere when Griff’s cell rang. He checked it and clicked onto the call.

Lori watched his face as he listened. The happiness that had appeared most of the evening evaporated, his eyes widened, the color in his cheeks had disappeared.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes. Right away. See you soon.”

He ended the call and turned to her. “It’s my grandfather. He’s had a stroke. I’m going to try for a late flight back home. I’m sorry. I’ve got to leave right now. You stay and enjoy yourself.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Lori asked, as shocked as he.

“They don’t yet know how bad it is,” said Griff, getting to his feet. “I have your number. I’ll call when I can.”

He hurried from the room.

Lori stared at his receding figure and let out a sigh of disappointment. The evening was ruined.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

GRIFF

Griff sat on the plane, relieved he was able to take a red-eye flight to San Francisco. The idea of hanging around at a party, knowing his grandfather was in the hospital, was a disturbing thought. Maybe leaving was for the best.

He liked being with Lori Hamlin, but that was a tricky situation. For one thing, it was way too soon to be with anyone after being humiliated by Cassandra. Besides, Lori had made it clear from the beginning that she wasn't ready for a new relationship. And he wasn't about to become involved with anyone else. He needed time to sort some things out. Besides, he and Pete had a lot of work ahead of them. Now, more than ever.

He pulled out his cell phone and thought about texting Lori, wondering what to say. After a while, he slid his phone back into his pocket and decided he'd wait until he could update her about his grandfather's condition.

Staring out the window of the plane as it pulled away from the gate, Griff thought of all the times his grandfather had been there for him. Even on the occasion when he got drunk at a school dance and had to be picked up. There were no angry words, just talk of disappointment, which hurt more than anything else his grandfather could've said. But that was the kind of man he was. Not many hugs, though. Those came from Sarita. Still, he'd always known his grandfather loved him.

Thoughts of his grandfather dying made Griff's eyes water. He hoped the strong man he knew and loved would recover. Sarita had said it was too early to tell.

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CHAPTER NINE

LORI

Lori awoke and lay in bed listening to the sound of the waves hitting the shore. The cries of the birds heralded a new morning. The last few days seemed like a dream to her, like something out of a romance novel with her as the main character meeting a “handsome knight” coming to the rescue of her, a “damsel in distress”. Cinderella’s magical evening ended abruptly at midnight. Hers hadn’t even made it until then.

But the evening was more than a couple of hours with a man who’d attracted her in every sense. It was a wake-up call for her to move ahead with her life. For that, she’d always be grateful to Griffin Sawyer.

Lori climbed out of bed with new intentions to find joy in her life again. If it was with another man, fine. If not, she was fine with that, too. It had been too long since she’d had a belly laugh or danced solo in her living room. She was lucky. She had a house, a job, and enough side hustles to get by. So what if the house needed fixing and all that work was sometimes exhausting.

Smiling with new possibilities, Lori gazed out at the beach, the swimming pool, and the palm trees and knew how lucky she was. She dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, put on her sneakers, and headed out to the beach.

There, she stood by the frothy edges of the water and gazed up at the sky at the seagulls and terns swirling in white-winged circles, greeting the morning with their cries. Waves splashed next to her feet. She looked down at the tiny bubbles in the sand. Someone had told her that they indicated trapped air coming to life. She felt it only appropriate to decide to come to life, too.

She walked along the beach staring down at the tiny footprints left behind by the sandpipers and sanderlings and found a seashell. She picked it up and put it into her pocket, a reminder of her new year resolution.

“ ’Morning,” came a voice nearby.

Lori looked up to find Ann Sanders approaching.

“What a pleasant surprise to see you out here this early,” said Ann. “I love walking along the beach at this time of day. Where’s your friend?”

“His grandfather had a stroke, and Griff had to leave early,” Lori said,

unable to hide her concern.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Ann. "You two looked as if you were having a fabulous time together."

Lori kicked at the sand with a sneakered toe. "The party was lovely. I'm sorry it ended that way."

"Me, too. Well, enjoy the rest of your stay here," said Ann. "And please let us know if there's anything we can do for you."

"Thanks. I will." Lori watched Ann jog away and knew why people loved The Beach House Hotel. The owners were two smart, caring women.

Lori noticed the president of the Neighborhood Association in the distance and jogged back to her room. She wasn't about to let anyone ruin the beginning of the rest of her life.

Later, enjoying a sweet roll and coffee on her patio, Lori pulled out her kindle and started to read. At home at this time of year, she usually read in bed, cuddled under her duvet. But here, she could escape into her book while the chorus of tropical sounds filled the background.

Lori was startled by the ringing of her cell. *Griff.*

She answered. "Hi, did you make it home?"

"Yes. I'm at the hospital with my grandfather. The stroke is a mild one, but it's a warning about the chance of others. I just wanted to thank you for the time we spent together at The Beach House Hotel. Maybe we could meet there next year, and I could make amends for having to rush away leaving you alone to celebrate the New Year."

"I had an enjoyable time with you, too. I'm glad your grandfather is going to be okay. You were right to go home to check on him. Perhaps we'll meet again."

"Let me know how things go with you," Griff said. "I know it's been difficult."

"I appreciate all the sweet things you did for me. Good luck," said Lori, ending the call. There was no point in following through with any plans for next year. It had been a rare luxury vacation.

###

Now that she had only a few days left in Florida, Lori decided to spend time driving around the area, getting to know it, trying various restaurants, visiting different venues. It surprised her at first to realize that whenever she drove back to The Beach House Hotel, it felt as if she was coming home.

Maybe because she'd been warmly welcomed, and Griff was part of the scene.

When it was time for her to leave the hotel, Lori told herself this new year would be different. She was ready to change her life.

###

After the plane swept down to the ground and rolled up to the gate at the Westchester County Airport outside New York City, Lori gathered her purse and carryon bag and waited with the other passengers to deplane. Lori had seen the landscape through the plane's windows and shuddered at the thought of dealing with cold and snow after relaxing in warm air. But this was home and where her family lived.

When she walked to the baggage claim area to meet her sisters, Lori couldn't help the smile that flashed across her face at the sight of them. Had it only been a week since she'd left? Flo looked ready to have that baby at any moment. Aurelia had an arm around her, as always the protective big sister.

When they noticed Lori, her sisters hurried forward to greet her.

Lori returned their hugs as enthusiastically as they gave them.

"How was it?" Aurelia asked as Flo said, "You look wonderful, a little tanned and much more rested."

"It was fantastic," said Lori. "Thanks to all of you."

"So, tell me, did you find another man, a much younger one, to have dinner with?" asked Flo, giving her a penetrating stare.

Forcing herself to give nothing away about Griff, Lori shook her head. "Everyone was very pleasant. For breakfast, I liked to order room service. And for dinner, I ate at different places. I went back to Ken's, a local bar and eatery, and the older gentleman and I ate together." Lori hated not telling them the whole truth, but she didn't want any grilling from her sisters.

"Well, you look happy, and that's all that matters," said Aurelia. "This is a new beginning for you."

"Yes, I think so too," said Lori. "This trip made me realize it was time to make a new start. She turned to Flo. "Any news on when the baby will arrive?"

"I went to the doctor last week and he's thinking it will happen in two to three weeks. I'm ready," said Flo.

“We’re having a baby shower for her this week at my house,” said Aurelia. “Mom and I decided we shouldn’t wait any longer.”

“Okay. I already have my gifts,” said Lori. “I can’t wait to add another girl to the group.”

“I love my boy, but I’m thrilled to have a girl. I think the two of them will be just fine. I don’t need more than that,” said Flo.

Lori remained quiet. She and Nick had wanted at least three. She shook off thoughts like that and told herself the past was the past. A fleeting thought of Griff entered her mind and was pushed away with determination.

Aurelia elbowed her. “Guess who’s back in town?”

Lori’s pulse speeded up as she studied her. At Aurelia’s sly look, Lori said, “Do you mean Guy Phillips?”

“The one and the same,” said Aurelia. “He’s divorced now and joining the law offices of Bingham and Smith downtown.”

“That’s news indeed. I lost track of him. It’ll seem funny to have him back in town,” Lori said. Guy and she had been together briefly in high school. But when his family moved to California during their junior year, distance was a problem, and they lost touch.

“He’s already asked about you,” said Aurelia, beaming at her.

Lori held up her hand. “Don’t rush me.”

“Right,” said Flo. “But, Lori, since the news came out, every unmarried woman under forty is thinking he’s the best thing to happen to Ellenton in years.”

Lori laughed. “I’m not surprised. He was the star of the football team and was used to all the attention. Remember?”

“Yes. And I remember he liked you a lot,” said Aurelia. “Don’t start pushing him away before you even see him again.”

Aware she’d been doing exactly that, Lori nodded. But it didn’t mean she’d be one of the single women in town running after him. That wasn’t her style.

Lori’s suitcase arrived on the baggage belt, and she picked it up. Aurelia rolled it to her SUV, while Flo and Lori followed, carrying the smaller bags.

After they were buckled into their seats, Aurelia turned to Lori sitting in the back. “Mom and Dad want me to stop at their house before dropping you off at home. Are you okay with that? They’re excited to see you again.”

“That’s fine,” said Lori. Part of living in town with her family was

being there for one another. After all her parents had done for her with this trip, it was the least she could do. Afterward, she hoped to go home, unpack, and get ready for school.

Reality meant leaving those moments in Florida behind, especially those spent with a very handsome, kind man.

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CHAPTER TEN

GRIFF

Griff sat beside his grandfather's bed in the local hospital and watched as the man slept, breathing heavily. Since Griff had arrived some days earlier, Grandad had made a lot of progress. The doctor was supposed to make a visit soon to arrange to release him.

He's a tough old bird, thought Griff. But there was no doubt that the mild stroke had shaken everyone at the winery. The man once thought of as invincible needed their help going forward. As much as the old man thought he was in charge, it became apparent to everyone else that the person in charge needed to be Griff, and that idea wouldn't be easy to implement.

Now that the humiliation of his failed wedding was behind him, Griff intended to stay focused on the business. Pete had warned him that he needed to look at the books, that Grandad hadn't been keeping things as up to date as he should have. Griff had been upset when he discovered how many bills hadn't been paid. Even now, as he was sitting with Grandad, he was reviewing the online accounting program for the winery and deciding how to pay for everything. The wine business was suffering, and Adeline Hills Winery had to proceed with the usual goal of keeping to a small but excellent harvest with exceptional wines.

Grandad's eyes flicked open. "Griff, that you?"

"Yes," said Griff leaning toward him. "I'm right here."

"Well, damn it, when are you going to get me out of the hospital?"

Griff sighed and drew in a breath. "Dr. Elliott should be here soon. He'll sign the release papers, and then I can take you home."

"Humph. It's almost noon," Grandad said, trying to sit up. "Help me get my clothes on. I'm gonna be ready for him."

Griff retrieved the plastic bag holding the articles Grandad had requested him to bring from the house.

Granddad swung his legs over the side of the bed and yanked on the hospital gown he wore. "I hate this damn thing. Get it off me."

"I'll try, but I won't be able to get it all off." Griff untied the back of the gown and lifted what he could out of the way, taking care not to disrupt the tubes still attached to his grandfather's hand and arms. Then, Griff

helped him get his pants and shoes on. The stroke had made it difficult to deal with Grandad's changed behavior. He'd always been a bit gruff on the outside, but Griff had yet to see that soft interior.

Grandad's movements had slowed, but he was able to help get his pants on. His shirt lay on the bed, waiting for him to get unhooked from the machinery.

Afterward, Grandad sat on the edge of the bed, checking the clock mounted on the wall.

"When the doctor comes, he'll have a list of instructions for you to follow. It will be my job to see that you follow them," said Griff. Before his grandfather could react, Griff raised his hand to stop any disagreement. "I'm doing this for you."

Grandad's shoulders collapsed. "I can see the end coming. You're going to be busy. Maybe losing Cassandra wasn't bad after all. She was never going to be content at the vineyard. It wasn't her style."

Griff shrugged. "Maybe."

"While you were gone, I hired someone as our new oenologist. She got her associates degree in winemaking a few years ago and comes highly recommended. I worked with her, testing her ability and talking to her about our wines. She's smart and has a naturally superior palate, too."

"Yeah? Who is it?"

"Someone here in Napa. I just happened to catch her between jobs. She's a looker, too."

Griff groaned. "Her appearance is the last thing we need to worry about. Replacing Enrico is our number one concern. Pete and I can handle the office and the vineyard and the winery." Even as he said it, Griff knew that was a stretch. "Do you think I should meet her before hiring her?"

"I'm still in charge," said Grandad. "It's already done. She's joining us in a few days. She can stay in one of the cabins on the property. The one Enrico used. Sarita will get it ready."

Dr. Elliott arrived, and Griff's attention was diverted to listening to the doctor tell Grandad what he could and couldn't do. "Don't worry, Sam," said the doctor. "It'll all be written down. Griff has already promised to see that you follow my orders."

Grandad looked like an obedient little boy as he sat on the bed and looked up at Dr. Elliott. But Griff knew it was an act. Nobody told Samuel Sawyer what to do.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

LORI

The moment Lori walked into the daycare center and saw the smiles of "her" children and how they reached out to her, Lori knew she was truly home. Her family's delight over her gifts and the hugs they gave her as they welcomed her back couldn't compare to this. She knew now this job was where she was meant to be.

Janie Sherwood, the older woman who owned the day care and preschool center, gave her a warm hug. "I heard you went to Florida for our break. You look fabulous. Healthy and rested, which is good because I've allowed one more child to enter our program. That, and a new part-time person."

"Oh, that's smart. As the kids grow, they need more attention, more teaching," said Lori. "I can't believe how much bigger some of them seem to me."

Janie laughed. "The center has been closed only ten days during the holidays. But having enough caretakers is important to me. We'll now have a total of ten staff members, including two part-time people." *Bright Beginnings* was expensive, but the cost was worth what the children's families could afford to pay. There would never be a question about how safe and happy their children would be.

"When do we meet the new person?" Lori asked.

"She'll come in later this morning," said Janie. "I wanted to give us time to get back into a normal routine."

"She's welcome anytime," said Lori. "I'll try to help her settle in."

"Thanks, " said Janie. "You're my number one employee."

Lori had enough education and training to open her own place, but she could never compete with *Bright Beginnings* and didn't want to.

After stowing her coat and purse in her locker, she put the leftovers she'd brought for lunch in the refrigerator in the kitchen.

Rubbing her hands together to warm them, Lori walked into the nursery and checked on the little ones to see who was awake. One of her favorites, a little girl six months old named Kyle, looked up at her and showed a toothless grin.

Lori swept her up in her arms and took a moment to cuddle her before changing Kyle's diapers.

The baby reached up and grabbed Lori's nose.

Laughing, Lori laid the little girl on the changing table and made silly noises while changing her. Then she carried Kyle into the kitchen and warmed a bottle of milk her mother had brought from home.

She took Kyle and the bottle into a nook off the nursery and settled into one of the rocking chairs. Kyle was drinking contentedly when a pretty young woman with light-tan skin and long, dark, straight hair entered the room.

"Are you Lori?" she asked. Her eyes, a lovely hazel, sparkled with life.

"That's me. Lori Hamlin. Are you the new part-timer?"

"Yes. My name is Dawn Beecher. I'm new at the center, but not new at taking care of children. I'm the oldest of six."

"You and my sister Aurelia would get along well. There's something about being an older sister that is the same for almost everyone. Right?" said Lori.

Dawn laughed. "Do you mean bossy?"

Lori laughed, liking Dawn already. "I'll show you around as soon as I get this little one fed and settled. Sit with us and ask any questions you might have."

Dawn sat in a rocking chair facing Lori. "You've been here several years. You must like it."

"Yes. I worked in an elementary school but decided I was ready for a change when this opportunity came up. Now, I do this and have a couple of side hustles. What about you? What brings you here?"

"I like kids of all ages, but I'm working on a degree in education, which is why I need the part-time job. I'll use my experience here to write a few papers."

"Janie is very kind and understanding about things like that. If there's any information I can give you, just ask. You'll see as we go from one space to another how well-run this operation is. Our babies and toddlers have excellent care and stimulation, and our preschoolers get an excellent education which makes the transition to public or private schools much easier."

"This whole set-up is unlike any I've ever seen. I'm sure it costs a lot," said Dawn.

“It does. But most parents who can afford this are like any others; they want to know their children are in caring hands. We have a few entitled parents who think their children should be treated differently, but not usually. Janie deals with them and won’t allow them to stay unless they’re willing to participate on an equal basis.”

Dawn’s gaze met hers, and they exchanged smiles.

Lori continued rocking and burping Kyle until, nestled to Lori, her eyes closed, and she slept.

Dawn followed Lori into the nursery and watched as Lori placed Kyle back into her crib. A little later, she’d want time in the special play area for babies. For now, Kyle was content.

Six other babies were sleeping in the nursery. One was being fed by another staff member.

Lori led Dawn to another room in the wing. “The toddlers sleep here in cribs or in small beds. The older children sleep in the room on the other side of the house.”

She led Dawn to the other side of the house where a large classroom and play area had been set up. Behind it, a large bedroom held a number of floor mats holding pillows, blankets and a few stuffed toys. “Each child has his or her own space,” Lori explained. “Believe me, when it’s time for an afternoon nap, most of the kids fall asleep instantly. We keep them pretty busy.”

“It’s important for kids to have enough sleep,” Dawn commented. “Working parents often have schedules that are a little erratic.”

“Yes, they like knowing their children have balanced activities here,” agreed Lori.

“How old is your oldest child here?” asked Dawn.

“We have a boy who just turned six,” Lori said. “But most in the preschool program are four and five. Janie has been asked about taking older children, but she refuses to get into a private school arrangement. That’s another, different situation.”

“*Bright Beginnings* is the perfect name for this business. It all sounds fantastic,” said Dawn.

“Like any day with small children, some are easier than others. But we don’t have many serious problems here. Janie is excellent at talking to parents about troublesome situations,” said Lori. “I admire her a lot.”

“Do you have children of your own?” Dawn asked her.

Lori shook her head. “My husband died a couple of years ago before we could have any.”

Dawn clapped a hand to her mouth. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“How about you? Do you have children?” asked Lori, ignoring the pain that had shot through her.

“No,” said Dawn. “I’m not ready for children of my own. Maybe after I get my degree..” She chuckled. “First, though, I need to find a man. I’m going to be thirty-four soon.”

“Me, too,” said Lori. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

Dawn’s smile lit her face. “I have a male friend you might like to meet.”

Lori held up a hand to stop her. “I’ll let you know when I want to date. But I’m going to try to be more open to it.”

“No rush. You may already know him,” said Dawn. “He’s a teacher at my brother’s high school here in town. If you’re not ready, that’s okay. But maybe you and I could meet up after work sometime. Go to dinner or the movies.”

“I’d love to do that,” said Lori, happy she’d found a chance to expand her social life.

“Thanks,” said Dawn. “It’ll be great to have a friend to do things with.”

“Yes,” said Lori. She loved the idea of changing her life up a bit.

Cara Trainor walked into the room.

“Hi, Cara! Come meet a new employee,” said Lori. Cara was one of Lori’s best friends. She was an attractive blonde who loved to have a good time. Each time Lori agreed to go out with her, they ended up laughing over the silliest of things, which was healing for them both. Cara had had a bad breakup and needed fun as much as Lori.

Lori introduced Dawn to Cara and noticed how easily they seemed to get along. The idea of growing her social circle was satisfying. Perhaps this new year was going to be better than she’d thought.

Janie joined them. “Let’s have you do some work in the preschool area, Dawn. Lori, one of your favorite babies needs you. And Cara, you’re needed in the crafts room.”

Lori gave them a little wave and headed into the nursery.

###

Guy Phillips called Lori a couple of days later.

The sound of his voice thrust Lori back to her high school years when just hearing him speak sent shivers of anticipation up and down her spine. Guy was the high school football hero and honor roll student who everyone knew would be highly successful in life. It was a shock when his family decided to move to California just before their senior year, and Guy opted to finish his high school years out west.

Lori and Guy had been dating the spring before, and she and everyone else couldn't believe that Guy would leave his adoring audience, including Lori, behind. She'd always wondered if that move had something to do with her. Guy's parents were polite to her, but Lori had always felt as if she didn't measure up to their standards. Maybe her growing relationship with Guy worried them.

"Hi," Guy said. "I ran into your sister, Aurelia, and she told me you still live here. I'm sorry about your husband."

"Thanks," said Lori. "How are you? It's been a long time. Tell me about yourself. Why did you move back?"

"Can I persuade you to go out for dinner with me tomorrow night at the country club?" asked Guy. "We can talk about it then."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. I already have plans." Lori wanted to say yes, but she'd already agreed to go out with Dawn, and she wasn't going to start a friendship by bowing out of their first evening together.

"Oh," said Guy. "I knew I should've called earlier. Maybe a movie on Saturday?"

"That sounds like fun," said Lori.

"Why don't we go out for a quick meal beforehand? I know you used to love Moretti's pizza."

She laughed. "I still do. There should be something playing at the theater downtown that we'd both like."

"I'll let you pick the movie, and I'll confirm times with you," said Guy. "Thanks, Lori. It'll be awesome to catch up."

"Yes, for me too," she said, ending the call and putting her hands to her hot cheeks. Gawd! He made her feel as if she was in high school again!

She laid her cell phone on the kitchen counter and stared out at the wintry scene in her small backyard. Their first real date had been on Valentine's Day for the high school dance that was more about the private party afterward at one of the seniors' homes. That's where they'd done a

little more than make out. The party broke up unexpectedly, giving both Guy and her the chance to cool off. Back then, they'd been innocent, following their parents' rules about dating.

The more modern dating rules were a little scary to Lori. She and Nick had enjoyed a passionate marriage with few inhibitions, which made it difficult for them to consider dating someone else or making love to them.

Her cell rang. *Flo.*

"Hi, Sis. Is it time for the baby?" she asked.

"No," snapped Flo. "I've decided this baby is going to stay safe inside until she has no choice but to face the world."

"If she's a true Pierce girl like you and me and Aurelia, she'll arrive when she damn well pleases," I said, teasing Flo.

"That's what I'm afraid of. Any word from Guy Phillips?" Flo asked.

Lori could hear the interest in Flo's voice and responded. "As a matter of fact, he and I are going to the movies on Saturday."

"Wow! Hooray for you, Lori. This is the first date you've had in a long time. I saw him the other day. He's still as hot as he was in high school. This is exciting!"

"I admit I'm a little nervous," Lori said.

"You're still a hottie, if that's the right word for you. But you know what I mean. You always were prettier than I am."

"Not true," said Lori. "But I think I'll get my hair done Saturday morning. I need it, and this is the perfect excuse to spend the money on taming my curls."

"I don't think you need it, but if it makes you feel better, go for it," said Flo. "My little boy is crying. I'd better go see what's happened. We'll talk later. Sunday morning, for sure."

Lori laughed, knowing Flo wouldn't be the only sister she'd be talking to that day.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

LORI

Saturday morning, Lori awoke with a sense of excitement. She felt as though being on a date with Guy would close a loop that had remained open for the past few years.

Lori was happy she'd made an appointment to get her hair done. After visiting The Beach House Hotel and seeing how well-maintained some of the women there were, she developed a new awareness about maintaining her appearance.

Working with kids all day, she'd forgotten that jeans and tops that could be easily washed free of spit-up were fine for the job and hanging around home, but she needed something better to wear on an actual date. Lori went through her closet and decided to make some thrifting trips in the next couple of weeks. And she knew just the place to do it. Working those side jobs made such trips possible.

She pulled on her favorite sweatshirt and a pair of jeans to go to the beauty salon. Franco, her hair stylist, would be pleased to see her this early in the morning. He'd squeezed her into his busy schedule by making her arrive before his first appointment.

Before she left the house, Lori made herself a cup of coffee and toasted a slice of wheat bread. She spread honey on the bread and ate it as she gazed outside. The bird feeder she kept was now empty. No doubt, the goldfinches had feasted there. For such small birds, they sure were piggy. She'd try to remember to refill the feeder when she returned.

Driving through the town, Lori realized how much she loved it when she saw a neighbor lift her hand and wave. She wanted to travel, especially after visiting Florida, but she knew her place was in this town, where she was known and loved. Ellenton and its people had helped her through the worst time in her life. She'd always be grateful to them.

At Hair Designs, Franco greeted her with a kiss on each cheek and ushered her to his special section of the salon.

"How was Florida?" he asked, running his fingers through her hair as she sat in his chair. "I'll put extra conditioner on to help with a little dryness. So, the trip?"

“The Beach House Hotel was absolutely gorgeous. I felt like royalty staying there,” gushed Lori. “It was a real treat.”

“You look fabulous, my dear,” he said, giving her a fatherly smile. In his late fifties and with beautiful gray hair, he’d been doing this job all his life. The salon he owned was extremely successful because he ran it like one of the top ones in New York City. Clients were offered comfy robes, glasses of bubbling water, and top-notch service as he and his carefully selected coworkers did their work.

Franco stood behind her chair and studied her image in the mirror. “I think this time we should go a little shorter, enough to let the curls have a softness of their own.”

“Do whatever you think you should,” Lori said.

“A little color? Perhaps a faint touch of a lighter color to add to your brown for a little interest? I see the sun in Florida has done that in places,” said Franco.

Lori drew a deep breath. A new year meant changes. Now more than ever.

###

Two hours later, Lori left the salon feeling as if she’d left the old Lori behind. She was thrilled with the way her hair seemed to shine no matter where she turned her head. Curls hung softly around her face.

Sliding behind the wheel of her car, she knew it was time to go to her favorite thrift store to find the perfect outfit for tonight’s movie date with Guy. For the first time in a long time, she was excited by the prospect of finding a few treasures for her nonworking wardrobe. Nick used to laugh at the way she went bargain hunting, but she liked expensive things for a bargain price and was willing to take her time to find them.

ReNew was a store of carefully vetted items, many of which were on consignment from women in New York City’s upscale suburbs. It was an excellent resource for the shoppers who were willing to spend a little more money than usual.

Just as Franco made his salon upscale, ReNew was far from a usual thrift store. The carpeted interior and private dressing rooms were adorned with silk flowers and featured a spring-like floral aroma. The racks of clothes hung on padded hangers in sections by kind of item.

Lori was browsing in the sweater section when she heard two women

talking in the dress section. “I want just the right dress to wear at the club. Guy might be there.”

“He’s very hot,” said the other woman. “It’s exciting to have him back in town.”

Lori peered around the rack of sweaters and saw her high school classmate, Cynthia Walters. A tall, statuesque blonde, Cynthia had dated Guy briefly before Lori and Guy began going out. Cynthia had always blamed Lori for Guy breaking up with her, but no matter how often Lori told her that wasn’t the case, Cynthia wouldn’t believe her. Needless to say, they were not friends.

Lori stayed where she was until Cynthia and her friend, a woman she didn’t know, left the dresses and went to check out. She didn’t want anyone to ruin her day.

Later, after finding a turquoise V-neck sweater and black designer jeans that could be dressed up or down, Lori headed home. Weekends were usually spent on household chores and preparing for the upcoming work week. She made a quick stop at her favorite grocery store and made just enough purchases to get through the next week. After getting her hair done and getting her new outfit, she’d have to watch her spending for a couple of weeks until her next paycheck.

Lori was leaving the grocery store when she noticed Guy pulling into the parking lot in a low-slung, silver sports car. He didn’t notice her as he sped into a parking space close to the front. She was tempted to slow down and wait for him to get out of the car, but an automobile behind her beeped its horn for her to make her exit.

Back at home, she stripped her bed, put the sheets in the washing machine, and began to vacuum the downstairs rooms when Aurelia arrived.

“Got time for a cup of coffee?” she asked. “The girls are at ballet class, and I have a few minutes to catch up with you. Wow! What did you do to your hair? It looks fabulous. Did Franco style it?”

“Yes. He suggested adding a few highlights and lowlights for interest. I like it,” said Lori as she fixed two cups of coffee and handed a mug to Aurelia.

“Thanks,” said Aurelia, taking a sip of the hot liquid and sighing with satisfaction. “Flo told me you’re going out with Guy Phillips tonight. I’m proud of you for making all these changes. It’s healthy for you to step out of your comfort zone. ”

“I know,” said Lori. “We’ll see how things go. I’m trying. That’s all I’m going to ask of myself. Each step forward is a move in the right direction. But it doesn’t mean that I’m forgetting Nick.”

“Of course not,” Aurelia said, giving her a look of concern. “Nick will always be part of your life. And should be. You two were fantastic together.”

“You couldn’t say that better. Even Mom would be proud of you,” said Lori, and they laughed.

“Sorry, I can’t seem to get out of big sister mode,” said Aurelia. “I might need you to get into ‘Auntie mode’ if I can’t get the girls to stop bickering at one another.”

“You know I love my nieces. I’ll try to work something out with them next week.” Lori shook her head. “I can’t believe how fast they’re growing up.”

###

Later, after Aurelia left, Lori made a note to schedule a girls’ afternoon with Sarah and Lizbeth next weekend. Feeling unsettled, she decided to calm her nerves about her date by getting out one of her favorite romance novels.

###

Later still, Lori gave herself a last look in the mirror, brushed off her new jeans, tweaked her sweater to show off her turquoise jewelry, and headed into her living room. She remembered how Guy used to be on time when they were dating. She checked her watch. He’d told her he’d pick her up at six o’clock.

Lori looked out of the living room window and saw a silver sports car coming down the street toward her house. Smiling, she guessed he hadn’t changed in that regard.

Standing away from the window, she watched Guy emerge from the car and head up the front walk, wearing khakis, a collared shirt, and a navy sweater. It brought memories of dating him flooding back. Happy memories.

He still looked like a football player with his broad shoulders, muscled body, and easy gait. His hair was a little lighter, no doubt from living in such a sunny area. A winter in Ellenton might change that.

She went to the front door and opened it, greeting him with a smile.

His gaze traveled from her face to the rest of her body and back to her face. “You look beautiful, Lori.”

“Thanks. Come in while I get my jacket.”

He walked inside and looked around. “Nice.”

“The house needed fixing up when my husband and I bought it. Some of the downstairs has been worked on, but the upstairs still needs help,” said Lori. “We chose the house for the neighborhood. It’s a convenient location.”

He helped her with her jacket. “I’m in a condo while I wait to close on my house in The Highlands.”

“I remember your family used to live there. It’s in the best part of town,” said Lori.

“A little weird for me to return there, but, oddly enough, it felt like home,” he said.

“I wondered why you’d even return to Ellenton. From what I’d heard, it sounded like you loved California when you first moved there,” said Lori, as he helped her into his car.

“I did. My ex still lives there.”

“What about your parents? Are they still there?” she asked.

He shook his head. “My father died two years ago, and my mother moved to Palm Springs for the warmer weather. She loves the desert.”

“I’ve never been, but I’ve seen photos of that area. Gorgeous.”

He grinned. “You’re a hometown girl, I remember.”

“Oh, yes.” She laughed. “I still am.”

“I saw your sisters. They looked the same.” His lips curved. “The Pierce sisters were always considered the beauties of the town.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” said Lori. “I’m sure you met a lot of beautiful people in Hollywood.”

He shrugged. “After a while, they all look alike.”

“What brought you back here?” she asked.

“I remember how happy I was in high school and how I liked being outdoors any time of year doing some kind of sport.”

