

the

ROMANCE

game



USA Today Bestselling Author

ELLIE HALL





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ROMANCE
game



ELLIE HALL

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About this book

Would I rather run into anyone other than the guy I love to hate?

Actually, yes. I'd rather be beamed up by aliens or get chased by a pack of werewolves than physically run into my nemesis with my rental car. Thankfully, I was going under five miles an hour, but still. The celebrity football player with an ego the size of the Atlantic will never let me live down this incident.

My sisters insisted I take a long weekend and retreat to our aunt and uncle's restaurant on what may as well be paradise island. They said I need a little R&R after the year I've had. They promised it would be fun. They insisted I lounge in a hammock.

They lied. They didn't mention that Ryan McGregor would tease me all these years later. That he'd propose a fake relationship then flip that hammock over and kick sand at me when I said no. Okay, to be fair, that last part didn't happen,

but it may as well have. I know Ryan and he'd relish the opportunity then cackle like the jackal he is.

There's just one problem and it's a living, breathing—and irresistibly adorable, if I do say so myself—secret that he can never know. It's the kind that's hard to keep. But as for that R&R? More like R&D as I figure out this strange fluttering inside.

Because the treasure hunt on a moonlit night was purely platonic. Kind of. Shh. There was no kissing. Mostly.

Book 3 in this beachy, small town, brothers, treasure hunt-romantic comedy mashup might just steal your heart. The hate to love, single mom 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!

Contents

1. [Harley.](#)
2. [Ryan](#)
3. [Harley.](#)
4. [Ryan](#)
5. [Harley.](#)
6. [Ryan](#)
7. [Harley.](#)
8. [Ryan](#)
9. [Harley.](#)
10. [Ryan](#)
11. [Harley.](#)
12. [Ryan](#)
13. [Harley.](#)
14. [Ryan](#)
15. [Harley.](#)
16. [Ryan](#)
17. [Harley.](#)
18. [Ryan](#)
19. [Harley.](#)
20. [Ryan](#)
21. [Harley.](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Ellie Hall](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Let's Connect](#)

Harley



CHAPTER 1

If I had ducks, they would not be in a row. The t's are not crossed. The i's lack their dots. In other words, I'm a walking, talking disaster.

I can all but hear my sisters' voices now, telling me that's nonsense and pumping me up about how great I am—a girl boss who does it all, but the juggle is real. I know the truth, and it stings a little.

I'm locking the door behind us when I realize I forgot to pack extra diapers. No sooner do I have those in hand than I realize I took my apron inside last night to wash, which means I need my backup.

And my phone is around here somewhere. Can't leave without that.

Steady breath, girl. Steady.

All the while, Luke burbles happily on my hip. I nuzzle my forehead against his every time the ride gets bumpy and I have to turn around to go back inside.

He is my greatest blessing.

“Am I forgetting anything else?” Obviously, he has no idea, but who else am I going to ask?

Luke puffs his cheeks, and he squeals with delight. “Ma!”

It tears me up that we'll be apart for the next seven hours. I'd give almost anything to stay home with him today, read board books, play with his toys, take a long walk, and snuggle at naptime.

I rub my nose against his and say, “That’s right. I was forgetting something. I love you, Lukey-boy. Mama loves you to bits and back again.”

And that is what is going to get me through the day at the Gastrodome. It’s a haven for lovers of fried food and sports, with plasma screen televisions covering the surface of every wall. The flashing images play behind my eyes well after my shifts are over.

After buckling Luke into his car seat and making sure he has everything he needs—his blanket, a teether, and his favorite bunny stuffed animal—I get into the driver’s seat. No sooner am I on the main road that leads from our nondescript studio apartment, than the low gas indicator beeps.

Usually, it only gives a trill in warning, but it must be malfunctioning because it beeps every ten seconds. I too feel like I’m running out of gas—in life. I’m behind on bills. Which ones? I’m not sure because that would require me to open my mail and email. Even though it’s just a simple tearing of an envelope or a click of a button, putting off finding out how much debt I have is somehow easier.

I know, I know. That’s not true in the long run, but sometimes getting through the day with clean clothes (okay, I wore these pants twice already, but I only have so many pairs that meet the “fitted and flattering” uniform requirement for the Gastrodome), food in our bellies (I get by on my employee meal and whatever is left over from Luke’s breakfast and dinner), and a semblance of normalcy.

Actual normalcy went out the window the day I met the “Givenator,” aka Troy Givens, also known as my ex. He got famous for winning the lottery and then giving it all away. Well, supposedly. He made grandiose claims about pledging huge amounts of money to various charities and entities. When the donations weren’t made, people started to get suspicious. He vowed that it was all a big misunderstanding. Turns out, he spent it all and then some.

I bought into it. Into him. He was a charmer. A narcissistic, lying prince charmer.

On the upside, I got my little prince out of the disastrous three-week marriage—all the wedding suppliers and companies sent me past-due bills when he'd promised to cover expenses. And that was just the beginning of the avalanche of debt.

Luke makes a beeping sound in time with the warning light. I send up a prayer.

God, if you get me to Little Steps Child Care Center and then the Gastrodome, I will go to sleep at a reasonable hour tonight.

Most nights, I doze off when I'm putting Luke down, then I wake up anywhere from ten to thirty minutes later and get a second wind. But because our apartment is so small, it's not like I can use that time productively because I'd risk waking up Luke. Instead, I scroll social media or ruminate.

Leaving my career behind. What the Givenator took from me. My finances.

After dropping Luke off at daycare, I'm nearly back to my sister's old Pontiac, and by old, I mean that she drove it in high school and recently celebrated her twentieth reunion. Before that, the vehicle belonged to our Aunt Martina and still has Florida plates. If anyone here in Mobile, Alabama thinks I'm from out of town, they're mistaken. The Owens aren't known for following rules or procedures. We're not criminals, we just have our way of doing things, and that sometimes involves *not* doing things.

Transferring the registration is on my mile-long to-do list—promise—along with a plethora of other things that I won't mention because I don't want to be judged.

Debating between whether to get gas now or later, the key is in the car door lock when one of the daycare moms waves.

Please don't come over to chat. I don't have time for small talk or mom talk.

It's not that I'm antisocial, it's just that this morning is timed down to the minute. One of the waitresses at the Gastrodome got fired last week for having someone else clock

in for her, so I won't risk texting any of my coworkers to do me a favor so I don't get docked for being late.

"Hey, Harley. It's Tabby, Wilder's mom."

"Oh, hi, Tabby." I open the car door to politely indicate I can't stay and chat.

"You can call me Tabs. It's short for Tabitha."

"Cute. I don't have a nickname." And that right there was my error. I should not have volunteered personal information. She goes on to tell me their son doesn't have a nickname either and the process by which she and her husband landed on the name Wilder.

I'm halfway in my car when I get a word in. "I'm going to be late for work, but we'll have to catch up some more soon. Maybe get the boys together for a playdate."

My inner and outer worlds don't quite match up, but I'm trying. Trying to be nicer, more outgoing, and not the sassy, sharp-tongued brat that I've been known as by certain people from my past. My sisters didn't deny this when questioned, so I know it's something I need to work on.

"That would be great. I was also going to ask you if you'll bring homemade applesauce to the ABC Party on Friday. All the other parents signed up for a task."

The car is on. I flash the one-minute signal and close the door, but lower the window a few inches. I have to go. "Yeah. Sure. No problem at all."

I don't know exactly what I just said yes to, which is kind of what got me into this situation, to begin with—not that I regret it, because Luke is the light of my life.

The short-lived era with Troy Givens was the opposite. More like a dark period. One I do my level best not to think about. I'd be grateful if he wanted anything to do with Luke, but when he found out about "the bump" he dumped me. During our whirlwind three months of dating, we failed to discuss whether we wanted a family. We got married and *boom!*

Baby!

“You’re amazing. You girl boss. Balancing it all. How do you do it? I have Shane and barely get through the day,” says Tabby? Tabs? Tabitha?

One, she knows I’m a single mom.

Two, I don’t balance it all. There’s no such thing as balance unless I’m on a balance beam—I did gymnastics when I was a kid. Some days, things don’t get done. I lean on God.

Three, I lean hard.

But I don’t say any of this. Instead, I call, “Applesauce. Friday,” and pull away.

I say another prayer because I’ll need to hit every green light between here and the Gastrodome. Otherwise, I’m going to get a warning for being late twice in a sixty-day period. I take the risk even though the low-fuel light plays on repeat. Can’t lose this job.

I hold my breath until I punch my four-digit code into the Gastrodome service terminal exactly on the hour.

The first half of my shift passes uneventfully. Because I cover lunch, most of our customers take it easy on the “suds” as the menu calls the beers on tap. But every once in a while, we get a rowdy crew. Hopefully, today is not that day.

“Hey, hey. What’s good here? Oh wait, that would be you,” says a guy with shaggy dark hair at table twenty-two.

Apparently, today is that day.

My smile is tight. My pants are too and he hasn’t been discrete about looking at my backside every time I walk by.

His gaze flicks to my hand. “I see you’re not married.”

“No, sir. But I am mothered.”

He glances at one of his buddies when he laughs.

“Told you all the good ones are taken.”

“What do you mean, mothered?” Shaggy asks.

“I’m a mom, meaning I’m not looking.” Not interested either.

He lifts and lowers his eyebrows. “I’m looking and I like what I see.”

Ew. Gag. Stop.

But I don’t say that. Instead, what I do tell him might be worse, insofar as my tip from these guys is concerned. “I’m especially not looking to have another child unless I meet the right man.”

“That’s me. Mr. Right.”

“Did you not hear what I said about not wanting two children? If I date, it’s for marriage. End of story.” The promise of my happily ever after was short-lived. Thirty-six days, to be exact.

“Dude, you are not dad material,” Shaggy’s buddy says.

He and the third guy at the table tease him and I make my getaway. Unfortunately, I have to return to the table five minutes later with their burgers.

“Come on. Meet me for drinks later. I’ll make it worth your time,” Shaggy says with a baggy-eyed attempt at a smolder.

With a plea in my gaze cast at Shaggy’s friends to call him off, I turn to him and say, “You seem like a, um, nice guy, but you do not want to board this hot mess express. The train is known for its delays and diaper disasters.”

“Where’s the baby daddy?”

This guy does not know when to quit.

Leveling him with my sassiest, sharp-eyed, and brattiest look, I deadpan, “The train ran him over.”

The others let out a resounding, *Ooh*. But whether it’s an *ooh* like tragedy or *ooh* like he was burned by my comment, I’m not sure, nor do I care.

I’m joking about the train thing, but when I walk by the hostess stand, my coworkers are in silent hysterics.

Stephanie gives me a high five. “You get to wear the Come-On Queen Crown today.”

I don’t want to think about my ex and the mistake he was—not the Luke part, though. The problem is, I put my money on the wrong horse. Bad analogy. He repeatedly put his money on the wrong horses with a secret gambling problem, among other things.

We fell in love hard and fast. It was over fast and hard.

It wasn’t that I was heartbroken, more like dumbstruck, because I should’ve seen it coming.

The room at large erupts in a cheer when someone on some team does something. I don’t even know what sports ball game is on until I hear them chanting, “McGregor.”

As far as I know, there is only one professional football player with that last name. And he’s also someone I’d rather not think about. But like everyone else in the Gastrodome, my eyes are glued to the screen as the quarterback for the Miami Riptide scores an epic touchdown—mind you, this is replay footage because it’s still off-season.

“Either you’re really impressed by number fourteen’s ability to throw a spiral or your eyes are on the guy in the uniform,” Stephanie says.

I’m quiet for long enough to remember how easily Ryan McGregor gets under my skin. “He’s not all he’s cracked up to be.”

Stephanie gasps and then claps her hand over her mouth. “He’s your ex?” she asks, implying that he’s Luke’s dad.

Not Luke’s dad and not my ex. Not really. “No, quite the opposite.”

Ryan McGregor is my nemesis. A person I hope never to see again. Doubtful. As soon as my cousin pops the question to the woman he called *the petal soft flower of his soul*—my sister found a book of his poetry back in high school—no doubt there will be wedding bells. I’ll have the unfortunate displeasure of having to participate in the festivities back

home. Ryan and Brando are best friends, something I've never understood...much.

Stephanie gazes wistfully at the television. "How could a man that fine be your nemesis?"

Pfft. "You're joking."

"I'm not. You don't think he's gorgeous?" she asks.

"Maybe on the outside, but trust me. On the inside, he's like the bottom of a busbin after a busy Saturday night."

There's no denying that the football player is extremely attractive. Women trip over themselves for him, but I'd rather go wait on Shaggy's table than think about Ryan.

Stephanie trails me while I do side work. "I can't believe you know Ryan McGregor. Tell me about him. Do you think you could get him to come in here?"

Before I can answer, I get another table. Thankfully, Shaggy leaves me alone and the rest of my customers are well-behaved. After I clock out, Stephanie stops me when I'm one step away from the exit.

"Do you think you could cover me this weekend? A guy from one of my tables asked me out."

If it isn't already apparent, there are a lot of dating connections made at the Gastrodome—that is why I took the job here. Not because I want to date, in case that wasn't clear. I do not. I'm in it for the tips, and sports bars are where it's at.

"I'm sorry. I can't do weekends unless my sisters are visiting." They each come once a month to help me out—with their kids. It's a zoo and I love it. Usually, for one of the nights, I'll pick up some hours while they entertain Luke. Every little bit helps.

The Givenator is facing jail time for various crimes, including for a Ponzi scheme. He denied paternity, which is an impossibility, but we signed documentation that he'll have no role in Luke's life per his request. I didn't argue. But that means I work hard and have little time for anything else, least of all dating.

All I want is a weekend with a hammock, a book, and time to get my life sorted out. I would also like my old job back. There I was, climbing the ladder at a PR firm, and then Troy barged into my life. He was a client at Appeal PR who tricked me into thinking I was someone special.

Mostly, I want to have dinner with my Lukey-boy, take a walk together and watch the birds in the park, give him a bubble bath, play together with his blocks, and then read his favorite books before we say our prayers and go to bed.

It's not until we do that last part, and I'm drifting off, nestled next to my son, breathing his fresh baby scent when my phone vibrates across the room—I always have the ringer off.

Reluctantly, I quietly get up to check it. Thankfully, Luke is out like a light. My sister texted, asking me to call ASAP but not to worry.

Of course, I do.

Closing myself in the bathroom and whispering into the phone, I say, "Hi. Luke just went down. What's up?"

"It's not a big deal. But Harper and I had an idea..."

And that is the beginning of how my sister, Heather with my other sister Harper backing her up, coax me into going to the Florida Keys this weekend.

I don't get a second wind tonight so much as I can't turn off my brain. I haven't been home since Aunt Martina's funeral. And before that, it had been ages because of the Miss Manatee incident.

Apparently, Uncle Eddie, my dad's brother, is having a rough go, and possibly the Plundering Pelican is suffering for it—his restaurant, not an actual pelican.

I'm reluctant to leave Luke. It will be my first time away from him for more than the length of a shift at the Gastrodome. But he'll be in good hands with Heather, my oldest sister, who lives in Tallahassee. Harper and her kids will visit for the weekend too, so I have nothing to worry about.

I'll miss him more than he'll miss me, spending time with his aunts and cousins. At least, this is what I tell myself.

They're each married with three kids and voted that I visit because I only have one. Dad is offshore on an oil rig and won't be home for a few more days. Brando, my cousin and Uncle Eddie's son, hasn't returned calls.

That means this is urgent, so they nominated me as the ambassador. Plus, they say having a couple of nights to myself will be rejuvenating.

I didn't know I was un-juvenated.

They pay the ninety-nine dollars for my flight to Miami. I do my best to ignore the Miami Riptide display at the airport, featuring their quarterback with his arm lifted as he intercepts a football. I'm not interested in the cut of his muscles, bronze skin, or his blue eyes. Not even a little. If I were to date, I'd prefer a runty gnome for a boyfriend. Someone with baggy eyes like Shaggy from table five.

I drive the familiar route south before hitting the Dixie, remembering our summers spent here when I was in grade school. Dad joined a fishing crew to make extra money. Then, when I was in high school, we relocated here permanently.

He raised us with our aunt, uncle, and my cousin Brando playing major roles. Mom hated Alabama and went back to Ohio when I was two—Heather and Harper are older. Dad did his best, and every Sunday after church, we'd bake cookies and eat them with milk, then play board games.

Milk and cookies are my favorite. Dad used the readymade kind from a package, but I never complained because sometimes he'd substitute ice cream for the milk, saying it was essentially the same, just thicker. My sisters and I still laugh at the logic, but he does it with the grandkids too, though not Luke. Not yet.

My mind doesn't let me linger there long and floats to the Miss Manatee incident. But I listen to my sisters' voices in my head. That was years ago. I'm all grown up. Ryan too.

But from what I've seen on TV and social media, he's little more than a man-child. Still up to his old tricks.

Do I occasionally browse his social media accounts? It's hard not to when stories about him are always popping up in my feed. It's probably the algorithm.

Just before I pull into town, I call my sisters to check-in.

"Everything is good," Harper answers. She gives me a full update about everything Luke has eaten today. Then she adds, "I know it's hard being away from Lukey, but just think, you haven't gone to the bathroom alone in months. Don't squander the long weekend."

I slap the steering wheel of the rental car. I forgot about the applesauce for ABC day, and I still have to get someone to cover my shift on Monday.

So much for being a boss babe who does it all. But do I care? Answer pending.

Heather joins her on speaker phone and they insist I enjoy my visit, telling me to think of it like a retreat on what may as well be paradise island. They say I need a little R&R after the year I've had. They promise it'll be fun. They dare me to lounge in a hammock.

By the time I get off the phone, I'm pacified, even encouraged. But before I have a chance to check on Uncle Eddie, Brando intercepts me in the kitchen of the house that still smells faintly of Aunt Martina's coconut crunch.

"Thank goodness you're here," he says.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. You won't believe it. The Driftwood is reopening." My cousin is tall, dark, and handsome with a poet's heart. But he does not wear his on his sleeve. Even after all these years and how close we are, I've never been able to tell whether he's serious, joking, or somewhere in between.

"I didn't know it was closed."

"Tonight is the grand opening. Go put on something nice."

I playfully slug him in the arm. “Are you saying my leggings and T-shirt aren’t nice?” If we’re heading out, maybe my sister’s concerns were unfounded. Fingers crossed, my uncle is okay.

“You look great, but maybe a dress. It’ll be fun.”

“I didn’t sign up for fun. I came here to relax and check on your dad, but you’re here so—?”

“Dad is fine-ish.”

“So maybe I should go say hi.”

“He’s at puzzle night. We’ll all have breakfast tomorrow. We have to hurry.”

And that is how I end up at Royal McGregor’s wedding. He’s Ryan McGregor’s twin brother. It’s also technically the soft opening of the resort...and you’d better believe Brando is going to pay for tricking me into this after I’m done steering clear of my nemesis.

Ryan

A decorative flourish consisting of three stylized, symmetrical scroll-like elements.

CHAPTER 2

I can't believe my twin is married. The wedding was awesome. I know that's kind of a cheesy word to describe such a momentous event, but I'm not known for my flowery prose. That would be my best friend, Brando.

The guy can turn a phrase. However, what he failed to mention when we caught up ahead of Royal's big day was that he was bringing his cousin.

The one, the only, the infamous Harley Jean Owens.

Seeing her earlier threw me off, made me dizzy. But she did her best to avoid me, so I know where I stand.

And it's not at the end of the aisle. Not yet.

Magnus, my older brother, is also getting married soon and says it'll be a small, intimate affair in Coco Key.

I've never seen my grumpy and stoic brothers, that's Royal and Magnus respectively, so happy. It's weird.

That leaves CJ and me. Turns out, I'm next. Wish it weren't so.

I'm close to hitting some Football Hall of Fame records, but this probably takes the cake for the shortest engagement ever. Case in point, Royal and Isla probably haven't yet left for their honeymoon and I'm already at my bachelor party looking for escape routes.

My brothers aren't here.

They don't know.

To my shame and embarrassment, this wasn't part of my life plan—not that I had much of one beyond football.

It went like this: I'm in my mid-thirties and the oldest guy on the team. The assistant coach has a daughter my age who was single. Apparently, to him and his wife, that's too old and so they not-so-tacitly rushed me into this. My contract is up for renewal and he suggested I'd be off the team if I didn't agree.

I should've laughed in his face and told him to look for a new job. But because of my lack of a post-football life plan, I froze. I'm nearing retirement anyway and don't want my last seasons to be for a different team.

The thing most people don't know about the sport is the extent of the politics—there's a disturbing amount of glad-handing and blackballing. I've mainly avoided that by being a golden boy—at least on the field. Maybe a little too golden, because assistant coach Webster thought I was a worthy candidate for his daughter's hand in marriage.

Some speculate there might be a trust fund he and his wife benefit from if this goes through, but I have my own problems related to wills to worry about.

Or not think about, as the case may be, which is exactly what I want to be doing in my current situation.

The guys on my team are cheering and having fun. Meanwhile, I'm trying to figure out how to undo these I-dos. Well, Jayda Webster and I haven't committed our lives to each other yet. Good thing too, because it's all a lie.

Garrison Wheeler, one of the other star players for the Riptide, and now married to a woman named Giselle, claps me on the shoulder. "It's almost time to welcome you to the club, man. I didn't see this coming. Who'd have thought you'd have a thing for Webby's daughter?"

I swallow thickly. "Yeah, who'd have thought? Not me."

He gives me a side-eye. "Love can make you do strange things. For instance, Giselle wanted to go to outer space, and your man Garrison got us tickets."

“You’re going to space?”

“Heck no. She just wanted to know that I’d do anything for her, including go to the moon.” Gaze fixed to the middle distance, it’s obvious his love for her is so thorough, so strong, he’d do anything for her.

Can’t say the same for myself.

“You realize that’s insane, right?” I ask.

“Wait a second,” he blurts. “Are you getting married because your brother did? Is this a twin sibling rivalry thing?”

It hadn’t occurred to me that it might look that way, given that Royal only got married last night and here I am, the next morning in Miami, having a rowdy brunch with the rest of the team. Granted, Mrs. Webster organized the bachelor party, and I have no idea what to expect from the rest of the day. I’m merely along for the ride.

Magnus would disapprove.

I have a full plate of eggs, ham, and toast in front of me that I’ve hardly touched. My stomach is a wad of gum and watermelon seeds and all the things you’re not supposed to swallow. Did I indulge too much last night at the wedding?

Someone looks at me and laughs in a way that suggests I missed a crucial piece of banter and laugh along. But the breath that bumps up against something in my chest, that won’t quite fill my lungs, tells me I’m uncertain about this move.

Part of my success is always obeying my coaches and trusting their vision. They have a fifty-foot view. I’ve got cleats on the ground.

But I’m not so sure this play is the right one. Sure, Jayda is nice, pretty enough, and successful in her own right. But would we make cute babies? Do I even want kids? These aren’t questions I’ve ever asked myself and probably should before we rush into things.

“McGregor, do you think the ref made the right call when Harmons fumbled the ball in the 2016 Crush/Bruisers playoff

game?” asks Kylon Johnson, our wide receiver.

I blink a few times.

“There’s only one right answer,” Garrison says, bailing me out. “No, because of the illegal forward pass that preceded it.”

“And yet the call stands.”

Again, I lose track of the same debates that have been raging for years, because, right now, I’m in one with myself.

