
1

“YOU TOOK YOUR WEDDING RINGS OFF.”

“I . . . did.” Taylor Cabot glanced at her hand resting on the weathered boardwalk railing and found the small indentation on her third finger. She refused to accept her stomach’s reflexive quiver. Her younger cousin Aimee Curran was right: the rings had finally come off, after migrating from her left to right hand in a painfully slow march through grief—like a turtle navigating broken glass. But two days ago she’d soaped her finger, twisted the rings off, and tucked them back into their original Grebitus & Sons box—along with a creased and well-worn love poem. The only poetry her firefighter husband ever attempted in his too-short life. “*My life . . . my wife . . . I love you more . . .*”

Taylor drew a deep breath of salty-cool March air, grateful there was no fresh stab of pain. Almost three years after the horrific accident that snuffed Greg's life, his death was a scar, not a tender scab now. All as it should be. She swept aside a breeze-tossed strand of her coppery hair and met her cousin's gaze. "It was time."

Aimee's eyes, nearly the exact Curran green as her own, held Taylor's for a moment. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks. I'm . . ." Taylor raised her voice over the lively thrum from the busy boardwalk and beach below: music, loudspeakers, carnival rides, childish squeals, and the amazing syncopated flap-flutter of hundreds upon hundreds of colorful and wildly fanciful kites surfing the sea breeze—the annual Kidz Kite Festival in its full glory. She smiled, new certainty buoying her as well. "I'm kind of proud of myself, actually."

"You should be." Aimee returned her smile. "And I'm selfish enough to think that moving back home was a big part of that."

"It was."

In fact, it was at the top of the Survival List Taylor had drafted—edited, rewritten, lain awake night after night getting straight in her head and in her heart—during the last edgy, anxious months in Sacramento. Those long months she had been so frustrated with herself, uncomfortably angry, and completely sick of being a widow, an unwilling member of a select club no one ever wanted to belong to. Moving away had seemed like a good way to move on. It had been a tough decision, finally made easier when she was asked out on her first new-widow date—by the husband of a close friend. When Taylor's skin stopped crawling, and after she'd hurled her cell phone against the kitchen wall, she sat down and drafted her list.

She hadn't shared it with anyone, but accomplishing every

last item, regardless of how difficult, had become Taylor's biggest goal. She was determined to move forward, step by shaky step.

Transfer to a nursing position at San Diego Hope ER
Start jogging again
Lose the Krispy Kremes—and fifteen pounds
Find a good vet for Hooper
Take off wedding rings
Go through the last of Greg's things

And—

“So . . .” Aimee's brows rose a fraction. “Did the gorgeous Dr. Halston have anything to do with the timing?”

“Timing?”

“Taking off your rings. You know, that you've been seeing him?”

“Not exactly . . . maybe,” Taylor conceded, unable to deny the confusing mix of feelings the surgeon managed to inspire. If you asked anyone at San Diego Hope hospital, they'd say Taylor Cabot and Rob Halston were a couple. Typical grapevine speculation. And not true. Though, lately, each step in Taylor's life did seem to be headed closer and closer to—“It's really more of a friendship thing.”

Her cousin's lips quirked ever so slightly. “Always a good place to start.”

“I guess.” Taylor tried her best for a casual shrug. “I'm not sure I'm ready for anything more than that. Not quite yet.”

It was the last item on her checklist: *Fall in love again.*

“I'm sorry.” Aimee touched her arm. “I didn't mean to put you on the spot. It's so good to see you looking happier.”

“I know.” Taylor smiled at her cousin. “And I am. Really . . .”

Her gaze swept the vista beyond the railing, a long stretch of beach and tranquil green ocean dotted with palm trees and pastel clusters of beachfront bungalows. The sun shone on red clay roofs of far grander homes on the cliffs above. Today’s cloudless blue sky boasted a joyful rainbow of kites. Like hope on a Southern California breeze. It was starting to feel that way now. She was back home, part of a skilled, tight-knit ER team at the same hospital where her favorite cousin worked in the dietary department. It wasn’t perfect; Taylor didn’t expect that. But it did seem promising, as if peace and healing were really possible. A new beginning. No more painful detours after unimaginable tragedy.

“Look.” Aimee jabbed her finger toward the distance. “See? Between the big purple dragon and the SpongeBob that keeps going into a spin? It’s a plane. I’m surprised they let the pilot fly in that close with all that’s going on here. Maybe it belongs to a news team.”

“Don’t think so,” Taylor said, locating the small plane. “There’s a privately owned airstrip a few miles from here. Greg had a pilot friend who got permission to use it a couple of times when we flew in to visit the folks.” She hesitated, prepared for a pang, but the memory came painlessly: Greg sitting beside his buddy at the controls of the rented plane, then turning back to grin at Taylor with boyish excitement on his handsome face—so full of life. The sun glittering like diamonds on the surface of the sea, that breathtaking view of Coronado Island from high above, and the roller-coaster dip in her stomach when the plane tilted into a turn . . .

“He’ll probably be directed to another approach,” Taylor guessed, buoyed once again by the certainty that removing her

rings had been good timing. Not because of what might or might not be on the horizon with Rob Halston, or even that the rings had been looming large on her checklist, but because she really was past the worst now. She thought of what she'd said to her cousin, that the pilot would be directed to another approach. Maybe Taylor was being redirected too. A giddy laugh rose. She tapped Aimee's shoulder. "You know what we need?"

"Kettle corn?"

"No way. I've only logged 11,000 steps today." Taylor touched her activity-tracking bracelet. "It won't work in my calorie budget."

"That evil thing. I keep telling you: Curran women are born to be curvy. You're coming dangerously close to losing your membership." Aimee feigned a childish pout. "Okay, what *else* do we need?"

"Kites!" Taylor pointed down the crowded boardwalk. "Down there, past the face-painting booth, there's a tent where we can make our own. All different kinds of options: diamond kites, rollers, deltas, sleds. Crazy colors and even glitter. C'mon, we haven't flown one together since we were Girl Scouts."

"Wait, hold on." Aimee squinted, staring toward the ocean. "That plane . . . I swear its wing skimmed the water. Some kind of air show? But it seems too reckless even for that."

"Where?" Taylor turned to look at the same moment the crowd around them exploded with shouts.

"What's he doing?"

"Oh no, that plane's in trouble!"

"Pull up, dude!" a young man yelled. "Stop clowning—"

"There," a woman offered with breathless relief. "He's back up in the air again and turning toward—"

step *by* step

No.

Taylor's heart stuttered as the small plane banked erratically, dropped far too close to the water again, then hurtled, out of control, across the sand.

She grabbed her cousin's arm. "He's coming right at us!"

"Look out," someone shrieked. "He's gonna hit the boardwalk! Run; get away from here!"

A tidal wave of screams was drowned by a deafening engine roar. Then a horrifying overhead shadow, a rush of wind that nearly knocked Taylor to her knees, the acrid and eye-watering scent of airplane fuel—and finally a thunderous, earth-jolting crash.

"Aimee!"