Guy helped her into his car and went around it to slide behind the wheel before taking off with a friendly roar.

He pulled up to a new Thai restaurant in town. “Is this okay for dinner? We talked about Moretti’s for pizza, but then I remembered you used to like this kind of food.”

“This is perfect. I’ve been meaning to try it now that it has new

owners."

He pulled into the parking lot of Thai Treasures, found a spot, and turned off the engine before they walked inside together.

At the entry, Lori took a moment to study the interior. The bright red walls made a pleasant background for framed photographs of Thailand. The black vinyl-covered benches and backs offset the wooden tables of the booths that lined the outside walls. Tables for four filled the center of the room. A vase holding bright yellow flowers on each table added color to the décor.

"Let's get a booth," said Guy.

"Yes, they're a little more private," Lori said.

A hostess approached and led them to the booth they wanted.

Lori took off her jacket and tucked it beside her as she sat down on her side of the table.

A waitress came over to them. "What can I get you to drink?"

"What would you like?" Guy asked Lori.

"I think a glass of white wine," she responded.

"Please bring a glass of your best Chardonnay for my guest," said Guy. "I'll have an IPA."

The waitress handed them each a menu, left, and returned with drinks and to take their order before leaving again.

"Here's to old times," said Guy, lifting his glass of beer.

Lori held up her glass of wine, and they smiled at one another.

"Tell me about your life here," Guy said to her. "What do you do? I heard something about teaching."

"I work at a daycare and preschool," Lori said. "*Bright Beginnings* is an excellent center owned and operated by Janie Sherwood, a woman who moved into town after you left. She's a delightful teacher, warm and loving. I'm very happy working there. I also have a couple of side jobs working as a Virtual Assistant."

"No kids of your own?" he asked.

Holding back a sigh, Lori shook her head. "No."

"Me either," said Guy.

"I gather you went to law school," Lori said.

Guy laughed. "Stanford. I practice Intellectual law."

"What are you doing here?" asked Lori. "I can't imagine a big demand for that here in Ellenton."

"You'd be surprised. With New York City nearby and home to numerous artists, writers, and actors, there is plenty of work to be found. The law office of Bingham and Smith was pleased to offer me a partnership opportunity. It's an area they've never explored, even though they have received requests for this kind of help in the past. Now, I will handle those requests."

"Josh Bingham replaced his father there. I heard Ben Smith is ready to retire," said Lori.

Guy laughed. "I forget how gossip gets around in a small town like this. Yes, Ben Smith is going to retire next year, and he's brought on a man to replace him. Steven Franklin is a smart man who didn't like working at a large law firm in New York City. He's going to be an excellent addition."

"I'm glad it worked out for you. They say you can never go home again, but maybe in your case, you can."

The waitress brought their food, and conversation stopped as they inhaled the aroma of their meals. Lori had ordered Laarb Gai, a chicken salad mixture served in lettuce cups. Guy's Thai Coconut Beef looked appetizing, too.

Lori took a bite of her chicken and groaned with satisfaction.

Guy gave her a look of approval. "You still like food. It's refreshing to be with someone who isn't afraid to eat."

"How can you leave something this delicious on your plate?" asked Lori. "And should I have any leftovers, I always eat them for lunch the next day. I don't enjoy cooking for myself."

"Me, either," said Guy. "Want to taste the beef?"

"Sure." Lori handed him her bread plate.

He put a piece of the beef on it, and she took a bite. "Yum."

"Guy! What are you doing here?" came a voice behind Lori.

She looked up and saw Cynthia Walters frowning at them.

"I'm having dinner with Lori. It's been a long time since we've seen one another, and we're just catching up," said Guy. "What are you doing here?"

"My girlfriends and I sometimes get together for a night of watching television. I'm on dinner duty."

"Well, enjoy," said Guy, going back to eating his meal.

Before Cynthia walked away, she glared at Lori.

"Guess you two don't get along," said Guy.

“Never have,” said Lori. “She thinks you dumped her to go out with me.”

“That’s not true. She and I had a few dates, but I didn’t think it was serious,” said Guy, checking his watch. “It’s getting late if we want to make the movies.”

They finished their meals, and after paying for their dinner, Guy helped Lori into his car.

“What movie did you choose?” asked Guy, sliding behind the wheel. “I hope it’s not a chick flick.”

Lori gave him a teasing look. “Not quite as bad, but there is a bit of romance.”

“And?”

“It’s a thriller,” said Lori.

“Okay,” said Guy, chuckling. “I knew you’d pick something exciting. Thanks.”

Lori remembered how easy it had been to date him in high school and was glad he hadn’t changed too much. He was a worldly man who’d had an interesting life away from Ellenton, much different from hers. But they still got along.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LORI

Lori and Guy left the movie theater, discussing the movie's final twist. Because Lori read thrillers and mystery books, she'd guessed the ending. Guy was surprised by it. However, discussing the various possibilities was enjoyable and sparked laughter between them.

"Can I buy you an after-dinner drink?" Guy asked her.

She hesitated and then said, "Why don't you come to my house instead? I've got some cold beers in the refrigerator. But it can't be a late evening. One beer. My sister's baby shower is tomorrow, and I promised my mother to help set it up."

"Okay, deal," said Guy.

They walked to Guy's car, got in, and drove to her house.

On the way, Lori told herself not to second-guess her decision. She'd had other men inside her house, but no one had stayed the night, nor would they until she was ready. In a way, having Guy come to her house would be a test of how things might progress in the future.

Her thoughts turned to Griff. She'd loved the idea of having a male friend but had to admit that under different circumstances, she'd have liked more than that with him.

When they reached her house, Lori led the way to the front door, unlocked it, and indicated for Guy to enter.

Closing the door behind them, Lori drew a deep breath and told herself to relax.

Guy turned to her with an easy smile, and the uneasiness she'd felt disappeared. It was a new year filled with determination for emotional growth.

She led the way into the kitchen.

"Heineken all right?" she asked.

"Perfect," Guy said. "I had the chance to enjoy the Heineken Experience while traveling in Amsterdam. It was very interesting, and it's a tasty beer."

"Have you done a lot of traveling?" Lori asked, handing him a bottle of beer.

"Yes. I took a year off to travel between getting my bachelor's degree

and starting law school. I've visited every continent except Antarctica. I traveled with a friend for part of it and picked up other friends along the way. It was a terrific experience."

"It sounds fantastic. I'd like to travel but haven't had the chance to do so," said Lori. "Tell me about Paris. Was it as wonderful as they say?"

"Anywhere in France, it's about the food. All of it is delectable. Paris is a large city, but like New York, it's full of neighborhoods and diverse places to stay and eat, aside from the usual tourist spots. That's what I was looking for, places off the usual tourist routes."

Facing him, Lori leaned against the kitchen bar and sighed. "How did you manage to pay for it without working as you traveled? That's always been a concern for me."

"My grandmother left me some money, and I decided to use some of it to travel. I knew I'd probably never have the chance to do something like that again."

"And now? Do you spend vacations traveling?"

He shook his head. "I only do it for business or to visit my mother in California."

"That's too bad," Lori said. "I'm glad you were able to see the world when you could."

"Yeah, me too," said Guy, looking away and then back to her. "The divorce cost me a lot. But someday I hope to be able to go on more trips."

"I'm sorry," said Lori. She went around the counter and sat on a kitchen bar stool facing him. "Tell me about living in California."

"My family moved to a suburb of Los Angeles, and I admit, at first, I found the weather a pleasant change from Ellenton. It was exciting to meet many kids who had famous parents. But after a while, it all seemed fake to me. My father was an entertainment lawyer, and he was very successful because he loved his work. So, the move was a wise one for my parents. I also loved learning to surf and sail. My father had a small yacht, and that was fun too."

"The one thing Ellenton doesn't have is an ocean," said Lori. "But we do have Loon Lake. I'm sure you remember that. It was a favorite place for high school kids to hang out."

Guy laughed. "Of course, I remember that. You and I went there together just before I moved." His gaze rested on her. "I've never forgotten it."

“That was a long time ago,” said Lori, remembering that Guy had wanted to do a lot more than kissing and how conflicted she’d felt.

“Tell me about your husband,” said Guy. “I noticed a photo of him. He looked like a nice man.”

“Nick was a special person whom everyone loved and respected. He taught science at the local high school. We had a very loving relationship, and were both devastated when he found out he had cancer.”

Guy studied her. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

Lori indicated the interior of the house with a wave of her hand. “We’d just started fixing up the house when we learned about it. I try to do a little something with the house now that I’ve paid off the medical bills. ”

“It looks very homey,” said Guy. “I like what you’ve done this far.”

“Thanks,” said Lori, realizing he’d probably never lived in a small, ordinary house like this. She could tell he was a little surprised by it.

They finished their beers.

Guy checked his watch and stood. “I guess I’d better be going. It was great spending time with you.”

“Yes, me, too,” she said, following him to the front door.

There, Guy stopped, leaned over, and kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks again for an enjoyable evening.”

“You’re very welcome,” said Lori, confused by his somewhat formal behavior, but she was determined not to show it.

He left, and she watched from the living room window as he got into his car and started the engine. With a quick beep of the car’s horn, he pulled out of the driveway.

She turned away and let out a sigh. This dating thing was difficult. Especially when it was with an old crush. A crush who was still very much out of her league. She wasn’t part of the country club crowd and never would be.

Her thoughts turned to Griffin Sawyer. It was obvious he had money, but he’d never made her feel as if she didn’t measure up to his standards. Of course, they both knew their friendship wouldn’t last more than a week. Even then, it turned out to be for only two days, so they didn’t know each other very well.

Lori turned out the downstairs lights and climbed the stairs to the master suite on the second floor. Though she and Nick hadn’t had enough money to do more than paint the walls a warm, sunny yellow, this room

held priceless memories of a beautiful love.

She lay in bed thinking of the year ahead. Now that she'd decided to make some changes, she couldn't let the disappointment of this evening change her mind.

As she nestled her head against her soft pillow, Lori reviewed the date. It hadn't been a complete failure. She and Guy had had a pleasant time. It was just the awkward ending that bothered her. Yet, at the same time, she was grateful to Guy for understanding her nervousness. He complied with her request and had one drink. She'd have to learn to relax and let things take a more natural course.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GRIFF

Griff sat in the office of the Adeline Hills Winery, going over the books. He was shocked by the neglect from his grandfather over the past few months. Now that Grandad would be recovering for the next few weeks, he couldn't protest when Griff told him he'd get things in order. Because Grandad was a proud man, Griff agreed to report to him on a daily basis.

As he ended a call with a supplier who hadn't been paid on time, Sarita walked into the office carrying a mug of coffee. "Thought you might like a refresh."

Griff looked up and smiled at the mid-sixties woman who'd been acting as his mother since he'd first come to live at his grandfather's house. Her hair had turned a pretty shade of silver, and her skin had weathered a bit, but her face was still beautiful with high cheekbones and large dark eyes that saw more than the surface of someone. He'd always been fascinated by how she seemed to know what he needed before he did.

"Thanks, Sarita," he said as she handed the mug to him and then sat in the chair in front of his desk.

"Your grandfather is getting stronger, but he'll never be the same," said Sarita. "And he's talking more and more about finding you a bride. He was deeply disappointed that it didn't work out with you and Cassandra. But I'm not. She was wrong for you. I knew it the first time I met her."

"I've put the wedding business behind me," said Griff. "And I don't intend to get pushed into anything to try and satisfy my grandfather. He tells me he doesn't want to die before knowing the vineyard is in capable hands with me, happily settled with a wife and family. I tried too hard to make him happy, but it won't happen again."

"I've heard that when you're looking least, romance with find you," said Sarita.

Griff let out a polite snort. "How many romance books have you been reading lately?"

Sarita chuckled. "Quite a few. I'd like to see you happily settled, too. But I won't push you into anything."

"Thank God. I've got enough on my hands," said Griff.

“How’s the winemaker turning out? She’s new to us but not new to the business, and she has her degree in Oenology.” Sarita shook her head. “Who knew there’d be a degree for the study of wine and winemaking?”

“I got my degree in viticulture, the science of growing, cultivation, and harvesting of grapes,” said Griff.

“That’s why the two of you will be competent working together. Your grandfather said Kayla Nielson is a natural with an exceptional ability to know excellent wine when she tastes it. She’s pretty too.” Griff cocked an eyebrow at Sarita, and she laughed. “I’m just saying …”

“As long as she can help me with the winemaking, Pete and I can handle the grapes,” said Griff. “That’s all I’m interested in. It’s the slow time of year for us, and I can get the business side of things under control.”

After Sarita left, Griff stared out the window at the rolling land striped by rows of grapes, relieved he didn’t have to worry about the stress of trying to please his grandfather, Sarita, or anyone else. The last thing he needed was a woman in his life. Period.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

LORI

As soon as Lori entered her mother's house to help with the baby shower, Aurelia approached her. "Well? How was the date with Guy?"

Lori shrugged. "It was nice to spend some time with him, but, really, it was just friends meeting up."

Aurelia studied her. "Are you disappointed? I thought you'd be thrilled. Guy was a catch back in the day and is considered one today."

"I'm not saying I won't go out with him again if he asks. However, as I mentioned, it was more like old friends getting together."

Aurelia chuckled. "Trust me. He'll respect you as you are. You are considered a very special woman by many in town."

"We'll see. Now, let me help with the party," Lori said. "Flo told me she doesn't plan to have more children after this one. And heaven knows if I'll ever be more than an auntie. Let's make this fun!"

Aurelia threw her arm around Lori. "You really are making this new year different. Love you, sis."

Later, after decorations were up, they made punch, plated cookies and other treats, and set the table. Then, Aurelia, Lori, and their mother sat in the kitchen with a cup of coffee.

"I can't believe all the lovely things Flo will be getting. I think the dollhouse is my favorite," said Lori, smiling at Aurelia and her mother.

"Sarah and Lizbeth have enjoyed theirs, and I wanted to make sure Flo's little girl has one too," said Aurelia. "Mom and you helped me pay for it. I think Flo is going to be surprised."

"She'll know Mom will be giving books, but she won't suspect this," said Lori, thrilled she was included in buying this gift and fitting it out with all the furniture and decorations.

"With the children close in age, Flo didn't need a lot of equipment for this baby. Still, I'm glad she'll be getting lots of girly things," said her mother.

"But who doesn't love Hudson and all his boyish toys?" said Lori. She loved having a boy in the family.

"Of course we love him," said Lori's mother.

Lori rose. “I’m going home to change. I’ll be back a little early to help greet guests.”

As Lori got into her car, she sat for a moment to look at the two-story colonial home that she’d always loved. Perhaps because the house had always been filled with warm acceptance and eager encouragement for each person who was there. That’s what she’d wanted with Nick.

###

Two hours later, Lori entered her mother’s house just before their guests were due to arrive. The pink balloons tied to the front porch banister were a dead giveaway that not only was a party going on, but it was for a girl.

Aurelia and her daughters were already there. Sarah, 9 years old, was selected to help greet guests at the door with Lori’s mother, and 7-year-old Lizbeth was thrilled to help Lori with placing coats in the den. Both girls were wearing their holiday dresses and looked adorable.

Aurelia was tending to the buffet table, where Lori would join her after the guests got settled in. Flo wasn’t allowed in the kitchen or near the laundry room because that’s where the doll house was hidden. When the time came, Aurelia and Lori would carry it into the living room, where the gift opening would take place.

After twenty family members and friends had arrived, the party began with plenty of food, drinks, and talk. Lori’s father had taken off for the day with a buddy to attend a high school football game in a neighboring town, declaring his ears were too sensitive to hide out in the house.

Lori sat on the couch in the living room, enjoying the bantering, food, and company. When she was younger, she’d been tempted to move into the city, but something about the friendly town had held her back. She’d reasoned she could travel there any time she wanted, but she couldn’t duplicate the sense of community anywhere else.

Cara Trainor, her high school friend and co-worker at *Bright Beginnings*, sat down beside her. She nudged her and whispered, “How was your hot date?”

“It was fine,” said Lori.

“That bad, huh?” said Cara.

“No,” said Lori, horrified at the idea of that thought being spread around. “It was a very pleasant time. I haven’t seen him in fifteen years.

What did you expect?"

"I thought it would be much more than pleasant," Cara said softly.

A neighbor took the remaining seat on the couch, and the conversation about Lori's date ended.

Flo came into the room and sat in the comfortable armchair by the fireplace, lowering herself with an audible groan.

"I can't imagine being like that," Cara whispered to Lori. "Poor thing. She looks like she's carrying a football player, not a baby. And a girl at that."

"She's more than ready to deliver," said Lori. Flo did look uncomfortable.

Sarah sat on the floor next to Flo, threading ribbons from packages through a hole in a paper plate, creating what would become a flower arrangement by the end.

Lizbeth handed the gifts to Flo.

It seemed to take forever until Lori's mother signaled for her to go get the dollhouse with Aurelia.

They went to the laundry room and took out a red wagon on which they'd placed a wide board holding the dollhouse.

Together, they wheeled the wagon into the living room.

When Flo saw them, she burst into tears of surprise and joy. Anxious to see it closer, she struggled to stand. As she did, she cradled her stomach and gasped, "Oh, no!" and quickly headed to the bathroom. But before she could get there, fluid streamed from her body onto the wooden floor.

Lori's mother rushed to her. "Come, let's see what I can do to help you." She turned to the others. "Help yourself to more food and drinks."

The women stayed long enough for Lori to announce that Flo was leaving to go to the hospital.

Flo's husband, Blake, arrived and, with Lori's help, got her into his car. As principal of an elementary school in the next town, he was used to crises and handled the situation calmly.

As they drove off, Lori stood with her mother and sister, watching them go.

"That's one way to end a baby shower," said Aurelia.

"Let's hope everything is all right," said her mother. "Flo's contractions were coming pretty fast. She'll be much more comfortable in the hospital."

“I can’t wait to see this baby. She’s a sassy one already,” said Lori, and the three of them laughed.

“I’ll never look at that dollhouse without seeing Flo’s reaction to it. Tears of joy and a baby announcing herself,” said Aurelia. “Now let’s go clean up.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LORI

That evening, Lori stood by Flo's hospital bed and watched her sister unwrap the blanket around the baby so they could see that she had all ten toes and ten fingers.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Flo said. "She looks like Blake, and she has his red hair."

Lori held back any momentary feelings of jealousy. She was truly happy for her sister. "Have you decided on a name for her?"

"After seeing her, I love the name Eloise," said Flo. "Don't you think that suits her?"

"It's perfect. Eloise was the character in one of our favorite books who always had a knack for finding adventure. She's already proved she's adventuresome too, wanting to join the baby shower."

Flo chuckled. "It makes for a cute story."

"Has Hudson seen her?" asked Lori.

"Not yet. Blake is going to bring him tomorrow. He wanted to be sure both Eloise and I were rested before Hudson arrived. He's a ball of energy, and I'm pretty sure he'll want to 'hold' the baby, as we'd talked about."

"Sounds like a wise decision. I'm glad I got to see her. She's precious. I promise to be a loving auntie to her."

"Her auntie and godmother," Flo said.

"Really? Thanks. That's very sweet of you and Blake," said Lori, leaning down and kissing her sister on the cheek.

Later that day, Lori sat in the living room sipping a cup of tea and thinking about the children she and Nick had wanted. They'd even started a list of names for them. Seeing Flo with Eloise, the green-eyed monster of jealousy took a chunk out of Lori's goodwill. She realized then that part of her vow to start dating was so she could someday have a family of her own.

###

A few days later, Guy called to ask her out to dinner. "The Country Club is having a dinner dance for Valentine's Day, and I wondered if you'd be my date."

Lori's heart sank. She wasn't part of the country club crowd, and she usually didn't like to dance. Then, an image of dancing with Griff entered her mind, and she remembered how much she'd actually enjoyed it.

"That sounds like fun," Lori said, reminding herself that accepting the unexpected was all part of the process of moving past her grief and accepting her loss.

"I had a great time the other night, and I'm looking forward to seeing you again," said Guy almost formally. "I know dating is something you're adjusting to."

Relieved he understood, Lori said, "How's your house coming? Are you going to be able to move into it sometime soon?"

"Renovation is something that always takes longer than one would think," he said. "But I'm comfortable in my condo and won't push too hard and mess things up."

"You're getting more settled?" she asked.

"Yes. It's been an enjoyable move for me," he said. "How's your sister? Did she have her baby yet?"

"It happened a few days ago. She's a beautiful little girl, they've named Eloise. I'm her godmother," said Lori with a note of pride.

"Congratulations," said Guy. "I've got to go, but I wanted to be sure you'd come to the dinner dance with me."

###

When she went into work the next morning, Cara met her in the cloakroom. "Guess who's telling everyone that she and Guy are dating?"

She recalled Cynthia Walters' threatening looks at the restaurant where she and Guy had dined and sighed. She didn't want any trouble.

"Cynthia is broadcasting it to everyone," Cara continued. "But I don't believe it. I remember what it was like when we were in high school. She had a big crush on him, but he wasn't interested. I can't believe he is now."

"I'm not sure they're dating at all," said Lori. "I just promised to go to a Valentine's Day dinner dance with him. At the country club. I said yes because this is the year I'm going to make changes in my life."

"Oh, hon, I know you don't like that crowd," said Cara.

Lori's back stiffened with determination. "That's true, but I'm older and more settled now. There's no reason I should be put off by the girls who used to be very mean to us. Right?"

“You got that right,” said Cara.

“I’m not going to worry about any of those times,” said Lori. “Besides, it’s just a simple date.”

“What are you going to wear?” asked Cara.

“I’m not sure. But I think a trip to ReNew is in order,” Lori said.

Cara gave her a thumbs-up sign. “I’ll go with you.”

###

After work, Lori entered the thrift boutique, hoping to find the right thing to wear to go out with Guy. Having been aware of his family’s expectations in the past, she wanted to look her best to accompany him. The pleasure on his face when he saw her dressed for their movie date sent her back to high school when she first realized her appearance was important to him. Maybe because his mother was such a snob, and Lori’s background didn’t quite measure up.

Cara raced over to the cocktail dress section of the store and began leafing through the hanging dresses.

Lori followed behind and began searching at the far end of the rack. She and Cara reached the middle of the rack at the same time and whispered, “Yes!” together.

Cara pulled out the sleeveless, dark-red sheath and held it up for Lori to see.

It looked demure until Lori noticed the skirt was slit on one side, exposing a bit of her leg.

“Why are you hesitating?” asked Cara. “This is fantastic. It’ll be beautiful for you. Try it on.”

“Okay. But you have to be honest with me. If it seems too much like I’m trying too hard, I need to know.”

Lori removed her sweatshirt and jeans inside the dressing room and slipped on the dress. Even without it being zipped up all the way, she knew it was a perfect fit.

When she stepped outside the dressing room, Cara studied her and clapped her hands. “It looks like it was made for you. Let me finish zipping it up, and you can see for yourself in the three-way mirror.”

Lori walked to the mirror and twirled around. The slit in the side of the dress exposed her leg in a subtle sexy way. She turned to Cara. “I love it.”

“Me, too,” said Cara. “If only buying a dress would be that easy for

me. But with your figure, you can make anything look perfect. While you settle the bill, I'm going to look around."

After browsing for more casual things, Lori and Cara left the store.

"Thanks for helping me find this dress," said Lori. "I owe you a favor."

"No, it was fun doing this. See you tomorrow," Cara said, getting into her car and driving off.

On the way home, Lori told herself she wasn't being disloyal to Nick by being excited to go out with Guy. But she couldn't stop thinking about how different Valentine's Day had always been with Nick. Usually, it was a simple evening at home with special food Nick had catered in, glasses of wine, and lots of loving. Sometimes, friends were invited, but the best times were when it was just the two of them.

###

Now that she knew what she was going to wear for her date, Lori couldn't wait for Saturday to arrive. There was something about the dress that gave her confidence.

She couldn't remember feeling this way about anyone else but Nick. This new excitement was a little troubling. Still, she'd make a real effort to enjoy herself and get to know Guy a little better, guilt-free.

After working at *Bright Beginnings* for just a half-day, Lori intended to use the afternoon to finish a project for a client and to get ready. First, she'd stop off at Flo's house and spend some time with her goddaughter.

When she arrived at Flo's, her husband, Blake, as principal, was overseeing an event at the high school. Hudson was sitting on the kitchen floor banging on a pot with a wooden spoon and Flo was seated in a kitchen chair nursing Eloise.

She looked up at Lori and said, "Thank God. The baby is ready to be burped, and I haven't even had time for a shower today. Will you take Eloise? She's had enough milk. And she needs a diaper change."

Lori studied the fatigue marring Flo's pretty features and said, "Sure." None of this was new work for her.

"You're a doll," said Flo. "Hudson is ready for a nap soon. But for now, he's fine. He's putting on a concert for you."

Lori laughed. "No worries. Enjoy your shower. I have time before I need to get ready to go out tonight."

“When I come back all clean and ready for the rest of the day, I want to hear all about it. I heard you got a new dress. A red one.”

“Yes, it’s perfect. Go! Go!” Lori said, taking the baby into her arms.

“Auntie Lori, listen,” said Hudson.

“I can hear you,” Lori said. “Can you play it very softly, like sending a secret message?”

Hudson’s eyes widened. His wild pounding changed to light taps, and Lori said, “That’s just right. Now, let’s get Eloise’s diaper changed. You can help me choose a new outfit for her.”

Hudson followed her to the baby’s room where she opened a dresser drawer for him to look through. She didn’t care what outfit he chose. It was keeping him busy.

She placed Eloise on the changing table and quickly took care of the wet diaper.

“This one!” said Hudson, holding up a blue sleeper.

“Excellent choice. That will look beautiful on her,” said Lori. “Now let’s go into your room for some quiet time. I’ll bring Eloise.”

“Will you read me a story?” asked Hudson.

“Maybe we’ll make one up this time. You can start,” said Lori. They’d done this before. It had turned into something silly but fun. She loved getting a sense of what thoughts were in his head.

Lori made sure Hudson was lying on his bed with his favorite blanket and toy, and then she sat on the edge of the bed holding Eloise, who was nodding off to sleep

Turning to him, she said, “How do you want to begin the story?”

He giggled. “I’m a bear! Grrr!”

Lori immediately reacted. “Oh, no, Mr. Bear. Don’t frighten me. Why don’t I give you some honey. That’s your favorite thing. Right?”

“Yes. Honey.” Hudson pretended to eat something. “Okay, I feel better now. Want to play?”

“Yes,” said Lori. “You close your eyes, and I’ll count from one to twenty-five!”

“Twenty-five?” asked Hudson.

“Yes. By then, you should have some sweet dreams.”

The baby began to fuss.

Counting softly, Lori rocked the baby in her arms.

Hudson’s eyes remained closed, and by the time she got to twenty, he

was snoring softly.

Careful not to wake him, Lori carried Eloise to her room and placed her in her crib.

As she stepped out of the room, Flo met her in the hallway.

"How do you do it?" Flo asked her. "It's as if you have something magical about you when you're with my kids."

Lori chuckled. "You learn all kinds of tricks when you're with them. Besides, your kids are very chill compared to some."

"Thanks for helping me," said Flo. "It's such a relief to be clean and a little organized. I'd forgotten all the time I'd have to spend feeding a newborn."

"Eloise is a darling. Enjoy this time while you can. When both the kids are walking, watching them can get complicated."

Flo laughed. "I can already see why the jump from one child to two is such a big leap."

Lori flung her arm across Flo's shoulders. "I'm not the least bit worried that you won't be able to handle it. Now, how about a cup of coffee before I have to leave to get ready for tonight's big date."

"Sure, but I want to hear all about the dress you bought," Flo said.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GRIFF

Griff was finishing his breakfast in the kitchen of the main house when Kayla Nielson walked into the room. She was an attractive, tall, wiry blond woman in her thirties. Griff's grandfather thought they'd be a perfect love match, ensuring the continued success of Adeline Hills Winery. What Grandad didn't know was that Kayla was gay and any relationship with her would be as friends and co-workers, which worked for them both.

"Hey," said Kayla, taking a seat at the table. "We need to see how the wines are doing in our oak barrels. These cool temperatures allow the wine to interact with the barrels, extracting a range of flavors and aromas. I want you to help me make sure everything is okay. No one but you and I should be allowed in the cellar."

"No problem," said Griff. "I can give you some time. Pete is heading up our crew in repairing the trellis systems and replacing damaged posts while they continue pruning the vines."

"Sounds like you have it all worked out," said Kayla with a nod of approval. "Some of our customers wouldn't understand how important winter is when the grapes are hunkered down for the cold months, and we can get the vineyards ready for another season."

"I agree." Griff noticed her unease and studied her. "What aren't you telling me?"

Kayla frowned and looked away before turning back to him. "Your grandfather wants to know why we haven't gone out these past weeks while I've been working here. I don't want to tell him I'm gay. I'm afraid he'll fire me on the spot. You know how he is when he thinks people aren't agreeing to his plans."

"Yeah, I do. I've been thinking of the situation myself," said Griff. "He's convinced we're right for each other and the winery's future. What do you say we go out together but as friends who simply want to protect our privacy from others? By pretending to be together, I can keep women away, and you and your partner can keep your relationship to yourselves."

Kayla gave him a thoughtful look. "That might work. Rosie is pretty

easygoing, and I think I can talk her into this. Though I'd want her to join us for some so-called dates."

"A few of the local women think they can help me get over Cassandra and the disastrous wedding, but I have no desire to begin dating any time soon," said Griff. "Not yet. Besides, I'm busy with the vineyard and my grandfather. You, of all people, know how difficult he can be."

Kayla's light-blue eyes lit with humor. "Oh, yes. He makes me report to him at least once a day."

Griff laughed. "That says a lot more about you than it does about him. I'm happy he was able to talk you into working for us. I can tell by the way you're handling the wine in the barrels that you know what you're doing. Thanks."

"You and Pete are the two that make it possible by growing the grapes well," Kayla said. She stood. "Thanks, Griff. I feel better. I appreciate our open honesty."

"Me, too," said Griff. He was tired of all the games some women played. The only one in his recent past who'd been upfront with him about not wanting more than friendship was that cute woman at The Beach House Hotel. Too bad she lived so far away.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LORI

Waiting for Guy to pick her up for their evening together, Lori paced her living room. Her nerves were on fire. She felt like a high school girl waiting for her date to pick her up for the prom. In fact, that was the last date she'd had with Guy before his family whisked him off to California. It seemed strange that, after fifteen years, they were dating again. A lot had happened to each of them in those intervening years.

She went into the bathroom to check on her hair one more time. The tiny diamond earrings Nick had given her shone through the wisps of hair at her ears. The gold locket she wore, a gift from her parents, looked elegant against the red of the dress.

Sighing with pent-up nervousness, she returned to the living room to look out the window. This time, she saw Guy pulling up to her house.

"Okay," she told herself. "I can do this."

When she went to the door to greet and usher him inside, Guy's wide smile at seeing her signaled his approval. "Beautiful."

"Thanks," she said, handing him her coat to help her into it. She wished she had something fancier than a puffer coat to wear, but her dress was all that she wanted to splurge on for this occasion.

They left the house, and Guy ushered her to his car and helped her inside.

"We'll be sitting with my partners and their wives," Guy explained. "But we'll be able to roam through the crowd during the cocktail hour and meet up with old friends."

