

# The Hope Chest

**Dogwood Hometown, Volume 1**

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Written by Shayla McAnn.

This book is dedicated to the victims of Breast Cancer: Those who won, those who lost, and also their families. My Aunt fought hard and lost in 1983. Years later, my mother would wage her own war against this disease, requiring several years of chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery. Congestive Heart Failure is what stole her from us many years later, at the age of 84. My sister, Judy, won the battle a few years ago. I am so grateful she is still with us. I love you, ladies. We must find the cure.





# The Hope Chest

Shayla McAnn

## Chapter One: An Eternal Love



He sailed over from Dublin to work for the Galveston newspaper as a journalist. As soon as he landed, he laid eyes on the loveliest creature he'd ever seen. Her long, auburn hair flowed down to her waist in such a fiery way it looked as if the setting sun had melted into it. She turned and looked directly into his eyes. Tristan was captivated. At that very moment, before ever speaking a word to each other, Tristan's heart would forever belong to her. He set his bags down and walked straight up to her, unable to pull his gaze from her eyes.

"I'm Tristan Murphy, and ye've just captured me heart," Tristan said, with the best smile he could muster.

"That blarney pish may work with the wenches in Eirie, but it'll ne'er work on a Scotch-Irish woman who's got her wits about her."

"I cannae believe me ears, lass! I speak straight from me heart, yet ye trot off like I'm some drunken fool with too many pints of cider down his gullet!"

If he was under her spell before, was nothin' then, her shutting him down only made him fall completely in love with her. The next morning, he walked into the newspaper office. There she was, that lovely woman who captured his heart.

"Oh, it's the blubbering poet, come to work as a journalist. Let us hope your prose is better than the rubbish you were spouting yester-

day.” She did smile at him then. He looked over at Carlena Rose and grinned.

“Aye, and ye’re still full of pish. I am Carlena Rose Kennedy Stewart.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said as he shook her hand. “Ye’ve a long name, lass.”

“Likewise. My da was a Kennedy, and Ma was a Stewart. I came from Scotland to work in the newspaper, but it weren’t as a reporter. I write articles and short stories. I believe you’re our new reporter. Welcome.” She smiled at him until she finally broke free from the handshake.

“Thank ye. I’ll do me best not to interfere with your work, love.” He continued smiling at her as she walked behind her desk.

Writing was her only passion until the day Tristan stepped off the boat. The crazy man couldn’t leave her be. Carlena knew she loved him from the start, but she would not tell him. He was already too full of himself, she thought. He thought she enjoyed pulling his heartstrings.

They spent every moment together. As the days passed, turning into weeks and months, she enjoyed every moment with Tristan since they started their relationship. Although she couldn’t help but wonder if he would ever ask her to marry him. He always stopped just short. One day, she marched straight up to him and said, “Tristan Murphy, I’m nae gettin’ any younger, ye ken. If ye mean to marry me, ye’d best put a ring on this finger o’ mine, or ye’ll be sorry ye let me get away.”

He made a quick turnabout back inside the newspaper office and called home to Ireland. She stood there gawking, mouth wide open, wondering how he could simply turn and walk away. She felt he didn’t care as much about her as she did him. He still spent every moment possible with her. Often, she seemed distant because she felt he slighted her. One day, he received a special delivery he’d been expecting. He stuffed it in his pocket and ran out the door.

Carlena Rose saw him receive a delivery and watched him run out. She knew he'd called home to Ireland several times recently, and believed he had a special someone waiting for him, and that's why he refused to marry her. It was hard for her to remain focused on the stories she was to turn in to the editor that evening, but she managed. Her day finished, she grabbed her purse and walked out. She planned to go straight home, not in the mood for meaningless banter, that day.

As she stepped up the stairs to go inside her boarding house, Tristan popped out from the hedges holding a bouquet. Startled, she jumped back. Nearly losing her footing, his firm hand grasped her arm to prevent the fall. He held her close to him to be sure she was steady. "Are ye okay, love?"

"Let me go, you galoot!" She took the flowers and hit him with them. "What do you mean comin' 'round here after you jilted me? You act a blubberin' fool and won't leave me be ever since you stepped foot on this shore. Then when I tell you I'm ready for ye to ask for my hand, you walk away. Now you're here with flowers. What do ye ken I'm supposed to think? How do ye ken I'm supposed to feel?"

He laughed, but jumped back with raised hands, to avoid her assault. He was such a cheerful lad, always making jokes and fun, but one thing he never joked about was his feelings for her.

"My intentions are honorable, my love. Always have been since the first day I saw ye so many months ago. I've loved ye since the moment I saw ye. I was afraid to ask ye. But, then ye said I'd better ask, or I'd be sorry I let ye get away. So, I called home to Ireland to have a ring made for ye. I couldn't ask ye proper, without a ring."

Carlena's eyes filled with tears. "You mean you had a ring made for me?"

"Aye, love." He opened the package and took out a small ring box. He opened it, holding in front of her. "The hands are the things that represent eternal friendship, the heart, love, and the crown, loyalty. Our

love is eternal, deservin' of the sacred Claddagh, and I had the ring blessed just for us."

"Tristan!" She jumped into his arms, kissing him soundly.

"Is that a 'yes,' then, love?"

"Oh, aye! 'Tis!"

He kissed her again and said, "Ye've made me the happiest man who ever lived. I love you, my wee Scottish lass."

"I love you too, ye big galoot."

She wore a lovely wedding gown and a Stewart clan tartan sash, clasped with a Scottish Luckenbooth brooch. The Luckenbooth is similar to the Claddagh, only the Scottish Thistle. She was a vision of exquisite perfection. They were married in the cathedral on the island. There were never two people who loved each other more.



THREE YEARS LATER, amidst the wailing of the victims and the sisters at St. Mary's Orphanage singing "Queen of the Waves" to the children, Carlena gave birth to a child. "Push, my love! Push! It will be over soon. Push harder, my lovely Carlena Rose." It was evident in his piercing blue eyes, how much he adored her. A tall, muscular, handsome man, and while he spoke with an Irish brogue, hers was more of a Scottish accent. His dark curls moved about, brushing his collar as he looked at her in a panic. With a final push, she brought a beautiful baby girl into the world. He instantly took the baby, cleaned and clothed her, and gently laid her in her mama's arms.

"My darling Carlena Rose, we've been blessed with a wee lass."

Trying to catch her breath between laughing and crying, she answered, "Aye, my love, our sweet Pearl. Blessed of God, she is. I love you, Tristan."

"And I love you, my beautiful wife," he said, then leaned over to give them both a kiss.

The woman gazed into the eyes of the adorable child. "I love you, my wee lass. I will keep you safe, by the power of our Lord Jesus, the Blessed Virgin, and our St. Bridget."

After delivering Pearl, Carlena Rose was exhausted. Still, she knew sleep had to wait, for the storm was already upon them. Living so close to the water, they knew they'd have to seek shelter at the orphanage further inland. They had no choice but to gather up a few belongings, supplies, their new daughter, and run for their lives, to flee inland with their precious newborn. The mother clutched Pearl to her breast while praying to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, "Please save us! God save us all!"

Neither of them had known such terror in their lives. While running, searching for a safe haven, there was none to be found. Behind them was a raging wall of seawater. Houses and trees exploded in its path as it sent debris rocketing through the air and left only destruction and death in its wake. All around, people screamed, cried, and scrambled for their lives. The gale-force winds were so strong that they ripped the clothes right off of bodies, leaving everyone shivering with cold and fear.

*"Help, then sweet Queen, in our exceeding danger... by thy seven griefs, in pity Lady save... think of the Babe that slept within the manger... and help us now, dear Lady of the Wave..."* As the nuns' lyrics echoed into my ears above the tumult, Carlena Rose urged Tristan to run toward the orphanage, hoping it could offer shelter. They knew the good sisters would do their best to provide sanctuary, if only they could make it. As Tristan ran beside his beloved, she clutched their child as tightly as she could to her breast, fearing the vicious wind might snatch the baby from her arms. They didn't dare stop until reaching St. Mary's Orphanage, a shelter built on consecrated ground.

"Surely even the sea won't harm us there," she said, out of breath as they hurried in that direction.

The hurricane blew relentlessly, with no signs of slowing down. It seemed to become angrier with each body taken as if the sacrifice of life fed its cruel strength. The city was the largest principal city in the United States, and it was growing more every day. Frantically, people flew past to and fro, some tossed about like ragdolls or as if nature itself was controlling its marionettes.

The fear seemed to harbor a foul stench, a rank odor that welled up from deep within the broken spirits and dashed hopes of those running for their lives. So horrible was that virus of terror. People tried to hold onto anyone they could, whether they were kin or not. Tristan and Carlana could only look on in horror as they slammed into the outer wall of their would-be solace.

The pain was sharp, but Tristan tried to soothe Carlana with his words of courage and hope. "Carlana, my love," he said between groans, peering down at the street lamp post that had impaled them both, spearing them to the wall, "we shall be together for all eternity. Pearl, my wee lass, grow strong, and find someone who loves you as I love your mama."

"Aye, my love. She will grow strong, and one of her daughters shall learn of our story." She removed the silver engraved comb from her hair and placed it in one of Pearl's tiny hands. The pearls were gifts from the sea. Two white pearls on either side of the black one that adorned the center. Then, from the depths of her soul, she cried, "Come thunder, come lightning, come winds from the bay! Continue our line from this day. I love you, my wee Pearl. Tristan, you are my own true love."



## Chapter Two: Not Today, Satan!



“Not today, Satan! Not today!”

Carley had her fill with nightmares she couldn't explain, and today wasn't a good day to deal with them. The day began like any other after a night filled with dreams so vivid she felt as though she'd lived through them. She could practically taste the salty spray from the ocean waves as they crashed onshore, Carley stepped into the shower to get ready for a double shift at the Dogwood ER, where she worked in the piney woods of East Texas.

With the water washing over her, she thawed out. The dreams were coming more frequently now. She remembered having these dreams as a child when her mama was still alive. Carley lost her mother, Ruby, when she was fifteen years old. Much too young to lose one's only parent and be forced to care for yourself. Carley promised her she'd finish high school and go on to college to achieve her nursing degree.

Carley walked into the kitchen after putting on scrubs. She needed coffee, extra strong, and lots of it to make it through this day. She grabbed a bagel, smeared some strawberry cream cheese on it, stuck it in her mouth, and walked toward the door. She spotted Shannon's leash hanging on the wall as she reached for her keys, and a tear slipped from the blue-green eyes, rolling down a pink cheek. “I said, not today, Satan. And ya really had to go there.” She wiped the tear away while walking through the door.

As she walked into the ER, Mitzie, Carley's nurse partner, and childhood friend met her at the time clock. “Carley Callaghan, you look about half dead. You need to dish on this new beau of yours, stay-

ing up all hours of the night. You oughtta be ashamed.” Mitzie grinned, then nudged her with an elbow. “But I wouldn’t be. It’s about time you started getting out of that tiny little house.”

“Mitzie, I don’t have a boyfriend. I don’t want one, and what makes you think I need one? Besides, I like my life just fine, as it is. Thank you very much!” She raised an auburn eyebrow to emphasize the point. “Now, let’s go to report, shall we?”

“Yeah, okay. I don’t know why you insist on torturing yourself. You don’t even let me come hang out with you anymore. You hole yourself up in that cracker box of a house, and read novels night after night.”

They headed to the nurse’s station to receive a report on the remaining patients. One patient, a fifty-three-year-old female with stage four cancer status post radical bilateral mastectomy, reminded Carley so much of her mama. Mitzie watched Carley inhale and look away. She knew it would be a long shift for both of them.

Mitzie was Carley’s only friend growing up. She was there when Ruby received her diagnosis, through all the treatments, and post-surgical recovery. She was there for Carley until the end. Carley always loved Mitzie even though she could be a bit pushy. Although they were close, Carley told Mitzie one day she didn’t need her to be a shrink. She needed her friend. Things were never the same between them.

The sleepy little town of Dogwood never saw much in excitement, aside from the annual Dogwood Festival and Trail Ride. However, it did receive its share of illness and injuries after motor vehicle accidents brought into the Emergency Room. This shift nearly did Carley in. They had charted the last of their patients when they heard the sirens blaring into the driveway. Carley turned to Mitzie and said, “Looks like round three.”

“Is that all?” Mitzie looked at the clock. “I would’ve sworn that was more like round five.”

Carley pulled the curtain back in room two and motioned the medics in with the stretcher. She noticed Hawk Battise, an elderly Na-

tive American gentleman with them. His face showed no emotion, but fear and sadness were evident in his dark eyes. Then she saw the little girl on the stretcher. She couldn't be over five or six, a tiny little thing. Her long, red hair was matted, her clothes tattered, smudged, and torn. Shattered glass all over her. Tears streaked through the smudges on her pale face. Carley nodded at her and the man and then turned to the medic speaking.

"We have a six-year-old female, motor vehicle accident, lost control on black ice. She's the only survivor. Vitals are stable. She is alert and oriented."

"The only survivor? Wait, is this Angel?" Carley asked, looking at her and the gentleman.

The man spoke, "Yes, Aidan and Aliesha Kathleen are gone. I'm her Ah-wo...sorry, grandfather."

She looked back at the little girl, and he said, "I have been friends of the family for many years, and am her godfather, but she calls me Ah-wo, meaning grandfather. I am now her guardian. It's good to see you again, Carley. I wish it weren't under these circumstances." He extended his hand.

"I understand." Carley shook his hand. "I'm so sorry for your loss. I knew y'all had been close ever since I've lived here, but wasn't sure of the connection. Let's see what we can do to clean you up." She looked at the girl. "Then, we'll see about a pink balloon."

"I want my mama and daddy."

"I know you do, sweetheart. I can't do anything to bring them back, but I can clean you up. Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so." Tears streamed from her eyes again.

"I'll be right back. You're going to be fine." Carley patted her hand and headed for the supply closet.

With a glance at the clock, she wondered if this night would ever end as she rushed to the supply closet. Maybe she thought she'd be okay if only she could catch her breath. But, she must distance herself from

the child to compose. Angry with God, she wondered why He must tease people with a family to love, and then snatch them away? He must be a cruel God to destroy the lives of children. It was terrible enough He made her mama suffer from Cancer, and then took her away when Carley was a teenager. But, this little girl was only six! How dare He?

To take her mind off the present, she thought of the ocean. As far as she was concerned, there was no feeling like salty air blowing through your hair in a time and place where you belong—a place where you know that you are part of something far more significant than yourself. Like most old sayings, this one rings true: Our loved ones are never gone, as long as we remember them and carry them in our hearts. We all have stories, and those we love are forever a part of our lives if we remember them and share their stories. Would this little girl remember her parents' stories? Would she share them or keep them bottled up inside like Carley did?

Carley burst into tears. Mitzie was standing outside the supply closet and heard her, so she rushed in. "Carley, are you all right?"

Carley stepped to the sink to wash her face, trying to hide her tears.

"Oh! Hi, Mitzie. Is something wrong?"

"Uh, yeah. You're in here crying your eyes out, while there's a little girl out there doing the same."

"I'm fine. I'm just washing my face. I got too hot. I've been right here getting bandages for the little girl. Why?" Carley asked, confused by Mitzie's befuddled expression as she gawked at her.

"No, honey, you need to get over this fear of attachment you have. You're the best nurse we have, but you refuse to get close to anyone. I'm used to it. You pushed me away years ago. But, I'm still not giving up on you."

"What? I never pushed you away, Mitzie! I just needed time to heal and remember telling you I needed a friend, not a shrink. Truth is, I'm just not big on going out anymore. I prefer staying at home."

“Yeah, well, at least you’ve got some new beau you’re spending time with. I’m still waiting for you to dish on this new love of yours. If this one’s got you off in Dreamland during the day, he must be pretty extraordinary at night! I mean, oh my!”

“New love? I don’t have a boyfriend.” Carley rolled her eyes. “You really don’t know me at all. Will this day ever end?”

“I used to know you, but apparently not anymore. Something’s going on. You come to work looking haggard, and like you’ve had no sleep.”

“I didn’t want to say anything because you never leave me alone, telling me I need to see a shrink. But, the nightmares have returned. And, the only thing I’m concerned with at the moment is getting through this shift and going home to a hot bath. I need to get the image of that precious girl out of my head. But first, I must clean her wounds and bandage them. I can handle many things, but seeing that baby cry for her parents. I just can’t.”

