

## Epilogue

# The Happily Ever After

Kizzy ran up and down the shoreline barking at the waves as I stood silently on the sandy beach, watching the warm summer sea roll gently onto the sand. It was hard to believe it had been ten years since I'd made the decision to leave my life in New York to come to Gull Island for the purpose of helping my brother, Garrett, with the resort he owned after he'd suffered a stroke and could no longer manage things on his own. When I'd first arrived, I hadn't known what to expect or if I'd fit in, but once I arrived, I'd found a community populated with friendly people ready to welcome me into their fold. It hadn't taken long for me to settle in, and within a few months, I'd known in my heart that I'd never leave.

"A penny for your thoughts," my husband, Jack, said as he walked up and stood beside me.

"I've just been thinking about the past ten years and how much has changed since I made the decision to come to Gull Island after Garrett suffered his stroke and then helping with the resort's remodel."

Jack laced his fingers through mine but didn't speak. He was good about knowing when to wait for me to work things through in my mind.

"I'd been going through a rough patch in my career and welcomed the change, but I really had no idea what to expect." I bent down and took the stick Kizzy had brought to me. "I was alone in the house in the beginning, which was odd given its isolation and size." I tossed the stick down the beach, and the dog went running. "Then George offered to come and stay with me until Garrett was able to come home, and suddenly what had seemed like a daunting task became doable."

"George does have a way of steadying things," Jack agreed.

"I'm not sure how things would have ended up if George hadn't come along. I remember struggling at first, but then he arrived, and everything just felt right. I suppose that having him here was one of the main reasons I settled on the idea of turning the resort into a writers' retreat in the first place."

“It was a good idea,” Jack said as he took a turn playing with the dog, accepting the stick from Kizzy and then tossing it down the beach. “By the time I met you, the house was filled with people who had a common interest and cared deeply for one another.”

I smiled as I remembered that first year before the cabins had been completed. While many writers had shared our little piece of paradise over the years, it was the core group that I held closest to my heart. Once George had settled in, my best friend, Vikki, had arrived, followed by Alex, Brit, and Clara. We’d been an eclectic group with different ways of approaching life, yet from the beginning, there had been a deep caring amongst us as well.

“Would you like to take a walk?” Jack asked.

I nodded as he began to stroll toward the section of the beach where the turtles came to nest. Jack called Kizzy to his side and instructed her to heel as we carefully strolled through the area with restricted access, being cautious not to disturb the nests.

As we made our way around the end of the peninsula and then headed west, we came to the large home that had been built to accommodate a family after Rick and Vikki had found out she was pregnant with the twins, Caleb and Connor.

Jack and I were already into our forties by the time we finally made the commitment to marry, so children had never been an option for us. While we were extremely happy, there were times I’d pause to imagine a little girl with my smile and his eyes. Still, being Aunt Jill to Vikki’s sons was almost as rewarding as having a family of my own, and it was a role I took seriously, making time in my life to be there for all the special moments.

After we’d passed the home Vikki shared with her family, Jack released Kizzy to run at will. *Maybe another puppy?* I thought to myself as I watched Kizzy run.

“The tide is out,” Jack commented as we strolled toward the walkway that would take us to the cabins inhabited by George and Grayson.

“I noticed that it’s out further than usual. I suppose we might be experiencing a super-tide of some sort.”

As we passed the side-by-side two-bedroom cabins that George and Grayson called home, I paused to remember the decision the group made to stop taking on new residents, who, other than Grayson, had never really seemed to mesh with the core group. The group also decided to divide the expenses required to maintain the property between those who lived there. Several small cabins had been torn down to make room for the two large homes now occupied by Rick and Vikki and Alex and his girlfriend, Serena. Jack and I still lived in the house Jack had built years ago, and Brit, who tended to come and go, claimed a cabin, feeling that she didn’t need more since she was there so seldom.

“I bet if we stop in at the main house, Clara will have the cinnamon rolls she was rolling out earlier out of the oven,” Jack suggested.

Clara made the best cinnamon rolls, and I was hungry. Clara had probably changed the most of any of the original residents. She’d been sort of loopy when she’d first arrived, but after meeting and falling in love with Garrett, the confusion Clara used to experience suddenly quieted, and most of the time, she happily played the loving wife to my teddy bear of a brother. Clara’s cat, Agatha, still didn’t get along all that well with Garrett’s parrot, Blackbeard, but even the two animals had learned to live in harmony the majority of the time.

When we walked into the kitchen of the main house, not only did we find Garrett, Clara, and still hot from the oven cinnamon rolls, but we found George and Grayson at the table as well.

“I see you had the same idea Grayson and I did,” George commented as I headed to the cupboard for plates for Jack and me.

“I’ve been thinking about these rolls ever since I was by earlier while Clara was rolling them out,” Jack answered, settling Kizzy with a bowl of water.

“They’re as good as they smell,” Grayson confirmed.

I settled onto a chair at the table and took a bite of the frosted treat. The cinnamon rolls really were excellent. “It’s too bad Rick and Vikki are still with the kids at Disney World,” I said. “Rick absolutely loves your cinnamon rolls.”

“They’ll be back at the end of the week. I’ll freeze a pan,” Clara offered. “I can serve them when they come by to share the photos they promised to take.”