Lori remained quiet. Growing up, there'd been a distinct break socially between those whose families belonged to the country club and those who didn't. It was silly, of course. Ellenton was a small town with no reason to boast about wealthy people or a country club compared to more glamorous towns around them. Still, high school had pitted country club girls like Cynthia against Lori and her friends who didn't belong.

Guy pulled up in front of the low-slung, white clapboard building and pulled to a stop. "I'll drop you off here and park the car. That way, you won't have to trudge through the cold weather."

“Okay, thanks,” said Lori smiling at the valet who stood ready to help her out of the car.

Guy drove off, and she walked into the lobby to wait for him. From there, she could see into the dining room where red linen cloths covered tables.

She was relieved when Guy appeared.

“Let’s check your coat,” he said, helping Lori out of it and leading her to the counter off the lobby.

The older woman who accepted the coat winked at Lori. “Pretty dress, hon.”

Guy put his arm around Lori. “I think so, too.”

They walked into the dining room hand-in-hand. Guy led her to a table near the dance floor. “This is us. You know Josh Bingham and his wife, Susannah. He took over for his father at the law firm. Steven Franklin is a new man on board who’s taking Ben Smith’s place. He’s retiring next month. I haven’t met Steve’s wife Nicole yet. I'm told they moved here from New York City for a quieter life.”

The others hadn’t arrived. Lori placed her purse at the seat Guy indicated and then walked over to the end of the room where the cocktail party was taking place.

“What’ll you have? Wine?” asked Guy.

“A glass of pinot noir, please,” said Lori.

While Guy left, Susannah Bingham approached her.

Cynthia joined them, studying Lori’s outfit. “You’re wearing one of my friend’s dresses. I’ll have to tell her how nice it looked on you.”

Lori felt the blood leave her face and rush back in a heated flow. She didn’t know where to look or what to say.

“Lori, you look beautiful, as always,” said Susannah. “Come with me. There are some women I want you to meet. See you later, Cynthia.”

As they walked away, Susannah said to Lori, “That woman irritates me no end. She has no idea her snobby airs would be considered laughable in more sophisticated social circles outside of town.”

They stood by one of the long windows overlooking a patio and beyond it to the golf course.

A group of women Lori recognized as mothers of children she worked with approached them.

“It’s a pleasure to see you here, Lori, “ said the mother of a two-year-

old boy whom Lori watched at *Bright Beginnings*. She turned to Susannah. “My son adores Lori. But then, all the kids do. Parents, too.”

Susannah smiled at Lori. “I can see why. I'm signing her up as soon as my daughter is ready for preschool. I’ve already requested for Lori to be her teacher.”

“But there’s a lot more interesting things to talk about with Lori,” said one of the mothers. “I saw you walk in with that handsome man.”

“He’s a new partner at the law firm,” said Susannah. “Guy Phillips.”

“He looks like Chris Hemsworth,” said another woman.

They turned to see Guy holding two drinks in his hands and facing Cynthia, who was leaning toward him as if expecting a kiss.

“There’s that obnoxious woman,” muttered one of the mothers. “She hit on my husband one night when she didn’t know I was around.”

Guy noticed Lori in the group and headed their way, ignoring Cynthia trailing after him.

“ ’Evening, ladies,” said Guy. “I’ve got a drink for Lori. Can I get a drink for anyone else?”

When no one spoke up, Guy said, “Excuse me. I’ll be back. I see Steven’s just arrived, and I want to talk with him.”

“I’ll go greet his wife, Nicole,” said Susannah.

After she left the group, one of the mothers hugged Lori. “I’m glad to see you dating. It looks like you got the hot guy everyone has been talking about. Just think. If things work out, we could be neighbors.”

“Whoa,” said another mother. “Don’t push her into anything. Right, Lori?”

“Yes, but I appreciate your encouragement,” Lori responded.

From across the room, Susannah signaled her to join her and two other women.

On the way, Lori noticed Cynthia whispering to a couple of her friends as the three of them stared at her.

She straightened her back and continued walking.

###

Susannah introduced Lori to Nicole Franklin, who looked to be in her fifties, and to Barbara Smith, whom she knew to be in her sixties and was about to retire with her husband to Florida.

They all greeted her warmly, and Lori couldn’t help thinking that if

anything between Guy and her became serious, she'd have supportive women around her. That was a comforting thought.

They sat at their table while the men continued to talk at the bar.

When the men joined the women at the table, Guy slid into a chair next to Lori and whispered in her ear, "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she whispered. "You, too." She clapped a hand to her mouth. "I didn't mean …"

He winked at her before turning to Susannah on his other side.

Lori turned to Ben Smith on her right. For a man who was ready to retire, he looked to be in outstanding shape. His gray hair was thinning but still held an attractive thickness. His hazel eyes were alert.

"I'm glad to see you fit in with the group," Ben said to her. "We're happy to have Guy become part of the firm. I think it will be superb for all of us."

"He seems excited about the opportunity," said Lori, unwilling to say anything more. It wasn't her place to do so.

The first course of shrimp cocktail arrived, and the table grew quiet as everyone enjoyed their food. Lori took a moment to assess the dining room.

Dark-stained pine wainscoting covered the bottom half of the walls. Above it, a medium peach color brightened and warmed the large room whose only other features were the long windows on the outside wall that were softened by lighter peach window treatments. It was an attractive room but nothing extraordinary.

Lori then studied the other three women at the table. She already knew and liked Susannah, a pretty blonde who came from Atlanta and still had a bit of a Southern accent.

She knew Barbara from her support of library functions, which Lori's mother oversaw. She too seemed healthy and eager for a different, warmer retirement life in Florida.

Nicole looked a little out of place. She was wearing a midi dress of black lace and wore an abundance of jewelry. Pretty, with dark hair and brown eyes, she leaned forward intently as she and Ben began discussing the New York business culture across the table. Her husband, Steven, looked on but said nothing and faced her with a smile.

On her other side, Guy leaned over. "How are you doing? Susannah told me Cynthia was nasty to you. I remember she was the same way in

high school."

"She and I have never gotten along," said Lori, wanting to leave it at that. She couldn't let Cynthia ruin this evening for her.

The main course, a surf and turf presentation, arrived.

The noise in the room settled down as everyone dug into their meals.

Lori was enjoying the last bite of her lobster tail when she noticed Guy staring at her.

"What?" she asked him.

"I like to see a woman who isn't afraid to eat," he said.

Lori looked down at her near-empty plate. "It's delicious."

Guy clasped her hand. "I meant it as a compliment. You're just fine."

As the wait staff began to pick up plates, Guy said, "Care to dance? We can join the other couples on the floor."

Lori drew in a breath and let it out. "All right. But it comes with a fair warning. I'm not the best."

"No worries. We'll just enjoy it," said Guy. He held out his hand to her. She took it and got to her feet.

He led her out to the dance floor and drew her into his arms. The soft, old classical jazz was easy to follow, with Guy leading her. He wasn't as smooth a dancer as Griff had been. Lori remembered how easily she'd nestled up against him. Still, Guy managed to keep from stepping on her toes or she, on his.

She cast a look at the diners watching them and whispered to Guy, "We have an audience."

He chuckled. "Let's forget them. I want to enjoy having you in my arms."

Lori closed her eyes, concentrating on the music as Guy swung her around. When she opened them, she faced Cynthia, whose glare sent goosebumps down Lori's back.

Guy felt Lori tense and said, "What's wrong?"

Lori shook her head. "Nothing. As you said, let's enjoy the dance. Thankfully, the group is playing slow music."

They moved together easily, and when the band started playing another song, Guy led her off the floor.

Guy helped Lori into her chair, and still standing, he asked Susannah if she wanted to dance. He turned to Lori and said quietly, "I promised Josh that I would ask her. Hope you don't mind."

“Not at all. This will give me a chance to go freshen up in time for dessert,” Lori said.

While Guy and Susannah headed to the dance floor, Lori grabbed her purse and made her way to the ladies’ room.

There, as she was washing her hands, Cynthia sidled up next to her. “I see how you’re looking at Guy like a starstruck teenager, but it won’t work. He and I are part of the same social group, and I intend to take advantage of that.”

Lori studied Cynthia in the mirror and said nothing.

As Cynthia left the room, Lori stared at her, wondering why she acted that way. But there’d been a ring of truth in what Cynthia had said. Telling herself to be cautious about forming a relationship with Guy, she finished wiping her hands and headed back to the table.

She was surprised to see Guy and Cynthia standing by her empty seat, talking. Cynthia was beaming, and Guy looked irritated by her presence.

As Lori approached, Guy smiled at her. “I’ve been saving this dance for you.”

“See you tomorrow,” Cynthia said to him and then gave Lori a little wave.

“Ah, another slow number,” said Guy. He held out his hand, and she took it, wondering why he was meeting up with Cynthia, then reminded herself he owed her nothing.

Following him onto the dance floor, she noticed several women turn to look at him and realized he was considered the most eligible bachelor in town. Her earlier self-confidence weakened. She’d have to remember he could choose to be with anyone.

The music was easy to dance to, and Lori relaxed as they swayed to its soft sounds. Once again, her thoughts returned to Griff, and she wondered how things were going for him. The couple of days they’d done things together had reminded her to find a man who gave her the same feelings of desire as she’d known with her husband. The thought was unsettling. Confused, she nodded when Guy asked her if she’d had enough dancing.

The dessert was Baked Alaska, served with a warm chocolate sauce, if one chose to add it. Lori and Guy both broke through the meringue topping to the chocolate ice cream and orange cake below.

Lori closed her eyes with pure pleasure. Living alone, she didn’t fuss with most of her meals. They’d become a task to get through. Now, Lori

enjoyed the pleasure of eating this luscious dessert.

She turned to Guy, who was lapping up his Baked Alaska with obvious pleasure. The thought of cooking for a man again was both intriguing and worrisome. She wasn't ready for all that it entailed.

Susannah said to Guy. "Ready for another dance? Josh says he wants the chance to get to spend more time with Lori."

"Sure." Guy turned to her. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Go, and have fun," Lori said. She liked Susannah and trusted her to be kind. Josh had seemed like a likable man, and she wanted to know him better.

Josh moved into a chair next to Lori. "I understand you and Susannah have already met, but I haven't had the chance to talk to you. Susannah told me she has already requested you to teach our daughter at *Bright Beginnings*. That says a lot about you. Susie and I both pamper our daughter, Elle. How long have you been teaching there? Do you intend to stay?"

Lori laughed. "Am I being interviewed for the job?"

Josh joined her laughter. "God! I didn't mean to sound like a lawyer. Just curious."

"Well, in that case," she teased, "I've been working there for eight years and love what I do. Other jobs may pay better, but the reward of seeing children get off to a healthy start is worth a lot more."

His smile lit his eyes. "I think so too. My wife is smart to request you. Elle will start with you in the fall."

"I look forward to having her," said Lori as Guy and Susannah joined them.

Guy sat beside Lori, and Susannah sat down next to her husband. They made a congenial group.

"The auction is about to begin," said Susannah. "This benefit for the town's charities is important. Get out your wallets."

A man stood behind a small lectern on the stage where the musicians had performed. "Hello, everyone. I'm Al Simon. I'll be running the auction tonight. It's for outstanding causes, benefiting several local charities. Before we begin bidding on special items, we have a couple of raffle prizes to offer to everyone. Ben Smith will be going from table to table, selling tickets. They're twenty dollars each, six for one hundred dollars. In the meantime, you may want to review the bidding offerings. If you haven't already

checked them out, they're on the table set up at the end of this room."

"What are the raffle prizes?" someone asked.

"There are two," Al said. "One is a one-week trip to a winery in California, all expenses paid. The other is a five-day stay for two at The Sanderling Cove Inn in Florida, plus airfare. Details for both places will be forthcoming at the drawing."

"I never have luck in things like this," said Lori. "But I'll pay for one ticket."

"No worries. I'll buy some too," said Guy. He pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and paid while Lori discreetly bought one ticket with her twenty.

Guy stood. "Want to take a look at what they're offering?"

"Sure," said Lori. "It'll be fun to see." She wouldn't be bidding on anything, though she saw a crowd around the table and realized most people in the audience would participate.

The long table featured a number of wonderful prizes—jewelry, services, decorative pieces, artwork, and other items that were sure to bring in a substantial amount of money.

While people were milling about, Al talked about the five charities that would benefit from the auction. Lori liked the idea that a Valentine's Day event was more than just a party.

"Is there anything you want me to bid on?" Guy asked her.

Lori grinned and shook her head. "Only what you want for yourself. Thanks."

"What do you think of this painting for my office?" Guy asked, indicating a watercolor of a nearby lake.

"It's pretty," Lori said. "I know the local artist's work, and I've always liked her paintings."

"Okay, we'll see how I do," said Guy.

Lori loved seeing the excitement on his face and hoped he'd win it.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

LORI

Lori enjoyed watching the proceedings with people bidding against one another good- naturedly. When Josh learned that Guy wanted the watercolor painting for his office, he bid on it too, raising the price for the charities, allowing Guy to win it.

Nicole won a piece of jewelry she wanted—a gold band with a diamond pendant. Susannah won a dinner for two at a local gourmet restaurant that served the best food in town. Ben Smith won a golf club he wanted.

Everyone was satisfied by the time the drawings were announced.

The trip to Florida went first, and an older woman won, delighting her husband.

"Okay, now the drawing for the stay in wine country," said Al. "I've kept the name of the winery as a special surprise for you folks who bid on it. Many of you enjoy their wine and don't know they rent out a small cottage on the property. We're proud to be among the first group to offer a stay at Adeline Hills Winery."

Hearing the name, Lori gasped. She'd only bought one ticket. Had she known it was Griff's winery, she would've bought six tickets.

"You know the winery?" Guy asked her.

"Yes and no. I've heard about it and how special their wines are," she said, clutching her ticket in her hands, which had grown sweaty.

"All right, here we go," said Al. "This is the final drawing." He reached into the glass bowl which held what looked like thousands of tickets to Lori and pulled one out.

He read off the number.

Lori stared at the ticket in her hand and let out a long sigh. The winning ticket wasn't hers.

"I've got it," said Guy getting to his feet. "That's my number."

After verifying the tickets matched, Al gave Guy a packet of information.

Lori clapped along with everyone else, but she was devastated. The thought of seeing Griff again had struck a need deep inside her.

Beaming, Guy sat down beside her. “This has been an enjoyable evening.”

“You’ve had fantastic luck,” said Lori. He’d spent a lot of money on charity and received prizes in return.

Everyone at their table stood, preparing to leave.

Lori spoke to each of them and walked with Guy to the coat check counter to get her coat.

Cynthia came up to Guy. “That’s a fantastic trip you won. I’m available to go with you. It’ll be more fun with two.”

“I agree,” said Guy, smiling at Lori.

Cynthia frowned and said, “We’ll talk about it later. And remember, we’re meeting tomorrow.”

“I’ll have time for coffee and to meet your friend,” said Guy. “That’s all.”

“We’ll see,” said Cynthia before turning away.

As Lori waited in the lobby while Guy went to retrieve his car, Susannah walked over to her.

“It was fun being with you tonight. Would you be interested in joining a group of my friends who meet every two weeks for a girls’ night out? It’s a lot of fun and a rewarding way to have some private girls’ talk.”

“Thanks. That sounds like a lot of fun. I’d love it,” said Lori, excited by the idea of broadening her social circle.

“I’ll call to give you details of where we’re gathering next.”

“I appreciate your thinking of me,” said Lori, waving as Guy’s car pulled into the front circle.

Lori went outside, where a Valet helped her into Guy’s car.

Guy drove out of the line of traffic and turned to her as he drove. “Want to go see my house? We can have a drink there before I take you home.”

“Yes. I need time to settle down. It was a lovely evening.”

“I think so, too. My partners enjoyed getting to know you better.”

“Everyone was very kind,” Lori said, wondering if she’d passed some sort of test.

###

Lori knew the neighborhood where Guy had purchased his home. The Highlands was considered one of the most exclusive areas in the county.

He pulled up to a two-story Tudor-style home with a brown stone and beige stucco exterior accented with strips of wood for effect. It was a tasteful and beautiful house that suited Guy, who had impeccable and expensive taste.

"It's a little big for one person, but that will change," said Guy. "It reminds me of the house I grew up in."

"It's beautiful," said Lori as they pulled into the three-car garage.

He helped her out of the car and then led her through the back entrance into the kitchen. Gazing at the high-end Bosch and Miele appliances, the many off-white, painted cabinets, and the gray granite countertops, Lori couldn't help the sigh that escaped her lips. It was everything she and Nick had wanted to do with their kitchen someday.

"While I open a bottle of wine, feel free to look around. I haven't fully furnished the house. That's why I'm meeting Cynthia tomorrow. She has a friend who's an interior decorator."

Lori walked through the dining room and into the living room, turning on lights as she went. She loved the layout of both rooms and that each room had windows, overlooking landscapes. It was too dark to see what kind of plants they were, but she liked the idea of having the plantings soften the outline of the house.

Guy joined her in the living room. "Let's sit in front of the fireplace. I'll turn it on."

He handed her a glass of red wine and turned on the fireplace before taking a seat on the couch beside her.

"Here's to a super evening," said Guy. "I can't believe I won a trip to wine country. It's because I was with you. Why don't you join me?"

"I'd love to," Lori said, feeling guilty that her excitement was from thinking she might have a chance to see Griffin again. "When is it?"

"The reservations are for the week of April 1st." Guy put his arm around her and drew her close. "Did you enjoy this evening?"

"Yes," said Lori, smiling at him. "I like your partners and their wives. I think you're going to be happy working with them."

"Yeah, I made a wise decision in coming here. Thinking back on it, my parents and I left in a hurry."

"It seemed that way at the time," Lori said. "And though many people we knew in high school have moved away, some have stayed."

"Yes, I've tried to get in touch with some of my old friends and have

met up with a few. I've even signed up for paddleball with a couple of them."

"That sounds like such fun. I don't know how to play," said Lori.

"I'll teach you. It's an easy way to meet people. Cynthia got me involved on a team."

Lori took a sip and stared at the flaming logs in the fireplace, unhappy with the idea of competing with Cynthia for Guy's attention.

Guy took the wineglass from her hand and set his down on the coffee table in front of them. Staring into her eyes for her acceptance, he drew her to him.

Her pulse pounding with excitement, she eagerly went into his arms. She leaned against his chest and inhaled his spicy cologne. It felt satisfying to be in a man's embrace again. Her last date had been almost a year ago, and it hadn't worked out for either of them.

Guy lifted her chin and gazed at her. "You're beautiful. Being with you reminds me of all the hopes and dreams I had back in high school."

His lips met hers, and they both sighed softly.

Guy's arms tightened around her, and his kiss deepened.

Lori responded, letting herself fall into the feelings he brought out in her. She'd missed this sexual pleasure.

When they pulled apart, Guy grinned at her. "Better than high school, huh?"

She chuckled. "Much better."

"We've both been through a lot. I'm glad to be back where I should be. I should never have let my parents dictate when we were leaving. I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye. And then communication just evaporated."

"I thought you didn't care all that much about me," said Lori. "But things tend to work out for the best. We both needed to grow up a bit."

He grinned at her. "You've done a beautiful job of that. Come here."

In his arms, they both acted like the teenagers they once were together.

But when he suggested they go into his bedroom, Lori shook her head. "I'm sorry. I can't. Not yet."

Guy was quick to back off and said quietly, "Maybe another time."

###

Later, as Guy was preparing to take her home, he handed her the

packet of information for the winery. “I saw your look of disappointment when you didn’t win. Take this home. You can arrange for us to make the trip. If, for some reason, I can’t do it because of a conflict, the trip won’t be wasted.”

“Are you sure?” Lori asked him, even as she tightened her grip on the envelope.

“Yes,” said Guy. “I have the niggling feeling I have a conflict that week.”

“Okay, but I’ll keep the reservation in your name,” said Lori, thrilled by the idea.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

GRIFF

Pretending to date Kayla turned out to be an excellent decision. Griff's grandfather was satisfied that he was settling down, the single women in the area had backed off, and being with Kayla was actually a lot of fun. Her partner, Rosie, was easygoing and went along with the idea, though she insisted on alone time with Kayla. That, Griff thought, was only fair.

After getting to know Rosie, he trusted her to fix up the little cottage on the property. Kayla had suggested renting it out for a week at a time, allowing guests to see the operation, taste the wines, and purchase them. It could be an extra source of income and was worth trying.

There were moments when he felt lonely, but he reminded himself that he needed time to get over Cassandra and the damage she'd done to his ego.

Sarita fussed at him like the mother that she was to him. "Keep busy but have some fun, too. All work and no play makes for a boring man."

"I know," Griff responded. "But I'm worried about this year's grape harvest. It needs to be an outstanding one. Grandad hasn't done his usual job of managing our money, and I need to pay off some debts. They're not outrageous, just worrisome, if you know what I mean."

"Your grandfather is a stubborn man who's losing some of his mental ability," said Sarita. "But I have to be very careful about what I say. I don't want to hurt or upset him. Years ago, he took in Carlos and me when we had no place to go. We'll always be grateful to him."

"Me, too. You were the parents I didn't have," said Griff.

Sarita gave him a quick hug. "I've loved having two boys, not just one. And I know Pete has enjoyed having a brother."

"He also enjoys dating one of the most popular women in the area," said Griff.

"She's not who he's going to marry," said Sarita with confidence. "Wait until Cristina Estrada comes for a visit. Her mother and I have it all planned. He's going to find his soulmate. Ssh. Don't tell him."

Griff gave her a wide-eyed look. "I wouldn't dare to even mention it to him. You know how independent he is."

"He's very strong-minded, but then, she is too," said Sarita. "When

they were little, Cristina used to follow Pete around like a puppy. Remember?"

"Yeah, I do. She was very cute. Good luck with matching them up."

"How about you, Griff? Are you ready to meet a woman? I know the trick you and Kayla are playing. I promise you I won't say anything to your grandfather about it. But you need to do more than fake a relationship."

"There's no one here I want to date," Griff said. The only woman who had interested him lately was Lori Hamlin during his brief stay in Florida, and they both understood that was never going to work.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LORI

Lori lay in bed reviewing her evening with Guy, remembering the chemistry between them. She wasn't ready to go to bed with Guy, even though she was pretty sure he'd be a kind, considerate lover.

There was a lot to like about Guy, but she couldn't help remembering how easily he'd cut off any communication with her all those years ago, leaving her to wonder if she'd just been a convenience for him, a date to the senior prom. Or maybe, as she'd once worried, the problem back then was that in his parents' eyes, she wasn't good enough for him.

Her sisters would tell her those were old concerns, that both she and Guy had done a lot of growing up since then, and she should let bygones be bygones. But they wanted things to work out for her so much that they were willing to avoid probing too deeply into her feelings of doubt.

One thing she knew for certain. If Guy couldn't go with her on the trip to California wine country in April, she was definitely doing it alone. She was going to pencil in vacation time for that week at work.

Lori climbed out of bed and gazed out the window at the dusting of snow on the ground. It was a precursor to a winter storm on its way.

She decided to use her day off to clean the house, prepare for the workweek ahead, and do some baking and meal preparation. Incoming snowstorms always brought out nesting instincts in her, she thought, chuckling at the memory of Nick saying those exact words to her.

In the kitchen, she poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table where she could watch an assortment of birds fluttering around her bird feeder. The way they gobbled the seed made it appear as if they, too, wanted to be prepared for bad weather.

The phone rang. *Flo*.

"Hi, Flo. What's up?"

"I've just put Eloise down, and Hudson isn't awake yet, so, spill. How did last night go? I bet you looked beautiful in that red dress."

"Thanks," said Lori. "Last night was fun, and the dress was perfect even if Cynthia announced in front of another woman that it had belonged to a friend of hers."

“What? Cynthia actually said that. It was cruel of her. Didn’t you tell me you saw her at your favorite Thrift store?” asked Flo. “Then, why is she saying something like that?”

“Cynthia and I have never gotten along. Now, she’s after Guy. She and a friend are meeting him sometime today. Apparently, Cynthia’s friend is an interior decorator and is hoping for some work. But Cynthia just wants time with Guy.” Lori shook her head. “I’m not about to get into a battle with her. What will happen will happen.”

“It sounds as if the evening was fine, but you weren’t swept off your feet,” Flo said. “Am I right?”

“Yes, but it might be that I’m simply not used to dating. I don’t think it’s a bad thing. Any relationship needs time to grow. That’s all.”

“I get that. Just be ready and open to a new situation. Guy has a nice reputation, is attractive, and has an interesting job. All of them important qualities.”

“I know,” said Lori. “I’ll try to go along with it. Oh dear, I hear Hudson crying. I won’t keep you. Thanks for the call.”

Lori ended the conversation and set her phone down. She hadn’t mentioned to anyone in her family or among her friends that she’d met an intriguing man in Florida over the New Year’s Day weekend. She didn’t intend to say anything about it now. It had become a treasured time in her mind. But were those moments with him holding her back? She’d had more than one sexy dream about him.

###

When she went into work, Janie, Dawn, and Cara clustered around her, asking her how the date with Guy went.

Laughing at all the questions peppered at her, Lori held up her hands. “Stop. Enough. The dinner dance was lovely, my red dress was perfect, and I had a pleasant time with Guy.”

“That’s it?” asked Cara, whose personal goal was to find a man to marry within the next year.

“Well, I got to sit at the table with all of Guy’s partners and their spouses. Susannah Bingham, whose daughter, Elle, is already signed up for next year, is very sweet. I hope to see more of her. She made the evening very comfortable for me.”

“She and her husband are decent people,” said Janie. “I had an

excellent interview with them. Guess we'd all better get to work. I'm glad you had an enjoyable evening, Lori. It's about time you did."

"Thanks," said Lori, realizing how much the school and the people in it had done for her since Nick's death. She followed Janie into her office.

"I'd like to reserve the first week in April as vacation time," said Lori.

"Are you going somewhere?" Janie asked.

"Guy won a trip to California wine country and has given me all the details to handle," she said, unable to stop a smile from spreading across her face. Maybe, just maybe, she'd have a chance to see Griffin Sawyer again.

"Okay," said Janie. "I've made a note of it. There should be no conflict with our other teachers."

"Thanks," Lori said. "I'll let you know if there are any changes."

She left the office feeling like dancing, wishing time would hurry up.

###

After a week of not hearing from Guy, Lori decided that he might have changed his mind about dating her. Every single woman his age was dying to go out with him, and she was loaded down with baggage from the past. She couldn't blame him for backing off.

Lori was relieved when Susannah called the following week to invite her to a girls' night out event.

"We'll meet for drinks at Sal's Thursday night at six. I hope you'll join us," said Susannah.

"I'd be delighted," said Lori. "That will give me time to go home and change."

"Fantastic. I'll see you there," said Susannah. "You'll like the other women in the group, but I'll make sure to get there early to introduce you to them."

"Sounds fantastic. Thanks," said Lori. She knew a couple of the women in the group through *Bright Beginnings* and liked them. More to the point, it was a new incentive to get out of the house and do some things for herself.

###

That Thursday, she was changing her clothes at her house when Guy called. "I'm wondering if you're free tomorrow night. We could go to a movie or do whatever you'd like."

Lori hesitated. He'd called late in the week without specific plans.

“Thanks for the invitation, but I’m busy this weekend. I’m babysitting Aurelia’s daughters so she and Gordon can go away.” She wouldn’t ask him to join her during that time.

“Oh, okay. Just thought I’d ask,” said Guy. “I hope all is well with you. Talk to you later.”

Lori ended the call, realizing she didn’t really care about being too busy to go out with him. If she was honest with herself, the magic she wanted with him wasn’t there. But she’d always be grateful for his interest and for making her try to be more social.

She finished getting ready and headed out to Sal’s, an upscale bar that served excellent food. A great place to meet and chat with new people.

###

Lori walked into Sal’s and stood a moment looking around.

Susannah waved to her from a large table in a booth and hurried over to her. “Hi. I’m glad you could make it. Come over and meet some of my friends. One woman couldn’t make it, but three others could.”

As Lori approached the table, she noticed the different appearances of the others. A blonde, a redhead, and a woman with jet black hair. They all smiled at her as Susannah made the introductions.

“I know you, Allison, from *Bright Beginnings*,” she said, smiling as she took off her coat and slid into the booth facing outward. Allison was married to a surgeon and had two little boys enrolled at the school.

The other two women lived in the Highlands, along with Susannah, her husband, Josh, and Guy.

“It’s delightful you could join us,” said one of the women. “I hear you dated Guy Phillips recently. We couldn’t make the Valentine dance at the club, but I heard all about it.”

“If you look now, you’ll see Guy coming into the bar with a woman who is his new decorator,” said the other woman.

“I don’t know what that’s all about,” said Susannah. “But I do know that Cynthia Walters set them up.”

“Her name is Sage Winters,” said Allison. “Isn’t that artsy?”

They studied the woman with strawberry pink hair, a low-cut, V-neck white sweater, and tight black leather jeans that matched her boots.

“Wow, she’s sexy,” said Susannah. “I can’t imagine what she’s doing for Guy’s house, but I bet it will have an edgy new look.”

“Quit staring, or they’ll notice us,” said Allison. “We’re here to have fun, not spy on one of our neighbors.”

Susannah put a hand on Lori’s arm. “We ordered a pitcher of margaritas. Is that all right with you?”

“Sure,” said Lori.

“You okay?” asked Susannah softly beside her.

“Yes,” Lori said firmly. “I’m not surprised to see Guy out with someone else. I’m glad. We were really never more than friends catching up with one another.”

The pitcher of drinks came, and after drinks had been poured into each glass, the women at the table lifted theirs in the air.

“Here’s to another Girls’ Night Out!” said Susannah. “Time to relax and remember what it’s like to have a few minutes to ourselves.”

“Hear! Hear!” cried the women in unison.

The conversation darted from one light-hearted subject to another before settling into more serious matters. Lori loved that the women could talk honestly about their feelings and were comfortable enough to ask for advice.

One of the women turned to Lori. “What about you? Anyone serious in your love life?”

“Not at the moment.” She swallowed hard. “I dated Guy a couple of times, but more as friends catching up than what I’d call a serious date. He’s a nice guy, but it wasn’t going to work out between us.” Lori looked around at the group. “Most of you know I was happily married before my husband died. Should I be worried about finding someone I think is as wonderful, or should I understand that I might not find something like that again and settle for less?”

“Oh, hon, I didn’t know about your husband,” said one of the women who reached across the table and squeezed Lori’s hand. “We’ve only been here a couple of years.”

“I don’t think you should settle for less with anyone,” said Susannah. “No matter who you find, it will be different. But it doesn’t have to be less than you want or deserve. We all want a little magic in our relationships to help us get through the bad times.”

Lori nodded thoughtfully. She and Nick had needed a lot of that to get through the ugliness of the disease.

She cast a glance across the room, and seeing how Guy and Sage were

huddled together, she knew she'd been right to turn down Guy's latest invitation. They looked happy.

Soon, she was laughing with the others as Susannah told a story about Elle swearing at the dog.

"Honest, I didn't realize she'd overheard Josh swearing while he was at his workbench in the garage," said Susannah. "It's like me when I'm picking up poop in the yard and let out a few F-bombs," Susannah added, bringing more laughter.