This situation is all my fault, but what do I do?

For so long now, my playboy personal life has distracted me. I strayed too far from my love of football that I became an easy target for Webster to manipulate into marrying his daughter. The season doesn’t start for a while and our wedding date is in two weeks.

It’s time to get serious.

My brothers will kill me.

Not only that, but what does that mean for our grandfather’s will? The will that I repeatedly chase from my mind, telling myself it’s a bunch of nonsense.

I want to believe there’s a woman out there for me—my brothers would criticize me for going through half the state’s eligible women to find that special someone. But not settling down is a byproduct of my career and celeb status.

Probably.

But I’m not so sure Jayda is the right person. I don’t even know her middle name, her birthday, or her favorite color.

This is an arranged marriage where both sides benefit.

Me: I get to live to play another season.

Jayda: doesn’t remain a lonely cat lady—she has nine of them.

When I relayed to the Websters that I’m allergic, they promised a lifetime supply of antihistamines.

Magnus, Royal—heck, even CJ—would argue that I’m a grown man and can make this decision for myself. I could

simply tell the coach that I'm out. Not going to do it.

But then I'd also be leaving behind my identity, my team, and my life.

Royal, ever logical, would also probably propose legal action for the blackmail, but there's no proof other than what Webster said. My contract is due to renew this year and if I don't say *I do*, they'll trade me to another team. I've only ever played for the Riptide, and moving this late in my career, with only a year or two left, feels like losing.

But I have to do something. Getting up from my seat and excusing myself from the table, I hurry outside and slide on my phone.

"Ryan, miss me already?" asks Brando, aka Brandon Owens.

"Ha ha. I'm in a bit of a bind."

"Don't tell me you and Harley had it out last night." His tone tightens in defense of his cousin. We've been best friends since childhood, but he will protect her to the end.

"No, no. Nothing like that."

"What, is she not good enough for you? I wouldn't want you with her, anyway." He may as well be her big and fearsome brother, theorizing what would happen if a guy like me ever broke her heart or didn't show up on their wedding day. The guy is great, but very long-winded—verbose, one might say.

"Slow down. This doesn't have anything to do with Harley. I tried to say hi. She avoided me. End of story. I'm at my bachelor party."

"I may still be single, but as a rule, bachelor parties happen before the wedding and Royal got married yesterday, so..."

"I repeat. I'm at *my* bachelor party."

"Shouldn't our boy Royal be setting off on his honey—" Brando interrupts himself. "Whoa. Hold up. Did you say you're at *your* bachelor party?"

Once more, I repeat my statement.

“Why?”

“It’s a bit of a long story, but it’s to save my career.”

“I saw you save the game against the Arizona Thunderbirds during the Super Bowl. You were the MVP. Your name was in lights. You got the Gatorade shower. Got the ring. I’m not quite sure what you mean.”

I explain the situation to him as briefly as I can. He *hmmms* every few sentences, processing what I’m saying.

Given this is my first time explaining it out loud, it all sounds outlandish. The plot of a movie. Not my life. Certainly not something I’d stand for. Yet here I am outside a brunch joint at the start of the #RyanMcGregorBachDay of festivities with the party bus idling nearby.

“If you’re asking me what you should do, I can’t help you out there. If you want to know what I’d do, I’m not sure, given my career is on my terms and that’s on purpose. But this is what you should ask yourself: Do you want to live a life for the coming attractions or wait for the special feature?”

That’s deep. I probably need more coffee to fully grasp exactly what that means. However, I make a run for it. I’ll deal with the fallout later.



I’m not especially familiar with this part of Miami on foot, so I go a few blocks, make some hairpin turns like I’m evading a bad guy, and pull my ball cap low when I walk into a café and call Garrison.

“I’m out.”

“Outside?”

“Yeah. Well, inside. Um,” I look around, “I’m at the Busy Bean Bakery.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know what I need to do, where to go.

“Where’s that?”

“Wheeler, I can’t do it. Can’t go through with it. It’s not cold feet. It’s not right. I need to get out of here. Can you come get me, bring me to my place?”

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever. Be right there.”

“Don’t tell the other guys. Not yet.” I send him a pin to my location as the line goes quiet.

Garrison drives me to my apartment and I tell him that I’ll be in touch. I pack in haste and less than an hour later, I’m heading to a place where no one will look for me. I can be relatively anonymous because the population is small and the Nosy Rosies aren’t the type to plaster my face on social media. Rather, they’ll tweet and chirp among themselves on the Coconut Wireless, their concerns ranging from whether I’ve been eating enough, why I’m not yet married with children, and if I’ve been wearing sunblock.

Okay, fine, they’ll probably also speculate about Harley and me, but that’s nothing new.

What they won’t do is gossip about how I’m a famous football player who skipped out on his bachelor party.

In Coco Key, I’m just Ryan.

Well, not to Harley. To her, not only did she put me in the friend zone, but I occupy frenemy territory.

At Royal and Isla’s wedding, she hardly looked my way. But seeing her broke something loose in me.

I only realize it now and it’s why I got so hung up today at the bachelor party. Merely seeing Harley Jean Owens brought all my regrets to the surface. Even now, as I cruise south with water on both sides of the road, they wash over me like a tsunami.

But we were the worst for each other.

I should know better than to even entertain the idea of a second chance. No, a third, fifth, eighth? I’m not sure what it was that we had together. Had we given it a chance, we’d have been that annoying couple who dated and then broke up. Repeat. Sort of. It was unclear what we were to each other.

All too soon, I'm back at the rental I've shared with my brothers since our grandfather summoned us down here with a mysterious invitation. Turned out to be the opposite of a birthday celebration.

Seated at the center island, gazing out to sea, I pick up and turn over everything that's transpired the last few months, trying to make sense of it all.

Lost in my thoughts, I only surface when something whacks me on the back of the head.

It's Royal with a rolled-up newspaper. "What are you doing here?"

I squint, making sure I'm looking at the right brother—yep, it's my twin with the same brown hair. We're not identical, but close enough. Royal's nose is smooth. His eyes are blue gray whereas mine are true blue.

"What are you doing here?" I echo.

"Are we playing this game?"

It takes me a moment to come into focus. "No, I'm not playing any games and that's the problem." I tell him about Webster arranging for me to marry his daughter.

Royal rubs his hand across his forehead. "Sounds more like a threat than an arrangement. That can't stand."

"Which is why I'm here."

Brows pinched steeply, he asks, "Do you need legal help? I know a guy."

"I'm not sure yet. I just came back to think things through. But there's no way I can marry Jayda. Speaking of marriage, why aren't you on your honeymoon?"

Just then, the bubbliest, most cheerful woman I've ever met bounces into the room. She laces her arm through Royal's—the two are like night and day. He towers with a brooding expression. She's human sunshine in a petite but powerful package.

“We have a lot going on at the resort. We’re postponing our trip. And let’s be real, every day with Royal is like a honeymoon.” She lifts onto her toes and kisses him on the cheek.

The guy wears the biggest grin—the kind I’ve never seen before.

Shielding my eyes, I mutter, “I need sunglasses.”

“Come with us into town and stop by the Treasure Chest. I have to go help Bean pack,” Isla says.

“Where’s your sister going?”

“On a honeymoon.”

“She got married too?” I ask.

“No, she’s going on our honeymoon.”

The two of them laugh like they have an inside joke.

Rubbing my eyes, I say, “Yeah, I could use some coffee.”

“Also, Bean made these fantastic new lemon poppyseed muffins you have to try.”

Five minutes later, I’m at Beans & Books and can confirm that the new muffins are delicious.

“Who’s going to handle things here while Robyn is on your honeymoon?” I ask.

Bean, whose real name is Robyn, swallows. “I’m entrusting my baby to my dear sister, Rosalie, and Lally.”

Seated on the windowsill, Robyn’s cat flicks its tail as if she supremely disapproves.

Robyn mutters, “I might be better off leaving Nutmeg in charge.”

“I heard that.” With a gleam in her eye, Isla herds her sister outside. “We have to pack.”

My gaze follows them out the door and lands on a woman wearing a denim skirt and a tank top. She has a heart-shaped jaw, an adorable nose, long golden hair, and piercing amber eyes. Eyes you never forget.

“She looks yummy.”

Royal raps me on the head with a book. “Don’t be a dummy. You two are like,” Royal glances at Nutmeg, “like cats and dogs.”

He’s not wrong.

But something about seeing Harley makes my pulse kick. My smile pops. I cannot help it. And this time, instead of running away from my problems, I go outside.

Harley



CHAPTER 3

No, no, no. This is bad.

I've been spotted and duck behind a cabbage palm. Crouched down here, I notice my shirt is inside out. Dare I fix it now?

My leg cramps and I try to shake it without rustling the fronds. I am not cut out to keep up with these covert moves, trying to evade Ryan. How do spies live their lives, always trying to blend in and remain unseen?

I squat-run to my rental car and close myself inside.

Letting out a long breath, I push the vehicle's "on" button. I miss Aunt Martina's Pontiac with the key. I miss her. I miss Luke.

Part of me misses Coco Key, but not Ryan. Nope. I do not miss him. Nopey nope nope.

Peering out the window, I spot him standing on the sandy road, looking around. Presumably looking for me.

A low drone sounds from nearby. I frown, wondering if it's a fishing boat or maybe a helicopter. No, it's lower. Closer.

It's then I realize there is a flying insect in the car with me. It buzzes by.

Update, it's a stinging insect.

As it throws itself against the windshield, trying to escape, I fumble for the button to open the window.

Why does this car have so many buttons?

The bee makes a, um, beeline, for me. It's aiming for the space right between my eyes. They cross, blurring my vision. I lean right at the same time that it veers course. I know better than to swat it and enrage it when I'm already in its crosshairs.

In my panic, I act rashly, desperately, and lay on the car's horn.

Honk!

If anyone was still asleep in Coco Key at 11:32 a.m., they're awake now. This strange incident, along with my unannounced visit, is sure to hit the Coconut Wireless before long.

However, the blaring horn does nothing to deter the bee, wasp, hornet, or whatever it is. All I know is that it is angry.

It aims at me, prepared to sting. I dodge right, left, and then slouch down in my seat, unwilling to give up ground because that means I'll be out in the open and vulnerable to Ryan seeing me.

Then the unthinkable happens. My knee hits the gearshift. Well, the button "shift," I guess is what it is. Or dial. I like cars that are made the old way. The right way. There are two pedals, a steering wheel, a gear shift, and minimal bells, whistles, buttons and dials. Don't even get me started with cars that have computer screens.

The rental shifts into "drive" and still trying to avoid the bee, my foot pushes the accelerator. The vehicle lurches forward and I make contact as I scramble to pull the plug on the thing.

No, not with the bee. Its death buzz tells me it's still somewhere trapped inside this button-covered bubble with me.

I make contact with a pair of blue eyes. Familiar blue—the shade of the surrounding sea on a sunny day. They widen with shock? Horror? Disbelief?

Mine must mirror Ryan's because I realize what's happening seconds before it's too late. Stomping on the car's brake, I stop before he flies through the windshield, but I think I skimmed his shins with the bumper.

They probably insured his professional athlete shins for billions.

Please don't say I injured him.

As the stinging insect continues to drone, and with one last glance at paradise before I probably spend the rest of my life in prison, I slide down in the driver's seat. Squeezing my eyes shut, I hope that if I hide for long enough, this will all go away.

Would I rather be anywhere but here right now?

Actually, yes. I'd rather be beamed up by aliens or get chased by a pack of werewolves than physically run into my nemesis with my rental car. Thankfully, I was going under five miles an hour, but still. The celebrity football player with an ego the size of the Atlantic will never let me live down this incident.

Ryan being Ryan and me being me makes this a travesty of epic proportions.

A light knock sounds on the window and the bee knocks into it.

"I'd rather not be trapped in here with me either right now," I whisper.

Yes, to the bee.

"Harley, what? I can't hear you." Ryan makes a roll-the-window-down motion.

As if this modern marvel of a vehicle outsmarting me had manual windows. Ha! That's the stuff of Aunt Martina's old Pontiac. And the stuff I prefer, thank you very much. At least right now.

I shake my head slowly.

"You won't open the window?"

I point to the bee. "I'm doing a public act of service, sparing you from this bee."

"You have to pee?"

“Ryan!”

“Hi.” He smiles that same, infuriatingly flirty smile that has likely wooed women the world over. But not this one.

Not much.

“No, there’s a bee.” And then the little sucker stings me. Right on my bare upper arm.

I rocket out of the car, hand pressed against my skin and hopping around like I accidentally stepped onto hot coals. “Ow. Ow. Ow.”

“What happened? I’m the one who got hit,” Ryan says in his stupid dumb handsome voice. Don’t even argue with me about how a voice can’t be handsome if you haven’t heard Ryan’s. It’s a mixture of southern charm, islander ease, and I’m-six-and-a-half-feet-of-pure-muscle-so-outta-my-way command.

I hate it.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I go still. Lengthen my spine. Drop my hand from my arm. I remember that I am not, nor was I ever, under this man’s spell. His eyes are the devil’s work. So deep and so blue no one has ever resisted their temptation.

“Nothing is wrong.” I bite the inside of my lip, an old habit when I lie.

To be clear, I’ve only ever lied to Ryan McGregor or about him. Honest.

“What the heck just happened?”

With the toe of my Vans checkerboard sneaker, I draw a little circle in the sand. Also, a bad habit when I’d nabbed the last of Aunt Martina’s coconut crunch and she was looking for the culprit.

Ryan’s eyes graze me. No, they penetrate my lying soul.

Or maybe that’s just what it feels like when guilt goes on a feeding frenzy.

He saunters over. Of course he saunters. He doesn't have the decency to at least give me the pleasure of seeing him limp after striking him with the rental car.

Kidding. Sort of.

Seeing him up close and personal after years of glimpses on the big screen at work or my small phone's screen, he still has the same thick, healthy brown hair and faint freckles.

The man is objectively attractive with his chiseled features.

Okay, fine. He makes my insides flutter like nobody's business. But that's beside the point. A long time ago, we established that we hate each other. Nothing, not even his being a successful athlete, will change that. Behind all that flash and flirting and charm, he's the same old rascal.

Probably.

"Hey, kiddo."

"Old man."

He presses his hand to his chest. "Ouch. We're the same age." I expect the defensiveness in his tone but not the flicker of something else that hides just behind his dark lashes. Is he reckoning with getting older?

"Let's try again. Hi, Nugget."

With a defiant lift of my chin, I say, "You don't get to call me that."

"Does anyone get to call you that these days?" he asks with the kind of swagger of a man who is sought after, the confidence of someone who's never been rejected or left to raise a kid by himself.

Waving my hand, I say, "Pass, next question."

"Were you avoiding me at Royal's wedding?"

I wish I didn't take that pass. Can I call a lifeline? Aunt Martina was big into game shows and was once on the Price is Right. That's where the Pontiac, her assortment of dumbbells, and dinette set came from.

A shaky sigh escapes, which has everything to do with missing her and not the fact that I am single.

“Nugget, what’s that?”

“What’s what?” My tactic is looking everywhere but at Ryan, which causes me to follow his gaze to the rapidly growing golf ball on my arm.

Changing course, I shift my gaze to his.

Wrong move.

The flutters come in a rush, bouncing into each other, and not sure where to go.

Our eyes make contact and hold, clustered together like a pair of neutrons and protons. It’s a strong force. One that cannot be broken by ordinary means. No, it’s more like the only thing that could break us apart is a miracle of fission.

Why am I so bad at this all of a sudden?

I used to be the queen of sassy, bratty, and mean. I could combat Ryan McGregor like nobody’s business, but I feel like a time bomb with the red wire cut. The countdown still runs, but then what?

His fingers graze my skin. I want to lean into his touch, but the stinging of my arm seizes my better sensibilities and I swat his hand away.

“What happened? Looks like a bite of some kind.”

“You.”

“Me? I didn’t bite you.” He stops short of laughing.

Seconds away from stomping my foot, I say, “I’m here on a silent retreat.”

“But you’re talking.”

“I was just trying to lie low and then there was a bee in my car and—”

“Why didn’t you get out?”

“Because you were out there.”

His lips quirk. “Ah, and you didn’t want to talk to me.”

“Yes.” I probably shouldn’t have offered up that information because it’ll only lead to more questions.

“So, you were avoiding me at the wedding.”

“No.” I press my palms over my face. This man muddles me up. I am not usually like this. Must be the bee venom.

“Come on. You need ice.”

Ryan’s strong, calloused hand wraps around my un-stung arm, and he practically frog-marches me across the street.

It’s bad enough that I have to deal with the saunter and the swagger. Now he’s touching me too.

Would I rather run into anyone other than the guy I love to hate?

Yes, actually. I’d rather be, well, I’m not sure where.

Instead, I blurt, “I’m dead. This is my ghost talking and I’m fine. My arm is fine.”

“Nugget, it’s swollen to the size of a baseball.”

I glance down and frown—at it and my inside-out shirt. “Half a baseball, like if you cut one in half.”

“You knew what I meant.”

We enter a new establishment here on Main Street. It’s called Beans & Books and must’ve opened sometime between now and when I was last in town. A cat suns itself on the windowsill.

A tall woman with dark hair stands behind the counter. “Hi, Ryan. What did you do?”

“What do you mean what did I do, Lally?” He glances at me. “Oh, you mean this? She did it to herself. Always does.”

I scoff and shrug my arm away. “It’s a bee sting.”

“So, you admit it,” he says.

“I never denied it.”

“You also never apologized for running me over.”

“I did not run you over.”

“Did so, Nugget.”

Lally clicks her tongue and says, “I’m going to leave you two to bicker like an old married couple and get the girl some ice.”

Ryan calls, “I’m going to tell Magnus you said that.”

She scoops ice into a cup and cuts him a glare. “I didn’t say *we’re* going to bicker when we’re an old married couple. We communicate quite nicely, thank you very much.”

“You communicate with my stoically silent brother? I find that hard to believe.”

Lally smiles primly then, ignoring Ryan, turns to me. “Hi. I’m Lally McGuinness. The latest soon-to-be-member of the McGregor family.” She flashes a massive rock around her finger.

“And the woman who single-handedly tamed the Beast that is Magnus.”

“I’m also telling him you said that.” She winks. “I prefer him wild.”

If I wasn’t already a ghost, I wouldn’t be sure what to make of this exchange or anything that’s happened since returning to Coco Key. The McGregors getting married off? The Coconut Wireless reporting their grandfather passed away and left them a strange will? The reopening of the Driftwood? Me running Ryan over?

Stunned, I don’t hear my phone buzzing in my back pocket until I notice Ryan staring at my backside.

“Eyes off. Ice on.” I nod to the cup Lally holds and pull my phone out, worried about Luke. Instead, it’s Harper blowing up my phone with texts. The first one says: **You will not believe this.** Then there are links to article after article with headlines containing a familiar name.

The name of the man standing over my shoulder, icing the sting on my arm.

Before I can tuck my phone away, he goes still. I sense his gaze travel from the sting on my arm to the phone in my hand.

And just like that, his world explodes.

Ryan

A decorative flourish consisting of three stylized, symmetrical scroll-like elements.

CHAPTER 4

It's time to face the music, as Chip used to say when he'd make us come clean about our shenanigans. Believe it or not, Royal and I were guilty of most of them. Magnus sometimes led our adventures, but those were mostly exploring the islands and less frequently involved defacing property and pranking.

I also have to face the press and, as it turns out, Harley.

It's hard to believe I only left Miami this morning. It's barely past noon. I'd hoped to put this off until later. Unfortunately, later comes too soon.

Harley, pink-faced, tucks away her phone with the links to the headlines about me, a runaway groom. Is she embarrassed for me or were she and her sister gloating about my misfortune?

Ouch.

Does she hate me so much that she revels in my being smeared by the media?

Harley's hand brushes mine as she takes the cup full of ice, making my pulse kick even though the ice is cold.

"I should go," she says.

"See ya around, Nugget," I say, suddenly feeling like I'm floating in a surreal haze.

She pauses by the door. "And sorry that I hit you with my car. Are you alright?"

I don't know what I am. All I saw on her phone was my name along with the headlines *Ripped from the Riptide*, *Spouses-to-be Spurned*, and *Ousted at the Altar*.

I give a weak wave and then lower into the loveseat under the window, feeling anything but love. I feel hated as I scroll through the alerts on my phone—the ones my publicist, agent, and management teams are supposed to handle.

Trust me, I've given them enough business over the years to pay for their cars, boats, toys, children's college tuition, and more. I used to joke that my antics were for charitable purposes. Now, I'm not so sure. This feels different.

I'm sucked into my phone as I scroll past headline after message after comment.

After an uncertain amount of time, someone's hand lands on my shoulder. "Hey, brother." The only time Magnus addresses us using that term is when things are bad—like when we lost Mom and Dad bad.

I shake my head slowly. "I don't know what went wrong."

"Talk me through it. One step at a time."

Glancing around, we're the only two people in here, except for Magnus's fiancée who's in the back kitchen. Hoping the Coconut Wireless isn't snooping, I tell my eldest brother about my prison break.

"That wasn't very honorable."

"I know. I should call Jayda and explain."

"That's a good place to start."

Lally, who I didn't notice appear, inches closer. "I'm sorry, guys. I don't mean to meddle. It was hard not to overhear." She squishes up her face like she's uncomfortable and genuinely doesn't want to interfere.

"It's okay, Love Muffin."

Her face turns red.

Magnus's expression ripples like he's trying not to grin—unlike me, he's not quick to smile. "Sorry. I thought that might

lighten the mood.”

“Lighten the mood? Dude, my career is over.”

Lally, aka Love Muffin, which is a term of endearment I vaguely recall using to tease Magnus when he and Lally were still new, tiptoes closer. “I didn’t mean to snoop, but—”

My brother pulls her down to sit beside him. “What she’s trying to say is, yes, your name is plastered all over the internet, but the lesson here is to read primary sources. If you look more closely, you will see that the fiancée in question, co-jilted.”

“What? How do you know?” My eyes widen with disbelief.

“I have alerts set up to find out what the world is saying about you,” Magnus reveals.

“You spy on me?”

“I keep informed in case I need to extract you from a life-threatening situation.”

I frown. “Thanks for having my back, I think.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Where were you when Harley ran me over?”

“She didn’t run you over. She merely gave you a love tap.” Magnus’s eyes dance with amusement.

“With her car.” Getting to my feet, I pace-stomp. “How do you know that, anyway?”

Magnus positions his first two fingers in front of his eyes then turns them to face me.

“Good to know you’ve got your eyes on me.” Though I’m not sure how I feel about that.

“Anyway, Harley can handle you,” Magnus says with laughter in his voice.

“Hold up. Whose side are you on?” I ask, feeling mildly betrayed.

Perched on the arm of the chair Magnus sits on, from behind, Lally laces her arms around his neck and kisses him on the cheek.

I tuck my head back, squish up my face, and frown. “Ew. Be in love somewhere else. It’s gross.”

Magnus’s lips quirk. “As you wish. But I have a feeling if you stick around, those flamingos will soon be back.”

“Don’t count on it,” I mutter.

They disappear into the kitchen. I drop a twenty-dollar bill into the tip jar and then take a giant chocolate chip oatmeal cookie from the display and pour myself a cold brew with cold foam.

Hashtag island life.

Returning to my seat near Nutmeg, I browse the internet, trying to make sense of the mess I’m in. More headlines roll in, including:

Runaway Bride and Groom?

