

The Gangster's Daughter

JODIE LEIGH MURRAY



Jodie Leigh Murray Books

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Cover design by Martin Vestgaard
Book design by Jodie Leigh Murray

Published in the United States by Jodie Leigh Murray Books

Printed in the United States

ISBN: 979-8-9882714-0-6

First edition: June 2023

www.jodieleighmurray.com

*For Joe,
for your unwavering trust in my ability to see this through,
and your incessant pushing to pursue my dream.*

Chapter One

I killed someone for the first time at the tender age of twelve, just shy of my thirteenth birthday. It had been self-defense, or so I was told, but I didn't believe it. I knew what had happened. After that, I was a tool. I had always been a tool, but hadn't understood it until I saw the pride shining in Pops' eyes after the incident. That should have been my first sign to worry about my future. I was the daughter who should have been a son, and I was a killer. He thought I wasn't afraid to take someone's life.

Except I was. And I wasn't the same person after.

He promptly enrolled me in classes meant to turn me into a fighting machine. I was an awkward kid, very much a loner, and the classes were not exactly honing my skills. I had expressed an interest in dancing and that was where I found my niche. Dance classes and practicing Jiu-Jitsu molded me into the person I am today. I don't like what I have become, what my father has made me into, but there was no point in blaming him. He wasn't the one who pointed the gun and pulled the trigger.

I was cunning, stealthy, and ruthless, and I would never be weak again.

At first glance, I was a well-put-together woman with an intelligent mind and a decent body that I'd earned.

Now, I stood on the thirty-fifth floor of a Miami skyscraper in a large, glassed in conference room, staring down a long

conference table at several people given important titles they didn't earn.

Mark McCarthy, owner of several boating companies, was not looking happy, and I watched silently while he waved away the room's other occupants. Quickly, they gathered their things and filed from the room, leaving just him and me to stare at each other.

"I know why you're here, Ms. De Luca."

I feigned surprise and carefully set my papers down, eyes bold and challenging. I perched on the table's edge, crossing my legs and leaning toward him. Intimidation was my favorite—a trait I inherited from my father.

"You hired me."

"Exactly. I hired you to do a job, not try to buy me out."

I laughed haughtily, head tilted back slightly. He wasn't wrong. Mark had hired me to do a job. As a strategic consultant, a career I had worked extremely hard to build a strong reputation in, he had hired me to analyze everything about his businesses. He was in trouble, and he was looking for me to help him identify solutions. It wasn't my fault I found a solution to one of them.

"Your father has been after me for years to smuggle drugs out of South America. I'm not getting involved."

I could see his staff looking at us through the glass in curiosity. I raised my eyes, only to see them scamper away as soon as they saw me notice them. Good, let them think I would eat them alive.

"Mark, look at the documents again. Do you see the name Gavriel De Luca anywhere on them?" I kept my voice level and calm. "I shouldn't have to remind you these are legal. Drawn up by my lawyer and reviewed by yours. You are selling to me, not my father."

He looked up at me, his eyes still trying to intimidate me. Except I wasn't easily daunted. If there was anything I learned

from being the daughter of a gangster, whether people knew my name, let no one see you sweat. Mark wasn't about to see any nervousness from me, and I wasn't about to let him know how much I wanted his boatyard.

When I found out that Mark McCarthy was in financial trouble with his boat businesses, I investigated immediately and found financial struggles he wouldn't be able to get out of easily. I contacted him, and although he was reluctant to do business with someone that carried my last name, he agreed to meet with me. He knew my reputation as a consultant, knew I could give him what he needed to turn him back around, and although I came with a hefty price-tag, I agreed to lower my fees to help him.

Of the boatyards and marina's that he owned along the southeast coast, the boatyard he owned on the island of Cape Haven off the coast of South Carolina, was my goal. Cape Haven was the location of one of my family's homes, where we visited often when I was younger. It was a place where I escaped when I needed peace, and a place where if I had the option, I would settle down. Even if I never put down roots there, to own a business there that would thrive, and help the community flourish, I would achieve something on my own. Pops couldn't take that from me.

"His name, absent from the documents, means nothing. He could be a non-operating owner. I'm not selling."

I tsked-tsked him and leaned back, tapping my finger against my lips while staring him down. "What *are* we going to do about that?" I emphasized the word 'are' for dramatic effect, and the sinister smile that curved my lips made him falter.

"You aren't going to scare me."

"Aren't I?" I challenged. "I have spent hours analyzing all your businesses, coming up with some very stimulating solutions to your issues, even lowering my fees substantially to

help you. Taking one business off your hands is not the worst thing you can do, Mark.”

Breathe in, breathe out, I reminded myself. Calm is what I needed to be. Calm and careful with my choice of words. There were few who I could trust with family intel. Very few.

“Let me tell you something, Mark. Something very few people know about me.” He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms in front of his burly chest. “I may carry the De Luca name, but my business is my business. Gavriel De Luca has no part in what is mine, and I have no part in what is his.”

It was only part of a lie. Pops wouldn’t have any part of this. This was mine. And this would be my key to finally settling down into a calm life. Eventually. Someday I would meet someone worth my time. My current relationship was going nowhere, but that was okay. It wasn’t much of a relationship. Our careers were more important right now.

His eyes narrowed. “Is that true?”

I nodded. “I promise you it’s the truth. What can I do to prove to you that you are selling to me, and only me?”

Before he could give me a response, the conference door opened, and the receptionist poked her head in. “I am so sorry to interrupt. Ms. De Luca, there’s a phone call for you.”

“For me?”

I always turned my cell phone off during business meetings. Not on silent or facing down. Off. There wasn’t anyone that would know where to reach me unless someone had a tracker on me. I looked back at Mark, but it was too late. He had already seen the worry in my eyes. Inwardly, I swore.

“The gentleman said it was urgent that he speak with you.”

I nodded, trying to calm the anxiety that bubbled up inside. Something was wrong.

“I’ll be there in a moment.” I turned back to Mark. “Think about it.”

Mark excused me with a nod and I walked gracefully out of the office room and to the receptionist's desk. The pretty receptionist sorted papers and tried to look busy. When she looked up, I gave her a quick smile and a wink.

"Line one."

I picked up the receiver and punched the button. "I'm in the middle of a meeting," I said, trying to sound annoyed instead of anxious.

"Regan, it's Giovanni."

Uncle Gio! How on earth was he able to track down where I was? I was also curious to know why he would track my whereabouts.

"Gio. I'm in a meeting. What's wrong?"

"Your father's taking a sabbatical. He asked me to call you, and urge you to take one yourself. No, not urge. You will take one yourself."

I measured my words carefully. Thoughts were racing through my head. "Why would I do that? And why would he do that?"

"He was making another Columbian deal, and something went wrong. He didn't give me all the details, but it's enough to make him go away for a little while. He wants you to do the same, since you carry his name."

"And you?"

"I'm handling things while he's away."

"How did you know where to find me? My cell phone is off. I'm in a meeting."

At the silence that followed, I knew I had triumphantly busted him. "Come on. You don't really think your dad doesn't track where you are? His only daughter and heir to his fortune?"

Gio knew me well enough to know I didn't give two shits about Pops' fortune. If Pops didn't leave anything to Gio, and to his long-time girlfriend, they would receive plenty from me.

If he did, then I would give a lot to charity. My salary was enough to pay for my beach condo in Malibu and a comfortable lifestyle. It was enough for me.

“Fine,” I said, seeing Mark getting restless. “I have to go.”

“Where are you going?”

“I can’t tell you that. If all goes well here, I’ll be fine.”

“Call me as soon as you get to wherever you end up.”