The rest of the evening was just as enjoyable, making Lori happy to be part of this group. Here, she could talk to the other women in a way that wasn't possible with her sisters. Aurelia and Flo wanted to protect her too much.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

LORI

Friday evening, Lori went to her sister's house, taking her usual place in the guest room, where she had stayed when babysitting the girls over an extended period. Aurelia and her husband were taking a quick trip to Tucson, Arizona, for four days of rest and relaxation. Lori knew that as a doctor's wife, Aurelia didn't always get enough time with Gordon. He was the type of GP who even made house calls if his patients were desperate enough.

Aurelia had already stocked the refrigerator and freezer with anything Lori might need to keep the girls nourished. She noticed the two casseroles prepared for them and couldn't help grinning. It was typical of her sister to do this. Lori ensured that the girls were active, and she and her nieces enjoyed ordering food to be brought in at the end of a busy day. By Sunday, however, a pre-prepared meal would be perfect.

The girls rushed into the kitchen. Sara, at nine, was an active, slender girl whose love of ballet was evident in the way she constantly tried to stand on her toes or twirl around. Lizbeth, a less graceful seven-year-old, was more of a tomboy who declared she was going to play football when she got a little bigger and stronger. Both girls had their mother's dark hair and their father's light blue eyes. Sara kept her hair in a long ponytail. Lizbeth's soft, curling locks fell just to her shoulders and swung about when she moved her head.

"What are we going to do tonight?" asked Lizbeth, giving Lori a gap-toothed grin.

"I thought we'd go to the ice skating rink for some free skating and then get some pizza. Sound like fun?"

"Yes!" Lizbeth cried, jumping up and down.

"Skating and pizza?" said Sara. "Thanks, Aunt Lori."

"I'm glad we all agree," said Lori. "We can watch a movie when we get home, and then it's off to bed for all of us."

###

As she drove to the local ice skating rink, Lori listened to the girls' chatter from the back seat. As the older sister, Sara liked to take charge, but

Lizbeth held her ground. The interchange reminded Lori of how Aurelia and Flo used to argue for control. Being the youngest, Lori had always known her two older sisters were in charge. It made it easier for her to follow along until it was important to speak out.

"Aunt Lori, will you help me with my skates first?" asked Lizbeth.

"We'll all need a little time to get our skates on. And when you need help, of course, I'll be there." Lori knew enough not to fall for the trap of first or second place.

They walked into the rink and confirmed the high school hockey team had ended their practice, which was why she'd chosen this time to come for a free-skating period.

The high school coach, a friend of Flo and Blake, waved at her, and she waved back. He'd tried to date her right after Nick's death, and she'd turned him down. Now, he was happily married with a child on the way.

Lori helped the girls with their rental skates and then put her socks and skates on while they moved impatiently beside her.

"There! Done," said Lori, standing up and moving toward the entrance to the rink.

The three of them went onto the ice at the same time. Lori held on as the girls wobbled beside her and then became more confident. Ice skating had always been a favorite sport of hers growing up. While she had no desire to compete professionally, at one point, she had a teacher who taught her some basic skills.

During the last couple of years, when she found herself going over and over Nick's death in her mind, she'd discovered that skating was a way for her to let those disturbing thoughts go.

She made sure the girls were comfortable on their own and then took off skating in long, smooth strokes around the rink, going faster and faster until she leapt and spun in the air.

As she landed, the few people who shared the rink with her clapped, along with the girls.

Smiling shyly, Lori bobbed her head and continued skating to where the girls were clinging to the side.

"I want to do that someday," said Sara.

"Not me. I want to play hockey," Lizbeth said, pointing to a couple of the boys on the hockey team who'd stopped to watch Lori do her trick.

"Whichever one you choose will require a lot of practice," said Lori.

“C’mon, let’s have fun. Grab my hands, and we’ll do some more skating.”

A while later, they’d all had enough exercise and began taking off their skates in preparation for going out to dinner.

Lori knelt to help the girls get their skates off and was startled when a voice behind her said, “Hello. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

She turned to find Dawn smiling at her.

“Hi,” Lori said. “What are you doing here?”

Dawn indicated the man standing away from them. He was one of the most handsome black men Lori had ever seen.

“An old flame of mine is in town. He’s a former hockey player and is thinking of buying into this business.”

Lori spoke softly so the girls wouldn’t hear. “Wow! It might be time to rekindle that old flame. It could get hot.”

Dawn chuckled, adding a sparkle to her brown eyes. “We’ve been thinking of it.” She waved to her companion. “Come meet a fellow teacher at the preschool, Lori Hamlin.”

The tall man strode easily to them. “Hi, Lori. Wayne Hopkins.”

“Dawn says you might be part of this business. I hope so. We need someone to take a more active role in managing the place, offering classes and the like.”

“We’ll see what happens,” said Wayne, smiling at Dawn.

Sara tugged on Lori’s coat.

“I’m sorry. I’ve got to go,” said Lori. “I’m taking care of my nieces, Sara and Lizbeth Evans.” She turned to the girls. “Can you please say hello to my friends, Miss Dawn and Mr. Wayne?”

“Hello,” said Sara, and Lizbeth piped up, “Hi.”

Lori led the girls away, so happy for Dawn that she wanted to skip. Dawn had never looked more excited. Lori could see why. Maybe that’s how easy it was when the someone you were with was the right person for you. It had certainly felt that way with Nick.

###

The next morning was a gray, cold, rainy one. Lori lay in bed, one sleepy girl on each side of her, and stared up at the ceiling.

“What are we going to do today?” asked Lizbeth.

“Can we do a spa day?” asked Sara.

“I don’t see why not,” said Lori. “I brought nail polish and my old

makeup bag."

"You're the best," said Sara, throwing her arms around Lori.

Lori hugged Sara and inhaled the strawberry smell of her shampoo, loving the joy that filled her. There was a time when she'd imagined what her children would look like. But after mourning the loss of Nick for a couple of years, she forced herself not to think about it.

Not to be left out, Lizbeth threw herself onto Lori and clung to her.

Lori rubbed her back and said, "Well, ladies, should we do it? Get up and face the day?"

They scrambled out of bed.

"I want pancakes," said Lizbeth, tugging Lori onto her feet.

"Okay, but I'll need your help. You can take turns stirring the batter, and you can both set the table while I get a cup of coffee and make things ready."

The girls left the room and hurried down to the kitchen.

###

Later, after breakfast was cleaned up and everyone was dressed for the day, Lori set up

the kitchen for their spa day. Spa days included nail polish on hands and toes, skin cream, lipstick, mascara, and eye shadow. The kitchen bar stools proved to be very handy for all the procedures.

These events had happened often enough that Lori knew Sara would choose pink polish for her fingernails while Lizbeth would choose green. Both girls liked purple polish on their toes.

The special fun for the girls was practicing putting makeup on Lori.

Midmorning, while the polish was drying on the girls' nails, the girls practiced applying eyeshadow and lipstick on Lori. One eye was shadowed with blue, the other, green. The bright red lipstick was applied way beyond the actual line of her lips as the girls tried to even out each side.

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," said Sara.

"No, I will," countered Lizbeth.

Lori sighed. "You girls stay here. I'll get it. Hopefully, it won't be anyone I know."

She went to the door, opened it, and stared at Guy, who tried not to laugh at her appearance.

“You said you’d be at your sister’s house. I was hoping I could talk to you,” said Guy. “But I can see that you’re busy.”

“No, no. Come in. We can speak inside,” said Lori. “First, I have to check on my nieces in the kitchen.” She stood aside to let him enter and then led him to the kitchen.

“We’re having a spa day. This is Sara, and that’s Lizbeth,” said Lori.

“Hi, girls,” said Guy. “Okay, if you give your aunt and me some privacy?”

Unsettled, she quietly said to her nieces, “Why don’t you get dressed? Your nails should be dry now. Then, when I’m free, we’ll do your makeup.”

The girls gave Guy questioning looks, then jumped off their stools and headed upstairs.

“Would you like a cup of coffee? Or anything else?”

“Coffee sounds great. It’s pretty nasty outside,” said Guy.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” said Lori, preparing a cup of coffee for Guy and fixing one for herself.

When she turned back to him, he was staring out through the kitchen’s sliding door to the backyard.

“Here’s your coffee. Black, right?” she said, handing him a cup.

“Yes, thanks,” he answered.

“Let’s sit at the table,” said Lori. “It must be something important for you to come here.”

“Yes, it is. I know you and Susannah saw me at Sal’s Thursday night with Sage. Susannah spoke to me about it. I was going to call you after the weekend when I knew you’d be home, but decided not to wait.”

Lori saw the discomfort on his face and knew what he was about to say. Oddly, she wasn’t the least hurt by it when he spoke.

“I like you, Lori. You’re an amazing woman and a lot of fun to be with. But I sense you’re not ready, at least for me, and I don’t want to play games. It’s a small town, and I want us both to be comfortable living in it.”

Lori reached across the table and patted his hand. “I’ve been having some of the same feelings. More than anything, I want to be friends. It’s nice of Susannah to act as a liaison between us to encourage us to settle this. I like her and want to continue to be in her group of friends.”

Guy leaned back in his chair and let out a long sigh. “I’m glad we could have this conversation.”

“Me, too,” said Lori, more relieved than she’d thought possible.

“Being with you at the Valentine's dance helped me become more realistic about what I needed. Thank you.” She clapped a hand to her mouth. “What about the trip to wine country? Should I return the packet to you?”

He shook his head. “As I suspected, I’ll be at a conference in Las Vegas that week. Why don’t you keep the packet and enjoy the trip? My gift to you.”

“Thank you. I do want to go,” said Lori, thrilled.

“Have fun. It’s all for a worthwhile cause,” he said. “When I saw your disappointment, I was almost sorry I’d won. But this way, you’ll get to go, after all.”

“You’re very kind,” said Lori. “I appreciate it so much. How’s your house coming along with Sage decorating it?”

He grinned. “You’ll have to see it sometime. She’s doing a fantastic job. She’s very talented. It turns out she’s done a lot of interesting projects in New York.”

“I’m happy for you,” Lori said. “It’s a beautiful house.”

“Thanks,” said Guy, getting to his feet. “And thanks for giving me this time to talk. I’d better go. It looks like you’re having fun here with the girls.”

She laughed. “You have no idea how exhausted I’ll be by Monday morning.”

Lori walked him to the door, and when he gave her a friendly kiss on her cheek, it felt right for both of them.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LORI

Lori managed to get through the next five weeks by ignoring the cold, blustery March weather, putting all her energy into her work, and figuring out what to take to California for her visit to Adeline Hills Winery. She read all she could about Napa and loved the idea that in April, the temperature in California would be a bit warmer than in Ellenton.

She read about tending a vineyard in the spring and knew Griff would be busy with both winter pruning and green pruning, watching for the first signs of bud break, weeding, fertilizing, and other activities, preparing the vineyard for summer growth.

Lori decided to say nothing to her family or her friends about the special man who would someday own Adeline Hills vineyard. After debating with herself, she decided not to let Griff know that she would be staying at his vineyard under the name of Guy Phillips.

The day before she was to leave, she made a visit to Franco at Hair Designs.

"Ah, yes, my dear. Let's add a few highlights. Winter always makes us look drab," he said, circling the chair she was sitting in, inspecting her hair from every side. "There's something wonderful, very feminine about your soft curls. We'll keep them that way. Like a halo around your face."

Lori chuckled. "Okay, do your thing. You always make it look better."

Smiling with satisfaction, Franco snapped his fingers for an assistant to come take care of the coloring process.

As she sat, her thoughts drifting, she wondered how Griff was. She was certain he hadn't become romantically involved with anyone in these past months. His wedding debacle had pretty destroyed him. Would he be glad to see her?

She lifted a finger to bite her nail when Franco's assistant grabbed her hand. "No. Don't destroy them. We will do your nails."

"Thanks. I only bite them when I'm extremely nervous," Lori explained. "But you're right. I want to look my best."

###

Two hours later, Lori left the salon, aware that the staff had done an outstanding job with her. She wasn't worried about what clothes she'd bring because she'd decided to do as the information brochure suggested and help work in the vineyard to get a real sense of what that world was really like. A couple pairs of her favorite jeans, some shirts and sweaters, and one dress were all she would need.

She stopped to see Flo and her family. Her godchild, Eloise, was growing fast and was already showing off a cute little smile that everyone but her suspected was a gas bubble. But Lori knew better.

When Flo answered the door, she grinned at Lori. "Wow! You look terrific! All this for a trip to a vineyard where you're going to work for a week?"

Lori shrugged, unwilling to give anything away. "This is an unexpected adventure for me. I want to look my best."

Flo hugged her. "Your worst is the best for many people. Don't mind my grumpiness. I'm feeling fat and tired. Come on in. Hudson is in the playroom. Eloise is asleep."

"I'll say a quick hi and leave," Lori said. "I wanted to see the kids before I left. Even if it's for just a week, I know they'll have grown and changed by the time I get back."

"Are you sure you can't stay for a cup of coffee? I need to talk to a real adult." Flo gave her an imploring look.

Lori quickly changed her plans. "Okay. But I honestly can't stay long."

"Thanks. I'll take what time you can give," said Flo, leading Lori toward the kitchen.

The playroom was next to the kitchen. Lori paused there to say hi to Hudson, who ran to her with open arms. "Hi, Auntie Lori!"

She picked him up and hugged him, loving the feel of his little arms around her neck.

"Can I have a cookie?" he asked Lori.

Lori laughed. "You little imp. You remember the last time I was here."

Flo came to the door. "I heard that. And, yes, Hudson, you can have some crackers. Here."

She handed him a plastic cup containing some goldfish crackers. "You can keep these in the playroom with you."

Smiling, Hudson took the cup and ran back to the pile of wooden blocks he was playing with.

“C’mon. We don’t have much time before Eloise wakes up,” said Flo.

They sat at the breakfast bar, facing one another.

“What’s going on in your world?” asked Lori.

“I’ve signed up for an evening gym class. Blake is going to watch the kids, and I get to have some time to myself once a week. I can’t tell you what that means. Aurelia has always been able to afford help, but I haven’t. So, this is a big deal for me.”

“I’m glad. And when Blake is unable to watch the kids, I will,” said Lori. “It’s important to have some time to yourself.”

“And it’s important to have a relationship with someone. You know that. What happened with you and Guy?” Flo asked.

“It was a mutual decision. Neither one of us felt it was right to continue dating. Frankly, I was relieved. You’re wrong if you think I don’t want a romantic relationship. I do. But it has to be with the right person.”

Flo took a sip of her coffee and patted Lori’s hand. “Okay. That’s all I needed to hear. You’ll go to California, come back, and then what?”

“I’ll do what I do,” said Lori, even as she hoped the trip would produce an unexpected opportunity for her.

“You turned it down before, but when you come back, will you consider online dating?” asked Flo.

Lori thought about it. “Maybe it’s time.”

“Okay,” said Flo. “Because I know one of Blake’s friends is on a dating site, and I know for a fact that he’d be an excellent choice for you.”

Lori placed a hand on Flo’s arm. “If I do go on a dating site, I’ll be the one to choose.”

Flo chuckled. “I know. I know. I’m just happy you’re considering it.”

The sounds of Eloise stirring in her bedroom came through the baby monitor, sitting on the counter.

Lori stood. “I’ll go get her.”

“Thanks,” said Flo. “I’ll check on Hudson. It’s almost time for his nap.”

Lori stepped into Eloise’s nursery and turned on the soft overhead light. She walked over to the crib and stared down at the sweet little girl who looked up at her. What hair she had held the slightest hint of red. Her eyes were somewhere between hazel and brown.

She lifted Eloise, still wrapped in a swaddle blanket, and hugged her. Talking softly, she took the baby to the changing table and cooed at her

while she deftly changed her diaper and put her in a pink, footed sleeper.

The baby's gaze never left her face as Lori carried Eloise to her mother.

"I'll let myself out," Lori told Flo. "I'll see you when I get back from California."

"Safe travels. Have fun. Love you," said Flo.

"Love you back," Lori said and walked to the front door and outside.

Standing on the doorstep, Lori drew a deep breath. She wanted what Flo had. But she wanted freedom, too. Where would all these feelings take her?

###

The next morning, Lori waited for Aurelia to arrive. Lori had packed wisely, filling one rolling suitcase to carry aboard, along with her large canvas bag holding her purse and a couple of items in case her checked suitcase was delayed, a trick she'd learned a while ago.

Aurelia pulled her car up right on time, and Lori hurried to meet her.

"Thanks for dropping me off at the airport," said Lori, stowing her luggage into the back and sliding into the passenger seat.

"I'm happy to do this for you, Lori," said Aurelia. "I hope this trip will be easy for you. You look lovely, especially for going to work in a vineyard."

"You know the trip is a whole lot more than that. Though it's a vacation, I decided to learn about grape growing and wine making." She didn't mention that Griff Sawyer was a big part of that desire.

"Just having you do something for yourself is what I care about," Aurelia told her. "I'm glad to see you coming to life again."

"Thanks," said Lori. "I know you mean that. I think I'm finally ready."

"You're far too young to just endure every day. Time for you to have a new adventure."

After Aurelia pulled to a stop at the drop-off area of the airport, Lori got out, grabbed her suitcase and bag, and waved goodbye to her sister. As Aurelia said, it was time for some fun.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

GRIFF

Griff sat in the office facing Pete, unable to hide his concern. “Our orders are secure for this year,” Griff said. “But with the drop in wine consumption in recent years, we’re going to have to be sure we have customers lined up for this next harvest. We’re lucky to have an excellent reputation and enough buyers that we didn’t have to worry. Now, we may need to adjust our sales program. When I was in Florida, I thought we could open up that market. Or, perhaps, we should aim for more customers in New York.”

“I agree. Some vintners in the area are letting some of their vineyards lie dormant until the market changes.” Pete shook his head. “Some more sophisticated people understand you don’t need to be guzzling wine all the time. There’s a special place for exceptional ones. An excellent wine with dinner enhances it, making the meal a real dining experience, whether it’s at home or out on the town.”

“Tell that to people who think the only way to party is with a lot of cheap wine,” said Griff. “We have to keep our reputation by working with top restaurants where people who come for outstanding food are willing to pay the price for an excellent bottle of wine.”

“We need our creative team to come up with better media advertising,” said Pete. “Let’s meet with them.”

“Okay. We’ll invite them here,” said Griff. “I’ve got another area of concern. Let’s boost our security. I’ve heard of some break-ins, perhaps by the same people who’ve worked in the vineyards here until recently and now can’t get a job.”

“Okay. Let’s get on it,” said Pete. “Juan, Sophia, and their kids have moved into the second house on our property. It’s a relief to know that Juan will remain my right hand in the coming year. It gives me some time to myself.”

“More time to woo a certain someone,” said Griff. “When is Cristina arriving?”

Pete’s lips thinned. “You and my mother. I can’t believe the Cristina I remember from my childhood is someone I’ll be interested in.”

Griff laughed and waved a finger at him. “You know your mother is

right about a lot of things. I should've listened to her advice about Cassandra. It would have saved me a lot of trouble."

"Yeah, I'm sorry," said Pete. "A man named Guy Phillips will be staying in the newly renovated cabin. Let's see how that works out. Anything for positive publicity."

"I agree," said Griff. He hadn't mentioned it to anyone else, but he was going to ask Guy Phillips if he happened to know Loralie Hamlin. Ellenton had sounded like a pretty small town.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LORI

After the plane landed in San Francisco, Lori went directly to the car rental desk and picked up a small, compact model to make the approximately fifty-mile trip to Napa and the winery.

As she drove, she inhaled the fresh air and admired the rolling hills, many of which were decorated with straight lines of growing grape vines.

Her anticipation grew.

Nervous energy kept her tapping her fingers on the steering wheel of the car. Had she done the right thing by coming to the winery unannounced? Would Griff be happy she was there or would she see a look of horror cross his face when he saw her?

Drawing deep, anxiety-filled breaths, she told herself to relax. But when she saw the carved wooden sign announcing Adeline Hills Winery, her nerves did a tap dance inside her all over again.

Lori passed an attractive, two-story stone building that looked like it was used for the winery's reception and sales area. Beyond it, she drove up a winding road to the crest of the hill where a two-story, beige stucco home with light blue shutters sat, spread out like a modern castle overlooking rows of vines around the top of the hill and below.

She pulled up in front of the house, got out, and stared at the simple lines of the house, admiring the wide front terrace and the double-door entrance to the inside. She pulled out a sheet of instructions from the information pack and realized she was supposed to take the side road beyond the house in order to get to her cabin.

Before she could get back into her car, a dark-haired man emerged from the house. Smiling, he strode toward her in easy, long-legged steps.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m staying in the cabin on the property for a week. A friend of mine won it in an auction,” said Lori.

“Oh, I see. I’m Pete. You need to take the driveway to the back. Then follow the road halfway down the hill. You’ll see two houses, and a little further down the road is the cabin. It’s all ready for you. After you get

settled, be sure to join us here at the main house for cocktails and dinner at six o'clock."

"Thanks," she said, pleased to meet the man Griff thought of as his brother.

Lori climbed behind the wheel of the car and followed the road behind the house, where she noticed a swimming pool and a large, beautifully landscaped yard.

Looking ahead, she saw two white clapboard, two-story houses.

As she got closer, she admired their wrap-around porches with simple porch railings. One house had wine colored shutters and a front door. The other house further down the road had green shutters and a red front door, reminding her of Christmas.

Eager to get to the cabin, she continued down the road and pulled up beside a single-story white clapboard cabin, which looked like a smaller, simpler building compared to the two houses.

It had light blue shutters and front door. The small porch held two Adirondack chairs and a table on which a pot of pink geraniums sat.

Lori clasped her hands with delight, walked to the front door, and opened it.

She faced a living room. Beyond it she could see a kitchen.

Inside, to the left of the living room, she discovered a half bath, and what looked like a guest room. To the right of the living room was a master suite with a king-size bed and full bath.

She walked into the kitchen where a breakfast bar held three stools. A packet of papers on the kitchen bar welcomed her and gave her a schedule at the vineyard and events at the winery.

In a dining nook in the kitchen, a simple pine table was surrounded by four chairs.

She studied the kitchen. For such a compact place, Lori was pleasantly surprised to see the well-equipped working area. All the appliances appeared new.

At the far end and behind the kitchen, she discovered a small laundry area and a door leading to a patio and an enclosed backyard.

Lori had been captivated by the elegant building at the top of the hill, but this little cottage won her heart. It was adorable.

When she went back outside, she noticed a wooden park bench sitting on the grassy verge between the cabin and the closest house, and wondered

who used it.

Not wanting to waste another minute, Lori unloaded her luggage and rolled her suitcase inside to the master suite. She could imagine newlywed couples staying here for a perfect escape.

After unpacking, Lori decided to take a shower to freshen up. She wanted to look her best for her first interaction with Griff. Just thinking of it, shivers danced up and down her spine.

###

Just before six o'clock, even though Lori could have driven to the main house, she decided to walk, carrying the lantern that had been provided for her at the cottage. There was still daylight, but by the time she was ready to walk back, she would need the lantern to see.

She waved to a woman sitting with a man and two children on the porch of the house closest to her cabin and continued on her way.

When she reached the top of the hill, she walked over to the fence surrounding the backyard of the main house and gazed at the swimming pool and patio. She could imagine how lovely it would be to swim there in the summer. Right now, the chill in the air was a reminder that it was early April.

She went to the front of the house and across the wide patio, which she thought might be used for social events, and climbed the two steps to the front door, where she rang the bell.

An attractive woman with black hair, now going gray, answered, wearing slacks and a lightweight sweater.

"Hello," Lori said. "I'm Loralie Hamlin, the woman staying in the cabin."

"Welcome to Adeline Hills Winery," said the woman whose brown eyes never left Lori's face. "Come in. We're having cocktails in the den. Dinner will be soon."

"You must be Sarita," said Lori, smiling.

Startled, Sarita said, "How did you know my name?"

"A friend of mine," said Lori. "May I place this lantern by the front door? I don't want to forget it."

"Of course," said Sarita. "Follow me."

Lori walked into what she'd call a masculine room. Wooden bookcases flanked a tall, stone fireplace. Indian rugs covered most of the tile floor.

Overstuffed couches and chairs provided comfortable seating for several people in a conversational arrangement.

Sitting in one chair by the fireplace, a gray-haired man was talking to another man his age. They both looked up as Sarita and Lori approached.

"Sam and Carlos, this is Loralie Hamlin, who is staying in the cabin. She's the first of the guests we hope to have stay with us," said Sarita. "Lori, this is Sam Sawyer, the owner of the winery, and my husband, Carlos, the foreman."

Carlos stood, and Sam bobbed his head in acknowledgement. "By the time it takes me to stand, you could already be tasting your drink."

"I understand. No problem," said Lori. "Where would you have me sit?"

Sam padded the arm of a chair next to him. "Right here. I want to know why you'd come to a vineyard on your own."

Lori quietly asked for red wine and sat down near Sam, or Grandad as Griff had called him. Staring into his bright blue eyes, Lori could see a lot of life there. Life lived and more life to come. Inwardly sighing with relief for Griff's benefit, she said, "I'm here to learn about winemaking."

The look of delight on Sam's face was amusing. "Why would you want to do that?"

"I became interested in it lately and then this opportunity came up. Now I want to do it. I've packed overalls and sneakers and wrote to Kayla to tell her I wanted to work in the vines."

Sam looked up as two people came to the doorway.

Lori let out a soft gasp.

Griff and a beautiful woman with strawberry blonde hair entered the room.

Griff's eyes widened when he saw her. "Lori? What are you doing here?"

"I'm the guest in the cabin. My friend won a stay here in an auction and couldn't come, due to a conflict. So, he allowed me to come in his place."

"You're Guy Phillips' replacement?" Griff said. "You're his girlfriend?"

"Hold on here," said Sam. "How do you know Loralie?"

"She's someone I met in Florida, and we became friends," said Griff.

Lori gazed at Griff and Kayla standing close and felt as if she was

going to throw up.

Sarita studied the three of them. “Everyone, please sit. I’ll bring some appetizers while you all help yourselves to drinks. Ah, here’s Pete now.”

Pete entered the room and stopped. “Hey, everyone. What’s going on?”

“Have you met our guest?” asked Griff.

Pete grinned. “As a matter of fact, I have. Which is why I’ve cancelled my date for tonight.” He came over and sat beside her. “Kayla tells me you want to learn about grape growing and winemaking.”

“Yes,” said Lori, wondering whether she should tell everyone she was suddenly feeling ill or if she should try to ride out the sickening waves of shock at seeing Griff with someone else.

Somehow, Lori managed to get through the cocktail hour by keeping her attention on Pete, listening as he talked about what they were working on in the fields at this time of year.

###

Later, at dinner, Lori watched the family interact. Sarita had obviously taken on the role of hostess. Though Sarita managed the house and cooked, a younger woman served the meal. Carlos and Sam teased one another like the friends they were. Griff and Kayla were an interesting couple. They seemed fond of one another but not like lovers. Pete was handsome and seemed like an easy-going guy who liked a good time. He’d wasted no time in arranging to work with her.

Talk around the dinner table centered around the vines and what work still needed to be done.

Kayla spoke about tasting different barrels of wine from the last harvest, trying to bring out the taste of each, focusing on the flavors and textures in her mouth. “I think it’s going to be an exceptional year as long as nothing disturbs the wine.”

“Kayla is our winemaker,” explained Sam. “She and Griff make an excellent team. They will be carrying on the business together and with Pete.”

Lori’s body turned numb. She’d made such a mistake in coming here unannounced. It would have saved her a lot of heartache. She drew a breath. She’d thought she might have a chance to reconnect with Griff, but that didn’t seem likely. She’d also come here to learn about grape growing and wine making, and that’s exactly what she was going to do.

As if he'd read her thoughts, Pete said, "When you're through with your breakfast, meet me here at the house, and I'll drive you into the fields myself." He took her cell phone and put in his information.

"Or I could work with her," said Griff.

"No. You have an appointment in Los Angeles," said Grandad.

"That's right. Maybe later, Lori," Griff said, looking uncomfortable.

Lori turned to Pete. "Thanks, I'll call you in the morning when I head to the house."

"I hope you've brought the right kind of clothes for working in the fields," said Kayla. "If not, maybe you can borrow some of mine."

"No need, but thanks. I came prepared," said Lori.

"I like how interested you are," said Grandad.

Sarita smiled at her. "I'm very glad you came."

Feeling better, Lori waited through dessert until she could politely leave.

Griff stood. "I'll walk you to your cabin."

"No, thanks," said Lori, holding up a hand to stop him. "I brought a lantern and need to get used to the area on my own."

Griff was quiet as he sank back into his chair.

"Thank you, everyone. I'll see you all tomorrow," said Lori, walking out of the dining room to the front door, where she picked up the lantern.

In the dark, where no one could see her, she let the tears inside her flow unchecked down her cheeks.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

GRIFF

Griff was shocked to see Lori at the vineyard. It brought back memories of their time together at The Beach House Hotel and how easily they'd shared those hours. She was kind and beautiful in all sorts of ways. He'd even had a few erotic dreams about her. But now, he saw that she was as unavailable to him here as she had been in Florida. She'd made that very clear when she'd firmly turned him down for help back to the cabin.

He and Kayla left the house together, working to keep up the front of their dating. But Griff's heart wasn't in it any longer.

"What's wrong? I can see how upset you are, even though you're trying to hide it," said Kayla. "Who is that woman, and what is she to you?"

"She is a friend I met in Florida. And when I say friend, I mean it. I was there after Cassandra dumped me, and Lori was trying to come to terms with the death of her husband two years earlier. Neither one of us wanted anything more than someone to hang out with."

"It looked like more than friendship to me, but who am I to judge?" said Kayla, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Now, I'll sneak home to my secret love."

He wrapped his arms around her. "You're a sport about playing this game of ours. Maybe we're being foolish, but it's worked up to now."

"Everyone knows the real story except for your grandfather, and that's all that matters," said Kayla.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

LORI

Lori woke up and blinked at the sunshine peeking through the small opening in the drapes at her windows. It took her a moment to realize where she was, and then it all came crashing back. The long trip, seeing Griff with Kayla, and the disappointment of knowing she'd made a huge mistake.

She got out of bed and stretched.

Walking to the window, she opened the drapes and gazed out at the countryside. It was a beautiful day with bright blue skies.

She checked the time and was shocked to see it was nine o'clock, a late time for getting out on the fields.

She took care of her morning routine, got dressed, and grabbed a cup of coffee and a piece of toast before heading outside.

Walking up to the house, she was glad for the jean jacket she wore over her long-sleeved T-shirt and overalls. She looked down at the black high-top sneakers and wondered if they would hold up for all the week's activities.

She called Pete at the number he'd put into her phone, and he picked up.

"I'm on my way now," she told him.

"Okay, I'll meet you at the back of the house by the pool area and take you to the barn to show you around. And then we'll go into the fields."

"Great," she said. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

Pete was waiting for her on a small tractor that from the narrowness of the front and how the wheels were placed must be designed for work in vineyards.

" 'Morning," said Pete. "Climb aboard. It will be a tight fit but that makes it fun."

Lori laughed at his teasing grin and climbed up onto the seat next to him.

"You must have passed the winery tasting room which sits on our property near the main road."

"Yes, it's beautiful, like the house," said Lori. "And close to the road for business."

