

LINDSAY GIBSON

Fly Away Summer

A Delightful, Heartwarming Summer Romance



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ALSO BY LINDSAY GIBSON

The Christmas Promise

PROLOGUE



“*L*ana, there really isn’t an easy way to say this, so I think it’s best I come right out with it,” the lawyer explained, leaning forward onto his desk. “The inn is in active foreclosure. And it was just sold in an auction.”

A sharp gasp left Lana Kelly, and she instantly felt dizzy. She must have heard the family lawyer wrong with the heavy rain that was pounding against the windows from the storm outside. “Did you say... *foreclosure?*” She looked at her grandad, but he wouldn’t meet her eyes.

Was it possible that she was just dreaming—and this was a nightmare? For the past month, she had been running on endless coffees, little sleep, and preparing for her last set of finals at Johnson & Wales’s culinary arts program in Rhode Island. It was a whirlwind of a semester, and she couldn’t have been more thrilled to be done. Maybe she’d been pushing herself too hard, focusing too much on the future that lay ahead of her, and this was her subconscious lashing back by manifesting her deepest fear.

But as much as she wanted to believe that to be the case,

the sinking feeling in her stomach, and the awful sympathy in the lawyer's expression, told her it was all too true.

Until this moment, her life had felt as if she were turning the page to a whole new chapter for her as a chef. The past four years of college, with her grandad cheering her on every step of the way, were now met with silence as those plans dissolved in front of her.

In a matter of weeks, she'd planned to step in and start running the inn, taking it off her grandad's hands and making sure to honor nearly forty years of his hard work since he'd opened it with her grandma.

"Yes... foreclosure," the lawyer repeated, barely able to look her in the eye, which she presumed meant, knowing the history of their inn, that he understood how important it was to her grandad.

The words were miles away against the sound of her thudding heart now raging in her ears.

"I don't understand." She shook her head. "How could this have happened?"

Her grandad finally spoke, explaining that he'd had to take out an equity loan to pay for her college tuition, and how the lack of revenue growth in recent years had made it difficult to keep up with the payments. She tried to listen, but all she could concentrate on was how frail he seemed. A foreclosure didn't feel like the only reason this meeting was taking place. Something about him seemed... off.

She remembered a week ago when he'd called her, asking her to drive home to Bluedale, Cape Cod, for this meeting. She'd thought the problem he wanted to discuss with her was something to do with his health. She'd never expected this.

As if he could hear her thoughts, her grandad continued, "And there's more."

Lana tried to brace herself—she knew how to deal with loss. Whatever the news was, she was sure she could handle

it. She'd be there for her grandad, whatever he needed. He was all the family she had left. And when he said the word "dementia," it was almost a relief.

The past four years without her grandma, she'd worried about him while away at school, and now she'd come to find out, her intuition about his condition had been right all along. She'd first noticed it six months ago, when he called to say he needed to move into a nursing home. After that, it had felt like a race to get through school and take the inn off his hands, only to find out it'd been too late. Piecing together all she had witnessed—from moments of simple forgetfulness to the way he would pause and stare at her at times, like he didn't know her—it all made sense. And now that they had an official diagnosis, she could at least finally stop guessing.

"There is one piece of good news," the lawyer said.

Lana stared at him blankly. The inn had been foreclosed on and her grandad had dementia. She was losing her home, her future, and her grandad's health in one fell swoop. What good news could there possibly be?

"As stated in your father's will, his old fish market next door to the inn has moved fully to your ownership now that you are twenty-two. It's yours to do with what you wish," the lawyer informed her. In all the years since her parents passed, the fish market had sat empty. They'd tried to sell it a few times, but without success. She'd dreamed of utilizing it somehow for more space next to the inn once she took over—and now it was all she was left with.

The lawyer began to talk her through the next steps with the inn. "Your grandad has struggled to get the inn cleared out in time, but the new owners are willing to provide a grace period to allow you all to gather your personal belongings from the property. Then you'll need to close all the accounts associated with the property."

She took notes, knowing that she'd need to remember all

of this information, even if dealing with it was the last thing she wanted to do right now.