“No,” I snapped. “You tell Pops to call me. Tonight.”

I heard Gio laughing right before he disconnected the call, making me smile as I handed the phone back to the receptionist. Pops was extremely careful, being a man of great importance in the game of illegal and underground activities. Gavriele De Luca ran a tight ship and was a fair and rational man, but was someone no one thought about double-crossing. Double-crossing meant they find your body in a freezer or never found at all.

There were big names in these games, and if he was doing business with another boss that he had business dealings with in the past, and possibly double-crossed, he wasn’t thinking straight. If he wasn’t thinking straight, it meant he was getting old. I was grasping, not knowing what he had really been up to.

I smoothed down my suit jacket and skirt and returned to the conference room to resume my discussion. Mark fidgeted with his tie when I stepped in front of the table, summoning my best intimidating posture. He wasn’t going to win this.

He leaned forward. “I will sell it to you under one condition. You keep the staff. Especially the senior boatbuilder.”

Elation struck me. That was quite the ultimatum to consider, without knowing the work ethics of the staff. If I accepted his counteroffer and kept the staff, I wouldn’t have to waste time on the long, tedious hiring process. I had seen the financials; it wasn’t the staff bringing him down, but there were some very odd things in the financials that didn’t quite add up that I would need to dig into.

“The boat builders there are some of the very best. It would be a shame for you to lose them.”

“I can appreciate that, Mark. I accept your counteroffer. Are you accepting my price?” He nodded. “Good. Now, let’s get these papers signed.”

“Regan.”

I looked at him, surprised at the sudden hitch in his voice. Here comes the sentimental side, I thought, and hoped that he wasn’t about to get teary-eyed on me.

“Mark?”

“Please promise me that your father is not involved in this.”

My eyes caught his full on. “I promise you; he is not involved.”

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It was evening when I finally returned to my hotel room, immediately removing my heels as I moved across the living room of the suite. The entire corner of the room was windows that showed the ocean and beach. It was a beautiful view. Nothing but the best, and I would never settle for less. I dumped my bag on the couch before turning to the bar and pouring myself a glass of wine.

Sipping the indulgent alcohol slowly, I dialed the airline to see when flights were leaving for Myrtle Beach International Airport. I could have gone online, but I didn’t want to waste time with technology, preferring to speak with someone who could get me dialed into my options for traveling quickly.

As soon as I’d booked my flight, my cell phone vibrated with an incoming call. I set my wine on the glass coffee table and sat on the black leather couch, tucking my leg beneath me.

“Pops.”

“My darling, girl.”

Pops had a soothing, calm voice. I recalled only one time when he was angry, his voice raising beyond his normal, calm voice. I challenged him during my teenage years. It was good to hear his voice.

“Gio said you are taking a sabbatical, that you’re in danger,” I said.

“I’m taking a vacation for a little while, yes. We won’t speak after we hang up. Not even Gio can reach me. It’s better this way.”

“What about Gio?”

“Will remain at the house. And you are to go somewhere that you’ll be safe, somewhere no one will know where you are.” I opened my mouth to interrupt, but he sensed it. “Regan, you will do as I say. Trust no one.”

That wasn’t true. There were people in my life that I could trust. Tatum and Jazz, my two best friends, were trustworthy. They knew nothing about my family history, or Pops’ business dealings. They knew the name, of course, but they never asked questions, and I offered no information. In fact, Tatum was such a good friend that she had moved into my condo in Malibu about a year ago. Part of the reason was to have someone there since I traveled sometimes. The other part was Tatum needed a place to stay, and her salary was not allowing her to afford a decent place on her own. It was nice to have someone there when I couldn’t be, and it was nice to have someone there when I was home.

The argument with Pops wasn’t worth the energy. Agreeing was the best thing I could do now. If he was in danger, the worry about me wouldn’t do him any good. So, I agreed I would go somewhere, and I knew the perfect place.

“I bought the boatyard in Cape Haven today, Pops.”

“Did you? I am delighted for you, my darling girl. Cape Haven is such a wonderful community. I miss visiting there. I know a

young man that lives on the island. His name's Cameron. Nice, young man."

"Mmmhmmmm," I said.

"You're twenty-seven now." Pops might have a soothing and calm voice, but I could tell when there was an edge to it. He was about to broadside me with something. "You're my only daughter. I need you to partner with someone who will take my place."

"Pops." My voice clipped with warning. My life was not a business arrangement.

"I've told you again and again that if you don't find someone suitable, I'll find someone for you. This has been a long time coming now."

I snorted, but said nothing. This was nothing I hadn't heard before. It was an idle threat he had brought up many times, usually when I was dating someone he didn't like, which was every time I met someone. Michael was a doctor, not an entrepreneur, and the most straightlaced person I knew. Michael would never break a rule in his life. He was incapable of replacing Pops. Not even close.

"The time has come now. You'll be married in March."

"I have a boyfriend."

The reminder wasn't enough. I knew it before I said it. "Michael doesn't have the backbone for this business. And your relationship isn't going to last."

None of them ever did, I thought to myself. Odd how they never worked out. It made me wonder if Pops had a hand in that. I wouldn't have put it past him to make sure my relationships didn't work out to make sure I married the right man. I shook my head, even knowing he couldn't see it. He wasn't wrong, though. My relationship with Michael was entirely too casual to last much longer. He was too involved in his career as an orthopedic surgeon, and mine had me traveling a lot. It had been good for us, the space. But it was too much space.

I didn't love Michael. It was the thought of settling down I loved. Having a family, maybe a dog. The idea of settling down with Michael would have been a possibility if my feelings for him were stronger. But they weren't. They would never be. I couldn't picture it with him. He deserved better.

I needed to admit it to Pops, but I couldn't if he was threatening to pick someone out for me. There was no humor in this. He couldn't force me to marry someone of his choosing, anyway.

"I had a contract drawn up years ago when you were a baby. With a family friend who I've known for many years. You're to marry their oldest boy."

Silence fell between us while I thought about it, and Pops waiting for my reaction. I laughed, then laughed harder and harder until my whole body shook. A contract. Drawn up when I was a baby to marry me off to some family friend's son. Medieval bullshit is what this was, I thought. The threats over the years had never ceased, but a contract?

"And what if I don't marry this man you've picked out for me?"

His voice turned low. As devious as I had turned on Mark earlier. "Don't forget who helped you get where you are in your career. I can take it away as easily as I helped you achieve it. I have more connections than you think I do."

That rankled me. I had never asked him to get me a part-time position at a firm as a consultant while I was going to college. The position had been too good to pass up, and I still took my courses. I busted my ass, but it gave me the experience besides the education to get me where I was today. I did everything I could to make sure I would never be under Pops' control.

"You also forget that I keep tabs on your friend, Jake. Would be a shame for something to happen to him." I gasped at the threat. "Seems he has a stronger mentality than his father."

It was one thing to threaten my career, but to threaten Jake was a new low. I would never risk Jake. Jake was the friend Pops never wanted me to have. The friend I still had today.

I held onto hope my reputation in my work was enough to keep my career strong without interference from Pops, but I couldn't risk it. He could ruin me. He had enough connections. I knew he did. He had me right where he needed me to be.

I wanted to yell. I wanted to scream. Most of all, I wanted to throw something. But I couldn't. All I could do was sit there, frozen. My mouth couldn't find words to argue with him. Never once had I thought his threat had meaning behind it. He would never make me marry someone against my will. Gio could take over his business, fill his shoes. Gio could have all his money. I didn't want it. Except that wasn't what Pops wanted.

"Regan, I don't want to argue."

