

STARLIGHT WISHES

(Book One in the Starlight Series)

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Wellington Grove (Book Two in the Wellington Cross Series)

A Wellington Christmas (A Wellington Cross Novella, Book 2.5)

Wellington Rose (Book Three in the Wellington Cross Series)

## Prologue

*Virginia Beach, 2005*

“Honey, can you grab me another one of these pretty little drinks?” Josie Callaway asked her husband, Luke, holding up a nearly empty glass with a blue umbrella stabbed into a slice of pineapple on the rim.

He leaned down and kissed her lips, salty and tangy from a mango margarita. “Sure, baby.”

Luke, Josie, and their six-year-old daughter, Cassie, were attending a Labor Day party at a friend and bandmate’s house up near Chic’s Beach, a stretch of beaches along the Chesapeake Bay in the northern section of Virginia Beach. He was the lead guitar player and vocalist in a local country band that played gigs at local bars and restaurants around the Hampton Roads area. They called themselves “Renegades,” and had even opened up for Keith Urban once at the amphitheater. Playing in Renegades was just a part-time thing for all of them. They had regular day jobs and then played on the weekends. Luke himself was an ex-Navy man who now worked as a government contractor and traveled a lot to the Eastern Shore.

The backyard of the bass player, Derek Jones, was popping with action, people milling about, talking, drinking, and cutting up. It was getting dark, and the pool was lit with alternating colors and filled with children and teenagers. Luke kept a watchful eye on Cassie and her best friend, Emily. Close by the pool, the Tiki bar had its own special lights where drinks were being served by Derek’s wife, Bridget, a red-headed,

bubbly, cheerleader type woman who giggled like a school girl as Luke walked over for his wife's request.

"Luke, how many of these have you had?"

"I don't drink these fruity drinks, Bridget, you know that. This one's for Josie, and I'll take another Yuengling, please."

"Sure thing, coming right up." She poured tequila and two or three other fruit juices in the glass and then swung around and opened the lid of a tall black cooler on wheels and pulled out his beer. Before handing it to him, she popped the lid off with a Hard Rock Café guitar-shaped bottle opener with palm trees on it.

He took hold of the beer, water dripping from its sides, and said, "Woo, this is good and cold! Thanks! You're really good at this. Did you ever tend bar?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. My last year in college, I worked at one right near the campus. Got a ton of tips, too, but I blew it all, of course." She laughed uproariously. She had a contagious laugh. Anytime she or someone else said something she thought was vaguely funny, she would laugh like it was the most hilarious thing she'd ever heard. You couldn't help but like her.

He took the beer and the fruity concoction over to his wife, who was sitting at a table on the patio surrounded by the other wives of his bandmates. The only one unmarried was Steve, the drummer, who was Emily's dad and was divorced. He did have a girlfriend there whose name was Maggie.

"Here you go, darlin'," Luke said, handing Josie the drink and was rewarded by another kiss. Her big blue eyes smiled at him underneath bright blonde hair, pulled up and tied in some sort of knot in a sexy way.

"Hey, hey," Derek said, walking out the door with a tray of food. "Enough of that. Save it for later." He winked at Luke.

Light laughter filled the air, and Luke followed the smell of wings over to the bar, which Derek poured them into a big empty bowl. Luke tried one, moaned appreciatively, and licked his fingers when he got down to the bone.

"Wipe your hands off and grab your guitar," Derek said, empty tray still in his hand. "Time for a little improv."

Luke walked around the pool and through the gate to the driveway and fetched both his Fender Tele as well as an old worn acoustic in

Brazilian burst and took them back to the backyard. The next half an hour was spent setting up, plugging in, and finally they started playing a bluesy funky groove. The girls all got up and started cheering and whistling, and for the next hour, the band played their versions of country and rock hits as the stars came out. Josie herself got up on the bar and started dancing, hollering, and clapping her hands, while the other ladies laughed at her exuberance.

The last song they played was one that Luke had written both lyrics and music, a love song called “Stay.” The other ladies had heard it before, but with a little alcohol in their system, they teased and hollered while swaying to the ballad. Luke had written that song about the love of his life, and he smiled warmly at Josie as he sang. Once it was over, Josie tripped getting back off the bar and fell over in the grass. Luke took his acoustic off and laid it down on a stand haphazardly and ran over to his wife, feeling the cool grass on his tan bare feet.

