

Secrets of
Sandpiper
Cove

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To my mother—
Who inspired my love of tidepools
and my joy in every gift from the sea.

1

Broken Promises

The sea was vast and eternal.

Love pretended to be, but in the end, it broke all its promises.

Rachel Wilson lifted a hand to shade her eyes. From her front porch, she looked past the bluffs to survey the endless sea. Morning light played on its undulating surface, reflective as a pewter mirror. This stretch of California coastline called Sandpiper Cove was ruggedly beautiful. Windblown cypress clung to the edge of the cliffs, shrouding the steep path leading down to the pebble-strewn beach below. The shine of the water pierced through Rachel like the sharp edge of a heartache. Michael should be here, standing beside her, holding her hand. He'd promised.

She pushed the ache aside. Rachel turned away from the ocean, her shoulders sagging. Inhaling a deep breath of moist salt air, she recited Grand-Papa's maxim. *Never run from the hard thing.* The time of the hard thing was at hand, and she was determined to face it head-on.

Rachel stood on tiptoe to hang the freshly painted wooden sign above the front stairs of the sprawling Victorian. She stepped down to the sidewalk to take in the full effect.

Sandpiper Cove Inn

Bed & Breakfast

Hands on hips, Rachel surveyed the flowing blue and gilt lettering of the sign. Perfect. The new sign made the refurbished Victorian look solid, peaceful, and inviting—everything she should be, but wasn't.

Rachel knew she should be excited about her new venture. She should be welcoming this answer to her mounting financial woes. So why was a lump of unshed tears gathering in her throat? A lone tear escaped before she wiped it angrily away.

She twirled a finger through the tangled curls of her honey-blond hair and chewed on her bottom lip. Her hazel eyes narrowed as she took the measure of her new inn and of herself. At twenty-eight, she felt both painfully young and old beyond her years.

Her life changed forever the day of the accident. The day nearly two years ago when her husband Michael's truck clipped an oncoming car and careened off the road at the sharp curve near Pirate's Landing—smashing head-on into an unyielding cottonwood tree. The unidentified red sports car that fled the scene continued to trouble her. Was Michael the victim of a hit-and-run, or had he been too drunk to navigate the curve? The question haunted her.

When Michael died, Rachel's life veered off the road, too.

Off the road and into a nightmarish ditch she was just now clawing her way out of. He'd left her with a burden of debt and a boatload of regrets. Widowed, with their five-year-old daughter Angela to care for, Rachel struggled to find a way to survive.

Grand-Papa had left her the rambling Victorian—aging and in need of repair. Logic pressed her to move to a smaller place, but how could she sell Grand-Papa's house—the home he'd left to her, along with his memories?



A widower, Grand-Papa Chandler hadn't hesitated a second in taking in the two of them—Rachel and her mother—after her father's death. When her mother died, he'd acted as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a seventy-five-year-old man to tackle raising a fourteen-year-old rebellious teen. Rachel smiled at the memory. If his full head of hair hadn't already been silver, Rachel reckoned she'd have turned it gray with worry about her shenanigans. She'd grown up in this house under his tutelage, exploring every nook and cranny of the old Victorian. He'd made it hers...all the books in the library...the flowers in the garden...the view of the sea from the windows.

After they'd worked out their differences, Grand-Papa began to reveal his heart. She remembered the catch in his voice as he proudly surveyed his legacy, Chandler Park—the twenty-five prime acres on the bluff overlooking the harbor. They'd walked the trail to the old gazebo and stepped up into its shade.

“See this land, Rachel?” He gestured with an open hand.

“I see it.”

“My father owned this land...and his father before him.”

Rachel fiddled with a morning glory twig, her mind on other things.

Grand-Papa Chandler’s eyes grew thoughtful. “My grandfather built the first cottage in this cove way back in the 1830s. Later, my father put the Chandler family name on this land.”

“Uh huh...I know...Chandler Park.” Rachel inhaled the fragrance of a climbing rock rose trellising on the gazebo, idly twirling the bloom in her fingers.