"Then don't make me do this," I choked out. "Don't make me marry someone I don't know. You are taking away every single choice for my future."

"I've told you many times before, I will protect you at all costs. You need someone to shield you. And he will do this. You'll have your career. Regan, you will be fine. Keep an open mind."

"Who is it?"

"I can't tell you that. I'll tell you when the time is right."

Dear God, this was getting worse. Choosing someone for me to marry, and not giving me the courtesy of telling me who I'm marrying, was too much to swallow. When I hung up with him, I was going to drink the rest of the bottle of wine and I was going to regret it, but I needed it.

That wasn't going to happen. Suddenly, I was exhausted. The argument with Mark had taken its toll, albeit a triumphant ending to it, but this wasn't one that I was about to win, and the energy was draining from me.

"Regan, please be well. I'll talk as soon as I can."

“Love you, Pops,” I said, resigned.

“I love you, too, my darling girl.”

I disconnected the call and tossed my phone onto the couch. It took a moment for me to collect my disarray of thoughts. Too many things were happening at one time. The glass of wine with the deep red liquid beckoned me, and without hesitating for another second, I grabbed it and took a few healthy gulps. Normally, I liked to savor my wine. I felt a pull for something stronger.

Marriage to an unknown man? My future tied to someone that I had never met? It was crazy. I'd never given marriage much thought, having built up my career in the last few years. I shook my head, wondering how I was going to end my relationship with Michael. It wasn't like I could be honest. Tying up my future with someone chosen for me was completely asinine.

Chapter Two

Where was Nicco? I looked down the street, craning my neck to see past the other vehicles in the pickup lane. There was no sign of the black Cadillac.

Nicco was never late picking me up from school. For the two years I'd been in middle school, he'd always parked and waited for me at the curb just beyond the tennis courts. Today, he wasn't there.

I adjusted the weight of my backpack, shifting my feet to take another look. I wondered what could have possibly delayed him. He would never forget about picking me up from school. Nicco was usually reading a newspaper or magazine when I got out of school. I always figured he got there early enough to make sure he was there waiting for me.

The minutes dragged on and on as my classmates, cars, and buses were slowly beginning to clear away. I didn't have to stand on my tip-toes to see the cars coming down the street. There were no cars lined up to pick up kids.

A black car pulled up, but it wasn't Nicco or his car. It came to a stop exactly where Nicco would always park. A dark-haired man with diamond studs in both ears climbed out of the passenger side. He motioned me forward with two fingers.

I took a step forward, then stopped. I didn't recognize this man. I leaned to get a look at the driver but didn't recognize him either.

“Your father sent us to pick you up,” he said, his voice firm. “Come along, Regan.”

He knew my name. I walked toward him but stopped when I was just out of his reach. Alarms resonated in my ears. Pops’ words echoed in my ears that I should never, ever go with anyone other than Nicco unless he specifically told me that someone else would pick me up from school.

Sensing my hesitation, the man lunged, grabbing me and forcefully walking me to the car despite my protests. His hand clamped down over my mouth just before I could scream. He tossed me effortlessly into the back seat of the car and slammed the door, leaving me to believe that no one had even noticed.

I pinched my eyes shut against the memory and rested my forearms against the ferry’s railing. Even though thoughts of that day resurfaced infrequently, they made me sick to my stomach. I had never wanted to end someone else’s life, but I had no choice. Every time I thought about it, I considered what I could have done differently to escape the situation. But there was nothing. If it hadn’t been that day, it would have been another.

The waves slapped against the boat, cutting through the blue water of the Atlantic. I stared ahead at the dot on the horizon that was my destination. It had been a few years since I had been to this house. While Pops had gotten me the job with the consulting firm during college, as grateful as I had been for the opportunity, I had only stayed for another six months after I earned my Master’s degree before I took the risk of going out on my own. I hadn’t planned on working for someone else, especially not for Pops. I had taken a brief vacation in Cape Haven before I delved into my independent consulting. My reputation for being the best strategic consultant took off quickly, and I hadn’t had time to come back since.

I sighed, forcing my memory back to the island. During the spring, summer, and fall months, the island’s small community

of businesses relied heavily on tourism. The island had the beauty of sandy beaches, lush green trees, and very few major roads. The town itself was on the southwestern part of the island, providing everything a vacationer might need—a coffee shop, bike shop, and a hotel owned by a friend of my family. There was a police station, albeit on the small side, as they had few noteworthy crimes other than a fender bender or an occasional shoplifter.

The main road traced the coast from southwest to northeast and was littered with resorts. Many boasted small cabins and a few family restaurants.

I was too young to remember when Pops had built a house right on the beach about a mile from the town. It hadn't taken long before there was a row of houses up along the beach. As I grew older, visits became much more infrequent. It had been quite some time since Pops and I had been to this place together, the last time being shortly after I was thirteen. I suppose he thought a vacation would help me heal from my ordeal, but it hadn't, and we returned home after only a few days.

It had occurred to me the last time I visited I could buy, or build, a resort and settle down into a quiet life. I knew I wasn't there yet. There was still so much to do before I could settle down. But now I was arriving with my triumphant purchase.

The boatyard wasn't a vast enterprise, taking about four years to build a boat, depending on the size purchased. It wasn't a big money-making business either. I would need to separate some of my efforts from my consulting to dig into marketing at the boatyard. This was the first business I had ever purchased. Although the excitement still burned new and bright, I would need to ask someone for help. Pops would be no help, but I knew the next best person on the island, and I would pay her a visit soon after my arrival.

I heard a snuffle, turning to see a little boy in the aisle of cars behind me, with tears in his eyes and his index finger in his mouth. He couldn't have been over three years old, looking around with wide, very frightened eyes.

I looked around, hoping to spot someone that I could point in his direction, but was unsuccessful. With a curse under my breath, pushed away from the railing to approach him. He looked up at me, eyes still wide and a string of snot accompanying the finger still stuck in his mouth.

I didn't consider myself the motherly type, but I had the urge to wipe away his tears. The last thing I wanted was to scare him into running away and getting hurt.

"Are you lost?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Should I help you find your mom? Or dad?" After another nod, I straightened. "Do you want to hold my hand, or do you want me to carry you?"

Closing one eye, he considered his choices and looked back up at me. It was oddly enduring, capturing my heart instantly. After a moment, he reached up his arms to me. I couldn't believe this child was trusting me.

I swooped him onto my hip as if nurturing came naturally to me. "Let's go on an adventure, shall we? Maybe we can find you a treat for being such a brave boy."

That at least earned me a smile, but he remained silent as I walked toward the cabin that contained a waiting room out of the wind and the sun, vending machines, snacks and drinks, and the bathrooms.

It was a pleasant day. Most people were sitting on benches or leaning along the railing like I had been, enjoying the warmth of the sun. The boat ride to the island was not a lengthy one, and since it was near the end of summer, there weren't many travelers.

"My name's Regan," I told him. "What's yours?"

I had about given up on him speaking to me at all, even though I had come to his rescue. At his age, I doubted that he even knew what was going on. I pulled open the door and stepped into the waiting area, hoping that someone would notice and recognize their child. There were a few people there, but no one looked up from their phones. I shook my head, walking toward the vending machines. I didn't know how old he was, and I wasn't sure he could have candy. I fed a dollar bill and some change into the machine and secured him a bag of animal crackers.

"Is this what it's like to be a mother?" I asked him, giving him a wink before tearing open the bag with my teeth and handing it to him. He gave me a little laugh before digging into his snack.

I decided it would be more conducive to walk around the deck and walked back to the door just as it swung open to a frantic woman. She looked at me, then the boy, and cried out, reaching her arms out to whisk him out of my grasp.