“Exactly,” said Pete. “The house and the winery public areas are the more upscale parts of the property. The barn is down the hill on the backside. That’s where we keep the farming equipment, a few cows, sheep, and pigs. Their droppings are used to help with special compost piles we keep nurturing. Then we can use the compost for fertilizing the crops in a synergetic way.”

“Oh, I like that,” said Lori with enthusiasm.

After they reached the barn, Lori climbed down and went over to the fenced area holding some sheep.

“Look! A lamb. How cute,” she said.

Kayla came out of the barn. “Hi, Lori. I’m here going over the schedule. We’re still in the process of checking the rows of vines for bud break, new growth, winter pruning, and shoot thinning. Not all the sections are in the same state of growth. I’ll work with you on shoot thinning, which is removing excess shoots to control canopy density. That will promote air circulation, which will help prevent disease issues.”

“Okay. It sounds like important work,” said Lori.

“It is,” Kayla said.

“This afternoon, I’ll walk the rows of vines with you to check on bud break,” said Pete. “Sorry, I had an unexpected meeting come up later this morning.”

“No, problem. I just want to help and learn where I can,” said Lori. She was eager to find out more about Kayla.

A man came out of the barn.

Kayla waved him over. “This is Juan Perez, our new assistant foreman. He and his wife, Sophia, and their two children live in the house next to the cabin where you’re staying.”

“Hello,” said Lori. “I’m here to learn about grape growing.”

“If there’s anything I can do to help you, please let me know.” Juan turned to Pete. “I’m heading to the chardonnay section to see how that’s doing.”

“Juan has been working here for a couple of years,” Pete explained after Juan left. “We’ve just recently been able to offer him family housing. Down closer to the road there are a number of small, rustic cabins we can offer to some of our workers on a temporary basis, especially during picking season. Then, timing is critical.”

“I had no idea that the vineyard was this large and accommodated so

many people," said Lori.

"It's grown over several years," said Pete. He checked his watch. "I'd better go. Have fun, ladies." He tipped his baseball cap at them, climbed onto the tractor, and drove away.

"Where does Pete live?" Lori asked.

"In the first of three buildings on your road, in the house closest to the main house," said Kayla. "I was offered the cabin before we decided to rent it out. But I prefer to have my own private place away from work."

"I was surprised to learn that Griff still lives at home," said Lori.

Kayla chuckled. "It's not like anyone else I know who is still living at home. Griff has his own private wing of the house, all the amenities of a hotel with a spa and workout room, and the swimming pool outdoors. Sarita is a fabulous cook, and he doesn't have to worry about his meals, even though his wing has a private kitchen."

"Griff talked about how much he owes to his grandfather and Sarita. I'm sure that is part of the decision to remain close, too."

Kayla studied her. "Exactly. You understand him." She led Lori into the barn and handed her a pair of comfort gloves and a pair of pruning shears. "Because we're pruning new growth, these shears will work well. Be careful, though, they're sharp-edged for a clean cut."

Lori accepted the gear.

Kayla pointed to equipment stored on shelves nearby. "For our winter pruning, motorized shears are used to cut through vines with clean and swift movement. We'll be working with tender green growth."

Lori pulled on her gloves, tested her shears, and slid them into the holster Kayla had given her. She put on her sunglasses as Kayla instructed.

"We need to protect our eyes while working with canes. We will be doing a different kind of pruning. Let's head out," said Kayla. "I thought we'd work in our pinot noir section, one of our fussiest areas. We'll do the work carefully."

As they walked, Kayla said, "At lunch time, workers head back to the barn. Sarita fixes a bunch of sandwiches and Carlos brings drinks and chips. We don't have a lot of workers year-round, but those we do have are well treated. Come planting, pruning, and picking, we use crews that travel from one vineyard to another during those times. We've even used college students and occasionally younger students to help us, depending on weather and time commitments."

“Yes, I’ve read how important it is to harvest the grapes at a certain stage,” said Lori as they left the building.

Kayla looked at her. “I can see why you and Griffin became friends. You’re very down to earth. Many of the single women in the area want the prestige of being with him. They were furious when they learned about him and me.”

“So, how long have you been together?” Lori asked.

Kayla looked away and back again. “Very soon after he returned from Florida, Sam wanted it more than we did. But it’s turned out well, and it gives Sam a lot of comfort to think the vineyard will be taken care of if anything happens to him.”

“I see,” said Lori, surprised. It didn’t sound like a passionate affair. But then she’d been drawn to Griffin when he wanted nothing more than to be friends. This was different.

###

When they got to the section of grapes they were going to work in, Kayla explained that they had to put their shoes into a footwear bath holding a chlorine solution and to spray their shears with an ethanol solution.

“Every vineyard has a different protocol, but it’s important,” said Kayla, twisting from one side to another. “You might want to do these stretches as you’ll find the work hard on your back.”

“So, what exactly are we doing?” asked Lori.

“We are going to check to see if any shoots need to be secured to the cordon wire, thinning them lightly by removing those that are emerging from the bottoms of cordons. We can also remove suckers, which are shoots growing from the trunk below the vine head.”

“It’s a beautiful day to do this,” said Lori.

“We only do this work in dry weather because shoot removal does wound the vine, and we don’t want any pathogens in the rain to infect the vines,” said Kayla.

“Wow, you know a whole lot about this,” Lori commented.

Kayla laughed. “I worked on a vineyard as a kid and have a degree in wine making. I’ve always loved the process and the magic of it all.”

“I knew I wanted to be a teacher,” said Lori. “I love working with kids.”

“You don’t have any children of your own?” asked Kayla.

Lori shook her head. “No, my husband died just after we’d decided to try for a baby. But I haven’t given up on the idea.”

Kayla stopped and looked at her. “I can tell you’d make a wonderful mother. Me? I don’t want kids.”

Lori studied her. Griff hadn’t been in a time and place where it would seem appropriate to discuss having children of his own one day.

“Enough talk. Let me demonstrate what we’re looking for,” said Kayla. “First, I’ll give you a little course in terminology.”

By the time they stopped for lunch, Lori was exhausted, but she vowed not to show it.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

LORI

As Lori and Kayla walked toward the barn for lunch, Kayla asked, “Are you as tired as I am?”

Lori laughed. “Does it show that much?”

“We all have to get used to the work,” Kayla said. “You’re doing fine.”

When they arrived at the barn, Lori saw that a long table had been set up outside. Several men were sitting there, along with Sarita.

“Better hurry or these vultures will eat all the food,” teased Sarita.

Kayla stood next to the table. “Hey, everyone! I want you to meet Lori Hamlin. She’s visiting the vineyard for the week. She wants to learn about grape growing and wine making. Please welcome her and answer any questions she might have.”

Lori gave the group a little wave and then sat down next to Sarita.

When the platter of sandwiches was passed to her, Lori had no hesitation about taking a thick grilled cheese sandwich. She helped herself to potato chips and a couple of pickles. It was as much food as she would usually have at home for dinner, but she was starved and knew she needed sustenance.

“You’ve been working hard, ” said Sarita. “Why not relax by the pool like other visitors?”

“I meant what I said about wanting to learn,” said Lori, shifting uncomfortably in her seat as Sarita continued to stare at her.

“You’re a lovely person. I can see that clearly,” said Sarita. She got to her feet. “I’d better get back to the house. Kayla is an excellent instructor. She’ll teach you well.”

“Thank you,” said Lori. “And thanks for the sandwiches.”

Sarita grinned. “All part of the job.”

After she left, Lori tuned into the conversation at the table. She recognized Juan, but didn’t know the other men. Everyone seemed congenial except for one tall man with a mustache who was speaking and waving his hands about in furious motions.

“What is he upset about?” Lori asked Kayla, who was sitting beside her.

“He wants better treatment from the owners in the valley,” said Kayla. “I don’t know him. He’s someone Pete hired last week to help us for the next couple of weeks.”

Lori remained quiet. There was something about the man she didn’t like. Just a nagging feeling.

###

When she headed back to the fields with Kayla, Lori said, “I didn’t realize that grape growing was this labor intensive.”

“Tractors and battery-operated pruners and the like all help with some of it, but the finer activities need to be done by hand. Believe me when I say that careful pruning and tying of vines makes all the difference.”

“Have you always lived and worked in wine country?” Lori asked her.

“Yes. My family has moved away but I never wanted to,” said Kayla. “I’m lucky I’ve found such a rewarding job here.”

“From what I’ve seen, it’s a well-run operation,” Lori said.

“Sam is an accomplished owner. He’s training Griff and Pete to take over. It’s time for them to do so.”

“Sam seems a very dominating person. Strong, but kind,” said Lori.

Kayla grinned. “That he is.”

As they worked, Kayla asked Lori questions about her family, how she liked living in a small upstate New York town, and what New York City was like.

Lori answered her questions, realizing how much she liked all of it.

Kayla hesitated and then said, “I’m sorry your husband died. That must have been very difficult.”

“I was devastated,” Lori admitted. “He was such a special man. I’ll never forget him, of course, but I’m ready to reenter the dating world, even though I have very specific ideas about it. I will not put myself out there for just anyone, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes,” said Kayla. “I understand.” She checked her watch. “That’s enough for today. Go home and relax for a while. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Thanks,” Lori said with a gratefulness she couldn’t hide.

Kayla gave her a quick hug. “You’ve been a great help. Thank you.”

Lori left the fields, went to the barn to turn in her equipment, and headed down the road to her cabin.

As she neared the cabin, she was surprised to see Sam sitting on the

park bench beside the dirt road. His white hair surrounded a face that was still handsome. It was a lot like Griff's.

"Good afternoon," she said. "What a surprise to find you here."

Sam smiled at her and patted the empty space beside him. "I like to take a walk in the afternoon. If I get as far as here, I give myself a rest before heading back up the hill."

Lori sat down and let out a long sigh. "We had a busy day in the fields. Kayla is a helpful teacher. I've learned a lot."

"Like any other type of farming, there's always a lot to learn, constant adjustments to be made, and, of course, lots of physical labor," he said.

"More than I thought," admitted Lori. "But as Kayla reminded me, the work that is put into it before growing season is important and will determine a lot to the success of the crop."

Sam studied her. "So, you and Griff met in Florida at that fancy hotel. What were you doing there?"

"My family bought me the airline tickets and the hotel reservations for Christmas. They wanted to make sure I'd be forced out of the rut I was in following my husband's death two years ago." Lori glanced at him and then gazed out at the rolling hills,

"Did it work?" Sam asked her. "Being in a different location?"

Lori turned back to him. "Yes, but coming here to see the place Griff told me about was a big step for me. Griff was very kind to me during that stay, and we became friends."

"You remained friends?" Sam asked.

Blushing, Lori said, "Yes. That's all either of us wanted."

Sam was quiet. Then he said, "There's something I think you ought to know. Kayla and Griff think they're fooling me, but they're not. I'm playing their game by not saying anything. But I need to tell you that they're not a couple. Kayla is gay and living in town with her girlfriend. Griff? Well, Griff wanted to stop the endless calls from single women in the area."

Lori stared at Sam in disbelief.

"It's true," said Sam. "You're different from the other women who'd like to get to know Griff better. I'm just letting you know the truth. What you do with it is up to you. And I'm not letting on that I've told you. At some point, they're going to have to come clean." He shook his head. "No matter how it might seem, I wasn't born yesterday."

Lori laughed. “I’d never dare mention your age, and I’m not telling Griff I know about his scheme with Kayla.”

“Good girl,” said Sam, getting to his feet. “Now, I’ve got to head back to the house for a nap and then dinner.”

They stood facing one another.

“Thank you,” said Lori, giving him a quick hug.

He saluted her and then went on his way.

Still stunned, Lori watched him leave. Her world had once again been turned upside down.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

GRIFF

Griff didn't care that his usual shmoozing with clients included cocktails and dinner. He was on a plane on his way home. No way was he going to let another day go by without being honest with Lori. Seeing her again had changed everything for him.

He gazed out the plane window as they flew up the California coast, not seeing anything below. Lost in thought, he remembered most details of the couple of days he'd spent in the Presidential Suite at The Beach House Hotel. He'd gone from feeling like a jackass over being dumped at the altar by a woman he never should've dated in the first place, let alone asking her to marry him, to someone at peace with what had happened.

When he met the attractive Loralie Hamlin, someone who was open and honest with him, he relaxed in her company. They'd had fun experiencing new things together. From the beginning, it had been a huge relief to know she wasn't interested in him as more than a friend.

But that night of the New Year's Eve celebration, things changed for him as he held her in his arms. A feeling of tenderness, of wanting to protect her, and hot desire had captured him. She'd rested her head on his shoulder like a wounded animal seeking shelter, and he'd wanted to show her how much he cared. If the call hadn't come about Grandad's stroke, who knows what might've happened.

Even now, thinking about it, Griff shook his head. Lori was happily settled in her hometown and obviously dating a man called Guy Phillips.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

LORI

Carrying a lantern, Lori headed up the hill to the main house for dinner. When she'd gone as far as the house next door, she paused as two children sitting on the front porch steps waved at her.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Lori. Who are you?"

The girl, who looked to be about nine, placed a hand on her younger brother's shoulder before he wiggled loose and ran to greet Lori.

"I'm Bert," said the little boy, whose sparkling dark eyes shone at her.

"And I'm Elsa," his sister said, staying by his side and placing a protective arm around him.

"Do you live there now?" asked Bert, pointing to the cabin.

"Just for a few more days. I'm here to learn how a vineyard operates," Lori said.

"My father is the assistant foreman here," said Elsa. "We just moved in."

"It seems like a wonderful place to live," Lori said.

Elsa shrugged. "I'm just making friends, so, we'll see." She seemed very grown-up for her age.

Lori was impressed by Elsa's easy acceptance of what might be a challenging move for her. Being the new kid in a classroom wasn't always easy.

Their mother came onto the front porch. "Hey, kids, don't bother our neighbor."

"They weren't bothering me," said Lori. "In fact, I'm the one who was interrupting them."

The pretty, heavy-set woman approached them and wrapped her arms around the children. "I'm Sophia Perez. And these are my children. Elsa is nine, and Bert is just five."

"I'm Loralie Hamlin, a guest in the cabin for the next few days. I understand you moved here recently."

"Yes, my husband is the assistant foreman. We're lucky to be here. Adeline Hills Vineyard has a reputation for taking care of staff."

"I'm here to learn about the vineyard, grape growing, and wine

making," said Lori.

Sophia smiled. "It's a lot to learn, but fascinating."

"I'm glad I met you. Perhaps we'll meet again."

"Yes. Once the kids are settled in school, I'll be helping in the fields," said Sophia.

Lori went on her way, thinking how it must be for some working families in the area. She imagined there was a lot to be done at all the vineyards.

###

When she reached the main house, Lori knocked on the door that had been propped open and called out as she entered the house.

Sarita met her in the hallway. "Glad to see you. We have a surprise visitor. Come join us in the den."

When she reached the doorway, Lori stopped in surprise as Griff rose to greet her.

"Hi. I didn't expect to see you here until tomorrow," she said, smiling at him. She wondered how long it would take for either Kayla or him to spill the truth about their so-called relationship and decided she'd say or do nothing about it.

Grandad patted the chair next to him. "Come sit by me. I want to know all about your day," he said, as if they hadn't spoken to one another earlier.

Smiling at the subtle wink he gave her, Lori sat down as Griff asked, "Would you like another red wine tonight? I thought since you worked in the pinot noir section, you might like to try one of ours."

"Thanks. That sounds perfect," said Lori. "Where's Kayla?"

"She'll be along soon. She and Rosie Torres have been looking over a display in the winery reception room," said Sarita.

"That's something I thought you should see tomorrow," said Griff. "If you're interested, that is. I do a lot of the sales and marketing and naturally think others might be interested, too."

"I studied to be a teacher, but my parents insisted I learn other practical things to supplement my income if needed. So, my minor in college was marketing. I love to see how others utilize those skills. Especially in the new online arena where there's a lot of money to be made. I'm a virtual assistant to two authors and three small businesses, handling all kinds of things, including marketing for them."

Both Sam and Griff studied her.

Lori laughed. “I know. It’s a surprise to many. Especially because I’ve chosen to work with young children.”

“Okay. Tomorrow morning, I’m going to have you stop doing fieldwork and help me think about new ideas for the reception areas. Rosie is willing to work there for as long as we want her, but we need a professional to look at it with a fresh eye.”

Lori held up a hand. “I’m not a professional, but I can certainly help with ideas.”

Kayla entered the room. “What ideas?” she asked as a young woman with long dark hair and startling green eyes followed her inside.

“Hi,” said Griff. “We were just talking about marketing ideas for the reception area. Lori minored in marketing and is willing to assess what we’re doing.”

He stood and gave Kayla a brief hug.

Lori saw the way Sam almost rolled his eyes and quickly looked away before she burst into laughter.

Kayla introduced Rosie to Lori, and Lori knew from the way her voice softened that Rosie must be Kayla’s girlfriend.

“It would be helpful to have some opinions about what I think should be done,” said Rosie.

“I’m not here to judge anyone,” Lori said. “But I do love seeing marketing opportunities. Especially with an online presence.”

“Very impressive,” Sam said to her, bringing a blush to her cheeks. “You sure you don’t want a job here?” He shot Griff a devilish look.

“I assume nothing’s changed about your desire to remain in Ellenton,” said Griff.

Unsure how to answer, Lori said, “All my family is there.” She glanced at Sam and realized he was just teasing Griff, waiting for him to be open about his true relationship to Kayla.

Pete joined them, bringing a young woman with him, who was introduced as Estelle Youngstrom.

It was clear that Sarita didn’t like the woman, though she was meticulous about being pleasant to her.

At the appropriate time, Sarita left them to check on their meal.

She quickly reappeared to announce that dinner was ready.

Dinner this evening consisted of a Mexican beef stew served with rice

and tortillas, accompanied by pickled jalapenos on the side.

"This is delicious," Lori exclaimed, digging in. After all her physical labor, she was not ashamed to enjoy every bite.

"Hard work demands comforting food," said Sarita. "It's my mother's recipe and a favorite of the family. It's rewarding to see people enjoying it." She cast a disapproving glance at Estelle, who'd hardly eaten.

For dessert, lemon sherbet and Mexican wedding cookies were served. Lori noted the pleasure on Sam's face when he ate them and realized how carefully Sarita took care of both him and her husband. Carlos was already helping himself to more cookies.

When it was clear that everyone was finished, Sam placed his napkin beside his plate and got to his feet. "Thank you, Sarita, for another tasty meal."

Lori thanked Sarita and stood up to join the others.

Griff walked to Lori's side. "I'll walk you home," he said with such firmness that she'd appear ungrateful if she turned him down.

"Okay, thanks," she said. "Let me get my lantern."

They left, then walked side by side onto the road.

As soon as they were out of sight of the house, Griff stopped her and faced her. "I'm glad to have this time to talk to you alone. Things aren't what they might seem. Kayla and I aren't really together. It's a long story, but basically, I wanted to get Grandad off my back about finding a woman to marry. And Kayla wants to keep her relationship with Rosie private. So, we were both agreeable to making everyone think we're together."

"And how's that going?" Lori asked.

"Well, it's making it easier for me. I've avoided a lot of hassles with women in the area," he answered. "And Kayla likes her privacy. Being gay isn't easy."

"And do you think your grandfather doesn't see through this?" asked Lori.

Griff shrugged. "I don't know. At least he hasn't been hounding me about finding someone who'd help me carry on with the vineyard after he's gone." He studied her. "Why aren't you more surprised about this?"

"Let's just say someone mentioned it," said Lori. "He thought I should know."

Griff clapped a hand to his forehead. "It was my grandfather. Right?"

Lori smiled and nodded.

“I guess it’s time for all that mess to end,” said Griff. He took hold of both her hands. “When I entered the den and saw you sitting there with Grandad, I knew at that moment it wasn’t wrong of me to keep thinking about you. Even though you made it clear you weren’t interested in more than friendship, I’ve thought of you every day since I’ve come back to California. Are you willing to get to know me better?”

Lori’s eyes filled with emotion. Her heart was answering yes, while her mind resisted.

Griff gazed at her. “May I?’ He lowered his lips to hers, and everything clicked into place for her.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

GRIFF

Griff tasted Lori's luscious lips and couldn't hold back a soft sigh as he enjoyed the kiss. How had he ever allowed himself to play a stupid game with Kayla in an attempt to appease his grandfather? It seemed silly when he'd been thinking of Lori all along. It was apparent that Grandad adored her.

Over the past few months, Griff had told himself that taking a short break in Florida and meeting Lori was just a way to escape the humiliation he faced at home. Nothing more.

Now, with Lori's arms around his neck, he felt complete. He wondered if this was what people meant when they said they'd found their true love, the person they were supposed to be with all along.

Griff pulled away and gazed into her eyes.

She smiled up at him.

That was enough permission for him to lower his lips to hers again, deepening the kiss to let her know what he was feeling.

Ah, sweet Loralie, he thought, as they clung to one another.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

LORI

Lori's body came to life, lighting a path of desire through her. It had been such a long time since she'd felt this way, and yet, it was different. More intense.

She inhaled Griff's spicy aftershave lotion and enjoyed the taste of his lips on hers, the sweetness of their dessert still on them.

He drew her closer, and she loved how they fit together in all the right places.

"You feel so good," Griff murmured, rubbing her back.

She leaned against him, liking the strength of his healthy body. She now knew why it would never work with her and Guy. What she was experiencing was genuine, easy, and natural.

"Guess we'd better keep moving, huh?" said Griff.

Lori stepped away and grinned. "It's not too far to my cabin. You're welcome to come in for an after-dinner drink."

He took hold of her hand and led her down the road.

"How is the cabin? Is it comfortable? Do you agree it's a unique way to raise money?"

"The cabin is lovely, with every convenience. Advertising it as a honeymoon or special escape for wine lovers to learn about the business, sharing home-cooked meals with the owners is a unique experience that I think many people would be willing to spend money on. But how would your family feel about having meals with strangers?"

"Maybe if we limited it to a first-evening opportunity, it could work. We wouldn't want that every night. It's different with you," said Griff, smiling at her.

"I was afraid to let you know I was coming, afraid you'd tell me to stay home," said Lori. "It worked out well that Guy couldn't make it."

"Who is this other man? Someone you care about?" asked Griff.

Lori shook her head. "Guy is my high school boyfriend who moved back to town. We recently went out two times, but neither of us was seriously interested in anything more. But it was the first time I'd dated in a while. Being with you in Florida helped me realize there was still fun ahead

for me if I made the effort. That's why I'm here."

He stopped walking, faced her, and drew her into his arms. "There was something special about our meeting at that hotel. Let's go back there for New Year's this year."

Lori couldn't help laughing. "Whoa! Let's take this one step at a time."

"A step or two or more," said Griff, giving her a sexy look.

A shot of desire stopped her from reacting.

He gave her a sympathetic look. "You tell me if I'm going too fast. Okay?"

"Alright," she replied, knowing he wasn't going fast enough.

They continued to the cabin, where the front porch light welcomed her home. She unlocked the front door and held it open for him to go inside.

He stepped into the entrance area and looked around. "Rosie did an excellent job of fixing the place up."

"The kitchen is small but well laid out with excellent appliances," said Lori. "I think anyone would be happy to work there."

They walked through the rest of the cabin and entered the living room.

"Would you like a cup of coffee, beer, or water?" asked Lori. "Not much choice, but I've been too busy to get back to the grocery store after I arrived here."

"A cold beer sounds great," said Griff.

Lori got him a beer, a glass of water for herself, and carried them into the living room.

She handed Griff his beer and took a seat on the couch facing him.

"Here's to Adeline Hills Winery and vineyards," she said, hoisting her glass. "The vineyard and the operation are much larger than I'd imagined. I looked it up online, but pictures there don't do it justice."

"Rosie is working to upgrade our website," said Griff, "but it's hard to put into words and photos all the aspects of vineyards and the parts of the winery that we open to guests," said Griff.

"It seems to go on forever," said Lori. "I see a lot of workers traveling on a variety of carts, including special vineyard ones, and regular Go-Karts for farms. I guess with this much acreage, they're needed."

"Yes, they are," said Griff. "Around the house, we walk. But in the fields and down by the barn, they're often used. Carlos takes care of them. We have a catering cart to get food and drinks out to the field staff. We're as modernized as we can afford to be. Still, we depend on people to do the

work."

"It's a lot of responsibility," said Lori. "Are you happy about taking it over one day?"

"I love this place," said Griff. "That's something some people don't understand. They see the money we make from it, and that's all they're interested in. Not the work or the challenge of it."

"Cassandra?" asked Lori, remembering how exhausted and hurt Griff had seemed when they first met.

"Yes. She and a couple of others. My grandparents worked together planting the first of the vines and every year after, even when they hired help. That is what formed this successful vineyard today."

"And Pete will be part of it?" asked Lori.

"Yes. We're like brothers, and though I'll have a majority ownership in it, Pete will own part of the vineyard one day too."

"He seems likable, though I don't think his mother cares for his girlfriend," said Lori.

Griff laughed. "Sarita and a friend of hers have arranged for the friend's daughter to visit us soon. Sarita is convinced she's the perfect girl for Pete. She says she knows all about soulmates."

"Interesting. Sarita seems like a very sensible woman," said Lori. She liked Sarita's openness and her devotion to Sam and the vineyard.

Griff smiled. "We'll see what Cristina is like. She might even arrive here before you leave. Is there any way you can stay longer than next Sunday?"

"I don't know," Lori said. "It depends on what's going on at the school."

"Well, let's enjoy this week, and we'll see what happens," said Griff. He set down his bottle of beer on the end table and turned to her. "Thanks. I'd better go. We get up early around here."

He stood and pulled her up beside him. "When you're ready, ask me to stay," he said. "I don't want to ruin anything by rushing you."

Lori let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Thanks for that. I love our connection and want to get to know you better."

"Me, too," he said, nuzzling her neck and then giving her a long kiss that told her he wanted to stay as much as she wanted him to.

But she knew tonight wasn't the night.

She walked him to the door and lifted her face for another kiss. "One

more.”

Delighted, he grinned and tugged her to him, lowering his lips to hers, allowing the kiss to linger before they reluctantly pulled apart.

Lori stood in the doorway and watched him walk up the hill, the light from the lantern becoming smaller and smaller.

She closed the door and leaned up against it, reliving the kisses in her mind. This is what she’d been waiting for.

###

The next morning, she prepared for the day, quickly scrambled an egg, and fixed herself a piece of toast and a cup of coffee. She might not be working in the fields today, but she knew she’d be busy.

When she arrived at the house, Griff and Pete were sitting in the kitchen, sipping coffee and discussing paperwork.

Pete winked at her as Griff jumped to his feet. “ ’Morning. I hope you slept well.”

“Thank you. I did,” said Lori. “There’s something about doing physical labor that helps you sleep at night.”

“Have a seat. Do you want some coffee?”

“No, thanks,” Lori said, sitting at the kitchen table.

“Pete and I are reviewing numbers from winery sales,” explained Griff. “There’s room for improvement. Because most of our wine is contracted far ahead of time, we don’t have the volume of wine to sell that others may have. But you and Rosie are right. It’s time to sell a lot more than wine. Rosie is meeting us at the winery.”

“And I’m making sure progress is being made in the fields,” said Pete, rising. “I’ll catch up with you two later on. You'd best let Sam know what’s happening, Griff. And I don’t mean with the winery.” He winked at Lori and left the room.

Lori faced Griff with flaming cheeks. “Was he talking about us?”

“Yeah. I can’t hide anything from him,” said Griff. “But he’s right. I’ve got to be upfront with Grandad. Especially now that he knows about the game Kayla and I have been playing.”

“I think he’ll be happy to hear you’re not trying to keep anything from him. And he isn’t going to react badly to Kayla’s relationship with Rosie,” said Lori.

“I agree,” said Griff. He helped her out of her chair. “Let’s get down to

the winery. I'll give you a ride down the hill on my golf cart."

"Thanks. It's another beautiful morning," said Lori.

###

As they traveled down the hill, a breeze ruffled Lori's curls and caressed her cheeks. Lori kept her eyes on the land around her, admiring the patterns of the vines following the contours of the hills.

A large yellow Lab ran up to them, barking and wagging his tail.

"This is Rex," said Griff. "He stays with one of the staff in a house near the winery reception building."

"You don't own a dog of your own?" asked Lori.

"I used to before I left to go to college and began traveling for the business," said Griff. "Sarita has a little Dachshund we all love, but she's getting very old. I suppose when we replace her, I'll go ahead and get a dog of my own, now that I'm more settled here. But oddly enough, grapes are poisonous for dogs, so we have to be careful."

They pulled up outside the winery reception building and climbed out of the cart.

"Before we go inside, let me show you around," said Griff. He led her to an enormous private patio at the back of the building. The space was surrounded by lovely landscaping that would be beautiful when the flowering bushes bloomed in the warmer months.

"This patio has many uses," he explained. "In the storage shed over there, chairs are kept, along with a portable arch that can be decorated with flowers for weddings. We've hosted small concerts here and receptions of all kinds. Most of our weddings, however, take place at the main house on a side lawn overlooking the valley. Some even take place inside, in the formal living room."

"Who handles those?" Lori asked. "I didn't think you had the staff to do that."

"We rent the space out to a wedding planner in the area. It works well for both of us," said Griff. "We don't want to be in the wedding business ourselves."

"I like the idea of smaller weddings anyway," said Lori.

"Me, too," said Griff, whose grin sent a hot streak of longing through her.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

LORI

Lori and Griff walked to the front of the two-story stone structure. With what looked like a round tower at one end, the commercial building reminded her of a castle. Double wooden doors welcomed people inside on the lower level. A long balcony off the second floor protected those entering with a wide overhang.

"Tell me about the tower at the end. What's inside that?" Lori asked Griff.

"The corporate offices are there. Pete, Grandad, and I have spaces on the second level. The lower level is reserved for staff, serving both the vineyards and the winery reception area. That's where we'll probably find Rosie because we're not open to the public yet."

"Are you open year-round?" asked Lori.

"No. We close right after New Year's Day for January, except for special requests. As you can imagine, January is a slow time of year for us. In fact, if it hadn't been for Grandad's stroke, I could've stayed longer at The Beach House Hotel."

"I wish you had, but I totally understand," said Lori.

Griff studied her. "I guess we'd better not keep Rosie waiting any longer."

They entered the tasting room.

A long counter with bar stools sat along the back wall, with racks of wine bottles behind it. To the left sat a group of small tables surrounded by chairs. Next to the area, a glassed-in cooler offered a variety of cheese boards and charcuteries.

To the right was an opening to a shop. Lori headed there.

The usual T-shirts and hats were there, but nothing out of the ordinary. Lori thought of all the opportunities for foodie gifts. She wondered if Sarita could come up with enough recipes for a small cookbook. Wine and tasty food went together. And where were the books?

"Okay, what are you thinking?" asked Griff.

She told him of her ideas.

He grinned. "I like what I'm hearing. Let's go talk to Rosie."

When they entered the office space in the tower wing, Rosie was sitting behind a desk. At dinner, the one night they met, there wasn't much time to get to know one another. But Lori remembered how welcoming Rosie had been. She was a pretty woman with long, dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and wide green eyes that shone with kindness.

"Hello," said Lori as Rosie stood to welcome them. "I've come to learn what you are doing with the reception area."

