

the

ROMANCE

fiasco



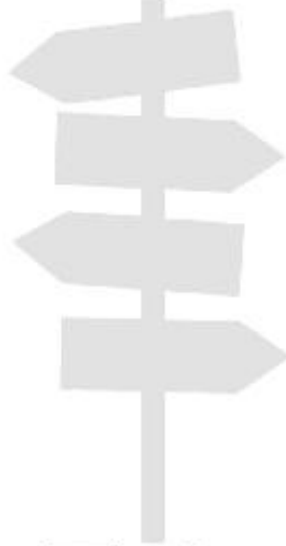
USA Today Bestselling Author

ELLIE HALL

#2



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ELLIE HALL

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About this book

Is there anything worse than your boyfriend hooking up with your best friend?

Actually, yes. What's worse is them getting married and asking me to be the maid of honor. Some might consider me a pushover for agreeing. I think of myself more as a peacemaker. Better not to make a scene. Already learned that lesson.

On the upside, the best man is the kind of ruggedly handsome that could cause a gal to experience a case of love at first sight. Despite his tough exterior, the moving speech he gave during the rehearsal dinner *might* have been why I swooned and fell into the pool.

Conveniently, the hotel made an error and we had to share a room. Magnus McGregor and Magnolia McGuinness are easy names to mix up. Probably. I think of the long conversation we had in the darkness well into the midnight hours as fate. But in a cruel twist, the next day he acted like we hadn't shared secrets and dreams.

Never expecting to see Magnus again, my surprise did cause me to make a scene when he rolled up on my island in his Jeep, wind tossed, sunkissed, and scowling because I have his dog. But I didn't steal it. I swear.

...Then that butterball digs up a golden ring and it isn't mine. At least not yet.

Book 2 in this beachy, small town, brothers, treasure hunt-romantic comedy mashup might just steal your heart. The

forced proximity, neighbors romance stands alone, but because of the mystery subplot, the books are best read in order. Fall in love with this sweet and swoony closed door romance today!

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Lally



CHAPTER 1

The softness in Kevin's eyes tells me that he really missed me—if only Kevin was a human male and not an Airedale Terrier.

“There, as good as new,” I say, giving his head a little pat.

“It's too bad you're not back here in Atlanta for good,” Kevin says—Kevin Junior's owner, not the dog. And yes, he named his canine after himself. He says it's a great way to meet ladies at the dog park.

“Considering I've fallen in love, no chance—”

His gaze widens before his expression returns to neutral.

“With Coco Key. It's beautiful, peaceful.” A soft sigh escapes. I'd tell Kevin and Kevin Junior to come visit but don't want to give them the wrong idea.

“I bet the weather there is better than here. These hot, sultry summers...” He trails off, eyes fixed on me as he steps closer.

Crouching down to give Kevin—the dog—a goodbye pet, I dodge human Kevin's advance, then pop up and gather my things before moving toward the door.

“I appreciate you doing house calls, even though you moved away. You know you're welcome anytime,” Kevin says with an air of lament in his voice.

“Thanks. I still have to get over to Lance's this afternoon. His Aussie is struggling with stomach issues.”

“Dolly can join the club.” Kevin rubs his stomach.

And if the subtle flirting wasn't enough of a reason to leave, this is my cue. I deal with dog messes all day, every day. I don't need to know anything about this guy's GI tract.

“It was nice seeing you guys. If you need anything, get in touch with Dr. Kimball. He took on all my previous clients. I'd trust him with Madame and General if that tells you anything.”

We say our goodbyes and I hasten to Lance's place. When I still had my veterinarian practice in Atlanta, I only made house calls in cases of emergencies or if the pet's owner wasn't physically able to make it to my office. Much to my chagrin, my return trip this week was made known, so I got a few requests for visits.

Next up, Lance and Dolly.

I gird myself for more one-sided flirting. It's not like I'm Dr. Hot Vet, nor am I disinterested in a little romance. Actually, I wouldn't say no to a little sweetness in my life, and I don't just mean my nightly dates with a bowl of butter pecan ice cream. But now is not the time, and these guys are not what I'd call candidates for election. I'm definitely not looking for love in Atlanta because my roots are now farther south. But even if I were, I don't think Kevin and I are at the point in our relationship where it's okay to discuss gastrointestinal distress. Plus, Kevin named his dog Kevin, which is a bit of an *ick* in my book. He's so full of himself that sometimes I worry he'll overflow. Could be what's causing the tummy trouble.

When I ring Lance's doorbell, I expect barking but only hear footsteps.

Lance smiles, pulling me into a hug. “I thought I heard a crash.”

“A crash?” Drawing myself out of his arms, I look around with concern.

“Like an angel fell from heaven.”

I try a smile, but it's more of a rumpiled grin. “Ha ha. Where's Dolly girl?” I ask, getting right to the point.

A fifty-pound ball of excited red merle hurtles toward me, lips flapping, eyes wide. She yips and spins and her tail wags happily. Getting down on my knees, I give Dolly a big hello. She was one of my favorites during the weekly weigh-ins Lance insisted she have—the man could probably benefit from watching his waistline.

When I stand up, he's looking at me as if disappointed I didn't meet him with such enthusiasm.

"She seems in good spirits," I say.

Lance doesn't move from the doorway. "I'm so glad you came on such short notice."

"Of course. Don't want her suffering, but she seems well, energetic. Her eyes are clear. Remember, I gave you Dr. Kimball's info—"

Lance shifts from foot to foot and exhales. "Actually, Dolly is fine. It's you I'm worried about." Lance steps closer.

I back onto the brick porch. "Me?"

Dolly nuzzles us both and I realize she holds a ball between her teeth.

"Can you spare five minutes and come to the backyard for a game of fetch?" Lance asks.

Ordinarily, this would be crossing a client-doctor boundary, but Lance was a friend first and I can't say no to dogs—canines, that is.

Before my exodus from Atlanta, Lance and I were in the same group. He was Ross's friend more than mine, though. I lost him and Dolly in the breakup because, of course, the bros were loyal to each other.

Mostly, it seems.

"Play ball? I'll do it for Dolly. And since you didn't ask, I'm fine, happier than ever."

A thought more uncomfortable than the southern humidity makes my upper lip bead with sweat. If Lance is going to ask me to be his plus-one to the wedding, he'll have to do a heck

of a lot better than the cheesy angel pick up line. Something meaningful. Powerful. Never mind, I don't want Lance to ask me anything.

On the short walk to the backyard, I pass under a flag billowing in the light breeze and remember when I met my former fiancé. Not Ross, my ex-boyfriend.

Tears of betrayal are salty. But tears of grief are another animal altogether—at times a growly, petulant creature.

While we throw the ball for Dolly, I anticipate Lance lobbing questions my way:

Are you upset with Romy? Hurt is more like it.

Do you want to get back together with Ross? An emphatic NO.

Are you going to make a scene at the wedding? Definitely not.

Do you resent them? Status pending.

But do I forgive them and wish them many years of married bliss? Absolutely. It's harder to forget, given the upcoming wedding and my role in it, but yes, I certainly forgive them. We're called to forgive seventy times seven times.

Lance's voice floats to me. "I bet you'll be the one who catches the bouquet. You'll be next, Lally."

I blink a few times, his meaning coming into focus. "I'm not in the marriage market."

His eyebrows shoot up. "You met someone down south?"

"You know me, always working. Fostering rescues. Getting my new practice established. It's a lot of work." And taking long sunrise walks on the beach, paddle boarding with my mutts, and poker nights with the locals. It's not retirement, but it's not the hustle of Atlanta either.

"Well, you never know. Perhaps you'll meet the future Mr. McGuinness. Or maybe you already did." He winks.

"Ha ha, Lance."

He bumps me with his shoulder. “Can’t blame me for trying.”

“I’m flattered. Thanks. But guys with Aussies just aren’t my type. I prefer the ones with lap dogs. The little pocketbook pooches.”

Concern streaks across his face.

“I’m joking. But if you were concerned about me and the wedding, don’t be. I’m fine. If you’re wondering if we can dance, just as friends. After—everything, I’m just not...” I shake my head, letting him fill in the blanks.

I’m just not feeling the love vibes as I anticipate witnessing my former best friend and ex-boyfriend at the altar.

If someone completely removed from the situation came along, perhaps I’d reconsider, but as it is, this entire week is going to be a fiasco.

The thing about me is I fall in love easily. But not with the guys that are interested in me. There has never been a match except for Ethan, but that was a long time ago.

Dolly brings me the ball, drops it at my feet, and then paws at me. “Alright, alright. You’re a very good girl.” I pet her enthusiastically and then give her the treat she knows is in the pocket of my jean shorts. Also, where my phone is stashed, which has repeatedly been going off with messages from Romy. I’m ignoring them because these house calls and the animals are my priority.

“And things are good down in the Keys? You’re not too lonely?”

“Lance...”

He holds up his hands in surrender. “Alright, alright.”

“All things considered, I’m settling quite nicely into my quiet life in Coco Key.”

All things being my last boyfriend hooked up with my best friend. I’m not super social these days, except I did recently meet Isla, Robyn from Beans & Books’ sister. They’re both super nice and I hope to soon consider them friends.

My phone buzzes again. This time I check it. “Romy has sent twenty-one messages. I’d better go. Maid of honor duties.”

“That’s right. The rehearsal dinner is tonight.”

“Wish me luck.”

I say goodbye to Lance and Dolly then head to my SUV parked on the street. The pit of dread in my stomach increases with each step.

Lance was sweet to check in on me, even if he had an ulterior motive. But the reality about how I’m doing is an uncertain one. Being back here after everything that happened is surreal. I didn’t return with my tail between my legs—if anyone were to be ashamed of their behavior, it ought to be the bride-to-be and groom. However, when I found out about their betrayal, let’s just say that I didn’t handle it well. It wasn’t my most mature moment.

As I park in front of Romy’s apartment, I push that out of my mind because I yearn to follow it down the street. I’m tempted to turn off my phone, drive away, and forget this ever happened. I could never speak to Ross or Romy again.

I could.

But I won’t because I have integrity. I maintain my dignity, except for that one time. It was a reaction, a tantrum, and involved paint that took weeks to get off my fingers.

Closing my eyes, I say a prayer, asking for strength, to continue to forgive if I sense bitterness returning, and for the couple to have a beautiful wedding day.

Someone knocks on my SUV’s window. Startled, I snap open my eyes. Romy stands there, recently tanned and with her brows done, wearing a trendy dress, waving frantically at me.

I can’t quite see my reflection, but am certain I wear a clown smile—it’s slightly deranged and a little too bright.

“Lally? What are you doing in there? It’s time to celebrate. We’re going to get this party started right now. And there’s so

much to do. Come on.”

“Didn’t we already celebrate with the bachelorette party?”

“Yes, and it was amaze-zing, but the guys are at the bachelor party—well, they have been since last night—and what is that saying? Um, while the rats are away, the mice play?”

I wince. Romy and I weren’t best friends because of her outstanding intelligence and wit. We were roommates in college and it was an opposites-attract situation. I think we balanced each other out in a lot of ways. She was inclined to party her way through school and I wouldn’t have left the library except to forage for food.

As I get out of the vehicle, Romy squeals and whines about everything at a rapid clip. “I just know it was meant to be because our names both start with the letter R. But the wedding planner didn’t get the monogrammed napkins I asked for. Instead, they have both our names. Tacky, much?”

I try to be enthusiastic and compassionate but can’t abide by being fake either, so I *Oh*, *Um*, and *Mmhmm* in response.

Romy swats my arm. “What’s wrong? Why are you so quiet? Don’t tell me you’re not over Ross. I know he’s a catch ___”

I stop listening because it’s not that at all. And if it was, I’d be righteously upset because they got together when we were still on and off. Mostly off because the breakup writing was on the wall. But this whole thing is extremely awkward for me.

But I said yes. As I step into her apartment, I tell myself I’m doing the right thing—committed to the high road.

“You’d said things were rocky, and that you weren’t sure how much longer you were going to be together.” Romy’s voice returns to a whine as she pours a glass of wine.

“It’s okay. Water under the bridge.” I wave my hand dismissively.

She dramatically goes limp with relief. “I’m so glad you’re over Ross, because that would be weird. I mean, we’d have to

fight over him and I just got my nails done.” She’s not joking.

I force myself not to roll my eyes. “Sure would be weird.” But it’s not, because I’m not interested in sloppy seconds or a fight, thank you very much.

“Okay, so let’s talk about some of your maid of honor duties.” Romy’s phone beeps with a string of texts, which she answers as if they’re more important than my duties. That’s a relief.

I’m not a pushover. More like a peacemaker. Romy had a posh but lonely life—her parents were never around and her nanny raised her.

For me, with Ross, if I’m really honest, I dated him mostly to see if I was over Ethan. I know that sounds questionable, but I hoped that I was ready, and let’s be real, the clock is ticking. All the same, the situation stings even though I’m over him. She can have him...and I could go for some ice cream right now, a big tub of butter pecan.

Romy texts while she talks. “And that’s when the flowers are supposed to be delivered, so if you could meet the florist to ensure everything is correct, that would be great. The wedding planner knows all this, of course, but I figure you should too as a backup. Astonleigh Bergerhoff referred her and then told me all the things that went wrong. For instance, there was an issue with the cake delivery on their wedding day. Apparently, she had some beef with the baker and they got chocolate ganache instead of vanilla silk between the layers. Can you believe that? But I’m locked in now. You just never know who to trust these days.”

I sigh. “No. You don’t.”

She goes on with more wedding day details.

Once more, my thoughts float away and I glimpse into the past at the wedding I’d been planning with Ethan.

“Oh, before I forget—” Romy drops a list in my lap. “I need you to check on the favors. There should be five hundred, not four hundred fifty. They made an error. So get more or make them yourself—I don’t care. But I can’t have guests

leaving empty-handed.” She goes on and on while her phone buzzes. “You got it?”

“Yes. Lots of duties.”

“And call this number to...” Romy’s phone won’t stop beeping with incoming texts. “Ugh. My mother wants to know if the Delaneys are coming. I don’t know and quite frankly, don’t care. Courtney didn’t come to the wedding shower, so I have my doubts.”

I hate to say it, but I don’t care either. Not about any of this. I eye the door.

She takes a slug of wine and stabs her phone. Mine beeps with an incoming text from her. She shared a contact with me. There’s no name or label other than MM. Those are my initials—short for Magnolia McGuiness—but I don’t say anything because then I risk Romy continuing to rifle orders at me.

Opting to go with the flow and stop the constant flow of alcohol into Romy’s system, I remove the wine glass from her hand and place it on the table.

“Romy, your wedding day is tomorrow and everything is going to be great. You are going to have a beautiful day. You hired a professional planner, all your friends and family are going to be there, and you’re marrying Ross. It’ll be so special and sweet and everything you want it to be.”

“But—”

Shaking my head at her protest, I say, “Can we say a prayer together?”

Her shoulders relax slightly. “I guess I was getting a little excited.”

“You should be excited. You’re pledging your life to the man of your dreams.”

“You’re probably going to find yours too someday.”

It’s juvenile of me to be annoyed by her comment, but it’s hard not to be. I say an additional prayer for patience and forgiveness, just in case. A soft and genuine smile lifts the corners of my mouth.

Soon, this will be over and I can retreat to my island hideaway.

Romy says she has to take a nap before her appointment at the salon for her rehearsal dinner hair and makeup.

“I’m going to head over to the hotel to check in.”

“No, wait. You have to—” She rattles off a litany of duties. “And the list. Don’t forget about the list. Or the rings. Be sure to text that number about the rings. We can’t have any problems tomorrow.”

“Right. Okay, I’ll text the number.”

After I say goodbye, I seal myself in my SUV. I could sure use a beach walk with my mutts right now.

Instead, my finger hovers over the *call* button with the name label MM. Most people prefer texting, so against my better sensibilities I tap the little speech bubble to send a text, half expecting it to show my phone number since those are my initials—Magnolia McGuinness. But no, there must be another MM. Maybe Romy wasn’t as off-kilter as I thought. I thumb in a quick message. Just as I hit send, I glimpse the autocorrect typo.

Me: Hi, this is Lally. Will you marry me?

I get a quick reply.

MM: Please forward your application to my assistant.

Magnus



CHAPTER 2

I chuckle darkly at my reply to the wrong number text. Ironic that I'm in Atlanta for a wedding and someone accidentally proposed to me.

Truth is, I'm desperate for an escape hatch but told myself I'd see it through. I'm doing this for my best friend, Sean, who I lost and for no other reason.

To be clear, it's not my wedding. I'm not married, engaged, or otherwise committed to anyone. I'm not opposed to 'til death do we part, but a proposal is the farthest thing from my mind when I have family matters on my hands—a mission of sorts, and this weekend is just like being on leave.

My brother Ryan would say that I'm in a mood.

For one, I'd rather be in Libya than here. Okay, that's a massive exaggeration, but if the rumors are true, and the groom didn't deny them, I don't necessarily endorse how this coupling between Ross and Romy came to be.

For two, the bachelor party that started last night and extended into the early hours of this morning was not my bag. I stood guard if only to make sure the groom wouldn't arrive on his wedding day in pieces.

My three brothers and I are very different, but Ross and Sean are like night and day. Whereas Sean was a man of integrity and honor, his brother is—words that I'd only utter downrange come to mind.

Not only is Ross a jelly-backed loser, but he's disrespectful, dull, and selfish. Not someone I'd want my

daughter to marry if I had one—though I guess that ship is in the port and ready to set sail. At thirty-eight, I'm afraid the door to my having a family is closing.

Those were Sean's last words to me, *Take care of my family*. Not only does that include his wife and son, but his brother too—regrettably.

Ross asked me to stand in for Sean. Couldn't say no. Thinking of how my buddy proposed to Nora, I grab my phone and type out a quick response to the unknown texter.

Me: Also, asking for someone's hand in marriage over the phone is underwhelming. I was thinking of something more thoughtful, personal.

Ryan is the flirt among us brothers. CJ is the jokester. Royal would've blocked the texter immediately. I don't know why I haven't. I guess even though the marriage proposal wasn't intended for me, whoever sent it should know the love of their life wasn't on the receiving end.

Me: I was joking about contacting my assistant. I don't have one. Also, you reached the wrong number.

Unknown Caller: I know. I mean, no. I didn't. I meant to text you.

The little dots indicating the person is typing continue to blink. Scrolling up, I reread the original message and glean her name is Lally. I may as well have a little fun with this because the next twenty-four hours are going to be torture.

Me: A marriage proposal and we haven't even met? That's bold.

Unknown Caller: It was an autocorrect. I meant it to say Hi, this is Lally, will you meet with me?

Me: Ah, that's more like it. A meeting before marriage. You should know that I'm a traditional guy, so now we're moving in the right direction.

With another chuckle, I toss my phone down and dig through my ditty bag for shaving cream. I suppose I should attempt to look respectable tonight. As I shake the can to find it empty, my phone beeps with another message.

Unknown Caller: In that case, that would mean you'd be flashing me. But getting back on track, I'm Lally, the maid of honor, and the broad would like me to make sure you have the things.

Her comment about flashing reminds me of a prank a couple of the guys pulled during basic training. It was gross. I don't laugh.

Me: Are you texting while driving?

Unknown Caller: No!

Me: Well, there will be no flashing. Who is the broad and what are the things?

Unknown Caller: Asking! I meant asking, not flashing.

Me: Say what you mean and mean what you say...and check your texts before you hit send.

Unknown Caller: I have fat thumbs.

Me: That's a strange thing to admit.

Unknown Caller: I didn't mean to call the bride a broad. That's an old-fashioned and insulting term. Definitely not part of my vocabulary and not applicable to the bride. I wouldn't dare. It was a simple mistake. Honest. Please believe me...and don't tell anyone. I don't want to ruffle any feathers or ruin anyone's day.

Me: Your secret is safe with me. For the record, I wouldn't judge you for calling her that.

Unknown Caller: But I didn't call her that. It was an error. It should've said the BRIDE would like me to make sure you have the things.

Unknown Caller: RINGS! The RINGS!

Me: I knew what you meant.

Unknown Caller: Then why did you ask?

I'm not sure. Fat thumbs or not, I'm having the most fun I've had in weeks engaging in this little text exchange with Lally.

Me: Where should we meet?

Unknown Caller: How do I know you're really the best man and not some crazy psycho?

Me: You texted me...with a marriage proposal, I might add.

Unknown Caller: That was a mistake. A big, fat thumbed beefsteak.

Unknown Caller: MISTAKE!

Me: Just promise to check your texts before you hit send.

Unknown Caller: Yes, sir. Okay, boss. Aye aye, captain.

I chuckle. Whoever this Lally is with the fat thumbs is spunky. I like it. Sitting down on the bed in the guest room at Nora's house, I pull out the notebook where I wrote the speech that I hope does Sean proud. I wasn't able to attend his wedding to Nora all those years ago because I was deployed and he was on leave, but this is what I would've said. What I should've said to him.

Even though I have most of it committed to memory, I read through and make sure there aren't any typos—that would be ironic, considering I just gave Lally a hard time about her autocorrect.

I think about Sean, who I considered a brother along with my three brothers, and the last correspondence my grandfather, Chip, sent me when I was still overseas. It was before the accident. He'd written that he hoped I found companionship, someone to love as much as he'd loved our grandmother. It was unusually intimate and surprisingly personal. My grandfather typically kept himself at a mysterious distance.

However, I guess he assumed that I too was familiar with loss—a loved one of the fraternal variety, our parents too, which was why Royal, Ryan, CJ, and our little sister were in Chip's care. If you could call it that. More like three boys set loose on an island with unlimited freedom, snacks, and promises of pirate treasure.

I still don't know what to make of the will, the letter, or what Royal thinks is a treasure hunt. I gave up on that a long time ago. I gave up a lot of things.

I'm not interested in money, prestige, or anything flashy. If I could be described in one word, I'd like it to be *honor*. I try to do the right thing no matter if anyone is watching. If I say I'm going to do something, I follow through. I live according to the truth.

But now that the patriarch, Chip, is gone, that leaves the role to me. It's one I didn't ask for and don't particularly want. I'm a born leader, but the rest of the McGregors are wily, unruly—like herding foxes.

These thoughts are for the day after tomorrow when I return to Coco Key. For now, I have to focus on getting through the rehearsal dinner tonight and the reception tomorrow.

I rub my temples, praying a headache isn't lurking just beneath the tension. I take a few deep breaths, roll my shoulders, and relax.

It's not because I'm at Nora's or found out she has a boyfriend—it's been years since Sean passed away. Their son, Alex, is great and growing like a weed.

It's not that Ross isn't my favorite person either or that I fundamentally disagree with his bachelor party antics.

And this isn't the kind of headache caused by the injury.

No, it's something else. Before I nail down what, my phone pings.

Unknown Caller: So, the rings?

Me: They're safe and sound.

Unknown Caller: But I want to see them with my eggs.

Laughter bursts from me. This woman is hilarious.

Me: It's well past breakfast, a bit late in the day to have eggs, no?

Unknown Caller: Breakfast for dinner is one of my favorite pastimes.

Me: Sounds like an interesting life you lead.

Unknown Caller: Are you being sarcastic? I just realized you don't use any emojis.

Me: You don't either.

Unknown Caller: Wouldn't want to risk using the wrong one, given my autocorrect track record.

Me: Fair point.

The little gray bubbles indicating Lally is texting blink and then disappear. I leave my phone on the bed and finish getting ready. I'll have to stop and pick up shaving cream on my way to the rehearsal dinner later.

As I make my way downstairs, I pause and gaze at the photos of Sean at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis—one in full dress blues and another seated on top of a Humvee somewhere overseas. There are numerous pictures of him and Nora, one on their wedding day.

The one that brings a lump to my throat is Sean holding Alex—the one time he got to meet his son. I’ve tried to stand in and attend birthdays and other events when I can, but it’s not the same. I’m Uncle Magnus, not Dad. It seems like he and Nora’s boyfriend get along well, which I’m grateful for. Young boys need strong men and good role models in their lives.

A prayer plays in the back of my mind as it so often does—one for forgiveness. One for the things I’ve done and what I’ve failed to do.

I could’ve been a better friend, brother, son, and grandson. I suppose there’s always today. Today and tomorrow and whatever days I’m blessed to live.

And I count those blessings. Every. Single. One.

I shouldn’t be here and that’s not me being self-deprecating or depressed. I’ve been screened for my mental health every which way, up and down, inside and out. The doctors are impressed with my resilience.

I shouldn’t be here because of the accident. What landed me on the no-fly list—not as a civilian, but I am one now—but as a navy pilot.

I’m grounded, and if anything were going to set me spinning, it would be that. But I got lucky. Lucky to still be here, because when that helo went down, I assumed it was over. As the water rushed in, I figured that was it.

I glance up at a photo of Sean wearing a knowing grin. “Thanks, buddy.”

Someone’s smiling on me, that’s for sure.

From outside Nora’s house, the kids laugh and splash in the pool. Someone talks about seating arrangements and how it was all left up to the bride.

“Having FOMO?” a female voice asks.

I almost startle. Frowning, I shake my head. “No.”

Nora smiles. “Ah, then it must be JOMO.”

“JOMO?”

“The Joy of Missing Out.”

I squint, trying to understand her meaning.

“Like, some things we’re afraid to miss out on: FOMO, and others we’re glad we don’t have to experience: JOMO.”

I glance at Sean’s photo and her reminder that yeah, I’m still here, still alive. I should be overjoyed.

“If Sean were here, he’d encourage you to find someone to dance with tomorrow night. To someday say I do to,” Nora says.

“More like I don’t,” I mutter.

She whacks me with a damp pool towel. “Oh stop. Please don’t tell me you’re still thinking about Waxy?”

“Waxy?” I sputter, wondering if I misheard or if Nora is having the verbal equivalent of Lally’s autocorrect.

“Do you mean Wanda?”

“Her skin was so waxy. Sean and I called her that. She wasn’t the one, not that it was any of my business.”

Thinking back, I snort a laugh. “Waxy? Well, you’re not wrong.”

“Well, mister, we’re going to find some fun for you tomorrow night.”

“If it’s Ross’s version of fun, count me out.”

“Was it that bad?” Nora cringes.

“Sean would’ve given him a whooping.”

“No doubt. It’s still hard to believe how different they were. Wish he were here.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“But we can’t forget JOMO,” Nora says.

I let out a sigh, I don’t plan to get married or do anything that would lead me to the end of the aisle. Not because I don’t want to, but because, inspired by Sean’s love story, I was going to propose to Wanda, aka Waxy. Dodged a bullet on that one because before I popped the question, she took off with her boss.

I’m gun-shy now. It’s silly to be afraid of rejection, but it’s the truth. I won’t lie to others, and least of all to myself.

“I have to bring the kids dry towels. Come on out when you’re ready. Don’t be a stranger. The kids would love whale rides on Uncle Magnus’s back.” Nora smiles warmly.

I return it because she’s not wrong about FOMO or JOMO.

As she strides down the hall, from my pocket, my phone beeps with a flurry of messages.

Unknown Caller: ☐

Unknown Caller: ☐♀

Unknown Caller: ☐

Unknown Caller: ☐♂

Unknown Caller: ☐

Unknown Caller: ♥

Me: Did you mean to send that last one?

She doesn’t answer.

But after receiving that red heart, I change the contact info from *Unknown Caller* to *Lally*.

Lally



CHAPTER 3

Something inside of me jitters. It's a shaky, tremulous sensation a lot like the time in college when I pulled an all-nighter and then literally drank a gallon of coffee to get through exams the next day.

To say I was wired is an understatement. My entire body vibrated. Much like my phone when I belatedly realize that among the wedding-themed emojis I sent to MM, I included a heart. The red one which signifies romantic love.

I tell myself it fits with the wedding theme, right? But he asked if I meant to send it so what did he think I was suggesting?

I drop my head into my hands. It's bad enough that I accidentally proposed to the best man, I then sent him a heart without thinking about how that might come across.

"I meant the love uniting the bride and groom. Yep. That's my story and I'm sticking to it," I say to no one in particular while I wait in line for a last-minute item Romy requested. She saw a social media post about a life hack that involved lining her shoes with maxi pads to keep her feet from sweating.

Gazing up at the foam-paneled ceiling and glaring fluorescent lights, I say, "I just don't know. I don't know anymore." Yet here I am, in line at the pharmacy talking to myself.

With only thirty minutes until the rehearsal dinner starts, I only went along with this because I was in desperate need of

deodorant. I'm not smelly. More like nervous. I think I took on Romy's anxiety. Not that she'd ever admit she had it.

Some girls in our dorm referred to her as an airhead. That's not entirely fair. It's more accurate to say that she thinks she's the star of her own TV talk show. I mean, she's chatty. That's all. Also, she thinks the world revolves around her, which I suppose I'm reinforcing by standing in this unusually long line with lady pads for her shoes on a Friday night at a drug store.

In fact, I've never seen Romy so scattered yet singularly focused as she was earlier. I guess that's what happens on the eve of your wedding day.

"But why should I be anxious?"

An elderly man standing in the next line over looks at me as if questioning whether he should be concerned for my wellbeing.

I give a little wave before realizing it's with the hand containing the feminine care products. Swallowing, I say, "Wedding later. Er, tomorrow. Not mine."

His expression falters. Maybe because I'm wearing a skimpy dress with a twirly skirt that Romy insisted was perfect, along with strappy high-heeled sandals that make me feel like a giant.

"Sheesh. What has gotten into me?" I mutter.

Then I slap my hand over my mouth. When the officiant asks if anyone objects, what if I involuntarily get out of my seat and holler, *I do*? No, not *I do*. To be clear, I do not want to marry Ross. What if I say that I object to their union?

On what grounds? That the guy is a lying cheater and I wouldn't want that for my friend. Then again, she cheated too. Not that we were dating. Nothing of the sort. She betrayed our friendship.

Yeah, I think I need to work on that forgiveness thing.

After checking out, I push the door open at the same time someone on the other side gives it a shove. We push and pull

like we're doing an even more awkward dance than "passing in the hall choreography."

At last, he pulls the door open for me and mutters something about shaving cream as I murmur, "Thanks," without making eye contact—no need to pile on the embarrassment.

"Get it together, Lally," I tell myself as I rush to my car. Thankfully, there aren't any new texts from Romy. Only the one from MM seems to glow on my device.

Me: Did you mean to send that last one?

I considered replying, but I've already dug halfway to the six-foot mark, why keep digging my own grave?

After swiping on more deodorant, checking my teeth, and smoothing my hair, I head over to the rehearsal dinner venue. Romy's parents own mansions in Hawaii, Montana, and the Hamptons, but they rented out an estate for this evening's event. Or I should say Romy did, and they paid for it. Actually, I'm not sure which contingent of her parent units footed the bill—her mother has remarried several times and her father's wife seems to get younger and younger. Is it the same one or is he replacing her with a new unit every few years?

These are the thoughts that distract me from the racing sensation vibrating under my skin as the sun begins its slow descent with a golden wink from the west.

A valet insists on parking my SUV. "I'm sorry about the dog fur. Occupational hazard," I say softly as he cruises away.

Laughter filters from inside the mansion. Swaths of neon LEDs light the exterior and glow from the interior. The strains of music greet me at the same time a man in a black suit ushers me inside.

Biting my lip, I say, "Just looking for the bride."

And looking and looking. I imagined the rehearsal dinner to be a small, intimate affair with the bride and groom's respective families along with the bridal party and best men.

Nope. This is what Romy would've called, back in college, a rager. Well, a respectable, sophisticated rager.

So far, I've counted three bars, two groups doing shots, and one woman whose clothing isn't sufficient even on this balmy Atlanta evening.

But no sign of Romy.

I spot her mother, some relatives I met over the years, and even Ross, but no bride.

Biting my lip, I pull out my phone and send her a text... and wincing when I spot the one from MM. It's as if after my brash reaction to Ross's cheating, I've opened myself up to a multitude of embarrassments. I'm not usually like this—flustered, talking to myself, or so fidgety.

Three minutes pass during which I eat three canapes—whatever those are—and pass up two cocktails. I long for a dog or even a pet bird to help ground me. I don't have social anxiety, so that's not it. But as I've gotten older, I prefer the companionship of animals to people.

No, that's not entirely true. While I adore dogs, cats, birds, bunnies, and even lizards, I love people. It's just that the ones who I thought were *my* people, turned out to only be loyal to each other.

I do another lap around the modern mansion and get lost a couple of times before I find myself in the library, which is nothing like the rest of the house with its stark lines, stone features, and minimalism. This is the stuff of a book lover's dream. Apart from one wall of windows, the rest are filled with books. There is even a rolling ladder and an antique card catalog cabinet. I'm more of a non-fiction person, but I instantly feel at home in here.

A soft sigh escapes because I'm still carrying around the feminine hygiene pads for Romy's shoes. I check my phone in case I didn't hear it beep above the bass-heavy music.

Nope. Still no reply to my spamming her with multiple *Where are you*s and *I have the goods*.

My finger hovers over the text thread with MM. Biting my lip, I open it.

Me: Has the eagle landed?

MM: Are you referring to the big bird or the little one?

Huh? I was trying to be funny, and it fell flat.

Me: Um, not the giant yellow one on children's television programming.

MM: Military term for helo.

Me: Helo? Do you mean hello?

MM: Helicopter.

Me: Wouldn't that be technically be heli with a letter I? H-E-L-I-C-O-P-T-E-R.

Ha, that time autocorrect didn't get the best of me.

MM: Negative. In Special Ops, it's Helo with an O.

Me: The thing about the eagle was not a result of my fat thumbs. I meant it as code for the rings. The five golden rings! Er, two. Obviously, I'm not as well-versed as you in covert spy speak.

I mean this to be funny but am not sure how it came off as I read and reread my message before MM replies. Should've thrown some emojis in there, well, not the heart one.

MM: Copy that. But they're platinum.

Has this become a military operation? Is the guy guarding the wedding bands with his life? Romy will be pleased.

Me: So, you have them?

MM: Not on my person. They're safe.

Me: Salami wants eyes on them.

MM: I prefer pepperoni, but is that what you call her?

Me: I meant Romy.

Hanging my head, I can't help but wonder why I'm nervous, jittery, and having butterfingers—butter thumbs? Am I nervous about texting the best man?

I could really, really use a scoop of butter pecan right now.

Gazing around the library, likely surrounded by poetry and love stories, I realize why. I am a people person, a pet person, and a romance person. One of those is missing from my life at the moment.

The truth is, I'm lonely, and the prospect of being at my ex's wedding, who is marrying my ex-best friend—because let's be real, friends don't do that to each other—only serves to highlight the fact that I'm not married. And it underscores that I was engaged once.

Ethan was my first and only true love. Also in the military, he died in an accident and the happily ever after he promised wasn't to be.

And here I am, all alone.

I plop down into a leather chair. The exhale that escapes is one of resignation. I won't become an old cat lady or a dog lady, for that matter. I want to believe there is someone out there for me. Someone to love and love me back—and not stab me in the back.

Ross isn't that guy. Romy isn't going to be by my side, holding my bouquet as I pledge my vows. And I'm not going to race around Atlanta at her beck and call fulfilling my “duties.”

Nope, I'm going to stay in this library until the dinner bell rings. Or maybe I can pretend to be a princess like Romy and have my servants bring my meal to me.

I chuckle because I won't be doing any of that. I get to my feet and with a heavy heart, I know it's time for me to head back to the party. When I near the door, from the hallway comes a voice as deep as the velvety night. His tone is firm, confident.

From the other side of the library door, I can't help but hear him say, "He doesn't act like it."

Silence.

He says, "I'll be back in two days. It can wait."

Pause. He must be on the phone.

"I never said one way or the other. Yeah, we'll discuss it when I get there."

The hallway falls silent and footfalls pound in the opposite direction.

I didn't realize I was holding my breath as I let it out. Whatever was going on sounded intense. I'm not sure if the guy was a rehearsal dinner guest or someone employed by the caterer. I suppose it doesn't matter, but that voice isn't one I'll soon forget, even if the contents of the conversation sounded slightly suspicious.

If I can find a man's voice attractive, maybe there's hope for my happily ever after.

Returning to the party, I still don't see Romy, but several of our college friends stop me, introducing me to their boyfriends and beaux.

Morgan asks me if I'm dating anyone while her fiancé checks his cryptocurrency stats.

"Nope, still single." Lips pressed together, I nod slowly. I'd like to add, *I wasn't until four months ago, which is why we're all here*, but I refrain from pointing out that my ex-boyfriend is the groom-to-be.

“I wonder if he’s single. Saw him before. There’s something about a slightly older guy.” Jessly licks her lips and points to a man with his back to us.

“I thought you were dating Ken from work?” Morgan asks.

She shrugs like that arrangement could easily be altered.

I try to hide my discomfort.

“Is he a sniper or a spy?” Morgan asks.

Jessly says, “Maybe a Viking, Thor?”

Morgan’s fiancé looks up and says, “A lumberjack?”

The man of interest has broad shoulders and firm muscles under a dress shirt that ripples with his movements. His stature is strong and his presence commanding.

“Come on, turn around,” Morgan whispers.

“I can take care of that.” Jessly thrusts her shoulders back, puts her chest out, and struts toward the guy.

I say, “Do you think it’s a problem that—?” But before I can finish questioning Jessly’s loyalty to Ken from work, the guy turns around.

The slim lines around his light brown eyes suggest he’s closer to my age than Romy, Morgan, or Jessly. I met them when I went back to college for vet school after serving as a military nurse...after I lost Ethan.

For the first time in a long time, something clicks in my chest. It’s an unusual sensation and has only happened once before. It replaces the nervous vibration under my skin with a steady beat.