"Oh, thank God," she said, smoothing her hand down his hair while he was oblivious to anything other than his animal crackers. "I turned around for one second, and the next thing I knew he was gone."

I noted the cell phone clutched in her hand, fervently hoping that she hadn't been on her phone instead of paying attention to him, resulting in him wandering off.

I smiled, holding out my hand. "It was my pleasure."

"Oh, and she bought you some animal crackers," she said to him, taking my hand without paying attention. "You're a very lucky boy, Andrew. Thanks so much for grabbing him."

"I was happy to help."

"Let me at least pay you for the crackers."

"No, no. That's unnecessary."

The woman nodded with a smile and turned out the door, presumably for where they were standing before. I rubbed my

hand over my face and followed them out just in time to see him waving to me as his mother carried him away.

I laughed, strolling back to the railing. I had just resumed my lean when a deep voice rumbled behind me.

“Excuse me.”

I turned toward the voice.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to bother you.”

I gave him a slight smile. He was a good-looking man with dark hair, ruffled from the wind, and the lightest blue eyes I had ever seen. They were almost translucent.

I had noticed him before. He was that last person to drive aboard in a sleek, silver bullet BMW. When he got out of the driver’s seat, he removed a black leather jacket to reveal biceps that strained against the short sleeves of his white t-shirt.

My first thought had been that he must be of Mediterranean heritage to have such deep-colored skin, perhaps Italian or Greek. He had no accent.

“It’s fine,” I said, casually leaning back until the rails pressed into my back.

“Heading to the island for some time away?”

“You could say that.” I held out my hand. “Regan De Luca.”

With a smile, he accepted my hand for a firm handshake. “Cameron Moretti. It’s nice to meet you, Regan De Luca.”

“Cameron,” I repeated.

He cocked his head to the side. “Do you know me?”

“I don’t.” I shrugged, regretting mentioning it. “When I said I was going to the island, someone said they knew a Cameron who was there.”

He gave a nod. “I saw what you did for that little boy. That was nice of you.”

“I couldn’t let him wander around alone. Do you live on the island?”

"I have a house on the beach. It's up the coast. Do you have a house here? I thought I knew just about everyone who lives here."

"I do. On the beach. It's been in my family since I was a little girl. I don't get back here very often, and my dad hasn't been here for years. I haven't been back here since after college."

"That couldn't have been that long ago," he murmured.

I couldn't miss the flirtation, as blatant as it was. I wanted to sigh out loud but refrained from doing so. I had enough on my hands right now. This was just an innocent conversation. Nothing could come of it.

Instead, I smiled and made sure that it reached my eyes. "It was more years ago than I care to admit, but that's a conversation for another day."

"I accept."

Now I laughed. "I'm sure we'll run into each other again. It's not a big island."

"How long do you intend to stay?"

This wasn't a simple answer. It would depend entirely on how long Pops thought there was danger to us both. It could be a couple of weeks, or it could be a few months. I stared into the distance, the island now coming into clear view. I could even see a sliver of my house.

"I'm not sure yet," I murmured.

"Though Labor Day weekend, at least?"

"I'm thinking so."

He grinned. "Great. I look forward to seeing you again, Regan."

I watched him back away from me, returning to the other side of the ferry and giving full admiration to his firm backside in a snug pair of denim jeans. Shaking my head, I turned back to the railing and closed my eyes to the feel of the ocean wind and the warmth of the sun on my face.

The ferry bumped to a stop against the dock at the southwestern tip of the diamond-shaped island. The three-story Palmetto Hotel dominated Main Street. It was the tallest building on the island, looking solemnly out toward the ocean with its swaying implanted palm trees framing the front doors. The top two stories were luxury suites, each having a walkout to view and listen to the ocean.

A half-hour later, I pulled up at the black iron gates and dialed in the code. Slowly, the gates opened, and I drove my rented car into the circular drive. Since it wouldn't be long before I would need to leave again, I left the car parked in front of the door.

The two-story home had been my favorite as a child and still was. Green trees and bushes, mixed in with transplanted palm trees and colorful flowers, decorated the backyard with impeccable landscaping while the sparkling ocean and beach were at the front. Above the three-car garage was a private dance studio.

My love of dancing had been the purpose of this design. Even the family house back in California had a dance studio, but this one was special to me. It took up most of the upper level and the windows on the balcony gave it plenty of natural light.

I hauled my bags out of the car's trunk and opened the double doors leading into the spacious foyer. Dropping the bags to the marble floor, I went straight through into the living room, past the open kitchen with a half-wall. Although spacious and an open-concept home, the half-wall gave the appeal of having some type of separation between the living room and kitchen. The house had a modern look with white suede couches and a simple glass dining room table with four cushioned chairs. I rarely ate at the table, preferring to be out on the deck as much as possible.

I threw open the French-style patio doors, inviting the warm breeze to enter the house. Someone had been there to uncover the sparkling in-ground pool and hot tub and to make sure they were both cleaned.

I would soak in the hot tub later. For now, there were things to be done and people to see. Turning, I surveyed the house and found that the cleaning crew had done a very thorough job. I retrieved my bags and brought them into the master suite opposite the kitchen.

My room had a master bathroom with a Jacuzzi tub. It also had a single glass door that led to the deck. I had a feeling that I would be in Cape Haven for longer than I wanted, but at least this room gave me enough peace that I was okay with an extended stay. I would need it for a clear head.

After unpacking, I decided it was time to visit my lair. Passing back through the house and foyer, I bounded up the curving staircase. Behind the staircase was a hallway leading to the other two bedrooms. If I was here long enough, I would let Tatum and Jazz fight over who got the room closest to the ocean when they came to visit. Pops had forbidden me from telling anyone where I would be, but I couldn't keep it from my two best friends.

At the top of the stairs, I walked directly into the spacious room with no furniture. The hardwood floors shined, and the entire back wall was a mirror. Pops had a ballet bar installed at one time during my teenage years, but I hadn't kept up on ballet. I loved to dance. Every kind of dance. But ballet hadn't been one of my favorites.

It had been too long since I had danced. If I had dressed more comfortably, I would have made use of the room immediately. Work had taken over my life so much that I hadn't had time to stop and treat myself to the one thing that provided solitude. I blew the stray hair out of my face and walked right

into the middle of the room, twirling around just as my phone vibrated in my pocket.

When I saw who was calling, it tempted me to put it through to my voice mail. I knew this was a conversation that needed to happen. I didn't know if I wanted to have it now. Putting it off would just delay the inevitable.

"Hey, stranger," I answered.

Michael's low laugh caressed my ear through the phone. "I'm thinking that's true. It's been weeks since I've been able to see you. When will you be home?"

I sighed. "I don't know."

There was silence for a minute, as though he was mulling it over. I knew it wasn't what he wanted to hear, and part of me hadn't wanted to say it. That wasn't even the worst part of what I would have to say to him. My heart hurt already.

"Michael," I finally said. "I adore you. You know I do."

"But this isn't going anywhere," he finished for me, a hint of sorrow deep in his voice. "I can't blame you. You're busy. I'm busy. Maybe this isn't the right time for us."

My breath let out in a whoosh. "Our careers are too important to both of us right now. I will always consider you a friend."

He laughed, short and to the point. "Take care of yourself, Regan."

"I will, and I don't have to tell you the same."

"Who knows, you may come in with another ankle sprain and we can pick up where we left off."

Not likely, I thought to myself. But I wouldn't count anything out of my future just yet. I had no ring on my finger yet, and I had yet to meet this man that I was supposedly marrying. But it would never be Michael.