“You all right?” he asked anxiously.

She slowly looked up at him, her face lightly red from the fire of the Tiki torches. It was an unusual sight since she normally had pale white skin. She started laughing. “I’m fine.” She stood up and eagerly jumped on him, her arms around his neck, and planted a wet sloppy kiss on his lips, squealing like a pig. “You know that song is my favorite, baby.” She nearly fell out of his arms trying to jump back down. He had to hold her back to steady her. “Can we go home now?” she whispered seductively in his ear.

“Soon as I eat some more wings,” he answered. “You want some? I’ve worked up an appetite.”

“You and me both,” Steve said.

Josie pouted a little but smiled. “All right. I’ll have another ’rita. Where’s Cassie?”

“She’s right over there in the pool with Emily. She’s been in there so long, she must look like a prune.”

He ate at the bar with his buddies, watching Cassie in the pool and Josie with the women, thinking about how they all needed this night of relaxation. He and Josie had been arguing a lot lately, so he felt like she deserved this night of indulging in alcohol and letting go of some of her inhibitions. He grinned, thinking about how the drink also made her feel more amorous, and he looked forward to getting her home. It made him feel guilty for fussing at her earlier.

They had discussed going to the beach the following day, Monday, and have a picnic for just the three of them. Josie was very pale, having Irish in her background, and freckled rather than tanned, so she stayed out of the sun as much as possible, especially in the hot summer. She didn't like the heat, and more than that, she didn't like sand, so she didn't go to the beach very often. Once in a while he would get her to go for a walk on the beach after sunset, but she rarely got her toes in the ocean. So she wasn't keen on going for a picnic in the heat of the day. He argued that she never wanted to do anything outdoors, and she'd ended up in tears, saying he didn't love her, that if he did, he wouldn't try to get her to do things she didn't enjoy.

Seeing her flirt with him and anxious to get home to make love made him feel better. So an hour and two margaritas later, with the stars shining bright overhead, Josie begged Luke again to leave and he agreed.

"I'm driving," he insisted when she grabbed the keys to his blue Mustang from his pocket. "You've had way too many margaritas and you're in no condition to drive."

"What about you? You've been drinking, too."

"I only had two beers, and that was long ago, before we even started playing. So hand them over."

"Fine, but you owe me." She grinned and slapped the keys down into his hands. "I'll go get Cassie."

He smacked her butt as she stumbled her way to the pool. She screamed in pleasure, and he laughed.

A few minutes later, Luke had packed the guitars back in their cases, Cassie was wrapped in a big pink-and-white striped beach towel, and they were driving up Shore Drive towards the oceanfront on their way home. Shore Drive was said to be the most dangerous road in Virginia Beach, as many had lost their lives on the four-lane road, which had a speed limit of fifty-five. The majority of the road was surrounded by a tall forest on both sides where Seashore State Park spread on one side and a campground and Army base on the other side.

While Luke was driving, Cassie fell asleep in the backseat behind her mother. Josie was feeling pretty turned on after all the margaritas and kept sliding her hand up and down his upper thigh, distracting him from the road.

"Would you stop that?" he teased. "I'm trying to drive over here, but you're driving me insane."

She giggled and edged her hand closer to his groin. “You mean this?”

Luke swerved the car a little bit with that gesture. “I mean it, Jos’. Stop doing that.” He took her hand off of his thigh and brought it to his lips.

She took her seatbelt off, but before he could protest, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, the chin, and put her head in front of his to kiss him on the lips. He panicked and pushed her aside gently. “I can’t see the road, Jos’. Get back over there and buckle up.” He took his eyes off the road for a split second to see if she was doing as he asked when all of a sudden, he heard a loud bang to his left and felt the car being pushed off the road.

He slammed on the brakes, but he looked over as a white SUV pushed their small car against the metal guard rail, and because of the high speed, the car bent like aluminum foil, making a loud scraping noise, and kept going until it slammed into a tree. He looked over at Josie, whose head hit the windshield hard since she was not seat-belted, and blood oozed from her head and dripped on the dashboard.

“Oh, God! Josie!” He shook her, but she didn’t move. Was she dead? He panicked, feeling for a pulse, but if it was there, it was faint. “Josie, please, speak to me!” He pushed her gently back up against the seat and looked around for something to stop the bleeding with. He glanced back at his daughter, who had just woken up.

