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—Romance B(u)y the Book

Dear Reader,

Unbeknownst to me, the seeds for this story were planted during the lazy days of summer family vacations and have been growing in my heart for years.

A long time ago we visited nothing less than a fairyland in the midst of reality—Mackinac Island, Michigan. My daughter claims she had one of the best days of her life horseback riding, eating homemade fudge and enjoying her first-ever carriage ride. Then there were the camping and fishing trips to Wisconsin, my home away from home. We’ve traveled up and down that state, but I have wonderful memories of our excursions to the Apostle Islands.

So what do you get when you cross Mackinac with an Apostle Island? That’d be Mirabelle, a quaint, idyllic village surrounded by rustic wilderness. What makes Mirabelle Island particularly special, though, are the characters. They’re loyal, quirky and lovable, some more than others. These islanders, especially Noah and Sophie, came alive for me. I hope they do for you, too!

I loved Mirabelle so much I couldn’t get enough of the place. Keep an eye out for *Next Comes Love* and *Then Comes Baby*, two more stories set on Mirabelle, coming in October and December 2009.

Happy reading!

Helen Brenna

FIRSTCOMETWINS

Helen Brenna



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Brenna grew up in a small town in central Minnesota, the seventh of eight children. Although she never dreamed of writing books, she's always been a voracious reader of romances. So after taking a break from her accounting career, she tried her hand at writing the romances she loves to read. Since her first book was published in 2007, she's not only won the Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA® Award and Virginia Romance Writers' Holt Medallion, she's also been nominated several times for Romantic Times BOOKreviews Reviewers' Choice awards.

Helen still lives in Minnesota with her husband, two children and too many pets. She'd love hearing from you. E-mail her at helenbrenna@comcast.net or send mail to P.O. Box 24107, Minneapolis, MN 55424. Visit her Web site at www.helenbrenna.com or chat with Helen and other authors at [Riding With The TopDown.blogspot.com](http://RidingWithTheTopDown.blogspot.com).

Books by Helen Brenna

HARLEQUIN SUPERROMANCE

1403—TREASURE

1425—DAD FOR LIFE

1519—FINDING MR. RIGHT

HARLEQUIN NASCAR

PEAK PERFORMANCE

For Joan Ulrich Twomey

The strongest, most resilient and compassionate woman I know and I get to call her Mom!

Acknowledgments

The real hero of this book is Adam Gadach. Several years ago Adam lost his leg in a car accident after

being hit by a drunk driver. His determination and willingness to share his struggles regarding his injuries and life with a prosthetic deeply touched me. If Noah Bennett depicts even a portion of Adam's courage, then I've done my job well.

I'd also like to thank Teresa Gadach, Adam's aunt, for her suggestions relating to this book, but mostly for her friendship and encouragement through these many, many years. Love you!

A shout-out to Michelle Schmidt for sharing with me her extensive knowledge of photography. And thanks for making plain-Jane me feel like a princess for a day.

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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

“WHAT A QUAIN T LITTLE ISLAND.”

“This place is gorgeous.”

“Look at all the flowers.”

Hanging toward the back of the throng of tourists, Noah Bennett only half listened to their jabbering as they filed off the Mirabelle Island ferry and onto the pier. The idiots couldn’t wait to get off the boat before snapping pictures left and right.

“Oh, get that storefront. And the lamppost.”

A lamppost. That one’s sure to win a Pulitzer.

“I already love this place.”

“It’s so charming.”

Yeah. And boring. And quiet. With nosy neighbors and absolutely nothing to do. You should all love it.

Hell, man, chill.

Taking in a deep breath, Noah did his best to dispel the anger that seemed to be his constant companion these days and tried to be patient while the last of the tourists exited the boat deck. They were all in so much of a hurry, and with his bum leg he’d only slow everyone up. He’d put this off for a decade and a half, five more minutes weren’t going to kill him. It’s not as if there’d be a welcoming committee waiting.

As the ferry cleared out, he couldn’t help noticing there weren’t any families. The majority of people heading down the pier were couples, both young and old. That was strange. Although it was only the end of May, used to be, this place was crawling with kids. Still, they all were happy people, all on vacation, all ready for an idyllic few days. They’d find it. Mirabelle was that kind of place for most folks.

After asking one of the attendants to have his luggage delivered to Grandma Bennett’s house, Noah adjusted his baseball cap and sunglasses, hoping to maintain his anonymity for a few days, and made his way off the ferry. By the time he left the pier his temporary prosthetic felt like a lead weight at the end of what was left of his leg.

They’d said he’d be good as new. Right. On what planet? He forced himself to walk to the end of the block before dropping onto the bench at the curb, not far from where the ferry passengers were catching carriage rides to their respective accommodations.

A look down Main Street took his mind off the dull ache in his leg. Other than the oak trees, maples, lindens and spruce being noticeably larger, little had changed on this chunk of dirt since the day he'd left. Miller's Ice Creamery and Candy Shoppe was still painted fire-engine red with white shutters, though they now offered gourmet coffees. There was a sedate new art gallery and two new restaurant-bar combos, although Duffy's Pub looked as entrenched as before. The bank, post office, floral shop and village chapel all looked exactly the same, from the green-and-white striped awnings to the baskets of flowers hanging from the black iron lampposts.

That's the way they liked it here on Mirabelle. Newfangled was bad. Static was good. Retro was better. And historic, well, now you were cooking with gas.

What had he been thinking coming back here? With nothing but a village on one end of the long and narrow island, a couple of isolated private homes on the other, and undeveloped state land sandwiched in between, he'd hated Mirabelle. Every minute of every day after hitting adolescence had been torture for Noah. Sophie had been the only reason he'd remained on the island past his sixteenth birthday. How ironic that after he'd left, she'd been the reason he'd stayed away. Well, her and Isaac, anyway.

Noah dreaded seeing his brother again after all these years. Every few minutes, he wavered between wanting to punch Isaac for what he'd done or hug the daylights out of him for missing him. Maybe Noah should've gone to his beach house in Rhode Island. Though he hadn't spent enough time there through the years for it to truly feel like a home, it might've been peaceful enough for what the doctors had in mind.

The ferry horn tooted, catching him off guard, and the explosion burst front and center in his mind. The rumble, like a small earthquake. The smells. The sand stinging his face. The shrapnel hitting his back. Oh, my God. John. Mick.

A sudden jolt of pain sizzled through his left leg and onto a foot that wasn't there. Phantom pains, his doctors had called them. A royal pain in the ass threatening to ruin what was left of his life was the description Noah preferred.

As the current subsided, he snapped his eyes open, sucked in a shaky breath, and quickly glanced around. Instinctively, he reached under his jacket and touched the Beretta handgun he'd taken to carrying a few months after this last stint of being embedded with the U.S. military. Despite a cool spring breeze, sweat beaded on his upper lip. People walked by, laughing and chatting, oblivious to anything except the waffle cones in their hands.

You're safe now. Safe. There were no bombs on Mirabelle, he reminded himself. No insurgents. No terrorists. Here he could walk across the street without watching his back. He had a chance at holding down a full meal and sleeping at night. With any luck, the doctors would be right and the familiarity and comfort of his childhood home would help him climb out of this uncharacteristic hole.

He took another deep breath and released the gun. Several people walking toward him on the sidewalk nodded their greeting. Thankfully, they weren't locals. Best to get out of sight as quickly as possible.

Noah levered himself back up and continued slowly down the block. Although groups of people dotted the sidewalks and street, he remembered days when he hadn't been able to ride his bike due to the crowds. As he passed by the gift shop, he noticed paint chipping on the windowframe, and the carriage parked outside the medical clinic had seen better days. Apparently rough times had befallen a few residents.

An older woman, in her early sixties Noah guessed, walked briskly toward him. Immediately, he recognized her as Sally McGregor, the island's postmaster and one of the biggest grouches known to mankind. Rumor had it, at least while Noah had lived on Mirabelle, that she'd been known to trap and kill rabbits eating her gardens, kick dogs making messes on the sidewalk in front of her post office, and hand out poisoned apples to any kids ballsy enough to knock on her door at Halloween.

Her gaze settled on his leg for a moment and then flitted uncomfortably away. She didn't recognize him, but she knew. He was a cripple. He wasn't whole like her. Yeah, well, we've all got challenges, don't we?

On the cobblestone street, a bike rider headed toward him, her metal basket filled with cut flowers of every imaginable color. The sight was a little too charming, if you asked him.

As she came closer, she smiled and nodded.

"Morning." Noah tipped his head. He could be as cordial as the next guy, when he forced himself.

She braked to a stop at the curb. "Well, I'll be a son of a gun!" It was Mrs. Miller, owner of the ice cream shop, and, since he'd worked for her one summer, one of the few people on the island who'd been nice to him. "Noah Bennett? Is that you?"

"Yes, ma'am." Apparently all that time embedded with U.S. soldiers had rubbed off on Noah in more ways than one. He rested a hand on the black corner lamppost and stood a little straighter. Hopefully, she wouldn't notice his bad leg. "Hello, Mrs. Miller."

"Oh, my. How long's it been since you've been home?"

"Close to fifteen years."

"You haven't changed a bit."

Right.

"Still the spitting image of your mother." She shook her head. "Does your dad know you're here?"

Noah felt his smile wane. "No, ma'am."

She didn't know how to respond to that, and he couldn't blame her. The truth was that other than right after the explosion when Noah had been in the hospital, he couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken with his father.

Worry lines creased Mrs. Miller's already wrinkled brow. "How long will you be in town?"

He shrugged. "Not sure."

"Are you feeling all right? You look a little pale." That's when she seemed to make a connection. Her gaze shot to his tennis shoes and back up again.

Had his dad told everyone? Even Isaac and Sophie? Dammit. The last thing he wanted was pity. "I'm fine."

“Well, if there’s anything I can do for you, let me know.” She put her feet back on the pedals and sped away.

Wonderful. The first thing Mrs. Miller was going to do when she got back to her store was call all her cronies. So much for a couple days of anonymity.

He’d taken no more than two steps when a young couple came barreling out of the flower shop and bumped into him. He recognized the woman’s bright pink jacket from the ferry. If memory served, these two had been the last to board over at the mainland and amongst the first off upon arrival at Mirabelle.

The guy turned around. “Sorry.”

“No problem.” Noah glanced into his face. Holy crap. Marty Rousseau. All grown-up. Of all the people—

“Noah?” Marty said. “Is it really you? Geez, I can’t believe it!”

Mrs. Miller was one thing, but Noah was not ready for this. He gave a moment’s thought to turning around and walking away without a word, but Marty didn’t deserve that. “Hey, Marty.” He held out his hand.

Marty ignored it and, laughing, pulled Noah into a tight hug with his free arm. “How the hell have you been?” He slapped him a couple times on the back and stepped away.

“All right.”

“I can’t believe you’re actually here!” He presented the pretty young blonde by his side. “This is my fiancée, Brittany.”

“Glad to meet you.” She smiled and energetically shook his hand. “How do you two know each other?” she asked. “Did you grow up on Mirabelle, too? Does he know Soph—”

Marty stopped her with a hand to her shoulder. “Noah is...was...the closest thing I’ve ever had to a brother.” And that was about as much as either could offer at the moment by way of an explanation. “We’re getting married in a couple weeks.”

“Congratulations.”

“I’ll send you an invite so you have all the specifics.” Marty’s smile returned. “You have to come.”

No effing way. “Maybe.” They stood awkwardly for a few moments, Noah hoping for as normal a stance as possible.

“Marty?” the carriage driver yelled. “You got your flowers? Ready to head out?”

Noah glanced back. Arlo Duffy. His beard was grayer than Noah remembered, but who could forget that lean, iconic face. The man had had more pictures taken and published of him manning his carriages than any other islander doing anything.

“Be right there, Arlo!” Marty yelled back. “Brittany, why don’t you get us a seat on the carriage? I’ll be right there.” He turned back to Noah. “How long will you be on the island?”

“I’m not sure. A few weeks, maybe more.”

“You staying at the inn?” he asked.

Good God, no. “Grandma’s place.” Why he’d kept the cottage after she’d willed it to him was anyone’s guess.

“Marty, honey?” his fiancée called from the carriage. “Let’s go.”

“Coming.” Marty squeezed Noah’s shoulder. “Listen. We’ll be having wedding festivities all week at the inn for our guests—horseback riding, lawn games, sailing. Come on down sometime, okay? I’d love to catch up.” He grinned as he jumped onto the carriage. “And beat you at a game of table tennis.”

Noah nodded and forced a smile, although he had absolutely no intention of getting anywhere near the inn. “Good seeing you again, Marty.” That, at least, was the truth.

The carriage pulled away from the curb and headed down Island Drive toward the Mirabelle Island Inn. Toward Sophie. It might take Marty a while to work up to it, but he’d eventually tell his sister that Noah was back on the island. Then what?

Noah had dealt okay with running into Marty. He could even fathom the possibility of seeing his dad after all these years, but Sophie? And Isaac? He looked down at his lifeless foot.

He thought he’d prepared himself. Over the past several weeks, since the doctors had convinced him that this was what he needed, he’d gone over it and over it. What he’d say, how he’d say it. What he’d do, wouldn’t do. Now he got it. Preparing for his return to Mirabelle? There was no such thing.

CHAPTER TWO

SOPHIEROUSSEAU SAT AT her desk, a Louis XV dining table an ancestor had brought over from France, and contemplated the dismal occupancy reports for the Mirabelle Island Inn on her computer screen. Less than two weeks from the start of tourist season and she wasn’t even close to full capacity. It’d been a nail-biting spring as the reservations had trickled in more slowly than normal, and if things didn’t pick up soon she’d have a hard time breaking even for the season.

“Sophie?” Jan Setterberg, the inn’s general manager, breezed into the sun-filled room and dropped off the day’s mail. “The three o’clock ferry passed by a few minutes ago.”

Sophie glanced at her watch. “Is it that time already?” So engrossed in work, she’d forgotten her baby brother, Marty, and his fiancée, Brittany, were coming today to help prepare for the arrival next week of their wedding guests.

“You’ve got a couple minutes before the carriage makes its way here.” Jan picked up Marty and Brittany’s wedding invitation from the corner of Sophie’s desk and studied the hand-painted watercolor design of wood violets and white lilacs. “Brittany’s parents must have paid a small fortune for these.”

“Nope.” Sophie quickly shut down her computer. “Marty’s not letting them pay for anything.” After struggling financially for years, her brother’s Internet brainchild had recently been bought out for a tidy sum. If he and Brittany had wanted, they could have treated the entire wedding party along with all their guests to a trip to Hawaii or Europe. “I hope Brittany’s happy with Mirabelle.”

“Rousseau weddings have been held on this island,” Jan stated the historic detail with the cadence of a commercial sound bite, “since Jean Paul Rousseau took Marie Le Blanc to be his bride—”

“Back in 1715.” As if Sophie needed the reminder. “I know. I know.”

All her life, Sophie had breathed and dreamed Rousseau family tradition. From the time she was little, she’d sit on her father’s lap and beg him to recount how Jean Paul and Marie had built the first inn on Mirabelle, how the voyageurs had sometimes passed through trading furs and stories, or how her ancestors had been friends with the Chippewa.

Even now, long after her parents had passed away, she’d held fast to their ideals, from the cassoulets, goose foie gras and Bordeaux on the restaurant menus to day-to-day operations. The Mirabelle Island Inn was as modern as could be when it came to computers, Web sites, phone and reservation systems, but not a hand soap, bedspread or plate was purchased without consideration of her fur-trading forebears who had settled the island back in the late 1600s.

The only tradition-breaking allowed at the inn was for weddings. On those occasions, the wishes of the bride and groom ruled. Normally, Sophie would be managing any wedding activities at the inn, but since this was Marty’s event and she’d have family in town her staff would be taking charge.

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” Jan said. “Everyone’s pulling out the stops for Marty and Brittany. That new wedding planner, Sarah, is a gem. Josie planned a spectacular menu for the entire week. I’ll keep the guests busy with all kinds of fun activities. And they’ll all be gone before the summer tourist season gets in full swing. You won’t have to do much of anything except relax and enjoy yourself for a change.”

“Okay, Mom.” She might pay the salaries around this place, but her employees, the entire island for that matter, were more extended family than anything. “A few days off before the summer rush sounds good to me.”

“Oh, before I forget.” Jan held out samples of wallpaper designs. “I need your decision on new paper for the front desk area.”

Sophie didn’t need to mull over that one. “Replace it with the same print.”

“I’ve said it before. I’ll say it again.” Jan waved the samples in front of Sophie. “We could use some contrasting color out there.”

Most people assumed she didn’t like change. Sophie preferred to think of herself as a stickler for historic details. “There’s plenty of color. It’s called green. Nice try though.”

“Mom?” Two young voices sounded in unison from the direction of the lobby.

“In here, guys!”

Flip-flops and tennis shoes echoed loudly in the otherwise quiet hall as her daughter and son made their way toward her office. Lauren breezed into the room first, her long, dark blond hair flying behind her, dropped her backpack on the floor and plopped into one of two ornately carved, gilded chairs. Kurt walked in next and fell into the other chair, his curly light brown hair ruffled from the wind.

“Last day of school!” Lauren exclaimed and met Kurt’s closed fist in the air with one of her own. “Yes!”

“I thought there was an end-of-the-year party,” Sophie said. “Aren’t you guys going?”

“Are you serious?” Lauren’s face scrunched up with distaste. “All they’re gonna do is play kissing games. Eww.”

“Oh, yeah!” Kurt smiled and nodded. “I’m going.”

“You’ll kiss anyone.” Lauren rolled her eyes.

“I wouldn’t kiss you.”

Despite being twins, Lauren and Kurt’s personalities were as different as cold from hot, making for great entertainment. Sophie could sit back and watch them interact all day long.

“Oh, come on, Lauren,” Jan said. “There must be someone at school you like.”

“There are eight kids in my ninth-grade class, and I’ve known them my entire life.” Lauren gave Jan a look she’d perfected in her fourteen short years, a cross between supreme condescension and youthful arrogance. “I still remember Ben peeing in his pants in kindergarten. Nate threw up last year during social studies. And Zach?” She folded her arms across her developing chest. “Still picks his nose.”

Sophie kept from smiling by biting the inside of her cheek. Having grown up on the ten-square-mile island, she remembered feeling the exact same way about every boy. Except Noah.

“Those are my options,” Lauren continued, turning from Jan to glare at Sophie. “If you don’t get me off this island, Mom, I’m gonna die never having been kissed!”

“Lauren—”

“I’m serious!”

“Drama queen,” Kurt charged.

“Indiscriminate kisser,” Lauren shot back.

“Hey, hey, hey! We don’t have time to argue. Marty and Brittany just got in on the last ferry.”

Lauren jumped up from the chair. “Brittany’s here? Now?”

“I thought the wedding stuff doesn’t start for another week,” Kurt said.

“They wanted some time to settle in and help get ready for their guests.”

“Awesome!” Kurt said.

Sophie stood. “Should we meet them out front?”

“Definitely.” The twins headed for the door.

Sophie followed, then stopped, looking back at Jan. "In case I forget, thanks for everything you're doing for Marty."

Jan smiled. "You're welcome."

Sophie caught up with Lauren and Kurt in the empty lobby. With dark green carpeting and pale green-and-rose printed wallpaper, one had the impression of walking into a garden. An awfully green garden. Maybe Jan was right. For a moment she considered some red accents to perk up the place.

But it's always been green.

She swung one arm around each of the kids' shoulders and headed outside. "Pretty exciting, huh? There hasn't been a Rousseau wedding on the island for years."

"There's no way I'm living here," Lauren said, "but I am getting married here."

"You have to kiss someone first." Kurt ran ahead.

"Oh, shut up." Lauren shot after him.

The moment Sophie stepped away from the entryway awning the late May sunshine hit her full in the face. She put a hand out to shield her eyes and perused the grounds, making sure all was in order for the fast approaching tourist season.

Irises bloomed along the front porch, ivy made its springtime creep up the east wall, and the lawns and hedges were trimmed to perfection. Pink and red geraniums and dahlias of every imaginable hue lined the walkways, and a row of purple lilacs in full bloom set a colorful backdrop to a flowing fountain. Even the rose garden, with its shrubs, topiaries and delightful climbing varieties, was budding out.

The gardener was doing an excellent job keeping the landscape alive and well and looking exactly as Sophie's great-grandmother had planned some one hundred years ago. Add to the mix a few details from her parents' wills, and the grounds would remain virtually unchanged for at least another century.

After they'd died, the inn property and over four hundred adjacent acres of undeveloped land had been put in trust for the Rousseau children: Sophie, Marty and their two sisters, Elizabeth and Jacqueline, who were both married and too busy raising families in suburban Minneapolis to care much one way or another about what was happening on Mirabelle.

Sophie earned a more than fair salary for running the inn, but she couldn't materially alter the premises, nor could the adjoining land be developed without unanimous approval from all four siblings. That was fine by Sophie.

She glanced beyond the manicured perfection and rested her eyes on the bordering wildness of craggy oaks and pines, some older than the inn itself. No wonder their little island had become a wedding destination for the Upper Midwest. No place mixed quaint with quiet better than Mirabelle.

She drew in a deep, satisfied breath and caught up with the kids farther down the drive. Past the row of blue spruce lining the road, the clip-clop of hooves on the cobblestone road sounded Marty and Brittany's arrival. The only motorized vehicles on the island were the ambulance and fire trucks, requiring guests and their luggage to be transported by horse-drawn carriages.

Lauren waved the minute Marty and Brittany appeared. Kurt, on the other hand, was far too cool to show his excitement. The carriage turned into the drive, and the moment the horses stopped, Brittany jumped up and—there was no other word for it—squealed. “I’m so excited! This island is perfect for a wedding. Thank you so much for agreeing to have this here. It’s the best wedding present ever.”

Sophie grinned. Brittany had taken a little getting used to, and Sophie had worried that a twenty-two-year-old was too young for Marty, but after seeing how Brittany’s zest complemented Marty’s sober personality, liking her had been easy.

“Take a breath, sweetheart.” Marty hopped out of the carriage and reached for Brittany’s hand, helping her down.

Brittany’s feet no sooner touched the ground than she turned and hugged Sophie. “You’re going to be the best sister-in-law any new bride could ask for.” Then it was Kurt’s turn. “Kurt!” She drew the reluctant teenager into a brief hug. “I can’t wait to see you in a tux. You’ll look so handsome.” She turned to Lauren and squealed again. “Lauren!” The two clasped their arms around each other. “I’m so excited. Aren’t you excited?”

“I can’t wait to see your dress!”

“I’ll show it to you as soon as I unpack.”

“Oh, your nails look gorgeous,” Lauren murmured.

“Do you want me to do yours? I can do yours.”

“Would you?”

Kurt looked at Marty and rolled his eyes.

Marty laughed as he grabbed their luggage from the back of the carriage. “Thanks, Arlo.”

“See you later, Arlo,” Sophie yelled.

“Ayep.” He took off the carriage brake and tapped his reins.

Marty turned to Kurt. “Hey, slugger, how you doing?” They went through the motions of some funky handshake they’d made up the last time Marty had visited. When he turned to Sophie for a hug his gaze turned serious. “Hey, Sophie.” There had to be something more than the normal prewedding jitters on his mind.

“What’s the matter?” she whispered.

“Later,” he whispered back.

After all the hellos, Brittany started up again, like a windup toy. “Everything is so beautiful. These gardens and grounds! They’re looking better than ever. The photographer’s going to love this. I love this! Oh, Marty!” She looked up at him and her eyes sparkled. “We’re going to have such a perfect week.”

He kissed her forehead. “Why don’t you and Lauren go find Jan? She’ll know our room numbers.”

"That's a great idea." Brittany grabbed Lauren's arm.

"Then we can unpack your dress!" Lauren exclaimed, her head tilting toward Brittany's as they walked to the inn.

Kurt shook his head at Marty. "Does she ever stop chattering?"

"Are you kidding? That sweet music lulls me to sleep and nudges me awake every day, and I wouldn't have it any other way." Marty laughed at the sudden grimace on Kurt's face. "Just wait. That bug'll bite you someday."

"Not for a while yet," Sophie cautioned.

"Can I go to the party now?" Kurt asked.

"Grab a bag first, eh?" They carried Marty and Brittany's luggage to the main lobby entrance.

After Kurt took off on his bike Sophie turned to Marty. "Okay, out with it. What's going on?"

Clearly uncomfortable, he ran his hands through his hair and shifted from foot to foot. "You're not going to like this."

"I've had so many wedding upsets through the years, nothing fazes me anymore."

"It's not that." He shook his head, hesitating. "There was someone on the ferry just now. Someone I didn't expect to see." He looked straight into her eyes and then away as if he couldn't stand to see her reaction.

"Who?"

"Noah Bennett."

Noah? Sophie's mouth turned dust dry. Though she hadn't heard his name spoken aloud for years the sound of it still hurt. "This ferry? Today?"

Marty nodded.

"You sure it was him?"

"Positive."

"Did you talk to him?"

"Briefly."

"Why'd he come back?"

"He didn't say."

"Where's he staying?"

“Grandma Bennett’s.”

Just up the hill from the inn. Too close for her comfort, but it made sense given the old woman had willed the property to Noah when she’d died, hoping to lure him home, at least every once in a while. She shouldn’t have bothered. He hadn’t even come back for her funeral.

“Why is he here?” she asked. “Why now?”

Marty shrugged. “He looks like he’s in pretty rough shape, like he could use some company. I...I hope it’s all right. I...asked him to come down some time this coming week. To join in with the wedding activities...”

Although Marty kept talking his voice barely penetrated her thoughts. Fifteen years she’d waited to give Noah Bennett a piece of her mind, and now the moment was at hand.

“Sophie?” Marty touched her arm. “You okay?”

“Not even close.” She spun away from her brother and marched toward Bennett Hill.

“Well, don’t do anything stupid,” Marty yelled. “Sophie!”

“When I get back, Marty,” she shouted over her shoulder, “you can definestupid for me!”

PINK RHODODENDRONS ANDbuttercup lilies flowered along the front of the house, and purple irises sprouted along the south side. Gingerbread trim, wide porch, old-fashioned swing, big shade trees. The sight of Grandma Bennett’s house poured a thick layer of calm over Noah’s ragged nerves.

As he walked up the front steps, he noticed bushes in dire need of pruning and chipped and peeling siding and trim. The place had surely seen more pampered days. He retrieved the key from under a large planter where his grandmother had always left it and, propping open the storm door with his good leg, unlocked the solid oak front door.

Apparently, his dad hadn’t gotten rid of anything since Grandma died. Everything looked pretty much the same, from the antique cherry furniture in the dining room and floral sofa in the living room to the white ruffled curtains and the red-and-white, circa-1950 table and vinyl chairs in the kitchen. Any minute now Noah half expected to see his grandma coming toward him, wiping her hands on her flower-printed apron.

Although he’d felt horrible for missing her funeral, there’d been no easy way out of the guerilla camps in the jungles of South America. She would have understood, better than anyone.

Noah left the heavy oak door open so air could flow through the screen on the top half of the storm door. He walked into the living room, sat on the couch and breathed a sigh of relief. After tugging up his pant leg, he rolled down the silicone sleeve holding the prosthetic to his leg and let the damned heavy thing drop to the floor.

He’d no sooner set his handgun within reach on the coffee table and sat back when his cell phone rang. Sliding it out of his back pocket, he answered, “Bennett here.”

"It's Liz." As in Elizabeth Ingram, his editor and the closest thing he had to a friend these days. "Where are you?"

"Mirabelle."

"Good." She was quiet for a moment. Most people weren't aware the woman could just as easily tear a man apart as spoon-feed him chicken noodle soup at his hospital bedside. She sure had shocked the hell out of Noah. Having married her husband late in life, she'd never had children. Noah supposed he was the closest thing she'd ever have to a son. "Have you eaten anything today?" she asked.

"Yes." Lies were easiest. "So what's up?"

"We can extend your deadline another two months."

"I told you I need at least four."

"That would mean moving the release date. I won't do that. Too many wheels are already in motion."

"I can't do it, Liz." He might have three-quarters of the book already written, but since the explosion he hadn't touched the manuscript. It wasn't likely the rest of it was going to write itself.

"Do me a favor," she said. "Take several days on this island, maybe a few weeks, to clear your head. Then give it a shot, okay?"

He supposed he owed her at least that. "I'll try."

After ending the call, he closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the couch. His thoughts drifted. He had no idea how long he'd been out when a noise penetrated his senses. He shot forward and reached for the gun before his grandmother's possessions reoriented him and he relaxed. Don't need it, dude. It was only someone coming up the sidewalk.

Not wanting anyone to see him without his prosthetic, he quickly hopped on his one good leg across the room. When he saw her through the screen, he stopped. "Sophie." He should've known she'd come.

She faltered halfway up the steps. "Hello, Noah."

God, what a sight. He wished he had his camera. High on the hill as they were, the treetops, with their spring leaves, framed her face, a face that had barely changed after all these years. Her eyes held a few laugh lines, but their color was as green as he remembered. Even her hair was still as dark as midnight.

He grabbed the doorframe for balance and hoped like hell she stayed outside. "How have you been?"

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

That was cold, abrupt. "I'm guessing Mirabelle's lost its Welcome Capital of the World status."

"Why now? What do you want, Noah?"

She never had been one to fake nice. That's one of the reasons he'd liked her so much. Amidst the trappings of this fairyland, she'd been so real. "I don't want anything, Sophie. From anybody. Just leave me alone."

“Why can’t you be alone on someone else’s island?”

“Why are you so pissed off?”

She narrowed her eyes. “One day you ask me to marry you and the next day you’re gone?”

“You turned me down, Sophie.”

“And you never said goodbye.”

“Ooh,” he groaned, shaking his head. “I said goodbye all right. For three days and nights in that Bayfield motel room.” Tenderly, passionately, fast, slow, laughing and crying. It was the only time in his entire life four walls hadn’t closed in on him. “At least, that’s the way I remember it.”

She looked down, as if trying desperately to wipe the images from her mind. “I needed to hear the words.”

“You knew I was leaving, Sophie. With...or without you.” If he’d really loved her and if she’d really loved him, they’d have found a way to be together. True love always found a way. Well, Sophie had found her way all right. Without Noah.

“No phone calls. No letters.” The fire was back in her eyes. “Nothing for damned close to fifteen years.”

“Well, it sure as hell didn’t take you long to replace me.” It couldn’t have been much more than a few months after Noah had left that she’d married his brother, Isaac. His own brother. Self-righteous anger boiled to the surface. “Married, two kids. Sounds like you and Isaac got along fine without me.”

Her face flaming, she stalked across the porch.

“Don’t!” He reached for the knob, but she was quicker.

She yanked open the screen door, cranked her hand back to slap him and stopped. Her gaze flew downward. She took in the one empty leg of his jeans and her fingers collapsed into a fist.

“Go ahead,” he said, through clenched teeth. “Hit me! I’m sure I deserve it.”

“You’re an asshole, you know that?”

Yeah, he knew.

“Isaac died more than two years ago.” She let the storm door slam shut and pounded off the porch.

CHAPTER THREE

ISAAC.DEAD?

After climbing the hill toward the small cemetery behind Mirabelle’s only church, Noah reached the wrought-iron gate, his hands shaking, his breathing uneven, his thoughts disjointed. He couldn’t believe his older brother was gone.

Looking past the weathered tombstones of the island's first settlers, the names engraved there as familiar to him as his own, he located the Bennett family headstone, a pale gray granite monstrosity, and forced himself to close the distance, one slow step at a time.

Though the cemetery was well-maintained, short grass infringed on the edges of the ground markers and dirt partially obscured the names. The middle two granite slabs were his grandparents. The two on the left were an aunt who'd died as a child and an uncle who'd been killed in military service. The marker on the right was new.

Noah fell awkwardly to his knees and brushed the granite clean. Isaac Andrew Bennett. Seeing his brother's name, his birthday and date of death didn't make the truth any more real. This had to be a bad dream. It had to be. Shit like this had happened to him over and over again in that damned hospital. Any minute he'd awaken from this nightmarish sleep. Any minute. He squeezed his eyes closed, hoping that when he opened them he'd be anywhere but on Mirabelle. Wake up. Wake up.

A robin chirped cheerfully from the branches of a nearby maple, and the sounds of a lawn mower buzzed in the distance. The scent of lilacs hung in the still, warm air. This was real. Very real. His older brother was dead. Gone.

Snippets of memories flashed through Noah's mind. Isaac and him fighting over what to watch on TV, fishing off the pier and snowshoeing. Isaac had always wanted to go traipsing through the snow in the midst of the most miserable blizzards. He'd loved being outside, especially in winter, and he'd loved this island, almost as much as Noah hated it.

How could two brothers be so different? Even in the troublemaking department they were like night and day. Oh, they'd both caused plenty of it. Creeping through this cemetery on Halloween and scaring the younger kids. Raiding McGregor's apple trees. Toilet-papering the Andersens' place. He could go on and on recalling the shenanigans he and Isaac had pulled. But no matter what they'd done together, Noah had always been the one who'd gotten caught. Trouble had a way of sliding off Isaac like water on a duck's back. Except for this time.

Noah traced the engraved letters of Isaac's name on the granite slab and, inside him, sadness over the loss warred with anger over what Isaac had done. He'd never forgiven his brother for marrying Sophie, and now he wasn't sure he'd ever forgive him for dying before Noah had gotten the chance to speak his mind, before he'd been able to find it inside himself, if that was possible, to forgive his brother and move on.

"Isaac," he said aloud. "What the hell?"

A horse snuffled somewhere behind him and Noah started at the sound. Adrenaline rushed through him as if nothing less than a gun was pointed at his head.

You're on Mirabelle, he reminded himself. You're safe. Safe. He took a deep breath and turned around.

This, Noah did not need. Mirabelle Island's Chief of Police, Jim Bennett, reined in his horse and stopped at the entrance to the cemetery. Apparently the island rumor mill had been working at lightning speed.

The chief dismounted and walked across the grounds, only to tower over where Noah knelt in the grass. Fifteen plus years of distance made the man no less intimidating. "Hello, Noah."

“Dad.” Noah glanced at Isaac’s marker and barely held the tears in check. “How’d it happen?”

“He was shot during a raid on an illegal fishing operation.”

Isaac, always the devoted son, had followed family tradition of military service or law enforcement and become a game warden. In idyllic northern Wisconsin, arresting deer poachers should’ve been the most dangerous part of his job. Instead, he’d been murdered over fish. Fish. It didn’t make any sense. None of it made any sense.

“Did Sophie... Did he make it to a hospital?”

“No. He was hit in the chest. Died instantly at the scene.”

Noah looked away. The thought of his brother shot and killed violently like so many soldiers he’d seen through the years was too much. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Couldn’t find you. I called your editor, your agent. Every number I had. After a while, it didn’t seem to matter.”

Noah glanced at the date on the marker. He’d been in the mountains of either Afghanistan or Pakistan, about as unreachable as he’d ever been. Still, an urgent message could’ve made it to Noah through the military. After all these years, his dad knew that. He hadn’t wanted Noah to come back, that much was obvious.

“I should have been here,” Noah said. “I would’ve wanted to be here. That wasn’t right.”

“I figured if you’d wanted to stay in touch,” his dad said, “you’d have checked in.”

The first years after he’d left Mirabelle, Noah had called every so often. Other than news of happenings on Mirabelle his dad rarely had anything to say. Eventually, Noah didn’t have anything to say, either, and there was a lot of dead air. He’d resorted to occasional letters, even though they often hadn’t been acknowledged.

“So what’re you doing here now?” his dad asked.

Noah debated, lies or the truth? For some reason a lie seemed appropriate. With a cop for a father, he’d gotten good at it at a very early age. “Thought I’d check up on Grandma’s place. See if there was anything that needed doing.”

His dad mulled that one over and didn’t seem to be buying it.

“And I needed to stay relatively close to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester,” Noah added for good measure. “It’s a little easier to get there from here than Rhode Island.” They wanted him to check in with a physical therapist, but he’d be damned if he’d go. He’d had enough of doctors, nurses and the like to last several lifetimes.

“How long you planning on staying?” The tone of his dad’s voice made the innocent enough question sound more like, “When’re you leaving?”

Why Noah had expected anything different was beyond him. “No more than a month or two. Why?” Sick of looking up at his father, he eased himself up onto his good foot. He was inordinately pleased to

notice that he'd actually grown quite a bit taller than his dad. Jim Bennett had, of course, aged. He'd put on some pounds around the waist, deep wrinkles marked his forehead and his hair had thinned and turned completely gray. Only his mustache held any remnants of his original dark hair. "You ready to escort me to the ferry dock, tell me to get the hell off your island and never come back?"

"No." His dad ignored the bait, glancing instead at Noah's legs, his jaw clenching with some unknown emotion.

"What is it then?" Noah asked, raising his voice. Fifteen years had gone by and he still felt himself falling right back into the old argumentative patterns. No one could cut Noah deeper or quicker than Jim Bennett. "What did I ever do to hurt you?" Noah asked. "It can't be because I didn't go into law enforcement, or do a military stint. You hated me long before that."

His dad's gaze flew to Noah's face. "I don't hate you."

"Then what is it, Dad? I want to know."

As if Noah hadn't said a word his dad mounted his horse. "Stay as long as you like, Noah. As long as you like."

JIMBENNETT PACED HIS KITCHEN floor waiting for night to fall. All he could think about was the sight of Noah kneeling at Isaac's grave. His eyes watered, blurring the image. Dammit. There were two things parents should never have to do, outlive their own children and be forced to make a choice between themselves and their own flesh and blood.

Feeling as if he might wear a track in the linoleum, he stopped in front of the sink and glanced out the window. "Oh, hell," he murmured to himself. "It's dark enough."

Taking off out the back door of his house, he quickly headed four blocks down the street and then cut through the woods. The moment he caught sight of the gray-and-white cottage with its wide front porch and four-season addition off the side, his shoulders relaxed and the knot in his stomach loosened. He knocked on the front door.

A moment later, Josie appeared, her knitting bag in hand. "How many times do I have to tell you, Jim, that you don't need to knock."

"It's your house."

"Which is why I gave you a key."

He made to step inside.

"I was just on my way out to sit on the porch." She flicked on the porch light, stepped outside and headed toward the swing.

"No. Let's go inside."

"You go inside." Josie sat down and pulled out her latest project, a pair of socks for her granddaughter living in eastern Iowa. "After spending the entire day in that kitchen getting ready for Marty's wedding I

need the fresh air.” Being head cook at the Mirabelle Island Inn, she’d be taking the brunt of an influx of close to a hundred people for Marty’s wedding. “It’s a beautiful night, and I’m going to guess you could use the fresh air.”

Jim glanced uneasily around. “All right. Fine. Have it your way.” He flicked off the porch light, cutting down the chances of anyone seeing him here at Josie’s this late at night. The jaws on this island were flapping about his business enough as it was with Noah coming home.