“And one more document I need you to sign for the nursing home...” the lawyer took in a breath, glancing quickly at her grandad before pushing a piece of paper across his desk. Lana reached over for her grandad’s hand. “With your grandad’s condition officially diagnosed, I need you to sign for power of attorney over him.” Looking down at the document, Lana tried hard to keep the flood of emotions contained. A heaviness pressed on her as she signed her name, knowing she was now the soul decision maker for her grandad—a responsibility she didn’t feel ready to do.

Finally, the meeting came to an end. A nurse aide arrived shortly to take her grandad back to his nursing home, where he said he’d wait for her so they could talk. Watching him walk with help jarred her, especially after many years of running the inn with such strength. She’d known he was slowing down—first hiring a temporary manager to handle most of the inn’s day-to-day operations, and later passing everything off to the manager after moving into the nursing home—but this was the first time it truly struck home how much he’d deteriorated. Now that she understood what was happening with his health, guilt panged in her. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she could have stopped this from happening had she not been away at school.

Making her way past the cherry trees toward her car, the spring sunshine captured her attention, softening the shock and slowing her down enough to even her breathing. Thunder rumbled in the distance from the storm that had pulled away, and Lana could still see dark clouds off in the distance. It seemed fitting considering how she felt, having just gotten news that dimmed the bright future she’d planned for so long. A falling petal caught her eye, twisting in circles

in front of her, gracefully showing off, as if it knew she needed to savor this moment of stillness.

Tears suddenly stung her eyes, and she decided she was in no shape to drive. Maybe walking for a while would help clear her head. After a couple of blocks, she stopped next to some newly planted flowers, finding comfort in staring at them. The lush greenery blanketed the ground, and spring colors of pink, purple, and yellow exploded throughout the flower beds. They reminded her of the fresh blooms she'd placed against both her grandma's and parents' headstones earlier that day on her way up.

"What do I do now?" she said out loud, as if someone would answer.

Looking toward the sky, childhood memories of the inn began to flood her mind, and she knew she had to see it. It wasn't far—just a short walk toward the water where the inn sat right beside the shoreline. She arrived in a matter of minutes and decided to stand by the bay to collect herself and face the ocean, kicking off her shoes and watching the waves lap over and over against her bare feet. It was far too cold to swim, but the spring rainstorm that had passed through brought enough warmth to comfortably stick her toes in the shallow water.

The tears that had pooled in her eyes from before began pouring out of her once she got to the beach, releasing everything she'd just learned. Turning away from the water's edge, she sunk down to the sand, facing the inn.

How could it be gone now? Years of memories, family history... all of it just gone, already auctioned off to new owners. Even though she wouldn't have been able to fix the financial setbacks the lawyer had gone over in the meeting, she still wished she had known sooner how much trouble her grandad was in so he didn't have to go through it all alone.

Shielding her eyes against the sun that was peeking out of the last of the rain clouds, she looked at the windows on the second floor, specifically the last one on the right—her old bedroom. The very first night she'd slept there after losing her parents to a terrible fire on their friend's boat when she was just eleven years old flashed across her mind, her grandma holding her for hours while she cried, comforting her broken heart.

Despite the pain, the inn had felt like home after such a tragedy. And as time passed and the edges of her grief softened, she was able to appreciate the years of happy memories before the accident. When she was at the inn, she felt closer to her parents, remembering all the time she'd spent there with them right next door, working their fish market, while she was in the kitchen at the inn waiting on her grandma's delicious food or helping her grandad fix something—not to mention the endless hours playing on the beach.

Lowering her gaze to the sand, she could almost hear the laughter of her younger self through the breeze, whipping by her, and she closed her eyes, her past blanketing her thoughts and bringing her to that fateful last day... only hours before the tragedy.

“LANA!” her grandma called after her, trying to keep up, and her mother trailed behind. “Don't scare the seagulls like that!”

“I'm not scaring them! I'm flying with them!” Lana opened her arms wide, flapping them around in circles before running straight into the water.

“Look, Lana!” her father called out to her, a little farther down the shore. “Look at the broad wings on that one!” She'd followed his gaze to a seagull soaring over the blue ocean,

ready to dive down. Its dark wings reflected against the bright sun while it searched the water.

“That one is so big!” she called back, running up to meet him.

“It’s called a great black-backed gull,” he told her. “Looks like it’s diving for food. I’m sure we’ll see the gull hanging around here. Its nest must be close because they never go far from home.”