“See this gazebo?” He ran his hand tenderly over the weathered wood.

“Everybody knows this ol’ gazebo.”

“Did you know I built it for my bride? For your Grandmother Anna?”

“You did?” Rachel tried and failed to picture Grand-Papa as a young buck capable of such a grand gesture for the wife he’d cherished for over fifty years.

“Every nail and board.”

“Hmmm...” Rachel stepped back to study the peeling gingerbread trim. She noticed the sheen in Grand-Papa’s eyes. “Do you still miss her?”

“Every day.”

“Me, too.” Rachel drew up treasured memories of her Grandma Anna. The scent of lavender that swirled about her. The tea parties under the old apple tree using Grandma’s best English china. Baking cookies, picking vegetables in the garden, the warmth of her welcoming hugs.

Grand-Papa straightened and looked out toward the sea. “You see it, don’t you?”

“What?”

“Your heritage.” His arm swept across the horizon. “The Cove, the bluffs, the cypress trees, the ever-changing sea beyond.”

“I’ve seen it all my life.” Rachel shrugged with adolescent unconcern.

“Look with your heart.”

Rachel looked.

Sunlight reflected from the water, highlighting the tips of the curving branches of the *Crown Cypress*, the town’s landmark tree, rumored to be over 500 years old. Colorful boats bobbed in the harbor. A rage of wildflowers, tangled masses of gum-weed and evening primrose made room for the occasional weathered bench along the meandering paths. The landscape was solid and familiar, like the old gazebo. A flock of brown pelicans vee’d low to the surface of the sea.

A fullness tightened her throat. *Chandler land*.

It wasn’t something that could actually be owned like a shiny new car or a winter coat. It was God’s creation. His bounty. His beauty. It belonged to him. Something of the divine invaded her soul, bringing a rush of tears.

“Ah,” said Grand-Papa. “You do see it now, don’t you?”

Rachel nodded, sniffing.

“It doesn’t really belong to us,” he said. “My name’s on the deed. Just as yours will be someday. But this land...these trees... this view...belong to Sandpiper Cove.”

“I built my house on the hillock above it, leaving the bluffs alone,” he said. “It never seemed right to fence in the view for one man’s pleasure.” Grand-Papa sank heavily onto the bench seat. “Not everyone feels that way. I’ve gotten plenty of offers

over the years. Folks wanting to build on it. Mansions. Resorts. A country club. It'd be easy to carve it up and crowd out the very sunshine. But I'll never sell it."

"Oh..." Rachel was stunned into silence. The thought of manicured mansions, or a fancy resort, fenced to keep out the locals, rankled her. For the first time, Rachel glimpsed the fragility of place.

"Promise me..." Grand-Papa laid his age-speckled hand on hers. "Promise you won't ever sell this land. Leave it wild and free as God intended."

"I promise, Grand-Papa." Rachel squeezed his hand. The two shook on it.



The view today was much as it had been on the long-ago day when Grand-Papa had opened her eyes to truly appreciate her legacy. The old gazebo still stood, a bit more weathered with time. The venerable *Crown Cypress* still anchored the tip of the grove. Wind-sculptured and flat-topped, the gnarled cypress was a survivor.

As Rachel studied the tree, something of her old spunk revived. She breathed in a lungful of cool salt-laden air like a dose of courage. If that ancient tree could weather its many storms, then so could she. A burst of joy cut through her. She'd created her inn from a neglected old Victorian and it was something to be proud of. The risky venture of using her trust fund—money set aside from her mother's life insurance—to renovate the house was paying off. She let herself admire the fresh paint col-

ors, the lush ferns hung on the porch, the bright sign that heralded a new beginning.

Petite, standing just an inch over five feet, Rachel planted her canvas shoes firmly on the walkway and surveyed her domain. “Small but mighty,” Grand-Papa had called her. She picked up a broom and swept the already-clean front sidewalk with short, rapid strokes. The insistent ocean breeze teased honey-hued threads of hair across her face, glowing with exertion and a healthy beach tan.