"You never know," I smiled. "I'll see you."

"Bye, Regan."

I ended the call and let out another enormous sigh. I needed hours of dancing to unwind from the stress of the last day. But for now, I needed groceries. I also needed to let Isabel know I was back in town, and what I was up to. Most of all, I needed her shoulder to cry on. Love hadn't been involved, but that didn't mean I didn't care for Michael. I cared about him more than I cared to admit, which was why I felt so awful. He was the best kind of guy. Someday he would meet a woman that he would be happy with. It wouldn't have been with me.

Chapter Three

“Regan! Oh, my word, but look at you!”

Isabel burst through the office doors behind the front desk, hurrying to enfold me in a giant hug with suntanned and toned arms. A large seashell clip secured her blond hair, and I noticed that there was not a trace of gray. Her brown eyes were dazzling behind a pair of hot-pink-rimmed glasses. She kept my hands in hers, opening my arms wide to look at me.

I laughed.

“How have you been? I’ve missed you so much!”

“I’ve been better. As much as I hate to admit that I didn’t want to come here, I’m glad I did. I need this.”

Isabel removed her glasses, letting them fall around her neck by the matching hot pink keeper. “Honey, I’m so sorry. Do you wanna talk about it?”

When I was younger, I felt that Pops and Isabel were more than they had let on. I would catch them looking at each other in ways that I didn’t understand until later in life. It was longing. It was passion. I knew they had loved each other, or at least had had an affair. It was after Pops met Anne when we stopped coming here. I was fifteen, and I didn’t blame him. It wasn’t a serious relationship with Anne; I knew that. My mother had been gone for many years, having died when I was too young to remember her in a boating accident. Anne was just there. She didn’t try to pretend to be my mother, or even

a step-mother. Their relationship was casual. Like my relationship with Michael.

“Did you eat?”

“I was going to grab something at the market, but I wanted to see you first.”

“Well, let’s go get us some dinner. My treat.”

Isabel linked her arm through mine and led me across the hotel foyer, chatting about how it was good to see me and how well she thought I looked. As busy as I was, I tried to take care of myself.

“You’re just in time for the Labor Day celebration! You haven’t been here for Labor Day weekend since you were a little girl. So much has changed.”

“Twelve,” I murmured, remembering the carnival set up in front of the town beyond the ferry slip, the games, bands playing in the amphitheater on the beach, and the weekend ending with a spectacular display of fireworks.

It was like being home. I relaxed in the tranquil life of leisure and delightful conversation. I followed Isabel out the front doors and down the sidewalk toward the bistro at the end of the street.

“It is good to see you,” Isabel admitted, not releasing my arm until we were standing in front of the host podium in the dimly lit restaurant. It wasn’t yet dinnertime, and the restaurant had only a few other guests.

The host grabbed two menus from the slat on the wall behind the podium and led us down the aisle between square tables covered with red and white gingham tablecloths. We sat at a small booth in front of the windows that faced the beach.

Isabel waved over the owner of the restaurant, a short man who was clearly not Italian. He clasped his hands together with a smile, not even allowing Isabel to state her request before announcing he would bring the best bottle of wine for his friend and her guest.

I raised my eyebrows. “No,” Isabel firmly said. “Not even close, so don’t give me that look. I am happily single, and that isn’t about to change with anyone on this island.”

“I didn’t say a word! But I want to ask you, do you know Cameron Moretti?”

Isabel’s eyes widened slightly, and I didn’t miss it. “How do you know him?”

“He was on the ferry with me.” I watched curiously while Isabel visibly relaxed. “He seems nice. I wouldn’t peg him to live on this island. He seems much more worldly. Drives a nice car.”

Isabel laughed, but it came out shaky as though she were nervous. “Oh, he must have been returning from some big city. He travels, but he spends a bit of time here on the island.” She gave me a look of annoyance. “Why am I telling you about him? He should tell you himself.”

“If the opportunity presents itself,” I murmured, just as the owner returned with a bottle of red wine.

We lapsed into silence while he uncorked the bottle and poured us each a healthy glass. I picked my glass up, raising it to Isabel, who raised her glass in return.

“To old friends and new friends.”

Isabel smiled. “He’s quite a looker, isn’t he? Cameron?”

I sipped, then nodded. “I’m not jumping into another relationship.”

Isabel let out another shaky laugh. “He might be your type.”

“I don’t have a type.” I sat back in the seat, fingers toying with the stem of my glass while I thought about it. Did I have a type?

“You were seeing someone?”

“Michael,” I said. “He’s an orthopedic surgeon. I met him when I sprained my ankle a couple of years ago when he was doing his residency in the emergency room. It wasn’t super serious. I travel a lot. He works a lot. We literally just broke up.”

"I'm so sorry!"

"I didn't love him. I wish I could have. It just wasn't there."

"Why?"

I stared at her. I had to be cautious who I talked to about my situation. Although Isabel had been in my life since I was a little girl, I wasn't certain that I wanted this news out in the open. Not yet anyway.

"You don't think ever about settling down?"

I smiled. "It's crossed my mind. I've worked hard to get where I am today, but I've been thinking about it more lately. Maybe that's why Michael and I broke up. I couldn't see it with him."

"You did the right thing, then?" Isabel teased.

"I think so. It still hurts. I hated doing that to him."

"And how's your father?"

Again, I lapsed into silence. I didn't know how much Isabel knew about the family, but there were certain things that I didn't want to divulge. Like the fact that he was on sabbatical, and no one knew where he was. Not even me.

"He's good."

"Is he still with that woman?"

I smiled. I had always sensed that Isabel was jealous. If she and Pops had carried on an affair, it would have been a long time ago. I was sure of it. "Anne. Yes, he's still with her. At least that I know. I haven't been home for a few weeks."

"But he never married her?"

"No."

"Does that bother you?"

"Not at all. She's involved with us as a family, but not so much that I think he would ever consider marrying her. And her daughter, you remember me talking about Amber? She's like a little sister to me. I talk to her sometimes."

"Your dad is a good man."

“Yeah, yeah. He’s the best.” I smiled. “But I have something positive to tell you. Something that I’m going to need your help with.”

Isabel reached her hands toward mine, touching my hands lightly. “Tell me.”

“I bought the boatyard from Mark McCarthy yesterday. Took a lot of convincing, but he finally sold to me.” Her face lit up, and I could see the fine wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. “I’m going to need your help on how to run a business.”

She clapped her hands together in delight. “This is the best news! That means you’ll be here more often now, so I’ll be able to see you more! I’m curious why you wanted to buy it? I didn’t even know he had it for sale.”

“He didn’t. I coerced him into selling it to me. You know I’ve always loved the island. The house. This would be the perfect place to settle down if I ever did. Maybe this is a good start.”

“It sounds like you’ve had some busy days lately.”

“It has been. I’m looking forward to opening the house and maybe sitting in the hot tub, listening to the waves washing against the shore.”

“It’s the perfect night for it.” She smiled. “Let’s eat, then I’ll let you get home so you can relax. It sounds like you’ll be around for a while. We’ll have plenty of time to catch up.”

After a heaping bowl of spaghetti and a large glass of water, Isabel and I parted ways outside the hotel with her, throwing her arms around me in an enormous hug, nearly busting my ribs. For a skinny woman, she was tough. It took me less than ten minutes to drive home, tucking the car into the garage and locking up the house.

I opened myself a bottle of wine and sank into one of the deck chairs to look out at the water washing up against the beach beyond the iron fence that surrounded the house. The sun was going down, casting an orange-red glow across the sky. For now, there wasn’t another place I wanted to be.



