

Chapter One

Eden Godfrey shifted in her window seat to gaze down at the landscape and coastline coming into view. The plane's revving engine and the sound of tray tables being folded signaled preparation for landing. As the plane descended and pressure built in her ears, buildings took the place of water through the smudged glass. Wilmington, North Carolina, was only a short distance away.

"Are you visiting or going home?" A male voice drew her attention from the sun-drenched view.

She turned to the older man seated beside her who'd been absorbed in his iPad for the duration of the trip. How easy it was for people to be friendly in the last ten minutes of a flight. He'd perched his glasses on his balding scalp and looked at her with weathered blue eyes.

Eden smiled. "I live in Indiana, but I'm going to Wilmington for a wedding. The wedding isn't until Saturday, but my college girlfriends and I are renting a beach house for a few days beforehand."

Even as she spoke, a flush of embarrassment heated her face. How confusing that must be for the man, since he could likely tell that she, at age fifty, was hardly a college student. She laughed. "I mean, I was in college over twenty-five years ago, but I get together with three women from my college days about twice a year. One of them is getting married. It's her second marriage." Why did she feel the need to explain why a woman nearing fifty was getting married? Happened all the time, though it hadn't happened to her since becoming a widow twelve years earlier. Not that she'd tried. But it *was* a statistical possibility and likely not much more than that for her.

"And you? Is this home?" She hoped her forced statement would steer her from the sudden turn of her thoughts, which lately, had been more frequent.

"Yes, I'm going home after a visit to see my daughter and grandchildren in Lafayette. When I retired, I moved to Emerald Isle, which is just north of here."

Eden nodded. "Sounds nice. I like the name." Would she want to live at the beach all year round? Sydney, the bride-to-be, had grown up in a beach town and ended up moving back the previous year. And *that* decision changed her entire future.

The roar of the engine intensified, cutting off further communication. The cabin shuddered as the plane's wheels bounced once on the tarmac, then rolled smoothly to a halt.

Eden unlatched her seatbelt and reached for her purse. She rejoiced to soon see her friends and was happy about how their lives were turning out. Yet, a thread of tension lay just beneath the surface when she thought of her own. Still adrift, she was like a marble on a Chinese checkerboard sliding around each hole, but not finding the right one. For the last three years since, at her instigation, the four of them—Sydney, Marissa, and Julia—began meeting twice annually for a fun and supportive girls' weekend, Eden had watched each woman's life unfold and flourish, both professionally and romantically. Would that change the bond they all had and gradually

phase out the special weekends she looked forward to all year? And would *she* remain the only one whose life sat securely in a rut?

“Enjoy your visit and your friend’s wedding,” the man said once he’d pulled a weekend bag from the overhead compartment.

“Thank you. I’m sure it’ll be a great time.” No doubt, it would.

She stood, unsteady in the narrow space between the seats and the crowded aisle. As usual, she’d worn wedge heels, a style adopted many years earlier to compensate for being five foot four.

With a smile and parting nod, the man melded into the thicket of passengers. Minutes later, at baggage claim, Eden tapped her toe as she scanned the stream of bags. She yanked her suitcase from the carousel.

Outside, a blanket of humid air enveloped her. She could almost smell the salt and hear the waves.

“There she is! Eden, over here!”

She shoved darker thoughts aside as she released her suitcase and spread her arms wide to Sydney, who bounded down the sidewalk from where she’d parallel parked. Sydney bent and hugged Eden, swaying her side to side. Close behind her were Marissa and Julia, each one in her turn offering *it’s been too long* hugs.

“You’re all a sight for sore eyes.” Eden grinned, buoyant with joy as soon as she saw them. “How is it that you all, quite unfairly, look more gorgeous than the last time we saw each other?” Seemed like ages since they’d been together, but it was only the previous October. “I’ve got airplane hair and feel like a folded envelope.”

Sydney, looking like an elegant hippie, wore a faded denim mini skirt and a lime green tank top, her thick braid hanging over one shoulder. Matching bangle bracelets adorned one wrist. She laughed and slid one suntanned arm around Eden. “You look great to me. And we have *many* ways of unfolding you this week.”

“How did you plan anything at all for us when you had a wedding to prepare, Sydney?” Dark-haired Julia walked beside Marissa as the women moved en masse toward Sydney’s SUV.