“How do you expect me to see what I’m knitting?”

“You can make a pair of socks in your sleep.” As if to prove his point, her needles clicked away, never missing a beat.

What he hated most about the island gossip chain was when the rest of the island knew about things that concerned him before he did. They’d known when Isaac had been given a scholarship to college. When Noah had broken his arm falling out of one of the Rousseaus’ trees. They’d all guessed Sophie was pregnant before the thought had occurred to Jim. They’d even known about Gloria leaving.

He’d been at his desk when Herman’s wife had called. Arlo had said something to his wife, Lynn, about Gloria going on a vacation. He’d taken her to the pier with several suitcases. Lynn had called someone, that someone had called several other someones, and in no time the entire island had been privy to one of Jim’s greatest failures. Who could blame him for wanting to keep parts of his life private?

He sat on the swing next to Josie, took his pipe and pouch out of his front pocket and packed some tobacco. A moment later, he struck a match, puffed and let go a long sigh.

“Have you seen him yet?” Josie asked.

There was no need to specify Noah. He knew. “Found him out at the cemetery late this afternoon.”

Her hands paused.

He took another puff on his pipe and stared out at the half moon rising over Lake Superior. “Isaac dying was bad. The worst thing I’ve ever gone through. But I’m telling you, Josie, seeing Noah kneeling at his brother’s grave...about brought me to my knees,” he said, his voice cracking.

She put her hand on his leg.

There was no doubt that Noah coming home after all this time was nothing short of bittersweet for Jim. His conscience gnawed at the lining of his stomach. “Maybe I should’ve tried harder to find him. A man deserves to bury his own brother.”

Then again, Noah coming home would’ve opened up a whole big can of worms. Nope. Noah had made his bed when he’d left. Jim might have to atone for other things, but not telling Noah about Isaac dying wasn’t one of them. “I guess Noah being here for the funeral wouldn’t have changed anything. He couldn’t have brought Isaac back.”

“Wasn’t there any part of you happy to see your own son?”

“Happy? Sure. I suppose.” He puffed on his pipe. “He’s a man now, Josie. I’ve seen pictures of him in magazines and on the backs of his books, but that’s nothing like seeing him in person. He’s bigger than

Isaac and built differently. His shoulders are broader. But seeing him limp on that fake leg? I sure as hell wasn't ready for that."

"How did he seem?"

"Oh, hell, he hasn't changed. Not one damned bit. Still as angry as ever. Still hates me."

"He doesn't hate you."

"Coulda fooled me. Since the day Gloria left he's been ornery and contrary. I say black, he says white. I don't think he'll ever change." Jim had always wondered if Noah hadn't blamed him for Gloria leaving, and he wouldn't have been too far off the mark.

"You still angry at him?"

"Angry? I don't know." He shook his head. "I'll tell you what, though, he's still the spitting image of Gloria. Those two were like peas in a pod."

"Well, there you have it." Her needles clicked on. "You divorced Gloria, didn't you?"

SOPHIE COULDN'T SLEEP. She lay in bed, telling herself that it probably had to do with that late-afternoon diet cola, or nerves over Marty's wedding plans, an unanswered e-mail or other work-related issues. Excuses, all of them. A violent storm of thoughts whirled through her head, making it impossible for her to shut down. How unlike her to not be able to disconnect. Shutting down was an art she'd perfected through the years. Why was it failing her now?

Noah. Her armor had been useless around him.

After flipping back the lightweight quilt, she dressed in sweats, checked on both kids to make sure they were sound asleep and set out into the warm night air for a walk. Other than Duffy's Pub and a couple other bars downtown, Mirabelle closed up after ten o'clock, so the only light illuminating her journey was a bright half moon and the dim, old-fashioned lampposts lining Island Drive. In truth, she probably could've made her way around this island in complete darkness, she knew it so well.

One mile led to another and, before Sophie knew it, she found herself taking an overgrown path toward the lighthouse. The lighthouse. Hers and Noah's. Old force of habit, she guessed, reinstating itself along with Noah's return.

No one usually went to the northeast side of the island. Surrounded as it was by undeveloped Wisconsin state parkland, this point was one of the few spots on the entire island a person could go and not worry about being bothered. None of the residents cared to hike this far off the main road and if visitors wanted lighthouse charm, the one in town was more easily accessible.

She cleared the white pine forest and looked out over the moonlit surface of the water. Ahead of her, like a postcard, the lighthouse stood sentinel on the island's rocky northeast peninsula. Although she hadn't been here in more than a decade, she and Noah had come here often, sneaking out of their houses late at night for time alone together. They'd stashed a blanket, lantern, sodas or a six-pack and food behind some bushes near the lighthouse foundation. How many hours had they lingered here talking about their future, where they'd go to college, where they'd live and, always, where they'd travel?

A lot of good it had done.

She picked her way over the barely discernible path toward a large, flat boulder at the water's edge, scooped up some rocks and skipped them across the relatively calm surface. Memories flooded in with every soft wave hitting the shore. The remembered sound of Noah's laughter echoed off the lighthouse and bounced off the water, free and unbound.

"I would've guessed you didn't come here anymore." The deep, masculine voice came from behind her.

She spun around and found Noah sitting with his back against the lighthouse, one leg stretched in front of him. "Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to scare you."

The sight of him now was no less upsetting than when she'd first seen him at Grandma Bennett's house. She barely kept herself from charging over there and...and...kicking him. "Scare me? Hardly. And I haven't been here for years."

Why was she here now, anyway? It was bad enough Noah was back on the island, but coming here, to the place they'd first made love, what had she been thinking? She started across the rocks on her way back toward the road.

"I couldn't sleep, either," he said before she'd taken more than a step or two. "Too many memories." He was wearing a stocking cap and had a heavy wool blanket wrapped around him, making it look as if he planned on camping there for the night. It might have been the beginning of summer, but on big water like Lake Superior the nights could be cold even after the hottest of days.

Curiosity got the better of her. "How long have you been out here?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Couple hours."

Hours. Sitting at their lighthouse, remembering, reliving. When she looked into his tired eyes she understood. That didn't mean she was any less angry. She started again toward the road.

"Sophie?" he said. "I'm sorry."

She stopped. For what? She wanted to scream at him. For leaving me here all alone? For ruining my dreams and breaking my heart?

"About Isaac."

Oh. Isaac. Sadness dampened the rage.

"If I'd known," he said. "I'd have come back."

She heard him swallow and softened for a moment. As much as she hated this man, he'd just discovered he'd lost his only sibling. "Your dad tried—"

"Not very hard, Soph. The military was always able, someway, somehow, to get urgent messages to me. He didn't want me coming back."

A small part of her had probably always wondered about that. "You being here wouldn't have changed

anything.”

“He was my brother. I should’ve been here to say goodbye. Regardless of the issues between all of us, I would’ve been here for you.”

Then it was probably for the best that he hadn’t been here for the funeral. There’s no telling what kind of fool she’d have made of herself in that vulnerable state. But she wasn’t vulnerable now. “Why now, Noah? Why the hell did you come back after all this time?”

He tossed a few rocks out into the water. “The truth?”

“What do you think?”

He studied her while he seemed to be deciding what, if anything, to say. “Okay,” he said. “The truth. Since losing my foot, I can’t sleep. When I do, I have constant nightmares. I can barely hold down a meal. I have a hard time concentrating. I can’t write, can’t take pictures. And I’ve got a book due in a couple months. I could lose my job, my career.” He patted his prosthetic. “And I sometimes have what’s called phantom pains that are almost worse than the pain after the actual explosion.”

“In short, you’re a basket case.”

“It could be worse. I could develop a full-blown case of post-traumatic stress disorder. That’s what my doctors are worried about. PTSD.”

“So your doctors wanted you to come here?”

He nodded.

“Why? What’s here for you? I don’t get it.”

He looked away. The only sound was that of the frigid waters of Lake Superior lapping against the rocks. “I don’t know if you can understand,” he said, sounding very tired.

“Try me.”

He sighed. “Since leaving Mirabelle, I’ve pretty much moved from one war-torn region in the world to the next. I’ve been shot at more times than I can count and actually hit a couple times. I’ve been blindfolded and taken to secret rebel camps. Nearly kidnapped twice. Spent many nights wondering if I was going to be alive in the morning. After more than a decade in places like Bosnia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq...” He paused. “Mirabelle is the only place...”

“You feel safe.” For a moment, she tried putting herself in his shoes and, in spite of every intention to the contrary, sympathy pricked her conscience.

He wouldn’t meet her eyes. “One full night’s sleep, Sophie. I can’t tell you what I’d do for a straight eight hours.” The moonlight cast pale light over his face, making him look almost ghostly, but the dark circles under his eyes were painfully real.

That’s when she noticed the unopened bottle of vodka next to him and wondered what he was waiting for. Maybe this end was no less than he deserved. “So am I supposed to feel sorry for you?”

“No.” He shook his head. “You don’t need to feel anything for me.”

“How long are you staying?”

“As long as it takes.”

That could be weeks. Oh, my God, months. She wasn’t sure she could handle more than a few days. What about Lauren and Kurt? What if Noah started asking questions? The possibility made her stomach churn. She started again toward the road.

“Sophie—”

“I don’t get it!” Unbidden, the words burst from her mouth. “You never called! Never wrote,” she said, needing to get this off her chest once and for all. “My dad died, and you left. You left!”

Her dad had suffered a massive heart attack and died right before she and Noah had graduated from high school. They’d been planning on heading off to college in the fall. Instead, she’d had to stay to help her mother with the inn. She’d had no choice. The Mirabelle Island Inn had been owned and operated by a Rousseau for hundreds of years, and her two sisters and Marty had been little more than teenagers at the time. Then her mother had gotten sick right after Noah had left and the decision had been all but taken out of her hands.

Overnight she’d gone from being on the cusp of seeing her dreams realized to having to run the inn and helping to take care of three younger siblings. And Noah? He’d left to make his dreams come true. Without her.

“You know I was the only one capable of helping my mom with the inn,” she said. “We plan a lifetime together and one snag comes along and you’re gone.”

“Hell, Sophie,” he said, sounding weary. “Back then every day on this island felt like an eternity to me. I had a college scholarship that was going to disappear if I didn’t show up on campus that fall. I was eighteen. An impatient, stupid kid. If I could do it over again...” He paused. “I couldn’t stay. You couldn’t leave,” he whispered. “No matter how much we want things to work out, Sophie, some things aren’t meant to be.”

“That’s what you’ve told yourself all these years, isn’t it, Noah. To clear your conscience.”

“No, Sophie.” He picked up a rock and angrily whipped it out into the water. “You marrying Isaac only a few months after I left took care of my conscience just fine.”

Maybe she should’ve told him the truth back then. Maybe—No! Her spine stiffened. He’s the one who left. He made his choice when he walked off this island and never looked back. “Well, at least I found out what you were made of before it was too late.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“That I obviously married the more dependable of the Bennett boys.”

“Boy, you got that right,” he bit back at her. “Now that we understand each other, I’ll do my best to stay out of your way.”

“You do that.” As she stalked away the unmistakable sound of a cap opening on a bottle followed her. Maybe he’d drink that vodka, suffer hypothermia and die out here.

She should be so lucky.

CHAPTER FOUR

A WHITE-TAILED DEER BOLTED twenty feet in front of Sophie as she came close to finishing her usual five-mile morning run that twisted and turned through Mirabelle’s undeveloped state land, continued with a jaunt straight through the Rousseau forest and ended back at the inn. A pair of gray squirrels scurried across the damp, leafy carpet and a woodpecker hammered after breakfast on a dying, if not already dead, pine tree that had been struck by lightning the previous summer.

She’d learned years ago to take the quiet morning hours for herself. Sometimes the kids or work took priority. More often than not, she reserved this precious time for walking or running through the forest, her wild sanctuary.

It was also the place that helped ground her in her ancestry. On windy days her father’s quiet, but authoritative voice seemed to whisper through the treetops. You’re a part of this island, cherie... You more than anyone have to keep the Rousseau traditions alive. And so she had, from the menu at the Fourth of July corn boil to the handmade Christmas decorations to the brand of New Year’s champagne. She felt his approval every time she ran this path.

This morning, though, her run didn’t have its usual calming effect. She couldn’t seem to slow herself down and maintain a steady pace. Images of Noah, one legged, standing at Grandma Bennett’s door and sitting, wrapped in that blanket at the lighthouse, kept popping into her mind, driving her on, faster and faster.

She burst through the tree line and onto the inn grounds, slowed to a walk and glanced at her watch. Normally, she ran her five-mile track around the island in an hour, but this morning she’d finished in record time.

While stretching her arms and neck, she looked up the hillside and strained to see through the trees. Was Noah awake? Probably not. It was early. The sun was only now rising over Lake Superior. Curls of fog clung to the water’s calm surface like a fuzzy blanket, and she couldn’t help imagining him sleeping, couldn’t help wondering if he still slept naked. That was a dangerous thought and a useless one at that.

She drew in a breath of the cool morning air before quietly entering her living quarters by the back door of the inn and peeking in on Kurt and Lauren. They were both snoozing away in their respective bedrooms, and what else should they be doing on their first day of summer break?

After showering and dressing, Sophie left a note on the kitchen table for the kids to check in at her office after they’d had breakfast, and then she entered the inn through the passageway into the kitchen.

Josie was busy at the stove, her thick black hair streaked with coarse gray strands drawn back in a large clip. Her white bib apron, fresh that morning and tied over a red T-shirt and khaki pants, had yet to become the least bit soiled.

“Morning, Josie.”

“Good morning, Sophie. Your coffee’s ready. Made an egg bake for Marty and his fiancée, or would

you rather have your usual?"

She shrugged. "Whatever you've already cooked up will be perfect. If you've got extras." She could live without oatmeal and fresh fruit for one morning.

Jim Bennett, Sophie's father-in-law, sat at the wide metal counter, sipping coffee. Every morning, provided there was time after his usual early morning fishing jaunt, he could be found in that exact location.

Jim and Josie were discreet about their relationship, but on an island this small nothing stayed secret for long. Jim had been divorced for decades, since Gloria had left, and Josie's husband had died several years ago. Why they didn't get married or move in together was anyone's guess.

Jim looked up from the Bayfield newspaper. "You're looking very relaxed today, Sophie."

And looks could be deceiving. She planted a kiss on his forehead and poured herself a cup of coffee. "I hate to say it, but you look tired."

"Nah, I'm fine."

His jacket smelled like sweet pipe tobacco and Sophie got a bit sentimental thinking about all this man had done for her through the years. She rubbed his shoulders. "Tense, too. I'm going to guess you've seen Noah."

Was it her imagination or had his shoulders tightened even more. "Yep," he murmured.

"You know, you could've warned me he was coming."

"I would have. If I'd known. The first I heard about it was from Lynn. Arlo told her after dropping Marty off and then she called the station."

Lynn was Arlo's wife. She ran Duffy's Pub and Arlo ran the stables and carriage business. Very little happened on this island without those two knowing about it.

Josie set a plate heaping with a baked mixture of scrambled eggs, sausage, cheese and veggies on the table in front of him and another plate with much smaller portions in front of Sophie. "You two eat before it gets cold."

"Thanks, Josie." She took a bite, but the food lodged in her throat. "Did you know about his accident?"

"That was no accident."

"But you knew?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Jim pursed his lips, considering. "I didn't want you feeling sorry for him."

That wasn't likely to happen any time soon. She glanced at Josie. "You knew, too, didn't you?"

She nodded.

“That means the whole island knows. Everyone except me. I can’t believe neither one of you told me.”

Jim ate a few forkfuls, but there was clearly something bothering him. He dropped his fork onto his plate. It clanged in the large open space of the industrial-sized kitchen. “Goddammit! I told him it would happen someday,” Jim blurted out. “You can’t flirt with disaster the way he has for years and not get burned.”

“There’s no point getting into this now,” Josie said softly.

“Did you know, too, that his doctors are worried he might develop post-traumatic stress disorder?”

Jim shook his head. “When did you talk to him?”

“Last night. I went for a walk and ran into him.”

“Don’t you dare feel sorry for him, you hear me?” Jim pushed away his plate of food, stood and pulled on his jacket. “For your own good, stay away from Noah. He’ll run again. Just like his mother.”

“You think I don’t know that?” she yelled. “You think I’ve forgotten how I felt when he left?”

The day she’d woken up alone in that Bayfield hotel room she’d promised herself she would never again love any man the way she’d loved Noah Bennett. Completely, recklessly, passionately. “Never again, Jim. Never.”

NOAH SAT ON THE FRONT PORCH swing holding a steaming cup of coffee in his hands, but after finishing off the better part of that bottle of vodka last night he wasn’t sure he’d be able to hold anything down. Scraping and priming the house? Not in this lifetime. He could only stare at the paint peeling off the railing.

A screen door slammed from the vicinity of the inn and he wondered if Sophie was out and about. Seeing her at the lighthouse—their lighthouse—last night had about killed him. There were few places on this island not fraught with memories of their childhood, their friendship, their love, though the lighthouse—the place they’d first made love—was the most poignant of all. But he couldn’t let himself remember what it’d felt like to hold her, make love to her. He’d been down that road before and all it had led to was physical and emotional agony.

Kids’ voices coming up the hill sidetracked him, and he craned his neck to look over the porch rail. A boy and a girl. Sophie and Isaac’s kids, no doubt.

A couple years after he’d left the island, his dad had told him they’d had children and that’d changed everything for Noah. Overnight, the desire to get as far away from Mirabelle, Sophie and Isaac as he could manage burned in his gut. He’d ended up taking an overseas journalism internship and from there traveled the world.

To hell with Sophie and Isaac, but the kids? Several times, he’d thought about sending Christmas presents or tokens of his travels to Kurt and Lauren, but in the end it had been too painful to make

contact with his niece and nephew. He'd had to shut out the whole lot of them.

Sophie and Isaac. Married. Sharing their life together. Making love. Making babies. It hadn't made sense, then or now. Isaac had always wanted to have kids, but how could he have had sex with Sophie? How could she have had sex with his brother? It had all been too painful, and seeing the kids suddenly made it all too real.

"I'm going to Kally's. Where are you going?"

"Ben's. Then to Zach's."

"You have to be home for supper. It's your turn to do the dishes tonight."

"I washed 'em yesterday."

"No, you didn't!"

"Then what did we have for dinner? Huh? Huh?"

They looked like teenagers, but that couldn't be right. Mentally, he calculated back to when his dad had told him about the twins. They couldn't be older than eleven, maybe twelve.

What hit Noah first was how much Lauren's face reminded him of Sophie as a young girl. Darken the young girl's hair, put in some waves, and bam, young Sophie, ready to skip stones at the lighthouse, or kayak to one of the other Apostle Islands to explore the caves. Kurt, with his startling blue eyes, favored Isaac.

Dammit, Isaac. Why did you have to take Sophie? You had everything else.

Yeah, but you left her, you idiot.

Doesn't matter. She belonged to me.

You left. She stayed. She chose.

The twins walked across his grandmother's yard, apparently on the way to friends' houses, and came to a quick stop on seeing him sitting on the porch. Staring back at Noah, they seemed intensely curious, making him wonder what, if anything, Sophie had told them about him.

"Hey there," he said. "You must be Sophie's kids."

His niece and nephew. Damn. He was an uncle. Of sorts.

The girl nodded.

"You Noah?" the boy asked. His young voice, on the cusp of puberty, fluctuated from high to low and back again, as if unable to make up its mind. Grow up, or stay young?

Like a punch in his gut, Noah realized he'd been younger than Kurt when his mother had left. Noah had come home from school one afternoon to find his dad and Isaac sitting at the kitchen table. His dad had looked up at Noah and said, "Your mother left this morning, and, this time, she won't be coming back.

What do you want for supper?" and that had been the extent of their conversation.

Sophie's mom had been the one to explain it to him. "It's not you, Noah, sweetheart," she'd said days later. "It's this island. A person either loves it, or she hates it."

It wasn't always as simple as that.

"Yep, I'm Noah." He nodded at the kids. "Lauren and Kurt?"

Lauren smiled and took a step or two toward the porch. "Marty said you're a writer."

So Marty, not Sophie, had been talking about him.

"No, he didn't," Kurt argued, keeping his distance on the lawn. "He said he's a photographer."

"Actually, I'm both."

"Will you be taking the pictures for Marty's wedding?" she asked.

"Not that kind of photographer."

"What other kind is there?"

"I'm a photojournalist. I travel, write books and articles, take pictures."

"I can't wait to travel," Lauren said. "I want to go everywhere. Have you ever been to Tokyo?"

"Nope." There weren't any wars in Japan.

"Marty said you were in an explosion." Kurt was clearly intrigued. "A roadside bomb went off in Iraq."

Noah nodded.

"Ever been shot at?"

"A few times." Noah didn't bother telling Kurt about his stint covering civil unrest in Haiti. There was nothing heroic about sleeping in a bathtub while bullets zinged overhead. "I took two bullets in Afghanistan. Right here and here." He pointed once near his shoulder, again at his thigh. "Left a couple of nice scars." He'd been lucky. The bullets had missed bone and went clear through muscle. "I had a flak jacket on, otherwise I wouldn't be alive today."

More and more these days he was considering settling down at his house in Rhode Island and focusing on his books.

"Do you carry a gun?" Kurt's face lit up. "Did you ever see Osama bin Laden?"

"No, I've never seen bin Laden." He laughed, sidestepping the question about the gun. "But I was with our military forces when they were fighting the Taliban."

"Cool."

In some ways, yes. Others, definitely no.

The clip, clop, clip of a single horse's hooves drew their attention toward the rider coming up the hill. Dark blue uniform. Hat and shield. Ah, hell. Now what? Too early in the morning for this.

"Hi, Grandpa," the twins said, practically in unison, clearly comfortable in the man's presence.

"Hey, there, Miss Mirabelle," his dad said to Lauren. "Young man," he said, nodding to Kurt. "Morning, Noah." He took off his hat, and his mouth flattened.

"Morning, Dad."

His father turned back to the kids, love and tolerance abundant in his damned grandpa smile. Go figure. "Did you two remember to check in with your mom before heading out this morning?"

"No." Kurt rolled his eyes. Lauren put a somewhat defiant hand on her hip.

"Well, then you know exactly what you need to do before you head off to any friends' houses, don't you? Hop to it."

"We're having a bonfire tonight," Lauren said to Noah. "You should come."

Noah opened his mouth, but he wasn't sure how to politely decline.

"I'm sure Noah has other stuff going on, kids," the chief said.

"Maybe another night," Noah offered.

"Okay," Lauren said. "Marty said he wants one every night he's here."

"Later," Kurt said.

"Bye." Lauren's hair flew when she spun around and raced her brother down the hill.

"Nice kids."

The horse shook his big brown head, shifted, and his dad loosened the reins. "Isaac was a good dad. He and Sophie did okay." His dad cleared his throat and looked out over the great expanse of Lake Superior.

"Something on your mind, Dad?"

"Yeah. I think it's best if you steer clear of Sophie."

Noah wasn't exactly sure why, but this pissed him off more than anything else. He'd been a black sheep as far as these islanders were concerned, never fitting in, always wanting something different for his life, but he'd never been a serious troublemaker. He'd never thrown it in their faces.

"Sophie can decide for herself who she wants to be around," Noah said. "At least she always did in the past."

“Sophie’s too softhearted for her own good, and you know it. With Isaac gone, I don’t want you getting any ideas.”

“You didn’t want me to know he’d died, did you? You didn’t want me coming back.” Amazingly enough, his father’s words and actions could still hurt.

“She doesn’t need you messing up her life—”

“We were kids. Remember? I never messed—”

“Bullshit!” The horse snuffled and pawed a front hoof in the dirt as if reacting to its rider’s anger. “Kids or not, she was hurt after you left. Until she and Isaac got together. No one on this island wants to see her go through that again. Not that you’d give a damn.”

Noah barely held his temper in check. “I care about Sophie more than you could ever understand.”

“You sure have a strange way of showing it.”

“Why do you think I’ve stayed away all these years?”

“You and me never did get along. That doesn’t have anything to do with Sophie.”

“Not everything’s about you, Dad.”

The chief studied him, hard. “You’re saying you stayed away from Mirabelle for Sophie’s sake?”

Silently, Noah held his father’s gaze.

“All right then.” His dad set his hat back on his head and turned his horse toward the street. “At least we agree on one thing.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“GOT IT!” SOPHIE YELLED, positioning herself directly under the volleyball’s trajectory. She popped the ball into the air, hoping to set it up for Marty, but she’d miscalculated.

“Dang, Sophie.” Her brother had to dive to hit the ball over the net. “That was a close one.”

“Sorry.”

It was late Sunday afternoon and Marty was taking a break from all the wedding preparations for a friendly game of beach volleyball with Lauren, Kurt and Sophie. Sophie should have been relaxed, calm, having fun. She wasn’t. The volleyball court faced inland toward Grandma Bennett’s and she couldn’t stop looking uphill.

“Game point,” Marty said, grabbing the ball for his serve. He hit it over the net and Kurt returned it.

The ball zoomed past Sophie. Too late, she dove and landed in the sand.

“Get in the game, Soph!” Marty yelled.

“Okay, okay,” she snapped back.

Since running into Noah at their lighthouse a couple days ago, she hadn’t once seen him out and about. She hadn’t noticed him in his yard or on the porch, in town or at the beach. The house shades were still closed. It didn’t matter the time of day or night, the house looked the same. Shades drawn. No lights flickering from within.

She’d thought Noah staying out of her way would ease her mind. Instead his vanishing act had set in motion a different set of worries. What if he did develop PTSD? What if her wish had come true and he’d drunk himself to death out at the lighthouse?

“You guys bombed!” Kurt heckled.

The kids—and Marty, for that matter—had been hooting and hollering at every point they earned. “Your serve.” Marty tossed Lauren the ball. “Let’s see what you can do, munchkin.”

Lauren glared at Marty. She hated that baby nickname.

“Right here, munchkin, right here!” Marty yelled, clapping his hands together.

“You’re toast, Uncle Marty.” Lauren grinned. She stepped back to the serving line, her face set with concentration. Tossing the ball into the air, she whacked it over the net. Marty popped the ball up, right above Sophie. Sophie jumped, planning to tip the ball over the net, and miscalculated the angle. The ball hit the ground by her feet.

“Woo-hoo!” The kids screamed triumphantly.

“I want a rematch!” Marty said.

“You’re on,” Kurt yelled.

“Tomorrow,” Marty said.

“Now or never,” Lauren challenged.

“No can do, munchkin,” Marty explained. “I promised Brittany I’d take her to the mainland to check out the casino we’re taking everyone to next week.”

The casino on the mainland? This was the first Sophie had heard of an excursion off Mirabelle as being part of the wedding festivities.

“Oh, good excuse, Uncle Marty,” Kurt teased, running off to join Lauren.

“Tomorrow, you guys are going down!” Marty yelled before joining Brittany on the sidelines. “You should have played,” he said to her. “We needed you.”

“Are you kidding? Volleyball would so ruin my nails.” Brittany wrapped her arm around Marty’s waist.

“You want to come to the casino with us, Soph?” Marty asked.

“Nah, I don’t think so.” Sophie didn’t do spur-of-the-moment jaunts off the island.

“Oh, come on,” Brittany urged. “It’ll be fun.”

Leaving Mirabelle was never Sophie’s idea of fun. It’d been almost a year since the last time she’d gone to the mainland for a back-to-school shopping trip with the kids. Just the idea of getting into a car and driving down a highway at fifty-five miles an hour made her heart race.

It hadn’t always been this way. When she’d been young, Sophie had loved heading off into the outside world, but then her dad had died and she’d taken over running the inn. One thing had led to another and before she’d realized it, years had gone by without going to the mainland. Now the only time Sophie ever left Mirabelle was after—and only after—weeks of advance planning, giving herself time to mentally prepare for stepping into the outside world. Necessity had somehow turned to a quiet acceptance.

“You sure you don’t want to come?” Marty asked.

“Positive,” Sophie said. “You guys have fun.” As they walked away, she called out, “Hey, Marty?”

He spun around. “Yeah?”

“Have you seen Noah at all?”

“No.” Frowning, he shook his head. “I went up to his house both yesterday and today to visit and drop off a wedding invitation.”

“And?”

“He never answered the door.”

Sophie glanced up the hill. You’ve always been our responsible one, she could hear her parents’ voices. Well, Noah is not my responsibility. Not. Not. Not .

The sooner he left this island, the better. For everyone.

NOAH STOOD BACK FROM the sheer curtains covering the front picture window and looked down the hill. From here he could see miles of the Mirabelle shoreline and, out ahead, the seemingly endless expanse of Lake Superior.

A white latticed gazebo near the point heralded the beginning of the Rousseau property line and beyond that, a great meandering lawn leading to the Mirabelle Island Inn’s sprawling veranda. Bookended with columned turrets and painted pristine white with a red tiled roof, the inn looked exactly as he remembered it, although the trees had grown, obscuring some of the property.

The back lawn of Mirabelle Island Inn, though, he could see as clear as a bell. People were playing croquet and horseshoes. He picked Sophie out at the volleyball net on the beach within seconds. Even if he’d wanted to—which he didn’t—there wasn’t much of a chance he’d be joining that crew. For the last several days, he hadn’t slept for more than a few hours a shot, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been able to hold down more than a mouthful or two of food. He was a mess and he sure as hell didn’t want to bring everyone else down.

He tore his gaze away from the window and glanced halfheartedly at the supplies—scrapers, brushes, primer and paint—he'd had delivered from the hardware store. For two days he'd been planning on getting outside and working on the house, and for two days he'd been coming up with excuses to stay inside. It was too hot, too cold, too cloudy, too sunny. Today the excuse was needing to get back to work on his book.

He sat at his grandmother's dining room table and stared at his laptop screen. The file with his manuscript about his stint in Iraq sat there, awaiting a word or two or thirty thousand. No matter what he did, or didn't do, he couldn't seem to string a sentence together to save his soul, and he couldn't motivate himself to care one way or the other. Not only hadn't he finished the damn thing, he'd yet to sort through his myriad files of photos to be included within the finished book.

He hated feeling this way and had no idea what to do to get back some semblance of normalcy, but it was becoming apparent that his doctors had been wrong. He'd been wrong. Coming to Mirabelle had been a mistake. He'd been blissful in his ignorance with regard to Isaac's death, and being near Sophie was far worse than not thinking about her at all these many years.

Sophie. He had a momentary thought of sending her a message. An SOS. Sail a paper airplane down the hill. Leave a window blind at a certain angle. Position rocks in particular patterns along the cobblestone road. Who needed cell phones or text messaging? He and Sophie, grounded or not, had always seemed to get through to each other when they'd needed each other the most.

Oh, Soph. Did you ever really love me?

That question had run through his mind many times through the years and he never came any closer to an answer, or maybe the answer was one he had a hard time accepting. He'd left and she'd married Isaac. Didn't that say it all?

More than once he'd wondered if Isaac had always had a thing for Sophie. Though Noah's brother had consistently denied any attraction, the summer Isaac graduated from college and returned home a full-fledged man was the same summer Sophie had bloomed into a woman. A man would have to have been blind not to notice, and it's not as if there had been a lot of options on the island.

What would've happened if Noah had stayed on Mirabelle? She would've had to choose between the two of them, and Noah had a feeling she wouldn't have chosen him.

The cursor stared at him from his laptop.

Start anywhere. The point was to start.

Tomorrow. He'd do it tomorrow. Noah dragged himself out of his chair and a jolt of pain, as if someone had suddenly pressed a live electrical wire to his knee, shot through his leg, making him stumble and nearly fall. Damned phantom pains! He flopped onto the couch, pulled off his prosthetic and threw it across the room. It crashed against the wall, making a satisfying hole.

"Sorry, Grandma. This isn't like me, I know. I'm not sure I'll ever beme again."

Coming back to Mirabelle had been the second biggest mistake of his life. He reached for another bottle of booze he never should've had delivered, but then drowning his pain had to be better than wallowing in it.

“GOOD AFTERNOON, ARLO,” Sophie said as the horse-drawn carriage passed her along Island Drive. After having started work quite early that morning, she’d decided to head to town before dinnertime for a few groceries. Only light, fluffy clouds dotted the clear blue sky and there was enough of a breeze to keep the gnats away.

“Ayep.” Arlo nodded back. “That it is, Sophie.”

The moment, in fact, would’ve been perfect, except that Arlo was only transporting a single couple from the ferry to their lodging destination. In Mirabelle’s heyday, his carriage as well as at least three more would’ve been loaded to the gills with guests and their luggage. Those booming business days were gone and didn’t look to be coming back any time soon.

Sophie’s family had weathered these kinds of slow times before, so the inn would be all right, but she wasn’t sure about some of the other establishments on the island. Resolving to bring up the issue with the town council after Marty’s wedding, Sophie continued her walk toward Main Street. She glanced up Bennett Hill.

As far as she knew, Noah hadn’t emerged from his grandmother’s house since the night she’d seen him at the lighthouse. With the blinds and curtains still drawn and no outside activity, the place looked as desolate today as it had before he arrived. He seemed to be taking his promise to stay out of her way to an extreme. Maybe he was in tougher shape than he’d looked. Then again, maybe it was none of her business.

She put Noah firmly out of her mind and continued on to Newman’s grocery store. Dan Newman, the owner, was putting out fresh produce on a display as she walked through the entrance. “Hello there, Sophie.”

“Hi, Dan.”

She put a few oranges in her basket and before she could stop herself asked, “Dan, have you seen Noah Bennett at all?”

“Yeah, I heard he was on the island.”

“Have you seen him? Here. In your store?” This was, after all, the only place to buy groceries on the island.

He pursed his lips. “Nope. Can’t say that I have.”

“He hasn’t bought any food?”

“Well, he did call here the other day to have some things delivered. Strange, though.”

“What?”

“We were out of a few things he’d ordered. When our delivery boy took them up later on, he said the other bags were still on the porch.”

“Did you call? Make sure Noah was okay?”

“It’s really none of my business, Sophie.”

“None of your—”

Since when had that ever stopped anyone on this island from helping another resident? Except that Noah, from the time he’d turned into an obstinate teenager, had been treated as more of an outsider than an islander, and somehow she’d let herself fall right into step with them.

She debated, get involved or stay out of it? Either course held its own pitfalls, but there was only one way to get Noah off her island and out of her life before he turned her world upside down. All over again.

After grabbing some staples, she rushed out the door. By the time she reached Grandma Bennett’s front steps, she was out of breath. The grocery bags were no longer on the porch, but there was no sign of life inside.

She rang the doorbell. Nothing. Pounded on the door. Still nothing. The door was locked. “Noah!” she yelled and then listened for any answering sounds. She pounded again. “Dammit, Noah, are you in there?”

“Go away.” Although the voice coming from inside the house was muffled, there was no doubt it was Noah.

“Open the door!”

He wasn’t moving around in there.

If memory served, Grandma Bennett had always kept an extra key under a rock by the garden hose in the back. Sophie ran around the corner of the house, found the old key nearly buried under years of decaying leaves and debris, and let herself in through the kitchen.

Despite being sunny and seventy-five degrees outside, the house was dark and had a dank feel. “Noah?”

“Dammit, Sophie. Go away.”

She found him in the living room, lying on the couch, looking as if he hadn’t shaved in a month. He was wearing shorts, making the fact that he wasn’t wearing his prosthetic immediately apparent. The vision of his leg cut off just below his knee made her throat close with emotion, but then she noticed the empty bottle of tequila on the floor by the coffee table. “Are you drunk?”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t.”

He put his hands on either side of his head as if holding it together. “Go away. I don’t want you here.” He was pale, thin and obviously waking up from a long and drawn-out binge.

“You’ve got a hangover.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Well, this is great. Perfect.” Disgusted, she shook her head. “This is how you go about getting better, huh?”

He didn’t answer.

“I don’t know how you lost your leg and, honestly, I don’t care. But you’re alive. Get off your ass and quit feeling sorry for yourself.”

His angry gaze settled on her face. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

Good. His antagonism was good. She could deal with him just fine when he was like this. “Apparently, the only person on this island who gives a damn whether you live or die.”

He rolled away. Wouldn’t look at her.

“Poor Noah,” Sophie said. “Got his foot blown off and now his life is over.”

“Screw you.”

“Wouldn’t you like to try.”

“Maybe I would.” For a moment, he glared at her, looking for all the world as if he might be furious enough to make good on the threat. “Go away, Sophie.”

Ignoring him, she glanced around expecting to find dirty dishes and opened bags of food scattered around the house. Instead, there was only the clutter of newspapers, magazines and, of all things, a handgun lying on the coffee table. His prosthetic lay on the floor below a nice big hole in the wall. It certainly looked as if what he’d said the other night at the lighthouse was true. He wasn’t eating, and he wasn’t sleeping. He was angry and frustrated and taking it out on his grandmother’s house and himself.

She had to admit, though, the gun bothered her more than anything. “What’s the gun for?”

“Nothing. It’s what happens when you hang with the military as much as I have.”

“That’s a lie if I’ve ever heard one.”

“It’s none of your damned business.”

Anger, red-hot and piercing, surged inside her. “Well, why don’t you just pick it up then, and put yourself out of your misery.”

“Trust me. I’ve thought about it.”

This was not the Noah she’d known most of her life. Where was the young boy with the mischievous smirk? The young man who could beat anyone around the island in a kayak? The man whose passion for life had come through in every one of his articles and books? Yes, she’d read them. Every single one. This was not the man who, over the years, had exposed political issues and brought to light famine and genocide all over the world.

If he kept on like this, he would end up being on Mirabelle for months, years even. There was no way she was living with that, not if she had anything to say about it. She picked up the phone and dialed.

CHAPTER SIX

“MIRABELLEISLANDINN,” Jan said, her voice clear and pleasant as she answered Sophie’s phone call.

“Jan, it’s Sophie. If anyone’s looking for me,” she said, walking into the kitchen and loading the few dirty dishes into the dishwasher, “I’m going to be gone for a little while, okay?”

“Oh, no, you’re not!” Noah yelled, sitting up.

Sophie ignored him and started the cleaning cycle.

“Sure. Everything’s under control,” Jan said. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” She rummaged through the groceries, still sitting in bags on the kitchen counter and took out a can of soup. “Can you check in with the kids and have them call my cell if they need me?”

“Go away, Sophie!” Noah was putting on his leg.

“No problem,” Jan said, hesitant. “Where are you? Who’s yelling in the background?”

Sophie dumped the soup into a pan and set it to warming on the stove top. “If there’s an emergency, I’ll be at Grandma Bennett’s.”

“No, you won’t,” Noah muttered.

A short pause hung over the phone line before Jan said, “Sophie, you may have forgotten, but I remember very clearly what you went through after Noah left. I don’t think I had a dry shoulder for months—”

“Trust me, Jan, I remember. This is no big deal.”

“Listen to her, Soph,” he mumbled, standing and heading toward the kitchen. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Another pause on the phone line. “When will you be home?”