Goodbye Groom and Bye Bye Bride

Jayda Webster and McGregor Meant to Be or Meant to Flee?

Marriage, a No-Go for Player Number Fourteen

Then I reach the motherload.

According to sources, the recently engaged Riptide assistant coach’s daughter and star QB left town, but not together. The rest of the article proceeds to smear me across the field and then mop me up with my losses. It lists every reason I should not be allowed to play for the Riptide next season. It uses expressions like *washed up*, *retire already*, and *not worth the screen time*.

Even with the coffee, my mental gears turn slowly.

What am I going to do?

Hammocking my head in my hands, the uncertainty I felt earlier at the bachelor party (how is this still the same day?)

turns heavy, viscous, and drops into the pit of my stomach.

An answer doesn't come. My head is empty, except for one thing.

Harley.

Now is not a good time for her games. To be fair, I play too. Magnus was right. We are like cats and dogs, fire and water, and water and oil all mixed up into one disastrous explosive concoction.

But she lingers in my mind until I remember what she studied in college.

Getting to my feet, I stuff the cookie in a wax baggie and march outside. I could text Brando to see if he knows where she is. Then I spot the car she was driving parked outside the Plundering Pelican—her aunt and uncle's restaurant. They used to have the best waffles, but according to the Coconut Wireless, the quality has degraded recently. One morning, Ray Higbee got a bowl full of sawdust instead of oatmeal and it wasn't April Fool's Day. Someone else said the maple syrup that came with their pancakes smelled like vinegar.

When I get inside, the windows are no longer nearly invisible from Mr. Owen's fastidious cleaning. The chairs are askew and the air smells faintly of burned hair rather than the malty scent of waffles.

"Harley?" I call when I reach the counter.

She crouches down there. "Oh. Hi. Didn't hear anyone come in. Just down here doing stuff."

"The bells are on the door and—" I peer over the counter. "There's nothing down there."

"Oh, there's loads of stuff. You just can't see it."

"And you're a ghost. Right." I roll my eyes.

She pops to standing. "We are all out of waffles, coffee, bread, butter, beer, you name it. There's nothing here."

"Is that your way of saying you don't want my business?"

“No. Unfortunately—” She peers over her shoulder. “Uncle Eddie is hard of hearing now, but he’s a bit lost without Aunt Martina. Brando hadn’t been here for a few months—he was overseas so...” She presses her lips together as if regretting saying as much.

“I’m sorry to hear that. But he’s back now. I saw him the other day.”

“Yep, and my sisters sent me here to check on things. Thought I was a good candidate. Little did I know Brando beat me here and is working on, um, things.”

“If he needs help—”

“No, we got it. We’re figuring things out. Thanks, though.”

I grip the back of my head and rub away the tension. “Does that mean now might not be a good time to ask for your help, Nugget?”

“My help?” She looks around the empty restaurant and then points to herself. “Me?”

“Yes, you. You were just the person I wanted to see.”

She scoffs and rolls her eyes. Her bright amber eyes. “I find that hard to believe.”

Leaning on the counter, I say, “Is that so?”

Arms slung across her chest, she says, “Yeah. All things considered. Where do I start? I drove into you with my car and then you saw—” She takes a deep breath as if not quite able to apologize for her sister’s texts. “And a lot of stuff before that.”

“If anything, we’re even.”

She lets out a huff as if to say, *Tell me what you need.*

“I’ve encountered a little social snafu and could use a PR patch-up. If I recall, that’s your specialty.”

“I’m a waitress.”

“Sure, right now. Today. But ordinarily, you’re a public relations professional.”

“I was. Things—” She takes a deep breath. “Escalated.”

“Relatable. Obviously, you saw the news. It turns out we co-jilted and in order to retain some level of respect in the sports community, I’d like to do a big cover-up and walk back the biggest wedding of the year.”

She squawks a laugh. “The biggest wedding of the year?”

“Yeah. I didn’t know this, but Jayda Webster stands to inherit billions from the Barnstable fortune—on her mother’s side.”

“Then I guess I can’t accuse you of being a gold digger.”

“Nothing of the sort.” As I speak, Chip’s will and the treasure CJ insists exists float through my mind like a slow-moving sailboat. I give my head a little shake.

“So, you were going to get married but backed out. I wasn’t sure what to believe.”

I feel the sudden need to elaborate. “It was a fake marriage. She and I hardly knew each other. I couldn’t go through with it, not only because it’s dishonest, but I don’t know...” I gaze at the ceiling because looking at the woman across from me makes me wonder about my motives, about the hope that I always held onto that there was someone out there for me.

Our gazes slowly drift together. She has the same mischievous gleam in her eyes, hidden behind fatigue. She must be worried about her uncle after losing her aunt not long ago.

“Can you help?” I ask after a beat.

“If the arrangement felt dishonest, why not be honest?”

“Because journalists are writing hit pieces on me.” I pull up the ugliest one on my phone. “This is ninety-nine percent lies.”

She arches an eyebrow and inclines her head.

“Okay, eighty-five percent of it is not true.”

She folds her arms in front of her chest and cocks a hip.

“Fine, it’s seventy-nine percent fabricated. The thing that happened in Monaco with the Lambo...” I shrug.

Harley shakes her head like I’m hopeless.

I hold up my phone in one hand so she can look at it and the cookie from Beans & Books in the other. “I brought something to sweeten the deal.”

She eyes the cookie and then takes it from me, peering into the bag and breathing deeply the buttery and chocolate chip scent. “You know me well.”

I have the strange thought, *If only that were true.*

After tearing off a chunk of the cookie, dividing it in half, and then passing it to me, she takes my phone. My pulse kicks up a few notches. I blame it on the coffee and chocolate.

“Who’s Leigh Green?”

Frowning, I don’t recognize the name. “Not sure.”

“She wrote the hit piece.”

My stomach drops. “Oh. Not good.”

“So, you know her?”

“You might say that.”

“You dated her and then dumped her,” Harley says, a statement and not a question.

I nod slowly. “You know me so well.”

“It was only a matter of time before your playboy ways caught up with you.”

“What do you know about—?”

“Plenty, Big Shot.”

“By the way, how is your arm?”

She angles away from me. “My arm is fine. None of your concern.”

“You wouldn’t have gotten stung if you weren’t trying to avoid me.”

Harley flips her hair and then gazes up at me. “You didn’t care that I got stung by a jellyfish that time we were at Hidden Hammock beach and—”

We were in the water, smooching, but I guess she doesn’t want to be reminded of that part. “I offered to pee on it.”

“Seriously, Ryan. How old are you?”

My lips quiver with a smile that I struggle against. “Same age as you.”

She huffs then passes me back my phone when it buzzes in her hand.

It’s a text from the coach. I wince as the phone rings. I have to answer. Crossing to the far side of the dining room in the Plundering Pelican, I take the call.

Coach Becker reems me out.

“Isn’t it enough that I give one hundred ten percent at practice and on the field?” I’d hoped he’d take my side.

“The team is a family. You’re accountable. I’ve seen guys like you before. What you do behind closed doors is our business.”

“But it’s more a matter of what I didn’t do, sir.” As in I didn’t go through with a dishonest union.

“You broke that girl’s heart.”

“You mean the assistant coach’s daughter? And a fair number of other hearts before hers.” I admit, subtly pointing out that he’s never cared about my antics until now.

“Do you care about this team?”

“Very much, sir. That’s why I couldn’t go through with it.”

He grunts and I’m not sure he’s even listening. “Do you know what this looks like for the Riptide?”

“That I’m not in it for the money. Jayda stands to be a billionaire. She could buy a husband.”

“You’re walking a fine line, McGregor,” Coach Becker warns.

I open my mouth, about to tell him what assistant coach Webster told me about my future, but hesitate. “Sir. I understand. I’ll fix this.”

“It’s that or find a new team next season.”

Or retire, but I don’t say that because it terrifies me.

Harley remains where I left her, lips parted as if shocked by the interaction.

I hang up and shove my phone in my pocket. “I’m in trouble with the team manager and the coach, the assistant coach, my agent said they might drop me from endorsements. Who knew this would have so much fallout? I talked to Brando this morning, and he asked—” Never mind. I won’t finish my thought because when he asked me about the coming attractions or the main feature, the woman standing on the opposite side of the counter kicked her way into my thoughts.

I have to clean up my act or else...or else I retire. But who am I if not the QB of the Miami Riptide?

Some guys work hard and play hard. I play hard and play hard. Now it’s been made public and my playing the game hard is not enough to erase the rumors and potential blemish on a team that’s worked to clean up its act in recent years—we’re no longer on the dirty dozen list. The Boston Bruisers make the top. Now I’m the weak link. It’s not okay.

“So, how about that PR patch-up?” I ask.

Our eyes meet and hold again as if our shared past plays together on an invisible slide projector screen. I wasn’t always this way. Well, I was always a rascal. I admit that. But I never felt alone and rejected like I do now.

“I’ll pay you,” I offer.

“How about some free advice?” As if unable to remain still under my gaze, Harley starts to clean up in the dining room.

Trailing her, I adjust the chairs and pick up straw wrappers and stray napkins off the floor. “That’s generous.”

“You probably won’t like it.”

I brush my hands together and then point finger guns. “I’ll take whatever you’ve got.”

“Okay, here goes. Do the opposite of whatever you’ve been doing,” Harley says simply.

“What do you mean, what I’ve been doing? I’ve been doing great.”

“They’ve been so great the assistant coach arranged your marriage?” she asks with an air of *I gotcha!*

I tip my head from side to side. “I worked hard to get where I am and am not about to go down in a blaze of embarrassment.”

“Then don’t do what you’ve been doing. Obviously, it’s not working.”

As she wipes crumbs into her hand, I notice her cheeks blister pink. I tease her with a grin because apparently, she knows what I’ve been doing even though her frown suggests she’d deny it even under the penalty of jail time.

“I bet you’ve followed my career.” I wink.

“I work in a sports bar, so it’s hard to avoid the oh-so-special star player of the Riptide.”

“And yet you’ve been avoiding me.”

I slide a chair aside and step into Harley’s space.

She steps back. I shift closer.

“Ryan, is it too much to suggest that you amend your player ways?”

“Play as in the game? Football? Never.”

“As in dating a new woman every night.”

So, she has been paying attention. I’m not proud of this, but it’s hard to say no. Especially to Harley. But she also brings out the worst in me. “Okay, Mom. Glad you’re looking out for me to find someone special and settle down.”

As soon as the word *mom* is out of my mouth, we both bristle. Hers left when she was little and mine was lost in a

boating accident.

After a beat, Harley looks up at me, eyes searching mine. “You have my advice. Take it or leave it.”

In her tone, I hear a slight emphasis on the word leave. Which makes me want to stay. Everything about Harley demands that I be a contrarian, to do the opposite. But a text from my agent suggested I find someone, anyone, to marry, which is not what I was doing before the Websters came along with the marriage proposal to their daughter.

“You’re suggesting I get in a relationship and settle down?”

“Sow those wild oats and make yourself a bowl of porridge.”

I stick out my tongue. “Too bland.”

“Not the way I make it. It’s one of Luke’s favorite breakfast items. Granted, he ends up wearing half of it,” she says offhandedly.

“Luke?”

She busies herself, making a fuss by moving around the tables. Maybe she didn’t hear me or I misheard her.

“I have an idea,” I say as the second one takes shape.

Harley goes still as if she senses my terribly wonderful idea involves her.

“Other than Jayda, I don’t have any prospects—”

“There are about a dozen women on this island alone that would line up to spend their lives with you.”

“There are only twelve women total on this island.” I list the Rosies, Mrs. Cross, Mrs. Lipman, Robyn, Isla, Lally... “Does that mean you too?”

This time Harley sticks out her tongue. “Gag. No way. Weirdo.”

“What’s wrong with me?” I ask, affronted.

“It’s not *you*.”

I chuckle. “Don’t you dare use the classically cringy it’s not you, it’s me line.”

“No, Ryan. It’s not you, it’s *us*. We would never work.” She speaks with finality, but that suddenly makes me want to prove her wrong, so I outline my proposal that we show the world what a wonderful couple we could be.

Harley



CHAPTER 5

Ryan's proximity and his clean linen scent are not helping my case. Nor are they allowing me to remain focused on getting the Plundering Pelican cleaned up. The tropical-pirate-themed restaurant was my aunt and uncle's pride and joy but seems to be sinking fast.

Uncle Owen is Dad's brother. After meeting Aunt Martina in Indiana and getting married, they dreamed big during the coldest winter on record. With my grandparents gone and my dad already working on the oil rig in the Gulf, they had the idea to open a restaurant in the Keys. It was the farthest south they could go, and thereby the warmest, while staying in the US.

As the wintery days passed and they planned their relocation, their idea took form from a regular fish and chips joint to a pirate and tropical-themed restaurant. Aunt Martina was the Energizer Bunny, creating the menu and the "brand" while Uncle Eddie was the muscle, building out the patio overlooking the water that looks like a ship's deck. They started simple with fish and chips, expanded to include an oyster bar, and didn't stop there. Eventually, they built out the interior with a pool in the center filled with koi, a waterfall, and private booths with loads of pirate memorabilia and fun details like portholes, ship's rope, paintings, and lots of "treasure."

Guests never knew when Captain Edward Tooth(less) was going to appear in costume. Though, these days, Uncle Eddie's fake scowl is more like a real frown.

Brando didn't opt to carry the torch, but when he returned, coincidentally, at the same time my sisters sent me on what was supposed to be a relaxing weekend, I'm glad I was here for moral support.

I imagine it was tough to see his father relatively despondent. It's like he doesn't know what to do without his wife by his side.

But right now, Ryan is by my side, and I don't know what to do other than remain in motion.

While I straighten the salt and pepper shakers, I say, "So let me get this straight, you asked for my advice on how to patch up your career situation, and your takeaway was a fake relationship with me?"

His shoulder lifts slightly. "Worth a shot."

"But me? Really?" The plan he outlined was along those lines and the worst idea ever.

"I can prove that I'm a team player."

"I think they're looking for you to make a commitment, to settle down, and become a family man." As I speak the words, my thoughts dive into my failed relationship with Troy the man-boy. Turns out that I don't know how to pick 'em. "Or don't listen to me. There's probably someone out there with a better idea." Salty liquid rises in my eyes because I can't give Luke the father he deserves and here Ryan is, throwing his life away.

Shifting toward the door, I'm about to show him out. As if sensing his dismissal, he clasps my wrist and then twines his fingers in mine. My stomach flutters and I flail like I can no longer tread water.

"Please be in a fake relationship with me. You're the only hope I've got." There's an amount of sincerity in Ryan's words that surprises me. Either that or I'm out of practice reading him.

I have to end this now before I do something stupid. Something I'll regret, because, if I know anything, when it comes to this guy and me, I'm prone to doing dumb things.

“Ryan Phiefer McGregor, the next person I date is going to be the man I marry and right now marriage is off the table. So am I, not that I was on it. There is no table and if there were, I wouldn’t be anywhere near it.” I wave my hands to signal that’s it. End of story.

And what does that scallywag do? He grasps my waist, lifts me up, and plants me on the Buccaneer Booth’s table. In high school, my sisters and I named each one. The Landlubber, Scuttlebutt, and Swashbuckler are a few others.

Ryan’s blue eyes dip to my lips then lift again, searching my gaze. I resist the flutters in my stomach and the way they cluster and scatter, cluster and scatter. I deny the weakness in my knees—thank goodness I’m seated.

His mouth twists and lands somewhere between a flirty and cocky smile as if he can read my thoughts and is pleased to still have an effect on me.

I’d like to grind out that there is no effect, but just then, the bells on the door jingle. “Sorry, we’re closed,” I call, my voice splitting between that and what I’d wanted to say to Ryan.

“Looks like you’re *something*, but not closed,” Uncle Eddie calls from across the room with a chuckle.

My cousin Brando stands by his side, eyes on Ryan. The quarterback shuffles back a few steps.

Uncle Eddie brushes his hands together. “See? Told ya. I have a clean bill of health. Mind as sharp as a tack. Lungs as strong as an ox.” He pounds his chest. “Now, I have to go fix the branding iron for the skull and crossbones on my burger buns.”

“Dad, I’ll help. I don’t want you to burn—” Brando calls after his father.

Uncle Eddie, more stooped than I remember, pauses. “Son, I’ll have you know that I’m fine. Just a bit, well, things are different here without your mother.” At that, he pushes through the swinging door to the back.

There goes that salt water again. It rises to my eyes and I stifle a snuffle.

“What are you two doing?” Brando asks, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“Just discussing Ryan’s pro, um, predicament.” I almost said *proposal*. Sheesh. Brando would have us both walking the plank by sundown.

“What predicament?”

“Haven’t you seen? Oh, right, you’re not on social media with the rest of us normal folks,” Ryan teases.

“If you haven’t noticed, I have other things going on.”

I sense a chill between the best friends that isn’t usually there. Is it because Ryan was standing so close back here in the dark part of the restaurant? Brando has always been protective of my sisters and me, like a big brother. Despite his lack of social media accounts, it’s likely he knows about Ryan’s scoreboard—and I don’t mean the football one.

“Harley, I want to talk to you, Heather, and Harper about things.” Brando angles his head toward the kitchen.

“Sure thing. I’m just finishing up out here.” I clear my throat. “Cleaning up, I mean.”

My cousin disappears to the back, likely to make sure Uncle Eddie doesn’t accidentally brand himself with the iron he uses to stamp the tops of the burger buns—not that he’s had customers in months.

“So, will you at least think about it?” Ryan asks when Brando is out of earshot.

“I’ll think.” Think about how Ryan is a flirt, a rascal, and not necessarily reliable. Who’s to say my face won’t be plastered all over social media as his rebound relationship?

He must read my dubious *you don’t take life seriously* look.

“I’ll change. I can be a gentleman. I want to.”

I harrumph. “I’ll believe it when I see it,” I mutter and then regret it because that almost sounds like I agreed to his hair-brained idea.

Then again, Royal and Ryan are twins. Never thought I'd see the day Royal would find someone who tolerated his ice man personality. One look from the guy always made me feel like he was going to sue me for everything I was worth and then push me off a cliff. Okay, that's a little extreme, but he's transformed since meeting Isla.

"I'll even make it worth your time," Ryan adds.

"How's that?" I cannot fathom a single thing Ryan can give me.

He glances around the restaurant. "You said you're a waitress. You probably make good money. What if I quadruple it?"

I blink a few times. "What now?"

"I said I'd pay you for your PR help. I'll give you one hundred thousand dollars a month for the rest of the year if you be my fake girlfriend, for starters."

My expression wavers because the words refuse to compute.

"I'll cover your bills, all your expenses. Call it two hundred grand if one hundred isn't enough."

I drop off the table and onto my feet. I know football players make a lot of money, but that is a stupid amount of money. "Ryan, we get by on less than two thousand a month, including gas and groceries."

He frowns. "We? Do you mean that the average person gets by on that amount? Doesn't seem possible."

"I mean like—" I almost say Luke and me, but that will open a door to questions I'm not ready to answer. "Yeah. National average."

"I can do better and all you have to do is pretend to be my love butter."

"Your what?" I practically shout.

"Everything all right?" Brando calls from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I, uh, just got surprised. All’s good out here,” I call over my shoulder.

When I turn back, Ryan’s ears are red.

Love butter?

Recovering quickly, the corner of his mouth lifts into a flirty smile. “I’d better go. But what do you say?”

“I’ll think about it.”

The second the bells on the door jingle, I whisper, “Love butter?”

Yes, I follow Ryan McGregor’s career as well as the exploits as reported on social media, but I cannot wrap my head around what that might mean. Calling me Nugget is one thing—I’ve always been quite a bit shorter than him. Also, he looks at me like a snack. Always has.

I could use the money, but even if I say yes, we’d never be able to pull off a believable relationship, no less a marriage.

For one, we can’t go five minutes without having a disagreement or fighting. Ryan drives me mad, and given the way he sometimes looks at me, I do the same to him.

If I were to read an article about how to know a relationship is bad, we’d probably tick off all the boxes and probably add a few of our own.

But he is good-looking, and the dream of all my coworkers at the Gastrodome. He’s funny sometimes, and have I mentioned that he’s attractive? There’s that.

But I feel silly for thinking Ryan was suggesting we be together—fake or not. I know better than to let him mesmerize me, hypnotize me, antagonize me.

I’m not interested in him. He’s a braggart and a hot shot show-off with an ego that could obliterate this island chain.

There are three things I know for sure:

1. Ryan and I are not compatible, much like tuna fish on top of pizza.

2. We're not capable of having a normal discussion, it's bickering or silence. No in between.
3. And I will never, not ever, date Ryan McGregor. The end.

“What’s up with the two of you?” Brando asks, startling me.

This time, heat creeps across my cheeks.

“No one. Nothing. What?”

There goes my cousin’s arched eyebrow. The thing is sharp, kind of like a scabbard.

“What did the doctor say?” I ask, changing the subject.

“The doctor said Dad’s bill of health is clear and that he’s in ship shape.”

“Then what’s going on?” I ask even though it’s obvious.

We’re both quiet for a moment and look around at the once-thriving restaurant.

“He’s heartbroken, huh?” I ask.

My cousin nods. “I miss her too. But I guess it’s different. I’ve never had the kind of love they did.”

“Me neither.”

Brando eyes me, surprised, perhaps because I was married briefly.

“If you’re wondering about Troy, absolutely not. That was—”

He shakes his head.

Just then, both our phones jingle. Heather calls me and Harper calls him.

“What’s the scoop?” Heather asks.

I tell her about the good news from the doctor.

“But we have to do something or else the Plundering Pelican is going under. I’m going to move business operations

here, at least for a while. I think Dad needs me.” Sadness cracks my poetic cousin’s voice.

And just like that, we all have the same reply. “Me too.”

Brando blinks. “You don’t have to.”

“Nope, we don’t have to—” Heather says.

“But we will—” Harper adds.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.” I hug my cousin who pulls away after a moment.

“Ew. You smell like Ryan.”

I glare at him. “How dare you!” I waft my shirt. There is a subtle fresh cotton scent, but it’s not like we even touched except when he iced my arm.

Brando shrugs as if ignoring that because the relief at having our help with Uncle Eddie and the restaurant lightens his load.

My sisters outline their plan of attack, er, travel attack like a pair of army generals, and I start to have second thoughts. What about my life in Alabama? Work? Luke’s daycare?

Ryan’s proposal...that part I don’t mention.

They tell me it’s summer and that we have plenty of time to figure out everything. But do I?

Swallowing thickly, I can let all of that go for two hundred thousand dollars a month. That’s a lot of cheddar.

“You okay?” Brando asks.

“Yeah. Just thinking about logistics—I guess we’ll all fit at your parents’ place.”

“Always have.” Much like the restaurant, Uncle Eddie built additions to it over the years to accommodate my sisters and me. In a lot of ways, never having had daughters, we were like Uncle Eddie and Aunt Martina’s kids. And our kids were like their grandchildren, though Aunt Martina only met Luke briefly after he was born. He’ll be a year soon and she’ll have been gone for a year a month after that.

“I’m glad I came back for the wedding. Glad you’re here too. Plus, I get to see Ryan,” Brando says.

I grunt because that means I do too and I’m not sure how I feel about that.

