



## Twenty-One

It was late morning when Caroline finally took a break and went down to the beach. Lorelei quickly summoned everyone upstairs to her bedroom to try on their costumes. Grams Dorea waved them off, too busy with her seashell jigsaw puzzle on the back porch to fight the stairs.

“Morning, Grams Dorea.” It was Earl, at the screen door.

“Morning, Earl, are you here to fix something?” she asked as she put a piece of puzzle into place.

“You asked me to replace the bathroom shower head and clean out the firebox. It ain’t been cleaned in years and it is dusty.” He knew why it was dusty and kept a straight face.

“I did? My memory is lapsing. Guess I had too much partying last night over on Ocracoke.” She put her

glasses on. “Okay, come on in and don’t be messing around too long.” She beckoned him with her index finger. “Earl, come here. You see my puzzle?”

His eyes narrowed on it. “You got a lot of tiny pieces.”

“I need to find the piece that fits in here. It’s the edge of that pink calico shell.”

“I ain’t good at puzzles, Grams Dorea.”

“Then it’s time to learn. Pull up a chair.” She pointed her cane to the left. “That chair.”

“Grams Dorea, I ain’t got time with fixin your place and all.”

“You ain’t got time?” Grams Dorea sat back and slid her glasses down her nose. Her piercing eyes met his.

“Okay, I got five minutes to find that shell piece for y’all.”

“Go on, chip in.” Grams Dorea began to sift through the puzzle pieces.

Upstairs, the four sisters were deciding the last details about the upcoming mermaid ceremony. The costumes were stored in the cottage’s cedar closet next to Lorelei’s bedroom-sewing room. Every detail needed to be addressed. The sisters tried on their mermaid costumes for tuck in or take out, along with repairs.

Aunt Calypso slid perfectly into hers. All it needed were a few missing sequins to be replaced. She did a slow twirl in the mirror. “I look like I did fifteen years ago.” She pulled on the string attached to her scalloped tail. “It works!”

“Make those ten years,” Pearl teased.

“Maybe so. But it fits. My mermaid tail is so pretty. The teal and gold beads and sequins still look new.”

“I’m adding a stronger fishing line on rings on the tail to the back of the costumes,” Lorelei said, “so this year we can pull them up and down and not trip.”

“Oh, Lorelei, what a great idea! I love it,” Pearl cheered as she leaned over to examine her costume.