“Nicco?”

I looked in the rearview mirror for his eyes to shift from the road to look at me. A smile curved my lips when his familiar blue eyes met mine.

“Yes, Twinkle Toes?”

“Do you like picking me up from school every day? I mean, Pops pays you to do it, doesn’t he?”

His eyes moved back to the road. “He pays me to do it, yes. But you wanna know a secret?” I eagerly nodded. “I would do it even if he didn’t pay me. I like to drive you.”

“You do? Why?”

“Because I like to make sure you’re safe. And I just so happen to like you. I think you’re a delightful girl who deserves to be picked up from school.”

I thought about it for a moment. “Why wouldn’t I be safe?”

I didn’t miss his heavy sigh, and I wondered if I was asking too many questions and was irritating him. I knew Pops had money and had people working for him. But I watched other kids taking a school bus, except those kids who had big, heavy band instruments or after-school activities. Other kids got picked up occasionally, but I was the only one picked up every day without an after-school activity or a large band instrument. After going to private school for primary school, I begged Pops to let me go to public school like a normal kid. He finally relented, and it was the worst possible decision I had made. They shunned me because of my name.

The kids in my school didn’t bother with bullying me, they just avoided me like a disease. Very few of my classmates talked to me, and those who talked to me did so sparingly so they wouldn’t get caught doing so.

“Your dad just wants to make sure. You’re all he has.”

I snorted. "He has Gio."

"That's not the same. You are his only kid. He just wants you to be safe."

I looked out my window from the backseat at the enormous mansions tucked behind tall iron gates pass by. I wasn't buying his answer at all. It didn't seem like Pops paid much attention to me. He was always busy. In his office, or at his golf course. With Uncle Gio.

"You aren't telling me the truth."

"There are people who don't like your dad. That might want to hurt him indirectly. But that doesn't mean that they would hurt you. He just likes to know that you're in expert hands, and he knows that I'm the right person for the job."

I smiled. "I like you, Nicco."

He returned my smile. "I like you, too, Twinkle Toes."

I sat up from my beach towel, looking out at the water. The mid-morning sun shimmered on the water, casting a glow like millions of sparking lights rippling in the waves. The day promised to be a warm one. Visitors to the island filled up the beach with brightly colored towels, umbrellas, coolers, picnic baskets, and bags of water toys and sports equipment.

I hadn't thought about Nicco for a long time. I missed him. More than I cared to admit. It was so long ago, but he had been my only friend for many years. He had been the only person who I could talk to. Pops didn't have enough time for me; never asked me how my day was, and if anything interesting had happened at school. He didn't know how my classmates gave me sideline glances while whispering to each other. I could tell that they were talking about me. They didn't know me, which made it hurt more. If they knew me, they would know that I was a person just like they were. There was nothing wrong with me.

I staked out my spot in the sand directly across from where my house was. I could have stayed on my deck and enjoyed

the clean water of the pool, but it had been so long since I had felt sand between my toes that the pull of the beach was too much.

I was around ten pages deep into my book about the habits of highly successful people when I noticed a shadow had fallen over me and stayed there. Calmly, I dogeared the page and set it down, squinting my eyes up at the guy standing over me.

"Hey!" he said, plopping down into the sand beside me. "I'm Matt."

All I was interested in was getting a suntan and reading my book. But I wasn't a naturally rude person, and as much as I didn't want to engage in small talk, I also didn't want to be impolite. "Matt, it's nice to meet you."

He had light blonde hair, flopping around in the slight breeze of the morning. Tatum would have been all over him. The look of a surfer, but maybe a little more intelligence behind his light green eyes. "Are you staying on the island for the weekend? For the big party?"

I laughed. "Yes. You?"

"Yeah, me and a few of the guys from inland. We're staying at that resort up the road. I forgot the name, but it's got the yellow house on the corner with the front porch. The old people that own it look like hippies. They're cool people."

Lord, was he going to take a breath? I thought. "Sid and Franky," I said.

"Yeah, that's them. You know 'em?"

"Yes. I've been visiting this island for many years." And that was all I was going to tell him. I didn't need someone visiting my doorstep. Especially if he had buddies with him. I was supposed to be on the down low.

I eyed him cautiously. This guy didn't seem like the type that would stalk someone, or have impure motives. Usually, I was an excellent judge of character. Matt looked simple enough.

“Me and the guys are going to play volleyball. Do you wanna join us?”

Aw. “That’s very sweet, but I’ll pass. I’d like to relax and read for now.”

He shrugged and pushed himself up. “It was worth a try. Maybe I’ll see you around. I didn’t catch your name.”

“Regan.”

He didn’t move, eyes sweeping over me. I was used to getting looks, but I wasn’t the only woman clad in a bikini. There were groups of girls, many of whom were much younger than I was, and likely college students.

“I’ll see you around, Regan!”

I watched him jog away from me, passing by a familiar face just as I thought I was going to get back to my book. It was just as well. Reading these types of books took intense concentration.

“Beautiful morning.”

Cameron strolled over to me, easing down on the sand next to me where Matt had just been. Even sweating, he looked good. The olive complexion of his skin was an interesting contrast to my paler colored skin. I was attempting to change that.

“Am I interrupting you?”

“No.” I was being honest. “It’s not a very engaging subject.”

He picked up the book briefly, looked at it for a moment, and set it right back down. “I’ve read it. You’re right. Why are you even trying?”

I smiled slyly, with a slight shrug. “Boredom?”

That brought a laugh from him, at least. He jerked his chin in the direction where Matt had gone. “Who was that?”

“That was Matt. He was looking for someone to join a volleyball game.”

His eyebrows raised. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. He was very nice.”

He cocked his head to the side and my stomach flip-flopped. "This island is going to be full this weekend. Make sure you're being careful. Lots of college guys."

He was very demanding. I liked it in an odd sort of way. Controlled was not something that I wanted to be, but he said it in such a way it made me feel cared for. It was silly. I had just met him, but it felt like he wanted to protect me. He didn't even know me.

"Did you know where to find me, or was this just a lucky coincidence?"

"Lucky coincidence. I jog in the morning when it's nice out, but this morning I was a little late getting going. I didn't think I'd run into you so soon."

He was getting to me. Athletic, protective, and sinfully good-looking with his dark hair and blue eyes. And that damned little dimple. The bones in his cheeks were high and defined at sharp angles.

It wasn't like me to have a no-strings-attached relationship. It would differ completely from what my relationship had been with Michael. We were together, we just weren't exclusive. Well, I was exclusive because I had too much going on in my life. I was pretty sure that Michael had been exclusive to me as well, even though neither of us had committed to it. To jump into another relationship, after just ending one, would make my life more complicated.

"It was nice of you to warn me, Cameron."

"I can't have an unprotected woman living down the beach from me and not be worried about her."

I placed a hand over my heart with a fluttering laugh. I was positive I wasn't the only single woman living on the island. "Who's going to save me from you?"

"Friends close and enemies closer." He shrugged, the muscles in his arms rippling with the movement. He leaned closer to me. "You should keep me very close."

I wasn't the type of woman to swoon over muscles or a pretty face. It was the intelligence that did me in. If I kept him close, I would have issues later.

"It would complicate a lot of things in my life right now." It was an admittance that I wasn't sure was for him, or for me. "I don't even know you."

"I live for complications. My life is the same way, and I'm not looking for a relationship either," he admitted back. "But you could know me if you tried."

"What do you do for a living, Cameron?"

"I do a little of everything, but in all honesty, I own a few businesses. An entrepreneur. I don't like monotony."