Carley grabbed the saline and bandages for the child and turned to walk out, but Mitzie blocked her path. “A shrink might be exactly what you need. But what do I know? I’m just the one who was always there for you. I love you, Carley, and if you don’t see that, maybe it’s you who doesn’t know me. That little girl needs much more from you than some Band-Aids slapped on her minor wounds.”

Carley rolled her eyes. “Come on, Mitzie.”

Mitzie shifted from one foot to another, while shaking her finger at Carley. “She needs a bit of compassion, and to know she’s not alone in this world, by someone who’s been through the same thing. Who better to help her than you? But, your problem is that because you lost your mama, you fear attachment. You need to get over yourself and realize you’re not the only one who’s lost someone you love.” Mitzie walked out, shaking her head.

After taking another moment to compose, Carley walked back out to the little girl. “Hey, sweet cheeks! I’ve got some stuff here to fix you

right up. Now, let's have Ah-wo step outside, while we get to it." Hawk smiled as he turned to walk out. Carley pulled the curtain closed and cleaned her up. "Angel, what do you like to do for fun?"

"I don't know. I guess I like to go fishing and horseback riding. We were coming home from buying my very own horse when we skid off the road. His name is Choctaw."

"Was he hurt?"

"A little, but he's the one who pulled me out of the truck."

"Wow! Your horse pulled you out of the truck?"

"Yes. Somehow Choctaw broke free from the trailer when it rolled over, and he came back for me."

"He loves you. That means we have to hurry so you can get home to take care of him."

"Yes. I'm ready to go home. Ah-wo!"

Her grandfather came back inside. "I'm here. What is it, Angel?"

"I'm ready to go home. Choctaw needs me."

"Okay, girl. Let's go."

Relief washed over Carley as she watched Angel walk out. She turned to Mitzie. "Now, I can finally go home and put this day behind me."

Mitzie was crushed. She wondered how their lives had taken such drastic turns. Two girls who grew up together, and were the closest thing to a sister either ever had drifted apart. She knew Carley was hurting, but so was she.



## Chapter Three: The Hope Chest



Carley walked into the kitchen and reached into the freezer to pull out another boring, tasteless, full-of-sodium microwave dinner, more out of habit than anything, since she wasn't even all that hungry. With no mother to remind her what she needed to do and when she had come to depend on routines. That is the only way to keep priorities straight to finish school. After a lackluster supper, she took a warm bath and went to bed with a book, Jane Austen's famed *Pride and Prejudice*.

She missed not having a mother, father, and sisters. Even the meddlesome Mrs. Bennett would have been preferable to not having a mother at all. Her mama was never the type to play matchmaker. But, the two shared many laughs over cute boys, and she was always Carley's best friend until she wasn't there anymore.

Carley wondered how it would feel to have a suitor like the dashing Mr. Darcy. The men in Dogwood weren't so debonair. Not that they were uncivilized, not by any means. Most were true Southern gentlemen. However, they never said fancy words like "milady." Carley had only a few boyfriends in her twenty-six years, and none compared to Mr. Darcy.

Her last relationship ended badly. The freeloader expected her to let him move in and live for free while he "researched his options." Carley, never a pushover, informed him that his only option was to get off his duff and get a job. "I have worked since I was fifteen," she sternly reminded him. "I put myself through college while finishing high school, and I'm not about to support an alleged grown man who is fully capa-

ble of working to take care of himself. Also, kindly take your feet off my coffee table,” she said as she swiped his feet from the table.

He left shortly after that, and she never heard from him again. He probably found a more pleasant and far more pathetic woman, foolishly happy to support him in his lazy endeavors. “If he wants to research his options on her dime, that’s fine with me!” Carley declared.

Ms. Austen’s words on the page soon lullabied her sleepy eyes to a close, but throughout the night, the nightmares refused to let Carley rest. Instead, they bombarded her with a vengeance.

Unable to remain asleep, she tossed for hours haunted by those pesky dreams that took over her entire being. They weren’t like a movie, it was more a feeling that she was the woman in her dreams, seeing from her perspective. Sleep was doomed to fail once again, so Carley flung the covers back and climbed out of bed to put on a pot of diesel coffee. She downed the first cup, the hot liquid burning her throat. Then poured another. After cooling off, she sipped while going through the motions of readying herself for work. After slurping the second cup down, she walked toward the door. The UPS man was standing in the pouring rain, about to ring the doorbell as she opened the door.

“Oh, hello,” Carley said, startled.

“I have a delivery for you, Ma’am.”

“Oh. I don’t remember ordering anything.”

He stepped aside to pick up a massive trunk and asked, “Where would you like me to put it? It’s heavy.” He strained as he walked inside.

“Right here in the living room is fine. Thank you.” She signed the receipt, and he left.

“When it rains, it pours,” Carley complained, reaching for the pink enveloped taped to the top of the chest. She opened it to find an intricate key with two white pearls and a black one in the center, just like the pearls in her comb. Also inside the envelope was a handwritten letter in an old calligraphy style. Several pages in length, she decided another

cup of diesel was in order. After pouring another cup, she sat down on the sofa to read.

*My dearest grandchild,*

*I hope this letter and hope chest finds you happy and well. I pray you are living the life of your dreams. I know you're probably wondering who would address you thus, and I'm about to tell you. I have searched for you for many years. Your mother, Ruby, was my daughter. I'm sure she never told you about me, or I would have seen you by now.*

*My selfish nature pushed your mama away. I only wanted to keep her home. There was a nice young man who lived on the island. He was a journalist, and your mama worked with him at the paper. I always thought they would be a perfect match. It looked as though she would marry him until your father came to the island with his hopes and dreams, and took off with my precious daughter. Not that I didn't like him. But, your mama always was a hopeless romantic and had a rebellious streak. She would do anything for love.*

*I gave her a beautiful wedding here on the island. She was the talk of the city for many years, and they called it the Wedding of the Century. Stewart, the journalist, wrote a lovely article about it for the paper. It made the front page. After their honeymoon, they never returned. Each time I asked her why she wasn't coming home, she'd reply that Collin, your father, was jealous of Stewart.*

*I guess he was. He knew Ruby and Stewart worked together, and of your Mama's passion for writing. He came back to the island one day for a job he was doing but left Ruby home. He said it wasn't safe, with the threat of a possible hurricane. He was right. He was caught in the storm and had an auto accident while trying to leave the city. I begged her to come home, but she believed that somehow I loved her less because she didn't marry the journalist. That was nonsensical, and I told her as much. Just because I was a writer, didn't mean she had to marry one. I only ever wanted my daughter to be happy.*

*When your mama received her diagnosis, I begged her again to come home. She refused. I wanted to care for her and help her recover. She was afraid she would run into Stewart, who she knew had never married. He always loved your mama. He said he went to her funeral, but he was afraid to approach you. He didn't know what you would think of your mama's childhood sweetheart coming to her funeral.*

*When I tried to find Ruby, the letters kept getting returned with no forwarding address. After hiring a private investigator, I was informed, she was still in Dogwood, but had been returning the letters unopened. I will never understand why.*

*I hope you know, my child, that I have always loved you and have fought hard to find you. I am an old woman now. But, I would like to spend what time I have on this earth getting to know you. Please enjoy the contents of this chest. They are a few of my favorite things I've saved just for you.*

*All my love,*

*Gramma Pearl*

“Grandmother! What? I’ve lived my entire life not knowing I had a grandmother, alive and well. A grandmother who’s been searching for me since birth.” Carley stomped through the house, infuriated with her mama for never telling her anything about her grandmother. All the illusions of having the most wonderful Mama in the world, shattered with one letter. Then, Carley tried to remember if she ever bothered asking if she had a grandmother.

She took the key and turned it in the lock. Inside the trunk, Carley found an intricately crocheted blanket, in an aged sepia color. She assumed it had been white or ivory originally. It looked like an oversized Irish lace doily. She pulled the work of art from its hiding place, and couldn’t help but be amazed by all the hours of love someone had put into making the masterpiece. After it was unfolded, Carley could see it was cloverleaf pattern bedspread and edged with Scottish Luchenbooth tassels.

Under the spread were stacks of old newspaper clippings about something called The Great Storm of 1900 and a bundle of unopened letters from Gramma Pearl. Carefully picking up the yellowed newspapers, she scanned the headlines before the dreams took over, again.

*On September 8, 1900, the city of Galveston was destroyed by The Great Storm, the deadliest hurricane in American history. Between 6,000 and 8,000 unfortunate souls met their end during that onslaught, many immigrants who called Galveston home, people from all over the world, including Ireland, Scotland, and Germany.*

*“It was a city-bound for greatness, but unprepared for impending doom,” one newspaper reporter wrote. The local meteorologist, Isaac Cline, was skeptical any storm would produce enough power to create the massive destruction the hurricane promised and delivered. As soon as he realized how wrathful Mother Nature was and that her rage was about to hit land, he became the hero of the day for reporting it. Like the famous Paul Revere, he rode his horse up and down the beach, warning residents. Rather than yelling, “The British are coming,” Mr. Cline announced, “The storm is coming! Seek shelter inland!” and because of him, lives were saved.*

It was refreshing to learn about the history of her home state. Still, other questions sprang to mind, questions she desperately needed answered. First, she wondered about all of the unidentified victims: Did they have families to mourn them, anyone to remember them? Did anyone know their names, their stories? Were they happy before the storm, in love? What types of lives did they live? What were their dreams, their occupations, their ambitions? If they were immigrants, how long were they here before they died? Where did they come from, and why did they move to Galveston? The most important question of all, however, simply wasn't logical. Why had Carley been having nightmares about something she'd never even heard of till then?



## Chapter Four: Journey To Galveston



Carley woke, trembling, sweating profusely, unable to shake the fear that continued to well inside her. She didn't have a clue why she'd dream of such things but knew a message was trying to get through. Inside the chest, she saw a picture of a girl she recognized as her mother, Ruby, when she was young. Then read a letter written to her and signed by her mama.

"I have a Gramma." Carley knew she must find her and set her fear of attachment aside. If her dreams were correct, that meant her great-grandparents, died to save her Gramma Pearl. Was she as lonely with no parents as Carley was without her mother?

It was time for a much-needed vacation, and the beach was calling her name. She often found comfort in the salty air blowing in off the bay when she went with her mama, to those sandy shores.

Remembering the pearl comb, a gift from her mother just before she died. She could no longer wear it since the chemo took all of her hair anyway. Before that, she always wore it to secure her bangs back from her face, while she left the rest of her long, auburn locks to cascade loosely over her shoulders. Occasionally, she pulled it up in a twist, but the one constant was that pearl comb, an adornment she never went without till she had no hair left and had to pass it on to Carley.

The object brought Carley great comfort, and she felt a strange kinship with it. Finger-combing her hair, she pulled it up with three twists and clipped in the silver comb adorned with pearls. Since losing her mother, she hadn't felt so connected to anything, but that day, when

she clipped the comb in place, it was as if it suddenly had some grand purpose of serving.

Carley picked up the phone to call into work. “No, I won’t be in today. I may not be back for a couple of weeks,” she said. “I just found out I have a grandmother, and I’m going to see her. I’ll call you when I get back into town.” She hung up before they could talk her out of it. Then, she dialed another number. “Hi, Mitzie. I just wanted to give you a heads up. I’m leaving town for a couple of weeks. I didn’t want you to worry when I don’t show up for work.”

“What? Where are you going, and when will you be back?”

“I don’t have a lot of time to explain. I found out I have a grandmother who’s alive, and I’m going to find her.”

“Okay. So, you’re going by yourself?”

“Who else would I go with on such short notice?”

“Oh, okay. I hope you wouldn’t plan a beach trip without me.”

“No, Mitzie. I wouldn’t. Besides, it’s a bit chilly yet for playing on the beach. I’ll call you, okay?”

“You better. I do worry, ya know.”

“I know. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

“The sooner I pack, the sooner I’ll get there,” she told herself, “to that salty air.” She grabbed a garment bag from the cedar chest at the foot of the bed, then reached into the closet for summer dresses, some jeans, and cute beaded halter tops. She placed the clothes inside the bag, then zipped it shut. Next, Carley retrieved her favorite shorts, ample undergarments, and cuddly pajamas from the dresser drawers and tossed them in a suitcase, followed by the hairdryer and a few toiletries.

Carley was never much of a girly girl and rarely packed so much, but had no clue how extended her stay would be, and assumed it was better to be safe than sorry. She made a last run through the house to be sure all the lights were off. She turned off the coffee pot and emptied the filter into the trashcan.

Carley stopped at the counter dividing the living room and kitchen, she couldn't help but look painfully down at the two little bowls on the floor. "Oh, how I miss you, my sweet Shannon." The furry playmate from her childhood was a constant companion and bed warmer. Always sleeping under the covers, with her head on the pillow next to her. Tears welled in her eyes as she grabbed the leash from the wall by the door.

"Shannon, here we go, girl," Carley said, recalling how she loved to run on the beach, "embarking on an impromptu adventure to Galveston." She realized it was silly to talk to the animal, but knew she'd be along in spirit, so continued, "I've never done anything like this. You know me. I always plan, follow a strict schedule, and make perfect preparations, so nothing catches me off guard. Here we are, though. It's time for a change, girl. I know I'll find at least some of the answers to my questions in Galveston. I just know it."

Carley was still unable to shake the dream, no matter how hard she tried distracting herself to avoid thinking about it. The visions were becoming more vivid all the time, like a sign, she was getting closer to discovering something. If only she could stay asleep long enough to get to the conclusion.

She took out the trash and took a moment to appreciate the gorgeous day. The sun was shining, the birds were singing sweetly, and the squirrels were hard at work, chattering as they gathered nuts with the momentary break in winter. The seasons in Texas change every five minutes. That day it was like fall, her favorite time of the year.

Back inside the house, she gathered her luggage, then stopped in the foyer. There, the family photo albums and journal occupied the desk. She quickly grabbed them, stuffed them into the outside pockets of the suitcase, and only questioned for a moment why she was compelled to take them. She locked the door as she walked out, then turned to say goodbye to the only home she'd ever known.

As much as she wanted and needed the journey, Carley feared the unknown. She was to leave that comfort zone, the place and routine she'd always known, but was even more terrified to not go through with it, for a reason she couldn't explain.

Carley turned, sprinting for the old Ford Escort station wagon, sensing that if she didn't get going, she might back out. She pushed in the clutch, started the motor, threw it in first gear, popped the clutch, shifted to second gear, and took off, without once looking back. There was one problem: the weather had turned cold again, and was pouring down rain. The heater was broken. It was a good thing she layered clothes and brought a blanket if she needed the added warmth. Since the car was a manual transmission, it got great gas mileage, so she didn't have to worry about making any pit stops along the way.

Traveling back roads she knew so well, Highway 190 to 146 South, then straight to I-45, she would be there in a jiffy, she thought while singing along with the radio, adlibbing unknown lyrics. Halfway there, she realized she'd forgotten to call and make reservations. She knew it wasn't safe to use the cellphone while driving, but didn't want to waste time pulling over.

After calling information, she asked, "Can you give me the number for the Flagship motel?" Cell phones in those days were nothing like they are today. Those things were massive, and the cases weren't cute by today's standards. They were more like small suitcases. She called the Flagship but received a busy signal. "I'll find a room somewhere, or pitch a tent on the beach if I have to!"



## Chapter Five: Mitzie



Mitzie got ready for work after the call from Carley. She couldn't help but worry about her dearest friend in the world. They were inseparable since preschool throughout nursing school, but they had drifted a little after Carley's mother had passed. She wished she hadn't insisted Carley see a counselor.

Maybe then things would be the same. But, if she hadn't been honest with Carley, then she wasn't much of a friend. All she could do was continue praying for her and hope she would one day forgive her.

When Mitzie arrived at work, the supervisor asked her, "Do you know what was so important for Carley to take off work with no advanced notice?"

Mitzie replied, "What did she tell you?"

"She said she found out she has a grandmother and was going to find her."

"Yeah, well, that's what she told me," Mitzie said, as she grabbed her time card and punched it in the clock.

"I don't understand what would make her pull a stunt like this. She knows how shorthanded we are."