“In a couple hours,” Sophie said.

“All right. I’ll take care of everything.”

Sophie hung up, sidestepped past a very angry Noah and ran upstairs, stripped the sheets off the bed he’d obviously been tossing and turning in and snapped up a towel from the bathroom floor. She went back downstairs and threw the linens in the washing machine. When she turned around, Noah was standing in the laundry room doorway, blocking her exit.

The young Noah she remembered was gone and in his place was a man. An angry, sullen, brooding man. Broad shouldered and built. Though his hospital stay had likely set him back a bit, he was still an intimidating presence. Physical awareness zapped her hard and fast. This laundry room was much too

small for the two of them.

"I don't want you here," he snapped.

"Too bad." She pushed past him, went into the kitchen and checked the soup. It'd do. She dumped the contents of the pan into a bowl, smacked the bowl onto the table and stepped back, setting her hands on her hips. Who knew when he'd last taken any food. "Sit," she said. "Eat."

He didn't budge. Then he grimaced as if in pain and his shoulders sagged. "Just go, Sophie. Please." He leaned against the doorway, taking his weight off his left leg.

"No," she said. "Not until you eat something."

"If it makes you feel any better," he muttered, looking away, "I still can't hold anything down."

"If you want me gone, you'll have to try."

Without a word, he dropped onto the chair and shoved three spoonfuls of soup into his mouth.

"More," she said.

"You want me to throw up? Are you getting some kind of sick pleasure out of this?"

"Maybe I am." She opened a package of saltine crackers and tossed it onto the table next to him. "These should settle your stomach."

She glanced into his eyes, saw the flash of heat there and felt an instantaneous response. Traitor.

But then what did she expect? For most of their childhood, Noah had been like a brother to Sophie and then almost overnight, her hormones had kicked in and changed everything between them. She hadn't been able to stop watching his lips, had been obsessed with wanting to find out what it would be like to kiss, not just any boy, but Noah. Only Noah.

It had taken him a while to catch up to her hormone-laden train of thoughts. When he finally did, they hadn't been able to keep their hands off each other. By the time they were in tenth grade they were secretly necking during recess, after school and every other chance they got to be alone. Sophie and Noah. Noah and Sophie. Hand in hand. Arm in arm. Until they'd gotten caught sneaking off to a janitorial closet during a school-wide assembly and the principal had been forced to call their parents.

From then on, their freedom had been gone, but the separation, the constant monitoring, only made the times they'd managed to be alone together all the more special. They'd been forced to get sneaky. By the time they were seniors in high school, they had their routines down pat. They'd planned times when they were sure they could be alone, like when their parents were neck-deep in tourists. With blankets, lanterns and food and drinks in coolers, they'd snuck away on kayaks or sailboats to the other uninhabited islands. Where no one could find them. Where no one could interrupt. Where exploring sex had turned into making love.

Oh, no. You are not going there. Get done what you need to and get the hell out of here.

She stalked into the living room, drew back the curtains and opened the blinds, letting the afternoon sun blaze inside. By the time she'd propped open the front door and gone back to the kitchen, Noah was

taking the last spoonful of soup.

“Now.” She leveled her gaze on him, ready for an argument. “When’s the last time you got any exercise or at least some fresh air?”

His answering chuckle held absolutely no humor. “Sophie, I’m not a child.”

“Then quit acting like one.”

“I understand what you’re trying to do, and there’s no point.”

“You came here to get better, right? Well, it’s not going to happen all on its own.”

“Why?” He slammed his spoon onto the table and stared at her. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t!” she yelled back.

“Then why are you doing this?”

“Because as long as you’re sitting around feeling sorry for yourself you won’t be getting better.” He’d be disrupting her thoughts, her life. She couldn’t let him disrupt Kurt’s and Lauren’s lives. She put her hands on her hips and met his gaze. “I want you the hell off my island! The sooner, the better.”

GET HIM BETTER SO HE COULD leave Mirabelle. Now that made sense to Noah, but there was no way he was spending any more time around Sophie than absolutely necessary. God help them both if either one of them started caring for the other again.

“You need to leave.” He pushed himself up from the table and hobbled back to the sofa in the living room. He’d no sooner sat down than pain ripped through his body. He stiffened and closed his eyes, letting short bursts of air puff out from between his lips.

“Noah,” she said, “what’s happening?”

“Phantom pains,” he grunted. “Feels like an electrical shock zapping my leg.”

“Can I do anything?”

“No,” he bit out. “It’ll pass.”

“There’s no medication for that?” she asked.

“Painkillers don’t do a thing.” He waved a hand at the prescription bottles sitting on the coffee table. “Believe me, I’ve tried every pill under the sun.”

“Physical therapy?”

The worst of the pain subsided and he ran his hands over his face. “They’ve been trying something new with mirrors that they say makes a difference.” He motioned toward a full-length mirror leaning against the wall. “But it sounds like a bunch of hooey to me.”

“You should be trying anything and everything to get better.”

“I should, huh? What do you know?” Who the hell did she think she was? Florence Freaking Nightingale? “You have no clue what I’m going through.”

“You need—”

“What I need is for you to leave!”

“I’m not—”

“Get the fuck out of here, Sophie! Now!”

She stepped back as if he’d hit her. “What happened to the Noah I knew?”

“Long gone, Sophie, and he won’t ever be coming back.”

“You’re pathetic. You know that?” Rousing, she charged into the kitchen and came back carrying an unopened bottle of whiskey. Slamming the bottle down on the coffee table, she said, “There you go, Noah. Knock yourself out.” Then she left.

The door slammed and Noah cringed as the noise reverberated in his head. Thank God she was gone. Blissful silence settled over his grandmother’s house as he stared at the whiskey. Why the hell not? Reaching for the bottle, he barely managed to crack it open. Pathetic? Hell, yes. Sophie had always known him better than anyone else.

THE NEXT DAY, SOPHIE POUNDED On Grandma Bennett’s front door sometime in the late afternoon. When Noah, all but passed out on the living room sofa, didn’t answer, she let herself in, apparently having kept his grandmother’s spare house key. Without a word, she made him more soup, carried it into the living room along with a banana and announced, “I’m not leaving until that food is gone.”

Noah glared at her for a few minutes, but then caved, his stomach feeling like an empty pit. The moment he finished his last bite, she took off out the front door without another word.

They went through the same charade the next day and the next. Each time, she added more food items and meatier portions, but never said anything. On the fifth day, she brought a meal from the inn. The moment she opened the take-out container, the smells of Josie’s beef Stroganoff hit his senses and his stomach growled with hunger.

Like it or not, her tactic was working. He hadn’t swallowed a drop of liquor in two days. He was sleeping marginally better and his metabolism was giving it a good go, forcing him to have to supplement the meals she’d been bringing him.

She held out the food. “So are you up for a walk today?”

“I don’t need your help. I can do this on my own.”

“What you need is some fresh air.”

“When did you get to be such a know-it-all busybody?”

“When haven’t I been?”

Sick of playing her game, he took the container out of her hand and ate.

When he’d finished, she asked, “How’s the food settling in your stomach?”

“So far, so good.”

“Then let’s go for a walk.”

“You mean go for a limp? Not interested, Nurse Ratched.”

“Are you sleeping at night?”

“No.”

“Lack of exercise isn’t helping.” She crossed her arms. “Noah, come on. Let’s go.”

Get him better so he could leave Mirabelle.

He did need to leave this island, for his dad, for himself. For Sophie. He needed to get off his ass and put the pieces of his life back together. “Okay, I give.” Too tired to fight anymore, he followed her out onto the porch.

They set off down the hill, and for a long while he and Sophie walked side by side in complete silence. Anger hung heavy in the air between them. What did you say to a woman who’d been your best friend and most passionate lover all rolled into one? A woman who’d married your own brother, for God’s sake. Nothing, that’s what.

After a time, he realized they’d struck out on the same roads, in the same direction they used to walk. How could she have stood it all these years? “Don’t you ever get sick of it? The same paths over and over and over.”

She glanced sideways at him, looking as if she might not answer him. “Every once in a while,” she finally said. “But there’s a...comfort in it, too. In the stability.”

“In the boredom.”

“You say tomato,” she said. “Bright lights and big cities don’t necessarily lead to a more fulfilling life. If you ask me, those always hunting for the latest war zones are the ones with issues.”

“Touche.”

“Does your leg hurt?” she asked.

“A little.” As weak as he’d gotten from lying in bed during his extended hospital stay, he felt every bit an invalid walking next to Sophie.

“Maybe you need a new leg.”

“I’ve got one up at the house. The new foot’s supposed to be good for all kinds of activity. Walking, running. Hell, even skating.”

“Then why do you wear this one?”

“I guess I’ve gotten used to it. This is the temporary leg they gave me after the surgery, and I suppose I’m a little attached to it.”

“But you’re limping. Don’t you think the new leg will fit better?”

He didn’t know what to say, didn’t know how to explain his jumbled-up emotions.

“What are you worried about, Noah?”

“Worried?” He stopped. “You don’t know me anymore, Sophie. Don’t presume to know what I’d be worried about.”

They walked along in virtual silence for close to an hour, making a big circle around the island. He had to admit it felt good to be outside, sunshine hitting his face, fresh air in his lungs, the sounds of robins and chickadees chirping nearby. When they came to the Rousseau woods, they both turned onto the path they’d always taken as kids, leading right by an old gnarly oak that had been great for climbing and hiding behind for stolen kisses.

“You still running?” he asked, redirecting his thoughts.

“Most mornings.”

“You can run all you want,” he mused. “You still can’t run yourself off this island.”

She glared at him.

“I know, I know. I say tomato.” He tried to shake his thoughts clear. “Same route?”

“That we used to run? No.” She shook her head. “These days, I take the road up, come back through the state forest and finish through here.” She pointed toward a path running along the shore, but Noah didn’t bother looking in that direction.

He couldn’t seem to take his eyes off Sophie’s face. Her skin was dappled with sunlight streaming through the forest canopy. It was amazing how little she’d aged. She seemed more petite somehow, but that probably had more to do with him having grown than anything. Surrounded as she was by leaves, grasses and brush the green in her eyes was more pronounced. She looked like a wood nymph, one of the fairies some of the old people swore inhabited the quietest parts of Mirabelle.

She caught his gaze and the moment became awkward. He turned away too quickly, hit the trunk of the tree with his bad knee and pain zinging up his side. “Shit!” He grimaced, leaned back against the tree and rubbed his leg.

“How’d it happen?” she asked quietly, as if she wasn’t sure it was her place. “Losing your foot?”

In the hospital, Noah had briefly described the explosion to various military personnel in order for them to file their reports, but, since then, he'd tried not to think about it. "It was exactly like you see in the movies. I'd been with the same unit for a couple months. They were acting on a tip about a small cell of insurgents hiding in Mosul.

"Out of nowhere, a roadside bomb hit our truck. It was probably remotely controlled, and they were waiting for us. I was in the rear with Mick, my military guide. When the bomb hit, I felt a burning sensation on the back of my left leg and was thrown out of the truck. Lost my foot, broke an arm and a few ribs, concussion, shrapnel punctures." He touched his chest and arms where shrapnel had hit him. "My back felt like it was on fire."

"The others?"

He grew silent, remembering. "Everyone else was killed."

The sound of Sophie's sharp intake of breath hit him hard. "I'm so sorry, Noah."

"For me? Losing a foot is nothing."

"It changed your life."

Curiously, for the first time since the bombing he wanted to talk, but not to just anyone. He wanted to spill his guts to Sophie, tell her everything that had happened over the years, his failures and successes, how his brushes with death and seeing others die had changed him.

"What about John?" he said, angry, not at Sophie, but at life. "He was a month from heading home after three tours of duty and never got the chance to hold his new baby daughter. Or Lindsey. She'd been in Iraq only two months, wanting to follow in the footsteps of her three brothers who all made it out of there alive. Then there's Mick, Chris, Leon. What about them?" There was nothing she could say, and he felt bad for lashing out at her. "I'm sorry."

"You've seen some terrible things. Things I can only imagine."

"I used to keep a journal of all the people I'd known who'd died in all the wars, military actions or peacekeeping operations I've been involved in through the years. During Iraq, I gave up."

"Too many?"

"Let's say I know more than I'd like about putting on field dressings."

"Why'd you keep doing it?"

"I was afraid no one would write about all the things the world needed to know. Half of what I've written has never seen the light of day because there isn't a newspaper or publisher out there who'll touch it."

"Why do you care?"

He'd never thought about it before. "I suppose I knew early on I could never be a cop, or a soldier."

“Too much like your dad.”

He nodded. “Guess, in my own way, I’m always looking for justice, for the truth.”

Somehow, somehow, the anger that had insulated and protected each of them seemed to have dimmed, and the awkwardness between them reared up again. Suddenly, he was done talking and done walking. “I need to go back,” he said.

“Get some sleep. I’ll stop by again tomorrow after work.”

“Don’t, Sophie, please.” He turned and went up the hill alone. She was hell on his nerves. “I’ll get myself off this damned island.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

WITH THE SUN BARELY RISING over the treetops off the east side of the island, Jim Bennett slowly motored his boat into the Mirabelle marina and aimed for his slip. He’d come in and out of this maze of docks so many times in the past forty years he could probably make the trip blindfolded. Good thing, too, as his mind was nowhere near the task at hand.

He docked his thirty-footer and took the pipe out of his mouth. After tying down the boat, he gutted the whitefish and salmon he’d caught that morning and threw them on ice. Gulls cawed overhead, piercing the quiet morning air in their quest for breakfast. He tossed the fish entrails in the water, letting the noisy buzzards fight over them, and washed his hands.

“You got in late this morning.”

Jim barely heard the soft feminine voice over the sound of the gulls squabbling. He glanced up to find Josie standing on the dock holding a take-out container.

“I brought you some breakfast,” she said.

He held out his hand, helping her climb onto the boat. “I thought we agreed to meet at the inn in the mornings.”

“You hungry or not?”

“All right. All right. I just don’t like people talking.”

“They’re going to talk, anyway,” Josie said. “No matter what you and I do.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like stirring the pot.”

“You know, when we first started seeing each other, I understood your privacy issues. But now...” She hesitated. “I’m not Gloria, Jim.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“Sometimes I wonder.”

He poured her the last cup of coffee from his thermos. “It should still be hot.” He held it out for her.

“You go ahead.” She sat across from him. “I’ve had enough already this morning.”

He opened the container she’d brought to find scrambled eggs and ham along with some hash browns, all still hot. “Caught a couple nice ones this morning, if you can use ’em.” He tapped the cooler with the tip of his tennis shoe. The position of police chief on Mirabelle didn’t pay all that much and left him with more free time than he liked, so he ran a small charter fishing operation and sold fish to the restaurants on the island. “If the inn can’t use ’em, I’ll take ’em to Delores.”

“Marty asked if we could do an old-fashioned fish fry one night when all his guests are here, so we’ll take them.”

“How’s the first week of summer season going?”

“Oh, the usual. Jan set up the wrong room for a buffet the other afternoon, and then changed the time for lunch yesterday and forgot to tell me. Nothing catastrophic.”

“You ready for Marty’s wedding party?”

“Not yet, but we’ll get through it.”

“You always do.” He finished the last of the breakfast, sat back and stuffed tobacco into his pipe.

“Well, I gotta get back to work.” Josie took the take-out container and gave him a goodbye peck on the cheek.

Jim glanced around the marina and breathed a sigh of relief that the docks were still deserted. He held out his hand and helped her out of the boat.

She paused, as if debating something.

“What?” he asked.

“Jan was complaining that Sophie’s been spending a lot of time with Noah.”

The news seemed to cause a tight feeling in his chest. “When? Where were they?”

“Every day this week. At your mom’s house most of the time. Arlo said they walked by the stables last night.”

Son of a...

“Jim, what if you’ve been wrong about them all these years?”

“You don’t know Noah the way I do.”

“Well, I know Sophie, and I know she’s a good judge of character.”

“Humph,” he grunted. “Growing up on this island, she’s too naive for her own good.”

“You need to tell him—and her—the truth.”

“I’m not telling anyone anything.” He threw her a questioning glance.

“Don’t look at me.” She headed down the dock. “Everyone’s chickens have a way of coming home to roost all on their own.”

ONSUNDAY MORNING, MORE THAN A week after he’d first arrived on Mirabelle, Noah awoke, or rather slid out of bed as there had been very little actual sleep involved, before the sun had risen. Feeling damned near close to human for the first time in a long while, he brewed himself some coffee and toasted a piece of bread and then sat at the table with his laptop in front of him.

After opening his work-in-process he forced out a couple words. He typed a line and deleted it. Typed another few and deleted those, too. Over and over, he attempted to pick up where he’d left off on his documentary on the Iraqi war and over and over, he hit a dead end. He was about ready to fling the damned computer across the room when the paragraph he’d written before the explosion caught his eye.

He backed up and read more. The thoughts and words flowed like the current on a river, smoothly, quickly, and, almost as if the man who’d written those passages was gone, he didn’t recognize a single line as his own. Would that man ever come back? Not with, for all intents and purposes, a gun pointed at his head that was for sure.

After forcing down the toast, he pushed away from the table and grabbed that full-length mirror his doctors had ordered him to use for therapy against the phantom pains. The first day he’d been here, the delivery boy had set it against the wall by the front door and that’s exactly where it had stood ever since.

His doctors had told him that phantom pain, while very real in a physical sense, could be the result of mixed messages being sent by the brain to the nerves. The experimental treatment they had him try in the hospital required him to sit with his legs flat in front of him and a full-length mirror, lying horizontally between his legs, standing upright on its long edge with the reflective side facing his good, full leg. While watching the mirror he was to flex and move his leg, supposedly tricking his brain into thinking he had two good legs. Maybe it was time to give it a shot again.

Noah sat lengthwise on the couch in his grandmother’s living room, his legs, such as they were, stretched in front of him. Then he set the mirror between his legs and rotated his right foot and flexed and released, all the while watching the reflection in the mirror. He repeated the process as many times as he could stand.

It looked as if he had two good legs, and if he concentrated he could almost—almost—remember what it felt like to run, to walk without discomfort. To be whole. As much as he wanted to, he refused to glance at the other side of the mirror at his stump. It was nothing more than a mass of scar tissue. No, he wasn’t close to whole. Never would be again.

He moved the mirror, set it against the wall near the box holding his new prosthetic. Maybe Sophie was right. Maybe he was worried about changing the status quo. If he got better, recovered one hundred percent, then he’d have to get back to life. Full swing. Then he’d have no reason for not writing his book. The old leg reminded him he was a cripple, told the world to back off. He was damaged goods. He had an excuse for hiding away. A new leg left him no excuse for being afraid.

He flipped back the box cover and stared at the high-tech piece of machinery. Made of the most

advanced materials available, the leg was at least ten pounds lighter than his temporary one. Carbon fiber with an arched foot, it would no doubt feel unbelievably better at the end of what was left of his leg.

What are you worried about, Noah?

That it'll be time to leave Mirabelle.

He closed the box. He wasn't ready.

In the meantime, he surely could keep busy. He gathered some supplies and headed outside. It was tough. He hadn't wanted to get moving or leave the safe confines of his grandmother's house, but he did get immense satisfaction from having trimmed every shrub in the entire one acre lot and scraped and primed all except a small section of the entire back side of the cottage before Sophie showed up late that afternoon.

"The yard looks good," he heard her say.

"Thanks." He looked down at her from his position near the top of the steel ladder.

"Marty's wedding guests have been arriving all day, so I wasn't going to come up. But then Josie made a big batch of lemonade and I knew you've been out here working all day." She held up a large plastic pitcher. "Would you like to take a break?"

He glanced down at her. She just wants you off her island. That's all. He wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Give me a few more minutes and I'll be finished painting the back." And very likely finished for the day as this was the first time he'd done any kind of manual labor since losing his foot.

"I'll be right out." She disappeared through the back door of the house.

When she came outside a little while later holding two glasses filled with ice and lemonade, he was washing his hands with the hose. After he'd finished, she held out a glass.

"Thank you." He took a sip. It tasted so refreshing that he downed the glass and poured himself another. Then he sat on the back stoop in the cooler shade.

"Did you sleep last night?"

"You mean that thing people are supposed to do at night?" He chuckled. "No."

"Have you eaten anything today?"

"Sure."

"Noah—"

"Mom!" Kurt's shout came through the front-door screen and out the back.

"I told you, she's not in there," Lauren said.

"I'm in back," Sophie yelled.

Only seconds later, the twins came running around the corner of the house.

“What are you two doing?” Sophie asked.

“Jan told us to come and get you,” Kurt said.

“Smart woman that Jan,” Noah whispered.

“And,” Lauren said, holding out a container, “Josie made Noah some dinner.”

“Well, wasn’t that nice.” Noah accepted the container.

“Will you be able to eat it?”

“Actually,” he said, holding Sophie’s gaze. “I’m starving.”

“Roasted chicken, mixed vegetables and mashed potatoes and gravy,” Lauren said. “I cut you a piece of the mixed berry pie I made myself.”

“You did?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She nodded.

“Making pies by yourself.” He studied her. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen,” she said. “But everyone says we’re mature for our age.”

Kids. Always in such a hurry to grow up. “Well, thank you, Lauren,” Noah said. “Is this what you had for dinner?”

Lauren nodded.

“I rarely cook,” Sophie said. “That’s one benefit to having a trained gourmet in the kitchen.”

“I’m surprised you’ve stayed so trim.”

Kurt frowned at him as if he sensed there was something between Noah and his mother and didn’t like it one bit. The feeling was mutual.

“Let’s go.” Kurt tugged on Sophie’s hand. “Marty said he wants you to come back down for the fire.”

“Are you coming to the bonfire, Noah?” Lauren asked.

“I’m not so sure—”

“Please come,” Lauren urged. “You’re family, remember?” She looked to her mom for support.

“Marty would love to visit with you,” Sophie said, standing next to Kurt.

“We’ll see.”

Kurt walked away and down the hill. "Come on!"

"Chill!" Lauren said, following him.

Noah followed the three of them around the side of the house and watched their downhill progress. Sophie. A mom. With kids and a business, she was obviously entrenched on this island. And him? He'd be leaving as soon as he could sleep through the night and hold down three square meals.

Nothing had changed.

BY SUNDAY NIGHT, MOST of the wedding guests, including Marty and Sophie's two sisters and their families, had arrived. True to their word, Jan, Sarah and Josie were taking care of everything. They'd prepped rooms, registered guests, set up buffets in the main dining hall for every meal, and distributed room keys and maps of the island as well as the week's calendar of events.

Sophie continued to check in with them from time to time, but for the most part, she was free to do as she pleased. Even Lauren and Kurt needed barely any supervision once their cousins had arrived. This island was their personal playground, and they loved showing their cousins around. It was the only time Lauren, in particular, appreciated living on Mirabelle.

At dusk, while Brittany set up extra chairs, Sophie built a fire in the large, stone-encircled pit and the kids chased fireflies around the inn's expansive back lawn. Once she'd gotten the campfire going, she sat in a folding camp chair and looked into the sky.

"Hey, kids," Brittany yelled. "Go find some marshmallow roasting sticks. Get one for me, too, while you're at it."

They dashed off and returned only minutes later, huddling in a circle. The campfire blazed, its flames leaping into the midnight-blue sky and casting flickering yellow-orange light onto the faces of Lauren, Kurt and Brittany, as well as several other nieces and nephews of Sophie's. Groups of guests and relatives milled about, some by the shoreline, some near the fire, and others near the picnic table Jan had set up with the makings for s'mores.

Sophie leaned back in her chair and zipped her jacket. Though the temperature was mild for this early in summer, an occasional chilly breeze blew in off the lake, making the heat emanating from the fire all the more comforting.

"This is going to be a perfect marshmallow roasting stick," Kurt said, continuing to strip the bark off a green branch with his pocketknife. "Want me to do yours?" he asked Lauren.

"Sure." Absently, Lauren handed Kurt the branch and went back to poking the red-hot coals at the center of the fire with a stick.

Sophie studied her son's profile. Tonight more than usual, she could see Noah in his features. The Bennett brothers had looked alike in some ways, but had been so different in personality.

Both brothers had been determined and achievement-oriented, but Isaac had been duty bound and methodical in his approach toward life. He'd been cautious and rarely failed at anything he set out to accomplish. In fact, Isaac had always been so meticulous Sophie had never imagined he'd be killed in the

line of duty. Guess there was no accounting for stray bullets.

Noah, on the other hand, had never been frightened of failure. He'd enjoyed the rush that came from taking chances. Always, he'd pushed his boundaries. She supposed that's what drew her to him when they'd been younger. He'd never been afraid to do anything, to go anywhere. So much like Lauren and Kurt. Or was she imagining that connection?

She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. "I wonder what's keeping Marty," she said.

"It looks like he's visiting with someone," Brittany said, more subdued than normal as she lost herself in the fire. "He'll be back in a minute." The flames seemed to mesmerize her. "Marty said he wants to have a fire every night, even in the winter, after we move—" She stopped, tucking her chin into the neck of her jacket.

Sophie glanced across the flames.

Kurt's jaw dropped. "You and Marty are moving to Mirabelle?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

"WHAT?" LAUREN LOOKED UP from the fire. "You're going to be living here? On Mirabelle?"

"I wasn't supposed to say anything," Brittany said, meeting Sophie's eyes with a worried expression. "Not until Marty talked with you, Sophie."

"Are you kidding?" Sophie said. "We'll be excited to have you!"

"Where are you going to live?" Lauren asked. "I hope you're close so we can see each other every day."

"We'd like to build a hotel," Brittany said, sitting straighter in her chair, and Sophie felt prickles of concern run up her spine.

"You should put it right there." Lauren pointed to the Rousseau forest west of the inn. "Neighbors would be so cool!"

"That's what we thought!" Brittany caught the buzz of the kids' infectious excitement.

"Tight!" Kurt's eyes went wide.

The trust land? Sophie's concern turned into full-fledged alarm. That land held the only virgin forest on the entire island. This was the forest Sophie had built forts in and tramped through as a kid. The forest where she and Noah had shared first kisses.

"What kind of hotel?" Lauren asked, leaning forward expectantly.

"A big one!" Brittany grinned. "Like the one on Mackinac Island in Michigan. You know. The white one with the porch that goes on and on and on. The big pillars. The beautiful grounds—"

Kurt asked, "Are you going to have a pool?"

Although several hotel owners had broached this topic before, there were no pools anywhere on the island and that's the status most residents preferred.

"Please," Lauren pleaded. "Please say you're going to have a pool."

"Yes," Brittany said, laughing. "A big pool. Heated. With hot tubs and waterfalls."

"Sweet!" Kurt exclaimed.

Sophie swallowed and took a deep breath. How could she be upset with someone so nice and perky?

"Awesome!" Lauren said.

"What's awesome?" Marty asked, tossing the bag of marshmallows between the kids and plopping into the lawn chair next to Brittany.

"You guys moving here!" Lauren shouted.

"A pool!" Kurt added.

Marty shot a look at Brittany.

Her excitement immediately fizzled. "Sorry," she said, cringing. "It slipped out."

Sophie attempted a smile, but one look at her and Marty's shoulders slumped. Brittany and the kids grew quiet.

"I'm sorry, Sophie," he said. "I meant to tell you myself. At the right time."

"It's okay, Brittany." Sophie reassured her soon-to-be sister-in-law. "There wasn't going to be a right time."

"Can we go for a walk?" Marty asked. "Talk?"

"Sure." She stood and crossed her arms, holding in the warmth.

As they walked along the beach, toward the forest, Sophie tried to find the positives in the situation. Marty would be back, Brittany was adorable, and they'd probably have children. Right next door, Sophie would have nieces and nephews and her kids would have cousins. The last thing she wanted to do was disappoint her brother only days before his wedding. "Marty—"

"Sophie, don't say anything," he said. "Not yet. Not until you've heard me out, okay?"

"This is going to take business away from the inn."

"That was my first concern," Marty acknowledged. "The truth is, Mirabelle has been steadily losing tourists for the last five years. If something isn't done to generate some interest in this island and to attract new visitors, Mirabelle's going to die a slow and painful death with or without a new hotel."

"None of the inns, hotels or B and Bs are at full capacity for the summer," she argued. "A new hotel will only make things worse."

“Soph, do you remember when we were kids most of the visitors to the island were families?”

She nodded.

“Well, lately the island’s mainstay has become couples and weddings, but without a steady influx of families we can’t survive.”

“We’re too quiet for families.”

“Exactly. There isn’t enough to do on the island. My hotel, with a pool, video-game rooms and a pizza parlor, will be a haven for families.”

“No one else has a pool. You’ll take business away from everyone.”

“I can’t take it away if it isn’t there off the start,” he said, sounding frustrated. “We can make it a community pool. I don’t care. The golf course will make the biggest difference in bringing in more people.”

“A golf course? Marty, how much land do you need for that?”

“The average course is about two hundred acres.”

“That’s half our forest!” She turned toward him, suddenly angry. “How can you just destroy it? Destroy everything Mom and Dad worked so hard to keep safe?”

“Something has to be done. Mirabelle is dying.”

“Well, I have to be honest. I don’t think your plan is going to help.” She took comfort in knowing that the land was in a trust. “You have to get this approved by all of us, and I don’t think—”

“Beth and Jackie have already said yes.”

“What?” Her two sisters had already put their stamp of approval on Marty’s project. This was too much.

“I only need your nod and we can go ahead with the plans.”

“Well, you’re not going to get it!” she said, charging away from him. “I won’t let this happen!”

“Sophie! Stop. You said you’d listen before you make up your mind.”

She spun around. “Even if I do give you the go-ahead, you’ll still have to get everything approved by the town council before doing anything.”

“I’ve scheduled a meeting with them for Tuesday night.”

“While all this wedding stuff is going on?”

“Brittany’s as excited as I am to get the ball rolling.”

So soon. She didn't have a clue what to think, what to do, and there was no one on the island she could talk to, either. As a Rousseau, her opinion would likely influence others and, for Marty's sake, she didn't want to sway any opinions. The islanders needed to make up their own minds.

"Besides, this initial meeting should be a piece of cake," Marty continued, shrugging. "I'm just asking for approval to do a feasibility study. I'm an islander. Hometown boy makes good. They'll eat it up. But I need you behind me, otherwise it won't happen."

How could I get behind this?

"All I'm asking is that Tuesday night you listen to my presentation and think about it before you make up your mind. Okay?"

She debated. "All right. Fine. I'll wait to make up my mind. That doesn't mean I'm going to let you destroy trust land."

"This will be good for Mirabelle. I know it." He hugged her. "Will you come back to the fire?"

She shook her head.

"Don't be angry at me, Sophie."

"Then don't do this."

"I believe in it, Sophie. I love this island and I don't want to see it die." His smile was sad. "Come back to the fire. Please."

"You go. I need to walk some more." Thoroughly unsettled, Sophie set off down the beach.

FROM A DISTANCE, NOAH STARED at the fire. He'd been leaning against a large rock near the point for some time listening to the muted rumble of voices, hoping it would relax him and calm his thoughts. It had helped somewhat, but a part of him felt uneasy keeping separate from the group. Normally, he'd be in the thick of a party, joining in, talking and laughing. It wasn't like him to insulate himself from anything, but since the explosion, since losing his leg, it was as if he'd lost his footing in more ways than one.

He contented himself with watching Sophie, her smile in profile, the way the firelight illuminated her face and hair. The vision of her helped him block out the memories of the last fire he'd witnessed, the military truck burning after the explosion in Iraq. He'd struggled in the dirt, his foot hanging by a tangled mass of broken bone and torn skin, trying to get back to the burning vehicle. He'd passed out before help had arrived, the images of those flames seared in his memory.

This fire, though, was different, harmless, and Sophie looked beautiful in the periphery of light. He couldn't help noticing how none of her mannerisms had changed, and how he still remembered them after all these years. The way she curled one leg under her as she sat in the camp chair. Then she'd lean forward, an elbow on her knee, and rest her chin in her hand. Some of his fondest memories of Mirabelle had been sitting around a campfire with her. She'd always looked so beautiful in that flickering, golden light.

When she got up to talk with Marty, he could tell by the stiffness in her movements that something was wrong. She and Marty walked away from the fire. After a short time, she took off along the beach alone, moving fast. With a full moon lighting her way, even the steep rocky incline near the point didn't slow her progress.

Her head bent in concentration, her path would take her right past him. If he said nothing, she'd likely walk right by, none the wiser to his presence. He kept his mouth shut, held his breath. Go by, Sophie. Go by .

Suddenly, she stopped, looked up and put a hand to her chest as if he'd frightened her.

"Hey," he said. "It's just me."

"You scared me." She took a deep breath. "Why don't you go down by the fire? Marty would love to see you."

"Too many people."

She tilted her head at him. "But you love people."

"Not these days." He thought for a moment. "It's this...prosthesis business. Some people..."

"Treat you differently?"

He nodded.

"Have I ever...acted like that?"

"No. Except for when you didn't slap me my first day back on the island."

She chuckled.

"Some day all that awkwardness from others won't bother me at all. It's just not now."

Preoccupied, she gazed out at the water.

"Something happen with Marty?"

For a moment, she didn't say anything and then she opened her mouth and her news spewed out, like a geyser erupting into the air. Pacing beside him, barely catching her breath, she went on and on about how Marty wanted to build a hotel with pools and a golf course. Guessing she was too agitated to sit, Noah stood and walked toward the path in the woods. She followed, continuing to vent.

Even Noah understood the impact those changes would have on the face of this community. "Where's he planning on putting the hotel?"

"On the family trust land. After he's through, there won't be anything left of it," she said. "How can Marty and my sisters let this pristine forest go? I don't get it."

"He doesn't live here."

“Well, after he starts living here, he’ll regret cutting down any part of these woods.”

“So your sisters have already approved this?”

She nodded. “No one said anything to me.” Soon, they left the forest behind, crossed Island Drive and walked along the dirt road that ran by the stables.

“Are you going to approve it?”

“Absolutely not. Other than the kids, this island is all I have. Destroy Mirabelle, and I’ve got nothing.”

“Soph, that’s not true. There’s so much more to you than this island,” he said, hoping to help her feel better. “All change isn’t necessarily bad.”

“A golf course? A pool? On Mirabelle? As we speak, my grandparents are rolling in their graves.”

“What about the town council? Have they okayed it?”

“He’s bringing the concept to them Tuesday night. Before getting contractors to the island to do a feasibility study, he wants to make sure the board will consider a proposal.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head as if she were shaking a thought loose. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Amazing. She still had that uncanny ability to redirect herself, to shut down. The only time she’d ever done it with him had been when he’d been getting ready to leave the island. It had killed him that she wouldn’t look at him, or face him.

That’s when he’d basically kidnapped her and taken her to that hotel in Bayfield. He’d wanted to make her deal with him leaving, except in the end, he’d been the one who couldn’t say goodbye and had left in the early morning hours while she was sound asleep. More than once he’d berated himself for being a coward, and the memories heightened his remorse.

“I’m sorry, Sophie,” he said, on impulse.

“For what?”

“For not saying goodbye. For letting you wake up alone the morning I left.” Before he knew it, they were back at his grandmother’s house.

As if the memory of that morning was too much for her, she looked away, forced it back. “Thanks for listening tonight.” She rubbed her arms as if she were chilled and took a deep breath.

“You cold?”

“A little.”

“Do you want some tea?”

“Will that help you sleep?”

He laughed. “Nothing helps me sleep.”

“Even medication?”

“The pills the doctors prescribed in the hospital worked for a while, but they also caused extreme nausea and made me tired all day long. I couldn’t think straight.”

They’d come to the house from the hillside, so Noah let them into the kitchen through the back door. He grabbed the teapot and filled it with water.

“Here,” she said. “Let me do that. You go relax. Better yet, get ready for bed.”

“Sophie—”

“I want you off my island, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Suddenly he did feel incredibly tired. The past few days of activity, quite possibly, were doing the job. “You don’t—”

“Humor me.” She skirted past him and put the teapot on the stove.

It irritated him that she could move so much faster than him, zipping this way and that. He wanted to grab her and slow her down. Before he’d made it to the steps, she was bent over emptying out the dishwasher. Damn. Sophie had filled out beautifully. The skinny teenager had been replaced by a curvy woman with flared hips and full breasts. Dwelling on what she’d feel like was definitely not going to help him sleep.

He tore his gaze away, climbed the steps and traded jeans for flannel pajama pants. As he brushed his teeth and washed his face, the sound of Sophie now loading the dishwasher filtered up from downstairs. He had to admit it was comforting having someone else in the house.

He emerged from the bathroom, minus his leg, to find she’d snuck upstairs while he’d had the water running in the bathroom. His bedcovers were turned down, and the windows were slightly open, allowing for a gentle cross breeze. The stage was set. The only thing missing was a woman. How long had it been? Too long. Sophie would be just what one of his doctors had ordered.

Bad, bad idea. He lay on his side, scrunched up the pillow and drew the blanket over him. For the first time in a long while, he wasn’t dreading the night.

Soft footsteps sounded in the hall. He opened his suddenly heavy eyes to see Sophie tiptoeing toward him. “I straightened up downstairs and made you some herbal tea.” She quietly set a steaming mug of chamomile on his bedside table, next to his Beretta. “Why do you have this gun here?”

“It helps me feel safe.”

“You are safe. You should put it away.”

He grabbed the gun and slid it under his pillow. “Not yet.” He closed his eyes. “Night, Soph.”

“Good night.” She hesitated and then whispered, “I won’t be back tomorrow.”

No. She’d be back in his dreams.

IN THE SHADOWY HALLWAY, Sophie stood quietly outside the door to Noah’s bedroom and listened to the sound of his steady breathing. He looked warm and comfortable and she was now chilly in the night air. A war waged inside her, and it took every ounce of resistance she could muster to not sneak along his backside and wrap her arms around him.

What in the world had come over her? She had wanted him off her island. Honestly. Truly. But tonight something had changed. Tonight, as they’d walked and talked, for the first time since he’d been back, Sophie had caught a glimpse of the old Noah, the Noah whom she’d always loved.

She wanted to feel that Noah’s arms cinched tightly around her, his hands caressing her skin. Her body ached to feel that again.

Only her Noah had broken her heart. And that heart had never healed. Her Noah had left once. He’d leave again. She, on the other hand, had children who needed a stable home. As the oldest Rousseau, she had duties and responsibilities. While many things had changed through the years, one constant remained. Sophie could no more leave Mirabelle today than she could have fifteen years ago.

CHAPTER NINE

“TEN...ELEVEN...TWE...LVE.”

Unable to force out another pull-up, Noah dropped down from the bar he’d installed within the laundry room doorframe. He’d already done as many sit-ups and push-ups as he could manage and, in as sorry a shape as he was in, he’d done enough for the night. It was hard to believe that once upon a time he’d actually kept up the workout regiment of the soldiers to whom he’d been assigned.

