

Lobster Bay Series

BOOKS 1-8

MEREDITH SUMMERS
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



Springtide Secrets

Autumn Tides

Seaside Bookclub

Seaside Bonds

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MEREDITH SUMMERS

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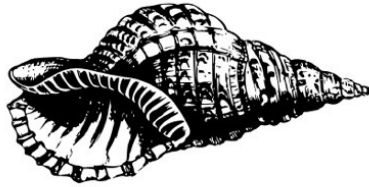
Saving Sandcastles

MEREDITH
SUMMERS

Lobster Bay
BOOK ONE



DESCRIPTION



Claire's childhood crush is the one person who can ruin everything she's worked for.

Claire Turner is much too busy running her bakery in the seaside town of Lobster Bay to think about past romances and first kisses, especially after she finds out the empty store across the street is going to be in direct competition with her. She's worked too hard after her divorce to establish her independence, and she isn't about to let some newcomer ruin things for her.

Rob Bradford needs a new start after his wife's lengthy illness and death. But when he goes back to the town that holds his happiest childhood vacation memories, he never dreams that the one girl he could never forget will be the one person who resents his presence. Rob is determined to make a new start in the seaside town and equally determined to win Claire's trust... and hopefully even something more.

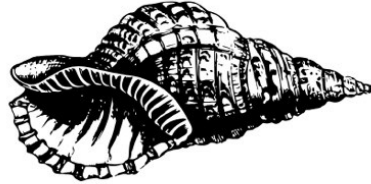
Claire suddenly finds herself taking desperate measures to make sure she doesn't lose business to the newcomer. Is Claire overreacting? Her friends think it's possible, but will they be able to talk her off the ledge before she does something drastic?

Her friends are dealing with their own problems. Jane's beloved mother, Addie, has dementia, and it's getting worse. Jane has her hands full trying to run the family inn and keep Addie safe. When Addie wanders away from the inn, Jane faces the hardest decision of her life.

And then there's Maxi. On the surface it appears as if she has an idyllic marriage, but does she really? Now that she and James are empty nesters, things aren't the same, and Maxi worries that James may not be interested in staying married. But Maxi has dreams of her own, dreams that she had to set aside while she was caring for her husband and children. Now that she has an empty nest, will she be able to find the courage to turn those dreams into reality?

This is Book 1 in the Lobster Bay series—a heartwarming journey of friendship, love, and loss set in a quaint beach town with a touch of romance in every story. Join the group of friends as they help each other overcome their obstacles and discover that every cloud really does have a silver lining.

CHAPTER ONE



The new store across the street was nothing to worry about, Claire Turner assured herself as she slid the door to her bakery case open, bent down, and peered inside. Her two best friends were due to arrive any minute for their biweekly morning get-together, and she wanted to have their muffins and coffee ready.

Hmm, what to choose? She had a variety of flavors—pistachio, chocolate, lemon poppyseed, orange-cranberry. As her hand hovered over the muffins, her attention wavered, drawn across the street again. Through the curved-glass front of the case, she could see that someone had painted the trim and put craft paper over the windows so no one could see inside. There was no sign announcing what kind of shop it was going to be. How odd. Probably just a beach store or shell shop. Lobster Bay had plenty of those, certainly nothing to concern Claire.

Not that she should be concerned. Her bakery, Sandcastles, was a popular destination for both residents and tourists in the sleepy beachside town. Business was booming. Good thing, too, because she'd put her heart and soul into her place, never mind her life savings. It had all been worth it to reinvent herself after her nasty divorce and prove that she could succeed all on her own.

Claire tore her gaze from the store and quickly chose two muffins then dug out a chocolate croissant for herself and put them all on a tray. The pleasure of eating it would be worth the calories, even though they would probably take up residence immediately on her hips.

“Don’t forget some muffins for Jane’s mom,” Hailey Robinson, Claire’s assistant, shot over her shoulder as she squeezed past Claire in the small space behind the case on her way to ring up a box of cupcakes for a customer.

“Thanks!” Claire reached back in, picked the two largest chocolate chip muffins out of the case, and added them to the tray. Claire held the tray overhead as she sidestepped Hailey on her way to the coffee pot and the clean white mugs hanging by their handles from hooks nearby.

Claire didn’t know what she would do without Hailey. The single mother was much more than just an assistant. Hailey knew everything about running Sandcastles, and Claire could trust her to fill in when Claire couldn’t be there. Claire was grateful that the bakery was successful enough that she could pay Hailey a good living wage.

Claire bagged the chocolate chip muffins, tipped the coffee pot’s contents into three mugs, arranged them and the plate on a tray, and left Hailey in charge of the customers while she went outside to meet her friends.

Claire navigated past the sandwich board, which announced her daily specials in brightly colored chalk, to an empty table on the brick sidewalk, where she could see the ocean at the end of the street. The sidewalks were wide, and the section in front of her café, designed for outdoor seating, was separated from the common walkways by tall planters loaded with lush leaves and colorful flowers.

She’d barely set the tray down when she spotted her friends a few stores down. Jane, tall and willowy, was laughing at something Maxi had said. Warmth bloomed in Claire’s chest as she watched Jane’s unfettered smile. It wasn’t often that Jane smiled like that these days.

As Jane walked, she continually tucked strands of her new pixie haircut behind her ear, as if self-conscious about the change. The haircut suited her. The silvery-gray color complemented her fair skin tone, and the cut highlighted her delicate features. It was a big change for Jane, who hadn’t done much to her appearance since her husband died more than a decade ago. It was about time Jane started caring about herself again.

“I’ve got everything ready for you guys.” Claire greeted her friends with a hug and herded them to their seats, where their muffins and coffees—fixed the way she knew they liked them—were laid out. Jane fussed with her hair one more time then smoothed her white-and-navy striped tank top

over her navy capri pants before sitting and placing a muffin and coffee mug in front of her.

Maxi plopped down in her chair, took a sip, and let out a sigh. “Ahh, caffeine.”

Maxi was dressed more casually than usual in a yellow-and-white flowing gypsy skirt and loose white top. Instead of thrusting her hair into a bun or a chignon, a style Claire suspected was encouraged by her husband, her blond hair was loose, the silver-tinged strands curling around her shoulders and tucked beneath the wide brim of a straw hat.

“Is James away?” Claire brushed flour off her apron before sitting down. She wasn’t dressed nearly as nicely as her two friends in her usual uniform of frosting-stained apron over her plain gray T-shirt and jeans.

“Yep, conference in Ohio,” Maxi said around a mouthful of muffin.

Claire caught Jane’s raised-brow look from across the table. Maxi’s husband was the president of the Lobster Bay Bank, and Claire and Jane had noticed that Maxi always dressed more casually when he was away. Claire liked James, but she knew that he valued appearances, and *casual* was simply not a word in his repertoire.

“So how’s everything going with you guys?” Jane asked.

“Great. I’m getting the house in order now that we have an empty nest.” Maxi plastered a smile on her face, but something in her tone told Claire that things might not be that great. Not that Claire would pry. They’d been friends long enough to respect each other’s privacy, and she knew Maxi would open up if she wanted to talk.

“Good here,” Claire said. Forcing herself *not* to look at the mysterious shop across the street, she took a bite of the chocolate croissant. The dark chocolate filling was decadent enough to soothe her worries about the other shop, not to mention the small water stain she’d spotted in the ceiling of her own. “I’ve hired Sally to do some repairs.”

Like many of the buildings in the village, Sandcastles was quite old. Claire loved the vintage details—the tall tin ceilings, the crown molding, and the wide pine floors. But repairs came along with those. Luckily she ran her business well and had money in the budget for them, a fact of which she was proud.

“She’ll do a good job,” Jane said. “We’ve had her do some things at Tides.”

“How are things going at Tides?” Jane’s family had owned the bed-and-breakfast on the beach for generations. It had been run by her great-grandparents then her grandparents then her parents. Jane’s dad had died long ago, and her mother, Addie, had run it on her own until her recent memory problems had surfaced. Jane had to take an early retirement from her accounting position so she could help out. Claire was never sure if she should ask Jane about Addie. She wanted Jane to know she cared, but she didn’t want to put a damper on the conversation if Addie was having one of her bad days.

“Things were going smoothly this morning. Mom was like her old self.” Jane looked at the watch on her wrist. “Which reminds me, I can’t stay too long. I need to get back to give Brenda a break.”

“Of course.” Maxi looked at Jane with concern. “It’s good that your mom was like her old self.”

Jane nodded, absently breaking a piece off her muffin. She smiled, but Claire could see the worry in her eyes. “Let’s hope it lasts for a while.”

A burst of giggling pulled their attention to the street. A group of teenage girls in cover-ups that barely concealed anything stood on the sidewalk, clearly trying to capture the attention of the teenage boys lingering near the beach store on the corner.

“Reminds you of when we were young, doesn’t it?” Jane’s half smile was wistful.

Maxi rolled her eyes then shoved the rest of the muffin into her mouth, pulled a pencil from her straw bag, and proceeded to sketch onto her napkin. “That was a long time ago.”

Claire nibbled the flaky edge of her croissant. Memories of the three of them as teenagers bubbled up. Of course, the town had changed over the decades but not as much as one would think. Most of the quaint old buildings were still there, and though new houses and restaurants had been built somehow over the years, the town had retained its old-fashioned small-town vibe despite it becoming an increasingly popular tourist destination.

Claire, Jane, and Maxi had grown up there. They’d had a lot of fun as teens, especially in the summer, when the town’s population would swell with tourists.

“Did we ever flirt like that?” Claire asked.

Jane laughed. "They seem a lot more accomplished at it. Do you remember how awkward it was when we were that age?"

Claire couldn't help but smile. "It wasn't all bumbling. I remember getting some results."

Jane smirked. "I seem to remember you getting some results with one of the tourist boys near the cedar tree on the Marginal Way, Claire."

Claire wrinkled her nose and waved her hand dismissively, avoiding her friend's eye. "That was so long ago. Who could remember one particular boy?"

But Claire *did* remember, in a hazy, dreamlike way. The edges of the memory were misty, from a time when she'd brimmed with energy and innocence. It felt impossibly long ago, but she still recalled the hot summer night, the full moon rising over the ocean, and the boy who had given her one of her first kisses on the mile-long path that weaved along the ocean cliffs and led from Perkins Cove to the beach.

It wasn't like she thought of it often, but sometimes, the memory came up. Odd. With all the boys that had come after, including her ex-husband, she still thought about that one kiss. She didn't even know who he was. She hadn't seen him or his friends after that night.

"What was his name?" Jane muttered to herself. "Teddy? Gerry?"

"Bobby," Claire answered absently, still halfway trapped in that thirty-five-year-old memory.

"So you *do* remember him." Maxi glanced over slyly from her drawing.

Claire blushed like she was fifteen again instead of turning fifty come the fall. "I don't. Not really. I mean, it was thirty-five years ago. I doubt I'd recognize him if we met on the street."

Brushing her hair out of her narrowed eyes, Maxi looked at Claire like she didn't believe the stammered excuse.

Claire needed a change of topic. She pointed to the napkin Maxi had been working on. "That's a great sketch."

Maxi glanced down and shrugged. "Just a doodle."

But it wasn't *just a doodle*. It showed one of the girls looking up, enraptured, at a boy whose figure was ominously in shadow. The sketch was exquisite and intricately detailed from what Claire could see before Maxi quickly shoved it into her bag.

"I have to get back." Jane looked apologetic.

Claire jumped up, her chair screeching along the bricks as she stood. She turned to face Jane, who started gathering up the trash on the table.

“Wait here a minute. I’ll get you some muffins for Addie.”

Claire disappeared into the shop. She found the bag she’d set in a corner earlier—not near the back where she suspected the roof leaked—and hurried back out. She passed the bag to Jane as she hugged her. “I know how Addie loves these.”

Jane smiled and clutched her tight. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

Claire beamed. “What are friends for?”

She hugged Maxi as well. As she pulled away, her gaze settled on the store across the street again. The teens had moved on, and now she had an unobstructed view. Her smile faded.

Her friends must have noticed because they both turned their gaze in that direction.

“Oh! I forgot to mention, I know who’s moving in over there.” Jane’s tone held a hint of excitement at knowing a secret.

“Really? Who?” Claire tried to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

“Bradford Breads.”

Claire’s stomach swooped. She snapped her gaze from the store across the street to Jane. “A bakery?”

“It’s not really a bakery,” Jane said. “Not like yours. They only sell bread.”

Claire glanced back at the store. The papered windows seemed to glare at her menacingly. Where had she heard of Bradford Breads before? Weren’t they some sort of chain? Chain stores were always the bane of the small business owner. Better recognition, lower overhead, and therefore, lower prices.

“Claire?” Maxi was staring at her. “Surely you aren’t worried about them. They don’t sell pastries like you do.”

“Yeah,” Jane agreed. “I went to one of the stores up in Bar Harbor years ago. They make good bread but no pastries, and certainly no sandcastle cakes. It’s a totally different product. Besides, no one can hold a candle to your baked goods.”

Her friends were right. She only sold a few types of bread. She was overreacting. She plastered on a smile so her friends wouldn’t worry. “You’re right of course. It’s just a little disturbing that a bakery would move in across the street from another bakery.”

Jane shrugged. "Maybe not. Since you don't sell bread, it could be a strategic move. Once the customers get their pastries at Sandcastles, they can pick up fresh-baked bread at Bradfords."

Or skip buying pastries and just get the bread.

Claire pushed the thought away. Now she was being paranoid. "I suppose you're right. Nothing to worry about at all."

The response appeared to put her friends at ease, and they left. But as Claire picked up the tray and made her way back into the bakery, she couldn't suppress that seed of worry that insisted on pushing its way into her thoughts.

"DID Claire seem overly bothered about that bread store, or was it my imagination?" Maxi glanced back over her shoulder at Sandcastles as she and Jane walked down toward the beach, where they would part ways.

Jane grimaced. "Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"She would have found out anyway. I just hope she doesn't do something drastic. She's probably back at the bakery researching Bradford Breads right now." They turned down Beach Street, and Maxi took a deep breath of sea air. At the end of the street was the ocean with its crashing waves and white sand beach. Jane's inn was a quarter mile down the beach, and she liked to walk back at the edge of the surf. Maxi's house was up on the cliff, and she would walk home on a path called the Marginal Way, which skirted along the very edge of the cliffs. It was all very beautiful and leisurely, but that was part of her problem. Maxi had too much leisure time.

Jane's pace slowed. "What do you think she would do?"

Maxi shrugged. "Who knows? You know Claire: act first and think about the consequences later."

Jane laughed. It was a running joke between the three of them that Claire could be impulsive. The funny part was that Claire didn't always see it that way. Maxi supposed they each had their own quirks, and it was great that they could try to steer each other in the right direction when those quirks took over. Jane liked to play it safe a bit too much, and Maxi supposed she was a little too easy going, too accepting of people's inconsiderate behavior, too ready to sacrifice what she wanted to please

everyone—like James, for instance. Troubling thoughts of her marriage caused her to frown.

“Maybe we need to call an evening meeting and feel her out a bit more. You know she wouldn’t want to bother us with her worries, and I want to be there to help her if she needs it.” Jane’s kind words pulled Maxi away from her selfish thoughts.

“Good idea. But I don’t think we should make too much of the bread store. Let’s just pretend we want to get together after a stressful day or something. If we build the store up too much, that might worry her even more.”

“It won’t be hard for Claire to believe I need a break after a stressful day. I’ve had plenty of those lately,” Jane said.

Maxi’s heart melted with sympathy. She knew Jane was conflicted about what to do with Addie. She’d been trying to give her gentle guidance, but the truth was Maxi had no idea what she would do in Jane’s situation. At the age of eighty-one, her mom was as sharp as ever. “I’m sorry you’re going through all this. I wish I could do more.”

“Thanks, I don’t think there’s anything anyone can do. I just have to do the best I can. Besides, we all have our troubles.”

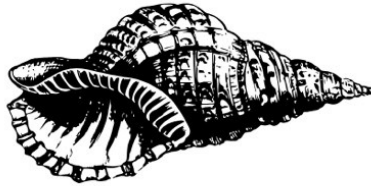
Maxi looked away from Jane’s probing eyes. She wasn’t surprised her friend had noticed that something was off. They’d been close for too long for her not to see it, but Maxi wasn’t ready to voice her troubles yet. In fact, she wasn’t even really sure that she and James had troubles. Maybe they simply needed to adjust to life being the two of them again.

They stopped at the beach, and Jane slipped her sandals off. “Okay, I’ll send a text later today.”

“Perfect. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

They said goodbye, and Maxi headed off toward the path.

CHAPTER TWO



Claire tried to focus on baking, but one name kept creeping into her thoughts. *Bradford Breads*. Huffing out an exasperated breath, Claire shoved the latest batch of snickerdoodles into the oven, dug her smart phone out of her pocket, and opened the browser.

Twelve store locations. The new, yet-to-be-announced location would be the “baker’s dozen” joked the website. Her jaw tightening painfully. Claire clicked to view the menu.

Breads, breads, and more breads: artisanal breads, multi-grain breads, dinner rolls, sandwich rolls, banana bread, chocolate zucchini bread, vegan and gluten free bread, cheese breads, breadsticks. None of it, not a word as she scrolled through the admittedly delicious-looking professional pictures, made any mention of pastries.

That made her feel better. She looked through the doorway of the kitchen to the café at her bakery cases filled with frosted delicacies. Her eyes came to rest on what she was famous for—her sandcastle cakes. The one-of-a-kind cakes looked like edible sandcastles. Never mind that it took three times as long to make than any other cake. Claire loved hand-cutting the turrets and battlements and pressing the colored sugar crystals to the fondant—a painstaking process. The cakes were popular and set her bakery apart. It was worth the effort. She bet Bradford Breads didn’t have anything special like that.

She was making too much of it, just like her friends had said. She just had so much tied up in Sandcastles. Any threat was blown out of

proportion. She didn't just sink all her money into it. She'd sunk *herself* into it too.

The clang of metal followed by a muffled curse came from somewhere near the back of the shop. That would be Sally Littlefield, the town handywoman, who was looking into the cause of the water stain that had appeared on the ceiling corner near the coffee station.

Claire's phone chimed in her pocket. She pulled it free, staring uncomprehendingly at the garble of numbers on the screen. *Who would be calling me from...?* She squinted at the screen. *What's that country code?*

Tammi! Her daughter was on a last-fling-before-settling-into-a-real-job overseas trip and had picked up a prepaid phone to use while in Europe. Claire punched the button to answer the call before she missed her chance. Breathless, she held the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom. Are you busy?"

"No," Claire answered at once, even though she should relieve Hailey soon for the end of her shift. Guiltily, she twisted to glance through the opening leading to the front of the store. Hailey's dark hair, which was twisted up into a messy bun at the top of her head, bobbed in and out of view as she smoothly cleaned the front counter and handled the occasional customer. "How's... France?"

"Germany, now. And it's great. We're having the best time!"

Claire listened with only half an ear, positioning herself for more privacy as her daughter recounted the adventures she'd had over the past week with her friends. Although Claire had worried about her daughter in a foreign country, she had to remind herself that Tammi was an adult now, and she had a good head on her shoulders. Plus, she'd convinced her two best friends to accompany her. Safety in numbers. Between them, they knew enough words in local languages to get by.

"That's great." Claire put the mixing bowl and spatulas into the sink.

"Mom?" Tammi asked, almost tentatively. "Is everything all right?"

"Of course," Claire answered, forcing a smile as if a table separated her from her daughter rather than the thousands of miles and ocean between them.

"You know I can tell when you're worried about something, right? What's going on?"

Claire sighed. As much as she didn't want Tammi to worry about her, she couldn't lie. Tammi would know if she did, and she was working on not treating her like a child. "Honestly, it's nothing. There's another bakery moving into Lobster Bay, that's all. I'm a little worried about how much competition it will be, which is silly. They only bake bread."

On the other end of the line, tinny with distance, Tammi laughed. "Why are you worried? If someone else is moving in, out-market them. You've already got a dedicated client base. This other place won't last."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is, Mom. I was a marketing major in college, remember? I know what I'm talking about. Take a few ads out in the local paper and online. Arrange for a special sale or discount day for seniors or students. Make a few flyers to promote it or maybe some coupons. Everyone will be flocking to your store and ignoring this new place. Trust me."

The idea of people flocking to Sandcastles was appealing. Maybe she should take Tammi's advice and show this Bradford Breads person who the better baker was. But Claire knew nothing about marketing. Then again, she had Tammi for backup.

"I've never really done much to advertise. What do I do?" Claire asked.

"That's a testament to how awesome your place is. But it won't hurt to get more people in. Like I said, it's easy. I would start with some coupons or maybe a special sale. Just take out an ad in the local paper. Maybe put a banner up outside the store."

Claire glanced through the front window. A banner right under the awning certainly would attract a lot of people. Business was good, but more customers were always welcome. And how much could ads cost? She could use some of her savings because surely the leak Sally was working on wouldn't cost *that* much.

"Look, if you want, I can sit down with you after I'm back from my trip. We can hammer this out together."

"Oh, I can figure it out," Claire said, her voice falsely bright. "Easy peasy." The last thing Claire wanted was for Tammi to think she was floundering, because she wasn't. She also didn't want her to think that she was a ditz who couldn't figure out how to run a few ads on her own. Claire might not have done everything right in her life, but the one thing she wanted to show her daughter was that she could be successful on her own

merits. If Claire was following her dream and running a successful business, she hoped her daughter would be inspired to do the same.

“Great!” Tammi said. “Okay. Well, I have to go, Mom. Love you!”

“Love you.” Claire’s answer was automatic and heartfelt.

Marketing. It was such a foreign word, and despite what Tammi had suggested, Claire didn’t know where to start or with what money. She had seven thousand dollars in her savings account. Hopefully that would be enough for a few ads with some left for the repairs.

The rattle and muttering from the back had stopped. Claire frowned, wondering if it was safe to approach Sally yet. Cautiously, she moved toward the source of the noise.

“Sally?”

The seventy-year-old woman stepped out of the back. There was a smudge of grease along one of her cheekbones and a few more on her overalls. The handywoman with her snowy-white hair braided tightly down her back and her shrewd blue eyes cleaned her hands on a rag. “Ayuh?”

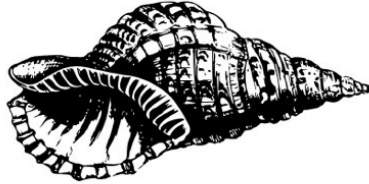
“Have you...?” Claire cringed to ask. “Have you found the source of the leak? Was it an easy fix?”

“Not this time, honey. I’m afraid it’s those pipes of yours. Won’t last much longer.” The creases in Sally’s face deepened in sympathy even as she delivered the news in her matter-of-fact way.

Pipes? Claire didn’t know anything about plumbing. Faintly, she asked, “How much will it cost for you to fix?”

“Fix?” Sally shook her head. “It’s more’n I can do. These pipes are original. You’ll need Ralph Marchand to tear out those pipes and put in new ones, if you ask me. He’ll know better about cost. But you’d better call him quick. If those pipes go, you’re going to have a big mess on your hands.”

CHAPTER THREE



Jane Miller watched a wave rush up the white sand beach to fill the footprint she'd left behind. The ocean breeze ruffled her hair, and she pushed a strand out of her face. The shorter style still felt foreign, but with all her duties at Tides, it was easier than messing with the shoulder-length cut she had most of her adult life.

A sandpiper darted along the foamy edge of the water on long sticklike legs, running forward as the surf went out then retreating just in time to avoid getting its feet wet. Sometimes Jane felt like she was doing the same thing at Tides, rushing forward then back and never making much progress.

Speaking of which, she'd best get back there and make sure things were running smoothly. Reluctantly, she turned and headed up the beach, leaving the soothing sounds of the crashing waves behind.

The wide back porch of Tides, with its row of rocking chairs, was a comforting sight. She'd grown up there, and some of her earliest and fondest memories centered around that house and the expansive beach beyond it. But now, as she stared at the French doors leading inside, the feeling of comfort gave way to anxiety. All the familiar and comfortable feelings tied to the house seemed to be fading away along with her mother's memories.

Even though her mother was still physically in good health, Jane was losing her, but then, Jane knew about loss. First her infant son, then her husband. She had weathered those storms. She would weather this one too.

She laid her hand on the porch railing. The wood needed a fresh coat of paint to survive the summer without being replaced. One more thing for her

to worry about. It seemed the hundred-year-old house always needed some kind of maintenance.

The bakery bag crinkled as her hand tightened around it. She used to love walking into Tides and seeing her mother bustling around, tending to guests, but not so much now. Now she was never sure if her mother would be the mother she'd always known or a stranger. She never knew if *she* would be the mother and Addie the child.

The French doors led to a gathering room with faded, overstuffed armchairs, a television mounted on the wall, and magazines scattered across the table. Jane stopped to straighten them, putting everything in its place, avoiding the kitchen, but she couldn't busy herself forever. Steeling herself, she lifted the paper bag full of muffins and continued on. The smell of bacon and eggs filled her nose as she stepped into the warm atmosphere. The kitchen had always been a refuge from the rest of the house, a place where Jane and her sister could sneak treats from the cook, where her grandmother—and in recent years her mother—seemed to spend most of her time. A place for family.

Brenda, about fifteen years Jane's senior, leaned over a pan of sizzling bacon. She had her white-threaded brown hair pulled back into a bun and an apron wrapped along the ample curve of her waist. Every time Jane walked into that room and saw Brenda, she couldn't help but breathe a small sigh of relief. If Brenda was there cooking, then Mom wouldn't be. Brenda had become far more than a cook over the past few years. She no longer went home after the cooking was done. Now she stayed to help care for Addie. And for her part, Jane's mom seemed to recognize Brenda more than she did her own daughter.

Hip to hip with Brenda, Jane's mom—a tall, frail woman nearing eighty who strongly resembled Jane—stood over a large pan of scrambled eggs, mixing them with the spatula. She hummed under her breath, a small smile on her lips, and Jane knew she must still be feeling good. Her mother loved cooking so much that Jane did not want to rob her of that simple joy, but every time Addie stepped close to the stove, Jane feared she would put on a pan or pot and walk away or touch a burner that was hot because she didn't remember it was on.

Smiling, Jane crossed toward her mother. She kissed her on the cheek and held up the bag. "I brought you some chocolate chip muffins."

Her mother's eyes brightened. As she turned away from the stove, Brenda took up the spatula Addie had left in the pan with the ease of long practice. Jane tried not to worry at how seamlessly Brenda took over her mother's post, as if she had done so countless times as Addie's attention waned. Instead, Jane opened the bag and rooted inside until she pulled out one of the chocolate chip muffins Claire had put inside.

With a wide smile, Addie took the muffin and started gleefully peeling off the wrapper. "Did you stop at Sam's?"

Addie wasn't as lucid as she looked. Jane tried to hide her disappointment as she guided her mother to the long pine table that had been in the kitchen since before Jane was born. Maybe even before *Addie* was born. The table was so old that most of the turquoise paint had been rubbed off. Still, some remained in the cracks and crevices and the turns of the legs. She sat in a chair across from her mom and watched Addie free the muffin from its paper.

Gently, she corrected her mother. "Not from Sam's. Sam's has been closed down for years, Mom. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

Despite Addie's words, the look in her eye was uncertain. She hadn't remembered, and Jane knew how she beat herself up over forgetting simple little things like that.

In a small voice, she whispered, "I guess I forgot. I'm so stupid, and you're such an angel for putting up with me."

Jane's heart twisted. She reached out and clasped her mother's bony hand. "Not stupid. We all forget things like this now and again." Even if her mother forgot more often than not now.

Jane added, "Claire baked those muffins. You remember Claire, don't you?"

Growing up, Claire had been as much of a constant in the house as Jane and her sister, Andie. Her mom always remembered the past more clearly than the present, even on her lucid days.

"Oh, Claire. Yes, of course I do. Such a sweet girl. How is she?"

Although her mother said all the right words, Jane knew that they were empty. The glassy look on her face and the way that she didn't quite meet Jane's eyes gave it away. She had no idea who Claire was, and that was almost as worrisome as the days when she forgot Jane.

She didn't want to make her mother feel worse, so instead of correcting her further, Jane just told her, "Claire is doing very well. She told me to say hello." Jane stood. She had work to do. "I'm going to take stock of the fridge, if there's nothing else you need?"

Addie's mouth firmed in a stubborn expression. "Of course not. I'm a grown woman. I can do things for myself."

Jane left her mother and the muffins on the table and stepped into the walk-in fridge, leaving the door wide open and basking in the cool air as she checked the shelves. With Brenda staying longer at the inn, they had taken to cooking not only breakfast for the guests but also lunch during weekends. They also baked snacks or left out trays of vegetables or crackers and cheese for the guests to munch on in the gathering room in the afternoon. In Jane's opinion, it had helped them get a higher rating on Yelp, which helped search algorithms. Anything to bring in more customers, something the inn seemed to be lacking as of late.

She supposed it was her own fault. She'd never paid much attention to the running of the inn. Had she really thought that her mother would be able to keep up with it forever? Maybe she'd expected her sister to rush in and take over. Andie had left after high school and barely come back since. Jane should have realized that running the inn would have fallen to her, but instead she had buried her head in the sand and continued down the safe road of her accounting career.

She pulled up a spreadsheet on her smartphone where she kept a running count of everything in the refrigerator. She modified that count and added a few items to the next grocery list. She scanned the shelves one last time, her mind drifting to Claire.

Jane knew Claire, knew her inside and out, just as Claire knew Jane. She'd known ever since Claire had opened the bakery—a sign that she was moving on with her life after an admittedly terrible marriage—that her friend's self-worth was tied up in its success.

Claire led her life with her heart on her sleeve. She didn't respond to logic the way Jane did. Telling Claire that her business would survive because of all its merits didn't help to ease her friend's worry. Claire was stubborn. She would have to see that for herself.

When Jane stepped out of the fridge, Addie was already back at the stove, instructing Brenda as they arranged bacon and eggs into the two

covered trays. Jane couldn't help but smile at the familiar scene. Her mother was always meticulous about presenting things to her guests just so.

Noticing Jane's return, Addie cast a quick smile over her shoulder as she hovered at Brenda's side while the other woman carried the tray. "Please thank Claire for that muffin, dear."

She *remembered*. It had been minutes, not hours or days, since Jane had given her the muffin, but there were days when Addie seemed to forget details the moment she heard them.

Jane beamed. "I will."

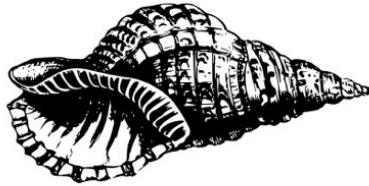
As Brenda shuffled through the swinging door into the dining room, Addie turned her attention back to food prep, humming under her breath as she took out measuring cups and a bowl. As she sifted flour into the bowl, Jane leaned against the door to the refrigerator and smiled. She counted the cups of flour, noticing that her mother didn't hesitate with the often-used recipe.

Turning, Addie frowned, hands on her hips. "Are you going to help me with these pancakes, or aren't you? I need eggs and milk."

Jane jumped to attention, just like in years long gone. "Yes, ma'am."

As she slipped back into the cool refrigerator, she tried to focus on the fact that this was a good day. She had her mother for however long she was lucid. Sooner or later, she would have to make hard decisions about her care, but until then she would cherish every last moment like this.

CHAPTER FOUR



“Y our instincts are as sharp as ever, Sally,” Ralph said, descending the ladder he’d used to inspect the pipes at Sandcastles. Despite the compliment, his face was grim as he glanced at Claire.

“Are they bad?” Claire asked.

Ralph nodded in agreement. “Ayuh.” He scratched his thinning pate. “I might be able to solder a patch here and there, but I can’t guarantee how long they’d hold. They’re the original copper pipes, and the fittings break down over time. Could be a year. Could be a day.”

Darn it! Claire had known the building was old when she’d bought it. That was part of its charm. But five years ago, the building was in good repair. It’d had no major problems until now, only small odd jobs she’d called Sally to fix. They made things better back when the old building had gone up. Surely those old pipes would hold out for a while. Ralph was probably being overcautious.

Sally gave Claire a sympathetic glance then turned to the town plumber. “Can you fit her in, Ralph?”

“Ayuh.” He scratched at his head again, seeming at a loss. “You’ll have to close, as I’ll need to rip some things apart in here, and it won’t do to have customers hanging around. I’ll warn you: you’ll need to get some repair work to the walls after.”

Close in the middle of tourist season? The sunny days were her best revenue days. During the winter months, maybe she could manage to close the shop and not suffer for it, but now, with a new bakery moving in, closing Sandcastles was not an option.

Claire chewed on the inside of her cheek. “How much?”

Ralph rocked back on his heels, considering. “I could do it for about ten grand, give or take. I’d have to price out materials before I can give you a better estimate.”

“Ten grand?” The words barely escaped through Claire’s tight throat. She didn’t have that much in her savings account. And after her conversation with Tammi, she’d relegated a good portion of her savings for advertising. Without it, there would be no savvy marketing. There would be no throngs of customers lined up in front of her bakery to show Bradford Breads who the town’s favorite baker was.

“It has to be done,” Sally said. Her practical manner helped to ground Claire. She was right, of course. Claire knew she would have to do it, but how would she find ten thousand dollars? Her gaze skated around the kitchen. Sandcastles was her dream. She’d put a lot of sweat and tears into it. She wasn’t going to let a few pipe repairs bring her down.

Jaw firm, she said, “I’ll try to get a loan from the bank to cover the cost. How long will you need the shop closed?” Two or three days, she might be able to work into the schedule. She could have a grand reopening and use some of Tammi’s marketing suggestions to draw in customers. Not to mention, she could continue to bake the custom-ordered cakes at home and deliver them personally. It might work out to her advantage after all.

“About two weeks, I’d say.”

Claire took a deep breath. *Two weeks? No way, not right now.* Not with that bakery about to open across the street. The pipes had lasted a hundred years. Surely they could last until the end of summer.

“I’ll talk to the bank. I might not be able to swing it until October.” The pipes groaned ominously, as if warning Claire to speed up the timeline.

Ralph raised a brow at Sally then turned to Claire. “Okay, I’ll patch the leaks for now. Give me a call as soon as you know when you want me to start.”

HAILEY NOTICED the worried look on Claire’s face as she let Sally and Ralph out the back. Something was really bothering her boss, and she

wanted to find out what it was. It was a slow time of day, so she filled two mugs with coffee and ushered Claire over to a table in the corner.

“Sit. Let’s chat. We haven’t done that in a while.” Hailey pushed Claire into a chair.

“Aren’t you supposed to leave now?” Claire wrapped her hands around the mug.

“Yeah, but I have a few minutes. Mrs. Pease doesn’t expect me back until four thirty.” Mrs. Pease was the babysitter to Hailey’s eleven-year-old, Jennifer. Hailey had actually planned to pick up some groceries with the extra time, but she and Claire had become close after working together in the bakery despite their fifteen-year age difference, and she sensed that Claire needed to talk.

Claire was a good boss and a nice person, and she paid fantastic wages, which Hailey was very grateful for. Being a single mother wasn’t easy financially, and Hailey knew that most bakery assistants didn’t get paid nearly as much as she did. Hailey needed her job, so if Claire was worried, that meant *she* was worried. Besides, she had something important to discuss with Claire, but maybe it wasn’t the time.

Hailey cut to the chase. “So, what’s going on with the ceiling?”

Claire made a face. “Pipes need replacing.”

“Oh. That sounds expensive.” Probably not the time to ask for more responsibility and a raise. Never mind that her car was on its last leg and she needed it to take Jennifer to her soccer games and get to work or that she was getting behind on payments toward all the debt her ex-husband had saddled her with. She didn’t want to seem ungrateful, and her troubles were not Claire’s problem. They weren’t anyone’s problem except hers, and she would figure out how to solve them.

“It is. But I have some money saved.” Claire sipped her coffee, her eyes drifting to the new store across the street. Her face darkened.

Hailey had noticed the store too. She had no idea what was going in there, but apparently it had Claire worried. “Do you know what the new store will be?”

“Bradford Breads.”

“Breads? Huh, seems odd to move in across from a bakery.”

“That’s exactly what I thought.” Claire turned her attention back to Hailey. “Oh, but it’s nothing to worry about, I’m sure.”

Hailey frowned. She got the sense that Claire really was worried and was just telling Hailey that because she didn't want her to worry. "Yeah, sure. I mean we don't even carry bread here, really."

"Right. No competition."

Hailey glanced over at the store. Maybe it sold breads now, but what if this Bradford Breads place decided to expand into pastries later on? Then it would be competition. No wonder Claire was so worried, and on top of that, there was this looming problem with the pipes. She would have to get that fixed, as she couldn't afford a big plumbing catastrophe with a bread store moving in. Plumbers cost a lot of money. Hailey knew that from experience. Definitely not the time to ask for a raise. They would just have to eat more ramen noodles for a while. Good thing Jennifer loved them.

"How's Jennifer?" Claire's question brought a smile to Hailey's face.

"Great. She got an award for summer soccer, and now she wants to play on the Lobster Bay school team in the fall." Hailey's smile faded just a bit. "She's growing up so fast."

"I know how that goes. Seems like Tammi was Jennifer's age just yesterday. Just try to enjoy every minute. Speaking of which—" Claire nodded toward the clock. "You should probably get going."

"Yeah, I suppose. Is there anything I can do to help with the pipes?" Hailey shot a glance over at the new store again.

"Oh, no. Don't you worry about those. Now scoot! I'll go see if Harry and Bert want a refill. It's always slow on Mondays, so I might close early anyway."

Hailey stood, taking her mug with her. She would wash it in the sink on her way out. "Okay, well if you're sure."

"Of course. Nothing for you to worry about. See you tomorrow!"

CLAIRE WATCHED HAILEY LEAVE. The last thing she wanted was to worry her assistant. The girl had enough on her plate raising an eleven-year-old all on her own. Hailey had picked up on the fact that something was bothering Claire, so she would have to be careful from now on. But the fact that Hailey depended on her job there was just another worry for Claire. If Bradford Breads stole business, would she still be able to pay Hailey?

Grabbing the coffee pot, she headed over to the corner table where Harry and Bert, her favorite regulars, were chatting away, huddled over a newspaper. The two men were in their late seventies and spent a good deal of time sitting right at that table, reading the paper. From their vantage point, they could see who was coming and going and greet any of their friends entering the coffee shop. They were good customers.

“What’s so interesting?” Claire tilted her head to look at the paper.

“That place across the street is finally opening. Gonna have a two-for-one sale on Saturday and a grand opening.” Harry pointed to an ad that took up a whole page. A smiling loaf of bread announced the opening of Bradford Breads. Claire resisted the urge to grab a marker and doodle a villain’s mustache on the smiling bread face.

“Looks like a big deal,” Bert added. “I hope they have rye. You hardly ever find that anywhere.”

Claire glanced back at the tiny bread section of her bakery case. She didn’t have rye.

“Do you think they’ll have some of those fancy breads like oatmeal molasses or honey olive?” Harry was practically salivating.

Claire glared at the new store, picturing all her customers rushing over for fancy breads. “Hard to tell what they’ll have.”

Her voice came out a little weak, and Harry glanced up at her, his gray brows furrowing in concern. “I’m sure they won’t have anything as good as you have here.” He glanced back at the case with the lame selection of breads, and Claire’s stomach tightened.

“Yeah, whatever this Bradford guy has can’t be as good as what you got.” Bert squinted down at the ad. “Looks like just bread. Man cannot exist on bread alone. We need pastries, and this is the best place for that.”

Claire’s chest warmed at the men’s loyalty and their attempt to make her feel better, but she knew what they were thinking: the same thing she was. Come Saturday, the whole town would be over at Bradford Breads, and she would be sitting in an empty coffee shop.

“Hey, maybe you should have a sale on Saturday too,” Bert suggested.

That might not be a bad idea. Tammi had suggested she have a sale, but Saturday was in less than a week, and Claire didn’t have any idea what she would put on sale, let alone know how to take out an ad.

The bell above the door jingled, and Claire turned to greet the new customer. Her cheery greeting froze on her lips when her gaze met the other

woman's baby blues: her ex-husband's new trophy wife.

Oh no. She did *not* need this today.

Sandra—or Sandee, as she liked to call herself—looked no older than thirty-five and dressed as if she were twenty despite being in her midforties. She insisted on everyone calling her by her ridiculous nickname. What grown woman chose to spell her name with two Es instead of a Y?

It was probably that fountain of youth Claire's ex-husband had hoped to tap by first leaving Claire for this woman then later marrying her. She was everything Claire was not—blond with a supermodel figure and a defined taste for fashion. And Sandee, petty as she was, never missed an opportunity to subtly flaunt her success as a real estate agent for high-end beach property.

Claire was successful too. Claire had a thriving bakery, *and* she didn't have to lure customers in by trying to look half her age.

"Hello, Sandee. What can I get you?" Claire had to make an effort not to choke on her words, but she was a professional, and Sandee *was* a customer.

"I'm here for your famous cupcakes. My parents are coming down to have dinner with me and Pete tonight, and they loved them the last time they were here. I guess you always were a talent in the kitchen. Not like me. I have far too many other things to do."

Claire bit the inside of her cheek to stop from making a sarcastic comment about how Sandee spent her time.

Sandee didn't seem terribly disappointed when Claire didn't ask what those other things were. She leaned forward as best she could on her pencil-thin heels, showing off her perky breasts through the dress's low-cut neckline. Had she gotten a boob job? Claire didn't want to stare, so she crossed her arms over her own modest chest and waited as Sandee took her time choosing the cupcakes.

"I'll take two of the chocolate, one of the vanilla, and..." Her nose wrinkled. "Don't you have a healthier choice?"

"In a cupcake?" Claire couldn't keep the incredulity from her voice.

Sandee straightened. "A vegan sugar-free option or something."

"You aren't vegan." Unless that was a new development.

"No," she drew out the word, "but it's probably better for you than this sugary stuff." She sighed dramatically. "Better add in another vanilla, then."

Leave it to Sandee to insult the very cupcakes she'd come in to purchase. Claire pressed her lips tight together and put four cupcakes into a box that fit them perfectly. She sealed it with a sticker that included her Sandcastles logo. When she perched it on the counter in front of the cash register, Sandee eyed the display case, tapping a bright-fuchsia fingernail against her lips.

"Anything else?" Claire tried to keep her distaste for the woman out of her voice.

The blonde shook her head, her straight hair billowing and catching the afternoon sunlight. "No, I don't think I'll buy bread here today. I'd rather wait for the sale at that new bakery coming to town." Sandee turned to look pointedly out the window at the new store, the store Claire was quickly coming to view as her competitor. Sandee turned back, her blue eyes all wide and innocent. "You know they're having a twofer sale? That's a lot. If my folks weren't coming to dinner, I'd spend the money over there. It's like getting double!"

Claire knew Sandee was baiting her, but she couldn't help the thoughts swirling in her brain. How many other people were skimping on buying pastries this week and saving their money for bread?

Even worse, Sandee had a look of triumph in her eyes that told Claire she'd been purposely trying to upset her. She loved that Claire was distressed about the bakery's grand opening. Claire wasn't about to let Sandee get the better of her.

Before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "I'm having an even bigger sale than Bradford Breads on Saturday!"

Sandee lifted a thin eyebrow. "You are?"

"Yes. Huge."

"Better than two-for-one?"

Claire swallowed against the lump in her throat. She couldn't take it back now. "Yes. Buy one, get *two* free."

"You're having a *bread* sale?"

"No." Her gaze dropped to the white box with its pink-and-yellow sticker. "Cupcakes."

"Are you now?" Harry called from the corner. There was real warmth in his voice.

His companion nudged him as they both stood, their chairs scraping back as they prepared to leave. "See? I told you she wouldn't let that bread

guy get the better of her. She'll give this new bread place a run for its money!"

Their support gave Claire confidence. Yep, a sale was the perfect solution.

Sandee looked skeptical. She glanced around the shop critically. "You're really going to have a sale? Why don't I see anything about it? Other stores have flyers and posters up whenever they're preparing for a sale."

"I'm going to advertise later," Claire answered, starting to stumble over her tongue. Okay, maybe she'd blurted it all out a bit too spontaneously. How far ahead did one have to plan to get an ad in the paper? How long did it take to make flyers?

"I'm sure you're going to be running a big ad to generate interest." Harry tapped the paper now folded under his arm.

"Oh, sure. There will be an ad and posters, flyers, the whole nine yards." Claire looked Sandee in the eye and forced a smile.

"I hope you're going to offer more variety than chocolate and vanilla. People won't come in for the same old thing."

Unfortunately, Sandee's caustic remark made sense. "Of course there will be other flavors. At least six."

"Oh?" Sandee pursed her lips. "Which flavors?"

Claire's forced smile was starting to hurt. "You'll have to come in on Saturday to see."

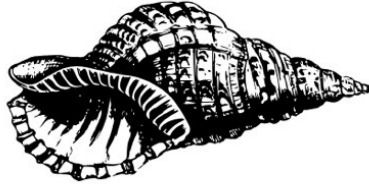
"You know we'll be here," Bert called as he and Harry left the shop. "Be sure to save us our usual spot!"

Claire waved to them as they exited into the summer air, leaving her pinned beneath Sandee's narrow-eyed gaze.

"If you're going to have such a popular sale, I can only imagine the enormous number of cupcakes you'll need to bake. Why, they'll have to overflow the display case, or you'll run out! Are you sure you'll be able to bake all those cupcakes in your tiny kitchen in time?"

"Don't worry, I'll manage. I know a little bit about baking. It'll be a piece of cake."

CHAPTER FIVE



Claire closed the shop after Bert and Harry left. There were no other customers, and she knew it would be slow for the rest of the day. She needed to retreat to her favorite place—the beach—and think about how she was going to pull off a bake sale.

Her feet had automatically taken her to the river side of the beach, a well-worn route she had walked a thousand times. There the sandbar shape of the beach cut away, and the ocean flowed into an estuary, separating the two sides of beach at high tide. She loved this section of the beach because it was less populated and teeming with creatures in the small tidal pools left beside the rocks when the tide went out. Crabs, snails, starfish, even an occasional sea urchin covered in purple spines.

She stood next to one of those tidal pools, dipping her toe into the water to nudge a reddish-brown crab. The crab—barely the size of her big toe—scuttled backward, raising its front claws at her in warning. It kind of reminded her of Sandee, all bluster but unable to hurt her, though Sandee did it in a more passive-aggressive way.

Maybe she shouldn't have let Sandee's barbs get to her. But she had, and now she had a sale to arrange. It probably wasn't a bad thing anyway. Especially if she wanted to show her customers that Bradford Breads wasn't the only place they could get a good deal.

There was no going back now, and she had so much to think about. Not only did she have to come up with some ads, but she needed to order more ingredients, come up with a schedule for baking, and bring in help. Yes, she

still had to think about fixing the pipes, but that was the least of her worries at the moment.

Taking out her phone, she started to make a list. First, she needed an ad in the paper. Preferably one bigger than Bradford Breads. Maybe a two-page ad. It was short notice, but she had worked herself ragged to bake and decorate a sandcastle cake in honor of a retirement party for the chief editor at the Lobster Bay Daily News last month. His replacement, Mona, owed her a favor. If Claire called it in, she could probably insert her ad in the paper in time for tomorrow's edition. But would that be enough?

Claire needed to think outside the box. She needed something that would draw the attention away from her competition, something that Bradford Breads hadn't thought of yet.

She stopped, the ripples of the wet sand hard under her feet as she stood across from the rocky bay, where lobsters were most plentiful. She loved that no one ever came to this part of the beach. The hard sand made it uncomfortable for towels, and the area filled with water when the tide came in, forcing people to move their blankets and gear. As a result, hardly anyone ever bothered to setup in that section.

At the moment, only one other person sat on one of the large rocks on the cliff, the local radio station blaring from their smart phone.

Good idea! She could take out a radio ad. She was sure Bradford Breads hadn't thought of that. She noted it on her phone to-do list. Having lived all her life in Lobster Bay, Claire also knew the staff at the radio station, and she was sure they would mention her cupcake sale on the radio to drive customers her way.

What else? Tammi had mentioned flyers. Claire could get some made up at the copy store and drop them off in a few strategic places. Knowing the other shop members in town did have its advantages, one Bradford likely wouldn't have.

What about the actual cupcakes? How many would she need? And with six flavors—why in the world had she said six? She needed enough of each flavor so she wouldn't run out prematurely.

Not to mention, she had to have an array of her regular baked goods too. After all, a three-for-one sale would allow her to barely break even with the cost of the ingredients, if that. She needed her regular pastries, cakes, muffins, perhaps even a few pies, to make back the money she was spending on those two advertisements. In fact, on Saturday she needed an

even larger selection with all the people she hoped to draw in. There was no extra baking time in the day, and it looked like she would be working nights until Saturday.

At least she could start on them right away. Many people didn't realize that cupcakes could be kept fresh for a week if sealed up tight in Tupperware, but she'd tested it out herself, and they came out as fresh as the day they were made. The frosting could be applied the night before. She would need extra hands to help with both. Maybe Hailey would want some extra hours, she could even bring her daughter Jennifer in if she had to. School was out, and two high school students, Ashton and Sarah, had worked in her shop before. She would see if they wanted some extra money to help her out. She would really like to get Jane and Maxi's opinion although they would probably think she was crazy for having the sale.

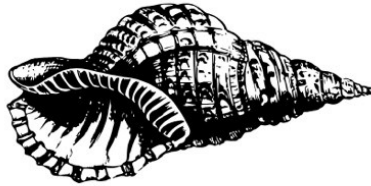
Just as she was pulling her phone out to send a text to them, one appeared from Jane.

Drinks at Splash 5pm?

Splash, a small restaurant on the beach, was their favorite place to gather for a cocktail. In years past, they'd been able to do it quite regularly. Since Claire had opened Sandcastles and Jane had started helping at Tides, their meetings had been sporadic at best. But when one of them needed someone to talk to, they usually texted a request.

Either Addie must be doing well and Jane had extra time, or she was doing poorly and Jane needed a break. Either way, drinks with her friends was just what Claire needed. She texted back immediately.

CHAPTER SIX



Maxi left a few minutes early to meet Claire and Jane at Splash. She wanted to walk the Marginal Way to the beach and take her time enjoying the gorgeous view. The sun glinted off the greenish-blue ocean. The foamy tops of the waves crashed on the jagged rocks below. A lone seagull soared above the cliffs.

If Maxi had an easel and her paints, she could have captured the pure white of the gull's wings as the sun hit them and the sea-green hue of the crest of the wave right before it curled over. But she didn't have her easel or her paints. In fact, she no longer owned any. When she was younger, she'd dreamed of making a living as an artist, setting up an easel on the beach, maybe even living a simple existence in a beachside cottage where she could paint the ocean any time of day. But then she'd fallen in love and gotten married, and more practical endeavors had taken over. There was a house to clean and children to raise—none of which she regretted.

Once the kids were older, she might have taken it up, but James frowned on her painting. He considered it too bohemian. She'd given up trying to convince him otherwise years ago. In the end, it wasn't worth the trouble.

Now that the kids were gone, she had plenty of time. James was always busy with work. He'd been spending such long hours at the bank that she doubted he would know what she did with her time. Sometimes she wondered if he even cared. She still kept the house, planned meals, balanced the budget. But she had so much free time, especially compared to her two best friends. Maybe now that James was more established and she wasn't so busy with the house, he would see her desire to draw and paint

differently. It had been years since she'd broached the topic. Maybe she should ask again.

As the path spilled out onto the beach road, she took a deep breath. The rich, tangy aroma of fried clams hit her nose. She was lucky to live near the ocean, where there was great seafood. As she passed one of the restaurants, she glanced at someone's plate. Stuffed lobster tail. Her stomach grumbled, hopefully Claire and Jane would want to share some appetizers along with the drinks.

Twinkle lights decorated Splash's patio, already full of people despite the predinner hour. Jane was easy to spot with her silver pixie hair at the corner table she'd chosen on the edge of the deck overlooking the water.

People were still on the beach, though not as many as during the day. A few brave swimmers faced the churning water. Children dashed to and fro, the waves nipping at their heels as they shrieked with laughter and collected seashells. With the sun setting to the west behind them, the sky was painted pink and light blue. Jane turned and waved her over.

"Pretty isn't it?" Jane twirled the stem of the paper umbrella in her drink.

Maxi lifted her hand to flag down a waitress as she spoke to Jane. "Gorgeous. How was your day?"

A tentative smile pulled at Jane's lips. "Pretty good. Mom was her usual argumentative self most of the day."

Maxi gave her a sympathetic smile and plucked at the triangular drink menu perched in the middle of the round table, scanning through the options despite the fact that she'd been there a hundred times before. The waitress came, and Maxi ordered the same thing Jane had—a beach breeze. "Where's Claire?"

"She's coming." Jane traced the rim of her glass. "I keep seeing the look on her face when I told her about Bradford Breads. I just hope she's not getting worked up about it."

"Well, that's why we're here. To make sure she doesn't."

"Might not be that easy. Don't forget, she has her heart and soul tied up in Sandcastles. A bread store across the street might not seem like a big deal to us, but Claire might look at it differently." Jane sipped her drink.

The waitress returned with Maxi's order. After sipping on it—fruity with the smooth taste of rum—Maxi said, "I suppose you're right. Claire

has blinders on. She's worked so hard on that bakery. I think it's more than just a store to her. It's a symbol of her independence."

Jane nodded. "And proof that she can make it on her own. Especially since Peter always made her feel like she couldn't do anything except be a housewife."

"We'll just have to help her see the light. The bakery doesn't define her ability to be successful or independent. She's not thinking straight about Bradford Breads. If she thought about it, she might see the possibilities instead. The two businesses might complement each other."

Jane laughed. "You want to help Claire see the light? That will take some doing." Her smile slipped, and her cheeks turned pink as her gaze slid past Maxi's shoulder. Looking guilty, she sat taller in her chair and whispered, "Here she comes."

Maxi lowered her voice. "Maybe now that the news has sunk in, she'll be feeling better."

Jane grimaced. "I don't know. If you ask me, she looks more stressed now than when we left her this morning."

CLAIRE SPOTTED her friends in the corner of Splash's patio, both nursing pink drinks in margarita glasses. She quickened her step, suddenly excited to tell her friends about her plans.

But first, Jane. Her friend must have called them there for a reason. Jane and Maxi cut off their conversation to wave as Claire stepped closer. She greeted both of her friends with a hug then claimed an open chair at the table. She squeezed Jane's arm.

"How's Addie? Is she doing okay?"

"Yes," Jane answered with a falsely bright chirp. "She had a pretty good day today."

"Really? That's great." Despite Jane's positive words, Claire could see the concern in her friend's eyes. She put her hand on Jane's arm. "We're here for you whenever you need to talk." She wished she could do more for her friend, but talking helped.

Jane nodded and smiled, the tension in her face easing. "I'm fine, really."

I'm having a crazy cupcake sale to draw in customers! Claire wanted to exclaim, but it didn't seem like the time to tell her friends that she'd managed to finagle an ad in tomorrow's newspaper—or the more exciting plans she had to arrange to make the sale come to life. Guilt gnawed at her stomach. Jane had asked for the get-together, and she was there to support her, not to steal the spotlight.

Never one to be the center of attention, Jane turned the conversation to Claire. "How was business at Sandcastles today?"

"Nothing from the usual except Sandee came in just as I was about to close."

Maxi made a face and sipped her drink. "Talk about a terrible way to end your day."

Claire couldn't help but laugh. "Tell me about it. What did you do this afternoon?"

Maxi made a face. "Nothing. It was a boring day, all told."

The waitress stepped up to take Claire's order. Jane and Maxi both ordered another, though Maxi still had half of hers to finish.

Maxi turned to Claire. "Are you feeling any better about the bread store now?"

Since Maxi had asked, Claire figured she could share her plans. "Much better, actually. I have a plan for how to deal with their grand opening sale."

Maxi frowned. "Their sale?"

"This Saturday. They put out an ad in the paper today. One of my regulars told me about it."

"What's the plan?" Jane asked.

"I'm going to have a sale of my own."

"That sounds like a good idea," Jane said with a smile of encouragement.

The waitress had returned and was placing three pink fruity drinks onto the table. "What's this about a sale?"

"A cupcake sale," Claire explained. "At my bakery on Saturday. I'm having a three-for-one sale."

The young woman's face lit up. "All day?"

Claire nodded. "Until I run out. But don't worry, I'm going to be prepared and have plenty of stock on hand in multiple flavors."

"I'll be there."

A man in the corner lifted his hand to hail the waitress. She apologized and hustled over to him.

Maxi was studying her skeptically. “Three-for-one? Why not two-for-one?”

Claire shook her head briskly. The ocean breeze teased a strand in front of her face. She brushed it aside impatiently. “Bradford Breads is having a two-for-one sale. I have to do better if I’m going to attract customers to me instead of them. That means three-for-one. I’m hiring a couple of students temporarily to help me bake them all. I told Sandee I’d be making at least six flavors, and I’ll want to have five dozen of each at least.”

Maxi choked on a sip of her drink.

Jane cast a sideways glance at Maxi and fiddled with her straw. “That sounds great. If you have a flyer, I’ll leave it in the gathering room of the inn to drive customers to the sale, and I’m sure I can carve out some time to help you make them. But, Claire, don’t you think you’re overreacting a bit?”

Claire blinked. “No. I have to get on top of this.”

“Bradford Breads is having a sale on bread. You’re selling cupcakes. You don’t have to outdo them. They’re entirely different things.”

“Maybe. But it doesn’t hurt to establish myself, and besides, this isn’t just about me. Hailey’s worried too. What if my business is impacted and I can’t afford to pay her? Jennifer is depending on her, and Hailey is a hard worker and smart. She hasn’t gotten a lot of breaks in life, and I would hate to see her without a job,” Claire said.

The looks on Jane’s and Maxi’s faces softened. All three of them had a soft spot for Hailey and Jennifer.

“I understand how you feel,” Maxi said. “But maybe six different flavors is putting a lot of pressure on yourself? How will you make them all?”

“I can make them ahead of time, actually. They can be stored in airtight containers, and they won’t go stale.”

Maxi nodded. “Okay. Sounds like you have a good plan for that. You’ll still have all your regular baking, though, so it sounds like you’ll need some help. I can pitch in.”

Claire’s heart warmed. “Thanks, but I don’t want to put you out.”

Maxi snorted. “Are you kidding? I have nothing to do. It will be fun for me.”

Jane reached out to squeeze Claire's arm. "I can help, too, but Saturday is less than a week away. Are you sure this isn't too much?"

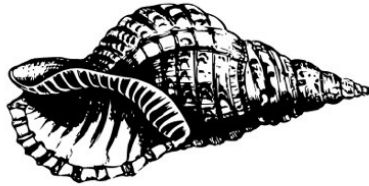
"No. Well, it's going to take some work, but Tammi said I should be advertising and having sales anyway, so I guess this is a good start." Claire slurped down a hefty portion of her drink.

"Well then, if you're sure, we're here to help." Jane raised her glass, and they all clinked.

Claire settled back in her seat, happy for their support, but the look that Maxi and Jane exchanged brought on a load of self-doubt. Had she bitten off more than she could chew? *Was* she overreacting?

Maxi picked up the appetizer menu. "Does anyone want to split some apps? I'm starving."

CHAPTER SEVEN



Claire's phone alarm chimed at four o'clock every morning. In the old days, before she owned a bakery and had to rise early to get things setup before she opened at eight o'clock, she had loved to lounge in bed. Of course, that was also before she had Urchin, the fifteen-pound cat that was now sitting on her chest, staring at her with half-slitted, reproachful eyes in an attempt to will her to his food bowl.

Claire felt for the phone, turned off the alarm, and rolled over. Urchin, not to be dissuaded from his task, climbed onto her head and batted at her nose with one paw, claws sheathed.

"Get off," she groaned. "I can't feed you while you're weighing me down."

She pushed the black-and-white cat off, and he thudded onto the floor then looked up at her expectantly.

"Yes, I'm coming." Claire slid her bare feet onto the thick area rug beside the bed and rolled her neck a few times to get the kinks out before standing up. Urchin trotted ahead into the kitchen.

Claire's cottage was small, but since it was just her, it was perfect. She had everything she needed. Two bedrooms, a kitchen and living room, and a great outside area. Plus, it was only a few blocks from the beach. She couldn't see the ocean, but on a good day, she could smell it. And if she wanted to see it, it was only a short stroll away, or she could take the pink Vespa she'd purchased to cruise around town in the summer.

Urchin insisted on being fed first, so she turned the coffee maker on then filled his bowl. He tucked in without a backward glance, and Claire

fixed her coffee. Leaning against the counter, she sipped and watched Urchin eat.

Her mind raced with details of the cupcake sale. Would thirty dozen be enough? Maybe she should make forty. And what about display stands? She should order more of those five-tiered stands she used to display cupcakes when she catered parties.

She finished her coffee, watered the plants, brushed her teeth, and changed in record time. By the time she was ready to head to the bakery, Urchin had hopped up to the wide window ledge in the kitchen, which always saw the best sunlight in the morning. He was asleep, having forgotten her existence.

Sandcastles was less than a mile away, so she hopped on her Vespa and was there in no time. It was early still, and fingers of sunrise licked at the ocean horizon, casting long shadows down the quiet street. Claire inserted the key to unlock the front door of her shop then peered over her shoulder out of habit as she pulled the glass door shut behind her.

Something was different about the bread store across the street.

Fresh, new letters announced the name of the bakery in the window. The paper had been removed, and she could see inside to the aisles of shelves. At the far end was a counter and a display next to it. A gigantic poster with a golden buttery loaf of bread hung in the window announcing the two-for-one sale for the grand opening on Saturday.

That poster was eye-catching, though. It, like the block letters of the name, was done in bright red. It would draw the eye of everyone who passed up and down the street. On Saturday, there would be a line around the block of shoppers.

Well, fine then. Bradford Breads wasn't the only one who could order a poster.

"You are not going to out-market me." She didn't care if Bradford Breads had more money to take out ads and make gorgeous signs picturing loaves of bread slathered with butter that made even her mouth water. Claire could do one better.

She ducked inside and pulled the door shut.

The sound of a drill made her jump. She'd given Sally a key so she could let herself in early in the morning if she had repairs and didn't want to get underfoot once the bakery was open.

The handywoman stood on a step stool, wearing her usual uniform of worn overalls. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and she had a look of concentration on her face as she placed a screw into the hinge of a cabinet where the door had come loose. When she swung it easily back and forth, testing the movement, it was obvious she had already fixed the hinge.

Claire smiled. "Good morning, Sally. You're here early."

"Ayuh. I figured I'd fix this up and get out of your way before you start the day. I heard about the sale. Lots to do, I'm sure."

"There is, but I've got a handle on it."

"Right, I'm sure you do." Sally climbed down off the step stool. She removed the screwdriver attachment from the drill and put them both into her old black metal toolbox that sat on the floor, then stood and looked Claire in the eye. "I don't think you need a big sale, though, just because the bread place is having one. Might be better to focus on those pipes. Just sayin'."

"I'll get the pipes fixed. Gotta find out about a loan first. And while I'm waiting, it won't hurt to have a sale." The pipes were important, too, but if Bradford Breads took all her customers, there might not be any point in fixing the pipes. Claire glanced in the direction of the bread store. She could just see the corner of the sign. Was it too early to call Stacy's Signs?

Like many of the residents of Lobster Bay, Stacy also owed Claire. Last year, she'd forgotten to order a cake for her daughter-in-law's baby shower. Claire had filled the order the morning of the shower as a favor, and now it was time to call that favor in. Images of a gigantic sign with a big pink cupcake and the words *three-for-one* in big bold letters near the Sandcastles logo came to mind.

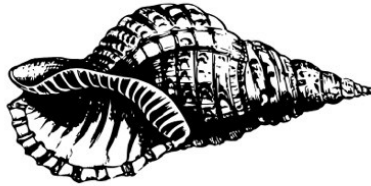
Sally clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth and crossed her arms over her chest. "I see you've got that look in your eye. But honestly, Claire, that bread place isn't a threat to you. They make savory. You make sweet. You ought to team up, even. It'd be a marriage made in heaven."

Claire jerked her gaze from the phone where she'd been scrolling for Stacy's contact info. "Marriage, my butt." The word stirred feelings in her best left forgotten. That part of her life was behind her. She'd come out ahead and was a better person for it, a more successful person.

Truthfully, she had built herself the perfect life, and she wasn't going to let Bradford Breads ruin it. Nor was she going to "team up" with anyone. If she had learned anything from that ugly time in her past, it was that she

could only depend on herself. Depending on another person only brought disappointment.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Rob Bradford had always known he would return to Lobster Bay. For most of his life, the town had been a bright and happy memory to look back on when the going got tough. And when he needed a fresh start, this was the place that had jumped into his mind.

Finally feeling the tension of the last few years start to drain from his shoulders, the owner of Bradford Breads leaned back in the leather seat of his five-year-old Chevy Tahoe and admired the newest location of his chain store. He had a dozen across New England, but this location was closest to his heart.

Rob had fond childhood memories of Lobster Bay, where he'd spent several idyllic vacations with his parents as a child before his mom got sick with cancer. Once she'd been diagnosed, there were no more vacations. When she'd finally died after a five-year battle, the family had been so exhausted, no one could find joy in vacations anymore.

Of course, that had been thirty years ago. A lot had happened since then, including his own wife's death five years ago. But Rob didn't want to dwell on the past. This was a new start for him, a fresh beginning that he was looking forward to after all the sadness in his life.

The town had changed a bit since he was a kid. There were more stores, but it was still a small, quaint town. It still had a gorgeous beach, and the town continued to decorate the streets with boxes and beds of flowers in an inviting, charming way. There was also Lobster Bay itself, with the bobbing lobster traps, and Perkins Cove, with its clusters of fishing boats. It was a place where a guy could start a new life.

Movement across the street caught his eye. The bakery. He didn't remember it being there when he was a kid. Someone was putting a sign up out front. He narrowed his eyes and craned his neck forward to see it. A cupcake sale—buy one, get *two* free? He squinted a moment before the date of the sale struck him. He jerked his head toward his own sign. It was the same date of his grand opening.

Was the bakery owner worried about the competition? Rob hoped not. He'd run into this sort of thing before. Whenever he opened one of his stores, the other businesses in town felt intimidated. He hoped the bakery owner didn't feel the same way. He had no intention of putting anyone out of business. In fact, he was very careful about that. With every new location he opened, he made sure not to setup business near another store that sold mainly bread.

Rob loved his bread business. It reminded him of his mom. From the time he could walk, he had grown up watching or helping her knead the dough, peeking under the cloth to check on rising bread, or smelling the fresh scent of it baking. In a way, every time he made bread, he was keeping her memory alive. After he'd graduated from college, he'd stopped buying bread at the store and started the tradition of making it himself. What began as a hobby had grown into a full-time, very lucrative business.

He got out of his SUV, shielding his eyes against the sun to look across the street and through the glass front windows of the bakery. Inside, customers sat at tables. More tables were placed artfully on the brick walkway outside. Planters loaded with flowers and ferns added color and vibrancy to the spot. It looked nice. Cozy. A place he would want to stay and linger. Should he consider something like this for his store? He'd never thought much about the ambiance, but the bakery looked so welcoming. It made him want to step inside.

He should introduce himself to the owner. The information he'd gathered from a representative before he'd leased his location had spoken of sweet baked goods rather than bread. Cupcakes, cookies, muffins, that sort of thing. Without bread to speak of, they weren't in direct competition.

He could make friends and show how their businesses could complement each other. He was starting across the street when a woman appeared at the window. Wisps of auburn hair, which had escaped from being pinned back, framed a pretty oval face. It gave her an air of busyness. Coupled with the apron she had tucked lovingly around the curves of her

body, she definitely posed an attractive picture. With her air of confidence and the way she was looking things over as if to make sure everything was perfect—much like Rob did for his stores—he figured she must be the owner.

She monitored the arrangement of the sign in front of her shop. Then her gaze drifted to him. Her face turned sour, her eyes shooting daggers across the street.

Rob backed up. That must have been the shop owner, and she did not look in the mood to make friends. Maybe today wasn't the best day to introduce himself.

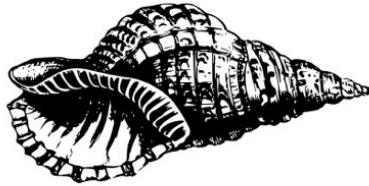
Rob retreated to his store. He had a lot to do before the grand opening on Saturday. He always personally outfitted the new locations with the equipment and supplies needed to open. It was an excuse to make sure it was up to his quality standards. Usually he just spent a day or two and handed the store over to a manager to run it day-to-day, but since he was making Lobster Bay his home, he was going to run the new store himself.

Whenever he'd run into resistance before, he'd always managed to win over the other shop owners. Perhaps before he talked to the bakery owner, he should feel out some of the locals to find out the best way to approach her. In fact, maybe he would start with the bed-and-breakfast he remembered as a teenager. Tides, he thought it was called. He had stayed there once with his mom, and a charming elderly couple had run it.

They might be interested in a standing order of homemade bread to serve to their guests. Next, he could speak with the handywoman listed in the local newspaper who he planned to hire to tie up some odds and ends.

The matter settled, Rob got to work with his shop inspection. Better to find out a little bit more about the bakery owner before he got his head handed to him on a platter.

CHAPTER NINE



Claire glared at the man across the street who was stepping into Bradford Breads. Was that the manager? He was about her age, fit, with shoulders that filled out his polo shirt. She couldn't see too many details from across the street except that he had a strong jaw and short-cropped dark hair with shades of silver. If he hadn't been working for the enemy, she might have thought him attractive. *Might* have.

Naturally, he was working for the enemy because he was heading for the bread store, which wasn't open to customers. Only someone who worked there would be able to get in. She'd never seen him in town before, so he wasn't local. And the owner of a franchise like Bradford Breads never did the grunt work himself. He sent lackeys. Middle-aged, attractive lackeys with silver at their temples.

"Is that the owner of Bradford Breads?"

Claire jumped at Sally's voice. "Probably some lackey."

Sally pressed her lips together as she stared unabashedly at the shop across the street. "Could be. I heard the owner inspects all his stores before they open personally."

"That's not him. Look at what he's driving."

Yes, the SUV was an expensive model, but it was several years old. And it appeared to be in good condition, no broken taillights or cracked wind shield. But there was dust caked on the car as if the owner had gone off-roading.

Sally squinted. "Ayuh. I heard those bread stores of his are successful. He probably drives something flashier."

Claire pictured a red Corvette, a short, balding man slipping from the driver's side as his blond trophy wife tottered to her feet on high heels that would get stuck in the sidewalk cracks. Her name would probably end in two Es.

The customer who had been standing at the cash register cleared her throat.

As Claire cashed her out, her phone chimed with an incoming text message. She ignored it until she'd boxed up her customer's choices and delivered them to her. Only then did Claire fish the phone out of her pocket.

She smiled in relief as she peered at the text. It was the last of her teenage hires promising to come in to bake cupcakes on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday evening. With their help and her supervision, she would be on top of the last-minute cupcake sale four days away. The morning was going well. She'd already secured an ad with the local radio station, ordered flyers from Stacy, and now had helpers for the baking. She breathed a little easier.

At least until she looked up from the phone to find Sally standing in front of her.

"Good news?" asked the old woman.

Claire nodded.

The handywoman grunted. "Well, that's good because you're not going to like what I found in the kitchen."

Claire sighed and followed the older woman to the site of the concern. What would she find? Rats? A busted pipe already turning her kitchen into the town swimming pool? The floor was dry.

Claire followed Sally to the bathroom, where the handywoman pointed under the vanity. "Got a leak."

Shoot! The pipes. "Can you patch it until I get money for the pipe repairs?"

Sally's eyes narrowed. She rubbed her chin and bent over to inspect the pipes again. "I guess so. But these are old, too, like the rest of the building." She peered back up at Claire, awaiting the final decision.

The cupcake sale was already in motion. She hadn't talked to the bank about the loan for the pipe repairs. She only needed four more days to make it through the grand opening, then she would get the ball rolling for the whole repair job.

“A patch job will have to do. Let’s hope it holds until after the big cupcake sale.”

HAILEY PARKED the old beat-up Dodge she’d borrowed from her grandfather in the town lot a few stores down from Sandcastles. She turned off the ignition and patted the dashboard. “Now you be nice and startup when I get off work.”

Ignoring the rusty groan of the car door, she hurried down the street to Sandcastles. Across the street, something was different. The store now had the paper off the windows and a big sign for a sale. *Oh no!* Would that take business away?

She let herself in the bakery’s side door, almost forgetting to pull it tight. The door was another thing at Sandcastles that needed to be fixed. If they didn’t make sure it latched, it would swing back open. The last thing they needed was a bakery full of flies.

“Did you see the big sale sign across the street?” she asked Claire as she cinched the strings around her waist.

Claire turned from where she’d been talking to Sally in the hallway. It seemed like Sally had been there more often than not lately, which added another layer of worry. Were there more and more things that needed to be fixed? *Poor Claire.* Hailey knew that Claire wasn’t exactly rolling in money. Even if Hailey took some responsibility from Claire’s shoulders, she wasn’t sure Claire would have extra money to give her a small raise.

“Yes, but we’re going to do them one better,” Claire said.

“We are?”

“Yes. We’re having a two-for-one cupcakes sale on Saturday.”

Hailey turned to survey the kitchen with its one oven and limited counter space, already calculating what they would need to pull that off in her head. “How many extra cupcakes?”

“About thirty dozen.”

Hailey let out a low whistle. “Okay, we’ll have to bake at night unless we’re going to have less of the regular items.”

“I know. I want to keep our regular schedule during the day but figured we could bake extra at night. The cupcakes will keep, and I’ll ask Jane and

Maxi to help frost them all on the last night. I've hired Ashton and Sarah to help with the baking, and if you have time at night, I'll pay you extra."

Hailey frowned. A few nights of extra pay wouldn't solve all her problems. Every little bit helped, though. "I might be able to do some extra hours." *If Gramp's car holds out.*

"Great! You can bring Jennifer."

"Shoot! Jennifer has summer soccer every night this week. Maybe I can get Mrs. Pease to take her."

Claire's eyes filled with motherly concern. "You don't want to miss a game, do you? It won't be but the blink of an eye, and she'll be off on her own. Don't feel like you have to come. There will be plenty of hands to bake the cupcakes."

"We'll see." Hailey didn't want to voice her worries or the fact that she could use extra money, so she changed the subject. "What's going on in the bathroom?"

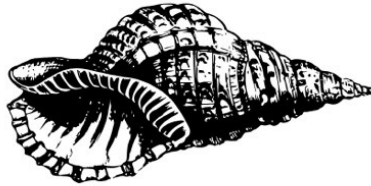
Claire glanced into the bathroom, where Sally could be heard clanging a wrench against the pipes, and plastered a smile on her face, one that didn't reach her eyes and worried Hailey. "Oh, just a little leak. Sally will take care of it." Claire gestured toward the kitchen. "I've got cinnamon rolls in the oven. Can you mix up some brownies?"

"I'm on it." Hailey headed toward the cabinet and pulled out cocoa, flour, and baking soda. "Do you have a game plan? Like how many per night and a list of ingredients, that sort of thing." She put the dry ingredients on the counter and headed to the fridge for eggs, milk, and butter.

"I'm making a list of ingredients, but a solid plan might be good. Maybe I should see if Maxi and Jane want to help me work it out. Jane is so good with that sort of thing. Would you come too?"

Hailey was honored to be included. She loved Claire's friends, who liked to mother her and Jennifer. It was welcome attention since Hailey's own mother had died when she was twelve. She liked to spend time with them, but even better, the invitation signaled that Claire trusted her as more than just hired help. "I'd love to."

CHAPTER TEN



Tides was the same as Rob remembered from when he had stayed there as a kid. Even the interior—with the large old-fashioned floral-wallpaper foyer that served as a lobby, the well-kept balustrade of the staircase leading to the second floor, and the walls hung with paintings of the beach and other nearby landmarks—hadn't changed.

At the tinkle of the bells attached to the door, an old woman bustled out from a room deeper in the old Victorian house. She was robust, if thin, her face craggy with wrinkles, and her long white hair pulled back from her face. Although the bell had called her, her eyes were glassy, as if she couldn't seem to remember why she had stepped through the door. She peered around, the wrinkles in her face softening with confusion as she searched.

"Are you looking for Dad?" Her voice was soft, almost girlish.

Immediately, the lost look in her face and the timidity of her voice clicked into a slot in his mind. The woman must have some sort of dementia. Rob recognized the signs, having lived with that very expression for far too many years of his life. Caroline, his late wife, had been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's. It was a disease that not only sapped the memory but also the personality, and finally the very life from her.

He was flooded with compassion for the woman in front of him. What was this woman doing there, unaccompanied? Was she a guest? Rob glanced at the open door, knowing full well a person with dementia could

wander off and get lost. He knew just how to handle someone with memory loss.

Tucking his hands into his pockets, he smiled and strolled forward. “Hello. I hoped to speak with the owner of this inn. Would that be you?” he teased.

She giggled. “Oh, Charlie, you know it will be some day. Do you have a delivery? You can bring it to the back with me.”

She fluttered her eyelashes at him. He didn’t have the heart to tell her that he wasn’t Charlie. Not to mention, given how young she seemed to think she was, he would be far too old for her to be flirting with him. She acted like a teenager.

He cracked a smile and shrugged his shoulders, careful not to encourage her but also not to confuse her by correcting her. Sometimes it was kinder just to play along. “No delivery today. But I hope I’ll be back soon with the delivery. Who should I talk to about that?”

A younger, harried-looking woman, who resembled the old woman to such an extent that they must be related, stepped out from another archway.

“You can talk to me.” Shyly, she tucked a strand of silver hair behind her ear. She was soft-spoken, not like the brusque business owners or overly friendly extroverts he usually dealt with. It was refreshing. Maybe she was someone he could do business with on friendly, trusting terms.

He gave the older woman another smile because that felt far safer. “I hope you don’t think I’ll be ignoring you, but I do want to talk to this fine woman about potential future deliveries. I have a business proposition.”

The younger woman nodded briskly and stepped up, offering her hand. “It’s fine. I’m Jane Miller, and this is my mother, Adelaide.”

Rob shook hands with Jane. “Nice to meet you both. I’m Rob Bradford from Bradford Breads. I just opened a store in town. Is there a place we can sit down and talk?”

Abruptly, the old woman sharpened. The fog of confusion left her face, and her voice gained strength. “If you’re talking business, then you’ll talk to me. I still run this place, you know.”

Rob was speechless at how quickly she seemed to shake off the confusion.

Then she added, “At least while Daddy is away.”

Lines spiderwebbed around Jane’s eyes, her smile turning forced. “Of course, Mom. Why don’t you show him to the kitchen?”

The old woman nodded and turned on her heel, bustling away with vigor that belied her age. As Rob indicated that Jane should follow first and he would trail behind, she lowered her voice and whispered, “It’s very kind of you to include her. Most people get uncomfortable around her when she’s like this.”

His smile faded, but he tried to hide it. “I have some experience with dementia.” Before she asked more—he didn’t want to open that can of worms with a stranger—he lengthened his stride. Not to mention, most people didn’t care to hear about a woman in her forties developing Alzheimer’s.

Thankfully, Jane simply nodded, a look of sympathy flashing through her eyes, before continuing to the kitchen.

The room had the atmosphere of antique nostalgia mixed with modern gadgets. Adelaide had already seated herself at a long pine table that had a plate of muffins in the middle.

Jane took her cues from her mother and offered some coffee. Rob accepted, hoping to foster a friendly arrangement between them. While she fixed three cups, he made idle conversation with Addie about the history of the bed-and-breakfast. She remembered a lot about the past, talking about raising children in the same breath as running wild up and down the halls as a child herself. Rob listened to her intently, even when she repeated herself. He always had the time to be kind.

Before long, Jane doled out several cups of coffee and took the seat next to her mother. “So, what did you want to talk about? I’ve seen your store in town.”

Rob couldn’t tell by her tone if she approved of the store or not. “We bake fresh bread every day, and in many of the towns surrounding our locations, I like to make connections with local businesses. Bed-and-breakfasts often serve our products for their guests. I thought you might also like to serve fresh bread to your customers.”

Adelaide, who had started picking apart a chocolate chip muffin, nodded emphatically. “That’s a wonderful idea! You know, we pride ourselves in having a great breakfast here at Tides, but we don’t make our own bread, do we, Jane? What do you think?”

Despite her mother’s enthusiasm for the topic, Jane didn’t seem as convinced. “It’s not a bad idea.”

He took a sip of his coffee. When she didn't continue, he raised one eyebrow, and said, "I sense a 'but' in that sentence."

She grimaced. Turning in her seat, she murmured, "Mom, I don't think Claire would like it very much if we started a business relationship with Bradford Breads."

Addie's forehead creased. "Claire? Who's Claire?"

Frustration crossed Jane's face for a second. Rob remembered that feeling. But then she shut her eyes, took a deep breath, and said very patiently, "Claire made that muffin, Mom. You remember, don't you?"

Addie nodded, but it was that blank, empty nod that meant she didn't truly understand. Rob recognized it well.

With a small sigh, Jane turned back to Rob and explained, "One of my best friends owns the bakery in town. To tell the truth, she's a little put out by you moving in across the street."

He'd judged as much by the stony look she gave him when he saw her across the street earlier. He sighed, pushing his mug a bit farther from him in preparation to leave. "I was afraid of that."

But Jane didn't seem ready to kick him out the door. She frowned, her eyebrows knitting together. "Afraid of it? Why do you say that?"

At least she wasn't ready to leap into battle for her friend and kick him out. He settled back in his chair. His eyes caught on the tray of muffins, and Jane pushed them toward him, indicating for him to help himself to one. Maybe it would help his case to compliment the baker when they inevitably met. He took one, and Jane grabbed a plate from a sideboard and slid it in front of him.

Before he bit into it, he explained, "I'm not here to put people out of business. In fact, I always make sure when I move into a town that there isn't currently a bakery specializing in bread. But even so, it always seems to happen that somebody is put out by my presence. I'm not a threat to your friend's bakery, I promise."

As he met her gaze, he saw something in her eyes. Conflict. Loyalty. Even if he couldn't get a standing order of bread from Tides, Jane might be able to help him smooth out the bumps in his business plan.

He leaned over the table. "Maybe you could help me out."

She seemed surprised, her blue eyes widening. "Me? I don't know..."

"Not with the bread order, though I do hope you'll change your mind. But if you're best friends with the owner of the other bakery in town, you

undoubtedly have some influence over her. I noticed the sign for her cupcake sale. I also noticed that it was a three-for-one and on the same day as mine.”

When he raised one eyebrow, Jane nodded. “She wants to establish a presence that day.”

Rob thought as much. “I would like to set things straight with your friend before this competition gets out of hand. I’m not here to hurt her. In fact, things would go a lot smoother if we could work together. What do you say, Jane? Will you help me?”

JANE NIBBLED on her lower lip. She should probably just tell Rob she wasn’t interested and send him on his way. But the thing was, she didn’t think he was a bad guy. Especially not with the way he’d treated her mother. Not once had he tried to avoid Addie or ignore her. Despite the way she butted into the conversation or entertained him with fragments of stories that only halfway made sense, Rob didn’t seem to mind. He treated her as kindly as he would his own mother. Jane appreciated that kindness more than she could express.

But if she took him up on his offer—either to approach Claire or to enter into a business arrangement with Bradford Breads, how would Claire feel? Claire had been Jane’s best friend since they were in elementary school. The last thing she wanted to do was create friction or add more stress when Claire seemed worried as it was. Even if Claire was being unreasonable.

Claire would come to her senses sooner or later. Maybe Jane could help her along.

Hesitantly, Jane asked, “You mentioned working together. In what way?”

Rob leaned back in his chair, chewing on a bite of the muffin as he thought. From the moment he had stepped into Tides, he’d had an easy, confident way of holding himself, a self-assurance that didn’t border on arrogance. He wasn’t one of those smooth businessmen who lied to get what they wanted. Jane knew it in her gut.

He swallowed and answered, “We don’t have to compete for customers. There’s room for them to visit both of us. All three of us, in fact. We could put on promotions together to get more people coming to Lobster Bay in the off-season. I know I’m doing my grand opening in the summer, but I did enough research to know that while this is the prime time for tourists, people do visit here year-round.”

Jane nodded. “You’re right. We get a few vacationers around Christmas but nothing compared to summertime. Promotions don’t sound like a bad idea.”

Rob’s eyes brightened, making him look even more handsome. Clearly, Claire hadn’t yet met the guy, or she wouldn’t be quite so prickly about him moving in across the street. Not that Rob held a candle to Jane’s late husband. She swallowed against the lump in her throat that grew smaller each year but never seemed to leave.

“You truly don’t mean to put the bakery out of business?”

Rob shook his head. “That would be bad for my business too. I definitely can’t make muffins like these. And the locals no doubt expect them. I wouldn’t be able to meet that expectation.”

One corner of Jane’s mouth hitched up in a smirk. She tried to swallow it but must not have been successful because he leaned forward eagerly, encouraged that he’d won her over even just a bit.

“So you’ll talk to your friend for me? Help her see that I’m not a threat to her?”

Jane pressed her lips together, but she nodded. “I’ll try. You have to understand, that bakery is like Claire’s baby. She’s put her heart and soul into it. She’s very overprotective.”

He chuckled. “That I can understand completely. Truth be told, I feel the same about my business.”

Jane drummed her fingernails against her coffee mug. “I’ll try to get her to soften up, but that’s it. I can’t in good conscience enter into an agreement with Bradford Breads at this time.”

Addie started to protest, but Rob held up his hands in surrender. “I understand. It’s not worth harming a friendship.” He swallowed down the last of his coffee, scraped back his chair, and took his plate to the sink. “Maybe once the tension has blown over, we can revisit the idea.”

Jane stood to shake his hand. “Absolutely.”

Despite the fact that Addie hadn't yet stood, Rob made a show of shaking her hand too. "It was so lovely to spend an hour with you. I hope we meet again soon."

"Do you need me to show you to the door?"

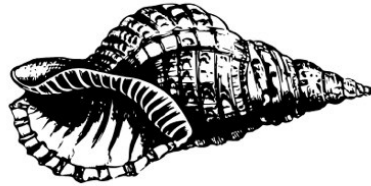
He shook his head. "I can remember the way. Thank you—and you know where to find me if you change your mind."

As he left, the kitchen door shutting behind him, Jane couldn't help but notice the glow on her mother's face. It was nice to see her mother happy. So many people talked down to her these days. Rob's kindness had done her good.

When Jane saw Claire again, she could safely say that his business meant hers no harm. Claire had texted her earlier that day about meeting at her cottage that night since her time was limited between now and the sale on Saturday. Maybe if Jane could get Claire to see what she had just learned of Rob Bradford, Claire would rest a little easier too.

But before she met with her friend, she had work to do at Tides. As she started to gather the cups to wash them, her mother giggled like a schoolgirl. She caught Jane by the arm, her eyes aglow. "How nice for him to come here and ask me to the dance. Won't Sadie Thompson be jealous when she sees me walking in with that hunk on my arm?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The sea breeze gusted through the open windows of Maxi's house. Waves crashed on the rocks below the cliff on which her house perched at the end of the lane. Maxi, accustomed to the white noise, almost thought of it like a companion. Right then, it was her only companion in the house.

For years, the house had been filled with sounds, shouts, teasing and laughter from her three children. But now, all three of them were grown, the youngest two in college and the oldest married with a place of his own. They were all doing well, and that made her happy, but now she needed more to fill her life, especially with James gone so often.

Maybe a decorating project? Decorating had been an artistic outlet for her over the years. She'd been told more than once that their house looked like it could be in a magazine. And at least that was something that James, too, was proud of. He loved entertaining his bank colleagues there and boasting about his wife's talent.

But the main floor had been redone recently for the kids' college graduation parties. Maybe the bedroom? Maxi climbed the staircase lined with family photos to the master bedroom. Done in cobalt blue and yellow, it had a serene feel to it. Was the color scheme dated? Maybe a new comforter in bright white and some accent pillows would give it a fresh look for summer.

At the foot of the bed, the pillows piled on a cedar chest provided cushioning to use it as a seat. She could get a new cushion for the seat part, maybe paint the wood white. Of course, she should probably clean it out first.

Something tugged at her to open it. Inside were memories: photo albums of her parents and grandparents, locks of hair from the kids, school pictures, and her art supplies that she hadn't touched in decades. Maybe she should just take a little peek at them and see what condition they were in. As she started taking the pillows off the chest, her phone rang. *James!*

"Hi, honey," she answered.

"Sweetie! How are you?" James's voice sounded like he was genuinely happy to talk to her.

"Great. How about you? How is the conference going?"

"Well, you know how they are, just a bunch of boring lunches and sleep-inducing presentations. What have you been up to?"

"Me? Not much." Maxi told him about the new bread store and Claire's plan for a sale. "I'm going to help her out. I don't have much to do with the kids gone now."

There was silence on the other end, and for a minute, Maxi thought James might forbid her to help Claire, but instead he said, "You don't? I guess maybe it will be good for you to help her out for the sale."

He put an emphasis on *for the sale*, but Maxi was encouraged anyway, so she plowed ahead. "I was thinking maybe I should take up drawing again. You know I used to enjoy it so much before the kids, and now with extra time..."

Muffled sounds came from the phone, as if James had covered it with his hand. Then she heard him faintly say, "Be there in a minute," before his voice returned in full. "Taking up drawing sounds like a great idea. That should keep you busy."

Maxi practically bubbled with excitement. "Yes, it certainly will."

"Good, then go for it. I have to run. Love you!"

"Love you too!"

James hung up, and Maxi tossed the pillow off the chest with a burst of energy. *That was so easy!* She *had* been making too much of James' reluctance to let her draw. Had that all been in her mind, an internal excuse because she was too busy with other things? It didn't matter now, she thought as she opened the cedar chest and looked inside, half-expecting the contents to have evaporated in the years since she'd tucked them away. But there they were, row on row, packed neatly. Her old sketchbooks from high school and the scant years after right up to the half-filled one she'd tucked away with the others some months after she'd gotten married.

Her hand trembled as she fished that one out of the neat row. She opened it to sketches in various stages of completion. And then a blank page. Untouched. In the corner of the cedar chest was the box in which she had stuffed her charcoal pencils. The cardboard crinkled as she opened the box and pulled out her favorite pencil, worn almost to a nub. The tip was blunt. A small pencil sharpener was crammed into the corner of the box along with a kneading eraser.

The blank page sang to her. She was reaching for the pencil and sharpener when her phone chimed with a text.

It was Claire, asking to get together that night at her place to help her plan the cupcake sale.

Of course, Maxi would accept. She could draw anytime, but if Claire needed her help, that was a priority. She texted back.

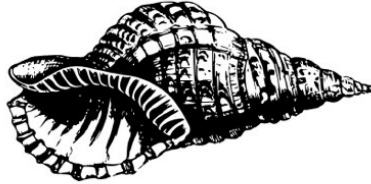
I'll bring my lobster dip. See you later!

She set the pencil and sharpener back in their place, piled everything else back into the cedar chest, then shut the lid. She placed the pillows on top of it neatly and stepped away, already planning what her first drawing would be.

Right then she had something more important. If she was going to make her famous lobster dip, she would need to head to the store for ingredients. Maybe while she was at it, she would get ingredients for her equally famous chocolate raspberry cheesecake.

The day was looking up.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Claire loved entertaining on her back patio in the summer. The patio had been one of her renovation splurges when she'd bought the small cottage, and Maxi had helped her design it. It was done in antique brick, laid out in a herringbone pattern. It was private, enclosed by a pleasant wood fence painted the same grayish blue as the cottage. Twinkle lights were twined around the top of the fence, and flowerpots bursting with colorful petunias and impatiens hung from hooks spaced evenly all around it.

The area was large. On the far end, she had comfortable wicker furniture, a patio umbrella to shade from the sun, and a gas fire pit. A gas grill and glass table and chairs sat closer to the cottage near the sliding door that led to the dining room. She'd already arranged napkins, plates, silverware, glasses, and a bottle of wine in an ice bucket on the table.

Maxi arrived first, loaded with her signature lobster dip, a box of sea salt crackers, a cheesecake, and a special lobster treat for Urchin. Claire tried not to be jealous at the way the cat cozied up to Maxi. Even after her friend had given him the treat, the cat continued to purr and rub against her legs. The only time he ever wanted to cuddle with Claire was when it was freezing cold and he wanted the heat. But then, Maxi did seem to have a way with pets.

Jane arrived a few minutes later with her platter of vegetables and dip, and Hailey not long after that with a plate of homemade brownies.

"I brought a little gift for Jennifer." Maxi held up a small bag. Jennifer didn't have a grandmother, and the three of them tried to make up for that

with occasional gifts.

“You don’t have to do that. She’ll get spoiled.” Hailey peered into the bag. “A sketchbook and pencils. She’ll love that.”

Maxi shrugged it off. “Just a little something.”

“Thank you. Speaking of Jennifer, I have to pick her up in a half hour. Mrs. Pease dropped her off at the soccer game, but I don’t want to miss too much of it.”

“Then I say we get started.” Claire gestured to the glass-topped table where she’d arranged the food, and they all sat.

Jane produced a tablet and scrolled to a display with columns. “I made you a spreadsheet for ingredients. You’ll need to change things for the right amounts per cupcake, of course, and make sure I have every ingredient listed, but the important part is that it’s a spreadsheet, so it will calculate what you need to order.”

“Really?” Claire watched as Jane changed some figures and the spreadsheet recalculated. “That’s much better than my handwritten jumble.” Claire pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket.

Jane rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Everything is electronic now, Claire.” She reached for the paper. “I’ll just plug what you have here into the formula, and you can double-check. Have you put in an order yet?”

“Just for the flour. I use a special brand, and it has to be ordered a day in advance, so I should get a delivery tomorrow, just in time for baking.”

“And the baking schedule?” Hailey dipped a miniature carrot into creamy ranch dip. “We don’t have much down time during the day, and there are only a few days until the sale, so I think it makes sense to settle on a set amount of cupcakes that need to get baked every night.”

“Good thinking. I’ve lined up Ashton and Sarah for the next two nights, and if we bake fifteen dozen each night, we should be good,” Claire said.

Jane glanced up from the tablet, looking over her readers at Claire. “You might want to add an extra dozen or so just in case.”

“I’m going to see if we can fit some extra baking in during the day.” Claire looked at Hailey. “Maybe in the afternoon, when it’s not so busy, we could get a dozen in each day. Just in case we fall short at night for some reason.”

Hailey munched on her carrot. “Sounds like a plan.”

“And don’t forget Maxi and I can help,” Jane said.

“And me,” Hailey added.

“Thanks. I think Ashton and Sarah will be enough for the baking. That’s fairly easy, and I’ll be there to make sure the batter is mixed properly. Then it’s just watching the timer to make sure they don’t burn. We only have the one oven, so I couldn’t really utilize more than two other people, anyway,” Claire said. “What I could really use you guys for is frosting them.”

Hailey nodded. “Frosting takes patience and a bit of skill. Patience isn’t something that Ashton and Sarah are known for.”

Claire laughed. “Yeah. They’re good kids but tend to rush.”

“Weren’t we all that way in high school?” Maxi asked.

“You can say that again,” Claire sliced a small piece of cheesecake and bit in. It was the perfectly creamy blend of sweet raspberry and dark chocolate. Maybe she should consider hiring Maxi to supply some cheesecakes for Sandcastles. *If* James would approve. “I think I have the marketing covered. I have a sign now out front and flyers on order.”

“I heard about the sign,” Jane said. She didn’t quite meet Claire’s gaze, her brow furrowing as she scooped out some of the dip with her cracker. It was loaded with pink chunks of succulent lobster. Urchin, still in Maxi’s lap, lifted his head enough to eye the dip.

Claire smiled. “You did? That’s great! It’s already working.”

The cracker hovered midway to Jane’s mouth. Her eyes met Claire’s. “Actually, I heard about it from the owner of Bradford Breads.”

“Really? When did you talk to him?” Odd that Jane hadn’t even mentioned knowing the guy. Well, there was probably nothing to it.

“Today. He came to Tides to see if we wanted to put in a standing order for fresh bread.” Jane tucked her hair behind her ear and added, “He seems nice. He was very sweet to Mom.”

Claire just bet he was. Probably trying to find out how easy it would be to take all of Claire’s business through Jane somehow. But how would he even know they were friends? Claire thought about the man she’d seen going into Bradford Breads. “Was he tall? Fit? Graying around the temples?”

Jane brightened. “You’ve met already?”

“Not exactly. I saw him go into Bradford Breads earlier today, but he’s not the owner. Probably a go-between or manager.”

“No. The man I met is the owner. He said so. It’s in his name too. Rob Bradford.”

Could the man she had seen on the street be the owner of the rival bakery? No, the owner couldn't be that good-looking, or that down-to-earth, if his clothes and car had been any indication. Jane must have met someone else.

And sweet?

"Well, just because he was nice to Adelaide doesn't mean he's a good person. Who wouldn't be nice to an old lady?"

A shadow crossed in front of her friend's eyes. "You'd be surprised."

Uncomfortable, Claire shifted in her spot. She took a sip of wine. "Of course Bradford wants you to think he's nice. They always seem that way right before they put you out of business."

"He isn't going to put you out of business."

Claire snorted. Did Jane want to buy bread from the guy? She often got baked goods from Claire, and Claire knew that Jane was worried about Tides. Maybe she thought having fresh bread would help business. Claire didn't want to stand in the way of that.

"Do you think fresh bread would be good for the inn? You should try it." Claire tried not to sound stiff and frosty.

"I don't think I will just yet," Jane said immediately.

"But if it makes sense for the inn..."

"The inn has survived without fresh bread this long." Claire felt like Jane was passing on the proposition to be loyal to Claire because she saw Bradford Breads as a rival. The warmth of her friendship bloomed inside Claire's chest, at least until Jane added, "But you should give him a chance."

"Ummm, I don't think so."

Jane looked conflicted. "Honestly, he's not out to ruin your business."

"So he told you."

"I believe him." Jane rarely spoke with such conviction, even among friends. She was more apt to agree than butt heads. The mysterious Mr. Bradford must have made quite the impression. "He was actually worried when he saw the sign you were putting up outside."

Claire scoffed. "I bet he was! My sale is going to blow away his grand opening, and he knows it."

"You're selling different products. It's probably more reason for customers to visit you both. If you worked together to do more promotions

like this, it could benefit you both. And he's willing to work together. You should at least talk to him and give him a chance."

Claire took a sip of wine and thought about it. Some of what Jane said made sense, but those old fears of failure crept up. What if Bradford Breads was just trying to get on her good side so he could figure out her vulnerabilities before he went in for the kill? Thoughts of Sandee just waiting for her to fail blurred her vision. Nope, she wasn't about to take a chance. Not right then, anyway.

She turned to Maxi. "What do you think, Maxi? I think Jane sees too much of the good in people sometimes."

MAXI HAD BEEN in a world of her own, daydreaming about painting and sketching, so she was surprised when she heard her name. "Huh?"

"Earth to Maxi. Jane was suggesting that I team up with Bradford Breads. She thinks the owner is nice. I say he's up to something."

Maxi frowned at Jane. "How do you know the owner of Bradford Breads?"

"Have you not been listening at all? He came by the inn trying to set up an ongoing delivery for fresh bread."

"Oh, sorry. I guess I let my mind wander. That sounds like it could be advantageous to both of you."

Claire's tight-lipped smile indicated that she didn't agree, but Maxi knew that since both she and Jane were encouraging it, Claire would give it careful consideration.

"We'll see what happens after the grand opening and my cupcake sale." Claire forked up a piece of cheesecake and gestured toward Maxi with it. "This is excellent by the way."

"Thanks."

"So the advertising is underway, and we have a baking plan," Jane said. "Don't forget to get me some flyers."

Hailey looked over at the spreadsheet on Jane's tablet. "If you fill out the spreadsheet and send it to me, I'll get the rest of the ingredients tomorrow morning, if you want me to, Claire."

Claire nodded.

Hailey stood. "Great. I'll see if Mrs. Pease can watch Jennifer for an extra hour each day. That way I can get a batch of cupcakes in before I leave work."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that. As it is, I think I'll be living at Sandcastles. But at least no one else needs me at home." Claire narrowed her eyes at Urchin, who was still in Maxi's lap. "I'm not even sure Urchin will miss me."

"That has its advantages." Hailey bent to pick up her purse and the bag from Maxi. "No one to tell us what we can or can't do or disapprove of our plans."

"You can say that again. I remember Peter always had something negative to say about any of my dreams." Claire savored another bite of pie. "I wanted to open a bakery years ago, but he was against it. Good thing I got rid of him."

Hailey laughed. "Yeah, I got the same from Lance. The only time he relented was toward the end. Then he seemed to encourage anything I wanted. Of course, it turned out that was because he was cheating and wanted to distract me."

Claire laughed. "Same with Peter! Turns out he was being nice and letting me do what I wanted to keep me busy so I wouldn't notice he'd taken up with Sandee."

Claire's words hit Maxi like a brick. *Keep me busy*. Wasn't that what James had said when he approved of her starting to draw again?

"Glad those days are past us." Hailey fist-bumped Claire. "Thanks for the gift, Maxi."

"Huh? Oh, you're welcome." Maxi's mind whirled as she watched Hailey leave. Surely, she was overreacting. The comment about keeping her busy was something anyone would say. But then she remembered how James had covered the phone. Who had he been talking to? She'd assumed he was in a break room or hallway at the convention, but maybe someone had been in his hotel room.

Maxi's thoughts were interrupted by a sputtering and coughing coming from the other side of the fence.

"What in the world?" Jane stood and peeked over. "Why is Hailey in a beat-up old Dodge? Thing looks like it's on its last leg. I thought she had a Toyota."

“She does.” Claire had joined Jane at the fence, and Maxi dumped Urchin on the ground so she could look too.

The car was pulling away. Its rusted trunk looked ready to pop open. What was left of the paint was a faded gray. As they watched, a puff of smoke came out the back, and the car bucked.

“Is that thing safe?” Jane asked. “I hate to think of her driving Jennifer around in that.”

“Me too. Maybe her car is in the shop,” Maxi said.

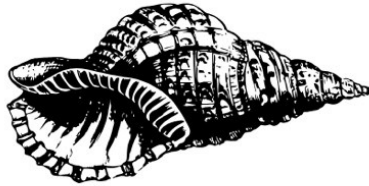
“She goes to Frank’s, and he has better loaners than that. I’ll find out what the story is.” Jane sat back down. Frank was her cousin and owned the best auto body shop in town.

“I hope she isn’t having money troubles.” Claire’s expression showed genuine concern. “Maybe I should think about a raise, but Sandcastles needs a lot of repairs, and there’s the competition across the street to be wary of.”

Jane and Maxi exchanged a look. It was clear that Claire was still thinking of Bradford Breads as the competition, even though they’d both tried to dissuade her, but they both knew that pressing the matter would only make things worse.

Maxi held up her glass of wine. “All the more reason to make sure Sandcastles’s cupcake sale is a rousing success.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Claire needed as many cupcakes as possible, so despite the fact that she had two helpers coming that evening, she started baking as soon as she could the day after their strategy meeting.

She began with the cupcakes she knew would sell the best, the flavors that flew off the shelves. Despite Sandee's disdain for them, chocolate and vanilla were crowd pleasers. Everyone loved them, and she consistently sold the most of them. She started with one batch of each. While they were baking in her industrial oven, she set a timer on her phone and went out front to help Hailey.

Mentally cataloguing all the things she had to do and in what order, Claire whisked away several errant dishes from customers who hadn't returned them to the front, wiping down the tables as she went. As she bent over one of the tables in front of the window, she smiled at Harry and Bert, sitting with their coffees in hand. They were drinking leisurely despite the clouds rolling in from the west.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Are you enjoying your coffees?"

"Always do," Bert said, tipping his up to take a sip from it.

"We can't wait for that cupcake sale," Harry added. "We saw the advertisement in the paper. Very classy."

"Thank you." She couldn't really take credit for that. Due to the last-minute rush for the ad, she hadn't been able to design anything and had left that to Mona. But Bert and Harry didn't need to know that.

"And the sign you have outside is quite something. I don't suppose you have samples of some of the flavors you'll be selling on Saturday?" Bert

added.

Claire laughed. “Not today, I’m afraid. I’ve got plain old chocolate and vanilla in the oven right now. But if you come back tomorrow, I’ll try to keep a small sample aside for two of my best customers.”

The old men beamed. “We’ll hold you to that,” Harry said. Bert nodded in agreement.

As Claire straightened, her gaze was drawn to the stream of tourists walking past the banner that Stacy had made for the sale. She was pleased to see potential customers craning their necks to look. A few even stopped and headed inside despite the sign advertising a sale coming on Saturday. Claire’s chest swelled at the sight of her bustling business. Getting Stacy to fast-track the sign had been the right decision.

The warm bubble in her chest burst as her gaze lifted from her cheery pink-and-yellow sign to the blatant red *Grand Opening* sign on the shop across the street. Claire chewed on the inside of her cheek and turned away. She had too much to do to start worrying about that.

As she headed into the kitchen area, balancing the dishes on her arms, Sally appeared from the hall that led to the bathrooms, where she had been fixing the leak. Claire slipped the dishes onto the counter next to the coffee and faced her.

“Finished?”

Sally nodded. “I think it should hold for a while.”

Claire’s shoulders relaxed with relief, but then she became wary of the smirk on Sally’s face as the handywoman’s gaze travelled past her to the front of the store.

“Looks like you have company. I’m going to grab a coffee.”

“Huh?” Claire turned as the bell above the door chimed. Her gaze landed squarely on the man filling her doorway.

The guy from Bradford Breads. In *her* store. He paused in the threshold, letting the door fall back into its frame as he scanned the interior of the bakery. Was he examining her products? Trying to figure out how to best compete?

Wiping her hands on her apron, she left the safety of the kitchen area and headed out front. When he saw her, he smiled, the expression deepening the attractive crow’s-feet at the corners of his sapphire eyes. She didn’t return the smile.

Undaunted, he stepped forward to meet her halfway with a hand extended. “You must be the owner of Sandcastles.”

Reluctantly, Claire slipped her hand into his. His palm was large and warm, with interesting callouses along the knuckles. She gave him a firm handshake, refusing to show even the slightest bit of weakness. Chin held high, she answered, “I am. Claire Turner.”

“I’m Rob Bradford. I own the bakery across the street. Do you have a minute to talk?”

So, he *was* the owner. Claire hadn’t wanted to believe Jane. She wanted the owner to be the soft, balding, work-avoiding guy that she envisioned getting out of his flashy red car with the blond trophy wife. This guy didn’t look anything like that.

She took her phone out of her pocket, quickly checking the time left on the cupcakes she was baking. Seven minutes and counting. She stuffed the phone back into the pocket of her apron and looked Rob Bradford in the eyes, which—her brain happened to inform her, even though she really didn’t want to know—were a pleasingly deep sapphire blue. “I only have seven minutes. Let’s talk outside.”

Something flashed across his face, indefinable and gone in an instant, but it left something niggling in the back of Claire’s mind. The expression had reminded her of something, but she couldn’t think of what.

The sky had darkened. Appropriate for their meeting, Claire thought as she led him to the farthest table she’d set out on the walkway and sat across from him. Her fingers itched for something to do. Rather than drum them on the table, she linked her hands together in front of her and resisted the urge to look at the timer on her phone.

He flashed her a charming smile that emphasized the cleft in his chin, and she got a funny feeling of déjà vu. “So, I suppose you’ve noticed that I’m opening soon.”

Claire raised a brow. Did the guy think she was blind? “Of course. Is that why you came over?”

His smile faltered. Clearly he’d been expecting her to fall for his charms. The bakery owners that he’d surely put out of business in the other towns he’d infiltrated probably crumbled at those perfect teeth and the appealing crinkles around his eyes. He probably expected her to do the same and acquiesce to his plan for town dominance of baked goods.

Claire smiled inwardly knowing that her frosty response had thrown him off balance.

He cleared his throat. "I was thinking we should team up. If we combine our efforts, we could both benefit. Take the sale—there's no reason customers visiting the grand opening of my store won't want to step across the road and pick up a batch of cupcakes and vice versa. We can help one another."

Sure they could. Claire imagined how he would maneuver things in his favor. If they worked together, he would know more about her resources. He would be able to figure out ways to hurt her business. That wasn't going to happen, but she didn't want to let on that she was on to him—better to let him think she was naive and unaware of his plans.

With a tight smile, she told him, "I'll think about it. Right at the moment, though, I'm very busy."

He looked surprised at her bluntness. Frankly she couldn't blame him. She had come off a bit ruder than she'd intended. Oh well, better to let him know right off the bat that they were not going to be friends.

As she stood, he did too. He flashed her an uncertain smile. That time a dimple winked in and out of life in his left cheek, making him seem almost boyish. Something in his blue eyes, a twinkle, brought back memories.

It was *him*. Bobby from under the cedar tree. That one magical kiss of her youth that she'd never forgotten. He was standing right in front of her, thirty-five years later.

Memories of that night came rushing back to her, as if she were there again: the darkness sheltering their shyness and making them braver, her heart fluttering in her throat as she leaned into the kiss, the hope that she would see him again the next day, get to know him better, steal another kiss.

But then there was the bitter disappointment she'd felt at not finding him on the beach or in town the next day, the next night, all through the next week. She'd learned through a friend of a friend that he and his family had left Lobster Bay. Their vacation had ended. He hadn't said goodbye. He hadn't made contact with her again.

And even if their kiss had predated the days of Facebook or cell phones and she'd been too swept up to remember to give him her number, he could have found her if he'd only put in a little effort. If anything, the way he'd kissed her and left town without a second thought only proved that he wasn't to be trusted.

She realized that she was standing in front of him, gawking, not saying a word. He appeared to be too absorbed in his own thoughts to call her on her peculiar behavior. His forehead was wrinkled with concentration, that teasing look replaced with something else. Something pensive.

He tucked his hands into his pockets, curling his shoulders inward like he was a sheepish teenager. "There's something familiar about you. Have we met before?"

Panic surfaced. She couldn't let him know she remembered. That might give him an advantage. And maybe her pride was a bit wounded that he'd never made an effort to contact her. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing she remembered that long-ago kiss.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Have you been to Lobster Bay before?"

"I have. It was a long time ago, when I was a teenager. I vacationed here with my family. I think I met a girl named Claire."

"Really? Huh, I don't remember you, but there are a lot of girls named Claire. I'm sure it wasn't me."

He stared at her for a few more seconds then smiled again. "Sorry. You seemed familiar."

She cleared her throat and turned away. "If you'll excuse me, I have a business to run. I'll think about your offer to work together."

She managed to reach the door to her bakery without turning back to look at him, but as she opened it, the itch between her shoulder blades grew unbearable. She turned to pull the door shut behind her, taking the opportunity to look at him one more time. He stepped off the curb to cross the street, his strides long and confident. His polo shirt clung to his shoulders, framing the line of his body as he crossed smoothly toward his store on long legs.

One thing was for sure, he hadn't lost any of his good looks in the past thirty-five years. If anything, he'd filled out from the lanky teenager into a distinguished man who probably drew the eye of any woman with a pulse.

That included Sally, who lurked by the doorway, watching him leave, and made an appreciative sound under her breath. Claire sighed, then her brows snapped together.

What was burning?

Jerking the phone from her pocket, she checked her timer only to find that she had turned it on silent by accident. Her alarm had already gone off.

Oh no—my cupcakes!

WHEN ROB HAD LEFT Lobster Bay on that last vacation thirty-five years ago, he'd been fresh with the memory of his first real kiss and eager to return and find that girl again. He'd kicked himself all the way home in the backseat of his parents' car for not asking for her phone number. But he'd been fifteen. He'd been nervous. He hadn't really known how to broach that subject or how his shy attempts at flirting had led to that one magical kiss.

Then his mom had gotten sick, and more important things had occupied his thoughts. But every once in a while, the memory would surface, and he would be looking into those gold-flecked hazel eyes again. The same eyes that Claire Turner had. He was positive Claire was the girl he had never forgotten, but apparently, she'd forgotten all about him.

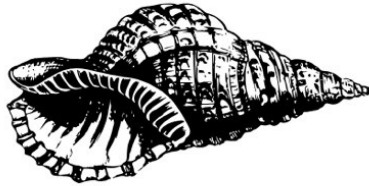
She had changed. Her face and body had matured, but her eyes hadn't. And her auburn hair—he remembered that, too, though now it was shot through with silver—was the same rich color that shone like copper in the sunlight. How had he not recognized her from the second he saw her?

Now, more than ever, he wanted to work together with her. Meeting her again was a sign. He was doing the right thing moving to Lobster Bay, making his fresh start where he had some of his fondest memories.

And even though Claire didn't remember him, it might be like a second chance. The timing was right. He hadn't been able to even think about starting over with someone else after Caroline died, but now it was five years later. He was lonely. It was time. Claire didn't remember him, but that was okay. He wasn't fifteen anymore. He wasn't a nervous kid. He was a man who knew how to capture the attention of a woman.

If only she wasn't so intent on hating his guts.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



I *diot, idiot, idiot.* As Claire tossed cupcake after cupcake into the trash, the refrain flashed across her mind. She shouldn't have even given Rob or Robbie or whatever his name was the time of day, let alone the more than ten minutes she'd allotted him. Where had the time gone? It seemed as though they'd been talking for only two or three minutes.

Two or three *tense* minutes.

Frustrated at finding every single one of the cupcakes she had in the oven charred, she upended the muffin tray and dumped them into the trash. Several bounced off the rim and scattered over the floor. As she bent to retrieve them, thunder rumbled in the distance. Her pipes creaked ominously in response, as if they were communicating with the building storm. Claire swore under her breath as she went on all fours to collect the chocolate cupcake that had rolled beneath the table she used for mixing and rolling. She fished it out and plopped it into the trash with the others.

She carried the muffin trays over to the sink to scrub away the charred remnants of cupcake batter. As the sink filled with hot, soapy water, her phone rang. Jane's name popped up as the phone continued to ring in her palm. Jane never called during business hours. She always texted.

A foreboding feeling pinched her gut as Claire answered the phone. "Jane?"

"Oh my God. Claire!" Jane's voice was thin and shrill. She sounded close to tears.

"I'm here. What's wrong?"

"Please tell me you've seen my mom."

“Addie? No. Why?” That feeling in Claire’s gut pulled it into a tighter knot. “Did something happen?” In her heart, she already knew the answer.

“She’s gone. I can’t find her. Please, I need help.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes. Don’t panic.”

As Claire hung up the phone, she heard another peal of thunder. Without even bothering to take off her apron, Claire bolted for the front of the shop.

Hailey looked up at her, her forehead creased. “Claire? What is it?”

“I know you’re about to leave, but I need you to stay on for a little while longer. There’s been an emergency.”

“An emergency?” The younger woman’s eyes were round.

Claire swallowed and nodded, struggling to maintain her composure. Jane’s panic had infected her. Addie would be fine. She had probably only wandered off to a spot where no one thought to look. But with the growing storm, that could be dangerous. If she’d wandered down to the beach... “Adelaide from Tides has wandered off. Jane is putting together a search group.”

At least she assumed Jane was doing that. Jane couldn’t search everywhere by herself. She’d called Claire, so she must have called Maxi too. Maxi had a head for organization. The first thing she would think of was organizing a search party. Even if that search party only consisted of Jane, Claire, Maxi, and Brenda. They would find Addie before anything bad happened. They had to.

“Go,” Hailey said. “I’ll call Mrs. Pease.”

“If you can’t stay, just close up shop. Business will be slow with a storm anyway.”

Claire might lose a few sales, but this was much more important.

Despite the cold wind now whipping in from the ocean, Claire bolted for her Vespa.

WORD MUST HAVE SPREAD FAST, as a dozen people were already at Tides ready to help. Jane stood on the porch, one hand clutching the hood of her raincoat to her head, the other pointing in various directions as she organized the search. She vibrated with nerves, her eyes scanning the small

group of people as they broke into pairs to search the grounds and beach. Claire parked her Vespa and joined Jane on the porch.

Fat raindrops had just started to fall. It was going to be an interesting ride back on the Vespa if the storm didn't blow through.

"What do you want me to do?"

Jane turned to her, despair clear on her face.

Claire enveloped her in a hug. "We'll find her. I promise. Where do you want me to look?"

Jane pushed herself taller, sniffing. "I don't know. Maxi took a group down to the neighbors on all sides to see if they've seen Mom. I want to go, too, but what if she comes back?"

Claire had never seen her friend look so lost, so helpless. She squeezed Jane's arm. "Staying here is a good decision. If she comes back, you can text us and let us know so we can too."

Jane swallowed hard. "With the storm, what if...?"

"We'll find her," Claire said with feeling.

"I've been sending people out in pairs, just in case something happens. You know how quickly thunderstorms can sweep up and how treacherous the beach can be, especially if there's lightning. I don't want anyone to go out alone. It's dangerous."

"Don't worry about me. I can go alone. In fact, I know where I want to look."

"Where is that?"

The male voice made the hairs on the back of Claire's neck stand on end. She hadn't realized that someone had come up behind them. She turned, back straight, to face Rob Bradford.

To her surprise, he looked as concerned as Jane was. Claire noticed the grateful look on her friend's face. Of course another hand in the search was welcome. She would have to set aside her feelings toward her competitor for Jane's sake. Finding Addie was the important thing.

Rob must have noticed the questioning look on Claire's face. "I heard about Adelaide in town. I want to help. I have experience with dementia."

He and Jane shared something unspoken, and she nodded.

When Jane turned to her, Claire was proud of the confidence she projected, even if the truth was far from it.

"You'll go with Claire, then. Claire, you don't mind?"

“It’s fine,” she said without looking at the man standing next to her. She pushed her hair out of her eyes. “Let’s go. We’re wasting time standing here.” She turned, taking off down the beach without waiting for him.

Rob fell into step beside her without question. “Where to?”

“Addie used to take Jane and me to the beach all the time as children. There’s a spot just north of here, a pool in low tide where we would find small fish, hermit crabs, seashells, that sort of thing. It’s cut off from the ocean itself by this rocky shore, so we weren’t in danger of getting swept out to sea. We’d go every week, sometimes more often.”

As Claire spoke, she was already leading him away from the white Victorian house and down the narrow path to the beach below. She hadn’t visited that pool since she was a teenager, preferring to walk on the beach or along the Marginal Way. The spot was close enough to Tides for the community to consider it Adelaide’s property and tucked in between dunes and rocky outcrops, which discouraged tourists.

Thunder rumbled overhead, and the ocean spat fingers of spray at them. It slickened the rocks over which she led Rob, who neither complained nor hovered at her elbow like an overprotective mother duck. At the bottom of the path, they came to a crude footbridge of flat wooden boards. The bridge crossed over the dunes to the alcove where the pool lay.

Rain pummeled them, soaking Claire’s hair and sending bedraggled strands in front of her eyes. At least she’d thought to put on her raincoat. Despite the pounding in her heart, she moved more slowly, testing each foot in front of the other. Between the sheets of rain, she squinted, hoping to see a familiar figure.

What if Adelaide wasn’t there? What if no one found her in time and she was washed out to sea?

Lightning split the sky, sharpening the dim scenery. Not far, on a flat rock overlooking the pool, a shadow moved.

“Addie!”

Claire bolted for the pool, waving her hands for balance as she navigated the slippery rock-lined path that had changed in subtle ways since she was a girl. The entire time, she never looked away from that shape.

It resolved into Adelaide sitting on the rock with her shoulders hunched and her knees to her chest like a little girl. She’d lost one of her shoes. The other one hung impotently from her toe. When she saw Claire, she reared back, startled.

Claire stopped. Rain drizzled down the back of her neck into her shirt. The chill made her shiver. "Addie, it's me, Claire. Jane is looking for you. It's time to come home."

Addie looked at Claire as if she didn't know her. What was she supposed to do? She didn't want to scare Addie, but the tide was coming in fast, and the rain would only make the path more treacherous.

Rob knelt at Addie's feet, putting his head at the same level as hers. "What did you do to your foot?" His voice was soft, warm, patient despite the rain pelting down on him.

"I stepped on a rock and lost my shoe. Does it look bad?" Addie's voice was small.

"Let me see." Slowly, he stretched out his arm, watching the old woman for cues that she might bolt. When he touched her naked foot, she jerked it back but otherwise showed no signs of fear.

Only then did Claire notice the gash in the bottom of Addie's foot. How much worse could it have been if they hadn't found her?

"Nothing a Band-Aid won't fix," Rob pronounced.

Claire was fairly certain he was lying. The cut looked deep enough to need stitches.

"But we need to get you home first. If you can't walk, will you let me carry you?"

Adelaide looked at him through lowered lashes, shy. "I'm sure I'm too heavy for you."

He laughed. "A little bird like you?"

Addie glanced up at him from under her lashes. Despite the cut, it didn't seem to be hurting her too much. Claire couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Her heart was in her throat, and she was afraid to speak, afraid to confuse the old woman further.

She certainly couldn't carry her, but Rob could. And he was so good with her, so kind and patient. Jane hadn't been lying about that. This sort of thing, it wasn't the kind of thing someone could fake.

"I suppose if you *want* to carry me..."

"I can think of no greater honor," Rob teased. He stood, scooping Adelaide into his arms as he did. She let out a squeak and wrapped her bony arms around his neck.

He turned to Claire. His thoroughly soaked shirt stuck to his body. Raindrops snaked down his face, but even the dark afternoon from the

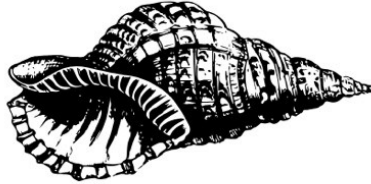
cloudy overhead sky couldn't snuff out the brilliance of his eyes. He was calm, in control. "Are you okay making your way back to the inn on your own? I think it's better if I run."

"Of course," Claire said, stepping back without thinking. She met his gaze for a moment more before he took off. Adelaide whooped, the sound almost swallowed by a fresh peal of thunder. Dimly, Claire heard her shout something about jealousy and someone named Sadie Thompson.

They were gone before Claire started to move. She couldn't run as fast, but with the rain splattering her at every turn, she moved as quickly as she dared. She kept her eyes peeled for Addie's other shoe but didn't find it. She cradled the first between her hands and followed in Rob's wake, wondering if she might have misjudged him after all.

And what had he meant when he'd said he had "experience" with dementia?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Rain pelted the sides of the bed-and-breakfast. Outside, flashes of lightning reflected off the wavy glass of the old windows. Thus far, the power had held, but in a house as old as Tides, Claire wasn't holding her breath.

Everyone who had participated in the search had been contacted and accounted for. Some had gone, but a small crowd remained, clustering in the gathering room at the back of the inn, the only room big enough to accommodate that many people. Brenda had put together a platter of grapes, cheese, and crackers. It sat next to a pot of coffee on the table facing the wide windows looking out to the ocean.

Everyone's attention was on Addie. She sat in an oversized armchair, a heavy navy striped blanket tucked around her. She looked very small, like a child being tended to by her mother, as Jane knelt at her feet to examine the cut. The first aid kit was laid out next to her, bandages and gauze scattered haphazardly and spilling over the white plastic sides.

Kneeling next to Addie, with a towel hanging around his neck, Rob held her hand and spoke to her, keeping her calm as Jane tended to her foot. His messy wet hair made him look as if he'd just stepped from the shower. Now why in the world was she having thoughts like that?

As if he could feel her gaze, Rob looked up and smiled at her. Claire smiled back before she could catch herself. Rob was very attentive to Addie and had seemed concerned about the woman, but Claire warned herself not to be fooled. It was hard to fit this facet of him against that of the ruthless

bakery owner she'd built up in her head, but people often acted nice when they had ulterior motives.

Not wanting to stare at him, Claire moved to the window, popped a grape in her mouth and poured a cup of coffee. The rain was starting to let up, thankfully. Claire didn't relish the idea of taking the Vespa back to Sandcastles. She could ask someone for a ride, but then she would have to walk back down and get it later.

She was on her third grape when a dry towel was thrust into her arms. "Here," Rob said unceremoniously. "You look like you could use this."

"Thank you." She put the coffee down, wrapped the towel around her shoulders, and started drying her hair with the end.

Rob tucked his hands into his pockets, reminding her again of that fifteen-year-old boy she'd kissed decades ago. "I'm glad you made it back safely."

"I know the beach pretty well, so it wasn't that hard." Had she sounded bitchy? She didn't mean to, but she also didn't want to encourage a friendship with the guy.

"Of course." Rob glanced around. Jane had finished bandaging Addie and was packing up the first aid kit. "I'd better see if Jane wants my help moving Adelaide to another room."

Claire was staring after him as a familiar feminine voice asked, "Who's the cutie?"

She jumped.

Next to her, Maxi laughed. She hadn't even noticed her come up. "I knew I caught you staring."

"I was not staring. I was watching Jane with her mom."

"Sure you were." Maxi started toweling off her hair. "So who is he?"

"You don't know? It's the Bradford Breads guy."

Maxi's left brow hiked. "Ohhh, well at least he has appropriately nice buns."

"Maxi!" Claire exclaimed, but it emerged half as a choked laugh, no doubt her friend's intention.

"So you two aren't enemies anymore?" Maxi asked.

"I wouldn't say that. We had to pair up to find Addie at Jane's request. He's still under suspicion as far as I'm concerned."

Maxi's lips pressed together. "Really? He seems so nice to Addie, and didn't I hear that he found her and ran back through the storm carrying her?"

That's kind of a nice thing to do, especially as a newcomer."

"Maybe he has an ulterior motive." Claire's voice was missing some of the conviction she'd felt earlier.

"What would that possibly be? To befriend Jane so he can ruin your bakery?" Maxi curled her towel around her shoulders and poured a cup of coffee. "Don't you think you're reaching a bit?"

Claire chewed her bottom lip and studied her friend. Why did no one see things the way she saw them? There was only kindness and concern in Maxi's eyes. She wasn't being mean or malicious, but it wasn't *her* bakery that was in jeopardy. "I don't think I'm reaching. I tell you the guy is acting nice but there's something odd about it. Why does he dote on Addie so much? That doesn't seem normal to me."

Maxi shrugged. "Well, he has a soft spot for people with memory issues because of his wife."

"Wife?" Claire hadn't even thought about him having a wife, but of course he probably did. She hadn't seen any wife hanging around the store across the street. Where was she, and what did that have to do with Addie? "That makes it even stranger. Where is his wife?"

Maxi looked at her funny. "She died. I heard him mention it earlier. Didn't realize he was the bread guy. You didn't hear him talking about that to Jane when he brought Addie in?"

Claire shook her head. It must have been when she was still making her way back from where they'd found Addie.

"Oh, well apparently his wife had early-onset Alzheimer's." Maxi's face turned sad. "He took care of her while she was sick."

Something inside Claire softened. She glanced back at Rob, who had moved Addie to the couch and was still doting on her.

Loudly, Addie's voice cut through the murmur of people. "Stop fussing around me. I'm fine."

"Take it easy, Mom. You can't walk on that foot for a while."

"Stop coddling me. All of you go on now. I have an inn to run! I can't sit around all day."

If nothing else, she sounded back in her usual spirits. After the scare they'd had, it was a relief.

Claire sipped the last of her coffee. The rain had stopped. She'd better say goodbye to her friends and head back to the bakery. She had a cupcake sale to prepare for.

BY THE TIME Maxi checked her phone, she found not one but three text messages from James.

The first had come not long after she had sent her initial text about Addie going missing. Jane's family was a pillar of the community, and she thought he would want to know that she was missing and that Jane was organizing half the town to look for her. The second text must have come in while Maxi was out knocking on neighbors' doors in search of Addie. And when she hadn't answered that...

Maxi, please text me back to let me know you are okay.

He cared. Maxi had started to wonder about that. Especially after what Claire and Hailey had said about their exes. Clearly she had too much time on her hands now, and it was making her overthink things. She leaned against the wall and tapped out a response immediately.

I'm fine. A bit wet. Claire found Addie and we're all inside now, warming up.

When she hit send, she tucked the phone against her and smiled, releasing a long breath and all of the tension that had gripped her those past few hours since she'd gotten Jane's call.

Most people had left, including Claire, who had toweled off the seat of her Vespa, shrugged on her raincoat, and zoomed off. Addie was sitting contentedly on the couch, talking to Rob Bradford. As she watched, Addie let out a carefree laugh in response to something Rob had said.

Maxi had been surprised to discover the good-looking stranger was the man Claire had built up to be some sort of dough-rolling villain. Claire hadn't mention that he was cute or that he had a kind way about him.

With a sigh, Maxi shook her head. How long was Claire going to hold onto this nonexistent animosity? To the outside eye, it was obvious that Rob held no ill will toward Claire. In fact, from the way he looked at her, he might even be smitten.

They would make a good couple. Both passionate about baking, they had a common interest. Claire had gotten a bit flustered when she'd tried to dismiss Rob's attractiveness. Maxi knew her friend too well. Claire *did* think Rob Bradford was cute. She was simply too scared, and too busy protecting her territory, to acknowledge that he might be worth pursuing.

Neither Claire nor Jane had dated in years, although Jane's reason was different. She'd been widowed quite suddenly. Maxi repressed a shudder, thinking how horrible it would be if she lost James. Maxi wanted her friends to be happy, but that didn't necessarily mean they needed a man in their lives.

But if Claire decided not to date again, it shouldn't be because of the hateful way her ex-husband had treated her. Maxi was certain she saw a spark between Claire and Rob.

Was there something she could do to help them over that initial hump? Probably not. Claire was as stubborn as a lobster sometimes. But even if nothing came of it, Maxi wished she could figure out a way to show Claire that Rob wasn't her enemy. In fact, he seemed like an all-around nice guy, and those types of people were hard to find.

The phone chimed again in her hand, and Maxi glanced down at the screen. She smiled at the words greeting her. Warmth spread through her, chasing out the lingering cold of the storm.

I'm glad you're safe. I love you.

She tapped out the reply on reflex. *I love you too.*

JANE WAS PUTTING up a brave front, but Rob knew from personal experience how upsetting it was to have a loved one wander off.

"Honestly, I don't think I can thank you enough for what you've done."

"It wasn't me. I carried your mother here, but the person who found her is Claire."

"It took both of you. And thanks for being so nice to her. I appreciate you distracting her while I bandaged the cut. She might have been hard to handle otherwise." Jane hugged herself and glanced at Addie, now seated calmly on the couch.

"Is the bandage enough? I could help you take her to the emergency clinic," Rob offered. The gash in Addie's foot hadn't looked half as bad once it was cleaned out, but it was best to be on the safe side.

"Norma Barnes looked at it. She's a nurse. She said it didn't need stitches, so I think we'll be okay." Jane hugged herself tighter and shivered. "I'm sorry I'm such a wreck about this."

Rob clasped her shoulder. "This was a big deal. Taking care of someone is a lot of pressure. It's okay to be a wreck sometimes."

When Jane looked at him, her eyes shone with unshed tears. "This isn't the first time we've lost track of her. She gets so confused and I—I thought I had all my bases covered, that she was safe."

"This isn't your fault."

Jane looked away. "I guess I wasn't paying close enough attention to her."

Softly, he confessed, "I know how you feel. Believe me, I don't envy your position or the decisions you'll have to make, but you're strong enough to handle this. Today was a bad day. There are still good days."

Rob sympathized with her, and he was surprised he wasn't spiraling into all the complicated feelings about Caroline's illness. Maybe time really was starting to heal those wounds. It helped that Addie was older. Rob could separate her failing mind from that of his late wife, who had had her entire life ahead of her. Caroline had been his best friend, and he'd lost that long before he'd lost the empty shell her body had become. He managed on his own, but he missed having that connection with someone.

His thoughts turned to Claire and how determined she'd been to find Addie. He knew she still didn't trust him, but she'd set that aside because she wanted to help Jane. Claire was a good friend. If nothing more, he could use good friends like that. But how to win her over?

"Do you think there are still good days? Because sometimes, I'm not so sure." Jane's question tugged him out of his thoughts.

"Of course there are."

Jane sighed. "Sometimes, I really don't know what to do. When she's having a good day, she's almost like her old self. A little forgetful maybe but not scaring me like this."

"I know," Rob said softly. He infused those two words with all the sympathy he could muster. He understood all too well how she felt in her position.

Quietly, she confessed, "She's afraid I'm going to put her in a home. She's mentioned it before and broken down because of it. I don't know what to do." Her eyes bleak, she raised them to meet Rob's. "What did you do for your wife?"

Rob hesitated. He rarely talked about the details of his wife's illness if he could help it. Jane had asked him earlier how he knew so much about

dementia, and he'd simply told her he'd gone through the whole thing with his wife. But he knew the exact turmoil Jane was experiencing, and he wanted to help her.

At his hesitation, Jane apologized. "I don't mean to pry. It's just so hard to know what's the right thing to do, but I don't want to dredge up unhappy memories for you. You've gone through more than you should have had to."

Normally, Rob grimaced at that answer. Pity was one thing he didn't need or want. But a shadow in her eyes made him wonder if she was echoing a sentiment she'd been trying to teach herself.

"I have," he answered. His gaze drifted, this time to Adelaide. "But so have you. I didn't put my wife in an assisted living facility."

Jane nodded briskly. "So, I'm doing the right thing in keeping her here."
"Not necessarily."

Was it a trick of the light, or did something like hope flit through her expression that time? She was tired. She wanted some relief. He knew exactly how that felt.

He told her, "I *should* have put Caroline in an assisted living or memory care facility. She asked for it, but I—I was selfish. I wanted to hold onto her for as long as possible." His left thumb travelled to meet his ring finger, where he no longer had his wedding ring. Sometimes, it surprised him to find it in the box in his nightstand instead of on his finger. Most days, he'd stopped thinking about it at all. "I was in a different position than you. I can work from home and only need to connect with my store managers in person once a week at most. And I had the money to hire a nurse to come in twice a day to care for her and sit with her while I did office work from home. I wasn't trying to run an inn. My managers are self-sufficient."

Jane hugged herself again, but she seemed to consider his words at the very least.

He added, "Ultimately, I kept her at home until the end. But I did extensive research into memory care facilities nearby. I'm happy to help you if you need it. I've been exactly in your shoes, and I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing to put your mother somewhere safe where she'll be lovingly cared for all the time."

Jane let out a gusty sigh, blowing the strands of hair falling into her face. "Maybe. I know she doesn't want it, but maybe it would be better to

put her in a place where she'd have proper care. It... she scared me today. And I can't run the inn and be with her twenty-four hours a day."

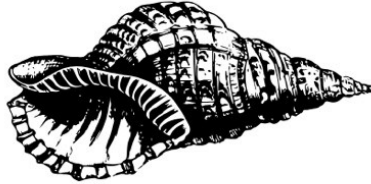
"It looks like she scared a lot of people." He gave Jane's arm one last squeeze. "Let me sort out where I put all those pamphlets and emails, and I'll bring the information later this week."

Her smile only halfway reached her eyes, but the weight of the afternoon seemed to have lifted. "Thank you. I really don't know what I would have done without you today."

"Me and Claire," he reminded her. "We'd make a better team than she thinks."

Jane rolled her eyes. "So it seems, but it's going to take a bit of work to convince Claire of that."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The next morning, Claire was buzzing around the bakery, trying to get ahead of the regular chores so she could get in some extra cupcake baking. After the search for Addie, she'd returned to Sandcastles and, with the help of Sarah and Aston, had baked well into the night. Now she was standing in front of the fridge, taking an inventory of the cupcakes and trying to block out all distractions as she counted.

"I think it would do you some good."

Sally's voice buzzed distantly behind Claire. She shut the fridge door and wiped her tired eyes. The handywoman stood, leaning against the counter, chewing on a corn muffin slathered in butter, and dripping crumbs onto the top of her overalls.

"What are you talking about?"

The old woman swallowed then gestured through the air between them with half of the muffin left. "You and Bradford. It would do you good to work together, like he wants."

"Who told you he wanted that?"

"He did."

"He did? When did you talk to him?" Sally knew Rob Bradford? That was news to Claire. And why was he telling everyone that he wanted to work with her? It was odd that he was being so obvious and insistent about it. Clearly he was up to something.

"He's hiring local folks to fix some odds and ends in the store before the grand opening, so naturally he called me."

Claire glanced toward the front of the store, over the heads of the seated customers, and out the window to Bradford Breads. So, he'd hired her handywoman, eh? Probably thought he could get insider information. "What did you tell him about Sandcastles?"

Sally's face scrunched. "Tell him? What are you talking about? I fixed some trim that had come loose on the doorframe over there."

"Did he ask you questions about Sandcastles?"

"Yeah, he asked if I thought you'd be willing to work with him. Didn't I just say that?"

Claire sighed. "I mean specifics. Like maybe what our busiest day is or what pastry we sell the most of."

Sally took her time chewing the bite of muffin. "Nope. Why would he want to know any of that?"

Good question. What would he gain from getting insider information on Sandcastles? Claire wasn't sure. But then again, she wasn't exactly up on the various goals and objectives of corporate espionage. Rob Bradford probably was, though. People didn't get bakery chains by being naive about business.

Sally was still looking at her like she wanted an answer, but Claire was saved from having to answer by the pipes in the bathroom, which decided to let out a series of disturbing gurgles.

"Are you sure the patch on the pipes will hold? I've been hearing some gurgling." As if to punctuate that sentence, someone flushed the toilet in the café washroom, and the gurgling noises intensified. Fearfully, Claire stared at the wall, picturing a geyser erupting at any minute. She really hoped that didn't happen. She only had one public washroom, and if something in there broke, she would have to close the shop per town regulations. And if she had to close the shop, she wouldn't be able to make the cupcakes.

Sally popped the last of her muffin into her mouth and chewed. She shrugged and swallowed. "I don't know. You heard what Ralph said about the pipes, but gurgling doesn't have much to do with leaking. The patch should hold. Whether or not you'll have another leak..." Sally shrugged to indicate she couldn't make a prediction on that.

Right, well at least Sally wasn't expounding on how she should team up with Rob Bradford anymore. To distract herself, Claire set back to work. Even though it was early in the day, she wanted to get setup for the

evening's baking. That way they could get started as soon as possible. She had time to make up for after yesterday.

"Flour, sugar, eggs, cocoa..." she muttered under her breath, listing the things she needed to bake the cupcakes.

She puttered toward the cupboards that housed her ingredients in pursuit of the first one. She pulled out the flour canister. It was empty. There were no helpfully stacked bags waiting next to it. She and her helpers had used all her flour last night.

Fortunately, she had thought ahead and sent in an order to her supplier for yesterday's delivery. She'd found it on the back doorstep when she had returned from Tides and tugged it into the shop before drying herself off and preparing for her helpers to come for the night's baking. They'd used up most of the flour she'd already had on hand and would need the new batch for tonight. Where had she put it?

She scanned the kitchen until she spotted the cardboard box with its distinctive logo on the side. Sunshine Flour was a US-based company that had the best flour she'd ever used. She lifted the box on the counter and took out a kitchen knife to break the seal of the delivery sticker on top.

The ink on the sticker was smudged. Claire had a sick feeling but ignored it as she cut into the sticker, which was dry, and the tape beneath. The box had been delivered yesterday while she was searching for Addie during the storm. Hailey, who hadn't been able to stay after all, due to a conflict in her babysitter's schedule, had manned the front only until the last customer had run to their car to drive home before the storm got worse. With the rain pouring down in sheets, Hailey had texted that she doubted Claire would be losing customers and she had to rush home to be with Jennifer before her babysitter left. She hadn't checked the back door before closing, and Claire had been too frazzled to remind her.

The cardboard beneath the tape wasn't moist exactly, but it didn't feel as sturdy as it should have. Claire reached inside the box to lift the first of the bags of flour stacked neatly on their sides to fit as many as possible into the box. The paper bag was still damp.

"Oh no."

She hefted the heavy bag and tore open the contents. It was wet and clumpy. Ruined. This wasn't good. She might not have enough flour to bake the cupcakes tonight.

"What's the matter?" Sally asked.

“The flour got wet.”

It was one bag. Maybe the others...

She opened another bag. Ruined. A third. Ruined. That left only two. Even if they were both fine, she had to bake at least ten dozen cupcakes tonight, or she would fall too far behind to be ready for the sale.

“Why don’t I run down to the grocery store and fetch you a few more bags?”

The offer was sweet, but Claire shook her head. “I don’t buy my flour from the grocery store. I buy it from a specialty supplier. They have a pastry blend that is extremely soft and fine. I can’t use grocery store flour, or the cupcakes won’t have the same quality my customers are used to. I’ll order more, but it will take at least a day to get here, and I have part-time help coming tonight to bake, and—”

Sally patted her arm. She had a kind face. Somehow, the crumb clinging to the corner of her mouth made her all the more sympathetic. “Is that the brand?” She tapped the side of the box.

Claire nodded. “Sunshine Flour.”

A gleam entered Sally’s eyes, and she stepped back with a sly smile. “Then I know exactly where to get you some. That Rob Bradford had a stack of these same flour bags in his shop. I’m sure he’d agree to let you borrow some if I asked.”

“No, don’t—”

Claire was too late. Sally had already turned and rushed out the door, leaving Claire with the unmistakable feeling that the day was about to turn into even more of a headache.

ROB FROWNED at the trim old handywoman who stared up at him expectantly. “You want to borrow a cup of flour?” Granted, it was the neighborly thing to do, but as a bakery, he’d never precisely been asked. It looked like Lobster Bay was going to keep him on his toes.

Sally hooked her thumbs in the straps of her overalls. “Ayuh, well, I was thinking more like several bags. It’s for Claire, across the road.”

“Really?” Rob’s gaze skipped to Sandcastles. Claire had sent Sally over to borrow flour? What an interesting turn of events.

“Claire’s shipment of flour got wet because, with all the hoopla going on up at Tides, the delivery was left outside in the rain. She’s fresh out of flour, and they don’t make emergency deliveries, so she’d have to wait until tomorrow.” Sally leaned closer. “She’s got all those cupcakes to make for the bake sale, and she needs that flour tonight.”

Rob’s smile widened. She needed the flour for the sale? This could be exactly the thing that would win Claire over.

“I’d be happy to bring over some flour for Claire. She needs one bag?”

“I’d say closer to three. She lost at least three in her shipment, and she has part-time help coming over this evening to bake.”

Perfect. Lending her flour for that would surely show her that he had no ill will toward her bakery. “Why don’t I lend her four bags just to be sure she has enough? They’re heavy. I’ll carry them across the street for you.”

Sally was robust. As a handywoman, she kept in pretty good shape despite her age. Rob had seen her carry some pretty heavy boards around. Nevertheless, a sneaky smile spread across her face. “What a great idea. I’m sure I couldn’t carry all four.”

In the end, Sally lugged one bag while he carried the other three. She led him around the building to the door on the side of Sandcastles, which opened directly into the kitchen.

As he stepped inside, he noticed the kitchen was old but had a rustic charm. The sweet smell of cookies hit his nose, and his stomach grumbled.

The color was high in Claire’s cheeks as she turned from where she’d been pulling the cookies out of the oven. She had an apron tied around her waist, and he noticed that it accentuated her curves. He forced himself to look her in the eye as he gallantly offered her the bags of flour.

“I hope four is enough for your purposes.”

“I don’t want to put you out. I wasn’t going to ask to borrow any, but *someone*”—she glanced at Sally over Rob’s shoulder—“ran off before I could stop her. I mean, it’s not like I’m so unprepared that I need to borrow flour.”

So Claire hadn’t sent Sally over on purpose? Darn, for a minute there he’d thought he’d made some progress with the feisty baker.

Rob set the bags of flour down on the counter. “It’s no trouble. I had extra. Sally told me yours got wet.”

Claire nodded. “In the storm yesterday.”

“Right.”

Tension hummed in the air between them, and Rob was uncertain what to say. Here was a great opportunity to broach the subject of the sale and the possibility of working together, but the frown on Claire's face stopped him.

Sally was watching them like a hawk watching a wounded baby rabbit. "Claire has that big cupcake sale on Saturday. You have your big opening then, don't you, Rob?"

"I do." What was Sally up to? Rob supposed he didn't mind. He could use the help since he wasn't doing a good job himself.

"Well, since you're both trying to get customers down here and you're set up across the street from each other..."

"I hardly think people will want to shop in both stores, if that's what you're getting at." Claire peeled the oversized cookies off the tray with a rubber spatula and set them carefully on a cooling rack. They were golden brown with sugar crystals on top. Rob's mouth watered.

"I disagree." Sally reached for a cookie, touching it tentatively to see if it was too hot. "I think after choosing the bread they're going to have at supper or keep in the kitchen for sandwiches, people are going to want to relax with a coffee and pastry. You guys could cross-promote. Would be better for both of you."

Claire hesitated, and for a moment, Rob thought she might be considering it. "That might have been a good idea a few weeks ago, but now there are only two days, and it's just not enough time to set anything up. Besides, all my time is taken between now and then. I don't have time to plan anything. Unlike some people, I can't just leave my shop willy-nilly." Claire shot Rob a pointed look.

Ouch! The only reason he could leave was because the shop wasn't open yet. Once it was, he would be tied to it as much as Claire was tied here. Even though he owned a chain of stores, he worked just as hard as anyone, especially in this particular store since he would be the manager. But he could tell that Claire had made up her mind. There would be no point in pushing because that would only make her dig her heels in more.

He raised his hands in surrender. "You might be right. There isn't a lot of time to make a plan. I hope the flour helps."

Claire's demeanor softened. Almost reluctantly, as if the words were dragged from her, she murmured, "Thank you for the flour, and that was a nice thing you did for Addie yesterday."

Rob shoved his hands in his pockets, suddenly self-conscious. "It was nothing really. I mean, I know how heart-wrenching it is when a loved one wanders off, so when I heard she'd gone missing, I had to volunteer to help. Plus, I'd met Addie the day before, and she's a real firecracker. I would hate to think of her coming to any harm."

Claire nodded. They were silent as her gaze held his for just a fraction of a second. In that fraction, Rob felt like he'd made some progress.

Sally broke the silence, her voice pointed. "Rob is widowed."

Despite his resolve to keep his past to himself, he'd found himself opening up to the town handywoman enough to tell her that much. But why was she blurting that out now?

Claire shot Sally a look then muttered. "I'm sorry about that."

"Claire is divorced."

Color washed into Claire's cheeks. "Sally!"

The old woman grinned, seemingly pleased with herself. "I thought you ought to know. To make it easier to work together. No jealous wives or husbands around to grumble if you two need to work late."

Surprisingly bashful, Claire turned away. She didn't look at Rob.

Rob glanced at Sally. Sally winked and reached for another cookie.

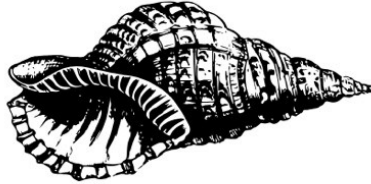
"I should get back to my shop. I have a lot of prep to do before Saturday." Rob turned to leave through the back door.

"Thanks again for the flour," Claire said.

He turned to catch her eye one last time, but she was already pulling bowls out of a cupboard, her back to him. "It's my pleasure," Rob said. "If you ever need anything, I'm right across the street."

As Rob walked back over to his shop, he couldn't keep from smiling. Even though Claire still didn't want to work with him, he could tell he'd made some progress. It was going to be a challenge to break through Claire Turner's tough shell, but he had a feeling it would be worth it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Despite the late-summer sunset, darkness had fallen by the time Claire squeezed the last of the cupcakes into her fridge and shut the door. She waved wearily to Sarah, tugging the side door shut behind her so it would latch. Ashton would be leaving, too, after he cleaned up in the bathroom, but it was a habit to keep that door closed. She really should have Sally fix it soon.

Her feet aching, she lowered herself onto a stool and leaned her elbows onto the table. Sarah had wiped it down before leaving, and all three of them had done the dishes while the last batch of cupcakes was in the oven. Claire was eager to get home. Poor Urchin would be frantic for his dinner.

The toilet flushed, and water gurgled through the pipes. Claire made a face. The pipes had been groaning all night, as if they were haunted. She didn't need that nightmare—or the reminder of replacing them. She'd contacted the bank about a small loan, but there was so much paperwork. She had no time to look at it.

The pipes hissed alarmingly, followed by a thunk and a muffled curse. A second later, Ashton stepped into the kitchen. His shoes squeaked on the floor, leaving a wet trail. He looked apologetic, wringing his hands. "I swear I didn't do anything, Ms. Turner. It just started leaking on its own."

"A leak?" *Crap!*

"It's coming from under the sink in the bathroom. I don't know how to fix it."

"It's fine," she assured him. She must have a good poker face because he relaxed. If only she really did feel it was fine. "I'll give Sally a call. She

can fix it.” Or so Claire hoped. Was it the same place she’d already fixed, and if so, could someone even fix something like that twice?

Claire took a deep breath. It was still two days until the sale. Hopefully that was enough time to fix it, even if it needed something more than a patch. But still, she couldn’t have the bathroom out of commission at all because then the store would be shut down, and who would want to come to a cupcake sale at a place that had been shut down for two days?

Ashton was staring at her. “So I can go home?”

“Yes. Go home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He didn’t wait to hear her say it again. He was out the door before she pulled her phone out of her apron pocket.

She dialed Sally, holding her breath as she approached the bathroom. Hopefully, she could convince Sally to work on it tonight. Timidly, Claire pushed open the door. The hiss was louder in there, the water pooling out from beneath the sink at an alarming rate. *Oh no!*

She bent down to look underneath. How in the world did one make this thing stop running?

Come on, Sally. Pick up!

“Hello?”

Claire blew out a breath of relief upon hearing Sally’s voice. “Sally, I have a problem at the shop.” Her voice was high and shakier than she’d hoped. She swallowed hard.

“A problem?” A garble in the background pulled Sally’s attention from the phone. “Hush, honey. I’ll be done in a minute.” Then closer again. “What’s the problem?”

“A leak. In the bathroom.”

“Where is it coming from?”

“Under the sink.”

“Same spot as before?”

“I think so.”

“You *think*?”

Claire crouched down to take another look. “It’s kind of hard to tell with water spraying everywhere.” Just then, even more water gushed out. She pulled away, leaving the door wide open. The water spewed from the cabinet to the growing puddle on the floor.

Claire ran to the kitchen and grabbed some towels. “Definitely the same place. How do I turn this thing off?”

“Turn the valve.”

Claire dropped the towels on the floor. They became soaked immediately. “Valve?”

“It’s easy. Look under the sink. There’s a knob on the side of the pipe that leads from the sink to the floor. Find it and turn it.”

Afraid of her phone getting wet, Claire thumbed the button to turn the call onto speaker and put it on the vanity counter. Taking a deep breath, she stuck her head inside the cabinet. Cold water splashed over her arm and down her front as she groped for the knob.

She found it. Turned. The knob stopped with a creak. “It’s not working. I think it’s getting worse!”

“It can’t get worse. The water is either on or it’s off. Turn it the other way.”

Claire did so, her hand slipping over the cold metal before she got a firm grip. As she turned it as far as possible in the other direction, the fountain of water slowed and then stopped. Claire sat back on her heels. She was soaked, but she’d stopped the water.

Except now there was no water to the sink. And no water meant no bathroom for the customers. She needed Sally to get there to fix it.

“I did it. The water stopped. How soon can you get here to fix the leak?”

The pause on the other end of the line made Claire’s stomach roil. She took the call off speaker, held the phone to her ear, and swished the towel around with her foot to sop up some of the water.

“Sally?”

“Well, I can’t make it there tonight.”

“What?”

“I’m in Portland babysitting my grandson. I won’t return to Lobster Bay until tomorrow afternoon.”

“*Afternoon?*” Claire had held out a faint hope of Sally sneaking in early in the morning to fix the problem before the shop opened. But without the bathroom fixed, Claire might not be able to open her shop tomorrow at all.

“You could call Ralph.”

Claire pushed out a breath. Ralph’s hourly rate spiked to unaffordable after five p.m., but what choice did she have? “I will. Thanks.”

Claire hung up and glared at the faulty pipes. “Why couldn’t you have stayed fixed for just a few more days?”

“Who are you talking to?”

The voice made her jump. Heart pounding, she turned to see Rob Bradford standing in the doorway. She bristled. “You almost gave me a heart attack! What are you doing here?”

What *was* he doing there sneaking around at night when all the stores were closed? More corporate espionage?

“I saw your helpers leave but not you, then I noticed the light was still on and the door was cracked open. I came to check that everything was all right.”

A likely story. She crossed her arms. “Why were you at your shop so late? You aren’t even open for business yet.”

“I’m not,” he admitted, a dimple winking into existence in his cheek. “But you aren’t the only person who is preparing for a big event on Saturday. I was baking.”

“Oh, right.” Claire stood in the doorway, determined not to let him see the mess inside. The last thing she wanted was for her competitor to see that she had a plumbing problem.

“So, what’s going on?”

Claire forced a smile. “Nothing. Just doing some baking, just like you.”

Rob frowned, his eyes drifting down to her chest, where her soaking-wet shirt clung. His left brow quirked up. “You sure?”

Obviously Claire’s claim of nothing being wrong while she was soaked wasn’t going to pass muster with Mr. Prying Eyes. “Just a little problem with the bathroom sink.”

Rob’s gaze skirted over her shoulder toward the bathroom. “Anything I can help with?”

“No.” Maybe he would use the fact that her bathroom was on the fritz against her. Could he call the town and have her shut down? Would he? The earnest look on his face indicated that he had noble intentions, but maybe he was a good actor.

There was another reason Claire didn’t want to accept help. She didn’t want to admit to anyone that she couldn’t do this all herself, not after she’d fought so hard against Peter’s constant insinuations that Sandcastles would never take off, that she couldn’t make the bakery successful on her own. She didn’t want Rob to think the only reason she could even stay open for the cupcake sale was because he had bailed her out. She didn’t want anyone else to think that either. Most of all, she didn’t want to think it herself.

“So you know how to fix plumbing?” The doubtful look on Rob’s face only made Claire want to dig her heels in deeper.

“YouTube has all sorts of tutorial videos. I’ll start there.”

He must have seen the mulishness in her expression because he leaned forward and added, “I’m pretty good at fixing leaks. I’m not trying to sabotage you.”

Claire hadn’t even considered that he would make the problem worse. She bristled again. Although he had leaned closer by less than six inches, the air between them felt more intimate. Like they were companions, friends even.

“I’m sure you are, but I’ve fixed plenty of things in here, and I’m sure a little leak won’t be my downfall.” Claire frowned. Fixing a leak wasn’t exactly like fixing a crack in the tile or a cabinet door. What if she tried to fix it and made it worse? “I don’t want to impose on you. You have your own bakery to worry about.”

Rob nodded, his gaze drifting back to the bathroom. “True. I’m sure you’ll get this fixed in no time. But the truth is, I could use *your* help, and if you’re busy fixing your bathroom, you might not be able to help me. What about a trade?”

Claire was about to turn back to her bathroom but paused, cocking her head. “A trade?”

“Yep. You’d be doing me a big favor.”

Claire lifted her chin. “That depends on what the problem is.”

His smile grew brighter than the overhead lights. “Ever since coming into your shop, I’ve been thinking about the cozy atmosphere you have going. I won’t be able to put anything up before the grand opening, mind you, but I’ve been thinking that it might be nice to add some tables to the front of my store to invite customers to stay a while. The problem is, I have no idea how to do that. If you’ll tell me where to start, I’ll fix the leak in your sink. Sound fair?”

Claire pursed her lips and tapped her toe. She shouldn’t barter with the competition who had moved in across the street. But without fixing that leak in her sink, she wouldn’t be able to open her store come morning. And if she called Ralph, he would charge an arm and a leg, and there was no guarantee he was even available. What if he was out of town too?

“You have a deal.” She held out her hand then gripped his firmly as he shook hers. She caught his eye. “But we fix the leak first.”

He laughed. "You drive a hard bargain. Show me where the problem is."

ROB HAD PURPOSELY WORKED LATE at his store that evening because he knew Claire would be baking her cupcakes at night after she closed. It was silly, he knew, but he'd been hoping to catch a glimpse of her, maybe even get up the nerve to suggest they grab something to eat.

From his shop, he could see the side of the building that housed Sandcastles. He'd seen her helpers leave one by one, but after several minutes, Claire hadn't come out. What was worse, the slice of light spilling out onto the alley told him that the door leading to the kitchen was ajar. Naturally, he'd gone over to investigate.

He didn't know what he'd expected, certainly not that he'd end up lying on his back on the damp, mopped-up floor of her bathroom trying to fix a leak in her plumbing. Luckily, the leak had been minor, and he'd fixed it the best he knew how.

It was a stroke of good luck, actually, and he hadn't been making up the part about wanting Claire's help. Okay, so he really hadn't planned on having a seating area over at Bradford Breads, but her café was cozy and inviting, and it wouldn't hurt to get her advice on how he could replicate that at his bakery. Besides, he knew she would never let him fix the leak if he didn't try to make it seem like an equal exchange.

Who knew? It could be a new beginning for them.

As he pulled out from under the sink, he stifled a groan. He wasn't young enough to lie on the floor on his back for that long anymore. He feigned a smile and stood, dusting off his knees. As he'd worked, Claire seemed to thaw toward him.

She returned his smile, but it was tentative. "Is it fixed?"

"Should be. Are you ready to give it a shot?"

She bit her lip and nodded. Although nervous, there was a hopeful gleam in her eye. He bent to open the shut-off valve, holding his breath as he turned the knob. The pipes pinged, but no water came gushing from the seams.

He turned to Claire and motioned to the faucet handles, confidence making the motion fluid. "Will you do the honors?"

A faint blush stained her cheeks as she stepped closer to him in the cramped bathroom. She smelled like vanilla. Hesitantly, she reached out to turn on the faucet. Water gushed into the sink. No drips. It looked as though his fix had worked.

When she turned to him, the relief was apparent in her face. Her eyes had warmed, softening toward him. “Thank you.” She infused a world of gratitude into those two words.

He cleared his throat. “You’re welcome.”

She nodded. The color in her cheeks deepened as she turned away to shut off the taps. With her back still turned, she told him, “Come with me to the front of the store, and I’ll give you some tips on how I set up the café.”

As they passed the opening separating the kitchen from the café, Claire groped for the light switch. Several lights hanging from the high ceiling shed light on the empty space.

At night, with no one in the café but the two of them, the space seemed strangely empty, and the emptiness made it seem more intimate. Claire led him past the display case, dotted with the remnants of the day’s baked goods, and toward the door.

She gestured to the front space. “What do you see?”

For some reason, he suspected it was a trick question. “Tables and chairs?”

“Good, but—” She walked forward, gesturing to the nearest table before turning to face him. “Don’t look at them individually. Look at them as a whole. Do you see the way I’ve placed them?”

“Along the window?”

She gestured to the tables farther back from the window, closer to the display case and aisle where customers presumably ordered. “The ones at the window draw customers inside, but there’s far too little space there. See how I’ve placed these tables diagonally from those along the window? It fills up the space but shouldn’t cause a problem when customers pull out a chair or leave it there when they’re finished. There’s still a wide enough aisle to walk through. It’s dark out, so you might not be able to see, but that’s what I’ve done on the sidewalk as well.”

“I remember.” He hadn’t thought anything of the checkerboard pattern of the tables then, but it seemed it had been deliberate. “That’s your secret?”

She laughed. “Partly. The other part is to make the tables inviting. You see how each table has a succulent?”

“A what?”

“The plant. It’s like a cactus, but these are less prickly. They don’t need a lot of water or take up a lot of space, but they help to make the table inviting. It’s more than a place to sit and eat. It’s a place to do the daily crossword or chat with friends. Each table has a holder with folded napkins and a themed bowl for creamer that matches the sugar dish. Yes, I paid a little extra to buy so many with seashells on the side, but I think it adds its own charm to the tables.”

“I don’t remember seeing any of this outside.”

Claire sighed. She rubbed the back of her neck. “It’s true. The wind tends to blow away the napkins, and I learned the hard way that if I keep a small potted plant on the tables, customers will walk away with them. So the tables outside are somewhat plain. I try to liven it up during tourist season with some large pots of flowers in between the tables.”

“I think you do a wonderful job.”

She met his gaze for a moment, almost shy. Then she turned all business, straightening her spine as if she hadn’t heard the compliment. “Is there anything else you need advice on?”

His smile turned chagrined. “It sounds as though I could use some decorating help. You’ve given me a lot to think about, though. After the grand opening, I’m going to give some thought to rearranging my store, but I don’t want to have a café like you have. I can’t compete with this, and why bother? If they want coffee, they can come over here, but I still want my place to look inviting like Sandcastles does.”

The look in her eyes softened, and he knew he’d said the right thing. Truly, he didn’t want to compete with her café. Ideas of how they could work together bubbled up, but he didn’t voice them, sensing that might be pushing things too far.

“Are you hungry? I have plenty of pastry left over.” Claire’s voice was tentative, as if she expected him to say no. *As if.*

Rob tried to act nonchalant. “Yeah, I’d like that. I’m starving.”

It took all of five minutes for Claire to choose some cupcakes from the case. She poured them each a coffee, carried it all on a tray to one of the tables, and gestured for him to sit. It still felt odd to be there after hours, but the cupcakes made it feel less like he was intruding.

Rob started in on his treat while Claire fiddled with the wrapper of hers. The cake was moist, the frosting creamy. “I can see why they’re a hit

around here. These are amazing.”

Claire beamed as she pulled the wrapper from the cupcake. “Thank you.”

He took another bite, stealing a moment to really look at her. It was hard not to compare her to the girl he’d met on the beach that one summer. She’d changed, but of course so had he. For some reason, he was still drawn to her. Maybe it was her inner sparkle, like she was enjoying life to the fullest. Or maybe it was the shy way she tucked her hair behind her ear, or the way her nose wrinkled when she smiled. He’d been drawn into her orbit from the second they’d first met.

“So tell me, what made you decide to open a bakery?” Had they been so similar, even back then?

She held a hand in front of her mouth for a moment more as she finished chewing. “I always loved baking, and it turns out I’m pretty good at it.”

He winked. “No false modesty, I see.”

Color flooded her cheeks, and she looked away, deeper into the store. She pointed at a display case. He followed the gesture to find an elaborate cake shaped like a sandcastle. The sides and turrets were dusted with something white and pink that couldn’t possibly be sand, but from a distance, it had a similar appearance. The construction of the castle itself was no rudimentary boxed affair with crenellations. It had turrets and walls rising in tiers. It looked like something out of a historical film dusted in pink sugar.

“That’s my specialty. What sets me apart. I used to make cakes like that for my daughter’s birthday parties. She loved them, and so did her friends. I loved making them. Soon, neighbors were asking me to make cakes for them. When I got divorced, I needed to make a living.” Claire gestured to the store. “And what better way than to do something I love?”

Rob heard the pride in her voice and turned his attention back to her. “Wow, that’s impressive. How old is your daughter?”

“Twenty-two. She’s backpacking through Europe right now.”

“She’s adventurous.” Even without Claire saying so, he could see that she was as proud of her daughter as she was the sandcastle cakes. The emotion was there, shining in her eyes.

Claire laughed. She shook her head, her lips tilting in an expression of chagrin. “She sure doesn’t get it from me. I’ve barely left Lobster Bay my

entire life.”

“From where I’m sitting, Lobster Bay isn’t a bad place to be.”

A small furrow formed between her eyebrows as she studied him. After a moment, she took another bite of cupcake. “Why did you choose Lobster Bay for your store location? We don’t have much to offer to draw in big chain stores.”

Rob lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Sentimentality, I guess. It’s not a bad spot for a store. No other bakery specializing in bread is nearby. It’s in the center of a chain of towns, and there is the flood of tourists every year. But mostly...” He turned his gaze to the window. The overhead light mirrored on the glass, throwing his reflection back at him. Beyond it, he could barely make out the shape of his shop. “I vacationed here when I was a teenager. I fell in love with it then. The last time was when I was fifteen.” He turned his attention to her, catching her gaze with his. “I could have sworn that I remembered you from that time.”

She shrugged. Rob searched her face for a sign that she really did remember him. He didn’t see one, yet he was positive she was the girl he remembered. Apparently, he hadn’t made a lasting impression.

“Why didn’t you come back?” Claire’s voice was soft, and she leaned slightly forward, as if weighing his answer.

“My mom got sick after that. Cancer.”

“I’m so sorry.” She lifted her hand, almost as if she meant to comfort him. He wished she would touch him, breach that gap between them, but her hand fell back to her coffee mug, and she took a sip.

He nodded solemnly, accepting her condolences. He’d gotten good at that. “After she died, I guess I just went through all the motions like I thought I should. I went to college and got a business degree. I started baking bread after I graduated. My mom always baked bread, and I guess it was familiar and comforting. I turned it into a job. I met the love of my life, got married, and then she...”

“You don’t have to talk about that,” Claire said in a rush. She looked horrified.

“No, it’s okay. That was a while ago, and it’s not so painful anymore.” He looked up at her, pinning her hazel eyes with his gaze. “Truth is I’m ready to move on, make a new start. That’s why I chose Lobster Bay for my store.”

Claire's eyes widened, and she looked away, but before she did, he saw a little spark. Was it a spark of interest? Or sympathy for his wife's death? Rob couldn't tell. At the very least, he felt he had removed some of her suspicion about his reason for coming there. Maybe now was a good time to ask about working together again.

He finished the cupcake in front of him as he practiced the words in his head.

"Your sale on Saturday will go off without a hitch. You bake fantastic cupcakes. I'm sure your customers will be begging for more."

Pink tinged her cheeks, and her smile was bright. "Thank you."

He leaned forward. "I think you can do even better if we take advantage of our shops being across the street to capitalize on your sale and my grand opening. It will get us both customers."

A hint of wariness entered her gaze. "How?"

"For one thing, we could set up a small table at each other's store. A tabletop sign or some flyers with the details, a few bite-sized free samples. I would cut some bread into cubes and put them out with cheese dip. If you made a batch of mini cupcakes or even cut up some of the larger ones into quarters, it could serve the same purpose. We'll drive customers across the street. Because it isn't far, I'm sure we'll get a lot of foot traffic that way."

For a moment, Claire didn't say anything. Her mouth was pursed. She was clearly thinking hard.

He counted that moment as a triumph. If she wasn't dismissing the idea right off the bat, he was starting to get through to her. The evidence of progress made his heart sing. He didn't mind putting in a little extra effort for Claire.

"I'll think about it."

"Good. Can I help you clean up?" He picked up his plate and mug, then stood, the chair scraping back on the floor.

"Oh, no. It will only take me a second." She took the plate and mug from him.

"Okay then. Thanks for the snack." He started toward the back door then turned. "Let me know what you decide either way. I promise you, I only want what's best—for both of us."

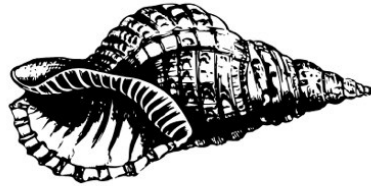
Words would only take him so far. He didn't want to overstay his welcome and give her a chance to distrust him. He bid her goodnight and left. He didn't want to leave. He could have stayed up all night talking to

her. There were still so many things about her that he didn't know, so many things about his life he wanted to share. But all of that would come in time, if he had his way.

He hadn't become the owner of a successful business with multiple locations by giving up at the first sign of trouble. He wasn't going to quit now, not when he was just starting down the path to his well-earned new beginning.

This time, he was going to get things right.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Claire completed her morning routine on autopilot. Her body was there, petting and feeding Urchin, getting ready for work, but her mind remained on Rob's proposal. Work together. Could they?

Had she gotten him all wrong, jumped to conclusions about his intentions with setting up a bakery across the street from hers? Sandcastles was a symbol of her success, a part of her, but was she too close to her business to think straight? Jane and Maxi certainly thought so, and they'd never steered her wrong before.

And then there was the attraction. Rob certainly was easy on the eyes, and working with him wouldn't be a hardship. Though, Claire didn't want to take things any further than business. Peter's betrayal still stung, and she didn't want to open herself up to that again.

Claire felt a pang of guilt for not admitting to Rob she indeed remembered him from years ago. At first, she'd been afraid it would give him the upper hand to know she recalled that night, and her ego had been bruised. He hadn't bothered to contact her.

Now that she knew about his mom getting sick, it made sense that he never returned. He had more important things to deal with than finding a girl he kissed once in the moonlight.

Claire was feeling pretty positive when she finally settled onto her Vespa and cranked the key. But as the engine purred to life, doubts crept into her thoughts. Why was he working so late at his bakery? He'd said he was baking bread, but why couldn't he get that done during the day? It

wasn't like he had to wait on customers like she did. He wasn't open yet. Maybe he preferred to bake at night.

But he'd fixed her pipes, which enabled her to stay open. If he really wanted her to fail, wouldn't he have just claimed he didn't know anything about plumbing? Claire didn't know if she was being overly suspicious. She needed advice before she made any decisions about teaming up with Bradford Breads. Would that be a good marketing move, or would it be a mistake?

Luckily, Claire had an expert in marketing at her fingertips. Tammi. Claire would call her as soon as she reached the shop.

Doubts tickled her stomach in the predawn light as she drove to the store. The gray sky was starting to lighten when she parked her Vespa and walked the short distance to her bakery. In the early morning, before anyone else was out, she could hear the ocean waves and smell the sea. As she was about to unlock the door, movement across the street caught her eye. Rob. Claire stopped short, her key halfway to the lock on the front door. Doubts warred with a warm, fuzzy feeling in her stomach. It swarmed like butterflies taking flight as their eyes met across the street.

He lifted his hand in greeting. With nervous electricity zinging through her, she did the same. As he disappeared inside his store, she turned her back to enter hers.

Although the shop was dark and empty, the quiet reminded her of their evening together the night before, filling in some of the blanks in their lives since they'd first met. Of the way he'd fixed the leak in her pipe. And that friendly wave that, for some reason, filled her with energy.

As she stepped into the kitchen and groped for the lights, she fiddled with the zipper on her purse, in search of her phone. Hopefully Tammi would answer and be able to talk.

As the phone rang, garbled in her ear, Claire crossed to the table in the kitchen and dropped the oversized tote bag she carried onto it. She took stock of the kitchen.

Everything was neat and tidy, exactly as she had left it. She had muffins to bake this morning as well as croissants to finish and put in the display case.

"Hello? Mom?"

Claire smiled at her daughter's voice. The quality of the call was a bit tinny, but warmth bloomed in her chest even so. When Tammi had gone to

college, Claire had gotten used to not seeing her every day, but it was still hard. She never felt she had enough time for Tammi when her daughter came home.

“Hi, honey. Do you have a minute? I could use some advice.”

“Advice?” Tammi sounded instantly more alert, maybe even excited.

“I told you about the bakery going up across the street, didn’t I?”

“Yes...”

“Well, the owner came in to talk to me. We’re both having sales tomorrow. His is a two-for-one on bread, and mine is buy one cupcake, get two free. He said he wants to work together to send customers across the street to each other’s stores.”

“Oh! Cross-promotion.” Although she didn’t say as much outright, Tammi sounded approving. A note of hesitation crept into her voice as she asked, “Does he sell cupcakes too?”

“No, his store strictly sells bread.”

“Well then, I don’t see how you have anything to lose. What sort of cross-promotion did he have in mind?”

Claire leaned her hip against the counter, her mind returning to that late-night conversation. “He wants to set up a table in each other’s stores with free samples and flyers pointing to the sale.”

“That sounds like a great idea! Nothing like a free sample to get people to try out your goods, and you make great cupcakes, Mom. I’m sure you’ll have customers stampeding across the street to take you up on the sale.”

Claire laughed at that image. Her daughter had been the eternal optimist and her biggest cheerleader ever since Claire had opened her bakery in the charming, old building. “I don’t know about that. But you think I should take him up on the offer?”

“Yeah. It sounds like it would cost you nothing and gain you a lot. Do it!”

A knot of tension unwound from between Claire’s shoulders at the cut-and-dried answer. Now she didn’t have to keep wallowing in indecision. Tammi knew more about marketing and promotion than Claire did. If her daughter said to do it, then she would do exactly that.

“Thanks, baby. I don’t want to keep you from your vacation.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too.”

Claire's chest ached a bit as she hung up the phone. The sooner her daughter returned from Europe, the better. As much as Claire knew she was having fun and experiencing something that most people never got to, she couldn't help but worry. Although, ever since Claire had decided to have the cupcake sale, she'd been too busy with preparations to worry. She didn't know whether or not that was a good thing.

Hailey wasn't scheduled to come in until later, which meant Claire had extra work to do, so she tried to put it out of her mind as she prepared for the day. After she had the muffins baking in the oven and the croissant dough arranged on a cookie sheet, ready to go in next, she went to the front of the store. The sun had come up, beaming down out of a sky dotted with wispy clouds. As she went about the business of opening up, her eye was drawn to the bakery across the street. Rob must have gotten new blinds, and they were down across all the windows, so no one could see inside.

She wasn't hoping to see *him*, of course, but she was curious if he would rearrange things based on her advice. Perhaps he needed help setting up. If she was going to team up with him to cross-promote during the sale, she would need to bring over a few things anyway, including the cupcake samples. She needed to frost those first and make a space for his samples in her shop.

She pulled two tables together along the wall next to the sugar and milk station, removing the chairs. A table alone wasn't enough of a draw. She needed to do something to make it look homier.

The timer on her phone beeped, and she hurried into the back to remove the muffins and get the croissants baking. Then she rooted around the kitchen, searching out everything she had that she was not already using. She found three wicker baskets and a crisp white tablecloth to arrange on the tables and set them aside. By the time she filled the display case with the baked goods she'd made that morning, still warm from the oven, it was time to open the store.

Bert and Harry waited outside her door with broad smiles and cheery waves. She answered them, her gaze slipping past to Bradford Breads. The bakery still showed no signs of life.

She opened the door and shooed the two old men inside. "Go ahead and sit at your table. I'll bring you the usual."

"You're a doll," Harry said with a fond smile.

Within minutes, she had set them up with steaming cups of coffee and warm blueberry muffins at their usual table.

“How goes the cupcake preparations?” asked Bert.

“Very well,” Claire responded, relieved not to have to lie on that front. After last night, she had baked the last of the cupcakes she would need to make. Tonight would come the colossal task of frosting them all.

“Are you going to give us a hint at the flavors you’ll be having? I need to prepare myself for how many I’ll be taking home.”

Claire laughed at Bert’s question. “The usual chocolate and vanilla, plus red velvet, chocolate mocha, lemon raspberry and the others I’ll leave as a surprise. If you come to the sale I’ll set aside some samples,” she said with a wink. “I promise you’ll be pleased.”

Another customer entered, someone Claire didn’t recognize—a tourist. She hurried over to serve them. Hailey would arrive any minute for her shift, but in the meantime, Claire was consumed with serving her customers. By the time her help came in, Claire was relieved. She handed over the front of the shop to Hailey and retreated into the back to fetch the baskets.

When she brought them to the table, she was satisfied to note that the tables inside and outside were cluttered with customers. More took their coffee to go in paper cups and carried out paper bags with their purchased baked goods. A thrill of gratification buzzed through her as she noticed early-morning tourists pausing to look at the sandwich board Hailey had set up outside announcing her sale. Everything was finally coming together.

Humming cheerfully under her breath, Claire arranged the baskets on the table invitingly. She left space for the flyers Rob had mentioned advertising his sale. With the free samples of his bread in the basket, and the bright red of his sale flyers she saw around town, customers would flock to that corner after purchasing their cupcakes at the counter. Thinking about the flyers reminded her that she still needed to give some of hers to Jane. Stacy had dropped them off, and they were in the kitchen. She could give them to Jane tonight when she came over to frost unless she got a chance to drop them off earlier today.

“What’s all that about?” Harry gestured to the display at the nearest table.

Bert lowered his newspaper with bald curiosity.

Claire smiled. “It’s a surprise. You’ll have to wait to find out.”

The old men chuckled. Harry said, “You sure are keeping the mystery about yourself today. You know how to string an old man along.”

Claire winked. “And hopefully the rest of the town too.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll get a fair few in here tomorrow. The only question is if we can get here early enough to claim our table!”

Claire wanted to promise to save it for them—after all, it was regulars like Bert and Harry who kept her afloat when the tourists left. However, at that moment, the bell over the door chimed, and Claire looked up.

Her stomach sank like a stone as first Sandee then Claire’s ex-husband stepped into the shop. Leave it to them to ruin a happy morning simply by showing up. Maybe they would just make their purchase quickly and leave. Too bad she couldn’t sneak out back and have Hailey wait on them. She would have to walk right past them to get to the kitchen.

Claire plastered a smile on her face. “Good morning.”

She didn’t see Peter often since the divorce, thankfully. Tammi had just graduated high school when it happened, so she was old enough to visit her father on her own. Claire’s stomach still tightened a little whenever she saw him, like she was waiting for the next nasty thing he would say. But that was simple self-preservation. She knew him well enough. He might have a new, younger wife, but Sandee hadn’t sweetened his disposition.

He grunted and jerked his chin at the store across the street. “The new bread place isn’t open yet? I was hoping to stop in there.”

Claire held her smile in place through will alone. If there was one silver lining, it was that the years hadn’t been kind to him since they’d parted. His hairline had receded almost to the crown of his head. His comb-over was doing a poor job of hiding that. The fact that she had ever loved him was a mystery to her. How had she not seen through his bullshit?

“He’s not opening until Saturday. Maybe you should come back then.”

Peter swung his gaze to meet hers again. “You don’t seem worried about a bakery going in across the street.”

“I’m not,” she said, biting off her words. “He only offers bread. I offer so much more.”

Peter raised his eyebrows. “I’m sure that nice little bakery in Bar Harbor offered much more than bread too. That didn’t stop Bradford Breads from putting them out of business last summer. Right in the middle of tourist season.”

Claire frowned. Was that true? Would that happen to her? No, she had her cupcake sale, and she and Rob were working together. This was just the sort of thing Peter would make up to upset her. Well, it wasn't going to work this time.

Sandee, turned away and tapping her chin with a long, ruby-colored fake nail as she peered through the glass at the baked goods on display, chimed in absently, "I heard that owner in Bar Harbor didn't see it coming. I guess the Bradford Breads owner was as sweet as pie to him." She straightened, gestured at the chocolate croissants, and held up two fingers to Hailey, who had just come out from the kitchen.

Claire didn't say a word. They were only trying to get under her skin.

With a bright smile, Sandee settled into the crook of Peter's arm. "If you ask me, I think the owner probably acts nice while he puzzles out what makes a bakery so successful. Then he emulates it and cuts into their business by doing more advertising. He can afford it with a big chain like that."

Claire swallowed hard, trying to keep her expression confident. She was afraid she failed miserably.

Fortunately, Sandee and Peter weren't looking at her. They were too preoccupied, staring across the street.

Sandee mused, "I have to admit, it's brilliant the way he's got the shades down. It really makes you wonder what it looks like inside." She turned and leaned forward, delicately glossing her fingers over Claire's shoulder. "Not that it will be able to compete with Sandcastles. You have a knack for decorating. I'm sure nothing Bradford Breads can come up with will compare."

"Thank you," Claire muttered, but it was through gritted teeth and a forced smile.

Had she handed her best decorating tips directly into the hands of the enemy?

"Your croissants?" Hailey prompted from behind the counter. Judging by the look on her face, she didn't approve of the way the conversation was going. Claire imagined she was trying to push Sandee and Peter out of the store as quickly as possible. Sandee tugged Peter toward the register to pay for them, buying Claire some time to compose herself.

She found herself staring at the shaded windows of the shop across the street and kicking herself. Had she fallen for the exact game that Sandee

and Peter had warned her about? Rob had been nice to her, had helped her, and now his windows were shaded, and he might be rearranging his shop last-minute to draw her customers away. Why hadn't she known about Bar Harbor? Why hadn't she done more research before she trusted the owner of a rival bakery?

The fact that her ex-husband and his wife were the ones to throw this in her face was adding insult to injury. Sick to her stomach, Claire tore herself away from the sight of the other shop.

See what happens when you try to be nice? When you trust others? She should have learned her lesson from her marriage. She stormed over and ripped apart the display she'd put together, returning the two tables to the way they had been previously.

How stupid could she be, agreeing to work with a man who was going to undermine her and put her out of business?

She tucked the wicker baskets under her arm and was about to stow them back in the kitchen when a tourist emerged from the washroom. He searched the shop, and upon seeing her fiddling with the chairs, he made a beeline for her. She straightened, ready to greet the customer despite how drained she was.

"Uh, ma'am? The water pressure in the bathroom is a little low. I thought you'd want to know."

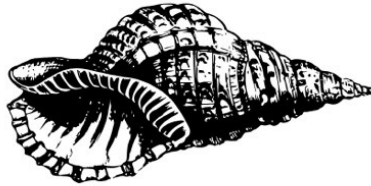
She pressed her lips together as her heart raced. She set the wicker baskets on top of the display case. *Calm, slow movements.* She wasn't panicking.

How could the water pressure be low? They repaired the pipes last night. Her eyes flicked to the store across the street. Had Rob really fixed them, or had he done something to sabotage her so she wouldn't be open tomorrow for the cupcake sale?

Claire was tense as she slipped into the public washroom and turned on the tap. Water poured out in a slow stream, but it appeared to be working. The toilet flushed, taking a long time to fill up again. She checked under the sink for a leak but found none. Everything *seemed* to be okay, but did the low water pressure indicate some catastrophe was lurking?

Maybe she should call Sally, just in case.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Jane had a thousand and one things to do to keep the inn running smoothly, but most of her time was spent checking that her mother hadn't removed her slippers and bandages. Her feet were still raw and cut up from her escapade on the beach, and her nurse friend had said they would be for another week at least. She would have thought that would keep Addie out of trouble because it made her less likely to walk away.

Not so.

It was only just after noon, but Addie was sleeping now, curled up on her bed with a blanket thrown over her shoulders and her feet peeking out from the bottom edge. The slippers were still on, and the socks and bandages underneath. She looked so peaceful while asleep, even though the lines etched into her face had appeared to deepen over the span of just a few months. She was aging so fast, right in front of Jane, and she didn't know what to do. She loved her mother. All she wanted was to keep her safe and happy.

But doing this, running after Addie to make sure she was still in the inn or hadn't left a dangerous appliance running or kicked off her shoes, made Jane feel like the mother rather than the child.

Softly, she closed the door and sighed. What was she going to do?

She wasn't about to ask her sister for help. Andie had left after high school and seemingly didn't care what happened back in Lobster Bay. Sure, she'd tried to be a comfort when Jane's son had died, and again when her husband, Brad, had died. But Jane could always tell that Andie couldn't wait to get back to her fancy life in New York City. She'd kept Andie

apprised of their mother's condition but had glossed over how bad it was. What would be the point of going into details?

She retreated back downstairs to the lobby, where she'd taken out the ledger. A family was due to check out of the inn today, and an older woman, Mrs. Weatherlee, who used to live in town ages ago, wanted a reservation in a few weeks. At least they had a few reservations. Bookings had dropped off that summer, and Jane had no idea why. Perhaps word had gotten out that the innkeeper's daughter didn't know what she was doing.

Jane went to the foyer, where she'd put the ledger books to work on while she watched the inn. At least her accounting background helped with the financial aspect of running Tides. Numbers were what she knew best. Numbers were soothing. Numbers always made sense.

Unless they were scratched in her mother's handwriting.

As a headache built behind her eyes, Jane scrunched up her nose and sought the exact sum on the chart that had turned the numbers so awry.

The door opened, letting in a burst of salty air and a broad-shouldered male form. Jane glanced up, smiling despite her weariness. It deepened when she saw that the newcomer was not a customer but Rob Bradford.

"Good morning."

He smiled and held up a sheaf of papers. "Good morning. I brought the information I have on memory care facilities. I visited a lot of these in person before, to look around. Would you like to go through them together?"

Jane's shoulders rounded inward. She didn't want to have to face this alone. Maybe she *should* wait for her sister. But no, Andie probably wouldn't stay long enough to sort any of it out, and besides, Jane wasn't sure she even wanted her sister's input with something that important.

Rob couldn't help her make her decision, but he could give her the information she needed. She nodded and slipped off the stool behind the rustic counter they used as a check-in desk. She slid the ledger out of sight and beckoned him toward the kitchen. "That would be nice. Come, I'll make you a cup of coffee."

Once they were ensconced at the table, steaming mugs between their hands and the papers spread out before them, Rob looked around. "No muffins today?"

"I haven't gone down to Claire's bakery in a few days. I take it she's very busy preparing for the sale tomorrow. How are your preparations

going for your grand opening?”

“Very well,” he said with a smile. “I think—I *hope*—Claire and I will be working together to cross-promote. I spoke with her yesterday about setting up a table in each other’s stores, and I think she might be coming around.”

Jane was surprised. So, Claire had finally come to her senses. Good. “That’s great to hear. I hope all three of our businesses can work together in the near future.”

He raised his mug to her. “That is my plan, as long as Claire is amenable to it as well.” He sipped, pausing. “Unless she said something different to you?” He asked casually, but there was something about the way he didn’t meet her gaze that hinted the question was weighing on his mind.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t spoken to her recently. Is something worrying you?”

He took another sip to cover his reaction, but Jane noticed the color tinging his cheeks. “No, it’s just—well, we didn’t actually make the final plans. I’m hoping she’ll come to me.”

Jane could tell that he liked Claire, not only liked her as a person but was attracted to her. And from the way Jane had witnessed her friend behave around the mere mention of Rob, she was almost certain that the attraction went both ways. There was something familiar, comforting, about Rob that Jane couldn’t put her finger on. It wasn’t only the kind way he’d treated her mother or how he’d rescued Addie from the storm. It was him. After the way Peter had treated Claire, Rob would be a refreshing change.

He was a good man with a good heart. He’d gone to all this trouble to help Jane with Addie. She looked down at the myriad pamphlets and notes strewn between them. Immediately, she felt out of her depth, like a fish out of water. She was far more comfortable thinking about Claire’s love life.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and looked Rob in the eye. “Okay. Tell me what you know about these facilities.”

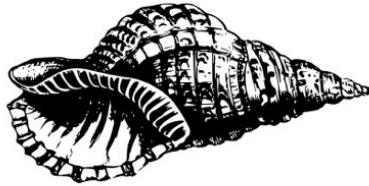
MORE THAN AN HOUR LATER, Rob left, and Jane was still conflicted. Her head swam with all the new information. If she put Addie in a memory

care facility, she had three top contenders to choose from. All had professional, caring, patient staffs and were close by.

But as clear-cut as all that data was, Jane was still struggling. In more lucid days, Addie had mentioned she never wanted to go to a facility. But she'd been referring to a nursing home, one where the patients were lined up in beds and neglected.

These places that Rob had shown her were more like residences. Rob assured her it was like having a room in her own home. The staff was lovely, the food good. Jane didn't want to betray her mother, but she felt like a ghost of herself trying to look after Addie and run the inn at the same time. She didn't know what to do. She needed advice. Luckily tonight was the night she'd promised to help Claire frost the cupcakes for her sale. She would get all the advice she needed from Claire and Maxi.

CHAPTER TWENTY



The shop Rob had leased in Lobster Bay was small. In any other location, he would have set up aisles to stock as much bread on the shelves as possible. However, he didn't want Claire to think he was ungrateful for her advice or that he'd only concocted it as an excuse to spend time with her.

So instead of baking more bread for his shelves, he pulled down the window blinds so no one could see what he was doing and spent the day rearranging the store to accommodate a cozy cluster of tables near the door.

Across from those, in the most prominent spot in the store, he arranged a table with paper wrappers ready to be filled with cupcake samples. He even made a sign with her bakery name to pin to the front of the table with the location of those delicious cupcakes. All that was left was for her to add the product and any promotional materials she had about the cupcake sale. Since Claire couldn't see inside with the shades drawn, he hoped it would be a pleasant surprise.

All day, he waited for her to march over and agree to his bargain, but she never came. When her store was about to close and she still hadn't made her way across the street, despite seeing her look his way several times in the distance, he decided to bite the bullet. He'd gone through all that trouble to accommodate her store. Surely it wouldn't be *too* untoward of him to ask her to take a look.

Yes, she would probably want to see it. And besides, they should talk about any strategy they might want to use to draw in more customers and send them to each other's stores.

Decided, Rob locked up his store and crossed the street, empty of tourists at this hour. Claire was clearly getting ready to close. She'd already pulled her sandwich board inside the shop and was wiping down the tables. He reached for the door latch, hoping that he wouldn't find it locked.

A bell tinkled overhead as he stepped into her bakery. It smelled sweet, chocolate and vanilla scenting the air and making his mouth water.

At the noise, Claire raised her head with a cheerful smile. It faded the moment she saw him. The disappearance was like a punch to the gut.

"I was just closing up."

The formal words were spoken in the frostiest tone he'd ever heard. She had been so open and friendly with him last night. What had changed?

"I don't want to keep you from your work, but you hadn't gotten back to me regarding our joint promotion. I set up a table, and I thought—"

Claire scrubbed at the table, barely giving him a glance. "Oh, sorry. I got to thinking maybe that wasn't the best idea."

"Really? Why?" Last night she seemed receptive. What happened to change her mind?

When she turned to face him, her expression was conflicted. Her face was stony, but her eyes flickered with indecision. They stared at each other for a few seconds, then she lifted her chin, defiant. She looked away, focusing on wiping down the already spotless table. "I just feel it might not be in my best interest."

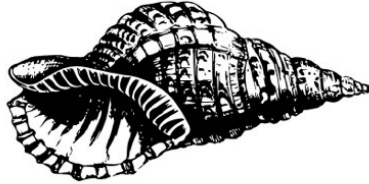
"I don't see why not. I mean, our products complement each other's, and we're both having a sale—"

She turned from her task, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm not interested right now. Maybe next time. But now, I have dozens of cupcakes to frost, so if you don't mind, I'd like to close up."

He met her gaze, trying to read the truth in her eyes. This was not the friendly woman he'd had cupcakes with last night. Had he done something to offend her? Or had last night been the aberration, when she was caught off her guard due to her crisis. He sensed there was no more to say. Claire had apparently made up her mind.

"Okay, well, good luck tomorrow, then." He left, disappointed and more than a little disheartened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“What was that all about?” Hailey stood in the doorway that led to the kitchen, the keys to her grandfather’s car dangling from her hand. She hadn’t been eavesdropping, not exactly. She just hadn’t wanted to interrupt what seemed like a very intense conversation.

Claire glanced out the window, a look of regret passing across her face. “That was the owner of Bradford Breads. He wanted to combine forces for the sale.”

“And you think that’s a bad idea?” Hailey had heard enough to know the man sounded sincere whereas Claire had been standoffish, almost rude. “It sounded like you guys had an arrangement worked out prior.”

Claire sighed and returned to wiping the table quite vigorously. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you, but he came over last night and fixed the pipe in the bathroom. It sprung a leak.”

Hailey frowned. That didn’t sound like something a competitor would do. “So it turns out he’s a nice guy, then.”

Claire straightened and folded the cloth into a neat square. “Well, he seemed nice last night.”

Hailey felt relieved. If the bread store didn’t want to put them out of business, then that made her job more secure and perhaps opened the opportunity for more responsibility and more pay. “Then maybe working with him would increase business. Why did you say no?”

“I found out that he puts people out of business. I think he was sneaking around, trying to find out things to use against us.” Claire went over to lock the door, pausing to look out across the street.

Hailey wasn't so sure about the motivation being to get information. What kind of information could he possibly get that would hurt them? From what she'd overheard, the Bradford guy was clearly disappointed they wouldn't team up, and Hailey sensed something else too. The man was interested in more than just a business relationship. He was interested in Claire. Couldn't she see that? Or was rejecting his business proposal a way for her to keep anyone from getting around the wall she'd built around her heart after her divorce?

Judging by the regretful look on her face, Claire might feel the same way about him.

"Anyway, it's not going to happen now. We'll see what happens in the future." Claire turned from the door and headed to the kitchen. "Aren't you supposed to be taking off? Oh, that reminds me. I saw that you were driving some old beater the other night. Is something wrong with your car? If you need money for it, I can give you a loan or maybe a bonus if we make a lot on the cupcake sale."

Hailey was horrified. Her pride would never let her take a handout, especially not from Claire, who had been so good to her already. "Oh, no! Frank just had to—umm—wait for a part. Mine will be fixed soon. Don't worry."

Claire looked at her a bit too long, and Hailey almost confessed, but then Claire nodded. "Okay great."

Hailey walked with her back to the kitchen. "I put out all the ingredients for you. Have fun tonight. I wish I could help."

"No worries. We'll be up past Jennifer's bedtime, and I have plenty of help with Jane and Maxi. I need you rested for tomorrow. It's going to be a big day."

CLAIRE LEFT the side door unlocked. Jane and Maxi would be there any minute, so she took out the big mixing bowls, spatulas, and frosting bags and set them next to the ingredients that Hailey had taken out. The flyers she'd had printed sat in the corner. Claire had already posted some around town, but she'd set a few aside for Jane, as she hadn't had a chance to get them to her yet.

She'd already put several dozen cupcakes out of their containers to let them get to room temperature, and she lined them up on the table in front of the chairs, then started on the frosting. She made three bowls, a lemon flavor, a vanilla, and a mocha.

"Jane Miller reporting for duty." Jane peeked her head in the door, holding up a brown bag. "I brought you a sandwich compliments of Brenda."

"Thank you." Come to think of it, Claire hadn't eaten. She took the bag and opened it. "Ham and swiss? My favorite. You want half?"

Jane shook her head. "I ate at the inn."

"Knock, knock." Maxi opened the screen door, careful to latch it behind her. "I brought you a salad."

"Thanks." Claire's answer was muffled since her mouth was full of sandwich.

"Oh, I see you're already eating." Maxi smiled at Jane. "Great minds think alike."

"I appreciate them both." Claire put the salad on the table and took another bite of the sandwich. While still chewing, she grabbed the bowls of frosting and set them on the table next to their respective cupcakes. "Okay, I figure we can each take a flavor. Maxi you get lemon raspberry, Jane you can do the red velvet, and I'll do the chocolate mocha. I use a pastry bag so that the frosting is a big thick swirl."

Claire loaded her bag and demonstrated how to frost the cupcakes, twirling the bag so the frosting spiraled up in a thick swirl then pulling the top to a peak. "Got it?"

"Yep."

Claire watched them focus intently on the task. Jane was more meticulous, calculating the swirl so that it was precisely even. Maxi more creative. Claire started in on her own.

"I passed Hailey on the way down here. She's still driving that car," Maxi said.

"I asked her about it." Claire set her cupcake down and picked up the next. "She's just waiting for hers to be fixed."

"That's not what Frank told me." Jane looked at Claire over the top of her cupcake. "He said her car needed a lot of work, and she can't afford it. That's her grandfather's car she's driving now."

Claire frowned. “Why would she tell me that she was just waiting for Frank to fix it?”

“Pride. And maybe she didn’t want to worry you with all this going on.” Maxi gestured to the cupcakes spread out on the table.

Worry bloomed in Claire’s gut. If Hailey was concerned, did that mean she thought Sandcastles might lose business? For Claire to worry was one thing, but if others did too...

“Well, nothing to worry about at all now that you’re teaming up with Bradford Breads. That must be a relief,” Jane said.

Claire’s fist tightened, and frosting surged out of the bag in an unsightly blob. “Where did you hear that?”

She put the unsalvageable cupcake down on the table. *Great, one less piece of inventory for the sale.*

The messy frosting blob didn’t seem to bother Maxi though. She pulled it in front of her and started peeling off the paper wrapper. “We get to eat the mistakes, right?”

“Yes, eat the mistakes,” Claire said to Maxi, but her eyes were on Jane, who now looked confused.

“Rob told me. He came over to Tides earlier.”

Interesting, now why would he do that if he wasn’t supplying them with bread? Claire’s gaze fell on the flyers. *Aha!* He’d probably brought her a flyer for his shop, likely trying to get his posted in front of Claire’s.

Claire grabbed the flyers from the counter and handed them to Jane. “Here are those flyers. I suppose you already put the one for Bradford Breads up.”

Jane frowned. “Huh?”

“You said Rob was at Tides...”

“He had promised to bring the pamphlets on the memory care facilities the other day, so he was dropping them off. He didn’t bring any flyers though.” Jane took the flyers from Claire.

“And he said we were working together?” How presumptuous. Claire specifically remembered saying she would think about it before she’d turned him down outright earlier in the day. He must have visited Tides before that.

Jane scrunched her nose. “No, not exactly. He said that he’d offered and you seemed as though you were coming around to the idea.”

Claire crossed her arms. “Well, I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“I’m just not sure about him.”

Jane’s eyes softened, the crease between her eyebrows gone. “Well, I am. He’s a good man. He didn’t have to do all the kind things he’s done for me and my mother, but he has.”

He might seem nice to Jane, but she didn’t know how he made a habit of putting bakeries out of business. “Peter and Sandee came into the shop earlier. They told me about a bakery he put out of business in Bar Harbor. He acts nice then steals the very things that make a bakery successful, implements them, and out-advertises them until they can’t afford to compete anymore. I won’t fall into his trap.”

Maxi scoffed. She had frosting on her nose from eating Claire’s cupcake mistake, so it was a little hard to take her seriously. “Claire, consider the source. When has Sandee or Peter ever done a thing to help you? I bet they’d say anything just to chip at your confidence, including driving a wedge into what sounds like a good business decision.”

“You say that, but...” Claire hesitated. Maxi had a point, and last night Rob had seemed so sincere, not to mention that Tammi thought teaming up was a good idea. But then there was the water pressure issue.

“But what?” Maxi asked.

Claire stifled a sigh. She studied the horizon as she recounted what had happened last night. “I was at the store late, and one of my pipes started leaking. I wouldn’t be able to open the store without fixing it, and Sally was out of town. Rob showed up practically out of nowhere. He said he was working late too.” She turned, picked up another cupcake, and started to apply the frosting. “He fixed the pipe, and I thought everything was fine, but now the water pressure is lower than it was this morning. What if he did something to the pipes to put me out of commission tomorrow? It’s not as though I have enough experience to tell either way.”

“Impossible,” Jane pronounced. “I don’t think he could do something to the water pressure from the bathroom sink. That would only affect that sink. You’d have to do something to the main line. And anyway, Rob isn’t that sort of man.”