Feeling giddy with celebration, Rachel tugged her long ringlets back into a ponytail, and did a spontaneous cartwheel on the lawn. That felt better. She laughed at herself.

“Mama...” Angela peddled her pink tricycle up the sidewalk. Rachel’s daughter was the heart of her heart. The dark curls so like Michael’s. Her brown eyes glinted with mischief.

“Somebody’s comin’.” Angela pointed down the walkway where an elderly couple stood in front of a black sedan, looking up at the new sign.

The man doffed his hat, revealing a full head of gray hair. He nodded at Rachel and came through the gate of the white picket fence. “Hello, Missus. Do you work here? My wife and I are driving up the coast and we’re quite taken with this little town of Sandpiper Cove. We’re looking for a place to stay for a few days.” Tall and lanky, he towered above Rachel’s diminutive frame.

Rachel smiled. She hoped they hadn’t spied her goofy cartwheel. Not the proper image for an innkeeper.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Rachel Wilson, owner of Sandpiper Cove Inn.” She extended her hand to her first paying guests. “I

do have a room for you.” *Six rooms to be exact.*

“That’s wonderful.” The man shook Rachel’s hand and ushered his wife inside the gate. “I’m Austin Churchill. This is my wife, Grace.”

Grace was pale and thin, the blue of her veins marbling her translucent skin. Still, her aqua-blue eyes sparkled with life. Her face was framed by short, white curls. “Pleased to meet you.” Rachel grinned. “This is my daughter, Angela.”

Angela hid behind Rachel.

“And what a little angel she is, too.” Grace bent down to Angela’s level. “How are you, sweetheart?”

Angela pouted, belying her celestial name. She clung all the harder to one of Rachel’s legs. Sunny, their golden Lab, trotted up, waving his plumed tail in greeting.

“And this is our dog, Sunny,” Rachel said.

Grace gave him a pat on the head. “He’s a beautiful animal.”

“Do you run the inn with your husband?” asked Austin.

“No...I...”

“Daddy went away!” blurted Angela.

Oh, great, thought Rachel. *Now they’ll think we’ve been abandoned—or worse.*

“My husband died,” Rachel explained. “Almost two years ago...”

“I’m so sorry, dear.” Grace’s tender hand on her arm brought the sting of unwanted tears pricking behind Rachel’s eyes.

Rachel kept the tears at bay.

Austin gave her a compassionate look. “Ahh...my dear Mrs. Wilson... This must be a hard time for you. Of real comfort to you might be a verse from Isaiah 54:5. *For your Maker is your*

husband, the Lord Almighty is his name. God can be your consolation.”

Rachel jerked back, as if struck. It was God who'd allowed Michael to be taken from her.

“Austin, you’re a *retired* preacher now.” Grace poked his arm. “Best be remembering that.”

“You’re right, of course, dear.” Austin nodded. “Old habits die hard.”

Grace rummaged in her purse. She spoke to Angela. “Little one, I always bring along a small gift for special young ladies like you.”

Angela’s eyes brightened. “What is it?”

From her ample sequin-embellished handbag the woman pulled out a plastic snow-globe. Inside was a sand castle with floating seashells, several starfish...even a sea horse. Instead of snow, silver glitter played the part of sand.

“Mine?” Angela asked, grinning.

“All yours,” replied Grace.

“What do you say?” prompted Rachel.

Angela shook the globe. “Did you bring me anything else?” She looked hopefully at the voluminous handbag as if it were Santa’s sack.

Rachel placed an iron hand on Angela’s shoulder. “Say ‘thank you’ to Grace, Angela.”

“Thank you...” Angela murmured before running inside with her treasure. In her haste, she bumped against her tricycle. It tipped over, leaving a wobbly wheel spinning.

Austin bent to examine the loose wheel. “If you’ve a wrench handy, Mrs. Wilson, I could just tighten up this bolt.”

“Oh, well...I don’t really think...you’re my guests...” Rachel stammered. “And please...call me Rachel.”