He glanced at the clock. Ten minutes to seven. Tuesday night’s council meeting would soon be starting. All day, while he’d been scraping and painting the house, he hadn’t seen hide nor hair of Sophie. She had to feel stuck between a rock and a hard place, caught as she was between wanting to help out her brother and wanting to keep Mirabelle undamaged and unchanged.

“Ah, hell.” His bum leg would make him a little late, but for some crazy reason he needed to be at that council meeting.

Fifteen minutes later, Noah stood in the foyer of the town hall, listening to some minor business about garbage pickups. He debated whether or not he should actually go inside. He could stand in the foyer and listen to the debate, or he could do what he’d intended and head right toward Sophie so she’d know he was there for her. There was only one problem. What made him think she’d care? She might not. Strangely enough, he did.

Noah stepped into the room. With its indoor-outdoor carpeting, fluorescent lights, painted concrete walls and the smell of industrialized sanitizer permeating the air, he felt as if he was back in elementary school.

The council members, including Noah’s dad, sat at a long table at the front of the room. They looked up

when he came in and Carl Andersen, owner of the Rock Point Lodge and an old classmate of Noah's, stopped talking. The entire room turned to see what had captured Carl's attention. Great. A grand entrance was not what he'd intended.

Sophie sat toward the front next to Marty. Noah walked down the side aisle and sat in the empty seat by her side. Ignoring the rest of the room, he whispered, "I hope it's okay that I came."

She gave him a funny little half smile. "It's fine."

Noah's dad cleared his throat. "Let's move on, Carl."

"Oh, yeah," Carl said, looking at the papers in front of him. "Where was I?"

After an introduction, Marty walked toward the front of the room with a large portfolio in his hand. He grabbed the microphone and said, "Everyone's going to have their own opinion about what I have to say. Some of you are going to love the idea and some are going to hate it. All I ask is that you give the possibility fair consideration." He paused and looked out over the crowd. "I want to build a new hotel."

That met with a few comments.

"We don't need more rooms."

"You're moving back to the island?"

"About time."

"I know the island already has excess occupancy, but I've got a plan to attract more people." Marty outlined his proposal. "I want to have two pools and I have plans for a municipal golf course that everyone in this room should be interested in."

His comment was met with stunned silence. Noah looked around. If Marty had been an outsider, they would've given him a quick and loud piece of their minds, but because he was one of their own, they politely kept their opinions to themselves. For the moment. When Marty finished summarizing his proposal, the resulting response was a combination of eagerness and outrage.

"Okay, okay," Carl said, quieting the room. "I don't think Marty's finished yet."

Marty set down the mike and looked out at the group. "Before you all get dead set against the idea, here are the facts. In the past five years, all of you have spent more and more money on promotion, and every year your sales have been slipping. The number of tourists visiting this island has been steadily dropping every year for the past five years."

"How do you know that?" Bob Henderson, the owner of the drugstore asked.

"The ferry company shared passenger figures."

"You think two pools and a golf course are the answers?"

"I think it will draw more families with kids."

"Maybe we like things the way they are," someone yelled.

“Look,” Marty said. “I’m not talking about building a huge, all-inclusive type resort here. Everyone benefits from this venture. My guests would visit your businesses, and the golf course would be municipal. We’d all benefit from that.”

The arguing went on and on, back and forth. Marty’s proposal threatened to tear the island in two.

“I’m not asking for anyone to approve my plans tonight,” Marty practically yelled. “All I’m looking for is approval to do a feasibility study. To bring engineers and contractors onto the island to determine whether or not a golf course and pool are even possible. Once we find out if it’s even possible, then I’ll be back looking for approval to get formal bids.”

“Okay.” Carl quieted everyone. “Is there anyone in this room who thinks this is a good idea?”

One hand raised, then another. Marty, no doubt, had what he was looking for, a crack in the stoic foundation. During a moment of silence, Noah’s dad said, “Sophie. What do you think?”

Marty’s gaze spun toward his sister. She could make or break this for him. “Be honest,” he whispered. “But please don’t kill it right away.”

“I think,” Sophie said, “that while I’m personally dead set against this—” she glanced at Marty “—it never hurts to consider possibilities. Marty knows what this island means to all of us. If there’s anyone who can do this while preserving Mirabelle’s integrity it’s one of our own.”

After more mumbling and arguing, the council called for a vote. All council members except Noah’s dad were in favor of allowing Marty to go ahead with gathering whatever information he needed to fully develop a final proposal, but in the end Marty would need a unanimous vote to implement his plan.

The meeting ended and people either left or milled about. Sophie stood. “I’m surprised to see you here, Noah.”

“Hey, I had to give the town something to talk about aside from Marty’s deal.”

Carrying his portfolio, Marty came down the aisle. “Thanks for coming, Noah.”

“No problem.”

“After all this,” Sophie said to Marty, “you still up for movie night with all the nieces and nephews?”

“Brittany and I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Noah’s dad came toward them. “No hard feelings, Marty, right?”

“Not at all, Jim. This is your home. You gotta trust your gut.”

“Noah, you want to go get something to eat?”

The offer surprised Noah, until he realized his dad’s motivation probably had more to do with trying to keep Noah away from Sophie than anything else. “I’m not really hungry right now, Dad. Thanks.”

“Suit yourself.”

Some islanders came up to Marty to get more details on his proposal, and Noah and Sophie found themselves alone.

“Sophie!” said a woman near the doors. With her plump cheeks and ready smile, the woman looked familiar to Noah. “Is that Lynn Duffy?” Noah whispered.

“Mmm-hmm.”

It was the hair that had thrown him. Her long wavy locks had changed from solid black to completely white since Noah had last seen her. “Hello, Mrs. Duffy.”

She nodded at him. “Sophie, you want to join us for a beer at the pub?”

“No, thanks, Lynn. Some other night.”

Lynn glanced at Noah and frowned. “Well...okay.”

After she’d left, Noah whispered, “I’m sensing they don’t want us together.”

“Ya think?”

They stepped outside and by unspoken agreement headed toward Noah’s house. Suddenly, Sophie laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“You. Calling everyone mister and missus. Do you know any of the adults’ first names?”

“No.” He chuckled. “Hey. I was eighteen when I left here. Gimme a break. It was always Mrs. Duffy, Mr. Setterberg, yada yada. I’m surprised my dad didn’t make me call him Chief Bennett.”

They walked along in silence for another block or so, neither seeming to know what to say. Something he couldn’t identify had changed between them since last night.

“You look like you got some sun today,” she said, clearly uncomfortable.

“Did some more painting.”

They reached Noah’s street and turned up the hill. “Did you sleep last night?” she asked.

“Four hours. Your magic did the trick last night. What’re you doing tonight, tomorrow night, the night after that?” he said, chuckling.

“I did some research on the Internet about that mirror therapy you mentioned yesterday. Have you ever tried it?” she asked.

“Once or twice,” he said, hesitating. He looked away, out toward the lake. The exercise had a funny way of making him miss his foot even more.

“The studies indicate it can make a difference after a short while—”

“Stop,” he said, cutting her off. “Don’t psychoanalyze me. And don’t doubt that I want off this island as much as you want me gone.”

She fell silent.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’m doing the best I can.” They’d reached Grandma Bennett’s house. “You should get back to your kids,” he said.

“Are you kidding me? Home is the last place I want to be,” she said. “Marty and Brittany are having a sleepover in my apartment with all the nieces and nephews.”

That actually sounded like fun. Maybe some day he’d have that kind of comfortable relationship with Kurt and Lauren.

“We need to get you sleeping through the night,” she said. “The tea helped last night, didn’t it?”

He nodded and climbed the porch steps.

“Let’s give that another shot.”

Too tired to argue, he went upstairs as she headed into the kitchen to make tea. After washing up and brushing his teeth, he went into his bedroom, traded jeans for flannel pants and pulled off his shirt. He was searching through the dresser for a warm shirt—the nights were often chilly even in June—when the sound of footsteps came from the hall.

“Here’s some tea.” Carrying two cups, Sophie came through the door. On seeing him naked from the waist up, she stopped.

He tensed, self-conscious about his body for the first time in his life. Other than the nurses in the hospital, no woman had seen the damage done to him over the years.

The moon cut a swath across her neck and chest, but he couldn’t see her face, couldn’t read her eyes. “All those scars,” she whispered. “You look like a soldier.”

Hardly. He’d done what he could for people in need whose paths he’d crossed through the years, often doing more than fighting their battles with his articles and books, but it wasn’t the same. He turned away.

“Oh, Noah. Your back, too.” Shrapnel from the Iraqi explosion had hit his stomach and chest, but his back had been virtually shredded, taking the brunt of the punishment. She set his cup of tea on the bedside table and sat down in a nearby chair. “You must’ve been a bloody mass of pulp.”

She had that right. Quickly, he pulled the first shirt he could find over his head. “Yeah. I had to be on my stomach for several weeks in the hospital.” Sitting on the edge of the bed, he took off the prosthetic.

Having her so near physically, in this intimate setting, was getting to him. He might not be himself, but he was still a man, and Sophie was...well, Sophie. The only woman he’d ever loved. The two of them alone here, at night, was not a smart idea. That’s when he realized what had changed. Walking and talking last night had dispelled the anger between them.

“Sophie—”

“I’ll go in a minute.”

He had to admit falling asleep with her nearby sounded comforting, and as long as she stayed in that chair and didn’t touch him, he’d be okay. He fell onto his stomach on top of the light blanket and stretched out.

“Will you be able to sleep?”

“Probably.” Already his eyelids felt heavy. “A back rub sounds nice.” Had he actually said that aloud?

Sure enough the mattress gave way as Sophie sat next to him. Her hands were on his shoulders massaging and kneading. Down his spine, working out the knots. Then her hands were all over him, harder now, massaging, bringing relief. He understood why he needed her, but Sophie? “Remind me again why you’re doing this,” he whispered.

“I told you. I want you off my island.”

“Liar.”

Her touch softened, and before he knew what was happening, he drifted off in a deep sleep. When he opened his eyes, it was dark outside. The room was chilly, telling him he’d slept for hours. With the next breath he became aware of a warm body snuggled behind him. Sophie’s arm was over his back, wrapped around his side, and a feeling of contentedness rolled over him in a slow, quiet wave.

He shifted, pulled a nearby blanket over them and turned onto his back. Sound asleep, she made a soft sound as she cuddled against his side. His arm had no place to go except around her. “You’re playing with fire staying here,” he whispered into the chilly night air.

“I don’t care,” she murmured, still half-asleep. “I missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” He had, more than he’d let himself believe. As he closed his eyes and drifted off once again, he couldn’t shake the feeling that safe wasn’t being on Mirabelle. Safe was being in Sophie’s arms.

SOPHIE CAME AWAKE TO THE QUIET, lonesome call of a mourning dove. With the colors of predawn tinting the room in pale, pink light, she became fully aware of having fallen asleep in Noah’s bed and having slept there the entire night. He’d slept, too, but at what cost?

Last night something had come over her, suddenly, completely, uncontrollably. She’d seen his scars, imagined the pain he’d gone through and the urge to comfort him had overwhelmed her. As if she’d walked through a time warp, she’d gone back to square one with Noah. Just like that.

You are so asking for a twice-broken heart.

Though she didn’t remember either of them waking, he’d turned in the middle of the night and drawn covers over them. He was behind her now, keeping her warm, his steady breath skimming her neck, his arm tucked around her, his body so close along the full length of her backside she couldn’t move without sliding her skin against his.

A raging awareness of her body—and Noah's—sprang to life inside her. Every bone, every muscle, every inch of her skin was tuned to Noah. If only she could strip off her clothes and feel him, his warmth, next to her.

Isaac had never liked making love in the morning, and yet the few times she and Noah had managed to spend all night together, their sunrise lovemaking had been some of their more tender moments together. Slow and warm, Noah had never been in a hurry.

Oh, God, Isaac. I'm so sorry.

She'd been a lukewarm wife for him. Oh, she'd been kind, respectful, considerate and, in a way, loving. They'd enjoyed each other's company. She'd been content with his lovemaking and, as far as she knew, she'd pleased him, but never once in all the years she'd been with Isaac had she felt this kind of consuming arousal. The kind that drove a woman to do crazy things. The kind that if she didn't leave right now...

Leave. Now. Before he wakes up.

But I want this.

What about Lauren and Kurt?

You may have learned to live with not knowing for certain whether Noah or Isaac is Kurt and Lauren's biological father, but Noah won't accept that. He'll want to know.

That worked like a splash of frigid water to her face. Carefully, she lifted Noah's arm and inched away from him. She glanced back at his still form as she tiptoed out the door. He'd better get well quick and leave Mirabelle, or she was going to find herself in deep trouble. There was no promise here, no future, only the messy past.

On entering her home, she found Marty asleep on the couch with Brittany and all their nieces and nephews crashed on the floor. Marty cracked open his eyes when she walked into the room.

"Thanks for staying," she whispered.

"Where were you?" he asked, still bleary-eyed.

Kurt groaned and rolled over in his sleeping bag on the floor in the family room. Sophie watched him for a moment, making sure he wasn't awake.

"Were you at Noah's?" Marty asked.

"Shh," Sophie said and motioned they take their conversation into the kitchen.

Marty followed her, the look on his face neither accusatory nor judgmental, only concerned. "You slept at Noah's?"

"It was an accident," she whispered. "I know what you're going to say. Don't. Nothing happened."

"Yet." He shook his head. "Sophie, Noah's never lied to you." He was struggling to keep his voice

down. "He's never given you reason for false hope. There's no happy ending to this story."

"I know, Marty." Better than anyone.

NOAH ROLLED OVER IN BED Only to have the glare of a midmorning sun smack him in the face. Groggy as hell, he flopped back to his other side and pried open his eyes. He felt like death warmed over. What was the matter with him?

Then he saw the dent from Sophie's head on the pillow and the previous night came back to him. He'd slept, that's what'd happened, damned close to a full eight-hour stretch.

He tucked her pillow in front of him, smelled her lingering scent on the linens, like a fresh breeze over open water, and fell back asleep to the remembered feeling of her hands all over him. Isaac had been one lucky son of a bitch.

CHAPTER TEN

ADD A FULL NIGHT'S SLEEP On top of all the work he'd been doing on the house these past several days, and Noah's appetite was back with a vengeance. He devoured a plate full of fried eggs, Canadian bacon, hash browns and toast and then went outside to finish painting and scraping the rest of the house. He was crouched on his knees on the porch, putting a coat of paint on the railing when Marty came up the walk.

"Hey." Noah dipped his brush in the paint can and finished off the last spindle. "What's up?"

"Word got around you still hold the island record for consecutive table tennis championships," Marty said in a relative monotone, his mouth set in a stern line. "We're having a tournament this morning."

Noah pushed himself upright and stepped away from the railing. "That's not why you came up here."

Marty hesitated and then stomped onto the porch. "What are you doing, Noah?"

Right. This was about Sophie. Last night. Noah would be damned before he'd defend himself, but he didn't want to give the wrong impression, either. "We fell asleep. That's it."

"I'm supposed to believe she spent the entire night here and nothing happened?"

"That's right."

"Well, I'm going to bet you wanted something to happen. A lot of something."

That, Noah couldn't argue.

"Does that mean you're thinking of staying on Mirabelle?"

"No." Noah shook his head. Just the thought of an isolated winter on this island sent an uneasy chill up his spine.

Marty paced the length of the porch. "I know what it feels like to want off this island. I couldn't wait to

head off to college. Now I can't wait to move back here, raise a family, run my own business. People change, Noah."

"Not this people."

"So there's no way you're staying?"

"No."

"Does she know that?"

"Yes."

"Do you still love her?"

"Hell, Marty, how should I know?" Now it was Noah's turn to pace, albeit with a bit of a limp.

"Then I get back to the original question. What the hell are you doing?"

"Obviously, I don't know."

"Well, do everyone a favor and figure it out before hearts get broken all over again." Marty went back to the steps.

A surge of protectiveness toward Sophie welled inside Noah. "What about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Wanting to tear down Rousseau forest land to build a brand-new hotel, pools and a golf course?" Noah couldn't believe he cared one way or the other. "Talk about breaking hearts. How can you do that to Sophie?"

"You don't live on this island anymore, so you don't understand the situation."

"You're threatening to destroy tradition, history. That's pretty simple."

"This island is dying, Noah, and all the residents refuse to see it. Since you don't live here anymore and never plan to live here again, maybe you should stay out of it." Marty pounded down the porch steps. "In the meantime, there are a couple of kids at the inn dying to beat you in table tennis."

"You still want me to come down?"

"I'm not going to figure this one out for Sophie. Unlike the rest of this island. She's a grown woman. She can take care of herself." Once in the yard, he turned. "Do you want to play Ping-Pong or not?"

Noah's initial reaction was not. All those people, the activity, the conversation, the looks. Kids staring at him, he didn't mind. They were curious. What bothered him most was the way adults often studied him, noticing his gait and then their gazes shifting away. These days, insulating himself felt more comfortable. He didn't have to watch everyone else getting on with his or her life while his stagnated.

"Noah, man, you're not a hermit." Marty's voice broke through Noah's thoughts. "It's not your way."

No. It wasn't.

"Maybe you're not up for the competition," Marty challenged with a sudden gleam in his eye. "Maybe you've gotten soft."

Noah laughed. "All right, Little Mart. You're on."

SOPHIE TOOK HER MIND OFF last night's town council meeting, not to mention what had happened between her and Noah, and locked herself in her office Wednesday morning to catch up on some work. It felt good to push everything out of her mind and focus, if only for a few hours. After lunch, she rejoined the wedding party outside and was surprised to find Marty playing against Noah in the deciding match of a table tennis tournament.

"Game point." Marty chuckled. It was his serve. "Get ready to lose, Noah."

"Go, Uncle Marty!" Sophie's nieces and nephews cheered for their uncle.

"Noah! Noah! Noah!" Lauren chanted.

"You're dead meat, Noah," Kurt yelled. "You can do it, Uncle Marty!"

Sophie glanced up at her son. There was something decidedly less than good-natured in his support of Marty. What was that all about?

While it was disconcerting having Noah in such close proximity to Lauren and Kurt, it was good to see Noah laughing and interacting with Marty and Brittany's wedding guests. His skin had color back and he was already gaining some weight. He grinned and Sophie saw a glimmer of a new Noah, an all grown-up and mature, full-fledged man. A man who could take care of himself. Not long now and he'd be leaving to get on with his life. Good. That was good.

"Here we go!" Marty served, and Noah returned. They volleyed back and forth. Marty slammed a fast one and Noah returned a little too hard. The ball missed the table by no more than a quarter of an inch. "Yes!" Marty raised his arms in victory as the crowd that had gathered clapped and cheered. "Finally, I beat you at something."

"Good game, Uncle Marty." Kurt tapped his fist against Marty's in midair.

"You did your best," Lauren said, patting Noah on the back.

"Maybe I let him win." A grin on his face, Noah set down his paddle.

"Yeah, right." Kurt rolled his eyes and turned to walk away.

"Hey," Sophie whispered to him, setting a hand on his shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." He shrugged her off and walked away.

When she turned back around the crowd had dispersed, leaving only Sophie, Lauren and Noah.

“Glad to see you made it down here,” she said.

“Marty came up to the house and challenged me to a game. What could I do? Besides, I needed a break from painting.”

“They’re setting up teams for a boccie ball tournament,” Lauren said. “Will you be on my team, Noah?”

“I don’t know, sweetie.”

“Oh, come on!” She dragged him across the lawn toward the sign-up table Jan was manning.

“Noah, do you remember Jan?” Sophie asked.

Jan looked up briefly, scowled and then went back to her paperwork.

“Sure, I remember. Your husband runs the equipment rental place, right?”

When Jan only nodded, Sophie said, “Yep, that’s Ron.”

“Noah’s going to sign up on my boccie ball team,” Lauren announced.

“Wait a minute,” Noah interrupted.

“All the teams are full,” Jan said.

“I thought I needed three more people,” Lauren complained.

“We had to shuffle things around to make the teams more even.”

Sophie cocked her head at Jan. Something about that excuse smelled fishy, but the less time Noah spent around Lauren, the better.

“Since when?” Lauren asked.

“Since you were watching the Ping-Pong tournament.”

“What—”

“It’s okay,” Noah said, patting Lauren’s shoulder. “I need to get some more work done, anyway.”

“Oh, all right,” Lauren said, disappointed.

They walked away from Jan’s sign-up table and were heading toward the beach when one of Lauren’s cousins yelled, “Lauren! It’s your turn for karaoke.”

“Coming!” She ran toward the inn. “See you guys later.”

That left Sophie alone with Noah. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Good. I slept...really well last night,” he said, then quickly changed the subject. “Went into town first

thing and picked up some groceries. I actually rented a bike.”

“How did pedaling go?”

“I did okay.” By this time they’d wandered to the water’s edge. Noah picked up a rock and skipped it over the surface of the water. “This place isn’t as friendly as I remembered.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Little things here and there. Old man Newman was at the grocery store along with his son. He barely looked up from the shelf he was stocking. His son was downright rude.”

“Mike Newman rude?”

“Feels like a conspiracy to me.” Noah grinned. “I think they want me off this island. Probably more than you do.” He kicked the toe of his tennis shoe into the sand. “Can’t blame them, I guess. I’ve never disguised the fact that I hated living here. Not to mention I pretty much put my dad through hell when I was a teenager. Then there’s always you—”

“Sophie!” The shout came from behind them. Josie was coming toward them. “We need your help. Brittany’s having a bit of a meltdown.”

“About what?”

“She wants the tables aligned in a certain way for the groom’s dinner, and it won’t work in the main dining hall.”

“Sorry.” Sophie looked at Noah. “I should go.”

“Can I come with you? I’d love to see the inn.”

“I don’t think now’s a good time.” Josie frowned. “Brittany’s fairly upset.”

“Come on.” Sophie pulled Noah with her toward the inn. “I’ll find out what Brittany needs and I’ll catch up with you in a little bit. Go ahead. Walk around.” She left him standing in the lobby and followed Josie into the main reception hall.

Brittany was standing in the middle of the room, her arms gesturing this way and that. For the groom’s dinner, the tables were to be dressed casually with lime-green tablecloths and napkins and bouquets of red roses. For the wedding reception, the colors were to be reversed, cherry-red tablecloths and lime-green candles and plants.

Sophie braced herself for the panicky tirade of a frazzled bride. “Brittany, how’s it going?”

She turned, surprising Sophie with a smile. “Oh, Sophie! Everything’s perfect. I can’t wait for Friday night. I can’t wait for the wedding! Josie and Jan are the best.” She squeezed Sarah around the shoulders. “And Sarah planned everything out perfectly. The band we’d booked cancelled, so she found us a better group for the same money. She suggested we...”

Brittany went on and on. When she finally took a breath, Sophie smiled. “You’re doing fine then. Let me know if you need me.”

“Oh, we will.” Brittany nodded.

Sophie glared at Josie and walked away.

NOAH TOOK IN THE LOBBY of the Mirabelle Island Inn. He hadn’t been in here for close to twenty years, and as far as he could remember everything looked exactly the same, yet somehow new and fresh. How in the world had Sophie managed that?

The receptionist, a young, college-aged woman Noah didn’t recognize, came through a door behind the desk. “Can I help you with something?”

“I’m waiting for Sophie.”

“Does she know you’re here?”

He nodded.

“If you want, you could wait in her office.” She pointed to her left. Obviously this young woman hadn’t been clued in to the islanders’ master plan. “Down that hall.”

Where Mr. Rousseau’s office had been. He thanked the receptionist as he walked past her and found Sophie’s office door wide-open. He went to her desk and turned, wanting to see what she stared at, day in and day out.

She had a view of Lake Superior out the window, picturesque for sure. What on this island wasn’t? But it was the wall full of framed photos directly opposite the desk that caught his eye. Some were black-and-white, some color, all enlargements, most of Kurt and Lauren.

Those kids had such life in their eyes, their smiles. Whether they were little and swinging at a playground, or older at birthday parties, he could almost hear their toddler-aged giggles and their teenaged smart-alecky comments.

Sophie took beautiful pictures. At least he was guessing it was Sophie. Isaac hadn’t been the type to have taken the time and effort to put together this display. Noah studied a couple more photos and spotted Isaac. Damn. The last time Noah had seen his brother, Isaac had been in his early twenties. Noah stepped closer and studied his brother’s face. There he was all grown-up. A man, a husband, a father. Jealousy hit Noah like a bitterly cold wave crashing against the lighthouse rocks.

Isaac, the good son. The straight-A student. The achiever. The man who had enjoyed walking in his father’s footsteps. The son who had stayed. The man Sophie had loved enough to marry.

“You had it all, Isaac,” Noah said into the stillness.

How could Noah possibly feel jealous of a dead man? Disgusted with himself, he turned away to find the door to an adjacent sitting area was ajar. That room had been Mr. Rousseau’s private space. Sophie’s dad would disappear for short moments here and there, or sometimes a few hours at a time. No one had been allowed through that door.

Noah and Sophie had peeked through the window from the outside a couple of times to find nothing more exciting than her dad taking a nap on a large, cozy couch. He'd kept a TV and small refrigerator in the room, as well. As Noah crossed the room for a quick glance inside, he couldn't help wondering if Sophie had claimed the space for herself.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE KNOB WAS LOCKED, BUT THE door hadn't been pulled completely closed. Curious now, Noah nudged the door open wider to find as feminine a sitting room as he'd ever seen. There was a red, ultra-suede couch with fluffy, floral pillows, a stained-glass floor lamp, filmy fabric draped across the window, candles on nearly every flat surface and a bottle of wine and a single glass sitting on top of a bookcase. There was still a TV, but there was also a stereo with stacks of CDs piled nearby. Photos covered every square inch of the far wall.

These photos were very different in tone from the family prints in her office. Some were black and whites, some colors, some sepia tints with only hints of color. Every picture was of the island, most were off-season shots, bright leaves on the trees, snow on the ground, irises popping up and trees beginning to change color.

He recognized almost every location, and while at first glance these might have seemed like cheerful tourist shots the longer he absorbed them the less jolly they seemed. There was a melancholy feel about them, something about the composition of each photo that left him feeling as if something was missing or out of kilter.

Early spring along the shore showed trees leafing out and new grass sprouting, but waves crashed onto the beach and chunks of ice floated off in the horizon. She'd taken amazing photos of storms rolling in off the lake. He could feel the cold, the wind in his face. Winter in town. Snow falling. The docks were empty, no boats, no tourists, no bikes, no one walking. On the black and whites, the happy tones of Main Street were noticeably absent. In the autumn shots with barren tree branches you could almost hear the leaves crackling as they blew over the forest floor.

The ones with the locals in them were the most poignant. He could smell Mrs. Miller's molasses cookies as she slid the pan out of an industrial-sized oven, sense her concentration and almost feel the arthritis in the knuckles of her hands displayed so prominently in the photos. As Lynn and Arlo Duffy walked along the sidewalk, he could almost hear their old bones creaking with every step.

Every shot held an emotion so clear to him it was as if he'd taken the photos himself. These were images of loneliness, despair and heartache. He closed his eyes and bent his head. Put up a damned good front, didn't she? For Lauren and Kurt. For the town. For herself, too? That was the biggie. Did she understand her own pain?

He turned around and found the wall at his back covered with more photos. Only these were different, older, and taken by...him! The breath whooshed from his chest, nearly knocking him down.

Oh, God. Sophie.

There she was, eighteen years old, innocent and beautiful, lying on a bed. At their motel. Or at least what he'd come to think of as their motel. In Bayfield, where they'd spent their three last days together. A white sheet clung to her obviously naked body and barely covered her breasts. He remembered looking at her through that old 35 millimeter, just looking, absorbing, branding the image of her on his heart.

She was so innocent, yet so incredibly sexy. They hadn't been able to get enough of each other. He'd spent most of three days with a hard-on for her that couldn't be soothed. He'd wanted her every possible way, every waking moment. They'd even fallen asleep joined together.

He tore his gaze away and looked at the next one and the next. There were more than a dozen of Sophie and him at the motel in varying degrees of dress and undress. His favorites were of her alone. Looking at him. Her eyes held the purest emotions one could imagine. And he'd caught it on film way back then. Sometimes understanding, other times clearly angry with him. Always with the love she felt for him wide-open, right on the surface.

He'd never forgotten these pictures. They'd been framed in his mind from the moment the shutter had clicked. He'd left his camera on purpose, knowing he'd never find the courage to develop the film.

Sophie had not only developed them, she'd framed them. Either these photos meant something to her, in which case, this had been a risky venture for a wife and mother, or Isaac had known about them and, other than nostalgic value, they meant nothing to Sophie.

"Noah? You in here?" Sophie. In her office.

Quickly, he spun around. It had been accidental, but he felt, nonetheless, as if he'd violated her privacy.

"There you are," she said, coming to the door. "I thought you'd gotten lost—" She stopped just inside the room.

He glanced into her face. For the first time in fifteen years, it dawned on him that he, a man who had taken pride in always telling the truth, may have been lying to himself. No matter what he tried to convince himself of over the years, he wasn't sure he'd ever stopped loving this woman.

"The pictures..." she said in a whisper.

"Did Isaac know about these?"

"No."

What did that mean? He saw his own jumbled-up emotions mirrored in her eyes and without thinking tapped the door closed and cupped her face in his hands. "Those were the best three days of my life."

"Mine, too," she murmured, her eyes closing and her head falling back.

All he wanted was to touch her, to feel her again, just once. One kiss. He lowered his lips to hers, softly, wanting to recapture the innocence they'd shared. With that one featherlight touch, his tenuous restraint snapped. Urgent need took hold, tightening in his gut. Not since Sophie had he felt this wild and uncontrolled passion.

Strengthening his hold on her, he pressed his lips to her mouth, her face, her neck, remembering, wishing he could step back in time and do everything all over again. What would he change? What could he change?

Then she moaned, a reckless whisper of a sound, and he no longer cared about anything except Sophie in this moment. Common sense disappeared along with thought and reason and innocence. Her hands were all over him, his all over her. He wanted her and she wanted him, no matter the consequence.

She leapt into his arms and he backed her against the door. Her arms went around his neck, and he held her there, closer, tighter. Meeting him, touch for touch, she felt like his memories and tasted like his dreams. Her ragged breath in his ear, his lips on her neck, he tripped back in time.

“Oh, God, Sophie. Sophie, Sophie,” he murmured, kissing her face, her neck, her lips again and again. “You’re the only—”

“Sophie?” A knock sounded on the door, and Noah stilled. It was Jan. He grabbed the knob and gripped it, holding the door closed only an instant before Jan tried opening it. “Sophie, are you in there?”

They both held still, barely breathed as they waited for Jan to leave. Seconds ticked by without a sound. Finally, he lowered her to her feet. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“I wanted that as much as you did.”

For an instant longer, he allowed himself the pleasure of her touch, and then he stepped back. “You’re thinking with your heart, Soph, not your head.”

“So you’re going to think for me?” She was angry and he didn’t blame her. “Since I’m incapable?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, but it’s what you mean.”

It wasn’t at all what he’d meant. He didn’t want to be responsible for hurting her. Again. That was all.

“I’m so sick of everyone on this island thinking they know what’s best for me.” She spun around, furious.

Good. Maybe that’d keep her away from him.

“Are you saying you want this?”

“I don’t know what I want.”

“When’s the last time you and I stopped at kissing?” he asked, pushing home his point. “This wouldn’t be the end. I’d want more. You’d want more. I can’t do this to you. Not again.” He ran his hands through his hair. “Nothing’s changed, Soph. In a few weeks, a month, maybe two, I’ll be leaving Mirabelle. We’re back to square one.”

“You could never see yourself staying on the island?”

“No.”

“Why?” she whispered. “Why not?”

He covered his face with his hands. “I remember when my mom left my dad, I was so angry at her. Couldn’t understand how she could leave me, leave my dad, leave our home. It wasn’t long before I started to see the island through her eyes. Turns out, I’m just like her.”

“That’s your dad talking.”

“I used to think so. Now I’m not so sure. Some people are happy in one place. Me? I felt like a caged animal here. I still do. You can walk and walk and walk and you’re still on the island. No matter where you go, you end up in the same place. The same faces, the same buildings, even the same rocks, over and over. Day after day after day. I can’t do it, Sophie. I need privacy. I need anonymity. I need change.”

“You’re still running away.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“From what?”

“I don’t know. Your dad. Yourself.” Her anger turned to annoyance, frustration. “You’ve moved on from one place to the next for fifteen years. Haven’t you figured out by now that you take yourself wherever you go, Noah?” She opened the door.

“Well, good heavens, there you are.” Jan’s voice came from Sophie’s office. “Josie wanted to run a menu change by you for next week.”

“Whatever she does is fine,” Sophie said.

“That—”

“I don’t care, Jan!” Sophie marched off.

Noah came out of Sophie’s private room and found Jan still standing in Sophie’s office. As he pulled the door firmly closed behind him, locking it, she glared at him.

“Yeah, I know.” Noah brushed past her. “Stay away from Sophie.”

STILL FUMING, SOPHIE STALKED toward the Rousseau family apartment. Who did Noah think he was, deciding for her how things would be between them? He didn’t have a right. She made her own choices. She decided. She—

You’re a part of this island, cherie... You have to keep the Rousseau traditions alive.

She was kidding herself. First her parents, then Isaac, then the kids, then these islanders. The only decision she’d ever made for herself was to let her decisions be dictated by others, by the past.

How the hell had her life gotten to this place? This hadn’t been her plan. Her plan had been to head to college with Noah. Afterward, they were going to work, travel, get married, maybe have kids, maybe not. Instead, her father had died and obligation had overrun dreams. The problem was that obligations had kept piling up.

Suddenly and profoundly sad, she opened the door to her apartment to the sound of raucous noise.

Apparently, the nieces and nephews, tired of karaoke, had decided to hang for a while. The girls were in the kitchen listening to music, talking and giggling, and the boys were in the family room killing aliens. Nail polish was out and pillows were being thrown.

“Hey, Mom,” Lauren said.

“Hi, Aunt Sophie.” A round of greetings sounded at once from her sisters’ daughters.

“Hi, girls,” Sophie said, then she looked into the family room. All the nephews were present, but her son was nowhere to be found. “Where’s Kurt?” she asked Lauren.

“Don’t know. He said he wasn’t feeling well.”

Lauren was her social butterfly, while Kurt was more introspective and quiet. No doubt several days of activities and late-night sleepovers with cousins had caught up with him. She found him in his room, where posters of sports cars plastered every inch of the walls. Lying on his bed, he decompressed with his iPod.

“You okay?” she mouthed.

He nodded. His red-rimmed eyes, though, were a clear indication his feelings went a little deeper than needing some time alone. Stepping inside, she closed the door and sat in the papasan chair in the corner, waiting. Kurt so seldom talked about anything with her. If she was patient, his words might escape.

“What?” he said, flicking out his earbuds.

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Give him a minute. Sophie bit her tongue, glanced at the pictures of cars with names like Lotus, Diablo and Viper and a pang of guilt swept through her that Kurt would have virtually no use for a driver’s permit when he turned fifteen next year. Was she being fair to her kids by raising them on Mirabelle?

Oh, hell. One thing at a time.

“Not talking about it definitely won’t help,” she said. “Talking about it might.”

Kurt stubbornly glanced away. His gaze caught on the picture of him and Isaac on one of their last camping trips and his eyes watered. “Dad should be here for Marty’s wedding. For all this family stuff. He would’ve had an awesome time.”

Sophie held her breath and battled to keep her mouth shut and her butt in that chair. The urge to go wrap her arms around him and rock him the way she had when he was a baby overwhelmed her, but Kurt was struggling so hard at being a man. Making him feel like a child again would only make him want to push her away.

“Things don’t seem right without Dad.” His voice caught and a tear dribbled down his face. “I miss him.” Then he sniffed and angrily swiped at his cheek. “But you don’t,” he said.

It felt like a slap. Maybe because it was partly true.

“You don’t have time to miss Dad,” he continued. “You’re too busy liking Noah.”

“That’s not fair.” The words were out before she could bite them back. She looked away and took a deep breath. “It’s partly true,” she said, softening. “But it’s not fair.”

“So you do like him?”

She tried to frame an explanation of her feelings for Noah, but how did one describe what seemed like a lifetime? “Noah and I were friends, best friends. Like you and Ben,” she said, giving it a shot. “Having Noah back here again after all those years is really nice. I missed him. I miss your dad, too.” In a different way.

“Did you love him?”

Her heart stopped. Her relationship with Isaac had been...simple, but complicated. Hard to understand and harder to explain, especially to an adolescent. “Who?” she asked, hedging.

“Noah.”

That, she could answer honestly. “Yes.”

“Do you still love him?”

She still wanted him. That kiss in her office, the way she’d leapt into his arms without any hesitation, proved that beyond any doubt. But love? “I don’t know, Kurt.”

“Then why did you sleep over at his house last night?”

“Wh—”

Then she remembered. When she’d gotten home this morning, Kurt had rustled around on the floor. Obviously, he’d overheard her conversation with Marty. So this is what his rudeness toward Noah during the table tennis tournament had been all about.

Guilt and shame settled. She slept at a man’s house. They didn’t understand her history with Noah. What kind of example was she setting for her children? How could she do this to them?

“It was silly, Kurt. I fell asleep by accident. We both did.”

“I feel stupid. Like I’m...jealous. But you’re my mom,” he said, looking disgusted. “I shouldn’t feel that way.”

She locked herself into that chair.

“I mean...I figured you’d date again sometime.”

“I’m not dating Noah.”

“But you like him. I can see it, Mom. And he likes you.” Kurt sat forward, shaking his head. “He’s Dad’s brother. Doesn’t that seem weird to you?”

No. Isaac was five years older. He'd babysat Sophie and Noah. He'd been like an older brother to her, someone she'd turned to for advice more often than not. And he'd never seen her as anything except a little sister, until she was a senior in high school. While Isaac may have noticed her when he'd come home from college for holiday breaks and summers, she'd barely seen past Noah to any other boy.

"Don't you feel like you're...betraying Dad?"

"No." Sophie could answer that unequivocally, too. "Your dad..." She smiled, thinking of how he had also missed Noah. Isaac had never spoken about it, but his brother's absence had left a hole in his life. "He'd be happy Noah's come home."

Kurt picked at the light quilt covering his bed. "I heard Grandpa talking to Josie. He said Noah's going to leave the island again. Said he probably won't ever come back. Then what?"

"I don't know, Kurt. Sometimes even adults don't have all the answers."

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE GROOM'S DINNER, a relatively informal yet traditional affair, was held Friday night in the main banquet room at the inn. Table seating was assigned with placards. Sophie was near the front with her kids and her sisters' families. She noticed Sarah had put Noah's card toward the back with a group of Brittany's coworkers. He hadn't come tonight, and, after what had happened yesterday in her office, she understood.

While her kids loved having all their cousins visiting, and her sisters, Beth and Jackie, were enjoying the time away from their hectic home life, the week had gotten long for Sophie. She couldn't wait until Marty and Brittany were off to Europe for their honeymoon and the wedding guests had all cleared out, so things could get back to normal and she could get back to work.