“Weren’t you just complaining that the pipes are on their way out?” Maxi asked. “I’m sure you mentioned something about it and the cost it would be to fix them. Ralph told you they had to be replaced, didn’t he? I don’t think it’s right to assume Rob did something.”

“Yes,” Claire admitted begrudgingly. She sighed and rubbed her forehead. What if she had made the wrong call in not teaming up with Rob? When she’d told him she’d changed her mind, he hadn’t acted angry or smug like she’d thought a competitor trying to sabotage her might act. He’d acted hurt. “I suppose you’re right. It’s not fair to make assumptions about Rob, but I still think I’m better off running the sale on my own.”

A deep groan sounded from the pipes, as if the very building disagreed, and they all looked at the ceiling. They went back to frosting their cupcakes. It was time for a change of topic.

“So did you find any facilities you liked? Are you really considering that?” Claire asked.

Jane’s expression turned grim. “I’m afraid I might have to. I’m finding it so hard to care for her and run the inn. Both are full-time jobs, and I’m stretched so thin.”

Claire had been careful about the advice she’d given Jane on the subject. She knew it was too much for one person to handle, but never being in that position herself, she didn’t want to push Jane into anything she wasn’t comfortable with. Jane was coming to the same conclusion on her own, and Claire was there to support her.

“I don’t know how much longer I can do this, but it feels so awful to put Mom into a facility,” Jane echoed.

“We know you want what’s best for her,” Claire said.

Maxi piped up. “And her well-being is important. This is about her health. If she’s going to hurt herself without meaning to, she needs help.”

With a heavy sigh, Jane brushed a short strand of hair out of her face. “I know that. But I feel like a terrible daughter for wanting to make her somebody else’s problem. I feel like I should be trying harder.”

“That’s not fair on you. You can’t do everything yourself,” Maxi answered.

Claire understood her friend’s thought process far better. It was difficult to trust someone, difficult to hand over work that she could be doing better herself. She was learning that this week too. Although a small voice in her mind still whispered that she would be able to bake and frost all these cupcakes better, she couldn’t do it as fast. She had made a sacrifice.

Maybe Jane needed to make a sacrifice too.

“I think you should really consider the way it would lighten the burden if Addie was taken care of by professionals. I know it isn’t what she wants,

but she isn't of sound mind, or you wouldn't be in this situation."

Every other time Claire had made the suggestion, Jane had dismissed it. Sometimes casually, sometimes with more heat. Today, she only nodded wearily. "I know. I am considering it. Rob stopped by today with some pamphlets and other information and walked me through the best choices for her. I know it's the right thing to do, but there's something inside me that just feels like a failure."

In a small voice, Maxi asked, "Wouldn't you feel like a failure if she hurt herself badly? If she had to go to the hospital or even died because she wasn't able to care for herself the way she used to and you were stretched too thin to do it yourself?"

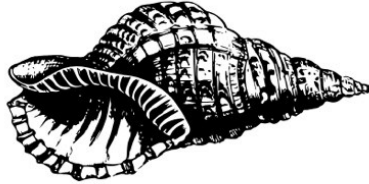
Jane nodded. "You're right. I would. So you guys don't think I'm being selfish?"

Claire's brows shot up. "Selfish? You're anything but. You've given up your retirement to run Tides the way your mom wants and take care of her. It's not selfish to put her in a place where she'll be safe and well cared for. If you continue the way you are, you'll probably burnout and not be able to do either job."

"Claire's right," Maxi said. "And remember, no matter what you decide, we're behind you one hundred percent."

Claire nodded her agreement. If anyone was selfish, it was Claire. Maxi and Jane didn't think Bradford Breads was a threat, and she valued their opinions very much. Yet there she was, worrying over the store across the street when Jane had real issues to deal with. Claire picked up the next cupcake, determined to think things through more objectively just as soon as the big sale was over tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Claire woke to sharp pinpricks of pain on her scalp. She winced, swatting at the offender. Her fingers met soft fur as Urchin climbed off her head with a disgruntled meow. The cat swiped at her hand with his sharp claws.

“All right, all right, I’m getting up.”

The words were not enough to convince the tomcat. Claire groaned as she sat up, much harder to do with Urchin now crouched on her stomach.

And then it hit her. It was Saturday, the day of the cupcake sale.

Claire jumped out of bed and hurried to feed the cat before he mutilated her further. She treated the scratch on her hand, combed her hair, and put it back in a clip. Her stomach was doing somersaults with excitement and nerves as she finished, looking herself in the eye in the mirror.

“You prepared for this. You can do this.”

And she *had* prepared. Last night, they’d frosted two-hundred and forty of the cupcakes, the rest she had left unfrosted on purpose so she could do them fresh in the afternoon. She had bought special tiered racks to display them on, which she would put on top of the glass display case. She had Hailey and Maxi coming in to help her with the influx of extra customers she expected. She had cardboard boxes at the ready to put the baked goods in. She had done everything she could to promote the sale.

As she scooted to work in her Vespa, she thought about Rob. She felt guilty about the way she’d treated him, but it was too late to turn back now. Or was it?

The lights were already on at Bradford Breads. The shades were up, revealing the interior. Claire hesitated mere feet from her store, but curiosity

overwhelmed her. Had he taken her advice and done something to the arrangement inside?

He would never know if she peeked. Checking the street—devoid of people or vehicles that early in the morning—Claire hurried over to the window. She cupped her hands and peered through the glass.

Rows upon rows of bread, buns, and bagels awaited customers. They were stacked neatly on shelves taking up the bulk of the inside space, forming makeshift aisles with a clear path to the front counter and the register there. To the left was a table with yet more buns placed in baskets the way she'd wanted to do yesterday before she'd thought better of it. On the other side was a cozy little cluster of four tables arranged at an angle to one another with red napkin holders to match the color of the logo. Claire couldn't help but smile. He had taken her advice, after all.

Then her gaze caught movement. Rob had just come out of the back, presumably the kitchen, and had a loaf of bread in either hand. Her heart pounded at the prospect of being caught. She turned on her heel and fled across the street.

She felt ridiculous. Would he ever want to be business associates or friends after the way she'd treated him? She didn't have time to feel sorry for herself. Today was the big day, and she had work to do.

She worked quickly, pulling the cupcake containers out of the fridge, gingerly opening the tops, not wanting to disturb the frosting. She brought them out front and arranged them on the tiered displays. The pipes made an ominous clanking overhead. Claire winced but tried to ignore it. She had work to do. As long as the groaning of the pipes didn't scare off her customers, she would be fine.

What next? Maybe she should cut up part of the sandcastle cake today and give out pieces as free samples. She could cut from the back and leave the front as a display. She removed it from the glass case carefully, not disturbing any of the artfully arranged turrets. She placed it squarely in the middle of her cupcakes, two tiers on either side, and rounded the counter to see how they looked from the front.

Beautiful. She couldn't help but smile, an expression that shrank quickly as the pipes clanged again, the groaning increasing. That one sounded different than the other groans.

Claire tilted her head up and squinted.

There was a new rust stain on the tin ceiling, and...

Wait, were those drops of water?

Drip. Drip.

Claire followed their descent to the floor, where a small puddle had formed.

Oh no!

Pop. Pop. Pop. More leaks opened in the ceiling, bigger this time. And then...

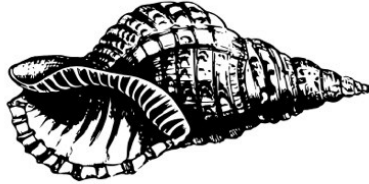
Crash!

One section of the tin ceiling smashed to the floor, a torrent of water behind it soaking the bakery floor, the tabletops, and the cupcakes on display.

“No!”

Everything was ruined. The pastries in the case, the cupcakes, the sandcastle cake, and Claire’s dreams.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



With twenty minutes left until Rob opened the doors of his newest bakery to the public, he paused and surveyed his shop. Bread lined every available surface, including the table he'd initially allotted for Claire. That table still knotted his stomach. All morning, he'd caught himself glancing across the street, hoping she would come over to tell him she changed her mind. He'd seen a shadow outside earlier, but no one was there, only a glimpse of her opening the side door leading to the kitchen in her bakery.

Unable to help himself, he stared across the street again. The cheery Sandcastles sign over the door looked the same as ever, but something wasn't right. He frowned. Where was Claire with her sandwich board promoting the sale? Why was her bakery still dark? And who was that hammering on her door? A familiar-looking petite blonde in a pencil skirt, cupping her hands around her eyes as she peered inside. Surely the town wasn't *that* eager for a cupcake sale.

Rob didn't like the feeling in his stomach. Wasn't that blonde one of Claire and Jane's friends? The one he met briefly when they searched for Addie?

It didn't matter that Claire might not welcome his presence—especially *this* morning. He needed to check it out. As he headed across the street, a second figure joined the first. This one, he recognized: Claire's assistant, Hailey. What were they looking at in the window?

"Is something wrong, ladies?"

Both of them jumped at the sound of his voice. Hailey turned, her face as white as a sheet. She pointed mutely at the window.

Frowning, Rob leaned forward and squinted through the sunlight reflecting off the glass. The interior of the shop was a disaster. Cupcakes were strewn everywhere. Frosting blobs marred the glass case. Part of the tin ceiling lay on the floor, an inch or more of water covering it. A slow drip rippled the water from overhead.

The bakery was in a sorry state, but...

“Where’s Claire?”

The blonde, he couldn’t recall her name, frowned and shook her head. “I don’t know. I was supposed to meet her here this morning to help open for the sale. People will be arriving soon.”

He turned to her assistant in the hopes of finding an answer. “Do you know where she is?”

The younger woman shook her head, looking every bit as distressed and lost.

He tried the front door—locked. Maybe Claire was around back. He rushed around to the side kitchen entrance, the two women trailing after him.

The kitchen wasn’t in much better shape. Although the bulk of the water had hit the front of the store, enough had rained down here to cause a damp sheen over the tiles and ruin the frosting on the neatly arranged cupcakes on the table.

Claire sat on a stool, a cupcake in her hand. She looked over at them clustered in the doorway. “At least I was able to save a few.”

She looked so forlorn that he wanted to take her in his arms, but he couldn’t do that. “What happened?” he asked.

Claire unwrapped the cupcake and took a bite. “I should have listened to Ralph and replaced the pipes.” The words were muffled because she’d shoved a big piece of cupcake in, but Rob understood.

The blonde pushed past him and rushed to Claire, hugging her. “What happened?”

“Pipes burst.” Claire took another bite. “At least I found the main valve and shut it off. Sally would be proud.”

“Are all the cupcakes ruined?” Hailey asked, making her way to the fridge.

“There are still several dozen in there, but the place is ruined, so I guess the sale is ruined.” Claire’s flat tone pinched Rob’s heart. Suddenly, he had an idea. “The cupcake sale isn’t ruined.”

Claire looked up. She was still frowning, but a spark of hope flared in her eyes. “What do you mean? Of course it is. I can’t open the shop. Most of the cupcakes are soaked.”

He pointed at the containers in the fridge. “But not all of them. These are still perfect. There must be five or six dozen here.”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. “But the shop...”

The blonde turned, assessing Rob with curiosity. “What are you getting at?”

Rob met the blonde’s gaze. “I’m not sure we were introduced during the search for Jane’s mother. I’m Rob.” He stuck out his hand.

“I know.” She smiled, placing her hand in his. “I’m Maxi.”

He nodded, feeling a bit out of place. “Well, Maxi. Do you think you can take Claire home and return here in—” He checked his watch. “Fifteen minutes? I think she’s going to want to change out of those wet clothes.”

That stirred Claire to a bit of her normal luster. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you have a cupcake sale to run.”

“Like I said, I don’t have a store.”

“No, but I do. We’ll move all these containers and the tiered displays to my store.”

“I couldn’t.”

He ignored her protests and carefully pulled the containers out of the fridge, piling them one atop another. “I already offered you a table in my store. You’re going to use it. We’ll put up a sign sending your customers across the street.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Claire said in a small voice. But the color had returned to her cheeks and the spark to her eyes. “Your offer applied when I had a space to offer you as well. Cross-promotion, remember? Now I have nothing, and I don’t want to take away from your sale.”

He smiled at her, teasing a smile out of her in return. “But you forget. If we send all your customers to my store, I’ll be benefitting too.” He nodded to Maxi, spurring both women into action. “Come on. We have customers waiting.”

She hesitated a moment before turning to follow her friend out of her store. Hailey had already grabbed the sandwich board and was making a

sign.

At the door, Claire paused and turned to look at him. "Thank you."
He needed nothing else.

HAILEY WATCHED Rob Bradford as he gathered the cupcakes. This was the guy Claire had seen as the enemy? More like a knight in shining armor. He didn't have to help them out. He could have just stayed over in his bakery and let the disaster put them out of business. Hailey was sure their customers would have found their way across the street without a sign at Sandcastles.

"So, what's your plan?" Hailey asked.

"I'm going to set up some tables for the cupcakes, and you guys can sell from there. Does that sound good? If you have a better idea, I'm all ears."

Hailey appreciated that he wanted her input. "That's a great idea and very generous. I was wondering, though. Maybe we could bring some of the ingredients for more cupcakes. The cabinets didn't get wet, and the more we sell, the more money Claire can make toward fixing this." Hailey gestured toward the ceiling.

"Good point. Let's bring them."

Hailey started gathering ingredients. "I hope she won't be out of business for too long." *And I won't be without a paycheck for too long.*

"Oh, don't you worry. I can rearrange my store so she can sell from there." His brow creased with concern as he glanced at Hailey. "Naturally, I'll need extra help. I'll pay you to work the same hours you do here, maybe a little extra since you'll be helping the bread customers too."

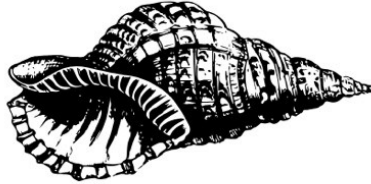
Hailey liked the guy. He was perceptive and very sweet. He must really have a crush on Claire to go to all that trouble.

"We can make do with one storefront until Claire gets the pipes fixed. Unless Claire doesn't want to." Rob looked up from the cupcakes at Hailey. "Do you think she'll ever stop seeing me as the enemy?"

Hailey had a feeling she already had, but a little encouragement from Hailey couldn't hurt. "Maybe I can help with that." Hailey piled the baking ingredients she'd collected on top of the cupcake containers in Rob's arms.

“Now let’s get across the street. We have a lot of work to do if we are going to pull this sale off.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Maxi had called Jane on the way to Claire's cottage, and she showed up as Maxi was blow-drying Claire's hair. Claire sat in the vanity chair in her bedroom wrapped in a terry robe. Even though her shop had just been ruined, she actually didn't feel so bad.

Jane pulled open the closet. "Maybe you should wear something less—" Jane glanced down at Claire's wet clothing now on the floor. "Dowdy."

"My clothes aren't dowdy." Claire looked at the pile uncertainly.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt to put on something a little nicer than a gray T-shirt. I mean you will be waiting on half the town, and you want to make a nice impression."

Claire pushed Maxi away as she tried to curl her hair. "I think everyone in town knows me already." She didn't miss the look that Maxi and Jane exchanged in the mirror. She knew what they were up to. They were trying to make her look nice for Rob Bradford. Claire was much too mature for that sort of thing. Besides, she liked the way she looked already.

"I'm really sorry this happened," Jane pulled out a pretty pink short-sleeved shirt with turquoise trim around the neck and arms and laid it on the bed.

Claire's heart plummeted. Despite her hopeful feelings that Rob's generous offer might save the cupcake sale, the fact still remained that her shop was ruined. How could her business survive?

"Might be a blessing in disguise." Maxi placed a mascara wand and lipstick in front of Claire.

“How do you figure that?” Claire asked, ignoring the makeup in front of her.

“Insurance.” Maxi opened the mascara and put it in Claire’s hand.

“Insurance?” Claire started to apply automatically, curious about Maxi’s statement.

“You have insurance for Sandcastles, right? Well, before this, you were going to fix the pipes on your dime, but now that the pipes have burst, you can put in a claim and let the insurance company pay for it.”

“Good thinking. Get some use out of those high premiums you pay.” Jane pulled out a pair of off-white linen capri’s with thin turquoise stripes. “So, it turns out Rob really is a nice guy. I hate to say I told you so.”

Jane’s good-natured barb hit home. “I guess I was wrong about him. I feel terrible.”

“Don’t worry,” Maxi said. “It’s easy to misconstrue things when it involves things close to our hearts. Like my relationship with James.”

Claire glanced up at her friend. She thought she’d sensed something wrong between them earlier but had been so wrapped up in her own problems she hadn’t been paying attention. “Is something wrong?”

Maxi smiled. “No. Well, things are *different* since the kids left. But I misconstrued that as James losing interest in our marriage and in me. It turns out we just need to adjust.”

“That makes sense. It’s a big adjustment going from a houseful to nothing,” Jane said.

“Yes, and I didn’t have a lot to occupy my time, so I overanalyzed everything. I was too close to the situation. But everything is good now, and I’m even going to start drawing again. James suggested it, actually.”

“That’s wonderful,” Jane said.

Claire agreed, even though she still saw a shadow of doubt in Maxi’s eyes.

“I guess I’ve done the same thing with Mom,” Jane said. “I couldn’t look at it objectively because I’m too close to it.”

“And now you can?” Claire asked.

Jane shrugged. “A little bit more. It’s still gut-wrenching, but I think I know what the right decision is.”

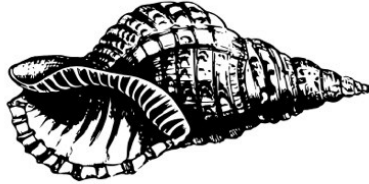
“I suppose that I have been blowing things out of proportion. Sandcastles is my baby, so it’s hard not to get emotional. Maybe it really was a blessing that the pipes burst. I would have had to close the bakery to

fix them anyway. I would have had to take out a loan to cover the repairs and backfill money lost from not being open with my savings. Maybe now I'll be able to keep my savings if insurance pays for it." Claire smiled at her two friends. "I'm sorry if I acted kind of crazy about Bradford Breads."

Maxi put her hand on Claire's shoulder. "No need to apologize. Sometimes you just have to take a step back from the situation."

"Speaking of which." Claire pushed back from the vanity and grabbed the outfit Jane had laid out. "We better get going. I have a cupcake sale to run."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Claire had never seen so many people packed into one small shop. Despite the locals and tourists descending on the new bakery in droves, Rob had found the time to move the tables from in front of Claire's store and arrange them on the sidewalk in front of his. The interior of the store was dedicated not to sitting space but to cupcakes and bread.

The men and women stepping into the store were immediately drawn to the cupcakes, which now sat on freshly washed tiers. A sign in front of the table read "Sandcastles." The sign was a surprise. When in the world had Rob had time to make that?

Maxi stood next to the cash register, ringing up orders and recording every sale in a little notebook to keep track of cupcake revenue. Jane had rushed back home but promised to bring Addie later on.

Claire's face hurt from smiling at everyone through endless explanations of why she wasn't across the street. The notice Hailey had put on the sandwich board had done its job of directing customers in here. Hailey was kept busy helping customers with both bread and cupcake purchases, and it appeared she and Rob had quickly formed a bond of some sort.

The bell over the door tinkled, as it did constantly throughout the day. It was approaching noon, and Claire would have been out of cupcakes soon, but she'd snuck into Rob's bakery kitchen and scrounged together a new batch. As soon as they cooled, she would send Hailey in to frost them and bring them out to sell.

Two old men entered the store, looking bewildered at the mass of people moving from shelf to shelf and plucking it clean of bread. They scanned the interior until they spotted her brightly colored table. Then, with matching smiles, Harry and Bert made their way over to her.

“Looks like we’re almost too late!” Bert exclaimed.

“I have more cupcakes in the back,” she assured them, her smile genuine. “The new flavors are going fast, though. You’d better grab some while you can.”

Harry adjusted his glasses and leaned in. “What flavors do you have, now?”

Claire launched into the spiel she had memorized by this time. Lemon raspberry, chocolate mocha, cookies and cream, red velvet, and of course, the traditional chocolate and vanilla. Harry and Bert both asked for a box containing one of each. Claire obliged.

As she gently slipped the cupcakes into the rectangular boxes, she said, “I’m afraid your regular table isn’t available this morning. I would have saved it for you if I could.”

“Why is the store closed?” Bert asked.

Claire stifled a sigh. It was a question she’d fielded endlessly that morning. Fortunately, her back was turned, and they wouldn’t see the slip in her smile. She took a deep breath, pasted it back on, and turned, offering them each their boxes.

“I had an incident at the store with the pipes. Until Ralph replaces them, I’ll be closed. But Rob Bradford was kind enough to lend me this table so no one will miss out on the cupcake sale today.”

“That’s a stand-up guy,” Bert replied with a nod.

Claire’s gaze travelled to the swinging door leading to the kitchen. Rob walked out with a tray of bread to replenish the dwindling supplies on his shelves. In giving her the extra space to display her wares, he had moved much of his bread back to the kitchen.

He caught her watching and smiled. She couldn’t help herself. She beamed back.

She had misjudged him. If Rob wanted to put her out of business, he would have left her in her kitchen, sobbing into her cupcakes. Instead, he had organized his space to save her cupcake sale and had motivated her out of her dour mood. If not for him, she would still be wallowing in misery, stuffing her face with cupcakes in the flooded bakery she owned.

Her problems weren't solved, but at least she had today.

"How long will the bakery be closed?" asked Harry, jarring Claire out of her thoughts.

She fought back a grimace. "I don't know for sure. Ralph told me two or three weeks initially, but I haven't booked him in yet. It's Saturday, so I'll have to call him on Monday unless he happens to stop by the sale."

"Two or three weeks! During summer?"

"I'm afraid so." To stem any further questions, she patted him on the arm and pointed toward the cash register, where Maxi perched on a stool. "You can pay for those over there, with Maxi. If you're also buying bread, you can pay for it at the same time. We're keeping track of what's what."

Reluctantly, the two men left, making room for more customers to step in. Claire handed out boxes and explained the flavors, smiling all the while until her cheeks hurt. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Maxi's husband, James, step into the store. He was a distinguished man with a well-trimmed beard and hair threaded through with silver. Even when he wore casual slacks and a polo shirt, like today, he somehow seemed as though he wore a suit. Claire followed him with her eyes as he made his way through the store to the front, sparing Claire no more than a glance and a nod in greeting.

For a second, Claire worried that James was unhappy that Maxi was helping with the sale, but the tension drained out of her as James reached his wife. They smiled at each other, and he leaned forward to kiss her cheek. Although they were too far away for Claire to hear what they were saying, he didn't seem angry. He seemed attentive, if the hand lingering lightly on her arm was any indication. She said something more to him then applied herself to helping the next customer in line. He didn't seem put off at the change in her attention.

Claire's gaze was drawn to the doorway, where an older man had just entered. He searched the crowd. His eyes lit, and a smile cracked his face as he found his target. "Rob!"

Claire watched Rob turn at the mention of his name. A look of surprise spread on his face. "Frank!"

The men strode toward each other, meeting in front of Claire. They hugged, genuinely happy to see each other.

"What's going on with you? Did you come all the way down for this?" Rob asked.

“Wouldn’t miss it, my friend.” Frank surveyed the store. “It’s looking good. Little small.” His gaze fell on Claire’s sign. “Sandcastles. Isn’t that the bakery across the street?”

“It is.”

“Why aren’t you open over there?” Frank stepped closer, squinting at the cupcakes in the tiered display.

“I had a problem with the pipes.”

Frank nodded knowingly and glanced up at Rob. “Let me guess. My man Rob here took you in. Reminds me of old times.”

“Old times?” Claire asked.

Frank stuck his hand out, and they shook. “Frank Martin. I owned the bakery across from Bradford Breads in Bar Harbor. Rob and I used to do a lot of cross-promotions. Made those last years before my retirement really profitable.”

Bar Harbor? That was where Peter and Sandee had said Rob put the bakery out of business.

“You *retired* and closed your bakery on purpose?” Claire asked.

Frank shrugged and went back to inspecting her cupcakes. “Yeah, none of my kids wanted to run it, so I just shut down.”

Peter and Sandee had been telling tales. Had they made it up or just assumed? It didn’t really matter. They had been wrong about Rob. But then, Claire had already come to that conclusion on her own.

Frank picked up a chocolate cupcake. “I used to bake a mean cupcake myself, you know.”

Rob laughed. “He sure did. Yours weren’t as good as Claire’s though.”

“You don’t say. I guess I’ll have to try some.” Frank picked out three cupcakes while continuing to talk to Rob. “I’m down for a few days. Maybe we could get together.”

“Sounds great.”

Frank nodded and handed his three cupcakes to Claire, who put them in a box. “Well, I know you’re busy. Give me a shout tonight, and we’ll catch up.”

He sauntered off to the cash registers, but Rob remained at Claire’s side.

“He’s a nice guy. Baked a great apple pie.”

“He’s not the only nice guy.” Claire tilted her head to meet Rob’s smiling eyes. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Sally at the wheat bread giving her a knowing look. She tried not to feel too uncomfortably

aware of the man standing next to her. They were adults, after all. Business owners. Colleagues of sorts. And she *was* in his store.

“How is the sale going?” he asked.

“Wonderfully. I think I might need to use your kitchen again if the customers keep up through the afternoon. What time do you usually close?”

“Five o’clock on weekends, but we can stay open later if there’s still a steady stream of customers.”

We?

“You should take a break and find yourself something to eat. Maxi or Hailey can cover for you while you do.”

Claire smiled. “You’re always thinking of others, aren’t you? What about taking a break yourself?”

“I had a sandwich in the kitchen, but I could be persuaded.” He trailed off as the door opened with a jingle of bells. When he smiled widely at the newcomers, Claire turned to see who had arrived. Jane stood next to her mother, cradling Addie’s arm and taking some of her weight as she moved. The old woman tried to shake off her daughter, but her foot must still hurt because the attempt was half-hearted. The pair carefully made their way over to Claire and Rob.

“Addie, it’s so good to see you,” Claire exclaimed.

The old woman blinked owlshly. “You too.”

The terse answer and her blank look told Claire that today wasn’t as good as she had hoped. She met Jane’s helpless gaze.

“I’m glad you’re here. Should I box up some cupcakes for you and Addie?”

Jane nodded. “Thank you. We’re here to pick up a couple loaves of bread too.”

Rob gestured at the shelves. “Be my guest. I’m happy to talk about a more regular delivery at a later date.”

Jane nodded but didn’t commit. “I guess we’d better move along. You’re busy, and Mom can’t stay on her feet too long.” She leaned in and whispered to Claire, “The outfit looks great.”

Claire self-consciously straightened the black apron she’d put over the pink-and-turquoise top and quickly boxed up the cupcakes for her friend, the last of the new flavors. As she turned back, she saw Addie lean closer to Rob with a wink.

“Don’t forget our date.”

Rob gave her a chagrined smile as Jane led the old woman away. The moment they were out of earshot, the babble swallowing up any sound Claire would make, she asked. "Date?"

Rob smiled. "I believe she thinks I'm taking her to a high school dance."

"Ah." It worried Claire that Addie's memory was so muddled, but at least she seemed happy.

"Speaking of dates," Rob said, leaning closer as he lowered his voice. "Maybe we should have dinner together sometime soon. We can talk about how we can work together to promote our bakeries and how to keep yours in business during the repairs."

Did he say *dates*? As in like a business date or...? Claire's heart fluttered in her throat. She swallowed before she answered in a small voice, "Why? I've been such a jerk to you for no reason at all. You've been nothing but kind this whole time, but I just couldn't see it. For what it's worth, I'm sorry for the way I acted. I really—" She swallowed again, and her gaze dropped to her hands, which she twisted nervously. "I really appreciate what you've done here for me today."

Rob reached out to put his hand over hers, stilling her nervous movement. His hand was warm, as were his eyes when she looked up again. "It's my pleasure. I meant it when I said I want us to work together. I'm sure we can find a way to benefit both our businesses. Besides, we can't let Hailey go without work while Sandcastles is being repaired. She's a great worker, and I've seen what she drives. She needs the money."

"That would be nice, but I'm not sure we'd have much to talk about. You could keep Hailey on, but I don't have a shop to work out of at the moment, and I don't know for sure when I'll reopen."

"This arrangement seems to be working," Rob said, gesturing to the table. "You didn't have trouble working in my kitchen either."

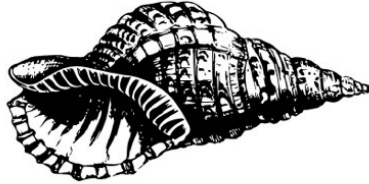
Claire frowned. "What are you saying?"

His eyes twinkled. "I'm saying you can set up here until your shop is up and running."

Claire resisted the urge to pinch herself and check if she was dreaming. "You would do that for me? You don't even know me."

He squeezed her hand. "Not yet, but I plan to."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Claire would have been hard-pressed to believe it at the time, but now, three weeks later, she could see that the pipes bursting in Sandcastles had a silver lining. It had opened her up to trusting Rob. That became a cornerstone of their working relationship.

Since then, Claire had worked from a small corner of Bradford Breads. Her profits were carefully listed in a ledger next to the cash register, and every Friday, Rob paid her promptly for the sales she'd made. Her regulars griped about not having their usual tables to eat breakfast at, especially if the weather outside was too dreary or blustery to sit out at the sidewalk tables. Very soon, they would have nothing to complain about.

The best part was that insurance had paid for most of the repairs. Claire didn't have to take out a loan, and the dent in her savings wasn't too bad either.

She'd hired Ralph that same day to begin work on the pipes. He was giving them a complete overhaul. She suspected he was giving her a break on the price. Supplying him with cookies, brownies, and cupcakes every day might have had something to do with that.

It was busy having both of them in the bread shop, but Hailey kept things running smoothly. Rob had insisted on paying her extra because it was more work. Claire didn't argue. She knew Hailey was worth every penny.

They operated surprisingly well together, too, she mused as they strolled along the Marginal Way, a habit they'd formed while speaking of business. He loved the calming effect of the ocean every bit as much as she did. It felt

less formal than dinner together—which they’d also shared several times—but the fact that they were coming up there to brainstorm joint marketing strategies for her bakery reopening in another week made the well-worn path something indefinable. Their talks were starting to feel less like business and more like dates, especially when they veered to more personal matters.

Claire still hadn’t confessed to Rob that she *had* been the girl he kissed so many years ago. She hadn’t worked up the courage. But sometimes, as they walked on the narrow path, their hands brushed, and she wondered, *What if...?*

“You know the last thing I want is to take business away from you.” Rob sounded hesitant, which jarred her back to the conversation at hand: an idea she had to integrate their two bakeries a little more.

“I know. That’s why we would exchange goods.” She paused at the bottom of the cliffside path. The wind whipped her hair in front of her eyes. She tucked it behind her ear instead and craned her neck back to look him in the eye. “I think it’s a good idea. I would make sweet breads like banana bread, chocolate zucchini bread, that sort of thing. In exchange, you give me loaves of your bread to use for sandwiches in my shop. I noticed you don’t offer drinks in yours, only bread, so customers are more likely to stay and have a meal in mine. If we put stickers on the bags saying those things come from each other’s shops, I’m sure we’ll find curious customers who travel across the road for more.”

“You already make bread,” he pointed out, his face expressionless.

“And I hate it,” she confessed. “I’ve never done a good job at it, and for the amount of work it takes, I’d rather bake a batch of croissants. I could use the bakery case space for pastries. Besides, I’ve tasted your bread. It’s much better than mine ever was.”

Was it her imagination, or was that a blush creeping up Rob’s neck?

“My daughter suggested the idea,” she added. “She says it will be good for marketing to have each other’s products so integrated in our shops.”

One side of his mouth lifted in a smirk. “I’d like to meet Tammi someday. She sounds like she has a good head on her shoulders.”

Claire beamed. “She does. She’s very smart. Takes after her mother.”

“Then I very much look forward to meeting her.” Rob spoke the words with a distracted air as he approached one of the large cedar trees dotting

the path. Without warning, he took Claire's hand in his and tugged her along after him, into a secluded area off the path next to the tree.

It was the same place he had kissed her when she was a teenager. Claire's stomach swirled with butterflies. She bit her lower lip, uncertain.

His eyes were warm on her face. "Do you remember this place?"

"Of course. I've lived here my whole life."

"Well, I haven't, but I remember it very well." He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. "I once kissed a very special girl in this spot."

The butterflies swelled until they felt like songbirds. "I know," Claire confessed.

One of Rob's eyebrows quirked up. "Oh, so you remember now." It was a statement more than question.

"I never forgot."

He squeezed her hand. "I never forgot either. It's partly why I came back to Lobster Bay, hoping to find you again."

Claire didn't know what to say. She was afraid to breathe and ruin the moment.

"But you know, there is something I regret about that night."

Claire stiffened. "What is that?"

"That I didn't do this a second time." He leaned down and kissed her.

MAXI STROLLED along the Marginal Way with Jane. There were only a few people on the path ahead. A group of teenagers, a family with a baby in a stroller, and a curvy woman and tall man. Did she recognize those two people?

"I think I'm going to do it," Jane announced.

Maxi glanced sideways at her friend. "Do what?"

"Put my mom in a memory care facility. I've had time to visit a few now, and there's one a couple of miles away that seems like just the fit for her. All I have to do is find a way to break it to her and hope she doesn't hate me for it." She paused, wrapping her arms around her middle. "Of course, she'll forget as soon as I tell her, so at least there's that."

"You have to think about what's right for both of you. It isn't fair to you to be her caretaker, and it isn't fair to her to have a caretaker who has her

attention elsewhere half the time. Your mom might need to adjust, but I'm sure she'll be better off this way. What did your sister think?"

Jane bit her lip and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I haven't told her yet."

Maxi faltered, almost tripping over a rock. "What? Don't you think you should?"

Jane sighed. "I suppose I'll have to. Not that she'll care one way or another."

Maxi remembered how hard it had been for Jane when Andrea had left town. Jane had idolized her older sister. "You should give Andie a chance. I know you two are estranged, but this could bring you together. I'm sure she cares."

Jane pressed her lips together. Maxi could see the urge to contradict her welling up behind Jane's closed-off expression, but her friend hated confrontation. She swallowed the protest. When she laid a hand on top of Maxi's arm, stopping her, Maxi assumed it was to change the subject.

Fine. Maxi could take a hint.

"Isn't that Claire and Rob?" Jane's eyes almost bugged out of her head.

Maxi followed her gaze to the figures up ahead. They had caught up a bit because the pair had stepped off the path and were under the base of a big cedar tree. The man, almost certainly Rob, was kissing the woman, definitely Claire.

Maxi grinned. "It looks like they're finally getting along."

Jane snorted and elbowed Maxi in the side. "Maybe we should give them their privacy."

"Only if we're allowed to tease her about this afterward."

Jane laughed and linked her arm through Maxi's, steering her around to walk back the way they came. Maxi couldn't believe she saw Claire kissing someone, maybe even for the first time since her divorce. The two bakers were perfect together. She and Jane had seen it from the beginning. Everyone should have someone to take comfort in.

Like James? The warm feeling dimmed a bit as she and Jane walked back toward the beach. She and James weren't what they had once been, but Maxi was taking steps to enliven their marriage. She didn't want it to turn stale and resentful. She was making good progress on that front. At least she *thought* she was.

“If you’re going to put Addie in a facility, what will happen to Tides?” Maxi asked.

“I’ll still run it, I suppose. It’s a family legacy. I sort of promised Mom I would.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Jane hesitated for a moment too long, giving away her misgivings. “I’d rather not, but there’s no one else. The fate of Tides is entirely on my shoulders.”

Maxi squeezed her friend, offering what support she could. “As long as you remember you don’t have to be in this alone. If you need us, you will always have me and Claire, even if she has a boyfriend now.”

They both laughed, lightening the mood. Maxi resisted looking over her shoulder to spy on the couple in question. Their lives might be changing, but that didn’t mean it was a bad thing.

Maybe it was a chance for a new beginning for all of them.

This is a work of fiction.

None of it is real. All names, places, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real names, places, or events are purely coincidental, and should not be construed as being real.

SAVING SANDCASTLES

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Changing Tides

MEREDITH
SUMMERS

Lobster Bay
BOOK TWO



DESCRIPTION

Pull up a beach chair and dig your toes in the sand as life continues in Lobster Bay.

Things are changing for Jane Miller. Just as her friend Claire gets on her feet again from a near catastrophe with her bakery, Jane faces challenges with the beachfront bed-and-breakfast her family has owned for generations. Her mother is no longer able to run things, and Jane finds herself in charge.

It's a big change, especially since Jane expected to be retired by now, but she's promised her mother she will carry on the family legacy. Too bad she doesn't know very much about running an inn.

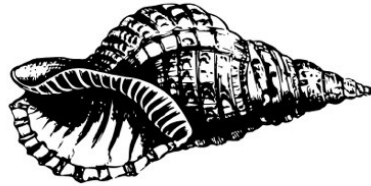
But luck is on her side when she comes across a new furry friend, Cooper, who helps her navigate the challenge. It doesn't hurt that Cooper's new owner is easy on the eyes—even though Jane vowed she'd never look again.

Naturally she also has Claire and Maxi to lean on. Claire is happy with her new bakery and new beau, but Maxi is facing some changes of her own. Will Maxi find the strength to finally pursue her passion for art even while her marriage may be in trouble?

Visit Lobster Bay on the coast of Maine today, and find out how these three friends navigate the changes in their lives.

This book can be read as a stand-alone story, but it will be a lot more fun if you read book 1 first, as you will get more background details about some of the characters in this story.

CHAPTER ONE



Jane Miller stood in the doorway of the private room at the Tall Pines Memory Care Facility and watched her mother, Addie. She was sitting in her old rocking chair beside the window, a pencil in her hand and her gaze intent on a word-search book that was laid out in her lap. The look of contentment on her mother's face brought Jane a mixture of relief and anxiety. Relief because her mother was happy. Anxiety because she didn't know how she was going to continue paying the bill.

The monthly cost was much more than their failing family inn, Tides, was bringing in. Jane didn't have any savings or much for retirement, so hopefully she could get some aid for her mother. That was actually one of the reasons for her visit. She had an appointment with the financial director in a few minutes but wanted to pop in and see her mother first.

She pushed the door open, and Addie looked over and smiled. It was no wonder her mother felt at home here. Jane had had one of her best friends, Maxi Stevens, help decorate the room, and it held all of her mother's familiar things from her room at Tides. The blue-and-white wedding-ring quilt that Jane's grandmother had stitched by hand, the bird figurines that Dad would give to Mom every wedding anniversary, the family photos, including Jane's favorite of her and her sister, Andie, arm in arm at the beach.

Maxi had brought in a few new things that she'd artfully placed here and there, too, and the overall effect was stunning. Jane wasn't surprised—as an artist, Maxi was bursting with creativity.

Jane perched on the edge of the bed. “How are you feeling today, Mom?”

“Wonderful.” Addie’s smile turned to a frown. “Shouldn’t you be downstairs feeding the guests?”

Apparently, Maxi had done such a good job of emulating Addie’s room, down to the small television in the corner, that Addie thought she was still at Tides. But since she seemed so content, Jane didn’t want to enlighten her. Let her think what she wanted as long as it made her happy. “Brenda can handle the guests this morning.”

Brenda had worked for Tides as their chief cook and general helper for decades. At first, she’d worked under Addie’s instruction and later had helped fill in where Addie’s memory lapses left off. When it became too much, Jane had retired from her job as an accountant in order to help Brenda and take over running the inn. She’d always hoped to keep her mom at the inn, but that wasn’t meant to be. Luckily Brenda knew as much as Jane did about running the place, and she could comfortably leave her in charge.

“Brenda is a good cook, but she isn’t the face of Tides. You should be down there making sure that their stay is a pleasant one. The guests won’t come back if it isn’t.”

Apparently, Addie hadn’t noticed that Tides had only had one guest for most of the summer. That was probably for the best too.

A change of subject was in order. “I brought you a chocolate chip muffin.” Jane held up a white bakery bag.

Addie put down the pen and reached for the bag, peering in with a delighted smile. “These are my favorite!”

“Claire made them.” Jane wondered if her mother would remember Claire Turner, her lifelong friend and owner of Sandcastles Bakery in Lobster Bay.

“She makes the best muffins,” Addie said around a bite. She seemed to remember who Claire was today.

“She does,” Jane agreed.

Addie glanced over Jane’s shoulder into what was sure to be an unfamiliar hallway. Jane expected her to become confused or upset. Instead, her mother set aside the far-from-finished word search and pen and asked, “Where is Andrea?”

Good question. Jane's older sister had once been her idol, back when Jane was a freshman in high school and Andie a senior. But when Andie left town for college and never looked back, Jane realized that she hadn't meant that much to her sister. None of them had, if the infrequency of her visits was any indication. Sure, she'd come back when Jane's baby—and then her husband—had died. She'd been there when their dad had gotten sick. But she never stayed long. Why would it be any different now?

Of course, her absence might be because Jane hadn't told Andie the full truth. Not that she'd wanted to leave Andie out of the decision-making process, but everything had happened so fast. Tall Pines was the best facility around, and they didn't often have openings. Jane had jumped at the chance, and there hadn't been time to wait for her sister to fly out to mull over the decision. Besides, Andie hadn't been here this past year watching their mother decline. Jane had done all the heavy lifting and felt she was best positioned to make the decision.

Still, she did have a tiny seed of guilt that she could have tried harder to let Andie know what was really going on. Hadn't she glossed over the real state of affairs in her texts and phone calls? And maybe she had felt responsible that their mother had wandered off and didn't want her big sister to think she'd fallen down on the job of making sure their mother was safe.

Andrea knew about the change in their mother's living situation. Jane hadn't gone into details, certainly not over a voicemail message, but she'd left enough information for Andie to get in touch. So far, they hadn't been able to connect. It probably didn't make much difference, though. She doubted Andie would want to come out and help. She'd probably be relieved that Jane was taking care of everything and happy to stay back in New York City, where she worked for Christie's as an antiques appraiser.

"Andie is at work right now." Jane didn't want to disappoint her mother and tell her that her oldest daughter most likely wouldn't be coming.

Addie latched onto Jane's arm. Her expression had lost its dreamy cast and was fully serious. The lines around her mouth and nose were deeper than ever. "You'll convince her to visit, won't you, Jane? She listens to you."

No, she doesn't.

Jane bit her lip. She didn't want to make a promise she couldn't keep. "I'll try. Speaking of which, I'd better get going."

“That’s right. You make sure breakfast is coming along. I don’t want Brenda to scare them all away with her crankiness. You know how she gets while she’s cooking.”

Brenda was perhaps the sweetest soul in Lobster Bay. A bit surly if someone got in her way while she was cooking, but she would never be cranky to a guest.

Nevertheless, Jane promised. “I will.”

“Good. But before you go, you better find my sweater.”

“Sweater?” Jane glanced into the closet. She’d moved all of her mother’s clothes over but hadn’t finished writing her name on the tags yet as recommended by the staff here. “Which one?”

“The sea-green one with the buttons shaped like seashells down the front. I can’t find it anywhere.”

Leave it to Addie to forget where she was but remember the exact description of her favorite sweater.

“I’ll help you find it,” Jane assured her. She tried to keep the frown off her face and out of her voice as she stood and turned toward the dresser. Unfortunately, despite searching through the dresser and the closet under Addie’s supervision, she didn’t find the sweater. “I’m sorry, Mom, it’s not here.”

“I knew it!”

“Knew what?”

“Sadie Thompson took it. She’s always borrowing my clothes and not giving them back!”

Sadie Thompson had been her mother’s best friend in high school. Apparently, they’d had some sort of falling out back then and hadn’t spoken in years. When her mother’s memory had first started to slip, she’d mentioned Sadie a few times. It was funny how the mind worked.

“I don’t think it was Sadie. Let me have a look through Tides and see if I can find the sweater for you.”

Addie beamed. “Thank you. I have to wear it tonight for my big date with that nice Bradford fellow!”

Jane smiled. Addie had a crush on the owner of the new bread bakery in town, Rob Bradford. Rob had been very sweet to Addie and had actually been the one who had told Jane about Tall Pines. No point in telling Addie that Rob was young enough to be her son and that he’d fallen pretty hard for Jane’s friend Claire. Since her mother thought she was still a teenager

sometimes, she'd let her mother believe what she wanted to believe about Rob.

Jane kissed her on the cheek. "We'll get it to you in time. I have to go now. Goodbye, Mom."

Jane hurried out of the room. She didn't want to be late for her meeting with Wendy Martinelli, the finance director for Tall Pines. Having her mother's future at Tall Pines secured financially would be a huge relief.

WENDY MARTINELLI WAS in her forties, with only a hint of crinkles around her eyes betraying her age. She had round cheeks, a ready smile, and straight white teeth. Jane liked her immediately.

"Hi, I'm Jane Miller. We spoke on the phone. Am I late?"

"Right on time." Wendy indicated for her to sit, and Jane folded herself into the chair opposite her desk.

Wendy clicked a couple of keys on her computer and opened a manila folder in front of her. "You're here to inquire about Medicaid for your mother, Adelaide?"

"Yes. I signed the release forms for you to check into her credit history and dropped off the completed form last weekend when we moved her in."

The woman nodded, a strand of blond hair falling across her cheek. "Yes, I see that here." Her smile dimmed as she closed the file and set it lightly atop her keyboard. "Unfortunately, we have a problem."

"What sort of problem? Did I forget to sign something?"

Wendy's eyes softened as she met Jane's gaze. "I'm afraid your mother doesn't qualify for Medicaid."

How was that possible? Jane had discovered that Addie had spent what little retirement savings she'd had over the past few years, and with bookings almost nonexistent at the inn, she had no income. "You must have made a mistake. It's there in the financials. She doesn't have much in the way of retirement savings. Every penny has gone into the upkeep of our family inn, Tides."

"That's the problem. Tides is a premium beachfront property. That's too large an asset to qualify for Medicaid. If you sold the inn, we might be able to discuss this again, but you'd probably have too much money to qualify

then.” Wendy looked at her with sympathy. “Unless your mother had signed the property over to another family member at least six years ago.”

Jane shook her head. As far as she knew, the property was still in her parents’ name. “So my only option is to sell it?”

Sell the inn? For a split second, she considered it. No more dealing with guests. No more worrying about food deliveries and room cleaning. Jane would have *free time* again. But she’d promised her mother she would never sell. It was their family legacy.

“If you sell, then you could use the proceeds to pay for your mother’s care. Once that money runs out, then maybe we could revisit the option of Medicare.”

“Maybe? What if the money runs out and she gets denied?”

“I’m afraid that’s a possibility. The money would last for a while, but we have no idea what the laws and rules will be in a few years. You might have to care for her at home.”

Jane almost laughed. She’d lost money on the sale of her modest home so she could move in to Tides to care for her mother and help her run the inn. If they sold Tides, there wouldn’t be any home in which to care for Addie, never mind any money to pay for the care she now needed.

Jane took a deep breath. She’d have to figure something out. “Okay, thanks for your time.”

They shook hands, and Jane left the office.

Her mind whirling with options, she barely noticed where she was going as she walked down the hallway, out the front door, and along the sidewalk next to the manicured landscaping that led to the parking lot.

Bookings were down at Tides and the inn needed repairs, but it had once turned a tidy profit. Maybe she could do some advertising or have some sort of sale like her friend Claire had done for her bakery. If she could fill the inn with guests and maybe find some additional income, she’d be able to pay for Addie’s room at Tall Pines and—

Oof!

Jane squeaked as she toppled backward into a fat, leafy bush. A big golden ball of fur leaped after her, a wet nose touched her chin, and she found herself staring into a pair of deep-brown eyes that shone with an eagerness to make friends. A leash dangled from the dog’s collar, and Jane grabbed it so the golden retriever wouldn’t take off.

“Cooper!” called a man. “Cooper, come back here!”

Jane scrambled out of the bush. Cooper seemed happy to stay by her side, staring up at her with soulful brown eyes. His happy demeanor made her smile.

"I'm so sorry." The man expertly hooked his fingers into the red collar around the dog's throat and tugged him back.

"It's no problem." Jane handed him the end of the leash then brushed herself off and picked a leaf out of her hair.

Cooper strained at the hold on his collar, trying desperately to reach her again. Jane crouched and rubbed Cooper's neck, dodging his wet kisses.

"Cooper, stop that!" The man, tall and in his late thirties or maybe early forties, flashed her a chagrined smile. "I'm sorry. He's usually much better behaved than this or I wouldn't bring him."

Jane looked up at the man. "Is he yours?"

He shook his head, and his smile widened. He had a very nice smile, probably the most noticeable thing about him aside from his height and curly brown hair. "He belongs to my grandpa. I'm Mike Henderson."

He stuck his hand out, and Jane stood and shook it. "Jane Miller. Is your grandfather here at Tall Pines?"

Mike nodded. "He's one of the oldest residents. Lived on his own in Lobster Bay until he hit ninety-five. Now he needs more help."

"Oh." Jane blinked, mulling over the name in her head. It was slightly familiar. "I run the bed-and-breakfast in Lobster Bay."

"Small world," Mike said with a grin. Cooper had retreated to Mike's side, who reached down and gave the canine a pat. Cooper wagged his tail at Jane as if to suggest that it wouldn't be a bad idea for her to pet him too.

"I just moved my mother into this facility. Has your grandfather been here long? How do you like it?"

"He hasn't been here long. The transition has been tough. That's why I'm staying in town for a while, to get him settled and make sure he gets to see Cooper. Cooper's visits really help."

"You don't live near here?"

"No. Seattle," Mike said. "We don't have family any closer to help Gramps, and I can telecommute. How does your mother like it so far?"

"She seems to be adjusting well."

"Good. It's a nice place." Mike glanced at Tall Pines. "Well, I suppose I better get in there. Nice meeting you."

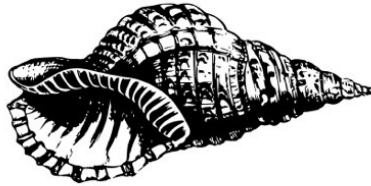
Jane watched them walk to the door. Cooper looked back at her as if to say, “See you later.” Jane hoped he would. Something about the golden retriever made her problems seem a little smaller.

She walked to her car, her spirits revived. She was on her way to meet her two best friends for morning coffee, and that always picked up her mood. She was sure they’d be able to help her figure out what to do about the fees at Tall Pines.

Things were looking up... until her phone chimed with a text from her sister. She’d left Andie a message about their mother a few days ago, and they’d been playing phone and text tag ever since. Jane wanted to talk to her in person. She owed her that, and the information was too much to pass back and forth in messages.

She threw the phone onto the car seat. It had taken Andie long enough to respond, and she could wait a few more hours. Jane had to stop at Tides to take care of a few things before meeting her friends for coffee, and she didn’t want to be late. They had a lot to talk about.

CHAPTER TWO



Andie Miller glanced down at the phone on her desk. Jane hadn't returned her text yet. The lack of communication had her worried. Jane's last message about their mother had had a ring of foreboding to it. There was something she wasn't telling Andie. Should Andie go home? But why? Jane would handle everything, and that was the way her sister wanted things, wasn't it? It sure seemed that way since Jane never asked for her opinion or her help.

But was that really the way Jane wanted things, or was it because Andie had practically abandoned them by taking off right after high school and only going back when something bad happened? Like when Jane's infant son had died... and then her husband. And when their father had gotten sick. Even on those horrible occasions, Andie had provided comfort as best she could and then taken off back to her career as soon as possible.

It wasn't that Andie didn't like her family—she loved them dearly. But there just wasn't much for her back in Lobster Bay. Her career as an antiques appraiser necessitated that she live in a city where antiques collectors and auction houses were prevalent, not in a small seaside beach town. Besides, the last time she'd gone home, her mom had been doing fairly well. A little more forgetful, but she was able to manage, and Jane was helping out at the inn.

Andie loved her job. She'd always been enthralled with the past, and as an antiques collector, restorer, and appraiser, she had the privilege of handling unique pieces of history that were hundreds of years old. She was good at her job too. Her expertise and passion were what had granted her a

senior position at Christie's. Her drive and her willingness to put in long hours had been what had made her boss, Doug, look at her in an entirely different light.

Her *married* boss. Surely she wasn't out of line for pushing him to get that divorce he had claimed for months he was on the cusp of delivering to his wife? They were estranged. They were unhappy. Doug had been happy with Andie these past seven months.

Or so he said. Yet ever since she'd brought the divorce up a week ago, Doug had found more and more reasons not to be in the office. And now he wasn't even returning her texts.

Andie looked away from the phone and concentrated on the ivory-inlaid box she'd been inspecting. Everything would work out fine. Doug was probably just busy. The box, with its intricate design and sterling silver interior, was in perfect condition. She noted so in her documentation before glancing at her phone again. Nothing from Doug or Jane.

"Andrea, how would you catalogue this?"

Susie Thornburg, the fresh-out-of-college new hire was looking at her expectantly with her wide brown eyes. Andie supposed that Susie was a good kid, and she did seem to have a love for antiques and a good work ethic. But Andie wasn't the most patient person, and being tasked with training an overly eager apprentice almost thirty years her junior really wasn't her cup of tea.

She looked at the item in question and very slowly, very patiently pointed out, "I just catalogued that. It's under metalware. See here?" She pointed to the entry in the computer, a few lines above in the Recent Entries column.

Susie laughed brightly. "Oh. I guess I'm still on vacation time."

They each returned to their work, but the silence didn't last long. It was just as well. If Andie didn't find some distraction, she was going to set the world record for most number of times a woman has checked her phone for messages and found none.

Susie asked in a chipper tone, "So, what's up with Doug? Shouldn't he have checked on us by now? He usually does."

Susie didn't know about Andie's affair with their boss. No one did. At first, Andie had accepted Doug's reasoning for keeping their affair secret. After all, it had started so fast, crossing the line from innocent to a deeper connection almost before she knew what was happening.

Neither of them wanted it to be a problem at work. Even though the company didn't have any rules against people dating, Doug had recently been separated from his wife, and it was awkward. Andie didn't want her coworkers to think she was getting the good jobs because of her relationship with Doug, even though everyone knew she'd earned those jobs with years of dedication and hard work and had been awarded them before the relationship started.

But as time went on, she should have picked up on the fact that Doug never really wanted to go to any parties or out in public. He didn't introduce her to any of his friends. She should have realized that meant that he wasn't as *separated* from his wife as he'd led her to believe.

She steered Susie to safer waters. "Who knows? So, how was your trip down to Florida to see your mom?"

If nothing else, Susie was always happy to chatter about her own life. Andie didn't mind so much. The girl's enthusiasm was contagious, and she had a nice manner about her. Maybe if Andie was younger, they might have been friends that went out for drinks together after work. Maybe they would now, even though Andie was probably Susie's mother's age.

As Susie talked about her visit home, Andie felt a weird pang of homesickness. She didn't often miss her hometown, and even though she never cared to visit there, it had a lot of things going for it. The sugar-sand beaches, the smell of the ocean. The fresh lobster. But it was a small town, and Andie had always wanted more. That was one reason why she'd left and never looked back—and why she'd treated the boy she'd been head over heels for so terribly. She'd been scared she'd be stuck in Lobster Bay waiting for him to come home from the navy. Or never come home at all. But that had been decades ago now, and it was all water under the bridge.

Stifling a sigh, Andie finished cataloguing the box and moved on to the next piece, a jade figurine of an elephant with a raised trunk. She put on her bifocals to inspect it more closely. Not everything in this room was rare or old. The appraisers sometimes bid on estate sales and had to wade through them to find the chunks of gold hidden amid the manure. But whenever she did discover a rare find, it always gave Andie a little thrill.

When she'd left for college, she'd wanted to be an archaeologist. But experience had soon taught her that she was not the outdoorsy type. Nevertheless, history fascinated her, and she always dreamed of making that one big discovery. A document from the founding of the country

hidden behind a painting, a long-lost diary, an important piece of jewelry lost by a queen whose government had been overthrown. Maybe it was a fantasy to hope for something so big, but it was a buzz that had gotten inside Andie's stomach and never left. It filled her with breathless anticipation every time she picked up a new piece.

But this figurine wasn't it. By her estimate, given its style and the wear of the grooves carved into it, it was from the early 1900s. She needed to consult her reference book to be sure.

As she moved toward the book, Susie's chipper voice washed over her again, piercing her sense of calm.

"No fair."

Andie frowned, looking up. She pulled her bifocals off her nose and perched them on top of her head again. "What isn't fair?"

"The way Doug is playing favorites."

Andie drew herself up. Was she referring to Andie? She couldn't possibly know about their affair.

Susie continued, "She's been here for less time than me!"

Andie turned to face her associate head-on. "Pardon me?"

"Elise," Susie answered with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I have a funny feeling about her, with her bright smile and chirpy attitude and supermodel figure. She might be getting special treatment. She just got a big appraisal job."

"She's getting prime jobs? Already?" Andie wondered if Susie was exaggerating. "That can't be right. I'm due to fly out for the next one."

Andie couldn't be losing her prestige to a new appraiser. She had clawed her way up to get to where she was. She worked long hours, even weekends. In the back of her mind, she had always feared that as soon as she passed fifty, she would start to get overlooked despite her expertise. But it hadn't happened. And now...

Susie patted Andie's arm. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure she'll choke and get pulled off the next run. I mean, sure, she has a good eye for antiques, but it's nothing compared to yours."

"Which job did she get?" Maybe it was a job that would conflict with a bigger job they intended to give to Andie?

Susie shrugged. "Vanderburgh in Palm Springs. It looks like a good one. I'm sure she'll be calling you any minute now for advice."

Andie pressed her lips together. It *was* a good one. Was that why Doug had ignored her texts? Andie was busy with this job, but they could have handed the grunt work off to Elise with Susie to assist and flown Andie to Palm Springs. Why would they let Elise go on her own? The last few jobs, she'd had to call Andie for advice on almost every item.

Andie sat back at her desk and glanced at her phone. Still no texts. Maybe a visit to Lobster Bay wouldn't be such a bad idea. She *was* worried about her mother. She hadn't seen her in almost a year. They'd talked on the phone, but sometimes her mother had been confused. And there was nothing like seeing someone face-to-face.

Maybe if Doug saw that she wasn't sitting around here waiting for him to call, he might realize what he was missing. Then again, a little voice inside her cautioned that maybe she didn't want him to realize that. Not for personal reasons, but she still wanted to be his choice for the good jobs. If she left, would Elise replace her as the new favorite?

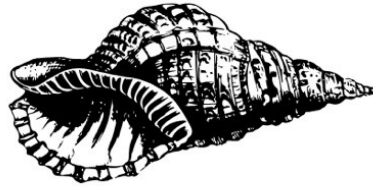
That was ridiculous. A respectable auction house like Christie's wouldn't replace an experienced veteran like Andie with a newcomer like Elise. She checked the schedule of upcoming appraisals on her computer.

There was a big estate that was expected to go on the market soon. Robert Richhaven had a collection that antiques collectors would weep over. No one had seen it in recent years, given his failing health and his propensity to return to his reclusive ways at the slightest provocation. However, with no children and distant relatives more interested in selling the estate fast, this could be Andie's find of a lifetime. More than anything, she was determined to be sent to the Richhaven Estate when it went up for auction. But that wouldn't happen for a few weeks.

She had time to go back home and let Doug see just how important she was for this operation. Without her here, Elise would have to sink or swim on her own. Andie didn't want her to sink. She didn't wish her, or Christie's, any harm, but if the higher-ups thought she was ready to go out on jobs on her own, then she guessed it was only fair that they saw how she could handle things without Andie helping in the background. Besides, Andie had a lot of vacation time accrued and had to use it by the end of the year.

She picked up her phone and started shopping for a plane ticket to Maine.

CHAPTER THREE



By the time Jane drove up the pebbled drive in front of Tides, she'd come to terms with the fact that paying for Addie's care might not be as easy as she'd hoped.

The silence of the inn was another reminder that moving her mother to Tall Pines was the right thing to do. Bookings had been down drastically this year, and Jane had been too busy trying to make sure her mother didn't wander off or leave the stove burner on to even think about how to rectify that. Now she didn't have much of a choice, not if she was going to keep her promise to her mother. She was going to have to figure out a way to bring in more business.

Jane was good at finances, though. She could juggle bills in her sleep. She could find a way to make this work.

Her footsteps echoed on the smooth, worn floors of the old Victorian house. Although the house was in working order, it had retained its rustic air as well as a constant list of minor repairs that needed to be handled. Jane liked its charm. In a way, she was glad that in appearance the inn hadn't changed much since she'd been a child. There was a nostalgia that hung from the eaves and gables, a cozy feeling of safety. If running the inn didn't go hand in hand with interacting with so many strangers, Jane might enjoy it a lot more. Of course, lately there hadn't even been that many strangers—just old Mrs. Weatherlee, who had been here for two weeks. She was quiet and mostly kept to herself, so at least Jane didn't have to pretend to be an extrovert around her.

Jane proceeded to the kitchen, where Brenda was washing out a thick yellowware mixing bowl.

Brenda was a cheerful woman with a round face and a bright smile. She liked to hum while she cleaned the kitchen, but she was always off tune. Jane cleared her throat to announce her arrival.

Brenda straightened with a jump. "Jane! You're back." She recovered from her shock quickly, still holding the dripping bowl. "How did the meeting at Tall Pines go?"

"Not as expected," Jane admitted with a grimace. "I'm just about to head into town to meet with Claire and Maxi, but I wanted to check in and make sure you didn't need anything."

Brenda's face creased with concern. The sixty-five-year-old woman was more like family than hired help. She'd been a close sidekick for Addie after Jane's father had died and had taken care of her as her dementia progressed over the past several years. Brenda was as concerned about Addie getting good care as Jane was.

"Don't worry," Jane assured her. "Medicaid won't pay for Mom, but everything will be okay."

"How can I help?" Brenda asked.

Jane sighed, running her finger along the well-worn surface of the rectangular pine kitchen table. The table had been there since before Jane had been born. Maybe even since before her mother had been born. She remembered many family meals at this table. She couldn't let that all slip away now. "I guess just keep cooking your awesome breakfasts. I'm going to have to figure out how to get more guests to the inn, and your food is the key."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Brenda waved off the compliment, but Jane could see that she was pleased.

Jane kissed her cheek. "Speaking of that, I guess I better play innkeeper and go make sure Mrs. Weatherlee is enjoying her breakfast."

"Stop and have some yourself," Brenda encouraged her. She turned her back to continue loading the dishwasher. "There's plenty there, and it will only go to waste if somebody doesn't eat it."

"Claire always keeps a muffin ready for me when we meet in the mornings."

Brenda *tsked*. "You need to eat more than a muffin. It's no wonder you're so skinny."

Some people would say those words with praise. With Brenda, who wore the evidence of her good cooking with a comfort that Jane could never emulate, it was a chastisement.

“If there’s still some left over, I’ll eat it for lunch or supper.”

That was a common theme in Jane’s life. The inn served one full breakfast, and Brenda usually went all-in with her meals. Even though they only had one guest, Jane wouldn’t be surprised to see piles of eggs, bacon, and toast laid out neatly along with the basket of muffins she made sure to keep stocked in from Claire’s bakery and the fresh-baked bread from Bradford Breads. It wasn’t unusual for Jane to have breakfast food for supper, just so it wouldn’t go to waste. Brenda had pared the volume of her cooking down considerably, but she hadn’t gotten the hang of cooking for the smaller amount of guests yet.

Through the swinging kitchen door was the dining room. Whereas the kitchen was an eclectic mix of modern and rustic—including a walk-in refrigerator, which was well used during the busy season—the dining room was all seaside elegance.

There were several tables set up so that guests could have their own private dining experiences. The tables were covered in pristine white linen. The mahogany-backed chairs all matched, their talon-and-ball feet resting on the jewel-toned Oriental rug that covered most of the wide pine flooring.

The ceilings were ten feet tall, and a row of floor-to-ceiling French doors faced the ocean, providing an astounding view of golden sand and cobalt waves. The windows were flanked by cobalt-blue silk drapes that had been custom made in Jane’s grandmother’s day. The doors were cracked open, and the edges of the drapes fluttered in the breeze.

One tiny white-haired old lady sat at a table next to the window, slowly cutting into the Belgian waffle on her plate. Brenda had certainly outdone herself with the meal today, with a bowl of fresh fruit on the table next to the muffins and a staggering stack of waffles. Jane would be eating them for days since Mrs. Weatherlee was barely five feet tall, and Jane would be surprised if she finished even one waffle.

“Good morning, Mrs. Weatherlee. How are you today?”

The woman turned from the window, smiling. “Wonderful. Who wouldn’t be with a plate full of food and this gorgeous view?” She patted her lips with her napkin.

Jane glanced out the window. The woman had a point. “I hope breakfast is satisfactory.”

“Of course. You always have the best breakfasts here. How is your mother, dear?”

For an old lady, Mrs. Weatherlee was sharp as a tack and didn’t miss a thing. She’d been here for over two weeks and had witnessed some of Addie’s less lucid moments. She knew that Addie was now residing at Tall Pines. “She’s doing great. Thanks for asking.”

Mrs. Weatherlee nodded slowly, her cornflower-blue eyes sympathetic. “It’s hard, but you made the right decision. Now you can focus on building this inn back to what it once was. You are going to do that, aren’t you?”

Jane glanced around at the empty tables. Could she? “I’m going to try.”

Mrs. Weatherlee nodded. “Good, then. Don’t worry. Everything will be all right.” She tucked back into her waffle.

Mrs. Weatherlee’s positive attitude gave Jane new confidence, and she started back toward the front. She’d better get a move on if she wanted to meet her two best friends, Claire and Maxi, at Claire’s bakery, Sandcastles.

She stepped out onto the front porch in time to see a blond woman step out of her bubblegum-pink Mini Cooper, carrying a sheaf of papers in her arms.

Oh no! What was *she* doing here?

Sandee Harris was a local realtor, and yes, Jane had reached out to a realty company to get an estimate on Tides, but she’d been dealing with Dorian Wells, *not* Sandee. Not only was Sandee mean, condescending, and generally annoying, she was also the woman Claire’s husband had cheated on Claire with. Claire was one of Jane’s best friends, and she’d rather deal with a pit of vipers than give any business to Sandee Harris.

“Janey! Oh, good. Looks like I’ve just caught you!”

Janey? Where had that come from? “Just Jane, actually. What are you doing here? I was dealing with Dorian.”

As Sandee rounded her car, she pressed the key fob in her hand. The car chirped as the doors locked. As if she needed to lock it here in Lobster Bay where the crime rate was practically zero. Just showed how out of touch she was.

“Dorian’s under the weather, so she asked me to fill you in.” Sandee smiled as if oblivious to the fact that Jane didn’t want her here.

A lock of hair falling into her face, Sandee—just barely forty, another blow to Claire’s fifty-year-old ego—flipped through the folder in her hand with fingernails painted the same color as her car. She held her lower lip between her teeth as she fished out a page and set it on the top. Then she offered the entire folder to Jane.

“Here’s the appraisal. If you’d like to list the property as is, I think we should start at the first number I’ve listed on that sheet and take no less than \$50,000 under the list price.”

The list price was appallingly low. Jane stared at the paper. Her ears rang with the numbers. Numbers that didn’t look right.

And Jane knew her numbers.

“You want to list the property for *this*?”

Not even the tiniest flicker of doubt passed over the agent’s face. “As is, yes.”

“We’re an oceanfront property! And it’s a viable business too. It’s worth at least twice that!”

Sandee scrunched her nose. “Is it? You need new siding or at the very least a new coat of paint. You’re on town water, but the pipes are old and will need to be replaced inside the next five years. Same with the furnace, the hot-water tank, the windows... do I really have to keep going? And tell me, Janey, how many customers do you have renting rooms right now?”

Jane pursed her lips and refused to open them. She had only one. And Sandee did have a point about the condition. But still, she had been hoping that the property itself would be worth more, just in case she needed to sell. Even if it needed a few minor things done, it *was* an investment property.

“We’re the only bed-and-breakfast in Lobster Bay,” Jane protested. She couldn’t believe that her childhood home and inheritance was worth so little.

Sandee looked pitying. “But there are plenty of homes rented through Airbnb now, and nice inns in the neighboring towns. And if Tides isn’t full right now at peak season, then I doubt your balance sheet is favorable. You have to look at this realistically, Janey, because that’s what a buyer will do.”

The page crinkled as Jane stuffed it into the folder and snapped it shut. “Well, Tides isn’t for sale.”

Sandee took the folder. “No? But you asked for the appraisal.”

“I changed my mind. I’m not selling, especially not for that price.” She couldn’t afford to. That would only pay for a few years of Addie’s care, and

what would she do after that? Never mind the question of what she, herself, would live on. She'd lost money on the sale of her own house when she'd had to let it go to live here, and her retirement savings were pitiful.

"Oh, well let me know if you change your mind." Sandee grabbed the folder and made off toward her car.

Jane blew out a breath as she watched the blonde fold herself back inside the small car.

"You okay?" The voice came from the corner of the porch up near the ceiling, and Jane looked up to see Sally Littlefield standing atop the second-to-last rung of a ladder with a caulking gun in her hand as she fixed the sealant on a window. Sally, the town handywoman, was in her seventies but still spry in both body and mind. Her expression grim, the woman set down the caulking gun on the top of the ladder and quickly descended to the bottom. She wiped her hands on her overalls as she turned to Jane.

"I'm fine," Jane said, not wanting to burden Sally with her problems.

"I heard what Sandee said to you. You really aren't thinking about selling, are you?"

"Not really. But it's expensive to have Mom in Tall Pines, and I just wanted a number in case things don't pick up here at the inn."

"I don't know what number that wicked woman put in that file you're holding, and it's none of my business, but if I were you, I wouldn't trust her."

"No?"

Sally shook her head. "She isn't good people. My guess is she's up to something sketchy."

"That doesn't make sense. She's a real estate agent. She makes a commission. She *wants* me to sell for the highest price because then she'll get a bigger payout."

Sally narrowed her eyes. She shoved her hands in her pockets and rocked back on her heels. "Ah-yuh, if you say so."

"You don't sound convinced."

"I'm not. That woman always has something up her sleeve. Besides," Sally added as she swept her arm toward the whitewashed Victorian house, "you can't sell. Tides has been a pillar of this town for decades. You used to be booked well in advance for all three good-weather months and some guests in the winter too. I wouldn't give up on it just yet."

Jane didn't want to. For one, it looked like selling wasn't going to gain her much anyway, and for two, she'd promised her mother. But how in the world was she going to get business to pick up? This wasn't her area of expertise.

Sally added, "And if you ask me, the repairs aren't so extensive. Ah-yuh, you might have to replace those pipes or furnace eventually, but they're still in good working order. It's the weatherproofing that I think is the most important, and there's a lot of little cosmetic things. But I have to tell you, I'm not sure I can handle it all myself."

Jane had a sinking feeling. "You can't? It's too complicated?" The work of finding a trusted contractor and negotiating a price and payment plan she could afford was another straw on her back. One she didn't need added right now.

"I can do it, but it would take me a while. Maybe months."

It was still summer. Surely, she would be able to finish before the snow set in.

Sally patted Jane's hand with a smile. "But you're in luck. I happen to know that Shane Flannery is back in town."

Jane opened her mouth then shut it again. "Shane Flannery?" A face flashed in front of her mind's eye, dulled by the years since high school. Surely it couldn't be the same...

"Retired from the navy," Sally confirmed. "And he's looking for carpentry work in the area. I've seen his work, and he's very good. Inexpensive, too, since he's just setting up his business." She winked. "Plus, he's not too sore on the eyes, if you understand me."

Jane smiled weakly. "I bet he isn't." The Shane Flannery she had known, back when her sister had dated him in high school, had been the athletic type. Filled with energy and smiles, radiating a magnetic sort of charm, and so head over heels for Andrea that it had been adorable. Jane seemed to recall that he'd wanted to get married, but Andie had gone off to greener pastures. Broke the guy's heart, from what she remembered.

"I'll look him up," she promised Sally.

And she meant it too. Obviously Shane and her sister had a history, but that had been decades ago, and Andie wasn't here. Jane needed help from somewhere, and she couldn't afford to be picky.

"Good." Sally turned back to the ladder. She paused with her hand on the rung and looked over her shoulder, her white braid obscuring half her

face. “Don’t you give up on this place, Jane,” she said fiercely. “It’s your family legacy. Family is everything.”

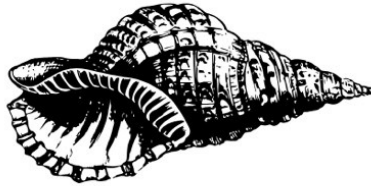
Jane knew that. Family was everything to her too.

The problem was she didn’t have much family left. Her husband and son had passed on from this world. Her mother was fading away. Her sister didn’t return her calls. All she had was this ramshackle inn and the memories it contained. But those memories still warmed her at night, and that was something.

She couldn’t give it up, wouldn’t give it up, without a fight. Somehow she had to bring more business to Tides. Then maybe she’d be able to scrape together enough money to pay for Addie’s care and eke out a modest living for herself. One thing was for sure, she had to make the effort or she wouldn’t be able to live with herself.

But even though she didn’t have much in the way of family, she wasn’t in this all alone. She had the two best friends in the world waiting for her, and between the three of them she was sure they’d figure something out.

CHAPTER FOUR



Claire Turner took a sip of her dark roast coffee as she watched Maxi whip up a quick sketch of the front of Claire’s bakery and cafe on the white napkin she’d plucked from the center of the table. They were seated at one of the round tables nestled on the sidewalk outside. The sun was shining, and Claire could almost hear the ocean waves crashing on the beach at the end of the road.

“Jane *is* coming, isn’t she?” Maxi split her attention between the napkin and the front of the bakery before ducking her head again to add a potted plant near the door.

“I think so. She texted me earlier and told me she had to visit with Addie first.” Claire looked down the street to see if she could spot Jane. She usually walked up from Tides, as it was only a few blocks away. “You don’t think something’s wrong with Addie, do you?”

Maxi glanced up. “I hope not.” The breeze tugged at the strands of silvery blond hair that had slid over Maxi’s shoulder from her ponytail. Today she wore a loose pale-yellow skirt and flowing white blouse. Maxi was dressing more casual lately. Maybe her bank-president husband—whom Claire suspected influenced Maxi’s typically more formal appearance—was loosening up. It was about time.

“Her coffee must be cold by now.” Claire touched the cup, finding it lukewarm beneath her fingers. “I’ll go refresh this. I’m sure she’ll be here any minute.”

Claire brought the mug inside. The cafe was busy—customers sipping coffees, working on laptops, reading the papers. She waved to her regulars,

Harry and Bert, who were seated at their usual table in the corner. And to think that just a few weeks ago the place had been flooded, and she'd feared she would be out of business.

Thankfully *that* didn't happen. Rob Bradford, who had opened the bread store across the street, had saved the day. Ironical, too, because at first Claire had feared that Bradford Breads would put her out of business. But it had all worked out, and luckily Ralph Marchand had been able to replace all the pipes in her shop in record time. Though the free pastries she'd supplied him with every day might have helped with that.

Hailey, her assistant, gave Claire a perky smile and brushed away some of the hair haphazardly falling into her face. "We just got an order for a sandcastle cake to be delivered Saturday. I quoted the usual price." Hailey referred to Claire's signature confection—a cake built from hand-cut cake layers shaped like a sandcastle and frosted with sugar-coated fondant that resembled sand.

"Great. I'll take a look at the order in a bit." Claire passed the mug over the counter to Hailey. "Would you mind dumping this and refilling it? Jane's late, and it got cold."

"Of course." Hailey took the mug cheerfully.

Hailey was really more than just an assistant. In fact, Claire didn't know what she'd do without her. Claire was grateful the plumbing issue hadn't affected Hailey. She was a single mother with a daughter to support. But that had been mostly due to Rob. He'd seen a way for Hailey to help them both out and earn more money at it too, though Claire knew the extra money Rob was paying her was due more to his generous heart than the extra work. But she was happy Hailey could make more. The girl deserved it.

Claire owed a lot to Rob. She snuck a peek across the street hoping to catch a glimpse of him inside his store and couldn't keep the smile off her face. Though they'd started off with a business relationship, it had turned into much more. A pang of guilt shot through her as she thought about Jane and Maxi.

Was it wrong that her life seemed to have come together in an unexpected but wonderful way while her friends appeared to be having problems?

"Here's Jane's coffee, just the way she likes it." Hailey held out the mug.

“Thanks.” Claire took the mug, looked toward Bradford Breads one more time, wiped the silly smile off her face, and then headed back outside.

She and Jane reached the table at the same time. “Brought you a fresh coffee. How’s your mom?”

“She’s doing great, actually.” Jane hugged Claire, then Maxi, and sat down, pulling the mug in front of her. “Sorry I’m late. Sandee came by the inn.”

Claire made a face.

“Yech,” Maxi said.

“I know. I had asked Dorian Wells to see how much Tides was worth—you know, just in case—and it turns out she’s sick so I got Sandee. I told her to take a hike, though. Turns out selling Tides isn’t going to help me out.”

“You didn’t want to sell anyway, did you?” Maxi asked.

Jane stared into her mug. “I promised my mother that I wouldn’t, but I’m not sure I’m cut out for running an inn. Besides, it’s expensive to keep Mom at Tall Pines, and now I’ve found out Medicaid won’t cover her stay.”

“Oh no.” Claire pushed the plate with the chocolate chip muffin on it toward Jane.

Her friend picked at the wrapper mechanically, peeling it away from the muffin beneath one side at a time.

A bit distracted by something behind Claire, Maxi tore the top from the blueberry muffin that had been sitting in front of her while she sketched. “What do you mean? I thought you said your mother has no retirement savings to speak of.”

“She doesn’t. Apparently, she’d taken out all their retirement savings over the years to put into the inn.”

“Can you pay for her to stay at Tall Pines?” Claire knew that business had been down at Tides. Jane had staff to pay, and if no one was staying there, how could she make enough?

“Well, that’s what I need your help for. I need to figure out how to bring in more money at Tides. The place is in disrepair, and I have no idea how to attract customers.” She stuffed another piece of muffin into her mouth, drowning out whatever else she had been about to say.

Maxi started clucking and cooing under her breath. With a frown, Claire twisted to look behind her. She spotted a shy tabby in the shadow of one of

the potted plants, looking wary. Maxi waved a piece of her blueberry muffin, trying to entice the feline closer.

“Do cats even like blueberry muffins?” She might have better luck with a salmon muffin. Not that Claire thought she’d be able to sell one of those to anyone but a cat. And cats only paid in glares and disdainful flicks of their tails. At least that was what her own cat, Urchin, did.

“I guess we’ll find out.” Maxi wiggled the piece of muffin, but the cat continued to stare at her with uncertainty.

Jane swallowed the last of her chocolate chip muffin and chased it down with a sip of coffee. “This is really good, Claire. I missed these.”

“I have my own kitchen back now, so I can bake the way I’m used to. It was nice of Rob to let me use his, but things just didn’t seem to come out as good over there.”

Jane teased, “You mean you weren’t holding back out of fear that Rob would steal the recipe?”

“No, I’ve made them for Rob before.”

Her two friends *ooohed* like they were back in high school again. Maxi resumed wagging her fingers at the wary cat.

Claire willed the heat warming her cheeks away. She knew her friends were happy that she and Rob had connected, but the relationship still felt too new to talk about much. Claire steered away from the topic of her and Rob. “We were talking about Tides. What are you doing to get more customers?”

The teasing twinkle in Jane’s eye flattened beneath the weight of the situation. “Not much, if I’m honest. Mom never did anything. Tourists always seemed to flock to the inn on their own. I know it’s a bit run-down and that’s part of the problem, but I’ll have Sally do some fixes. The truth is I’m not sure what to do to get more people to stay there.”

Maxi broke off another piece of muffin and waved it under the table. Absently, she said, “Why don’t you do some of the things Claire was doing when she thought Bradford Breads was going to run her out of business?”

“I can text Tammi. She’s an expert.” As Claire spoke, she was already pulling her phone out of the pocket of her apron. “You probably can’t have a three-for-one sale like I did, but you could put out some newspaper ads or get in touch with the radio station for an ad there. Awareness is half the battle. Maybe you aren’t getting as many bookings because more people are using Airbnb. You have to do something to make Tides stand out.”

Hope sparked in Jane's eyes. "It would be great if things picked up with ads. I mean, Tides is in a premium location on the beach. That would make it stand out, wouldn't it?"

Claire nodded as she typed a quick message into her phone and hit Send. "There. Tammi is probably sleeping right now, but I'll let you know what she says, and we can go from there."

Maxi cooed and clucked her tongue. "That's it, I'm not so scary."

Claire glanced over her shoulder to see that the tabby had tentatively emerged from the shadow of the potted plant. She tucked away her phone and frowned as she tried to think. "From what I remembered from when I asked her, she told me ads were big in the paper, but you also want to do things online. Have you kept the inn's website up to date?"

Jane opened her mouth then shut it again. She reached for the chocolate croissant on the plate in the center of the table. Her voice emerged as a squeak. "Website?"

"You must have a website," Claire said. "I had to update mine. It only had one page with some pictures, but Tammi convinced me to have someone revamp it. It's not that expensive, but she said it's necessary."

Jane frowned. "I guess we have an old one too. Honestly, I haven't even looked at it in ages."

Claire whipped out her phone again, this time texting Jane. "I'm passing along the names of three web designers I got for mine. I ended up using Rachel Sanders. She was booked a few months out, so you might not want to wait for her. The others seemed good too."

"Great, thanks." Jane was trying to sound in control but looked overwhelmed.

"Aha! There you are, you handsome fellow." Triumphant, Maxi leaned down and scooped the cat into her lap. For a moment, it stood stiff and wary, but as she started to pet it, the cat settled into her and started to purr. Maxi smiled as she stroked the tabby's fur.

Claire couldn't help but smile too. "He knows how much you like cats." Maxi was forever monopolizing Urchin's attention whenever she came to visit Claire at her cottage, but Claire didn't mind. Maxi was clearly a cat lover. "You should get one of your own."

Although she continued to pander to the feline, Maxi made a face. "James didn't seem too keen on that when I broached the subject before."

Claire seemed to remember something about James not wanting to get animal hair on his expensive suits.

“Sometimes you have to think about what *you* want, Maxi. I used to think only about what Peter wanted, and look where it got me. A big fat divorce and an ex with a snarky younger wife! I’m much better off now.”

“Yes, but Peter never treated you right,” Maxi pointed out. “It isn’t the same with James at all. He’s thinking about his career, a career he has used to keep us comfortable enough so that I could stay home and raise the kids. Other parents both had to work.”

She had a point about the differences. James wasn’t a bad guy, but at some point, one had to live their dream, and she was certain Maxi wasn’t living hers.

Gently, she told Maxi, “Thinking about myself for a change has been what has gotten me to this point in my life. Look what I have now! I have something of my own, something I’ve always wanted to do. I’m living my dream life.” Claire was proud of the way her life had turned out. Proud of the way she had picked up the pieces after her divorce and been selfish, for once in her life.

She honestly thought that it was high time for Maxi to be a little selfish too.

Maxi nodded. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. But James is loosening up, and things take time. I’m working on him about a pet.”

“Speaking of pets,” Jane said. “I ran into this adorable golden retriever while I was at Tall Pines earlier. His name is Cooper, and he plowed me right over! I fell into a bush.” She laughed, the color rising in her cheeks the only indication that she was a little self-conscious in the retelling.

“He sounds charming,” Claire said, recognizing the twinkle in Jane’s eye, even though it had been a while since she’d seen it. When she spoke of the dog, she all but glowed. And why shouldn’t she? Dogs were in a perpetually good mood. Dogs followed their owners as though they were starved for attention, and they gave as much affection in return. Perhaps Maxi wasn’t the only one of them who needed a pet. Jane had been a widow for a long time, and now that she didn’t have her mother at home, a dog might be a great way to fill that hole.

Claire exchanged a glance with Maxi, who seemed to be thinking the same thing. It had been so long since Jane had allowed herself to care for someone else. From the time her son had died a decade ago, she’d been

reluctant to let anyone new into her life in more than a superficial way. And now that her husband was gone, it must be lonely.

Rather than broach the subject just yet, Maxi asked, “Have you heard from Andrea?”

Jane’s expression turned dark, but she shrugged as if she didn’t care. “I’ve tried calling her to talk, but she hasn’t called me back. We’ve exchanged a few texts, but I think the situation is too involved to get into with text messages. Either she’ll call me to talk about it or she won’t hear the details.”

“Oh. Well, I hope she calls,” Claire said.

Jane nodded. “Either way, I’m not sure she’ll be much help. Speaking of which...” Jane picked her bag up from beside her chair and pushed up from the table. “I’d better get going. Lots to do.”

Claire stood too. “Wait. I packaged up a chocolate chip muffin for Addie. I know you, and you’ll be checking on her every night until you know she’s settled in.”

“Thanks, Claire. You’re a good friend. I really appreciate it.”

Claire hugged her tight, letting her know without words how much she was there to support Jane whenever she needed it. She ran in the cafe and grabbed the white bag with the Sandcastles logo. “Here. And give her my best when you see her.”

“I will.”

Still pinned in the chair beneath the stray cat, Maxi suggested, “Why don’t we meet up for drinks later this evening at Splash? Tammi will have texted back by then, don’t you think?”

Claire nodded. “I’m sure she’ll have something for me to send along by then. What do you say, Jane?”

“That sounds really nice, actually.”

“Then it’s settled,” Claire said with satisfaction. She hugged her friend one last time and whispered, “See you later.”

MAXI RELUCTANTLY PUT the tabby down. The cat was well groomed. Its fur was sleek and soft, and it appeared to be well fed. She—or he—

probably belonged to somebody, and it wasn't like Maxi could take it home anyway.

She helped Claire clean up the table and carried half the plates and cups back inside the bakery. She was happy that Claire had reopened, and not only because their weekly breakfasts together could now resume. The last month had been especially tough on Maxi for no good reason. After all, she wasn't dealing with the stress of redoing the pipes in her business or of balancing a business she barely knew with caring for an ailing mother like her two friends were. No, Maxi had the freedom to do whatever she wanted.

Well, *almost* whatever she wanted. Her mind turned to the hoard of sketchbooks she kept in the bench at the end of her bed. She hadn't mentioned to James that she'd kept those after giving up on sketching shortly after she'd had their first child. She sensed he didn't approve of her taking up the hobby again, as if painting and sketching didn't befit a bank president's wife. Maxi loved James with all her heart, but sometimes she didn't love the way he'd changed with all the responsibility of his position at the bank.

"Hey, Maxi, I'll take those." Hailey Robinson reached for the plates with a smile. Maxi had taken a liking to the young mother and she, Jane, and Claire thought of themselves as pseudo-grandmothers for Hailey's twelve-year-old daughter, Jennifer.

"How's Jennifer? Enjoying the summer, I hope." Maxi handed the plates off.

"She's great. She loved that kite you gave her. Uses it all the time. Why don't you come down to the beach sometime and help her fly it?"

"I might just do that," Maxi said. At least it would give her something to do, and James might even approve. Hailey disappeared into the kitchen, and Maxi turned to Claire. "Can I have an almond scone to go?"

"Still hungry?" Claire eyed her as she opened the pastry case. "You ate two muffins."

Maxi laughed. "It's for later. I was thinking about taking a sketchbook up to the Marginal Way and doing a pencil sketch of the ocean."

"Really? That's great! You haven't done that since we were kids. I'm glad you're progressing from napkin sketches," Claire joked as she plucked a bakery tissue out of a box and reached into the case.

"Well, it's just a way to pass the time. I found an old sketchbook and figured I'd fill out the pages. Just for fun."

“You are a talented artist. You could make something out of it if you wanted. When we were kids, you always said you wanted to be an artist when you grew up.”

Maxi remembered that desire well. It was like a rope of regret tugging at her even now. “Well, that wasn’t a very practical ambition, and I’m not really *that* good.”

Claire slipped the scone into a white bag and folded the top shut. “I’m sure you’re better than you think. Your napkin sketches are lovely, and we’re all our own worst critic, aren’t we?”

Maxi mustered a faint smile. She reached into her purse to pay for the scone. Although Claire would have given it to her for free, it was important to Maxi to support her friend financially by buying the pastries she took home with her.

Claire handed the bag over the counter but kept hold of one end when Maxi grabbed for it. Gently, she said, “It might be good for you to take art up more seriously now that you’ve become an empty nester. How are you adjusting to that now?”

Maxi had shared her feelings with Claire and Jane when her youngest had gone off to college last year. After years of taking kids to sports events, doing laundry, and making sure the kitchen was supplied with snacks and meals, it was a bit of an adjustment. “It’s a change, but I guess I’m getting used to it.”

“It is a big change. Especially for the couples involved. How’s James taking it?”

Maxi shrugged. “He seems okay. He works a lot, but that is usual, so we’re doing fine.”

She kept on a cheerful face for Claire, but there were times when she wondered if the kids had provided a bond for her and James that was no longer there. Things between them were different now. Of course, there were times when he was sweet and considerate just like he had been when they’d first been married. But then there were times when he worked such late hours that he came home only to eat and sleep.

Maxi paid for the scone, then tucked the bag with the scone into her large, striped tote bag for safekeeping. Not wanting to burden her friend with her problems, she changed the subject. “Did you see the way Jane’s face lit up when she was talking about that dog?”

She and Claire moved to the side as another customer approached the cash register. Hailey took over to serve the customer, leaving Claire free to continue their chat.

“I did,” Claire answered. “If you ask me, what Jane needs is a pet.”

“It might help her during this transition time with her mom and the inn.”

“You would do well with a pet too,” Claire added. “But for different reasons. Jane is...” Her expression grew somber. “Jane is hurt. She needs to ease her way into opening up.”

Maxi nodded. “I know. I can’t imagine losing a child and a husband, and I know it still hurts her.”

“If she only had a cat or a dog to open her heart to, I think she’d be much closer to healing. I’m afraid she’s shutting too many doors and missing out on life.”

Maxi adjusted the straps of her tote bag higher on her shoulder. “You think she should find a new boyfriend?”

“Not necessarily. Just because I did doesn’t mean it’s for everybody. But if Jane decides to remain single, I think it should be because her life is full without a romantic partner, not because she’s afraid of losing someone again.”

“It would also help if her sister came back. I remember that Jane idolized her once, but I don’t think they’ve been close since Andie left for college. Do you know why she hardly ever visits?”

Looking weary, Claire shook her head. “Not really. I got the impression that Lobster Bay was just too small for her. I guess her dreams were too big to fit in the town. It’s too bad.”

Maxi noticed her friend’s gaze drift toward the front window of the bakery, which overlooked Bradford Breads across the street.

Dreamily, Claire added, “This town is the perfect size for me. It always has been.”

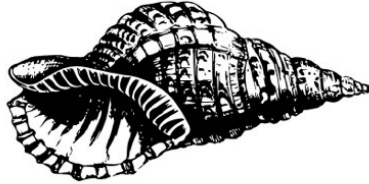
“Especially now,” Maxi teased.

Claire didn’t seem to notice, still staring across the street. Maxi smiled. Claire was smitten. And judging by the look on Rob’s face every time Maxi had seen him and Claire together, the feeling was mutual. It was so warming to see, especially after everything Claire had been through.

“You’re right. Lobster Bay has always been perfect for me too. I never even thought of leaving, except maybe to go to college.” But Maxi’s dreams had included art school in Paris, not a math degree from Massachusetts. In

the end, she hadn't even used the degree, but she had a beautiful home and three wonderful children. She couldn't complain about any of that. "Well, I better run. I'll see you tonight."

CHAPTER FIVE



By midafternoon, Jane was sick of numbers. She'd gone over the books twice, set up an appointment with Shane Flannery, and sent messages to the web designers whose contact info Claire had given her. She was starting to think that maybe she could make this work.

She took a break to walk on the beach. Strolling at the edge near the surf, she watched for interesting shells. It was just past high tide, and you never knew what treasures the ocean might have left. A brown, striped spiral shell tumbled in the foamy surf, and she bent to pick it up. Some type of whelk or conch shell, she wasn't sure. It was pretty common, and she had bowls full of them. Jane only kept the rare shells these days, so she tossed it back, the motion helping to loosen the stiff muscles in her neck.

She stretched, bringing her arms over her head, and turned away from the ocean. This part of the beach was practically deserted because there were no public parking lots nearby. It was dotted with quaint cottages that were painted in pretty colors—aqua, pink, mint green.

Wait. Was that Sandee Harris in the window of one of those cottages? Jane would recognize that bleach-blond haircut anywhere. Sandee was the last person she wanted to talk to. Hopefully she wouldn't look this way. It was kind of hard to hide out in the middle of the beach.

But Sandee *didn't* look at the beach. She was too focused on the man next to her, a man whose arm she was leaning over as she showed him something invisible from Jane's vantage point. That wasn't...

James? *Maxi's husband*? It couldn't be. He never took off his suit jacket. But his profile was familiar. What was he doing with Sandee? Maxi

hadn't said anything about investing in a cottage, particularly one so close to home. Maybe Jane was mistaken. She needed a closer look.

As she started toward the cottage, the pair moved out of sight, away from the back window and into another room.

Weird. Maxi had always said she wanted to have a cottage on the beach where she could paint all day. Maybe they were finally buying one. But Jane had just seen Maxi this morning, and she hadn't mentioned a thing.

A bark gave her thirty seconds of warning before a golden ball of fur launched into her. The next thing she knew, she was lying in the sand, an eager golden retriever nose stuck in her face right before his tongue lapped her cheek.

"Cooper! Come here!"

Jane laughed, further encouraging Cooper, who wagged his entire body. She balled her hands in his fur, trying to pat him and push him away at the same time. She had to admit the exuberant devotion of the dog felt good. That was something you sure didn't get from people.

"Cooper." Mike sounded exasperated this time and much nearer. A moment later, Cooper jumped off Jane.

She rose up on her elbows and caught her breath before Mike's charming smile appeared in front of her face as he battled the dog one-handed and offered her the other.

"We have to stop meeting like this."

She smiled back at him. "One of these days I would like to be upright when we meet." Her voice was a little breathless. She took his hand, letting him help her to stand before she started to brush off the sand as best she could.

Cooper divided his attention between them, his tail moving back and forth in a perpetual wag.

"Here, boy," Mike said, swiping a stick of driftwood off the beach. "Fetch!"

Cooper looked conflicted as he glanced between Jane and Mike. However, when Mike let the stick fly, the dog rocketed down the beach after it.

"Are you all right?" Mike asked, his eyes twinkling.

Jane couldn't help but notice that in addition to a nice smile, Mike also had nice eyes. When she'd met him in front of Tall Pines, she'd thought them gray or brown. But here, in the sunlight, they looked green. A

beautiful shade of green that reminded her of the ocean. Why in the world was she noticing these things about him?

“I’m fine,” she answered, her voice even quieter than usual. She glanced at the beach to see that Cooper, unable to find his initial stick of driftwood, had found an even bigger piece and was on his way back, carrying it precariously. When she risked a glance toward Mike, she found him watching her with that smile still in place.

“Did your grandfather live here on the beach?” Jane gestured back toward the cottages. “I remember you said you were staying here to care for him.”

“Actually, I’m renting one of the cottages. I was staying at Gramps’s place over on Elm Street, but it sold last week.”

Something felt sad and final about Mike’s grandfather’s place being sold, as if he could never go back. Though clearly Addie could never go back, either, especially not if Jane screwed up and didn’t get Tides profitable again. That would be doubly problematic since there would be no Tides for Addie to go back to and also no money to keep her at Tall Pines.

Mike must have sensed her thoughts. His eyes were sad as he watched Cooper. “It was kind of a bummer letting the old place go. Gramps loved living in the town. He used to be a town official here.”

“You know, I think I might remember my grandparents mentioning a George Henderson. Is that your grandfather?” Jane asked.

“Yep. They probably knew each other. Seems like most people in town did back then.”

Cooper dropped the stick proudly at Mike’s feet. It was as big around as Mike’s fist and nearly as long as the dog. Mike stared blankly at it. “What do you expect me to do with that?”

The dog sat proudly, his tail thumping the sand.

With a sigh, Mike bent to pick up the stick. “This thing has to weigh ten pounds!”

He threw the stick hard, and Cooper took off after it.

“I’m sure your grandfather appreciates you being here and taking Cooper to see him. Will you stay out here long?”

“I’m a programmer. I can work on my code from anywhere, but I’ll have to go back at some point.” Mike’s face turned serious as he looked down at Cooper, who had returned with a different stick. “I’m not sure what

I'll do with Cooper, though. My apartment in Seattle is definitely not dog friendly."

Jane's heart pinched as images of Cooper sad and depressed in a small apartment—or worse, inside a cage at the animal shelter—bubbled up. A dog like Cooper needed room to run.

Mike picked the stick up and threw it. "But I guess I'll figure something out. He's a good dog, deserves a good home. Besides, I'm not ready to leave yet. Gramps needs me."

"Well, they're both lucky to have you," Jane said. "I guess I better get back. My inn is down at the other end of the beach."

"Oh, well, then I guess I'll see you around?"

"Probably," she said as she turned to leave.

When she glanced behind her, she found Mike shading his eyes, keeping a closer watch over Cooper. The dog was happily frolicking in the waves, chasing them up and down the beach. Jane couldn't help but laugh.

And just like that, the tension melted from her body, and she wished that she could stay. Because the dog, for whatever reason, made her forget the weight of her worries, the weight of the past. She could just be herself, free and happy.

But she couldn't stay. She had lots to do to rebuild Tides. After a moment, she turned back and continued to the inn.

MIKE TORE his gaze away from the happily frolicking dog to watch Jane walk away, his mind automatically comparing her to the last woman he'd dated, Tiffany. She was the complete opposite. Of course, he wasn't dating Jane, not even close. He barely knew her, but he wouldn't mind getting to know her a little better.

Though maybe dating wasn't a good idea. The last relationship had not gone well. He should have listened to his best friend about dating a woman six years younger than him, even if she was thirty-five. She acted more like twenty-five and was prone to drama, not the least of which was the way she refused to accept the fact that things were over between them.

Jane was more mature, and she didn't seem the least bit like a drama queen. She fit with Lobster Bay—humble, unassuming, peaceful. She was

elegant in a way most women strived to be. The short haircut, that might look mannish on some women, looked incredibly feminine on her. She didn't wear a lot of makeup or color her hair like Tiffany had either. Nor did she dress in tight flashy clothes designed to draw the eye—but classy, plain clothing that made a man feel at ease while still admiring her figure. Jane had a nice figure, long legs and a lean body that told him this wasn't the only time he'd find her walking along the beach. Maybe, if he was lucky, she'd do it daily.

Judging by the age of her mother at Tall Pines and what she'd said, she might be a bit older than him, but probably not by much. What was a few years between them at their age, anyway? Besides, she was cute, and he liked the way she blushed every time she fiddled with her hair. If he gave her just the right smile, he got that faint blush in return. It had become a challenge.

Yes, he definitely hoped to see her again.

His eyes flew to Cooper just as the dog plunged into a particularly deep wave then bounded back onto the beach, shaking the water off and looking toward Mike.

Mike sighed and rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. The dog needed more than his small apartment. The longer Mike spent in his company, the more attached he became, even though he knew it wouldn't be fair to the dog to cart him back to Seattle. He'd have to find a home for the dog here, but it was going to be hard to leave him. Cooper had such a good personality.

Honestly, it was going to be difficult for Mike to leave Gramps too. Some of his fondest memories had been made on the coast of Maine: Gramps teaching him how to fish. Tagging along at Gramps's heels as they visited the community, helping people out who needed it. Mike had spent most of his summers around this area, a world away from his parents' suburban home. Returning made him feel lighter, carefree.

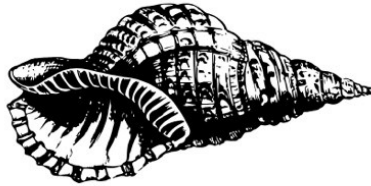
But he couldn't stay. His life was in Seattle.

Or was it? What did he have back home that he couldn't have right here? He was forty-one years old, and all of his friends were married with children. Most of their time was spent with their kids. He'd broken up with Tiffany. He could telecommute. Truth was, he really didn't have much back in Seattle, and Gramps needed someone nearby as his power of attorney.

Mike's phone pinged, and he slipped it out of his pocket to check it out of habit. Tiffany. Scowling, he shoved it back in. That was, what? The sixth text he'd received from her in the past two days? He'd taken to counting them, responding only to every fourth. He should block her and stop replying, but he didn't want to be rude. It might have to come to that, though. The girl just was not getting the message, even though he had spelled it out as plain as day the last time they'd talked in person.

Tiffany was one more reason to stay here, to start fresh. As he glanced down the beach after Jane's retreating figure, he turned over the idea in his mind. He didn't have any reason to go back to Seattle, except for the cactuses on his windowsill. The idea of staying here, in Lobster Bay, was becoming more appealing the longer he thought about it.

CHAPTER SIX



Jane returned to Tides in time to snag the last remaining lemon poppy seed muffin, see Brenda out the door, and vigorously clean the sunroom. The part-time maid had dusted and laundered the bedsheets from Mrs. Weatherlee's room. With no other guests, there wasn't much else for her, or Jane, to do. Jane checked the messages on the answering machine, but no new bookings had come in, so she retreated to the rocking chair on the porch with her muffin and a cup of coffee.

Rocking in the chair, her thoughts turned to Cooper. The dog was a welcome distraction from her troubles, and she leaned forward and craned her neck to see if she could spot him down the beach. She couldn't, though. The section in front of the cottages was too far away, but it was nice to think she might run into Cooper again, simply by walking down that way. She'd run into Mike, too, but it was Cooper she really wanted to see, of course.

Jane settled back in the chair and fished her cell phone out of her pocket, taking in a deep breath to steel herself before dialing her sister. Andrea had returned her call earlier, but she'd missed it. Now it was time to call her back. Too bad all she got was voicemail.

Jane sighed. "I guess I missed you again. Call me later." She hung up, not knowing what else to say.

She stuffed a big bite of muffin into her mouth and opened the email app on her phone. She had a lot to accomplish and no idea where to start except to see if someone had gotten back to her about the website work she needed done.

Only one of the website designers she'd emailed had answered her, and the news wasn't favorable.

Hi, Jane. I'd be happy to redesign your website, but I'm booked solid for the next three months. I can start working on it then, if that timeline works for you. Let me know, and I'll give you a quote.

Three months! No, that timeline did not work for Jane. For all she knew, by then she might be out of business. Luckily there were two other web designers. Surely one of them would be able to start sooner. They had to because she needed a better website. But, of course, that wouldn't help if she didn't start tending to some of the maintenance issues at Tides. She closed her eyes, rocking in sync with the waves as she made a mental list of the things that needed to be spruced up. First there were the railings on the stairs that needed repair, the wallpaper in the sunroom, the molding in the front parlor needed to be painted—

"Is this a bad time?" Sally's voice permeated her thoughts.

"No, sorry. I was just thinking. Are you done for the day?"

"Your windows are all tight as can be. There won't be any cold air coming in through cracks this year. That, I promise."

"Thank you. I really appreciate you fixing up the inn so quickly." Not everyone was willing to go to such lengths to make time for her, and she didn't want Sally to get overwhelmed with all the work ahead of her. "I spoke to Shane Flannery, and he's coming for an interview."

Sally nodded approvingly. "He's a good sort. Loyal. Hardworking."

"I know," Jane said simply.

"You know him?"

She shrugged. "We went to high school together. He and my sister dated for a long time."

"Oh, that's right. I think I remember that now." Sally studied her for a few seconds. "Is something bothering you?"

Jane sighed. "I was just going over all the things that need to be done to get Tides in tip-top shape so we can bring in more customers. It's overwhelming."

"Ah-yuh," Sally said, with feeling. "I can see it would be. But don't worry, once you get Shane on board, the two of us can whip it into shape. This place has charm, but if you got with the times and modernized it a bit, I'm sure you'd have people coming here in droves."

Jane stopped rocking in the chair and tilted her head, thinking.

“What do you mean?”

Sally shrugged. “You need to do something to make it stand out from those Airbnbs cropping up everywhere. Talk about the delicious breakfasts you make here—Brenda offered me a piece of quiche when I got in earlier. I’d stay here just for that! And why don’t you have some tables out here so your customers can come out and watch the ocean while they eat? It would be perfect.”

Jane considered her words in silence. Neither her grandparents nor her parents had served meals on the porch, but nowadays restaurants all had outdoor seating. She’d just gotten used to doing things the way they’d always been done and only serving in the dining room. Sally might be on to something.

With a sigh, Sally shook her head. “Has your sister given you a reason why she hasn’t come down to help you run this place?”

“We’ve been playing phone tag, but I suppose she’s busy. She has a very demanding job as an antiques appraiser at Christie’s in New York.” Why did she feel the need to defend Andie?

Sally made a face. “Ah-yuh, I know. Fancy city job. That girl always did want more than she had. But the thing she never realized is that sometimes you’ve already got what you really need. They say ‘Home is where the heart is’ for a reason.”

Jane looked out over the ocean. “I know exactly what you mean.”

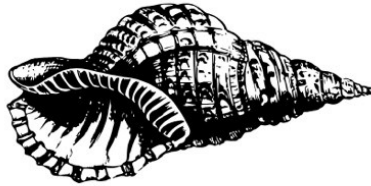
It was part of why she *couldn’t* sell the inn. Not without taking her best shot at running it first. Every time she walked through the door, she was comforted by happy memories. “But I’m not sure Andie will ever realize that. I don’t think she feels the same way we do about Lobster Bay.”

Sally *tsked* under her breath. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that. Home calls to us all at some point.”

Maybe Andie had made herself a home away from Lobster Bay. Maybe she was happy. Jane didn’t really know because they’d grown apart over the decades. They’d never gotten back to the closeness they’d had when they were younger, and somehow over the years, Jane had stopped hoping it would magically happen.

Jane looked out over the beach and then back at the inn. Sure, it might need a coat of paint and there might be a few broken things here and there, but Tides was her family legacy, and Jane was going to do her best to make it profitable again, whether or not her sister cared to be a part of it.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Andie poked her head into Doug's office.

"Fancy finding you here," she said with a little laugh. She meant the statement to be ironic, poking fun at the fact that too often when she had stepped past this same office in the last week, Doug *hadn't* been inside. She'd thought he'd been avoiding her. Maybe he'd only been busy.

She stepped into the office. Doug had always been messy. It was in direct contrast with his neatly trimmed beard threaded with silver and the suits and ties or sweater vests he tended to wear to the office. But as much as the clutter of his office sometimes got on Andie's nerves, it was also kind of charming in a distracted-professor sort of way.

She trailed her fingers over the edge of the desk as she waited for him to look at her. "When did you get back in? I didn't realize you'd come back."

"Is there something you need? I'm really busy."

His voice was curt, and it cut her. She gritted her teeth, trying not to show it. She'd feel better if he looked like a mess, stressed up to his eyeballs or overworked and exhausted. But no, he looked pristine. Cold and pristine.

She could take a hint, even if it stung.

She should have known she would get hurt if she carried on with a married man. A part of her had hated it—and herself—from the start. It was why she pushed him about the divorce. She'd wondered all along if the separation was really as final as he'd said. But now she was starting to wonder if maybe his lack of attention had more to do with a certain new

employee than it had to do with his not really wanting to make the break from his wife.

Well, the heck with him.

“I need time off,” she blurted out.

He frowned. He pulled the reading glasses off his nose and tossed them haphazardly onto the desk. How he’d be able to find them again in the pile of all that junk was anybody’s guess. “You can submit a vacation request.”

“Actually, I need time off now. Today. I finished my cataloguing for today, and I have a family emergency at home.”

His eyebrows climbed. “I didn’t know anyone in your family was sick.”

If he’d even remotely listened to her, he would have known about her mother’s health problems. But Doug had always been all about himself. Tightly, she told him, “There’s been a decline in my mom’s health, and I have to go home.”

“Home is... where?”

“Lobster Bay. It’s in Maine.”

He grunted. Why wasn’t he consoling her? She didn’t expect him to leap over the desk or anything, especially not here at work where everyone could see, but a few friendly words would have been nice.

“That’s a long way from here. What if the Richhaven estate comes up while you’re away?”

“Text me if that happens, and I’ll fly back.”

He was treating her like she was a new, flaky employee, not a woman he’d known and dated for the past few years. When they’d started their affair, she had felt as though he had seen her, valued her. Now it was clear he didn’t.

But maybe, if she left, he would. Not as a girlfriend—now that she was seeing another side of him, she realized that she’d known for quite some time their relationship was going nowhere. And oddly, it didn’t hurt as much as it should have. Maybe she’d dated him because deep down she knew he would never be able to make things more permanent.

She hadn’t been satisfied for months with their arrangement, and he didn’t care enough about her to keep her happy. Besides, didn’t she deserve somebody who gave her his full attention, who didn’t keep her as his dirty little secret?

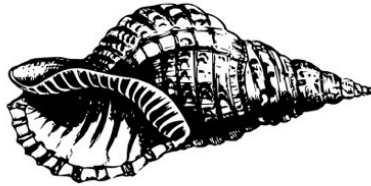
“Okay, fair enough. If it’s an emergency, you must go, then.”

“I’ll call you later in the week and let you know how long I think this emergency will take. Text or email me if the Richhaven estate comes up. Goodbye, Doug.”

She turned and walked out of the room, feeling lighter for having turned her back on him. She needed to get away—from all of this, but especially from Doug. And maybe, with her gone, he’d realize how big of an asset she was to this company.

After all, no kid barely out of college could do her job like Andie could. It was about time somebody acknowledged that.

CHAPTER EIGHT



The sun was just about to set when Jane arrived at Splash, the oceanside restaurant that she, Claire, and Maxi frequented. Splash was casual, with an outdoor eating area on the beach. Tiny white lights twinkled from the umbrellas, and frothy waves washed up on the beach in front of them. The evening sky reflected the pinks and blues of the sunset.

Maxi and Claire were already seated with drinks in front of them. Maxi's had a tiny plastic pink mermaid perched on the rim—Claire's, a blue seahorse. Jane ordered a salty seafarer margarita and sat in the empty chair facing the ocean.

"We put in an order of steamers." Claire glanced over the rim of her drink. "How are things going at the inn? Any new bookings or ideas?"

"Not too bad. I'm going to hire Sean Flannery to help Sally so we can get some repairs done." Jane's drink came, and she took a sip, glancing out at a dog frolicking on the beach. It reminded her of Cooper, and she smiled, craning her neck toward the end of the beach where the cottages were. But of course the section where Cooper lived was way too far down.

"Looking for someone?" Maxi asked.

Jane blushed. "No, I just ran into that dog again on the beach. Cooper, the one I told you about?"

Maxi and Claire glanced at each other, and Jane caught a look between them. What was that about? Thinking about Cooper and Mike reminded her that she also thought she'd seen James. "I guess he is staying up in those cottages at the north end. Did you say you were looking into buying one of those, Maxi?"

Maxi scrunched her face. “What? Buy a cottage? No. Why would we do that?”

Jane was confused. Maxi wouldn’t lie to her, and she seemed surprised by the question. The man probably hadn’t been James at all. Plenty of men were his height with dark hair. Jane glanced down at her drink. “No reason. I thought you mentioned that a while ago, and the cottages there are adorable. Very artsy.”

“So, this guy you met at Tall Pines and his dog live there?” Claire asked.

“Just renting, I guess. He’s from Seattle and just here to get his grandfather settled at Tall Pines.” Jane looked from the beach to her friends. “I told you guys this before, didn’t I?”

“You did. Having a dog is always nice. I wish I could have a pet.” Maxi looked out at the beach wistfully.

“I have Urchin, but he doesn’t run on the beach. The only place he runs to is his food bowl,” Claire joked.

Maxi laughed. “You could have a dog at Tides, Jane. A mascot for the inn.”

“I don’t know. Not everyone likes dogs.” The idea wasn’t totally unappealing. She’d always wanted a dog as a kid, but her parents had said that the inn was no place for pets. But that had been forty years ago. Times had changed, and now dogs were welcomed everywhere. Even the local restaurants were starting to allow them. Jane filed that away for future thought. She had more important things to talk about. “I’m dying to know if you heard from Tammi. Did she have any marketing advice? I really need to get on this.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, she had some great suggestions.” Claire paused as the waitress slid a large white bowl filled to the brim with steamed clams onto the table then set down another for the shells and a few small bowls of broth and butter. “She suggested advertising in papers, but not local, of course. You need to go to the big cities people will want to get away from for a seaside vacation.”

“That makes sense. What else?” Jane grabbed a shell and peeled the clam out. She swirled it in the broth then the butter then popped it in her mouth.

“She suggested some getaway specials, especially in the slow season.” Claire picked through the bowl, coming up with one of the larger clams.

“Every season is slow lately. Did she suggest anything I could do now?”

“Well, you need a website first and foremost, but you’re already working on that.” Claire tossed her shells in the discard bowl and dug for another clam.

“I’ve only heard back from one of them so far, and they can’t do it for three months.”

“Three months! That won’t work. Tammi said a website with a way to book online is critical these days. No one wants to call anymore. She looked at your website and said it’s outdated, and a contact page with just an email and phone number won’t do.” Claire dipped her clam in the butter. “And she said you need to get set up on Google and Yelp and all that.”

“You might want to check with the chamber of commerce here. I think they have a website with all the local businesses listed. Might be good to get on there with a link to your site,” Maxi added.

“Hopefully one of the other website designers will reply soon. Maybe I should email them again.” Jane would definitely need help with the website. She was technically challenged. “What else?”

“She mentioned something about a unique selling proposition, you know, something that sets Tides apart,” Claire said.

“Sort of like your sandcastle cakes set your bakery apart?” Jane asked.

“Exactly!”

“Sally suggested doing things that make the inn more appealing, like maybe having tables set up on the back porch for dining. But lots of places have that now. I don’t know if it’s unique enough.”

“That’s a great idea.” Maxi sipped her drink. “Oh! Maybe you could have a special event out there. Like maybe a wine tasting or something?”

“Hmm... I like that train of thought. That might bring in a bit of money, but we’d have to make it something really big to entice people to stay overnight,” Jane said.

“Maybe you could offer some sort of package,” Claire said.

“It would be great if we could combine a money-making event with a reason for guests to stay over.” Jane was starting to feel hopeful.

Maxi snapped her fingers “I’ve got it! You could do beach weddings.”

Jane frowned. “Weddings? I don’t know anything about putting on a big wedding. Seems like that could lead to disaster.”

“Not big weddings, small niche weddings.” Maxi was on a role, her gestures animated. “The beach wedding could be your unique selling point,

at least for weddings.”

Claire jumped in, just as excited. “And weddings bring in a lot of money.”

Jane appreciated that her friends were excited for her, but all she felt was anxiety. This wasn’t something she could pull off, was it? She’d never done anything like this before. “But it would take permits, and we’d have to have it catered, and need tents and a dance floor—”

Maxi put her hand on Jane’s arm. “All things that are easy to do. Think about it. We have the tent-rental place right in town, and there are plenty of good caterers. Claire could make sandcastle wedding cakes. Lots of people would want a wedding like this.”

“And who would deny you a permit? Your family has been a mainstay in the town for generations. Everyone wants you to succeed,” Claire assured her.

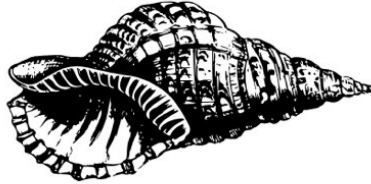
“It would be guaranteed bookings since the whole wedding party would want to stay at Tides.” Maxi sat back and sipped her drink. “You could take out an ad in *Niche Wedding Magazine*. My daughter-in-law scoured that thing to find a good wedding venue for their wedding.”

“I suppose it might work. Mom’s gardens have gotten overgrown, but we could spruce those up and put the dance floor next to them. Sally could probably build a portable one that we can store in the old garage.” Jane glanced at the beach. “Maybe we could do a lobster bake right on the beach, you know, to set Tides apart.”

“Now you’re thinking,” Claire said. “Why not take out an ad and see what happens? It could generate a huge influx of money.”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to bite off more than I can chew, but I suppose I could send some feelers out.” Jane sat back and sipped her drink, her mind reeling with possibilities. How much profit could a wedding bring in? She pushed down a wave of panic at the thought of taking on something so big. If this would help her save Tides, she’d have to step out of her comfort zone.

CHAPTER NINE



The next morning, Jane woke to an email at the business address for Tides. She had a booking! She hadn't even put any of Tammi's suggestions into play, and already things were looking up.

She called the number in the email and talked to a pleasant man named Chandler Vanbeck. He was an art appraiser coming to town to scope locations for a new art gallery. He'd seen Tides on a previous trip. Jane happily booked him for the week and went downstairs.

Mrs. Weatherlee was seated in the dining room with her breakfast, and Jane swung in to exchange some pleasantries then went outside. She wanted to take a walk on the beach and think about the opportunities she'd talked about with Maxi and Claire at Splash. Walking on the beach always helped her think things through.

She'd lain awake for most of the night, going back and forth on the idea of weddings. What if she booked a wedding and failed? It would be a risk, but it would bring in the most money and could be the thing that saved Tides. Of course, there was no guarantee that anyone would want to book the inn for a wedding. Maybe it would be better if she focused on smaller events like a wine tasting or clambake.

She slipped off her sandals and let the sand warm the bottoms of her feet as she walked down to the surf. She missed her sister. Even though they weren't close now, it would be nice to have someone to bounce ideas off of. Of course, she had Claire and Maxi, and they cared about her more than Andie did, it seemed. But Tides wasn't their family inn, it wasn't a part of them, and only Andie would know exactly how it felt to weigh these

decisions. But maybe Andie didn't care about their family legacy like Jane did. Andie still hadn't returned her last call.

The freezing water of the Atlantic turned Jane's toes numb even in the heat of summer as she splashed in the froth at the waves' edge. She headed toward the north end of the beach, keeping her eye out for Cooper and Mike.

A ding from her phone signaled that she'd received an email on the Tides business account.

Another booking? She looked at her phone eagerly only to be disappointed. It was one of the web designers, this one replying to say that they were booked for four months. Shoot! Hopefully the third time would be the charm. She needed a website desperately, according to Tammi.

Her hopes dampened, she turned back. She didn't have time for a long walk, and she wanted to get started on researching what types of events she could have so she could get the ball rolling on setting them up. Would the efforts be a waste without a website? Claire had given her three names, and two were booked solid. She should probably look for more designers just in case the third was booked up too.

Her phone plinked, signaling a text message.

It was Andrea. She was flying in today, and she'd be here in the late afternoon. Jane hadn't expected her to come at all. And now she'd be coming to see Tides was run-down and had no guests. Suddenly the state of Tides felt like a reflection on Jane. Like she'd somehow fallen down on the job and was responsible for ruining the family business.

She started walking with purpose, suddenly realizing that more than anything she wanted to prove that she could revive Tides. As she walked back, she googled "niche weddings" and found the magazine Maxi had told her about. There was a form where you could apply to be listed as a niche wedding venue.

Squinting at the screen, she thumbed in the information. It asked for the usual basic info but also wanted to know anything that made the venue special or unique. Jane figured an old home with a gorgeous view of the ocean right on the beach was pretty special, so she took a picture of Tides, angling it to show off the wide porch and avoid the overgrown gardens. Then she turned and snapped a photo of the ocean. Later on she could add pictures of the guest rooms and dining room. None of these pictures were truly unique, though. What could she offer to make someone's wedding

different? A thought occurred. She had one more photo she could add, and she was sure no other wedding venue would have anything like it. *That* photo she could only get at Sandcastles.

Her thumb hovered over the submit button for a few seconds, then she pressed it. Maybe she could make this work after all.

SANDCASTLES WAS BUSTLING WITH CUSTOMERS, and Claire was behind the counter cashing out a woman who was buying two boxes full of pastries when Jane arrived.

“I see business is good,” Jane said.

“Yeah.” Claire secured a strand of auburn hair into the clip on the back of her head. “I was afraid people would forget about this place when we were closed to repair the pipes, but I guess they didn’t.”

“I told you they wouldn’t. Your stuff is too good to forget about.” Jane glanced over at the case where Claire kept her signature sandcastle cakes. “Speaking of which, if I’m going to do weddings, I was thinking to make them really beachy. Maybe a lobster bake on the beach, and I thought that including your sandcastle cakes for the wedding cake would be something really unique. Would you make them for the weddings?”

“You decided to do weddings! That’s great.” Claire slipped out from behind the counter and walked over to the case with Jane. “Of course I’ll make them.”

“Good, I was thinking about taking a picture of one to submit to that magazine Maxi talked about.” Jane held up her phone.

“Let me find a spot that will look good in a photo.” Claire turned slowly. “How about this table in front of the window?”

“Perfect.”

They took the cake out and arranged it on the table. Harry and Bert, well-known regulars at Sandcastles, were seated beside the table, having their usual coffee and reading the paper.

“What’s this about weddings? Are you having one at Tides?” Harry winked at Bert. “I hope Claire and Rob decided to get married?”

Claire blushed and swatted at Harry. “No. Jane is offering weddings at the inn.”

Claire might have protested, but Jane could see she kind of liked the idea of marrying Rob. Of course, it was way too soon, but maybe someday she would be hosting Claire's wedding. It warmed her heart to see her friend so happy.

"Oh, that's a great idea. Such a pretty spot," Bert said.

"Who doesn't love a beach wedding?" Harry added.

"I think it will be a great way to expand business." Sally's voice drifted up from the floor. Jane hadn't seen her crouched there, painting the baseboard. "Tides is a beautiful venue for a wedding. I can just picture the back porch set up with tables, flower vases, candlelight, white linen cloths."

Jane smiled at her. "That's part of the plan. Of course, I'm also going to need some other things, like a dance floor."

"Oh, don't worry about that." Sally balanced the brush on the top of the can and stood, wiping paint off her fingers with a cloth. "I can whip something up. You'll probably need an arbor for the happy couple to get married under. And I think we need to spruce up the common areas for guests to mingle inside. Well, with Shane helping, all that will be no problem."

"Great. I knew I could count on you." Jane warmed with the support of everyone, and now the task didn't feel so monumental.

"What's this I hear about a wedding?" The grating voice came from behind Jane. Sally's smile slipped.

Jane turned, and her own smile faded when she saw it was Sandee Harris. She hadn't even noticed her in here, the place had been so crowded. Why had she even come here? Was it to rub it in that she'd stolen Claire's husband? It was mean—just the sort of thing Sandee would do. Though Jane doubted Claire cared about that anymore. She had Rob now, and he was way better than Peter. So Sandee was the loser in this one.

"I'm thinking about having a wedding venue at Tides," Jane said.

"Oh?" Sandee's brows rose. "So you aren't going to sell the place? I'm surprised."

"No, we're going to try to revive it, bring it back to the way it was before my mom got sick," Jane said, the snooty look in Sandee's eyes only adding to her determination.

"Good luck. The place needs a lot, but I'm sure you can handle it." Sandee gave her a fake smile, her tone implying that she wasn't sure of that at all. She turned and left.

Jane turned back to Claire and Sally in time to see Sally stick her tongue out.

“That woman is bad news.” Sally crouched again and picked up the brush then glanced at Jane over her shoulder. “I’ll be out tomorrow, and we can talk about specifics.”

“Great. Thanks.”

Jane helped Claire put the cake back. Once it was safely in the case, Claire leaned against the side and crossed her arms over her chest. “Weddings are going to work out great. You’ll see.”

Jane held up crossed fingers. “Let’s hope.”

Claire’s expression turned serious. “That’s going to be a lot of work. If you need help, just shout. I know you’ll be there all alone, and trying to run the inn and set up weddings could be a lot to take on by yourself.”

“Thanks, but I won’t exactly be all alone, at least not for the next few days. I just found out that Andie is coming.”

“Oh, that’s great. I’m sure she’ll be a big help.”

Jane held up crossed fingers again. “Again, let’s hope.”

Jane wasn’t sure if Andie would be any help. She usually just breezed in and left quickly, but she had to admit that she would love it if her sister did help. Somewhere deep inside sprouted a seed of hope that their mother’s illness and resurrecting Tides could bring her and Andie close again.

As she left Sandcastles, she called Maxi. If she was going to pull off this wedding venture, she was going to need some help decorating.

MAXI FLUFFED the pillow on her couch for the fifth time that morning. She stood back, arms crossed over her chest, surveying the arrangement.

Maybe if she put the two white pillows on the ends and the gray-and-black striped in the middle.

She turned away with a sigh. What did it matter? Rearranging the decor in the house was like taking a grain of sand from one side of the beach and putting it on the other. The house already looked great, but she was bored and didn’t have much to do.

Her gaze fell on a family photo on the whitewashed hutch next to the stairs. She and James stood in the back, the three kids lined up in front of

them. The kids had been small, ages five through ten. The picture brought up happy memories. She missed the sounds of kids running through the house, but this was the course of life, wasn't it? She cocked her head and looked toward the kitchen, picturing a dog or cat padding toward her. Not quite the same as a toddler, but a lot less work. Perfect for the stage of life she was at. Now if only she could get James on board.

She'd expected that the kids would eventually leave home, but what she hadn't expected was the way her relationship with James would change. She never anticipated that they would grow apart.

Maybe it was normal to go through some growing pains once the kids left the nest? She supposed she should give it more thought before she started to worry that something was wrong in their marriage.

She didn't get a chance to think about it too much because then her phone rang. It was Jane.

"Hi, Jane. What's up?" Jane rarely called. They usually texted. Maxi's heart fluttered. The last time Jane had called was when Addie had wandered away from Tides and gotten lost. Hopefully nothing was wrong.

"I hope I'm not bothering you, but I wanted to call and talk instead of texting."

"Is something wrong with your mom?"

"Oh. No, nothing like that. Nothing's wrong. Actually, I wanted to ask for your help."

"My help?" Maxi's spirits lifted. "With what?"

Maxi had helped decorate Addie's room, and she'd loved the challenge. Perhaps Jane wanted her input at the inn. Right about now any project would be exciting.

"I put in an application at that wedding website that you mentioned. And I was thinking if we're going to have weddings, I'm going to need some advice on how to decorate the place for them."

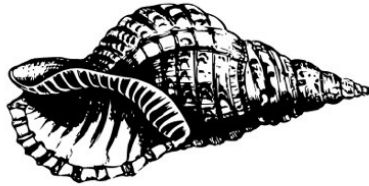
"That's wonderful!" Maxi couldn't be happier for her friend. She knew Jane sometimes liked to follow the safe path, but she had a feeling that hosting weddings and other events at Tides was going to help pull them through. And she really wanted Jane to pull Tides through, not only so that Addie could stay at Tall Pines but for Jane to feel like she'd accomplished something. "I'm happy to help with anything. Do you want to get together and talk about it in person?"

“I’d love to. I have to visit Mom this afternoon, and my sister is coming tonight. So I won’t have time today, but would you mind coming over tomorrow around ten?”

“Mind? I’d love it.”

Maxi made a cup of coffee and sat at her kitchen counter, her outlook brightening. Helping Jane with the weddings would give her a purpose, a goal. She’d had too much time on her hands lately, and maybe she’d been seeing problems where there were none. Hopefully having something to focus on other than her empty nest would prove that things at home weren’t as bad as she’d thought.

CHAPTER TEN



Jane's office at Tides was on the third floor. It was small, but all she really needed was a desk. Despite the small size, Jane liked it because it had an oval window beside the desk that looked out at the ocean. Jane didn't have time to look at the ocean, though. She was busy uploading the photos she'd taken of the guest rooms, the dining room, and the other parts of the inn that were in good repair, as well as the sandcastle cake, to the wedding venue website.

She hoped that the angle of a quaint oceanside inn offering lobster-bake weddings on the beach along with sandcastle wedding cakes would be enough to pique someone's interest.

Jane looked over the form, making sure everything was correct. Was this the right thing to do? It was scary venturing into new territory, but what was the worst that could happen?

As she scoured the rest of the form, she noticed that the coastal wedding-listing website had a section for a link to her own website where the interested parties could reach her to ask for more info to book a wedding.

Darn it! She still had the old Tides website, and now she wanted to create a special section for weddings. Glancing at her email folder, she saw the third website developer had replied. Bad news. They were booked for a month.

She sighed, the old chair creaking as she leaned back. She looked out the window at the ocean. Now what was she going to do? She'd googled

web designers in the area and come up empty. She supposed she didn't have to use someone local, though. Maybe she should expand her search.

A golden blur running on the beach caught her eye. Was that Cooper? She leaned forward, recognizing the tall figure of Mike as he threw a stick to the dog. The anxiety that had been roiling inside her eased. Just seeing the dog calmed her, as it probably did for many people. Maybe Claire was right and having a dog at the inn could be a benefit that would attract animal lovers.

But there wouldn't be any inn if she didn't get a website designer. Wait a minute... hadn't Mike said that he was a freelance programmer? Programmers made websites, didn't they? Jane pushed up from the desk and hurried outside.

COOPER SPOTTED Jane coming down the beach from two hundred yards away and made a beeline toward her, water flying off his fur as he ran. Jane crouched as the big dog practically bowled her over. She petted his wet and salty fur.

Beyond Cooper, Mike waved, jogging to catch up.

"Cooper sure has taken a liking to you," Mike said. "Fancy meeting you out here again."

Jane stood and looked down at Cooper, whose adoring brown eyes gazed back. "The feeling is mutual." Cooper nuzzled her hand, and she stroked his ears. "Actually, it's not a coincidence that I ran into you out here."

Mike's lips quirked in a grin. "Oh?"

His smile held a hint of flirtation that made butterflies swarm in Jane's stomach. This was crazy. She wasn't interested in Mike that way. She hadn't been interested in anyone that way since her husband and wasn't about to start now. "I was looking for you because I remembered you mentioned that you were a computer programmer."

"Yeah, that's what I do back in Seattle." Now Mike looked intrigued and maybe a bit confused.

"Well, it so happens that I need a website for Tides." Jane turned and pointed back toward the inn. "I was wondering if that's the sort of work you

did, and if so, would you be looking for extra work while you're out here?"

"Yeah, I could do that. I'm pretty experienced with websites."

"Great." Jane kicked at a small white shell that had rolled up in the surf. Now for the hard part: the payment. Did freelance web designers charge a lot? Could Jane afford it? She didn't have much of a choice. If she didn't get the website in place, there would be no weddings booked, and not having an online booking system was a deterrent for guests who wanted to reserve a room online. "Great. What would you charge?"

Mike's gaze flicked to the inn, his expression uncertain, as if he could see how it needed repairs from here. "Charge? Well, to be honest, I'm not used to charging individual people. I usually work for companies, but I heard that Tides serves a hell of a good breakfast."

What did breakfast have to do with websites? "Yeah, we do."

"How about you just pay me with breakfast?" At Jane's skeptical look, he raised his hand. "No, no, I'm serious. I don't know how to cook, and I'm tired of cereal. You're not far down the beach, and I could get my morning walk in then stop for breakfast. That would be worth it for me."

"I hardly think a few breakfasts would pay your fee."

"You let me worry about that. Honestly, it's not a lot of work, and it would be more of a burden for me to have to come up with the invoices and so on for taxes. This would work out a lot better for me. When do you want to go over what you need?"

Somehow Mike made it sound like *she* was doing *him* a favor when she was sure it was the other way around. Jane couldn't afford to look a gift horse in the mouth. "I need something as soon as possible, so could we meet tomorrow? I'm busy in the morning, but I'll have our cook, Brenda, whip up something special for you, and maybe we could meet around eleven thirty?"

Mike rubbed his belly. "My mouth is watering already. Tomorrow it is."

"Great. See you then."

Jane stuck out her hand, and they shook to seal the deal. She headed back to Tides, her heart a little lighter not only for seeing Cooper but for securing a great deal on getting the website done.

MIKE WATCHED Jane walk back to Tides, his hand still warm from their handshake. He was looking forward to the idea of working on the website, and not just because he'd get a hot breakfast. Spending more time with Jane definitely appealed to him. He didn't really need an extra job, but he could create websites in his sleep. She'd been right about the breakfasts not covering his fees—he charged a lot—but he didn't care about the money. He'd sensed that Tides wasn't doing that well and didn't want to take her money.

Cooper trotted along behind Jane.

“Cooper, back here!” Mike whistled for the dog, who stopped short, his attention wavering between Jane and Mike.

Jane turned and waved.

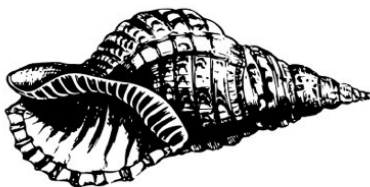
Mike picked up a stick and threw it, making the decision for the dog, who immediately raced in the direction of the stick.

Mike headed back toward his cottage throwing the stick, Cooper racing ahead then bringing it back. He was due to visit Gramps in an hour, and he wanted to go in and shower first. But Cooper needed to burn off some energy. Being cooped up in that small cottage all day wasn't good for him. He wouldn't be happy in Mike's apartment in Seattle, that was for sure.

“Mr. Henderson! Yoo-hoo!”

The woman Mike had rented his cottage from was standing on the deck waving him in. And not in a friendly nice-to-see-you way either. Judging by the rigid position of her body and the sour look on her face, she was not happy about something.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Jane had been on pins and needles waiting for her sister to arrive.

She'd straightened the living room, dusted the foyer, and was now standing in the doorway picking away at the silver-foiled chocolate candy kisses that sat in the crystal bowl on the table.

Her eyes drifted to the missing spindle on the stairs, the peeling paint on the old crown moldings, and the water stain in the upper corner on the wallpaper.

When had all this deterioration happened? Over the years, things had fallen into disrepair little by little, and she hadn't noticed. She didn't want Andie to think that she'd let the family business become run-down. Of course, it didn't help that Brenda had pointed out a bad Yelp review stating the inn was in bad shape earlier that afternoon.

Think positive.

She had a lot to look forward to. Mike was going to work on the website, and she was sure he would get that done quickly. Chandler Vanbeck was checking in tomorrow, so at least they'd have two guests and the place wouldn't be totally empty.

Maxi was coming to help plan how to decorate for the weddings, and she'd submitted the application. Things were on an upswing.

Finally, a blue Volkswagen Jetta rental pulled up in front of the inn. Jane swiped at her mouth to remove any chocolate and smoothed her white linen shirt as she watched her sister get out of the car.

Strange feelings of warmth mixed with betrayal bubbled up. Jane could hardly blame her sister for leaving to pursue her dream career in New York,

but she could've come back more frequently and at least shown a mild interest in the family business.

Still, her career must have agreed with her because Andie looked fabulous. She was wearing a sky-blue silk top over black capris with beaded black flip-flops on her feet. The sun hadn't quite set yet, and her large sunglasses and sleek dark hair that fell below her shoulders made her look like she should be featured in a magazine. Was her hair that color naturally? Jane touched her own pixie cut self-consciously. She'd let her hair go silver, but maybe she should have dyed it? She was the younger sister but felt like she looked like an old lady compared to Andie.

Jane took a deep breath and rushed outside to greet her sister.

ANDIE FELT a surprising rush of emotion as she looked up at the big old house that had been so much a part of her life when she was younger. Even though she hadn't spent much time here in recent decades, it still felt familiar.

The old place was looking a little more dilapidated than when she'd seen it a year ago, but Andie didn't see any of that. All she saw was the porch she and her sister, Jane, had played on as kids, the garden her mother had lovingly tended, and the gorgeous cobalt-blue Atlantic Ocean beyond the building.

As she stepped out of the car, the salty sea smell hit her, and the sound of the waves calmed her. She immediately felt like a weight had been lifted. She was home.

Jane came rushing out of the front door. She looked good. She'd cut her hair, and it suited her. The casual shorts and linen shirt would make some people look dumpy, but not Jane. Jane looked classy.

Feelings of guilt replaced all those cozy feelings of home when she saw the look of strain on her sister's face. She should've been here to help more often.

They exchanged an awkward hug, and Andie resisted the urge to hold Jane close and apologize. Once, when they were younger, she would've known the right thing to say, but now she barely knew her little sister.

"Did you have a good flight?" Jane asked.

“Great. No turbulence.” Andie popped open the trunk and hefted out her suitcase. “The place looks great.”

Jane’s forehead creased, and she turned to look at Tides. “Thanks.”

Andie closed the trunk then stood there. “So, tell me the truth, sis. How is Mom?”

Jane shrugged. “She has her good days and her bad days. But she’s getting very good care at Tall Pines. It’s really the best place for her. I tried to keep her here at home as long as I could.”

Andie felt terrible. Jane had struggled to keep their mom at home, and she could only imagine what that had been like. “It does sound like the best place. Are we going to see her tonight?”

Jane grabbed the suitcase and lugged it up the steps before Andie could stop her. “No, she has a routine over there. They eat dinner in twenty minutes, and then after that she’s usually tired and goes to bed. I thought it was better not to disrupt that, so I figured we’d go early tomorrow morning.” Jane turned to look at her. “I have some muffins and tea in the kitchen. I thought maybe you’d be hungry after traveling.”

Andie smiled. She was starving. “That sounds great.”

Andie followed Jane through the inn, taking note of the peeling paint and stained wallpaper. She didn’t say a word, though. “How are things going here?”

“Great. I’ve got some ideas to bring in new business. You know, kind of modernize the place. Mom let things go a little bit, but I’m on top of it.”

Andie sensed that her sister wasn’t telling her the whole truth. She should’ve come back to help before this, but she’d been too wrapped up in her career and her stupid affair with Doug. Her sister had had a lot to handle here, but Jane had never let on how bad things had gotten. She’d never asked Andie for anything. Had she been such a bad sister over the years that Jane didn’t even feel comfortable reaching out to her for help anymore?

“Sit down at the table and tell me how things are going with you.” Jane poured the tea into dainty cups that Andie remembered their grandmother serving them tea in. A plate with hand-painted forget-me-nots sat in the middle of the table, loaded with pastries. Andie chose an almond croissant.

“Things are going pretty much the same.” Andie bit into the buttery, flaky croissant. “This is delicious.”

“My friend Claire makes them at her bakery. You remember Claire, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah, of course.”

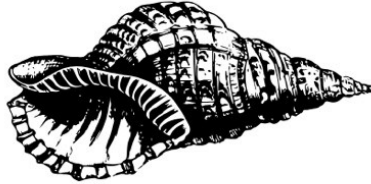
They chatted for an hour, getting caught up. Jane told her about helping their mom and how she was planning to host weddings and events to bring in more money. It sounded like Jane did have things under control, and that eased Andie’s guilt a bit.

It was dark when Jane showed her to her room. It was the room she had slept in as a kid when they would stay here with their grandparents in the off-season, when the inn didn’t have many guests. The floral wallpaper and creaky wooden floors brought a rush of cozy memories. The room was on the east side facing the ocean, and a bright crescent moon was high in the sky, sending golden light onto the flickering waves. She pulled out her phone expecting a text from Doug, but there was nothing.

Andie cracked the window open, letting in the scent of the ocean and listening to the surf. She sat on the edge of the bed and took it all in, a peaceful feeling of calm coming over her. Should she be more upset that Doug had let her go without even saying goodbye and hadn’t texted her? Maybe she wasn’t as attached to him as she’d thought.

She put her clothes away and crawled between the crisp linen sheets that still smelled of Grandma’s detergent. Much to her surprise, she immediately fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Early the next morning, Jane drove Andie to Tall Pines. Somehow she thought the visit there would be less stressful with Andie at her side.

Don't get too used to it. Jane had no idea how long her sister would stay; they hadn't broached the subject the previous evening.

"This place is really nice." Andie surveyed the foyer with its muted soft-tone carpeting; soothing, slate-gray walls; and charming water fountain. "It must be expensive."

Jane paused. Was her sister going to complain about the cost? But when she looked at Andie, she only saw concern in her expression. "I'm hoping all the new things I have planned for Tides will cover Mom's care."

"Oh, good. I don't know much about the finances but wasn't sure. Didn't mean to pry."

"Don't worry. It's all being taken care of." Jane crossed her fingers even though it wasn't exactly a lie because she *was* trying to take care of it.

Laughter peeled out of Addie's room, and the two sisters exchanged a bemused glance. When they got to the doorway, they saw that Rob and Claire were there. Rob was kneeling down in front of Addie, flirting with her in that kind way he had. Naturally Addie was eating it all up.

"Andie, you remember my friend Claire, right?" Jane said gesturing toward Claire.

"Of course. How are you?" The two women shook hands, and then Jane introduced Andie to Rob, who stood to greet her.

"It's so nice of you guys to come and visit Mom," Jane said.

Claire gave her a hug. "Of course. She's like a second mother to me. Plus, I had some extra chocolate chip muffins."

"We'll let you visit with your mom alone." Rob took Claire's hand and led her from the room.

"Make sure you let Sadie Thompson know that Rob is my guy, and get back my sweater!" Addie yelled after them as they left.

Andie shot Jane a look of confusion. "Rob is her guy?"

Jane shrugged. "Sometimes Mom thinks so. We just let her think what she wants."

"Isn't Sadie Thompson the lady who has the big old house on the cliff? The oldest house in town?" Andie asked as she sat across from her mother and took her hand gently.

"Yep. She's an old friend of Mom's from when they were teens, remember?" Jane frowned. "I think they had some kind of falling out, but maybe not. Mom's memory about recent events isn't so great, but she remembers everything about when she was young."

"What's this about a stolen sweater, Mom?" Andie asked.

"Sweater?" Addie looked at Andie, her expression clouded, as if she didn't recognize her or remember about the sweater. Then suddenly her expression cleared, and she reached out to touch her arm. "Andie, you came. It's so nice of you."

Jane's heart almost broke seeing the looks on her sister's and mother's faces. She was glad her sister had come out. Obviously it was doing Addie good.

"Of course I came, Mom. Your room is great. Looks just like you wanted at Tides."

"I do love it here at Tides," Addie said.

Andie glanced at Jane. "It's a great place." Apparently, she agreed with just playing along.

"I'm going to go talk to the staff about some stuff and let you visit with Mom, okay?" Jane said.

Andie nodded and turned back to her mother. "Now, why don't you tell me about the sweater?"

ANDIE WAS glad her mother was in a nice place, but she'd changed so much since she'd last seen her that it was a bit of a shock. The last time she'd been out to visit her mother, she'd been forgetful, but not like this. As she held her mother's hand, she couldn't help but notice how fragile the tiny bones and paper-thin skin were.

"What sweater, Bridgie?" Addie used the nickname she'd called her older sister, Andie's Aunt Bridget. Bridget had died fifteen years ago, but Andie didn't correct her.

"You said you lost a sweater."

Addie nodded. "That's right. My sea-green sweater. I didn't lose it, though. That Sadie Thompson took it."

"She did? Huh, I'll have to see if I can get it back for you," Andie said, scanning the room for a green sweater lying about and coming up empty. Maybe it was in the bureau or closet. She'd look later. Right now it felt good just to sit here and hold her mother's hand.

Jane had done a good job. The room resembled their mother's bedroom at Tall Pines but with a few modern updates. And the place was nice. Andie couldn't have picked anything better herself. How was Jane paying for this? Hopefully she wasn't using her own retirement savings.

Judging by the state of things at Tides, there wasn't much money in the business. Her earlier comment about Tall Pines being expensive had raised her sister's hackles, indicating that broaching the subject of how it was being financed wasn't going to be easy. Andie would have to tread carefully on that, but if her sister needed financial help, she wanted to chip in. Not that she had a lot of money, but she could cut a bit here and save a bit there and maybe even dip into her own retirement savings.

"It was so good of you to come, dear," Addie said, pulling Andie from her thoughts. Now her mother's eyes were clear, and her smile had that sparkle Andie remembered. "How are things in New York?"

Suddenly her mother remembered who she was. Jane had said she had moments of clarity and moments of confusion. Andie would take the clarity when she could get it.

"Things are really good. I do love my job, and I've made a good life there." Except for Doug. Her mother didn't need to know about that, though. Getting involved with him had been a mistake, and one of the benefits of living away from home was that all your mistakes weren't flaunted in front of the whole town.

Addie scowled. “Well, I suppose the bright lights in the big city are fine for a while, but I don’t think you’ve really made a life there. The city won’t give you what you really want. Your roots are here.”

Andie was shocked into silence. Her mother’s memory might be failing, but her perception skills were spot on.

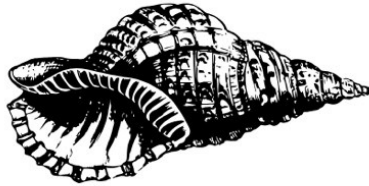
“Now, don’t you forget about Tides. It’s as much as part of the family as you and your sister are, and it needs to be kept up.” Addie clutched Andie’s hand with a surprisingly strong grip. “Promise to help your sister with the inn.”

Andie covered her mother’s hand with her other hand. “I promise, Mom.”

“That’s good, Bridget. I knew I could always count on you.” Her mother’s eyes turned cloudy again, her gaze drifting to the window. Andie’s heart pinched. Her mother had gone back to the past. Maybe her mother thought that it was Bridgett who had just promised to help with the inn. That might be just as well, as Andie wasn’t sure she could keep that promise, even if Jane wanted her to.

“Well, I guess Mom was right about one thing.” Jane appeared in the doorway holding a sea-green sweater with seashell-shaped buttons down the front. “Sadie Thompson actually is here, and she really did have Mom’s sweater.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Maxi took the scenic route to Tides, walking along the path on the ocean cliffs called the Marginal Way and then down across the beach once that path ended. She arrived right at ten, just as Jane had requested.

Jane was standing on the back deck, and a striking woman with long dark hair pulled up in a ponytail stood beside her. Was that Andie? Maxi hadn't seen her in years, since her visits to Lobster Bay were so infrequent.

"Andie, do you remember my friend Maxi?" Jane asked.

"Of course." Andie shook Maxi's hand. "How are you doing?"

"Fabulous. How are things in New York?"

Andie gave a half shrug, and Maxi sensed that maybe New York wasn't all she had hoped it would be. "It's okay. Right now I'm enjoying this amazing beach. You don't get that in the city. In fact, I was going to go take a walk on the beach. Unless you guys need me?" She looked at Jane.

"No, go ahead. Maxi and I are just going to discuss how we might decorate for a wedding here."

Andie hesitated for a second but then started down the steps onto the beach. "Okay, I'll leave you to it, then."

"How are things going with your sister?" Maxi asked as they watched her walk toward the surf.

"It's nice having her here, but I doubt she'll stay long, so there's no sense in having her in on any of these plans." Jane's voice didn't hold much emotion, but Maxi sensed regret and wondered if Jane wanted her sister to stay. It might be good for her if she did. Jane needed someone to be close to, especially now that her mother was at Tall Pines.

The back porch at Tides was wide, with an unobstructed view of the ocean. Living right on the ocean must be amazing. Sure, her house up on the cliff was nice, and it had a fabulous view, but to be down here right on the sand, listening to the waves crash on the beach and smelling the salty air, was a whole different experience.

"I was thinking the dance floor could go over there." Jane pointed to an area to the left of the house near the old garden. The garden used to be Jane's mother's pride and joy. She'd had a knack for gardening, and the whole area would be bursting with color and lush with greenery. Now it was overgrown and dotted with dead, dry leaves.

"Of course, I have to spruce up the gardens," Jane said, as if reading Maxi's mind.

They descended the steps, walking out onto the sand then turning to look back at the house.

"The tent would go over the dance floor, and the seating could be up on the deck for small weddings and then maybe under the tent for larger ones," Jane said. "That's what I know so far. Do you have any ideas as to how to make it cozy and unique?"

Maxi liked the idea of seating on the deck. It was under cover, so there would be good protection if it rained. She was brimming with ideas on how to make it unique. "How about getting some sheer drapes and hanging them at the corners of the deck and the sides of the tent? Bunch them up so they don't obstruct the view, but let them flutter in the breeze. It would add a dreamy feel to the wedding, and if you got the right type of rings, you could remove them when the wedding was over."

"That sounds perfect. I never would've thought of that!" Jane's eyes shone with an excitement that Maxi hadn't seen in a long time.

"And you need fairy lights. Depending on how you do the garden, we could twine them around some of the shrubs and string them on the tent. The deck, too, but we don't want to go overboard. You could keep the ones on the deck even when there isn't a wedding. And maybe add some lanterns with soft lights."

Jane clapped her hands together. "Another great idea. It would be magical."

"Yes." Maxi spun around, looking at the area, trying to picture it decked out for a wedding, searching for what else she might want to add. She pointed toward the ocean. "An arched arbor with roses climbing at the edge

of the garden would be a perfect frame for the bride and groom to say their vows.” She turned back to the house, pointing to the steps and running an imaginary trail with her finger. “You could roll out a runner on here for the bride to walk down the steps to the arbor.”

“This all sounds amazing.” Jane was thumbing notes into her phone. Maxi smiled. It felt good to be doing something productive and useful.

While Jane made notes, Maxi gazed out at the waves. The tide was coming in, so they were large, peaking up about three feet and then crashing into the beach. Farther to the right, where the tidal river met the open ocean, several surfers were bobbing in the water with surfboards, waiting to catch the perfect wave. Down near the edge of the water, a small dog chased a Frisbee, leaping into the air to catch it.

“That dog looks like he’s having fun. Have you seen that one that you met at Tall Pines again?”

Jane looked up from her notes. “Yes, a few times. Actually, his owner, Mike, is doing my website.”

“He is? How did that come about?” Maxi was intrigued. Jane wasn’t the type to just ask strangers to work for her. She must really have taken a liking to the owner, as well as the dog.

Jane sighed. “Well, none of the contacts Claire gave me could do it in time, and I was having a hard time finding anyone else. He’d said he was a freelance programmer, so I figured I’d see if he needed extra work. He can do it right away, and I’m desperate.”

“Oh, great. Is he expensive?”

“That’s the best part. He’d heard about the breakfasts at Tides, and that’s what he wants for payment.”

Maxi’s left brow quirked up. “Breakfast?”

“Yeah, I know it doesn’t even out. I’ll give him money, too, but the point is it’s not going to break my budget, and I’ll get a website fairly quickly. We need it for the weddings, and Tammi said people want to book online these days. Plus, I get to see Cooper more. Actually, they’re coming this morning to discuss what I want.”

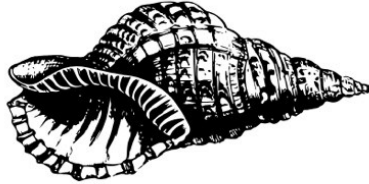
“That sounds perfect.” Maxi tried not to smirk. She guessed Mike’s interest might be in more than work but kept it to herself, as Jane appeared to be oblivious.

“Let’s hope.” Jane tapped her phone. “Thanks for these ideas. I really appreciate it.”

"No problem. I'm happy to help. When you do book a wedding, just let me know, and I'll come over and make some of these ideas come to life for real."

They hugged, and Maxi headed back down the beach. She hoped that Jane would get the wedding and be able to start making Tides profitable again. And she couldn't wait to meet this mysterious Mike and his dog. She had a feeling things were about to get interesting.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Jane sat at the old table in the kitchen, her laptop open and her attention wavering from the screen showing her bank account balance to the whopping electric bill in her hand. The air-conditioning at Tides cost a small fortune. The inn had been built before central air-conditioning was invented, and they didn't have a complete house-wide system. She relied on window air conditioners and a few wall units her father had had put in years ago. Good thing she had Sally working on the weatherproofing. That would cut down future costs, but that wasn't going to help her with *this* bill.

Eventually she'd modernize the air-conditioning and heating systems, but right now she couldn't afford that. Nor could she afford this electric bill. The utility budget for the year had already been spent, and it was only July. How long could she go before they shut it off? She certainly couldn't risk that, and the bill was due tomorrow. She'd have to divert some funds from the account she used to pay the food-supply company that delivered to the inn.

The food bill wasn't due for another two weeks. Hopefully money would come in between now and then to pay it. As an accountant, Jane knew that taking all the money from one account to pay another was not a healthy way to run a business, but what choice did she have?

"Thank God, coffee's brewing." Andie came into the kitchen, and Jane folded the utility bill back up and slipped it into the envelope. Andie didn't need to worry about the inn's financial troubles.

Andie poured coffee into a white ceramic mug and leaned against the counter, sipping. "I was out walking the beach. What are you doing?"

“Just tending to some of the finances of the inn.” Jane closed the laptop and smiled at her sister.

“Running the inn is a lot to handle. I really appreciate that you do this,” Andie said.

Jane was taken aback by her sister’s kind words. Was it wrong not to tell Andie about the financial troubles? But what good would it do to tell her? She would be leaving, and everything would be up to Jane. No sense in even talking about it.

“I’ve spent a lot of the past year taking care of Mom, and some things are falling by the wayside. But now that Mom is safe at Tall Pines, I’m going to fast-track repairs and get this place up to full earning potential. Of course, I have Sally, but I’ve also hired someone else to help out.

“In fact, I think you know the person. It’s Shane Flannery,” Jane said. “That’s the guy you used to date, right?”

Andie shrugged, staring into her coffee. “Yeah, just a bit.”

Just a bit? Jane seemed to remember that they were inseparable, if Shane Flannery was the one she was thinking of. So many years had gone by. Her memory was actually a little shaky, and at the time, she’d been sixteen and too self-involved to worry too much about her sister’s love life.

But judging by the way Andie wouldn’t make eye contact and seemed a bit *too* disinterested, she had the distinct feeling her sister’s relationship with Shane Flannery had been more than her sister was letting on.

“When is he coming?” Andie turned to top off her mug.

“Later this afternoon.” Jane watched her sister, amused.

“Oh.” Andie fell silent, working on her coffee for a few sips. “Do you need any help with anything around here?”

“No. You’re on vacation, you should enjoy yourself. Go out on the beach,” Jane said, even though she actually could use help. A *lot* of help.

She didn’t want her sister to know that, though. If Andie kept the same pattern she had before, she wouldn’t be staying long, so there was no sense in getting her involved in a project.

Jane glanced at the clock over the stove. It was almost eleven thirty, and Mike would be here soon to talk about the website. Would he bring Cooper? Jane hoped so.

ANDIE STOOD at the edge of the surf, her coffee mug in her hand, tentatively dunking a toe in the water. She'd forgotten how frigid the ocean could be in Maine, even in the middle of summer.

She turned and looked back at Tides. It was still a magnificent house, even if it did need a few repairs. A surge of love for the inn bubbled up. She wanted Tides to succeed, but she was worried because it needed a lot of care. Jane had said she didn't need help, but was that just her pride talking?

Andie had made a promise to her mother about helping Jane. Even though her sister pushed her off, she wanted to do *something* useful while she was here. As a girl, she'd loved working in the garden with her mom. Maybe that was something she could do to help out.

She headed toward the garden, slipping her phone out of her pocket to check for messages. Still no text from Doug, but that didn't bother her. She'd almost forgotten to even look. It was as if being at the ocean had a cleansing effect where he was concerned.

The garden needed some serious tending. The weeds had taken over most of the flowerbeds, but Andie could still see purple cone flowers, brilliant red monarda, and clumps of black-eyed Susans. It would take some weeding, some bark mulch, and a few new flowers here and there, but these beds could be beautiful again.

Her mother had always planted impatiens and pansies along the garden edge. Andie had usually helped with that task, under her mother's instruction. Now she'd have a chance to see if she'd inherited her mother's green thumb.

Her mother had always put out bird feeders too. Some of Andie's fondest memories were sitting and watching the jewel-toned hummingbirds battle around the feeders. No feeders were out in the garden now, but did they even still have them?

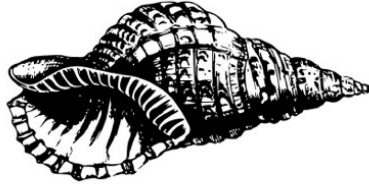
On the other side of the driveway that circled around the front of the house sat the three- car garage attached to the old outhouse the family used for storage. Her grandfather had called the outhouse a three-seater. His stories of how he and his two brothers would use it at the same time for warmth in the frigid winters had always had Andie and Jane giggling. By the time Andie and Jane had come along, indoor plumbing had been installed, but the structure still stood. It was useful for storage, though it did need a good paint job.

She rummaged around inside, pushing spiderwebs and dust away until she found the familiar red-topped glass hummingbird feeder. It was a little dusty but in good condition, with little perches shaped like flowers on the bottom.

She'd forgotten how fun it was to watch the tiny birds. They didn't have any of those in New York City—or if they did, she'd never seen one. Maybe she'd been too busy working to take the time?

If memory served correctly, all she had to do was mix one part sugar to four parts water to make the nectar. She headed back to the house, eager to get the bird feeder set up as soon as possible.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Jane was just finishing up with the accounting when Mike appeared at the kitchen door. Much to her delight, Cooper was at his side.

“Thanks for coming.” Jane bent down to pet the dog. “Brenda made a breakfast plate for you. Why don’t you get settled at the table, and I’ll heat it up.”

Mike took his laptop out of the bag and sat at the table while Jane heated up the plate of eggs, sausage, and pancakes that Brenda had set aside.

“So, what exactly do you want in a website?” Mike asked as he shoveled in the breakfast. “This is delicious, by the way.”

“Darn tootin’. Brenda makes the best breakfast,” Sally piped in without even taking her eyes off her current job of fixing the hinges on one of the corner cabinets.

“Can’t argue with that.” Jane slid her laptop around so Mike could see the screen. “I surfed around the internet and found some examples of what I would like our website to look like. Of course, I’ll need a form that people can fill out with information on weddings. And also, it needs to be hooked up to some sort of a reservation system—even if it just sent me an email—as long as the people can fill the form out online.”

Mike studied the example sites she had on her screen. “Looks simple enough. Should be easy.” He shoved his plate aside and started typing notes on his own laptop. “I should have a mock-up ready for you tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“So soon? That would be great. You don’t need to rush on my account, though.”

“I’m not rushing. I’ll put together some examples. Then we can go through it, and you can tell me what needs to be changed.”

“I really appreciate this,” Jane said as Mike started packing up his laptop. “Are you sure you don’t want payment? I know website designers cost a lot.”

Mike smiled and shook his head. “No. Seriously, the breakfast is enough.”

“We’ll be sure to have a good one ready for you when you come tomorrow.” Jane knelt down in front of Cooper, running her fingers through his thick fur. “And I guess I’ll see you tomorrow too.”

“Actually, you might not.” Mike’s voice sounded grim. Jane glanced up at him, and his expression indicated that something was wrong.

“What do you mean?” Jane asked.

Mike sighed. “The landlady that I’m renting the cottage from said I can’t have pets. Even though on the Airbnb listing, it did say pets were allowed, now she’s saying that was a mistake, and I can’t keep Cooper there. No place else is available in town, so I’m going to have to put him in the kennel until I figure out something permanent.”

“A kennel?” Jane’s heart pinched at the trusting look in Cooper’s whiskey-brown eyes. He seemed so happy, wagging his tail, eagerly awaiting another walk on the beach. Images of the dog sad and depressed and crammed into a dirty kennel with no beach to run on came to mind. “Surely there’s got to be something else you can do?”

“I wish there was. I’m not putting him up for adoption or anything yet, but I’ll have to keep him somewhere and come and take him out to visit Gramps.”

“But he’ll be in a small kennel all day. That won’t do. What if he stayed here instead?” Jane had blurted the proposition out before she knew it was coming, but now that it was out, she didn’t regret it. Having Cooper at Tides felt right.

Mike’s eyes widened. “Oh, I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“Of course you can. You can consider it partial payment for the website. You’d have to pay a lot to have Cooper stay in a kennel, right?”

Mike’s gaze flicked from Jane to Cooper. “I don’t know. It seems like an imposition.”

Jane stepped over to Cooper and patted his head. “No imposition at all. In fact, it will be a joy to have him here.”

Mike still looked uncertain, but Jane could see that he liked the idea of having Cooper at Tides a lot more than putting him in a kennel. Who wouldn’t?

“Okay. Well, if you put it that way, I guess I can’t refuse.”

“It’s a deal, then.” Jane stuck out her hand, and they shook. Letting the handshake linger a little bit longer than necessary, she looked up. Their eyes met.

“Ahem!”

Jane dropped Mike’s hand and looked over to see Andie standing in the doorway.

“Oh, Andie. This is Mike Henderson. He’s making the website for Tides. Mike, my sister, Andie.”

The two of them shook hands, and Jane thought she saw an amused smirk on her sister’s face. Why would her sister be amused at Mike making a website?

Jane gestured toward the dog. “And this is Cooper. He’s going to be staying here.”

Andie’s brows shot up. “Oh? That’s great. I love dogs.”

Andie held up an old glass hummingbird feeder. “I was just coming to make some nectar for the hummingbird feeder. I thought I might spruce up the gardens.”

“That’s a great idea. They could use it.” Apparently, Andie wasn’t rushing back to New York. Sprucing up the gardens would take a few days at least. Jane felt cautiously encouraged about her sister’s involvement in Tides.

“Okay. Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow morning, then. I’ll show you the website example and collect Cooper to go visit Gramps.” Mike nodded at both the girls and left through the back door.

ANDIE TRIED to keep the smirk off her face as she watched Mike leave. She and Jane hadn’t been that close in recent years, but she was pretty sure her sister hadn’t even thought about dating since Brad died. But the

attraction between Jane and Mike was obvious. At least it was to Andie. Jane, on the other hand, seemed oblivious. Mike, not so much. Well, good for them. Just because Andie wasn't doing well in the relationship department didn't mean she wasn't happy for others who were. Besides, Mike seemed nice, and he was kind of cute.

She pulled the jar of sugar out of the cabinet and started measuring for the nectar. "So, you're revamping the website?"

"Bringing it up to more modern times," Jane said. "The old website is so outdated. People want to be able to book rooms online these days. Plus, if we have weddings, we need information about them on the site and a form for people to fill out online."

Andie squatted down so her eyes were at counter level, making sure she'd put the right amount of sugar in the measuring cup. "That sounds like a smart idea."

Woof!

Cooper was standing at the door, staring down the beach after Mike. He wagged his tail, looking from Jane to the door.

"Sorry, buddy, you're going to be staying here. You'll see Mike later." Jane patted her leg, and the dog cast one last look out the door then sat beside her, staring up at Jane adoringly.

"I think he's getting attached to you." Andie thought Jane might be getting attached too.

"He's a good boy." Jane massaged his neck. "Oh darn. We're going to need dog food and bowls and supplies."

"I think I saw some bowls when I was looking for the bird feeder in storage," Andie said. "I can grab those and pick up some other supplies on the way home from visiting Mom at Tall Pines." Andie leaned against the counter and looked at her sister slyly. "Unless you want an excuse to call Mike."

Jane looked genuinely confused. "Of course I don't want an excuse to call him. Why would I?"

Andie gave her a look, and Jane blushed.

"That's silly. He's just making my website, and besides, he's too young for me." Jane glanced out the door, where they could still see Mike walking down the beach.

"He's not that young. I know his family," Sally piped in from where she was still working on the hinge. "Aren't you about forty-eight?"

“Yes,” Jane said.

Sally looked up at the ceiling as she did mental calculations. “Let’s see now. Mike was born the year that Jesse had Brady, so that makes him... yep, he’s forty-one. That’s only seven years.”

“That seems like a big difference to me,” Jane said.

“Not really. Mom was ten years older than Dad,” Andie said.

Jane scoffed. “I’m not in the market for a boyfriend.”

Jane sounded like she was protesting a little bit too much, but Andie decided to let it go. She glanced over at Sally. Judging by the look on Sally’s face, she agreed.

Sally shoved her screwdriver into one of the slots in her toolset and then bent to pet Cooper. “I think Cooper will be a good addition here. Are you ready to discuss some of the ongoing work? Shane is going to be here in a few minutes.”

The mention of Shane’s name jolted Andie into action. She did not want to be here when Shane arrived. She felt guilty for the way she’d treated him and didn’t know what to say to him. Should she apologize? Or had so much time gone by that it was no longer an issue? Better to not run into him at all.

“Gotta run! I’m going to go visit Mom at Tall Pines.” She quickly poured the nectar in the feeder and headed to the garden.

Out in the lobby, a man was standing at the check-in desk. She hesitated. Should she check him in? She didn’t know the first thing about the process, but it seemed rude to just walk past him.

“Andie?” The man turned, and she recognized him as Chandler Vanbeck.

“Chandler? What are you doing here?”

“I’m thinking of opening an art gallery in town. I’ve never stayed at this inn before, but the location is great, so I figured I’d try it.” He looked up at the ceiling, the wallpaper, and the broken spindles on the stairs. “It’s quaint. Are you staying here too?”

“I suppose you could say that. This is my family’s inn. But I am just visiting on vacation.” Andie glanced out nervously at the driveway. Shane would be here any minute. She didn’t want to be hanging out in the lobby like a sitting duck when he arrived.

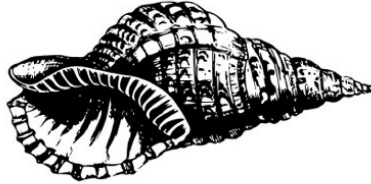
“Oh, that’s great. Nice place. I didn’t realize you were from back East.”

Jane, Sally, and Cooper came out into the lobby. Chandler’s eyes lit up when he saw the dog. “You have a resident dog? Delightful. Now I know I

made the right decision.”

Andie took the opportunity to make her exit. “I guess I’ll let you get checked in. I’ll see you later.” She hurried outside, the nectar sloshing around in the feeder and spilling out some of the holes, but she didn’t care. She was in a hurry to get it set up in the garden and get the heck out of there.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Shane Flannery arrived exactly when he was supposed to. Jane had heard stories about contractors habitually being late, so this set things off on the right foot. Hopefully Shane would continue to be prompt. Sally introduced them, and Shane shook her hand.

“Jane. How are you? It’s been a while.” He had an easy, friendly way about him, and Jane liked him immediately.

The gangly teenager who had dated Andie had grown into an attractive man. Years in the navy had broadened his shoulders. He stood straight, with cropped dark hair graying at the temples and kind gray eyes with crinkles at the edges. Jane wondered what Andie would think when she saw how he’d turned out.

Shane didn’t ask about Andie, but his eyes kept drifting over Jane’s shoulder, as if he were looking for someone. Maybe he was just scoping the place out to see what he was getting himself into.

“We have a lot of projects going on here,” Sally said. “As you can see, there’s a lot of cosmetic repairs, but we have some other things going on too. Let’s walk through, and I’ll go over everything with you.”

Jane let Sally take over. She knew more of the specifics of the work that needed to be done, and she and Shane spoke the same language. Shane offered some good suggestions on some of the projects, and Jane could tell that he and Sally would work well together. He knew his stuff too. Before they were even halfway through the tour, Jane had already decided that she wanted to hire him.

Cooper stuck by her side the whole time they were walking through the house. It felt good to have him there. And every time she looked down, he would glance up with that adoring look in his eye.

She was taking a risk. Having a dog at the inn might turn off some potential guests, but if Chandler Vanbeck's reaction was any indication, it might also attract others. And besides, there was no way she was going to let Cooper go to the kennel now.

Sally ended the tour outside in the spot where they'd decided to put the temporary dance floor should someone book a wedding.

"You think we can build something that will withstand a lot of dancing and still be able to be taken apart and stored away in the outbuildings?" Sally asked Shane.

Shane dug the toe of his boot into the sand. "It's pretty soft, but I've built something similar. We may need to tamp down the area, but it shouldn't be a problem."

"Good, because I think having weddings is going to be a really good business venture for Tides." Sally glanced over at Jane. "Shane's divorced, you know."

Shane laughed at Sally's blunt words. "Well, that was a long time ago. I don't think working on additions for weddings is going to bother me."

"He's got a cute grandson now, though," Sally added.

Shane beamed.

Sally looked at Shane and cocked her head to the side. "Say, didn't you used to date Jane's sister, Andie?"

Shane shifted on his feet, looking embarrassed to be put on the spot. "A little bit. That was a long time ago."

"She's still single," Sally blurted out.

Jane and Shane both looked at Sally, and she put her hand over her mouth.

"Was that inappropriate? Sorry, I'll mind my own business from now on."

Shane simply shook his head and laughed. "Now come on, Sally, you know minding your own business is impossible for you."

Sally did not look the least bit contrite. She often meddled, but she had good intentions.

"Andie's actually in town now. She's visiting our mom at Tall Pines, but I suppose it won't be long until the two of you run into each other here at

Tides,” Jane said.

“Oh, good.” Shane’s tone was flat.

Jane couldn’t tell if Shane looked hopeful or terrified, but either way it would prove to make things interesting in the days to come.

ANDIE RETURNED from Tall Pines with bags of supplies for Cooper. Jane made tea, and they settled on the soft, comfortable couches in the living room. This room had tall windows that overlooked the ocean, and it was Jane’s favorite. Cooper flopped down on the floor in-between them. None of the guests were around, so they had the room to themselves.

“I wasn’t sure what kind of food Cooper ate, so I got a few different brands.” Andie pulled several bags of dog food out of the shopping bag.

“Brenda was worried he might be hungry. She made him boiled chicken and rice, so he probably won’t even eat commercial dog food anymore,” Jane joked, looking down at Cooper, who thumped his tail on the floor.

Andie bent down and addressed the dog while running her hand along his back. “Well, I guess we don’t have to worry about you going hungry.”

“How was Mom?” Jane looked into one of the bags. It held a variety of dog toys. Plush animals, rubber toys, a rope.

“She was fine, but I had a little scare when I got there. She wasn’t in her room,” Andie said.

Jane looked up from inspecting the bag, worry blooming in her chest. Had Addie started wandering away from her room? “She wasn’t?”

“No. She was in the craft room working on a puzzle. One of the nurses said it was a good sign that she wasn’t just sitting in her room alone. She’s getting involved in doing things. She seemed really happy,” Andie said.

Jane supposed that was a good sign. She had expected it to take longer for her mother to acclimate to her new environment, but this was better. She was glad her mom was settling in and happy, but it made the responsibility of having to make Tides a success weigh on her even more heavily.

“I noticed the hummingbirds have come to the feeder you put in the garden. Do you have plans for sprucing it up?” Jane asked. Seeing the jewel-toned birds buzz around the feeder had brought back memories of when they were kids. Jane felt bad that she hadn’t been able to keep up with

it, but she'd been so busy this last year with running the inn and taking care of their mother that there had been no time. Gardens took a fair bit of time to maintain, which made Jane wonder what Andie was planning. If she was going to rush back to New York City, she didn't want her digging up the garden and making a mess that she couldn't finish.

"Remember how Mom used to plant those white-and-pink striped impatiens all along the border and then have those hostas in the middle?" Andie's face lit up as she talked about the garden. She always had been more interested in gardening than Jane. "I checked at the gardening store, and those plants aren't that expensive. I think I'd like to put those in just like Mom did. And, of course, I'll weed and get some new mulch. You have a lot of repairs here at Tides, and I know there might not be anything in the budget for all that, so I'll just pay for it myself."

"You don't have to do that. Just give me the receipt. It's a tax write-off." Jane paused then glanced over at her sister. "So, you're staying a while, then?"

Andie sat back in the chair and sighed. "Maybe." She looked down at her feet. "Work isn't going that great."

Jane felt a pang of sympathy. "I'm sorry to hear that. There's plenty for you to do here, so if you need to take a break from your job, I can keep you busy."

Footsteps in the hallway interrupted their conversation.

Chandler Vanbeck appeared in the doorway. He looked at them uncertainly. "Am I interrupting?"

"Course not, come in," Jane said. The living room and common areas were always open for guests. Her great-grandparents had wanted the inn to be like a home away from home and provide a comfortable family setting, and Jane intended to continue that.

Chandler came into the room, and Cooper immediately walked over to greet him with a friendly sniff. Chandler smiled and petted the dog. "This place is lovely. I was out on the beach earlier, and it's an amazing spot. Andie, you never mentioned your family had such a great property."

Andie gazed out at the ocean. "I know. I guess it never came up."

Chandler had wandered over to the east wall and was eyeing the collage of gilt-framed paintings. The paintings dated back to Jane's great-grandparents' time. Old landscapes, vibrant ocean scenes.

“You have quite the collection here. Some of these paintings are quite valuable.” Chandler turned to look at them. “You wouldn’t be interested in selling any of them, would you?”

Jane was startled by the thought. The paintings had been there since before she was born.

“These paintings have been in our family forever. We would never sell them.” She turned to her sister. “Would we?”

Andie shook her head. “No, they’re like family heirlooms. We couldn’t part with them.”

Chandler smiled sheepishly. “Oh well. I hope I didn’t offend you. It’s just that one can’t help but be interested when you run into something exquisite in my line of work. You know how it is, Andrea.”

Andie nodded. “We’re not offended, are we, Jane?”

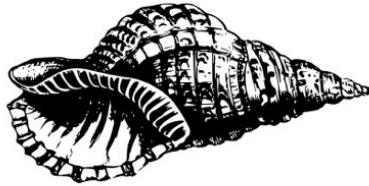
Jane shook her head. “Of course not.”

The inn was filled with antiques, paintings, furniture, and knickknacks. The thought of selling them had never crossed Jane’s mind. She could practically feel her ancestors looking down and shaking their heads. She couldn’t possibly part with anything in the inn... not unless she was absolutely desperate. Thankfully, she hadn’t gotten to that point yet. All she needed was to ramp up the bookings, book a wedding, or come up with an idea for some other type of event.

Chandler headed to his room, and Jane and Andie chatted for a bit longer before taking Cooper out to do his business and then heading to bed. Jane was surprised at how Cooper took to living at the inn. He simply followed her up to her room and lay down.

Jane fell asleep, feeling more hopeful than she had been in weeks.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Jane's bedroom faced east, and she was used to the rising sun peeking in at an early hour. What she wasn't used to was the warm body in bed beside her. She startled awake when a wet nose against her hand reminded her about Cooper. He'd started off on the floor but must have made his way into the bed during the night. Jane didn't mind.

"Come on, boy. You probably have to go out, right?" Jane wasn't used to having another being to consider, but she was happy to make the adjustment. She took Cooper outside to do his business and then fed him before even getting a cup of coffee for herself.

Settled at the kitchen table with an English muffin on her plate and Brenda cooking in the background, Jane checked her email and practically fell off her chair.

Brenda turned around, concerned. "Is something wrong, Jane?"

"Someone wants to book a wedding."

"Really? That's good isn't it?" Brenda asked.

"Of course. It's just a surprise. I wasn't expecting something this quick, and they want it in less than five weeks." Jane started to panic. How was she going to pull together a wedding in a month? She didn't know anything about weddings. Why had she signed up for this?

Brenda, unflappable as usual, forked the bacon out of the pan, laying it on paper towels. "Nothing wrong with getting more money sooner."

Brenda had a point. She'd just taken money allotted for the food service to pay the electric bill. If she could pull this wedding off, she'd get a deposit

and should be able to replace that money without having to be overdue on the bill to the food supplier.

She read the comments on the form application carefully. “It’s a rush job because the place they had booked closed down without notice. It’s for fifty people, and they’re excited about a beach wedding and lobster bake. Do you think we can handle that?”

“Of course we can. And just think, maybe they’ll book all the rooms.” Brenda seemed happy at the prospect of being able to cook breakfast for a full house.

The applicant wanted pictures of the actual outdoor area where the wedding would be and a description of Jane’s plan. Plan? Was she supposed to have a plan? She’d be filling the role of wedding planner, but how hard could a small beach wedding be to plan?

The comments on the form specified that they wanted something classy, not a venue with picnic tables and porta potties. If they liked what Jane sent and her quote was reasonable, they would send a twenty-five percent deposit right away.

Jane’s mind whirled as she thought about what she should send them for a plan. She wanted more pictures. Maybe some close-ups of the work Andie was doing on the garden and one of the ocean framed by the arbor. She already had basics of the rooms and interior of Tides up on the website, but she didn’t have any of how it would look at an actual wedding. Maybe Maxi could help with that.

Mike was due any minute to go over the website, and Jane wanted to visit her Mom at Tall Pines, so she asked Maxi to come later that afternoon.

There! She’d put the plans in motion. This could really work.

Cooper let out a sudden woof and rushed to the screen door. Jane looked up to see Mike, his laptop bag slung over his shoulder.

COOPER’S exuberant greeting lightened Mike’s heart. The night in the cottage without the dog had been lonely. Cooper wagged his tail and wiggled as Mike crouched down and hugged him.

“I missed you, big guy.” He was getting attached. Not only to Cooper but to the ocean, to the town, to the people.

“I think he might’ve missed you, too, at least for a little bit, until Brenda made him chicken and rice,” Jane teased.

“Ha ha. Seriously, how did he do? I hope he was no trouble.” Mike wrestled the laptop out of his bag and put it on the table.

“Not at all. He adjusted quite well, and I love having him,” Jane said.

“He’s a good boy.” Brenda tossed Cooper a small piece of bacon and slid a plate in front of Mike. It was overflowing with scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, and toasted English muffins.

Mike dug in, looking up at Jane every few seconds. She had a spark in her eye today, and her face was flushed. He suspected something exciting had happened but felt awkward asking. “I feel rude eating in front of you.”

“I already ate. But I am eager to see the website. I got a booking for a wedding, so things are starting to come together.”

So *that* was why she looked so excited. His assumption about Tides doing poorly financially must have been true. A wedding would bring in a lot of money. “That’s great! Tell me more.”

“It’s in a month, so I’m going to have to hustle. Apparently, the venue they had booked closed down suddenly.” Jane blew out a breath. “I’m a little nervous about taking it on, but I think it will be good for Tides.”

“What can I do to help?” Mike asked.

Jane looked surprised, like she hadn’t been expecting him to offer to help. “I guess just putting the website up would be a big help.”

Mike set his plate aside. “Then I guess we should get started, and I’ll show you what I’ve got.”

He proceeded to show her several pages of the website that were similar to the examples she’d shown him but with pictures and text specific to Tides. The navigation still wasn’t set up, since he wasn’t sure if she’d want changes. Of course, he had the contact page, and he’d installed a form where one could book online and generate an email to Jane.

“You might want to consider integrating a calendar that will block off dates. Right now you’d have to go back and forth with email to confirm the booking,” Mike said. “There might be a plug-in or program you can buy. I can look into that for you.”

“That would be great. I love what you have so far,” Jane said.

“Then I should go ahead and finish it up?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. It won’t take me long to get everything hooked up and working properly.” Mike slung the laptop bag over his shoulder then hesitated. “I want to take Cooper to visit Gramps at Tall Pines today. Can I swing by later and get him?”

“Of course. Come by any time. No need to ask permission. We have people coming and going from here all the time. I was actually going to Tall Pines myself to visit my mom right after this.” Jane looked at her watch, and Mike got the impression she might be in a hurry. He almost collided with Andie on his way to the door. She was holding the hummingbird feeder.

“Those birds sure drink a lot of nectar,” Mike said.

Andie laughed. “They do, but this is actually a second feeder. Hummingbirds are territorial and will fight, so we put feeders at either end of the garden.”

“Who knew?” Mike said goodbye to Cooper while Andie filled the feeder in record time.

When she was done, she sidestepped the dog on her way to the pantry.

“Why are you going out that way?” Jane asked, looking confused. “Wouldn’t it be shorter to go through the lobby?”

Andie stopped and looked at her sister. “Probably, but I don’t want to spill nectar in there.”

Jane glanced at Mike, her expression indicating she thought Andie wasn’t making much sense. “Okay, whatever suits you.”

But Andie had already headed off through the pantry, which, from what Mike knew of the layout, seemed to be a roundabout route.

Mike gave Cooper another pat on the head and set off down the beach. Maybe he would extend his stay in Lobster Bay. Gramps had perked up a lot since Mike had come to visit, and the scenery didn’t hurt. Plus, he was making new friends... like Jane. Besides, he liked it here. Things were more laid-back, and he was getting attached to Cooper.

His phone dinged, and he pulled it out to see a text from Tiffany.

Wondering when you’re coming back?

Mike rolled his eyes. Apparently, he’d need to have another talk with her. She certainly wasn’t getting the hint. How could he possibly make it clearer that he didn’t want to date her anymore? He’d told her so in no uncertain terms. She just wasn’t getting the message. Maybe it was time he blocked her number.

ANDIE RUSHED THROUGH THE PANTRY, away from Jane and her darn questions. The truth was that she was avoiding the lobby because she'd seen Shane in there earlier fixing the spindle on the staircase. It was silly because it had been decades since she'd broken up with him, but she just didn't want to talk to him. Why add more stress to her life? There was no point in reconnecting since she would be leaving Lobster Bay soon enough.

She turned left, intending to cut through the dining room and then go out the side door, except—

“Watch out! That paint is wet!”

Over thirty years had passed, but Andie recognized Shane Flannery in an instant. They stood staring at each other, and the years peeled away. It was as if they were both awkward high school seniors again. Except Shane looked way better than he had back then. How unfair was that?

“Andie. Hi.” Shane smiled, revealing the dimple on his right cheek.

“Hi.” Andie's tongue appeared to be stuck to the roof of her mouth.

“How are you?”

“Good. You?” Andie tried to add something clever, but nothing came out.

“Pretty good. Got out of the navy, and now I do carpentry work.” He gestured toward the room, where there was clearly a big project going on.

“You're standing on Sally's brush.”

“What?” Andie's gaze jerked down, and she lifted her right foot to reveal a squashed brush. The bottom of her flip-flop was smeared with red paint. “Crap!”

“Yeah, Sally's not going to be happy you ruined her brush.”

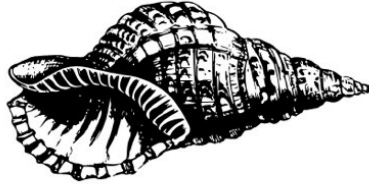
Shane looked amused as Andie tried to balance removing the flip-flop with one hand while trying not to spill the nectar she was holding in her other. He could have offered to help!

“Well, nice seeing you.” Shane turned back to his work, and Andie hobbled off.

Seriously, was that it? She didn't know what she had expected, but the interaction with Shane felt like a slight. She was probably being overly sensitive. It had been decades since they'd seen each other, so there was no reason to act like they were buddies. Even though they'd dated, that was so long ago. He'd been married since then, and of course he was over her.

Probably barely even remembered they'd dated. And what did it matter?
She'd gotten over him long ago. Hadn't she?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Jane had a momentary surge of panic when she got to Tall Pines only to find that Addie wasn't in her room.

One of the nurses, Gloria, noticed her standing at Addie's door. "She's up in the art room."

"Art room?" Jane remembered taking the tour when she'd first looked at Tall Pines. They had several recreation rooms. She hadn't pictured her mother using any of them and hadn't paid much attention. She'd been more concerned about the rooms themselves, the meals, and, most importantly, the price.

Gloria nodded. "She's painting with another resident, Stella Ambrose."

"Really?" Her mother had made friends this quickly?

Gloria smiled. "Go see for yourself. It's on the second floor, end of the hall to the right."

The art room was large, with long tables and easels at the front. Light spilled in from a large palladium window. Addie was standing at one of the easels, her concentration focused on the work in front of her. A short woman with colorful glasses and short, spiked white hair dabbed large blobs of paint on the canvas at the easel next to her.

Neither woman had seen Jane come in, and she paused to watch her mother. Addie looked happy, serene. Other than keeping the gardens up, Addie had never had time for hobbies while running Tides. At least maybe her mother could get a chance to unleash her creativity during this stage of her life.

Jane entered the room and stood behind Addie. “That’s beautiful, Mom.”

The other woman turned to address her. “Thank you, dear!”

“Umm... you’re welcome.” Jane hadn’t been talking to the woman or even looking at her work.

Addie laughed. “Now don’t be silly, Stella. Jane is *my* daughter.”

Jane was encouraged that her mother remembered her.

“Oh, sorry.” Stella laughed. “You look a lot like my daughter.”

At least Stella was taking it on the chin.

Addie dipped her paintbrush in a cup of white paint and motioned Jane closer. “Come over here, and I’ll show you a little trick I learned.”

The painting was really just a bunch of colorful splashes, sort of modernistic in a way. Jane wondered what Chandler Vanbeck would think of it.

Addie’s demeanor was serious as she focused on the painting, placing the brush very carefully in the middle of the blue splotch and making a perfect white dot. “See? If you put a little white spot here, it makes it look like a reflection.”

“I see. That’s a great tip,” Jane said.

“Yes, well.” Addie stepped back, putting the paintbrush in a mason jar filled with water. “I think that’s enough for today. I smell lunch, and I don’t want to miss it because it’s grilled cheese. Would you like to stay, Jane?”

Jane would’ve loved to have stayed now that it was one of her mother’s lucid times, but she couldn’t. She had to meet Maxi at Tides. She longed to tell her mother about the wedding and ask for her advice, but she was afraid it might confuse her, so instead she simply smiled and patted her mother’s arm. “I have to run, but you have a good time at lunch. Do you need anything?”

Addie laughed and gestured around the room. “What would I possibly need? I have everything I could ever want right here.”

Jane left tall Pines feeling like at least part of the weight on her shoulders had been lifted.

MAXI POWER WALKED along the beach, her footsteps leaving deep prints in the wet sand. She'd chosen to walk to Tides for her meeting with Jane, even though it was almost two miles from her house. She needed to clear her head after the disturbing discovery she'd made while cleaning out the pockets of James's suit before taking it to the dry cleaner.

Maybe it wasn't such a great idea to bring a heavy bag of sketching stuff, though, she thought as she hitched her blue-striped tote bag up onto her shoulder. But bringing along a sketch pad, pencils, and watercolor pens was necessary if she wanted to paint after she left Tides.

The tide was out, so the shoreline where she was walking was almost the length of a football field away from the buildings. Glancing over, she could see the big white structure of Tides. Jane was standing on the porch.

Maxi took a deep breath of calming ocean air, let it out slowly, then headed up on the dry sand to meet Jane. Plastering on a smile, she waved as she approached the inn.

"You walked?" Jane asked.

"Yep. Need my exercise." Maxi made power-walking motions. A golden retriever trotted over from where he'd been sniffing the rosebushes. Maxi's spirits lifted. Animals always made her feel better. "Is this Cooper, the dog you've been talking about?"

Jane smiled. The dog plastered himself against her leg, and she reached down to pet the top of his head. "Yep. Mike ran into a problem with his landlady, and he couldn't keep him. So I offered to have him at Tides."

"Awesome. How do you like having a dog?"

"It's just temporary, but it is kind of nice having him around."

Maxi looked at the dog wistfully, but a pet wasn't in the cards for her right now. Her future suddenly felt uncertain. But this meeting was about Jane, not her. "So, tell me about this wedding. It's so exciting."

Jane took a deep breath. "I don't know if *exciting* is the word. *Terrifying* might be more like it. Someone emailed from that ad I took out in *Coastal Living*. Their wedding venue was canceled at the last minute, so they wanted to see if we were available. But the thing is the wedding is in less than five weeks."

"Five weeks? Can you pull a wedding together in that time?"

Jane shrugged. "I have no idea, but I'm going to try. They wanted a proposal and pictures of how it would be set up. I was hoping you could help me dress the place up a bit like it might be for a wedding."

Maxi surveyed the area, looking at the porch, the beach, the gardens. Her artistic eye immediately homed in on some things to highlight. "I think you can take an angle of the garden to show the new plants. Maybe use that bench and put some decorative pillows on it." Maxi turned to look at the porch. "And we can set up some tables on the porch here and put up those sheers and add some pillows." She turned again to face the ocean, framing a little picture in her hands with her thumb and forefinger. "And then take a picture of where you would set up the arbor. It's too bad we don't have that now."

"Maybe I can get Sally and Shane to work on that first. Andie is working on the garden. I could have her concentrate on one area so it will look nice for the picture."

"That sounds like a good plan. I can get some pillows, and we can have Sally tack up one sheer curtain, just so we can get it in the corner of one of the pictures."

Jane hugged her. "Thanks so much. I don't know what I would do without you and Claire."

"Same." At least Maxi could count on her friends. Even if things went wrong with James, she knew she'd have their support. She put her hand in her pocket, and her fingertips brushed the sharp edge of the business card she'd found in James's suit. It was Sandee Harris's card, and it had a phone number written in pen. Her business number was printed on the card, so Maxi assumed that must be a personal number. Why would James need that?

"Hey, remember when you asked if James and I were buying a cottage? Was that because you saw James with Sandee?"

Jane looked uneasy, her gaze drifting out to the ocean. "Well, I thought I did, but it was from far away. I was walking the beach and only saw them for a second. I think it was just someone who looked like James. Why do you ask?"

Images of James and Sandee and some illicit tryst in one of the cottages bubbled up. Maxi bent to pet Cooper so Jane couldn't see her face. "Oh, no reason, I was just curious."

She didn't want to voice her concerns, even to her best friend. It was a big accusation to call someone a cheater, and she really had no proof other than the business card. If she was going to accuse James of cheating, she owed it to him to discuss it with him first.

A movement over at the garden caught her eye, and she turned to see Andie straightening up from the flower bed. She wiped her brow, smudging dirt on her face as she turned in their direction and waved.

Jane waved her over. "Perfect timing. Now we can ask her to concentrate on one area of the garden for the pictures."

ANDIE TUGGED OFF THE HOT, sweaty gardening gloves as she made her way toward Jane. She had to admit gardening was cathartic. It was satisfying to see the area come back to life with the colorful impatiens and lush, green hostas that she'd been planting.

"It's hot out here." Andie swiped at the sweat on her brow.

"The garden is looking great." Jane's kind words warmed her heart. "Maxi and I were just talking about taking pictures for the wedding client, and we were hoping you could concentrate on the area near the bench first."

"Wedding client?" Andie looked from Jane to Maxi. Had Jane gotten a bite on her ad?

"I didn't tell you?" Jane said. "Sorry, I just found out this morning. Someone emailed about having a wedding here. And they want pictures."

"That's great!" Andie was genuinely glad but a little worried about the amount of work. "It's a bit different from what we are used to, though."

"It is, but it will be good for Tides," Jane said. "It's just a small wedding, so I think we can pull it off."

"It will bring in good money. What can I do to help?" A look of surprise crossed Jane's face at Andie's offer. She supposed she couldn't blame her. Andie had never offered to get involved in the family business before, as she never stayed long enough. But for some reason, Andie felt this time was different. It wasn't just that Doug had apparently forgotten about her—it was something more. Her mother's words about the city not giving her what she really needed ran through her head.

"Thanks, I think the gardening will be a big help. I can handle everything else."

Andie nodded, a little disappointed that Jane hadn't called upon her for more, but why would she? She had Maxi and Claire, who were here to help

all the time, and if the past was any indication, she probably thought that Andie was just passing through.

The French doors opened, and Chandler Vanbeck came out onto the porch. He stretched, inhaling deeply. "The sea air. Always so refreshing."

Maxi looked at him curiously, and Andie introduced them. As Maxi leaned forward to shake hands, the tote bag slipped off her arm and fell onto the deck, spilling its contents. Pencils rolled, sketchbooks flopped open, erasers bounced. Chandler bent down to help her pick them up. He hesitated when he saw one of her sketches. It was just a pencil sketch of a seagull, and Andie was no art expert, but even she could see that the details were exquisite, the shading so precise you almost expected the bird to fly off the page.

"This is wonderful." Chandler looked up at Maxi. "Are you the artist?"

"It's just a little sketch. It's nothing." Maxi snatched it from him and stuffed it in her bag, clearly embarrassed by the attention.

"Don't sell yourself short. You have talent." Chandler turned to Andie. "I was sorry to hear about the Richhaven job."

Andie frowned. "What about it?"

"You didn't hear? It came through, and Elise was named as the lead appraiser. She called me this morning to see if I could come out and appraise some of the artwork."

Andie felt as if she'd been punched in the gut. Elise had gotten the Richhaven job? That couldn't be possible. Doug had never even called her.

Chandler must've seen her look of disbelief because he continued, "I thought for sure you'd get it because you have so much more experience, but I guess I just assumed you're needed here and couldn't accept the job."

Jane and Maxi were looking at her. Could everyone sense how hurt she was?

"Right. It's more important for me to be here. My mom needs me right now." Andie started backing away. She had to get out of there before the tears that were threatening came. "Speaking of which, I better get going on the garden so you can get your pictures." She turned and hurried down the path to the garden.

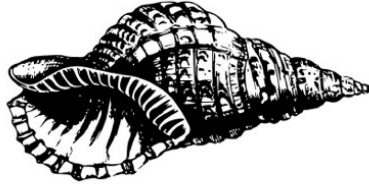
In a daze, she sat on the stone bench and pulled out her phone. Maybe Doug had tried to message her about it. She'd been having so much fun focusing on the garden that she'd actually forgotten about him. She hadn't checked her messages in a while. But there was no message. No email. No

text. No phone call. Doug had given the job to Elise without even consulting her.

Had they forgotten all about her at Christie's in the few days that she'd been out here? Maybe she should get back there right away to secure her job and make sure she didn't lose out on anything else. She could finish the section of the garden near the bench quickly, and Jane had made it perfectly clear that she didn't need any help here at Tides.

She scrolled to the airline site and started looking for flights.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Jane spent the next few hours rearranging tables; tacking up soft, flowing, sheer drapes; and strategically placing pillows Maxi had picked up from the fabric store. Maxi instructed, and Jane took the pictures.

Shane and Sally were just starting on the arbor and dance floor, so she couldn't take pictures of those for a few days, but Jane wanted to get back to the client right away. She could send more pictures later.

By the time she was done, it was almost time for Mike to come and pick up Cooper. She took the laptop to the kitchen to organize the pictures and call the lobster-bake company and tent-rental place for quotes so that she could send that along with the pictures to the client.

She had to take all the expenses into consideration, but how much should she tack on for using Tides as the venue? Ten percent? Twenty? She had no idea what was reasonable but knew that wedding venues charged a high fee. Unfortunately, she didn't have a lot of time for research. She wanted the client to know that she was going to answer promptly and also really wanted to get that deposit in so that she could use it to pay the food-service people, who probably would not deliver food this week if she didn't pay.

She did her best and sent the email off with her fingers crossed. Part of her was terrified they would say yes, but the other part was getting a little excited about the wedding. It was all overshadowed by worry for her sister and Maxi.

Jane had no idea what the Richhaven job was but could guess it was something important. Andie had acted like the news that someone else had

secured it was nothing, but Jane could tell her sister was pretty shaken about it. She'd wanted to go to the garden and see if she needed to talk about it, but she wasn't sure what to say or even if her efforts would be welcome. It wasn't like they'd had any heart-to-hearts in the last twenty years.

Jane had been surprised by Andie's offer to help with the wedding. She hadn't known what to say. Was Andie planning on staying longer? She did seem serious about the garden, but Jane still wasn't sure whether she wanted to open her heart to letting her sister in only to be abandoned again.

And Maxi... why had she asked about seeing James with Sandee? Jane tried to remember exactly what she'd seen at the cottage that morning. She'd really only seen a glimpse and couldn't be absolutely certain that it had been James. The last thing she wanted was to jump to conclusions and cause a problem between James and Maxi.

Woof!

Cooper rushed to the back door, signaling Mike's arrival.

"Hey, boy, are you ready to go for a ride?" Mike asked.

Cooper spun in circles.

Jane laughed. "I guess you said the magic word."

"He does love rides." Mike clicked the leash to Cooper's collar, but instead of heading right to the door, he lingered at the end of the table.

"Have a good visit with your grandfather. Andie is there visiting my mom, so you might run into her," Jane said.

"I will." Mike still lingered, then at Jane's questioning look said, "I was thinking when we get back, maybe you and I could take Cooper for a walk on the beach together. Since he's been staying at Tides, I haven't had much of a chance to walk him, and I noticed that you like to walk on the beach, too, so..."

Jane had been so busy with the wedding she'd forgotten that a big dog like Cooper needed exercise. Just another thing to learn about having a dog. "That sounds like a good idea. I should be done with my work by then."

Cooper wagged his tail faster, glancing between Mike and Jane as if he knew what they were talking about.

"Should I message you when I leave Tall Pines?" Mike pulled out his phone, and Jane realized they didn't even have each other's numbers.

"Right. Good idea." They exchanged contact info. It made Jane feel as if their relationship was taking a turn. Now Mike wasn't just some guy she

ran into on the beach and hired to make her website. He was becoming a friend.

“Okay, it’s a plan, then.” Mike’s eyes met hers, and Jane felt a little flutter in her stomach. As he left, Jane wondered if the walk was about more than just getting exercise for Cooper. Had Mike just asked her on some sort of date?

SHANE AND SALLY had been working outside for hours, trying to finish the arbor and dance floor so Jane could take pictures. Jane decided to take them some lemonade and check on their progress.

Sally gulped down half the glass. “Thanks. It’s hot out here.”

Shane was a little more polite with his. He took a few sips and gestured to the work. “What do you think?”

Jane wasn’t sure what she thought. All she saw were a few boards and part of a trellis. “I guess it’s good progress.”

“Yeah, the dance floor will go here.” Sally picked up a stick and drew two very long lines in the sand. “Is that big enough?”

Jane nodded.

“And the arbor will be at the edge of the garden so that you can train the rosebushes to grow up it.” Shane turned toward the ocean.

“And then when the bride and groom stand under it, they’ll be facing the ocean, and the guests could be seated in folding chairs in the garden.” Sally chugged the rest of her lemonade and then burped.

“Sounds wonderful,” Jane said.

Sally smiled proudly. “Thanks. And then we can...” Sally paused midsentence, her gaze drifting past Jane’s shoulder. She pulled a face. “Ugh.”

Jane turned to see Sandee Harris stomping up the beach toward them.

“What’s going on up here?” Sandee demanded.

“We’re building a dance floor and an arbor for the new wedding venue,” Sally said.

Sandee raised a perfectly plucked brow. “Wedding? You’re having weddings here? You have to have permits for that, you know.”

“I know.” With all the excitement, Jane had forgotten about permits, but she wasn’t about to tell Sandee that. She made a mental note to check into permits.

“And if you’re doing anything on the beach, you need a special variance,” Sandee said.

Jane crossed her arms over her chest. “That won’t be a problem.”

“How many guests?” Sandee asked.

“Small weddings, around fifty.”

Sandee assessed the inn with narrowed eyes. “How many bathrooms do you have in there?”

“Each room has its own bathroom. My grandparents had it renovated that way for guest convenience decades ago.”