I don’t mention the football player’s fake dating suggestion, but the fluttering inside threatens to lift me clear off my feet. I used to always think it was nervousness because I never knew what kind of battle Ryan and I were in, but I’m starting to wonder if it’s something else.

When I get back to my aunt and uncle’s house, I can’t help but feel I’m right back to where I started. Only, after high school, I saw a clear horizon ahead with college and opportunities. I was headed to the big city, and I was going to make something of myself.

My sisters all reached their goals. Brando too. I thought I wanted to make a name for myself in PR, but now I’m not so sure. The best I can do lately is to get through the day.

I think about the money Ryan offered. I could contribute to helping fix up the Plundering Pelican, and I’d still have plenty left over.

But what about Lukey-boy? What about the little life I carved out for us in Alabama?

I went there because it was affordable. Plus, Dad comes ashore a few weeks at a time each season, so I get to see him. We took over his studio apartment—he has an RV, so he stays there when he’s back. It’s closer to my sisters who live in the panhandle and on the west coast of the state.

A recent but relatively hazy memory floats into my mind. Something about applesauce...Oh, no! I promised Tabby or Tabs or Tabitha that I’d bring applesauce to ABC day.

That’s it. I can never go back. To Alabama. I’m the flaky mom who agreed to help out and then failed to come through. I hang my head, but a large, old ship dotting the horizon catches my eye. It hardly moves at all. Kind of like me, or, more accurately, taking a few steps forward before being thrown back to where it all began.

But the water laps gently on the shore and the night insects start to play their tunes. It's so peaceful here with the wide-open sky. Maybe it's not so bad. It feels like home. Or perhaps just familiar, safe. Then again, there is nothing safe about being around Ryan McGregor.

Back in the day, there was no telling if he'd dip my pom poms in school glue or want to kiss me. Then again, I'd been known to fill his cleats with shaving cream and kiss him right back. We were each other's biggest tease and greatest temptation.

Drawing out my phone, I'm about to call my sisters and tell them about Ryan's offer, but I can practically hear their chatter and warnings from here.

I'm afraid if I tell him that I'm a mom, he'll tease me. Whether I approve of his lifestyle off the field or not, the guy is successful.

I could use the money, so who cares what he thinks?

My thoughts spin and spiral.

Finally, I call my sisters anyway and relay the whole thing.

"Wasn't he your first kiss?" Heather asks.

"No comment." The truth is, Ryan was my first fifty kisses—we shared so many secret kisses that I lost track.

"Didn't he also stand you up for prom?" Harper asks like she wants to kick him in the kneecaps.

He offered to take me and then stood me up. We never talked about it.

Harper and Heather give me every reason to decline Ryan's offer.

But the fluttering inside gives me the opposite answer.

Ryan

A decorative flourish consisting of three stylized, symmetrical scroll-like elements.

CHAPTER 6

Now that the Plundering Pelican is non-operational, there aren't too many options for dinner close by. The cabinets in the rental are empty. The Treasure Chest sells snacks but nothing nourishing. Nothing to feed a football player with the appetite of a bear.

It's strange being in my hometown but not quite feeling like I belong here. Actually, that's not entirely accurate. It's just that things have changed a lot. Coco Key never recovered entirely from Hurricane Howie and, without my grandfather's influence, has fallen into disrepair. We don't have a town mayor, but he may as well have been it. He was what most would consider the team leader, or in sports parlance, the coach.

Chip was the kind of guy who you'd want to sweep your sidewalk for, display your best items in the window, and make sure his favorite ice cream flavor was always stocked.

What was his favorite?

Unfortunately, I don't know. Never paid attention because it was always about my sundae scoop—all the flavors of an ice cream sundae mixed into the ice cream instead of just on top.

There are so many things I don't know about my grandfather, including why he left me his diary, a pen with a plume, and the Sip & Scoop, the very place that used to serve my favorite flavor.

I sit down on the bench dedicated to the late Mr. Cross and look out at the water. My brothers have been freaking out

about an old ship that's been prowling our shores. I see it now in the distance.

But what's at my back concerns me more—my past and what that means for my future, the shuttered ice cream shop, and what I'm going to do. Okay, and dinner. Not sure about that at the moment, either.

I hear a low growl.

A shadow crosses the patch of sunlight.

"Can I sit down?" a familiar voice asks.

"Did you just growl at me?"

Harley's forehead furrows. "No. That was your stomach, Hot Shot. Scoot."

Sitting in a full manspread on the bench, I shuffle over slightly.

"Come here to watch the sunset?" I ask.

"Yep and not to tell you that I'll do it."

"So, you will?" I ask.

This time she growls. It's kind of adorable, like a kitten angry at a ball of yarn. Harley puffs her cheeks with an exhale. "Yeah, against my better judgment, the fluttering in my stomach said to help you out."

"You listen to what your stomach tells you? If I did that, I'd weigh eight hundred pounds." I pat my abs.

"I find that hard to believe." I sense Harley's eyes travel toward me.

Being fit the way I am is a necessity of my job. Some women admire my physique—who am I kidding, a lot of them do—but it always made me feel funny. Like I was just a piece of meat. With Harley's eyes on me, it's more like she appreciates that I'm capable and could protect her from a bear—probably.

A strange question seems to roll in with the lapping waves.
But can I protect her from myself?

“So, this fluttering, can you describe it?” I ask, taking my focus off my thoughts.

“It’s not a baby kicking. That’s a distinct feeling and no way that I’m preg—” She goes quiet.

“Pregnant?”

She shifts uncomfortably. “I meant it was like nerves.”

“Do I make you nervous?”

Eyes on the water, she lifts her chin. “Not generally. More like annoyed, angry at times.”

“Sheesh. Tell me how you really feel.”

“Okay. This is already a mistake. Something I should not have agreed to—”

“And yet you did.”

“Because all the while I was talking to my sisters, the fluttering wouldn’t stop. It was insisting I say *yes*.”

“You sure you’re not hungry?” I ask as my stomach gurgles.

“No, that was your stomach, again.”

“I meant the feeling isn’t hunger?”

She thinks about this for a moment. “Define hunger.”

“Like when I see a big, juicy cheeseburger, and—”

“Definitely not that, Big Shot.”

I stab the air, finally realizing her angle. “Ah. So, you want to put me in check, humble me, knock me down a peg and you can do that by fake dating me.”

“No, Champ. Not that. I’m not an evil, manipulative mastermind. But just for that, it’ll be Hot Shot from now on.”

“I’ve been called worse,” I mutter.

Harley remains quiet for a long moment as if she’s run out of argument steam. “My life took an unexpected turn not too long ago. Then, when I got back on track, I found myself here.

And it looks like I'll be sticking around for a while, so why not help a brother out, you know?"

Great. So, Harley thinks of me like a brother. I shouldn't be surprised.

"Speaking of brothers, did you tell Brando?"

"You mean my cousin?"

"He loves you like a brother." And would protect her like one too. I shift slightly away from her on the bench.

"No. I didn't mention it. Not sure that's a good idea, considering your friendship with him."

"But if we're faking a relationship, he's bound to find out."

I can't quite read the silence that follows. Is she weighing something? Worried? Should I brace for impact?

"I guess we'll have to tell him. But that it's fake. We have to emphasize that."

"Obviously." I cannot believe she agreed to this.

"I'll talk to him." Harley's tone is firm as if she doesn't trust me to say the right thing. "First, let's set up some game rules in case Brando asks."

"Right. Let's see. Only two players." I point from her to myself.

"Absolutely." The way she says it reminds me that beneath all Harley's tough armor, she's a woman with a heart, one that could be broken just like anyone else's.

Has anyone broken her heart? My jaw ticks. If so, I'll be right alongside Brando, ready to crack bones.

"And the game objectives," I add.

"You tell me."

Without thinking much about it, I say, "Our feelings for each other are the reasons why I ditched Jayda. I should've come forward and told her that there's been someone else. There's always been someone else my heart belongs to. That it's not fair of me to marry her when I couldn't give her all my

love. It's not honest or right." Not sure where that came from but my pulse races like I was just doing drills.

"Did you steal that from one of Brando's poetry journals?"

"No." I shake my head and only now realize my gaze didn't leave Harley's the entire time I spoke.

"I'm not sure they'll buy that. It's too out of character for you."

"They will if I explain that my reputation for being a player off the field was a result of my resisting this deep, buried love like a treasure I knew was there but had to keep hidden away. Not allowing myself to be with the gem of my eye, my true love, all these years and trying to fill the void pushed me to compensate in ways I regret." Eyes on Harley, I'm not even sure what I'm saying, only that I feel those internal flutters or whatever it was she was talking about.

Our eyes lock then she tips her head back with howling laughter.

I'm not sure about that response...or how I suddenly feel.

She wipes her eyes and then claps. "Wow. You deserve a standing ovation. The film academy should give you a golden award for such a moving and convincing profession of love and honesty."

I swallow the rest of what I suddenly feel like telling her.

"And if that goes public, you're going to have an entirely new set of fans and admirers. Women like Harper would eat that up," Harley says.

"She's married."

"And she'll be secretly mad that Ron doesn't make grandiose speeches about the gems of his love for her."

I wrinkle my nose. "Do women actually like that stuff?"

"Some women. Not this one."

"No?" I find that hard to believe.

She lifts one shoulder. "I mean, it's fine. But—"

“You practically laughed me off the stage.”

“Because you’re you and I’m—” She looks down at her hands. “Because I’m Nugget.”

“Gem, nugget, same thing.”

“Like a gold nugget and not a chicken nugget?”

“Yeah. Wait did you think I called you nugget like the food?” My stomach rumbles.

“Like a chicken, afraid to jump off the rope swing that first summer when we moved here. The tide was low that day. I was afraid I’d hit the sand.”

I called her Nugget because her hair was so golden in the sun. Why can’t I say that now when I just recited what may as well have been a sonnet? Alright, I don’t know if that qualified as a sonnet because I was not paying attention in English Lit. Brando would know.

No, Brando can’t know.

“You okay?” Harley asks.

Giving my head a little shake, I say, “Yeah. Fine. Why?”

“You looked stricken for a second like you realized you forgot to pay a bill or bring applesauce for ABC day.”

Not sure what that means, but something inside ricochets. I can’t be nervous, can I? “I don’t worry about those kinds of things,” I say in my most casual voice.

“Must be nice,” Harley murmurs.

It never occurred to me to consider her financial situation is likely the opposite of mine.

“We should probably get you something to eat. Maybe your blood sugar is low.” She shifts to get to her feet.

Grabbing her arm, I draw her back. My pulse kicks. “What about the game rules? And I wasn’t done telling you what I’m going to tell Riptide management. Not only will I tell them all that lovely-dovey stuff, but I’ll confess what I should’ve told

the Websters from the beginning, and if this means I sacrifice my career, so be it.”

“And if you add that last part, they’ll realize they can’t blackmail you because now it’s public. That’s kind of genius. Who’s the evil, manipulative, and mastermind now?”

This time it’s my turn to laugh.

“Okay, so back to the rules. Duration of play?” Harley asks.

“How long do you have for our game?”

“No current outstanding commitments, other than helping out at the Plundering Pelican, but my sisters and their families will be here all summer too, so I think we can get things figured out in time for snowbird season. As for my job and life at the Gastrodome, I guess they get to keep the pom poms I’d use when we’d sing happy birthday to customers.”

“Then where do you go? Where are you calling home these days?”

“Back in Alabama.”

I frown. “Why? You hated it there.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“Let me rephrase that. Why? You loved it here?”

“If you didn’t notice, there aren’t a lot of job opportunities.” She looks around dismally.

“But you said you’re waitressing now. I’m literally staring at a restaurant, er, an ice cream shop.” I point to the Sip & Scoop. “And the Plundering Pelican.”

“They’re both closed. Any other rules?” she says as if wanting to change the subject.

“Let’s see. We have the number of players, the objective, duration...”

“How to play?”

“We’ll probably have to figure that out as we go. But if there are any events, you could be my guest. We’ll probably

need to be seen in public a bit to make it believable. That kind of thing.”

“Sure. But it’s pretend. It’s all pretend.” Harley’s voice wavers as if she’s trying to convince herself of something.

“And no one other than your sisters can know that. Deal?”

She spits on her hand and holds it out for me to shake. A memory surfaces from one of the first summers Harley visited. I bet her to climb a palm tree and promised that I’d make sure she had a summer supply of ice cream from the Sip & Scoop. She made me agree to it with a spit shake.

I spit on my hand and then reach for hers.

She pulls away. “Nasty. I don’t want your dirty germs on my hand.”

“But you—?”

With a mischievous gleam in her eyes, Harley says, “Just wanted to see if you remembered your promise. You still owe me one ice cream from that summer.”

“I thought I made good on that debt.”

“We were going to meet up the morning before I left, but my dad woke us at dawn because he was afraid there would be traffic since we were leaving a day later than expected.”

Scratching my head, the memory comes back. Apparently, I buried it. “Yeah. I recall waiting out there for you.” I point over my shoulder. “And waiting and waiting. You never showed, then Brando told me you left. Not even so much as a goodbye.”

“What did you want me to do, throw pebbles at your window?”

I smirk. “If it meant that I wouldn’t owe you an ice cream all these years later, yeah.”

She playfully shoves me and when I right myself, the space I put between us earlier shrinks a bit.

“What else should we consider for this game? Any components? Like the equivalent of a gameboard, pieces, and

that kind of thing?” Harley asks.

“I’ll need your bank info for the payments and you’re welcome to stay at the rental. Royal is at the Driftwood and Magnus is occupying one of the cottages until he and Lally get married.” I tell her about the big house the four of us got with a twelve-month lease.

“Okay. That could work but separate rooms.”

“What kind of boyfriend do you think I am?”

She gives me a side-eye.

Once again, regret threatens to push me under. “What’s the name of the game?”

The corner of Harley’s lip twitches. “The Romance Game, of course.”

“Of course,” I repeat. “So, you’re giving me a second chance?”

“I didn’t know there was a first.”

My lips quirk with a smile that I can’t let her see.

“You just participated in us making up the rules of this fake game of fake romance, so it’s pretty clear I’m playing along.”

“But what about the other times?” I ask, knowing I’m pushing my luck.

“Oh, you mean season three in the ‘She Swam with Sharks’ episode when you made me give you my sunhat, then threw it in the ocean and I had to swim with the baby Bonnetheads to get it?”

“The wind caught your hat.”

“Then there was season four, episode six called ‘Lost in the Dark.’”

“I thought you were with the rest of the group.”

Harley pouts. “You told me to meet you at Hidden Hammock Beach to play tag.”

“Miscommunication.”

“You were so mean.”

“I was dumb,” I say.

“Glad you admit it. But let’s not forget season eight.” The resentment in her voice tells me exactly what she means.

“The one when I didn’t take you to prom?”

Harley stares at her hands as if hurt all over again.

I swallow. “Ask your cousin.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Regret snowballs toward me. “He found out you were my date. He didn’t approve.”

“As if Brando had a say.”

“He made it very clear he did.”

“And you listened to him?”

“He’s my best friend.”

“So, you chose between him and me?”

Sucking in my cheek, I say, “I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“Me neither.”

We’re quiet for a moment.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” I say.

Harley nods. “Apology accepted.”

Relief sweeps through me.

Then she continues, “But if that’s the case, in what world do you think he’ll be okay with the Romance Game?”

“He’ll understand that you’re helping me out and because it’s fake, pretend—right?—he won’t be afraid that I’ll hurt you.”

“Yeah, okay,” she says, but the force of nature that usually drives Harley’s voice, her every action, isn’t there.

“So, were you likening our something-ship to a show with seasons?” I ask.

“Our something-ship?” she echoes.

“Were we ever together? There were the kisses at Hidden Hammock Beach—” I get a waft of her pink bubblegum scent.

“And on the peninsula.”

“And behind the bleachers,” I add.

“But it was confusing.”

“Muddled.”

“Romantic-plicated.”

“Like complicated?” I ask.

Wearing a faint smile, she nods.

I don’t think we’re on the path to simplifying the matter, either.

“Thanks for helping me with this PR patch-up,” I say.

“You’re welcome.”

The banter that’s flowed so easily, so forcefully between us over the years seems to dam up or change course, and we both watch it as if we’re not sure what to say or do now.

Clearing my throat, I say, “I’m a no-strings kind of guy and no rings, so you’re not obligated to marry me like the whole Jayda thing. Hopefully, everyone’s attention will land on a juicier story before long.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I owe you an ice cream.” My stomach rumbles.

“How about dinner first?” Harley asks.

“Sure. We’ll go to the Driftwood.”

We get up and start walking.

My thoughts from when I sat down on the bench catch up with me. “There’s just one more thing.”

“I thought you said no strings.”

“No. Not strings. More like—”

“Of course, there’s more.” Harley sighs and her hair, painted by the soft rays of golden hour, glows.

But her smile isn’t tight like it was earlier when she ran into me—the kind of smile that told me the water was not under the bridge. Nope. That she’d just as soon see me drown in it. But this is a different kind of smile—the same one I imagined her wearing on prom night.

Maybe this is the start of something new for us.

First, I have to tell her about the tangled web.

Harley



CHAPTER 7

Whatever Ryan was going to tell me is forgotten as we walk to the Driftwood along the familiar seashell path.

He said there aren't any strings, and maybe not, but there could be baggage, skeletons in his closet, or something I'm better off not knowing.

Truth is, I'm afraid to ask, so I change the subject. "Looks like Royal showed Hurricane Howie who's boss."

He tells me about how he was afraid Royal was going to tear the place down. "Or burn it to the ground."

"He wouldn't. This place is your family's legacy."

"He's more of a build his own empire kind of guy."

"In high school, he was voted most likely to be a mogul and make millions."

Ryan laughs. "He made the yearbook committee correct it to billions."

"He didn't!"

Ryan's laugh picks up right where it left off.

"And you were voted most athletic, most likely to be late to graduation, and flirtiest," I say.

"All true. Brando and I also got best bromance."

"Yeah, you two were inseparable."

"Unless I was with Royal...or you."

The flutters start up again. Never mind. They haven't stopped. Either that or I'm hungry too. "I was always jealous of you guys."

"Is that why you also got voted brattiest?"

I playfully swat Ryan. "I was not. But I was a brat to you guys sometimes."

"Let's be real. All the time, but I had my moments too."

"Like the time you threw my car keys into the sand at the beach bonfire."

"To be fair, I didn't want you to leave."

"I don't buy it." He didn't want me to leave? The only time it seemed like he wanted to be around me was when we'd make out in secret. Otherwise, he acted like I was an obnoxious little sister.

"True story. However, I didn't have much foresight that it would result in me searching for them with you for five hours."

He doesn't mention what happened when everyone else gave up, leaving the two of us alone on the hunt.

"We were romantic-plicated," I say.

"Were you thinking about the time I had you called out of the class and you thought you were in trouble then—"

My laughter catches on the memory. "Then you and Brando cut class and drove off in your grandfather's convertible, leaving me in the dust? No, I wasn't thinking about that time."

"I wanted you to come on a joy ride with us, but your cousin got ticked off when I said you were coming."

"Brando didn't want me around?"

"He was afraid you'd tell his parents and they'd make him work Friday night."

"I was practically his partner in crime, why would I do that?"

He shrugs. “Maybe you weren’t the only one who was jealous.”

We take a fork along the path that leads toward the main building at the resort, the Galleon. The lantern light illuminates the fresh landscaping and Ryan’s apologetic smile.

Like finding sea shells that wash up on the beach, I pick up and turn over all of this new information as we walk up the few steps to the door. Ryan swings it open and lets me through first.

“Before I forget, you were also voted most likely to have a kid addicted to coffee.”

My heart skips a beat. “I was not.”

“Best laugh.”

“I can’t quite remember.”

“Prettiest smile.” Ryan’s voice massages the words.

“I don’t remember that one.”

“Eyes that are unforgettable.”

“Ryan?” My voice catches.

“I’m not sure if this one made the final cut by the yearbook committee, but we were voted the cutest couple that never was.” His lips play with a smile.

I inhale sharply and then realize what he’s doing. “You’re messing with me.”

He shakes his head slowly.

“Has the game officially started?” I ask.

“You tell me.” There he goes with that flirtatiousness, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Are you trying to warm me up so it seems like we had undying crushes on each other, but for complicated reasons, we couldn’t be together? Now, only when you were nearly going to tie the knot, you realized how much you loved me.” I tap the air like I found the winning answer.

Ryan smolders.

The lobby of the main resort building has a massive compass rose on the floor. Ryan stands over the *N* for north. The corner of his mouth lifts slightly, but it's not the flirty Ryan McGregor smile. Not the winning one. Not the silly one either. This is a different kind of grin that I don't know how to read.

"I guess we'll have to work on our story, but first, I need food."

For a second, the flutters were tricking me into thinking about what he was saying when we were still on the bench about buried love had to do with us. I worried it was trying to unearth something inside me...never mind.

I have to focus on the fake relationship.

Even though we're at a place of business, being here with Ryan reminds me of home—how this place was our playground.

"I can't believe how different the Driftwood is, yet so much is the same," I say as we pass a giant bowl with a layer of sand at the bottom and already starting to fill with seashells.

"Royal tried to keep all the good stuff and in other areas, make things better."

"Please tell me the giant chess set is still out there."

"And now Jenga too, plus loads of other outdoor games."

"It makes me so happy to know that L—" I almost said that Luke will be able to have the Driftwood as part of his childhood memories. "lots of people will be able to come here."

If Ryan notices my sentence delivery is strange, he doesn't say anything.

"Here's hoping." We walk to the restaurant and grab a table outside on the patio, strung with lights.

"This is an upgrade."

"It was Isla's idea. She wanted it to be like a tropical paradise."

“Achievement unlocked. I just hope we can restore the Plundering Pelican to its former glory. Well, in a kitschy, themed restaurant kind of way.” This place is next level. Then in slow motion, a dismal thought socks me in the stomach.

“What’s wrong?” Ryan asks as I slouch into my chair.

“I assumed Brando wants to fix up the restaurant. I thought my sisters were coming to town to help. That it would be like an Owens reunion.” My eyes widen to the size of saucers. “But what if that’s not the plan? What if they’re going to take steps to fix it up to sell or close it? Brando has his business overseas. Harper and Heather have their lives out of town. And I—” This would be a good time to look into my Lukey-boy’s eyes and be reminded to have hope.

Instead, Ryan’s bright blue gaze is on me.

“The family text thread has been blowing up with plans. My dad will be driving down next weekend with some of my things—between now and then I have to decide how long I’m staying and what he should pack of mine. But no one has said anything about their objective—the outcome of the game.”

“That’s because it’s not a game. This is real life, Harley. Whatever happens, you get a say. If you want the Plundering Pelican to remain open, maybe you can help facilitate that.”

“How would I possibly? Making rent is hard enough with the t—” I almost said two of us. “I mean, it’s just tough, you know.”

“Remember, I’m helping you out because you’re helping me out.” He brushes the pads of his fingers and his thumb together in the universal sign for money.

I exhale my long-held breath. “Oh. Right. Forgot about that. Because this is a game.” I wag my finger between us.

If I’m not mistaken, Ryan flinches, but it could just be that the server surprises us with an enthusiastic greeting. “Welcome. I’m Chelsea and I’ll be your server this evening.”

Ryan orders frosty drinks and three appetizers, then asks for a few minutes to browse the menu.

I gawk, mouth open, not used to “living large.”

“Sorry. Was that—?”