Back to normal. As if that were possible with this whole new hotel concept hanging over her head and Noah still on the island. She'd gotten over being mad at him. He didn't want to hurt her and she couldn't fault him for that. But that kiss in her office, the way it'd felt to have his arms around her, she couldn't get it out of her mind.

Later in the evening, several bonfires were built outside on the beach and a fireworks display had been planned for dusk. After roasting marshmallows with Lauren and Kurt and making s'mores for the little ones, Sophie, hoping for a few minutes of peace and quiet before the fireworks, wandered toward her forest and the weathered, gray trunk of a fallen tree. She'd no sooner left the dim firelight than she heard movement nearby.

"Here we are again." Noah was leaning against a nearby boulder.

Part of her, she supposed, had hoped she'd find him here. "You didn't come to dinner." She sat next to him, close enough that her arm brushed against his. She knew she was flirting with disaster, but she couldn't seem to help herself.

"I didn't think it'd be a good idea. After a while, it's a little much, isn't it? All the people, the activity, the craziness."

"You coming to the wedding?"

“Marty sounded as if he’d be disappointed if I didn’t.” He shifted away from her. “About what happened in your office—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Soph, that won’t make it go away.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Nothing happened.”

“Right.” He was quiet for a moment. “Did you take those photos of the island?”

She hesitated. “Yes.”

“So after the inn closes for the summer season, that’s what you do? Take pictures?”

“It’s become a hobby.” She nodded. “I know they’re nothing like yours, still I have fun.”

“They’re not fun, Sophie. They’re...haunting. I can’t get them out of my head. You’re very talented.”

She tried to slough it off, but his opinion thrilled something deep inside her.

“Can I send some to several friends who run galleries?”

Her reaction was swift and from the gut. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Why? What would be the point?” She had to change the subject, quick. “So what’s it been like all these years, traveling the world in search of a story?”

“Amazing. Rewarding. Exhausting.”

Although she could force her photos out of her mind, she couldn’t imagine what it would be like flying the world over. These days she hardly ever left Mirabelle. She’d only been out of the state of Wisconsin three times. Twice to her sisters’ homes in Minneapolis and once to see Marty in Chicago. She’d never been on a plane, never been to an airport. It seemed odd for someone this day and age, but after Noah had left she’d never had a reason, let alone the desire, to travel.

“Sophie?” He was back to her pictures.

“No,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Why?” She was content with her life on the island as it stood. There was no need to stir the pot.

“Sophie, your pictures will resonate with people. You have huge commercial potential.”

“So?”

She might have sounded indifferent. In truth, when he'd talked about her photos as if they were art, her heart had hammered in her chest as though her life hinged on his opinion. Why should she care? She'd taken the pictures for fun, for entertainment during the long, cold, off-season months. It had kept her occupied. It had helped her look forward to every day.

He chuckled. "Okay, so it's not a great way to pay the bills. I get it. Where's the harm in sending out a couple shots? What are you afraid of?"

He not only made her dream again, he made those dreams seem achievable. He'd always been that way. With Noah, anything seemed possible. Lakes and oceans and deserts had never stopped him from going where he wanted to go. He was fearless and brave, reminding her of everything she wasn't.

Until he kissed her, and something intense and passionate and true came to life inside her. "All right," she said. "Sure."

"How... I don't remember you liking photography."

At that, she turned toward him. "You did it. When you left your camera behind." In an instant they were both transported back in time. Both of them remembering. She could see it in his face. "After you left, why didn't you ever write or call?"

"That's a tricky one."

"The truth."

"Okay. For the first few months, I couldn't bring myself to. I missed you so damned much my body actually ached, like I was going through withdrawal. By the time I came around later and realized how unfair I'd been, you'd already married Isaac." He heard her sigh, and realized now was the perfect time for a question that had plagued him for years. "Now I've got a question for you."

"Tit for tat, I guess."

"Did you ever really love me?"

"How can you ask that?"

"You married my brother so soon after I left. It's not a big deal. Really. We got involved so young. I figured what you'd felt for me had been a teenaged kind of thing. What you felt for Isaac was stronger."

How could one man be so wrong? "Noah, I..."

"It's okay. Either way, I'll admit, it was easier to stay away."

"Was what you felt for me some kind of teenaged thing?" she asked.

"No. Leaving you was the hardest thing I've ever done."

He'd left anyway, went out into the world to make his dreams of being a photojournalist come true. If he'd loved her enough, if there'd been any way to work things out, he would've come back.

"Believe it or not," she said. "You leaving was the hardest thing I've ever gone through, too." They'd

shared so much together, been so much a part of each other's lives.

"If memory serves," he whispered, "I think we were sitting very close to this spot the night of our first kiss."

"I think you're right."

He glanced back at her, his eyes searching for her meaning.

"Yes," she whispered. "I want you to kiss me again."

This time, she didn't want a short and swift stolen kiss, as they'd shared in her office. She wanted time with him, time for languor and passion. Kissing Noah, or being kissed by Noah, had always been... What had it been like? Memories assaulted her, there were so many. He'd been everything a first love should be.

"Kiss me." She glanced at his lips and felt her own opening expectantly.

"Sophie." His whisper was raspy and filled with longing, his eyes intent. "I'm not a boy anymore."

"I know."

"There's nothing innocent and sweet about what I want from you."

"I know."

The darkness of night surrounded them as he reached for her face and softly trailed his fingers over her cheeks. There was still time to change her mind, to step back. Until he gripped her upper arm, pulling her toward him, and reached under her chin, tipping her face. Any awkwardness and timidity that may have been between them in their youth was gone. In its place was a powerful adult need.

His mouth covered hers, with confidence and gentle force, and there was no stopping, no going back. She threw her arms around him and drew him with her to the sand. He was over her, his weight on her, his leg pinning her, and, when she felt his erection, she shifted, wanting to feel that glorious pressure against her own swollen center.

"I've never forgotten," he whispered. He kissed her again, all gentleness gone. His tongue thrust into her mouth, searching, demanding. She wanted skin against skin, heat and pure need. He ran his hand under her shirt, pushed away her bra and cupped her breast. He couldn't read her mind, but he'd always been able to sense what her body needed.

"Mom?"

At the sound of Lauren's voice Noah froze, his hand on her breast, his lips at her mouth. Sophie stopped breathing. If Lauren found her and Noah like this, what would she say? Though Lauren was dealing with Isaac's death marginally better than Kurt, she was still recovering.

"She isn't over here," Kurt said.

Oh, my God. They were both here, only a short distance away. Thank God it was dark.

Slowly and silently, Noah inched her bra back in place and slipped his hand out from under her shirt. He couldn't shift off her without alerting the kids to their presence.

"I saw her," Lauren argued. "Heading this way."

Guilt tripped through Sophie. Seeing her like this with Noah would hurt and confuse them both. What was she doing?

"She went for a walk."

"She's gonna miss the fireworks."

A loud boom sounded, signaling the start of the display, and Noah jerked as if startled by the sound. Sophie instinctively gripped him tighter. Red and blue lights exploded in the sky.

"They're starting!"

"Let's go!"

As the children ran back to the inn, their voices faded into the night. Still, she couldn't move. Another boom sounded and Noah jerked again.

"Are you okay?"

"Loud sounds. Still do a number on me."

She held him through another series of fireworks, and then he quietly rolled off her and onto his back. He took a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair. "Go. Go back. I'll stay here awhile."

"Noah, I—"

"Don't say anything. Don't make any excuses. Your kids. Me. We're too complicated, Sophie. That's all there is to it. Let's pretend this never happened."

As if.

She straightened out her shirt, smoothed her hair and walked away. The fireworks exploding overhead seemed tame compared to what she'd experienced in Noah's arms. Always, it had been that way with him. He forced her emotions so close to the surface. Sophie should've known guarding her heart against Noah would be pointless. He could leave Mirabelle tomorrow and already it might be too late.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MARTY AND BRITTANY'S WEDDING day had dawned with stormy gray skies and rain falling in sheets. Hours later, though, a brisk Lake Superior wind had blown away most of the clouds and the sky remained, if not clear, at least dry. By the time the ceremony rolled around that afternoon the wind had died down, giving way to oppressive humidity.

Noah sat in the back pew of the white church on the hill and tried to force out the quiet conversations going on around him as the guests waited on the ceremony. He wasn't having much luck. His thoughts were scattered, his attention unfocused.

He'd always hated weddings. Well, not always. He'd only hated every wedding he'd been to since Isaac had married Sophie.

"My heavens, it's hot in this church," Mrs. Stotz said. She was Herman's, the assistant police chief's, wife and Noah could remember when the young couple had first moved to the island. He'd thought they were both crazy, couldn't figure out why anyone would ever have wanted to move to Mirabelle.

"It's a wedding day," Mrs. Gilbert, who owned one of the quaint bed-and-breakfasts, returned. "What did you expect?"

"Sunshine, clear blue skies and a nice, cool breeze."

"In your dreams."

Noah glanced to his right and saw Kurt, dressed in a black tux, standing in the entryway, waiting. Then Sophie came into his line of sight and wrapped her hand around Kurt's arm. She wore a midnight-blue dress in some slinky fabric with thin shoulder straps and an angled skirt that came up above her knee on one side and draped past her ankles on the other. Although she was wearing more makeup today than usual, her look wasn't overdone.

She smiled at Noah before Kurt escorted her to the front pew, and his thoughts focused on the conversation they'd had last night. She'd lost a husband, her children's father, and still Sophie had claimed that Noah leaving the island had been the hardest thing she'd ever gone through. How could he have meant more to her than Isaac? First, that kiss in her office, then feeling her under him last night at the beach. She'd brought it all back to him, the longings he'd thought buried years ago.

Now this wedding. Dammit. After he'd left Sophie on Mirabelle, he'd accepted his life would be nomadic. One country, one tent, one bunkhouse after the next. In an attempt to give himself some semblance of roots, he'd bought the house outside Providence in Rhode Island. Though he hadn't spent much time there through the years, being on the ocean reminded him a little of Mirabelle, only with a warmer climate and a lot more people and activities.

"It's too bad Marty couldn't have married Dan Newman's daughter, Marissa."

"Did they date in high school?"

"All four years. They were cute together."

"Does anyone from Mirabelle ever marry someone else from Mirabelle?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Practically never."

"What about Sophie and Isaac Bennett?"

Noah wished they'd shut up.

“Don’t you remember the scuttlebutt? They got married at the courthouse in Washburn.”

The courthouse in Washburn? What the hell? He closed his eyes and concentrated on blocking out their conversation, only it wasn’t working.

“That’s right.”

“The last time two of Mirabelle’s own got married on the island was way back in the Eighties.”

“Ah, the Andersens. I remember that wedding.”

“Excuse me.” A tall, heavyset woman with three kids and a husband standing behind her approached Noah from the aisle. “Are these seats taken?”

“No.” He slid in to make room.

“I’m Eva. Cousins of the groom from California. Don’t keep in touch very well, so we thought this would be a good opportunity to reconnect. My mom had a cancer scare last year and she’s wanted to see family. So we brought her and everyone else.”

Noah nodded and slid farther down the pew.

“Aren’t you Sophie’s husband? Shouldn’t you be sitting more toward the front?”

“No. Sophie’s husband died a few years ago.”

“Aren’t you the Bennett boy?”

“I’m a Bennett, yes, but Sophie married my brother, Isaac.”

“Oh, I assumed—”

Noah stood and moved.

By the time the reception rolled around, he wasn’t feeling any calmer. He managed to get through the meal, the speeches, the endless clanking of glasses for Marty and Brittany to kiss.

Once the dance began, he found himself an inconspicuous spot in the shadows to sit back and watch the revelry. Sophie was on the dance floor now with one of her sister’s husbands and her silky skirt billowed out with every step she took, showing off her calves, and ankles and feet decked out in tall black heels. He couldn’t keep his eyes off her. She had the ability to be at once perfectly stable and wondrously uninhibited. He hadn’t known it all these years, but he’d missed her constancy, her strength, the way she’d always managed to center him, no matter how off course he’d seemed to be. And her passion, her directness, her generous spirit.

“You’re looking mighty somber tonight,” Marty said, pulling out a chair next to him.

“It’s been a long week.”

“Tell me about it.” Marty chuckled. “Can you dance? With the prosthetic?”

“Why?” He grinned. “You asking?”

Marty laughed. “Sure. Let’s go.”

“I suppose I could with some practice, but the occasion hasn’t presented itself before today.”

“No time like the present.”

Dancing with Sophie. Wouldn’t that rouse the locals? “Maybe later.”

“I know we haven’t had much of a chance to talk, but I’m really glad you ended up being here this week. Having you back made things even more special for me.”

The pesky, snot-nosed, tagalong Little Marty was long gone. This man was Noah’s equal, could be his friend. “I’m happy the timing worked out, too, Marty. Congratulations. Brittany’s a great lady.”

Marty glanced over at his bride. “Lights up my boring world, that’s for sure.” Then he focused back on Noah. “I’d like to keep in touch after things settle. With any luck, Brittany and I will be living here. Come back to Mirabelle now and again?”

“Maybe.” He wasn’t sure he’d be able to handle seeing Sophie on a regular basis. These past days had been hell on him. “You sure you want to live here?”

“Can’t wait for it.”

“What about what Sophie wants?”

Marty looked away. “I’m not sure if what Sophie thinks she wants is what’s best for her.”

“Are you talking about me—?”

“Actually, I was talking about the island. What do I know?” Marty stood, clearly uncomfortable with the turn in the conversation. “All I’m saying is don’t be a stranger, okay?”

“I THINK MARTY’S IDEAS are spot-on,” Doc Welinsky said. “This island’s been long in need of a shot in arm.”

“Easy for you to say,” Shirley Gilbert said. “You’re not looking at the possibility of losing customers to some newfangled spa.”

“We got enough tourists as it is,” Sally McGregor added.

Jim sat at the large table lined with islanders at Marty and Brittany’s wedding reception trying hard to keep his mouth shut and simply listen to everyone’s concerns and opinions, but it was hard to remain objective. He did not want Mirabelle to change at all. This was one messy situation.

“I think the golf course is a great idea,” Dan Newman said. “Not too sure pools are cost-effective.”

“You gotta have both,” Bob Henderson said. “If you want to attract adults and families.”

“Before you know it,” Arlo Duffy said. “People’ll be wanting cars.”

“Oh, no!”

“That’ll never happen.”

“Give an inch, they’ll take a mile.”

The table erupted with one opinion after another, threatening to turn into a shouting match.

“Now hold on there!” Jim said, his stomach suddenly acting up. “This is a wedding. We should be enjoying ourselves not talking business.”

After several hems and haws, the conversation turned to lighter topics, and Josie leaned toward him. “Are you all right, Jim?”

“I must be coming down with something.” He popped a couple antacids into his mouth. “My stomach’s been bothering me.”

“You need a vacation off this island.”

She was right, but between Noah’s return and Marty’s proposals for island improvements, the winds of change were clearly hitting Mirabelle’s shores, and he needed to be here to direct, as much as possible, that change.

Even now, Noah looked as if he might walk over to Sophie any minute and ask her to dance. “Kurt,” Jim said, leaning back and tapping his grandson on the shoulder. “Have you danced with your mother yet?”

“Nope.”

“Why don’t you go ask her? She’s over there by the bar talking with some of Brittany’s family.”

“Okay.” Kurt left the table full of kids and dragged his mom out onto the dance floor.

“I think I’d like to dance,” Josie announced to the table.

“What do you want to go out on that crowded floor for?” Jim said.

“Maybe I like it crowded.” Josie shrugged. “If you don’t want to dance with me, I’m sure I can find someone else who will.”

“I’ll dance with you, Josie,” Doc said.

“Like hell you will.” Jim stood up and held out his hand. “Come on. Let’s dance.”

“Why, Jim, you’re such a charmer.” She smiled, took his hand and walked out onto the dance floor. Wearing a red, pink and wine rose-printed dress, she looked as pretty as a picture.

Trying to forget about Noah for a few minutes, he took Josie in his arms and whispered in her ear, “You

know I love you.”

“I know.” She smiled. “I still need you to show it every once in a while.”

NOAH WALKED SLOWLY TO THE BAR. “A beer, please,” he said to the bartender before turning to watch the dance floor.

“You must be Sophie’s husband.” A middle-aged woman came to stand next to him. She must have been one of Brittany’s aunts. That bubbly voice had to be genetic. “The kids look so much like you, you probably get that all the time.”

“No, actually, I don’t—”

“Not so much Lauren, although I can see the likeness in the shape of her face, but that Kurt. You two are spitting images of each other.”

Noah watched Sophie and Kurt dancing a waltz. Kurt. Spitting image. Kurt looked a little like Isaac. But Isaac... looked enough like Noah to make him wonder. He’d thought the kids were around twelve, but then Lauren had said fourteen. Fourteen. Noah had been gone a little under fifteen years. The woman continued babbling, but he was too stunned to hear a word she was saying. How could he have been so blind, so obtuse, as to not wonder?

He thought back and calculated. He’d left for college in August. If their birthday was in May or earlier they were his kids. He could be a father. Kurt and Lauren could be his children.

Shocked, disbelieving, lost in confusion, he walked to where Sophie was dancing with Kurt and tapped the boy on the shoulder. “May I cut in?”

“Whatever.” Kurt shrugged, and Noah saw something in the gesture that reminded him of Isaac. Or was it his imagination?

He took Sophie in his arms, but he was feeling like anything except dancing. Her smile disappeared. “What’s the matter? What happened?”

Never having danced with the prosthetic, his movements felt awkward and stiff. He crossed the slippery floor, maneuvered them out onto the veranda and shut the door.

“What is it?” she said, concerned. “What’s going on?”

“Are Kurt and Lauren my children?”

She looked as if she’d been slapped in the face and turned away.

“Look at me!” He grabbed her arms and spun her around. “Am I their father?”

“Isaac is their father. You’re hurting me!”

Though he loosened his grip, he held her still. “You’ve never lied to me before. Don’t start now.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Then there’s more to the story. If you were telling me the whole truth you wouldn’t be turning away.” He let her go.

Jan poked her head outside. “Sophie—”

“Go away,” Sophie yelled. “Leave us alone!”

Jan’s face registered surprise, but she quickly disappeared back into the ballroom.

Sophie faced him straight on. “Isaac is their father in every way that matters.”

If that wasn’t an evasive answer, he didn’t know what was. “How about this then? Did my sperm fertilize your egg?”

For a moment the only sound was the music filtering outside from the ballroom, and then she whispered, “I don’t know.”

He grabbed her upper arms. “Sophie!”

“I don’t know!” she cried.

His world tilted, skewed strangely. Things he’d believed were truths turned out to be lies. His emotions went wild. Up seemed down, right was now wrong. “What do you mean, you don’t know? How can you not know?” Anger, at himself, at her, pulsed through him. Resentment and disgust combined with disbelief and confusion. He pushed her away from him. “What? Did you sleep with every available man the day after I left?”

Her jaw clenched. “I can’t believe—”

“So you were screwing other men before I left.”

“How can you be so cruel?” she said.

“Me? You won’t tell me whether or not I’m the father of two children. If that isn’t cruel, I don’t know what is.” His anger turned to agony. He moved away, feeling vulnerable and so terribly alone.

“Noah?” She reached for him, and he sidestepped her. After a long moment of silence, she whispered, “I slept with Isaac about a month after you left. He’s the only...” she said, her voice breaking, “the only other man I’ve ever been with.”

“Well, at least that narrows the playing field.” He clenched his jaw, reining himself in. “You must’ve started dating him right after I left.”

“We never really dated. It was just one night.”

“One night.” Now the courthouse wedding in Washburn made more sense. Their wedding hadn’t been planned. He swallowed, not ready to go there just yet. “So it’s between me and Isaac. You ought to be able to figure that one out. You should know.”

"I don't."

"Dammit, Sophie." He spun toward her. "Doctors can pinpoint conception dates by fetal development. Even I know that."

"We asked them not to tell us—"

"We? Are you saying Isaac knew the kids might not be his?"

She nodded. "He didn't care."

"You never tried to figure it out?"

"No. Isaac asked the medical staff not to tell us anything. Even due dates. Since my periods have always been irregular—"

"What's their birthday?"

"May sixteenth, but the date doesn't mean anything, Noah. If you're their biological father, then they were born relatively on time. If Isaac's their father, they were born early. Twins are often early."

"Sophie."

"I wanted to find out. Isaac didn't!" Tears fell down her cheeks. "He convinced me that it didn't matter. He said that whether the children were his or yours, he would love them the same. He did. He was a good man."

"And I'm not."

"That's not what I meant."

"No. But it's what everyone on this damned island believes, isn't it? If you weren't dating Isaac before you married him, no one on this island would think he fathered the twins. No wonder they all hate me. They all think I walked away from my own kids, walked away from you knowing you were pregnant. That's what they think, isn't it?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "No one ever asked."

"My father?"

"No. Never."

"I didn't even get a chance, Sophie, to set things right. To be there for you. For the kids. You didn't give me a choice."

"Would you have wanted a choice? Before you answer that, think back to who you were all those years ago. Think about how desperate you were to leave Mirabelle."

"I would've stayed. For you. For the kids."

"And given up a scholarship." Her eyes turned sad and soulful. "That's why I couldn't tell you."

He turned away. "You had no right to make that decision for me."

"I did what I thought was best for everyone. For you. For the kids."

"I want...I need...to know."

"You mean DNA testing?"

"Yes. As soon as possible. I need to know whether or not Kurt and Lauren are my kids."

"I understand, I really do." She laid her hand on his shoulder.

Instinctively, he pulled away. "No, you don't."

"Stop! Think about this! Before you push this, you need to think about Kurt and Lauren and what's best for them. Please. There's a lot more at stake than your feelings. A few days, a week, a month won't change anything."

When he said nothing, she dropped her bomb. "You know you'll be leaving again, Noah. Leaving me is one thing. If the kids are yours, leaving them is an entirely different matter. Think about whether or not you're truly prepared to be in their lives."

"We can know the truth and not change anything. I need to know, Sophie, so I can make a decision."

"I think you've already made your decision."

"How?"

"When you'd heard that I'd gotten married, that I'd had children, did you honestly not wonder? When you got back and saw them, did the possibility never cross your mind?"

"No." On that, at least, he was square. "I found out you and Isaac had kids through Dad. He didn't tell me about them for a year or more after they were born, but I didn't know he'd waited. When he told me, I thought they were babies. Now that I think back, he was purposefully vague about the whole deal. Now I know. He was protecting you." He didn't know what to say, what to do. "I can't believe it. My own father."

He cleared his head. First things first. "I want the testing done, Sophie."

"I won't consent." She shook her head. "Not until you spend some time thinking about it."

"Well, I guess that settles one thing. You can forget about me leaving Mirabelle any time soon."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BEING AN UNCLE HAD SEEMED strange enough, but a father? Noah sat on his grandma's couch and put his head in his hands. The reality seemed impossible to accept. All day Sunday, he'd hung around the house, trying to wrap his brain around the idea. He didn't want to see anyone, talk to anyone. On this island, he felt like an outcast.

Monday morning, he'd woken up no closer to an understanding let alone an acceptance of the situation. Him? A father? Impossible. Crazy. Incredible. Thrilling. Scary as hell.

How could Sophie have done this to him? Taken the decision out of his hands? His own brother, his own father, how could they have both lied to him year after year after year? He'd lost out on the chance at being a dad. But as a single guy all these years, Noah wasn't even sure exactly what he'd missed, and that infuriated him more than anything. The whole situation left him feeling impotent, but there was one thing, at least, he could get off his chest.

He stalked out the door and headed toward the center of town. The police station was in an old, well-kept white clapboard building a block off Main. Noah passed the American flag flapping in a gentle breeze and pushed into the reception area. A woman Noah didn't recognize glanced up from her desk, her smile waning after one look at his face.

Herman Stotz, the assistant chief, was standing at the photocopier whistling softly as the machine worked away. He turned. "Hey, there, Noah."

"Is my dad in?"

Herman faltered, his eyes widened with concern. "He sure is, but I believe he's on a phone call."

"I need to talk to him." Noah walked past Herman and toward the corner office in back. He found his dad at his desk, facing the window with a phone to his ear. Noah rapped twice on the door and his dad turned.

"Stan, something came up here," he said, holding Noah's gaze. "Can I call you back? Yep. Okay, then." He hung up.

Noah closed the door and paced the outer edge of the room.

"All right, Noah," his father said. "Out with it."

"You didn't just lie to me once. You've been lying to me for fifteen years." Noah glared at his father. "Who gave you the right to mess with my life like that?"

No remorse. No guilt. His dad's expression betrayed no emotion whatsoever as he held Noah's gaze.

"All that time I could've had with Lauren and Kurt. Lost. And Isaac? Damn him. He lived my life."

"Don't blame your brother." His dad tossed the pencil in his hands onto his desktop. "It's not Isaac's fault."

"So this is your doing? Entirely?"

His dad nodded. "Isaac wanted to call you as soon as he found out Sophie was pregnant. He and I had a pretty big falling out over that. If I remember right, he left you a couple messages."

Noah hadn't been able to bring himself to return his brother's calls.

"Eventually he gave in," Noah's dad continued. "But it never sat right with him. Never once all those years."

“Still you and Sophie kept the decision out of my hands. I wasn’t given a choice.”

“You made your choice when you hightailed it off this island and never came back. It was damned clear what you wanted out of life.”

“I might’ve made a different choice with different facts. It was my decision to make. Not Isaac’s. Not Sophie’s. And definitely not yours.”

A fresh wave of pain swept through Noah. He would’ve been with Sophie during her pregnancy. For the birth. He could’ve been a real father, a husband. That time, those years, were forever lost to him. “What did I ever do to make you hate me so much?”

Noah looked into his father’s face and saw nothing except anguish in the drawn features, the wrinkles, the knowing eyes. “I don’t hate you, Noah.”

“Coulda fooled me.”

His dad looked away.

Noah waited. “You got nothing to say to me?” No apology. No explanation. “Must run in the family. I have nothing else to say to you, either.”

BYTUESDAY MORNING, EVERY LAST, straggling wedding guest had checked out of the Mirabelle Island Inn, Marty and Brittany had left for Italy on their honeymoon and Sophie would, after her ritual run around the island, be back in her office, attempting to reestablish her normal summer routine. The tourist season would finally be underway.

Getting busy again held the promise of helping Sophie deal with Noah’s cold shoulder, but after only a couple of days she already missed talking with him, missed seeing his face. He wouldn’t answer the door, the phone, and she hadn’t seen him up and about. Sophie couldn’t really blame him. Finding out that a pair of fourteen-year-old twins might be yours had to be a lot to digest. But it was done. The truth was out, and she couldn’t help feeling a tremendous sense of relief after having carried that secret for fifteen years.

She ran past the massive lilac bushes that grew along Island Drive, slowing her pace, and glanced up, as she did every morning, toward Grandma Bennett’s house. The place looked unoccupied. Had Noah left? Panic made her heart race faster.

When she reached the inn, she didn’t bother stretching. She went right into the kitchen, looking for Jim. He was sitting at the counter eating breakfast, a cup of coffee in his hand.

“Have you seen Noah?” she asked.

“Morning, Sophie.” Jim sipped his coffee. “Good run?”

“When was the last time you saw Noah?”

“At Marty’s wedding dance,” Josie said.

“Did he leave the island?”

“No,” Jim said. “At least, not that I’m aware. Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s just...” Oh, Noah.

Jim set his coffee on the counter. “Leave it alone, Sophie.”

“Leave it—” Glaring at Jim, she set her hands on her hips. “I am so sick of this town judging Noah so harshly. He’s your son. How can you be so wrong about him?”

Jim only stared back at her.

“Have you ever read any of his articles or his books?”

Reluctantly, Jim nodded.

“Then how can you miss the fact that he’s a good man? Just because he didn’t become a cop or a marine, doesn’t mean he hasn’t done his part fighting for what’s right. He’s been making a difference out there, and all you can do is criticize him for leaving.”

Jim pushed his plate of food away.

“So he left Mirabelle,” she argued. “Where’s the crime in that? A lot of people have left the island. Marty. The two Duffy boys. Mrs. Gilbert’s daughter. The list goes on and on. They’re treated with respect when they visit. I don’t pretend to understand why you and Noah fight, but you’d better make your peace with him, Jim, before it’s too late.”

“What happened, Sophie?” Josie asked, reaching out for her hand.

“He found out Lauren and Kurt are his children,” Jim said. “So now he’s acting all wounded.”

Dumbfounded, Sophie stared at him. All these years, Jim had believed they were Noah’s children. “Noah was right.”

“About what?”

“You didn’t tell him about Lauren and Kurt on purpose.”

He looked away, his jaw set in a stubborn, unforgiving line.

“You know what, Jim?” Sophie said, suddenly so sad that it had come to this. “The crazy thing is that I don’t know if the twins are Noah’s kids.”

He cocked his head at her. “How can you not—? Never mind.” He shook his head. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do.” She touched his hand. “As much as Isaac was a wonderful man, he came into my life when I was feeling incredibly lonely and vulnerable. In some ways, he was the worst thing that ever could’ve happened to me. In others, the best. Either way doesn’t change the fact that he happened to be in the right place at the right time.”

“What does that mean?”

“I know everyone was so happy for me that he came along after Noah left. He seemed to perfectly fill a void. He was kind, generous, quick with a smile. But the truth is we were more like good friends than husband and wife.”

“You seemed happy. So did Isaac. Looked as if you two got along like two peas in a pod.”

The more she thought about it, the more she realized that she’d convinced herself she and Isaac had been happy. She’d loved him in a way, but, more than anything, she’d accepted her fate. “I respected Isaac. I appreciated him. That’s exactly what he gave back to me. You know as well as I do, Jim, that Isaac wanted to be a father more than he wanted to be a husband.”

“And you? You never loved Isaac?”

“I loved Noah, Jim. Probably still do. Probably always will.”

NOAH SAT WITH HIS BACK AGAINST the lighthouse, staring out over the moonlit water, waiting. She would come. He’d stake his life on it. There was still too much left unsaid between them. He had to admit, though, she was taking longer than he’d expected, so when light footsteps crunched in the rocks behind him, he breathed a sigh of relief. At least some things in his world still made sense.

Without a word, Sophie sat next to him. For a long while the only sounds were the waves lapping against the rocks and the occasional hooting of an owl some distance away.

“I don’t get it,” he finally said.

“What part?”

“Did you come on to Isaac?” Anger and accusation shaded the tone of his voice, but he couldn’t seem to tamp it down. “Or did Isaac come on to you?”

“It wasn’t like that,” she whispered. Shame and guilt laced her every word and he felt like an ass.

“Will you tell me what happened?” He tried to soften his voice. “Please?”

She didn’t say anything for a moment. Finally, she looked up into the night sky. As angry and confused as he was, one glance at her neck in the moonlight and all he wanted to do was hold her, kiss her, make love with her.

“I don’t know how to explain what I felt after you left,” she said softly. “One day you were here and the next day you were gone. I guess I went kind of... numb. I couldn’t believe it was over between us. I couldn’t eat. Had no appetite. I wasn’t sleeping. I felt like a robot moving through the motions of every day. Then one afternoon, about a month after you’d left, I was sitting in the gazebo, and Isaac stopped. At first, I thought he was you. I thought I was dreaming. Something about the way the shadows hit his face, darkened his hair.

“He sat and we talked. You know how Isaac was, always so easy to talk to, and I was confused and

lonely. He told me if there was anything I needed, if there was anything he could do for me, to let him know. He'd be there. He squeezed my hand and left."

Isaac had reached out to comfort Sophie as a friend. How could Noah fault him for that?

"Two days later, I went to his house," she said.

"Why?"

"To talk, I guess. I ached. Literally, my whole body was in pain. I didn't know what to do, where to go. I knocked on his door and asked him to hold me. Just hold me. Who else could I go to on this island? Everyone was glad you were gone. No one else understood.

"Isaac didn't say a word. He missed you, too. He just stepped back and, after I walked into his house, closed the door. Led me to his couch, lay down with me and wrapped his arms around me. It felt so good. I knew he wasn't you. He felt different, smelled different, but his arms felt like heaven around me and when I looked into his eyes, I could pretend he was you."

Son of a bitch. Noah looked down at the ground and bit his tongue. No man lies down with a woman without intentions.

"We didn't do anything at first. We fell asleep." She took a long, deep breath as if suddenly embarrassed to go on. She looked away. "When I woke up, all I wanted to do was feel. Something good. I closed my eyes and kissed him. One thing led to another. It happened very quickly."

Noah picked up a rock and angrily threw it toward the water. "You were vulnerable. Isaac took advantage."

"It wasn't like that. You have to remember he'd graduated from college, moved back to Mirabelle and was ready to start his life. There were very few options for him on Mirabelle. He was lonely, too, and I was the one who started it."

"He should've stopped."

"It happened, Noah. Once. A month later, I found out I was pregnant."

"Once." He couldn't believe it. "Once."

"That was all."

"What did he do, say?"

"He was happy. Happy!" She shook her head. "I sobbed. He smiled."

"He loved kids. He couldn't wait to be a dad."

"He was so excited. Right then and there, he asked me to marry him."

"Did you tell him you couldn't be sure of the father?"

She nodded. "He didn't care."

“Did you ever consider an abor—”

“No.” Vehemently, she shook her head. “I kept thinking they could be your children. I wanted them to be. I wanted a piece of you. But I didn’t want them growing up without a dad.”

He stepped away from his own pain for a moment and realized that those days, weeks, months had to have been torture for her.

“It took me a month to make up my mind. I promised myself, and Isaac, that I would never let you come between us. I may not have been the best wife, but I tried. I stuck to that promise until the day he died.”

“Dad said he was happy.”

“I thought that over time, if he was angry or upset, he might punish me. He never, ever brought it up. They were his children, I was his wife, and that’s all that mattered to him.”

“He loved you.”

“He loved being Kurt and Lauren’s dad.”

“Did you love him?” God help Noah, but he needed to know.

“Isaac was steady and true. Always. I knew he would never leave.”

“But did you love him?”

She stood. “I loved you and where did it get me?” Then she ran into the woods.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NOAH LAY IN BED THE NEXT morning, trying to make sense of it all. Sophie may not have answered his question last night at the lighthouse, but the fact remained that she’d loved Isaac enough to marry him. She wouldn’t have married Noah. He’d asked and she’d turned him down.

Now what?

When the answers didn’t miraculously pop into his mind, he threw back the covers and took a shower. As he came down the stairs his gaze caught on his camera equipment, including several digital units, different lenses and filters, a tripod, light meters and various flashes. The whole lot remained exactly where he’d thrown it upon arriving on Mirabelle.

He picked up one of the digitals that had needed a new battery, replaced it and then framed a shot of angles and shadows playing against the photos his grandmother had hung on the wall. Then out the window he zoomed up to the Rousseau inn silhouetted against Lake Superior. Sunset would make it more interesting, but early morning would have to do. He shifted his focus to Main Street downtown. He could get a pretty good shot of the Mirabelle Inn’s gazebo out near the shoreline, but the angle was wrong. The chapel on the hill looked interesting from this vantage point, but there was no doubt it would look more inspiring from the pier.

That’s it. He might not know what to do about Kurt and Lauren, or Sophie for that matter, but one thing

was certain. He wasn't going to sink back into that self-pity hole Sophie had helped draw him out of in the nick of time. There was no point in delaying the inevitable.

After doing some mirror therapy, he summoned every ounce of courage he could muster and opened the box with his new leg. Tentatively, he picked it up. It was light, surprisingly so. He ran his fingers over the silicone sleeve, pressed the foot onto the floor and watched it move with the shifting weight. It sure looked like an improvement, but was he ready? There was only one way to find out.

He took off his old prosthetic and without giving it another thought, rolled the brand-new silicone sleeve over his stump. Now all he had to do was stand. Walk.

He was sick of feeling sorry for himself. Sick of hiding out. Sick of excuses. Do it.

He stood and tested his weight. He bent his knee and marveled at how light this new leg felt. He walked across the room and almost sighed at the absence of pain. That old leg had felt like a log with a brick attached to the end of it. This foot, made of arched carbon fiber, flexed and moved with every step, more like a real foot.

He couldn't believe that it had taken him so long to do this, but now there was no going back. Resolutely, he went upstairs and was about to pack his old leg away out of sight and out of mind in his bedroom closet when the Beretta handgun on the bedside table caught his eye. That was something else he no longer needed.

He tossed it into the box and hid the whole lot in the far back of the top shelf in his closet. He'd deal with the gun later, but for now, it was out of the way. That done, he felt lighter than he had since the explosion.

Time to test his new foot. He grabbed his camera and walked out of the house, stopping at the bottom of the hill and snapping off several dozen shots of the tree-lined road. He couldn't have planned it better when Arlo Duffy pulled onto the road with his horse-drawn carriage.

"Good morning, Arlo. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Ayep. Got that right." Arlo nodded as he passed, but seemed more reserved with Noah than he might've been with another islander, or tourist for that matter.

On reaching the outskirts of town, Noah peered through the drugstore windows to find Bob Henderson with his wife, Marsha, sitting at the front cash registers. A modern day Ma and Pa Kettle if there ever was one—him, skinny and drawn, and her in a checkered dress with her hair piled on top of her head. Noah snapped off a few pictures of the couple talking and laughing with each other.

Farther down the street, Ron Setterberg, with his weathered face and hands, stood on a ladder outside the equipment-rental building painting the trim on the second-floor windows. It seemed an appropriate picture of Ron, being that in Noah's every memory of the man he was holding some kind of tool.

"Hey there, Ron," Noah said.

Ron glanced behind him. "Noah."

"Mind if I snap a couple pictures?"

“What for?” Ron asked, looking rather suspicious. The man likely shared his wife Jan’s opinions about Noah.

“Just goofing around. Do you mind?”

“Naw. Go ahead.”

Noah walked another block and found Charlotte Day, a quintessential spinster if there was such a thing these days, unlocking the front door to the library. He snapped a few shots. Man, could he put together a photo layout with the characters on this island.

He wandered aimlessly around town, taking in favorite old haunts and finding a few surprises, things he wouldn’t have been interested in as a kid, but as an adult could appreciate. Like Mrs. Gilbert’s bed-and-breakfast inn. With a yard surrounded by a black wrought-iron fence and filled with every imaginable color of flower, her cotton-candy-pink Victorian was right out of a dream.

After a couple hours, his stomach grumbled loudly. The Bayside Cafe, a bright blue one-story building with a cedar shake roof and white shutters glistening in the late-morning sun, was down the block. He remembered them as having had the best cheeseburgers on the island.

He opened the door, and a bell, secured overhead, chimed his entrance. There were two men at the counter, neither of whom he recognized, and a couple in a booth by the windows. As he took the nearest seat at the counter, Delores Kowalski came out of the kitchen. Other than a little salt mixed in with her short pepper hair, she’d barely changed. “Well, if it isn’t Noah Bennett.”