“Rachel it is then.” Austin’s smile was warm. “Now about that wrench...”

“Thank you, Austin, but I’ve a handyman who can tend to the wheel.” Where in the dickens had Flatfoot Freddy gotten himself off to? He always seemed to turn up missing just when there was a pressing task at hand, like hanging the sign, or right now, the need to carry in the luggage.

Before he died, Grand-Papa had asked only one other thing of her. Freddy was his wife Anna’s nephew. After a bout of rheumatic fever as a boy, Freddy had been coddled by his dotting mother. And he’d been taking it easy ever since. Grand-Papa had given him a job and a place to live in the carriage house above the garage.

“I told him he could stay as long as he needed to,” said Grand-Papa. “Will you do the same...for Grandmother Anna?”

Rachel agreed—a promise she was beginning to regret. Still, she’d keep Freddy on, no matter his failings. She refused to be like Michael, who hadn’t lived up to all he’d promised. And even he had his reasons.

“Do you think we could go inside now, Rachel?” Austin put a hand beneath Grace’s elbow. “My wife could do with a bit of rest.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry...my mind must be in the clouds somewhere.” Rachel headed up the steps. “Come right this way.”

“What a beautiful home,” said Grace as they entered the foyer. “Simply charming.”

“Thank you.” Rachel warmed with the praise. “It once be-

longed to my grandfather.”

Grace let her eyes rove over the polished oak furniture, the lush ferns set in wicker stands, the pastel draperies pulled aside to let in the soft beach light. “It’s lovely, and you’ve decorated it beautifully.”

“Thank you for saying so.” Rachel hoped each carefully planned expenditure was worth it. After sign-in and a brief tour, she led the couple to their room on the ground floor.

A *flap flap* behind her alerted her to the approach of Flatfoot Freddy. “Oh, there you are, Freddy. Would you be so kind as to fetch our guests’ luggage from their car?”

“Sure thing...” Freddy took a crunching bite of apple. His checkered red-and-black flannel shirt was tucked in on one side at the waist of the faded jeans covering his thin frame, hanging out on the other. His thatch of coal-black hair, edged with gray, spiked out above his right ear where he’d likely slept on it the night before. Freddy wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. He was fifty, or thereabouts, but seemed older because of his flat-footed walk and languid pace. He drifted in and out of the place like a clownish ghost.

The black-framed glasses perched on Freddy’s hawk-like nose sagged slightly to the left, framing lazy brown eyes. He took the trunk key from Austin and headed back the way he’d come, his oversized red tennis shoes slapping the ground. Freddy had his own rhythm. . . . mostly slow.

In the past few weeks, she and Freddy had locked horns over the smallest of jobs. Freddy took his own sweet time getting to things like the broken gate latch, the dripping faucet, or the loose screen door hinge—repairs that still needed to be

done. “Hold yer horses,” he’d say. “I’ve only got one toolbox. I’m gettin’ to it.”

The *getting to it* was the problem. Often, she saw his faded red toolbox and its array of rusty tools sitting idle while he disappeared or napped in the lounge chair beneath the ancient apple tree out back. She had a long list of repairs that needed to be done before the next visit by Hiram, the pesky city code enforcement inspector. Maybe Freddy’d improve with time...if she didn’t kill him first.

In late afternoon, another couple checked in and settled into an upstairs room—young, trendy clothes, new luggage, eyes only for each other. Rachel pegged them as newlyweds.

Two sisters took another room and then an older woman named Clara checked in. Hope rose as Rachel wrote each name neatly in her new register. If this kept up, she just might make ends meet.



Once she got her guests settled in for the night and had provided a light supper for herself and Angela, they headed up to the family wing. Climbing the stairs, she tucked Angela into bed, pulling up her colorful *Little Mermaid* spread. The new sea globe rested on the nightstand. After a story and a bedtime prayer, Angela gave the globe a final shake to send the glittery sand in motion. One starfish perched haphazardly on the edge of the turreted sandcastle.

“Nite, Mama.”

“Nite, ’nite, Angela.”