“No, I’m just surprised you remembered that I liked the citrus ginger crush drink in a coconut cup and was a sucker for the bada bing coconut shrimp appetizer.” If I hadn’t trained myself to find the cheapest things on the menu, that’s what I would’ve ordered.

“You were also voted most unforgettable, Harley. Couldn’t forget you. It’s in print.”

I frown, not quite remembering that superlative. “I wonder if I still have my high school yearbook somewhere.”

In the next few minutes, we travel so far down memory lane with easy conversation, laughter, and a few debates about the accuracy of certain information, we hardly notice when the food comes. Our shared laughter fills the patio and wafts into the night like puffs of smoke from a chimney.

“You were one of us island grunions until high school,” Ryan says.

“I was only here during the summer before that, so how do you know what I was like the rest of the year? Maybe from June to Labor Day, I let my hair down.”

“Then you moved to Coco Key freshman year and joined the cheerleading team.”

“I did gymnastics growing up. If you didn’t notice, there isn’t a gym nearby, so cheerleading made sense.”

“And so did asking you out.”

“Ryan McGregor, you never asked me out.”

“Three days before school started. I saw you, Darcy, Talia, and Tallulah by the lifeguard tower at Quiet Cannon Beach.”

Gazing at the stained-glass panels of a ship with cannons, I think back to that day.

“We waved at each other.”

I nod slowly, the memory tiptoeing back to me. “You were with your brothers.” Surprisingly, Brando wasn’t there.

“I said, ‘Want to dominate high school together?’”

The space between my eyebrows pinches. “Hopefully, you’ve improved your pickup line game since then because nothing about that suggests you wanted me to go out with you.”

“Out, in, up, down. All of it, Harley.”

I splay my fingers on the table, exasperated. “How was I supposed to know?”

“I asked if you wanted to dominate high school *together*.” He emphasizes the last word.

Instead, we just tried to dominate each other—it was a constant tug-of-war between us.

“You went from being one of us to a pageant princess. I had a crush on you. Asked you out. Then you sidelined me.”

“I wasn’t rejecting you, because how was I supposed to know you were asking me out?”

His eyes sparkle. “Can I try again?” Without enough time for me to wrap my head around two trains colliding, Ryan asks, “Harley, would you like to dominate life together?”

I tip my head to the side and let out a sigh of hopelessness.

His lips quirk with a smile. “Harley, would you like to go out with me?”

“Ryan,” I hiss, afraid people in the restaurant might hear us. He’s relatively anonymous in Coco Key, but you never know when a rabid fan might spot him. It happens occasionally at the Gastrodome when a pro athlete will come in and get mobbed.

“But will you?” he presses.

I suppose we do have an agreement and now we have a story for how we “officially” got together.

“Yes, Ryan. I’ll be your girlfriend if you’ll be my boyfriend.”

He wears his most satisfied smile and nods. “I guess things have a way of turning out in the end.”

“But it’s just the beginning.”

“That too, toots.” And he’s back with his typical teasing.

“Oh, here we go. You may as well call me fart.”

The color leaves his face. “No, I meant like tootsie. Or like the guys in old black and white movies, *Hey, toots*,” he says, imitating a star from the silver screen.

“No, you meant toots like fart. Never thought I’d say this, but I prefer Nugget.”

“Then Nugget it is. And I thought we cleared that up.”

“You never said what Nugget means.”

“Nugget like gold, the color of your hair, like something rare and valuable.”

“Oh.”

“What are you going to call me?”

“Impossible.”

“Har Har.”

“Let’s be real here—”

“When have I ever not been?”

“All of the times. You’ve never been real with me.”

“Because I had thoughts about you that Brando would’ve drowned me for. He’d drown me, run me over, then throw me off the water tower.”

I incline my head with disbelief because, if nothing else, Ryan has always known how to yank my chain.

Time to change the subject. “So, now we have our reunion story. Tell me a little bit more about what I’ll find on social media about your runaway groom move.”

“I didn’t run. I was at my bachelor party and I made a casual exit.”

I can picture him sauntering through the door...and into my arms. No, I didn’t picture that. Nope. I fill my mouth with a bite of the bada bing coconut shrimp appetizer.

“I’d talked to my buddy Garrison and then Brando about my doubts.”

“That might be the first time in history that a dude left his bachelor party.”

“We were at brunch. Things were just getting started. Incidentally, Jayda’s mother planned it, so I don’t expect it would’ve gotten too wild.”

“Anything else I should know?” I instantly regret the question because there is probably a lot about Ryan’s past that I’d rather not be privy to, namely all of his ex-girlfriends, flings, and whatever sordid affairs he’s had. I’ve seen enough online to make me understand his reference to Brando’s purported murder methods. Oh, and to be clear, my cousin wouldn’t hurt a fly. Okay, maybe he’d swat one of those, but he’s a poet, for goodness’ sake, and helps run an import-export company that sources Fair Trade crafts from South America and helps plant Christian mission bases.

Ryan says, “Just one thing. Chip passed away recently and left me his journal and a pen. Well, a pen with a plume.” Sadness tinges his voice and confusion too.

I extend my hand and give the top of his a squeeze. “I’m sorry. My dad told me but mentioned there wasn’t a regular funeral, otherwise, I would’ve come.

Chip was a mysterious figure and seemed to let the boys run wild all over the island, but they were family. I have no doubt they all loved each other. I never thought about the particulars of his parents’ tragedy because I had one of my own. It was more of a *we’re in this together mentality*. I didn’t ask him for details, because I didn’t want to have to share my own.

“Miss the ‘ole guy, but you know, we’d all gotten distant over the years. Ironic that his passing brought us back together.”

“You and your brothers had a falling out?” I ask, shocked.

“More or less. We kind of went our separate ways.”

“But you were so close. Like a band or a pack or a team.”

Ryan shrugs. “We drifted. Things changed.”

Compassion runs through me because I can’t fathom not having my sisters in my everyday life, even though we live far apart. However, given this abrupt turn of events with Uncle Eddie, not for long. At least for the summer.

“In January, Chip sent us each an invitation. At least that’s what I thought it was.”

“Like to a birthday party?”

He nods slowly. “I feel dumb now. Didn’t get to say goodbye. Instead, we all showed up for the reading of his will. Well, except Emmie,” he says, referring to his sister. “She wasn’t a part of it.”

I didn’t know the youngest McGregor, mostly because she wasn’t part of her brothers’ shenanigans. Come to think of it, CJ wasn’t always either. Before Magnus graduated, it was the twins and him, then just Ryan and Royal along with my cousin.

“The will was like one big riddle. A mystery.” Ryan flips his phone in my direction and it displays a document that starts *Last Will and Testament...*

Ryan

A decorative flourish consisting of three stylized, symmetrical scroll-like elements.

CHAPTER 8

Harley squints and then pinches her fingers together to enlarge the text. When we were kids, she wore glasses. Of course, I called her four eyes. But even then, her eyes were like two butterscotch candies. In high school, she must've gotten contacts because I never saw them again.

“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.” She shakes her head slowly and passes the phone back to me.

I don’t take it. Same as the first time I heard my grandfather’s will, the words refuse to make sense. It’s like I’m hearing someone speak a foreign language or watching a video with the sound off.

Harley says, “I shouldn’t read it.”

“Please?” I ask because maybe she can help me understand what it means—not the riddles, necessarily, but the loss. She too experienced it recently when her Aunt Martina died who was very much like a mother to her.

“It’s none of my business, Ryan,” she says softly.

“This is the thing I wanted to tell you earlier when I said there aren’t any strings but—”

She must’ve glimpsed a little beyond what she read aloud because she interrupts and says, “No, this is more like a tangled web.”

I rub my hand down my face. “My sentiments exactly.”

Harley slides my phone toward me. “I’m sorry about this. I know your relationship with Chip was—” She shrugs because like me, like all of us, it’s nearly impossible to define. It was a something-ship but in a different way than the one I share with Harley. “I’m also sorry that this doesn’t seem to provide answers or closure.”

“Nope. Just more questions.”

Ones I have no idea how to answer. It’s great being back with my bros again, but until now, I didn’t realize how much I’d been avoiding, dreading, and feeling weighed down by Chip’s will.

Taking a deep breath, I say, “It’s bad enough he’s gone. Even though we’d grown distant, his larger-than-life personality made it so he was never far from my thoughts. I mean, it was like he was watching every game of mine. I didn’t realize it until it was too late, but I always sensed him with me on the sidelines. His voice in my head, giving me tips. Mostly what not to do, as if he were a football expert.” My scoff is warm-hearted.

The corners of Harley’s lips twist in a sympathetic smile. “He probably did watch all your games, Ryan. He was always at the ones in high school.”

“He wasn’t.”

“A lot of them. At least the home games.”

“I think I’d know if my grandfather was in the bleachers.”

“That’s because he wasn’t there. But I saw him with my own eyes. He sat in the commentator’s box.”

“You used to wear glasses, so just how good are your eyes?” I tease.

Her smile thins. “Ha ha. Very funny. I got contacts before high school because someone, not naming names, teased me. Now, I only need glasses for reading. My eyes are fine. I can see you clearly and you have something in between your teeth.”

“I do?” I run my tongue over them.

She flashes the brattiest smile. “Ha ha. Made you check. No, you don’t have anything in your teeth. But Chip was in the box. Mr. Gustafson was the main guy, and he always had a student assistant—usually the head cheerleader’s boyfriend Chris Jackson. She’d tell me to tell him where they’d meet during halftime.”

“You’re not making this up, are you?”

“Why would I make up such an elaborate and pointless story? I figured you knew your grandfather was there.”

I tap the air with my finger. “Ah. He sat up there because the commentator’s box was air-conditioned.”

Harley nods and her eyes dip in reverie. “Yep. And those thirty seconds relaying the message to Chris were pure climate-controlled bliss. But then I’d have to run back down the stairs and would be hotter than when I’d gone up.”

“You were definitely hot.”

“If this table weren’t between us I’d give you the atomic elbow.”

I chuckle at the way Brando, my brothers, and I used to torment each other with elbow jabs—the atomic one was the worst. “You can’t do the atomic elbow.”

“I’ve had over ten years to practice, you’d better believe I can do it.”

Holding up my hands in protest, I say, “I’m not volunteering. But everyone at Key Largo High School knew you were hot. Senior yearbook superlative: Harley Jean Owens, the hottest student.”

“If you don’t stop, I’m going to start believing you.”

“Be my guest.”

Our gazes cruise past each other as if not sure whether the light is green, yellow, or red.

My pulse kicks.

She shifts slightly as if something flutters inside.

My breath is shaky when I exhale. “I’m surprised Chip was there. News to me. So was the will. I consulted the Romance Game rulebook and you need to read this.” Her phone is on the table too and I switch them like a dealer in a shell game.

“Okay, fine. But I’m only doing it so I don’t break any rules. The Junk goes to Magnus, the Sloop, to Ryan...” She trails off and must read the rest before she goes quiet. “The Sloop?”

“The Sip & Scoop. Chip named all the buildings after boats.”

“You own the old ice cream shop?”

I nod slowly.

She keeps reading. Even though I practically have it memorized, it refuses to make sense to me. Throughout school, I could do my homework just fine. Okay, not often, but still, I could complete an assignment. When it came to taking tests, I’d choke up. Couldn’t understand the same words I’d read hundreds of times. It’s kind of like that with the will.

Harley’s voice fades, but her lips continue to move. I cannot stop staring at her lips. They’re so full, so soft, so perfect.

“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.”

Her gaze lifts to mine. It’s the perfect package, a gift really: Harley’s eyes and lips. Even though she doesn’t have great eyesight and even though she doesn’t always say what I want to hear—like acknowledging that I think she’s hot or saying yes to being together with me freshman year—I could speak clearer too.

“Ryan, what if Chip wasn’t giving you questions to answer, but simply wanted to stoke your curiosity?”

My mind wakes up with a jolt at that possibility. “Could be. Knew there was a reason I kept you around, kiddo.”

“I thought it was Nugget.”

“Toots?”

She kicks me under the table.

“Ow. Careful with those tootsies.”

Royal appears and tilts his head toward me. “The two of you have been flirting since you were thirteen, so I’m not sure whether this is a good thing or if I should get the firehose now that you’re seated together at a table in public.”

“Is that what you call flirting?” Harley asks.

“More like taking the snot out of each other.” The words are almost robotic, scripted, so no one thinks we’re a “thing.”

“Don’t make it sound so sexy,” Royal says.

“It’s just proof that we’re frenemies,” Harley adds.

“Welcome to the Driftwood, we hope you’ve enjoyed dinner at the patio,” Royal says, moving past our banter.

“You deserve the atomic elbow,” I mutter.

Royal steps back. “What memory hole did you dredge that one out of?”

“Harley and I have been reminiscing. She was just reading Chip’s will. So not flirting. She’s wildly impressed that he left me a diary.”

“And a pen,” Royal adds.

“A pen with a plume.” Which makes about as much sense as Royal thinking that Harley and I have been flirting. *Pshaw.*

“By the way, have you read the diary?” Royal asks.

“No. It’s in the safe.”

“Why?” my twin asks.

“To keep it safe.”

“From who? What? Obviously, he wanted you to read it.”

“Even if the printing was anywhere near legible, which it’s not, I can’t read it.” I couldn’t bring myself to.

Harley crosses her arms in front of her chest. “You think we’re that gullible? You can’t read? Really, Ryan? Your brother knows you’re not illiterate. You’re some other kinds of *iterate*, but not that.”

Royal laughs in public, a rare sight.

“What’s iterate?” I ask.

Harley scowls at me. “I don’t know. It just makes you sound dumb.”

“You sound dumb.”

“You just told us you can’t read,” Harley says, flabbergasted.

I inhale slowly, about to tell them that I can’t bring myself to read it and the handwriting is very fancy, when Royal says, “I’m going to go get the journal from the safe.”

Harley stews with indignation. It comes off her in waves, making the silence between us uncomfortable. We both pick up our phones.

“Wait. That’s mine,” she says.

“Mine now.”

She launches from her chair, reaching for it. I’m quite a bit taller and hold it away from her as she throws herself against me, trying to reach for it. I’m not complaining as her soft, warm body knocks into mine.

“Ryan, you’re making a scene.”

There’s hardly anyone left in the restaurant.

“You’re the one dancing around there like a show bear.”

She goes still. “A show bear?”

“I’m just going to give you my phone number since we’re dating,” I whisper.

“Fake dating,” she whisper shouts back.

“Mmhmm.” To my surprise, her password is the same as her locker combo. I only left a rotten fish in there once. Other times, I left doughnuts, Halloween candy, and once, a flower. But she doesn’t know that it was from me.

I snap a selfie and send it to my phone number so now we have a text thread started. I label it *Mr. Right*. “Calm down, Nugget. I’m entering my digits so you can call me.”

She launches herself at me like a flying squirrel. My finger slides across the screen, opening the photo app. I can handle five hundred pounds of muscle coming at me in a tackle. Harley is a lightweight. A feather compared to a wall of bricks. But one I want to hold on to, to feel her valleys and hills, to melt together.

My pulse throws the ball out of sight. Didn’t see that coming.

Multiple photos of an adorable baby bring me to my senses. “Who’s this guy? Cute baby. Harper’s or Heather’s? How many kids do they have now? You’re the last of the Owens women standing. Just never found Mr. Right, huh?” I waggle my eyebrows.

She drops to her feet and pouts. “Lots of Mr. Wrongs.”

“I know the perfect guy for you.”

“But the rules. This is a two-player game.”

My lips barely resist a mega huge smile. “I meant me.”

Royal appears and slaps the journal into my hand. “Read it. We want a full report.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Make sure he reads it,” Royal says to Harley.

“When has he ever listened to me?”

“Oh, he listens to you.”

She goes back to the table and slips her phone into her purse. "I'll meet you outside."

"Be there in a second."

Royal gives me a *See, told ya so look* then leans in and whispers, "You and Harley, really? You once told me that if I ever found the two of you together, to spray you down with a firehouse. Plus, you're benched until the stuff with your team blows over. You need to focus."

"So now everyone is keeping track of my career?" I ask.

"More like your scandal."

"I can date and focus."

"Since when?"

"Harley and I have an agreement."

"That can't end well. What about Brando? He will tear you limb from limb, then throw you to the gators if you hurt her."

"I won't."

"Famous last words." Royal grunts.

I catch up to Harley as she exits into the chilly night with an onshore breeze. She shivers.

"Thanks for dinner," she says.

"You can thank Royal."

"Did you just dine and dash or did I unknowingly go on a date with your brother? He's a married man. We need to get a few things straight, Hot Shot. This is a two-player game. Do I need to spell that out?"

"From the looks of things on your phone, you have quite a few photos of guys."

"Of Luke?" She goes strangely quiet. "Of a baby?"

I nudge her slightly. "I was teasing." Taking a risk and lacing my arm across her shoulder, I say, "Nope, Nugget. It's just you and me."

Harley must be cold because she doesn't shrug me off.

Without thinking or necessarily meaning to, we follow the path to the beach. The moon is bright tonight and makes the white sand glow. We plop down on the beach and chat for a few moments about dinner, the resort, and the will. It's natural, normal.

I draw a grid in the sand and place an *X* in the center. Harley looks at me in question then makes an *O* in one of the boxes.

All the while, we talk about my grandfather's legacy.

"So, you think he left you guys a treasure hunt?"

"Seems so. He was always sending us on quests and adventures. According to family legend, our great-great-great—not sure how many to go back—grandmother got involved in piracy. Magnus recently said she was called the Devil's Charm and captained a ship called the Crimson Tide."

"For real?"

I shrug. "Legend and lore. Chip believed it. CJ thinks so. I think Royal and Magnus are on board too."

"What about you?"

"I got a journal and a pen—"

"With a plume."

I'm surprised she remembered that detail. "The Sloop—an ice cream shop that's seen better days and a cryptic message: When inside is out, what do you do?"

"So maybe it's less about what you think and more about what you do."

I shrug, landing another *X* in the tic-tac-toe box. Harley wins the first round and does a seated happy dance.

"Rematch," I say, drawing another grid.

We start the game over.

"What was the part about diving, the shallowest humbling and—?"

“Obviously, I’m the shallowest.” Before she argues, I say, “Think about it: 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. CJ is the youngest, Magnus is the strongest, and Royal is dang clever. That leaves me. The shallowest.”

I can’t deny that it stings my grandfather thought so little of me. As if reading my mind, Harley rubs a soothing circle on my back with the flat of her palm.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” she asks.

“What do you mean?”

“If I told you that you’re a terrible football player, what would you do?”

I balk. “I’d say you don’t know anything about the sport. Check the scoreboard. Look at the stats.”

“And if I told you that you’re shallow, what would you do?” Harley asks, not backing down.

I see her point. “I’d prove you and him wrong.”

She nods slowly and our gazes hover together in question.

“By going deep, do you think he means I should dig for treasure?”

“I’m not sure it’s a literal instruction. But I remember that time you and CJ came into the Plundering Pelican, insisting some of the lost Trabuco gold was in the treasure chest where we kept the menus.”

I chuckle. “Wow. Totally forgot about that.”

“You were hunting for treasure.”

“Do you think it could be buried here?”

“At Driftwood Beach?”

Harley nudges my foot with her foot. It’s strangely intimate. Her toenails are painted pink. The tomboy I knew didn’t smell like pink bubblegum or have pink toenails. And I certainly didn’t feel this way when I was around her.

When I get three in a row on our sandy tic-tac-toe board, I say, “You know what the X’s and O’s also stand for, right?”

“Symbols for the offense and defense on a football play?”

“Kisses and hugs.”

Harley must sense me looking at her, gauging her reaction because she peers at me through her long lashes, her gaze sweeping mine.

My pulse kicks.

She bites her lip.

We both lean in slightly.

My thoughts turn fuzzy except for one.

Her lips. Mine.

“Kisses win over hugs.” My voice is scratchy.

“You got three in a row, Hot Shot,” she whispers.

I cup Harley’s jaw. Her skin is buttery soft.

We sink closer together, and I breathe in her pink bubblegum scent.

The answer to my silent question reflects in her eyes.

I drag in a breath.

Then our lips crush together in an explosion. It’s atomic. However, nothing is destroyed except my longing. She fills me up and I tell myself I won’t let her down.

Harley



CHAPTER 9

Ryan McGregor's lips are on mine and it's not the first time. But it feels like the best time.

His fingers trace their way along my jawline. I lean into his touch.

In the beginning, our lips brush softly, tenderly. But I know where this is going.

Ryan's hands lace into my hair and mine curl into his.

Our lips move together like they've been waiting for this moment all this time.

My hands slide along the ridges of his muscles. I feel the bump of his biceps under my palms. His arms wrap around me, pulling me close, closer, closest.

My body remembers what it's like to kiss Ryan McGregor and I want more.

Soon the kiss turns hungry and intensifies.

The world around me loses focus, and it's not because I lost a contact or need my glasses. It's because the man in front of me has my attention—all of it.

He smells like clean cotton and soap. He feels solid, immovable and that's welcome because I'm at risk of floating away right now—and in life.

Ryan tethers me here in a way that I didn't realize I needed. He reminds me of who I am—not just one of the girls who works at the Gastrodome. Or that single mom who can

only afford a studio apartment and forgets ABC Day. He reminds me that I'm Harley Owens—that I belong somewhere and have a community here on this island.

Ryan shifts away slightly, his arms still wrapped around me. "Come back," he whispers.

We were still kissing, but he must've noticed my thoughts sharpen.

"I'm here."

"Do you want to be?" he whispers.

When our gazes meet, my stomach flutters. But it isn't only that. It's my heart too.

"Yes."

Our chests press together. My heart drums against his. Ryan's hands slide down my back. Mine crest his shoulders before winding around the nape of his neck. His cup the sides of my head.

We both want so much. It's a gentle give-and-take that gives way to hunger and then shifts back again. We follow each other's cues, equally matched as the kiss deepens.

Eventually, my thoughts flutter back as if drawn in by the wake of how amazing this feels. I lean away ever so slightly. "What just happened?"

"This is what happens when I win tic-tac-toe." The second the last word drops from his lips, his mouth is back on mine.

Then we should play more often.

Ryan turns up the volume, and the kiss turns demanding. I soften it after a beat then reverse course, hungry for more before he returns us to a sweet spot as his hands wrap around my waist.

Mine tighten around him. It's like we know exactly how to play this game and it's all ours. We're the only two who can kiss like this, and the bonus is that we both win. I like those results.

The tide washes in and over our feet, reminding me we still occupy space and time.

“What are we doing?” I ask, not sure if this kiss should continue. I know what I want to happen, but I’m not sure it should happen.

“I don’t know, but I like it.” His thumb grazes my lower lip.

I do too. I like it so much. Our mouths crash together again like waves hitting the shore.

But when they recede, again, I ask, “No, really, what are we doing?”

“Kissing,” Ryan says, his voice low, mouth on mine once more.

“Kissing,” I repeat, my lips meeting his.

“Yeah, you and me,” he says between still more kisses.

Breaking apart, but unable to tear my gaze from Ryan’s lips, I whisper, “Last I checked, you and I were voted the least likely people to kiss.”

His lips press to my neck, trail along my shoulder, warming it, and then find their way under my jawbone before rambling back to my mouth.

Before we meet for another kiss, he says, “We’ll have to consult the yearbook.”

It’s like we’re chasing each other’s lips between words until we finally come together for another long kiss.