Sandee clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth and looked at Jane as if she’d just said something very stupid. “Not the *guest* rooms, the public space. If you’re going to have weddings with fifty people, you’ll need three bathrooms in the public areas of the venue.”

Was that true? Jane jerked her gaze toward the house. “We only have one...”

“Well, that’s going to be a problem.” Sandee’s voice held an air of superiority that grated on Jane. “And you won’t be able to add more until the town meeting the middle of next month.”

Jane’s hopes plummeted. The wedding was before that.

“I suppose you could always bring in porta potties.” Sandee wrinkled her nose, indicating her opinion of porta potties. “Well, good luck.” She flounced off back toward the ocean, leaving them all staring after her.

Sally made a face at Sandee. “Don’t listen to her. She’s a killjoy.”

But Jane was already starting to panic. She couldn’t use porta potties—the client had specifically stated she didn’t want that. Jane could’ve kicked herself. Why hadn’t she thought about the bathroom situation?

The inn had ten rooms. If ten couples stayed here, that would be almost half the guests that would have their own private bathrooms. Would that waive the three-bathroom rule if several of them had their own? Would ten couples from the wedding even stay at the inn?

“Look, I wouldn’t put much stock in what Sandee says,” Shane said soothingly. “But even so, maybe you should go down to the town offices tomorrow and find out what the real story is.”

Jane's phone pinged, and she pulled it out to see a text from her bank. "The wedding client made a deposit. I guess we're having a wedding."

"Holy smokes." Sally picked up her hammer and nails and headed toward the arbor. "We better get cracking. We only have a few weeks to get this place in shape."

Only a few weeks to line up caterers, tents, tables, flowers, and lord knew what else. Jane rushed back to her computer and got to work, assuring herself that the toilet situation was only a minor worry. Sandee probably just made all that up because she was mad that Jane didn't list Tides with her. At least now that she had some money, she could pay the food service. Of course, she'd need some to use for a deposit for the caterer and tent rental, but hopefully there would be some left she could funnel toward other bills. And if some of those wedding guests booked rooms, she'd get a small deposit and know that more was coming.

She was more than ready to take a break when Mike showed up with Cooper. As they set off down the beach, Jane was surprised to discover how much she'd been looking forward to their walk. She was really starting to get attached to Cooper, and Mike was good company.

They walked at a slow pace, and the conversation was simple and easy, like old friends'. *Just* friends, of course. Jane was sure that's all Mike was interested in. She actually felt embarrassed that the thought that he might have been asking her on a date had even crossed her mind. What was she thinking? She was old enough to be his... older sister. And that's probably exactly how he thought of her.

She glanced over at him as they walked. Sure, he was attractive, and she liked that he was tall—not many men were taller than her—but Mike didn't live here. He would be going back to Seattle, probably sooner rather than later. Jane had had enough of people that she cared about leaving her. She didn't want to get attached to someone else who would only be around for a short while. But being just *friends* while he was here couldn't be a bad thing, and besides, it was better for Cooper to have Mike around.

MIKE WATCHED Cooper bound after the piece of driftwood he'd just tossed. The sea air was invigorating, the sun warm on his back, the water

cold on his feet, and the company enchanting.

He and Jane walked along the edge of the surf, letting the water rush over their feet and up to their ankles. A shell caught his eye, and he bent to pick it up. It was a somewhat unusual shell—a squat brown-and-white spiral with a wide opening.

“Look at this. A basket whelk.” He held the shell out in his palm.

“You know what that is?” Jane seemed surprised. “Most people just call that a snail shell.”

“I’ve been interested in shells since I was a kid. I even found a fully intact purple dog whelk once when I was visiting Gramps years ago.”

Jane glanced out into the ocean. “There used to be a lot more shells when we were kids. I used to comb the beach religiously for them every day. I got pretty good at identifying them.”

“Me too,” Mike said. “It’s kind of sad that there’s not as many shells anymore. Where do you think they’ve all gone? And the sea glass too. There used to be tons of it in all different colors.”

“I remember.” Jane bent and picked something out of the surf. She held it out in the palm of her hand. It was a smooth, round shell in a bland beige, just shy of being luminescent. “What’s this one?”

Mike took it from her and turned it over in his hand. There were several types of shells that were similar in shape and size and color, but Mike knew the subtle differences. “That’s easy—this is a Northern moon snail.”

Jane laughed. “I guess I can’t trip you up.”

“Nope.” Mike handed the shell back to her, noticing how her nose crinkled and her blue eyes lit up when she laughed. She seemed less stressed than usual. Maybe it was being out at the beach, but he liked to think it had something to do with him. Probably more to do with Cooper, though.

As they sauntered along the edge of the beach, he resisted the urge to grab her hand. He wasn’t sure if that would be welcome. He thought it might be, but he didn’t want to do anything to ruin their blossoming friendship.

Cooper ran up and dropped a stick at their feet then proceeded to shake his wet coat, spraying drops of saltwater everywhere.

“Look out!” Jane and Mike both held up their hands, and Mike stepped in front of her to try to shield her from the onslaught.

It didn't work, and they were both covered with droplets. Jane didn't get mad, like some other girls he knew. She didn't whine about her hair or makeup being ruined. She simply laughed and rubbed Cooper's neck.

"You know, Cooper has a way of making one forget about their troubles. He lives in the moment and always has fun," Jane said.

"That's not a bad way to be," Mike said. "So, what's going on with the wedding at Tides?"

"Didn't I tell you? They sent in their deposit."

"That's great!" Mike glanced at Jane, but instead of looking happy about the wedding, she looked tense. "You don't seem very happy about that."

Jane sighed. "The truth is I'm a little worried about it. I've never taken on anything this big, and there may be a snag with permits."

"What kind of snag?"

Jane waved her hand dismissively. "Something about the bathrooms, but the person who mentioned that isn't exactly reliable. I'll know more when I talk to the people at the town hall. It's probably nothing."

"I'm sure that whatever it is, you can handle it."

Jane smiled and glanced at him. "I appreciate your confidence in me, but you don't know me that well. I like to stay in my comfort zone, so this is all scary territory for me."

"I know enough to know that you're confident and capable. You're going to do fine. And besides, sometimes it's good to get out of your comfort zone, don't you think?"

Jane hesitated for a minute, as if thinking it over. "I don't know. Maybe you're right."

Mike decided to steer the conversation toward something that would give Jane a positive outlook on the wedding. "I'm going to have your website finished tonight."

"Already? That's great! I don't feel like I paid you enough for that, though," Jane said.

"You might want to wait until you see it before you say that. I'll come over for breakfast tomorrow and walk you through it. You might decide it's not worth a few breakfasts."

Jane laughed. "I doubt that."

"Besides, you're keeping Cooper, and that's worth a lot. You know what it would cost to put him in the kennel?"

Jane glanced at Cooper. "Having him around is my pleasure. But you can still come for breakfast every day for as long as you're in Lobster Bay. I owe you at least that much."

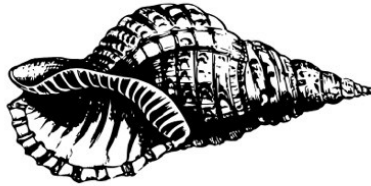
Mike glanced over and tried to read her face, but she was looking away from him toward the ocean. Did she really want him to come for payment, or did she like his company? "Home-cooked breakfasts are always welcome, but you don't need to do that. Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course. We have plenty of food."

"Okay, then I guess I won't look a gift horse in the mouth."

Jane smiled and tossed a piece of driftwood for Cooper. "Cooper will be very happy about that."

CHAPTER TWENTY



The next day, Jane helped Brenda with breakfast. Even though they only had two guests and Mike to feed—and Brenda could surely manage that on her own—Jane sometimes liked to help, as the familiar task of cooking breakfast helped her think.

“We might have a full inn again with this wedding. I’m going to need a lot of eggs and bacon.” Jane took care not to splatter her hand as she flipped over the pieces of bacon that sizzled in her grandmother’s cast-iron pan. “I’ve booked the Lobster Bay Clambake Company for the wedding, so we don’t have to worry about cooking food for that.” Good thing, too, as the kitchen was much too small to provide the types of meals that a wedding would require. If they were going to do weddings, they would all have to be catered.

Brenda soaked a thick piece of bread in the egg mixture she’d just mixed. “I might come up with some different dishes for breakfast. Maybe something fancier.”

Jane glanced at Brenda. New dishes? Tides had served the same things for breakfast for as long as she could remember. Then again, maybe fancier dishes would bring in more people. She thought back to Mike’s comment about getting out of her comfort zone. That applied to the small things as well. “Like what?”

“I don’t know. Eggs Benedict, quiche, breakfast sandwiches.”

“That does sound good. Maybe I should do some research and see what other inns offer.”

Brenda sliced off a chunk of butter and put it in another cast-iron frying pan, watching it melt. "Andie has already been down to eat. I told her to wait for a hot breakfast, but she grabbed a muffin and took it back to her room."

Jane frowned. "Really? Was she not feeling well?"

Brenda picked up the egg-soaked bread with tongs and laid it in the puddle of butter. "She didn't say much. Seemed a little down in the dumps."

It was probably that job she'd lost. Maybe Jane should've gone to her and said something to make her feel better. But now Jane had to wonder... if Andie's job wasn't so good back in New York City, would staying in Lobster Bay appeal to her?

Andie had offered to help with the inn, but were those just hollow words? Jane battled the urge to ask her sister to stay. What if Andie said no? Jane wasn't quite ready to open herself up to disappointment. Still, maybe she should run up there and see if Andie was okay. But Mike would be here any minute to show her the website. Maybe after that she could talk to Andie.

Jane's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the kitchen door. Outside stood a man in a suit holding a clipboard.

She went to the door and stood on the threshold. "Can I help you?"

The man stuck out his hand. "Hi, I'm Bob Grover from the Lobster Bay town offices. No one was in the lobby, so I figured I'd find you out back in the kitchen anyway."

Jane's stomach tightened even as she smiled at him and motioned for him to come into the kitchen. "What can I do for you?"

"I heard you're planning a wedding here, and I've come to check your facilities and make sure you have the appropriate permits."

"Where did you hear that?"

"I got a note on my desk." Bob smiled. "It might seem a little informal, but that's the way things happen here in Lobster Bay. Is this a bad time?"

Jane doubted someone randomly found out about the wedding and put a note on Bob's desk. No one knew about it except her friends, Andie, Mike, Shane, and Sally. None of them would go to the town hall. Jane knew exactly where the information had come from. Sandee Harris. It was no coincidence she had been blathering on about permits just yesterday. But why would Sandee try to ruin things for Jane? Was she purposely trying to make it so that Tides would fail so she could scoop it up at a cheap price?

“Not at all. What do you need to see?”

Jane walked Bob through the inn, showing him the main gathering area, the porch, and where everything would be set up outside.

“So, you won’t be cooking for the guests in the kitchen here, then?” Bob asked.

“No. We’re not set up for that. It’s going to be a catered lobster bake.”

“And the only structures are the portable dance floor and arbor?”

“Yep.”

Bob jotted something on his clipboard. “Okay, then. Looks like you don’t need a building permit, and since you’re not using the kitchen, there’s nothing to inspect there.” Bob pressed his lips together. “I’m not sure why this landed on my desk. I think you just need a variance for the clambake and gathering on the beach, but that’s no problem. You can see Mary down at the town offices and get one today.”

Jane had an idea why it had landed on his desk. Sandee was trying to make trouble. But that had backfired, as Bob had given the inn his blessing, and it wouldn’t be any problem to get the variance.

“Great. Thanks for coming.” Jane started walking toward the driveway, but Bob paused and turned. “How many guests did you say this wedding was going to have?”

Jane’s hopes sank. “About forty to fifty.”

Bob turned toward the inn. “And how many public bathrooms do you have in there?”

“Well, there are ten bathrooms, but those are with the rooms. The common area has one because every room has its own private bathroom.”

Bob rifled through a battered codebook. “That doesn’t matter. Even if the rooms are booked. Page fifty-six, section seventy-three, subsection A of the beach-gathering code says you have to have one toilet for every thirty guests at a gathering.” He looked up from the book, apologetic. “So that means you’re going to need another toilet. Of course, you can get Clean Day to bring some porta potties.”

Shoot! Porta potties wouldn’t do. “Maybe I could add a real bathroom...” She glanced around over at the inn. Where could she carve out some space for another bathroom? Off the living room? Maybe close off part of the porch? “How long would it take to add a bathroom?”

Bob shook his head. “I don’t think you can add one. That takes a special meeting with the town sewer-and-water committee. Because the property is

on the beach, there are special considerations, and they don't meet until next month. No exceptions there. Sorry, but you're only allowed as many bathrooms as the house originally had or were added before 1953."

Jane wanted to cry. She'd been getting her hopes up, thinking this wedding could solve all her financial problems, but now it looked like she might have to refund the deposit money that she'd already spent.

"I'm very sorry," Bob said.

"It's not your fault." Jane walked him up to the driveway, her hopes sinking even further. As if sensing her mood, Cooper pressed himself against her for comfort.

"Morning!" Jane turned to see Mike coming up the beach toward them. Cooper ran to him and did his tail-wagging routine.

Mike petted the dog, then his eyes filled with concern as he looked at Jane. "What's wrong?"

She told him about Bob's visit and the distressing news about the bathrooms.

He put his hand on her arm. It was warm and comforting. "That can't be right. There's got to be something you can do."

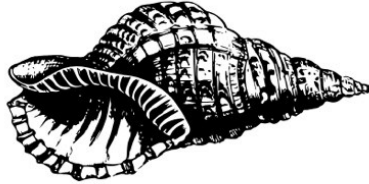
Jane sighed. "I don't know. It seemed pretty cut-and-dried. He made it pretty clear that the committee doesn't meet until next month, and the wedding is supposed to be in almost four weeks. Even if the meeting is the week before, it's not enough time. I can't keep the client hanging on, as they'd need to find another venue as soon as possible. It's almost impossible to get something last minute."

Mike pressed his lips together. "Let's not give up. There's got to be a way. We just need time to think about it."

"Maybe." Mike's words gave Jane a little encouragement. Maybe he was right and there was a way to work this out.

But what was this "we" stuff? He didn't need to make this his problem. Determined to think positive, she brightened. "Either way, I'm going to need a website, so let's go inside and see what this thing looks like."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Andie's grip tightened on the phone as she listened to Susie fill her in on everything that had been happening at work.

"And Elise has been spending a lot of time in Doug's office," Susie whispered into the phone after verifying that Elise had gotten the lead-appraiser position on the Richhaven job.

Andie used to spend a lot of time in Doug's office, too, but surprisingly the fact that she'd been cast aside for Elise didn't bother her at all. Her feelings for Doug had evaporated with his shoddy treatment. "Is there anything else going on? Any rumors of new jobs coming in?"

"Nope. Dull as a doornail here... whoops, I gotta go. Marcy is looking for me."

They hung up, and Andie glanced at the airline app on her phone, where she'd made a reservation for a flight for the next day.

It was time she headed back to New York City. If she didn't do anything to protect her job, she might end up as the low person on the totem pole. But unlike her previous visits to Lobster Bay, this time she was in no rush to get back. Maybe after all these years, the excitement of antiques appraisal had worn off. If she hadn't made that exciting find yet, what were the odds it would come along now? It wasn't like her career had been unsatisfying. There had been plenty of exciting small finds over the years.

Outside her window, the sunlight sparkled on the tops of the waves. Her visit to Lobster Bay had been a great change of pace from the city. It was slower here, less hectic. There were no interoffice politics, no married

bosses. If only there was more to do in this town—something she could sink her teeth into. Something that gave her a purpose.

She'd enjoyed working in the garden more than she'd thought possible. Speaking of which, she didn't want to leave it half finished. She'd have to get a move on if she wanted to complete the garden and visit her mother at Tall Pines before her flight tomorrow.

Standing, she stretched and made her way downstairs, creeping down the stairs slowly and peeking over the railing to make sure she didn't run into Shane Flannery. One good thing about leaving tomorrow was that it would ensure that she wouldn't have to see him again.

Jane was in the living room, staring at the wall of paintings that Chandler Vanbeck had said were so valuable. "Hey, sis, I..."

Jane turned, and Andie could sense that something was wrong. "Is something the matter?"

Jane shrugged. "I think we might have to sell one of these paintings after all. If you'll agree."

Andie's eyes flicked to the painting, a seascape with turbulent waves crashing on jagged rocks.

"What? Why?" She had a sinking feeling that the finances were a lot worse than her sister had let on. She'd felt something was off all along and should've insisted that Jane give her specifics, but she'd felt like it was none of her business. Jane had been taking care of this all along, and Andie was ashamed that she'd never once offered to help or asked how things were going. Who was she to butt in now?

Jane sighed. "I'm afraid the wedding might not happen. We have to put in a new bathroom to accommodate all the guests."

"Oh. Well, that seems problematic, but why do we need to sell a painting because the wedding is off? Are finances that bad?"

Jane looked as if she might cry, and Andie resisted the urge to hug her, not sure if the gesture would be welcome.

"I'm sorry. I guess I should've fessed up sooner. I just didn't want you to think that I'd ruined the family business, but the truth is finances are not okay. This wedding was going to bail us out," Jane said.

"Ruin the family business? I never would've thought that." Andie felt like a selfish jerk. How could things have gotten so messed up between them that Jane felt like Andie would blame her for ruining the business instead of knowing she would jump in to help her?

Plagued with guilt over leaving everything on Jane's shoulders, Andie was moved to solve the problem. "Okay, so the client doesn't want porta potties. Who could blame them? But could we add another bathroom?" Andie mentally added up the money in her 401(k). She could take some out—the heck with the penalty. Her sister needed her help, and that was more important.

"Where would we put it? The space is tight down here. Even if we could add another one, would we get it done in time for the wedding? And how would we pay for it? Not to mention that we need to wait for some special approval that we can only get during a meeting that doesn't happen until next month." Jane flapped her arms. "It's hopeless."

"Can you request an emergency meeting? What about the upstairs bathrooms? We have plenty of those." Andie couldn't believe how backward things were in these small towns.

"Those bathrooms go with the guest rooms, so they don't count. According to the man from the town hall, if we put in more bathrooms than the house originally had or were added when plumbing came along, then we need some special variance."

Standing there with her sister, surrounded by their family belongings and the ocean in the background, she could feel the memories bubbling up. How many times had she stood here with her sister? Her mother? Her grandmother?

This house was full of those memories. She should have read between the lines and realized things were this bad, but she had been too involved in her own problems. Suddenly, Andie realized that more than anything, she wanted Tides to prosper. More than her job back at Christie's, more than being part of a significant antiques find. She felt a sudden closeness with Jane that she hadn't felt since they were kids. Jane needed her. And not only that, but something about what Jane had just said sparked an idea in her brain.

"Wait a minute! Did you say something about the original bathrooms?" Andie asked.

"Yeah, I guess there's something grandfathered in. But this place didn't have bathrooms originally, remember? Gramps added them with his father when indoor plumbing took off."

"I remember. They had to reconfigure some bedrooms to turn it into an inn with private baths for every room," Andie said. "I'm not sure, though."

All might not be lost yet.”

“I doubt that. The guy was pretty sure that we couldn’t get a special meeting.” Jane cocked her head and squinted at Andie. “Was there something you wanted to talk to me about?”

“It was nothing.” Andie spun on her heel and started walking away. “Don’t cancel the wedding or do anything drastic until you talk to me.”

“Why? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll tell you later tonight! Until then, keep the faith.”

As Andie hurried out to her car, she opened the air-travel app on her phone and canceled the plane ticket. She didn’t want to say anything to Jane because she didn’t want to get her hopes up, but if Andie’s plan worked, Jane was going to need her help for this wedding—and maybe even beyond.

THE DRAMA with the bathrooms had made Jane and Cooper late for the weekly meeting with Maxi and Claire at Sandcastles. She’d walked from Tides because she needed the time to think, not only about the bathroom situation but also about Andie’s parting words. What in the world was she up to?

Maxi and Claire were already seated at a table on the sidewalk with a tray of pastries and mugs of coffee in front of them when she got there. They were midconversation, talking animatedly and gesturing. Jane slipped into a chair, and Cooper flopped down at her feet.

“And we can make the sandcastle cake with the colored frosting to match the wedding colors.” Claire slid the tray of pastries over toward Jane. “Don’t you think that would be great, Jane? Add a personal touch?”

“And I was thinking I could make a few special pillows to match the wedding party. It would bring all the decor together and make the weddings at Tides really special,” Maxi added. “We could place them on the rockers on the back porch.”

Her friends were so excited about the wedding that Jane almost didn’t have the heart to tell them about the bathroom problem. “Those sound like great ideas, but I’m afraid there might not be a wedding. At least not this summer.”

Their faces fell. “What? Why?”

Jane told them about her visit with Bob and the issue with the bathrooms. “The client specified no porta potties, so I’m not sure what to do. I can email them and see if they’ll make an exception given the tight schedule, but she seemed pretty adamant.”

“There must be something we can do,” Claire said.

Jane picked a pistachio muffin off the tray and broke it in half. “Andie said she had some kind of idea, but she wouldn’t say what it was, so I don’t know if it’s anything good.”

Claire pursed her lips. “Well, at least she’s trying to help now.”

Maxi patted Jane’s hand. “Don’t give up. Something else will come along.”

Jane sighed. “I know. It’s just disappointing.” She bit into the muffin and chewed for a few seconds. “At least I have a good website now.”

“Oh? So Mike made the website? I’ll have to check that out. He did a good job?”

“Yep. He put in everything I wanted and did it really quick too.” Jane bent down and patted Cooper’s head. “Thing is, he won’t take any payment. Just breakfast every morning at the inn.”

Claire and Maxi exchanged a look.

“He’s been coming over every morning?” Maxi leaned forward. “Tell us more.”

“There’s nothing really to tell.” Clearly Maxi thought there was more going on between her and Mike, and Jane wasn’t sure how to address that. Jane suddenly felt flustered, tongue-tied.

Luckily, Hailey saved Jane from having to answer more questions. As she carefully stepped over Cooper to top off their coffees, Maxi’s attention switched to the young single mother.

“Hailey, I was cleaning out some of the closets at home, and I found these old toys from when my daughters were kids.” Maxi rummaged in her giant tote bag, pulling out pencils, sketches, notebooks, erasers. Finally, she pulled out a little pink gift bag and presented it to Hailey. “Do you think Jennifer would like them?”

Hailey peered into the bag. “Yes, she loves dolls. That’s so nice of you to think of her.”

Maxi shrugged. “Well, it’s not like my girls are going to use them, and I hate to see them go to waste.”

Maxi's expression was somber. Why was she cleaning out her house? Jane knew that her friend cherished the childhood memories of her kids and was surprised to see her giving things away. Though she supposed one couldn't hold on to that stuff forever, and it wasn't unusual for her to bring gifts for Jennifer. Maybe it helped Maxi not feel so much like her nest was empty to know that the dolls went to good use.

Maxi started putting things back in her bag, and Jane saw that as the perfect opportunity to take the focus off herself. She turned to Claire. "Did Maxi tell you what my new guest, Chandler Vanbeck, said about her sketches?"

Claire looked at Maxi. "No? Who is Chandler Vanbeck, and when did he see your sketches?"

Maxi waved her hand dismissively. "It's nothing. They fell out of my bag when I was at Tides trying to come up with ideas for the wedding."

"It's not nothing," Jane said. "Andie said that Chandler is a renowned art critic. He saw Maxi's sketch and said it was quite good."

Claire sipped her coffee. "Well, that's no surprise. We all know Maxi is a fantastic artist."

"Oh, come on! It was just a rough sketch. He was probably just trying to be nice." Maxi tried to brush it off as if it was nothing, but Jane got this feeling that she was actually pleased and proud.

"I think you should do something with your artwork. Maybe have an art show or something. Don't you think, Claire?" Jane turned to look at Claire, but her friend's attention was riveted on something behind Jane. Jane turned to see Rob Bradford coming over from his bread store across the street.

"Hi, ladies," Rob said, his kind smile lighting his face. He nodded to Jane and Maxi, and then his eyes locked on Claire as if she were the Hope Diamond. He skirted around the plants, came over to the table, and kissed her on the cheek, causing her face to turn scarlet.

"Hi, Rob. How's the bread business?" Maxi asked.

"Pretty good. I was just going out to run some errands. Do you need anything, Claire?"

"No, thanks."

Rob raised his brows at Jane and Maxi. "Anyone else?"

"Nope, I'm good," Maxi said.

"Me too," Jane added.

“Okay, I’ll leave you ladies to your coffee.” Rob walked off, hands in his pockets, whistling.

“He comes over and asks if you need errands run?” Maxi said. “Looks like things are really cooking up with him.”

Claire squirmed primly in her chair. “He was just being neighborly.”

“Yeah, sure,” Maxi said. “No matter how you slice it, I think there’s some heat in the kitchen.”

Jane sipped her coffee, enjoying Claire’s discomfort. It was hilarious that she was pretending her relationship with Rob was no big deal but couldn’t wipe the smile off her face. “I can’t blame you, Claire. Rob’s a nice guy, and the fact that he knows how to cook is just the icing on top.”

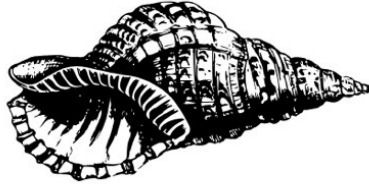
“Okay, guys. Stop!” Claire waved her hands, and they all burst out laughing.

Jane’s heart lifted. Her friends were happy and doing well. She’d been a bit worried about Maxi, but looking at her now, there was nothing to worry about. Surely that person she’d seen at the cottage with Sandee really hadn’t been James. It was all just her imagination.

Everyone was doing good... except her. Jane’s gaze dropped to her muffin, and she shoved another piece in her mouth, remembering how she’d used the deposit for the wedding to pay for the food delivery. If she canceled the wedding, she’d have to give the deposit back. Where would she get the money for that?

Hopefully, whatever Andie was up to would pan out. It was her only hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



The finances looked grim. Jane had tried jiggling this and moving that, but every way she looked at it, she came up short. The pinging of her phone with a text from Mike was a welcome distraction.

Can I pick up Cooper to visit Gramps?

Jane could use a break, so she messaged back suggesting she join them. She was due to visit her mother.

“Why don’t you come in and meet Gramps real quick?” Mike asked as they walked into the foyer of Tall Pines.

“Okay. I guess it would be nice to know some of the other residents.”

Mike led the way, and as they passed the locked door that led to the dementia wing, his face softened. “I’m sorry that your mom is in the dementia section. That must be hard. At least Gramps is still fairly sharp. He forgets stuff every once in a while and has trouble with self-care, but I’m grateful he’s not worse.”

Jane’s hand automatically felt for the comfort of Cooper’s head. “Thanks. It’s hard sometimes, but she can be lucid at times. I have to hang on to that. She seems to like it here, so that’s a relief.” Jane pushed away thoughts of how the money would run out in six months if she didn’t find a way to get Tides profitable.

When they got closer to Gramps’s room, Cooper sped up, running in ahead of them.

Mike and Jane got to the door in time to see his grandfather bent over, petting the dog, a look of pure joy on his face. Mike’s grandfather was a thin man with a wrinkled, weathered face and a full head of silvery hair.

“Have you been a good boy?” Gramps asked, happily accepting Cooper’s kisses. He glanced up at them. “Hi, Michael.” His gaze drifted to Jane. “Who is this?”

Jane stepped in and held out her hand. “Jane Miller.”

He put his hand in hers. It was worn and calloused but warm and friendly. “George Henderson.” His eyes drifted to Mike. “I see you finally found yourself someone suitable.”

“Oh no. We’re not...” Jane looked from George to Mike, not knowing what to say.

“Cooper is staying with Jane. And Jane’s mother is here in the dementia wing, so we decided to come together,” Mike said.

“Oh, I see.” George’s eyes twinkled, and he winked at Mike, as if not quite believing his explanation. Then he cocked his head to the side and looked at Jane. “Did you say your last name was Miller? Are you from Lobster Bay?”

Jane had kept her maiden name even when she’d been married. Though Miller was a common name, her family was well-known in Lobster Bay, and she was proud of it.

“Yes. My family has owned Tides, the inn on the beach, for generations.”

“Yes... yes. I knew your grandparents. Frank and Delta, right? Frank did me a big favor once. I’ll never forget that,” George said.

“That sounds like Gramps,” Jane said proudly. Her grandparents and her parents were all about helping people when they could. “Well, I’ll let you two visit.” She turned to Mike. “Should I meet you in the lobby?”

“Yeah. How does an hour sound?” Mike asked.

“Sounds good.” Jane took off back toward the dementia wing.

Mike was lucky his grandfather still had his memories, but she was lucky, too, because Addie still remembered *sometimes*. Jane had seen that some of the other patients here were much, much worse, and she decided to be grateful for what she had.

Her mother was in her room this time, asleep in the chair with a book in her hand. She looked peaceful, like a child without any worries. Perhaps that was what she was. Maybe being in the state that she was in and being well cared for wasn’t so bad after all. The painting she’d seen Addie doing the other day was hanging on the wall, fresh laundry sat folded on top of the bureau, and the room was clean.

“You watch out for that one.” A woman with a walker was approaching from the other end of the hall. “She’s got sticky fingers.”

“Sticky fingers?” Jane asked.

“Steals things.” The woman stopped at the door. “In fact, I think she has my sweater.”

The woman started into the room. Just then a nurse came along and grabbed her gently by the elbow. “Now, Sadie, come along. Didn’t you want to go to the puzzle room?”

Sadie scowled at the nurse. “Puzzle room? Oh yeah. I did. That’s right. I’m working on that piece with the moose in it.”

She let the nurse lead her away. As they were walking down the hall, Jane heard her ask, “Say, have you seen my sweater with the seashell buttons?”

Addie had been awakened by the noise, and she smiled at Jane benignly. Jane’s stomach swooped. Addie didn’t recognize her.

“Hello,” Addie said in her polite tone reserved for strangers.

“Hi.” Jane stepped over to the painting and pointed at it. “This is a lovely painting. Did you do it?”

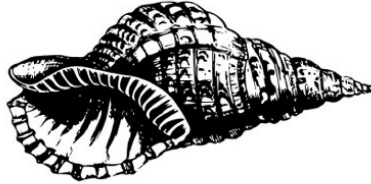
Addie smiled proudly. “Yes. Do you see how I made the highlights and contrasted the colors?”

“I do.” Jane noticed the lunch tray on her desk. “Did you have a good lunch? What was it today?”

Addie frowned, as if trying to remember, then she brightened. “Oh yes, it was very good. Hot dogs. I like mine a bit crispier, but what can you do? The service in this hotel isn’t like the Park Plaza.”

Jane sat on the end of the bed, and her mother put the book aside. “Now, was there something you wanted to talk to me about? You’ll have to make it quick. We have a sing-along before supper, and I don’t want to miss it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Maxi stared at the ocean beyond the wall of glass windows in her living room. It was suppertime, and the summer sun was low in the sky, bouncing off the waves and turning the sail on the boat in the distance bright white. What color blue would she use to capture that scene if she were painting. Cerulean? No, it was lighter. Maybe manganese with a touch of green.

She turned away from the window, her thoughts turning to her friend. Jane had talked a good talk at Sandcastles that morning, but Maxi could see she was worried about Tides. Jane needed the money from the wedding to keep Tides going. Jane wouldn't burden Maxi or Claire with her problems, but Maxi wished there was some way she could help. Maybe she could approach James about giving Jane a low-interest loan. *If* James ever came home. These days he hardly ever showed up for dinner.

As if trying to prove her a liar, the front door opened. He smiled when he saw her, just like old times. It was as if nothing was wrong, which made Maxi wonder if something actually was wrong or if it was all her imagination.

"Hey, honey." As he walked toward her, she was struck by how handsome he was. Over the last years, he'd gained a few wrinkles, a couple of extra pounds, and some gray hair, but he still made her heart beat faster, just like he had when they'd first met. He came over and kissed her cheek, the spicy smell of his aftershave bringing up all kinds of emotions. Funny, he wasn't acting like a man who was having an affair.

"Something smells great. What's for supper?"

“Pot roast.” Maxi wasn’t sure why she still cooked big meals. With the kids gone and James working late most nights, it was usually a waste. But old habits die hard. Or was she just desperate to have things return to the way they were before?

He looked pleased. “My favorite. Roasted potatoes too?”

Maxi nodded. “The way you like them.”

“Can I help you with anything?” He took his jacket off, folded it precisely, then laid it over the back of the sofa.

“I guess you could set the table.” Maxi didn’t bother setting the table anymore, since she never knew if he would be home.

She followed him to the kitchen and checked on the potatoes while he pulled out plates, silverware, and glassware.

“How was your day?” he asked as he meticulously placed the items on the modern granite table.

“Great. You?” *Did you inspect any beach cottages with Sandee Harris?*

James shrugged. “Boring. You want wine?”

“Sure.”

They ate, settling into the familiar routine, just like thousands of meals they’d eaten before. It was as if nothing was wrong, and Maxi again wondered if she was just being overly sensitive. Emboldened by their closeness, or maybe by the wine, she asked, “I was wondering, were you at one of the beach cottages the other day?”

James glanced away, taking a sip of wine. “The cottages? No. Why would I be at a cottage?”

Maxi studied him for a second, her heart breaking. After thirty years, she knew all his tells. James was lying.

“Oh, no reason.” She focused on her pot roast, trying to keep tears at bay as she moved the pieces from one side of the plate to the other. Her appetite was gone. An awkward silence fell.

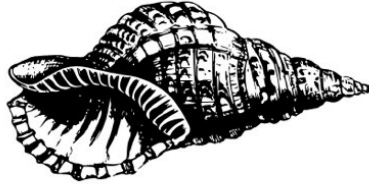
Why hadn’t she asked him point-blank about Sandee? What was wrong with her? Didn’t she have the guts to confront him?

But she had no evidence. Even Jane was now saying that it wasn’t James that she’d seen. And a business card was hardly proof of anything. What if she accused him and was wrong? Infidelity was a pretty serious accusation, and it would definitely put a wedge between them. No, she’d watch and wait until she could get solid evidence. Meanwhile, she’d use the

time to get all her ducks in a row, make sure he didn't control the finances so he could cut her out.

Once she had evidence and things were set so that she'd come out of this with her fair share, she *would* confront him. She had no intention of turning into one of those wives who just ignored her husband's infidelities.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“I’m almost done with these spindles on the main stairs. What do you think?” Sally stood back, admiring her handiwork.

Jane was impressed. The turnings in the spindles matched exactly.

“Nice job.”

“Shane helped.”

“Seems like he’s doing great work.” Jane turned back to the paintings she’d been studying. They were similar to the ones in the living room and just as old. They did have a lot of them, and maybe if they had to sell just one, it wouldn’t be so bad.

“Ah-yuh.” Sally lingered instead of going back to work. “Those are nice paintings. Always liked those.”

“Me too. Chandler Vanbeck said the ones in the living room are really valuable.”

Sally scowled. “You’re not thinking of selling them?”

“We might have to. Without another bathroom, the wedding will probably fall through, and we’re running low on funds.” Jane hated to admit it, but she supposed she was going to have to say it out loud at some point.

“Didn’t Andie say she had a plan?” Sally asked.

Did Sally hear everything that went on around the inn?

“Yeah, but then she took off, and I haven’t heard from her.”

Sally started picking up her tools. “Have some faith. That girl will come around. You’ll see.”

Jane turned back to the painting. She wasn’t so sure about that. If Andie followed her usual pattern, she was probably booking a flight back to New

York right now.

The front door flew open, and Andie rushed in. “Big news! I’ve just been to the town hall. I talked to the building inspector, the town clerk, even the town attorney.”

“And?” Jane asked. Andie’s face was flushed with excitement, her body nervous with energy.

“It turns out that we can put two more bathrooms in, and we don’t need a special variance.” Andie fist-bumped Sally then turned to Jane, her fist out.

Jane was skeptical but bumped knuckles with her anyway. “We can? How did you wrangle that?”

“I didn’t really have to wrangle anything. Something you said about the existing bathrooms triggered a thought in my mind. Remember the three-seater outhouse that we use for storage?”

“Yeah, I remember we used to play there as kids. Yuck. But it’s all run-down and gross. It’s worse than a porta potty. That will never fly with the wedding client.”

“We’re not going to use the outhouse. The town clerk said that you needed a special variance if you wanted to add more than the *existing* bathrooms. Well, come to find out those bathrooms in the outhouse count as existing.”

“They do?” Jane was having a hard time believing it could be this easy. “But they’re not hooked up to plumbing or anything.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s a loophole because the bathrooms existed originally with the house. I’ve run into similar things in my business. Not with bathrooms but with existing laws and things grandfathered in. That’s what made me think of it.” Andie pulled a piece of paper out of her bag. “I have the permit to renovate the outhouse with a functioning bathroom right here. No special variance necessary.”

Jane’s spirits lifted. On impulse, she hugged Andie. It was a little awkward and stiff, but it was a start. “That’s great news. We can still have the wedding. Shoot! Except... how can we build an entire bathroom structure in four weeks?”

“I bet we could do it in two weeks with the right people,” Sally piped up. “We built one for the Andersons in eight days.”

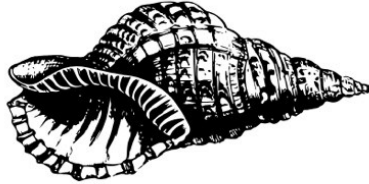
Jane was still doubtful. “Seriously? Where would we find people to work on it on such short notice?”

Sally winked. "I know a lot of people in this town that don't want to see Tides go under. Your grandparents helped their grandparents, and they'll be happy to repay the favor. Lord knows what they would build here if you had to sell, and no one wants some new monstrosity coming in. With a little bit of persuasion and a few favors, people will be able to shuffle their schedules around."

Jane couldn't believe it. "Do you really think so?"

"Ah-yuh. And I know we can persuade Ralph Marchand to do the plumbing. Good thing Claire already greased the skids with him by plying him with all those free pastries when he was fixing the pipes at Sandcastles."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



The next week flew by in a blur of permit getting, supply ordering, and contractor hiring. Before Jane knew it, the old outhouse building had been cleaned out and demolished. A backhoe had dug a hole for the foundation of the small bath building that would replace it, and concrete had been poured.

The design of the bath building was simple, but the white siding and nautical-blue trim would match with Tides. Things couldn't have worked out more perfectly because this separate bathroom would come in handy if Jane had events out in the garden. People wouldn't have to traipse back into the inn this way, and Andie had suggested adding a planting bench with a sink and a foot-wash station for people coming from the beach on one side.

Maxi and Andie had bonded over coming up with the design for the bathroom. Jane was happy to leave it to them. They'd taken several trips to the local home-fixer-upper store, picking out toilets and sinks and fixtures. Andie had even managed to get a coupon so everything could be bought at a discount.

Thankfully, a second wedding deposit came in, and wedding guests were booking rooms at the inn for the days surrounding the wedding.

The project was expensive, though, so Jane had taken out a small equity line of credit on Tides, thanks to Maxi and James, who had pushed it through quickly for her. The interest rate on a line of credit was much lower than a regular loan, and it was faster to get and better than charging things on credit cards.

Jane was heartened by the way people had juggled their schedules to accommodate her. Many of the local business owners had taken over the businesses from their parents, who had been friends of Jane's parents. And they all wanted to help their neighbor.

The permits had been sped through the system. Shane and Sally had worked double time on the bathroom, arbor, and dance floor. Jane suspected they weren't even charging her for some of their hours. Claire had made some extra pastries to bribe Ralph Marchand to drop what he was doing and plumb the building as soon as they were ready.

Jane stood with her feet planted in the sand and Cooper at her side, watching workers nail down the roofing on the small building. She could hardly believe it was really happening.

Woof!

Cooper bounded off to meet Mike, who was walking up the beach toward Tides. He'd texted earlier to see if he could take Cooper to visit his grandfather at Tall Pines and had invited her to go with them, but she had so much to do here that she couldn't go.

"Things are really coming along. Looks like you'll be able to have the wedding after all." Mike was clearly happy for her, but Jane's excitement dimmed a little. There was still one fly in the ointment.

"Maybe. There is one problem. We still need to hook up to the sewer lines at the street, and for that we need the town sewer people to come out. We've almost got everything ready for them, but they have a full schedule, and it might take several weeks before they can fit us in. They said they'd call if there was a cancellation, but there's a chance we might not be able to get the bathroom up and running in time."

Mike frowned. "You've come this far. Something like that can't stop you now. Are all the other plans moving forward?"

Jane nodded. "Wedding guests are already starting to book rooms for that weekend. Maxi is making special pillows. Claire is matching the cake to the bridesmaids' dresses. It would be a tragedy if I had to call it off now. I mean, not only will it be bad for Tides, but these poor people will never be able to book another venue in time." Jane sighed, feeling the weight of ruining someone's wedding on her shoulders. They had a few weeks before the wedding, but Jane would feel a lot better if the bathrooms were up and running now. What if something happened to delay the completion and she

had to cancel at the last minute? That would surely result in some bad reviews.

Mike put a hand on her arm. “Don’t worry. You still have a few weeks. And besides, I think I might be able to help.”

“How?”

“Leave that to me.”

As Jane watched him leave, she realized that Mike and Cooper might not be around much longer. She’d gotten attached to the dog, and the thought of the inn without him almost brought tears to her eyes. Was it time for her to do something to try to make it permanent? And could she really hope that whatever Mike was going to do would save the day?

ANDIE HAULED the flat of petunias out of the trunk of her rental car. She’d been lucky and had snagged some of the pink-and-white-striped variety. Her mother had always used them to edge the garden, but they were rare, and she’d been lucky to find them at the garden store.

The garden was coming along nicely. It should be in pretty good shape by the wedding. It would take longer to fully build out the way her mother had always kept it, though. Maybe if she stayed the rest of the summer... but *was* she going to stay that long? The thought wasn’t unappealing. These last few days had made her realize she really didn’t have much waiting for her in New York. And Jane needed her here now.

She was treasuring the time with her mother, even with her failed memories. Andie felt like she was getting to know her better on a different level. She’d even brought some of the flowers in on her visit this afternoon and asked for her mother’s advice. Addie had lit up. Surprisingly, she hadn’t forgotten a thing about planting flowers and proceeded to tell Andie just where to put each color, how to pinch off the leaves for bushier growth, and when to water them.

If she returned to New York, she wouldn’t be able to see her mother at all. Even though Addie was in good physical shape, she wasn’t going to live forever.

Glancing out at the ocean, she took a deep breath. It was so different from the city here. In New York, when you took a deep breath, you inhaled

diesel fumes. In Lobster Bay, it was saltwater and sunshine.

The sounds of hammering made her smile. She was proud of the way the bathhouse was turning out. It had been a lot of fun working with Maxi to design it. They'd picked out fixtures, pored over paint samples, and had even found a few cute decorations. Maxi had a great eye for color and decorating, and the two of them shared a common passion for design. If Andie stayed here in Lobster Bay, she imagined that she and Maxi might even become friends.

She hauled the flat to the garden area, surprised to see a man with a young toddler there. The toddler laughed and pointed at the hummingbird feeder as the tiny brightly colored birds buzzed around it.

She laid the flat down on the ground and paused to watch. Andie never regretted not having children, but the baby tugged at her heartstrings. Grandchildren might have been nice. Still crouched at the child's level, she called out, "Magical, aren't they?"

The child turned to her, smiling, but before he could answer, someone yelled from behind her.

"There's my favorite boy!"

Her heart leaped at the familiar voice. It was Shane, and he was coming toward them. He swooped in and scooped up the child, holding him up in the air. The child kicked and screeched with delight.

He turned to Andie. "Hi, Andie. This is my grandson, Caleb." He settled Caleb on his hip. "Can you say *hi*?"

The little boy smiled and flexed his chubby fingers at her, and Andie couldn't help but smile and wave back.

"Looks like me, don't you think?"

Andie glanced between the two of them, her lips tugging in a smile. "He's much more handsome."

Shane laughed then introduced the man. "This is my son, Greg. And this is Caleb. Greg, Andie Miller. Her family owns Tides."

Andie shook hands with Greg then returned her attention to the baby. Shane tickled him, and he laughed hysterically. It helped ease the tension. Why had she been avoiding Shane? It seemed silly now. Clearly, he wasn't mad or holding a grudge. She'd been making too much of their past. In fact, it looked like he didn't even remember their teen romance or the way she'd broken things off.

One of the reasons she'd avoided Lobster Bay all these years was because she felt guilty about the way she'd ended things with Shane. Now she felt foolish and self-absorbed. It appeared that Shane had moved on from her years ago. He'd been married and now had children and grandchildren.

Now that she didn't feel awkward with Shane and she was making inroads with her relationship with Jane, she had even more reasons to stay and even fewer reasons to return to New York City.

SHANE'S HEART swelled at the joy in Caleb's eyes. Having a grandchild had changed everything for him. He'd never known he could experience such love. Well, maybe once when he'd been young. And Andie had been that love.

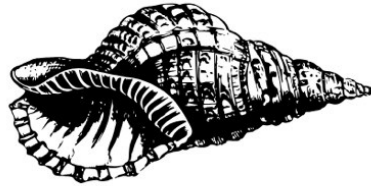
But he was older now, and that had all been in the past, water under the bridge. Yet looking at her laughing with that wicked twinkle in her hazel eyes brought it all flooding back. It didn't help that she still looked much like that young girl he'd fallen in love with. She still wore her hair in that sleek ponytail. She'd filled out a bit, but only in the right places. She was no longer the skinny girl he'd once proposed to.

But Andie was an adult now, with her own life in New York City. She probably had a boyfriend. And a lot of responsibility, if her demeanor since she'd been here was any indication. She wasn't carefree like she had been back in high school. But every once in a while, like now, he caught a glimpse of the girl he once knew in high school, and it made his heart beat faster.

Better not get wrapped up in her again, Shane cautioned himself. She'd hurt him once, and she was only staying in town for a short while. Or was she? He'd overheard some snatches of conversation, and Sally had mentioned some things that indicated she might be having second thoughts about that.

Shane didn't dare get his hopes up. Even if Andie *was* staying, he knew he would have to bide his time if he wanted to get to know the mature version of Andie better. At least she had stopped avoiding him now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Sitting on the back porch of Tides in the moonlight was one of Jane's favorite ways to end the day. It was peaceful with the wide swath of empty beach in front of her and the vastness of the dark night sky, its billions of stars stretching forever over the ocean. The waves crashing on the beach had a relaxing cadence. The glass of wine didn't hurt either.

Andie opened one of the French doors and poked her head out. "There you are. Want some company?"

"Sure. I have crackers and cheese, if you're hungry. Grab a wineglass." Jane held up the bottle.

Andie disappeared back inside then came back out, juggling a wineglass along with an armful of items. Jane filled Andie's wineglass as she settled into the creaky rocker.

Cooper, who was lying next to the railing, kept his eye on the plate of cheese and crackers as if he were willing a morsel of cheese to drop on the floor.

"I wanted to show you some of the paint samples and fixtures that Maxi and I picked out for the bathroom."

The excitement in Andie's voice was contagious, and Jane's spirits lifted as Andie showed her paint cards, pictures of faucets, and flooring samples. Everything was perfect, from the simple lines of the fixtures to the nautical accents.

"And I found these adorable blue-and-white striped hand towels. Of course, we'll have a hand dryer in there, too, but these will look cute rolled up on a shelf like you would see in a spa."

“That will give it a little bit of class.” *Hopefully not too many people use them*, Jane thought, mentally adding up the laundry bill.

Andie took a sip of wine and gazed out toward the ocean. “So, it’s all coming together, if we can just get the sewer hookup.”

“Yeah, if...” Jane let her voice trail off. She’d waited on pins and needles for the sewer department to call with an opening in their schedule, but so far, nothing. She didn’t want to voice what might happen if they couldn’t. She’d taken out a loan, rooms were booked, and she didn’t have enough money to give everything back. Not to mention the poor bride who was counting on them to host her special day.

Andie reached for a cracker. Cooper’s ears perked up.

“Don’t worry. It will all work out. I have a good feeling.” She chewed thoughtfully. “This was a fun project, and I had fun working with Maxi. I never really got to know her or Claire very well because you guys were so much younger than me in high school. It wasn’t cool for seniors to hang out with freshmen.”

Jane laughed. “Funny how age made such a big difference back then and not so much now.”

Andie washed down her cracker with a sip of wine. “Sure is.”

They rocked in silence. Jane felt content sitting here with her sister. It didn’t escape her that Andie had stayed longer than her usual two or three days. Was she thinking about moving here permanently? Jane wasn’t sure how she felt about that, but she had to admit the last few days with Andie had been very pleasant. She wanted to tell her sister that but wasn’t sure exactly how.

“Maxi seemed a little distracted. Is she okay?” Andie asked.

Andie had picked up on that too? Maybe it wasn’t just Jane’s imagination. Still, she didn’t want to voice her worries to Andie. Maxi and James’s relationship was her friend’s personal business, and Andie was practically a stranger. “I think so. She’s a recent empty nester and trying to adjust.”

“Oh, I guess that must be hard.”

Jane glanced at Andie. She was staring straight at the ocean, but there was a tenseness in her jaw that indicated maybe Andie had some problems of her own. Well, it would all come out in time.

Andie flipped a piece of cheese to Cooper, who caught it expertly in the air. “Will Cooper be staying on here at Tides?”

“I’m not sure. Do you think that’s a good idea? I don’t want to do anything that could be off-putting to potential guests.”

Andie shrugged. “We have guests now that seem to love him. Maybe it would actually attract guests.”

“I like having him here.” In fact, Jane couldn’t imagine *not* having him here. Mike had said he couldn’t keep him in Seattle. What would happen to him when Mike went back home?

“What about Mike?” Andie asked.

Jane glanced over to see Andie watching her. “What about him?”

“Is he leaving? Will he take Cooper?”

“I suppose he’ll go back to Seattle at some point.” The thought made Jane’s chest constrict uncomfortably. “He said he didn’t have room for Cooper there.”

“How do you feel about that?” Andie asked.

“I’d like Cooper to stay here, but technically he belongs to Mike. Actually, to Mike’s grandfather. If he stayed here, though, I could bring him to visit at Tall Pines.”

Andie piled some cheese on another cracker. “I meant how you felt about Mike leaving.”

Jane frowned. “What do you mean? I guess he’s become a friend but...”

Andie snorted. “Friend? I wonder if that’s what he’d say. Maybe it’s time you thought about letting someone in. You know, besides Cooper. It’s been a long time since Brad died. You deserve someone to care about you.”

“You mean Mike? I’m sure he doesn’t feel that way about me. He probably thinks of me as an older sister. I am quite a bit older than him.”

“I doubt that. I’ve seen the way he looks at you, and besides, you yourself said earlier that age doesn’t matter so much once you get to be older.”

Jane took a gulp of wine. Was it true what her sister said about Mike looking at her? She was eight years older than him, but when they were together, she didn’t feel it. She was uncomfortable with the way the conversation was going and decided to turn the tides on her sister. “I saw you happily chatting with Shane. Looks like you didn’t need to avoid him after all.”

“I wasn’t avoiding him. I just didn’t go out of my way to talk to him.” Andie’s tone was indignant.

“Uh-huh.” Judging by the way Andie started rocking faster in the chair and avoided eye contact, Jane could tell there was more to that story. She decided to give her a break and instead asked, “How’s the garden coming along?”

Andie relaxed, excitement taking over as she talked about the various flowers she had planted and her plans for future plantings. “Of course, I have to be mindful of budget, but I think in time we can make it as pretty as Mom used to have it.”

Jane agreed. But it sounded like doing that might take a while, and she had to wonder once more: Was Andie considering staying permanently in Lobster Bay? And did Jane want her to?

ANDIE COULD FEEL the excitement bubble up inside her as she talked about the garden. She’d forgotten how much she’d loved gardening as a kid. Her current lifestyle in New York City didn’t give her much time to think about gardens. Much of her job consisted of being locked away in dusty attics and moldy basements hunting for valuables amid broken-down castoffs. She hadn’t realized how much she missed working outdoors.

Not to mention that rambling on about hydrangeas, petunias, and hostas got her sister off the subject of Shane Flannery. Talking to him in the garden earlier had stirred up old feelings that she’d thought had been long buried.

“You must be eager to get back to your job. It sounds like you missed out on an opportunity, from what Chandler Vanbeck said the other day.” Jane’s look of concern warmed Andie’s heart.

“Yeah, but I think taking some time off is doing me good.” Andie hadn’t missed the job as much as she thought she would. She was keeping herself busy, and the garden work was important. The bathroom project had been invigorating and a good change of pace. These projects would help bring Tides back to profit, and that was important. But once they were done, would Lobster Bay seem like the same boring small town it had been in her youth, or had her priorities changed?

“The ocean has a way of setting one’s perspective.” Jane turned to her. “I’m glad you’re here. Mom has perked up a lot since you came.”

“She has?” Andie hadn’t considered that her presence would have a healing effect on their mom.

Jane nodded and picked up the wine bottle. “More?”

Andie held out her glass. “I like Tall Pines. It’s a nice place. You did a good job finding it. I’m sorry I didn’t help more with that.” Whew, there! She’d been working out how to convey to her sister that she felt guilty about not being here to help with those decisions. One small little apology didn’t make up for all of it, but it was a start.

“It’s been a big help having you here to visit with her, especially with this project.” Jane gestured toward the bathroom project and the area where the wedding would be held. “I wouldn’t be able to manage it if I didn’t have you to help out with visiting her.”

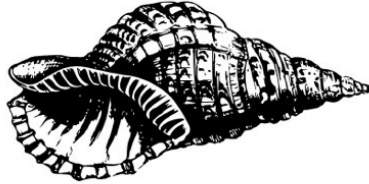
Andie settled back and sipped her wine. Jane’s words soothed her and removed the doubt that her sister didn’t want her here. Would it be possible for her to start over in her hometown? What would she do here? Would she get bored? It was definitely a slow pace, but she was getting tired of the cutthroat antiques business. People didn’t realize how much competition there was for the good estates, and one had to be on their A game all the time. Andie wasn’t getting any younger, and the constant competition had become a bit tedious. She wasn’t exactly excited about the idea of going back and working with Doug again either.

Maybe she would never find that big antiques score here in Lobster Bay, but the town did have other benefits. Not the least of which was that she’d be able to visit her mother every day and reconnect with her sister. Her mother’s words came to mind.

The city won’t give you what you really want. Your roots are here.

She’d been in the city for thirty years and still felt a void. Her mother might be losing her memory, but apparently her advice was still spot-on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



The inn was fully booked for the wedding, but Jane wouldn't allow herself to feel hopeful. She still hadn't received a call from the sewer department. She'd hoped a miracle would happen and someone would cancel or they'd finish up some other jobs faster. Maybe that had just been wishful thinking.

If she didn't hear from them soon, she'd have to tell the bride there would be no wedding unless they had porta potties. They might cancel, and there would go all her bookings. But it wasn't fair to the bride to wait until the last minute. She might be able to book something more suitable if she had enough notice.

If only Andie could work a miracle like she had with the bathroom situation in the first place. Hadn't Mike said he thought he could help? She hadn't heard from him since.

As if the universe was reading her thoughts, her phone pinged with a text from Mike. He couldn't make it for breakfast.

Don't worry about payment. You've paid me enough and have been taking Cooper. We're even!

Jane's spirits sank. Mike was saying goodbye. He must be getting ready to go back home and didn't want to get her hopes up about their friendship and so was distancing himself. That meant he'd be thinking of what to do with Cooper.

Jane looked down at the dog sleeping at her feet. "Well, Coop, looks like we might have to do something drastic to stay together."

She clipped the leash on Cooper's collar and went out the back to walk on the beach. Mrs. Weatherlee was seated at one of the round tables Jane had put out for people to dine on the back deck. The old woman called out to her as she started down the steps, "The place looks great!"

"Thanks." Jane backtracked and stopped at her table.

Mrs. Weatherlee seemed delighted to see Cooper, feeding him a piece of bacon and petting him excitedly. "It does me good to see the old place getting a face-lift and a new purpose. Your grandparents would be happy."

"You knew my grandparents?" Jane had never even thought to ask her.

"Oh, sure. Everyone in Lobster Bay knew everyone else back in the day. It's much the same now, at least with the families that have been here for generations, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess it is." Though the town had grown and she didn't know *everyone* anymore, Jane felt proud to be part of such a community where the people you did know went out of their way to help out.

"Now, don't you worry dear. Everything is going to be fine," Mrs. Weatherlee assured her as Jane headed back down the steps. Jane wished she could be so sure.

She took Cooper for a brisk walk. Even watching the carefree dog bound along after the sticks she threw didn't raise her spirits. She checked her phone for the millionth time. No call or message from the sewer department. After an hour, she headed back to Tides. She was running out of time.

They detoured over to the bathhouse, where Andie was supervising the offloading of toilets. Jane peeked in the building to see Ralph Marchand on his back under the sink, connecting the pipes. A bag of pastries with the Sandcastles logo sat on the vanity.

"Almost done in here," he said. "I've got another job out in Perkins Cove, but once they get the lines hooked up out at the street, call me and I'll come right over to get things squared from this end."

"Will do." Jane was heartened by Ralph's quick turnaround, but it didn't erase her worry over the fact that everything might be for nothing if the sewer department didn't find time in their schedule.

Cooper suddenly raced over toward Tides. Mike was coming around the corner, but not from the beach as he usually did. He was coming from the front. How odd.

Had he driven and parked in the driveway? Her stomach swooped. Why would he drive here? Was he leaving now and had come to take Cooper?

Mike crouched to pet Cooper then looked up at Jane. "I've got good news."

"You do?" She couldn't imagine what it might be.

"Turns out Gramps still has contacts in the town water and sewer department. He called in a favor and got the connection here at Tides fast-tracked."

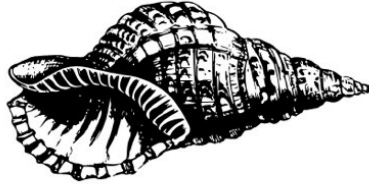
"He did? What does that mean, actually?"

Mike looked at his watch. "It means that they're going to be here in two hours to hook up the water and sewer to your bathhouse."

Jane didn't know what to say. Was it really going to happen in time?

At Jane's obvious fluster, Mike grabbed her hand and squeezed. "Looks like you're going to get the bathroom finished in time for the wedding."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Andie stood on the back porch, watching Ralph Marchand hook the sewer and water lines to the bathroom. The town had come and hooked them up at the street, and now Ralph was here to hook everything up to the building and test the lines.

There was an air of excitement about the group gathered around the bathhouse as they watched. Several people stood around chatting. Jane looked happy and the most relaxed Andie had seen her. Claire was handing out scones from her bakery. Maxi laughed as she chatted with Sally. Even Cooper wagged his tail faster than usual.

The door opened, and Chandler came out.

He took a deep breath of air and let it out slowly. "There's nothing like the sea air."

"That's for sure," Andie said.

"Looks like you've got a project going on over there."

"Yes, we're putting in a bathroom so we can hold events and weddings here."

"It's looking good. Well, I'm off back to the city today." Chandler glanced at the ocean. "I kind of hate to leave, but duty calls. Are you staying on?"

Good question. "I'm not sure. My world is about antiques, and this town isn't like the big city. There's not a lot of old antiques."

Chandler frowned. "Oh, I wouldn't necessarily say that. These old towns are rife with treasures. Yankee families never throw anything out. You never know what you could find in these attics." Chandler turned

around, surveying the area. “And I hear there’s a very old house on the cliff that has some interesting history.”

“Sadie Thompson’s house. She’s in the assisted living facility with my mom.” Andie had heard several rumors about the house that ranged from it being the headquarters of Blackbeard the pirate to it being a stop on the Underground Railroad. She didn’t believe any of them, but it was the oldest house in town and had been in the same family for generations.

A car horn tooted in the driveway. Chandler reached in his pocket and pulled out a card. “I have to run, but I was wondering if you would give this to Maxi. I’m going to be opening an art gallery, and I’d be interested in talking to her if she ever wanted to do a showing.”

Andie took the card. It was made of thick paper with embossed lettering. “I think she might like that. I’ll make sure she gets it.”

Laughter from over at the bathhouse drew her attention. Claire, Jane, and Maxi were clustered around the little shutters with the starfish cutouts. Someone must’ve told a joke because they were practically doubled over with laughter. It made Andie smile. It was good to see Jane happy, without the constant worry lining her face. She was lucky to have friends like Maxi and Claire to help her.

Andie didn’t have any friends she could depend on like that. She’d been too focused on her career, and everyone in her circle was too busy trying to make a name for themselves to have much time to hang out. But things in Lobster Bay were more relaxed, and there was more time for friends.

Maybe it was time for her to make a change. She started toward Jane, Claire, and Maxi with Chandler’s card.

MAXI STARED down at the card in her hand. It was fancy, made with thick ivory paper and black embossed letters. A show in an art gallery? She didn’t think so—she was just a hobbyist.

She glanced over toward Tides, but Chandler was gone. “Thanks. But I don’t think I’m ready for that.” But even as she said the words, a tiny little flutter of excitement sprouted inside her rib cage.

Suddenly there was a seed of hope for her future. Something that didn’t depend on James. Something that was just about her.

She longed to confide in Jane and Claire about her suspicions. Normally they told each other everything, but this was such a sensitive subject. James's reputation was at stake, and she couldn't say it out loud until she was one-hundred-percent sure. All she had right now was a card with a woman's number and a sneaking suspicion.

Then there were the kids to think about. They were grown adults, but she still didn't want to talk badly about their father to them. This was a delicate matter and needed to be handled properly. Though she trusted Jane and Claire implicitly, she wasn't ready to say the words out loud. Not yet.

And besides, Jane was so happy now with things going well at Tides, and things were working out nicely for Claire with Rob. She didn't want to bring them down. There would be plenty of time for that later.

"Everything looks so great. I really appreciate all the help you guys have given me," Jane said.

"It was my pleasure," Maxi said.

Claire shrugged. "I didn't really do anything."

Jane laughed. "You don't have to actually *do* anything. Just being there for me to vent with is enough. I couldn't have done it without either of you."

Jane turned to Andie. "And you were the biggest help of all. Honestly, this couldn't have come together without you, either."

Andie's face flushed. She was pleased by the compliment. Maxi noticed a warm look pass between the sisters. Their relationship was thawing.

Andie slipped her arm around Maxi's shoulders. "Hey, I couldn't have done half as good a job without this lady right here. Teamwork!"

"It was a lot of fun, and teamwork is always good, right, Jane?" Maxi added.

But Jane was no longer paying attention. Her gaze was focused halfway down the beach where Mike Henderson was walking toward the inn. Cooper's tail wagged even faster. Cooper looked up at Jane. She nodded, and he trotted off to meet Mike.

"Will you guys excuse me for a minute? I have something I need to tend to." Jane started after Cooper.

COOPER BOUNDED UP TO MIKE, casting one glance back at Jane as if for permission before demanding Mike's attention. Well, that settled it. There was no way she could let Cooper go to a kennel or be adopted by someone else. Cooper needed her as much as she needed him.

"Did they show up?" Mike asked.

Jane looked back at Tides. "Yes. Everything is all set. Thanks for helping out with that." Jane was happy, hopeful, for the first time in a while. There was just one little problem—Mike was leaving, and that meant she was going to have to do something about Cooper.

"I was happy to help," Mike said. "I'm glad things are working out for you."

"There is something I want to talk to you about," Jane said.

Mike's expression turned curious and perhaps a little hopeful. "Oh?"

Cooper returned to her side, and Jane patted his head. "Yes. I'd like to adopt Cooper."

Mike looked a little disappointed. "Oh."

"I know you'll be leaving soon, and you said you don't have room for him in Seattle. He's settled in at Tides, and I could take him to visit your grandfather." It all came out in a rush. Jane was worried that Mike would say no.

"I think that sounds like a great idea, except you're wrong about one thing. I'm not leaving soon."

"You're not?"

"No. Gramps has really improved since I've been here, and I don't want to take that away from him. I can work from anywhere, and besides, this town is growing on me." Mike looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "And some of the people too."

Jane's heart skipped a beat. She suddenly felt very self-conscious.

"There's just one thing, though," Mike continued.

"What's that?"

"Since you have Cooper with you and we both go to Tall Pines, maybe we could go together sometimes." Mike dug at the sand with the toe of his shoe as if he was nervous about her answer.

"Of course we can. That would be great. And you're still welcome for breakfast any time."

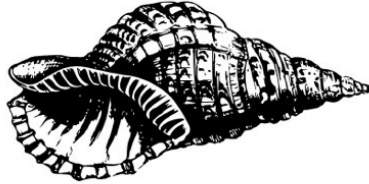
Jane looked back at Tides. From her vantage point on the beach, the new bathroom structure blended in perfectly, as if it was meant to be there.

Sally and Shane were putting the finishing touches on the archway while Andie was instructing them where to situate it, probably for the best position to train the roses to climb the lattice on the sides.

The inn was going to be full for the wedding, and Jane had everything under control. And her ads and new website must be working because she'd been getting reservations for several weeks out.

She had a new dog, her sister wasn't leaving right away, and now Mike wasn't either. What more could a girl want?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Jane balanced the plate of oatmeal-peanut-butter-chocolate-chip cookies in her hand as she stepped out of Andie's rental car at Tall Pines. The cookies were from an old recipe of her grandmother's and a thank-you gift to Mike's grandfather for pushing the sewer hookup through. The hookup had gone off without a hitch, and the bathroom was complete except for a few finishing touches. With that work behind them, Jane and Andie had decided they could both use an afternoon off and came to visit Addie together.

"We'll pop in and visit George first. You'll like him, and I know he'll love seeing Cooper." Jane glanced at the dog, who Andie had on a leash, and Cooper wagged his tail enthusiastically, apparently knowing he was going to see George.

"That was nice of him to do that favor. Actually, it was nice of a lot of people in the town. It's refreshing to see how people went out of their way to help us out. You don't get much of that in the city."

Jane smiled. Andie was right—Lobster Bay was special. The more her sister saw that, the more she might want to stay in town. And Jane had decided she really wanted Andie to stay.

The closer they got to George Henderson's room, the harder Cooper strained on the leash. Jane told Andie to unclip it when they were two rooms down, and Cooper rushed in ahead.

"Cooper! Hey, boy." The joy in George's voice was unmistakable.

Jane poked her head in the room, holding up the tray of cookies. "I brought you a little something to say thanks for helping to fast-track that

sewer hookup.”

“Cookies?” George’s attention wavered from the dog to the cookies. “I love cookies.”

“It’s my grandmother’s recipe.” Jane turned to Andie. “This is my sister. Andie, George Henderson.”

“Andie. Andie Miller. You know, I think I remember you as a little baby. I knew your grandparents.” His eyes narrowed. “Did you move away? Can’t understand why anyone would do that.”

“I’m beginning to wonder that myself,” Andie said as she shook his weathered hand.

George offered them a cookie then proceeded to munch on his. “I hear you’re going to be taking care of my friend here.” George nodded toward Cooper.

“He’s been staying with me at Tides, and I’ve gotten really attached. I just figured that Mike can’t have him in the cottage, and who knows how long he’ll be staying in town.”

George nodded. “I think Cooper will be in good hands with you.”

“Me too. And I can bring him to visit you whenever you want after Mike goes back to Seattle.”

“I’m not so sure that Mike is going back. I think he might come to see that there is more for him here in Lobster Bay. And I’m not just talking about the ocean. I think he’s met some special people here too.” George’s eyes twinkled as he glanced at Jane before taking another cookie from the plate.

Jane’s cheeks heated. “We’d better go visit our mom. We can swing back afterward and get Cooper if you want to spend more time with him.”

“That would be great. Thanks for the cookies.” George turned his attention back to the dog, and Andie and Jane left.

“Sounds like Mike might stay. What do you think of that?” Andie said once they were out in the hall.

“He’s just a friend, Andie, but it would be great if he stayed. One can never have too many friends.” Jane could feel Andie smirking at her the whole way to their mother’s room, but at least her sister didn’t say anything more. Jane wasn’t sure how she felt about Mike. She liked his company, and there was a hint of attraction, but any thoughts of romantic relationships had died when her husband passed years ago. Or had they? Maybe everyone’s advice was right and it was time Jane opened up and let

someone in. After all, she'd let Andie and Cooper in, and that seem to be working out okay.

Addie's room was cheery and neat as a pin. But she wasn't in it.

"She's in the living room playing cards." A woman that Jane recognized as a volunteer wheeled past them in a wheelchair. "Follow me."

A small crowd was gathered outside the living room. She recognized some of the people as the children of residents. Her heart leapt. Was something wrong?

She hurried toward the crowd. "What's happened?"

A woman with shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair turned to her. "Shhh. Nothing has happened." She gestured toward the room. "Look at them. They're having so much fun we didn't want to disturb them."

Inside the room, three residents sat on the sofa watching TV. Two other residents were sitting at a table eating a snack, and five, including Addie, were sitting around the card table.

"I've got a five!" One of the residents slapped a card on the table.

"Go fish," another, whose cards kept falling out of his hands, said.

"I'll raise you a goldfish." Addie added a card to her pile.

"I've got old maid!" a woman with a white bun announced.

The woman next to her frowned at her. "Who did you say was an old maid?"

The woman with the bun thought for a second and then replied, "I am!"

They all burst out laughing, each of them putting down cards and randomly picking up others. They weren't really playing a structured game. It was more like they were pushing the cards around the table, but apparently it worked for them.

"Your mom has made lots of friends. She's fitting in very nicely here," one of the nurses who'd been standing in the back watching said to Jane and Andie.

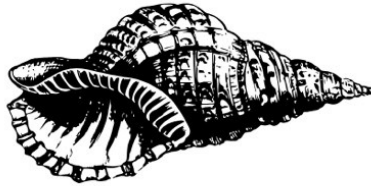
Jane's heart soared as she watched her mother laughing and interacting with the other residents. She was animated and truly enjoying herself. "That really takes a load of worry off. They look like they are having so much fun."

"I know. Sometimes I think my mom has more fun when I'm not here," the woman with the salt-and-pepper hair said.

"They don't always make a lot of sense, and they have their issues, but it's as if they speak the same language," the nurse said.

As Jane watched her mother, she felt the burden of worry about her mom lifting from her shoulders. In that moment, she knew that no matter what, her mother was going to be okay.

CHAPTER THIRTY



It took a few days for the reality that things might work out after all to settle in for Jane. *Everything is coming together, and Andie is really bringing the garden to life*, Jane thought as she admired the mounds of pink flowers along the edge of the driveway. Cooper sniffed at a bush with long sprigs of purple flowers, disrupting an orange-and-black monarch butterfly.

“The pink flowers are impatiens. Remember Mom used to plant them?” Andie stood beside her, admiring her own handiwork.

“I remember. She’d replace them with mums in the fall.” Jane wondered if Andie was planning on doing the same. Would she be around in the fall?

“Impatiens are annuals, so they have to be removed at the end of summer.” Andie stepped back to get a wider view of the edge of the driveway. “Mums would look great all along here and in some big planters near the bathroom.”

“Good idea. Now that everything has been approved and I know the wedding is really happening, it might be smart to spruce the bathroom area up with flowers.”

“I’m really glad things are working out, and the wedding is kind of exciting,” Andie said.

“Yeah, except the more I talk to the bride, the more I wonder if this is going to be as easy as I thought.”

“Oh no. Bridezilla?”

“Maybe. She keeps making strange demands. Like special cake frosting and a particular type of candle.”

“Maybe she’s just nervous. I’m sure everything will be fine,” Andie assured her. “Anyone would be nervous with a wedding coming in two weeks. But look on the bright side. We’ll have an inn full of guests and get good experience.”

“And bookings are up in general.” Jane frowned. “I don’t love dealing with the people, though. I’m better with the behind-the-scenes stuff.”

“True, but I see you’ve been stepping out of your comfort zone and interacting with them. It’s kind of fun talking to them, isn’t it? Meeting new folks from different places. They’re usually happy, too, because they’re on vacation.”

“I don’t think it’s that fun.” Jane hesitated then decided to go for it. “If you think it’s fun, though, maybe you should stay on. I could use the help.”

A look of surprise flashed in Andie’s eyes, but at least she appeared to consider Jane’s invitation. “I don’t know. I have to admit I like the pace here. At work I spent most of my time indoors, and this is nice.” Andie waved her hand to indicate the garden and ocean beyond. “I’m not sure there would be enough for me to do here, though.”

“Well, you’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like. You might be surprised at how much there is to do.” Lobster Bay might not be as busy and hectic as Andie was used to, but what’s so great about being busy and hectic? Maybe Andie needed to get out of her comfort zone too.

“I might take you up on that.” Andie looked at Jane’s outfit. “You look dressed up. Where are you off to?”

Jane had taken an hour to pick out the outfit—a short-sleeved top with a bold black-and-white print that hung at hip level and black linen capris. Black, beaded sandals completed the look. She had to admit it was a nice change from her usual T-shirt and jean shorts, and with her thin frame, she looked pretty good. “Oh, just out to eat.”

Mike’s car pulled into the driveway, and Jane tamped down the butterflies swarming in her stomach.

“Come on, Cooper, you ready?” She tugged Cooper’s leash, avoiding looking at Andie. She was sure her sister was smirking behind her back. It was okay, though, because Andie was right. Jane *was* stepping out of her comfort zone, and not just when it came to running Tides.

MIKE CRACKED open a lobster claw and picked out the meat. There was nothing like good old Maine lobster. That was one of the things that Lobster Bay had over Seattle. The other was Jane Miller.

He snuck a glance at her, thinking of how beautiful she looked sitting across from him at the patio restaurant. The setting sun gave her skin a healthy glow. Behind her, colorful fishing boats and dinghies bobbed in the blue waters of Perkins Cove. The soft, warm breeze ruffled her silver hair and brought out the smell of summer flowers. A seagull flying high above the mast of a sailboat cawed, and Cooper, who had been laying at his feet, stirred. He couldn't ask for a more perfect evening.

Jane dipped a piece of tail meat in melted butter. "This is great. I'm glad the restaurant started allowing dogs."

"Me too. And I'm glad I stayed in town." Mike tried to gauge her reaction. She seemed happy to have him staying here, but he reminded himself to take things slow. They'd been walking Cooper together regularly, and when Jane had accepted his invitation to dinner, he felt they were moving in the right direction. She clearly enjoyed his company, and a good friendship was a solid base to a more intimate relationship. As Gramps had told him, there is no need to rush when you know you've found "the one."

"How is your search for a place coming?"

"I have the cottage for another month, but I've been looking at some condos." Mike slipped a piece of lobster to Cooper. "I'm not in a hurry, though. I'd rather wait and get the perfect place. Maybe you could help me."

Jane looked surprised. "Me? I don't know much about real estate."

"I'm looking more for an opinion. I need someone I trust to keep me in check."

Jane smiled and fiddled with the paper straw in her drink. "And that person is me?" She looked at him from under her lashes, almost flirty.

"I hope so."

Cooper thumped his tail under the table as if he understood the subtext of their conversation.

Jane took a sip of the drink. "Okay, I'll help you out."

"Great."

Their eyes met, and Mike's heart did a little flip at the promise in her gaze.

His phone dinged, breaking the moment. He looked down. Darn, it was Tiffany! With everything going on, he'd forgotten to block her.

Let's get together when you get back to Seattle.

Mike sighed. She simply was not getting the message that their relationship was over. Yet another reason to stay in Lobster Bay. He'd have to call her and explain things clearly. He didn't want her to linger on thinking they were still an item.

"Something important?" Jane asked.

Mike turned his phone off then looked back up at Jane, giving her his full attention. "Important? Nope. Not important at all. Now, what was it that we were talking about?"

This is a work of fiction.

None of it is real. All names, places, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real names, places, or events are purely coincidental, and should not be construed as being real.

CHANGING TIDES

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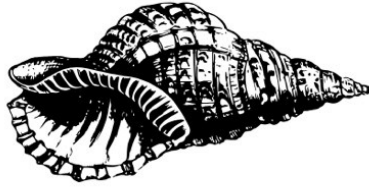
Making Waves

MEREDITH
SUMMERS

Lobster Bay
BOOK THREE



SUMMARY



Maxi's life is about to change but not in the way she expects...

Maxi Stevens is at a crossroads. Things between her and James haven't been the same since their kids left the nest. When she finds proof that indicates he may have strayed, she strikes out on her own. James's infidelity has a silver lining, though. Maxi can finally do all the things James wouldn't approve of, like pursuing her lifelong dream of becoming an artist.

But everything is not as it seems. James wants Maxi back and will do anything to win her over. He'll even beg Maxi's best friends, Claire and Jane, for help. Will they want to team up with someone who they think has done their friend wrong?

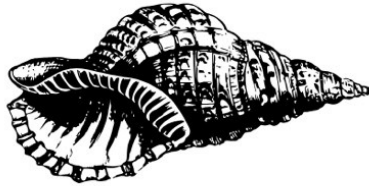
Jane Miller has her own problems to deal with. She's trying to satisfy the demands of a bridezilla whose outbursts could ruin the first wedding at Tides. The success of the wedding is critical for the survival of the inn that has been in her family for four generations. Luckily she has her sister, Andie, to help out.

Everyone is surprised that Andie is still in Lobster Bay. She didn't think she'd still be here, either, but she's found a few reasons to stick around... at least for a little while. It's not too late for her to go back to her job as an antiques appraiser in NYC and make that one big discovery she's always dreamed of. Does Lobster Bay have something even better to offer?

Jane's new relationship with Mike Henderson hits a snafu, Andie makes a startling discovery, and things come together for Maxi with a happy ending she never would have predicted.

This book can be read as a standalone story, but it will be a lot more fun if you read books one and two first as you will get more background details about some of the characters in this story.

CHAPTER ONE



She was supposed to be the one that had her act together, Maxi Stevens thought as she picked at her bran muffin and pretended to pay attention to the conversation she was having with her two best friends, Jane Miller and Claire Turner. They were at Sandcastles, the bakery and café that Claire owned, seated outside at a cozy café table with steaming mugs of coffee, a plate of Claire's delicious pastries on the table, and Jane's golden retriever, Cooper, at their feet.

The summer morning was bright with sunshine, the warm air spiced with the salty scent of the ocean just one street over, the café abuzz with the murmur of conversation from patrons.

But Maxi didn't notice any of that. Not the vibrant purple, red, and pink flowers that overflowed the large planters separating the café area from the foot traffic, not the colorful awnings hanging above the windows of the quaint shops in the seaside town, and not even the familiar bitter, earthy taste of the dark roast coffee that Claire had brewed just the way Maxi liked it.

Her mind was too busy trying to process the horrible revelation about her husband, James, to notice the everyday things in her hometown that usually brought her comfort and happiness.

How could she have been so stupid? Sure, things had been strained between them, but Maxi had assumed it was a natural adjustment, since their youngest had just moved away to college.

But that was before she'd found the card with the woman's number in his pocket.

And not just any woman either. The number and name were those of Sandee Harris, the very woman *Claire's* husband had cheated on her with years ago. Sandee was a realtor in town, so at first blush, it might make sense that James had her card—except she and James weren't in the market for any real estate. And the number was handwritten. Sandee had her *business* number printed on the front of the card, so what was up with the handwritten one on the back?

“...and she wants us to make the floral arrangements with ribbons to match the exact shade of the bridesmaid dresses.” Jane turned to Maxi, her side-swept silver bangs fluttering in the breeze, blue eyes inquisitive. “Don't you think that's a little too matchy-matchy?”

Maxi's heart swelled at her friend's confidence in her design abilities. The wedding at Jane's family's inn, Tides, was very important to Jane. It was part of her initiative to get the family business back on track and the very first wedding she'd ever hosted there. The reviews and referrals from this one wedding could have a profound impact on the future of Tides. Jane was gambling everything on that future, not only because the inn had been in her family for four generations but also because she needed the money to pay for her mother's care at Tall Pines, the area's foremost memory care facility.

Maxi considered the question carefully. “I think it could be okay as long as everything that has to do with the wedding isn't that same shade and you don't mind finding more ribbon. Have you already bought some?”

“We were going to do it all in white. White roses, baby's breath, white ribbon, a white tea candle inside clear glass. So we bought the supplies, I made one up and sent a picture, and she complained about the white.” Jane rolled her eyes.

Maxi wrinkled her nose. “Sounds like she wasn't too nice about it.”

“Andie called her a bridezilla.” Jane pulled a piece of fabric out of the pocket of her jean shorts. “She sent me this swatch of the bridesmaids' gowns so I could match.”

Maxi took the small piece of sky-blue fabric. “Pretty color. Sounds like it wouldn't be too bad to just get some ribbon over at the fabric store.”

Jane nodded. “She also wanted tall candles with stripes to match a lighthouse but in this same blue color.”

Maxi pressed her lips together. “Oh. That sounds like a bit more work.”

“And she’s demanded that I make the frosting of the sandcastle cake the same shade.” Claire cut into a chocolate croissant that was on the platter. A thick blob of chocolate oozed out of the middle as she put half on her plate. Cooper’s ears perked up at the sound of the knife on the plate, but he didn’t move from his spot. “How am I going to make an exact match? It’s not like I have a full palette of colors to work with when mixing frosting.”

Claire’s pride and joy were the cakes she made that were shaped like sandcastles and covered with sugar-coated fondant that resembled beach sand. She was probably regretting agreeing to provide them as wedding cakes for the beach-themed weddings at Tides right about now.

“Oh no. Surely she doesn’t expect the shade to be exact.” Maxi looked down at the fabric swatch in her hand. “I mean, a ribbon is one thing, but painting the candles and the frosting is another.”

“She’s very specific, and when we talked on the phone, I could hear her mother in the background making things worse,” Jane said. “I need this wedding, but I almost wish I’d never gotten myself into this. Hopefully all brides don’t act like this.”

“It’s almost as if she’s making it as difficult as possible to pull off the wedding of her dreams.” Claire stuffed an auburn lock back into the barrette at the back of her head where she secured her thick shoulder-length hair.

“Maybe that’s what she is doing. Subconsciously, I mean. Who could blame her? Being married isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Maxi blurted out.

Ooops... Now why had she said that? Too late to take it back now. Claire and Jane had stopped talking and were staring at her, so she’d have to come clean. But not all the way—she didn’t actually have solid proof that James was cheating, and she owed it to him not to accuse him until she did.

“Is there something you’re not telling us?” Jane asked.

Maxi felt bad. Usually the three of them told each other *everything*. But Claire’s new relationship with Rob Bradford was going so well, and Jane had her own problems with her mother, plus a budding romance of her own. Maxi hadn’t wanted to bring them down with her problems. Besides, she didn’t have anything concrete to say. Still, she supposed she had to say something now.

“Not really. It’s just that things have been weird between James and me for a while now.”

Claire put her hand lightly over Maxi’s. “I’ve noticed you mentioned a few things over the past weeks, but I didn’t want to pry. Tell us what’s

wrong. You know we have your back no matter what.”

The comfort of her friends’ support buoyed her, and Maxi took a deep breath. “It’s just that he’s never home anymore. I can’t tell you how many cold dinners I’ve thrown in the trash.”

“Where is he? At work?” Jane peeled the wrapper off a corn muffin and slathered it with butter.

“So he says.”

Jane and Claire exchanged a look.

“I suppose as the bank president, he does have a lot of work to do,” Claire said.

“He’s become distant. We hardly ever talk.” Maxi wrapped her hand around the coffee mug as if seeking comfort from its warmth. “When the kids were home, the dinner conversation was filled up with what they’d done. What they were learning in school, sports, that sort of thing. Now that it’s just me and James, apparently there is nothing to talk about.”

“I think that’s natural.” Jane pinched off a tiny piece of muffin and fed it to Cooper. “You focused on the kids all your lives. Now that it’s just the two of you, things are different. I bet James came home late a lot before too. You just didn’t notice as much because of the kids.”

“Yeah, and you were busy driving them to sports and activities. Now you have a lot more time on your hands,” Claire added. “You could be reading too much into things if you’re focusing on what is or isn’t going on between you and James. Maybe you should pick up a hobby.”

“Great idea,” Jane said. “I know you’ve been sketching on napkins, but what about taking it even further? You used to love painting when we were in high school. Didn’t James suggest that you do that anyway?”

“He did, but...” Maxi’s voice trailed off. She didn’t want to say what she was thinking, that James had suggested she take up painting again to keep her busy and distracted so she wouldn’t notice what he was doing. Claire and Hailey—Claire’s assistant at the bakery—had said their cheating husbands had done that. And why would he suddenly want her to start painting? She’d put aside her ambitions to become an artist so she could focus on raising the kids, and even when they got older and she had more time, James had discouraged her creative tendencies. Back then, he was working his way up in the bank. He wanted to become president someday and didn’t think being artsy was befitting of a bank president’s wife. Appearances were important to James.

“Have you talked to him?” Claire signaled to Hailey, who was circling the area with a coffeepot to top off people’s cups. “Maybe you should tell him how you feel, suggest some things that you could do together that would bring you closer again. Or some things that would give you goals and a purpose.”

“I’ve mentioned a few things, but James acts dismissive of them. I’ve mentioned getting a pet before, but he doesn’t want animal hair on his suits.” Maxi bent down and scratched Cooper behind the ears. She loved animals and had broached the subject of a dog or cat a few times. James wasn’t interested, so she supposed she’d have to make do with Jane’s dog, Cooper, and Claire’s cat, Urchin. “I saw the most adorable kittens at the animal shelter the other day. Little balls of fluff, one white and one black, but when I approached James, he basically just changed the subject.”

“Maybe he needs time to think about a pet. It’s a big commitment. What about some things the two of you can do together?” Claire persisted.

Maxi shrugged. “We don’t have a lot of the same interests anymore. James is mostly interested in work.” *And apparently Sandee Harris.* “I’ve mentioned a few things to him. A trip to Myrtle Beach. Oh, and ballroom dancing.”

A snort came from behind the planter, and Sally Littlefield, Lobster Bay’s favorite handywoman, peeked around the side. She had her work overalls on and a paintbrush in her hand as she was apparently giving the planters a fresh coat of paint.

“Sorry, but I can’t picture stodgy James taking ballroom dancing.”

“Yeah, he didn’t seem too keen on it,” Maxi said.

Sally rested her brush on the open can of paint and stood, wiping her hands on the rag hanging from the loop at her hip. A thick braid of gray hair hung over one shoulder. Sally was on the other side of seventy, but that didn’t slow her down. As one of Lobster Bay’s most sought-after handywomen, she was known for her meticulous work and unsolicited advice. “I couldn’t help but overhear. Maxi, you’ve invested a lot in your marriage. You have kids, a home. You can make it work. Maybe you just need a little break.”

Hailey had made her way over to the table, and Maxi held up her cup while she thought about what Sally had just said. Maybe she *did* just need a break, but what exactly did that entail?

“How are you ladies this morning?” Hailey asked as she made the rounds with the coffee, serving those at the table as well as Sally, who had a mug stashed next to the paint.

“Good. How about you? How’s Jennifer?” Maxi liked the young single mother. They all did and had taken her under their wing, acting somewhat as pseudo-grandmothers to her twelve-year-old daughter Jennifer. Hailey had had a rough time. Her husband had lost all their money then cheated on her. She didn’t have much for family, either, just a grandfather, so Maxi, Jane, and Claire tried to treat Jennifer a little specially.

“We’re good. Jennifer is doing a summer camp and—” Hailey’s apron pocket erupted in song, and Hailey pulled out her phone. She frowned at the screen. “It’s Gramps. He never calls. I better take this.”

Hailey put the coffeepot on their table and stepped around the planter, the phone to her ear.

“I hope nothing’s wrong.” Jane’s gaze followed Hailey, her words echoing Maxi’s thoughts.

On the other side of the planter, they could see Hailey’s shoulders droop as she talked into the phone. A few minutes later, she came back to the table for the coffeepot, her face tight with worry.

“I hope that wasn’t bad news,” Claire said. “I can handle things if you have to leave.”

“I don’t have to leave. It was about Gramps’s cottage. The one on the beach.” She looked at them, and they nodded. Hailey’s grandfather wasn’t a rich man but did have a small run-down cottage on a more isolated part of the beach that had been in his family for generations. Maxi remembered Hailey saying one time that he could barely pay the taxes and had to rent it out. He didn’t want to let it go—too many childhood memories that he wanted Jennifer to also experience.

“What about it?” Jane asked as Hailey bent down to pet Cooper.

“It’s getting really run-down, but he’s been able to rent it every summer. Except the people that rented it this year took one look and refused to stay,” Hailey said.

“Oh no. Can he get someone else?” Claire asked.

“Unfortunately not. The people sent pictures to Airbnb, and they terminated his listing. Said it wasn’t fit to rent.” Hailey’s expression turned grim. “He needs that money for the tax bill. Now he might have to sell.”

“No, he won’t. I’ll rent it,” Maxi blurted out.

All eyes turned to her, and she felt a sinking sensation in her chest. Had she just offered to rent a cottage? What would James say?

“Maxi! What are you going to do with a cottage? You have a gorgeous house on the cliff,” Jane said.

“Right. I know. But maybe I can use it as a retreat. I mean, it’s right on the beach, and I’ve always wanted an artist studio or cottage on the beach.” Maxi looked down into her coffee mug, away from their shocked gazes. “And besides, things are changing between me and James. It might be smart to have someplace to go.”

“Are you sure?” Hailey asked. “It’s really run-down. You might not like it.”

“I’m sure. Give me your grandfather’s number, and I’ll call him right away to make arrangements.” Hailey rattled off the number, and Maxi put it into her phone. Now that she thought about it, renting the cottage was a great idea. She wasn’t sure if she would even tell James. Even though her house on the cliff was gorgeous, she’d always loved being right down on the beach. She could turn it into an art studio. And if Claire was right about her just needing something else to put her mind on, then this would be the right move. She excused herself from the table to call Hailey’s grandfather.

Sally frowned and shook her head, her gaze following Maxi. “When I suggested a time-out, I meant like a girls’ weekend away, not renting a whole cottage.”

“I HOPE Maxi doesn’t do anything drastic,” Jane said as she slipped another piece of muffin under the table to Cooper.

She glanced over at the corner of the building where Maxi was on the phone. Today Maxi was wearing one of her more casual outfits, a flowing pale-yellow skirt and white linen sleeveless top. Her silvery-blond hair hung loose just past her shoulders. Normally Maxi had more of a tailored look, which Jane suspected was what James preferred. But lately her friend had been dressing more and more casually. Things were changing with Maxi, and Jane hoped it was for the better.

“Yeah, renting that cottage was kind of sudden. I didn’t realize things were that bad, and honestly, it doesn’t seem that they are from where I’m

sitting. I still remember how it all went down with Peter and me, and unless Maxi isn't telling us everything, things might not be as drastic as they seem." Claire glanced across the street, and Jane followed her gaze.

Claire was looking over at Bradford Breads, no doubt feeling thankful that she'd connected with the owner, Rob Bradford, and things were going good for them. Jane didn't have any divorce experience to compare with—her husband had died young—but she, too, had a new romance to be thankful for. She hoped Maxi wasn't going to have to go through a painful divorce, but she'd had suspicions of James for a week now. "I thought I saw James with Sandee in one of the cottages on the beach last week when I was walking Cooper. I asked Maxi if they were thinking about buying a cottage, but she knew nothing about it." Jane's gaze drifted again to Maxi, who was still on the phone with Hailey's grandfather. "But I could have been mistaken. I didn't get a good look."

Claire frowned. "You don't think James and Sandee..."

Jane sighed. "I don't know what to think."

Sally, who was now munching on a chocolate chip muffin, brushed some crumbs off her shirt. "Sandee does like to cheat with married men."

Claire made a face. "Yeah, but James? He's as steady as they come."

"And he and Maxi have been together forever." Jane hoped Maxi was just being overly sensitive and that the man she'd seen with Sandee was someone else. But then, relationships could be uncertain. Maybe she'd better take it slow with Mike. She hadn't dated anyone else since Brad died ten years ago, and she didn't need another heartache. Plus she'd only known Mike a few weeks, and if husbands who had been married for decades could dump their wives without batting an eyelash, she had to think of what a guy who'd only been in town for a few weeks would do.

"I'm sure things will work out." Claire had picked up the swatch and was frowning at it. "I just hope I can match this color on the cake."

Jane put her hand on Claire's arm. "Don't stress about it. If you can't match it exactly, she'll just have to understand. I appreciate everything you're doing for me."

Claire smiled. "Hey, whatever it takes. We're going to pull this wedding off. At least you have Andie here to help."

The mention of Jane's sister made her smile. They'd been close as kids, but when Andie left after high school, they'd gradually drifted apart. Andie hardly ever came back to Lobster Bay, but now that their mom's dementia

had progressed to the point that she had to be in a facility, Andie had come back. It did look like she was sticking around, at least for a while. Their relationship was coming back to what it used to be, but there was still a lot of work to be done in that department. Jane didn't dare get her hopes up. "Andie has been a big help. Both with Mom and the wedding."

"Isn't that her over there?" Claire waved to someone behind Jane. "Should we have invited her to our morning coffee catch-ups?"

Jane turned to see her sister coming toward them. Though Andie was four years older than Jane's forty-eight years, she looked about ten years younger with her long dark hair and slim figure. Today she was wearing oversized sunglasses, a black tank top, and tan capris. Her style was more reflective of New York City, which made sense as that was where Andie had lived most of her adult life. "I doubt she'd be interested in that, and besides, she might not even still be here the next time we have one."

"There you are! Do you have that blue swatch? I'm going to the fabric store and thought I'd try to match some ribbons for the centerpieces." Andie stood on the other side of the three-foot-tall planters that separated the café from the main sidewalk. Her position on the opposite side of the planters was further evidence to Jane that she didn't want to join in on their morning coffee routine.

Claire held it up. "It's right here." She stood and leaned over to pass it to Andie. "Can I get you a coffee? Some pastry?" She pointed at the plate.

Uncertainty flicked through Andie's gaze. "Oh... thanks. Um... I guess I'd better not. I have a lot of work to do today."

Jane stood. "We're just about done here anyway. I'll go with you to the fabric store if you'd like."

Andie smiled. "That would be nice."

Jane stood and grabbed Cooper's leash. "Thanks for coffee." She glanced over at the corner of the building where Maxi was still on the phone. "Say bye to Maxi for me and tell her I'll message her later."

ANDIE GLANCED BACK at Sandcastles as she and Jane walked toward the fabric store. Claire's invitation had been tempting. The mugs of steaming coffee, the plate of pastries, the camaraderie. They'd never asked

her before, and she wasn't sure if Jane wanted her horning in. If anyone should invite her, it should be Jane, so Andie had declined.

Granted, she'd only been in town for three weeks, and how long she'd remain was uncertain. The fact that she was still here was a surprise to everyone, including Andie. She hadn't expected it to feel so much like home, and spending time with her mother at this critical time of her health was important.

But there wasn't much for her here in Lobster Bay. Even at middle age, Andie wanted to do something important, and she'd worked hard to become one of the top antique appraisers at Christies. She couldn't just throw that all away, which meant she'd have to go back to New York. The best antiques were in the big city, weren't they?

"Do you think we're being too accommodating for this wedding?" Jane asked as they turned down School Street toward the section of stores off main where the small fabric shop was located.

"No. This wedding is important—critical, even. We need to get the good reviews from it. Plus I think that's the way it goes with customers. And really, she hasn't been asking for *too* much. It's all easy fixes."

Jane sighed. "I suppose so. She seems sort of entitled when we talk on the phone."

"Yeah, wait until she actually gets here." Andie knew from dealing with clients on antique estates that they could be a little over the top. Would she even be here when the bride arrived? Some of the guests had booked rooms starting the day before the wedding, but that was still a week away. She couldn't leave Jane to deal with that all by herself, so of course she'd be staying at least that long.

"The thought of all the guests and the wedding coordination almost has me breaking out in hives. I hate dealing with the people. You're much better at that than I am." Jane shot a hopeful sideways glance in Andie's direction.

Andie laughed. "I'll deal with the check-ins, and you can hide in the kitchen with your spreadsheets and accounting formulas. On the bright side, the inn is fully booked, and we're getting reservations for after the wedding too."

"Someone even inquired about a fall wedding."

"See, things are picking up!"

"Mrs. Weatherlee is checking out tomorrow."

"She is? I'm going to miss her. Seems like she's been there forever."

“I know, right? But we can use the room for the wedding guests. I had to turn a few away because we’re booked.”

Andie slowed. “Oh, that’s great we’re booked, but I just realized that I’m taking up a room that a paying guest could have.”

Andie was staying in the old room she’d always stayed in as a kid when their grandparents ran the inn. When she’d arrived, the inn had only one guest, and she’d thought nothing of taking up a room.

She couldn’t find a more permanent place, though, as she’d have to sign a lease. “I’m sorry. I never considered that. I could book into a hotel or Airbnb.”

Jane made a face. “Don’t be silly. You’re helping me out a ton. It’s only one room.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

“Of course. I need my sister staying with me.”

Andie glanced away. She didn’t want to see that Jane looked happy at having Andie stay with her, because it made it that much harder to think about leaving. She glanced at the traffic moving slowly down the street. It was peak summer season, and tourists flocked to town, jamming up the narrow roads and causing traffic to the beach to come to a standstill. The coastal town had been designed for fishermen, not tourists, but that was part of its appeal.

She spotted Mustangs, Toyotas, even a cute white-and-red Mini Cooper, but no black truck like her ex Shane Flannery drove. Not that she was looking for him. What they’d had was over and done with decades ago. She’d moved on. But ever since she’d run into him doing repair work at Tides, thoughts of him kept randomly cropping up. Probably guilt over the immature way she’d broken things off back in high school. Probably better if she didn’t run into him again.

Taking her mind off the traffic—and Shane—she looked at the swatch again. “I was thinking maybe we should get Maxi to help with the centerpieces. She might have some good ideas.” Andie had worked with Maxi on the bathhouse they’d had to build at Tides in order to get permits for the wedding and had enjoyed the collaboration. Maxi was smart and had a good eye for design and style. *Unlike Jane*, Andie thought, eyeing her sister’s simple gray T-shirt and faded jean shorts. Jane was plain vanilla.

“That’s a great idea. I think Maxi needs to keep busy. She’s a recent empty nester.” Jane’s voice held undertones of a possible other reason Maxi

might need to keep busy.

“Yeah, I got a sense that things were a little off at home when I worked with her on the bathrooms.”

“You could say that. I think Maxi is really taking the change to heart, and well... to tell the truth, I’m afraid she might do something drastic.”

Andie was surprised. “Like what?”

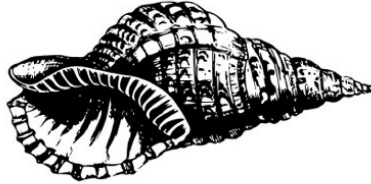
Jane lowered her voice. “She just rented a cottage on the beach. Said it could be for an art studio, but I wonder...”

“She is a good artist.” Andie had seen some of Maxi's napkin sketches, and they were quite good. But she wondered about the cottage rental too. Jane made it sound like she thought Maxi might be making too much of her marital troubles, but Jane didn’t have any experience with that sort of thing. While Andie had never been married, she had plenty of experience with what happened when relationships soured. If Maxi was going as far as to rent a cottage, there might be more to the situation than Jane knew.

Andie had been too ashamed to admit to her sister that for the past few years, she’d been having an affair with a married man. Of course, Doug had said he was separated, but Andie had discovered that wasn’t exactly the truth. It was good luck for Andie that he’d moved on. She wasn’t even upset that he hadn’t messaged or called her since she’d been in Lobster Bay.

But from that experience, she knew the signs of cheaters. And if Maxi was doing something drastic, like moving out of her house, then Andie thought she might suspect her husband was one. Maybe she was too embarrassed to tell Jane, or maybe she had only suspicions and not positive proof. Either way, Andie felt the bond with Maxi tighten. If Maxi was going through something like that, then Andie wanted to be there to support her.

CHAPTER TWO



Hailey wasn't kidding when she'd said the cottage was run-down. The small hundred-year-old structure was covered in cedar shingles turned gray from years of sunshine and salty sea air. The blue shutters were present but faded.

Inside, it looked like nothing had been done in decades. The kitchen had plain wooden cabinets painted white with plenty of dirt marks near the knobs. A little bit of elbow grease would fix that. What elbow grease wouldn't fix were the broken drawer and the holes in the worn linoleum that looked like it had been there since 1940.

One of the walls was down to the studs. The bathroom was functional but rusty, and the bedroom at least had a fresh coat of cheery yellow paint. The old-fashioned brass bed was charming. A few throw rugs, a comforter, and some pillows would spruce that up.

The living room boasted a brick fireplace and shiplap walls. It was serviceable despite the water stains on the ceiling that indicated a leaking roof.

But the view! Maxi could forgive all the problems inside for the unobstructed view of the cobalt-blue ocean and the stretch of white-sugar sand leading to it. And when you opened the sliding glass door, you could hear the waves. It was everything she'd dreamed of.

"I'll take it." She turned to Hailey's grandfather, Henry, a thin man with a halo of white hair and lively green eyes. He stood stooped over, most likely from years of hard work, but his handshake was firm and his voice strong.

Henry glanced around. "You sure? I can't do any fixing up. Don't got the money."

"I'll do some, if you don't mind. Some minor repairs with my own money." Even though she wasn't moving in, fixing some of the things would help with her creativity. She needed her area to look nice, or it would zap her creative juices.

"With your own money?" Henry looked suspicious.

Maxi laughed. "I know it sounds crazy, but this is exactly the retreat I'm looking for. I'm an artist, and the patio outside would be perfect for setting up my easel. I don't mind fixing a few things if you rent it to me long-term. I'd like to bring in some of my own furniture and accessories, too, if you don't mind."

"I *would* like a long-term rental, and since you're a friend of Hailey's, I guess I can trust you." Henry looked out the door to the sea, his eyes clouding with memories. "You know this place has been in my family for a hundred years. It started off as a fishing shack for my grandpa."

"Hailey mentioned that. I bet you had some great times here."

"Ayuh. Used to collect shells right out there when I was a kid." He turned and pointed at the craggy rocks that stuck up out of the sand at low tide. "And there I'd search for starfish and crabs."

"Those sound like great memories."

"I want Jennifer to have those memories too. That's why I won't sell." Henry stroked his chin. "Place down the beach sold for over a million. 'Course I can't get that. This place needs work. But I just can't bring myself to let it go."

"Of course not. Hailey and Jennifer are welcome to come here anytime while I'm renting."

Henry brightened. "Really? Hailey mentioned you've been really good to Jen. I guess that settles it, then." He took a key out of his pocket and handed it to Maxi. "The place is yours for the summer, even longer if you want it."

Maxi took the key and wrote him a check.

MAXI COULDN'T BELIEVE she'd just rented a cottage on the beach. What would James say? Maybe she wouldn't tell him. After all, he had his secrets. Now she would have hers.

But the more she thought about it, the more she realized that wasn't the right move. She didn't have an income of her own, but James had part of his check deposited in an account with only her name. James had insisted when Maxi gave up working to raise the kids that she have her own money to do with as she pleased. James at least had been generous with that. She'd paid Henry with a check from her account. James would never know she'd rented the cottage.

But if she didn't tell him, she was no better than he was. And, after all, she wasn't one hundred percent sure that he was cheating. And he *had* encouraged her to work more on her art. Maybe he'd be optimistic about this move.

She opened the sliders and stood out on the little patio, breathing the sea air, listening to the waves, envisioning herself out there painting. A sense of freedom came over her. A sense that now, finally, she could have everything she wanted. Her thoughts turned to the two kittens she'd seen at the animal rescue. James didn't want pets in the house, but here...

She dialed Henry's number again.

"Ayuh?"

"Henry, it's Maxi Stevens."

"Changed your mind so soon?"

Maxi laughed. "No, it's just that... Well, I was wondering if I could have pets here in the cottage. Just two kittens." *To start.*

"Pets, eh?" Henry chuckled. "Well, why not? Place can't really get much worse. Have as many as you want."

"Great. Thanks. I'll fix any damage, of course."

Maxi hung up and raced to her car. While she'd been talking to Henry, she'd gotten a text from Jane asking if she'd help Andie with the centerpieces for the wedding. She was looking forward to that, as she'd connected a bit with Andie when they worked on the bathroom project at Tides and liked working with her. She had about an hour to kill before meeting Andie. Just enough time to visit the Lobster Bay Animal Rescue downtown and adopt the kittens.

THE LOBSTER BAY Animal Rescue had the unfortunate location of being right next to the realty office that Sandee worked at. *That's okay*, Maxi thought. She could ignore the realty office altogether. She parked in the town lot and walked down. A familiar car caught her eye.

Her car.

The one James took to work. It was at the curb in front of Sandee's office, and James was in it! What was he doing there? He was supposed to be at work!

She stood frozen on the sidewalk as he pulled away from the curb, heading toward her. She wasn't sure what to do. Wave? Step into the street? Shoot his tires out? She couldn't do the latter, since she didn't have a gun, which was probably a good thing.

She couldn't quite see into the car with the way the sun glared off the windshield, but she could have *sworn* that James had seen her. The car sped up, and when he came in line with her, his head was turned as if to avoid eye contact. Did he think he was hiding from her?

Maxi collapsed onto the bench a few steps down. It was true. James was cheating with Sandee. Apparently a little part of her had hoped that she was just making something out of nothing, but this was proof.

That little lying cheat! Well, he couldn't hide from her for long. Tonight she was going to muster all her anger and courage and confront him. The universe must have been looking out for her when the opportunity for Henry's cottage dropped in her lap. At least she'd have somewhere to go.

She wasn't going to let James derail her plans. She pushed up from the bench and marched into the animal rescue.

There was no one behind the desk, so she rang the bell. After a few seconds, a middle-aged woman—Marie, her name tag said—came out of a door. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I was in the other day and saw two kittens. I'd like to adopt them."

"Excellent. We have some paperwork..." Marie went to a filing cabinet and pulled out some papers. "Let's go see exactly which ones you are talking about. We have quite a few cats available."

Marie led Maxi through the glass doors and along the cages. Maxi liked it here. It was clean, and the animals looked well cared for. Maybe she'd volunteer now that she was *free*. She stopped midway down the row at a

cage where a fluffy black kitten was curled into a ball. "This is one... and the white one in the next cage."

Maxi stepped to the next cage. It was empty. She turned around, glancing in all the cages. "Where is the white kitten? It was right here the other day."

"I'm not sure. One of the other volunteers might have moved him to another cage, or maybe he got adopted. I've been in the stockroom all morning." Marie frowned and flipped through papers on a clipboard that hung from the bottom of the cage. "Looks like that one got adopted."

"Oh no." Darn! She really wanted the pair. Maxi looked around at the other cages. There were plenty of cats but no other kittens.

"Probably for the best. We feel it's better to just adopt one at a time," Marie said.

"Oh, okay." Maxi supposed that advice was wise. She'd be living alone for the first time, and maybe it was smart to take things slow. "I'll just take this one, then."

"Let's fill out the paperwork, and I'll have someone get him ready." Marie led her back out front. "Now, do you have all the accessories? Litter box, cat food, carrier?"

"No, actually. I guess I can get those and come back."

"Good idea. That will give us time to get him brushed and ready." Marie handed her the paperwork. "Just make the check out to the Lobster Bay Animal Rescue."

MAXI STEWED about James the whole time she shopped for cat supplies and all the way to Tides.

Of course she should confront him, but was it possible he'd been somewhere else? Was she jumping to conclusions? There were a dozen shops on that street. He could have been in any of them. But that didn't explain why he'd pretended not to see her.

When she got to Tides, Jane was busy with the food delivery and sent her to meet Andie on the back porch. As Maxi made her way through the historic old home, she noticed that things were taking shape. Broken spindles in the turned mahogany railing had been repaired. The crown

molding above the vintage floral wallpaper had a crisp coat of paint. The hardwood floor gleamed a golden oak.

The back porch was perhaps the most amazing feature of Tides. It was wide enough for tables to be set up and wrapped around to the side of the house. A row of white rockers sat at the railing, facing the magnificent ocean view.

Andie was seated at one of the tables. Candles, ribbon, flowers, and glass containers were spread in front of her.

Cooper bounded up to meet Maxi, and her heart lightened as she bent down to pet him. A bubble of excitement pierced her sour mood as she thought about the black kitten who she'd already named Rembrandt. Soon she'd have a pet of her own.

"Hey, thanks for coming." Andie's smile was genuine.

"No problem. This will be fun." Maxi sat down at the table, and Andie slid a fabric swatch and piece of ribbon over to her.

"Do you think these match? The swatch is from the bridesmaids' dresses."

Maxi held them up and turned to inspect them in the light. She'd seen the swatch earlier, but holding the items together provided the best way to compare. "They're pretty close. Maybe a hair off, but I don't think anyone will notice."

"Okay. Good." Andie proceeded to show her how they were thinking about arranging the centerpieces, but Maxi had a hard time focusing. Her mind was on her confrontation with James. Should she confront him as soon as he got home? What if he stayed out late, as he had so often these past months? Should she call and demand he come home on time? Or should she bide her time so she could move her favorite things out of the house before he knew that she'd discovered his affair?

"Maxi?"

Maxi looked up to see Andie looking at her with concern. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

"I was asking about painting the candles. The bride wants stripes, sort of like a lighthouse. Is there a special paint for candles?"

"Ummm. Yeah, you can buy special acrylic candle paint."

Andie put the candle down and looked at Maxi over the rim of her aqua reading glasses. "Is something wrong? You seem a little distracted."

Maxi sighed. She was bursting to confide in someone, but she felt like such a failure. She'd wanted to say more to Jane and Claire that morning, but admitting it to her best friends was hard. Somehow it seemed easier to talk to Andie. She was practically a stranger, yet they'd bonded when they'd worked on the bathrooms together, and Maxi sensed Andie had experience that might help her.

"Things aren't going great with my husband."

"I've noticed over the past weeks you mentioned a few things. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Sort of." As if sensing Maxi's distress, Cooper came to her side, and she buried her hands in the soft fur between his shoulders. "I think he might be cheating."

Andie's gaze narrowed. "Are you sure?"

Maxi thought about it. All the signs pointed at it, and she didn't want to be the sucker of a wife who buried her head in the sand and waited around.

"I'm fairly sure." She told Andie about the card, the late nights, and how James had avoided eye contact when she'd seen him in the car earlier.

"Ouch, that sounds bad. I'm so sorry, Maxi."

"I haven't mentioned the specifics to Jane or Claire yet. I guess I was hoping that I was making too much of things, but when I saw him parked in front of her office..." Maxi felt guilty for not telling Jane and Claire first, but she'd just sort of blurted things out to Andie.

"Don't worry. I won't mention it to either of them," Andie said. "So what are you going to do?"

Maxi gazed out at the ocean. "I'm not sure. Confront him, I guess. Luckily I rented a cottage... it was going to be an artist studio, but now I might just live there until I figure out more about what I want."

"You're doing the right thing."

Maxi turned back to Andie. The confidence in her tone made Maxi feel like she was on the right track. "You sound pretty sure of that."

"I was in a similar situation but maybe reverse." Andie looked away. "I'm embarrassed to admit that I was the other woman. He'd said he and his wife were separated. Turned out it wasn't actually true."

"On no. Is that why you've stayed here longer than usual?"

"Partly. The other part is that Jane needs help here. I want to see it through and make sure Tides gets back on its feet before I run off." Andie glanced into the house through the French doors, a soft smile flitting across

her lips. “And to tell the truth, I’m getting really fond of it here. Suddenly it feels like home in a way it never has before.”

“So what happened with the guy?”

Andie shook her head. “Once I started asking about taking our relationship to the next level, he became less interested. Turns out he was still with his wife. Then he just pushed me aside, and last I heard, had taken up with someone else. Still not separated from his wife.”

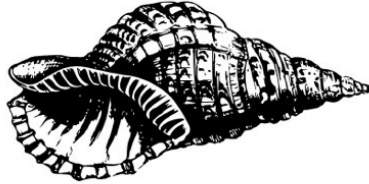
“That’s terrible. I’m sorry.” *Once a cheater, always a cheater*, Maxi thought. Even if she and James worked things out, he’d probably do it again.

“Don’t be. Turns out it was the best thing that could have happened. Now I can live my best life without him treating me as an afterthought.”

Afterthought? Was she just an afterthought now for James? After twenty-seven years of marriage and raising three kids?

Well, she wasn’t going to stand for that. She had a cottage on the beach, a new kitten, and a new plan for her art career. Middle-aged or not, she still had plenty of time to live her best life.

CHAPTER THREE



Maxi was waiting for James with her bags packed when he came home. Her car was full of things she wanted to take with her, including all her art supplies. The suitcase at her side held her favorite outfits. She could get everything else later. She'd picked up the kitten at the Lobster Bay Animal Rescue and set him up in her cottage. At least that was something to look forward to after she confronted James.

When his key finally turned in the lock, she almost chickened out. Almost rushed back upstairs with her bags... but she didn't.

James was in a good mood. He came through the door whistling—smiling, even. *Probably just coming from Sandee's place.*

His smile faded when he saw Maxi's face. His gaze drifted to the bags beside her. He stopped mid-whistle.

"Maxi? What's going on?" He was a good actor because he seemed genuinely confused, as if he couldn't think of a reason why Maxi would have her bags packed. Then again, maybe his confusion stemmed from the fact that he thought Maxi was too naive to figure it out. That thought ratcheted up her anger another notch.

Maxi willed herself to keep calm. "I think you know what's going on."

"Are you going on a trip?"

"No. I expect you're probably relieved and happy that I'm leaving."

"Leaving? But where? For how long?" James still seemed confused, and now he looked appropriately upset, which only made Maxi angrier.

"You don't have to play dumb. I know all about what you've been up to."

“You do?”

Ha! See, he isn't even denying it! “I’m not stupid. All the late nights. The way you don’t want to take up any of the things I’ve suggested...”

“Huh? I’ve been working at the bank on a project. I figure it would give you time to—”

Maxi cut him off. “Enough! At least give me the dignity of admitting it.”

“Admitting what? I still have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Seriously? I suppose you’re going to deny that was you downtown pretending like you didn’t see me as you drove past?”

James’s face turned red, a sure sign he was lying. He sputtered, “No. I didn’t s-see you downtown. I was at the bank. Well, I went out for a—”

Maxi grabbed the handle of her suitcase, the action cutting off his words. She started toward the door. He grabbed her arm as she walked past.

“Maxi, it’s not what you think. Let me explain.”

The pleading look in his eye might have stopped her if she hadn’t been so angry. But she was on a roll now and didn’t want to lose her nerve.

It was now or never.

She jerked her arm away. “I’m sorry, James, but I can’t listen to any of your excuses now. Don’t try to contact me. I’ll contact you when I’m ready.”

Maxi opened the door and fled before he could say another word.

JAMES STARED at the front door, his brain trying to process what had just happened. Maxi was leaving?

“Wait!” He rushed to the door and flung it open, only to see the taillights of Maxi’s car as she peeled out of the driveway.

What in the world was going on?

Maxi had been acting a little strange lately, but he’d never expected something like this. He’d thought she was just bored. He’d tried to encourage her to take up one of her old hobbies, but she’d seemed reluctant. And yes, their relationship had been off, but he put it down to all the turmoil with their last child moving out and the house being empty. It was a

big change for Maxi. He'd tried to support her, but truth be told, he had no idea how to do that.

He collapsed on the couch, the sinking feeling growing. Was she really gone? Maybe she just needed some time to think. That was probably it.

But she'd said some odd things. It was almost as if she were mad at him for something. Maybe he shouldn't have worked late so much, but the project he was on could be a big one for the bank, and getting it done early meant he could surprise Maxi with that trip to Europe she'd been hinting about.

But now... would he ever go on a trip with her again?

If only she'd let him get a word in edgewise, he would have told her that. Dammit! He'd never been good at thinking quickly on his feet. That was why he'd pretended not to see her downtown. He'd gotten flustered. And tonight she'd caught him off guard, and he didn't know what to say to her because he didn't want to spoil the surprise.

Speaking of which...

James pushed to his feet and ran down to his car in the garage. He opened the door to the back seat and poked his head in.

"Hey there, little guy. Are you okay?"

Two blue eyes surrounded by snow-white fur blinked out from the mesh front of the cat carrier.

"Sorry. I got waylaid. Come on, we'll get you inside." James reached for the handle of the carrier.

Hiss!

Yikes! He jumped back. The cat sounded angry, probably from being left in the car. He looked back in at it.

"Sorry about leaving you in here so long, but I have good news. This is your new home, Picasso." He'd tentatively named the cat after one of Maxi's favorite artists, but if she wanted another name, that was fine with him. *If* she ever came home to see the cat.

He grabbed the carrier and the bag of cat supplies and brought them into the house. He set the carrier on the floor and looked in the bag, realizing he had no idea what to do with the supplies the lady at the animal rescue place had suggested he buy. He'd expected that Maxi would set everything up.

"Hmmm... litter box. Okay. I guess I need to put the litter in and put it... somewhere." He glanced at the carrier where the cat was crouched down,

staring at him as if ready to attack. “Better do that first before I let you out, eh?”

Where would Maxi put the litter box? The bathroom? Probably. The bathroom on the main floor was large, and he set the box up in the corner and poured litter in.

Back out in the living room, Picasso was moving around in the carrier.

Meow!

“Guess I better let you out now.” James opened the door and stood back.

Picasso poked his head out, his eyes wide as he looked around the room. He tentatively ventured from the carrier. His body low to the ground, he slinked around the carrier’s edges and finally came to the bag with his supplies. He stuck his head in and sniffed the cat food bag then turned an accusing glare on James.

Merooow!

Oh right. Poor guy was probably hungry. James filled one of the new stainless-steel bowls with water, the other with food. Picasso didn’t waste any time tucking in.

James watched the cat, wondering what Maxi would think of him. She’d been hinting at getting a pet for months now. James had pretended to dismiss the idea, acting like he didn’t want a pet, because he’d wanted to surprise her and see the smile light up her face. He wasn’t a big animal person, and all that hair did make a mess on his suits. He was very particular about his appearance, but he’d purchased several sticky rollers that he hoped would help remove any hair. A little cat hair on his suits was worth it if the cat made Maxi happy.

Mew. Picasso had finished eating and trotted over to James. He rubbed against James’s leg, leaving a clump of white fur on the bottom of his dark-gray Brooks Brothers suit. James grimaced, but when the cat looked up at him with his wide blue eyes, his heart pinged. The small kitten was pretty cute.

He picked Picasso up, holding him away from his body so he didn’t get more hair on his suit. “Don’t worry, little guy. We’ll get her back.”

MAXI PUT the last of her clothes away in the small pine bureau in the bedroom and shoved the drawer shut. The cottage was a bit more dilapidated than she remembered it being when she'd looked at it earlier, but she'd brought a cheery yellow comforter and sheet set and a few pieces of wall art to spruce up the bedroom.

Mew! Rembrandt jumped up on the bed and looked at her with his eager grayish-blue eyes.

When she'd returned home from her confrontation with James, she'd found him asleep on top of a pillow on the sofa, already seeking out the most comfortable spot in the cottage. He'd used his litter box and eaten the food she'd put out, too, so apparently he was settling in just fine. Maxi wished she could say the same for herself. It felt weird to be moving into a place of her own after living with James for her entire adult life.

She picked the cat up and tucked him under her chin. His purrs were comforting as she stroked his soft fur and walked to the main room. The kitchen was open to the living room, where she'd placed more pillows and artwork. It was starting to look like home.

Her phone pinged. It was James.

ARE YOU OKAY? *I'm worried.*

A SURGE of regret and uncertainty bubbled up. Had she done the right thing? Could she make it on her own? But then she remembered James driving past her and pretending not to see her, and she became angry.

She didn't want to answer him, but she also didn't want him to keep texting, or worse, calling. She put Rembrandt down and picked up her phone.

I'M FINE. *Staying with a friend. We'll talk later.*

SHE DIDN'T WANT him to know about the cottage yet because she didn't want him coming over. This was her retreat, her safe space. The place where she could be the *real* Maxi, the one that had been hidden all these years because she'd always done what James wanted. Always worn the outfits he'd approved of, hosted the executive dinners, and frequented the

classier establishments instead of wearing colorful flowing skirts, attending art shows, and hanging out at the artsy bohemian bars and coffee shops that appealed to her.

Sure, she'd have to let him know about the cottage eventually, and they'd have to have a discussion at some point, but right now, it was too raw. She needed time to think.

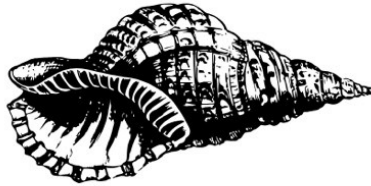
Outside, the moonlight danced along the waves, and the surf crashed on the beach. She'd already set her easel up out on the patio. Tomorrow she'd start painting as soon as the sun came up.

She uncorked a bottle of wine and poured a glass. Then, picking Rembrandt up in one hand and the wine glass in the other, she stepped out onto the patio, where the ocean breeze and sound of the surf were amplified.

Two chairs were placed at the edge of the patio, and she sat in one. Rembrandt curled up in her lap.

She held the wine glass up and looked down at the cat, who was looking up with trusting eyes. "Here's to a new start for both of us."

CHAPTER FOUR



Andie woke up to a ray of sunlight across her eyes. It took her a moment to remember where she was, since the sun was never so bright in New York City. She wasn't in New York, though. She was in Lobster Bay. She was home.

She rolled over to look out at the ocean. A hint of ocean breeze snuck in from the cracked window. She kept the window open a little at the bottom and the shade up just for that reason.

A feeling of contentment washed over her as she kicked off the crisp sheets, sat up, and stretched. Nothing like waking up to an ocean sunrise. Except the sun had risen a few hours ago, and she'd better get a move on if she wanted to catch her mother at Tall Pines before she took her after-breakfast nap.

Her phone rang with the old-fashioned telephone sound she preferred. It was Susie from work.

"Hey, Susie. How are things going?"

"Eh, okay. We got a few estates in, but Elise seems to be getting all the good projects."

Of course she was. Elise was the new appraiser who apparently had replaced Andie both in status at Christies and also in Doug's personal life. Surprisingly, this last part didn't bother Andie in the least. She was over him.

"You must be learning a lot. I hope it's not too much of a workload." Andie had been training Susie before she left for Lobster Bay on a temporary leave to help get her mother settled at Tall Pines. The younger

woman had been coming along, a bit slow but steady. She did feel a little guilty about being absent for so long. It meant the others had to put in more hours.

“I am actually. You’d be proud of me. But I was wondering... when are you coming back?” Susie’s voice had taken on a pleading tone. “Elise isn’t as nice as you when I have a question.”

More guilt as Andie thought about the answer. Prior trips to Lobster Bay had been short, as she’d always wanted to get right back to work. But something had changed. Maybe it was being over fifty now, or maybe it was the peaceful setting, but Andie’s interest in going back to Christies was waning with each passing day.

“I’m not exactly sure about that.”

“Oh, well, I hope you’re having a good time. Things here are a little weird. I’m mostly on my own, since Elise spends most of her time with Doug.”

“She does? Huh, well, look on the bright side. You don’t have her nagging at you all day.” Elise could act a bit superior, and she was bossy.

Susie laughed. “I know, right? Hey, did you know that Chandler Vanbeck is opening an art gallery in Lobster Bay? I ran into him the other day, and he mentioned it.”

“He is? Actually, he was staying here at my family inn last week, and he said he was scouting locations. Guess he must have found one.” Andie made a mental note to tell Maxi.

When Chandler had been at the inn, he’d seen one of Maxi’s sketches and expressed an interest. He’d even given Andie a card to pass on to Maxi. If he was opening an art gallery here in town, he’d need local artists. This could be just the thing Maxi needed to make a positive change. And after what Maxi had told her yesterday, it sounded to Andie like she was going to need something hopeful to focus on.

“Yeah, he’s opening pretty soon too,” Susie said. “Well, I guess I’ll talk to you later. I just wanted to catch up and see if you had a return date yet.”

“Nothing yet, sorry.”

“Then I suppose I’ll carry on on my own.”

Andie hung up and quickly got dressed. The smell of bacon had started to creep into the room, and she wanted to get some while it was still hot and crisp.

Andie detoured through the dining room on her way to the kitchen. They'd had to repair some of the original crown molding, and she wanted to see how the work was coming along. Sally was standing on a ladder, fitting one of the pieces in. She turned as Andie poked her head in.

"Are you looking for Shane?" Sally snorted then turned back to her work. "He's on another job."

"No! I wasn't looking for him." She really wasn't. Why would she? "I wanted to see how the crown molding came out. Looks great."

Andie hurried on to the kitchen.

"Breakfast smells amazing!" She snatched a piece of bacon from the plate Brenda, the cook, was piling slices onto. She broke a small piece off and tossed it to Cooper, who was sitting by the back door, before taking her own bite. It was delicious, crispy and salty.

"Help yourself," Brenda said half sarcastically. "I have plenty for the few guests we have. I can't wait until there's a full house to cook for."

"You won't have to wait long. Wedding guests will start to arrive soon." Jane sounded stressed instead of happy.

"That's good, isn't it?" Andie said as she grabbed a piece of toast and folded it around another piece of bacon.

Jane sighed. "I suppose it is. It's just all that checking in and dealing with their complaints. I think this wedding is testing my limits with people."

"Don't worry. I'll help with the people part."

Jane's face lit up. "I appreciate that so much, but don't you need to get back to your job?"

Andie frowned. Was that a hint? "Not right away. I want to help out."

"You have no idea how grateful I am. And for helping out with Mom too. It really takes a load off."

Andie checked her watch. "Speaking of Mom, I'm on my way to visit her this morning. You don't need me to do anything for the pictures of the centerpieces you're sending to the bride before I go, do you?" She and Maxi had finalized the design and made up a sample centerpiece for Jane to send to the bride and her mother for approval.

"No. Claire and Maxi are coming in a few minutes to work on the pillows, and Claire's bringing a sample of her sandcastle cake so we can compare the frosting to the swatch, if you want to wait around."

This was the first time Jane had included Andie in her plans with her friends. It felt silly and high-schoolish to care about that, but for some reason Andie did. “Darn! I wish I could, but I want to get to Tall Pines before Mom goes in for her nap. You know how tired she gets after breakfast.”

“Yep. Right about now I could agree with her.”

Woof!

They turned to see Mike Henderson at the back door. Cooper always got excited when he saw Mike. The dog had originally belonged to Mike’s grandfather, who now resided in Tall Pines. Cooper had bonded with Jane and ended up at Tides when Mike couldn’t keep him in his rental.

“Hi, Mike.” Andie motioned for him to come in. “You seem to be a regular here at breakfast. Maybe you should just book a room and move in.” Andie couldn’t help but tease. Mike and Jane had become more than friends. They thought they were hiding their feelings from everyone, but it was blatantly obvious.

Andie shoved the last bite of bacon and toast into her mouth. Seeing that both Jane’s and Mike’s faces had turned beet red, now was probably a good time to make her exit. “Gotta run. I want to have some time with Mom before nap time.”

Andie ran into Maxi in the foyer.

“Hi, I’m glad I ran into you.” Andie paused. Maxi had dark circles under her eyes and looked stressed. “Are you okay?”

Maxi took a deep breath, her eyes misting. “Yes, I suppose. I had it out with James last night.”

“Oh no. Did it not go well?”

“It went as expected. Truth is, once I got on a roll, I did most of the talking. I was proud of myself that I didn’t buy into his excuses or let him talk me into staying.”

“Staying?”

“Yeah, I’ve moved into that cottage I rented from Hailey’s grandfather.”

Andie had to give Maxi credit. She didn’t waste any time. “Oh, do you want to talk about it?”

Maxi glanced at the key fob in Andie’s hand. “It looks like you’re heading out.”

“I was going to see my mom, but if you need to talk...”

“No, you go ahead. We can catch up later. I’m supposed to meet Jane and Claire anyway.” Maxi managed a smile. “Was there something you wanted to tell me, though?”

Of course Maxi would want to unburden herself with her best friends, not Andie. “Do you remember Chandler Vanbeck?”

Maxi’s brow furrowed, and she tilted her head. “The art appraiser that was staying here?”

“Yep. He’s opening an art gallery here in Lobster Bay soon. Do you still have his card?”

Maxi nodded, a spark of interest in her eyes.

“It might not be a bad idea to give him a call. He could be looking for local talent, and it might give you something positive to focus on.” Andie reached out and squeezed Maxi’s arm. “I’m here whenever you want to talk.”

Maxi nodded. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

They headed their separate ways with Andie feeling a little bit lighter knowing that she could help out a friend in need.

“AND HE DIDN’T DENY HAVING an affair?” Jane looked up from her comparison of the swatch next to Claire’s sandcastle cake sample. They were sitting on the back deck at Tides, the three of them at one of the tables and Cooper lying next to the wide stairs that led to the sandy beach. Maxi had just finished filling them in on the events of the previous evening.

Maxi saw concern, compassion, and even a little hint of pity in both her friends’ eyes. It had been hard to tell them about her confrontation with James, but now that it was out, she felt relieved. Besides, she needed the support of her friends now more than ever.

“Nope.” Well, that wasn’t totally true. She hadn’t *exactly* mentioned that she suspected an affair. “I didn’t come right out and accuse him. I couldn’t bring myself to say the words. But I know he lied about pretending not to see me downtown.”

Claire clucked in sympathy. She, more than anyone, would know how it felt because Peter had done the same to her. “I understand. It’s hard to

accuse them. Such a betrayal. Don't worry. I know what you are going through and will help you every step of the way."

"We both will," Jane added.

"Thanks." Maxi's throat was too tight to say more. She cleared it and pointed at the cake sample. "Well, I say we cut this thing up and try it out."

Claire made a face. "Might as well. The color doesn't match the swatch enough. Don't you both agree?"

Maxi and Jane nodded. "Sorry, but it's off by quite a few shades."

Claire cut the small sample into three pieces and handed them out, licking frosting from her thumb. "I'll just have to try again. We may be eating a lot of sample cakes in the future."

Cooper raised his head and looked over.

"Not you," Jane said. "Cake isn't good for dogs."

Cooper put his head back on his paws.

Claire mashed the last of the cake crumbs onto the back of her fork. "How was it sleeping alone in the cottage?"

"A bit scary but also freeing. It's great being right on the beach."

"When do we get to see it?" Claire asked.

Maxi wanted to show her friends the cottage but not until she'd made it a little more presentable. She didn't mind springing for a few minor repairs, especially since it would help Henry out, but mostly she planned to spruce it up with some new decor. And since she was known for her decorating skills, she didn't want her friends to see it until she'd had that chance. "I still have some finishing touches to do on the cottage, You know it's sort of run-down, right?"

"We don't care about that!"

"I know, but I want your first impression to be a good one, so give me a couple of days."

"Of course we will," Jane said. "Let us know when you're ready."

"So what will you do now?" Claire asked. "Are you going to do more painting?"

"Funny you should ask. I need advice on that. I ran into Andie on the way out, and she told me that Chandler Vanbeck, the art appraiser that was here last week, is opening an art gallery in town." Maxi appreciated Andie seeking her out to tell her and her offer to talk about things. She made a mental note to fill Andie in later on everything that had happened with James. She didn't want Andie to think she was brushing her off.

“He was impressed with your work. I bet he’d want to put some of it in a show,” Jane said.

Maxi laughed. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that...”

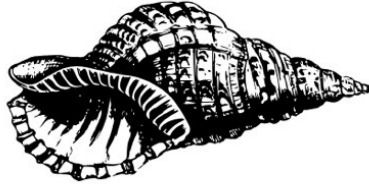
“Didn’t he leave a card for you when he left?” Claire asked. “I think that shows he might be interested.”

“You should at least call him,” Jane suggested. “What have you got to lose?”

Maxi felt a nervous flutter of excitement. Her life-long dream was to be an artist, to have her work in a gallery. But it was all happening too fast. Too much was going on. Still... she’d be a fool to let this opportunity pass, wouldn’t she? “Maybe I will give him a call. We’ll see.”

“Sounds like we might have a lot to catch up on tonight.” Jane picked up the swatch and compared it to the ribbon on the centerpiece again. “How about we meet at Splash? We can find out how Bridezilla liked the centerpieces, and Maxi can update us on her call with Chandler Vanbeck.”

CHAPTER FIVE



Andie was getting used to Tall Pines, the memory care facility her mother, Addie, now resided in. It was a nice place, set up to look more like a giant home than an institution. Addie's room had been decorated to resemble the way her room at Tides had always looked. It was clean, comfortable, and since it faced south, always bright with sunshine.

Andie had to admit she was surprised at how well her mother had adjusted. Addie was always happy and interacted with the residents, and just like when she ran Tides, she seemed to keep busy. At Tides it was with guest registration and overseeing the cleaning. Here it was with playing cards and word search. It was a huge relief.

Today Addie had been working on a small puzzle at the table under the window when Andie came in. She turned and smiled, recognition lighting her face. She was having one of her lucid moments, which Andie was learning to treasure more and more. Who knew when those would start to become few and far between?

"Are all the guests at breakfast?" Addie asked. Okay, so maybe she wasn't totally lucid. It wasn't unusual for Addie to think that she was still at Tides, though Andie wondered if that didn't have a lot to do with the fact that they'd replicated her room.

Andie took her hand, frail with skin like parchment. "Jane has everything under control. Don't worry."

"Jane's a good girl. You need to help her."

"I'm trying, Mom."

Addie chuckled. “She is a bit stubborn, I know. But she’ll come around. After all, everyone should be able to do what they love.”

“And Jane loves running Tides?” Andie doubted that, given the way her sister hated dealing with the guests.

“Oh sure, who wouldn’t? But *I* run Tides. Jane is just helping.” Addie turned curious eyes on Andie. “And what about you? You love Tides, too, don’t you?”

Andie pressed her lips together. She did love the old place. It held most of her fondest childhood memories. Her work on restoring the garden at Tides had been invigorating. She’d loved gardening with her mother as a kid but had gotten away from it with being in the city. She’d forgotten how much she loved plants and flowers. And being back here had changed her. It had made her see that maybe some things she’d thought were important really weren’t.

“I do love Tides, but I also really love antiques. Antiques are my passion. There’s something exciting about digging around in old trunks and attics, anticipating an important find.” Andie sighed and patted her mother’s hand. “But all the good antiques are in the city, so if I want to work in that field, I can’t stay in Lobster Bay.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that. These old New England towns have the best finds,” a voice boomed from the doorway. Andie turned to see a woman in a wheelchair. She had curly gray hair and looked to be ninety if she was a day.

“Oh, Sheila, this is my sister Bridget,” Addie said. Addie often thought Andie was her younger sister Bridget, so the mis-introduction didn’t bother Andie much.

Apparently it didn’t bother the woman either. She winked at Andie then wheeled into the room and extended her hand. “Rita Duvalle.”

“Andie Miller.” Andie shook her hand then lowered her voice. “Addie’s daughter.”

Rita smiled and nodded. “I live here at Tall Pines in the independent living section. I like to come over to the memory care unit and help out with the activities. My body might not work so good anymore, but the brain needs to stay active.” She tapped the side of her head with a gnarled finger.

“Rita is very good at painting too,” Addie said, glancing at the paint-splotched paper hanging on her wall. It was one of Addie’s creations, which she was very proud of.

“Sorry to barge in,” Rita said. “But I couldn’t help but overhear you mentioning antiques. I was an antique dealer my whole life. Miss all that old stuff. It has a way of getting into your blood, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does.” Andie was enjoying helping with Tides, but she had to admit the pull to get back to her world of dusty old pieces of furniture and long-forgotten family heirlooms was strong. “I work at Christies as an appraiser.”

Rita’s brow shot up. “Oh, how interesting. I thought about going that route but found that setting up shop here in town was much more interesting.”

Andie was intrigued. “Really? How so?”

Rita tilted her head as she considered the question. “I guess you’d say it’s the people. The connection to the families. The opportunity for undiscovered finds.”

“Undiscovered finds? I wouldn’t think there would be much of that in a small town.”

“You’d be surprised. There’s actually a better chance. These frugal New Englanders never throw anything out, and unlike in the big city, it’s not all picked over.”

“I guess you have a point there.” Most of the collections that Andie appraised had been carefully curated, and there weren’t many surprises to be found. Could Rita be on to something? But there was no big auction house around Lobster Bay.

“But the thing I liked the most is the stories. People would come into my shop and ask me to hoe out their attic. Every item had a personal story. You wouldn’t believe some of the things I found! Civil War papers, old diaries. It’s so rewarding to connect with the actual ancestors of the people who owned the items.”

“So you had a shop here in town?” Andie didn’t remember any antique shop, but then she hadn’t really paid much attention to what was in town for the past thirty years.

“Still do, actually. Oh, I can’t run it anymore.” Rita gestured to the wheelchair. “Body’s too old to get around, but I couldn’t bear to sell it. I own the building. Antique store downstairs, apartment upstairs. There’s still quite a bit of inventory in the store.”

“See, now you can follow your passion and stay here and help Daddy and me with Tides,” Addie said matter-of-factly. Even though she was

mixed up on who was here running Tides, the sentiment was the same.

It got Andie wondering... would she be as happy here running an antique store as she was as an appraiser at one of the best auction houses in the world? Then again, was she really happy in her current job? “Civil War papers and old diaries are interesting, and I like dealing with the people, but I’m sure there’s nothing of real significance in these old towns.”

Rita shook her head. “Not true. Old Harry Westin came in with a tiny painting he found in his mother’s jewelry box, and it turned out to be an old Russian icon dating to the 1300s. How it got in Harry’s mother’s jewelry box is a mystery, but it was quite a find, as it was in incredibly good condition. Written up in all the papers.”

Andie thought she remembered something about that.

“And don’t forget, we have one of the oldest houses in New England right here in town, and it’s just bursting with undiscovered treasures.” Rita’s eyes lit up.

“The Thompson house.” Andie had heard rumors about the house, one even claiming that it had been part of the Underground Railroad and another that it had been a hideout of Blackbeard the pirate. She didn’t think either of them were true, but the house was still interesting because of its age.

“Thompson?” Addie cut in, her face drawn in a scowl. “Did you say Sadie Thompson? I wouldn’t trust anything she has. She stole my green sweater!”

“Oh dear. That was probably just an honest mistake, don’t you think?” Rita said to Addie.

Addie’s scowl deepened. “No.”

Rita turned to Andie. “It happens a lot here. People forget which items are theirs.”

“I can imagine.” Andie remembered the sweater incident well. They actually had found her mother’s sweater in Sadie’s room. “Sadie is here at Tall Pines.”

“Yes, I know. Her room is right down the hall. I never did talk her into letting me into the attic. The house has been in the same family for three hundred years. Oh, the things that might be there! But I guess it won’t happen now. Don’t know why I’m holding on to that shop. Won’t be of use to me. I suppose I should think of selling, but it would have to be to the right person.” Rita raised a brow and looked at Andie out of the corner of

her eye then clapped her hands. “Well, I suppose I better get going. I wanted to help with the sing-along. You coming, Addie?”

Addie jumped up. “Oh yes! I’ll go with you. Bye, Bridgie.”

As Andie watched them leave, she felt something shift in her perspective. Was she ready to give up her dream career at Christies and start a new one in Lobster Bay?

ANDIE TOOK the long way out of Tall Pines so she could peek into Sadie Thompson’s room.

The old woman must not have liked sing-alongs, because she was sitting in a recliner, the television remote in her weathered hand, as the TV blared a talk show. She might be missing her memories, but she was alert. Her head swiveled to the door, her forehead creasing. “Addie?”

“It’s Andie, actually, Addie’s daughter.” The similar names were confusing enough, but Andie did look like her mother.

“Don’t you fool with me. I know who you are. Are you going to the dance tonight? I heard Bobby Gleason will be there.” Sadie looked quite pleased about this.

Andie didn’t know who Bobby Gleason was, but it was clear that Sadie thought she was a teen again. Sadie and Addie used to hang around back then. Andie was used to these fuzzy memories from her mother. She and Jane had decided it was better to play into the memories as long as they were pleasant. Trying to remind Addie of the year or to get her to recognize who someone really was only brought confusion and anger.

Andie stepped into the room. “Of course I’m going. It should be fun.”

Sadie nodded, her eyes clouding for a second then clearing again. “You can come over before the dance if you want.”

“That sounds nice. I’ve always liked your house. It’s so old and charming.”

Sadie nodded, her face lighting up. “Built by my granddaddy’s granddaddy’s granddaddy.”

“I bet there are a lot of memories in there.” Andie wasn’t prying, not really. Sadie seemed so happy to be talking about the house that Andie

couldn't help but encourage her to get lost in those memories. Who knew how long she'd have those for?

"Oh yes. And there's a library and a conservatory and secret passages."

"Secret passages?" Andie's thoughts went to the rumors. "Have you been in them?"

Sadie laughed. "Of course, silly. Remember we went in one together? But we didn't go up in the attic. Mom said there was too much junk up there."

"Excuse me. Just *who* are you?"

The angry voice made Andie whirl around, guilt heavy in her stomach. Not that she'd been doing anything wrong, but the way the woman was looking at her, you'd have thought she'd been torturing the poor old lady.

The woman in the doorway was about Andie's age. She was short and wide, her auburn hair fell to her shoulders, and her emerald-green eyes brimmed with suspicion.

Andie stuck her hand out. "I'm Andie Miller. My mom, Addie, is a resident here. She used to be friends with Sadie."

The woman glanced at Andie's hand as if it were poison. "So you know my mother?"

Andie let her hand drop. "Well, not technically, but..."

"Then why are you here talking about our house? Are you one of those opportunists trying to buy the place for cheap? I've had enough of that." The woman brushed past Andie to her mother's side. "Are you okay, Mom?"

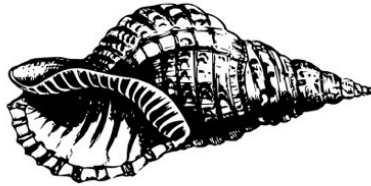
"Of course, Emily. I was just chatting with Addie. You remember Addie."

Emily glared over at Andie. "I think *Addie* was just going."

"Right." Andie smiled at Sadie. "Nice talking to you."

She turned and left Emily to cluck over her mother. Apparently she wouldn't be making friends with Sadie's daughter anytime soon.

CHAPTER SIX



James was miserable without Maxi. He'd picked up the phone at least a dozen times to call her, but he didn't want to push her away more. Hopefully she just needed a little break and would come back soon.

He was starting to realize how much she did around the house. It had only been two days, but the sink was already full of dirty dishes, and his clothes needed to be laundered. First he'd have to figure out how to run the washing machine. And who knew how often a litter box needed to be emptied? Yech!

Coming home from work to an empty house was the pits, he thought as he slid his key into the lock. He opened the door with none of his usual enthusiasm as he clawed at his tie and stepped inside.

What in the world—

The house hadn't been in its usual neat array now with Maxi gone, but this took the cake. Something—toilet paper, he thought—had been spooled around the living room, over the chair and around the couch, and sitting at the end of it was Picasso.

"What have you done?"

Mew!

Picasso ran off to the kitchen and lurked around his food bowl while James followed the toilet-paper path to the bathroom, where almost a whole roll of it had been spooled off with Picasso's needle-like claws.

He was starting to regret adopting Picasso, especially since the main reason for it—Maxi—didn't even know about him.

Not wanting to get his suit dirty, he went upstairs to change. Picasso followed, batting at the leg of his pants as he walked up the stairs. Great, now he'd have little holes in the hemline.

He put his suit away and spent another five minutes trying to shoo Picasso out of the closet. The cat finally got the message and retreated to the bed, which he climbed up on by using his claws on the silk bed skirt. He then proceeded to glare at James as he rummaged through the bureau for jeans and a T-shirt.

James didn't dare open the sweater drawer. Picasso had developed a crush on his cashmere sweater vest, and anytime he opened that drawer, the cat would jump in and start kneading it. That sweater was expensive!

"Now I know why they make kittens so cute. You'd want to strangle them otherwise."

Picasso followed him downstairs and perched atop a bookcase, glaring down in superiority as James cleaned up the mess.

"I guess I should have appreciated Maxi more." James glanced up at the cat. Did he just nod in agreement? "I will when she gets back."

Mew.

"Good question. Where is she? Probably with Claire or Jane." James glanced at the phone he'd tossed on the table. "At least she answers my texts so I know she's safe."

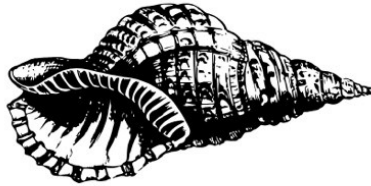
He'd thought Maxi would have been back by now. She must be really mad about something, but James had sensed more than anger in her when she'd left that night. She'd seemed hurt and maybe a bit disappointed. For the life of him, he couldn't think of what he had done to make her feel that way.

With the toilet paper all gathered in a pile and stuffed in a trash bag, he glanced into the bathroom, wondering if he should take the toilet paper roll out of the holder and put it out of reach. "Maxi would know exactly what to do. She knows what to do about everything."

Picasso glared down at him in reproachful silence.

"Oh, I see, you think it's my fault she left." Was it? Of course it must have been. "All right, then, I guess there is only one thing left to do. If it's something I've done, then there must be a way to undo it. We need to figure out exactly what action I have to take to get her back."

CHAPTER SEVEN



Maxi fiddled nervously with her coffee cup and studied the man across the table from her, Chandler Vanbeck. They were sitting in the Townline Diner, a retro-style eatery that was decorated with a lot chrome and Naugahyde. They made good coffee, and it seemed like a neutral place to meet, which was why Maxi had suggested it.

Chandler had just finished updating her on the renovation efforts in the building on the edge of Perkins Cove that he'd secured for his art gallery.

"I know it's an aggressive schedule, but I want to have the gallery open by Thursday, and I'd love to feature some of your work," Chandler said.

Maxi was taken aback. Chandler seemed like a nice guy. And he certainly seemed interested in her work, if not maybe a little *too* interested. Maxi wondered vaguely if he was interested in more than just her work. The thought was awkward and unappealing. She had no intention of having a relationship with anyone. The mere thought of it made her feel resistant and sad because deep down, she still loved James.

"But I've never shown my work anywhere. I haven't even finished a proper painting in decades." Maxi thought about the seascape she'd started the other day. It was sitting on the easel at her cottage, the paint still wet.

"It's fine," Chandler assured her. "I like to highlight emerging local artists, and no one expects them to have a following."

"I'm hardly emerging."

"You could be if you put some work in the show. Just three pieces."

Maxi sipped her coffee and contemplated Chandler's offer. Could she even get three pieces done by then? But she sensed that this was a once-in-

a-lifetime chance. If she passed it up now, she might not get an offer again. "Okay, I'll do it."

"Wonderful!" Chandler stuck his hand across the table, and Maxi shook it. "I'll need the paintings by Wednesday afternoon. Will that work?"

A wave of panic struck Maxi, but she managed to nod. "Yes, that will be fine."

"Chandler! I thought I might find you here." A woman who Maxi judged to be in her early seventies stood at the end of their table. She had close-cropped white hair and bright-red-framed glasses, and was wearing a colorful flowing skirt and dozens of bangles. She looked artsy and airy and like everything Maxi was hoping to become. She smiled at Maxi and stuck her hand out. "Hi. I'm Muriel Fox."

Maxi shook her hand, feeling suddenly out of place in her crisp white blouse and tan Bermuda shorts. "Maxi Stevens."

"Nice to meet ya, Maxi." The woman turned to Chandler. "Are you going to be at the Purple Blueberry later on? Gerry is going to recite some of his poetry."

Chandler smiled. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Okay, see you then." She smiled at Maxi then turned and walked back to the counter, where a cup of coffee and piece of pie awaited.

"Have you been to the Purple Blueberry?" Chandler asked.

"I've heard of it, never been." The Purple Blueberry was a trendy little outdoor bar where the more artsy crowd hung out. Maxi had always been curious but never brave enough to go. James thought anything artsy was too "Bohemian" for someone like a bank president—or his wife—to be seen at. She was sure Claire or Jane would have gone with her, but she'd never considered asking them because she didn't want James to be mad. She didn't have to worry about what he would think anymore, but that was bittersweet.

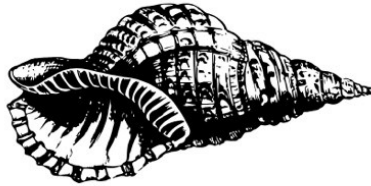
"If you'd like to go this afternoon, I'll be going around five," Chandler said.

Warning bells surfaced. Was that just a friendly invitation or a date? Either way, best for Maxi not to encourage too much friendship from Chandler. She didn't want to send the wrong message.

"Thanks, but I can't. I have plans with Jane and Claire." At least she didn't have to lie. They were meeting at Splash at five.

Maxi couldn't wait to meet Jane and Claire and tell them the exciting news about the art gallery. As she sipped her coffee, a smile spread across her face. She was finally on her way to having everything she always wanted. Well, everything except James.

CHAPTER EIGHT



“So you haven’t gone back home?” Jane asked as the waitress slid pink frothy drinks with pineapple slices perched on the rims in front of them. They were seated at Splash, one of their favorite gathering spots. It was a bar right on the beach and had all the sights, sounds, and smells of the ocean. The beachgoers had packed up their things and left, but the coconut scent of suntan lotion still lingered in the air. They could hear the lulling sound of the waves, and the colorful blues and pinks of the sun setting behind them completed the picture.

“No chance of that.” Maxi actually hadn’t even considered it. Sure, she felt a little homesick, and when she thought about James, her heart felt like it was broken into a million pieces, but she was determined to focus on the positive.

She loved having her own place and loved the beach, and Rembrandt was turning out to be a great addition to her life. Since moving to the cottage, she’d spent most of her time painting and had enjoyed every minute of it. Why hadn’t she done this sooner? Not leaving James—she never would have done that if it hadn’t been for the cheating—but getting a space of her own to pursue her creative endeavors was something she should have done years ago.

“Are you sure?” Claire picked a sweet potato fry out of the basket and dipped it in the horseradish sauce. “You and James have been together for a long time. Maybe you’re just having a rough patch.”

Maxi sighed and reached into her tote bag for the card. She knew she’d have to tell Claire and Jane sooner or later, but something felt wrong about

the situation. It almost felt as if *she* were betraying James and not the other way around.

“It’s not just a rough patch. I found this in his pocket.” She held the card up. Jane and Claire both looked confused.

Claire reached for the card and put it on the table in front of her. “Sandee’s business card?”

“Except I don’t think James had it for business.” Maxi reached out and flipped the card over. “Looks like her personal number is on the back.”

Claire pressed her lips together. “It could be. I don’t know her number.”

“I figure her work number is the one actually printed on it, but this is seven digits. So it’s probably a personal number she gives out to a select few.” Maxi turned to Jane. “Remember when you thought you saw James with Sandee at the cottage?”

Jane nodded solemnly. “But you said you weren’t in the market to buy one.”

“Right. I don’t think James was there looking at real estate... if you know what I mean.”

“There could be a logical explanation—” Jane started, but Maxi cut her off.

“That’s what I hoped at first. But then I thought about all the nights he came home late and how things have been strained between us. The real kicker was the other day when I saw him pulling out of the spot next to the real estate office, and he pretended that he didn’t even see me!”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. “And you think he was visiting Sandee. In broad daylight? That would be just like her. She’s a home-wrecker with no conscience.”

Maxi knew very well what Sandee was capable of. She’d lived through it with Claire when Claire’s husband, Peter, had cheated on her with Sandee. And now it was happening to her. But it had worked out good for Claire. She’d eventually been able to start Sandcastles and now had everything she’d ever wanted, including a new devoted boyfriend. In a way, it had inspired Maxi because she knew that she, too, could use this as a way to reinvent herself into everything she always wanted to be. Just without the boyfriend.

“And he admitted to seeing her?” Jane’s tone was skeptical.

“No, not really. But when I confronted him about pretending not to see me in the street, he lied and said he wasn’t there!” Maxi took a long sip of

her drink. "I know him well enough to know when he's lying."

"I can't believe it." Jane's expression softened with sympathy. "You always seemed so good together. What can I do to help?"

Maxi shook her head. "Nothing. I'm doing fine, really."

"You are?" Claire studied her. "Sometimes it doesn't hit you for a while. If you need to talk, please let me know. I've been there."

Maxi appreciated her friends' offers to help, but she was surprised to find that she really was doing okay. "I'm just focusing on the future. I love the little cottage. I've been painting and... I have a new man in my life."

Claire and Jane were taken aback. "So soon?"

Maxi pulled her phone out of her tote. She'd taken several pictures of Rembrandt to show them. She'd yet to tell them about the cat and was excited to surprise them. She thumbed through for her favorite, the one in which he was reaching up with one paw at her.

"His name is Rembrandt."

Claire and Jane tilted their heads to look at the phone.

"How adorable!"

"How old is he?"

"He's only six months." Maxi's heart swelled as she swiped to the next photo of him curled up and sleeping on the couch.

"Already spoiled, I see," Claire said.

"He's great company. And the cottage is coming around." Maxi took her phone back. "Do you guys want to come over and meet him and see the place tomorrow night?"

"Of course!" Jane said.

"That would be perfect," Claire agreed.

"Good. I might be really busy the next couple of days." Despite the grim news about her marriage, Maxi was bubbling over to tell her best friends about her show in the art gallery.

"Oh? Why is that?" Jane asked around a mouth of fries.

"I'm going to be showing three paintings in Chandler Vanbeck's new art gallery."

Claire's and Jane's eyes grew wide.

Jane clapped her hands. "That's wonderful!"

"Congratulations! I'm so excited for you!" Claire held up her drink, and they all clinked glasses.

Maxi took a deep breath. "I'm not going to lie, I'm terrified. But I met with Chandler Vanbeck, and I figured if I turned him down, he might not offer again so..."

"You'll do great," Jane assured.

"Well, I don't have time to dwell on it because he wants three paintings, and I only have a couple of days to get them done."

"Oh, I guess you *will* be busy."

"I think that will be good. I feel like this is a new chance for me to do all the things I never did when I was busy raising the kids and being a model wife." Maxi made a face. "All the things that James didn't seem to approve of."

"Good for you. I know it hurts now, but look at me. Peter hooking up with Sandee was really for the best." Claire glanced around the restaurant then lowered her voice. "And I can't say it does feel like just deserts that Sandee is cheating on Peter. He deserves it."

"Payback is a bitch." Jane bit into the pineapple from her drink.

"Yeah, he deserves it." Maxi's look turned serious. "But don't let that poison you about all guys. Your two seem to be real gems."

Both Claire and Jane blushed.

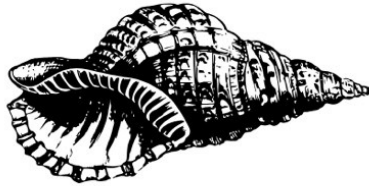
"Let's hope so. I'm taking things slow," Jane said.

"Me too," Claire agreed. "Actually, I think our two guys are over at Salty's watching the ball game together."

Jane's left brow quirked up. "Oh? Good for them. I wouldn't want them to get too dependent on hanging out with us. We girls need our space."

"Here, here." Maxi raised her glass, and they all clinked again.

CHAPTER NINE



James's hunch that Maxi might be at Splash with Jane and Claire turned out to be correct. She looked happy, laughing and talking and sipping one of those frou-frou drinks she liked. She looked good, too, in one of those shirts with the wide loose sleeves that she sometimes wore.

He loved seeing her happy, but this time, it broke his heart because she wasn't happy with *him*. When was the last time they'd laughed together like that?

He stood in the shadows on the beach where he could see the patio, but no one could see him. He felt like a creepy stalker, but he wasn't stalking Maxi, not really. It was just that he'd been so desperate to see if she was okay that he'd taken to scoping out the places that she liked to frequent.

But now that he'd seen her, he knew he should leave. He turned, causing an avalanche of sand to fall into his Italian leather loafers. Darn it! Those things cost a bundle and were shined to perfection. He bent down to brush them off, taking care of a few white hairs Picasso had managed to deposit on the cuff of his slacks in the process.

He probably shouldn't have worn his good slacks and shoes to the beach, but James prided himself on his appearance. That was one thing he and Maxi had in common... they always dressed properly.

Except...

He glanced back over at the patio. Maxi wasn't wearing one of her usual muted-toned tailored outfits but was wearing something colorful and loose. She usually dressed in a more business-like manner. He'd complimented her on that many times, telling her she looked classy. But he'd noticed

whenever he traveled, she took to wearing the more bohemian-style outfits... was that because of his influence? He liked those outfits, too, but he'd never complimented her on them.

Now that he thought back, Maxi had tried to encourage him to dress down a bit. Like he used to when they were younger, she'd said. Was that one of the reasons she was unhappy with him? He had been less conservative in their younger days, but once he started moving up in the bank, he had more responsibility and had to keep up appearances. He couldn't act or dress like a carefree youth anymore. Had he gone too far?

Walking in the dark back to the parking lot, James wondered if it wasn't time to make a change. Looking around, he noticed the other people walking in and out of the shops had on T-shirts and shorts. No one was dressed for success. He looked out of place.

Maybe it was time for a change. Maybe it was time to loosen up a bit about his reputation and how things looked.

James headed up the street toward a crowded tavern he'd seen a few streets over. He was going to do something he hardly ever did anymore. He was going to a bar for a beer.

"YES!" Mike Henderson fist-bumped Rob Bradford as the Red Sox scored a triple homer. They were playing against the Yankees, and everyone in Salty's was jazzed that they were winning.

Mike didn't know Rob well, but he liked him. He seemed like a stand-up guy, and Jane had said he'd helped her a lot with her mother. That was good enough for him.

"Hey, is that Maxi's husband over there?" Rob nodded his chin toward the door.

Mike squinted through the crowd. He'd only met Maxi's husband, James, a couple of times in passing, but it did look like the guy. "I think so."

"Looks like he just got out of a boardroom meeting," Rob said. "Should we invite him to join us?"

"Sure. Maxi, Jane, and Claire are all together, so we might as well be too." Mike turned and waved at James. The guy really did look like he'd

come from a board meeting with his linen slacks and polo shirt, quite a contrast to Mike's black T-shirt and tan board shorts.

It took a second for James to recognize Mike and figure out that he was waving him over. They shook hands all around, and then James pulled a barstool up to the pub table they were sitting at and ordered a Sam Adams Boston Lager.

"So, you looking for something to do while Maxi is out with Jane and Claire?" Rob asked.

James glanced from Rob to Mike. "I... I guess you could say that."

Mike could sense something was off. "They're at Splash, aren't they?"

"Yeah, it's just..." James let his voice trail off and looked down into his beer.

"Is something wrong?" Rob must have picked up on the vibe too.

James sighed. "It's just that Maxi and I aren't together anymore. I would have thought you guys knew that from Jane and Claire."

"What? No." Rob looked at Mike.

Mike shrugged and shook his head. Jane hadn't mentioned anything, but this didn't seem like something she would talk lightly about. Maxi and James had been married a long time. They had kids. This was serious.

"What happened?" Mike asked.

James shrugged. "I wish I knew. I came home the other day, and she had her bags packed."

"With no warning?" Rob looked skeptical.

James grimaced. "Well, now that I look back, I could see she was bored after the kids left. I encouraged her to take up painting. Thought that would be enough, but I guess not."

"Darn, tough break." Rob swigged his beer, his eyes drifting back to the television.

"I just can't figure it out." James sounded downright despondent. "I wish I knew why she was so mad. I'd try to rectify it if I knew what to do."

Mike shrugged. "Who knows what women want? Sometimes they're hard to figure out." Like Mike's last girlfriend, Tiffany. She'd kept him on his toes by saying one thing but then doing the opposite. And no one should even get him started on how she refused to accept that they were broken up, even though he'd explained it to her face-to-face and in the nicest way possible. Maybe he'd been too nice about it? Even now, he felt a pang of

dread when he looked at his phone, thinking it might be her with another text expecting them to get back together.

Thankfully, Jane wasn't like that. At least she didn't seem to be. It might have been because Tiffany had been a lot younger than Mike, and Jane was eight years older, or maybe it was just that their relationship was so new that she was on her best behavior. Either way, Mike had already discovered that Jane was a lot more mature.

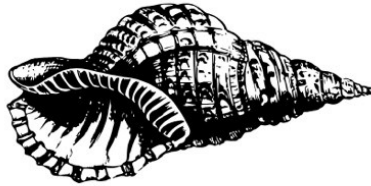
"So I guess Jane or Claire didn't say anything about why Maxi left?" James had a pleading look in his eye that reminded Mike of how Cooper looked when he wanted some table scraps.

"No. Sorry." Rob did sound genuinely sorry.

James took a pull of his beer. "I just wish I knew what to do to get her back. I don't want to push her—I get that she probably needs some space. I thought she'd come back after a night away, but it's been a couple of days now, and I don't think she is. I'm clueless as to what to do to get her back."

The poor guy was miserable. Too bad Mike had no idea how to help him. But he knew a few people that might. "If you really want to know what to do to get Maxi back, then I think you need to talk to Jane and Claire."

CHAPTER TEN



“Maxi really seems to be doing well,” Jane said the next morning as she stood outside Sandcastles, talking to Claire. She was waiting to meet Mike so they could take Cooper for a walk on the beach then head to Tall Pines to visit her mother and his grandfather.

“Yeah, almost *too* well.” Claire handed Jane a white bakery bag. Inside were two chocolate chip muffins, Addie’s favorites. “Take these to your mom.”

“Thanks.” Jane opened the bag, stuck her nose in, and closed her eyes as she inhaled. “Smells delicious. Anyway, I hope Maxi can keep her spirits up. She certainly is keeping busy with the paintings for the art show, and she also volunteered to paint the candles for the wedding.”

“That art show is going to be really good for her.” Claire bent to pet Cooper, who had been obediently sitting next to Jane, watching their conversation. “How is the wedding going?”

Jane rolled her eyes. “I can’t wait until it’s over. I’m thinking about putting Andie in charge of guest check-in.”

Claire’s left brow quirked up. “Oh? So does that mean Andie is staying?”

“She hasn’t said as much, but she also hasn’t said anything about leaving either.” Jane didn’t want to get her hopes up, but she really did want her sister to stay. She’d seen her in a different light over the past two weeks, and they’d bridged some of the gap that had happened in their relationship over the last few decades.

Claire's eyes drifted over Jane's shoulder, and her face immediately lit in a smile. Jane didn't have to turn around to know that Rob Bradford was coming from his store across the street.

"Hey, Jane, how are you?" Rob came to stand beside Claire, his smile matching hers.

"Good. You? How's the bread biz?"

"Great. Gaining business every day." Rob looked over at his store with pride. "I love being here in Lobster Bay. In fact, last night Mike and I had a great time at Salty's. Ran into Maxi's husband there." Rob's expression turned serious. "I didn't realize they were having trouble."

Jane's warm feelings were replaced by anger for James. "Yeah, turned out he's not such a great guy."

"After all those years of marriage. We've known him as long as Maxi, and I've always liked him, even though he's a bit stuffy," Claire said. "But I never expected he was a cheater."

"A cheater?" Rob frowned at Claire. "What do you mean?"

Claire glanced around to make sure they couldn't be overheard. "Yes, he cheated on Maxi. That's why she left."

Rob made a face. "Are you sure? Because the guy I talked to last night didn't seem like a cheater. In fact, he seemed oblivious to the reasons why Maxi left."

"Huh? That can't be right."

Cooper let out a small bark, and his tail started thumping. Jane turned to see Mike coming up the street. As he joined the group, he took Cooper's leash, his hand brushing Jane's and causing her heart to flutter.

"Hey, Mike." Rob and Mike shook hands. "Didn't you think James seemed sincerely baffled as to why Maxi left when we talked to him last night?"

"Yeah, the guy was practically crying."

"Claire and Jane said that Maxi thinks he cheated," Rob said.

"Cheated? No. He wants her back. Did she talk to him about the cheating? Because he didn't mention that. He seemed genuinely in the dark about what was bothering her. I think he'd know what it was if he was cheating on her." Mike bent down to rub Cooper's neck.

Claire pressed her lips together. "Well, I don't think she mentioned it exactly, but he's been acting funny, and she found a card with a phone number."

“Is it possible this is just a miscommunication?” Rob asked.

Claire shook her head. “I don’t think so. There were other signs.”

Rob shrugged. “I don’t know. If you saw how James was last night, the last thing I would suspect would be that he had another woman. If he did, why would he seem so clueless about why Maxi left and desperate to get her back?”

Claire put her hands on her hips and looked up at Rob. “You’re too nice to notice, but cheaters always lie. I know from experience. I bet if I talked to him, I’d pick up the lie in a heartbeat.”

“Good, because you’re going to get that chance.”

“I am?” Claire asked.

Mike nodded. “Yep, last night we advised James that if he wanted to get Maxi back, you and Jane were the ones to talk to.”

MAXI GLANCED at the ocean then back at her painting. She leaned in, dabbing a line of bright-white paint along the top of the wave. She wanted her painting to be realistic, to capture the way it actually looked when the sun hit the foamy crest of the wave. She glanced back at the ocean. Not too bad.

She’d been working for several hours, and this one was almost done. One down, two to go. But if she could finish them as quickly as this one, she’d have no problem making the deadline for the art show.

Putting her brush in a bottle of turpentine, she stretched and flexed her fingers. Her hand was slightly cramped from holding the brush for so long, but it was surprising how quickly she got back into the rhythm of painting after not having done it for so long. The soothing cadence of the waves and the sea air helped.

A noise drew her attention toward the cottage. Rembrandt sat on the back of the couch, looking out the window. He raised his paw and tapped on the glass, his adorable big eyes looking right at her. Her heart swelled. Adopting the cat definitely had been the right thing to do. He was good company, and she barely even missed James. Of course, that could be because James hadn’t been home much for the past few months anyway, so there wasn’t much to miss.

She took her paints and dirty brushes and turpentine inside. Time for a break. As soon as she got in, Rembrandt scampered over to her. She picked him up and cuddled him under her chin, looking back out at the beach.

Over by the shoreline, a golden dog ran past. Cooper? Must have been because Jane and Mike followed, holding hands and laughing. Maxi was happy that Jane had finally found someone. She could have gone out to say hi, but they looked so involved in each other that she didn't want to interrupt them.

Maxi cherished her good friends, but now that her life was changing, maybe it was time to make some different friends. She put Rembrandt on the chair and picked up the local paper. Hadn't she seen a list of events in the paper? She flipped through, finding the small section listing the events. The Purple Blueberry was having a wine tasting tomorrow afternoon. That might be fun to go to. Did she dare?

She grabbed the charcoal pencil from the coffee table and circled the ad then folded the paper and put it on the table so she could find it later. She'd better get busy. She had to clean the place up and had a few pieces of artwork to hang and some throw rugs to put down. She wanted the place to look as good as it could for Jane and Claire tonight.

MIKE WOULDN'T HAVE THOUGHT it possible, but his grandfather had improved since he'd been at Tall Pines. At first he'd been afraid that taking Gramps out of the home he'd known for forty years would make him deteriorate even faster, but it hadn't. Instead he'd thrived with the care and people to socialize with.

The frequent visits from Cooper and Mike seemed to perk him up even more. Another reason for Mike to give up his apartment in Seattle and stay in Lobster Bay.

"Now you be a good boy." Gramps smiled down at Cooper. The dog was still damp from his romp on the beach, but that didn't stop Gramps from petting the dog's fur. If dogs could smile, Cooper would have been smiling right back at the old man. Gramps looked up at Mike. "Looks like you're taking him for lots of walks on the beach. He loves that."

“He’s getting good care,” Mike said. Even though Cooper was now living with Jane because Mike couldn’t have him at the cottage he was renting, he still spent a lot of time with the dog, which had the happy consequence that he also spent a lot of time with Jane.

“Jane sure has been spoiling him. Looks like maybe she’s been taking good care of you too.” Gramps sat back in his chair, sparkling blue eyes assessing Mike and making him a little uncomfortable.

“She’s a good friend.”

Gramps laughed. “Come on now, I think there’s more than that.”

Mike smiled. “Maybe. There’s no reason to rush things.”

Gramps eyed him. “Sure, just don’t let her get away.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan to.” Which was really his main reason to stay in Lobster Bay. Mike had never met anyone like Jane. She was sweet and pretty and mature. And even though their relationship was still new, he knew in his gut that she was the one. But Jane seemed a little more cautious, and Mike was taking things slow. Couldn’t blame her—she’d been widowed and hadn’t dated in decades. She was easing into the relationship, and Mike didn’t want to rush and scare her off.

“Speaking of which, she’s probably ready to leave.” Mike patted his leg, and Cooper nudged Gramps’s hand for one last pet then trotted to his side. “See you tomorrow.”

Out in the hall, Mike’s phone rang. It was Tim, his buddy from Seattle. He paused in front of the door to the memory care wing, where Jane was visiting her mother.

“Hey, Tim, how’s it going?”

“Great. How about you? Beach life must suit you, since you haven’t come back yet.”

Mike laughed. “I guess it does.”

“And your grandfather?”

“He’s doing really good.”

“Great! Hey, I found someone who wants to sublet your apartment, so if you’re really serious about staying out there, maybe you can switch over the lease.”

Initially Mike had come to Lobster Bay just to get his grandfather settled. He’d intended to return to Seattle and had been paying a lot of money to keep his apartment there. But that was before he met Jane. “I am serious about staying.”

“Okay. I’ll send you the contact info. Gonna miss you back here. And I’m not the only one.” Tim’s pause made Mike feel uneasy. “There’s some other news too.”

“Oh?” Mike looked down at Cooper, who was looking up at him, his brow slightly wrinkled as if he sensed Mike’s concern.

“Tiffany is apparently taking a trip to Lobster Bay.”

“What? Aww, come on! Does she still think we are getting back together?” He could not have been clearer to her that their relationship was over. Should he have been more forceful? Maybe he should have yelled instead of calmly discussing it with her. The girl did seem to thrive on drama.

“She said she’s going there for some art gallery opening, but of course she was asking if you were still out there.”

Darn! The last thing Mike wanted was Tiffany hanging around trying to get back together. But there really was a new art gallery opening up—Maxi was showing some paintings at the opening. Was it possible that Tiffany really was coming out for that and not to get back together? She hadn’t messaged him since a few weeks ago when he’d had to make it brutally clear. It was possible she was asking if he was still there so she could *avoid* him. Wishful thinking, perhaps?

Thoughts of the gallery made him think about Maxi and James. Mike made a mental note to try to persuade Jane to talk to James. He had a feeling the guy was sincere and totally lost without his wife.

He hung up with Tim just as Jane was coming out the door.

“Something wrong?” Her blue eyes were dark with concern as they flicked to the phone in his hand.

Mike took her hand. “Of course not. That was Tim. I might have someone to take over my lease in Seattle.”

Jane smiled. “Really? So you really are going to stay?”

“I think so. There’s a lot of benefits to staying in Lobster Bay.”

Jane nodded and stepped past him to lead the way down the hall.

“Good, Cooper will be happy about that,” she teased over her shoulder.

Mike fell in step with her. “Hey, speaking of happy... I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind hearing James Stevens out.”

Jane’s smile faltered. “You really think I should talk to him? I know you and Rob mentioned it this morning, but I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

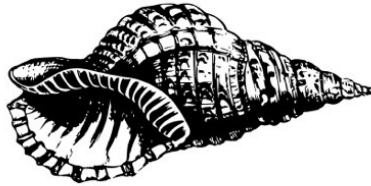
“I think you should hear him out. Honestly, the guy was hurting. I’m convinced he didn’t do anything wrong and really wants her back.”

Jane stopped and turned to him. “Really? Why?”

“Just a feeling. When you see the guy, you’ll see what I mean.” Mike put on his most sincere face.

Jane rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. But only because you’re vouching for his innocence. I still think he’s a louse. But I’ll talk to Claire, and if she agrees, then *maybe* we’ll see what he has to say.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



“What should I wear to meet with Jane and Claire?” James glanced back at Picasso, but the cat was no help. He barely slitted an ice-blue eye at him from his position curled up on the bed.

James was regretting setting up the meeting, even though it was probably his best chance of winning Maxi back. The frigid tone in Jane’s voice when he’d called made him realize that convincing them to help might be difficult. But why was she so cold toward him? Was it just that she was acting standoffish in support of Maxi? He’d done nothing wrong.

Now the thought of meeting with both Jane and Claire, who he assumed would be equally icy, terrified him.

“Clothing is important, and I want to make a favorable impression so that they can see their way toward helping me.” James laid out some slacks and shirts on the bed and stood back. Slacks might be too formal. Where were his old jeans?

He pushed to the back of the closet where the clothes he hadn’t worn in years still hung. One pair of jeans was all faded. That wouldn’t do. He picked a stiff dark indigo pair that he’d hardly worn and brought that out to the bed.

Picasso perked up. Perhaps sensing that his white hair would make a mess on the dark blue, he stretched and wandered over to the jeans.

“Don’t even think about it.” James whipped the jeans off the bed and laid them on a chair. Undaunted, Picasso sat on his haunches and started to wash behind his ear.

James pulled his tie rack out of the closet and laid it on the bed. He picked out a blue paisley tie and held it up. “Maybe this one?”

Mew! Picasso swatted at the tie.

Okay, apparently he didn’t like the blue tie. James held up a yellow one. “How about—”

Merow! Picasso lashed out, ripping the yellow tie from his hand and then batting all the others off the bed.

“Right. No tie. That’s exactly what I was thinking.” The cat might be on to something. Rob and Mike hadn’t been wearing ties last night. In fact, they’d been dressed pretty casually in T-shirts and jeans. James eyed the button-down shirt he’d selected. Too formal? He didn’t want Jane and Claire to feel like they were in a business meeting. Maybe it was best to dress like Mike and Rob. Did he even have any regular T-shirts?

James rummaged in the bureau, eliciting more interest from Picasso, who managed to jump on top of it so he could look down into the drawers. No doubt he was looking for the cashmere sweater vest.

The closest thing to a T-shirt was a polyester short-sleeved shirt with a pocket on the left front side. That would have to do.

James put the rest of his clothes away, got dressed, and checked himself in the mirror. He glanced over at Picasso for approval. The cat simply blinked and curled up in a ball.

“Right, not exactly the look I was going for. Maybe Jane and Claire can give me some guidance.” He straightened his collar and patted the cat. It felt good to have someone to talk things over with, but Picasso was no substitute for Maxi.

Feeling like he was going to the gallows, James straightened his collar and grabbed his wallet. He glanced back at Picasso. “I’m off to see what I can do to get her back. You hold down the fort.”

On the way out, James double-checked the bureau to make sure he hadn’t left the cashmere sweater drawer open.

“HELLO, JAMES.” Jane stood with her arms crossed over her chest, trying to be polite and wondering why she’d agreed to talk to James about Maxi. If

it wasn't for Mike and Rob convincing her and Claire to give James a chance, they would have turned him down outright.

"Jane, Claire. Thanks for talking to me." James cleared his throat, clearly nervous. Good. After what he'd done, he should be. But still, Jane had an inkling of a doubt about James's guilt. Mike seemed convinced that James had done nothing wrong, and if James had cheated, why would he go to the effort of arranging this meeting?

He'd clearly thought hard about it, judging by the outfit he was wearing. It looked like he was trying to be less formal. Either that, or he hadn't had a chance to do laundry since Maxi left.

"How about we go out on the back porch? It's much more scenic, and Brenda made some lemonade."

They headed out back and sat at one of the little tables. James glanced nervously at Sally, who was up on a ladder, hanging little crystal chandeliers from the ceiling. Maxi had said it would give the inn an upscale look and be perfect for weddings. At first Jane had thought they would be too fancy, but they were so small and not loaded with crystals. They gave the porch a chic look without seeming out of place.

"So what do you want?" Claire blurted out, her distaste for James obvious.

Jane poured lemonade into tall glasses while James fidgeted to come up with his answer.

"Well... I ... uh... I ran into Mike and Rob, and they said maybe you could help. I don't know what I've done to make Maxi so mad, but I want to get her back."

Jane's left brow quirked up. "You don't know what you've done?"

James looked appropriately confused. "No. Honestly. Well, okay, I know I've been working a lot, but I was trying to clear up a project so we could take a trip. Maxi always wanted to go to Italy, and I thought it would help cheer her up. And then I guess we haven't been as close as usual, but I thought maybe she was just in a funk with no kids at home. I tried to encourage her to get back into art, and then I had a few other things..."

He was rambling now, spilling it all out.

Claire cut to the chase. "And is that why you took up with Sandee Harris?"

"What? Took up?" James looked from Claire to Jane. "What do you mean?"

Claire slapped the business card she'd pocketed at Splash on the table and pointed at the number written in ink. "Why else would you have her personal number?"

James squinted. "Personal number? That's not a phone number."

Claire sat back, crossing her arms over her chest. "You can't weasel out of it that easy."

"I'm not weaseling out. That's not a phone number."

"So you deny meeting with Sandee Harris in a cottage, then?" Jane asked.

James looked sincerely baffled. "No. I did meet with Sandee. It was supposed to be a surprise."

Claire snorted. "I'll say!"

James shook his head, his face red. "It's not what you think. I was meeting with Sandee because I was looking to buy a cottage on the beach. Maxi has mentioned many times over the years that her dream is to have a little studio and paint on the beach. There aren't any commercial studio spaces on the beach, so I thought if we bought a cottage, she could use it for that."

Claire's shoulders relaxed, but her eyes were still full of suspicion. Jane couldn't blame her. She remembered that when Peter cheated, he'd been full of excuses. But this was different. "So why did you need Sandee's personal number?"

"This?" James tapped on the writing, and Claire nodded. "That's not her personal phone number. That's the price for the cottage."

Claire frowned and snatched the card up. "One million two hundred eighty-five thousand nine hundred seventy-nine." She glanced at Jane. Jane felt like an idiot. That was about the going price for small oceanfront cottages like the one she'd seen James at. Why hadn't she thought of that before?

"So you're not having any affair with Sandee?" Jane asked.

James made a face. "No. She's hardly my type. I like women that are classy. Like Maxi."

He had a point. James had always been worried about appearances, preferring Maxi to dress in conservative clothing. Sandee with her brassy blond hair, low-cut shirts, and fake boobs was hardly conservative.

Apparently Claire wasn't quite convinced. "What about when you pretended that you didn't see her downtown?"

James looked sheepish. "I panicked. That was another one of her surprises. I got her a kitten."

"You did?" Jane was incredulous. Maxi had mentioned many times that James didn't want animal hair on his suits, and he'd gotten a kitten?

"She's been acting down in the dumps lately, and I knew she wanted one." James brushed a few white hairs off his shirt and sighed. "I bought a lot of those sticky tape rollers, too, but they don't work very good."

Jane glanced at Claire. Her expression was a mix of skepticism and dawning realization that there had been a big misunderstanding. Had they misjudged James? He looked so lost and forlorn and eager for them to believe him. He'd adopted a kitten, for crying out loud! He'd clearly been very nervous coming here. A man who had been cheating wouldn't bother to put himself in that position. She'd made a big mistake, and now she needed to make up for it.

"We're seeing Maxi tonight. We'll talk to her," Jane said.

James's tight expression dissolved with relief. "I'd really appreciate that."

"She's not gonna just go back that easy," Sally piped in from atop the ladder.

James frowned and turned in his chair. "But if she left because she thought I was cheating..."

"Yeah, I know." Sally descended the ladder. "But now she's doing things she couldn't do before. She's got a little freedom. And she's probably gonna feel silly for thinking that of you. You might meet a little resistance."

"But surely she won't be mad still. Maxi is quite reasonable, and I know she loves James," Jane said.

"I know. But I have an idea. One that could work out better in the long run. I should know. I've seen this happen with lots of couples once they get to empty-nester age. They grow apart. But if you play this right, you could bring the two of you back together and solidify your marriage for the long haul," Sally said.

"Seems like Maxi coming back to the house would help with that," James said.

"Ayuh. And she might do just that, but..." Sally scrutinized James's outfit with a scowl. "Then you'd fall back into your old ways. Your relationship needs a shake-up. Maxi's already changing, and now you need to follow suit."

“She might be right. Things get stale when you’ve been together a long time, and Maxi’s been antsy for a while, I think,” Claire said.

“This would be the perfect time for a new start,” Jane added.

“Ayuh,” Sally said. “It’s the perfect opportunity. Now you don’t want to push Maxi. She’s likely all worked up and will tend to think you are lying if you start pushing about how you didn’t cheat. You’ll put her on the defensive, and you don’t want that. Let Jane and Claire clear the path. They can vouch for you, and that will go a long way to her believing it.”

“Okay, that sounds easy. And then what?”

Sally cocked her head to look at his outfit again and shook her head. “Then... I think you’re going to need a makeover.”

ANDIE LOVED TAKING flowers from the gardens at Tides to her mother. It was fitting, too, since her mother had been the one to foster her interest in gardening in the first place.

Today she’d picked a small bouquet of black-eyed Susans and purple cone flowers and put them in one of her grandmother’s vases to bring for Addie. The flowers always cheered her mother, and it felt like she was keeping her in touch with the gardens she’d cherished so much.

“These are lovely, dear!” Addie’s face lit up as she took the vase from Andie. She sniffed the flowers, closing her eyes, her smile widening. Then she examined the vase. “Don’t tell Nona you are using one of her good vases. She’ll scold you.”

“It will be our secret.” Andie wasn’t worried. Nona had died decades ago.

Andie reached for the Sandcastles bakery bag on the small desk under the window. She’d seen Jane grab the bag on her way out with Mike to visit Tall Pines and figured Claire had supplied her with a few fresh muffins for Addie. Too bad the bag was empty. She was hungry and could have used one of those chocolate chip muffins.

When she’d been picking the flowers, she’d seen Jane and Claire talking to Maxi’s husband on the back porch at Tides. Looked like they were in quite the conversation. Andie wondered what that was about. Maxi and James were going through a hard time. Was he trying to weasel his way

back in? Andie didn't need to worry about him pulling any shenanigans, though. She'd seen Sally join the conversation, and the old woman was sharp. She wouldn't let James pull the wool over anyone's eyes, if, in fact, that was what he was doing.

A knock on the door drew Andie from her thoughts.

Standing in the doorway was a tiny woman with wispy white hair. She had a thick maroon cardigan wrapped around her despite the fact that it was summer and the air conditioning was barely on. She had an intricate silver box clutched to her chest.

"Sorry to interrupt." Her voice was timid. "Are you the girl that knows about antiques?"

The question took her by surprise. Had Rita mentioned her to the woman? "Yes, I am."

"I'm Gloria Farnsworth. I was hoping you could look at this box for me." The woman held the box out. Even from eight feet away, Andie could see it was a high-quality piece with an intricate raised design.

"Of course, come in." Andie glanced at Addie.

"Yes, please do come in." Addie gestured for Gloria to enter.

Gloria shuffled over to Andie and handed her the box. Andie dug out her reading glasses and started to inspect it. Turning it over, she saw the English silver hallmarks for pieces made in Birmingham in 1890. "It's solid silver and old."

She inspected the sides and top. It was in great condition, the raised floral decoration very intricate. The inside was lined with cobalt-blue velvet in near perfect condition with only a few spots of wear.

"It was my grandmother's. She always said it was worth a lot." Gloria sounded hopeful.

"It is a very nice piece and in good condition. I would say it has some value." Andie guessed it was worth around a thousand dollars. The silver alone was valuable, but the craftsmanship of the piece itself raised that value, and knowing the provenance added to that even more.

"More than twenty-five dollars?" Gloria asked.

"Twenty-five! Yes, I would say around a thousand."

Gloria frowned. "Are you sure? Damien Carruthers said it's only worth twenty-five, and he would give me twenty."

"Who is Damien Carruthers?" Andie already didn't like the man if he was ripping off little old ladies. But maybe he was just not very good at

valuing antiques.

“He has an ad in the classifieds to appraise antiques,” Gloria said.

“Well, I might get a second opinion if I were you.” Andie handed the box back. “It’s worth considerably more. Of course, a dealer buying it couldn’t pay one thousand, but I think you could get five or six hundred.”

“Really?” Gloria looked quite pleased. “I’d sell it to you for five. I was hoping to use the money to pay for my granddaughter’s 4H camp this fall.”

“Oh, sorry, but I don’t have a shop or anything, so I’m not in the market to make purchases. Do you have someone who can take it to a shop for you?” Since Gloria appeared to be a resident at Tall Pines, Andie figured she needed assistance.

“My daughter can help me, but she said the only shop in Lobster Bay is closed.”

“Maybe take it to Portland? There are some high-end shops there that might give you a good price.”

“Okay, thanks so much.” Gloria nodded at Addie and shuffled out into the hall.

Andie watched her leave, a smile spreading on her face. It had felt good to help the woman. She’d had a brief moment of hoping the silver box might have been one of those rare finds she’d spent her life searching for, but helping the woman get a fair price had its own rewards. If she ever ran into this Carruthers person, she was going to give him a piece of her mind.

Outside the doorway, another resident was lingering.

“Well, what did she say?” the woman asked Gloria.

“You were right. It is worth a lot more.”

The woman glanced in at Andie. “Do you think she’d look at my mother’s figurines?”

Andie could hardly refuse the woman. “I’d be happy to look at them.”

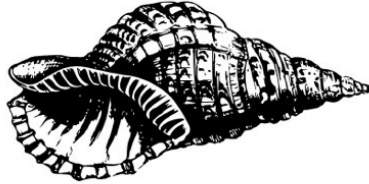
“Oh! I see you’ve found her.” Rita wheeled up to them and looked up at Andie. “I hope you don’t mind, but I told Gloria and Mae that you were an antique expert. I told them their things are much more valuable than Damien said. That guy is a snake.”

Gloria flushed. “It’s not that I didn’t believe you, Rita, but Damien seemed so sincere.”

“Yeah, he can be very persuasive, and I realize you can’t actually shop around.” Rita turned to Andie. “What Lobster Bay needs is a good reputable antique dealer these folks can come to.”

Rita had a point. Apparently there was a need for someone to take in antiques here in town. It wasn't as glamorous as working for a prestigious auction house, but Andie was starting to think that Lobster Bay had a lot more to offer than New York City, and her time at Christies had proven that prestige might be overrated.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Maxi's excitement over showing Jane and Claire her cottage faded as soon as her friends arrived. Something was wrong, something they didn't want to come right out and tell her. She could tell by the awkward way they were acting.

"This place is adorable!" Jane exclaimed as she handed Maxi the lobster dip she'd brought.

"And Rembrandt too!" Claire picked up the kitten and held him up to her face, smiling and cooing at him. Rembrandt purred and acted adorable as usual.

"It's small, but so far I'm enjoying it here." She really was. Okay, she missed James a little, but every time her thoughts turned to him, she shoved them away. The sooner she stopped thinking about him, the better.

"I think it's perfect, and the scenery can't be beat." Claire nodded to the ocean view outside the sliding-glass door.

"It needs work, but since it's not mine, I'm not putting a lot of money in. I don't mind fixing a few things, though, because it belongs to Hailey's grandpa." Maxi herded them toward the small bedroom, showing them the tiny bathroom along the way. "Of course, I decorated with my own comforter, throw rugs, and some things on the wall."

"It's very cottage chic," Jane said.

"Thanks." Maxi pulled a bottle of wine out of the fridge and grabbed three glasses. "Let's go out on the patio."

Claire put Rembrandt down and picked up the plate she'd brought, which was loaded with bite-sized pieces of cake. She held the door open for

Maxi and Jane, blocking Rembrandt's exit with her foot.

The patio was Maxi's favorite part of the cottage. It was made of concrete pavers and sat level with the beach. That meant the sand often encroached on the edges, but Maxi had swept it away before the girls arrived.

Claire and Jane gasped at the painting on the easel. Maxi had to admit that she'd outdone herself. The colors were vibrant, and she'd captured the light perfectly. It was still wet—acrylic paintings took a while to dry—but that wasn't why she'd left it outside. She'd wanted her friends to see it in the natural light.

Claire turned from the painting. "It's gorgeous!"

"Stunning." Jane tilted her head as she inspected it.

"Thanks. It's easier than I thought getting back into the swing of painting. This is the first one for the gallery show. I hope the other two come as easy."

They settled into the white wooden beach chairs that were arranged in a semicircle and filled their glasses. Maxi loaded a cracker with lobster dip. Jane took a piece of cake.

Maxi washed down the cracker with a sip of wine then gave her friends a pointed look. "Okay, out with it. I know you two have something on your minds."

Claire and Jane exchanged a glance, and Maxi's stomach tightened. Hopefully they weren't going to try to talk her out of living here in the cottage. She was too emotionally invested in her new life now. But they wouldn't want her to go back to a cheater. Maybe they'd found out that James was even worse than she'd thought. That he'd been cheating for years with several people. Maxi's cheeks burned with embarrassment, and she braced herself for the worst.

"James didn't cheat on you," Claire blurted out.

"Huh?" Maxi stared, stunned. That was the last thing she'd expected to hear.

"We talked to him, and he explained about the card," Jane said.

"Sure, I just bet he did. Don't tell me you guys fell for some lame lie?"

Jane leaned forward and slathered dip on a cracker. "Of course not. We were skeptical at first too. But, Maxi, if you had seen him..."

"Yeah. He's a mess," Claire said.

Maxi wasn't buying it. "What about the card I found in his pocket?"

Jane glanced at Claire, who nodded, then said, "That wasn't a phone number. It was the price."

"The price of what?"

"A cottage."

Aha! That proved he was lying. "We weren't buying a cottage."

"Not that you knew about. James was trying to surprise you." Claire leaned forward and touched Maxi's arm, her eyes brimming with sincerity. "James had noticed that you were unhappy, and he was trying to do things to make you happier. That's why he suggested you take up art again."

"And why he was working so much. He was trying to get a project done quickly so he could take you on a trip," Jane said.

Maxi's gaze flicked from Jane to Claire and back again. They wouldn't make light of James cheating, and for them to come here on his behalf... well, they must believe him.

"Seriously? I feel like a jerk now. At least I didn't accuse him of it to his face or spread it around town." Maxi drank down the rest of her wine then refilled her glass.

"He was kind of shocked that you thought he was cheating."

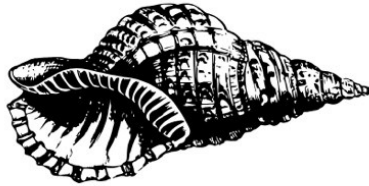
Maxi's heart was flooded with guilt. "I feel so awful. Poor James. But still..." She looked around the patio, at her painting and the cottage. And Rembrandt curled up on the back of the couch. In the few days she'd been here, she'd felt like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. She was starting a new life, and she was afraid there might not be room for James in it. "I'm not sure I want to give everything up and go back. I'm afraid."

Jane frowned. "Afraid of what?"

"Afraid that I'll lose the momentum I've made with my art. Afraid that maybe I don't really love James like I used to. Afraid that if I go back, things will go back to the way they were, and I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

To their credit, Jane and Claire didn't try to talk her into it. Maxi needed to figure this out on her own. Yes, she owed James an apology, but things hadn't been all roses between them regardless. She wasn't ready to just go back to their house and move in like nothing had happened. Not now and maybe not ever.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Maxi stared at the phone in her hand. She'd called James to apologize, and he'd taken it a lot better than she'd expected. He'd been quieter than she expected, too, probably because his feelings were hurt. She felt like a heel.

"I kind of thought he'd ask me to come back," Maxi said to Rembrandt, who was on the coffee table batting at one of her charcoal pencils.

The cat looked up at her as if to ask how she felt about that. Maxi wasn't sure. Now that she realized James wasn't a cheater, her move to the cottage seemed overly drastic. But there had been something wrong with their relationship, and she was enjoying her freedom. It had only been a few days, but she wasn't the same person she'd been when she left James.

Would James still want the new Maxi? And, more importantly, did the new Maxi want to go back to her old life?

Oh well, nothing like immersing yourself in a painting to let the subconscious work those things out. Maxi took her palette and brushes out to the patio, where the canvas for her second painting for the art gallery opening awaited. She'd already sketched in the craggy rocks, crashing waves, and one lone seagull. She took a minute to set up the paints then grabbed her palette and mixed cerulean blue with yellow ochre for the cresting wave.

It would take several hours to lay in the basics, then she'd let it dry for a while before adding the highlights tomorrow. That would be just about the right timing to visit the Purple Blueberry for that wine tasting this afternoon.

Yesterday she'd been excited to step out to the trendy bohemian bar, something she'd always wanted to do. But today her feelings were apprehensive. In thirty years of marriage, she'd hardly gone anywhere without James at her side, and suddenly it felt like she would be missing a part of her.

But the Purple Blueberry wasn't a place that James would ever want to visit. It wasn't a place where one wore neatly pressed chinos and golf shirts. But it was a place where Maxi had always thought she'd fit in.

She felt as if she were standing on the very cliff she was painting, looking down at the ocean of her future. If she went back to James, what would become of that future? All the things she wanted—to immerse herself in creativity and find new like-minded friends and activities—might be pushed out of her reach. But yet, she couldn't imagine a future without James. Now that the sting of thinking he had cheated on her had worn off, she realized she still loved him.

She didn't want to lose him, but more than that, she didn't want to lose herself.

HOW IN THE *world have I let myself get talked into this?* James wondered as he stood in Montgomery's Department Store, his gaze shifting between the selections of clothing Claire and Jane held up.

James hated shopping. He usually just ordered things at O'Malley's Men's Shop. They knew his measurements. He'd pick out a suit, and Ted would tailor it for him. Casual clothing was off the rack. He always bought the same thing. But Claire and Jane and that odd handywoman, Sally, had insisted he needed to change his image.

He supposed they were right. Maxi had looked more casual the last time he saw her, and Rob and Mike didn't dress up like he did. Had he become a stodgy old man as Sally had implied?

"I like this and this." He pointed at a pair of jeans that looked old and faded and a black T-shirt with gray stitching that made it look more tailored than a regular tee.

"I'll go grab some similar items." Sally pushed off from the rack she'd been leaning against and disappeared into the store.

“So how did Maxi seem when you saw her?” James asked Jane and Claire. He’d told them about Maxi’s apology call and had even earned an awkward slap on the back from Sally when he’d explained how he’d managed to not appear too eager. Sally had advised him against begging her to come back home like he’d wanted to. She seemed to think that playing hard to get was the way to go.

James wasn’t into games like that, but then again, he also knew nothing about women, and since Jane and Claire both agreed with Sally, he’d reluctantly gone along. It had been the hardest thing he’d ever done, but Picasso had been there to lend him moral support. The cat must have felt sorry for him because after the call he’d even let out a few purrs, the first time ever.

Pretending to be cool, calm, and collected, as if Maxi’s absence wasn’t killing him, had been the most difficult thing he’d ever done.

“She did feel terrible about suspecting you.” Claire held a sky-blue shirt up under his chin and glanced at Jane for approval.

“That one brings out your blue eyes,” Jane said. “She seemed like she was settling in to the cottage, but I got the impression she misses you.”

“She’s just having too much fun exploring her freedom,” Sally piped in as she piled three more pairs of pants into James’s arms.

“It’s going to take her a while to adjust. She was getting all geared up to hate you,” Claire said. “In the meantime, we’re going to help you out so you’re well positioned to win her back.

“Thanks.” James looked down at the pile of clothes. “Updating my appearance is good, I guess, but I feel like I need to take some kind of action.”

“Don’t worry, we have that covered too.” Sally pushed him toward the changing room. “See, the thing is you need to *show* Maxi that you’re willing to change. To make the relationship better for her. To give her everything she needs to live her best life.”

“Okay.” James drew out the word. “But how do I do that? Should I write a note? Send some flowers? Call her?”

Sally shook her head and rolled her eyes. “No. You show her by *doing*. Once we find your perfect outfit, you’re going to run into Maxi on her own territory and show her you can be part of her new life.”

“I am?” James asked.

“Yeah, you are.” Claire motioned for him to go into the dressing room. “Don’t forget to come out and show us what each outfit looks like on.”

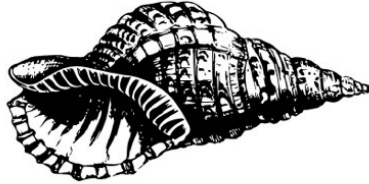
James felt stupid changing outfits and parading around in front of Maxi’s friends. But if it helped get her back, he’d do it. “So how am I going to run into her on *her* territory?”

“You’re going to the Purple Blueberry,” Jane said. “I think she’s going to a wine tasting there this afternoon. I saw it circled on the paper on her coffee table last night.”

James stopped halfway into the dressing room and turned to face them. “But that’s a hangout for hippies.” James was very careful about where he hung out. He needed to keep up appearances.

“Yes, it is, and if you want Maxi back, it’s going to become a hangout for you as well.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Jane returned to Tides after their shopping trip with James to find Andie on the phone in the foyer.

“Yes, we’ll make sure the candles are the perfect shade of blue.” Andie rolled her eyes, pointed at the phone, and mouthed, “Bridezilla.”

“The cake, too, yep,” Andie said into the phone. “Oh, we’re all invited? How lovely.” Andie made a sour face, which Jane echoed. “A full table of eight.”

A table of eight? Who in the world would she put at that? Claire, Rob, Andie, herself, Mike, Maxi... an idea ran through her head. She could invite James, and maybe that would be another thing that would help push him and Maxi back together.

She felt bad for James. The poor guy was making an effort. And he’d adopted a kitten for Maxi. If that didn’t spell true love, she didn’t know what did. The new clothes would make a difference. James hadn’t always been so stuffy either. When they’d been younger, he’d been much more casual. Like Rob and Mike.

Thoughts of Mike reminded her of the phone call he’d gotten at Tall Pines. She’d sensed that he’d gotten some disturbing news. He’d acted different afterwards but insisted nothing was wrong. It made her feel wary, and she wondered about their relationship. Things were going well, but maybe she should be more cautious. She wasn’t very experienced at dating and might be reading too much into things.

“Pink roses on the arbor?” Andie was still talking to Bridezilla on the phone. “Yes, those would look lovely with the blue bridesmaids’ outfits.”

Jane glanced out the window toward the garden. Andie had done a great job bringing it back to life. It was bursting with a rainbow of flowers and lush green leaves and teeming with butterflies and birds. But the rosebushes beside the arbor were red. They hadn't fully climbed the trellis either. Why in the world was Andie promising pink roses?

"Yes, lovely talking to you too. Can't wait to meet in person." Andie hung up the phone.