Griff gave them a little salute. "I think you two will get along well. I will leave you so I can attend to some business of mine. However, I hope you will discuss ways to improve this area and develop potential solutions. We haven't paid attention to it before now."

"We'll be happy to be truthful," said Rosie. "I've got some ideas, and I'm interested to know what Lori thinks."

The two women exchanged smiles.

After Griff left, Rosie said, "It should be quiet because the tasting room is closed today. Let's grab a cup of coffee in the kitchen, and we can talk."

Rosie led Lori to a small, well-equipped kitchen reserved for staff.

After they'd helped themselves to coffee, they sat at one of the two tables there.

"This room serves the employees. We can store some of the food we have catered here, as well."

"Are you talking about the charcuterie boards I saw? Where did those come from?" asked Lori.

Rosie gave her a sheepish look. "Actually, they're from my parents' gourmet store in town. My family has owned and run '*Taste Treats'* for a number of years. We have not only the store, but also a thriving catering business. I'm able to get special pricing for the winery through them."

"I like the idea of the winery being part of the town's businesses," said Lori. "I went into the shop here and briefly looked around. It needs work."

"Oh, yes," said Rosie. "I've told Griff and Pete they need to budget more money for the shop, but I think a complete upgrade of the shop could easily recapture any investment. In the past, it received little attention, except from the person who ran the tasting area. She's very happy to have me take over that job."

"That gives you the chance to take it up a notch or two," said Lori. "In addition to my required courses for teaching, I've taken marketing courses

and one semester of merchandising. Now, I'm not only teaching but also working as a virtual assistant to two authors and three small businesses. I think there's an opportunity for the winery to grow business online."

"I agree," said Rosie. "Let's go look at the shop and talk about the changes I want to make."

They went to the store's doorway and stopped.

"At first glance, tell me what you'd change," said Rosie.

Lori's gaze swept the area from one side to the other and the back. "If I'm being honest, it looks like someone was afraid of shoplifters and wanted to protect the merchandise. Some of it should remain on shelving, but a lot of it needs to be laid out on display tables to allow shoppers to get an enticing look at it."

"I agree," said Rosie. "But what else do you notice?"

Lori studied the area again. "Nothing stands out to me. Nothing draws me in. It all seems ordinary."

"Exactly," said Rosie. "Suggestions?"

"More color, more variety. Wine and food go together. I'd have kitchen items, cookbooks, especially from the region, and kitchenware available. Maybe Sarita would be willing to put her recipes into a small cookbook. We could include a short history of the vineyard."

Rosie turned to Lori and gave her a quick hug. "Yes! Yes! That's what I've been thinking." She elbowed Lori. "Did you realize you said 'we' not 'you', when you were speaking? I wish you didn't have to go back to New York. Is there any way you could stay here?"

Lori shook her head sadly. "My family is there."

"No matter what, I want to keep in touch and continue to work with you on the changes," said Rosie.

"That I can do," said Lori, feeling better. She was excited to think she could be part of this, even from a distance.

"Okay, come back to the office with me," said Rosie. "I want you to go through a list of items I'd like to add to the store. But first, I want you to look over the new design of the space and tell me if I'm missing anything."

Thrilled to be part of Rosie's plans, Lori eagerly followed her back to the office.

After Lori was seated, Rosie unrolled sketches on the desk in front of Lori. "Please look this over. Like you, I would prefer to have several display tables with storage underneath them placed throughout the shop. I

also want to be mindful of traffic flow, so we had to place fewer tables than I initially wanted. They're a bit larger, though, which should help. The checkout area will hold smaller items, which can be guarded against theft."

"T-shirts, caps, and the like can be showcased pretty much where they are," said Lori. "What about using the corner for books about the area, winemaking, and cookbooks? Next to it can be kitchen and gourmet items. You'll still sell wine glasses at the tasting bar?"

"Yes," said Rosie. "That's done well, especially after our guests use and like them. Another thing tourists like is the work of local artists. I've spoken to several well-known artists and craftspeople and plan to offer unique, one-of-a-kind pieces. They won't necessarily be about grapes and vineyards, but something different. The local shops carry almost anything one could want about grapes and wine. We need to be different."

"Maybe you could use other artists and craftspeople as well. Adeline Hills wine is available nationwide. You could do a marketing campaign to tie into that theme and use crafts and art from those areas, too," said Lori.

Rosie clapped her hands. "Super idea."

Griff knocked on the door and entered. "How's everything here?"

"I'm trying to convince Lori to move here," said Rosie. "We could work together beautifully."

Griff glanced at Lori.

"I've told Rosie all my family is back home. They've been so supportive of me. I can't disappoint them," Lori said, wishing things were different. The idea of living and working here was beginning to sound enticing.

"What are you two doing for lunch?" asked Griff.

"I was going to offer Lori some charcuterie items and a glass of wine," said Rosie. "Why don't you join us, and we can tell you what we've discussed."

"Okay," said Griff. "With the tasting room closed, we can have the privacy we need."

The three of them entered the employee's break room.

"You two stay there. I'll get our lunch," said Rosie.

After she left, Griff turned to Lori. "So, what do you think? Are Rosie's ideas good?"

"She's very creative. I think you'll be happy with what we discussed," said Lori, looking up as Rosie entered the room carrying a large charcuterie

tray.

"Griff, what wine shall we have?" Rosie asked him.

"Let's open a bottle of pinot noir. Lori likes it," said Griff. "I'll get it and the glasses."

While he took out glasses and opened one of the bottles of wine placed in the kitchen, Lori turned to Rosie. "I told Griff he's going to like what we've come up with."

"He'd better," teased Rosie. "I've been working on this for a while."

"I heard that, and I'm ready to listen," said Griff, handing them each a glass of wine.

Lori listened as Rosie went over the checklist they'd drawn up. Rosie coupled that with financial projections she'd created earlier.

"When do you think our break-even point will be?" asked Griff.

"If everything goes as planned, I think we could recover the cost in less than two years," said Rosie. "We'd have high inventory expenses to begin with."

Lori watched as they talked, liking how carefully Griff listened to Rosie. It said a great deal about him as a person.

"Any comments?" Rosie asked her.

"I think we could get some of the artists to provide items on consignment. That would save some money up front," Lori said.

"Smart idea," said Griff, giving her a look of approval.

He turned to Rosie. "You've done an excellent job. Thank you. I'll talk it over with Pete and Grandad and let you know their reactions. But I don't think you'll have any disagreement from either of them."

"Then I guess we're done here," said Rosie. "I have a meeting to go to."

"And I'm going to give Lori a tour of the town," said Griff.

Rosie left, and Griff said, "I thought you should see the town and some of its surroundings, so you have an idea what it's like to live here."

"Sounds great." The more Lori learned about the business, the more she wished she could be part of it. But the thought of the children at *Bright Beginnings* tugged at her heart. She was as confused as ever.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

GRIFF

Griff led Lori to a green Jeep and helped her get in. For business, he sometimes used the BMW his grandfather owned but no longer drove. A week wasn't much time, but he hoped to convince Lori to come and work at the winery and see if she could make a life here.

"I think you'll like the town," said Griff. "It has a lot of shops and tasting bars and is sometimes a needed escape from the vineyard. Some people even kayak on the Napa River."

"The entire area is gorgeous," said Lori.

"Founded in 1847, Napa is an old city by state standards," Griff explained. "The stores on the main streets are upscale, and the architecture is interesting. There are lots of music venues, galleries, and excellent restaurants. I'll give you a quick overview this afternoon, and then we'll come in for a fun night later this week. Sarita told me Cristina, her friend's daughter, is arriving today. I promised her we'd be home for dinner. Is that okay with you?"

"Perfect," said Lori, settling back in her seat and gazing out at the beautiful landscape.

As they drove into Napa, Griff glanced at Lori and was glad to see her expression of interest.

"This is a convenient time to go shopping because summer and fall can be hectic. I'll park, and we can wander up and down First Street," said Griff. "The stores there are the best. Friends of mine own a gift shop you might want to see."

Lori grinned. "I'm happy to look."

Griff parked his Jeep and helped her get out.

When she saw some of the women dressed in high-fashion clothing, she looked down at her jeans. "I think I'm underdressed."

Griff wrapped his arm around her. "Nonsense. You look like one of the locals in your jeans. No worries." He gazed at her body with appreciation. The jeans fit her like a glove, and the sweater she wore couldn't hide her curves. He felt his body react and hoped she hadn't noticed.

"Let's go," he said,

Lori seemed to take in everything as they walked slowly past storefronts. Every once in a while, she stopped and gazed inside.

"Take your time. I'm not in any hurry," he told her.

She laughed. "I'm just seeing what's here before I do any shopping of my own."

When they approached *Whimsy*, Griff pulled Lori to a stop. "Here's the store my friends own. I want you to go inside. They have a bit of everything in the arts and crafts area."

"Oh, I can't wait to see," said Lori. "Rosie and I were talking about adding some like items to your reception area shop."

They stepped inside, and Lori was immediately overwhelmed by colors, textures, and shapes. When she looked up at Griff with a wide smile, it took all his willpower not to sweep her in his arms and kiss her.

Down boy, he told himself. He knew he had to go slowly. She'd made that clear.

A short woman with a blond, messy bun approached them.

"To what do I owe this visit, Griffin Sawyer?"

He laughed. "It's been a while, I know. But I wanted to introduce Loralie Hamlin to you and your store."

"Oh, my! This is an occasion." She turned to Lori. "I love your name. I'm Mia Davidson. My husband, Mike, isn't here at the moment, but I hope the four of us can get together sometime."

"I'd like that," said Lori, charmed by this woman who obviously was a friend of Griff's.

"Take your time and look around," Mia told Lori. "Because you're a friend, I can offer you a discount."

Lori didn't hesitate to begin looking.

"What do you think?" asked Griff, coming up behind her.

"I love all the whimsical art objects, the bright-colored artwork hanging on walls, and the way each shelf, cupboard, and table hold things of interest," she said. "I'm glad I came inside."

"I knew you'd like it. Everyone does. Mia and Mike work hard, but they do very well."

"I want to come back here. But, for now, I want to see what they have," said Lori.

While Lori went on her own to look, Mia approached Griff.

"Loralie's adorable. Is this the woman from Florida?" asked Mia.

“What? How do you know about her?” asked Griff.

Mia chuckled. “You had too much to drink one night and told me about her. Don’t worry. I won’t say anything about it.”

Griff studied Lori across the store and turned to Mia. “I think she’s the one for me. She doesn’t know it yet.”

“I’m glad you’re over Cassandra, not that you were ever truly into her. I still don’t understand why you wanted to marry her,” said Mia.

Griff frowned. “You know why. Grandad was afraid he’d die without my having found a woman to help with the vineyard.”

Mia let out a soft snort. “Cassandra was never going to be part of it, no matter what she said. She wanted your money.”

“Well, I know that now. Besides, what I feel for Lori is totally different. She wants to learn about the winery and the winemaking process. Grandad is quite smitten.”

“And you aren’t?” said Mia cocking an eyebrow at him.

Griff lifted his arms in surrender. “I admit it, okay?”

“Good,” said Mia. “Now, back to business.”

Griff stood back and watched Mia and Lori talking, relieved he’d finally said out loud what he’d been feeling for Lori. He’d been intrigued with her from the beginning, and being with her now made him realize she was everything he’d been looking for.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

LORI

Lori and Mia chatted easily as Mia spoke about some of the items that had caught Lori's attention. It was more than a gift shop; it was filled with a diverse range of art, from sophisticated to more unconventional pieces.

"Rosie and I discussed showcasing art at the winery's shop," said Lori. "Perhaps a deal could be worked out between the two of you. You could display items there. It would help you both."

Mia studied her. "I like that idea. Rosie is smart, and you are too. Griff tells me you're interested in the winery and vineyards. Is that true?"

"Yes. Ever since we met and I learned about Adeline Hills Winery, I became fascinated by the process," said Lori. "After hearing him talk about it, I wanted to learn more. It's much more work than I thought. But I love the idea that it produces lovely wines for everyone to enjoy."

"Do you think you'll ever move here?" asked Mia.

"A part of me would love to, but all my family is back home in New York. They were my strength through my husband's battle with cancer and the aftermath two years ago. Without them, I might not have made it. I owe them a lot."

"But wouldn't they want you happy, even if it means you living away from them?" asked Mia, focusing her attention on Lori.

"Maybe so. It's something I have to work out for myself and them," Lori said.

"Griff is a great guy, and someone sought after by many women who don't appreciate what a fantastic person he is," Mia said. "Please don't hurt him. Cassandra was a mistake from the beginning, but it still caused him pain that he didn't deserve."

"What are you two ladies talking about? It looks like something serious," said Griff, coming up to them.

"Just girl talk," said Mia lightly, smiling at him.

"The things in this store are amazing," said Lori. "I suggested that Rosie and Mia work together to display some of these items at the winery. It would help both businesses."

Griff gave her a heartwarming smile. "You sure are full of surprises."

“I like her,” said Mia, nodding at both of them.

Griff put his arm around Lori. “Me, too.”

###

After they left the store, Griff said, “Let’s have a glass of wine and a snack. I want you to see what some wineries do here for business.”

A couple of storefronts down the street, they walked past tables and chairs on an outside patio and into a store. Inside, a bar was set up with tasting glasses lined up in several groups.

“Hello,” said a young woman. “Are you here to sample some wine? Or to sign up for our wine club?”

“We’d like two glasses of your pinot noir,” said Griff. “I’m well acquainted with it. And could we please have a small bowl of olives.”

As the clerk was pouring their wine, an older man came out from behind the bar. “Griff Sawyer! I haven’t seen you in a while. How are you?”

“Fine, Charlie. Just introducing my friend to your pinot. It’s one of my favorites.”

The gray-haired man grinned. “Coming from you, that’s high praise. It’s on the house.”

“Thanks,” said Griff. “It’s a pleasure to see you. How’s business?”

“Not too bad for this time of year. But this slower season beats the hectic summers and falls.”

Griff and Lori carried their glasses of wine and the small bowl of olives outside.

“Have a seat,” said Griff. “You’re in for the best show around.”

They sat facing the sidewalk.

Lori immediately became fascinated with the women’s styles as they strolled by, dressed in either elegant or more relaxed outfits. There was something about the sparkling jewels and rich-looking styles that appealed to her as an onlooker. She reminded herself that she was a simple person who taught preschool kids far away.

“Quite a parade, huh?” said Griff.

“Fun to see,” she said.

“I like the idea of Mia and Rosie working on a mutually beneficial project together,” said Griff. “You really do care about the winery, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. It’s very interesting to see what it takes to produce a bottle

of wine. It's a lot of hard work, but the challenges are worth it, aren't they?"

"I've always believed it," said Griff. "I knew from a young age that the vineyard would someday be in my care."

"Tell me about Mia," said Lori. "It's obvious that the two of you are friends."

Griff chuckled. "We've known each other since we were kids. Our grandparents were friends who often got together, bringing us along. Her brother took over the vineyards, and Mia happily stayed busy with her artwork. She does some cloth weavings, and they're really nice."

"And Mike, her husband?" asked Lori.

"They met at the California Institute of the Arts. He's a painter who works in oils and is happy to be part of running the store when he's not creating. He says it's a healthy balance."

"Any kids?" asked Lori.

"Two. A boy and a girl. I'm godfather to their son, Jonathan, who is eight. Their daughter, Lily, is six."

Lori listened to how Griff's voice softened when he talked about the children and realized Griff cared about them.

"You look happy and relaxed," said Griff. "Are you going to be ready for more work at the winery? Tomorrow, Kayla will show you some of the work she does with the barreled wines."

"That will be great," said Lori. "What time did you say we need to be home for dinner?"

Griff looked at his watch. "We'd better get going. I didn't realize it was this late. I told Sarita we'd be there before six o'clock."

###

Back at the vineyard, Lori had time to freshen up in her cabin before heading up the hill to the main house. She was curious to meet Cristina, the woman Sarita had discreetly chosen for her son. Pete had no trouble finding dates in the area, and Lori wondered how he'd react to Cristina. Parents' choices didn't always work out.

When Lori arrived at the house, she heard voices in the kitchen and went to investigate. When she entered the room, Sarita looked up from where she was preparing hors d'oeuvres. "Hello, Lori. Come and meet Cristina."

Lori stared at the stunning dark-haired young woman who looked as if

she were an ad for Napa with her black slacks, turquoise sweater, and a multi-colored scarf wrapped artistically around her neck. Long, soft, dark curls fell beyond her shoulders, in a princess style. Golden eyes gazed at her curiously.

"Hi," said Lori. "I'm Loralie Hamlin. You can call me Lori. I'm here for just a week, staying in the cabin down the road. When did you arrive?"

"An hour ago. My flight from Phoenix was a little late, and the drive from San Francisco took longer than I thought."

Lori thought Cristina's musical voice held strength behind it and wondered how she and Pete would be together. Pete was a good-looking, confident man who decided which woman he wanted to date at the moment.

Sarita gazed at Cristina and then at Lori. "Cristina lives and works in Phoenix, but she's thinking about buying into a shop in town. A friend of mine is looking for a younger partner. It's one of my favorite stores, and I think Cristina would be a wonderful addition to its success."

Lori smiled at them both, aware of Sarita's excitement and the reason behind it.

"I've been managing a successful store in Phoenix. When my mother heard of this opportunity, she reminded me of my childhood days here in Napa." Cristina turned to Sarita. "Those were happy days for my family."

"Yes," said Sarita. "Your father and Carlos were friends, like your mother and me. It was very sad when your family left for Arizona."

"I haven't been back in years," Cristina explained to Lori. "I don't know what I'll find here."

"Griff gave me a tour of the town, and I loved it. Any one of those stores would be a fun place to work." Lori turned to Sarita. "I met Mia Davidson. She's very friendly."

"Yes, there is a nice group of young people in business here. I'm sure you, Cristina, will find it easy to make friends."

Pete walked into the kitchen, stopped, and stared at Cristina. "Wow! You've grown up."

Cristina laughed. "Yes. You can no longer tease or play tricks on me. I won't fall for them again."

Pete gave Cristina a sheepish grin. "Sorry about those times. You were annoying, but my mother told me I had to look after you."

"Things are different now. You don't have to worry about me anymore. I'm very able to take care of myself." Her unusual, golden-brown eyes

sparkled with energy.

"Well, I hope you'll allow me to show you around," said Pete.

Cristina dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "Thanks, but no, thanks. I want to rediscover the area on my own. I remember some of it from my childhood, but I want to look around privately to determine if I want to go into business here."

Lori hid a smile at the look of surprise that crossed Pete's face. He was used to being adored by a flock of admiring girlfriends. Sarita looked distressed.

Griff walked into the room. "Hi, Cristina. It's been a long time. How are you?"

Cristina stood and allowed herself to be hugged by Griff. "You're still as handsome as ever. I'm delighted to see you again."

"I understand you're thinking of buying into *Finery*. My friend Mia Davidson and her husband own *Whimsy* downtown, and I'm sure she could be of help to you," said Griff.

Cristina turned to him. "Lori already mentioned her name. I'd love for you to introduce me."

"I'm happy to do that for you," said Griff, unaware Pete was frowning at him.

"Let's go into the den," said Sarita. "Sam will be anxious to see you, Cristina. You should be aware that he's had a stroke. You need to pay attention to what he's saying in order to understand him."

"No problem," said Cristina. "I can't wait to see him again. He was always very kind to me." She sent Pete a meaningful look.

They all followed Sarita into the den, where Sam was sitting in his chair by the fireplace.

His eyes lit up at the sight of Cristina. He patted the chair next to him. "Hello, Cristina. Come sit by me."

Lori sat on the couch beside Griff. Pete chose a chair on the opposite side of the fireplace.

Carlos walked into the room and went over to Cristina for a hug and a kiss. "It's delightful to have you here. My! You've grown into a beautiful woman. How are your parents?"

"They're fine. Retired now, but living a pleasant life and keeping busy with a variety of projects."

"That's splendid," said Carlos, taking a seat in a chair next to Pete.

“Tell us about you, Cristina,” said Sam. “You’re working in retail? Fill us in.”

Lori could sense Cristina’s uneasiness, but Cristina told them about her job as manager in Scottsdale and the opportunity in Napa.

“Any male friends?” Sam asked in a blunt manner of some elderly people.

“No. I’m not interested at the moment. Maybe after I get settled. But I’m not in any rush, much to my mother’s disappointment,” said Cristina, grinning.

“Well, don’t hurry,” said Sam.

“Best not to wait too long,” countered Sarita.

“I heard you went to town,” Sam said to Lori. “What did you think?”

“I loved it. It was a pleasant counterpoint to the vineyards. Fun and festive.”

“I’m glad,” said Sam. “I understand you’ll be spending some time with Kayla tomorrow learning about winemaking.”

“Yes,” said Lori. “I can’t wait.”

Sam gave her a nod of approval.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

GRIFF

The conversation at dinner was interesting. While they talked about the vineyard and the upcoming changes in the reception area, Griff was aware of Pete's interest in Cristina. But she showed none in him.

He studied the woman Sarita wanted Pete to marry. She was beautiful and bright, not unlike Pete's many other women who came and went in a regular pattern. He could tell Lori liked her. Grandad enjoyed the attention Cristina gave him. It should've been easy for Pete to attract her attention. But maybe she'd been warned that while Pete was considered to be a great catch in the area, he wasn't serious about settling down.

That made him think about Lori. She was very different from all the other women he'd dated.

Lori sensed his gaze on her and smiled, giving him a sense of satisfaction.

After dessert and coffee were served, Griff caught Lori's attention. "Care to go for a walk?"

"Yes, that would be lovely," Lori said, sending him an eager look that hit his body like a flaming arrow. He sometimes couldn't believe she was sitting with his family in California. He wondered who this man, Guy Phillips, was to her. She'd dismissed him as a friend, someone who lived in her hometown. He knew how important that was to her. Time was running out for him to make a move.

After thanking Sarita for a delicious meal, Griff and Lori excused themselves.

At the front door, Lori retrieved her lantern, and they headed off.

He took her arm and gazed at her. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me, too, " she said. "I like Cristina. Do you?"

"Oh, yes. I remember her from our childhood. She and Pete were both interested in other things than I was. I didn't hang around with them too often."

"I'm not sure Sarita is going to be successful in getting Cristina and Pete together," Lori said. "Cristina didn't seem at all interested."

Griff laughed. "I noticed. It's killing Pete."

They continued their walk.

At her cabin, he waited while she unlocked the door and invited him in.

“Let’s listen to some music and relax,” said Lori. “I don’t know about you, but I’m tired after a busy day like ours. Not that I didn’t love it.”

“I liked what you and Rosie discussed this morning. You’d be an asset to our business, you know.” He wanted to encourage her to think about moving to California to continue to grow their relationship.

Lori offered him a cold beer which he accepted. “I liked having something different to do. It was stimulating.”

Griff studied her, wanting to excite her in a different way.

Lori’s cheeks grew pink. “It’s chilly enough outside to light the fireplace in the living room, don’t you think?”

“I’ll take care of it,” said Griff, kneeling in front of the fireplace. He added tinder wood and newspaper beneath the logs resting on a grate and lit them.

When it caught and the fire began to burn, Griff stood and eased himself down on the couch facing Lori. “I want to make this time with you count. You know how much I care…”

Lori gave him a steady look that gave her answer. “I do. I really do.”

He leaned forward to kiss her.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

LORI

When Griff's lips met hers, Lori felt the tension in her body release and then begin to build again. God! It felt fantastic to be in his arms, kissing him like this. She'd missed intimacy with her husband and liked being close to Griff. Lori forgot all her worries back home and told herself to simply enjoy the moment. This surge of desire for a man she was growing to love felt right.

"Ah, Lori, you make me feel alive," Griff murmured, drawing her closer and letting her know he wanted more than kisses.

She responded with a soft moan of pleasure, and when their kisses became lovemaking, it was as if she'd been waiting for him her whole life.

Later, when she and Griff lay together sated, Lori allowed herself to relish what was happening between them. Nick had told her over and over again to find someone new, someone special in her life after he was gone. She'd been horrified at the idea then, but now she was grateful for his generous words.

###

The next morning, Lori awoke in her bed and turned off the alarm, giving herself a moment to relive the time with Griff before hurrying to get ready for another day. She wanted to be on time to meet with Kayla. First, she'd have to face the family at breakfast. Sarita was going all out for Cristina with a family meal this morning.

As she left the cabin, Lori wrapped her sweater tighter around her, surprised by the cooler temperature. But then, it was only April. Back home, snow wasn't uncommon in the hills at this time of year.

Lori couldn't help feeling a little nervous about seeing Griff this morning. Last night's lovemaking was very special, freeing her in a way that was new for her. She wanted to be with him again and hoped he felt the same way.

She walked into the house and, hearing voices in the kitchen, went there. Sarita was standing at the stove cooking scrambled eggs, Carlos was buttering toast, and Cristina was sitting at the kitchen table sipping a cup of

coffee.

“ ’Morning, everyone,” Lori said, accepting a cup of coffee from Carlos. “Where are the guys?”

“Outside,” said Sarita, giving her a curious look. “They’ll be in shortly. They’re just reviewing the day ahead. Have a seat. Eggs, bacon, and toast are on their way.”

Griff and Pete came into the room.

Lori relaxed when she saw the way Griff was looking at her, his smile telling her what he couldn’t say aloud.

After everyone had been served breakfast and were seated at the table, Sarita said, “I thought it would be nice to give Cristina a healthy send-off to her meeting downtown.”

“Good luck,” said Lori. “I’m sure you’ll be successful.” There was something stylish and appealing about Cristina. This morning, she was wearing a pair of white slacks with a raspberry-colored sweater and beautiful turquoise and silver jewelry. Lori loved all of it.

“I can drive you into town,” Pete said to Cristina.

“Thanks, but Sam has given me the use of his car while I’m here,” said Cristina sweetly.

“Okay,” said Pete, looking a little glum. “Maybe later, the four of us can get together in town.”

“That’s a good plan,” said Sarita. “I want Cristina to see how Napa has changed. The four of you should go out together and enjoy the evening.”

“Oh, okay,” said Cristina.

“That will be nice,” Lori added, seeing the look of concern on Sarita’s face.

Sarita smiled at her. “You should see for yourself how much fun it can be.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll see that she has a pleasant time,” said Griff, giving Lori a wink that made her toes curl with anticipation.

Griff stood as the last of them finished their meal. “Lori, I’ll walk you over to the barrel building, where you can spend some time with Kayla.”

“There’s more to the property?” Lori said.

“Oh, yes. The barrel cellar is the most important building of all,” said Griff.

He waited for her to grab her purse, and then they headed out of the house.

“Where are we going?” Lori asked as Griff started walking toward the barn.

“Our barrels of wine are kept in a racked warehouse, also known as a rickhouse. Barrels are stored off the ground in a cool, well-ventilated cellar away from direct sunlight to prevent mold growth and excessive temperature swings.”

“I don’t remember seeing a warehouse,” Lori said.

“It’s a one-story building covering a cellar,” Griff explained. “We use both levels for our barrels. Barrels need to be stored away in a place with 65-75% humidity. The barrels used for longer-term storage are in the basement. Wines that don’t need to be stored as long use the upper, windowless level, which is carefully controlled for temperature and humidity.”

When they came to the road leading to the barn, Griff turned right and followed a road to a squat concrete block building painted brown that made it seem part of the landscape.

He indicated the building with a wave of his hand. “This is where the magic happens. Kayla is a skilled winemaker. We’re lucky to have her. She’ll show you how she does her job.”

They walked past a large overhead door that Lori guessed was opened for transferring equipment and supplies, to a smaller door at the end.

Griff opened it, and they walked into an office where Kayla sat behind a desk.

“ ’Morning,” said Kayla. “I’m glad to see you here, Lori. I understand you want to see what a vintner does. I’m happy to show you.”

“I’ve already told her we’re lucky to have you,” teased Griff.

Kayla laughed. “I love it here, and you know it.”

“I’ll leave you two and check in with you later,” said Griff, giving them a salute before leaving.

“I was unaware of this building,” said Lori. You can’t see it from the barn area.”

“For a reason,” Kayla said. “Some vineyards have their barrel cellars available to the public, but here at Adeline Hills, they prefer to keep the winemaking a separate, private operation. It’s larger than you think. Let me show you around. This, obviously, is where we keep a lot of records and information, along with daily postings.”

They left the office and went into what looked like a high school science lab. Glass beakers, test tubes, and other scientific-looking equipment sat on a long wooden table, and a laptop computer rested at the end of it.

"Winemakers perform chemical tests on the initial juice, which can include measuring fermentable sugars, yeast assimilable nitrogen concentration, and spoilage indicators," said Kayla.

Lori glanced at her. "Where did you learn all this?"

"I have a degree in Viticulture and Oenology," said Kayla. "In short, for winemaking. It's interesting, but the real value is having a reliable nose and a sensitive palate for the taste of wine. Griff mentioned that you instinctively have those qualities."

"But this seems overwhelming," said Lori. "After the grapes are pressed, what do you do?"

"We test for several other things as the grapes are processed," said Kayla. "Things like acidity, sulphur, residual sugar, and other components. Every step of the process is important and determines the outcome of the wine. Let's go into the cellars."

Kayla led her into the warehouse, which had barrels stacked horizontally on metal racks above the ground.

Lori shivered and pulled her sweater tighter.

"We keep it cooled and well-ventilated here," said Kayla. "Lighting is low. We also have an actual cellar where our well-aged wine is stored in barrels."

Lori followed Kayla down a set of steps into an even cooler cellar where barrels were stacked with enough room between to get easily around them.

"It's morning, but how about a taste of wine that will be bottled in two years?" said Kayla.

She led Lori to an old wooden barrel and poured wine into a glass sitting close to a special stopper. "Taste this. I think this is going to be a very special cabernet."

Lori remembered how Griff had taught her to taste wine. She inhaled its bouquet, then took a sip of wine, allowing air to enter her mouth.

"What do you think?" asked Kayla.

"I think it's ready now," Lori said. "It's already very tasty."

"We'll let it sit for longer, and then the tannins won't be as strong,"

said Kayla. “Let’s go upstairs. I have coffee and will answer any questions you might have.”

###

Kayla led her to a small kitchen off the lab and then outside to a patio where a couple of chairs had been set up around a small, round metal table.

The warmth of the sun on her shoulders felt healing to Lori. She sat facing the rolling hills covered with straight rows of vines. “Such a lovely view,” Lori said. “When Griff told me he lived at a vineyard, I had no idea this property was so large.”

“You’ve known Griff for a while?” Kayla asked.

“Not really. We met in Florida for New Year’s, and then he left to go home. I stayed a couple of days more and then went back to New York. Having a friend win a week’s stay here is almost eerie. But I’m glad he let me come in his place.”

“Weren’t you going to come together?” said Kayla.

“Yes, but we decided not to. We’re just friends,” said Lori.

Kayla gave her a penetrating look. “That’s what you said about you and Griff, but anyone can see it’s more than that.”

Lori let out a sigh. “It’s true. I’ve fallen for him.”

“Well, he’s certainly attracted to you,” said Kayla. “I’m glad. He’s an exceptional guy, and I’m happy for you. I think you make a terrific pair.”

“Thanks, but I live in New York. My family and my life are there,” said Lori, saying all the things she told herself over and over.

“Bullshit,” said Kayla. “What are you afraid of?”