Eventually, I ask, “What about the rulebook?”

“We made the rules. Remember? This is a two-player game. We’re dating.”

“It’s not called the Dating Game.”

“No, it’s the Romance Game.”

“Is this how you usually romance ladies?”

“No, Nugget. I’m only getting started, and you’re not just one of the ladies.” Ryan’s voice is deep, commanding, and

emphatic.

“Then what am I?”

“Right now, you’re mine.”

We dive into the deepest kiss yet.

Despite what Chip said in the will, this man isn’t shallow. He’s thorough. He fills me with the kind of affection and satisfaction I didn’t realize I wanted, needed.

Ryan and I eventually break contact and he pulls me close before we lie down in the sand, gazing up at the stars. I nestle against him, resting my head in the crook between his arm and chest.

After a beat, during which I count the ones in his heart, he says, “I think you like me.”

“Definitely not.”

With all the confidence in the world, he replies, “The kiss said otherwise.”

I make a little dismissive snort. “I’m not convinced.”

“You like me and you liked the kiss.”

“That’s a categorical no.”

This is the game we play, our banter, the teasing back and forth, building tension until we both explode—explode with a kiss that confirms Ryan’s words are absolute truth, but not one I’ll let in easily.

“I think we should try again,” he says.

I bite the inside of my lip. “Hard pass.” The yearning in my voice makes me an absolute liar.

Ryan’s eyes flash with longing.

The flutters inside lift and my chest swells.

His lips part slightly and he wears a hazy, lazy smile. It’s one I can’t resist and I don’t want to, anyway.

The throb of my heart increases as I lean closer with only one destination in mind. I curl into Ryan. We melt together,

turning liquid and then atmospheric after our mouths meet.

We kiss again and again. There is no beginning and no end. I float into the clouds. Flying higher and higher until all the stars in the sky rain down like glitter. New galaxies flash into being. The universe, at least my own, will never be the same.

This time when we part, he says, “You sure about that whole not liking me or the kiss thing?”

“I’m not sure about anything.”

Eventually, he walks me to my aunt and uncle’s house where I’ll stay for one more night until my sisters and their families descend tomorrow. Then I’ll have to tell Ryan about Luke. My stomach knots. I’m not sure why.

We stand on the porch, safely shrouded in the darkness.

Ryan laces his fingers through mine and in a low voice says, “Forget treasure maps. If *X* marks any spot, it’s where you are.”

“Your pickup lines don’t work on me.”

“That wasn’t a pickup line.”

I recall what he’ll tell his coaches about gems and treasure.

“Then what was it?”

“The truth.”

“Stop. You don’t have to pretend right now. The world isn’t watching. It’s dark. Only someone with night vision could see us right now.”

“Brando might be on the other side of the door.”

“His name is Brando not Rambo.”

Ryan steps back slightly. “And he’ll kill me if he—I have to talk to him.”

“We can explain. He’ll understand.”

“Not likely,” Ryan mutters.

“Well, you don’t have to keep up the charade if it’s just the two of us.” I shift from foot to foot.

“I’m not playing.”

“But I thought this was—”

“Practice? No, Harley. It’s the real deal.”

It feels real, but I’m afraid of what that might mean.

Ryan doesn’t let me argue anymore and leans in, planting a big ‘ole whopper of a kiss on my lips. He plants a flag, marking me as his, and I don’t mind a bit.

When I go inside, I lean on the back of the door, whisper screaming like a high schooler who just went on the most perfect date with her crush.

I suppose I did.

Then I go silent, motionless except for my heaving chest, realizing he’s still on the porch.

“Me too, Nugget. Me too,” he says before his footsteps fade into the night.

Much like in high school, I go up to my room and flop onto my bed, then stare at the ceiling and my thoughts start colliding.

I truly didn’t realize Ryan had asked me out on that day before the start of freshman year. It’s a blurry memory and a blurry Romance Game we’re playing.

Replaying our conversation on the bench, then shifting to the Driftwood and finding out about Chip’s will, wandering to the beach, and then back here was like binge-watching an entire season of a sitcom. Or a drama. Or an adventure and mystery. All of it. Maybe the Romance Game isn’t so much that as it’s our story.

Two kids who played together, grew up and had secret crushes that we managed by pretending we each still had cooties but kissed in secret because there was no escaping the truth.

There still isn’t.

It'll always catch up one way or another—Dad taught me that when I'd ask him about our mother.

But this is different. Ryan and I caught up to each other after all this time. Yet, he doesn't know the entirety of the truth—that I'm a mom.

He's right. I liked kissing him. I like him...a lot. And I want him to like me, but what if the fact that I was married (briefly) and have a son (who's so adorable) with someone else is a deal breaker?

But is a relationship a deal? No, this is a something-ship. A game. I have to remind myself of that as my thoughts duke it out.

Before I go to sleep, I take a look at a few photos of my sweet little Lukey-boy, relieved we'll be together tomorrow. I say a prayer for him, for our family, of gratitude for all my blessings.

Afterward, feeling more grounded, I remind myself that the last forty-eight hours were just a blip in my life—like a layover during a flight, I was merely passing through.

Still in my hand, my phone beeps with a message.

Mr. Right: Good night, Nugget. Miss you already.



I don't know what time it was when I finally fell asleep last night because Ryan and I texted until my phone's battery died, but I wake up to clattering from downstairs.

Occasionally, everyone wakes up and forgets where they are. I'm well aware that I lie on the single bed across from the bunk beds in the room my sisters and I shared growing up—though we all know Princess Harper would often sneak to the guest bedroom with the double bed when my dad wasn't here.

My groggy confusion comes from not being sure what year it is. My sisters' voices filter from below along with Brando and Uncle Eddie. It smells like someone is making pancakes—pirate pancakes by the scent of chocolate. Then my father's

low, rumbly voice from years of smoking filters up and everyone laughs—he’s good at making people laugh.

I bounce out of bed and race downstairs. Glimpsing myself in the mirror in the bathroom at the end of the hall, my hair is a snarly mess and I’m wearing an old school spirit shirt that says *Largo Longdoggers*—Heather was on the surf team. Then I remember that I’m a fully grown woman with a son.

My heart doubles, grows. My family is back here, together again, and so is my boy. I bounce into the kitchen, not sure who to hug first.

“Family hug,” I call.

Everyone goes so quiet, even the kids, we can all hear the sizzle of butter on the pancake griddle. They’re so still, I’m afraid this is a dream.

But then Luke extends his arms. “Ma!” My dad gets to his feet, surprisingly spry for having worked so many years doing hard labor, and wraps his arms around me.

He whispers, “I missed this too.”

Then everyone piles in. The entire Owens clan is one big squishy, happy hug for a long minute before Heather hollers, “The pancakes are burning.”

Her three kids rush toward the stove along with Uncle Eddie.

Heather’s husband calls them off with a request to set the long table outside. Harper’s clan hoists the flags with their dad—the US flag first and the pirate flag with the Plundering Pelican logo. Uncle Eddie blows a conch shell when the food is ready, and Dad makes more coffee.

The bustle is so much like it was when we were younger, except Aunt Martina is missing, and there are lots of kids here. It’s only then that I realize Brando is absent.

“Where’s—?”

“Looking for me?” he asks, startling me from the crushed seashell path and not from upstairs.

“Late night?” I ask.

“You tell me.”

I sense a blush coming on, but I just rub my cheek against Luke’s and say, “Are you wondering what your uncle is up to? Yeah, me too.”

Of course, Luke doesn’t quite understand, given he’s barely twelve months old, but reading between the lines, Brando knows that I was out late last night or he’s deflecting his own activity. But with whom? We only just got back here and Brando did not have a Ryan. At least not that I know of.

Does that mean I do? Have I always?

Before I can think more about that, we gather around the big table. Uncle Eddie says the blessing and we dig in. Conversations start but don’t end as we all get distracted and pulled in different directions in the best of ways.

I catch my dad grinning. I’m guessing the love and liveliness gathered around this table is what prompted him to make the tough decision to have us live here in high school instead of back in Alabama. Granted, he was probably also terrified of dealing with three teenage girls without a woman’s influence. Aunt Martina loved us so well—even when she had to remind us to behave. To be fair, I was the unruliest.

Uncle Eddie’s smile falters for the briefest moment as if he too thinks about her. And it’s then I realize I don’t want this to be fleeting. I want us to gather around this table as often as possible and not just one week in the summer and at Christmastime. I want Luke to have this kind of family life all the time.

“I’m staying,” I blurt.

“What?” Harper asks.

“I’m staying in Coco Key to live.”

My dad smiles knowingly. “Thought so.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“Don’t mention it. I packed up the apartment. You didn’t have too much. Your car is at Harper’s, so it’s not that far. I’m retiring in three years and I think this would be a nice place to hang up my hat.”

“Dad, you need to wear a hat in the sun, how many times do I have to tell you that?” Harper asks, who is very invested in UV protection.

“Thank you for the reminder, darling.”

But before we can discuss future plans, the kids erupt into maple syrup-induced chaos. Once we have everything cleaned up, Luke goes down for a nap, and the husbands take the kids to the beach. Heather and Harper corner me.

“We need to talk,” Heather says.

“We were thinking,” Harper adds.

Dread swims in my stomach. “About what?” Do they know about Ryan? Do they not want me to live here?

“We want to run the Plundering Pelican,” Heather announces.

“Oh,” I say, actually staggering backward. “Yeah. That’s awesome.”

Heather adds, “Brando is going to handle marketing. I’m going to organize the kitchen. Harper has the front.”

She launches into plans for game nights, updated employee uniforms, and introducing karaoke and live music on the weekends.

“And me?” I ask when I get a word in.

“It’ll be all hands on deck.”

“But we can’t have too many cooks in the kitchen.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to wear the chef’s hat,” I joke.

“No, of course not.”

“I guess I can waitress.”

Heather and Harper exchange a look.

“What?”

“Yeah, of course,” Heather says.

“Maybe you can help with desserts or something,” Harper adds.

“Why are you two acting weird?”

“Us? More like you.”

They both stare at me. I shift away, feeling like I’m under a microscope but have no idea why.

“Harley, what’s going on?” Heather asks.

“What?”

“Is there an echo in here?” Harper asks.

“You have a rosy glow.” Heather studies me.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“She can’t be pregnant again. At least, it’s very unlikely so soon. Is *DesTroy* back in your life?” Harper calls him that because of his destructive powers.

“No, of course not.”

Heather gives what I can only describe as a *mom look*. I pity her children. “No, she passed the test.”

“The test?” I tuck my chin.

“If I deploy that look, if any of the children flinch within the first fifteen seconds, something is afoot.”

“Nothing is afoot. Troy isn’t back.”

“If he was, I’d *destroy* him,” Harper practically growls.

“What was that family love fest stuff down there?” Suspicion laces Heather’s voice because I wasn’t the warm, fuzzy sister. More like the bratty, you’ll find pencil shavings in your pancake butter sister.

“I missed you guys.”

“I thought we’d traveled back in time because you looked just like you did in high school, but something was different.”

“But Miss Sassy Pants didn’t act like it. No, she was acting like she’s in love.”

“Is it wrong to love my family? And I missed Luke.” I look anywhere but at them because it’s only a matter of time before they figure me out. The heat in my cheeks indicates that I am experiencing a deep blush. There’s no way it’ll escape my sisters’ notice.

“What did you do last night?”

“You should ask Brando. He’s up to something.”

“Don’t avoid the question.” Heather narrows her eyes.

Harper arches an eyebrow. “If she doesn’t tell, it’ll be on the Coconut Wireless by the end of the day.”

“Anything worth mentioning? Anyone worth mentioning?” Heather probes.

“What did you have for dinner?”

“The treasure hunt on a moonlit night was purely platonic. Mostly. There was no kissing.” I swallow. Kind of.

I have to get my mind off Ryan, but I succumb to Heather and Harper’s expert interrogation tactics and tell them almost everything that happened last night.

“So, there is something afoot,” Harper says.

“A game is afoot,” Heather adds.

But I’m not sure if it’s a game after all.

“Are you still in love with Ryan?” Harper asks.

“I was never in love with him.”

They both break out into hysterical laughter.

“We could create a dating app profile for her. Hook her up with a tourist on the islands. I bet Rosalie knows about any eligible bachelors around here,” Harper says.

“I am not interested in your or anyone’s matchmaking services.”

Heather teases, “That’s because you’re in love with Ryan.”

They break into the K-I-S-S-I-N-G song, teasing me in a way that only sisters can.

“No, it’s not love. It’s a Romance Game. A two-player game. We made up rules,” I try to explain.

Their laughter eventually must wake up Luke because he calls for me.

Ryan doesn’t know about him. I’m afraid that if he does, he’ll think less of me for being an idiot and saying yes to Troy. He’s the exact kind of guy Ryan would despise. Me too, if I had been thinking clearly.

I could blame Heather and Harper for this predicament. They suggested I come down here. Had I remained in Alabama, I wouldn’t have run into Ryan, literally.

He wouldn’t have been able to propose a fake relationship and the K-I-S-S-I-N-G last night wouldn’t have happened.

What’s he going to think when he finds out about my living, breathing—and irresistibly adorable, if I do say so myself—secret?

I let out a long sigh. As for that R&R Heather and Harper suggested as part of my trip here to check on Uncle Eddie, more like R&D as I figure out what this strange fluttering inside actually means.

What will happen if I’m honest with myself?

Ryan

A decorative flourish consisting of three stylized, symmetrical scroll-like elements.

Seated on the bench outside Beans & Books, my brothers and I speak in hushed tones.

“You think that’s a wise idea?” I ask, not quite believing that I’m the voice of reason for once.

“Listen, we know what we know. But we don’t know what we don’t know,” CJ says.

“Is that a riddle?” I ask.

CJ runs his hands through his shaggy hair, bleached by the sun. I’ve taken a few knocks to the head and Magnus had one explosive brain injury, but our youngest brother sounds insane right now, and the one I trust to be logical is going along with it.

“I’m just saying, it sounds risky.”

Glancing over my shoulder, Lally appears with my coffee. “A perfect pour-over for you, Ryan.”

“She got you hooked on these things too?” Magnus asks, lifting his coffee cup in my direction.

“I don’t say no to someone making coffee for me.”

“Cinnamon rolls coming up in five, four, three, two, one.” Isla appears wearing an apron and oven mitts, carrying a tray of cinnamon rolls drizzled with a glistening glaze.

We all help ourselves. “If this is the new look for Coco Key, I’m here for it,” I say, taking a bite. However, my teeth

somehow don't sink into what I'm expecting to be a soft and pillowy dough.

“So, what are we talking about? What's risky?” Isla, beaming proudly with her fresh-from-the-oven treats, lifts and lowers her eyebrows.

“Strawberry Shortcake, my dental health is at risk right now,” Royal says, setting his cinnamon bun back on the tray.

She blanches. “What's wrong?”

He says, “You tried. Let's see where you went wrong.”

“Were they too sweet?”

Royal handles this gently, lovingly. “I don't know because I couldn't bite into it. They were, how to put this delicately, they weren't delicate.”

“Hard as a rock, Isla,” I confirm.

She slouches and says, “Guys, I'm sorry. I followed Bean's recipe exactly.”

Placing his hand around her waist, Royal leads his wife back inside.

I lick the glaze off the top then holler after them, “Glaze gets a ten out of ten though!”

“We could have Lally pack these in her purse if the crew aboard the Dark Seas gets rough. She can use them as weapons,” CJ says.

She snatches the cinnamon rock from his hand and squeezes. “Oh. That is hard. Isla's gift isn't baking, but she'll get better.”

Thinking about Harley, which is an increasingly common experience with no more than sixty-second intervals between occurrences, I say, “I know someone who can help.” My gaze travels over to the abandoned Sip & Scoop. I think about how there'd often be a line outside with boaters docking for a scoop or a frosty beverage like the citrus ginger crush Harley had last night at the Driftwood restaurant.

“Who can help?” CJ asks.

I give my head a little shake, surfacing from thoughts about Harley. “Huh?”

“He’s asked you three times, brother. What’s up?” Magnus asks.

“Who asked me what?”

“Earth to Ryan. You said you know someone who can help.”

“Oh, I meant Isla in the kitchen, er, baking.”

“So not with this issue we have in our hands. Or *not* in our hands. We need the other stone, the rest of the map, and the crown in our hands.” CJ exhales long like his hands are already full.

“What CJ is trying to say is the stuff with the will is heating up with whoever Captain J is.”

“Then what?”

“Then what *what?*” CJ repeats.

“What happens after we get the last stone, the remainder of the map, and the crown?”

CJ and Magnus exchange a look.

“Then we’ll figure it out,” CJ says.

“That’s not much of a plan. In football, there’s a concept called follow-through. We know what to expect if X, Y, or Z happens.” My thoughts drift to the X’s and O’s from last night, especially the X’s.

“It’s similar in the military. We always have a contingency plan and a contingency for the contingency. but that’s because A, B, and C are known variables.”

“Are we talking about algebra or pirate treasure? Surely, in the military, you have a lot of unknowns.”

“Exactly. That’s why we adapt, overcome, and improvise.”

“Isn’t that a Marine’s saying?” CJ asks.

“It’s a brotherhood saying,” Magnus says.

“I’m okay with getting on that boat,” Lally says.

I’m about to ask to see the letter she received, supposedly from the Dark Sea’s captain, when the familiar trill of squealing fans comes from nearby.

Generally, men lower their voices a few octaves when they want something signed or a photo. The female contingent releases an ear-piercing shriek that some of the guys on the team call the un-mating call, as if we’re all a bunch of birds.

Knowing what’s coming, I separate myself from the group and indulge the requests for a few selfies and sign some T-shirts and other sports swag. I used to think of it as a major flex, indicating that I was wanted and important. Now, I’m not so sure. Back home, it doesn’t seem to matter as much.

When I turn back to my brothers, a woman with golden blonde hair stands under the eave of Beans & Books but somehow still in a patch of sunlight.

With a wave to the Miami Riptide superfans, I saunter over to the group by the dock.

“Good morning.” My voice is scratchy, reminding me that last night we stayed up way late after I texted good night. It was a good night, but that didn’t mean sleep. It was us reminiscing and teasing each other in digital ink for at least three hours.

“What’s good here?” Harley asks, gesturing to the bookstore from which we all hold branded paper cups.

“Not the cinnamon rolls,” I say.

“At least not today,” Lally adds.

Harley opens her mouth, presumably to ask why when instead of words, a yelp comes out. She hops around, brushing her hands over the chest of her crochet halter top I recall from high school.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Lizard,” Magnus says.

“Is that some kind of code?” Lally asks.

Harley continues to do what's either an interpretive modern dance or is panicked. Then she crouches down, chest to knees, and waves the back of her top away from her body.

"Are you overheated? She needs ice. Bring Harley ice. Someone help," I call, seized with worry. "Were you stung by another bee?"

A large hand lands on my back. "Brother, she's fine."

Popping to standing, Harley says, "Yes. I'm fine. Sorry, a lizard went down my shirt." She glares at me.

I stare back, remembering the last time I saw her wearing that top. We were at a BBQ for the football team and the cheerleaders were there too, all wearing our high school's team colors—teal and yellow.

"Did you prank me?" Harley gasps.

"Just now or—?"

Face pinched, she says, "Did you put a lizard down my shirt, Ryan McGregor?"

Holding my hands where she can see them, I say, "Absolutely not."

"I've had eyes on him this whole time. Ryan is innocent in this case, but I can't account for his guiltlessness on other occasions," Magnus says smartly.

Harley lifts an eyebrow into a sharp arch. "My nephew has a baby bearded dragon, Gandalf, and I found the thing in the bathroom this morning."

"So cute," Lally says.

"Maybe he pranked you," I say.

Harley wrinkles her nose. "Doubtful and not cute when you're brushing your teeth."

Lally cites several lizard fun facts. Meanwhile, I cannot stop thinking about Harley in that shirt. Today, or all those years ago. The party was at Jeff Simpson's pool and I walked by at the same time she fell in. The guys had dared me to go swimming with her, but that's not how I meant for it to

happen. She thought I was about to push her in and jumped out of the way at the same time Joey Marciano streaked by. Their near collision sent her into the water. Of course, she blamed me for the unexpected dip.

“Thinking about Simpson’s pool party?” Harley says, arms across her chest.

“How’d you know?”

“You have the same satisfied look on your face.”

“I blame that shirt.”

“McGregor, what am I going to do with you?”

The corner of my lip lifts. “I can think of a few things.”

“And that’s our cue to leave. Goodbye, love birds,” Magnus says.

“Are the flamingos out?” Lally asks, looking around as they walk away.

Before I can dial up the charm a notch, the squealing of more football fans comes toward me like a cloud of locusts. Apparently, word has gotten out.

I know I’ve got it bad when all I can think about is Harley: Harley’s favorite foods and drinks, Harley at the beach, Harley’s clothing. Harley this, Harley that, Harley everything all the time.

“It’s selfie time,” one of the fans drones, making a kissy face toward me.

My gaze doesn’t leave Harley and the way the crochet knit halter top hugs her curves and highlights her sun-tipped shoulders with a smattering of freckles.

“Number fourteen, our favorite,” a second adds, draping herself over me.

My eyes locked on Harley, I hope she can read my mind this time. I want nothing to do with this situation with the fans.

The third woman hurls questions at me about my relationship status, Jayda, and everything that happened before

and after the bachelor party. It feels very much like an inquisition when my single ambition in life right now is Harley's attention.

But instead of a knowing smile of her understanding that this is part of my job and I no longer take any pleasure in it, her arms cross over her chest and she wears the sassiest, brattiest expression.

The three Riptide fans must sense the ice coming from her gaze despite the morning sun and they scuttle off.

"Did you want a coffee?" I ask.

"No."

"Something to eat? Typically Beans & Books has great muffins, pastries, and uh..." I trail off because she's acting more annoyed than the lizard incident when she thought I'd pranked her.

Is she jealous of the attention those women were giving me? No way.

"I came into town to see if there are any doughnuts for everyone back at the house."

I try to steer the conversation toward family stuff and away from fans. "Your sisters and their families arrived? I can't believe they're married with kids."

"It's really no big deal." If her teeth were sharper, those words would've torn flesh.

"I didn't mean it in a bad way. I just—"

"Some people want to get married, have kids, and lead a simple life, Ryan. Is that so hard to believe?"

Tucking my chin back, I say, "Not at all. I think it's cool. That's not what I meant—"

"Well, you can take your famous life and go back to Miami for all I care." At that, she marches toward the Treasure Chest.

"Their doughnuts aren't very good," I call.

Before she goes inside, a guy wearing sunglasses, baggy shorts, and a souvenir-style T-shirt stops her. It's not Brando. It's not one of my brothers. My hackles lift. I stalk over there in case it's unwanted attention.

But she probably gets a lot of attention from all kinds of guys. I bet she's dating someone back in Alabama right now. Someone who misses her, takes her on dates, and leaves her special treats like chocolate hearts and flowers.

Who am I kidding? She's not a chocolates and flowers kind of woman. Or is she? Unfortunately, I don't know. But it is a fact that Harley is hot.

No, no. She's not hot. She's Harley. I've been trying to convince myself of this for a couple of days now. The big stop sign is that Harley is my best friend's cousin. We may as well be siblings. She's off-limits. Forbidden. I repeat this in my mind like lines I'm supposed to memorize.

She's not hot. She's Harley.

But Harley is hot.