“Daddy? What happened?”

“We had a wreck, baby. Do we have another towel or a blanket back there anywhere?” He tried to keep his cool so Cassie wouldn’t panic.

His daughter handed him the beach towel that was draped around her. “You can have this. What do you need it for?”

“Your mama’s head has a little blood, and I need to try and stop it. Are you all right?”

“My arm hurts,” she said, holding it up. There was blood on her forearm where she must’ve hit it against the door.

“Look for another towel then and wrap it around your arm. I think there’s one under daddy’s guitars.”

He wrapped the towel she gave him around his wife’s head and looked around for the car that hit them. It was a few yards away, and he looked at the guy who was driving with a little boy in the front seat. They were both looking at Luke one moment and the next, the man pulled away. Perfect.

A hit and run. It was too dark to see the license plate. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and called 911 to report the accident. In no time at all, fire engines, police cars, and ambulances made their way noisily to the scene, while Luke rubbed his wife's arm, trying to awaken her, but to no avail.

Little Cassie's arm was hurting, and the loud sirens scared her. Her daddy was outside the car yelling at the firemen to do something with her mama, who was sitting in the seat in front of her, not making any noise.

"Mama?" she said in a timid voice. No answer.

She looked to her right and saw nothing but dark trees, which frightened her. The car was right up against a tree, so her mama wouldn't have been able to get the door opened if she wanted to. That must've been what her daddy was fussing about.

One fireman opened her daddy's door and looked at her mama, picked up her arm, frowned, and then looked back at her. "Are you all right, sweetie?" he asked.

She nodded but held up her arm. "My arm hurts."

"We'll get that taken care of real soon. First we have to get your mama out of the car."

He left to go talk to her daddy again, who looked a little calmer.

"Mama?" she said again. "Can you hear me?" She couldn't understand why she wasn't answering her. Was she mad at her? Maybe she passed out. Her daddy said she had blood on her head.

What if she was dead? Maybe that's why her daddy was so upset. She started to cry.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked around but saw no one. She wiped her tears as another man with a light blue shirt with patches on it came into the car and slowly pulled her mama out. She unbuckled her seatbelt to get a better look at her but her stomach turned when she saw her mama's head hanging sideways with blood dripping down her face. She watched them put her on a little bed with wheels, and her daddy came over, looked at her mama, and then hung his head and started crying.

"Don't cry, daddy," she whispered. She knew then that her mama was dead.

Glass hung down from the sunroof above her, and she worried about some of it falling down on her. She looked up into a clear sky at all the stars. It felt comforting somehow to think about those stars up there so far away from all the noise, blood, and pain down here below. It seemed like there were a thousand stars up in the sky tonight. One particularly bright star caught her attention and she was momentarily mesmerized by it. A poem her mama used to read her came to mind... "Star light, star bright, the first star I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight." The two of them used to sit in her bedroom and look up at those stars when she couldn't sleep, and her mama would tell her to make a wish.

She was scared she'd never see her mama again, so she wished that she would wake up. Just get up off of that bed and surprise all of them. That it was all a joke and daddy wouldn't cry anymore. She also wished she could just get out of this car. She was starting to feel panicky. No one was paying any attention to her.

Before she knew it, a young fireman with sparkling blue eyes and dark brown hair curling around his helmet poked his head in the car at her. He reminded her of someone...the little boy in the other car, the one that had stopped up on the road after they wrecked. She'd been asleep but awoke suddenly when she felt their car hit something. She'd looked all around and saw the big white car and a young dark-haired boy about her age in the front seat. He looked at her curiously, she saw a strange flash of light, and then the driver pulled away. She wondered why they didn't stay and help.

"Hey, there," the fireman said softly. His voice was kind and soothing. "It's going to be all right. I'll take care of you. I'm going to help you get out. Is the seat belt unfastened?"

She nodded.

"All right, come through the middle here and I'll lift you out. The driver's seat is broken and won't move up, okay?"

She nodded again and did as he said. When she reached him, he put his big strong arms around her and lifted her feet and quick as a flash, she was out of the car and standing on her feet again. She turned around to thank him and saw him take his big helmet off.

"Thanks," she said quietly.

"Stay here. I'll be right back," he said.