"Excuse me? What's not to understand? She lost her mama at fifteen years old, and she's done a darn good job of raising herself. She works harder than anyone at this hospital. She never asks for a day off. She is lonely and has no family."

Mitzie took a breath while she put her time card back, then continued, "She finds out just today that she has a grandmother, and you

don't understand what would make her pull a stunt like this? Put yourself in her shoes. How would you feel?" Mitzie glared at the supervisor.

"It would have been nice to have a little advance notice."

"How do you think she feels?" Mitzie tossed her head before she walked out of the break room, leaving the supervisor standing there with a stunned expression on her face.

She knew the shift wouldn't be the same without her partner, but she made it through. She drove past Carley's house on the way home. She lived only two doors down and remembered playing on the lawn with her best friend.

There was a treehouse out behind Carley's house. Her daddy built it for the girls before he died in an accident.

They decorated it together, using a clothesline to hang hand-me-down curtains. They covered the floors with old woven rugs. Inside were two wingback chairs and a little table sitting between them. That's where they read Jane Austen's stories and *Little Women*. She remembered Carley dreamed of being a writer but promised her mama she'd become a nurse. Ms. Ruby wanted her daughter to have a job that would provide stability. She wondered if Carley's manuscripts were still up in that old treehouse, and decided to go have a look.

Aside from dust and cobwebs, everything remained the same. She lifted the top of the trunk where they stored their costumes after they played dress-up, and found the manuscripts in a pink folder. Mitzie sat there reading the stories until it was too dark to read the pages. She then placed the folder back inside the trunk where she found it, hoping that someday her dear friend could write again. Maybe she couldn't bring herself to. Maybe Carley felt if she did write, she'd betray her mama.

Then, Mitzie got thinking, she had wanted to be an actress and only went to nursing school so she could be with Carley. Carley was supposed to write the plays, and Mitzie was supposed to be the lead actress. She shrugged it off as she walked back to her house. Then, fixed a grilled

cheese sandwich and tomato soup for supper. She wondered if Carley knew Mitzie was as lonely as she was if she would still isolate herself. Mitzie had no other friends, either.

The men in Dogwood just didn't appeal to her. Either they were married or not her type. She would not lower herself to trespass on another woman's territory, and settling for someone also was no option. Maybe she should move somewhere and start a new life; she'd had that thought for several years. The only thing that kept her in Dogwood was Carley. Now that Carley's discovered she has a grandmother, she may move to be with her, leaving Mitzie all alone. If she did that, Mitzie decided she would move, also. She would research to see where she could go to drama school. Juilliard seemed so far away in New York. Maybe that was the break she needed. Oh, well. As Scarlet O'Hara would say, "Tomorrow is another day."

She got up from the table, washed her dishes, and then went to take a soak in the tub. Her shoulders were stiff from the stressful shift, and her feet were screaming after seeing double her usual amount of patients. She climbed into bed and turned the TV on. There was nothing on she was interested in watching, but she liked having it on so she'd have something to listen to as she drifted off to sleep. She pulled Charlie over to snuggle.

Charlie was a stuffed border collie that Carley gave her after she got Shannon. Mitzie wasn't allowed to have a dog growing up. Her folks couldn't afford one. Carley felt terrible for Mitzie and parted with her beloved Charlie. "Here, Mitzie. You take Charlie home with you. I don't need him anymore since I have Shannon. He will keep you safe and warm." Charlie brought a lot of comfort to Mitzie through the years.

"Come home soon, Carley. I miss you," she said as she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Mitzie rose to put on a pot of coffee. "Diesel, hot and strong, just like Carley likes it." Mitzie needed diesel herself

this morning. She didn't sleep well, missing Carley. She worried if she found her grandmother and if she was okay. She prayed Carley would call to let her know something, anything. She didn't want to face her supervisor with an encore performance of yesterday.

Mitzie got dressed and went to work. Sure enough, the supervisor met her at the time clock again. Mitzie looked her square in the eye. "If you're gonna start your blabbering about Carley again today, tell me now, and I won't bother clocking in."

"Really?" the supervisor whined.

"Yep. Like Carley says, 'Not today, Satan.'" Mitzie curled her fingers in Margaret's face and hissed like a cat.

Margaret stormed out of the breakroom. Mitzie felt proud of herself, and giggled like a schoolgirl, before punching in and heading out to the nurse's station. Ron, another nurse who'd been called into work, asked, "Well, well, well. What's got you so chipper, beautiful?"

"Stuff it, Ron. You can save your flirtin' for the next nurse. I'm not interested."

"You always say that."

"I always mean it."

She could not wait for Carley to come home. How dare she leave her here alone to deal with this Casanova yahoo? She felt him still staring at her, so she shot him the Mitzie glare. Mitzie wasn't as sweet as Carley. She could be a real fireball. Although Carley could take care of herself, Mitzie was the tougher of the two. Carley was known as the nurturer, and Mitzie, the protector.



## Chapter Six: The Cottage



As she drove into the city, Carley noticed an awful lot of traffic. She pulled into a Motel 8 and walked inside. “Good morning, ma’am. How may I help you today?” greeted the man behind the counter

“Hello. I hope you have a room available. I’ll be staying on the island for a couple of weeks.”

“I’m so sorry, but we’re completely booked this week. That’s usually the case around the holidays.”

“The holidays?” Carley never thought much about holidays with no family to celebrate.

“Yes. It is hard to find a room anywhere around the holidays.”

“Oh. Well, thanks anyway,” Carley said. “Shoot fire and save matches! I wish I’d called for reservations,” she muttered to herself as she walked out the door. A block up the strand, she stopped at a Motel 6, walked inside, hoping their ad would hold true and that they had left a light on for her.

“Hello, young lady,” a woman pleasantly said from behind the counter. “What can I do for you?”

“I need a room for a couple of weeks,” she said with a hopeful smile.

“I’m sorry, miss,” she said, her sweet grin melting into a frown, “but without a reservation, we can’t possibly accommodate you this week. I can offer you a ten percent discount for next week if that will help.”

“Thank you. I will keep that in mind,” Carley said. The same story was played out time and time again at every motel along the strand in the historic district. The only other option was a condo inside the Victorian, across from the seawall, but the rates were astronomical, and she

didn't have that kind of money. There were simply no vacancies to be had on the island, and Carley wondered if she would have to put up a tent.

To kill time, because of a sudden onslaught of the anxiety of meeting her grandmother for the first time, she pulled over to the curb at a beach grill.

"Hi. Can I have a hotdog, a cola, and a bag of chips, please?"

"Sure thing," the handsome vendor replied.

Carley noticed a "For Rent" sign in the window of a small, beachside cottage. She called the number to inquire about a short-term rental, but all she got was an answering machine. She left a message and waited for a reply while eating.

At a table for two, beneath an umbrella and nibbling on lunch, she stared out from the bistro, smiling at the families, the parents playing with their happy children. It was a sweet sight, but Carley also felt a tinge of envy, hoping those kids appreciated the time their parents were spending with them. She longed to play with her mother again. She enjoyed every moment with her mama during her short life and would have given anything for just one more day with that beautiful, amazing woman who raised her by herself.

Every chance they got, Ruby said, "Load up, Carley! It's beach time," because they both loved the salty brine. She always insisted on taking a bottle of nail polish, claiming, "There's no reason to waste money on a pedicure when we're at the beach. The sand will just slough the dead skin right off our feet. We just need a bit of paint to pretty our toes up!" A sudden whine caught Carley's attention, jolting her from the reverie.

Carley swung her head around and saw a group of kids playing with a ball, while others chased waves or built sandcastles with their little plastic buckets and shovels. No one seemed to notice the whimpering, and it became even more evident when she felt something cold and wet against her leg. Startled, Carley jumped and looked under the table.

There, a tiny puppy whined and stuck out her little pink tongue, then cast sad eyes toward the beach, as if to tell her she was hiding from someone and needed help.

“What’s the matter, girl?” Carley asked, but received the answer when she spotted the Animal Control truck patrolling the sandy walkway nearby. She scooped up the little black and white border collie and ran to the car. Remembering seeing a veterinarian’s office up the street, she made quick work of taking her there. Carley wanted to be sure the pup had all her shots and was healthy. One could only assume she was a stray and needed a home, and she had every intention of giving her one, because she couldn’t bear the thought of the sweet little creature ending up in an animal shelter, or worse, smashed beneath the wheels of someone’s car.

“And what’s your dog’s name, ma’am?” the veterinarian asked.

“Huh?” she asked, taken aback as she looked dumbfounded, down at the puppy in her arms.

“Oh! Sorry. It’s, uh...Mackenzie,” she finally blurted. The vet typed out the information and handed Carley the puppy’s vaccination records, then fastened the rabies tag to the new pink collar she picked out.

“You girls have a wonderful day,” he said before he moved on to the next pet in line, a scruffy cat that did not look very happy to be there.

On the way out, Carley glanced at her watch, desperately hoping to hear about the cottage soon because she didn’t want to dig the tent out of the wagon. Besides, what if it stormed? She recalled all those newspaper clippings about The Great Storm and shuddered profusely. More than once, she’d tossed about the possibility of selling her childhood home and moving to Galveston.

Carley had such fond memories there, and it always reminded her of the last year of her mama’s life. She was a strong woman, and she fought so hard to hang on to life, at least until Carley graduated high school. Cancer left her body frail and did too much damage, so despite

her hard fight, she succumbed in the end. Carley felt her presence on the beach and belonged here with all the memories of their happiest times together.

Carley was unsure about selling her home, though, as it was the only one she'd ever known. Besides knowing there was always the possibility of a hurricane, she didn't want to be anywhere near a beach if the tragedy of 1900 revisited.

But deep down, her heart was set on moving. The wheels were already turning with that plan. She could apply for a job at the local hospital and clinics. She would find gainful employment and be able to afford a lovely home here soon enough.

With a fiery passion she hadn't felt in a long time, Carley decided that was the new goal, to move closer to the beach, as soon as she could secure a place to stay. Carley believed that Mackenzie claiming her on the beach was a good omen, and was more determined than ever to conclude the story.

She prayed her attachment to the puppy wasn't a betrayal to Shannon, but felt her spirit, hoping she'd find happiness, even in the paws of another. For all she knew, Shannon's spirit sent Mackenzie, and it seemed like more than a coincidence that the two looked so much alike.

Mackenzie was black, with a white blaze down the center of her face and inside her ears. She had a beautiful white collar of fur around her neck and long white stockings on all four legs and the tip of her tail. Even if she still had her leash on, she was always happy to stay right next to Carley, with every step she took.

Together, they played on the beach, watching the seagulls swooping down to steal scraps of food from the beachcombers. It was hilarious to see the new pup bark at them because she was so tiny that the big gray birds ignored her and went on about her business. Though she did engage in tug-o-war with one when it tried to partake of a hotdog bun that Mackenzie had found first.

The cellphone finally rang with a call from the cottage owner. "I can come to show it to you right now if you'd like," he offered, so Carley agreed. She hurried to throw her garbage in the receptacle, then raced to the car, eager to see the place the two might call home for at least a few weeks while she worked out the details of her fresh start.

The owner awaiting her arrival waved, an eccentric, elderly gentleman who looked as if he'd weathered many storms. "Hello, young lady. I'm Potter Thurgood. I take it you're Carley," he said before he held his hand out for a shake.

"Yes, sir, and it's nice to meet you." She returned his smile.

"The pleasure's all mine, miss. Come on in, and I'll show you around." He held the gate of the little picket fence open for her, then led the way up the front steps of the covered porch with gingerbread trim.

Inside, the place was small, cozy, and inviting, a welcome retreat from the life she'd just escaped. The living room was a Victorian parlor, complete with fireplace, and an entire wall of windows offering a spectacular view of the beach. Through the doorway was a small dining room, and then a bright kitchen that led out to a covered back porch, more inviting than the front, if that was possible.

The bedroom was perfect, furnished with a Victorian estate canopy bed, draped with elegant, sheer curtains. Along the far wall were window seats with festive colored cushions, the ideal place to dive into a good book, or just look out at the waves. The bathroom was exquisite, with a pedestal sink and a claw-foot tub Carley couldn't wait to take a hot soak in.

"As you can see, this li'l cottage is well stocked, with linens, towels, dishes, cookware, and most anything you might need. There's even a bit o' food in the pantry, but you'll probably wanna make a stop at the grocery soon. Or, if you prefer, you can gimme a list, and I'll be happy to pick up what you need."

“It’s lovely, Potter!” she declared, taking in the charming place. “It’s just...well, I’m not so sure I can afford such beautiful accommodations. I tried to book a room at the motels just up the road, but they were all full. I’m told it’s almost impossible to find any vacancies this week.”

“My friend, if you can afford any of the motels, you’ll find more reasonable and more comfortable lodging here. You’ll even have money left over for shopping or entertainment. I’m only askin’ one hundred dollars a week.”

“Only a hundred...for a whole week?” Carley asked in teary-eyed awe.

“Yes, ma’am. C’mon. I’ll throw in bellhop services for free!”

“Well, I need to get your deposit and—”

“Don’t you worry none ‘bout that. We’ll settle up later. I can see you’re tired and ready move on in, maybe get a little shut-eye.”

“Thank you so much. I can’t tell you how much I need this time away.”

“You’re welcome,” Potter said, handling some bags. “You go ahead and get settled in, and I’ll check on you in a few hours. If you need anything from the store, have your list ready.”

After he left with a heartwarming smile, Carley immediately removed her clothes from the garment bag and hung them in the closet. She unpacked the suitcase and placed the folded clothes in the dresser drawers, then organized the toiletries in the bathroom. She turned on the faucet to fill the tub and added sweet-smelling salts that fizzed in hot water.

She was happy to find a bottle of red wine in the kitchen. Helping herself to a glass, she carried it to the bathroom along with a bathing suit and wrap. She quickly undressed and slid gingerly into the hot bath. It wasn’t difficult to relax in that soothing water while sipping the wine. It had been a long time since she’d slept an entire night, and cat-naps had become the norm. *Finally*, she thought, leaning her head back

against the tub, *I'll get a good night's sleep with no nightmares.* It has to be impossible to have bad dreams in a place like this.



“HELLO? CARLEY, ARE you okay, miss?”

“Oh, Jesus! Hold on, Potter. I'll be right there.” She splashed in the water and carelessly dropped the wine glass in the tub, but thankfully it didn't shatter. After she dried off quickly and dressed in a swimsuit, she flung the wrap around herself, twisted the towel around her head, and ran to the parlor.

“Picked these up for you,” Potter said, holding out a fresh bottle of wine and a bouquet. “Thought it might liven the place up a bit. My wife always insisted on fresh-cut flowers in her vases.” He paused and looked at her strangely. “You all right? Didn't come at a bad time, did I?”

“Thank you. Yes, I'm fine, just a little tired still.”

“Did you hurt yourself?”

“I'm sorry?” she asked, confused.

“Your lip. It's bleeding.”

She wiped her mouth and looked curiously at the red smudge on her fingertips. “Hmm. I must'a dozed off in the tub and bit my lip when I heard you at the door. I'm sorry,” she said, offering a pathetic attempt of a smile that betrayed her embarrassment.

“It's all right, dear. I'm just sorry I startled you. Do you have your shopping list?”

“Oh, I haven't written it yet. Gimme just a sec', and I'll...” Carley looked around for a pen and paper.

“Will this help?” Potter said, holding out a pencil and notepad and wearing a broad grin.

“Thank you again,” she said, then took it and jotted down a few salad ingredients, fresh fruit, a loaf of French bread, and cheese. “I don't feel like cooking any big meals. If I get famished, I'll just visit one of the little bistros along the beach.”

“All righty then. I’ll drop these things off in a bit. So you know, there’s a private little beach out back. The only neighbor around is staying at my other cottage, but it’s down a-ways, so he won’t bother you none. Your little dog will enjoy romps on the beach too.”

“Thank you for everything, Potter,” she said, trying to return his cheerful smile as she realized that she might run into someone sometimes. Carley knew Potter meant well, and was glad to meet him, but never felt comfortable around people. She was always a loner for a reason: Even if she did get lonely, it was easier than being hurt when someone died.

After pouring another glass of wine, she returned to the bathroom. Then, wiped the steam off the mirror and considered the swollen lip, where she’d bitten it. She knew she had only been in the tub a short while before the dream took over, and that was upsetting. She removed the towel from her hair and wiped the mirror off again. This time, the reflection revealed more than her face.