I scrub my hand down my face just before I reach Harley and the guy whose gaze on her confirms my case.

She and I agreed to a two-person game. However, she can still talk to other men. Or maybe she just turned the gameboard upside down because of the way the fans were acting. Perhaps it's already over.

She won.

"Ryan? Ryan McGregor?" The guy, seemingly having forgotten about the total babe in front of him, extends his hand for a fist bump. "Remember me? Jeremy Mueller. We were in science together."

I give him a fist bump but don't remember who he is. "Oh, right. Nice to see you."

"Can we get a selfie? Man, I'm a huge fan. Can't believe you're back here of all places. How's Miami treating you?"

While he peppers me with questions, I step closer to Harley who all but fades into the stucco wall of the store with

the way this guy just forgets about her.

Taking a risk that feels a lot bigger than Lally boarding a pirate ship, because there's no telling how Harley will react, I slide my arm across her back.

“Oh, are you guys—?” Jeremy asks. “I didn't mean anything. I just thought she was single because—” He glances at her hand.

She slides it behind her back. “I should go.”

“I'm going with you.”

“Wait. Are you guys, ya know, a thing? Because Harley, I'll take your number if you're—”

“No,” I say.

“No?” they both repeat.

No, he can't have her number or no we're not together? The Romance Game was strictly for the cameras, for the fans. This is a dude from high school who I hardly remember. Where does the game begin and end? I search Harley's face, hoping not to see the same icy irritation I did moments ago when the female fans fawned over me.

“She's looking for doughnuts,” I say as if that's an answer to either of their questions.

We go into the store, and after browsing around for less than two minutes, Harley's stormy body language tells me she's still upset.

“Come on, I know where we can find doughnuts.”

“It's not essential. We had pancakes earlier. My dad took—I mean he suggested doughnuts might be nice.”

“Two islands over. Dough Boy. Best doughnuts south of Miami.”

“You know this, how?” Eyes raking over me, she pauses on my abdominal area which is pure muscle. “I guess I'm not above bribery.”

“I’ll bribe you with a trip there so we can talk, but if I bring you, I insist you tell me what’s really on your mind.”

“That’s not exactly how bribery works.”

Scooping Harley under my arm like a football, I race toward my SUV, parked behind Beans & Books. To my surprise, she doesn’t once beg me to put her down.

Once inside the vehicle, I gasp when she puts on her seatbelt.

“What are you doing and where is Harley Jean Owens?” Her not wearing a seatbelt when in my car back in high school, if we rode in together, was a point of contention.

“I used to do that to annoy you.”

“Does that mean you trusted my driving abilities?”

“More like I wanted to get under your skin.”

“And there I thought you liked to live on the edge. I was worried about your safety.”

“It worked.” She winks.

We’re both quiet for a beat because that wink does something strange to my pulse that has nothing to do with the revving engine.

I clear the cobwebs from my throat and say, “About that thing with the fans back there. Can we call a truce?”

“Why would we need to do that?”

“It’s not good to hold grudges. It’s better to forgive. Hanging onto things can give you hemorrhoids.”

“Pull over,” Harley demands.

“Why? Are you sick?”

“I never want to hear you use that word again. Ew. Yuck. No.”

I chuckle and remain on the road, I say, “What about through sickness and health?”

“We’re not married, Ryan.”

“What about the Romance Game?”

“Through sickness and health are nowhere in the rulebook.”

“Fine. But an official truce. No more teasing. Tell me how you feel. Let’s be honest with each other.”

She sighs as if not yet willing to give in.

So, I do. I give in to more of the truth.

“After I asked you out at Quiet Cannon Beach, and you rejected me, Brando got word that I was interested in you. He wasn’t pleased.”

“Did he threaten you?”

“More or less. I didn’t want to mess with our friendship. I told myself I had to treat you like a bro. One of the guys. Not a total babe. Which was hard. You were a cheerleader. Took over as kicker for John Wallis when he injured his ankle junior year.”

“That was pretty epic.”

“It was so hot.”

“I know. Talk about a long summer,” she says, dismissing my comment.

“No, you were hot. But I had to think about you as one of the boys. Unless we were kissing and when you were jumping around in your cheerleading costume.”

“I can’t tell if you’re messing with me or not, Ryan.”

“I blame Brando. He declared you off-limits. I had feelings for you. Dumb, immature ones. And now... Now you think I’m messing with you.” I all but pound my fist on the steering wheel.

Harley twists in the seat to face me, “Ryan, my cousin isn’t in charge of my love life. For the record, I’m not off limits.”

My pulse kicks as we pull into a parking spot at the doughnut shop.

Harley gazes at me intently, her lips parted slightly.

I lean over the center console and say, “Thank you for clearing that up.”

“If you must know, I was jealous of those women. I don’t like them touching you, draping themselves over you like how Harper uses her stationary bicycle as a clothes rack.”

“I hate it, just so you know. But I don’t hate you. Not even a little bit.”

She straightens slightly as if surprised. “Is that so? Could’ve fooled me.”

“No, you’re the one who acts like you hate me.”

Lips pressed together, she shrugs a little as if reluctant to admit that I’m right. “I guess this is a start.”

“I’d like to think this is the start of more than a something-ship, Harley.”

The space closes between us as someone knocks on the window of the SUV. I ignore it, feeling Harley’s breath on my skin. Then the squealing un-mating call breaks into the moment. My heart sinks. I go still, sensing women snapping pictures with their phones.

“This is going to be a problem,” Harley says.

The real problem is I set too strong a boundary between Harley and me and not a strong enough one with the fans. I think I’ve made progress with the former, but what am I going to do about the women swarming my SUV, waving their arms wildly, and pawing at the window like I’m the last meal on earth?

Harley



CHAPTER 11

Having worked at the Gastrodome for six months, I've seen rabid football fans, but I've never had to compete as a player's biggest fan.

Glancing over at Ryan, frozen in the driver's seat, the cocky, confident charmer shifts uncomfortably. "I'm sorry. I guess word spread and—"

"It was bound to happen at some point."

"Does it happen often?"

The women are all but rocking the vehicle like we're trapped in a city riot.

He winces. "Not quite like this. It could be that since I backed out of the wedding with Jayda, they're trying to catch me on the rebound."

The sassy, bratty side of me concocts a plan to put an end to this that's completely outside the scope of something I'd do for a PR at my former job. It's far more extreme. Then again, so are these fans as they shout Ryan's name, two of them in tears with mascara tracking down their cheeks.

"Trust me?" I ask.

"Yeah, of course. Well, mostly. You have a look in your eyes." He gazes at me as if captivated like we're not surrounded by obsessed fangirls and it's just us.

I grin. "How badly do you want this to go away?" I ask, waving my hand at our surroundings.

“On a scale from one to throw them a slab of raw meat as a distraction and hope they run after it?”

I wrinkle my nose. “They’re not guard dogs. Let’s scale back a little.”

“We could use doughnuts as a decoy.”

“My thoughts exactly.” I explain my plan. “But it’s just part of the Romance Game. Pretend, but I imagine it’ll do the trick.”

One of the women, in hysterics, splays herself across the hood of the SUV.

“Or we could just leave,” I say.

“But they’ll follow. They’re bound to turn up in Coco Key unless we nip this in the bud.”

“You’re right.”

“Do you want to do this?” The insanity of my idea catches up with me and makes my heart race like I’ve already eaten a half dozen doughnuts and then tried to run up a hill.

Ryan is quiet for thirty seconds, sixty, and almost two minutes pass as I watch the women grow increasingly distraught before he exhales and nods. “Yes. I’m in. I just had to figure out how to make the play.”

“Okay, Hot Shot. You ready?” I grip Ryan’s hand, wishing we could get out of the car together, so I don’t have to let go. I tell myself it’s only because I don’t want to get mauled.

I just hope my plan works, otherwise, there’s a very strong possibility of that happening.

“Activate your charm one more time. You got this.”

“Game on.” Ryan slowly opens the driver’s side door and the women back up a little. “Ladies, ladies. I appreciate your enthusiasm. Today is a very, very special day. And you are very, very lucky.” He glances back at me.

Giving a slight nod, I cross my fingers.

“I’m wondering if you can help me out. You’d be playing a really important role. Your help would mean the world to me.”

I’m not sure they can hear him over the shrieking and sobbing.

“Please.” He casts them a smolder.

They practically swoon and fall silent, listening.

Opening his arms, he invites them into a huddle, likely telling them my plan. A few of them glare at me. Another studies me with curiosity.

I wiggle my fingers with a wave.

They break apart and walk toward the beach that’s behind the main street and the doughnut shop. Ryan disappears inside. The flutters within me build and I start to second-guess this plan. It won’t be my first time and we all know how that ended.

Then again, this is part of the Romance Game. It’s not real.

Ryan emerges and waves me out of the SUV.

One of the women peers around the corner of the line of shops. He discretely flashes her the thumbs up and she scurries away.

I get out of the car and wish I were wearing something nicer and had done my hair.

“This is pretend,” I blurt.

Ryan holds a cardboard pastry box in one hand and slides his other in mine as we round the corner. When we reach the beach, one of the women draws a heart in the sand. Another writes *Ryan* and a plus symbol followed by the letters H-A-R-L-E-Y.

“Wow, your charm flipped a switch,” I whisper.

“Glad to use it for good.”

I look around, making a good show of being surprised. One of the women hands me a flower that she must’ve plucked from one of the garden box barrels that led down here.

“Thanks.” I worry about a thorn or something pricking my finger because I didn’t outline this in the plan.

She nods and claps her hands together like a little seal.

Ryan passes one of the women the box of doughnuts and she posts herself to his left. Another flanks him on the right.

“What’s going on?” I ask as if the plan is news to me. To be fair, this part is.

Still holding my hand, Ryan pulls me into the center of the sand heart. His expression turns briefly shy, boyish. But then, pulling a half smile, like he remembered his lines, he takes my hand in his and holds it between us.

I sense two of the other women with their phones lifted—one to record and the other to snap photos from different angles.

“Harley, our love story has been complicated,” he says.

“Romantic-implified.”

He smiles.

“You are a-dough-rable.” Plucking an old-fashioned doughnut from the box, he holds it in front of me and then passes it to the other woman at his side.

He must remember that’s not my favorite kind.

Next, he takes a glazed one and says, “You are a-glazing.”

I’d been holding back a smile, but now it plays on my lips.

He takes two more doughnuts from the box and says, “Even though we drive each other glazy, I’m dough-nuts about you.”

The women giggle. Swept into the moment, I do too.

“Without you, there’s a hole in my life.” He presents a chocolate doughnut.

For the record, this is far more elaborate than my non-conventional PR patch-up plan.

“Everything I dough, I dough for you. I want to sprinkle you with everything you need and want.” He presents a stack

of three sprinkle-topped doughnuts before passing them to his helper. I'm kind of shocked by how creative this dough-posal is. It may be one of a kind.

"Harley, I dough-not want to live another day without you. I'm ready to have a dough-lightful life together." Two more doughnuts make their way out of the box.

I wrinkle my nose. "As far as puns go, that one was a stretch, but I'm dough-lighted by your creativity."

Ryan kisses my forehead.

I could nap inside his clean cotton scent.

"Thanks for playing along," he whispers.

"Of course. I was starting to get jelly of all these fans."

Ryan chuckles and takes two more doughnuts out of the box, pointer fingers through the center of the doughy rings. "I like you a hole lot. No, I love you a hole lot."

The women swoon. My heart does too. I've never heard anyone outside my immediate family say those words to me, certainly not Ryan. They do something to the flutters inside. They don't go *glazy*. Rather, they settle as if finally contented, quietly joyful.

Then I remember this is all a performance and part of the Romance Game. It was my idea, well, except for the puns. He gets five stars for coming up with this on the fly. There is only one doughnut left in the box, making a total of a dozen. It's a cinnamon sugar. My favorite. He remembered.

"Harley, dough-not break my heart. Please say yes. Will you marry me?"

He lowers to one knee and presents the doughnut as if it were a ring.

I tip my head back with laughter and splay my fingers like it would possibly fit. "I dough-not know what to do with you, Ryan McGregor. But I dough-not say no."

"So, it's a yes?" he asks.

"Yes, it's definitely a yes."

Our audience has grown and the women clap and cheer as Ryan wraps his arms around me. Eyes bright, he winks and then fingers clutching my chin, he angles my head for a kiss.

When his lips meet mine, I forget that this is all make-believe. That it's part of a game we're playing. The kiss feels so real I let myself pretend for a moment that our future isn't full of holes and we really are getting married.

Although my grand plan got the wild women off Ryan's back, it also endears them to him. They want photos with the newly engaged couple, insisting I hold up the doughnut. By the fifth selfie, no longer able to resist, I take a big bite out of my doughnut engagement ring.

After two more photos, it's gone.

Ryan laughs and plants his arm on my back, leading us off the beach. We're both quiet as we return the way we came, driving toward Coco Key.

It's like we don't want to burst the happy little bubble of bliss that a newly engaged couple would be basking in. Or we don't want to discuss what this means. I'm not sure which.

News travels the speed of a category five hurricane via the Coconut Wireless and soon, both our phones erupt in a frenzy of beeps and rings.

"That was fast. One of the fans must've already posted it. Before long, the entire world will know that Ryan McGregor is officially off the market," he says.

"Again." I just realized the flaw in my plan.

"What do you mean *again*?" Ryan asks.

"You were off the market after you got engaged to Jayda."

"Oh, right," he says as if that didn't have any effect on his status.

"Did it help thwart the fans?"

"I wasn't thinking about it then," he says vaguely. "I guess because it wasn't real."

And there's my answer. The happy bubble pops and I land hard on the ground with the reminder that this is fake, fake, fake.

I browse the messages on my phone. "My family already knows." I exhale and close my eyes. "My dad."

"Never mind the world. What about Brando?"

"Bring me home," I blurt, hoping Heather or Harper explained to my dad that this was staged. That Ryan and I are not actually engaged. He's going to be disappointed. Talk about romantic-plicated.

"What? No. Anywhere but there." Ryan slows the SUV.

"I have to deliver the doughnuts and stuff."

"And stuff? Like watching me walk the plank?"

"Ryan, we're adults. You're like twice the size of my cousin and we can explain to him that this is fake."

"That's the problem," Ryan says.

"Yeah. A big problem. Please just bring me home."

Ryan pulls into the sandy lot in front of Uncle Eddie's house. Two kids streak by, heading toward the beach. Harper appears on the porch with Luke in her arms.

Heather waves from the upstairs window and then points at her ring finger. I lift the box of doughnuts.

"We brought treats for everyone." I trade the pastry box for my baby boy, instantly feeling a little more grounded.

"And news." Brando leans against the porch rail, arms crossed.

"Hey, Brand-bro," Ryan says as if everything is normal.

"Hey," my cousin says in a low tone. "We have to talk."

"No, you don't. I can explain. As a former PR specialist, I offered to help Ryan out—"

Ryan glances at my father to his left and his best friend to his right. "No, we have to talk. Mr. Owens, Brandon." He tips

his head toward the garage and they all march in that direction. Even Uncle Eddie joins them.

My sisters flock toward me and ask a dozen questions before I'm able to explain what just happened. "Remember the game? We just upped the ante."

"You upped something because I was afraid those four were going to come back with black eyes and split lips. Instead, they're smiling like old bros," Harper points.

To my shock, she's right.

Yet, Ryan is still breathing, and no one has blood on their hands.

"Everything okay?" I ask while Luke rests his head on my shoulder and twirls a piece of my hair.

"Everything is a-glazing," Brando says.

I narrow my eyes with suspicion.

The corner of my dad's mouth lifts with a smile. "Congratulations are in order." He gives me a hug and Luke wiggles into his grandpa's arms. Those two are best friends.

Desperate to find out what Ryan said to them, I try to get him alone to ask, but the rest of the day is like an engagement party with everyone hanging out, playing games in the yard, and swimming down at the beach. Ryan and the kids build a giant sandcastle. Luke loves splashing in the water while secure in my arms. There are fierce rounds of corn hole, we search for seashells, and eventually, a football appears and Harper and Heather's husbands are like two kids on Christmas morning. They all hit it off and I hardly see Ryan until the children prowl around for dinner.

"It's been such a fun day, why don't you stay and eat with us, Ryan?" Harper asks.

I try to give her a sisterly look because she didn't consult me. It's not that I want him to leave. Quite the opposite, but between our impromptu dough-posal this morning and his subsequent conversation with my father, I want to know why everything seems so, well, normal.

“We’re testing a few new recipes for the restaurant,” Harper adds.

Ryan glances at me as if checking in.

“The more the merrier,” I say.

If anyone thinks that was a strange response coming from me, the sassy brat, they don’t say anything. The thing is, my family loves Ryan. The kids, the guys, everyone. It was only ever me that had a problem and that was spotty at best. It was a love-hate kind of situation.

Ryan was right. As glazy as we drove each other, I’ve always been dough-nuts about him.

But there’s still one adorable matter. All day, I’ve been taking care of Luke, my son, but haven’t officially introduced Ryan to him. I haven’t mentioned that I’m his mom. Ryan chats with the guys as they clean up the grill and corral a pint-sized cleanup crew outside with the promise of sparklers if they do a good job.

While inside, changing Luke’s diaper, I whisper, “That’s you someday, Lukey-boy. Before long you’ll be running around with the big kids.” He coos and gurgles and repeatedly shouts, “Ma, Ma, Ma.”

I’m proud to say those were his first words. Setting him down, I let him cruise around the room, gripping the edge of the bed and a low table to help him stand up. My sisters keep stats about when their children started walking and speculate about when Luke will take his first steps. Heather says soon. Harper places her bets on after his first birthday, which is in less than a month.

The floor creaks behind me and I sense the approaching footsteps belong to the biggest guy in the house.

“I’m grateful you helped me handle this PR mess. But I’m glad I spent the day with you and your family, completely ignoring it all.”

“Remember, I’m just a waitress now,” I say.

“We both know you’re much more than that,” Ryan says.

It's time to tell him the whole truth, which will make things extra complicated.

His phone buzzes, interrupting. Glancing at it, he says, "The headlines read, *McGregor Moved On to Sunnier Shores, The Bachelor Party Bolt Leads to Dough-nuts Proposal*. Ah, here's another, *McGregor on the Move, but Not on the Field*." Lifting his gaze to me, he says, "*But is He Ready to Quit Playing the Field?*"

I search his face, but his eyes are glued to Luke. "Does he usually do that?"

Spinning around, my heart hammers with worry.

Luke stands on two wobbly feet, arms in front of him. One, he points at me, and says, "Ma!" The other, he directs at Ryan. Then, taking the shakiest of steps, but wearing the biggest, brightest smile, he puts one foot in front of the other, and says, "Da!"

Ryan

A decorative flourish consisting of three stylized, symmetrical scroll-like elements.

Harley gives those crazed fans a run for their money with the fuss she makes over Luke, albeit very quietly, so she doesn't scare him. I can feel the excitement and pride coming off her in waves.

"He took his first step," she whisper shrieks. "You are such a good boy. Wowee! Wow!" *Gooing* and *gaaing*, in a very un-Harley kind of way, she coaxes him to do it again. But this time, he plops onto his backside.

However, arms still uplifted, he points to her and says, "Ma!" Then at me and repeats, "Da!" At least, that's what it sounds like.

Harley blinks a few times as if only now processing what he said on top of taking his first steps.

Not wanting to make her uncomfortable, I say, "I don't know squat about babies other than that they're adorable, but I have a feeling this little guy is going to be the future MVP QB for the Miami Riptide. Isn't that right, little dude?" I'm not sure what comes over me at that moment, but when I look into Luke's eyes, I don't stop. "You are going to be a first-draft pick. Football is going to be as natural to you as walking. Ooh. I wonder if they make miniature footballs." Turning to Harley, I ask, "Like one he could hold? Let's see, and a very small jersey. I've seen those for sale. And wouldn't he look cute in sneakers? I mean, cute in a manly way. But they'd just be so teeny tiny. I'm going to teach you all my moves and one day you'll wow the world with your killer arm. Then you'll win

the Super Bowl and we'll go to Disney World. Well, we can go before then too, but doesn't that sound fun?"

Luke claps his hands together like he's game, then busies himself with a light-up toy thingy with lots of flaps and buttons and stuff.

Harley blinks at me then shakes her head slowly as if not at all sure what to make of the last five minutes, never mind the day. Me neither.

"Is it safe to say that I can speak freely, and he's not going to understand?" I ask.

"At this stage, he picks up on emotional cues more than specific words, but you never know what he might repeat. And for the record, he's never said, um—"

"Da!" I supply.

"Yeah." Harley shifts uncomfortably.

I want nothing more than to take her in my arms, hold her, and promise her that everything is going to be fine. No, it'll be great. It is already.

"When we got back here this morning, and I saw you swap the box of doughnuts for the baby..." Emotion fills my voice and I pause. "I saw him in your arms. Saw his eyes. I know yours even with mine closed." I let out a sigh. "You didn't have to tell me that the baby is yours. You didn't have to hide it, either."

Harley studies her clasped hands. "I was operating with *let him figure it out* logic."

"Bad logic."

"The story that came before Luke isn't one I want to tell at the moment, or ever." Harley, whose personality is so big it can push people out of stadiums, seems small right now.

"You don't have to be ashamed of what happened with Luke's father, especially if he's the Givenator."

For some reason, calling her ex the Givenator breaks the tension. An amused smile flits across Harley's face. "That's

the most ridiculous name coming out of your mouth. Never say it again.”

“Is it on the list with hemorrhoids?”

She doubles over with laughter and Luke joins us with happy giggles.

We don’t talk about it more, for now, and join the family for sparklers before a bonfire on the beach. Luke must fall asleep in Harley’s arms because she disappears into the house where some contingent of her sisters’ families also get ready for bed, leaving me with Mr. Owens, Uncle Eddie, and Brando.

“No bad days,” Mr. Owens says.

“We going to have more of these?” his brother asks.

“I reckon so. What do you think of the pack returning to the island?”

“I think Martina would love it.” Uncle Eddie’s voice cracks.

Brando’s is thick when he says, “Being back, in some ways, it feels like she’s still here. But when I was far away, trying to escape missing her, it was a lot worse.”

“So, you’re staying?” I ask my best friend.

“Sure am. You?”

“I’m wherever Harley and Luke are.” I’ve never said something that felt truer, well, except maybe when I told Harley I love her a *hole* lot.

“I can’t believe you’re retiring,” Uncle Eddie says.

“I have my sights set on my replacement.”

The guys laugh, knowing I’m referring to Luke.

“What are we laughing about?” Harley asks, appearing in a Riptide hoodie.

“Life,” her dad says. “It has a funny way of coming full circle. Kind of like a doughnut.”

Everyone chuckles.

Mr. Owens gets up and hugs his daughter. “I’m turning in. Those kids whoop me something good.”

Uncle Eddie and Brando follow, with the latter clapping me on the back, which is better than stabbing me. I fully expected a prison shank when I headed to the garage with the three of them earlier.

“I have questions,” Harley says when she sits down beside me.

“Fire away,” I say, poking the coals of the bonfire.

“Where did the doughnut inspiration come from?”

“You supplied me with the idea. I just worked with it. We make a good team.” I wrap my arm across Harley’s shoulders.

“And why aren’t we dealing with a dead body?”

“Were you just as afraid as me when we went to the garage?”

“It contains many sharp objects.”

I chuckle. “I told them the truth.”