She looked for her daddy and found him talking to a police officer, walking in a straight line like he was on a tightrope. The fireman walked back over to her with a medical kit and started rubbing some cold stuff on her arm that stung.

“Sorry, sweetheart. What’s your name?”

“Cassie.”

“Cassie, what’s your favorite color?”

“Pink,” she said, thinking about the walls of her room, which her mama and daddy had painted a cotton candy pink last summer.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little pink teddy bear. “Would you like to hold my bear? He’s a little scared from all the noise.”

Cassie nodded. She glanced over as a big tow truck pulled off the road towards them, and then took the bear from him and hugged it to her neck, whispering that it would be okay, that she would take care of it. The fireman put something sharp in her arm that hurt, and then all the pain slowly faded away to nothing. She watched him pull out what looked like needle and thread, and he asked her more questions while he sewed up the long cut on her arm. She tried not to look at what he was doing. Even though she couldn’t feel anything, it still looked gross and made her stomach hurt. The fireman finished up by putting some white squares over the wound, covered that up with pink Band-Aids, and then wrapped the whole thing up in a long strip of material.

“There. You’re good to go now until those stitches are ready to come back out in a week or so. Where’s your daddy?”

She looked around and pointed to him just as he walked over towards them.

“Cassie, are you all right, baby?”

She nodded, happy to see him. He picked her up and squeezed her tight.

“Thank you so much for all your help,” he said to the fireman, who had put his helmet back on.

Cassie watched the fireman take the medical kit away, and then he just disappeared. She never saw him again. She turned her attention back to her daddy, who held her as they watched their car being lifted up on the back of the tow truck.

“Where’s mama?” she asked him quietly, though she knew what the answer was.

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“She’s not going to make it, Cassie. She was hurt too bad. Her injuries won’t heal. I’m afraid she won’t be coming back home with us.” His voice broke off, and she put her hand on his cheek. He pressed his hand over hers. “She’s going to Heaven now. We have to let her go.”

She started crying, and he broke down and started crying right along with her.

A policeman offered them a ride home, and they held each other tight in the backseat all the way home.

Home would never be the same again without her mama.

## Chapter One

*Ten Years Later*

Cassie Callaway heard the sounds of reggae music blaring from a house on Sandbridge Beach as she walked in the sand towards it. It was the first Friday night in August and a friend from school, Danny, was having a big party in a green-and-white house with upper decks looking out over the ocean, called “Jewel of the Sea.” Nearly all the houses in this beach neighborhood had names on them. The sun was setting, and the sky was turning deep pink to her left and dark purple to her right where it blended with the navy blue ocean.

Her Aunt Jen had a best friend, Maggie, who lived in one of these houses just down the beach from the Jewel. Maggie had been her friend Emily’s stepmom for a while, but she and Emily’s dad divorced. Cassie’s dad traveled a lot with his job, so she had to stay with her aunt quite a lot and tagged along with her wherever she went. She knew Cassie was going to a party, but she didn’t know what she was really wearing to it. Underneath a long flowing summer tank dress, she had on a skimpy black dress that was short enough to technically be called a shirt, and the front cut low between ample breasts. She’d shed the outer dress as soon as she’d gotten out of sight of Maggie’s house, and then sat on a dune to apply black eyeliner, mascara, and red lipstick.

With the house now in view, she tried to balance herself as her high-heeled sandals sank deep into the sand. She pushed her bra strap back under her spaghetti strap and tucked a loose strand of her long blonde hair

behind her left ear. Her on-and-off boyfriend, Kerrick, greeted her at the bottom of the steps off the deck with a light kiss and discreetly handed her a joint, which she sniffed and quickly put into her small black purse with sequins reserved for special occasions.

“Hey,” she said, and followed him up the stairs to the upper deck and then inside the house. They walked into the family room, which was filled with teenagers who were drinking, smoking, kissing, and dancing. The party seemed to be in full swing. It was a huge gorgeous house, and the décor was very tasteful with walls of light teal green and dark wood trim throughout. To their right was a family room with a big screen TV and lots of comfy chairs. Across from that was a huge kitchen in the corner with windows all around overlooking the ocean. Nearby was a long table and chairs of dark wood that could seat up to twenty people. The kitchen bar was full of alcoholic drinks and the long table was full of food – a necessity after smoking weed. Danny’s parents left him alone a lot, and he had an older friend who would buy the alcohol for him, a supplier for the weed, and he used part of his allowance to run up to the market for food. It looked like he really splurged for this party.