Lana began to imitate the bird, flapping her arms again, calling out to it. Jumping into a wave, she popped back up with her arms still straight out. Strong hands picked her up from behind, swinging her around, as giggles escaped her. Wrapping his arms around her shoulders, her father kissed her on both cheeks, before he scooped both legs under his arms, holding her out, while she spread her arms straight out to her sides. A wave crashed down all around them, but her father’s steady grip held her tight against the splash.

“Lana!” he called out...

LANA’S EYES POPPED OPEN, her body trembling to will itself out of the memory. Feeling like the wind had been knocked out of her, she stood up from the sand and took in the ocean air. School had kept her so busy the last few years that she rarely found herself thinking about her parents. Here, now, in a place so tied to their memory, a heaviness welled up inside of her for the first time in a while, ripping through every barricade she’d tried to keep in her heart since that final day in the hospital when she’d said goodbye to them. Grief showed no mercy.

She began walking along the sand back to her car, passing by her father’s old fish market. For a moment, it felt as though he were about to appear around the corner hauling

the large wooden crates of freshly caught seafood. An image of her sitting on top of those crates flashed across her mind, laughing uncontrollably as her father would pop up and scare her from behind them. She stopped walking as something began to brew in her, ideas swirling in her mind, and she knew that, out of all the things her grandad had taught her after her tremendous loss, giving up was never an option.

The inn sat in front her now, so close yet out of reach. Its legacy lost... but never forgotten.

CHAPTER 1



FIVE YEARS LATER

As the sea retreated into low tide, the rising sun slowly lifted above the water, reflecting its rosy hue off the dock behind her. Lana pushed her curls behind her shoulders and tipped her head up to take in the perfect view of the colors before daylight. Within the last moments of twilight, her floating basket was already nearly filled with long-neck clams—enough for the forty-two-person Memorial Day party that her restaurant was expecting. Her hip waders pulled slightly against her shins as she moved through the lowing ebb of water.

It would be the first clambake party of the summer—her specialty—and one of the most sought-after events at her small seaside restaurant, On the Bay. Five years had flown by since she'd begun transforming her father's tiny fish market. The new patio that she'd designed herself provided a simple outdoor oasis with a wide variety of fine seafood dinner choices.

She also had an offering that many other restaurants on the Cape didn't—beach space for her customers to host private clambakes, which had become a fast favorite among

both the regulars from Bluedale and the tourists. It was her favorite addition, but for Lana, this part of being a chef had come easily. Her father had been a master of the New England seas before he died, providing the best seafood at his market here in Bluedale for many years, and that talent certainly hadn't skipped over Lana. Digging for clams, the way he had taught her starting at the age of five, made clam-bakes the perfect fit for her restaurant. However, teaching her how to fillet fresh fish with practiced skill, and properly determining the quality when buying or catching her own, had made Lana's reputation what it was.

Making her way to the first soft mound of sand, she placed the full basket down next to the others, and picked up a fourth and final basket to fill. Stepping back through the water as the tide continued its retreat out to sea, she bent down to begin raking through the sand some more.

Her phone rang in her jacket's front pocket, and she yanked it out, answering before looking at the screen to see who it was. "Hello?"

"Hey there!"

"Oh," Lana said, letting out a disappointed sigh when she recognized her best friend Alicia's voice. "It's you."

Alicia laughed. "If I didn't know you so well, I'd be pretty offended right now."

Lana grimaced. "I'm sorry, it's not that I'm not happy to hear from you. I was just—"

"You were just hoping I was the bank," Alicia said. "I know. Although it would be a bit odd for them to call you this early. Not everyone starts work at sunrise like you. Are you digging?"

"Oh, right. I forgot." Lana looked down at her basket. "Yeah, I'm out here digging. I have my first clambake party this weekend."

"Still no word?"

“Not yet.”

It had only been a few weeks since the inn had gone back up for sale, and without a plan or a second thought, Lana had contacted her bank for a preapproval for a loan to buy it. Everything in Bluedale moved at a slow pace, but each day felt like it was crawling by as she waited on an answer.

