

Epilogue

Two years later.

Jay stood on the balcony overlooking his vineyard. Like a curtain rising on a Broadway show, the early morning fog lifted off the rows of grapes leaving behind a spectacular vista of lilac sky and lush greenery bathed in dewy glitter as far as the eye could see. As often as he'd witnessed nature's splendor from this vantage point, the sight never failed to amaze him.

The only sound in the quiet house was a hot air balloon being filled somewhere in the distance. The loud whoosh of the propane burners didn't seem to bother the sleeping baby nestled in his arms, however.

"Of course you would sleep like the dead now that it's almost daytime," he said softly, his words lacking any real annoyance. "You couldn't do that a couple of hours ago?"

The baby's only response was to blow a spit bubble in her sleep. The awe Jay felt looking out over his vineyard was nothing compared to what he felt gazing down at the miracle in his arms. She was beautiful, his precious daughter.

"Someday, little Vivian, you'll get married in this vineyard," he whispered against her soft cheek. "Just like Mommy and Daddy did."

"Aren't you rushing things a bit?"

Jay started at the sound of his sister's voice causing him to jostle the baby. He held his breath when Vivian let out a whimper, but, thankfully, his daughter's eyes remained firmly closed. A moment later, she settled back into a blissful sleep.

He turned to glare at Charlie, but the rebuke he was about to utter got stuck in his throat when his eyes met hers. Jay's gut clenched at what he saw reflected in them. It was barely six in

the morning, and his sister was not only awake but dressed to kill. She wore a circumspect smile as she crossed the room in wedge heels, careful to keep her footfalls quiet on the wood floor.

"She's only just been born, and you're already marrying her off." Stopping in front of him, Charlie reached up and gently brushed her finger over the blonde fuzz on top of Vivian's head.

A tightness in his throat made the words difficult to get out. "It seems like yesterday when I was holding you like this, and look how quickly that time passed."

Charlie continued to peer at the baby. "All the same, neither one of us is getting married anytime soon." She did look at him then. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "I have to leave now."

"No!" Vivian stirred in his arms. Jay swore beneath his breath, rocking her slightly as he lowered his voice. "It's too soon. It's only been a week."

The sad smile was back on her lips. "Lots of women deliver babies and then go right back out into the field to harvest food for their family."

"Not in my family they don't," he huffed, a feeling very similar to panic gripping his chest. "And you just gave birth to twins. You need to get your strength back."

"I have my strength back. And now it's time to get my life back." She snorted. "Or I probably should say *finally get a life*."

"Damn it, Charlie," Jay closed the space between them. "Your life is here with your family."

She put a hand on his chest, right over his heart. "No, Jay. This is *your* family. You and Bridgett need time to bond with your children. Alone."

Vivian sighed, indignant even in sleep, causing them both to freeze. Nine months in her aunt's womb had clearly given the baby an education in the subtle art of drama.

“I never meant for you to give up your life for us,” Jay said, his throat thick again. “For *this*.”

“You didn’t ask me to do it. I volunteered. Being a surrogate to Bridgett and your children has been the most astounding and worthwhile thing I’ve ever done.” Her voice wavered briefly before she summoned her control again.

Later, Jay would be astounded that, between the two of them, his wild-child sister actually was the one better able to regulate her emotions. Right now, though, his chest was burning something fierce.

“But I’m quickly coming up on my quarter-life milestone,” she continued. “Don’t you think it’s time I find out what else I’m supposed to be doing with my life?”

When he was twenty-five, Jay was already on his second start-up company. It was hard to find fault with his sister’s logic. “You’re barely twenty-three. And I hate the thought of you being alone right now,” he argued anyway.

“I won’t be.” She was actually grinning now. “Mom is coming with me.”

“Mom!”

Charlie put her finger to her lips when Vivian flinched again. “Yes, Mom. She says she wants to see Europe. Besides, after months of her company, I’ve come to realize that her very brilliant mind could be quite useful. And I have some business ideas I’d like to explore with her.”

“Business ideas?” Jay was stunned she hadn’t discussed them with him.

She patted his chest again. “My brain didn’t turn to total mush while I was incubating your progeny.” Bending down, she laid a tender kiss on the baby’s cheek. “Mm, I really need to find a way to bottle up that smell.”

“You sound as if you’ll never see them again,” he grumbled.

“Not right away. Finding myself isn’t going to happen overnight,” she said, and Jay’s heart thudded. Sensing his unease, she stretched up to kiss him on the cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered. “For always being there for me.”

“I always will be,” he whispered hoarsely.

Charlie nodded. With one last look at the baby in his arms, she turned to leave the room.

“Hey,” he called after her.

She glanced over her shoulder at him, her lashes damp.

“Try not to kill Mom.”

With a grin and a wave, she walked out. Vivian squirmed against his chest. Likely a reaction to the tension she could feel rolling off him. He headed for the master bedroom and the bassinet. Her twin brother, Grayson, was already inside it, sleeping peacefully. As usual, Vivian settled instantly when Jay placed the babies back to back.

Bridgett was lying on his side of the bed, her hands neatly tucked beneath her cheek. Her eyes flickered open at the sound of him shucking his jeans.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Your face says it all. Charlie told you.”

His wife scooted to the center of the bed. Jay crawled in next to her. His body was weary from sleep deprivation and, if he was honest, the battering his heart had just taken. Bridgett took his arm and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“This is the very reason she waited until right before she left,” she whispered. “She didn’t want to see you pout.”

He did his best to glare at her. But it was hard to hold onto his anger when she was crawling on top of him.

“I don’t pout.”

Bridgett's gray eyes were smiling beneath her arched eyebrows. She seductively traced his lips with her finger. "If you say so."

"Damn it, Bridgett, I just want her to stop feeling like she's alone. She has us. We're a family. All of us," he argued. "No matter what she believes, she's *not* an island. And I want her to always be a part of the twins' lives."

She kissed his chin. "Charlie helped give them life, Jay. I don't think she can be a bigger part." Her lips traced his jaw. "Your sister is more like you than you think. She's going to be okay. Give her this time for self-discovery. She'll come back to us."

Her hands found their way beneath his T-shirt, and her nails were tracing little patterns on his chest. "You seem awfully sure," he groaned when her thumb brushed over his nipple.

"Mmm," she murmured against his neck. "That's because if Charlie's not back by summer, Gwen is taking your Mom's place as her traveling companion."

Jay bit back the laughter rumbling in his chest so he wouldn't wake the babies, but he couldn't hold back his grin. He rolled them over so his lips were a breath away from hers.

"Well played, Counselor."

Bridgett nipped at his mouth. "I learned from the best."

"Perhaps you should show me what else you've learned."

She arched her hips beneath his. "That might take a while."

The tension in Jay's chest evaporated as he stared down at his beautiful wife. The one who almost got away. The woman for whom he'd sacrifice everything he owned. And suddenly, he felt like the luckiest man in the world. With Bridgett by his side, he could face whatever life threw at him—including waiting out his little sister.

"For you, my love, I've got all the time in the world."