"You handle people a lot better than I do," Jane said. "You sounded so convincing and reassuring."

Andie laughed. "Lots of practice with high-maintenance antique-appraisal clients."

"What about the arbor, though? The roses are red. You promised her pink."

Andie glanced out the window. "The rosebushes needed some work. I had to cut a lot back, so they aren't tall enough to climb all the way up anyway. I've been thinking about how to handle that. Maybe we could buy pink roses and weave them in? Perhaps hang some pots of those small roses. Might look pretty to have pink at the top and red at the bottom."

"That's a good idea. I think Shane has some more work to do on the arbor. Maybe he could make something so that it's easy for us to weave in fresh roses?"

"Oh, maybe."

Andie looked like she was trying to pretend lack of interest, but by the way she perked up when Jane mentioned Shane's name, Jane doubted she wasn't interested. She'd noticed her sister looking around the inn as if looking for someone and had guessed it was Shane. He'd been helping Sally out with all the repairs they'd been doing but had been out of town for the past few days.

Jane decided not to comment further on Shane. "You're a real asset to the inn. Honestly, I'm not good at handling people, especially when they are demanding like our bride."

"I'm happy to help. Like I said, lots of experience."

"Well, I might have to call on that help a lot over the next week. The inn is fully booked for the wedding, and it's important that everyone is happy. That money is going a long way toward keeping Mom at Tall Pines, and good reviews will bring in more business."

“Mom’s doing so good there. I’ll do my best to make sure the guests love Tides,” Andie said.

“Good. We don’t want to end up like Sadie Thompson.”

“What happened to Sadie Thompson?” Andie looked concerned.

“Nothing yet. But I heard that the family is having trouble coming up with the fee.”

“Huh. The daughter does seem a bit... unreasonable.”

“Really? You know her?”

“No. I peeked into Sadie’s room, you know, because Mom keeps talking about her, and she started up a conversation. Her daughter came by and practically kicked me out.”

“Really? Maybe she’s under a lot of stress about paying the fees. If you ask me, she should sell that old place. Sadie lived there by herself for decades, and now it’s empty and falling apart.” Jane looked around the foyer. Tides wasn’t in the best condition either. She’d considered selling for a brief second, but Tides had been in her family for generations, and besides, she’d promised her mother she would never sell. Maybe Sadie’s daughter felt the same.

“Yeah, I suppose. We’re lucky that things are picking up for us. The weddings were a great idea, and everyone seems to love Cooper.” Andie bent down to pet the dog, who had been lying near the door.

“Who wouldn’t?”

“Plus having Cooper means that Mike comes around often.” Andie looked at Jane out of the corner of her eye, and Jane’s cheeks heated.

“I hope he doesn’t want Cooper back when he gets a place here.”

“I’m sure he won’t do anything that you wouldn’t like.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that.”

Andie frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that we really don’t know each other, and everything is so new. I don’t want to make any assumptions,” Jane said. Somehow voicing her concerns made her feel a lot better.

“I understand. I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Speaking of which, what’s going on with Maxi? I gave her some advice earlier, and I hope I didn’t do the wrong thing.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.” Andie grimaced. “She confided in me that she thought her husband was cheating and she was going to move into the cottage, and I

told her it was the right thing to do. I hope that I said the right thing.”

“Well, I think you did, given the circumstances, but it turns out James wasn’t cheating.” Jane told Andie about the misunderstanding and how they were helping James so he could get Maxi back.

“Oh gosh, if I had known, I wouldn’t have encouraged her,” Andie said.

Jane laid her hand on Andie’s arm. “It’s okay. We thought he was cheating too.”

“Oh good. I’m glad he wasn’t cheating. Is she going back to him?”

“Let’s hope. Right now I think she’s tasting her freedom and doesn’t want to go back to their old relationship.”

“That makes sense.” Andie looked thoughtful. Jane wanted to ask if something was on her mind, but her sense that Andie wasn’t ready to tell her was proven correct when Andie plucked the car keys off the desk. “Okay then, if you don’t need me here, I have something I need to do before I visit Mom at Tall Pines.”

ANDIE TOOK a detour on the way to Tall Pines. As she drove, she thought about what Jane had said about Maxi finding her way and not wanting to go back to her old life. Andie was experiencing something similar.

She was excited for the visit, not just to see her mother but also because Mae was bringing her figurines in for Andie to evaluate. For some reason, the idea of helping these folks was very appealing.

But the mention of Sadie Thompson’s house had piqued her interest. She remembered the house that sat high up on a cliff from when she was a kid. Back then it hadn’t been run-down, or if it had, she hadn’t noticed. She’d been into other things, like Shane Flannery. But the history of the house was appealing, and she wanted to know more. She wanted to go inside and see the old family treasures. Maybe she could help Sadie Thompson like she was helping Mae and Gloria?

She tried to replace the thoughts of Shane that were stuck in her head with thoughts of the old house, but Shane stuck around. Remembering him as they were back in the day. He’d been cute back then, but he’d gotten even more appealing as he’d aged. Not for the first time, Andie wondered if she’d made a mistake back then in dumping him after his proposal and

running off to college. It hadn't been because she didn't love him. It had been because she was afraid. Afraid that he'd never come back from the Navy. Afraid that she'd never make anything of herself if she stayed in Lobster Bay.

Oh well, it was water under the bridge now. Shane hadn't expressed an interest in her. He didn't seem mad. He actually didn't even give any indication that he remembered how close they'd been. That was decades ago, and he'd been married and had kids and even a grandkid now. How could she expect him to remember their teen relationship?

Rounding a corner, the Thompson house came into view. Sitting on a cliff, it looked out at the ocean like a widow awaiting a sea captain's return. It was much as Andie remembered, except it did need a good paint job. A shutter hung askew on one of the upper-floor windows, and Andie imagined it banging against the house in a strong wind. The windows were dark, the grounds overgrown. The house screamed of empty silence.

What would happen to it? Surely Sadie's daughter, Emily, wouldn't just let it rot there? She must not have the money to fix it up. Maybe she was waiting for Sadie to die and she could use insurance money. Andie would love to ask, but judging by the way Emily had acted when she'd found Andie in her mother's room, the woman wasn't going to be easy to make friends with.

Andie turned around and headed back to town, thoughts of Maxi crossing her mind. *Had* she done the right thing to encourage her? Probably not, since James didn't cheat, but maybe all the things Jane and Claire were doing to bring James on board with Maxi's dreams would be a new beginning for them. Maxi leaving could be a blessing in disguise. Andie hoped so. She liked Maxi and wanted to see her happy.

She was starting to get attached to people and to the town. When Jane had come into the foyer and seen her on the phone with Courtney, the bridezilla, Andie had worried Jane might be mad that Andie had taken it upon herself to talk to the bride. But Jane had been relieved. Andie had felt proud to help smooth things over with Courtney and her mother, Marilyn, who had dominated the conversation. Andie actually had a feeling that Courtney might have been more easygoing if not for her mother butting in, but what could you do? Good thing Andie had helped out, though. Jane was right—she didn't have the personality for it. She got flustered too easily.

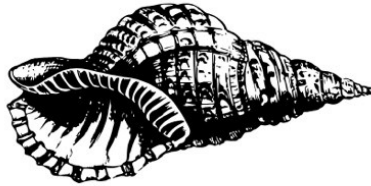
Andie liked being a part of the team at Tides, but that would never be enough for her. She needed something else to do.

Almost as if it had a mind of its own, her rental car turned toward Main Street. She drove past the shops with their cheery awnings and flower-laden window boxes, passing a cute boutique shop, a florist, a hairdresser, and then the antiques shop. Its door was closed, its window boxes empty, and the lights off.

The building was a decent size and in a good section of town. Andie found herself wondering what the apartment above looked like. Was it outdated? In need of major work? Her room at Tides was getting a bit small, and it was also a room they could rent out. With the current upswing in guests, it didn't make sense for her to take up that space.

If she decided to stay in Lobster Bay, buying the antiques shop and apartment would be a perfect solution for her. Excitement rippled through her as she weighed thoughts of staying with thoughts of going back. Suddenly and with much clarity, she had a clear winner. She knew exactly what she wanted to do.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The Purple Blueberry was everything Maxi imagined it would be. Awash in vibrant tones, the outdoor bar was dotted with round tables shaded with colorful umbrellas. Strings of lights with large filament exposed bulbs were strung around the tall purple fence that blocked the bar from the neighboring business. Artwork hung on the fence and the walls of the building. Inside was another bar and more tables, but it was a gorgeous evening and the crowd was outside.

Maxi sat at a small table, taking it all in as she sampled a glass of pinot noir from a local winery. The buzz of conversation, the excitement of creative energy, the colorful casual outfits. This was what her life had been missing.

“Maxi, great to see you here!” Chandler Vanbeck rushed over, making Maxi feel a little uncomfortable. She didn’t want him to think she’d come looking for him. “Mind if I join you?”

“Of course not.” Maxi gestured toward the empty chair across from her.

“So how are the paintings coming along?” Chandler relaxed back in his chair, crossing his ankle over one knee and taking a sip of his white wine. He was wearing cargo shorts and a T-shirt with a colorful artsy dog face on it. Quite a different look from their previous meeting, where he’d worn business-casual chinos and a button-down shirt.

“Good. Great actually. I’m almost done with the second one, so it should be no problem to have three ready for the opening.” She couldn’t believe that she was casually talking about having her artwork at a gallery opening.

“Perfect! I think you’ll be surprised at the attention your work gets.” Chandler leaned forward, a little too close, causing Maxi to lean back to maintain the distance.

Was he flirting? She wasn’t sure if she liked being flirted with, especially now that she’d been so wrong about James. She’d been second-guessing her decision to stay at the cottage and feeling bad about the way she’d suspected her husband. Then again, James hadn’t exactly acted like he would welcome her back with open arms. Maybe he was mad at the way she’d acted. She wouldn’t blame him if he was.

“I’m looking forward to it. I’m surprised I got back into painting so easily. It’s been years.”

“You’re a natural. I could tell by that sketch I saw. Can’t wait to see the paintings.”

A woman who Maxi recognized as the one she was introduced to at the diner drifted up to their table. Today she was wearing a bright-yellow linen shirt and white pedal pushers. She had gigantic daisy earrings and necklace to match. Overly large white-rimmed sunglasses completed the outfit. “Hello there. Maxi, right?”

Maxi nodded. “And you’re Muriel?”

“Yes! How lovely of you to remember.” She glanced at an empty seat. “May I?”

“Please do.” Maxi felt a lot better now that it wasn’t just her and Chandler. It wasn’t that he was entirely unpleasant. Actually, he was rather handsome. And he’d been so nice to her. She might have welcomed his flirtation if things were different, but when she thought about having a man in her life, all she could think of was James.

“Chandler tells me you’re a new artist.” Muriel gave Maxi a smile of encouragement. “You must be good if he’s including you in the opening.”

Maxi blushed. “I’m sort of new. I used to paint a lot when I was younger, but then I got married, had a family...”

“Oh, I know what you mean. That’s one benefit of getting older. You finally have time to do what *you* want.”

Maxi nodded her agreement. She liked Muriel. The woman was outgoing, smart, pleasant.

A familiar figure hovering around the edge of the tables caught her eye.

James? Except he wasn’t wearing his usual clothes. He was dressed down, casual. Handsome. Their eyes met, and Maxi’s heart flipped. For a

second, she was transported back to their younger days when they were both more carefree. James looked good, better than he had in years.

Maxi waved him over, and Muriel turned. "Who is that?"

"My husband." Maxi couldn't help her voice rising an octave at the end as if it were a question.

"Hi." James stood beside her at the table, looking nervous.

"What are you doing here?" Maxi asked.

"Oh, just wanted to check it out." James frowned at Chandler. Maxi wondered if he was jealous.

"James, this is Chandler Vanbeck—he owns the new art gallery—and this is Muriel Fox."

"I hear your wife is quite an artist," Muriel said to James.

"Yes. So do I." James's odd reply caused Muriel to frown. "I mean, she hasn't had a chance to do it for a while. When we were younger, she was quite good."

"Would you like to sit?" Maxi asked. "We could pull over a chair from that table."

"No... I... um... I have to be somewhere else," James stammered. "I was passing by and saw you so figured I'd say hi."

"Okay." Why was James acting so strange? Probably because he hadn't expected her to be at the Purple Blueberry. But why was *he* here? Was he really just passing by? Her earlier suspicions of him and Sandee bubbled up, but that couldn't be true. Jane and Claire had assured her that was a misunderstanding.

James pecked her cheek and squeezed her arm, and before she could think any more about it, he walked away.

Muriel turned in her chair and slid the sunglasses down her nose as she watched him walk away. "Your husband is quite handsome. Both coming and going."

"I know." Maxi was also watching James leave.

Chandler cleared his throat, and both women switched their gaze from James's retreating behind to Chandler.

"Don't worry, dear, you're handsome too," Muriel assured him.

"Thank you." He held up his empty wine glass. "And with that, I think I'll go get a refill. Would you ladies like one?"

They shook their heads. Both of them had half-full glasses.

Chandler left, and Muriel put her sunglasses on the table then looked at Maxi. “Kind of odd that your husband didn’t sit with us.”

Was it that obvious, or was Muriel just really perceptive? Maxi sighed. “We’re kind of going through a rough patch.”

Muriel patted her arm. “I think I know what you mean. You’re branching out, doing things for yourself for once. You said you hadn’t painted in decades because you set it aside to raise your family. Now you’re having *you* time, and it’s adding a different dynamic.”

“It’s not just that.” Maxi glanced at Chandler. She felt awkward talking about her personal problems to a stranger, but Muriel had a way of making one feel as if they’d been friends for ages. Maxi had a feeling that Muriel would understand exactly where she was coming from. “We were having trouble before. Our relationship was distant. That’s what prompted me to go my own way.” She didn’t want to tell her how she’d wrongfully suspected the cheating. It was embarrassing. “We’ve grown apart since the kids left.”

Muriel’s left brow quirked up. “Well, if you ask me, that’s not a man that wants to stay apart.”

“Really?” Maxi glanced in the direction James had taken, but he was gone. “Maybe it’s for the best. I’m afraid if we go back to our old ways, I’ll lose this new part of me. If I have to choose, I’m not sure if I would choose my old life or my new.”

Muriel gave her a funny look. “Who says you have to choose?”

Maxi frowned. “I don’t know. James never really encouraged me to do creative things before. Somehow, I feel like I have this one opportunity to live out my dreams, and I don’t want to waste it.”

Muriel shrugged and took a sip of wine. “I can certainly understand that, but maybe you can find a way to blend the old with the new and have it all.”

JAMES’S MIND whirled as he wandered through the crowd of tourists with their colorful summer shirts, flip-flops, and half-eaten ice cream cones. He didn’t know what he’d expected, but things hadn’t gone quite as James had planned at the Purple Blueberry.

Who was that guy—Chandler—sitting with Maxi? Okay, maybe he was reading too much into that. They had only been sitting at a table together, and it wasn't just the two of them. Another woman had been there. For all James knew, the man and woman were a couple. Maybe they were all just friends. But the vibe the man was giving off wasn't that of a friend. And the way he looked at Maxi told James the man's intentions were more than just friendly.

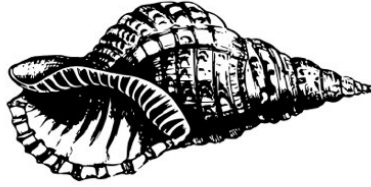
He'd messed up. The whole plan was to join Maxi, loosen up, have a good time, and reconnect. But the presence of this Chandler guy had thrown him for a loop, and James had never been good at thinking on his feet. In fact, this whole misunderstanding had started because he couldn't respond to Maxi's question about how he'd ignored her downtown when he'd been trying to keep Picasso as a surprise.

What he should have done was sat right down at the table and joined in. Pretended to be at ease in Maxi's artsy world. Had that really become her world so quickly? Would he ever fit in? Sally would probably say he never would if he didn't try. And now he'd screwed up trying.

Maxi had invited him to join them, which probably meant that Chandler was just a friend. If James could only have thought that through faster, he would have sat down. Right now he could be drinking wine with Maxi. Instead he was walking down the street alone, and she was sitting back at the Purple Blueberry with Chandler. It was too late to go back now. He'd already said he was just passing by. Too late to fix what he should have done.

Should have, would have, could have. Hopefully he hadn't blown his chances.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The next morning, James got a call from Jane.

“How did it go at the Purple Blueberry?” Jane’s tone was one of curious optimism.

“She was with a guy.” James walked through the bedroom, looking on the bed for Picasso. The cat hadn’t eaten his breakfast, and James hadn’t seen him this morning. He was starting to get worried.

“A guy? What do you mean? I know for a fact Maxi doesn’t have a boyfriend,” Jane said.

James felt a pang of guilt at suspecting she did. “I know, but it threw me. She was at a table with this guy, Chandler, and a woman named Muriel.”

Jane sighed. “Chandler is the art gallery guy. They were probably talking business.”

“She did invite me to stay, but I got all flustered about the guy. I didn’t stay.” James opened the closet and looked inside. No cat. “Guess I messed up.”

“No. You just missed an opportunity to spend time with her and reconnect. Don’t worry. There will be others. In fact, I have a great idea on how you and Maxi can spend a lot of time together.”

“You do?”

“Yes. We have a table for friends at the wedding on Saturday, and you’re invited.”

“I am? I don’t even know the bride and groom.” James peeked into his office. Picasso had taken to pushing his books off the bookshelf and lying in

the empty space, but the cat wasn't there.

"You don't need to. All you need is Maxi and a romantic setting."

James felt nervous. What if Maxi didn't want him there? What if he messed up again? "I don't know. What if she brings that guy?"

"Don't worry. She won't. She's not interested in him. She loves you and wants you back, but she also wants to still be able to continue with her creative endeavors. You want her to do that, don't you?"

"Yes, of course." James was kicking himself for not nurturing Maxi's creative side sooner. Whatever she wanted, he was good with it as long as she was happy.

"And you're going to the gallery opening, right? Her work will be in there."

"Should I?" James peeked into the bathroom, pulling the shower curtain aside. No Picasso.

Jane sighed. Probably at his cluelessness. Maxi had been the only woman he'd seriously dated, and apparently, in addition to lessons on how to dress, he needed lessons on how to win a woman over. Maybe he should consult with Sally.

"Yes, you should go. It will be a perfect way to show Maxi that you support her new life," Jane said.

"Okay, I'll be there."

"Great, see you then. And don't worry. Maxi will come around, and you guys will be back together and stronger than ever."

Jane hung up, and James stared at the phone. He hoped she was right.

A gagging sound had him racing to the bedroom. It was coming from the bed. The cat wasn't on top of the bed, but...

"Picasso?" James peered under the bed skirt, and his heart sank.

Picasso was crouched down like a rabbit, his eyes mere slits. He reminded James of the way the kids looked when they had the flu.

"Are you okay, little buddy?" James lay on the floor and reached in for the cat. Picasso did not resist, a sure sign that something was dreadfully wrong.

James pulled him into his lap and leaned his back against the bed, trying to comfort the cat, but Picasso wanted none of it. He tried to slink away but only made it a few feet before he started the most ungodly heaving and choking noises James had ever heard.

Oh no! What was happening? Should he call the vet?

Picasso stopped choking and glared at James. James's heart twisted. He'd become incredibly attached to the cat in the few days he'd been here. If something happened to him, he didn't know what he would do. He needed to call the vet, but in the meantime, he racked his brain for something he could do to ease the poor thing's suffering.

The cashmere sweater vest!

James leapt up, grabbed the vest out of the drawer, then made a little nest on the floor for Picasso, who was starting with the heaving again. The cat eyed the vest, hobbled over to the middle, his stomach lurching, and then...

Gak!

Picasso's mouth opened wide, and out came an impossibly large tube of compacted hair. A hairball?

It landed on the white trim of James's sweater vest, staining it cat-food yellow.

Picasso shook his head then sat on his haunches and proceeded to groom himself. He'd apparently recovered from the ordeal quickly. James's sweater, on the other hand, had not.

James got a paper towel and disposed of the disgusting hairball. When he came back, Picasso was fast asleep, curled up in the middle of the sweater-vest nest. James couldn't help but smile. The sweater might be ruined, but Picasso was okay.

JANE HUNG up and looked around the foyer at Tides. She'd done her good deed for the day in calling James. Cooper thought so, too, judging by the way he was looking up at her approvingly.

"Don't worry, boy. They'll find their way back to each other."

Woof!

Jane took a deep breath and looked around the lobby. She needed to focus on getting this place in perfect order for the wedding. Her mother had always said that making a good first impression was important.

"Maybe I should put out some coffee and pastries for when people check in. Brenda will be happy to make something special, and I can hit up Claire for some treats from Sandcastles."

Cooper trotted over to the narrow mahogany sideboard against the stairway wall. Jane had always loved that piece with its richly carved grapes and white marble top. “You’re right, that’s a perfect spot.”

She cleared her grandmother’s flow blue china plates, which stood in little easels, off the top of the sideboard and put them carefully in the glass-front china cabinet in the dining room. Cooper trotted around behind her, watching patiently, then followed her back out into the lobby.

“Now what? Flowers? Maybe if we place some of Nona’s vases around with flowers from the garden...” Jane went to the window beside the door and looked out at the garden. Andie had done an amazing job with it in the few weeks she’d been here, and it was thick with colorful flowers. The hummingbird feeders Andie had pulled out of storage sat filled with red liquid, and iridescent green birds zoomed around them.

Andie herself was at the arbor, probably trying to figure out how to get the pink roses the bride had requested. “Let’s go out and talk to Andie about the flower vases, and we can get an update on the arbor while we’re at it.”

Cooper didn’t have to be told twice about an opportunity to go outside. He was already at the door before Jane even finished the sentence.

ANDIE TRIMMED a few dead leaves from the rosebush at the base of the arbor and eyed the hanging baskets loaded with miniature roses. If she could place those in strategic spots then weave in some fresh-cut roses the day of the wedding, the arbor would look fantastic. She just needed someone to make some adjustments to the arbor so she could hang and weave.

Woof!

Cooper bounded over, and Andie knelt to pet him.

“Those are pretty.” Jane gestured to the hanging baskets. “I bet this will look great when you’re done.”

Andie stood. “Let’s hope. I need some adjustments to the arbor, though. Did you talk to anyone about doing that?”

“Sally is going to take care of that today,” Jane said.

“Oh great.” Hadn’t Jane said that Shane was going to do that? Andie wasn’t exactly disappointed—Sally would do a good job—but she had to

admit she was kind of hoping for Shane. Oh well, she had more important things to think about right now. “How are the centerpieces coming along?”

“Great! Maxi finished painting the candles for us and is bringing them over tomorrow morning. She’s focusing on finishing her painting for the gallery opening today.” Jane fingered a delicate petal of one of the roses that climbed up the arbor. “You are going to the opening, right?”

“Of course, I wouldn’t miss it.”

“You can come with Mike and me if you want.”

“Thanks, I’d like that.” It felt good to be included, and it was nice of Jane to think of her. “How are things going with Maxi and James?”

Jane sighed. “Not easy. He seems to be worried that Chandler has designs on Maxi.”

“Chandler? I doubt that. He usually goes for ditzy blondes.” Andie thought for a minute. “But he did seem really interested in Maxi. I figured it was just because of the sketch he saw, but maybe not? She is attractive. You don’t think she’s interested in him, do you?”

“No, definitely not. She loves James.” Jane’s phone pinged, and she pulled it out of her pocket, her face lighting up. “It’s Mike. He wants me to go look at condos with him. Says he needs a second opinion.”

“Sounds serious.” Andie wiggled her brows.

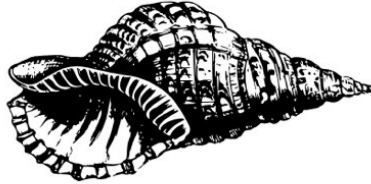
Jane blushed. “I’m not moving in with him, if that’s what you mean.”

“Why not? You guys make a great couple.”

Jane’s smile faded, and she gazed out at the ocean. “Well, you never know. I guess for now it doesn’t hurt to approve of his condo. Besides, it’s fun to look at places. Can we get together when I get back to go over more plans for the wedding?”

“Of course. I’ll be here.” Andie watched her sister walk away. Things were getting a bit complicated in Lobster Bay. Maxi and James’s relationship could have a wrinkle if Chandler was in the mix, and why did Jane suddenly seem concerned about her relationship with Mike? Andie shook her head and went back to her work. Hopefully everything would work out fine for everyone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Mike liked the condo at Boulder Hills. It was an end unit with two bedrooms and a large deck in the back. The yard was private, too, fenced off from the abutting unit with a tall fence. It didn't have a water view, but those condos were out of his price range.

"I thought you might like the kitchen island and the window over the sink looking out at the woods." Mike pointed the features out to Jane. Sure, he liked them, too, but he really wanted to be sure it was a place where she could see herself spending a lot of time.

"Those are good features. But do *you* like them?"

"Yep. Very nice." Mike also liked the simple clean lines of the place. They sort of reminded him of Jane. The condo suited her personality—not pretentious or frilly.

"Are you going to take up cooking?" Jane teased. It was well-known that Mike could barely pour cereal. That was why he'd bartered with Jane for breakfast at Tides every morning in return for creating the website for the inn. Well, *one* of the reasons. The other was to see Jane, of course.

"I was thinking maybe you'd come over and cook."

Jane frowned. "Maybe you should see if the kitchen suits Brenda. She's better at it than I am."

"Well, I hope she likes it, because I think I like this one the best," Mike said. They'd looked at three condos already, and he did like this one but wanted to pick the one Jane liked.

Jane turned to the realtor. "Do they allow dogs?"

“Yes, one dog per unit. I saw the golden in your car. Is it yours?” she asked Mike.

“No, he’s Jane’s, but he will be visiting a lot.” Mike glanced at Jane. “Hopefully.”

Mike didn’t regret his decision to let Jane adopt Cooper. Cooper and Jane had bonded, and she brought Cooper to see Gramps often. Plus, if things worked out the way Mike wanted, he’d be seeing Cooper almost as much as if he did live here. And maybe eventually...

His phone vibrated, and he pulled it out of his pocket and turned it off without looking. Truth be told, he was afraid to look. Tiffany had texted him a few times about meeting up, since she was in town for the art gallery opening. Hopefully she would get the message that he didn’t want to get together at all.

Jane glanced at his phone, a frown creasing her brow. “We’re still going to the gallery opening tomorrow night, right?”

How odd she would mention that when it was the very thing Mike was worrying about. How would Tiffany react when she saw Mike with Jane? Would she cause a scene? Maybe Mike was making too much of this. Tiffany was probably over him and just wanted to say hi.

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Good. I invited Andie to go with us. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all. Whatever you want is good for me.”

“Great.” Jane took another turn around the condo. “You know, I think this one is my favorite too.”

MAXI CRADLED Rembrandt in her arms and stood back to admire her painting. It was the last one for the art gallery opening, and it was almost finished.

Stepping away, she glanced toward the ocean and took a deep breath of sea air to quell her nerves. Even though she had done her best work, she was still nervous about the gallery opening. Would people like her work? How would it stack up against the other artists on display?

“What do you think, Rembrandt?” She put the cat down and watched as he walked the perimeter of the patio. He was crouched low, moving slowly.

She didn't let him outside very much and only under strict supervision, so his little kitten eyes were wide with delight. Maybe if she and James got their own place, she would make some kind of fence or enclosure so Rembrandt could go outside and still be safe.

She and James? What would their life be like going forward? Did they even have a future, or had Maxi ruined it?

She'd been shocked to see him at the Purple Blueberry, but why didn't he stay? She didn't buy his story that he was on his way somewhere else and saw her so stopped in.

He'd looked good in more casual attire. Maxi suspected that Jane and Claire had had something to do with that. Had they been coaching him? She wouldn't have a chance to ask them today. She had to finish the painting and wasn't allowing herself to do anything else until she did.

The thought of James going to all that effort for her warmed her heart. Should she call him? No, that would be a distraction from her task of painting. And besides, she was a little nervous now because he'd left so abruptly. Maybe he'd decided that hanging out with the artsy crowd and frequenting places like the Purple Blueberry really wasn't his thing. If that were the case, did that mean they couldn't be together? Maxi didn't want to give up her new life, but she also didn't want to give up James.

Mew!

Rembrandt was sitting at the slider, looking inside. He probably wanted to graze at his food bowl. She'd never seen a cat eat so much!

She opened the slider, and he scooted inside. Then she turned to the painting and picked up the brush. She'd told Chandler she would drop the paintings off this afternoon. She'd better get those final touches in soon so it would have time to dry.

JANE WATCHED as Andie pushed the centerpiece a smidge to the left. They were out on the back deck of Tides, setting up the table-scape for the reception so they could have something to show Courtney and her mother. They weren't arriving for another day, but Jane didn't want to leave it to the last minute.

Jane and Andie had been moving things around, standing back. Moving more things. Cooper was apparently uninterested, lying on the edge of the deck near the railing, the ocean breeze ruffling his golden fur.

Andie stepped back and tilted her head as she assessed the arrangement. “There, I think that’s perfect.”

The table did look perfect with the backdrop of the ocean, the crisp white cloth, sparkling cut crystal wine glasses, white porcelain gold-rimmed dinner plates, and the white flower centerpiece with blue ribbon.

“I agree,” Jane said, glad that all the moving about was done. She honestly didn’t see how moving the knife one millimeter to the left made a big difference, but Andie knew more about this stuff than she did, so she’d deferred to her sister’s expertise.

“We just need the candles,” Andie said.

“Maxi is bringing those tomorrow morning.” Jane glanced over toward the area where the tent would be set up on the morning of the wedding. Since the wedding was an evening affair, the tent rental place had advised they do the setup that morning instead of the day before.

Andie put her arm around Jane’s shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

“I suppose. It’s just that Courtney is so picky.” Jane’s gaze drifted to the bathhouse, with its quaint sailboat shutters and colorful window boxes. Andie had loaded them with flowers, and they’d spruce up the inside of the bathhouse with giant conch shells, starfish, and sea glass on the towel shelves and vanities. Her gaze drifted to the arbor. “Did you figure out a method for the roses?”

“Sally had a hard time figuring what to do, but in the end, we figured it out. She said Shane would have been better at it, but he was busy.”

Jane flicked her gaze to her sister, to something unreadable reflected in her hazel eyes. “Disappointed?”

Andie blushed and looked away. “No, of course not. Sally did a great job. It’s going to look fantastic.”

“I’m sure it is.” Jane decided to press her luck. Andie was opening up lately, and she felt like she could get more personal. “So what happened with you and Shane back then? I was too young and self-involved to pay attention. He seems like a really nice guy. And not too hard on the eyes either.”

Andie laughed. “He did age well. I guess our lives just weren’t heading in the same direction. He was going into the navy, and I wanted to be in the city.” She avoided eye contact, looking out at the ocean.

“Seems like maybe now your lives are different. Maybe you're going in the same direction,” Jane said softly.

Andie pursed her lips as if she was ready to protest, but then her face softened. Her expression turned teasing. “So, tell me how the condo shopping went with Mike.”

Now it was Jane’s turn to blush. “I liked the last one we looked at today. It was just on the edge of town in Boulder Hills. The development is pretty, lots of nice landscaping.”

“Is that where the old Swenson farm used to be?”

Jane nodded. While she hated the idea that an old farm was no longer in existence, they had made a nice neighborhood out of it.

“Did Mike like it?”

“I think so. He seemed more interested in finding out if I liked it.”

Andie smirked. “Of course he did.”

Jane frowned. “Why?”

Andie shook her head. “Sis, I think I need to take you under my wing in the relationship department. You’re kind of naive. Mike wants you to like it because he’s hoping you’ll spend a lot of time there.”

“Oh, really?” Jane’s heart fluttered, and she felt flustered. She’d been hoping that was the reason but was also nervous if it was.

“Yeah, any fool can see that.” Andie squeezed her hand. “I’m happy for you. Don’t worry. Just enjoy it. He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah, he is, except...”

Andie’s expression turned concerned. “What?”

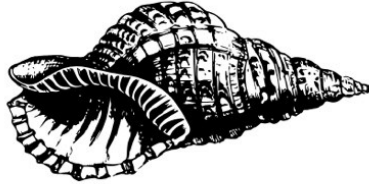
“I don’t know. The other day at Tall Pines, he got this weird phone call from back home, and he seemed concerned after. He said it was nothing, but I got the impression he was hiding something.”

“Are you sure?” Andie asked. “He doesn’t seem like the type. Maybe you’re just being paranoid.”

Jane turned back to the table and moved a fork a centimeter to the right. “Maybe. You’re probably right.”

Setting her focus back on the table, she pushed thoughts of Mike aside. She had a lot more pressing matters to worry about.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Andie's life was becoming more and more about Lobster Bay and less and less about New York City. She now found the ocean breeze much more appealing than the city smog, and working in the garden at Tides and dealing with the guests had given her back her sense of family pride. Not to mention that visits with her mother had become even more precious now that Addie's memory was failing.

She'd been surprised to discover that helping the residents at Tall Pines with their antiques so that they didn't get ripped off by the unscrupulous Damien Carruthers was more rewarding than any big find she might have scored in the antique world.

When she'd visited her mother at Tall Pines the day before, Andie had sought out Rita to ask if she could look at the antique shop and apartment. She'd awakened to find a message from a realtor. She could view the shop and apartment this morning if she wanted.

She showered and rushed downstairs to grab some breakfast before heading to the appointment. Brenda was in her glory, anticipating an inn full of guests to cook for.

"Try this New Mexican egg scramble." Brenda dished up a colorful plate of eggs with peppers, onions, and beans and handed it to Andie.

They were fluffy, spicy, and delicious. "Fabulous. Maybe some sour cream on the side?" Andie said as she shoveled the rest in and picked up her car keys. She only had a few minutes to spare.

Andie ran into Maxi in the foyer. She was just coming in the front door, her arms full of two dozen candles painted with blue stripes.

“Those look great.” Andie took one and examined it. She had a good eye for color, and it looked like a perfect match for the bridesmaid colors.

“Thanks. I hope they pass muster. I hear the bridezilla is coming tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Jane’s on pins and needles, but I think she’ll love everything. It’s all coming together.” Andie hoped. “How are you doing? Are you ready for the art gallery opening?”

Maxi beamed. “It’s all very exciting and overwhelming. But I finished the paintings, so I’m as ready as I’ll ever be. Are you going?”

“Of course, I wouldn’t miss it.” Andie cocked her head. “And how are other things going?” Andie was in a hurry to see the antiques store, but she genuinely cared about Maxi. The realtor would wait a few minutes, especially if they wanted their commission.

Maxi sighed. “You mean with James? I don’t know what to do there. It seems like he’s trying to win me back.”

“That doesn’t seem like a bad thing.”

“No, but I think Claire and Jane have something to do with that. Though now that I know the truth, I guess I might have overreacted. I owe him, since I acted like a jerk. But I’m still reluctant to give up my new life.” Maxi shrugged. “Honestly, I’ve been so focused on finishing the paintings, I haven’t thought much about it. Now I need to straighten out the rest of my life.”

“Do you still love him?” Andie asked.

Maxi nodded. “I do. It’s just that things are different now. I think we need to approach our relationship carefully so that we mend it in the right way. But I can’t imagine being with anyone else. Especially since Chandler seems a little flirty.”

“Chandler was hitting on you?”

Maxi frowned. “I don’t know if I’d say that. I’m so out of touch with dating, I don’t know if I’d recognize it if someone were hitting on me. But it seems like he’s interested, and it’s making it a bit awkward with the gallery and all. But it’s probably my imagination. Why would anyone be interested in me?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. Any guy would be lucky to have you,” Andie said sincerely. “Chandler usually goes for younger blondes with, um... not as many brains. You’re smart and sophisticated.”

Maxi blushed. “Thanks. I guess maybe I’m getting a little full of myself.”

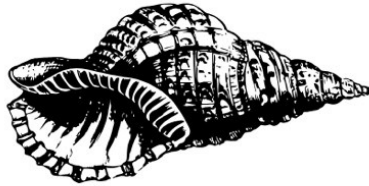
“Not at all. A woman knows when a guy is flirting. But you shouldn’t let that impact any of your decisions with the art gallery, or your career. Just send Chandler the signal you aren’t interested. I’m sure he wouldn’t take away any opportunities because of that.” Andie hoped he wouldn’t. She’d known Chandler a long time and had never heard of him being a jerk in that way.

“I’m not even sure I know how to send those signals. I guess I’ll be asking for a lot of advice at coffee this morning.” Maxi’s gaze drifted to the keys Andie was jangling in her hand. “Are you heading out somewhere?”

“Yeah. I have a meeting.” Andie didn’t want to tell anyone about the antique store yet. She hadn’t even mentioned it to Jane, and she wasn’t one hundred percent sure she would rent it. No sense in talking about it until she’d made the final decision, and when she did, Jane should be the first to know. “I do have to run. We’ll catch up later? And good luck tonight if I don’t see you before the opening. Break a leg!”

Andie rushed out to her rental. That was another thing. If she decided to stay, she’d have to buy a car. She didn’t have one in New York. Better to make the decision sooner—the rental cost a lot. She was glad Maxi was going to work things out with James and glad Jane, Maxi, and Claire had one another to bounce things off of. She didn’t want to horn in on their coffee hour, but it would be nice to be invited ... if only just once.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



The antique store was crammed full. Depression glass, mahogany furniture, oriental rugs. Andie ran her finger along a half inch of dust that had accumulated on an oak roll-top desk that looked to be from the late 1800s.

“So, as you see, it’s fully stocked already!” the perky realtor, Autumn Blaisedale, said in a chipper voice that grated on Andie. She hadn’t had much choice in who she chose as an agent, though. There were only a few realtors in Lobster Bay, and Andie had made sure not to use the infamous husband-stealing Sandee Harris. Even if the woman hadn’t been cheating with James, she *had* cheated with Claire’s husband. “This inventory must be worth tens of thousands.”

Irritating voice or not, she had a point. Though Andie wasn’t scrutinizing every item, her experienced eye did pick out a few very nice pieces. Most were fairly common, but that sort of thing appealed to many shoppers. Not everyone was in the market for a rare Ming dynasty vase. As she looked at the items, her pulse quickened. Excitement rippled through her as she pictured herself sorting through the inventory, handling the items, going on house calls in some of the old houses in Lobster Bay, and attending antique auctions.

But she didn’t want to get too excited, lest the chirpy realtor smell an opportunity to jack up the selling price and thus her commission. “It seems adequate.”

Chirpy’s smile dimmed a few watts. “Would you like to see the apartment?”

Andie followed her upstairs. She'd expected a space that was old-fashioned with braided rugs and hand-crocheted doilies, but the upstairs area was a pleasant surprise. It had high ceilings, exposed brick walls, and tall windows that let in tons of natural light. The living area was open to the kitchen and boasted black granite counters with gray cabinets. The original wide pine floors were in good condition. Rita had good taste.

The place boasted two bedrooms, the one in the back with a distant view of the ocean over the rooftops of the smaller buildings behind it. The bathrooms could have used a bit of an upgrade but were serviceable.

Andie could see herself living there. It already felt like home.

"And the hair salon next door is very convenient. They give the best pedicures and amazing cuts." Chirpy fluffed her short bob. "Such a cute family business, three generations."

Andie looked out the window to see a woman with long curly gray hair sweeping up in front of the shop. It did look appealing with its gigantic scissors sign and large plants in front. She pulled her own long ponytail over her shoulder, wondering if it might be time for a shorter cut. Jane's hair looked so cute in its short pixie style, but Andie had had long hair her whole life. She wouldn't feel like herself if she cut it. The gray hairs coming in, on the other hand, might need a touch-up.

"So what do you think?" Autumn pulled some papers out of her leather briefcase. "Rita is anxious to sell and gave me the financials for the shop. It's been out of business for five years now, but the numbers should still be fairly relevant."

Andie would do her due diligence on the shop later to make sure it was in the black. She didn't need to make a ton of money and still wanted to help Jane at Tides part-time.

"Thanks." Andie took the papers and did a slow turn around the room. "So, what do you think Rita's best price is?"

MAXI SAT at one of the outdoor café tables at Sandcastles with a blueberry muffin so fresh the steam came out of it when she cut it open. Next to the muffin was a dark roast coffee, but the best part was that she was with her two best friends, Claire and Jane.

Could life get any better? Only if she sold a painting at the gallery opening.

“I’m so excited for the gallery opening tonight!” Claire slathered butter on her muffin, and it immediately started to melt.

“Me, too,” Maxi said. “Okay, mostly I’m nervous.”

“You’ll be fine,” Jane assured. “And the candles came out perfect.”

“The table-scape looked amazing, and Claire’s cake is perfect. I’m sure your bride is going to love it,” Maxi said. Not everything was about her. Jane had something important going on in her life too. Also, when Maxi had dropped off the candlesticks earlier that morning, she’d seen a sample of Claire’s frosted sandcastle cake. The color had almost been an exact match.

Claire let out a breath. “I hope so. I tried to match the frosting color as much as I could.”

“It’s almost identical,” Maxi said. “I’m pretty good with color.”

“Andie said so too.” Jane reached for the other half of her muffin.

“So what’s going on with Andie? She’s been around for a while now. Is she staying in town?” Maxi had been about to ask her to join them for coffee when she’d bumped into her in the lobby at Tides but then Andie rushed off.

Jane shrugged. “She hasn’t said. But it’s been really nice having her. I feel like we’ve reconnected.”

“I was thinking it might be nice to ask her to join our morning coffee meetings,” Maxi said. “I was going to ask this morning, but she was rushing off somewhere. Do you guys mind?”

“Not at all.” Claire turned to Jane. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“No. I should have thought of it earlier, but I kept expecting her to leave town abruptly.”

“She seems to be settling in.” Maxi sipped her coffee, looking at her friends over the rim of the mug. They were watching her expectantly. “Okay, I know you guys are dying to ask about James. The truth is I’ve been busy with the paintings, and maybe I’ve been using that as an excuse not to think about our relationship too. I’m actually not sure what to do.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“Not since I saw him at the Purple Blueberry.” Maxi put the coffee mug down and leaned forward to pet Cooper, who had been lying at Jane’s feet. “By the way, don’t think I don’t know that you both put him up to that...”

and have you been dressing him too? I noticed he had an outfit that was less...”

“Stodgy?” Claire supplied, and the three of them burst out laughing.

“I guess you might say that.” Maxi admitted that James had taken to going a bit overboard with the business attire.

“I hope you don’t think we were going behind your back.” Jane’s face softened. “He really is in a bad way.”

“Once we were convinced he didn’t cheat on you, we couldn’t help but give him a few pointers.” Claire’s expression turned serious. “I hope we weren’t overstepping.”

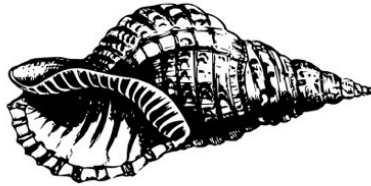
Maxi shook her head. “No, I think it might help. I feel like we can’t go back to the way things were. Something has to change.”

“But you are going back.” Jane said it as a statement rather than a question.

Maxi paused, her gaze traveling to the bread store. Claire and Rob had a good thing, and Jane and Mike did too. She couldn’t imagine starting dating again. She had no desire to do that.

When she’d seen James at the Purple Blueberry, she’d been impressed that he was making an effort. She leaned back in her seat. “Yes, we will get back together, but I want to make it perfectly clear that from now on, I’m going to focus on living my best life. I just hope James can see his way to being a part of it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



Jane and Andie stood at the full-length mirror in Jane's room. The inn had been spruced up for the arrival of the wedding guests, but tonight was a night for relaxation and fun before the storm of the guests' arrival.

If only Jane could figure out what to wear.

"What about this one?" Andie pulled a chic black sheath dress out of Jane's closet and held it up to Jane's neck then turned her so she could see it in the mirror.

Jane supposed the dress had potential. It was simple, just the way she liked it, but was it good enough for the opening? What would Mike think of it? Andie, of course, looked like a model in a gray chiffon pantsuit with silvery trim. Her dark hair had been brushed to a silky sheen and flowed down past her shoulders.

"I don't know. It's kind of plain." Jane glanced into her closet. Maybe she could dress it up with some fancy shoes?

"It suits you. With some simple sparkly earrings and a necklace, it would be stunning," Andie said.

"Maybe." Jane slipped the dress off the hanger and pulled it over her head.

"This reminds me of your freshman prom, when you couldn't decide what to wear." Andie zipped up the back and nodded her approval over Jane's shoulder in the mirror.

Jane smiled at the memory. "You picked out that pretty blue dress, and I got a lot of compliments."

Andie nodded. "I think you look even better now."

Jane turned back to the mirror. She supposed she looked okay. Luckily she had a slim figure, and the dress accentuated that and seemed to make her silvery pixie haircut look modern and chic.

“Those were fun times.” Jane turned to Andie. “I miss those times.”

“Me too. Simpler times. These last few weeks have been...” Andie’s voice drifted off, and she looked away from Jane, out the window toward the ocean. Jane’s heart sank. Here it was, the good-bye speech. At least Andie was trying to let her down gently.

Jane picked a pair of diamond stud earrings out of her jewelry box. “It’s been great having you here, but I get that you want to go back to work.”

Andie turned from the window. “When I first came, I figured I would bolt after a week like usual. But I wanted to spend more time with Mom, and then there was the garden project, and suddenly this place started to grow on me. And now I’ve realized that Lobster Bay is where I belong.”

Jane turned from the mirror, adjusting the back of the earring. “You mean you’re staying?”

Andie’s smile widened. “Yep.” Then her smile faded. “I hope that’s good news.”

“Of course it is!” Jane threw her arms around her sister. “We’ll fix up your old room and get you some better furniture and—”

“I’m not going to stay at Tides. I don’t want to take up a room that could bring income, and besides, I need my own space.”

“Oh, of course.” Jane felt slightly disappointed, but it made sense. Her sister would want her own place. Maybe she was sick of helping Jane out and would find work elsewhere. The gallery, perhaps?

“Don’t worry. I’m still going to help out here with the guests, but there’s really not enough for it to be a full-time job.”

“Oh. That’s great!” Jane said. “What else are you going to do?”

“Well, I’ve bought an antique store.”

“The one downtown that’s been closed all this time?” Jane had wondered when someone would buy that.

“Yep. It has an apartment above.” Andie told her about meeting Rita and appraising the items for the other women. “So I feel like I can fulfill a need there, and it will be fun. I like helping out here, but I’m chomping at the bit to get back into antiques too.”

“Sounds perfect.”

The crunch of tires on gravel came through the front-facing window, and they looked outside to see Mike's car pull up.

"Looks like our date is here," Andie said. "You ready?"

Mike was in the foyer. Dressed in a sharp black suit, he looked so handsome it made Jane lose her breath. As they descended the stairs, he looked up. His gaze tracked over Jane, making her feel self-conscious.

"You look amazing."

"Thanks." Andie teased by answering him, though it was clear by the way Mike couldn't take his eyes off Jane that the compliment was meant for her.

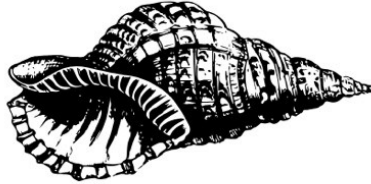
"You both do." Mike held out both elbows. "How lucky am I to be able to escort Lobster Bay's most beautiful sisters to the art gallery opening."

Jane took one arm, Andie the other.

"Very," they both said at the same time.

Jane's heart was full. She glanced at Mike from the passenger seat. His smile was relaxed, with none of the stress she thought she'd seen earlier after his mysterious phone call. She truly must have imagined that. She settled back into her seat, happier than she'd been in years. Tonight her best friend was realizing her dream of having an art show, her sister was staying in town, and she was attending the art show on the arm of the most handsome guy in town.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



James had to admit the Lobster Bay Art Gallery was comparable to any gallery he'd seen in a big city. He knew the opening had happened pretty fast and had expected it to look thrown together, but it didn't. The building was an old mill and had vaulted wooden ceilings and exposed ductwork painted black. The walls had been painted stark white, which highlighted the artwork. The floors were black tile. The front of the building had been renovated to have glass windows that rose two stories high.

The space consisted of several large rooms. Dotted around the rooms were four-foot-tall rectangular blocks that held sculptures. The lighting had been aimed precisely to highlight the individual works of art.

It wasn't hard to find Maxi's paintings. In fact, he could tell which ones were hers with a glance. Maybe that was because he knew her so well. He stopped to study his favorite, a sailboat with bright-white sails cutting through the cobalt sea. It was finely detailed and even had little people on board in striped shirts. It was so vivid and realistic he could practically smell the sea air.

"Do you like it?"

Maxi stood beside him, a hopeful, hesitant smile on her lips. She looked radiant in a royal-blue satin dress. Classy plus artsy. He fell in love with her all over again in that moment.

"It's amazing."

A blush crept over her cheeks, making her even more radiant, if that was even possible.

“Thanks.” They both looked at the painting, their shoulders touching. “I was out of practice, but I think it came out pretty good.”

“Maxi... I’m sorry, I...” James stuttered. All the words he wanted to say got stuck in his throat, and only gibberish came out.

She turned to face him, reached out to touch his arm. “Oh, James, it’s not—”

“Maxi!”

Chandler grabbed Maxi’s elbow and turned her away from James.

“Excuse me,” he said to James then turned back to Maxi. “I have someone you simply must meet.”

Maxi shot him an apologetic look as Chandler dragged her away. “Sorry, we can talk later.”

James was left staring. What had she been about to say? That it wasn’t necessary to apologize because she’d already moved on? His hopes plummeted. She’d rushed off with Chandler and left him there. That said enough, didn’t it?

He put his glass of champagne on the next passing tray and left.

ANDIE WASN’T SCANNING the crowd at the art gallery grand opening for anyone in particular. Certainly not for Shane Flannery. Talking to Jane about high school proms had brought up memories of Shane. She still had vivid memories of how he’d looked the night of their senior prom, still a kid but almost a man. He’d made everything magical—an orchid wrist corsage, a limo, dinner at a fancy restaurant then the prom, the beach later.

Oh well, that was all in the past. Andie sighed and sank into the shadows of the ten-foot-tall potted palm in the corner, where she’d retreated to be alone with her thoughts.

As she scanned the crowd, her gaze fell on Jane, Maxi, and Claire. They were clustered around one of Maxi’s paintings and looked to be having a great time. Maxi’s cheeks were flushed with pride, and Andie felt happy for her. She really was talented, and Andie had heard several of the attendees comment on how vibrant her paintings were. Maxi was going to have a successful career.

Maxi might have been right about Chandler, though. Andie noticed the way Chandler looked at her. Right now he was talking to a group in the corner, but his eyes kept straying to Maxi.

Where was James? Andie had seen him and Maxi talking earlier. It had looked serious, and Andie had hoped they were reconciling. But now she couldn't find him. Hopefully James wouldn't see the way Chandler was eyeing his wife.

The palm tree rustled, and Mike stepped out, his expression registering surprise when he saw Andie.

"Oh, hi. I wasn't expecting anyone to be here." He peered out into the crowd warily as if not wanting to be seen.

"Are you hiding from someone?"

Mike's gaze flicked back to Andie. He sighed. "Sort of. My ex is here, and I think she might not want to be my ex anymore."

"You mean she's still interested in you?" Was that the phone call Jane had been worried about? Protective feelings for her baby sister bubbled up. "Do you return the interest?"

"What? No! That's why I'm hiding back here. She's very... persistent. Practically threw herself at me when she saw me." His gaze went back to the crowd, and his voice softened. "I don't want it to ruin my chances with Jane."

"Which one is she?" Andie knew practically no one there, and she was curious.

Mike pointed his chin toward a blond woman. She looked to be in her thirties, younger than Mike. She was batting her eyelashes up at a tall gentleman. "Looks like she might have found another victim."

Mike let out a breath and leaned against the wall. "Let's hope. I don't know why she's still after me. I broke up with her before I came out here. She usually goes for rich, prominent guys that can help her be seen around town. Not sure what I even saw in her. She's nothing compared to Jane."

Andie turned to study Mike. The guy was clearly distraught. "She usually goes for rich prominent guys?"

"Yeah, she likes the limelight. Sort of a social climber."

"What's her name?"

"Tiffany."

Andie handed Mike her champagne glass. "I think I have an idea that might help you out and also solve another problem at the same time."

THE NIGHT HAD BEEN like a dream come true, Maxi thought, as she stood with Jane and Claire in front of her painting. *Her* painting! Hanging on the wall during an art gallery showing. Just two months ago she would have laughed if anyone told her she'd be standing here now with her two best friends. There was only one other person who she would want at her side.

"Have you guys seen James?" she asked.

"I saw him earlier but not in the last half hour. Did you talk to him?" Jane looked distracted. She was scanning the crowd, probably looking for Mike.

Maxi nodded. "We talked earlier, but Chandler pulled me away to meet one of the art gallery patrons, and I've been looking for him ever since."

"Did you resolve anything?" Claire asked. She was wearing a chic pink tea-length dress that gave her a rosy glow and made her look like she was twenty-five. Or maybe she glowed because she had come on Rob's arm. The two were clearly infatuated. Maxi had watched them as they kept looking through the crowd for each other, Claire's cheeks turning pink every time they locked eyes.

"I think so... not sure. Chandler pulled me away before we had much of a chance to talk. That's why I was looking for him. To finish the conversation."

The dawning realization that James had left dashed Maxi's good mood. If he were here, she would have seen him by now. But why would he come and leave so early? Was it only to tell her what he had started to say? And what, exactly, *had* he been starting to say?

He'd been saying he was sorry. Maxi assumed it was because of the rift between them, though now that she thought about it, James had no reason to be sorry. What if he meant he was sorry that he didn't want to be married anymore? What if her "finding herself" had shown him that he didn't want to be with her? Had she been too selfish and waited too long to make things right, and he wanted out? She wanted her art career, but all of this wasn't worth losing James... What should she do now?

"Who is that woman with Andie?" Claire's question pulled Maxi from her thoughts. Andie was chatting with a pretty blond girl who Maxi hadn't been introduced to. As she watched, Andie flagged down Chandler and

introduced the two of them. “I don’t know. Maybe one of Andie’s antique business acquaintances. That’s how she knew Chandler.”

“Probably,” Jane said. “I forget she has a whole other life and people I don’t know in it. Or I guess I should say she *had* a whole other life.”

“Had? What do you mean?” Claire asked.

Jane beamed. “Andie’s decided to stay in Lobster Bay.”

“Oh, that’s great!” Maxi was glad. She liked Andie and wanted to get to know her better.

“I think that’s a good move. I’m glad for both of you,” Claire said. “Will she be working at Tides? Giving up antiques?”

“Part-time. She’s buying the old antique shop on Main Street. The one that’s been closed.” Jane’s eyes narrowed, her gaze directed at the corner of the room. “Is that Mike over by the plant?”

Maxi turned. “Yep. Oh, here he comes. Wonder what he was doing over there?”

Jane shook her head. “Who knows.” Jane returned her attention to the group. “Anyway, I’m glad she’s staying. Aside from Mom, I don’t have any family.”

Maxi touched her arm. “I’m happy for you. Andie’s great.”

“Thanks.” Jane smiled as Mike stepped into their circle. “And I’m happy for you. The show is doing really good. Looks like you have a great start to your career.”

Maxi glanced at another of her paintings. Five people were grouped around, pointing at it and discussing. That was a good sign. She should just focus on the show and her painting career. But what should she do about James?

JAMES STOOD AT HIS CAR, looking at the large windows in the art gallery. Golden light spilled out, and inside he could see shadows of the people mingling. Maxi was one of those people. Was she with that Chandler guy?

They’d been together at the Purple Blueberry, and now he’d dragged her away as if he were a priority. Were they *dating*? The thought made him

sick. He couldn't decide what to do. He'd never been a quick thinker. He needed time to mull things over.

Should he go in and tell Maxi how he felt? But he didn't want to make a scene or ruin the show for her, and if she was dating this Chandler guy, then it might not matter how he felt.

"You look glum."

James almost didn't recognize Sally Littlefield without her trademark overalls. Tonight she was wearing a long black skirt and black and tan blouse. She still had the braid, though now it was coiled around the top of her head.

"It's Maxi. I'm not sure she wants me back."

"Really?" Sally tilted her head. "We did a good makeover. Did you go to the Purple Blueberry like we told you to?"

"Yeah, but she was with that gallery owner. Chandler. I didn't stay long."

Sally's eyes narrowed. "Why not? Did she invite you to stay?"

"Yeah... but I felt uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable? How uncomfortable is it going to feel to *not* be with Maxi at all?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

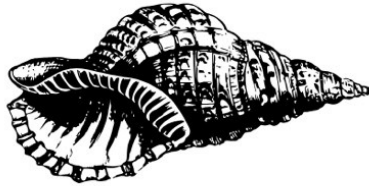
"And what about here at the art show?"

"We were talking, and then Chandler came and pulled her away. I didn't know how to take it. Maybe she'd rather be with him."

"I doubt that. He's not her type. You don't have to worry about that. But if you don't do something fast, you might have something to worry about." Sally leaned in close. "You ask me, you're going to have to get out of your comfort zone if you want Maxi back. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some free champagne to drink."

Sally walked off toward the art gallery, and James stood by the car for a few more seconds before getting in and driving away. Get out of his comfort zone? How in the world was he going to do that? He needed time to come up with a plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Why did they all have to check in at once? Jane thought the next morning as she dodged angry aunts and chatty cousins in order to register all the guests who had come for the wedding.

Thankfully she had Andie here to help because Jane doubted she would have been able to referee the argument going on between the bride's feuding great-aunts.

"I will *not* stay on the same floor as her!" Aunt Birdie, a plump woman in her mid-seventies wearing a red polyester pantsuit, crossed her arms over her chest and glared at a shorter woman with a salt-and-pepper bun, who was wearing a pair of navy stretchy pants and a blue flowered shirt.

"Well, I'm certainly not staying on the floor *below* you!" Aunt Gladys huffed.

"Ladies. Would you like some fresh-baked cookies? We can figure out the room arrangements over here." Andie herded them off to the corner of the foyer where Brenda had set out snacks for the guests' arrival.

"Are they gluten free?" Birdie asked. "I'm allergic to gluten."

Jane turned her attention back to the registrations. The feuding aunts were the least of her worries. She wanted to get the rest of the guests lingering in the foyer checked in before the bride's mother arrived.

The mother, Marilyn, had called earlier to say she'd be checking in around ten thirty and stated in no uncertain terms that she was expecting a full inspection of the premises shortly after she arrived. Judging by her demanding tone, Jane wondered if all the bridezilla's demands had really originated with the mother, as Andie had guessed from talking to them on

the phone. Then again, the apple might not fall too far from the tree, and she could be dealing with both a bridezilla and a monster mother of the bride. She just hoped everything they'd done would pass muster.

Brenda came whistling out from the kitchen as Jane finished the last check-in. At least Brenda was enjoying the influx of guests. She'd been happily cooking muffins, breads, and cookies all morning to feed them.

"Well, it's nice to see the inn teeming with guests again," she said as she filled the coffeepot and adjusted the pastries on the tray.

Jane simply smiled at her.

"Boy, that was a challenge getting those two feuding aunts into satisfactory rooms, but I managed to do it. Guess working with difficult antique clients paid off." Andie picked a snickerdoodle off the tray. "It *is* good to see the inn full, though."

Jane wasn't so sure. "Paying guests are always nice."

The crunch of tires on the driveway signaled the arrival of a black sedan. A woman stepped out. She wore a hat with large flowers on it, dark sunglasses, and an expensive Chanel suit.

"Is that the bridezilla?" Brenda whispered.

Jane wiped sweaty palms on her slacks. "No. Worse. It's her mother."

Marilyn Lambert sailed into the foyer, looking over the tops of her sunglasses to appraise the three of them then whipping them off to look around. Her gaze fell on the tray of snacks, and she muttered something that sounded like "pedestrian."

Brenda took in a deep breath. No doubt she was preparing to give Marilyn a piece of her mind, but Andie pushed her back into the kitchen before a fight could break out.

Jane stepped forward and held out her hand. "Welcome to Tides. I'm Jane Miller."

Marilyn gave a limp handshake. "Marilyn Lambert. The place seems... adequate. I'd like a tour of the wedding venue after I check in."

"Of course. Let me get you situated, and then I'll be waiting down here for you." Jane moved behind the desk, dread building in her chest. Pleasing Marilyn Lambert was not going to be easy.

JANE GOT Marilyn checked into her room and then checked on Cooper, who she'd put in her office in order to keep him from getting underfoot while the guests were arriving.

Andie poked her head in. "Everything going okay?"

"Yes. I'm meeting Marilyn downstairs after she freshens up."

"Need help?"

"Maybe you could help keep Cooper out of sight. It might be best to keep him from running around trying to greet all the guests." Jane would have liked to pawn the job of showing Marilyn around off on Andie, but since she'd been the one to originally book the wedding and talk to Marilyn and Courtney, she felt it was her responsibility.

"Of course." Andie clipped the leash to his collar. "I'll make sure he stays to himself."

Jane got to the foyer at the same time as Marilyn.

"I'd like to see the table-scape, if I may." Marilyn looked at Jane as if she were an indentured servant.

"We have an example out on the back porch." Jane led the way.

"The back porch? I thought there was a tent." Marilyn ran her finger along the surface of a sideboard then inspected it for dust. Jane half expected her to whip out a white glove.

"There will be, but it's being set up tomorrow morning."

Marilyn frowned. "So I can't see the actual setup right now."

"The rental company said that setting it up the morning of the event would be best so that everything is crisp and fresh for the wedding itself. Since it's in the evening, I think that makes sense, don't you?"

"I suppose." Marilyn looked around the room as Jane held the French doors to the back porch open, hoping to distract her with the gorgeous ocean view.

"Luckily it's outside and not in here. So many knickknacks. They collect dust, you know. I hate dust. I like things spic-and-span clean. I don't allow clutter." Marilyn waved toward a sideboard that held Grandma Miller's collection of flow blue plates. "Or pets. Dust and dander are so dirty."

As she swept out onto the back deck, Jane saw Andie disappearing with Cooper on the other side of the inn just in the nick of time.

Thankfully, Marilyn approved of the table setting, albeit a bit grudgingly. They proceeded to walk across the garden to the bathroom. Jane

stopped at the arbor.

“Here’s the arbor where the bride and groom will say their vows facing the ocean, and the tent will be directly behind it,” Jane said.

Marilyn looked around. “I suppose it’s pretty. Those roses are a bit unusual.”

“Yes, we worked on the arbor specifically to your daughter’s instructions.”

“Well, we’ll see how she likes it. Now the bathrooms?” Marilyn raised her brows at Jane. “I hope those will be clean and uncluttered, unlike the main house.”

Uncluttered? Darn! Jane pictured the starfish and shells she’d placed on the vanities as she led Marilyn toward the building.

MAXI PUTTERED AROUND THE COTTAGE, basking in happy memories from the art gallery opening the previous night. Too bad those memories were mixed with worry about James.

She’d been happy with the way her paintings had come out and thrilled at the compliments she’d received, and when she’d seen James, she felt like things were okay between them and all the tension from their misunderstanding had melted away. Then why did he leave?

Rembrandt skittered down the hall, batting a plastic bottle top in front of him. She knelt and scooped the cat up and held him in her arms like a baby as she talked to him.

“Did I miss the signs with James? I thought he wanted to reconcile, but was he really there to tell me things were over?”

Rembrandt wriggled, and she put him down. He trotted to his food dish.

“And what about that day at the Purple Blueberry?” She got cat food out of the fridge and spooned some into the dish.

James had been seeking her out, she knew. And he’d reached out to Jane and Claire to help him. He’d had a wardrobe makeover, for crying out loud!

No. She was sure he wasn’t breaking things off. Something must have made him leave though... Crap! It was because of Chandler, of course. Chandler had dragged her off, and James must have gotten jealous.

She hoped he hadn't gotten the wrong impression, though she was sure that Chandler had been flirty. He'd almost seemed possessive when he'd carted her away.

She'd tried to give off the vibe that she wasn't interested, as Andie had suggested, but her vibe-giving skills were rusty. Though something must have worked, because at the end of the night, he'd been so busy talking to some blonde that he'd hardly even acknowledged Maxi to say good night.

Maxi took out her paints and a fresh canvas. Painting always helped her think, and she needed to figure out the best way to reconcile with James in a way that would solidify their relationship and not leave a lot of unanswered questions.

"I SUPPOSE the building is cute in a commonplace sort of way." Marilyn eyed the bathhouse with a scowl on her face.

Jane bit her lip to remain quiet. Andie and Maxi had put a lot of time into the design, and Jane thought the sailboat shutters and window boxes were quaint. But if Marilyn didn't approve of the outside, she surely wouldn't like the way Jane had set decorative shells and starfish around the inside.

Jane pushed the door open, gesturing for Marilyn to go inside, and closed her eyes, waiting for her words of disapproval.

"Huh, it's very clean. Sparse. I'm surprised, considering how cluttered the house was." Marilyn's praise held a grudging tone.

Huh? Jane opened her eyes and peeked in. Where were the shells that she'd lined up on the vanity? And the dozens of starfish she'd stood upright on the shelves? Had Andie overheard Marilyn taking about dust and clutter and rushed in to remove them?

Marilyn opened each stall door, nodding her approval. Finally she turned to Jane.

"I suppose this will suffice." She glanced out the window. "Courtney should be here soon, and we'll have to show it all to her, but I wanted to have a look at things beforehand so I could try to rectify any shortcomings before she saw them. I don't want my little girl to be disappointed."

“Of course.” Jane felt bad for Courtney to have such a meddling mother, though it was nice that Marilyn didn't want her daughter to suffer any disappointment on her big day.

Marilyn led the way outside. She paused at the garden, her gaze resting on the large area to the side where the tent would be set up.

“What about the dance floor?” She narrowed her eyes at Jane as if eager to discover a flaw with the plan.

“That will be set up under the tent. We have a gorgeous wooden floor that will be perfect.”

“Oh, well I suppose I can wait to see—”

“Woof!”

Cooper came bounding toward them, his leash trailing from his collar.

Marilyn's eyes widened as the dog brushed past her on his way to Jane's side. He pushed his head under Jane's hand as she grabbed for his leash.

“Is that creature yours?”

“Well, yes... but—”

Andie came around the side of the house, juggling a handful of shells and starfish. That explained where the shells from the bathroom had gone.

“Sorry. I had my hands full, and the leash slipped out.”

Cooper strained to sniff at Marilyn, and she jumped back. Jane tugged on the leash to rein him in.

“I certainly hope *that's* not going to be here for the wedding!” Marilyn pointed at Cooper.

Apparently Cooper didn't register Marilyn's dislike for him because he wagged his tail and strained to get at her even harder.

“He won't be at the wedding. We'll keep him inside.”

“Oh no. This won't do. Not at all. I think—”

“Hey! Mom!”

All three of them swiveled toward the driveway on the other side of the garden, where a young woman waved cheerily. She started toward them, her long honey-blond hair bouncing like in a shampoo commercial as she hurried across the garden. At least she had normal taste in clothes, judging by her plain tan shirt and khaki capris.

Jane's stomach twisted as Courtney hurried toward them. What if their bridezilla hated dogs as much as her mother did?

JAMES WOKE up determined to get Maxi back. Jane's invitation to the wedding had provided him an opportunity. Sally had said he'd have to get out of his comfort zone, and he knew exactly what to do.

"We'll show her how much we love her, right, Picasso?"

Picasso simply slitted one eye open from his position atop the cashmere sweater vest that James had placed on the bed.

After the hairball incident, James had no desire to wear that sweater again. It didn't go with his new less-fussy look anyway. He'd hand-washed it and then given it to Picasso to lie on. The cat seemed pleased.

James felt nervous about his plan. He'd definitely be out of his comfort zone, but he knew it was something Maxi wanted. And he'd worked hard to gain the new skill that would hopefully prove to her that he had changed and was willing to work toward their relationship. Now if she just didn't show up at the wedding with another date, everything might just work out.

He got his most impressive dress shoes out of the closet and started to polish them. He still had a lot of work to do to perfect his plan and only one day in which to do it.

JANE HAD EXPECTED Courtney to be a sourpuss like her mother, but she actually seemed rather cheery as she approached the group. On the other hand, she was happy to see her mother, which Jane took as a bad sign because if the two of them were anything alike, she was in for a rough road ahead.

"Great to see you, dear!" Marilyn hugged Courtney and then air-kissed her cheek.

"Hi. I'm Jane. We talked on the phone a few times." Jane stuck out her hand.

"Yes, I remember. Nice to meet you." Courtney's handshake was firm, her smile genuine. Maybe she wasn't so bad after all. "Sorry to be such a stickler on the phone, but Mother wanted everything to be perfect."

Aha! So maybe it was the mother all along.

"Yes, I did. Nothing is too good for my darling daughter." Marilyn sniffed. "But I'm afraid there's a little problem, dear." She nodded toward Cooper.

Courtney's eyes widened, apparently noticing the dog for the first time. "Oh! A dog!"

She crouched down, holding her hand out for Cooper, who was delighted to sniff. Once they were acquainted, Jane eased up on the leash, and Courtney hugged the dog. She looked up at Jane. "Does he live here?"

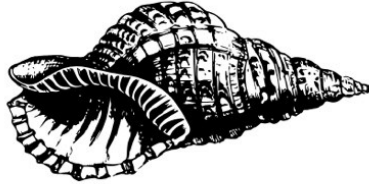
Jane nodded.

"He's gorgeous. Do you think he could be a ring bearer?"

Stunned, Jane answered, "Sure. He's pretty smart. I'm sure we can train him."

Courtney stood, brushed off her slacks, and hooked her arm through her mother's. "Perfect. Then I guess I'll check in and then take a look at what you have set up for the wedding. The property is lovely, and I'm sure what you have will be just wonderful."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Jane was so busy the rest of the day and into the next that she barely registered the hours ticking by. It turned out that Courtney really wasn't as bad as her mother.

Brenda made a quick ring box and pillow to attach to Cooper's collar, and Courtney helped Andie and Jane train him to walk down the aisle behind her. He learned quickly, but it was one thing to do it with empty chairs and another to do it while the tent was full of guests that could distract him. Jane could only keep her fingers crossed.

The guests all seemed happy, and the couple looked enamored with each other at the small rehearsal dinner held on the back deck of Tides the night before the wedding.

Even the feuding aunts had found common ground. It turned out they both loved dogs and had tolerated each other's presence, since they both wanted to be near Cooper. Jane had even overheard them reminiscing pleasantly about family dogs they'd had in the past.

When the moment finally came for the wedding, Jane was relieved and somewhat eager to get it over with.

She stood at the back of the tent and watched the couple exchange vows. Cooper stood between them, patiently waiting for the ring exchange.

"See, I knew he'd do a good job." Mike took her hand. "Everything worked out just perfect."

"I guess." Jane watched as the groom kissed the bride, and the crowd erupted in applause. "Now let's hope the reception and dinner goes smoothly."

Several yards away on the beach, the Lobster Bay Clambake Company was tending to the steaming pit they'd dug in the sand and lined with seaweed for the lobsters. Two industrial-sized grills were set up for steak. Waitstaff circled in the tent with trays of hors d'oeuvres as the crowd moved from the seating area to mingle under the tent.

The band had taken their place in the corner and was starting to get set up. Fairy lights twinkled along the edges of the tent. Sheer drapes hung in the corners billowed exotically in the sea breeze. Above the ocean, the first stars were just starting to appear in the cerulean sky.

The guests seemed to be enjoying themselves, and the bride was beaming, which eased some of Jane's nerves. Never having hosted a wedding before, she had no idea if she was doing things right, but so far, so good. Over to the side, she spotted Claire's sandcastle cake. It looked magnificent with its blue sugar-coated icing and really did match the bridesmaid dresses.

"Let's go to the table. I want to tell Claire how much Courtney loved her cake." Jane tugged Mike over to the round table in the back designated for Jane and her friends. Claire and Rob were seated at the table, their heads bent together in private conversation. Maxi sat next to Claire, a champagne flute in her hand as she scanned the crowd.

Andie was standing beside the table talking to the two feuding aunts, who were laughing together about something. Apparently, they'd forgotten about their feud.

Most of the guests were standing in small groups, while a few were seated at the tables. The bride was circulating with the groom in tow. The only person not laughing and talking was Marilyn. She was seated at the head table by herself with a sour look on her face. Jane wasn't surprised about that.

As she approached their table, James came up beside her.

"Wish me luck." He winked at Jane as he went over to Maxi then took her hand and led her to the dance floor just as the band started to play.

Jane squeezed Mike's hand as she watched the couple. "Ahh, see, you were right. Everything is working out just perfect."

MAXI'S HEART fluttered as James took her in his arms on the dance floor. James wasn't much of a dancer, but she appreciated the effort.

James looked over at the band and nodded. How odd. Did he know them or...?

They started playing a song she associated with the tango, and James held her hand out in a tango pose. What in the world? James didn't know how to dance the tango.

She played along, shocked when he started to whirl her around in perfect sync with the music.

"When in the world did you learn how to tango?" Maxi had to admit, he was pretty good at it. She'd learned years ago, and her steps were a little rusty, but James was leading beautifully.

James laughed. "You always wanted to take ballroom dancing, and since I'm a klutz, I figured I'd get a head start."

"You took lessons?"

James nodded. Their eyes locked. His were filled with love and a little uncertainty. She reached up and touched his face. "For me?"

"Anything for you."

"Oh, James, I've been so stupid."

"No, you haven't. You've just been doing what you wanted. All the years you sacrificed to raise the kids, I was too blind to notice that you'd done nothing for yourself. I had my dream career and what I wanted, but you nurtured everyone else at the expense of your own dreams. Now it's your time to do things for *you*." He twirled her away then scooped her back into his arms.

"You mean you don't mind if I paint, or have a cottage studio, or hang out at the Purple Blueberry?"

"Not at all. Well, maybe hanging out at the Purple Blueberry might take some getting used to." He dipped her skillfully. It was impressive how much he'd learned in a short time. How long had he been taking lessons? Surely he wasn't taking them before she left. "I'm hoping I'll be able to join you at all those things."

Maxi's heart expanded. "That would make everything just perfect."

He pulled her back in. "Then let's start tomorrow. I have a surprise for you at home."

Maxi raised her brows. "Okay, but first I want to show you my cottage." What would James think of Rembrandt? The old James would have balked

at him, but somehow she thought this new James just might be more accepting.

“I can’t wait to see it.” James pulled her into his arms, and Maxi knew she was exactly where she was meant to be.

ANDIE STOOD on the side of the tent and watched Maxi and James whirl around the dance floor. They looked like newlyweds, and she was happy for them. They were going to be okay.

Her thoughts turned to Jane and Mike. They were seated at the table next to Claire and Rob, the four of them in a lively conversation. At the art gallery opening, Andie had sensed that Tiffany and Chandler had hit it off. Hopefully Tiffany would switch her affections to Chandler and leave Mike alone. Jane was being overly cautious, but Andie knew she and Mike were meant for each other just like Claire and Rob were.

She glanced out at the beach, at Tides, at the bathhouse. They’d pulled the wedding off, and she couldn’t be happier. She hadn’t thought of her old life in New York once during the past several days. She belonged here. This was her town, and these were her people.

The bride, Courtney, had been ecstatic about what they’d done. Her mother, not so much. But Andie recognized her type, never happy with anything. It was kind of sad in a way, since those types of people always pushed others away. Right now, Marilyn was sitting alone at the head table, stiff backed and pursed lipped, while the rest of the family congregated in groups, talking and laughing.

There was only one creature that didn’t seem to be put off by her sour disposition. Cooper. He’d repeatedly tried to make friends, but Marilyn had brushed him off.

She glanced over the crowd again. Most people seemed to be in couples. Even Jane and Claire, who had both been alone for a long time, were in relationships. Maybe everyone had someone out there waiting for them, but was there someone for her? Thoughts of Shane Flannery bubbled up, and she tamped them down quickly. That ship had sailed, and the fact that he hadn’t been working at Tides since they’d run into each other there made her wonder if he’d been avoiding her.

“You’re looking dreary despite the fact you pulled off this amazing wedding. What’s wrong?” Sally wore a gauzy ivory pantsuit, her hair clipped back in a chignon. Andie almost didn’t recognize her.

“Oh nothing, just thinking about things.” Andie turned her attention to the handywoman. “I didn’t know you were coming to the wedding.”

“Well, I wasn’t invited by the bride or anything. I met Payton over there at the Salty Dog last night, and he invited me.” Sally tilted her champagne glass toward a table where a dapper older gentleman in a bow tie sat talking to a younger man. “I never turn down free lobster.”

“You look nice.” Andie nodded toward Sally’s outfit.

“Ayuh. Thanks. I’ve had enough of this dressing up, though. First the gallery opening then this. I’ll be glad to get in my overalls and back to work.” Sally appraised Andie. “You look good too. No date?”

Andie sighed. “Nope. Just me.”

“Well, at least it looks like things are going to work out for Maxi and James.” Sally’s gaze followed the dancing couple. “I guess he finally listened to my advice. You know, if people would listen to me more often, they’d be a lot happier.”

“I bet they would.”

“I have to admit I was a bit worried about that Chandler fellow, though. Seemed like he had a thing for Maxi. But I saw him cozied up down at the Purple Blueberry with a blonde. Not a townie.”

“Was she in her late thirties? Shoulder-length hair? Perky?” Andie described Tiffany as best she could.

“Yeah, you know her?”

“Not really. But as long as he’s found someone else, that works for everyone.”

“Guess so.” Sally focused her attention on Andie. “What about you? I hear you’re staying in town.”

“Yes. This is my home now,” Andie said.

“Good. You’re the face of Tides now.”

“I don’t know about that. But this is where my family is, so this is where I’m going to stay.” Andie glanced back at the inn. “I’ll help with the guests at the inn part-time, and I bought the antique store downtown.”

“Good. That’s going to work out just perfect for you.” Sally scanned the crowd. “And Tides is going to do well. This event is coming off perfectly.

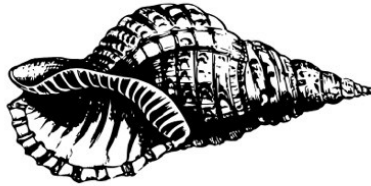
I'll bet you get a lot of good reviews. Even that sourpuss Marilyn is softening."

Andie followed Sally's gaze. Marilyn was still seated alone at the head table. Andie watched as she picked a morsel from her plate and leaned down tentatively, clucking to Cooper, who sat at her feet. Cooper's tail wagged furiously, and he put up his paw. Marilyn took the paw as she fed the treat to Cooper, and for the first time since she'd arrived, Andie saw the woman smile.

"Guess dogs bring out the best in everyone." Sally's attention jerked toward the other side of the room. "Payton is motioning me over. Gotta run."

Andie sipped her champagne and watched Sally rejoin her table. She was glad to hear that Chandler and Tiffany had hit it off. It felt good to help people. And now she had a chance to help even more people with their antiques. She couldn't wait to get started.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



James approached the front door to Maxi's cottage with a mixture of nerves and anticipation. It was the night after the wedding at Tides, and he and Maxi had picked up where they'd left off. Better than where they'd left off, actually. They were entering a new phase of their relationship. One that he was very much looking forward to.

The cottage was similar to the one he'd looked at with Sandee, and he liked it immediately. He could see Maxi's touches everywhere, from the whimsical wrought iron chair she'd placed out front to the flowers overflowing the window boxes.

Meow!

Picasso voiced his displeasure at being cooped up from inside the cloth cat carrier James held in his right hand. He hadn't told Maxi about the cat and couldn't wait to see the look on her face when he presented Picasso to her.

Palms clammy, he knocked on the door.

The door opened, and there she was. Maxi was wearing a yellow-and-white-checked sundress, and her hair was loose. She looked fantastic.

"Welcome!" She opened the door wider, then her eyes fell to the cat carrier. "What is this?"

James held the carrier out to her. Her smile widened. "Remember when you saw me downtown that day and I tried to avoid you? This is why. It's a present I was getting for you."

Maxi's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, James, I'm so sorry. I was a fool."

“Never mind that now. It’s water under the bridge. We don’t need to think about that. Let’s focus on the future. Our future.”

Maxi smiled, took the carrier inside, and put it on the table.

The inside of the cottage was a little worn, as Maxi had already told him. James liked it anyway, especially since she’d added touches here and there and fixed it up with her usual skill.

Something scampered down the hallway toward him. “You already have a cat?” James sat on the floor and extended his hand to the black kitten, who approached cautiously. “Hey, I think I recognize this little guy. He was at the shelter when I got Picasso.”

“Picasso?” Maxi had taken the white kitten out and was cuddling him to her chest.

“I named him after one of your favorite artists. You can change it if you want.”

“No, it’s perfect.” Maxi placed Picasso down next to the other cat and sat on the floor next to James. “This one is named Rembrandt.”

Together they watched the two cats circle each other warily. There were a few hisses and a couple of paw swipes, but then they settled in and started playing. Soon they were rolling around in a fluffy flurry of black and white fur.

He stood and brushed a few hairs off his jeans. Oddly, he didn’t care as much now about cat hair or appearances. “Looks like they are going to get along fine.”

“Almost as if they were meant to be together,” Maxi said, her eyes softening as she looked up at him.

“Yes, it is.” James took her hand. “Now show me the rest of the cottage and your artwork. I think I’m going to be spending a lot of time here.”

MAXI’S HEART was lighter than it had been in years. But she also felt bad. That day in the street when she’d thought James had avoided her had all been because he was getting her a precious gift.

He should have been mad at her, but here he was, smiling and holding out his hand.

She took it and stood. Keeping her hand firmly in his, she gestured around the cottage. "It's not big, but it works for a nice studio. As you can see, it's not fancy either."

"Who needs something fancy with that view?" James pointed at the beach.

"I know, right?" They had a great view from their house on the cliff, but there was something about being right on the beach and being able to hear the sound of the waves and smell the sea. She pulled him toward the slider and then out onto the patio. "This is my favorite part."

"I can see why." James's gaze drifted from the ocean to the easel setup in the corner. "Is this where you paint?"

Maxi nodded. "I'm going to start a new one tomorrow."

"Excellent. The ones you had at the gallery were amazing. I'm happy for you."

"Really?" Maxi was seeing a new James. He'd always been generous with money and compliments, but he'd never really acknowledged her creative side.

Of course, that might have been because she'd never talked about it. After all, it was she who had abandoned painting, so she couldn't really blame him. She could sense he really was proud and that he wanted her to continue. He wanted to be a part of it. She wondered, though... how far would he go to be a part of her new life?

"I was thinking... maybe later on we could have a drink at the Purple Blueberry," Maxi said shyly.

James's brows rose. "Okay, if that's what you'd like. The place seemed... interesting."

"You don't have to go there if it makes you uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable? I don't know if I'd say that. It's just not the sort of place I'm used to. But a wise woman told me I have to get out of my comfort zone, so I'd be happy to go."

"A wise woman?"

"Yeah. Sally."

Maxi laughed. "Well, she does like to dole out advice."

"And sometimes it is wise." James pulled her into his arms and kissed her. "She helped me see that I'd become complacent in our relationship. Took you for granted. That's not going to happen anymore."

"Good. Me either."

James looked thoughtful. “You know, getting to know the artsy side of town might not be such a bad idea. Maybe I should institute a lending program for artists down at the bank.”

At least James hadn’t changed totally. He was still thinking of business, but this time he was mixing it with pleasure. James loved business, and she didn’t want him to push that aside for her, but now it seemed like maybe they could both have what they wanted. She could still have James and not lose herself in the process.

ONE WEEK LATER...

ANDIE PUT the inventory list beside Gloria Farnsworth's silver box on the counter of the antique store. She’d paid nine hundred for the box. That was top dollar, and she'd be lucky to make any profit on it, but the look on Gloria's face when she’d realized the extra money would allow her to purchase horse-riding lessons along with the admission to 4-H camp for her granddaughter was worth it.

The grandfather clock in the corner chimed the hour. Almost time to meet Jane, Claire, and Maxi at Sandcastles for morning coffee. She’d made a dent in the inventory this past week, cataloguing everything in the shop and entering it into her computer. She’d dusted and polished so that everything was in top shape for her opening next week.

The apartment upstairs, on the other hand, still needed work. And furniture. But she could work on all that later. It had been an adjustment moving out of Tides, but with bookings up, she wanted the room to be empty so they could rent it out.

She grabbed the old skeleton key that locked the front door, stepped outside, then turned and slipped the key into the lock. It was still warm, but the air had that brisk undertone that signaled fall was right around the corner. The leaves were still green, but she pictured how pretty they would be when the tall oaks and maples that lined the street started to turn color.

“Well, hello, stranger.” The familiar deep baritone sent her pulse skittering.

Shane Flannery leaned in the doorway of the beauty salon next door. His long legs were crossed, T-shirt stretched across his broad chest.

“Hey, hi,” Andie said lamely, trying to act casual. Of all the times she’d looked for him at Tides and when she was running errands around town, he had to come up and surprise her when she was least prepared? She smoothed her hair that she’d shoved into a ponytail atop her head and glanced down at her frayed jeans and dust-covered T-shirt. “Are you doing work in the salon?”

The salon had been busy every time Andie had come to work on her apartment and store. She’d made a mental note to check them out herself. She needed a trim and maybe to cover up some grays. She hadn’t noticed any renovations going on, but maybe that was why Shane hadn’t been working at Tides.

Shane glanced back into the salon. “No, actually just visiting.”

“Oh.” Right. His girlfriend probably worked there. Maybe she was the one with the platinum blond bob or the dark curls? Certainly it wasn’t the woman with the long gray hair. She looked a good twenty years older than him.

“My aunt, cousin, and niece own it,” he said. “Do you remember them?”

Andie’s gaze flicked back to the window. She didn’t recognize any of them, but it had been decades since she’d met them, and it wasn’t like she’d known them well. Just a few meetings at family gatherings. “Oh! Yeah... I mean, I remember them, but didn’t realize they owned the shop.”

“What are you doing here?” He gestured toward the door.

“I bought the shop and the apartment above.”

“Wait. So you’re staying in Lobster Bay?”

Did he sound pleased? Andie couldn’t tell. Maybe he was just surprised. She couldn’t blame him. She’d surprised a lot of people with the decision, including herself and her coworkers at Christies.

“Yep. Gonna help Jane with Tides and run the shop in my spare time.”

Shane pushed off the wall, the smile spreading on his face showing off the dimple that always caught Andie’s heart. “Well, then, looks like we’re going to be seeing a lot of each other. I visit Aunt Mary a couple of times a week.”

“Huh, I guess we will, then.”

Andie watched him walk to his truck before continuing toward Sandcastles. Yep, it was looking more and more like she'd made the right decision. Despite her feelings of uncertainty at giving up her career and leaving the town she'd called home for most of her adult life, somehow she had a feeling that things were going to turn out just fine for her in Lobster Bay.

This is a work of fiction.

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MAKING WAVES

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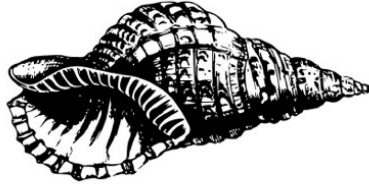
Shifting Sands

MEREDITH
SUMMERS

Lobster Bay
BOOK FOUR



CHAPTER ONE



Andie Miller hoped she hadn't made a huge mistake.

She sighed as she pinched a small piece from her corn muffin and subtly reached down to feed it to her sister's golden retriever, Cooper. Cooper wagged his tail enthusiastically, remaining silent as if to keep this secret treat from Jane, who was seated across the table. Cooper had gained a few pounds since coming to live at their family inn, Tides, and Jane was being outright militant about restricting his treats.

They were seated at one of the scrolly wrought-iron tables outside Sandcastles Cafe. Andie should have been blissfully content. She'd uprooted herself after a lifelong career in New York City and moved back to her small seaside hometown of Lobster Bay just to experience leisurely mornings like this, not to mention the other benefits of coming home.

For one, she'd reconnected with Jane. Decades of living far from each other had eroded their once-close relationship, but since she'd come back they'd reconnected. And she'd made new friends, too, something she'd never had time for in the city. She was flattered to be included in the weekly breakfast ritual with those friends, Claire and Maxi, as well as Jane.

The atmosphere was a lot more pleasant here too. No one could argue that the scent of the salty sea and the cawing of gulls held more appeal than the exhaust fumes and honking horns of the city.

But still... something was missing from her new life.

"Thanks for helping out at Tides this morning." Jane frowned as her gaze switched from Cooper, who was still licking his chops, to Andie's muffin.

“My pleasure.” Andie knew Jane hated dealing with customers at their family inn, so Andie had offered to work there part time checking in new guests while Jane took care of the day-to-day running of the business.

“How are things going at Tides?” Claire asked. “The wedding went off perfectly, so I hope that brought in more bookings.”

“It did, bookings are way up.” Jane beamed, pushing a lock of her silvery hair behind her ears. She was still self-conscious about the pixie haircut, but Andie thought it looked cute. Andie pulled the strands of her ponytail over her shoulder. Unlike her sister, she still wore her dark hair long, though now it had gotten a bit too long at halfway to her waist. She needed a trim but wasn’t as gutsy as Jane to just get it all chopped off.

Thinking of Tides gave Andie a surge of pride. When she’d come back to town to visit her ailing mother, she’d never imagined she would get involved in renovating the beach-side inn. But it had gotten run-down with their mother’s declining health, and they needed the increase in business in order to pay for the care necessary for Addie’s failing memory. They’d put a lot of work into sprucing Tides up, and Jane had been a whiz at instituting new promotions and venues for them to bring in more business. It had worked wonders, and now business was on a definite uptick.

“What about your new shop, Andie?” Claire looked over the plate loaded with pastries that sat in the middle of the table. She angled her knife over a chocolate croissant and cut it in half. Goopy chocolate oozed out as she picked up one half and put it on the smaller plate in front of her. “I heard you’re finally paying fair prices.”

Andie blushed. When visiting her mother at Tall Pines, the assisted living facility just outside of town, she’d discovered that an unscrupulous antiques dealer, Damien Carruthers, had been ripping off little old ladies that wanted to sell their family heirlooms. That was one of the reasons she’d bought the old antiques store in town. She wanted to make sure they got a fair price, though she had to admit she had a soft spot for the old ladies and sometimes paid so much that she’d be hard-pressed to make a profit.

“Great. I’ve inventoried most of it and rearranged the shop. Everything is organized the way I want it. The apartment is another story, though.” The store she’d purchased had come with inventory and an apartment above. Andie had moved right in but had spent all her time on the inventory, and her apartment was bare bones.

Maxi piped up. “Maybe I can help with the apartment.” She’d been quiet up until now, but the dreamy look on her face told Andie it wasn’t because she was upset about anything. More likely she was thinking about her husband, James, who she’d recently reconciled with.

“That would be fantastic, ” Andie said. Maxi had a great eye for design, and Andie had liked working with her on some of the projects at Tides.

“Actually, we could help each other because I’m looking for some vintage items to decorate the cottage with, and I thought you might have something in the shop.” Maxi had just rented a small cottage on the beach to use as an art studio. She had a huge house on the cliff, but she said there was something about being right on the beach that spoke to her inner artist. “How about I stop by tonight and bring some takeout?”

“That would be great.” Andie was a big fan of takeout. She hated cooking for one and was much too busy.

“How *are* things at the cottage, Maxi?” Jane wiggled her eyebrows, indicating that she was really asking how things were with James.

“Perfect.” Maxi settled back, smiling over the rim of her mug. “James and I are getting along better than we have in years.”

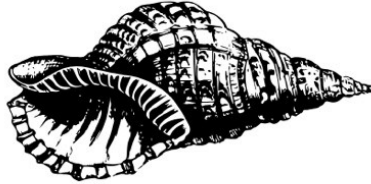
“And the kittens?” Claire asked.

Maxi had recently adopted two kittens, one black and one white. “They’re adorable. Playing up a storm. Of course they did ruin the drapes, but those can be replaced. But the best part of it all is that I’m painting consistently now, and my paintings are slowly getting recognition. Some businesses have even asked if they can display them. It’s like I’ve found a renewed sense of purpose.”

That was it! A sense of purpose! Andie bit into the corn muffin. Maxi was happier than ever. She’d found her purpose by taking up painting again. That was exactly what Andie needed... she needed to find her own purpose.

She used to have that as an antiques appraiser—her purpose was looking for that one big, important historical discovery. It was what she loved. But how in the world could she get something like that in her small town of Lobster Bay?

CHAPTER TWO



When Andie returned to her shop, there was a yellow sticky note on the door from Mary, the woman who owned Curlz, the hair salon across the street. The two had struck up a friendship in the three weeks Andie had owned the antiques store, and Mary often took in packages for her if Andie wasn't around when they were delivered.

Andie turned and headed over. She could see Mary through the glass windows, sweeping up a mound of auburn hair. Jules, Mary's great-niece, had a client in one of the three salon chairs, the woman's hair loaded with tinfoil strips. Jules's own dark curls were perfectly styled in an updo that cascaded in corkscrews from the top of her head.

Jules caught Andie's eye and nodded toward Andie's hair. "About time for a trim, don't you think?"

Andie grabbed at her hair. "I do. I'll schedule one before I leave."

There were no customers waiting, which was great. It meant Andie could chat with Mary. She looked forward to their chats.

Mary finished her sweeping and picked up a medium-sized box. "This was on your doorstep. Wouldn't want anyone to steal it."

"Thanks. It's a diamond tester I ordered online. You never know when someone might come in with what they think is junk jewelry and it turns out to be diamonds."

"Really? I can't imagine not knowing I had a diamond." Mary turned toward the little beverage station they had in the back. "Coffee?"

"Tea?" Andie was coffee-ed out after two cups at Sandcastles. "Some people inherit jewelry and don't realize. It happens more often than you'd

think.”

“That’s crazy. Lemon zinger?” Mary looked at Andie for confirmation. She knew that was her favorite.

Mugs in hand, they settled into the two chairs in the back room. The decor was just as nice as out front, with a chic black-and-white theme. The chairs were comfortable, soft music played, and the smell of hair products swirled around them.

Mary was in her mid- to late seventies with long, thick gray hair. Her hair didn’t look witchy though, as it did on some older women. It looked classy and youthful. Her face was kind and welcoming, and Andie always felt comfortable unburdening herself to her. She valued Mary’s advice too. It was like getting advice from her own mother, something she could rarely do now with Addie’s memory problems.

“Do you have a lot of people trying to sell jewelry? It seems like that would be a last resort.” Mary’s expression showed her concern for anyone who would have to sell jewelry as a last resort.

“Sometimes people have too much and just want the money to go on a cruise or whatever. I just want to be prepared to give them a fair price.” Andie tapped the box. “And this is the best way to do it.”

“That’s nice. I guess I would probably be selling some of my jewelry if I had a lot.” Mary glanced out at the main room. “Though I’ll probably leave it to Jules.”

Andie remained quiet. She knew that Mary had a daughter from whom she was estranged. Mary didn’t have any grandchildren and just the one daughter. Jules was her grand-niece, and the two of them were close.

Mary sighed. “Anyway, what are you up to today?”

Good question. It would be more of the same, cataloguing and looking through the auction fliers for any good estate sales. Andie liked doing those things, but it felt a bit hollow. Andie looked out at the street, her mind going back to Maxi’s words about finding her purpose. “Nothing much.”

“Yeah, me too. Slow day for haircuts.” Mary sipped her tea, and after a few seconds Andie realized Mary was studying her.

“What?” Andie asked.

“Seemed like you were deep in thought. I didn’t want to interrupt. Is something on your mind?”

In the few weeks Andie had known Mary, she’d discovered the woman was very perceptive. She had a way of sensing when people needed to talk

things out and seemed to genuinely want to help. She probably should have been a therapist. Maybe she got to do some of that therapy while cutting hair.

Andie felt silly talking about how she was unfulfilled. She had a great life, was doing well financially, and was in good health. Who was she to complain? But somehow the words spilled out. “I don’t know. It feels like I have no purpose. Yes, I have my shop, and I do love selling antiques and helping out at Tides, but it feels like there should be more. I know, it’s selfish for me to complain.”

Mary shook her head. “Not at all. Everyone should have a purpose. Many people don’t find theirs and continue with their humdrum routines. What kind of life is that?” Mary glanced out into the shop. Andie could have sworn she was looking directly at Jules... no, she was probably just checking to make sure her next customer hadn’t arrived yet.

“Do you have one?” Andie asked.

“Of course!” Mary gestured toward the salon. “I love styling hair. Ever since I was a little girl, this is what I wanted to do.” She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. “Did you ever dream about something as a little girl?”

Andie nodded. “I did. I always dreamed of making a big discovery. When I was a kid, I think it stemmed from all those pirate books my dad used to read me. I always wanted to dig a treasure chest up on the beach.”

Mary laughed. “Who doesn’t?”

“I know, right? I was a little obsessive, went through a lot of shovels digging. But as I got older, I became interested in antiques. Tides is full of things from my great-grandparents and grandparents, and I loved all that old stuff. That’s why I became an appraiser. I’d always hoped to find some item that was historically significant.”

“You must have come across a lot of valuable things in your career.”

“Yes, but nothing earth shattering. You know, like an undiscovered Rembrandt or the missing jewels of a royal family.” Andie played with the tea bag, dunking it in her tea. She sighed. “I guess that’s not going to happen now that I live here.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. Lobster Bay might be small, but it’s rich with history. Take the Thompson house. Surely you’ve heard the rumors about its importance.”

The Thompson house was the oldest house in Lobster Bay. It sat on a cliff overlooking the ocean. It was rumored that the pirate Blackbeard had

lived there and also rumored that it was part of the Underground Railroad. These two very different rumors made Andie skeptical. People loved to make up stories about old houses.

“Yes, but those are just rumors. Probably no truth to them. And besides, Sadie Thompson’s daughter hates me, and Sadie and my mom don’t get along, so even if there was some historical significance there, it’s not anything I could be a part of.”

Mary laughed. “I forgot about your mom and Sadie. I wish those two would make up. But my point is that there is a lot of history here in town. You never know what you might find. And you never know what your purpose is. You might think it is one thing, and it could be something else. So don’t give up on realizing your purpose here in Lobster Bay.”

Andie sipped her tea and mulled that over. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Mary stood. “Don’t lose hope. And don’t lose hope about Shane either.”

“What about Shane?” Andie tried to act casual. Her burning cheeks probably gave her away.

Shane Flannery, her high school sweetheart, was Mary’s nephew. He’d actually asked Andie to marry him thirty years ago, but she’d fled town instead. She’d been afraid of being stuck in small-town obscurity her entire life and not wanting to wait for Shane to get back from his stint in the navy. It might have been a big mistake, and now she was embarrassed to face him over the way she’d treated him back then.

Mary laughed. “I know you know that he comes to visit me a lot, and I see you looking out your shop window.”

“Well, I’m not looking for him.” Not really. Well, maybe a few times she had.

“Oh, then you must be really interested in my clientele,” Mary teased as they walked to the front room.

“I just like to look outside.” Andie handed over her mug and glanced at her watch. “Well, guess I better go.”

Mary chuckled. “Okay, I’ll stop teasing, but remember what I said about your purpose. Don’t give up.”

“I won’t.”

Andie stopped at the front desk to make an appointment with Jules for a trim before heading across the street to her shop.

MARY WATCHED Andie cross the street. It was nice to have someone in the old antiques store, which had been dark for years. Now the storefront, which had been deteriorating, had a new black-and-white striped awning, flower boxes under the windows brimming with color, and a fresh coat of paint on the trim.

Funny it would be Andie Miller who moved in there. Mary remembered Andie from way back when she'd dated Shane. She hadn't known Andie well back then, but Shane was her favorite nephew, and she knew how much he'd adored Andie. What had happened to break them up? Shane never said, though Mary knew he'd been crushed when Andie moved away.

Maybe even then she'd been seeking a purpose. Guess she never found it, but then maybe she wasn't looking in the right places. She'd said she always wanted a big historical find, but physical "things" never really satisfy.

Mary had told Andie her purpose was cutting hair, but it was really much more than that. It was about making people feel good about themselves. It sounded like a small thing, but it could make a big difference to people when they could start the day with a boost of self-confidence because a new hairstyle made them like what they saw in the mirror each morning.

Maybe Andie had never found her purpose because she was looking at it the wrong way. That was something Andie would have to find out for herself.

The girl always had been too ambitious for her own good. Mary hoped that ambition didn't drive her out of town like before. She knew Shane had never gotten over Andie and wanted to see the two of them together. She had a sneaking suspicion Andie wanted that too... now if only Mary could come up with some way to help them out. She'd become close to Andie, closer than to her own daughter, whom she'd only spoken to sporadically over the last several years.

Thoughts of Caroline made her heart ache, and Mary pushed them away. Best not to think of that betrayal. It was better to focus on what she did have, like her lovely grand-niece and now a new neighbor ready to fill the gap Caroline had left.

"When's your next appointment?" Jules's client was under the dryer, and she'd come to the window, draping her arm around Mary's shoulders, almost as if sensing she needed some comfort.

Mary glanced at the clock. "Ten minutes." She looked back at Jules. A young woman as pretty as Jules shouldn't have the defeated look that Mary saw in her grand-niece's eyes all too often. At thirty-six Jules had grown into a fine woman and was a decent hairstylist. Mary knew that hair styling wasn't Jules's passion. It was only temporary because Jules had lost her way. Would she ever find it again? Mary hoped so, though after what happened she wouldn't blame Jules for losing her nerve and ambition.

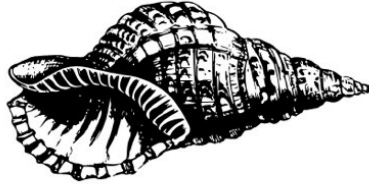
"I saw Andie blush when you mentioned Uncle Shane. I've seen him looking over at her shop when he's here." Jules looked amused. "The two of them really had a thing when they were in high school?"

"Yeah. Andie never got married, either. And Shane needs to find love again after his divorce. Too bad we can't do something to get them together." Mary shrugged and turned from the window.

"Who says we can't? Andie has an appointment this afternoon at three. Don't you need Shane to look at some repairs in the shop?"

Mary looked at her niece. The girl had a mischievous glint in her eye. "Now that you mention it, I do think I need him to look at that plug over by the sink."

CHAPTER THREE



Andie unpacked the box from Mary and then went to visit her mother at Tall Pines. Andie liked that the assisted living facility was more like a big old house than an institution. It was in a big brick building that resembled a mansion. The grounds were always perfectly manicured and the staff always cheerful, and it always smelled clean and fresh inside. Addie had flourished here and was well cared for, making it worth the hefty monthly expense.

Rita Duvalle, the woman she'd bought the antiques store from and who was now a resident at Tall Pines, was gliding down the hallway in her wheelchair as Andie walked in.

"Hey, Andie. They're in the art room this morning. I was just heading there." Rita wheeled alongside Andie. "So, how's the antiques shop going? I hear you're bringing it back to life."

"It's been a lot of fun cataloging the inventory. You had some great stuff." Andie had bought all the old inventory that Rita had left in the shop when she closed, which was convenient since she didn't have to spend time looking for items to stock the store. She'd had fun rearranging and re-pricing, and as it turned out, a steady stream of customers wanting to sell items kept new inventory coming in.

"Heard you spruced up the outside and that you've been offering fair prices." Rita glanced up at her. "In some cases more than fair."

Andie shrugged. "I don't have a lot of operating expenses, so I can pay more than some others, I suppose."

The truth was she had been paying a lot more than any other antiques dealer would for some of the items. So what if she only made her money back and a dollar or two of profit? Some of the elderly folks who had brought stuff to her didn't have much, and it felt good to see their surprised smiles when she handed them more cash than they'd anticipated. Damien Carruthers had been ripping them off for ages, so she was just trying to make things even. But she didn't want word to get out that she had a soft touch. She did need to make a profit on some stuff or she'd go out of business.

The art room was crowded, but Addie was easy to recognize with her colorful smock and cheery attitude. Her face lit up when she saw Andie. She didn't always recognize her and sometimes thought she was her late sister, Andie's aunt Bridgett, but at least she was always happy to see her.

"How do you like my landscape?" Addie pointed to the canvas in front of her where there was a swatch of pale blue at the top, a line of green in the middle, and dots of brown on the bottom.

"It's lovely."

"It's impressionist," Addie said with authority.

Andie bit back a laugh and kissed her mother on top of the head. "Very nice. You're a regular Monet."

"Did you say money? I don't think I'll get any money for it." Addie stood back and cocked her head to assess the painting. "This is one of my better ones, and it's not for sale."

"Speaking of selling, I wanted to thank you again for giving me a fair price on my mother's figurines." Mae Pendergast beamed up at Andie. She'd sold several delicate Dresden figurines to Andie for many times what she'd been quoted by Damien Carruthers.

"My pleasure," Andie said.

"Andie knows her antiques!" Addie cut in. Apparently this was one of the days when she remembered exactly who Andie was.

"Maybe you should think about selling some of your things, Sadie." Mae turned to a white-haired woman sitting at one of the easels. Andie hadn't noticed Sadie Thompson there. Unfortunately Sadie's daughter, Emily Wilder, was standing beside her. "I know you have generations of antiques stuffed into that old house."

Sadie looked uncertain. "I don't know. Emily tried to sell some, but she said that man tried to rip us off. Isn't that right, Em?"

Sadie glanced at her daughter, who didn't appear to be keen on selling anything if the way her lips were pursed was any indication.

Rita waved a hand. "That was Damien Carruthers. He's a bad apple. Andie here will treat you right, isn't that so?" Rita looked up at Andie.

Well now, this was awkward. Andie had gotten off on the wrong foot with Emily when she'd discovered Andie in Sadie's room. Andie had been asking about Sadie's house purely from a historical perspective because it was the oldest in town. Emily must have assumed Andie was trying to get her to sell some of her belongings and probably figured she'd be just as unethical as Damien.

"I don't think we need to sell anything right now." Emily looked at Andie with suspicious green eyes.

"Yes, we do. You said the other day we might not be able to pay for my stay here much longer," Sadie blurted out.

"Mother! Where did you hear that?"

"I heard you talking to your brother on the phone. You were trying to figure out where I was going to go. But I don't want to *go* anywhere. I want to stay here."

Emily's cheeks burned, and Andie felt a pang of sympathy. Tall Pines was expensive, and she and Jane had been in a similar position before they'd spruced up Tides and taken steps to get more business.

Sadie addressed Rita. "You say this girl will give us a fair price." She narrowed her eyes and studied Andie. "You look familiar."

"That's my daughter, Sadie," Addie said. "Looks like me, don't you think?"

"Oh! Of course. Well, if that's Addie's girl, she's good people," Sadie said.

Really? Sadie and Addie, who had been best friends in younger days, had had a feud going for the last several decades. One of the benefits of memory loss was sometimes you forgot old grudges. Sadie must have forgotten or she never would have vouched for Andie.

"I don't think we need to discuss this right now, Mom." Emily tried to return her mother's attention to the painting, but Sadie was having none of it.

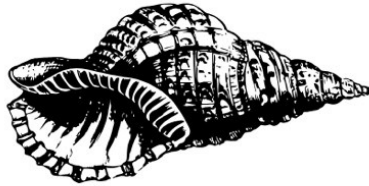
"Now, Emily, I want you to take Andie to the house and show her some of the antiques. See what she says, at least. If that's what I have to do to stay here then that's what I'm going to do. We can trust Andie. I can tell just

by looking at her.” Sadie looked up at Emily, her chin thrust out in determination. “Now you promise me.”

Emily shuffled her feet and glanced around the room. Everyone was now listening, and Andie felt bad for the woman. Emily’s gaze came to rest on her mother again, and she took a breath.

“Yes, Mother, I promise.” Emily said the words, but the look on her face said that she didn’t have the same confidence in Andie that her mother did.

CHAPTER FOUR



Andie thought Emily was just telling Sadie what she wanted to hear and had no intention of hiring her. With her memory issues it was unlikely Sadie would remember the promise. She was surprised when Emily caught up with her as she was leaving Tall Pines.

“I never go back on my promises, so I would like to hire you to look at some of Mom’s stuff.” Emily’s lips were pinched as if the request physically hurt her.

Andie hesitated. Did she even want to take on a job with such a reluctant client? But something in her gut told her the Thompson house might have exactly what she’d been looking for. There was a slight opportunity to find a treasure, with its history. “Sure. When is good for you?”

Emily’s posture was stiff, her demeanor unfriendly. Frigid waves radiated from her. Andie was not looking forward to working with this woman.

“How about tomorrow morning around ten? I usually visit Mother for breakfast.”

“Sounds good.”

“Fine. See you then.”

Emily walked away, and Andie started to second guess her decision. There better be something really exciting at the Thompson house in order for her to work with that lady.

Andie was still wondering if she’d made a mistake when she walked into Curlz for her trim.

Jules draped the apron over her shoulders and sat her in the chair. “So, what do you think? A pixie like Jane’s?”

“No!” Andie had kept her hair long since grade school and couldn’t imagine cutting it off. She glanced in the mirror at Mary, who was arranging shampoo bottles in perfect alignment on the shelves. If Mary could keep hers long into her seventies, so could Andie.

Jules plucked the curling iron out of its holder and, to Andie’s surprise, started to curl her hair. “Okay, then just a trim for the split ends? How about something to cover the silver? How about a reddish tone? Your hair is dark. It would look nice.”

“I don’t think so. I like it the way it is. And I sort of like the silver. I’m thinking about just letting it grow in naturally.” Unlike Jane’s, Andie’s hair only had a few streaks of gray, and she thought they looked more like highlights than anything. Andie watched as Jules uncurled a lock from the iron, turning it into a subtle wave. It looked kind of nice. Maybe she would think about getting a curling iron and styling it for something different. But why was Jules doing this now? It would be ruined once she washed her hair, and Andie always got it styled at the end, not before it was even washed or cut. “Don’t you usually do the styling after the wash and cut?”

“I just wanted to try it to see if you liked it and wanted me to curl it when I’m done.”

Andie studied the soft waves from the curls on the right side of her face. “It’s different. Might be good for a change.”

“Change is always good.” Jules continued with the curling iron, rolling locks of hair and gently releasing them, then fluffing and curling them to perfection. “I was wondering if you have any Frozen Charlottes in your shop.”

“Frozen Charlottes?” Mary turned from her task at the shelves. “Sounds like a cocktail!”

Andie laughed. “It does, but they’re actually small china dolls that were made in the late 1800s. Highly collectable.” Andie met Jules’s brown eyes in the mirror. “I have some nice ones. Do you collect them?”

“It’s not for me. For my grandmother. She’s sick in hospice at Tall Pines now, and I thought it would cheer her up.”

Jules’s expression was pained, but Andie thought she saw something deeper than just sadness. She had no idea what that was about, but every

family had their issues. “Sure. Come over anytime, and I’ll pick out some of the best ones for you.”

The bell over the door chimed, indicating a new customer.

“Hey, Aunt Mary, Sheila, Jules—”

Shane Flannery’s voice stopped mid-sentence as his eyes met Andie’s in the mirror. Suddenly self-conscious, Andie was glad she wasn’t sitting there with sopping-wet hair and looking like a drowned rat. What a stroke of luck that Jules had decided to practice curling her hair... hey, wait a minute. Andie narrowed her gaze at Jules, who had a guilty smirk on her face.

“—Andie, how are you?” Shane recovered from his surprise.

“Great. How about you?”

Shane looked as good as the last time she’d seen him—tall, broad shoulders, intriguing gray eyes, and the dimple when he smiled. Which he was doing now.

“Good.”

Was that all she could think of to say? She found herself tongue-tied because it seemed like Jules and Mary were watching her and Shane as if they were some kind of entertainment. She wouldn’t have been surprised if one of them made popcorn so the two could have something to munch on as they listened in.

Shane turned to his aunt. “Where’s that plug, Aunt Mary?”

“Right over there in front of Andie.”

Convenient.

Shane wedged himself in between her and the plug. It was a little crowded and awkward. Jules made no move to situate her somewhere else, though.

They all watched as Shane took out a tester and pushed it into the plug. “Huh, seems fine.” He frowned down at the tester. “Maybe I should take the cover off and look at the wiring.”

“Would you like some coffee?” Mary asked.

“No, thanks. I’ll only be a sec.” His arm brushed Andie’s as he worked. “Sorry.”

“No problem.”

“I see you’re settling in nicely.” Shane nodded toward her shop. “The place looks great.”

“Thanks.” More witty conversation on her part.

“It’s good to see it spruced up.” Shane’s gaze held hers for a while before going back to the switch.

“I’ve been having fun with it.”

“Great. We should catch up sometime now that you’re staying in town,” Shane said without looking at her.

“Yeah, we should.”

Shane pulled the wires out of the plug and frowned. “There’s nothing wrong with this, Aunt Mary.”

“Really? It didn’t work earlier, right, Jules?”

“Yep, tried to use the blow-dryer and got nothing.”

Shane looked skeptical. “That’s odd. I’ll tighten these up, and hopefully that won’t happen again.”

As Shane went back to fixing the outlet, Andie saw Jules and Mary exchange a look. Had they set her and Shane up? Andie feared that they were in for a big disappointment. She doubted things with Shane would work out after all these years. Too much water under the bridge. Then again, one never knew until one tried.

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AS SHANE LEFT CURLZ, he glanced back in the window at his aunt and shook his head. Aunt Mary’s little trick about the outlet was an obvious ploy to get him and Andie together. Mary had been hinting about that for weeks now, and he was sure there was nothing wrong with the outlet.

Shane didn’t really mind. He knew Mary was only looking out for his best interests, and Andie’s move to town had stirred up a lot of old feelings. Not all of them were unpleasant.

A lot had happened in the thirty years since they’d been a couple. Shane had completed a career in the navy, gotten married, and had two great kids who had grown up to be wonderful adults. And of course the highlight was his grandson, Caleb. Even though his marriage hadn’t lasted, he didn’t regret it because he wouldn’t have his kids or Caleb without it, though he could have done without the bitter divorce.

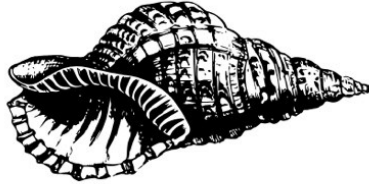
He resisted the urge to peek back into the salon at Andie as he got into his truck. Andie had looked good with her hair curled. He hadn't spent much time with her since she'd come back to town other than a few quick conversations when he'd run into her while working at Tides. She still looked mostly the same, though. Her face had a bit of a harder edge and a few wrinkles, but Shane thought that added maturity. When he'd dared to look into her golden-hazel eyes, he'd seen that same depth of emotion and vulnerability that had always made his heart leap when they were younger.

It was encouraging that she'd been agreeable to catching up. Or had she just said that to be polite because he'd asked in front of the others?

He wondered if she was different now. Thirty years had come and gone, and that changed a person. Andie had once been the person he was closest to. The person he shared his hopes and dreams and fears with. He *knew* her, and even though life shaped and molded a person, people didn't change much at the core.

And because of that, he also knew if he wanted things to work out with Andie he had to go slowly because she could easily be scared off and bolt like she did back in high school. And if that happened again, he was afraid his fragile heart might not survive.

CHAPTER FIVE



Andie was starving by the time Maxi arrived through the main door of the antiques shop for supper.

“I brought lobster rolls and coleslaw.” Maxi held up a takeout bag in one hand and a large canvas duffle bag with a mesh front opening in the other. “And something else. Hope you don’t mind, but I had to take the kittens to the vet for a checkup and came over right after.”

Andie peered into the opening to see Rembrandt and Picasso, Maxi’s two kittens, blinking out at her with innocent blue-gray eyes. They were adorable with their fuzzy kitten fur, innocent expressions, and soft meows.

“Of course not. We can eat first and let them run around the apartment while we talk about decorating ideas. I put some vintage cottage-chic stuff that might go well in your cottage aside, but you can poke around down here in the shop later if you want.”

Upstairs, Andie let the kittens out. She couldn’t resist scooping up the white one right away. His fur was so soft, and when she held him under her chin, the low hum of his purring was soothing. “This one is Picasso, right?” Andie held him up in front of her face, looking into his sweet kitten-blue eyes.

“Yep. He’s a little devil, so watch out.” Maxi was over at the tall windows that looked out onto the street. She turned, surveying the space. “This place is great. It’s almost like a city loft, but right here in our little town.”

Andie had been surprised when she’d viewed the place before buying it. Rita Duvalle was well into her eighties and had lived here for decades.

Andie had expected it to be outdated with 1970s wallpaper, shag carpet, and doilies, but the apartment actually had a modern vibe with its exposed brick walls, high ceilings, and hardwood floors. Rita had had the whole thing redone before she had to move to Tall Pines, and the kitchen boasted granite counters and gray custom cabinets.

Andie put Picasso down, and he scampered off to join Rembrandt, who was exploring the bedroom.

“We can sit at the breakfast bar.” Andie nodded at the two stools that were the only furniture she had as she pulled plates out of the cupboard. “I sold my condo in New York with all the furniture in it and haven’t gotten around to buying anything yet. Still trying to decide exactly what I want.”

“It’s always smart to live in a place for a while and let its personality develop. This apartment has great bones.” Maxi helped set out the plates, forks, spoons, and napkins. “I’m picturing a sectional facing the fireplace and maybe some industrial-style tables, accessories, and lighting to go with the loft look.”

“That’s what I was thinking. But also maybe go eclectic with industrial furnishing and antique nautical accents. I have to have my antiques, and I set aside a great brass porthole and an old seafarer’s chest for the shop.” Andie bit into the lobster roll. The meat was sweet and the mayonnaise tangy—just the way she liked it.

“Some long drapes with one big, bold horizontal stripe like a lighthouse would look great on those windows.” Maxi gestured toward the windows with a forkful of coleslaw.

“I was thinking a seascape would be perfect on the wall in the dining area.” Andie looked up at Maxi, who was focusing on forking lobster meat out of the overstuffed hot dog roll. “If you’d let me commission one from you.”

Maxi looked up, surprise in her blue eyes. “Commission? I’m not taking your money. I’d love to paint one.”

“I don’t want you to do it for free. You should get paid for that now.”

“Pfft.” Maxi waved her objections away.

Before Andie could insist, the kittens came chasing each other down the hall, and Maxi focused her attention on them. Andie let it ride. She could argue with her later, or if Maxi insisted, she’d pay her back in some other way, maybe barter for the vintage items she wanted for the beach cottage.

When they were done, Andie put the dishes in the sink and got a small piece of tinfoil out of the drawer. She rolled it up into a ball and tossed it at the kittens, watching them skitter and slide as they batted it around the room. “So things are working out good for you at the cottage?”

“Wonderful.” Maxi looked content. “James has been so agreeable I can’t even remember why I thought we should break up. Looking back, I realize how silly it was, but I guess when something is missing from your life, then nothing in your life seems right.”

She had a point. That was why Andie had been thinking she’d made a mistake to move here. Would she find what she was seeking at Sadie Thompson’s house? “I’m going to be helping Sadie Thompson sell some of her things.”

“Oh? Wow, I bet there’s some cool stuff in that house. When we were kids, we used to be afraid it was haunted,” Maxi said.

“I remember. And there were rumors of pirates and something about the Underground Railroad.”

“Maybe you’ll find pirate treasure or a secret passage,” Maxi joked.

“I doubt that, but there could be something of value there. At least I hope so.”

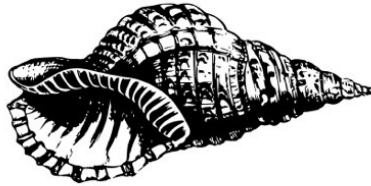
Maxi studied her quietly. “I do too. I remember you told me that you always wanted an important find.”

That was during one of the heart-to-hearts when they’d been working on renovating the bathroom at Tides. Andie had been conflicted over whether to move back, afraid to make the wrong decision. Maxi’s advice had helped.

“In all those years at Christie’s, I was lucky enough to handle a lot of great pieces but nothing really noteworthy. It was still fun though, and I bet Sadie Thompson’s place has a lot of fun stuff to discover too.”

“I’m sure it does, and I hope you find exactly what you’ve been looking for.”

CHAPTER SIX



The next morning, Andie left the By Appointment Only sign on her door and headed to Sadie Thompson's house. She'd decided to keep the antiques shop open by appointment or chance for the next few days. She still had duties at Tides and wanted the freedom to come and go as she pleased, only opening for business when she wanted to. Being single most of her life, she'd saved up a good nest egg and didn't need to make a lot from the antiques shop.

As she drove toward the Thompson house, a feeling of unease crept over her. Sadie wouldn't be there, and her daughter, Emily, had made it pretty clear she didn't like Andie. Would they be able to work together?

Andie knew firsthand how some clients could be difficult at the best of times. Selling items that had been in the family for generations was emotional, and many times people thought things were more valuable than they actually were. With Emily already not her biggest fan, maybe this was going to turn into a big mistake.

The house was in worse shape than she'd thought. The grass was overgrown, the shutters hung askew, paint peeled off the siding—but the view!

The old seafarer's home sat atop a cliff with nothing but sweeping dunes separating it from the sugar-sand beach and cobalt-blue ocean. A faint breeze kicked up, bringing salty sea air. Andie could hear waves crashing on the beach below and imagined sitting in a rocking chair on the porch with her morning coffee and just watching the sea. Had Sadie done that?

There had been many times she and her grandmother and sister had sat on the back porch at Tides when she was little. The view wasn't quite the same because Tides was set right on the beach but was still stunning nonetheless.

As she picked her way up the broken wooden steps, her trepidation about working with Emily was replaced with worry for their situation. If they didn't have any money to pay the bill at Tall Pines, then how were they paying the property taxes on the house? It had been in the family for generations, so they probably didn't have a mortgage on it, but with this waterfront view the taxes must be steep.

Would they have to sell? Andie and Jane had almost been forced to do that, and she felt a newfound sympathy for Emily and what she was facing. Someone would love to tear this place down and build a hotel here. As a lover of history and antiques, Andie hated that thought. Hopefully they'd find some good, expensive antiques inside that Emily could use to pay for Sadie's care and any bills they owed on the house.

"Thank you for coming." Emily looked more wary than thankful as she opened the front door for Andie.

The foyer was spacious. A large area on the left revealed a living room loaded with carved mahogany furniture including two curio cabinets stuffed to the brim. The view out the windows of the ocean beyond was stunning. On the right was a dining room that boasted tall windows with faded velvet drapes, a modest chandelier, and more furniture than was necessary. The three sideboards were loaded with knickknacks from every generation. A set of stairs led up, and Andie could see more furniture on the landing.

"You sure have a lot of antiques," Andie said.

Emily looked around as if only just noticing. "I suppose. My family isn't much for throwing things out. You should see the attic."

Andie would love to. Her imagination went wild as to what might be up there.

Emily led her down the hallway, pointing out a library, bathroom, and kitchen. One section had a wall that looked out of place. Emily saw Andie eyeing the wall.

"Mom had the house sectioned off a while back. Said it was too big for just her and she didn't want to pay the heat. There's a lot of things in there, too, but it's probably pretty dusty."

“Okay.” Andie looked around. Where to start? “I’d like to spend some time evaluating the items so I can give you a general idea of what to expect for value.”

“Okay.” Emily’s green eyes were filled with the wary resignation of someone who didn’t want to be in the position they were in but knew they had to be. Andie just hoped she wouldn’t balk at selling the good stuff and expect to make a lot from the broken and lesser-value items, as clients often did.

Andie spent the next few hours under Emily’s watchful eye assessing the antiques in the living room, library, and dining room. They had a lot of good items, nothing overly important, though. The common was mixed in with some rarer finds.

“So how does this work? Would you give me a price for all of it or...”

“I could. I do have a budget to work with.” The urgency in Emily’s voice gave Andie pause. She’d only allocated so much per month for acquiring new stock. It cost several thousand dollars a month to have someone at Tall Pines, so she knew Emily needed at least that, and that was just for *this* month. What about next month? And what other bills had the family accumulated?

“Oh, of course.” Emily looked around the room, disappointment evident on her face.

“How about we look a little more, try to find the most valuable items, and figure out how to sell them the fastest way that will get you the most money?” Andie suggested.

For the first time since they’d met, Andie saw a glimmer of a smile tug at Emily’s lips. “That sounds like a good idea.”

An hour later, she found an item that might help their cause. It was an oil painting of a field with cows that had been hanging in the back hall. Andie recognized the simplistic primitive style as a popular art form called folk art. She wasn’t an expert in paintings, but she knew someone who was.

“That’s been hanging there since before I was born.” Emily eyed the spot on the wall where the painting had been hanging. The wallpaper was much darker there, as the rest of it had faded over the decades. “Do you really think it’s valuable?”

“Possibly. If it is, we’ll probably have to send it to one of the big auction houses to get the best price, though, and unfortunately, that could take months for you to wait for it to be placed in an auction.”

Emily was visibly disappointed. “I suppose there aren’t too many people in Lobster Bay who collect expensive items.”

“Most of the collectors with deep pockets go to the auctions in the city for the important items but...” Andie looked around at all the stuff crammed here and there. Maybe they could make it up in volume. “That’s for *one* big, important item. You have thousands of lower-priced items. What if we had an estate auction right here for those items and you could get the money right away?”

Emily looked cautiously interested. “How would that work?”

“I know an auctioneer in the area, Frank Fowler. He would set up a tent with chairs. We’ll choose the items to be in the auction. People can come and inspect them the morning of the auction, then everything sells, and he takes a commission. People love estate auctions, especially from a home like this where the items have been in the family for generations, so you should get a good turnout.”

“Well, I’m not sure I want to get rid of *everything*...”

“Of course not. We can pick and choose and put the items you want to keep out of sight.”

“Is it expensive?”

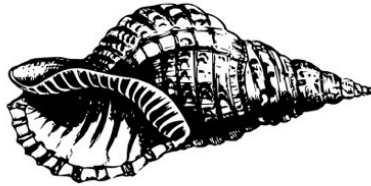
“Nope, he’ll set everything up, and he works on commission so you won’t need to pay a dime.”

Emily thought for a while then nodded. “Okay, if it gets me the money I need for Mom, then let’s do it.”

“Perfect. I’ll set things up today.” Andie grabbed the painting. “Meanwhile, I’m going to take this to the new art gallery and have it appraised.”

Andie left the Thompson’s thinking that she just might have melted Emily’s frozen heart just the tiniest bit.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Andie had just enough time to go to the art gallery before she was due at Tides to tend to the late-morning guests who were scheduled to check in. The new Lobster Bay Art Gallery sat just outside Perkins Cove, an idyllic cove filled with colorful lobster boats and dotted with fisherman's shacks turned into restaurants and shops.

Andie had known the owner of the gallery, Chandler Vanbeck, for years and trusted his opinion on the painting. Out front, Chandler had installed a modernistic bronze sculpture and some lush plants. She held the painting carefully as she opened the plate glass door.

The gallery was awash in sunlight from the wall of windows that made up the front of the gallery. It wasn't a huge space, but the twenty-foot ceilings made it appear spacious. Inside, potted plants softened the effect of the stark white walls that served as a background for the various paintings. Sculptures atop four-foot-high marble pedestals placed strategically around the room added interest.

Chandler's office was in the back, but she paused for a moment to admire one of Maxi's paintings. This one captured a lighthouse in a storm with violent waves swirling up over the foundation. Her heart soared for her friend. Maxi had set aside her artistic ambitions to raise a family, and now at the age of fifty was finally getting back to what she'd always wanted to do—paint.

As she made her way to the back, a woman with long blond hair backed out of Chandler's office. "See you tonight, Boopsie."

Boopsie? The woman turned and then stopped, her face turning bright red as she saw Andie. Andie recognized her. She'd actually introduced the woman, Tiffany, to Chandler at the art gallery opening several weeks ago. Apparently they'd hit it off, if the nickname of "Boopsie" was any indication.

"Hi there," Andie said.

"Oh, hi. Sorry, I didn't realize anyone was here." Tiffany grimaced and then slipped past Andie.

Andie continued to Chandler's office. "Knock, knock."

"Andie! Come on in." Chandler sat at a modern-style plexiglass desk. His gray suit perfectly fitted his trim body. His salt-and-pepper hair was impeccably groomed. He had a splash of color in his cheeks, probably from his visit with Tiffany. He seemed genuinely pleased to see Andie.

"Looks like things worked out with Tiffany." Andie nodded toward the front door, which was just closing behind the blonde.

Chandler's smile deepened. "Yes, and thank you for introducing us." He narrowed his gaze on the painting. "What do you have there?"

Andie placed it in his hands. "I was evaluating the Thompson estate and found this. It seems like it could be an important piece."

"The Thompson estate? That big house on the cliff?"

Andie nodded. "Been in the same family for generations."

Chandler's brows rose. "Could be an important find in there." He laid the painting on a table, pulled a loupe out of his pocket, and started to inspect it.

Funny thing, Andie had been so concerned about Emily getting the money she needed that she'd momentarily forgotten about her quest for that big, important discovery of a lifetime. But she had plenty of time for that. There were rooms of antiques to go through, and if the Thompson house was like any of the dozens of old family homes she'd been in, the oldest stuff was in the attic. That was where she'd make her big discovery *if* there was even one to be made.

"This is in fairly good shape. A little cracking of the paint." Chandler pointed out an area where the paint had crackled. "But the signature is genuine. It's a Statler."

"Is it worth a lot?"

"He's not one of the most prominent, but... let me see." Chandler went to his computer and checked a few websites. "One sold recently for ten

thousand.”

Ten thousand was good, but Emily wouldn’t get all of that. There were fees associated with auctions, and this painting wasn’t perfect. Emily would be lucky to get the fee for one month at Tall Pines.

“Do you plan to consign it?” Chandler asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll ask my client. I think that’s her best bet to get the most money.”

“I agree. Let me know if she says yes, and I can contact Arpello’s. They usually get the best prices for this sort of painting.” Chandler came from around the desk, handed the painting back to Andie, then escorted her out of the office.

“The place looks great.” Andie gestured toward the gallery, and Chandler beamed with pride.

The door opened, and Andie frowned when she saw that it was Damien Carruthers. He stopped when he spotted Andie, his beady eyes turning cold. “Oh, hello.”

Damien had taken a dislike to Andie ever since he’d discovered that she’d been paying top dollar to the senior citizens who wanted to sell their antiques. Her fair prices had ruined the little scam he had had going to pay them a pittance. Well, too bad. Andie wasn’t about to let people get ripped off, even if it meant that she would make less.

“Damien! Welcome!” Chandler apparently didn’t know of Damien’s unscrupulous practices.

Damien smiled at Chandler, then his eyes drifted to the painting in Andie’s hands. “What a lovely folk art painting. Is it an important artist?”

“It’s a fine Statler from the Thompson estate.” Chandler rushed on before Andie could stop him. She didn’t really want Damien to know anything about her business.

Damien scowled. “Thompson? You mean the old Thompson estate on the cliff?”

“Yes.” Chandler’s hesitant tone and confused look indicated that he was starting to realize that something more was going on.

Damien turned to Andie. “*You’re* handling that estate?”

Andie smiled smugly. “Yes. My mother and Sadie Thompson are old friends.”

“I was supposed to get that.” He sounded like a spoiled school boy. Andie expected him to stamp his feet and throw a tantrum. But she couldn’t

help but feel smug. That's what he got for ripping people off.

Chandler cleared his throat uncomfortably.

Andie clutched the painting to her chest. "Sorry, I guess the Thompsons decided to go with me instead. Now if you will excuse me, I must get to Tides."

Andie rushed out, feeling the weight of Damien's stare on her back as she hurried past the bronze sculpture to her car.

ANDIE COULD FEEL the weight of Damien's stare as she drove away. The encounter hadn't been totally unpleasant, and she'd felt a satisfaction at his surprise that the Thompsons had secured her services and not his. But it worried her too. Something in his dark, beady eyes promised he might take revenge.

She called Emily, who was surprised and pleased at the value of the painting. She mentioned her worry about the dilapidated steps on the porch of the house. It was a liability for the auction. When Andie pointed out that she could have Sally Littlefield, the town handy-woman, who had done a lot of work at Tides, fix them and bill her for after she had the auction money, Emily agreed.

Next, Andie called Frank, her auctioneer friend. Luckily Frank had a cancellation for the coming weekend, so Andie secured the date then stopped by the town offices. She had a lot of experience with the permitting department when they'd had to do some renovations to Tides in order to hold weddings, so it was an easy task to get the permit for the auction. All that remained was for someone to come out and inspect the area. She hoped Sally would be able to fit the porch repair in between now and then.

The sight of the family inn nestled on the beach soothed her. The house had been in her family for four generations, and her great-grandparents had started Tides as the first inn in Lobster Bay.

The foyer was clean and smelled of lemon Pledge mixed with sugar and chocolate. Either Jane or their part-time cook, Brenda, had made a batch of oatmeal peanut butter chocolate chip cookies, and they were still warm on the sideboard. The aroma added to the experience of the new guests.

“I’m here!” she yelled out, putting her purse under the tall podium desk they used to check people in.

“Woof!”

Cooper came trotting out to greet her, and Andie crouched down to pet him. “Are you the only one here?”

“I’m cleaning the parlor! Come out on the porch after!” Jane yelled, proving she’d do just about anything to avoid dealing with the guests.

A car pulled up, and Andie spent the next forty minutes checking in the guests, who all came one after the other. The close check-in times were on purpose. They tried to arrange guests into a small check-in window whenever possible so Andie could be there to get them settled. She was much better with people than Jane.

Cooper stuck with her, wagging his tail and tilting his head endearingly as the guests gushed over him. They’d been afraid a resident dog would put guests off, but the opposite had happened. People were calling and asking if this was the inn with the “nice golden retriever” now.

Once the guests were settled in their rooms, Andie snagged a cookie for herself and headed to the back porch, where Jane was seated at one of the tables they’d set up for outdoor dining. Her turquoise half-moon glasses had slid far down her nose as she studied some of the new promotional material for the inn.

“Which do you like better, this view of the living room that shows the ocean through the windows or the one that shows the fireplace?” Jane slid two glossy photos over to Andie.

“Ocean, definitely.” Andie plopped into a chair and took a bite of cookie. The back porch wrapped around one side of the house, and the steps led right to the beach. Andie could practically feel the sand between her toes. Maybe she’d go for a walk at the water’s edge after. The beach was wide here and the ocean a hundred feet away at low tide, but she could still smell the sea air and hear the waves. Cooper must have been able to too. He sat on the top of the stairs looking out, ears cocked toward the ocean, nose sniffing.

“Yeah, I agree.” Jane took her glasses off and folded them over the paper. “Is that the last cookie?”

“Yeah. Sorry. Want half?”

Jane pressed her lips together then shook her head. “Better not. I ate three while I was making them.”

“They’re delicious.” Sally Littlefield peered around the corner of the porch. She’d been working on painting the window trim and looked like she’d gotten most of the gray paint on her overalls. Today, her long silver braid was coiled around the top of her head. Sally had to be near seventy, but that didn’t stop her from performing painting and maintenance for most of Lobster Bay. Recently she’d teamed up with Shane Flannery, who’d just retired from the navy. Shane did the more demanding tasks.

Thoughts of Shane had Andie glancing at her phone. She’d been half expecting him to call since he’d mentioned getting together. She was sure Mary would gladly give him her number. But maybe his invitation had just been something he’d said to be polite. Why did that thought make her feel disappointed?

“Thanks,” Jane said. “Brenda was busy making some concoction for tomorrow’s breakfast, so I made them.”

“Heard you were out at the Thompson house this morning,” Sally said to Andie. Sally knew everything that happened in Lobster Bay and usually had something to say about it.

“They have a lot of antiques,” Andie said. “I actually wanted to talk to you about that. Sadie’s daughter, Emily, wants to have an auction there, but we need some minor repairs to the porch steps. Could you do that on short notice?”

Sally tilted her head, squinted her eyes, and looked up at the porch ceiling. “I suppose I could fit you in. Thursday okay?”

“Yeah. And you bill end of month, right?”

Sally nodded. “Ayuh.”

Sally disappeared back around the corner.

“How was it at the Thompsons’? Did Emily thaw out?” Jane asked.

Andie sighed. “I think she did thaw a little. I guess I can’t blame her for being cautious. I feel bad for her too. She’s faced with losing the house that has been in her family for generations, just like we were, and that is a scary feeling.”

They both looked back at the house.

“So, will you be able to help her? Tall Pines is expensive.”

“I hope so. There is a lot of stuff crammed into that house. That’s why I suggested the auction. She’ll be able to sell off a bunch of things and get some money quickly.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Jane looked thoughtful. “But how do you get paid if she has an auction?”

Andie hadn’t thought about that. She’d been too focused on the actual antiques and worried about Emily losing her home. Who knew she was so selfless? Or maybe she was just a bad business person.

“Well, that’s a good question.” Andie laughed. “I hope to pick out some key items to sell in the shop which will turn a tidy profit. And maybe they have something of historical importance there too. I did find a cool folk art painting that’s worth a couple thousand.”

“You did? Will she sell it?”

“Yep. I brought it to Chandler, and he’s going to put it in an auction. I saw Tiffany there. Looks like those two are getting along good.” Andie glanced at her sister to see her reaction.

“That’s great. So she’s staying in town?”

Tiffany was Jane’s boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend. If Jane had been worried about her staying in town, she didn’t show it. Mike seemed to be the one who was most worried about his ex showing up. He adored Jane and was afraid Tiffany would mess things up between them because she had seemed to want to reconcile with him at first. Apparently it had been a good move to introduce Tiffany to Chandler, and now it looked like things had worked out for everyone.

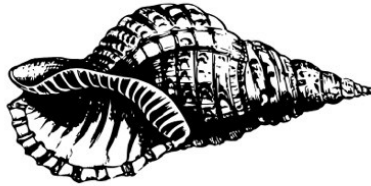
“Seems that way.” Andie frowned. “I also ran into Damien Carruthers while I was there. He was not happy that I was handling the Thompson estate.”

Jane made a face. “He’s a jerk.”

“He’s kind of creepy too. The whole time I was talking to him, I felt as if he was calculating a way to get back at me for offering people fair prices for their antiques.”

“No doubt. You cost him some money. He had a good thing going swindling little old ladies. But I wouldn’t worry too much about him. What could he possibly do to get back at you, anyway?”

CHAPTER EIGHT



Andie picked up a roast beef sub and went back to the antiques shop. She didn't have any appointments, so she flipped the sign to Open in order to pick up some foot traffic. She was crouched down rummaging through the contents of an old oak display case when the bell over the door chimed.

She popped up to see Jules standing at one of the curio cabinets.

"Hi, Jules. I was just gathering the Frozen Charlottes for you."

Jules turned, and Andie was struck by how pretty the girl was. She was medium height and not too thin, but not fat either. She still had the flawless skin of someone under forty. Long chocolate ringlets of hair fell below her shoulders. Her eyes, the same color as her hair, were bright. But even with all that, there was an air of sadness about her.

"Check these out." Andie reached under the counter she used as a checkout desk and grabbed the little dolls she'd collected to show Jules. She unrolled a piece of dark-purple velvet fabric and laid the dolls carefully on top of it. They ranged in size from one to four inches and were made from old china bisque. Their golden painted hair, sky-blue eyes, and rosy cheeks were still vibrant despite being over a hundred and fifty years old. Andie had inspected each one thoroughly to insure there were no chips or cracks that would decrease their value.

"Those are adorable!" Jules reached out to one then hesitated. "Can I pick them up?"

"Of course."

Jules picked the smallest one, holding it up to her face and smiling. "These are just like the ones I remember Gram having."

“It’s thoughtful of you to buy these up for her.”

Jules’s smile fell. “I wish I could do more. Truth is we had a little falling-out, and I don’t have much time to make up for it.”

“Oh, I know how that is.”

“You do?”

“Sort of... I mean I guess I didn’t have a falling-out with my family, but I left home after high school and didn’t come back much to visit. I regret that now,” Andie said. She hadn’t had a falling-out with her family. They still called and were on good terms. Shane, on the other hand, had been a different story. But that was water under the bridge. He didn’t seem bothered by it, so why should she?

“But you’re here now,” Jules pointed out.

“Yep.” Andie looked around the shop. Coming home had been a good idea. It was what she wanted. She just hadn’t expected it to feel like something was missing. “I hope you can make amends and get back to a good relationship with your grandmother.”

Jules’s eyes misted. “I don’t know if I can. She’s pretty sick.”

“All the more reason then.” Andie was grateful that even though her mother’s memory was failing she was still in good health and still aware enough to be happy and active at Tall Pines. Another reason to stay in Lobster Bay. If she left, she could never get that time with her mother back.

“We used to be close. Gram owned the Surfstone Motel. She and Gramps had a few of them on the Maine coast.” Jules smiled at the memories.

“Oh, that motel was so cute.” Andie remembered it from her childhood. A typical L-shaped one-story motel right on the beach with a pool in the middle and colorful turquoise shutters. There was a duplex there now. “What happened to that?”

“I ruined it.”

“Oh.” Andie wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. Apparently that was what had caused the rift in their relationship.

“Yeah, well, not *just* me. I had some help. I always loved the family motels. My cousins and I grew up spending a lot of time there. Gram let me and my cousins run the Surfstone one year so she could focus on a new motel she was building in Kittery. Unfortunately things didn’t go very well.”

“Sorry to hear that.” Andie didn’t want to pry. She knew it wasn’t easy to run a hotel, and she’d seen her family struggle sometimes with Tides.

Julie shrugged it off. “That’s all in the past. I know Gram was disappointed. Even worse, I was disappointed in myself.” She glanced at the hair salon. “That’s how I ended up cutting hair. Luckily Aunt Mary had an opening when I needed a job.”

Andie touched the ends of her hair. The trim Jules had given her looked good, perfectly blunt with a little angle. “You’re good at it.”

Jules smiled. “Thanks. I don’t think it’s my dream like Aunt Mary, but I’m grateful to be able to work there.”

“You’re young. Still plenty of time for a dream job.” Andie thought about her job as an appraiser at Christie’s in New York. It had been her dream, but now for the first time she wondered if it had really been satisfying. “Maybe dream jobs aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.”

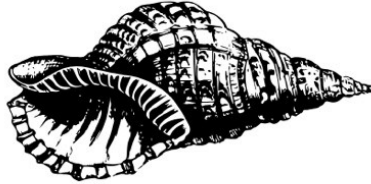
“Maybe.” Jules picked out three of the dolls. “I’ll take these.”

Andie wrapped them carefully and took her money.

She felt bad that Jules didn’t seem as fulfilled as a hair stylist as Mary was. Maybe she’d grow into it. It was good to work at something that you had a passion for, and Andie realized that working at the Thompson house had given her a renewed passion for antiques. Maybe all she needed was a few good estates. The painting they’d found was a nice surprise, if not an “important” discovery, but maybe she didn’t really need to set the antiques world on fire with anything important like she’d always thought. For the first time in years she felt excited about her work.

Her eyes fell on the brass porthole that she’d envisioned on the wall in the hallway in the apartment upstairs. Maxi’s suggestions on furniture and drapes had been good ones. She could picture her apartment outfitted like that. Why had she waited to get furniture and decorate? Was it because she doubted that she would really stay? She needed to have some furniture, but maybe she’d hold off on any expensive purchases, just in case the excitement wore off and little finds like the one at the Thompsons’ weren’t enough to keep her rooted in Lobster Bay.

CHAPTER NINE



Jules unwrapped the little figures from the purple velvet and laid them out on the reception desk at Curlz while her aunt watched. It was just about closing time, and the last client had just left.

“Those are so adorable!” Mary picked one up and inspected it carefully. “I bet Rena will love them.”

Jules smiled as she held up her favorite, the smallest one that had rich blue eyes. “I hope so.”

“She will, and it’s a nice gesture.” Mary hugged Jules.

“I’m going to visit her at Tall Pines. I just hope I don’t run into Maddie or Gina.”

Maddie and Gina were the cousins that she’d run the Surfstone Motel with. She hadn’t seen them since they’d parted ways on that last day when they’d had to close the motel and didn’t want to see them now.

“It might not be a bad idea to make amends,” Mary suggested. “Let bygones be bygones.”

Jules got the impression from the faraway look in Mary’s eyes that she was talking more about her own past with her daughter than Jules’s past with her cousins. Her heart ached for her aunt. She knew Mary missed Carolyn terribly, no matter how much Jules and her mother tried to fill the gap. She wasn’t even sure what had happened between them. Something about Mary’s divorce and her ex poisoning Carolyn against her.

But the falling-out with Maddie and Gina was different. It had been all their fault. Okay, so maybe Jules had made a few bad decisions when it came to the motel, too, but the failure had come down mostly to her

cousins' stubbornness. She could never forgive them. They'd ruined her dream.

"That was nice of Andie to pick through her inventory for you." Mary grabbed a broom and started sweeping up errant hairs.

Jules glanced across the street at the antiques store. "It was. Do you think she knows we set up that meeting with Shane?"

Mary laughed. "Maybe, but I don't think she minds. Did you see her face when he suggested they get together?"

"They looked like teenagers."

"I just hope he follows through."

"I heard from Sally that Andie is having some repairs done at the Thompson house. Maybe I'll suggest that Sally have Shane help her out. They work together a lot anyway," Mary said.

"Good idea." Jules carefully wrapped the china figures back in the velvet. "I think after their history Shane and Andie need all the help they can get."

Mary nodded. "Yes, some people do need a push."

Jules's gaze jerked from the package of dolls to her aunt. Mary was looking at her intently, as if she was referring to Jules. "What?"

Mary gestured to the salon. "You know this isn't your passion. Oh, you do a great job, and you're welcome to work here as long as you like. But I want to see you happy."

"I'm happy." *Sort of.*

"Uh-huh. But I think there was a time when you were happier."

"Not really." There actually was, but that was when she was running the motel, and the horrible ending outweighed the happy times.

"Just remember, you only have one life, and you need to live it to your fullest."

"Yes, Auntie," Jules teased.

Mary made a face, and her hand flew to her chest. "Oh."

"What is it?" Jules practically dropped the figures.

Mary took a deep breath then burped and waved her off. "Sorry, just indigestion."

Jules breathed a sigh of relief. That was the second time she'd seen her aunt clutching her chest like that, and it was scary.

Mary started tidying the reception desk. "Think about what I said. Don't waste your life in here if there is something else you should be doing."

Remember, where there's a will, there's a way."

Truth was Jules thought about that all the time. She had loved running the motel, but she didn't have the money to buy one or the credit to get a loan. Even if she did, she doubted she would go through with buying one because the biggest thing stopping her was that she was terrified she'd fail at it again.

MARY WATCHED Jules out of the corner of her eye as she put the pencils back in the mason jar and straightened the appointment book so that it was exactly parallel to the edge of the desk. Sure, everything was on the computer these days, but Mary still liked an old-fashioned paper appointment book too.

Jules's expression belied her inner turmoil. She'd been scarred by the whole failure with the motel and had lost her confidence. She was a smart girl and a loving grand-niece, and Mary wanted her to have a good life. She didn't think that cutting hair was going to accomplish that.

Mary was lucky. She'd known what she wanted and gone for it. Of course that had caused a rift in her marriage and her eventual divorce, but now looking back, she realized her marriage hadn't been all that solid to begin with. It had been for the best. The fallout from that was the regrettable estrangement from her daughter. If she'd known that would happen, she might not have taken this path.

She'd tried to patch things up, called, sent letters. Carolyn was cordial but always had an excuse why she couldn't come out to visit. Carolyn felt that Mary had chosen opening the salon over their little family and had never forgiven her, even now as an adult.

But Mary wasn't the type to dwell on the sad things in life. She preferred to be grateful for what she had. So many others never figured out what they really wanted to do. Like Andie, Mary thought as she glanced over, seeing her turn the shop sign to Closed. It was good she was working with Emily Thompson. Mary didn't know if Andie would make that big discovery with any of the Thompsons' antiques, but she suspected she might find what she was looking for all the same.

Speaking of which... she picked up the phone and dialed Sally Littlefield.

“Hey, Sal, it’s Mary.”

“I know it’s time for a haircut, but I’ve been so busy,” Sally said in her usual brusque manner.

Mary laughed. “I’m not calling about that. Remember when I ran into you the other day and you said that you were doing some work at the old Thompson house?”

“Ayuh. Andie Miller is cleaning that old place out. Gonna be an auction there.”

“I know. I was thinking maybe it might be a good idea to send Shane to do the work.”

“Pfft. You think I can’t handle fixing some old steps?” Sally sounded offended at first, then she hesitated. “Oh... I see what you mean. Andie will be there.”

“Right. Exactly.”

“Yeah, you know, I think my bursitis is acting up. I’m gonna see if he’ll take that job.”

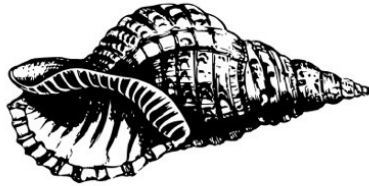
“Good. Wouldn’t want you to get injured.”

“No sirree, we gotta take care of our bodies. Getting old ain’t for sissies.”

Mary hung up with a smile on her face. Shane had mentioned getting together with Andie when he was here, but would he follow through? A little push in the right direction never hurt anyone.

Her chest burned, and she reached for the bottle of antacid she’d taken to keeping in the top drawer of the reception desk. The indigestion was a nuisance, striking at odd times. She’d never had a problem before, but lately it had been coming on more and more. Sally was right. Getting old wasn’t for sissies.

CHAPTER TEN



It wasn't until the third day that Andie got the nerve to approach Emily about the attic. They'd worked through the living room, dining room, and library for the first phase of sorting out the items that Emily didn't mind sending to auction.

Frank had been there and set up the tent for the auction already, and they were putting in long days to make their way through as much as possible.

Andie had sifted through elaborate chased silver flatware, admired antique Depression-glass platters, and inspected dozens of handmade linens and doilies. All very nice items but no important discoveries. Oddly, Andie didn't mind. It was fun looking through the items, and each day Emily seemed to thaw a little toward her.

Emily had been suspicious about how much Andie was going to charge for all of this, but when Andie said she simply wanted first dibs on some of the better pieces, for which she would pay fairly but with enough room to make a good profit, Emily had started to come around. Andie suspected the slow change in attitude might have had something to do with Rita and some of the ladies at Tall Pines vouching for her over and over again.

Emily had even offered her coffee and banana bread in the old-fashioned kitchen with its giant fireplace, and the two of them were settling into a routine that was almost friendly.

She was spending a lot of hours on the job, but from what she'd seen she'd be able to make good money from the choice pieces. She'd have no trouble selling them and had already lined up a buyer for a tiger maple

bureau that was two hundred years old but in pristine condition and a set of Limoges china, also pristine. She wasn't worried about the money, and she was having fun. Perhaps she'd set up a little service doing estate clean-outs after she was done. It felt good to help people.

"I think maybe we should look around in the attic next," Andie said once they'd moved the last of the items slated for the auction into the living room. They'd decided to stage those items in there and then work from that pile to set them out on tables on the porch and under the tent for the auction-goers to preview.

Emily made a face. "I think it's all old junk up there. Castoffs. No one has even been up in decades. Plus, it's sweltering."

It sounded perfect to Andie. In her experience all the best stuff could be found in attics and basements that everyone thought were filled with junk and where no one had been in decades.

Ten minutes later, Andie discovered that Emily hadn't been exaggerating. The attic was sweltering, and it was also packed to the brim. There was no way they could get to all of it, so Andie decided to come up with a plan that included starting in the way back, as that was where she assumed the oldest things would be.

They made a path by moving old boxes and shoving broken dressers and chairs aside.

"I don't think my ancestors threw anything out," Emily said as she put an old rocker against the wall. The caning on the seat had broken and was hanging down.

"Their trash is our treasure." Andie opened an old steamer trunk that sat under a window. Dust flew up and swirled in the sunlight. Emily sneezed.

Inside the trunk was an old dress made from a mile of fabric. It had once been black but had faded to brown with age. The fabric felt stiff and crackly as Andie carefully lifted it out.

"Imagine wearing this thing." Andie wiped sweat from her forehead with her arm and then held the dress up.

"I'm practically fainting thinking about it." Emily pulled an old quilt out of the dome-top trunk she'd opened. "There are a lot of quilts here. They look homemade."

Andie could tell by the small, tight stitches that they were. She'd seen thousands of quilts over her career, but they usually followed one of a dozen or so patterns. There was something unusual about these.

“These are quite old.” The material practically disintegrated in her fingers. Moths had eaten a few spots. Andie could tell they had at least a hundred years on them, but the condition wasn’t too bad for the age.

One of the benefits of being a top appraiser for decades was that she had a lot of contacts, so she snapped a few pictures of the quilts and sent them off to Susan Walker, an antique textile expert she’d worked with before.

Hammering noises had been drifting up into the attic for several minutes now, signaling that Sally had arrived. “I think Sally is working on the steps now, and I’m ready for a break.”

Emily straightened from bending over a box of glassware. Her face was red and shiny with perspiration. Her silver-streaked brown hair stuck out in various directions from where she’d clipped it back. “Good idea. I’ll make some lemonade.”

They struggled down the narrow stairs with the boxes of items they’d picked for the sale. Andie ran back up for another box while Emily made lemonade.

Andie poured a glass for Sally and one for herself and put them on a tray. Using her hip to open the screen door, she backed out onto the porch.

“Hey, Sal, I brought you some—”

She turned around and almost dropped the tray. She’d expected to see Sally crouching down repairing the steps. Instead she found herself staring down at Shane.

SO *THAT WAS* why Sally had asked him to take this job, Shane thought as he helped Andie steady the tray. He was relieved because he’d been worried when Sally had said she wasn’t feeling up to it. He knew from experience that there wasn’t anything that Sally wasn’t up to doing. Even a little matchmaking. He had a sneaking suspicion his aunt Mary had something to do with this. Not that he minded an excuse to run into Andie.

She looked confused, maybe a little vulnerable. Like the girl he *used* to know. Not the adult Andie, who seemed somewhat stiff and aloof.

Her navy-blue T-shirt was covered in dust. Her silky dark hair cascaded from a clip atop her head. Her face was flushed, and the angle of the sun turned her hazel eyes golden, bringing up long-buried memories of lazy

days on the beach in their teenage years. Those were happy memories, even if they were tinged with the pain of how abruptly she'd raced out of town right after turning down his proposal.

Was that old Andie in there still? He hoped so. The years tended to change people though, and he wondered if Andie had changed enough to really want to stay in Lobster Bay or if she'd bolt again like she had last time.

"Is something wrong with Sally?" Andie's eyes brimmed with concern.

"She said her bursitis was acting up." Shane sipped the lemonade. It was cool and sweet.

"She has bursitis? I didn't think there was an ailment that would dare mess with her."

Shane laughed. "No kidding. I'm sure she'll show it who is boss." He gestured to the stairs, where he was replacing several rotted boards with new wood. "I figure these three need replacing, and then it looks like the railing might need some work too."

Andie bent over to look, and a whiff of her vanilla-scented shampoo brought on more memories. "It's all rotted at the bottom. Maybe we should replace the entire thing."

"That's what I would recommend." Ice cubes clinked, and the side of the glass was slick with condensation as Shane took another sip.

"I'll talk to the owner."

Shane expected Andie to go back inside, but instead she came down the steps to stand next to him. She looked back up at the porch. "Is there anything else? We're going to set some of the items up on the porch for the preview, and I don't want any trouble with the inspector."

"Inspector?"

"Yeah, they're coming at one thirty, so if there's anything else..." Andie looked up at him, and her trust in his judgement made his heart swell.

"The rest of it looks safe. Needs paint, but that's not unsafe. I'll try to get these steps done quickly."

"I don't think that's necessary, as long as we show that we are doing it. It's not like a regular building inspection, just for the event occupancy permit for the auction."

Shane picked up his hammer. He really should get back to work, but he wanted to stand here talking to Andie. "It must be full of antiques in there." He nodded toward the house.

“Crammed. I don’t think they ever threw anything out.”

“Did you find any secret passageways? I’ve heard rumors.”

Andie laughed. “Not yet, but you never know. I’m just trying to help them out and maybe pick up a few things for my shop.”

“The shop looks great.” Shane fiddled with the hammer, trying to think up interesting things to say and refrain from blurting out something about her running off again.

“Thanks.” Andie sipped her lemonade. “So, you’re settling in since the navy, I guess.”

“Yeah. That was a few years ago, and my son is here and Caleb, so that makes it nice.” Thoughts of his grandson, Caleb, made Shane smile.

“It *is* nice to be back,” Andie said. “It’s changed a lot but stayed the same too.”

“I know what you mean. The old places we used to hang around are still there and some of the old shops, but new ones like the bread store have come in.”

“The best part of the town never changes, thankfully.” Andie gestured toward the ocean, where the white sails of a sailboat bobbed amidst cobalt-blue seas.

“Remember all the bonfires we used to have down there as kids?”

Shane’s question brought a smile to Andie’s face. “Yes! How about the time that we got Steve’s brother to buy beer for us and we all lost track of time?”

“You got home late, and your mom was waiting on the porch!”

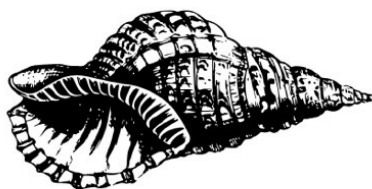
“I got grounded for a week, and I only had one beer.” Andie laughed. “Those were good times, though.”

“Sure were. Simpler times.” Shane grabbed the hammer. He really should get back to work, but all he wanted to do was stand here with the sun warming his shoulders and a cool drink in his hand and talk with Andie. Judging by the way she was lingering, Shane hoped that maybe she felt the same.

Her stomach grumbled loudly, and she looked down.

Before he even knew the words were coming out of his mouth, Shane said, “Guess it’s lunch time. I’m about to head down to the Clam Shack. You want to join me?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The Clam Shack was a Lobster Bay mainstay. Situated right on the beach, it had been frying up clams, onion rings, and fish since Andie was a little girl. They took Shane's truck, which brought back memories of the hundreds of times they'd driven the route to the beach.

Of course, it wasn't the same truck he'd had in high school, but as Andie gazed out the passenger-side window over the dunes at the ocean, she felt herself slipping back to those carefree days.

"Have you been here since you've been back?" Shane asked.

"No." Andie stood in front of the small building, breathing the tantalizing aroma of fried clams, and wondered why she hadn't.

"I don't come here that often, trying not to clog up the arteries. Every once in a while it tastes good, though." Shane stepped up to the window. "You still like tartar sauce?"

Andie nodded, surprised he remembered.

They sat side by side on the weather-worn gray wooden picnic table bench, facing the ocean. You couldn't beat the view. The tide was out, and the ocean was about a hundred feet away. Andie could feel the moist, salty air on her cheeks and hear the rhythmic sound of the waves punctuated every so often by the cry of a seagull.

Toasted rolls overflowing with golden fried clams sat in red-and-white checked paper "boats" on the table in front of them. On the side of each tray sat a mound of French fries and creamy coleslaw in paper cups.

Andie slipped off her sandals and dug her toes into the warm beach sand.

“This table is ancient. Do you think it’s the same exact one we used to sit at?” Shane asked before trying to stuff the end of a roll in his mouth.

Andie looked behind her at the Clam Shack. The small building, barely big enough to house a kite, was painted white with green trim. A green-and-white striped awning shaded the order window. The menu posted on the side had been updated as well as the awning, but otherwise it looked the same as it had thirty years ago. “Could be. The place hasn’t changed much.”

“I think the portions are smaller.” Shane frowned at his roll.

Andie picked a clam out of her roll, dipped it in tartar sauce, and popped it into her mouth. Crunchy and sweet. “Still just as delicious though.”

A gull swooped down and landed on the beach in front of them, looking expectantly at the table.

“Remember that time a gull stole a clam right out of your hand?” Shane asked.

Andie pulled her tray closer. “Yes. That was not funny. It scared me.” It hadn’t been funny at the time, but now the memory made her laugh. She’d been holding the clam roll in her hand while talking, and a gull swooped right in and grabbed a clam. She’d been so startled she’d dropped the whole roll in the sand. Shane had bought her a new one. He’d always been a nice guy like that.

“Did you ever want to live anywhere else?” Andie asked, keeping an eye on the gull. She might feed him a fry, but she wasn’t wasting a clam on him. Those were all for her.

Shane thought for a minute then shook his head. “Nah. I was stationed all over the world in the navy, but I always just wanted to come back here.” Shane turned to look at her. “What about you? You lived in the city for a long time. Do you miss that?”

Andie tossed a fry to the seagull, and two more swooped down to battle him for possession. “Maybe I miss it a little. The pace mostly. The scenery is much nicer here.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine living anywhere else. Of course now that I have a grandkid, I wouldn’t want to live too far from him, and luckily they’ve made their home here.”

Andie studied Shane. He’d aged well. Looked like he was still keeping himself in good shape despite having been out of the navy for over a decade. His face was tanned, and the few wrinkles he had were in the right

places—laugh lines that showed he spent a lot of time smiling. His hair was that distinguished salt-and-pepper color that looks a lot better on men than on women.

She was suddenly self-conscious about how she'd aged. She wasn't the thin waif she had been back in high school. Her hair was the same length but shot with strands of silver. And the wrinkles. She didn't even want to think about those.

"It's nice you can be close to Caleb. He's adorable." Andie had met the chubby toddler a few weeks ago, and he'd just about stolen her heart, as well as made her sad that she'd never have a grandchild of her own. She'd never regretted not having kids, but a grandkid would have been nice.

"I got a few good things out of the marriage, anyway."

"Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to bring you down."

Shane laughed. "No problem. That's old news now and really was for the best. We had some good years, but in the end, she just wasn't the right one."

Andie sensed him looking at her, and she kept her eyes on the ocean, suddenly feeling awkward. "Hard to picture you as a grandfather. Feels like just yesterday we were graduating high school."

"I know. Those were good times."

"They were."

They lapsed into silence, staring at the ocean, each with their own memories. It wasn't the awkward silence of strangers, but the compatible silence of old friends.

"What about you? You never married, right? No kids?" Shane asked.

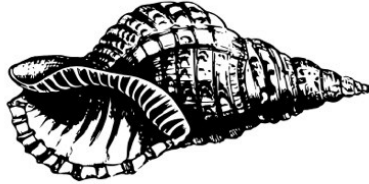
"Me? No. Never found anyone that could stand me long enough," Andie joked. But as she glanced sideways at Shane, something in her heart pinged, and she wondered why she'd pushed away every guy that had tried to get close. Was it because she'd left "the one" behind?

Ding!

Her phone alarm went off, and she pulled the phone from her pocket, adrenalin shooting through her when she saw the message.

"Oh crap, look at the time! We have to get back. The inspector is due to be at the Thompsons' in ten minutes!"

CHAPTER TWELVE



Shane raced back to the Thompsons' house, managing to steal a few sideways glances at Andie as he drove. She'd seemed younger, less uptight during lunch. She'd been more like the Andie he remembered from their youth, but now her face was tight and her shoulders raised with tension and anxiety at potentially being late for the inspector.

Shane was a little worried too. He wanted the job to be as complete as possible before the inspector looked at it.

"Do you know who the inspector is?" Hopefully it was Bob or Dick. Shane had worked with them before, and they were good guys.

"No. Is there more than one?" Andie looked surprised.

"Yeah. Most of them are retired and just work part time, so they have a few." Shane turned into the road a little too fast, and Andie had to grab the armrest to keep from sliding. "Sorry. I have a few things I want to button up on the stairs before the inspector starts poking around. Can you bring him over there last? I want to clean it up so I can show him the intended fixes."

"Sure. No problem." Andie flashed him a shy smile even as she pulled on the door handle, ready to jump out as soon as he parked. "Thanks for lunch."

"My pleasure." Shane pulled to a stop, and Andie jumped out and jogged toward the house.

He thought about their conversation as he watched her go. He'd felt the tug of that deep connection they used to have. Not as strong as back then, but maybe it could get there. Had she felt it too?

The logical part of his mind warned him not to pursue it. She'd hurt him before, and who knew if she'd really stay in town. She had said that she missed some things about the city. Andie was ambitious, and there wasn't much for a person with big ambitions in this town. Maybe she'd decide Lobster Bay wasn't for her after all.

But even as the logical part of his mind sent out the warning, his heart was already planting a seed of hope that somehow he and Andie could find their way back to what they'd once had.

ANDIE RUSHED around the front rooms of the Thompson house, picking up this and moving that. She didn't want it to look cluttered or disorganized for the inspector. She wasn't sure why because it wasn't like he was inspecting the interior of the house. He was only interested in the areas where the public would be allowed—the tented area outside and the porch. Maybe she just needed to work off some nervous energy.

She was straightening a display of coin silver spoons that sat on a coffee table in the living room when she heard a car pull up.

"That must be the inspector." Emily parted the blue velvet drapes and glanced out the window. "Oh no."

"What?"

Andie joined her, her heart sinking when she saw Damien Carruthers squeeze out of a black Volkswagen Beetle. "He's the inspector?"

"I don't like him."

"Who does? Crap. Well, hopefully he won't be here long. I'll deal with him."

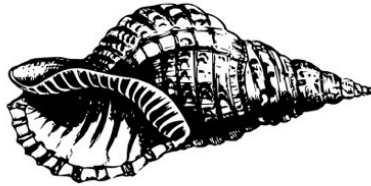
Andie's offer earned a small smile from Emily. "Thanks. I'm going to walk to the mailbox out by the road and get the mail."

"Chicken," Andie teased.

Emily laughed. "He's nasty. Don't worry, I owe you one."

She might have to spend a few unpleasant minutes with Damien Carruthers, but at least she'd found common ground with Emily and perhaps even the start of a new friendship.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Andie should have known by the scowl that darkened Damien's face as soon as he saw her that the inspection would not go well.

"So, you've talked the Thompsons into having an auction?" Damien pressed his lips together disapprovingly and scribbled something on the paper attached to the official-looking metal clipboard he was carrying. They were over at the front section of the tent. Damien had insisted on inspecting each tent pole and stake and, so far, hadn't given any indication as to how his inspection was going. Andie was afraid it wasn't going very well if the sour look on his face was any indication.

"I didn't actually talk them into it, really." Had she? He'd made it sound like a bad thing. "There is so much inventory, and they wanted some of the income sooner."

"Uh-huh. So you're getting a commission. Nice gig for you."

Andie bristled at the insinuation that she was somehow ripping the Thompsons off. "I'm actually not getting a commission."

Damien's brows rose as if he didn't believe her. "Really? And why are you doing all this work? There must be some really good items in the house that you are holding back for yourself."

"I'm just helping out." There were some good items in the house, but he made it sound so nefarious. Andie worried if the deal she'd worked with Emily was fair enough and made a mental note to make sure she was paying fair prices for the items she'd intended to buy for her shop.

Damien moved on to the pole that held up the center of the tent. He tugged on the pole, bent down as far as his overly large stomach would

allow to look at the area near the ground, then took out a tape measure and ran it from the pole to the nearest chairs.

“These chairs should be six feet away.” He marked something down on the clipboard.

“You’re writing that down? The chairs are easy to move!” Andie demonstrated by moving a chair farther away from the pole.

“Just doing my job. Now, the order says people will be on the porch of the house.” He narrowed his eyes and looked toward the house.

Andie followed his gaze, suddenly very nervous. “We’re going to set tables up with some of the items to preview on the porch. As you can see, we’re having the porch fixed up so it’s safe.”

“Uh-huh.” Damien started toward the porch, and Andie followed.

“Hi, Damien,” Shane said. Damien grunted a greeting then bent to inspect the boards Shane had just nailed into place.

Shane stood back and watched Damien scrutinize his work. “As you can see, everything is up to code, and I use the highest quality materials.”

“Are they galvanized nails?” Damien pointed to the pile of nails.

“Yes, of course.”

Damien nodded but looked disappointed that Shane had given the right answer. He ascended onto the porch, making a show of checking the spindles and marking things on his clipboard.

Shane looked at Andie and shrugged. She could tell he shared her low opinion of Damien, but then who didn’t?

Shane continued, “As you can see, I’ve replaced most of the rotted boards and will replace the spindles. I plan to finish up by the end of the day so it will be all done well before the auction.”

“I wouldn’t rush if I were you.” Damien came back down the stairs and stood beside them.

“Huh? Why not?” Andie asked. “We can’t have the attendees getting hurt on the porch. I wouldn’t want anyone to sue the Thompsons.”

“There aren’t going to be any attendees. Or any auction. At least not this week anyway.” Damien’s tone was almost gleeful.

Andie refrained from punching the smug expression off his face. Fury built in her chest. “What do you mean? Everything is in good shape here.”

“I’m afraid not. There are over fifty items on our safety checklist.” Damien tapped the clipboard. “And I’m afraid you don’t pass some of them.”

Shane frowned. "What do you mean? My work is up to code and would pass any inspection."

"Yes, your work is fine. It's the tenting area and the yard slope. We don't require that all of the items pass, just a percentage, and I'm afraid I must be a stickler in this case." Damien feigned regret.

"Can't we fix them? What are these items?"

Damien ripped the paper off the clipboard and handed it to her. "It's all written here. You'll see it's all within guidelines."

Andie studied the list, getting madder as she looked at the items. They were ridiculous and things that could be easily remedied, like the chairs. "Most of these are easy fixes. Can't we just put them right now and you can pass it?"

Damien pressed his lips together and shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

Andie narrowed her eyes. He was being purposely inflexible. "Why not? Surely we can move a few chairs and adjust some tent stakes. You wrote down the most minor things here. This isn't fair."

"Fair? Oh, you want to be fair. How about stealing clients? Is that fair?"

Andie was too stunned to reply. He was flunking the inspection because of that?

"I'm going to appeal this. Who do I talk to?"

Damien nodded, his dark, beady eyes gleaming. "You have every right to appeal. But it won't happen in time for the auction. We have an appeals process, and appeals are only heard the last Friday of every month. You just missed the one for this month." Damien gave her a look of fake sympathy. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have another appointment to get to."

They watched him leave in silence, fury, disappointment, and failure blooming in Andie's chest.

"What a jerk," Shane said. "Can I do anything to help?"

"I don't know. I'm so mad I'm not even sure what to do."

Emily came walking back down the driveway as Damien drove off. She didn't look very happy either. "How did the inspection go?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid. Damien's playing hardball. He wrote up some stupid minor violations." Andie showed her the list, but she only glanced at it, looking as if she was going to cry.

"Don't worry. I'm going to figure something out. Maybe we can move everything to Frank's auction hall, or I could pay you for the items I've picked out for my shop now." Andie did a mental calculation. So far what

she'd picked out wouldn't even cover the cost of the month at Tall Pines. Maybe she should bump up her offer price.

"That's nice of you, but don't waste your time. It's not going to help." Emily's voice was shaky.

"What? Why?" Andie asked.

Emily held out an envelope, her hand shaking. "This came in the mail. It's a foreclosure notice. I didn't realize that Mom took out a second mortgage. We owe four months already. There's no way I can come up with the money for Tall Pines and for this house."

Andie looked over the notice. Emily would have to come up with more money than Andie could pay for the items. Would the auction even net her that much? There was no way to know. Even if they found important antiques like the painting, it would be months before Emily could get the money unless they could find a buyer right away.

"I know the house is falling apart, but it's mostly the only thing Mom remembers these days. She always lights up when I take her back for a visit." A tear spilled out and ran down Emily's cheek. "She begged me to keep it in the family. I was trying to figure out how to sell my place and move in, but I'm underwater on my mortgage. Now what am I going to do?"

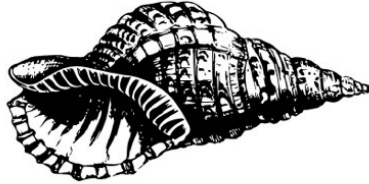
Emily covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

Andie felt like crying herself. The story was familiar. They'd been in the same position when her own mother had begged Jane not to sell Tides. Suddenly she felt the tenuous bond she'd formed with Emily tighten.

She slipped her arm around Emily's shoulder. "Don't worry. We can make this work. I'll come up with something."

She'd helped Jane save Tides. Could she help Emily save her house too?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Andie left the Thompsons' and headed to visit her mother at Tall Pines. She needed some time to come up with a plan for the Thompson house. Hopefully she hadn't hastily made a promise she couldn't keep.

She'd called Frank Fowler and cancelled the auction. His annoyance turned to sympathy when she mentioned Damien Carruthers was behind the cancellation. Turned out he'd had some run-ins with Damien, too, so he agreed not to charge Emily for his wasted time. He'd offered to bring the items to his auction hall, but that wasn't going to happen by Saturday when they would have had the auction here at the estate. His hall was booked three months out, so Emily wouldn't get any money from him in time to pay the bills.

Andie peeked into Sadie Thompson's room on her way to her mother's. Sadie was sleeping peacefully in her green recliner, the television remote clutched in her hand. She looked so relaxed, worry-free. Renewed determination surged in Andie when she thought of how Emily had described Sadie lighting up when she brought her to visit her home. She had to help them keep that house. But how?

They'd saved Tides by advertising to get more guests and including events and weddings in their venue. The situation at the Thompsons' was totally different. It had never been an inn and wasn't set up like Tides was with bathrooms for each room. Not to mention there was no online presence, no Yelp reviews, and the layout just wasn't set up to accommodate guests. Since there was no money for renovations, Andie

didn't see how anything like that could happen. Shane had offered to help with anything, but she couldn't ask him to take on a big job like that.

Then again, Sadie had already sectioned off part of the house. Maybe Emily could use that section for something like an Airbnb? Still, they'd have to do a lot of expensive work to get that set up, and bills were looming.

Laughter drifted out of her mother's room, and Andie arrived to discover Claire and her boyfriend, Rob Bradford, entertaining Addie. A white bakery bag sat on the table, and a chocolate chip muffin—her mother's favorite—sat in front of Addie.

"...and then she said... why not put the daisies in the pantry!" Addie slapped her knee and giggled while Rob and Claire convulsed with laughter. Good to see that her mother hadn't lost her ability to tell jokes. If, in fact, it was an actual joke. She couldn't tell if her mother had actually said something funny or if Claire and Rob were just being polite.

Addie looked over at Andie, her smile widening. "Bridgette! How nice of you to stop by." Apparently today her mother thought Andie was her late sister. Oh well, as long as Addie was happy. That was all that mattered.

"Hi, everyone." Andie edged into the small room and exchanged greetings with Claire and Rob. Claire and Jane had been best friends since they were kids, and it was nice that Claire visited Addie like she was her own mother. Andie didn't have any childhood friends, but maybe now that she was back in Lobster Bay that would change.

"How are things going over at the Thompsons'?" Claire scooted over to make room for Andie on the bed. Rob was sitting in the only other chair aside from Addie's.

Andie groaned. "Not too good. Turns out Damien Carruthers is one of the town events inspectors, and he shut us down."

"Thompson?" Addie scowled. "Don't let that Sadie Thompson tell you what to do."

"I won't, Mom."

"So what are you going to do? Can you still have it later?" Rob asked.

"Yeah, but there is some urgency for money." Andie didn't want to go into any details, as it wasn't her place to talk about the Thompsons' financial problems. She didn't need to, though. Rob and Claire weren't the type to pry, so they simply nodded and didn't press further.

“I wish I could figure something out to help them. That house needs some work, and there are great antiques inside, but it’s more than I can handle at my little shop.”

Addie snorted. “Help Sadie? Ha! She always did think she was better than us because her house was older. Lots of junk in the attic. *Her* house had a secret passage and lots of history. Talked like that thing was some kind of a museum. I was in there plenty of times, and it’s just a bunch of old junk.”

Her mother never forgot who Sadie was, but Andie never knew whether Addie would think that Sadie was her best friend, as she had been early in her life, or her biggest enemy, as she had been later in life.

Claire stood and patted Andie on the knee. “Maybe we can put our heads together and figure something out. That usually works when Jane and Maxi and I have a problem, and it just so happens I’m meeting the two of them at Splash at five o’clock. Why don’t you join us, and we’ll see what we can come up with?”

Andie’s heart swelled at the invitation, and she’d welcome having people to toss around ideas with. “Thanks, that sounds great.”

“Okay, see you then.” Claire and Rob said their goodbyes to Addie and left Andie to chat with her mother.

WHEN ANDIE LEFT two hours later after settling her mother in her recliner for a nap, she was in much better spirits. Addie’s good mood had been like sunshine for her soul, and the prospect of hashing over her problems with Jane, Claire, and Maxi at the beach bar they frequented made things seem not so insurmountable.

She ran into Jules Whitmore sitting on a bench outside Tall Pines. Jules had her head bent and was reading something. She looked a little down in the dumps.

“Hey, everything all right with your grandma?” Andie asked, remembering that she’d mentioned her grandmother was in failing health.

Jules looked up, wide brown eyes thoughtful. “Yes, thanks. Well, as good as they can be. She loved the Frozen Charlottes.”

“That’s great. Glad I could help.”

“I’m kind of glad I ran into you. I have a question.”

“Fire away.”

Jules sighed. “You had a big career in the city, right? I heard you telling Aunt Mary that your purpose and passion were to find an important antique. But now you’re here. Did you give up?”

The question gave Andie pause. Had she given up, or had her priorities changed? And was that good or bad? Earlier in the week she’d been questioning her decision to move to Lobster Bay until she’d gotten busy with the Thompson house. Would she start to question herself again once that project was over, or would she be content to stay here? But Andie was already fifty. Jules was much younger. She should encourage the girl to go for her dreams.

“I wouldn’t say I gave up. More like my priorities changed.”

“Right. So what you thought you wanted when you were younger isn’t as important now?”

She could already see Jules getting ready to shift priorities. That would be a big mistake. “Maybe, but I think if you really know what you want, you shouldn’t let anything stop you. Not at your age. Time goes by fast, and you don’t want to look back and have regrets because by then it could be too late.”

Jules squinted up at her, shading her eyes from the sun that filtered through the Japanese maple across from them. “So you don’t have any regrets?”

Did Andie have regrets? The past few days working at the Thompson house, she hadn’t thought about how “important” any of the antiques were. She’d been more focused on how she could help Emily. Maybe her important “thing” wasn’t about the antiques after all.

“Well, I did go for my dreams. And I did find some great antiques. Never anything that would get worldwide attention, but maybe that’s overrated.”

Now that she thought back, her most satisfying finds hadn’t been the ones with the most monetary value. They’d been the ones that had brought tears to the eyes of the families because of their sentimental value. Like the old diary she’d found from a client’s great-grandmother and the Civil War discharge papers rolled up in a trunk in the back of an attic. “But I think if you feel really drawn to something and you really want it, you owe it to yourself to try,” Andie said.

“I’m not sure what I want. I love Aunt Mary, and cutting hair is fine, but when I was helping to run one of Gram’s motels, that’s when I really felt like I was doing what I was supposed to do.” Jules sighed. “Of course, that didn’t work out very well. Besides, I couldn’t afford a motel anyway.”

“Maybe you could get hired on to manage one? You have experience, and then once you get some money saved up you could probably get a loan to buy your own.”

Jules’s eyes brightened at Andie’s suggestion. “Do you think so? I want to expand on Gram’s idea of boutique motels.”

“Boutique motels?” Andie was curious. Maybe this was something they could use for Tides.

“All of her motels have a theme. You know, like tropical, or lighthouses, or zoo themed. All the rooms are decorated for the theme. Like the zoo one had a room with a zebra-striped bedspread and zebra accents. That was the zebra room. Then we had a leopard room and so on.” Jules became more animated as she described the motels. She leaned toward Andie. “I want to do a vintage one with all cool yard sale finds.”

Jules’s excitement was contagious, and Andie found herself wondering if she could help the girl. Visions of them attending yard sales and antiques auctions together as she scouted out finds for her motel came to mind. But she was getting ahead of herself. Maybe right now the best way was with some friendly encouragement. “I think you should do it.”

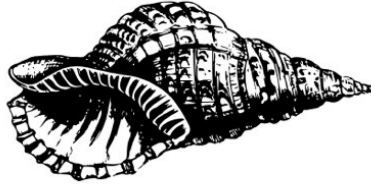
Jules’s excitement faltered. “But I wasn’t very good at it before.”

Andie waved her hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about that. Think of that as a learning experience. Now you know what to do.”

Jules looked up at her, the smile slowly growing back. “Yeah, you know you could be right.”

Andie said goodbye and left with the elevated feeling one gets when they’ve really helped someone. Now if she could just figure out how to help the Thompsons. Hopefully Jane, Claire, and Maxi could help her figure that out when they got together at Splash.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Splash was set directly on the beach. Its concrete patio sat about a foot above the sand and offered expansive views of the ocean. Andie was meeting Claire, Jane, and Maxi around five, so most of the beach-goers had packed up, but there were still a few holdouts sitting on striped beach blankets under colorful umbrellas. Children danced in the waves at the water's edge, and the air was spiced with suntan lotion, fried seafood, and laughter.

"Glad you could come!" Jane indicated for Andie to take the seat next to her. "I heard about the auction. Is there anything I can do?"

Claire and Maxi murmured sympathetic noises over their fruit-laden drinks. A basket of tortillas and dip sat in the middle of the table, and Andie reached for one.

"Nothing really." She crunched into the salty chip. It was sweet of her sister to offer, but what could be done? The closest thing they had to a contact at city hall was the ninety-year-old grandfather of Jane's boyfriend, Mike, who used to work in the sewer department.

"Maybe you guys can help me come up with some ideas. We can talk about that later though. Tell me, how is Mike's place coming along?"

Mike had just moved to a condo, and Jane had been helping him set it up. "Not very good. I don't think he's very interested in decorating. I've been trying to suggest things, but he doesn't seem to get it. Not that it's really my concern. I mean, it's not like I'll be living there or anything." Jane flushed and paused to let the waitress take Andie's order.

“Hmm, yeah, you won’t be living there. Uh-huh.” Maxi gave Claire a knowing look.

Jane feigned irritation. “I kind of *have* to live at Tides.” She smirked and turned to Claire in an attempt to cast the attention away from herself. “What about you? Rob is still renting, and your adorable cottage is perfect for two.”

It was Claire’s turn to blush. “We haven’t talked about that, but he does get along well with Urchin.” Urchin was Claire’s cat. She turned to Maxi. “How is James getting along with Picasso and Rembrandt?”

Maxi’s husband, James, had always resisted her attempts to adopt a pet, but a temporary separation had changed his outlook, and they’d ended up with two kittens.

Maxi laughed. “Believe it or not, he loves them. Remember how worried he used to be about getting pet hair on his suits?”

“Yeah, he was kind of prissy about it,” Claire said.

“When you’re the bank president, you have to make a good impression, I guess.” Jane sipped the rest of her mojito and signaled the waitress for another.

“He doesn’t seem to mind anymore. He just carries a lint brush everywhere now.”

Maxi was practically bursting with happiness. Things had been rocky between her and James for a while, but they’d worked it all out. In fact, all of them had happy relationships.

Except Andie.

Her thoughts turned briefly to Shane. The lunch had been good. It was almost as if no time had passed since they’d last been together, and for that hour Andie had forgotten all of her worries and guilt about how she’d broken things off. And there was still a spark there, at least for her.

Despite the decades that had gone by, Shane was still the good-hearted person she’d fallen for in high school. When he’d seen Emily so upset he’d even offered his services with a deferred payment without hesitating. But how could he possibly be interested in her after what she’d done to him? He was probably just trying to be nice.

“... those decorating ideas I suggested?” Maxi’s question pulled Andie out of her thoughts.

“Yes, the couch and drapes. I agree that would be perfect. I just need to pick one out. I’ve been so busy with the Thompson house that I hadn’t even

thought about it.”

“Speaking of that,” Claire said. “Bring us up to speed so we can help you out.”

Andie told them about how they’d picked out items for the auction and how Damien had failed them on the inspection. She didn’t mention the foreclosure but simply said the family needed money sooner rather than later. She didn’t need to go into details. The other women had no problem reading between the lines.

“You’re going above and beyond to help her out.” Maxi eyed her over the salt-frosted cobalt rim of her margarita. “Maybe you should just make her your best offer for what she has and that’s the best you can do.”

Maxi had a point, but in Andie’s heart she couldn’t just abandon Emily. She wasn’t sure that Emily knew what to do next. The woman appeared to be very flustered. Andie had always been one to finish what she started, and she wasn’t going to change now. “I know it’s not really part of buying the antiques, but the woman needs help. Her mother and mine used to be good friends, and I guess I just feel like I should help her out.”

“That’s nice of you.” Jane looked at the others. “We understand how that is. So what do you think she should do next?”

Andie sighed. She’d been trying to come up with a good idea all day, and all she could think about was opening an inn. How else to keep the house and get immediate income? “I’m not sure. The house is loaded with generations of antiques, and I haven’t looked at all of them yet. But it takes a long time to find the right buyer for the good ones, and she doesn’t have time. The only thing that could save them maybe is some sort of loan? Can you get a loan for future sale of antiques?”

Maxi shook her head. “I doubt that. There’s no guarantee on what the antiques would bring at auction, and if I’ve learned anything from James, it’s that the bank usually wants guaranteed collateral for a loan.”

“He gave us a small loan for Tides without much collateral,” Jane pointed out.

“That was a business loan, that’s different. Plus, you had the inn as collateral.” Maxi swirled her glass and looked thoughtful. “You know, James did mention that he has some historical preservation loans available.”

“Really? What are those?” Andie picked up the menu. She hadn’t eaten since lunch, and her stomach was starting to make noises. Two drinks on an empty stomach wasn’t a good mix for her.

“Special loans to preserve homes with historical value. The Thompson house is definitely historical, so maybe Emily could get one of those.” Maxi picked up a menu too. “I’m starving. Do you guys want dinner?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

“Crab cakes look good.” Andie put the menu down. “I don’t know. How would Emily pay back the loan? She really doesn’t want to sell the house.”

“Does the loan have to be for a residence?” Jane asked. “What if she could get the loan and use part of it to pay the bills she owes and the other part to fix the place up and get it to generate some income?”

“You mean an inn like Tides?” Andie laughed. “Talk about creating your own competition.”

“Wait! Today your mother said that the Thompson place could be a museum.” Claire signaled the waitress.

“And there is the rumor that it was part of the Underground Railroad,” Jane added.

“I thought a pirate lived there?” Maxi said.

“Either one is historical,” Claire said. “Have you found anything to tie into that?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean I won’t.”

The waitress came, and Andie mulled over the idea as the waitress took their order. Clam cakes for her, burger for Maxi, Caesar salad with shrimp for Jane, and fried clam plate for Claire.

“I don’t know if a museum would make enough money or if Emily would want people traipsing through her house,” Andie said once the waitress was gone.

“I think Emily might have to compromise here if she wants to keep the house,” Jane pointed out.

Claire nodded. “It’s going to have to generate some income. And it’s not that bad. I mean, look at Tides. Jane doesn’t mind people traipsing through there, do you?” Claire looked at Jane.

“Sometimes I do, but it has to be. I’m just glad it’s making a lot of money now and we’ll be able to keep it in the family.”

“A museum won’t make nearly that much,” Maxi said.

“Funny though, Sadie had actually sectioned off part of the house. She didn’t need the whole thing and didn’t want to heat it, so it could actually

work quite well as an inn or some sort of Airbnb situation,” Andie said. “But that wouldn’t really tie into a historical preservation loan, would it?”

Maxi shrugged. “I don’t now, but the rate for those are great, and you don’t have to start paying right away.”

“Too bad you can’t tie the two together.” Jane pushed her drink aside to make room for her meal.

“What do you mean?” Claire asked.

Jane nibbled a crouton. “I don’t know, like a historical inn or something.”

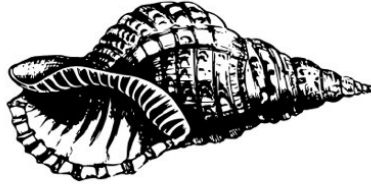
Andie’s fork hovered over the golden crab cake. “Wait a minute. I might be able to do that. Jules Whitmore mentioned that her grandmother owned a string of boutique motels. She was going to do a vintage one. If Emily turned part of it into Airbnb units, would she still be able to get the historical preservation loan?”

Maxi picked a clam off her plate. “I can ask James. I know he likes to preserve the older homes, and Thompson’s might just be the oldest one in town.”

Andie dug into her clam cake. “I’d really appreciate that. I’m glad you guys invited me to join you. It’s been really helpful to talk about this.”

A spark of hope bloomed. If the loan worked out, it might just be the thing that helped Emily save the house.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The next morning Mary looked out the front window of Curlz to see Andie watering petunias in the window boxes in front of her shop. The flowers in the boxes were coming along nicely, with trailing ivy and a rainbow of purple, pink, and white flowers crammed in. Such a nice difference from the abandoned look it had before.

She caught Andie's eye and waved her over. She wanted to see how things were going with the Thompson job and find out if Andie was realizing what her purpose was. Maybe if she was lucky Andie would tell her if Shane had ever made good on his invitation to get together.

"How are things at the Thompsons'? I expected to read about you making an astonishing discovery in the paper," Mary said.

"Nothing like that has happened, though they do have some nice things." Andie accepted the mug of coffee that Jules handed her, and the three of them stood around the reception desk.

"Sounds promising. Emily must be happy. I know she was worried about keeping Sadie at Tall Pines the last time she came in for a color." Mary blew on the top of her coffee then took a sip.

"The auction will help bring in a lot of money. I can't wait to see what you have there." Jules gave Andie a knowing look. Mary wondered why. She'd never heard Jules express an interest in antiques before. Perhaps she was finding a new purpose. Good for her, Mary thought.

Andie grimaced. "Yeah, that's a problem. The auction is off, unfortunately."

"What? Why?" Jules asked.

“Damien Carruthers flunked us on the inspection, so we can’t hold the auction.”

“That Damien Carruthers is bad news. I used to cut his wife’s hair.” Mary made a face then patted her chest, burped, and reached for the Tums. “Sorry, indigestion again.”

Andie’s and Jules’s looks of concern gave her pause. It *was* just indigestion, right? Of course it was. They were just being silly, but it was nice to have people care about you. Unlike her own daughter. Mary glanced at her phone again. The hurtful brush-off message from Carolyn was still on the screen. She picked it up and wiped that screen away. No need to be thinking about that all day.

“Poor Emily. I bet that’s why she looked so sad when I saw her at Tall Pines yesterday after I ran into you, Andie,” Jules said. “She must be bummed out.”

“Well, don’t worry,” Andie said brightly. “I have a new idea for Emily.”

“Oh?” Mary quirked her brow as she crunched on the Tums. The burn was going away. But it felt funny, not really like any indigestion she’d had before.

“Maxi Stevens mentioned that the bank has some new historical preservation loans with very good rates now. I’m hoping she can get one of those. Then maybe she could turn it into an inn like Tides but maybe even with a historical hook like a boutique motel.” Andie nodded at Jules.

Jules must have told Andie about her grandmother’s motels. That was good that Jules was thinking about motels again. If she was talking about it, she was thinking about it. Mary knew it was Jules’s passion. Jules just needed to come to grips with her failure and all the horrible fallout that had caused and muster up the courage to try again.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Mary said.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure what it takes to qualify for the loan.” Andie sipped her tea and looked out the window.

“Easy enough to find out.” Jules opened the laptop, her red nails clacking on the keyboard.

After a few minutes she turned the screen toward them. “Looks like you need specific historical provenance.”

Mary squinted at the screen, where there was a listing of acceptable historical provenance for the loan. “Hmm... so it has to have ties to

someone famous or some famous event. The house is pretty old, so that seems possible if you dig enough.”

“We could look up the Underground Railroad, maybe?” Jules swung the computer back in her direction and typed. “Hmm... there isn’t much on it. I guess they didn’t actually advertise where the stops were for that.”

Mary noticed Andie’s disheartened look. “I’m sure you can come up with something. Maybe the Thompsons had an important guest. You know, like a ‘George Washington slept here’ sort of thing.”

“I’m sure if they did, they would have talked about it. Emily will know,” Jules said.

“I’ll definitely ask her.” Andie craned her neck to look at the screen, worry creasing her face.

Mary worried as she would for her own daughter. In fact, she was probably closer to Andie than her own daughter. She wanted to reassure her. “I’m sure it will work out fine.”

“Of course it will.” Andie smiled. “Thanks for looking that up, Jules.”

“No problem.”

“I saw Shane drive by here a few times last night.” Mary pretended like she was just casually mentioning it.

Andie’s eyes narrowed. “Well, it is the main street. He’d have to drive by if he were going to a lot of places.”

“Uh-huh,” Mary said. “Did you guys ever get together and talk about old times?”

Andie blushed and sipped the last of her tea. “In fact, we did have a nice lunch. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get with Emily and figure out how we can tap into this loan.” She handed the mug to Jules. “Thanks for the tea.”

Mary and Jules watched her leave.

“Did you see how she blushed when you mentioned Shane?” Jules asked.

Mary nodded. “Yep, I have a good feeling about those two.” Mary turned from watching Andie out the window to look at Jules. “Now, about you.”

“Me? I’m not in the market for a boyfriend.”

“Not that. You were talking to Andie about motels, I think, right? Does that mean you’re considering going back into that business?”

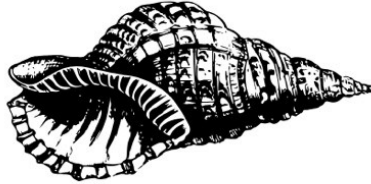
Jules sighed. "I doubt it. I just mentioned it to Andie because it came up in conversation. I don't have the money or the ambition right now. Not after I messed things up... and what happened with Steve."

"You didn't mess things up. Things happen. And it's harder when you have to consult with other people to make the decisions." Mary felt sympathy for Jules. "You girls were young. You have more experience now. And the thing with Steve, well... I think that was more on him than on you."

Jules picked up the broom and started to sweep. "Yeah, well, it's not in the cards for me financially right now. I have bills. And since my first hair client is coming in five minutes, I better get my station set up."

Mary glanced at her phone again before she started on her own station. She hated logging in, so there was no password. All she had to do was nudge it for the screen to light up and show that there was no further message from Carolyn. Only the short text she'd left yesterday with yet another excuse as to why she couldn't come visit Mary. But Mary would put on her smile and pretend it didn't bother her like she always did. Sooner or later after so much pretending, it would actually become reality.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Frank Fowler was just driving away as Andie pulled in at the Thompson house. He'd taken away the tent and chairs, and all that remained in the spacious side yard was a row of folding tables Andie and Emily had put out for the auction.

Emily was standing in front of the steps, looking at Shane's handiwork. She looked like she was about to cry.

"Good news!" Andie acted overly cheerful so as to perk Emily up.

Emily looked skeptical. "Really?"

"Yes. My friend Maxi Stevens is married to the president of Lobster Bay Bank, and she said they have great rates on historical preservation loans right now."

Emily pursed her lips and glanced up at the dilapidated house. "That's nice, and the house does need work, but I think you might be forgetting that my family won't be owning this house much longer."

Andie followed her gaze, mentally calculating what the renovation might cost. New paint job. New roof. Some of the shutters were missing. And that was just the exterior. "I was thinking we could use the loan money to pay off the bank and then put more elbow grease into the renovation so it wouldn't cost as much." A *lot* more elbow grease.

"That's nice of you to mention it, but I doubt the bank would give me a loan given the impending foreclosure and the fact that I have no way to pay it back."

Emily had a point, but Andie knew that James would work with them. "I think we can work something out with the bank. James has a soft spot

toward longtime residents and old properties. He'll want to save the house. I mean, it *is* one of the oldest ones in town."

"Okay, but then how would we pay off the loan? It's not like my income is going up, so we'd be in the same financial mess." Emily planted her hands on her hips and looked around. "I suppose we might be able to get some money from selling stuff, but eventually that will all be gone, and then what?"

"I have an idea as to how you can make some money from the property and keep it in the family."

Emily shook her head. "I know your family has an inn, but I don't have any experience or even the desire to run one."

Andie took a deep breath. Emily was going to have to make some sacrifices if she wanted to keep the house. "This house is bigger than you need. Even your mom had it divided up. But I wasn't thinking about an inn exactly. I was thinking a boutique B&B tied to the history of the house."

"That sounds like an inn with a fancy name."

"More like an Airbnb. Your mother already has it sectioned off, so it wouldn't be much more work to make a couple of separate units, and if you handled it through Airbnb and got electronic locks, then you wouldn't be tied to checking in guests or cooking for them."

Emily looked at the house again, her expression still skeptical.

"Let's face it, you need the house to bring in money or you won't be able to keep it no matter what."

Emily took a deep breath. "Mom did say she wanted to keep it, and the thought of selling is gut-wrenching. I guess we could try to get the loan and see what happens."

"There's only one catch."

Emily returned her gaze to Andie. "Now you tell me. What?"

"We need something historically significant to qualify."

Emily frowned. "Like what?"

"Did anyone famous ever stay here? Or maybe a famous event?"

Emily shook her head. "Not that I know of. There are the rumors. And some of my ancestors were in the Civil War. Maybe they did something important?"

"Were there any family stories? Usually that stuff gets handed down," Andie said. "My mom mentioned something about a secret passage once,

and I wondered if that had to do with the rumors about the Underground Railroad.”

“When I was a kid, one of my friends said something about a secret passage, but my mom said that was silly. She scared the daylights out of me and forbade me from even looking for it.”

“I wonder if my mother was just misremembering. Half of what she says is fantasy, so maybe this was too.” Too bad because a secret passage would make a nice hook for a B&B.

“I guess our moms don’t always remember things exactly the way they were,” Emily said.

“That’s for sure.”

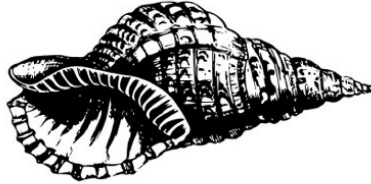
“Or sometimes they remember it *too* much. When I bring Mom here, she gets mad about the changes and accuses me of not keeping it up. It was her that got it so run-down. She wouldn’t let me do anything to the house.”

“So is this something you really want to try to do?” Andie asked.

Emily thought for a few seconds then slowly nodded. “Yeah I guess so. Why not?”

“Okay, great. I’m meeting Maxi in a few hours to get more specifics on the loan. In the meantime, let’s take another look in the attic. Maybe we’ll find something that we can use.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



By the time Andie went to meet Maxi at Sandcastles, she was wilting from the heat. Her hair hung in damp clumps, and her T-shirt was covered in antique dirt. They chose a table outside, and Claire brought them a tray of scones and some coffee.