I can’t help but take in every inch of the sniper, spy, Thor, Viking, lumberjack guy. He has dark hair, cropped short, and a couple of days’ worth of stubble but wears it well.

Morgan whispers, “Oh, I know who that is. He’s the best man.”

My heart tumbles as the recently familiar, deep timbre of his voice floats my way, and his gaze lands on me.

Magnus



CHAPTER 4

When I spot the woman with the curly brown hair and legs for days a few long strides away, something flares inside of me. Her green eyes, which seem impossible, flash before she turns around, sending the hem of her skirt swirling around her legs.

Her legs. She's tall. They're long.

She's athletically fit like she's active, yet every curve is feminine.

Surrounded by a couple of other women and their dates, they take turns glancing my way as if we're at a high school dance. After watching Rambo at a relatively young age and reading every book I could get my hands on about military operators, I knew the course for my future. Started as a jet pilot, graduated to fighter pilot. But that didn't stop me from a relatively normal schooling experience, complete with a spot on the football team and the homecoming court. While I had a couple of girlfriends during those years, my head was elsewhere.

I dated in the years since and there was the waxy Wanda blip. But it never felt like this. My instincts make me want to move closer to her, but my sensibilities wave a red warning flag because this sensation inside is different. New. Strange.

As if moving involuntarily, which is odd because I am very deliberate from my years of training, I take a few paces toward her but stagger. Or at least it feels that way. It's not from the TBI, I know those sensations all too well and thankfully, seem to have made a full recovery.

However, it's as if by closing the space between us I'm making a choice—one that will change the rest of my life.

Either that or I'm getting tipsy by osmosis because Ross has been drinking all day—since last night at the bachelor party if I'm keeping track. If I had my way, we'd have taken a deep woods excursion, gotten into the wild, hiked, and cooked around a campfire.

She shifts deeper into the circle of women surrounding her before they thrust her my way as if pulling the ejection lever in an old F-14—though my preferred wings are an F-18.

Something about her hesitancy amuses me.

As if giving up on avoiding whatever dare her friends put her up to, she squares her shoulders, lengthens her spine, and meets me halfway. Presenting her hand to shake, she says, “Hello, I'm Lally. You're the best man.”

Oh, so not a dare. We're already acquainted. What a coincidence...and not at all what I expected. More. Much more.

“Magnus,” I manage to say, but that's it. The only times I've been rendered speechless were when I took an earful of explosives or gunfire without protection. Lally's touch swirls letters, spirals punctuation, and twists my ability to make coherent sounds into the air like a sandstorm.

This is Lally? This gorgeous woman with legs for days and the body and grace of a dancer, but not at all delicate, is the same person with terrible text abilities?

I blurt, “You're the maid of honor?”

“I do. I mean, I am. Yes.” She presses her lips together and squeezes her eyes shut for half a second.

“You're tall, especially in those high heels, which works well for us having to walk down the aisle together,” I say, belatedly realizing how that sounds. “What I mean is because I'm tall too. I was afraid Romy's best friend would be more her stature. You're the opposite.”

“Ex-best friend,” she mutters.

My eyebrow arcs.

Then, lifting her foot and gazing back at her choice of footwear, she says, “Typically, I’m more of a tennis shoes kind of person. Flip-flops too. I don’t usually wear heels is what I mean. I feel like a baby giraffe in these things.”

If I were the kind of guy with an easy smile like Ryan, I’d be beaming. There is something so endearing about the comment, but the red warning flag inside hoists itself a little higher to be sure I see it breezing in the wind.

“When I was younger, I didn’t like being tall, but I embrace it now. I don’t typically feel like a giraffe.” Clutching a purse, she clears her throat as if she’s self-conscious here at this party.

“You’re the perfect height.”

She bounces slightly. “Helps me reach the top shelf without help.”

“So, you’re single?”

And that, folks, is the single most outrageous thing that has ever come out of my mouth. Not because I’m not curious about her answer, but because I’ve never come close to asking a woman that. Not my style. My command of English malfunctions, the barbarian has passed the gate! It pounds its chest and grunts, *Ooga Booga!*

She blinks slowly at me as if we haven’t been speaking the same language this whole time. “Obviously.”

“I just meant since we have—tomorrow—the whole thing.” I wave my hand at our general surroundings.

Never in my life have I had a more awkward conversation. If Royal, Ryan, and even CJ, who I’ve never known to date, were observing their oldest brother break down, they’d be belly-laughing in the corner.

I’m bombing. Bad.

“Right. We have our wedding party duties. Which, by the way—”

The clinking of a spoon on a water glass interrupts whatever Lally is going to say.

“We’re gathering for dinner, and as per tradition, the maid of honor is going to say a few words,” Romy says with a bright smile in Lally’s direction.

“I am?” she murmurs.

I lean in, breathing Lally’s tropical coconut scent from her curls. “You have it better tonight with less of a crowd. I’m on deck tomorrow.” I grimace as she shuffles toward her place at the main table.

Everyone takes their seat, including me, which I realize is directly across from Lally.

She remains standing. It’s hard not to stare, to admire her delicate wrists as she takes the microphone. Her elegant fingers. I try to see the thumbs she claimed were fat, but they’re out of view before I can take a peek.

Clearing her throat, she begins, “Thank you all for joining us tonight to celebrate on the eve of Romy and Ross’s wedding day.”

Everyone claps on cue.

Continuing, she says, “There’s something really special about being engaged. It’s like the bridge between dating, where everything is new and uncertain, to the otherwise which is a lifelong commitment. Early on, in a new relationship, we might have questions like *Will he call me back? Or text?*” Turning toward the couple, Lally’s voice wavers when she says, “Romy and Ross were big texters early on, as it turns out.”

The couple grins at each other.

“But unlike dating, the engagement period is more concrete. It’s the next step toward forever. A beautiful and special step. A time to get to know each other on a deeper level, plan to create a life and family together and ensure that your values and beliefs align, especially when it comes to the future. And tomorrow they’ll be stepping into that future. A forever future...”

The room is strangely silent, eerily still as if everyone is waiting for Lally to say something off-script even though she isn't reading one.

I glance up and liquid pierces the corners of her eyes. It's the tiniest amount and I only see it because I'm so close. As quickly as it appeared, it vanishes and a hesitant smile stretches across her full lips.

I'm captivated, my thoughts dodging the red flag and the past, and wondering about forever futures.

She lifts her champagne flute and says, "May the happy couple enjoy this last night of being engaged, celebrating with friends and family, and enjoy many years of wedded bliss."

Not going to lie, that last part did sound scripted, wooden, like she recited it from rote memory or a line she repeated if only to convince herself of it.

However, the clapping and cheering from the guests quiets my curiosity about the speech. It was a good one. And given her subtle comment about Romy being her ex-best friend, perhaps a struggle. There's a story there, but it's none of my business.

I just hope that tomorrow, when I give my toast, I do as good a job honoring the couple, despite my general dislike of Ross.

I'm doing it for Sean.

And Sean would say something meaningful now. I feel a nudge, a Spirit prompting, so I get to my feet. "As the best man, I was going to save some of this for the toast tomorrow, but if Sean were here, he'd tell Ross that he's about to embark on the journey of a lifetime. He'd want his little brother to know that the promise he's making to his fiancée is forever. That marriage is a blessing where two people come together in a faithful partnership."

The room is completely still, silent. It hasn't been long, but I'd forgotten what it was like to hold rapt, respectful attention. It's time to make my brother from another mother proud.

“Sean once told me that he’d always been looking for the woman who completed him. Then he met Nora. He said she complemented him. They were a team. And the guy knew a thing or two about being on a team. A spouse is someone you learn with and grow with. Together, you figure out a way through trials and celebrate triumphs. You’re there for each other through sickness and health, for better or worse... It’s no small thing.”

I’m not sure if Nora is here but hope I haven’t made her cry.

“Sean was known as the serious brother, and I know he’d be overjoyed to see you taking this serious step in your life, Ross.” I lift my glass. “Romy and Ross, may you both step forward in faith and fidelity tomorrow.”

I get a golf clap in response from Ross and Romy’s friends and a more robust response from the older folks in the crowd. I guess I’m serious too, but I don’t regret saying my piece. Sean would’ve done the same thing.

I sneak a peek at Lally. She blinks a few times as though somewhere far away and only comes back to earth now.

“I wasn’t in Lallyland,” she says as if caught red-handed. “I heard every word. That was beautiful.”

“Yours too,” I say, but then the guy seated to my left bangs my ear off about my time in the military. Ordinarily, it’s one of my favorite things to talk about—especially with guys who’ve served—but this turns into a bit of a debate. It’s the kind I like to avoid because there are so many intricacies that I could go into, but the guy is already a couple of sheets to the wind and it’s not worth it.

I’d much rather be talking to Lally.

But like the ketchup Ross slathers over his steak, the red flag flaps, a reminder to be cautious. Keep my distance. I’m not relationship material. I have too much going on.

After dinner and dessert, the younger guests move the party to the resort hotel where everyone is staying tonight. I

get wrangled into babysitting Ross and his buddy Linc so they're not hungover tomorrow.

I'd say yes to a family someday, but I'm not a candidate for babysitting—or babywatching, as the case may be—especially adult male children. In fact, I resent it, thank you very much. However, it turns out that I am very skilled at noticing a certain woman when she walks into the room, er, onto the deck surrounding the pool.

I tell myself it's because she's unsteady in those heels and the ground is slippery.

“I still can't believe Romy asked her to be a bridesmaid,” Linc slurs.

“Maid of honor,” Ross corrects with a chuckle as if they have an inside joke.

“Is she still single?” Linc wriggles his eyebrows.

Ross smirks. “Everyone knows what she's hoping will happen tomorrow. No chance. Not a fun girl, if you know what I mean.”

“So, she's up for grabs,” Linc says, a statement, not a question. “I wouldn't say no to a wedding night fling.”

“I do not object. She was a play toy, but then something better came along.”

I do my level best not to listen to Ross and his friends with their inane and disrespectful chatter, but something rises inside me at the comment. Guys like me solve things with fists, but I don't want to ruin Romy's wedding day photos or have to explain why the groom and his groomsman have matching black eyes.

Instead, I cut a glare their way and say, “Show some respect.”

Ross pumps his hands. “Sheesh. You're so uptight. You and Sean were so alike.”

It's the first time he's mentioned his brother aside from when he asked me to fill these shoes.

“You’re right and we both know what Sean would do with a mouth like that.” Too late, I realize it sounds like I’m suggesting he’d kiss Lally and not punch them both square in the teeth.

“Have at it, my man,” Ross says, clapping me on the shoulder.

I flick him off and mutter, “That’s not what I meant.”

The guys slouch to the open bar.

I’m done with them. My babysitting duties are officially over. “Sean, I tried,” I murmur.

Time to say goodnight. Before I move, my gaze catches Lally standing with a few women. They glide toward the guys at the bar. At the sight of her, that same flare inside heats again.

She hangs back and says, “I was thinking I’d head up to my room. I haven’t checked in yet.”

“Oh, come on, the night is young,” one of the women says, looping her arm and dragging her closer.

She stumbles in her heels. Her feet must ache, but her strappy choice of footwear does accentuate her already gorgeous legs. It’s hard not to notice her in that dress that skims her thighs. And the rest of the view is exceptionally nice to look at. Though, her smooth curls have taken on some frizz and her posture suggests she’s not a night owl like the others. That makes two of us.

“Big day tomorrow. Ladies, I’ll see you all in the morning.” She gives a little wave.

I half expect the women to insist she stay, but the drink menu occupies them.

The undulating silver-blue glow of the pool paints her in an ethereal light. The flare inside warms and I could use a dip to cool off. However, I realize that I probably seem like a creeper over here alone, lingering in the shadows. Time for me to go. I turn toward the gate surrounding the pool when I hear

Romy hiss, “He’s right over there. Somewhere. I saw him with Ross a minute ago. Have you seen the rings?”

I push the button to open the electric gate and Lally’s voice floats toward me.

“Um, he has them.”

The button refuses to release the magnet holding the gate shut. I could hop the wall but don’t want to startle anyone. I don’t know why I’m suddenly in such a hurry to leave other than that red flag blowing wildly, invisibly in the wind like a warning.

“But did you see them?” Romy presses.

“No, it’s bad luck,” Lally replies.

“That’s if the groom sees the bride in the gown before the wedding march.” Romy adds, “Chase Magnus down and make sure he has the rings.”

There will be no chasing, but I sense I’ve been spotted. Instinctually, I turn around to check at the same time Romy shoves Lally in my direction.

Sent suddenly off balance, and very baby giraffe-like, she stumbles.

Her eyes widen.

Her arms windmill.

Her purse flies toward a lounge chair.

Then comes the splash as she falls into the pool.

A long silence follows and my instincts kick in when she doesn’t immediately surface. Without hesitating, I do a shallow dive before opening my eyes.

Spotting her instantly, I swim deeper. Her skirt billows, but her arms and legs move laterally as if she’s trying to keep herself underwater. Eyes open, our gazes meet.

Tiny bubbles escape her mouth as if she sighs, then in one swift motion, pushes through the water toward the surface.

I follow, and after shaking off the water, I say, “Are you okay?”

“Just cooling off on this hot Atlanta night.”

“Flyboy to the rescue,” Ross shouts.

Some people clap and Linc whistles.

We move toward the edge.

“Why didn’t you come up right away?” I ask.

She smooths her hair. “Staving off the embarrassment for as long as possible?”

“But I saw Romy push you.”

“...In your direction.”

“Did you turn an ankle or hit your head?”

“No, but thank you. It’s just my pride that took another hit.”

Another hit? But I don’t ask what she means as we climb the ladder on the edge of the pool. I get a few striped towels from the stack for guests.

I overhear Romy saying, “In college, Lally was voted most likely to bring home a cat.”

“Is that because she was always attracting strays?” Ross chuckles.

Lally must overhear despite toweling off her hair. “Gee, thanks. You paint such a splendid portrait. But it’s because I was studying—”

But having already moved on from the spectacle of her falling into the pool, they turn back to their drinks, not interested in her response.

It’s then I realize I have my hand resting on her shoulder. Whether it’s to keep her from toppling into the pool—we’re still near its edge—or to stop myself from making good on my promise to look after Sean’s family, I’m not sure. And by look after, I mean make sure he keeps in line and isn’t disrespectful.

“They’re drunk. I’m ready to go home,” Lally mutters, dismissing them completely.

“Do you live nearby?” I could give her a ride.

“Used to. I’m staying here at the hotel courtesy of the bride and groom-to-be. Haven’t checked in yet, though.” She bends over and picks up her strappy sandal high heels. Water drips from them and she starts toward the exit.

She forgot her purse and I find it under the chair, hastening after her. But like me earlier, she’s stuck at the gate.

“Need this?” I hold up her purse.

Our hands brush as she takes it.

Her lips part as if she’s going to say something, but the words must stick or she’s talking herself out of saying them.

Our eyes meet. Hers sparkle, still retaining their bright green hue even in the pool’s silver-blue glow. Lally’s makeup runs slightly and I take the corner of the towel and wipe it away.

Her expression falters. “Thanks, by the way. If it puts your mind at ease, unlike a giraffe, I can swim. I do laps in the ocean every morning.”

“Me too.”

“So, you don’t live inland either?”

I shake my head, but I’m not sure where to call home these days.

Puffing her cheeks with a breath, she says, “Also, I don’t ordinarily forget things like my purse.”

“No worries. It’s been a night.”

“You can say that again. Though not quite as bad as I expected.”

I look at her pointedly.

“Oh, this? It’s nothing. You don’t want to know about what happened last time I was in Atlanta. Unless you already know which—never mind.” She tries the gate again and when it

doesn't open, without another word, she hops the fence in one swift vaulting motion.

My brothers and some of my buddies have pointed out that I don't smile often. Something about how the fact that Lally can take care of herself, find her way out of a pool enclosure in a dress, and swims ocean laps causes that flare inside to stir a smile onto my lips.

Lally can clearly take care of herself, but I follow her into the parking lot, partly because I'm a gentleman and I have to get my stuff, including the rings, from my truck.

Lally goes left, presumably to her vehicle. I go right, but I listen in the night, making sure she's safe. Two minutes later, we find ourselves in the hotel lobby.

"I guess I'll be seeing you in the morning to walk down the aisle," Lally says with a tired smile on her lips.

"Big day...that I'm all too happy to get over with."

"Same," she says as if she wishes that weren't the case.

The receptionist calls us forward. Allowing Lally to go first, I hang back a pace. Again, I take her in at a safe distance. The smooth slope of her neck, her shoulders, her curves...

She turns around, slouching. "They don't have my room. Romy—" Lally goes quiet and drops her head onto the marble counter as if she's given up.

She can have my room. I'll sleep in my truck—that's a major step up from some places I've caught forty winks. Stepping forward, I say, "Magnus McGregor. Checking in."

"Good evening, sir. Yes, we have you right here. Oh, wait, Miss. Did you say your name is Lally? Lally McGregor. My apologies. We have you both right here. I thought you said your last name was McGuinness. It's been a long day."

We both look at the man and then at each other as if not quite sure we understood what he said.

"I'm Magnus McGregor and I reserved a room for one night."

“That’s right. You’re all set. Please enjoy your stay.”

“Doubtful, at this rate,” I mutter.

The man passes us a paper folder with two keys. When I don’t take it, he extends it to Lally.

Her brow creases with confusion.

“We have you in one of our premier rooms. California king-size bed, which is perfect for a tall couple like yourselves.” The receptionist smiles.

As if in sync, both of our jaws drop and our gazes meet in a mixture of damp dismay, given the unintended swim, and something else I can’t put my finger on.

Lally



CHAPTER 5

Today has slowly unraveled and then tangled into a confusing web. Now, I'm caught in its net.

Turning away from Magnus, aka MM, I'm glad the butterflies fluttering in my belly have damp wings.

To the man behind the registration desk, I say, "Sir, I think there has been a mistake. I'm Lally McGuinness."

"And I'm Magnus McGregor." The deep timbre of his voice is soothing, reminding me of the pine forests where I grew up in the Pacific Northwest. Now I live diametrically opposed, almost as far away as I could get from my hometown where I met Ethan. And I'd really like to be at my little island oasis south of here right now.

"You kept your maiden name? A lot of women do that these days," the man says politely, shuffling some papers, and eager to be clear of the two people who decided to "swim" in formalwear.

"No, we're not—" I wave my pointer finger between myself and the tall man by my side—my handsome and would-be rescuer had I not known how to swim and hadn't been purposely trying to delay my humiliation in front of Romy and Ross.

"We'd like separate rooms," Magnus says.

"Unusual request, but okay. Let's see." He clicks something on the computer. "We are all booked."

"But I had a room," I say.

“And I had a room,” Magnus echoes.

“Nope. You’re together.”

“We’re not—” he starts to repeat.

“My apologies. We have a big wedding party staying here this weekend. And the bride,” he lowers his voice to a whisper, “is a particular kind of delight.” His smile is as plastic as Romy’s—she has lip fillers, to be clear.

“I know,” I mutter.

“This is the best I can do. I am sorry about the name mix-up, but you can see how that might happen. McGuinness and McGregor sound very similar.”

“No, they don’t,” Magnus and I say at the same time.

The man offers us a tired but conciliatory smile. “Next, please.”

A few people stand behind us in line and we move aside.

“What do we do?” I ask vaguely.

“I’ll sleep in my truck.”

“No, you can’t do that. It was your room first. Romy must’ve—or her wedding planner—made a mistake.”

Magnus hefts his duffle bag. “Good night, Lally.”

“Wait. No. I won’t sleep knowing that you’re crunched up in your car. As the guy pointed out, you’re tall. That won’t be comfortable. I know a couple of people here in Atlanta. I can make some calls to see if I can stay the night.” Kevin or Lance come to mind and I cringe—could join Dolly in the doghouse.

Magnus checks his watch. “It’s late. Almost midnight. Are these people you know and trust or—?”

“Former clients. I mean, their dogs. I was their vet. Listen, it’s really sweet of you to look after me. I appreciate it, but I’ll figure something out. You have a big speech to give tomorrow. You ought to get some rest.” I pull out my phone.

Magnus remains, unmoving, standing by my side. “No.”

“No?” I ask, taken aback.

“Unless you’re sure that they’re nothing like Ross or his dink of a friend Linc, you’re staying here, securely at the hotel.”

“Are you my personal bodyguard now?”

He shifts from foot to foot as if realizing he overstepped. “No, I’m an older brother and wouldn’t want my little sister staying on some stranger’s couch.”

“I’ve stayed on a lot of couches over the years. Usually, they’re surprisingly comfortable.”

Magnus doesn’t laugh. I’ve noticed he doesn’t really smile. But he does smell like mountain air and his voice is deep and rich, making me sleepy.

I lift my eyebrows. “Maybe there’s a sofa in the room. One of us could stay on it. The other could take the bed.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Would I let my sister stay in the room with a strange man? The answer is no. Definitely not.”

“You don’t seem that strange.”

“Ha ha,” he says drily.

“You can’t be that bad, given you’re standing in for Ross’s brother as his best man.”

“I wouldn’t say Ross is a good judge of character.”

I wince because of our history. “How about Sean?”

“Excellent. The best kind of man. Someone I aspire to be like.”

“Well, there you go. Trust bond secure. If you haven’t noticed, I’m dripping wet and barefoot standing in a hotel lobby. I’d like to go up to the room.”

“Be my guest. It’s all yours.” Magnus gestures toward the elevator.

I tilt my head. This man is as stubborn as me and that’s saying something because I am well aware of how headstrong

I can be. “I’m not going anywhere unless you come with me. I owe you. You rescued me from the pool.”

“You said you know how to swim.”

“Had I not, I might be in the hospital or drowned.”

“I’m sure someone else would’ve—” Magnus squints as if considering the crowd around the pool. “Maybe not.”

I incline my head. “See? You deserve a bed. I’ll take the couch.”

“If there’s a couch.”

“We can’t very well sleep in the lobby. They’ll kick us out or force us to take the room that we paid for, er, that Romy’s parents paid for.”

Raucous laughter comes from the entryway that leads outside to the pool at the same time the elevator dings. To spare myself from having to engage with Romy, Ross, or their friends again or explain the situation, I grip Magnus by the wrist and pull him into the carriage before pounding all the buttons.

Expecting him to protest, he simply stares at my hand. “You don’t have fat thumbs.”

I tilt my head back against the mirrored elevator wall and a long laugh escapes.

He doesn’t join my laughter, but I detect a faint smile playing on his perfectly proportioned lips, slit through with a slim scar.

The elevator stops at the next floor and a couple stands on the other side, making out. Magnus glances at the keycard and taps the button to close the doors.

We’re quiet until we reach the eighth floor and room eight-nineteen. It’s the moment of truth. Will I be sleeping on a sofa or a nest on the floor?

Magnus opens the door and then gestures I go first.

The room is fresh and spacious, but not a suite. Just one big square filled with a massive king-size bed. An executive

desk, television stand, bistro table, and a cushy reading chair along with a lamp take up the rest of the space.

“It’s just one night. It’s perfect.” I lower down and bounce a little on the chair.

“You take the bed. I’ll sleep over here,” Magnus commands.

“This isn’t up for debate. You get the bed. It’s your room. Also, you can shower first if you want to. I have a few beauty routines to do before tomorrow, so I might take a while.”

“I’ll take you up on the shower, but we’ll see about the bed.” A little growly exclamation comes out of his chest before he disappears behind the bathroom door.

Exhausted and prepared to improvise, I rifle through the drawers looking for extra bedding. Nothing.

When the shower comes on, I flop onto the bed. I just need one moment to regroup before I sleep sitting up or in a ball on the floor.

My eyes flutter and dip closed. Like watching a B-grade movie, the last hours play in my mind. Accidentally proposing to the best man over text. The best man who turns out to be the best man that I’ve ever seen in recent years.

The man with the deep brown eyes.

The head full of hair that begs me to run my fingers through it.

Who smells like mountain air.

His stature is one of strength.

His posture with purpose.

Whose lips...

I shudder a breath.

The best man who seemed to acknowledge the conflict in my heart and mind as I gave the toast at the rehearsal dinner. Who has spared me from bringing up my history with Ross.

Who dragged me like a stray from the pool while looking at the others like he was going to drag them into a brawl.

The man who's on the other side of the wall and whom I'm now sharing a room with for the night. It's 12:32 so technically, it's morning.

I spent much of my youth hiking and orienteering in the wilds of the Pacific Northwest. When my dad moved to Alaska, I spent summers with him in the wildlands.

All of that is to say I can handle a night in a temperature-controlled room on a chair...with a handsome but slightly gruff man who seems like he wants to be here about as much as me.

Which is to say not at all.

Perhaps I found a kindred spirit.

Not likely. But I do find myself waking with a snore when Magnus nudges my foot with his. I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling briefly before looking at him, towering over me with wet hair.

Instead of a dress shirt and pants, he wears a tank and athletic shorts. His scent of mountain air and high altitudes wafts my way. No need for oxygen up here, er, down here.

Bolting to sitting, I say, "Are you just coming from the gym? Is it tomorrow?" Tearing my eyes from his fit and delightfully muscular physique—like WOW—I look toward the window. "Either it's really early or really late."

"The second one. I usually just sleep in just my shorts so —" He gestures to his attire.

"So that explains why you're wearing your gym gear. Got it." Cheeks on fire as I scramble to my feet, I hurry toward the bathroom. "I am sorry I fell asleep. Wasn't trying to stake my claim on the bed. Just toss a pillow on the chair and I'll be good. G'night," I call as I slam the door behind me.

Surveying my surroundings, I could sleep in the bathtub. But given there are only a couple of towels, they'd be soaked

by the time I dried it and the base would likely be uncomfortable.

“Focus, Lally,” I whisper.

Not easy to do with a gorgeous man in the other room.

I meet my gaze in the mirror.

Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.

How'd he go from handsome to gorgeous? I am getting way ahead of myself. It's bad enough I've embarrassed myself multiple times in front of him, I can't have flutters and feelings. This is silly. I'm probably just trying to distract myself from the wedding tomorrow.

Okay, time to get ready to go to sleep, and let's be real, look great tomorrow.

First, I shower and do my normal routine of washing and brushing. Then I apply a special serum to my hair that I got from a local in Coco Key. It's only something I do once a week but helps keep my curls shiny.

I scrub a little circle of steam off the mirror and apply an overnight face mask. I tested it already so I know I won't wake up with a breakout or splotches. Lastly, I slather a balm onto my feet that works to relieve the ache from the high heels and softens the rough spots. The only problem is they make the soles of my feet slippery and I catch myself on the edge of the bathroom vanity before I go splat.

I already took a spill tonight, I don't need another accident. Having seen Magnus in action, he'd probably break the door down if he heard me yelp or crash to the floor.

I don't want to sound petty, but I can't help but wonder if Romy meant to push me in the pool as he suggested. We were right at its edge. I didn't want to bother the best man about the rings again, but she was being insistent. Then the next thing I knew, I was in the pool.

The good news is, after tomorrow, I never have to see Romy and Ross again. Unless they ask me to be their child's

godmother—if they have kids. Romy said she didn't want any because it would make her saggy.

What I would give to be a mom, sags and all. First, I'd need to get married.

I glance at my finger that once held an engagement ring. Then I recall Magnus commenting that I don't have fat thumbs. Romy once said that my thumbs look like a pair of big toes. She's not entirely wrong. The nail beds are wide and not slender like hers.

Letting out a sigh, I tug on my pajama set—a modest, ultra-soft button-up top and shorts with, yes, a giraffe print—and hang up my towel.

Turning off the light, I tiptoe across the room with the one remaining dry towel to use as a blanket in case I get cold. The room is pitch black and eerily silent as if Magnus doesn't breathe. Feeling around in the dark, I smooth my hand along the desk, find the bistro table, and then take two steps forward to where the chair should be.

My toe stubs the base and as I drop down, I meet something soft, but not a cushion. Nope. I'm in Magnus's lap.

This time, I do yelp, leaping off him, and crash into the reading lamp. The shade lands on my head like a hat and the light blinks on.

Magnus's eyes fill with a mixture of concern and mirth.

“I'm not usually this much of a menace.”

He helps me to my feet. Like before, when we shook hands, his rough palm around mine feels strangely like a hug. Contact that I've sorely needed.

“I did not mean to sit in your lap. What were you doing in the chair?”

“I was trying to sleep.”

“The bed. You. Now.”

He holds up his hands. “So commanding, but it's hard to take you seriously with that yellowish-green goop on your

face. It seems you took the whole giraffe thing seriously.”

“Ha ha. Not funny.” I pick up the nearest pillow and toss it at him. He catches it deftly and a smile works its way toward his eyes.

I’m not sure if it’s because I’m wearing a ridiculous facemask or something else.

Magnus



CHAPTER 6

I can't claim to feel good about Lally bunking in the chair, but if we don't go to sleep soon, we'll both be wrecked tomorrow. I don't know about her, but as soon as the wedding is over, I have a long drive ahead of me.

Not to gloat, but the bed is surprisingly comfortable. After years in barracks, unusual housing situations, and staying at a rental with my brothers, this is a pleasant upgrade.

But no matter what position I get in, I can't sleep. Typically, I close my eyes and can switch off if necessary. Not tonight. The room is quiet except for Lally's soft breathing and the commotion in my chest. I ignore the flare and the stirring.

Time to sleep, soldier.

But my eyes won't stay closed. They adjust to the darkness and I glance over at the chair which I was more than willing to occupy. Maybe I'm awake because I'm too comfortable, especially knowing she's over there, leaning to one side, long legs curled toward her chest.

Every few minutes, she adjusts as if she's sliding off the silky upholstery of the chair.

"Want a blanket?" I ask.

"You're still awake?"

"You don't look comfortable."

"You can see me?" She shifts again and wraps her arms around her legs.

“I have exceptional night vision.”

“Like a lion on a savanna.”

I consider saying something to put her at ease like, *I'm not a predator and don't eat giraffes.*

But she speaks first. “When I was a kid, I wanted to go on a safari in Africa. I spent a lot of time hiking in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, sleeping under the stars, but always wanted to see them from the southern hemisphere. To experience something other than what I was used to.

“I take it you didn't make good on that goal.”

“It was more of a desire than a goal. A goal was becoming a veterinarian.”

“And that one you met. You should've taken a trip to Africa as a reward. A graduation gift.”

“That's a nice idea in theory, but life happened.”

For some reason, the way she says those last two words makes me think of the opposite.

“Yeah, life happened,” I echo.

“And life goes on,” she adds.

Silence whispers between us, but her breathing doesn't change. Sleep doesn't come.

“So how do you know the nearly newlyweds?” I ask.

“You mean you don't know? It went viral.”

“Like on social media?”

“Yep.”

“Sounds like a sordid tale.” I've heard rumors but prefer original sources.

She tells me how she and Romy were best friends and she was dating Ross. “We'd all hang out, watch movies, stuff like that. No big deal. Over time, Ross and I weren't clicking, you know? We were on and off. Hot and cold. But then one day, I got a text from him. I'll spare you the contents, but it seemed

very out of character, at least insofar as our usual communications go, if you get my meaning.”

“Yeah, and quite frankly, it’s not something I want to think about.”

“I take it you’re not Ross’s biggest fan.”

I have to intentionally unclench my fists and jaw. The guy deserves a pummeling. “Even less so now because I can guess where your story is going.”

“Yep. The text was meant for Romy. Turns out they’d been seeing each other behind my back. We were still officially together, or hadn’t officially broken up, depending on how you want to think about it.”

My default emotion is tightly wound anger, but I feel for her too. So unfair what happened. Then again, that’s life, I suppose. We won’t find heaven here on earth.

“They confessed to me their feelings for each other. Supposedly, they’d been quote, *hanging out*, end quote for only a few weeks.” Seated upright, she flashes air quotes. Her voice drops when she says, “But when I think back, it was probably for a while. Ross and I dated for a few months and things were good, but then they started to cool off around the same time Romy, he, and I started to hang out more. My apartment was halfway between theirs and she’d just moved back to Atlanta after following her ex to Chicago and then breaking up.”

I hammock my hands behind my head. “Too much drama.”

“You’re telling me. Is there anything worse than your boyfriend hooking up with your best friend? Actually, yes. What’s worse is them getting married and asking me to be the maid of honor. Some might consider me a pushover for agreeing. I think of myself more as a peacemaker. Better not to make a scene. Already learned that lesson.”

“Is that what went viral?”

“Yeah. Um, I didn’t take the news very well.”

Sitting up, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and face Lally. She's a slim outline in the near darkness, but I can see the glint of her eyes, meaning she can see mine.

"If you need to rant, cry, complain, or if you want me to go drag Ross out of bed and drop him out of the window and into the pool, I'm your huckleberry."

She takes a sharp intake of breath and then laughs lightly. "I've never had a huckleberry before."

"You do now."

Lally takes a moment before she says, "It isn't so much what they did because, honestly, Ross wasn't *the one*. I'm not sure I even loved him. We never said as much."

Thinking back, I've never been in love. Never felt what I've been feeling all night, anyway. But after hearing her story, the red flag doubles and then triples in size.

"Trust me, I know what love is. I might look like a tomboy, but I believe in romance and true love and—" Lally covers her face with her hands and then quickly draws them away. "Forgot that I'm wearing this face mask. You must think I'm unhinged."

"All things considered, I'd say you're quite hinged...and quite beautiful." The last bit spills out of me but doesn't sound accidental or haphazard. No, the words have weight, meaning, truth.

She laughs softly. "I wouldn't want to date or move further in life with someone who'd cheat on me with my best friend. It's more the bitter reality that two people I was close to and trusted would do something like that behind my back."

"A betrayal."

"Exactly. For a long time, I thought that tears of betrayal were among the saltiest. But they've dried up. I'm not so quick to excuse bad behavior or lack of integrity. I lost my boyfriend and best friend, but also a sliver of hope about the goodness in them and my judgment of character. Had Ross felt things cooling off between us and came to me and broken things off

first, it would've been a different story if Romy then expressed interest.”

“I never respected him.” And I'll keep to myself the comments Ross and Linc made at the pool so as not to upset Lally more.

“It would've been weird, but not that big of a deal. I just want to get tomorrow over with.” She flutters a sigh through parted lips.

I did too, at least until I met Lally. This unexpected situation notwithstanding, I'm not in the market for romance, drama, or relationships. I have work to do. Family issues to resolve, and yet, that flare burns inside.

“Magnus, I'm sorry for unloading on you.”

“No need to apologize. I asked.”

“These are the kinds of thoughts that are bound to result in me getting frown lines and I'd prefer to age gracefully with laugh lines.”

I grin in the darkness. “That's a good way to think.”

“How about you?”

“Laugh lines for sure.”

“No, I meant what brought you into this mess?”

“I was best friends with Ross's brother.”

“He doesn't talk about Sean.”

I grunt. “That's a shame. Sean was a good man. The best.”

“The best man. I get it. You mean that he was the opposite of Ross.”

“He doesn't even spend time with Alex, his nephew.”

“I always thought that was odd. Sad. Ross's loss. The kid is probably better off.”

“Nora got lucky. Nathan, her steady boyfriend, is a good guy. I wouldn't be mad if they got married.”

“Is that up to you?”

“No, of course not, but Sean asked me to...” I trail off.

Part of me hopes that the conversation puts Lally to sleep. I don't want to think about the loss that haunts me to this day. Over the years, I've abruptly said goodbye to a lot of good men, friends, and brothers—thankfully, not my biological brothers. It stings every time. But Sean was different. We would've been best men at each other's weddings. Our wives would've been best friends. Our kids would've grown up together.

In one terrible instant, everything changed. I changed.

“So now I know what brought you here...what about before that?”

“I was in the military.”

“I gathered.”

“You met Romy in college. I don't mean any disrespect to either of you, but how do I put this? You seem more mature.”

“Do you mean older? You know, in the South, it's not polite to ask a woman her age.” A hint of laughter lifts her voice.

“I didn't ask your age. But you're different than her...and the rest of the bridal party from what I've seen.”

“Do you mean I stick out like a sore thumb?”

“No, not a fat thumb either.”

Once more a smile plays on my lips because this feels a little like flirting. The relative darkness brings some courage, but would I say these things even if the light were on? Could I?

The flare in my chest suggests the answer is yes. And before the red flag lifts to caution me, Lally interrupts my interior thoughts.

“You're not wrong. I'm in my mid-thirties, they're in their late twenties. I decided to become a veterinarian later on. Ross called you a flyboy, so I take it you're a pilot. Plus, the hair, the stance, the commanding presence.”

“The stance?”

“Your posture. It’s specific. I recognize it.”

I thought I lost all that when I retired.

When I don’t say more, Lally’s voice floats to me in the darkness. “To bring this full circle, just before I met Ross, I made a plan to say yes after being told no numerous times. I called it my summer of yes. I made the mistake of saying yes to him.”

“Did he propose?”

“No, but I said yes to testing the waters of a relationship after—” She goes quiet.

“We’ve all been there.”

“Not like this.”

No, not like this. I started my military career as a grunt and worked my way up to flying fighter jets, running helo missions into war-torn areas, then graduating to special forces... but nothing prepared me for this tumult inside.

These unidentifiable inner objects. It’s like Lally entered the hotel room of my heart even though the *No Vacancy* sign flashes brightly.

I should demand she leave. Tell her to take shelter elsewhere. The Holiday Hotel down the street offers free cinnamon buns for breakfast.

Instead, I pick her up off the chair, plop her on the bed, and flip on the dim night table light. Then I grab the slippery silk cushions and form a perimeter along the middle length of the California king.

“It’s late and we’re probably too old to play pillow fort,” she says.