“Morning, Delores.” He righted his blue-and-white coffee mug. She’d always liked Noah. Might’ve had to do with the fact that he was the only kid who ever tipped her.

“Let me see if I can remember after all these years.” She poured steaming black coffee into the cup. “Cheeseburger. Onions, mustard, no ketchup. Fries. Strawberry shake.”

“That’s pretty good.” He chuckled. “Today, though, I thought I’d give breakfast a shot.”

“Sounds good. What’ll it be?”

All that fresh air had spurred his appetite. “Two eggs, hash browns, a short stack.” He nodded at one of the other men’s plates down the counter. “And an order of those famous sausage patties.” He could pick at whatever tickled his taste buds, and, these days, he could count on it staying down.

The doorbell chimed behind him and the blue vinyl stool next to him swiveled as Lauren sat down. “Hey.”

Once again, he was taken aback by the color of her eyes. Was she his daughter? A baby was one thing, but this...this teenager...this fully formed being...Could she be a part of him? He couldn’t seem to make sense of it. “Hey, Lauren. What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” she said. “You?”

“Breakfast.” He’d no sooner said the word than Delores delivered the plates of food she’d likely made herself.

“Want some?”

“Maybe.” Lauren’s face scrunched with indecision. “I’ll take one of those pancakes. If you really don’t want it.”

He forked one, plopped it over his eggs and slid the other pancake toward her. “Take it and one of these.” He dropped a sausage patty onto the plate. “There’s no way I’ll eat four of them. You want some juice or milk?”

“Sure.”

He motioned for Delores while Lauren slathered butter and blueberry syrup over her pancake and gulped it down in about four bites, no easy feat given the golden cake spanned the diameter of a full-sized plate.

“You’re looking pretty hungry to me.” He tossed her another sausage.

“Don’t tell Josie I said this, but Delores makes the best pancakes on the island.”

He laughed, and they talked about her favorite meals at each one of the island restaurants. The lighthearted company and conversation seemed to help the food settle comfortably in his stomach. Ten minutes later, he nearly licked his plates clean, it’d all tasted so wonderful, and his stomach wasn’t the slightest bit queasy.

“More coffee?” Delores dropped the check off.

“No, thank you. Would you mind if I take some pictures out front?”

“Go right ahead.”

“Can I come with you?” Lauren asked.

“Sure.” He paid the bill and followed Lauren outside into the warm, bright sunshine.

“What are you taking pictures for?” she asked as they crossed the street.

“Just passing time.”

“I read most of your book.”

“Which one?”

“About Sarajevo.”

“The sad one.” The one that had jump-started his career.

“We had to do a report in school on a recent war,” she explained.

He’d written a series of articles on the Bosnian war that had been picked up by international news networks. Later, he’d combined everything in a book, comprehensively detailing his experience. After years of freelancing in vain, his career had finally taken off. He’d become the go-to reporter on war

throughout the world. The depressing thing was he was never lacking for material.

“That’s a pretty heavy topic for someone your age.”

“Mom had to explain some of it to me.” She paused. “Did you see all those people die?”

“Some of them.” Some had been friends. His stomach flipped. Maybe that last sausage wasn’t sitting as well as he’d thought. “What did you think of the pictures of the countryside?” he asked, changing topics.

“It looked beautiful.”

It was. Before the fighting. “Did you have a favorite photo?” he asked, keeping her attention off the war and his stomach from tossing breakfast.

She seemed to think about it. “The bridge. I guess.”

“Which one? Mostar? Visegrad?”

“I don’t remember.”

“What do you think of Delores’s restaurant?” He tilted his head and considered how to frame it.

“I think it’s boring.”

Was she his daughter? Did he have a right to find out? More importantly, should he exercise that right?

“Everything on this island is boring,” she added.

“You think?” There was a time and place for boring, a sentiment Noah had never before appreciated. He snapped off a picture or two. “What’s your favorite building on the island?”

“The Duffys’ old barn on the other side of the stables.”

“Good one!” He slung his camera pack over his shoulder. “I’ll race you.” It was about time he discovered what this new foot could do.

They’d no sooner taken a step than a voice yelled from behind them. “Lauren!” It was Kurt.

“Come on,” Lauren called back. “We’re racing to the stables. Ready, set, go!” Lauren took off without giving Kurt a chance to prepare.

“That’s not fair!” Kurt yelled. He took off after her anyway. No doubt he’d cry foul if she beat him.

Noah gave them a good run for their money, but he was no match for sibling rivalry. Out of breath, he slowed up a short distance from them.

“What are you doing hanging out with him, anyway?” he heard Kurt whisper to his sister.

“He’s our uncle, and he’s nice,” Lauren said.

“Whatever.” Kurt glared at Noah as he approached them. “I didn’t think you could run with a fake leg.”

Lauren swatted his arm.

“Yeah, it’s a little awkward.” Noah sensed Kurt’s protectiveness toward Lauren and Sophie and couldn’t blame him. What would Kurt think if he found out Noah was his real father? How would that news affect Lauren? Not knowing a damned thing about kids, other than having been one himself, he didn’t have a clue.

That was his first step. He had to get to know Lauren and Kurt. Maybe then he’d have his answer.

THE FIRST THING NOAH DID was to buy a camera for Lauren. For a somewhat suspicious Kurt, he installed a TV and gaming system in the living room of his grandmother’s house. They also kayaked, hiked and fished. Noah lapped up as much time as the kids were willing and able to give him, and he counted himself lucky that they—Lauren more so than Kurt—seemed almost as interested in getting to know their uncle as he was in getting to know them. Over the next several weeks, he taught Lauren some rudimentary techniques on framing and lighting, and Kurt, gradually losing some of his guardedness, updated Noah on the most recent video games.

One afternoon, when Sophie was sure to be busy with staff meetings, Noah hung out in the Rousseau apartment and looked through every photo album in the place, lingering on the ones when Kurt and Lauren had been little. There were videos, too. He took some tapes back to his house and watched them, Christmases and birthdays, sporting events and school musicals, watching the kids grow and change and become who they were today.

There were lots of scenes with Isaac and the kids. Seeing his brother again and listening to his voice was difficult, but watching his brother interacting with the kids and Sophie gave him the perspective he needed. Though Sophie and Isaac often seemed more like brother and sister to each other than husband and wife, the four had gotten along well. Noah was glad he hadn’t been around to witness firsthand the happy family.

The most recent video had been taken less than a month or two before Isaac had died. He was packing camping gear and Sophie was taping the three loading gear into the car. His brother looked into the camera and grinned. There he was, the Isaac from Noah’s memories. His older brother, his comrade in crime, his opposite in so many ways.

“Thank you, Isaac,” Noah whispered. “For taking care of Sophie and the kids.”

TOO MANY TOURISTS. NO SPACE. No room to breathe. Same running paths. Same food. Same stores. Sophie glanced around her office. Same four walls. She understood how Noah must have felt all those years ago, how he was likely feeling right now.

A full month had passed since Marty’s wedding and, although her kids had been spending a lot of time with Noah, Sophie had barely spoken with him. After the lighthouse, after explaining to Noah how everything had started between her and Isaac and he’d asked her point-blank whether or not she’d loved his brother, she knew she had to keep her distance. She’d been a hair’s breadth from explaining that what she’d felt for Isaac had been only a shadow of what she felt for Noah.

I loved you then, you idiot! I love you now! She'd wanted to scream it at him. She'd wanted to push him to the ground and show him just how much. It was killing her, not being close to him, but she had to give him time to get to know Lauren and Kurt.

Although a part of her felt extremely protective of her children, she trusted Noah to do what was right for Lauren and Kurt. The more she thought about it, the more she accepted that any kind of relationship with Noah would benefit them. He was their uncle, Isaac's brother, the closest connection they could have to their father.

"Sophie?" Jan's voice sent a ripple through the stream of Sophie's disconnected thoughts.

"Huh?" She spun her chair away from the window and back toward her office desk. "I'm sorry. I'm..."

Jan looked worried and Sophie hated being the cause of concern.

"I'm just tired."

"We've got a problem with one of our bookings." Jan sighed. "The Fultons insist they reserved the Champlain suite again when they were here last year, but that room's occupied and won't be vacant again until tomorrow."

"Is the Marquette suite open?" she asked, weary of the same problems cropping up, year after year.

"Yes."

"Set them up there for the night at no charge, and make sure they know it's our best available room."

"Will do and Josie wanted you to approve the Bastille Day menu." Jan put a list of traditional French foodstuffs on her desk.

For as long as Sophie could remember, Mirabelle Island marked France's national holiday with a parade, a wine and beer fest, a small art fair and, of course, fireworks. Before she looked at Josie's suggestions, Sophie knew what she would find. Crepes, quiche Lorraine, vichyssoise, French onion soup, salade nicoise, coq au vin, and so on and so on. They were the same recipes that had been passed down from Sophie's great-grandmother.

"Tell Josie I want her to do something different this year." Sophie handed the menu back to Jan.

"Different?" Jan looked at her as if she had sprouted hair from her ears.

"Yes. As in French with a twist. She's been wanting to do that for years. Tell her I said go for it."

"You're sure."

"Positive." At least the food she could change.

As Jan left her office, Sophie looked out her window to see Lauren walking slowly across the lawn with a tourist boy about her age and was surprised her daughter wasn't with Noah and Kurt. Lauren and the boy were talking, laughing, flirting.

Oh, God. Sophie swallowed, remembering all too well those summer months when an influx of families

would flock to Mirabelle. Families with kids, both young and old. Cute boys from big cities. Coming on and going off the island. All summer long. A constant flow of possible romantic entanglements.

She'd looked, she'd talked, heck, she'd flirted a time or two, but she'd never really been interested. None of those boys with all their experience and big-city flash had held the promise of a candle to what she'd felt for Noah.

Lauren? She was an entirely different story. Knowing from experience there were plenty of places on this island a boy and girl could go to be alone, Sophie knew she was going to have to keep a closer watch on her daughter.

Suddenly, the boy shook his head and laughed. Lauren's brows drew together. She crossed her arms over her chest and said something to the boy. He shrugged and walked away as Lauren marched in the other direction toward the woods. That didn't look good.

Let the kid figure it out for herself, or butt in? That always seemed to be the tightrope the parent of a teenager walked. There'd been a lot going on these past weeks and she and Lauren hadn't had a good heart-to-heart in a long while. The decision made, Sophie went outside and found Lauren sitting high in a tree about twenty feet in from the clearing. "You okay?"

"Fine."

"What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"Come down, would you?"

"No."

"Lauren, honey, come on. It's hurting my neck looking up at you."

"Then don't look."

That's it. Sophie reached and grabbed the lowest branch. She swung her foot over the top and pulled herself up. It'd been a long time since she'd climbed a tree, but, as it turned out, trees were something a person never forgot how to scale. Without too much trouble, she was in the canopy, sitting on a branch opposite Lauren.

"Okay," she said. "After what I went through to get up here, you have to tell me."

"I hate this place!"

So what else was new? "Why? What happened?"

"That's the problem. Nothing happens here. This island is dead. There's no mall to hang in. No cool stores or restaurants. No movie theaters. Did you know that Chicago has everything we have here, including a marina. Matt goes to Six Flags three times every summer."

Oh, Matt. So the boy was from Chicago. Figures. A lot of Mirabelle's visitors came from northern Illinois.

“He’s been to the Sears Tower. The Field Museum. The aquarium. Zoos. He says there are more shopping malls in the Chicago area than anyone could ever count. Arcades. Parks. You name it, he says you can find it there.”

And smog, noise, crime, gridlocked traffic and a higher cost of living. For every benefit, Sophie could name a drawback, but that wasn’t what Lauren needed to hear.

“What are you saying? That you want to move to Chicago? All because of a boy?”

“It’s not because of him, Mom. I’ve always hated this place.”

“Mirabelle has some shortcomings. Every place does.”

“We have no soccer team, dance studio or gymnastics classes. If I wanted to learn piano, French or woodworking, I’d be fine. I happen to want to learn guitar, Spanish and yoga, so online is my only option. This place is so...like, limiting.”

“Some day you can move anyplace you want.”

“What am I supposed to do for the next four years?”

“Maybe we need to get away more often. I haven’t done a very good job of that, have I?”

“You’re doing the best you can, Mom. I know that. When I’m out of school in the summer, you have to work. When you have more free time, I’m in school. It’s not your fault that I feel like I’m suffocating.”

Where had Sophie heard that before?

“You should marry Noah, so we can get off this island.”

Sophie almost fell out of the tree. “So you think getting married is the only way a woman can leave this island?”

“No. But it’s probably the only way you’ll leave.”

Sophie couldn’t argue with that. “Why Noah?”

“What? You think I’m that lame that I couldn’t figure it out?” Lauren rolled her eyes in that sanctimonious teenage-girl way. “Gawd, Mom. So you and Noah had a thing when you were kids. What’s the big deal? He left, you married Dad, and now Dad’s gone.”

Kids always had a way of boiling things down to their barest elements. Sophie couldn’t believe it. How blind and deaf of a mother was she? She looked away, gathering herself and then asked, “Have you and Kurt talked about this?”

“A little.”

“And?”

“He’s not too sure about Noah, and he misses Dad.” Lauren’s expression turned serious. “I miss him,

too, but I want you to be happy. And before...Noah came, I knew you weren't."

"What do you mean?"

Lauren grabbed at a branch and tugged off a big green leaf. "Every once in a while, you have this look on your face. Sad. Like you want something and can't find it. And then you try to cover it up. For us."

Sophie didn't know what to say. Her daughter was so perceptive and so right.

"I used to think it was because you missed Dad, too, but then I remembered. You sometimes looked like that when he was alive."

Shit. The mirror was smack-dab in front of Sophie's face and to turn away would've been cowardly.

"You still love Noah, don't you?"

"Yes."

"But you won't leave the island and he won't stay?"

Won't or can't? That was the question. She nodded.

"So that's it? End of story?"

"It's a little more complicated than that."

"If you say so," Lauren said, clearly unconvinced.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NOAH ROLLED HIS GRANDMOTHER'S old lawn mower into the storage shed and wiped the sweat from his brow. Weeks had passed since the first time he'd trimmed the bushes and weeded the gardens, so the whole yard had needed a cleanup.

He turned around, taking a long swig from a water bottle and stopped short. His dad, dressed casually in shorts, T-shirt and baseball cap, was walking toward Noah, carrying something bulky. When he got to the yard, he bent over and took a long breath.

Though Noah was still royally pissed, the man was his own flesh and blood. "You all right?" Noah asked, probably a bit more gruffly than he'd intended. He recapped the water bottle and tossed it onto the porch for a later pickup.

"When I was a kid, I could run up that hill ten times without stopping. Getting old, I guess." He held out a long box. "I got something for you."

Noah didn't move.

"It's not from me."

"What is it?"

“Open it.”

Noah flipped open the box. Two pairs of old snowshoes lay inside. The sight of the leather bindings, worn and tattered, drilled a hole in his heart that old memories quickly rushed to fill.

“Isaac wanted you to have those,” his dad said. “It was in his will.” His dad moved into the shade of a large ash tree, took off his hat and brushed back his thinning gray hair. “I think if he’d known he was going to die before seeing you again, he’d have had a few things to say.”

Noah looked away.

“He tried to do what was right with Sophie, and he never wanted to hurt you. He loved you. He was proud of you. He missed you.”

Emotion clogged the words in Noah’s throat. Why did his brother have to go and get in the way of that bullet? So much violence in this world.

“He would’ve wanted you and me to talk. To settle things between us.”

Noah closed the box and set it on the porch. “I said everything I needed to say back in your office. I’ve got nothing left.”

“Oh, yes, you do. I know that look on your face.” His dad leaned against the tree and fanned himself with his hat. “When’s the last time you went fishing?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Well, I ain’t getting any younger.” His dad put his hat back on his head. “It’s time, don’t you think?”

“All right. You asked for it.”

For as far back as Noah could remember, his dad had docked a boat in the marina. This recent one was bigger than any of the earlier ones and set up for deepwater charter fishing excursions. Well-stocked with food, beverages, first aid and with a head and sleeping quarters below, Jim could easily spend a week or two out on Lake Superior without docking.

While Noah had been growing up, if his dad wasn’t at work, he was out on the water. And as far as Noah was concerned, there’d been nothing more fun than fishing with his dad, until he’d turned thirteen and had noticed Sophie growing into a young woman. By the time fifteen rolled around, Jim couldn’t pay Noah enough to get him out on the water. Funny how things had a way of going full circle. Today, Noah was actually looking forward to seeing if he could catch one of those big Lake Superior salmon.

It didn’t take long before they were cruising on the open water. They hadn’t gone far when Jim cut the engine and prepped his downriggers for trolling.

“Want something to drink?” Noah headed below deck.

“Grab me a beer.”

He rejoined his dad topside and handed him a frosty can. “How’s fishing been?”

“Terrible. If you know where to go, it’s not too bad. This lake’s overharvested, and I told Isaac that on more than one occasion.”

At the mention of Isaac again, they both grew quiet.

“Did he like being a game warden?”

“Loved it. Almost as much as he loved being a dad.”

That topic still felt a bit too raw. Noah glanced around. He could see the faint outline of Mirabelle’s shore. “You’re not catching anything this close in, are you?”

“We’re just messing around. You want to catch some real fish we’ll need the whole day.”

Noah took a swig of ice-cold beer as he watched his dad work. The man had always been methodical and efficient in everything, including this hobby. Today, though, he seemed troubled. It took him longer than normal to find the right tackle and he was moving slowly. “You feeling okay?”

“I must be catching something. Headache. Stomach’s upset.” He wasn’t even smoking his pipe.

“Why are we out here then?”

“Can’t pass up a day like today.”

The sun was bright and the water was about as smooth as a big expanse like Lake Superior ever got. “Sit down. Let me do it.”

“Hah.” Jim stepped back. “You remember after all these years?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

Jim sat in the shade under cover of the boat’s canopy and sipped on his beer. “How’s your leg doing?”

“Better.”

“You sleeping and eating?”

“Yeah, actually. I feel pretty good these days.”

“Good.”

“You going to tell me it’s time to leave the island?”

“No, son. I want to tell you I’m sorry.”

Noah glanced up.

“You and Sophie are right. I’ve wronged you—and her—in more ways than I can count.”

Andher? What had he done to Sophie?

“Your brother was a good man—”

“That’s what I keep hearing.”

“He was stable. Loved Mirabelle. Loved those kids. And he loved Sophie.”

“Not as much as I did.”

“I’m realizing that now.” Jim nodded. “I thought what you and Sophie had was puppy love, Noah. That it’d pass once you were gone. For both of you. Isaac wanted to stay on Mirabelle and he wanted a family, but I didn’t want to see him go through what I went through with your mother.

“The couple of other single women the right age on Mirabelle weren’t well-suited to Isaac. God help me, I not only steered him toward Sophie I made him see that she’d be the perfect wife. And when he insisted Sophie belonged to you, I convinced him that Sophie belonged to herself. She could make her own choice.”

Noah couldn’t look at his father.

So many years. Gone.

“I was wrong, Noah. Can you forgive me?”

“For that I can,” Noah whispered. “What happened between me and Sophie wasn’t your fault. It was mine. For leaving.” He paused and turned around. “But why didn’t you tell me about the kids right away?”

His dad looked wary. “That’s a little harder to explain.”

“That’s what you brought me out here for, isn’t it?”

His dad nodded. “It has to do with your mother leaving.”

“Mom? How?”

“She hated Mirabelle. Couldn’t stand being on an island.”

“So she left.”

“That’s the easy answer. There’s more to it than that.”

“Did I do something to make her go away? Is that why you were angry with me after she left?”

“No, son. You and I... We’re just different.”

“Did you do something to make her go away?”

His dad shook his head. “You blamed me, though, didn’t you, for her leaving?”

“I suppose in a way,” Noah said.

“Wasn’t very long after she left that you and I started fighting, left and right. Remember?”

“I remember you were always angry.”

“I was angry with everyone after she left.” His dad took a deep breath. “But you’re right, Noah. Every time I look at you, I see your mother. It’s in your eyes, in the way you talk, in the way you live your life. You’re a lot like her.”

“But you loved her, married her, brought her here with you.”

“I did. I loved her very much.” He focused on the deck. “That first winter was hard. She was lonely. We didn’t have e-mail and cell phones back then, making it difficult for her to keep in touch with her family. She asked for us to move back to San Diego. I wouldn’t go.

“Once she had you and Isaac, things got better for a while. Then you were both in school and things went downhill real fast. She started saying that if she stayed on the island, she was going to shrivel up and die.”

Noah understood the feeling.

“Finally, she couldn’t take it anymore and asked for a divorce. She wanted you and Isaac to spend the school years with her in California, the summers with me. No way, I said. Then she asked for the summers. I wouldn’t give an inch. Mirabelle was your home. I told her the only way she was going to get her divorce, was by giving up both of you.”

“She could have fought you in court.”

“Fought against a police chief? A man who knows the Wisconsin court system, the judges and lawyers inside and out? I would’ve raked her over the coals. I was as unbending as that hundred-year-old oak in Shirley Gilbert’s backyard.”

As if the conversation was too much for him, his dad got up and checked on the downriggers at the back of the boat. He stood astern and turned. “I was wrong. I made your mother choose between herself and her children.”

“You wouldn’t even let her see us?”

“I knew if she came to Mirabelle, it’d be moans and groans and tears every time she left.” Suddenly looking so tired, he sat back on the port side of the boat. “If you two had gone to San Diego, you’d never have wanted to come back to Mirabelle. I’d have lost you both.”

“I always thought she didn’t want me.”

“I don’t blame you for being mad at me, Noah.” His dad leaned back as if he couldn’t catch his breath.

“Strangely, I’m more relieved than anything. I think I need to find her.”

“When you do, tell her I’m sorry.”

“That’s something you’re going to have to tell her yourself.”

"I doubt an apology will cut it. A mother—or a father—should never have to choose between herself and her children."

Understanding dawned in Noah. "So when you found out Sophie was pregnant, you didn't want me to have to make the same choice Mom had to make."

"I didn't know what I was doing at the time, but I desperately needed to set the past right. I wanted you to be able to live your life without guilt or regret. Free. I wanted you to be free."

"Free." Noah shook his head. "How can a man be free when his heart's—"

"Oh, damn." His dad groaned. "My arm..." He tried to stand, couldn't, and lost his balance. His feet went out from under him and he started to fall backward.

"Dad!" Noah shot forward. Reached. Caught a handful of shirt, but his tenuous grip wasn't enough to stop the momentum. With a loud splash, his father fell into the water. "Dad!"

"Noah...I'm having a heart att—" He went under and was sinking like an anchor.

Frantic, Noah dove after him and grabbed him under the arms. His dad's eyes were closed, his mouth slack. He was out, deadweight. Noah kicked, but he'd never been in the water before with his prosthetic. His left leg seemed totally ineffective.

He kicked, kicked and kicked toward the surface, and instead of getting closer they seemed to be moving farther away from the boat. As long as he held on to his dad he'd have only one arm and one good leg. It wasn't enough to move the water. His lungs felt as if they might explode. They were sinking. He couldn't let his dad go. No way. If one of them sank, then they were both going to sink. That was all there was to it.

Sophie! Oh, God, Sophie. He didn't want to leave her again. Not like this. Not ever. Kurt. Lauren. Dammit! You can do this. Bum leg or not. Move, Noah! Now!

He made one last surge toward the surface. This time, he made headway, could tell he was closing in on the surface. Kick, kick, kick! He shot up out of the water, sucked in a breath, and lunged for the boat. He floated his dad to the stern, yanked on the ladder and managed to get his good leg up on the first rung.

As soon as he pulled himself partially out of the water, his father's weight, no longer buoyant, dragged him back. Noah was running on adrenaline and didn't have much time.

With everything in him, he heaved himself up, dragging his dad after him and into the boat. It was a damned good thing he'd been working out, or they would both be dead. They fell onto the deck in a heap. Noah prayed there was a defibrillator on the boat.

He hopped up. His dad wasn't breathing. First his airway needed to be cleared of water. Noah lifted his father's limp figure, grabbed him low on his diaphragm and pressed, once, twice. Harder. Water flowed from his dad's mouth. He pressed again and again and more water spilled through his lips. After several more compressing thrusts, all the water seemed expelled.

Noah laid him back on the deck of the boat and frantically searched through the cabinets. Fire extinguisher. First-aid kit. Yes! An automated external defibrillator. An AED. His dad must have kept it

on board for his charter fishing operation. Noah had used them before. Too many times.

He unzipped the bag, ripped off his dad's shirt, grabbed a nearby towel to dry off the exposed skin, and applied the electrical pads to his dad's chest. Then he sat back and waited for the thing to charge. Go, go, go!

Finally, it was ready and Noah hit the button. The machine zapped his dad and then automatically monitored the response. Three times it zapped his dad before his heart started and his rhythms stabilized, but he wasn't breathing. Noah administered mouth-to-mouth, inflating his dad's chest. Minutes seemed to pass before his father began breathing on his own.

"Dad!" Noah shook him. "Dad!"

Nothing. He was unconscious, but alive.

Noah raced to the radio, revved the engine and ran the boat at full speed toward Mirabelle. "Herman!" he yelled over the line to the deputy chief. "Herman!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"MOM!"

"Mom!"

Focused as Sophie was in attempting to calm a guest, the frantic calls barely penetrated her consciousness. "I'm sorry, ma'am," she said, facing the woman, doing her best to sound sympathetic. "Unfortunately bee stings do sometimes happen, especially if a child is traipsing through the gardens."

"Traipsing?" The woman's eyebrows rose and she put her hands on her hips. "What are you suggesting?"

"Only that the bees tend to gravitate toward the flowers." And soda cans. And kids with sticky fingers. The little twerp had all but sent out invitations.

"Well, shouldn't you spray, or something?" the woman yelled.

"Mom!"

"Mom!"

That time, the two distinct voices registered loud and clear. Sophie spun around to find Kurt and Lauren running toward her from the direction of the marina. They nearly knocked her to the ground as they slid to a stop.

"Grandpa...had...heart attack!" The words spilling from Lauren's mouth were interrupted by choking sobs.

"A helicopter just took him to the hospital!" Kurt added in a rush.

"Slow down," Sophie said, not sure she'd heard correctly. "Start over."

Jan came racing out of the inn. "Sophie!" she yelled. "Jim had a heart attack out on his boat. He's being airlifted to the Ashland hospital."

"Quick!" Lauren said.

"We have to go there. Now!" Kurt grabbed her arm and tugged.

"Okay, okay."

"I already called a water taxi. He'll meet you in the marina," Jan said, holding out her purse, a small black wallet with an attached shoulder strap.

"What about Noah?" Sophie called over her shoulder as the kids tugged her toward town.

"He was with Jim on the boat and went along in the helicopter. Josie's already left for the mainland."

"Hey!" the guest with the stung kid shouted. "What about me?"

Sophie nearly turned back again to give the woman a piece of her mind. Selfish little —

"I'll handle this," Jan said. "You go!"

In the short time it took to run to the marina, Sophie's insecurities about leaving the island raced to the forefront. She followed the kids along the docks to the taxi station. Their boat was waiting, and the moment the driver saw them he started his engine. "All aboard." The man helped Lauren and Kurt climb into his boat. When he held out his hand for Sophie, she faltered.

"Come on, Mom," Lauren said.

"Hurry," Kurt added.

Sophie swallowed. You can do this. Jim needs us. Pretend it's like any other trip. You need to be there for Noah.

She reached out and climbed into the boat. Her stomach flipped and flopped the entire ride to the mainland. When they stepped on shore, strangers were walking this way and that, but being on the mainland wasn't so bad. Except for the cars. They were zipping by on the road.

"Mom, come on!" The kids were running down the pier.

Sophie paid the water taxi and ran after the kids toward the garage where she stored her vehicle, a ten-year-old economy car with only fifteen thousand miles logged on the odometer. After unlocking the storage garage, she put the key in the ignition, keeping her fingers crossed that the couple she paid to service the car had upheld their end of the bargain. The engine turned over without a problem and in no time they were on the road.

She only used the car, at the most, once a year, so there was usually a bit of relearning involved once she got behind the wheel, and knowing Jim was in the E.R. didn't help matters. She felt like a frantic teenager, jerking her way out of the parking lot, and like an incompetent grandmother, cruising the highway.

For the first ten minutes, about how long it took her to get the vehicle moving the posted speed of fifty-five miles an hour, other drivers passed her with either honks or glares, sometimes both. It was always a strange sensation being off the island. Strange people, strange buildings, strange happenings. As if she were on another planet. Planet Not-Mirabelle. Jim's heart attack magnified everything.

By the time she drove into the hospital parking lot about an hour later, she was a mass of nerves. This was where they'd brought Isaac, where she'd first seen his lifeless body. She'd been able to—barely—maintain her calm for the kids' sake the entire drive. The moment she turned the corner to the waiting room and saw Josie sitting in a chair holding a balled-up tissue in her hand and Noah looking out the window, she burst into tears. His head came up and his eyes watered, and she sobbed all the more.

He turned and held out his arms. Relief cooled the anxiety that had been building inside her since she'd set out from Mirabelle. She practically fell into him. His clothes were cold and damp.

"He's not going to die, Soph." He squeezed her tight, resting his head on top of hers. "At least not today. He'll be okay."

"You're sure?"

"He and I have too much left to say to each other." He relaxed his hold and Sophie felt Kurt and Lauren being drawn by Noah into a group hug. Lauren sniffled and Kurt's fingers dug into Sophie's back. "I'm telling you guys," Noah whispered, "he's going to be okay."

"You're wet," she whispered.

"We were on the boat. Dad fell into the lake when his heart attack hit."

"You got him back onto the boat?" Sophie stared at him. "By yourself?"

"Guess all that time I've spent with the military was good for something."

Sophie turned to Josie and hugged her tightly. While they sat and waited together, Sophie grabbed Noah's hand and wouldn't let go. Some time later, a doctor came out of surgery to explain that they'd performed a triple bypass on Jim, that the heart attack had been relatively minor and there'd been no permanent damage. Jim would be in the hospital for a week, give or take, and would have to rest for at least another month.

"Noah," the doctor said. "If it wasn't for you, your dad wouldn't be alive right now. Whatever training you've had, it came in handy today."

As Sophie felt tears spill onto her cheeks, Noah held his emotions in check; only his red-rimmed eyes gave him away. Josie sobbed and Noah tried to calm her down.

"When I think of all the times," she said through her tears, "he's been out on that boat alone—"

"It's okay, Josie." Noah hugged her. "He's going to be all right."

Soon after the doctor left, a nurse came to let them know Jim was in intensive care and they could see him. "Family only," she cautioned when all five of them stood.

Noah grabbed Josie's hand and tugged her along. "We are family. All of us."

Lauren grabbed Noah's other hand and Kurt's worried features softened. All five of them walked into the room together. The equipment hummed and beeped, and Jim had tubes coming out of him every which way but Sunday.

When Lauren took his hand, he opened his eyes. "Hey there, Miss Mirabelle," he whispered. "Where's Kurt?"

"Here, Grandpa." He moved up the other side of the bed and loosely took Jim's other hand.

Noah pushed Josie a little closer. Jim smiled weakly up at her. "Guess you're stuck with me for a while longer," he mumbled.

"I guess so," Josie whispered.

"How do you feel?" Noah asked.

"Like shit." He glanced at Sophie. "Excuse my French, Mom."

The kids chuckled nervously.

"I hope they have a lot of opportunities to hear worse from you." Sophie smiled.

"Noah?" Jim searched for Noah's hand. "You saved my life, son."

Noah gripped his dad's fingers and squeezed. "Guess that means I'm stuck with you, too."

MONITORS BEEPED AND EQUIPMENT buzzed in the hospital room. Noah sat in a chair with his good foot resting on the rollout cot he'd slept in the previous three nights and his laptop propped open on his lap. He was getting some writing done, but it wasn't amounting to much.

Over the top of the screen he studied his dad's face. The past several days hanging in the hospital and keeping an eye on his dad had brought back a host of bad memories for Noah of his own internment not all that long ago. Constant pain and frustration. Surgeries and physical therapy. Pills, shots and blood being drawn. The smells of antiseptic mixed with flowers and cafeteria food. Hard beds and lumpy pillows. The air temperature in a hospital room seemed to forever be either too cold or too hot. No wonder Noah's nightmares had come back.

Still, Noah had barely left his dad's side. Josie had come every day to give Noah a few hours off here and there, but he refused to leave his dad for more than the time it took to eat a meal in the cafeteria. He remembered all too well what it was like waking up alone in a sterile room with nothing more for company than a TV mounted on the wall.

His dad stirred, moving his head back and forth. "Noah?"

Noah set his computer on the table, stood and moved to the side of the bed. "I'm here, Dad." He squeezed his hand.

“What day is it?” he asked, trying to swallow.

“Wednesday.” Noah grabbed a cup of water and positioned the straw near his dad’s mouth.

“Thanks.” He took a sip. “When am I gettin’ outta here?”

“Not until this weekend.”

“Dammit,” he murmured, his eyelids fluttering from open to closed and back again. “Guess I’ll be missing tomorrow night’s council meeting.”

“They’ll manage without you.”

Although his dad cracked open his eyes, he was clearly still very tired and groggy from pain meds. “They’re voting on whether or not Marty should get bids.”

Noah was trying very hard not to care.

“I need you to...go for me,” his dad said, closing his eyes again. “A Bennett...” he said, his words barely audible, “should be there.” The last word had barely left his mouth before his fingers went completely lax.

“Dad?”

No response. He’d fallen back to sleep. Noah was adjusting the blanket over his dad’s bare feet when his laptop dinged with incoming mail.

He glanced at the screen and noticed e-mail messages with a Pick Up The Phone subject heading from Liz, his editor, flying left and right into his mailbox. She’d called no less than ten times in the past week and he’d ignored her messages. He might have a few more paragraphs written in his book, but that level of progress was more pathetic than hopeful, so there didn’t seem any point in talking with her. Now, it appeared, he didn’t have a choice.

He stalked into the waiting area and called her on his cell. “All right. All right. Stop, already.”

“So that’s how I get your attention,” Liz said, triumphantly.

“What do you want?” He paced outside the door.

“I want to know how you’re doing.”

“You mean you want to know how the book is doing.” The answering silence caused regret to slice through him. After the way she’d gone out of her way to visit him in the hospital, Liz hadn’t deserved that. “I’m sorry.” He set off down the hall, passing other open doors, nurse’s carts and food trays.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Part of why I’m calling is about the book. It’s my job.”

“I know.” He took a left and headed into another wing of the small hospital. It felt good to stretch his legs. “My dad had a heart attack.”

Her heavy sigh was audible. “When it rains, it pours. Is he expected to recover?”

“Fully.”

“What about you? Are you eating?”

“Yes.”

“Sleeping?”

“I’ve been staying with him at the hospital. I’m doing okay.”

“Then the book will come.” She sighed again. “Word came out yesterday that our competitor bought an Iraqi book and slated it for publication the same month as yours. I’m getting pressure to move up your pub date.”

“Liz, I can’t—”

“I know. We’ll get down to the wire on this one, but we’ll get it done, Noah. Okay? I’m not giving up on you.”

“I hear ya.”

“Do me a favor and answer my calls?”

“Yeah, all right.”

She hung up.

He stretched out his neck and let his shoulders relax on the way back to the room. After confirming his dad was still sound asleep, Noah sat back in the chair and deleted Liz’s rapid-fire e-mails.

A Bennett should be there.

Noah didn’t want to get involved in tomorrow night’s council meeting. He shouldn’t have an opinion one way or another. But he did. Mirabelle needed a shot in the arm, and while Marty’s new hotel didn’t fit the bill, Noah didn’t have an alternative.

Lacking the motivation for anything more productive, he grabbed his laptop and flipped through the pictures he’d taken of Mirabelle these past weeks. They were the usual tourist-type shots, including the view of Mirabelle Island Inn from the marina, the quaint chapel on the hill. The carriages, the horses. Although he’d framed all of them well, getting the most out of the colors and lighting, the photos with the people in them captured and held his attention.

One by one, he scrolled through the photos, selecting several and lining them up on his desktop. The silhouette of Sophie, Lauren and Kurt on the shore against the backdrop of a glorious sunset. Mrs. Gilbert with a floppy sun hat, tending to her gardens in front of her pink Victorian bed-and-breakfast. Ron Setterberg carrying kayaks to the shore, the colorful sails of the boats docked in the marina behind him. What a story they told.

A story. That was it. His story of Mirabelle Island. Forget Iraq. He was sick of war and violence and death. For once he was going to write something about all that was peaceful and right in the world. The

prodigal son had returned and could finally see the good in his childhood home.

He started typing and the words flew off his fingertips. Sentences became paragraphs, paragraphs became pages. For hours, he worked on the article. Writing, rewriting, revising. Finally, he was done and satisfied with the result. It wasn't just fun and fluff. It was Mirabelle, his all-grown-up vision of the place, warm and touching, a place for making memories.

That was it. He e-mailed the completed article and a batch of his favorite photos off to an editor he'd worked with for years at a popular, high-profile magazine.

It wasn't a book. It was a beginning.

MARTY AND BRITTANY HAD NO sooner arrived back on Mirabelle, home from their extended honeymoon, than Marty had met with his contractors to discuss the feasibility of his plans. He wasn't merely satisfied with the results, he was ecstatic. Initial estimates were that the entire project could be completed within his budget and the preliminary marketing analysis supported his proposal on all fronts. All he had to do now was convince the Mirabelle town council this was best for the island and he could begin getting detailed, formal bids. After that, all he needed was the board's unanimous approval to start construction.

While Marty was floating on cloud nine, Sophie found herself annoyed with her brother. He had the money to do virtually anything he wanted. Why couldn't he find another island to destroy?

She sat next to Brittany, at the front of the large auditorium, waiting for Marty's second council meeting to begin. This time, in contrast to the first meeting, there was standing room only. Nearly the entire island had decided to attend. The room was buzzing with conversation, some of it positive, some negative, very little neutral, and all of it revolving around Marty's plans.

The council members, all except Jim Bennett, came into the room, took their seats and brought the meeting to order. Carl Andersen got the ball rolling and invited Marty to come forward to present his detailed proposal.

Marty had enough booklets to pass out to everyone in the room and a video presentation outlining his idea. He shut off the video and looked out over the audience.

"All of you have your opinions on what's right and wrong here," Marty said. "So let's look at the facts. Tourist season is in full swing. Two of your three busiest months are nearly over." He cleared his throat. "Who on this island is at full capacity? Who on this island has reached sales comparable to the first tourist month last year? The year before that? The one before that?"

Some looked worriedly around the room. Many bowed their heads in concentration. He was right. Everyone in the room knew it.