This was not her first time at this beach house and not her first time at a party that involved drinking and smoking. In the past year since she’d met Kerrick and came to her first party here with him, she had developed an addictive habit of both weed and alcohol, mostly wine, and sometimes pain pills.

She and Kerrick had met in school. He used to sit behind her in algebra class and would play with her hair when the teacher wasn’t looking. She thought he was so cute and had been thrilled with the attention. Her first boyfriend. His dark curly hair hung over his forehead and big brown eyes. He would ask her questions about algebra that were so easy, she knew he was just making up stuff to talk about. He finally got up the nerve to ask for her cell phone number and started texting her...a lot. Their first date had been to the movies. She didn’t even remember the movie; they had kissed through most of it. They quickly became inseparable.

He brought her to Danny’s for the first time at a summer’s end party last year, when she’d first been introduced to smoking weed and drinking beer. She had been resistant, having been brought up not to do those things, although her dad himself got drunk on plenty of occasions, ever since her mother’s death. But she finally agreed to give weed a try and soon

found out that smoking clouded up her mind from thoughts about that night of the car wreck when she'd lost her mother. It made her forget when her dad started becoming distant and sulking, getting drunk, and working out of town almost all the time. Smoking and eventually drinking helped her relax and forget about her problems.

Kerrick was sometimes moody and yelled at her, and recently, he'd stopped contacting her. Stopped calling, stopped texting, and stopped driving to her house. They had a really big argument one night about a month ago when she refused to have sex with him. She was a virgin and wished to remain so until her wedding day. That angered Kerrick, but she was not going to let him talk her into that. That was one thing that her Aunt Jen had stressed to her – to save it for the one person she felt she couldn't live without. The one person she loved more than anything. And Cassie agreed with her. Kerrick was definitely not the one person she couldn't live without.

Yet Kerrick was very attentive tonight and she couldn't help wondering why. Perhaps he wanted to reconcile.

"Hey!" Danny said when he saw them. He'd been talking to some other guys and came over and poured them some drinks – Barefoot Zinfandel for Cassie, rum and Coke for Kerrick.

She and Kerrick walked down the hall by the long dining table and looked in the movie room on their right. Her best friend Emily was sitting in the corner flirting with a guy named Trevor while "Dazed and Confused" played softly on a big screen. Trevor had eyes only for Emily, which was just what she craved. That was her modus operandi – flirting. It was how she got attention. Cassie's dad called her boy-crazy. She was pretty with layered brown hair, big brown eyes and long eyelashes, so she got plenty of attention, but that didn't keep her from wanting more. Her parents divorced when she was young so she liked getting attention. Her dad, Steve, had played in the band with Cassie's dad, and she only got to see him on occasional weekends. She used to live with her mom in the nearby Creeds area until a few years ago when her mom remarried and they moved into an adjoining neighborhood close to Cassie's.

Cassie walked in the room to say hi to her.

She smiled excitedly and said, "Hey, Cassie, Kerrick." She kissed Trevor quickly and then asked, "Can us girls talk for a sec? I'll be right back, so don't go anywhere." She smiled and winked as she got up and

took hold of Cassie's dress strap and pulled her out into the hall as Kerrick went into the movie room and sat down. Emily pulled her across the hall to a secluded alcove near a bedroom, while Cassie gripped her plastic cup to keep the wine from spilling.

"So...I see you're here with Kerrick. Are you guys back together?" she asked.

"Not really. He was already here when I got here. He gave me something to get started with."

"Let me see."

Cassie pulled the joint out of her purse and showed it to her.

Emily put it up to her nose. "This smells sweet. Is it a new kind?"

Cassie raised her shoulders. "I don't know. I don't really care, as long as it gets rid of this headache."

"I hear ya."

"What about you and Trevor? Is that a new romance brewing?"

Emily laughed. "You know I've always got a romance brewing somewhere."

"Ain't that the truth!" Cassie said, rolling her eyes but smiling.

"You think I'm a whore?"

Cassie's eyes widened and shook her head. "I never said that."

"You didn't have to. Your body language said it all. I don't give my body away to everyone I flirt with. I just like to have fun. Don't you?"

"Um, not that way."