I almost smile, at her, at the memory of my brothers and I doing the same thing. “It’s a fortress,” I say, reinforcing the notion that she stays on her side. I remain on mine.

With a lazy salute, she stands on the far side of the bed, eyes heavy. “Sir, yes, sir.”

I click off the light and the mattress's springs shift as we each claim our cordoned-off sides of the bed.

“Goodnight, Huckleberry,” Lally whispers.

Goodnight, Beautiful, but I'm not sure if I think this or if it's already part of a dream.

Lally



CHAPTER 7

When I wake up in the morning, my eyes bolt open with alarm. It takes me a moment to remember where I am.

My body buzzes as if I had a coffee infusion, but I don't dare move. The pillow wall remains firmly in place except one cushion at the bottom of the bed hangs off the end. Listening for Magnus on the other side, I hear nothing but the venting of the climate control in the room.

No snoring or the heavy breathing of sleep.

No rustling of sheets or the scratch of an itch.

No running water or bathroom sounds.

No Magnus?

I carefully push to sitting and peer over the side of the pillow barrier. The sheet is smoothed as if no amount of time out of the military will stop him from making his bed—or in this case, making it as neatly as he can.

The buzzing inside doesn't settle when I realize I'm alone. The high hum of my pulse doesn't relax. My heart tumbles when I recall our late-night conversation, spilling our thoughts like stars between us.

What I know about Magnus McGregor:

- Until recently he was a Navy pilot
- He's traveled all over the world
- Enjoys swimming, has three brothers

- His voice, even in the darkness, is a deep, resonant song that I somehow know the words to

I wonder what kind of music he likes? Is he a dog or cat person? Horses? Birds? Lizards? You can tell a lot about a person by what kind of animal they identify with. What about ice cream? Tacos? Steak? I bet he likes a good cheeseburger.

There's so much I don't know about Magnus McGregor. His middle name, his happy place, does he read? He seems like his middle name is something simple like John, given his relatively unique first name. I imagine his happy place being somewhere flying in the clouds and I bet he loves books, especially historical accounts and modern-day action thrillers with a tease of espionage.

As I sit squarely on my side of the bed, I think about how the single-room mix-up could've been a disaster but was a pleasant surprise. I haven't connected with someone like that in a long time. It's refreshing.

It's more than that.

The humming under my skin. The questions. The tumbling tummy.

I bite my lip as I realize what this is...

If I take the word *romance* and smoosh it together with *anticipation*, I get romantic-ipation.

This is romanticipation.

Even though it's not my wedding day, I'm walking down the aisle with the best man.

A man who said I'm beautiful. Who dove into the pool to rescue me. A guy who was a perfect gentleman and unwilling to let me sleep on a slippery chair, yet respected my personal space.

My phone beeps from across the room, drawing me back to reality.

Nope. Today is not my wedding day. It belongs to Romy and Ross. Before I check the message, I see the time.

It's half past noon.

I check again because that can't be right. Flicking on the television, the hotel welcome message confirms the hour.

How did I sleep in? I haven't slept past seven a.m. in recent memory. The dogs always wake me up. Then again, Magnus and I were up late. Early. I don't know, but I spring into action because if I don't get moving, Bridezilla is going to breathe fire.

Thankfully, Romy and Ross also overslept, and the ceremony isn't until late this afternoon, but the next hours breeze by as I answer Romy's every beck and call.

Repeatedly telling myself it'll soon be over is the only thing that gets me through. Well, that and glimpsing Magnus a few times as I scurry through the hotel lobby checking on the flowers then back again to make sure the chairs are properly arranged in the garden, and once more because Romy is insistent that I take a photo of the rings and text it to her.

Each time, he was occupied and didn't spot me—talking to a group of guests, on the phone, and then this last time giving a kid with dark hair a high five.

I recognize Nora, Ross's brother's wife. Tragically, Alex never got to know his dad, but he's smiling and seems comfortable around Magnus which suggests he's part of the little boy's life.

And that he likes kids. Could be father material.

I stop in my tracks. What am I thinking? We've known each other for less than twenty-four hours. I'm letting the stress of today go to my head and am looking for an escape hatch.

And to be real, being at Romy's wedding reminds me that I'm getting older. I'm single. No prospects. After meeting Magnus, I've doubled down on relief that things didn't work out between Ross and me.

If this were my big day with him, I'd be a runaway bride, halfway to Mexico by now. He and Romy suit each other.

Magnus, on the other hand... He's taller than me. Ross only had me by half an inch. Magnus is strong and capable, and his voice...

It comes to me now. "Morning, Lally."

"Morning? It's late afternoon."

His eyes bulge ever so slightly and then he says, "Yeah, I just meant, yeah."

Nora looks from him to me.

Clearing his throat, he says, "Have you two met?"

"Once before," I say. "It's great to see you, Nora. Are you excited for today, Alex?" I ask.

"I'm here for the cake."

I chuckle. "Me too, buddy. Me too."

Magnus and Nora share a shaded look like his comment skirts toward a sad memory they share related to Sean.

Leaning over slightly, I say to Alex, "I happen to know all about the wedding cake. What's your favorite kind?"

"Chocolate with vanilla frosting."

I nod. "Your Aunt Romy got fussy about the cake and insisted it be layers of Grand Marnier, strawberry champagne, and bourbon hazelnut with a guava-infused buttercream."

Alex pulls a face.

"My thoughts exactly."

"I don't even know what that is," he says.

Magnus chuckles. "That's a good thing, trust me."

Nora laughs.

I raise my eyebrow and lean a little closer. "I had to taste test those flavors and you're not missing anything. However, I made a special request that a chocolate cake with vanilla frosting be made just for those of us who aren't fans of such strange and exotic flavors."

"Really?" Alex asks.

I nod and tilt my head toward Nora. “After they cut the cake, I’ll make sure we each get a slice of the good stuff.”

Alex jumps up and down.

“You’re a lifesaver. The promise of cake helped me get that tie around his neck.”

Alex fusses with it. “It’s a clip-on.”

“Your dad wore a tie with pride on special occasions,” Magnus says. “Like the day he and your mama got married.”

Sadness pierces Nora’s eyes.

“It was an important day. If we should all be so blessed...” Magnus adds.

I gaze up at him, his brown eyes filled with emotion. If only...

“You look just like him, Alex.”

“Just on a smaller scale,” Nora adds.

“Would my dad have laughed if Aunt Romy and Uncle Ross smooshed the cake into each other’s faces? I saw it in a movie once.”

We all burst into laughter.

“Yes,” Magnus says.

“Definitely yes.”

“What was that?” a strained voice asks.

We all whirl around to see Romy standing there in a robe and with a flute of champagne. “Do you have the photo?” she asks me.

Turning to Magnus I say, “Do you have the rings?”

He just barely rolls his eyes and pats the breast pocket of his suit. “Safe and sound.”

“Can I see them?”

Nora says, “We’re going to explore the hotel. See you all at the ceremony.” She leans into me and whispers, “Thanks for

the promise of cake. It's been a tough day for Alex. He's dealing with a case of doggy heartbreak."

Romy grabs my arm and says, "Make him show me."

I blink a few times, my thoughts caught on *doggy heartbreak*. As a vet and animal lover, I know all too well about that and miss my mutts something fierce. "Make him show you what?" I ask Romy.

"You're the maid of honor. He's the best man. This. Is. Your. One. Job."

"I've been running errands for you all day, all week, so technically I've had many jobs, Romy. You asked me to be your maid of honor. More like handmaiden."

"You're so funny, Lally. You were always so funny, not to be mistaken with fun." Romy laughs and then to Magnus adds, "She's so uptight. Always studying and doing stuff. She needs to take a load off and kick up her feet every once in a while. Am I right?"

My smile tightens and with unrestrained sarcasm, I say, "That's a novel idea, given I'm at a resort. But I should go get ready for your wedding since that's why I'm here. However, I'm not sure what I can make Magnus do, given—" Palms flat and a few inches away from the frame of his shoulders, I ripple my hands down his sides.

"I want to see the rings," she says through gritted teeth and with a slight slur.

She's probably had enough to drink. I move to take the champagne out of her hand, but she grips the flute so tight I'm afraid the stem might break.

With a huff, I say, "Magnus, please can Romy see the rings?"

"All you needed to do was use the magic word." His gaze doesn't leave me as if he's focusing on not being overly annoyed with the bride.

We exchange a knowing look as she heaves a dramatic sigh. "They're just so beautiful. Have you seen the

engagement ring?”

“Yes, every day.”

“No, I mean the best man. Marshall. Um, Mark? Matt?”
Romy flashes her bejeweled finger.

“Magnus,” he and I say at the same time.

This is my cue to get the woman some coffee.



The first half of the day flew by, but the next couple of hours slow to a creep. I want to take the high road and gush over how lovely the wedding ceremony is, but I’m already looking forward to this memory turning stale and being forgotten.

Is that awful of me?

While still getting ready, when I brought up Magnus’s toast from last night, hoping to draw Romy out of her alcohol-fueled haze, she went on about how lucky she was to get the fun brother and not the serious one if Sean was anything like Magnus.

That was her takeaway.

Truth be told, as I watched Romy and Ross exchanging vows, I wanted it to be me. Not in Romy’s shoes and certainly not with Ross. There is zero love lost there.

But finding someone I want to pledge ‘til death do we part. To build a God-centered life together. To receive the blessing of holy matrimony. To create a family. To have someone by my side on this grand adventure. To be together through trials and triumphs, sickness and health, for better or worse.

Magnus’s powerful speech last night echoes in my thoughts. Those aren’t trivialities to stumble through like lazy recitations. They’re a covenant. One I desperately want. I send up a prayer as I so often do on this matter.

During the recessional, when Magnus holds out his arm for me to take, the ticking clock that has accelerated as I move

through my thirties seems to slow down.

On the upside of all of this, the best man is the kind of ruggedly handsome that could cause a gal to experience a case of love at first sight.

Giving my head a little shake, I glance up at him. He isn't smiling, but I make it a goal to get one out of him before the night is through. Maybe we could even dance.

First, we endure photographs and a cocktail hour during which I sneak away to the hotel's restaurant and beg them to bake me a chocolate cake with vanilla frosting.

After much debate, one of the bellhops runs out to the store and buys a Betty Crocker mix and a tub of vanilla icing...setting me back thirty dollars.

But it's worth it because I don't want anything to do with Romy's boozy Franken-cake and I made a promise to Alex.

When we finally sit down for dinner, Magnus is on the other end of the table. He delivers another moving toast, but this one is slightly lighter. He tells a few stories about Ross, roasting him, along with teasing about the couple not getting into too much trouble on their honeymoon.

But still, I don't see a hint of that dimple on his cheek.

When the first course arrives, I try to get his attention, but Romy's father tells a long, drawn-out story about the future and finances to our group at large.

It's the most I've ever heard the man say.

Discretely pulling out my phone, I text MM.

Me: I have the good stuff.

MM: Is this another code?

Me: You tell me, muffin man.

Me: I meant military man.

MM: Are you going to complain that I'm too serious? Regimented?

Me: Not at all. Your speech last night was powerful. The toast was meaningful and humorous.

MM: Thanks. Tried to keep it light. I can be fun too.

Me: Is that so?

I recall Romy's comments earlier and wonder if Magnus refers to that or is teasing me. If so, I'll make sure he knows that I'm not all books and boredom.

Me: So, you're going to ask me to dance?

MM: I, uh, don't typically dance.

Me: That's a problem. No dance. No cake. Those are the geoses.

MM: First an eagle. Now geese? Are they releasing geese? I thought weddings involved doves.

Me: I meant those are the rules. RULES

MM: So, if I dance with you, you'll share some of your secret cake with me? That's a hard bargain. The thing is, unlike Sean, I don't like cake.

Me: You're a monster!

The little dots blink and then disappear. I peer down the table at Magnus. He pounds out a text, his expression stony.

I check my phone, but I don't get a reply from him, and then double-check that I didn't send a text with a terrible autocorrect.

Nope. I just called Magnus a monster and not by accident.

Taking another look at him, he gets to his feet and tosses his napkin in his chair. He whispers in Ross's ear. Ross's eyes aren't in focus and I'm guessing he didn't register what his brother's best friend even said.

Then, just like that, Magnus stomps out of my life.

Magnus



CHAPTER 8

Nora must've seen my hasty departure from the bridal party table and hurries after me as I breeze through the hotel's lobby.

"Magnus, what's wrong?" she calls.

She probably recognizes the mission-critical look on my face.

I don't have time to explain the fine details, but she knows a little bit about the family history because, of course, Sean told her everything. "The woman who was helping with my grandfather's will was kidnapped."

Nora's hand presses against her lips. "That's horrifying."

"My brother texted. I have to head back."

"I hate to ask this of you, but can you still take Boo? I'm afraid I've exhausted all my other options."

"Of course. But I have to hurry."

Under five minutes later, I'm zipping toward the highway in the truck with a dog in the passenger seat.

"Hold on tight, buddy. It's time to turn and burn."



The ten-hour drive gives me plenty of time to think about the day and worry about tomorrow. I formulate a plan and it's only when Royal calls to let me know Isla is safe and secure, that my thoughts wander to love and marriage.

It may not be readily evident to my younger brother, but the guy has it bad. Er, good. I mean he's been bitten. Not by bedbugs or fleas.

I eye Boo and consider I ought to read up on how to take care of dogs. Surely, a veterinarian can provide the old guy with some bug spray or whatever it is they use if necessary.

A veterinarian.

Lally.

Lally who I left in Atlanta.

Lally who I talked with almost all night.

Lally who I connected with in the most unexpected way.

During deployments, I got close with some of the guys and Sean, of course. But talking with Lally was different. Despite the pillow blockade, it was like a door opened between us and I had the option to go through.

Now, with this issue in Coco Key, I feel like it slammed shut and is a reminder that I don't have time to entertain a relationship. That's a someday thing. I have to adjust to retirement, figure out my next steps, and make sense of Chip's mysterious will.

For the last few days, I'd successfully put distance between myself and the four pages of confusion Isla read in Mr. Edmonston's office, but now it crams my mind, taking up half the space.

Lally occupies the other half.

When I stop at a doggy relief station in central Florida, I check my phone. Nothing more from my brothers. I see Lally's message, asking me to dance with her. I consider replying.

I'm not a great dancer. I'd be afraid to break her toes.

Break her heart is more like.

A sigh escapes.

Lally turned heads when she walked down the aisle by my side. Not to steal the bride's thunder, but she looked gorgeous. The mint green satin gown was beautiful on her. I stole a glance, okay more than one. Her curls looked so soft. Her green eyes sparkled. I noticed the little brown freckles spilling over the bridge of her nose.

The flare inside brightens.

I exhale. Can't think about that. My brothers and I have a crisis on our hands, and if I'd been back in Coco Key, I could've mitigated it. That's my role. Failed my mission.

Again.

As the next hours pass, I can't help but mentally review the texts—Lally's opener, asking me to marry her.

I laugh and Boo gives me a look like he knows something weighs on my mind.

“Okay, you want the story? Here goes.”

I tell the dog about the flare when I saw Lally. How she made me smile inside. How in such a short time, she was able to sand some of my rough edges.

As we cruise south, the rising sun kisses the Atlantic. I talk to the white shepherd about love, marriage, and the speech I gave at the rehearsal dinner. Almost like I'm talking to Sean.

“I meant every word of it and didn't think I'd ever have any of that...” I trail off because I have to wipe the wedding from my mind, and by wedding, I mean Lally.

Meeting her was a blip on the radar. A reminder that there is a heart beating in my chest and not a chilled-over muscle that merely does its job to keep me alive.

And yet, I cannot stop thinking about her, our conversation in the darkness as yet another new day dawns, and what it could mean to have forever with someone.

“But I have to focus on family issues and you, Boo.”

We cruise past the faded sign welcoming visitors to Coco Key. It's a long-forgotten spit of land that used to be a thriving

resort town. I chuckle to myself. Chip Almeida was the resort. A larger-than-life figure that was as gregarious as he was mysterious.

He could captivate a room with a story of treasure and pirates and adventures to faraway lands one minute and then seem just as far away the next.

Something tragic that he didn't talk about happened with my grandmother. One day, she was on the beach and disappeared. Never heard from again.

After that, he made it his mission to find a family heirloom. Then, when we lost our parents, he became more reclusive, yet determined. At times, it was like he was Indiana Jones and the four of us McGregor brothers were his apprentices. At others, he'd be lost somewhere in the resort, adding another piece of driftwood to a structure, fastening a sail to an island-bound ship, or affixing a slab of stained glass to a door that led nowhere.

And that's just what it seemed like—as if half the time he was full of hope that he'd recover his wife, daughter, son-in-law, and the treasure, and the other half he'd accepted that the hunt was going nowhere.

Then we got the will.

As I cruise down Main Street in the truck, I focus on my surroundings. Growing up on this island when it was booming fooled me into thinking that it would never change.

Now, it's weathered wood, overgrown sea grapes, and abandoned businesses.

“Welcome to Coco Key, Boo. Let's see. There must be a veterinarian for you somewhere.”

He whines.

“Not a fan of the vet?”

He lowers onto the seat, his body filling it completely with his chin hanging over the edge.

“Hopefully, you're a fan of this vet. You're stuck with me now, buddy. But don't worry. We'll visit Nora and Alex as

often as possible. Maybe pay a visit to some of my brothers who were injured in the line of duty.” I’m one even though my wounds aren’t visible—I sustained a traumatic brain injury and am one of the few warriors who fully recovered except for the occasional headache—it’s very specific, unlike a regular one.

I think about Palmer who lost his left arm at the elbow. Jones, his right leg. Prado left behind both and the countless guys whose wounds are invisible. The ones who can’t sleep. Can’t focus. Have flashbacks and guilt and confusion about what it was all for—like Sean.

Those are my men.

I’m them. They’re me.

An idea sparks.

First, what am I going to do with the cottages? Do I give any weight to the will Chip left? The day, not long ago, when I got the invitation from Chip returns to me.

I’ve known two kinds of guys who give their lives to brotherhood, to the military, for four years or more. Those who cannot wait to get out and have a plan once they receive their discharge papers. Then there are those, like me, who never imagined leaving. I was in it for life. Knew at some point it would put me in the grave, but I never expected to walk away.

To retire.

To have to make a tough choice.

To have to think about my future outside the service.

Who am I without the uniform? The mission? That was the focus and everything else was filler. But now what will I do with my days?

I got the letter from Chip while I was trying to figure that out. Still am. Less than a week as a civilian, and the first step was deciding where to live. Staying at Nora’s for longer than a week wasn’t an option.

The two of us were never in the same room alone—Sean was always there with us. It’s not that I didn’t want to

remember my best friend, but the heaviness of it, even all these years later, hasn't dissipated, at least not when around her.

I scratch Boo's ears. "How's it going to be with you, buddy? You're a walking, barking, heavy-breathing reminder of Sean. Okay, the last two aren't entirely true. But he did bark orders, and I always worried the guy's snoring would wake the enemy two districts over.

I drive by Mr. Edmonston's hacienda-style mansion, recalling the suspicious invitation from Chip, my grandfather. Royal and Ryan, the twins, thought it was a birthday party. I had my doubts but didn't expect a confounding challenge in place of the family fortune—not that I was entitled to a penny of that either.

I drive by the Plundering Pelican, a restaurant, and brush my hand over my face, exhausted, but I've pulled harder, longer nights than this. I'm just glad Isla is okay.

"They have terrible coffee but great waffles." I eye Boo. The German Shepard is kind of porky. Maybe he shouldn't have waffles.

The McGregor boys loved waffles. But my brothers and my relationship changed after we lost our parents. Instead of bringing us closer together, from then on, we permanently guarded ourselves against loss in our own ways. Mostly by adventuring and causing trouble on the islands. Best not to get too close to anyone.

Chip left me a pocket knife and a pillow. I could sure use that now. Royal, the older of the two twins, got the family Bible and a book of matches along with the dilapidated Driftwood resort. I half expected him to burn it down. To Ryan, he bequeathed his journal and a pen with a plume.

As I said, Chip was eccentric.

Ry also got the Sip & Scoop, an ice cream shop where he'd flirt with the summer servers to give us free sodas and then leave a tip twice the cost of a cup. The letters are still missing from the sign and in the week I've been away, it

doesn't look like a speck of dust or a smudge has been wiped away from the shuttered windows.

Ryan can throw a ball like no other, evidenced by the Miami Riptide's recent win, moving them up the rungs in the playoffs, but I cannot fathom him running a business.

Then to the youngest brother, CJ, our grandfather left his sextant and the Salty Skeleton. Still don't know what that is.

Every time I think about this, I have to ask myself if I care because, in addition to that, he left us each with a riddle. A puzzle to solve that I can't wrap my head around—the head that still occasionally aches after the accident. The head that doctors didn't want to put at risk, meaning I could no longer fly. That's my one restriction.

The head that could really, truly use that pillow right now.

Or coffee. I'd take that too.

“Boo, it looks like Beans & Books is open. We'll stop there,” I say as we pass. The Treasure Chest, which sells souvenirs and more—from plungers to paperweights to oil pans, as Chip used to say—consolidated when some of the other shops on the island went out of business. Then there is the florist, Island Blooms, run by a long line of women with variations of the name Rose.

“There's also a church, post office, town hall, and police department—one person does it all—so stay out of trouble, Boo,” I say as I get out of the truck.

Taking a deep breath, the notion of home floats through the dewy morning air, tipped with salt. The glow over the horizon, the beginning of a new day, makes me wonder if I'll call Coco Key home or if this is just the means to an end. Where that would be, I have no idea.

The dog relieves himself in an overgrown bush around the side of the bookstore slash coffee shop when my phone trills. The flare inside brightens at the thought of it being Lally.

No, I need to get my head right. Maybe a coconut will fall from a tree and reverse the damage I sustained overseas. Or

perhaps these unusual feelings are a surprise consequence of traumatic brain injury.

Checking my phone, it's my sister, and an entirely different flare goes up than the internal one I experience when thinking about Lally. I worry that something happened to Emmie.

"You okay?" I ask when I answer.

"Good morning to you too. Of course, I'm okay. The military is posted outside my door twenty-four hours a day, I have barbed wire, closed circuit security, and a sidearm."

"Good."

"I'm joking, Mag. But I'm fine. I just heard that something happened to Royal's new girlfriend. Never thought I'd use those two words in the same sentence."

Emmie doesn't say that because Royal isn't good-looking. What he has there, he lacks in personality. Or he did. The guy is gruff, grumpy, and grouchy, as Isla and her sister accurately pointed out when we first met.

"I wanted to get the story from you," my baby sister says.

"Left wedding early. Drove all night. Only just pulled into town."

"And you also left pronouns and conjunctions behind. Where were you?" Emmie asks.

She's a writer, so of course, she'd note things like this. I was trained to deliver pertinent information as efficiently as possible.

"Atlanta. Wedding."

"You're such a brick. All of you are to varying degrees. Zero emotions. No feelings. I take that back. Ryan has a passion for football and women. And CJ—" Her voice drifts away and only comes back when she says, "I know, I know. You haven't had time for relationships. I hope your inner feelings machine still operates."

It does because I had feelings last night when talking with Lally and stirrings when she and I walked down the aisle

together. But I left that several hundred miles back too.

“I’m starting to think something is wrong with you. Let me consult Doctor Search Engine to diagnose you.” In the background, I hear the tapping of computer keys.

“I don’t have a disease.” The words fall like bricks, though, because of the TBI. After the helo crash, I was in a medically induced coma. Later, I was told the chances of my recovery were spotty, but I pulled through and all of the tests revealed a clean brain bill of health, except for occasional headaches. I shot up to level ten of the TBI recovery stages in record time. Again, the doctors were astonished. I give God credit. He wanted me back here for some reason.

“Well, let me know what you find out when you see Royal and the others.”

“And give the soldiers posted outside your door my info. I want hourly updates.” I mean for it to sound like a joke, but my tone is hard, brick-like.

“And if one of them looks at me the wrong way, I’ll—” she interrupts herself. “Or asks me out to dinner or begs me to marry him, I promise you, Mag, I will never date a military man.” She refers to cautionary conversations I’ve had with her. I probably painted my brothers in arms in a bad light, but I wouldn’t wish what Nora and Alex, a gold star family, had to endure on anyone, least of all my little sister.

She quickly gets off the phone and questions replace our conversation. Why was Emmie excluded from the will?

Was Chip murdered?

What happened with Aunt Lorena?

Why was Gerome Glandman mentioned in the will?

Should I text Lally back and take a raincheck on that dance?

Answers don’t come. My feelings machine is likely on the fritz, but coffee will wake me up.

Soon, I have a large, black pour-over in my hand—one of my buddies overseas was a coffee snob and got me hooked.

Robyn, Isla's sister, makes the perfect cup with fresh-ground Brazilian-grown beans and a precision bloom with steady spirals for an even saturation of the grounds.

From behind me, a familiar voice says, "So, I have an idea."

Royal materializes and replies, "No."

"No? But you haven't heard it yet."

"No, just no. Whatever it is. No." Royal is emphatic.

"Even after I helped rescue your pink flamingo sweetheart, we found the pearl, and part of the map, no?"

"N-O," Royal says, looking at me as if he knows what CJ has in mind and is requesting backup.

Royal and I had a quick phone call while I was in the hallway at the rehearsal dinner and indicated that CJ was scheming. Being outside the contiguous United States so often, I mainly remained in the dark about my youngest bro's life. Being abroad had its benefits, but now I'm back and still in the dark.

Just then, Boo barks. Nutmeg, Robyn's cat, hisses.

Ten seconds of chaos ensue which results in the feline streaking through the bookstore, knocking things off surfaces, and the dog sitting at my feet pleased with himself.

I admonish him and say, "Let's take this outside, guys. Sorry, Robyn. I'm a new dog owner. Forgot that cats and dogs..." I wag my hand in the air.

"No worries. Nutmeg has a strong personality."

Isla appears, not at all looking like she was recently abducted, and says, "Nutmeg thinks she's a person."

Robyn huffs. "I'll never understand why the two of you don't get along."

"Relatable. I'll never get why you and Jackie hate each other."

The sisters quibble while my brothers and I head outside. Well, except Ryan. I gather that he's still in Miami.

In short order, I learn that Isla's ex-boyfriend and a couple of goons driving a van with South Carolina plates kidnapped her. Royal got into it with Dax, the ex, and CJ dispatched with the two thugs, sending them all out to sea.

"I'm still questioning whether that's a euphemism." Royal holds up his hands. "Never mind. I don't want to know."

We walk toward my truck.

CJ leans in toward me. "I didn't do anything unlawful. Could've sent them to jail for sure. Instead, a group of people I know operate a medical ship, going out on missions to islands only reachable by boat for three months at a pop. They serve those in need and share the Gospel. Figured Dax and those idiots could work as deck hands and maybe absorb some of the Word."

Clapping my hand on his shoulder, I say, "You never cease to surprise me."

His smile is funny like he isn't sure whether to take a compliment or he has a secret.

I'm eager to hear more about the kidnapping and progress on Chip's treasure hunt when I realize the dog slipped his leash.

"Boo!" I call for him.

CJ checks Beans & Books.

Royal frowns, not having noticed the dog.

I explain that Boo, elderly now, was Sean's military dog.

"Oh," he says, fully understanding the gravity of what it would mean if I lost the animal on my first watch.

We canvas the immediate area and when we still can't locate Boo, we spread out. Royal heads toward the resort property. CJ stays close by and offers to check with the locals. I hop in my truck and head toward Quiet Cannon Beach and the cottages, aka the Junk, that I inherited from Chip.

Lally



CHAPTER 9

Rosalie and I walk along the beach together with our pack of dogs chasing and bounding in the waves.

“You missed a ton of drama and action. For starters, Isla, Robyn’s sister was kidnapped.” Rosalie goes on to tell me about a lousy ex-boyfriend in trouble with the law. “Don’t worry, our girl is safe and sound. The assailants are long gone. Peace has been restored. Hmm. What else?”

“That’s a lot.”

“Tell me about it. But her new beau swept in and saved the day. Also, there’s a rumor of a treasure hunt. There has been activity around the old resort on the other end of the island. But I don’t know much about that.”

“Then your name isn’t Rosalie.”

“It most certainly is.”

“Then you know every single detail about the supposed treasure hunt.”

She zips her lips. “I know a few, but I’m not at liberty to tell.”

“If I ply you with enough homemade popsicles, you’ll spill.”

“Only the mango ones. I’m addicted.”

I have several fruit trees and took up popsicle making. The dogs like them as a cool treat.

“So, you survived the wedding?” she asks, presumably because I haven’t said a word about it.

Don’t want to think about it, and not because of Ross and Romy. I nod and give a vague, “Mmhmm” in response.

“I’ll tell you about the treasure hunt for the *Coroa de Lágrimas*,” she says with perfect pronunciation, “if you give me wedding details.”

“The what? Never mind. There’s not much to say.”

“I’ll let you name your first-born Rosabella if you indulge me with tales of wedding woe,” she singsongs.

“Are you, Rosamarie, and Rosalina still competing to see who will become a mom first?”

“Do our names start with R-O-S? Are we all part of the Nosy Rosies? Of course.”

Rosalie has multiple relations with variations of her name including Rosamarie and Rosalina here in the Keys—it’s unspoken, but they run the Coconut Wireless, transmitting local news.

I do want to someday be a mom if it’s not too late. But for now, I adopt and foster dogs.

“Are the three of you still competing?”

“Always. It’s in good fun.”

“What if the firstborn is a boy?”

“Easy, Rosario, Rosaire, Rossano...”

“Sounds too much like Ross.”

“Ew. True. I’ll have to rethink that for your sake.” She nudges me as the dogs gambol about. “Come on, gimme the scoop.”

“Are you counting on my having been miserable?”

“No, I was hoping Romy and Ross’s wedding cake got eaten by a roving pack of wild boars, the cake toppers were beheaded, or the groomsmen got drunk and cannonballed into the cake.”

“Those are oddly specific.”

“Hashtag wedding fails.”

“And they all have to do with cake.”

“I’m hungry.”

And after this weekend, I need a win. My father has a saying about how the McGuinnesses are among the salt of the earth. We just keep on keeping on. Doing the next right thing then, the one after that, but is it too much to ask to have something sweet, just once?

Maybe my *once* was last night, and that’s it.

A flash of love at first sight. A temporary case. However, my vision has now been restored. Magnus was a stormy, unsmiling jerk. Glad that’s over.

Who am I trying to kid? I can’t stop thinking about him and I’m trying to protect this beat-up heart of mine. I tell myself to despise him for leaving so abruptly. No goodbye. No smile. Nothing.

“I never liked Ross,” Rosalie says.

I try to substitute that name for *Magnus* and then echo it in my voice, in my head. It doesn’t work. “You never met him.”

“But I did hear you talking to Romy on the phone that time, and she was—” Rosalie mutters some words in Spanish under her breath.

After befriending Rosalie and Robyn within the first week of arriving in Coco Key, I learned the former only knows swears in Spanish but can understand the spoken language perfectly, and the latter is fluent in English and Spanish for legalese but doesn’t know any slang or swears.

“So, give me the scoop. I want to know how it all went down.”

Rosalie Batista is part of the Nosy Rosies. All the women in her family have a variation of the name Rosa and are always the first to know about the goings-on in town. Recently, a flock of flamingos appeared, indicating love was in the air—of

the Isla and Royal variety. Sure enough, they were behind it. Apparently, it's an island thing.

"I still can't believe you accepted her invitation to be her maid of honor after what they did."

"Me neither, to be honest. I said yes because I'd made an agreement with myself to say yes, instead of no because I'd been hearing lots of no's in my life. Then couldn't talk myself out of it."

"My tía Rosalinda always said, "May your yesses be yesses, your no's be no's, and your *ay, ay, ayes* be loud."

"Exactly. But it went just as you'd expect. Romy was demanding and obnoxious but looked beautiful."

"And Ross? Tell me he looked like a toad in a tux."

"Very much like a toad and not the kind that turns into a prince."

She laughs. I can't quite muster a chuckle.

Rosalie stops on the beach. "But there's something else. Something you're not telling me."

I shrug.

She grips my forearm. "You met someone."

Taking my silence as affirmation, her smile broadens. "Oh, I've always wanted to meet the future Mr. Rosalie at a wedding. Or in a coffee shop. On the beach. At my store where he orders a bouquet and then gives it to me. Wouldn't that be romantic?"

"You've thought a lot about this."

"Every day."

"And yet you go on a date just about every week."

"And each time I get closer and closer to the one." She winks.

I don't think Rosalie has commitment issues so much as high expectations. She's gorgeous and the kind of woman who

knows her worth yet hasn't met a man who sees her for more than a pretty face.

“And you? Tell me about this mysterious matrimony man.”

I shrug. “It was no big deal.”

Oh. But. It. Was.

And given that simple—no, that very complicated truth—I cannot keep it to myself. I tell Rosalie how I sent Magnus a text asking him to marry me and then how it turned kind of flirty. The awkwardness when we met in person at the rehearsal dinner, then how I fell in the pool and he rescued me. “There was a mix-up with our rooms. My last name is McGuinness and his is McGregor and—”

She squeals which sends the dogs barking. “You shared a room?”

“Kind of. I mean yes, we did. But there was no funny business. He took the bed and I took the chair. Then we made a pillow barricade when I kept sliding off. He remained on his side of the California king and I was on mine, but we stayed up talking half the night.” Clearing my throat, I say, “Actually, almost until dawn.”

Now I'm afraid I went too far when I called him a monster for not liking cake.

“That's amazing. The start of a real love story, a—”

I cut Rosalie off before she can say more. “But in a cruel twist, the next day he acted like we hadn't shared secrets and dreams. We went our separate ways.”

Just as I want to forget about the wedding, he's already forgotten about me.

Rosalie, crouched down and petting one of the dogs, looks up sharply at me. “Wait a minute.” She gets to her feet. “Back up.”

I do, because even though I tower over her by about six inches, she's intimidating.

“I don’t mean to literally back up. You said your last name, McGuinness, and his. What was it?”

“McGregor.”

“McGregor?” Rosalie repeats.

At the same time, I notice the dog she’s petting isn’t one of ours. I have Madame de Pupadour and General MuttArthur. She has Roo, a min pin mix who hops around on three legs. But this is an elderly white German Shepard. I rub the dog’s flank and then take a good look at him—occupational habit.

“Where’d he come from?” I ask.

“Such a beautiful dog,” Rosalie says.

“A retired working dog, I’m guessing. And a little spoiled.” I turn to the K-9. “I bet you’re thirsty and like cookies. Do you like cookies?”

“Who doesn’t?” Rosalie asks.

“Dog treats,” I say.

“My cousin Rosamund makes her own and says even people can eat them.”

Dropping to my knees and unable not to gush over this animal, I say, “You’re just a little pudgy love muffin. I bet you love biscuits and tummy rubs and ear scratches.”

“You are such a sucker for dogs. Your profession makes so much sense,” Rosalie says.

“They’re unfailingly loyal.” And Ethan, my fiancé, wanted to get into the military working dog program in Texas after his first few rotations. That was the goal, anyway.

“His collar says *Boo*, so I’m guessing...” Her gaze travels toward the dunes where someone calls for the dog.

“Boo?” I ask, knowing Ross’s brother Sean had a dog by that name.

A deep, velvety male voice repeats, “Boo,” from beyond the dunes.

“McGregor,” Rosalie repeats.

I give her a squint-eyed nod because we already established Magnus's last name.

"McGregor," she repeats.

"Rosalie, yes. Magnus McGregor."

She points to the distance. "Do you mean that Magnus McGregor?"

My jaw drops at the sight of the tall man of strong stature wearing a nicely fitting T-shirt and dark denim. As the waves roll in, they cover my feet, keeping me locked in the sand.

"Move over Maverick. He's the soldier of the bunch. A navy pilot who considers himself broken yet remains strong. Imagine if Jack Ryan, James Reece, and Jack Reacher retired from world-saving and formed one super-man. That Magnus McGregor."

I incline my head toward Rosalie in shocked question as Magnus approaches.

"How do you know that—?"

"Robyn told me all about Isla's interactions with the McGregor brothers. Plus, I'm a Nosy Rosy. I know things."

And she's proud of it too.

Whether Magnus recognizes me or wants to acknowledge our previous meeting is unclear as he focuses on the dog, eyes sharp. My senses confirm it's him, especially with the pleasant gust of mountain air that comes my way.

"What are you doing with my dog?" Magnus asks.

I realize I'm holding Boo's collar and recall Romy's comment about me picking up strays. With an affectionate pat, I release the animal.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Looking for my dog. My dog," he repeats as if assuring himself or getting used to the notion, I'm not sure.

"I mean what are you doing in Coco Key?"

"I live here," Magnus says.

“I live here. Er, there.” I point to the beach bungalow over my shoulder.

“So, I take it you know each other. I’m Rosalie, and this is my dog Roo. You’ve met Lally and don’t forget about her dogs.” She gestures.

Madame and General each let out a perfectly timed bark.

“And this must be Boo, and you’re Magnus,” Rosalie says pointedly, eyes bopping between the two of us.

Boo doesn’t leave my side. Madame gives him a sniff by the tail and General sits next to him like they’ve got each other’s backs. Er, mine.

If it weren’t for the sunny morning, it would be like we’re having a beachside standoff. The sand an old western street, and the dogs our best men.

I recall Magnus saying that he’d be my huckleberry. So, why does it seem like right now we’re enemies?

Rosalie picks up Roo. “I take it this is my cue to vamoose. You can be sure this little episode of the O.K. Corral will hit the Coconut Wireless later.” She mutters that last part.

A rain cloud moves in from the west at a rapid clip and I feel a shadow crest over me.