“Hey, guys, I wish I could join you, but I’m slammed. Hailey is off today.” She glanced over at a table that was flagging her down. “Let me know how things work out with the loan.”

She headed off, and Andie turned her attention to the paperwork Maxi had placed on the table.

“These papers outline the guidelines and terms. Did you find anything historically significant in your search?” The dust on Andie’s shirt must have given away the fact that she’d been digging in the attic.

Andie pulled out an old rolled-up paper. “We found these Civil War discharge papers from a relative. I was thinking of looking it up to see if he was prominent in the war. Do you think that would be enough?”

Maxi made a face and cut her pistachio scone down the middle. “I’m not sure. Doesn’t sound that exciting.”

“We’ll keep looking.” Andie picked up the raspberry scone and looked it over, but she didn’t feel like eating. Two hours searching that attic had come up with nothing. Thoughts of the secret stairway haunted her. If there really was a passage, wouldn’t that indicate the house was part of the Underground Railroad or maybe something else? Maybe they should start looking for that instead.

“The application is in there too.” Maxi waved at the pile of paperwork. “James said to fill it out and he’d push it through quickly. There are specifics about paint colors and all that too. I mentioned the boutique Airbnb idea, and he said there is nothing that specifically prohibits her from doing that. As long as the outside is historically preserved, the inside can be updated.”

“That make sense. I mean, they could hardly expect you to work in a 1700s kitchen. Most people would want modern appliances.”

“Right. They just want to make sure the exterior is in keeping with what would be appropriate for the time period of the house.”

“That’s easy enough. Not much has been done to it structurally on the outside, so it’s mostly repairing and painting.” Andie was already wondering what they would do to the inside to make it suitable. She hadn’t taken a good look at the partition that had been done. Maybe there wasn’t a lot of work left to do? How much money would they get anyway?

“So how are things with Shane?” Maxi asked.

“Shane? What do you mean?” Why would Maxi ask about him out of the blue? “He worked on the stairs at the house, but...”

Maxi was smiling and glancing over Andie’s shoulder, and she turned to see Shane crossing the street and heading in her direction.

SHANE NODDED to Maxi as he crossed the street toward their table. Suddenly he felt awkward and shy. Which was stupid. He was a grown man just stopping over to say hello to old friends.

The awkward feeling might have had something to do with the way Maxi was leaning forward, her eyes full of anticipation and darting from Shane to Andie as if she were expecting something to happen. His heart skipped a beat as Andie turned around, the sunlight sparking off the silver highlights in her dark hair. Her eyes crinkled at the corners, and her pink lips tugged into a smile as she saw him.

“Hi.” He had planned to say something more clever, but that was what came out.

“Hey, Shane, how are you?” Maxi asked.

“Great.” Shane shifted his gaze to Andie. “How are you guys?” Again, not very clever.

“Great,” they both said.

“Would you like to join us?” Maxi gestured to the table. “We could have Claire bring another cup of coffee.”

Shane glanced at Andie. She had a panicked look in her eye. Did she not want him to join? He couldn’t tell. Maybe they’d been having a private conversation that was none of his business.

He didn’t want to appear overeager. He didn’t want her to guess that he’d been thinking of their lunch at the Clam Shack pretty much nonstop since the other day. Shane wondered if Andie had felt the same magic that he had that day. Probably not. But what if he took her to more of their old hangouts? Would she loosen up again? Did she even want to?

His instincts told him to go slow, not to push. Part of it was that he sensed Andie needed more time. The other part was that he didn’t want to be hurt by her again.

“No thanks, I’m working over at Bradford Breads.” He glanced back over his shoulder at the bread store, where he was replacing some gutters. “I just saw you over here and thought I’d say hi.”

“Glad you did,” Maxi said then raised her brows at Andie as if prompting her to say something.

“Yeah. Good to see you,” Andie said.

“I wanted to talk to you about the Thompson house, anyway,” Shane said, not ready to leave Andie’s company quite yet. “After Damien shut down the auction, Emily seemed kind of upset.”

“Yeah, he’s a jerk. We came up with a solution, though.” Andie’s face lit with excitement, reminding Shane of how she used to love to help others during high school. Apparently that part of her hadn’t changed over the years. “Maxi suggested we try a historical preservation loan to get some immediate money, so I’m going to help Emily apply for that.”

“Oh great. So that would help with restoring the house, but what about the antiques she wanted to sell at the auction?”

“Frank Fowler is going to have one at his barn, but he’s booked for a few months. That will help bring in some money for the loan, and then...” Andie leaned forward and lowered her voice as if the next part was a secret. Shane felt flattered she was sharing with him. “She’s going to try to set up part of the house as a boutique Airbnb.”

“Really? Is the house set up for that?” Shane hadn’t been inside, but he figured if you were doing vacation rentals, you’d need separate kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms.

Andie grimaced. “Sadie had already separated part of the house, but I’m sure we’ll need to do a lot of work to make it suit our purposes. I’ll probably ask you and Sally for an estimate once we have the loan locked in, if you don’t mind.”

Mind? He’d love any excuse to work closely with her. “Sure, that would be fine. I’m kind of busy but can probably fit you in.”

Shane did a mental calculation on what a renovation like that might cost. Kitchens were expensive, even if Emily wanted to set up the units as efficiencies with smaller kitchens. Or maybe she’d set it up more like Tides and wouldn’t need kitchens. Either way, it was going to be a lot, and he knew Emily had debt she needed to pay. But maybe he didn’t need to be paid right away. He’d talk to Sally about letting Emily defer payment until she was on her feet.

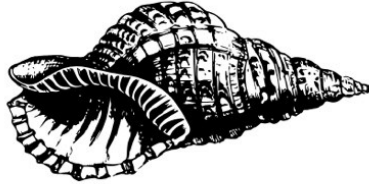
“That would be great.” Andie’s smile was brilliant, and his heart stuttered again. Better to leave while he was ahead.

“Okay. Nice seeing you both.”

“You too,” Andie said.

He nodded to Maxi and Andie then turned and walked across the street, feeling awkwardly like they were watching him walk away.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Emily was sitting on the porch steps, looking pretty dejected, when Andie got back to the Thompson house. Suddenly Andie realized how important this was to Emily. Now she wondered if maybe she shouldn't suggest going forward with the loan. What if the boutique Airbnb didn't work out? Emily would be stuck with a loan she couldn't repay unless she sold the house. If Andie couldn't pull this off, she could cost Emily her future. But if Emily didn't try, she was going to lose the house anyway. Failing at this venture was not an option.

"I brought the loan application for you to look over. Maxi thinks we have a good shot." It wasn't totally the truth, but Maxi hadn't said they didn't have a good shot, just that they might need something of historical importance. Andie would just have to find that thing.

Emily brightened. "Really?"

They sat side by side on the fresh new wood steps that Shane had repaired and went over the application together.

"They have certain paint colors you have to choose from?" Emily looked back at the house. "I think the house has always been white, but it might be pretty to pick a contrasting trim color."

"It would make it stand out."

Emily made a face. "But how much do you think we can get? If I have to bring the mortgage current and pay Mom's bill at Tall Pines plus get the work done on the house, there might not be enough."

"Maxi didn't say how much, but she did say James would push it through. We can get Shane to give us an estimate, and Maxi said James can

defer payments. Maybe we can do some of the work ourselves to save money?" Andie suggested. "I'm pretty good with a paint brush."

Emily smiled. She put the paperwork in her lap and looked at Andie. "Thanks. You know, you've been a real friend throughout this. At first I thought you had an ulterior motive, but now I know you're just a good person."

Andie's heart bloomed at the compliment. Emily had hit on something. Andie did love helping. It made her feel good. Maybe that was what had attracted her to antiques in the first place? The act of helping a family sort their loved ones' items and get the most money for them?

Andie glanced back down at the paperwork in Emily's lap. "Now we just need to come up with a historical angle for the application."

"I might be able to help with that. I've been doing some research, and the Underground Railroad did have a stop in Lobster Bay." Emily stood and motioned for Andie to follow onto the porch, where her laptop sat on a small table beside one of the rocking chairs.

"It doesn't say which houses were part of the railroad, but now, thinking back, I do remember some hushed whispering." Emily tapped the screen to life and swiveled it toward Andie so she could read the article. "It says that most people didn't make it known because there was still a lot of resistance here. So it makes sense that maybe my ancestors never talked about it and it didn't trickle down over the generations."

Andie started getting excited. "There were only a few houses in town back then. This was one of them."

"I know, right?" Emily's eyes twinkled. "There might be something here. I mean, you saw the attic. My relatives never threw anything out."

"You can say that again."

Emily leaned back in the rocker and looked up at the ceiling, as if digging back into her memory. "We should go back to that old section of the attic. You know, the place where you found those old quilts you took pictures of. That's where the oldest things are. Maybe we'll find something in there."

The quilts!

Andie checked her email. The reply from Susan Walker left her stunned and elated. She turned to Emily.

"I think I have it. I heard back from my quilt expert. It turns out the quilts might be connected to the Underground Railroad."

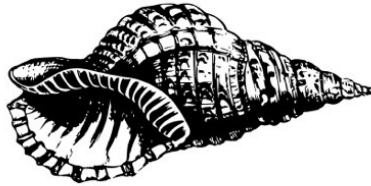
“What? Really?”

“Susan says that they used quilts as a signaling mechanism. They would hang a certain type of quilt on the line to let slaves on the run know that it was safe to stop there.” Andie tilted her phone toward Emily so she could see the email. “Nothing was documented specifically about the quilts, but Susan says from what she has found in her research, the patterns of these quilts and the age could mean they were used as signals.”

Emily looked excited but cautious. “Do you think that would be enough for the bank?”

Andie grabbed the application and pen. “I’m not sure, but I think we should find out.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



Andie dropped the application off with Maxi at her cottage. She hadn't been there in a while and was happy to see all of the charming touches Maxi had added, as well as the kittens. The black-and-white balls of fur had seemed to grow even since she'd seen them a few days ago and were more like gangly teenagers full of energy and enthusiasm.

Maxi had been painting out on her patio on the beach, and Andie hadn't wanted to interrupt her for very long. Just long enough to drop off the application, which Maxi said she would give to James that night. James was waiting for it and would look it over. If it passed his approval, he'd make it official in the morning. Maxi promised to stop by Andie's place with the verdict.

Maxi had pointed out a few of her finished pieces that she thought might look good in Andie's apartment. Andie didn't want to take her work for free, but she knew Maxi wouldn't accept any money. Luckily Andie noticed that the corner near the slider was in need of a little table, and she had the perfect piece at her shop. A vintage round table with a turned pedestal and chipped paint. It wasn't worth as much as one of Maxi's paintings, but she could work on finding something else later.

Andie was too excited to sit in her shop or apartment. She wished she had someone to share things with. She tried Jane, got no answer, and then remembered she was out at the Ogunquit Playhouse with Mike on a date night.

She briefly thought about calling Shane, but they weren't really that close... yet. Pulling up in front of her place, she saw activity in the hair

salon. Mary and Jules were becoming like family. Who better to share good news with?

“Did you decide to get those red highlights?” Jules teased.

Andie laughed. “Hardly.”

“You look chipper. What’s going on? Hot date?” Mary asked hopefully.

Andie’s eyes narrowed. Was Mary trying another fix-up? Surprisingly she didn’t think that was a bad thing, especially if it involved Shane.

“No. Things are going really good at the Thompson estate, and I’m excited about it.” Andie told them about the quilts that could tie the house to the Underground Railroad and their plan to do a boutique Airbnb based on that theme.

“A boutique Airbnb?” Jules sounded interested as she mulled the idea over.

“I got the idea from you. Do you think it would work for an Airbnb? I don’t think Emily wants to get into running an inn or hotel,” Andie said.

“It could work. You’ll need the appropriate items to decorate with. Should be no problem for an antiques dealer, though I’m not exactly sure if things that old are readily available.” Jules gave Andie a questioning look.

“I might be able to get a few things and then just decorate it in an antique style,” Andie said. “What did your grandmother do with her motels?”

“She used to scour yard sales and flea markets for things to decorate with. If she ever needed specific things to round them out, she usually just bought replicas.”

“That’s a good idea. I’m leery of putting anything truly valuable in the rooms, but I want the guests to feel like they’ve stepped back in time but with modern amenities.”

“The location of the house right on the cliff overlooking the ocean won’t hurt either,” Mary said.

Andie noticed Mary looked a little pained, her face pinched. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, of course. Just a little indigestion.” Mary waved it off, but Andie noticed a look of concern cross Jules’s face.

“If you need any tips, I’d be happy to help,” Jules said, handing Mary the Tums.

“Thanks. I might be getting a little ahead of myself though. We haven’t gotten approved for the loan, and we don’t even know how much Emily

will get. It might not be enough for her to pay off her bills and do the renovations to get things started.” Andie glanced over at her shop. “Maxi said she’d come by tomorrow morning with the verdict.”

“Good. Tell her to stop in here. She’s due for a cut. I know she’s growing it out, but she has to take care of those ends,” Mary said, now looking less pained and more her usual serenely happy self.

“I’ll tell her.” Andie had often admired Maxi’s long silvery tresses. For most of their adult life, she’d worn it tucked up in a bun at the nape of her neck the way she thought James liked her too. But since discovering her artistic side, she’d starting letting it grow even longer and had taken to wearing it down. It was now halfway down her back.

“I guess I better get over to the shop. I want to open up and catch some of this tourist traffic.” Andie pointed to the tourists in their brightly colored shorts and tank tops as they strolled past the various shops. A few were looking in her window across the street, and she wasn’t one to turn down a sale.

As she turned to leave, the door opened, and Sally Littlefield stepped in. She was wearing her usual paint-splattered overalls, her long braid hanging over her left shoulder.

“Hi, Sally,” Andie said as they passed.

“Oh, hi there. How’s things?” Sally jerked at her hair, pulling the strands out of the braid.

“Good. You?”

“Pretty good. Just finished up replacing some lighting over at Tides. Looks good.”

“I’ll have to get over there and check it out. I’m due to check some people in tomorrow.” Andie felt a stab of guilt. Other than the night at Splash and morning coffee at Sandcastles, she’d pretty much ignored her sister since the Thompson job had come up.

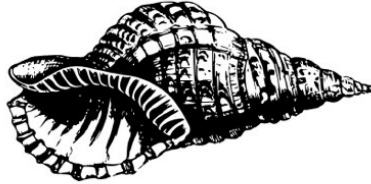
Sally nodded. “I need to get a treatment done on my hair. And maybe a trim. It gets all kinked up when I keep it in this braid.” Sally tugged at her hair then lifted the bottom to inspect the ends.

Mary and Jules grimaced as they got out a black apron and pointed Sally toward a chair.

“I’ll let you guys get to it then.” Andie said her goodbyes and headed over to the antiques store. She wanted to dig out the table she thought would be perfect for Maxi’s cottage and have it ready when she arrived in

the morning. And if she hurried, she might be able to sell that jewelry box in the window to the couple who were still peering in at it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



The next morning Maxi showed up at Andie's place with the painting she'd shown her the day before.

"This will be perfect right on the long wall in the dining room." Maxi held the painting on the wall to illustrate.

Andie stood back to get the full effect. It was a gorgeous seascape, and the blueish green of the ocean drew out the blue in the muted slate-gray tone of the walls. In the painting a wave was crashing on a rock, the image lending a certain energy to the room. "It's perfect."

Maxi set the painting on the floor and leaned it against the wall. "It's already got a wire across the back, so it's ready for hanging."

"Thanks so much." Andie grabbed the table she'd set aside for Maxi. "This is for you. I think it's perfect for that empty corner next to the slider in your cottage."

Maxi looked delighted. "It's perfect! And it matches with cottage chic decor." She leaned down to look underneath the top of the table. "But where is the price tag?"

"I'll tell you what the price is when you tell me the price of the painting."

Maxi straightened and frowned at Andie. "Don't be silly. I'm not charging you for the painting."

"Then I'm not charging you for the table."

Maxi opened her mouth to argue then closed it and laughed. "Okay, fine. A trade then."

“Deal.” Andie went into the kitchen area, which was only separated from the rest of the living space by a breakfast bar. “You want coffee?”

“Love some,” Maxi said.

Andie popped a K-Cup into the brewer while Maxi rummaged around in her oversized blue-and-white striped tote. She pulled out a manila envelope and plopped it on the breakfast bar. “I also have this for you.”

Andie slid a mug of coffee in front of Maxi and blew on hers. “The loan application?”

“Yep.” Maxi opened the folder and spun it around so Andie could read the papers. “James approved it last night. Emily got the loan, and he managed to defer the payments for six months.”

“Really?” Andie put down her mug and flipped through the papers. There were lots of official-looking paragraphs with stipulations. “That’s fantastic. I hope she can still do the renovations for the Airbnb units.”

“She can, and see here.” Maxi pointed a paint-splattered nail to Part C, Subsection 5 on the second page. “She can use the money at her discretion. James has also stipulated part of it be used to bring the loan current so the property won’t be foreclosed.”

“That’s great. I was worried she wouldn’t even get a loan with that hanging over the property.”

Maxi nodded. “It was a problem, but you know how James feels about the town’s older properties. He wants the town to retain its charm, not be filled with strip malls and condos, so he figured out how to make it happen. It’s a little unconventional, but it’s all legal.”

“Emily is going to be thrilled. Please tell James how much I appreciate this.”

“He’s happy to do it.” Maxi sipped her coffee while Andie leafed through the paperwork.

“So, looks like the bank only plans to inspect the exterior?” Andie asked.

“The whole purpose is to keep the outside historically appropriate. That’s what people see from the street. She can change the structure a little, but it has to be in keeping with the era of construction. Inside they don’t care as much. No one wants to have a kitchen that’s the same as it was in 1856.”

“Good point.”

“The bank needs to approve any structural changes as well as the paint colors, and I told James about her idea to rent it out. He said that’s perfectly fine, but of course, you’d have to get the town to inspect that, and she might need a permit or something.”

“Yeah, we need to look into all of that, but without any money, it didn’t make sense to start. I guess I can put that on my to-do list now.”

“Guess so. You seem happy to have a project.” Maxi regarded her over the rim of her mug.

“You know, I guess I am. I always thought I just liked sorting through antiques, but maybe what I really liked was helping the people that owned them.”

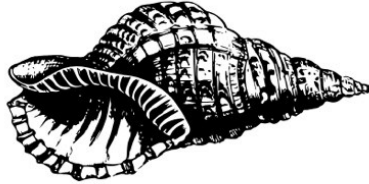
“That’s good. Doing what makes you happy is the best way to live.” Maxi had recently discovered this herself, and Andie agreed.

“Looks like maybe things might work out for Emily. Thanks for letting me know about the loan and for your help.”

“You’re welcome. She’ll have to meet with James at the bank to sign the loan documents in person, of course.”

“No problem. I’m sure she’ll be happy to do that.” Andie closed the folder and tapped it on the top of the breakfast bar to align the papers inside. She couldn’t wait to tell Emily the good news.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Andie had a few hours before she was supposed to check in guests at Tides, so she messaged Emily, and they met at the Thompson house. They sat on the porch with the ocean sparkling in the distance. The sea breeze ruffled the papers as they went over the loan.

“Do you really think this will work?” Emily looked concerned.

Andie chose her words carefully. She didn’t want to give Emily false hope, but she also really did think they had a chance. “I think it could. What do you have to lose?”

“Only a big giant loan to pay back and no money to pay it with,” Emily said.

“There is a chance things won’t work out, but you won’t be in a worse position than you are now. Right now you’d have to sell the property. At least this gives you a chance to avoid that.”

Emily gazed out at the ocean. “I suppose you’re right. I have to try to keep the house. Sometimes I think it might be one of the things that’s keeping Mom going.”

“Let’s look at the numbers again.” Andie slid the sheet of paper they’d been working numbers on out of the pile and set it in front of them. “We use five thousand to bring the mortgage current. And ten thousand for Tall Pines. That should pay for Sadie for a few months until we get some money coming in.”

“At least the second mortgage was small. If this thing does work out, we can pay it off pretty quick, and then we’d only have to pay taxes on the property and, of course, Mom’s bill at Tall Pines.”

“You need to get those rental units up and running.” Andie thought about her own inn. Reservations had dribbled to nothing before Jane took over. Jane had done some advertising and special events, so maybe she would have some good advice as to how to start getting interest in the boutique units. “We really should start looking into advertising right away so we can formulate a plan of attack. Then when we get the units done, we can take some pictures.”

“How much do you think we can rent them for?”

Andie glanced out at the ocean. “With this gorgeous view and the historical aspect, if we can get a permit to put in kitchenettes, I would say at least three hundred a night.”

Emily whistled. “Well, that would certainly go a long way to paying some bills.”

“I have to go to Tides later on today, and I’ll ask my sister more about the advertising and how she got word out about our inn.”

“I was wondering one other thing,” Emily said softly.

“What?”

“I was hoping to hire you to oversee the whole process. It’s too much for me, and you’re so good at it.”

“Oh. Sure. I’d love to.” The truth was that Andie was planning on helping her out anyway. She didn’t know if she could take any money from Emily, but at least she knew her role.

Emily smiled, apparently relieved that Andie would help. “So all we need is to get a quote from Sally and Shane. Depending on their costs, this might even be doable.” Emily had gotten more positive the more they’d talked. “I ran into Sally this morning, and she said she might stop by.”

No sooner were the words out of Emily’s mouth than Shane’s truck came bumping down the driveway.

“I guess we’re going to find out if this is doable,” Andie said.

SHANE AND SALLY got out of the truck. Shane’s thin gray T-shirt was a little tight, and Andie noticed that he filled it out in all the right places. He caught her looking, and Andie blushed but managed to meet his gaze. It was

ridiculous that she felt awkward. She was a fifty-year-old woman, not a teen. Feeling like a teen again felt good, though.

Sally was wearing her usual paint-splattered denim farmer jeans, her gray braid pinned in a coil at the top of her head.

“So, this is the work you did?” Sally asked Shane as she inspected the stairs and spindles he’d repaired for the auction. “Looks like you went a little overboard with the hammer. There’s hammer marks in the wood.”

Shane took the criticism in stride, smiling in amusement at her critique. “I was in a bit of a hurry. Damien Carruthers was coming to inspect it.”

“Harrumph. He’s a turd. Let’s not let thoughts of him ruin our day.” Sally strode up the steps to Emily and Andie.

“So, what’s the plan? Heard you needed some more work,” Sally said.

Andie closed the folder on the loan documents. She figured Emily wouldn’t want Sally and Shane to know the particulars. She explained that Emily was getting a historical preservation loan and outlined their plans to make two boutique vacation rental units for income.

“I was hoping you could give me a quote and let me know about the payment schedule. I know you usually ask for half up front,” Emily added.

Sally waved her hand dismissively. “Schedule? How are you going to pay me when you have to get a business up and running here? You’ll need money for advertising and essentials like towels, sheets, and doo-dahs to put around the place.”

Emily looked flustered. “I... I don’t know. Everything hinges on being able to rent out those units, so I was hoping we could manage somehow.”

Sally shook her head. “Nope. I’m not charging you up front. It might make you come up short and hurt your chances. I’m deferring the payment for ninety days.”

“Ninety days? I couldn’t ask you to do that.” Emily glanced at Andie.

Andie didn’t know what to think. She glanced at Shane, but his expression was hard to read. He didn’t look surprised, so he and Sally must have discussed this beforehand. Her heart swelled at the thought of the two of them delaying their payment so Emily could have the best chance possible.

“Don’t worry about that. We have enough money to tide us over, don’t we, Shane?” Sally glanced at Shane.

“Yep, plenty. We’re used to having some on hand because a lot of our payments are delayed.”

“Besides, I owe your people. Your granddaddy did a big favor for my daddy, and this is my chance to repay it. You wouldn’t deny an old lady her chance to repay a family debt, would you?” Sally gave Emily *that* look. No one ever argued with Sally when she gave that look.

Emily shook her head. “No, ma’am.”

Sally looked pleased. “Okay then. Let’s take a look at what you want us to do.”

Emily walked them around the house. “The outside is fairly simple. You can see what needs to be repaired and painted.”

“Ayuh.” As they walked around, Sally took a small notepad from her front pocket and scribbled on it with an old number two pencil complete with pink eraser. From what Andie could see, she wasn’t actually writing words. It was more like drawings.

At one point she glanced up and caught Shane’s eye. He had been staring at the scribbles too. He simply shrugged and shook his head. Sally had her ways, and Andie had learned not to question them. Whatever they were, they seemed to work.

The interior was more complicated, and it took almost an hour for Sally to inspect every nook and cranny of the main house and make more scribbles.

“My mother already had a big section partitioned off, so we figured we’d use this section for the rentals,” Emily said when they came to the wall that split up the house.

“Ayuh. I did that work,” Sally said.

“We want to make it into two separate rental units each with a mini kitchen and separate entrance,” Andie said.

Sally raised a brow and looked at Shane. “What do you think about that?”

Shane glanced around, his gray eyes turning serious. “It’s kind of a big job.”

Andie’s heart sank. She glanced at Emily, who looked equally disappointed.

“But doable, right?” Sally asked.

“I think so. Let’s see what it looks like.” Shane nodded at the doorknob, and Emily opened it, and they all stepped through.

“Now I remember.” Sally nodded her head as she looked around. “Your mother wanted to block off part of the house since it was too big and cost a

lot to heat. But she also had me make some changes in case one of the kids wanted to move in so it would be like a separate apartment. I think a lot of what you need is already set up.”

Sally walked around the area, moving bureaus and sideboards out of the way. It consisted of three large rooms, all of which were still crammed with antiques. Andie made a mental note to move them elsewhere before work started.

After she was done inspecting the perimeter, Sally stood in the middle of the space, her arms crossed over her chest. “It’s plenty big enough for two small studios.”

“There’s already an exterior door here.” Shane indicated a doorway that led out onto the end of the wraparound porch near the driveway. “We could make a small vestibule in here and then have two doors each going to the different units.”

“That would be perfect since the door is near the driveway. I could expand the parking at the end, and guests could get right into the unit. I’m not going to have a check-in desk or anything,” Emily said.

“And the back wall is next to the bathroom, and that means easy access to plumbing.” Sally looked at Emily. “That will keep your costs down.”

Emily looked hopeful. “So this is doable for under thirty thousand?”

The loan was for seventy-five, and they’d only budgeted thirty for the renovation, but that was before they knew Sally and Shane would defer payment. They could go a little higher now, assuming they could get the units rented quickly.

Sally nodded slowly. “Might be tight, but we’ll give you our best shot. You can save a lot if you’re frugal with the fixtures. You know, the countertops, appliances, lighting.”

“I know how to get the price down on those.” Andie had shopped for fixtures with Maxi for the bathrooms they’d had to put in at Tides. They’d managed to cut the costs quite dramatically, and she could do it again.

Sally nodded. “Okay, well, if you want to do the sourcing, that’s less labor for us. Saves you even more money.”

“I’d be happy to do it,” Andie said.

“Okay then, I’ll write up a quote with our best price. Now, when would you like us to start?” Sally asked.

Emily glanced at Andie. “I’m not sure. I’ve hired Andie to oversee the whole process... it’s a bit much for me.”

Sally turned to Andie. "Oh? A new venture for you?"

Andie hadn't thought of it that way, but maybe this *could* be a new venture. Were there other people that needed help with their antique family homes? "I'm not sure. I guess we'll see after this."

"That suits you," Shane said.

His words confused Andie. "It does?"

"Yeah. In school you were always helping the other kids who were falling behind on school work. You were smarter than everyone, and you always helped them come up to speed. I think some of them wouldn't have graduated without you."

Andie blushed at the compliment. It'd been so long ago she'd forgotten. She rarely thought of herself as a helper, but now that he mentioned it, she had spent a lot of time helping out their friends, and it had been rewarding.

"Okay. Enough of the reminiscing," Sally said. "We've got work to do. I'll work on this tonight. I think we can get started right away, unless you have something else going on, Shane."

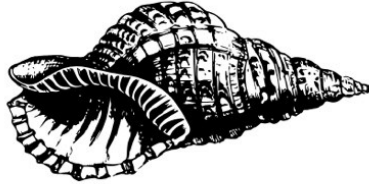
"Nope. Actually just finished up a job, so I'm free as a bird," Shane said.

"Good. Let's get outta here. I need a corn muffin." They said their goodbyes, and Sally led the way to the truck.

Andie and Emily stood in the yard next to the passenger side as Shane started the truck. Sally rolled down her window and smirked at Andie.

"Good thing you and Shane are old friends. Looks like you're going to be spending a lot of time together." She winked as they drove off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Andie arrived at Tides a little late. She rushed into the foyer and grabbed one of the oatmeal peanut butter chocolate chip cookies Jane had just set on the side table.

It was still warm and gooey. Cooper padded out and turned his soulful brown eyes on her then flicked his gaze to the cookie in her hand. She broke off a small piece and fed it to him.

“Those are for guests, you know.” Jane peeked in from the kitchen, her tone teasing.

“Sorry!” Andie mumbled around a mouthful of cookie. “I didn’t get a chance to eat—busy morning.”

“You seem chipper. Good news?” Jane stepped into the room.

“Yes, things seem to be going good for Emily Thompson, but I wanted your advice on something for her.”

“I’d love to help.”

A car pulled up, and Jane glanced out the screen door into the driveway. Andie could tell she wanted to get out of there before she had to deal with the guests. “We can talk later, after I do the check-ins.”

Jane was already halfway to door that led to the kitchen. “Great. Meet you in the garden?”

“Yep.” Andie had planned to check on the garden today, anyway. The garden had been her mother’s pride and joy, but Addie had let it go in the past few years.

Andie had the fondest memories of working in the garden with her mother when she was little and had restored it since she’d been in Lobster

Bay. Now it was lush with blossoms and greenery, but she had been neglecting it as she'd been so busy with the Thompson project. She wanted to fill the hummingbird feeders, do some weeding, and cut some flowers to bring to Addie.

The new guests were the Ryders, a young couple from Ohio, who had never been to the east coast. They fawned over Cooper and stared wide-eyed at the ocean when Andie detoured them to the back deck on the way to their room. Was she ever that young and enthusiastic? Maybe she had been, but decades of city living and stress had dulled her enthusiasm, though over the past week she'd felt some of that coming back.

After the Ryders, she checked in an older man and then two middle-aged sisters here on their first vacation together since they'd both been divorced. Once the guests were settled in their rooms, she made a batch of hummingbird nectar and headed to the garden.

The feeders were empty, and Andie made a mental note to come by at least every other day. It wouldn't be long before the colorful birds were gone for the winter, but she knew they needed nectar now more than ever to store up for the long flight south.

"I've been weeding and trying to deadhead the flowers." Jane gestured toward the edging of pink impatiens. "I don't know as much as you and Mom."

"Looks like you're doing a great job. I'll try to get over here more once we get on a schedule at the Thompsons'." Andie had finished the garden a few weeks ago, and it didn't require much maintenance. She'd told Jane if you cut the roses right before they started to fade, the plant would bloom all summer, and Jane had done a good job of that, as the red blooms were all over the vine. The rest of the small area was colorful with a variety of annuals and perennials in orange, purple, red, pink, and white.

"I could fill the feeders for you if you can't get over as often." Jane sat on the stone bench. "Tell me about the Thompson project."

Andie started cutting flowers. Cooper made himself busy sniffing a hydrangea that was bustling with butterflies. Andie was sure there were bees there, too, and hoped he didn't get stung.

Andie brought her up to speed on the loan acceptance, Shane and Sally's generous offer to defer the bill, and their idea for boutique Airbnb rental units. "She needs to get income coming in, and I was hoping you'd have some advice on how she can advertise the units."

“I advertised in specialty magazines for coastal weddings. And I advertised in the nearby cities—Boston and New York—thinking people might need a vacation at the coast.”

A ruby-throated hummingbird buzzed to the feeder and hovered in the air while it drank from one of the red-and-yellow petal-shaped spouts. Soon another came, and Andie watched them swoop in circles around each other.

A coastal wedding magazine wouldn’t help Emily much, but the niche coastal weddings part gave her an idea. “Jules down at Curlz told me her grandmother had boutique motels. I wonder if there is a niche magazine for those?”

Cooper flopped down in front of them, his heavy paw on Andie’s foot. It felt warm and comforting.

“I don’t know about that, but it’s worth looking into,” Jane said.

“Definitely. I’ll ask Jules. Maybe I’ll even run into her at Tall Pines when I bring Mom these flowers.”

ADDIE LOVED THE FLOWERS, a bouquet of black-eyed Susans, purple coneflowers, and Queen Anne’s lace, which Andie presented to her in one of her grandmother’s old glass vases with a bow of rough twine around the rim.

“They’re from the garden at Tides,” Andie said.

Addie held them to her nose, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. “I do love fresh flowers.” She put the jar gently on the table under the window then turned back to Andie. “It was nice of you to bring them, dear, but I have to go.”

“You do?” Addie had acclimated fabulously to Tall Pines, and she now had a very busy schedule of games and crafts.

“Yes. There’s a card game, and I don’t want to be late.” Addie pushed past her on her way to the door.

“I’ll walk down with you, Mom.” Andie fell in step beside her mother. Addie had seemed so pale and fragile just a few months earlier, but now she appeared determined and independent. The change was good, though Andie did feel a little put out that her mother preferred to play cards rather than visit with her.

They ran into Emily and Sadie on the way. Sadie was seated in her wheelchair because she couldn't walk far distances.

"I'm not going to the card game if *she's* going," Sadie said, giving Addie the evil eye.

"Mom! That's not nice. Why would you say that?" Emily rolled her eyes at Andie over her mother's head.

"She stole my sweater."

"No, Mom. It was actually *her* sweater. We went over this before." Emily referred to an incident where Addie's favorite sweater had ended up in Sadie's room. Andie didn't think anyone stole anything. The two women were just confused.

Sadie scowled at Addie. "Well, she went to the dance with Tommy Sullivan, and he was supposed to be my date."

"He asked me!" Addie said.

Sadie pushed on the left wheel of her chair to turn it. "I don't care. We're going the opposite way from these two. Those Millers are bad news."

"Mother, you know that's not true. Remember I told you that Andie is helping me with the house? If it wasn't for her, we wouldn't be able to keep it." Emily looked at Andie and shook her head. Funny how things could change. It was only a few days ago that Emily was suspicious of Andie and Addie, and Sadie was the one sticking up for them.

Sadie looked at Andie out of the corner of her eye. "She is? Well, maybe she's nicer than her sister there."

"Mother," Emily said.

"What?" Sadie looked up at her.

"Addie is Andie's mother. Remember you and Addie were friends when you were girls?"

Sadie and Addie scowled at each other.

"No," they said at the same time.

"Of course you remember," Andie chimed in. "You told me how much fun you used to have playing at Sadie's house when you were a girl."

"Okay, I guess that was sort of fun."

"And you said you were inseparable when you were teens," Emily said to Sadie.

Sadie's face softened, and a light flickered in her eyes. "Remember we could stand up in that big fireplace?" she asked, referring to the giant fireplace that was part of the old kitchen at the Thompsons'. It had been

part of the working kitchen back when the house was built, and the family was smart enough to keep it intact when they'd modernized. Andie had seen too many old houses where people covered up the antique features.

"Yes, that was fun." Addie's face lit up with the memory. "And your room was in the turret. I always loved your bedroom."

Sadie looked pleased with the compliment. "Your house was great too. Remember how your mom used to bake those cookies for us?"

Addie nodded. "And we used to play hide and seek in the two-seater." Addie referred to the old outhouse that used to serve as a bathroom before indoor plumbing.

"Are you going to the card game?" Sadie asked, apparently forgetting how she'd refused to go if Addie was going in the first place.

"Yes, shall we go together?"

Sadie nodded, and Addie walked alongside her as they continued down the hall. Apparently they were back to being the best of friends.

"Glad to see you two have rekindled your friendship," Emily said as they settled their mothers next to each other at the card table. Andie had a feeling their newfound camaraderie might be temporary, but it was what it was.

"Yes, as soon as you return my Nancy Drew mystery book," Addie said.

"What are you talking about?" Sadie bristled. "I don't have your book."

"Yes, you do. I left it at your house," Addie insisted.

"No, you must be mistaken." Sadie picked up the deck of cards and randomly started turning them over.

"I don't think so. It was right in your... hmm... now where was that?"

"See? You can't remember."

"Are you calling me a liar?" Addie huffed. "I'm moving across the table." Addie switched chairs. Sadie appeared unaffected.

Emily and Andie retreated to the hallway.

"Darn, I thought for a minute there they'd forget about their feud and return to being friends," Emily said.

"They're like oil and water. I'm sure they've forgotten what their feud was even about."

"They've forgotten most everything else, unfortunately." Emily's expression turned sad as she watched her mother, but then she sighed and turned back to Andie. "Did your sister have any ideas for advertising?"

“She gave me an idea of someone I can ask. Jules over at Curlz. She actually might be here visiting her grandmother.” Andie looked down the hallway to see Rita gliding toward them in her wheelchair.

“Hi there! How are things? I heard you two have a plan for saving your house,” Rita said.

“News travels fast,” Emily said.

Rita smiled. “Good news does.”

“Yes, it is good news,” Emily agreed.

“And how are things at the antiques shop?” Rita asked Andie.

“Great. Settling in. I’ve been kind of busy at the Thompson house, but I managed to sell a few items at the shop here and there.”

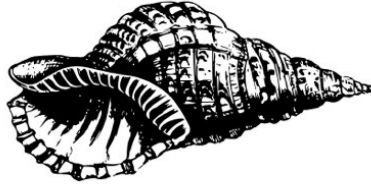
“I saw those gorgeous Frozen Charlottes you sold to Jules for her grandmother,” Rita said. “Rena was very comforted by them.”

“That’s great. You haven’t seen Jules here today, have you? I have a question that actually has to do with Emily’s house. She might be able to help us.”

“Oh, she’s not here. Her grandmother isn’t doing well and was transferred to the hospital this morning.” Rita looked sad.

“Oh! That’s too bad. Poor Jules. I guess it will have to wait.” Andie turned to Emily. “I’ll see if she’s at the salon when I go home tonight. In the meantime we still have plenty to do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



When Andie arrived home later that night, she saw Jules cashing out a client at Curlz. Hopefully her grandmother was doing better, or at least Jules wasn't too distraught to work. And hopefully it wouldn't be a bad time to ask her advice about the advertising.

"Hey, Andie." Jules's smile brightened when Andie walked in as the client was exiting.

"Hey. I heard your grandmother wasn't doing well. Sorry about that."

Jules's smile faltered. "Thanks. It's not a surprise, but it still hurts."

Mary, who had been stocking the hair products on the shelf behind the register, slipped her arm around Jules's shoulders. "It does, but remember you had a lot of good times with Rena, and you were there when it counted."

"I know."

"I have a question for you." Andie hoped she wasn't bringing up bad memories or being insensitive, but she needed this information. "When you ran the boutique motels, did you advertise in any special magazines or websites for people looking for that sort of experience?"

Jules brightened again, and Andie felt relieved that her questions had cheered her instead of having the opposite effect. "We did. There's an online website for that, and you can buy ads."

"Oh? Can you send me the URL?"

"Sure." Jules took her phone out and swiped to Andie's contact number.

"Is this for the Thompson house?" Mary asked. "How are things going?"

“Great, actually.” Andie filled them in on the loan acceptance and Sally and Shane’s offer. “If their estimate comes in at a good price, we need to get moving quickly. The sooner Emily can get those units done, the sooner money will come in. It will be a few months until she gets any money from selling the antiques at auction.”

“That sounds great.” Jules seemed genuinely excited for them. “I’ll message you with some other ideas that worked for Gram’s motels.”

“Thanks. The only fly in the ointment could be the inspection. You know how Damien Carruthers has it in for me and Emily.”

Jules pursed her lips. “Ugh... But does he do that type of inspection, too, or just for the events?”

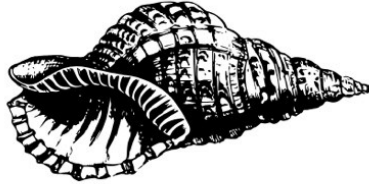
Mary cut in. “It doesn’t matter. You shouldn’t worry about that. He can’t make things up, and anything he finds can be corrected. It’s a bit different from the event where you didn’t have the time. Besides, I don’t think you need to worry about Mr. Carruthers.”

Mary sounded so sure of that, Andie turned to her. “Really? Why not?”

“Just focus on the job.” Mary’s eyes twinkled. “Sounds like you’ll be working a lot with Shane.” Mary glanced over at Jules, and they both wiggled their brows.

“Yes, but it’s just work.” Andie blushed at their insinuation. They were reading too much into it because it *was* just work, after all. But deep down she wondered if working more closely might lead to something else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“Sally dropped off the estimate.” Emily handed Andie a piece of paper. It was early morning, and they were sitting at the table on the Thompsons’ porch.

The paper was a mass of scribbles and drawings with one big number underlined at the bottom. “Twenty-five thousand? That’s all?” It was quite a bit under the amount they’d budgeted.

Emily looked excited. “I know. Isn’t that great?”

Andie wasn’t quite as excited. She was no expert on renovations, but this didn’t seem like enough. Had Sally and Shane cut their prices? They needed to earn a living, too, and she didn’t want any favors. But this wasn’t for her. It was for Emily and the Thompson family. Maybe she should just gracefully accept it. “It is great. Let’s call and ask when they can start.”

Andie felt awkward about calling Shane. On the one hand, it would be a good excuse to talk to him, but did she really need an excuse? She’d be working with him every day soon enough. She called Sally, who assured her the price was plenty for them to make decent money and they could start right away.

Andie hung up and turned to Emily, excitement welling up inside her. She hadn’t realized how much she was looking forward to turning the old dilapidated Thompson house into something better. To make it useful again. It was the same feeling she’d had when she’d helped Jane with Tides. The feeling of doing something good.

“Sally and Shane are going to be here after lunch hour to go over the plans and figure out exactly what supplies they need to start, which means

we better get busy cleaning out that area. I figured we should do the renovation in the units first then move to the outside. James said the bank won't be around to inspect our work for a few months." Andie opened the screen door to the kitchen. There was no time to waste.

Two hours later, they'd managed to move most of the smaller items into the living room. They'd sorted them into piles; one to keep, one for auction, and one to use to decorate the rental units. They were moving a heavy oak dresser inch by inch and stopped to rest in the middle of the hallway.

Emily blew her bangs off her forehead. "I really appreciate this help. I know I'm not paying you enough. We need to discuss that. And I want to apologize for how I treated you when we first met."

Andie waved off the apology. "Forget it. You were only reacting to what you had heard."

"I should have known not to listen to my mother. One day she feels one way, and the next day it's the opposite."

"I can relate to that."

"Funny how they keep going from friends to enemies."

Andie secured her long hair in a ponytail at the top of her head so her hair was off her neck. It was sweltering, and her hair on her neck felt like a wool blanket. "Seems like they have a lot of good memories. I wish they could just focus on those."

"Me too. It's weird, they still remember details from when they were little girls, but not what they had for breakfast. Mom sure does love this place." Emily pressed her lips together as she looked around. "I hope making these rental units doesn't upset her."

"It's necessary to keep the house."

"Yeah, well, hopefully it will actually serve that purpose. I'd hate to do all this for nothing."

"Don't worry about that. I got some tips from Jules on how to advertise boutique motels. There are specialty places we can advertise where people are looking just for this exact type of vacation."

"There are?"

"Yep. I have the links to some online magazine we can check out. I wanted to go over those after we talk to Sally and Shane about the renovations." Andie picked up her end of the bureau. "Come on, let's get this thing moved. I want to get the rest of the furniture out and have lunch before they get here."

THEY MANAGED to get everything moved out with forty-five minutes to spare. Emily made some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and they sat on the porch to eat them. Andie's muscles were sore, and she was soaked with sweat, but it felt good to do honest work.

The sandwiches were on old-fashioned white bread, and the combination of the salty peanut butter and the sweet jelly along with the view of the ocean reminded her of being a kid and sitting on the back deck at Tides with Jane, eating sandwiches their grandmother had made.

Andie and Emily were six years apart, so they hadn't known each other as kids. Emily was curious about what life was like in New York City. Andie filled her in on her job as an antiques appraiser and living in the city.

"Everything's more fast-paced, less personal." Andie glanced out at the ocean. "I think the quality of life is better here. Have you been here your whole life?"

Emily nodded. "Moved to Kennebunkport for a while, but then when Mom got older I came back." Emily continued on to talk about her career as a teacher and her hopes that her adult daughter would get pregnant with a grandchild soon.

As they chatted, Andie realized something was happening. They were becoming friends. With Andie's friendship with Claire, Maxi, and her sister Jane and now Emily, she actually had more friends in Lobster Bay than she'd had in New York. Not to mention more time to nurture those friendships.

They were discussing Jane's advice on the advertising, and Andie had just started showing Emily the websites for boutique hotels when Shane's truck pulled in.

"Sorry we're late. I stopped by the town hall to see about the permits," Sally said.

Emily's face clouded. "Is there going to be a problem?"

"Nope." Sally pulled some official-looking papers out of the top pocket of her overalls. "The permits for the work are all set. Since you're renting it as an Airbnb, you don't need any permits or zoning changes. All you need to do is register as a short-term rental and pay the fee. It's twenty-five per unit. Plus there's a sales tax on the retail money you collect."

"That's great. Thanks for looking into that for me."

“Ayuh.” Sally turned to Shane. “Well, why are we all standing around? We have work to do, don’t we?”

“I have some ideas about how to proceed in the units,” Shane said. “Let’s hash that out first, and then we can get to work.”

Emily led the way to the partitioned space.

Sally stood, hands on hips, in the middle. “Looks bigger without the furniture.”

“You guys did a good job getting all of that out.” Shane smiled at Andie, and her heart did a ridiculous flip.

“Thanks.” Emily’s amused gaze skipped from Shane to Andie.

“We’ll do the hallway for the entrance first, of course.” Sally walked over to the door and drew an imaginary line on the floor. “Put it right here and leave that nice paneled wall with the chimney going up at the end.”

“That’s from the original house. It’s hand hewn,” Emily said with pride. “And the chimney goes down to a fireplace in the cellar. I guess they used to use it for cooking and laundry down there.”

“In the cellar? Glad that was before my time,” Sally said.

“Just barely,” Shane teased.

“The paneling and chimney will be perfect when guests come in. It will give them exactly that antique feeling right off the bat,” Andie said.

“Ayuh.” Sally moved to the right part of the space. It was split up into three rooms. A large dining room, a large parlor, and another smaller room that looked like it had once been a library. “I figure we’ll try to keep the existing walls as much as possible. The wallpaper and moldings are still good and give that antique ambiance. We’ll put the dividing wall here and run the plumbing through that. Double insulated wall for safety and noise reduction. Then on each side, we’ll put the kitchenettes and bathrooms.”

Emily nodded. “Sounds good. We want it to look as antique as possible, so keeping the walls is a good idea.”

“And saves you money,” Shane said.

“Sure. So if you agree, we can get started.” Sally looked at Emily expectantly.

“Yeah, sure. I agree.” Emily glanced around. “How long will it take?”

Sally scrunched up her face and looked around. “Could probably do it in a week or two, right, Shane?”

Shane nodded. “If we haul butt.”

“Two weeks?” Emily sounded shocked and a bit rushed. “You mean I could be renting it out in less than a month?”

“Yeah, but then we’d move on to the next unit. Gonna be noisy,” Sally said.

“Oh, right.” Emily sounded relieved. “I need some time to get things like sheets and towels. Some of those remote digital locks for the door.”

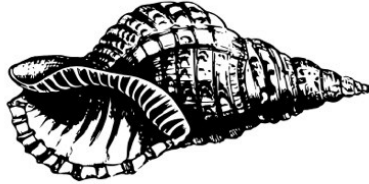
“And we have to have it inspected,” Shane reminded them.

Emily’s expression clouded over. She was probably thinking of the auction inspection from Damien. “Let’s hope that goes smoothly.”

“It should,” Sally said. “We don’t do shoddy work, so there’s no reason it won’t pass.”

Emily nodded. “Of course. Okay then, looks like we have a plan.” She turned to Andie. “Guess we better get going on that ad.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Emily and Andie spent the day rummaging through the house for antiques they could use to decorate the rental units. Luckily, there were a lot of items that were old and would give the right ambiance, but none were terribly valuable, so it wouldn't be a hardship if any of the guests got sticky fingers.

Not that either of them expected sticky-fingered guests, but one never knew. Andie found it easier to plan for it in advance than be surprised when it inevitably happened.

Sally and Shane had been hard at work all day; the sounds of saws buzzing and nails being hammered drowned out the creaking of the old floorboards. The sharp scent of freshly cut lumber and sawdust, borne on a slight breeze so welcome in the heat of the day, filtered through the windows as Andie searched the house.

It wasn't until late afternoon that Andie and Emily got a chance to sit on the porch, glasses of lemonade in hand, and dig through the web, searching for the boutique motels Jules had told Andie about.

"Who knew there were so many boutique hotels?" Emily said as she scrolled through search engine listings.

"No kidding." Andie watched as Emily scrolled past different articles on hotels and travel. The sidebar was filled with ads for more. Andie was surprised to see how many different hotels had niche themes.

One boutique hotel was all about animals, complete with animal-print wallpaper in the rooms. One was built like an old train station with train-

themed bedding and decor. In another, all the suites were decorated like an old Hollywood stage set.

“I think we need to pay attention to the wording of the ads so we can emulate them,” Emily pointed out. “If we can find commonalities, it might give us a hint as to what types of phrasing is effective when we do our own.”

“Good idea.” Andie continued to scroll. “We should see about doing an article about our rooms and the history of the house for that magazine website too.”

“With lots of pictures of the gorgeous view.” Emily swept her arm to indicate the expansive view of the ocean below.

“There are quite a few antique boutique hotels in here. That’s a good sign.” Andie figured if there was more than one, that meant there was customer demand. With this many, they would have no problem booking guests once the rooms were open.

“Look at this one.” Emily tapped the screen on a big ad that took up a wide portion of the top of the screen. “It has a widow’s walk where they say guests can see the ghost of Captain Elijah Perkins’s widow!”

“And this one in Salem, Massachusetts, claims to have the original cast iron pot that Bridget Bishop cooked in before she was executed as a witch.”

“And a black cat,” Emily added. Her brow puckered in a slight frown. “All we have is the quilts. Maybe we should put them on display somehow so people can’t ruin them? They’re too precious and old to let people use.”

“Good idea.” Andie looked through a few of the other ads, worries creeping into her thoughts almost undetected until one in particular settled in. Lots of competition was good, but with so many great choices out there, how would her vacation rentals rise above what was already on offer?

All of the listings she’d seen seemed to have one or two—some had three!—special items with stories that really hooked their visitor’s imagination. She would certainly be drawn to a hotel where Bridget Bishop’s actual cauldron was on display. Maybe her hotel needed something more?

“I see you guys already called quitting time,” Sally said as she came around the corner. Glancing at the computer, she tilted her head to acknowledge the boutique hotel ads. “Going on a trip?”

“No, we’re scouting out the competition.”

“You don’t say?” Sally squinted at the computer as she brushed sawdust from her jeans. “I’m about to melt. It’s too hot for working much longer. I’m thinking a nice walk on the beach would be great to cool us off.”

“Sure would,” Andie agreed.

“And I heard Buddy is having a two-for-one sale down at the hot-dog stand on Smugglers Beach.” Sally leaned against the freshly painted railing and cocked her head to the side. “Didn’t you and Shane used to hang out there when you were in high school?”

“Yeah, it used to be a big hangout for the teen scene.” Andie gave Shane a cautious glance as memories bubbled up. They used to have a lot of fun there.

“Bet you haven’t been there in a long time. You guys should check it out.” Sally shoved Shane over toward Andie. “You both look hot. You’ve been working all day. Don’t you think you need a break? I think you need to take a break.”

Andie glanced up at Shane then peered at Sally. Was she trying to fix them up?

Shane looked uncertain, but he unfurled his arms, indulging in a bit of a stretch. “It *is* hot, and I do love hot dogs.”

He looked at Andie. “What do you say, Andie?”

SHANE LOVED SMUGGLERS BEACH. Unlike the beach where the Clam Shack was, Smugglers was nestled under a cliff with a huge rock jetty that reached out into the ocean. As a child he used to search the pools of water left on the rocks for sea life. As a teen, he’d spent quite a few nights partying on those rocks. The best times of his life had been spent here, aside from when his kids and grandchild were born.

He wondered if Andie remembered those days at all, or if she had put them out of her mind. Looking around at anything so he wouldn’t keep staring at her, he noticed the bench where he’d carved their names was still there. Should he steer her in the opposite direction? No, she probably didn’t remember. Did she?

A quick glance at her face, and he knew she did remember. There was a faraway look in her eyes, one that said she, too, had drifted back in her

thoughts to another place in another time.

This had been *their* place, and when she'd left, he couldn't bring himself to take anyone else here. He'd come by himself but never with a woman, not even the one he eventually married. But now he was here with Andie, together for the first time in thirty years, and it felt right.

"You want to split a double dog order?" Shane asked, searching for something to break the silence that had grown between them. When he looked at her, he was smiling. Surely she would catch that reference to their past.

She did, and she laughed. He'd only once offered to split an order, and she'd laughed then too. He could eat four or five hot dogs by himself.

"Are you kidding? I'm starving. I want my own order."

Shane smiled. She looked more relaxed than he'd seen her since she'd come back to town. Possibly more relaxed than when they were kids, too, and he wondered idly what had put the new brightness in her eyes. The last time they'd visited one of their old haunts, she'd brightened then too. Was it possible that she was feeling the same as him? He didn't dare ask. No, it was best to keep the conversation light and casual.

Shane ordered the dogs—six of them, four with mustard and onion—and then sat with her at one of the picnic tables facing the water where they could look out over the ocean while they ate.

"This hasn't changed a bit since back in the day, has it?" Andie asked.

"When things are good, they don't have to change." Shane's tone was nonchalant. He didn't think she'd be comfortable knowing he was still caught up in thoughts of the two of them in the past.

Looking over, his brow rose, and he fought back a grin. Resisting the urge to dab at the blob of mustard on the corner of Andie's mouth, he pointed to his own mouth and flicked his finger up and down.

"What? Oh, I have food there? Sorry." Andie swiped at her mouth after downing the rest of the dog. "I always was a messy eater, right?"

Shane was glad Andie didn't seem to mind talking about before, about that magical period of happiness they'd shared before she had up and walked out of his life. Still, he didn't want to push things, to push her. That was why she'd left the first time. He'd pushed for them to get married, and it had spooked her. He didn't want to spook her now.

Pushing up from the picnic table, he gathered up their trash and walked over to put it in the litter bin. It could have been wishful thinking, but his

radar told him that Andie might be interested in being with him, at least for the moment, but that he'd have to go slow with her this time.

They'd talked a little, and they'd eaten, but he didn't want their time together to end. Not yet. He stared at the beach, where the waves rolled in, lapping gently at the sand before floating lazily back. The tide was out, and the sand was exposed past the rocks, perfect for walking. His gaze drifted back to Andie, and he stuffed his hands into his pockets, not sure what to do now to keep her by his side.

He remembered when they used to walk this beach, arm in arm, bare feet dragging in the wet sand while they strolled.

Ignoring everyone and everything around them but each other, they'd laugh and splash and laugh some more, and some days, they'd sit on the rocks and talk for hours.

"It's still early, and the cool air feels good," he said without realizing he'd spoken aloud. Then his lips quirked, and he nodded toward the water. "You want to go for a walk?"

Maybe, he'd thought, he could get some of that magic back tonight. But then she looked uncertain, and for a second Shane thought he'd pushed too far too fast.

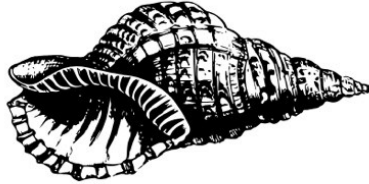
Andie was quiet for a full ten seconds as she stared out at the ocean, and Shane's peace in the moment died a little, then a little more, right up until she glanced back up at him and smiled.

"Sure. That would be great."

Shane's heart lifted. Maybe she didn't want it to end either.

She got up from the table, and he resisted the urge to take her hand. Slow and steady wins the race, he reminded himself. And he was determined to win—this time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



The next day, Andie arrived at the Thompson house to find Emily on the porch with a laptop open and pieces of paper spread out all over the table in front of her. She had a pencil in her hand, and her hair was sticking out of a messy bun. Shane's truck was already there, and she could hear power tools going in the house. She resisted the urge to look for him, amused that she even had that urge and also a little worried. What if Shane only wanted to be friends? Would she be disappointed?

"I've been working on an ad, and I think I've got a good one." Emily handed her a piece of blue-lined paper with neat writing.

"I used the ads in the online magazine as a template." Emily turned the laptop to face Andie and pointed to a half-page ad that was up on the screen.

Andie didn't know much about ads. The content was similar, describing the historical significance of the house, a bit of history about the Underground Railroad, and the key points of the ocean setting. But it seemed like something was lacking. She didn't want to tell Emily that, though. The woman had worked hard. "This is great. I'll take it to Jane. She has more experience with this sort of thing than I do."

Emily wasn't upset. She looked more relieved than anything. "That would be great. I'm also working on choosing towels and bedding. I was thinking an antique quilt look for the comforter and just good-quality plain white towels like they have in a hotel."

"That sounds great. You could use the linen service we use at Tides for sheets and towels. I can get you the number."

“Perfect.”

Sally came around the corner and headed straight for them, all business as usual. “I’m glad you’re here. Gotta get going if you want this done quickly. The room is coming along, but we’re going to need cabinets, countertops, and fixtures in a couple of days.”

“Oh dear!” Emily gave Andie a panicked look.

“Don’t worry, I have a plan for that.” In truth, Andie had sort of ignored the fact that she would have to act this fast. She could still pull it off, though. She sent off a text to Maxi for an emergency meeting on picking out the cabinets, countertops, and fixtures. She looked up at Sally. “Appliances?”

“Ayuh, I suppose you would need those. That’s not really part of my job though.”

She was right, but they did need them, so Andie made a note to look over the selections at the home improvement store. Maybe she would happen across a good sale. That, combined with the coupons she and Maxi had used, should save Emily a lot of money.

“I guess I better get going.” She held up the ad that Emily had written. “Mind if I take this to Tides to show my sister?”

“Go for it.”

“Okay, I’ll check back later.”

As Andie turned to leave, she couldn’t help but glance into the house to see if she could catch a glimpse of Shane.

TANTALIZING breakfast smells wafted out of the open kitchen window. Andie had noted the appetizing aromas the minute she’d stepped out of her car after arriving at Tides.

Her stomach rumbled low as she made her way up the walk, but she ignored it for the moment, searching the occupied tables on the back porch for Jane instead. Some of the guests lingered there with their breakfasts, but her sister wasn’t to be found.

After a few polite greetings of “good morning,” Andie headed into the inn and went straight through to the kitchen, thinking Jane might be there. She found Brenda instead, cleaning up after breakfast.

Greeting Brenda with a hug, Andie asked, “Do you know where Jane is?”

She leaned against the counter and reached over to snag a piece of bacon.

“I think she took Cooper for a walk.” Brenda gestured toward the back door then shoved some eggs onto the plate she’d just finished drying, added the last few pieces of leftover bacon, and handed it to Andie. “Finish these for me.”

Without question, Andie dug in. Glancing out the back door, she could see down the beach. Jane, Cooper, and Mike were walking along. Jane and Mike were holding hands and laughing. Every once in a while Cooper would return with a stick in his mouth, and one of them would toss it for him to retrieve again.

A wave of wistful longing hit her. For just a moment, Andie tried to picture herself holding hands with someone special, like Mike was to Jane. An image of Shane rushed to the fore, filling her mind, and she pushed it away. But it came back as if she’d subconsciously willed it.

Probably because of the many times she and Shane had walked the beach hand in hand, just as Mike and Jane were now doing, Andie decided. But she’d had her chance thirty years ago, right?

So many years had passed. So many things had changed—she’d changed. Yes, she’d had her chance with Shane, and then she’d gone away. But now she was back and... had she completely blown it?

Before her brain could remind her once more that it was *her* decision to up and leave town—and Shane—all those years ago, Jane, Mike, and Cooper came barreling in the back door.

Cooper barked and rushed to Andie, his tail wagging in happy excitement, and her heart swelled as she bent to pet the dog.

Jane and Mike laughed. When Andie straightened, she noticed they were still holding hands. They were still smiling, too, and they both seemed just as happy as Cooper to see her.

“Hey, Andie! How’s it going?” Mike’s green eyes were genuinely welcoming. She truly liked Mike. He was good for Jane, and Andie was glad her sister had found someone as nice as him.

“Great so far,” she answered. “How about you?”

“Pretty good.” He glanced at the clock then at Jane. “I better get going, I have to finish a website for a client this morning.”

Mike kissed Jane goodbye, albeit a little self-consciously. His cheekbones colored a bit, and Andie grinned, noting a similar rush of high color on her sister's face as well. She thought it was cute that they both blushed.

"So what brings you here?" Jane asked once Mike was gone. She grabbed a coffee mug and held it up to ask if Andie wanted coffee. She nodded, and Jane filled two mugs then joined her at the long pine table.

Andie had already put the ad on the table. She slid it to her sister. "I was hoping you could take a look at the ad Emily wrote for the Thompson house vacation rentals."

Jane took the paper and looked it over carefully, her forehead creasing into a little frown. "Hmm. It's good, but... I think maybe it needs a little pizzazz. You know, play up the historical angle a bit?"

Jane got up to get her laptop from the sideboard. "When I was researching for Tides, I looked at all the boutique hotel ads I could find. What I noticed was that each one usually had something uniquely appealing."

Andie sighed. "I thought the ad lacked something but couldn't put my finger on what. I guess *unique appeal* could be it."

Jane nodded as she typed. "Yes. See here?"

She turned the laptop so they could both see the screen. "Look at this ad. 'Have wine on the widow's walk where Henry Perkins's widow stood every night as she watched for his ship to return from sea.'"

Tilting her head to the side in consideration of the words, she said, "Henry Perkins's widow. The walk she, personally, stood on while waiting for him. It's very specific."

Reading through the ad along with Jane as she pointed out details, Andie said, "Yeah, I guess."

Jane typed some more. "And this one. 'Sleep in the room that was a favorite of President Theodore Roosevelt.'"

Andie caught the words "president" and "Theodore Roosevelt" and gnawed her bottom lip. Jane had a point. "Looks like they have a particular experience tied to each of their hotels. The guests can correlate their own stay to a specific, unique moment from history."

Jane looked up at her. "Exactly! Something that is utterly unique to that particular hotel. *That's* what Emily needs. A unique hook. I think an

unproven theory that the house was part of the Underground Railroad might not be specific enough.”

Andie agreed, but what in the world were they going to use for a hook?

ANDIE RUSHED OVER to Maxi’s cottage directly from Tides. She wanted to get the products for Emily ordered right away. Sally wouldn’t be happy if they didn’t come in when she wanted them, and she wanted Emily to be able to start renting as soon as possible.

She knocked on the door of the quaint little seaside cottage. When no one answered, Andie went around to the back and drew up just in time to see Maxi and James racing up from the edge of the water, laughing together.

A breeze blew in off the water, ruffling Andie’s hair until it almost blocked her view, but not enough to make her miss the spark of joy in Maxi’s eyes. Or how relaxed and content James looked at her side.

Andie felt the sharp stab of... something. Not quite jealousy and not quite regret. She was thrilled for her sister and Mike. She couldn’t be happier for Maxi and James. Just like Jane and Mike, Maxi and James were completely happy, and Andie wouldn’t want anything different for either of them. But she couldn’t help but feel a bit melancholy for herself.

“Andie!” Maxi rushed toward her, the brim of her floppy hat held tight with one hand while she waved with the other.

“Hi!” Andie called back. “Did you get my text?”

“Yeah, sorry, I wasn’t here. James decided a breath of fresh air and sunshine after breakfast would be nice. We just ran out for a quick walk before you came.”

James let go of Maxi’s hand and greeted Andie.

“Thanks so much for helping out with the loan for Emily Thompson,” Andie said. “You’ve given her a chance to keep her family home.”

“No problem. You know I love to see the older houses restored.” James glanced sideways at Maxi and then winked at Andie. “Besides, I’m eternally grateful for your part in bringing Maxi and me back together. I would help you anytime.”

“It was my pleasure.” Andie smiled at the happy couple for a few seconds then looked pointedly at Maxi. “Well, should we get started? I want

to make sure we get everything ordered in time. You know how Sally can be if things don't go to schedule."

Maxi laughed. Looping her arm through Andie's, she walked with her into the cottage, leaving James to trail in behind them. "Don't I ever! She fixed the leak in the living room and nearly had a cow when I didn't have matching paint right away."

Andie looked up at the ceiling. There had been a leak in the corner, but there was no sign of it now. "You paid her to do that? But you don't even own the place!"

Maxi shrugged. "I know, I know. But Hailey's grandfather doesn't have a lot of money, and it seriously needed fixing. No big deal."

"You, on the other hand..." Maxi glanced at Andie out of the corner of her eye. "When Sally was here, she mentioned something about you and Shane going to the beach together."

Andie blushed, then shrugged off Maxi's insinuation that something was happening between her and Shane. "We did go for a walk, but it was nothing, really. We had hot dogs."

"Uh-huh," Maxi said, but she sounded doubtful.

"Seriously," Andie insisted then sighed. "Okay, maybe there was a little spark, but that might just have been on my end."

And that was exactly what Andie was afraid of... being so interested in spending time with Shane again herself that she was reading more into things when they were together than he actually meant. She shrugged. "I don't know if he really wants to get involved."

"You can't always tell though." Maxi glanced outside to make sure James, who had gone right back out after following the two of them inside, wasn't listening. Nodding in his direction, she told Andie, "Guys get scared, too, and you shouldn't let a misunderstanding stop you from getting what you want."

James looked toward the bungalow and waved. Maxi waved back at him and smiled. "I didn't, and now look how happy I am."

Andie had to agree that Maxi had a point, but... "I'm not sure it's just a misunderstanding, Maxi. I think maybe Shane is just not that interested."

Not anymore, Andie thought, swallowing back yet another wistful sigh.

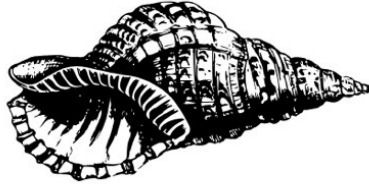
"Really?" Maxi asked, doubt clear in her eyes. Andie thought she saw something else, too, but she would never accuse Maxi of feeling pity for her.

“Well, that’s not what it looks like to me,” Maxi insisted. “Have you ever considered that he might be wary because of how you broke things off before?”

As if she could feel just how uncertain and confused Andie was suddenly feeling, Maxi reached over and patted her consolingly on the arm. “Maybe you’ve just been thinking too much about how you feel and not enough about how Shane feels.”

Without giving Andie a chance to get lost in the *are you sures* and the *whys*, Maxi grabbed her big striped tote bag from the chair. “Now let’s get going. I’ve already done some research, and I want to show you all the options I think will look best in those units.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



The next day Andie was happy to tell Emily she and Maxi had managed to find cabinets that were in stock and got a great deal on some granite for the countertops. Fixtures were on back order but should only take a few days.

“It’s really coming together,” Emily said.

Andie couldn’t tell if she was excited or terrified. Maybe a little of both, she decided.

“What about the ad? Did you get advice from your sister?”

“She liked it... but there was something she pointed out. Let me show you.”

They went into the kitchen, where Emily’s laptop was open on the burnished antique pine table. She had the window open, and the lacy curtain she’d hung over the sink fluttered in the warm ocean breeze.

With a few quick keystrokes, Andie navigated to the online boutique hotel magazine site and brought up the page with the ads. She turned the screen to Emily and pointed to several different ones. “Each of these have a unique selling point that helps bring guests into their hotel. We don’t really have that.”

As Emily studied the ads, Andie glanced down the hallway. Shane was working on the doorway that led into the space where the rental units were.

He was standing on a stepladder, plastering. Trowel in one hand, hopper in the other, he spread and scraped, and Andie couldn’t help but notice how each movement showed off the taut muscles in his broad shoulders.

He still looked as good today as he had thirty years ago. Well, he'd matured, obviously, but he'd done it very well.

"So, you mean like this bit about the widow's walk?" Emily asked.

"Uh-huh." Andie answered her without really knowing what she'd answered to. She was completely distracted now by Shane's movements.

"I don't think we had anyone famous," Emily continued. "My relatives never said..."

Emily went on about her relatives and the mostly colorless history of the house, her voice a mere murmur Andie barely took note of. Emily was repeating what she'd already heard a few times from family and friends, and none of it was interesting enough to distract Andie from the view she was currently enjoying.

Watching Shane was much more thrilling than the fairly dull history of a decades-old house. She sat there in silence, just watching... until his arm stopped, and he glanced her way!

Andie turned away quickly, embarrassed to have been caught staring at him. More like ogling, the voice in her head taunted. But... wait... had he winked at her?

"Something like that?"

Andie turned to find Emily looking at her expectantly, but for the life of her, she had no idea what Emily might be expecting.

"What? I'm sorry..." Andie dropped her gaze to the screen where Emily was pointing at a line of text that talked about how guests could sleep in the exact same room President Theodore Roosevelt had slept in. Oh right, the ad. "Yes, like that. Something specific to your place and its history. Something your guests can connect with and experience for themselves."

"Darn. I don't know if we have anything." A frown pulled at her brow. "I mean, we do have the quilts, but that's about it. Do you think it's enough?"

Sally had come in and was chugging a glass of lemonade from the tray Emily had put out for them. Apparently she'd also been listening in on the conversation. "Sounds like you need a hook, and I know exactly what you can use."

Andie and Emily both turned to stare at her in surprise. "You do?"

"Ayuh. Rumor has it there's a secret passage in here. Used it back in the Underground Railroad days. It provided a secret escape exit into the attic. Folks could hide up there if anyone unfriendly came knockin'."

“That’s just a rumor, Sally. My mother told me there definitely was no secret passage,” Emily said.

“If you say so.” Sally didn’t look convinced as she guzzled the rest of her lemonade. Tipping her now-empty glass in Emily’s direction, she continued. “I’m pretty sure back when I was a kid, someone I knew actually saw it.”

Emily and Andie exchanged a questioning glance.

“My mother has mentioned it, but I thought it might just be her faulty memory.” Andie hadn’t taken her seriously, of course. With her memory issues these days, nothing she said could be taken at face value.

“Now that I think about it,” Emily said, “Mom was overly adamant about it not being true. Maybe she was afraid we’d find it and get stuck in there or something? Of course, my brother and I were way too terrified to look for ourselves.”

“Maybe.” Andie shrugged. “You know, there is one way we might find out...”

Emily understood. “We need to talk to our moms.”

Andie nodded. “Exactly. And the best thing I can think of that might jog their memories is to bring them both right here to this house.”

SINCE JANE frequently brought their mother out to lunch and Emily took Sadie home on a regular basis, it was fairly easy to get Addie’s and Emily’s moms to leave Tall Pines without too much confusion.

Luckily, the two elderly ladies were in a friendly mood today, Andie thought, as she and Emily helped them get situated in Emily’s car.

“You sit right beside me,” Sadie told Emily, patting the seat next to her as Addie climbed into the car. “Mother has a pot roast ready for dinner.”

Andie’s eyes met Emily’s. Andie shrugged. Hopefully, Sadie would forget about the pot roast by the time they got home.

Shane was in the kitchen, washing out a paint brush, when they arrived. His eyes lit when he saw Addie. “Mrs. Miller! It’s so nice to see you.”

Andie shot him a look then bit her lip to keep from saying anything until her mother got her bearings. She might get confused and uncomfortable if she didn’t recognize Shane.

Addie squinted at Shane for a minute then brightened. “Shane Flannery? Is that really you? Oh, how lovely it is to see you!”

Addie motioned him forward for a generous hug, and Andie couldn’t help but remember how close the two of them had once been. Now that she thought about it, her mother had been quite angry Andie had broken things off with Shane.

Their eyes met over her mom’s head. Andie offered an apologetic smile—whether for the moment or for the past, she wasn’t sure. Shane dipped his head in acknowledgment.

“The kitchen looks different than it did this morning.” Sadie ran her hands along the Formica counter tops. She stopped, a frown wrinkling her brow. “Hey, where is the Mr. Coffee?”

“We got this new maker, remember?” Emily pointed to the brand-new Keurig.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been here. Things are different.” Addie looked around with a confused look on her face until her eyes fell on an old cupboard with antique dishes inside, and she smiled. “I always loved those mulberry dishes.”

“Do you remember a lot about the house, Mom?” Andie asked.

“Oh, sure,” Addie said, but she frowned, her gaze narrowing as she turned a glare on Sadie. “Maybe now would be a good time to get my Nancy Drew books back.”

“I told you, I don’t have them,” Sadie said, her tone suddenly belligerent.

“You most certainly do! Remember? You wanted to read *The Secret of the Old Clock*,” Addie insisted.

“I returned that,” Sadie muttered, exasperated.

Addie screwed up her face, and her head tilted to one side as if she were trying to remember whether or not Sadie was telling the truth. Apparently unsure, she said, “Maybe it was *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*, then.”

“Ladies, would you like some lemonade?” Shane asked, holding up a pitcher and a couple glasses. Glad to have his interruption save them from a potential argument, Andie mouthed, “Thank you.”

The two older women took their lemonade and wandered around the house, pointing at this and that. Each of them had memories for different pieces of furniture, or an old picture, or some knickknack. Andie and Emily

let them reminisce until Sadie found her way into the new area they had sectioned off for the rental units.

She stopped abruptly, taken aback. There was a mixture of confusion and anger in her voice when she demanded, “What is going on here?”

Emily rushed to ease her mind. “You remember, don’t you, Mom? You sectioned it off because the house was too big.”

“Oh... right. Yes,” Sadie said, but then she pointed to the new wall, where Sally was busy skim coating the seams on the drywall. “But I didn’t know we were splitting it up like this.”

Sally turned with a smile and waved at Emily’s mother with the trowel she was holding. “Hiya, Sadie. Remember you told me to do this in case your kids want to move in?”

She looked at Emily and then Andie and attempted a bit of an explanation that she ended with another kindly smile. “Sort of like an in-law apartment, but in reverse.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Sadie sounded doubtful, though, as if she were trying to convince herself she did, indeed, remember.

Andie led her mother and Sadie through the unit, hoping to get them into the main room before anything else could come up, but Addie stopped again in the portion that served as an entrance for the two units.

Addie’s face screwed up as she glanced from the original wall of brick and paneling at the end to the new wall with the doors to the units. “I don’t remember it looking like this.”

Casting an accusing glance at Sadie, she asked, “Where’s the old bookcase? My books could be in there.”

Sadie rolled her eyes. “Probably in the next room on the other side of the wall.”

Before Addie could rush off into the next room to search, Andie caught her by the arm and said, “Wait, Mom. You can look for your books in a minute. I was wondering if either of you remember there being a secret room here in the house?”

Addie and Sadie exchanged a sharp glance. Sadie shook her head. “Nope, I don’t remember anything like that. Do you, Addie?”

“Nope,” Addie insisted while shaking her head. “No, siree, no secret room here.”

Andie looked at Emily. Her mother’s expression said she was telling the truth. Of course it would be true for her. She knew about the room so it

wasn't a secret! But the flush of color on her cheeks was what let the cat out of the bag.

Andie grinned and nodded at Emily, urging her to continue. They were definitely onto something!

"Come on, you can tell us," Emily encouraged kindly, but she could see in their mutinous expressions that neither woman intended to share.

"Nope." Sadie mimed zipping her lips.

"You told me about it before, remember?" Andie tried, since Emily's gentle prod had failed. "You won't get in trouble for admitting it now."

"Of course we won't," Addie said without looking at her daughter. In fact, Andie might say she was specifically avoiding doing so. "We didn't do anything wrong."

Addie's eyes kept darting to the chimney and to the paneling at the end of the room. Probably still thinking about her books, Andie thought, but right now she wanted her mother to think about the alleged secret room.

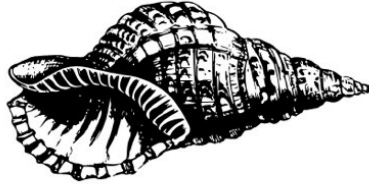
"Mom, it's okay if you tell me about it. I'm grown. We won't get lost or hurt. We're all adults now, and—"

"Oh, I remember where my books are!" Addie hurried toward the paneling at the end of the hall. She pressed around near the bricks a bit and then...

To everyone's surprise, a panel slid open, revealing a three-foot-high opening and a set of rickety, narrow stairs that went behind the chimney. And what was sitting right on those stairs?

A Nancy Drew book. *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



The discovery of the missing Nancy Drew book had created something of a turning point between Addie and Sadie. It seemed to have solidified a sort of truce between them, one that surprisingly held beyond the time it took to drive back to Tall Pines. They had even asked to be seated next to each other at mealtime, when Emily and Andie were trying to get them peacefully settled in, which they'd managed just in time for the elder ladies to have supper.

Now, Andie stood with Emily in the foyer, both of them staring in awe at the newly discovered staircase.

As soon as they'd returned from Tall Pines, Andie had gone up it, despite the cracks and creaks of the boards with every step she took, not to mention her slight feeling of claustrophobia. The thing was so narrow she'd had to turn sideways to climb it!

At the top, she'd pushed open a rough wood door and discovered a tiny room in the attic, just big enough to hold a few adults, or maybe a single family.

There were cobwebs everywhere, but no windows and no other doors. A single chair, with one leg broken so badly it listed sideways, held up more by the dust-covered webs than anything, had been tucked into a corner.

"I never suspected there could be something behind the chimney because the wall is so thick there to accommodate the brick work," Emily admitted, apparently still amazed by their discovery. Or rather, Addie's surprise disclosure.

“I think it’s pretty darn clever,” Andie told her. “Imagine how many people must have hidden in there. Brothers could have been there. Fathers and sons. Sisters, and mothers, and their babies. All quiet. All still. All desperately afraid for their lives while eagerly anticipating freedom...”

Andie felt the swell of emotion in her throat. Tears pooled in her eyes, and she blinked them back before Emily could see them.

Emily nodded. “It’s very humbling.”

Clearing her throat to rid it of the same emotion still tightening her own, Andie guessed, Emily changed the subject. “I’ve been doing some research since our talk the other day. I’ve discovered Underground Railroad inns are actually quite an attraction. There are already several of them out there. The Ashley Manor in Barnstable, Massachusetts. 1830 Hallauer House in Ohio.”

“Really?” Andie didn’t recognize the names, but she was excited to hear Emily’s research proved what she’d suspected from the beginning—this sort of themed place to visit and sleep was something people really wanted. Emily was going to do so well!

“That there are more like yours out there, already operating and making a profit, is great because it means we have proof of concept, Em. And you know what else?” She grinned and pointed at the stairway. “We now have our hook!”

“Yeah.” Emily returned her smile, then pressed her lips together as she glanced up into the stairs, her brow creased. “I’m just a bit worried, though. Do you think it could be dangerous for people to go up there? The stairs are pretty old and rickety. I don’t want to get sued.”

“You could put handrails on the stairs,” Sally suggested as she walked into the foyer and holstered her hammer.

“Or rope it off with a velvet rope and leave it open so your guests could just peek in,” Shane offered.

Finished with their work for the day, Sally had walked in to join the ladies in peering up the staircase. Shane had stopped behind Andie and was standing very close now, so close she could feel his breath as it rushed through her hair.

Warmth flooded through her, and gooseflesh rose up on her arms. In an effort to distract herself from his nearness and keep Sally and Emily from realizing how it had affected her, Andie crossed her arms one over the other

and rubbed away the bumps. She also took one step to the side, toward the opening in the paneled wall, to put a bit of distance between them.

“Good idea. And we could put a plaque or something here,” she said, gesturing to the paneling, “to tell your guests all about the history of the house and what the stairs were used for.”

More hopeful now that they were certain there was a demand for this type of lodging, she told Emily, “I think this is going to work out very well.”

“Ayuh,” Sally said. “And we’re almost done with the first unit. Just waiting on the cabinets and countertops to be delivered. Plumber is coming tomorrow.”

“Wow.” Emily peeked into the unit. “So I guess that means I can start taking reservations? Any idea when they will both be done so I know what dates to set aside?”

“Should be done in three weeks with both,” Shane told her.

“And then we’ll need to set them up,” Andie said. “Get the furniture in. Decorate. Take pictures to put online.”

“Don’t forget, there’s one other really big step you have to take care of before you can rent anything. Maybe you need to wait for that,” Sally advised.

Emily looked confused. “What?”

“We’ve been renovating a house that’s more than a century old to bring it up to code, remember? Which means it has to—”

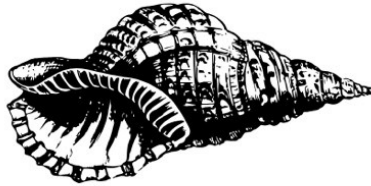
“Pass inspection,” Andie finished for her. She sighed.

“Ugh...” Emily muttered, sounding suddenly deflated. “I forgot about that. I hope the inspector’s not Damien Carruthers.”

At the mention of Damien, Andie’s enthusiasm waned.

“Don’t you girls worry about him,” Sally urged, her tone filled with encouragement and a hint of mischief. Her lips curved in a secretive half smile, she winked at Andie. “Mary down at Curlz is going to make sure he doesn’t mess things up for you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



Andie wasn't sure what Mary had up her sleeve to convince Damien to let Emily's inspection pass, but she meant to find out.

After she'd left Emily's, there was still some daylight left, so Andie decided to stop by Tides on the way home to update Jane on the day's events and to pick some flowers to drop off at the hair salon.

"I saw Mom after dinner, and she was tuckered out but happy," Jane said as soon as Andie got out of her car. "She and Sadie were getting along like best friends. Mom was reading to her. Can you believe that?"

Andie smiled as she swung the car door closed then looked up at Jane. "Let me guess, *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*?"

"Yes!" Jane's eyes went wide. "How did you know?"

"I'll tell you when we get to the garden," Andie said, tugging her sister forward.

While Andie selected flowers out of the backyard garden, carefully cutting the stems with a pair of shears Jane kept handy, she recounted for her sister what had happened at the inn with Addie and Sadie.

Jane walked beside her and listened, occasionally holding out the basket to collect the cut stems. "Finding that hidden stairway must have been exciting."

Taking the flowers to a potting bench near the spigot, Jane absently arranged the Shasta daisies, black-eyed Susans, and monarda in a Mason jar filled with water. "I've heard Mom talk about it, but I thought it was just her faulty memory."

“Me too. It’s pretty cool.” Andie laughed. “I think Emily was pretty shocked to realize she’d lived there her whole childhood and never found it.”

Jane handed the bouquet to Andie. “Those secret stairs will add a lot of interest to the rentals.”

Andie nodded. “It’s a great hook for us to use. Thanks for your advice on that, for the ad.”

“I’m happy to help.”

Following her sister inside, Andie set the jar of flowers on the counter and went to the sink to wash her hands.

“So, when is she going to be able to rent them?”

“Sally and Shane will be done in three weeks.” Andie dried her hands on a printed dish towel and frowned. “But we still have to pass the inspection.”

Jane made a face. “Is Damien the inspector?”

“Probably. I’m not sure. How many does the town have?”

“A couple, I think. Maybe you can request someone other than him?” Jane suggested.

“Maybe I’m worrying for nothing. Sally and Shane do top-notch work. Everything looks great so far, and by the time they are done, the inn will look amazing. There should be no reason for it not to pass.”

“I know that, and you know that,” Jane assured her. “But Damien seems sneaky, judging by what you told me he pulled at the inspection for the auction.”

“Sally said not to worry. She seemed to think Mary was going to persuade him to be nice.”

“Mary at Curlz? Hmm...” Chuckling, Jane shook her head. “Well, you know those hairdressers. They always seem to know everyone’s secrets. Maybe she has something on Damien we don’t know about?”

“That’s what I was thinking. Hoping, actually.” Andie picked up the jar of flowers and held out her free hand, motioning for a goodbye hug from Jane. “I’ve gotta get going. I want to drop in at Curlz before they close for the night.”

MARY WAS JUST FINISHING up with her last client when Andie arrived bearing the arrangement of flowers. Jules was waiting behind the checkout desk in the reception area, and her face perked up instantly at the sight of them.

“These are so pretty!” Jules took the vase from her and placed it on a table in the corner of their small but cozy waiting area.

“Thank you. I just picked them from the garden at Tides.” Andie smiled. “I thought you two might enjoy having another bright spot in your day.”

“Did you say the Tides?” Mary’s client, an older woman in her eighties with unnaturally dark hair, had followed Mary from the back and come to stand in front of the checkout desk with her purse open so Mary could cash her out.

She looked at Andie, her gaze curious. “My daughter is staying there next week on her visit. Do you own it?”

“Sort of. It’s been in our family for generations, but my sister, Jane, runs it.”

“Lovely place.” The woman nodded as she fiddled with her purse, pulling a few bills from it for Mary, then she looked at Andie again, her expression sympathetic. “I knew your mother back in the day... how is she?”

Andie knew she was asking about her mother’s memory issues. “She is doing pretty good.”

Mary finished cashing the woman out, and she waved goodbye to Andie and Jules while calling her thanks to Mary as she left.

The shop door closed behind her client, and Mary turned to Andie, a friendly smile on her lips. “How have you been? I haven’t seen your shop open in a few days, so I figured you must be busy up at the Thompsons’. How is that going?”

Andie settled into one of the chairs in the waiting area. “It’s going pretty good. We’ve got a lot done already, and there’s still a few things to do, but it feels good to be accomplishing things.”

“You seem to have a zip in your step, or I should say a renewed sparkle in your eyes? Is that because of the project? Or maybe it’s because of Shane?” Mary asked slyly.

Andie felt her face heat. She really wished people would stop making suggestions about her and Shane. Especially since nothing was going on

between them. “The project. There’s nothing going on with Shane.”

Jules looked over from her task of rearranging the flowers. “No? I heard about the little date you had with him at the beach.”

Andie blushed. “It wasn’t a date.”

Was it? Their walk along the beach had felt so similar to those of days past, and yet so different. Shane was there. She was there. She’d felt drawn to him exactly as she had before. But there was still a distance between them—about thirty years of distance—that a single walk down the beach for hot dogs couldn’t quite bridge.

“It wasn’t?” Mary asked. “You look a little disappointed.”

Shaking herself out of the memories, Andie blinked. “No. I mean, I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

Mary *tsked*. “Nothing complicated about it. You like him. He likes you. So you have history. Get over it.”

Andie laughed. “You make it sound so simple.”

“It is.”

Andie wasn’t so sure. If it were, Shane would have said something, right? If he were okay with moving forward despite their past, he would at least have tried to see her again. Wouldn’t he?

“We’ll see. Right now, I’m concentrating on the Thompson project. Which reminds me, that’s one of the reasons I came over.”

“You didn’t just come to spread cheer with your flowers?” Mary asked.

“That too. But we’re nearing the part of the project where we need an inspection.” She waited.

It didn’t take long for Mary’s face to acknowledge the significance of her inflection. “Damien. Right.”

“Sally mentioned something about you taking care of it...?”

Mary waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, yeah, don’t worry about that.”

Andie’s face scrunched up. “Seriously? I mean, I can’t imagine how you could influence him.”

“I have my ways, but I can’t tell you what they are. Hairdresser-client privilege, you know.” Mary’s hand fluttered to her heart protectively, and she grimaced as she reached for the bottle of Tums she kept on the checkout desk.

Andie slid a quick glance at Jules and decided not to press Mary more. She changed the topic to something more positive. “The best part of the

project so far is that we took Addie and Sadie to the house, and they uncovered a secret passage.”

Jules’s eyes widened. “Really? I’ll bet it was used for the Underground Railroad.”

“We think so.”

“Oh, that’s a perfect draw for a boutique rental! There are a few out there already, and from what I hear, guests love them.”

“I saw them in that online magazine you told me about. Thanks for that, by the way,” she said, turning back to Mary. “But even better than the passage’s discovery is that it seems to have healed the feud between Addie and Sadie.”

“Oh, that’s great news! Those two have been at odds for a while now.” Mary’s attention drifted for a second, and she became thoughtful. “Good things can happen when people forget about the past and move forward.”

“That’s true.” Andie caught a look in Mary’s eye and was now doing a little thinking herself. Had Mary been talking about her and Shane, or had her thoughts drifted to her own ongoing feud with her daughter?

Rubbing her suddenly fidgety hands against her thighs, she stood up. “Guess I’d better get home. I need to turn in early. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day.”

AFTER ANDIE LEFT CURLZ, Mary and Jules stood watching as she watered her plants in the window boxes across the street.

“I don’t know about you,” Jules said, her tone low, as if she half suspected Andie could hear her from across the street, “but I think Andie really likes Shane. Did you notice? She blushed when you mentioned him earlier.”

“Mm-hmm,” Mary murmured, her mood still thoughtful. “I know he really likes her. That boy always did wear his heart on his sleeve.”

Not everyone would have noticed, but it was clear to Mary that Andie’s leaving town all those years ago had hurt him pretty badly.

“They made a cute couple back in their high school days. Sally says they are still cute when they’re together. A little awkward, given the circumstances and their past, but cute.”

Jules chuckled.

“I hope we get to see them together again soon, and I don’t know how or why,” Mary continued, “but I get the feeling we will.”

“It’s hard to keep hearts once joined apart,” Jules said, her voice a little wistful. She walked over to the flowers Andie had brought and bent to breathe in their sweetness.

Mary turned away from the window to look at her. “Interesting, isn’t it, how Addie and Sadie made up by going back to their roots? The Thompson house was where they always hung out as little girls.”

“Kind of like Andie and Shane are going back to their roots, too—the beaches? Seems like everyone is managing to get over whatever their past issues were and move on with their lives.” Jules took a black-eyed Susan out of the center of the vase and tucked it back in along the edge then cast a glance at Mary out of the corner of her eye. “Maybe it’s time you went back to your roots, Aunt Mary, and healed your feud.”

Mary glanced at the phone. Her lips tightened. She hadn’t mentioned it to Jules, but she’d texted Carolyn over a week ago.

Her grandest hope was to see her daughter this Thanksgiving, which was still months away. She had chosen the Thanksgiving holiday because it would give her daughter plenty of time to prepare.

Plus, Mary knew the values she’d instilled in her children, and she felt sure Carolyn would understand the significance—no matter the trials or grievances of the year gone before, Thanksgiving is a time to acknowledge and embrace what is truly important in one’s life.

Mary wanted so much to be able to hug her daughter once more, to let Carolyn know just how proud she was of her. To tell her how very much she loved her still. And she had hoped...

But she never got a response. “Maybe trying to go back and fix things doesn’t work for everyone.”

“I don’t believe that.” Jules’s quiet words soothed. Turning back to her aunt, she said, “I think they all can. Maybe you just need to try harder.”

Mary fisted her hands on her hips, her eyes narrowing as she glared at her niece. “You’re one to talk. Have you spoken to your cousins lately?”

Jules could feel the censure in her aunt’s gaze. Her cheeks flushed, and she looked down. “No, I haven’t heard from either of them.”

“Well then, maybe it’s time you took the initiative yourself. Have you reached out to them?”

“No.”

Jules hadn't spoken to either of her cousins during the past five years. She couldn't. They'd ruined her one chance to do something, to prove herself, to be happy.

Quickly, she blocked the thoughts before her mind could drop into the vortex of what could have been. Instead, she forced herself to focus on what did happen. It was life. Life had happened.

Turning back to the window because life outside was easier to watch than the images playing out in her head, Jules gazed out at Andie, who had just finished watering.

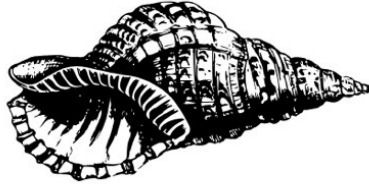
She turned and waved, then went into the shop, leaving the ladies of Curlz to the pain of their past and the clamor of unwanted thoughts.

Mary took one last glance at her phone.

Jules looked thoughtful as she fiddled with the flowers.

Maybe not everyone's feuds could be healed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



The next few weeks were a whirlwind of finishing up with renovations and then decorating. Whatever Mary had on Damien must have been pretty good because he passed them on the renovation inspection with flying colors.

Of course there was no reason not to. Sally and Shane's work was always above standard. Still, Andie would have bet Damien found something, even if he had to lie about it, just to spite her.

It might have helped that Sally had followed him around the whole time he was there, giving him the evil eye and making sure he reported that everything was up to par because if he didn't, he'd have to answer to her.

Today, Andie stood in the foyer leading to the two rental units, looking into first one and then the other with satisfaction.

Emily walked up beside her and gave her a friendly nudge. "The place is looking so good now, Andie. Thank you for your help. I couldn't have done it without you."

Andie smiled and held out her fist for a bump. "Thanks. It has been a fun project. We're not done yet, though. Still need to get pictures for the ad!"

Andie moved Emily out of the way to get some shots of first the foyer and then the secret staircase.

They'd opted to put an old trunk in front of the entrance to the stairs, along with a sign stating that guests were encouraged to have a peek up the stairs but for their own safety could not go inside. Andie snapped a picture of the entry to the stairs.

The antique quilts they'd found in the attic had been placed in protective sealed plastic boxes and were now sitting atop the trunk that blocked the secret stairs, along with a card describing how they were used to signify that the house was part of the Underground Railroad.

Sure the quilts and their use would generate the interest and curiosity of prospective guests, Andie snapped a picture of those, as well.

Emily had also had a plaque about the history of the house installed on the paneling nearest the entry to the rental units, but rather than get a photo of the plaque—there was just too much information for a photo, and she figured guests would prefer to read it on-site—Andie moved into the first rental unit.

It was a good-sized studio, featuring an eat-in kitchenette, a decent-sized bedroom area with a comfy queen bed, and a cozy but efficient bathroom.

The gray cabinets and white swirled granite countertops in the small kitchenette, combined with stainless steel appliances, looked classy, especially paired with the two upholstered dining chairs in slate gray that sat at a round table by the window. Andie had had a local seamstress make pillows out of some of the old damaged linens they'd found, and those sat on the chairs, blending the modern with the antique.

Emily had made up the bed with fluffy white bedding then placed small oriental rugs in muted blue tones on either side of it. A colorful patchwork quilt artfully strewn over the corner of the bed paired with similarly patterned curtains gave the entire room an inviting look.

Emily and Andie had called on Maxi to help with the antique décor, and they'd spent two days placing the items around both the units. Andie's favorites were the dainty white crochet doilies that sat beneath antique vases that had come from various curio cabinets in the Thompson house.

Andie clicked the last few pictures, feeling a little nostalgic for the time they'd spent together on this project and a bit depressed that it was almost over. Sure, Shane and Sally still had a few things to do to the outside of the house, but she wouldn't necessarily be there for that.

Her job here was almost done, and soon she wouldn't be dropping by every day to see the progress on the house, or Emily. Or Shane.

She was still a little conflicted about where she stood with him. Other than a few stolen glances in her direction now and then, he hadn't said much to her all week. He hadn't sought her out for her opinion. He hadn't

asked her to join him on the beach. He hadn't done a lot of things she'd secretly thought he might. Things she'd secretly wished he would.

Then again, she hadn't sought him out, either.

Maxi's words came creeping back into her thoughts, needling at an already touchy wound. Maybe she really was too worried about what she thought and not considerate enough of what Shane might be thinking.

As if she had conjured him with her thoughts, Shane pushed by her and went into the unit to finish tacking up some of the trim work. She watched as he crouched on the floor, hammer in one hand, finishing nails in the other.

"Great job. You and Sally are to be congratulated." Andie leaned against the wall closest to him, and he looked up for a second before he went back to work nailing on the trim.

"Thanks. We are almost done with the interior." Standing, he stretched and flexed his arm before propping his fists on his hips while his gaze moved slowly around the room. "We'll move to the exterior next week."

"I'm almost done here too," Andie offered, trying to gauge whether or not he seemed disappointed by the news. "I won't be coming by as often."

He didn't seem disappointed, but neither did he meet her gaze. Why was he making this difficult by being so hard to read?

"I've enjoyed seeing you again, Andie," he told her. "Emily swears she never would have made it this far without you on her team."

Realizing she had a bit of a choke hold on her camera, Andie set it on the counter and walked over to the wide window to look out at the beach. "It's so peaceful. The sound of the waves. The cool breeze coming in off the water. The warm sand..."

She hadn't heard him come up beside her, but when she turned around again, he was there, staring out at the view with a faraway look in his eyes. "It sure is."

"So, I thought maybe we could celebrate finishing the units by going to Smugglers Beach again later," she blurted out, feeling both an urgent need to be herself with him and cautious because maybe he no longer wanted that from her.

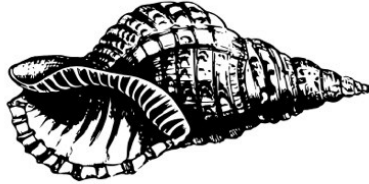
She felt her cheeks heat but forced herself to say, "It's supposed to be a great night to walk on the beach."

Shane looked at her for a second with questions in his eyes, but then he smiled and his eyes brightened. The faraway look she'd seen before had

completely disappeared.

Relief flooded through her, followed by happy anticipation when he said, “I thought you’d never ask.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Andie and Shane skipped the hotdog stand this time. Instead, they headed farther down the beach, hand in hand. Shane had brought a six-pack of beer, like he used to do when they were in high school.

“I forgot how nice it was here,” Andie murmured as she settled on a long slab of flat rock, the one she always used to sit on when they came here before, and gazed out at the ocean.

It was still as gorgeous as she remembered. Right here, so close to the ocean, the sound of the waves splashing against the rocks was soothing. The sharp salt air cleansing. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath.

“You haven’t been here since you came back?” Shane popped the top off the beer and handed it to her then carefully slid the top into his pocket so as not to litter. “I come all the time.”

Andie took a sip from the bottle and looked at him. He was staring out to the sea, pensive. She imagined him coming here to “their place” alone. Did he think about her when he was here? Another thought occurred to her. Had he brought his ex-wife here? Did she know that this had been her and Shane’s “spot”?

“I haven’t spent nearly enough time on the beach since I’ve been here. I rushed home because Jane said Mom was getting worse, and I was busy with getting her settled, then Jane needed help at the inn, and I wanted to stay for that. And then... well...” She shrugged. “Suddenly Lobster Bay seemed like a better fit for me than New York, and the next thing I knew I was buying an antiques shop.”

“So you’ll be staying then?”

“I bought the antiques store and apartment in town, so yeah, I’m staying put.” Side-eyeing him, she was able to see surprise register on his face. “You thought I was leaving again?”

From his expression, she could see he had. Was that why he hadn’t bothered to make any special effort to reconnect with her? Because he thought she would up and leave again?

She couldn’t blame him really. But if his fear of her taking off again was why he’d been so hesitant with her, would it all change now? Since he knew she was staying, would he be different than he had been these past weeks?

Andie finally admitted to herself she had been secretly hoping to rekindle what they’d had before. He’d been so distant, but...

Was it possible he wanted to be with her too? Andie had asked herself all these questions before, but right now, seeing the questions and something more in his eyes when he looked at her, she felt a tiny ray of hope that she would finally know the answers tonight.

SHANE WATCHED ANDIE CAREFULLY. She sounded like she’d made up her mind to stay. She had bought the shop and the apartment that went with it, but what if she was only temporarily satisfied with her decision? She could just as easily sell it.

He still had feelings for her—the kind that ran deep and never really went away—but he didn’t want to get excited just yet. He was still skeptical, and who wouldn’t be after how she’d left him thirty years ago?

But what he was feeling for her again... now... was too raw to let him jump headfirst into anything that might not last. As odd as it might seem, he was still looking for forever. Andie was too special for just a fling.

“I wasn’t sure,” he admitted. “Back in high school you seemed like you wanted something bigger. You had ambitions that couldn’t be realized in Lobster Bay.”

Eyeing her carefully, he asked, “Did you satisfy those ambitions?”

Andie looked out to sea and took a sip of her beer. He’d always liked the way she did that, daintily, not a chug like a guy. Her nose wrinkled slightly from the tickle of the carbonation, and he couldn’t help but smile.

For a second, she'd looked just like the girl he had known thirty years ago, and in an instant all those old feelings came rushing back.

Shane resisted the urge to reach for her, to brush that stray lock of her long hair behind her ear, and lean in to snuggle her close. She wasn't his to do those things with anymore... or was she? When she looked back at him, something in her eyes told him she might be.

"That's a good question. I'm not sure I even knew what I was looking for back then. And maybe, whatever it was, it isn't as important to me now."

"You just came off a big job with the Thompson estate. Maybe that's satisfied you for a while, but Lobster Bay is a small town," he cautioned. "There isn't a lot of opportunity here career-wise."

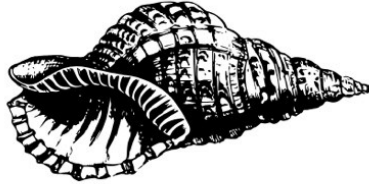
Andie leaned back a bit, propping on her elbows to look up at him. Her eyes sparkled with... something. "Maybe there comes a point in one's life when a career is less important. And maybe I've decided there's a lot more here for me that will make me a lot happier than any career ever could."

Her eyes shuttered for a moment, but then she glanced back up at him, a bit of a challenge mixed with complete and utter contentment in her eyes. She snuggled closer to him, just like she used to back when they were younger. His arm went around her almost without him thinking about it. "Like what?"

Her arm came up until her fingers touched his neck, then she tangled them in his hair.

"Great scenery. Good beer. And best friends." She looked at him then, her hazel eyes filled with hope, sincerity, and a lifetime of promise. And that was when he leaned over and kissed her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



On her way home after her time at Smugglers Beach with Shane, Andie felt excited. Shane had been on the same wavelength as her tonight. It was almost like old times, except better, because they were more mature now and both of them knew what they wanted.

Andie was pretty sure they both wanted the same thing, and that was what had her feeling as giddy as a schoolgirl. She was so happy and elated, she didn't want to go back to her lonely apartment. She needed to move around, to talk to someone, to do something with the thrill of excited energy thrumming through her.

Now that the Thompson project was winding down, she could focus on settling in, on getting some furniture for her place, and she wanted to spend some time really thinking about Maxi's suggestions. But it was best to start that with a fresh eye, which meant maybe tomorrow or next week. It was late in the evening, and the tourist traffic had dwindled to a small trickle. Not enough to make it worth opening her shop. Maybe she could go chat with Mary and Jules?

The salon's lights were on, and the Open sign was up, but there were no customers inside. It was the perfect time for chatting, so Andie parked in the spot behind her shop and headed straight across the street. She wanted to bring them up to speed about what was happening with her and Shane, and she really hadn't had a chance to check on Jules's grandmother's health.

The bell over the door jangled as she opened it, and she stepped inside, expecting Mary or Jules or both to appear from the back room. When no

one did, Andie called out, “Hello? It’s me, Andie. Are you guys back there?”

No answer.

Maybe Jules was at her grandmother’s and Mary was in the bathroom? Andie used the wait time to inspect the shelf full of hair care products, but after a few minutes with no sign of either Jules or Mary, Andie started to feel concerned. It just seemed funny not to hear any noises from the back if they were there.

“Mary?”

Nothing.

She ventured farther into the shop until she could see down to the bathroom. The door was open and the light off, which meant no one was inside. Now she was getting worried. Would Mary go somewhere and leave the shop unlocked? She didn’t think so.

“Mary?” Andie walked farther around the corner to the kitchen and... “Oh no!”

Mary was lying on the floor, motionless. Her eyes were closed, her face ashen. A bottle of Tums lay spilled on the floor beside her. Andie rushed to kneel at her side. “Mary! Are you okay? What happened?”

Mary’s eyelids fluttered. She clutched her chest and made a gurgling sound. Was she having a heart attack? Suddenly terrified, but relieved Mary was still alive, Andie’s hands shook as she took out her phone. “Hold on. I’m calling 911.”

Andie called and did everything she was told exactly as the operator instructed. Still, she felt helpless. Mary was now unresponsive, though thankfully still breathing.

After what seemed like hours, though it was only minutes, Andie finally heard the wail of a siren. Relief flooded through her, and she ran to open the door.

The EMTs came in, and Jules rushed in right behind them. She saw Andie instead of Mary, and her brow wrinkled with confusion. “Andie? What happened?”

“It’s Mary. I found her on the floor.” Andie pointed toward the kitchen.

Jules rushed in, but the EMTs were already at work, and she couldn’t get close.

“She’ll be okay, I’m sure,” Andie soothed her even though she was worried too. They watched anxiously as the medical team got Mary on a

gurney and then into the ambulance.

Jules caught one of the EMTs' sleeves and tugged until she had his attention. "Where are you taking her?"

"York Hospital."

"I'll follow you." Jules rushed halfway out the door then turned back. "I'd better close up."

Andie pushed her back toward the door. "You go. I'll close up. Where's the key?"

Jules leaned over the counter and handed her the key then started back toward the door, calling over her shoulder as she went. "Call Shane and let him know!"

Andie watched the ambulance drive off, lights flashing, and her stomach twisted. Mary had become important to her, almost a substitute mother, and she didn't want anything bad to happen to her.

She bent and picked up the spilled Tums, thinking about how Mary had been having indigestion a lot lately. And now this. Could it have been something more serious this whole time?

Pushing that thought away because she remembered Jules's hurried reminder to let Shane know what had happened, Andie set the bottle on the counter and made the call. He picked up on the first ring.

"This is a nice surprise to hear from you so soon."

"I wish I could say it was just a pleasant call, Shane, but I'm afraid I have some bad news."

There was a moment of silence, then, "You do?"

"On my way home, I stopped in at the hair salon and found Mary on the floor. She's been taken to the hospital."

She heard him suck in a breath, then, "Is she okay?"

"I'm not sure. She wasn't responsive. She's alive, but... I'm just not sure."

"Okay, thanks for letting me know. I'm heading there now. I'll call you when I know something."

Muttering a quick thanks, Andie hung up. Despite her worry over Mary, talking to Shane had made her feel better. Hearing the sound of his voice had soothed her wrangled nerves. He calmed her.

And after their walk on the beach tonight, she'd felt like she was getting a second chance with him and was so grateful, so happy, she'd wanted to share the news with Mary and Jules. Not everyone got a second chance.

Only now this had happened with Mary...

Should she go to the hospital? Shane had said he would update her, and Jules was there too. If Mary was in the ICU, they probably wouldn't even let Andie in. The ICU was strictly family only.

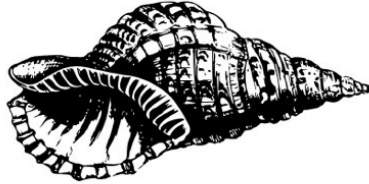
Andie decided she would wait at home. She glanced around, making sure everything was picked up before she left, and her gaze fell on Mary's phone. That was when she remembered there was still one member of Mary's family who didn't know she was in the hospital.

Her daughter.

Andie grabbed the phone. Surprised to find it wasn't locked, she clicked to view her contacts. It was easy to find Carolyn's information.

She hesitated only for a second then dialed. Carolyn might not care about Mary's condition, but at least she could know about it. Andie knew she had to try. This might be Mary's only opportunity for a second chance.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Andie woke with a start and scrambled for her phone. Her eyes opened in bare slits, the lids feeling like sandpaper after spending a fitful night worrying about Mary. She peered at the screen. There was a text from Shane. Mary was in surgery.

A few hours after the ambulance had taken her to the hospital last night, he had called to tell her Mary was stable and going through a battery of tests. There was no sense in her rushing down to visit. But now she was in surgery?

Shane's brief text gave only a room number—one that could be temporary. He hadn't said what type of surgery, and Andie's thoughts were suddenly filled with visions of Mary lying still and lifeless on a table, while surgeons worked fitfully over her to correct her heart.

A feeling of dread descended, and she tossed the covers aside. She wasn't sure if she'd be able to see Mary, but she would be there to support Shane and Jules.

After a quick shower, she dressed and then hurried to the hospital, her only stop one for coffees and doughnuts. If her memory served, hospital food wasn't very appealing. She remembered how grateful she'd been when someone had brought her good coffee from the coffee shop while she'd been at her father's bedside when he'd been hospitalized.

As she walked down the hall toward the room number Shane had texted, Andie had a terrifying thought. Her steps slowed. Had Mary even survived the operation? Tentatively, she pushed open the heavy door and peeked into the room then nearly dropped the coffees on the floor.

Mary was there, and she looked perfectly fine, sitting up in bed as chipper as a squirrel, talking to a woman Andie had never met. She smiled when she saw Andie.

“Oh, Andie, come in! I want to thank you for finding me and calling the ambulance.”

“I’m just glad I did.” Andie stepped farther into the room toward Mary’s bed, her gaze drifting from her friend to the woman at her bedside.

Mary smiled and patted the woman’s hand. “This is my daughter, Carolyn.”

To Carolyn, she said, “Andie lives across the street from the hair salon. She’s the one who found me last night and saved my life.”

Recognition dawned in the other woman’s eyes.

“So you’re the one who called me?” She looked at her mother then back at Andie, her eyes moist. “I can’t thank you enough. If you hadn’t called, I might not have come, and, well...”

Her voice cracked, and she drew in a breath. Her lips trembled, and her eyes closed for a second, but she quickly opened them again to look at her mother. She even managed a little smile. “I’ve wasted a lot of time over stupid grudges, so I appreciate your call, as I am grateful to have a chance to correct that.”

Andie nodded in understanding. “I’m just glad your mother left her phone behind and that I was able to reach you.”

Andie’s concerned gaze turned to Mary, who was beaming. “Are you okay? Shane said you were supposed to have surgery...”

Andie knew it took a lot longer to recover from heart surgery, and no one she knew of who’d had it came out laughing and chatting. Maybe it had been cancelled? Her heart dropped. “Was there a complication?”

Mary pointed to her right side. “No complication, and I’ve had it. Laparoscopic surgery on my gallbladder. All this time I thought I was having indigestion, it was gall stones!”

Her hand went to her side for a gentle rub. She shook her head. “Last night, the pain was so excruciating... I passed out, Andie, which is why I was on the floor when you found me.”

“Wow, that’s great, actually. I was terrified coming over because I thought it was your heart! I came in here half expecting to find an empty room.” Andie held up the bag of doughnuts. “I brought coffee and snacks. Are you hungry?”

Mary shook her head, but Carolyn said, "I'll take one, thanks. I left so fast last night, and this morning, well..."

"She's spent every moment with me. Poor girl hasn't even gone for breakfast!"

Andie handed her a coffee and tilted the bag for her to choose a doughnut. Jules came into the room and took another one.

"Thanks," she told Andie, her voice unusually subdued.

Andie's gaze sought hers, but it was directed at the floor. Something was wrong. She looked depressed despite Mary's good health after last night's scare.

"Are you okay, dear?" Mary asked.

"I just collected Gram's things." Jules turned to Andie to explain. "She passed last night."

"Oh, Jules, I'm so sorry."

"It's not like it was a surprise, but still." Jules looked at Mary, and her face brightened. "At least Mary is going to be okay. I'll focus on that."

"Did you see your cousins?" Mary asked, gently probing. "I'm sure they came to see your grandmother before..."

Jules shook her head. "No. I guess they came, but I missed them."

Andie thought she looked relieved about that rather than regretful.

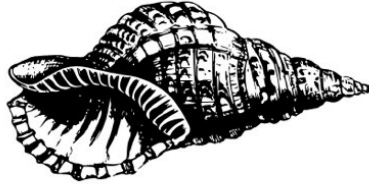
Mary's eyes narrowed.

"Maybe now would be a good time to reconnect with them, Jules." She held up Carolyn's hand. "It worked for me."

"It's a very good time to reconnect." Shane's voice filled the room as he crossed to Andie and put his hand on her shoulder. "It's never too late to let go of the past and have a second chance at rekindling a relationship with those you love."

Andie looked up to find him gazing down at her. She put her hand atop his. She couldn't agree more.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Three days later, Andie pulled up in front of the Thompson house. Though she was done with the “job,” Andie still intended to help Emily with the final setup.

As soon as Andie opened the door of her car to get out, Emily rushed down the front steps, her laptop open in her hands. She was beaming. “Look! I got my first booking!”

Andie couldn’t help but grin at her excitement. “That’s fantastic! Congratulations!”

“It is great, but also kind of nerve-racking. I could never have done it without help. You, Shane and Sally, and whatever Mary did to get Damien to pass the inspection so quickly.” Emily’s expression turned serious. “How is Mary, anyway?”

Mary was home from the hospital with instructions to stay in bed for a week. She and Jules had promptly closed the hair salon, since Mary was on bed rest while recovering and Jules was grieving the loss of her grandmother. “Mary’s doing great, recovering at home.”

“That’s good to hear. I noticed the shop was closed and got worried, but now I understand. She needs the rest. I don’t think that woman ever stops—unless she’s forced to!”

Andie agreed.

“Anyway, the reason I wanted to stop by was to personally thank Jules for showing us that boutique hotel magazine website. It’s been a huge help. Guess I’ll have to wait until they open up.”

“Maybe not. I invited Jules over to see the work we did.” Andie glanced at her watch. “She should be here any minute.”

Two seconds later, Jules pulled in, and Emily immediately thanked her for her help.

“It was nothing, really. I’ve always loved this house. I’m glad you’re fixing it up.” Jules glanced at the house. “To be honest, I was hoping for a peek inside. Can I see the units?”

“Of course!”

Emily took them around to the separate entrance on the side of the porch, talking over her shoulder to them the whole way.

“We made a separate foyer, one that only leads to the two units. I’ve finally sold my house, so I’m moving into the main house, and this way, I won’t be disturbed by guests. There are digital locks, so I don’t even need to check them in or anything. And look!” she said, motioning to the side as soon as they stepped through the door. “The best part is here—the secret stairway!”

Jules leaned around her and looked up the stairs. “It goes to a hidden room in the attic, right? That is very cool. I think your guests will love seeing this little slice of history. The motel I managed didn’t have anything half so interesting as this.”

“Why did you stop doing it? Was it a pain to handle?” Emily asked, then a little laugh escaped. “I’m sorry for prying, but I can’t help but think I might regret getting myself into this.”

Jules sighed. “Oh, no, it wasn’t that. I actually loved the day-to-day running of the motel, but I guess I didn’t do a very good job. It went out of business.”

Andie sensed a change in Jules. When Jules had first mentioned the motel to Andie a few weeks ago, she’d had the distinct impression Jules was too leery to get back into the guest hospitality business, but now, she saw a little spark—a hint of longing in her eyes that became more when Emily showed her the finished unit.

“We got all the décor, like these brass beehive candlesticks and the four-poster bed, from the house,” Emily said.

The room had been decorated with an eye toward balance, with a handful of antiques interspersed throughout to remind visitors of a time gone before while also offering up all the usual expected modern conveniences—things like a full fridge, stove, and custom granite counters.

Andie thought the bathrooms, in particular, would rival those of any upscale hotel.

“Wow, this is fantastic! I feel like I’ve just stepped into a magazine,” Jules said. “If I was uncertain before, seeing this took it all away. Seeing what you’ve done here makes me eager to get back into the business.”

Andie glanced at Emily. Maybe the two of them could work something out? But Emily had set things up here as an Airbnb with minimal guest contact because she didn’t want the day-to-day work of running an inn. Jules, however, might thrive on it.

Emily must have had the same thought, because she said, “Well, maybe I could—”

“Oh, no! I wasn’t fishing for a job.” Jules quickly cut her off. She shrugged as if to downplay the importance of her explanation. “The truth is, my grandmother had several motels. Apparently she’s left me one.”

“She has? Where?” Andie could tell Jules was excited about the prospect of starting over with her own motel, and she was excited for her.

“It’s in Shell Cove. I think it’s in a bit of disrepair.” Jules glanced around. “But seeing the miracles you’ve all wrought here, I’m starting to think I could bring it back to life.”

“What about your cousins?” Andie asked. “Did she leave them to all of you?”

Jules frowned. “I don’t think so. I got a letter from Gram’s lawyer yesterday. It didn’t mention anything about my cousins. I meet with him next week to find out more, but... I mean, I’m not even sure it’s something I want to do. Should I?”

“Of course you should!”

Andie and Emily had blurted out the same response, but it was Andie who reached out to put a hand on Jules’s shoulder and said, “A person doesn’t get too many chances in life for a do-over. This could be yours. Don’t let it slip away without even trying.”

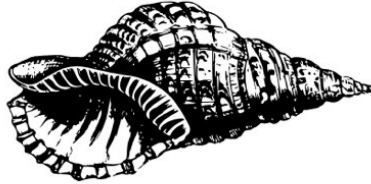
There was still uncertainty in Jules’s eyes, and Andie knew she was thinking about her last attempt and how it had ended in failure.

“Look, even though things didn’t work out at the last motel, you must have learned a lot, right? All that knowledge can be put to making this motel a huge success.”

Jules’s attention drifted to the windows, and she stared through the light curtains shifting in the breeze to the ocean below. She was silent for a few

moments. Then, as if having come to a decision, she nodded. “You know what? I think you’re right.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Jules took a deep breath and knocked on her Aunt Mary's front door, ignoring the dread she felt over the news she had to deliver. She loved working with Mary and appreciated everything her aunt had done for her. But if she was going to give a real effort to bring back the motel in Shell Cove, she'd have to quit the hair salon. She just hoped her aunt didn't see it as a slap in the face after all Mary had done for her.

Carolyn answered the door, her face breaking into a smile when she saw who was there. "Jules! It's so nice to see you again."

Jules hugged her, feeling a little relief knowing Carolyn was here. She was happy Mary and her daughter had reconnected, and it looked like Carolyn was taking very good care of her mother. Maybe her news wouldn't be quite so difficult to deliver with Carolyn here.

Mary came out into the hallway and noticed Jules. She, too, hurried over for a hug. "Hey, look who's here!"

"How are you doing?" Jules asked, pushing back slightly to assess her aunt. She looked good, with nice rosy cheeks, and it looked like she was getting around well enough too. There had been no hint of painful hesitation in her steps.

"Fantastic!" Mary pulled her inside and sat her at the kitchen table, where the two apparently had been having tea. Carolyn poured Jules a cup, and Mary slid a plate of cookies in front of her. "I got the all clear from my doctor today, so I'm opening the salon on Monday. I'm anxious to get back to work, and I'll bet you are too."

Jules felt a big whoosh of anxiety in the pit of her stomach but somehow managed to say what she needed to say. “Actually, that’s one of the reasons I came. I got a letter from Gram’s lawyer, and it appears I’ve inherited a motel.”

Mary’s eyes widened. “A motel?”

“Yes. She owned several, actually. Aunt Mary, I think I’m going to try to make a go of it.”

Quietly, Jules waited for the meaning behind her words to sink in. “I hope you don’t mind. I really don’t want to leave you shorthanded...”

Understanding dawned, and Mary waved away her worries. “Mind? Not at all. You’ve been a great help with the salon, but I’d be mad if you didn’t jump on the chance to take this opportunity.”

Relieved, Jules nodded. “I was worried...”

“Nonsense.” Again, Mary waved away her concern. Then her eyes misted. “I will miss you, though.”

Mary leaped up to hug her, and Jules fought back her own rush of tears, sad to think that soon she wouldn’t be able to see Mary every day. “Thanks. I wasn’t sure at first, but now, I think it’s the right move.”

“Where is it?” Carolyn asked.

Jules leaned to the side to answer her. “Shell Cove.”

“Shell Cove,” Mary repeated. She went back to the table and sat. Reaching for a cookie, she looked up at Jules. “Isn’t that the cute little picturesque town tucked into a curve of the coast up north about three hours from here?”

Jules nodded.

“Yeah, that’s it. The motel looks a little run-down, but it’s in a great location—up on a cliff with its own beach below.” Jules took out the picture the lawyer had sent and handed it to Mary. “Despite the obvious deterioration, the motel has a great retro-seventies look, and I’m a little excited about bringing that back. I’ll be decorating it in 1970s fashion.”

“I remember Shell Cove was really hopping years ago.” Carolyn dunked a cookie in her tea, took a bite, and then pressed her lips together. “Then they built a new main road inland, farther from the coast. The one through Shell Cove is a lot less traveled now.”

Jules hesitated. She hoped “less traveled” didn’t mean Shell Cove had become a ghost town.

Mary must have seen her hesitation because she quickly added, “But everyone loves the coast no matter where the main roads are, and look at that view!”

She handed the picture to Carolyn.

“With its own beach to boast about and a little sprucing up, you’ll have yourself a winner in no time.”

Of course Mary was right, Jules thought. People always flocked to the coast, no matter what. “Thanks, Aunt Mary. Your confidence means a lot to me.”

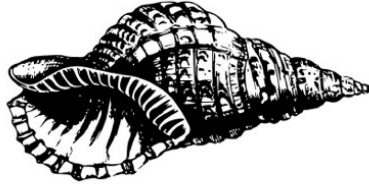
Mary flushed but then waved the compliment away. “Looks like a big job, though. What about your cousins? What are they going to do?”

Jules straightened at the mention of Gina and Maddie. The lawyer hadn’t said anything about either of them, and honestly, she’d been glad. This was her chance to make up for the failure of her past venture, and she didn’t need them showing up to screw things up like before. “The letter didn’t say anything about them. I’m meeting the lawyer next week, and we’ll see the property.”

“I’m sure you can handle it,” Mary reaffirmed. “I can’t wait to see what you do with the place.”

Of course she could handle it, Jules thought. Without her cousins in the mix, all the decisions would be hers... and this time, she was determined to make it a huge success.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



“Hello? Earth to Andie...”

Maxi waved a chocolate cruller in front of her face, snapping her out of the daze she’d fallen into.

“Sorry, I was daydreaming.”

“Oh? About Shane?” Claire teased, her eyes bright over the rim of her coffee cup, and Andie snorted.

She was one to talk. How many times had Andie caught her glancing over at Bradford Breads to sneak a peek at Rob during their morning coffee rituals at Sandcastles?

“Actually, I was thinking about how great it is to be back in Lobster Bay for good.”

Had it really been just a little less than a month ago when she’d sat at this very table, feeling like her move to Lobster Bay was a huge mistake?

Andie shook her head in wonder. How quickly everything had changed. Within a matter of weeks, she had gained a new passion for helping people—one that involved her love of antiques.

She’d made new friends, reconnected with family, and...

And she had Shane.

“Lobster Bay *includes* Shane,” Maxi pointed out as if she’d read Andie’s mind, but Andie knew she was still just teasing her. She and Claire had been trying to get her to talk about what was going on between her and Shane, but so far, Andie had kept mum.

Everything felt too new. Fragile even. Andie didn’t want to jinx herself by talking about it when the bright and shiny packaging on her second

chance at love had barely been stripped back, so she simply smiled. Yes, she knew her silence was driving her friends crazy, but she also knew she would fill them in soon enough.

“I saw Emily’s ad in one of the hotel magazines. It looks good,” Jane said, changing the subject, and Andie mouthed a silent “thank you” to her sister for having finally taken pity on her.

Aloud, she said, “Thanks again for your help with that. Things are starting to fall into place, just like we’d hoped they would. Emily has her first bookings already.”

Andie turned to Claire. “We put flyers in the units for Sandcastles, and Bradford Breads too.”

“Thanks,” Claire mumbled around a bite of raspberry danish. “Really appreciate you guys doing that for us, but you didn’t have to.”

Maxi cut off a tiny piece of blueberry muffin and popped it in her mouth. “James said the inspection of the progress on the exterior went well.”

“It did. Sally and Shane know what they are doing, so the colors and details were exactly what the bank wanted.”

“So you enjoyed helping Emily?” Claire asked. “I saw some of the items from her estate in your shop. Nice stuff, but is it really worth all that work you did?”

Andie took a sip of her coffee, weighing Claire’s question and her thoughts on it. She was obviously never going to get rich helping people like Emily. Not monetarily, anyway. But she had acquired some prime pieces from the estate, and that would elevate the status of her shop. Besides, Andie had enough to live comfortably on, and that was all she wanted. And that was the answer she gave Claire.

“It was worth it on several fronts. Plus, I liked helping, and as Mary at Curlz once told me, if your work is also your passion, it really makes your whole life worthwhile.”

Jane, Maxi, and Claire nodded in unison. They all knew from experience this was true.

“How is Mary?” Jane asked, changing the subject once again.

“Fully recovered and ready to open the shop,” Andie said. “The doctor wants her to wait a bit longer, but you know Mary. She’s raring to go. Luckily, her daughter, Carolyn, is staying with her and seems able to keep

Mary in line.” Mary and Carolyn had been inseparable since they’d reconciled.

“What about your apartment?” Maxi raised her brows in question. “Have you thought about my suggestions?”

“I’m going to start on it now, and yes. I’ve been so busy with the Thompson house, I completely neglected my own place,” Andie admitted. “But now that I’ll be home more, I need furniture!”

Jane reached out and touched her hand. “I’m glad to hear you utter the word ‘home,’ Andie, because I believe it means you’re staying, yeah?”

Andie nodded. “I am. I’ve got a list of people who want me to look at their estates. None are as big as the Thompsons’, of course, but these ladies need help.”

Since word had spread that she’d been helping Emily with her family home, Andie had been approached by several of the grown children of the residents at Tall Pines. Not everyone had an old house loaded to the brim with generations of antiques, but there was a need for someone to help fairly disperse the family belongings. And Andie would help them, no matter how small the job. Helping made her feel good.

“They sure do, after Damien Carruthers tried to rip them all off,” Claire said. “I’m glad people will have someone they can trust now.”

Claire’s words warmed Andie’s heart.

Maxi nodded her agreement and settled back in her chair. “I heard Damien is moving out of town.”

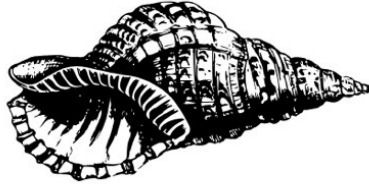
“Good riddance,” Jane said, her tone utterly dismissive. Then she pointed to the last cinnamon bun on the tray of pastries. “Anyone want to split that?”

Andie smiled, sinking back in her chair as her sister and friends continued to chat about Lobster Bay news, thinking how right it felt to sit here with them.

There was none of the worry from weeks ago about whether she was doing the right thing or if she was missing out on something more important or more fun. No, this was her place. Her home. She’d done her roaming, but now she was back, and strangely enough, Andie didn’t think she’d want to leave here ever again.

Lobster Bay was where her family, her friends, and the love of her life were anchored, and now, so was she. Finally, she thought, she was exactly where she belonged.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



Later that night, Andie stood alone in her empty apartment, her mind filled with ideas about where to place the furniture Maxi had suggested. She'd already gone through Maxi's recommendations at least twice. Still, she went over them again because she wanted to make sure she ordered the right size pieces for the room.

Glancing at the time, Andie closed her computer and put it to the side. Shane was coming any minute now, and she'd spent so much time going over the furniture, she hadn't really prepared for his visit.

Thoughts of Shane's impending arrival made her stomach flutter as if it were filled with butterflies. Would he like her place? Everything was so empty...

Really should have gotten on that before, girl, she muttered to herself as she heard his car pull up.

Two minutes later, he was standing in the middle of her living room, his eyes surveying the empty space while quiet surprise was reflected in his gaze. A low whistle passed across his lips. "Boy, I guess you like to live minimally now, huh?"

Andie laughed and swatted at his arm. "I haven't had a chance to order furniture yet. I was thinking I'd put a sectional over here," Andie added quickly, pointing to a spot in front of the fireplace. She didn't want him getting the impression the emptiness meant she wouldn't be here long enough to furnish the place. True, she didn't have furniture yet, but that didn't mean she wasn't staying.

“That seems like a good place for a sectional,” Shane offered noncommittally.

“And two chairs and a small table could make a sitting area at the front windows,” Andie told him as she walked into the dining area next to the kitchen. “Do you think I should get a rectangular table or a round one?”

Shane stood back to assess the area then turned his inquisitive gaze on her. “I’m not sure, Andie, but I think it matters more what you want.”

It sounded like he was testing her, perhaps not realizing why she wanted his input. She decided to set him straight right away. “I was hoping for your opinion, since I’m hoping we’ll be having lots of dinners here together.”

Shane’s body language changed. He came to stand in front of her, his eyes full of hopeful longing.

“Then I think a round one. But make sure you can put the chairs close together. Very close,” he said, reaching out for her.

The thought made Andie smile, and she put her arms around his waist then tilted her head back to look up at him. “Good idea. I feel like we missed so much, so many years that we spent apart.”

He smiled down at her. “Don’t worry. We have a lifetime to catch up.”

READ JULES’ story! Things in Shell Cove aren’t exactly what she pictured they would be. Find out what happens when she shows up to take ownership of the [Beachcomber Motel](#):

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEREDITH SUMMERS

Beachcomber Motel

SHELL COVE
BOOK 1



DR. JOSIE'S OATMEAL PEANUT BUTTER CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIE RECIPE

DR. JOSIE'S OATMEAL PEANUT BUTTER CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES

If your mouth was watering at the thought of the oatmeal peanut butter chocolate chip cookies made by Jane, then you are in luck. This recipe is courtesy of retired food columnist Paula Anderson, Scarborough, ME, and Hobe Sound, FL. Thank you, Paula!

Ingredients:

- 1-1/2 cups old-fashioned oatmeal (not quick cooking type), divided use
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. salt
- 2 sticks (1 cup) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup firmly packed light-brown sugar
- 1 tbsp. vanilla extract
- 3/4 cup chunky peanut butter
- 2 large eggs
- 2 cups semisweet chocolate chips
- 8 oz. semisweet chocolate, grated (may substitute 8 oz. semisweet chocolate chips and process until finely ground in food processor)

Directions:

Place 1 cup oatmeal in bowl of food processor; pulse until finely ground. Transfer to a large bowl and add remaining 1/2 cup whole oatmeal, flour, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Reserve.

In another large bowl, combine butter and both sugars and beat on medium speed of electric mixer until light and fluffy. Beat in vanilla and peanut butter. Add eggs, 1 at a time, beating well after each addition. Gradually beat in reserved oat/flour mixture. Add chocolate chips and grated chocolate, beating just until combined. Chill cookie dough, covered, at least 2 hours and up to 1 week.

Form rounded tablespoons of dough into balls and arrange about 2 inches apart on parchment-lined sheet pans. Flatten balls slightly and bake in a preheated 325°F oven in batches in middle of oven 15-17 minutes or until just slightly firm—do not overbake! Cool cookies 5 minutes and transfer to racks to cool completely. Yield: 4-1/2 dozen cookies.

This is a work of fiction.

None of it is real. All names, places, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real names, places, or events are purely coincidental, and should not be construed as being real.

SHIFTING SANDS

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Seaside Bonds

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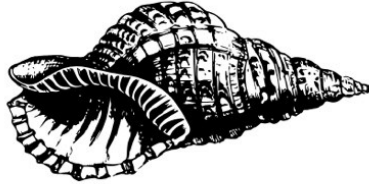
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lobster Bay

BOOK FIVE



CHAPTER ONE



Liz Weston sat on the deck of Tides and looked out over the sugar sand beach at the glistening ocean waves. She was glad she'd decided to splurge on accommodations at the old inn located in her hometown of Lobster Bay, Maine. The rooms were cozy, the service impeccable, and the view gorgeous.

The crashing of the waves, the tang of the salty sea air, and the gulls darting above created a peaceful atmosphere. She wrapped her sweater around her to ward off the slight Maine chill. Summer had passed. Now it was early fall, which, in her opinion, was the best time to be at the beach, since it wasn't crowded with tourists.

But she wasn't back in her hometown to visit the beach. She was here to clean out her old family home. For most people, a visit to their hometown would be a fun trip, but not to Liz. Her childhood memories weren't exactly pleasant.

She'd volunteered to do this job because she was always the one who did the dirty work in her family. Always the one everyone else depended on. But that wasn't the only reason. The inn was a distraction from her own problems, not to mention a nice place to stay—something she currently didn't have.

"I never get tired of this view." Jane Miller, proprietor of Tides, stood beside her holding a coffee pot. The proprietor's golden retriever, Cooper, waited obediently at her side. Jane gestured towards Liz's empty mug, and Liz slid it over for a top-off.

Liz was a few years younger than Jane, so they hadn't known each other well in school. Of course, all the families in a town as small as Lobster Bay knew one another, and Liz knew Jane's family had owned the inn for generations.

"It must be wonderful living right here on the beach." Liz's childhood home was several blocks from the beach. No ocean view or sound of waves, but she could walk to the beach in twenty minutes. That had been her escape when her father started yelling.

She glanced up at Jane, who was gazing blissfully out at the ocean. Liz was forty-five, and she guessed Jane must be almost fifty. She looked younger, though. Jane was tall and thin, and her silver hair looked sassy in a trendy short haircut, while her blue eyes sparkled with life. She looked happy, at peace. A woman comfortable in her own skin.

Had Liz ever felt that way about herself? The last few years had been hard. First Kyle leaving her for a younger woman, then Dad getting sick and Liz having to deal with her feelings for her father and argue with siblings to manage his care. All that was over now, but she still felt a bit beaten down. Maybe a trendy haircut like Jane's and a new health regimen would help.

"It is. But there was a time when I thought we might lose this property." Jane's words pulled Liz out of her thoughts.

"Really? But your family has owned it for generations."

"Yeah. My mom started having memory issues, and we didn't realize what was going on until she'd almost run the business into the ground." Jane sighed. "I set aside my retirement plans to help straighten things out, and here I am."

"Memory problems? I remember your mom. She was a real dynamo."

"Still is. I'm sorry about your dad. He was at Tall Pines, same as Mom. I remember talking to him a few times at movie night." Jane said. "Nice guy."

Liz simply smiled and said thanks. In truth, her father really wasn't a nice guy. Or at least he hadn't been when she was growing up. Gruff, strict, always yelling and belittling her.

Liz reached out and ruffled Cooper's fur. "It's so great that you have a dog here. I love dogs, but it's been a while since I've had one. My husband wasn't that keen on them."

Memories of Major, the German shepherd they'd had when they'd first been married, bubbled up. Liz had adored that dog. Back then, Kyle had been nicer to her. But after Major had passed, he'd forbidden her to get another dog. She should have stood up to him and insisted on it, but it hadn't seemed worth the fight at the time. One good thing about him leaving was that now she could do whatever she wanted.

"Guests seem to like Cooper. At first, I thought he might be off-putting, but it turns out he's quite an attraction."

"No doubt."

"Are you staying in town long?"

"Long as it takes to clean up the house and put it up for sale."

"Oh, your dad still had the house here in town?"

"My siblings and I couldn't agree on whether to sell it or not after he had the stroke. My brother and sister always thought maybe Dad would come back home." Liz sighed. "But he never did, and the house has been sitting empty for over almost six years now. Right now, there's no electricity, even, and it's kind of a mess, which is why I'm staying here." Liz glanced out at the ocean. "Plus, the view is better."

"Oh, gosh, well, I hope things go well at your dad's. Do you need anything else? More coffee?" Jane asked.

Liz shook her head. Two cups were enough for her. "No thank you. I'd better get in gear and start on the house."

"Okay. Have a great day."

"You too." Liz watched Jane and Cooper leave, thinking wistfully of how happy Jane seemed.

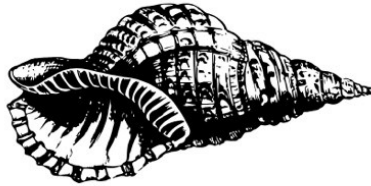
Liz wished she could be that happy, but right now, she was on a bit of a downswing. Things weren't exactly turning out the way she'd planned. Not only did cleaning out the family home mean revisiting unwanted childhood memories, it also reminded her that she had no place to live. The small apartment she'd rented after the divorce was being turned into condos, and she couldn't afford one because she had limited savings and was too young to tap into her retirement money.

It had been a mistake to take early retirement from her position at the school, but how was she to know that her husband would spend their life savings and leave her with no house and very little money? At least she would get something from the sale of her father's house. But first, she

needed to clean it out and spruce it up so someone would actually want to buy it.

She took one last look at the ocean and then pushed back from the table. She dreaded going to that house, but she couldn't really put it off any longer.

CHAPTER TWO



Jane hung her white apron on the hook in the kitchen and clipped the leash to Cooper's collar. She didn't remember Liz well from when they were kids, but she had empathy for the woman. Liz seemed a little bit sad and lost, and Jane felt bad that Liz apparently hadn't gotten along with her father.

Having had a wonderful relationship with both of her parents, Jane couldn't imagine what a bad one would be like. She hoped that while Liz was in town, she could make peace with the past.

It was funny because Mr. Weston had always seemed nice whenever she'd interacted with him at Tall Pines, the assisted living facility where Jane's mom, Addie, lived. He'd always been ready with a warm smile, never bitter and angry like some of the people that lived there. It was hard to imagine him not being a good father, but people often mellowed as they aged.

Brenda, the cook, was just cleaning up the breakfast dishes.

"I'm off to Sandcastles. You're in charge." Jane met her sister and best friends for coffee several mornings a week at Sandcastles Bakery, which was owned by one of her friends, Claire.

Brenda hung the dish drying towel over the faucet. "Okee-dokey. I can hold down the fort until Andie comes in an hour."

"Thank you." Jane gave her a little hug. She didn't know what she would do without Brenda. She'd been working at Tides as long as Jane could remember and had helped her mother immensely, especially when Addie's memory had started to fail.

Jane's phone dinged as she rushed out the door. She smiled when she saw a text from her boyfriend, Mike. But the smile faded when she noticed the text's subject.

HOW IS *the search for a helper* going?

JANE HAD MET Mike earlier that summer, and the two became fast friends and then even more. These days, she spent a lot of time at Mike's new condo, but she still had a lot of responsibilities at Tides. Mike had been urging her to find some good help so she could take more time off. And she deserved time off. After all, she was supposed to be retired now but had delayed her retirement to run the place after her mother got sick.

But it was hard to find someone to run things. It had to be someone she trusted with her family business. Someone who would show up on time. Someone who would be pleasant and cordial to the guests. In a small town like Lobster Bay, that special someone was hard to find.

WORKING ON IT!

SHE FELT guilty as she typed the response because she wasn't exactly *working* on it—more like thinking about it.

"Who are we going to get to help at the inn?" she asked Cooper as they walked the two blocks through the quaint town to the bakery.

Cooper glanced up at her. Was he frowning? It certainly seemed that way. Perhaps he was criticizing her lack of effort on the subject.

"I know I should be looking harder. Should I put an ad in the paper?"

Cooper answered her by stopping to sniff a shrub on the corner.

"But I love running the inn now and greeting the guests myself..."

Cooper barked softly.

"I know it's not fair to expect Andie to keep coming over to watch the place. She has her own business."

When their mom's memory issues had boiled over, Andie came back to town just to help for a little while. It was a bit awkward because the two sisters hadn't been especially close as adults. Andie had left town decades ago for an important job in the big city and rarely came to visit. But she'd

decided to stay, and Jane was pleased their relationship had been rekindled. Now Andie had a thriving antique business in town, and she deserved to spend most of her time on that.

Sandcastles, with its multihued awning and sidewalk café, came into view, and Jane picked up the pace. She could see her friends Maxi and Claire seated at a round table near the large planter, which was brimming with colorful flowers even this late in the season. Andie wasn't there yet, but a plate of pastries was already on the table, and steam swirled up from the coffee mugs at each place setting.

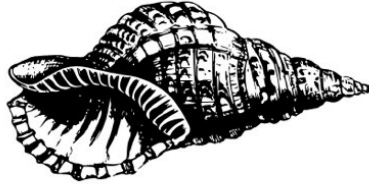
She made a mental note to work harder to find someone who would take some shifts at Tides. She and Mike were going to meet that night for dinner at one of their favorite restaurants, Oarweeds, and she wanted to have some progress to report to him.

"Maybe it will be nice enough to sit out on the patio for dinner tonight," she said to Cooper.

Cooper wagged his tail.

"And hopefully I'll be able to talk about a better plan for getting help at Tides so Mike won't be disappointed."

CHAPTER THREE



Andie Miller crept down the back stairs from her second-floor apartment to her antique shop. She still couldn't believe the shop was all hers.

She loved the scent of old wood and furniture polish, the soft ticking of the grandfather clock, and the creak of the hardwood floors softened by the Oriental rugs on top of them. Why had she resisted coming home to Lobster Bay for so long?

Once, she'd thought being an appraiser for Christie's in New York was the best career. She'd wanted to grab that big once-in-a-lifetime antique find. Lobster Bay had seemed like a step backward.

But now, she felt differently. Good riddance to her old job in the noisy, smog-filled city. The fresh ocean air and simple small-town life suited her much better. And the excitement of finding new treasures with local estate sales and helping the people in her town get money for their antiques was a lot better than searching for a big find that never came.

Little everyday discoveries were much more fun. Like the ones she'd been finding in the estates she'd recently acquired. One estate had been loaded with antique furniture, high-boy servers decorated with ornate carvings, sterling silver tea sets, and hand-painted porcelain. The other, smaller estate had several boxes of hand-embroidered linens, silver place settings, and some vanity items like perfume bottles and ivory brushes. She hadn't even had a chance to go through all the boxes yet.

It was Tuesday, so Andie was meeting her sister and their friends at Sandcastles in an hour for their morning coffee and pastry. She didn't want to miss that. It was her favorite time of the week. But she was an early riser

who kept her window shades open to see the sun coming up over the ocean every morning, and since she'd been up too early to meet at Sandcastles, she couldn't resist looking through one of the boxes from the estate.

After setting aside the decades-old yellow newspaper, she pulled out an emerald glass glove box with yellow and white enamel flowers painted on it. She was surprised to find it had no chips or cracks. Someone had taken good care of it.

Next, she picked up an old humidor with ivory inlay. A few little pieces of ivory were missing, but that was normal for this type of item. A collector would still want it, since it was an unusual piece and in good enough condition.

Some old scraps of clothing lay underneath the humidor and a trio of brass buttons. On the bottom was an old black cylinder. Was something inside?

The cylinder didn't seem as old as the other things in the box. Perhaps someone had rolled up a rare painting at a later date? A trill of excitement ran through her as she popped the end off and peered inside to see the brittle edges of a piece of yellowed paper. She took it to the counter, carefully pried the paper out, then unrolled it. Civil War discharge papers!

Apparently, Robert P. Koslachowski had served in the Civil War and been honorably discharged. It was an exciting find but not something Andie would ever think about selling. This item belonged with Robert Koslachowski's descendants. She'd bought the items from someone named Nadine Parker, so Koslachowski must have been her ancestor. She'd get in touch with Nadine so she could come and pick up the discharge papers and the old buttons and scraps of fabric, which must have been what was left of Robert's uniform.

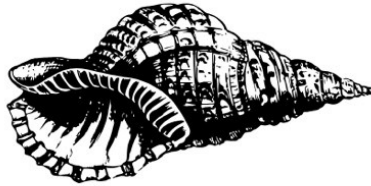
She could call Nadine while she was taking her shift at Tides. She was happy to help out at the family inn, even if it did take her away from her antique business a bit. She hated that Jane was tied to the place and wanted to give her a break whenever she could. But Jane had mentioned hiring someone else to take some shifts, and Andie, for one, would be pretty happy if that happened.

Movement across the street caught her eye. She looked over at the hair salon, Curlz, where the proprietor, Mary, was opening up. The two women waved at each other. Andie and Mary had formed a bond in the time she'd

been in Lobster Bay, a bond made even stronger because Andie was dating Mary's nephew, Shane.

Shoot! She was late for her meeting at Sandcastles! She carefully stored the Civil War papers in a drawer then swiped the dust from her T-shirt and headed out the front door.

CHAPTER FOUR



The outdoor seating at Sandcastles was full, just as it was every morning, despite the slight chill in the morning air. Hailey was topping off coffee mugs. Maxi was mostly content sitting there with her best friends since childhood, Claire and Jane, and waiting for Andie to arrive. She pinched a piece off her bran muffin and slipped it under the table to Cooper, who was sitting obediently at Jane's feet.

Cooper looked up at her with adoring eyes, and she tried to analyze the look in them for the pet portrait she had been commissioned to paint. Was it the highlights that made them so expressive? The depth of color? The shading?

She was worried about the pet portrait. She'd finished many paintings before, but those were landscapes. She'd never painted animals, and this commission was important because it was to commemorate Sandcastles regulars Bert and Harry's pug, Goblin, who had recently passed away.

She bent down to get a closer look at Cooper, pushing silvery-blond curls out of her face as she studied the dog.

"Did you drop something?" Claire asked from the other side of the table.

Maxi looked up at her friend, who was tucking a strand of her wavy auburn hair into a clip, a questioning look in her golden-flecked hazel eyes. "No, just studying Cooper for my commission. I'm a little nervous about getting it right."

"You're having a hard time with it?" Jane asked.

"Unfortunately, yes."

“Don’t worry, you’re a great artist. You’ll nail it,” Jane reassured her.

But Maxi *was* worried. “I just want to capture Goblin’s essence and show her heart so when Bert and Harry look at the painting, they can feel the joy they had with Goblin and not be sad that she isn’t around anymore.”

“That’s sweet.” Claire put her hand on Maxi’s arm. “I’m sure you’ll pull it off.”

“What’s sweet?” Andie appeared at the table, frowning at Claire. The expression in Andie’s hazel eyes indicated she didn’t like anything sweet or mushy. Today, she was wearing her long dark hair in a messy bun on top of her head and had on a plain T-shirt and jeans that apparently had some dust on the side. Knowing Andie, she’d probably just come from rooting around in an attic for antiques.

Jane scooted over to make room as Hailey set a mug in front of Andie and poured some coffee into it.

“Maxi’s doing a painting of Goblin for Bert and Harry,” Claire said.

Andie’s face softened. “Awww, that is nice.”

“So, anyway, how are things going with you guys?” Maxi changed the subject. She was uncomfortable talking about herself and didn’t want to bring everyone down with her problems. She gestured to the papers on the table in front of Claire. “What’s all this?”

“I’m trying to come up with some new recipes for fall. Pumpkin muffins, spiced coffees, that sort of thing. Rob is doing the same at his place. He’s been baking tons of pumpkin bread.”

They all looked across the street to Bradford Breads, where Rob was putting out a sign with the latest sale items. He glanced over and waved.

Claire blushed. Once, the two had been competitors. Now, they were an item. They were deliriously happy together, which pleased Maxi. It was funny to think that at one time Claire thought Sandcastles would be threatened by the new bread store Rob had opened across the street.

“I ordered some of his pumpkin breads for Tides,” Jane said.

“How is business with the summer winding down?” Maxi asked.

“Slowing down a bit, but I’m going to do some fall specials to bring people in. Getaway weekends, apple cider tastings, that sort of thing.” Jane slathered butter on half of her blueberry muffin. She had two chocolate chip muffins in a bag for her mother, Addie. Claire always sent a few of Addie’s favorite muffins when Jane went to visit her mother at Tall Pines. “Liz

Weston is back in town and staying at Tides while she cleans out her family home. You guys remember her?"

Andie frowned. "I think I remember her brother. Peter?"

Claire shook her head. "The last name is familiar, but I don't think I knew any of them."

"I remember them vaguely," Maxi said. "Their dad was kind of mean, wasn't he?"

Jane looked up from her muffin. "Liz alluded to that as well, but I met him a few times at Tall Pines, and he was very nice."

Max shrugged. "People change."

Jane nodded. "Anyway, she's the only guest right now, but we have a few other reservations. It's pretty slow overall, though, and as I recall, this is the slowest time with kids going back to school and no one going on vacation. Which is a good thing since I can't seem to find anyone to work there."

"No luck in the search?" Claire looked up from the paperwork. "Maybe Hailey knows someone."

"Hailey knows someone who for what?" Hailey appeared at their table with her endless coffee pot.

"To work part-time at Tides."

Hailey pressed her lips together. "You know I really don't know anyone looking for that kind of work. Most of my friends have full-time jobs."

"You're looking to hire someone for a part-time job?" Sally Littlefield, the town handywoman, who had been fixing one of the large planters that separated the outdoor café area from the sidewalk, peeked at them over the purple petunias that spilled out of the planter. Her bright blue eyes assessed Jane from underneath silver bangs, and Jane nodded.

Of course, Jane should've realized that if anyone knew someone in town who was looking for this kind of work, it would be Sally. She'd lived in town for most of her seventy-odd years and knew everyone. "Just to fill in part-time. I still want to work there, but Mike wants me to spend less time at work, and Andie has her antique business."

Sally screwed up her tanned, weathered face. She pushed the long silver braid back over her shoulder. "You know I can't think of anyone offhand, but I'll ask around."

"Thanks." Jane settled back in her seat. "I guess I can check the task of looking for an employee off my list now."

Everyone laughed.

“So, what’s going on with you, Andie?” Claire asked.

“Nothing much. And I don’t mind helping out at Tides, Jane. I could do more hours.”

Jane stole a piece of corn muffin from Andie’s plate. “I know. But you have your business to run. We can afford to hire someone part-time, and we should.”

“That would give me more time to process estates like the one that just came in. Do you guys know a family by the last name of Koslachowski?”

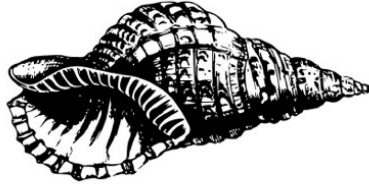
Everyone looked around and shook their heads.

“No. I think I’d remember that name,” Claire said.

“Someone came in and sold me several dusty old boxes from their attic. I found some Civil War discharge papers and part of a uniform in one of the boxes. I figured the family would want the papers and uniform back, but I’ve never heard of them. Must be some long-forgotten relative of the woman who sold me the box.”

That seemed like an easy problem to solve, Maxi thought as she sat back and nibbled on her muffin. If only all problems were as easy. Her thoughts drifted to the painting. How could she figure out how to give the painting that real feeling of warmth and love one experienced when they looked into the eyes of their pet?

CHAPTER FIVE



“The house is in a lot worse shape than I thought.” Liz stood in the avocado and gold kitchen of her childhood home, talking on the phone to her sister, Shelly.

She hadn’t been inside the house in over ten years. Now it was clear her father had struggled in the years after her mother’s death. When her father had become ill, her brother was the one to close up the house. He’d never mentioned the items piled on the counters, the clutter in every room, and the layers of dust. Her mother, who had died years before, would be appalled at the condition.

Sudden guilt washed over her. Should she have come back to help her father in those years after her mother’s death? She’d returned to visit a few times but never for long, always opting to meet her father somewhere for a quick lunch. When he’d gone into assisted living at Tall Pines, she’d visited once a year but never returned to the house.

“Does it still have that orange and brown shag carpet that Mom wanted to get rid of years ago?” Shelly asked.

“Yep.” The carpet, which was once fluffy and colorful, was now matted and dull. “Looks like Dad hasn’t vacuumed it since she died.”

“Well, the house has been empty for almost six years. It’s sure to be showing some signs of age and neglect.”

“Yeah, there is lots of dust... and spiders.” Liz shuddered as one ran across the wall to a web in the corner.

“I just wish Dad had a chance to go back home after the stroke. That was all he really wanted.” Shelly sounded teary-eyed.

Liz sighed. She'd argued with Shelly and her brother, Peter, about keeping the house. They never gave up hope that their father would come home.

"Thanks for doing all of this with the house," Shelly was saying. "I'm so busy at work I can't break away right now."

Just because Liz had taken early retirement, her siblings thought she had nothing better to do while they were still too busy with their jobs. They were partly right. She didn't have much else to do and nowhere else to go, not that they knew about that.

Maybe she was being too hard on them. After all, she had volunteered, and they did have jobs. They'd both come for the funeral, of course, and offered to help, but Liz had brushed them off. It was her own fault.

"It's okay. I don't mind," Liz said.

"You sure?"

"Yep."

"How is the yard?" Shelly asked. "We were paying someone to tend to it. I hope they did a good job."

Liz stepped over a pile of boxes on her way to the big picture window in the living room. Someone—either Peter or her father—had closed the drapes the last time they'd been here, and now it was dark as a cave.

She pulled the thick drapes back. Sun streamed in, highlighting the particles of dust released from the drapes like a snow globe.

The gorgeous maple tree they'd climbed as kids was still in the front yard. She almost smiled as she remembered how pretty it was with its bright-red leaves later in the fall. But then raking the leaves...

"It looks fine." The grass was a little yellow but freshly mowed, and the shrubs were neatly trimmed. The yard could use some of the flowers that her mother used to plant to add some color, but that would be for the new owners to worry about.

"Is it really bad? The fees at Tall Pines took most of Dad's money, but I suppose we could scrape some together for repairs," Shelly said.

Liz hoped the "we" didn't include her. She had nothing to scrape together. But Shelly didn't need to know that. "I think it just needs a good cleaning."

She wandered into the bathroom, which had pink tile and a matching toilet from the 1960s. Her mother had pestered her father to upgrade it in the '80s, but they'd never gotten around to it. "It is a bit outdated, though."

“Maybe we could spruce it up?”

“We?”

Shelly paused. “I could see if I can get time off, but we have a big event coming up and...”

“No, don’t worry. I’ll see what I can do. I’ll check with some realtors and see what they think. Maybe people want houses with vintage charm.”

She wandered back to the kitchen and saw a woman standing at the fence and craning her neck toward the house. She looked to be a hundred if she was a day. When Liz and her siblings were kids, the O’Donnells had lived in that house, but that couldn’t possibly be Mrs. O’Donnell, could it?

As she watched, the woman crossed her arms over her chest, made a beeline down the length of the fence, and then proceeded into her yard and toward the front door.

“Shell? I gotta go. Looks like I’m about to get a visitor.” Liz hung up and hurried to the front door.

“Can I help you?” Liz peered down at the woman, who was studying her with suspicion.

“I think the question is can I help *you*?” The woman waved toward the house. “Last I heard, this is Frank Weston’s house.”

“Oh! Sorry.” Liz stuck out her hand. “I’m his daughter, Liz.”

“Oh.” The woman shook her hand. “Bunny Howard.”

“Howard. What happened to the O’Donnells?”

“Ted and I bought the house from them fifteen years ago. I’ve been picking your father’s tomatoes.”

Huh? Liz glanced out toward the backyard, where the garden used to be when she was little. It looked a bit overgrown. “He still had a garden?”

“Yep.”

“But it’s been six years since he’s been here. Surely nothing would still be growing through all those winters.”

Bunny shrugged. “I thought he might get better, so I planted, fertilized, and harvested. Do you want some? I have the last of them ripening on the kitchen window.”

“Umm... no thanks.” The thought of biting into a sweet, juicy garden tomato did make her mouth water, though.

“I was sorry to hear of your father’s passing. He was one of the good ones.”

“He was?” Liz wondered if maybe Bunny had the wrong house. Then again, maybe she had known her father in a different capacity, and Liz supposed it was possible he had mellowed. To be honest, her father hadn’t seemed quite as mean when she’d visited him at Tall Pines, but her unpleasant memories had always colored those visits.

“Oh yeah. After Ted passed your dad helped me fix the back shed, put up Christmas lights, even shoveled my driveway. He played a mean game of poker too.”

“You played poker with my father?” Liz couldn’t picture her father playing poker. Maybe she hadn’t known him as well as she’d thought.

“Sure!” Bunny smiled at the memory, then her eyes narrowed. “Not that strip kind you young folks play. Regular poker. He was a friend. That’s all, no hanky-panky.”

Liz almost laughed picturing her dad playing strip poker and engaging in hanky-panky. “Are you sure you’re talking about Frank Weston?”

“Yes, of course. You said you were his daughter, didn’t you?” Bunny looked confused.

“I am. I just can’t picture him playing poker. Did you know Mom?”

Bunny smiled again. “A little bit. She was a lovely woman. So sad that she died so young and left your father a widower. He was very lonely. Such a nice guy.” Bunny looked at her as if wondering why she hadn’t come to visit more often.

“My siblings and I live far away.”

“Of course. Well, I just wanted to make sure you had permission to be here.”

“I’ll be here every day.” Liz gestured to the mess in the house behind her. “Need to clean the place out and get it up for sale.”

“For sale? Your dad always hoped one of his kids would move here.”

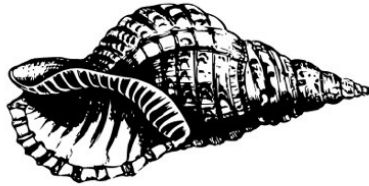
Why? The house wasn’t exactly a grand estate that had been in the family for generations. “Umm, I don’t think so.”

Bunny simply smiled and then turned to go. “Okay, dear, let me know if you need any help. I’m right next door.”

“Great, thanks.”

Bunny left, and Liz turned back to the house. It looked like a time capsule from a hoarder. Where in the world would she start?

CHAPTER SIX



When Andie arrived at Tides for her shift, she found Brenda sitting behind the check-in desk in the foyer and a large tray of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies on the side table. Andie grabbed a cookie as she walked past.

“Those are for the guests!” Brenda admonished.

Andie turned around to survey the empty lobby as she took a bite. “What guests?”

“Very funny. It’s still nice out, and someone driving up the coast could decide they want a room.”

Andie eyed the three dozen cookies in the tray. They didn’t even have that many rooms. “That would be great if they do. I promise I won’t eat any more.”

Brenda laughed. “At least rearrange the tray so there isn’t an empty spot.”

“I will, and now that I’m here, you can head out.”

“Are you sure? You have a business to run. I can stay a little later.”

Andie was sure. She didn’t mind taking shifts at Tides. She loved it here. Everything from her great-grandfather’s old writing desk to her grandmother’s flow blue china to the antique paintings that had hung on the wall was familiar and comforting. “I don’t mind watching the place. Don’t you have some grandkids’ soccer games to attend or something?”

Brenda’s eyes lit up at the mention of her grandkids. She doted on them. “Well, if you’re sure...”

“I am.”

Brenda grabbed her purse from under the counter, and Andie had a thought. Brenda's family had been in town for ages, and even though she was only about twenty years older than Andie, she might be able to help find the family those Civil War papers belonged to.

"Hey, Brenda, do you know a family with the last name Koslachowski?"

Brenda pressed her lips together and tilted her head as she repeated the name. "Can't say I do. Why?"

Andie told her about the Civil War papers. "I just want to return them to the family. I'm sure the person I bought them from is a distant relative, but I was just curious because I didn't recognize the name."

"Well, I'm sure you'll get them into the right hands."

They said their good-byes, and Brenda left.

Andie looked up Nadine Parker in her contacts and was about to call her when Liz Weston, covered in dust and sneezing, came breezing into the lobby.

Liz looked up to see Andie. "Oh, hello. Where's Jane?"

"She's off this afternoon. I'm her sister, Andie." From the way Liz had strolled in, Andie figured she was staying there, and they only had one guest right now, so it wasn't hard to figure out who the woman was. "Are you Liz Weston?"

Liz looked down at her outfit. "How did you guess? Did Jane tell you I was going to clean out a house that has been closed up for six years?"

Andie laughed. "It's kinda obvious, plus you're our only guest."

Liz smiled, but she seemed a little down in the dumps.

"It's hard going through all your family memories, isn't it?" Andie asked.

"You sound like you know what you're talking about."

Andie glanced around the lobby. "Well, not personally. All our family memories are here. My parents and sister and I didn't live at the inn, but my grandparents did, and we always spent a lot of time here. But I used to be an appraiser at Christie's, and many of my clients were clearing out old family estates, and I know there are a lot of memories that bubble up. You should take your time and be kind to yourself."

Liz looked about to burst into tears, so Andie rushed over to the cookie tray. "Cookie? Brenda made them from scratch earlier today."

That got a smile. Liz took a cookie. “You know, it is hard. I haven’t been back to the house in a long time, and Dad has been in Tall Pines for six years. There’s a lot of dust, and I guess before that, he wasn’t that great of a housekeeper.”

“Are you selling it?” Andie asked.

Liz nodded. “I own it with my sister and brother now, and none of us live in town, so that’s the best thing to do.”

“Where do you live?” Andie asked.

Liz hesitated. “Well, I’m actually in a bit of a transition. I spent the last twenty years in Vermont, and I’ve had a bit of upheaval in my life lately, not the least of which was Dad’s illness.”

Andie nodded sympathetically while Liz munched on her cookie and glanced out through the sitting room to the ocean beyond. “Though I have to say Vermont has pretty mountains, but nothing beats the ocean.”

“You just inherited a house right near the ocean. Maybe selling isn’t the right thing?” Andie sensed that Liz needed some direction. She didn’t know what kind of upheaval she’d had, but Andie could sympathize, since she’d gone through an upheaval herself just that past year.

“You know, living in Lobster Bay wouldn’t be too bad but not in that house. That’s the house I grew up in. It’s outdated and looks like something from *That ‘70s Show*. I could never live there even if I could afford to buy out my siblings.”

“You said the house is full of stuff? The mid-century era is really popular with collectors right now, and there might be some good antiques in there. If you want, I could take a look and let you know if anything’s valuable. I’d hate for you to throw out something that was a desirable collectable.” Andie was always on the lookout for old treasures and figured doing that could help Liz. “You’d be surprised at some of the things that are valuable. Vases that you think are junk, outdated furniture, even old kitchenware.”

Liz grabbed another cookie and headed toward the stairs. “You know, I just might take you up on that.”

Andie called Nadine Parker and explained the Civil War papers.

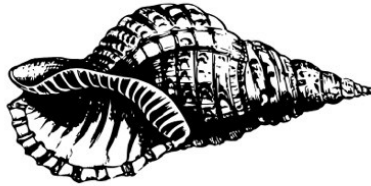
“Well, I’m afraid I can’t help you there. We bought the house recently as a fixer-upper, and I found those boxes in the attic. I have no idea who that family is.”

“Could you tell me who you bought it from? I could trace the family back through that.”

“Actually, we got it at a bank auction because it had been foreclosed on. I don’t know who owned it before us. Maybe the bank would help you out?”

Andie had a sinking feeling as she hung up the phone. Would the bank disclose that information? And if they wouldn’t, how could she know who to return the Civil War items to?

CHAPTER SEVEN



Maxi stood in the Lobster Bay art gallery admiring the new display of impressionist paintings hanging on the wall. They showed ocean scenes by a Kennebunk, Maine, artist who was known for his use of wide brush strokes with bold colors and masterful contrast of light and dark.

The art gallery was one of her favorite places and where she came when she was feeling a bit off. The main room was always quiet and peaceful. The white walls were a perfect backdrop to showcase the paintings and sculptures. A few strategically located potted plants softened the area and brought nature inside. The light streaming in from the two-story windows bathed the paintings in a golden glow, especially in the late afternoon, when it slanted in at an angle, as it was doing right now.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Muriel Fox, who worked at the gallery a few days a week, looked chipper this morning. She had short cropped white hair that framed a tanned face. Her turquoise blouse and rainbow-striped broomstick skirt added color. Dozens of bangles jangled on her wrist as she crossed her arms over her chest and stood back to admire the painting.

“Gorgeous. I love the use of color and how the sunlight dances on top of the waves.”

“Me too.” Muriel turned from the painting. “So, what brings you in? Just admiring art today or another reason?”

Maxi sighed. “I have a bit of a problem, and it usually helps me to come here and think.”

Muriel looked concerned. “Nothing too serious, I hope.”

Muriel had been instrumental in helping Maxi reconnect with her love of painting. If anyone could help, she could. Maxi told her about the commission to paint Goblin and how important it was for her to get it right.

“So what’s the problem? Perspective? Color? Fur techniques? Animals are much different than landscapes,” Muriel said.

“You can say that again. I think the problem is that I can’t capture the embodiment of Goblin’s character. The life in her eyes. The expression on her face.”

“Ahh, yes, makes sense. Have you tried practicing on something that isn’t so important? The anxiety of getting it right might be blocking your creativity. I know how Bert and Harry loved her. She was such a good dog.”

Muriel might be on to something. Maybe Maxi had been trying too hard. Putting too much weight on getting it perfect. “That’s good advice. I went right into painting Goblin, and it does feel a bit stressful. Maybe I will practice on my cats, Rembrandt and Picasso. I can relax when there’s not so much riding on the outcome.” Just thinking about her two cats—one solid white and one solid black—made Maxi smile. She’d gotten them as kittens over the summer, and while they’d grown a lot, they weren’t full-grown yet and still got into everything.

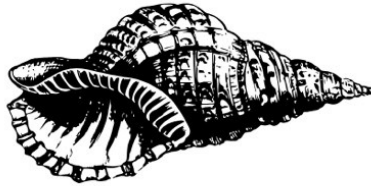
Suddenly more optimistic, Maxi hitched her blue-and-white-striped tote bag up on her shoulder. “Thanks, Muriel. As usual, you have great advice.”

“If that doesn’t work, you might consider a lesson. I know someone right in town who is a master at animals. Let me write down her number.” Muriel grabbed a business card from the desk and scribbled something on the back. “Her name is Bunny Howard. She’s getting on in years, but I think she’ll be happy to help you out.”

Maxi took the card and rushed out. She was suddenly eager to get to the little cottage on the beach that she used as an art studio.

It was a short walk to her car in Perkins Cove, and the fresh air felt great. She spotted Jane and Mike heading into Oarweeds, but she didn’t have time to visit with them. She needed to get to her cottage while there was still some natural light for her to paint by.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Jane felt lucky to have snagged an early dinner reservation at Oarweeds. The day still had some natural light by which to see the ocean from their patio table that overlooked the small cove.

She'd called ahead for an outdoor table so she could bring Cooper. He was now lying in between her and Mike, contentedly watching the people passing by as they walked along a popular path called the Marginal Way, which wound along the cliffs next to the ocean. There was a lot of foot traffic because it was the perfect early fall night for walking.

"I never get tired of dining outside." Jane dipped a piece of bread into the puddle of olive oil and balsamic vinegar she'd poured onto her small appetizer plate.

"Me too. You can't beat the view." Mike gazed out at the ocean.

"You can say that again." Jane let out a sigh of contentment. With Cooper and Mike at her side, the salty ocean air, sounds of the waves rushing over the rocky cove, and a lobster roll on the way, what could be better?

Mike turned to her and put his hand over hers. "I don't want to be a pest, but have you made any headway getting someone to help you out at Tides? You know if you got more help at the inn, we could do this more often."

Way to bring the mood down. Jane knew he meant well and wasn't doing it in a nagging way. He only wanted what was best. Any girl should be flattered that Mike wanted to spend more time with her. When she looked across the table into his green eyes, she saw only concern for her.

Jane looked away, pretending to adjust the napkin in her lap.

"I've got some feelers out." It wasn't exactly a lie. She'd asked around at Sandcastles just that morning. But she had to admit she could do more.

"That's my girl. I know it's hard to trust it to someone else, but you and Andie deserve to have free time to do your own thing."

"You're right. I can get so caught up with what's going on at the inn, and I really need to let go."

The waitress came to their table, bearing Jane's lobster roll in a grilled bun and Mike's clam chowder and broiled scallops. The pair ate in companionable silence for the first few bites.

"How was your day?" Mike asked as he dropped a few more oyster crackers into his chowder.

"Pretty slow. We only have one guest, Liz Weston. She grew up here in town and is back clearing out her father's house."

"Did you grow up with her?" Mike was from Seattle, so he wouldn't have known Liz, but he knew that Jane was familiar with practically every family in town.

"Not well, but her dad was at Tall Pines with Mom." Jane picked a piece of lobster out of the roll with her fork. They always stuffed them so full of meat it was hard to get a bite without taking some out. "He seemed nice."

"How is Addie? Did you visit her today?"

"She's great. She was painting another one of her watercolors when I visited today. I can't believe I resisted putting her in Tall Pines for so long. That place has been great for her." It had been heartbreaking for Jane to put her mother in an assisted living place, but Jane couldn't care for Addie herself. That decision turned out to be a blessing. Addie was getting much better care there, and Jane was free to run the family inn and live her life.

"Did you take Cooper?" Mike flipped Cooper an oyster cracker.

"Yes, everyone loves to see him so much." Cooper was always welcome at Tall Pines and seemed to put everyone in a good mood.

"Next time, give me a shout, and if I don't have any meetings, I'll go with you. I love visiting Addie too."

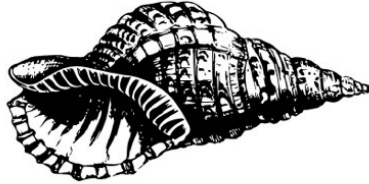
"She loves seeing you too." Jane's heart warmed. Mike was a nice guy—successful, handsome, and he loved her mother. What more could she ask for? He never asked for anything except to spend more time with her. She was crazy not to make searching for another person to help out at Tides her top priority.

But a part of her wondered if she was hesitating for a self-destructive reason. After her husband had died, she'd distanced herself from any romantic entanglements. Until Mike. But now she had to wonder if maybe she just wasn't meant to be with anyone else.

They settled into small talk about things going on in the town, Mike's job, and their various friends. Over the summer they'd settled into a comfortable routine of hanging around with her best friends and their significant others. She loved spending time with Maxi and James, Claire and Rob, and Andie and Shane.

Things were going very well for her. She made a mental note to step up her search for the perfect person for Tides, since she didn't want to mess things up with Mike. And if her subconscious was trying to meddle, it would just have to butt out.

CHAPTER NINE



The next morning, Liz lingered over coffee on Tides's back deck before leaving for her dad's house. Funny, she still thought of it as her father's house instead of her home, even though she grew up there.

"How did things go at your house? Still no electricity?" Jane asked.

"It's getting turned on today, but the place is such a mess. I don't think I'll stay there even when the lights get turned on." Liz had been surprised that spending time in the house was less horrible than as she'd expected. She still had no desire to sleep there, though. "I met a neighbor, Bunny Howard. She seemed nice. Apparently, she's been keeping my father's garden up all these years. Isn't that odd?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

Jane had been staring out at the ocean, apparently lost in her own thoughts. She looked troubled. Liz's instincts as a school guidance counselor took over. Maybe it would help if she talked to someone and took a break from her own troubles. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, it's nothing really. How could I not be okay with this great view?" Jane topped off her coffee. "Did you ask me a question?"

Apparently, Jane wasn't ready to open up, so Liz continued talking about the house. "It was nothing. Straightening out that house is a bit overwhelming. I don't think Dad ever threw anything out. I met your sister in the lobby yesterday, and she said she'd take a look to see if anything was valuable."

"That's great. If there's anything of value, Andie will find it."

Liz laughed. "I doubt anything is." She could sure use the money, though.

"You might be surprised."

Jane stood there holding the coffee pot, wearing a troubled expression that Liz recognized. It was the same look Liz had had on her face when she was going through everything with her ex.

"I can see something is on your mind. Guy trouble? Sometimes it helps to talk to a stranger who won't spread your business all over town." Liz gestured for Jane to sit across from her.

Jane smiled and sighed. "You're perceptive. It's not really guy trouble... but maybe."

"Tell me all about it."

Jane took a deep breath and put her hand down to pet Cooper, who had trotted to her side when she sat. "I was married to a wonderful man, but he died many years ago."

Liz felt an immediate pang of sympathy. "Oh, I'm so sorry!"

Jane shook her head. "Like I said, it was long ago, and I have a new man now. One who is kind and sweet."

"But..."

"He wants me to work less. Find someone to take some hours here at Tides. Wants to spend more time together. For some reason, that makes me nervous."

"But you really care about him."

"Very much."

"Woof!"

Liz laughed. "Cooper seems to agree."

"Cooper was actually Mike's dog, but he couldn't have him in the place he was renting here, so I sort of adopted him. Of course, now Mike has a more permanent place in town where he could have Cooper, but Mike likes him to stay at Tides with me. He said that Cooper will protect me. From what, I have no idea, but I love having the dog with me, so I don't question it."

Liz petted the dog. "I bet he would protect you." She looked up at Jane. "It sounds like Mike's a great guy. Do you think you might just be nervous because you lost your first husband so young, and you're afraid that might happen again?"

“Maybe. But that seems so silly. I mean, why would that cause me not to want to hire someone here?”

“Well, if you hire someone to work at Tides, then you can spend more time with Mike, and your relationship might progress to the next level. Then you would have that much more to lose if anything happened to him.”

“Oh. I didn’t think of it that way.”

“But it sounds like it is all misplaced worry. I would hate to see things get messed up with you and Mike because you’re worrying about something that might never happen.”

Liz was happy to see the tension in Jane’s shoulders ease.

“Thanks. It makes sense now that you put it that way. I guess my subconscious was being overly paranoid. I’ll have to try to get it to butt out.” Jane studied Liz for a minute. “But I suspect I’m not the only one that might have some misplaced worry. Is there a reason you don’t want to stay in your house besides the mess?”

Liz wasn’t sure if it was the ocean, the coffee, or the dog, but she found herself telling Jane everything about her past. The way her father had always been so critical. How most of their communication when she was a teen was him yelling. How she’d moved away to college and then stayed away from her father, doing only the minimum at the end. How her husband had frittered away all their money and then dumped her and, finally, how her apartment was being turned into condos, and she couldn’t afford any place to live back home.

“So I’ll be homeless in a few months.”

“You can stay here! I’m sure we’ll have plenty of empty rooms.”

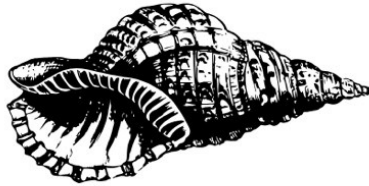
“Oh, I couldn’t impose. But thanks.”

“No, thank *you*. You’ve given me some insight into my issues, and I’m grateful.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Liz took a deep breath. It had felt good to talk to someone about all her issues, even if no solution had resulted. She was happy that she’d given Jane something to think about and truly hoped her relationship with Mike could get to the next level.

Liz finished her coffee and set the mug down. “Well, I’d better get to the house. Who knows—maybe I’ll find a rare antique that will solve all my money issues!”

CHAPTER TEN



After Liz left, Jane cleaned up the table and went to the kitchen. She fed Cooper, popped a bagel into the toaster, and sat at the old pine table that had been the setting for many family dinners for generations.

Jane felt bad for Liz, and her offer to stay at Tides was genuine. The inn was usually nearly empty in the late fall and winter. She'd have several empty rooms. It was still a mystery, though, why Liz wouldn't stay in her family home. Her childhood couldn't have been *that* bad. Maybe Liz just needed to see things from a different perspective.

Just like Jane was now seeing things from a different perspective, thanks to her conversation with Liz. Had she been subconsciously procrastinating about hiring someone because she was afraid that spending more time with Mike would lead to something more permanent and she didn't want to lose another person she'd let get so close? Logically she knew that was silly, and knowing that gave her a new focus.

"Time to get out of my comfort zone, Coop." Jane flipped open the paper to the classifieds. Cooper, who was lying by the back door, swished his tail back and forth as if agreeing.

Jane studied the ads to inspire some ad copy ideas that suited her needs, then she called Debbie at the local paper and told her what she wanted.

"Do you want to have them contact you by phone or email?" Debbie asked. "I suggest email. Otherwise, you might have a lot of weirdos calling."

"Weirdos? Does that happen often?" Jane didn't want to have to weed through a bunch of undesirable applicants.

“Sometimes. You know how people are.”

“Right. Email it is, then. You wouldn’t happen to know anyone who might be interested, do you?” It never hurt to ask around.

“No but I’ll keep my eyes peeled and my ears open.”

Debbie told her the price for the ad, and Jane gave her the business credit card number and hung up.

Judging by the way Cooper’s gaze flicked from Jane to the screen door, he wanted to go for a walk on the beach.

“Okay, buddy. I think I can sneak out for a short walk.”

On the beach, Jane took her shoes off and let her feet sink into the soft sand. It was still too early for the sun to have heated it, so the sand was cool, but the rough texture still felt good. Cooper rushed off and returned with a stick. Jane threw it.

Cooper raced to get it. He returned dutifully and dropped it at her feet, looking up at her with a goofy smile on his furry face.

She threw it again, and Cooper raced off again.

They repeated the process as Jane angled down to the water’s edge. She couldn’t resist dipping a toe in. She jerked her foot back. The water was cold enough to take her breath away. No surprise there. The Maine ocean was ice cold in August, and now, at the end of summer, it was even chillier.

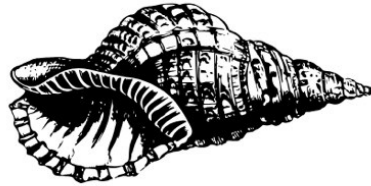
She walked on the hard wet sand at the water’s edge, throwing the stick and watching the sandpipers race along the foamy surf. They never seemed to think the water was too cold.

After twenty minutes, she came to the portion of the beach that was dotted with small cottages. She glanced over at the one that Maxi rented as an art studio. Maybe she’d be out on her patio with a coffee, and Jane would drop in for a visit.

Maxi wasn’t sipping coffee on the patio, though. Jane saw through the picture window that her friend was in the living room, standing at her easel. As Jane watched, Maxi raced to the couch and picked up Rembrandt. The black cat did not look pleased as Maxi arranged him on the couch then ran back to the easel.

Maxi appeared to be busy, so Jane proceeded down the beach, enjoying the sunshine and cool ocean breeze, satisfied that she’d taken a solid step toward hiring someone to take some of the workload off her shoulders at Tides.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Painting a cat was not easy, Maxi thought as she struggled to get Picasso into the perfect position next to Rembrandt. She'd given up on expecting them to sit still while she painted, even though they were quite happy to do that all day long when she wasn't trying to paint them. Now she only wanted them to stay still for a few seconds so she could snap a picture.

She glanced back at the easel. She'd sketched in the scene and painted the background. She'd done a good job portraying Rembrandt's sleek ebony coat and Picasso's snow-white fur and pink nose. But their eyes were dull, not intelligent and mischievous like they were in real life.

Picasso was curled on the chair near the window, basking in the sun. Maxi crept up to him with her cell phone. She crouched down and made a noise so he would open his gorgeous blue eyes, but before she could snap a photo....

Meow!

He bolted from the chair, somehow pushing it back into the window and knocking over a starfish that had been sitting on the windowsill. He stopped in the hallway and looked back at her with reproachful eyes.

"Fine, I'll paint Rembrandt, then, and make him famous."

Rembrandt didn't like that idea. He ran under the couch as she approached while Picasso leapt up on the kitchen counter and started batting at her brushes with his paw.

Her phone trilled. It was her husband, James. Maxi plopped down onto the sofa and answered.

"Hi, honey, how is it going?"

“Exhausting! Turns out herding cats isn’t as easy as I thought.”

James laughed, which immediately made Maxi feel better. “Sounds like you need a break.”

“You can say that again.”

“How about we meet at Splash for a glass of wine at four?”

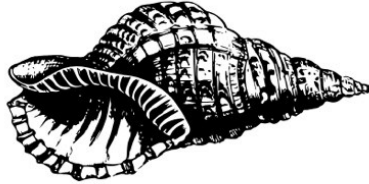
“That sounds absolutely perfect.”

Maxi hung up, feeling much better. She and James had gone through a rough spot, but their relationship had come out stronger in the end. And now things were absolutely perfect.

Well, nearly perfect, she thought, as Rembrandt crawled into her lap and stared up at her adoringly as if trying to make up for his previous bad behavior.

“Don’t think you can be forgiven so easily,” she said then hugged the cat anyway.

CHAPTER TWELVE



The small kitchen area at Curlz, the hair salon across the street from Andie's antique store and apartment, had become almost as familiar to Andie as her own kitchen. She often popped over to chat with Mary when business was slow for them both and she wanted to take break.

Andie settled back in the chair, sipping a peppermint tea while Mary relaxed in between clients.

"So, you have no idea who the Civil War papers belong to?" Mary was always interested in the antiques that Andie bought. "No one in town has that last name?"

"The person I got it from said it was left in their attic. They bought the house as a foreclosure and don't know who owned it before. I tried the bank, but they weren't very helpful."

Mary dipped her teabag into her mug. She had a variety of mugs, and this one was black with white scissors dancing across the rim. "Maybe the family doesn't want them?"

The thought had never occurred to Andie. She couldn't imagine someone not wanting their family history. "Maybe, but I don't feel right just selling them or throwing them away. I think it's more likely that the family didn't know they were up there. The box was probably put there by some ancestor generations ago."

"Yeah, probably." Mary thought for a few minutes. "Lucky for you, I might be able to help. Agnes Crosby works down at the town hall. She comes in every month for a cut and color. Maybe she knows of a way you can find out."

Mary grabbed her phone off the counter and dialed a number. “Agnes? It’s Mary over at Curlz. I have a question. If someone wanted to find out who owned a house that had been foreclosed on, could you help them?”

Andie watched as Mary nodded and said “uh-huh” a few times. Then she hung up the phone. “Agnes says that sometimes that information is sealed. She doesn’t want to dig in and get into trouble, but she did have another idea. You could trace the family tree.”

Andie frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The town library has a huge genealogy section. You can put in your guy’s name and see the family tree.”

“Really? That will be great. Thanks so much.”

“No need to thank me. After all, we’re practically family.” Mary got a mischievous glint in her gray eyes. “Speaking of which? Is my favorite nephew coming today?”

Andie’s cheeks heated, and she felt silly. She was a grown woman, but somehow, thoughts of Shane always made her feel like the teenager she’d been when she’d first met him. It was downright embarrassing. “I’m waiting for him to come and pick me up for dinner, actually.”

“Just killing time here with me, then?” Mary feigned being insulted.

Andie laughed. “Oh no. I’m killing time with Shane. Just using a date with him as an excuse to talk to you.”

The door opened, and Shane walked in. Andie’s heart did a little skip, as it always did when he came into the room. He was tall with dark, slightly graying hair and kind gray eyes. And when he smiled at her, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes didn’t make him look aged—they made him look magical.

“Hey, how are my favorite girls?” Shane came over and kissed Mary on the cheek and Andie on the lips.

“Great and you? How are things over at the Brown house?” Andie asked. Shane was a general contractor in town and had been renovating a house for the Brown family. He must’ve gone home to change and shave because he smelled slightly spicy and looked fresh in a crisp, clean shirt and jeans.

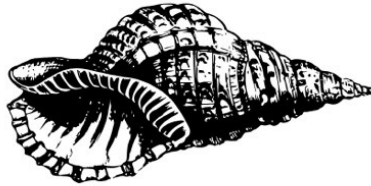
“Pretty good. Got the kitchen in, and the tile guys are coming tomorrow for the bathrooms. I was thinking maybe we could head on over to Splash and watch the sunset. Maybe split some appetizers?”

“Sounds delicious.”

Shane turned to Mary. “Would you like to join us?”

Mary waved her hand. “No, you two go along. I don’t want to be a third wheel. Besides, I have a client coming in half an hour.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



A basket with a note from Bunny sat on the front steps to Liz's house.

THOUGHT YOU MIGHT NEED A SNACK.

INSIDE WERE some muffins that looked freshly baked and tomatoes from her dad's garden. She glanced over at the house next door to see Bunny looking out a window. Liz waved and headed inside. She had to admit she kind of liked the old woman and found it sweet that she'd baked muffins. Ideally, Bunny wouldn't be a pest, though.

Was it her imagination, or did the house smell a little less dusty and mildewy than it had the day before? She flicked the switch on the living room wall, and the lights came on. At least the electric company had been timely in their restoration of service. She moved into the kitchen, taking the basket with her, and cleared a space on the Formica counter.

The blueberry muffins were still warm and smelled of sweetness, and she could practically taste the juicy middles of the bright-red tomatoes. She was surprised at the fond memories the tomatoes brought up. Her dad had always been so proud of his garden. Tomatoes, zucchini, squash, and even cucumbers. One time he'd tried to grow corn, but that hadn't worked out. As a kid, she'd spent a lot of time in the garden with her dad, learning how to plant, fertilize, and harvest. Surprisingly, those memories brought a smile to her lips.

When had her dad become so mean? Thinking back, it seemed to have coincided with her teenage years. How odd that she had happy memories before that. An unsettling thought bubbled up. When her own kids were teenagers, they weren't exactly all sweetness and light. She remembered many fights. Had she been the same to her parents? Probably. And if that was the case, maybe her father wasn't the only one to blame for those bad memories.

No sense in thinking about the past, though. She bit into a muffin and looked around the house. Where to start?

The kitchen would be the most time-consuming. The countertops were cluttered, and the cabinets were stuffed full. At least her brother had cleaned out the refrigerator and unplugged it before her dad went into assisted living. She shuddered to think of what six years of moldy food would be like in there.

She started with the cabinets near the fridge, pulling out baking dishes, pots, pans, and cast-iron skillets. Hadn't she read somewhere those could be worth money? Maybe she should set some of the stuff aside and consult Andie before she had it hauled away as junk.

The thought of finding something valuable excited her. She could really use the money, though, of course, she would have to split it with her siblings. Truth be told, she felt like she should get a higher percentage, since she was doing the bulk of the work, but she hadn't wanted to broach that topic with her brother and sister. Things had been a bit strained among the three of them because they hadn't agreed on their father's care or what to do with the house. The funeral had brought them back together, and she didn't want to mess that up now. Besides, she really didn't have anything better to do.

Moving on to the drawers, she opened the old bread box and slid the metal top back. She was a little worried she might find old moldy bread in there, but she didn't. Apparently, her dad had stashed all her mom's old recipe books and cards in there.

She brought them to the kitchen table, cleared a spot, and sat down. The cookbooks were stuffed full of magazine articles, and the recipe cards were in her mom's own handwriting, the ink faded and the cards splotched with food stains. They included some of her favorite dishes from when she was a kid—crab puffs, cherry cheesecake pie, Congo bars. Warm memories of cooking in the kitchen with her mom bubbled up.

She was so engrossed looking through the recipes she didn't notice Bunny until she heard a knock at the door.

Bunny was wearing what looked like a flowered house coat and furry pink slippers. Liz couldn't help the expression on her face when she opened the door.

Bunny laughed. "We don't stand much on formality here in the neighborhood. Pajamas are not uncommon."

"You mean you walk around like this?" Liz asked, glancing out to the street, expecting to see an army of neighbors in furry slippers.

Bunny shrugged. "Sometimes. We've all been here a long time, and we're kind of like family. Your dad was too."

Liz definitely couldn't picture her father trotting around the neighborhood in pajamas, but the thought of neighbors as close as family tugged at her heartstrings. It would be nice to have a neighborhood of family. A place to belong and where people watched out for one another. She hadn't had that since her kids were little and her marriage was solid.

But then came the disturbing thought that she actually didn't have any place to live now. All her belongings were in storage. And after she was done cleaning out her dad's house, where would she go?

Staying at Tides had actually brought a newfound appreciation for her old hometown. Living near the beach was always nice, but she couldn't afford a place in Lobster Bay. Maybe a neighboring town? Of course, she would never take Jane up on her offer to stay at Tides over the winter.

Bunny came in, and they sat at the table. "Thanks for the muffins. Would you like one?"

"You're very welcome, dear. I guess I could have one." She produced a stick of butter and some tea bags from her pocket. "I came prepared."

Liz rummaged up her mother's old stainless steel kettle and boiled some water.

"So, how is the cleanup going?" Bunny gestured to the piles of items Liz had taken out of the cupboards.

"Pretty good. I think there's a lot of junk. I might have to get a dumpster."

"Don't be too hasty. Your dad didn't throw anything away, which I guess is obvious. But you don't want to let go of some of these things from your childhood because you can never get them back." Bunny suddenly looked very sad. "I should know."

“Oh?” Liz sensed Bunny wanted to talk about it, so she bit into the muffin she’d just slathered with butter and settled back in her chair.

“Yep. My family home burned down when I was young. We had generations of antiques and things in there, but nothing was saved.” Bunny got a faraway look in her eyes. “There was one distant relative that had taken some of my great-grandparents’ things, but he had a falling out with my dad, and we never got anything back.”

Liz frowned. “Oh, that’s so sad. I’m sorry. What happened?” Liz thought about Tides and all the generations of family belongings there. Jane seemed so happy to be surrounded by them. But those things were much older than anything in this house. Her family didn’t have any antiques from the early 1900s and certainly nothing expensive. But the items that filled the house still elicited a warm feeling of nostalgia, even though they were only from the fifties through eighties.

“Ack. Too much drama. Something about family trees and names.” Bunny leaned forward. Family history is important, and you don’t want to let go of it too easily.” She looked pointedly around the kitchen.

Liz followed her gaze. The kitchen was a mess, but some of the items did bring back fond family memories. Like her mother’s recipes and the vintage kitchen canisters with colorful mushrooms on them.

“Of course, one can’t keep everything. Maybe you could donate some of the things you don’t want?” Bunny’s words brought Liz out of her thoughts. “Like all the books in the den? Your dad loved reading, and I have to say he did collect a ton of books over the years. But the library is always looking for good books. I hope you’re not going to just throw those out.”

“No, of course not. I’ll stop by the library later and see if they want them. And maybe the Salvation Army?”

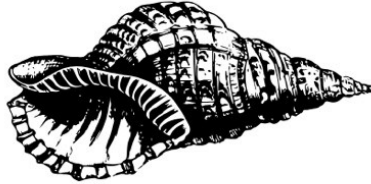
“That’s my girl.” Bunny shoved the rest of the muffin into her mouth and stood. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything. I’m right next door.”

Bunny left, and Liz continued her task. She was surprised to find herself humming as she boxed up some of the books and set the items she thought might be valuable aside for Andie.

Time flew by, and soon it was late afternoon. Funny, she hadn’t hated being there as much as she thought she would, but now that it was time for a break, she needed a real meal. Muffins and tomatoes weren’t cutting the mustard.

She grabbed the tomatoes on her way out the door. There were far too many for her to eat. Maybe Jane could use some at the inn.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Splash was one of Maxi's favorite restaurants because the outdoor patio area sat right on the beach. It wasn't anything fancy, but who cared? The view was amazing, and even though the sun set behind them in the west, the ocean was still dazzling with the reflection of pinks, blues, and golds.

The menu was decent enough. She liked the appetizers, and you could get a good drink, like the gin and tonic she had sitting in front of her right now. After a stressful day, nothing soothed her more than listening to the ocean while she watched the seagulls darting around on the beach for scraps.

Even this late in the season and at this time of day, there were still some holdouts on the beach with their coolers and colorful umbrellas. Despite the cooler air, children rushed screeching into the waves farther down the beach.

She settled back in her seat and smiled at James. "Thanks so much for suggesting this. It's just what I needed."

He put his hand over hers. "I'm always happy to dine with my favorite girl. But I feel bad that the painting is giving you trouble. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Maxi shook her head. "I wish. It's just that I can't seem to capture the look in Goblin's eyes. I am making some progress by practicing on the cats, but it's impossible to get them to stay still enough."

"Maybe I could hold them for you?" James suggested.

"What? No. You're busy at work. I don't want to bother you with it." Maxi was warmed by his suggestion. The old James would never have

offered to miss work, much less risk getting cat hair all over him.

"It's no problem. I have some vacation days that I have to use anyway, and what better place than at the cottage on the beach with you and the cats."

"Well, if you're sure..." Maxi supposed it would help. She didn't usually like painting in front of people, but James was different. And it would be nice to spend some time with him in the cottage.

"That settles it, then." James pulled his hand away and picked up his beer, and she missed the warmth of his touch. "I'll come tomorrow whenever you want and hold them."

"Fancy meeting you here!" The familiar voice pulled Maxi's gaze from her husband, and she looked over to see Andie and Shane standing at their table.

"I didn't know you guys were coming here tonight." Maxi gestured toward the extra chairs at the table. "Why don't you join us?"

"Well, if you're sure we're not interrupting?" Andie's gaze skipped from Maxi to James.

James stood and pulled out a chair for her. "Not at all, we're always happy to eat with you guys."

Kristi, the waitress, came over with four extra place settings.

"I don't think we need all these," Maxi said. "There's only four of us, and James and I already have ours."

Kristi jerked her head toward the front of the restaurant. "I just saw Claire and Rob come in, so I assumed they'd be joining you."

Maxi craned her head in that direction. "Oh, there they are. Good thinking." She motioned to Claire and Rob, and they cut through the crowd that was waiting to be seated.

They were all settled in and just about to order when Andie spotted Jane and Mike walking down the beach with Cooper.

"Oh, look! Let's see if we can get them to join us." Andie stood and yelled across the beach, catching their attention.

Jane and Mike came to the edge of the patio.

"I didn't know we were having a couples' night," Jane said.

Maxi knew Jane was joking. Of course they wouldn't have a couples' night and leave Jane and Mike out. "We all ran into each other by accident. There's plenty of chairs at the table. Can you guys join us?"

Luckily, the round tables outside on the patio were all very large, and since it was outdoors, dogs were allowed. Jane and Mike accepted the offer, and everyone settled in, ordering a round of drinks and appetizers.

“How funny that we all ended up here.” Shane raised his glass. “Here’s to impromptu dinners on the beach.”

“Might be one of the last ones.” Jane zipped up her hoodie. “It’s getting chilly at night.”

“We better make the most of it while we still have warm weather. But how did you get away, Jane?” Claire asked.

“Liz brought a bunch of tomatoes from the garden at her house, and Brenda is making a frittata with them tomorrow morning. She wanted to do some prep work tonight, so she said she’d watch the place. Liz is our only guest, and no one new is scheduled to check in, so it should be pretty easy.”

“A frittata?” Mike’s brows shot up. “I’ll be over first thing in the morning.”

“It is nice to get out. So I’m really focusing on my hunt for someone to take some shifts at Tides now,” Jane said as Kristie slid calamari, steamers, and fish dip onto their table.

“Did you say you’re hiring at Tides?” Kristi asked Jane then blushed. “Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear.”

“It’s no problem. I’m looking for someone to work part-time.”

“My cousin has been looking for something. Could I have her call or drop in?”

Jane looked a little hesitant, but Mike spoke up.

“That sounds perfect, doesn’t it?” He looked at Jane.

“Yes. I suppose it does.” Jane picked a clam out of its shell and swirled it in the broth. “Maybe she could stop by tomorrow. I’ll be there all morning.”

“Okay. Thanks, I’ll tell her.” Kristi left.

“I think it’s great that you are starting to look for help,” Claire said. “You won’t regret hiring someone. I love having Hailey to depend on, and Rob loves Tillie and Ella. It gives us more of a chance to be together.”

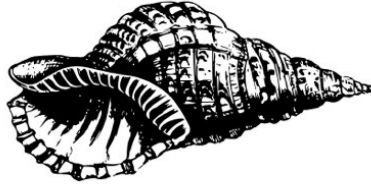
The two of them smiled at each other so brightly that Maxi nearly heard wedding bells.

She was glad Jane was thinking about getting help. It would be good for Andie too. They both worked so hard, and Jane deserved to spend more time with Mike. Maxi remembered helping Jane through that horrible first

year after her husband died. And she'd always tried to encourage Jane to date again years afterward, but she'd never found anyone until Mike. Mike was obviously smitten with Jane. Spending more time together would be a good thing for them both.

Maxi spread some fish dip on a cracker. She was content to eat good food on the beach with her best friends. Now, if only she could nail down the painting, everything would be perfect.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Kristie's cousin must have really wanted a job because she called Tides first thing the next morning and arranged to come in for an interview.

They were sitting in the dining room, which was still much the same as it had been when Jane's grandparents were alive. A long mahogany table was set up in the middle, surrounded by smaller round tables. The walls, covered in floral wallpaper, boasted gilt-framed paintings and floor-to-ceiling windows with the drapes pulled back to expose the ocean view. A heavily carved server, where Brenda set out the breakfast dishes when the inn was full, sat along one wall. Since the only people in the dining room this morning were Jane, Liz, and Brenda, they hadn't bothered with setting things out. The three of them had eaten in the kitchen. Brenda's frittatas loaded with the tomatoes from Liz's garden had been delicious, and Jane was very full.

Stacy sat across the table from Jane. She was an interesting individual with lots of piercings and tattoos. Jane didn't really mind them, but her guests skewed older, and she wondered if that might be a problem. Not to mention she was wearing a ripped T-shirt and shorts. Jane hadn't thought about having a dress code, but perhaps she should mention the idea.

"Do you have any experience with registering guests? Maybe a motel or something?" Jane asked.

Stacy blew a bubble and then sucked it in and continued chomping as she answered. "I was head hostess at the Waffle House."

"Head hostess? That's great." Jane was trying to be positive. "Though I suppose it's a little different than checking guests into their rooms, still I'm

sure you could be trained.”

Stacy laughed. “Trained? It hardly seems like you need to be a rocket scientist.”

Jane frowned. Wasn’t that a little mean? “Still, there are some things to learn. How do you feel about working weekends?”

Stacy looked taken aback. “Weekends? I thought this was just part-time?”

“It is, but that includes weekends. I’ll be here mostly during the week, and we need someone to fill in a few afternoons and on weekends.”

Stacy chomped her gum harder. “I don’t know about that. I have a lot of plans on the weekends.”

Jane set the sparse resume Stacy had given her on the table and sat back in her chair. “Perhaps this job isn’t a good fit for you, then?”

Stacy’s face changed as if she was just realizing the same thing. “Yeah, maybe not. But I really need a job. Is there any way you could change the hours for me?”

“Afraid not. We really need someone on the weekends.” Jane stood, hoping Stacy would follow her lead. “I have your number, though, and if we change our minds, I’ll call you.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

She walked Stacy out and then collapsed into one of the chairs in the parlor. Cooper trotted along behind her and sat looking up at her with sympathy in his eyes.

“Yeah, that wasn’t what I expected either.” Jane rubbed behind his ears.

Andie stuck her head into the parlor. “Was that your interviewee?”

“Yep.”

“That bad, huh?”

Jane sighed. Maybe she was expecting too much? “I guess I don’t know what my expectations are. She seemed kind of young.”

“Well, if that’s what she wears to an interview, things have changed a lot since I interviewed.” Andie sat on the sofa across from her. “Maybe we need to set some guidelines? What exactly are we looking for?”

“Well, definitely someone responsible. Some kind of experience would be a plus, but I think the job is pretty easy to learn.”

Andie nodded. “And somebody who has a pleasant demeanor for the guests.”

“Right, and maturity.”

“And can make decisions without calling us all the time.”

“Agreed.” Jane felt better. “What brings you here?”