I laughed again, wondering what it was about him that made me laugh so nervously around him. He didn't appear to be trying to be humorous.

"I would be an excellent escort for the weekend festivities." He frowned. "Or maybe companion sounds a little better. I'm not running an escort service here."

"I wouldn't peg you for a male escort. One would think it would be exhausting to entertain at night, then get up so early to go jogging."

"I'm not a heavy sleeper. I'm an early riser no matter what time I get to sleep."

"You sound like me, Cameron."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a strategic consultant." I grinned.

I didn't know if he was trying to be sly, but I caught sight of his fingers inching in the sand toward my hand. His eyes caught mine and held me immobile for a moment. Another time, and another place, and no commitment forthcoming could have made my decisions about him so much different. But I couldn't help but wonder.

"I might need a strategic consultant."

"You wouldn't be able to afford my rates."

"I would love to take you out to dinner."

"No," I laughed. "Thank you for the offer."

"A challenge?"

The charm was coming on again, smoothing over me like a salesperson. And it was working. I knew he owned his own business. Or businesses. He had charmed me. I was interested. I was hooked.

"Not a challenge, no."

"I'll continue to ask until you say yes."

"I'm not looking for a relationship."

"Neither am I."

I pushed myself to my feet along with my book and towel, taking a moment to look out at the great expanse of the ocean before I looked down at him. "I'll think about it."

"Regan!"

I turned to look at Isabel, waving at me from my deck. I waved back at her while Cameron got to his feet. He grabbed my hand, and it surprised me, almost like a jolt of electricity.

"Go out with me, Regan."

"No."

"Go out with me. Once. That's all that I'm asking."

I pulled my hand away. "See you around, Cameron."

I took off in a graceful sprint toward my house, not bothering to look back so he could see my sneaky smile. He hadn't stopped me to press the issue, at least. A moment later, I was giving a quick kiss to Isabel's cheek, ignoring the raised eyebrows in her silent question. I also ignored the glance toward Cameron.

"Is that Cameron Moretti?"

I shrugged, grabbing my water bottle from the table near the pool to take a few gulps. I swiped the back of my hand across my mouth. "He's nice."

"And nice to look at," Isabel said, turning around to watch Cameron continue his jog up the beach toward his house.

“He asked me out.”

“And?”

“Not interested. And I just met him yesterday.”

“The island isn’t big. He’s got a house about a mile from here. It’s huge and gorgeous with a high iron fence around it. I’ve never seen him with a woman. He must be lonely.”

“Hmm,” I murmured noncommittally.

“You might like him. If nothing else, for a pleasant conversation. He’s easy to talk to, like you don’t have to try.”

I merely shrugged. She was right. He was easy to talk to. Isabel watched me pull open the patio door and resigned herself to following me into the house. She sat down on a stool at the kitchen counter and watched me tidy up the kitchen.

“What brings you by, Isabel? Other than my wonderful coffee.”

“I would never ask this of you. I truly wouldn’t unless I was desperate.”

I turned around with a cup of steaming coffee in my hands, leaning against the counter with a smile. “You need my help.”

“God, yes.”

“You know you can always ask me. What do you need?”

“Two of my housekeepers have called in sick, one out of plain irresponsibility and the other with a sick baby. I need at least two on each floor.”

“When do I start?”

Isabel laughed, coming around to hug me. “That’s my girl. I truly owe you. Can you be at the hotel in an hour?”

“Can and will.”

She grabbed my hands and squeezed with a twinkle in her eyes. “Think about giving Cameron a chance, honey. He’s a good man. Sweet. He’ll never let you down.”

“I’ll think about it. In the meantime, I need to take a shower. I’ll be at the hotel within a half hour.”

Chapter Four

The rhythmic clicks of my high-heel shoes as I walked along the sidewalk threatened to put me in a trance as I walked toward the glass doors of the boatyard office. Today, I was a business owner. Quite the change from yesterday's housekeeper position. Doing the job of two housekeepers exhausted me, but I was happy to have helped Isabel. I felt rotten for turning Cameron down for a date, so helping her might have redeemed me a little. He might have been telling me the truth and was just looking for a conversation rather than a relationship.

The double-glass doors boasted a logo promising a smooth sail. We sold and rented boats. I had noticed the plethora of sailboats in the bay and yachts out even farther. According to Mark's financial reports, business had been steady in the last decade, and I would put up a fight to keep it that way.

Good managers were hard to get, especially on such a small island. The economy had taken a dip in the last few years, and new hires had been even harder to find. The general manager had taken a walk for reasons unknown, leaving me to deal with finding a replacement and reviewing financials more in depth than what I had done in my initial review. They were making a profit, this much I knew.

I stopped at the doors, admiring the bold white lettering of the company name with the outline of a yacht stenciled

in gold. It wasn't exactly a gold mine, but it had brought in enough money to keep afloat. No pun intended.

The lobby was comfortable, with a waiting area with a small couch and two brown leather chairs nestled in a triangle around a low coffee table with several issues of boating magazines. Across from the waiting area was the receptionist's desk with the logo on the wall behind the taller desk.

Behind the desk was a blond, who looked like she was right out of high school, looking at her cell phone. I slipped my sunglasses off as I approached and raised my eyebrows at her when I stopped. She had yet to even glance up at me. Perhaps a receptionist was an extra expense that wasn't necessary.

I cleared my throat to get her attention, not at all surprised when she raised her eyes slowly and set her phone purposely down on the desk to address me.

"Can I help you?"

With a tight smile, I debated whether I should play the bitch boss part or tamp down my instant flare. I tried not to judge people. Even though she had been on her phone, the office was clean with everything in its place. There could simply not be enough business to keep this role busy.

"I'm Regan De Luca."

Surprise lit her eyes as she leapt to her feet, the chair spinning out from under her and banging against the wall behind her. "Miss De Luca! It's so nice to meet you! Is there anything that I can get for you? Anything you need?"

"No. I don't expect you to be a gopher," I said, looking around and spotting an office in the corner next to the waiting area. "Is there somewhere I can use as an office?"

"Of course. That's the only office we have, but it's not being used anymore."

"How long have you been working here... I'm sorry, what's your name?"

“Oh, good gracious, I’m so sorry! Melanie. Melanie Miller. I’ve only been here for a month. The last manager hired me just before he went to lunch one day and never came back.”

“I’d like to meet with you sometime this week to review your duties in the office.” The poor girl looked alarmed. “I may want to add some duties so you don’t feel the need to be on your phone all day.”

“I was just—”

I stopped her by holding up my hand. “Relax. I merely want to make sure that you have enough to do. I don’t expect you to be productive a straight eight hours a day. I’m not.”

She smiled at me, and I suddenly felt sorry for her. I had been in her shoes at one time. I remembered what it was like to be intimidated by upper management, owners, and CEOs. Although the desire to reassure her was strong, I waited to do so. I promised Mark that I would not dispatch any staff, but I didn’t know whether they knew that.

The office, now mine, took up nearly the entire rear of the office building with a single glass door leading into the warehouse on the same side as the receptionist’s desk opposite the office that I walked into. The office had dark brown and mahogany furniture. The massive desk was at the far wall with two tall bookcases on either side.

I set my oversized Coach bag on one of the two chairs in front of the desk and turned to look at the parking lot, the white side of the boat barn, and the lush green shrubbery. It was too bad that we couldn’t have the office facing more towards the ocean. I longed for a view of the water, but trees and the boat barn hid it. There was a couch, longer than the one in the lobby, made of the same brown leather with another coffee table—void of any magazines this time—and two more leather chairs with a small table at the center.