Shocked by Kayla’s boldness, Lori sank back into her chair, her mind racing.

Kayla gave her a sheepish look. “Sorry to be so blunt. I wasn’t here for the Cassandra mess, but I know how hurt Griff was by her actions.”

“I understand,” said Lori. “I guess I’m afraid that this moment of happiness with Griff won’t last. It didn’t with my husband because of life’s cruelty. What’s to say it won’t happen again?”

Kayla shook her head. “That’s something you have to work out for yourself.”

They both looked up as a boy ran past them and hid in the bushes next to the building.

Lori thought she recognized Bert and rose to go to him.

As she drew closer, he burrowed deeper into the landscaping of grasses and a variety of green-leafed bushes.

"Bert, is that you?" Lori asked. "Is everything all right? You can tell me. I'm here to help you."

A brown face peered out at her. "Is he around?"

"Who? There's no one here but Kayla and me. No one else." She scouted around the corner. "Nope, just us."

Bert stayed where he was.

"Did you do something?"

Bert shook his head.

"Did you see or hear something?"

"*Si*," Bert said. "He wanted to hurt me."

"Who?" Lori asked, growing increasingly concerned.

"The man at the barn. He was doing something to a tractor. Something bad."

Lori held out her arms and spoke in a soft, comforting way she'd learned with the kids at *Bright Beginnings*. "Come to me. We need to talk. Don't worry. I'll keep you safe."

Bert hesitated and then walked out from behind the shrubbery and ran to her.

She swept him up in her arms. "It's okay, I promise. We'll get help."

Kayla came up beside them but remained quiet.

Lori exchanged a worried look with her. "There's some sort of problem at the barn. Let's take Bert inside and get him something to drink. Then, he can tell us what he's afraid of."

Bert clung to Lori until they got to the kitchen, where he allowed her to set him down.

Kayla got him a glass of water, and the three of them sat at the kitchen table.

Lori spoke softly but firmly. "Bert, you need to tell us what's bothering you. It's important. We need the truth. No one is going to be angry with you."

"I saw a man at the barn. He was hurting the tractor," said Bert.

"Hurting the tractor? How?" asked Kayla, taking Lori's hint and speaking softly, slowly.

"He was putting dirt inside. Papa told me that it was bad to do that,"

said Bert.

Lori immediately thought of the one worker who'd unsettled her. "Was this man tall, with a mustache?"

Bert glanced at the door.

"Don't worry. He won't come here," said Kayla.

Bert stared at her wide-eyed and nodded.

"Has he been here some other time?" Lori asked.

Bert nodded.

Kayla's phone rang.

"Hello. Oh, hi, Sarita. Yes, I've seen him. He's here with Lori and me now. He's okay. In fact, he's helping us with something. Please tell his mother that we'll bring him home when we can. Thanks."

"Guess this isn't the first time you've run around the grounds," said Lori.

Bert grinned.

"No worries. Let's talk some more, and then we'll take you to your mother."

With the addition of a cookie to keep him speaking, Lori and Kayla learned that Bert, who apparently loved to take off and wander the area, had seen the man hovering around the barrel office the day before, but he'd been frightened away when his father appeared to check the area.

"Griff and Pete need to know about this," said Kayla. "Why don't I take care of calling them while you take Bert home?"

"Okay," Lori quickly agreed. She didn't want Bert to get into trouble for telling them the truth.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

GRIFF

Griff's jaw tightened when he heard the news that Bert had observed a man meddling with one of the tractors. The tall man perfectly described Slim Owens, someone Pete had hired the previous week. Griff hadn't been happy about it after meeting him. There was something secretive about him. With competition among the wineries at a high level, it was important to keep information about Adeline Hills private. A smaller winery in the valley had been forced to close, and there was a rumor of another shutting down.

He left his office and went to find Pete at the barn.

Griff recalled how, as boys, he and Pete had wandered the vineyard. He understood why Bert had done the same. There was a lot of nature to discover in open land like theirs. Griff had loved to wade in the creek and build tiny fortresses of sticks and mud.

As he approached the barn, he saw Pete, Kayla, and Lori talking together.

"Where's Slim Owens?" he asked them.

"I fired him, told him not to return, and took back his badge," Pete said.

"He understands we know what we did," said Kayla.

"I told him we'd notify other wineries about his activity," said Pete. "He was furious, but we owe it to the others to inform them of his actions. He's working for someone else. We just don't know who."

"Unfortunately, that can happen," said Griff. "I need to remember to trust my gut. There was something about him I didn't like. We never should've hired him."

"It's my fault," said Pete. "We needed help, and I didn't check him out as carefully as I should have. All it takes is one person to upset our operation."

"Do things like this usually happen?" asked Lori.

Griff, Pete, and Kayla all shook their heads.

"I took Bert home to his mother," said Lori. "I explained that he was very helpful to us."

"I'll speak to her myself," said Griff. "Pete, remember how we spent

a lot of our time as boys his age?"

"Yes. Those were good times," said Pete. "I'll work on the tractor and hope it didn't do much or any damage."

"Thanks," said Griff. He turned to Kayla and Lori. "How's the training going?"

"It's excellent," said Kayla. "I believe Lori has a complete overview of what happens."

"I've learned a lot," said Lori.

"Then, I want your help at the reception center. Okay?"

"Sure," said Lori. "Thanks, Kayla."

"Anytime," said Kayla, and turned to Griff with a smile. "She's all yours."

Griff chuckled even as he felt the tips of his ears turn red.

Lori couldn't help laughing at his reaction and took hold of his hand.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

LORI

As she and Griff left the barn area, Griff asked, “What did you think of the winemaking we do?”

“I had just a quick overview, but I can see how important it is to have space and privacy for it. It is both a scientific and natural process. One mismeasurement, one wrong guess can make a huge difference.”

“My grandfather has succeeded in making superior wine from the beginning,” Griff said proudly.

They approached the reception building.

“Rosie has rearranged some things in the store, and she’d like you to look at it,” said Griff. “Afterwards, Grandad is asking us to join him for lunch.”

Lori gave him a surprised look.

“It’s something Grandad and I do every couple of weeks. It gives him a sense of being part of the action,” said Griff.

Lori admired how sweet Griff was with his grandfather. It told her many things about him.

They walked into the tasting room and beyond it to the store.

Lori stood at the entrance and glanced around the space. It was much more open, and the displays of different items were more inviting.

“I like it,” she told Rosie, who gave her a big smile in return.

“The more I work with the space, the better it is,” said Rosie. “Our sales are beginning to show a difference. I think by the time summer groups arrive, our sales will have an even greater increase.”

“Thank you, Rosie,” said Griff. “This is an opportunity for both of us.”

Beaming at him, Rosie said, “I think so, too.”

###

Lori was a little nervous as they entered the house for lunch with his grandfather.

Griff led her to a small solarium at the back of the house.

“Thought we’d eat with sunshine and flowers,” said Sam, already seated at a round glass table.

“Delightful,” said Lori, watching as Griff hugged his grandfather before sitting opposite her.

“I’m glad you could join us,” Sam said to her. “Griff and I find this an easy way to catch up with one another.”

“Thank you,” said Lori. “It’s a treat to have a quiet, beautiful place for lunch. Back home, I usually have only a few minutes in the staff room to grab a bite to eat.”

Sarita came into the room and poured them each a glass of white wine, a sauvignon blanc, and announced that lunch would be an asparagus quiche and salad.”

“Thank you, Sarita,” said Sam. “As always, you provide us with superior meals.”

Sarita smiled affectionately with gratitude. “It’s always a pleasure. We’ve been a family since before Griff came to live with you.”

As Sam nodded, Lori noticed the moisture in his eyes.

Griff cleared his throat. “Lori, I hope you don’t mind my talking business with Grandad.”

“Not at all.”

While the men discussed the week’s activities, Lori gazed around. The room was hexagonal, with sliding glass doors leading to an outside garden. She noticed how plants in large pots were mounted on platforms with wheels, which made it easy to move them around. She wondered if the room was used for small, private weddings. It would be a charming location.

She was startled out of her thoughts by Sam asking, “What about you, Lori? You leave in a couple of days. What will you do when you return home?”

“I’ll go back to teaching at the preschool where I work. It’s a rewarding job and keeps me close to my family. I’ve already registered my godchild, my niece, Eloise, who was born a few months ago.”

“Are you sure we can’t talk you into returning to the vineyard?” Sam asked bluntly, ignoring the discomfort on Griff’s face and hers.

“That’s a big move,” said Lori.

“Sam, are you making the kids uncomfortable?” Sarita asked, carrying in a tray of their lunches.

Sam chuckled. “You know I like to come right to the point.”

Sarita set the lunch plates in front of each of them and placed a kind

hand on Sam's shoulder. "Settle down," she said softly, bringing a smile to Lori. She noticed the way Griff's expression relaxed.

For the remainder of the meal, the conversation was kept to polite talk. But Lori saw how Sam's gaze kept flitting from her to Griff.

When Sam signaled that he was ready to leave, Griff jumped to his feet, helped his grandfather out of his chair, and then walked with him out the entrance.

Lori took that time to get up and go outside to the garden. Standing there in the sunshine, she saw some flowers in bloom and noticed the valley below. It was a perfect place for a garden wedding.

Griff found her there. "Sorry to leave you like that, but I could see that Grandad was getting tired and needed to lie down."

"I understand. No problem. I like looking around," Lori replied. "This house and the grounds are full of one surprise after another. I love this garden. Is it used a lot?"

"Not as often as one might think," said Griff, coming up from behind and wrapping his arms around her. "Perfect wedding space, huh?"

She turned around and met his lips with her own. Beneath all the business talk, there lurked a romantic man.

When they finally pulled away, Griff said, "Sorry, but I have an online meeting. I'll pick you up at four o'clock to head into town. Pete and Cristina will meet us there, along with Mia and Mike Davidson. Sound good?"

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it," said Lori, delighted to have some time to herself.

###

After a few quiet hours of relaxing, Lori got ready for an evening out. She was happy that Kayla and Rosie also planned to join them. They helped make it a congenial group that she'd miss when she returned home.

Lori checked herself in the mirror. Being outdoors in the sun had brought a rosy hue to her cheeks. Her brown curls had softened into a halo around her face, and her eyes sparkled. She looked healthy and happy, with just a few freckles sprinkled across her nose. This week had been one she would cherish.

When Griff picked her up, he gave an appreciative glance at the simple black sleeveless dress she wore with a soft green cashmere shawl she'd

received for Christmas.

He swallowed hard. “You look beautiful,” he said, holding out an arm to escort her to his car.

“Is everyone else meeting us there?” asked Lori as Griff got behind the wheel.

“Yes. Pete’s already gone, and Kayla and Rosie are leaving soon.”

“It’s an easy, pleasant group,” said Lori. “I’ve enjoyed meeting them.”

“Good, because they’re my friends,” said Griff. “I’m glad you fit in with them.”

“Where are we going?” Lori asked, excited about the evening ahead.

“We’ll start at a rooftop bar called *The View* and go from there,” said Griff. “By trying several places, you’ll get an idea of the wine and food in the area. In addition to wine, you can always find a cocktail, a craft beer, or soda, if that’s what you prefer.”

“I want to try different wines to compare them to yours,” she told him. “You know how much I like Adeline Hills wines.”

“I think by doing comparisons, you’ll be happy with what we produce.”

“What about food?” she asked.

“Oh, there are several excellent restaurants,” Griff said. “Who knows where we’ll end up? For your last night, I’d love to take you to a more formal dinner at one of my favorite places.”

“That would be marvelous, though I’d hate to think of it as my final night here,” she said.

“Me, too.” Griff found a parking spot, pulled the car to a stop, and faced her.

She knew he wanted to kiss her and leaned forward.

Griff’s lips met hers,

She couldn’t help releasing a sigh of pleasure. He knew exactly how to make her want more. Aware this wasn’t the time or place, she pulled away and studied him.

“Guess we’d better meet the others,” said Griff, looking as shaken as she felt.

###

The View was as vibrant as Griff had indicated. Though the inside was busy, the outside patio overlooking the landscape was packed with even

more people,

From a large round table in a corner, Pete stood and waved them over.

Lori followed Griff through the crowd to him. It felt marvelous to be part of a noisy group chatting and laughing with one another. She realized that working at the vineyard every day was solitary in some respects. Being able to come to town provided a healthy balance between the two.

Cristina and Mia greeted her with friendly smiles. Mia introduced her husband, Mike, to her and then motioned for Lori to sit next to her.

"What are you drinking?" Mia asked her.

"I'd like a light pinot noir from an Adeline Hills competitor," Lori said. "I'm going to do some taste testing and learn more about different wines."

"Great idea," said Mia, studying her. "You truly are sincere about the vineyard. Griff has had women date him for the prestige and what they think is a lot of money. You don't seem that way at all."

"I'd honestly never thought much about growing grapes and how wine was produced until I met Griff," Lori admitted. "Knowing about it, seeing the actual process, I find it fascinating. And I love the family history behind Adeline Hills Winery. Sam Sawyer is an interesting person."

"Oh, yes. He's a well-known figure in Napa," said Mia. "He doesn't get out much anymore, but he was very much a part of growing this area into what it is today. You can see his picture in some of the photos that are posted in a few of the restaurants and at the Chamber of Commerce."

A glass of red wine was placed in front of Lori. "This is a pleasant wine from a vineyard I like," said Griff. "Taste it, and when you're through, tell me how you think it compares to a pinot from our vineyard."

"Okay," said Lori, feeling part of the group. She now realized her sisters were right about the importance of socializing. Her whole world had changed.

From across the table, Cristina waved at her.

"How did your day go?" asked Lori. "Were you able to decide on the ownership?"

"I have a lot of thinking to do," said Cristina. "But while I'm not sure what business I'll be involved with, I know I want to move here. That's a big decision for me and one I don't think I'll regret."

Pete put an arm across Cristina's shoulders. "We've been reminiscing about our childhoods. We remember things very differently."

Cristina laughed. “Very much so. I’m trying to forget the awful things he and, sometimes, Griff did to make my life miserable back then.”

Lori laughed with her and could see the beginning of a spark between Cristina and Pete, something that would make Sarita very happy.

Beside her, Griff checked his watch. “I wonder where Kayla and Rosie are. They should be here by now.”

Lori was surprised to see how much time had passed. “Have you tried calling them?”

“Yes,” said Griff, “but it keeps going to voicemail.”

After a while, Mia said to Griff, “Text Kayla and tell her to meet us at *The Desert Oasis*. We want to keep moving to show Lori as many spots as possible.”

“Okay,” said Griff. He helped pay for the drinks and the snacks and stood.

He held the chair for Lori while she got to her feet, and they headed out the door.

On the street, they walked with the others toward another new bar.

Griff’s cell rang. “It’s Kayla. Hold on.”

Lori watched Griff’s expression change. His cheeks drained of color. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“What’s wrong?” Lori asked.

“Kayla and Rosie were in an accident,” said Griff. “The police and EMT’s are there now. Her car has been totaled. She wants me to come to the scene.”

Ahead of them, Mia stopped. “What’s wrong?”

Griff told her and the others what had happened and faced Lori. “You can stay…”

“No,” she said. “I want to be available to help.”

“Let’s go,” said Griff.

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CHAPTER FORTY

LORI

Lori and Griff arrived at a crossroads outside of town, where the accident had taken place. The flashing red lights, the uniformed police, and the EMTs filled her stomach with acid.

Kayla was standing by an ambulance, talking to one of the first responders as Rosie sat on the back step of their emergency vehicle, being checked by another.

An older model tan Volvo with one side badly damaged sat on the verge of the road. A red truck was parked on the other side, where a policeman was talking to a young man. Lori suspected he was the other driver.

Griff pulled his car to a stop beside the road and got out.

Lori quickly followed.

When Kayla saw them, she hurried over. “Thank God you’re here. I’m okay, but Rosie has injured her shoulder. They’re also checking the injuries to her face from the airbag.” She held out her hands. “I’m still shaking.”

“What happened?” asked Griff, putting an arm around Kayla.

“We were driving to town when that young kid in his truck went right through the stop sign and hit us. He tried to stop, but it was too late.” Kayla lowered her voice. “I think he’s high on something. A policeman is talking to him now.”

“How about you?” Lori asked Kayla. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

Kayla’s eyes filled. She shook her head. “I’m shaken and probably a little bruised, but I’m not badly hurt. It’s Rosie whom I’m worried about. The truck hit her side of the car.” She gripped her hands and looked at the damage to her automobile. “I think they’ll total it.”

“As long as you both will be okay, don’t worry about anything else,” said Griff. “You can use one of the vineyard’s trucks until you have the situation with your car settled. The important thing is to make sure both of you are all right.”

“Come see Rosie,” said Kayla. “Lori, I’m glad you’re here. Rosie wants to talk to you.”

When they approached the ambulance, the EMT workers turned to

them. “We’ve given Rosie something for the pain so we could put the dislocated shoulder back in place. Rosie will need to wear a sling for a couple of days. She’ll be able to resume most activities within a couple of weeks. However, it takes about 12-16 weeks to completely recover.”

Lori felt sick looking at the bruising and scraping on Rosie’s beautiful face.

“Rosie’s face will be fine. No broken bones,” commented one of the EMTs.

“All in all, you’re both lucky,” he said to Kayla. “Good thing you were driving a Volvo.”

Kayla nodded numbly, sat beside Rosie, and put her arm around her. “We’ll get you home and help you rest.”

“Why don’t I drop Rosie and Lori off at your house and come back here to help you with your car, while you talk to the police,” Griff said to Kayla.

“I can drive your car to Rosie and Kayla’s place, if that will help,” Lori said.

“Yes. That will save time,” said Griff, handing her a set of keys to his Jeep. “I’ll call Pete to come get us.”

Though Rosie acted dazed, she gave her a lopsided smile when Lori told her she was taking her home.

Kayla gave Rosie a hug. “Lori will help take care of you until I finish up here. Be sure to keep your arm and shoulder still, even in the sling.”

Lori led Rosie to Griff’s Jeep and helped her inside.

After getting behind the wheel, Lori turned to Rosie. “Better give me directions.”

###

Lori pulled into the parking area of the apartment complex on Solano Avenue and got Rosie to the apartment she shared with Kayla.

Inside, Lori helped Rosie to the couch in the living room. “What can I get you? Water? Soda?”

“I’d love some ice water,” said Rosie. “I’m glad you’re here. I want to talk to you about the store. A big order is being delivered tomorrow for our weekend open house event taking place in Napa. Will you and Cristina be able to open the boxes, put the items in our inventory, and arrange them on display?”

“Yes, I’m sure we can do that. Cristina knows inventory routines, and I can display the items.”

“The display is a lot like what we talked about. You’ll see where everything should go,” said Rosie, trying to stifle a yawn.

“You’d better lie down. I’ll bring you some water, and you can rest. I’ll stay right here until Kayla comes,” said Lori.

She poured a glass of water, gave it to her, and pulled a blanket up over Rosie, who’d begun to shiver in response to all she’d been through.

While Rosie catnapped, Lori sat in a chair, lost in thought. Seeing the EMTs, remembering the times she’d had to call them to help get Nick off the floor, her eyes filled with tears. It had been such an awful time that seemed to go on forever with an ending everyone expected.

Lori checked to make sure Rosie was all right and then went onto the balcony outside the apartment. From this side of the building, she could see the hills in the distance. She loved this part of the country. She thought of her family waiting for her to return home. She owed them for all the ways they’d helped her, though these last two days in California would be difficult for many reasons.

###

Later, Griff and Lori sat in the kitchen of the main house at Adeline Hills Winery eating a cheese omelet Lori had put together.

“Even though you didn’t get to all the places I wanted you to see, I hope you saw enough to know how outstanding Napa nightlife can be,” said Griff.

“I like Napa and your friends,” said Lori. “I was there long enough to see how much fun it could be.”

“Thanks for helping Rosie tomorrow. Knowing you were there meant a lot to her. She promised me the store would be ready for this weekend,” said Griff.

“Having Cristina work with me will help a lot. Together, we’ll get the job done, no matter how long it takes,” said Lori.

“I like how you can easily adjust to changed plans,” said Griff. “Growing grapes and making wine is filled with variables.”

Lori sighed. “Life itself is always changing.” She had no idea how she’d come to regret those words.

###

Lori lay in bed the next morning, reviewing the day ahead in her mind. After a quick breakfast of coffee and toast, she'd head to the wine-tasting center and the store. Rosie mentioned that deliveries usually start to arrive by nine o'clock, including two big deliveries from rush orders for items with the winery logo on them.

Before starting the day, she took a few moments to savor the memories of lovemaking with Griff. He was such a generous, passionate man.

Her cell phone rang. *Cristina.*

"Hello," said Lori. "Are you ready for a busy day?"

"Oh, yes. I'm here at the store reviewing the items for sale," said Cristina. "I've checked out the inventory system here and have all the pricing tags and stickers ready. If you don't mind, I've got a routine set up that I think will work."

"I bow to your expertise," Lori said.

"And I am appreciative of your taking care of the displays," Cristina said. "The shop has a lot going for it."

"I agree," said Lori. "I think there's plenty of potential for a stronger marketing program, in general. I'll meet you in a few minutes."

"Okay, I'll have coffee and a breakfast treat ready for you."

Lori took care of her morning routines and managed to get to the store in record time.

Cristina greeted her and led her to the employee kitchen, where she poured her a cup of coffee and handed her a plate with a slice of coffee cake."

"Sarita made this for us," said Cristina, taking a seat opposite Lori at the kitchen table. "How did you become involved with Adeline Hills Winery?"

Lori told her about meeting Griff at The Beach House Hotel and how they'd spent some time together and became friends.

Cristina's eyes widened. "I've seen pictures of that hotel. It's on my 'someday' list. Very nice."

"It's gorgeous, and the owners are especially caring. I can't wait to go back someday," said Lori. "Let me tell you the rest of the story."

Cristina listened and said, "It's almost as if fate was stepping in with a plan for the two of you to be together."

"There's one problem. Distance," said Lori. "It's keeping us from moving on to anything serious."

“Just take it one day at a time,” Cristina advised her. “When you’re finished, I want to walk through the store with you while we discuss the changes. I’ve looked over the orders, and it’s a lot of merchandise.”

“The shop could use it. We just have to display it in a way that is enticing,” said Lori. “Rosie and I had similar ideas when we talked. And though you work with clothing, you’ll see what we were saying.”

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

GRIFF

Unobserved, Griff stood at the doorway to the shop's workroom and watched as Cristina and Lori worked together, checking inventory and tagging items, chatting away like old friends.

He knew that Sarita was right to direct Pete's attention to someone as down-to-earth, kind, and unassuming as Cristina. He also recognized that Lori was perfect for him.

Seeing the way Lori worked and how happy she was to help out, he couldn't help comparing his past girlfriends to her. He'd fallen for the glamorous young women in the area instead of someone with substance. Somehow, he'd have to convince Lori to give him a chance without pushing too hard and scaring her off.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

LORI

Lori was barely aware of the time as she and Cristina worked together. It wasn't until they took a break that she realized how much her feet and back hurt from standing without moving. At the school, helping kids, she was in constant motion, not standing still for hours.

She checked her watch. Two o'clock. No wonder she was hungry.

Just then, Sarita walked into the room carrying a tray of sandwiches, chips, and cookies. "Thought you might be hungry."

"You're a lifesaver," said Cristina. She lifted a sandwich. "Oh, yum. I remember your chicken salad sandwiches. They were one of my favorites back then."

Sarita beamed at Christina. "Oh, I'm well aware."

Cristina laughed. "I know what you and my mother are doing."

"Just enjoy life here," Sarita responded. She turned to Lori. "I have a feeling that you should be here, too."

"But tomorrow is my last full day," Lori said, hiding a twinge of sadness.

"We'll see," said Sarita. "How's the store coming along?"

"Good," said Lori.

"She and I are an excellent team," Cristina said. "By the end of the day, the store will be ready for tomorrow."

"You know, if you …" Sarita began.

Cristina thrust out a hand to stop her. "Don't say it."

Sarita laughed, and soon the three of them laughed together, in touch with one another's feelings.

###

That evening, Sarita served a family meal. When Pete mentioned that a night in Napa might be fun, Lori and Cristina shook their heads.

"Not me," said Lori. "Thanks anyway. I'm going to bed."

At the quiet in the room, Lori's cheeks flared with color. She didn't dare say anything more, especially when Pete murmured, "Lucky Griff."

Neither Sam nor Carlos heard it, but Sarita shot Lori a questioning

look, which Lori ignored by answering her cell and excusing herself from the table, delighted to be interrupted by a call from Aurelia.

"Hi, sis, what's up?" asked Lori, stepping outside to the patio.

"Hi, Lori. I'm calling to tell you that Dad is in the hospital. He's had a heart attack and had surgery to install a couple of stents. We didn't want to worry you before we knew what was going on. He's doing fine and will be released from the hospital in a day or so. We thought you'd want to know. There's no need to come home a day early. There's nothing that needs to be done."

Lori felt the blood leave her face and her feet sway. "Thanks," she managed to say as tears filled her eyes. It was the worst kind of news, this sudden change concerning someone's life. It brought back all kinds of bad memories.

"Are you all right?" Aurelia asked in a gentle, caring voice, indicating she knew how Lori might be feeling.

"I'm okay. I'll let you know of any change in plans," said Lori.

"There's no need to come home early. Dad is fine, and Mom is coping," said Aurelia.

"I know," said Lori, well aware of her mother's strength. "See you soon." She ended the call and sat on a chair, fighting tears.

"What's wrong?" asked Griff, walking outside and coming over to her.

Lori told him what had happened. "Aurelia said I wasn't to worry, but I can't help it."

"Why don't you sleep on it and make any decisions in the morning," said Griff, pulling her up into his arms.

Lori leaned against him, grateful for the way his embrace steadied her.

###

Sometime later, Lori lay alone in her bed, exhausted and worried. She'd been too upset to have Griff stay with her. It seemed the wrong thing to do when her father might still be in danger, no matter what Aurelia had said.

Too tired to fight the sweep of depression, she closed her eyes and fell into a restless sleep filled with terrible visions.

The memories of her husband's hospital days, the sight of Kayla's accident and Rosie's wounded face, and memories of her father's presence while she was growing up twisted together into hideous scenes that had her

moaning and tossing about in her bedding.

At one point, sweaty from all the emotions roaring through her body from the images in her brain, she awoke crying.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. But her hands and fingers couldn't erase the horrors that trooped through her brain. Afraid to fall asleep again, she got out of bed and went to the kitchen to fix herself a cup of tea.

Disappointment trailed through her when she realized she wouldn't be able to enjoy herself in California while her father lay ill. She had to see him for herself to know that he was all right. He was too young to die. But then, Nick had been, too.

She took a sip of tea and sighed. Not long ago, she'd announced almost nonchalantly that life was always changing, unaware hers had very dramatically done so.

A knock sounded at the door.

Startled, Lori checked the time. Six o'clock.

She went to the door, peeked out, and let out a breath of relief at seeing Griff.

"While I was jogging, I saw the light on. Are you all right?" he asked.

"Come on in," she said, opening the door to him. "I've been fighting nightmares, and I'm afraid to go back to sleep."

"Why don't I stay here on the couch, so you won't be afraid?" Griff said, sensitive to how she'd told him earlier that she needed to be alone.

"Would you do that for me?" she said.

"Of course," he answered. "I don't want you to be afraid."

"That would be so helpful. I'm physically tired, but my brain has been working overtime." She led him to the couch. "Mind if I curl up next to you? I don't even want to be in my bed."

"Go ahead. Come here. There's a blanket for us both," Griff said, sitting on the couch and letting her curl up next to him.

Sighing, Lori leaned against him and closed her eyes.

She didn't know what time it was when Griff shook her awake. "It's okay, Lori. It's okay."

Lori touched her wet cheeks and drew in a breath. "I'm sorry. The dreams about my past trauma with my husband keep coming back."

Griff rubbed her back in comforting circles and drew her closer. "You're okay. Everything will be fine."

Exhausted, she closed her eyes.

Much later, when she opened them, she was alone on the couch. She sat up and gazed around, but there was no sign of Griff.

Lori stretched and picked up her cell. She knew what she had to do.

When she Facetimed her sisters and told them she was leaving a day early, the looks on their faces told the story of her own disappointment.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

GRIFF

Griff stood with other members of his family as Lori gave them one last wave goodbye before heading to the airport in San Francisco for her flight home. He struggled to hide his emotions. He and Lori had had a long talk about meeting up in the future, but while they obviously loved being together, neither suggested anything more than keeping in touch.

As her car disappeared from view, Griff chided himself for not saying what was in his heart, that he wanted her to return to give their relationship a more serious chance at something permanent.

But Lori had been distraught enough from her nightmares that he didn't dare take the chance of appearing not to care about that. He had to refrain from talking about himself and his own desires.

Without saying a word, Sarita put her arm around him and squeezed as she'd done many times when he was a child facing disappointment.

He turned to her.

"It's up to you to live the life of your dreams," said Sarita.

"Have I ever thanked you enough for being you?" he asked with affection.

She hugged him. "Just be happy."

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

LORI

As Lori drove away from the friends she'd grown close to in such a short time at the winery that fascinated her, she was filled with doubts. She loved Griff. His family, too.

But when a memory of her trying to save Nick in her nightmare came to her, she knew she was right to go home. In California, things were moving too fast. And her parents needed her. What did she actually know about her father's health, except words uttered to keep her from freaking out about it? She needed to see him for herself and help her mother cope with this unexpected situation. It was her duty.

###

Once aboard the plane, Lori tucked her carry-on beneath the seat in front of her and leaned back to stare out the window. She hoped the flight would help her sort things out in her mind. She'd hardly slept the night before and was still shaken by all the frightening images of her dreams.

After the plane reached its cruising level, Lori closed her eyes, hoping for sleep.

It wasn't long before unbidden images took over her dreams and she stirred restlessly in her seat, waking herself up.

Her seatmate, an older woman, looked at her. "Are you all right?"

Embarrassed, she said, "Just a bad dream."

"There's a cute movie available. Maybe that would help," the woman said sweetly.

Lori knew it would take more than a movie to rid her mind of her bad dreams, but she gamely put on her headset and tuned into the movie about a young couple who finds love.

By the time the movie was over, Lori was more discouraged than ever about leaving Griff.

###

All regrets about leaving California fled when she saw her mother and Aurelia waiting in the baggage claim area to greet her.

Feeling like a child again, Lori hurried toward them.

“I’m glad you’re home. Dad has been asking for you,” Lori’s mother said, giving her a big hug. “Don’t tell him I told you, but he’s been very frightened and wants his family around.”

“I’m happy to see you,” said Aurelia, looking tired. Lori knew how responsible Aurelia felt as the eldest sister and vowed to help take some of the stress off her.

“Flo’s home with the baby, who has a cold,” said Lori’s mother. “She’ll take a break and come to see you when she can.”

“We all want to know how your time in California went,” said Aurelia, taking Lori’s rolling suitcase off the baggage conveyor belt. “You look wonderful with a little color from the outdoor activities.”

“Thanks. I learned a lot about making wine,” said Lori. “And Napa is a very interesting place.”

“I hope you took a lot of photos,” said her mother. “Hard to believe my daughter was working in a vineyard.”