"There is no one in this room who hasn't been affected by a drop in tourism. The world is changing and we have to change with it or risk getting left behind. That's all there is to it. The initial conclusion of the feasibility study is that my plan will work."

Marty stepped down and that's when all politeness left the room. It was neighbor against neighbor, business owner against business owner. The sound was deafening. Sophie ached for her brother, for the

islanders. If they didn't come together, this would tear the island apart.

"Okay, okay!" Carl said, quieting the room. "Let's open this discussion. In an orderly fashion."

Sophie glanced behind her to see residents line up at a microphone and begin asking questions, presenting issues, raising concerns. One after another, Marty fielded them. She couldn't help feeling proud of her brother. She didn't agree with everything he said, but he was articulate, passionate and well informed.

Sally McGregor, the island's postmaster and first-class crank, stepped to the podium. She adjusted the microphone. "I don't give a rat's ass what everyone else has had to say. All of it's neither here nor there."

Tsking, chuckles and outright laughter erupted in various directions in the room.

"Laugh all you want. Here's the bottom line. Call it a community pool and a municipal golf course all you want, but put 'em on Rousseau property, and the Rousseaus will be the only ones benefiting. Period."

"She's got a point."

"What about the rest of us?"

"Ain't that the truth?"

"Well, who's going to pay for it, Sally? You?"

"Hold on. Hold on," Marty said. "Guests won't have to be staying at my new hotel or Sophie's inn to use the facilities."

"The Rousseau property is on the west side of the island," someone shouted.

"Yeah," another person added. "Who's going to want to trudge all that way with their clubs and their swimming stuff?"

"Well, for heaven's sake." This was a third person. "There isn't room to put a pool, let alone a golf course, in the center of town."

The hubbub picked up again, and Sophie watched Marty's confidence falter for the first time. Brittany grabbed Sophie's hand and squeezed. Sophie had never felt quite so conflicted.

Suddenly, the room turned quiet and all eyes turned to the podium. Sophie spun around to see Noah standing at the microphone. Instantly, she was hit by a skin-tingling awareness of him. He glanced at her, but his expression was impossible to read.

"I know most of you think I don't have a say on this, and you'd be right," he said, loud and clear. "My dad asked me to be here, so here I am. Besides, this isn't an opinion. This is a suggestion." He paused to take a look around. "You want every business on the island to benefit from these developments, then you have to put the developments in a central location."

Some in the audience nodded their assent.

“The only way you’ll get equal access for all guests, is if you put the pool and the golf course on state land just north of the town center in the middle of the island. Problem solved.”

More murmurs, these quieter, more thoughtful. With a golf course and pools, traffic on the island would increase to the point they would need a new hotel.

“That’s a good idea, Noah,” Marty said, nodding. “I’ll check into it with the state.”

Sophie could’ve kissed Noah. She couldn’t believe no one else had thought of this ideal compromise. Sometimes it took an outsider to see what insiders couldn’t.

A short while later, the board agreed to consider Marty’s final proposal, but only if the state would allow the sale of some centrally located parkland to be used for the pools and golf course. They would then take Marty’s proposal under advisement. All islanders were encouraged to make their views known to the council members. A final vote was expected before the end of summer.

The room cleared, and Sophie noticed Noah heading for the door. “Brittany, I’ll see you and Marty later. I need to talk to Noah.” She squeezed through the crowd and once outside the town hall, ran to catch up with him. “Noah.”

He stopped and turned, but didn’t say anything.

“Thank you,” she said. “For Marty’s sake.”

He studied her for a moment. “What about for your sake, Sophie? What about what you want?” His gaze was serious, penetrating. “For so many years you’ve been doing for others. First your parents and your brothers and sisters. Then your kids. Isaac. The islanders. What about you, Sophie? Do you even know what you want anymore?”

She stared at him, silent, speechless.

He turned and walked away.

Well, I know what I don’t want, all right. I don’t want you to leave Mirabelle. I don’t want you to leave me. Again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“GRANDPA!”

“You’re home!”

Noah glanced up and grinned at the sight of Kurt and Lauren standing at the pier and waving at the ferry as they approached Mirabelle. He wondered how long they’d been waiting for them to get back from the hospital, but was so glad they’d been patient. “Looks like they really missed you, Dad.”

His father waved back. “At least I’ve done one thing right in my life.”

Noah and Josie both reached at the same time to help his dad off the ferry. “I can do it myself.” Jim shooed them both away and stepped onto the pier holding the rail with one hand and a cane with the other. “And I can make it to Arlo’s carriage on my own, too. All this hovering. You two are gonna make

me wish I was back in the hospital.”

Though Josie let go of his arm, she walked slowly by his side. Noah grabbed his dad’s bag and followed as Kurt and Lauren joined their group. Everyone except Lauren climbed onto Arlo’s carriage.

“I’m going to Nikki’s,” Lauren said. “I’ll see you later, Grandpa.”

“All right, Miss Mirabelle. You have a good time.”

Noah threw his dad’s bag in the back. “Take us to Josie’s, would you, Arlo?”

“Ayep.” Arlo nodded. “Sure thing.”

Noah climbed into the back and watched Kurt interact with his grandfather. In profile, the boy reminded Noah so much of Isaac, and an ache of warring emotions slowly weaved through him. Why couldn’t Noah be more like his brother, Isaac? Why couldn’t he stay on Mirabelle?

Then he remembered the winters.

Summer time had never been much of a problem for Noah, but then fall would hit, the tourists left, kids went back to school, a somber quiet fell over the town, and a part of Noah would shrivel up and die like the leaves on the trees. Snow would fall and Chequamegon Bay would freeze over, like always, encircling Mirabelle in icy isolation. There were months when the only way off the island was by helicopter or plane. Noah couldn’t live like that. He guessed he really was like his mother.

Arlo pulled up alongside Josie’s house. Noah hopped to the ground and held out a hand for Josie. “Come on, Dad. This is your stop, too.”

“Oh, no.” Jim shook his head. “I’m going home.”

“The doctors said you can’t stay at home alone.”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“I’m not worried, and I don’t want to start worrying. You’re either staying with Josie or me. Take your pick.”

His dad glanced at Kurt and the young boy only shrugged. “Don’t look at me.”

“Jim Bennett.” Josie put her hands on her hips. “You’re staying here. Whether you like it or not. And if you’re worried about appearances, get over it. Everyone on this island knows you’re here most nights, anyway.”

Jim glanced at Arlo.

Arlo grinned. “You ain’t fooling anyone ’cept yourself, Jim. Haven’t for years.”

“Damned island,” Noah’s dad muttered as he eased himself off the carriage. “Everyone always butting into everyone else’s business.”

While Arlo turned his carriage back to town Josie opened her front door. Noah dropped the bags inside

and helped his dad get settled in an easy chair in the living room.

“Anyone want lemonade?” Josie asked on her way into the kitchen.

“Sounds great,” his dad said.

“Noah?”

“No, thanks, Josie. I need to take off in a few minutes.”

“I don’t want any,” Kurt said. “Thanks, Josie.”

“You going to be okay?” Noah asked his dad.

“I’ll be fine.” Jim released a slow breath. “Did you know she threw away all my pipes, tobacco, filters, ashtrays,” he whispered, pointing to the kitchen. “Everything. Gone.”

“The doctor said you had to quit.”

“Yeah, I know.” Worry creased his brow. “I guess along with quitting smoking, I’d better look into quitting work.”

“You don’t have to do that, Dad. The doctor is expecting a full recovery.”

“What would you do if you’re not chief of police?” Kurt asked.

“Retire.”

“Just cause you had a heart attack?”

“I hate admitting it, but I’m actually ready for winters some place a little warmer. A lot warmer. Every winter, twenty below feels just a little colder than the year before.”

“You?” Noah laughed. “Leaving Mirabelle?”

“Only for the winters, mind you. I asked Josie to come with me.” Suddenly, he reached for Noah’s and Kurt’s hands. “You know that no matter what happens...I love you two, right?”

“I know, Grandpa.”

“Dad, you’re going to be fine. But, yeah, I know.” Noah tightened his grip and then let go. “I love you, too.”

Jim nodded. “I know.”

Josie brought in two glasses of icy lemonade and handed one to Noah’s dad.

“Well, I need to get going.” Noah kissed Josie on the cheek and whispered, “Thanks for taking care of the old coot.”

“Hey!”

Noah was happy to see color had returned to his father's cheeks. "Well, let me know if you need anything, Josie." He glanced at Kurt. "You hanging out here for a while?"

"Yeah," Kurt said. "I want to stay with Grandpa."

Noah watched the two, side by side. Kurt had the kind of bond with Jim Bennett that Noah had always wished for. Maybe if he'd stayed on Mirabelle, that close relationship may have come to pass, but he'd made his choice with regard to so many things when he'd left Mirabelle. Noah headed for the door.

"You know what, Kurt?" his dad said. "I'm pretty tired after all that cashushing from the hospital. I think I'm ready for a nap. Why don't you take a walk with Noah and ask him about the time he karate-chopped your dad and ended up breaking his own wrist."

Noah turned around and laughed.

"No one knew your dad better than Noah," Jim said, winking at Kurt.

Noah shook his head. "See you later, Dad." He stepped out onto the porch and held the door open. "You coming, Kurt?"

Kurt followed him outside.

"That was nice of you and Lauren to meet the ferry today," Noah said, hoping to break the ice.

"Mom told us you were bringing Grandpa home. She would've come to the pier, too, but she was too busy with work." Kurt picked up a stick and started breaking it in pieces as they walked down the hill. "Did you really break your wrist in a fight with Dad?"

"Well, I'm not sure I'd call it a fight." Noah laughed again, remembering that day. "Your dad was older and bigger than me. Our fights were more like Isaac holding me off while I tried to inflict as much damage as possible. Generally speaking, I ended up doing more damage to myself."

They walked in silence to the bottom of the hill. When they turned toward the inn, Kurt said, "Did you really know him better than anyone?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe."

"What was my dad like? I mean, as a brother?"

Noah smiled. "Calm. What I remember most about Isaac is that he was always relaxed. Confident. Content. I remember pestering him, trying to get a rise out of him and it never seemed to work. No matter what I did. I could change the TV channel. Chuck a pencil at him from across the room. Whistle while he was doing homework. Tap my fingers on a tabletop. He'd either completely ignore me or laugh at me.

"Your grandpa would take us fishing and the two of them would sit there for hours, as quiet as could be, not saying a word, enjoying the day, sunshine or clouds, wind or rain. They didn't care. They were just happy being out on the water. Drove me absolutely crazy. I could never sit still."

Kurt laughed. "And he never cared if he caught any fish, either."

“Exactly!” Noah laughed, too. “I could never seem to catch up to him, either, in strength or height. He was five years older, so he always, always, beat me at arm wrestling. And, man, could he throw a football.”

“He used to play catch with me and Lauren. Football, baseball, Frisbee.”

Noah wished his brother were alive, so he could hug him, yell at him, laugh with him. “He was a good older brother, so I’ll bet he was a good dad.”

“You were mad at him, weren’t you? For marrying Mom?”

Whoa.Noah stopped. “Who told you that?”

“No one.” Kurt turned and held Noah’s gaze. “You’ve never been around before, and I’ve heard people talking. I might be only fourteen, but I’m not stupid.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I was mad at him. And your mom.” Noah picked up a rock at the edge of the road and tossed it toward the water. “I was in Afghanistan in the mountains when he was killed. If I’d known, I would’ve come back for the funeral.”

Kurt’s eyes watered. “Did Dad steal Mom from you? Is that why you left Mirabelle?”

“No, Kurt.” It was time Noah fessed up to himself, to the world. “I left Mirabelle before your mom and dad started dating. No one made me go. No one made me stay away. It’s what I chose to do.”

Isaac had taken care of Sophie and the kids. Noah had no right to be resentful, jealous or angry with his brother.I’m sorry, Isaac. I should’ve let it go years ago. Noah smiled at Kurt and started walking again. “So tell me some of your favorite memories of your dad.”

Kurt walked alongside. “He liked to play video games with me, but he wasn’t very good at it. He was goofy. Made us laugh. He used to take me and Lauren camping to lots of different places. Every year, he took each one of us on a solo trip with him and at least another one with both of us.”

“Your mom never went?”

“She doesn’t like to camp.”

That didn’t sound like the Sophie Noah remembered.

“I liked snowshoeing in the winter with him,” Kurt said.

“He used to take me out, too, when I was little.”

“It was cold.”

“And quiet. You could hear the snow landing on the tree branches. And, early in the morning, you could sometimes hear a deer walking through the woods or cardinals calling to each other so loud and clear.”

“Yeah. I remember.”

Those memories of Isaac had to be so near and dear to Kurt's heart. Isaac was the only father Kurt and Lauren had ever known. Did Noah have a right to mess with that?

"Sometimes you sound like him," Kurt said.

Noah didn't know what to say.

"He'd have to be gone sometimes for work and every day, he'd call to say good-night. Sometimes, I just wish I could hear his voice again."

"Does it bother you when you hear my voice?"

"At first, it did. Now, I think it's kinda nice."

Noah squeezed Kurt's shoulder. "I miss him, too," he whispered.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SOPHIE TURNED AWAY FROM listening to Marty discuss the state land near the Duffy stables with various contractors and a golf course designer to find Noah, his camera in hand, coming up the hill. He looked so good, lightly tanned, his dark hair highlighted from time in the sun, and healthy, having put back some of the muscle he'd likely lost from his hospital stay.

Wouldn't it be fun to grab his hand and take off in a kayak for the day? Be gone. With each other. There was a reason people called them fantasies.

"So did the state approve the sale of the land?"

She nodded. Marty had jumped one more hurdle.

"Looks like a good spot for a golf course," Noah said, slowing as he reached her side.

"I wouldn't know. I've never golfed. How are you doing?" she asked.

Since Jim's heart attack, they'd established a tentative truce, but much was still unsettled between them.

"I'm okay."

"No, I mean how are you feeling about what's happened with your dad?"

"It's a lot to digest. I've wasted—we've wasted—a lot of years. There's hope for us to rebuild a good relationship. We'll keep in touch, no matter where we both end up." He picked some grass and, for a moment, she was mesmerized with watching his fingers deftly tear the blades down the middle. Touch me. Me. "Dad told me that Mom had wanted custody of us boys," he said, "but he refused to let us leave Mirabelle. He apologized."

She looked up and focused on his face. "So now what?"

"I'm going to try and find her. I don't have any illusions that everything will be all sunny and rosy, but seeing her again will help to put some pieces back together. For me. I'll take it from there." He spun away from her as if he suddenly became aware of the current between them. "Look at that view," he

said, doing his own abrupt changing of subject. "You can see it all from up here."

"This is where Marty's thinking of putting the main clubhouse."

"Good choice. Rolling hills. Plenty of trees. Seems to me, the right designer could carve a damned good course out of this land." He turned to look at Sophie. "If this is done right, it could mean a lot for Mirabelle."

"It's a small island, Noah." The sun felt hot on her head. She moved to the shade under a craggy old oak and Noah followed. "We can only handle so many visitors without destroying the place."

"That's the marvelous thing about this place. You can control how many people visit based on the ferry schedule, and you can control how many people stay here by the number of available hotel rooms."

"Everyone wants something different."

"They'll come to a compromise."

"I'm not so sure."

He shook his head. "Sophie, all change isn't necessarily bad."

"When something is already perfect, change is bad."

"This island is far from perfect."

"It's perfect for me."

"You think so?" He glanced at her hands, and she was struck with the sense that he'd almost reached out for her. She stepped back, out of his reach. "What about when you want to see a concert or a play?" he asked. "Go out to a restaurant that has more than burgers, fries and beer on the menu?"

"That doesn't happen very often."

"Ever get sick of shopping on the Internet? Say you're looking for that perfect gift for one of the kids and have no ideas, so you can't search for anything. Wouldn't it be nice to go to an actual store and browse? Feel the sweaters. Smell the cologne. Match colors."

"We go into Minneapolis about once a year. Been to Chicago once or twice, too."

"What about when Lauren grows up and wants to leave Mirabelle because there's nothing here for her? You know that day is going to come. Probably sooner rather than later."

"Okay, so it's not perfect."

"That's all I'm saying." He picked some more grass. "By the way, I heard back from several of the galleries where I sent your photographs."

She held her breath.

"All of them like your stuff. One in L.A. has a showing scheduled for October with some well-known

photographers. She said your work would integrate quite nicely—her words not mine—with the others.”

“What does that mean?”

“Whatever you want it to mean.”

“Noah—”

“Don’t say anything yet. Okay? Just think about it. Nothing needs to change. This doesn’t need to be anything more than a creative outlet for you during the winter. Then again, it could be a new beginning.”

The beginning of what? The whole idea of her photographs being displayed in a gallery left her feeling unsettled, as if a door stood open before her, but she had no concept of what was on the other side.

“Enough of that.” Something else was on his mind and he was having a hard time voicing it. No doubt it had to do with Kurt and Lauren. “Thanks for helping with my dad.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Sophie said.

“You were there. It made a difference to him. To me.” He tossed the blades of grass aside and looked into her face. “I’ve been thinking a lot about Kurt and Lauren. I wanted you to know that I understand.” His gaze penetrated hers. “You made the right decision.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

“There’ve been days these last fifteen years that I wasn’t so sure. But once a big, heavy ball is rolling in one direction, it’s hard to change course.”

“Boy, don’t I know that.” He nodded. “The other day, Lauren showed me the collection you have of my books and articles.”

Sophie looked away, embarrassed.

“It’s cool that she’s read some of them.”

“She’s so hungry for the world.”

“So was I. I was selfish and driven. If it had turned out that I was Lauren and Kurt’s father, I’m not sure I would’ve been able to put yours and the kids’ needs ahead of mine. I probably would’ve resented not being able to travel or write the way I wanted to—”

“That’s not—”

“I know.” This time, he did reach out and grab her hand, quieting her. “Whether you realized it or not, Soph, I had a lot of growing up to do, and I couldn’t do that here. If I’d have stayed, I’d have made everyone, including myself, miserable.”

She wasn’t so sure about that, but what was done was done. “So now what? What are you going to do?”

“About Lauren and Kurt?”

She nodded.

“I’m not sure yet, but for now I’m enjoying getting to know them. You raised a couple of great kids.”

He rubbed her fingers in a motion meant to comfort, but, at the moment, that was the last thing she wanted from him. She imagined intertwining her fingers with his, bringing his hand to her lips. She yanked her hand away and turned toward the inn. “I wish you’d just make up your mind, Noah. About everything.”

“MOM SAID SHE WANTED AN ADULT with us,” Lauren explained, a little breathless after having run all the way up the hill.

“I don’t get why,” Kurt muttered, looking a little put out. “We went out by ourselves lots of times this summer.”

Noah stepped out onto the porch and glanced at Kurt and Lauren. Finally, after all the time he’d been spending with them, he was feeling like an uncle. Only the big question remained. Was he father material?

“She suggested we ask you,” Lauren explained. “Wanna come sailing with us?”

“Oh, man,” he said, “I’m not sure I remember how.”

“We can teach you,” Kurt offered.

“You can, huh?” Summer was over. They’d be heading back to school soon and Noah was already missing them. What did that say about him eventually leaving the island? “Is your mom coming?” He was hoping she would.

“She has to work.”

Figures. It was her way of trying to disconnect from him, and he could hardly blame her. His stomach rumbled from hunger. “Have you guys had lunch yet?”

“No.”

“Then come on in for a sec.” He threw some sodas, water, bread and lunch meat into a cooler, grabbed a bag of chips and rejoined them in the living room. “Okay, let’s go.” Noah reached for his camera, a baseball cap and sunglasses and followed the kids out the door.

“Are you two fighting?” Lauren asked.

“Who two?”

“You and Mom.”

Noah looked at her. “It’s...complicated.”

“Right.” Lauren and Kurt exchanged looks.

Thankfully, on reaching the marina, they became preoccupied with tying and untying knots, and the uncomfortable subject was forgotten. A short while later, they were out on the glittering, relatively smooth waters of Lake Superior. Noah couldn’t have asked for a better day for sailing. With winds strong enough to build speed, but light enough to keep heavy whitecaps from forming, the weather was perfect.

“How much longer are you staying on the island?” Lauren asked once they were out on the water.

“I don’t know.”

“Can I see your fake leg?” Kurt asked.

Lauren whacked his shoulder. “Geez, Kurt!”

“It’s all right. I get it.” Noah pulled up the leg of his jeans and let Kurt touch his prosthetic. “I remember once asking Mr. McGregor to see his fake eye.”

“Is that the old guy who used to live by the stables?” Kurt asked.

Noah nodded. “Used to? Where is he now?”

“He died last year,” Lauren said.

“That’s too bad.”

“Are you kidding?” Kurt trimmed the sail. “He was scary.”

“Especially with a rifle in his hands.” Noah laughed, leaning back and letting the kids do the work.

“He shot at you?” Kurt’s eyes bulged.

“He threatened to if I didn’t quit running through his yard and raiding his apple tree. One day, his wife, Sally—”

“The mean woman who works in the post office?”

“Yeah, that’s her. Well, she invited me in for cookies.”

“Cookies?” Lauren asked, her mouth gaping. “You’re kidding.”

“And you lived to talk about it?” Kurt asked.

Noah laughed, remembering all the rumors about the McGregors. “Believe it or not, she was nice. Even sat at the kitchen table with me. That’s when I asked to see the old man’s eye.”

“What did he say?” For the first time since he’d met the boy, he noticed something damned close to respect in those young eyes.

“He popped it out right there and held it in his hand.”

“Gross!” Lauren exclaimed.

“Bomb,” Kurt said, smiling. “You can’t make this stuff up.”

Noah laughed.

“Yes, you can,” Lauren said.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“What?” Kurt said. “You gonna put that in one of your books?”

“You seem awfully interested in writing, Lauren,” Noah said, breaking things up. “Aspirations?”

“Yeah. I’ve started a couple stories and already finished one. Will you read it? Tell me what you think?”

“Don’t,” Kurt warned. “It’s a romance.”

“Sure,” Noah said. “I’ll read it.” He regretted all those years he’d missed spending time with these kids. “Not to make things heavy here or anything, but I want to apologize for something.”

They both glanced at him.

“I’m not quite sure how to say this, but I wasn’t much of an uncle all those years you guys were growing up. I’m sorry. It was me. My problem. It didn’t have anything to do with you guys.”

“That’s okay,” Lauren said.

“No, it’s not, but I’d like to keep in touch. From now on.”

“Whatever,” Kurt said, looking away.

His apology may not have meant much to them, but it lifted a weight off Noah’s shoulders. They were on the water for hours, snapping off pictures of each other, talking, eating and exploring one of the smaller, unpopulated, nearby Apostle Islands. He’d never spent much time around kids, but he enjoyed Kurt and Lauren’s company. There was only one person missing from the picture.

“Let’s go see if your mom can break from work to get ice cream with us.”

FROM HER OPEN OFFICE WINDOW, Sophie watched her children coming back from sailing with Noah. While Lauren was all for spending time with Noah, Kurt had taken some convincing, so she was glad they’d been out for a nice long time.

Instead of going directly to the marina, they landed the dinghy on the beach in front of the inn. If she quickly glanced at them, she could almost imagine that it was Isaac with them, rather than Noah, but anyone who had known the brothers at all would’ve immediately noticed their differences. Noah’s hair

was much darker than Isaac's, but it was the way he held himself that marked him. Noah was shorter and more muscular, whereas Isaac had always been taller and more slender.

Integrate quite nicely. The words Noah had relayed from the L.A. gallery owner about Sophie's photographs popped in her mind. She pushed them back. She had too many other things to worry about.

The three sun-kissed sailors walked toward the inn. Noah saw her standing in front of her office window and waved. Kurt and Lauren ran toward her.

"Come with us for ice cream," Lauren said, standing outside.

"Yeah, Mom, come."

Not sure if she should intrude on his time alone with the kids, she glanced at Noah.

"How can you resist the finest homemade ice cream in the entire Midwest?" His imitation of Mrs. Miller was perfect, and Sophie laughed. "Please," he added.

"I'll meet you around front." She turned, walked down the hall and through the lobby.

Jan looked up from the reception desk.

"I'm going to get some ice cream with the kids."

"Sounds nummy." Jan smiled. Then she noticed Noah waiting with Lauren and Kurt. "I almost forgot. Josie..."

Not again. "You know what, Jan?" Sophie said, interrupting her. "I need to set the record straight on something, and I'd appreciate it if you'd quietly pass it around to all the islanders."

Jan flattened her lips as if it took everything in her to keep quiet.

"All those years ago, when Noah left the island?"

Jan waited.

"He was gone long before I found out I was pregnant," Sophie said. "I never told him, and neither did his dad. Noah never knew I was pregnant. I should be so lucky that he forgives me for what I did. And didn't do."

Sophie walked out the front entrance feeling a little lighter. She and Noah walked side by side, following Kurt and Lauren across the lawn toward the shops in the main part of town. "How was the water?" she asked, breaking the ice.

"Perfect," Noah said. "Sailing's not all that different than riding a bike."

"You haven't been since you left Mirabelle?"

"Nope."

His leg didn't seem to be bothering him at all today. "Are you wearing your new leg?"

He nodded. "The mirror therapy is working."

"Before you know it," she said, swallowing, "you'll be ready to leave the island."

He didn't say anything. What could he say? She was right. He'd be leaving.

"So where are you off to after...you heal up?" Sophie asked.

"They're expecting me in Iraq, but I'm not sure I'll be going back."

"What would you do instead?"

His gaze was completely unreadable. "I don't know."

"You should stay here," Lauren said.

"You think?" Noah smiled.

"If you want," Kurt said, throwing in his somewhat reluctant two cents.

Noah glanced at Sophie. Stay, she wanted to say. Please.

"Actually, I have a beachfront house in Rhode Island," he said. "Bought it a few years back. Kind of reminds me of Mirabelle with the ocean out the back door and a little town nearby. Only there's a decent-sized city nearby and Boston and Manhattan are a stone's throw away."

The thought of such big cities made her skin crawl.

"You think you wouldn't like living in a city," he said, as if reading her thoughts. "You'd be surprised. Whether you live in a big city or a small town, you can live your life however you choose. Isolate yourself, or explore every nook and cranny. Get to know only your immediate neighbors or involve yourself in the larger community. A city gives a person options. Your lifestyle isn't defined by nature, like what happens when you live on an island."

Sophie had never thought of it that way. As they hit Main Street, his gaze was intensely focused on her. What was he saying?

Somehow the kids had gotten ahead of them. "Come on!" Kurt called out.

"We'll catch up to you," Noah yelled back. He turned back and touched her cheek. "Think about it. That's all I'm asking."

About leaving Mirabelle? About going anywhere, anytime with him? She already had, more times than she could count. The days of her envisioning herself anywhere except on this island were long gone. She was a Rousseau with an obligation to carry on tradition at the inn. She could not uproot her children. This was their home.

The kids were standing outside the ice cream shop. "Come on, you guys!" Lauren was almost jumping up and down with impatience.

Noah turned around and jogged backward. "Yeah, come on, Mom!" Suddenly, he tossed her his camera. "Why don't you take some pictures, huh?"

She hadn't held a camera since last winter and the cool metal felt good in her hands. She followed Noah as he ducked inside the ice cream parlor, turned on the digital and immediately started framing shots.

"So what's good here?" Noah asked Lauren.

Lauren pointed at the far case. "They have the best chocolate caramel fudge brownie in the world."

"Sounds like your mom's favorite."

"Get the Bubble Gum Bomb," Kurt said, taking a lick off his own double-dipped cone of bright pink ice cream.

"Maybe another day." Noah cringed.

"He'll take chocolate chip," Sophie said, coming up beside Lauren.

"She's got that right." Noah grinned and went on talking about ice cream options with Lauren.

Sophie only half listened. She was more interested in taking pictures of them. She studied the three of them through the lens and suddenly, with everything in her, she wanted Kurt and Lauren to be Noah's children. Maybe then he would stay.

But if they weren't? Then what?

CHAPTER TWENTY

"HAVE YOU HEARD THE NEWS?" Sally McGregor asked.

Was she talking to him? Startled, Jim glanced over his shoulder. Sally never small-talked while on duty. Seeing that he was alone in the post office and she couldn't possibly be talking to anyone else, he turned back around. "What news?"

"A flood of calls and e-mails have been coming in the last few weeks," she said. "I hear every hotel and B and B on the entire island's booked up for the rest of this summer and half of next. It's all because of your son."

Oh, shit. "What did Noah do?"

"He wrote an article for some big magazine that came out last week."

"No kidding."

"Just to set the record straight. I've always liked that boy."

Jim paid for the roll of stamps and walked outside. His doctors had wanted him to get some exercise in every day, and he was feeling pretty good, all things considered, so he headed toward the drugstore to see if anyone there knew about this magazine business.

Marsha Henderson practically assaulted him the moment he walked through the door. "Chief, did you see it?"

"Noah's article? No."

"I saved the last one for you." Marsha slapped a copy in Jim's hands. "Who would've thought that boy had it in him. Your son's a hero."

"Well, I'll be damned." Jim bought some shampoo along with the magazine and wandered back out into the street, staring at the glossy cover. Below the picture of some movie star was the title of a feature article, Mirabelle Island, Where Past Meets Present.

"That's a damned nice article," Ron Setterberg said as he passed by on his way back to the island equipment-rental office.

As he continued walking, Jim flipped through the pages and located the piece. Sure enough, Noah had written it. His pictures were plastered across several pages. There was one with Sophie and the kids.

"Jim!" Doc Welinsky was coming toward him. "How are you feeling?"

"Doing good."

"You need anything, you let me know." Doc gave Jim two thumbs-up. "The next time you see that son of yours, you tell him I said good job."

"I think you should tell him yourself."

Doc shrugged. "Maybe I will."

Jim sat on the nearest bench. All that walking had taken it out of him.

"You look like you're not sure how you'll get back to Josie's." That was Noah's voice. His son was coming out of Newman's carrying a bag of groceries.

"Yeah, I probably got myself out a little too far."

Noah sat, putting the bag on the sidewalk.

"How'd you manage this?" Jim asked, pointing at the magazine in his lap.

"Right place at the right time. They had something else scheduled and the writer bailed on them."

"Looks like it took a lot of time."

"It was nothing. What was I supposed to do all these weeks?"

"I can think of a lot of things. Instead, you stepped out of line to help your old neighbors and friends."

"Don't read too much into it, Dad."

"Noah, son, that's been my problem all along. Not reading you at all."

“Dad, don’t—”

“I know we’ve cleared the air a bit. There’s one more thing that needs to be said.”

Noah fell quiet, listening.

“I don’t always understand you. You’re different than me. But I know you’re a good man. Just as good a man as Isaac.” He paused. “I’m okay with you leaving Mirabelle again. Just don’t stay away so long next time.”

Noah nodded.

“As for Sophie—”

“I don’t think you’d better go there.”

Maybe his son was right. Maybe this tentative truce between them was too fragile to withstand a volatile topic like Sophie.

“She’s always been like flesh and blood to me, and well...” Jim said, pausing.

“Don’t ruin it, okay? The less said, the better.”

“This needs saying, too.”

Noah looked as if he was holding his breath.

“I know it sounds silly, me saying this, but you’ve got my permission—no, my wholehearted blessing—to take her and the kids off the island, too.”

“That isn’t going to happen.” Noah looked up into the clouds and sighed. “Not in this lifetime.”

“I never offered your mother a single compromise. Not one. I stuck to my guns like the stubborn son of a bitch I am, and look what it got me. Don’t make the same mistake I did.”

“There is no compromise, Dad.”

“Don’t lose her again, Noah. You’ll regret it the rest of your life.”

AFTER HELPING HIS DAD BACK TO Josie’s, Noah went to his house and poured some iced tea into one of his grandma’s orange-and-yellow flowered glasses. On his way to the porch, he stopped and looked at the photographs from Iraq he’d printed out and had scattered across the coffee table. Although he’d gotten a good start on the photo layout for the book, there was one file he’d yet to open. He’d never looked at the photos of the explosion and his subsequent stay in the hospital.

Setting his iced tea on the table, he flipped up his laptop, opened the folder and looked through the pictures, one after another. In an instant, he was transported back to Iraq where the unrelenting heat and sun, the wind, the sand and dirt were more than a memory. He was there. In the moment.

The explosion. Damn . He studied the pictures of the aftermath. Half of the truck was gone. No wonder everyone else had died. Then there was the hospital. He'd had to practically beg a nurse to snap off a couple shots for him, and now he understood why she'd been so hesitant. He looked like shit. Pale, haggard. Depressed. The other amputees didn't look much better.

This book had to be finished. Not because he was under contract, but because he finally had something to say. This time it was their story. This time he wanted to write about life not death. Explosion. Recovery. Survival.

He opened his manuscript file, began typing, and typing and typing and typing. For the next several days, his fingers flew over the keyboard and the last of the book practically wrote itself.

As he keyed in the last line, he realized that he may have lost a part of his leg, but his soul felt more complete than ever. He was whole, at least in spirit, and he was finished traveling the world documenting unrest and war. He'd keep writing, of course. It was his job, what he loved doing, but he was all done running away. There was no longer anything, or anyone, nipping at his heels. Not anymore.

As for truth? It was staring him in the face.

SOPHIE WALKED THROUGH HALLS of the Mirabelle Inn taking mental notes. Everything was green and blue and white. She stopped in the lobby. Suddenly she was sick of the monotonous color schemes.

"Soph?" Marty was coming down the wide circular staircase. "Do you have some time for a walk?"

"Sure." She set her notebook behind the front desk. "Do you think this foyer needs more color?"

He glanced around. "I don't know. It looks like it's always looked, right?"

"Yeah. That's the problem." She was going to talk to Jan when they got back. Changes at the inn were long overdue.

She and Marty went outside and automatically headed toward the Rousseau forest. "You're worried about the council meeting, aren't you?" she asked.

He nodded. Tonight they were going to take a final vote. "Have you talked to Carl or Jim? Do you have any idea how they're leaning?"

"No, but if I were to guess, I'd say Carl's a go for it and Jim's on the fence. The council's probably fairly evenly split." They walked on in silence for a while.

"What about you?" he asked. "Have you decided whether or not you'll approve the use of the trust land?"

"I don't know, Marty. I know this isn't what you want to hear, but I still haven't decided. Tell me, why do you want to move back to Mirabelle?"

"I miss it."

“That’s all? You sure you won’t get bored here?”

“Positive. I’ve lived here before. I know what it’s like and I know what I want. This is it.”

“What about Brittany? You sure she won’t get bored?”

“She’s from a speck of a town in Oregon. She knows small and isolated and she knows how to make her own fun. She doesn’t need malls or theaters. She needs good people, people who’ll accept her and treat her kindly. She can’t wait to run her own spa. And we want kids, Sophie.

“I’m not getting any younger and Brittany’s ready now. We don’t want to raise them in a big city. Both of us want our kids to be able to run out the back door and not have to worry about who they’re with or where they’re going. There aren’t many places in the world still like that. Then when you get to the teenaged years? You wouldn’t believe what’s out there. The kind of trouble they can get in.”

Yes, she would. She well understood the mines her kids had sidestepped by living on Mirabelle. All she had to do was watch and listen to some of the families who visited during the summer months.

“Is there a reason you don’t want us to live here?”

“I’d love for you and Brittany to live on Mirabelle.” She shook her head. “That’s not the issue.”

“Then what is it? What’s the bottom line?”

She stopped and spread her arms out wide. “These woods. I don’t want to lose them.”

“There’s plenty of undeveloped land on the island.”

“It’s not Rousseau land. This ground, right here, under our feet, belonged to our ancestors. You develop this and part of our family’s history is gone. Forever.”

Marty looked around. “We’ll be putting the pools and golf course on state land, but the hotel? That I’d have to put here. They’re just trees, Sophie.”

“Don’t you remember playing in these woods? Don’t you want your kids to have these woods to play in?”

She could see his wheels turning.

“I need something to do on this island. I can’t retire and raise kids here, and I don’t want to raise kids in a place that’s dying. I want my kids to have other kids their ages growing up here. When’s the last time someone moved to Mirabelle? We lose residents. We don’t gain. It won’t be long before there aren’t any kids left on this island at all.”

He had a valid point. “Maybe the pools and golf course are good ideas. Could you manage those?”

“I’m not sure they’d keep me busy enough.” He picked up a stick and threw it into the woods. “There is a possibility we could add on to the inn. Build a spa facility and an entertainment complex on the west lawn.”

That would change the landscape of the shoreline. She sucked in a breath. The first thing people saw when they came over on the ferry was the inn and its expansive green lawns, topiaries and rose gardens. "Take that away, and you take away Mirabelle's image."

"With good architects and landscape designers, the additions could be an improvement on the image. The woods would stay intact. It could work." He stopped. "Sophie, nothing ever stays the same. Life is change."

"I know."

"You've dealt with a lot of change in your own life. Mom and Dad dying. Noah leaving. Getting married, losing a husband, having kids."

"I know."

"You've adapted. Grown. Changed."

"I know."

She understood everything he wanted for Mirabelle and it all made sense. It sounded good for the island and the residents.

"Sophie, I know you feel like it's your responsibility to keep the faith. When Dad died, he passed on to you the responsibility for keeping the Rousseau traditions alive. I get it. But as wonderful a job as you've done, I'm not so sure that was fair. Maybe it's time for you to take a break. While I can't guarantee that things won't change, I can promise you I'm home to stay."

As he hugged her, Sophie couldn't decide whether the past fifteen years had been a burden or a gift.

"There's something else you're holding on to, isn't there?" Marty asked. "Something you can't let go. What is it?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"FIRST, WE RUN OUT OF toilet paper and it takes your housekeeping staff an hour to get it to our room," the woman said, shaking her head animatedly. "Then we asked for fresh towels and..."

Sophie stood behind the front desk and tuned out the disgruntled guest. As if it hadn't been a rough enough day with the upcoming council meeting hanging over her head. She could tell within thirty seconds of coming out of her office on Jan's request to deal with this mess that all the woman was after was monetary compensation. She didn't care about any of the accidental inconveniences. She was an opportunist. Even the woman's husband, standing behind her, looked embarrassed.

Jan stood silently next to Sophie. She knew the drill.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Campbell," Sophie forced the words out, all the while wishing she could give this woman a piece of her mind. "I trust a coupon for twenty percent off your next bill at our restaurant will ease your troubles." She tried to smile while holding out the offering.

“Well, all right, but—”

“Please feel free to call me at any time for the duration of your stay.” She handed the woman her card. “I hope this inconvenience doesn’t keep you from coming back next year.”

“Oh, we won’t be staying here next year.” The woman snapped up the card.

Of all the nerve. “Well, in that case—” Sophie snatched the discount coupon out of the woman’s hand “—I’ll be taking that back.”

“Wa—but—I—” While the woman stammered and sputtered away, her husband hid a smile behind his hand and Jan’s mouth dropped open.