“I was just on my way to the library and figured I’d stop in and see if you needed anything. I’m going to look up the genealogy on the Civil War guy.”

“That’s a good idea. Hope you find something.”

“Me too. I mean, I guess if the family hasn’t missed it all these years, they probably don’t even know the papers and uniform exist, but I would really like to get the items back to them.”

Jane nodded. “That was fun last night with all of us running in to each other at Splash. We should plan more get-togethers with the eight of us.”

“I agree. I really love our morning coffees, but it would be fun to have something that we do regularly with the guys too.” They’d gotten together many times but had nothing planned on a regular basis.

“It’s a great way to catch up. Poor Maxi, though. She seems a little down. She’s still having trouble with the dog painting.” Jane reached down and petted Cooper, who responded by thumping his tail against the leg of the table.

“She’ll work it out. She’s a great artist.”

“Yep, she just needs to figure it out.”

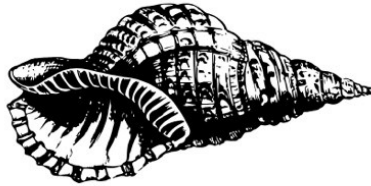
“Speaking of get-togethers, we’re meeting at Sandcastles tomorrow morning, right?”

“Yes.” Jane’s phone pinged and Andie stood.

“I gotta get to the library. See you later.”

Jane looked down at her phone and saw an email, an applicant replying to her ad in the newspaper. She hoped this one would be a little more suitable.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“Get back here, you little rascal!” James watched Rembrandt dive under the couch until only his black tail stuck out.

“Maybe it will be easier to catch Picasso,” Maxi suggested.

James had been trying to wrangle the two cats into submission for over an hour. Unfortunately, the two fur balls objected vehemently to doing anything Maxi and James wanted them to do. On any other day, they were happy to lounge around in one spot, soaking in the sun all day, and even happier if they could be on someone’s lap. But not now. They had an uncanny ability to sense that was exactly what James and Maxi wanted and were now determined to do the exact opposite.

James turned and eyed the white cat, who looked at him warily. He took a step. Picasso’s fluffy tail swished. He lunged and grabbed the cat.

Picasso wriggled in James’s arms. “Meow!”

“Want a treat?” Maxi rushed in, holding a piece of the cats’ favorite tuna-flavored treat.

That caught their attention. Picasso stopped wriggling and sniffed. Rembrandt poked his head out from under the couch.

“I guess we know how to control them.” James carefully sat down with Picasso in his lap, and Maxi handed him the bag of treats.

Not to be left out, Rembrandt jumped up onto the couch. James managed to arrange both cats in his lap and keep them there with the aid of the treats.

“We might have to put them on a diet after this,” Maxi joked as she got to work behind the easel. Pictures were great, but there was nothing like

painting from real life. She could capture the shadows of light, the subtle change in colors. Soon she was lost in the art of painting.

After about an hour, Maxi stepped back from the painting. "There. I think I got enough for now. I can put the final details in later but won't need you to sit with the cats."

James got up from the chair and brushed the fur off. He stood beside her at the easel. "The fur is really good. You really captured it."

"Thanks to you." She kissed him on the cheek, happy she'd made progress. The painting of the two cats curled up together was good. The contrast of the white and black fur was striking.

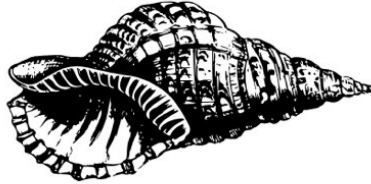
She put the brush in the small glass jar of turpentine and stashed it in the cupboard so the cats couldn't get into it. "I think it's coming along. After I take a break, I'll work on the eyes more, but I'm happy with the way they are coming out."

"How about we go for a walk." James looked toward the beach. It was a gorgeous sunny day and perfect weather for walking. Even better, the beach was empty. They would have it all to themselves.

"Great idea." Maxi took off her painter's smock and draped it over one of the kitchen chairs. A picture of Goblin caught her eye. Bert and Harry had given it to her for the painting. Their favorite picture of the dog, it featured Goblin looking up at the camera with her wrinkled fawn-and-brown face, pug nose, and expressive brown eyes.

Even through the photograph, Maxi could see the love in the dog's eyes, and it made her heart melt. She just *had* to get this painting right for Bert and Harry.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The Lobster Bay library was in a large gothic stone building that had an arched oak door with iron hinges. Walking into the library felt like entering an old castle. Inside, the ceilings were vaulted, and the air was heavy with silence. A bespectacled librarian sat behind a large round oak desk, stacks of returned books in carts behind her.

“Can you tell me where the genealogy section is?” Andie asked in a whisper.

“We have books on genealogy and also a local history section.”

“The local history is what I’m after.”

“You’re looking something up?”

“Yes.”

The librarian nodded as if she was expecting that and had just been testing her. “Everything we have is on microfilm. We’re just a small operation and don’t have staff to get everything online.”

“I understand.” That was too bad because it would have been a lot easier to sit at home and look things up.

“You’ll find that section in the basement.” She stood and pointed to the left. “Around that corner there and down the steps.”

“Thanks.”

The basement was not as nice as the upper level. The floor was old green and beige tile, the walls an uninspiring off-white like the color of manilla folders. The old gray metal cabinets were clearly labeled, and she found the town genealogy records easily. The microfilm machines sat in a

dark corner, each one in its own little cubby. Andie sat down with several rolls of film and got to work.

After a few hours, her eyes were burning from scrolling through the old documents, which included images of certificates and newspaper announcements with births, deaths, and marriages.

There was no way to search, so she had to look through each roll. She didn't find anything for the name Koslachowski, but most of the information was dated from the 1890s and on. He might have moved out of town by then, or maybe he wasn't even from Lobster Bay. Just because the box was in an attic in one of the houses in town didn't mean it had been there since the end of the Civil War.

She made some notes about what rolls she'd searched and put everything away. Her eyes weren't that young anymore, and she needed a break. She could come back later and dig further, though she didn't have high hopes of finding anything in the other films.

In the lobby, Andie spotted Liz standing at the round desk with several boxes of books. "How's the cleanup going?"

The librarian jerked her attention from the book she was processing to frown at her. Oops. Andie guessed she hadn't lowered her voice enough.

"Good." Liz whispered. "Better than I thought. My dad was a big reader, so I'm donating these books."

Andie glanced into the box, which contained mostly fiction. Nothing too old or leather bound in there, so Liz wasn't giving away anything valuable.

"I also found some items I thought you might be interested in. Do you want to come and look at them?"

That perked Andie up. "I'd love to. What have you got?"

"Some kitchenware. I heard it could be valuable, and there's a whole china cabinet of dishes and knickknacks."

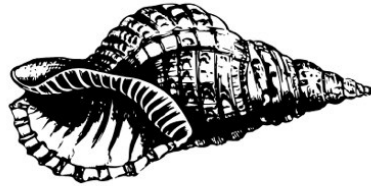
"Sounds like fun. When were you thinking?"

"I have a few more rooms to clean out, so I was thinking it would be best if you wait until I have it all sorted. Maybe Thursday?"

"Sounds perfect."

They set a time, and Andie left, much to the relief of the librarian, who looked like she'd been just about to shush them. Andie was disappointed that she hadn't found out more about her Civil War guy, but at least she could look forward to checking out Liz's antiques.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



After Liz dropped off the books, she picked up a lobster roll and returned to the house. She'd cleared some space off the kitchen table earlier, so she sat down and bit into the sweet buttery sandwich. It was just the way she liked it—a buttered, grilled hot dog bun with nothing inside except lobster meat, mayo, and crispy iceberg lettuce.

As she looked around, a feeling of nostalgia crept in. She smiled, remembering fighting with Shelly and Peter over who would wash the dishes and who would dry. Nights at this very table playing Scrabble with the whole family. Now that she'd cleared out the dust and clutter, the house wasn't too bad. It had been kept up nicely, and she liked the retro feel.

Her phone blared.

"Peter! How are you?" Liz had only talked to her brother once since the funeral and was genuinely happy to hear from him.

"Good. You? Shelly said you were working on the house already."

"Yep. Cleaned out some junk. Boy, was it full."

Peter sighed. "I know. I'm sorry about that. Dad couldn't keep up with it, and I guess none of us noticed. When he had the stroke and I came in to close things up, I was shocked. I guess I should have cleaned up, but I was more worried about getting back to the hospital. We didn't even know for a while if he would make it."

"You did the right thing," Liz assured him, just as she always did.

"So it's not too much work? I could get some time off—"

"It's fine," Liz interrupted him. Now that she was in a groove, she didn't want anyone coming in and messing with her process. She wanted to do

things on her own timeline.

“Okay. What about all the stuff. Are you dumping it? Do we need to do any repairs or fix things up for sale? There’s still a little bit in Dad’s savings, so let me know if you need it.”

“Thanks, I actually might be able to sell some of this old stuff. Believe it or not.”

“Really?”

She told him about Andie and how she’d volunteered to take a look. “If it turns out there’s a million-dollar masterpiece in the attic or something, you’ll find me on a tropical beach,” Liz joked.

“We can only wish! But if there is anything of value, you can keep the money. You’re doing all the work.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I’ll put it into any repairs.” It was nice of him to offer, but Liz didn’t need handouts like that.

They chatted a bit about their families, and then Liz got back to work. She wanted to go through most of the closets and drawers and pull out anything she thought Andie might be interested in. Some things she didn’t want to let go of, like the vintage silver flatware her mother always put out on holidays and the living room lamp that had been her favorite.

She found the old photo album in the cabinet next to the fireplace. She was almost afraid to open it, worrying that it would bring up bad memories and ruin her good mood. But as she sat on the sofa and flipped the pages, she began reliving happy times.

Photos of her and her siblings when they were little. The yard looked so strange, since it had hardly any trees back then. The giant maple was much smaller too.

Thanksgivings with the table loaded with a giant turkey and all the fixings. The big tree her dad would drag home every Christmas loaded with tinsel and those giant bulb lights they had in those days. And the toys! Dolls, play kitchen sets, trucks. If only some of those were still around, they’d probably be worth a bundle. But they’d been well played with and tossed or given to younger cousins decades ago.

She paused at one photo. A picture of her with the German shepherd mix, Ranger, they’d had when she was eleven. In the photo, she was sitting on the grass with Ranger right beside her. Her hand was on his back, and they were both smiling at the camera. She remembered that day and the warm reassuring feeling of Ranger’s back as if it were yesterday.

How nice would it be to have a dog now? She was sort of lonely. Her kids called frequently but rarely came to visit. Her daughter, Sophie, was busy with her own toddler, and her son, Matt, was away half the year on a crab fishing boat.

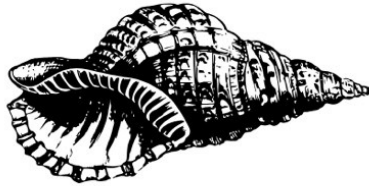
But before she could get a dog, she needed a place to live.

But where? She wasn't tied to her old town. In fact, she wanted to be far from it, since Kyle had settled near there. She needed a change. Someplace friendly. Near the beach would be nice. A small town like this one, with a garden and neighbors that were like family.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. It was Bunny. Liz invited her in, and they sat on the living room sofa.

"So, tell me more about this neighborhood." Liz put on some tea while Bunny talked about each house, who had lived there in the past, and who lived there currently. It was easy to see why Bunny loved living in the neighborhood. As she talked, Liz started to form a plan.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Sandcastles was as busy as usual when the four met for coffee the next morning. The bright sun had chased away the worst of the morning chill, and Claire, Maxi, Jane, and Andie took a table outside, even though the weather was still a bit brisk. Inside, the chatter of customers wafted out the door whenever Hailey came out to refill their coffee mugs.

“Brrr...” Maxi pulled her white waffle sweater tighter around her.

“Won’t be long until there’s a layer of frost in the morning.” Andie shivered.

“Then the trees will start to turn. That’s always pretty and brings in leaf-peeping tourists,” Claire said.

“And then, after that, snow!” Jane sounded happy about that, and the others stared at her. “What? It’s pretty on the beach and makes the town look like a Hallmark movie.”

“I guess it does have its appeal.” Maxi picked a corn muffin off the tray of pastries that Claire had set in the middle of the table. She tried to feed a tiny piece to Cooper, who was sitting between her and Jane, when Jane stopped her.

“I think Cooper has been getting enough treats,” Jane said kindly. “Liz has been feeding him snacks at Tides. He needs to keep his trim figure.”

Maxi made a sympathetic face at the dog, who was looking up at her with eager brown eyes. “Sorry, buddy, looks like you’re on a diet.” She turned to Jane. “Speaking of Liz, how is your guest?”

“She’s great. She seems to have bonded with Cooper and said he reminded her of the dog she used to have.” Jane stirred cream into her

coffee. “She does seem a bit lonely.”

Claire frowned. “Why is she staying at Tides? Her house is right in town. Seems more convenient to stay there.”

Jane shrugged. “Bad childhood memories.”

“Good thing we don’t have those, it would be hard to run the inn.” Andie smiled at Jane over the rim of her mug.

“Darn tootin’—your folks were salt of the earth. Addie still is.” Sally Littlefield had been up on a ladder, fixing part of the awning. She’d known their parents. Heck, she knew most of the people in town. She smiled down at them then zeroed in on Andie. “What’s with the scowl on your face?”

“Who, me?” Andie didn’t realize she’d been scowling. Truth was, though, her mind wasn’t totally on the conversation. Talk of Liz had gotten her excited about going to see her family treasures, but then that had reminded her of the Civil War soldier she’d had no luck in tracing. “Oh, it’s nothing.”

“Still no luck finding your Civil War guy?” Claire asked.

“Unfortunately, no.”

Sally came down from the ladder and stood beside the table, wiping her hands on a towel. “What’s this about a Civil War guy?”

Andie told her about the find from the estate.

“Did you look in the Civil War archives over in Arundel?”

Andie paused. “There’s a place that specializes in Civil War data?”

“Yep, got all kinds of information on the battles and soldiers. Names, dates, and descendants.” Sally started packing up her tools. “It’s all fixed, Claire. I’ll send you a bill at the end of the month.”

“Great. Thanks!”

“She’s a real gem.” Jane and Andie had hired Sally to do a lot of work at Tides. “If only I could find someone like Sally to run the inn.”

“Kristie’s cousin didn’t work out?” Claire asked.

Jane snorted. “She was a little... modern for my taste. And then someone emailed me from the classified ad I took out but then never showed for the interview.”

“Aww... Don’t worry, you’ll find someone.”

“Morning, ladies!” Bert and Henry stopped by the table, a look of sad longing in their eyes as they stooped to pet Cooper. The stooping came with some creaking and groaning. The two men had to be pushing eighty, but they were the sweetest men in town.

Bert glanced up at Maxi. "How's the portrait going?"

Maxi's stomach plummeted. She didn't have the heart to disappoint them with the truth.

"Great, won't be long now." She tried to keep the smile plastered on her face and stop her panic from bubbling up.

"We can't wait to see it." Bert stood and then helped Harry. "But don't let us rush you."

"Don't worry, I won't. I'm taking my time to get it just perfect."

"That's what we want. Have a nice day, ladies."

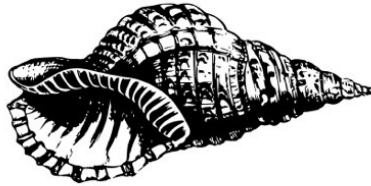
After the two men ambled off, everyone turned to Maxi.

"So, you've made a breakthrough with the painting. I knew you could do it," Jane said.

"Hardly, I just couldn't disappoint them." Maxi hated the look of sympathy in their eyes.

Luckily, that didn't last long because Jane's phone pinged. She looked down at it. "Just got an email. Another applicant. This one is older. I hope she'll fit the bill."

CHAPTER TWENTY



After breakfast, Jane went to visit her mother at Tall Pines, and Andie went to relieve Brenda from duty at Tides. Even though she was eager to get to Arundel and see what the Civil War archives had, that would have to wait. Ideally, they'd find someone to work at Tides soon, maybe even the person who had emailed Jane at breakfast.

When she arrived at the inn, Brenda and Liz were chatting it up with a middle-aged couple in the foyer. The woman, who wore a soft blue sweater and jeans and had a designer suitcase beside her, was laughing. The husband, wearing a sky-blue golf shirt and chinos, was enjoying one of Brenda's cookies.

"This is such a lovely inn. I know our stay will be so much fun. Will you be here for breakfast tomorrow, Liz?"

Liz smiled. "You bet. Brenda makes the best breakfasts. Eggs, bacon. Sometimes there's homemade bread. You'll love it."

Brenda handed over the key, and the woman turned to Liz. "And thank you for advice on our daughters. You made me see things a different way."

Liz beamed, and Andie waited for the couple to go upstairs. When they did, she asked, "What was that about?"

Liz shrugged. "They used to bring their kids here when they were little and seemed a bit sad about how their daughters don't have time for them. I gave them a way to see it from the daughters' side."

"People seem to really open up when they are booking a room." Brenda glanced up the stairs. The look on her face indicated she wasn't on board with people blurting out problems to strangers.

Andie was glad they had another guest, and she supposed it was true that people did seem to open up when booking a room. “You can say that again. But you didn’t have to feel like you had to give them advice, Liz.”

“Oh, no problem. I just blurted it out. Hope you don’t mind. Must be my guidance counselor background.”

“I’m glad she was here.” Brenda came out from behind the desk and took off her apron. “They needed someone to talk to, and I’m better at cooking than talking. Speaking of which, I gotta run. I’m baking cookies with my granddaughter today and need to get to the store.”

Andie gave her a hug. “Thanks for watching the front desk.”

“I’m happy to do it.”

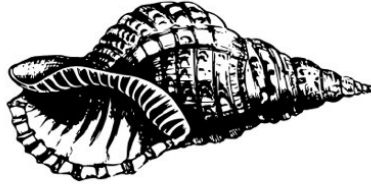
“I better get going too,” Liz said. “Are you going to stop by later? I’ve set some items aside for you.”

“Yes, I can’t wait.” Andie figured she could go after her trip out to Arundel.

Liz gave her the address and left. Liz seemed a lot happier than she had before. Cleaning out her parents’ house must not be as bad as she’d expected it to be.

The couple upstairs was getting settled in their room. The place was quiet. Andie went into the front parlor and picked a chocolate kiss out of Grandma’s cut glass bowl. She unwrapped the chocolate and popped it into her mouth. The steady tick of the grandfather clock marked the slowly passing time. Only two hours until Jane would be back to relieve her, and she could head out to Arundel and continue her search for her Civil War soldier’s family.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Maxi stood at Bunny Howard's front door clutching her blue-and-white-striped tote and waiting for her to answer. After seeing Bert and Harry at Sandcastles, she'd realized she needed to do everything she could to finish that painting, so she'd dug out the card Muriel had given her and called.

Maxi had never really taken lessons. Art sort of came naturally to her. But Bunny had sounded very nice, and she was looking forward to hearing her advice. Ideally, the lesson would go well.

The door opened to reveal a cheerful senior citizen who was about a foot shorter than Maxi. She was wearing a loose, paint-covered smock and white cotton pants. Her gray hair was up in a messy bun. Maxi liked her right away.

"Maxi? Bunny smiled and opened the door. "Come in. I've seen your work at the gallery, and it's quite amazing, so I was surprised when you called for a lesson."

Maxi felt a rush of pride at the compliment. It had taken her a long time to be able to accept compliments gracefully. "Thank you. I have a specific problem, and Muriel said you might be able to help me."

"Ahh, well, she would know. Why don't you sit down for some coffee and tell me about the problem?"

Bunny led her through the tidy living room. Though the older, ranch-style house was small, it seemed bigger because Bunny had kept the decor in light whites and beiges and had furniture with simple lines. Unlike most older people's houses, Bunny's residence was not cluttered with "stuff."

The Danish modern dining room table was already set with cups and saucers and a little plate of shortbread cookies. The earthy smell of coffee wafted out from an old-school percolator on the sideboard.

Beyond the dining room, Maxi could see a sunroom that had probably been an addition. This room had several sets of sliding glass doors to let in maximum light and was where Bunny had set up two easels and paint supplies. It looked out over her backyard and the woods beyond as well as the neighbor's yard, which had a large garden that appeared to be somewhat out of control.

Maxi told Bunny about the commission to paint Goblin and the problem she was having capturing the dog's likeness. She'd brought one of her earlier attempts at painting Goblin as well as a practice painting of Rembrandt and Picasso and showed them to Bunny.

Bunny studied the canvases and nodded. "I see. It's the light in the eyes. That makes them come alive. Come on, I'll show you."

At the easel, Bunny sketched in the head of a dog then added fur with quick brush strokes. "This is just a simple sketch for context. I'll go into more detail when I get to the eye, since that's where I think your problem stems from."

A few strokes of the brush later, Bunny had a pretty good rendition of a dog's eye on the canvas.

"See, you use the reflection to give it depth," Bunny said as she added a white dot to the corner of the eye.

Maxi nodded.

"And I always mix at least five colors into the iris." Bunny added some blobs of blue, green, and yellow paint to her pallet and painstakingly added them to the iris area. She stood back and waved at Maxi's canvas. "Now you try."

Maxi picked up the brush, and the two women painted side by side with Bunny instructing. Soon Maxi was lost in the creative act, absorbing all of Bunny's instructions and thinking about how she could apply them to the painting of Goblin.

After an hour, Bunny put down her brush and stretched. "Well, I think that's enough for today. You're coming along, don't you think?"

"I do. Thanks so much." Maxi stepped back to admire her work, her eyes drifting to the garden next door. "I love this room. And the backyard is so scenic. Looks like your neighbor needs to do some yard work, though."

“That’s Frank Weston’s house. He got sick, and it’s been empty for some time. I was keeping the garden going in case he got better. Sadly, he died, and his daughter is cleaning it out.”

That sounded like Jane’s guest at Tides. “Is her name Liz?”

Bunny looked surprised. “Yes, do you know her?”

“Not really. I knew the family a bit from growing up in town but not well. She’s staying at Tides, and my friend Jane runs the inn, so she mentioned her to me.” Maxi walked over to the window to view the garden area more closely. This late in the season, most of the plants were dying off, but she could see some bright-red tomatoes waiting to be picked and some pumpkins just getting started. “I wonder why she doesn’t stay at the house instead of Tides?”

“I wondered that too. I’ve chatted to her a bit. Seems like a nice lady, but if you ask me, she has some unresolved issues from her youth.”

Maxi turned to face Bunny. “That sounds serious.”

“It’s not, really. I think she might be making a mountain out of a molehill and misremembering. Frank told me that for some reason, she got cold toward him when she left home for college. Poor Frank. He loved her so much and blamed himself for pushing her too hard in high school. He always just wanted her to succeed. Wanted the best for her. I think she might have been a bit too headstrong. You know how teenagers are.”

Maxi thought about her own kids and their high school days. Luckily, they had been good students, but there were times when she’d had to play the bad guy and they’d fought it. They’d had more than their share of arguments. Was that the only reason Liz hadn’t wanted to stay in the house, or did Bunny not know the whole story? “That’s too bad. I hope she makes her peace.”

“Me too. She seems to be coming around. One really needs to hold onto family and treasure it. Once you lose that connection, it’s hard to get back.” Bunny looked sad for a few seconds then brightened and turned to the paintings. “Let’s sign our paintings and clean up. I think you did a great job.”

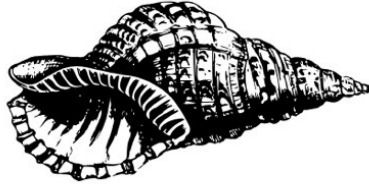
Maxi signed her last name. She’d never been able to come up with a snazzy-looking signature and admired Bunny’s, which looked like a squiggle that resembled a *K* connected to an *S*.

“Thanks for the lesson. I feel like I connected some dots, but maybe I need a bit more instruction. Can I come back another time?”

“Of course. Why don’t you go home and process what you learned? Then you can come back, and we can go deeper into the concepts.”

Maxi paid Bunny and carefully laid her wet canvas in the back of her car. A new sense of hope sprang up inside her. She’d gotten some great tips from Bunny and was becoming more confident that she could do justice to Goblin’s likeness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Liz shoved the old bedding, placemats, and Tupperware lids that had no bottoms into a garbage bag, which she then put outside the slider to be taken to the end of the driveway for trash collection. Had her father never thrown anything out? She had to admit the place was shaping up. It actually looked good enough to live in.

Sure, it was a little dated, but some of the old lamps and clocks and even the furniture were coming back in style.

But while the inside was shaping up, the outside was another story. She wandered out into the garden, letting old memories wash over her. She laughed when she passed the spot where her dad tried to plant carrots one year. The ground was hard, and the carrots had come out more like disks.

She paused at the heirloom tomato plant and picked one. Her mouth watered as she imagined sprinkling salt on it and biting into it like an apple as she'd done when she was a kid. Not too much salt now, though. She had to watch her blood pressure.

As she lugged the trash around the side of the house, she spotted Bunny in her sunroom, painting. The older woman was starting to grow on her, and Liz almost looked forward to her visits now. She'd told her all about the other neighbors.

The divorced single mother, Emma Chamberlain, who lived in the modest ranch at number nine. Sheila and Bob Donahue, the middle-aged empty-nesters who lived at number six. Olga Svenson, the ninety-five-year-old woman, proud of her Scandinavian heritage, who delivered Norwegian goodies to them at Christmas and refused to move no matter how much her

kids tried to talk her into it. The whole neighborhood watched out for her. It seemed like a good place to live.

And now that the house wasn't such a mess, she might be able to save the estate some money and stay here instead of Tides. She didn't dread coming here anymore. Somehow all the bad memories were being replaced with good ones. Maybe her aged brain had forgotten the wounds of her teenage years... or maybe those wounds had been exaggerated in her head the whole time. Whatever the reason, the house now felt warm and welcoming, like home.

Staying at Tides right on the beach was pretty nice, though. She smiled, thinking about helping that couple. She hadn't done much, really, just pointed out the obvious and made them see things a different way. Sometimes people needed that. And it had felt good to help someone, to be connected.

That was what she was missing in life. Since she'd retired, she had no purpose, no goals. She'd thought she'd be traveling with her husband, but he'd had other plans, and she'd done nothing to fill that void. She needed to settle down and get a job. Was Lobster Bay the place?

But how could she afford it? She didn't have very much in her 401k and couldn't withdraw it without a penalty anyway. She had a little bit in savings, but she was too young for Social Security and had no job. Maybe she could get a job at the school or the assisted living place where her father once was. Her education and experience would be useful for either. She'd get a third of the sale of this house, but after paying the realtor fees, back taxes, and other bills, that might not amount to enough for another place in town.

Her phone interrupted her train of thought. It was Sophie, her daughter, trying to FaceTime her.

"Mom! So sorry I haven't called. Luke has had the flu. I feel awful that you are out there doing all the work at Grampie's house and I can't come to help."

All her resentments about her kids not helping melted away. Naturally Sophie's first responsibility was to her two-year-old. And when she saw her daughter's anxious face and heard the sincerity in her voice, Liz knew that was all it was.

"I hope he's okay?" Now Liz was worried about her grandson.

Luke's cherubic two-year-old face appeared on the screen. "Gam!"

Liz's heart soared. He seemed fine. She certainly couldn't expect Sophie to get away with a little one at home. Liz remembered those times it was nearly impossible to get away. Sophie wouldn't be much help if she had to watch him, and even though Liz would love to visit, she had work to do.

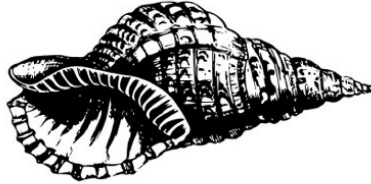
"As you can see, he's fine. But, Mom, do you need help? I can have David take some time off work so I can come out."

"Oh no, I'm fine. Look!" Liz turned the camera around and panned the room so Sophie could see her handiwork.

"Wow, that looks nice. It's retro, and all of that is coming back in style. I think that place will sell in no time."

"You do?" Liz frowned. She didn't like the thought of it selling in "no time." But wasn't that what she wanted? Of course it was, because then she'd get her third of the sale and could use that money on another place. Strangely, though, she was slowly discovering she might not want *another* place.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



The Arundel Armory was an old brick building with a creaky door that opened to a modest Civil War museum. Andie expected to find an old war veteran at the desk, but instead a young woman with heavy dark eyeliner, jet-black hair in a long ponytail, and an all-black outfit greeted her. Her name was Patty, according to the tag on her shirt.

“Hi. I was told you have Civil War archives with listings of the soldiers and their families.”

Patty’s dark brow quirked up, and she looked skeptical. “You want to dig around in there?”

Dig around? Andie was hoping for something with a computer screen. “I think so. I came across some discharge papers for a Civil War soldier and want to locate his descendants.”

“Okee doke. The archives are over here.”

Patty led her to a room in the back. It was chock-full of old, dusty boxes with brittle yellowed papers. Andie was afraid to even touch any of them and aghast that they were kept in this condition.

“We’re working on moving them to digital.” Patty moved some of the papers from the top of a box, seemingly uninterested that the paperwork was disintegrating before her very eyes.

“I think you’d better hurry.” Andie carefully opened a folder and took a piece of paper out, the edge crumbling beneath her fingers.

“They’re more interested in the displays.” Patty gestured toward the museum section with its tanks and guns and uniforms.

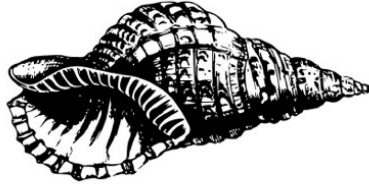
Voices emanated from the lobby, and Patty ran off to tend to them, leaving Andie with the archives. She studied the labels on the boxes, trying to figure out where to start. The boxes had a range of dates, so she started with the one that had the dates coinciding with the discharge papers.

Fortunately, the actual papers inside weren't as old as the mid-1800s. It looked like most of the information had been recorded or transcribed in the 1950s and filed in folders according to town. Sorting through the papers was tedious work, and after a few hours, she was about to give up when she finally found a lead on her guy.

She followed a paper trail for another hour. Apparently, Robert Koslachowski had been married and had one son. That son, Edward, had a son and daughter. The daughter had died before having any children, but the son had had two sons, and the last records of him were that they'd lived in the county. Unfortunately, that was where the family tree ended. There were no records of the two sons getting married, having children, or dying. At least not any that Andie could find.

Where did the two sons go? Andie made a mental note to check into the county records. The Civil War archives might not go that far, but surely the county would have some records. At least she knew that Robert had descendants, and, even though the trail ended, these records were old and incomplete. So it was back to the library with the new information to try to pick up the trail.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Victoria Weathers showed up at Tides precisely on time for her interview. She was an older woman who wore a crisp white blouse and navy slacks. Her gray hair was cut short and fluffed on the sides. She had dark eyes that darted around, taking in every detail.

She'd accepted the offer of a cup of tea. Now she was perched on Grandma Miller's blue velvet wingback chair in the small sitting room on the south side of the inn, holding the dainty cup, pinkie extended.

Jane settled into the carved mahogany sofa across from her and looked over the woman's resume. At least hers had plenty of relevant experience. She didn't have any experience running a hotel, but Tides was a small operation, and the experience she did have as a housemother at a girls' school and as a nanny was along the same lines.

"So, Mrs. Weathers... or should I call you Victoria?" Jane smiled at the woman.

"Mrs. Weathers is fine. I think a level of formality is appropriate here, don't you?"

Jane's smile dimmed. This one seemed like a real fun person to have around. But Jane wouldn't be here when Mrs. Weathers was watching the inn, so maybe she should let that go. "Of course."

Mrs. Weathers gestured toward the resume. "As you can see, I have plenty of experience. I'm known for being responsible and prompt. You can call the references if you'd like."

"Great. So why did you leave your last job as..." Jane glanced down to the last job on the list. Nanny for the Rivers family in the next town over.

“A nanny?”

“The children grew up. They were such lovely little cherubs. And so well-behaved. Mostly due to my influence, even if I do say so myself.” Mrs. Weathers practically inflated with pride.

“I see. And why do you think working at Tides will be a good fit?”

“Well, it’s part-time, which suits me, as I’m semi-retired.” She glanced around the room as if taking inventory. “And I know how to take care of things and treat people.”

“And you don’t mind greeting them and answering phones?”

“Not at all. I’m very efficient and run a tight ship.” Her eyes fell on Cooper, who had trotted in and sat on the floor next to Jane. “Oh, you allow dogs?”

Jane’s hand dropped to pat Cooper, who thumped his tail against the leg of the coffee table, apparently unaware of Mrs. Weathers’s disapproval. “Guests love him.”

Mrs. Weathers said nothing, but her brows rose a notch. “Oh, well, it seems a little... unsanitary.” Her eyes fell on the cut glass candy dish loaded with chocolate kisses, and Jane felt more disapproval radiating from the woman.

“No one has complained about Cooper. People love the little candies we leave around, and sometimes we have cookies out in the foyer when guests are checking in.” Jane was proud of the little extras they offered at Tides.

Mrs. Weathers shifted in her seat. “I see. All those hands touching the food seems a little risky, don’t you think?”

“Risky?” Seemed like Mrs. Weathers was a germaphobe and maybe a little bit strict. Jane already thought she might not be a good fit.

“Germs. But I suppose people do like food. Speaking of which, your pamphlet says you provide lodging and breakfast. No other meals?” Mrs. Weathers took the Tides brochure out of her purse, as if she needed to remind Jane about her own pamphlet. Jane added “condescending” to her list of dislikes about the woman.

“Sometimes we have a light snack in the afternoon, and if there’s a special event, we might offer a meal, depending on the event.”

“And would I be expected to serve the guests?” Mrs. Weathers’s facial expression suggested that she considered serving food a most unpleasant task.

“We usually do a buffet, and guests serve themselves, but sometimes Brenda—she’s our cook—or I walk around to top off the coffees and make sure everything runs smoothly. I find it’s nice to chat with the guests. Those personal touches make for good word of mouth about the place when people get back home.”

Mrs. Weathers wore a look that indicated she was considering the matter. “I suppose it must. What time precisely do you put breakfast out?”

“Brenda usually gets the buffet loaded up around eight and keeps bringing dishes out as needed until ten.” Jane was starting to feel like she was the one being interviewed for a job.

“What is the menu? Do you have a sample?” Mrs. Weathers glanced at the credenza that was set against the wall as if expecting to find menus there.

“We don’t have a menu per se. We offer the basics that most people like and a bit of whatever Brenda feels like making.”

“Sounds a bit unorganized.” Mrs. Weathers pursed her lips. “So there are no other meals or duties? Laundry? Lugging bags upstairs? Cleaning?”

“We have a maid, people take their own bags up, and I use a laundry service, so none of that. Sometimes we might have an event that involves a small party or extra food.”

“Yes, I’ve heard you do weddings. Would more be expected of me during those times?”

They’d had one wedding, but Jane had gotten a few queries for more next summer. “Not really. There might be a rush of people checking in the few days before the wedding, but I’d probably make sure either me or my sister, Andie, was on duty to help.”

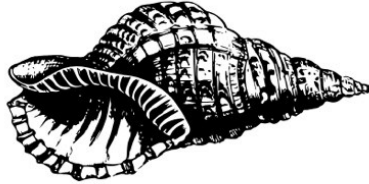
“Very good. Well, it is a lovely place you have, and the location can’t be beat. It really is perfect for weddings, and the family heirlooms and antique furniture add a nice touch.” Mrs. Weathers’s compliment appeared genuine.

Jane smiled. Maybe Mrs. Weathers wasn’t so bad after all.

They each asked a few more questions, and Mrs. Weathers was quite pleasant. As the interview drew to a close, however, Jane had the sinking feeling that she wasn’t the right candidate. She wanted so badly to tell Mike that she’d hired someone before this situation caused a problem between them. As it was, she’d just had to turn down a lunch invitation from him. While he hadn’t said anything about that, she’d sensed his frustration. She

didn't want to ruin their relationship. He was important to her, but Tides was important too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Andie was fairly familiar with the neighborhood Liz Weston's house was in because one of her best friends in grade school had lived there. Stella Macintyre had moved away when they were in junior high, and Andie had lost touch years ago, but she recognized the house, even though the trees and shrubs had grown a lot since she'd last been there.

The street was quiet with mature landscaping. The homes were older ranches and split-levels that had been built around the 1970s on large lots. Some of them had been remodeled, and most had been kept up nicely. Except for the Weston home.

The one beside Liz's was cute as a button with a rose trellis out front and window boxes and... wait. Was that Maxi's car in the driveway?

As she squinted toward the car, Maxi came out of the house.

"Hey, fancy meeting you here," Andie said out the window as she parked in Liz's driveway.

"Andie?" Maxi hitched the straps of her tote bag back up her shoulder and came over to the car. "What are you doing here?"

"Remember our guest, Liz, who is in town to clean out her family home?"

"Yeah."

Andie pointed toward the house. "Well, that's her house. She asked me to come over and evaluate some of the old items she's found."

"Oh, right. Bunny did say she lived there."

"Who's Bunny? What are you doing here anyway?"

Maxi turned to look at the house she'd just come from, her expression a bit embarrassed. "Bunny is an artist, and I'm taking painting lessons, if you can believe that."

"For the pet portrait of Goblin?" Andie felt sympathetic and wanted to encourage her. "That's great. I'm sure it will help."

Maxi smiled. "Already is."

Liz had come out the front door with two large cardboard boxes brimming with items. She set it down beside two other equally full boxes and came to join Andie and Maxi. "Hey, Andie, glad you could stop by."

"I'm happy to." Andie turned to Maxi. "This is my friend Maxi."

"Nice to meet you. I was just over at Bunny's." Maxi's gaze fell on the box Liz had just put down. "That's a great lamp."

Liz turned to the box. "It is? I was going to throw it out. It was in the living room for ages." She looked back at Andie. "Maybe you should look through the boxes. I really have no idea what is valuable and what isn't."

Andie picked the lamp out of the box. It was tall with a bulbous base and long neck. The shade was a bit dirty and tattered, but the pink glass base was handblown. "This is actually a highly sought-after example of mid-century lighting. Worth a couple hundred."

"Oh!" Liz grimaced and looked back in the boxes. "Good thing you came before the trash guy."

Maxi had moved closer to the boxes and was poking around inside them. "You shouldn't throw some of this out. At least not yet. It would be perfect for staging the house."

"Staging?" Liz asked.

"Yeah, you're selling it, right?"

Liz nodded.

"Houses look better when they are set up as if people are living there except without the clutter," Maxi said.

"Maxi is a wiz at decorating. She decorated my apartment, and it looks like it could be in a magazine." Andie couldn't help but compliment her friend. The apartment really had come out amazing thanks to Maxi.

"Gosh, I don't know much about selling houses. I was just supposed to be cleaning it out before we put it on the market, but if it will sell better with the things still in it..."

"It will. I'd be happy to help you if you want," Maxi offered.

“Oh, I couldn’t ask you to do that,” Liz said. “I could talk to my brother and sister and see if they want to hire you.”

“Nonsense.” Maxi took Liz’s arm and led her toward the front door. “Let’s go see what we have to work with.”

Inside, the house was like a time capsule. Andie was surprised to recognize things that reminded her of her own childhood.

“We had this same clock at our house!” Andie pointed at the starburst clock hanging over the fireplace.

“We did too. And I think we had that same coffee table with the slats in it.” Maxi turned in a slow circle, taking it all in. “And the colors!”

“You like them?” Liz frowned as she looked at the avocado, gold, and green color scheme that permeated the house.

Maxi pursed her lips as she considered the question. “Well, it is very vintage.”

“It hasn’t changed much since I was little,” Liz said.

“Maybe that’s not very good for resale. Not everyone wants those colors. You should probably try to diffuse them with more neutral tones to appeal to a broader range of buyers.” Maxi fluffed an orange-and-yellow pillow that sat on the green couch. “But something that goes with the color of the furniture and accessories, since you don’t want to buy all new things. Maybe a light beige or gray?”

Liz looked skeptical. “I was actually going to have Goodwill come and take the furniture. Do you think I should leave it here?”

“Yes, of course! People need to be able to envision how they might live here.” Maxi walked over to the large brick fireplace in between the living room and kitchen. “But get rid of anything personal and all the knickknacks on the mantel and side tables.”

“I’ll look over them and let you know which ones can be tossed and which have value,” Andie volunteered.

Maxi picked up a picture of a smiling family and a dog that had been on the mantel. “I’m sure you’ll want to keep some things for sentimental reasons. Is this your family?”

Liz stood next to Maxi, a smile spreading on her face as she pointed out the people in the picture. “That’s Mom and Dad. My sister, Shelly, and brother, Peter. The goofy kid is me. And, of course, our family dog, Ranger.”

“Looks like you were happy. Are your brother and sister coming to help you sort through the house?”

Liz looked a little sad, and Andie wondered why. Were the siblings leaving all the work to Liz? Then again, Liz was retired. Maybe they had an agreement.

“I’m not sure. They’re very busy.” Liz glanced around the room. “And I guess none of us really care much about sentimental things. At least I thought I didn’t.”

Andie could see the conflict on Liz’s face and knew exactly how she felt. “You thought coming home would be depressing and stressful, but now that you’re looking around, you’re finding being home brings up comforting memories, too, aren’t you?”

Liz looked surprised. “How do you know?”

“Same thing happened to me.” Andie took a breath. She hadn’t talked much about this, but it seemed important for Liz to know that you really could come home again. “I left Lobster Bay right after high school and avoided coming back. Bad memories were tied up in this town.”

“I know what you mean. But somehow now the memories don’t seem so bad. I think I was making too much of them when I was younger, and that just festered over the years,” Liz said.

Andie nodded. “Same here. When my mother’s health started to decline, I had to come back to help with the Inn. Funny thing, though, at first I thought it would only be temporary. I dreaded coming back and facing all those memories. But it turned out that coming home brought up comforting memories instead, and I decided to stay.”

“You did? So you recently moved back here?” Liz asked.

“Yep.”

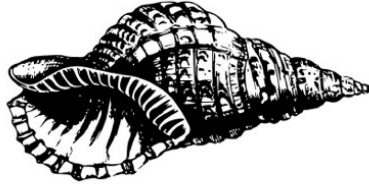
“And do you regret it?”

“Not one bit.” Andie glanced at Maxi. “The people here are great, and you can’t beat being near the beach.”

“You can say that again.” Liz gestured toward the hallway. “There are a lot of things in the bedrooms, and now I have no idea which ones are worth money. Maybe we could have some coffee and a muffin, and then you could take a look?”

“I’d love to.” Andie followed Liz to the kitchen. Liz seemed a little happier since their conversation. If Andie wasn’t mistaken, Liz was looking at her old childhood home with new eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Liz was surprised at the amount of money Andie offered for the items she'd said were valuable. Andie had suggested that Liz could look them up online and see if she felt the offer was fair. Considering that Liz had thought most of the items were trash, she didn't see the need. She trusted Andie and was happy to get some extra money that she hadn't been counting on.

Should she have consulted her siblings? Maybe, but they hadn't expected to get any money, either, so Liz considered it a windfall and was happy to save the time. Peter hadn't been that concerned about it when she'd spoken to him, and she was sure Shelly felt the same. Plus, the extra money could pay for the new interior paint, which she needed to get done right away.

Andie had hauled most of the items away, leaving only a few pieces she would pick up later. Then she and Maxi had helped Liz lug the junk boxes to the curb.

Clearing out all of it made a huge difference. Maybe she should save the estate some money and move out of Tides. Giving up a free room at a quaint inn on the beach seemed crazy, but she felt at home here in the house now.

Don't get too comfortable. She was only here until the house got fixed up. Then it would be sold. And after that, she had nowhere to go until she got her portion of the house sale. Not knowing how much that would be was stressful. It surely wouldn't be enough to buy another place outright. Would a bank give her a loan if she had no income?

She didn't want to dwell on her current lack of opportunities. If worse came to worst, she could rent a small place somewhere. Rents were expensive these days, and it would be a drain on her savings, but if she went to a more rural town, she would find cheaper rents.

For now, she'd better call Shelly and update her on the progress.

"Liz, how is it going? Do you need anything?" Shelly sounded chipper, and Liz appreciated the offer.

"It's going good. I don't need anything. There's been a few developments."

"Oh?"

"It turns out some of the things Mom and Dad had are worth a little money, so I had an antique dealer come and look at them."

"Really? What was worth money?"

Liz hesitated. She hoped Shelly wouldn't be mad. What if she wanted to keep an item for sentimental reasons? But if that were the case, she should have said something or come here to secure it. "Things you would never think of. Salt and pepper shakers. Ashtrays. End tables."

"Wow. Who knew?"

"I hope you don't mind that I sold them. The place needs a fresh coat of paint, and I was going to use the money to pay for that. It will sell a lot better with new paint." At least Maxi thought so.

"I don't mind at all. You're in charge, so whatever you decide is good with me. Are you going to stay in the house now?"

"I'm not sure. I've made good headway cleaning it, and I know putting me up at Tides is expensive, but..."

"Look, don't worry about the money. If Dad's savings run out, I can chip in."

Liz didn't want Shelly to pay for her lodging. She felt guilty enough as it was that she was eating into what they would eventually divide among the three of them.

"I'd love to see what you've done with the place, and I wish I was there. There must be so many things from when we were kids. Did you find my Barbie dolls, by any chance? Those are probably worth money now."

Liz laughed. "I doubt it. Ranger chewed the feet, remember?"

"I thought that was you who chewed them," Shelly teased.

"Maybe. I think Mom got rid of our old toys when we all went to college. I can take some pictures and send them. The place looks pretty

good now.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, and then Liz hung up and took some pictures with her smartphone and texted them to her sister.

She sent the text to Peter, too, and then called. They had a similar conversation about the state of the house and the items she’d sold. He claimed he was looking at his busy schedule and trying to clear it to come out and help. She wasn’t holding her breath.

Next, she called Sally Littlefield. Maxi had given her the woman’s name and said she’d be great for painting the walls. Sally seemed very nice. She could start right away and was willing to come over to give an estimate on the job in a few hours.

Liz picked some tomatoes from the garden and was washing them in the sink when a knock sounded on the front door. Was Sally here already? She opened the door to reveal a woman in her early fifties holding a casserole.

“Hi. I’m Sheila Donahue from number six.” The woman turned to look at a gambrel down the street. The house was the same age as Liz’s but had been much better cared for with a trim lawn, colorful flowers, and fresh paint. Sheila looked well cared for, too, with honey-blond hair and sharp blue eyes. She was wearing a flowered T-shirt and faded jeans. Liz liked her right away.

Liz introduced herself and reached out and took the casserole. “Nice to meet you. Won’t you come in?”

They sat in the kitchen, and Liz dished out small pieces of the chicken enchilada casserole. Sheila had even brought sour cream and guacamole. It was cheesy and delicious with just a hint of spice. Maybe it was a good thing she wasn’t living here; with the way neighbors brought over food, she’d certainly gain some weight.

“I was hoping that you were moving in.” Sheila had been disappointed when Liz explained that she was only cleaning out her father’s house and that it would soon go up for sale. “Ever since the kids went to college, it’s been kind of boring around here. I used to drive them to soccer and friends’ houses, so now I have a lot of time on my hands. I could use someone my age to liven things up.”

Liz liked the idea of that. She’d spent the last decade focusing on her kids and then, when they went out on their own, on her marriage. Fat lot of good that last part had done her. She didn’t really have any close friends.

For the rest of her life, she wanted to focus on herself and having good friends to spend the time with.

“It is a nice neighborhood. What about the other neighbors?” Liz asked. Even though Bunny had already given her the lowdown, she wanted Sheila’s impression.

“Emma is such a darling, and her little daughter, Avery, is so cute.”

Liz forked off a small bite from the casserole on her plate.

“I give her a lot of credit, raising that kid all on her own, and she’s doing a great job. Her ex-husband is kind of a jerk.”

“Aren’t they all.” Liz noticed Sheila’s coffee mug was empty. Had they been talking that long? She stood and pointed at the coffee pot. “More coffee?”

“That would be great.” Sheila slid her mug across the table. “And Mrs. Svenson is very sweet. She’s over ninety, you know. I could sure use some help with her. We try to help her in the yard, and I check on her quite frequently to make sure she hasn’t fallen or anything.” Sheila laughed. “It won’t be long before someone’s doing that for me!”

They talked their way through another cup of coffee. Liz wasn’t surprised to discover that they had a lot in common. They discussed everything from their careers to their kids to the benefits of living in Lobster Bay.

When she finally showed Sheila out, Sally was pulling into the driveway in her work truck.

The handywoman wasn’t anything Liz had expected. She must’ve been in her seventies but looked thin and spry. She had a long gray braid wound up around her head. Her face was tanned, and her blue eyes sparkled with intelligence.

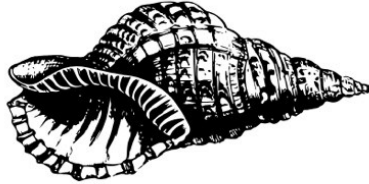
“This looks like a fairly easy job,” Sally said. “I’ll have to measure the space to give you a quote.”

“Of course. When do you think you could start?”

“You’re in luck. Mrs. Oberman’s granddaughter had her twins early, so she put off the work I was going to do on her sunroom next week. I could start right away.”

Liz smiled. “That’s perfect. Guess we better get measuring, then.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Jane felt bad about having to refuse Mike's invitation to lunch, so she baked his favorite chocolate chip banana bread and headed over to his place with Cooper.

Mike lived in a townhouse in a development called Boulder Hills. Even though Jane did have responsibilities at Tides, she was still able to carve out enough personal time to spend quite a bit of it at the townhouse. She felt right at home there, which she should have because Mike had consulted her on every aspect of its decor and even on which unit to buy. She wondered if maybe he was going to ask her to move in, but how could she do that? She needed to be at Tides to run it. It was too much to think about.

Cooper raced to the front door, and Jane rang the bell, feeling a little nervous. Mike had given her a key, but she didn't feel right walking in unless he knew she was coming. And considering how frustrated he'd sounded when she'd had to say no to lunch, she wasn't even sure if she'd be welcome.

He opened the door with a curious expression on his face. His brown curly hair was tousled, as if he'd been running his hands through it. His green eyes widened when he realized who was at the door.

"Jane! I wasn't expecting you. Thought you had an interview?" He bent and petted Cooper, who wriggled with excitement.

"I hope you don't mind me dropping by?" Jane hesitated.

"Of course not." He sounded sincere. She'd been worried he was mad about the lunch thing, but maybe that was just her overactive imagination.

She held up the tinfoil-wrapped loaf. "I made some banana bread as a peace offering for missing lunch."

Mike laughed and took the bread. "A peace offering is not necessary, but I'm not going to turn down fresh baked banana bread." He opened the door wider, and Cooper raced right in.

Jane followed him to the kitchen. She loved the white cabinets, the marble counters, and the breakfast nook with its large windows. She'd picked it all out, and Maxi had helped decorate it with splashes of sunny yellow and bright blue.

Mike got out a cutting board and cut two slices of bread while Cooper ran around sniffing every square inch, as if expecting the condo to be full of new smells since the last time he was there, just two days ago.

"How did the interview go?" Mike asked.

Jane settled into a chair at the breakfast bar on the other side of the counter from where Mike was working. "Not very good, I'm afraid. She insisted I call her *Mrs.* Weathers, and she seemed like a bossy fussbudget that would micromanage and disapprove of everything that went on at the inn."

Mike grabbed the butter tray out of the fridge. "So I guess she's out."

"Yeah, sorry."

He slid the plate of bread slices and butter over to her, and she picked up a piece.

"I'll try to get some better people in," she said. "I never realized how hard it would be to find someone."

He sat beside her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Don't feel pressured. You need to find the exact right person, and if that takes some time, then so be it."

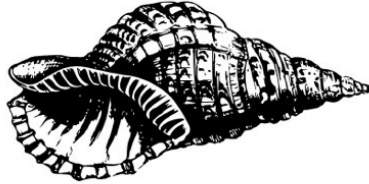
"But I thought you were getting frustrated with me because I had to spend so much time at the inn." Jane was a little relieved that maybe Mike was less put off than she'd thought.

Mike bit into his slice of banana bread and chewed for a bit before answering. "No. Not really. I mean, we have the rest of our lives to spend together."

Jane's heart hitched. Did he just say the rest of their lives?

He smiled and reached for another slice of bread. "Besides, if breaking a lunch date means I get fresh baked bread, I won't mind if it happens a few more times."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Andie wrapped the antique porcelain pitcher carefully in tissue paper then placed it in a bag and handed it over to her customer. “This is going to look great in your china cabinet, Mrs. Litchfield.”

“I think so, too, dear. Thank you.”

Andie watched the elderly woman shuffle out of the shop, the bag clutched to her chest. Mrs. Litchfield was one of her best customers. She collected a special type of porcelain that was made in the Limoges area of France. The pitcher—hand-painted with cherubs and gold detail—was an excellent example and one of the nicest pieces Andie had seen in a while.

She picked up her feather duster and walked around the shop, swooshing the dust off the tops of the mahogany side tables and crystal candy jar lids. This was her favorite activity, walking around and looking at her inventory while the shop was quiet. The subtle creaking of the old floorboards and the smell of antique wood and lemon Pledge swirled in the air.

She opened the curio cabinet and gave the glass shelves a dusting. Her gaze fell on the box beside it that held the Civil War papers.

Her search of the county records for Robert Koslachowski’s two great-grandsons hadn’t yielded a thing. It was as if his family disappeared. Maybe they had, or maybe they had moved to another state. How many states should she check? Maybe checking just a few of the surrounding counties wouldn’t take too long.

She settled in at the computer behind the counter and was so engrossed in her search that she didn’t hear someone come in.

“Must be pretty interesting.”

Andie jumped, dropping the notebook she’d been holding even though she hadn’t found anything to take notes about.

Shane stood on the other side of the counter, looking amused. “What’s so interesting?”

Andie sighed and stretched. “Sorry, I was looking up my Civil War guy.”

“You still haven’t found his family?”

“No. It’s weird because I know he had two great-grandsons, but all traces seem to disappear.” Andie had already filled him in on her visit to the armory.

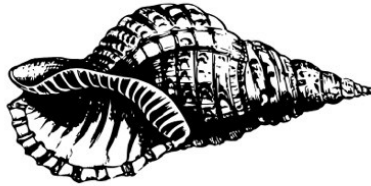
“Oh. I’m sorry you’re having a hard time. I know how important this is to you, but maybe there is no one to give the documents to. You’ve put a lot of work into this. Might be time to let it go.”

The expression on his handsome face was sincere. She knew he had her best interests at heart. And maybe he was right. She was letting it take over too much of her life, and it was overshadowing the really important things—like Shane. She’d even considered skipping the morning coffee at Sandcastles the next day so she could do more research. But her sister Jane and her friends were too important to skip out on for this.

By getting those papers to the family, she would feel like she helped someone. But those people were strangers. Maybe she should focus on helping those closest to her instead.

Andie shut her laptop and stood. “You’re right. Now, did you say you were going to take me to the beach so we could have a glass of wine and watch the sunset?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Maxi had taken her latest painting home and set it on the easel next to the large picture window that overlooked the ocean. The cottage on the beach was her creative painting space, but she liked to take her finished work home to look at it in a different light.

James had a high-profile career at the bank, and they lived in an upscale home on the cliffs near the Marginal Way. Though she wasn't right on the ocean, her view was outstanding. Sometimes she could even hear the waves crashing on the rocks from her deck on the side of the house.

Maxi stood back and admired the painting. Bunny was a good teacher, and her rendition of the cats had improved. In this painting, the two cats were curled up on a blue velvet pillow. She was especially proud of the area where their fur met. It had been difficult to show the individual black and white hairs overlapping without creating a big mess.

Their eyes looked luminescent and alive with just the right amount of mischief. They looked so sweet and innocent relaxing on their cushion. Nothing like the mischievous rascals they were being right now as they ran around the living room, batting a toy and clawing the rugs.

James came down the stairs. "That looks great. Is that today's work?"

"Yes. I think my skills are improving."

"I agree."

A tinfoil ball skidded past them with Picasso right behind it. James intercepted him by picking him up and cradling him like a baby. Picasso let James cuddle him for about three seconds before trying to climb up onto James's shoulder. It was a new trick James was attempting to teach the cats

so that they would perch on his shoulder like parrots. Picasso got on his shoulder but only for a second before leaping off to the floor. He landed gracefully on all four paws with only a soft thud.

"It makes me so nervous when they jump that far! I always think they're going to break a leg," Maxi said.

"They're made for it." James turned his attention back to the painting. "So, do you feel satisfied with the progress you're making and the lessons you took with Bunny Howard?"

"The lessons are great, and Bunny is nice." Maxi tilted her head to see the painting from a different angle. "I guess it is an improvement, but it's still not quite there yet."

"Don't worry, you'll get there. Why don't you take a break?"

It wasn't a bad idea, and she was getting kind of hungry. Her stomach grumbled, and James looked down at it. "Seems like you need one. I have steaks ready to go on the grill and a salad in the fridge."

"You do?" Was it dinnertime? Maxi had been so intent on the painting she'd lost track of time.

"I know it's a little early, but I figured we could eat an early supper and snuggle up by the fire pit. We don't have too many nights left to eat outside."

They'd installed a large gas fire pit on the patio earlier in the summer so they could extend their outdoor season.

"Sounds like a good plan. I just need to get out of my painting clothes."

Maxi ran upstairs and changed into her comfortable jeans and a pink sweatshirt with Lobster Bay written in white on the front. She grabbed a soft, thick, knee-length gray sweater from the closet and joined James on the patio. The sizzle of steaks and the smell of grilling meat made her mouth water. James had set plates out on the edge of the fire pit, which was wide enough to use as a table. A bowl of salad sat on the side table in between two cushioned patio chairs.

"It doesn't get much better than this," Maxi said. "Can I help with something?"

"I have this under control. Maybe you could get that bottle of wine and a couple of glasses."

Maxi returned with the wine just as the steaks were coming off the grill.

They relaxed into their chairs around the fire pit. The steaks were grilled to a perfect medium rare with a little bit of char on the ends, just the way

Maxi liked them. Her mouth watered as she cut off a piece.

“So, how was work today?” she asked James. Lately, their conversations had focused on her painting issues, and she didn’t want everything they talked about to be about her.

“Pretty good. Nothing too exciting ever happens at the bank.”

Maxi laughed. “Well, sometimes that’s good.”

“What did you do today? I hope you didn’t spend the whole day hunched over your easel at the cottage.”

Maxi told him about how she’d run into Liz and Andie. “The house is like a time capsule. I gave her some advice on staging the house.”

“Another thing that you’re excellent at.” James looked over at their house. “Our place could be in magazines thanks to all the great work you’ve done decorating it.”

Maxi had enjoyed decorating the house. The kitchen was a gorgeous light-gray with wide pine flooring and white quartz counters. The living room was white with blue and yellow accents. Their bedroom, in blues and yellows, was soothing. Maybe she should consider redoing the master bath, which hadn’t been redone since before she had the kids.

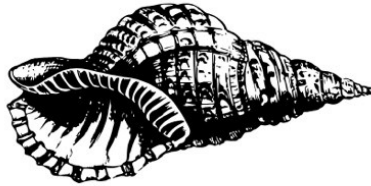
“I ran into Marie Lapino at the bank today. She was really grateful for the donations we’ve been collecting in the lobby.”

Marie ran the Lobster Bay animal shelter. Since bringing Picasso and Rembrandt home, James and Maxi had become somewhat active in trying to help her cause. The shelter always needed things like blankets, crates, food, and cleaning products. Maxi liked to scour yard sales for soft toys and cheap animal accessories and always bought pet food when it was on sale at the grocery store.

“That reminds me, I have a pile of stuff cluttering up the hall closet. I’ll bring that down to her tomorrow.”

“Good idea. It won’t be long before we are using the closet for our fall jackets.” James’s lips quirked in a teasing smile. “Just be careful you don’t come home with another cat.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



Liz watched Sally Littlefield as she measured the wall surfaces to determine the scope of the project. The older woman sure was a character. Liz liked her no-nonsense attitude and could tell she was a hard worker.

“Looks like about a three-day job.” Sally stood back and looked up at the ceiling. “Unless you want the ceiling done too.”

Liz glanced up. The ceiling did look a bit yellowed, and as far as she could remember, her parents never had it painted. “I probably should. How much time will that add?”

“Just a day.” Sally pulled a pencil from behind her ear and a piece of paper from her back pocket. She licked the end of the pencil and started scribbling then held the piece of paper out to Liz. “Here’s the estimate.”

It looked reasonable and wouldn’t even use all the money she’d gotten from Andie for the antiques. “Sounds good.”

“What about the other rooms? As I recall, there are three bedrooms and the kitchen. Kitchens usually need ceiling paint.”

“As you recall? You’ve been here?”

“Ayuh. Knew your mom—she was a peach. Then played poker with your dad and the gang in later years.”

The gang? It seemed funny to think of her dad having a gang of poker-playing friends.

“He was a peach too. I was really sorry to hear of his passing.”

“He was a peach? Never heard him described that way.”

Sally laughed. “He was always talking about you kids.”

“Really?”

“Ayuh. He was especially proud of you and your good grades. Said he always knew you could get into the best college with those grades, and that would be the best thing for your future.”

Liz frowned. “Are you sure? As I recall, my grades were never good enough. He was always getting on me about them. Seemed to disapprove of everything I did.”

Sally studied her for a few beats. “I think you might be remembering it from a teenager’s perspective. When you’re a teen you think you are invincible, and thinking about your future involves worrying what to wear to the next party. From an adult perspective, things look a lot different. Adults know how hard life is when you are on your own and how important it is to get a good start. Some fathers think they have to be tough to push their kids to do their best.”

Had Liz done that with her own kids? There were plenty of times she had to be a lot sterner than she’d wanted. At least she’d had a soft side and hadn’t been as bad as her father.

“You should have seen how my father treated me.” Sally snorted. “But our parents were from a different generation. Their parents gave them tough love, and that’s what they passed on. Didn’t mean they didn’t love us.”

Liz looked around the room as Sally’s words sank in. More memories surfaced, this time the bad ones, but now she saw them in a different light. She could see herself storming out the front door after one of the many fights. But hadn’t her dad been calling after her to come back? And hadn’t he treated her to ice cream or something special after? And the sofa where her father had waited up when she’d come in late... she’d assumed it was so he could catch her and yell at her for staying out past the time she was supposed to be home, but was it really because he was worried and couldn’t sleep until she was home safe?

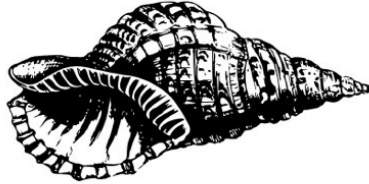
The way he’d kept on her about her grades... She’d seen it as not being good enough, but did he really want her to just do her best so she could have the best opportunities in life?

Could it be that she’d had everything wrong all along?

The house took on a whole new feeling. The new paint to match her new perspective would make it seem like it was her own. A new start with the best opportunities for a good future. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to stay here until the house sold.

But the house was full of drop cloths and paint fumes, so it looked like she'd be staying at Tides a few more nights.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



The next morning, Jane went to Sandcastles early. She sat at the table she and her friends favored. Cooper lounged on the warm sidewalk next to her. Hailey brought a mug of coffee, and Jane spread the classifieds out on the table. Since her visit with Mike, she was more determined than ever to find someone. Liz had been right. Jane might have been subconsciously tying herself to Tides to avoid taking that next step in her relationship. She needed to get over her fear and move on. She wanted to spend more time with Mike and see where that led.

The appearance of a plate of pastries on the table diverted her attention from the help wanted section she was studying. Claire slipped into the seat next to her, a mug of coffee in her hand.

“You looking for a job?” Claire joked.

Jane sighed. “Just studying the ads. Mine just doesn’t seem to be working. No one new has applied.”

“I thought you were interviewing someone yesterday?”

“Yeah, that didn’t pan out.” Was she being too critical? She hadn’t called Mrs. Weathers yet to tell her she wasn’t hired. Maybe she should give her a try. She might be better than nothing.

“Oh, sorry.” Claire sipped her coffee, and Jane reached over to cut a bran muffin in half.

“It’s not as easy as I thought it would be.”

“Don’t worry. Things will work out.” Claire’s gaze skipped over Jane’s shoulder, and her brows pulled together. “Hey, is that Liz Weston? That woman looks familiar, and I know you said she was staying at Tides.”

Jane twisted in her seat to see Liz walking down the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. She waved at her. "Hey Liz!"

Liz looked up, a little confused at who would be calling her name. Then, upon recognizing Jane waving at her, she smiled and started over.

"I'm not sure if you guys know each other?" Jane gestured between Claire and Liz.

"I don't know." Liz squinted at Claire. "Hard to remember everyone from our younger days."

"Liz, meet Claire. She owns Sandcastles Bakery here. I highly recommend it! Would you like to join us?"

Liz hesitated, and Claire jumped up from her seat. "Please do. I'll pull another chair over and get you a cup of coffee."

"Well, okay. Don't go to any trouble for me." But it was too late. Claire had already pulled a chair next to Jane and was halfway to the bakery door. Liz sat down and bent to pet Cooper.

"It's lovely here. Do they have good coffee?" Liz asked.

"The best." Jane took a sip of hers.

Claire returned with more pastries and a mug and small plate for Liz. "Help yourself."

"Just coffee for me." Liz patted her stomach. "I just had one of Brenda's delicious breakfasts at Tides with the nice couple that's staying there. The Silvermans."

"Those sure can fill you up," Claire said.

"How is the house cleanup coming along?" Jane asked.

"Pretty good. Andie came over and bought some of the old junk... er, I mean antiques," Liz joked. "And your friend Maxi gave me some pointers for staging and suggested I do some interior painting, so I hired this nice older lady, Sally, and she's starting today."

"Sally Littlefield?" Claire asked as she placed a steaming mug in front of Liz.

"Yes, that's her."

"She's great. Did a lot of work here." Claire gestured toward the bakery.

"And at Tides," Jane added.

"She seems very efficient. She said it would take three days, so I'll be staying at Tides for a few more days at least."

"At least?" Jane raised her brows. "Does that mean you're thinking of moving into your old house?"

Liz shrugged. “Maybe.”

“But you’re still selling?” Claire asked.

“Probably.” Liz sipped her coffee. “This is good.”

“Are you having second thoughts about selling?” Jane asked.

Liz sighed. “It just seems so comfortable and familiar now, and my apartment is being turned into high-end condos, so I’m looking for a place—”

“Morning!” Andie plopped into a chair. “Hey, Liz, good to see you.”

“You too. Thanks again for coming over to look at the things from my house,” Liz said. “The money you gave me paid for the painting.”

“I was happy to. It’s what I do. I get inventory to sell, a collector gets something they really want, and you get money for something you no longer want. It’s a win-win-win.” Andie pinched a corner off a corn muffin and popped it in her mouth. “How did it go with Sally?”

“Great. She’s hired.”

“Oh, really? Gosh I’d love to see the place once she’s done,” Andie said.

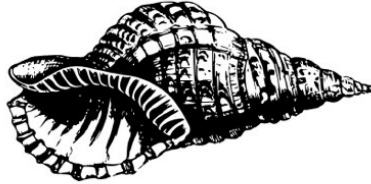
“You would? Bunny mentioned that too. Maybe I’ll have a little party to show it off.”

“I bet Maxi would like that too.” Andie frowned at something across the road. “Hey, isn’t that her over there?”

They turned to see Maxi heading down the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. She waved at them and yelled. “I’ll be there in a few minutes!” Then she headed straight on.

“Huh, that’s weird.” Claire cut a cheese danish in half and slid one half onto her plate. “I wonder where she’s off to.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Maxi hoped the others didn't think she was avoiding them. She wasn't—well, not exactly. She had to drop stuff off at the animal shelter, and she had to admit that she hoped Bert and Harry would have finished their morning coffee and moved on by the time she was back. Although she was making progress on the painting of Goblin, she couldn't bear their hopeful looks and didn't want to make excuses again.

She pushed her doubts about the painting from her mind and focused on the joy of seeing all the animals at the shelter. Even though they were in between homes, the animals were always very happy, and the place was spotless. She definitely wasn't bringing home another cat, though. But there was no harm in looking at them.

She stopped in front of a cage containing a huge, fluffy striped cat with big yellow eyes. The tag said his name was Norse.

"Hey there." She poked her fingers through the cage, and the cat pressed his head against them. She scratched him, eliciting a low purr.

The cat in the next cage must have been envious. A dainty pink nose poked out of the cage, and the gray-and-white cat meowed loudly. Maxi moved over to give him attention.

"Maxi! Are you looking for another cat already?" Marie Lapino appeared from the back room with a mop in one hand and a sparkle in her eyes.

Maxi laughed. "I think the two I have are enough for now. I've been collecting towels and leashes from various yard sales and buying pet food when it's on sale. I wanted to drop it all off."

“Thank you so much.” Marie leaned the mop against the wall and took the two large bags Maxi had brought. She peered in. “This is wonderful. I really appreciate it.”

“I’m happy to do it.”

“So, how are Rembrandt and Picasso doing?”

Maxi moved on to the next cat. She had a gorgeous charcoal-gray coat and blue eyes. “I think they’re finally out of the terrible kitten stage. Some of my furniture didn’t survive.”

Marie laughed. “Kittens are rambunctious. Next time you could consider an older cat if you want to add to your family.”

Another cat? Maxi wasn’t ready for that yet. Maybe someday. Or if one caught her eye... Glancing around, she saw that almost all the cages were full. There were all kinds of cats with different colorings and markings. Most of them looked at her with curiosity in their eyes. She found herself thinking about how she would paint those eyes using the techniques she’d learned from Bunny. When she noticed the way the light reflected off them, she thought about where she would put the shadows and highlights and considered all the colors she would have to blend to get them just right. “You’re pretty full up right now.”

“We took some overflow from a shelter in Biddeford. Don’t worry. They never stay long. All these little guys will get a forever home soon.” Marie poked two fingers into a cage and petted a petite little calico. The cat rubbed her cheeks against Marie’s fingertips. “Got a lot of dogs too. Maybe you need to adopt a dog to balance things out.”

“Nice try. I don’t think so, but I wouldn’t mind saying hi to them.”

“If you want to help me bring this stuff out back, you can check them out.”

Maxi agreed, and they went back to the dog section. There was a German shepherd mix, a bulldog, a hound, and a little pug-terrier mix. The pug mix made her think of Bert and Harry. Were they ready for another dog? Maybe she should mention it to them.

She bent down in front of the bulldog’s cage. The plate on the door said the dog’s name was Shania. Her big brown eyes looked up at Maxi as if pleading for a home.

“Hey, Shania, you sure are pretty.” Maxi turned to Marie, who had squatted down beside her. “It’s funny—their expressions seem human. And

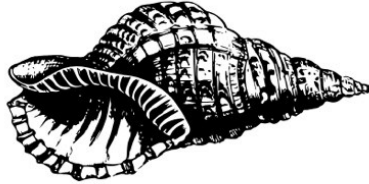
very different from cats. Cats seem to want to be waited on while dogs just want to be loved. You can see it in their eyes.”

“Yep.” Marie opened the door, and Shania stepped out so Maxi could pet her properly. “Cats’ eyes are a different shape. Light hits them differently, and it makes them appear deeper but also without emotion. That’s why their eyes seem so luminescent, almost glowing. It helps them see at night. Dogs’ eyes just seem to go right to their souls.”

Maxi stared at Marie. She was right! Could that be why her paintings of the cats were good while she was still struggling to paint Goblin? Could the answer be as simple as just adjusting the shape and reflection of the light?

Suddenly, she couldn’t wait to get home and work on her painting, but first she had to meet her friends at Sandcastles.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Liz had just finished cleaning out the old bookshelf next to the fireplace, and Sally had just finished painting the living room when the doorbell rang.

A young woman in her mid-thirties stood on the doorstep. She was dressed in a tan T-shirt with crochet detail and striped linen pants. Comfy but not too casual. Her straight blond hair hung just below her shoulders, and she had wide-set blue eyes that brimmed with energy. She was holding a tray of sandwiches and a pitcher of lemonade. Boy, this neighborhood sure was big on bringing food.

“Hi! I’m Emma Chamberlain from number nine. Bunny said you’re redoing the house, and I saw you here working and thought you might need a break.” Her eyes widened as she peered past Liz’s shoulder into the living room. “Wow, this place looks great!”

“Thanks. I’ve cleaned a lot of my parents’ stuff out, and I’m having it painted.” Liz pointed at Sally.

“Hey, Sally.” Apparently, everyone in town knew Sally, including Emma.

“Emma, how’s the deck holding?”

“Great.” Emma turned to Liz. “Sally fixed the deck on my house last year. She’s the best.”

“Come on in.” Liz shooed her all the way in and shut the door. “How long have you lived in the neighborhood?”

“Just about eight years. I moved here with my daughter after the divorce.”

“Did you know my dad?”

Emma nodded. “He was so nice to Avery. That’s my daughter. She’s in school right now. She was just little when he was here, but she used to come over when he was outside tending to the yard, and your dad would be so patient with her, explaining all about plants. I guess she needed a father figure.”

Would the surprises never end? Liz was learning more and more about her dad.

“Anyway, I was so sorry to hear that he passed. We used to visit him up at Tall Pines.”

“That was nice of you.” Liz felt new guilt that Emma had probably visited her father more than she had. “Let’s go eat in the kitchen. I’m starved. What about you, Sally?”

Sally eyed the platter as if she wasn’t sure if she was invited.

“I made enough for all of us.” Emma said.

“Well, I am pretty hungry.”

“We both deserve a break.” Liz herded Sally and Emma toward the kitchen. She paused at the doorway and looked back at the living room. All the clutter was gone, and the walls looked fresh and crisp with their coat of warm gray paint. “You did an awesome job.”

“Thanks.” Sally smiled with pride.

Liz got out plates and glasses, and everyone sat at the table.

“This house really looks good. I hope whoever you sell it to appreciates your hard work and is a nice neighbor.” Emma took a bite of her sandwich. She’d brought an assortment—ham and swiss, tuna and egg salad, all cut into neat triangles.

Liz picked an egg salad triangle off the tray. The thought of someone else living in her house was unsettling. Especially since she’d just put so much work into it.

“Seems a shame to move out of this nice place,” Sally said, as if reading her mind.

Liz looked around at the familiar, homey kitchen. Okay, maybe it could use new cabinets and granite counters, but it still felt comfortable and familiar.

“Why don’t you just stay here?” Emma asked.

“I own it with my siblings, so we have to sell and split the money.”

Emma nodded. "Of course, and I suppose you have your own home somewhere too."

"Actually, I don't. I moved into an apartment after my divorce, and they're turning it into condos that I can't afford."

Emma nodded in sympathy. "I had a similar experience after my divorce."

"You might be able to afford it once this place sells." Sally crunched a chip. "You'll get one-third of the selling price. Unless there's a mortgage that could be a lot of money."

Liz frowned. Silly as it sounded, she actually hadn't considered that she could buy her old apartment. The mortgage had been paid years ago, but she had no idea what her third of the house sale would be. The house still needed work, and she wasn't sure how much they could sell it for. But did she even want to buy her old place? That seemed like a closed chapter in her life. She needed to open a new one.

"That's right," Emma said. "You can live in lots of places... maybe even here."

"Here?"

"Sure, you'd have enough for a down payment, or maybe you could work a deal with your siblings and not even have to get a loan." Sally chomped on her sandwich. "My friend Elsie's granddaughter did that after Elsie passed. She worked out some deal with her cousins and ended up with the house."

"It would be really great if you could stay," Emma said. "Bunny said you're just the right type for our little neighborhood."

But Liz was hardly listening. She was too busy wondering if it was even remotely possible for her to work out a deal with her brother and sister. And if it was, how exactly would she go about that?

AFTER THEY FINISHED up Emma's delicious sandwiches and Sally called it quits for the day, Liz called the investment broker with whom she had her retirement savings. She wanted to see if she could possibly use the leverage of her share of the property and her own retirement savings to take out some sort of a loan to pay her brother and sister.

He mentioned some possibilities, including taking out a loan against her retirement savings to pay them. He also asked some questions that she didn't know the answers to. What was the house worth? Would her siblings want a lump sum right away, or would they be willing to take payments?

But even if she could get some sort of loan like that, how would she make the payments? And there would be other household expenses, not to mention the property taxes. Without a big mortgage, all of that would be minimal, but she'd still need to supplement her income with a job. She had only a limited amount of savings to last her until she could collect Social Security and start tapping into her 401k.

But, at least, a plan was forming, and she felt more hopeful for the future than she had in a long time.

Would her siblings agree? There was only one way to find out. She never asked for favors for herself, but the way Sally had put it, it didn't seem like it would be too much of a favor to let her use her portion for a down payment.

Brimming with determination to make her plan work, she called her sister.

"Liz! How's it going?" Shelly sounded a bit distracted. Liz hoped this wasn't a bad time because she wanted an answer right away.

"You won't believe it. The house looks so nice... almost too nice."

There was a beat of silence on the end of the line. "Huh? Too nice? Is that a problem?"

"Well, I had an idea, and I thought maybe—"

"Hold on, sorry..." Liz heard muffled sounds, as if Shelly had put the phone aside and was talking to someone else. Then Shelly came back on the line. "I'm sorry, Liz. I'm going to have to call you back later."

"But I just had this one thing, really quick—"

It was too late. Shelly had already hung up.

Maybe Liz would have better luck with her brother.

She made a cup of tea and then called Peter.

"Liz. Hi." Peter sounded very hesitant and guarded, which was odd. He was usually happy to hear from her.

"Hi, Peter. I'm just calling to update you on the house. I've cleaned out most of it and gotten it painted. It looks fantastic."

"That's great. I appreciate you doing all this work. Okay, well... gotta run."

“Wait a minute!” Why was Peter acting so weird? He usually chatted more. “I actually have an idea for the house, and I wanted to feel you out about it.”

“An idea? Whatever you want to do, it is fine. You’re doing a great job fixing it up. You can tell me about it later. I have an important—”

So Peter was going to brush her off too? Liz was sick of it, so she interrupted him. “No, Peter, really. I want to talk to you about this right now.”

“I’m so sorry. I’m being called into a meeting.” Peter hung up.

Liz stared at the phone. That was weird. Her siblings seemed to be purposely putting her off. Had they guessed what she wanted to ask and didn’t know how to tell her no?

She felt angry. All her life she’d done things for them. And she’d come out here and done all this work on her own without them even lifting a finger. Granted, she had volunteered, and she had refused their offers to help, but still.... And now she wanted one little favor, and they couldn’t even listen to her?

They both had plenty of money and didn’t need the profits from the house right now, so they should have no reason to oppose the plan.

And her agent had said that after a few years, she could take out a home equity loan and pay them the rest. Couldn’t they wait a few years for the money to make their sister happy?

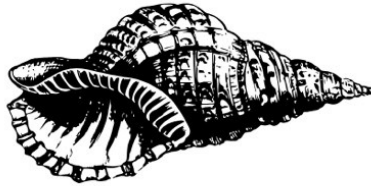
Maybe she wasn’t being fair. They couldn’t have any idea what she was about to propose. And she’d never told them the full truth about her situation because she didn’t want them to feel sorry for her. They had no idea that she had no place to live. Maybe they both really *had* been busy, and Liz was reading too much into this.

Liz wandered around the house. The kitchen with its familiar layout was outdated, but, in time, she could renovate it and make it her own. The living room where they’d had family game nights looked retro modern with the fresh coat of paint. The old wall-to-wall rug would have to go, but Liz was pretty sure there were hardwood floors underneath it.

Her old bedroom would be a perfect office. Shelly’s would make a nice guest room, and Peter’s could be used for storage. The spacious master with its en suite bathroom would be a perfect bedroom for her. She could already picture it painted a calming light blue. Maybe she should add that to Sally’s list.

Suddenly she was more determined than ever to stay in Lobster Bay and in this very house. No matter what the obstacles were, she was going to overcome them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



A young woman was coming out of Tides when Andie arrived for her afternoon shift.

“Good afternoon!” Andie chirped.

“Afternoon.” The woman mumbled, keeping her head down and shuffling away as if afraid.

Jane was standing in the lobby with a clipboard in her hand.

“Who was that?” Andie gestured toward the door.

“Latest interviewee.”

“Not a keeper?” Andie said as Jane ripped the paper off the clipboard and tossed it in the trash.

“Afraid not.” Jane motioned for Andie to follow her into the sitting room. “Did you see her? She was definitely not the outgoing type. We need someone who would be personable with the guests.”

“That’s too bad. How many people are you going to have to interview before you find the right one?” Andie asked. Just like Shane had suggested last night, she should be spending less time looking for her Civil War soldier’s family and more time helping her sister. She didn’t even know if there were any Koslachowskis left or if they would even care about the papers of some long-forgotten relative. “I should be helping you with the interviews.”

Jane waved her off. “Don’t worry about it. You have the antique business to run. I just have Tides.”

“But still.” A pinch of guilt made Andie decide that if a new application came in, she would offer to interview the next person.

Jane took the couch, and Andie flopped into the chair. Cooper trotted over to lie in the puddle of sun coming in from the picture window. Jane frowned at Andie. "You seem a little down. Is something wrong?"

Andie reached over and plucked a chocolate kiss out of the dish. "Not really." She unwrapped the kiss and popped it into her mouth.

Jane took her own chocolate kiss out and started to unwrap it. "Seriously. What's wrong?"

Andie felt silly. Her problem with the Civil War document was nothing compared to other people's problems. On the other hand, she was grateful her sister cared. For many years, Jane and Andie had been estranged. Now that she'd moved back to town, they enjoyed a close relationship, and she wanted to keep it that way. That meant telling her everything, no matter how silly it seemed. "It's just the Civil War document. I've run into a dead end trying to find the family."

"Oh, that's too bad. That seems like something a family would want. So what are you going to do? Are you just giving up?"

Andie picked another kiss out of the bowl. Jane did the same.

Andie rolled the velvety chocolate around in her mouth slowly as she thought about what she was going to do. "I think so. I might've been getting a little obsessed about it."

They plucked two more kisses out of the bowl and unwrapped them.

"So what will you do with the document?" Jane asked as she popped her kiss into her mouth.

"Not sure. It doesn't feel right to sell it. Maybe I'll just save it in case someone comes looking."

"That sounds like a good idea." Jane plucked another kiss out of the bowl.

"What about you? Is it causing problems with Mike that you haven't found someone to take more shifts at Tides? I could add a few to my schedule." Andie leaned forward and took another kiss from the bowl.

"Don't worry about it. I thought he was upset that I couldn't go to lunch the other day, but then I bribed him with some fresh banana bread, and everything seems to be okay."

Andie laughed. Scooping a handful of the kisses out of the dish, she settled back into her chair. "Well, that's good. You guys make a nice couple."

Jane smiled, her cheeks turning the slightest shade of pink. “We do, don’t we?”

The two sisters chatted about some ideas for bringing more guests to Tides. They exchanged town gossip and wondered how their mother was getting along at the assisted living facility.

Suddenly, Andie looked at the bowl. “Oh my gosh, we ate this whole bowl of chocolate kisses!”

Jane looked at the pile of silver foil wrappings in front of her. “Geez, I guess I wasn’t paying attention. Guess I’ll have to have salad for supper.”

Andie laughed. “Yeah, me too. Seems like I just look at food and the pounds go on.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“You’re not the only ones,” Liz Weston said from the doorway. “Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear about the pounds going on.”

Cooper trotted over to her, wagging his tail rapidly as she stooped to pet him.

“Come on in and join us.” Jane gestured toward the empty chair. “Sorry there’s no more chocolate.”

“I’m on my way to my room, but I was looking for you two so I could invite you to a little reveal party I’m having to show off the house. It’s mostly cleaned out now, and Sally is almost done with the painting.”

“How does it look?” Jane asked.

“Fabulous. I can’t believe the difference.”

“I’m dying to see it,” Andie said.

“Great. Sally is coming, and so are Bunny Howard and a few of the other neighbors. Could you invite Maxi and that nice lady from the bakery?”

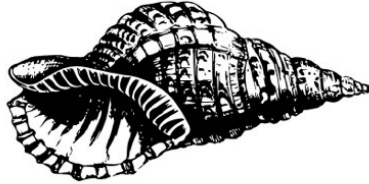
“Claire?” Jane asked.

“Yes. She was so gracious to me the other morning.”

“Of course. She’d love to come, and Maxi will be excited to see the change.”

“Great.” Liz bent down and petted Cooper again. “And you’re invited, too, Cooper. Tomorrow night at six o’clock.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Maxi stood back and assessed the painting. Her back hurt from standing at the easel for almost eight hours, and she had paint all over her clothes and hair. But the ocean breeze billowing the curtains beside the open French doors and the sound of waves crashing on the beach made up for it.

This was her best attempt yet. She was getting close but...

Knock, knock.

She leaned out to look through the kitchen and saw Claire peering in the door. She was holding a basket and looked concerned.

Maxi put the brush in turpentine and turned her painting to face the wall. She wasn't ready for anyone to see it.

"You haven't been answering your phone," Claire said.

"Sorry, I got carried away painting." Maxi was touched by her friend's concern.

"James came into Sandcastles for a coffee and said you were here painting. He hadn't heard from you, either, and suggested you might need a snack." Claire put the basket down on the kitchen table and pulled the red gingham towel off the top.

Bakery smells wafted out, and Maxi realized she was, indeed, ravenous. Inside the basket was an assortment of muffins, cookies, and brownies. Maxi picked out a corn muffin, put on some coffee, and set some mugs and dessert plates on the Formica table.

"Want to go sit out on the patio?"

Maxi had rented the cottage furnished, but she'd brought over a lot of furniture and accents to make it her own. Her favorite was the patio set that she'd put out back. The cottage had a small area with pavers that sat right on the beach, and she loved to sit out there. Sometimes in the summer, she and James got up early and came from their house on the cliff to watch the sun rise before he headed off to work and she started painting. But it was gorgeous to sit out any time of day. Now, in the late afternoon, it was still warm enough if you wore a sweater.

They sat out watching a few beachgoers stroll through the waves at the edge of the ocean. It was low tide, and the edge of the waves was a good three hundred feet away. Just far enough to keep the patio private but still be able to see the waves.

"This is great. Thanks. I didn't realize how hungry I was." Maxi cut the muffin in half and spread butter on it.

"There's another reason I was calling." Claire dunked a cookie into her coffee.

Maxi looked up from her muffin. "Oh?"

"Yes. We got invited to a little party at Liz Weston's. She's done with sprucing the house up and wanted to show it off."

"That's great! That house is so cute. I can't wait to see what she's done. Who is going?"

Claire squinted as if to remember. "You, me, Jane, Andie, and I think they said she had asked some neighbors."

"Probably Bunny Howard. I took a painting lesson with her." Speaking of painting, Maxi really wanted to focus on finishing the painting of Goblin for Bert and Harry. Her eyes strayed over to the window, where she could see the easel facing the wall. She had just a few things to try... but taking a break would be good. Besides, she needed to let some of the underlayers dry before putting in the details that she hoped would pull it all together.

Maybe her subconscious would fill in the blanks to the last piece she was missing. Besides, she would never turn down an opportunity to hang out with her friends. "When is the party?"

"Tomorrow night at six."

"Sounds good. Is Rob going? Do you want to go together?"

"Rob isn't going. It seems like it's just a quick reveal, and he didn't seem interested. I'd love to go together. I can pick you up."

A noise at the window caught their attention. They looked over to see Rembrandt pressing his face against the window. His mouth opened in a meow, and he glared at them.

“He wants to go out,” Maxi said.

“I get that look from Urchin too.” Claire’s gray cat, Urchin, was a favorite of Maxi’s, and she always looked forward to visiting Claire’s little cottage so she could see him. She especially anticipated those visits before she’d adopted two cats of her own.

“It’s too dangerous to let them out alone. I can only imagine the trouble they would get into,” Maxi said. “You’d think they’d get enough with traveling from our house to the cottage and back again every day.”

“Cats are never satisfied,” Claire said.

“You can say that again.” Maxi settled back in her chair, her hand wrapped around the warm mug. “So, what have you been up to?”

“Not much. Still gathering recipes for fall.” Claire snugged her aqua hoodie with the Sandcastles bakery logo on it a little tighter. “Rob has the pumpkin bread market cornered, but I figured I could do the usual pumpkin cream cheese muffins. I also want to try something different, though.”

“Like what?” Just the mention of Claire’s pumpkin cream cheese muffins had Maxi’s mouth watering, even though she’d already gobbled down her corn muffin.

“I’m not really sure. Maybe something like pumpkin spice cream horns or sweet potato danish.”

“Hmm...” Maxi took a sip of coffee. Neither of those sounded particularly appetizing, but she didn’t want to say that to Claire.

“Jane was thinking of having an event at the inn for Oktoberfest to bring more people there, and I was thinking I could whip up something really unusual that she could offer them.”

Jane liked to order desserts from Claire’s bakery and breads from Rob’s bread store to serve to guests at the inn. It was one of the nice ways that people in Lobster Bay worked together.

Thoughts of October made Maxi frown. It was still a ways off, but she didn’t relish the colder temperatures or the leaves falling from the trees. But those bleak late fall days would turn to winter soon enough, and she’d be cozied up in front of her fireplace while the snow fell outside and her Christmas tree twinkled in the corner. That was something she could look forward to.

“I hope Jane finds some help at the inn before then. She works too much,” Maxi said.

“She needs to slow down. Maybe we all do,” Claire said, shrugging. “But I love work, and Jane probably feels the same way.”

“Probably. I think she’s worried about Mike being put off that she doesn’t have a lot of time for him, but it seems like he doesn’t mind.”

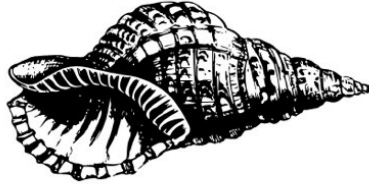
“She’s making too much of it. I think she’s still a little afraid to accept that things are going great for her in the romance department.” Claire tapped Maxi’s hand. “And I see things are going great for you and James too.”

Maxi smiled. “They are. And you and Rob have settled into being amicable competitors.”

Claire laughed. “I guess I was a little overly suspicious of him at first. But things are great now. In fact, things seem great with everyone. Life is nearly perfect.”

“Yep.” Maxi’s gaze slid to the easel again. “Everything is *nearly* perfect.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Liz took one last tour around the house to make sure everything was perfect. She'd set out an array of appetizer trays on her parents' old dining room table. Nothing fancy. Just some cheese and crackers, ranch dip with carrots and celery slices, and basil and mozzarella crostini. The tomatoes and basil were straight from the garden. She'd spent hours there weeding, pulling up dead plants, and trimming. It was almost fall, so she'd harvested the last of the vegetables.

She'd made a watermelon mint punch, which sat in her mother's old crystal punch bowl on the kitchen table.

She'd even found some vintage paper plates and napkins with a party theme in the dining room hutch and had set them out.

It was a small party, but it felt like the first time entertaining in her new home. Except this wasn't her new home... not yet. Because her siblings had successfully avoided her calls. And now she would have to force them to talk to her before it went on the market.

Claire and Maxi were the first to arrive. Claire was carrying a large bakery box, and Maxi held a tray of brownies.

"You guys didn't need to bring anything. It's only a small gathering," Liz said as she ushered them in.

"Oh, these are just brownies from a mix, but Claire brought one of her masterpieces." Maxi pointed at the box. "Wait until you see it."

They unboxed it in the dining room. Liz couldn't believe the sight of the tall cake shaped like a sandcastle complete with turrets and ramparts. The

cake even had sugar-encrusted frosting that made it look just like it was made of sand. "It's too pretty to cut into."

"Trust me, you'll want to cut it because it tastes just as delicious as it looks," Maxi said as Claire beamed with pride.

Jane and Andie arrived next with a tray of cookies. Bunny rushed over from her house to join them at the door with seven-layer dip and tortilla chips.

"You all didn't have to bring food. I have plenty. I'll have enough to feed the whole town!"

Jane had Cooper on a leash. "I wasn't sure if it was okay to bring him, but I know you pay a lot of attention to him at Tides."

"Of course it's okay. We had a dog growing up, actually." Liz pointed at the family picture on the mantel. She was delighted to have a dog in the house again. And if she was lucky enough to live here, maybe she could get her own... but she was getting ahead of herself. She saw no sense in getting her hopes up.

Sally, Emma, and Sheila arrived, and Liz gave everyone a tour of the small house.

"It looks fantastic," Bunny said. "You did a great job painting as usual, Sal."

"Thanks."

"And the house looks great without the clutter. You're pretty good at putting together the accents and moving things around." Maxi fluffed a pillow.

"So how come you don't want to stay here?" Sheila dipped a tortilla chip into the seven-layer dip and shoved it into her mouth.

Liz sighed. "I actually do want to stay. But it's complicated because I'm not the only one inheriting."

"Seems like there should be a way if you really want it." Bunny balanced a small plate with several appetizers in one hand and a glass of punch in the other.

"Yeah, you can't let your siblings rule. You have some say in this too. Have you talked to them?" Sally asked in her usual blunt manner.

"I tried to, but they've been putting me off."

"You shouldn't let them. You just tell them what you want. You might be surprised at their answer," Bunny said.

The doorbell rang, which was odd because everyone Liz had invited was already there. She hoped a neighbor wasn't coming to complain.

Liz opened the door, and her mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Lizzy!" Peter and Shelly stood in the doorway. They were both smiling ear to ear and wearing old clothes, as if they were ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

"Hi." Liz was at a loss for words. "I wasn't expecting you guys."

"We know. We wanted to surprise you," Shelly said.

"So you weren't brushing me off?"

"Of course not. We had this planned. We both feel so bad that you did all this work, and we want to help. We arranged to come here and wanted it to be a surprise. We were afraid we'd blurt it out. That's why we acted so weird on the phone." Shelly looked into the house over Liz's shoulder. "Are you having a party?"

Liz got over her shock and opened the door wider. "Yes, please come in."

Feelings of family warmth bubbled up as Liz introduced her brother and sister around the room. They hadn't been ignoring her. They'd been making plans to come and help!

Peter and Shelly seemed shocked at the changes.

"This looks so nice. I haven't been here in ages, but I remember it looking all cluttered and old." Shelly turned slowly and took in the living room. "Wow, so many childhood memories here."

Sally stood on the side, arms crossed over her chest. "Liz made this really homey, and she's really taking a liking to the town again."

Bunny stepped over beside Sally. "Your dad would love the way it's come out. He always said this home was a part of the family."

Sheila piped in from the other side of the room. "And it would be a shame to sell this little gem to some stranger."

Shelly frowned. Then her eyes widened, and she looked at Liz. "Wait, you mean you would want to live here?"

"Oddly enough, I think I do. It has all happy memories of our childhoods, and I'm looking for a new place. But I know you guys want your share from the sale—"

"Well, not right away," Peter interrupted. "I know this isn't a giant estate or anything, but Dad always said he wanted to keep it in the family."

We all have our own homes now out of town, so I never thought to broach the subject with you guys.”

“He said that?” Her father had never said that to Liz, but then again, she hadn’t spent much time with him in the last few decades, and the last several years after the stroke made it harder and harder for him to talk.

“Yep. I didn’t know that you had no place to go, though. I thought you were thinking about buying the place you were living in?”

Liz had told her siblings that so they wouldn’t worry. “Unfortunately, that didn’t work out. And now that I’ve been back in town, I’ve decided I really like it here. I need a fresh start.”

“Then I say you have it here. We can work things out. Can’t we, Peter?” Shelly turned to their brother, who nodded.

“I think that sounds like a good plan. Dad would love it.” Peter opened his arms, and the three hugged, just like they had when they were little kids.

“But you have to promise we can come and visit,” Shelly said as they released each other.

“Of course.” Liz would love to spend more time with her siblings.

“We’ll just call Dad’s lawyer and see what we can work out. Maybe a rent-to-own sort of situation?” Peter said.

“That sounds perfect,” Shelly agreed. “You can pay us bit by bit, whenever you have extra.”

“Great. Let’s eat. I’m starving.” Peter headed toward the dining room.

They cut Claire’s sandcastle cake, and everyone took a piece.

“This is delicious,” Bunny said to Maxi. “I’m glad Liz is staying. She’s going to be a good neighbor. And Claire can bring cake any time.”

Maxi laughed. “We’ll be sure to drop by often.”

Bunny’s expression turned serious as she scraped some frosting onto her fork. “How is the painting going?”

“I think I’m getting there. Your lessons really helped.” Maxi was happy with the progress she’d made, but she still felt a niggles of uncertainty. “But enough about me. What about you, Liz? How does it feel now that you are going to stay?”

Liz looked like she was still processing the information. “It’s exciting. But also scary. I mean, it’s very generous of my brother and sister to be so flexible with the payments, but I still need to pay them something, and there will be utility bills and other expenses. I have some savings, but I’m going to need to get a job.”

Andie, who was cutting herself another piece of cake, looked over. "You do?"

"Yeah, well, maybe not full-time but at least part-time. I took early retirement from teaching when I thought my husband and I were going to travel together." Liz made a face.

"Sounds like he wasn't very nice," Bunny clucked soothingly. "I bet you can find something around here. Though it might be hard now at the end of the season."

"I have the perfect thing!" Andie turned to Jane. "Liz was brilliant at chatting up the guests at Tides. She'd be perfect for the position."

"Position?" Liz asked.

"We need someone part-time at the inn," Andie said, glancing at Jane. "Unless you found someone?"

"I haven't." Jane smiled. "Liz would be brilliant. The job is yours if you want it."

"Oh." Liz looked stunned. "Well, I certainly do like talking to people. And it seems like fun work. We'd need to work out hours and salary, but I'm definitely interested."

Jane looked overjoyed.

"Well, this is nice. Seems like things are working out for everyone." Sally sipped a glass of punch. "What about your Civil War guy, Andie?"

All eyes turned to Andie, and her cheeks heated. "I sort of gave up on that."

"Gave up?" Sally's incredulous expression indicated she'd never given up on anything in her life.

"What's this about a Civil War guy?" Sheila asked.

Andie told the other party guests about her quest. "I've looked through all the archives, been to the town hall, even the Civil War museum in Arundel. I managed to trace his family through a few generations, but all mention of the Koslachowski family seems to just disappear in the early 1900s."

Bunny's fork clattered to her plate, and all eyes jerked in her direction. "Wait. Did you say Koslachowski?"

"Yes, the Civil War discharge papers were for Robert Koslachowski." Andie looked hopeful. "Do you know the family?"

"Know them? I am them. That was my family name."

“But I don’t understand. I couldn’t find any mention of it in recent times.”

“That’s because my grandfather had it changed.” Bunny sighed and put her plate down on the table. “It was just too hard to pronounce, so he changed it to Koslo. That’s my maiden name. It caused a rift in the family, actually. My uncle had a falling out with my father and grandfather over it. Then Gramps’s house burned down, and we thought we’d lost everything. Where did you say this box came from?”

“It was found in the attic of a house that was foreclosed on. The house was on Maple Street.”

“I don’t know if any of my relatives owned a house there. The two families haven’t spoken since the rift between my father and his brother. I don’t even know my cousins.” Bunny’s expression turned hopeful too. “Was there anything else in the house?”

“There was some china and silver.”

“That might have been from my family.” Bunny was downright excited now. “I thought it was all lost in the fire, but I guess my uncle must have had some family things all these years.”

“I can keep the items set aside for you,” Andie offered. “None of it has been sold yet, since I just got it in.”

“I would be so grateful if you did that. Truth be told, I was getting a little envious of Liz having all these wonderful family heirlooms around.” Bunny gestured at several items around the room.

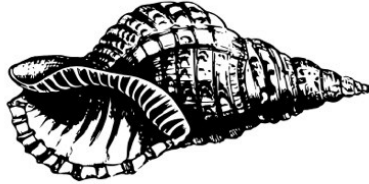
“Hopefully now you can have some of your own,” Andie said.

“Wow, that worked out good,” Emma said.

“Looks like you’re moving to a great town with great neighbors, Sis.” Shelly sounded almost envious.

“She sure is.” Sally put her arm around Liz’s shoulders. “Welcome to Lobster Bay. I think you’re really going to like it here.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Two weeks later...

“Here’s to new friends.” Claire raised her coffee mug and clinked it with Liz then turned to Jane, Maxi, and Andie and added, “And old ones, too, of course.”

They were seated on the outdoor patio at Sandcastles for one of their last outside morning get-togethers. The weather had turned chilly, and they were all bundled in sweaters. The patio heaters were running to help ward off the cold. The only other people braving the chill this morning were a pair of older women who sat at a table in the corner.

Liz had moved into her family home and started working at Tides right away. No new guests had checked in, but Jane had kept busy teaching Liz the ropes. Jane had invited Liz to their coffee chat and left Brenda in charge—not that there was much to do with no guests in residence.

Jane, Claire, and Maxi had been meeting for years like this. They’d recently added Andie to the mix when she’d moved to town, and now they had Liz. If things kept up this way, Claire was going to have to get bigger tables.

“Did Shelley and Peter get home okay?” Andie asked.

Shelley and Peter had stayed for almost two weeks helping Liz spruce up the house. Jane could tell Liz loved reconnecting with them, but adult siblings could only stay under the same roof for so long, and she sensed that Liz was happy for them to go home.

“They did. Shelly flew out yesterday and Peter the day before.” Liz bent down and petted Cooper. “I’m going to miss them. It’s a little lonely in the

house now all by myself.”

“I’m sure Bunny is happy to drop over quite frequently,” Maxi joked.

Liz laughed. “She is a character, but truth be told, the camaraderie in that neighborhood is one of the things that sold me on staying.”

“There’s nothing like having great neighbors,” Jane agreed.

“Bunny really appreciated all those items you gave her,” Liz said to Andie. “But she feels guilty taking them for free. She said she wanted to pay for them.”

Andie waved her hand dismissively. Jane could tell she was embarrassed. Knowing Andie, she’d paid a fair price for the items, but Jane had learned that her sister had a sentimental side. She’d seen her giving items away to people who had a connection to them before.

“I was happy to get those Civil War papers to the rightful owner. I put a lot of work into that. I didn’t pay very much for the whole lot, and I just couldn’t find my way to charging her.”

Liz switched her attention to Cooper again. Maxi watched her thoughtfully as she petted and talked to the dog.

“You know, there are some nice dogs down at the Lobster Bay animal shelter just waiting for a good home,” Maxi said.

Liz glanced up at her. “There’s an animal shelter in town? Where is that?”

“Over next to the real estate office on Main Street.”

Liz stopped petting Cooper and grabbed her coffee mug. “Thanks for letting me know. I might pay them a visit. Now that I have my own place and no one to tell me what to do, there’s nothing stopping me from getting a dog.”

“Speaking of dogs...” Jane nodded toward the door through which Bert and Harry were exiting the bakery and stepping onto the outdoor patio.

Maxi squirmed in her seat and glanced down at the large shopping bag sitting next to her chair. She’d refused to tell anyone what was in it, but now that Jane saw how nervous she was getting at the sight of Bert and Harry, she had a pretty good idea of what was in there.

“Oh look!” Andie leapt out of her chair and rushed to Bert and Harry. Jane leaned to the right to see around Claire, who was blocking her view. Bert and Harry were smiling from ear to ear as they looked down at their new addition, a little dog that looked like a terrier mix.

“You got another dog. That’s wonderful!” Jane rushed over and petted the dog, who basked in the attention. Cooper trotted over, a little more cautiously than Jane and Andie. Everyone stood back and let the two dogs sniff each other. At first, they went slowly, touching their noses then down their bodies. Then the little dog adopted a playful stance, and Cooper wagged his tail. It looked like they would become good friends.

“No one can ever replace Goblin, but little Chloe here has already started to heal our hearts,” Bert said.

Maxi cleared her throat, and everyone looked her way. She stood, the big shopping bag in her hand. As she reached into it, Jane could see the anxiety on her face.

“Maybe this will help you heal even further.” Maxi pulled out a canvas with the most realistic pet painting Jane had ever seen. She half expected the likeness of Goblin to wag its tail or let out one of Goblin’s soft woofs.

Bert and Harry’s expressions morphed from surprise to delight with just a tinge of sorrow. They clearly loved it. Bert reached out for the painting then clutched it to his chest. “Oh, Maxi, it’s perfect. Thank you so much.”

He held it out again so everyone could see. “It looks just like her. Even has that little glint in her eye that she would get before she got into zoomie mode, don’t you think?” Bert asked Harry.

Harry smiled. “It sure does. And look how she captured the coloring and that little white spot above her nose just perfectly.”

They both rushed over and hugged Maxi. “Maxi, we can’t thank you enough.”

Maxi beamed with pride. “I was happy to do it. In fact, I have a couple of other surprises in here.” She reached into the bag and pulled out two small canvases. One was a painting of Cooper that she presented to Jane, and the other was a painting of Urchin that she gave to Claire.

“Thanks so much.” Jane was truly touched by the gift. She held the painting next to Cooper so everyone could see how much it looked like him. “Mike will love this.”

“I love it,” Claire said as she admired the painting of Urchin.

“I was happy to stretch my artistic wings and do something different,” Maxi said.

They chatted with Bert and Harry for a few more minutes until Chloe pulled them away, leaving the girls alone out on the patio.

“Was that one of the dogs you saw down at the animal shelter?” Liz asked Maxi.

“Yes, but there are a few others. Don’t worry.”

Liz laughed. “Sounds like I better get there quick if I want to have my pick.”

“So many people are getting dogs that I think I better set up a dog watering station here on the patio,” Claire said. “Maybe some water bowls and a faucet. I could even branch out into baking dog treats.”

“That’s a good idea, but I think outdoor season is almost over for this year. Maybe there are a few more mornings for the diehards, and then we’ll have to move it inside for the cold weather.” Jane bit into her chocolate chip muffin and made yum-yum noises.

“It was really nice of you guys to invite me today,” Liz said. “Hopefully I’ll be checking in guests at Tides next time, though.”

“We do have one guest coming in a few weeks. It’s kind of odd because this is really the dead season, and he was a little mysterious,” Jane said.

“Mysterious how?” Liz asked.

Jane shrugged. “I don’t know. He just seemed a little hesitant about giving his name and information.”

“Is he an older gentleman? I find that older people are hesitant to give that information over the phone. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure he feels right at home,” Liz said.

“If anyone can, it’s you.”

“Thanks. I meant to mention that Bunny had an idea that might bring more people to Tides in the off-season.”

“I’m all ears,” Jane said. “What is it?”

“A book club.”

“Would that bring guests to Tides? Sounds like Bunny just wants to have some get-togethers,” Maxi joked.

“That’s probably true. The book club itself wouldn’t bring in new guests, but she did have a good idea about coupling it with book signings. You could make an event out of the book signing, and then it would at least elevate awareness for the inn.” Liz picked a cheese danish from the tray. “People might not stay overnight for the book signing, but they’d get to see the inn and might come back on their summer vacations to stay.”

“That’s not a bad idea. I always wanted to make a library in that back room next to the kitchen.” Jane turned to Andie. “Remember Dad wanted to

do that? But then we have to build bookshelves and get books. It was a lot of work, and he never got around to it. But that room would be a great one to have the book club in. It's got a fireplace and all those windows looking at the ocean."

"I think it's a great idea. I love reading," said Andie.

"We could invite Bunny and Sally and that nice Emma that we met at your party, Liz," Jane said.

Liz eyed Cooper. "And I suppose dogs will be allowed, right?"

Jane laughed. "Of course. Dogs are always allowed at Tides."

"Sounds like a plan, but there's one detail we have to nail down," Claire said.

"What's that?" Jane asked.

"What book are we going to read first?"

This is a work of fiction.

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SEASIDE BONDS

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Seaside Bookclub

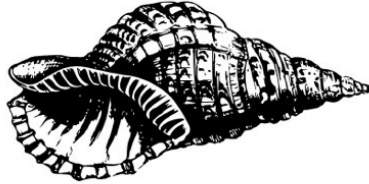
MEREDITH
SUMMERS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lobster Bay
BOOK SIX



CHAPTER ONE



“**M**ove it, or lose it.”

Bunny Howard said the words out loud to herself as she snugged her thick wool sweater tighter and trudged down the beach, her shoes making imprints in the soft sand. At least that was what she’d read about staying young and active while aging. Bunny was about to turn seventy, and she intended to be the youngest seventy she could. “Seventy is the new fifty” was her motto.

Bunny loved her life. She had everything she could want and wanted to keep it that way. She had her independence and her creative endeavors, like crossword puzzles and painting, and she was hardly ever lonely because she had wonderful neighbors who were more like family. There was one thing she could use more of, though—mental activity. But that was where the new Lobster Bay Book Club came in. And that was where she was headed right now.

There would be plenty of mental stimulation as they discussed the protagonists and underlying themes of each book they read. Bunny could hardly wait to get started. They’d chosen a murder mystery by Edward Kingsley for the first book. She’d devoured the book in two days and couldn’t wait to tell the group how she’d deciphered the clues in order to figure out the identity of the killer early on in the book.

In keeping with her health initiative, she’d parked her car in the public beach parking lot, which was fairly empty this time of year since it was the first week in October. Walking down the beach was always such a pleasant task, except maybe when it was windy and cold, like now. Not to mention it

was getting dark. Bunny glanced behind her at the empty lot, envisioning how that might feel a little threatening when she had to walk back to her car after dark.

“No worries,” she said out loud. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Tides, the quaint seaside inn where the book club’s first meeting was being held, came into view. The old Victorian was one of the oldest buildings on the beach and fit right in with its large turret, wide back deck, and widow’s walk at the very top of the roof. Tables were still set up on the back deck for guests to enjoy breakfasts outside. It was early fall, and there were still some nice days left to eat outside while gazing at the ocean.

Lights were on inside, and she could see people moving about. Claire from Sandcastles Bakery was standing in the dining room. Hopefully, she’d brought some of her delicious pastries. Andie, one of the sisters who owned the inn, was stacking coffee mugs on the sideboard next to a big coffee urn. Some of Bunny’s neighbors were there, too, including Sheila Donahue and Olga Svenson. Liz Weston, the new gal who had moved in next door to Bunny, was setting out some napkins and plates. She worked at Tides part-time, so she’d probably stayed on after work.

Bunny tucked the hardcover book she’d been carrying under her arm and paused at the bottom of the steps to the deck. Cooper, Jane’s golden retriever, trotted over. His friendly face, with his golden fur and soulful brown eyes, gazed through the glass at her.

She paused, putting one hand on the side of the house for balance as she lifted her left foot to dump sand out of her shoe.

“Bunny? What are you doing back here? You could have come in the front.” Jane, the other sister who ran the inn, opened the door for her.

Bunny nodded back toward the ocean. “I walked down the beach. Gotta get my steps in.”

Cooper rushed out to escort her up the steps, and she bent to pet him as the smell of coffee and muffins tugged her inside.

“Bunny!” Emma Chamberlain turned from the corner where she’d been talking to Hailey Robinson. Emma was Bunny’s neighbor and had recently become good friends with Hailey, who worked for Claire at Sandcastles Bakery. The two had bonded over being single mothers with preteen girls. “I would have given you a ride.”

“Thanks. I actually parked in the public lot and walked down the beach.” Bunny received Emma’s hug a little awkwardly. Even though they

were very close as neighbors, she did find Emma to be a little overenthusiastic in the hugging department. But it was hard to fault the girl with her bright blue eyes and zest for life.

“Walked down the beach, you say?” Olga Svenson peered at Bunny from over her reading glasses. “You go, girl! That’s how I got to be so spry at my age. You have to keep moving.”

Olga, another of Bunny’s neighbors, was ninety going on thirty. She lived alone and refused to move despite her children practically begging. She did pretty well on her own, and everyone in the neighborhood looked out for her.

“I can give you a ride back to your car after if you want.” Liz appeared at Bunny’s side. She glanced out the doors toward the ocean. “It will be pitch-black by the time we’re done.”

“Thanks. I might take you up on that.” Bunny tried to make it sound like she wasn’t afraid of walking down the lonely beach alone in the dark, but she was secretly relieved.

Liz held out a tray loaded with little pieces of toast topped with basil, mozzarella, and grape tomato halves. “Have one.”

Bunny grabbed a napkin then one of the hors d’oeuvres and popped it into her mouth. “Delish! Are the tomatoes from your garden?”

Bunny knew Liz’s garden well since she’d helped plant and harvest it and was lucky enough to be able to take as much as she wanted.

“Yep, there are still a few last tomatoes left.”

Hailey came to stand beside them. “Watch out for those weird-looking pastries.” She whispered, pointing to a tray of something that looked like orange Danish. “Claire is experimenting with recipes for fall, and those are sweet potato Danish.” She made a face.

Bunny noticed the tray was still full, while the brownies beside it were going fast. “Should I have brought something?”

“Oh no! You know Claire—she always brings stuff from the bakery, and I just didn’t want all the tomatoes to go bad. No one else brought anything. If we all did, there would be way too much food,” Liz assured her.

“That’s the thing about tomatoes. They all seem to ripen at once. And these were late bloomers,” Bunny said as she edged toward the brownies.

“Okay! Everyone. Let’s get the discussion going. Grab a plate of food and something to drink and follow me.”

Jane led them to a cozy room in the back of the inn. Bunny had been to Tides a few times but mostly to the larger rooms in the front. This one had a large stone fireplace and window seats. Chairs were set in a circle, and small tables had been placed thoughtfully so everyone would have something to put their snacks on.

Bunny chose a chair near the tall windows that faced the ocean. To her left, a row of bookcases went halfway up the wall. They were loaded with leather-bound books, and she could practically smell the vanilla scent of their old, yellowed pages.

“What a great reading room.” Olga made a slow circle around the room while nibbling on a cracker with cheddar cheese on it.

“It’s one of my favorite rooms in the whole house. Dad was going to make it into a library.” Jane smiled as her gaze traveled around the room, then her smile dimmed. “But that never came to be.”

“Still could happen.” Olga took a seat next to Emma.

“We have a lot of things to do here and a limited budget, so it’s at the bottom of our priority list. Maybe someday.” Jane glanced at Andie, who had just bitten into the orange Danish and looked a bit surprised. Apparently, she hadn’t gotten the warning. Jane frowned then held up her book. “Now then, what did you guys think of the book?”

“I thought it was a little scary.” Olga glanced at the hardcover on the table next to her as if she were afraid it might come to life. Bunny hadn’t thought the book overly scary. In fact, it had seemed quite mild to her.

“I thought it was fascinating. Especially the parts with the cat.” Maxi plucked a grape off her plate.

A shadow near the door caught Bunny’s eye. Was that someone lurking in the hall? Probably her overly active imagination. Anyway, shadowy hall lurkers went hand in hand with mystery book discussions.

She turned her attention back to the conversation as each person said a little bit about the book.

“I thought it was nice,” Hailey mumbled.

“Nice?” Claire squinted at her. “There was a murder.”

“Oh, I know but... umm...”

“Wait. Did you even read it?” Andie teased good-naturedly.

Hailey’s face turned red. “Okay. Busted! I didn’t have time. It’s hard with Jenn always wanting to be driven here and there.”

There were murmurs of sympathy all around.

“It’s okay,” Jane assured her. “I’m sure you could use a night out.”

Hailey blew out a breath. “You can say that again. Gramps is watching her, and they enjoy their alone time too.”

“What about the characters?” Jane got the conversation back on track. “I love Abigail Childs.”

“Didn’t Franny Parker remind you of Ellen at the library? With those gigantic glasses and big eyes.”

Everyone laughed.

Bunny glanced out into the hallway again. She was sure someone was there, but why? The room was in the back, so the hall didn’t lead anywhere else. Were they listening in?

“The killer was a big surprise. Did anyone else figure it out?” Emma glanced around the room at the others.

Bunny waited just a tad to see if anyone else had. Maybe her skills of deduction weren’t as great as she thought. But everyone just shook their head.

“I did. And early on too.”

“You did?” Liz looked impressed. “How did you figure it out?”

Bunny was practically bursting with pride. “I followed the clues. Like the hole in the garden? The author led you to believe it was for a shrubbery, but I knew it was to hide the murder weapon!”

“How did you know that?” Claire asked.

Bunny opened her book to the section where she’d put a green sticky note. “In chapter five, the landscaper brings five shrubs and plants them next to the driveway.”

“Oh, gosh, I didn’t even notice that.” Andie passed around a tray of cookies.

“And there was also the clue at the farmers market,” Bunny said.

“You mean the green tomatoes?” Olga asked.

“That was a red herring,” Bunny said. “But the disruption at the local honey stand was the clue.”

“You’re really good at this, Bunny. Maybe you should be a detective.” Emma’s compliment practically made Bunny blush.

“Oh, it’s just a matter of deduction.” Bunny tried to sound humble. She was going to add that anyone could do it if they paid attention to the details, but she was distracted by more movement in the hallway. She craned her neck to see around Jane, who was blocking her view of the hall.

“What I don’t get is how did the killer dispose of the body so easily?” Claire was trying to pass around the tray of sweet potato Danish, but everyone was claiming to be full.

“Oh, that was easy.” Bunny leaned forward as if about to reveal a big secret, and everyone else leaned in too. She lowered her voice. “You see, the killer simply went to the site beforehand and—”

Creak!

Heads jerked toward the sound in the hallway.

Jane leapt up from her chair.

“Hello? Can I help you... oh, Mr. Smith! What can I do for you?”

“Err... sorry. I... umm... Someone said there would be coffee, and I wanted a cup.” The voice came from the hallway, and Bunny tilted to the right to look around Jane so she could see who it belonged to.

“It’s in the dining room. I’ll show you.” Jane put her book on her chair and hurried into the hall.

The hall was only dimly lit by a wall sconce, but right before they turned to go to the dining room, Bunny caught a glimpse of Mr. Smith. He looked to be in his mid to late forties. He was average height, with dark hair cut short and beady dark eyes. Okay, she couldn’t actually see his eyes, but she’d bet money they were beady.

Bunny turned to the group as Mr. Smith and Jane disappeared down the hall. “Coffee? Does anyone else think that’s a little odd?”

Olga raised her mug filled with coffee. “Not me.”

“He was probably really looking for the pastries,” Sally said.

“He keeps strange hours and drinks a lot of coffee. It’s not that unusual,” Liz said.

Jane returned, and they continued to discuss the book, but Bunny was only half paying attention. Something about Mr. Smith had her concerned. If her intuition was correct—and it usually was—then Mr. Smith was up to no good. But what was he up to?

There was only one way to find out. She’d already proven that her skills of investigation were superior when it came to book detecting, and now she was going to prove they were superior in real life. Bunny was going to find out what Mr. Smith was up to, no matter what it took.

BUNNY TOOK Liz up on her offer of a ride to her car after the book club. She didn't want to walk down the dark beach, but she also wanted to pump Liz for information about Mr. Smith.

"It's kind of weird that there's only one person staying at Tides, don't you think?" Bunny asked.

"Not this time of year. Jane said hardly anyone comes because it's too late for beachgoers and too early for leaf-peeping." Liz chewed on her bottom lip. "I guess you could say it's unusual to even have *one* guest since it's off-season."

"Huh." Bunny added that to her list of suspicions. "Mr. Smith does seem unusual. Especially the way he was lurking in the hallway during our book discussion."

Liz looked over at her. "Lurking? He was just looking for the coffee urn. I'd mention to him earlier that we would have coffee and snacks."

"I think I saw him standing in the hallway for a while, and everything was set up in the dining room. You'd think he would have seen it in there."

Liz shrugged. "He doesn't seem to be overly observant."

"Really? What is he like? Why is he in town?"

Liz laughed. "Is this an inquisition? He's quiet and mostly stays in his room. Though I have seen him go out to the beach a few times. It's still nice enough for walking."

"Is he visiting relatives?"

"I really have no idea. I only work a few days a week. He's polite. I'll tell you that." Liz frowned. "Though I do wonder why he is here. He seems lost in thought and very private. Maybe he's recovering from a death of a loved one or something."

Or planning a murder. That probably takes a lot of thought. At least it did for the killer in the book they'd just read.

"Don't you think Smith is kind of a common name?" Perfect to use for someone who wanted to hide their real identity. "Did he pay in cash?"

Liz glanced at her. "Bunny, I think you might have gotten too involved in our mystery book. Real life isn't like books. Smith is a common name. Tides was bound to get some guests named Smith that pay in cash. I'm sure Andie saw his license when she checked him in."

"Of course. Silly of me." Bunny sat back in the seat. She didn't want Liz to think she was a foolish old lady. She decided to change the subject. "Did you try the sweet potato Danish that Claire brought?"

Liz made a face. “I didn’t have the heart to tell her they weren’t that good. I should have, though. She said she was trying them out on us. It’s good that she’s trying different recipes for the bakery.”

“I agree. I love everything she carries there, but it’s always fun to have something different. Maybe if she put more sugar in them.”

“At least she didn’t try to make us test out the dog biscuits that she’s added to her repertoire.” Liz laughed.

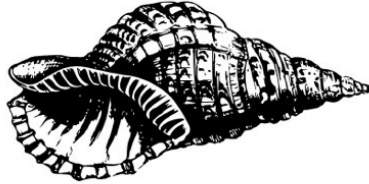
“I don’t know. Cooper sure seemed to like them.”

“I’ll follow you back,” Liz said as she pulled up next to Bunny’s Volkswagen.

They lived next to each other, so of course they’d be driving the same route. Did Liz think Bunny was worried about driving in the dark? Maybe her eyes weren’t as good as they used to be, but she could still drive fine! Still, Bunny appreciated that Liz wanted to keep her safe, so she thanked her and got into her car. She made sure to pull out first so Liz could see for herself that she had no problem navigating after sunset.

As she drove home, her thoughts turned to the mysterious guest at Tides. What should be the next step in her investigation? Maybe she should take another look at her book to see how the detective in the book went about investigating and figure out if she could do something similar.

CHAPTER TWO



Claire arranged the dog biscuits up in the display case carefully. She had a special section for them and was careful to keep them away from the human pastries. People seemed to get upset about that even though every ingredient in the biscuits was perfectly safe for human consumption and probably healthier than the sugar-laden pastries she was known for.

“I sold a ton of dog biscuits yesterday.” Hailey breezed in, wrapping the strings of her white apron around her waist and grabbing the coffee carafe. The earthy aroma of dark roast swirled around her, mingling with the sweet scent of muffins and cakes baking in the kitchen out back. “You’re going to have to think of a name for them. People keep saying ‘the dog biscuit thingies.’”

“I did that last night after the book club.” Claire held up a sign she’d made on her printer last night. She’d had to call her daughter, Tammi, to help figure out the right fonts and so on, but Claire was proud of the way the sign had come out. It looked professional. “Beach Bones. What do you think?”

“It’s catchy.” Hailey slid out from behind the counter to top off the coffee mugs of the customers seated at the tables. It was only eight thirty, and the murmur of early-morning conversation and clinking of spoons against porcelain mugs filled the space. Claire’s heart swelled at the number of customers already inside the café. There were even a few brave souls sitting at the outside tables, bundled in sweaters, with dogs at their feet.

The bakery was Claire’s pride and joy, a dream she hadn’t been brave enough to bring to fruition until after her divorce. That had been years ago,

and everything was going perfectly for her now. She had a thriving business, her grown daughter was doing well, and she had even forgiven her husband for dumping her for a younger woman.

Sure there had been some blips, like when she'd thought the new bread store opening across the street was a threat to Sandcastles, but her fears had been unfounded. And now that she was dating the owner of the bread store, Rob, well... things were better than ever.

With Hailey minding the customers, Claire went out back and grabbed some fresh muffins for the case. She was just putting the last one in when Sam Campbell came in the door.

Sam was in his early seventies, tall and thin, with a thick head of snowy hair, a prominent nose, and a kind way about him. Sam used to come with his wife, Jean, most mornings. The couple had practically vibrated with life, always happy and talkative. They would sit at the corner table for hours with Sam, entertaining people with stories of his exploits as a police detective.

But then Jean got sick. Their visits had become less frequent, less cheerful. She'd passed two years ago, and Sam had stopped coming. It was only recently that he'd returned, now with a bloodhound mix named Dooley, who was now tied up on the post outside that Claire had put out expressly for her customers to tie out their dogs if they were just popping in to buy something. Dogs weren't allowed inside, but the outdoor seating at Sandcastles had become very popular with dog owners. That had sparked the idea of branching out into gourmet dog biscuits.

Sam still seemed sad. His posture was stooped, almost as if he were trying to cave in on himself and disappear. His complexion was sallow. His blue eyes no longer sparkled with mischief like they used to. He was here, though, and that was something at least.

Claire gave him one of her biggest smiles, wishing her happiness were contagious and could spread it to him. "Hey, Sam, what can I get you?"

"How about a corn muffin and one of those new biscuits for Dooley?" Sam turned to look out the door at Dooley almost as if to reassure himself the dog—who was staring into the store, eyes locked on Sam—was still there.

"Coming right up. Coffee?"

"Yes, black please. Just a small. No, make it a medium. Dooley and I might sit a spell on that bench by the beach."

“That sounds nice.” Claire busied herself getting Sam’s order.

“I think Dooley would like it,” Sam said as if any enjoyment he could get out of life was over and he was only doing it for the dog.

She was glad to hear he was at least going to sit at the beach. Sam and Jean had walked the beach and the Marginal Way—the popular path that ran along the edge of the ocean cliffs—almost every day. Sam had given that up since her passing. But maybe sitting would lead to walking, and maybe that would lead to more enjoyment for Sam.

“Have a great time.” Claire handed him the bag. “I put an extra biscuit in for Dooley.”

“Thank you.” Sam almost smiled as he took the bag and shuffled out the door.

Claire watched him unhook the dog and start down the street. Dooley had been a gift from Sam’s son, Brad. He’d thought taking care of a dog would give Sam a purpose, but watching the two of them and the way Dooley obviously slowed himself down to keep pace with Sam and kept glancing up at the man, she had a feeling it was really Dooley taking care of Sam.

As she watched them disappear down the street, another person caught her eye. Wasn’t that the strange man from Tides?

She craned her neck to look closer. Yes, it was Mr. Smith. Kind of a weirdo, really. Bunny had said he’d been lurking in the hallway during the book club meeting. Claire wasn’t so sure she believed that, but he was an odd one. Not very friendly, according to Jane.

He was walking down the sidewalk with a purpose, not at all like a tourist on vacation. She wondered where he was in such a hurry to get to.

BUNNY HAD STAYED UP LATE, thinking about Mr. Smith and how she should go about figuring out exactly what he was up to. She decided to do what the amateur sleuth in her mystery book would do: follow him.

She’d risen at the crack of dawn. The lack of sleep and early wake-up time didn’t make her tired. In fact, the opposite had happened. The prospect of investigating something revitalized her and gave her energy.

She'd had to skip her morning painting session. She hated to do that. Painting was important to her, but this took precedence. She also hadn't been able to bring muffins over to Liz like she did four or five times a week. That was okay—she'd do that later this afternoon so she could pump Liz for more information about Smith.

She filled a thermos with coffee and drove past Tides before stopping a little ways down the street from the entrance. She parked under a low-hanging oak tree branch, hoping her car would blend in.

Unlike in the book, Mr. Smith did not zip right out of the entrance as soon as Bunny parked. She waited a few hours and was just about to give up when a car pulled out with Mr. Smith at the wheel. *Bingo!*

She followed several car lengths behind, just like the detective in the book. When he pulled into a spot downtown, Bunny pulled in a few spots away. At first she was nervous. There weren't many people out at eight forty-five, unless she counted the gang over at Sandcastles getting their morning coffees and Danishes. She was afraid Mr. Smith would notice her, but he didn't even glance in her direction as he locked his car. *Who locks their car in Lobster Bay?*

No one did. In Bunny's mind, that was further proof that he was of a suspicious nature and up to something.

He started down the sidewalk along the row of stores. She scrunched down in the seat and opened the newspaper she'd brought as a disguise. She slid it up to cover the bottom of her face, peeking up above it through her large-framed sunglasses every so often to keep her eye on the suspect.

Mr. Smith walked past the candy store with its pink-and-green awning and pyramids of fudge in the window, past the framing store where she'd had her ancestor's Civil War discharge papers that Andie had given her framed, past the jewelry store with its display of diamonds twinkling in elegant deep-purple velvet, and straight into the hardware store. *Very curious.*

About twenty minutes later, he came out holding a large bag. Bunny scrunched out of sight again as he made a beeline for his car. He was walking fast and acting almost as if he didn't want anyone to see him. Or was that her imagination?

As far as she knew, the hardware store only had tools and home improvement items. *What in the world would someone vacationing at an inn need with home improvement items or tools?*

She was about to pull out after him when she noticed the hunched-over man and his dog lurking around her car. Was he watching her?

She craned her neck to look at him in the side-view mirror. No, he wasn't watching her. The dog had just stopped to sniff something. But she didn't want to draw attention to herself, so she stayed put until they lumbered off toward Beach Street.

Luckily, she could still see Mr. Smith's car going slowly down Main Street. She pulled out, taking care to stay far enough behind, excitement thrumming in her veins. She was really on to something. And she was the only one who suspected him. With any luck, she could catch him before he did any harm and save someone from a terrible fate. *How's that for being useful!*

But it wasn't going to be today, because he went straight back to Tides.

Bunny drove past and took the back route home. Maybe she could still catch Liz at home and ask her some questions about the suspect. Besides, she'd finished off almost the whole thermos of coffee and really had to pee.

"SHE GAVE me an extra biscuit for you," Sam said to Dooley.

He'd been doing that a lot lately—talking out loud to the dog. Funny thing, he almost felt like the dog was answering using some sort of silent communication technique. Like right now, he was looking up at Sam, one floppy ear tilted slightly and an eager look in his eye as if asking if he could have one of them now.

"Maybe when we get to the beach. We'll drive down to the lot if you don't mind." It was only a ten-minute walk to the beach, but this time of year, the parking lot would be empty, and Sam hadn't walked that long in a while.

He felt a pang of guilt, knowing Dooley was dying for a longer walk, but Sam usually ran out of energy and enthusiasm after a few blocks. He was working his way up to it for Dooley's sake, though. And maybe a little for Jean too. She was the one who'd always insisted they walk one more block or to the next corner on the Marginal Way or just a little farther down the beach. She'd said it would help them live longer. It hadn't worked out

so well for her. She wouldn't approve of Sam's lack of walking, but maybe he didn't want to live longer.

Dooley whined, as if sensing Sam's thoughts.

"Ah, don't worry. I won't leave you alone."

Most days, Sam wouldn't even get out of bed if it weren't for Dooley. Before Dooley, he had lain in there until noon a few days. But now, Dooley jumped up there at seven thirty every morning. Sam knew he had to get up to feed the dog and take him out. Dooley was depending on him, so he forced himself to get up.

That was getting easier lately, and he'd even started venturing downtown and taking the dog to the beach—things he hadn't done since Jean died. He wasn't sure if he liked it or not. It felt hollow and empty, like something was missing. Of course he missed Jean, but it was more than that. It was like he didn't have a purpose.

Dooley woofed and sniffed a pile of something gooey on the sidewalk. Sam's attention drifted to a parked car. It was a pale-blue Nissan, and a woman sat inside. She was reading a newspaper. How odd. *Who does that in a car?*

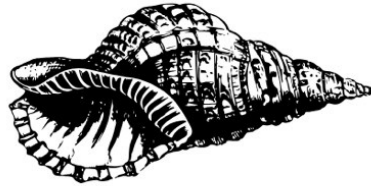
No, not exactly reading... He slowed down. Now that was very strange—she was scrunched down inside, peering over the paper as if canvassing the street. And she was wearing ridiculously large sunglasses. It reminded him of a comical version of all the stakeouts he'd been on when he was a detective.

Feelings of those times came flooding back. The excitement of the chase. The mental stimulation of following the clues to catch a dangerous criminal. The feeling that he was doing something useful, something good for society. But those days were long gone. There wasn't much to feel useful about anymore. Except Dooley.

Dooley tugged the leash, and Sam started walking again. "You know what, boy? Maybe we'll walk to the beach today instead of taking the car."

Dooley's tail wagged faster, and he picked up the pace.

CHAPTER THREE



Jane was bringing the last of the dishes from the book club meeting out to the kitchen when the front door of Tides opened and Mr. Smith came in. He started for the stairs then, upon noticing her, stopped short.

“Good morning! Were you out walking the beach? It’s a bit chilly but gorgeous for a walk.” Jane glanced out toward the ocean, where sunbeams bounced off cobalt waves.

He held up a shopping bag, barely making eye contact with her. “Had to pick some things up.”

“Well, maybe later you can walk. It will be warm in the afternoon.” Jane tried to keep the cheery tone in her voice even though Mr. Smith was already heading toward the stairs.

Liz came into the foyer, carrying a pile of freshly laundered sheets and pillowcases. Jane had been having her do some of the chores that had piled up during the busy season since there was only one guest for her to see to at the moment.

“He sure is a strange one,” Liz whispered after his door clicked closed.

“You can say that again. Seems very solitary and a little bit sad. I bet there’s a story there.” Jane continued on toward the kitchen, and Liz followed.

“Bunny thinks he’s up to something.” Liz put the laundry on the long pine table and started folding.

Jane turned from the sink. “What would he possibly be up to?”

Liz shrugged. “Beats me. You know Bunny—her imagination is very active.”

Jane laughed. She really liked Bunny with her messy, silver-threaded auburn curls and fun attitude, and she had to admit it was a little weird that Mr. Smith had been in the hallway like that at the book club meeting.

“What’s his first name, anyway? I keep calling him *Mr.* Smith. Seems very formal.”

Jane squinted to remember. He’d filled out the forms online, shown her some credentials when he checked in, and paid in cash. She tried to picture the card he’d shown her. *Was it his license?* She couldn’t remember. “I think it’s Reginald.”

“You mean our one and only guest?” Brenda the cook turned from the stove she’d been cleaning. “He’s not weird. He’s very polite.”

Brenda had been the cook at Tides for decades and insisted on making breakfast even though there was only one guest. Sometimes she even insisted when there were no guests. Brenda was more like family than an employee, though, and Jane loved having her around. Plus, she cooked a mean breakfast.

“You’ve spoken to him?” Jane was surprised. As far as she knew, the man mostly stayed in his room. He’d certainly never tried to be friendly to Jane.

“Yeah. Came down for breakfast yesterday. Hearty appetite on that one.” Brenda beamed. Anyone who appreciated her breakfasts was just fine in her book.

“He never says much to me,” Liz said.

“Guess I’ve got the magic touch,” Brenda joked.

“Have you seen Andie?” Jane asked Brenda. “I thought she was going to meet us here.”

“She was here earlier with Mike, but she left,” Liz said.

Jane frowned. *Why would Andie and Mike be together?* Her sister and boyfriend were good friends, but she didn’t think they hung out together. *And why would neither one of them stop by to see me?* “Are you sure she was with Mike?”

Liz looked up from her folding, her brows rising slightly at the look on Jane’s face. “I thought so. Maybe I was wrong?” Liz glanced at Brenda for confirmation.

“I didn’t see either one of them. The bread delivery came, though. Maybe you thought Eddie was Mike. Kind of looks similar.” Brenda gave the stove another swipe.

That was probably it. *Though why would Andie be with the bread guy?* She had said she would come early to get some of her work done.

“She mentioned something about meeting us at Sandcastles.” Liz glanced at the clock.

Brenda turned from the stove, noting Liz’s gaze. “Speaking of which, aren’t you two supposed to be there now? I’ll watch over the place. Not much happening here.” Brenda made shooing motions with her hands. “Go. I’ll finish up.”

CLAIRE BROUGHT the tray of experimental fall-themed pastries out from the back and hurried to the table where her friends were gathered with their coffees.

“Specially made just for you guys.” She set down the tray and took a seat eagerly watching the expressions on everyone’s faces.

Jane looked a bit skeptical, her blue eyes lingering on each pastry, a line forming between her brows as if she were assessing what was in them.

Maxi was more eager. Her hair, now streaked with white, was in a long ponytail that slid over her shoulder as she reached for a cinnamon cruller.

Andie gnawed on her bottom lip, her hazel eyes glittering, a whisper of long dark hair falling out of the bun atop her head as her hand hovered over the cider donuts.

“Are these all pumpkin and spices?” Liz pointed to the tray.

“Yep. Some are from the recipes you gave me.” Claire pointed to the pumpkin-raisin muffins in the center.

“Looks delicious.” Liz reached for one.

“What’s this?” Jane pointed to a slice of cake with white frosting.

“Carrot cake with cream cheese frosting. I grated the carrots fresh myself.” Claire watched with pride as each one of them ate their pastry and made num-num noises.

“So, they’re all good? Should I add them to my offerings for the fall season?” Claire gestured toward the glass cases, where her baked goods, including the sandcastle-shaped cakes that the bakery was known for, were on display.

“The crullers are great. I’d add those.” Maxi nodded, and the others nodded in agreement.

“But maybe not those sweet potato Danishes from the book club meeting.” Jane grimaced, her voice soft.

Claire frowned. “No one liked those? I noticed hardly any were eaten.”

“Sorry.” Maxi reached for a molasses cookie. “But looks like everything here is great.”

“Thanks.” Claire wasn’t upset about the sweet potato Danish. That had been an experiment. After all, that was what it was all about. Some of them didn’t come out very good while others hit it out of the park. Like her dog treats. People really seemed to love them. In fact, a small crowd was gathering around the case that held them right now.

“Aren’t these cute?” a woman in thick glasses said.

“Are they for people or dogs?” Her husband’s face was almost pressed to the glass.

“Beach Bones. That sounds familiar,” the lady next to him mused.

The first woman pushed her glasses up on her nose. “Has a good ring to it.”

Perfect! Her name was familiar, with a good ring to it. That was just what she wanted. Except by “familiar,” she hoped the woman meant it sounded comfortable and not like something from a famous brand. She made a mental note to call Tammi and ask her about researching trademarks. She didn’t think anyone else had used that name for a dog biscuit, but one could never be too careful.

“How is your mysterious guest today?” Maxi’s eyes twinkled. “Do you really think he was creeping around last night?”

“Of course not.” Jane waved her hand dismissively.

“That’s just Bunny. She’s creative even with her imagination,” Liz said. “Brenda said the guy is really nice. He’s probably just shy.”

“Bunny is a character. She was a big help when I was stuck with painter’s block.” Maxi cut a pumpkin-spice muffin in half and glanced down at Cooper, who was sitting at Jane’s feet.

“He doesn’t need a muffin, Max,” Jane said.

Everyone loved to give Cooper treats, and Jane was diligent about keeping him healthy.

“I think Mr. Smith is just a regular guy. Saw him going into the hardware store this morning, just like a normal person.” Andie sipped her

coffee.

“Oh, is that where you went off to?” Jane asked. “Did you need something for Tides there?”

“Oh no. I wasn’t in the store. I was... Well, I had some errands. For the antiques store.” Andie focused on rooting through the sweetener packets in a small basket in the middle of the table.

Claire thought she might be avoiding eye contact with Jane, but she could have been wrong. Maybe it was a sister thing she wasn’t privy to.

“What would he be doing in the hardware store?” Claire asked.

“Maybe he’s making some repairs to his room,” Liz joked.

“How nice would it be if all the guests did that?” Jane mused.

“How is business at the shop?” Claire asked Andie, who had recently moved back to town and opened an antiques store.

“Great. Now that Liz is helping out at Tides, I have more time for house calls, which means I get to root around in creepy attics and spider-filled basements.” The thought didn’t appeal to Claire, but the look on Andie’s face indicated it was one of her favorite activities.

“And the painting, Maxi? Any new masterpieces?”

Maxi laughed, a blush tinging her cheeks. She’d just completed a series of pet portraits, including one of Claire’s cat, Urchin, and one of Cooper. “I’m working on a series of paintings looking at the ocean from different vantage points on the Marginal Way, and I have a pet portrait for Wendy Martinelli at Tall Pines.”

Tall Pines was the assisted-living complex where Jane and Andie’s mother, Addie, lived. That reminded Claire... “Don’t let me forget to give you some chocolate chip muffins for Addie.” She’d already put some in a bag, which was sitting in the kitchen.

“That’s so nice of you,” Jane said. “I’m heading over to visit her after this, so it’s perfect timing.”

“Did anyone get the new book for the book club yet?” Jane asked. They’d chosen another mystery to read for next month’s meeting.

“I have it on my Kindle,” Liz said. “Bunny had hers in her mailbox already last night.”

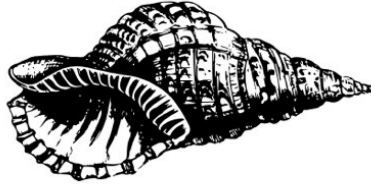
Maxi scrunched up her face. “I need a real book, so I ordered the paperback.”

“I’m looking forward to reading it and to the next meeting,” Andie said. Claire nodded. “We all are.”

“Especially Bunny,” Liz said. “Let’s just hope she doesn’t take this mystery stuff too much to heart. She’s already starting to get overly suspicious of your guest.”

Jane laughed. “She is, but I’m sure it’s all just talk. Bunny would never do anything crazy, and I’m glad she has something to keep her mind occupied.”

CHAPTER FOUR



Bunny dipped her smallest brush into the puddle of white-with-a-touch-of-cerulean-blue paint and leaned forward. She dabbed a spot on the canvas and then blended it in with quick strokes. She stood back to admire the work. It was a close-up of a pile of shells on the beach and looked almost like a photo. She was grateful that her eyesight was still good enough to make those fine details. It should be—she took enough bilberry extract and ate tons of carrots.

But the shells in the painting weren't quite right. She needed to add something in, something different. She liked to paint from real objects, and she made a mental note to check the low-tide schedule. There was a little beach off the Marginal Way near the small lighthouse that was a great place to find shells at low tide. The receding tide exposed rocks in the sand where starfish, crabs, and snails could be found. Once in a while, she'd run across a sea urchin. Looking for sea life around the rocks was one of her favorite pastimes, and if she found some interesting things to paint, all the better.

A car pulling in next door caught her attention. Liz was home! She put the brush in her mason jar of turpentine and hurried into the kitchen, where a loaf of fresh zucchini bread sat waiting on the counter. She'd baked it with the last of the zucchini from Liz's garden.

After placing the zucchini bread into a towel-lined basket, she grabbed cream cheese out of the fridge and headed on the well-worn path from her slider to Liz's kitchen door.

Liz answered with a welcoming smile. "That looks delicious. I just came from Sandcastles, though. I might have gone overboard sampling

Claire's fall pastry line. But I can take this for later."

Bunny handed over the basket, and Liz invited her in. With the two of them, it was more about the company than the food.

At the sight of the kitchen, Bunny's eyes widened. The top cabinets had their doors open, and all the dishes were gone. The house had been Liz's childhood home, and she'd just moved in. It was outdated, and Bunny knew Liz intended to upgrade, but she hadn't realized she was doing it this soon. "Are you getting new cabinets?"

"I think so." Liz placed two mugs of tea on the table. "I was going to just replace the old Formica counters, but the guy that came out said it would make sense to do the cabinets at the same time, so..."

"Yeah, sounds like the smart move. It's going to be like a whole new place." Bunny looked around, feeling a little nostalgic. She'd known Liz's parents since they were around the same age and had spent quite a bit of time in this house before Liz moved in. She'd been especially close to Liz's father, Frank, after his wife died. But now Frank was gone, too, and she was getting close to Liz. Bunny never had children, and Liz was becoming like a daughter to her.

"Yeah, new but still familiar and comfortable." Liz gestured for Bunny to sit.

"So, what's the hubbub at Sandcastles? Did you guys discuss the book club and our little lurker?"

Bunny could hardly believe how lucky she was to be able to segue into asking about Mr. Smith so easily. She'd spent a considerable amount of time contemplating how she would broach the subject without sounding like a silly, gossiping old lady.

Liz raised a brow. "Are you still thinking about him? Brenda said he was really nice."

"That's what they said about Ted Bundy."

"Bunny! You don't really think the guy is a serial killer, do you?" Liz looked as if she were concerned about Bunny's mental health.

"No, of course not." Bunny waved her hand as if that were the farthest thing from her mind. *Maybe a thief or someone with a specific victim in mind, but certainly not a serial killer.* "He's just a little mysterious, and it makes me curious is all."

"Jane did find it odd that he was in the hardware store."

"Indeed. What was he there for?"

“Don’t know. Andie saw him. He did bring a bag back to the inn but went straight to his room.”

Bunny nodded and sipped, not admitting that she’d also seen Mr. Smith in the hardware store.

Bunny reached for a piece of zucchini bread that Liz had placed out along with the cream cheese. “Have you noticed him doing anything unusual?”

“Mr. Smith? No. He just stays in his room.”

“Well, that seems unusual. Tourists typically go out and about. See the sights.”

“He might have just needed alone time or something. You never know what people are going through, and some people take a trip to have alone time.”

Bunny thought back to when her husband had died. She remembered going around in a fog while the rest of the world carried on around her as if nothing had happened.

“True. I mean, it’s not like anyone found murder weapons or kill lists in his room while cleaning it.” Bunny tried to sound like she was joking, but she could only hope Liz would mention something that Bunny would see as a clue.

“Of course not! Well, he asked not to have cleaning service, which, now that you mention it, is kind of odd...”

“Uh-uh.” Who wouldn’t want cleaning services? Someone with something to hide—that was who. “No weird noises coming from his room or nighttime excursions?”

“Jane didn’t mention anything like that. I haven’t seen or heard anything, but I’m not there much since it’s off-season.”

“You might want to check his trash, just in case.”

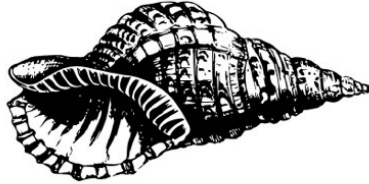
“For what?”

“You never know! Look at what happened in our book club book.”

“But that’s just a book. It’s not real life.” Liz’s brow furrowed. “Though I guess if you add up everything, it is odd.”

Bunny sat back and smiled. At least she wasn’t the only one who thought Mr. Smith was suspicious, because judging by the look on Liz’s face, now she thought so too.

CHAPTER FIVE



As assisted-living facilities went, Tall Pines was one of the best. It had friendly staff, expert medical care, wonderful activities for the residents, and great meals, and the rooms were like a posh hotel but with your own personal items and furniture.

Jane's mother, Addie, had been there for several months. Jane had been reluctant to move her there at first. Her instinct had been to care for her mother at home. But Addie's dementia meant Jane also had to take over running Tides, and doing both had become impossible. Tall Pines was a much better place for her, and she was thriving.

Cooper was a frequent visitor at Tall Pines. The management encouraged dogs, as it always seemed to please the residents, and Mike usually brought him once a week. Cooper loved car rides, so he was excited when Jane brought him with her. When she parked in the lot, he knew exactly where he was and walked beside her to the front door.

Jane greeted the receptionist and then unleashed Cooper, letting him run down the hall ahead of her to Addie's room.

"Cooper! Are you back again so soon?" Addie smiled as the dog rushed to her. Addie always remembered Cooper, even if she did get Jane confused with her sister sometimes. Jane stepped into the room, which had been decorated with all of her mother's favorite things from the blue-and-white wedding ring quilt her grandmother had made to the bird figurines that had been gifts from her father to the furniture she'd had in her room at Tides.

"Well, it has been almost a week, Mom." Jane hadn't brought Cooper the last two times. She usually visited at least every other day, but mostly

every day.

“Not you, dear. Mike was here with Coop yesterday.” Addie pressed her lips together and looked up at the ceiling. “Or was it earlier today?”

He was? Cooper had initially been Mike’s dog, but when his living circumstances had almost forced him to give up the dog, Jane had taken him in at Tides. Now that she and Mike were an item, they shared Cooper. He had taken Cooper yesterday, but he didn’t mention coming to visit Addie. Her mother was probably confused about timing.

Jane held out the bakery bag. “Claire sent these.”

“Isn’t she sweet! Did she make them in that culinary school?” Addie reached her weathered hand into the bag and pulled out a muffin. “Nice job. She must be learning a lot.”

Jane didn’t correct her. Claire had gone to culinary school, but that was years ago. Addie’s memory wasn’t always cohesive.

“Did Mike get his sizes?” Addie asked.

“Sizes?”

“Measurements maybe. You know. Wait. Is it your birthday, dear? I didn’t get you anything.”

“It’s not today, Mom. Don’t worry. There’s plenty of time.”

“Oh. Phew.” Addie bit into the muffin, spilling crumbs down her shirt. “Oh, look at me! What a mess!”

Claire had provided napkins, and Addie pulled one out. Then as if just remembering her manners, she tilted the bag toward Jane. “Would you like a muffin?”

“No thanks. I’m full.” She’d eaten more than her share at Sandcastles.

“I’ll save it for later.” Addie winked and slid the bag into a drawer. Jane made a mental note to remove it before she left. Addie would forget it was in there.

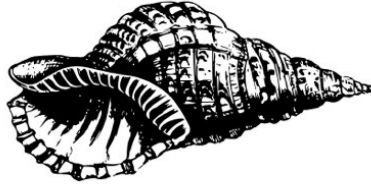
“Anyway, I had a lovely chat with Mike.” Addie looked down at the dog. “And you, too, Cooper. Mike is a good catch for you.”

“I know.” Jane did know, but something about the way her mother said that lent her to believe that something strange was going on concerning Mike.

Liz had said Andie was with Mike this morning, and now her mom seemed to think Mike had been here asking about measurements. *Could it all be a coincidence?*

There was one way to find out. She had plans to meet Mike for a late lunch at their favorite restaurant, and she'd simply ask him.

CHAPTER SIX



Sam broke the biscuit into four pieces and tossed one at Dooley, who caught it deftly. Dooley smiled and wagged his tail, his eyes locked on the other pieces in Sam's hand.

"Just one for now. Don't want you to get fat. Gotta keep you healthy." Sam couldn't bear losing another person. Well, Dooley wasn't a person, but pretty close in his book.

As if understanding, the dog trotted over and nudged Sam's hand with the top of his head, indicating he wanted to be petted. Sam complied. "You liked that walk today, huh?"

"Woof!"

To Sam's surprise, he'd enjoyed it too. He hadn't had much energy or ambition lately, but he was starting to find a little more of it through Dooley—and that silly woman with her newspaper in the car. It had sparked his detective instincts, and for a split second, he'd felt almost... alive.

Sam sighed. Those thoughts were foolish. He was retired and too old for investigating. He had nothing to investigate anyway. All he had was Dooley and waiting around for his sons to visit. Brad lived in California, so that didn't happen often. His other son, Todd, was in Europe, so visits from him happened even less.

He glanced down at the dog, who was looking up at him. "Okay, maybe tomorrow we'll walk a little on the Marginal Way."

"Woof!" Dooley's tail wagged, and he ran to the door.

"Not now. Tomorrow." Sam almost laughed. "Tell you what—we'll go early in the morning."

That appeased Dooley. Early morning was best if Sam wanted to get one of the parking spots, and he didn't mind the chill. Better than the heat, he always said.

The Marginal Way had been one of Jean's favorite walks. They used to walk the entire thing from Perkins Cove to the beach. Sometimes, they would take the trolley back to Perkins Cove if they left the car there. On a good day, they would walk down and back. It was over two miles round trip.

He'd loved walking the winding path with its gorgeous views of craggy rocks and ocean on one side and lush plantings on the other.

He hadn't been there since the last time with Jean. That time she couldn't even walk anymore, but he'd parked at the little lighthouse and wheeled her along the path. She'd loved it.

He didn't have the energy to walk the whole thing tomorrow. But maybe they could walk a little ways and then sit on one of the benches that looked out at the ocean.

Dooley trotted into the living room, and Sam reached into the cabinet to grab a sandwich bag to store the other pieces of the biscuit in. The cabinets were a bit old, and the countertops were dated. The owl canisters, toaster, and salt and pepper shakers were all where they had been when Jean was still alive. In fact, the whole house was the way it had been, right down to the lighthouse paintings on the wall. He actually never really liked those, but Jean had loved them, and he didn't have the heart to remove them now.

His son had suggested he remodel, but he liked it this way. He was used to it, and why change? If he didn't change anything, then things would stay the same, as if Jean could walk back in at any moment.

There was only one sandwich bag left, but Sam had more in the garage. He always kept backups, because he hated running out. He stored the biscuit pieces in the bag, added sandwich bags to the grocery list, and headed to the garage.

Dooley noticed and rushed over, looking excited. He loved car rides.

"We're not going in the car, buddy." In the garage, Sam glanced across the hood of the white Nissan he normally drove to the car in the second bay. It was covered by a cloth tarp, but he could still picture the candy-apple red of the convertible Corvette underneath. That had been their fun car. They'd loved taking it for rides on weekends.

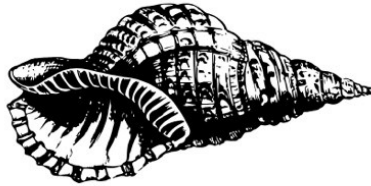
Sam hadn't taken it out since the last time he'd driven in it with Jean. He hadn't wanted to even look at it, but he'd had his son start it up every few months to make sure it still ran and was in good working order.

He turned away and grabbed the box of sandwich bags.

"Okay, back in the house," he said to Dooley as he held open the door. "No big walk until tomorrow."

Dooley looked excited about the big walk, but the thought made Sam feel exhausted. Maybe tomorrow he'd have more ambition.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Oarweeds was one of Jane's favorite restaurants. It sat in a little rocky cove on the east side of Perkins Cove, facing the ocean. The beginning of the Marginal Way started right next to the restaurant, and there were small tables set out in between the building and the pathway. It was crowded out there in summer, but this afternoon, it was only Jane, Mike, and Cooper. The weather was cooler, and there weren't many tourists, which suited Jane just fine. They wouldn't have been able to bring Cooper with them if they ate inside, so she simply snuggled into a thick cable-knit sweater and enjoyed the cozy feeling.

"How was the book club meeting?" Mike dipped a steamed clam into broth and then butter. They'd decided to start off with steamers, and then both had ordered salads with lobster on top for their meals.

"It was fun. I never realized there were so many things to discuss about a book." Jane had enjoyed reading the murder mystery and was excited about the next book they'd chosen. "Bunny Howard was really into deciphering all the clues."

Mike laughed. "That sounds like her."

"She even got suspicious of our one guest." Mike had been disappointed that they even had a guest, though he hadn't made a big deal out of it. Jane would have been able to spend more time with him if she didn't have anything to attend to at Tides. That was why she'd hired Liz, but Liz hadn't been there very long, so Jane was still a little reluctant to be away for too long.

“Why? What did he do?” Mike pulled another clam out of the shell, and Cooper looked up at him expectantly. “I don’t think you like clams, buddy.”

“He knew we were having snacks, and I guess he came down looking for them and got lost.”

“Lost? The place isn’t that big.”

“We were in the sitting room way in the back, and somehow, he ended up down there. Bunny thought he was lurking and listening.”

Mike’s left brow quirked up. “Oh. Is that the room you said your dad always wanted to make into a library?”

“Yes. That’s why I thought it would be perfect for the book club.” Fleeting memories of the plans she and her dad had made for the room bubbled up—where to place bookcases, what kinds of furniture. Jane always regretted not following through on those. Maybe someday. For now, she would just be happy they were putting the room to use for the book club.

“He was probably just unsure if he should barge in to get a snack.”

“Well, the food was actually in the dining room.” Jane pulled a roll out of the basket. It was still warm.

“Oh, then I guess that is weird. Wouldn’t he have had to walk past it to get to the room you were in?”

“Sure, but he probably didn’t even see the food in there. He heard our voices and followed them.”

“I see. Still seems weird. And it is odd that he was in the hardware store. I hope he’s not some creeper. I want you to be safe at Tides.”

“Cooper will protect me.” Jane wasn’t worried. She looked down at the dog, who smiled up at her as if agreeing that he would protect her. Then something Mike had said hit her. *How did he know Mr. Smith was in the hardware store?* “You saw him in the hardware store? Were you with Andie?”

Andie had said she’d seen Mr. Smith there too. And didn’t Liz say Andie was with Mike at the inn? Seemed like a lot of coincidences.

“Andie? No. I wasn’t with her.” Mike focused on buttering a roll.

“Oh, I think she mentioned seeing Smith downtown too.”

“Lots of people go there. Why would Andie be in the hardware store? If you need something fixed, I can do it.”

“She didn’t mention why she was there. Why do you think Mr. Smith would be in there?”

“Maybe Andie has him fixing something at Tides,” Mike joked.

The waitress brought their meals, and they concentrated on digging in. The lobster was buttery and sweet; the salad was crisp.

“So, I was hoping now that you have Liz to cover and since it’s the slow time for the inn that you could stay over more,” Mike said. “I cleaned out a space in my closet.”

Jane looked up, her heart melting at the hopeful sparkle in Mike’s green eyes. He’d been asking her to stay over more and more... even mentioned something more “permanent,” whatever that meant. Jane loved Mike, but she wasn’t sure she was ready. Her first husband had died not long after they were married, and she still had some unresolved issues around that.

But she didn’t want to disappoint Mike. “Liz is doing well, so I guess I could stay over more.”

Cooper gave a soft woof and wagged his tail.

“Cooper is excited about that,” Mike said.

Jane was excited, too, but she couldn’t push away the nagging feeling that Mike was leaving something out about being with Andie and how her mother had mentioned him.

“Did you visit Mom at Tall Pines yesterday? She mentioned seeing Cooper and something about measuring.”

“No. I ... Oops.” Mike dropped his roll, and Cooper scarfed it up. “Guess you got an extra treat.”

Jane’s brow furrowed. Was he avoiding her question?

He sipped his water. “I mean, yes, I was there. You know how I take Cooper once a week. Brightens people’s day. And, of course, I dropped in on Addie. I don’t know what she means about measuring, though.”

That made sense. Jane was probably making too much of her mother’s remark. With her dementia, she often said things that weren’t reality. “Probably one of her confusions.”

“Probably. But she seemed good overall,” Mike said.

Jane smiled and dug into her lobster salad, certain she was making too much of everything. Bunny’s suspicions and the mystery books they were reading must have put her in a suspicious mode. Everything was perfectly fine, wasn’t it?

JANE STOPPED in at Bradford Breads on the way back from her lunch with Mike. The bread store was set up like something between a bakery and a country store. Loaves of fresh bread sat in display cases and on wooden racks. Strategically placed old barrel-shaped tables held spreads, honey, jams, and other things one might put on bread. The homey smell of sourdough permeated the air and made Jane's mouth water even though she'd just come from lunch.

"Hey, Jane!" Claire came out of the back, with Rob just behind her. Their cheeks were flushed, and Jane's brows rose automatically. Rob was a nice guy and handsome, too, with his dark silver-tinged hair and deep-hazel eyes. She was glad that he and Claire had developed a relationship. She was about to make a joke about them baking in back when Claire's gaze skidded past her to the window.

"Is that Cooper in the car?"

Jane turned. Since she was just running in, she'd left him sitting in the passenger seat with the windows cracked open. "Yep. We just came from a late lunch with Mike."

"Perfect, because I happen to have some dog biscuits for him in my purse. I was going to drop them off at Tides." Claire darted into the back again and returned a few seconds later with a bakery bag in her hand.

"Thanks. Cooper loves these," Jane said. "How are sales going for them?"

"Really good. I've been thinking about brand names, though I guess I might have some work to do on that."

"Oh, really? Why do you need a brand name?" Jane asked.

Claire shrugged. "I don't really, but maybe if I wanted to package them and sell them online or something. Unlike my pastries, they stay good for a while and could easily be shipped. I came up with a good name, but there might be a glitch."

Rob had gone over to one of the racks to grab her loaves of bread, and he returned, handing them to Jane before slipping behind the counter to the cash register.

"What's the glitch?" Jane fumbled in her purse for her card to pay Rob.

Claire sighed. "Well, I came up with the name Beach Bones, and I've had a few customers say that someone else is already using it."

"Oh, and you have your mind set that it's the name you want to use?" Jane asked.

Claire made a face. “Sort of.”

“You know how she is when she has her mind made up.” Rob smiled at Claire fondly. “But even if someone else is using it, you can too. Just make sure it’s not trademarked or anything.”

“I have Tammi looking into that.”

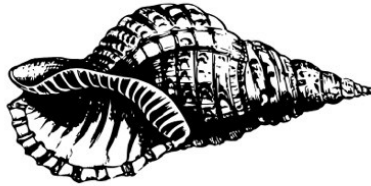
“Well, sounds like it should work itself out easily then. I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.” Jane took her card back from Rob and left with her packages of bread and the dog biscuits.

She hesitated at the car, juggling everything she was carrying as she unlocked it. Her eyes drifted to the hardware store. She couldn’t help but think it was odd that both Mike and Andie had mentioned Smith in the hardware store. Not to mention she wondered what the guy was doing in there. Of course, it could have been a dozen things. Maybe he was picking something up for back home or needed some thumbtacks or to have a key made. *Hopefully not the one for his room.* Jane shook her head. Now she was starting to think like Bunny!

Of course, both Mike and Andie had dozens of reasons to be downtown too. Neither of them had been in the store. They’d just seen Mr. Smith... which meant they had been there at pretty much the same time. But that wasn’t so odd, was it? Her gaze drifted over the stores in view of the hardware store: the candy store, the frame store, the trinket store, the jewelry store—

Wait a minute... jewelry store. Her heart hitched. A few weeks ago, Mike had mentioned something to the effect of making their relationship more permanent. Liz had thought Andie and Mike were at Tides together. Addie had said Mike was asking about sizes and measurements. Could they all be conspiring over an engagement ring?

CHAPTER EIGHT



Early the next morning, Bunny plunged her hand into the little tide pool beside the rock on the beach. The water was freezing! She pulled out her hand, clutching the moon snail shell. No snail was inside, and it was perfect for her to use to capture the exact subtle colors of lavender and gray in her painting.

She dropped it into her tote bag and turned to face the ocean. The sun had come up an hour ago and it warmed her face. Taking a deep breath, she basked in the beauty of the ocean, the salty air, the sound of the waves, and the serenity of being the only one on the small beach.

Bunny loved this time of year. The cool air was refreshing, there were hardly any tourists, and the beaches were so peaceful. Especially the small ones along the Marginal Way, like the one she was on now. These beaches were sparsely populated even in summer, because they were covered with water when the tide came in.

There was something exciting about being the only one in sight, standing with the vast ocean in front of you—except, she wasn't the *only* one there. A man was walking along the outcropping of rocks that formed a cliff a little ways down. It was a good spot; she'd walked there many times herself. From there, the wide river to the beach was visible. It was slippery up there, though. At high tide, the ocean splashed up over the rocks. She'd found starfish, sea urchins, and crabs up there. There was always a covering of slippery seaweed clinging to the rocks, and she'd fallen a few times.

She hoped the man didn't fall. *Hmm...* He looked kind of familiar.

Bunny shaded her eyes and squinted to see better. *Wait! Is that Mr. Smith? And what does he have in his hand?* Something big and round.

She watched as he picked his way across the rocks. He stopped at the edge, looked over, then raised the round thing level with his shoulders before letting it drop.

Bunny gasped as it smashed on the jagged rocks below.

What in the world?

She watched as Mr. Smith then leaned over the side. He pulled something out of his pocket. A rope? A string? He slid it over the side, letting it down almost to the bottom.

Is he measuring?

A chill ran down Bunny's spine. In the mystery book, the killer had counted the number of stairs it would take for the victim to become seriously hurt in much the same manner.

Was Mr. Smith plotting to push someone off the cliff? It wasn't a tall cliff, only about twenty or thirty feet, but the rocks below would do a lot of damage. Just ask the cantaloupe that was now smashed to pieces on them.

Mr. Smith walked back to the path and disappeared.

Bunny scrambled up the stairs to the path and headed in that direction to see exactly what Mr. Smith had been up to.

SAM HAD WALKED FARTHER than he'd intended, but Dooley had wanted to keep going. Sam was surprised to discover that he didn't mind. They'd walked up to where the path had a little shortcut through a wooded area. In this little area was a series of copper plaques with the names of people who had donated to the upkeep of the path.

Sam's eyes misted as he read through the names. At the bottom were empty spaces for more names. Jean's name was on the list to be printed on one of those.

As if sensing his sadness, Dooley pressed against Sam's leg and snuffed his hand.

That brought a smile to Sam's face. And when he looked up at the ocean to see the sun kissing the tops of the waves, heard the birds chirping in the

trees, and felt the sea breeze on his face, his heart lifted. Maybe there were still things to be grateful for.

“Let’s go back to the car, eh?”

Dooley looked a little disappointed.

“Okay, maybe we’ll sit on one of the benches for a spell.”

Dooley’s tail wagged in response.

Sam felt a little lighter as they walked back. He chose a bench not far from the car, overlooking the little beaches that were revealed when the tide receded. Maybe tomorrow, he’d take Dooley down onto the beach. He knew the dog would like that.

He took out a treat and fed it to Dooley, who had settled in at his feet. When Dooley didn’t take the treat right away, Sam looked down to see Dooley was busy staring at something to the left.

Sam followed his gaze to see a person scurrying over the rocks at the base of the cliff.

What in the world? Wait a minute... The silver-tinted auburn hair looked familiar. *Is that the woman from the car? And what in the world is she doing?*

It looked like she was inspecting something on the rocks. She held up a piece of something that looked like a cantaloupe rind. How odd.

Then she rummaged in her tote, pulling out a variety of things before settling on a... *What is that? A measuring tape?*

He felt a pang of something in his gut, something he hadn’t felt in a long time. It was his detective instincts. The instincts that had allowed him to catch hundreds of criminals. The instincts that had given him a purpose in life. The instincts that he thought were long gone.

He leaned forward, feeling that spark of excitement he used to get. His days on the force were long over, but this woman and her odd behavior made him wonder if maybe he didn’t necessarily need to be on official police business to investigate. She was clearly up to something, and maybe he could find out what it was. Of course, if it was something criminal, then he would report his findings to the police. He still had contacts.

But there was something about the woman that made him hope she wasn’t some kind of criminal. Maybe it was her auburn hair, which reminded him of Jean’s hair, or maybe it was the air of determination that radiated from her.

He noticed how she was gingerly stepping over the rocks. He guessed her to be around his age, but she didn't seem to be afraid of falling and breaking something. Nope, she had a clear purpose and wasn't going to let anything stop her. She was clearly not a useless old person.

Was that what he'd become? Jean wouldn't like that at all. And with that thought, he felt something shift inside him. It was as if Jean were reaching out to give him a nudge.

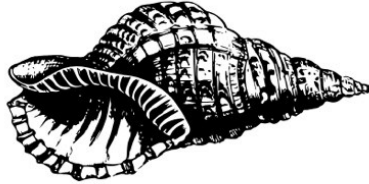
Here was something he could do to get back into the swing of things and make himself feel useful again.

He had a million ideas on how to find out who the woman was and what she was up to. He found himself hoping she wasn't up to anything too nefarious. He was also hoping she didn't fall. Despite her suspicious behavior, there was something he liked about her.

“Woof!”

“You think so too?” He fed Dooley a treat. “We’re almost out of these. Better make a trip to Sandcastles to get some more. I think we’ve just found ourselves something interesting to do.”

CHAPTER NINE



“I’ll have a half moon and two cannoli please.”

Claire turned from wiping down the coffee station to see Bunny Howard standing at the bakery case. Her face was flushed, and she looked excited. “Hi, Bunny. How are you?”

“Great. You? Have you started the new book yet?”

Claire grabbed a pastry tissue and reached into the case for the half-vanilla-half-chocolate frosted pastries. “Not yet, but I’m looking forward to our new book club meeting.”

“Me too. I think I have the killer worked out in this book too.” Bunny leaned closer, which wasn’t easy to do since she was not much taller than the case. “I think I’m getting pretty good at working out mysteries.”

Claire slid the pastries into the bag and opened the other side of the case for the cannoli. “You did a good job on the last book.”

“Yes. And it’s not just in books, either.” Bunny glanced around and lowered her voice. “But I’ll keep mum until I have real evidence.”

“Evidence?” Bunny certainly was overly dramatic this morning.

Bunny waved her hand in the air. “Don’t mind me! Just silly chatter.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. She didn’t take Bunny for a silly chatterer, but she could tell that she wasn’t going to get any more out of her. The book club mysteries certainly were having an influence on her, but she appeared to be having fun, so what was the harm?

She rang up Bunny’s purchase and watched her leave.

Sam was outside, tying Dooley up at the post by the door. His eyes followed Bunny as she got into her pale-blue car.

Did Sam seem a little less stooped today? That was good. Dooley was having a good effect on him. He still had a sad air about him, but if she wasn't mistaken, she'd seen a teeny bit of spark in his eyes as he walked in the door. Did that have something to do with Bunny?

"How are you, Sam?"

"Great. Just took Dooley for a walk on the Marginal Way. Haven't been there in a while."

Maybe that was what was responsible for Sam's apparent vigor and it had nothing to do with Bunny.

He turned to face the door. "Say, isn't that the woman who... Um... Oh, what is her name? The one in the blue car."

Claire leaned over to see out the window. "You mean Bunny."

Claire understood Sam's forgetfulness. It happened to her more often than she liked to admit, and Sam had a few decades on her.

Sam snapped his fingers. "Yes, that's it! Bunny Johnson."

"Bunny Howard."

"Oh, right." Sam looked sheepish. "Memory isn't all that. I remember her from a while back. Guess I should have said hi."

"I'm sure you'll have plenty of chances to see her again. She comes in quite regularly."

"She does, does she?" Sam shuffled over to the section where the dog biscuits were, and Claire followed.

"Yep, and she's part of our new book club at Tides." Claire looked over the case at him. "You might want to join that."

Sam frowned as if considering it. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe." His demeanor seemed to dim, and Claire wished she hadn't said anything.

"How many?" Claire held up the dog biscuit bag.

"I'll take four." Sam smiled as if to offset his rejection of the book club.

A woman was perusing the items in the case. She pointed at the biscuits as Claire took out four for Sam.

"Oh, you carry Beach Bones. My dog loves those. I got some down in Wells," the woman said.

"Wells? I only sell them here. These are my own recipe," Claire said proudly. The woman was probably confused about some other dog biscuits, but Claire hoped she'd try hers.

"Oh. Well, the others were named something similar. I thought it was a brand from a big store. My mistake. I'll try some of yours, though."

Claire was happy to sell the woman some Beach Bones, but now she was feeling little uneasy, especially since she remembered someone mentioning they'd seen that name the other day. Maybe changing her name was best, but Claire was getting sort of attached to the name. And besides, if someone had copied her, then she didn't want them to think they could just take her name for the biscuits. She made a mental note to have Tammi step up the pace on her trademark research.

SAM UNTIED Dooley and gave him half a treat.

"I still got it, boy." Sam chuckled. "Did you see how I got Claire to tell me the name of that woman?"

Dooley looked up at him, and Sam imagined he was nodding his agreement.

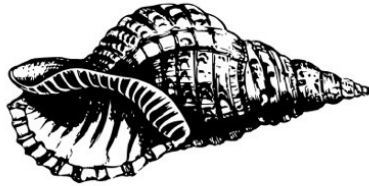
Sam had used an old trick he'd employed as a detective. When he was on the force and wanted to know someone's identity, he would pretend he'd forgotten their name. It worked every time. Of course, a bakery in a small seaside town was a bit easier than in the city, but it accomplished the same thing. It probably worked even better now that he was older. People seemed to just assume folks his age were forgetful, even though his memory was as sharp as ever.

A pang of guilt bubbled up over tricking Claire. It felt a bit like lying, and Sam didn't like that, but it was for a good cause. He liked Claire, and it had warmed his heart that she'd invited him to the book club. He wouldn't join it, of course. He preferred sitting at home and... and what? Watching television with Dooley? Doing crossword puzzles? Maybe he should consider joining. He did love to read.

But the thought of getting out there and socializing without Jean made a heavy pit form in his stomach. Maybe he'd consider it later on. For now, he had some work to do. He needed to figure out where Bunny Howard lived so he could set up a little surveillance. Not like a stalker or anything, more like what he used to do back in his police days. He still knew how to follow someone without being noticed. At least he thought he still did.

Sam picked up the pace to his car. He couldn't wait to get home. For once, he had something to look forward to.

CHAPTER TEN



Jane practically ran Maxi over on her way to double check that they'd cleaned up all the crumbs and polished off the coffee mug rings from their book club meeting the other night.

"Oh! Sorry!" Maxi had a sketchbook open in her hand and was busy drawing in it, which wasn't that unusual. What was unusual was that she was standing in the middle of the hallway while doing it.

"What are you drawing?" Jane craned her neck to peek into the book, and Maxi snapped it shut.

"I was just putting the finishing touches on a drawing. You know how I get lost in them."

"Standing in the hall?"

"I started outside."

Andie came down the hallway. "What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing. We just bumped into each other," Maxi said.

"I was on my way to the back room to make sure we'd cleaned everything up after the book club meeting," Jane said, wondering why she suddenly felt like she had to explain herself.

Andie held up a cleaning cloth in one hand and some crumpled napkins and a bookmark in another. "No need. I just cleaned it. But I do have something to talk to you about. Let's go to the kitchen."

Andie breezed toward the kitchen, and Jane turned and followed with Maxi behind her.

When they passed the foyer, Maxi headed for the door. "I gotta get back to my cottage and finish this up." She tapped on the sketch pad. "See you

guys later.”

“Why was she sketching from here? She has her own cottage on the beach,” Jane said as she and Andie continued to the kitchen.

“Different vantage point. From here, you can see part of the Marginal Way. Can’t see that from her cottage.” Andie turned to look at her. “You’re awfully suspicious. I think those mystery books are getting to you.”

Andie might have a point. Maxi had painted from their deck before, so it wasn’t exactly unusual.

Liz was in the kitchen with a trash bag open in front of her. She looked startled when she heard them come in. “Oh, hi. I emptied the trash from the rooms. Well, our one room.”

Emptied? To Jane, it looked like she was going through the trash, not emptying it. But maybe she was being too suspicious, as Andie had just pointed out.

“Perfect. I have some trash to throw in from the book club meeting.” Andie shoved the trash in her hand into the bag, and Liz tied up the bag and headed to the kitchen door to the small dumpster that sat just outside.

“I’ll just toss this out and then head home, unless you guys need something else?”

“No, we’re good. See you in a few days.” Andie opened the door for Liz and then turned to Jane. “I’m glad I caught you. I have a proposition.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I was hoping you could come to the New England Antique Inns and Furnishings Conference with me in a couple of days. It’s in Bar Harbor.”

“Umm... okay. What is it?” Jane was caught a little off-guard. She’d never heard of the conference and didn’t do well with quick decisions.

“It’s an industry conference for owners of antique inns. I found out about it in the *Antique Digest* newsletter I get for my shop. It could be a great way to make some contacts with advertisers that have leads for people that like to stay at old inns, and we can see some of the furniture that will fit in with our antiques.”

Jane looked around. She liked all their antiques but had to admit that sometimes they weren’t all that practical. “It would be nice to have a more useful place to serve coffee other than having it drip all over Great-grandma Miller’s bird’s-eye maple server.”

“And maybe see if they have any antique-style beverage coolers,” Andie said. “Plus, there could be tons of magazines we should be advertising in but just don’t know about.”

“That does sound like a good idea.” In the spring, when Jane had taken over running the inn because of their mother’s memory problems, she had been worried about getting enough guests. Her mother had let things go, and they’d lost a lot of their repeat business. But now things were picking up. Still, it did make good business sense to see if she could make some contacts that would allow her to expand her advertising.

“Liz said she’d keep an eye on things, and with only one guest, I don’t think anyone really needs to be in attendance here, do you? Maybe we could stay overnight. We could go out to a nice restaurant and spend some sister time.” Andie looked overly hopeful.

“Now you’re talking,” Jane said. “Do you really think we could leave the inn overnight?”

“I’ve already talked to Liz, and she’ll be happy to stay in one of the rooms, but I also think we don’t need to be here at night as long as no guests are checking in. Our one guest will be fine here all alone. And Brenda still comes every morning.”

“True. Okay, overnight it is.” Jane didn’t want to miss a chance to spend time with Andie. The two hadn’t been very close most of their adult lives and had just recently reconnected. Jane didn’t want to waste one minute of that.

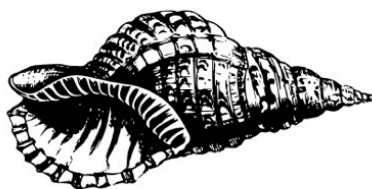
It would be a good test of her resolve to spend less time at the inn. Mike would surely like that. But now worry about what Mike was up to snuck into her thoughts. Liz had thought Andie was with Mike this morning, and they’d both seemed a bit cagey about seeing Mr. Smith at the hardware store. Was Andie in on Mike’s plan? If so, the trip might be a good opportunity to try to wheedle it out of her. And maybe she should even ask Andie for advice, because if Mike really was planning to propose, what would her answer be?

“Great!” Andie said. “I gotta get to the antiques shop. We’re still meeting at Splash tonight for dinner, right?”

Jane glanced outside. She, Andie, Maxi, and Claire, along with their significant others, usually dined out together a couple of times a month. “It’s still warm enough, so I think so.”

“Great, see you tonight!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Bunny mixed some warm gray with just a touch of king's blue light paint and dabbed it onto the canvas right at the apex of the moon snail shell. Most people thought the shells were rather plain, but Bunny wasn't most people. She saw the beauty in the shell, especially when under water and the intricate blue, gray, and purple colors became more vibrant.

Of all the snail shells on the beach, the moon snails were one of her favorites. The snail itself could live for fifteen years—most people didn't know that. And it was one of the few that ate other snails. Their unique characteristics aside, Bunny just liked to paint them.

Glancing at the shell she'd picked up off the beach for reference, she blended the colors. Her thoughts drifted to that morning on the beach and the nefarious activity she'd seen Mr. Smith engaging in.

After he left, she'd checked out the smashed cantaloupe lying on the rocks. It was a bit disturbing, like a smashed skull. It made her wonder, though, if pushing someone off the cliff could cause a deadly accident. Maybe Mr. Smith was wondering the same thing.

She still hadn't come up with a plan of action for further investigation. Should she just lurk outside of Tides and wait for him to go somewhere? That seemed a bit inefficient. She didn't want anyone to see her and think she was up to something... Though now that she thought about it, she had seen that cute hound dog that had been around her car when she'd been surveilling Smith more than once in the past few days. And if she had seen him more than once, than maybe his owner had seen her. She needed to be a bit more discreet.

A knock on the slider startled her out of her thoughts. Liz was outside, having used the path between their gardens as usual. She looked anxious. Maybe she had intel on Mr. Smith.

Bunny set her paints aside and rushed to let Liz in.

"I'm not interrupting your painting, am I?" Liz glanced at the canvas.

Bunny waved her hand. "Not at all. I can paint any time. Come in the kitchen. Coffee? Tea?"

"Tea would be great." Liz followed her into the kitchen.

Bunny put on some water and put the little basket with a variety of tea bags on the table. She grabbed two mugs and sat, putting one in front of Liz, who had a paper on the table in front of her.

"What's that?" Bunny tilted her head to see what it was. The paper looked crumpled and stained with handwriting in black pen.

Liz grimaced. "Well, I probably shouldn't have taken this, but I was emptying the trash, and it sort of stuck out. It came from Mr. Smith's room. Aren't these all poisons?"

She shoved the paper in front of Bunny. On it were four words, one on top of the other: *hemlock*, *nightshade*, *death cap*, and *dapperling*.

"These are poisons. Natural ones that can be found in the woods." *Poison?* That was strange. Judging by his behavior on the beach, Bunny had assumed Mr. Smith was thinking about pushing someone off the cliff. Perhaps this was a backup plan. But she didn't want to say that to Liz, because Liz looked worried.

"You don't think he plans to poison someone, do you?" Liz asked.

The tea kettle whistled, and Bunny poured the water into their mugs. "Don't worry, dear. I highly doubt he's planning to poison people at random. Besides, that list could be for anything. Those last two are mushrooms. Perhaps he's going mushroom collecting and wants to make sure to avoid poison mushrooms and herbs. Isn't fall good for mushrooms?" Bunny actually thought the warm summer weather was better for mushrooms, but her statement seemed to quell Liz's fears.

"Oh, that could be! I heard him making plans to meet someone at the Rachel Carson Refuge. They probably have tons of mushrooms there."

"You did?" The Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge was one of Bunny's favorite places. Named after the late marine biologist who'd dedicated her life to wildlife conservation, it consisted of over nine

thousand acres of forest, coastal meadows, and salt marshes. “I love to go see the deer in the fields there.”

“Me too. Dad used to take us when we were kids.” Liz smiled at the memory. “I guess that’s what Mr. Smith must be doing, too, because he did say he would meet the person around dusk tonight.”

“See then? Nothing suspicious about this at all.” Bunny tapped the paper, smiled, and sipped her tea, all the while thinking that dusk was the perfect time for a murder and the Rachel Carson Refuge was a great place to hide a body.

“Right. I guess it was silly of me,” Liz said.

“Not at all! I’m glad you brought it over. He did act suspicious the night of the book club, but that was probably my imagination. Now, would you like some carrot cake to go with the tea?”

Bunny made a mental inventory as she cut the cake. *Binoculars, vest with pockets, camera.* Now all she had to do was go to the refuge a little bit before dusk, and she could easily get into place so that she could follow Mr. Smith and prevent him from doing whatever horrible thing he intended to do.

IT DIDN’T TAKE much effort for Sam to discover who Bunny Howard was and where she lived. She seemed like a normal person. She liked painting, was a widow, and had lived in her house for forty years. She was about Sam’s age, but of course, he already knew that.

“It’s kind of scary all this information is right out on the internet,” Sam said to Dooley. They were sitting in his kitchen, the late afternoon sun slanting in through the window.

The old owl canisters that had sat on the counter for decades were now upside down on the drying rack. Sam had thrown out the old sugar and flour that had been inside them. He wasn’t sure what he’d do with them, maybe get new ones. It might be time for some changes.

“Don’t worry. Not too many changes,” Sam said out loud just in case Dooley knew what he was thinking. It sure seemed like the dog did sometimes.

Sam should have been tired. He'd had more activity in the past few days than he'd had in two years, but he felt energized. After looking up information on Bunny, he'd driven past her house, feeling a little bit like a creeper. He'd convinced himself he was only a guy taking his dog out for a ride. It felt good to get out of the house.

The neighborhood was nice, full of mature landscaping and well-kept lawns. The homes were neatly painted and trimmed, with enough space for privacy but not too much. He felt like people could be neighborly there. He'd known his neighbors when Jean was alive, but most of them had moved in the last few years. And since Jean's death, he'd stayed in his house like a hermit, not venturing out to meet the new ones, even though they all seemed friendly and waved to him whenever they saw him out in the yard.

Bunny's car had been in the driveway of her modest ranch house. As Sam had driven past, a woman had come out of the side door. In his detective days, that would have raised his suspicions, but this was a suburban neighborhood, and neighbors often used back doors. Jean had done so herself many times when the Crosbys had lived next door to them.

He hadn't been able to learn much else about Bunny Howard. She certainly didn't seem like a suspicious character, but in his experience, those could be the worst kind.

But what to do next? Perhaps he should just forget about the strange things he'd seen her doing. It wasn't like he was a detective acting in any official capacity. On the other hand, what else did he have to do?

Dooley trotted over to his leash, which Sam kept hanging from the doorknob. "Woof!"

"You want to go for a ride?"

"Woof!"

It was a nice evening for a ride. And if he happened to drive through Bunny's neighborhood, then who would notice?

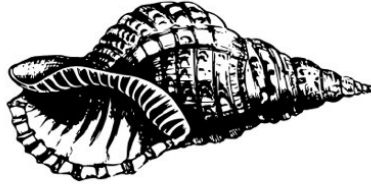
His car was in the garage, and he led Dooley out then opened the passenger side for the dog to hop in. As he turned, he brushed against the cloth tarp covering the Corvette, revealing a glimpse of the cherry-red paint underneath. A spark of excitement bubbled up.

What would it feel like to drive the Vette again? But that car would be much too conspicuous for following someone. He'd be spotted right away.

And besides, those days were long gone, and he should probably think about selling it.

Sam brushed away the thought. He didn't need the money, and there was plenty of time to think about that later. Right now, he had more important things to do. He had a suspect to follow.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Splash was one of Jane and her friends' favorite restaurants to gather at because it was situated directly on the beach. In fact, they liked it so much that over the summer, the four couples had gotten into the habit of eating there a couple of nights each month. The restaurant officially closed just after Labor Day, but the owner opened it on select nights when the weather was warm enough, and tonight was one of those nights.

The restaurant wasn't anything fancy, but its patio just above the sugar-soft sand offered an unobstructed view of the ocean that couldn't be beat.

The sun set behind them to the West, but the colors on the ocean were always fantastic. And it was always a treat to smell the salty sea air and listen to the soothing sound of the waves. Even the seagulls that hopped along outside the patio waiting for a morsel of food were fun to watch.

It was warm for October, but Jane had worn her thickest sweater coat. Maxi must've been feeling the chill; she even had fingerless gloves on. Claire, on the other hand, was wearing only a light jacket. Perhaps she was suffering from hot flashes. Jane had heard her complain about them a few times.

Andie and her boyfriend, Shane, had arrived a little late. They'd decided to eat around four in the afternoon to take advantage of the afternoon warmth and be finished by the time it got darker and cooler. Shane had had to rush from his renovation job. He'd apologized for not changing first, but with his tall, muscular body and close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, he could easily pull off a flannel shirt and jeans with a bit of sawdust still clinging to them and look like he'd dressed that way on purpose.

Everyone had assured him there was no need to apologize as they sat back with their drinks and plastic cups that had colorful stirrers in the shapes of crabs, starfish, and mermaids sticking out of them.

“It’s getting chilly. I suppose this will be our last dinner out here until next summer.” Rob’s voice held a tinge of regret.

“Maybe after this, we can move the dinners inside to Tides for the winter. There’s plenty of room for all eight of us in the dining room,” Jane said.

“Will you still be living at Tides then?” Claire wiggled her eyebrows and glanced from Mike to Jane.

She should talk—she’d been dating Rob much longer, and the two of them still had separate places. But her reaction made Jane wonder if there really was something going on behind her back. First Mike and Andie seeming to be in the same places and not telling her, and now this little comment.

She glanced at Mike, but he didn’t seem at all concerned and was happily taking a swig of beer.

“I think I will still be living there. But it doesn’t really matter. We can still use Tides. I don’t have to be living in the inn for us to use the dining room. In fact, now that we have Liz to help out, I’m not needed there as much. And no one actually needs to stay overnight. All the guests have keys to the front door.” Come to think of it, it wouldn’t be so bad if Jane did get another place. The owner’s suite in Tides was kind of small and consisted of just a bedroom and sitting area. Then again, it was nice to be on location in case something happened and she was needed.

“Jane and I are going away to Bar Harbor overnight,” Andie chimed in.

“You are?” Maxi looked excited. “I went up there to get some inspiration for a painting a couple of weeks ago. It’s beautiful there.”

Andie nodded. “There’s an antique hotels conference there, and Jane and I are going to catch the conference and then spend some sister time.”

Andie leaned over and put an arm around Jane’s shoulder. It warmed Jane’s heart, but had Andie’s gaze flicked to Mike for a split second? Mike didn’t seem to acknowledge anything, though. Maybe it was Jane’s imagination.

“You’re leaving the inn all alone with the mysterious Mr. Smith?” Rob asked as he passed around the basket of bread the waitress had left on the table.

“Have you been talking to Bunny?” Jane laughed.

“She was in Sandcastles this morning, talking about evidence.” Claire slid the butter over to James, Maxi’s husband.

James frowned. “What kind of evidence?”

“She wouldn’t say. If you ask me, that woman has too much time on her hands,” Claire said.

“And reads too many mysteries,” Andie added.

“But you have to admit, Mr. Smith is a little mysterious.” Jane picked out a roll. It was still warm, and steam wafted out when she pulled it open.

“What does he do? Do you even know why he’s in town?” Maxi asked.

Jane shrugged. “No idea. But people have lots of reasons for coming to town, and we try not to pry.”

“That’s smart,” Claire said.

“Anyway, what’s going on at the bakery? How are your dog biscuits doing?” Jane automatically reached down to pet Cooper, who was sitting beside her on the patio. His tail wagged excitedly as soon as she mentioned dog biscuits.

Instead of looking excited, Claire’s brow creased into a frown. “Well, people seem to like them, but I think there might be someone else using the same name. I’ve had Tammi research it, and she says nothing is trademarked or anything, so I guess I can use it...”

“You sound uncertain about that.” James, Maxi’s husband, was a banker and knew a bit about legal things. “If no one else has trademarked it, you have every right.”

“I know. But it feels a little strange. I wish I knew who was using it or even if someone really is. Some of my customers seem a little uncertain about the exact name.” Claire shrugged and took a sip of her drink. “But I really like the name, and if someone is copying *me*, then I’m certainly not going to be the one to stop using it.”

“Yeah, don’t let someone else make you change your plan,” Andie said.

“I won’t. What about you? Any great finds at the antique store?” Claire asked.

Andie had once worked for Christie’s auction house in New York City, dealing with high-end antiques and hoping to make an important antique discovery. But when their mom had gotten sick, Andie had come back to help out. And Jane was grateful that she’d fallen back in love with their

small town and realized she could have a fulfilling career right here in Lobster Bay.

She hadn't made any big discoveries, but she'd helped the people, and that was more important. Of course, reuniting with her high school boyfriend, Shane, might have had something to do with her decision to stay, but Jane liked to think that being close to family was the main reason.

"No great finds this week," Andie joked. "It's actually kind of slow. Do you guys know the house out on Ledge Road that's been boarded up for years?"

Jane knew the house well. It was a big old Victorian with chipped paint, shutters hanging on their hinges, and spindles missing on the porch. "If I recall, there was some sort of mystery surrounding that house, wasn't there?" Jane asked.

Andy nodded. "Yeah. Something about a missing woman. I'm not really sure exactly, anyway, but a woman came in saying that she owns it and she's moving out here from Ohio. Apparently, it's full of stuff, and she was wondering if I would look at some of it."

Jane could sense Andie's excitement. There was nothing her sister loved more than old houses full of stuff.

"Really?" Rob asked. "I thought that house had been boarded up for decades. You mean no one has gotten in there to ruin it yet?"

"I guess not. Maybe the rumor about it being haunted has kept people away."

Everyone laughed at Andie's joke. When they were kids, someone had still lived there, even though Jane seemed to recall it was quite dilapidated even back then.

The waitress came by, and they all ordered. Jane chose her usual lobster roll. She liked the way they made it with little bits of celery on a toasted hotdog bun.

As they waited for the meal, they settled into the familiar banter of old friends, catching up on town happenings and what each of them had done during the week.

"I noticed you put a place up for people to tie their dogs outside Sandcastles. Do you have anything for cats?" James joked. Maxi and James had two kittens, Rembrandt and Picasso, that they adored.

"If you think your cats will stay tied up to a post, you're welcome to bring them." Claire laughed. "But people seem to really appreciate it.

Everyone got used to bringing their dogs with them to sit out on the patio this summer, but now that it's been too cold to sit out most of the time, at least they can have them right outside."

"I noticed Sam Campbell's dog out there. It's good to see them getting out," Maxi said.

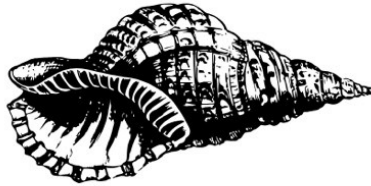
Claire smiled. "Isn't it? He's been in such a funk after Jean's passing. Barely even left the house, from what I hear. Hardly saw him at the bakery, but he's been in a few times this week, and his spirits seem to be picking up. He was even asking about Bunny Howard."

"He was? Maybe it is a little romance there." Andie wiggled her eyebrows.

"I think they'd make a cute couple. Maybe that will take Bunny's mind off Mr. Smith. She does seem a little obsessed with proving that he is up to something," Claire said.

"Liz said that Bunny has been talking about him too. Poor Mr. Smith. He's probably just a regular guy that only wants some peace and quiet. I do hope she doesn't do anything drastic that could get her into trouble."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Bunny wasn't going to do anything drastic that would get her into trouble. She was simply going to observe. Of course, she might have to intervene if Mr. Smith tried any funny business on his companion. What she would do to intervene, she had no idea. Perhaps she would be able to detain him and call 911. Though Mr. Smith was a bit younger, taller, and stronger than her, she wasn't afraid.

She'd arrived well ahead of dusk and parked in an inconspicuous spot down the road. She then headed into the woods to wait for Mr. Smith's arrival. She didn't mind waiting. While she was there, she would take advantage of the beautiful scenery. The leaves were starting to turn, and there were splashes of bright orange, yellow, and scarlet mixed in with the lush green on the trees.

The refuge was filled with trails, and she was happy to explore them, taking pictures of the colorful flowers and fall foliage for her painting endeavors as she waited for Mr. Smith to show up.

She was careful to always stay within sight of the parking lot so she could be alerted when Mr. Smith's car came in, and it did about an hour later. Soon, another car pulled up behind him. That looked like a clandestine meeting if she'd ever seen one.

She watched as the two men disappeared down the trail. They seemed to be talking amicably. Perhaps Mr. Smith was lulling his victim into complacency.

Bunny was quite familiar with all the trails and where they led, so she was able to follow Mr. Smith on a parallel trail without being seen. After a

few minutes, she saw them come to a small clearing and sit on a bench that overlooked a marshy area. To her disappointment, they simply continued talking.

Bunny considered her options. She could wait for Mr. Smith to make his move and then intervene, or she could try to warn his companion. The latter option seemed the safest, but if she did that, she wouldn't be able to get any evidence, and Mr. Smith might just deny he was up to something.

She wished she could overhear what they were talking about. Perhaps she should creep closer. But the sun was setting, and the light was fading. Everything was turning to a gloomy stone-gray color.

She could take the southeastern path and come around behind them. The forest was a little denser over there, and it was getting darker. Perhaps this really was just an innocent meeting between Mr. Smith and his companion.

But wait a minute! What was that flash in the woods? It looked like the sun glinting off the lenses of a pair of binoculars.

She shrunk back behind a tree. What if Mr. Smith had an accomplice? She hadn't considered that, but that might explain why Mr. Smith was being so slow in doing anything to his victim. He was waiting for the accomplice, and they were probably both waiting for it to become completely dark.

Bunny couldn't be dissuaded that easily, though. She knew of a path where she could keep her eye on Mr. Smith and circle behind the accomplice. Maybe then she could find out what they were really up to.

SAM HAD LUCKED out that Bunny was pulling out of her street when he drove over with Dooley. He'd decided to follow her and was surprised to see her turn into the Rachel Carson Wildlife Refuge. Was she just going birdwatching? He felt like a creepy stalker but followed her in anyway and parked in an out-of-the-way spot down the road to watch.

When she got out of her car with binoculars swinging on her neck, he'd almost left, but Dooley looked excited about the prospect of a walk in the woods, and Sam didn't see the harm in that. He grabbed his binoculars out of the back and got out of the car.

Sam took a different path from Bunny. He knew the wildlife refuge well and where each path intersected. Dooley was excited to sniff every leaf and

blade of grass.

After walking a bit, Dooley pulled him over to a bench in the woods. The dog must have known Sam was getting a bit tired. He'd walked more in the past few days than he had in the past few years. From this vantage point, he could just see Bunny through his binoculars. She was sitting on a log, looking through her binoculars in the opposite direction.

Sam hadn't been there long when two men came walking down one of the paths. That was nothing unusual since the refuge was visited by many and it was a nice crisp fall evening. But what was unusual was that Bunny immediately trained her binoculars on the men.

Sam raised his own binoculars to follow their path. The two men sat on a bench and appeared to be having a friendly conversation. What in the world was that about? Was one of them the person Bunny had been surveilling when he'd seen her downtown with the newspaper? Was she some sort of private detective?

Perhaps he shouldn't be tailing her. He'd gotten a little overexcited, and the thought of having something to investigate had clouded his better judgment. The notion that Bunny Howard was some sort of suspect was preposterous. Maybe he just wanted something to do, and maybe he liked something about her, so finding out more about her couldn't hurt. Luckily, he hadn't done anything crazy, like bust out his old badge and accuse her of something.

But if she wasn't a suspect, why was she watching those men? She looked to be about his age. Maybe too old to be a private detective? Then again maybe not. Maybe he should consider becoming a private detective. He certainly did miss the thrill of the chase and had more than enough experience.

Dooley had been busying himself sniffing under a log. Sam reached down to pet him. "I should bring you here more often, huh?"

Dooley wagged his tail.

"Used to come here all the time with Jean," he said, as if to explain why he'd never brought the dog before. He glanced around, picturing all the trails he and Jean had walked. They used to stand under the oak tree over there and look at the marsh, trying to see who would be the first to spot a great blue heron. He could almost see the two of them now.

Those memories used to be clearer. Now they were fading. He closed his eyes as if to conjure up the memory again, to embed it clearly in his

mind, so it wouldn't disappear for good.

He could almost hear Jean's voice inside his head. "Keeping memories is good, but don't let them overshadow everything you're doing now. Don't let old memories prevent you from moving on to make new ones."

Sam nodded. That advice sounded smart. It sounded just like something Jean would say. Maybe he *should* look into being a private detective and—

"Just what do you think you are doing?"

Sam's eyes snapped open, and he spun around to see Bunny Howard standing behind him. Her hands were fisted on her hips, her eyes were narrowed, and she was looking at him as if he were some sort of suspicious character.

Dooley wasn't much of a protector. He ran to the woman and nudged her hand as if wanting to be petted.

Much to Sam's surprise, Bunny complied, even smiling down at the dog.

"Dooley and I love coming to see the deer." He hadn't even thought to mention he used to come with Jean. Last week, that would have been the first thing that popped to mind. Maybe he was making progress. And oddly, he didn't feel guilty about not including his memories of Jean in his explanation. It was as if her words about moving forward without guilt were finally sinking in.

Bunny looked skeptical. "Usually, they're in the fields. You're in the middle of the woods."

That was true, but Sam chose to ignore her and ask his own question. "And what are you doing spying on those two men?" He pointed in the direction of the two men. They were barely visible through the cover of trees.

"You mean your cohorts?"