“I have some photos, not too many,” Lori said, trying to figure out how to keep pictures of Griff hidden. She didn’t want her family to know much about him. Not until she’d figured out what the situation was between them.

“Dad is still in the hospital. There was a bleeding situation, but they took care of it,” said her mother. “He’s coming home tomorrow. I told the doctor we wanted to make sure Dad was all right to leave by then.”

Aurelia said, “It’s an added precaution. There's no need to worry. Dad’s getting excellent care.”

“Can I visit him in the hospital?” Lori asked.

“Yes, of course,” said her mother. “We’re going directly there. I know how easily you become worried.”

Lori was grateful for her understanding. She could deal with almost anything once she understood the situation. That’s how it had been taking care of Nick at home.

They got into Aurelia’s SUV and headed to the local hospital.

“How are the girls?” Lori asked. It seemed longer than a week since she’d seen them.

“They’re fine. Happy to have you back and hoping for a sleepover soon,” said Aurelia. “They sometimes make me laugh when they remind me of you and Flo.”

“I love having my grandchildren around,” said Lori’s mother. “It’s important for them to grow up with extended family. It gives them a solid

foundation."

Lori thought of Griff's situation. Sarita and Carlos were a large part of his childhood. Sarita, especially, played the role of parent. Griff always spoke highly of being raised at the vineyard with his grandfather, Pete, and Pete's family. Would her parents understand if she moved there?

###

When Lori walked into her father's hospital room and saw him in the bed with tubes attached to his body, she held in a sob of both joy and sadness. Her father, normally an active man, looked frail and much older. It was, she knew, a glimpse into a future she wasn't ready for. Though still in his late sixties, he showed signs of aging she hadn't noticed before.

"There's my girl," said her father, holding out his arms to her.

She rushed to him and held on tight. As the baby of the three girls, she'd often been found on his lap or sitting next to him on the couch while reading books. Now, it was her turn to embrace the idea of her being there for him.

She stood back and studied him. "Mom says you'll be home tomorrow. Has the doctor given you a list of rules to follow?"

"Don't worry. Between your mother and you three girls, I don't stand a chance of going astray," grumped her father, making them all laugh.

"We don't want anything to happen to you, hon," Lori's mother said to him.

"It's nice to have you home, Lori," said her father. "It's always fulfilling to have my three daughters together, the way it's always been."

Lori smiled even as she realized how breaking that routine might upset her parents and sisters.

She stayed with her dad while Aurelia and her mother went to get coffee for themselves.

"I'm glad to have you alone," said her father to her. "I know hospitals hold bad memories for you, and I don't want you to feel you have to stay here. It's enough to see you now and know you'll visit me tomorrow. When your mother and sister return, I want you all to go home."

Lori's eyes filled with tears of gratitude. After the nightmares she'd recently had, she was especially grateful he understood.

Her mother and Aurelia appeared, and Lori's father told them he'd see them in the morning, that he wanted to rest.

“Are you sure?” Lori’s mother asked.

Her father glanced at Lori and nodded.

“Okay, then,” her mother said brightly. “Time for us to get Lori settled back in her house.”

As they returned to Aurelia’s car, Lori’s mother faced her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize being back in that hospital would be painful for you.”

“It’s only because I had a restless night yesterday, with some of my bad dreams about Nick’s illness returning,” said Lori. She couldn’t tell them about the nightmares where she’d tried and failed to save Griff from a horrible ending.

###

As her sister pulled up the driveway to Lori’s house, she studied the small, modest home she and Nick had proudly bought. Compared to the main house at the winery, it appeared tiny but not neglected.

“Home sweet home,” said Aurelia bringing the car to a stop. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to leave you to get settled. I’ve already put fresh milk and other items in the refrigerator, and a casserole is ready for you to heat up for dinner.”

From the passenger seat, Lori reached over and hugged her sister. “Thanks. You always think of ways to help. I appreciate it.”

“I’ll help get your suitcase to the front door before we leave,” said her mother. “Then, I’m going home to rest.”

“Thanks for greeting me at the airport. It’s great to be home,” said Lori. At the front door, she hugged her mother goodbye, waved to Aurelia, and unlocked the front door.

Stepping inside, she drew in a deep breath and gazed around. Memories assailed her, feeling like a blow to her head and stomach. This well-loved home was full of both her past happiness and sorrow.

She moved into the kitchen and studied the pots of violets she kept on the windowsill over the sink. They looked healthy and happy, which helped Lori realize that life here was ongoing.

Feeling more settled, she hung up her jacket and took her luggage into her bedroom to unpack. As she returned items to her closet and bureau drawers, she felt more settled. This was her home, and she was needed here.

Finished with unpacking, Lori went into the kitchen for dinner. She checked the refrigerator and saw that Aurelia had left her favorite chicken

and rice casserole. At the last minute, she decided to have a glass of wine before eating. Having learned about wine in California, she gazed at the few bottles she kept in the pantry and pulled out a bottle she'd been given for her birthday. It was a pinot noir from Santa Barbara.

She uncorked the bottle, poured some into a glass, and let it air for a minute while she set the table and popped the casserole into the oven to reheat.

Sitting at the table, she took a sip of wine, letting it roll around in her mouth before swallowing, as Griff had shown her. Then she sighed with approval. After having a few more sips, Lori lifted her cell to call Griff to tell him about the wine, and then she put it back on the table.

She jumped when her cell rang. *Flo.*

"Hey, sis! Sorry, I couldn't meet you. Eloise is sick with a cold, and I didn't want to leave her. I'm thinking she'll be better in a day or two, but I didn't want to expose you. I know what it's like with your work with kids. You don't need any germs from us."

Lori chuckled. "No, I don't. Tell my godchild I love her and her brother and want her to feel better."

"I will. But because I'm stuck at home, it doesn't mean we can't talk about the trip. How was it? Was that cute guy from the winery website there? Spill, girl."

"The trip was fabulous," gushed Lori. "A dream. Now, I have to get settled back into my normal routine. I learned a lot about growing grapes and making wine. It's fascinating."

"And the winery itself?"

"It's beautiful, much larger than I thought. There's a great group of people working there. They were very eager to show me how things work."

"And the handsome man whose grandfather owns the winery?" Flo asked.

"He's as nice as he was at The Beach House Hotel when I first met him," said Lori.

"Wait a minute! This is the same man?" said Flo. "You never made that clear. In fact, you told us the man you were doing things with was an older man. You even sent us a picture of him. What haven't you been telling us, little sister?"

"It's complicated," said Lori.

"Not really," Flo said. "It's about time you fessed up to this whole

winery mystery man. If Eloise is better tomorrow, I'm meeting you for coffee. You can tell me all about it then."

Lori sighed. She was trapped.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

LORI

That night, Lori lay in her bed, grateful to be in familiar surroundings and with her favorite pillow. As she rested there, she could see the interior of the rental cabin clearly in her mind. How could one week have made such a difference in her life?

Her breathing slowed, and tired and stressed from all the trauma that brought her home early, she finally fell asleep.

Sometime later, she awoke and tried to catch her breath and slow her heart rate. The nightmares were back. Sobbing softly, she turned on the bedside lamp and climbed out of bed.

Lori padded into the kitchen and heated water in the tea kettle, hoping hot tea would calm her. She told herself the nightmares weren't real, that everything was fine, but she had to force herself to think of other things.

After pouring herself a cup of tea, she sat at the kitchen table with a pad and pencil. Following Nick's death, a therapist had trained her to write down her worst fears and either how to fix them or recognize they weren't real.

As she began writing down her concerns, she realized that her memories about Nick, twisted as they were in her dreams, posed no real threat. Instead, she had to remember the happy times with him. As she wrote down a few of them, tears stung her eyes. They'd had a special marriage. A marriage that tragically ended.

She moved on to the images of Griff in her dreams, where she tried to save him. As she thought about it, she realized that in reality, he was trying to save her. She wanted to be with him, but she had to be sure that's what he truly wanted. She was fragile and wouldn't act without his encouragement. But she couldn't allow herself to stop believing that what they shared was special.

Unable to resolve anything, exhausted, she got up and headed back to her bedroom to try and sleep. She had a lot to do the next day to prepare for her teaching job.

###

Lori awoke late, feeling as if she hadn't slept at all. She dragged herself out of bed and got into the shower, hoping to revive herself.

After washing her hair and cleaning up, she dressed in jeans and stood by the washing machine giving a longing look at the overalls she'd used in California. She loved working in the field, tending to the vines. Though it was a tedious job, she'd enjoyed being part of the process of caring for the vines that would produce the grapes that would create lovely Adeline Hills wines.

She tossed the clothes in the washing machine and went to the kitchen to make coffee for herself.

Her cell rang. *Flo*.

"Blake said he'd watch the kids when Eloise goes down for her morning nap. Why don't we plan on my being there in a half-hour? I'll bring something sweet to eat, and Aurelia is going to join us for a sisters' breakfast."

"Okay. I've got juice and some fruit in the refrigerator. See you soon."

Lori ended the call and was both relieved and unhappy that her sisters were coming to visit. The two of them would persist until she'd told them all they wanted to know.

###

A short while later, Lori opened her door to her sisters, smiling when she saw that Flo had brought a box of doughnuts and Aurelia had brought homemade granola bars. It was typical of each of them.

"Come in, come in," Lori said. "It's cold outside." The temperature change from California to New York was noticeable.

Her sisters deposited their coats on the chair in the front hallway and headed to the kitchen.

"We have many questions to ask you," said Flo.

Aurelia followed Flo into the kitchen and put her plate of granola bars in the middle of the table for them to share.

"Coffee for everyone?" asked Lori.

At their nods, Lori served coffee in mugs while Flo opened the box of doughnuts and placed them on a plate.

"Something for everyone," said Flo.

Lori got out the box of blueberries from the refrigerator and served them in a bowl.

Aurelia took a sip of coffee and sighed. “You don’t know how much I’ve needed this.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help,” Flo said to Aurelia. “But I didn’t want to spread cold germs to Dad. Or mom.”

“I know. It’s best that you stayed away. Is everyone better now?” asked Aurelia.

“Yes,” said Flo. “I’ll make some casseroles to take to Mom and Dad’s house. Then Mom won’t have to worry about getting a meal. I know how much she’ll fuss over Dad.” She turned to Lori. “She was a mess when Dad had to go into the hospital.”

“I’m sorry I was away. But I knew they both were being carefully tended to with the two of you,” said Lori.

“And we know how you feel about hospitals,” said Aurelia. “We’re just glad we were around. That’s what makes living close to family valuable.”

“But we were glad you were having an enjoyable time in Napa,” Flo quickly injected. “Tell us about it. I’ve seen pictures of Napa online and the website for Adeline Hills Winery is stunning.”

“Is it actually like that?” asked Aurelia. “Gordon and I have talked about a trip there one day, but we tend to take short trips along the East coast or in the Caribbean.”

Flo held up a finger to stop her. “Before we talk about the vineyard, I want you to tell us about a certain Griffin Sawyer. His photo on the website shows he’s a handsome guy. His friend, Pete Mercado, is another one. You told me you met Griffin at The Beach House Hotel, but you also told us you were doing things there with an older man, just for fun. Which is it?”

“You sent a picture of the older man,” Aurelia said. “Was that just a ruse?”

Lori squirmed under her stare. “Yes. I didn’t want you to get any wrong ideas. Griff and I did some things together. We both made it very clear that we were friends. He’d been left at the altar by someone he says he should never have been involved with, and I still wasn’t ready for a new relationship after Nick’s death. That’s why it worked so well between us.”

“But I guess it’s now more than that for each of you, right?” asked Flo.

“At the time, I honestly just enjoyed being with him. He had to leave in a hurry because his grandfather had a stroke. It turned out to be a mild one, but Griff left in the middle of our New Year’s Eve celebration.” Lori

still remembered her disappointment.

"But you obviously wanted to see him again," said Flo. "Thus, the trip to California."

"Yes, and I also wanted to learn more about his winery," Lori admitted. "In Florida, he taught me a lot about sipping wine and told me about growing up there. I wanted to see how it all worked."

"Flo and I checked the website, and like she said, it looks like a beautiful place," said Aurelia.

"It is," said Lori. "More than that, the family who lives at the vineyards and the people who work for them are very kind. They made me feel welcome."

Flo frowned. "How about the grandfather? Did you two get along?"

"Yes. I made it clear I was there to learn about growing grapes and making wine. Besides, when I arrived, Griff was dating the winemaker, Kayla Nielsen. It turned out she's gay and has a partner who was willing to go along with their plan. Griff's grandfather told me privately that he knew it was a fake relationship to try to keep him off Griff's back about finding a suitable woman."

"Oh, I love that," said Flo, laughing. "He was actually encouraging you."

Lori chuckled. "Sam Sawyer is a remarkable man in his seventies who raised Griff after his parents died. Sarita runs the house and was like a mother to Griff growing up. He and Sarita and Carlos' son, Pete, will run the business when Sam turns it over to the younger generation."

"So, having a relationship with Griff would mean you'd move to California?" said Aurelia.

Lori sighed and nodded. "That's holding me back. After all you two did when Nick died and still do for me. How could I leave?"

"Nonsense," said Aurelia. 'I didn't have the opportunity to move away, but it doesn't mean I wouldn't have if I'd met someone other than Gordon. But Gordon's practice is here, and I love him."

"You do an awful lot for Mom and Dad," said Lori.

"It's part of being a member of the family," Aurelia said.

"But that's exactly why I'm hesitating …" said Lori. "Besides, you can't imagine how many women are interested in Griff. Some, just for his money. That's what happened with Cassandra, the woman who left him at the altar."

“Wha-a-at?” said Flo. “Why would someone do that?”

“The story I heard from others is that after Cassandra pressed Griff for an engagement, she learned that as a member of the family, she would be expected to work at the winery. Just before the wedding, she met someone from Hollywood staying in Napa. He invited her to move in with him. At the last minute, she sent a text to Griff telling him she was leaving.”

“That’s awful,” said Flo. “Is she still with the man?”

Lori shook her head. “I don’t think so. No one has heard from her, but there are rumors that it didn’t work out. The family wasn’t happy with her, anyway, but it hurt Griff. That’s why we bonded so quickly and became friends.”

“Are you a rebound for him?” asked Aurelia, giving her a worried look.

“We had many conversations this past week, and I don’t believe so. We were very honest with one another about everything.”

“So, this isn’t something sudden for you?” asked Flo.

“Not really,” said Lori truthfully. “Since the trip to The Beach House Hotel, I’ve thought about him a lot. I’ve even dreamed about him.”

Aurelia studied her. “And what about him? Does he feel the same way?”

“He told me that’s why he set up this arrangement with Kayla. He couldn’t think of being with anyone but me and needed time to think about it,” said Lori. “He was surprised to see me but said that’s when he knew he wanted to pursue the relationship.”

“It sounds like a true love story in the making,” said Flo, hugging her. “I’m happy for you.”

“Me, too. You deserve to find happiness again,” said Aurelia. “Do Mom and Dad know anything about this?”

Lori shook her head. “I haven’t mentioned it and won’t until I hear from Griff. If he’s sincere about us being together, I want him to show it.”

“He might be waiting for you to make a move. Especially after having been treated unfairly in the past,” said Flo.

Lori settled her gaze on her sisters. “You won’t be upset if I move away? I know it will take time for Mom and Dad to get used to the idea.”

Aurelia placed an arm around Lori. “We all want you to be happy. We can fly to see you and would hope you’d return to Ellenton as often as you could.”

“Well, then, I can only wait and see what will happen,” sighed Lori.

Flo focused on her. “That’s not like you. Why won’t you fight for him?”

Lori thought for a minute. “I’ve learned that we can’t always choose what happens to us, and I don’t want to make a mistake by being rash. I have a lot to think about. I have to believe that things will work out the way they’re meant to be.”

Flo started to speak.

Lori stopped her. “That doesn’t mean I won’t fight for what I believe in.”

“Good. That’s the sister we know and love,” said Aurelia.

Lori hesitated and then decided to be open about it. “I told you I have a lot to think about. The nightmares have come back. This time, worse than ever.”

“Oh, hon, what can we do to help?” asked Flo.

“Just support me and my decision,” Lori said. “I do love Griff, but I need to be sure everything is right with him. He’s been through a lot, too.”

“We’re behind you all the way,” said Aurelia. “You can call me any time of day or night. I used to help you through nightmares as a child. I haven’t forgotten how.”

Lori’s eyes filled. Her sisters meant the world to her.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

GRIFF

Griff awoke and checked the time. Seven o'clock. Ten o'clock in Ellenton. He'd thought he'd hear from Lori when she arrived safely in New York.

Sitting up in bed, he grabbed his cell phone and stared at it for a long time before replacing it on the bedside table. He didn't want to harass her.

He slipped on his jeans and a T-shirt and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

" 'Morning," said Sarita. "The coffee is made. Help yourself, and I'll fix you scrambled eggs."

"Thanks," said Griff. "This morning, I'm going to check the fields with Pete to see how the vines are doing. The open house at the tasting area and shop did very well yesterday. I think Cristina would make a wonderful addition to the staff. Do you think there's a chance she'd accept?"

Sarita gave him a wily look. "I do. She and Pete are both stubborn, but I see how they are with one another. Believe me when I tell you they were meant to be together. Just like you and Lori."

Griff's head shot up. "Me and Lori? Are you convinced of that?"

"Me, the stars, and fate," said Sarita grinning. "You'll see."

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

LORI

Lori felt better after talking with her sisters. They had a way of pulling information out of her, which was sometimes irritating, but in this case, it turned out to be a needed release of her worries.

That afternoon, she sat down with paper and pen and began writing down her thoughts. She was well aware of what her nightmares about Nick meant. Now, it was time to analyze why she'd had them about Griff. She wrote down what she could remember of them. And then, as her therapist had taught her, she questioned why those scenes were part of her dream, looking for answers so she could dismiss them.

After working on it, Lori saw a pattern. She was trying to save Griff from getting hurt. She feared he was running away from her. And she didn't want to be alone. Guilt at leaving her old life behind was part of it, too, she realized. She didn't need to talk to her therapist to understand why she was feeling that way.

Her cell phone rang. *Cara.*

Smiling, Lori picked up the call.

"Hi, girlfriend," said Cara. "I'm glad you're back. I want to hear all about your trip to the winery. Did you meet the handsome man who runs it?"

"It's great to be back. I can't wait to see all my special little ones," avoiding Cara's question. "Was it busy at school?"

"Yes, and we missed you," Cara said. "But we hoped you were having a fantastic time."

"It was wonderful," sighed Lori. "I learned a lot."

"But did you meet Griffin Sawyer, the man on the website?" Cara persisted in asking. "He and the other man, Pete, are total hotties."

"I did meet them and spent time with them," said Lori. "I met a lot of people and saw a bit of Napa. As I said, it was a much needed, little getaway. How about you? Dating anyone new?"

"Now that you ask, I met up with one of our classmates, Brian McArthur. Remember him?" asked Cara. "He was sort of small and wore glasses back then. You should see him now. Tall and handsome and hunky.

We hit it off. I'm seeing him next weekend."

"That's exciting news," said Lori with genuine enthusiasm. She'd been worried about leaving her best friend if she and Griff decided to move forward with their relationship.

"Anyway, welcome back," said Cara. "The kiddos will be happy to see you as we all will."

Lori ended the call excited how things might be happening for her friend.

###

The next morning, Lori went into work early hoping to find a few free moments with Janie Sherwood. As owner of *Bright Beginnings*, she was sometimes difficult to find alone.

When Janie saw her, she beamed at Lori and hurried over to give her a long hug. "Welcome back. We missed you! Did you have a nice time?"

"I had a fabulous time, but I missed being with the kids when I had time to think about them."

Janie studied her. "You look wonderful, tanned and relaxed. I'm glad you took this week off. Now, let's get to work. As usual, this time of year, parents are already wondering about our summer programs."

"Are you planning to be open as usual or do something else?" asked Lori.

"I think it's smart to open a special summer day camp for kids 5 to 7 years old. What do you think?" Janie asked her.

"That age group could use a chance to get out and be with others during the summer months. I know our mothers will be thrilled with the idea," Lori said.

"I want you to take charge of the program," said Janie. "Will you do it?"

Lori looked down at the ground and then faced Janie. "I can't make that commitment until I clear up an unexpected situation."

"Want to tell me about it?" asked Janie.

Lori shook her head. "At the moment, I can't. It's out of my hands."

"Hm-m-m." Janie focused on her. "Okay, but don't leave it for too long."

The other teachers and kids started to arrive, and the day began in a flurry of activity.

When the children ran to her for hugs, Lori's eyes filled. She loved these kids who filled her days. It would be hard to leave them.

###

The next ten days flew by during the day and dragged on and on each night. Lori began to believe that the time with Griff was nothing more than friendship like before.

One late afternoon, Lori had just diapered a baby when Cara came rushing into the nursery. "Quick, Lori! There's someone here to see you. Give me the baby and go to the front entry."

Cara took the baby from her and gave Lori a gentle push out of the room.

Lori's thoughts were spinning.

When she got to the front entrance, she gasped at the sight of Griffin. "What are you doing here?" she asked, hating the breathiness, the uncertainty of her voice.

"We need to talk," Griff answered.

Shocked by the look of determination on his face, she said, "Okay. Follow me."

She led him outside onto the sweeping front porch and over to an area at the side of the house. "We'll have privacy here."

They stood facing one another uneasily.

"I need to know where I stand with you," said Griff, giving her a penetrating look. "You promised to call me after you got home. At first, I thought you didn't do it because you were busy. Then I realized that, like before, you just wanted to be friends."

"Oh, but …" Lori began. "I've been waiting for you to call me," she admitted sheepishly. "The longer I waited, the more certain I became that you wanted to end what we had and didn't want to hurt my feelings."

The grim look on Griff's face transformed into a bright smile. He held out his arms. "Come here." His brilliant blue eyes shone.

In response, she hurried into his embrace and nestled against him.

"God, I've missed you," murmured Griff. "I know this may sound crazy after all that's happened in such a short time, but seeing you again, I have no doubt. Lori, will you marry me?"

Lori stepped back and gazed at the hopeful expression on his face, then threw her arms around his neck. "Yes, Griff. Oh, yes! I'll marry you."

As Griff's lips met hers, Lori had no doubt that this was right. She knew it heart and soul. They'd spent hours talking. She'd seen him with his family, seen him work hard. He was everything he represented.

When they pulled apart, Lori heard the sound of soft clapping and realized that Cara, Janie, and several toddlers were staring at them, heads turned at a sharp angle, from a window a short distance away.

"I guess others like our decision," said Lori.

"None more than Sarita who told me we were meant to be together, that she saw it the first day you arrived at the winery," said Griffin, wrapping his arm around her. "I'll formally ask your father's permission, and together we can pick out a ring. Is that okay?"

"It's perfect. But I need to warn you that my parents don't know much about our time together. I didn't want to spoil it until I knew for sure that my feelings for you were reciprocated."

"Life is full of surprises, as we both know. Let's make this one the best of all," said Griff.

Joy surged through her. They'd begun the New Year weekend at The Beach House Hotel. Now, they were beginning a new life together.

And she knew the perfect place for a wedding.

###

On such a momentous occasion, Janie readily agreed to give Lori the rest of the day off.

Lori told Griff to follow her in his car to her house. From there, they'd go together to her parents' home. First, she couldn't wait to get him alone.

He seemed as anxious as she was to be together as they traveled the few blocks to her house.

They pulled their cars into her driveway and got out.

"Want to come in before we go to visit my parents?" Lori asked him.

He grinned at her. "You know I do. It's been way too long since we've been alone."

At the sexy look he gave her, Lori put her arms around his neck, and they kissed once more. This time they had more privacy. But it still wasn't enough.

When they broke apart, Lori went to the front door and unlocked it. She turned to him at her heels. "Come on in."

Inside the front hallway, he lifted her into his arms and held her tight.

“Let’s not waste a minute.”

Her body filled with anticipation, and she directed him to her bedroom.

There, they showed one another how much they wanted their union.

###

Satisfied by their lovemaking and brimming with joy, Lori called her mother.

“Mom, I have someone I want you and Dad to meet. May I bring him over?”

“Does this have anything to do with a handsome California winemaker?” asked her mother.

“Yes, it does. How do you know?”

Her mother chuckled. “Your sisters adore you and have been fussing about certain news. Bit by bit I could put it together. Please come. We can’t wait to meet him. Do you mind if I call your sisters so we can all celebrate?”

Lori laughed. “By all means, call them. Griff needs to see how close our family is. We’ll be there shortly.”

After Lori hung up, she turned to Griff. “Well, it’s too late now. You’re about to meet my entire family.”

He laughed. “Might as well get it over with,” he teased. “It’ll be a bit like you meeting mine all together.”

By the time Lori and Griff drove up to her parents’ house, Flo’s van and Aurelia’s SUV were already in the driveway.

She parked the car and got out to lead Griff to the front door of the two-story colonial home that had housed their close-knit family.

They’d reached midway up the sidewalk when the front door opened, and both of her sisters rushed to greet them.

Lori accepted their hugs and then introduced Griff.

“We’re very happy to meet you,” said Aurelia.

“I’m glad you’re visiting. Guess it was a surprise,” Flo said.

“A fantastic one,” said Lori, turning to Griff, who was grinning.

Lori looked up and saw her parents at the doorway waiting. Her mother was blinking rapidly as she held Eloise in her arms. Her father had hold of Hudson’s hand. Aurelia’s daughters, Sara and Lizbeth, broke free and ran toward her.

They stopped when they got close and studied Griff with openness and

then ran to hug her.

Lori made more introductions.

"Gordon is going to pick up Blake," said Aurelia. "They should be here soon."

Lori noticed both of her sisters study her ring finger but neither said anything about her bare hand.

"Okay, everyone. I want to introduce Griff to Mom and Dad," Lori said. "Let's go."

Lori led Griff to the entrance.

"Mom and Dad, I want you to meet Griffin Sawyer. Griff, these are my parents, Caroline and Henry Pierce."

Griff shook hands with each of them, and they all entered the house, followed by the group outside.

"Well, this is a special occasion," said Lori's mother. "It's nice you could visit."

"Yes," said Griff. He put an arm around Lori. "It's a real pleasure."

"Why don't we have a toast to celebrate your visit?" said Lori's father.

"I suggest we have an informal dinner together. By informal, I mean ordering in New York style pizza, salads, and anything else we want," Lori's mother said. "It's easiest with the kids."

"Are you game?" Lori asked Griff.

"You bet," he said.

While her mother took charge of the kids, her father suggested he could use some help from Griff in selecting a proper wine.

Left alone, Lori turned to her sisters who'd gathered around her.

Flo fanned herself. "What a hottie! The website doesn't do him justice."

"He seems very nice," said Aurelia.

They turned as Aurelia's husband, Gordon, arrived with Blake, Flo's husband.

Lori's dad and Griff emerged from the kitchen talking comfortably to one another. Griff gave her a wink before setting down a tray of glasses on the coffee table in the living room.

Griff shook hands with the newly arrived men and then handed out glasses of wine to everyone, including her mother who returned to the living room to help celebrate.

Her father raised a glass. "This is a bigger celebration than we thought.

Griff has asked for Lori's hand in marriage, and I've congratulated him on making an excellent choice."

Her mother let out a little cry of joy. "Oh, my! Such marvelous news." She set down her glass and hugged Lori, then hesitated just a moment before hugging Griff, who hugged her back as best he could while holding a glass of wine.

"Hear! Hear!" said Aurelia. "We're happy for you both!"

Everyone raised their glasses.

Lori gripped hers tightly, wanting to seize this moment and make it last.

"Lori and I are going to pick out a ring together," said Griff.

"I hope it's a big, bright one," Flo said, and everyone laughed.

Lori didn't care what it looked like. It was simply a symbol of what she knew now would be a lasting love.

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

LORI

Eight months later…

Lori sat in the back of the limousine with her parents, Flo, Blake, and their children. In another limousine behind them, Griff rode with his grandfather, Sarita, Carlos, and Pete. Aurelia, Gordon, and her two nieces would arrive later in the day, along with Cristina, Kayla, and Rosie.

Excitement bubbled inside Lori. She gazed at the impressive pink stucco building, the swaying palm trees, the elegant entrance and drew in a breath of appreciation. She'd tried to tell her family how special The Beach House Hotel was, but seeing it again, she was thrilled that in lieu of a big fancy wedding, both families had agreed to have a private wedding at this resort.

Ann Sanders and Rhonda Grayson, the owners of the hotel, descended the front steps to welcome them, and Lori knew she'd made the right choice to be married here. When she and Griff first met and became friends a year ago, they'd commented on how perfect a beach wedding would be. Now, they were about to realize that dream of hers.

"Welcome to The Beach House Hotel," said Ann Sanders, beaming at them.

"We're excited to have you here," said Ann's partner, Rhonda. "I told Annie back at the beginning of the New Year that you two made a nice couple. I'm really good, an expert you might say, at matchmaking, but I see that this time you've done it on your own." She beamed at them.

"We love having special weddings here," said Ann. "We'll make sure yours will be everything you want. Our staff is ready to meet with you after you get settled. I understand you'll be staying in The Presidential Suite."

"Yes," said Lori and turned to Griff, who'd walked up beside her with Grandad on his arm.

"Welcome to another New Year celebration here at the hotel," Rhonda said to Griff, then looked delighted to see Sam. "We have a very special wine for you, sir."

"One of your finest," said Ann. "Welcome."

"By the look of things, it seems the perfect place for us and our wine,"

said Sam.

While Ann and Rhonda chatted with Sarita, her parents, and the rest of the group, Griff drew Lori aside.

“Thank you for making me very happy,” he said. “My family too.”

Remembering how kind they’d been to her, Lori’s eyes welled with tears. “I can’t tell you what it means to be part of it and for you to be part of mine. In a way, my family is responsible for us being together by sending me here in the first place.”

Griff shook his head. “Sarita wouldn’t agree with you. She’d say it was the stars and fate and something even she can’t define.”

“What are you two lovebirds talking about?” asked Sam, coming over to them and placing a hand on each of their shoulders.

“Magic,” said Lori. “The magic of love.”

Sam bobbed his head with satisfaction. “Now, let’s go in and have a taste of that wine the owners talked about.”

Lori and Griff laughed and headed inside to a future together.

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About the Author

A ***USA Today*** **Best-Selling Author,** Judith Keim is a hybrid author who both has a publisher and self-publishes. Ms. Keim writes heart-warming novels about women who face unexpected challenges, meet them with strength, and find love and happiness along the way—stories with heart. Her best-selling books are based, in part, on the many places she has lived or visited, as well as the interesting people she has met, creating believable characters and realistic settings that her many loyal readers love.

She enjoyed her childhood and young adult years in Elmira, New York, and now makes her home in Boise, Idaho, with her husband, Peter, and their lovable miniature Dachshunds, Wally and Kacy, as well as other family members.

From a young age, she was drawn to the idea of writing stories. Books were always present, being read, ready to go back to the library, or about to be discovered. All in her family shared information in general conversation, giving them a wealth of knowledge and vivid imaginations.

Ms. Keim enjoys hearing from her readers and appreciates their enthusiasm for her stories. “I hope you’ve enjoyed this book. If you have, please help other readers discover it by leaving a review on Amazon, BookBub, Goodreads, or your preferred site. And please check out my other books and series:

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Ms. Keim can be reached at **www.judithkeim.com**

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