"You still haven't had sex yet, have you? Honestly, Cassie. Sometimes I think you're too pure to hang with this crowd."

"I'm not pure. You can't smoke weed and be pure. But no, I haven't let anyone go all the way with me. I'm waiting for the right one to come along."

Emily laughed again. "You might be waiting a long time for that. Come on, let's get back to the guys before they find other girls to get interested in."

When they went back into the movie room, Trevor was talking to another friend, Josh, who had long blonde curly hair, but Kerrick was gone.

"Where's Kerrick?" Cassie asked Trevor.

He raised his shoulder up and down. "I don't know. He left, didn't say where."

Cassie took another sip of her wine and walked back to the kitchen and family room area, looking for Kerrick. She walked back to the dining table for something to eat when Danny walked over to her.

“Hey, what’s up, Cassie?” He bent over and kissed her cheek, which surprised her. She felt herself blush. He was a cute guy, tall and thin with brown hair that was combed back in front and reached his shoulders, and green eyes. He had a friend with him, one she hadn’t seen before. This guy was really tan, had dark brown hair that was layered to his neck, and nice brown eyes. “This is Jackson, my, uh, cousin.”

Jackson took her hand and kissed it, which seemed very old-fashioned, but kind of nice. “Pleasure to meet you,” he said with a deep voice. He looked a little older, maybe mid-twenties.

“Nice to meet you,” Cassie said demurely. She looked around for Kerrick once more, starting to feel uncomfortable with all the attention, and she was ready to get started smoking since her head was pounding.

“Let me fill that drink for you,” Danny said. He took the blue plastic cup from her and walked over to the bar.

Jackson lingered.

“Are you new to the area?” Cassie asked him, making polite conversation.

“I’m just a cousin, visiting the area.”

“Oh, right. Cousin.” She had honestly forgotten already. Her memory was terrible lately. She dreaded going back to school in a month. Weed helped her forget her problems but it also made her forget a lot of other things, too.

Kerrick showed up again walking down the hall with a brunette who was well-endowed. He had been holding her hand and let it go discreetly, and she hung back and watched him.

“Sorry, I got distracted, babe,” he said to Cassie. “Some friends are going to hang upstairs. You want to come up?”

She knew what was upstairs – bedrooms. She looked behind him to the brunette. This was a moment of decision that could change the course of the evening. Either she went upstairs with him and they ended up making out, and he would eventually pressure her into having sex again, or she would let him go up with the brunette and she would be on her own the rest of the night. She didn’t want to be alone. She was alone too much,

that was the problem. And she wasn't giving him up to that other girl so easily.

Maybe Emily was right about just having fun. Maybe she could have fun with Kerrick and appease him without going all the way.

"How about a smoke first?"

"Sure. Hold on a minute."

He turned around and walked back towards the brunette girl. That irritated Cassie until the other girl turned around and went down some nearby stairs, and Kerrick came back to her. "Let's go downstairs to the pool room."

They walked downstairs where there was a game room, a couple of bedrooms with bunk beds, and a huge indoor pool. They opened the clear glass door with an etched heron on it, and walked into a cloud of smells: chlorine mixed with weed. There were flashing disco lights and bubbling lava lamps all around the room. Many people were sitting in different groups, passing bongos and joints. A couple was making out in the pool quite intensely.

Cassie saw the brunette sit down at one of the groups, and her eyes followed them as they passed. She resisted the urge to stick out her tongue. She and Kerrick sat down in a corner to themselves and she pulled out the joint he'd given her earlier. The music from the kitchen had been hooked up to this room, too, and a Bob Marley song played loudly.

Cassie smoked until her head stopped throbbing, and then realized she'd not gotten that refill of wine from Danny. She was already hungry and thirsty.

"Can we go back up and get some food?" she asked.

"Sure."

They walked past the brunette again, and this time Cassie's inhibitions were down. "Mind your own business, bitch," she said. "Right now, he's mine."

Kerrick laughed at her, put his arm around her neck and led the way back out and up the stairs. They took sandwiches, a whole bag of chips, and some more drinks upstairs. There was another sitting area up on that floor, overlooking the ocean. They munched, got a little drunk, and then started kissing right there in front of two other couples. Kerrick stood up and pulled her with him, heading for the master bedroom. It was a huge room with another sitting area with big windows overlooking the ocean.