The longer Magnus stands there, the more my heart tumbles. It’s like we’re both waiting for the other to make a move.

Time slows.

I blink slowly, taking him in.

Same handsome face? Check. But once more in need of a shave. Or not, the day-old scruff suits him.

He rubs his hand across his cheek.

Same hidden dimple? Check.

He tears off his aviator sunglasses.

Same strong hands. Check.

They clench and unclench.

Same powerful posture. Check.

He lifts his arm and then rubs the back of his neck.

Never expecting to see Magnus again, my surprise freezes me. Of all the places, he rolled up on my island in his truck, wind-tossed, sun-kissed, and scowling because I have his dog.

“I didn’t steal your dog.”

“Sean’s dog.”

“Yours now?” Feet locked by the shifting sand and water, still, I don’t move, but the dogs do, bounding for my bungalow and Boo chases after them.

The sky cracks open with a downpour of rain.

Immediately drenched, I race for cover with Magnus at my heels.

Magnus



This isn't the first time Lally and I have stood together dripping wet. But right now, the thunder in the distance matches the pounding in my chest.

Boo and one of Lally's dogs isn't bothered, but the little brindle dog with a small patch of pink in her fur gazes up at her dog mom with the puppiest of puppy dog eyes.

"Oh, don't worry about the rain, Madame. You've had worse." Lally turns to me and says, "She got into some pink paint over at the resort a short while back. I, um, didn't realize you were a McGregor."

"Then I take it you haven't lived on Coco Key long."

"Long enough to know that you don't live here." Sadness hides behind a true strength in her eyes.

Unsure where I'm going to put down roots, I gaze into the pouring rain. "Typical Florida afternoon carwash."

"And here we are, drenched again."

Turning my attention back to Lally, my lips quirk. I can't help but wonder what else she sees when she looks at me.

"Yep, but as you said about Madame there, I've seen worse. I'm like a utility vehicle, practical. Not pretty."

"Well, unlike you and your truck, Madame de Pupadour is a beautiful, real lady and likes to keep dry and groomed." She nuzzles the damp dog. "Don't you listen to him. You are *très belle*."

“A face only a mother could love.”

Our gazes meet for a moment, the flare in me surging.

Then I catch up to the animal’s full name.” Madame de *Pupadour*?” I ask, on the edge of laughter.

Lally sets down the small, mixed breed. “Everyone has that response when they hear her name. Madame de Pompadour is a historical figure. This is Madame de *Pupadour*, Madame for short.”

“Was Madame de Pompadour a distant relation?”

“No, definitely not. Madame de Pompadour was the chief mistress of French King Louis XV.” Lally lifts her eyebrow pointedly. “Yes, it’s what you think it means. But she also advised him and some believe she helped broker deals with pirates. She was a fan of finery just like my Madame de *Pupadour* here—who has some papillon, a French breed, in her, hence the name.”

I had no idea what a keen interest I had in French history until now. Until Lally shared it with such passion and knowing in her voice.

“When I went back to college, I was at a crossroads. I wanted to study history, but given my background and desire to help, um, save lives, I went with veterinary sciences.”

“Save lives? Why not go with becoming a nurse, doctor, first responder?”

The dog yelps.

“Yes, you can have a biscuit, but we’re staying out here until you dry off some,” Lally says to Madame.

Boo rivals Madame with that little upturned pinch between her brown eyes.

“Can your dog have one of these?” Lally pulls a little dog biscuit out of her pocket.

“I don’t know.”

She inclines her head. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

“Boo was Sean’s dog. His battle buddy. He left him to Ross, but Ross didn’t want him. He’s been with Nora. Figured you’d know that.”

“Ross didn’t want this love bug?” In one swift motion, Lally is on her knees, positively gushing over the white shepherd. If it wasn’t immediately evident before, this woman is dog’s best friend.

Madame and General snarfle up their biscuits and then stare at me as if I’m the one with the cookies in his pocket. I give them a pet. The bigger one leans into me and then flops onto his back, lifting his leg for a belly rub.

Lally looks at us over her shoulder. “Oh, my. General doesn’t do that for just anyone. Only for me. He must like you.”

I tell myself to ignore the warmth in her tone, the possibility that Lally might mean that she doesn’t allow just anyone onto her porch and around her dogs.

“General seems like a good boy.” I give him the belly scratch of a lifetime and his leg kicks with delight.

“You got the spot.” Lally gushes, “Magnus got your happy spot. Today is the best doggy day ever, huh? Who loves General MuttArthur? We do, that’s who.” She talks in a baby voice like these dogs carry all her love alone.

“MuttArthur like General MacArthur?” I ask.

“You got it. But I can’t fathom why Ross wouldn’t want Boo. Why he wouldn’t have asked me, knowing full well that I take in,” she clears her throat, “strays.”

I recall Romy’s comment, intending to insult Lally.

“I also foster dogs and rarely say no when someone needs to find a new home for an animal. Eventually, I can usually place them with another person or family because this bungalow is only so big. I had more space up in Atlanta but not a doggy playground paradise like the beach.”

The wild business idea that floated into my mind on the drive down here returns and hovers like the clouds raining

overhead. “Nora and Alex had Boo for a while, but their rental doesn’t allow dogs and she’s exhausted her landlord’s patience.”

“Looks like Boo will have a good home with you.”

“Yeah. But I don’t know the first thing about dogs except that they’re awesome.”

“You’ve come to the right place. After all, the history degree didn’t happen.”

“The veterinarian one did.”

She nods. “Boo looks healthy. What is he, twelve? Seen some battles, buddy?” she asks, roughing up his coat.

Under the cover of her beach bungalow’s porch, we talk about the dogs for so long that I don’t even notice when the sun drops through the clouds over the water.

“On the disaster scale today, so far, it comes in at moderate,” I say, figuring it’s probably time to go.

“Are you expecting a crisis?”

“I’m always prepared.”

“In that case, the first thing you’ll want is a better collar, preferably one embroidered with your info so if Boo escapes again, there’s no question where he belongs.”

“Thanks for the tip.” I give Madame and General each a pet goodbye.

Glancing up, I catch Lally gazing at me with a small smile on her face as if she’s trying to restrain a larger one...or the setting sun might be in her eyes. I can’t be sure.

“You look—”

“Surprised,” she says. “Surprised that you’re a dog person...and not a cake person.”

Straightening to my full height, I know what I need to do. “About that. I have to admit that I rarely make good decisions or good first impressions.”

“Technically, I think I, um, take the cake for the botched first impression.”

I chuckle at the pun, but the space between my brows pinches in question.

“The text.”

I snap my fingers. “That’s right, the text.”

Lally gazes at the painted wood planks of her porch. “No need to rub it in.”

Unable to take my eyes off her, she picks her gaze up. Ours meets for one fleeting moment. Her eyes spark green like that little flash that occasionally appears on the horizon over the water at sunset.

“That was a first for me for sure.” My phone beeps in my pocket as if on cue, startling us both.

“Being proposed to by a stranger? Yeah, me too. Er, I mean asking someone to marry me. Nope, it’s just these two and me.” Lally points to the dogs and her cheeks pinken.

My phone beeps with several messages, likely coming from Emmie. She’s the only one who spams me with single-word texts so I’m annoyed enough to check my phone if I don’t respond right away.

“I mean, I’m single. I’ve never proposed to anyone or been proposed to is what I meant.”

Pulling my phone from my pocket, the name *Emmie* with a heart emoji beside it scrolls across the screen. She added that in my contacts when she was sixteen and I can’t be bothered to erase it.

Lally cringes slightly and then adds, “I should head inside.”

Phone in hand, I check to make sure Emmie is okay when the device rings. “Yeah, I have to take this. Boo thanks you for the biscuit.” Taking a few steps off the porch, I answer. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, of course, Mag. You’re always on high alert. I just needed to ask a military question for a project I’m working on.” She inquires about Brazil’s military history.

“You’re better off asking the internet. My memory of that is foggy.”

“Oh, come on, Grandpa told you guys all about everything having to do with Brazil. He was practically a historian. I just want to confirm this sentence is an accurate way to portray the incident.”

I should ask Lally. After all, she said she studied history. But I have to go. Have to avoid temptation. The red flag inside me waves wildly while the flare threatens to set it on fire.

After helping Emmie rework the phrasing of her sentence so there’s no question about historical accuracy, I’m halfway to my truck when I realize that Boo remained on Lally’s porch.

I call for him, but he doesn’t budge. “I have a biscuit, buddy.” It’s a lie, but these stirrings inside are confusing. I have to put distance between Lally and me. It’s for the best. For now.

Boo bounds my way, legs pumping and kicking up sand.

“I owe you one, buddy,” I say, attaching the dog’s leash. He whimpers as if knowing full well I don’t have treats. “But I do keep my promises. We’ll get you something good later.”

Pivoting toward the truck, I belatedly realize where we are. The Junks, aka the cottages, that Chip left me are just over the next dune.

The plan was to hold off visiting these until after the wedding. Standing there staring at the rough shacks, I think of the Big Bad Wolf blowing them all down. Or a stiff wind could do the job.

Boo whines.

“You’re right. It is after the wedding.” I’m not sure why I’ve been putting off this visit.

After a couple of particularly tough rotations, I came back here to regroup. To get my head together. But before that, the

cottages were used for people who preferred a more austere island experience than the Driftwood resort. Chip rented them out to kids' camps in the summers.

But it's more than that.

Claiming this property as mine comes with more. Much more. It would mean that I accept the terms of Chip's will—ambiguity, mystery, and all.

With Boo by my side, I walk over to the cabins. I forgot how much I hate sand in my boots. Lally would probably tell me I'm silly and should be barefoot when on the beach. She was. Her toes were painted bright, neon green. Not that I was paying attention. Okay, maybe a little bit.

She also wore small silver hoops in her ears. One of her teeth is slightly out of place, but otherwise, she has a perfect smile. No, that tooth is what makes her smile perfect. And her lips.

I growl a little. Boo looks at me in alarm. I should not be thinking about her lips.

Sand covers the small deck in front of the first cottage, but I can see it's splintered in some places. The next one has a broken window. The third is missing porch railings. My brothers and I would sometimes camp out over here, swim and boat all day, leave our towels out to dry on the fence, roast hot dogs and marshmallows, and then tell stories around the campfire.

As soon as CJ started talking about Mom and Dad, we'd turn in. Emmie was never involved in our adventures...and she was the only one to call Chip *Grandpa*. He had a special affection for her. We all did. She knew our parents for the briefest time. Me, the longest.

I suddenly imagine our mother and father sitting on the beach as they so often did to watch the sunset. I'm more of a sunrise guy, but wouldn't mind sharing that with my sweetheart—that's what Dad always called my mother. Or his bride, his beloved, or *My Ella*, short for Emmanuella, her name, as well as Emmie's.

Jiggling the doorknob on the eighth and final cottage, it sticks. I could kick the door down, but then an animal could sneak in or the structure could take on more water damage. I'm surprised it's locked.

Instead, Boo and I head back to town to see if any of my brothers have the keys. If not, I'm guessing Mr. Edmonston, the lawyer in charge of Chip's will, can help.

Quirky people occupy Coco Key. We have easy access to the mainland so no one can claim to get island fever, but the place with the annual Manatee Jubilee, featuring our mascot Lola the Sea Cow, the Nosy Rosies, and coconut crunch—a legitimately addicting combination of top-secret ingredients—is unique, to say the least.

Royal approaches from the other direction in his BMW. I flash the truck's headlights.

Boo barks a greeting.

"You found the dog," Royal says as if he knows how much this dog means to me.

Isla, Royal's recently proposed-to fiancée, gets out of the passenger side. "Phew. We were ready to organize a proper search party."

"Thanks for your help, guys. Now, I'm looking for the key to the cottages."

Royal slow claps. "Well done not keeping track of anything."

"Shut it," I snap.

Isla says, "The neighbor has a copy. Her name is Lally McGuinness. She's the sweetest—"

"Yeah, I know." The words slip out.

"You know she has the key or you know that she's the sweetest?" Isla asks.

The corner of Royal's lip lifts as if he knows something I don't. "You met her?"

"Something like that."

Just then, an SUV roars toward us. Ryan skids to a stop and hops out all smiles. “Bros! What are we doing now, having board meetings in the middle of the street?”

“It’s not like there’s much traffic,” Royal mutters. However, his gaze doesn’t leave me, as if it snagged on my familiarity with the neighbor.

Isla says, “Not much traffic, yet.”

“What’s going on?” Ryan says, picking up on his twin’s vibe.

“Looking for—” I start.

“Mag met someone.”

“Her name is Lally,” Isla supplies.

“Yeah, I met my neighbor. So what?”

Royal and Isla exchange a knowing look that Ryan glimpses as well.

“My, my, my. The mighty does have a heart in his chest,” Ryan teases. “Good luck, bro. I have a feeling you’ll need it.”

“There’s a story here,” Royal adds, ever perceptive.

One I’m not going to tell. “Just need the key.”

“Lally lives in the beach bungalow next to the cottages by Quiet Cannon Beach, but I’m guessing you already knew that,” Isla says with a smirk.

Fighting a smile, and trying to cast them a glare for getting in my business, I move to return the way I came, fighting with myself the entire way. As my siblings leave, I have second thoughts. I’ll get the key from Lally at a different time. I need to get my head (and heart?) together, so I head back to my truck. I’ll save this visit for tomorrow.



The next day, I stand in front of the cottages, fully appreciating (resenting?) their dilapidated state. I could get the key from

Lally. I could break the doors down instead. No need to make the situation worse. Call a locksmith. Have the lawyer obtain the key. Search Chip's old place, surely, he had a set of spares for all his properties.

Instead, I head next door and walk past the gray SUV in the bungalow's driveway. From inside, the dogs bark. Boo looks at me excitedly.

"Yes, we're back here."

I have to admit, I'm feeling less like a wolf and more than a little sheepish coming back so soon. Or are there pigs in that children's story? I could ask Nora. Or Lally. I bet she'd know.

Boo stands at the ready by my side, but by the way he leans forward, he's desperate to visit with the other dogs.

Lally answers without me having to knock. Her hair is dry and a little frizzy, but she changed out of her wet clothes and into a cotton sundress with slim straps. It skims her ankles, hiding her long legs. I've never before paid much attention to what women wear.

"Back so soon?" she asks when I simply stare at her, not saying anything.

The wedding with her in that mint gown comes to mind, our arms linked as we marched down the aisle, her so close, teasing my senses with her coconut scent.

"I promised Boo a biscuit."

The dog looks up at both of us as if to confirm that's true, but that's not all.

"I certainly have biscuits, but recommend only one or two a day along with a balanced diet of fresh dog food. I make it for Madame and General myself. I could give you the recipe."

I listen to every word she says but cannot stop staring. It's like I'm standing at a threshold. Okay, I'm literally in her doorway, but if I open my mouth to speak, I'll say something that could change my life forever.

After making a fuss over giving Boo a cookie and splitting one in half so Madame and General don't feel left out, my dog

runs inside and makes himself at home with his two new friends and a squeak toy shaped like a taco.

Still in the doorway, Lally looks at me with her gorgeous green eyes.

Giving my head a little shake, I say, “You have the key.”

“I do?”

Our eyes meet and time slows down. Nope. It stands still.

The flare inside is blinding. My thoughts race in a jumble. The red flag tries so hard to wave. I must resist her. But the flare inside sets it on fire.

“If you’re wondering why...” I can’t bring myself to reject her directly. “Listen, Lally, I have a lot going on. Have to fix up the cottages.”

“It was your grandfather’s property. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“How’d you know he left them to me?”

“I didn’t exactly. Just assumed since he owned pretty much the entire town and passed away recently. Were you close?”

“We were complicated.”

“Sounds like that’s par for the course in your relationships.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The look she gives isn’t pity or even understanding. More like she filled in the gaps of what I couldn’t say when I started, *If you’re wondering why...*

“The flirty texts, us in the hotel room when we stayed up almost all night talking, the wedding. I thought, hoped, it was the start of something. But I see now. You’re not good at relationships. It’s easier to keep people at a safe distance. The way you see it, you can’t hurt them if something happens to you. I get it.”

I stagger backward as if the words pierce my heart with an arrow of truth.

But I don't see judgment in her eyes. More like sadness in communicating a simple fact. But it's not immutable. I have to believe that.

"You're wrong about just one thing. You said I'm bad at relationships. No, I'm terrible."

"Maybe you haven't been in the right one." She turns to call the dogs with a tap on her hip. Then, as she sweeps back around, hair cascading over her shoulders, she adds, "Or haven't let yourself be in one, period."

Lally is bold. Never mind kicking down doors, she bashes at my walls. Barrels right through.

No holds barred. Identifies my defenses and calls me out.

Forget wolves and sheep and pigs. Time for me to be a man. I meet her eyes, holding that green gaze like I would a pair of precious gems. "You captured everyone's attention when you walked down the aisle—"

Before I can finish, she interrupts, "Probably because they heard I fell in the pool the night before. As if that's the greatest of my problems."

"You never told me what went viral."

"You can just look it up online. After all, the internet is forever."

"Just tell me."

She squawks a laugh. "And embarrass myself all over again?"

"I find it very hard to believe that whatever happened really, truly embarrassed you. You're made of tough stuff, Lally McGuinness. You're courageous. Unafraid to be yourself. Tell it like it is. It's honorable. Your dignity is a kind of armor. I respect that."

Her shoulders sharpen slightly and her chin lifts, then she wrinkles her nose. "Well, except that one time."

I laugh softly because whatever it was she did that went viral likely had a humorous element. I can't imagine this

woman having a mean bone in her body. “Also, I didn’t finish what I was saying. You recognized that we shared something special that night and that I bailed—emotionally.”

“Funny that we both ended up here.”

“Funny or fate?”

“Depends on what you believe.”

“In God. He knows us, loves us, and has a plan for our lives. Everyone’s. It’s just a matter of whether you let Him in. Allow Him to take the wheel.”

“Is it that simple?”

She nods. “And that difficult.”

Seems like she knows a thing or two about that. Me too.

“But what I wanted to say was you captured everyone’s attention when you walked down the aisle.” I gaze at my hands, wanting madly to put them on her. “But most especially mine. You looked beautiful, Lally McGuinness, and it’s been awfully hard to stop thinking about you.”

With a little smile twirling on her lips, she says, “In that case, Magnus McGregor, you owe me a dance.”

What would happen if I gave her more than that?

I’m also wondering how she saw me so clearly. Has she been hurt before? The thought cripples me for one second, but then fuels my desire to make sure that never happens again, least of all by me.

While she gets the key to the Junks, I remain on the threshold. I can no longer worry about my role in the military putting me in harm’s way and resulting in loss of life, hurting my sweetheart, my bride, my beloved, my Lally.

So, what’s stopping me?

Lally



CHAPTER 11

Even though I sweep and vacuum daily, there's no escaping the sand and dog hair on the beach bungalow's wooden floors. However, right now, I don't feel any grit under my feet. It's as if I'm floating.

Lost in the look in Magnus's eyes.

The quirk of his lips.

The words he spoke.

I remain in the clouds until I realize that the dogs and I are standing with him in front of the cottages. There are eight, each a perfect square with two windows and a rectangular porch. But that's about all that makes them resemble structures that humans might occupy. They've seen more storms than seems fair. Not given enough love or repairs. Abandoned, alone.

When I pass Magnus the key, I drop it into his palm, afraid one of us might get shocked if we touch. Both of us carry an electrical current that was subtly acknowledged while on the safety of my porch, but now we're out in the open and surrounded by water. There's no telling what might happen.

"I'm surprised your grandfather locked these shacks up. No one locks their doors on Coco Key."

"They should."

Yet some residents keep their hearts locked up.

"I've never been over here," I say, keeping a safe distance.

“That’s smart.”

I’m not sure if he refers to the structures or himself.

Magnus steps carefully onto the wooden deck of the first cottage. Boo sniffs around, ears sharp.

It’s not accurate to say they have peeling paint. It’s stripped right off. Windows are broken or only partially closed. A gauzy curtain covers half of one like a trapped ghost.

From inside, the floor creaks with Magnus’s footfalls. “Roof leak,” he calls.

I’m surprised it’s still attached.

“Everything is cracked and crumbling,” he grumbles.

When I came down to Coco Key after what happened with Romy and Ross, I chose this location precisely because I didn’t have neighbors, not like in the rest of town. However, now I’m rethinking that. Well, if I had one particular neighbor.

When Magnus emerges from the dark cabin, he says, “Junk is right.”

“Junk? I mean, you could probably fix them up and—”

He grunts, somewhat disagreeable. “This place looks to be in worse shape than the Driftwood and that’s saying something.”

“I was over there recently. They’ve done an amazing job fixing it up.”

“I think this place is beyond salvaging.” He kicks at a post and it splinters.

“You could give it a chance.” But I’m not sure who’s the fixer-upper here—the buildings or the man with his carefully hidden wounds.

Even at rest, Magnus wears a dangerous expression, but sadness hides behind his eyes. Yet, when he looks at me, I see something else. Protection...affection?

“The Junks were what my grandfather called these cottages. Chip named all the buildings and properties after

kinds of ships.”

“Ah, a Junk like a Chinese ship traced back to the Han Dynasty. Used for fishing, trade, and during wartime. Typically, they have a flat hull and battened sail.”

“You do know your history.”

“A bit. They were also used for piracy.” Which was a particular historical interest of mine.

He grunts dismissively. “My grandfather had ideas about that. When Chip passed, he left each of us a property with resources to fix it up. Royal got the resort, Ryan, the ice cream place, he called it the Sloop.”

“Ah, the Sip & Scoop, Sloop. Clever.”

“Me, the cabins on the beach.”

“The property is valuable.”

“These cottages also hold a lot of memories,” Magnus says, moving toward the next building.

Boo has already surveyed each, likely determining they’re bomb free, and he happily chews on a piece of driftwood.

“Good ones?” I ask.

Magnus peeks into the third cottage. “Some. I also would come down here to decompress from time to time.”

“After you were deployed?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s peaceful here. Did it help?”

“I’d like to think so.”

When he gets to the fourth cabin, I follow him inside. It’s dark, damp, and shadowy. The two windows let in minimal light. The bathroom door remains closed. A counter runs along the back wall with shelving on one end.

Magnus turns abruptly and extends his hand, catching mine. “You’re too pretty to be in here.”

His palm is rough. Fingers strong. The contact is electric and so intense, it instantly melts me. Before I was floating, now I'm goo, molten, liquid fire.

It takes me a moment to find my voice, but once I do, I go big and bold. It's either that or go home, and the fact that Magnus unexpectedly reappeared in my life makes me brave. I also cannot ignore the strong feeling of romanticipation, that this time together could become something more.

Do I want that?

With Magnus?

Yeah. I think I do.

But first, there's work for us both to do, and I don't mean on the Junks.

Cocking my head to the side, I ask, "Do you say that because I'm wearing a dress or because you've seen ugliness and you're trying to stick to your guns to keep me at a distance?"

His hand squeezes tighter around mine. "Both, but I'm fighting it, Lally. Usually, I win." The weight in his voice is powerful, like he recognizes as much as I do that there's something here, between us, but we're wading in, and have to leave behind hangups and bad beliefs.

A smile sneaks across my lips. "Good. Keep at it. I've heard Boo makes a good battle buddy."

"Sure does. Did your dogs get you through tough times?"

"Yeah. Them and a whole lot of time with God. Ice cream too."

Magnus turns and his mouth opens and closes as if he wants to say something. "I've been thinking, this idea came to mind, and it's kind of crazy, but I—" He cuts himself off.

I hold his gaze, wanting him to know he can tell me what it is, however wild, but the light outside shifts, and something glints behind him on the shelf against the wall. Our hands still linked, I walk toward it and pick up the small, shiny object.

“It’s a key. Looks like I found a spare.” This time, our hands brush when I set it in his palm.

Magnus studies it and shakes his head. “I’m not so sure. That looks like it belongs to a safe deposit box.”

Before I can ask questions, the dogs bark at the same time someone honks.

We step outside the cottages and our hands instantly drop like we’re not sure what this is and certainly aren’t ready to make it public. But like getting a hug on a cold day, my skin chills instantly without Magnus’s hand in mine.

Isla and Royal emerge from a black BMW. A guy who looks a lot like him emerges from an SUV and a third man with a striking resemblance to them all, but with longer and shaggier hair, pulls up in a Jeep.

“The gang is all here,” Magnus mutters.

“Hey, Lally,” Isla calls with a wave. Her gaze skips between Magnus and me, still standing close together.

“You’ve met half the McGregor brothers—Royal, the businessman and my fiancé. And Magnus, the soldier, I see.” Her lips quirk like she wants to say more.

I glance at him, but he’s steely-eyed as though not anticipating a welcome party.

“Say hello to the other two. Royal and Ryan are twins if that’s not obvious. He plays for the Miami Riptide. Ryan, not Royal. It’s also worth noting that he’s a rascal and can be quite flirty.”

Ryan smirks. “Not going to deny any of that. Nice to meet you, Lally.”

He reaches for my hand and Magnus claps him on the shoulder, blocking the contact. I half expect him to growl protectively. That’s what I have General for, but he’s gamboling around Ryan’s legs as if they’re long-lost friends.

“I had a BLT for lunch.”

“That explains it. General loves bacon.”

Ryan and I laugh. Magnus does not.

“And last but not least—”

CJ frowns, “No, I’m usually least. I’m used to it, though.”

“This is CJ. He’s an unknown quantity. A wildcard. What happens in his life, stays in his life,” Isla says.

He nods as if that’s accurate.

“Who’s the oldest?” I ask.

“Isn’t that obvious?” They all say at the same time except Magnus.

“Now that introductions are out of the way, I’d say that the obvious question is what are you all doing here?” Magnus asks.

“Today is a big day. You finally came over here,” Ryan says.

“I was waiting until I got back from the wedding.”

“If the state of the town and the Driftwood were any indication, the cottages could’ve washed into the sea.”

“I was hoping—”

Before the brothers start discussing business that’s none of mine, I say, “Isla, I heard what happened. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

She gazes lovingly at Royal. “I had my knight in shining armor come to my rescue.”

“Don’t forget about me. I helped,” CJ says.

“I’m only sorry that I wasn’t here,” Magnus says heavily.

“Bro, let’s be real. You wouldn’t have given those thugs a second chance. They’d be—” CJ drags his pointer finger across his throat. “At least now, they have the option to receive mercy.”

My eyes widen.

Magnus says, “He sent them on a church mission ship where they’ll have the chance to give their lives to God.”

“Moving on,” Isla says hastily as if she doesn’t want to think about that day. “There were some additional developments.”

Magnus tilts his head with interest.

“Remember the whole thing about starting on the eighteenth?”

“Avoid the sand,” Royal adds.

Ryan goes next. “Seek her with all your heart and might.”

“Bring your wits. You’ll need them and each other,” CJ finishes.

“Yeah, I remember.”

I do not and find this fascinating. Like reading the first page of a historical account and not having any idea where it’s going.

“I painted that mural for Gerome Glandman and let’s just say not a penny of your grandfather’s fortune is going to that man. At least not if I have anything to do with it.”

“You do,” Royal says, sliding his arm across her shoulder.

“So, you’ve changed your tune?” Magnus asks.

Royal nods. “We’ve fixed up the Driftwood. Soft opening soon.”

Isla smiles a secret smile.

My eyes must be the size of footballs because Ryan turns to me and says, “Our grandfather didn’t leave us with the typical last will and testament. I mean, he left us each with some remembrances, though I still can’t figure out what I need with the pen with a plume. But anyway, it was also something of a riddle. ‘The youngest would sooner dive than the shallowest go deep. But neither will find what they seek without the strongest softening and the cleverest humbling.’”

“I mentioned the will to Lally,” Magnus says.

“But we started at the eighteenth,” CJ says.

“And did you avoid the sand?” Magnus asks dryly.

“Eventually. First, we found a pearl,” Isla says, practically jumping up and down.

“The pearl that very likely belongs to the *Coroa de Lágrimas*,” CJ says with surprisingly perfect pronunciation.

“This again?” Magnus asks, casting his gaze at Royal.

He pumps his hands. “I know, I know. I was hasty to dismiss CJ’s theories, but—”

“Hasty? You wanted to punt him off the island,” Ryan says.

“And I’m sorry,” Royal says to his youngest brother. “Genuinely sorry.”

Magnus crosses his arms in front of his chest. “This is progress.”

“People can change,” Isla says, echoing my thoughts.

“Thing is, if our parents were still alive like CJ thinks, they’d have come home. They’d do whatever it took. They were loyal. I know that firsthand. They’d have...I’d do anything for my team and they would’ve done the same.” Magnus’s tone drops a few decibels.

Boo whines and sits down at his side before lying at his feet.

“We know that, Mag,” CJ says softly.

“But we found the pearl, which could lead us to the crown, which might help us find out what really happened.”

I have the feeling that this is less about whatever that treasure is and has more to do with something deeper, more personal, and very likely painful.

Stepping closer to Magnus, I plant my hand behind his shoulder. His breathing slows as if reminded of his training.

“Anything else I should know?”

“There was a ship with dark sails. A brigantine. Any chance you could use your intel and find out anything about it?” Royal asks.

“A brig? Those are rare. But sure. I’ll look into registered vessels, interactions with the Coast Guard, that kind of thing.”

“Like a pirate ship?” I ask.

Isla says, “If you’re tuned into the Coconut Wireless, you’ve probably heard all kinds of rumors about the excitement on the island now that the infamous McGregor boys returned.”

“Most of it is true,” Ryan winks.

Magnus scowls.

“Let’s meet for dinner at the Driftwood. We have a lot to discuss, including what you’re going to do with the cottages,” Royal says, all business.

Magnus’s lip curls. “I have an idea.”

“A crazy one,” I say.

All eyes land on me, including Magnus’s.

I shrug. “That’s as far as you got telling me about it, but I’m all ears.”

“I still have some details to iron out.”

“Whenever you’re ready, but the sooner the better because Glandman has been sniffing around,” Royal warns.

“We can take care of him.”

Ryan’s eyebrows shoot up. “Says my sniper brother.”

“Airforce pilot.”

“And a variety of other top-secret roles. You don’t fool us. Twenty years in the military, and all those medals, commendations, and mad respect from your superiors.” Ryan shakes his head in awe.

Magnus lifts his shoulder with modesty. I barely conceal my smile. Something about that interests me, excites me, and not going to lie, attracts me to him even more than I already am.

After a quick goodbye, Magnus returns to inspect the other four cottages.

I follow, my attention on the man walking sure-footedly in front of me, wondering about him, wanting to know more about his history, and his vision for the future of these cabins.

But I'm focused so much on that, I don't notice until it's too late when I lean against what turns out to be a rotten window casing and fall through until I'm on the ground outside.

Magnus's head fills the window opening.

Before I can tell him that I'm fine and that I merely fell onto the sand, he's by my side, assessing the damage.

"I'm okay. I just fell through the screen. Truly. I'm okay."

The look he gives could kill a man—or the cottage—if it hurt me in any way.

"Never mind. Forget it. This place is going down." As if he'd stored up all his anger and frustration in his fist, in one swift motion, he drives it into the side of the cottage's wall.

I startle, my hands lifting to my mouth.

Breath heaving, he moves to round on it again. This time, when he punches, his entire arm goes through and lodges there.

Scrambling over, I go onto autopilot, assessing the severity of the situation.

"Are you stuck?"

"That was dumb but necessary. And yes, I am stuck. I mean, I could wrench my arm out, but something is poking into the skin just behind my shoulder."

It's the same spot where I pressed my palm to his earlier. He's practically wedged into the battenboard of the cabin.

I go inside to see the damage and what could be keeping him in place.

"After the first strike, I didn't think I'd punch through the wall."

Taking a peek through the splintered wood our gazes float together.

“I feel foolish,” he says.

“And snagged by a nail.”

“Thought I felt something sharp poking into me.”

“And rusty. You good on tetanus?”

“Absolutely. Just please get me loose so I can go lick my wounds in privacy.”

This time, I grunt because I’ll get him cleaned up properly. For someone with a weaker stomach, dislodging Magnus from the nail would cause them to rush into the bathroom, but I get him loose with minimal discomfort for either one of us. At least, I hope. He seems like the type to suffer in silence.

Back outside, I slip my fingers into his so he can’t make a quick getaway. “If you need to blow off some steam, by all means, but don’t punch the building until I hear your crazy plans.”

“Never mind. It was dumb. I should go.”

I study his knuckles. Blood soaks his shirt in the back. “You’re bleeding. The nail punctured you. Looks like a splinter too.”

“It’s just blood. It doesn’t matter. I’ve had worse. A lot worse.”

Still holding his hand, I say, “Come on. Let’s go get that cleaned up. Also, the dogs need some water. And I want to hear about the crown and the treasure hunt.”

“It’s all tall tales and nonsense.”

“You don’t really believe that?” I ask because his brothers seemed to have a change of heart.

He grunts.

“Well, I’m also curious about what you plan to do with the cottages, the Junk, considering we’re neighbors and all.”

“That’ll take a while. Even if I do go through with it.”

That's what I'm hoping for.

Magnus



CHAPTER 12

Even though my shoulder and knuckles sting from the stupid self-inflicted wounds, holding Lally's hand is like a hug. One I didn't realize I'd been desperate for.

Her touch softens something inside me. Allows me to breathe easier. The stirring in my chest has turned to burning. I feel unexpectedly safe with her, like she'll always know what to do. She's the kind of woman to remain calm in a crisis, clearheaded.

It scares me.

That's why, when we get to her house, I wash my hand and staunch the bleeding in her bathroom, also washing my face and then finding a towel she probably uses for the dogs because it's not fluffy and white like the rest. However, it is clean because it smells wonderfully like her: sea breeze and coconut.

Meeting my gaze in the mirror, there's something in my eyes I've never before seen.

What's going on with you?

Boo barks from the other room.

Then it's like I hear Sean's voice in my head, he whispers three words, but I can't quite hear them above his knowing laughing.

Door in glove?

That can't be right.

But there was nothing funny about Lally falling through that screen. Had she gotten hurt, I'd never forgive myself. Instead, I acted a fool and punched the wall to the cottage. If that weren't enough, I did it again and got myself stuck. But it had nothing to do with her and everything to do with *emotions* I'm not sure what to do with, so I put them in *motion*—sorry, wall.

Letting out a breath, I shake my head.

Reluctantly, I leave the bathroom. Not because I don't want to be around Lally, but because I should leave and get the puncture on my back cleaned up.

Lally pours a tall glass of iced tea and offers it to me. "I also have lemonade, water, iced tea, coffee, if you'd prefer. Pick your poison."

"Chip used to say that. His poison was Rum." I take a sip. It's sweet like Lally. "Thanks. I'd better go."

"No, sit down. Shirt off."

I stagger backward. "What?"

"I'm going to clean up your shoulder."

Brow rumpling, I say, "You don't have to."

"True, but I'm doing it, anyway." She points to the chair in her sunny kitchen.

"You're not qualified."

She laughs. "I'm more than qualified. Now, sit."

"Lally, I know you're a veterinarian, but I'm not a dog."

"I know my way around flesh wounds, Magnus."

"To animals."

"And humans. Before vet school, I was a nurse."

"Seriously?"

"Quite."

I didn't even realize, but while she was convincing me to take a seat, she was already inspecting the wound like one of

those ninja nurses. Muttering the diagnosis under her breath, I drop to sitting and a smile grows on my face.

The dogs gather around as if watching a movie scene filmed live. I half expect Lally to say, *Scalpel* and for one of them to retrieve it.

I consider telling her about my condition and the occasional headaches that I have but keep that to myself for now. Instead, sipping the iced tea, I find myself intoxicated by Lally's scent and her soft yet deliberate touch. She knows what she's doing and isn't squeamish at all when she shows me the three-inch splinter she pulled from my back.

"I see you've taken worse," she says.

"A few bullets."

"And a stab wound?" She must see the scar by my ribs.

"Good eye. I've been shot, stabbed, impaled, taken shrapnel. The gamut."

"Glad you have a handy knack for staying alive." Warmth fills her voice.

I've had similar conversations, talked battles and scars with guys, but the warmth and sincerity in Lally's voice thaws me out and warms me over in the best of ways. It's welcome, even in this tropical climate.

Lost in my thoughts, I only realize it when she squeezes my good shoulder and says, "Good as new, flyboy." She says the last bit with flirty, teasing affection.

Gripping her hand planted there, I have the idea to spin her around and draw her onto my lap. To kiss her madly. Instead, I glimpse a photo on the wall in the living room.

It's a man in dress blues—her brother maybe—and there's a similar image of her in uniform along with several certificates and awards.

"You were in the military?" I ask, aghast.

"For a time."

"Lally?" My tone is measured.

She seems to know what I'm asking without me having to say it.

"I don't have people over here that often. Only moved to Coco Key a few months ago. Hanging these photos is a way for me not to forget without having to remember all the time."

"Only people who've experienced devastating loss would understand that logic."

"And you do." She says as a matter of statement, fact.

"I do," I confirm.

"I grew up in the Pacific Northwest and did a lot of hiking and backcountry camping, that kind of thing. When I was sixteen, I just didn't fit in at high school. I wasn't interested in the latest movies or pop songs." She gazes at her feet. "Though I didn't mind school dances."

I take her fingers in mine, making good on her sitting on my lap. I resist the smile that's eager to bloom on my face.

"I was more interested in hunting knives, orienteering, bows. My dad moved to Alaska, and I spent a lot of time up there too. He was in a bad accident and talked me through using a tourniquet. After that, when I went home, I learned about the opportunity to do dual enrollment through my high school and community college. Two years later, I had a high school diploma and an associate's degree. Two years after that, I had a bachelor's in nursing. Then I, um, enlisted as a military nurse."