“Mama!”

“Yes, my darling.”

“Why am I having all these dreams? I need you here.”

“That’s why I’ve come to remind you that I’m always here. You don’t have to be alone. You have people who love you. You only have to give them a place in your life, and I will always be in your heart.”

“I know, Mama, but it’s not the same as having you here with me. I need you.”

“You don’t need me. You need to stop being afraid of loss. People die all the time. You’re a nurse. You know that.”

“Yeah, but if I don’t allow myself to get close to anyone, it won’t hurt as much if I do lose them.”

“And rob yourself of the joys of loving and being loved by others? It is in the journeys we share with others that make life worth living. It’s the memories we make. Don’t waste your life, merely existing day-to-

day. Live loud and proud!” She laughed. “Take risks, let someone sweep you off your feet, kiss the boy!”

“What, boy? Mama, you’re talking crazy, again. You always were a hopeless romantic.”

“Kiss the boy!”

A knock echoed from the front of the house, jarring Carley to her senses. She looked into the mirror once more but found only her own eyes looking back at her. Confused and unnerved, she sprinted for the door and opened it quickly to help Potter inside with the groceries. “Thanks so much, Potter. You sure were quick about it.”

”Not that quick,” he said. “Miss, I’ve been gone for almost two hours. You sure you’re okay? You look a bit...flushed.”

“Oh, I’m all right. Thank you for your concern, but I’m just more wiped-out than I thought. I’ll fix a bite to eat, then go out for a walk before I turn in early.”

“If you say so. I won’t pester you about it. Just call if you need anything, okay?”

“I will. Thank you again.” She put the food away and had no more wine that night. She wasted most of the first glass by accidentally dumping it in the tub after only a few sips, and the second glass was only half-empty.

“Wine? Could it be...” she mumbled. “God, if wine makes me fantasize about having a conversation with Mama about kissing boys when she’s been gone eleven years, then I certainly don’t need any more. Then, again, it has been a long time,” she argued with herself. “No, Carley! Put your mind on something else...like a long walk on the beach.”



## Chapter Seven: Kiss The Boy!



Carley stepped into her flip-flops and headed out the back door and down to the beach. The wind against her skin was reminiscent of the summers she'd spent here with Mama. "Mama's right. The only notable memories I have of my life are all from when she was alive. Girl, you've gotta get out more," she scolded herself. Desperate to feel the sand between her toes, she took off her sandals and ran to a nearby boulder. There, she sat watching Mackenzie frolic and play by the water, and took great delight in seeing her skitter around chasing sand crabs.

She removed the comb, freeing her hair to be softly blown around by the wind. Then, she looked at the silver heirloom and felt as if her mother wasn't too far away, especially in that warm, tropical place they both loved so much. Carley closed her eyes, listening to the waves caressing the beach. She listened to the gulls, calling out as they searched for food. And heard the occasional yaps of her pup when a crab snapped back at her.



THE PAIN WAS SHARP, but Tristan tried to soothe Carlena with his words of courage and hope. "Carlena, my love," he said between groans, peering down at the street lamp post that had impaled them both, spearing them to the wall, "we shall be together for all eternity. Pearl, my wee lass, grow strong, and find someone who loves you as I love your mama."

"Aye, my love. She will grow strong, and her own daughters shall learn of our story."

She removed the engraved silver comb from her hair and placed it in one of Pearl's tiny hands, staring through her tears at the pearls, gifts from the sea, even the black one that adorned the center. Then, from the depths of her soul, she cried, "Come thunder, come lightning, come winds from the bay! Continue our line from this day. I love you, my wee lass. Tristan, you are my own true love."



"ARE YE OKAY, LOVE?"

"What? I-I, uh...I think so." Carley looked around, trying to focus on her surroundings as she realized she'd fallen right off the boulder where she sat. Carley trembled in fear, none too happy that a stranger caught her in such a humiliating state on her rump in the sand.

"I just came back from my evening swim and saw you lying here. I had to make sure you're all right."

"A good Samaritan, huh?" Carley asked with a crooked grin.

"Just doing what anyone should," he defended sheepishly.

"Well, thank you. I guess I fell asleep or something." She allowed him to assist her to her feet and back to the stone seat. "Thank you. I'll feel better after I get a bit of sleep." Something about his touch felt familiar, awakening a long-buried part of her being. It was warm and wanting, almost fiery. Carley didn't understand that odd desire.

"You dropped something, love," he said, handing her the comb as he peered into her blue-green eyes, she hoped didn't give away her thoughts. "Christ almighty, you are lovely," he whispered.

Confused and overwhelmed with a tumult of conflicting emotions, she wasn't sure what to say. She feared if this man didn't stop looking at her like that, she'd be tempted to leap into his arms right there on the beach. *God, if he doesn't stop touching me, I'm gonna. Wait. What in the world is wrong with me?* She wondered.

Finally, she mustered another thanks as she reached for the comb. The man's fingers brushed hers, and she looked up into his eyes, like

flames of blue, mirroring her desires. “Pearl,” she suddenly heard from somewhere afar, like a voice carried in on a strong gust of wind.

“What? Did you say something?”

“No. I thought you did, milady,” Ian said.

By his expression, she could tell he was as puzzled as she, and all she could do was shrug. Realizing he was staring too intently, he apologized. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be impolite. I live next door, and I’d love to invite you to dinner. If you do not feel comfortable visiting my place, we can go out.”

*Well, Potter trusts him, she convinced herself, and the guy does seem genuinely concerned about my wellbeing, despite that hungry look in his eyes.* She couldn’t argue with any of that. “Yes, that would be lovely. Thank you.”

“Oh, my apologies again. I’m Ian, Ian Sheehan. And you are?”

“Carlena Rose Callaghan, but everyone calls me Carley. Pleased to meet you, Ian.” She shook his hand, and to her surprise, he leaned over and gently kissed it.

“A pleasure it is to meet you, lass. May I walk you to your cottage? Then, after I’ve showered and put on something more appropriate, I’ll come back for you.”

“Thank you. That will give me time to make myself more presentable as well. Do you live here, or are you just visiting, like I am?”

“I am a freelance travel writer. A few years ago, I came to the island and fell in love. I landed a job at the local paper, and the cottage has been my home ever since.”

“You fell in love? So...you have a girlfriend.”

Ian laughed. “Huh? No! I meant I fell in love with the island.”

To hide her embarrassment, she took in the landscape. The Gulf was beautiful. It brought a peaceful serenity she could find nowhere else. “Oh, uh...that’s good. I mean, it’s not good that you don’t have a girlfriend, but, um...” The sudden blush revealed her extreme embarrassment.

“Come on. I’ll take you back to your place,” Ian said with a smile.

On the way back to the cottage, Mackenzie walked between them. Either she didn’t wish to share Carley’s attention with their new acquaintance, or she liked Ian and wanted to spend more time with him. They smiled into one another’s eyes as they reached the kitchen door. He leaned over to kiss the back of her hand once more. As she closed the door, her brain kicked into overdrive, anxiety threatening to overwhelm.



## Chapter Eight: The Date



To say she was looking forward to the night would have been the understatement of the century. There was a little Texas girl, about to have dinner with a handsome rascal from Ireland. Just the sound of his deep brogue was enough to make her swoon. Not only that, but he was gorgeous from head to toe. And those eyes! Oh, sweet baby Jesus! From the moment she met him, those eyes seemed to peer into her soul. She had no idea what to wear, unaware of his view of dinner, and due to the fact, she never went anywhere.

Carley finally decided on a beautiful, long white sundress, with a matching scarf she could wrap around her neck, trailing behind. Based on the way he looked at her earlier, he would not be all that concerned about attire. As she slid the wrap over her neck, cold feet got the best of her.

Unsure if she was ready because it had been such a long time, she argued with herself. *I'd better call Ian and tell him I can't go. I mean, I can hardly remain vertical in his presence.* It then dawned on her, she couldn't call him anyway, because she was so taken by his gaze she didn't even think to ask him for his phone number. When she heard a knock on the back door, she nearly jumped right out of her skin and yelped.

"Are ye okay, love?" he asked, whooshing through the door.

"Yes, I'm fine. Well, I didn't expect you quite so soon," Carley answered breathlessly.

"I'm sorry, my darling. I couldn't stay away from you any longer."

*Must he roll his r's that way? I swear, I will not make it through the night if he doesn't stop talking like that,* she thought, looking up at him. "You are incredibly sweet, Ian. I have to admit that I missed you too."

Even as the words tumbled out of her mouth, she couldn't believe she said them. Something about the man just wiped away all sensibilities. Carley knew that no man would ever make her feel the way he did.

"Are you ready to go then?"

She took a moment to assess his black tailored trousers and the long-sleeved white dress shirt, unbuttoned at his throat. His long, black, wavy hair was neatly pulled back in a ponytail. "Yes, I believe I'm ready," she said with a smile, suddenly wanting to leap into his arms.

"You look lovely, milady. I'll be twirling you around the dance floor this evening."

Carley was terrified, as she wasn't well-practiced at dancing. The weekly dance classes didn't teach ballroom waltzes or any fancy footwork, and Carley was sure Ian was not suggesting they partake in Texas two-stepping. Putting all that out of her head, she said, "Thank you. You look mighty handsome yourself."

She took in the sight of him. He was the proverbial tall, cool drink of water, and she was thirsty. He pulled her into his arms, and she heard Mama whisper, "Kiss the boy!" It was the sweetest kiss she'd ever shared with anyone. Then, they just stared into one another's eyes for a moment, as if their souls recognized one another.

"Shall we, milady?" he asked, finally breaking that beautiful silence.

"Yes, I believe we shall," she answered. "I'm starvin'!"

He laughed. "I'm rather hungry myself. I've reserved a lovely table for us, close enough to the pier for us to hear the water splashing. It is good that you brought your shawl in case there is a chill in the air."

*You'll keep me nicely heated, good sir,* she thought but dared not say. She was surprised that Ian didn't pick her up in a fancy sports car or a limousine. Instead, it was an old-fashioned date. They held hands while

strolling the boardwalk, and that alone made for a fantastic and romantic evening—an evening neither would forget.

Lights strung along the railings illuminated the piers in a soft glow. Banners waved in the wind, welcoming visitors to the lovely scene. Violinists sat on the deck of a nearby ship playing.

Carley nearly squealed with delight when he walked her to the plank to board the ship because that meant they were about to set sail for a sunset dinner cruise. They were seated at a table set with candles, the most delicate china, and 1900s-era silver cutlery; everything about it was exquisite, right down to the dressed servers behind their respective chairs. For a few moments, all they could do was stare at one another. Oddly it didn't make her nervous. Instead, it was the most natural feeling. Already, she wanted to spend all eternity with that good-looking man she'd just met.

“Wine, madam?” her server offered.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Sir?” Ian's server asked. He just nodded, never looking away from her eyes. “A toast, milady?”

“Yes, of course!” Each raised their glasses, and after his eloquent toast that flattered Carley, they clinked them. After sweet conversation and a delicious dinner of lobster and prime rib, they danced while watching the fireworks show from the shore. He was her own personal Fred Astaire and somehow left her feeling she could glide across the floor as gracefully as Ginger Rogers. Carley felt like Cinderella at the ball but feared losing her glass slipper all too soon.

“Now, milady, please tell me your story. I'm dying to learn everything I can about the lovely siren I found washed ashore.”

She smiled. “Well, if you want the short version, Mom died of cancer when I was fifteen. I supported myself by working part-time at the newspaper while I finished high school. I earned my nursing degree on a scholarship and went to work in the emergency room. I never knew

my father, so I've pretty much been on my own, till I came here and found Mackenzie."

"No short stories, love. I want the whole novel. Everything there is to know about you." He smiled, still gazing deeply into her eyes and looking just as hungry, even after a five-course gourmet meal.

Carley smiled back at him. "Okay, well, I've been on my own for eleven years. As I said, Mama died of breast cancer when I was only fifteen. I had to take care of her before and after school, and then I went to the newspaper office to answer phones, just to earn a little money to keep the lights on." She fumbled her napkin, not used to talking about herself.

"I don't know anything about my father, except that Mama said he died in a car crash during some storm here in Galveston. After Mama died, I kept my promise to her and finished high school with good enough grades to earn a scholarship for nursing school. I went through nursing school with no problems, then started working at the clinic."

She took a sip of wine before continuing. Ian still never took his eyes off her.

"For a while, my border collie, Shannon, was my constant companion until she died of old age a few months ago. I guess others think my life is fine. I mean, I have a degree, a good job with benefits, a home, and decent transportation, even a little savings put back. I just feel there has to be more, though. I don't feel like I belong there. I mean, what's my purpose in life? Taking care of myself and paying bills can't be all there is. I mean, it'd be so nice to have someone to love, someone to share a connection. I know many folks have no family. I wonder if they feel completely alone, with no sense of belonging."

"I am sure there are many lonely people in the world, lass," he said, with a tinge of sadness in his voice.

"Well, back home, my daily routine is simple. I just get up and go to work, return home, nuke something in the microwave, read a book, and go to bed. My weekends consist of sleeping in until noon and reading

a book or maybe writing in my journal. During the loneliest of times, I look at my photos of me with Mama. The ones hanging all over my walls.

“I even sleep in her bed sometimes, just to inhale the aroma of her shampoo. She loved lavender so much, said it relaxed her. It was even in her laundry detergent and fabric softener. Then an old chest filled with letters and newspaper clippings was delivered. It revealed I have a grandmother I never knew about, and she lives here. That is what led me here, to the island.”

“What about prom? Surely you were taken by the most handsome suitor in your school.”

“Actually, no, I didn’t go to prom. I guess I felt there was no point in it without a mother to help me pick out my dress and put my hair in an up-do. I haven’t had many boyfriends, and none were serious.” She looked at him, and he just stared back, hanging on every word. “What’s your story?”

“Well, as you may have noticed from my accent, I’m originally from Ireland,” he obliged. “Mum and Dad are still in Dublin, along with my two brothers and one sister. I mentioned that I’m a writer, and I worked as a journalist, reporting on the political struggles between Northern and Southern Ireland. See, only part of my homeland is truly free, even if the powers-that-be don’t wish the world to be aware of that.”

“So you’re a humanitarian, huh?” Carley said with a wink. He laughed.

“I suppose one might call it that. I wrote the truth and got myself into loads of trouble. For the safety of my family, I had to recant what I wrote or move away so I could write it from elsewhere. I chose the latter, and so far, I’ve traveled all over the United States. When I came here, though, something about this island, its history, and its people just captured me. As I mentioned, I fell in love with this place, so I was thrilled to be offered a job with the local paper.”

“Surely, that isn’t everything. Wasn’t there someone special in your life? Have you ever been in love?” Carley asked.

“No, I don’t believe so. Sure, there have been girls, even one I had a special fondness for, but she moved on to another lad when I left the Emerald Isle. No woman I have ever met on any continent has ever fascinated me as you do, Carley. I know we only met earlier today, yet I feel as if we have known each other for many years. You said you have a grandmother on the island?” he asked, turning the subject back to her.

“Yes, I should be with her now, but I chickened out. I guess I will go see her tomorrow.”

“That means you might be staying on for a while. I hope you’ll permit me to spend more time with you. One evening is not nearly enough. I want to know all the little things about you.”

Carley never wanted that night to end. Just twenty-four hours earlier, she was lost and alone, wishing for someone to share her with. Suddenly, she found herself in the arms of a man who seemed to adore her. It was all happening so fast; her head was spinning. *Or is that from the wine?* Carley wondered, knowing all along that it was Ian.

The salty breeze swirled through her hair, freeing it from the comb attempting to hold it in place. The wind blew harder, battering the sides of the ship and rocking the vessel back and forth, till the great boat was bucking like a rodeo steer.



## Chapter Nine: Uncle Potter



“Carley? Carley, wake up, love!” Hearing sirens, Carley stirred. Slowly regaining consciousness, she looked into the eyes of Ian, gazing down at her. As her blurry sight cleared, she noticed more people standing around them.

“Wh-what’s going on, Ian?” she stuttered, terrified.