He pulled her onto the king-sized bed, and they kissed and got pretty hot and heavy, but when he tried to pry her underwear off, she stopped him.

“No, Kerrick.”

“Aw, come on, Cassie. I won’t hurt you, I promise.”

He nipped her neck and gave her kisses down her neck to her cleavage, his hand still gently tugging at the underwear.

She pushed his hand away. “Stop it. I said no.”

He rolled onto his back, sighed heavily, and looked up at the ceiling fan, which was whirring softly. She lay still, trying to get the room to stop spinning.

Kerrick got up suddenly and zipped his shorts up. She hadn’t even realized he’d unzipped them.

“We’re through,” he said. “I bet Chelsea wouldn’t hesitate to give me some.”

That must be the brunette’s name. “Fine! Go to her! See if I care!”

He left her in the room alone and slammed the door behind him. He sure didn’t waste any time finding a replacement.

Half an hour later, Cassie was down in the kitchen eating again. She’d smoked another joint to make her forget how awful Kerrick treated her and to forget the fact that him and Chelsea were probably doing it in one of the other bedrooms. She felt a nice buzz and enjoyed the way the lights in the kitchen seemed to sway back and forth.

Jackson sat down next to her at the bar and put his arm around her back. “Hey, you’re back. Was that your boyfriend I saw you with?” He smelled like the ocean; he was probably a surfer. He had on a white shirt that was unbuttoned halfway down, which showed off his tan chiseled chest and a hint of dark curly chest hair.

She had to force her attention back to his question. “Well, he used to be. We just broke up. He’s probably hooking up with Chelsea now.”

“Chelsea?”

“Yeah, do you know her?”

He shook his head. “He’s a fool.”

She smiled at the compliment. “I don’t care. I’m done with him.”

“Too bad for him. Good for me.” He winked. “Do you come here often? Oh,” he laughed. “That sounded like a bad pick-up line, didn’t it?”

She laughed at him. “I have been here a time or two. This is a really nice beach house. I’ve always wanted to live at the beach. That’d be so *sick*. To be able to tan anytime I wanted...to have the beach right in my backyard, and a pool, too.” She seemed to be rambling. She did that when she got high.

“Yeah, this is nice. Danny’s dad and stepmom are out sailing for the weekend in the Chesapeake Bay, up the coast to Maryland. They won’t be back until Sunday, so I told Danny to live it up, have a big party.”

“I thought something was going on. There’s way more booze and food here tonight than I’ve ever seen. So where do you live, Jackson?”

He didn’t get a chance to answer the question because Danny walked up. “Hey, Cassie. I was going to give you more wine but you disappeared. Are you getting enough? You need more merlot?”

She held her cup up. “I’ve got plenty, thanks.”

Danny kissed her cheek again. *What was going on?* Must be the dress. Plus, word may have gotten around about her and Kerrick breaking up. She sure was attracting a lot more attention tonight.

“Ok, but let me know if you need anything at all.”

“I will,” she promised.

Jackson had walked away for a moment and came back with a brownie. “You have got to try one of these brownies. They’re a little piece of heaven.” He handed her a small plate of the gooey chocolate stuff. She couldn’t resist. “Mmm, you’re right...heaven.”

Jackson sat down on the barstool and scooted it over closer to her. He then turned towards her and put his hand on her knee and kissed her cheek. She stopped chewing, swallowed the rest of the brownie and reached for her cup of merlot and took another drink. As she sat it back down on the bar, he slowly turned her face towards his and kissed her on the mouth. He wasn’t a bad kisser. His arms slipped around her. This cousin of Danny’s certainly was a fast mover.

“You taste good,” he whispered between kisses.

“It’s the brownie...and the wine,” she said.

He continued to kiss her, and she started to feel crazy. Not only was the room spinning, but her cheeks felt flushed and her stomach started gurgling. She felt like she was going to be sick.

“I don’t feel so good,” she said, breaking off the kiss.

He stood up and pulled her arm. “Come on. You can lie down in one of the bedrooms for a while.” He met her eyes with his piercing brown ones, and she saw a mixture of concern and desire there.

In her effort to get up, she almost fell, her heel getting caught on the bar stool. He grabbed her arms to help keep her from falling.