The vision of opening her restaurant in the inn after culinary school hadn't gone exactly as planned, but if things went well with the bank, then she would be able to move her restaurant into the inn *and* honor her family in the greatest way possible.

“They'll like the plan, won't they?” she asked.

“Girl, they're going to love the plan. How could they not? These types of things just take a while, is all. Besides, my brilliant husband and I helped you put that plan together, so how could the bank say no?”

Lana grinned. “It was pretty detailed. Maybe they're still reading through it,” she joked. “But you two are amazing. Not sure what I'd do without both of you.”

Alicia was an estate planning lawyer, who Lana had met one night at a party in downtown Providence during her final year at school. While she was busy in the kitchen, Alicia was in her second year of law school at Roger Williams University. They'd become fast friends, and after five years, they were inseparable. Alicia's husband, Nathan, a marketing professional, had helped Lana get *On the Bay* launched after she'd remodeled it from the old fish market, and they'd both given her plenty of notes on her loan proposal before she sent it to the bank.

“You're Bluedale born and raised, you run a successful business, and you're looking to take back over a local landmark that was in your family for years. What could be better?”

Lana nodded along, but none of Alicia's reassurance

could stop the anxiety she felt. “I just... I want this so badly. For me, but also for my grandad.”

In the five years since his official diagnosis, dementia had been slowly making its way through his memories, yet despite the challenges of watching him battle the disease, their time at the inn was still vivid in his mind. He didn’t always remember who she was as an adult when she went to see him at the nursing home, but their early years always brought him back to her. Regardless of how hard some of those memories were, especially when he’d get fixated on discussing special times with her parents, it’d kept them close during her visits. She wanted nothing more than for him to live out the rest of his days knowing she’d gotten the inn back—before he couldn’t remember anything at all.

“Well, I can’t make the bank move any faster on your loan, but I *do* have the perfect thing to take your mind off it.”

Lana groaned. “Is this about that friend of Nathan’s again?”

“Come on, this guy is perfect for you!” Alicia insisted.

Lana rolled her eyes. “You always say that.”

“Yeah, but I mean it this time. Just wait until you meet him. Besides, you can’t stay cooped up in that kitchen for the rest of your life. You need to talk to people besides me and Nathan.”

She knew her friend was right, but she still scrambled to think of how to tell her that she’d rather not. Alicia had texted Lana earlier about these dinner plans, but she’d held off answering, knowing this friend of Nathan’s was a setup. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to date or settle down and have a family one day, but running her restaurant with only one extra chef took up all her time.

“I’m not cooped up. I’m just trying to maintain my restaurant all on my own. Besides, I talk to Heidi every day.”

“Talking to your sous chef while hiding in the kitchen

doesn't count." Alicia sighed through the phone. "Would you just pop outside and have a quick bite with us? Tell Heidi you're taking a break. You know her, she won't mind."

Lana hesitated because Alicia knew her sous chef well and was right—Heidi would most likely encourage her to get out of the kitchen too. "I'm not trying to be a social drag, I'm just busy."

"Ugh! I'm busy too, but I don't go reclusive on the world. Just give it a try. I booked us for an eight o'clock reservation on your patio tomorrow night. Make sure you put on something fun and flirty."

Lana chuckled. Alicia seemed to forget that chefs on duty couldn't wear "fun and flirty" outfits in the kitchen. She drew her eyebrows together. What reason could she give this time? When Alicia had tried to fix her up with a different guy over breakfast last month, a head cold had saved her from having to go. She truly had no desire this time either, but as her mind raced for an excuse, she couldn't think of one. She'd have to surrender. "Okay, you win. But I will be dressed how I always dress at work: in my uniform, which isn't fun *or* flirty."

"Lana! Come on! At least brush those gorgeous red curls into something presentable!"

"I make no promises," she said. They wrapped up their conversation a minute later, and Lana returned her phone to her pocket, stopping for a moment to just enjoy the quiet of the beach.

In the distance, the seagulls swooped up, drifting through the air, before landing in a new spot in the sand near the inn's old deck. She always felt comforted at the sight, remembering how hard her grandad had worked to build that deck. Like the shore's own melody, the birds called out to each other, strutting over the sand. Her grandad's words from the night before whispered in her ear as she watched

them peck around, scrounging for any piece of food they could find.