“Well, the wind got a bit angry, and it threw a massive wave crashing into the side of the boat. Lots of people toppled like bowling pins, but I think you might have hit your pretty head in the tumble. You must let the paramedics check you out to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m all right. I had another nightmare. Each is more frightening than the last. I’m scared,” Carley confessed, tears streaming down her cheeks. Ian lifted her into his arms, holding her tightly against him as if he knew just how much she needed that comforting embrace.

“Carley? Are you okay, girl?” Potter yelled, approaching in a hurry. He knelt by Ian and placed his hand on Carley’s forehead. “What happened, Ian?” he asked, concern written all over his face.

“I’m okay,” Carley assured him. “I’m sorry if I frightened y’all. I just wanna go home. Please take me back to the cottage. I need to go through the trunk.”

As soon as the EMTs had a good look at Carley, they cleared her to leave. Ian and Potter took her back to the cottage.

“This is gonna be a long night, I figure. I’ll make it black and strong,” Potter said as he put on a pot of coffee. As the coffee was brewing, giving a warm, nutty smell to the cottage and waking her up from the head-trauma haze, Ian brought the trunk from the bedroom into

the parlor. They sat on the sofa and spread the newspaper clippings and photographs all over the floor.

“Potter, who are these women?” Carley asked, unable to hide the desperation from her voice. She wanted to solve the mystery, and something told her they were running out of time. “They look so much like my mother and me—not just a little similar, I mean, it’s a striking resemblance.”

Potter sat down beside her and gently reached over to pick up one photo. He looked at it for a moment, and a small smile curled up his lips as if he was fond of the woman. “You aren’t gonna believe this, but this one is my mother, Pearl,” he said.

“What!?! Pearl, is your mom?” Stunned, she continued, “But I-I just met you, and I brought this trunk from home. I-I just don’t understand this. It’s too...coincidental.”

“Coincidences are often far more than that, love,” Ian said as he remained seated on the other side of Carley. He put one arm around her, pulling her closer to him while they listened to Potter’s explanation.

“My mother, Pearl, was raised in the orphanage. After she married my father, Herbert Potter Thurgood, they had one daughter, Ruby Carlana.” He handed me another picture. “They also had a son, me. I’m the boy in this photo. Ruby married and moved away.” With that shocking revelation, he lifted a photograph of my mother and showed it. “I heard she gave birth to a daughter, but we’ve been unable to find her.”

“Oh my gosh, Potter! Do you know what this means?”

“Well, I’m not quite sure. I’ve never been too good with puzzles.”

“Ruby Carlana was my mother. I’ve never known any of my other relatives, so I’ve been feeling rather lonely since Mama passed. I had no idea about all this!”

The connection was so intense, so real, and—like Ian said—far more than mere coincidence. Carley wanted to stay forever, and magically turn into a sponge, to soak up every possible bit of information she could about what she believed to be her family.

“Carley, I’ve spent years tryin’ to find you. I honestly don’t know how you ended up with this trunk, but I’m glad it found you and brought you home.”

“Potter, I’ve been having recurring nightmares about a woman named Carlena Rose and her husband, Tristan, victims of The Great Storm. In my dreams, I’ve learned they gave birth to a baby girl, Tristina Pearl, and they ran to the orphanage in search of shelter, but a broken lamppost impaled them. Then, this trunk was delivered with a letter from Gramma Pearl.” She handed him the letter for him to read.

“Mom was raised in the orphanage and never knew anything about her parents,” Potter started. “It’s said ninety orphans and ten sisters died in the storm, and only three boys escaped. We believe someone found Pearl and took her further inland. There was so much destruction in that storm, and the resultin’ financial crisis hit the island hard. We figure whoever took her probably just couldn’t afford another mouth to feed, so they eventually brought her back to the orphanage.”

The pained expression on his face revealed he was also struggling to put the pieces of the puzzle in place. Potter scrunched up his brow in thought for a moment, then continued, “The sisters said she came with one possession, a pearl comb, like that one you wear in your hair. Her birth certificate simply says, ‘Pearl Storm, mother, and father unknown.’ It could very well be that my mother is the lost daughter of your dreams. She always wondered who she belonged to.”

The emotions got the best of Carley, and she burst into a fit of tears. “I finally belong to someone!” she said sobbing. “I do have a family, after all. Maybe I never met them, and most of them are probably gone now, but there’s still time to find the rest. I’ve at least got you now, Potter, and you’re my uncle!”

Potter reached over to hug her tightly. “Yes, darlin’, you’re no longer a stray pup out in the world all alone! You’re my niece, and you’re a wonderful niece at that. You’re finally safe at home, where we love you already as one of our own.”

“Do you think the nightmares will stop now since my dreams don’t have to try so hard to tell me about it?” she asked, looking at Ian for some reassurance.

“I can’t say,” he answered, “but if you want something more pleasant to dream about, dream about us.” That remark warmed her all over, and she blushed before turning back to Potter.

“I’ll take you to see Mama in the morning.” He turned to walk into the kitchen. “Ya know, I believe her determination to find you is what’s kept that woman alive for so long. She lives in a nursing home on the other side of the island. I wish I could’a kept her with me, but after my wife passed away, I was unable to provide the care Mama needs. I do see her three times a day, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Gosh, you look so much like Mama. I wanted to tell ya when we first met, but I didn’t wanna scare you off.”

Potter smiled, squeezing her tighter before going after more coffee. Overflowing with excitement, Carley decided it was time to read more letters from her grandmother, Pearl. She wanted to know everything. She plopped right down on the floor and looked up at Ian. He was still just staring at Carley, with a shocked expression on his face.

“Ian, I’m sorry if I ruined our beautiful evening. I bet you’re wonderin’ what kind of mess you’ve gotten yourself into. We just met, and you’re finding out all these crazy things about my family, a family I don’t even know!”

He got up from the sofa and sat down next to her. “Carley, you haven’t ruined anything, love. This has been the most incredible night of my life. Of course, I’m shocked, just as you are, but I certainly don’t regret meeting you. On the contrary, I am amazed by you.”

“Amazed?” she asked with a chuckle.

“Of course! Look how well ye managed to raise yourself after ye lost your mother. Ye’ve been through so much, and I admire your determination to solve the mystery of this trunk. I adore ye, me love, and I already cannot imagine a life without ye in it. Your mother and grand-

mother must have been beautiful and strong, for they certainly passed those traits on to ye. I imagine your Mama smiling down upon ye with such pride.”

Potter walked back into the parlor carrying a tray filled pimento cheese sandwiches, cookies, a pitcher of sweet tea, and a pot of coffee. “I thought we could use some snacks while we read Mama’s letters.”

Carley’s eyes welled with tears again. “What’s wrong, love?” Ian asked.

She laughed, even as the salty drops fell from her eyes. “It just feels so right to have a family to share these moments. I embarked on this journey, determined to find my Gramma, and I found myself instead! My mother was Ruby Carlana, and now I know Carlana Rose is my great-grandma. My uncle will introduce me to my grandmother tomorrow, and I’m so blessed to have you two gentlemen in my life.”



## Chapter Ten: Gramma Pearl



After such an eventful day, Carley didn't expect to have trouble falling asleep. So many thoughts and emotions jostled about in her head and heart. She felt like a kid on Christmas Eve, so excited about the coming morning, she couldn't doze off. She could hardly wait to see Pearl when she woke up. She lay there for a while, listening to the ticking of the old grandfather clock. Sleep finally pulled her into her dreams.

The wind roared its anger, whipping to and fro, swirling and churning the waters, battering everything in its path. Carley felt a sense of urgency and heard something slap against the side of the cottage. She was jerked awake to the deafening roar of furious winds. The house seemed to swell and shrink as if it was breathing. "Hurry, my love!" Ian cried as he ran into her room, his blue eyes as wide as saucers. "We must move! We have to get out of here."

As soon as he turned on the light, Carley rushed to throw on jeans and a t-shirt. She slid her feet into slip-on tennis shoes, most handy at a time like that.

"Let's go!" Potter commanded as soon as they ran into the kitchen. "We're runnin' out of time! That storm's a nasty one, and it'll be here before we know it!"

"What!?! You mean it's not here already? You could'a fooled me!" Carley yelled.

They closed the house up as tight as they could, and Carley learned what it meant to batten down the hatches. Then they ran out to Potter's car, climbed up in a hurry, and headed to the other side of the island.

He drove fast but safely in the hard-pouring rain and fighting winds, even as other cars lost control and spun out on the roads and in the ditches around them. The sun didn't seem to realize that it was on duty at seven that morning, because it was not shining; it was as dark as dusk.

As Potter drove, a wave as black as night swelled high above the sea wall. They all gasped, sure it would reach over with its foamy, white fingers to grab them, but it headed back out to sea before doing any damage. Three more swells threatened, but they narrowly escaped them and reached the end of the sea wall.

"Whew! That was a close one," Potter said as he took a hard turn north, heading inland.

"Where are we going?" Carley asked, keeping a white-knuckled death grip on the handrail inside the truck.

"To the site of the old orphanage. Hold on!" With that, he swerved hard left, just in time to avoid a little Chevrolet that hydroplaned in front of them.

"We aren't going to the nursing home to see Pearl?" Carley asked.

"We will, but first, you need to see where the orphanage was."

"We have to hurry! We're running out of time."

"What do you mean by that?" Potter asked.

"I have to see Gramma Pearl before it is too late!"

"Mama is safe, in the nursin' home. They take proper care of her, and while she's got lotta years under her belt, she's not in ill health. Or is it this storm you're worried about?"

"I just...I can't explain it," I said. "I just have this feeling we have to get there before it's too late. Please hurry!" Carley begged, pleading with her eyes. He reached over and took her hand, being careful to keep a tight grip on the wheel with the other one.

"We'll make it, dear. Have faith. We're almost there."

They pulled up to the place on the corner of 69th Street and Seawall Boulevard, where the orphanage once was. The historical marker

was the perfect place to honor the ten nuns and ninety orphans who tragically lost their lives in The Great Storm. Now that she knew more about the tragedy and realized she had personal links to it, she couldn't help but be overcome with emotion as they read the inscription through the window of the car. She was trembling as tears streamed down her face while she read the inscription.

*“Original Site of St. Mary’s Orphan Asylum. Children orphaned by a yellow fever epidemic in 1867 were cared for temporarily in Galveston’s St. Mary’s Infirmary by the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word. In 1874, Galveston Bishop Claude Dubuis bought the thirty-five-acre plantation and home of Farnifala and Laura Green located between this Gulf front and Green’s Bayou for use as a permanent orphanage. In early 1874, The Sisters of St. Mary’s Infirmary founded St. Mary’s Orphan Asylum by housing twenty-eight children here at the site of the Greens’ Former residence. A two-story facility for orphan girls built nearby in October 1874.*

*The girl’s dormitory was all that remained of the orphanage after the Storm of 1875. A new residence for boys was built by 1879. St. Mary’s was caring for orphans from throughout Texas at the time it was granted a Texas Charter in 1896.*

*The catastrophic Storm of 1900 completely destroyed the orphanage. Ten nuns and at least ninety children were tragically killed despite the nuns’ valiant efforts to save the children by securing them to their own bodies with clothesline. Three orphan boys rescued at sea were the only survivors. St. Mary’s orphan asylum reopened at 40th and Q Streets in Galveston City in 1901 and remained there until closing in 1967.”*

Tears ran uncontrollably down her cheeks, and she was covered in goosebumps. The wind continued whipping about, blowing so strong, her hair was all over the place, like an out-of-control bird’s nest. She pulled a hairband from her wrist to tie it up, not wanting to risk losing the comb in the nasty weather. “You’ll stay safe in my pocket,” she said, patting the heirloom and rolling the window back up.

After a few moments, the wind calmed, and the storm was over. The sun finally showed up, and there was little evidence there was even a storm. Then, they stepped out of the car. Carley was amazed the storm could come up so quickly and, in an instant, be over.

“Potter!” she called, frightened once she realized he was nowhere in sight. “Uncle Potter?”

A strong arm moved around her, and a beautiful voice consoled, “It’s okay love. I’m here. Potter said he’ll be right back. Neither of us will ever leave you alone.”

She looked into his eyes and knew his words were true, that his promise was sincere. Potter made that clear a moment later when he returned with a wheelchair that carried a little old lady, a woman with a beautiful smile on her pink lips.

“Gramma Pearl!” Carley cried and ran toward her, then knelt at her feet and hugged her legs.

“I told you there’s no place that far, child,” she said, then gave her head a gentle pat. “You’ve come home at last. We’ve been waiting for you.”

Carley looked up into her eyes and saw they were filled with more wisdom than she would probably ever possess. Not only that, but they were also overflowing with love.

“I’ve been trying to find you, Gramma Pearl.”

“This is one of my happiest days ever, dear child.”

Carley reached into her pocket and pulled out the comb, then handed it to her. “Is it yours?” she asked softly. She had to know because if it were hers, that would be confirmation that she’d found kinfolk, the family she never knew existed. It didn’t matter, because she felt she would be her Gramma Pearl regardless of bloodlines or lack thereof, that she would always be part of her life no matter what, but she still wanted to know.

She rolled the comb around in her weathered hand a couple of times and smiled, rubbing her thumb over each pearl and paying par-

ticular attention to the shiny black one in the center. “No, child,” she said, handing it back. Carley’s heart sank a little, and her lips curled into a bitter frown. “Not anymore,” she quickly clarified. “It is yours now. This comb has survived nearly a century, just like I have. I gave it to your mother on her wedding day.”

Carley looked up at Potter and Ian and saw that even they were crying happy tears.

They spent the entire day together at the cottage. Potter and Carley cooked, and it was a great deal of fun because she didn’t have to prepare for one anymore. As they dined together, she took in their faces, memorizing every line, crease, and wrinkle, the shades of each strand of hair, the colors of their eyes, their facial expressions, and gestures.

She listened intently to the sounds of their laughter. And noted the tones of their voices and even the whispers of their breath. She inhaled their scent and tried to etch that evening in the archives of her memory if she woke and discovered those incredible moments were also just part of a dream.

After daintily eating the last bite off her plate and wiping the corners of her mouth with a napkin, Gramma Pearl had an announcement to make. “I’m not going back to that old folks’ home,” she said. “I’m gonna stay right here. Now that we’ve found our Carley, I wanna spend every moment I can with her. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Mom, you know you can’t stay here. They have things you need, and they can properly care for you. We don’t have all that here, and I can’t—” Potter began.

“Oh, hush, you! I’ve been around for many years. I’ve held on all this time to see this girl and bring our family together. I’m gonna die, sure as everybody else does, but my time’ll come no matter where I am. Before I go, I wanna enjoy the sound of the water, feel the wind blowing through my hair, and be with y’all.”

“Uncle, did you forget, I am a nurse. I can care for Gramma.”

Knowing she'd bested him, Potter rolled his eyes, let out a sigh, and picked up the phone to inform the nursing home. Within an hour, a sister was knocking on the door, with everything Carley needed to adequately care for Gramma Pearl.

The cottages were the family rentals, but Gramma Pearl's house was much larger, a two-story Victorian manor surrounded by gardens—it sat high on the hill, overlooking the cottages and the private beach. Carley looked forward to seeing it, but at the moment, she was happy where she was, with the people she'd missed before ever knowing them.

For the time being, Carley just wanted to soak up every drop of love and wisdom she could from the amazing lady who had lived for eight decades. Carley sat at her feet while she told story after story of her life on Galveston Island, and hung on every word.



## Chapter Eleven: Letting Go



Carley was excited to be moving Gramma Pearl back into the main house. As soon as she crossed the threshold, Carley felt as if she'd finally come home, even though she'd never set foot in the manor before. It had survived The Great Storm, just as Gramma Pearl had, and it seemed to embrace her as she walked from room to room.

Even though it hadn't been lived in for some time, it smelled as fresh as if it had just been cleaned. "I come over about once a week to check on things," Uncle Potter said.

"It is beautiful. Look at these pastels," Carley said, admiring her taste. "The velvet drapes and the lace panels... It's so cozy and inviting."

"Yes, Mama always had a keen eye for decoratin'. As I told you before, she also insisted on fresh flowers fillin' all her vases.

"That's probably why the place still smells so nice." As she looked in each room, bud vases of every size and shape were strategically placed for the most dramatic effect. A massive fireplace, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, lined the far wall of the parlor. Carley imagined an enormous Christmas tree in the corner, with a happy family sitting around a roaring fire, drinking cups of hot chocolate, and reading Christmas stories from an old book.