At last, Rachel retreated to her own upstairs bedroom. She sat on the silky blue- green spread of her antique sleigh bed, staring out the windows. A full moon glowed in the evening sky. The movement of the water, chasing moonlight, cast dancing shadows across the room.

Rachel sighed, her earlier euphoria lost in the many chores of running the inn. Even the sea had lost its power to soothe her. Nights were the worst. The loneliness closed in like clinging fog on dark water.

She glanced over at the wooden sandpiper on her dresser. As a young girl, Rachel had watched Grand-Papa carve the bird from a piece of driftwood, his sharp pocketknife sending wood chips flying. She'd marveled at how the wood shape changed, until a life-sized sandpiper emerged. He added sand-smoothed driftwood sticks to complete the form—a curved bill for probing the sand, long legs for waltzing in waves.

She ran a hand across the smooth curves of the carved sandpiper. Would running the Sandpiper Cove Inn help her find some unknown treasure hiding in the moist sand of her loss? Rachel hoped so.

Fighting off the headache that threatened to engulf her, Rachel lay back on her bed. *Oh, Michael...how I wish you were here to help me.* She recalled her husband's lopsided smile. His unruly thatch of dark hair. The humor and love in his bright eyes before his alcoholism had come between them. Her throat tightened as she thought of his funeral and the other deaths that had come before.

The loss of her parents seemed so long ago. Only on nights like this, when exhaustion overwhelmed her, did Rachel let her

thoughts wander to her father's sickbed and her mother's fateful choice. The empty hospital bed and the lonesome high bluffs outside the old Victorian's window. The high cliffs calling.

After all this time, Rachel still wasn't sure of the true measure of her mother's love, or the meaning of that final goodbye. Worse yet, she was still tormented by her own part in it. She bit back the lump crowding her throat and blinked away the unwanted rush of tears. Longing wouldn't bring them back. Not Michael, her parents, nor the grandfather who'd finished raising her.

Rachel propped her chin on her hands. Grand-Papa was dead these past six years. She could almost feel the warmth of his hand in hers. She'd lied to him only once. The familiar leaden weight squeezed her heart.

The night before Mama's funeral he asked a question. "Do you know something you're not saying about it, Rachel? You can tell me."

Rachel's mouth had run dry. "No," she said, the awful lie raw and aching in her soul.

Locked away from the light of truth, the keeping of her secret was the only thing that had come between them. When he caught her brooding, he'd begged her to tell him what was wrong. She never did. Her silence and her guilt ravaged her like a scorched tree split by lightning.

Sometimes, when his eyes clouded with sorrow, she wondered if he'd uncovered the truth. Seen it shadowed in her heart. If so, he'd backed away from the knowing of it. Away from the pain it would cause. She never blamed him. Shrouded in shame, the secret was her burden to carry alone.

She looked over at her Bible on the nightstand. Grand-Papa

had given it to her all those years ago. A thin layer of dust lay on the cover.

She'd believed, once. Trusted God to guide and protect. She'd prayed when her father got sick...believed...hoped. But God hadn't listened. She'd prayed that Michael would stop drinking. Prayed for her marriage. God didn't hear her prayers. If God did exist, she doubted he loved her. Maybe God couldn't forgive her, either.

Rachel wasn't sure she wanted a Scripture-quoting retired preacher as her first guest. What was it Austin had quoted? *Isaiah 54:5*. Curiosity got the best of her.

Rachel thumbed through her Bible 'til she found the verse.

Remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.

For your Maker is your husband.

The Lord Almighty is his name.

Your Maker is your husband. What was Rachel supposed to do with that? She hadn't exactly been on speaking terms with her Maker for quite some time now. Wasn't sure she even wanted to be. Deep down, she knew she deserved to be exactly where she was. Alone. An orphan and a widow.

Rachel was too tired to sort any of it out, now. Her eyes drifted shut and she fell asleep, lulled by the distant booming of waves hurling themselves upon the rocks. The moonlit shadow of the sandpiper fell across her as she slept.