

# Chapter One

*“In my mother’s version, I am not buried in Alpine snow; death comes after I’m dredged in seasoned breadcrumbs and fried like a chicken cutlet.”*

—*Adriana Trigiani, The View from Lake Como*

If someone had suggested this six-month life hack timeline—launch an unexpected pregnancy, sell three beloved homes, and combine those three households under one roof (including two old ladies and multiple pets)—I would have dissolved in hysterical laughter. Truthfully, the impending baby was the tipping point. Even my handsome police officer husband Nathan admitted that if he had realized how hard all the change would be at once, he would have nudged us to do something differently.

“Like abstinence?” I’d suggested with a big grin. But Nathan gave me an irresistible crooked smile telling me that solution would never be on the menu.

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With my mother's help, I was trying to roll with what life had thrown at me. Miss Gloria, one of our neighbors who'd moved from Houseboat Row to the little guest cottage in our new Key West backyard, was trying too. Although even she, princess of practicality and optimism, was a tiny bit glum about leaving her home. For her, I thought it was not only leaving her houseboat and the casual lifestyle on the water but also leaving memories of the time she'd spent living with her husband on their floating home. I couldn't even picture that loss without tears blurring my eyes.

Annie Dubisson, Miss Gloria's best friend and neighbor on Houseboat Row, had moved into the second bedroom in the guest cottage. She had her own losses to grieve. Plus, I suspected the close quarters were a big adjustment for both. It would all work out in the end, I was sure of that, but the transition for each of us was bumpy.

We'd learned that when our real estate agent Cory Held described a property in Key West as perfect for owners with a vision—emphasizing *vision* as if it came in bold with verbal italics—that meant the house was likely a dump, a dog, or possibly even a knockdown. However, we were in a bit of a hurry (see eight-plus months pregnant, above) and most of what we were smitten with was quite out of our price range. Nothing we'd seen in the Meadows neighborhood, where I dreamed of living because of its proximity to Houseboat Row, could accommodate our family plus our two older friends.

Casa Marina, closer to the Atlantic side of the ocean and home to multimillion-dollar homes and big yards, was where

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we *envisioned* ourselves into the new place. We'd have to live through a couple months of construction chaos, but since Nathan and I had mostly enjoyed the process of gutting and renovating our little houseboat (that is, survived without murdering each other), we went into this project with unwarranted hubris. The house we'd chosen had a lot going for it—a gorgeous covered front porch, biggish yard with a mango tree, and a two-bedroom cottage in the backyard for the ladies. There was the small matter of demolishing the unusable kitchen and downstairs bath, but the chaos would be worth it in the end.

Everything had been falling into place until the architect's estranged father died unexpectedly in New York and he suffered a bit of a nervous breakdown and had to leave the island for a month to sort through his father's effects and come to terms with the permanence of his loss. My psychologist friend Eric assured me the breakdown was quite "normal" because the usual mourning process had been complicated by the estrangement. Next our contractor had fallen off a ladder while installing the gingerbread trim on another project, breaking several necessary weight-bearing bones and temporarily leaving our kitchen with no walls, no counters, and no appliances. We did have a kitchen sink, a plywood island, and a full-sized refrigerator, plus a card table on the back porch with room for a hot plate, a slow cooker, and a hot water pot. The only decorating I'd done was to hang a harvest wreath festooned with corn cobs and pine cones and faux autumn leaves on the front door to celebrate the Thanksgiving season. That holiday was bearing down on

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us quickly, though absolutely no one expected me to host this year.

We'd seen a lot of my friend Eric over the past few months—he had a wise perspective on life challenges. (In other words, he'd kept us from losing our marbles completely.) In fact, all my friends had been troopers. Connie, my college roommate and our neighbor down the dock on Houseboat Row—who was also sad that we couldn't live closer by—assured me that having a baby brought a surge of unreasonable hormones at every step along the way.

“Go with it,” she'd advised. “This is the one time in your life, other than toddler days, when you can pitch fits for no discernible reason, and no one will dare challenge you on it.”

Lorenzo a.k.a. Ron, my tarot card-reading friend who was a genius at spotting trouble and understanding the universe, had seen nothing but good news in the cards he'd read for me last week. Did I suspect he would flat-out fib if he had to? Yes, I did. But was I happy to hear positive news from him just the same? Yes, indeed.

When I complained about feeling useless, Nathan reminded me that I was doing the most important thing in the world, nurturing another human to life in my miraculous body. Did he also sometimes tease me about whether, based on the size of this very pregnant me, that life might turn out to be an alien being or a barn animal? Yes, he did, but that was only to make me laugh. Or so he said. *Grrrrr.*

My mother had been brilliant, of course, cooking me anything I had the slightest craving for and not taking it personally if I felt queasy after she'd gone to all the trouble.

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Despite all that support, I was feeling enormous and useless and at sixes and sevens. Not to mention absolutely terrified and unable to concentrate on anything but imagining the gruesome details of the birth ahead.