"Carley, I'll leave ya to get acquainted with the place for a while," Uncle Potter said, then gave her a peck on the forehead and left.

Carley went into Gramma Pearl's room and sat down on her bed for a moment. While exploring the closet, she found the wedding gown, neatly stored away, and couldn't help herself. Gently removing it from the heirloom box, Carley put it on and stood in front of the

cheval mirror. She noticed Gramma Pearl's reflection in the mirror. "Oh, Gramma! I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"Hush, child." Gramma was smiling. "I wore this dress when I married your grandfather, and your mama wore it when she married your daddy. You will wear it when the time comes."

"Really?" Carley's face shone brightly as she smiled. "I'd better put this away, so I can get all your things unpacked, and have you settled back into your home."

"Back into our home, sweet girl." Gramma Pearl kissed her cheek before walking out of the room.

Carley took off the dress, then placed it back inside the heirloom box. She walked past the library. It was immaculate, with fancy woodwork and a fireplace with floor-to-ceiling bookcase, facing them, a Victorian sofa, and two wing-back chairs. In the center of the room overlooking the garden, was a writing desk, beckoning her into the chamber. Never in her life had Carley felt more at home than she did in that library. She could almost see herself sitting at that desk writing stories, so she took a seat to look out the window. There were steps carved into the hillside overlooking the two seaside cottages, a gorgeous sight that would have made a perfect postcard. As much as she loved the little cottage she'd been staying in, Carley knew her new place would be Gramma's house because there she felt love all around.

"I love that library, and the desk is perfect," she said, walking into the kitchen. "I'd love to sit there and write someday."

"Well, Mama penned a few stories herself through the years. I guess the gift of writin' runs in the family."

"I write in my journals from time to time. It helps me sort my thoughts. I used to write stories but then went to nursing school because I promised Mama I would have a career that offered stability. When I walked into that library, though, something just felt right about it for some reason."

“Well, it oughtta, because this is your home, Carley,” Gramma said, smiling. “You can continue staying in the cottage if you want, or you can move in here with me.”

“It’s so beautiful. I’ve been thinking about applying for a position at the hospital or one of the doctor’s offices in town, but maybe they can give me something at the paper, just an internship or something, while I learn. When Mama was ill, I worked part-time for the newspaper and learned a fair bit. I really don’t wanna go back home, to live in that house I stayed in after Mama passed. This place already feels like home to me now.”

Potter set a plate in front of her just as Ian walked through the door, and they all enjoyed a tasty shrimp fettuccine and salad for lunch, discussing Carley’s plans between bites. After lunch, she faxed her resignation to the office and planned a trip to move her things from the house in Woodville.

Carley picked up the phone. “Mitzie, I wanted to check in and let you know I will be staying on for a while. Gramma needs someone to care for her.”

“Oh, I thought that might happen.” Mitzie’s voice cracked.

“I’m sorry, Mitzie. You’re welcome to come to visit. I can’t leave her after just finding her.”

“I understand. I’m just disappointed you’re not coming home. I miss you, ya know.”

“I miss you, too. I’ll be coming back to get my things and put the house on the market, and we can catch up then.”

Mitzie wiped tears from her eyes when she hung up the phone. It was terrible enough Carley was distant at home, but now she would be hours away from her. She could go visit or maybe try Juilliard.

Carley went to check on Gramma Pearl and noticed her slumped sideways on her bed. Carley rushed into the room, “Gramma!” She checked her pulse and then reached for the blood pressure cuff to place on her arm. “Uncle, call 911!” She continued assessing Gramma while

Potter ran into the room. "I believe she's had a stroke. We need to get her to the hospital. The paramedics can start an IV en route."

"I've already called them. The ambulance will be here in about five minutes."

After they arrived at the hospital, the doctor said she did have a stroke, but she should recover to about eighty percent in a couple of days. He thought the excitement of seeing her granddaughter for the first time was what triggered it. Carley felt bad.

"I'm sorry, Uncle. It's all my fault. I should have never come." She burst into tears.

Potter pulled her into his arms. "No, darlin'. Don't ever say that! You being here is the happiest I've seen Mama in years. You have brought nothing but joy to our lives. Never even think this is your fault." He kissed the top of her head.

"I just hope she'll recover. We can't lose her, Uncle. We just can't."

Potter hugged her more tightly. He understood how Carley must feel, being alone most of her life. Potter had felt alone since his wife died. But, he'd never been without his Mama. That thought frightened him, too.

When the doctor released her to go home, Carley made sure Gramma would have round the clock nursing care, as well as physical therapy and occupational therapy, to help her recover. Carley took the evening shifts, so she could be right by her side if she needed anything.

One evening, Carley felt cold. She woke to place another blanket on Gramma. When she turned the light on, she looked over at her dear Gramma and noticed she wasn't breathing. Feeling for a pulse and finding none, she screamed for Potter to call the ambulance, while she began CPR. Potter rushed into the room.

"Carley, honey. Mama is a DNR." He placed his hand on her shoulder while she frantically fought to bring her precious Gramma back.

“No! She can’t leave yet. Gramma, don’t go! Oh, please don’t go,” Carley cried while she continued counting compressions with all she had.

“Let her go, Carley. Mama’s wishes were no heroic efforts to save her life. You have to let her go, sweetheart.”

Carley finally relented, but only because she was spent. She crawled up onto the bed and curled up, cradling her Gramma’s lifeless body in her arms. “I love you, Gramma. I’m sorry it took so long for us to find each other. But, I will always treasure the time we had.”

Ian rushed into the room after hearing Carley’s screams from his cottage down the hill. When he walked in, seeing her on the bed with Gramma, and Potter’s tears, he paused. Then he walked over, placing a hand on Potter’s shoulder, and look on at his beloved. After a few moments, he scooped Carley up in his arms, saying, “Let’s go, love. I’ve got you.” He carried her to her own bed and lay next to her until sunrise.



## Chapter Twelve: Saying Goodbye



At sunrise, Carley rose. Ian was still lying on the bed, where he held her after losing her grandmother. She'd never known a man could love like that. The only love Carley ever knew was that of her mother and Mitzie. Mitzie, she thought. She walked over to the phone by the window sill. She dialed the number, then looked out the window, and waited for her to answer.

"Hello?"

Carley choked back sobs before she could form words. "Gramma's gone, Mitzie."

"Carley, Is that you?"

"Gramma's gone."

"Oh, Carley. I'm so sorry. I'll be right there. Gimme the address."

"But you have to work."

"Yeah, right! Like I'd leave you down there heartbroken. Not a chance. Margaret can take today's shift and stuff it. Gimme the address."

Carley gave her the address, and felt Ian's arms around her waist, pulling her into his warm, strong chest. "I'm here, love."

Carley sank into his embrace for a moment, closing her eyes. She felt so safe there like nothing could ever hurt her again. Carley remembered, she opened her heart after so many years of shutting people out, then she lost Gramma. She couldn't bear the thought of losing Ian or Uncle Potter, too. So, she pulled away, wiped her tears, and said, "I have to go. I have to help Uncle make preparations."

“Okay. What do ye need me to do?” The purest form of sincerity and concern shown from his eyes.

Carley looked into those depths, and said, “I’ll be fine. You can go to work. I know you have stories to turn in.”

“Carley, me love, there’s no way I’d leave ye hear to deal with this. I’m here for whatever ye need.”

“I’ll be fine. Please, just go.” Carley ran from the room, leaving Ian standing there alone. His face grimaced. He watched her leave the room, but he’d never felt so empty inside. He felt his heart crack and found it difficult to breathe. He went to find Potter in the kitchen and saw no signs of Carley. Potter looked up.

“Hey, Ian. Coffee’s fresh. Where’s Carley?”

“I don’t know.”

Potter noticed the pain written across Ian’s face and the tear that slipped down his cheek. “Hey, what’s happened?” He pulled a stool up to the kitchen counter.

Ian sat down. “I don’t quite know what just happened. She made a call to Mitzie, and I held her because she was distraught. Then, she pulled away, saying she must make preparations. I asked what I could do to help, and she dismissed me, saying she’s fine. I don’t know what to do, Potter. I’d never do anything to bring her pain. God knows, she’s had her share of that.”

“Yes, she has. Don’t worry, Ian. A war is raging inside that girl, we know nothing of. She’s strong, and she’ll pull through. We’ll be here when she needs us.”

“I hope so. It breaks me heart to see her suffer, so.”

“I know. I feel the same.”

After Carley called the funeral home to have her Gramma picked up, she called the florist to order the arrangements, then she went down to the beach. Mackenzie ran with her. Knowing her human was hurting, she stayed right next to her, leaving the sand crabs alone. Carley didn’t know how long they’d been out there, feeling the wind blowing

her hair freely. She sat down, looking out across the Gulf, crying out to her Mama and Gramma, asking why they had to leave her alone.

“You’re not alone.” Carley turned, seeing her dearest friend and reached out to her. “I have never left you alone, and I’m not about to start now.”

“I’m sorry I pushed you away. I never meant to. I’m just scared, Mitzie.”

“I’m scared, too. After my mother died, you’re all I had.” She held Carley tightly.

Suddenly realizing what she’d done, Carley raised up to look at Mitzie. “I am so selfish. I was never there for you like you were for me. I’m sorry. I’m surprised you don’t hate me.”

“I could never hate you, and you were there for me when Mama passed. It was later you drifted away. But we’re together now. What do we need to do?”

“I’m afraid I’m repeating old patterns.”

“What have you done, Carley?”

“I pushed Ian away, and he’s been nothing but the perfect gentleman. I love him, Mitzie, but I’m not ready for a relationship. I saw the look in his eyes when I told him I was fine and didn’t need him. I hurt him, and that’s the last thing I wanted to do. I just needed to be alone to try to come to grips with all this.”

“Listen to me. First, you’re gonna have to dish on this new love of yours, and no telling me you don’t have a boyfriend now.” Mitzie grinned. “Then you’re gonna make nice with him. You’re not getting any younger. You’ll be an old maid if you don’t get this fear under control.”

“Do you think he’ll still want me? I mean, when I’m ready?”

“Yes, he’ll still want you. But, there’s someone who needs you. That little girl, Angel?”

“Yes? What about her?”

"I went out to the farm to check on her and pick up my weekly supply of eggs. She's struggling like you are. She needs you, Carley, and her grandfather fears he's losing her. She's withdrawn, and no longer speaks. She just sits with that horse of hers."

Carley looked back out over the Gulf. "I'll come back to Dogwood. I can spend time with her while I try to sell the house. You and I can hang out like old times."

"So, you're still gonna move down here?"

"Yeah, I love it here, and it is home—where I have a family. I do need some time away to process the loss of Gramma, then I'll come back."

"I'm your family, too," Mitzie cried.

"Yes, you are. Have you thought about your acting anymore? There's a nice theater here, where you could audition. I've thought about writing again."

"Yes, I was thinking of going to Juilliard."

"What?" Carley looked shocked. "And leave me?"

"You left me."

"Fair enough." The two women giggled while hugging each other.

Uncle Potter walked down the steps to the girls. "The funeral home is here to take Mama."

"We're coming," Carley said. She stopped to hug her uncle. She couldn't tell him just yet she was leaving.

After they sent Gramma off with the funeral director, Carley walked over to Ian. His eyes were swollen and glassy. "I'm sorry," she said and walked into his arms. "I never meant to hurt you. I'm just afraid I'm not ready for a relationship now. I do love you."

"I love ye too, sweetheart. I will give ye all the time ye need, but please let me help ye. It breaks me heart to see ye hurting, so."

People arrived with all sorts of food. Carley was amazed to see so much food in one place. She never realized her Gramma was such an essential part of the community. She was president of the Garden So-

ciety and conducted writing workshops for the local aspiring authors, she even had a book club. She was a busy woman throughout her life

A week later, her funeral took place along the shore in front of the cottages. She was cremated, so they spread her ashes at sea. She wanted to be where her parents were. Carley knew it was time.

She walked into the parlor, where Uncle Potter and Ian sat before the fire. "I have something I need to tell you."

Mitzie walked into the room behind her, as the two men looked at Carley.

"Yes, darlin'?"

"What is it, love?"

"I need to go back home to Dogwood." Seeing the puzzled looks on their faces, she held up her hands. "I'll be back. There's a little girl there, who needs me, and I must put my house on the market. I have a lot to pack, to bring home to Galveston."

Relief washed over their faces. "I'm so glad to hear you say you're coming home, Carley. We just got you, and can't bear losing you right after Mama."

"Yes, I understand ye have things to do, but please don't be gone long, love."

"I won't. I promise. I will return. I love you both. I can try to take this time to learn how not to be so afraid of loss."

Many tears were shed as she hugged her two men. None wanted to release the other. Ian was afraid to let her go.

"Promise me you'll come back." Ian held her chin, looking into her eyes.

"I promise, but I need time." She stood on tiptoes to kiss him. He held her so tightly. He wanted his heart to memorize every beat of hers.

She finally pulled away from Ian's embrace and walked into her uncle's. He held her just as tightly. "Come back to us, sweet girl. Life hasn't been the same since you blew onto the island. It won't be right until you come home."

"I will, Uncle. I promise."

He turned to Mitzie and hugged her. "Please take care of our girl, and bring her back to us," he cried.

"I will, Uncle. I promise."

As the two girls drove away, back to Dogwood, Potter turned to Ian. "Come on. It's time for a bit of Glen Fiddich."

"I don't believe I've ever had the pleasure of Scottish whisky, but I've some Jameson down at the cottage."

"Oh, son. Once you've had the Scotch, ye'll never turn back," Uncle Potter laughed while raising his glass. "*Slainte va!*"

Ian raised his own glass. "*Slainte!*"

They both sipped their whisky lost in thought for a bit. Then, Ian turned to Potter. "Ye do believe she'll return to us, eh?"

"I'm sure she will, son, though I'm not sure when. One thing is certain, our lives are far richer for the blessing of her."

"Aye, to be sure."



## Chapter Thirteen: Relationships



After Carley and Mitzie arrive back in Dogwood, they pulled into the drive at Carley's. First, Carley's station wagon, followed by the old pickup that Mitzie drove. They quickly unloaded all the luggage and then took it inside the house. Once inside, they unpacked, throwing dirties in the laundry to wash while they fixed supper.

"Mitzie, what do ya want to eat?"

Mitzie grinned and stretched out her tired muscles, "Ya know what I've been craving for an eternity?"

"What?"

"Your chicken fried steak, gravy, and mashed taters. I swear, those thangs would rival my mama's."

Carley couldn't help but laugh at Mitzie, she was always so dramatic. "You know, you'll win an Oscar one day if you continue with performances like that." She grabbed her paring knife from the counter and set the bag of potatoes next to it. "You best get to peeling and chopping."

Carley missed this. She wondered why she'd shut Mitzie out, but she never would have realized it if she hadn't made the journey to see the grandmother she never knew she had. Being with her family on Galveston Island made her realize, you never know the extent of your blessings until you face losing them.

"Sure, you're gonna put me to work," Mitzie complained.

"Nah, just keeping you close. I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was pushing you away. I can't stand the thought of losing you. That's just not an option, any more so than losing Uncle Potter."

“What about Ian?”

Surprised, Carley nearly dropped the cubed steak in the egg wash. “I’m not sure. I don’t want to lose him. I never thought I’d ever feel this way about any man. I’m just not ready to go down that road. At the same time, I don’t want to lose the friendship he and I share.”

“Girl!” Mitzie raised her hands, shaking her head. “What you share with that hunka gorgeous, is much more than friendship. Don’t you even sit there, tryin’ to pull that. Even if I hadn’t seen the two of you together, I still would have felt it. I have never known passion like that. I’ve heard about it, and believe it’s real, sure enough, but I’ve never experienced it personally, nor witnessed it.”

“What?” Carley was shocked to hear such things come from Mitzie, as blunt as she was. “I. We. Have never done anything like that.” Carley stood with her mouth and eyes wide.

“Oh, shush.” Mitzie flipped her hand at Carley. “Passion is more than sex. It’s the energy, the life force of the universe connecting two people in a way nothing on earth can shake it. You feed off each other. It connects you in ways no two other people can be connected. It’s sharing one another’s thoughts, feeling the other’s presence even from miles away. It’s not the same as having passionate sexual desires, though I’m sure that’s part of it. The two of you were bound by that love from the moment you set eyes on each other. The rest of your lives, neither of you will feel whole without the other. So, no matter what choice you make, your hearts belong to each other.”