“I’d suggest you enjoy the rest of your stay,” Sophie said, unable to stop the outpouring now that the dam had burst, “but I doubt you enjoy life in gen—”

Jan stepped in front of Sophie. “I think what Ms. Rousseau means is that twenty percent off isn’t nearly enough. Here.” She handed the woman a different coupon. “You and your husband enjoy an entirely free meal. Okay?” she said politely and scuttled Sophie off into her office. “What the heck was that all about?”

Sophie crossed her arms and stood looking out her window over the sun-kissed water, feeling unsettled and antsy.

“Look, you haven’t had a day off since Marty and Brittany’s wedding,” Jan said. “Go. Get out of here. It’s not much, but an afternoon is better than nothing.”

The kids were going fishing with Jim and Josie after school. Sophie was free until the council meeting. Mounds of paperwork sat on her desk, but Jan was right. She had to get out of here. She couldn’t go to Noah’s. That would be trouble. She couldn’t go downtown. All the tourists looking for fall colors would drive her crazy. There was no point in isolating herself in the small room off her office. She’d only stare at the pictures of her and Noah.

In the end, she settled for lunch and a book at the lighthouse. Along with picnic fare, she brought a bottle of wine and blankets. She sat back under the shade of a white pine to read and heard footsteps crunching across the rocks.

“Thought I’d find you here.”

She should’ve known Noah would come. “Why?”

“I saw you walking this way with that look on your face.”

“What look is that?”

“The one that says, ‘If I have to spend one more minute with a brainless tourist I’m going to shoot myself.’”

She laughed.

He sat next to her. Immediately, the heat emanating from his skin warmed her side and she felt an urge to

snuggle into him. Trouble. "Want a glass of wine?" More trouble.

"Sure."

She reached behind her for a plastic cup from her stash hidden in the bushes, poured him some cabernet, and held it out. Her fingers brushed against his as the cup exchanged hands, and the reckless need to fall into him passed through her. Do not do this.

"So," she said, trying to redirect her thoughts, "have you figured out what you want to do about the kids?"

"That's not why I came here." He looked away. "We've been getting along fine. I don't want to ruin it."

"We have to talk about it. Eventually."

"Not now."

"Then why did you come here?"

"There's something else, something more important."

She took a sip of wine and waited.

Noah stood and paced. "I've been thinking a lot about you and Isaac. You and me. The kids. Trying to find a solution. I know this is going to sound as though it's coming out of nowhere, but..." Suddenly, he stopped in front of her. "Could you... Do you think you could ever love me... as much as you loved Isaac?"

"How could you really believe all these years that I loved Isaac more than you?"

"What was I supposed to think? You married him. You never would've married me."

"Damn you, Noah." She stood, tears springing to her eyes. "If my dad hadn't died, we'd have gotten married. How can you not know that?" She turned to walk away.

"Wait a minute." He grabbed her arm. "Sophie?"

She swallowed. Though the words felt stuck in her throat, she forced them out. "I learned to love Isaac," she whispered. "Like a good friend. I never loved him, the way I loved you."

Her answer took him back. He looked as if he didn't know what to say. "Could you ever love me again?"

She felt as if she might burst from holding herself back. She had to let everything out. "I'm not sure I ever stopped loving you, Noah. Every day of my life, you've been there, in my heart. Front and center."

He stepped toward her and wrapped a hand around the back of her neck. "Then come with me."

"My life is here."

"Make a new life. With me."

“I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?” He studied her face, and his eyes slowly closed as if he could barely contain himself. “The islanders have been right in trying to keep us apart. Because all I want to do, right or wrong, is make love to you.”

“Right or wrong.” She leaned forward, and his gaze focused on her mouth. His short, fast breaths hit her cheek. “It’s what we both want.”

“That won’t solve a thing.”

“I don’t care,” she whispered.

Suddenly, with a yearning that made her chest ache, she wanted back what she and Noah had shared so long ago. She didn’t care what the consequences might be. Noah had been right. Most of her life she’d been doing for others. Her parents, her children, Isaac, the inn, the island. This time she wanted. She needed.

“I want you. Wherever this goes, Noah, I don’t care. I need you.” She reached up, put a hand at the back of his neck and drew him toward her. His eyes slowly closed as she pressed her mouth to his.

She cupped his rough, whiskered cheek in her hand and tilted her head, to deepen the kiss. He was holding himself back, but God help her, she wanted him to let go. She wanted to experience once again the abandon she’d felt in his arms so long ago. She ran her tongue along the inside of his lips and explored his mouth, wanting, needing to taste him.

His chest heaved with restraint, and he jerked away. “No. I’m sorry.” He set her away from him and stood. “We can’t do this.”

Sophie watched him walking away, a mixture of anger and emptiness draining her, and then the recklessness hovering on the fringes of her consciousness took charge. “Oh, yes, Noah, we can.”

NOAH DIDN’T LOOK BACK and he sure as hell didn’t stop until he’d reached his grandmother’s front porch. What they’d had together had been real. She had loved him. All these years, he’d been telling himself a lie to get by. She’d loved him then. She loved him now.

He couldn’t believe he’d summoned the willpower to walk away and leave her at the lighthouse. In truth, though, that willpower had been hanging by the barest of threads. His honorable intentions had been close enough to flying into the bright blue sky that the hazy overhead clouds wouldn’t have known what hit them.

He reached for the knob and rested his forehead on the smooth wooden surface of the front door. Oh, hell. He smelled her on the warm air. She was in him. On his skin. Burning him up. He could go back. She might still be there. If not, this was a small island. He could find her. Then what?

He’d been down this road before. Not a damned thing had changed. Resolutely, he turned the knob and, at the sound on the porch steps creaking behind him, he froze, his heart racing all over again. “Sophie, don’t,” he whispered. “Don’t come closer. Don’t touch me.”

Her arms came around his waist and her fingers wasted no time unbuttoning his shirt. "I know," she whispered. "You're trying to protect me."

"Yes."

"Don't." Her lips were on his back, her breath burning his skin. "I don't want anyone deciding things for me. Not anymore."

He threw his hands up and rested his palms against the door, refusing to turn, refusing to take her in his arms. "For the love of God, Sophie," he bit out, "I don't want to hurt you."

"You already have. If I have to endure pain tomorrow, I want the pleasure due me today."

No mercy. None. She drew his shirt off and stepped closer, pressing against him. Her fingertips dipped beneath the waistband of his jeans and his gut tightened. His movement created space, allowed her easier access. She took advantage and moved lower, touched him, ran her hand roughly against him.

That was it. This was too much. He flung open the door and spun around. Angry and frustrated. "So this is what you want?"

"You. I want you. More than any—"

He kissed her, lifted her into his arms, and kicked the door closed behind them. He glanced at the steps, unsure if his leg would support them both, but he'd be damned if he was going to take her on the couch like a randy teenager. He took one step, then two, and his leg miraculously held, fueling him, making him feel complete. He felt strong, whole.

"Put me down. I'll walk."

"No." Quickly, he carried her the rest of the way upstairs and laid her back onto the bed. "Now that I've got you, I'm not letting you go."

By the time he finished stripping off her shorts and underwear, she'd already worked the fly on his jeans and was cupping him. Frantic movements. Haggard breaths. Hands searching, needing, possessing. Her mouth was on him, loving him. "Sophie. Slow down."

"No." She dragged her shirt over her head and unsnapped her bra. "I don't know how long I've got you and I want to make every minute count." She was naked in the shaft of sunlight streaming through the window.

The air left his chest, the angry wind left his sail. "You are so, so perfect." He touched her cheek, trailed his finger down her neck and circled the nipple of one full and beautifully peaked breast. All at once, he felt like an ogre next to her in his own scarred, battered and hacked-up body.

Then she kissed him sweetly and whispered, "I can't believe I have you back." Her lips trembled against his. "My Noah."

He was still her Noah, all hers. His misgivings dissipated, and he couldn't get his prosthetic off fast enough. Once it was gone, she tugged off his jeans and boxers and dragged him back with her onto the bed.

It took him a moment to get his balance with only one foot, but then he was over her, kissing her mouth, deeply, as if they'd never been apart. He drew her knee up and found her so slick with need, he almost lost it right there. He was inside her in one swift movement.

"Noah!" she cried out, taking him in, moving with him.

He couldn't stop. A grown man and he felt as if he were seventeen all over again. He pulled away. "Slow down—"

"No!" She rolled over on top of him and took him back inside her, took him back in time. It was the Bayfield motel all over again. The rest of the world ceased to exist. There was this room and the two of them, their bodies, their lips, their skin. They came together. She was his. He was hers.

THEY STAYED IN BED FOR HOURS, talked and laughed, whispered and snuggled, made love again and again. Dozed off as if they had all the time in the world. Sophie awoke hours later, muscles she never knew she had tight and stiff. She smiled, feeling Noah's arms draped possessively around her.

The afternoon had been heaven. She turned and studied his sleeping face. How she'd longed for a moment like this. Noah. Back. In her arms, in her bed, in her life. For how long? She'd given herself to him wholly and completely, knowing their time together would be so limited. Knowing he'd be leaving. Heaven and hell, all wrapped into one.

And she was going to do it all over again, and again, and again, willingly, for as long as she could, for as long as he'd let her. Holding back the tears, she kissed his neck, his cheek, the corner of his mouth, gently waking him. His eyes opened and the fire burning there made her forget all about the heartbreak to come. She'd take heaven now. Hell would come soon enough.

NOAH HAD NEVER BEFORE WANTED to stop the night from coming the way he did at this moment. In a very short while, Sophie would be leaving for the council meeting to vote on Marty's proposal, and once she climbed out of this bed, their private bubble would pop. Everything would change.

The first puff of cool evening air passed through the screen of the open window and Noah wished for a few more minutes, an hour, maybe two. Who was he kidding? He wanted a lifetime, and he wasn't going to get it. He wanted to be a father. He wanted a wife, children, a home. A life. He wanted Kurt and Lauren to be his children. And he wanted Sophie by his side for the rest of his life.

With Sophie in his arms, her head on his chest, he put his face to her hair and breathed her in. True love always found a way. How wrong could one man be? How could he have been so totally ignorant of his denial?

He still loved her. She still loved him. If anything, what he felt today was stronger. Adult. Mature. More complete. There was no childish idealism, no infatuation. He loved her.

But this time there would be no walking away for him while telling himself real love would find a way. Real love didn't find a way all the time, every day. People had coined a name for such an occurrence. It

was called a broken heart, and Noah had barreled full steam ahead, causing his own monumentally jagged fracture.

Did they have any kind of a chance?

"Sophie," he whispered. "You awake?"

"Mmm," she murmured, trailing her fingers lightly through his chest hair. "Barely."

"I'm not going back to Iraq. I'm done traveling to war zones."

Abruptly, she sat up, dragging the sheet with her and focused on him.

"I can't go back to that life. Not anymore."

Her relief was visible. "That's it? You're really done?"

"Yes."

"You'll be satisfied, happy with that decision?"

"I want to settle down. Dig in. Make a home." Feeling raw and uncertain, he had to go one step further. He had to lay his heart on the line and hope like hell she picked it up. "Come with me?"

"You said you were done traveling."

"Done going outside the States, but I can't stay here. It's still a damned small island. I'd be fine for a few years, but the winters here are brutal. Summer ends. Tourists stop coming. Snow falls, people huddle in their homes, and this place turns into a graveyard. You know that." He paced. "Have you thought about Rhode Island? You and the kids. Making a life with me there. You'll like it. I know you will." He grabbed her hand and held it to his heart. "Marry me, Sophie. Put the past right once and for all."

"Leave Mirabelle?" She stood, wrapping the sheet around her. "That's what you're asking me to do?"

"We could come back in the summers. When the kids are out of school." He hopped up and yanked on his boxers. "It would work. We could make it work. Split our time between two homes. People do it all the time."

"What about the inn?" She stepped back, away from him.

Damn. Damn. Damn. Quickly he put on his prosthetic, so he could be ready if she dashed out the door. "Maybe Marty could take it over? You could hire a general manager? I don't know. It doesn't matter—"

"Doesn't matter? Maybe it doesn't to you, but this business has been in my family for hundreds of years." She tugged her T-shirt over her head and stepped into her shorts. "I can't just...just...leave."

"Yes, Sophie, you can." He stepped toward her and stopped. "You can let someone else in your family take charge and carry the burden, so you can live your life. You deserve it. You deserve to be happy."

"I like Mirabelle. I am happy here."

“That’s what you’ve told yourself all these years, so you could get by. But this isn’t the life you wanted.”

“What I wanted changed. Just because you can’t live here doesn’t mean other people don’t want to. People sometimes move here to stay. People who are happy, content, say it’s the best thing that ever happened to them and their families.”

“They’ve chosen Mirabelle. They weren’t born here.”

“I’ve chosen Mirabelle.” She put her hands out at her sides. “That’s what you can’t accept. I ended up choosing an island over you.”

“There’s a difference between choosing this island life and hiding away from the rest of the world. Somewhere along the way you wanting to stay on Mirabelle changed to hiding on Mirabelle.”

She didn’t say anything.

“You can’t see it.” Frustration burned in his gut. He felt her slipping away and was helpless to stop it. “You hide behind your life here, behind your ancestors’ expectations. Rousseaus have to live on Mirabelle. The Rousseau forest has to stay completely intact. A Rousseau has to run the Mirabelle Island Inn. That’s bullshit!” He laid it out, risking everything, knowing he had no choice. “You use all that as an excuse to keep yourself locked away. You’ve been hiding for years.”

“What am I supposed to be hiding from?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know everything else.”

He studied her, debated. “Pain. You’re hiding from pain.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Everyone has pain in their life.”

“And everyone copes differently. While you’re on this island, you can pretend everything is okay. That one day will flow smoothly into the next and you’ll be able to handle anything that’s coming. You can contain your pain. Like the shores of this island.

“Your father dies and you compensate by making his life’s work yours. You keep him alive every time you keep that inn exactly the way he made it. Your mother dies, and you redouble your efforts. I leave, break your heart, and you find someone who...won’t ask too much of you. My brother.”

Her eyes turned red as tears pooled. She looked away and swallowed.

Had he gone too far? Maybe. Maybe not far enough. Some of what he was saying seemed to be hitting its mark. “You pretend everything is the way it’s supposed to be, Sophie,” he continued, softening the tone of his voice. “Because it’s Mirabelle. Because life on Mirabelle is supposed to be picture-perfect. So you tell yourself you have everything you’ve ever wanted. You lie to yourself. Every day.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is, Soph. I know it is. Because I’ve lied to myself for fifteen years.” He ran his hands through his hair.

"You were right. All the while you've been hiding, I've been running away. From you. From my dad. From Isaac. Well, I'm done." He reached for her, and she backed away. "If I can be done running, you can be done hiding."

"You're wrong."

But she wasn't sure. "I can see it in your face, right now. You wondering if I could be right. Think about it, Sophie. Your actions through the years. Even your photographs... tell a different story. You've given up fifteen years of your life. For the kids. For your dad and mom. For the inn. For Mirabelle. Don't you think it's time you start living for yourself?"

She moved toward the doorway. "You'd say anything to get me to go with you, wouldn't you?"

"This isn't about me, Sophie. It's about you making your own life, not letting this island make your life for you. Don't let fear run your life."

"I'm not afraid."

"Yes, you are. When you step off this island everything shifts. You don't know the people. The people don't know you. Strangers won't take care of you. You'd be on your own, making your own way. You can't handle that, can you?"

She didn't say anything.

"I hurt you and I'm so, so sorry. And if you leave this island and come with me, I'm bound to hurt you again. I'm not perfect, but I promise I will never, ever stop loving you. Marry me, Sophie. Come with me."

"You need to leave." She backed into the hall. "So go."

"What?"

"Get...off...my...island." She turned and ran down the hallway.

"Sophie!" He followed as fast as he could. This was it, his last chance to make her see. "Is this the message you want to send Lauren and Kurt?" he asked, pulling out all the stops.

"Don't you dare bring them into this!" She was at the front door before he'd made it down a few steps.

"They'll follow your lead. Lauren will hesitate. Kurt won't ever leave."

"Get off!" she yelled. "Don't ever come back. Ever. I don't ever want to see you again. You're wrong. So, so wrong." She ran out the front door. He watched her disappear down the hill. Out of his sight, out of his life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

STILL FUMING, SOPHIE STALKED through town to the council meeting. Lauren and Kurt, coming from the direction of the marina, caught up with her on their bikes. They'd probably just gotten home from fishing with Jim and Josie.

“Mom, what happened?” Kurt asked.

“I’ll bet she was at Noah’s.” Lauren didn’t wait for her response. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Sophie kept on walking.

“Yeah, right,” Kurt said.

“You should work it out with him, Mom,” Lauren said.

Sophie looked at each of her children, alternately, directly in the face. “Why do you two care?”

“We just thought...Noah...” Lauren said, her voice trailing away.

Kurt glared at Sophie. “You love him, don’t you?”

This was too much. Too much. It was bad enough she’d had to stand her ground with Noah, but the kids, too?

“He’s leaving, isn’t he?” Kurt asked.

Sophie nodded.

“Why?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Not really,” Lauren said. “He can’t stay on the island and you can’t leave.”

Can’t? Or won’t? That was always the question, and she was no closer to answering it than she had been fifteen damned years ago.

“I don’t get it,” Lauren said. “If you two love each other, isn’t there some way to make it work?”

“No.”

“What happens if he stays on the island?” Kurt said.

“He’d go crazy.”

“If you leave?” Lauren asked.

“I can’t leave the inn. I can’t drag you kids all over the country.” Can’t or won’t?

“Mom, the inn will be okay,” Kurt said. “Besides, Lauren wants to leave Mirabelle. She’s always wanted to leave.”

“What about you?”

“I want you to be happy.”

"I can't be happy if you're not."

"Lauren's not always happy, and you stay on the island anyway."

Dammit, he was right, but she couldn't look at that just now. She was too confused and emotional to think straight. They'd reached the town hall. Sophie was ten minutes late. "I have to go."

"So that's it?" Kurt said, letting his bike drop to the ground. "You go to the meeting like nothing's happened?"

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know," Kurt said.

She glanced at Lauren. "What do you think?"

"I don't know." Lauren looked as if she might cry. "It's complicated, isn't it?"

IT WAS OVER. SOPHIE HAD NEVER been the type to throw fits. She'd meant every word she'd said and, still, Noah couldn't believe it. He bent his head back, staring at the ceiling, trying to absorb it. They'd split again. Only this time, she'd left him. They were done before they'd had the chance to make it work.

Son of a bitch! He hated this island. Hated everyone on this ridiculous small freaking piece of rock. He couldn't wait to leave, and this time, this time, he was never coming back. "That's the way you want it. You got it."

Furious, Noah packed what he'd need to get by for a few days and walked to the pier. Later, he'd hire someone to pack the rest of his things, ship them to Rhode Island, and then he'd sell Grandma's house. For now, he needed to be any place but here.

He bought a ticket to the mainland and with deep regret over his hasty departure left a message on his dad's voice mail briefly explaining the situation and promising to keep in touch. Then he stood looking out over the water, watching the ferry dock at the pier. In no time, he'd be on that boat and on his way to gone, putting Mirabelle behind him. He turned around and took one last look up the hill.

Main Street looked different than it had all those months ago when he'd first arrived back on the island. His ghosts were gone and he could see it for what it was, just a place, a pretty, quaint, quiet spot on the map with good, caring people. He wished them well. He hoped the island and its residents thrived, and he hoped to continue to visit his dad, Lauren and Kurt, but the truth was without Sophie there was no reason to stay one moment longer.

"BUSINESS HAS PICKED UP," someone from the audience called out.

Sophie closed the town-hall door behind her and searched for a place to sit. The room was packed. She wasn't going anywhere.

“Yes,” Marty said. “Business has picked up, but only because of Noah Bennett’s article.”

“So what we needed was more advertising,” someone else said.

“Advertising and promotion are only a part of the problem.” Marty paced in front of the room. “When those tourists come, if there isn’t enough here to keep them active, there won’t be anything to come back for next year. It’s too late to get a pool and golf course built and running for this season, but if the guests this summer can see the improvements that will be in place for next summer, they’ll be back. They’ll tell their friends and relatives.”

Heads were nodding in the audience. More islanders were turning sides.

“I’ll put together a brochure, posters for all the businesses outlining what the new and improved Mirabelle will look like.” Marty stopped and faced the audience. “I’m willing to invest in this island, folks.” Then he turned to the council. “All you have to do is let me.”

As Marty took a seat next to Brittany in the first row, Sophie noticed another open chair next to him. She scooted toward the front of the room while the air buzzed with conversation, some quiet, some heated, some enthusiastic, some angry. Carl Andersen slammed his gavel onto the desktop. “Okay, people. Quiet down, please.”

Sophie sat, grabbed Marty’s hand and squeezed. He squeezed back and mouthed, “Thanks for coming.”

After the crowd quieted, Jim Bennett took the microphone. “I’ve been pretty vocal about how important it is to keep Mirabelle whole, to keep her soul alive, but coming near death made me realize some things about life.” He paused and looked out over the crowd. “It would be wonderful to leave Mirabelle Island exactly as it is today and still keep making a decent living. In fact, maybe we could go one step further and create an island of the past. Where visitors could experience history. I can see it now, step back in time on Mirabelle. They could experience history as our ancestors lived it. Sounds appealing, doesn’t it?”

Several faces expressed their approval. Many others frowned.

“In the interest of authenticity,” Jim continued, “we could say goodbye to our TVs, computers, microwaves.”

Those who’d been nodding their approval now shook their heads.

“That’s ridiculous,” someone said.

“No one’s asking for that.”

“Now, you’re carrying it too far.”

“Am I?” Jim said. “This island is not the same island of my childhood. The last five years have brought changes. While not big enough to have required council approval, those changes have altered the feel and culture of Mirabelle.”

“Name one.”

“Delores Kowalski, you added a video-game room to your restaurant. Shirley Gilbert, you added a

business center to your bed-and-breakfast. Carl Andersen, you added a wine bar.”

“Yes, but all of those changes,” Sally McGregor, one of the most vocal opponents to Marty’s plan, yelled out, “were made to accommodate changing interests and tastes.”

“Exactly. This island treads a thin line between maintaining our identity and meeting the needs of our visitors. As much as some of us want Mirabelle to stay exactly as it is, change is inevitable. If we fall too far behind the rest of the world, we will lose business.”

“Why, Jim Bennett, you of all people.”

“So you’re approving Marty’s proposal?”

“I don’t have the right anymore,” Jim said. “One way or another to approve or deny.”

Carl Andersen glanced at Jim. “What are you saying?”

“This is as good a time as any to make this announcement. I’m retiring, and I’ll likely be spending the winters down south somewhere.” That stirred a new round of murmurs from the crowd. “You don’t need to worry. We’ll find a good replacement before I leave. In fact, I’ve already put some feelers out and there’s a Chicago police detective showing some interest. The point is that my opinion here doesn’t hold a lot of water. Still, there are a few more things I’d like to say.”

He took a deep breath. “Sometimes we hold on to the past so tightly, that we can’t breathe. We want everything to stay the same because we’re scared of change. We can’t see the opportunities right in front of us. We don’t know we’re not living in the present.” He glanced directly at Sophie. “Sometimes, all we gotta do is make one step away from the past. For our vision to clear. We take a deep, full breath and trust ourselves. Trust the people we love. Trust the people who love us and jump into the future. Because if we’re not moving forward, we’re very likely standing awfully, damned still.”

The room was quiet.

“Sophie,” Jim said, an understanding smile on his face. “You haven’t said much during all these meetings. What do you think?”

There was no doubt in her mind that Jim had been talking to the whole island, but he was thinking of her. How had she gotten here? So entrenched on this island that she’d lost sight of what had once been her dreams? How had she stopped moving without even realizing it?

Marty leaned over and whispered, “Have you figured out what you’re holding on to, Sophie?”

“No.” She shook her head.

Marty sighed and stood. “I’m going to leave now, and I want you all to know that what’s said in this room stays in this room. One way or another.” He squeezed Sophie’s shoulder and walked out. Every face in the room turned toward Sophie.

“Well?” Jim urged.

She closed her eyes. Her childhood flashed in bits and pieces through her memory. Birthdays and holidays, weddings and funerals. The faces changed, by age and death, marriage and birth, but the

background always stayed the same. She supposed that's how she kept her memories alive. Change the surroundings and her memories might fade. In most of the snapshots in her mind, Noah played a part. Nothing significant in her life had happened outside of Mirabelle, except for the days she'd spent in that Bayfield motel with Noah before he'd left.

Noah, Noah, Noah.

That was it. She was holding on to Noah. Because that's the only way she could keep him. In her memories. She was living in the past. While the present was slipping through her fingers. She'd been standing still.

Oh, God, what had she done?

"Sophie?" Jim's voice drew her back.

Trembling, she stood, walked to the council's table and picked up the microphone. This island was as evenly divided as it could possibly get. Whatever she said at this moment would likely sway the decision one way or the other.

"I think..." she said, looking out over the audience. "That we can purposefully change Mirabelle, or set out to keep her exactly the same as she's been year after year. In the end, what we do or don't do won't matter. She's going to change whether we like it or not. In the end, only our memories stay the same."

"Your parents would disagree," Sally said. "The important things are exactly the way they've always been here on this island."

"Maybe, Sally. Maybe not," Sophie said. "To me, Mirabelle isn't just about Main Street, our Victorian houses or our carriage rides. Mirabelle isn't the old and quaint buildings. She isn't the land, the trees, the water surrounding us." Sophie looked around at all the faces of the people she'd known for as long as she could remember. "Mirabelle is the people on this island. All of you are her heart and soul."

"Without Arlo Duffy's 'Ayep' from the bench of his carriage, without Doc Welinsky's thumbs-up, and Sally, without your gruff manner at the post office window... Mirabelle isn't Mirabelle."

"Each of us has put who we are into our businesses. We've laid ourselves out there because we love our jobs, we love our island and we'd like to make a little bit of a profit. But I can promise you that if we don't grow and change, we die. It'll be a slow death. We might be able to resuscitate with a well-placed ad or article, like Noah's. In the end, we'll still die."

"Building a new hotel, golf course or pool doesn't change who we are. When all the tourists leave, it's still just us. We're still here. We're still the same. Making changes that today's tourist wants, needs, insists upon, keeps us alive and vital."

Sophie glanced around at all the faces, envisioned herself staying here on Mirabelle. The only problem was that vision without Noah at her side no longer seemed whole. She had to leave Mirabelle. For herself. For Lauren. Even for Kurt. He needed to know there was life outside Mirabelle.

"And now, you can toss out everything I've just said because like Jim, I may, if I'm very, very lucky, be leaving Mirabelle."

"What?"

"I can't believe it."

"Why?"

"It's that Bennett boy, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's Noah Bennett." She nodded. "It's always been Noah." She set down the microphone and, with one quick look back at a smiling Jim, she walked out of the meeting. Amidst an uproar of voices, the door closed behind her. She hit fresh air and found Kurt and Lauren sitting on the curb talking with Marty. "What are you guys doing here?"

"He left," Lauren said with a frown.

"Who?" Sophie asked.

"Noah," Marty said.

"After you went into your meeting," Kurt said, "we saw him heading to the ferry pier."

"How long ago?"

Lauren shrugged. "Ten minutes?"

She glanced at her watch. He may have caught the top of the hour ferry. Then again he might've missed it. Oh, God. Oh, God. She had to move. Fast. Her heart was breaking all over again at the thought of Noah leaving. "Kurt." She bent down, doing her damndest to not get mushy. He hated mushy. "What do you want to do?"

He looked away, thinking. "I'll miss Ben. Can we come back in the summer?"

"We'll be back every summer, with or without Noah." But I hope it's with.

"Then let's go."

"Lauren? What do you think?"

Her daughter grinned. "You have to ask?"

Sophie turned to Marty. "I'm ready to pass the Rousseau baton. You want it?" It was time for her to live her own dreams.

"You betcha!" Laughing, Marty stood up and gave her a quick hug. "Now, go!"

"Okay, kids. Let's see if we can catch Noah!" Sophie ran as fast as she could toward the pier, but she couldn't keep up with Kurt and Lauren. When they looked back, she yelled, "Run! Don't let him get on that ferry, and if he's on it tell him to get off."

She turned the corner, across the street from the Bayside Cafe and stopped. Kurt and Lauren were standing at the end of the pier, watching after a ferry that had long ago left the pier and was already on its return trip.

Noah was long gone. She'd succeeded in pushing him out of her life. Every word she'd used, every attack she'd thrown in his face came back to her like a foghorn over the water. She'd pushed him, but he'd left her again. He'd left. Sophie bent her head and cried. Then the kids were there, wrapping their arms around her.

"It's okay, Mom," Lauren said.

Kurt squeezed her shoulder. When had he gotten so tall? He was suddenly eye-to-eye with her. "We'll go after him."

No. She couldn't. What would be the point? He would always be leaving her.

"Mom," Lauren whispered. "He loves you. You love him. It's not that complicated."

Sophie's heartbeat quickened. "You're right, both of you." The ferry was already docking and people were filing off and onto the pier. She had to move fast. With the kids right behind her, she ran into the ferry office and bought a ticket to the mainland. "I'm going to get Noah."

"We want to come, too," Lauren said.

"Yeah." Kurt grinned. "We can help."

"You're sure?"

They both nodded. She bought two more tickets, and they ran outside. They turned toward the ferry and Sophie stopped. Noah was walking toward them on the sidewalk amidst a crowd of tourists, a pack slung over his shoulder. It was all she could do not to leap into his arms.

He nodded at the tickets in her hand. "Going somewhere?"

"To find you," she said, rubbing at the tears streaming down her cheek.

Noah glanced at Lauren and Kurt. "Do you mind if your mom and I have a few minutes alone to talk?"

Kurt and Lauren looked at each other.

"First, we both have something to say," Lauren said.

"Just so you know, I'm okay if we leave Mirabelle," Kurt said. "I'd like to come back in the summer."

"I reminded him that if we got off this island he'd be able to get a driver's license." Lauren grinned. "But I'm okay if we stay, as long as we get away on more vacations."

"I think you're both jumping the gun a bit," Sophie said.

"No." Noah shook his head. "I think they're right on target."

Lauren tugged on Kurt's sleeve. "Come on, they need to talk." The kids walked a short distance away, leaving Sophie alone with Noah.

Sophie wrapped her arms around herself, trying to keep from falling apart. "I'm so sorry," she said. "What I said back at your house was wrong and unfair. I wanted to hurt you, the way you'd hurt me. I was scared and trying to push you away."

"Well, it almost worked." He stepped toward her and ran his fingertips over her cheek, drying her tears. "Only I'm not going anywhere ever again, Sophie. You can fight me tooth and nail. Pretend to ignore me. Turn the whole island against me. None of it will matter. You can't turn me away ever again." He smiled a little sadly. "I learned my lesson the last time I left Mirabelle. This time, I'm fighting back. I'm not leaving. You. The island. The kids. Unless you're all with me."

"You're sure?"

"We go. We stay. I don't care. As long as we're together, that's all that matters." He opened his arms as if in surrender. "If you'll have me, I'm yours. I will never leave you again."

She leapt at him, almost knocking him over.

"I love you, Sophie." He buried his face in her neck. "I don't ever want to be without you."

"I thought you'd left."

"I did." He set her down, but left his hands at her waist. "I got on the ferry and looked back at the town and realized nothing had changed. Once again, there was nothing for me on Mirabelle except for you and the kids. If you didn't want me here, I had to go. As the ferry left the pier I looked forward to Bayfield but, this time, I realized there was absolutely nothing ahead of me. There's nothing more important to me in this entire world than you." He leaned toward her, rested his forehead against hers. "You, Sophie, you're my world."

"And you're mine. You and the kids. I'll go anywhere," she said against his mouth. "Well, almost anywhere," she clarified with a chuckle, "as long as it's with you." She tilted forward, and, as the kids looked on, she kissed him, thoroughly, completely, rejoicing in the knowledge she would never again have to let him go.

"So are we staying or going?" he asked with a smile.

"How 'bout both?"

"Both?"

"I want to go, Noah. I want to experience the world off Mirabelle with you and the kids. Let's go to Rhode Island during the school year and come back here for the summers. And maybe during school breaks we can do some traveling."

"As in New York, L.A., London, Tokyo?"

A little thrill of anticipation ran through her. "Yeah."

He nodded. "I'd like that."

"What do you want to do about Kurt and Lauren?" she asked.

“You mean DNA testing?”

She nodded.

“It’s not necessary.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to ruin one single memory Kurt and Lauren have of Isaac. My brother deserves to be remembered as their dad, their one and only.” Noah shook his head. “Uncle and stepdad is good enough for me.”

Sophie swallowed. She’d never loved Noah more than in this moment. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.” He drew her close. “Lauren and Kurt? Is it okay with you two if I marry your mom?”

They grinned back and yelled in unison, “It’s about time!”

EPILOGUE

ABITTER WIND BLEW ACROSS the vast expanse of a frozen Lake Superior. Snow fell hard and fast, and sheets of white swirled into foot-high drifts against doorways and coated street signs and evergreens. Sheltered from the blizzard wreaking havoc on Mirabelle Island’s landscape, Noah waited in the inn library listening to gusty winds rattle the windowpanes and whistle down the flue of the nearby fireplace.

“January in Wisconsin.” He rubbed his hands together warming them. “What am I doing here?”

“Getting married,” Marty said, poking his head through the doorway.

“I thought Rousseaus were supposed to get married in June.” Noah chuckled.

“Sophie’s been breaking some traditions lately, hasn’t she?”

“Yes, she has.” Including traveling around the country showing her photographs at art galleries and living with Noah in Rhode Island.

She and the kids loved his beach house. It was far enough away from the neighboring town to be peaceful, and close enough for the kids to bike to their new friends’ houses. Within a few short months, Sophie had turned his sparsely furnished house into a living, breathing home. She and the kids had brought some of their favorite things from their apartment at the inn, but she’d had fun buying new things, too. Life with limited traditions was good.

“Smile, man. You look like you’re headed to a firing squad,” Marty said, looking, in his black suit and tie, every inch the island business leader.

As it turned out, as soon as Marty decided to take over the Mirabelle Island Inn rather than build a big, new hotel, the islanders, with only a few exceptions, jumped wholeheartedly behind him and his plans for building two pools—an indoor and an outdoor—and an eighteen-hole municipal golf course on state land.

He’d also fronted a comprehensive ad campaign and the entire island was at full capacity for the next two seasons. There were some holdouts complaining Mirabelle was going to be too busy, but, overall, the reaction from the residents had been positive.

The only thing worrying Noah about today was whether or not the islanders would come to the wedding. They loved Sophie, but she was marrying Noah. He'd taken her away from them, from Mirabelle. They'd be back over the summer months, living at Grandma Bennett's since Marty and Brittany had taken over and were remodeling the Mirabelle Inn, but everyone knew things wouldn't be the same.

The chapel was too small to fit the entire island, so they'd decided to have the ceremony at the inn's banquet hall. Sophie would be crushed if her favorite people didn't come out and celebrate this day with her, Lauren and Kurt.

"Is she doing okay?" Noah asked.

Marty grinned. "Never seen her happier."

"She was worried about the storm. Whether folks would end up staying home because of it."

"They'll come."

Again, Noah glanced out the window. The wind swirled in front of their window creating patterns in the snow. Something about the crisscrossing lines of the patterns seemed familiar. It looked like the shape of a snowshoe forming in the drift outside their window. "Do you see that?" He pointed.

Marty looked outside. "Who would be out snowshoeing in this mess?"

Noah smiled. He could think of one person. Imagined or not, he liked to think Isaac was putting his blessing on the day. Thanks, bro. For being here.

"You ready?" Marty asked.

Noah blew out a controlled breath and headed toward the hall. "I've never been more ready for anything." A sense of deep contentment flooded through him. No more wars. No more world traveling. No more running away from anything.

He opened the door to the banquet hall, was immediately hit with a gust of warm air, and was astounded to see so many faces turn to look at him and smile. They'd come. From the looks of it, the whole island was here. Four hundred or so people in one room warmed a big, cold space up real fast. "Well, I'll be damned."

Marty stood next to him. "Standing room only. Pretty good turnout for this crappy weather."

"That's good. They came for Sophie."

"And you," Marty countered. "Whether you can accept that or not. They'll be talking about this wedding for years to come. Noah Bennett and Sophie Rousseau. It isn't every day two of Mirabelle's own get married."

Maybe Noah belonged to this island more than he'd realized. He nodded at all the faces on his way toward the elevated dais. Arlo and Lynn, Jan and Ron, Herman and his wife, and on and on. Noah finally knew them all by their first names. Even Sally McGregor had braved the blizzard.

When he reached the front of the room, he turned around and smiled at his mom who was sitting in the

front row. He'd found her living back near her childhood home in California, remarried, happy, and following his career, waiting for the day when her boys would come looking for her.

There were some hard feelings between her and his dad, but that was their baggage, not Noah's. She didn't bat an eye when he asked her to come to a wedding in Wisconsin in January. Turned out Noah had four half siblings, and he was enjoying getting to know them and their families.

The music began, some quiet classical piece Lauren and Brittany had picked out, and Noah's heart filled with hope this day would be nothing less than perfect.

Kurt and Lauren came to the door. Smiling shyly, they walked toward the front. Next, his dad appeared, the music changed, and Noah's knees nearly buckled. He waited, unable to breathe. Then there she was. His first best friend. His childhood sweetheart. The only true love of his life. Peace, the kind that stayed with you forever, swept over Noah. There was no place on the earth he'd rather be at this moment than right here on Mirabelle Island. Blizzard and all.

With Sophie's arm looped through Jim's, she smiled at the crowd, walked forward and searched ahead for Noah. Their gazes caught, and her smile widened, her eyes grew bright.

"Sophie," he whispered, "you're beautiful."

Her short hair was done up in some messy curls and a simple veil attached to a small princess-type crown poofed behind her head. Her dress was white and sexy, but in truth all he wanted to do was strip it off and make love to her.

He stepped forward as his dad and Sophie met him at the front. His dad was crying. "This is one of the happiest days of my life, son."

"Mine, too, Dad."

The suddenly-not-so-scary retired chief of police sniffed and brushed his rough cheeks. "Noah and Sophie," he said. "I know you two will take good care of each other. I'm so proud of you both."

Sophie kissed her father-in-law's cheek, Noah hugged his dad, and Jim stepped back to stand next to Josie. To everyone's surprise, Jim put his arm around Josie and kissed her cheek in front of the entire island.

Sophie turned to Noah. "Can you believe it?" she whispered. "We're getting married."

"Better late than never." To hell with waiting until after the ceremony. He was done waiting for anything as far as Sophie was concerned. He kissed her, right then and there.

The room filled with the sound of snickering and laughter, chuckles and murmuring. That's when it hit Noah, hit his heart like a basketful of rose petals. "Lovewill always find a way," he whispered.

"If you let it," she whispered back.

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FIRST COME TWINS

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