The way she hesitates suggests there's more.

"You met someone?"

"When I was in college. He was in the military too. Different branch, but I figured it would be a way for us to be closer, so to speak. A few years in, he was killed." Her eyes tear up as if the memory still stings. "It was tough. After that, I found it harder to work with the wounded. I got transferred to assist the staff veterinarian."

"Seriously?"

"I don't think they knew what to do with me."

“I bounced back and forth between combat zones and ships. They wanted me in the thick of it because I was good at my job.”

I glance at the merits on the wall. “Really good.”

“But I couldn’t stomach it.” Her voice is strained like this is a source of regret.

“You patched me up just fine.”

“This is different. When we’d have a new person, critically injured, I couldn’t stop thinking about Ethan and—”

“Do you still think about him?”

“Only when we were at the wedding.” Her shoulder lifts as if her answer, having let go of that dream with him, pains her.

I don’t know if I could fill Ethan’s shoes, but the fact that Lally uses the word *we* tells me that she’s grieved him, but perhaps hasn’t given up on sharing her future with someone she loves.

“While on the ship, there was a lot of downtime. I used it to read, learn, and figure out my next steps. In the end, I couldn’t become a history teacher. I had to help somehow... animals, in this case. Before I left the military, I had the idea for a ‘pet’ project to train therapy-type dogs for veterans.”

“No,” I say, shocked.

“Yes. Is that a bad thing?” She falters.

“No, it’s just...that’s amazing.” My crazy idea suddenly feels possible, but also terrifying, and that’s saying something, because my motto is to be prepared, not scared.

Brows creased with concern, I ask, “Why didn’t you tell me that you’re also a veteran?”

She shrugs. “I don’t talk much about that time of my life.”

“By any chance did you know Sean and Boo?”

“No, I figured that out when Ross told me about him even though I didn’t realize he had a MWD. His brother and I never crossed paths.”

“Maybe we did. As dangerous as it can be, it’s a small world.”

“Strange too, how it led us together.”

Her gaze jumps from the photo of the guy on the wall. It’s then that I notice another of the two of them, her hand in his, a ring sparkling on her fourth finger. They were engaged. Lally was someone’s sweetheart.

My heart breaks for her. She’s so strong, but I see there is a delicate, fragile part to her after all. Or maybe it’s me. Both of us? More than anything, I want to take away her pain and for her to like me.

That’s new. Strange. Unexpected.

She gets to her feet and refills my iced tea. “So, talk to me about your plan.”

“You’re not going to believe it.”

She frowns.

“I came to these cottages a couple of times, helped sort myself out. At first, I thought other guys in my position could use them too. But then when I was riding here with Boo, the idea expanded. It could be a place where I match retired military dogs with vets. Veterans, not veterinarians. Though, one of those on staff would be essential.”

I flick my gaze to her, standing in a patch of sunlight across the room. Never have I seen something, someone, so perfect. Her eyes are bright, intent as she listens carefully to me.

She’s not the kind of woman to jump into something on a whim unless she thinks it’s a sure bet. I wonder how the rest of this conversation will go.

“The idea is it would be part retreat center, part doggy-vet love connection.”

Lally laughs, and it’s a delightful sound...I think.

“Is that a dumb idea?” I ask, second-guessing myself.

“No, I like the way you phrased that. A love connection.”

Our gazes flit past each other then back again.

“Dogs need to have a purpose, especially working dogs, whether they’re retired or didn’t quite meet qualifications. Veterans, after experiencing the brotherhood, need to as well, especially if they were wounded.”

“And some wounds aren’t visible.”

This time our gazes hold. Does she know? Could she?

“Exactly.”

“By creating bonds between the vets and the dogs, they could begin to rebuild trust in themselves and others. They could heal and eventually forge meaningful relationships with humans.” I’m thinking on the fly, but it’s like it all comes to me from somewhere else, a place just beyond my knowing.

“Granted, not all veterans need this kind of thing.”

“Of course not. Many that I know are strong, well adjusted. They have ironclad trust bonds, great relationships...”

“But others hide it. We’ve lost too many...” I trail off, thinking about the ones who’ve taken their own lives. Thinking of Sean.

Lally wraps her hands around mine and then squeezes—the one without the bloody knuckles.

My breath is sharp with surprise and fills with her coconut scent.

“Magnus, it’s an amazing idea. I’ll help however I can, in whatever ways you’d like me to.”

“Really? Do you think so? It’s not hair-brained?”

She shakes her head and gets out a pen and notebook. We jot down ideas with everything from how to obtain and adopt dogs, find matches and guys in need, to creating a retreat center where they could come, stay a week, learn how to take care of the K-9s, and experience the wild side of this island with snorkeling, fishing, and a camp-like experience without

connectivity and modern conveniences—much like it was among us brothers downrange.

“My friends Catherine and Kellan adopted a military dog. And I know a woman who volunteers at Angel Ears Animal Shelter—she helped someone open a branch in the UK. I’ll see what I can find out about that side of things.”

“You handle the dog end. I’ll focus on the vets,” I say.

Lally holds out her hand to shake. “It’s a deal.”

Like when we first met, I slide my hand into hers. In movies or books, you hear about the fit being perfect—like a hand in a glove. Mine is much larger and rougher, but feeling her palm against mine, I get the whole baseball mitt analogy now. It fits. It belongs.

She sucks her lip in slightly and an entirely different idea than dogs and veterans comes to mind. Something more personal...

The flare inside builds. The red flag waves.

The battle is over. I want this woman. I want her to be mine. I’ve lost everything. At this point, I only stand to gain.

I shift to draw her closer, but sense eyes on me, us.

Three sets stare at us and it’s only now, hours later, that I realize it’s dinner time.

As if shaken from a stupor, we both spring to our feet.

“I’d better feed them.”

“I ought to, um—” I point to the door. But I don’t know what I ought to do. I don’t want to leave. Where will I go?

“Have dinner with your brothers.”

“Oh, right. Forgot about that.”

“What should we call this endeavor?”

“You mean the dogs and veterans thing?” For a second, I was thinking of calling it *us*. Lally and me. Nearing forty, I’m a little too old for boyfriend-girlfriend terminology, but this feels like the beginning of a relationship.

She says, “How about Boo’s Battle Bros?”

“I like that. Let’s do it.” I wander toward the door, Boo rooted to the spot where Lally prepares Madame and General’s dinners.

As if not realizing I’m about to leave, Lally says, “This is going to sound like a weird question, but I’m from the Pacific Northwest, so this island world is all new to me. Was your family a band of pirates?”

She turns around, spotting me with my hand on the doorknob when I laugh.

“Oh, you’re leaving? I thought Boo could try some of my homemade dog food. I’ll mix it with regular kibble, so he can make a gradual adjustment.”

“That would be great. And why don’t you come with me?” I blurt.

Looking around, Lally asks, “Where?”

“To dinner at the Driftwood. You could be my plus-one.”

“That sounds formal.”

“I don’t know what it will be, but I’d like you there with me.”

Lally beams a smile, something that I’ll never, not in a million lifetimes, tire of seeing.

Lally



The last time I visited the Driftwood Resort was when Isla was painting a mural on a broad wall of a building and Madame made her debut as a Pink Lady. Tonight, lantern-lit paths lead Magnus and me toward a softly glowing building that appears as if it's sailing in the darkness.

He knows his way by heart and took my hand the moment we got out of the car. It's a protective gesture, but I think he's less worried about anything lurking in the shadows ready to attack me and more concerned about being back on this property.

Despite Magnus's genuinely tough guy exterior, there's a history hidden behind his eyes and I have a feeling it has much to do with treasure found...and lost right here.

He's quiet, but I wouldn't be surprised if the man's middle name is *Tall Silent Type*. I know, I know, that can't be a middle name but cut me some slack. My dogs are called Madame de Pupadour and General MuttArthur.

Wayfarer signs appear at every junction along the path, pointing toward fire pits, the Pirate Ship Playground, mini golf, the pool, and something ominously called The Plank.

Instead of going inside the main building named the Galleon, which resembles a ship of the same name but is composed of a mosaic of salvaged items—stained glass windows, iron grates, driftwood, ship's wheels, portholes, and more—Magnus detours around the back to a garden patio strung with twinkling lights.

So captivated by the resort, I hardly heard the laughter filtering through the night.

Isla jumps to her feet and greets me with a hug. She opens her arms for Magnus as well. I half expect him to give her a formal shake instead of a warm embrace.

“Welcome, welcome. If it weren’t already dark, we could play a little predinner pickle ball or have a corn hole tournament. There’s also giant chess.”

“We’ll have the outdoor lighting done in time for our opening, don’t worry,” Royal says, planting his palm lovingly on the flat of her back.

“I know, I know. I just want to test everything out on friends and family who’ll forgive us if something goes wrong.”

“Nothing is going to go wrong.”

Isla playfully rolls her eyes and smiles. “Silly me. I forgot. You’re Mr. Right.”

He kisses her temple.

“Where are Ryan and CJ?” Magnus asks abruptly.

“Ryan said he’s probably on his way and CJ, well, you know him.”

Magnus grunts. “You’re serving dinner. He’ll be here.”

I gather that as the baby brother, he gets treated like the runt.

Meanwhile, Isla launches into an enthusiastic account of all the resort has to offer. “As I mentioned, there’s chess, corn hole, and pickle ball, but we’ll also have croquet and volleyball. Plus, poolside and beachside games and lounging. Sandcastle contests, snorkeling, game day, movie night, live entertainment, and dining alfresco.”

“Speaking of dining, let’s eat,” Royal says.

“What about the others?” Magnus asks.

“Bro, chill. They’ll be here.”

“We should wait.”

Isla bites her lip as though suddenly nervous.

“You’ve created a serene ambiance, yet it can also be fun and lively—if you want it to be,” I say.

She smiles. “Just like Royal and me. He’s the serene one, if it wasn’t obvious.”

CJ launches himself over a nearby fence and then claps his hands. “What did I miss?”

Isla presses her hand to her chest. “You startled me.”

“Don’t step on the landscaping,” Royal orders.

“What were you doing lurking over there?” Magnus asks as if he’d noticed his brother before the rest of us.

“I wasn’t lurking.”

“I spotted you in the bushes the minute we walked onto the patio.”

CJ smirks. “I was waiting for a message. Didn’t want to be rude—no cellphones at the dinner table rule.”

“When have you ever cared about being rude?” Royal asks.

“My manners are impeccable.” CJ greets Isla and then turns to me. “If you haven’t noticed, us McGregor brothers have a certain dynamic.”

“I gathered.”

“Can we eat?” Royal asks.

CJ tsks. “Says the guy who was commenting on my manners. What about waiting for Ryan?”

Royal sighs. “Ryan might be busy.”

CJ and Magnus roll their eyes.

At a stage whisper, Isla says, “It’s taken me some time to decipher their expressions, gestures, and comments, and I’m not entirely sure I have the translation right, but I think that means Ryan is entertaining a lady.”

Royal guffaws.

“Or fending one off,” Magnus adds.

“When it comes to Ryan, it always has something to do with a lady.” CJ winks.

We gather around a long, whitewashed farm-style table, topped with bowls and plates with enough food to feed a small army. A McGregor-sized army.

There is one empty place setting, presumably for Ryan, which means they knew I was coming. Hope springs inside and lands like a gymnast with her arms outstretched in triumph. Is that also part of the brotherly code Isla is learning to read? Did seeing Magnus and I together earlier mean something?

Isla tells us about all the different dishes and then Royal says the blessing.

“And y’all have to tell me what you think of every single thing you taste because this is the potential wedding dinner menu. Though I haven’t decided whether to go with the fig, blackberry, and farro salad, steak, and smashed potatoes or lemon chicken with a kale and strawberry side, local goat cheese, and conch fritters.”

“You know my vote,” Royal says.

“It’s delicious,” CJ says.

Isla has hardly touched a thing and sets down her silverware, then flaps her hands. “I can’t hold it in for another second. We’ll have to just tell Ryan when he gets here.”

“I’m here.” The missing McGregor brother slouches into a chair.

Royal claps him on the back. “You okay, man?”

Ryan takes a long glug of the water by his place setting. “It’s been a day, but don’t let me interrupt, Isla. You were saying?”

She bounces in her seat. “We’ve officially set a date for the soft opening of the Driftwood, which also means we have a

wedding date.”

Royal grips her hand and squeezes. “Instead of doing a destination wedding, this is the destination. Our families and closest friends will be our first guests.”

“Guinea pigs?” Ryan asks.

“You okay to run the place and get married?” Magnus asks, ever practical.

Isla and Royal turn to face each other. “We can do anything together.”

It would be easy for someone in my position to feel like an outsider, but it’s like I’ve been sitting at the table for dinner with this family for years. I don’t feel excluded or like I’m Magnus’s flavor of the week.

Is that because he’s never brought anyone home to meet them? Is there an unspoken understanding that because they set a spot for me at the table, I’m instantly part of the crew?

I gaze up at Magnus’s brown eyes and the corner of his lip hitches toward a smile, toward making his dimple pop. I can’t help but feel as if he’s waited all his adult life for this moment, to have someone by his side. It’s been a while time since I felt like I belonged in this way.

Seated next to me, it’s hard not to notice the flash of Isla’s engagement ring—a lustrous pearl flanked by diamonds.

“It’s beautiful.”

“The pearl in the fountain was much bigger,” Isla says.

“I asked if you wanted a bigger pearl, Strawberry Shortcake,” Royal says, having overheard her comment.

“And I told you that it’s perfect. I don’t want a bigger one. If it were larger, I wouldn’t be able to lift my hand to do anything, much less paint.” She pecks him on the cheek. “I love it and I love you, Mr. McMuffin.”

CJ and Magnus exchange an *Ew, our brother is being romantic* look.

I just giggle and Magnus glimpses my left hand for the briefest moment. There used to be a ring there, but not for a long, long time. Long enough for me to grieve. I'll never forget Ethan or stop loving him, but it's different now.

"Anyone else make headway? Any new developments on the quest to uncover the lost Crown of Tears?" Ryan asks.

I tip my head in question because I'm not yet fluent enough in McGregor-ese to know if that's an inside joke or if it means something.

"The will said it's a great adventure, not a quest," CJ says.

"Same thing." Ryan chugs another cup of water. "Food is good by the way."

"Technically—"

"But is it great?" Isla interrupts.

"It's amazing. The best," Royal says, putting her at ease.

"While the two of you have been rebuilding the resort and planning your wedding, have you given any thought to the Coroa de Lágrimas?" CJ asks.

I recall him saying that before. Must mean the Crown of Tears as Ryan said.

Magnus turns to me. "It's hard to get a word in edge wise with this bunch, but if you're wondering, our grandfather left us with a mystery to solve."

"A great adventure," CJ corrects. "Here's what we have so far: a massive pearl that may or may not be part of the crown and the fragment of a map...and that's it."

Isla turns to me. "In case you're wondering, just before I was abducted, I was painting a mural over there." She gestures into the darkness. "There was a dried-up fountain in rough shape, but on the top was a mermaid statue, perched on a shell. She was pointing toward a cement treasure chest that would've appeared to be floating on top of the water if the fountain was full."

"We used to throw pennies into it," Magnus says fondly.

“And starting next week you’ll be able to make your most secret wish...if the plumber gets it done in time,” Isla says as if consulting a mental checklist of the remaining resort projects.

“Anyway, then with the help of my sister, Bean, who found an old ship’s logbook in her shop, drone footage of the island that Royal provided, and a hunch, we discovered part of a map on the old mini golf course.”

“The eighteenth hole,” Magnus says.

“Did we learn anything useful about the logbook?” Ryan asks.

“That it belongs to an old brigantine by the name of the Dark Seas but the last record logged was from 1863.”

“A brig?” Magnus asks.

“Did you find out any intel on that?” Royal follows up.

“Working on it.” He gives CJ a curious look that I’m not sure how to read.

Note to self, study McGregor-ese.

“So, we have the pearl that presumably goes to the crown and part of the map that presumably leads to the crown...but that’s it.” Isla stares at her plate.

“Glandman was interested in that ship’s log,” Royal adds.

“If Glandman steps foot on this property—” Magnus starts.

“I want to know more about that ship,” CJ says.

“Then why don’t you find out?” Magnus says.

“Yeah, you’re on a first-name basis with pirates, right?” Royal teases.

CJ sighs as if he’s used to taking verbal blows from his bros.

“What I want to know is was Chip murdered? What happened with Aunt Lorena and Glandman? And what good is the crown to us?”

CJ wraps his knuckles on the table and then turns to me in apology. “Our family originally comes from Portugal—on our mother’s side, so Chip was our maternal grandfather. They were royalty and a branch of the Régia Casa de Sousa—”

“Our ancestors,” Royal adds.

CJ continues. “They took to the sea to settle in Brazil. The plan was to expand the royal family’s territory. However, shortly after arriving in the new lands, João, his wife Márcia, and their four children were cut off from the throne.”

“Why?” I ask.

“That was my question exactly.” Magnus’s lip curls.

“The two heirs to the throne were twins, like Ryan and Royal, and sending João overseas was Adão’s master plot to get rid of him so he could reign unfettered. Understandably, João was upset at being cut off from the crown. He couldn’t assert his authority in the lawless land and was killed, leaving Márcia to take care of their five kids.”

“I can’t imagine how difficult that must’ve been,” I say, my attention captivated by the family lore.

“Márcia was strong, resourceful, capable...and she started trading with pirates,” Magnus says. “Maybe even became one.”

CJ grins. “She was a queen, at last, a pirate queen. Acknowledging her tragic past, she created the *Coroa de Lágrimas*.”

“The crown of tears, and swore revenge on the House of Sousa,” Magnus says.

“After our grandmother, Fernanda Sousa, went missing, our grandfather, Chip, became crazy about the crown,” Royal says.

“Our parents were looking for it too,” CJ adds.

“If you believe that,” Royal mutters.

“We were told they died in a boating accident. No bodies. No evidence. Don’t believe it,” CJ says.

“So, you lost them in a shipwreck?” I ask, my heart hurting for these boys. “Was it a brigantine?”

“What about the Royal?” Isla asks.

“I’m fine. I’m right here. Listening. Thinking,” he says.

“No, I mean the boat. Was it by chance the same one with the tattered sails that darkened our shores not long ago?”

“Are you asking if the Dark Seas is the same as the Her Royal Cartagena?” Royal asks.

“The ship that the queen sent between Brazil and Columbia to thwart pirates?” CJ asks.

“I thought the queen was a pirate?” I say.

“Yeah, but you can’t trust pirates. Not even if you are one,” Magnus says.

“Also yeah, I’m named after a boat,” Royal adds. “But no, not the same one. Our parents met on that ship, hence my name, and it’s nothing like the one that’s been darkening our shores.”

“Fitting name,” Ryan says.

“What about the key?” I ask, filled with curiosity about this great adventure, as Chip put it in his will.

“How do you know about the key?” CJ asks, surprised.

“Well, I found it.”

“You found *the* key?”

I shrug. “A key.”

“We found a key in one of the cottages. I’ll look into it tomorrow.” Magnus removes his napkin from his lap and sets it on the table.

“And the ship,” CJ adds.

“Why can’t you?” Magnus says.

“Because—” CJ goes silent as Ryan and Royal give their brothers a peculiar look. It’s as if they both thought they knew the answer to that particular question—Magnus having

military ties—but are second-guessing themselves because of how he posed the question.

“I’ll make sure he looks into it,” I say with what I hope is a helpful smile.

Tonight has been a pleasant surprise, seeing the growing McGregor family in action. It makes me long to truly be a part of it. To have one of my own.

Whereas Royal seemed grumpy, he’s surprisingly friendly. I thought Magnus was brooding, but it turns out that he’s serious, stoic, commanding...and sweet and thoughtful.

Especially when dessert comes, and he lets me eat the icing off his cake.

Ryan is a flirt for sure and CJ is, well, an “island” man of mystery instead of an international man of mystery.

“We’re also serving chocolate on the half shell,” Isla announces.

We all laugh, mouths watering as she describes the creamy Crème brûlée -style dessert, topped with chocolate and served in an oyster shell, because of the beach-inspired wedding.

The conversation turns from treasure back to the wedding. We bring in the dishes and help clean up, with Isla giving me the details of her big day. It’s the polar opposite of all the conversations I had with Romy. Whereas she was a Bridezilla, Isla is full of enthusiasm—a bridal unicorn—Bride-i-corn?

We move to what Isla calls the drawing room with bookshelves, seating areas, a massive mural map of the world painted on the wall, and a piano. An old song comes on and Ryan starts singing along. Royal joins him and Magnus pounds the piano keys, also singing, which comes as a surprise.

Isla and I start belting it out and dancing, swinging each other around, before Royal takes her hand. Ryan and CJ boogie. Magnus looks up at me.

It’s as if the room goes quiet. The music no longer vibrates through our bodies. Something else pulses between us. In a

few short strides, he crosses the room, takes my hand, and twists me around, then into his arms. It's a lively, jaunty tune, and for a guy who said he doesn't dance, he's good. Uninhibited. The McGregor family musical revue seemed totally spontaneous and positively fun.

As I glide away from Magnus and then he reels me back in, the deep timbre of his voice singing the song lyrics makes me gaze at his lips. But his gaze on me lifts mine to meet his and hooks there.

It's right then something shifts, takes anchor.

We dance and sing and...

I'm in love.

And breathless.

After we say goodnight to everyone, instead of going to Magnus's truck, he leads me across the property toward the peninsula.

"Tell me about your family," he says.

"Yours is fresh in my mind, so think exactly the opposite. My mother worked part-time at a lumber mill, and even though she was home often enough, she was distant. We never got especially close, though we did play cards a lot. More like a bare-bones relationship. My dad and I were closer, hiked a lot. But he was quiet, not available for much more than casual conversation."

I leave out my mother's habit, the one we never talked about. I don't mention the only time she spent with me was playing card games, the fights with my dad about money missing from their bank account, and how, each month, she'd disappear for a few days.

My poker skills paid off, though, because it helped me fund the difference that my GI Bill benefits didn't cover for vet school. But this isn't something I discuss.

"Are they still together?"

"Technically, yes, but my dad lives in Alaska and my mother is still in Washington. I don't think they were

expecting me or knew what to do with me. I see moms and dads involved in their children's lives and am like, that's how it's supposed to be. That's how I'd want it to be if I had kids."

"Do you?"

"Want kids? A whole bunch. Even one would be good. First, I'd want to take a few steps, you know, the whole marriage thing." In movies, talking about this so soon, so early is often portrayed as being taboo, a surefire way to turn a guy off, but I want a man who's excited about marriage and not scared of merely discussing that kind of commitment.

I can't see Magnus's expression as we walk swiftly along the dimly lit path, but his hand finds mine.

Before I let myself get too comfortable, I have to ask a hard question. "Would you mind telling me about the text you got from Emmie? Is she someone special? Did she propose to you?"

Magnus goes still and then erupts with laughter. "Emmie? Yes. No. She's my sister."

"There's another McGregor? A secret sister?"

"She's not a secret."

"Then why isn't she involved in all this treasure stuff?"

He lets out a breath. "Good question. I don't know. Chip had a different relationship with her. He'd send us boys out on quests, which usually resulted in the other three getting into trouble."

I poke him in the side. "Not you, flyboy?"

His lips flutter with a grin. "Maybe a little."

"I'm sorry that I asked, I thought maybe you were spoken for, so I was prepared to be super embarrassed by how I acted at the wedding and then since. I started to get worried and—"

Magnus looks down at me, brown eyes blazing. "I am spoken for."

I move to jump away, but he doesn't let me.

“By you. If you want me to be.”

“Are you asking me to...?”

Our gazes drift together, searching, finding that beacon in the darkness.

“Today. Coming here. The place at the table. Right now. It all means something.”

I’m used to people *not* using their words. I may not yet be fluent in McGregor-ese, but I’m an expert at reading between the lines.

Now, as Magnus said, is different than it was when the two of us were alone in the hotel room. The air is charged and it’s not because there’s a lightning storm nearby. We’re generating our own electrical current.

It grows as our eyes lock.

Whereas sometimes I see in them Magnus’s stoicism, strength, focus, and, even at times, hidden sadness, right now it’s longing, affection, and desire.

The romanticipation inside me builds.

He glances down at my lips and shifts closer.

My heart tumbles, doing somersaults playfully down a hill.

His rough palm finds my cheek, resting softly, as he closes the space between us.

My mind goes blank at his touch.

All I know is that our lips meet in a kiss that could shut down the power grid. Blackout everywhere. And from the darkness emerges stars, a million of them twinkling inside.

Magnus’s other hand grasps the back of my head as the kiss continues. My arms lace around his neck and we press more closely together. Our inhales and exhales fall into sync and even though the only action is the rising and falling of our chests, our lips navigating this new territory, it’s like we’re dancing again, but this time it’s just us, just the stars inside and above.

Magnus leads, takes charge, as the kiss deepens. I give myself over to him and let him guide me toward wherever this is going. He's proven himself capable, trustworthy. The steely grip I so often have on my life loosens, and I relax into this man's embrace.

Because I trust him.

Because he's true.

Because I want him to feel the same inner, electric buzz. Experience what it's like to scale these heights, the heart tumbles, all of it. I want him to know he's also wanted. Because that's how he makes me feel and it's something I didn't even realize I wanted, needed.

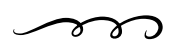
Intoxicated by his mountain-fresh, high-altitude scent, I don't think I ever need to breathe again.

Magnus's hands drop to my shoulders and wrap around my back. The proximity somehow increases even though we couldn't possibly be any closer. Whatever this is feels binding. Like when two investors shake hands in agreement. Only this is more. So much more. Like a mutually agreed upon legal contract. But it's all pleasure. No business.

From this kiss we agree to invest in each other, in an unknown future, and hopefully, many, many more kisses just like it.

This great moment with our noses softly brushing, our hands exploring and gripping, and our lips moving is the start of our great adventure.

Magnus



CHAPTER 14

Most people would claim that I'm more of a physical type of person—defined by strength, capability, and calm in the face of danger and difficulties.

The kiss I'm sharing with Lally starts as an overtly physical experience with the last glimpse of her sparkling green eyes before they close with a yes.

Yes, hold me.

Yes, kiss me.

“Yes, Magnus,” she murmurs those words now.

It's like she's not only saying yes to this, but to me, to us.

It's a bodily experience as her soft breath whispers across my skin. When our lips meet. Hers like rose petals. The sensation of her cool skin under my warm palm. The pulse in her neck when I pause and press a kiss there. The rise and fall of her chest with every breath. Her coconut scent. The space closing between us and our bodies welcoming each other into what's otherwise considered personal space.

Her lips. Have I mentioned them? Yeah, especially those.

As the kiss continues, the flare inside burns hotter and brighter than ever, bypassing the physical and leading somewhere else.

Can't lie. Lally makes me weak in the knees. The red flag gives one last limp wave, telling me that I can't afford this. That I have to remain strong.

But as my shoulders relax under her touch, as she yields softly to me, allowing me to lead the way, the stirring inside changes, shifts, and morphs into a different kind of feeling. Not one merely experienced by the senses—sight, scent, taste, sound, touch.

Built upon that strong foundation, it's unshakable. A vibration, an electrical current, a buzz silences my thoughts except one.

I want this woman. I honor this woman. I adore this woman.

In this short time, she's made my hardened, cynical heart love. She strengthens me in ways that aren't immediately visible.

As I give back in the kiss, I want her to know that she can trust and rely on me. I will be her rock.

I will be hers.

When we part, we make a slow and pleasantly quiet walk back to my truck. It's like we're both afraid that if we open our mouths to speak, we'll pop this bubble.

Hands swinging between us, it's like we're both floating.

When I open the passenger side door to the truck, Lally gets in and says, "This is new."

I close the door and grip the doorframe. "What is?"

She draws a little upturned crescent in the air much like the moon. "You're smiling."

"I am?" My lips twist, trying to hold it back.

"It's a rare sight. I like it."

Rounding to the driver's side, I get in and say, "Ryan and CJ are quicker to smile. Royal, not so much. Me, I was trained to—"

Lally stretches across the center console and kisses me on the cheek—on that pesky dimple of mine. "I love it."

Something seals between us, a wax stamp like Chip kept in his office. Whatever this is with Lally and me is something special.

“You don’t seem like the kind of guy who typically shares his feelings, afraid that would make him vulnerable. You’re not wrong and I respect that. I’m not the kind of woman who cries easily—not like Rosalie who probably would’ve wept at Romy and Ross’s wedding even though she’s on Team Lally. I’d never sit you down and make you tell me how you feel. But if you ever want to...you could. I’m here. You can trust me.”

I squeeze her hand to let her know I appreciate what she means about vulnerability, intimacy, and trust. Then add, “My emotions aren’t too locked up. Believe it or not, being in the military for so long taught me a lot about human behavior—physical, mental, emotional.”

Pulling up in front of Lally’s beach bungalow, I bring the truck to a stop. The interior lights glow and her green eyes sparkle as I meet them.

“My brothers would be the first to tease me about my ego, but it’s not as big as they think.” I brush the back of my hand along Lally’s cheek. “I take the Lord’s teachings about humility seriously, honor too. All of them. Some I’m better at than others. But I know this for sure, and I am not afraid to declare it. I like you, Lally. I like you a lot.”

Our lips meet in another kiss. A goodnight kiss.

I’m certain about the *like* part of it...just not so sure I’m brave enough for declarations of love.

I walk her to the door and get Boo and leave her with a kiss.

But I’m still smiling when I return to the Airbnb where Ryan and I have been staying.

CJ’s there when I enter the kitchen. “Hey bro. You keep staying here, you’re going to have to chip in for rent.”

“I was just making a sandwich.”

“Groceries too. Wait. We ate dinner not too long ago.”

He grunts as he takes a bite of his ham, cheese, lettuce, and tomato—with a hefty sprinkling of pepper. Yes, I know how all my brothers fix their lunch, coffee, all of it.

“I thought you bought a house somewhere on the island.”

“It’s occupied,” he says around a mouthful.

“You’re renting it out?”

“Not exactly.”

My brow furrows with confusion, but not much about my little brother has ever made sense. When we were young, he’d tag along with the three of us. As the oldest, I was the natural leader with the twins always keeping up. CJ was often a few steps behind. Then, when I graduated high school and joined the military, he took off and started doing his own thing. No one ever really knew what, though.

Ryan and Royal were responsible for the pranks and shenanigans in town—ruttled roads from blowing doughnuts, toilet paper in the palm trees, and once repainting the town welcome sign to say *Loco Tea*. Don’t ask.

But CJ remained mysterious, in many ways much like Chip. We just always assumed our brother’s dealings weren’t strictly legal. But lately, I’m starting to wonder. No, it’s been a while now that I’ve questioned us having labeled him as the loser, slacker brother.

“I’m not going to be staying here much longer, anyway.”

“Fixing up the cottages? Not a bad view.” He waggles his eyebrows.

I slug him in the arm. “Watch it.”

“I was talking about the ocean view. But I did notice you were admiring a certain dinner guest. The first on record.”

He doesn’t need to come out and say that I’ve never brought a girl home—not since high school. Lally is different.

“Plus, Boo will have some playmates over there in the neighborhood.” The dog stares at CJ as if hoping a slice of

ham will fall out of his sandwich.

“I was talking to Royal on the phone when I was up in Atlanta. He said Ryan is taking the will seriously. I disagree.” I’ve been wondering what will happen if we disregard the will...and if we don’t.

CJ sets his sandwich down and wipes his mouth. “Chip taught me many things. One of them was patience.”

“So, you’re saying Ryan will come around?” I ask.

“Royal did. You have.”

“Fair point. What was your big idea the other day, anyway?”

He grimaces. “The one Royal shot down?”

I nod and freshen Boo’s water.

“We have some blind spots. There’s the will and then everything we don’t know. Chip left you a pillow and a pocket knife. Ever thought about why?”

I exhale a sigh. “Not really. Have I ever understood why our grandfather did what he did? Rhetorical question. No.”

“He always had a reason.”

I drop onto a kitchen stool. “I take it that he left me the pillow because I’ve slept many times without one and maybe because he probably thought I ought to take a rest.”

“And the knife?”

“It was his father’s, our great grandfather’s. Handmade in Brazil. If you didn’t know, I have a sizeable knife collection. Admire the craftsmanship.” I’ve carried it every day since the reading of the will and study the wooden handle, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and abalone that looks like moving water if you stare at it long enough.

“Admire it a little more,” CJ says, taking the last bite of his sandwich.

I roll my eyes.

“While we’re asking questions, any info on the brigantine?” he asks.

“Right. On it.” I pull out my phone and log into the government database that’s been slow to deny my access since retirement. I don’t get anything about a ship that matches the description. Then again, I have almost nothing to go on other than Dark Seas.

I send a couple of texts to guys I know who might be able to tell me more, but who knows where they are in the world? I’m used to operating in different time zones and CJ’s comment about patience comes to mind.

However, my phone instantly beeps with a reply. I take the call from my buddy, call sign Dallas, who used to fly with me. After twenty years in the military, my superiors identified my strengths, in particular, my focus and targeting accuracy. I didn’t only fly fighter jets. I spent plenty of time with boots on the ground. My call sign in the air was *Magic*—because it was a *now you see me, now you don’t* situation in the skies. When I shifted lanes, the guys called me Magnum, after Magnum PI the old show, and because for a while I sported what Ryan called an epic mustache, but mostly because I never missed. Not once.

When I get off the phone with Dallas, I tell CJ what I learned.

On the books, and as we already know, the brigantine is called Dark Seas. It docks in Porto de Santos.”

CJ nods at this additional info. “São Paulo.”

“And was allegedly registered to Benecio Estevão, but the records are spotty.”

“Let’s find him.”

“Not so fast. The info is from 1911 before registration laws were in effect. It was more on the honor system, but ships were still accounted for. Do the math. There’s no way Benecio is still sailing the shining seas.”

“I suppose not.”

“That makes it a ghost ship.”

“A pirate ship,” CJ whispers.

“But why?”

“Maybe my idea wasn’t so bad after all.”

“What idea?” I ask.

“The one where we fill in our blind spots. We have to talk to the Pirate Defense League.”

Laughter bursts out of me. “Chip’s old game night cronies? Half of them *are* blind.”

“Not Ray Higbee. He warned Isla and Royal. Fishy, right?”

“Like an old cod washed up on shore.”

“Magnus. There’s something to this. You know it. I know it. Ray did. Chip for sure.”

“What? Like when he died it was open season on the island?”

“This place has been pirate-free since our grandfather won it in a poker game. We need to find out about that night, why the pirates stayed away, and what they’re doing here now.”

“Probably looking for the same thing we are. But you do know this is all a game. A clever way for Chip to cover his tracks, to not feel bad about leaving his family a bunch of weather-worn, worthless properties.” But even as I speak these words, I’m not so sure.

“Have you seen the Driftwood in the light of day?” CJ asks.

I have and he’s not wrong. Royal and Isla have done a magnificent job updating it while maintaining the resort’s unique character.

CJ lifts his thumb as he names the members of the so-called Pirate Defense League. “On Mondays, he met for canasta with Melly Lipman. There was Ray, of course. He and Chip would play chess on Tuesdays. Wednesday was cribbage

with Slidell Williams and Thursdays were backgammon with Amelia Cross. Friday was poker night, and they'd all get together."

"You think they were the original crew, present when he won this island?"

"Could very well be his original crew."

"So, we'll question them."

"An interrogation? They're kind of old, fragile. Don't want to cause anyone's blood pressure to go haywire," I caution.

"I meant for us to make house calls, stop them if we see them in town. No need for criminal inquiries. We just need to find out what we can."

"I thought you were friendly with the locals," I say.

"Not them. They've kept to their little clique. The thing is, I never knew if the Pirate Defense League was to protect islanders against piracy or to defend the pirates."

Whereas I thought CJ was a ball of chaos, his mind seems surprisingly squared away.

"Me neither."

"That's why we have to get on the inside."

"Consider it done. I'll run background checks and figure out a way..." Even if I have to call in another favor to Dallas.

"I'm not looking for their social security numbers. I could obtain those easily enough. I meant in a more personal fashion, Mag. Have them tell some old stories. Work some elicitation."

The spycraft term makes me wonder about what CJ does with his days...and if he's had some covert nights.

"Will do."

"Game on," CJ says as Chip always did when he'd send us on his wacky adventures.

A little thrill runs down my spine as I repeat, "Game on."

This sounds more like a mission even though I'm out of the service. But I have a complication in my life. A beautiful one. I fall asleep thinking about the kiss with Lally.

When I wake up the next morning, she's still bright in my mind. I can't escape her. Don't want to, so it's no surprise when I go to town for coffee that I find her standing next to the dock, dog leashes in hand, and chatting with Robyn and Isla.

An invisible current hums between us. For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, I find my lips lifted at the corner. "Hello, ladies. Nice morning."

No sooner are the words out of my mouth than I'm drenched with water. When I wipe my eyes, I notice the proliferation of plastic pink flamingos planted around town.

Lally



No need for coffee from Beans & Books. I'm wide awake now and very, very wet. The dogs bark happily as if they want to jump in the water and splash too.

"Lola," Robyn calls with more affection in her tone than reprimand. Below the dock, the massive manatee rolls onto her side and lifts her stubby fin.

It's hard for me to be upset because she's too adorable for her own good. When she surfaces, snorting some water, I'm certain she smiles with knowing.

"Yeah, you got us good, girl," I mutter, then crouch down so I'm closer to what sailors long ago may have mistaken for a mermaid. Human beings are a miracle, but it's hard not to marvel at sea creatures.