Carley took a deep breath. “Whew! Looks like I’m in more trouble than I thought.”

“Yep. I can only pray I’ll find a love like that one day.”

“You will. You mentioned Juilliard. Are you serious about that?”

“No, it would be nice, but that’s too far away. What if we need one another?”

“I support you in whatever you want to do. I know how much you always wanted to be an actress, just as much as I wanted to write. I’ll come to visit if you choose to go.”

“Honestly, it wouldn’t be the same if I can’t be with you. That was our dream. You wrote the stories and plays. I played the parts. Remember?”

“Yes, I do. After I sell this house, I’m going to move back to Galveston Island, and start writing fulltime. I’m going to see about classes at UT and learn screenwriting. Why don’t you see about their drama department and the theater?”

“Well, I reckon I’ll be selling my house, too. I’m not letting you leave me again. However, first thing tomorrow, you’re off to see Angel. Our dreams have waited this long, but her’s haven’t had a chance to begin.”

“You’re right.” Carley flung flour on Mitzie.

“No, you didn’t!” Soon the two girls were covered in flour from head-to-toe. Flour dusted every square inch of that kitchen, like freshly fallen snow. After they finished playing, they ate supper, cleaned their mess, and took their showers. Mitzie went to work the next morning to deliver both her and Carley’s resignations. Carley was off to Angel’s farm.

Carley pulled into the drive at the farm. She saw the little girl from afar, and the horse standing next to her. She pulled up out front and got out of the car. Angel looked up at her but didn’t speak. Carley walked up and said, “Hi, Angel. Is this Choctaw?” She reached up and patted Choctaw’s forehead.

Angel watched her quietly. “Mind if I sit next to you?” Angel moved over and patted the bale of hay next to her. Carley sat down next to her. “It’s beautiful out here.” Carley looked around the farm. “Looks like Choctaw is enjoying his new home.” Carley didn’t know what to say to the little girl, but she knew she should keep talking. “Would you like to take me for a ride?”

Angel looked at her and then got up. Carley watched her walk towards the barn, then stopped to look back to see if she was coming with. Carley got up and followed. Angel slipped a bridle over the head of a red mare and led her out of her stall. She handed the reins to Carley and then went for the saddle. She picked it up and struggled to bring it to Carley.

Ah-wo walked in and took the saddle from Angel. "Hi, Carley. It's good to see you. Let me saddle this horse for you, and Angel can take you for a ride. She's a good rider. I hope you can keep up."

"Oh, it's been a long time, but I do enjoy riding."

Angel stepped into Ah-wo's hands, so he could lift her up. She rode bareback, with only reins attached to a halter. Carley climbed on the red mare. Angel looked back, questioning with her eyes if Carley was ready. Once Carley was situated, she nodded at Angel. The only sound that came from the little girl's lips was "Ssss!" Choctaw took off quick as a hiccup. Carley said, "Come on, girl," as she bumped the horse in the side, as she rode.

"Wait up!" Carley never dreamed the girl could ride like the wind, as small as she was. They rode down to the creek, and let the horses cool off, while the girls looked for tadpoles. Carley counted twenty-two. She asked, "Angel, you gonna take me fishing, one day? I'd sure like to catch a mess of catfish."

When Carley arrived home, she saw that Mitzie had supper cooked and had brought in boxes. "Mitzie! What have you done?"

"Well, I've been a busy little bee. I delivered our resignations to the hospital. Then I went to every store in this little ole hicktown collecting boxes. After I went to my house, I started sorting all my stuff. Everything I don't need went to the Goodwill. I packed everything else I won't need for the next few weeks and then gave the house a good cleaning. Everything I need is here, so I made my way back over here and cleaned and cooked supper. I'll put a fresh coat of paint on my walls tomorrow."

Carley didn't have the heart to tell her she'd already eaten supper. "I smell fried chicken, collard greens, and cornbread." Carley grinned.

"You've got a good nose, there." Both girls raced to the kitchen. "And ya made a chocolate cake?"

"Yep."

"Dang, are ya trying to make me fat? Keep this up, and I'll have to break Ian's heart for sure."

"What do you mean?" Concern was written all over Mitzie's face.

"Well, I'll have to tell him if he can't cook as good as you, then he's outta luck. I'll have to marry you."

Both girls giggled, then Mitzie said, "Well, we'd sure enough have to leave town. Folks in these parts already think we're more than friends."

"Aww, let 'em think what they want. We are more than friends. We're sisters." Carley took a bite out of her chicken leg, with a growl.

Each morning Carley went to spend the day with Angel. When she arrived one morning, Angel smiled. She got on her horse and rode towards an old rope bridge. When Angel got off Choctaw, standing on the edge, Carley feared Angel would fall. She dismounted and rushed to the girl's side. Standing next to her, Angel took Carley's hand and pointed with the other one, towards another bridge, a big wooden bridge. She could see a broken rail and saw it was charred black from a fire. Carley noticed tears streaming down Angel's face. And she knew.

Carley knelt at Angel's feet, looking into her eyes. "Honey is that where...?" Angel nodded. "I'm so sorry, Angel. I so wish I could bring them back for you, but I can't. I just lost my Gramma." A tear slipped down Carley's cheek, and Angel took her finger, catching it. Carley took one of Angel's tears, then they joined their two fingers. A silent promise to carry one another's tears. Carley pulled Angel into her arms, holding her tight.

"I miss my mama and daddy. I know they're not coming back, but I will carry them here." She put her little hand on her heart.

“Yes, and they will always be with you, just like my Gramma Pearl will always be with me.”

Together they rode back to the farm. Angel showed Carley some of her favorite places. “I enjoyed visiting with you today. Can I come back tomorrow?”

Angel smiled. “Yes, Ma’am. I hope you will. I enjoyed the day with you.”

When they arrived, Ah-wo met them at the porch. “I’ve got supper on the stove with some fresh frybread. Would you like to stay and eat with us, Carley?” She considered politely declining but looked at Angel, whose face was earlier lifeless, now was smiling brightly. “Yes, I’d love that. Thank you.”

When she returned home each day, she helped Mitzie get their two houses ready to put on the market. They stayed at Carley’s since it was the smaller of the two and, therefore, less to clean. All the boxes were stacked in Mama Ruby’s bedroom, and the girls shared Carley’s room. The realtor said she thought she’d have both houses sold within the month, so the girls worked on a tight schedule to have everything out. Angel continued showing improvement, and Carley was happy to see the little girl’s smiles.

Carley had learned another valuable lesson that relationships are a huge responsibility, and sometimes, one must sacrifice to see their loved ones happy. The two girls sat on the sofa, taking a much-needed break from packing and cleaning. Mitzie propped her feet up on the coffee table. Carley said, “Ya know, I once knocked a guy’s feet off my table.”

“Yep. I remember. But I’m special.”

Carley laughed. “Yep, you’re special, all right.” She propped her feet on the table next to Mitzie’s. Four bare feet in a row with chipped polish. “Dang! We’re in desperate need of pedicures.”

“I’ll call and schedule them first thing in the morning.”



## Chapter Fourteen: Never Let Go



About a month after Carley arrived back in Dogwood, the houses were on the market, and potential buyers were making appointments to come see them. Carley came home from Angel's to find Uncle Potter's Expedition in the driveway. She burst through the door to find her uncle and Ian talking with Mitzie. "Uncle Potter!" Her excitement shown from her.

"Hey, sweet girl." He opened his arms as she ran into them. "I missed you so much, I had to come to find you." Uncle Potter smiled.

"I'm glad you did. I've missed you, too!" She turned to Ian. "And I've missed you."

"I've missed you too, love," he said, receiving her into his arms. "I hope you don't mind me coming."

"No. I don't mind at all. We'll have supper and then make beds for everyone to sleep. Oh, we have good news. We may have a buyer for both houses. An investor wants to turn them into rentals."

"That's great news!" Uncle Potter said.

"Does that mean you'll be coming home soon?" Ian asked.

"We hope so," Carley and Mitzie echoed.

"Mitzie is coming with. She's the only family I had for such a long time. I can't leave her here."

"The more, the merrier!" Uncle Potter was happy; the girls would still be together.

They all went into the kitchen to cook supper. That's one thing Carley loved about having a family, they could cook and do all kinds of things together. After supper was done, they all cleaned up the kitchen

and then made the beds for the night. The men would sleep in Mama's room, and the girls would sleep in Carley's. While they took turns showering, three would play dominoes, while the one showered. Once everyone had their showers, they took the party into the living room. Carley and Ian sat on the sofa, while Mitzie and Uncle Potter sat in the chairs.

After a while, Uncle Potter excused himself. "If all you young folks don't mind, I believe it's time to rest these old bones." He walked over to kiss Carley goodnight and then stopped to kiss Mitzie. "I guess I got lucky again. Two nieces for the price of one."

"Goodnight, Uncle Potter," the girls replied.

"I love you," Carley said.

"I love you too, my sweet girl."

Mitzie said, "It's time for me to retire, as well. All this painting and packing has worn me out. You two lovebirds have a good one." She stopped off to kiss Carley's cheek and then went to the bedroom.

"Looks like it's just the two of us, love." Ian put his arm around her.

"Yes, just you and me." Carley laid her head on his shoulder. She still wasn't ready, but she wanted to enjoy every moment she had with him.

"Carley, I have a confession. I have missed ye so much more than I believed possible. When Potter told me he was coming to see ye, I had to come as well. I couldn't bear another moment without ye in it."

Carley raised her head to look at him and saw the ring he held before her. She looked up into a pair of piercing blue eyes, which held more love for her than she'd ever seen.

"Will ye marry me? Let me love ye every day for the rest of our lives."

Carley didn't know what to say. She wanted to take his face in her hands, kiss him silly, and say, "Yes!" but there was still that part of her that couldn't get past the fear. She took his hands in hers while looking into his eyes. "Ian, I love you more than words can convey. I never want

to be without you in my life. Until you, I never knew this sort of love was real, but I'm not ready to marry you. For now, I want to enjoy the friendship we've created and treasure it." She folded his hands over the ring.

"I know these are not the words you wanted to hear, and I wish I could give you more, but until I am ready to break free from this prison of doubt and fear, that will not be fair to you. When I do break free, there will be no looking back."

Ian wiped a tear from his cheek and then squeezed her hands with his own. "Ya know, love, I told ye I will wait until you're ready but remember this: Ye can choose to spend the rest of your life isolating yourself from everyone who loves ye and wants to be a part of your life, or ye can choose to take a leap of faith, and cherish every moment you're blessed to have loved ones in your life. The choice is yours." He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I will love you all the days of me life, so I will."

She watched him walk into the bedroom with Uncle Potter as she wiped tears from her own eyes. When she finally went to bed, Mitzie rolled over, putting her arms around Carley. "There ya go, sister. I'm here." She held Carley until she fell asleep.

The next morning, Mitzie got up to make the diesel. When Carley smelled it, she went to the kitchen. "Where's Uncle and Ian?"

Mitzie's expression told her all she needed to know. "They were gone when I woke. I'm sorry."

Carley couldn't sip her coffee for sobbing. "They didn't even say goodbye?"

"Well, honey, after you turned him down, did ya expect him to still be sitting here at your feet, like a starved pup? Men can't handle that sort of rejection, and you wouldn't be able to, either."

"I thought for sure, Uncle would want to kiss me bye."

"Carley, someone had to support Ian. Uncle Potter got him out of here, and I'm sure he'll call you once he gets Ian home to lick his

wounds.” Carley winced. “Sorry, hon. I know my words are sometimes harsh. I’m rooting for the two of you.”

“I know, but what if I never see him again? He sounded like he won’t wait forever.”

“Why would you want him to?”

“I don’t. I mean. I have to go to him! Mitzie, losing Ian is not an option. Losing either of them is not an option.” Carley raced to the bedroom, tossed her nightgown, and stepped into a fresh pair of jeans, a T-shirt, a pair of flip-flops, and then brushed her teeth. She pulled her hair back and ran to the living room to get her keys. She stopped short when she saw Mitzie waiting in the doorway with the luggage.

“What? You didn’t think I was gonna let you leave me again, did you?”

“Oh, I have to call Angel and ask if she can be my flower girl.”

“I’ve already called Angel and her Ah-wo. They’ll meet us down there.”

“What? How did you know I would ask her?”

“Who knows you better than I do? The flowers are already ordered, and I have a priest on standby since Ian is Catholic.”

“How do you know he’ll do it since I’m not Catholic?”

“The priest is Irish, he knows all about this sort of passion. He’ll do it, but he may make you convert.” Mitzie grinned.

“Well, at least we’ll be in Galveston, where there is a Catholic church, and I can go through the Catechism. We’ve gotta go!”

The girls ran outside. Mitzie went to her truck, and Carley asked, “Where are you going?”

“My truck’s filled with gas,” Mitzie replied.

“Oh!” Carley knew she hadn’t filled her car yesterday, so she jumped into the truck. “Probably best if you drive anyway.”

“Yeah. I’m not trusting you to drive.” The girls laughed.

Carley couldn’t wait to see Ian. She prayed, “Please, Lord, don’t let him give up on me.”

That was the longest drive to Galveston, through the raging storms. “You would choose to go after your man when a hurricane is about to hit the Gulf.”

“Hurricane?”

“Yep.”

When they pulled into the drive, both Potter and Ian saw the lights from inside Gramma Pearl’s house. They opened the door for them. Carley jumped out in the pouring rain, running straight to Ian. “I’ll marry you!”

“What?” It was hard for Ian to hear over the howling winds.

“I said, I’ll marry you,” Carley repeated as they made it through the doorway.

“I’m sorry, love, but I’m not sure ye really want me.”

Seeing the pain in his eyes, she knew she hurt him and was sorry for it. “Ian, I love you. I told you that.”

“Ye also told me ye weren’t ready.”

“Yes, I did. But you don’t understand. I didn’t think I was ready until you spoke those words to me last night, and then I woke to find two of the people I love most in this world gone. I was more afraid I’d never see either of you again than I was to get married.”

Ian bit his lip, trying to maintain his composure. Potter and Mitzie tried to hide their laughs.

“Why do ye want to marry me, lass?”

“So, I can be with you every day for the rest of our lives.”

He screwed up his face like he was thinking about it, with one eye closed. “Hmm. Not good enough.”

“So we can build sandcastles and plot stories of our life together.”

“Hmm, close, but still not good enough.” He turned to walk away.

She grabbed his arm, “You once told me that you wanted the whole novel.”

“Aye. And, it must be epic.” He grinned.

“Okay, how’s this for a novel? Twenty-six-year-old hot mess of a nurse discovers she’s more afraid of losing those she loves than being hurt, she leaves behind everything she’s ever known to fight for her family and to convince her man she loves him more than the air she breathes and wants to spend eternity building a life with him. Her bonus: she gets to kiss him anytime she wants.”

Mitzie howled, and Potter tossed his head back, laughing. Ian scooped her up in his arms and kissed her. “I’ll never let go, me love,” he said

“Never? Ya promise?”

“Tis more than a promise, love. Tis a sacred vow. You’re me whole heart. *Mo anam chara.*”

The sun shone once more, and Ah-wo and Angel pulled into the drive. “What’s this?” Potter asked.

“That’s Angel, my flower girl.”

“Ye were that sure I’d be here, waiting for ye?”

“Yes. Neither of us can walk away from a love like ours.” He held onto her, afraid to let her go.

“Me lady, ye’ve have made me the happiest Irishman who ever lived.”



## Chapter Fifteen: Murdoch's



“Carley, I know I’m a man and don’t know much about weddings, but I do know it takes time to plan a wedding. You’ve already got your flower girl here, so when are you planning this wedding to take place?”

“Uncle, it will take place this week,” Carley answered.

“Yeah, two and a half women can get the job done with our skills, and you gentlemen can provide the muscle,” Mitzie explained.

Uncle Potter and Ian looked at each other, fear radiating from both. “Ian, son. I do believe we’ve been volunteered.”

“Aye, to be sure, we have. What’s to make of it?”

“Oh, we just do as we’re told, son. In my experience, that’s the best way.”