"What? I don't even know them." *Who says cohorts these days, anyway?*

"Of course you'd say that if you were up to something with them. I happen to know that the dark-haired one is very suspicious."

Sam smiled. She'd just admitted she was spying. "I'm not the one spying on them. Apparently you are. Why?"

Bunny hesitated. Dooley, whose gaze had been flicking back and forth between Sam and Bunny as if he were following the conversation, directed his attention to Bunny.

“Who are you anyway? Didn’t I see you downtown the other day? Were you following Mr. Smith too?” she asked.

Ah, so the man’s name is Mr. Smith. That answered one question, but there were still many to be answered. Sam’s detective instincts told him that Bunny didn’t mean any harm, so he figured making friends was the best approach. Besides, he had to admit he was intrigued by this situation and, perhaps, a bit by her as well.

“I’m Sam Campbell. Just taking my dog for a walk here.” Sam stuck out a tentative hand.

Bunny stared at it while making her decision then put her hand in his. Her hand was warm and soft, and she had a strong grip. “Bunny Howard.”

“Nice to meet you, Bunny,” Sam said as if he hadn’t already known her name. “So, what is it that you think this Mr. Smith has done?”

Dooley had inched over toward Bunny and nudged her hand. She started petting him without hesitation. That was a good sign. Sam imagined Dooley was a good judge of character, and anyone who wouldn’t hesitate to pet a dog couldn’t be half bad.

“What is your interest in that?” Bunny kept petting Dooley as she cast a skeptical eye on Sam.

He supposed it was a fair question. “Nothing really. I just find it curious. I used to be a police detective, so I guess mysteries are in my blood.”

Bunny’s brows quirked up. “A detective? Well, in that case, I guess I could tell you. You see, it all started with the book club.”

DESPITE HER EARLIER SUSPICIONS, Bunny found herself warming to Sam. That was why she told him about how Mr. Smith had been lurking outside the book club meeting, how he’d smashed the cantaloupe on the cliff, and how he had a list of poisons. She omitted the part about Liz taking those out of the trash. She didn’t want to get Liz into trouble.

And it didn’t hurt that Sam was a retired detective. Maybe he’d know some good ways to figure out what Mr. Smith was up to and stop him if he was planning to harm someone. He was also kind of cute, and she really liked Dooley.

“So, when Liz said she overheard him saying he was meeting someone here, I felt like I should come here just to make sure he didn’t have any nefarious plans for his companion. It can be very isolated here. A place where no one can hear you scream.” Bunny looked around. The sun had set, but it was still light enough to see the trails. Even so, she’d better start back to her car soon.

Sam’s brow quirked up. “No one can hear you scream?” He looked a little concerned.

“Oh sorry! I’ve been reading the new mystery book for the book club and might have been focusing on the tagline a bit too much. I guess I can be a bit overly dramatic sometimes.”

Sam did not look surprised to hear that. “Well, it sounds like you do have some valid concerns, and I suppose following this Smith character isn’t doing any harm, but you should be careful.”

“Oh, I will be.” Bunny was a bit disappointed that Sam hadn’t given her any sage detective advice. She was reluctant to end their chance meeting even though the dim light was starting to become worrisome and she wanted to get back to her car before it got too dark. But for some reason, she wanted to keep talking to Sam—probably because he hadn’t given her any good advice yet on how to thwart Mr. Smith.

“This book club, is that the one at Tides?” Sam asked.

“Yes!” Bunny brightened. He’d heard of it. That was good. That meant he wasn’t some random weirdo but a friend... or at least a friend of a friend.

Sam nodded. “Claire at Sandcastles told me about it.”

“Oh, I love Sandcastles. Have you tried her cannoli?”

“Delicious. I love the blond brownies.”

“Me too!”

“Dooley likes the Beach Bones.”

“I’ll bet.”

“So, you like the book club then?” Sam asked.

“Well, we just had our first meeting, but it was fun. Lots of good snacks and good company.” Bunny hesitated a bit, not wanting to sound too full of herself, before adding, “I was the only one who figured out who the killer was early on.”

“Really? How fun.” Sam seemed suitably impressed, as did Dooley.

“But I bet you’d be even better at it, seeing as you were a detective. You should join.”

“I might.” Sam stood. “It’s getting rather late, and I don’t think you’re going to catch Mr. Smith doing anything tonight.”

“Why is that?” Finally, this guy was going to impart some professional detective wisdom!

Sam nodded in the direction of the parking lot.

Bunny squinted and moved a branch aside to peer through the trees. Mr. Smith was walking to his car, his companion to another car. They waved and got in. Some detective she was—she hadn’t even noticed they were leaving!

“Seems like they are both in good condition,” Sam said.

“Oh, I guess that was just a regular meeting.” Bunny felt a little silly.

“No worries. That doesn’t mean that something funny isn’t going on, just not tonight.” Sam turned to her. “Can I walk you to your car?”

“Sure.” They were both headed in the same direction anyway, so why not?

Luckily, the moon was full, and just enough light filtered through the tree branches to make the path easily navigable. They got to Bunny’s car without incident.

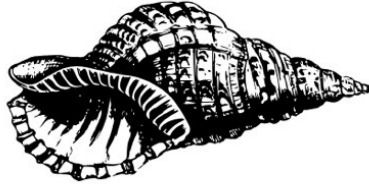
“Well, it was nice meeting you and especially you, Dooley.” Bunny bent down to pet the dog.

“Same here,” Sam said. “So, what will you do next with the Mr. Smith situation?”

“Not sure. In the book I’m reading, the detective does a lot of following, but that hasn’t worked out that good so far.” Bunny looked up at Sam, who was a good foot taller than her. Now that they were in the open without the trees shadowing the moon, she could see he had lustrous silver hair and kind brown eyes. “Do you have any ideas?”

“I might have a few. What do you say we meet tomorrow at Sandcastles to discuss them?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“Is that a truck from the hardware store?” Jane squinted past Andie to see out the dining room window at Tides.

“What? No. Why would the hardware truck be here? That’s the food delivery. Brenda’s stocking up.” Andie grabbed her elbow and turned her toward the hallway. “Maybe you need glasses. Come over here. I want to show you something.”

“I think Brenda might be overly optimistic about our bookings.” Jane let Andie lead her to the back parlor. Why would they need another food delivery if they only had one guest and no new bookings?

One of the things Jane loved about Tides was that it had several common rooms for guests to gather in. It had once been the home of a sea captain and boasted several living rooms, a dining room, and smaller parlors. There was plenty of room for guests to mingle in large groups as well as separate off into smaller more intimate groups.

The back parlor was a favorite because it had tall arched windows that faced the ocean. Right now, the view was stunning since the sun had risen about an hour ago and the sky was golden hued above the cobalt-blue ocean.

Andie plopped down on the couch and pointed at the coffee table, where there was a spread of pamphlets and magazines. “These are from the Antique Inn Conference.”

Jane sat on the sofa on the other side of the coffee table. She picked up one of the pamphlets. It was nothing that exciting—some pictures of past

conferences along with the booths and attendees. Another pamphlet had a list of the vendors who would be attending. "This is great."

Jane glanced back over her shoulder as she heard the truck drive off. "That was quick. Maybe Brenda isn't really that overly optimistic."

"Did you see the magazine?" Andie shoved a glossy magazine in front of her face. It had the name *Antique Inn Times* at the top and a picture of an old brick colonial. "These are other inns like ours. Maybe we should check some of them out."

"Do you think some of the other owners will be there? Might be good to talk to them."

"I hope so." Andie glanced at her watch. "Speaking of talking to people, we better get a move on over to Sandcastles. It's a gorgeous day to walk."

As they headed out the front door, Andie linked her arm through Jane's. "This trip is going to be really fun. I've even picked out a nice restaurant for us and booked us some spa time at the hotel."

Jane smiled at her sister. "That sounds great. Thanks for making all the arrangements."

Sandcastles was only a few blocks away, and they were seated at the table with Claire and Maxi sipping their coffees in no time. Andie had filled the walk with chatter about the hotel she'd booked, the restaurants, and other sights they might take in in Bar Harbor. Jane was getting excited about the trip, even if she was slightly nervous about leaving the inn. Mr. Smith probably wouldn't even notice she was gone, though. She hardly saw him, and any attempts to strike up a conversation were met with polite but very short replies.

"What is this?" Andie pointed to one of the pastries that Claire had loaded onto a plate in the middle of their table.

"Apple cider Danish," Claire said proudly.

"What's the filling?" Maxi pointed to the blob in the middle that looked like mustard.

"Curcumin-spiced marmalade."

Everyone made a face.

"Maybe you should stick to basics," Jane said. "Your stuff is already fantastic."

Claire sighed. "Thanks. But I wanted some new offerings for fall."

"Most of the ones we tested the other day were great. That seemed like plenty," Maxi said.

Jane nodded. “And everyone already loves your pastries. Even the town dogs. Speaking of which, remind me to get some Beach Bones for Cooper before I leave today. I’m dropping him off at Mike’s this afternoon for our trip, and I want him to be stocked up.”

“What’s going on with those?” Maxi asked. “Did you ever find out who was using the name?”

Claire shook her head. “Nope. Maybe the customers were just mistaken, or the person stopped selling them. I’m not going to worry about it, and I’m definitely going to keep selling them. They’ve brought some new customers in and caused some old ones to keep returning.” Claire nodded toward a table in the corner, and Jane looked to see an older man sitting alone, his head bent over the newspaper, pencil in hand.

“Isn’t that Sam Campbell?” Jane asked.

“Yep. He gets the Beach Bones for Dooley. Dooley’s out front,” Claire said, and everyone swiveled their attention to the front door, where the beagle mix was tied to the post, waiting patiently.

“That’s great. I haven’t seen Sam around much the past few years since Jean...” Jane let her voice trail off and looked at the corner again. Sam looked content, and if she wasn’t mistaken, his pale complexion had a bit of color in it now. He was also sitting straighter, less stooped, than when she’d last seen him.

“He’s been coming in a lot more lately. I think Dooley has been good for him. He usually just gets a pastry for himself and the Beach Bones for Dooley and then leaves, but today, I guess he decided to sit for a while. It’s good to see him getting back out.”

The front door opened, and Bunny Howard came in. She looked smart in a yellow sunflower-splotched shirt and jeans, her hair carefully swept into her usual bun. She scanned the café, which was crowded, as usual, her gaze stopping at the corner table.

“Well, will you look at that,” Maxi said. “Looks like maybe Sam came here for more than the pastries and Beach Bones this morning.”

BUNNY HAD WONDERED if Sam would actually show up and was almost surprised when she recognized Dooley tied up outside. She wasn’t

sure why she was surprised. Sam hadn't struck her as the type of person who reneged on plans, but she still found it a bit unusual to make plans with someone she'd met in the woods. Well, she supposed that's what people did these days.

Sam was sitting in the corner. He had a coffee mug to his right and a newspaper laid out in front of him with a school-bus-yellow pencil hovering over it. Was he doing a crossword puzzle? Bunny's thoughts toward him warmed even more. She loved crosswords.

She hurried over to the corner, barely waving at Jane, Claire, and the others as she breezed past their table.

As she approached Sam's table, he looked up and smiled. Then surprisingly, he stood and pulled out a chair for her. *Who does that anymore?* Bunny took this as another indication that Sam was a good guy. He had manners, and maybe it was a bit old-fashioned, but so was she. Sam was a person she could be friends with, someone she could trust.

"Good morning. How are you today?" Sam asked.

"Wonderful." Bunny twisted around in her seat, looking for Hailey, because she really needed coffee.

Hailey was there in an instant, filling up her mug.

"Did you order anything to eat?" Bunny asked Sam.

Sam shook his head. "I was waiting for you. I didn't know if you would want anything."

"Are you kidding? I never turn down an opportunity to eat." Bunny looked up at Hailey. "I'll have a bran muffin."

Sam smiled. "I'll have the same. Oh, and a half dozen Beach Bones for Dooley."

Sam's gaze slid to the window, where he could see the dog tied out front. Bunny could see how his eyes lit up when he saw the dog safe and happy out there.

"Claire's bran muffins are my favorite. I love the raisins, and do you know she puts real shredded carrot in them?" Sam asked.

"I do indeed. They're very good and not too sweet. I saw Dooley outside and gave him a little pat. He's a great dog."

"Thank you very much. He's good company."

Bunny nodded. She imagined he would be. She knew that Liz adored her new dog. *Maybe I should consider getting one myself.* Her gaze fell on

the crossword. She tilted her head sideways to see the clues and what Sam had filled in so far.

“Risky,” Bunny said.

Sam’s left brow shot up. “Pardon?”

“Twelve down.” Bunny pointed to the newspaper. “Full of uncertainty. Five letters.”

“Oh!” Sam penciled it in. “Are you a fan of crosswords?”

“I am. Do them all the time.” Bunny tapped the side of her head. “Keeps the brain active.”

“I agree.” Sam looked up, and their gazes met.

Bunny got the strange feeling that something important was happening. Then Hailey came with their muffins, and they got busy cutting them open and putting butter on. Bunny was amused to discover that Sam used an overabundance of butter, just like she did.

Sam cleared his throat. “Shall we get to the business at hand? Do you have any ideas of how to proceed with our little...” Sam glanced around and then lowered his voice. “Investigation.”

Bunny frowned at the people at the next table. Were they eavesdropping? She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Maybe we should come up with a code word. We don’t need people overhearing us and assuming we’re stalking someone or anything.”

“Good idea. It could be risky”—Sam tapped the word on his crossword—“if people overhear us. In the police force, sometimes we’d make a code name for the suspect. What if we refer to our suspect as ‘the dogcatcher?’ People will think we are simply referring to the actual dogcatcher.”

Bunny wasn’t sure if Lobster Bay even had a dogcatcher, but she supposed it would work. No one would be interested in conversations about a dogcatcher. “Sounds good.”

“So, what do you think our next steps should be?” Sam asked.

Bunny sat up a bit straighter. With his investigating experience, Sam was sure to have ideas on what to do next, but Bunny was proud he was asking her opinion.

“Well, I’ve gotten most of my ideas so far from the mystery book we’re reading for the book club. This month’s book is *Death on the Cliffs*, which coincidentally involves a mysterious death in a seaside town just like this. Anyway, the protagonist in this book gets most of the clues by following the suspect... er, dogcatcher... around, interviewing people about

suspicious events. And she also breaks into his place. I'm not sure we should do that, though." Bunny pinched off the top of her muffin. "But you have real-life experience, so your ideas are probably much better."

"Not at all," Sam said. "I think you've got a great start. That's basically how I would do it. But I think we've already followed Mr., er... the dogcatcher... and we don't want to overdo it. Otherwise, he might notice."

Bunny pressed her lips together. "True. So, what do you suggest we do next?"

"Well, on the job, I used to do a lot of research into the background of someone we were looking into. I don't have access to the databases anymore. I probably wouldn't even know how to use them now." Sam laughed, and Bunny joined him.

Technology certainly had changed a lot, as Bunny had learned when she was shown a new program for digital painting a few weeks ago. The program was neat, but she wondered if she'd have the patience to use it. She was sure she could figure it out if she devoted the time to it, but why bother? She much preferred using paintbrushes and real paper.

Sam continued, "I think we can get some information just using the internet. Social media is so revealing these days."

"That's a great idea." Bunny wondered where they would do this. Of course, she had a computer at home, but it didn't seem right to invite Sam over. He seemed nice enough, but she barely knew the man. What if he was really some weirdo who gained access to ladies' homes by pretending to work with them? She'd read a book where that happened. "We could meet at the library and use the computers there."

"That's a wonderful idea," Sam said. "I suppose maybe we should exchange phone numbers just in case one of us can't make it."

"Yes, that would be a good idea. Plus, we can message each other if one of us gets an idea or finds a clue." Bunny pulled out her phone, and they exchanged numbers. "I prefer texting. How about you?"

"Me too. I'm not much of a phone talker."

"Well, this sounds like a good plan." Bunny looked regretfully at the empty muffin cup on her plate. She'd already had two cups of coffee and didn't want a third, yet she felt reluctant to leave. She did have that painting to work on at home, though.

"What time would you like to meet at the library?" Sam was looking at his empty plate too.

“How about three thirty?” That would give Bunny time to get her thoughts together, figure out what to search, and finish her painting.

“Sounds good.”

Hailey brought the bill, and Sam insisted on paying.

“I wouldn’t dream of letting you pay. You’re helping me out,” Bunny said.

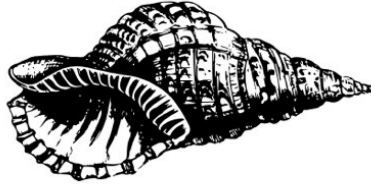
“Not at all. I’m looking forward to doing something useful, so, in a way, you’re helping *me* out.” Sam pulled out his wallet.

“Oh well, since you put it that way. I’ll get the next one, then,” Bunny said.

“That sounds like a deal.”

Bunny left Sandcastles with Sam’s words ringing in her head. He was glad to be doing something useful. That was exactly how she felt about it. And if they stopped Mr. Smith from doing something horrible, that would be an added bonus.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“Well, this has been a busy day, hasn’t it?” Sam said to Dooley later that day. After his meeting with Bunny at Sandcastles, he’d taken Dooley for a walk on the beach. Now they were back home in the dining room, where Sam was clearing some of the knickknacks off the tables.

He glanced over at Dooley as if looking for an answer, but the dog was staring into the kitchen, his gaze riveted on the counter, where Sam had put the bakery bag of Beach Bones.

“Oh, I see, you have other things on your mind.” Sam took one of the bones out of the bag, broke it in half, tossed it to Dooley, then returned to the dining room.

“I think these will be much better in the curio cabinet.” Sam wasn’t much of a knickknack guy. Jean had collected all of these little glass figures, frogs, fish, dogs—you name it. She’d placed them on various tables and windowsills around the house. She hadn’t overdone it so it didn’t look cluttered, and the figures were cute, but Sam thought it was time for a cleaner look.

He didn’t want to toss them away—that would be like tossing Jean away—so he moved them to the curio cabinet, arranging them carefully in a way he thought she would like. When he was done, he stood back and smiled. At first, he’d thought doing this might make him sad, but as it turned out, it only did a teeny bit. Mostly, it felt right. This way, the main parts of the house would be a little less about her and a little more about him.

“It’s about time I make the place my own, don’t you think?”

“Woof.” Dooley seemed to agree. Or maybe he just wanted another bone.

“You don’t think I should have invited her over here, do you?”

Dooley tilted his head as if considering the question.

Sam hadn’t really known what to suggest to Bunny when it came to continuing their investigation, but it seemed a bit awkward to invite her to his house. Was he being too old-fashioned? It wasn’t like they were going on dates; they were investigating a suspect.

But was Mr. Smith really a suspect? His detective instincts told him probably not, but still, there was no harm in what they were doing. And Bunny had said something that struck home... She’d said it made her feel useful. And that was exactly how it made Sam feel. Not to mention that he enjoyed Bunny’s company. And she did crosswords! Since Jean had died, it seemed most of their friends had drifted away. About time Sam got some new ones.

Sam glanced at the clock. “Sorry, you can’t come to the library.”

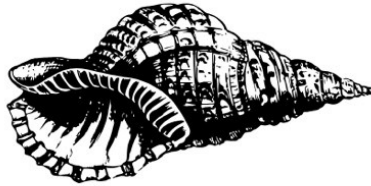
Dooley padded over to the plush dog bed Sam had bought for him and made a show of lying down as if trying to tell Sam he preferred to take a nap anyway.

Sam grabbed the book of extra-difficult crossword puzzles from the pile on the end table in the den. *Let’s see Bunny try to solve these*, he thought.

Out in the garage, he glanced at the Corvette still sitting under the tarp. It had been there a long time. Maybe he should at least wash and wax it. He reached out then pulled his hand back. *No, better to leave it covered*.

His convertible days were over. Besides, he was much more interested in this new investigation than in driving around in a flashy car anyway.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“Don’t forget to bring a jacket. It’s going to be colder in Bar Harbor,” Andie instructed into the phone as if Jane didn’t know that Bar Harbor was much farther north and, thus, colder.

“Yes, Mom.” Jane switched the phone to her other hand as she leaned into the car to grab the bag of things for Cooper that she was bringing to Mike’s. He already had his own basket of toys, dog beds, treats, and food at Mike’s, but for some reason, Jane felt like she should bring more. It might have been the slight guilt at leaving him for the weekend trip with Andie. She hadn’t left Lobster Bay since meeting Mike and Cooper.

“Very funny.”

Jane could hear the bell in Andie’s shop tinkle, announcing a customer, then Andie said, “Okay, catch you later. I’ll pick you up bright and early tomorrow.”

Jane hung up and tugged Cooper to Mike’s front door. Mike lived in an upscale townhouse with crisp white vinyl siding and gray shutters. It had a nice backyard for Cooper and great landscaping throughout the development.

“You’re going to miss me, right?” She glanced down at Cooper. His silky blond tail wagged, and his soulful brown eyes gazed up at her. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

She knocked on the door. She had a key but still felt a little funny just walking in. When Mike didn’t answer after a few seconds, she rang the bell.

Footsteps echoed, and then he answered. His hair was a bit messy, and... were those wood chips in it?

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi. Were you in the basement?” Jane peered into his place, expecting to see signs of a home renovation project. Was he changing things in preparation to ask her to move in?

“What? No. I mean, yes. The breaker went.” He stood back and opened the door for them to enter then crouched down to pet Cooper, who wriggled, basking in the attention.

“The breaker? This place is brand-new. You wouldn’t think there would be electrical issues.” Jane felt like Mike was acting a bit suspicious, but why? Did this have something to do with her ring suspicions? What would a ring have to do with electricity?

“It’s fine. I was just doing too much. Air fryer was on, plus I was fixing a table leg for Judy and was using tools.” Mike motioned toward the basement.

Judy was Mike’s neighbor, a nice older woman he often did little maintenance tasks for.

Maybe Jane was reading too much into this. With the book club mysteries, Mr. Smith, and her ring suspicions, she really was probably overreacting. A weekend away with Andie would help to clear her head.

She relaxed and smiled as Mike took the bag of Cooper’s gear and gave her a kiss. Cooper had made his way to his toy basket and was snuffling inside for a toy.

“Are you excited about your trip?” Mike asked.

“Yeah. A bit.” She was excited, but also a bit apprehensive. “I’m going to miss you.”

Mike smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. “Miss you too. But you know they say absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

Cooper selected a stuffed octopus from the basket and dropped it at Jane’s feet.

“Looks like someone wants to play,” Mike said.

“Woof!”

“Why don’t you take Coop outside, and I’ll make us a few cups of coffee, and we can toss the toy around in the backyard.”

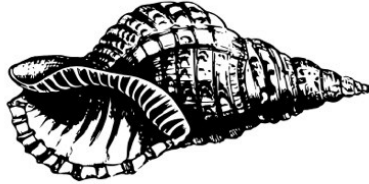
Mike had recently fenced in the yard, and they’d spent several weekend mornings and evenings outside with Cooper.

“Sounds good.” Jane picked up the toy. Cooper knew the drill and rushed to the back door before she’d even straightened up. It was a familiar

routine. Perfectly normal.

“Girl, you gotta get a grip on your overactive imagination,” Jane muttered to herself as she tossed the octopus toward the back corner of the yard.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The Lobster Bay Library was housed in a big stone building with a giant oak door that had side iron hinges and looked like it belonged on an old castle. Bunny thought the door was so interesting that she'd even made a painting of it once.

A cement path lined with colorful flowers led to the door. The pink and white impatiens were still blooming even this late in the season, and there were gorgeous pots of mums in bright yellow and deep purple.

Inside, the space was cloaked in hushed silence. The walls were painted the palest shade of blue, and the royal-blue carpeting muted Bunny's footsteps.

Evelyn Carson was seated behind the round desk opposite the door. She looked up over her red-framed half-moon glasses and smiled at Bunny. Evelyn had been town librarian for decades and always had a kind word for everyone who entered. Unless people talked too loudly, then she would shush them sternly.

"Pssst..." Bunny turned toward the sound to see Sam sitting in one of the wingback chairs over by the fireplace.

She waved, and he stood and walked over to her.

"I hope you haven't been waiting long." Bunny hated being late, so she had shown up five minutes early. Sam must not like being late either, she surmised. Another thing they had in common.

"Not at all. I was returning a book anyway and figured I'd catch you when you came in and we could walk down to the computer area together."

The computers were kept in the back of the library, in a small room with utilitarian wooden desks and uncomfortable plastic chairs. They were older models, and back when no one had home computers, the room was used often. But these days, everyone had a laptop, and Bunny had actually brought hers. The room was a bit dusty and seemed like no one had been in it for a while, but it was a good place to meet. They'd also be able to discuss the investigation in privacy without risking Evelyn's shushing or anyone spying on their activities.

Bunny put her laptop on one of the desks, and they pulled two chairs over.

"I guess we can start by searching Google?" Bunny raised a brow at Sam.

"Yep. Good a place as any." Now that Sam was sitting closer to her than at Sandcastles, she noticed the crinkles around his eyes from laughing and also that his eyes were blue. He smelled good, too, clean like soap.

"Oh!" Sam pulled something out of his jacket pocket. "Almost forgot. I brought you this crossword puzzle book. These are quite difficult."

Bunny slid her reading glasses on, feeling almost a bit self-conscious because she noticed Sam didn't have reading glasses. Maybe his eyes were still good. Well, that was okay. She was happy for him.

"I don't think I've tried these. Thanks." She put the book in her bag, confident she could solve the puzzles in record time.

As her fingers flew over the keyboard, she noticed the flecks of blue and brown paint. Sam did too.

"Were you painting your house?" he asked.

Bunny laughed. "No, I'm an artist. I was painting a vignette of shells before I came here."

"An artist? Wow, that's impressive. Do you have any pictures of your paintings?"

Bunny felt a flush of pride. Sam seemed genuinely interested. "Well, I suppose I have a few on my phone."

She practically knocked her bag off the table, getting to her phone. She opened one of her photo albums and scrolled through a few pictures for Sam. Not too many, though—she didn't want to be one of those boring people who showed dozens of pictures when a few would suffice.

"Is that a moon snail shell? You captured the colors so perfectly. A lot of people think those shells are too plain to be admired, but they are

actually quite lovely,” Sam said.

“I totally agree.” Bunny put away her phone.

“Thanks for showing me those. You’re very talented.”

“Oh, well...” Bunny stammered, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “Thank you. I guess we should get started. Do you want to drive?” Bunny slid the laptop in front of Sam.

“Sure. What’s our, er... dogcatcher’s... first name?”

“Reginald.” Liz had looked that up in the guest book at Bunny’s request.

“Oh, good. That’s a bit unusual, so that will make it easier. I was afraid you were going to say something like Bob. There must be a dozen Bob Smith’s everywhere.”

They spent the next hour googling, searching Facebook, and even looking into Instagram. But they came up with absolutely nothing for a Reginald Smith who lived in Greenville, New Hampshire.

“Well, I guess we’ve exhausted all our avenues.” Sam stared at the computer thoughtfully. “Are you sure Liz got the town right?”

“I can ask her.” Bonnie closed the laptop. “So, what’s the next step?”

“If I was still on the job, we’d interview people close to the subject. But we don’t really know anyone close to Mr. Smith.”

“Just Jane and Liz, but they don’t really *know* him.” Bunny shoved the laptop into her bag. “I’ve already asked Liz about him, and from what she says, he’s a bit mysterious. Keeps to himself.”

They sat there for a few seconds, both thinking. Bunny was reluctant to get up and leave, and she wondered if Sam felt the same.

“Perhaps we should arrange a time to meet again after we’ve thought about this. I can fill you in on what Liz says after I talk to her.” Bunny tapped the side pocket of her tote, where she’d put the crossword puzzles. “And I can fill you in on how easy these were.”

Sam laughed. “Good idea. Shall we walk out together?”

Near the front of the room was a kiosk with the book display. One of them was *Death on the Cliffs*, the next book club book. “Oh, this is the next book we’re reading for the book club.”

Sam picked up the book and leafed through a few pages. “Claire asked if I wanted to join the club. I just might.”

“You should! It’s a lot of fun. I like to play along with the detective, kind of like solving a real crime. There are lots of ideas on how to catch

killers. Like in the last book, the killer invited his victim to a somewhat-public place but at a time when he knew they would be alone.” Bunny looked thoughtful. “That’s why I thought the dogcatcher was up to something when he brought that other person to the Rachel Carson Refuge.”

“That would be a good place to do someone in. Lots of places to hide a body in there. Of course, the cliffs on a remote beach or a creepy old inn on the water would be a good place too.”

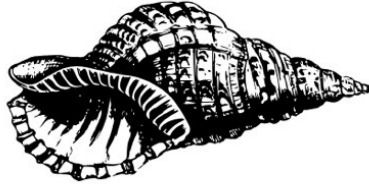
Bunny laughed. “The beaches here are hardly remote. Always someone walking along the Marginal Way, and Mr.... er... the dogcatcher would hardly be alone at Tides.”

“Right. Of course. He must be planning something else... *if* he is planning anything.”

Bunny sensed Sam was doubtful about Mr. Smith. Did he think she was being foolish? If so, he was being a good sport about going along with her. If nothing else, it was kind of fun and gave them something to do.

Her spirits picked up even further when he tucked the book under his arm and headed toward the checkout desk. Maybe he would join the book club. She wouldn’t mind having an excuse to see Sam on a regular basis. It was always nice to have a friend with similar interests.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Claire balanced one of her specialty sandcastle-shaped cakes in her left hand while she opened the door to the display case with her right. She slid the cake carefully onto the middle shelf and stood back to admire her handiwork. The cake was one of her biggest yet, with two turrets and a moat. She'd covered the structure in sand-colored sugar, and the moat was blue frosting.

She closed the door and turned in time to see Sam Campbell tying Dooley up to the post outside. Sam patted the dog's head then stood and walked into the store. His back was straight, his head high. No more shuffling, and was that a smile on his face?

"Hi, Sam. Back for more Beach Bones?" Claire hurried behind the counter.

"Yes, please. Dooley loves them. And also a bran muffin for myself."

"How are you today?"

"Just fine. It's a warm afternoon, and I'm taking Dooley for a walk on the beach. He loves it, and it's been far too long that I haven't been doing that."

Claire simply looked up and smiled. She couldn't have agreed more. She noticed the book tucked under his arm. "That's the book for the book club. Are you thinking about joining?"

"Yes, I was at the library with Bunny Howard earlier, and she mentioned this was the book. I remember you had invited me, and I thought maybe it's time for me to get out a bit more."

“Bunny, huh?” Claire’s gaze slid to the table where she’d seen Sam and Bunny earlier. Apparently, they’d hit it off. That was good. “She’s a character, isn’t she?”

Sam laughed. “She sure is.”

“We’d love to have you at the book club. It meets the last Thursday of every month at Tides. Just show up around seven if you want to come.”

“I think I will. Thank you.” Sam paid for the bag, and Claire noticed a spring in his step as he left.

“I bought some of these Beach Bones in a cute little shop over in Kennebunkport!” Two women who had come in while Claire had been waiting on Sam were standing in front of the case. “I’m glad to see she’s branching out and selling them in your shop too.”

Claire frowned. “What do you mean? I make these dog treats here.”

The woman squinted and leaned closer to the case. “Really? I bought dog bones just like this in a cute little gift store over in Kennebunkport, and I swear they were called Beach Bones.” The woman opened her large tote bag and rummaged around. She pulled out the little bag tied up in a blue ribbon. It had a card on it and two gourmet dog bones that looked just like Claire’s inside. She held it out toward Claire. “Yep. See? Beach Bones.”

The woman with her regarded Claire with suspicion. “I was there too. Didn’t that other woman say someone was copying her?”

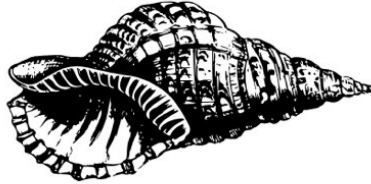
“What?” Claire was offended. “I’m not copying her! I made them first.” Or did she? She might have made them first, but she hadn’t named them until earlier that week. Was it possible she’d inadvertently used the same name as someone else?

The woman looked skeptical. “Well, I don’t think I’m going to buy yours. I saw this lady’s first, so I don’t know if she is the original or you are.”

“Can I see that card?” Claire hoped she’d find the person’s name on the back. Maybe she could contact them and settle the whole thing.

The woman handed her the package. Sure enough, a name was on the back of the card. Claire did a double take when she saw who it was. “Oh no. Anyone but her.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



“I don’t know why we had to leave so early,” Jane said to Andie as they drove up the turnpike. It was just before eight in the morning, and she’d barely taken a sip of her coffee. “We can’t even check in until three.”

“I figured we could take the scenic route and stop at a few places. There’s a cute lobster shack with a great view and outstanding clam chowder on the way.” Andie sounded annoyingly peppy. She must really be looking forward to this conference. “The leaves are starting to change farther north. Should be pretty.”

“I suppose that sounds nice.” Jane took another sip of coffee, her thoughts returning to when she’d dropped Cooper off at Mike’s. He’d acted mostly normal, except for that strange part about him not being in the basement. Was he doing something down there? But if so, what did that have to do with an engagement ring? Or was her hunch about that off base? Jane decided it was best to not say anything to anyone. It would be really embarrassing if she assumed he was up to that and it turned out he wasn’t.

“Are you worried about leaving Tides? It will be fine,” Andie said.

“It just seems weird to leave a guest there alone.”

“He has a key, and Brenda will be there tomorrow morning to feed him. He seemed fine with it.”

“But what if someone walks in and wants to book a room?”

“Seriously? No one has done that in weeks. It’s not summertime, and anyway, we left that big sign on the check-in desk with our phone numbers, and Liz said if we get someone last minute, she’ll run over and get them set

up.” Andie glanced at her. “Are you worried that Mr. Smith might have a party and wreck the place like an unsupervised teenager?”

Jane laughed. Andie had a point—she was probably worrying too much. “No, but he did ask if he could have that friend over.”

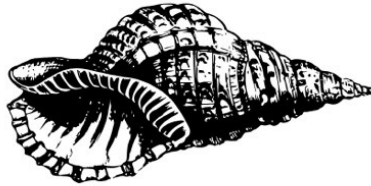
“Really? That’s kind of funny. Of course anyone can come over.”

Jane settled back in her seat and watched the passing scenery. Andie seemed quite at ease with leaving Tides unattended, but still, she sensed a bit of tension thrumming along underneath her sister’s calm demeanor.

Maybe it was just excitement over the conference, or maybe it was something else. Visions of Andie and Mike seemingly doing something behind her back and her mother’s mention of the dimensions and size bubbled up.

It was probably all her imagination. Reading the mystery books for the book club had certainly renewed her interest in mysteries. But if there really was something going on, this trip with her sister might be the perfect time to try to wheedle some information out of her.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Bunny called Liz as soon as she got home from her library meeting with Sam. She was eager to ask Liz if she could have been wrong about Mr. Smith's town of residence, but that wasn't going to happen right away since Liz was busy. They made plans for the following afternoon, and Bunny occupied her time with the crossword puzzles Sam had given her.

Sam was right—they were challenging. Still, Bunny had made good progress that night, and when she awoke in the morning, she finished three of them while having a cup of coffee. They weren't *that* hard.

She couldn't wait to tell Sam, so she messaged him: *Crosswords are a piece of cake! Completed the first three already.*

After a few minutes, she got a reply: *Good work. Try the one on page 98. That's a doozy.*

Sam was right. It *was* a doozy. After working on it for a few hours, Bunny decided to get to her painting. She'd finished the one with the shells and had started a seascape with waves crashing on the rocks.

She mixed up some shades of brown using burnt umber, yellow ochre, and white and started painting the rocks using the side of her palette knife to replicate the sharp edges.

Over the next few hours, she only took a few breaks to check her phone to see if Sam had messaged her again. Not that she was waiting around for him to strike up a conversation or invite her out or anything. They already had plans to meet again tomorrow after she talked to Liz, but she couldn't resist checking in, just in case he'd thought up something new they should try. Apparently, he hadn't, since no further texts came.

She was setting out some molasses cookies and getting the kettle ready for tea when she heard Liz tapping on the slider door.

Bunny rushed over to open it. "Come on in. I baked some cookies."

"Oh, you didn't have to do that!" Liz stopped at the painting. "How lovely!"

Bunny felt a flush of pride. "Thanks!"

Liz stepped into the kitchen, her eyes widening at the plate of cookies. She sniffed the air. "Bunny, these smell amazing!"

Bunny inhaled the aroma of sugar, spice, and molasses as she turned up the burner under the kettle. "I love baking—it's so therapeutic for me."

Liz took a seat at the table and reached for a cookie. "Don't let Claire find out. She might get worried."

Bunny laughed as she fixed the tea. "I doubt that, but it's still fun. So, what have you been up to?"

Liz smiled. "I was busy mailing some things I found in the basement to my sister and brother."

Liz was still cleaning stuff out from her childhood home and often sent some of the sentimental discoveries to her siblings.

"That's nice. I'm sure they appreciate that." Bunny sat at the table and dipped her tea bag into the mug of steaming water. Normally, she loved this neighborly chitchat, but today, she wanted to get right to the point.

"And I had another little errand." Liz took her time adding sugar and cream to the tea. Bunny was almost ready to prompt her when she said, "I stopped by the animal rescue to look at the dogs."

"You did! Oh, that's so exciting. Did you get one?"

Liz shook her head. "No, not yet."

"How come?"

Liz sighed. "I want to adopt the perfect dog, and there are so many to choose from! I've been going every day to visit them, and I just can't make up my mind."

"I know exactly how you feel. I've thought about getting one, too, but I'm not sure exactly what kind I should get." Bunny thought about Dooley. She wanted a dog just like Dooley. He was quiet, obedient, and lovable.

"So anyway, enough about me. What's going on with you? Did I hear you had a date?"

Bunny snorted. "A date? Hardly. I've been working on finding out more about Mr. Smith with a detective friend, Sam."

“Oh? Wow, I guess you really suspect him of something. If a detective is involved, I’m worried he might be dangerous.”

“Oh no, dear, it’s not like that.” Bunny didn’t want Liz to worry. “Sam is a retired detective. We’re not sure, just looking into him. Which reminds me—I have a question.”

“Oh?” Liz raised a brow and sipped her tea.

“Are you quite sure that Mr. Smith is from Greenville, New Hampshire?”

Liz pressed her lips together and thought for a few seconds. “I think so. I mean, that’s what he put on the register.”

“Did you ask him or hear him mention the town?”

“No. You don’t think he’d be lying, do you?”

Bunny shrugged. “I don’t know why he would.”

“Huh, well, he sure is an odd duck. Speaking of Tides, I hope Andie and Jane are having a good time.”

“What do you mean? Is something going on at Tides?”

“Oh no. Well, yes, but what I meant was that Andie and Jane are out of town at a convention and doing some sister bonding.”

“Oh, that’s nice. So do you have to go over and stay at Tides?”

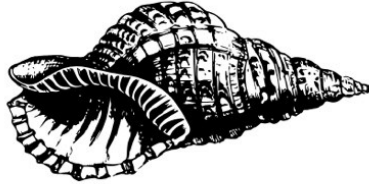
“Nope. Jane said there’s a key for Mr. Smith, and he wasn’t planning on going out anyway.”

“Wait. You mean Mr. Smith is at Tides all alone tonight?”

“Oh no, he isn’t all alone. He asked Jane and Andie if he could have someone over to visit.”

Bunny’s heart lurched. She reached for her phone to message Sam. She didn’t say anything to Liz because she didn’t want to worry her, but she had a terrible feeling that they needed to get over there right away before something bad happened!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“I think this will make a perfect den, don’t you?” Sam asked Dooley. They were standing in one of the extra bedrooms. Jean had used it for a sewing room, but Sam didn’t sew, and it was a waste to leave it set up.

He’d been happy to give the sewing machine to one of his neighbors and even happier to actually connect with the neighbor. Turns out the people who had moved in across the street were a nice younger couple with not a lot of money. She loved sewing outfits for their twin girls and really appreciated the sewing machine.

Thoughts about that interaction and the texts from Bunny made Sam smile. He’d figured Bunny would be able to finish the crosswords easily. She’d probably started from the beginning. Those were fairly straightforward, but what she didn’t know was that they got more difficult toward the back. He couldn’t wait to see how she did with the one on page ninety-eight.

He stood back to look at the room. He’d replaced the sewing table beside the window with a cozy armchair that was perfect for reading. A small desk where he could use his computer sat in the corner. It was perfect.

“Now time to have a rest.” Dooley glanced expectantly toward the kitchen.

“I guess you want a treat before resting?”

“Woof!” Dooley raced to the kitchen.

Sam got a biscuit out of the tin and made a coffee. As he was stirring in creamer, he spotted the book club book on the kitchen table. He’d started it

earlier in the day, and it was quite intriguing. Now would be a perfect time to relax in the den and read a few more chapters.

Dooley followed him into the den and got settled in the plush dog bed Sam had put in the corner.

“This fellow really is quite clever.” Of course there were a few things in the book that weren’t realistic, but Sam expected that. Making all the police red tape and rules true to life would make for a pretty boring novel. But he had to admit the author knew his stuff.

Sam looked at the author bio on the back of the book. The author picture was interesting. It was mostly in shadow, which made it difficult to make out the guy’s face. It definitely set the mood, though, with the author dressed in a hat and trench coat like an old-time detective.

“I wonder what other books this guy has written.” Sam put the book on the side table and sat at the computer to google the author’s name.

“Huh, Pat Jamison... Looks like he has quite a few books.” Sam clicked on one of the links, and a listing of books and a better picture of the author came up. Sam squinted at the picture.

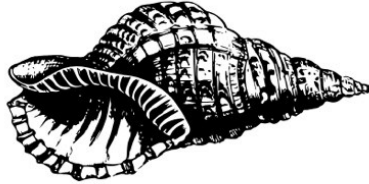
“Well, I’ll be...” He reached for his phone then realized he’d left it in the kitchen while rearranging the den. “I need to message Bunny right away!”

But when he picked up his phone, he saw Bunny had messaged him. His heart dropped.

Meet me at Tides right away. The dogcatcher might be ready to make a move!

The text had been sent thirty minutes ago. Sam grabbed his keys and rushed to the garage. “Hold down the fort, Dooley. I have to stop Bunny from doing something drastic!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“This lobster bisque is amazing.” Andie gestured toward the bowl of creamy pink soup in front of her. “Want to try some?”

They were seated at a window table at an upscale waterfront restaurant. The view of the harbor at night was mesmerizing, from the boats swaying on the water to the lights of the buildings behind them to the reflection of the moon.

The table was covered in a crisp white tablecloth, and the wineglasses sparkled with reflections from the electric candles on the table.

“Thanks.” Jane dipped her spoon in and tasted it—rich and creamy, just like it looked. “Delish.”

Andie sighed and took a sip of her wine. “This is a great restaurant. I’m glad we got to spend the weekend together. I thought the conference was really good. Did you?”

“I did. I’m glad we came.” The Antique Inns Conference had been a lot more informative than Jane had anticipated. She’d connected with several antique inn owners from various parts of New England and gotten some ideas for promotions they could do to attract more visitors.

“Me too.” Andie dug into her lobster casserole.

Jane studied her sister. Was it her imagination, or had Andie been evasive when she mentioned Mike earlier that day? If Jane wanted to dig into what was really going on, this would be the perfect time, especially if Andie had another glass of wine.

“So, I was wondering, have you noticed that Mike is acting a little strange?”

Andie looked up sharply. "Strange? No. What do you mean?"

Jane shrugged. "I don't know. He just seems a little off lately."

Andie frowned and took another sip of wine. "You think so? I hadn't noticed."

"Really?" Jane set down her spoon. "I thought maybe you had. I saw you talking to him the other morning at Tides."

"I talk to him a lot, but I didn't notice anything. He still seems just as smitten with you as ever." Andie shrugged and took another bite of her casserole.

Jane watched her sister for a moment longer then picked up her fork and picked some stuffing out of her baked stuffed shrimp. Maybe she was just being paranoid. "It's not that I think he's losing interest in me. Quite the opposite, actually."

"The opposite? What do you think is going on with him?" Andie asked casually. Almost *too* casually.

Jane paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. "Well, I know it might be presumptuous, but I was visiting Mom the other day, and she said Mike had been there asking about dimensions, but I think she really meant size." Jane pointed to her ring finger.

Andie's eyes widened. "You mean you think he might be looking for a ring for you?"

"Maybe. I don't know." Jane was starting to regret bringing this up, especially since Andie had a funny smirk on her face. She'd figured that maybe Mike had asked for Andie's advice, but now she wasn't so sure.

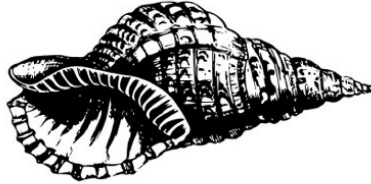
"Well, I wouldn't put much weight on what Mom says. She does have dementia." Andie sipped more wine, sat back in her seat, and studied Jane. "But if he was looking for a ring, would you be happy or disappointed?"

Jane wasn't sure which she would be. "Nervous."

Now Andie was looking at her with a knowing expression that spoke volumes. Mike *was* shopping for a ring. Jane could tell just from the look on Andie's face. She really didn't know how she felt. On the one hand, she didn't want to lose him, but on the other, she just wasn't ready.

A sense of doom came over her as she wondered when Mike was going to spring this on her, and when he did... what was she going to say?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Bunny approached Tides from the beach like she had when she'd attended the book club. The salty air whipped at her face, and she pulled her hood up to protect herself from the cold. It was getting dark, and she felt a tiny bit uncomfortable as she kept her eye on the dunes, looking for the three-story Victorian house.

"There's nothing to be worried about out here," she reassured herself. The killer was *inside* Tides, so the beach was safe. But even so, she was a little uneasy as she continued on. She felt Mr. Smith wouldn't expect someone to approach from the beach, and she wanted the element of surprise.

The lights on the main floor of Tides were on, and Bunny crept closer to the house, keeping to the shadows lest Mr. Smith be peeking out. She could hear what sounded like sawing somewhere on the back side of the house. Odd, because she assumed Mr. Smith would be alone with his victim. Did he have accomplices? No, maybe that was just the television. She cocked her ear to listen, but the sound of the waves crashing on the beach behind her drowned out almost everything.

Skirting along the edge of the building, she tiptoed up onto the porch, crossing her fingers that the boards wouldn't creak. She peeked out from the shadows just as someone passed the window. It was Mr. Smith! She jumped back. It wouldn't do to let him see her now.

He had someone with him. Was it the same man he'd met at the Rachel Carson Refuge? Bunny couldn't be sure. It didn't matter, though. Whoever it was, Bunny had to save them.

They headed into the side parlor, and Bunny inched over to the French doors. She reached out to touch the handle and tried turning it ever so slowly. It was locked!

Mr. Smith passed the doorway. He had something in his hand, and it looked like a knife!

Bunny's heart lurched. She had to get inside. She ran to the front, hoping the foyer door was open. It was!

She rushed inside, barely aware there was a lot of noise coming from the back of the house. She was more interested in the side where Mr. Smith was. She hurried through the dining room, down the hall, and through the door to the side parlor.

"Stop right there!" she yelled, then she hesitated in the doorway, confused about what to do next.

She'd been ready to tackle Mr. Smith and stop him from stabbing his victim, but she hadn't been expecting to see what was in front of her.

Mr. Smith and his victim were seated facing each other, a pile of books, two glasses of wine, and a tray of cheese and crackers sitting between them. They were both looking at her with startled expressions. Mr. Smith did have a knife, but he was using it to cut a slice of cheese.

She heard someone coming up behind her. "Yes! Stop!"

She whirled around.

Sam? What was he doing here, and why was he holding up the book club book?

Before she could say anything, he grabbed her elbow and escorted her into the room.

"Mr. Jamison, we were wondering if you'd be so kind as to sign our book."

Mr. Smith's concerned look morphed into a smile. "Very astute. I see you figured out who I am. I'd be delighted to sign it."

BUNNY PLAYED along with the whole thing. Apparently, Sam had researched the author of the book club book and recognized him as Mr. Smith. Bunny felt like she'd made a rookie mistake in not doing that herself.

The man with him was Steven Thompson, his agent—not a victim, as Bunny had suspected. Mr. Jamison had invited his agent to Tides to discuss a release date for his next book and sign some copies of the last one.

“I decided to come here in the off-season so I could have peace and quiet. I need to immerse myself when I’m writing,” Mr. Jamison said.

“That makes perfect sense.” Bunny nibbled on a cracker. “But I thought I saw you on the cliffs at the beach with a cantaloupe.”

“I thought the beach was empty when I did that. It was research for the book. Now I can’t tell you exactly what. Don’t want to give away any spoilers.” He winked at Bunny.

“And your trip to the hardware store?” Bunny asked. She didn’t dare mention the list of poisons that Liz had found in his trash, but it made sense that that was probably research as well.

“Yep. More research.”

“But why register here as Mr. Smith?” Bunny persisted.

Jamison grimaced. “I know it sounds pretentious, but I need peace and quiet to write. Whenever I go anywhere and use my real name, word gets out, and next thing you know, people are showing up in the lobby and following me around.”

“That must be terrible.” Bunny took another cracker. She felt a little silly knowing the truth. She was glad that Mr. Smith, er... Jamison wasn’t a killer, but it was a bit embarrassing that she’d just spent the last week following him around thinking nefarious thoughts. Luckily, he hadn’t noticed.

“To tell you the truth, it was a bit of a surprise to discover that they were having a book club meeting about my book here. I couldn’t help but lurk in the hallway and try to overhear what you all thought.” Jamison looked apologetic as he signed Sam’s book with a flourish and handed it over.

“We all loved it,” Bunny said truthfully.

“It’s much appreciated.” Jamison smiled.

Bunny slid a piece of cheese onto another cracker, her attention drifting to the sounds of banging at the back of the house. *What in the world is going on back there?*

“Bunny! What are you doing here?” Liz had appeared in the doorway.

“Oh, umm... just getting a book signed.”

Liz frowned at the books on the table then at Mr. Smith. She seemed confused, probably because she didn’t know Mr. Smith’s true identity.

“Oh.”

“What are you doing here, and what is going on out back?” Bunny asked.

“It’s a surprise for Jane. Do you want to see?”

“Of course.” Bunny grabbed another cracker and stood, motioning for Sam to join her.

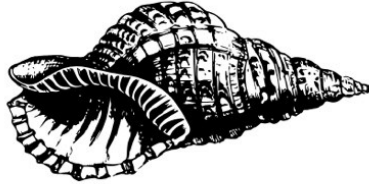
“Okay, but I’ll have to swear you to secrecy. Mike is surprising Jane when she gets back from her trip tomorrow.”

Bunny promised not to tell and followed Liz down the hallway toward the back room where they’d had the book club meeting. She hung back a little bit and whispered to Sam, “Thanks for saving my butt.”

He smiled. “No problem. That’s what friends are for.”

Bunny nodded. “Oh, by the way, the puzzle on page ninety-eight was a piece of cake.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Andie was chattering away as she drove the backroads back to Tides. If Jane didn't know better, she'd say her sister was nervous, but why would she be?

"Are you that excited to be home? You're rambling on like you used to do when we were kids and Mom and Dad took us for a car ride." Jane thought for a second. "Oh wait, that was because you had to pee."

"Ha ha. Very funny. I don't have to pee, and it's good to be home." Andie pulled into the driveway in front of Tides.

"Okay, well then you can just drop me off if you're in a hurry to get to your place." She was probably excited because she was meeting Shane.

"Oh no! I want to come in. I'm starving, and I have nothing at home. Brenda probably has something delicious in the kitchen."

"Oh, okay."

Andie parked, and Jane pulled her suitcase out of the back while her sister ran in ahead. She must really be hungry, or she actually really did have to pee. Maybe Jane was overtired, but she had the feeling something odd was going on.

She was halfway to the staircase when Andie's voice rang out from somewhere in the back of the house. "Jane, you'd better come back here."

What the heck? Jane left her suitcase in the foyer and headed toward the kitchen, but Andie wasn't in there. "Where are you?"

"In the back hallway, down at the book club room."

The book club room? What in the world had made Andie go down there?

On no! Does this have something to do with Mike? Andie was in on whatever was going on—Jane was sure about it.

Jane got more nervous the closer she got to the book club room. Was that the murmuring of voices? It sounded like more than two people.

What's going on? Is Mike going to propose in front of a bunch of people? The thought made Jane want to run. Not that she didn't love Mike, but it was too soon. She wasn't sure if she'd say yes, and that would be especially awkward with a room full of witnesses.

But surely Andie would have told her given their conversation about it at the restaurant. Wasn't there some sister code that dictated she spill the beans even if she'd promised Mike to keep the secret? But then Andie had acted kind of smug, as if Jane's assumption was wrong.

There was only one way to find out. Jane forced a smile on her face as she turned the corner that led to the book club room.

"Surprise!"

Jane's jaw dropped. But not because Mike was kneeling in front of her with a shiny diamond ring. The room had been transformed into a library. Mahogany shelves ran from floor to ceiling. The old furniture had been replaced with leather Chesterfield sofas and club chairs. It was exactly what she and her dad had always envisioned.

Mike stood on the other side, beaming.

Jane beamed back. "You did this?"

"I had a little help." Mike gestured to the others in the room: Andie, Shane, Maxi, James, Claire, and Rob. Bunny and Sam were there, too, along with Liz and Brenda, of course. "Everyone helped."

"You guys did all this behind my back? But how?" Jane asked.

"It wasn't easy," Mike said. "Andie and I had to do some fast talking to get around your suspicious interrogations."

"Wait. So when I came over to your house, you were working on these shelves?" Jane remembered the sawdust.

"Yep."

"And when I thought I saw you both together here the other morning, that was true. And you *were* at the hardware store together."

"Right again," Andie said.

"And the trip to the convention?" Jane asked.

"I really did want to go to that, but it was also a great way to get you out of the house so they could do the work."

“Did you ask my mom about dimensions?” Jane asked Mike.

“I did. I didn’t think she’d remember, though. You’d said that you and your dad always planned to do this, and I wanted it to be exactly as you planned,” Mike said. “Luckily, Andie found those plans that you guys drew up.”

“I can’t believe you did all this in two days.” Jane looked around the room again, this time taking in the details like the corner moldings on the bookshelves and the library ladder leaning against one of them.

“I tried to do as much as I could in my basement, and then we brought everything here,” Mike said. “Had to work all night, but I think it came out pretty good.”

“It’s gorgeous!” Jane rushed over and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you all so much. I don’t know what to say. What did I do to deserve this?”

“It was really Andie’s idea,” Mike said.

Jane looked at her sister, who blushed. “Not really. We both wanted to do something.” Andie walked over and linked her arm through Jane’s. “I just wanted a way to show that I appreciate that you’ve taken over running the inn. I know most of the burden rests on your shoulders.”

“And I wanted to let you know that I appreciate how hard you work,” Mike said. “I know I’ve been complaining about us not having enough time together, and that was selfish of me, so I wanted to do something to try to make up for that.”

“Aw, you guys are the best!” Jane hugged them both then made her way around the room.

When she got to Bunny, Bunny said, “I didn’t really do much, but this room will be perfect for the book club. Speaking of which, there’s another surprise for you.”

“There is?” Jane couldn’t imagine how they would top the library surprise.

Bunny leaned in and whispered, “Turns out Mr. Smith is the author of the book club book.”

“What?” That really was a surprise. “But I thought the author was Pat Jamison.”

“He’s here incognito. Didn’t want to be mobbed by fans.” Bunny laughed. “It’s a long story, though we’ll tell you about it later. For now, Brenda has been preparing some snacks, so let’s party.”

“AND THEN SAM came and saved me from making a complete fool of myself.” Bunny had just finished telling everyone about how she’d thought Mr. Smith was going to do away with his guest. She glanced over at Sam, who had been quiet the whole time she was telling the tale. Did he think she was just a silly old woman? His eyes still had that same sparkle of kindness.

“But how did you figure out he was the author?” Jane looked at the back of the book club book. “The photo is just really a shadow.”

“I got curious and looked on the internet,” Sam said.

“I should have thought of that. Guess I’m not that good of a detective.” Bunny grimaced.

Sam patted her shoulder. “You did fine. Don’t forget—you’re just beginning, and I have years of experience. Besides, I would have thought the same as you, except I got curious about the book club. It was a fluke that I discovered his true identity, because I wouldn’t have looked up the author of the book as part of the investigation.”

“Well, maybe.” That made Bunny feel a lot better. “Enough about me. What’s going on with you, Claire?” Claire had been pretty quiet, and Bunny sensed she had something on her mind.

“Oh, not much. Same old.”

“How about the Beach Bones issue?” Maxi asked as she balanced a small plate with miniature sandwiches and tiny desserts.

“Oh, that. Well, there’s been a development.” Claire sighed.

“What?” Jane asked.

“It seems like Sandee is the other person selling Beach Bones.”

Jane’s eyebrows flew up. “You mean your ex-husband’s wife?”

Claire pressed her lips together. “Yep.”

“Well, that’s an interesting development. What are you going to do?”

Claire shrugged. “I’m not sure. I mean, I could just pick another name, but somehow now that I know it’s Sandee, that makes me want to keep it.”

“It’s not trademarked or anything, right?” Maxi asked.

“I had Tammi look, and she said no. The name is free and clear, but I wonder if I should just let it go so I don’t have to deal with the drama,” Claire said.

“Or maybe it would be a good way to get well-deserved revenge.” Maxi popped a tiny quiche into her mouth and spoke around a mouthful. “She

took your husband, and now you can take her dog biscuit name.”

Claire laughed and put her hand over Rob’s. “Well, turns out her taking my husband was a good thing. Now I have Rob.”

“Awww... That’s cute,” Andie said. “I say you use the name and outsell the heck out of her.”

Bunny stole a few glances at Sam as the others continued to discuss what Claire should do about the dog biscuits. She still felt awkward about how Sam had rushed in to save her from embarrassing herself in front of Mr. Smith. Afterward, she’d thanked him, and he’d assured her it was a mistake anyone could make, pointing out that he had also been suspicious. Still, Bunny couldn’t help but feel weird about the whole thing.

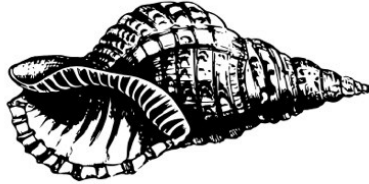
Liz had invited them to the library reveal when they’d stumbled upon it the night before during the whole Mr. Smith debacle. Bunny wasn’t really sure Sam would show up since he didn’t know Jane very well, but she’d been happy to see him. He’d seemed happy to see her, too, but she really wasn’t sure about that.

But now that the party was almost over, she wondered if she’d see Sam again. They didn’t have the investigation as an excuse to meet. Should she invite him over for crossword night? No, that seemed contrived. At least she’d see him at book club, though she had kind of hoped they could become better friends than that.

She wondered what to do. Maybe going home and gardening was the best thing. The Mr. Smith investigation had been fun, but now it was over. Yeah, she’d made a few mistakes, but that wasn’t going to stop her from investigating. She would learn from her mistakes and do better next time. *Maybe take on something a little less heavy than a murder. Perhaps a missing cat or dog?*

She could work her way up to getting a private investigator license. Either way, she planned to keep doing things that made her feel useful. And she didn’t need Sam Campbell for that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Sam stared down at his phone. It had been two days since the library reveal, and he'd thought Bunny might have texted him. The investigation was over, but surely, she might have something to say about the crossword puzzles. Maybe he should message her and invite her for a muffin at Sandcastles?

He hoped she didn't feel self-conscious over their presumptions toward Mr. Smith. It was only a fluke that Sam had discovered his true identity, and he'd agreed the man was acting suspicious. He'd already told her that. He hoped she didn't think he was just saying it to be nice.

He headed toward the garage to put away the paintbrush. He'd been doing more work on the house, making it his own. Not getting rid of Jean but just making her less prominent. She'd always be a part of his heart, but he had many years to live on his own, and he wanted them to be good ones.

A spot of shiny red color caught his eye. The cover had slipped off a corner of the Corvette. He went over and lifted it. The paint job was still pristine.

"Might as well take a look at her, eh?" he said to Dooley, who had trotted out behind him.

Dooley wagged his tail.

Sam slipped the cover off carefully and stood back. The top was down, and the leather seats still looked supple and comfortable. The paint was shiny. This time, instead of sad regrets, the sight of the car made his heart lift with happiness. He'd thought good times had died with Jean, but maybe not.

He pressed the button to open the garage door, then took the key from the peg on the wall and held his breath as he slid into the driver's seat and slipped it into the ignition. It started right up.

"Ready to go for a ride?" he asked Dooley.

The dog ran over to the passenger side. Sam opened the door, and Dooley jumped in.

"Maybe you'd better get in back. There might be a passenger that needs to sit there."

Dooley's ears stood up, and he glanced uncertainly at the back seat.

"Go ahead."

Dooley jumped in back, and Sam opened the garage door and drove out. It was a little chilly for riding around in a convertible, but Sam relished the feeling of freedom and the wind in his hair. Well, what was left of it, anyway.

He took the scenic route, driving along the ocean. When he found himself turning into Bunny's neighborhood, he had a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. Maybe this was a big mistake. She probably wasn't even home.

But she was home, and she was even outside, pruning the giant rose bush that grew at the corner of her house.

She turned as he pulled in. Her expression wasn't exactly as he'd hoped. She looked surprised but not happy to see him. *Oh no! This was a huge mistake.* She probably thought he was a foolish old man with a midlife crisis car. He wished he could back out and speed off, but it was too late. She was coming over to the car.

"Sam?" She peered into the car.

He gulped. "Want to go for a ride?"

She stared at him for a few more seconds, and he felt like sinking down into the seat and disappearing. Then her face cracked into a wide smile.

"I love convertibles! Of course I want to go for a ride! Whoop!" She ripped off her gloves and threw them onto the lawn. He got out to open the passenger door for her, but she practically vaulted into the car.

"You never told me you had a convertible," Bunny said.

"I haven't told you a lot of things. But I think we have plenty of time for that."

"I certainly hope so." She put her hand over his on the console, and he looked over at her. Her sparkling bright eyes were full of promise. He

smiled and eased the car out of the driveway.

As he drove off, Dooley stuck his head between the two front seats. He put his chin on top of their hands, and all three of them knew it was the start of something good.

This is a work of fiction.

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SEASIDE BOOKCLUB

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Autumn Tides

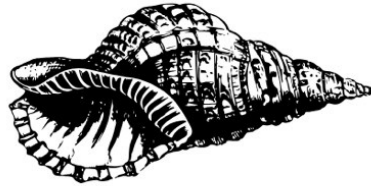
MEREDITH
SUMMERS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lobster Bay
BOOK SEVEN



CHAPTER ONE



“Hard to believe the inn has four guests even in the offseason,” Jane said, sharing a contented smile with her sister, Andie.

Earlier that year, when their mother had fallen ill, Jane had doubted her ability to manage the family inn, Tides. Now, the inn was thriving, a testament to her perseverance.

Andie looked into the dining room, where four women were enjoying breakfast. “They seem like they’re having a good time.”

“They are,” Jane affirmed. She caught a glimpse of the ocean beyond, a serene backdrop that never grew old. “They grew up here, I guess, and were best friends. Now, they come back for Prelude every year to catch up.”

“That’s nice.” Andie smiled in at the ladies. “Do you need any help with things here?”

Jane shook her head. “No, I’ve got Brenda in the kitchen and Liz up front. You have your own business to tend to.”

“I don’t mind helping out. I did just get in some interesting items from an estate sale that I’m dying to pick through, though. Found some old trunks up in an attic.”

Jane could see the excited gleam in her sister’s eye. Andie used to be an antique curator at a high-end auction house but had come back home when their mom got sick. Now she had her own antique store right in town. “Then you should get to it. Could be a treasure in there.”

Andie laughed and hugged Jane. “Let’s hope! Give me a shout if you need anything.”

Jane watched her sister leave and then picked up the coffee carafe and entered the dining room. The aroma of fresh coffee mingled with the scent of bacon and eggs. "Would anyone like a top-off?"

Four heads turned, their faces breaking into smiles. Susan, her short gray bob impeccably styled, held out her cup with manicured fingers. "Oh, yes, dear, please," she said.

As Jane went around refilling mugs, Betty's eyes met hers. "How is your mother, Addie? We remember she was such a gracious hostess. A true gem of Lobster Bay."

Jane felt her chest tighten briefly but masked it with a smile. "She's well. Thank you for asking. She's in a memory-care unit at an assisted living facility. She's comfortable and well taken care of."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear about the memory care," Susan said, sympathy filling her eyes. "But it's good she's in a safe place."

"Thank you." Jane nodded, eager to lift the mood. "So, you all grew up here in town? I bet it hasn't changed much."

The four of them laughed.

"It really hasn't," said Carol, tall and elegant with striking snow-white hair. "That's a good thing. The town is charming. I grew up over on Willow Street, and there are a few new houses but not much else different."

Susan, wearing a blouse that spoke of her penchant for meticulous order, picked up the thread. "And I was on Harbor Lane. Still pretty much the same there."

Betty's eyes were a soft green, almost the color of sea foam, framed by wavy salt-and-pepper hair. She wore a comfortable, oversized knit sweater and a chunky silver charm bracelet on her right wrist. "I grew up on Elm Street. It was a lovely place until...." Her voice trailed off, and her eyes grew sad.

Carol reached over and patted her hand.

Jane stood there awkwardly until Betty sighed and looked up. "My sister, Heidi, died when she was seventeen. Car accident. I was only fifteen and adored her. I never got to say goodbye. We had such a happy life in that house until then."

"I'm so sorry." Jane's heart ached for Betty.

Betty waved her hand dismissively and smiled. "Well, that was long ago, and I've come to terms. Still, I do always hope she'll give me some sort of sign when I'm back here."

“Lobster Bay has its own way of sending signs. Who knows? Maybe this visit will be special.”

“I hope so,” Betty said then deftly changed the subject. “Anyway, we’ve all had quite varied careers since then. I went into marine biology.”

“And I became a stewardess—flew all over the world!” Carol said, her voice tinged with nostalgia.

“That sounds amazing,” Jane said.

“I didn’t do anything quite so exciting. I became an accountant,” Susan added, a playful glint in her eyes. “Someone had to make sense of the numbers.”

“Very true,” Jane nodded.

Margie, vibrant in a flowy boho skirt and tank top that showcased her assortment of arm tattoos, waved a hand adorned with chunky rings. “I became a fashion designer.”

“That’s a diverse set of careers,” Jane marveled.

“We like to keep things interesting.” Margie winked, her bangles jingling with the motion. “These days, our competition has shifted to buying the best gifts for our grandchildren. We’re hoping to pick up some unique items here in town.”

“Oh, how lovely!”

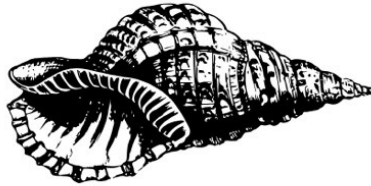
“It’s our own version of *The Price Is Right*,” Carol joked.

“I think you’ll find exactly what you want.”

Jane’s phone chirped with an incoming text, and she left the ladies to their conversation. Pulling the phone out of her apron, she saw it was from one of her best friends, Maxi.

SOS! *Art Gallery Chaos! HELP!*

CHAPTER TWO



Jane pushed open the gallery door, stepping into an airy space that felt like a war zone rather than the sanctuary of art it usually was. The room was generous in size, its floor-to-ceiling windows and overhead skylights usually offering an inviting luminescence. White walls, normally the quiet backdrop for vibrant art, today seemed to amplify the tension in the room. At opposite ends stood two artists, each guarding their exhibit as if it were a fortress. Both wore expressions sharp enough to etch glass. Maxi, her long white hair twisted into a messy bun, was caught in the crossfire, standing between them. Her arms moved erratically, punctuating the air as she attempted—unsuccessfully, it appeared—to play mediator.

“What on earth is going on?” Jane said, slipping in next to Maxi.

Maxi’s expression was a mix of relief and exasperation. “Oh, thank heavens you’re here! Meet Gerard, a fine sculptor specializing in blending Native American art with digital installations. And this is Priya, an incredible painter who merges classical Renaissance techniques with Bollywood themes.”

Jane took in the exhibits. Gerard’s space was filled with intricate sculptures that incorporated digital elements—like a totem pole that transformed into a virtual waterfall via a projection. On Priya’s side, richly colored canvases showcased sumptuous Renaissance-styled portraits in saris and turbans, adorned with flashy Bollywood jewelry.

“The problem,” Maxi sighed, “is that they both want the centerpiece spot for their exhibit, and neither will budge.”

“I was here first,” Gerard grumbled, arms crossed. “My installation needs the central space for the digital projections to work correctly.”

“And I should have the central spot,” Priya retorted, “because the lighting there will highlight the jewel tones in my paintings!”

Jane looked at Maxi. “They both have valid points. But why not try to see this as an opportunity?”

“An opportunity for what?” Maxi asked, clearly at her wits’ end.

“Working together maybe?” Jane threw a hopeful look at the two artists.

Gerard threw up his hands. “That’s it! I will not share my space with her primitive pieces!”

Priya shot back, “Primitive? At least my art has soul, not like your superficial pop art!”

“I’m leaving, Maxi. Make your choice,” Gerard huffed.

“And I’m taking my work with me,” Priya declared.

“In that case, I’m leaving first!” Gerard said, marching toward the door.

“No, I am!” Priya insisted, quickening her pace to beat him to it.

The two artists arrived at the gallery’s entrance simultaneously, both hands reaching for the doorknob. They glared at each other, stuck in a comedic deadlock, each refusing to let go. Finally, they pulled the door open and stormed out, shoulders bumping, both muttering under their breath.

Maxi sighed, brushing a stray lock of white hair from her forehead. “Well, that went well,” she said, the sarcasm dripping from each word.

Claire burst into the gallery, her eyes darting from the departing artists to Maxi and Jane. “I got your emergency text. What on earth is going on here?”

Maxi ran a hand over her messy white bun, looking utterly defeated. “Just a minor catastrophe. Those two artists couldn’t agree on exhibit space, and now they’ve both stormed off, threatening to pull their work.”

“Oh no!” Claire adjusted her auburn curls as she glanced back out the window.

Maxi sighed and flopped down onto a white cement cube that was supposed to hold a sculpture. “Those are the only two artists that I could find who had work that included a holiday theme with a cultural twist. Chandler is not going to be happy that I messed up my first time hosting a gallery event.”

“Don’t worry. We can fix this. Any chance we can get them back?” Claire asked.

Maxi shrugged, “I doubt it. Their egos are as big as their talent.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Tell me about it. It’s not just artists, either. Restaurant owners too.”

“What do you mean?” Jane asked.

Claire sighed, taking a seat next to Maxi. “Coordinating the menu for Taste of the Town is like trying to organize a herd of cats. Everyone wants their dish to shine, but nobody wants to overlap flavors or types of cuisine. There’s an unspoken rivalry among some of the restaurant owners—you can cut the tension with a knife. Or a fork, depending on the dish.”

Jane grinned mischievously. “Ah, rivalry among cooks. But I bet you and Rob are on the same page.”

Claire’s cheeks flushed a rosy hue. Earlier in the year, she’d started dating Rob Bradford, who owned the bread store across the street from Sandcastles. “Rob and I are perfectly in sync, thank you very much.”

“And what’s going on with Beach Bones? Did you talk to Sandee?” Jane queried, glancing between Maxi and Claire. Claire had started a line of homemade dog biscuits in her bakery and named the line Beach Bones. Unfortunately, she’d discovered someone else was using the name. Even worse, it was her ex-husband’s new trophy wife, Sandee.

Claire shook her head, worry lines etching her forehead. “I don’t know what to do. I probably should just pick another name.”

Maxi’s eyes flared with indignation. “She can’t do that! That’s your brand, your hard work. You can’t let her take that too, Claire.”

“So you haven’t talked to her about it?” Jane asked.

Claire grimaced. “No, not yet. I’ve been avoiding the confrontation. It’s complicated, you know? Tammi said I might be making too much of it.”

Tammi was Claire’s grown daughter who was off at college. Jane wasn’t exactly sure where Tammi stood on the subject of Sandee. Tammi had only been a teen when the divorce had occurred. Claire had tried to shield her from the nastiness and never spoke badly of Peter because he was Tammi’s dad.

“Tammi might not see things the way we do,” Jane said.

Maxi huffed, “Well, you could always try to outsell her. I’ve seen Sandee’s business ventures; she has the attention span of a goldfish. She’ll lose interest and move on to the next shiny object soon enough.”

“I don’t know, Maxi. It’s a risky strategy. What if she doesn’t give up? What if she makes it her mission to dominate the dog biscuit market? I don’t really want any drama.”

Jane sighed. “It sounds like you have some tough decisions to make, Claire. But remember, you’re not alone. We’re here to support you, just like we’re all here to help Maxi with her gallery crisis.”

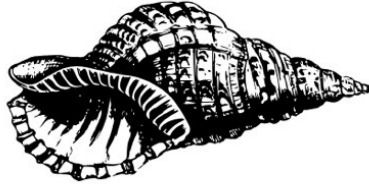
“Speaking of which,” Maxi interjected, “we still need to figure out what to do about these empty walls.”

“Sounds like we need a girls’ night out.” Jane wiggled her brows.

“Great idea!” Maxi pulled up the calendar on her phone. “We had a couples’ night last week, so the guys won’t feel left out. How about tomorrow night?”

“Sounds good to me.” Jane pulled out her phone. “I’ll send a text to Andie. Should we plan for six at Barnacle Billy’s?”

CHAPTER THREE



Andie's phone pinged with a text. It was Jane wanting to know if she was free for a girls' night out on Thursday. Of course she was!

Warmth bloomed in her chest at the invitation. She hadn't always been this close with her sister; in fact, there had been a time when they'd only spoken on holidays. Moving back to Lobster Bay was the best decision Andie had ever made, and now her life was perfect. She had her friends and even had reconnected with the love of her life, Shane Flannery.

She loved that she, Jane, Maxi, and Claire had formed a friendship bond. She hadn't had close friends when she'd lived in the city, and she cherished their frequent get-togethers. Usually, they met at Sandcastles for coffee a few times a week. In the summer, they liked to go to Splash after work since it was right on the beach, but it was too cold for that now. So they'd moved to Barnacle Billy's in Perkins Cove, where they could watch the boats in the cove.

Her fingers tapped out a jubilant "Yes!" on the screen before returning her phone to the counter and picking up the feather duster she'd been using to dust off the antiques in her store.

Amid the charm of weathered cabinets and glass-fronted display cases, Andie's antique store was a treasure trove of history and beauty. From vintage jewelry to midcentury furniture, the store was a testament to Andie's keen eye for unique finds. The polished hardwood floors gave off a warm, inviting glow, and the overhead track lighting was strategically aimed to showcase the best pieces. Antique chandeliers hung from the ceiling, illuminating the space with a soft, welcoming light.

Customers often felt like they were stepping back in time, and today was no different. A few were scattered throughout the store, their eyes wide with curiosity as they rifled through crates of vinyl records or examined ornate picture frames. A faint scent of aged wood and polish filled the air, adding to the nostalgia.

A customer approached the register, holding a delicately painted vase adorned with intricate floral patterns and a crackled glaze. It was one of Andie's favorite pieces, and she had almost hesitated to sell it.

"Isn't this just beautiful?" the customer remarked, setting the vase on the counter.

"It is," Andie agreed, her eyes meeting the customer's as she began wrapping the vase carefully in protective tissue. "It's a special piece—nineteenth-century French porcelain. You have excellent taste."

The customer beamed, clearly pleased with her find. Andie processed the payment, handed over the bag containing the vase, and bid her customer a cheerful goodbye.

Andie picked up the duster again and started cleaning an antique slag glass lamp that sat atop a vintage writing desk. The lamp's intricate metalwork and colorful, marbled glass had caught her eye at an estate sale months ago. As she moved the duster in gentle circles, her eyes wandered to a pair of old trunks tucked away in the corner of the store.

Those trunks had come from the attic of a stately home, hidden so well among cobwebs and old furniture that most people had missed them. Andie had only had the chance for a cursory look inside each, but the initial peek had revealed a tantalizing glimpse of old books, tarnished jewelry, and fabric that might've been clothing or linens from decades—maybe even centuries—past.

The customer who had been browsing in the back had made her way out the door, and finally, Andie was alone in the store.

"No time like the present," she thought, setting aside the duster and hurrying over to the trunks.

With a sense of expectation tingling at the back of her mind, she pulled one of the trunks closer to a cushioned chair meant for customers to take a load off while contemplating a potential purchase. She unbuckled the rusted latch, its creaking sound accompanied by a puff of dust that spoke of long-kept secrets.

As the lid swung open, a musty but not unpleasant odor wafted up—a mixture of aged leather, wood, and the indefinable scent of old things long stored away. It felt as if she was about to open a time capsule. Her fingers tingled with anticipation as she considered the untold stories that might be hidden within.

Andie could hardly wait to explore the contents. As she began to carefully lift out the topmost items—a couple of old books and what appeared to be a hand-embroidered shawl—she felt a rush of excitement.

Digging deeper into the trunk, Andie uncovered a porcelain figurine of a ballerina, one arm gracefully stretched above her head, though her tutu was chipped at the edges. Next, she found a small tin box filled with vintage postcards, the faded images capturing long-gone landscapes and landmarks.

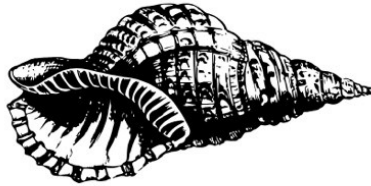
But as she moved these items aside, she noticed something incongruous with the other treasures. Tossed haphazardly at the bottom were what appeared to be Christmas decorations. Garland, plastic mistletoe. Some ornaments had been placed there without much care, and sadly, a few were smashed, their shattered pieces intermingling with strands of tarnished tinsel.

And there, partially buried by a broken ornament and a sprig of artificial mistletoe, was a sad little present. It was still wrapped in yellowing paper that must've once been vibrant and cheerful. A frayed ribbon barely held its bow together. A tiny tag dangled from it, the ink faded but still legible. It read, "To Urchin."

Urchin? Was that a nickname? Andie couldn't help but wonder who it was and why this gift had never found its way into their hands. A sense of melancholy washed over her as she considered the countless possible stories behind this unopened gift.

As she looked at the tag, she felt an inexplicable connection to its intended recipient, a responsibility to try to find out who it belonged to. And she knew exactly who she could ask to help.

CHAPTER FOUR



Jane returned to Tides after talking Maxi down off the ledge. Cooper, her golden Lab, bounded into the foyer, his tail wagging energetically. Jane bent down to give him a quick scratch behind the ears. “Hey, Coop. Miss me?”

Cooper’s wagging tail seemed to say “Always” as he circled her legs before settling down, eyeing the decorations on the counter with canine curiosity.

As she straightened up, Liz Weston looked up from the front desk and greeted her with a smile. “You’re just in time. Olga Svenson dropped off some Norwegian Christmas decorations that she made herself. She thought they’d be perfect for the Prelude.”

Jane’s eyes widened as she approached the collection spread out on the counter. Traditional straw ornaments, delicately carved wooden figures, and intricately woven heart-shaped baskets caught her eye. A small tomte, a mythological creature resembling a gnome, sat in a corner, its red cap tilted just so.

“Olga really outdid herself, didn’t she?” Jane beamed, clearly pleased with the array.

“She likes to keep busy,” Liz agreed, casting a glance at Cooper, who seemed intrigued by the straw ornaments.

“I’ll say.”

“Her children keep pressing her to move to assisted living, you know.” Liz shook her head. “She’s ninety-five and can craft better than anyone I

know. Not to mention she still manages to walk three times a day. She's more than capable of living on her own."

"I couldn't agree more." Jane nodded, picking up one of the straw ornaments and twirling it gently between her fingers and looking around to pick out a place to put it. "I think the baskets could go over here, and maybe we could hang the paper chains on the window." Jane stopped and narrowed her gaze at the window in the foyer, where the top trim seemed to be a bit loose. "Guess I'll need to call Sally to fix that first."

There was always something to repair in these old houses, and Sally was the local handywoman who Jane practically had on speed dial.

Jane looked up from her conversation with Liz to see Susan, Betty, Carol, and Margie coming in the front door, arms loaded with shopping bags from their early outing.

Cooper bounded over to the ladies.

"Cooper!" Carol cooed, dropping her bags to hug the exuberant dog.

"He's a sweetheart, isn't he?" Jane said, beaming as Cooper wagged his tail furiously, clearly enjoying the attention.

"We're going upstairs to change," Betty announced after all four of them had fawned over the dog. "We want to walk the Marginal Way. We always loved it as kids, and it's something of a tradition for us, even if it's a bit chilly right now."

"We've got our new Lobster Bay sweatshirts," Susan added, lifting a bag as proof.

"Sounds like a lovely plan," Jane said.

Margie caught sight of the festive setup. "Oh my, these Norwegian decorations are absolutely adorable!"

"Thank you! They're courtesy of our neighbor, Olga Svenson. She's in her nineties and still as crafty as ever," Liz chimed in.

"Aww, how sweet," Susan said.

"As a little evening treat, would you ladies like to have a glass of wine in the living room later? The view of the ocean is quite spectacular," Jane offered.

"That sounds heavenly," Carol said. "A glass of wine would be perfect."

"How about I set out some cheese and crackers as well?" Jane suggested.

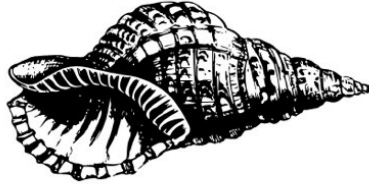
"Oh, you're a gem, Jane. That would be fantastic," Betty said, her eyes twinkling.

Carol turned to Cooper. “We’ll even bring a treat for you. We’ll pick up some Beach Bones from Sandcastles.” Carol glanced up at Jane. “If that’s okay with you?”

Jane smiled. “Of course. He loves them.”

The ladies went upstairs, and Jane and Liz continued finding places for the Norwegian Christmas decorations, but now Jane’s mind was on Beach Bones and Claire’s situation with Sandee. With both Claire and Maxi having some drama, Jane was glad things were calm for her. Still, she couldn’t wait for girls’ night out so that she could try to help her friends solve their problems.

CHAPTER FIVE



Claire filled in the last restaurant assignment in the Taste of the Town event sheet. There, that should do it! She'd somehow managed to wrangle the other town restaurateurs into some sort of schedule and series of foods that would be fun for visitors and not too repetitive.

Putting the pencil behind her ear, she sighed, stretched her arms, and looked over the busy café. Sandcastles Bakery was doing well, filled with the aroma of freshly baked pastries and the chatter of satisfied customers. Her signature sandcastle-shaped cakes sat proudly in the display case, enticing everyone who walked by.

When she glanced across the street, her eyes met Rob's, who was standing in the window of Bradford Breads. He gave her a warm wave, which she happily returned, feeling a surge of warmth and affection.

Turning her attention back to the café, she saw Hailey, her ever-efficient assistant, topping off coffees for the customers. Among them were Bert and Harry, their newly adopted dog tied up outside the café. Claire smiled; they looked content. Then there were Sam and Bunny, snuggled in a cozy corner booth. It warmed Claire's heart to see them so smitten in their later years. Sam's dog, Dooley, was outside, munching on one of Claire's popular Beach Bones dog treats.

The thought of Beach Bones made her grimace. She still needed to confront Sandee about the whole name-stealing issue.

As if conjured by her thoughts, the door swung open, and in walked Sandee, a slim, young blonde dressed in high heels and an outfit that

screamed high-maintenance. There was no avoiding her now. Sandee was headed straight for the counter.

Claire took a deep breath, preparing for the inevitable confrontation. The warm and fuzzy feeling from waving at Rob was now replaced by a knot of tension. But it had to be done. She braced herself and greeted Sandee with a practiced smile. “Hi, Sandee. What can I get for you today?”

Sandee’s eyes darted over to the Beach Bones display before settling back on Claire. “We need to talk,” she said, her voice tinged with a mixture of accusation and vulnerability.

“About the Beach Bones?” Claire guessed, feeling her own defenses rise.

“Exactly,” Sandee replied, crossing her arms. “Why would you steal my product name? Is this some sort of payback for me marrying Pete?”

Claire sighed, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Hardly, Sandee. First of all, I had no idea you had a dog biscuit company named Beach Bones. And for all I know, you could have stolen the name from me.”

At Claire’s words, a flicker of hurt crossed Sandee’s eyes. For a moment, Claire saw a glimpse of something more complex behind Sandee’s polished exterior. Perhaps it was vulnerability or even a tinge of regret.

“So you didn’t do this intentionally?” Sandee finally asked, her voice softer than before.

“Of course not,” Claire responded, her own voice softening as well.

“Then you won’t mind changing the name,” Sandee said, her voice resuming its earlier edge.

The suggestion rankled Claire. It would be just like Sandee to expect Claire to change to accommodate her. “Actually, I think you should be the one to change the name. I’ve built up my bakery, and Beach Bones has already been integrated into my brand.”

Sandee’s face flushed a shade of pink that clashed with her carefully chosen lipstick. “Why should I change? You already have this whole bakery, clients, a reputation. I’m just starting to build something for myself. I should be the one to keep the name!”

“Why? I don’t think it matters who has what. It matters who used it first!” Claire retorted, her own arms crossing in a gesture that mirrored Sandee’s defensive stance.

“Right, and I was the one who used it first.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed. “Can you prove that?”

Sandee huffed and gnawed her bottom lip. Finally, she said, “Fine, have it your way. But this isn’t over.”

With that, Sandee turned sharply and walked toward the door, her high heels clicking against the wooden floor like tiny gavels declaring a hung jury. Just as she reached the doorway, she nearly collided with Andie, who was walking in.

“Watch where you’re going!” Sandee snapped, not breaking stride as she pushed through the door. She left Andie looking puzzled and Claire sighing in a mixture of relief and trepidation.

“I see you and Sandee finally talked about Beach Bones.” Andie glanced back at Sandee’s retreating form.

Claire rolled her eyes. “Yep, and she won’t budge.”

“And I hope you won’t, either.”

“Not after the way she was acting, I won’t.” Claire waved her hand dismissively. “But anyway, at least that’s over with now. Now, what can I get you? We have a new pastry that I’m going to feature at Taste of the Town: a caramel apple croissant, perfect for autumn. Want to give it a try?”

Andie’s eyes lit up. “That sounds divine. I’ll have one of those and a coffee, please.”

“Coming right up,” Claire said, signaling to Hailey, her helper, who began preparing the coffee.

“So, what brings you here today?” Claire continued, handing Andie the flaky, warm croissant on a delicate plate.

“Actually, I came to see Bunny and Sam,” Andie said, taking the croissant and coffee. “I have a little mystery they might be able to help me with.”

Claire’s left brow shot up. “Do tell.”

Andie leaned in, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Well, you know I’ve been going through those old trunks I found at the estate sale, right? I found some Christmas stuff hastily thrown in there and one sad little present, still wrapped.”

“Aww, that is sad. So you’re trying to track down the recipient?”

“That’s right. Can’t think of anyone better than Sam and Bunny to help.” With that, Andie picked up her coffee, gave Claire a friendly wave, and headed toward the corner table, where Sam and Bunny were bent over a crossword puzzle, oblivious to the drama that had just unfolded at the counter.

SANDEE HURRIED DOWN THE STREET, her high heels clicking rapidly against the pavement. She clenched her designer handbag tightly, trying to keep her composure until she was out of sight. Her eyes brimmed with tears she didn't want Claire or Andie or anyone else in that café to see. As soon as she rounded the corner, she took a deep breath, her hand pressed against her chest.

"Why does everything have to be so complicated?" she muttered to herself.

She had genuinely thought Beach Bones was a brilliant name for her new line of dog treats. It was a cute play on words, and she never dreamed it would overlap with anything Claire was doing. The last thing she wanted was to be perceived as the town villain, especially after the whole ordeal with Peter.

"Peter," she muttered under her breath, her grip tightening around her bag. The name alone churned her stomach. Sandee felt misunderstood by the community, and much of it tied back to him.

Everyone thought she was a home-wrecker, the younger woman who had snatched up a married man. But they didn't know the full story. Peter had told her he was separated when they met, and she had naively believed him. Only later did she discover the reality of the situation, leaving her feeling foolish and used.

Sandee sighed, brushing a stray tear from her cheek. She needed to make things right, but she didn't know how. Everyone seemed to be on Claire's side and rightly so.

As she walked away, her mind raced with thoughts of how to mend her tarnished reputation, starting with the Beach Bones debacle. She should have let Claire use the name, but for some reason, her pride had taken over. Giving up that name seemed like giving up the one thing she had. Perhaps there was a way to resolve this without lawyers and public drama. But for now, she'd retreat, pull herself together, and think of a new strategy.

Sandee spotted a medium-sized black-and-white dog tethered to a lamppost, its owner inside the Lobster Bay gift store. The dog's tail wagged as she approached. Kneeling, she extended her hand, letting the dog sniff her before she stroked its head. The simple, unconditional affection from the animal lifted her spirits, even if just a little.

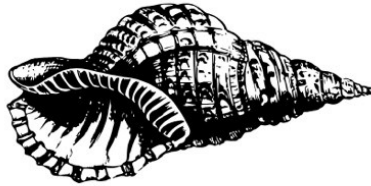
“I wish people were as easy to understand as animals are,” she said softly to the dog, scratching it behind the ears. Sandee truly loved animals more than people and volunteered to foster animals in need, often traveling great distances to pick them up—something that no one knew about her.

As she stood up, her mind wandered back to the upcoming town event—the Prelude. Sandee had volunteered to manage the charity sales tent, a role that people often avoided due to its demanding nature. Between the cold weather and the long hours, it was not the most glamorous of positions. But she saw it as her chance for redemption, an opportunity to give back to the community and, perhaps, show them a different side of herself as well as a way to help animals.

If she could run the charity tent successfully, maybe, just maybe people would start to look at her differently. It wasn’t about proving anything to Claire or anyone specific but rather to the town at large—and to herself. Sandee wanted to demonstrate that she could be more than the young woman who got entangled with a not-quite-single man, more than the source of a trivial dog biscuit controversy.

With a final pat to the dog, Sandee straightened her posture, her heels clicking with newfound resolve as she walked away. The road to redemption would be long, but she was ready to take that first step, and the charity tent at the Prelude seemed like the perfect place to start.

CHAPTER SIX



Back in the cozy, aromatic space of Sandcastles Bakery, Andie savored each bite of her caramel apple croissant, a flaky masterpiece that seemed to capture the essence of autumn in each mouthful. She looked across the table at Bunny and Sam, who were still filling in the crossword puzzle even as the three of them chatted.

“Ah, got it!” Bunny exclaimed, filling in a word on the paper. “Seven across is ‘tire.’”

Sam chuckled. “Right you are!”

As he filled in the word, Bunny looked over at Andie. “Now, tell us more about this mystery.”

“Well,” Andie began, “I was going through these old trunks I bought at an estate sale, and I discovered something odd. There were a bunch of Christmas decorations and ornaments, but also one sad little present, still wrapped. The tag says, ‘To Urchin.’ No idea who Urchin is, but I feel compelled to find out more.”

Bunny’s eyes widened with curiosity, “A lone, unopened gift in an old trunk? That is mysterious.”

“Exactly,” Andie said. “I thought maybe you could help me figure out who Urchin is and maybe even give them their long-lost gift.”

Sam raised his brows and looked at Bunny. “We don’t have much else to do...”

“And it does sound interesting,” Bunny added.

Andie’s eyes sparkled at the prospect of embarking on this adventure with her friends. “So you’re in?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Sam affirmed, his eyes twinkling. “Where did you get the trunks? That seems like the obvious place to start.”

“Iris Perkins’s estate sale,” Andie said, sitting back with her hands wrapped around the coffee mug.

“Ah, Iris Perkins, you say?” Bunny’s eyebrows furrowed as she made a slight face. “That woman was a notorious hoarder. And she never met an estate sale she didn’t like. You can’t be certain those trunks originally belonged to her family.”

“True,” Andie conceded, “but they were hidden deep in the attic, covered in dust. It wasn’t just part of the usual clutter, which makes me think they’ve been there for a while.”

“Still,” Bunny continued, “Iris could’ve acquired those trunks at any time and from anywhere and simply stashed them in her attic.”

Sam looked thoughtful, his eyes narrowing as he mulled over the details. “Bunny has a point, but I still say we start with Perkins.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Bunny said. “We’ll do some research, and it might really help to see what else was in the trunk.”

“Oh, sure! I have it at the shop. Pop on by whenever you get a chance,” Andie said.

“Hey, folks,” Bert chimed in from the next table, leaning back in his chair so he could join the conversation. “Have you heard about that big storm down the Cape? Quite the whopper, they say.”

Bunny frowned. “Oh no! I hope it’s not going to ruin Prelude.”

“Don’t worry, the forecast says it’s going to stay down there,” Bert reassured them, glancing out the door to make sure his terrier mix Chloe was okay outside. She was sitting next to Sam’s hound dog, Dooley, the two of them watching tourists stroll past. “Looks like it will be sunny here and mid-sixties, perfect for Prelude.”

All eyes turned toward the window as they caught sight of volunteers and town workers stringing up twinkling lights on the lampposts and setting out paper-bag luminaries along the sidewalks.

“Excellent,” Sam said, putting his hand atop Bunny’s and gazing at her fondly. “This year is very special, so I’m not surprised everything will work out perfectly.”

Bunny nodded. “And hopefully, we can make it extra special for the person that never got their gift all those years ago.”

Just then, the door chimed, and the four women who were staying at Tides came in. They spotted Andie, their eyes lighting up with recognition.

“Oh, hi, Andie!” Susan exclaimed, walking over with her friends in tow.

“Hello there,” Andie greeted them with a warm smile. “Let me introduce you to my friends Bunny and Sam.” She turned to Bunny. “These ladies are guests at Tides: Betty, Susan, Margie, and Carol. They used to live in Lobster Bay.”

“Hello, nice to meet you.” Bunny extended her hand, her eyes sparkling with warmth.

“A pleasure,” Sam echoed, nodding politely.

Bunny shifted her chair to make room. “Care to join us?”

“Oh, we’d love to, but we’re actually on our way to walk the Marginal Way,” Susan explained. “We just stopped in to get some Beach Bones for Cooper.”

“Cooper will love that.” Andie chuckled.

“Have a great walk!” Bunny replied as the four women headed to the counter to place their order.

Bunny turned her attention back to the table. She leaned in and lowered her voice. “Now, let’s come up with a solid game plan for this investigation.”

Andie sat back and sipped her coffee, satisfied that she’d found the right people to take on the job. She just hoped that Claire and Maxi would be able to solve their issues as easily.

BETTY PULLED her scarf a little tighter around her neck as the four friends made their way along the Marginal Way. The walkway hugged the cliffs, offering breathtaking views of the Atlantic Ocean. The ocean breeze was blustery, a reminder that fall was setting in, but somehow, it felt invigorating rather than cold.

Margie led the way, her eyes lighting up at the sight of a bed of late-blooming flowers. “Would you look at that? Even in the fall, this place refuses to lose its charm.”

Carol nodded, her hands tucked into the pockets of her cardigan. “There’s something about the ocean that’s eternally captivating. It’s like it holds all the world’s secrets.”

Susan, ever the photographer of the group, stopped to capture a dramatic cluster of rocks jutting out into the ocean. “This place is a photographer’s dream. Every angle is a new surprise.”

Betty smiled, genuinely happy to be sharing this moment with her friends. Yet her thoughts kept drifting. When she was a teen, she and Heidi used to walk down the Marginal Way as a shortcut from their house to the beach. If there were ever a place for her to feel her sister’s presence, or perhaps even receive a sign from her, this was it.

They came upon a bench that seemed to have been perfectly placed, offering a panoramic view of the main beach across the river.

“Let’s take a breather,” Margie suggested, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face.

They all settled onto the bench, each lost in her own thoughts as they looked out over the crashing waves, the distant beach, and the infinite horizon.

Betty felt a mix of peace and melancholy wash over her. She closed her eyes for a moment, half praying, half wishing for some form of connection. The emotion swelled in her chest, making it hard to breathe.

Suddenly, Carol nudged her softly. “Look, Betty.”

A lone seagull had landed on one of the nearby rocks, its white feathers a stark contrast to the dark stone. The bird seemed to hesitate for a moment before turning its head to look directly at them.

Betty felt a shiver run down her spine. Could this be the sign she had been hoping for? She felt her heart race as she considered the possibility. Was it foolish to think that a simple seagull could be a messenger from beyond?

Margie, unaware of Betty’s internal struggle, chuckled. “He’s quite the poser, isn’t he? It’s like he’s asking for his photo to be taken.”

Susan, never one to miss an opportunity, lifted her camera and took a few shots of the photogenic bird.

The seagull lingered for a few more moments before taking off, its wings catching the wind as it soared away, blending into the vast sky.

Betty felt tears prick her eyes. Whether it was a sign or just a simple coincidence, it had given her a moment of unexpected but much-needed

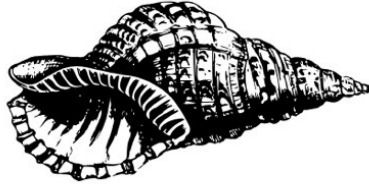
comfort. For the first time in a long while, she felt a gentle lifting of the weight she had been carrying.

Finally, Susan stood up, slinging her camera over her shoulder. "Shall we continue? There's so much more to see."

Betty nodded, rising from the bench. "Yes, let's."

As they resumed their walk, Betty took one last look at the spot where the seagull had been. She felt a newfound sense of peace as they moved forward, her friends by her side and her sister's memory tucked safely in her heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN



“Gerard, won’t you please reconsider?” Maxi pleaded, her voice tinged with desperation as she paced back and forth across the spacious gallery, passing through the patches of natural light from the floor-to-ceiling windows and skylights. The white walls around her seemed all too empty without the artwork that had been the cause of so much tension.

“My artistic sensibilities cannot allow it, Maxi,” Gerard said firmly from the other end of the line. “I’ll be by to collect my work as soon as that harried Priya has removed hers.”

Maxi glanced over just in time to see Priya wheeling out the last of her pieces, the door chimes ringing softly as she exited. “Fine, Gerard. I’ll expect you soon, then.”

With a resigned sigh, Maxi hung up the phone and flopped down into a chair. She ripped her hair out of the bun and ran her hands through it before twisting it up on top of her head again. This was a disaster. Chandler Van Beck had entrusted her with curating a special gallery event for Winter Prelude, and now she had no art to show for it.

Just then, her phone rang again. This time, the caller ID showed it was Chandler himself. Her stomach twisted in knots as she picked up the phone.

“Maxi, how are the preparations going for the gallery event? I trust all is well?” Chandler’s voice was smooth but carried a weight of expectation.

Maxi hesitated for a moment, choosing her words carefully. “Everything’s coming along, Chandler. I’ve got something special planned for the event.”

“Oh? Do tell,” Chandler pressed, his curiosity piqued.

Maxi felt her heart racing; she couldn't let Chandler know about the artists pulling out. "Well, it's a bit of a surprise, actually. I don't want to give too much away, but I think it's going to be something truly unique and memorable."

"A surprise, you say? I do enjoy a good surprise," Chandler responded, sounding intrigued but cautious. "Just remember, Maxi, this event is important not only for the gallery but for the cultural aspect of the Winter Prelude. I trust you'll make it exceptional. And don't forget it needs to be filled with holiday vibes and showcase a wonderful culture that people might not be familiar with."

"You won't be disappointed, Chandler. That's a promise," Maxi assured him, even as a wave of uncertainty washed over her.

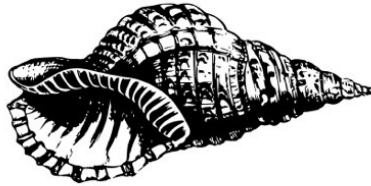
"Ahh, so you are playing it close to the vest. Don't want to reveal any more details? You know I have eyes and ears around town," Chandler added casually.

Maxi felt a jolt of panic. Would someone see Priya and Gerard moving their things and tell Chandler about the empty gallery? How could she prevent that? "Of course I know that." Maxi's gaze darted around the room as she desperately tried to think about how she could spin this. A piece of paper had blown up outside and was resting against the window. It gave her an idea. "That's why I'm going the extra mile to keep it all under wraps," Maxi quickly responded, her mind racing. "The windows will be covered to maintain the element of surprise for everyone."

"I like the sound of that. Keep up the good work, Maxi," Chandler said before finally ending the call.

Maxi placed the phone on the desk, staring at it as if it were a ticking time bomb. She had just bought herself a little time, but now she had to deliver on her promise of a "surprise." She couldn't let Chandler or the community down. Winter Prelude was too important. Maxi stood up, straightened her blouse, and took a deep breath. One way or another, she was going to pull this off.

CHAPTER EIGHT



As Jane carefully arranged an assortment of cheese and crackers on a rustic, antique wooden platter, she couldn't help but feel a deep connection to the room she was in. Tides was a place full of history. Each piece of furniture, every framed photograph, had belonged to her ancestors, and the place exuded a sense of belonging.

The room's palette was in soft shades of blue and beige, reminiscent of the ocean and sand just outside the window. The air smelled of a comforting blend of salty sea air and the earthy aroma of vintage wood furniture. One could also catch the delicate fragrance of the cheese and crackers, beckoning anyone who entered to partake.

A classical music station played softly in the background, filling the room with tranquil melodies that blended well with the rhythmic sound of waves crashing against the shore. The occasional cry of a seagull punctuated the soundscape, seamlessly intertwining nature and nurture.

The silk oriental rug underfoot still felt luxurious even though it was two hundred years old, adding a tactile richness to the room that was comforting and inviting. The armchairs and sofa had the worn-in softness that only came with years of love and use.

But it was the view that took center stage—the sky was an artist's palette of pinks and blues, melding seamlessly into the horizon. Though the sun was setting to the west, its retreating light lent a magical glow to the eastward ocean view. The hues of the sky were reflected on the surface of the ocean, making the waves look like they were dancing in a kaleidoscope of color.

Jane heard a flurry of voices in the foyer and poked her head out into the hallway to see Susan, Betty, Carol, and Margie, their arms laden with shopping bags.

"I've set up the wine and cheese for you in here!" Jane called to them.

Their eyes widened appreciatively at the view and the setting Jane had prepared.

"Jane, this is gorgeous! You must join us," Susan insisted, her eyes twinkling.

Betty chimed in, "Yes, absolutely. We could use a new person to talk to."

"And settle our bet as to who got the best gift." Margie laid her bags down and sat in an overstuffed blue chair. Even though the room was full of antiques, Jane had put in some modern furniture for comfort.

Cooper raced in and proceeded to greet each of the women, much to their delight. At least they loved having a dog at the inn. Jane had been a bit leery of having a dog there, but so far, all of the guests had loved him. If she ever did have a guest who was put off by a resident dog, she could always send him to stay with her boyfriend, Mike. Cooper was half his, after all.

Jane took a sip of her wine, savoring the robust flavor before setting her glass on the antique coffee table. "So, how was your walk along the Marginal Way? It's a bit chilly this time of year."

Carol giggled, "Oh, it was brisk, all right. But a little cold air never stopped us from enjoying the view."

Margie added, "The ocean looked so alive today. The waves were really putting on a show."

Cooper plopped himself next to Jane, his tail wagging in slow, contented sweeps. He looked up expectantly as Betty picked up a cracker. She popped it into her mouth then looked down at the dog. "We got something for you, Cooper."

Susan reached into her bag and brought out a package of Beach Bones. She looked to Jane for confirmation before breaking one in half and holding it out to Cooper. Cooper sniffed it then took it gently and inhaled it in one gulp.

"You know, something unusual happened while we were sitting on one of the benches. A seagull landed on a rock right in front of us and just... stared at us for the longest time," Betty said.

Susan grinned, “Maybe it wanted some of the coffee we had brought along!”

Betty shook her head, her face turning somewhat introspective. “No, it felt different—special even. I couldn’t help but think it might be a sign from my sister.”

The smile that stretched across Betty’s face was serene, as though she’d come to some unspoken agreement with the universe about her sister’s passing.

The room went quiet for a moment, allowing everyone to take in the weight of Betty’s words. Even Cooper seemed to sense the change in mood, resting his head gently on Jane’s lap.

Carol was the first to jump in, eagerly unzipping her shopping bag. “All right, ladies, get ready to see the ultimate gift for my grandson, Jack. Ta-da!” She pulled out a quirky, colorful beach towel featuring a lighthouse scene complete with little cartoon seagulls and starfish and matching swim trunks.

“Imagine how cool he’ll look at his swimming lessons with this. It’s like giving him a piece of the ocean!”

Betty was next. “That’s adorable, Carol, but wait until you see what I found for Emily.” She carefully unwrapped a hand-carved wooden model of a lighthouse, her charm bracelet jangling. “She loves lighthouses. Just look at the craftsmanship!”

Susan chuckled as she reached into her bag. “You guys are so sentimental. I went for fun! Look at this for Lily!” She presented a quirky, oversized sun hat, complete with fake flowers and a band that read “Beach Please!”

“Her Instagram photos are going to be epic!”

Margie took the final turn. “Prepare yourselves, because I found a treasure for Ben.” With a flourish, she unveiled a pirate-themed puzzle. “It’s a 3D puzzle of a pirate ship, and the pieces are made from recycled materials! Ben’s into that eco-friendly stuff, so this is perfect!”

Each lady reveled in the playful banter and gentle ribbing that followed, arguing lightheartedly about whose gift would make the biggest splash. Even Cooper seemed to join in, wagging his tail happily as if he, too, had an opinion on the best gift.

“So whose is best?” Carol turned to Jane.

“Ummm... well...”

“Yoo-hoo! I’m here!” a voice called from the foyer, saving Jane from having to answer.

“In here!” Jane called.

Sally stepped into the room, her tool belt slung casually around her waist and her long silver braid pulled over one shoulder. The moment she appeared, Carol, Betty, Margie, and Susan practically leapt from their seats. “Sally!”

With a hearty laugh, Sally opened her arms wide, enveloped in hugs from the women. Their chatter all blended together as Sally made the rounds. Betty broke into laughter, her eyes twinkling. “Oh my gosh, Sally! No one has called me that in ages!”

Jane had watched the heartwarming exchange, a glass of wine in one hand and Cooper by her side. Apparently, the women all knew Sally, though Jane shouldn’t have been surprised. They were the same age, and Sally had grown up in Lobster Bay too.

The room was filled with a tangible sense of community, one that extended through generations and connections, and it added a layer of warmth.

Sally finally looked at Jane, “All right, where’s the window trim that needs attention?”

Jane smiled, pointing to the foyer. “It’s in the foyer. I’ll show you.”

“I can find it.” Sally rolled up her sleeves. “I’ll have it fixed in a jiffy. Though I must admit, it’s hard to focus on work with such good company and a view like this.”

“Well, hurry up, then, and when you’re done, you can join us!” Jane said.

“Oh, we have one more thing. Look at this, ladies!” Margie said.

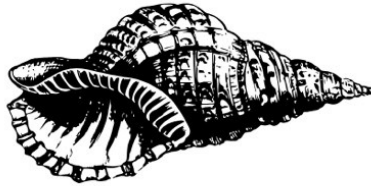
She carefully unwrapped a small porcelain figure, a charming Victorian house situated on the beach. It bore a striking resemblance to Tides, the very inn they were in. “We got this for Addie. We always loved how welcoming she was whenever we stayed here. Thought it might brighten her day in the assisted-living facility.”

Jane was touched, her eyes misty. “Oh, Margie, this is beautiful. Mom will love it. Really, she will. Cooper and I are going to visit her tomorrow morning, and this will be such a lovely surprise for her.”

As she spoke, Cooper wagged his tail in agreement, as if he, too, knew the sentimental value of the porcelain house.

“Well, then, it’s settled. This little house will have a new home, and it’s the perfect way to keep Tides always near to Addie,” Carol chimed in, her glass raised in a toast.

CHAPTER NINE



Early the next morning, Claire was behind the counter at Sandcastles Bakery, ringing up a string of blueberry muffins, almond croissants, and steaming cups of coffee. The cozy bakery was bustling, tables full of customers sipping lattes and savoring pastries.

Maxi burst through the door, her eyes darting around before landing on Claire. “Morning, Claire! Can I get two lemon poppyseed muffins, three raspberry scones, and a large coffee to go, please?”

Claire began to assemble the order, curiosity piqued. “You seem in a hurry. Big plans?”

“Plans? You could say that,” Maxi huffed. “I’m in the middle of covering the windows at the art gallery. I’m trying to keep the new display a surprise. Plus, I’ve got a couple of leads on artists whose work I might be able to feature. And I only have three days to pull it all together!”

“A surprise display? That sounds exciting!” Claire handed Maxi the bag and the large coffee. “Who is helping you out?”

Maxi sighed. “No one. That’s why I need all these pastries. Gotta keep up my strength.”

Claire raised a brow. “If you have a few minutes, Jane should be here soon. I’ve got a bag of chocolate chip muffins for Addie.” Claire pointed to a white bakery bag sitting on the counter.

Maxi glanced at her watch and then back at Claire. “I’d love to, but time is of the essence. I’ll catch up with her tonight at girls’ night. See you then!”

“All right, then. Good luck, Maxi! You’ve got this.” Claire offered a supportive smile as Maxi rushed out, her arms full but her spirits high.

Claire watched Maxi bustle out of the bakery and almost collide with Sam, who was outside, tying Dooley to one of the dog-friendly stations Claire had set up. Dooley, a lovable hound dog with droopy ears and soulful eyes, wagged his tail as Sam patted his head. His nose quivered, catching the scent of freshly baked goods wafting from the bakery.

During the summer months, Claire allowed patrons to bring their dogs to the outdoor eating area, and it had been an instant hit. In fact, the idea for the Beach Bones dog treat line originated from seeing how much the canines enjoyed hanging out. Now, even during the cooler months, dog stations with water bowls were placed in front of the café so people could still bring their furry friends along.

Sam walked in, the door chiming as he entered. “Morning, Claire. Could I get two bran muffins and some Beach Bones for Dooley? He seems to like the red ones.”

Claire’s eyebrows furrowed. Red ones? She didn’t make red Beach Bones. For a moment, she wondered if Sam was confused. He was getting up in years... or had he somehow gotten hold of Sandee’s Beach Bones? Were they better than hers? She pushed the thought aside.

“Red ones? That’s strange. I haven’t made red Beach Bones. But here are our original-recipe bones. Dooley seems to like them too, right?”

Sam chuckled. “Oh, he loves them! I must be mistaken about the color. Old age, you know?”

Claire prepared the bran muffins and Beach Bones for Sam, placing them carefully into a bag. “You’re not going to sit with a crossword?” Sam and Bunny came almost every morning now and did crosswords at their favorite table.

“Actually, I’m about to pick up Bunny.” Sam glanced toward the curb, where his red convertible was parked. Even in the chillier weather, he and Bunny adored the feeling of open-air driving. “We’re heading over to Andie’s antique shop to have a look at that old trunk she’s curious about.”

“Sounds good.” Claire loved that Sam and Bunny kept active even though they were in their late seventies. And it was fantastic to see that spark back in Sam’s eye. Claire hadn’t been sure she’d ever see that again after Sam’s wife passed, but then he’d met Bunny, and the rest was history.

“Thanks!” Sam held up the bag and left just as a woman approached the counter.

Claire recognized her immediately—it was Marie from the local animal rescue organization.

“Hi, Claire, how are you today?” Marie greeted her warmly.

“Doing well, Marie. What can I get for you?”

“Well, first, I wanted to give you this.” Marie handed Claire a letter with the rescue organization’s logo on it. “It’s a thank-you letter for being such a friend to animals. The way you’ve made Sandcastles a pet-friendly place has really made a difference, not just to pet owners but to the animals themselves. And the Beach Bones? They’re a hit at the rescue center!”

Claire’s heart swelled with pride as she opened the letter and quickly skimmed it. Official recognition for her efforts made her feel even more grounded in her determination to keep the Beach Bones name.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Marie continued. “I know you’re going to be manning the charity tent at the Winter Prelude event, and we’re so grateful for that. But would you consider doing a little more? We’ve got an influx of animals due to natural disasters in other parts of the country. Any chance you’d be open to fostering?”

Claire paused. She hadn’t considered fostering animals before, but the idea intrigued her. “That’s quite a responsibility,” she said thoughtfully.

“It is, but I think you’d be amazing at it,” Marie replied. “Plus you’d have a captive test audience for new Beach Bones recipes!”

Claire chuckled at that. “You make a compelling case, Marie. I’ll definitely think about it.”

“Great, that’s all I ask. Thanks again for everything you do, Claire. Oh, I’ll have a pistachio scone and a small coffee.”

Claire got the scone and coffee and rang Marie up then put the letter somewhere safe. She’d have it framed. The morning rush had died down, and some of the tables were empty, so she grabbed a rag and started wiping them down.

Her phone rang. It was her daughter, Tammi.

“Hey, Tammi. How’s your day going?” Tammi was doing an internship far away, and Claire missed seeing her every day, but she was proud of the woman Tammi had become.

“Busy but good. How about you?”

“Actually, amazing,” Claire gushed, unable to hold back her excitement. “Marie from the animal rescue just came by and gave me this thank-you letter for being a friend to animals and the community. It feels so good to be recognized.”

“That’s wonderful, Mom! You deserve it,” Tammi replied.

“Thanks. It makes me all the more determined to keep the Beach Bones name,” Claire asserted, her voice tinged with resolve.

Tammi paused, choosing her words carefully. “Mom, you and Sandee have more in common than you think.”

Claire snorted. “I highly doubt that.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge. Sandee’s a friend to animals too. She’s not the villain you think she is.”

“That’s hardly something substantial to have in common,” Claire retorted. “Unless you consider being married to your father something in common.”

Another pause on Tammi’s end had Claire worrying that she’d said the wrong thing. She’d always been careful not to be one of those divorced parents that bad-mouthed the other or their new partner.

“Actually, Dad and Sandee are getting divorced.”

“Oh.” Claire didn’t know what to say. “Well, that’s... interesting.”

“Yeah, well, maybe the two of you could find some common ground, you know? Life’s too short for grudges,” Tammi suggested.

Claire sighed. “I’ll think about it, Tammi. I really will.”

Funny, Claire had always thought Sandee and Peter deserved each other. Maybe Tammi was on to something... or maybe Peter had found an even younger woman and tossed Sandee aside. Either way, it wasn’t really her problem.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

Claire looked up to see Jane standing at the counter.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Claire quickly brushed it off, though her mind was still racing with the new revelation about Sandee and Peter. A strange mix of emotions—annoyance, curiosity, and, surprisingly, sympathy—filled her. Could Sandee also be a victim of Peter’s insincerity? Claire knew all too well how that felt.

“I’ve got your chocolate chip muffins for Addie right here,” Claire said, handing over the white paper bag.

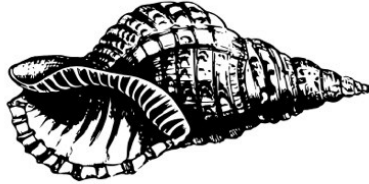
“Ah, she’s going to love these! Thank you, Claire.”

“Of course. Anything for Addie,” Claire replied, sharing a warm smile with Jane.

“Gotta run!” Jane turned toward the door. “See you at Barnacle Billy’s tonight?”

“Absolutely! Six o’clock, and don’t be late. We have a lot to catch up on.”

CHAPTER TEN



Jane stepped into her mother Addie's room, which was warm and comforting. It was filled with the familiar furniture that had once adorned their family home, each piece a treasured relic of their shared past. The bed was covered with a patchwork quilt that Jane had seen since her childhood, each square a testament to the years gone by. Outside the window, a bird feeder hung from a branch, attracting an array of colorful birds that Addie loved to watch.

Cooper ran in ahead of Jane, and Addie's face lit up. "Cooper! I always love seeing you!" Addie leaned down to pet the dog, who wiggled with delight.

Jane handed her mother the bag of chocolate chip muffins from Sandcastles Café. Addie's eyes lit up as she caught the aroma wafting from the bag.

"Oh, these smell divine! Did Claire make these?" Addie asked as she took a muffin and bit into it, savoring the taste.

"Yes, Mom, she did," Jane replied, pleased that her mother remembered her friend.

"Has she graduated from cooking school yet?" Addie inquired, her eyes shining with curiosity.

Jane felt a bittersweet emotion wash over her. "No, Mom. Claire runs her own café now, remember? She's been out of school for quite some time."

Addie looked slightly confused, as if trying to fit together pieces of a puzzle. "Ah, yes, I must've forgotten. Time flies, doesn't it?"

Jane nodded, her heart aching a little but also filled with love. “Yes, it does. Speaking of which, do you remember four women that used to come to the inn every fall? Susan, Margie, Betty, and Carol?”

Addie nodded even though the confused look in her eye told Jane she didn’t really remember them.

“They wanted me to give you this.” Jane pulled the little figurine out of her bag.

Addie’s eyes lit up. “It looks like Tides!” Addie took the figurine from Jane and admired it for a few minutes before giving it a prominent place on her bookshelf. “I’ll keep it right here where I can see it all the time. Will you thank them for me?”

“I will.”

Addie took another bite of her muffin and then glanced around her room. “They’ve started decorating for the Winter Prelude. Would you like to take a walk and see the decorations in the common rooms?”

“I’d love to. Mike is supposed to meet me here to take Cooper back to his place. Why don’t we wait for him?”

“Sure. I can finish my muffin.”

Hearing a soft knock on the door, they turned to see Mike standing there. Jane and Mike had been dating for a few months now, and the sight of him still made her heart flip. Cooper rushed over to Mike, and the man bent down to lavish the dog with attention.

“Hey, boy! I missed you.” Mike rubbed Cooper’s fur then stood and gave Jane a soft kiss on the cheek. “And you too.”

“And me?” Addie asked innocently.

Mike laughed. “Especially you.” He walked over and kissed Addie on top of the head.

“I was just telling Jane that they’ve started putting up the decorations for the Winter Prelude,” Addie chimed in. “Maybe we can all go take a look?”

Jane, Mike, and Addie wandered through the common areas of Tall Pines Assisted Living. The soft glow of twinkling white lights washed over them, lending a magical touch to the surroundings. From the art room to the library, each space seemed transformed into a cozy winter wonderland.

When they reached the puzzle room, they heard a voice tinged with concern say, “Now, Mom, this is too much. You should take it easy.”

An unmistakable Norwegian accent shot back, “Hush up. I’m perfectly fine and full of energy!”

Rounding the corner, they came upon Olga Svenson and another woman standing among a flurry of festive decorations. Olga was arranging an intricate ornament on a shelf.

“Ah, Jane! So good to see you!” Olga beamed. “I hope you are enjoying the decorations I gave Liz for the Inn. Meet my daughter, Kristina.”

“Nice to meet you, Kristina,” Jane said warmly then turned to Olga. “Thank you so much for sending of the decorations. They look fantastic, and my guests love them.”

“You’re very welcome, dear. I have more. It gets lonely just sitting around all day, so I’ve been getting into the holiday spirit early.” Olga’s sapphire eyes twinkled.

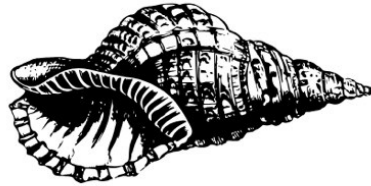
Kristina sighed. “Mom, really, you’re doing too much for your age. The decorating, the baking, managing the house—it’s a lot. Maybe it’s time to consider a nice room here at Tall Pines.”

Olga’s eyes narrowed, her gaze full of defiance. “Not a chance, young lady. I have more energy than people half my age and love to keep busy!”

Addie, who had been quietly observing the exchange, finally spoke. “Oh, let Olga be. As long as she’s able, she should do what makes her happy. You never know when you might not be able to do things or even take care of your own home anymore.”

Her words hung in the air, carrying a weight that seemed to hit home for everyone in the room. Kristina looked at her mother, perhaps seeing her in a new light, while Olga nodded appreciatively at Addie’s insight.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



In the warm, cozy ambiance of Andie's antique store, Sam and Bunny were seated in front of the old trunk in which Andie had found the unopened gift. Antique furniture and vintage collectibles surrounded them, each with a story of its own. Dooley sat obediently nearby, his keen eyes watching the proceedings.

Sam carefully lifted the lid of the trunk, revealing a mishmash of items—a true time capsule. Bunny, her eyes shining with curiosity, was the first to reach inside. She pulled out an old Raggedy Ann doll and some doilies.

"I don't think Iris even went through this. You know, sometimes, she would come back on a Saturday afternoon with her car full and just fill up her spare room. I wonder how many of her treasures she never even looked at again," Bunny mused.

"No wonder her kids just wanted to have a big sale to clean it all out." Sam reached into the trunk and carefully pulled out an old 45 record. "I hear the place was packed full."

"It was." Andie remembered having to pick her way through the piles of stuff at the sale.

Bunny pulled out a set of old linens, beautifully embroidered but showing signs of age. "Oh! Look at these!" Bunny exclaimed, holding the linens up to the light. "They're exquisite, but they have a D embroidered on them. That can't be from the Perkins family."

"What was Iris's maiden name?" Sam asked.

"Brown," Bunny replied without even looking up from the trunk. "But that's a good thought. It could be one of the related families. That should be

easy to find out in the town records at the library.”

Sam agreed. “And these old newspapers might have some clues.” He pulled out a stack of yellowed papers dated from fifty-five years ago. “We can look through town records or old newspapers to find a family with a D in their name.”

“And these bulletins from St. Mary’s church. Whoever had this trunk must have belonged to the congregation,” Bunny added.

As Bunny and Sam continued to sift through the trunk, their hands landed on a variety of items that instantly transported them back to their own childhoods. Sam pulled out a View-Master, complete with scenic reels.

“I had one of these!” he exclaimed, peering through it for a moment. “Hey, these are antiques?”

Bunny laughed as she examined an old rotary-dial phone, lifting it as if she was going to make a call. “I guess that makes you an antique, too, Sam.”

Dooley seemed to catch the jest, letting out an excited bark as if he understood the humor.

The room filled with laughter, which echoed warmly through the store.

“Ah, well, if I’m an antique, I’m a well-preserved one,” Sam joked, giving Bunny a playful nudge.

As Bunny carefully folded the old linens back into the trunk, Sam neatly stacked the yellowed newspapers on top.

“So, we’ll start by looking through the Perkins family tree to see if there is a branch whose last name begins with D,” Sam said, outlining their plan. “And if that doesn’t pan out, we’ll start in on the town files to look for families whose last name begins with a D.”

“Right,” Bunny confirmed. “Then we should probably speak with some of the older residents. They might remember something useful. Olga, for instance, seems to have the memory of an elephant.”

“And after that, if we come up with any potential families, we could dig a little deeper. Maybe look into estate sales or yard sales around that time,” Sam added, latching the trunk closed.

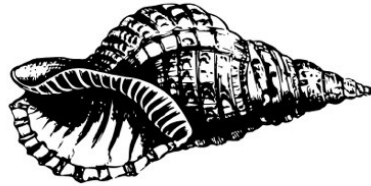
“Those are great ideas. What can I help with?” Andie asked.

Bunny and Sam exchanged a glance.

“You just leave it to us, dear. We have a process, and you’re busy here at the shop anyway.” Bunny glanced at Sam. “What do you say we hit the library?”

Sam stood and stretched. “Great idea. I always say there’s no time like the present to get started on an investigation.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



Maxi carefully adjusted the last piece of paper covering the gallery windows. Peeking through a tiny gap, she caught sight of the Winter Prelude festivities happening outside. Stores were setting up tables brimming with holiday merchandise, and twinkling lights adorned windows and lampposts. The cheerful ambiance made her stomach churn with nervous anticipation; she still hadn't found the perfect artist for her gallery showing.

Her gaze shifted to the bright sign she had put up outside: "Grand Reveal Saturday!" Passersby stopped to read it, their curiosity evident as they tried to look through the covered windows. Maxi felt a mix of excitement and sheer panic. Time was running out, and she still had no art to reveal. She did, however, have some prospects, and one of them, Una Thomas, was supposed to be here any minute. Maxi had never heard of the woman, but she'd answered an ad Maxi had put up at the artists' café, and Maxi was desperate enough to talk to anyone.

Just then, the door swung open, and a woman walked in, looking around in confusion. She spotted Maxi and smiled.

"Hi, I'm Una," she said. She pulled a wheeled suitcase behind her. "Ready to have your mind blown?"

"Absolutely," Maxi said, eager but also apprehensive. "What do you have for us?"

Una unzipped her suitcase and pulled out what looked like a Christmas wreath, but upon closer inspection, Maxi noticed it was made entirely of

mini voodoo dolls adorned with holiday hats and scarves. Each was carefully pinned with tiny mistletoe leaves and holly berries.

"It's a cross-cultural celebration," Una explained, beaming. "Louisiana voodoo meets holiday cheer!"

Maxi's eyes widened. While she couldn't deny the cultural infusion and festive element, the artwork was also downright eerie.

"Imagine an entire gallery filled with these!" Una exclaimed as she pulled out a giant doll with a knife through its right eye.

Maxi hesitated, trying to find the right words. "It's... very unique, and certainly embraces a cross-cultural theme," she said cautiously, "but I'm not sure it's got the festive vibe we're looking for."

Una looked slightly deflated but nodded in understanding. "Oh, well..." She glanced around the empty gallery.

"Thanks for coming by." Maxi walked her to the door. "I'll be in touch."

After Una left, Maxi sighed and flopped into the chair behind the desk. Hopefully, she wouldn't have to resort to a gallery full of voodoo dolls wearing garland and tinsel.

Her phone buzzed on the counter. It was Muriel, a well-connected artist friend of hers.

"Maxi! I just got your message," Muriel chirped. "I think I've found someone for the gallery showing."

"Oh, that would be fantastic."

"I don't know her personally, but her name is Elana Brussels. I heard that she has a very interesting blend of local Maine heritage and holiday cheer. Can she drop by tomorrow afternoon?"

"I have an art lesson with Bunny at four, but any time before that is good." Maxi loved the painting lessons she took with Bunny and didn't want to miss one if she could help it.

"Okay. How about two? I'll tell Todd to relay the message to her," Muriel said.

"Sounds perfect." Maxi's spirits lifted considerably. Muriel had a variety of interesting contacts, so Elana was bound to work out. She couldn't be as bad as the last person.

"Great. Let's get together soon." They said their goodbyes and hung up.

Maxi had a half hour before she had to head to Barnacle Billy's to meet the others, and that was just enough time to give her husband a quick

FaceTime call.

As she held her phone in front of her, Maxi felt a rush of affection when she saw James's familiar face on the screen. Picasso and Rembrandt, their black-and-white cats, darted about in the background, their youthful energy evident even through the small screen.

"So, how's your day been?" James asked after they'd laughed at the cats' antics. "Any luck finding the perfect artist for the gallery showing?"

Maxi sighed, rolling her eyes for comedic effect. "You wouldn't believe the candidates I've had to interview. One artist came in with Christmas-themed voodoo dolls."

James chuckled. "Well, the search for art is much like the creation of art itself—full of surprises and challenges."

"Very poetic, James." Maxi smiled. "And how's your day?"

"Busy with meetings, but it's winding down. Picasso and Rembrandt have been keeping me entertained," he said, pausing to reach down and pick up Picasso, who had decided that moment to pounce on James's foot. "So, girls' night out tonight, huh?"

"Yes, we're meeting up at Barnacle Billy's. You know how much I love our girls' nights," Maxi said, her eyes lighting up at the thought of an evening spent with her close friends.

"I do, and I'm glad you have them. Everyone needs a break and some quality time with friends," James replied warmly. "But I'll still miss you."

"I'll miss you too," Maxi said, her voice softening. "But I won't be too late, promise."

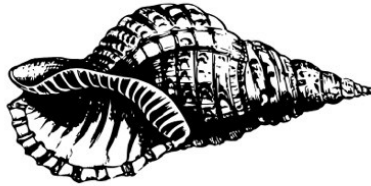
"Don't worry, Picasso and Rembrandt will keep me company."

"Thanks." Maxi smiled, touched by his understanding and support.

"See you when you get home. Love you."

"Love you too," Maxi said, ending the call with a satisfied sigh before grabbing her big striped tote bag and heading off to Barnacle Billy's.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Jane pushed open the door to Barnacle Billy's, her stomach grumbling at the aroma of freshly grilled seafood.

The restaurant was alive with a symphony of sounds. From the low murmur of conversations among diners, punctuated by the occasional hearty laugh, to the soft clinking of glasses and utensils against fine china, each noise contributed to the inviting atmosphere.

She saw Claire, Maxi, and Andie seated at a table and started across the blue carpet toward them.

"Hey, ladies!" she greeted as she pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Jane, you made it! We were just about to order some wine," Claire said, her eyes lighting up. She gestured to the menus laid out on the crisp white linen tablecloth. In the middle of the table, a single candle flickered, casting a warm glow that softened their faces.

The row of windows behind them looked out onto Perkins Cove, where fishing boats and dinghies bobbed peacefully in the water. The footbridge could be seen at the mouth of the cove, and though they often dined on the patio to enjoy the view, the cooler weather had them inside tonight.

"What's everyone feeling—red, white, or sparkling?" Andie inquired, flipping through the wine list.

"I'm in the mood for a nice Chardonnay," Maxi chimed in.

"Sounds perfect. White it is," Claire confirmed, nodding at Jane for agreement. Jane offered a warm smile and nodded.

The waitress appeared and introduced herself as Sarah, and they ordered their wine.

Andie turned to Jane. “Did you visit Mom? How was she?”

“Great as usual,” Jane said. “They’re decorating Tall Pines for Prelude, too, and Mom seemed to like that.”

“That’s great. I’m glad we made the right decision putting her there,” Andie said.

“We did, and speaking of decorating, I saw the paper up on the windows of the gallery when I walked by earlier, Maxi. Were you able to straighten things out with the artists for the event?”

Maxi shook her head, waiting for the waitress to set their basket of bread and wine down before answering, her voice lowered so no one could overhear. “No, unfortunately. I’m in the process of looking for new talent, and let me tell you, it’s been quite the adventure. The themes some artists have been suggesting are—well, they’re out there.”

“Like how out there?” Claire asked, curious.

Maxi leaned in, as if sharing a secret. “Okay, so imagine this: one artist had these garish voodoo dolls with Christmas-themed clothes and mistletoe—“

Jane made a face, “Really?”

Yes!” Maxi took another sip of her wine. “So I struck out today, but Muriel found someone that might work out, and I’m going to talk to her tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s good. I hope things work out.” Claire flipped open her menu, and the others followed suit while discussing the different options. Once they’d decided and put the menus down, Sarah appeared.

“Looks like you ladies are ready to order. May I interest you in tonight’s special? We have a beautiful swordfish steak, grilled to perfection and served with a citrus-herb sauce.”

“That sounds delicious,” Claire commented, her eyes scanning the menu one last time.

“Do you all know what you’d like?” Sarah asked, pulling out her notepad.

“I’ll take the swordfish special,” Claire decided, closing her menu.

“I’ll have the lobster tail, please,” Jane said, already imagining the rich, buttery flavor.

“And I’ll go for the seared scallops,” Andie chimed in, smiling at Sarah.

“I’m in the mood for shrimp scampi,” Maxi added, handing her menu to the waitress.

“Excellent choices,” Sarah said, scribbling down their orders. “Would you like some bread for the table?”

“Of course,” Jane answered for the group, earning approving nods from her friends.

“Very well. I’ll get your orders in right away,” Sarah said before heading back to the kitchen.

As she left, Maxi turned to Claire. “Enough about me. Tell us the latest in the Beach Bones saga.”

Claire sighed as she buttered a piece of warm, crusty bread from the basket Sarah had deposited in the center of the table. “You won’t believe it, but Sandee actually had the nerve to come into my store today. And no, we didn’t resolve anything. We’re both as stubborn as mules.”

“That’s tough,” Maxi said sympathetically. “I can’t even imagine having to deal with that level of tension.”

Claire took a bite of the bread, contemplating her next words. “You know, sometimes, I wonder if I’m just being silly about the whole thing. But when I try to approach her rationally, she just... I don’t know, makes it difficult.”

“Well, you’ll get another chance to sort it out,” Andie chimed in with a mischievous grin.

Claire looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“You really don’t know?” Andie’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “Both of you are on the roster to man the charity tent for the animal shelter tomorrow. You’ll be side by side for the entire afternoon.”

Claire’s eyes widened, the piece of bread frozen in midair. “You’re kidding. Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Nope, it’s happening,” Andie confirmed, taking a sip of her wine. “Who knows, maybe things will work out.”

Claire snorted. “More like there’ll be a brawl.”

Everyone laughed.

“Maybe she really isn’t that bad if she’s volunteering to work the charity tent,” Jane said.

“Maybe.” Claire didn’t look convinced. “Tammi said we did have a lot in common, and I guess Sandee and Peter are getting divorced.”

“What?” Maxi looked surprised.

“Yeah, I had no idea. Tammi sounded like she even felt sorry for her,” Claire said. “Maybe I should give her a chance.”

“You never know, could be a new friendship.” Jane dipped a piece of lobster tail in butter.

“Doubtful.” Claire forked off a piece of swordfish. “What about you, Jane? How are your guests working out? I hope you don’t have drama like me and Maxi.”

“Thankfully, there’s no drama at the inn. The guests are absolutely lovely, and guess what? They all know Sally!”

“Doesn’t everyone know Sally?” Claire quipped, and they all laughed.

“How about you, Andie? What’s going on at the store?” Maxi asked.

“No drama, but I do have a little bit of a mystery.”

“Oh?” They all looked intrigued as Andie told them about the present she’d found in the trunk. “I have Sam and Bunny helping me try to find out who it belongs to.”

“Bunny and Sam, eh?” Claire grinned. “They’re so cute together.”

“They’re quite the pair, aren’t they?” Jane chimed in, nibbling on a piece of bread. “Every time I see them together, it just warms my heart.”

Andie nodded. “They really are good together. It’s like they’re both rediscovering their zest for life, and it’s adorable to see. It’s one of those late-in-life romances that gives everyone hope.”

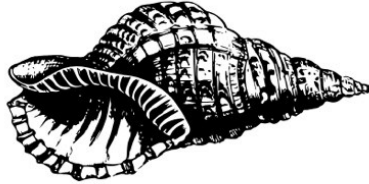
“Well, I hope you find the owner. That would be cool to get a gift that was meant to come years ago,” Maxi said. “I have a lesson with Bunny tomorrow night after I interview that new artist. Maybe she’ll have solved the mystery by then.”

“I hope your new artist works out okay,” Claire said to Maxi.

“Thanks, and I hope your special time with Sandee turns out okay too,” Maxi teased.

Jane raised her glass. “I hope everything works out great for everyone. Here’s to good friends, easy solutions, and great meals.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



As Sam and Bunny stepped out of the library, leaves from the oak trees that lined the street cascaded down like golden confetti, greeting them in the crisp evening air. The town was a warm, inviting scene: twinkle lights adorned trees, streetlamps, and even the front windows of quaint local shops. Pumpkins were placed here and there, some elaborately carved with faces or designs that reflected the spirit of the season.

Bunny looked around and sighed. “Isn’t it just beautiful? Fall is my favorite time of the year, especially with the Winter Prelude approaching.”

Sam smiled, inhaling deeply as if to absorb the essence of the season. “I love it too. The whole town seems to come alive.”

Their eyes met, holding a moment of shared contentment. Then Bunny brought them back to the task at hand. “Well, we didn’t get as many leads as I’d hoped. But we do have a hefty list of yard and estate sales from the classified sections of the old papers.”

Sam chuckled. “Yes. If only we could narrow it down to a specific year, it’d make our search a whole lot easier.”

Bunny’s eyes lit up, and she nudged him playfully. “Oh, I’m sure we’ll be able to figure it out. Remember how I brilliantly deduced the identity of Jane’s mysterious guest a few weeks ago?”

Sam raised an eyebrow, looking amused. “Hmm, that’s one version of the story. My recollection is a little different.”

“Are you implying that you had a hand in that particular stroke of genius?” Bunny teased.

“Let’s call it a team effort,” Sam said, grinning. He patted Bunny’s hand gently. “But you are undeniably sharp and very good at investigating. It’s one of the many things I adore about you.”

The flattery made Bunny blush, but she didn’t mind one bit. “Well, thank you, Sam.”

Sam grew more serious. “Look, I have an idea. When I was on the force, we often had to sift through lots of information quickly. I think we should put everything we know into a spreadsheet and then look for patterns. It might help us zero in on the right yard sale.”

Bunny nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, I like that! Very organized, very systematic. It sounds perfect.”

Just then, they ran into Earl, an old friend who was busy setting up paper luminaries along Main Street. The lanterns were carefully placed to lead up to the entrances of various businesses. Battery-operated candles sat inside each, ensuring there was no fire risk.

“Earl! What are you up to?” Bunny greeted him warmly.

“Hey there, you two! Just setting up for the luminary walk tomorrow night.”

“It looks wonderful,” Bunny remarked.

“Thanks! Lucky thing that big storm brewing is staying down near New York City and not coming up this way. Rain would ruin all our hard work with these luminaries.”

Sam nodded. “Not to mention put a damper on the Prelude event.”

Just as they were about to continue their walk, Marie from the animal rescue came rushing up to them, her face flushed and her eyes filled with urgency.

“Sam, Bunny, I’m so glad I caught you!” she panted, trying to catch her breath.

“What’s the matter, Marie?” Sam asked, concern evident in his voice.

“It’s the storm down in New York City. It’s causing all kinds of problems, and many animals have been displaced. Shelters there are overwhelmed. We’re coordinating efforts to provide them with some relief. I might need fosters, but I have no idea how to get the animals in need up here.”

Bunny’s eyes widened at the gravity of the situation, but Marie immediately clarified, “Oh, no, I don’t want you guys to drive down. It’s

too dangerous to go right into the storm. I just meant in general, we're looking for volunteers."

Sam looked conflicted. "I'm not sure about fostering another animal. I've already got Dooley, you know."

Bunny gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Well, I could foster. You know I've been thinking about getting a pet anyway. This could be the perfect way to make a meaningful contribution."

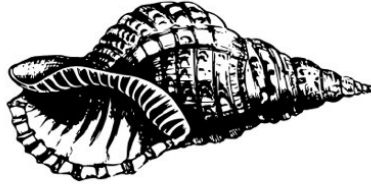
Marie's eyes lit up. "Oh, Bunny, that would be such a big help. Fostering not only provides these animals with a temporary home but also makes room for other displaced animals in the shelter."

Sam nodded, appreciative of Bunny's willingness. "That sounds like a great idea. If you're fostering, I can at least help out with supplies and maybe even offer some logistical support. Dooley might not appreciate a new roommate, but I bet he'd be okay with sharing his toys."

Marie let out a sigh of relief. "You two are lifesavers. I'll get everything set up and let you know if I need you to foster. I hope there won't be too many animals, in which case you guys are off the hook."

Marie rushed off, and Sam and Bunny looked at each other. "Looks like we're going to be very busy the next few days."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Sandee gripped the steering wheel tightly as she navigated the treacherous roads, rain pelting against the windshield like an unyielding drumbeat. Her wipers worked in overdrive, swiping away water just fast enough for her to catch fleeting glimpses of the road ahead.

Her phone buzzed in the cup holder beside her. It was Marie, and she clicked on the speakerphone option, careful to keep her eyes on the road.

“Sandee, are you okay? This storm is crazy!”

“I’m fine, Marie,” Sandee assured her, her voice tinged with a steely determination. “Someone had to go down to rescue those dogs, so it might as well be me. I’ll take as many as can fit in the car.”

“Please be careful,” Marie urged. “The roads are treacherous.”

“I will,” Sandee assured her. “Look, with this weather, I think it might be best if I stay the night here. I’ll try to make it back in time to man the charity tent tomorrow.”

“All right,” Marie agreed, her voice tinged with relief. “Just make sure you’re safe, okay? Those dogs need you, but we do too.”

“I will, don’t worry.” She hung up, her heart swelling at Marie’s concern. At least someone needed her.

Her car hit a puddle, causing her to hydroplane. Her heart leapt into her throat as she lost control, the car spinning briefly before landing in a ditch beside the road. The jolt from the impact cut her conversation short, her phone falling from the cup holder and onto the car floor.

For a moment, Sandee sat there, stunned. The rain continued its relentless drumming against the roof, a stark contrast to the silence that

enveloped her in the aftermath of the crash. She took a deep breath, feeling her heartbeat gradually return to normal.

Still gripping the steering wheel, Sandee stared at the rain-soaked road ahead, her thoughts swirling like the storm outside. She took a deep, shaky breath, gathering her composure.

“All right, Sandee, it’s just a bump in the road. You’ve navigated through worse,” she muttered to herself, her voice barely audible over the rain’s relentless patter.

She glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror. The woman staring back hadn’t been brave enough to face a challenge like this in the past. The old Sandee would have given up at the slightest hint of trouble. She’d floated through life sheltered and pampered. But she was a different person now. The mess with Peter, the tension with Claire over Beach Bones, and now this ditch on a stormy night; they were all hurdles, but none was insurmountable.

Sandee’s eyes narrowed as she surveyed the ditch her car was stuck in. Maybe, just maybe, she could get herself out of this jam without waiting for the tow truck. She gripped the steering wheel, took a deep breath, and gently pressed on the gas. The car’s wheels spun in the slick mud, throwing muck and water into the air.

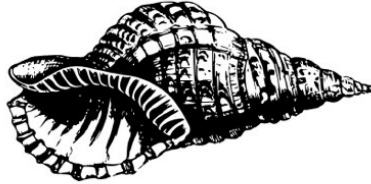
For a moment, it felt hopeless—the wheels just couldn’t gain traction. But the new Sandee wasn’t about to give up that easily. She eased off the gas, rocked back a little, and then pressed down again, giving it another go.

The car lurched, rocked back, and—yes!—slowly started to crawl its way up and out of the ditch. Sandee felt a surge of triumph as her tires hit the pavement. With one last spin, she straightened the car out onto the roadway.

“Ha! Take that!” she exclaimed, her face lighting up with a grin of pure satisfaction.

She took a second to catch her breath, her heart still racing from the adrenaline. Then, with renewed determination, she carefully navigated back onto the road, determined more than ever to help save those dogs.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The next morning, the dining room at the Inn at Tides was bustling with life. Betty, Susan, Carol, and Margie were seated at a round table draped in white linen, bathed in the morning sunlight that streamed through the large bay windows. Brenda, the inn's talented chef, walked in with a steaming plate of fluffy pancakes and set it down in front of them with a proud smile.

"Here you go, ladies, fresh off the griddle!"

Jane followed her, coffee pot in hand. "Would anyone like some more coffee?"

The four women erupted in compliments for Brenda. "These pancakes look amazing!" Susan said, the smell of maple syrup filling the air.

"Oh, Brenda, you've outdone yourself," Margie added, eagerly taking a pancake off the stack.

Brenda beamed. "Well, I'm glad you ladies are pleased. Anything to make your stay special."

After topping off everyone's coffee cups, Jane joined the conversation. "So, what's on the agenda for today? The town is buzzing with excitement for the first day of Winter Prelude."

"First things first: we're going to Spoiled Rotten," Carol declared. "I heard they're having a sale on their Lobster Bay candles. We absolutely have to get one each."

"That's definitely first," Betty agreed, sipping her coffee. "The fragrance is just so reminiscent of here. It's like taking a piece of Lobster Bay back home."

“And you’re going to love the little gift bags they’re giving away,” Jane added, a gleam in her eyes. “Filled with local goodies.”

“Of course we want to hit all the shops. I know there are such good deals during Prelude.” Betty poured maple syrup on her pancake.

“Have you all noticed the lights and luminaries along Main Street?” Margie asked, taking a sip of her coffee. “The town looks so magical.”

“Yes, and the pumpkins!” Carol added. “Some people are really talented with their carving. I saw a few that were genuine works of art.”

“I love how everyone gets into the spirit,” Susan said. “And it’s the perfect weather for our cozy fall sweaters and boots. I’m glad I brought mine, though I may have overpacked.”

“You definitely overpacked,” Carol joked, and everyone laughed.

Jane smiled, enjoying how everyone seemed to appreciate the little details that made Lobster Bay special. “The decorations really bring the community together. It’s like the entire town is giving you a warm hug.”

They all agreed, caught up in the heartwarming ambiance of the season.

“Oh, by the way, where’s Cooper? He’s usually here, begging for a morsel or two,” Carol inquired, looking around for the friendly pooch.

“He’s with Mike today,” Jane said.

“Oh, how lovely. I hope he’ll be back before we leave,” Susan said.

As they finished their coffee and pushed their empty plates away, Susan glanced out of the window, where the sky was brightening into a beautiful, clear day. “You know, ladies, since we’ll already be out and about, maybe we should take a ride to the Rachel Carson Preserve at dusk to see the deer. It’ll be the perfect ending to our day.”

“Oh, I love the preserve!” Carol’s eyes twinkled with nostalgia. “My sisters and I used to love going there to see the deer at dusk. There was something magical about it, especially this time of year.”

“I know what you mean,” Margie agreed. “We used to walk the paths there all the time on weekends with my family. My dad was a big fan of all the different trees, and he’d teach us the names. Of course, I’ve forgotten most of them now, but those moments were special.”

Susan chimed in, “And the leaves! Even though many have already fallen, the remaining ones create such a vibrant tapestry of colors. It’s like the trees are putting on a final show before winter sets in.”

Carol nodded, smiling warmly. “Yes, the shades of amber and crimson against the backdrop of evergreens— it’s like a painting, only better

because it's real. And the deer seem to love the tranquility too."

Betty's eyes softened at the memory. "And those moments when a deer would just suddenly appear in the clearing, almost like a spirit animal—it's as if the forest shared one of its best-kept secrets with you."

The table went quiet for a moment, each lost in her own thoughts and memories of days gone by and simple pleasures.

"And then after that, how about dinner at Oarweeds?" Carol asked.

Betty sat back and patted her stomach. "I can't even think about food right now."

Margie patted her hand. "Well, if I know you, you'll be more than ready to eat by dinnertime."

Betty laughed. "True."

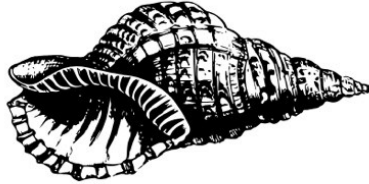
Susan pushed back her chair. "Let's go upstairs and get ready. We have a big day ahead of us."

After the ladies went upstairs, Jane cleared the dishes from the dining room, and she and Brenda wiped down the kitchen counters, the residual aroma of fresh pancakes and coffee filling the air. As she placed the last of the dishes in the dishwasher, her thoughts returned to the previous night's dinner with Maxi, Andie, and Claire.

The news that Claire and Sandee would be manning the animal shelter charity tent together had been a bombshell. Given their history and lingering tension, Claire was definitely going to need some moral support. And what better way to provide that than to show up as a united front?

Jane double-checked her apron, hanging it carefully on the hook by the kitchen door, and stepped out into the crisp autumn air. A walk on the beach first would be nice, and then she'd venture to the charity tent. She didn't want Sandee to feel ganged up on, but if there was going to be trouble, her loyalties were with Claire.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Maxi paced the empty gallery, her soft-soled shoes squeaking on the floor. It was the first day of Winter Prelude, and the clock was ticking down to tomorrow's opening. She glanced around at the barren walls that were crying out for art. But maybe, just maybe Elana Brussels would be the answer to her prayers. Muriel had suggested her, and Muriel had a good eye for talent.

Just as she was in the middle of this thought, the front door creaked open, and in walked Elana. The woman was an interesting ensemble of colors and textures. She wore a patchwork skirt of various fabrics, paired with a knitted sweater featuring every shade of blue imaginable. A rainbow of bangles adorned her wrists, clinking softly as she moved. Her hair was a wild, untamed curling mass, punctuated with random small braids adorned with tiny seashells.

The woman looked around uncertainly, a frown creasing her face as she noticed how empty the gallery was. Her gaze stopped on Maxi, and she smiled.

"Ah, you must be Maxi." Elana beamed, offering a hand decorated with paint-splattered nails. "So pleased to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, Elana," Maxi replied, shaking her hand cautiously. "So, what kind of artwork do you specialize in?"

"Well," Elana began, her eyes twinkling, "I create Christmas-themed artwork, but with a local Maine flair."

Maxi felt a moment of hope. That sounded perfect for the Winter Prelude event. "That sounds intriguing," she encouraged.

Elana's eyes brightened even more as she opened a large portfolio bag. "Allow me to show you," she said, pulling out several pieces wrapped in tissue paper. She carefully unwrapped the first, revealing what looked like a Santa Claus figure—except, upon closer inspection, Maxi realized that Santa was actually assembled from lobster claws.

"This one I call *Santa Claws*," Elana said, grinning.

Maxi blinked. The piece was kitschy, to say the least. The red lobster claws had been arranged in the shape of Santa's arms, legs, and head. The shell of the lobster tail made the body. And it emitted a faint aroma that Maxi couldn't ignore: it smelled like old, sour seafood.

Elana unveiled the next piece, this one featuring a Christmas tree made entirely out of the ends of the lobster tails, adorned with miniature buoys as ornaments. "And this," she declared, "is *O Lobster Tree*."

Maxi suppressed a sigh. This was decidedly not what she had in mind for her gallery's Winter Prelude showcase.

"The art has a unique scent because it's authentic," Elana added as if reading Maxi's thoughts. "Smells like a real Lobster Bay Christmas, doesn't it?"

"Ah, yes." Maxi forced a polite smile. "Very authentic."

Elana went on to show her more in the same vein—a lobster-shell Rudolph and a miniature nativity scene made out of tiny lobster legs.

"Wow, these are certainly unique," Maxi finally managed to say, trying to maintain her composure. "I've never seen anything like them."

Elana looked pleased. "So, what do you think? Perfect for your showing, right? Muriel said you wanted something holiday themed but with a cultural flair, and what could be more cultural here in Maine than lobster?"

Maxi hesitated, searching for the right words. These pieces were undoubtedly unique, but they were not the elegant, refined artwork she had envisioned for her gallery. And she'd wanted something cultural that people could learn from, that would show how holidays were celebrated in a different time or a different place. How could she let Elana down gently?

"You know, Elana," she began cautiously, "your work is certainly one of a kind, but I'm not sure it's the right fit for this showing. Thank you for showing it to me, though."

Elana looked a bit deflated but nodded understandingly. "Well, art is subjective, isn't it?"

“Yes.” Maxi sighed inwardly. “It certainly is.”

As Elana packed up her lobster-claw creations, Maxi’s mind raced. She was back to square one, and time was running out.

Maxi stood in the center of her art gallery, surrounded by empty walls that echoed her own sense of defeat. Her fingertips traced the edge of her cell phone, contemplating the awkward calls she might have to make. Should she ring up Priya or Gerard and plead for them to showcase their art on such short notice? The weight of potential failure pressed on her; the last thing she wanted was to let Chandler down.

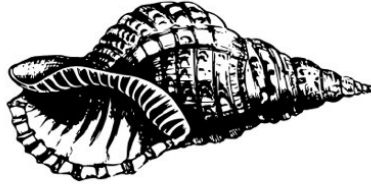
Maxi sighed and moved toward the window, carefully peeling back a corner of the paper covering the glass. Outside, Winter Prelude was in full swing—children were laughing, couples in bright scarves and pom-pommed hats strolled arm in arm, and shops were bustling with holiday shoppers. The atmosphere was so jubilant, so hopeful, contrasting sharply with the emptiness of her gallery.

Then her eyes caught sight of the charity tent a little way down the street. Probably the only person doing worse than her was Claire. She was in the tent, awkwardly sharing the space with Sandee.

Perhaps she should go over and lend Claire some moral support. In Lobster Bay, community meant everything, and right now, one of her best friends was in the trenches.

Taking a last glance at her vacant gallery, Maxi grabbed her coat and scarf. “Who knows,” she mused aloud to the empty room, “maybe a bit of goodwill can turn both our days around.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Bunny was so busy thinking about the mystery of the present that she practically ran Maxi over when she came out of the side street that housed the art gallery.

“Oh, Maxi, I’m so sorry!” Bunny exclaimed, steadying a bag filled with notebooks and papers. “I didn’t see you coming out of the gallery.”

“Oh, no worries. I wasn’t watching where I was going,” Maxi said.

Bunny’s eyes darted toward the gallery’s papered-up windows. “So, is everything in there still a top-secret project?”

Maxi let out a tired sigh. “Well, sort of... Let’s just say it’s a work in progress. I promise, I’ll fill you in during our painting lesson later. Right now, I’m off to rescue Claire in the animal rescue charity tent.”

“Oh dear. I heard about the storm. Those poor animals.” Bunny frowned. “But why does Claire need rescuing?”

Maxi leaned in closer, lowering her voice as if sharing a state secret. “She’s manning the animal rescue charity tent with Sandee. Do you know about the whole Beach Bones fiasco?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Bunny nodded. “I was hoping they’d work things out, you know? Dooley absolutely loves those treats.”

“Same here,” Maxi agreed, “but from what I hear, there’s still a lot of tension between them. So I’m heading over there to provide some emotional backup.”

Bunny smiled warmly at Maxi. “That’s very kind of you, Maxi. I’ll see you at four for our painting lesson.”

“Looking forward to it,” Maxi said, waving as Bunny continued down the cobblestone street.

As Bunny made her way to meet Sam, her thoughts kept drifting back to the Beach Bones debacle. Sam had mistakenly bought Sandee’s Beach Bones from the market, thinking they were Claire’s. Dooley had taken to them immediately. In fact, Dooley seemed to prefer the red ones from Sandee’s collection over Claire’s. Though she would never tell Claire that!

“Bunny! Over here!” Sam’s voice broke through her reverie as she saw him standing near the entrance of the town library, holding two cups of steaming coffee.

“Hey!” she called back, waving and increasing her pace to reach him.

As she took the coffee cup from Sam, they shared a quick kiss.

“Did you find anything more?” Sam asked. They’d split up the detective work, with Bunny going to some of the local auction companies and Sam researching the items in the trunk further.

Bunny shook her head, a wisp of her hair falling into her eyes. “The auction houses didn’t really have much. I asked to search back on what ones Olga attended, but that long ago, there were no computerized records. How about you?”

Sam shook his head. “Everything in the trunk is fairly common. So we know the people were not wealthy, at least I don’t think so. But the items were a little mismatched, as if they were thrown in from different rooms or something.”

Bunny sipped coffee, and an idea occurred to her. “You know, the problem is that there is too broad a time span. Maybe we should focus on the wrapping paper on the gift. If we can identify the pattern or the style of wrapping, we might be able to find out which years that paper was popular. That’ll help us narrow down the yard sales we have to look at.”

Sam’s face lit up, “That’s brilliant, Bunny!”

“I have a picture of the present on my phone. Let’s get into the library and start poking around on their internet. Who knows? Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

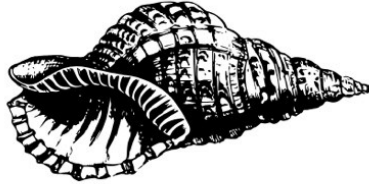
Sam gave her a hug and smiled down at her. “I already got lucky when I met you.”

Bunny smiled back, but internally, doubt tugged at her. Not about Sam; she felt the same way about meeting him. She was the one who had gotten

lucky. What she doubted was the odds of finding who that present belonged to.

Bunny wasn't one to give up easily, but for the first time, she had to admit she wasn't one hundred percent sure they'd be successful at solving this mystery.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Inside the animal rescue charity tent, Claire looked at her watch impatiently. She'd only been here an hour and had worked up a sweat dealing with a steady stream of people all by herself. Sandee was supposed to be here, too, not that Claire really wanted to spend time with her, but the woman had never shown up! She should not have been surprised.

The tent was a burst of autumnal colors set up near the sidewalks of Main Street. Under the canopy, tables were neatly arranged and covered with cheerful tablecloths that showcased falling leaves and pumpkins. In the middle of one table sat a donation jar, surrounded by an array of pet-themed trinkets—everything from little paw-print keychains to doggy bandanas. Another table was laden with baked goodies, among which Claire's own Beach Bones dog treats prominently stood out in their festive packaging. She'd brought them along and had pictured them competing side-by-side with Sandee's. At least that was one benefit to the other woman not showing up.

Claire bustled about, adjusting displays and greeting passersby with an enthusiasm that belied her annoyance. The tent was located perfectly to capture the afternoon sun, which cast a warm, inviting glow over everything. The weather was splendid—mild with a slight breeze, the kind of day that made her forget winter was just around the corner.

As people meandered down Main Street, the town's commitment to festive décor was evident everywhere. Twinkle lights adorned the shop fronts, each trying to outdo the next with an eye-catching arrangement of hay bales, scarecrows, and vibrantly colored mums. The paper luminaries,

set up by locals earlier, outlined the pathways and seemed to invite evening to fall so they could show off their glow.

Claire glanced down the street to see Jane hurtling towards her. She entered the tent, a frown creasing her forehead as her eyes swept over the space.

“Hey, Claire! Wow, this all looks amazing,” Jane exclaimed, but her tone carried a note of concern.

“Thanks. What’s wrong?” Claire was genuinely pleased to see her friend but sensed something was bothering Jane.

“Well, I came because I thought you might need some moral support.” Jane glanced under a table then lowered her voice. “Where is she?”

Just then, Maxi burst into the tent, a little breathless but smiling broadly. “Hi, guys!”

“Maxi! I thought you’d be busy down at the art gallery. Did you find an artist?” Claire asked.

Maxi sighed. “No, but I needed to take a break and thought I’d stop by and—”

“Hidey-hoo, everyone,” Andie’s voice rang out from the side of the tent.

“It’s getting a bit crowded in here.” Claire smiled at her friends. “But in a good way.”

“Claire, this is impressive, but where’s Sandee? Wasn’t she supposed to help?” Andie asked, and her eyes grew wide. “Oh no, what have you done with her?”

Claire laughed at the joke. “She was supposed to be here, but she never showed up. I should have known better.”

“That’s outrageous,” Maxi said. “You can’t do this all by yourself!”

“Actually, Marie was supposed to come by later, but she’s tied up. She’s coordinating relief for animal shelters in New York City that were affected by the floods,” Claire explained, frustration and worry mixing in her voice. “She’s stretched thin, and I don’t want to add to her stress. But yes, Sandee not showing up didn’t help.”

“Wow, who skips out on a charity thing? That’s really low,” Jane said.

Claire paused for a moment, taking in the love and support she felt from her friends. It made her reflect on the tentative plans she’d had concerning Sandee. “You know, I was actually contemplating calling a truce with Sandee over the whole Beach Bones name debacle,” she confessed.

“You were?” Maxi asked, a little surprised.

“Yeah. Tammi almost had me convinced that maybe I was wrong about Sandee. That perhaps she had good intentions and it was all a big misunderstanding,” Claire explained, glancing at the assorted Beach Bones dog treats neatly arranged on a table.

“But her not showing up today...” Maxi trailed off, letting Claire finish the thought.

Claire shook her head, her expression resolute. “Exactly. It’s like she’s shown her true colors. I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, but not now. There’s no way I’m letting her use the Beach Bones name.”

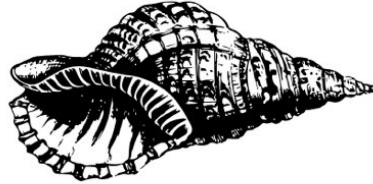
“You go!” Andie turned around to look at the people who had gathered to look at the various items for sale. “Now, let’s roll up our sleeves and help these people out.”

Maxi stuffed her tote bag under the table. “What can we do to help?”

“Yeah, consider us your unofficial volunteers for the day,” Jane added.

Claire looked at her friends, and her tension seemed to melt away. “You guys are amazing. Thank you so much.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



Rain hammered against Sandee's oversized raincoat as she tried to find a dry spot under the makeshift tarp. The chilling droplets trickled down her face, mingling with strands of hair glued to her forehead. Daniel, the rescue coordinator, looked over at her.

"We were severely short-staffed today. Your help made a world of difference. We saved more pets because of you," he said, his voice tinged with genuine appreciation. "Everything okay?" he asked, sensing her distant gaze.

Smiling, Sandee nodded. "Yes, everything's fine."

As Daniel turned his attention back to the rescued animals, Sandee's thoughts drifted to Lobster Bay. She felt a pang of guilt tighten in her chest. She'd promised to be at the charity tent for Prelude, and she felt guilty that she'd had to miss it. Marie had assured her over the phone that whoever was handling the tent could manage on their own, and her time was more needed here in the chaos of flood-hit New York City, yet the feeling of having let people down back in Lobster Bay was hard to shake.

Sandee and Daniel moved through the maze of makeshift kennels, both of them drenched but focused. Volunteers were milling about, each attending to an array of rescued animals—cats, dogs, even a couple of birds. In a large, waterlogged tent, several wash stations had been set up for cleaning the animals. Muffled barks and meows filled the air, a chaotic symphony of need.

Daniel looked around, clutching a clipboard. "We've got another twenty incoming. Foster families are maxed out."

Sandee paused, her eyes scanning the wet, shivering forms. “How many do we still need to place?”

“Eight, maybe more,” Daniel said, flipping through his papers. His eyes met Sandee’s, both understanding the gravity of their task.

Wordlessly, they divided their efforts. Sandee moved toward the wash stations where several dogs were tethered, waiting to be cleaned. She picked up a hose and started with a scruffy terrier mix, working the soap through its matted fur. Beside her, Daniel was doing the same with a trembling poodle. Other volunteers joined them, creating a sort of assembly line of washing, rinsing, and drying.

Once the dogs were clean, Sandee moved to the next station, where volunteers were checking each animal for identification tags or chips. “Any luck?” she asked a woman who was holding a scanner.

“A few. Maybe we can reunite them with their owners,” the woman replied, hope lifting her voice.

Two hours passed like this, the work monotonous but deeply urgent. Sandee’s muscles ached, her focus narrowed to the immediate needs before her. It was a type of tunnel vision that she welcomed, a state in which she could feel herself making a tangible difference, one animal at a time.

Finally, Daniel approached her. “We’re running out of room, Sandee. I don’t know where we’re going to put the next batch.”

“We need more transport out of the city,” Sandee replied, already considering her options.

“I know, I know,” Daniel sighed. “We’ve already sent some with Janine. Can you take any?”

Sandee considered for a moment. “I can take five. My car’s not huge, but it’s spacious enough.”

“Five might be a lot for one person to handle,” Daniel warned, clearly concerned. “And we already sent ten up to Marie in the van earlier. I think the shelter up there might be full.”

“I can manage,” Sandee insisted. “I’ll keep any overflow dogs that don’t find foster families at my house.”

Convinced, Daniel led her to a group of five dogs, each different in size and breed but similar in their expressions of anxious hope. Sandee recognized the dalmatian mix she’d washed earlier and a stout bulldog with an underbite. She also saw a lanky greyhound and a German shepherd that had been keeping a watchful eye on everything.

Together, she and Daniel loaded the dogs into crates in Sandee's car. The greyhound seemed to fold into itself to fit into its crate, while the dalmatian whined softly, as if asking for reassurance. Sandee felt her heart swell and constrict, a curious mix of joy and pain.

The last to board was a tiny Chihuahua they'd just rescued. Shivering and wet, it looked up with large, vulnerable eyes as Daniel carefully placed it in a crate. "That's the last of them," he said, sliding the crated Chihuahua into the passenger seat.

Sandee looked at her car, now filled with the anxious, hopeful faces of her charges. It was a heavy responsibility, but as she met each pair of eyes, she felt an inexplicable lightness, a sense of purpose that made every challenge seem trivial.

"Have a safe trip back, Sandee," Daniel said, closing the hatch.

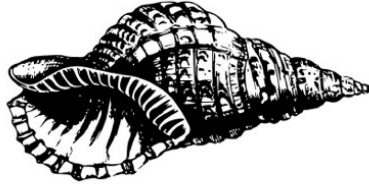
She got into the driver's seat, her eyes meeting those of the assembled canines in her rearview mirror. As she started the engine, the vibrations seemed to offer a bit of comfort to the motley crew in the back, settling them down.

But it was the Chihuahua in the passenger seat that caught her attention. With a simple, heartfelt lick to her hand, the dog seemed to convey a universe of thanks and trust. When he looked up at her, his eyes were full of a love and gratitude so profound that it pierced right through her earlier reservations.

"Don't worry, buddy. We'll find your family," Sandee promised.

As she pulled out onto the rain-soaked road, that simple exchange dissolved any remaining fragments of doubt or guilt. Despite the challenges and the missed commitments, this—this right here—made it all worthwhile. With a newfound sense of resolve, Sandee began the long drive back to Lobster Bay, her heart full and her spirit lifted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



The buzz of the oven timer cut through Bunny's concentration, momentarily diverting her attention from the endless scrolls of vintage Christmas wrapping paper displayed on her computer screen. She'd been squinting at these festive designs for hours, trying to pin down the exact year of that mysterious gift Andie had found. But so far, the origin of that beautifully wrapped box remained a tantalizing enigma.

Grateful for the interruption, Bunny stood up and made her way to the oven, where the scents of carrot, cinnamon, and nutmeg mixed harmoniously and made her mouth water.

She grabbed the floral oven mitt hanging from a hook near the stove, its fabric slightly faded from years of use but still fully functional. Sliding her hand into the mitt, she felt the quilted padding envelop her fingers as she opened the oven door. A wave of heat rolled out, warming her face and fogging up her glasses.

Carefully, she pulled out the muffin tin, each cavity filled with a perfectly risen carrot muffin, their tops golden brown. She set the tin on a wire rack to cool, inhaling deeply as another wave of that heavenly scent filled the air.

Bunny counted out a few muffins and set them aside on a small plate. Maxi would be arriving in about twenty minutes for her art lesson, and these muffins would make a perfect snack during their painting session. The rest she placed in a woven basket, covering them with a blue-and-white-checked cloth. Those were for Olga Svenson across the street.

Bunny picked up the basket and went out the front door. Leaves swirled around her doorstep, and she made a note to rake tomorrow. Everyone in the neighborhood liked to keep their lawns nicely maintained, and Bunny was no different. She loved the street with its large lots, abundance of trees, and blend of architectural styles and always did her part to keep it looking neat.

As she made her way across the street toward Olga's quaint little house, she felt a sense of gratitude for this peaceful neighborhood. Here, looking out for one another was just a way of life, and Olga, with her years of wisdom and kindness, was a cherished part of that community fabric. Bunny was happy to be able to bring some muffins and have a nice chat with her neighbor. She'd been so busy with the investigation into the mysterious gift that she hadn't had time to talk to Olga in the past few days and wanted to catch up.

Bunny tapped lightly on the door and shifted the basket to her other arm as she waited for Olga to answer. The door creaked open, and there stood Olga, phone cradled between her ear and shoulder. She flashed a warm smile and gestured for Bunny to come inside.

Trying to be as discreet as possible, Bunny stepped into Olga's living room. As usual, the home was immaculate. The Danish modern furniture looked like it had just been cleaned. Gorgeous vases and boxes with colorful rosemaling—the flowering Scandinavian decorative folk painting—accented the room. Nothing appeared cluttered or out of place. Family photos adorned the walls, and a faint scent of potpourri filled the air.

Olga continued speaking into the phone, her face a mix of exasperation and resolve. "Yes, Richard, I've told you, I'm perfectly fine on my own," she said, firmly yet lovingly. "No, you and Kristina don't need to have someone looking in on me. I haven't burned the house down or forgotten my own name, have I? And besides, my neighbors take very good care of me." Olga smiled at Bunny.

Finally, Olga said her goodbyes and set the phone back in its cradle. "That was Richard," she sighed, shaking her head. "My son and daughter are ganging up on me again with this assisted-living nonsense. I swear, I don't know what I've done to make them think I can't manage on my own anymore."

Waving her hand dismissively, Olga shifted her focus to Bunny's basket. "But that's not your problem, dear," she said, her eyes lighting up as she

peeked under the blue-and-white-checked cloth. "Oh, carrot muffins! You really shouldn't have, but I'm so glad you did."

Olga moved toward the kitchen. "I'll put on some tea, and we can enjoy these in the sunroom. The late-afternoon sun is lovely today," she announced, already reaching for the teapot.

Bunny walked toward the sunroom, a destination she had visited countless times during her trips to Olga's. But when she reached the doorway, she stopped dead in her tracks. Unlike the rest of Olga's neatly maintained house, the sunroom looked like a Scandinavian Christmas jumble sale.

Piles of items filled the space haphazardly. Dala horses were stacked on one side, their vibrant red and blue colors jumbled together in a kaleidoscopic heap. Tomtes, those gnome-like figures with their iconic pointed hats, were piled in a corner, no longer standing guard over anything specific but instead appearing to have congregated for a meeting of the mythical minds. Intricately carved wooden ornaments were heaped in baskets, their delicate craftsmanship hidden away under layers of other items. Boxes filled with slender Swedish Christmas trees, unassembled and packed away, were stacked against another wall.

Despite the disarray, the scent of traditional holiday spices—cardamom, cinnamon, perhaps a hint of cloves—still filled the air. The room seemed to have captured the spirit of the season in a wild, unorganized manner, as if it were a storage unit for cherished memories and beloved traditions that couldn't be contained.

Bunny moved to one of the wicker settees, pushing aside a cluster of embroidered Christmas pillows to make room. Then, she turned her attention to the small wicker table in front of where she was sitting. It was already covered with knickknacks: delicate straw ornaments, tiny advent calendars, and a scattering of Christmas cards. Carefully, she shifted these items to the edges, clearing a central space in which she placed the basket of freshly baked muffins.

Just then, Olga walked into the sunroom holding a tray laden with teacups, a pot of steaming tea, and various accompaniments like sugar cubes and lemon wedges. "Oh, my! Look at this mess," she exclaimed, setting down the tray, her eyes widening as they took in the room's cluttered state. "I apologize, Bunny. I normally wouldn't let anyone see the room like this."

"No need to apologize," Bunny assured her. "I think it's wonderful that you're so involved in your traditions."

Olga poured the tea, her hands slightly trembling but still remarkably steady for her age. The amber liquid flowed into the fine china cups, releasing a comforting aroma that mingled with the scent of Bunny's muffins. "Ah, traditions. Yes, they keep us grounded, don't they?"

With a soft clink, she placed the teapot back on the tray and then picked up her cup. "You see, I've been making these decorations and delivering them all over town. I've spent hours decorating Tall Pines Retirement Home. I even sent a batch of ornaments with Liz over to Tides Inn."

Bunny listened intently, sipping her tea and taking a bite of a carrot muffin.

"It's really been consuming all my time, but I don't mind," Olga continued. "Do you know why? Because it's my little act of rebellion. My children, bless their hearts, have been urging me to move into assisted living. But what they don't understand is that I'm perfectly capable of living on my own."

Olga's eyes gleamed with a mix of defiance and sorrow. "This," she gestured broadly at the piles of Scandinavian Christmas artifacts surrounding them, "is my proof of life, so to speak. I want to show them that I'm not just some helpless old lady who needs constant watching. I'm active, involved in my community, and committed to my traditions. I'm still the mother who taught them the importance of heritage, the value of community, and the magic of Christmas."

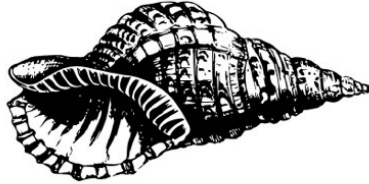
Bunny felt her eyes moisten. She reached over and touched Olga's hand. "Olga, you don't have to prove anything to anyone. You're amazing just as you are."

Olga smiled, her eyes twinkling like the Christmas lights that she'd no doubt hung herself. "Well, sometimes, we do have to remind people, even our own children, who we really are. I hope they will come to see I'm fine on my own, though I do think I need something more, something bigger, perhaps."

As they sat there, sipping their tea and discussing everything from the upcoming Lobster Bay holiday festivities to the current book Olga was reading, Bunny couldn't shake what Olga had shared earlier. Her words resonated in Bunny's mind like a haunting melody—needing something big

to prove to her own children that she was just fine on her own. Bunny wished she could help Olga, but how?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Claire's phone buzzed on the folding table next to a stack of "Adopt, Don't Shop" flyers. She glanced at the screen and saw Marie's name. "Excuse me, I have to take this," she told Andie, Maxi, and Jane as she stepped away.

"Marie, what's up?"

"Five dogs are coming up from New York," Marie reported, her voice tinged with urgency. "We need fosters. Are you still up for it?"

Claire hesitated, thinking of her territorial cat, Whiskers. "I can't, Marie. My cat would have a fit. But Rob Bradford said he'd be willing to foster one."

"Wonderful! If you know of anyone else who will foster, let me know. Thanks, Claire."

Hanging up, Claire rejoined the group, who were sorting through some donations. "That was Marie. Five dogs need fostering because of the flooding in New York."

Jane looked up from a box of leashes. "Are you taking one?"

Claire shook her head. "No, but Rob is."

Maxi grinned mischievously. "Rob's spending so much time at your place, you might as well be taking one."

Claire felt her cheeks warm. "What? Are you guys stalking me?"

Maxi rolled her eyes. "Nope. It's obvious."

Jane looked up from the box of leashes she was sorting through. "That's great that Rob is doing that. I know a foster is only temporary, but having Cooper has really enriched my life. Dogs just bring so much joy."

Claire cast a playful glance at Jane. “Having Mike around seems to have had a similar effect on you.”

Jane’s face flushed a delightful shade of pink, and her eyes sparkled with happiness. “Well, I can’t argue with that.”

Claire glanced up from the donation jar as a rush of fresh air swept into the tent, heralding the arrival of four women loaded with shopping bags expertly balanced in their arms.

“Jane!” one of them said.

Jane turned, and her eyes lit up in recognition. “Everyone, meet Carol, Susan, Betty, and Margie. They’re staying at Tides. Ladies, these are my dear friends—Claire and Maxi, and you already know my sister, Andie.”

Pleasantries and handshakes were exchanged, filling the tent with a warm camaraderie.

“So lovely to meet you all,” Claire said, gesturing toward the table filled with pet-themed trinkets. “This is the animal rescue charity tent, in case you didn’t notice. Proceeds go to our local animal rescue.”

“Oh, I love animals! I have a Bichon Frisé named Charlie.” Susan beamed, her eyes sparkling as she started to describe her pet. “He’s the most curious little guy—has a knack for stealing socks. You’ll find him hoarding them under the bed like they’re pure gold!”

Betty chuckled at Susan’s story before chiming in. “And you should meet my dachshund, Oliver. He’s quite the entertainer. Whenever I play the piano, he howls along as if he’s providing the backup vocals. He’s the Pavarotti of the dog world!”

Laughter rippled through the tent at Betty’s vivid description.

“They both sound utterly adorable,” Claire remarked, genuinely charmed by their stories.

“And worthy causes like this are so close to our hearts because of them,” Susan said, pulling out a bill from her purse and dropping it into the donation jar.

Betty followed suit, her charm bracelet jingling as her hand reached into her stylish tote to retrieve her wallet, from which she pulled another generous bill.

Carol and Margie followed suit with generous donations.

“Thank you all so much. Every bit helps,” Claire gratefully acknowledged.

“Jane mentioned that you four come back every year,” Maxi said.

Margie nodded. “We love coming back to Lobster Bay for Prelude and some preholiday shopping. Of course, we love doing our favorite things, too, like the Marginal Way, and we’re about to head to the Rachel Carson Preserve to watch for deer.”

“The preserve is magical this time of year,” Maxi observed, her eyes lighting up at the mention.

“And afterward, we have a reservation at Oarweeds,” Susan said.

“I love their clam chowder,” Claire said.

“Me too,” Margie agreed.

“We may be living all over the place now—Boston, Denver, San Francisco, and Atlanta—but Lobster Bay remains our common bond,” Betty declared, her voice tinged with nostalgia.

Nods and smiles of agreement circled around the tent.

“Well, we better get a move on,” Susan secured her bag on her arm. “Hope to see you all around town!”

Claire watched as Carol, Susan, Margie, and Betty disappeared into the festively decorated main street, their laughter fading into the distant sound of carolers.

“They seem like really nice guests,” Maxi commented, her gaze following their figures until they vanished from view.

Jane smiled in agreement. “Oh, they are. A pleasure to have breakfast with—always full of stories and laughter, though Betty seems a little sad.”

“I did sense that. I wonder why,” Claire asked.

“She mentioned losing her sister when they were kids, and coming back probably brings up bittersweet memories.” Jane glanced at Andie, and Claire’s heart swooped at the affection between the two sisters.

“That’s sad,” Andie said, putting her arm around Jane.

“It is.” Maxi glanced at her watch, and her eyes widened. “Oh, I have to go. I’ve got an art lesson with Bunny!”

Claire gave her a hug. “You better get going, then. Thanks so much for your help!”

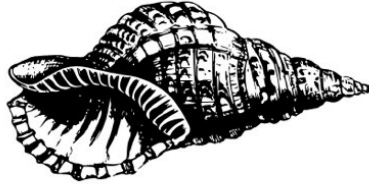
Andie chimed in with, “Hope you find that perfect client for your gallery. Your event will be amazing, I’m sure of it.”

Jane added her own sentiments. “Yeah, the universe has a way of working these things out, especially around the holidays.”

“Thank you all. That means the world to me. See you soon!”

With a wave, Maxi left the tent. Claire, Andie, and Jane watched her go, each privately sending good wishes her way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Maxi pulled up in front of Bunny's charming home and admired the small white pumpkins Bunny had lined up on her porch. The neighborhood was a postcard of fall décor, with mums and pumpkins adorning each front porch and yard.

Walking up to the door, she took a moment to appreciate Bunny's seasonal touches. A wreath made of autumn leaves hung on the front door, and planters with mums in various colors were arranged artfully on the steps.

Bunny welcomed Maxi in, the warm aroma of fresh-baked carrot muffins filling the air.

"Wow, it smells heavenly in here," Maxi said, her eyes widening at the sight of the golden-brown muffins on the kitchen counter.

"Thank you! I figured we could use something homemade when we take a break from painting," Bunny said, leading Maxi to the back room where easels and paints were set up, ready for their artistic endeavors.

The room was awash in late-afternoon light, illuminating the paint palettes and brushes that lay on a table near the easels. Through the glass patio doors, they could see Liz Weston in the garden, busy harvesting the last of the pumpkins.

"Now, today's lesson is highlights. I know you've been wanting to improve in that area," Bunny said, gesturing to the easels and the beautiful outdoor tableau beyond.

"I sure have." Maxi picked up a brush and palette. The paints were all laid out, and she soon got to work on an ocean scene, with Bunny closely

watching.

Maxi dipped her brush into the dollop of titanium white, her fingers tingling with a mix of anticipation and apprehension. Highlights. They always seemed to elude her, either too stark or too subtle, never capturing the natural shimmer she aimed for.

“Remember, Maxi, less is often more when it comes to highlights,” Bunny said, her voice as soothing as a warm cup of tea. “You want to think about where the light source is in your painting. Place your highlights accordingly.”

Maxi glanced at her canvas. It was a seascape today, a vivid sunset stretching across the sky and cascading its fiery hues onto the rippling water below. She touched the brush lightly to the crest of a wave.

“That’s it,” Bunny encouraged. “A light touch. Just kiss the canvas with the brush.”

Heart buoyed by Bunny’s assurance, Maxi added more glints to the wave tips, her brush dancing across the canvas as if guided by an unseen hand. A sense of awe washed over her; the canvas seemed to glow with newfound life, the highlights transforming flat shapes into voluminous forms.

She took a step back, amazed at how such small strokes could bring out such immense depth and emotion. A satisfied smile spread across her face, mirrored by Bunny’s own beam.

“You’ve got it, Maxi. Those highlights are just what this painting needed to come alive.”

Maxi’s chest swelled with pride. This was a skill she’d long struggled with, but now, thanks to Bunny’s expert guidance, she felt she’d crossed an important threshold.

“I think now would be a great time for a break,” Bunny said.

“Good. I’m starving.” Maxi carefully placed her paintbrush in the jar of turpentine, her thoughts still swirling around the artistic breakthrough she’d just experienced.

Bunny led the way to the kitchen. “Tea and muffins, the perfect artist’s break,” Bunny said as she popped the muffins into the oven to heat and put on water for tea. Five minutes later, Maxi had a warm muffin and a cup of Earl Grey in front of her.

Maxi eagerly slathered butter over the muffin, the melted goodness soaking into the crumbly top. The first bite was heavenly, a sweet and nutty

flavor that seemed to encapsulate all the cozy comfort of a home kitchen.

“So, how’s the mystery solving going?” Maxi asked, catching Bunny’s gaze.

Bunny sighed, her shoulders drooping a little. “I wish I could say I’ve cracked it wide open, but it’s more like I’ve just scratched the surface. Andie’s mystery has proven more elusive than I’d hoped. What about you?” Bunny asked, shifting the topic. “The gallery’s big reveal is in two days, right? How’s that going?”

Maxi grimaced. “It’s stressful. The criteria are very specific. We’re looking for something that’s holiday themed but also carries a cultural element. And I can’t find anyone who fits the bill.”

Bunny’s eyes twinkled, a spark of inspiration crossing her face. “Does it have to be paintings?”

“No, not at all. Any form of art would work,” Maxi said.

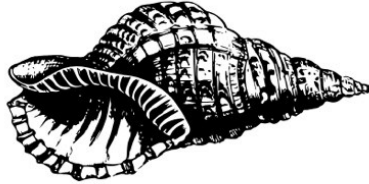
“So handmade art would be considered?”

“Handmade would be perfect,” Maxi assured her.

Bunny looked out the kitchen window, her gaze falling on Olga Svenson’s house across the street. A knowing smile crept onto her lips.

“Come on,” Bunny said, rising from her chair. “I think I have an idea that might just solve two problems.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Betty sat in the back seat of the car they'd rented for a few days, her eyes tracing the path of oak leaves as they swirled in the air and gently landed on the road. Susan's hands were steady on the wheel, guiding them down the oak-lined lane leading to the Rachel Carson Preserve. It was dusk, that magical time when the world seemed to pause, holding its breath in anticipation of the night.

Carol and Margie filled the car with laughter and stories from their trip, the camaraderie warming the air. "This has been such a fantastic getaway," Carol said, looking back at Betty through the rearview mirror. "I couldn't have asked for better company."

"Absolutely," Margie agreed, her eyes scanning the large field that bordered the road. "The shopping, the food, and now the nature—this trip has had it all."

"I couldn't agree more," Susan added, adjusting the rearview mirror slightly. "I can't remember the last time I felt this relaxed."

Betty nodded, her smile genuine but tinged with an inner weight. "It's been amazing, truly."

Betty felt a tug of mixed emotions. She had enjoyed every bit of this trip—the laughter, the bonding, the new memories—but underneath it all, the memory of her sister lurked. Whenever she visited places of natural beauty like this, the thought of her sister was never far away. Their family had come here many times, and Betty still remembered sitting in the back seat with her sister. At least now those memories brought a smile to her face.

Suddenly, Margie let out a soft gasp, her finger pointing toward the edge of the field. “Look, there they are!”

A small group of deer had emerged from the woods, their silhouettes framed by the dimming light. For a moment, the car fell silent, all four women captivated by the peaceful creatures grazing at the field’s edge.

In that silent space, Betty’s heart held a quiet wish—a longing, really—that one of the deer would venture closer, right up to their car. It was a silly thought, one born from the depths of her hope and imagination. She had always envisioned such an event as a sign, a small cosmic signal from her sister that she was still with her in spirit.

But the deer stayed where they were, peacefully nibbling at the grass, as if understanding the sacred boundary between humans and nature.

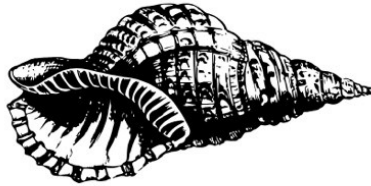
Finally, Susan broke the silence. “This moment—it’s like the perfect bow on top of our trip.”

“Agreed,” Carol murmured, her eyes still fixed on the deer.

Margie snapped a few pictures, her face glowing with awe. “I can’t wait to share these.”

Betty smiled, appreciating the beauty of the moment even if it hadn’t fulfilled her quiet, private hope. “It’s perfect,” she said softly, wrapping up her complex swirl of emotions in those two simple words. The trip had been wonderful, and the sight of the deer felt like a fitting end, even if the secret yearning of her heart remained unmet. As they drove away, she took one last look at the field, committing the serene scene to memory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Bunny nibbled at the last of her carrot muffin, her eyes scanning the crossword grid in front of her. She had just filled in the last box, completing the puzzle. A sense of accomplishment washed over her, because it wasn't just the crossword she had conquered today. Maxi's art lesson had been a success, and she may have solved a problem for two people.

"Now, if only I could solve this gift mystery," she mused.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the jingling melody of her phone. Glancing at the screen, she saw it was Sam.

"Hey, Sam, what's up?" she greeted him, the excitement already building in her voice.

"Bunny, you won't believe what I found!" His voice crackled with enthusiasm. "I was at the library, going through some old church bulletins, and guess what? I think I've found a clue about our Christmas gift mystery."

"Do tell!" she urged.

Sam read out a line from one of the bulletins, dated back to one of the years they had suspected the present could be from. "Listen to this: 'To the family who has put the holidays on hold, may you find your Christmas spirit again.'"

Bunny's heart skipped a beat. "That could explain the undelivered gift! A family that didn't celebrate Christmas that year for some reason might have forgotten about a hidden present."

“Exactly,” Sam concurred. “I think we should dive deeper into these church bulletins. Maybe we can figure out why they didn’t celebrate Christmas that year. We could even talk to Father Frank.”

“Sounds like a plan. Meet you downtown?”

“Sure, in about thirty minutes?”

“Perfect. Oh, and by the way, I finished the crossword. I win our little challenge,” Bunny gloated, unable to suppress a chuckle.

Laughing, Sam replied, “You always do, don’t you? See you soon.”

After hanging up, Bunny grabbed her keys, slipped on her coat, and headed out to her car. The engine roared to life, and she took the familiar route downtown, her thoughts racing ahead of her. As she pulled into a parking spot, she glanced around. The area was buzzing with activity; it was dusk, and the twinkling streetlights cast a magical glow. The small village was loaded with tourists, and everyone seemed to be enjoying the magic of Lobster Bay Prelude.

She peeked down the street where Maxi’s art gallery was located. Through the paper-covered windows, she could see shadows moving about and lights flickering on. *Good*, she thought. *Looks like things are coming together for the big reveal.*

Now, if she could just solve the mystery of the undelivered present.

Bunny spotted Andie and Shane walking toward her. Her eyes instantly lit up, and she couldn’t wait to tell Andie that they might be on to something.

“Hey, you two. Don’t you look cozy.” Bunny was glad to see the couple so happy together.

“Thanks. We are.” Shane put his arm around Andie’s waist and squeezed. Andie beamed.

“How’s the Crosby job coming along?” Shane was retired from the Navy and now a carpenter who specialized in additions around town. He’d built quite a business for himself and was doing a kitchen renovation at one of Bunny’s friends’ houses.

“We’re making good progress. Should wrap up just in time for their family Christmas,” Shane responded, a pleased smile gracing his face.

“How’s the investigation going?” Andie asked.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Bunny teased. “Sam might be on to something. In fact, I’m heading to the library to meet him.”

“Really? Do tell!” Andie’s eyes sparkled with keen interest, reflecting her impatience to hear the details.

Bunny quickly spilled the beans about the church bulletin Sam had discovered, about the family that had “put the holidays on hold,” and their plans to delve deeper into the church archives.

“That’s amazing! It sounds like you’re getting close!” Andie said, visibly thrilled.

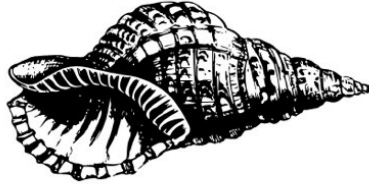
“As promising as that lead sounds,” Shane added, his tone tempered with a touch of caution, “don’t forget the present is really old, and there weren’t many clues in the trunk to begin with. It might still be impossible to figure out exactly where it came from.”

Bunny nodded, acknowledging the note of caution in Shane’s words. “You’re right, of course. But we’ve got to follow every lead we have, no matter how slim the chances.”

“Absolutely,” Shane agreed, his eyes meeting hers in a reassuring gaze. “But sometimes, mysteries are part of the magic, too.”

“True, but either way, it keeps Sam and me exercising our gray matter, so it’s all good.” Bunny gave them each a pat on the arm. “Well, I better be on my way—Sam’s waiting. Nice to see you both!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Maxi couldn't believe her eyes as she looked around the gallery space. They'd loaded all of Olga's items into her car and raced over to the gallery. In less than two hours, Olga had transformed it into a Scandinavian Christmas wonderland, brimming with handcrafted items that told stories of a culture deeply rooted in tradition and festivity. There were intricately knitted julekuler ornaments, their patterns reflecting age-old Nordic designs, soon to hang on a faux Christmas tree at the center of the room. Hand-carved dala horses and small wooden figurines of tomte, the little Swedish gnome, were laid out on a table, ready for placement on shelves.

Along the walls, Olga had spread out yards of beautifully embroidered linen and colorful woven jul runners. A delicate mobile featuring the St. Lucia procession, crafted from thin sheets of birch, was yet to be suspended from the ceiling, promising to add an ethereal quality to the space. Candleholders designed in the unique kurbits style often seen in Swedish folk art were being positioned on the counter next to an arrangement of traditional woven heart baskets.

As they moved around, placing each item with care and intention, Maxi finally broke the silence. "Olga, I can't even begin to express my gratitude. This is beyond amazing. I hope it's not too much for you, though."

Olga waved away Maxi's concerns with an energetic hand. "Oh, don't you worry about me, young lady. I'm a lot spryer than people give me credit for—especially my children." A wistful expression crossed her face. "Hopefully, this will prove to them, once and for all, that their old mother can manage just fine on her own. They don't have to fuss so much."

“If this doesn’t convince them, I don’t know what will,” Maxi replied, genuinely impressed. “Pulling off a one-woman art show like this is no small feat.”

Olga’s eyes twinkled as she looked at Maxi. “Well, they always say experience comes with age, and I’ve had plenty of both.”

Maxi took a step back, looking at the gallery from a variety of angles. It looked fantastic. Chandler would be impressed.

“You know, we have Bunny to thank for this incredible collaboration,” Maxi said, smiling at the thought of how Bunny had brought them together.

Olga adjusted one of the displays. “Ah, yes, Bunny. She’s such a nice lady. Quick thinker too.”

Maxi nodded. “And makes great carrot muffins.”

“Indeed.” Olga smiled.

“The moment I saw your Scandinavian pieces, I knew they’d be perfect for the gallery. They capture the essence of the holidays while offering something unique and deeply cultural.”

“Ah, you flatter me,” Olga said, beaming. “I was so thrilled when Bunny suggested the idea. It’s a wonderful opportunity to showcase a part of my heritage that’s so dear to me.”

Maxi couldn’t help but ask, “You’ve created so many pieces, Olga. Where does all this energy and ambition come from?”

Olga chuckled. “Well, you know, dear, age hasn’t sapped my enthusiasm for life. Crafting these pieces is a hobby that brings me immense joy. And let’s just say I still have a wellspring of energy and a backlog of ideas.”

“It’s evident in every piece,” Maxi agreed. “But what did you plan to do with all of these beautiful items before the gallery idea came up?”

Olga laughed heartily. “Oh, you won’t believe it, but I was running out of people to gift them to! My home started looking like a Scandinavian holiday market. It’s a good thing you found a purpose for them; otherwise, my children would have had another reason to fuss over me—‘Mom’s hoarding Christmas decorations again!’”

Maxi laughed along with Olga, but as her eyes scanned the room, her gaze caught on the bare walls. The thought escaped her lips before she could filter it. “The walls, though...they’re so empty.”

Olga chuckled. “Ah, you’re right. But don’t you worry about that either. I can paint some rosemaling artwork to fill those spaces. It’s a traditional

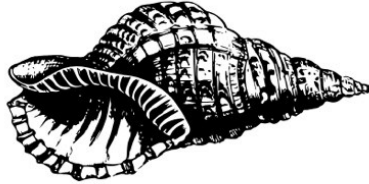
Norwegian decorative painting, you see. Perfect for our theme here!”

“Rosemaling?” Maxi’s eyes lit up as she pictured canvases filled with the colorful folk art on the walls. “That sounds fantastic, but again, don’t push yourself too hard.”

“Pushing ourselves is how we grow, dear,” Olga said, her eyes twinkling mischievously. “Besides, how else will I convince my overprotective children that their mom can still function on her own and still has a lot of life in her?”

Maxi laughed, grateful for Olga’s wisdom and resilience. “Well, if this gallery showing doesn’t prove it, I don’t know what will.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



As the evening sun dipped below the horizon, Claire and Rob found themselves pulling into the parking lot of a somewhat rundown apartment complex. The building had seen better days, and Claire couldn't help but wonder if they were in the right place.

"Are you sure you want to foster a dog? I hope I didn't push you into this," Claire said, eyeing the tired facade of the building as Rob parked the car.

Rob looked at her, smiling as he placed his hand reassuringly over hers. "Not at all. I'm actually pretty excited about it. But are you sure this is the right place?"

Claire double-checked the address that Marie had texted her earlier. "Yes, this is it."

Claire rang the doorbell, feeling the evening chill seep through her jacket. The door swung open, and her jaw dropped. Standing on the other side was a woman Claire could scarcely recognize as Sandee—dressed in jeans and a dirty sweatshirt with her hair in disarray.

"You?" both women said almost simultaneously.

"You live here?" Claire asked, her eyebrows knitting together.

Sandee crossed her arms over her chest, defensive. "Yes. Peter and I have separated."

At that moment, a cacophony of barks and yips filled the air as a cluster of dogs scrambled about. Sandee smiled, crouching to pet them and hushing their noisy enthusiasm. She opened the door wider, inviting Claire and Rob inside.

Claire gestured toward Rob. "This is Rob."

"Yes, from the bread store," Sandee said, extending her hand to Rob.

Rob chuckled, "Yes, and I remember you like crusty French bread."

For a brief second, Claire felt a pang of jealousy. Was Sandee flirting with Rob? But she quickly reassured herself. She trusted Rob, and Sandee seemed more interested in the dogs than in Rob.

"You can take your pick." Sandee gestured to the dogs.

Rob scanned the excited faces and wagging tails before his eyes settled on the dalmatian mix. "How about him?"

"He's yours! But understand, we're trying to find the owners of these lost dogs," Sandee explained, petting the chosen dog affectionately. "If they've run off because they're scared, they might get separated from their families. So he might not be with you for long. But if we can't find his owner, you're more than welcome to adopt him, of course."

Rob seemed to mull this over as he petted the dog, clearly already enamored.

As Claire and Rob prepared to leave, she turned to Sandee. "By the way, I managed just fine at the animal rescue charity tent today."

For a fleeting moment, Sandee's eyes met Claire's, and she looked genuinely regretful. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it," she said, gesturing toward the whirlwind of canine activity around them. "As you can see, I've been a bit tied up. Just got back, actually."

Claire's curiosity was piqued. Marie had mentioned something about a volunteer from their group going to New York City for an emergency rescue operation. She'd never imagined that Sandee, who always seemed so wrapped up in herself, would do something so selfless.

"You went to New York?" Claire couldn't hide her surprise.

"Yes." Sandee nodded. "It was a last-minute thing. They needed all the help they could get."

Claire was momentarily taken aback. Perhaps there really was more to Sandee than met the eye. The thought was humbling and nudged at her preconceptions.

Claire wanted to say more, but the dog was already tugging Rob toward the door, and she wasn't even exactly sure what to say.

Claire and Rob returned to the car, the dog happily sitting in the back seat.

“Do you think you’ll keep him if they don’t find the owner?” Claire couldn’t help but ask, noticing how Rob already treated the dog like a long-lost friend.

Rob sighed. “I don’t know. It’s tough. I’m worried about getting too attached and then having to give him up.”

Claire chuckled. “Then don’t name him!”

Rob looked puzzled. “But we have to call him something. Just calling him Dog doesn’t seem right.”

The conversation shifted as Rob looked over at Claire. “You know, I thought you said Sandee was all about appearances. Wearing designer clothes, always perfectly styled. But she seemed rather down-to-earth today,” he noted, one hand resting on the steering wheel, the other patting the dog sitting behind them.

Claire bit her bottom lip, her mind reeling with the day’s revelations. “She did, didn’t she? I’ve always had this image of her, and today just didn’t fit that mold. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’ve been seeing her in just one light. Tammi did say that people are complex, and maybe she’s wiser than I give her credit for sometimes.”

Rob nodded. “Tammi has a good head on her shoulders. It’s easy to pigeonhole people based on a few interactions, but everyone has layers we don’t see.”

Claire sighed. “True. It’s a lesson I keep learning. But you know what they say, ‘A leopard doesn’t change its spots,’” she added cautiously, still not fully ready to change her opinion about Sandee.

“Spot! That’s a great name for him!” Rob exclaimed, his face lighting up as he turned to pet the dog again. “See, he likes it.”

Claire chuckled, her heart warming at Rob’s enthusiasm. “He does seem to be responding to it,” she admitted.

Rob grinned. “It’s settled, then. Spot it is, at least for now.”

AFTER CLOSING the door behind Rob and Claire, Sandee collapsed on her worn-out couch, her muscles aching and her mind buzzing. She looked around at the whirlpool of wagging tails and excited eyes surrounding her. There was Bella, a golden retriever with a heart of gold, and Rosco, a

lumbering, lovable mastiff. Dexter, the high-energy border collie, was already vying for her attention. And then there was Peanut, the tiny Chihuahua, who hid behind the larger dogs, trembling and clearly still frightened by all the recent changes.

She reached into a jar on the coffee table and pulled out some of her homemade red Beach Bones treats. “Okay, everyone, treat time!” she announced. The room erupted into happy barks. Even Peanut inched forward at the smell, his tiny nose twitching.