“I’ll be okay. I think I just need some fresh air.” She tried to get out of his grips. No way was she going in another bedroom alone with a guy. She barely even knew this Jackson, and he moved way too fast for her.

“I’ll come with you.”

They walked towards the sliding glass doors that led outside to a balcony when nausea hit her. She was going to throw up.

“Jackson, I’m going to be sick.” She turned around to find the nearest bathroom, which was halfway down the hall in that alcove she’d been in earlier. She briefly wondered where Emily and Trevor were; she hadn’t seen them since she first arrived.

She turned around, Jackson close on her heels. “I’ll be right out.”

Once she closed the door, she rushed to the toilet and lifted up the seat to expel the brownie and wine. She felt just awful. Once she could stand again, she flushed it all down and then washed her face and hands with cold water. She looked at herself in the mirror, noting her bloodshot eyes with dark circles underneath, and her hair was disheveled. She looked a mess. How could any guy want to flirt with that? Her eyes drifted to the low-cut dress and she knew the answer to that question. She attempted to straighten out her hair and reapplied some lipstick, hoping that would detract from her red eyes.

She walked back out of the bathroom, where Jackson was still waiting. He helped her walk back through the house to the balcony and they went outside. A few people were talking, laughing, throwing things off the balcony, being too noisy. They walked down the stairs to the beach below when nausea hit her again. She threw up again on the beach as soon as she hit the sand. She stumbled in her heels, fell onto her knees, and Jackson struggled to help her, but she smacked his hands away. It was embarrassing enough knowing that she was going to throw up in front of a cute guy, but for him to coddle her made her feel worse.

She threw up and then covered it up with some sand. She sat down with her legs straight out, and Jackson plopped down beside her. She

looked out over the sand to the ocean. There was a sliver of a moon hanging in the sky above the ocean. Sea breezes whipped her hair around her face. Jackson took hold of it and pushed it behind her ear.

“Feeling better yet?” he asked, his deep voice hauntingly quiet.

She took a deep breath and then let it all out in a sigh. “A little.”

She vaguely wondered how long she was going to have to stay at the party before going back to Maggie’s. She couldn’t go there in this condition. Her aunt would have a fit if she saw her this way. She began to rock back and forth in the sand. Her head felt really dizzy. She couldn’t seem to get the beach to stop swaying. She really overindulged this time.

Her cell phone began vibrating in her little purse. She pulled it out and saw that it was her cousin, Logan, her Aunt Jen’s son.

“Logan?” she asked cautiously.

“Hey, Cassie. Mom was getting worried about you and asked if I would check up on you. You’re not answering her texts.”

“She’s been texting me? I’ve had my phone on vibrate. What time is it?”

“Ten o’clock.”

“Really? Wow, time sure flies. I’m okay. Still at the party.”

“Kay.” She heard tinkling glasses and loud talking in the background.

“Where are you?”

“I’m just hangin’ over here at Ryan’s.” Ryan was a friend of his who lived nearby in Pungo. “Well, long as you’re okay, will you please text mom and tell her so? Hey, Ryan! Cut that out, I’m on the phone.” She heard a crash in the background.

“What’s going on over there? Have you been drinking?” She did her best to sound like a reprimanding adult, but knew she fell short. She had no room to talk anyway, in her condition.

“Naw, I ain’t drunk,” he insisted. “Just had one beer, I promise.” Being raised in Georgia when he was young, his Southern drawl became more pronounced once in a while, especially when he was really tired. “We’re just shooting some pool. These guys over here are trying to show off, and they’re going to wind up hurt in a minute.”

“Okay. I’ll text Jen, I promise.”

“Kay. Bye.” There was silence and then before she pressed the red button to end the call, she heard him say, “Let me know if you need me.”

He'd always been a little protective of her. They were closer than cousins, more like brother and sister really. Since she stayed with her aunt so much when her dad traveled, they'd gotten close. He had lived in Georgia until ten years ago when her mother died. That was when he and Jen moved back to Virginia Beach to help take care of her and her dad. Jen was her mother's sister.

"Who was that?" Jackson asked.

"My cousin. I've got to text my aunt."

She read all the text messages that she had sent her, which sounded more urgent each time, ending with one that threatened to come looking for her if she didn't answer her. She texted back a response that she was fine, phone was on vibrate, and she'd be back at Maggie's by midnight, her weekend curfew. She had two hours to get sober.