“Oche, aye.”

“Don’t worry, boys. It’s all gonna come together, beautifully. You’ll see,” Mitzie said as she ran towards Gramma Pearl’s room. “Carley, ya comin’?”

“I’ll be right there, Mitz!” Carley tiptoed inside Ian’s embrace and kissed him. “It won’t be that bad, handsome. I promise.” Then she hugged Uncle Potter. “Uncle, are you gonna walk me down the aisle?”

Uncle Potter’s eyes widened, and he put his hand over his heart. Such love radiated from his withered face. He held her face in his hands. “Carley, I’d be honored. I’ve only recently been blessed with the knowledge that you’re my niece and have greatly enjoyed getting to know you, but through that process, you’ve become like the daughter my wife and I were never fortunate enough to have. Yes, darlin’, I’ll walk

you down the aisle.” He kissed the top of her head and then wiped tears from his eyes.

Ian took hold of her hand before she headed to Gramma Pearl’s room. “Carley, me love. Whatever makes ye happy, makes me happy. If ye want a big wedding or a small wedding, ‘tis grand. Ye decide the wedding of your dreams, and I’ll help make it happen.”

Carley entered Gramma Pearl’s room and saw Mitzie pulling the dress from the closet. “Mitzie, are you sure we can pull this off? I mean, it does take time to plan a wedding.”

“Carley, you don’t have to worry,” Mitzie said while walking around the bed to Carley. “I told you, I’ve already called the florist and they’re on standby. All we have to do now is call again and tell them it’s a go. We give them the date and time, and they’ll have the flowers delivered.”

“Okay. What kind of flowers did you order?” Carley asked while fidgeting with her hair. “I’ve got to get these ends trimmed.”

“It will all be sorted, and you will be beautiful. As for the flowers, I only ordered your favorites; black calla lilies, white orchids, and King Protea. I just got off the phone with the rental company, and the tables and chairs will arrive later today, along with the linens. I went with chiffon and burlap, and we’ll have the rope to hang them with.”

“Oh, Mitzie, it’s gonna be so fun setting all this up with you. Thank you for coming with me,” Carley hugged Mitzie. “But how did you know? And, you knew everything I’d want.”

“Here, sit down.” Mitzie patted the bed for Carley to sit next to her. She reached under the pillow and pulled out the pink folder. “Do you remember this?”

“That’s my old manuscript folder! Where did you find it?” Carley reached for the folder and flipped through the pages of manuscripts.

“When you came to Galveston, I was full of myself, because I felt you’d forgotten all about me. I was waxing nostalgic, missing the old days when we did everything together. I went to the old treehouse, and

I found it in the trunk. I read as much as I could before it got dark outside and put it up.”

“So when did you get it back out?”

“When we started packing, painting, and getting the houses ready to sell. You were out at Angel’s every day, and I knew things were serious while we were here. So I went out to the treehouse, got the folder, and started planning the wedding you wrote.”

“Oh, Mitzie! Remember the broach bouquet in the story?”

“Yep, already made.” Mitzie went to the chest at the foot of Gramma Pearl’s bed and opened it. “See?” She pulled out a beautiful bouquet made of old brooches, seashells, and pearls. “I found Gramma’s old jewelry. Now, I promise I didn’t destroy any. I only used broken pieces and created your bouquet.”

“When did you manage this, Mitzie?” Carley was stunned, holding her precious grandmother’s jewelry in her hands that had been repurposed into the most exquisite piece of art she’d ever seen.

“While you and Uncle were planning Gramma Pearl’s funeral. I saw the old jewelry in the closet and remembered the one you’d written. I thought it would be something you could keep forever, something put together to represent such a wonderful lady.”

“Mitzie, I don’t know what to say.” Carley hugged her best friend. “This means the world to me.”

“Listen, most everything is already prepared. We just need to put the finishing touches. Oh, before I forget, here’s a boutonniere I made for Ian. See, it matches.”

“Okay, so I guess we need to go outside and see where we’re setting up. I’m gonna be a married woman soon.” The two girls squealed.

“Yep, let’s go. Mackenzie! Come, girl. Let’s go outside.”

The girls ran out back, down the steps to the path between the cottages. Mackenzie led the way. They turned and looked back at the steep steps going back up the hill to the main house. The girls had an epiphany simultaneously.

“Mitzie.”

“I see it.”

“Yeah, that would be pretty, walking down those steps, all lit up. Mmm.”

“That will be an epic entrance, for your Mister McDarlin.”

They walked down to Murdoch’s, one of Galveston Island’s most historic places.

“Carley, do you think we’ll find something in here?”

“Oh, yeah. Murdoch’s has everything you could imagine. It is a fun place to shop or stop for a drink,” Carley said while pointing at a little bar hut in the center of the store. The store was like a long pier reaching out over the water.

“This is really a unique shop. I like it! So are we getting a drink?”

“Yes! And I’ll tell you more of Murdoch’s rich history while we drink and shop.” Carley turned to the barkeep. “Could I get a sangria swirl margarita, please? And, my friend will have a bloody mary, extra spicy.”

“Sure thing, ma’am.” The barkeep smiled and then winked at Mitzie. She couldn’t help but notice his perfect tan and muscles that rippled beneath his T-shirt.

“Yeah, I like the spice.” Mitzie grinned when he winked at her.

“Okay, so about the history of Murdoch’s. Thank you, Kevin.” Carley read his name tag and nodded to him, as she placed his tip in the jar, and took the drinks. “Murdoch’s is an institution that began back in the late 1800s and was destroyed during The Great Storm of 1900. They rebuilt it in 1901, and after several hurricanes, they were forced to rebuild each time. It is said that the rebuild of 1910 cost around thirty-five thousand dollars.”

“Wow! So this place is old.” Mitzie was so amazed, she sat down in the patio area over the water, so she could catch all the story.

“Now, when it began, it was a bathhouse catering mostly people who would come to the island for the day, to swim, rent bathing suits,

and the like. After a day of play on the beach, one could get a room and bathe or shower. At one time, over seven hundred rooms were available. With each rebuild, they made improvements to keep up with the tourist demands. I believe it was even a marina, at one point.”

“I love hearing stories of old places. It makes me wonder who all has walked through these doors.”

“I wonder if maybe my great-grandparents, Carlena Rose and Tristan, came here. I have always loved Murdoch’s, but to think we may be sitting where my great-grandparents used to hang out, makes this place seem even more magical to me. I wish they could all be here, Carlena Rose, Tristan, Mama Ruby, and Gramma Pearl. I wish they could watch me walk down the aisle in the morning.”

“Well, if we don’t hurry and get our supplies, no one will see you get married.”

“Oh, yeah. Let’s go!”

Carley and Mitzie grabbed some seagrass baskets, shells, coral, starfish, a fishnet, and some wind chimes. Then they went over to Wal-Mart to stock up on some candles. They knew the wedding would be perfect after they finished decorating. When they got back home, the men were waiting on the porch with lemonade.

“That didn’t take too long,” Potter said.

“We tried to hurry, Uncle. Now, all we have to do is start putting these shells with the candles, and set up the beach.”

“No,” Mitzie said. “The island wedding group will be here first thing in the morning to set up the table, chairs, and archway. We have all the decor for it, but we can set the candles and shells down the stairs. Then, in the morning, someone can go light it before you walk down.”

“Oh, okay. That sounds perfect. Now, we need to go get our hair and nails done. Angel, come on. We’re gonna turn you into a real little sea angel.”

“Can I be a mermaid?” The little girl looked up at Carley, pleading with her eyes.

Carley knelt down before her. “Sweetheart, if you want to be a mermaid, I don’t see any reason why you can’t.” Carley looked at the men. “We’ll be back.” She kissed them, and the girls left.



## Chapter Sixteen: Mo Anam Chara



The next morning, everyone met up down in the kitchen for coffee and a rundown of the morning's schedule. When Carley walked into the kitchen, she froze.

"What is it, darlin'?"

"Uncle, where is Ian?" Her voice raised to a panic level.

"Honey, he can't be here. I sent him down to his old cottage to wait. I'll be going down there soon to help him get ready. Don't you worry your pretty little head. He's not going anywhere." Potter held her close, then kissed her before grabbing two cups of coffee to take down to the cottage. "Oh, and I'll come back up and light the candles."

"Thank you, Uncle. Mitzie! How am I to make it through this ceremony."

"I'll tell ya how you're gonna make it through, sweet cheeks. You're gonna get your hiney back upstairs, I'm gonna get you dressed and put that mop of flaming curls together. Then we're gonna strut our Godiva arses right on down those stone steps, straight into that gorgeous Irishman's awaiting arms. You are going to enchant him, as you descend those stone steps."

Angel walked into the room, wearing a long, mermaid gown and carrying her basket of flower petals and seashells, ready to have her hair done. Mitzie pulled her sides and top back with a partial braid and clipped in tiny strands of seashells, so they trailed down the back of her long, auburn hair. Carley came out of the bathroom from brushing her teeth, ready to have her gown slipped over her head.

"Mitz, is my makeup, okay?"

“You look beautiful. Now come, let me get this dress on you without getting makeup smudges all over it. Raise your arms high.” Mitzie struggled to get the dress over her with so many yards of fabric. “Hold on. Gramma Pearl, don’t roll over in your grave, but I’ve gotta get on the bed. Now, then!”

“You did it, Mitz. Gramma was cremated, she can’t turn over in her grave,” Carley teased.

“Oh, I know. Now, turn around, while I fasten a thousand pearl buttons down the back. Oh, hold on. Oh, Gramma, you cheeky little tart.”

“What is it?”

“This gown is in two pieces. The part I thought I had to work the buttons, isn’t part of the dress. You can anchor it on there, with snaps, but it is like a vest to cover. Look in the mirror.”

Carley turned around to look in the mirror and saw the entire back was open down to the top of her hips. It had an off-the-shoulder neckline and flowing Romanesque style A-line with a side slit up to her hip. Pearls were handsewn all over the dress. Carley let out a sigh.

“Oh, my! This looks a bit risqué, even for today’s standards. But, Gramma Pearl must have looked like a Hollywood Glamour Queen wearing this. It didn’t look like this when I tried it on before. The jacket was snapped over it. I see that the slit on the side can be fastened. Maybe I’ll snap a few.”

“Oh, come on, Carley! Live a little! It’s your wedding day, and it’s on the beach. It’s perfect. Now, let me fix your hair. I’ve got your pearl comb to finish it off.”

Carley smiled as a tear dripped down, missing her cheek. “Who says Gramma Pearl’s not with us, today? All these pearls, yeah, she’s here with me.”

“Don’t you mess up your face, Carlina Rose!” Mitzie dabbed her face with a tissue. “Now, let’s go.”

They walked through the kitchen, where Uncle Potter waited for Carley. “Here’s your bouquet, darlin’. Mama would sure be proud. She loved this dress. She wore it to some gala on the island one evening to receive an award.”

Carley stopped. “I thought this was her wedding gown.” Her mouth was wide open.

“It was, with the jacket. This is more appropriate for the beach.” He winked at Mitzie, who stood frozen in fear, worrying that Carley would try to back out.

“Let’s go, the sun’s coming up.” Mitzie rushed past Carley and Uncle Potter. Outside, they could hear steel pan drums and an orchestra down on the beach.

Ian watched his beloved descend the stone steps, walking towards him and their new life together. Unsure if it was her or an apparition, she seemed to fairly float down the candlelit steps. He kept thinking, how did I become so lucky to find her on the beach? As she took the last remaining steps towards him, he thought she’d never been more lovely than she was at that moment.

Carley kissed Uncle Potter as he handed her off to Ian. She thought he was the most handsome man she’d ever seen, dressed in his white tuxedo. Uncle also wore a white suit. Mitzie stood next to Uncle, wearing a long, white mermaid gown identical to Angel’s. Ah-wo wore white jeans, a white ribbon shirt, and a thunderbird bolo tie.

The priest waited at the archway, which was dressed with the fishnet draped over it, along with white chiffon. Seashell wind chimes hung from it, softly chiming in the wind. Flowers were attached over that. Two tall pedestals sat on either side of the archway, with hurricane lamps glowing in the dark. The sun was just peeking through the clouds, promising crimson, orange, and golden rays to come. The priest began with a prayer, and they moved on to their vows.

“I, Ian Sheehan, in the name of the spirit of God that resides within us all, by the life that courses within my blood and the love that resides

within my heart, take thee, Carlana Rose Callaghan, to my hand, my heart, and my spirit, to be my chosen one. To desire thee and be desired by thee, to possess thee, and be possessed by thee, without sin or shame, for naught can exist in the purity of my love for thee. I promise to love thee wholly and completely without restraint, in sickness, and in health, in plenty and in poverty, in life and beyond, where we shall meet, remember, and love again. I shall not seek to change thee in any way. I shall respect thee, thy beliefs, thy people, and thy ways as I respect myself.”

The seagulls, danced on the wind, and the windchimes melody played, as the sky turned purple, and then, the golden rays burst forth, kissing their faces.

Together, they said, “We swear by peace and love to stand,  
Heart to heart and hand to hand.

Mark, O Spirit, and hear us now,  
Confirming this, our Sacred Vow.”

They exchanged the sacred Claddagh rings.

The priest said, “May the gentle breeze bear witness to this ritual and carry its message to all lands. May the sun warm their hearts, and its ever-burning fire fuel their desire for each other. May the water provide for them from its bounty and comfort their souls with their sounds. May the land lend its strength and reveal its mysteries. Ian, ye may kiss your bride.”

Ian held Carley’s face in his hands. “*Is breá liom tú, mo anam chara.*” He gently kissed her as the orchestra played once more.

After the wedding, everyone had brunch on the beach, and photography session with a local photographer, Stewart Wilson.

“Carley, it’s been a pleasure to photograph you. I’m the photographer of your dear mama’s wedding. She was a wonderful woman and a good friend.”

“Thank you, Stewart. You and my mama were friends?.”

“Yes, we were. I loved your mama. I love her still.”

"I'm sorry, Stewart."

"Oh, no worries. I still carry Ruby in my heart."

"Stewart, won't you do us the honor of joining us at the house? I'd love to get to know you better." Sensing he was about to leave, she said, "You see, I'm just now getting to know my family here. I only learned I had a grandmother a short while ago. I've been on my own since Mama died. Please, Stewart. I want to learn all I can."

"Okay, thank you, Carley. I'd love to get to know you better as well."

Back at the house, everyone enjoyed telling their favorite stories of life and tales on the island.

Carley was finally living the life of her dreams. She would never again feel alone.



TWO YEARS LATER, CARLEY walked along the beach. As she looked out across the Gulf, she remembered how a short time back, she was such a hot mess, afraid of attachment and being alone at the same time. Then she met her grandmother, her uncle, and Ian. She didn't have near enough time with Gramma Pearl before she left, but they shared a lifetime of stories. "Mama, I kissed the boy!"

Mackenzie barked and ran to meet Ian, so she could race with him back to Carley. When he stood in front of her, he kissed her, and then took their flame-haired daughter from her mother's arms. "Let me help you back to the house, love. You need to rest, and it's past Ruby Pearl's naptime."

When they got to the stone steps leading up the hill, Carley held her belly. "You go on. I'll catch up."

He took her by the hand and said, "Take your time, me gorgeous queen, and together we'll make it up all the hills."

That night, a storm broke. Carley could feel the barometric pressure drop, and her waters broke. Unable to drive in the storm, her uncle

and husband, along with Mitzie, helped her deliver a son. She said, “Meet our Tristan Potter Sheehan. He’s got the black hair and blues eyes of his handsome daddy.”

Potter choked up, he was so touched at her naming the child after him. He felt blessed to have them in his life.

“I love you all so much. My whole heart is right here in this room.”

Ian sat by her side. “And my whole heart is in this room. You are my soul, *mo anam chara*.”

THE END



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## About the Author

Southern Women's Fiction Author, Shayla McAnn, brings us Tales From the Front Porch Swing, her weekly blog, where she shares stories of strong Southern women, some from her own pen and others passed down from her Grams. Shayla says there are a few things done right down South, and some of those are good eats, sweet tea, and tall tales.

Shayla lives in North East Texas with her husband of twenty years, children, and furkids. When not homeschooling or writing fiction, she can be found on road trips, or maybe a cruise.

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