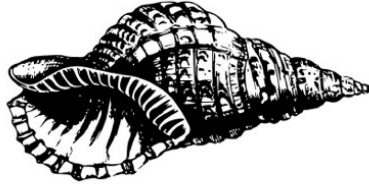
As she handed out the treats, her mind wandered back to Claire’s unexpected appearance. She hadn’t known Claire was dating Rob. The moment their eyes met, she’d seen something flicker in Claire’s gaze—an inkling of understanding, maybe? As if Claire finally saw that Sandee wasn’t the villain she’d painted her to be. And was that a hint of jealousy? Sandee had to admit, Rob was kind of cute. But the idea of encroaching on Claire’s territory never crossed her mind, and besides, Sandee was done with men for the foreseeable future.

Her relationship with Peter had taught her the importance of focusing on herself, her own happiness, and these abandoned animals that gave her so much joy and purpose. “Right, guys?” she asked, scratching Bella’s ears, earning a thump-thump of approval via the dog’s wagging tail.

She thought about the uneasy truce between her and Claire. If there were ever a time for the ice to thaw, it seemed like now could be it. But Sandee wasn’t going to make the first move. She’d extended the olive branch before, and it had snapped. This time, if Claire wanted peace—if she wanted to negotiate about Beach Bones—she’d have to be the one to extend her hand first.

And until then, Sandee had these wonderful dogs to keep her company. She sank deeper into her couch, allowing herself a rare moment to just breathe, each wagging tail and wet nose nudging her closer to something that felt like redemption. “We’re a motley crew, but we’re perfect,” she whispered, smiling as even little Peanut finally hopped onto the couch, curling into a tiny ball beside her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



The office of Father Frank at St. Mary's was as unassuming as the man himself—a room of simple, utilitarian design. A wooden desk, a couple of chairs, and a small bookshelf filled with theological texts and Bibles occupied the space. The walls were adorned only with a crucifix and a framed painting of the Virgin Mary. There were no frills, just essentials, and that seemed to perfectly match Father Frank.

Father Frank, the embodiment of pleasantness, sat across from them. He had a calming presence, eyes twinkling with an inherent kindness. Snow-white sideburns framed his lined face, complementing his genial appearance. His voice, gentle yet firm, had the unique ability to put anyone instantly at ease.

Internally, Bunny was practically buzzing with excitement. She felt they were on the verge of solving the mystery of the gift and finally finding the intended recipient. She glanced at Sam, who looked equally expectant as he handed Father Frank the church bulletin they'd found.

After uncovering the bulletin that mentioned a family facing a joyless Christmas, Bunny and Sam had decided to delve deeper into the church archives. Their persistence had paid off when they stumbled upon another article that highlighted a charity benefit organized for a local family. The article went on to describe how the community had come together in an unprecedented manner, contributing record-breaking donations that included a sizable trunk brimming with gifts. The article didn't mention who the family was, but Bunny figured that if anyone would know, it would be Father Frank.

Father Frank took his reading glasses from his desk and skimmed through the pages. "Ah, I remember this well," he said, referring to the notice about the charity benefit and the trunk full of donated gifts. "I was just a young priest back then. We held a benefit for a family in dire straits. The father had died suddenly, leaving the wife and children to fend for themselves."

As they talked, Bunny couldn't shake off a nagging feeling. The notion of the gift being merely overlooked seemed too simple, too convenient. She looked over at Father Frank and Sam, feeling the weight of the unsolved mystery on her shoulders.

"But then, how did the trunk end up in Mrs. Perkins's attic?" Bunny asked, her eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

Father Frank paused, considering the question. "That is indeed puzzling. Perhaps the trunk was misplaced and then forgotten over the years. When families go through significant changes, especially under stressful circumstances, things can be easily misplaced or misattributed."

Sam nodded. "And then maybe when someone cleaned out the house, no one remembered what the trunk was for. It could've just gotten lumped in with everything else."

"That could be," Father Frank agreed. "Mrs. Quillen moved to Tall Pines a few years ago. She's almost ninety, you know. Before she moved, her children had a big estate sale. Maybe in the shuffle of selling off items and cleaning the house, the trunk found its way to Mrs. Perkins's attic."

"Mrs. Quillen? She's still alive?" Sam queried, eager to follow the trail.

Father Frank nodded. "Yes. Her name is Ellen. Her children have moved away, but she's still here and sharp as a tack, though she needs help with mobility."

Bunny's eyes widened, her excitement reaching a new peak. "Sounds like we need to go to Tall Pines. It's late tonight, but maybe we can take Andie and the gift tomorrow."

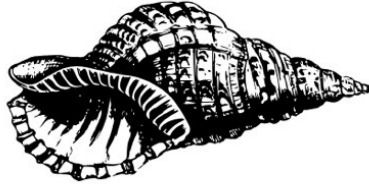
Father Frank's eyes twinkled even more brightly if that were possible. "It would truly be a holiday wonder to reunite the gift with its intended recipient."

As they stood up to leave, Father Frank offered a final blessing. "May your journey be filled with discovery and your hearts with fulfillment."

Bunny felt a wave of serenity wash over her, mingling with her excitement. She made a mental note to zip a text off to Andie and arrange a

time. She couldn't wait for tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



The next morning at Sandcastles, the café was a cozy hive of activity. The scent of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the aroma of cinnamon and sugar from the pastries cooling on wire racks. Claire and Hailey were in their element, moving seamlessly from the counter to the tables, their aprons filled with orders. A display of buttery croissants, crumbly blueberry scones, and decadent chocolate chip muffins beckoned to customers from behind the glass case.

Claire's spirits lifted even further when she saw Rob walk in, a cheerful expression on his face. Through the café's large window, she noticed Spot tied securely to a post. He was sitting obediently, his eyes keenly following Rob.

"Hey," Rob greeted as he approached the counter, "just stopping by for my usual, and maybe a little something for Spot?"

While Hailey steamed the milk for Rob's latte, Claire couldn't help but ask, "How did Spot do on the way to the store? He was a lot of fun last night. I can tell someone trained him well."

"Yeah, he's a good boy." Rob glanced out at the dog. "He didn't mind the ride and is already acting like he owns the place even though he has to stay in the office."

Claire handed over Rob's latte, a small bag with the Beach Bones, and one of Rob's favorite pastries, a cheese danish. "The cat was a bit miffed when I went home to feed him this morning. I think he sensed that I've been spending time with another animal."

Rob chuckled. "Jealous, is he?"

“A bit.” Claire laughed. “But he’ll get over it.”

The door chime jingled, and in walked Marie, dressed in her usual animal-themed attire. She looked around the café, spotted Rob, and headed straight for him.

“Rob, I wanted to thank you again for fostering that dog,” Marie started, her eyes warm and appreciative.

“You mean Spot,” Rob grinned, his eyes meeting Claire’s for a brief second. “I’ve decided to name him Spot.”

“Spot, huh?” Marie chuckled. “Well, don’t get too attached just yet. We’re still trying to locate his owners.”

“But if we don’t?” Rob asked, raising an eyebrow.

Marie looked at Spot and then back to Rob and Claire, a twinkle in her eye. “If we don’t, I have a strong feeling that Spot has already found himself a good home.”

Claire couldn’t help but smile at the thought. Then, switching gears, she turned to Marie and said, “Could I have Sandee’s phone number?”

Rob looked puzzled but didn’t say anything as Marie quickly scribbled down Sandee’s number on a piece of paper and handed it over to Claire.

“Thanks, Marie,” Claire said. “Would you like anything? A raspberry almond croissant? Or perhaps an apple-cinnamon scone?”

“You know, both sound delightful,” Marie answered, pulling out her wallet. “One of each, please.”

After ringing up Marie’s order and watching her leave with a smile, Rob finally asked, “So, why’d you ask for Sandee’s number?”

Claire sighed a little, gathering her thoughts. “I think you and Tammi might be on to something. Maybe I’ve been too hard on her, misjudged her. Plus, the dogs seem to prefer her red Beach Bones biscuits, so it could be a smart business move.”

Rob looked at Claire, his eyes glowing with pride and love. “That’s my girl,” he said, pushing his fist over the counter.

Claire bumped her fist to his and laughed. “We’ll see how it works out.”

“I think you might be surprised. Thanks for the coffee and pastry.” Rob raised the bag and exited, stopping to untie Spot. As they trotted off, he looked back over his shoulder and gave her a wave.

Claire was still holding onto the piece of paper with Sandee’s number when Hailey wandered over, drying her hands on a towel.

“Is that one of the fosters from the NYC run?” Hailey nodded toward Rob and Spot, who were still crossing the street.

“Yeah,” Claire affirmed. “Did you know that Sandee went down to get them?”

Hailey’s brows shot up in surprise. “Really? I have heard that she’s gotten a lot nicer lately.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “You too?”

Hailey laughed, her eyes twinkling. “Maybe she’s turning over a new leaf or something.”

Before Claire could reply, Hailey spotted a new customer walking through the door. ‘I’ll get them,” she said, scurrying off to attend to the incoming patron.

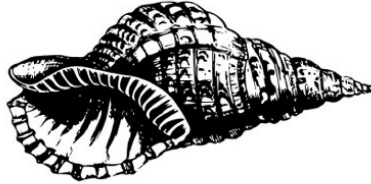
Left with her thoughts, Claire found herself fiddling with the piece of paper. Taking a deep breath, she dialed Sandee’s number. Her pulse quickened as the phone rang. “What if this is a disaster?” she thought.

Claire felt a momentary sense of relief when the call went to voicemail. “Hi, Sandee, it’s Claire,” she began, trying to keep her voice steady. “I was wondering if we could meet tomorrow morning at Sandcastles to discuss some business. Stop by around eight if you are interested. Thanks.”

She hung up, placing her phone on the counter. Her feelings were a mixture of relief and tension. Sandee probably wouldn’t even show, she reasoned with herself. But what if she did?

Claire looked up to see Bunny, Sam, and Andie walking toward the door. She picked up the bag of chocolate chip muffins and other pastries that she’d set aside for Andie to take to Tall Pines and pushed thoughts of Sandee out of her mind. Whatever would happen, she’d deal with it tomorrow.

CHAPTER THIRTY



Andie clutched the Sandcastles bag in her hand as the trio entered Tall Pines. The place was a large complex with interconnected buildings that seemed more like a small community than an assisted-living facility. There were various rooms for the residents to watch TV or do a puzzle as well as a big dining room and several cafés.

Stopping at the reception desk, Bunny said, “We’re here to visit Ellen Quillen. Could you please tell us where to find her?”

“Certainly,” the receptionist replied with a welcoming smile. “Mrs. Quillen is in the assisted-living wing. Just go down this corridor, take a left, and then it’s the third right. You’ll find her apartment down that hall.”

Armed with directions, they ventured deeper into the facility, their footsteps softened by the plush carpeting. As they walked, they couldn’t help but notice the little alcoves outside each door—spaces where the residents could personalize their entries. Welcome signs, pumpkins, and pots of vibrant mums were popular. They even spotted an array of handcrafted Norwegian ornaments and trinkets, courtesy of Olga Svenson.

Finally, they arrived at Ellen Quillen’s door. They knocked and waited. It took a few moments, but the door eventually creaked open to reveal a petite elderly lady with snowy white hair, leaning on her walker for support. Her face lit up with a blend of curiosity and warmth.

“Hello,” she greeted them, her voice rising in question at the end.

“Hi, Mrs. Quillen,” Bunny began, smiling as genuinely as she felt. “I’m Bunny, this is Sam, and this is Andie. Father Frank from St. Mary’s said you might be able to help us with something. May we come in?”

“Of course, of course,” she said, her eyes twinkling as she stepped aside to let them enter. “Please make yourselves at home, and please call me Ellen.”

Her small apartment felt like a cocoon of yesteryears—photographs of younger days adorned the walls, a crocheted blanket was neatly folded on the armchair, and a delicate scent of lavender hung in the air.

The layout was simple but thoughtful—a compact kitchenette sat just to the right of the entrance, equipped with basic appliances and a small dining table set for two. The living room was the centerpiece of the apartment, featuring overstuffed furniture.

Ellen’s eyes sparkled with genuine happiness at their presence. “I rarely get visitors these days. Would you like some coffee? I could put on a pot,” she offered, her voice tinged with a gracious enthusiasm.

“That would be lovely, thank you,” Bunny replied as Andie handed over the bag of pastries they had brought. With deft movements that belied her age, Ellen carefully unwrapped the pastries, arranged them on a fine china dish, and set it on the coffee table for her guests.

“Now then,” Ellen said, settling into her armchair, “what did Father Frank think I could help you with?”

Taking this as their cue, Bunny and Sam began to recount their quest to find the intended recipient of the unopened Christmas gift and how clues had led them to her doorstep. As they unfolded the story, they produced the old church bulletin that Sam had discovered—articles and all.

As Bunny and Sam unfolded their story, Ellen’s eyes took on a faraway look, her gaze turning inward to memories long stored away. The weight of those years was palpable in her eyes. She nodded along with their recounting as if confirming details to herself, lost in a reverie of a time long past.

Setting out steaming mugs of coffee on the table beside the dish of pastries, Ellen eased herself back into her armchair and began her own tale. “My husband, God rest his soul, was killed suddenly in an accident. It was... unexpected, to say the least. We had two young children, and I was a housewife. Suddenly, there was no income, only a mountain of medical bills and the looming costs of a funeral. The church... oh, they were our saving grace. They helped us so much during that difficult time.”

Her eyes moistened as she continued, “That Christmas was a bleak one, but our congregation made sure the children had gifts to open. They did

their best to bring some light into a very dark time for us.”

Andie, who had been listening intently, leaned forward and gently placed the beautifully wrapped gift on the table in front of Ellen. “Could this possibly be one of those gifts?” she asked, her voice tinged with cautious optimism.

Ellen looked at the gift, her eyes scanning the wrapping paper and ribbon, then shook her head slowly but decidedly. “No, I don’t think so. I remember that Christmas vividly, and I’m certain there were no leftover gifts. Also, this wrapping paper doesn’t look familiar to me. And ‘Urchin’? I have no idea who that could be. The gifts from the congregation were all addressed to the children by name, Linda and Tom.”

A pall of disappointment settled over the room. “You’re sure?” Bunny asked.

Ellen nodded. “Definitely. I’m sorry.”

Andie’s hopes deflated. They’d been so close, and she had been sure she’d found the person who should have the gift. She sighed and took a sip of her coffee. It looked like they would have to start again from square one.

AFTER A HEARTWARMING HALF hour with Ellen, Bunny, Sam, and Andie left her apartment with a mixture of contentment and disappointment. As they navigated their way through the maze of hallways in Tall Pines, Sam broke the silence.

“Do you think there’s a chance Ellen could be wrong about the gift? I mean, it was a long time ago.”

Bunny shook her head. “I don’t think so. Ellen seemed mentally sharp, and she was insistent that the gift wasn’t from that Christmas. Plus ‘Urchin’ doesn’t match any of her kids’ names.”

Andie, who had been quiet, chimed in, “I agree. I hope you two don’t mind if we drop off these muffins to my mom since we’re here already.”

“Of course not. We’d love to see Addie,” Bunny said.

The trio continued to the memory-care wing and soon found themselves at Addie’s room. Addie looked up from her seat by the window. After a moment of hesitation, her eyes sparkled with faint recognition. “Oh, Bunny and Sam. It’s been ages!”

“How are you, Addie?” Bunny asked.

“Fine, and you? Are you going to art school now? And Sam, you’re at the police academy, aren’t you?”

Bunny and Sam exchanged a glance, then both looked at Andie, who gave a subtle shrug. They decided to play along.

“Yes, we’ve really been hitting the books,” Sam said.

“That’s good.”

Addie’s face creased in confusion, lost somewhere in the past, so Andie decided to try to bring her back to the present. She stepped forward, holding out the chocolate chip muffins. “We brought you some muffins, Mom.”

Addie took the bag but seemed momentarily distracted, her eyes drifting past them to glance into the hallway as if she were expecting someone.

“Who are you looking for?” Andie asked, following her gaze.

“Jane,” Addie responded, a hint of anticipation lacing her voice.

“Jane isn’t coming today. But would you like to call her?”

Addie nodded, and Andie dialed the number.

“Hey, Andie, how’d it go?” Jane knew that the three of them were coming to Tall Pines in the hopes of finding the person the gift belonged to.

Andie sighed. “No, we struck out. But we’re not giving up. We’re actually at Mom’s room right now. She wants to talk to you.”

Andie handed her phone to Addie, who eagerly took it. “Jane, sweetie, make sure you finish your homework before you go out with your friends, all right?” Addie told her.

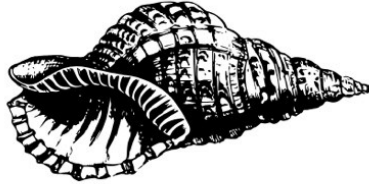
Jane chuckled on the other end. “Don’t worry, Mom. I won’t go anywhere until it’s done.”

Andie took back the phone, laughing. “I guess that message was important to Mom.”

“No doubt. Thanks for calling. I’ll see you later at the big art gallery reveal tonight, right?”

“Absolutely. Can’t wait!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



As Jane hung up the phone, her smile remained. Picking up a duster, she gently swept it across the antique buffet table in the living room. It used to bother her that her mother sometimes thought it was still the past, but she had learned to roll with it. After all, her mom still knew who she was, and that was no small blessing.

She moved on to dust a side table. It hadn't been an easy decision to put Addie in Tall Pines, but it had been the right one. Addie was thriving there. Once she'd settled into Tall Pines and started her new medications, her dementia had miraculously halted its progression.

It was funny how what you thought you wanted wasn't really what you needed. Just a few years ago, Jane had wanted nothing more than to retire. Then her mother's memory issues had escalated. Jane had resisted taking over Tides Inn, the family business. But now, she found she loved it—loved being the keeper of her family's legacy. Life's unexpected turns had led her exactly where she needed to be.

As Jane made her way into the foyer, Susan, Betty, Carol, and Margie came down the stairs.

"Oh, Jane, our stay here has been absolutely wonderful!" Susan exclaimed, her eyes twinkling with genuine happiness.

"Please extend our warmest thanks to Brenda; her breakfasts have been the highlight of our mornings," Betty chimed in.

"You're all too kind." Jane beamed. The four women had been great guests, and she wished they weren't checking out today. "If you'd like, you're welcome to extend your stay. We don't have any other bookings

coming up soon. And the art gallery is having its grand opening tonight. Plus the Prelude festival is just kicking off!”

The women exchanged glances, apparently weighing their commitments against the pull of yet another evening in the idyllic town. Carol’s eyes had a far-off look as she pondered. “I have my grandson’s football game this weekend, and I’ve promised to be there. And we already dropped off the rental car so we could just uber back to the airport.”

“We really should get back to our dogs.” Susan glanced at Betty, who nodded.

“But that art gallery opening,” Margie mused, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. “The paper they’ve put up on the windows has us all guessing. What a clever marketing strategy that was.”

Internally, Jane chuckled. If only they knew that Maxi’s “brilliant marketing move” had been born more out of desperation than strategy. But if the mystery drew people in, then who was Jane to correct their assumptions?

“Maxi does have a way of getting people talking,” Jane said diplomatically, her lips curling into a sly smile. “It’s going to be quite the event. But of course, I understand if you have other commitments.”

The women looked at one another, the temptation clear in their eyes but reality pulling them in another direction. .

Finally, Carol said, “I guess we’ll have to think about it and discuss it, so don’t hold the rooms for us if you get other reservations.”

“I am curious about the art gallery, though, Do you have any insider info on what the showing will actually feature?” Betty asked, her eyes twinkling with curiosity.

Jane leaned against the check-in desk, enjoying the moment of speculation. “To be honest, even I don’t know what’s going to be displayed. Maxi has been incredibly tight-lipped about it. It’s as much a mystery to me as it is to the rest of the town.”

“Oh, how intriguing!” Betty exclaimed. “What do you think it could be, Jane?”

Jane considered the possibilities. “Well, Maxi has eclectic taste. It could range from traditional landscapes to avant-garde installations. She’s been so secretive, it really could be anything.”

“What about a series of paintings focused on the beauty of Prelude?” suggested Margie, her eyes lighting up at the thought.

“Or maybe something provocative that challenges the norms?” Carol proposed, wiggling her eyebrows for added effect.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s something abstract,” said Susan. “You know, something that makes you tilt your head and squint, wondering what on earth you’re looking at.”

Betty laughed. “Or perhaps it’s a mixture of all those things.”

Jane nodded, entertained by their guesses. “All very plausible. I guess we’ll find out soon enough. I must admit, the suspense is part of the fun.”

“Yes, we may have to delay leaving until later tonight just so we can see,” Carol added, clearly more tempted than ever to stay.

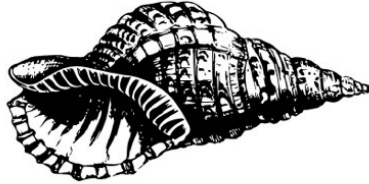
Margie sighed. “Changing flights could be problematic, though.”

“If you guys don’t make it to the gallery, I’ll let you all know what Maxi unveils tonight,” Jane promised.

“Please do,” they all echoed.

Betty added, “And now, we’re off to walk downtown for some last-minute shopping. See you later.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Maxi meandered through the gallery, her heels clicking softly against the polished wooden floor, her phone pressed to her ear. “Chandler, you should see it—the entrance is graced by this rosemaling painting that practically dances on the canvas. And Olga’s hand-carved dala horse? A masterpiece under the skylight.”

The gallery setup had been completed, and Maxi and Olga had gone home to change. Now they were in the gallery alone with James, waiting to open.

Maxi adjusted the waist on her fitted emerald-green dress and glanced at Olga and James. Olga wore a navy dress that shimmered under the gallery lights, while James, in a tailored charcoal suit and crisp white shirt, looked every inch the proud husband.

“Sounds intriguing, Maxi,” Chandler’s voice buzzed from the other end. “You’ve done a spectacular job shrouding all this in mystery, what with the papered windows. Clever marketing!”

A modest smile curled Maxi’s lips. “Well, sometimes, the allure is in the unknown, don’t you think?” She chose not to reveal that the papered windows had been more a stroke of necessity than genius.

“I’d love to see it all. Send me some pictures, won’t you?”

“Absolutely,” Maxi assured him, her eyes lingering on a delicately sculpted glass figure near her. “Pictures will be on their way.”

She ended the call, slipped the phone into her clutch, and turned back to James and Olga. “Chandler wants pictures.”

“Oh dear, I hope he won’t be disappointed.” Olga pressed her palm to her face. The older woman suddenly seemed a bit overwhelmed with the idea of having a gallery showing.

“I’m sure he won’t be,” James assured her, handing her a bottle of water.

Maxi’s eyes twinkled, but her stomach churned with a mixture of excitement and jitters. “Hopefully, everyone else will like it too. What if covering the windows has the opposite effect and no one comes?”

James laughed. “Have you looked out? Half the town is out there.”

Maxi and Olga exchanged looks of panic and raced to the windows then peeked out between the gaps in the paper.

Maxi’s nerves eased a bit. Faces both familiar and new were gathering. Jane and Mike, Andie and Shane, Bunny and Sam, Claire and Rob—all waiting for her moment.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she glanced at the clock. “All right, everyone, it’s showtime.”

As James and Olga began tearing down the paper barriers, Maxi pushed open the door and let everyone in.

AS BUNNY STEPPED into the gallery, her disappointment about the Quillen family not being the ones the gift belonged to evaporated, overtaken by the sheer splendor of the space. She squeezed Sam’s hand, stealing a glance at him. He looked remarkably handsome in a sharp, likely new charcoal-gray suit. It complemented her own lavender dress—a flattering, flowy piece that made her feel radiant.

Andie and Shane were already inside, their eyes wandering across the artwork. Andie wore a classy sky-blue wrap dress that contrasted beautifully with her dark hair, while Shane was in a black suit with a matching green tie. Jane and Mike were not far behind. Jane sported a champagne-colored cocktail dress which gave her an air of vintage elegance. Mike looked dapper in a navy-blue suit with a light-blue shirt.

Joining them, Bunny couldn’t help but beam. “Isn’t this place incredible?”

“It really is,” Andie agreed. “Olga has outdone herself.”

“Olga’s work is phenomenal,” Jane chimed in, her eyes still scanning the pieces around her. “I have a couple of her smaller works at Tides. They add such character to the place.”

As they chatted, Bunny felt a swell of pride. She had been the bridge that connected Maxi and Olga.

Maxi and Olga rushed over to the group, their faces glowing with joy and accomplishment. Hugs and congratulations were exchanged, laughter bubbling around them like champagne.

“You guys, this wouldn’t have even happened without Bunny,” Maxi declared, causing Olga to nod in agreement.

Bunny blushed. “Oh, no, I can’t take credit for any of this,” she demurred.

As if on cue, the room filled with a low, appreciative hum. Snippets of conversation floated toward them, phrases like “It’s brilliant” and “The colors are so vibrant” weaving through the air, punctuating the atmosphere with a sense of awe and admiration. Maxi and Olga beamed, soaking in the praise.

Maxi, never one to let the spotlight shine solely on her, pivoted the conversation. “So, how is everyone? And how’s your foster dog, Rob?”

“He’s doing great,” Rob responded, his eyes twinkling.

“We might be getting a little too attached,” Claire shrugged.

“I don’t see Sandee around,” Maxi continued. “How’s the whole Beach Bones situation?”

Claire smiled. “I may have an update, but I’ll fill you guys in at our usual coffee meetup at Sandcastles. Tonight is about you and Olga. I don’t want to detract from that.”

Just as everyone nodded in agreement, Olga’s children came rushing over. Their faces were etched with frowns, sending a ripple of unease through Bunny’s stomach.

“Mom, you did all this?” Kristen’s eyes widened as she took in the room, her gaze tinged with awe.

Olga smiled warmly. “I made the pieces, but Maxi arranged them into this beautiful gallery. We’re a team.”

Richard’s brows furrowed, concern etched on his face. “But, Mom, this is a lot of work.”

“Oh, it is,” Olga agreed, her eyes twinkling. “But when have you ever known me to sit idle? Keeping busy keeps the mind and body young.”

Finally, the tension on Kristen and Richard's faces eased into smiles. They moved in to hug their mother. "Well, you must be on to something," Kristen said, "because you're acting years younger than your age."

"We're sorry for trying to push you into assisted living," Richard added. "Clearly, you don't need it."

"Thank you." Olga looked at her children fondly. "I understand you were only looking out for my well-being, but I'm fine in the house. I still garden and rake the leaves and can take care of most everything I did years ago."

"You're right, Mom. I guess we got a little overprotective." Richard chuckled before adding, "So does this mean you're coming over to rake my lawn next week?"

Olga laughed. "Oh, don't push your luck!"

Olga's arms wrapped around Kristen and Richard's shoulders as they moved away from the group, their path taking them toward a display featuring intricately crafted dala horses.

"Remember when Grandma Johnson used to put these in all of her windows?" Olga said, her voice tinged with nostalgia.

Kristen and Richard looked at each other then back at the dala horses, their expressions softening. "I'd forgotten about that," Kristen admitted.

Sally joined the group. Her hair wasn't in its usual braid and flowed freely past her shoulders for once, and her outfit was a colorful departure from her usual work clothes, with a red skirt and colorful top.

"Bunny, you look wonderful tonight," Sally said, her smile as bright as her skirt.

"So do you," Bunny returned the compliment.

Sally nodded toward Olga. "Looks like Olga finally got her kids to see the light."

"It seems that way," Maxi said. "I'm delighted for her."

"Me too. I hope my kids don't try to put me in a home before my time," Sally added with a wink.

Laughter rippled through the group. Everyone knew that if there was one person in town who could manage a home all on her own, it was Sally.

Sally turned to Bunny. "So how is it going with that mystery you were trying to solve?"

Bunny filled Sally in on their latest disappointment.

“Intriguing,” Sally said, visibly interested. “And you found it in an old trunk? Was it a big gift?”

Andie held her hands apart, forming a small rectangle. “No, just a little box, about this big,” she said, indicating a size of roughly three inches.

“And you have no clues?” Sally asked, her eyes narrowing.

“None, really.” Andie sighed. “The tag just had a nickname—Urchin.”

At the mention of the name, Sally’s eyes widened, her posture straightening. “Urchin, you say? Now, that’s a name I haven’t heard in years, but I think I know who that might be. Even better, she’s in town right now!”

Andie and Bunny exchanged astounded glances.

“In town? Where?” Andie stammered, hardly able to contain her surprise.

Sally nodded, her face alight with excitement. “Yes, she’s right at Tides. Betty! We grew up together, and Urchin was her family’s nickname for her. Jane, you must have heard me call her that when I saw them at Tides.”

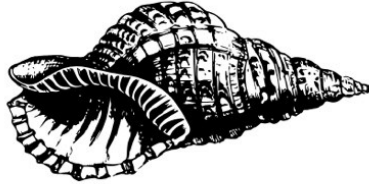
Jane shook her head regretfully. “I remember seeing you greet them, but with all the commotion of the day, I must’ve missed that.” Jane’s expression turned somber. “I’ve got some bad news. They were planning to leave tonight.”

Bunny’s eyes widened, her heartbeat quickening. “Tonight? What time?”

Jane looked at her watch. “They weren’t sure. Actually, they did talk about extending to see the art show, but I don’t see them here, so I’m afraid they decided to leave.”

Bunny grabbed Andie’s hand and tugged her toward the door. “We need to get to Tides. There might still be time to catch them!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Betty strained to drag her now-overstuffed suitcase down the stairs. “I don’t know how I managed to fit everything in here!” she exclaimed, her voice tinged with both exasperation and delight.

Susan, Carol, and Margie looked up from the foyer and chuckled. “Well, it was a fruitful trip, wasn’t it? The grandkids will absolutely adore the art we got for them,” Carol remarked, smiling warmly at the thought.

Just then, a car screeched to a halt outside. Margie quipped, “Gosh, I hope that’s not our Uber driver showing off his skills.”

Peering out the window, Susan recognized Andie stepping out of the car, her face flushed and focused. Close behind her were Bunny and Sam. “Hey, that looks like Jane’s sister. She seems to be in quite the rush.”

Before they could speculate further, the door flew open, and in rushed Andie, followed by Bunny and Sam, their faces a mix of urgency and relief.

“Oh, I’m so glad we caught you before you left!” Bunny exclaimed, visibly relieved.

Betty felt a twinge of unease. “Is something the matter?”

“No, not really,” Andie assured her. “This might seem a bit odd, but we’ve been looking for someone with the nickname Urchin, and Sally said that it might be you.”

At the mention of the nickname, Betty’s expression shifted to one of bittersweet nostalgia. “Yes, that was me. My family used to call me Urchin because I loved the sea and would always find sea urchins in the tide pools as a child. It’s sad, really. You can hardly find them anymore.”

The room quieted for a moment, the weight of the memory settling in. “It was a special name, but it also reminds me of my sister, Heidi. She loved the sea just as much as I did.”

Bunny and Andie exchanged glances, sensing that they were on the cusp of resolving a mystery and yet uncovering new emotional depths they had not anticipated.

Andie carefully extracted the small, wrapped box from her pocket. “Then I think this is for you,” she said, extending it to Betty.

Betty’s eyes widened at the sight of the little package. There was something hauntingly familiar about the handwriting—she recognized it as Heidi’s. “Where did you find this?” she asked, almost breathless.

Andie explained that the tiny gift had been found in a trunk she’d bought at an estate sale. “We’ve been trying to find its rightful owner, and it looks like we’ve succeeded.”

The room hushed into silence as Betty contemplated the small package in her hands. “Should I open it?” she wondered aloud.

“Yes!” Susan, Carol, and Margie responded in unison, their excitement palpable.

Gently unwrapping the package, her charm bracelet jingling softly with each movement, Betty discovered a sterling silver urchin charm lying in the palm of her hand. Her eyes misted over at the sight.

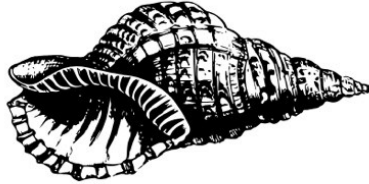
It was unmistakably from Heidi, who not only had called her Urchin more than anyone else but had also contributed many of the charms that adorned her bracelet. Heidi must have bought this charm before her tragic accident and had been saving it. Somehow, it had gotten mixed in with the items that were sold off in the estate sale after they’d sold the house—during those sorrow-filled days when the family was steeped in grief.

But now, as she held the charm, Betty felt a profound sense of closure. This was the sign she had been seeking for years, a poignant, tangible connection to a past filled with love and a sister deeply missed.

“Thank you,” she said softly to Bunny, Sam, and Andie. The words seemed insufficient for the emotional journey the small object had taken her on, but they were all she had. Hugs were exchanged all around, their warmth reaching deep into her soul.

Just then, an Uber pulled up outside, breaking the spell. Betty, Susan, Carol, and Margie gathered their things and headed out, waving their final goodbyes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



The next morning, Claire stood behind the counter at Sandcastles, ringing up a customer.

“Do you think she’ll show?” Hailey asked. Claire had filled her in about inviting Sandee for a chat.

Claire shrugged. “I have no idea.” Then, spotting a figure at the entrance, she added, “Oh, there she is.”

Sandee walked in, a far cry from her usual immaculate appearance. She wore jeans and a sweatshirt, a few stray dog hairs clinging to the fabric. Her hair, normally perfectly styled, was pulled back into a simple ponytail. Yet her expression was one of a soft half smile, and her eyes held a light Claire had never seen before.

“Hi,” Sandee said softly, her voice tinged with vulnerability. In that moment, Claire knew she had made the right decision in inviting her.

“What would you like to eat or drink?” Claire asked as she led Sandee to a secluded table in the corner.

“Just coffee for me, thanks,” Sandee replied.

They settled into their seats, the tension in the air palpable. Both women looked nervous, but as they made eye contact, it was as if an unspoken agreement passed between them.

Sandee took a deep breath, her eyes meeting Claire’s. “Look, I want to clear the air right off the bat about Peter. I never stole him from you. He told me you two were separated and getting a divorce.”

Claire felt as if the ground had shifted beneath her. “What? That wasn’t the case at all. I had no idea he was cheating.”

“Yeah, well, it turns out he’s a good liar,” Sandee said, a hint of bitterness touching her voice. “So, anyway, I apologize for my part in all that—and for the way I’ve treated you in the past.”

Claire was taken aback by Sandee’s candor. The tension that had been building up over the years seemed to deflate in an instant. “Thank you, Sandee. I appreciate that. I should apologize too. Tammi has always encouraged me to think more graciously of you.”

At the mention of Tammi, Sandee’s eyes softened, and her lips curved into a genuine smile. “Tammi’s a good kid, a really nice person. You should be proud.”

Claire’s heart swelled, and her eyes sparkled. “I am, very proud.”

For the first time, the two women felt a connection, a shared sense of understanding.

Claire took a sip of her coffee, her fingers gripping the mug a bit more tightly than usual. She still felt a tad nervous about what she was about to propose, but something about this newfound understanding with Sandee made it seem like the right time. “So, about the Beach Bones thing—”

Sandee cut her off, her expression softening. “You can use the name, Claire. I apologize for being so difficult about it earlier. It’s just that I’m starting fresh, and it felt like the first thing I was truly successful at on my own.”

Claire nodded, her heart buoyed by Sandee’s sincerity. “Actually, that’s sort of what I wanted to talk to you about. I was thinking... what about a partnership?”

“A partnership?” Sandee looked genuinely surprised, her eyes widening. “How would that work?”

Claire began outlining her vision. “We could divide up the work, collaborate on some new recipes, and sell the treats here at the bakery as well as other locations. You have a knack for sales; you could be the one to pitch our products to other shops.” Claire paused and chuckled. “And, I have to ask—what on earth do you put in those red dog biscuits? Dogs seem to really love them.”

Sandee laughed, her eyes twinkling. “Well, it’s a secret recipe. But if we’re going to be partners, I suppose I can let you in on it.”

Claire felt a mixture of relief and excitement. “So you’ll consider it?”

Sandee nodded, her gaze locking onto Claire’s. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Claire's eyes met Sandee's once again, and the newfound camaraderie between them felt like a warm glow.

"So, how's Spot doing?" Sandee inquired, her tone gentle.

"Spot's doing great. Rob is getting really attached to him," Claire replied.

Sandee nodded. "We still haven't found the owners. Of course, we're doing our best to give them every chance to claim him."

"Well, if they don't, I think Spot has a home," Claire said, her eyes shining with a mix of happiness and slight concern.

Sandee's smile echoed Claire's sentiment, but her expression quickly shifted to a frown as she looked over Claire's shoulder. Claire turned around to see what caught her eye, and there was Peter, arm in arm with a young blond woman.

"Is that Peter with a new girlfriend?" Claire asked, a touch of disbelief in her voice.

"Yep," Sandee confirmed, her gaze still fixed on them.

Claire squinted for a better look and then turned back to Sandee. "She looks even younger than you."

Sandee craned her neck slightly for a second look and nodded. "She does, the poor thing."

Claire leaned in across the table, looking Sandee directly in the eyes. "Should we warn her?"

"Do you think she'd listen?" Sandee questioned, her brows furrowing slightly.

Claire shook her head. "Probably not."

With a knowing look, Sandee raised her coffee mug. "Let's just be glad that neither one of us is that poor girl."

Claire clinked her mug against Sandee's and grinned. "I couldn't agree with you more."

SANDEE STEPPED OUT OF SANDCASTLES, the bakery's doorbell chiming softly behind her. The air was crisp but not too cold, the sky was a vivid blue, and the last of the autumn leaves were making their graceful descent from the trees, carpeting the sidewalk in a kaleidoscope of colors.

She inhaled deeply, savoring the sweet scent of baked goods still lingering in the air.

As she walked down the bustling street, Sandee's boots crunched on the fallen leaves as her thoughts replayed the meeting she'd just had with Claire. She was amazed at how well it had gone and had been pleasantly surprised by the warm atmosphere between them. The proposal of a partnership had been the furthest thing from her mind when she'd entered the bakery, but now, it felt like the beginning of something wonderful.

Claire had even extended an invitation to join her, Maxi, Jane, and Andie for coffee, but Sandee had declined, excusing herself politely. One change at a time, she thought. One relationship mended, one step forward. There was a slight pang of regret, but she assured herself that there'd be other opportunities.

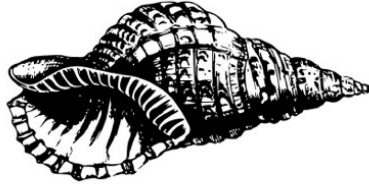
As she approached the storefront of a quirky little antiques shop, she spotted a dog tethered to a lamppost. She couldn't resist. Bending down, she petted the dog's soft fur. Its tail wagged in response, and for a brief moment, she felt a simple, unconditional love that only animals seemed to offer.

Standing, she continued her walk toward the animal rescue shelter, at which she was volunteering. Cleaning out litter boxes wasn't glamorous work, but it was honest and it was needed. And strangely enough, she found satisfaction in it. Gone were the days when her self-worth was measured by the number of social events she attended or the brands she wore. Now, she found meaning in contributing to a cause greater than herself—in providing comfort to animals who had none.

As she neared the shelter, Sandee couldn't help but feel proud of the person she was becoming. The old Sandee, the insecure mean girl who'd trample over anyone to get what she wanted, was becoming a distant memory. Every step she took felt like a step away from that past and toward a future that held so much promise, so much more substance.

After entering the shelter, she took off her coat and rolled up her sleeves. There was work to be done, but for the first time in a long time, Sandee was genuinely excited about doing it. And as she set about her tasks, each small action felt like a piece of a new identity falling into place—one built on empathy, compassion, and authentic connections.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Claire was cleaning off the table when Jane walked into Sandcastles, her eyes scanning the bakery before landing on Claire. “Was that Sandee I saw leaving?” Jane inquired, setting her purse down on the counter.

Claire’s smile widened. “Yep, that was her.”

Jane glanced back out the window toward the sunlit street Sandee had just walked down. “She looked... happy.”

“You know,” Claire began, pausing to tuck a stray hair behind her ear, “I think she was.”

Jane raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “So what happened?”

Claire chuckled. “I’ll spill all the tea once everyone gets here. But since you’re early, you’re on table-setting duty.”

Jane laughed and nodded, accepting her assignment as Claire moved to the display case. She selected an assortment of freshly baked pastries, including a chocolate cruller that Jane requested. Claire arranged the pastries on a serving tray while Jane made the coffees just the way everyone liked them.

They had just set everything on the table when Maxi and Andie arrived.

“What perfect timing we have,” Andie said as she sat down in front of the black coffee and slid a danish onto her plate.

Everyone else settled into their seats and grabbed a pastry. The conversation naturally turned to Maxi’s gallery show.

“I think it was a smashing success, even if I do say so myself.” Maxi beamed. “We had record attendance, and Olga sold several pieces.”

Claire clapped her hands, delighted. "Oh, that's wonderful! And what did Chandler think?"

"I sent him a video, and let's just say he was more than impressed." Maxi grinned. "But the real win was Olga's kids finally coming around, realizing she's perfectly capable of living in her own home. That alone made the night for me."

Everyone nodded, sharing in Maxi's joy.

"But enough about me." Maxi then turned her attention to Andie. "What was that big emergency last night? You, Bunny, and Sam rushed out of here like the place was on fire!"

Andie leaned back, her face glowing with the satisfaction of a mystery solved. "Well, it turns out that the gift was meant for Betty, who was staying at Tides. You won't believe how it all came together. Even after Bunny and Sam put in hours of research, all it took was Sally recognizing the name on the gift as Betty's nickname."

"So you rushed off to Tides in the hopes of catching her?" Maxi asked.

"Yes. Jane said they were leaving last night, so we were hoping to catch them before they left," Andie said.

"And did you?" Maxi asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"Yes. They were practically on their way out the door!" Andie said.

"Did you give her the gift?" Claire cut a carrot muffin in half and put one side on her plate.

"I did." Andie smiled. "It was a sterling silver urchin charm. You should have seen her face when she opened it. Turns out, the charm was from her late sister, Heidi."

Jane nodded, "Ah, yes, Betty had mentioned her sister to me and how she'd been looking for some sort of connection, a sign, maybe."

"Then I bet the charm was the connection she was looking for," Andie mused.

Jane nodded. "I'm happy for her. They were nice ladies. They even left a wonderful note at the reception desk. Looks like we'll be seeing them next year!"

"That's great to hear," Claire chimed in. "Sounds like everything worked out nearly perfectly."

Andie grinned. "It did. Although Bunny was a bit disappointed that we didn't actually solve the mystery through hard-boiled detective work, both

she and Sam were thrilled to have played a part in reuniting Betty with such a sentimental treasure.”

Jane, shifting her attention from Andie’s delightful tale, turned to Claire. “So, spill the beans! I saw Sandee leaving Sandcastles as I walked in. What happened?”

Claire took a deep breath, her face glowing with an air of hope and new beginnings. “Well, Sandee and I are going to work on a project together. We’re considering a partnership for Beach Bones!”

The table went silent for a moment, a mixture of surprise and curiosity painted on everyone’s faces. Maxi broke the silence first. “A partnership? With Sandee? Wow, that’s unexpected!”

Claire nodded. “It is. But you know, I think we may have misjudged her. She’s changed, really changed. Did you know she drove all the way down to New York to rescue dogs affected by the flooding? Risked her own safety for it.”

Jane looked impressed. “That does sound like the action of a changed person.”

Claire continued, “She was fooled by Peter, just like I was. I think it’s high time we gave her another chance, and honestly, I’m looking forward to working with her.”

Andie raised her coffee mug in the air. “Well, here’s to new beginnings!”

Everyone clinked their mugs together, the sound echoing the harmony and unity that filled the room.

Claire looked around the table at her friends, grateful for the love and community that seemed to wrap itself around every corner of their small town. “You know, it really does seem like everything always works out in the end.”

This is a work of fiction.

None of it is real. All names, places, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real names, places, or events are purely coincidental, and should not be construed as being real.

AUTUMN TIDES

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Springtide Secrets

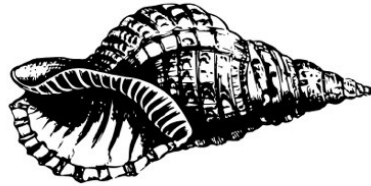
MEREDITH
SUMMERS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lobster Bay
BOOK EIGHT



CHAPTER ONE



A droplet of water struck the hardwood floor with a soft plink, then another, their slow rhythm joining the steady drumming of spring rain against the windows. Jane Miller pressed a thick towel against the growing puddle near the wall even though it was becoming clear that one towel was not going to be enough.

From downstairs came the clatter of breakfast dishes and the low murmur of guests' voices, mingled with the jangle of the tags of her golden retriever, Cooper, as he made his morning rounds. The sound made Jane smile. At least some things were running smoothly.

"Well, at least we caught it before it leaked to the main floor," she muttered, glancing up at the dark stain spreading across the ceiling.

Her sister, Andie, appeared in the doorway, arms full of clean towels, her dark hair slightly frizzy from the humidity. "Good thing no one's booked in this room." She tossed the stack onto the antique dresser that had belonged to their great-grandmother. "Can you imagine the Tripadvisor review? Lovely inn, charming host, complimentary breakfast... also, indoor rain."

Jane sighed, straightening to stretch out the kink in her back. Her gaze drifted to the old photographs lining the hallway, generations of her family standing proud in front of Tides Inn. Her mother's face smiled out from one of them, younger and vibrant, before the illness had taken so much away. The weight of responsibility settled on Jane's shoulders, familiar now after all these years.

"Let's not tempt fate," she said softly.

The room itself was one of the oldest in the inn, a cozy space with wide bay windows that usually offered a stunning view of the coast. Today, the spring storm turned everything to watercolors—grays and blues bleeding together through the rain-streaked glass. Even so, the pale morning light gave the antique furniture a welcoming glow.

Andie peered out at the misty coastline, pressing her palm against the cool window. “Maybe the leak will discourage Victoria Barnes from bugging us about selling. We’ll tell her it’s all leaky.”

Jane laughed. The local Realtor had been annoyingly persistent about her inquiries. “Somehow, I don’t think that will stop her, but there’s no way we’re selling. Not now that bookings are steady.”

Steady. The word settled something in her chest. It had been a long road since their mother’s diagnosis, since Jane had dropped everything to take over the inn. Sometimes, she still caught herself waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Andie gave her a knowing nudge. “You know what this means? You actually have enough business to hire more staff.”

Jane laughed. “One thing at a time. Besides, Brenda’s got the kitchen under control, and Liz is handling the front desk just fine. Did Brenda get ahold of Sally?”

“She did. Sally’s finishing up at the harbor and will be here soon.”

That was a relief. Sally Donovan had been fixing things at Tides Inn for decades. Even now, well into her sixties, she was faster and more reliable than any handyman in town.

Still, Jane had a feeling they wouldn’t be getting away with a quick fix.

“Let’s see where this water is coming from.” Jane looked up at the corner of the ceiling and its growing water stain.

Andie gave her a knowing look. “You mean pull down the paneling?”

“Yep. I want to see exactly where it might be coming from. Besides, this paneling is old, and it’s time to redo the walls in something more modern anyway.”

“Good thing you’ve got someone handy to rebuild it.” Andie smirked. “Mike did a great job on that library. Maybe he can fix this too.”

Jane hesitated then smiled. “It was sweet, wasn’t it?”

The library had been a surprise, one she hadn’t known she needed until the moment Mike had revealed it to her, complete with shelves lined with her favorite books. He had spent weeks planning it, carving out a space in

the inn just for her. The gesture had warmed her in a way she hadn't expected.

And yet, she still found herself holding back. She knew why. The scars left by Tom's sudden passing ran deep. Love wasn't something she took for granted anymore.

Shaking the thought away, she grabbed the pry bar she'd brought just for this purpose. "Let's see how bad this is before we start assigning jobs to Mike."

She wedged the tool into a seam between the old wood paneling and the wall, pressing until the nails loosened with a slow, reluctant groan. The wood shifted, and she pulled again, expecting damp insulation or rotted beams.

Instead, the panel came away completely, revealing something unexpected.

Jane blinked. Behind the wall there wasn't just water damage or warped boards. There was a dark, narrow space.

Andie leaned forward, her breath catching. "Uh, is that a closet?"

Jane reached for her phone and switched on the flashlight. The beam illuminated wooden shelves coated in decades of dust, the air heavy with the musty scent of forgotten things.

Her pulse quickened as she stepped inside, brushing aside cobwebs. The space was tight, no more than two feet deep, with shelves built into the walls. Her fingers skimmed the top shelf, searching, until they bumped against something solid.

She pulled out a journal, its leather cover cracked and worn with age. Faintly embossed initials marked the front: L. W.

Andie leaned in as Jane carefully turned the fragile pages. The ink had faded, but the writing was still legible, neat and deliberate. "Looks like a diary."

Andie leaned in. "Who's it belong to?"

Jane squinted at the inside cover, running a finger over the faint inscription. "Lillian Whitmore."

Andie frowned. "That name sounds familiar."

Jane didn't answer. She turned a few pages, the delicate paper whispering softly as it moved. A short entry caught her eye.

January 14

It's quiet now. I never know if the quiet means I'm safe or if it's the calm before the storm. He didn't say a word at dinner. That's worse than yelling. I fear what will happen next.

Jane felt a small shiver at the words.

Andie let out a low whistle. "That's... unsettling."

Jane was about to turn another page when—

Drip.

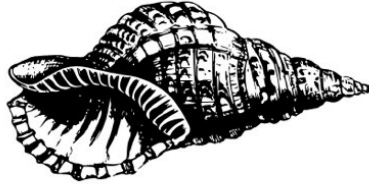
A cold splash landed right on her forehead. She jerked back, blinking, as Andie tilted her chin up just in time for another fat drop of water to hit her square on the nose.

They both sat frozen for a second.

Andie wiped her face with the sleeve of her sweater. "Right. The *other* mystery we have to solve—the one where your ceiling is trying to drown us."

Jane sighed, carefully closing the journal. "Okay. Leak first. Hidden history later."

CHAPTER TWO



Jane stood with her arms crossed as Sally Donovan pulled down another warped section of paneling, sending a soft cloud of dust and damp wood fibers into the air. The smell of wet plaster and aged wood filled the room.

“This is a mess,” Sally muttered, inspecting the damage. She ran a weathered hand over the exposed beams, frowning. “Looks like whoever did these renovations back in the seventies didn’t think too far ahead. Half of this should have been replaced back then.”

“That’s the seventies for you,” Andie said, leaning against the doorframe.

Sally snorted. “Tell me about it. I’ve fixed more bad renovations from that decade than I can count.” She pulled a flashlight from her toolbox and shined it along the dampened wood. “Leak’s coming from a valley in the roof, probably where it meets the dormer. Could be the flashing, could just need a patch.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad. Maybe Shane can look at it.” Jane glanced at Andie. Her boyfriend, Shane, was a local carpenter.

“I’m sure he won’t mind,” Andie said.

Sally let out a hmm and took a step back, wiping her hands on a rag. “I’ll get to work on sealing this up from the inside and replacing anything wet. Shouldn’t take me too long.”

Andie hesitated then glanced toward Jane. “Actually, while we’ve got you here, we wanted to ask you something.”

Sally glanced up. “Yeah?”

Jane stepped forward, holding up the journal they'd found in the hidden closet. "We pulled down that panel this morning and found a closet behind it. This was tucked way back on a shelf."

Sally narrowed her eyes at the worn leather cover. "Old thing, huh?"

Andie nodded. "Looks like it belonged to someone named Lillian Whitmore."

For a moment, Sally said nothing. Then she frowned. "Lillian Whitmore..." She shook her head slightly. "That name sounds familiar. Can't say why, but I know I've heard it before."

Jane and Andie exchanged a glance.

Sally tapped a finger against her toolbox. "If you want to know more about her, you ought to ask Bunny and Sam. They love digging into old stuff."

Jane tucked the journal under her arm. "That's what we figured. And if we hurry, we can meet the girls at Sandcastles for our weekly coffee meeting and maybe even catch Bunny there too."

Sally nodded and turned back to her work, already muttering about how people used to slap wood over anything and call it a day.

Jane and Andie left her to it, grabbing their rain coats. Their weekly coffee meetup with Claire and Maxi had become a tradition, something steady in the midst of their busy lives. Even when things got hectic, they always made time for it.

Jane reached for Cooper's leash, clipping it onto his collar. He wagged his tail, ears perked, ready to go.

The golden retriever was actually Mike's dog, but now Jane and Mike sort of shared custody. Sometimes, Cooper stayed at Mike's house, lounging in his sunroom or joining him on long morning walks. Other times, he stayed at Tides Inn, curling up beside the reception desk as Jane worked or keeping her company on quiet evenings. It was a rhythm that worked for all of them—especially Cooper, who seemed to love both homes equally.

They stepped outside into the morning air, the rain having settled into a light mist. The air had the smell of fresh rain, and the streets of Lobster Bay glistened, damp from the earlier downpour, but the sky was already brightening.

As they neared Sandcastles Bakery, Cooper suddenly perked up, his tail wagging faster.

Jane followed his gaze and smiled. Tied to the wooden railing outside was Dooley, Sam's hound dog, looking just as excited. The two dogs greeted each other with a playful nuzzle, tails wagging in sync.

Jane looped Cooper's leash beside Dooley's and ruffled his ears. "Be good, boys."

Andie grinned. "They'll probably swap gossip while we're inside."

The bakery was warm and filled with the scent of fresh bread and cinnamon. The early morning rush had started to die down, leaving a handful of regulars scattered at tables.

Claire and Maxi were already at their usual spot, steaming mugs in hand. Next to them, Bunny and Sam sat at a smaller table, a newspaper spread between them.

Sam was picking at a bran muffin while Bunny tapped the eraser of her pencil against the tabletop. "Five-letter word for 'meddling,'" she mused aloud.

Sam smirked. "B-U-N-N-Y."

Bunny narrowed her eyes.

Jane and Andie waved to Sam and Bunny.

"Let's sit with Claire and Maxi for a minute before we talk to Sam and Bunny," Jane said as they made their way to Claire and Maxi.

"Finally," Claire said, smiling as Jane and Andie slid into their seats. "We thought you'd stood us up."

Jane shook her head. "Never! We had a little emergency at the inn this morning."

Andie pulled off her coat. "The ceiling in Room Five decided it wanted to let the rain in."

Claire groaned. "That happened here once. Stressful as heck."

"Yeah, but Sally fixed yours, and she'll fix mine," Jane said. "She already found the problem and has a plan to patch it up."

As if on cue, Haley arrived with the coffee pot and refilled their mugs. "You two are later than usual."

Jane smiled. "Blame the leak."

Haley smirked. "That's a new one. Let me know if you need anything else."

Maxi broke off a piece of her croissant. "Speaking of the bakery, how's the dog biscuit business going?"

Claire leaned back, resting her arm on the chair beside her. “Honestly? I’m enjoying it more than I expected. Sandee and I actually work well together.”

Andie raised a brow. “That’s a change from a few months ago.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “Don’t remind me.”

Jane took a bite of her scone, the almond flavor rich and warm. “Are you guys doing the Springtide Festival with Beach Bones dog treats?”

Claire nodded. “We have a booth. Sandee’s excited about it. She’s got ideas for new treats to debut.”

Maxi perked up. “That reminds me—I’m putting together a special event at the gallery. It’s a mix of historical photos of Lobster Bay and paintings by local artists.”

Jane wiped a crumb from her hand. “That sounds great.”

“I’m excited about it,” Maxi said. “I think people will love seeing how the town looked over the years.”

Andie nudged Jane. “Speaking of history…”

Jane reached into her bag and pulled out the journal, setting it on the table. “We found something weird at the inn this morning.”

Maxi leaned forward. “Weird how?”

“It was hidden in a closet that had been sealed off decades ago.”

Claire’s eyes widened slightly as she ran a hand over the cracked leather cover. “This is definitely old.”

Maxi leaned in, inspecting the worn edges. “Look at the binding. This thing has been handled a lot.” She traced her fingers over the faded embossing. “No title, no date…”

Andie flipped open the cover, carefully turning the first page. Her brow furrowed as she read. “Lillian Whitmore?”

A chair scraped against the wooden floor.

Jane glanced up just as Sam leaned slightly toward their table.

“What’s that?” he asked, his interest piqued.

Bunny set down her crossword puzzle, eyeing the book. “You two look like you just found a buried treasure.”

Jane hesitated. “It’s an old journal. We found it hidden in a closet at the inn.”

“One of your ancestors?” Bunny asked.

Jane shook her head. “No. The name inside is Lillian Whitmore.”

Sam’s expression shifted. “Did you say Lillian Whitmore?”

Jane's fingers tightened around the edge of her coffee cup. She wasn't sure why, but the way he said the name—slowly, like he was sorting through an old memory—sent a flicker of unease down her spine.

Andie nodded. "The name sound familiar?"

Sam exchanged a look with Bunny before leaning back in his chair. "Yeah. That was a cold case I worked on."

Claire frowned. "A what?"

Sam nodded. "She disappeared. Decades ago. It happened before my time on the force. Back then, everyone thought the husband killed her, but they couldn't prove it. I got it as a cold case years later when forensics had advanced."

"That explains the ominous entries." Jane turned the pages, angling the diary so they all could read it.

MARCH 3

He was in another mood tonight. I could tell the moment he stepped through the door. I barely spoke a word, and yet somehow, it was still the wrong thing to say.

JANE FROWNED, turning a few more pages. Another entry caught her eye.

APRIL 7

I have to be careful. I know what happens when I'm not. But how much longer can I do this? How much longer before he—

THE SENTENCE CUT OFF ABRUPTLY. The ink trailed down the page as if she had stopped mid-thought.

Andie exhaled. “Yikes. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was scared for her life.”

“Did you prove the husband killed her?” Jane asked Sam.

Sam shook his head. “Nope. Couldn’t prove it with new forensics either. Problem was, there was no body.”

For a moment, no one spoke.

Sam leaned back in his chair, fingers drumming lightly against the table. “What I don’t understand is what was it doing in your inn?”

Jane exhaled. “We have no idea. It was hidden in a closet that was completely boarded up. If the leak hadn’t started, we never would have found it.”

Bunny and Sam exchanged a look, one of those quick, knowing glances that told Jane they were already intrigued.

“Quite a mystery,” Sam said, tapping a finger against the table. “Mind if I borrow it?”

Jane hesitated only for a second before sliding the journal across the table. “Of course.”

“We’ll take good care of it,” Bunny assured her.

The bell above the door chimed as Katie Green entered, notebook tucked under her arm. Katie was new in town, a promising young reporter at the town paper. She headed straight for the counter, barely glancing up from her phone, where she was reviewing her notes from the morning’s town council meeting.

Claire half stood to wait on her, but Claire’s assistant, Hailey, motioned for Claire to stay seated.

“The usual?” Hailey asked, slipping behind the counter.

“Please,” Katie replied, finally looking up. “That meeting was endless. Three hours discussing historical preservation guidelines.”

“Sounds thrilling,” Hailey said, already preparing Katie’s standard order—large coffee, extra shot, splash of cream.

“Actually, it was interesting.” Katie accepted the coffee gratefully. “Did you know Lobster Bay has some of the strictest historical building codes in Maine? Apparently, there was a huge fight in the seventies when someone wanted to turn the old courthouse into a mini mall.”

Jane and Andie exchanged glances. Their grandmother had often told that story. She'd been part of the preservation committee.

Katie turned toward their table, addressing Jane and Andie. "Your grandmother was involved in that, wasn't she? Margaret Miller? She helped write the original preservation guidelines."

"She did." Jane nodded, impressed by Katie's research.

"I'd love to do a piece on that sometime," Katie said. "About how those guidelines helped preserve Lobster Bay's character." She pulled out her notebook. "Maybe we could set up an interview."

"Sure," Jane agreed. "Though you might want to talk to some of the older residents too. They remember the whole fight."

"That's exactly what I need, the human angle. That's what makes a story matter." Katie held up her coffee. "I'll catch up with you later. Thanks for considering talking to me."

Andie glanced at her watch. "We better get going. You know Mom likes her visits early in the day when she's chipper."

Jane stood as well. "You're right."

Claire, already ahead of them, reached for a small paper bag sitting on the counter and handed it to Jane.

"Chocolate chip muffin for Addie," she said. "Tell her I said hello."

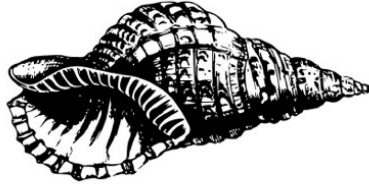
Jane took the bag with a grateful smile. "Thanks. You know she wouldn't forgive me if I showed up without one."

Claire grinned. "She has good taste."

They said their goodbyes and stepped outside. The drizzle had stopped, leaving the streets damp but glistening under the shifting morning sun.

Cooper wagged his tail as Jane unhooked his leash from the railing. "Ready to go visit, boy?"

CHAPTER THREE



The Lobster Bay Library stood quiet in the late afternoon, its brick walls glowing warm against the deepening sky. Inside, Sam hunched over the microfiche reader, squinting at decades-old newspaper articles while Bunny sorted through a stack of town records beside him.

“Found another one,” Sam murmured, adjusting the focus. “May 1938. ‘Local Woman Missing, Husband Claims She Left Town.’” He scribbled the date in his notebook, his detective’s habits still strong after all these years.

Bunny leaned over his shoulder, her silver-streaked curls brushing against his cheek. “What else does it say?”

“Not much. Just that George Whitmore claimed Lillian had been ‘acting strange’ and must have run off.” Sam’s jaw tightened. “I’ve heard that excuse before. Usually from men with something to hide.”

“Here’s something,” Bunny said, pulling a yellowed newspaper from her stack. “Social column from a month before she disappeared. Says Lillian Whitmore was seen at church on crutches. Claimed she fell down the stairs.”

“Classic excuse,” Sam muttered. He reached for the bran muffin he’d bought on their way out of Sandcastles and broke off a piece. “You know what bothers me? Back then, the police barely looked into it. One interview with the husband and that was it.”

“Different times.” Bunny sighed. She settled into the chair beside him, their shoulders touching comfortably. “Though that doesn’t make it right.”

“True,” Sam said.

Bunny pulled out another clipping. "Look at this. Two weeks before she vanished, she sold her grandmother's pearl necklace at Davidson's Jewelry. They put it on display." Bunny pointed at the article with a grainy picture of the necklace in the window of the jewelry store. "As it was quite lovely, it was worth a lot of money, especially back then."

"Getting money together," Sam said softly. "Planning an escape."

"But did she make it?" Bunny wondered. "And why hide the diary at Tides Inn?"

Sam leaned back, his detective instincts stirring. "Maybe Lillian didn't hide it there."

"You think whoever made her disappear stashed it at Tides?" Bunny's voice dropped lower. "But why not destroy it?"

"Sometimes, people like keeping trophies." Sam's expression darkened. "I worked a case once where the suspect held on to his victim's wedding ring for thirty years. Couldn't bring himself to get rid of it."

"That's... disturbing." Bunny suppressed a shiver. "So you think her husband might have hidden it at the inn?"

"Or someone else." Sam started gathering their research materials. "The question is, What's the connection to Tides? Why hide it there?"

"Jane mentioned she was going to look through the old guest books," Sam said. "Might give us an idea of who was around back then."

"Good thinking." Bunny stood, stretching. "For now, how about some dinner? I'm thinking lobster rolls."

"Perfect." Sam offered his arm. "Though we should probably drop these notes off first."

"Your place or mine?"

"Mine's closer." Bunny smiled. "Plus, you have terrible filing systems."

"I do not! I have a very specific organization method."

"Piles on every surface is not a method, Sam."

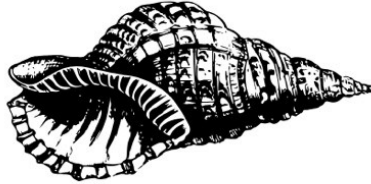
Outside, Sam's red Corvette convertible gleamed in the parking lot, freshly waxed after its winter hibernation. Through the windshield, they could see Dooley sprawled across the back seat, enjoying the last rays of sun.

"You know what this means," Bunny said as they walked to the car. "We're officially on another case."

"Looks that way." Sam held the door for her. "Though this one's different. This isn't about finding a lost gift or solving a minor mystery."

“No,” Bunny agreed softly. “This is about finding justice for someone who never got it. Even if it’s eighty years too late.”

CHAPTER FOUR



Tall Pines Assisted Living sat just beyond the main stretch of town, its wide porches lined with wicker chairs and colorful flower boxes that changed with the seasons. A few residents were already outside, bundled in light jackets, soaking in the fresh air.

As soon as Jane and Andie stepped through the front doors with Cooper, a familiar voice rang out.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite visitor!”

Cooper’s ears perked up at the sound of his name, and he eagerly trotted toward Nora Fields, one of the longtime residents who had taken a particular liking to him.

Jane barely had time to let go of the leash before Nora was scratching behind his ears.

“You’re getting fluffier every time I see you,” Nora said. “Jane, you must be spoiling him.”

“He’s not exactly the high-maintenance one in this relationship,” Jane said, grinning as Cooper flopped onto his back for a belly rub.

Another resident, Mr. Grady, leaned forward in his chair. “That dog’s got the life. You bring him to see us more than my own son visits me.”

“You want me to start bringing Cooper to your family holidays?” Jane teased.

“I wouldn’t say no.”

They chatted for a few minutes before heading toward Addie’s room.

Inside, their mother was sitting in her armchair by the window, a book resting in her lap. She looked up, a smile spreading on her face.

“Oh, my girls! And Cooper too!”

Jane leaned down to kiss her cheek while Andie perched on the edge of the bed. Cooper padded over and rested his chin on Addie’s knee, tail thumping softly against the carpet.

“I brought you something,” Jane said, handing over the paper bag.

Addie opened it and let out a delighted laugh. “Claire’s chocolate chip muffin. You girls always know how to spoil me.”

“She said hello,” Jane added. Addie had known Claire since they were kids, but some days, she didn’t remember her. Apparently, today she did, which made Jane feel good.

“She always does,” Addie murmured, breaking off a piece of the muffin. She took a bite then frowned slightly as if something had just slipped her mind.

“Now, where’s your father?” she asked suddenly, looking around the room.

Jane and Andie froze. A small, familiar ache settled in Jane’s chest, but she forced her voice to stay light. “He’s not here today, Mom.”

“Oh.” Addie blinked then gave a small nod. “Of course. He’s busy.”

They let the moment pass, shifting the conversation to easier things—who was staying at the inn this week, what new pieces Andie had found for the antique shop. Addie listened, nodding along, occasionally asking a question she had already asked five minutes earlier.

After a while, Jane hesitated then said, “Mom, do you remember ever hearing about a woman named Lillian Whitmore?”

Addie tilted her head, her expression distant. “Lillian Whitmore... Lillian... No, I don’t think so. Should I?”

“We’re not sure,” Andie said. “We found an old journal of hers hidden at the inn. In a closet that was boarded up.”

Addie frowned. “The inn?” She seemed to be working through something, but whatever she was searching for wouldn’t come.

A shadow fell across the doorway, and Cooper’s demeanor changed instantly. Instead of his usual friendly greeting for visitors, he stiffened and remained in place.

“Oh! What a surprise to find you both here.”

Victoria Burns stood in the doorway, perfectly coiffed and in a crisp navy suit. Her practiced smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Victoria,” Jane said coolly. “I wasn’t aware you visited Tall Pines.”

“I make it a point to stay connected with the community,” Victoria said, stepping into the room. Cooper moved closer to Jane, his usual friendly nature nowhere in sight. “And since I was here, I thought I’d check if you’d had a chance to reconsider my offer for Tides.”

“Our answer hasn’t changed,” Andie said firmly. “The inn isn’t for sale.”

“But surely with your mother’s care costs...” Victoria glanced meaningfully around the room. “My offer was quite generous.”

“Bookings are up,” Jane said. “We’re doing fine, thank you.”

Victoria’s smile tightened almost imperceptibly. “Well, if you change your mind...” She pulled a business card from her designer purse. “My door is always open.”

After she left, Addie looked confused. “Selling?” she asked, her voice small.

“No, Mom,” Jane said quickly, squeezing her hand. “We’re not selling Tides. Never.”

“Good,” Addie said firmly then just as quickly seemed to forget what they had been talking about. “My mother always said we could never let that place go.”

Andie and Jane exchanged a glance. Their mother’s words seemed to be about more than sentimentality.

“Mom, do you remember when the inn was last renovated?” Jane asked.

“Oh yes, I was a little girl, and I remember my mother complaining about the mess. I think they added a pantry in the kitchen.” Addie took another bite of muffin.

“Mom,” Jane said gently, “are you sure it was the kitchen?”

Addie pursed her lips. “Of course I’m sure.” Then just as quickly, she shook her head. “No, maybe not. Maybe it was upstairs. They rearranged walls to make more rooms.” She exhaled and gave them an apologetic look. “I don’t know, girls. My mind’s playing tricks on me today.”

Jane reached over and squeezed her mother’s hand. “It’s okay, Mom. We were just curious.”

Addie smiled, but her expression was already distant again.

“Anyway,” she said as if they hadn’t just been talking about it, “I think I’ll save the rest of this muffin for later. Too good to eat all at once.”

Jane forced a smile. “Good idea. Savor it.”

Before long, a gentle knock on the door interrupted them. A nurse stood in the doorway, smiling. "Sorry to intrude, but I need to steal Addie for a bit. We've got a special birthday lunch today, and I don't want her to miss it."

Addie's face lit up. "That's right! Marian Fine's turning a hundred today!"

"A hundred?" Andie asked.

"She's outlived three husbands and half the town," Addie said fondly. "If anyone deserves a party, it's her."

"We should let you get to it, then," Jane said, standing.

Addie reached for her hand. "Thanks for coming, sweetheart. And for the muffin. It was perfect, as always."

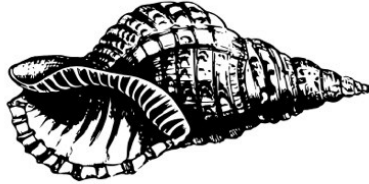
They said their goodbyes and stepped out into the hall. Cooper walked happily beside them, stopping now and then for extra attention from passing residents and staff.

"Well, that was a good visit," Andie said as they made their way toward the exit. "She remembered Claire today."

Jane nodded. "And the renovation, even if the details were fuzzy."

"Speaking of renovations..." Andie checked her phone. "I need to go open the shop, but text me later to let me know if Sally was able to fix the leak."

CHAPTER FIVE



Andie balanced a Victorian hatbox while fumbling with the shop's front door lock, raindrops sliding off her umbrella and onto the worn welcome mat. The morning drizzle had left Main Street quiet except for the occasional splash of cars through puddles and the distant call of seagulls from the harbor.

Inside, she set the hatbox down beside a Queen Anne side table. Sometimes, she still couldn't believe this was her life now—running an antique store in Lobster Bay when just last year, she'd been climbing the ranks at a prestigious auction house in Boston. Back then, she'd had a corner office with a view of the Charles River and a five-year plan that definitely hadn't included moving home.

But life had had other ideas. When their mother got sick, everything changed.

Andie flipped on the vintage chandelier she'd restored last month, watching as warm light spilled across the polished hardwood floors. The shop looked particularly cozy on rainy days like this, with lamplight reflecting off gilt frames and cut glass decanters.

Her phone buzzed. A text from Jane: *Sally says roof definitely needs work. Can you call Shane?*

Andie smiled as she reached for her phone. Things with Shane had been... nice. Surprisingly nice. They'd fallen into an easy rhythm these past few months, so different from their high school romance yet somehow familiar too. Like putting on a favorite sweater and finding it still fit perfectly after all these years.

She called Shane while sorting through a box of vintage costume jewelry she'd picked up at an estate sale. Each piece needed to be cleaned and cataloged, but even though it was tarnished, she could see the craftsmanship.

"Hey there," Shane answered, the smile evident in his voice. "Funny, I was just thinking about you."

"Good thoughts, I hope." She held up an amber necklace, studying the art nouveau details. The morning light caught the stone, warming it to honey gold. "Though this is actually a business call. Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"Sally took a look at the leak at Tides. She fixed it from the inside but thinks the roof needs work. Any chance you could check it out?"

"Of course. I can stop by after I finish the Morgans' kitchen renovation. Around two?"

"Perfect." She hesitated, setting down the necklace. "But we need to discuss payment..."

"Not happening."

"Shane."

"Andie." His tone was gentle but firm. "Your sister lets me store half my tools in her garage. I've eaten more of Brenda's cooking than I deserve. And you..." He paused. "Well, you're you. Let me do this."

"At least let me feed you dinner."

"Deal. Though that would make it the third time this week."

"Is that a problem?"

"No. I like that we're seeing a lot of each other."

Andie felt her cheeks flush. They had been spending more time together lately. He'd stayed over three nights this week already, though he barely had a toothbrush at her place...

Maybe she should clear out a drawer for him? But was that too much? Too soon? She glanced toward her apartment stairs above the shop, thinking about the empty drawer in her bedroom.

"Andie? You still there?"

"Yeah, sorry. Just thinking about... inventory."

The bell above the door chimed, its gentle ring pulling her from her thoughts. An elderly woman stepped in, immediately drawn to a display of Royal Albert teacups Andie had arranged in the front window.

"Customer," Andie said quickly. "But... dinner tonight?"

“Definitely. Pick you up at six.”

She was still smiling when she hung up. The elderly customer was examining the teacups with careful reverence, holding them up to the light.

“That’s from the Old Country Roses collection,” Andie said, moving closer. The pattern of deep-red roses against bone china never failed to catch the eye. “I found it at an estate sale in New Hampshire. The previous owner’s grandmother brought it over from England in 1962. She used to serve afternoon tea every Sunday.”

The customer bought the whole set and as Andie carefully wrapped each delicate piece in tissue paper, her mind kept drifting to Shane. To that drawer she was thinking of clearing out. To how different this felt from any other relationship she’d had. Even in Boston, dating had always felt like checking boxes on a list—successful career, nice apartment, suitable boyfriend. But with Shane...

Her phone rang again. This time, it was Claire.

“Please tell me you’re still on the Springtide Festival committee,” Claire said without preamble.

“Hello to you too. And yes, though I’m starting to regret it. Why?”

“Emergency meeting. Maxi’s freaking out about the setup logistics, and I need backup. Can you come to Sandcastles in twenty?”

Andie glanced at her watch then at the boxes of estate sale finds still waiting to be unpacked. A brass compass caught her eye, its needle swaying slightly. “Make it thirty? I need to finish unpacking this estate sale stuff.”

“Deal. But hurry. You know how Maxi gets when she’s in full event-planning mode.”

“Let me guess. She’s already color-coding the vendor map?”

“Worse. She’s talking about themed lighting concepts.”

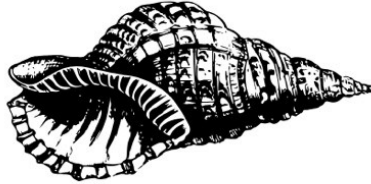
Andie laughed. “I’ll be there soon.”

She hung up and looked around her shop, taking in the carefully arranged vignettes—silver tea services gleaming on mahogany tables, vintage maps in gilt frames, delicate porcelain figurines caught mid-dance. It wasn’t the prestigious auction house she’d once dreamed of, but somehow, this little space had become more than just a temporary solution. *Kind of like Shane*, she thought then quickly pushed that idea away.

One thing at a time. Festival committee first. Relationship drawer decisions later.

Though maybe, she thought as she finished wrapping the last teacup, later didn't have to mean too much later.

CHAPTER SIX



The display case at Sandcastles gleamed, showcasing Claire's signature pastries—delicate cakes sculpted into miniature sandcastles, each one dusted with powdered sugar and decorated with tiny candy seashells. It was these whimsical creations that had inspired the bakery's name years ago.

Andie spotted Claire and Maxi at their usual corner table, looking increasingly overwhelmed as Maxi spread out color-coded vendor maps and timeline drafts for the Springtide Festival. Maxi tapped a purple marker against her chin, frowning at the papers.

"I still think we need more lighting along the outer edges," she said as Andie slid into the empty seat at their table. "What if we did paper lanterns? Or maybe those Edison-bulb strings..."

"Please tell me you're not redesigning the entire festival layout again," Andie said, grateful she'd answered Claire's rescue call.

"Just tweaking." Maxi held up a map covered in highlighting and arrows. "See? The flow would be so much better if we moved the music stage here and—"

"And drove the planning committee completely crazy?" Claire rubbed her temples. "They already approved the layout last week."

"But—"

The bell above the door chimed as Sam and Bunny walked in, Bunny clutching what looked like old newspaper printouts.

"Morning," Sam called out, making his way to the counter. "Bran muffin?"

Claire was already behind the counter, reaching for one. "As if I'd run out of your favorite."

Bunny settled into a chair at the next table. "We've been looking into your mystery woman."

Maxi set down her marker. "Find anything interesting?"

"Some newspaper articles from back then," Sam said, joining them with his muffin. "Nothing concrete about why she disappeared, but..." He hesitated. "The police reports from that time are pretty sparse. They didn't look too hard for her."

"Because of the husband?" Andie asked.

Sam nodded. "He was well-connected in town. And she didn't have any family here to push for answers."

"But if he killed her," Andie asked, "why did they never find a body?"

Sam's expression darkened. "It's pretty rural around here. If someone wanted to hide a body in those woods..." He shook his head. "Well, let's just say there's a lot of ground to cover."

Claire shivered. "That's horrible."

Sam nodded and placed the diary on the table in front of Jane. "You can have this back now. Thanks for lending it to us."

Andie frowned, glancing at the diary. "What I don't understand is how her diary ended up hidden at Tides Inn. And why would someone have hidden it?"

"That's what we need to figure out," Bunny said quietly. "There has to be a connection we're missing."

The bell chimed again, and Sandee burst in, her face flushed with excitement. She was clutching a stack of glossy pamphlets.

"Claire! You're not going to believe this!" She practically bounced to their table. "Marie just called. Rob can officially adopt Spot! All the paperwork went through!"

Claire's partner, Rob, had been fostering a dog, and they'd both gotten pretty attached to him.

Claire's face lit up. "That's wonderful! He must be so happy."

"He doesn't know yet. I'm heading over there now to tell him." Sandee held up the pamphlets. "But first, look what I had made for our booth! I thought we could do a display about rescue dogs along with the Beach Bones samples."

She spread the pamphlets out next to Maxi's festival maps. The pamphlets showed photos of happy dogs and their owners, with "Beach Bones Supports Local Rescues" printed in cheerful letters across the top.

"These are perfect," Claire said, picking one up. "And using recycled paper. Nice touch."

"I remembered you mentioning that about being environmentally conscious." Sandee smiled then glanced toward Rob's store across the street. "I should go tell him about Spot. He's been so worried about whether they'd approve him."

"Go." Claire laughed. "We can go over booth details later."

Sandee gathered up the pamphlets then paused. "Oh, I almost forgot. Would it be okay if I brought Buddy and Bella to the festival? I thought it might help show people how great rescue dogs can be."

"Of course," Claire said. "Cooper and Dooley will probably be there too. And I'm sure Rob will want to bring Spot. It'll be like a dog party."

"Perfect! Okay, I'm really going now." Sandee headed for the door then stopped again. "Wait, one more thing. What if we did special Beach Bones bags for the festival? Like little treat sample packs?"

"Great idea," Claire said. "Now, go tell Rob about Spot. We can plan later."

"Right. Yes. Going!"

They watched through the window as Sandee hurried across the street toward Rob's bread store.

"I still can't believe how well you two get along now," Andie said, turning back to Claire.

Claire smiled. "Me neither, sometimes. But she's... She's actually pretty great once you get to know her."

"And she clearly cares about the business," Maxi added. "Those pamphlets were a good idea."

"She's full of good ideas," Claire said. "I probably should have given her a chance sooner."

Sam cleared his throat. "Speaking of chances, I've still got a few rocks to turn over about Lillian Whitmore."

"I asked Mom if she remembered anything about her," Andie said, "but with her memory problems..." She shrugged.

"Did anyone else in your family ever mention her?" Sam asked.

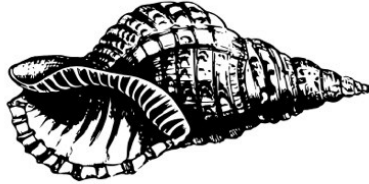
Andie shook her head. "Not that I can remember. Though I suppose that's not surprising if she disappeared so long ago."

"Well, I'm not giving up," Bunny said firmly. "Lillian deserves to have her story told. Whatever happened to her, someone out there must remember something."

"Speaking of stirring things up," Maxi said, turning to her festival maps, "can we please talk about the vendor layout? Because I really think if we just moved these three booths..."

Claire caught Andie's eye and mouthed "thank you" for the rescue call. But as Maxi launched into another round of planning, Andie couldn't shake the nagging question. Had someone in her family hidden Lillian's diary on purpose? And if so, did they know something about what happened to her?

CHAPTER SEVEN



Sandee hesitated outside Bradford Breads, the adoption paperwork clutched in her hands. Through the window, she could see Rob kneading dough at his work counter, Spot curled up contentedly on a bed near the ovens. The warm scent of fresh bread drifted out onto the sidewalk, mingling with the damp spring air.

Sandee glanced back toward Sandcastles, where she could just make out Claire through the window, still deep in festival planning with the others. Part of her wished she'd asked Claire to come with her to share the news. After everything that had happened with Peter, Sandee was painfully aware of how things might look with her going alone to see Rob, even for something as innocent as this. But Claire had not seemed the least bit worried.

And that was exactly why Sandee had to do this right. She wasn't that person anymore.

Bella and Buddy stood obediently beside her, their leashes tangled together. She'd brought them along partly because they needed the walk but mostly because dogs made everything easier. Less awkward.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door. The bell chimed softly, and Spot's head lifted immediately.

"Afternoon!" Rob called out, not looking up from his work. His hands moved steadily through the dough, the muscles in his forearms flexing with each fold and turn. "Be with you in just a sec."

"No rush," Sandee said, leading Bella and Buddy toward Spot's corner. "I actually came with some news about this guy."

Rob glanced up then, flour dusting his dark hair. His eyes went straight to the papers in her hands. "From the rescue? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's perfect." Sandee couldn't help grinning. "Marie just called. The waiting period to find the owners is over, and the paperwork went through. You're officially approved to adopt him!"

Rob's face lit up. "Really?" He quickly wiped his hands on his apron and crossed to where Spot was wagging his tail enthusiastically. "You hear that, buddy? You're staying!"

Spot responded by covering Rob's face in enthusiastic kisses while Bella and Buddy danced around them, caught up in the excitement.

"I can't believe it," Rob said, scratching behind Spot's ears. "I mean, I hoped, but..." He looked up at Sandee. "Thank you. For helping with all the paperwork and everything."

"Of course! Though honestly, you made it easy. Marie said your application was perfect." Sandee watched as Spot, Bella, and Buddy got reacquainted, their tails wagging in friendly circles. "He's lucky to have found you."

Rob's gaze drifted toward Sandcastles, and Sandee caught the soft look that crossed his face. She'd seen that look before—on the good guys, the ones who fell hard and true. Not like Peter, who'd looked at her the same way he'd once looked at Claire and the way he now looked at his new girlfriend.

"Hey, would you like some fresh sourdough to take back? Just pulled it from the oven," Rob asked.

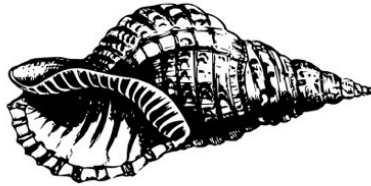
"That would be great." Sandee gathered up the dogs' leashes as Rob wrapped a still-warm loaf. "Oh, and Claire and I were thinking of bringing the dogs to the festival, show people how great rescue pets can be. Would you and Spot want to join?"

"Definitely. Though..." Rob grinned. "You might want to run that by Claire first."

"Already did." Sandee accepted the bread with a smile. "I know who the boss is."

As she headed outside, the dogs trotting happily beside her, Sandee felt a familiar ache in her chest, not for what she'd done wrong in the past but for the person she was becoming. Someone who thought things through. Someone who considered others' feelings. Someone who could look at herself in the mirror and actually like what she saw.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Claire had just finished boxing up Mrs. Peterson's weekly muffin order when she spotted Rob heading across the street. The morning sun caught his dark hair, and she smiled, remembering how he'd looked just hours ago in her kitchen, making coffee while her cat, Urchin, watched suspiciously from his perch on the counter.

The bell chimed as Rob entered, grinning.

"Hey, congratulations on officially adopting Spot!" Claire said as she poured him a coffee.

"Thanks! It's great news. I was getting really attached."

"I know. Me too. Urchin, not so much, though."

"Yeah, I know. You should have seen him this morning after you left for work."

"What did he do now?" Claire wiped her hands on her apron, already anticipating some new drama between their pets.

"Let's just say he's made it very clear who is the owner of the window seat." Rob settled onto the stool at the counter and grabbed his coffee. "Did you know cats could look that judgmental?"

Claire laughed. "Oh yes. That's his specialty. Remember when he knocked over your coffee last week? That was his way of saying your morning routine was disrupting his nap schedule."

"And here I thought he was just clumsy." Rob accepted the fresh coffee she offered. "Though this morning was next level. Spot tried to be friendly. You know how he is, all tail wags and optimism."

"And?"

“Urchin just... stared at him. For, like, ten straight minutes. Didn’t blink once. Poor Spot got so nervous he tried to hide behind my legs.” Rob shook his head. “Then when Spot finally worked up the courage to approach, Urchin just casually knocked Spot’s water bowl over. Didn’t break eye contact the whole time.”

“Classic Urchin power move.” Claire nodded sagely. “He did the same thing when I tried to rearrange the living room furniture. Knocked everything off the coffee table one by one while maintaining direct eye contact.”

“At least he’s consistent.” Rob chuckled.

Claire began restocking the display case with fresh scones, thinking about how natural it felt having Rob at her house almost every morning. Even Urchin’s theatrical protests couldn’t change the fact that their lives had woven together seamlessly over the past months.

“Sandee’s actually really good with animal behavior. The other day, she mentioned some techniques for getting pets to get along.”

Rob raised an eyebrow. “Still feels weird hearing you say nice things about Sandee.”

“Trust me, no one’s more surprised than I am.” Claire smiled, thinking back to those first tense encounters. “Remember when I found out she was using the Beach Bones name? I was so angry I actually considered putting salt in her coffee instead of sugar.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, but I wanted to.” Claire leaned against the counter. “It’s funny how things change. Yesterday, she brought me these amazing marketing materials for the festival booth. Full color, professionally designed, perfect messaging about rescue pets. And my first thought wasn’t ‘she’s showing me up’ or ‘she’s trying to take over.’ It was just... gratitude. For having such a great business partner.”

“You know what’s really impressive? How you gave her a second chance. That couldn’t have been easy.”

Claire thought about it. “It wasn’t, at first. But then I saw how hard she was trying, not just with the business, but with everything. The way she volunteers at the shelter, how she goes out of her way to help people. I realized I was holding on to anger that wasn’t serving anyone, least of all me.”

“Plus,” she added, sliding a scone across the counter, “it turns out we actually work really well together. She has all these great ideas I never would have thought of, and I have the experience to help make them happen. Like these new treat flavors we’re testing, combining her knowledge of what dogs need nutritionally with my baking expertise.”

Rob took a bite of his scone. “Match made in heaven?”

“More like... redemption story meets second chance.” Claire smiled.

“Hopefully, Spot and Urchin will figure out how to get along like that too.”

“I’ll text Sandee about those techniques. She probably has some ideas about helping them adjust.” Claire refilled his coffee. “Though honestly? I think they’ll figure it out. Urchin pretends to hate everything at first, but he always comes around. Remember how he used to hide whenever you came over? Now he sleeps on your shoes.”

“True. Though I’m not sure if that’s affection or just his way of marking territory.”

“With Urchin? Probably both.”

Rob stood. “I should head back . Got a whole morning of kneading ahead of me. But dinner tonight?”

“Sure,” Claire said. “I was thinking maybe we could try that new Italian place in Portland. Celebrate Spot’s adoption officially.”

“Perfect. Though maybe we don’t tell Urchin we’re celebrating Spot. He might retaliate by redecorating the living room again.”

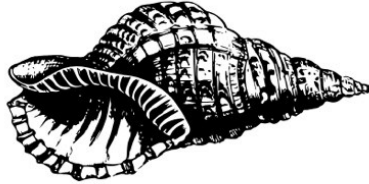
“Good point. As far as Urchin knows, we’re celebrating his generous decision to allow Spot to continue existing in his presence.”

Rob laughed, leaning across the counter to kiss her goodbye. “See you tonight. Love you.”

“Love you too,” Claire said softly, watching through the window as he headed back to his shop. Spot was visible in the front window of the bread shop, tail wagging as Rob returned.

Claire pulled out her phone to text Sandee about the pet relationship techniques. It was still strange sometimes, how easily she could reach out to the woman she’d once considered her nemesis. But that was the thing about second chances—they had a way of surprising you.

CHAPTER NINE



Jane sat at the worn oak table in Tides Inn's kitchen, surrounded by receipt books and scheduling notes. The evening sun slanted through the windows, casting long shadows across the floor where Cooper dozed in a patch of golden light. The old kitchen had a way of feeling especially peaceful at this hour, when the day's bustle had settled into a gentle quiet.

She smiled, thinking of how well things had been running lately. The leak was temporarily fixed, though the roof still needed work. Even the particularly demanding Mrs. Harrison had been won over by Liz's graceful handling of her complaints about room temperature, turning what could have been a disaster into a booking for the entire Springtide Festival.

The back door opened with its familiar creak, and Cooper's head lifted immediately, his tail thumping against the floor as Mike stepped in. He was carrying two paper bags with the distinctive lobster emblem from Barnacle Billy's, and the rich aroma of seafood chowder filled the kitchen.

"I was in the neighborhood," he said with a grin, "and thought you might like some company for dinner." He set the bags on the counter then leaned down to give Cooper a scratch behind the ears. "Plus, this guy sent me a very concerned text about how hard you've been working."

Jane felt warmth spread through her chest at his thoughtfulness. "You're sweet to think of us." She began gathering her papers into a neat stack. "Though I suspect Cooper's just trying to score extra treats."

"Can't blame a dog for trying." Mike started unpacking the containers, the steam rising in the cool evening air. "How's the leak situation?"

“Sally has it under control for now.” Jane sighed. “The roof definitely needs work, but Shane says it will be an easy fix. Though you’ll never believe what we found when we opened up that wall to find the source of the leak.”

Mike raised an eyebrow. “Please tell me it wasn’t a family of raccoons.”

“No, but almost as surprising. There was this hidden closet, completely sealed off during some old renovation.” She described finding Lillian’s diary, watching as Mike’s expression grew more intrigued.

“A hidden diary?” He whistled low. “That’s something. Any idea why it was sealed away?”

“Sam thinks it might be connected to an old missing persons case.” Jane got up to grab bowls from the cabinet, her shoulder brushing against Mike’s as she reached past him. The casual contact felt natural, right. “A woman named Lillian Whitmore disappeared decades ago. Everyone thought her husband killed her, but they never proved it.”

“Lillian Whitmore.” Mike frowned thoughtfully. “You know, old Mr. Peterson used to mention that name sometimes when I did work on his house. Said it was one of the town’s great mysteries.”

They settled at the table with their chowder, the warm scent of fresh bread mixing with the salty seafood aroma. Cooper looked hopefully between them.

“Don’t even think about it,” Mike told him fondly. “You already had dinner.”

Cooper huffed and settled his head on Mike’s knee, his expression mournful.

“Such a hard life.” Jane laughed. “Having to split your time between two houses, getting spoiled at both...”

“Maybe with Liz handling things so well at the front desk, Cooper won’t have to divide his loyalty much longer,” Mike said softly.

There was something in his tone that made Jane look up. Mike was focused on opening a package of crackers, trying a little too hard to appear casual.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Mike shrugged. “It’s just that with Liz handling things, you probably don’t need to live here full-time anymore. It must feel great to know that Liz has things handled when you aren’t here.”

“It is,” she said slowly. “Though I’m not sure Mrs. Harrison would agree. She asked if I’d personally be here to make her morning coffee during her stay.”

Mike grinned. “And what did Liz say to that?”

“That I’d trained her in the exact art of proper coffee preparation.” Jane smiled at the memory. “She’s good at making people feel taken care of, even when she’s telling them no.”

Cooper moved between them, looking hopefully at the chowder.

“It’s hard to let go, but sounds like Liz can handle things..” Mike petted Cooper. “Besides, my place is feeling a little empty when you’re not there. Both of you,” he added quietly.

Instead of the usual flutter of anxiety those words might have caused, Jane felt something else. Something that felt a lot like coming home.

As if on cue, Cooper trotted to his bed by the window and returned with his favorite rope toy, dropping it at their feet with a hopeful whine.

“See?” Mike laughed. “Even Cooper thinks it’s time. He’s tired of having a split-custody arrangement.”

Jane watched as Cooper nudged the toy closer, looking between them with eager eyes. He’d adapted so easily to having two homes that had slowly become one. Maybe he’d been trying to show them the way all along.

She thought about the diary hidden in the walls, about generations of lives lived within these old rooms. About how sometimes, the best way to honor history was to keep making it.

“You know,” she said, surprising herself with how right the words felt, “I could bring some things over this weekend. Just... see how it feels.”

Mike reached across the table, taking her hand. His palm was warm against hers, steady and sure. “Yeah?”

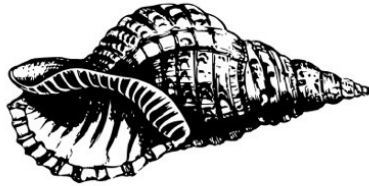
“Yeah.” She squeezed his fingers, feeling lighter than she had in ages. “The inn will be fine without me here every night. Liz has proven that. And your place does have better water pressure.”

“Ah, so that’s the real reason,” he teased, but his eyes were soft with understanding.

Cooper’s tail was practically a blur now. He dashed to the mudroom and returned with his leash, dropping it in Mike’s lap.

“Well,” Mike said, laughing, “I guess that settles it. Can’t disappoint the dog.”

CHAPTER TEN



The Harbor House gleamed against the darkening sky, its windows casting warm light onto the weathered dock below. Andie smoothed her navy silk dress—the one she used to save for special client meetings in Boston—and smiled as Shane held the heavy wooden door for her. The maitre d’ led them to a corner booth overlooking the harbor, where fishing boats bobbed gently in the evening tide.

“This is nice,” Shane said, settling into the leather booth across from her. In his charcoal sport coat and blue button-down, he looked different from the contractor she usually saw in work boots and jeans. But his easy smile was the same. “Though I feel a little overdressed.”

“Says the man who showed up to senior prom in cargo shorts.”

“Hey, those were nice cargo shorts.” He picked up the wine list. “Besides, if I remember correctly, you still danced with me.”

“Only because Tommy Peterson had already stepped on my feet three times.”

The sommelier approached, and Shane ordered a bottle of cabernet. Andie watched him, thinking how naturally he handled these moments now. The Shane she’d known in high school would have been intimidated by a place like this. Then again, the Andie from high school would have been too.

“So,” she said once their wine had been poured, “how bad is the roof at Tides?”

Shane took a sip of wine. “Not terrible. The flashing around one of the dormers needs replacing, and there’s some wear on the north side. But it’s

all standard maintenance stuff.” He grinned. “Though Jane tried to write me a check anyway.”

“Of course she did.” Andie swirled her wine, enjoying its rich berry notes. “Did you see the mess we found in that wall?”

“The hidden closet? Yeah, Jane mentioned something about an old diary.”

Andie nodded then paused as their waiter arrived with warm bread and described the evening’s specials. They ordered—rib eye for Shane, filet mignon for her—before she continued.

“It belonged to a woman named Lillian Whitmore. Sam says she disappeared decades ago. Everyone thought her husband killed her, but they never proved it.”

Shane’s expression darkened. “That’s heavy. Any idea why it was hidden at Tides?”

“Not yet. Though Sam and Bunny are investigating.” She broke off a piece of bread, still warm from the oven. “It’s strange to think about this woman’s whole life, just... hidden away in our walls.”

Their steaks arrived, perfectly cooked and accompanied by roasted potatoes and fresh asparagus. The conversation drifted to lighter topics—the upcoming festival, a funny story about one of Shane’s clients, Andie’s latest antique finds. It felt easy, natural. Like they’d been doing this forever.

When the check came, Andie grabbed it before Shane could reach for it. “You won’t let us pay you for the roof work. At least let me get dinner.”

“Fair enough.” He smiled that soft smile that still made her heart skip. “Though I should warn you, I ordered the expensive wine because I thought I was paying.”

After dinner, they took the long way home, driving along Ocean Avenue, where the full moon painted a silver path across the dark water. They passed Tides Inn, its windows glowing warmly in the night. Mike’s truck sat in the parking lot. Andie smiled, thinking of her sister. She was glad Jane had found happiness with Mike.

They pulled over at Lighthouse Point, where they used to park in high school to watch the waves. The ocean stretched endlessly before them, moonlight dancing on the surface.

“Remember how we used to come here after football games?” Shane asked softly.

Andie laughed. "Of course. Though I don't think I appreciated the view as much as I do now."

"Me too."

She squeezed his fingers. "We've grown up a bit since then."

"Speak for yourself. I still own those cargo shorts."

They continued back to her apartment above the shop and settled onto her couch. Shane found an old movie on TV while Andie kicked off her heels then tucked her feet under her. It felt comfortable. Right.

Her gaze drifted to her bedroom door, slightly ajar. She'd been thinking about clearing out a dresser drawer for him but hadn't found the courage yet. What if she offered and he thought it was too soon? Maybe she should casually ask if he'd like a drawer first. But then again, that might make things awkward if he wasn't ready for that level of commitment.

She thought about their history, how she'd left for college without saying goodbye, too afraid of what staying might mean. How she'd broken his heart without meaning to just because she'd been young and scared of feeling too much.

"You're thinking awfully hard over there," Shane said, pulling her from her thoughts.

"Just... remembering things."

He shifted to face her. "Good things or bad things?"

"Both, I guess." She took a sip of wine. "Do you ever think about... back then? About how things ended?"

Shane was quiet for a moment. "Sometimes. But mostly, I think about how things are now."

"And how are they now?"

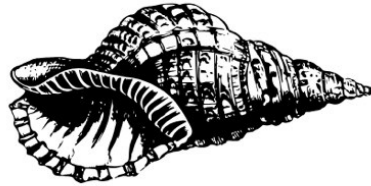
He smiled, reaching over to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "Pretty darn good, I'd say."

Andie leaned into his touch, pushing thoughts of empty drawers aside for now. Maybe some things didn't need to be rushed. Maybe it was enough to just be here, in this moment, with the taste of good wine on her lips and the sound of waves in the distance.

But later, after Shane had fallen asleep beside her, Andie lay awake watching moonlight paint patterns on her ceiling. The empty drawer waited, a symbol of everything she wanted to say but couldn't quite voice yet. Soon, she told herself. When the moment was right.

She just hoped she would recognize it when it came.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The morning dew still clung to the grass as Claire made her way across the town green, carefully balancing a tray of sample Beach Bones treats. Workers were already setting up tents and booths for the Springtide Festival, their hammering mixing with birdsong and distant waves. The air held that perfect spring mix of salt and sweetness that made Claire fall in love with Lobster Bay all over again each year.

Sandee was already at their assigned spot, surrounded by boxes and display materials. Buddy and Bella lounged in patches of sunlight nearby, occasionally perking up when someone walked past.

“I brought the new recipes to try,” Claire called out, setting down the tray. “The peanut butter pumpkin and the apple carrot.”

Sandee looked up from where she was arranging their banner. “Perfect timing. I just got the display stands set up.” She stepped back, studying the layout. “What do you think? Too much blue?”

Claire took in the booth—the clean lines of the counter, the bright coastal colors, the professional signage Sandee had designed. It was worlds away from Claire’s first attempts at selling Beach Bones from a card table outside Sandcastles.

“It’s perfect,” she said, meaning it. “Though maybe we could add some of those seashells I collected. Give it that beachy feel.”

“Ooh, yes!” Sandee’s face lit up. “And what if we did little treat samples in those tiny sand pails you mentioned?”

A year ago, Claire would have bristled at someone suggesting changes to her business. But now, watching Sandee’s genuine enthusiasm, she felt

only gratitude for having such a dedicated partner.

A soft “woof” made them both turn. Rob was approaching with Spot trotting happily beside him, the dalmatian’s new collar glinting in the morning sun.

“How was the first official night as an adopted dog?” Sandee asked, reaching down to scratch Spot’s ears.

Rob laughed. “Well, he and Claire’s cat, Urchin, had a bit of a standoff over who gets the prime sunspot under the living room window.”

“Oh no,” Sandee said. “Who won?”

“Let’s just say Spot learned that cats don’t fight fair.” Rob grinned. “But they’ll figure it out. Eventually.”

Claire caught his eye, warmth spreading through her chest at his easy mention of their pets sharing space. It felt natural, right, like so many things about their relationship did these days.

“I sent Claire some tips on how to get them to be friends,” Sandee said, reaching for the tray of samples. She turned to the other dogs. “Who wants to be our taste testers?”

The dogs’ ears perked up immediately. Buddy and Bella, who had been dozing, trotted over with hopeful expressions.

“All right, official taste test time,” Claire announced, breaking the treats into smaller pieces. “Peanut butter pumpkin first.”

They watched as the dogs sampled the treats, tails wagging enthusiastically.

“I’d say that’s a yes.” Rob laughed as Spot looked up hopefully for more.

“The pumpkin adds fiber,” Sandee explained, “and it’s good for their digestion.”

“Plus, it’s seasonal,” Claire added. “Perfect for fall.”

“Always thinking ahead,” Rob said, and Claire felt a flutter in her chest at the pride in his voice.

The morning continued in a pleasant blur of setup and planning. They arranged displays, tested treat combinations, and watched their dogs play together in the grass. Claire found herself pausing now and then just to take it all in. How different everything felt from last year.

“Earth to Claire.” Sandee waved a hand in front of her face. “You okay there?”

“Yeah, just...” Claire smiled. “It’s nice, isn’t it? All of this.”

Sandee's expression softened with understanding. "It really is."

The click of a camera shutter drew their attention. Maxi stood nearby, her professional camera in hand.

"Sorry," she said, lowering the camera. "But that was too perfect not to capture, all the dogs and humans getting along."

"Ha ha," Sandee said dryly, but she was smiling.

Maxi gestured to the tents being set up. "I think everything is looking perfect. Don't you?"

Claire nodded. "It does. And you were worried."

Maxi laughed. "I guess I had a bit of a meltdown, but it's the first time I've been in charge of the layout, and with the gallery, too, it was a lot."

"Well, you did a great job," Sandee said.

"Thanks." Maxi smiled. "Actually, I wanted to show you some of the photos I've collected for the gallery exhibit. People have been bringing in amazing old pictures of the town."

They gathered around as Maxi scrolled through the black-and-white images that she had taken pictures of on her phone—the harbor in the 1940s, Main Street during a parade, the town green during what looked like an old summer festival.

"These are incredible," Claire murmured.

"Oh!" Sandee pointed at one photo. "Is that Tides Inn?"

The image showed the inn in what must have been the 1930s, its wraparound porch decorated for some long-ago celebration. A group of people stood on the steps, their faces small but distinct.

"I think so," Maxi said. "Jane's going to love this one. Look at the details on the—"

"There you all are!" Sam called out, striding across the grass with Bunny beside him, Dooley trotting eagerly at their heels. The hound immediately joined the other dogs, tail wagging as Sandee pulled a Beach Bones treat from her pocket.

"Here you go, handsome," she said, giving Dooley the treat while Bella, Buddy, and Spot watched with interest.

"What's wrong?" Claire asked, noting Sam and Bunny's excited expressions.

"Nothing's wrong," Bunny said quickly. "But we found someone who remembers Lillian Whitmore."

“Bud Fletcher,” Sam explained. “He’s in his nineties now, but he remembers her from when he was a kid. Said she used to give him penny candy when he’d see her at the general store.”

“Did he know what happened to her?” Sandee asked softly.

Sam’s expression darkened. “He said she always seemed sad. And once... Once, he saw her husband hit her. Right there on Main Street.”

A heavy silence fell over the group.

“That poor woman,” Sandee whispered.

Claire reached for Rob’s hand without thinking, drawing comfort from his steady presence. The dogs, sensing the shift in mood, pressed closer to their humans.

“We’ll figure it out,” Bunny said firmly. “Whatever happened to her, she deserves to have her story told.”

Maxi nodded toward her laptop. “Maybe some of these old photos will help. People kept everything back then. There might be more clues in family albums.”

“I hope so,” Claire said softly, thinking of the fearful entries in the diary.

Sam gathered up the newspaper clippings and tucked them carefully into his folder. “Next step is to check with Jane. See if there are any old guest records from the inn. Maybe Lillian managed to get away from her husband and stayed there.”

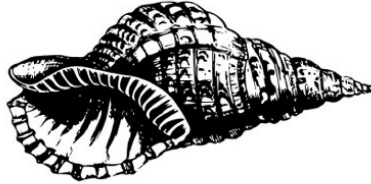
“I’ll continue to ask around, too, while I’m collecting art for the gallery.” She glanced at her watch and jumped up. “Speaking of which, I need to get over there and start setting up the new pieces.”

The moment was broken by Spot suddenly deciding it was time for a game, grabbing one of the display ribbons and darting away with it.

“Spot, no!” Rob laughed, chasing after him while Buddy and Bella joined in the game.

Just like that, the heavy mood lifted. Claire watched Rob playing with the dogs, Sandee calling out helpful suggestions that mostly involved treats, and Maxi hurriedly snapping a few photos before rushing off to the gallery.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Sunlight streamed through the gallery's tall windows as Maxi carefully arranged black-and-white photographs on the pristine white walls. Each image captured a moment of Lobster Bay's history—fishing boats laden with the day's catch, women in long skirts strolling the boardwalk, children playing on beaches long before condos lined the shore.

She stepped back, tilting her head to study the arrangement. "Maybe the harbor scene should go here instead," she muttered, already reaching to adjust the frame.

"Still rearranging?" Chandler's voice made her jump. The gallery owner stood in the doorway, impeccably dressed as always.

"Just fine-tuning." Maxi straightened a frame that was perfectly straight already. "The lighting hits differently as the sun moves."

Chandler nodded approvingly. "The historical theme is working beautifully. Though..." He gestured to a wrapped canvas leaning against the wall. "I notice you haven't hung your piece yet."

Maxi felt her cheeks warm. "Oh, I don't know if—"

"It's going up," Chandler said firmly. "Right there." He pointed at the feature wall. "Your work deserves to be seen, Maxi. Stop hiding it."

The bell above the door chimed before she could protest further. Jane walked in, bringing a gust of fresh air and the faint scent of sea salt with her.

"This looks amazing!" she exclaimed, taking in the photographs.

"Perfect timing," Chandler said. "Maybe you can convince Maxi to stop being modest about her own work."

Jane raised an eyebrow. "Still haven't hung it?"

"I'm getting to it," Maxi muttered.

Chandler checked his watch. "I have a meeting, but when I come back, I expect to see that canvas on the wall." He gave Maxi a pointed look before heading out.

"He's right, you know," Jane said once he'd gone. "Your work is beautiful."

Maxi busied herself adjusting another perfectly straight frame. "Did Sam and Bunny happen to find you?"

"Nice deflection." Jane smiled. "But no. What did they find?"

Maxi filled her in on Bud Fletcher's memories of Lillian, watching Jane's expression darken at the mention of abuse.

"That poor woman," Jane murmured. "I can't imagine living like that, especially back then when there weren't many options for escape."

"Speaking of the inn..." Maxi pulled up the old photograph on her laptop. "Look what someone brought in."

Jane leaned closer, studying the black-and-white image of Tides Inn. "Oh wow, this must be from the thirties! Look at the old porch railings. We replaced those years ago." Her finger traced the group standing on the steps. "That's my grandmother right there."

"Really? Who are the others?"

Jane shook her head. "No idea. Though..." She leaned closer to the old photograph, studying the sepia-toned faces. "Wait. The woman on the left, that's my great-aunt Mazie. My grandmother's sister." She traced a finger over the faded image. "I recognize her from other old family photos, but I don't know who any of the others are."

Jane took out her phone and snapped a picture of it. "I'll have to ask Mom if she recognizes anyone. Though it's hard to know if she'll remember."

They were quiet for a moment, both thinking of Addie's declining memory.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you," Maxi said, carefully unwrapping a new canvas, "but what brings you by? I thought you'd be dealing with that leak at the inn."

Jane hesitated, fidgeting with the corner of a nearby drop cloth. "I actually wanted to talk to you about something. I... I told Mike I'd start staying at his place a few nights a week."

Maxi set down the canvas, noting the uncertainty in her friend's voice. "That's a big step."

"Is it crazy?" Jane asked softly. "I mean, the inn has been my whole life. What if I'm making a mistake?"

"Jane! That's wonderful!" Maxi beamed, reaching over to squeeze Jane's hand. "And before you start second-guessing yourself, this is exactly the right move. When did you decide this?"

"Last night. He brought dinner to the inn and... I don't know. It just felt right." Jane's smile faltered slightly. "Though sometimes I still worry..."

"About what happened to Tom?"

Jane nodded. "I know it's irrational. Lightning doesn't strike twice like that. And Mike is... He's so steady. So present. But sometimes, I catch myself waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"That's understandable," Maxi said gently. "But you can't let fear of what might happen stop you from being happy now. Look how happy James and I are. You deserve that for yourself."

"I know." Jane sighed. "And I do love him. So much it scares me sometimes."

"Good scared or bad scared?"

"Good scared. Like... like standing at the edge of something wonderful and knowing you're about to jump."

Maxi smiled. "Then jump. Mike's worth the leap."

Jane's expression softened. "He really is."

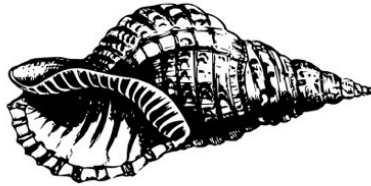
"Now," Maxi said, reaching for the wrapped canvas, "help me hang this thing before Chandler comes back and gives me another lecture about false modesty."

Jane laughed, already moving to help. "Only if you promise to stop being so nervous about showing your work. It's beautiful, and you know it."

Together, they hung Maxi's painting, a watercolor of the harbor at sunset, the sky bleeding from gold to purple while fishing boats returned home. It looked right, there on the feature wall, like it had been waiting for its moment to shine.

Kind of like them, Maxi thought, watching Jane step back to admire the piece. Sometimes, you just had to trust that you were exactly where you were meant to be.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



The spring breeze followed Jane out of the gallery, carrying with it the scent of salt and warming earth. She felt lighter somehow as if sharing her decision about Mike with Maxi had made it more real. More right.

Her phone buzzed, Sam's name lighting up the screen.

"Jane? Any chance you have access to old guest books from the inn?"

She smiled, already turning toward home. "Every single one since 1928. My grandmother never threw anything away."

"Perfect. We need to check some specific months. I'll text you the dates."

Back at Tides, she found Liz methodically dusting the library shelves, her dark curls escaping from a messy bun. The afternoon sun caught dust motes dancing in the air.

"You know," Liz said without turning around, "you really don't need to keep checking on everything. I've got it handled."

Jane laughed. "I know. Just passing through on my way to the attic. Sam needs some old records."

Jane started toward the stairs then paused. "And Liz? You really are doing an amazing job."

First, she detoured to check Sally's work on the leak. The wall was perfectly patched, no sign of water damage remaining. Through the window, she could see Shane on the roof, methodically replacing old shingles. He waved when he spotted her.

The stairs to the attic creaked familiarly under her feet, Cooper following close behind. The space smelled of cedar and memories,

generations of Miller family history packed away in dusty trunks and boxes.

Sunlight filtered through the dormer windows, illuminating dancing dust motes as Jane made her way carefully between stacks of old furniture. Her mother's wedding dress hung in its protective bag next to her grandmother's hope chest. A dollhouse she and Andie had played with sat waiting for the next generation. Each item held a story, a piece of their family's legacy.

The guest books would be... there. Behind Great-Aunt Mazie's collection of hatboxes and underneath a stack of faded Christmas decorations. Jane carefully extracted the leather-bound volumes, their pages soft with age.

On her way back downstairs, she passed her bedroom. The suitcase sat open on her bed, half-packed with things to take to Mike's. The sight made her smile instead of panic, another sign she was making the right choice.

She settled at the kitchen table, the familiar heart of the inn. Cooper flopped at her feet with a contented sigh as she opened the first book, its pages crackling softly.

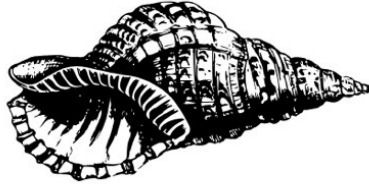
The neat columns of names and dates stretched back through time, each entry a snapshot of someone's story. Honeymooners, families on vacation, business travelers seeking refuge from city life. How many of them had found what they were looking for here?

Her phone buzzed again—Sam's text with the specific dates to check. Jane ran her finger down the yellowed pages, searching for answers about Lillian hidden in these careful records of comings and goings.

Cooper's tail thumped against the floor as the afternoon light shifted, painting patterns on the worn kitchen tiles. From upstairs came the distant sound of Shane's hammering, the steady rhythm somehow comforting.

This was her legacy—not just the building or the business but the stories held within these walls. And maybe, she thought, smiling as she turned another page, it was time to add some new chapters to that story.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Andie pulled into the gravel parking lot at Tides Inn, the late-morning sun warming her face through the windshield. As she stepped out of her car, movement on the roof caught her eye. Shane was up there, working near one of the dormers, his T-shirt stretched across his shoulders as he hammered new shingles into place.

She allowed herself a moment to watch him work, appreciating how at ease he looked even on the steep pitch of the roof. He'd always been comfortable with heights, even back in high school when he would climb the water tower just to prove he could. Now he channeled that fearlessness into something productive, building and fixing things with the same steady confidence.

Inside, the inn felt peaceful. Sally's repair work looked good. The wall near the leak looked completely different with its fresh drywall and new paint.

Unable to resist, she made her way to the dormer window before carefully pushing it open and sticking her head out so she could see Shane. "Hey there, handsome," she called out. "Come here often?"

Shane looked up, grinning as he set down his hammer. "Only when beautiful women call me from windows." He shifted closer, careful on the steep slope. "Though usually, they're trying to escape their towers, not chat with roofers."

"Who says I'm not trying to escape?" She leaned on the windowsill, enjoying the warm breeze. "Maybe I need a dashing carpenter to whisk me away."

“Sorry, I left my white horse at home. Though I do have a pretty reliable pickup truck.”

Andie laughed, the sound carrying on the spring air. These moments with Shane felt so natural now, like they’d never spent all those years apart.

“How’s it looking up there?” she asked, nodding toward the new shingles.

“Not bad. Should have it done by tomorrow.” He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “Though I wouldn’t say no to some cold lemonade when I’m finished.”

“I think that can be arranged.” She smiled.

Andie closed the window and headed toward the main stairs, the open door to Jane’s bedroom catching her attention. A suitcase lay open on the bed, partially packed with familiar items—Jane’s favorite sweater, some books, a few pairs of jeans.

Curious, Andie headed downstairs to search for Jane. She found her in the kitchen, surrounded by old guest books, Cooper dozing at her feet.

“Hey,” Andie said, sliding into a chair. “Going somewhere? I saw the suitcase upstairs.”

Jane looked up, a slight flush coloring her cheeks. “Actually, I’m moving some of my stuff to Mike’s. I’m going to start staying there a few nights a week.”

“Really?” A smile spread across Andie’s face. “That’s wonderful! When did you decide this?”

“Last night.” Jane traced her finger along the edge of the guest book. “He brought dinner over, and we were talking, and... I don’t know. It just felt right.”

“That’s usually how the best decisions feel.”

Jane smiled. “Yeah. Though it’s still a little scary. Good scary, but still.”

“I get that.” Andie thought about the empty drawer in her bedroom, waiting for the right moment. “Sometimes, the scariest steps are the most important ones.”

“Speaking of steps...” Jane gave her a knowing look. “How are things with Shane?”

As if on cue, they heard footsteps on the roof above them followed by the steady rhythm of hammering.

“Good. Really good.” Andie fiddled with the corner of one of the guest books. “I’ve actually been thinking about... maybe clearing out a drawer

for him at my place.”

“Andie! That’s perfect!”

“You think? It’s not too soon?”

Jane laughed. “You’ve known him since high school. I think you’re past the ‘too soon’ worries.”

“True.” Andie glanced up at the ceiling, where Shane’s movements created a comforting percussion overhead. “I just don’t want to mess this up. Not again.”

“You won’t.” Jane reached across the table to squeeze her hand. “You’re not the same people you were back then. And sometimes... Sometimes, the timing has to be wrong before it can be right.”

A floorboard creaked in the pantry, making them both turn. A woman stood in the doorway, looking slightly embarrassed. One of the guests, Andie assumed.

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” she said quickly. “I was looking for the way to the back deck and got turned around.”

“No problem,” Jane said smoothly, though Andie noticed her sister’s slight frown. “The deck is through the sunroom, just past the dining room.”

“Thank you.” The woman’s gaze lingered on the guest books for a moment before she hurried away.

“New guest?” Andie asked once she’d gone.

“Yes, checked in this morning. Liz said she was asking a lot of questions about the inn’s history.” Jane’s frown deepened.

“What’s with all the guest books, anyway?” Andie asked, gesturing to the leather-bound volumes spread across the table.

Jane sighed, pushing one of the books aside. “Sam asked me to look for any record of Lillian Whitmore staying here. He gave me specific dates to check, the months right before and after she disappeared.”

“And?”

“Nothing.” Jane shook her head. “Not a single entry under her name. Not during those months, not any other time.”

“That’s weird,” Andie said, pulling one of the books closer. “If the diary was hidden here, you’d think she must have stayed at some point.”

“Unless...” Jane’s voice trailed off thoughtfully.

“Unless what?”

“Unless someone else hid it here. Someone who didn’t want it found.”

Their phones buzzed simultaneously, the distinctive tone of their friend group chat. Andie pulled hers out to find a message from Maxi:

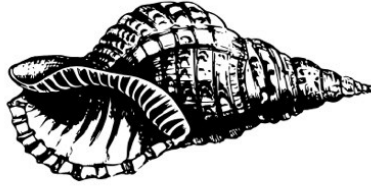
First really warm night of spring! Anyone up for drinks at Splash? The deck is finally open!

“Oh, that sounds perfect,” Andie said. “I haven’t been to Splash since they reopened for the season.”

Jane was already typing a response.

Count me and Andie in!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



The library's archive room was unusually quiet when Sam and Bunny arrived, but something immediately caught Sam's trained eye. The microfiche reader was already loaded with newspapers from the summer that Lillian Whitmore had disappeared, and several boxes of archived papers from that specific time period were stacked neatly on the research table.

"That's odd," Bunny murmured. "Someone else is looking into this."

Sam's detective instincts kicked in. "These records are from exactly when we needed to check. The exact months around Lillian's disappearance."

"Could be a coincidence," Bunny suggested, but her tone was doubtful.

"In my experience, there's no such thing." Sam examined the neat stack of materials. "Whoever was here knew about Lillian."

They exchanged a look, both thinking the same thing—someone else was investigating Lillian's disappearance, someone who didn't want to be discovered.

"Well, I guess we'd better get to work." Sam sat at the microfiche machine. Beside him, Bunny sorted through a stack of printouts, making notes in her precise handwriting.

"Sam," Bunny said suddenly, her voice low. "Look at this."

She pushed a yellowed newspaper clipping across the table. The headline read: "Local Inn Undergoes Major Expansion—Tides Sets Sights on Year-Round Operation."

Sam leaned closer, adjusting his reading glasses. "What's the date on this?"

"Three weeks after Lillian disappeared." Bunny's finger traced the lines of text. "Listen to this: 'Margaret Miller announced extensive renovations to Tides Inn, including the addition of several new guest rooms and modern amenities. When asked why she might want to expand in such an economic downturn, Mrs. Miller stated only that 'the time is right for expansion.'"

Sam frowned. "Remember the article about Lillian's mother's pearl necklace at Davidson's?" He laid the clippings side by side. "The necklace was valued at quite a sum for those days."

"Enough to fund renovations?" Bunny asked quietly.

"Maybe." Sam sat back, rubbing his temples. "The timing is..."

"Suspicious," Bunny finished.

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of implication heavy between them.

"It could be nothing," Bunny said, but her voice lacked conviction. "Maybe Margaret Miller had been planning the renovations for months. Maybe she got a loan. Or saved up."

"Maybe." Sam pulled out his notebook, flipping through his careful timeline. "But look. Lillian sells an extremely valuable necklace. Two days later, she disappears. Three weeks after that, Tides suddenly has money for major renovations."

"And years later, Lillian's diary turns up hidden in those very walls." Bunny shook her head. "It's too many coincidences."

"The question is, Did Margaret Miller get the money from Lillian? Or..." Sam's voice trailed off.

"Or did she get it to hide something she knew about Lillian?" Bunny finished softly.

They both stared at the articles spread before them, the pieces of a decades-old puzzle that was beginning to form a troubling picture.

"We can't tell Jane and Andie about our suspicions," Bunny said finally. "Not yet. Not without proof."

"Agreed." Sam gathered the clippings carefully. "Their grandmother, she's practically a saint in their family history. The woman who made Tides what it is today. We can't just throw suspicion on her without being absolutely certain."

"But if she was involved..." Bunny's voice trailed off.

“Then maybe that’s why the diary was hidden there.” Sam’s detective instincts were humming. “Either as evidence or—”

“Or as insurance,” Bunny finished. “But insurance against what? And for whom?”

Sam’s phone buzzed—a text from Jane asking if they’d found anything new.

“What do we tell them?” Bunny asked, watching him stare at the message.

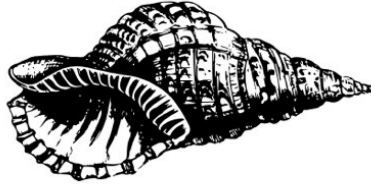
“Nothing yet.” Sam typed a quick response about still looking through records. “We need more than circumstantial evidence before we suggest their grandmother might have been involved in”—he gestured at the articles—“whatever this was.”

“Poor Jane and Andie.” Bunny sighed. “First finding that diary, and now...”

“Hey.” Sam reached across the table to squeeze her hand. “We don’t know anything for certain yet. Let’s keep digging before we jump to conclusions.”

“You’re right.” Bunny started gathering their research materials. “Though I have to say, for a small town, Lobster Bay sure knows how to keep its secrets.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The waves rolled almost to the edge of Splash’s beachside patio, their gentle rhythm mixing with clinking glasses and laughter. Jane settled into her chair, inhaling the salt air and letting the tension of the day ease from her shoulders. Behind them, the sun was sinking toward the western horizon, painting the sky in spectacular shades of pink and gold that reflected off the darkening Atlantic waters.

“I can’t believe how warm it is tonight,” Maxi said, studying the menu even though they all knew it by heart.

“We should share some steamers,” Claire noted. “I haven’t had any in ages.”

“And the spinach dip,” Andie added. “Always the spinach dip.”

Their server, Erin, approached with a tray of drinks—cosmos for Maxi and Claire, a glass of sauvignon blanc for Andie, and Jane’s favorite dirty martini.

“Ladies,” Erin said with a familiar smile, “beautiful night for the patio. Steamers and spinach dip to start?”

“You know us too well.” Claire laughed.

As Erin headed off to place their order, Claire turned to Maxi. “So how are the festival plans coming?”

“Good.” Maxi took a sip of her drink. “I know I had a panic moment, but now everything seems perfect. And I’ve got something special planned for a gallery preview tomorrow night.”

“Special how?” Jane asked, catching the familiar gleam of enthusiasm in her friend’s eyes.

“Well, I was talking to Marie at Tall Pines about some of their residents who contributed photos, and she mentioned how hard it is for them to get out to evening events. So...” Maxi paused dramatically.

“Oh no,” Claire teased, “I know that look. What did you do?”

“I hired a special bus!” Maxi beamed. “It’s perfect. They’ll bring all the residents who want to come, including Addie.” She glanced at Jane and Andie.

“Maxi, that’s amazing,” Jane said warmly, touched by her friend’s thoughtfulness. “Mom will love it.”

Andie exchanged a quick look with Jane before speaking. “Actually, would it be okay if we picked Mom up ourselves? I know the bus is a great idea for everyone else, but...”

“But it might be nice to make it special,” Jane finished. “Like when we were kids and she’d take us to galleries in Portland.”

“Oh!” Maxi’s eyes lit up. “I remember those trips. She’d dress you both up in those matching outfits.”

“The sundresses.” Andie laughed. “She made them herself.”

“Mom always made everything an event,” Jane said softly. “Even if we were just going to a small gallery opening, she’d make it feel like we were attending something magnificent.”

“Of course you should pick her up,” Maxi said warmly. “The bus will bring them early, before the main opening, and you can bring your mom then too. That way, they can take their time looking at everything without the crowd. Plus, I’m having special refreshments.”

“I’ll make those lemon cookies your mom loves,” Claire offered. “And some of those little tea sandwiches the Tall Pines residents always ask for.”

The steamers arrived with little cups of drawn butter that made Jane’s mouth water. A particularly large wave crashed nearby, sending a fine mist of salt spray into the air. The string lights overhead had begun to twinkle as the sky deepened to purple over the water.

“Speaking of the festival,” Maxi said, “we could really use some help tomorrow morning with the final setup. You know, if either of you nonparticipating friends are free.” She gave Jane and Andie her best pleading look.

“Subtle.” Andie laughed. “What time?”

“Nine? The art tent setup needs an extra set of hands, and I know Claire could use help with the Beach Bones booth.”

“Count me in,” Jane said. “Though I might be coming from...” She hesitated, feeling her cheeks warm slightly. “From Mike’s.”

Three heads turned toward her with identical expressions of interest.

“Oh?” Maxi prompted.

Jane took a sip of her martini. “I, um, might have decided to start staying there a few nights a week. In fact”—she glanced toward the parking lot—“I might have a suitcase in my car.”

“Jane!” Claire exclaimed. “That’s wonderful!”

“It is,” Jane agreed then bit her lip. “Though I’m a little nervous about being away from the inn so much. I know Liz is handling things beautifully, but still.”

“That’s totally normal,” Maxi said warmly. “I remember when James and I first moved in together, I was so worried about leaving my gallery apartment. But you know what? It all worked out. And now, with the kids at college, having our time together is even more special. We’re rediscovering why we fell in love in the first place.”

“Rob and I are practically living together without really planning it,” Claire added. “Though Urchin is still adjusting to sharing his space with Spot.”

All eyes turned to Andie, who suddenly became very interested in her wineglass.

“And how about you?” Maxi asked gently. “How are things going with Shane?”

Andie’s cheeks flushed pink. “We might be... spending more nights together lately,” she admitted softly. “But we’re taking things slow. Learning from past mistakes.”

Claire raised her glass. “To new beginnings. And second chances.”

They clinked glasses, and Jane felt a rush of gratitude for these friends who understood exactly what these changes meant to all of them.

“Speaking of second chances,” Claire said, “I was thinking maybe we should invite Sandee to our morning coffee meetings.”

A brief silence fell over the table.

“I asked her before,” Claire continued, “but she seemed hesitant. Like she didn’t feel welcome. But things are different now, and she’s really become such a great partner with Beach Bones.”

“Of course she should come,” Jane said firmly. “She’s part of things now.”

“Definitely,” Maxi agreed.

“Any news about Lillian’s diary?” Claire asked, drawing her sweater closer against the evening breeze.

Jane sighed. “Nothing in the guest books. Not a single record of her staying at Tides, which seems strange given that we found her diary there.”

“Sam and Bunny haven’t found anything new either,” Maxi added. “Though they seem... I don’t know. Like they’re holding something back.”

Jane wrapped her hands around her glass, thinking about the mysterious diary and its fearful entries. About the woman who wrote them and what might have happened to her.

“It’s sad,” she said softly, “thinking about her being so afraid. About not knowing what happened to her.”

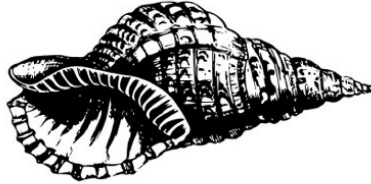
“We’ll figure it out,” Andie said firmly. “Between Sam and Bunny’s detective work and all the old photos Maxi’s collected, something will turn up.”

As they finished their meals, the conversation drifted back to festival preparations and gallery arrangements. But Jane’s mind kept returning to thoughts of change—of Lillian’s hidden diary, of her own careful steps toward a new chapter with Mike, of all of them moving forward in their own ways.

“Don’t forget, nine o’clock tomorrow,” Maxi called as they gathered their things. “The art tent won’t set itself up!”

Jane paused at her car, her hand resting on the trunk where her suitcase waited. Through the salty air, she could still hear the waves crashing, steady and sure. Like her friends. Like Mike. Like the life she was slowly building, one careful step at a time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The next morning at Tides, Jane paused in the kitchen doorway, inhaling the familiar scents of coffee and bacon wafting from the kitchen. After spending the night at Mike's, coming back felt both strange and completely natural, like putting on a favorite sweater that still fit perfectly.

Cooper trotted ahead of her, his nails clicking against the floor as he made his way to his usual morning spot near the front desk. Liz looked up from her computer, smiling as she reached for the container of dog treats she kept in the bottom drawer.

"Morning!" Liz adjusted her glasses with one hand while offering Cooper a treat with the other. "How was your night off?"

"Good. Really good." She glanced at the reservation book. "Everything okay here?"

"Smooth as silk." Liz pulled up the daily schedule. "Mrs. Harrison actually complimented the coffee this morning. Said I'd mastered your technique."

"High praise indeed." Jane laughed. The fact that Liz could handle even their most particular guest was just another sign that Jane had made the right choice in hiring her. In trusting her.

The smell of fresh muffins drew her toward the kitchen. Cooper followed, ever hopeful.

Brenda stood at the industrial stove, expertly flipping pancakes while keeping an eye on a tray of muffins in the oven. The kitchen radio played softly—classic rock, Brenda's preferred breakfast preparation soundtrack.

“There’s fresh coffee,” Brenda said without turning around. “And don’t worry. Everything’s running like clockwork. Though Cooper might need extra attention after spending the night away from his favorite kitchen.”

Jane poured herself coffee in the blue mug Brenda always saved for her. “Am I that predictable? Checking up on everything first thing?”

“Honey, you’ve been checking up on this place since you were tall enough to reach the counter.” Brenda’s voice held nothing but affection. “Though I hope you at least had breakfast at Mike’s before racing over here.”

“He made French toast,” Jane admitted, smiling at the memory of that morning—the easy domesticity of sharing kitchen space, the way Cooper had settled so naturally into their routine.

“Good man.” Brenda pulled the muffins from the oven, their sweet aroma filling the kitchen. “Speaking of good men, Rob dropped off fresh sourdough earlier. Said to tell Claire he’ll see her at the festival setup.”

Jane settled at the kitchen table with her coffee, enjoying the familiar morning rhythm. Cooper flopped at her feet with a contented sigh. Everything was running smoothly, just as she’d known it would. And yet...

She frowned, her gaze landing on the stack of guest ledgers on the counter. They weren’t where she’d left them last night. She distinctly remembered leaving them on the kitchen table, organized by decade. Now they sat in a neat pile by the coffee maker, and something about their arrangement seemed different.

“Brenda?” Jane tried to keep her voice casual. “Did you need to move those old ledgers? I’m sorry if they were in your way.”

“Hmm?” Brenda glanced over. “Oh no, didn’t touch them. They weren’t in my way at all.”

Jane stood, moving closer to examine the books. “Are you sure? They’re not where I left them last night.”

“Positive.” Brenda turned down the radio. “You know me. I don’t mess with the organizational systems here. Learned that lesson years ago when I tried to reorganize the spice rack.”

Jane carefully lifted the top ledger. The ribbon bookmark had been moved. She specifically remembered leaving it in the month of August, but now it marked a page in early spring.

“Did anyone else come through the kitchen this morning?”

Brenda thought for a moment. “Not since I’ve been here.”

Jane stared at the ledgers then laughed softly at herself. “You know what? I’m probably just remembering wrong. Between moving things to Mike’s and helping with festival prep, my mind’s all over the place.”

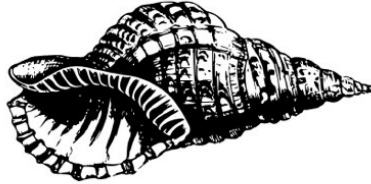
“That’s what happens when you’re in love,” Brenda teased, turning back to her pancakes. “Makes you forget the little things.”

For a moment, Jane thought about the guest who’d gotten “lost” looking for the deck yesterday. But no, that was ridiculous. She was letting all this mystery about Lillian’s diary make her suspicious of everything. Nobody else would even know about these old records, let alone care enough to go through them.

“I’ve been reading too many mysteries.” Jane checked her watch and grabbed a warm corn muffin. “Gotta run. I promised Maxi I’d help out at the festival.”

“Go on.” Brenda shooed her toward the door. “We’ve got everything under control here.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The town green hummed with pre-festival energy as Jane pulled into the parking lot. Volunteers scurried between white tents that dotted the grass, their canvas walls billowing in the morning breeze. The air carried a mix of sea salt and coffee from the vendor carts already setting up their morning service.

She spotted Claire and Sandee struggling with a banner for their Beach Bones booth. Claire balanced precariously on a stepladder while Sandee directed from below, both of them fighting with a gust of wind that seemed determined to turn their sign into a sail.

“Need another pair of hands?” Jane called out.

“Please!” Claire carefully climbed down. “This banner is being impossible. And the labels are curling in the humidity.”

“Here, let me.” Jane took the other end while Claire remounted the ladder. Together, they managed to secure it properly.

“Much better,” Sandee said, stepping back to examine their work. “Though I still think we should have gone with the seafoam-green background.”

“Next year,” Claire promised, and Jane noticed how naturally they worked together now, their former animosity replaced by an easy partnership.

A crash from the art tent drew their attention, followed by Maxi’s distinctive voice expressing creative frustration.

“I’ll check on her,” Jane offered. “You two good here?”

“We’re fine,” Claire assured her. “Though if you see Rob, send him over. These display cases are heavier than they look.”

The art tent was larger than it had been in previous years, with proper gallery lighting and professional display panels. Bunny and Andie were helping Maxi arrange photographs while trying to avoid the broken glass from what appeared to be a fallen picture frame.

“Everything okay?” Jane asked.

“No.” Maxi straightened up, adjusting her glasses. “The humidity is affecting the matting on half the photographs, the lighting keeps shorting out, and Mrs. Peterson just told me about the festival superstition.”

“What superstition?” Jane and Andie asked simultaneously.

“Oh, you haven’t heard?” Mrs. Peterson appeared from behind a display, carrying a jar of her lavender honey. “They say the Spring Festival predicts the whole tourist season. Good festival, good summer. Bad festival...” She shrugged meaningfully.

“That’s ridiculous,” Jane said, but she noticed how Maxi’s shoulders tensed.

“Maybe,” Mrs. Peterson agreed. “But last time we had a really bad Spring Festival—remember when that sudden storm blew through in ’98?—the whole summer was a wash. Literally. Rained every weekend through Labor Day.”

“Well, the weather’s holding today,” Jane pointed out as Andie helped Maxi adjust a particularly stubborn light.

“True.” Maxi sighed. “But everything needs to be perfect. The whole town depends on summer tourism, and this festival sets the tone.”

As they arranged the display, Jane noticed Katie Green moving through the festival setup, camera in hand. She stopped occasionally to take notes and photos, pausing to chat with vendors about their preparations.

“Katie’s thorough,” Maxi observed. “She was asking me earlier about the historical significance of having art shows during festivals.”

“She’s good at her job,” Jane agreed, watching as Katie photographed Claire and Sandee’s booth setup. “Takes it seriously, even for small-town stories.”

“Maybe because she knows they’re not really small,” Maxi said. “Not to the people involved.”

“Speaking of stories,” Bunny interrupted quietly, nodding toward the tent’s entrance.

Victoria Barnes stood there, impeccable in a cream linen suit that probably cost more than most vendors would make all day. Her heels sank slightly into the soft grass as she surveyed the festival grounds with the calculated gaze of someone assessing a potential acquisition.

“No booth for Tides this year?” Her voice carried the precise chill of corporate disapproval. “Such a missed opportunity for community engagement and getting new guests in.”

“We’re fully booked through September,” Jane replied evenly. “Word of mouth seems to be working just fine.”

Victoria’s lips tightened into something that wasn’t quite a smile. “And I couldn’t help but notice that rather... aggressive sign outside your antique store, Andie.” She turned her attention to Andie. “Someone should really review the town ordinances regarding sidewalk advertising. Violations can be so problematic.”

“My sign meets all requirements,” Andie said firmly, though Jane noticed her sister’s hands clench at her sides.

“Perhaps.” Victoria tapped something into her phone. “Though regulations can be open to interpretation. It would be unfortunate if any issues arose during peak season.”

Before either sister could respond, Mrs. Peterson stepped forward. “Sample, Ms. Barnes? Fresh honey, just harvested. Though I suppose you prefer the mass-produced kind they stock at those chain hotels.”

Victoria’s expression flickered. “How provincial. But I avoid sugars. Corporate wellness policy.” She glanced back at Jane and Andie. “Do consider what I said about community engagement. And that sign. Sometimes small infractions can cascade into larger problems.”

They watched her pick her way across the green, pausing occasionally to make notes on her phone.

“I really don’t like that woman,” Mrs. Peterson muttered, gripping her honey jar like she might be tempted to throw it.

“She’s trying to intimidate us,” Andie said, her voice tight. “Make us feel vulnerable.”

“That woman is trouble,” Mrs. Peterson said darkly, still clutching her honey jar. “I wouldn’t trust her after what she did to The Boulders down in York.”

“What did she do?” Jane asked.

Mrs. Peterson shook her head. "Beautiful restaurant. Been there sixty years, family-owned. Victoria Barnes wanted to buy it, but the owners wouldn't sell. Next thing you know, rumors start spreading about health code violations, tax problems, all sorts of nastiness."

"But that's illegal," Andie protested. "They could have fought back."

"Oh, it was all carefully done. Nothing that could be traced back to her." Mrs. Peterson's expression hardened. "But everyone knows she was behind it. She dug up some dirt on the owner's past, something unsavory, and made sure everyone in town heard about it. By the time she was done, their reputation was ruined. Nobody would eat there anymore."

Jane felt a chill despite the warm spring day. "What happened to them?"

"What do you think? They had to sell. And guess who swooped in with an offer?" Mrs. Peterson shook her head. "Half what the property was worth, but they were desperate by then. Now it's one of those trendy boutique hotels. All chrome and glass, charging three hundred a night."

"That's horrible," Andie said.

"Just be careful," Mrs. Peterson warned. "That woman doesn't play fair, and she's got her sights set on Tides. Wouldn't want to see your family's legacy get the same treatment."

Jane and Andie exchanged worried looks, then Andie checked her watch and grimaced. "I need to open the shop." She turned to Jane. "Are we taking your car to get Mom tonight?"

"Yes, more room." Jane nodded. "What time do you think?"

"Maybe six? That would give us time to help her get ready. She's always better earlier in the day, anyway."

"I found her blue silk scarf yesterday," Andie said, gathering her things. "The one she always wore to gallery openings. Thought she might like to wear it tonight."

"Perfect." Maxi smiled, adjusting a display. "And I made sure to hang that photo of the three of you at the Portland Museum of Art near the front. You know, the one where you're wearing those matching sundresses she made."

"We could take the coastal route," Jane suggested. "Mom always loved watching the sunset over the water."

"Oh, and don't forget, Mike and Shane are coming too," Maxi added. "And Bunny and Sam, of course. Claire's bringing some of those little tea sandwiches your mom loves."

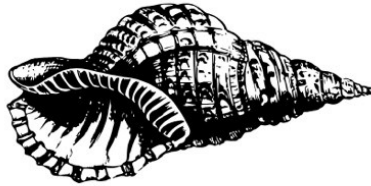
Jane laughed. “What happened to just a quiet preview for the older residents?”

“Please.” Maxi waved her hand. “In this town? Everything turns into a party eventually.”

“Mom will love it, though,” Andie said, smiling. “She always said art was better with friends.”

The sisters shared a look of understanding before Andie headed off to her shop, both already planning how to make the evening as special for their mother as she’d always made things for them.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Andie stepped out of the festival grounds into the warmth of the spring morning, her mind still buzzing with Victoria Barnes's thinly veiled threats. The sea breeze carried the mingled scents of coffee and fresh-cut lumber, and she found herself following the latter, drawn toward the distinctive sound of hammering from the hardware store's side alley.

She wasn't surprised to find Shane there, putting finishing touches on old Mr. Henderson's new display shelves. He worked with focused precision, his movements sure and practiced. Just like in high school, when he would spend hours in woodshop crafting beautiful pieces while everyone else struggled with basic joints.

He must have sensed her presence because he looked up, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Hey there, beautiful. Come to supervise my work?"

"Maybe I just like the view," she teased, leaning against the brick wall.

Shane set down his hammer and closed the distance between them. He smelled like sawdust and coffee, and Andie fought the urge to brush the wood shavings from his shirt. "The view, huh?" He raised an eyebrow. "Good to know some things haven't changed since high school."

"I seem to remember you doing a fair bit of watching yourself," she countered. "Especially during tennis practice."

"Guilty as charged." His hands found her waist, pulling her closer. "Though I have to say, the present view is even better than my memories."

When he kissed her, Andie melted into it, forgetting about Victoria Barnes and threatening phone calls and potentially problematic signs. For a

moment, she was seventeen again, stealing kisses between classes, certain that nothing could ever come between them.

But they weren't seventeen anymore. They'd lived whole lives apart, grown into different people who somehow fit together even better than before. And this time, Andie wasn't going to let anything get in their way.

"Hey," she said when they finally parted, "what are you doing tonight?"

"Missing you, probably. Unless you have a better offer."

"Maxi's having a preview for her gallery show. Nothing fancy, just a few people from town getting a first look before tomorrow's official opening." She looked up at him through her lashes. "Want to be my date?"

"Let me think..." He pretended to consider it carefully. "Spend the evening with the most beautiful woman in Lobster Bay, looking at art I won't understand while drinking wine I can't pronounce?" His grin widened. "Absolutely."

"Good." She straightened his collar, allowing her hands to linger. "Though you'll have to meet me there. Jane and I are picking Mom up and bringing her. Trying to make it special for her, taking the coastal route and everything."

"Of course." He nodded, understanding immediately. "Maybe we could grab dinner after, once your mom's back at Tall Pines."

"Perfect." She stepped back reluctantly, aware that she needed to open the shop soon. "Seven o'clock at the gallery?"

"I'll be the handsome guy pretending to understand the art."

"Lucky me." She walked backward a few steps, not quite ready to look away. "Try not to miss me too much until then."

"No promises." He picked up his hammer again, but his eyes stayed on her. "See you tonight, beautiful."

The warmth of his gaze followed her down the sidewalk, and Andie found herself smiling despite the niggling worry about Victoria's threats. She paused at her shop, examining the sign that had drawn the developer's criticism.

It looked perfectly fine to her—tasteful, well-maintained, and definitely within town regulations. She moved it closer to the building just to be safe.

Before turning the sign to "Open," she headed upstairs to her apartment. The morning sun filled the bedroom, warming the old hardwood floors. Andie stood for a moment in the doorway, looking at her dresser—

specifically at the bottom right drawer that still held old sweaters she never wore.

It was time. She pulled open the drawer and began removing its contents, creating a donation pile on her bed. With each item she removed, it felt like making space not just in her furniture but in her life. Space for something new. Something real.

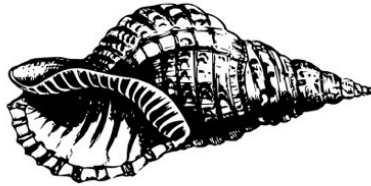
When the drawer was empty, she wiped it clean, lined it with fresh paper, and stood back, heart beating a little faster than normal. It was just a drawer—a simple, empty drawer—but it felt monumental. Like the first page of a new chapter.

She thought about Shane's clothes hanging next to hers, his toothbrush in her bathroom, his presence becoming a permanent part of her daily life. The idea didn't scare her like it once might have. Instead, it felt right. Natural. Like coming home.

Looking at the empty drawer one last time, Andie felt a surge of certainty. Victoria Barnes could threaten all she wanted, but some things were beyond her reach. Some things—like love, like trust, like second chances—couldn't be intimidated or bought out.

Back downstairs, the bell above the shop door chimed as she flipped the sign to "Open," and Andie smiled, already counting the hours until seven o'clock.

CHAPTER TWENTY



The art tent was quiet for a moment between waves of festival visitors. Maxi adjusted a photograph that had tilted slightly, while Bunny helped reorganize the price cards that had been shuffled by curious browsers.

"I think this might be our best turnout yet," Maxi said, stepping back to survey the displays.

"The historical theme was brilliant," Bunny agreed. "People love seeing old photos of themselves and their families."

"This is just a small taste of what I have in store for the gallery," Maxi said.

They both looked up at approaching footsteps. Sam entered the tent, his expression troubled. He glanced around to ensure they were alone before speaking.

"Just talked to Tommy Davidson," he said quietly. "His father's records confirm Lillian sold the pearl necklace two days before she disappeared."

"Could you trace where the money went?" Maxi asked.

Sam shook his head. "She took cash. Tommy says his father remembered that specifically because it was such a large amount. He tried to convince her to take a bank draft instead."

Bunny and Sam exchanged a significant look that Maxi didn't miss.

"Okay, what aren't you telling me?" She moved closer, lowering her voice. "You've both been acting strange ever since you started looking through those old records."

Bunny hesitated then seemed to make a decision. "We found something disturbing. About the timing of certain things."

“What kind of things?”

“Three weeks after Lillian disappeared,” Sam said carefully, “Tides Inn suddenly had money for major renovations. Expensive ones.”

“Wait.” Maxi’s eyes widened. “Are you suggesting that Margaret Miller—”

“We don’t know anything for certain,” Bunny interrupted quickly. “And we can’t tell Jane and Andie. Not yet. Not without proof.”

“But their grandmother...” Maxi trailed off, processing the implications.

“Could have helped Lillian escape,” Sam finished. “Or...”

“Or something worse,” Bunny said softly.

They stood in silence for a moment, the cheerful sounds of the festival filtering through the tent walls in stark contrast to the weight of their conversation.

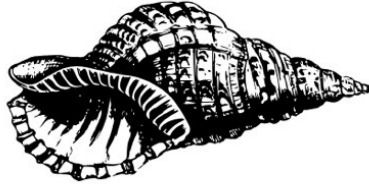
“You’re both coming tonight, right?” Maxi asked finally. “To the preview?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Bunny assured her. “Though we might need to step out early. There are some old bank records we still need to check.”

“Just...” Maxi glanced toward the tent entrance, where festival-goers were beginning to gather again. “Be careful with this. Jane and Andie... their grandmother is such a huge part of their family history.”

“We know,” Sam said grimly. “That’s why we have to be absolutely certain before we say anything.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Jane's car wound along the coastal road, the late-afternoon sun painting the Atlantic in shades of gold and rose. She'd rolled down the windows slightly, letting in the salt air and the distant sound of waves breaking against the rocky shore. Beside her, Andie hummed along to the radio, the blue silk scarf draped carefully across her lap.

"Mom always loved this drive," Andie said, turning down the music. "Remember how she'd make us count the boats?"

"And guess where they were going." Jane smiled at the memory. "According to her, they were always headed somewhere exotic."

"Madagascar." Andie laughed. "That was her favorite. Though I'm pretty sure most of them were just heading out to check lobster traps."

Jane glanced in her rearview mirror, a habit she'd developed lately without quite meaning to. The road behind them was empty except for the lengthening shadows of pine trees.

"Okay, what's wrong?" Andie asked, catching the gesture. "You're acting jumpy."

Jane hesitated then decided to share her concerns. "You'll think I'm being paranoid, but something weird happened at the inn this morning. The guest books, the ones I've been checking for Lillian? Someone moved them. And not just moved them but went through them. The bookmarks were all in different places."

"Are you sure? Maybe Liz needed to check something."

"No, I asked. And Brenda didn't touch them either." Jane checked the mirror again. "And there's this guest... She wandered into the kitchen, but

it almost seemed like she was lurking.”

“Lurking?”

Jane laughed. “I guess that does sound a bit dramatic, but I just have a feeling.”

“Why would anyone care about old guest books?” Andie paused. “Unless... You don’t think this has something to do with Victoria Barnes, do you? Remember what Mrs. Peterson said about how she operates.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been thinking.” Jane slowed the car to take in a particularly stunning view of the sunset. Their mother had always insisted on stopping at this exact spot, claiming the light was perfect. “What if she’s trying to dig up something she can use against us?”

“But what could she possibly find? The inn’s been in our family for generations.”

“That’s just it. We don’t really know everything that happened back then, do we? I mean, look at Lillian’s diary. That was hidden in our walls for decades.”

They drove in silence for a moment, both contemplating the implications.

“Well,” Andie said finally, “if Victoria Barnes thinks she can intimidate us with whatever she might or might not find, she doesn’t know the Miller sisters very well.”

Jane smiled, feeling some of her tension ease. “No, she doesn’t.”

They turned in to the parking lot at Tall Pines, the familiar building softened by the golden evening light. Marie met them at the entrance, her warm smile tinged with slight concern.

“Your mother’s having a good day,” she said as she walked them to the elevator. “Though she’s been talking about a gallery opening all afternoon. Says she needs to get you girls ready.”

Jane and Andie exchanged glances. Their mother’s memories often merged past and present, especially in the evening hours.

They found Addie in her apartment, standing at her closet door with determined focus. She turned as they entered, her face lighting up with recognition.

“There you are! I’ve been worried we’d be late.” She moved to touch Jane’s hair. “We need to curl this before we go. And Andie, darling, I’ve almost finished your dress. Just the hem left to do.”

“Mom,” Andie said gently, holding up the blue silk scarf, “look what we brought you.”

Addie’s hands fluttered to the silk, her expression softening. “Oh! My gallery scarf.” She ran her fingers over the familiar texture. “But weren’t you just little girls? I was making you dresses.”

“You did make us dresses,” Jane said, taking her mother’s arm and leading her to sit on the bed. “Beautiful matching sundresses. Remember? We wore them to the Portland Museum of Art.”

“The sundresses!” Addie’s face cleared. “With the blue sashes to match this scarf. You both looked so precious.” She paused, confusion flickering across her features. “But that was... That was a long time ago, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” Andie said softly, sitting on her mother’s other side. “And tonight, we’re going to another gallery opening. Maxi’s having a special preview of her show, and she’s displaying that photo of us at the museum. The one where we’re wearing those dresses you made.”

“Maxi’s show,” Addie repeated, her grip on the scarf tightening slightly. “Yes, of course. That’s tonight.”

“And we thought you might like to wear your special scarf,” Jane added.

Addie smiled, the confusion fading from her eyes. “Yes, that would be perfect.” She looked between her daughters. “My beautiful girls. Taking me to a gallery opening.”

“Just like you used to take us,” Andie said, carefully draping the scarf around their mother’s shoulders.

“There,” Andie said, adjusting the scarf one final time. “Beautiful.”

Their mother turned from the mirror, her eyes clear and present in a way that made Jane’s heart ache with gratitude. “Well, then,” she said, reaching for both their hands, “we shouldn’t keep the artists waiting, should we?”

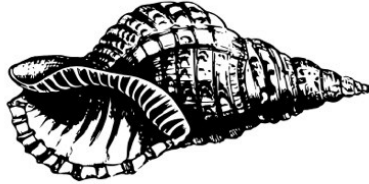
As they helped their mother to the car, the last rays of sunset painted the sky in exactly the colors she had always pointed out to them, the deep rose bleeding into purple, the final splash of gold along the horizon. Jane thought about all the times they’d made this drive in reverse, their mother behind the wheel, taking them to discover beautiful things.

Now it was their turn to guide her, to help her find beauty even as her memories faded like the sunset. To give back just a fraction of what she’d given them.

“The light is perfect,” Addie said as they drove toward town, and for a moment, she sounded exactly like she used to. “Everything looks more beautiful at this hour, doesn’t it?”

“It does, Mom,” Jane agreed, catching Andie’s eye in the rearview mirror. “It really does.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



The gallery glowed with warm light as Andie helped her mother up the shallow steps, Jane holding the door. Inside, the familiar space had been transformed. Maxi had arranged the historical photographs and paintings in chronological order, creating a visual timeline of Lobster Bay's history that wrapped around the room.

"Oh, how lovely," Addie breathed, her blue silk scarf catching the light as she turned to take it all in.

The room hummed with conversation and the gentle clink of glasses. Claire had set up a refreshment table near the window, and Rob was helping her arrange delicate tea sandwiches on silver trays. The familiar scent of her lemon cookies mingled with coffee and the slight saltiness of the evening air drifting in through the open door.

"There you are!" Maxi hurried over, resplendent in a flowing artist's smock over black pants. "I was hoping you'd arrive early. Come see the centerpiece of the show."

She guided them toward the far wall, where a large photograph dominated the space. It showed Tides Inn in what must have been the 1940s, its white clapboard gleaming in summer sun. A group of people stood on the front steps, their expressions both formal and proud.

"Oh!" Addie stepped closer, her hand reaching out but not quite touching the glass. "That's my mother. Right there in the center."

Andie studied the elegant woman in the photograph. Her grandmother stood straight-backed and confident, one hand resting on the porch railing.

She wore a dark dress with a white collar, her hair styled in the fashion of the day.

“She looks so young,” Jane said softly.

“She was.” Addie nodded. “This must have been right after she took over the inn from her parents.” She frowned slightly, her finger hovering over other faces. “I should know them all, shouldn’t I?”

“Here, let me help with that.”

Bud Henderson had approached quietly, a glass of wine in his weathered hand. Though well into his eighties, he still moved with the careful precision of someone used to working on boats.

“That there’s my father.” He pointed at a tall man near the edge of the group. “And next to him, that’s old Doc Wilson. Delivered half the babies in town back then.” His finger moved to a younger woman standing slightly apart from the others. “And that’s Lillian Whitmore.”

Andie felt Jane stiffen beside her. They exchanged a quick glance before Andie asked, trying to keep her voice casual, “That’s right. I think Sam said that you knew her.”

“Lord, I was just a boy then, but I remember her clear as anything.” Bud’s eyes crinkled at the corners. “Pretty as a picture, she was. Used to help out at the inn sometimes, doing the books or some such. Had a bit of a crush on her, truth be told, though I was just a kid.”

“What happened to her?” Someone else had joined their group—Mrs. Peterson, Andie realized.

“Nobody really knows.” Bud shook his head. “Just disappeared one day. Some said she ran off with another man, others thought maybe her husband...” He glanced at Addie and didn’t finish the thought.

“Odd timing, wasn’t it?” This from Marian Fine, who was sitting in her wheelchair. “Right around when they filled in that old root cellar.”

“Root cellar?” Jane didn’t remember anything about a root cellar.

“Oh sure, all the old houses had them back then.” Marian nodded. “I remember it clear as day. That was before modern refrigeration, you know. Makes me sound like I’m ancient, but I guess I am a hundred! Those root cellars were dangerous things, especially the type Tides had, built right into the hillside, all stone and earth. Proper hazard, really. Smart of your grandmother to have it filled in.”

“How fascinating.”

The smooth voice cut through the conversation like a blade. Victoria Barnes stood just behind them, elegant in cream linen despite the late hour. She held a glass of wine but hadn't taken a sip.

"A missing woman and a conveniently filled-in root cellar." She tapped something into her phone. "What an... interesting coincidence. Though I imagine modern guests might find such history rather unsettling. People can be so sensitive about these things."

Andie felt her mother's hand tighten on her arm.

"I'm a bit tired, dear," Addie said softly. "Perhaps we should..."

"Of course, Mom." Andie shot Victoria a cold look before guiding her mother toward the refreshment table, where Claire was arranging fresh cookies.

"Everything okay?" Claire asked quietly as she offered Addie a plate of her favorite tea sandwiches.

"Just Victoria being Victoria," Andie murmured. She watched as the developer moved through the crowd, phone in hand, occasionally pausing to make notes.

"Who invited her, anyway?" Claire's eyes narrowed.

"She's up to something," Rob said, appearing with fresh coffee. "Saw her earlier taking pictures of the old photographs, especially the ones of Tides."

Jane joined them, her expression troubled. "She's trying to dig up dirt, just like she did with The Boulders in York."

"But surely nobody would believe..." Claire trailed off, glancing at the photograph of Tides. "I mean, it's just a coincidence about the root cellar, right?"

Before anyone could respond, Maxi called for everyone's attention. She stood near the center of the gallery, practically vibrating with excitement.

"I want to thank you all for coming tonight," she began. "Especially our friends from Tall Pines. This exhibition is about more than just photographs. It's about our community, our shared history, and the stories that make Lobster Bay special."

There was warm applause, and Andie used the moment to study her mother's face. Addie was watching Maxi with clear eyes, but her hand still clutched Andie's arm a bit too tightly.

"Mom?" she whispered. "Ready to head back?"

Addie nodded. “Just one more look at that photograph? Of your grandmother?”

They made their way to the large photograph. The evening light had shifted, casting long shadows across the image, making the figures seem somehow more dimensional, more real. Andie found herself staring at Lillian Whitmore’s face—at the slight tension around her eyes, the way she stood apart from the group.

“She was afraid.”

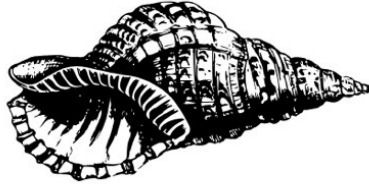
Andie turned to her mother in surprise. “What?”

But Addie was already moving on to the next photograph, her moment of clarity gone. “Oh, look at the old fishing boats! Your father would have loved this one.”

As they helped their mother into her coat, Andie caught Jane’s eye. Their shared look held volumes—concern about Victoria’s insinuations, worry about what she might do with the information, and underneath it all, a new question about their grandmother and the woman who had vanished all those years ago.

The gallery door closed behind them, but Andie could still hear Victoria’s voice carrying through the evening air. “Such a fascinating history, Tides Inn has. So many... buried secrets.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



After the gallery preview, Jane and Mike returned Addie to Tall Pines then went back to his condo to cook dinner. The kitchen was filled with the aroma of garlic and herbs as Jane stirred the sauce, letting the familiar motions soothe her troubled thoughts. Through the wide windows, the last traces of sunset painted the harbor in deep purples and blues. Cooper lay sprawled beneath the kitchen island—his new favorite spot—his tail thumping occasionally against the hardwood floor.

Mike moved around her with practiced ease, reaching past to grab the colander for the pasta. They'd developed a rhythm in his kitchen, learning to navigate the space together just as they were learning to blend their lives.

"So," Mike said, adding salt to the pasta water, "what's up with Victoria Barnes?"

Jane sighed, reaching for her wineglass, the one she'd brought over last week that now lived permanently in Mike's cabinet. "She's trying to dig up dirt on Tides. Like she did with that restaurant in York."

"The root cellar thing?"

"Mm-hmm." Jane tasted the sauce, adding a pinch more oregano. "It's ridiculous, of course. But the timing is suspicious, Lillian disappearing right when the cellar was filled in and then her diary being hidden in Tides."

Mike leaned against the counter, studying her face. "You know none of that matters, right? Even if she tries to start rumors, people here know your family. Know you."

"I know." Jane smiled as Cooper got up to investigate a potential dropped morsel. "It's just... Tides isn't just an inn to me. It's—"

“Your heritage. Your responsibility.” Mike nodded. “Speaking of which...” He hesitated slightly. “I was thinking maybe we could have your mom over for dinner sometime. Nothing fancy, just... It might be nice for her to see you here. In our space.”

Jane’s heart skipped at the words “our space.” She looked around the kitchen—at her favorite mug in the dish rack, the throw blanket she’d brought over and draped across a kitchen chair, the dog bed Cooper ignored in favor of the cool kitchen floor.

“That’s...” Jane felt a wave of guilt wash over her. “That would be really nice. We don’t take her out enough, Andie and I. We always worry about whether it’s going to be a good day or not.” She stirred the sauce absently. “Sometimes, it feels easier to just visit her at Tall Pines, where it’s controlled. But she loved tonight, being at the gallery. At least until Victoria showed up.”

Mike moved behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “So let’s do it. We could make it a regular thing. Maybe Sunday dinners? Even if some days aren’t as good as others.”

Jane leaned back against him, letting herself absorb the comfort of his presence. “You’d do that? Even knowing some days might be challenging?”

“Jane.” He turned her to face him. “Your mom is part of who you are. Just like Tides. And I love all of who you are.”

The pasta water began to boil, and they moved apart to tend to their respective tasks. Jane watched as Cooper followed Mike to the pantry, clearly hoping for a pre-dinner treat. The dog had adapted to this dual life so easily, completely at home whether at Tides or here at Mike’s.

“Speaking of Tides,” Mike said, measuring out the pasta, “do you need to stop by in the morning before the festival?”

Jane reached for her phone automatically then stopped. “I should check on—” She paused, considering. “Actually, no. Andie offered to help out with checking in. She can do it tomorrow, and we can take Cooper straight to the festival.”

Mike’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Really? No morning inspection of the guest rooms? No coffee quality control?”

“Hey!” She bumped him with her hip as she reached for plates. “I’m not that bad.”

“Honey, last week you drove back at midnight because you thought you forgot to check the backup generator.”

“That was important!”

“It was also the third time that week you’d checked it.”

Jane laughed, acknowledging the truth in his words. She pulled out her phone and dialed Andie.

“Hey,” her sister answered. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just wanted to check. You’re opening the shop tomorrow morning, right?”

“Bright and early. Why?”

“Would you mind checking in at Tides first? Just a quick look to make sure everything’s running smoothly.”

There was a slight pause. “You’re not coming in?”

“No,” Jane said, surprised by how easy the word felt. “I thought I’d spend the morning here, then Mike and I will head straight to the festival.”

“Well, well.” Andie’s smile was audible. “Look who’s finally learning to delegate. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure the inn hasn’t collapsed in your absence.”

“Thanks. And Andie? What Mom said at the gallery, about Lillian being afraid...”

“I know. We’ll figure it out. But not tonight, okay? Tonight, just enjoy being where you are.”

After they hung up, Jane helped Mike plate the pasta. Cooper settled between their chairs at the small kitchen table, clearly hoping his strategic position would result in dropped food.

“You know what’s weird?” Jane said, twirling pasta around her fork. “This doesn’t feel weird anymore.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Being here. Not being at Tides. It used to feel like I was neglecting something important whenever I stayed away. But now...”

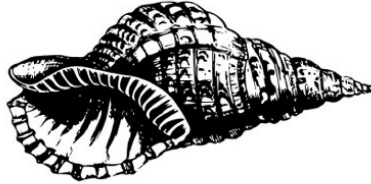
“Now?”

She looked around the kitchen again, at all the little signs of her presence slowly accumulating. like Cooper’s water bowl next to the sink and the comfortable way Mike waited for her to finish her thought.

“Now it feels like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.”

Mike reached across the table and took her hand, his thumb brushing her knuckles. “You are.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



The next morning, Andie sat at her small kitchen table, watching Shane wash their breakfast dishes. He moved through her space with easy familiarity, knowing which cabinet held the dish soap, which drawer contained the dish towels.

“You don’t have to do those,” she said, though she loved that he did.

“Consider it rent for my new drawer.” He glanced over his shoulder with a grin that still made her heart skip, even after all these months.

“About that.” Andie got up, wrapping her arms around him from behind. “Thank you for being patient. With the drawer. With... everything.”

Shane dried his hands and turned to face her. “Hey, I’d wait forever for a drawer in your apartment.”

“Forever’s a long time.”

He kissed her softly then glanced at his watch. “I should head to Tides. That roof won’t fix itself.”

“I need to check on things there too. Jane’s actually taking the morning off.”

Shane’s eyebrows rose. “Really? Our Jane? The one who checks the backup generator three times a week?”

“The very same.” Andie watched as Shane gathered his tools. The morning was warm enough that he shrugged off his hoodie.

“Mind if I...” He gestured toward the bedroom.

“Your drawer awaits.”

She followed him, leaning against the doorframe as he carefully folded the hoodie and placed it in his drawer—the one that had held her old

sweaters just yesterday. The simple domesticity of the moment made her throat tight.

"I'll see you at the festival?" she asked as they headed downstairs.

"Save me some of Claire's lemon cookies." He kissed her once more before heading to his truck.

Andie watched him drive away then got into her own car. The drive to Tides was short, but it gave her time to think about Victoria Barnes and her thinly veiled threats at the gallery. About their mother's strange comment about Lillian being afraid.

The inn's parking lot was full, a good sign for a spring morning. She could hear the rhythmic sound of Shane's hammer on the roof as she entered through the kitchen door.

"There's fresh bacon," Brenda called without turning around from the stove.

"You're an angel." Andie snagged a piece, earning a mock-stern look from the cook.

"Those are for the guests, you know."

"I'm quality control." Andie grinned, heading toward the front desk, where Liz was typing something into the computer.

"Everything running smoothly?" Andie asked.

"Like clockwork." Liz adjusted her glasses. "Though there is something odd."

"Oh?"

Liz glanced around before lowering her voice. "You know that antique desk in the library? The one that belonged to your great-grandfather?"

Andie nodded. The desk was a beautiful piece, solid mahogany with brass fittings, carefully maintained through generations. Their great-grandfather had used it to manage the inn's accounts during the Depression, and it still held its original inkwell and pen rest.

"Well, Emma Cole, that guest in Room Four? She seems very interested in it. I've caught her examining it several times. And yesterday, things seemed... shifted."

Andie frowned. "Shifted how?"

"The inkwell was in a different position. And one of the drawers wasn't quite closed."

"Has Victoria Barnes been around?" Andie asked, her eyes narrowing slightly. "She's trying to dig up dirt on us, and what better way than to

snoop in our furniture?” One didn’t need to be a guest here to just walk into the inn.

“No, thank goodness. Though she did call asking about our historical records.”

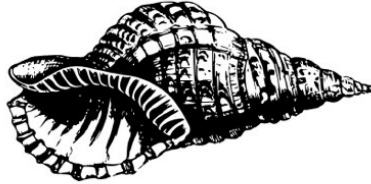
Andie walked to the library, Liz following. The desk sat in its usual place by the window, morning light highlighting its rich patina. But Liz was right—something was off. The brass inkwell had been moved slightly.

Using skills honed from years of antique dealing, Andie examined the desk carefully. The drawers all opened smoothly, their contents seemingly undisturbed. But then she noticed something, a slight scratch near the lock of the bottom drawer as if someone had tried to force it.

“I should get to the festival,” Andie said finally. “But Liz? If Victoria shows up, don’t let her in.”

“Of course.” Liz smiled. “I’ll be happy to send her packing.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



The Springtide festival was in full swing when Jane arrived. She walked hand in hand with Mike, Cooper trotting beside them, his nose twitching at the mingled scents of grilled food and salt air. Music drifted from the bandstand, where local musicians played, and everywhere she looked, people were walking dogs of all sizes.

“Looks like Beach Bones is the place to be,” Mike said, nodding toward the crowd gathered around Claire and Sandee’s booth.

He was right. The booth was packed with people and dogs. Claire and Sandee wore matching blue aprons with paw prints, working in perfect synchronization as they served customers and chatted with their four-legged clientele.

A golden retriever puppy bounced excitedly as his owner purchased treats, while a dignified old basset hound waited patiently beside his elderly owner. At the corner of the booth, a tiny Yorkie in a pink sweater sampled one of Sandee’s new peanut butter treats.

“Your original recipe is still the bestseller,” Jane heard Sandee tell Claire as they approached. “But the peanut butter is gaining ground.”

“The maple bacon ones are popular too,” Claire replied, restocking the display. “Good thing we made extra batches.”

“Ladies,” Mike called out. “Looks like business is booming!”

Cooper’s tail wagged as they reached the booth, and Claire immediately produced one of his favorite treats. “Can’t forget one of our original taste testers.” She laughed.

“This is incredible,” Jane said, taking in the professional display of treats, the stack of new business cards featuring both Claire and Sandee’s names, and the steady stream of satisfied customers. “You’ve really taken it to the next level.”

“We’re just getting started,” Sandee said, then she caught herself, glancing at Claire. “I mean, if that’s what we both want.”

“Actually,” Claire began, but she was interrupted by the arrival of a well-dressed woman in her forties, accompanied by an elegant chocolate Lab.

“Claire Turner? Sandee Brooks?” The woman extended her hand. “I’m Jennifer Mills. I own Coastal Canine Boutique.”

Jane watched as both Claire and Sandee straightened slightly, recognizing the name of the upscale pet-store chain.

“We’ve heard wonderful things about your treats,” Jennifer continued, accepting a sample for her Lab. “In fact, I’m interested in carrying Beach Bones in all six of our locations.”

“That’s...” Claire looked at Sandee, who nodded encouragingly. “That would be wonderful. Would you like to see our wholesale price list?”

As Claire and Sandee discussed business with Jennifer, Jane felt Mike’s arm slip around her waist.

“Want to grab some lunch?” he asked quietly.

“In a minute,” Jane said, wanting to hear how the negotiation turned out. Cooper seemed equally invested, sitting perfectly still beside the booth.

Finally, Jennifer pulled out a business card. “Let’s start with an order for five hundred bags for each location,” she said. “Split between original and new flavors. If they sell as well as I think they will, we can discuss larger quantities.”

After Jennifer left, Claire and Sandee stared at each other for a moment before breaking into matching grins.

“Three thousand bags!” Sandee exclaimed.

“We’re going to need a bigger kitchen.” Claire laughed.

“Katie!” Sandee waved as the reporter approached their booth. “Perfect timing. We just got amazing news. You might want to write about it.”

Katie pulled out her notebook, already smiling. “The Coastal Canine deal? I heard. Been following your partnership since the beginning. It’s exactly the kind of local success story people need to hear about.”

“Really?” Sandee asked, still sounding surprised when anyone showed interest in their business.

“Absolutely,” Katie said firmly. “Two local women putting aside differences to build something together? That’s what community is about.” She glanced at her notes. “And I heard you’re expanding your rescue support program.”

“We are,” Claire confirmed. “Sandee’s idea, actually.”

Katie’s pen moved quickly across the page. “Mind if I quote you both? I’m thinking feature article, not just a business brief.”

“You don’t think it’s too small a story?” Sandee asked.

Katie looked up, her expression serious. “After working for bigger papers, I’ve learned something. Sometimes, the most important stories are the ones that show how people can change, how communities can heal. Those aren’t small stories at all.”

Katie jotted down some notes and left just as Andie and Maxi arrived with their arms full of festival food.

“We brought fried dough!” Maxi announced.

“Perfect timing,” Claire said. “We’re celebrating!”

As they shared the news about the Coastal Canine order, Jane noticed how naturally Sandee fit into their circle now, her earlier uncertainty replaced by genuine warmth.

“We should have a proper celebration,” Andie suggested. “Coffee at Sandcastles tomorrow morning? You in, Sandee?”

There was a brief moment where Sandee seemed unsure, but Claire jumped in. “Definitely. Nine o’clock? We can start planning how to handle this order.”

“I’d like that,” Sandee said softly, and Jane could see how much the inclusion meant to her.

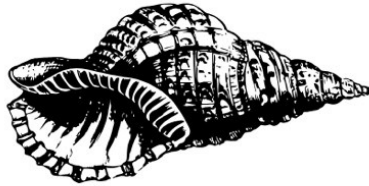
The moment was perfect until Jane caught sight of Victoria Barnes. She was near the local honey booth but was staring directly at Jane.

Mike followed her gaze. “Don’t,” he said quietly. “Not today. Today is for celebrating with friends.”

Jane took a deep breath and turned back to the group. He was right. Whatever Victoria was planning could wait. Right now, she wanted to enjoy this moment—the spring sunshine, the festival atmosphere, and most importantly, the sight of old wounds healing and new friendships blooming.

“Nine o’clock tomorrow,” she confirmed, smiling at Sandee. “Don’t be late. Claire’s lemon scones wait for no one.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



The morning's celebration at the Beach Bones booth had lifted everyone's spirits, but Jane couldn't shake her unease about Victoria Barnes's presence at the festival. After helping Claire and Sandee handle their lunch rush, she'd offered to get drinks for everyone.

"Lemonade run," she announced, needing a moment to clear her head. "Orders?"

"Pink for me," Maxi called out.

"Regular," Claire and Sandee said in unison then laughed.

"I'll come with you," Mike offered, but Jane shook her head.

"Stay and help them with the crowd. Cooper and I could use a walk."

Jane dodged kids with ice cream and shoppers with bags of local goods on her way back from the lemonade stand, Cooper walked close to her side, occasionally glancing up as if checking on her mood. She'd been trying to ignore Victoria Barnes all day, but now the developer's voice carried clearly from the local history booth near the bandstand.

"How fascinating," Victoria was saying to a small crowd. "And this root cellar, it was quite large, wasn't it, Mr. Collins?"

Jane slowed her pace, her hand tightening slightly on her cup of lemonade. Victoria stood in a perfectly tailored linen suit, her phone held casually as she recorded the conversation.

"Oh yes." Mr. Collins nodded eagerly. "All the old houses had them back then. Though Tides Inn's was particularly substantial, built right into the hillside, with stone walls."

"And it was filled in quite suddenly, as I understand it." Victoria's voice held just the right note of casual interest.

"Well, they were dangerous things," Mrs. Peterson interjected. "Liable to collapse. Margaret Miller—that's Jane and Andie's grandmother—she was smart to have it filled in."

"The timing, though," Victoria mused, tapping something into her phone. "Right around when that poor woman disappeared. Lillian, wasn't it?"

Jane felt Mike's presence before his hand settled on her back.

"We can leave," he said quietly.

But Cooper had already trotted toward the history booth, his tail wagging as he greeted Mrs. Peterson. Jane had no choice but to follow.

"Oh, Jane!" Victoria's smile was perfect, practiced. "We were just discussing your inn's fascinating history. You must know all about the old root cellar."

"It was filled in long before my time." Jane kept her voice level. "For safety reasons."

"Of course, of course." Victoria turned back to her audience, which included several tourists. "Though one does wonder about the coincidence. A woman vanishes without a trace, and suddenly, a large underground space is filled in..." She let the implication hang in the air.

"That's ridiculous," Mrs. Peterson said firmly. "Margaret Miller was the kindest soul—"

"Oh, I'm sure she was," Victoria interrupted smoothly. "Though sometimes, the kindest people keep the darkest secrets. Protecting family, you understand."

Jane felt Mike tense beside her, but before either of them could respond, Bunny hurried up to their group, Sam close behind.

"Jane." Bunny's voice was urgent. "We need to talk to you."

Victoria's smile widened slightly. "Don't tell me you've seen the posts."

"What posts?" Jane asked, though her stomach was already sinking.

Bunny pulled out her phone, pulling up a local tourism forum. "Someone's been sharing 'historical facts' about Tides Inn. About Lillian's disappearance and the root cellar. They're calling it 'Maine's Forgotten Mystery' and suggesting..." She trailed off, glancing at the gathering crowd.

"Suggesting what?" Jane's voice was sharper than she intended.

"Well," Victoria said, her tone sympathetic but her eyes gleaming, "you can understand how tourists might be... unsettled... by such history. Especially given the current renovation work. All those walls being opened up."

Cooper growled softly, the first time Jane had ever heard him make such a sound toward a person.

"That's enough." Mike's voice was quiet but firm. "You're deliberately twisting facts to hurt a respected business."

"I'm simply sharing public information," Victoria replied. "Though I suppose if the inn has nothing to hide, there's nothing to worry about. Unless"—she paused delicately—"there are other secrets waiting to be uncovered."

The implied threat was clear. Jane thought of the mysterious guest examining the desk, of Victoria's careful documentation of every historical detail she could find.

"The only secret at Tides Inn," Jane said clearly, ensuring her voice carried to the gathered crowd, "is how my family has maintained such high standards of hospitality for four generations. Though I suppose that's not the kind of history that interests you, Victoria."

Victoria's smile never wavered. "We'll see what other history comes to light, won't we?" She turned to the tourists. "Though I do recommend visiting soon. Before any potential... changes in ownership."

As Victoria walked away, Jane felt the curious stares of the crowd. The festival sounds suddenly seemed too loud—the music, the chatter, the children's laughter all pressing in around her.

"Hey." Mike's voice anchored her. "Don't let her bother you."

"She's trying to damage Tides's reputation," Jane said quietly. "Make people nervous about staying there. Drive down its value."

"Then we'll fight back," Bunny declared. "Sam and I are already looking into Lillian's story. The truth is in there somewhere."

"And the town knows you," Mrs. Peterson added fiercely. "Knows your family. We won't let some outsider spread lies about Margaret Miller."

Jane nodded, grateful for their support, but Victoria Barnes had made her move, turning a family tragedy into a weapon. Now Jane had to decide how to protect not just Tides Inn but her grandmother's legacy as well.

Cooper pressed against her leg, his solid warmth a comfort. Above them, the festival flags snapped in the rising evening breeze, and

somewhere, a child laughed, reminders of the real Lobster Bay, the one Victoria Barnes would never understand.

ANDIE HAD BEEN SAMPLING jams at the Marmalade & More booth, trying to decide which flavor would work best in their grandmother's famous thumbprint cookies, when she overheard Victoria Barnes's shrill voice carrying across the festival grounds. She caught fragments about root cellars and disappearances, and her heart sank. She hurried toward the growing crowd around the local history booth.

She arrived just in time to hear Victoria's parting shot about "changes in ownership." The developer's words hung in the air like poison, and Andie saw how they affected her sister—the slight stiffening of Jane's shoulders, the way her hand tightened on Cooper's leash.

"Don't let her get to you." Andie pushed through the dispersing crowd. "Nobody in town believes a word she says."

Mrs. Peterson nodded vigorously. "That's right. We all remember your grandmother, Jane. Such a kind soul."

Bunny caught Andie's eye and made a subtle gesture toward the quieter area near the bandstand. Sam was already heading that way, and after a moment's hesitation, Jane allowed Mike to guide her away from the curious onlookers.

Once they were relatively private, Bunny spoke in low tones. "We've been talking to everyone we can find who might remember something about Lillian's disappearance."

"Any luck?" Andie asked, watching her sister's face carefully.

Sam shook his head. "Lillian's husband passed away decades ago. She had no family, no children. That avenue's pretty much a dead end."

"But"—Bunny brightened slightly—"we're taking some of Billy's famous clam chowder to Marian Fine tomorrow. She was just a girl when Lillian disappeared, but she might remember something useful."

"If she remembers anything at all," Jane cautioned. "And with Victoria stirring up trouble, we might not have much time before this gets out of hand."

Andie suddenly remembered her conversation with Liz that morning. “Oh! Speaking of trouble, Liz told me someone’s been going through Great-Grandfather’s desk in the library.”

Jane’s head snapped up, something that Andie couldn’t quite read flickering across her face. “Going through the desk? What do you mean?”

“Things moved around, drawers not quite closed.” Andie described the scratch marks she’d found near the lock. “I thought it might be Victoria snooping, but Liz says she hasn’t been in the inn. She seemed to think it was one of the guests.”

“One of the guests?” Jane asked.

Andie nodded. “Emma Cole.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “Wait! Is that the one that was lurking around the kitchen, pretending she was looking for the porch?”

“I’m really not sure,” Andie said.

Jane was quiet for a moment, then a determined look crossed her face, one Andie recognized from childhood. It usually preceded either brilliance or disaster.

“I think I know how to handle Victoria,” Jane said slowly. “How to expose exactly what kind of person she is.”

“Wait. What?” Andie grabbed her sister’s arm. “Jane, what are you planning?”

But Jane was already pulling out her phone. “Don’t worry. I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“That’s what you said right before you decided to reorganize the inn’s filing system and lost three months of receipts!”

“I was twelve,” Jane protested. “And I found them, eventually.”

“In the Christmas decorations box,” Andie reminded her. “In March.”

Mike tried to hide his smile, but Sam didn’t bother concealing his chuckle. Even Cooper seemed amused, his tail wagging as he looked between the sisters.

“Just...” Andie sighed. “Whatever you’re planning, be careful. Victoria Barnes isn’t like the mean girls from high school who put gum in my hair. She’s dangerous.”

“I know.” Jane’s voice softened. “Trust me, okay? I’m not going to let her hurt Tides or Grandmother’s memory.”

Bunny cleared her throat. “While Jane works on... whatever she’s working on, Sam and I will keep digging. There has to be something in the

historical record that explains what really happened to Lillian.”

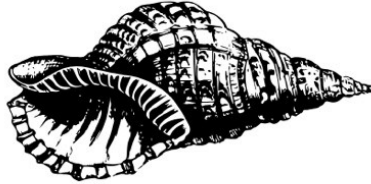
“And I’ll check the security cameras,” Mike added. “See if we can catch whoever’s been snooping in the library.”

Andie watched as Jane typed rapidly on her phone, that determined look still on her face. In the background, the festival was winding down—vendors packing up, families heading home with their purchases, the band playing their final songs.

“At least tell me you’re not going to do anything crazy,” Andie pleaded.

Jane looked up, and for a moment, Andie saw their grandmother’s steel beneath her sister’s usual warmth. “Nothing crazy,” Jane promised. “Just a little lesson for Victoria Barnes. Now, I gotta run! See you all later!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



If Jane's assumption was correct, Victoria Barnes would soon regret trying to destroy Tides Inn's reputation. And if she was wrong, well, she might have just lost a guest and made things even worse. Her hands were shaking slightly as she pulled into the inn's parking lot.

Usually, this was Jane's favorite time of day at Tides, when the light made everything glow and the day's tasks were winding down. Today, her stomach churned with anxiety as she approached the front desk.

Liz looked up from her computer, glasses perched on the end of her nose. "Oh good, you're back. I was just about to call you."

"Everything okay?"

"Better than okay! We're almost fully booked for the entire summer. Almost every week is filled."

"That's great," Jane said, watching Liz beam with pride. "Good job."

Jane glanced around before leaning in closer to the desk. "Hey, Andie mentioned something about a guest looking through my great-grandfather's desk."

Liz nodded and lowered her voice. "Yes, Emma Cole. She's kind of strange if you ask me." She flushed slightly. "Not that I like to speak badly of the guests."

"No, I understand," Jane assured her. "Is she still staying here?"

"She is. In fact, she's out in the sunroom right now."

Jane turned toward the sunroom then stopped. "Liz? If Victoria Barnes shows up, don't let her in. No matter what she says."

The sunroom was one of the inn's most beautiful spaces, with windows on three sides offering views of the garden and the ocean beyond. The light filled the room with a warm glow, making the wicker furniture cast intricate shadows on the wooden floor.

A woman sat in one of the oversized chairs, apparently absorbed in a book. She looked harmless enough, in her fifties with shoulder-length brown hair and sensible shoes. But there was something about the way she held herself, like she was trying too hard to appear casual.

Jane's planned confrontation suddenly felt foolish. What if she was wrong? What if Emma really was just an ordinary guest with an interest in old buildings and desks? Katie Green, the reporter, would be here soon. Jane had called her, convinced she was about to expose Victoria's scheme. Now doubt crept in, making her palms sweat.

But then she remembered Victoria at the festival, spreading her poison about Tides Inn, about Jane's grandmother. She thought of the suspicious scratches on the desk and the way Emma kept appearing in places she shouldn't be.

Taking a deep breath, Jane stepped into the sunroom.

"Excuse me, are you Emma Cole?"

The woman looked up from her book, startled. "Yes." She drew out the word.

"I'm Jane Miller. I own Tides Inn."

There was a slight widening of Emma's eyes that told Jane her suspicions were correct, though Emma quickly composed herself.

"Oh! It's a lovely inn."

"Really?" Jane's voice was cool. "I wouldn't think you would think so."

Emma's brow furrowed in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Let's cut to the chase. I know why you're here."

"I'm sorry?" Emma's confusion seemed genuine, but Jane had seen Victoria's act at the festival. Some people were very good at appearing innocent.

"The desk in the library? The lurking around the kitchen?" Jane's voice grew stronger with each accusation. "It's a bit obvious, don't you think?"

Emma closed her book slowly. "I don't understand what you're suggesting."

"I'm suggesting that Victoria Barnes hired you to dig up dirt on Tides Inn. To find something she could use against us." Jane's hands clenched at

her sides. “Well, it won’t work. Whatever she’s paying you, it’s not worth destroying an innocent family’s reputation.”

“Victoria Barnes?” Emma stood, genuine bewilderment crossing her face. “I don’t know who that is. I’m here because—”

“Because you’re trying to find evidence that our family did something wrong?” Jane interrupted. “About the root cellar? Lillian Whitmore? Well, you can tell Victoria that her little scheme isn’t going to work. I’ve called the press. They’ll be here any minute, and then everyone will know exactly what kind of person Victoria Barnes is, sending spies to—”

“Wait!” Emma held up her hands. “Please, just listen. I don’t know any Victoria Barnes. I’m not working for anyone. I’m here because...” She took a shaky breath. “Because Lillian Whitmore was my grandmother.”

The silence that followed was absolute. Even the usual creaks and settling sounds of the old inn seemed to hold their breath.

“That’s impossible,” Jane said finally. “Lillian never had any children. She disappeared before—”

“Before my mother was born.” Emma’s voice was soft but steady. “She was pregnant when she left. I think your grandmother helped her escape.”

Jane felt the room tilt slightly. “My grandmother?”

Emma nodded, reaching into her bag to pull out a bundle of old letters. “I found these after my grandmother died. They mentioned Tides Inn and a woman named Margaret who helped her disappear so she could start a new life.”

Jane sank into the nearest chair, her accusations forgotten. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I was so sure...”

“It’s okay,” Emma said gently. “I should have been honest from the start about why I was here. But I was afraid. Afraid you wouldn’t believe me, afraid you’d think I was trying to make trouble.” She smiled slightly. “I guess I managed to make trouble anyway.”

Jane stared at the letters in Emma’s hands, her mind racing. “But why did it take so long? Why didn’t Lillian or your mother ever come back, try to contact someone?”

Emma carefully unfolded one of the yellowed papers. “My grandmother never told anyone the truth. Not even my mother.” She smoothed the letter with trembling fingers. “I think she was terrified. Terrified that her husband would find them, that he’d take my mother away from her. From what I can gather, she didn’t tell him she was pregnant.”

She looked up at Jane. “Grandma was always very vague about my mother’s father. Said he died in the service. Back then, being an unwed mother was...” She shook her head. “It was different times.”

“How did you figure it out?”

“Bits and pieces, really. After Grandma died, I found these letters hidden in an old jewelry box. Started piecing things together.” Emma gestured around the sunroom. “I wasn’t even sure if this was the right place. The letters just mentioned an inn and someone named Margaret that helped her. I thought maybe...” Her voice caught slightly. “So this was really where my grandmother hid? Before she got away?”

The hope and longing in Emma’s voice made Jane’s throat tight. She thought of her own grandmother, young and brave, helping a pregnant woman escape an abusive husband. She thought of Lillian, terrified but determined to protect her unborn child.

“Yes,” Jane said softly. “And I have something for you.”

“Wait here,” Jane said, hurrying to her office. The diary was still in her desk drawer, wrapped carefully in acid-free paper. She’d been studying it, trying to understand the woman who wrote it, never imagining she would be giving it to the woman’s granddaughter.

When she returned to the sunroom, Emma was standing by the windows, looking out at the ocean just as Lillian must have all those years ago.

“We found this,” Jane said, holding out the diary, “when we were fixing a leak in Room Seven. It was hidden in the walls. It was your grandmother’s.”

Emma’s hands shook as she took the small book. “This was really my grandmother’s?”

She touched the worn leather cover reverently, fingers tracing the faded initials, L. W., stamped in the corner.

“Yes.” Jane watched as Emma carefully opened the diary and saw her eyes fill with tears at the sight of the familiar handwriting.

Through the sunroom windows, Jane saw a familiar car pull into the parking lot. “Oh no,” she groaned.

“What is it?” Emma asked, still holding the diary close.

“I called Katie Green. She’s a reporter for the *Lobster Bay Gazette*. I was so sure you were working for Victoria Barnes that I...” Jane ran a hand through her hair. “I called Katie to expose the whole scheme.”

“Victoria Barnes?” Emma’s brow furrowed. “You mentioned her before. Who is she?”

Jane explained about the developer’s attempts to buy Tides Inn, about her threats and insinuations at the festival, about the cruel rumors she was spreading about Lillian’s disappearance and the root cellar.

“She’s trying to damage our reputation,” Jane finished. “Drive away guests so she can buy the inn for less than it’s worth. When I saw you looking through the desk, I assumed...”

Emma’s expression hardened. “She’s using my grandmother’s story? Twisting it into some kind of scandal?”

Jane nodded miserably. “And now I’ve called a reporter here for nothing. Katie’s going to think—”

“No,” Emma interrupted, a determined glint in her eye. “Not for nothing. If this reporter wants a story, let’s give her one. The real story.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it,” Emma said, warming to the idea. “Instead of Victoria’s made-up scandal, we tell the truth. About how your grandmother helped mine escape an abusive marriage. How she gave a pregnant woman the chance to start a new life, to protect her child.” She held up the diary. “We have proof, not just of your grandmother’s kindness but of the inn’s legacy of helping people.”

Jane stared at Emma, hope blooming in her chest. “You’d do that? Tell your family’s story?”

“My grandmother kept these secrets out of fear,” Emma said softly. “But now? Now her story could help protect the very place that once protected her.” She smiled. “Besides, I think more people would want to stay at an inn with a history of courage and kindness than one with Victoria’s imagined scandals.”

Through the window, they could see Katie getting out of her car, notebook in hand.

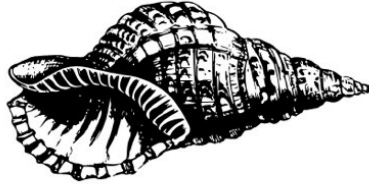
“Are you sure about this?” Jane asked.

Emma squared her shoulders. “Absolutely. Let’s go tell Katie Green about the real history of Tides Inn, about two brave women who changed the course of both our families forever.”

As they walked to meet Katie, Emma still clutching Lillian’s diary, Jane felt a profound sense of rightness. Victoria had tried to use the past to

destroy Tides, but instead, she'd helped uncover a story of hope and courage that would only make it stronger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



The next morning, Jane sat at her kitchen table, staring at the front page of the *Lobster Bay Gazette*. The headline read: “Tide Inn: A Legacy Of Courage—Historic Inn’s Secret Role in Helping Women Escape Abuse.”

Katie’s article was everything they’d hoped for. It detailed how Margaret Miller had helped Lillian escape her abusive husband, selling her pearl necklace to fund a new life for the pregnant woman. The story included excerpts from Lillian’s diary and quotes from Emma about discovering her grandmother’s past.

Most importantly, it emphasized how Tides Inn had always been a place of sanctuary and hope.

Mike appeared behind her, setting a fresh cup of coffee by her hand. “I’d say that’s a pretty effective response to Victoria’s rumors.”

“Emma was amazing,” Jane said, still reading. “The way she talked about her grandmother, about mine, Katie couldn’t write fast enough.”

Cooper trotted in from the living room, settling at Jane’s feet with a contented sigh. Outside, the morning fog was starting to lift, revealing glimpses of the harbor.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Mike asked, sitting across from her with his own coffee.

“That Victoria’s plan backfired?”

“That, and”—he grinned—“you’re probably going to need to hire more help. Once this story spreads, everyone’s going to want to stay at the historic inn that helped save lives.”

Before Jane could respond, her phone buzzed with a text from Andie: *Have you seen the paper? Turn to page 4!*

Jane flipped to the indicated page and found a small article titled “Local Developer Faces Investigation.” The piece detailed how Victoria Barnes was being investigated for similar tactics in other towns, spreading rumors and manipulating property values.

“Looks like karma finally caught up with her,” Mike observed.

Jane’s phone buzzed again, this time with a message from Emma: “Heading home today. Thank you for everything. You’re carrying on your grandmother’s legacy in the best way possible.”

As if to prove Emma’s point, Jane’s email notification chimed. Three new booking requests had come in overnight.

“I should get to the inn,” she said, standing. “Liz will need help with all the—”

“Jane.” Mike’s voice was gentle. “It’s not even seven. The inn will survive if you take an hour to enjoy your coffee.”

She looked at him, really looked at him. At the way the morning light caught his smile, at the easy way he fit into her kitchen. Into her life.

“You’re right,” she said, sitting back down. Cooper’s tail thumped against the floor in approval.

Mike reached across the table and took her hand. “You know, your grandmother didn’t just save Lillian. In a way, she saved you too.”

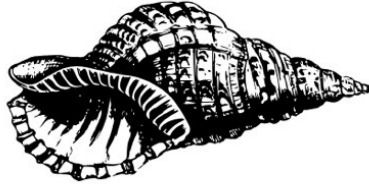
“What do you mean?”

“She showed you that sometimes, the most important thing isn’t holding on to the past. It’s knowing when to help someone move forward.” He squeezed her hand. “Just like you’re learning to do.”

Jane thought about that as she sipped her coffee. About her grandmother’s courage, about Emma finding peace in her family’s story, about her own journey of learning to balance tradition with change.

The fog had lifted completely, revealing a perfect spring morning. She had a few minutes before she was supposed to meet the gang for coffee at Sandcastles, but for now, she was content to sit in her kitchen with Mike, drinking her first coffee while Cooper dozed at her feet, knowing that sometimes, the best traditions were the ones you chose to keep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Jane approached Sandcastles Bakery, Cooper trotting happily beside her. Her friends were already gathered at their usual table on the patio, copies of the *Lobster Bay Gazette* spread out before them. Sam and Bunny sat at the next table doing a crossword puzzle, looking up only long enough to nod at Jane.

Andie waved Jane over, and she settled into an empty chair, Cooper immediately flopping down beneath the table. Claire and Maxi were splitting a blueberry muffin, while Andie nursed what was probably her second cup of coffee.

“Has everyone seen the article?” Andie asked, though the scattered newspapers answered that question.

“Katie did an amazing job,” Claire said, tapping the front page. “The way she wove together Emma’s discovery with your grandmother’s courage, Jane. It’s beautiful.”

Cooper’s tail started wagging, and Jane looked up to see Sandee hovering on the sidewalk with Bella and Buddy, who replied to Cooper’s tail wags with wags of their own. Despite their invitation, she still seemed unsure of her welcome, her hands fidgeting with her purse strap.

“Sandee!” Claire waved at her. “Perfect timing. I saved you something.” Claire pointed at a ham-and-cheese scone in the middle of the plate.

Sandee’s face brightened with surprise. “You remembered?”

“Of course,” Claire said easily, pointing at an empty chair for Sandee to sit in. “Can’t let my business partner start her day without proper fuel.”

The simple gesture seemed to dissolve Sandee's hesitation. She settled into the offered chair, accepting both the scone and the coffee Hayley immediately poured for her.

"Actually," Sandee said after taking a sip, "I have some news. I saw Victoria Barnes loading up her car this morning. Looks like she's leaving town."

"Good riddance," Andie muttered.

"Guess she realized she didn't make any friends," Sam mused from the next table.

"Speaking of friends," Bunny said with an exaggerated sigh, "I can't believe after all our detective work, the mystery solved itself!"

Sam patted her hand consolingly. "There's always next time, honey."

"Next time?" Jane raised an eyebrow. "Planning on finding more mysteries in Lobster Bay?"

"Oh, there are always mysteries," Bunny said wisely. "Though maybe not as dramatic as this one. By the way, did Emma get home okay?"

Jane nodded. "She called last night. Said she's planning to write a book about her grandmother's story. With our blessing, of course."

"Of course you gave it," Claire said, joining them with her own coffee. "It's a story that deserves to be told."

"What I don't understand is why the diary was hidden in that closet," Sandee said.

"We wondered about that. We can't know for sure, but Emma and I figured maybe Lillian had hidden it on the upper shelf, tucked behind the wall. You know how people like to keep their diaries secret. And then maybe she had to leave in a hurry and forgot to get it." Jane shrugged.

"She never wrote about Maggie or staying at the inn in it," Sam said.

"Probably too worried about her husband finding it and then punishing Maggie somehow." Andie picked at a gooey cinnamon bun.

The conversation flowed easily after that, punctuated by comfortable silences and occasional laughter. Cooper's tail thumped steadily against the floor as Claire slipped him bits of scone, and the morning sun warmed their shoulders.

Jane looked around the table at her friends—at Bunny and Sam sharing knowing smiles, at Maxi sketching idly on a napkin, at Andie deep in conversation with Sandee about the Beach Bones display at the festival, finally truly at peace with the changes in her life.

As if reading her thoughts, Andie raised her coffee cup. “To Grandmother Margaret,” she said softly. “Who knew that sometimes, the bravest thing you can do is help someone else start over.”

They all raised their cups in response, even Cooper lifting his head at the movement.

“And to Lillian,” Jane added, “who trusted her with that decision.”

“And to new friends,” Claire said, meeting Sandee’s eyes with a warm smile. “Who remind us that change isn’t always a bad thing.”

Around them, the morning continued its gentle flow—customers coming and going, Cooper dozing in the warm sun, friends sharing stories and laughter. Just another ordinary day in Lobster Bay, made extraordinary by the people who called it home.

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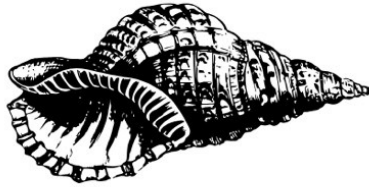


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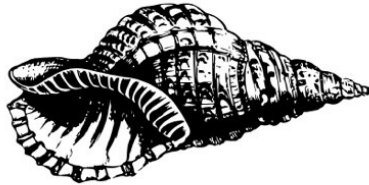
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Meredith Summers writes cozy mysteries as USA Today Bestselling author Leighann Dobbs and crime fiction as L. A. Dobbs.

She spent her childhood summers in Ogunquit Maine and never forgot the soft soothing feeling of the beach. She hopes to share that feeling with you through her books which are all light, feel-good reads.

Join her newsletter for sneak peeks of the latest books and release day notifications:

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SPRINGTIDE SECRETS

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