Our eyes meet for a beat before I glance up at Magnus, towering over us. Instead of the annoyance I expect, his mouth is full of hidden amusement.

I guess it's hard not to feel that way in a town with a manatee mascot who somehow makes love matches and where pink plastic flamingos take over when love is in the air. The Coconut Wireless lit up this morning, speculating about Coco Key's latest couple.

That would be Magnus and me.

"I guess I need to get some dry clothes." It took me three outfit changes before I settled on this white T-shirt and a green pair of shorts, which is not like me at all. I'm as low maintenance as they come, but for some reason, today, I

couldn't settle on what to wear. My mind, body, and heart hummed with romantic anticipation, thinking about the kiss last night.

I had my first kiss when I was when I was eighteen. It was also my first semester officially in nursing school and not in the dual enrollment program between my high school and the community college. His name was Gill. It was like being attacked by a squid. Then along came Ethan. He was a great kisser. But all of those were *before* kisses. Last night was an *after* kiss. It was the big one. It was a meteor about to strike; brace for impact, the world burning up, earth-shattering kiss. If kissing Magnus were my last moment, my final experience before we turned to space dust, I'd consider it a life well lived...and loved.

Because there was more to that kiss than the mere meeting of lips. At least it felt that way.

I was wondering if I'd see Magnus today. I didn't have to wait long at all. Wearing what I've come to think of as his uniform of a nicely fitted tee and dark denim, he gives me a little nod and the lines around his eyes lift in a way that suggests he likes what he sees.

But by the way that Isla and Robyn are looking from him to me and back again, it's like they're waiting for something. For us to stop smiling at each other like we got away with a crime and are keeping it a secret? Nope, somehow the whole town knows, and the Pratt sisters have a front-row seat to the show. I blame the Nosy Rosies. They know everything.

Just then, Ryan sidles up, lifting and lowering his sunglasses and whistling low. "I came here for the eye candy, but see the love birds returned. Who is it this time?" He looks at Robyn, Isla, and me, then lands on his brother. "Tough call, but I'm going with the brunette." He points at me.

Robyn and Isla, sisters, wear matching smiles.

A blush races across my cheeks.

The dogs gambol around our legs, causing a stir. Ryan pets General; Isla and Robyn fuss over Madame while Magnus and

I go for Boo at the same time.

Ryan mutters, “He’s a puppy dog, and she’s a biscuit.”

“Ryan,” Magnus says sternly.

He clicks his tongue and then claps Magnus on the back. “Big brother, didn’t know you had it in you.”

Magnus casts his brother a glare of warning and then clears his throat. “I was going to grab a coffee and head over to the Treasure Chest to get some supplies for fixing up the cottages.”

“And that’s my cue to vamoose,” Ryan says.

“I never said I wanted your help.”

“And just when I thought you were finally ditching the whole loner bit.”

Robyn and Isla watch the exchange with rapt attention.

“Ryan, what makes you an authority on relationships?” Magnus asks.

“I’ve been around.”

“Some of us take a different approach than playing the field.”

“What can I say? Football is my middle name.”

“It is not. It’s Phifer.”

“Okay, Magnus Charles, Mr. Straight-Laced and too serious for his own good.”

“I’m doing just fine.”

I step closer to Magnus, wanting to defend him even though I’m well aware the banter between the brothers is all in good humor.

“Happy birthday, bro. Do me a favor, Lally. Spoil him rotten.” Ryan winks.

“Ignore him. My birthday isn’t until next month.”

“Yeah, but you have to prepare in advance or the big four-oh.”

“Ryan, brother, check a calendar. I’m turning thirty-nine.”

“It’s forty-junior. Your last decade as a young man.”

“I hear the forties are when things really get started,” I say, not at all concerned about entering that decade even though I’m still several years away.

“That’s because you’ll make it look good, Lally.” Ryan’s lips twitch with a flirty smile.

Magnus’s nostrils flare and he shakes his head as if recognizing that Ryan is hopeless. “I’d better head over to the store.”

“How about that coffee for the long day of work ahead?” Robyn asks.

“I’ll take one,” Ryan says, already heading over to Beans & Books even though the owner is still out here with us.

“That too,” Magnus says.

“I’ll help you,” I say.

“No, I got it,” Magnus says.

“It’s not a problem.”

“I already have a crew. Hammer and nails.” Magnus pounds his left fist into his right.

Isla erupts into giggles and Robyn heads toward the coffee shop after Ryan.

“For the record, I can handle myself around a worksite,” I say.

Isla points at my feet. “Pro tip: wear sensible shoes.”

I wiggle a flip-flop shod foot. “I only wear sensible shoes.”

“So, you’re fixing up those old cottages?” Isla asks.

“Magnus has a wonderful business idea that’ll partner vets with retired working dogs and rescues,” I supply.

“Aren’t you a vet?” Isla asks.

“I’m a veterinarian. I meant veterans.”

“You are too,” Magnus says.

“Not like you. I worked on the medicine side of things.”

“But you were in the field.”

“Okey dokey, I’m going to leave you two kids to sort this out, whatever this is.” Isla spins her hand in a circle.

Yeah, what is it?

Seconds ago, I was all heart eyes, flying high with those pink flamingos and dreaming of kissing Magnus again. Something shifted, and it wasn’t the wind. I think I know what it is and I’m under no illusion that he owes me anything, but what happened to us being on a team? In this together?

Hand on hip, I say, “Weren’t you part of a flight team?”

“Yeah.” Magnus lengthens his spine at attention.

“Do you know how to spell?”

His lips quirk. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. There’s no letter *I* in the word *team*. But there is an *M* and an *E*.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Oh, stop. I’m helping. You can get things started, but I’ll draft up a logo for Boo’s Battle Bros, outline a website, and get the forms you’ll need to start a business.”

“You’d do that for me?”

My heart answers that question with an emphatic, *I’ll do anything*. Instead, I simply say, “It’s for a good cause and as your resident veterinarian, I do have a say, right?”

Magnus gazes at his wet attire as if reminded of something. Humility? Comradery? His hand finds mine, and he squeezes it in affirmation.

I can’t be sure, but the flamingos must release a low sonar sound, signaling to the Coconut Wireless that the newest couple in town is holding hands on Main Street because I cannot help but feel like everyone is watching us, wondering what’s going to happen.

Me too, guys. Me too.



The next several weeks pass in a momentous amount of demolition, nailing, sanding, painting, and roofing. When Magnus said he was getting supplies, I figured it would amount to a few trash bags and spackle to patch up the holes in the plaster.

Nope, he's gutted each of the cottages down to the studs and is repairing each one, mostly himself. Who knew he had carpentry skills on top of kissing skills? Not this girl, but I'm taking advantage of his many talents every chance I get.

While I sit on the beach bungalow's back deck working on my laptop, keeping an eye on the dogs, and noting that my neighbor's shirt came off—presumably to keep him cool while he works in the midday sun and revealing a delightfully strong physique—Rosalie pops in.

“Well, what do we have here?” She follows my gaze.

I tear mine away from Magnus. “Oh, you know, just a regular run-of-the-mill afternoon. Work, work, work.”

“I'll say. Make sure you take a break so you don't sprain your eyes.”

I can't help but laugh.

“The Coconut Wireless has been buzzing,” she hints.

“My lips are sealed,” I reply.

“You sure about that? It's our duty to keep our town safe and informed. If I notice any suspicious activity, it must be reported,” she says mock matter of fact.

“Well, of course. But as you can see, I'm over here, and he's...” A little sigh escapes as Magnus hoists a two-by-eight over his head.

Rosalie fans herself. “Progress looking good.”

I'm not sure if she means progress on the cottages or my relationship with Magnus.

“Well, I shouldn’t linger. I also have things to do.”

“You mean, nosy news to report?”

She clears her throat. “We’re preparing for the Manatee Jubilee.” Rosalie refocuses and tells me all about the upcoming festival, featuring sea cows, food, games, a parade, and more.

After she convinces me to help, she slips through the gate which doesn’t stay closed—something I need to fix. I learned a lot from watching *Designed to Last*, my favorite HLTV home improvement show. Or I can ask my new neighbor for a favor. I’ll pay him in kisses, promise. That’s as good an excuse as any to go next door.

When I moved here, the beach bungalow was a fixer-upper. Emphasis on the *fix*, but I’ve invested my time and resources into making it home. I haven’t questioned my decision. Somehow, Ethan knew this was paradise on earth and that I’d love it.

“Madame,” I call when she nears a pile of debris by the work site.

“She’s over here. Just came over to ask her daddy for a cookie,” Magnus hollers.

“Are you keeping biscuits in your pocket now too?” No sooner are the words out of my mouth when I realize what he said.

Daddy.

He’s the dog daddy? If so, I am here for it.

Magnus’s lips flicker. “Maybe one or two. Good to be prepared.”

Boo watches, slightly jealous at the attention Madame is getting. I go over to him and scratch behind his ears. “Don’t you worry, soon you’re going to help too. Mommy will make sure of that.”

I sense Magnus watching me from behind, his dimple shining.

One of the many things I adore about my relationship with Magnus is how naturally it flows. He's sweet and thoughtful, and I like to think I am too, but we don't get nitpicky about much of anything—big or little.

Some nights, he makes dinner at his place and I join him on the beach to watch the sunset. Other times, we sit at my picnic table with the dogs by our feet.

He sometimes joins me for my early morning swim, or we meet for coffee and walk along Quiet Cannon Beach like it's been our routine for years. If I'm popping out to the store, I'll grab cold cuts for his lunches. If he heads to town, he'll return with a cookie or chocolate sample from Beans & Books for me.

It's just so natural. So perfect.

I'm lost in Lallyland when Boo barks at the hole he'd been digging like he was recovering a lost relic. He spins circles around it, making himself dizzy.

“What is it, boy? Did you find an old biscuit you buried?”

Magnus and I hover over the hole. Something glints at the bottom.

“What did this big butterball find?” he asks, crouching down and retrieving a golden ring.

A wedding ring.

Our eyes meet and catch like a flame.

There's no way this was an elaborate proposal plan because as amazing a dog as Boo is, there are yards and yards of beach. I don't think Magnus would've buried a ring and then relied upon him to find it.

Yet, the idea has been planted, er, uncovered.

“Wow,” I say, looking at the petite gold band in Magnus's big, rough hand.

“There's an engraving on the inside.” He squints.

“Your glasses are at my place.” He only recently agreed to start wearing them and is always leaving them around.

“Thanks for reminding me that I’m almost forty.”

“Almost thirty-nine,” I correct.

We both chuckle.

Inside, I flip on the brightest light in my bungalow, but even with that, I cannot make out the inscription. However, I can feel the love shared by the couple on their wedding day.

“It’s like we found a secret, special part of someone’s history,” I whisper.

Magnus focuses and then lifts his gaze to mine. “I know what it says.”

I lean closer, inhaling his mountain-fresh scent.

His gaze flicks to mine. “It says, *Eu te amo sempre*.”

Watching Magnus doing manual labor and swimming is attractive. But nothing prepared me for hearing his deep, woody voice speak a romance language.

I blink a few times.

“*Eu te amo sempre*,” he repeats. “I love you always.”

Unlike when he called himself *daddy*, referring to the dogs, and I used *mommy*, this one doesn’t fly under the radar. The air is suddenly close, the room smaller than ever. The sun brightens and my heart tumbles in my chest.

A long moment passes before I ask the obvious question, “I wonder who it belonged to?”

“A Brazilian. Maybe even someone in my family.”

“Your mother?”

He shakes his head. “No, her ring was silver. But it could’ve been my grandmother’s or anyone’s really.”

“I like the idea that it belonged to your grandma, though. How do you say that in Brazilian?”

“I called her *avó*.”

“Do you speak Brazilian?”

“I’m a little rusty.”

“Say something.”

Magnus grins and his dimple peeks out from the stubble across his cheek. “I did.”

“Say it again,” I whisper, moving closer.

“*Eu te amo sempre.*”

His eyes flicker as they dip toward my lips.

I lean in close, once more inhaling his manly scent.

Magnus tips my chin toward his and our mouths fuse together.

As always, the current between us is strong. It sends sparks everywhere, like little stars blistering the space behind my eyes. There’s no need for the bright light overhead. We’re illuminating the room, could probably supply the whole town with power.

His rough stubble reminds me that I’m still on Earth and not floating in another galaxy, but we may as well be in Magnus-Lallyland.

Magnus



CHAPTER 16

If I weren't as disciplined as I am, I'd be thinking about Lally twenty-four-seven. Instead, it's just twenty-three-six and a half.

I told her, *Eu te amo sempre*.

This is it. She's my future.

There's no going back.

And as I spin the ring on the table, I realize all I want is to go forward.

"Yo," Ryan says, entering the kitchen at the rental.

"Yo ho," CJ says, coming in behind him.

"I brought a bottle of rum," Royal says.

"Are we celebrating something?"

"Not that I know of. The excavators found this buried when they were digging for the installation of the new pool plumbing." Royal sets the glass bottle on the table with a thud.

"Seems Chip had a private label. *Sempre Spirits*," Ryan says.

"Always?" Royal says, translating.

I slap my hand over the ring.

My brothers stare at me.

No going back.

“Found this.” I pinch the wedding band between my fingers. “Actually, Boo dug it up.”

They take turns studying it and the inscription.

“This is our grandmother’s ring,” CJ says with certainty.

“How do you know?” Royal asks, ever doubtful.

“I remember it.”

“She passed away just after Emmie was born. You couldn’t have been more than a three? Four?” I ask.

CJ sighs like he’s the one talking to a bunch of toddlers. “Avó probably didn’t pass away. And she always took off her rings at night when she washed up. She’d take a beach walk every morning before dressing for the day. The salt and spray would mess up her hair. When she’d return, she’d put on her jewelry.”

It’s hard to deny how much CJ reminds me of Chip. After all, he’s Chip Junior.

He frowns. “I remember one afternoon you guys were out doing *whatever* without me and Chip was in one of his moods.”

“The rum kind of mood?” Royal asks.

“It’s probably a good thing that he buried it all,” Ryan says, reminding us of what the excavator found on the Driftwood property.

It was a shame, but from time to time, Chip would slip into something like an angry depression. It wasn’t that he didn’t get out of bed. No, he’d storm around, looking at everything and everyone like he wanted to burn it to the ground or cast it into the ocean. He’d tell wild stories and proclaim even wilder—and sometimes weirder—theories.

Then in the calm after the storm, he’d add a new section onto one of the buildings, something like the mini golf course would appear, or a new adventure would be hatched.

CJ nods. “One day, he was in one and held out his palm, saying, ‘Boy, I want you to see this. Memorize it. Whoever

finds it, if used in good faith, will find their true love.' Then, taking me by the hand, he dragged me to the shoreline and chucked it in the water."

Arms crossed, Royal leans back. "I don't believe you."

Our youngest brother shrugs. "You never do."

Ryan passes the ring back to me.

"See? Lost doesn't mean forever." CJ says meeting my gaze.

"But *sempre* does."

"Technically, it means always," Royal says.

"Always and forever." I lift my gaze to my brothers. "I thought it belonged to our grandmother." I was hoping so. "I'm going to ask Lally to marry me. With your blessing, I'd like this to be her wedding band... If she says yes."

To my surprise, CJ leaps to his feet and hugs me. His voice is muffled, but I think he says, "The greatest blessing."

The other guys and I shake hands.

"Well, this is interesting. If Lally says yes, that means two down. Two to go." Ryan's lips are slack as if he's slightly nervous about what that could mean for this band of brothers.

CJ grumbles then his eyes widen. "Wait. I know where Avó's engagement ring is. It's part of the set. I saw it when I was cleaning up Chip's things."

"Yeah, yeah. More like clearing out," Royal mutters.

I cast him a sharp look.

"Royal, I know what you're suggesting. While I don't have to prove anything to you, if I were *clearing* things out and were the loser you imagine me to be, wouldn't I have sold an engagement ring that contains a fragment of the Dresden Green Diamond for top dollar?"

"The what diamond?" I ask.

He explains that the rare green-hued Dresden Diamond was mined in India in the seventeen hundreds. "Of course, it's

not the original, that's on display in a museum and it's huge. This is a piece of it, smuggled out of the jeweler's studio long, long ago."

"How do you know this?"

"Come up to the Brig with me and I'll get it for you."

"Why is it up there?"

"That's where Chip was staying toward the end." CJ's excitement turns solemn.

"Not the Frigate?" I ask, naming the building he'd called home for most of my life.

Ryan, texting on his phone, looks up. "So, is the meeting adjourned?"

Biting the inside corner of my lip, I say, "Yeah." For now. But this also means that it'll soon be time to make my move.



Lally bounces on her toes excitedly, reminding me of Isla. The former is usually pretty grounded. The latter, well, bouncy. Of the two brothers entering into formal relationships, I think I lucked out. Nothing wrong with Isla, but her energy is a lot.

"Sit down here and close your eyes. It's a surprise," she says.

I do then peek at her.

"Eyes. Closed."

I dive in for a kiss and then obey this beautiful woman with the pink-stained lips.

With a shake of her computer's mouse, it hums to life. "Okay, open 'em."

I look at a neon pink logo squawking the words *Manatee Jubilee* with a neon blue sea cow in the middle wearing a life ring and a crown. "Are we celebrating the town mascot that splashed us?"

“Oops. Not that one. I’m on the planning committee and made a new website. It’s this one. Ta da.” She clicks on a nearby tab and reveals an altogether different logo. It reads *Boo’s Battle Bros* with a rendering of the dog and is in red, white, and blue.

“What do you think?” she asks when I remain quiet.

As I scroll through, I’m speechless. Lally highlighted the vet-dog program perfectly. She even features a tribute to Sean and a pledge to partner with other veteran-run programs to support our community.

She peers over my shoulder and I turn my head slightly, kissing her on the cheek. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Do you like it? I can change the color, font, or redo the whole thing if it isn’t what you had in mind.”

Getting to my feet, I cup her jaw in my hands. “Lally, I love it.” Then I show her just how much with a kiss.

When we part, I say, “You didn’t have to do this.”

She lifts one shoulder. “I wanted to. Figured I could since I was already doing one for the Manatee Jubilee.”

“So, you just whip up websites on the side?”

“I’m sort of between things right now. Haven’t quite gotten my new veterinarian practice up and running here on Coco Key—didn’t do much market research before moving here. It turns out that there aren’t a ton of people in need of veterinarian services on the island. When I started my business in Atlanta, I did a lot of things on my own, including the website.”

Thinking back to the night Lally and I stayed up talking, she shared so much about herself, but most of it was alone—solo hikes, the solo business venture, being single after Ross betrayed her, living on this island by herself. Granted, she has friends and has talked about her family, but largely, it’s just her.

And now me. Part of her independence is genuine and part of it is stubbornness—I’m confident of this because it takes

one to know one—but I also think another piece of it is fear. She wants to do everything on her own, but why?

A question forms in my mind, but I'm not sure how to ask it, and depending on the answer, I don't want to ruin this moment.

After taking another look at the website, I scoop her into my arms, smother her with kisses, and say, "Thank you for making the website. It's perfect and I love it."

"You're welcome. Now, as payment, I'll take another kiss or ten and might ask you a teeny tiny favor."

"Yes, to the first. For the second, what's the favor?"

"Will you help me with the Manatee Jubilee?"

"I can't say I'm particularly fond of Lola after she drenched me with water."

"It's for the town. We're looking for sponsors and I happen to know a guy with a new business. It'll help get the word out. You can think of it like advertising."

"Sure."

"That was the teeny part. The tiny part is they requested each sponsor to donate a sum of money," she explains the tiers and then adds, "and I need to obtain another nine-hundred and fifty dollars for a total of a thousand."

"Who donated fifty?"

"You." Biting her lip, she smooths her finger on my chest.

"I can cover the rest," I say without hesitating.

"That's very generous of you, but there are the bronze, silver, and gold sponsor levels and I have to adhere to them."

"So, we need to go around town and raise money?"

"And we can make calls."

The things we do for love.

The burn in my chest is undeniable. I love this woman... even when we meet later in town and head over to the other nearby islands in our fundraising efforts.

We stop at the Tropical Popsicle and she tries to get me to try something called *acai*.

“What is it?” I ask.

“It’s a fruit made into sorbet.”

“Sherbert?”

“It’s like ice cream. You’ll love it.”

“I can’t even say it.”

When we get to the front of the line of the little shop, Lally orders first. “I’ll take a layer of acai and coconut, please, plus, all the toppings.”

When it’s my turn, I say, “I’ll try the same.”

“And there I thought you were Brazilian,” she teases.

“Half Brazilian. Haven’t been there since I was a kid. Does acai come from Brazil?”

“Sure does. They have some pretty amazing exports. Coffee, beef, extremely handsome men.”

“Men?” I ask.

Her lips tease me. “One man.”

I crack a smile.

When our orders come, my bowl looks like a relatively healthy sundae. It’s topped with berries, granola, coconut flakes, a drizzle of nut butter, honey, and chocolate chunks.

I dig in and it’s love at first bite. “Where have you been all my life?”

Lally smiles sweetly as she finishes a spoonful.

But the real question is will she be part of the rest of my life?

After we’ve raised eight hundred fifty dollars, leaving only fifty to go, we’re nearly back to my truck when a slick sedan pulls up to the sidewalk. Lally already crossed the street to the truck to get her bottle of water.

I eye the vehicle warily as the tinted window rolls down.

“You’ve grown up,” an older man with a horseshoe of hair says from the passenger seat. His driver stares dead ahead.

“People tend to do that,” I say dryly.

“I remember when you were just this tall,” says the man with the horseshoe of hair, gesturing with his hand out the window. His cufflinks glint in the sunlight.

“And I remember you, Gerome.”

“Not Mr. Glandman?” he asks.

“I’m not a kid anymore.”

He snorts slightly. “The word around town is that you’re raising funds for that event in Coco Key. As the owner of the Platinum Shores Empire, I’d like to donate.” He pulls out a checkbook.

Lally waves, eager to go, likely not knowing my family’s history with Glandman and picking up on my prickly reception of the man.

“We’ve met our goal,” I say, not keen to lie, but not interested in his dirty money.

“Ah, but the owner of the shop you were just in said you still needed fifty dollars.”

“We’re all set. Thank you anyway.” My tone is firm, dismissive.

“My money is no good to you? To the cause?” Glandman fixes his dark, beady, dead shark eyes on me as if trying to intimidate.

“You’re well aware of my opinion of you. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Lally must’ve heard part of the conversation because she starts to make her way over, but I meet her halfway and plant my hand on her lower back, leading us toward the truck. With a glance over my shoulder, I can’t help but notice Gerome look at her with interest, as if he makes the connection that she means something to me.

My gaze in response is a warning shot. But even though the man isn't as young and spry as he used to be, my guess is he's equally shrewd and slimy.

"What was that all about?" Lally asks as we head back to Coco Key.

"That was Gerome Glandman."

"The Gerome Glandman? I didn't get a good look at him. What's the story there exactly?"

"Family feud. Bad blood." Again, my tone is one of finality, but Lally doesn't let it go.

"To recap, your grandfather, Chip, left you and your brothers with a great adventure. Not only did you each get a property with instructions to revitalize it, but if you forfeit, the fortune goes to that man, Gerome Glandman."

I arch an eyebrow. She's astute. "He was briefly married to my Aunt Lorena, Chip's sister—they had different fathers. She stood to receive a massive inheritance and when that happened, Glandman used all her money to build his empire, as he called it, and destroyed hers."

"Why did she let him?"

"We don't know."

"Oh. That changes the gameboard."

"Does it?"

"He has a stake, after all, as someone who was related to you by marriage."

"So far, he hasn't made a move. Hasn't even acknowledged Chip's death. Typical Glandman."

"There's also the treasure hunt, unless that was just something to distract you from losing Chip. One last great adventure to remember him by."

"I thought of that, but no, he was too clever. He'd built up the lost crown of tears too big over the years for it to be a distraction, a dead end."

“So, you think the lost crown of tears is out there somewhere, waiting to be found?”

I grunt in affirmation. And I’m starting to think Glandman does too. As we cross the causeway above the sparkling blue sea hiding its treasure, I add, “Or not wanting to be found. There was also this, in the will, ‘The youngest would sooner dive than the shallowest go deep. But neither will find what they seek without the strongest softening and the cleverest humbling.’”

“That’s intense. So, the shallowest would be Ryan, the cleverest, Royal, and the youngest, CJ.”

We pass the sign, welcoming us to Coco Key, someplace I didn’t think I’d ever return to—especially not on the brink of engagement. I’m still wondering what brought Lally here, of all places.

“So, you’re the strong one and your grandfather instructed you to soften.”

“It makes a strange sort of sense, considering he left me a pillow.” I park in front of her house where we left the dogs who probably need to go out.

Lally laughs and it turns my dreary thoughts sunny. “Anything else?”

“He left me a knife,” I add as we get out of the truck.

“That’s an opposite object in some ways. Kind of like you.” She laces her arms around my chest, hugging me. “The toughest, strongest man I’ve ever met, but you also have a secret soft spot right here.” She points at my heart.

“Only for you.” But as soon as the words are out, that stupid red flag lifts. Instead of the stirring I’ve felt, something stutters. I’m getting so close to asking her the big question, but a few smaller ones back up behind it. They’re dumb and probably don’t matter. But they’re there, nonetheless. And I have one for myself. Can I handle marriage? Can I be the strong man she thinks I am?

Her pink-stained lips quirk. Then in one swift motion, she leaps into my arms, wrapping her legs around me. I have to

grip the backs of her thighs, otherwise, she'll fall. Yes, I have to. The red flag warns me not to. That she should remain standing in front of me. She's too close. She should move ten feet away. Twenty.

But I love having her close. The flare inside burns. Ignoring the flag, I lean in and kiss her madly. This is the real treasure. But I can't forget about the one that's potentially somewhere on this island.

"I've always wanted to do this," she breathes.

"Kiss?"

"Yes, but I mean jump into a man's arms and have him be able to support me. If you haven't noticed, I'm on the taller side."

"I have noticed and I love every inch of you." My ears heat. I said *I love you* in Brazilian and almost said it in English. But not quite.

The dogs bark from inside the house.

With Lally still in my arms and taking powerful strides, I walk up the path toward the house.

"Also, Isla and Royal found the pearl and the fragment of the map," she says when I set her down in front of the door as if reminded by the stained-glass mermaid seated atop a treasure chest in the window greets us.

"You've been paying attention," I say.

"It's hard not to when my neighbor is so handsome."

She gets a kiss on the neck as she unlocks the door.

"But the pearl and the map are where the trail ends," I say.

"But we found a key, remember?"

I tip my head to the side, having forgotten about it.

"Should we go to the bank tomorrow and see if it belongs to a safe deposit box?"

"Yes, but first we should do this again." Trailing kisses from the slope of Lally's neck to her cheek, I spin her around.

Once more, our mouths meet with a kiss and it unlocks something inside me.

Lally



CHAPTER 17

The next day, Magnus and I head over to the bank. On the way, we pass Ray Higbee who stumps along toward the shoreline with a scowl on his face, which is no surprise, because I've never seen him wearing any other expression.

Slidell Williams slides by on his Segway with a wave. He and Ray are opposites—the former being jolly and the latter, well, scowly.

Amelia Cross sits on a bench bearing a plaque dedicated to her late husband because that was their spot, watching the water. Her weepy-eyed gaze doesn't waver, nor does she look up as we pass.

I'm surprised to see them out, but not Rosalie and the rest of the Nosy Rosies.

When we enter the bank, we almost bump into Melly Lipman.

“Good morning, Mrs. Lipman.”

She looks me up and down as if unable to place me out of context.

“Lally McGuinness, poker nights.”

She adjusts her glasses. “I was distracted. My mind elsewhere. How are you today, dear?”

“Great. Do you know Magnus McGregor?”

“Of course I do.”

His brow creases. “I don’t believe we’ve met, Mrs. Lipman.”

“Not recently. You and your brothers were young, also distracted, your minds elsewhere.” She leans in, and adds, “On one of your grandfather’s scavenger hunts, most likely.”

“Probably. It’s nice to formally meet you,” Magnus says.

“You have your hands full with the Manatee Jubilee. Is there anything else I can help with?” I ask.

“I’m here on personal business today. But I look forward to seeing you on poker night, dear.”

We say an abrupt goodbye. My, she was distracted. As we approach the bank teller, Magnus looks at me strangely, like he has questions for me, namely why I play poker with a bunch of old folks. Or, more likely, considering he has a bunch of brothers, if I’m any good.

What I didn’t tell him when we discussed our families is that my mother has a gambling problem and I grew up playing cards with her, so yeah, I’m good.

Magnus presents the safe deposit box key. “Does this go to a box here?”

She frowns. “Sorry, sir. I’m not—”

He presents his identification. “My grandfather, Carlos Almeida, did his banking here.”

“But your last name is McGregor—?” the bank teller starts.

“Please check your records.” His tone is firm, an order.

The bank teller types into the computer and says, “Oh. Wow. A lot of banking. Actually, yes, you are the co-owner of the box.”

He mutters, “That’s news to me. Anyone else? Carlos Junior? Royal? Ryan McGregor?”

Her eyes light up at the mention of the famous football player’s name. “No, they’re not listed.”

We follow the bank teller to the vault and using another key, in unison, she and Magnus open one of the larger metal doors. She retrieves a metal box with another keyhole, gestures to a room with a door, and says, “You may take this in there and please let me know when you’re done so we can reverse the process.”

I pause outside the private room in case he wants to open the box himself.

He juts his head toward it.

“Sure you don’t want to do this alone?”

“No, Lally. Would you want to?” The words are forceful, almost an admonishment.

I’m afraid he’s upset that I didn’t tell him about playing cards with Mrs. Lipman and the others. “Texas Hold ‘Em, butter pecan, and Top Gun.”

“Huh?”

“Those are a few things you don’t know about me, a few of my favorite things. My best game is Texas Hold ‘Em. I’m a sucker for a scoop of butter pecan, and—”

“And you love Top Gun.” Magnus’s lips twitch with a smile. “Does that last one have anything to do with me?”

“It does now.”

We’re so close in this little room that it’s hard not to get lost in Magnus’s brown eyes. His dimple appears.

He kisses me on the forehead and says, “Believe it or not, I’m terrible at cards, my flavor is mint chocolate chip, and I’ll watch anything with Tom Cruise—though I have to sometimes suspend my disbelief, occupational hazard.”

Nothing, not even a box with a double lock, could contain my attraction for this man.

We turn back to the metal box on the table. Magnus slides the key in, turns it, and then lifts the hinged lid. From inside, he pulls out another box, this one made of polished wood and about seven by seven inches square on all sides. There aren’t

any hinges, no slit to reveal a lid. It's solid wood except for a slim slit in the top.

“What is it?”

Magnus shakes his head slowly. “I'm not sure.”

Picking it up, he turns it over in his hands. “Mahogany.” He smooths his palm across it.

“A treasure chest?”

“No opening.”

“Except at the top. Could be a piggy bank.”

He shakes it. Nothing rattles around inside.

Puzzled, he stares at it. I look it over carefully, but don't come to any conclusion.

“Why would your grandfather put a wooden box in a safe deposit box? Why would he only put your name on the account?”

“The questions stack up,” Magnus mutters.

“Do you think it could have anything to do with the will? The treasure? The crown?”

He knocks on the box.

We listen.

“Sounds hollow.”

Magnus puts the box under his arm and after locking up the empty metal box, we leave the bank.

Pausing in the town square, I perch on the edge of the manatee fountain with a sea cow perched like a mermaid at the top, squirting water from her pursed lips, fins outstretched. Every once in a while, someone sneaks a coconut bra on her. My bet is on Ryan.

Magnus's lips quirk. “I forgot that Chip had this fountain installed as a dedication to Coco Key at the same time he did the ones at the resort.”

“Lola’s grandma is forever memorialized as the town’s original sea cow.”

We chuckle, then I look over my shoulder in case she’s by the docks, but we’re safely out of the splash zone.

“If only she pointed toward a treasure chest containing a pearl like the one Isla and Royal found.” His brows pull together.

“Are you looking for more pearls that go to the crown?” I ask.

“I don’t believe so. The Coroa de Lágrimas is gold and supposedly each of the three lágrimas, the tears, are different. One a pearl, as we now know, and the others could be anything—precious stones, diamonds, rubies, emeralds.”

Magnus meets my eyes, uncertainty flickering in his.

“The crown is missing along with the stones that belong to it? Could they be hidden inside the box? You could cut into the wood with the knife or smash it.”

“A saw is more like. But I’d risk destroying what’s inside if there is anything.”

“Yeah, I suppose that’s kind of the opposite of his wish for you to *soften*.”

Magnus grunts.

I open my purse and pull out two coins. “Let’s each make a wish.”

He tosses the coin up and catches it in his palm. “Haven’t done this since I was a kid, but I always thought that it wasn’t so much about expecting that your wish would magically come true. Rather, identifying what you want. What you long for.”

I throw my coin into the water beneath the statute of the manatee. My wish isn’t for me. No, my longtime wish, my prayer has been granted. I just hope he feels the same way.

We head back to the cottages where Magnus has a meeting with an electrical contractor. I set the dogs loose to play on the

beach.

Magnus meets me a short time later. Seems he has a hard time staying away. I'm not mad about that.

"It's hard to believe all the progress you've made in the last month or so," I say, surveying the rustic meets modern cottages.

"They're coming along, but the guy Royal recommended to check the wiring is late." He looks at his dive watch for the third time.

"Island time."

Magnus grunts.

"You have to admit, it beats Atlanta," I say even though there have been countless occasions when I'd have liked people to have been more punctual, especially when I had a few projects done at the bungalow.

"I know why you left Atlanta, but what brought you here to Coco Key?" Magnus asks.

I lean against the porch rail beside Magnus who hulks in his impatience.

"Ethan wanted to take our honeymoon here." I press my lips together and stare at my hands.

He doesn't say anything.

"The memories remain in my heart, but—" I want to tell Magnus that I love him now, but the words catch between my lips.

He softens, lacing his arm across my shoulders and snugging me close.

"It was a long time ago. I wasn't a widow because we weren't married. Fiancée-widow isn't exactly a thing. There's no name for it that I know of. It was like I was lost, stuck in this unnamed grief—losing him and the life we could've had with a family."

He nods slowly, thoughtfully. "I lost Sean to PTSD. Not sure if you know that. I worried about him being too close to

the edge. He was still on deployment but couldn't handle some of the things that happened. I thought he was stronger." Magnus glances at me. "There isn't a name for that either."

"No, but it doesn't only take strength. Not on your own, at least not all the time. When things get difficult, we're meant to lean on each other, family, and friends. God."

"I've lost so many guys—bullets, bombs, accidents. Every time, it could've been me." He shakes his head slowly.

"Is that why you got out?"

"No. I dedicated myself to my blushing bride for twenty years. Til death do we part. I was married to the military. Thought that was my future. Then there was a helo accident." He scratches his temple. "I had a TBI."

I gasp and fight wrapping my entire body around this man—not because I think it can protect him in some way, but because I'm so thankful he survived when so many haven't.

He tells me about the accident, his recovery, and the one thing he lost permanently—the ability to fly. Of course, he's thankful that he didn't lose something else when the helo went down: a limb, his memory, but I understand that for a guy like him, not being able to get in the cockpit is a major blow.

Magnus doesn't say anything for a long moment and just when I think he's about to break his silence, a work van pulls up with Key-lectric emblazoned on the side.

I linger while he shows the electrician to the junction box because I don't quite feel like we were done with our conversation.

When he returns, I'm about to tell him that we're lucky, blessed now, to have each other, when my phone rings.

"It's Romy. Should I answer?"

"Maybe she finally had the presence of mind to thank you for almost single-handedly making her wedding day happen."

"She had the wedding planner."

"Who we all know repeatedly dropped the ball."

If even Magnus, the best man, knew that it, must've been pretty obvious.

“Hello?” I answer.

In one long string of sentences, she tells me that she and Ross are swinging by Coco Key on their honeymoon tour of the Caribbean and how they can't wait to meet my someone special.

How does she know? Surely, the Coconut Wireless doesn't reach Atlanta. I'm shellshocked when I get off the phone. I tell Magnus, echoing Romy's uninterrupted flow of words, but mine are slightly more panicked.

“Are they on a sailboat?”

“No, her parents chartered a yacht for them.”

“And just when you thought you'd washed your hands of her.”

“But what about us?”

“What about us?” he asks.

My gaze slides from side to side as if I'm looking for an escape route, because what if I've been wrong about everything? “Well, that we're together, right?”

Magnus takes both my hands and draws them toward his chest, closing the space between us. “What do you think?”

“I, uh—?”

“Do you want to know what my manatee fountain wish was?”

I press my palm to his lips. “No, don't tell me. It won't come true.”

“Suit yourself.” His expression falters. “Maybe you have a point. We'll have to be tactical about this.”

“Yeah, that's smart,” I say, but it's almost like in that moment we switched roles. Whereas before I was worried, my confidence returns and his fades.

“We'll have a tactical dinner, movie, tactical cuddle...”

My head falls back with laughter. “Seriously, How is this going to work?”

“Texas Hold ‘Em, butter pecan, Top Gun. I always ask for directions if I’m lost, admit when I’m wrong, and put the toilet seat down. I don’t do small talk. There. Now we know what we need to know. We’ll pass any test.”

My laughter continues. “And I’m a romance-a-holic trapped in a tomboy’s body.”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately, Lally? Your body is beautiful.”

I blush and once more, we swap confidence and doubt. “But still. Romy. Ross.”

“You never told me what happened—the video that went viral.”

With a defeated sigh, I pull out my phone. I do a quick search for *Woman, break up, revenge, window* and pass Magnus my device.