Rather than unpacking and arranging kitchen supplies around my new hot plate (no room there anyway) or writing up my review of the Red Shoe Island Bistro for our *Key Zest* staff meeting this week, I'd spent the day doom scrolling bad birth stories. I was in the throes of explaining all the ways the process could go wrong to Nathan (again) over cocktails/mocktails on our new front porch when Deputy Darcy Rogers pulled up in her Sheriff's Office cruiser. Nathan sprang up and stood at the top of the stairs to greet her. Anything to shift the focus off childbirth.

Darcy parked the car, then strode up the front path lined with coral rocks and climbed the steps. "Nice night, nice digs." She shook Nathan's hand and waved at me. She and I had not hit it off on our first go round—she'd considered me overinvolved in Sheriff's Office business—but I thought she'd come around to admiring my spunk in the end.

"Come sit a minute, can I get you a beer?" Nathan asked. "I'd offer you a tour of our new place, but Hayley might murder me for showing it before she's gotten everything unpacked."

"It's not a matter of unpacking," I corrected him, gritting my teeth over his description that made me sound like a slothful wife. "The whole place is in a shambles, and the workers have deserted us. We can't make a cup of coffee without a construction helmet."

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“Understood,” Darcy said, giving me a wink. “Not a problem. I wouldn’t turn down a cold one.” While Nathan went to get the beer, she took the rocker next to me and patted her own stomach. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I swallowed a sixteen-pound bowling ball,” I said, pleased that she’d asked. I’d never thought of her as the motherly type, nor actually a people person. I certainly had no idea whether she was married or had kids. “I don’t know whether to hope this ends early or be grateful for the quiet before the storm.”

“My grandma always said the present moment was a precious gift that often went unappreciated. That present moment is the only moment where we are.”

“Wow,” I said, bringing my rocker to a standstill. “She was deep.”

Darcy laughed. “She was. I didn’t get my personality from her side of the family.”

Nathan returned and handed her a locally brewed Crazy Lady beer. They chatted for a few minutes about the fentanyl bust that had almost brought Fantasy Fest to a standstill, including the arrest of the primary dealer dressed only in black boots and a Santa hat. He was not even wearing the requisite jockstrap required by both the city of Key West and the police department. Instead, he’d fastened a small gift box over his privates, which he opened for any woman who told him she’d been good that year. *Ugh*. The photo of him pretty much naked except for the dangling gift box, in handcuffs, flanked by two grim deputies, had spread across local media like wildfire.

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I watched Darcy as they talked, wondering what in the world she was really after. She had never, not once, dropped in on us for a friendly chat.

“I’ll get to what I came for, because I can see Hayley is wondering.” She winked at me again. Two winks in one visit? Something was definitely up. “You probably read about Florida’s new law, the Safe Exchange of Minor Children?”

Nathan nodded. I shook my head no.

“It’s also called the “Cassie Carli Law, after Cassie Carli, a Florida mother who went missing after a custody exchange,” she explained to me. “The law requires all sheriff’s departments to arrange a neutral place with video recording available where parents can safely exchange their children.

“You can’t imagine the horror stories we’ve heard about uncooperative parents fighting like demons, right in front of the kids,” she continued. “A lot of things can go terribly wrong, and this kind of trouble hurts the kids most. The law cuts down on a lot of potential problems.”

“So this happens if the relationship is extremely bad and one of the parents requests help? Or is it a situation where there was sole custody awarded, and the other parent disagrees with the visitation schedule or something?” I asked.

“All of the above, and more,” said Darcy. “Sometimes it’s court-ordered, and sometimes less formal. The point is we provide the safe place to keep the guardrails on.”

My husband’s face morphed from curious to slightly stony. “This concerns us because?”

Darcy drained the last of her beer and set it on the table between us. “We’re looking for a civilian to accompany a

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young woman on a child custody exchange, and I thought of Hayley.”

“Hayley?” Nathan croaked. “You may not have noticed that my wife is quite pregnant.”

“I noticed,” she said, adding another uncharacteristic smile. “This would all happen under the watchful eyes of the authorities. I will be staked out across the parking lot, but nearby. The challenge is that this young woman’s ex-husband can’t be trusted to do the right thing unless another adult is involved. That person cannot be wearing a uniform because he would freak out and bolt with the little girl instead of turning her over to the mother. He fought against this kind of exchange tooth and nail and only agreed if law enforcement keeps its distance. The young mother herself is a basket case and needs someone older, but not too much older, to support her. To make things a little worse, she doesn’t have a car. That bastard ex took it when he left.”

“Absolutely not,” Nathan said, almost stamping his foot. “My wife is pregnant.”

“Eight months pregnant *plus* not *minus*, waddling like an overfed penguin, and desperate to get out of my own head,” I snapped at Nathan. “Not to mention my own house, which is a scene of complete destruction at the moment.”

“Yes,” I said to Darcy. “Yes. As long as there’s no danger to the baby or me, I’d be delighted to help.”