“The boys sure were excited about the trip,” George offered. “It seems the rides they planned to go on were all they could talk about for weeks before they left.”

“I’ve been to Disney a time or two,” Grayson shared. “It really is a magical place.”

“Do you know if Alex and Serena met them there as they planned to?” Jack asked.

“As far as I know, they did. Alex and Serena planned to spend a couple days with the family once Alex completed his book tour,” I said.

“I can’t believe how well his new book is doing,” Clara said. “Not that all his books aren’t fantastic, but this book is so different from the sort of thing he usually writes. I’m not sure even he thought it would do as well as it has.”

“Alex has a real gift,” Jack reminded her. “He’s one of those writers who’s able to touch the hearts and imaginations of his readers no matter what he writes.” He looked at George. “Speaking of excellent writers, I saw that Brit’s new book hit the New York Times Best Sellers list. She must be ecstatic.”

“She is,” George confirmed. “She’s already holed up writing the next book in the series in that little cottage she bought in Maine.”

“Did she say when she might be back our way?” I asked.

“She didn’t say, but she did mention that she might spend at least part of the winter on Gull Island. She loves Maine and has a network of friends she really enjoys, but I know she misses us as well.”

“I had lunch at Gertie’s place yesterday, and she said that Meg was in for breakfast,” I said. “I guess Meg and Brit talk on the phone quite often, and Brit told Meg that she would be home for the Harvest Festival in the fall. I’m not sure that’s a for sure thing or a maybe thing, but it will be good to see her if she can make it.”

“Meg is coming to my place for dinner tonight,” George said. “I’ll ask her about her conversation with Brit when I see her. I suppose I should call Brit as well. It’s been a while since we had a nice chat. I know how busy she is, and I try not to be the pesky uncle who calls more often than she’d prefer, but I do miss her now that she’s dividing her time between Gull Island and Holiday Bay.”

“I’m sure she misses you too,” Clara assured him. “Give her a call. You can use her making the best sellers list as a reason to get in touch with her.”

“Good idea,” he said while slipping another cinnamon roll onto his plate.

The conversation shifted to the upcoming summer festival, and the roles volunteer coordinator, Brooke Johnson, still needed to fill. Jack and I had been super busy at the newspaper, but George, Grayson, Garrett, and Clara were all retired, so they often pitched in where they could. I was sure that Vikki would join the volunteers once she returned from her family trip. I really did hope she was having a wonderful time. The road to parenthood had been a rocky one for Rick and Vikki, but I knew from the start that once their miracles finally arrived, they’d be the best parents any kid could ever have.

“I’ve been thinking about getting a puppy,” I voiced the thought I’d had on the beach aloud.

Agatha hissed and sped out the door towards the staircase. I swear that cat understood English.

“Puppy bad, puppy bad,” Blackbeard said, seeming to agree with the cat.

“Puppies aren’t bad,” I said to the bird. “They’re cute and cuddly.”

“Chase the bird, chase the bird,” Blackbeard squawked.

“If we get a puppy, I won’t let it chase you.” I looked at Jack. “So, what do you think about a little brother or sister for Kizzy?”

Kizzy looked up from her nap when I said her name. While I was pretty sure that both Blackbeard and Agatha really did understand “people talk,” I was sure that the only words Kizzy knew besides her name had to do with walks and treats.

“A puppy might be fun,” Jack said. “But puppies are also a lot of work. Do you think we have the time to commit?”

“I can help,” George joined in.

“I’m in as well,” Grayson seconded.

“A baby on the peninsula would be fun now that the boys are past the cute, cuddly baby stage,” Clara agreed.

Jack smiled. “I’m in. Are you thinking about getting another golden retriever?”

“How about we just start by calling the shelter. If they have puppies or even younger dogs, we can take Kizzy to visit and see which puppy she’s most drawn to. I’m sure we’ll be able to find a little guy or gal who wants to come home with us.”

“I think that’s the perfect plan,” Jack looked toward Kizzy, who had lifted her head and was watching us. “Would you like a brother or sister to play with?”

She barked once.

We all laughed when she picked up her pink stuffed hippo and put it in Jack’s lap. Knowing Kizzy, I’m sure she’d focused on the word “play” and really had no idea what we were talking about, but she was an easy-going dog who would make an excellent older sister to any pup we choose.

“I guess we should get back to the house,” I said after the discussion stalled. “I have an article to write, and Jack has a layout to approve.” I glanced at George. “Tell Meg hi. I’ve been meaning to drop by the museum to chat with her, but I haven’t had any free time lately.”

“I’ll tell her. I’ve been thinking that a big family dinner once Rick and Vikki get back would be just the thing. Maybe we can grill on the patio.”

“I love that idea.” I hugged both Garrett and Clara and then called Kizzy and headed out the door with Jack.

The life I’d found on Gull Island had been unexpected. I’d initially planned to make the trip a temporary sort of thing after life had thrown me a curveball, but after spending a few months on the island, I really began to understand what Garrett had meant when he’d warned me that Gull Island wasn’t the sort of place you lived in and moved on from, it was the sort of place that, once experienced, touched your heart and claimed your soul.

**The End**