“It’s been planned for a while, so not much more to do. Plus, we weren’t aiming for the gala of the century. Something simple with my best friends, you all, of course, and family.” Sydney pushed the button on her key fob and the back of the SUV opened.

“Are your brothers coming? I remember you fell out with them last year.” Marissa took Eden’s canvas bag against her protest and slipped it into the car. She pushed a wavy strand of dark hair from her face and waited as Eden settled her suitcase in the trunk.

They all slid in, and Sydney pulled away from the curb. “My brother, Kevin, and I made up. He and his family’ll be at the wedding. Chet is still nursing imaginary wounds, so I don’t expect him there. Nor did I invite him.”

“His loss,” murmured Julia.

“Got that right. Here we go, ladies. Onward to the beach!”

When they entered the condo Sydney had found for their week, each woman stopped and looked around, oohing and murmuring in appreciation.

“Wow, this is beautiful. Sydney, you’ve outdone yourself.” Eden took in the luxury. Surrounded by beachy furnishings in off-white and turquoise, with waves and sand meeting her direct gaze through the balcony window, Eden relaxed her shoulders and eased into vacation mode.

Sydney preened. “Only the best wow-worthy digs for my girls.” She stretched one arm toward a hallway to her right. “There are four bedrooms and baths, which we’ll all enjoy until Saturday morning. Then *I’ll* be whisked away by my groom to a romantic island and you three can have it to yourselves for a couple more days.”

“That is definitely an acceptable plan,” said Eden, who’d ventured close to the sliding glass door. “Especially for you, Sydney. As for me, I could just park myself here and look at this stunning view for a while.” She pulled open the door and allowed a balmy breeze to stroke her face. Mesmerized by the rhythmic sound of gentle waves below, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

“Or park yourself with the rest of us on this roomy balcony.” Marissa joined Eden at the door, her soft southern lilt adding warmth to the inviting scene. “Looks big enough for us *and* our snacks.” The two women gazed out in silence. Julia and Sydney crowded alongside to see the view.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” Marissa said. “I miss being an easy drive from the ocean, but the Asheville mountains are stunning too.”

“So much to catch up on.” Julia sighed, likely thinking of Marissa’s recent move from Raleigh to Asheville. She turned then, her clear blue eyes panning the small group. “We’d better get started, ladies.”

In a matter of minutes, they’d all deposited their suitcases into their respective bedrooms and changed into comfortable clothes. According to their tradition, they carried the usual overload of snacks and beverages to the balcony and settled in. The space was well furnished for meals and relaxing, though the women would surely hit the beach that beckoned them from five stories below. Eden could almost feel cool waves foaming around her bare feet. April in North Carolina was more like summer up north.

“Oh, this is heavenly. Just the break I needed.” Julia’s slight New York accent flavored her words as she sighed and leaned her head against the plump cushion of her chair. “My work has been so pressured lately by two clients in particular. Picky, picky. Thankfully, I’ll finish their projects soon.”

“Individual homes or hotels?” asked Marissa.

“One of each. Business is good in D. C.” Julia reached for a plate of crackers that Eden had unwrapped.

“And *you* have a wedding to plan too. It’s not just mine we should talk about.” Sydney’s voice carried a mischievous inflection. “Aside from it taking place in Florence, Italy, I know *no* details.” She flicked her braid from her shoulder.

“Except that you’re all invited. That’s the main thing you need to know.” Julia took on a secretive smile, her olive skin illuminated by clear blue eyes.

“Must be nice to have relatives in Italy.” Eden placed a slice of cheese on a cracker. “And so very convenient that you met your handsome hubby-to-be there too.”

“They’re the only relatives I’ve got, even if they’re across the world,” Julia said.

“Ha, you wouldn’t hear *me* complaining.” Sydney gave an emphatic nod then mimicked, “Oh, gotta go see the fam in *Florence*.”

The women laughed. Julia poured herself a glass of sparkling water. “Some details even I don’t know. My cousin Valentina is handling a lot of it, since she lives in Florence. It’s her gift to us.”

“*Molto Fantastico*.” Sydney reached for the corkscrew. “Jessie was a big help with mine, although she’s a senior, in the throes of college applications and other senior-y things. She made time and enjoyed the heck out of it.”