Instead of watching it, I gaze at the ocean and the diamonds rippling on the surface. In the distance, a ship darkens the horizon.

Magnus winces when the video ends.

I wrinkle my nose. “Proudest. Moment. Not.”

“That’s a warning not to cross a woman scorned if there ever was one.”

“It was less about Ross specifically, and more like latent anger that Ethan was gone, leaving me with the dregs.”

Magnus presses his hand to his chest, mock insulted.

“I don’t mean you. I thought I’d had my shot at love, it was lost, and—”

“And?” he asks.

I bite my lip as romanticipation builds inside. “And according to the official romance manual, when I bare my soul, you’re supposed to do something grand like spin me

around, stare wistfully into my eyes, then kiss me, Captain.” I poke him in the chest.

“Technically, it’s Lieutenant Colonel.”

I lift onto my toes so we’re about eye to eye. “Sounds very official.”

“Is the spinning and gazing and kissing an official order?”

“I’m not ranked like you, Lieutenant Colonel McGregor, so you tell me.”

“First, I want to know everything that preceded the video. I ought to know what I’m dealing with,” Magnus says with a smile on his face.

“You sure about that?”

“It might help to get it off your chest.”

I’ve never really talked about that day or processed it, except for the shame every time I think about it and when I had to talk to the police and pay a hefty sum to the building owner for defacing their property.

“Here goes. When I found out about Ross cheating on me with Romy, my so-called best friend, he was in a business meeting, but I had an urgency to discuss things. Blinded by rage... or something, I tried to get ahold of him via cell.”

“That’s not wholly unreasonable.”

“When he didn’t answer, I repeatedly called the office secretary, requesting to speak with him. Ross wouldn’t excuse himself from the meeting and eventually, she let my calls go to voicemail.”

“Also, not unreasonable.”

“Hey, whose side are you on?” I tease, bumping him with my hip.

Magnus kisses my temple. “Definitely yours.”

Warmth and assurance push against my shame. “Anyway, when that didn’t work, I went down to the building, but security must’ve been alerted because they denied me

entrance. I don't blame them. I was being kind of psycho. Didn't let that didn't stop me."

My shoulders crater and Magnus rubs them with an understanding tug to his lips. "Come on, let it all out."

Taking a deep breath, I say, "The window washers were on site that day. During their lunch break, I helped myself to their equipment. Instead of glass cleaner, I had a can of red spray paint in hand. When I got to Ross's floor, I spray painted *Ross is a cheater* on the window. Someone filmed it from inside. And embarrassingly, even though I had the presence of mind to reverse some of the letters, it looked jumbled. More like a child learning to write than an angry ex bent on revenge."

Magnus chuckles.

"Needless to say, I learned my lesson. Thanks, internet."

"Wouldn't expect that from you, but we all do things..." Magnus takes my phone and watches the video again. "That's really you? Because of the sun's glare, I can't make out your face."

"Luckily, not many people did. But still. It's shameful. I went too far."

"Yet Ross and Romy still welcomed you to their wedding."

"Only so I remain in a permanent state of mortification. They're shallow like that." I slap my hand over my mouth. "I didn't mean that."

"You're not wrong."

Phone set aside, Magnus says, "I'm on Team Lally all the way. Remember, I'm your huckleberry."

Our lips are a breath away, but before they lock, someone nearby clears their throat.

Magnus finishes up with the electrician while I smooth my hair.

When the guy leaves, I say, "But Romy and Ross are coming here? I just realized the dates she gave are the same as

the Manatee Jubilee, which coincides with the official opening of Boo's Battle Bros."

"Maybe Ross will appreciate the tribute to his brother. I was going to let the Haskins family know. As for you and me, we'll just be ourselves. No holding back. Though, I suppose we should practice a tactical kiss."

I laugh.

In one swift motion, Magnus dips me back, our gazes meet, and then he plants a long, intense kiss on my lips. It's passionate, like in the movies or that famous photo snapped in New York City's Times Square when the sailor kissed the nurse the day World War Two ended.

When we part, we both have to catch our breath. "If that was a tactical kiss, I want to know what a spontaneous one is like."

Magnus's dimple pops and he laughs, but it just as quickly dies as something offshore catches his eye.

I turn, afraid something happened to one of the dogs, but it's just that ship, floating closer.

Magnus's demeanor changes. "Speaking of tactical, you mentioned you play poker with Ray Higbee, Slidell Williams, Amelia Cross, and Melly Lipman, also known as the Pirate Defense League."

It's my turn to laugh. Only, Magnus's stony eyes, fixed on that boat, suggest he isn't joking.

"I need you to gather intel. Find out what that means, whose side they're on, whether they're protecting the treasure or the pirates."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I hate to say it, but this is mission-critical."

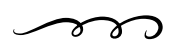
"You want me to spy on Coco Key's old folks?"

Lips pressed together, Magnus nods. "And see if they know anything about that ship, the Dark Seas. Try to get them talking about the Pirate Defense League."

By the grave expression in his eyes, it's obvious he's not joking. Not at all.

...and that's how I end up dressed as a pirate on a Friday afternoon after I make a pit stop and ask Royal if he'll donate a couple of bottles of rum to a good cause.

Magnus



CHAPTER 18

“Bro, there’s no doubt you really like her. Where to start? You’d texted me to let me know you were bringing someone to dinner. That was a first. Literally a first,” Royal says.

We’re at Chip’s old place, sitting around the wooden box that I retrieved from the mysterious safe deposit box. I told them everything, including that I was the only one on the account aside from our grandfather.

We speculate that it could’ve been because I’m the oldest, but it was strange that it wasn’t in the will.

“Don’t forget, that same night, he played the piano, sang, and danced with her,” CJ says.

“You’ve seen me play the piano and sing plenty of times.”

“But not dance,” Royal says matter of fact.

We should be trying to figure out how to open the box. Instead, it’s open season on my love life.

“Why are we talking about this instead of finding out what’s inside this box, if anything?”

“Because we know you, Mag. You’re afraid of commitment,” Ryan says.

“And what would you call twenty years in the US military?”

“Since it appears that the obvious must be spoken, that’s different,” Royal says.

“It’s just that we can tell you like her. It should be acknowledged, celebrated,” Royal says, holding the trophy for being the first of us brothers who was officially in a relationship.

“I bet she calls you something sweet like cuddle muffin,” Ryan says.

I slug him in the arm. “No, she does not.”

“Sweetie cakes?”

I punch him in the other arm.

Ryan opens his mouth and I narrow my eyes, suggesting he’ll get one right in the kisser if he doesn’t keep it closed.

But Ryan’s gaze drifts over my shoulder. The room turns exceptionally still, quiet. Rare for us McGregors.

“I present our grandmother’s engagement ring,” CJ says appearing from upstairs.

My jaw lowers slightly at the delicate yet ornately beautiful engagement ring with a large greenish oval diamond in the center, surrounded by smaller regular diamonds around the band.

“Whoa. You’ve been sitting on this rock all this time?” Royal asks.

CJ casts him a glare. “It goes with the wedding band Magnus and Lally found. Supposedly, it has a sister.”

“Another ring?”

CJ shakes his head. “No, another diamond. Even though it looks whole, it was the other half, a heart, cut perfectly in two. This one was shaped into an oval. The other, into a teardrop.”

“Like from the lost crown of tears?” Ryan asks.

“You’re sure this belonged to Avó?” I ask.

“I have photographic evidence.” CJ pulls out a few dusty photo albums, arrays them on the table, and flips them open.

Nostalgia for a time during which I was not yet alive makes my throat tight. Chip, with a similarly strong jawline

and the same eyes as me smiles in many of the pictures, happily in love with his bride on their wedding day.

“There it is,” CJ says, pointing to the two bands around our grandmother’s finger. “And there and there.”

It’s hard not to think about how Chip’s happiness was torn from him—his wife lost like so many things in his life: the crown; his daughter- and son-in-law; eventually us boys; and then his mind, if the will is any indication.

Or maybe it’s all meant to lead us back to something, to this moment.

I don’t think about that for more than a second before the fear that played tag with me when Lally and I were talking about the past and what happened to Sean taps me on the shoulder. I shove it away, but not before I think about how I’m afraid I might break Lally. Sure, I’m a gentle giant, relatively speaking, but I could break her heart.

I’m not sure I’m cut out for this, not even a soft launch into love.

But the ring is in my hand. My brothers are looking at me expectantly.

It’s go time.

The pillow, the knife, and the treasure hunt will have to wait.



I don’t have any real reason to be worried about Lally playing poker with the Pirate Defense League. According to her and word around town, she’s a card shark and can hold her own. It’s more that I asked her to do my dirty work. I could’ve just interviewed Higbee, Slidell, Mrs. Cross, and Mrs. Lipman myself. Heck, I should’ve.

But it’s getting later in the day and I expect her to be done with the game anytime now. The sky is clear and shaping up for a perfect sunset.

Boo sits by my side as I turn the engagement ring over in my hand.

“What do you think, boy?”

His bark sounds like the word *brave*.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

I send Lally a text, asking her to meet me at the cottages. The Junks are in a lot better shape than when I got here. We have some last-minute landscaping to do, otherwise, this looks like a manly type of place for dudes and their dogs to get some R&R, prepare for civilian life, heal wounds both inside and out, and meet man’s best friend.

Mine is somewhere on her way over here. I mean that Lally is my best friend, someone I trust, and a major side benefit is that I love her and am attracted to her in a way that I would never be with just a friend, especially a guy...or a dog, obviously.

No, Lally is on another level. I imagine her with her hair down, curls shining, eyes sparkling, and wearing that sundress.

Instead, she stumps toward me wearing a... I tilt my head. Boo does the same.

She waves.

My head tips to the other side. Boo’s follows.

Squinting, from top to bottom, I make out a tricorne cap, a puffy white shirt with ruffles, a red sash above a pair of black britches cut off just below the knees, and old brown boots.

“Arghh, matey. I have intel!” she hollers.

“First, what are you wearing?” She smells so good, like coconut and moonlight, I almost don’t care about the answer.

Up close, she removes an eye patch. “I wanted to keep the mood light.”

“So, you showed up to poker in character. You’re lucky they didn’t make you walk the plank.”

“They’re not pirates. Not anymore.”

My eyebrows lift. “This ought to be good.”

I lead us toward the cottages, unsure if I can ask this woman to marry me with a straight face, dressed as she is.

Lally is at my side one moment, telling me about her idea for the get-up, and then she yelps and hits the ground. “I fell in a hole.”

It’s a small one that the dogs dug. “Are you okay?”

“I may have turned my ankle.”

Crouching, I inspect the damage. “It’s not yet swollen, a good sign. The boot probably afforded some protection.”

“Argh. It hurts, me hearty.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

The internal red flag that I thought I’d thrown in the dumpster with the rest of the demolition materials from the cottage inches its way up the flagpole. It waves, telling me to abort the marriage mission.

“I meant to fill the hole. The landscapers will be here tomorrow. I’ll add it to the list.” I glance down and extend my hand to help her up.

She limps by my side and we make slow progress, but I can’t tell if we’re heading toward her beach bungalow or the cottages.

When I extend my arm for her to take for support over the uneven terrain, she shrugs me off. “I’m fine. The Manatee Jubilee is tomorrow. I can handle this.”

“But you’re limping. Let me help you.”

“I got it. Grass doesn’t grow under my feet, Magnus.”

I give a hopeless roll of my eyes. She’s so stubborn, having to do everything herself. It pains me knowing she’s pretending her ankle is okay, meanwhile, she won’t let me relieve some of the pressure. Even if she was lying on the ground, she wouldn’t ask for help.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be ready for tomorrow no matter what.”

“How about we head back to my place? I’ll make you some mac and cheese.” She told me she loves the stuff when she doesn’t feel good.

“The cupboards at the cottage are bare.”

“I stocked them.”

“I’m not in the mood for monkey cheese.”

“Huh? Mac n cheese. Wait. Did you hit your head too? Tip back some rum with the old folks? Are you messing with me?”

“No to all of the above.”

“How do you like your mac and cheese? The powder or squeeze cheese?”

“I’ll take a rain check on the monkey cheese.”

Moments ago, she seemed fine. This suddenly turned odd. I’ve never seen her act like this. Is she nervous? Does she know that I was going to propose? There are the Nosy Rosies in this town and the Coconut Wireless, but no way would one of my brothers out me and they’re the only ones who know about the engagement ring in my pocket.

I stop and Boo does the same. Planting both hands on Lally’s shoulders, I ask, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just a slightly swollen ankle.”

“It wasn’t swollen.”

“Oh, it feels swollen. But I heal fast. I’m almost as good as new. I’ll be back on my feet in no time.”

“The only thing that’s puffy is this shirt of yours.”

“Ha ha. We’ll put your cooking skills to the test tomorrow. I’m certain your gourmet monkey cheese is superb.”

Scratching my head, I mutter, “Monkey cheese.”

Her gaze shifts to her house. “Just, um, we have to make it to the bungalow.”

I make a mental note to add the construction of a well-lit path between our places.

“But the cottages are closer.”

“I should probably change out of this costume.”

Letting out a slight sigh of defeat, I take her hand and we walk over to the beach bungalow.

“Oh, good. We made it,” she says loudly.

The inside corners of my eyebrows squeeze together. “Is your blood sugar low?”

“Yeah, I could really go for some cake.”

“Can’t help you there. Not a fan.”

“Not even chocolate with vanilla frosting?”

I shrug. “Not especially.”

She bites her lip. “Well, I’m so glad you walked me home. I’m going to open the door now.” Again, her voice is unnecessarily loud. I’m shocked the dogs aren’t barking up a storm.

She opens the door, the lights flick on, and confetti goes everywhere as everyone I know in Coco Key shouts, “Surprise!”

My first reaction is to grumble. I’m not a fan of surprises and am somewhat concerned that she pulled this off without my realizing. My job is to notice things.

She pokes my cheek and whispers, “You’re supposed to smile.”

Friends and family greet me, wishing me a happy birthday. Balloons and streamers decorate the room along with a big happy birthday sign.

With my pirate woman still by my side, through clenched teeth, I say, “I’m not big on birthday parties.”

“Then just tell yourself it’s for the dogs. Happy Boo-day.” She’s glowing, pleased with herself as she pets the shepherd.

It’s then I realize how petty I’m being, and in front of everyone, I toss Lally’s pirate hat across the room, sweep her

into my arms, and plant a kiss on her lips. “Thank you for planning this, cake and all.”

She beams and seeing her smile like that is one of my greatest joys, the perfect birthday gift.

“I got you a mint chocolate chip ice cream cake with a brownie base since you said you don’t like cake.”

Just then I spot Nora and Alex, standing by the counter with Boo by their side.

Lally winks. “And of course, a regular cake for him.”

“Not only did you remember my birthday, but you invited them to be here for tomorrow’s grand opening? I’ve been so wrapped up in getting the business off the ground, I forgot to let Nora know tomorrow is the big day.” Granted, we won’t yet have guests and our first dogs won’t arrive for another week, but we’ll officially be on the map and spreading the word.

Lally smiles sweetly and then says, “Now, go say hi to all your guests while Alex helps me put thirty-nine candles in the cake before it melts.”

I give them both a high five and talk to Nora about how much it means that she’s here, and about the plans for Boo’s Battle Bros.

A short time later, everyone sings Happy Birthday to me, and just as I blow out the last of my candles—in one breath, I might add—Lally and I share a kiss.

Solely focused on Lally, I nearly forget that we’re not the only two people in the room when someone golf claps from behind me.

I whip around to see Ross and Romy standing in the doorway wearing white boating clothes contrasting with their cooked shellfish sunburns.

“Hi, Uncle Ross and Aunt Romy,” Alex waves.

They ignore him and Ross sneers at me. “Always trying to edge into my territory, eh, Magnus?”

“What are you doing here, Ross?”

“Lally invited me, of course. You know that she’s never gotten over me. That’s why she insisted on being in the wedding. I would’ve preferred Nora over there be Romy’s maid of honor.”

His wife pouts. “Ross, you should’ve told me. You know I would’ve—”

Ross cuts her off. “Magnus had to be Sean’s best buddy. It was always Magnus this, Magnus that. He was the one my brother called when he needed something. When he had something to share. He named Magnus Alex’s godfather.”

“That’s not something to hold against the kid,” I mutter.

“You were always right there, hawking into my role,” Ross blusters.

“Because that’s what brothers—best friends—do. Had you known how to change a tire or ever showed up on time, I’m sure Sean would’ve—”

“No, Magnus. You always had to outshine me.”

My brow instantly goes what can best be described as Cro-Magnon and my hands ball into fists. “I have three brothers already and don’t need any of this sibling rivalry nonsense.” The McGregor men are instantly at my sides.

And so is Lally.

“Ross, for the record, I am over you. Quite honestly, having hardly ever heard a word about your brother who was a hero, watching you ignore your nephew, and then the fact that you cheated on me isn’t exactly attractive. If you think, for one second, I’d choose you over Magnus, you’re delusional.”

Rosalie joins her. “I’m only just now putting this drama together and I can assure you, if everything I’ve heard is true, and from what I’ve seen, the man is definitely delusional.”

...And this surprise party drama will stream across the Coconut Wireless in a matter of minutes.

Reminded that they're right and that Ross is being immature, my hackles relax and I find the unflappable side of myself—the guy who was a brother in arms to Sean, that could handle anything, including the most intense missions where lives were at stake.

“Ross and Romy, you're welcome to some cake and to enjoy the festivities. Tomorrow is the grand opening of Boo's Battle Bros, and we'd be honored if you'd attend as a tribute to your brother.”

Ross eyes the white shepherd whose lip curls slightly as a snarl issues from his chest.

“Thank you, guys,” Romy says. “Ross had a long day at sea. Bottomless drinks on the yacht. We'll just help ourselves to some cake. Thanks.” She laughs in a high pitch.

The heated exchange forgiven, but not forgotten, the remainder of the night slides by with me visiting with friends and family, my brothers convincing me to play a few songs on the piano as everyone sings along—one of Chip's traditions for us on our birthdays—and me wondering about Lally's game of poker with the Pirate Defense League, while she's still dressed like one.

I don't have a chance to ask her about what she learned, check on her ankle, or steal much more than a kiss before she falls asleep on the couch after all the guests leave.

I'll help her clean up in the morning. I'm also exhausted, and even though we once shared a hotel room, I slip over to the cottages to stay for the first night since their renovation.

I dream about pirates waging war on the seas, cannon blasts, and being stung by musket fire.

When I wake up, my thoughts are foggy as I recall where I am. It's just past dawn and I remember the party last night. I want to help Lally clean up before we spend the day at the Manatee Jubilee and cut the ribbon at Boo's Battle Bros.

That reminds me, I'd better pick up some ribbon from the Treasure Chest, unless Lally did. She may have. She's so

thoughtful, always thinking of everything, including my birthday.

I start to shift to sitting, but I can't move.

Blinking a few times, I check in with my head. It doesn't ache, but this could be part of my TBI. Fear races through me. Am I paralyzed?

A burning sensation scorches my back.

I try to roll over, but the most I can do is reach for my cell phone on the side table as my nerves fire with pain.

I've been riddled with bullets, taken shrapnel, and fallen in a helicopter to the brine below, but this is different. This is from the inside out. Tapping into my training, I go through my list of symptoms to detect what it could be.

It's then I notice the sticky web in the shadowy corner of the room and remember the exterminator had to reschedule the other day.

I punch a text to Lally.

Me: I've been bit.

Lally: By a dog?

Me: Much worse.

Lally: Was that an autocorrect? That's my schtick, remember? Or are you getting me back for last night, pretending that I'd turned my ankle? It was obvious you wanted to go to the cottages and the party was at my place. I'm sorry for fibbing. FYI: If I ever start replacing common words with jungle animals, you know I'm lying. Monkey cheese sounds awful. But my poker face is not 😊

Pain, racing through my legs, seemingly snapping at every previous wound I've ever had makes the words on the screen blur.

Me: Spider.

My entire body burns as if with a fever—*island fever*, *treasure fever*, *Lally fever*.

My thoughts slip in and out of focus as a cool cloth presses against my forehead. For a moment, I can think clearly.

I was a Navy pilot, became a special forces operative, and led covert missions. I ruined my previous relationships, if they could even be called that, because I was afraid of what it would do to the woman if something happened to me.

Now, retired, I thought I'd be spared from that worry, but I lost Sean to PTSD and depression, to a cocktail of medications. What if that happened to me? What if I'm not strong enough? What if I break Lally from this side?

I push her hand away, moaning in pain, but relief comes too because I've made my decision. I dodged the bullet by not asking her to marry me last night.

I just have to get through this, purge this poison from my body, and then it's wheels up.

But the pain is so much. I toss and turn.

She tends to me, her voice soft and soothing. Her touch even more so.

But I resist.

I've seen action. Combat action. Dogfights in the air. This is a Nerf gun fight.

But then the heavy artillery takes aim. Only, I'm firing on myself.

It's through this fog of agony that I realize I've told Lally I love her.

That I asked her to marry me.

Lally



Nothing to see here. Not me freaking out because Magnus, in his spider bite venomous fit of agony, told me he loves me and said he wants to make me his wife. And to check his pants pocket if I didn't believe him.

To be clear, they were on the floor next to his bed, where tangled in the sheets, he withstood the nerve pain from the spider's venom.

When I got the text earlier this morning, I calmly assessed the situation. Made some calls to confirm the path of treatment.

He's not a candidate for antivenin. However, I've taken the prescribed comfort measures. Unfortunately, they don't do a lot to ease the tremors and sweating. It's just one of those things that has to run its course.

I'm concerned for Magnus because I don't want him to suffer, but he just has to get through it. The other issue is how am I going to get through the Manatee Jubilee knowing that inside cottage one at Boo's Battle Bros, there's a man who wants to marry me.

I know what I heard but am having a hard time wrapping my head around it.

After checking his vitals on the hour, refreshing his ice water, making sure he has clean towels (showers seem to help), and applying a cool compress, I freshen up and go into town. The best thing to do is for him to sleep when he can, so I leave him in peace.

Meanwhile, I'm in pieces.

His phone is charged if he needs anything. I tell myself everything is going to be okay. I'll check in throughout the day. He's survived war and battles. He can handle this.

But can I?

The morning at the Manatee Jubilee is a stark contrast to Magnus purging his body of neurotoxin. The entrance is a massive bamboo arch with a sign that says *Coco Key 27th Manatee Jubilee* leading to a closed-off Main Street.

I wasn't here for last year's event so this is all new to me. I missed the parade this morning, but the floats flank the nearest cross street. Meanwhile, stalls set up with crafts, games, and local businesses offering specials on their services line the sidewalk.

Beans & Books gives out free chocolate samples and coupons. Rosalie has her new flower cart poised proudly on the corner. Royal and Isla host a table with information on the Driftwood along with a bunch of games and prizes.

Families with children wearing face paint and holding manatee balloons race around the kiddie pool, which is a chalk circle on the ground—inside are loads of fun activities.

And then there are the food vendors. I only went to the Plundering Pelican once, and have not returned for...reasons. However, other local restaurants and bakeries from nearby islands set up shop.

There's everything from fresh fish to all kinds of savory and sweet fritters. Mango popsicles and ice cream, at least five different kinds of key lime pie, and coconut *everything* are featured. I'm suddenly starved.

And slightly overwhelmed because this afternoon, we're supposed to cut the ribbon and officially open Boo's Battle Bros.

There is no world in which Magnus will be feeling better in time. No way. No how.

And yet, later that day, he staggers out of the cottage, looking like he was battered and fried like a conch ball, dragged through the sand, stayed out all night long, and then left to dry in the sun.

Okay, he doesn't look that bad. It's just that usually, he looks really, really good. Exceptional. The most handsome man on the planet. You can fight me on it. But it's true.

His brown eyes truly see what he's looking at. He listens and has the most deliberate touch. His words are meaningful. His actions always align with what he says.

Magnus McGregor doesn't let life happen to him. He's solidly lived it...and would like to continue to with me.

I'm not sure how that makes me feel other than cautiously optimistic. My dad used to tell me not to count my chickens before they hatched. I never had chickens, but I get the message.

Magnus asked me to marry him when he was down and out with the spider bite. Was it desperation? Delusion? A very unique proposal?

I don't know and am afraid to ask.

The corner of his lip lifts in an uncharacteristic, if not slightly forced, smile. His dimple doesn't pop and he doesn't look at me. Instead, he greets family, friends, and festival visitors who crowd around the ribbon I set up in front of the cottages. They form a long line down the beach like soldiers standing at attention. The doors are on the ocean side along with new porches.

On this side are picnic tables, a campfire ring, a grilling space, and a few other outdoor areas along with a small pavilion for gatherings that's sheltered from the rain. Magnus has a few ideas for expanding it to have a full kitchen, additional bathroom, and bunkhouse for him. As it is, he's staying in cottage one.

"Thank you, everyone, for joining me today as we pay tribute to Sean Haskins, a great patriot, husband, friend..." He scratches Boo's head. "And dog's best friend."

He goes on to talk about battles, both on the field and in life. It's touching and powerful. Instead of taking my hand, as I'd hoped, and introducing me when he mentioned the in-house veterinarian and dog whisperer, he opens the scissors around the ribbon. That last part might be a little self-indulgent, but I recently met with some of the dogs we're going to match with the vets, and it was pretty amazing. I thought we were partners in this.

After Magnus slices through the ribbon, everyone claps, and he chats with various friends and his brothers congratulate him.

Nora gets a huge hug. Alex, a double high five, and, well, I'm not even an afterthought when things wind down and Magnus returns to the cottage.

I spend a few minutes catching up with Nora and explaining about the spider bite. A shadow crosses the window of cottage one. I don't know how he kept it together for the last hour, considering black widow venom is vicious, but I imagine he needs some rest.

The friendly chat with Nora turns into a lengthy conversation while Alex has a field day with the dogs.

"He missed Boo a ton." She goes on to say how much they both miss Sean, but that Magnus has been great, pinch-hitting as a male role model in her son's life.

I tell her about Ethan and how I was very nearly a widow. We fall easily into conversation and what I imagine would become a fast friendship if she lived nearby.

However, not realizing the personal nature and intensity of our discussion, Rosalie bops over, all smiles and congratulating me on the grand opening.

Nora calls for Alex and we say our goodbyes.

"Anytime Alex wants dog time," I drop my voice to a whisper, "and cake, you know where to find us."

Rosalie wants me to head back to the event. "You're going to miss the Rosies singing karaoke in mermaid costumes."

I laugh. “That I have to see.”

“Plus, after dark is when the good food comes out.”

“And what has this been all day?” I ask.

“A warm-up. Trust me. Plus, there’s the crowning of Miss Manatee. I wore it a few years ago.” She winks.

“It all sounds like so much fun, and I’ll be there, but I should check on Magnus.”

Her eyebrows waggle. “How are things between you two?”

I know better, given the questionable sources of the Coconut Wireless material, but I say, “Oh, you know, a regular romance fiasco.”

Rosalie lets loose a belly laugh. “I know all about those. Tell him you’ll bring him back a slice of Rosalinda’s coconut cream key lime pie. She and Rosemarie have competed for twelve years, but now you know which one I think is best. Trust me, one bite and all is right in the world.”

“I’ll bring him back one of each and let him decide.” I smile, but it’s wooden. It’s not that I don’t want to experience my first-ever Manatee Jubilee in full, but something is bothering me.

Magnus’s profession of love should have me lit up. His rambling about the ring should have me glowing. Instead, he’s rumbly. Grumbly. Seemed less than thrilled that I was at the ribbon cutting.

I go inside the cottage and he doesn’t acknowledge me. Instead, he shakily sips bone broth. I go to check his vitals and he waves me off. Says he’s fine.

“Can I get you anything?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Do you want me to look at the bite site?” It’s on his back and I’ve been watching to make sure it doesn’t worsen. So far, the red puffiness has slowly tapered off.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Rosalie told me about the coconut cream key lime pie at the festival. Want a slice or do you have any special requests?”

“No, I’m fine.”

And that’s it. He’s fine. Doesn’t need me.

Message received.

Without a word, I take the dogs, Boo too—because he’s been cooped up, not wanting to leave Magnus’s side—and walk into town.

The sun set while I was in the cottage, but cheerful, colorful lights beckon me to the activity. Live music echoes across the water. Even the cement manatee in the fountain is cheerful with beads tossed around her wide neck.

I have to admit that I love it here. Ethan sure picked the perfect spot for our honeymoon that we weren’t able to take. Without meaning to, he led me to love again. I didn’t think it was possible. After saying a quiet prayer of gratitude, I bring my concerns about things with Magnus to God.

By the time I reach the heart of the Jubilee, I feel better, realizing the obvious. Magnus doesn’t feel good. I’ve dealt with all kinds of patients in my days as a nurse. Some are cheerful, grateful, and quiet, matching their regular, healthy day demeanors. Others are the most ornery and difficult jerks who are as sweet as pie when I see them after recovery. You just never know.

After stopping at the pet pampering station for water and biscuits, the dogs and I watch a band play Jimmy Buffett hits. I buy a Mana-Tee—each year there’s a call for design submissions for T-shirts. This year Lola, the sea cow, features prominently in the middle with a pink bow on her head, heart-shaped sunglasses, and splashing the water with her fin. Apparently, she’s been very splashy lately. Or maybe Mrs. Cross said, *Sassy*. It’s hard to hear over the cheering at the nearby lively game of pin the fin on the manatee.

This reminds me that I still haven’t told Magnus about what I learned while playing poker—the Pirate Defense

League was not impressed by my costume, which told me that they're not fans of pirates.

Robyn comes over, talking about the book club she wants to start. We chat for a few minutes then get a photo with Rosalie, dressed in her mermaid costume made of flowers. Apparently, there's also a mermaid costume contest.

“Originally, it was a manatee costume contest, but you can only get so creative with that, you know? No offense, Lola,” she calls into the dark water edging the well-lit dock.

“I'll have to dress the dogs up next year.”

Rosalie gushes. “That is such a good idea. They can even be in the parade. So, how's your patient?”

I shrug. “He's fine.” His repeated uses of that expression echo in my mind.

“That's good. Spider bites are no joke.” She tells me about her cousin Rosangela who was bitten by a recluse spider before bringing me over to the pie contest table.

After getting a couple of slices for Magnus and me to celebrate the official opening of Boo's Battle Bros, I say goodnight to everyone.

But when I get back to the cottages, he's fast asleep.

He's a tough guy, withstanding that bite. He's strong in other ways too. So am I, though. He's worried about me being fragile. Well, I survived fiancée-widowhood. I'm going to figure out a way to prove that I'm not a ceramic doll who'll break into pieces at the sight of a spider. To be fair, I'll be avoiding black widows at all costs. But I don't need to call him to help me squish one that finds its way into the bathroom and is dangerously close to the towels.

I'll show him that I'm strong too.



Two days later, Magnus is mostly recovered. He doesn't say a word about his love and marriage comments. In fact, he

doesn't say much of anything until he sees me leaving the beach bungalow with the dogs.

"Glad to see you out and about," I say brightly.

"Heading to pick up our first two dogs today."

A frown drops onto my lips. "Oh, I thought we were going together."

"You look busy."

I'm about to argue, considering I already went to the adoption center, filled out the paperwork, and met the Malinois, but perhaps this is something he wants to do on his own since he wasn't able to thoroughly experience the official opening of the business.

I'm just the veterinarian on staff.

"Sure. Safe travels. Can't wait to see Maiti and Rebel."

Boo loads up and he's about to get in his truck when he says, "I meant to ask you if you learned anything about the Pirate Defense League."

"Oh, you mean when I infiltrated the poker ring?" I ask playfully.

I've lost track of the number of times I've restrained myself from rushing over to Magnus's to spill the story. If it's true. Could be tall tales.

Magnus's expression remains blank, no twitch of the lips toward a smile. No laughter in his eyes. Not even a spark of interest. Meanwhile, I can hardly contain myself.

"Ready? This is what I learned: officially, Chip started the Pirate Defense League in 1959, shortly after he claimed the island. As you know, he won it in a card game—pineapple poker, if I'm not mistaken. Not familiar with that one, but I'm willing to learn."

The way Magnus looks at me, expression hard, makes me sympathetic to the men below him in rank. I consider pushing my shoulders back and saluting him.

“Anyway, back then, this area was largely wild, unsettled. Boundaries and land ownership were negligible. The Golden Age of Piracy was long over, but the many stories of sunken ships, buried treasure, and stashed rum brought modern pirates to the various islands, including this one. Especially this one.”

Magnus remains at attention as if recording all of this information in his memory bank for later analysis.

“There was one particular band of merciless pirates, intent on pillaging Coco Key. They called themselves the Torment and sailed, you guessed it, the Dark Seas brigantine. One night they came ashore, prepared to do what pirates do when the captain of the ship laid eyes on a beautiful young woman. A woman he claimed should be wearing a crown.”

A pause grows between us as I anticipate Magnus filling in the name, but he doesn't.

“It was Fernanda,” I say simply. “Your grandmother.”

The air is still. Magnus is motionless. Even the tide seems to pause. But he doesn't say anything.

I go on. “Captain Benecio Estevão challenged Chip to a game of cards for Fernanda's hand in exchange for a ship in a bottle. Of course, he declined. They were a young couple, newly and happily married. From then on, Captain Estevão and his men tormented the coast, driving people away from Coco Key. As you know, that didn't intimidate your grandfather. He built the Driftwood. They had a family. Life carried on.”

The dogs, giving up on their walk, lie down at my feet with forlorn, doggy sighs. I imagined telling this story with the backdrop of the ocean and Magnus's rapt attention. Maybe a soundtrack. The ocean is there. Magnus is here, but he isn't engaged.

Stifling a sigh, I continue. “The attacks and sabotage by the captain and his men continued. All this time, Chip salvaged old boats and, in so doing, heard many strange tales. Including one about a ship in a bottle. Supposedly, it was the fiercest that had ever sailed the region, but it was cursed and

shrunk, stuffed in a glass bottle. It was the original ship in a bottle.”

“Sounds like something that would’ve interested my grandfather.”

“Upon learning the ship in the bottle might be relevant, Chip challenged Captain Estevão to a game of cards. If your grandfather won, he’d get the ship in the bottle and the pirates would leave. If the captain won, he wouldn’t get your grandmother. She wasn’t up for barter. Instead, Chip offered bottles of his recently distilled rum, Sempre Spirits.”

Magnus rocks back on his heels, the first time he’s moved in minutes. However, he doesn’t say anything.

I expect he will now. “Supposedly, the ship in the bottle was the Crimson Tide, captained by a woman who called herself the Devil’s Charm.”

Magnus doesn’t give any indication that he knows who that is. I didn’t either until Mrs. Lipman let it slip, filled with shock and awe.

“She wore a crown. A special crown.”

Still, nothing.

“Her given name was Márcia Sousa.”

He tilts his head as if he doesn’t believe me. “She would’ve been long dead.”

“True, but if the ship was cursed and shrunken, who knows what kind of dark magic was used.”

“Do you really believe that?”

I don’t know what to believe other than that he’s relatively non-responsive to this outrageous story.

“Chip brought his wager onboard. The card game was played. He won.”

“And the pirate was willing to trade a bottle of Sempre Spirits rum for the supposedly magic ship in a bottle?”

I shake my head slowly. “True to pirate form, they attacked Chip, and while wrestling the glass bottle out of his winning hands, it broke. Smashed on the ship’s deck. He noticed something interesting about the sail...it looked like a piece of a map. The tussle continued and he managed to get the map fragment into an empty rum bottle—his wager that they’d drank during cards—and tossed it into the sea, making it a message in a bottle.”

“It was all for nothing. Chip didn’t get the ship or the map fragment. Why would he do that? Chances of it washing up on shore are slim.”

I offer a mouth shrug. “The Pirate Defense League was formed to keep watch. They’ve been doing so all these years. My guess is that Benecio Estevão is long gone. But that ship returned. The card game waits. A debt is owed. Maybe the message in a bottle was recovered and is onboard.”

“And the old folks told you all of this?”

“Sempre Spirits did the talking.” I wink.

Magnus doesn’t respond. Perhaps he’s processing the outlandish account, trying to piece things together. I understand that it’s a lot to absorb. I hardly believed my ears as they told it all to me. I suppose it could be tall tales.

But as the days pass and the ship with the tattered sails appears and then disappears along the horizon, I can’t help but wonder whether the card games continue on the ship. If the message in the bottle is there. If the Torment pirate gang is looking for the same thing the McGregor brothers are.

Meanwhile, Magnus is slightly distant, but he had a close call with the spider bite. It’s hard not to think about how somewhere in the cottage there is a ring he wanted to give me. There are words on his lips that he hasn’t spoken since he was in a fit of agony.

For the most part, he’s acting like everything is normal.

It’s not.

But we can pretend, right?



The next day, I bring my laptop over to the cottages because we just got our first official applicants for the veteran-doggy love connection and week-long retreat, and I want to see Maiti and Rebel again.

As I tell Magnus the good news, he seems far away, staring at the wooden box that was in the safe deposit box. Then he jumps to his feet and wavers.

Likely, he's still regaining his strength. "I realized something during those long hours."

I look at him expectantly, wondering if this is it. He's going to ask me...

"The box. The knife." He pulls the blade from his pocket, opens it, and then slides it into the slot at the top of the box. Something clicks and where we didn't see any seams or openings, the four wooden sides fall away. In the center is another smaller box.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I repeat.

The small box inside has a sliding lid inlaid with mother-of-pearl and abalone.

"It matches the knife handle," I whisper.

Magnus gently nudges the top with his thumb and it opens to reveal a silk purse with strings almost too small for his massive fingers. He fiddles with it but can't get it open.