“IS HE STILL THERE, LANA?” he’d asked her.

Lana had pulled up his blanket, tucking it around him as if he were a little boy. “Who, Grandad?” But she already knew.

“That seagull. The one from that summer. Don’t you remember?” His eyes drifted toward the ceiling, looking calm and clear in his thoughts. Lana bent down, kissing his forehead, unable to find the right words and trying to escape the feeling of wind rushing through her curls and the memory of her father’s firm grip. *Of course I remember*, she’d wanted to say.

“There are always seagulls out there, Grandad. I can never remember which one is which.” That was *always* her answer. In recent weeks, this memory had been resurfacing, and he’d replayed it over and over with her.

“I hope you take the pontoon out soon,” he said, changing the subject as his thoughts shifted like they always did.

AS IF THE seagulls from that last summer with her parents weren’t hard enough to talk about, this was how he’d ended their conversations lately. It took everything Lana had not to crumble each time, knowing the family boat he was referring to would continue to stay on dry land.

Being out on the water was where Lana had always found the most joy as a child, but everything changed after she lost her parents. What had once brought reprieve only reminded her now of the stormy seas of her past. And no matter how

hard she'd tried, she couldn't get herself onto a boat of any kind.

No good would come of getting lost in those thoughts, especially when she had so much to do today. Looking away from the inn, she refocused on the task before her.

With her attention on clam digging, she noticed there was still no one else clamming with her. That would change after the holiday weekend passed. Catching shellfish was a popular activity for both residents and tourists in Bluedale, so Lana couldn't help but soak in the tranquil start to her day.

After successfully filling her last basket, she stacked them, picked up all four by holding them under the bottom one and made her way to shore, easily walking along the soft sand flats that were now fully lit by the sun. Just down the beach, early risers had begun to show up with their coffee or books to sit and enjoy the quiet in the sun before crowds of people arrived. Reaching the parking lot behind her restaurant, she waved at some familiar faces who ran past, and brought all her baskets to the back of her bright-red Jeep. She placed them on the ground before peeling out of her hip waders and muck boots, then opened her trunk and tossed her wet attire in.

Now shivering without anything on top of her swimsuit to warm her, she quickly hopped into the driver's seat to fetch her sweatpants and zip-up sweater. The hot summer air was taking its time blowing in this year, but she didn't mind because soon enough, the salty humidity would make this job a little harder.

With her sweats on, her body began to warm back up, and she opened the car door feeling satisfied with the number of clams she'd collected. They needed to be cleaned, soaked, and put on ice before they spoiled. Her lobster order

didn't need to be picked up until later, so she picked up the baskets again, and headed to the kitchen.

Wiping sweat off her brow a few minutes into scrubbing, she cracked a window to let in some of the cool, early summer air. Alicia's insistence on meeting this friend of hers crossed her mind again as she examined each clam, discarding the ones that were already opened and putting the cleaned ones in bowls to soak. Her job required a lot of focus and she bit her bottom lip, continuing to mentally justify her resistance to meeting someone new. Shaking off the guilt she felt for trying to dodge her friends' nice gesture, she pulled her full attention back to the clambake preparation.

Making it a successful kick-off party for the summer season was a much more important thing to worry about. Her reputation was riding on her future with *On the Bay*, and that reputation might determine whether or not she got approved for the bank loan.

That meant making sure every private party and the daily food preparation were the best she could provide. She needed no distractions or uncomfortable blind dates.

Tossing the last clam into the bowl, she thought again about all the possibilities of owning the inn. Perhaps she could remodel the dining area and expand it, not to mention finally having indoor seating. It would all depend on the loan amount, but her mind raced with ideas, and she prayed this would be the answer she'd been waiting on to grow her business. She could daydream all day, but for now she had a private party to finish getting ready for.

After the clams were all in bowls to soak for a couple hours, she cleaned and dried her hands and moved on to getting the night's appetizer prepped, when she heard a car pull up near the window. Peeking out, she saw Heidi get out of her adorable yellow Volkswagen Beetle. She tossed the

towel down onto the counter and walked outside to greet her.

“Did you have a good dig this morning?” Heidi shielded her eyes, her short blonde hair, nearly the color of her car, flapping in the breeze as she shut the door.