“I’m glad she’s supportive. That’s so sweet,” Eden said. Sydney and her daughter Jessie had always been so close. It was a blessing that Jessie wasn’t jealous of Sydney’s new-old love. Or renewed love might be a better term.

Eden sighed happily on Sydney’s behalf. Her friend had known past struggles but now sat glowing and peaceful across the balcony table from her.

“How long did you take off from your job, Sydney?” Marissa asked.

“Two full weeks. I have a very cool boss who told me to take as much time as I needed. I tell you, after eighteen years teaching high school math, this analyst job is almost a breeze. It has its moments, but it’s a good fit for me. And I get to work from home.”

“That sounds perfect.” Marissa took the plate of cold cuts Julia passed to her. “And to be available to your mom and to Jessie is a huge advantage.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“I want to hear more about your new life, Marissa.” Eden leaned her elbows on her knees. She knew the basics, since the two of them talked often on the phone, but it wasn’t the same as in person.

“Have you enjoyed living in Asheville? Be honest, does it measure up to Raleigh?” Julia asked as attention went to Marissa.

“Oh, yes. It’s been just over a year now, so I’m fully settled in. You all probably remember when I sold my house in Raleigh. I bought the Asheville condo and moved soon after. I wanted to be closer to Jarrod but have my own space too. It’s been good for us. He’d been doing most of the driving from Asheville to Raleigh, so I think he was relieved.”

“Aw, Jarrod would climb mountains for you, Marissa,” Sydney said. “He’d cross oceans, he’d scale—”

“Alright, alright.” Marissa laughed. “I thought I’d miss Raleigh, and I do a little, but Asheville is different and fun. It’s beautiful there too. I love it. I should have sold that money pit—I mean that historic house—long ago.” Her smile faded. “I think it kept me stuck in grieving Robert. I feel freer now, and I think Robert would want that.”

“Absolutely, he would. Now you’re beginning a new life, a new love. So exciting.” Eden clasped her hands. “Any talk of marriage? Let’s see, you’ve known him almost two years, moved to Asheville a year ago . . .”

A delicate flush crossed Marissa’s pale face. “Yes, we’ve talked about it. It’s not official, but we’re talking. Probably won’t be long before I have an announcement for you.”

“Oh, my, that’s exciting news. My goodness, I need a dedicated calendar just for weddings.” Eden sent them all a wide-eyed expression of glee, despite a faint weight inside her that screamed,

you're being left behind. She swallowed and blinked but held onto her congratulatory smile. The other women murmured their enthusiasm for Marissa's news.

"Keep us posted. That's not an option." Sydney shot Marissa a pointed stare with a fake scowl as everyone murmured their agreement.

"What about you, Eden? Anything new and different? Oh, I'm sorry for how that sounded." Julia's ivory face pinkened. "I didn't mean—"

"No offense taken *ever* from you, dear sisters, and that goes for all of you. We can speak the truth here. You and I all know I'm stuck. Let's admit it. I'm the aimless widow. That's what I am."

Sydney set her glass on the table and stared at her. "For once in my life, I don't know what to say."

Maybe she was trying to be humorous, as was her style, but Eden didn't think so. Sydney's gaze was compassionate, solemn, her voice soft.

"The question is," Sydney continued, "How do *you* feel about being *stuck*, as you say? Are you peaceful with it or do you long for something else? Are you chafing or resting?"

Eden forced out a light chuckle as a nearby seagull shrieked. "Wow, Sydney, you've changed. No more snarky one-liners? You could preach a sermon on that thought." Her outburst drew some soft laughter, but everyone fell silent again, awaiting her response. She took a breath as they all stared at her. *No reason to be intimidated. They love you and want your best.* "Okay, I guess since selling my restaurant over a year and a half ago, I've dabbled in this and that. It was nice for a while, and I needed the break. No stress, time to work on my house, volunteer at church, take up painting, find myself. But the last part hasn't worked that well. I haven't found myself, or what I want to do next."

Sydney leaned forward and grabbed one of Eden's hands. "The point I wanted to make was if you're happy with your life, who's to say you're stuck or should be doing something else? How *you* feel is what matters."