"Want me to try?"

He passes it to me and where I expect our hands to brush, casting electrical sparks or at the very least sending a warm rush through me as we make this discovery together, he slides his hands into his pockets. Cold.

I loosen the strings of the little pouch. Instead of peering inside, I pass it back to him.

His eyes widen when he sees the contents. “I have to go show my brothers.”

Slouching, I call, “See you tonight.”

He stops by the door. “What’s tonight?”

“Your birthday present.”

He looks startled or like I’ve gone dumb because it’s days after his birthday.

“I got us tickets to go kayaking.”

“At night?”

“It’s bioluminescent kayaking. I’ve heard it’s beautiful.”

But the look that I got used to, the one that tells me I’m beautiful, isn’t there.

Magnus



I have to give CJ credit because he was right about the diamond in our grandmother's ring having a sister, one shaped like a teardrop. Excitement at the discovery rushes through me until I reach the Driftwood.

My memory of the early hours that I fought against the black widow venom is hazy, but I am certain I told Lally that I love her. That I want to marry her.

But in the days since, I've been questioning everything. I shouldn't have retired. All this is uncharted territory. I don't know how to navigate without a clear assignment.

I belonged in the military. End of story.

After looking for Royal in all the likely places, and not finding him, CJ, or Ryan, I send them a text and realize I'm standing outside the Brig, the building where Chip lived at the end of his life. In my mind, I imagine him at the Frigate, but there's a lot I don't know about my grandfather. Too bad it's not as easy as assembling an intelligence package.

I think about the will and what Chip wanted from me.

There will be no softening. Lally saw me down and I can't afford that. Can't let her witness me weak. I'm not going to be the second man who takes a fall in her life.

If I were to follow through with a marriage proposal and something happened to me...it's better to withdraw before things intensify.

It's time to go back to living a regimented life. I'll focus on Boo's Battle Bros. Maybe Lally and I can just be friends, business partners. Nothing more. There's too much risk.

Staying busy for the rest of the afternoon, I expect my brothers to make contact, but I don't get so much as a text.

Just before dusk, I talk myself into heading to Lally's place. We'll talk to discuss the new arrangement.

When she hollers that the door is open and appears from her room, looking pretty with her curls kissing her shoulders and cascading down her back, her green eyes sparkling like diamonds...

The flare inside surges.

The red flag lurches.

She wears a pair of leggings and a Boo's Battle Bro's T-shirt. She passes one to me. "Happy belated birthday."

"You had these made?"

My resolve to end things goes out to sea. She's so thoughtful, so perfect. But what if something happens? What if something happens to me and it breaks her?

"Are you ready?" she thumbs over her shoulder toward her SUV. "The idea is to leave at sunset to enjoy it and naturally acclimate to the lack of light."

"We're going somewhere? Can't we just use the kayaks I got for the program?"

"It's a group excursion with a guide. Figured it would be safer because they know the best launch spots, the currents, and any hazards."

I grunt.

When we get to the kayak shop, a man half my age gives us a spiel about what to expect, safety, and to watch out for Lola.

The Manatee Jubilee, that I missed, comes to mind. I won't lie, I enjoyed the pie Lally left for me, but I know it was meant for us. She works so hard, tries so hard. She's amazing.

But I shake my head, telling myself *no*.

“Did you have a question, sir?” the kid asks.

“What? Oh, no. I’m fine.”

Lally’s brows pinch together.

She can tell that I’m not all here, but I have to create distance. It can’t be physical because we’re neighbors and she’s an amazing veterinarian that I’m lucky to have on staff, but I will create emotional space between us.

It’s for her own good.

Lally and I load into a tandem kayak with a clear hull. As we launch, I realize it’s been far too long since I’ve been on the water. Getting a boat to go along with the retreat experience at the cottages wouldn’t be a bad investment. I wonder if Boo would enjoy it.

My mind elsewhere, I don’t notice the sunset. I don’t hear Lally whispering my name until she looks over her shoulder, rocking the boat.

“Are you back there?” she asks with laughter in her voice. Or maybe it’s nervousness.

It’s then I notice we’re paddling directly toward a neon bloom. It’s wondrous. Magical. Breathtaking.

“It’s like shooting stars under the water,” Lally says as we get closer.

Little creatures like plankton and other microscopic organisms put on a show. They glow fluorescent, shimmering and swaying underwater.

The guide and the other kayakers continue while Lally and I remain behind, completely rapt, and almost wrapped up like a glowing gift.

“It’s amazing,” she whispers.

“Yeah,” I repeat. “Thanks for the birthday present, by the way.”

“You’re welcome. Wish we were side by side,” she says, craning over her shoulder.

The boat teeters.

I tell myself that, no, the space is necessary. I do battle with myself, fighting between thanking her with a massive kiss when we’re back on land or saying a polite goodnight.

The kayakers paddle in a loop and we’re so far behind that we cut across the water in the direction they’re going so we can join up again.

At that moment, Lola swims by, a massive manatee, lit up like a Christmas tree.

From in front of me, Lally gasps.

My gaze follows the sea cow, but then I squint. In the distance, illuminated by the sliver of moon rising in the sky, are tattered sails.

“Did you see that?”

“Yeah, I see it.” My voice is rough. If what Lally told me is true, that boat is out for vengeance and is biding its time.

Lally goes still. Her spine stiffens. “Oh, I see that too.”

“We should go back.” I rarely get spooked, but something about seeing the Dark Seas’ silhouette on the horizon makes me want to be on land.

The guide takes photos of each kayak surrounded by the bioluminescence as part of the package and as a keepsake, delaying us.

I want out of the water. Until I have both feet on land, I go into military mode, on alert, head on a swivel.

Turns out, I don’t have to worry about anything other than Lally’s proximity. She gives me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. I’m heady from her coconut scent. “Happy belated birthday.”

“Thanks again. It was really thoughtful,” I say, no longer needing my sea legs.

She's quiet until we get back to the cottages. I instantly regret not driving her home, but the dogs need to go out. She understands that things between us shifted. Probably saw Ross and—I scrub my hand down my face.

I'd like to blame the black widow bite for these dark thoughts, but this is all me.

“Well, goodnight, Magnus. See you.” It sounds like a goodbye. One I know I don't want to hear.

“Lally, wait. Um,” I fish for a reason for her to stay. Something to keep her here a moment longer but not give her the wrong idea. “Thanks for finding out what you could about the Pirate Defense League and the message in the bottle.”

“You can thank Sempre Spirits. That's what did the talking.”

A beat passes between us.

“I'd better go let out the dogs. G'night.” Lost in thought, I don't realize she's gone until the screen door slots into the frame.

A better man would rush after her. Walk her home. Make sure she's safe even though I created a path and installed solar lanterns between her bungalow and the cottages.

No, this distance is good. It's done.

After taking a shower, I let out the dogs before bed. It's late, but I can't help but focus on Chip's message, trying to understand what it could mean. A few weeks ago, I would've dismissed this, or at least put it on the back burner. But now that I found the diamond, it's like I'm hot on the trail. The answer is close. I can feel it.

A rumble comes from behind and headlights sweep across the beach. The dogs let out low warnings and are instantly by my side. Maiti and Rebel instantly adapt to the pack.

Three doors open and then close. Heavy footfalls approach in the sand. My senses are on alert. Probably not a couple out for a moonlight walk.

Could be some underage kids looking for a place to drink.

Could be trouble.

Could be pirates.

“There he is,” a male voice says.

My muscles coil and I assume a stance that’ll allow me to fight or flee, depending on the assessment of my adversaries.

The men approach.

A growl comes from my throat.

“Magnus, what are doing?” It’s Ryan.

“Who’s the skulker now?” CJ says.

“We went up to Miami with Ryan for the day,” Royal adds as if that explains the late hour and why they didn’t answer my texts earlier.

“Football stuff. The season is officially over.” Ryan’s hoots fill up the night.

So consumed by Lally and the business, I hardly registered that his team, the Miami Riptide, won the Superbowl.

“What’d you find out?” CJ asks.

I lead them and the dogs to the pavilion behind the cottages and reveal the open puzzle box. “This was inside.” I show them the diamond and share the story of what Lally learned from the Pirate Defense League.

“Old Chip and his rum.” Royal clicks his tongue.

Then I tell them about seeing the Dark Seas when Lally and I were kayaking.

“Romantic,” Ryan singsongs.

I glare then a horrible thought seizes me. “Would she—?” Without explanation, I race next door.

From behind, I hear Ryan say, “Sheesh. So testy.”

Then Royal asks, “Has he asked her yet?”

“Cold feet?” CJ asks.

They follow me at a distance, but Lally isn't answering. She gave me a spare key, and Madame and General's barking doesn't bring a sleepy-eyed Lally out of her room. I check and she's not in bed.

My breath coming in short bursts, I say, "She isn't here."

The other McGregors stare at me blankly.

Yeah, fine. I might have gotten spooked about the whole marriage thing. But I am suddenly cold. A shiver works through me. "She's paddling out to the ship. She's going to play cards and hope to win. She's—"

"Whoa. Back up, bro. What are you talking about?" Ryan asks.

"There's no time to explain. I have to rescue her."

CJ fills the doorway. With surprising authority, he says, "McGregor, you're forgetting your training."

"Lally is kayaking out to the ship. I have to—"

"She needs rescuing. Protection. But you're not going until you get your head together and you're certainly not heading out there alone. We need the intel. Tell us the plan."

I brace myself on the table. I have not been myself since that bite. Since... never mind. There's no time to think about that. Every second that passes, the more danger Lally is in.

"When was the last time you had eyes on her?" CJ asks.

"Three hours ago, maybe? I showered and stuff. Answered some emails. Tended to the dogs. Then I let them out one more time when you guys rolled up."

"You think she went out to that ship?" Royal asks.

I nod gravely.

"I have a boat," CJ says.

"Are we just going to board a pirate ship?" Royal asks.

"Rambo over here can handle himself," Ryan says.

We gather weapons and a few supplies then set out in the darkness. My pulse keeps pace with the boat as it flies over the

water.

CJ cuts the engine when we get close and paddles to the brigantine. Up close, it's enormous with splintered wood and truly tattered sails. It's a surprise the thing still floats and isn't a relic at an island attraction or part of a movie set.

I gesture to the guys before realizing they likely have no idea what the gestures mean. CJ, eyes sharp, seems the most equipped to deal with whatever happens.

I listen carefully over the water lapping the hull. I'm just about to fire my grappling hook and climb aboard when I hear a soft *plop*.

CJ motions aft and I squint into the darkness. Night vision would be handy right now. All my covert equipment is still in a gear locker.

A cloud shifts from in front of the moon and a figure takes shape. A slender figure with curly hair glides through the water away from the ship.

I want to shout at her through the night. Ask her what she thought she was doing. Scold her for how dangerous this is—kayaking at night, getting on a ghost ship.

It isn't nearly as calm as it was when we took the tour earlier and the boat rocks in the waves. Lally bobs like a cork in the water—like a living breathing message in the bottle. One I refuse to listen to right now. But at least she's out here and not smuggled into the faraway unknown aboard the Dark Seas.

My chest burns with anger, relief, and something else. If anything happens to her... I send up a prayer. *Take me instead*. I'll sacrifice myself ten times over rather than her be in harm's way. Then again, that's the exact thing I've been trying to avoid.

CJ took control of the situation and jets over to the kayak.

In the moonlight, Lally's eyes widen.

He angles so we're parallel.

"Nice night," Ryan says. "Do you come here often?"

“Oh, hi guys. What are you doing out here on this lovely evening?” she asks, fluttering her eyelashes.

“Lally,” I say more sternly than I probably should, given the way she slits her eyes.

“Sorry. I was in character. But I got you the goods.” Lally moves to pull something from under her arm when the waves toss the kayak and nearly capsizes. “It’s getting a little rough out here.” Her voice quavers.

I’m about to dive and wrestle her into the boat if I have to when CJ helps her aboard. Her sweet coconut scent wafts my way. The flare and flag wage war inside.

For the first time in our lives, CJ gives me a *look*. The kind of look I’d get from a superior if I needed to take a knee.

The boat ride to shore is silent.

The walk to Lally’s cottage is like the grave.

She stops in front of her door and says, “Sorry. Not sorry. But I got this. Thought it might help with your great adventure.” Her voice is small, defeated as if she knows it’s over.

I have about a million questions, but take the bottle containing the fragment of a map in hand, marveling at it.

“And I know things between us are—” But she doesn’t finish. Just goes inside and closes the door behind her.

My brothers wait for me back at the cottages.

“She’s safe,” Ryan says.

“But is she your fiancée?” Royal asks.

“No, I should probably focus on—” I wave my hand toward the cottages.

“Is that what Sean would’ve wanted?” CJ asks.

“You guys don’t understand. That could’ve been me.”

“No, brother. We are well aware,” Royal says.

“I know you guys wrestled with the fact that I could’ve fallen in the line of duty. I meant stress, depression, any of it

could take me out at any time.”

My three brothers, formidable in their own right, stand shoulder to shoulder. Royal had a point. Never thought of it from their side.

The words Lally said about leaning on friends, family, and God come to mind along with my strategy not to let anyone get too close or else I’d risk hurting them. She was right about that. Spotted it early on, from two clicks away. That woman amazes me.

I broke up with Wanda and didn’t get into any serious relationships, devoting myself to the missions because I was afraid if something happened to me, they’d wind up alone.

Turns out I’m the one who’s alone, and by distancing myself, she’s alone anyway.

But I’m secretly afraid that if I seal the deal with Lally and something happens as it did with Sean...

As if they can read my mind, my brothers speak in turn.

“You’re being dumb.”

“Stupid.”

“Foolish.”

Chip’s letter, sent long ago when I was in Ramadi, urged me toward companionship in some fashion, but he didn’t specify humans. I have the dogs.

Unmoving and unyielding, my brothers remain standing there. A strong wall of men. Strong enough to see me through this moment of weakness.

“You haven’t been the same since the spider bite,” Royal says.

I nod because I’ve thought the same thing.

“I think we got the diagnosis wrong,” Ryan says. “Mag is lovesick.”

Royal’s eyebrows shoot up. “Lally is a vet.”

“I’m not a dog,” I practically bark.

“The symptoms are the same,” Ryan says.

Royal shakes his head. “No, I meant a veteran. So are you. That means she’s going to understand whatever is going on in that thick head of yours probably more than anyone.”

I flip my hands upward. “She wasn’t a combat veteran. It’s different.”

“Everyone has a battle out there. She’s been with plenty of people in their last moments. She’s saved lives. Lost a lot too, probably. Your relationship isn’t a live human, but it is worth fighting for,” CJ says with surprising intensity.

Everything they’ve said reaches me, loud and clear. But the message I receive is actually one I need to send.

I thank my brothers, tell them I’m going to be brave, and pull out my phone.

Lally



Sitting in my reading chair, knees to chest, I haven't yet showered to wash the salt off my skin. After my adventure on the high seas, I should be in bed, fast asleep.

But if I could even doze off, all I'd dream about is how I paddled out to the Dark Seas, challenged the captain to a game of pineapple poker, and lived to tell the tale.

Oh, and I won.

But yeah, it was stupid because no one knew I was out there. They could've made me walk the plank—yes, there was a plank—and no one would've known.

A terrible thought seizes me. I would've had the same story as Magnus's grandmother, the one whose ring we found. The ring that probably isn't in Magnus's pocket anymore.

He's made it clear that our relationship ran its course. He's done with me, with us. I don't know which is worse, a big, dramatic breakup resulting in a viral video or stone-cold silence. More accurately, I should say he's been all business lately. No pleasure. No smiles. Nothing.

Legs pulled up to my chest, I give myself a little hug. A hug I would've liked from Magnus once I was safe on land.

Upon a brief reflection, paddling out to the ship was dangerous and immature of me, but I wanted to show Magnus that I am strong. Stronger than he thinks. Strong enough to withstand life's challenges.

My phone beeps with a text—the Coconut Wireless probably got word and wants a statement that I’m okay.

To my surprise, it’s Magnus.

MM: Remember the first text you sent to me?

Me: Yeah.

How could I forget the mortifying autocorrect? Even though I recently spent a few hours on the ocean, my reply is dry. So are my eyes. I could be sad, mad, or in between, but I feel nothing. Just emptiness.

My phone beeps again. There’s no reason for him to rub in that mortifying autocorrect.

MM: I should’ve said yes.

Me: Yes to what?

I have to admit, I’m confused. If he’s talking about yes to me taking the bed in the hotel room, or eating cake, or us... He changed his mind because all I’ve been feeling from him are big, fat no’s.

The little gray bubbles indicating he’s replying blink at the bottom of our message thread. Madame lifts onto her spindly legs and lets out a throaty growl. General barks twice in warning.

I listen carefully, suddenly afraid the sailors from the Dark Seas are coming after me. I keep my phone on, ready to call for help.

Someone knocks on the door. I click off the light.

“Pirates, if that’s you, know that this place is booby-trapped and I have dogs. Big, mean, angry dogs that will tear the flesh from your bones.”

Whoever it is responds, but I can’t hear over the dogs’ barking.

I pick up the dog ball slingshot thrower thingy that I keep by the door. It's the closest I have to a weapon.

"I'm warning you," I repeat.

"Lally, it's me."

"Me? Identify yourself," I demand, my pulse racing.

"It's Magnus."

"Are you being held at scabbard point?"

"Lally," he says in a wholly different tone than the one he used to reprimand me earlier.

To his credit, he wasn't wrong. I would've been worried about me too.

"Can I come in? I think we should talk."

The angry, rejected side of me wants to growl and bark at him. Too little too late, buddy!

"Oh, you want to talk now? In the middle of the night?"

"We're good at staying up late talking."

I tip my head to the side, remembering fondly that night in the hotel.

Unbolting the first lock, I pause. This past week of him being bitten by a black widow, seeing a strong man down for the count, worrying. Then distancing himself at the official opening of the retreat has been a roller coaster—and not the fun parts.

I told myself that getting the message in the bottle was my last attempt to reach Magnus—if it was there. The dangers of boarding a pirate ship were part of my calculus, but my reasoning was if I could operate a skyscraper window cleaning machine and spray paint a garbled message to a guy I didn't even love, surely, I could try to obtain a message in a bottle.

But I guess the relationship isn't what I thought it was. Yes, he came after me on the ship, but he was as cold as the sailors. I didn't see any relief in his eyes. Granted, it was dark,

but still. No long embrace on shore. No whispers of relief that I was safe.

It's not that I put myself in harm's way to scare him or obtain a certain response other than to prove that I'm strong. I can hold my own. That I'm willing to fight for him.

"Lally?" he says, inches away on the other side of the door.

Right now, if I let Magnus in, I'm opening myself to more disappointment. Maybe even an official, *It's over*.

Can I bear that? Am I as strong as I think I am?

I click the lock and pull open the door. The dogs greet their doggy daddy, completely oblivious to his formal resignation from the role.

The other three dogs follow, Boo with a glance my way and a lick of the top of my hand and the other two, Maiti and Rebel, with their heads high, sniffing out the new-to-them space.

"Can we talk?" Magnus asks.

"Go ahead. Talk." My tone is flat.

His eyes search mine, but I don't move. Don't invite him to sit down. Arms crossed in front of my chest, my defenses are up. The moat is being dug in real time.

"Things haven't been the same since I got bit by the spider and I'm sorry."

He led with an apology. I nod, accepting it.

"The grand opening of Boo's Battle Bros was a haze. I was afraid I was in over my head. Still am. It's a lot."

"And there I thought we were in it together."

Magnus's shoulders drop a fraction. "We were. We are. I apologize for not acting like it."

"You intended to avoid hurting me. But when you pulled away, you did anyway."

He steps closer, face full of anguish. "I'm sor—"

"I accept your apology."

“Thank you. I remember what I said to you while I was in that black widow fit. When I saw you talking to Nora, so much came crashing down on me. You were right. The reason I avoided relationships was because I never wanted to fall in love with a woman and then leave her to live alone or be a single mother. I know it’s been a while, but I guess I still grapple with everything that happened with Sean. Even though I got out of the military, stuff follows you.”

“There’s no deadline marked on the calendar to resolve grief.” I know this firsthand.

“Yeah, but what happened to Sean could happen to me.”

“But it could also *not* happen. You’re you.”

“That’s just it. Sean was the toughest, strongest guy I know.”

“Nora told me he never talked about his time over there. Any of it. Didn’t deal with it. Magnus, I’m not trying to talk you out of being vigilant, but if you didn’t notice, you just built yourself a redundancy, a contingency plan, a failsafe.”

His eyes squint as if he’s trying to see what I mean. I glance at the dogs who spread out on the floor under the big window overlooking the water. They’re dangerously close to my treats stash. Madame must be bribing them.

“Maybe it’s true that you got in over your head. But you’re creating a community for guys like you—to support each other. Plus, you don’t have to do it all and you certainly don’t have to do it alone.”

“Says the woman who paddled out to a ghost ship in the middle of the night.”

“Ghosts?” My eyes widen. “I didn’t see any ghosts.”

“The Dark Seas registration lapsed, er, never was.”

“You have a point, but we’re talking about you right now. Us.”

“Lally, my heart is all jacked up.”

“I monitored your vitals for almost forty-eight hours. There were no signs of—”

“I mean my other heart.”

“You have two hearts? I don’t think that’s possible.”

His dimple peeks through his stubble. “You know what heart I’m talking about.”

I lean back, unconvinced he has one of those. Okay, I’m being dramatic, but if we’re going to get through life together, he has to show me that he’s strong enough to face this with me.

“My heart isn’t perfect.”

Letting a little slack out of the proverbial line, I say, “I don’t want a perfect heart. A few imperfections are okay. I’d rather be with someone who recognizes their flaws than a guy who thinks he doesn’t have any. Cough, Ross, cough.”

The tension around Magnus’s eyes eases slightly. “For days I fought with myself. I thought I wanted solitude. That it was safer. I tried to convince myself to tell you that it’s over. But I couldn’t. I don’t want it to be.”

Like an ember in a campfire catching light, romanticism builds in me. From the sounds of it, Magnus is on the right track.

“When I texted you early on, I told you to say what you mean and mean what you say...and check your texts before you hit send.”

“Magnus, have you seen my thumbs?”

He steps closer, takes one of my hands in his, and kisses both of my thumbs.

My breath catches. This is escalating quickly.

“Yes, I’ve seen your thumbs. I love your thumbs. I just meant that I need to take my own advice.”

Magnus’s brown eyes capture mine. He doesn’t waver. Doesn’t look away. I don’t either.

“One of the other things I love about you is that you’re steady.” He kisses my forehead.

The corner of my lip lifts toward a smile.

“I also love that you’re beautiful.” He kisses me on the nose.

“Smart, strong, brave, compassionate, creative, beautiful. Did I mention that?” He punctuates each statement with a kiss.

The other side of my mouth lifts in a full-blown smile.

“I love your thumbs and am glad you texted me, asking me to marry you even if it was a mistake.”

“Was it a mistake?” I ask softly.

“I owe you a dance.”

“What about when we were at the Driftwood?”

Magnus leads me onto the back deck of the bungalow. The moon is still high. Pearls of light bob in the seawater.

“I owe you a wedding dance.”

My heart tumbles.

“At our wedding,” his voice is velvety like the night.

Taking my hands in his, we sway slowly to the music of the softly lapping waves.

Magnus tucks his head back after a few minutes and says, “Lally, I promise from now on to always be your huckleberry.”

We share a smile.

We share an exhale.

We share a kiss that fills the abyss I’d fallen into. That assures me that whatever happens, we’ll be okay. That reminds me of all the things I love about this man.

Magnus hums the song he played on the piano at the Driftwood. That we dueted, that we danced to.

“That night, after dinner, was the moment I realized I love you,” I say.

“I said it once. I’ll say it again and forever. *Eu te amo sempre*. I love you, Lally.” Magnus leans back, eyes holding, and dives in for another kiss that stretches toward the stars.

It’s a refreshing dip in a placid pool, an invigorating swim in fresh water. It’s everything I want and need.

Eventually, we part and sit on the deck chairs. The horizon is clear. The night still.

“So, what happened during your visit to the Dark Seas?”

“Rum happened, Magnus. Rum did the talking. Always does, as it turns out.”

“Did you find out why the ship has been stalking our shores?”

“Yeah, the captain wants the crown.”

“Don’t tell me it’s still captained by that Benecio guy.”

“Not unless he discovered the fountain of youth-ish. My guess is that he passed the torch to someone. Had bushy hair—could’ve been a wig—a scar, a scowl, and shiny cufflinks.”

“Did you catch his name?”

“They called him Captain J. There’s not too much to say other than it turns out that I’m a crack pineapple poker player.”

“You’ll have to teach me.”

“Maybe you can come to poker night with the Pirate Defense League.”

As I tell the tale of me boarding the ship, almost having my neck slit, challenging the captain to a game, and then making off with the message in a bottle when the captain was good and sauced, the sky lightens, bringing dawn with it. From inside the beach bungalow, the dogs rustle, needing to go outside.

Magnus lets them out. Then, taking my hand, we walk along the beach.

Even though I’m exhausted, I welcome the stillness of the early morning, the gentle lapping of waves to the shore, and

the dogs chasing each other, reminding me that I won't be getting any sleep soon.

Magnus pauses as if waiting to watch the sun officially rise. Turning to me, he says, "You make me weak in the knees. For once, I don't mind."

Hands linked, I kiss his dimple.

Magnus says, "I need to live life looking through the windshield, not the rearview mirror. I want that life to be with you."

"Good plan."

He drops to one knee and tucks his hand in his pocket, before removing something sparkly.

My heart tumbles.

The diamond is greenish and the flecks of diamonds surrounding it are bright. It's beautiful.

"I need one more mission. I want it to be us. Our marriage and future. Lally McGuinness, I love you. Will you trade out a few of those letters and become my wife, Mrs. McGregor?"

I draw Magnus to his feet, smiling as I kiss him and whisper, "Yes, yes, yes," the volume growing with each one.

The sun winks at us and I repeat, "Yes."

Then we seal our promise with a kiss.

Epilogue



Royal and Isla's wedding is like a fairytale, a bright, bubbly, and beachy dream come true. It's the exact opposite of Ross and Romy's wedding, except for one thing, Magnus and I are here... together.

He looks dashing in his three-piece suit, complete with a vest. Who knew vests were so hot on a guy? He'd been testing out a beard like so many guys do when they leave service but is clean-shaven for the wedding reception.

It's twilight when we leave the church, and I linger where the shallow water hugs the coastline with the dogs zooming around. Done with photos and big-brother best-man duties, he whips off his aviator glasses when he spots me.

Locked onto his target, he marches my way.

The corner of my lip lifts into a smile.

His matches and it's mine. All mine.

I've kissed his dimple so many times, it's going to make a tattoo. But I'm just filled with so much romanticipation—I'm excited for the bride and groom, Boo's Battle Bros and the success we're having, and my future with this man by my side.

We let the dogs run so they don't get bored while we're at the reception. Boo's Battle Bros already has its first retreat booked. Miati and Rebel have vet matches. Business isn't booming. More like growing at a manageable pace. But the number of guys who've visited Magnus is impressive. It's like a reunion every weekend. He found his new element, and it's here, with me, with the dogs. Hopefully, a family before long.

After feeding the dogs we head over to the Driftwood just as everyone gathers in the dining room.

“It hadn’t occurred to me that other people could have their weddings here too. It’s perfect,” I whisper. But is it perfect for us?

“I won’t tell you how many weddings my brothers and I crashed when we were kids and this place was in its heyday.”

I raise my eyebrows with alarm.

“Okay, it was only three, but we were hooligans, nabbing cake and causing a stir.”

“I thought you didn’t like cake.”

He nods slowly. “Ate too much one night.”

I wrinkle my nose.

After the McGregor brothers give a joint toast, we eat and then dance before the couple cuts the cake...Magnus indulges for this special occasion.

Isla and Royal have their first dance and I can’t help but recap another recent wedding, but it’s time for that memory to go into cold storage. Well, except for the bits with my future husband.

The song that Magnus sang to me, that he played the piano along with, comes on and we step onto the dance floor, getting into a groove. A good one, the best one.

“This is our song,” I say.

“Should we dance to it at our wedding?”

“Do you even have to ask?”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think today was your special day, you’re so...”

“Happy? I’m genuinely happy for Isla and Royal. They have something special.”

Magnus takes my hand, glances at the engagement ring, and shimmies me closer. “We do too. Should we start planning our big day?”

“How about little?” I say.

He swirls me and I inhale his mountain air, high-altitude scent.

“Little?”

“This is a huge wedding. I’m thinking something smaller, more intimate.”

“I like the sound of that. Close friends and family only. That’ll keep wedding invitations and seating arrangements simple.”

Biting my lip, I say, “Thoughts on Ross and Romy?”

“In a way, they brought us together.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call them matchmakers, but you do have a point.”

“But Ross didn’t show exemplary behavior at Sean’s tribute and the grand opening of Boo’s Battle Bros.”

“If he weren’t Sean’s brother, I’d uninvite Ross from my life,” Magnus says.

I laugh and mentally cross them off the invite list with relief.

“Looks to me like Isla and Royal invited half the town.”

Robyn, her sister, has looked highly disgruntled all day, but especially so after she had to walk down the aisle with the best man, a guy named Jack.

Hopefully, it’ll work out favorably for her like it did with Magnus and me.

“Soon, accounts of tonight will be broadcast across the Coconut Wireless.”

“You got that right,” Magnus says, likely remembering when our engagement was announced before we’d even had a chance to tell his brother. But I can’t be mad because my future is so bright, so clear, so perfect.

Except one thing.

“Have you given any thought to our honeymoon?”

Magnus wears a sly grin. “I have.”

“And?” I ask, leaning in.

“It’s all taken care of.”

“What do you mean? We haven’t even set a date yet.”

“We have to book a church and location sometime between now and three months from now.”

“You arranged our honeymoon already?”

“Had to figure things out for the business and dogs. Figure the wedding itself will take place close to home so that’ll keep things simple.”

I tilt my head to the side, “Oh, that makes sense. So where are we going?”

“Remember how you always wanted to go on a safari?”

I practically leap into Magnus’s arms, but since I’m wearing a dress, that would be tricky. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” he repeats.

The song changes from a jaunty tune to a slow one and I rest my head on Magnus’s shoulder.

We sway for a few bars and through the other wedding guests dancing, something glints, reminding me of when I spotted the safe deposit box key.

Squinting, I make out a pair of cufflinks. They’re somewhat familiar, and by the time I remember where I saw them, I lose track of the person in the crowd.

“Wait. There they are.”

“There who is?”

“Do you know that guy with the cufflinks?”

Magnus peers through the crowd and shrugs. “A distant cousin, maybe. Isla went over the top with the guest list. Shh. Don’t tell her Royal said that.”

“No, I’m aware, but they wanted to also use this as an opportunity for a soft opening for the resort.”

“I’d say it’s a success.”

“And it’s marvelous with luxury amenities and good old-fashioned, relaxing fun all rolled into one.”

“So, do you have a thing for guys in cufflinks? I could probably arrange that. Chip had a few sets.” The deep timbre of Magnus’s voice almost makes me forget that I saw those exact cufflinks fastening the shirt sleeves of the captain of the Dark Seas. They stood out because they were in the shape of a pair of cards—lucky aces.

After dessert—the cake is amazing—only Magnus looks at me like I’m the most delicious thing in the room—a question floats into my mind and refuses to leave.

“Want to take a walk?”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

As we exit, I glimpse Isla looking gorgeous and she and Royal gazing lovingly at each other. CJ is sparse, but Ryan looks concerned, his expression not the flirty ease I’ve grown accustomed to.

Magnus squints then says, “No, couldn’t be.”

“Huh?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Thought I saw someone from the past.”

“Your past?” I ask.

“No, Ryan’s. The girl who broke his heart. Though, to be fair, he did a number on her too.” Magnus squints as though peering through time. “Heather, no. Hayley, uh uh. Harley.” He snaps his fingers. “That would be a nightmare waiting to happen.”

I don’t ask what he means because we’re outside in the fresh night air. The stars shine overhead, reminding me of our first kiss on the peninsula. We walk along the path in that direction now, passing the mural Isla painted.

Magnus pauses and takes in the painting with its smooth brush strokes and splashes of color. It’s a scene I could step

into, depicting the perfect day at the Driftwood, complete with locals, guests, Lola, and even Nutmug, Robyn's cat.

I inhale sharply. "Wait. There's something new. Someone. Me." Painted next to Magnus, tossing a ball to a dog, stands a figure that looks remarkably like me.

Magnus smirks. "Happy anniversary."

"We're not married yet."

"It's an early present. Isla painted you in. It's the perfect scene now."

Planting a kiss on Magnus's cheek, I say, "You're perfect."

"Careful, you don't want that going to my head."

Our gazes catch, reflecting our mutual love. Mouths are about to come together when footfalls approach at a rapid clip.

"Hey, I was looking for you guys." It's CJ.

"Did you see Harley?"

CJ grunts. "No, I got this. It's addressed to Lally. Didn't think it was a good idea for her to be up here in the dark."

"She's with me," Magnus says protectively.

"And she's been known to board ghost ships at night."

Magnus eyes me. "I suppose I can never be too careful."

My arms sling in front of my chest. "Ha ha, guys. I'm not about to run off and set sail tonight. Have you noticed what I'm wearing?"

Magnus wears a private smile. "Yes, I have."

"What is it, CJ?" I ask, nodding to the box in his hand.

"I, um, opened it."

"That's a federal offense."

"It doesn't have postage."

"What's in it."

"A bottle. An empty bottle of Sempre Spirits with a note that says, *Rematch?*"

I tuck my head back.

Magnus peers into the darkness, daring anyone to come closer. “Let’s get back to the party.”

“I think we should talk,” CJ says, catching up to us and listing all the items Chip left to the brothers.

“And you got the Salty Skeleton. No one knows what that is,” Magnus says, accusingly.

“But we have two stones for the crown. One to go. Two pieces of the map.”

“Two more to go?” I ask.

“And the crown.”

“Exactly. Maybe the Dark Seas captain can help.”

Magnus stops in his tracks and rounds on his little brother. “Royal is finally happy. I’ve never seen him smile this much in his entire life. As for Ryan, if Harley is here he may have an issue on his hands. Me, I’m over the moon. You, Brother, I know you have connections. It goes unspoken between us, like we made a mutual but silent agreement not to discuss classified topics, but don’t think I don’t recognize things.”

CJ’s expression remains impassive. I don’t ask questions. Strictly speaking, this is brother business.

“Let’s go,” Magnus says to me.

CJ calls after us, “Chip left us each a piece of the puzzle so we’d search together.”

“And what will happen when we find the crown? Send it to a museum?” Magnus asks.

“No, we’ll get our parents back,” CJ says, but I don’t think Magnus hears as he breezes back to the reception.

I’m involved, a bit, but don’t want to overstep or ruin tonight. It’s a time to celebrate. We can think about the bottle, the note, and the treasure tomorrow. It’ll still be there. It has been all this time.

After a couple of turns dancing, Magnus relaxes, and when we get a slow song, he whispers to me, “Lally, I was looking for a reason.”

“A reason for what?” I ask, meeting his brown-eyed gaze, slightly glazed over as if what he sees is every reason in the world.

My heart tumbles with joy.

“A reason in general. You are my reason.”

I suck in a breath. “This is the beginning of our great adventure.”

Mouth cocked to the side, dimple popping, he says, “Game on.”

Then we kiss.

Read book three, *The Romance Game*, Ryan and Harley’s love story as the hunt for the Crown of Tears continues [here](#).



Click the image above or visit elliehall.com/bean to sign up for my newsletter and get the Jack & Bean Bonus scene!

Then come back and swipe to check out Chip’s will!

The Last Will and Testament of Carlos 'Chip' Almeida

To the eldest, Magnus, I leave my father's pocket knife and a pillow
To Twin Royal, I leave the family Bible and a book of matches
To Twin Ryan, I leave my journal and a pen
To Chip Junior, I leave my sextant and the Salty Skeleton

The Junk goes to Magnus
The Sloop, to Ryan
The Galleon and the entire Driftwood property go to Royal.
CJ gets anything left that floats

The youngest would sooner dive than the shallowest go deep. But
neither will find what they seek without the strongest softening and
the cleverest humbling.

Start on the eighteenth. Avoid the sand. Seek her with all your heart
and might. Bring your wits. You'll need them and each other.
If each of my grandsons answers the following questions, the family
fortune will be theirs to do with as they wish. If even one of them fails,
the funds and all properties on the island, including the Driftwood go
to Gerome Glandman.

Magnus: When up is down, what do you do?
Royal: When right is wrong, what do you do?
Ryan: When inside is out, what do you do?
CJ: When high is low, where do you go?

Solving this puzzle will be a great adventure that takes you beyond
your comfort zones. It'll be humbling and educational. It will require
careful thought, collaboration, courage, and strength. Think of any
setbacks as opportunities. Learn while you wait and learn to wait. You
win if you don't quit. Go forth and find her. Godspeed and may the
wind and tide be ever in your favor. The end.

Carlos Chip Almeida

Also by Ellie Hall

All books are clean and wholesome, Christian faith-friendly and without mature content but filled with swoony kisses and happily ever afters. Books are listed under series in recommended reading order.

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About the Author

Ellie Hall is a USA Today bestselling author. If only that meant she could wear a tiara and get away with it ;) She loves puppies, books, and the ocean. Writing sweet romance with lots of firsts and fizzy feels brings her joy. Oh, and chocolate chip cookies are her fave.

Ellie believes in dreaming big, working hard, and lazy Sunday afternoons spent with her family and dog in gratitude for God's grace.