“It was a success!” Lana said, while Heidi opened the back door and pulled out a giant plastic tub filled with unshucked corn. “How do you manage to fit anything in that tiny car of yours?”

“Hey now, don’t start the day knocking my car!” Heidi said with an amused expression. Lana walked over as Heidi placed the bucket on the ground. Since the day Heidi had bought it, Lana couldn’t help but poke fun at her, especially with how different her Jeep looked next to the little yellow car. “You’d be surprised what I can squeeze in here.” Heidi pointed to the bucket, grabbing a handle. “Can you help me drag this in? It weighs a ton.”

Lana gripped the other side of the bucket. “You sure got a lot. Did you clean out all the corn at the farmer’s market? I’m surprised they had so much this early.” Together the women lifted it up.

“Pretty much. It’s not the sweet kind yet, but they sure had a good bunch. The potatoes are on the other side of my back seat and that bucket is even heavier. What time is the lobster order going to be ready?” Wobbling back inside, carefully balancing the bucket, they placed it down in the kitchen near the small island and went back to get the potatoes.

“Around two this afternoon, which is perfect. Then we don’t have to ice them too long. Are you still up for gathering the rockweed?” Lana asked.

“Absolutely—you know that’s my favorite.” Heidi opened the other back door, and together they pulled out the potatoes, which were indeed much heavier, and brought them in.

“Besides, you did the dig this morning all by yourself, so it’s no problem for me to get it.”

“You do a better job of gathering it up anyway,” Lana told her, nearly throwing her back out as she set the potatoes down next to the corn. “I think we’re set for a while with potatoes.”

“You can never have enough potatoes in a kitchen.” Heidi dropped the other side down and brushed her hair off her face.

“Or enough dates. What was last night?” Lana twisted her mouth, pretending to think for a minute. “Date number twelve this month?”

Heidi grabbed one of the potatoes and held it up. “Don’t make me use this on you!”

Lana raised a teasing brow. “Don’t be mad ’cause it’s true. You’re like the ‘one-and-done dater.’”

“Excuse me, but remember that guy we met at the tavern in Eastham? He got two dates.” Heidi tossed the potato back in the bucket. “And I’ve only been on a few dates these past few weeks, thank you very much.”

“Wow, *two* whole dates? He should get a prize. Tell him to come on down and I’ll give him a free lobster roll.”

“Says the woman who dates no one!”

Lana couldn’t help but smile. Heidi may work for her, but the two had grown very close, and even though they were just having fun, she knew Heidi wasn’t scared to be a little truthful either. “You’re right. You win. But I will date again. Eventually. Once I hear back from the bank.”

At that, they both laughed.

“I know you will.” Heidi winked at her. “And he will be as perfect as your food.”

“He’d better be.” Lana nodded to the door. “The skiff boat is in the storage out back. Let me give you the key.” She pulled out her key ring, twisting one off and handing it to

Heidi before glancing at her watch. It was already close to noon, and she wanted to run home to shower before coming back to get things ready. The event was for a fortieth birthday, and the family wanted to arrive a little early to decorate the patio. "I'll meet you back here around two-thirty, after I pick up the lobster?"

"Sounds good. There's an abundance of rockweed out there this early in the summer, so it shouldn't take me long. See you soon!" Heidi dashed out of the kitchen and headed off.

Lana grabbed the broom out of the supply closet, left the kitchen, and went out to the patio to begin sweeping it off. Muffled voices in the distance caught her attention. Following the sound, she leaned the broom against one of the tables and walked across the sand to the edge of the beach grass that divided her restaurant from the inn. Two men with clipboards were standing in front of the large outdoor deck. Perhaps they were from the bank and had been sent to appraise the property. She leaned her head in to try and make out what they were saying.

"I think there will be enough room for the proposed plan, but only on the east side of the building." Both men walked farther away, and she couldn't hear their conversation anymore, but something about what he'd said made her uneasy. She didn't have anything in her proposal about that side of the building.

Picking the broom back up, she swept around to the side, where she caught sight of the blue reusable cover that was stretched over her parents' pontoon. Lana swallowed a lump in her throat and blinked back her emotions. The men's voices from the inn echoed in the distance again as they started to come closer, pulling her attention away from the boat.