Eden pressed her lips together and nodded. "That's true, I guess. I, uh, I was content for a long time. I learned to enjoy running the restaurant after Gerry died. He didn't involve me all that much when he was alive, so it was nice having that opportunity. Not that I'm glad he's gone, of course." She smoothed an imaginary wrinkle from her shorts. "I'm not unhappy, but now with the kids out of the house and the restaurant gone, I'd like a new challenge to focus on. Something . . . meaningful."

Marissa and Julia nodded in her peripheral vision, waiting for her to go on.

"And . . ." She moistened her lips, "I'd like to . . ." She shrugged and splayed her hands. ". . . not be alone anymore. It was always too hard to think of that with everything else I had to do. And I honestly haven't met anyone for years. *And years.* I'm satisfied in some ways. You know, I don't really like change. Things are stable and boring. No one's at home getting on my nerves or telling me what to do. I'm not desperate or needy. But it would be nice to talk to someone in the evening. To travel with someone. And seeing you all settled in your love lives—"

"Which we didn't have only two years ago," Sydney added.

Eden gave them a crooked smile. "Yeah, it can happen quickly, I guess. I'm so pleased for each of you. I hope it won't change what we all have together."

"Of course, we'd never give us up voluntarily, either." The old Sydney was back.

Eden laughed. "Amen to that!" She shot a jubilant fist into the air.

“Well, there’s *that* concern out of the way, Eden. But at least you’re identifying that you’d like companionship.” Marissa’s dark eyebrows lifted as she made her point. “I think that’s healthy because I’ve never heard you say that before.” Maybe Marissa had missed her calling by becoming a successful novelist instead of a counselor.

“Let’s not waste our week feeling bad for lonely old Eden, okay? I’ll be fine. We want to share Sydney’s happiness and being together. And of course, Julia’s happiness and Marissa’s happiness.” She ignored the doubtful expressions on her friends’ faces as she realized how pathetic she sounded.

Eden reached for a bowl of crackers and dip. “How ‘bout some of that dip? Looks tasty.”

Marissa had hit on something. Something that had hovered quietly in her mind for the last few months and was growing louder with every passing day.



Eden dug her toes into the sand, chuckling at the paradox of a barefoot beach wedding. Knowing Sydney, it seemed a perfectly natural decision. Rows of folding chairs formed a semi-circle around an arched pergola festooned with flowers and vines. Behind it, waves lapped, providing gentle and fitting music prior to the ceremony. Overhead, the sky stretched an endless velvet blue.

Surprisingly, the days at the beach had been a relaxed vacation for all the women, rarely interrupted by last-minute wedding tasks or crises. Sydney had made a few phone calls and beginning on Friday, out-of-town guests began to arrive followed by a festive rehearsal dinner. *This is our time*, the bride had said to them on that first day. *Time for our extended bachelorette party, but I’m not the focus. We all are.*

Eden savored each day walking on the beach, taking part in a gab session that seemed to ebb and flow but never end, sampling local restaurants, cooking in the condo, and embracing the circle of love surrounding her. She desperately hoped Sydney’s earlier proclamation would be true, that they’d stay close friends even as each woman married and began a different type of life.

Today, they’d witness the first among them step into her new future with a second chance at a loving relationship.

Sydney appeared beside her, a fairy princess in an off-white calf-length dress, its uneven hem flowing around her like whipped cream. Her thick, highlighted hair hung to her shoulders, and a crown of tiny flowers encircled her head. And, of course, her feet were bare. “Eden, this is my dad, Richard, and his wife, Melody.”

Eden shook hands with the older man and woman standing beside Sydney. She saw a resemblance between the distinguished-looking man and his daughter. “It’s very nice meeting you both.” She’d said the same thing numerous times already but was glad to see a good turnout for Sydney and Tyler’s special day.

Apparently, Sydney wasn’t the type of bride to hide out until the start of the ceremony. She left Eden’s side to escort her father and his wife to meet other guests. Nearby, the groom, Tyler, talked with a cluster of people dressed in casual suits, elegant dresses, and bare feet. Being the

owner of two golf courses, he likely had hundreds of friends and acquaintances in town, though a more modest number were present that day, since he and Sydney had wanted a smaller event.

Julia and Marissa were already seated in the second row and beside them were their fiancés, Craig and Jarrod, who'd arrived the previous day. Eden had been glad she could finally meet the men she'd only heard about for the last two years. Her next encounter with them would be at Julia's August wedding in Florence.