I walked around to the large leather chair behind the desk and lowered myself with a longing to kick off my heels. There

was an inbox at the corner of the desk filled with mail. I groaned. Somewhere in that pile of information was a sexual harassment issue that I had yet to deal with, and I had a feeling that the issue might involve the young receptionist.

I set up my laptop before sifting through the pile of invoices, receipts, and mail before I finally came across the manila file marked 'confidential' in bold letters. Leaning back, I flipped it open and scanned through the report. It shouldn't have surprised me that such a thing would happen. I knew from looking at everything about the boatyard from top to bottom, including every single person who worked here, that Melanie was the only woman. My blood boiled.

An hour later, I pressed the intercom button to summon Miss Miller in. I had already removed my jacket, and it wasn't even close to lunchtime yet. A moment later, Melanie opened the door.

"You wanted to see me?"

All sweet and cheerful, naturally innocent. I told her to come in and have a seat in front of the desk and she did so, but not without giving me a nervous smile. No doubt she knew what this was regarding.

"It's my understanding that you are involved in a case of workplace sexual harassment." I laid the folder flat on the desk and clasped my hands together, resting them on the folder. "I don't condone harassment of any kind. I would like to ask you some questions about the incident first."

I watched her cheeks flame with color, and she nodded.

My eyes stayed on her, and I hoped my eyes were sympathetic to her. "This happened two weeks ago?"

She nodded.

"After hours?"

Another nod. "I was here later than usual." She visibly swallowed. "I was behind in getting payroll entered."

"And this is when he touched you inappropriately?"

“He pinned me against the desk here. And kissed me. And touched me.”

I stood up, moving toward the window to look outside. This was a tough situation, with very limited options. There was nothing I could do since the manager, who is the accused, had walked out shortly after the incident. It made me wonder if that’s why he walked out. This report hadn’t come from this office, it had come from Mark’s office.

“Thank you for answering my questions, Melanie. I understand how difficult it must be. The manager hasn’t been back since he walked out?”

I returned to the desk while Melanie slowly stood up. “No. I’m not in trouble?”

This baffled me. “Why would you be in trouble? He attacked you, right?”

“If you talk to him, he’ll deny it. He’ll tell you I made it up.”

“I’m not even sure I can find him. But if I do, I’ll deal with him. Is that what you want me to do?”

“I don’t think he’s on the island. I haven’t seen him since.”

I had to remind myself to keep quiet before something slipped out. That would mean trouble for me as the owner. Pop’s way of dealing with things was coming out of me. If what she said was the truth, I could pummel him myself.

“I don’t doubt it,” I said. “If I found him, what do you want me to do? He’s not an employee here, but that doesn’t mean you can’t press charges. I can help you do that if you want me to.”

Her face lit up. “You would do that?”

“Are you telling the truth?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t lie about this. He’s already not here anymore.”

“If you’re telling me the truth, and he really did this to you, then I would absolutely help you do whatever you need to do to make sure he stays away from you for good.”

She smiled, her lips curving into the first confident look on her face I had seen since meeting her. “Thank you, Miss De Luca.”

“It’s Regan. Please. Now, I would like to have lunch at some point today. Would you like to have lunch with me?”

“I would love to have lunch with you!”

“Great. Why don’t you order something for us? Put it on the company account. I am the least picky person you’ll ever meet. Just don’t order me any fish.”

Melanie left the office, and I realized she had a bounce in her step that had not been there before. It made me happy, knowing I might have given her the confidence that she needed to get somewhere in life, other than to be a receptionist. I didn’t know her, but I would help her. Woman to woman.

My eyes drifted to the windows in time to see Cameron striding across the lawn, pulling on a white t-shirt while he walked. What a devil, I thought. And why the hell was he here?

Damning myself for being such a girl about it, I couldn’t help but admire his long, tanned legs below a pair of tan-colored cargo shorts. The muscles in his torso and arms rippled with the movements to get his shirt on before reaching the office building. I wasn’t sure why he didn’t just use the adjoining door between the boat barn and the office.

His hair was wind-blown when he walked into my office a moment later. He stopped just inside my door, staring at me and shaking his head with a grin. He probably had young girls falling at his feet daily. The trouble was, I liked him a great deal already, and I didn’t even know him.

I crossed to the door, looking at Melanie. Her mouth had fallen open, and a blush had crossed high on her cheeks at the sight of Cameron. The feeling was mutual. I just hid mine better. I winked at her. “Did you order lunch?”

After seeing a nod of her understanding with widened eyes, I closed the door firmly and motioned for him to have a seat

while I perched on the corner of the desk. Dear Lord, he was a handsome man. He was still smiling.

“What are you doing here, Cameron?”

He sat down in the chair, but propped his feet up on the desk next to me as though he owed the place, not me. “I might ask you the same thing.”

“I’m the owner of this boatyard.”

“You clean up nice, Miz De Luca,” he drawled. “I like it.”

I raised my hand to my hair, still swept up and secured by a clip. I supposed I looked serious in my black suit skirt with a sleeveless white top. Legs bare and in high heels. I caught him staring at my legs.

I stood up, sliding into the chair behind the desk before I could do or say something that I would later regret. My nerves tightened. He was looking at me with piercing blue eyes. It was like he was devouring me, making the situation more difficult.

“You lied to me,” he said.

“Not telling you something is not the same as lying.”

“You said you were a strategic consultant.”

“And you said you were an entrepreneur.”

“I am. I also said I said I do a little of everything.” He folded his arms in front of his chest, making his biceps threaten to split his shirt sleeves. “I help with supplies.”

“I didn’t lie. I literally just bought it two days ago. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision while I was consulting for Mark.” I shrugged. “I just didn’t want you to think I was here permanently.”

“Just an inconvenience for us.”

“There is no us,” I ground out, then sucked in a deep breath.

There was that dimple again as his lips curved into a wide grin. “You think there isn’t. I think there is. Why don’t we find out?”

“Why don’t we just wait to see what happens? If you aren’t looking for a relationship, and I’m not looking for one, why rush? I’ll be here for a while.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Are we finished?”

“Do you have something else to do?”

“We just got an order for a forty-five foot yacht. They’re just getting started on it and they’re down two people who left the island and decided not to come back. I need to get the supply order and get going on it.”

I groaned. Being a business owner was a bitch. Short-staffed all the way around. This made me uneasy. I didn’t want to lose this boatyard.

I smiled at him. “We’re finished.”

Cameron stood up, but rather than going to the door, he stepped around the desk right up to me and took my hand in his. He kissed my knuckles, his lips soft and barely there. “We’re far from finished, Miz De Luca.”

I tugged my hand out of his. With a quick laugh, he strode to the door, and with his hand on the door handle and a grin that was full of sin, he turned back to me.

“Regan?”

“Hmmm?”

“You look damn sexy in that skirt.”

My eyes snapped up to meet his. He yanked open the door and strode out without another word. I watched him give Melanie a nod, who turned red in the face again and looked down. Damn, there went her confidence again.

“Lunch will be here in a half hour,” she told me a minute later.

I looked up to see her in my doorway. “Great, I’m starving. What did you order?”

“There’s a sandwich shop downtown that is to die for. I just ordered two Cuban sandwiches. They are so good.”

I laughed. "Find something to do, Melanie. We'll review your position tomorrow and see if we can find you some other things to do so you aren't bored all day long."

Melanie went back to her desk, and I looked out the window to see Cameron's long legs eating up the distance between the office and the boat barn. It hadn't taken him long to remove his shirt. I wondered what he was supplying. I'd have to investigate the invoices. Having a little company while I was here wouldn't be so bad. Especially if I could spend it with a man like Cameron.