When she was finishing sweeping, she went back inside

the kitchen and put the broom in the closet. The voices could now be heard outside her kitchen window, which meant they were in the parking lot her restaurant shared with the inn. There was no time to ponder what they were doing, so she quickly checked the clams and hurried to her car to get home and shower. Forty-two people were not going to serve themselves.

A COUPLE HOURS LATER, Lana returned feeling clean and refreshed, and ready for the clambake. She and Heidi got the lobsters, clams, corn, and potatoes covered on top of the rockweed to steam in the firepit, before they went back to the kitchen to get the rest of the food.

When they reemerged onto the patio, the family hosting the party had placed a red velvet cake for the birthday celebration on a side table next to Lana's red, white, and blue macaroons. The hired bartender for private parties had just finished setting up the drinks, and Lana looked around, impressed with the family's choice of burlap table covers and nautical runners with red-and-blue lanterns on top—each table complete with a small bucket holding lobster bibs and napkins.

After a quick meeting with the servers, Lana headed over to sample both of the specialty drinks the barman had crafted for the evening, and gave him her approval before she disappeared into the kitchen. As she mixed the batter for the strawberry shortcake biscuits, her phone lit up on the counter with an incoming call.

Normally she would ignore it once she got started in the kitchen, but she froze when she saw it was the bank calling.

"Hello?" she said, trying to sound confident. Capable. Like

a woman who could—who *would*—take over the inn and make it thrive.

“Is this Lana?” a female voice said.

“This is she.”

“Hi, Lana, it’s Debbie from Bluedale Trust. Gearing up for the holiday weekend?”

“Hi, Debbie! We are. We’re preparing for our first clam-bake of the season.”

“Sounds wonderful. I really enjoyed experiencing that last summer.” Lana heard her sigh and felt her stomach drop. “So I’m calling about your application for a loan to buy back the inn.” Lana’s heart was in her throat. This was it—the moment of truth.

“Yes?” she said eagerly.

“There’s no easy way to say this, but your application has been denied.”

The words were such a shock that Lana literally stumbled, banging her hip on the edge of the table. The sudden burst of pain forced her to gasp in air so she could reply. “Was there a problem with my business plan? With my financials? I thought—”

“The issue is with the property itself,” Debbie cut in. “The bank can’t approve the loan for you to purchase the inn because it’s no longer for sale.”

“Wh-what?” Lana stammered. “But it only went on the market a month ago.”

“And right when your loan application came in a few weeks back, so did another offer—which was ten percent *over* the asking price. The owners sat with the offer for a couple weeks. They knew you wanted to buy it too and they really did consider it—but money has been tight for them lately. The extra funds were just too hard to say no to, so in the end they accepted this other offer.”

“Is it too late to counter?” Lana knew she wouldn’t be able to top ten percent over asking, but she was desperate.

“Unfortunately, it is. We just got word that zoning and planning approved phase one building permits already.”

Lana’s knees went weak, and she had to cling to the table to keep from falling as she struggled to push down the tears that filled her eyes.

“Not again...” she said, barely above a whisper, before it dawned on her what Debbie had just said. “Wait, did you say building permits?”

“Yes, the offer came in from a development company out in New York City. That’s all I know about them.” There was a pause, and when Debbie spoke again, her voice had a forced cheerfulness to it. “But you’ll be glad to hear there is some good news. You’ve built up enough credit for a business loan. Maybe you can get building permits of your own, and extend the space you have now for the indoor dining area you originally hoped to add.”

It was something Lana had thought to do a couple years prior, but she’d stopped pursuing the idea when she wasn’t approved for a large enough loan. The space around the restaurant was very limited, with property lines from the inn taking up most of the land on one side—but it wasn’t impossible to expand on the other.

“Maybe,” she said, trying her hardest to sound appreciative of Debbie’s suggestion.

“I know how hard this is, Lana. Everyone here at Bluedale Trust was rooting for you, and I’m sure the rest of our town will be sad to hear this news too.”

“Except for the zoning and planning committee,” Lana said sarcastically.

“You know them—all business and care for how this offer will enhance Bluedale’s growth.”

After a few more pleasantries, which Lana barely heard, she hung up. In the quiet of the kitchen, she hung her head, still in disbelief that she'd have to let the inn go... all over again.