Eden sighed as her eyes panned the group. Near the pergola, Sydney's blonde daughter, Jessie, was discussing something with a young dark-haired man she guessed was Tyler's son, Zach. Next to them, two guitars were perched on stands.

Sydney was again beside her. "My mom is here, Eden. Do you remember her?" Sydney seemed slightly breathless from so many introductions and pre-wedding excitement.

"How do you stay so serene with all this going on?" Eden laughed. "You don't have to personally introduce me to everyone with all that's on your plate, wedding girl."

"Just my mom, Carolyn. You haven't seen her since we were in college."

"With pleasure. How is her health?"

Sydney clasped her hands together. "I'm so grateful. She's been in remission now for about six months. Let's pray it continues."

"Absolutely."

Sydney led Eden to where an older woman sat at the end of a row. Though she was thin and her short hair pure white, her eyes exuded a youthfulness and an intelligent spark. "It's nice to see you again, Eden," she said, lifting a bony hand to grasp hers. "I'd recognize you anywhere, with that golden-blond hair. You haven't changed since you were nineteen."

Eden laughed. "You're so kind, but exaggerating ever so slightly, Mrs. Davis."

"Call me Carolyn. Everyone does, even my own kids sometimes. Have you met my son, Kevin, and his family?" She extended her other hand toward a group of six that took up an entire row.

"Yes, I met them a while ago," she said with a tight little wave in their direction.

"Please take your seats, everyone," Zach said into the microphone on the pergola. "Thank you all for coming to our parents' wedding."

Eden settled into a chair next to Carolyn. What a remarkable day it was. Sydney was finally marrying her high school sweetheart. So much had happened in the intervening years, but at the perfect time, those pieces had come together for her. Evidence that it was never too late.

Zach's father was marrying Jessie's mother that day, but Zach and Jessie seemed to be a couple as well, or at least excellent friends. Jessie stood next to him, and he handed her a guitar. He picked up the second one and slid the strap around his neck.

"Welcome to everyone on this very important day," Jessie called over the shush of waves and the hum of conversation. "We'd like to start our ceremony with a special song dedicated to our parents."

She and Zach exchanged a glance, plucked a string twice to tune, then strummed. With an impish expression, Zach leaned toward the microphone. "This is a song we wrote called, *It Took You Long Enough*."

He and Jessie bestowed angelic grins on the audience as laughter rippled through the rows. A light wind fluffed Jessie's hair as she cradled her guitar. "Here goes . . ."

*People always say
Good things are worth the wait
And thirty years is long enough
To see that truth today*

*As teenagers who fell in love
So very long ago
We're glad they finally got a clue
As they're about to show."*

Eden giggled along with the other guests as some leaned forward to hear the lyrics over the waves. Jessie and Zach exchanged a laugh as they continued singing. Not a very solemn beginning to a wedding procession, but considering Sydney and Tyler's history, so fitting.

*"Took you long enough
To recognize your love
To see that you belong as two
And all that mushy stuff.*

*We're happy, Syd and Tyler
To witness this great day
We never thought you'd figure out
It should have always been this way.
It should have always been this way."*

When they finished, everyone erupted in applause as Jessie and Zach took a bow. Jessie leaned toward the microphone. "If you don't know the background of their story, I guess the song filled you in. Now we'll get into the more serious stuff as we honor our parents on this sacred occasion."

They kept their guitars strapped to their necks and began strumming a non-traditional but beautiful tune. Tyler took his place at the pergola next to the pastor and turned toward the sandy aisle where Sydney approached in small steps. She kept time with the guitar music, one hand curled around her father's arm, her eyes riveted on Tyler's.

Eden's gaze shifted from Sydney to Tyler. She drew in a sharp breath and her throat tightened at the look on his face as he watched his bride approach. Eden's eyes stung as both joy and loss tumbled over her. Was she thinking of Gerry, with whom she'd exchanged the same vows so many years ago? And who she'd lost so young? Or was she longing for someone to love her the same way Tyler obviously loved Sydney?

No, she couldn't think about that. She wouldn't be selfish enough to think of her own pain while her friends had found love and new a future. And before her, as Sydney and Tyler faced each other and joined their hands, oblivious of all but one another, they finally entered a life, as Jessie had sung, which should have always been theirs.