“And that is—?”

Before I can answer, my phone goes off. I’d already silenced it, but now I shut it down. This is a moment just for Harley and me.

“I’ve had a manvalanche of messages from the guys on the team offering congratulations today. Apparently, the doughnut proposal—”

“Dough-posal,” Harley corrects.

“That was a lot more authentic than the staged proposal with Jayda.”

“How’d that go? Never mind, I don’t want to know.”

“No more than I want to think about when the Givenator asked you to marry him.”

Harley winces. “You know about that?”

“Saw it online.”

She tucks her chin back. “Were you a fan of his?”

“Him? No, but I’ve been your number-one fan for a long time, Harley Jean.”

“I’m not sure if I should be touched or completely embarrassed.”

“Had the guy not been a total loser, I’d give him some cred for the classic Eiffel Tower proposal, but mostly, I want to send him into a ditch for ditching you.”

“The trip I ended up getting billed for.” She waves her hand. “But don’t worry, he only put me in debt. I got Luke, so it wasn’t a total loss.”

“You were only married for three weeks, so you get a pass.”

“Wedding night baby. You’re not mad at me for not telling you, though?”

“I have a few skeletons in my closet too. No babies though. Promise.”

“That sounds awful.” Harley shakes her head.

“I just mean I don’t have any children. Not yet.” The hope in my voice is undeniable. “No, I’m not mad at you. I’m upset with myself for not acting faster. For not realizing how I felt about you. For not talking to Brando years ago instead of denying that I wanted you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I think you do.” I shift so we’re facing each other.

“We had a plan to pretend we’re dating to take the heat off you for backing out of the wedding to Jayda.” Harley’s eyebrows knit together.

“But you took it to the next level.” Our knees bump.

“I did?”

I wink. “The proposal was your idea. I simply made the play. As I said, we make a good team.”

“But this is a game.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, but...”

“You’re surprised by how real it feels?” I plant a kiss on her forehead.

“Yes, but...”

“You wish this were more private, just for us, and not splashed all over the internet for the world to see?” I kiss the space behind her ear, getting a breath of pink bubblegum.

“Yes, but...”

“You’d like a real ring in place of the doughnut?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say no.”

Clasping Harley’s jaw, I say, “I think we both know that this is no longer a game. The games are over. From now on, it’s just honesty, truth, and us.”

“I thought you hated me.”

“You were the one who hated me. You said as much.”

“But only because you acted like you hated me. Everything was a big, fat I-hate-Harley slap to the face.”

“I’m sorry.” And I mean it.

“Me too.”

As the fire dies, the one between us grows, burning hotter than ever. The space between us shrinks.

My pulse kicks as we pick up exactly where we left off the last time we kissed. Our noses brush. Our chests press together.

Harley tugs on the neckline of my shirt. I press my palms to her lower back.

The kiss deepens.

This is what it must feel like for a football when it sails through the air toward the end zone.

If I were keeping track, you know, for statistical performance purposes, each kiss is better than the last. And

each time I get a little more lost, a little closer to forgetting everything from the past and seeing a future...one with Harley in it.

When we part, she rests her head on my chest. I release a long exhale, one I may have been holding for the better part of my life. Instead of feeling like I always need to be on the move, running the field, I settle.

After a beat, I ask, “What do you want to do?”

“Now, or in ten minutes, or—?”

“In life.”

“I’d like to know what you said to Brando in more detail.”

“First, I apologized for not coming to him or your father sooner. I also stood close to Uncle Eddie in case either of them took a swing. Have you seen the guns on that guy?” I was banking on him having my back.

Harley chuckles. Even in his older years, the man is massive.

“I attempted to make things right with your cousin. I told him that since high school, I’d admired your brains, beauty, and bossiness.”

She tilts her head toward me in question.

“You keep me in check. But I regretted not talking to him sooner about how I felt. I was afraid to mess up his and my friendship, so I created boundaries between you and me. Meanwhile, we were sneaking around smooching. It all became very confusing because I acted like I didn’t like you, yet all I could think about was you.”

“I guess I felt the same way but wasn’t afraid of my cousin. I liked you so much that I looked past the way you acted toward me in public and kissed you in private.”

“And gave me what I deserved in public for being an idiot.”

“That too. We were both dumb.”

“Totally immature. Brando and I talked for a few more minutes. I told them that I’m officially retiring. No more games. Just you and me. Then I asked for your dad’s blessing.”

Harley is quiet for a long moment. I’m afraid I went wrong somewhere. Then she snuffles and wraps her arms around me. “That’s the sweetest. I guess this is why we save dessert for last.”

I clasp her back and say, “It was more than worth the wait.”

She inhales sharply. “Hold up. When we were on our way back to Uncle Eddie’s and you were worried about Brando making you walk the plank, and I said that we can just explain to him that it was fake then you said that’s the problem—?”

“Because it stopped being pretend the night we kissed. Maybe even before that? Was it ever actually a game? I don’t know, Harley, but what I am sure of is the moment I decided to ask you to marry me for real, to tell the truth to your family, to cut the pretense and charade, things turned around.”

“It’s not a game,” she says as if reassuring herself. Then she squeals and bounces a little, which is so not Harley. “So, what do I want to do in life? I’d like to do life with you.”

“Anything more personal, like a dream you’ve always had? I got mine.”

“I can’t believe you’re retiring from football.”

“That, but I mean you. You were my dream girl. Always have been. Always will be.”

“I dough-not know what to say.”

“Say yes.”

“I already did.”

“Then it’s real.”

Harley bites her lip. “There is one problem. I ate the doughnut.”

We both laugh. “I can fix that. How about a real engagement ring?”

“I will say yes to that.”

We spend the next hours chatting about life. She tells me that she’s happy to be back in Coco Key, close to family. We discuss Luke and the possibility of brothers or sisters for him.

“I have to catch up to Heather and Harper. They’re up by two. What about you? You kind of have a golden life, but I guess playing football doesn’t last forever. Do you want to coach or do something else?”

“I’d put off thinking about change. In my profession, aging is hard.”

She shakes her head slowly. “Aging can be hard, but it’s also a gift. Waking up in the middle of the night with a crying baby is hard, but it’s a gift because it means you have a family. Your sisters telling you that they’re going to run the Plundering Pelican, but there’s no place for you is hard—”

“Seriously? Where’s the gift in that?” I ask, not quite following the pattern.

“I’m still working that out.”

“What do you mean they’re running it?”

She tells me their plan. “You know me, the baby sister... with a baby. I suppose from their point of view, I have enough on my plate. They have husbands to help with their kids.”

“You do too.” But no sooner are the words out of my mouth, do I jump to my feet, drawing Harley to hers. “I got it. Ice cream.”

“There’s nothing hard about ice cream, well, except that by definition it is hard since it’s frozen.” Harley’s brow creases with confusion.

“We could have soft serve too.”

“We? Is this one of those you can have your cake and eat it too explorations of philosophy?”

“No, Nugget. We can have an ice cream empire.”

“Are you hungry again already? We basically ate our way through the day.”

I shake with laughter. “Harley, you and me will fix up the Sip & Scoop and open it again.”

“But you’re a kitchen hazard, banned from domestic and commercial kitchens in nine states.”

“There won’t be any open flame. But we could get a waffle cone-making machine.” Taking Harley’s hand, I say, “Chip left me the Sloop, the Sip & Scoop. This could be our thing. You and me.”

Her smile slowly spreads. “I said yes to you once today. I guess we’ll make it two points for McGregor.”

“I’d say this is a win.” I pick her up and swing her around before our lips meet and we seal the glaziest and best day of my life with a kiss.

Harley



CHAPTER 13

The next day, after another mega family breakfast and playtime, I help my dad unpack his truck, still full of my things.

“I appreciate you doing this for me.”

“You’re my baby, you know that? I didn’t approve of that Troy guy, but Ryan is a-okay in my book. He’ll do right by you, darling, if you give him a chance.”

“You remember that we were rotten to each other?”

“There couldn’t be that much fire without something keeping it lit, darling.”

I giggle. “Dad.”

“I knew you liked him before you did. I reckon you were the last one to realize it. Many parents say they want to see their kids happy. You understand that now. But as your father, I want to see you secure. And I don’t just mean with money. I mean in a relationship, family, a home, and with the way you spend your time.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I give him a side hug.

The guy came late to the hug game, but as a single father of three girls, there was no avoiding it. Whatever rough edges he had, we shaved them down, just enough so that he’s no longer bitter about our mother leaving. He’s quick to tell us that he got the better deal. I suppose I did too when it comes to Luke.

He squints at the sky. “I wish I’d paid more attention to how Eddie was doing after we lost Martina. For me, when your mother took off, I was like a cat in a bag. Didn’t readily occur to me how busted up he’d be. But in a way, I’m glad he was, because it brought us all back together.”

“A blessing in disguise.”

“So many blessings, darling.” Dad winks at me.

“It’s hard to believe Harper and Heather’s husbands are game to move onto the island. They work in the online world and can be remote. Plus, I think the Plundering Pelican brings out the kid in everyone.”

Dad takes another box from the bed of the Ford. “Which has always amused me because real pirates aren’t exactly kid-friendly.”

Ryan’s story about Chip’s will drifts into my mind.

“What I want to know is how are y’all going to fit into this house. It was already loaded back in the day with your aunt and uncle, Brando, and the four of us. Add nine more and that’s not just a full house, it’s packed to the gills.”

We both laugh.

Then I remember Ryan offering me a place at the rental. “Dad, don’t finish unloading just yet. Unless you need the truck this afternoon.”

“I’m ashore for the rest of the week, then I head back to ‘Bama.”

“I’ll miss you. Luke will too.”

“I’ll be back before you know it. In the meantime, y’all have your hands full, and I’m hoping that when I get back, it’ll be to the sound of wedding bells.”

I give my daddy another big hug then find Luke with his auntie and cousin. After lunch, we head to town where I told Ryan I’d meet him.

He stands squarely in front of the Sip & Scoop building, hands hammocked behind his head, and his back facing us.

My, what a fine specimen of human strength. He's fit and lean and a feast for the eyes. It's no wonder he has so many female fans.

"Da! Da!" Luke calls.

Ryan turns around and his eyes light up. As if he's done this a hundred times, he unbuckles the belt on the stroller and lifts Luke into his arms. "There's my favorite little man in the world."

Compared to our relatively quiet life in Alabama, except when Dad was ashore, this kid is going to overdose on love.

After a happy reunion for my big and little boys, Ryan's focus returns to the Sip & Scoop.

I follow his gaze to what was once a standard wooden storefront with a striped awning and the option to order from a window or go inside. It was a staple throughout my childhood and I imagined it would always be here. In fact, I'd hoped it would be part of Luke's core memories of Coco Key. Now, the wooden structure is splintered and rotten, the paint stripped, and the big glass window cracked and covered with plywood. The metal poles from the ripped awning groan in the wind. The missing letters from the sign read *ip & oop*.

"Hurricane Howie did a number on it."

"It looks terrible. Kind of like us when we showed up on this island," he says.

I slug Ryan in the arm. "Speak for yourself, Hot Shot. I was wearing wedding attire."

"Yeah. You looked really good. Any particular reason you avoided me that night?"

"Because I was afraid of what would happen if I didn't."

He rocks into me with his hip. "Didn't turn out that bad. But I meant emotionally. We were like this building, tearing each other down."

That's surprisingly insightful. "I suppose you're right. But now we're building each other back up and we can do the same to the *ip & oop*."

Ryan laughs and his eyes light with renewed hope that it's possible, even if he can't see it. Even if he doesn't know the first thing about running an ice cream parlor. Me neither.

“Do we dare go in?” Ryan asks.

“Do you have a small hard hat?” I ask, pointing to Luke.

Ryan's eyes grow and his lips part at the novel idea. “That would be so cute. A tiny hard hat for the little guy. What about a small football helmet? I bet they make miniature everything.”

I can't help but be tickled by how amused he is by Luke's size and accompanying accouterments. “You do realize that someday he'll grow up and use regular-size things.”

“Yeah. He'll someday be big and strong like me. Won't you, little man?” He bounces Luke.

I recognize the love in his eyes—it's the same as when my dad, Uncle Eddie, his uncles, and even Brando, who claims to be allergic to kids, have when they're with my son.

The Givenator took the bad deal, that's for sure.

We decide to bring Luke back to the house where he'll take a nap under the careful eyes and ears of my sisters while they make Plundering Pelican plans. There's a lot of debate about what to keep from the old menu.

Ryan and I return to the ice cream shop. He opens the door with a creak and then a cloud of dust puffs out. “Smells bad.”

“Like sour milk.” I frown.

We carefully pick our way inside, avoiding the debris. It's surprisingly bright considering the electricity is cut.

“I don't remember a skylight,” Ryan says as he glances up at the ceiling.

“Looks like part of it caved in.”

“The tables are somewhere underneath it.” He points.

Chairs are askew, bird droppings cover the surfaces, and I'd bet money that wild monkeys came in and redecorated, but

the ice cream cooler is still intact.

Ryan pushes the double swinging doors to the kitchen open and then waves his hand in front of his face. “We’ll save that for another day. Maybe one when we’re wearing hazmat suits.”

He turns toward the crumbling plaster walls. The enormous mirror that ran along the wall broke and is in slivers. Ryan walks over to it with his usual swagger which makes me almost forget where we are.

“That looks like a lot of bad luck,” I say, trying not to get drawn into the tractor beam of his attractiveness.

“It also looks like a map.” He tilts his head.

Contacts or not, I don’t quite see it.

Keeping his finger an inch from the wall, he traces a rippling line that leads to another.

Faint shapes slowly come into focus. I start to see the edges of what I can only guess are islands. These islands? “Yeah, I see it now.”

“Could this be what we’ve been looking for? Well, what my brothers are looking for?”

I carefully brush the remaining corner of the mirror away. “There’s a folded piece of paper tucked in here. Looks like part of a map. See here, it’s torn.”

To my surprise, Ryan’s eyes light up. “It must be. Royal and Magnus found parts of a map that looked like it was torn into quarters. Why would it be hidden here?”

“By who?”

“I’m hoping you can help me with that.” Ryan carefully removes the map fragment from the wall. We speculate that it was tucked behind the mirror at some point and had been there a long time, possibly forgotten.

“It looks like we have our work cut out for us,” I say when we step outside.

“You sure you still want to do it?”

“If I get to eat ice cream every day, how could I say no?”

“I thought you were going to say that you get to work with me every day.”

“That too.”

Ryan squeezes me close and we gaze at the ip & oop for one long moment. “I say we have our first official meeting as business owners.”

“You own it. I’m just helping.”

“You’re my future wife. We’re in this together.”

“Speaking of together, does the offer still stand for Luke and me to stay in the rental with you? Uncle Eddie’s is getting a little too cozy.”

“So long as I can too. Sorry, I love all the kids, but it’s a lot,” Brando says, appearing as if out of nowhere.

I startle.

Ryan wears a confident smile. “There’s plenty of room for you to make sure I keep my word, no funny business.”

Brando clasps Ryan’s massive shoulder. “I trust you. I trust you both.”

“You do?” Ryan asks.

Brando’s phone beeps and he checks it. “Gotta go. See you over there. Tonight okay?”

“Yeah, of course.” Ryan scratches his temple. “He’s got me worried.”

I shake my head. “He’s up to something and not just about keeping an eye on us.”

“What do you mean? How do you know?”

“Takes one to know one. He’s acting the same way I used to when I’d sneak home after meeting you at Hidden Hammock Beach. In fact, he’s walking in that direction right now. I’ll have to check the Coconut Wireless later. Surely, they’ll report about Brando being back in town and what he’s been doing.”

“Up to what though, sitting alone on the beach and writing poetry?”

“Most likely meeting a girl. But who?” I’ll see if my sisters know anything.



That evening, my dad helps us move the boxes into the four-bedroom rental. Luke and I have a room on the second floor, down the hall from Ryan’s. Brando takes the smallest room. CJ is there too, which is baffling because Ryan claims he owns a house somewhere on the island.

We have pizza for dinner and then take a long walk on the beach. I tell Ryan a bit about Luke’s habits with naps, snacks, and bedtime.

Without me having to ask, he helps out and even makes a diaper change attempt.

“That’s not bad for a first-timer, but...” I show him the gaps on the sides. “A little snugger around the legs.”

“Got it. Snugger. More like snuggler.” He picks Luke up and blows raspberries on his belly. The two of them make faces at each other. At first, I’m afraid it’s going to wake Luke up too much before bed, but Ryan’s attention tires him out more than ever. By the time we’re done with our first story, he’s fast asleep.

I set up the baby monitor, grab it, and meet Ryan downstairs. The rental has a massive kitchen with windows on three sides. The ocean sparkles under the moon in the distance.

Ryan gazes out the window. I lace my arm across his waist and he drapes his arm over my shoulders and then kisses the top of my head.

“I never imagined this, Harley.”

I squeeze him tighter and don’t need to ask what he means. I feel it too—we’re full, full of love, joy, and sheer blessing. “God has a good plan for our lives.”

“He sure does.” After a beat, Ryan adds, “But does He have a plan for the Sip & Scoop? I’ve been thinking about it

all day and don't know where to start.”

“First, get rid of the debris, then see what we have left to work with. I suppose the main question to ask is do you want to restore it to the way it was before or do updates? For instance, my sisters are keeping the look of the Plundering Pelican the same as it ever was, because people love themed restaurants, but they're going to modernize the menu. A little less fried and a little more fresh.”

“Don't tell me they're getting rid of the fish and chips.”

“Everyone agreed that stays. The waffle boats too.”

“Phew. You had me worried. But what about the ice cream parlor? What do you think?”

“I think people love the classic ice cream shop option, but maybe we could add a few elements. Like, we could have an area where customers can show off their ice cream and snap a photo for social media. Do something unique in the shop that goes beyond just selling the best ice cream around. We could offer seasonal flavors, one-of-a-kind toppings, or blends. Perhaps some retail items like T-shirts and swag. Mostly though, we want them to have an experience that's beyond just standing in line, ordering ice cream, and eating it. Like we could update the interior. Do something out front that draws the eye, but nothing tacky and tourist-trappy. You know?”

“I like it. Makes me think of the Plundering Pelican a bit. Must be in your blood.”

“One of my guilty pleasures after working at the Gastrodome all day, and after Luke would go to sleep, was watching shows on HLTV with the sound off. I was such a sucker for fixer-uppers, before and after remodels, and that kind of thing. Looking back, I think I was hoping for that in my life.”

“How's it coming?”

“We're between before and after, but so far so good.”

I get another kiss.

“Remember how I mentioned Chip left me his journal?” He picks up a leather book tied with a leather lace from the coffee table. “I know it’s asking a lot of you—fixing up the Sip & Scoop with me, but I’m wondering if you’d read this too.”

Ryan passes it to me. The journal looks smaller in his hands than it does in mine which must be why he’s so enthusiastic about all of Luke’s baby-sized things.

I turn it over and smooth my palm along the cover. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Seems like it’s private.”

“Probably. But I can’t read it.”

“Because of what it might contain or something else?”

“Kind of. Open it and you’ll see what I mean.”

Not feeling good about opening Ryan’s grandfather’s diary, I hesitantly untie the lace securing it.

“I want to help my brothers. I want to find the missing stone. Or at least try to. This has to be a key.”

When I part the cover, an envelope falls out. Compared to the dry, yellowed paper in the journal, the envelope is crisp, white, and sealed with a wax monogram *CVA*. I pass it to Ryan.

He studies it, and like me, hesitates to open it. “This is Chip’s seal with his initials, but I don’t see who it’s addressed to. Maybe no one?”

“Or you, considering it was in the diary and that was the item he wanted you to have.”

“But Chip was so mysterious. Everything meant something.”

“He gave you a pen, right? Maybe you’re supposed to fill it out for him.”

Ryan puffs an exhale. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe there are instructions in the journal.” I glance down at the page and blink a few times.

“Need your glasses?”

“No, it’s not that. You’re right. I can’t read this either.” I trace my fingers over the loopy letters, trying to make sense of the old-fashioned handwriting.

“See? It’s hard to read, right?”

I frown. “I think that’s because it’s not in English.”

“Chip was fluent in Brazilian.”

“But you’d be able to read that, wouldn’t you?”

Ryan shrugs. “I’m better at understanding than speaking or reading. But Magnus is fluent. Maybe he can tell us what it says.”

I flip through a few more pages and the same handwriting continues until one page where the ink must’ve run and the words blur. Scooting closer to Ryan, I show him.

“A few of the words are splattered, like whoever wrote it was crying.” I glance up at Ryan. “Or whoever read it was crying.”

“Chip wasn’t an emotional kind of guy.”

“No, but it could’ve been someone else. Does this look like Chip’s handwriting?”

“Not really.”

“We could compare it to the letter in the envelope.”

Ryan exhales again.

“We don’t have to do this,” I say.

“Sorry. I want to. I’d just have preferred my grandfather had made things clearer. Like when Coach Becker outlines a play, I know exactly what I need to do.”

“If I were to look at the Miami Riptide playbook, it wouldn’t make sense to me. But you see it differently. Maybe this made sense to your brother and will become clearer to you.”

Ryan’s shoulders relax and his gaze hovers on mine. “And this is why you are a-glazing.” He opens the seal on the

envelope. Wearing a hopeful smile, Ryan pulls out the paper inside. He turns it over and then turns it over again. “It’s blank. What the heck, Chip?”

“Maybe there are some other documents at the resort we can compare it to.” I turn a few more pages in the journal and reach one that’s blank even though I’m only halfway through.

Ryan frowns and turns to the next page and stabs it with his finger. “That is Chip’s handwriting. Now that I see it, I’d know it anywhere.”

“And it’s fairly legible. But that begs the question, who wrote the first half?”

Ryan shakes his head and then goes still as something catches his eye. “He wrote about my mom and dad. This is the day they were in the boating accident.” His finger shakes as he points at the date.

I start to close the diary.

“No, I have to know what he said.” But he doesn’t read it.

Instead, I do. “It’s going to crush the boys. I don’t know how I’ll manage. How they will. They’re still young. Colin and Emmanuella knew the risks, but I should’ve stopped them. Put an end to all this nonsense. And yet—” I’m not sure what the next bit says. “The co, uh, coro?”

Ryan looks over my shoulder. “The *Coroa de Lágrimas*. The Lost Crown of Tears.”

I read, “None of us could stop looking for it and I’m afraid it’s cursed us.”

He runs his hand through his hair. “Does that mean they were looking for it too? Has CJ been right all along?”

“Of course, I have.”

We both whip around. Seated at the kitchen island, he tosses a handful of Luke’s Cheerios in his mouth.

“You’re like a ninja. How did you come in and we didn’t hear you?” Ryan says.

“Concerning, considering there’s a baby asleep upstairs.” CJ slugs some orange juice.

“We’re buying a house with full security. I’ll start looking tomorrow.” Ryan’s jaw ticks like he failed to protect us.

“Don’t worry. It’s just your little brother spying on us. Nothing new there.”

“Har har. I wasn’t spying, love birds. But I’m glad you finally opened Chip’s diary. Anything juicy?”

“Ew. No. I mean, we don’t know. Can’t read most of it. Want to take a crack at Brazilian?”

CJ picks up the diary with surprising care as if it’s a relic. He stares at the first page.

“See? It’s impossible to read,” Ryan says.

“No, not impossible. Improbable.” CJ pauses and looks at his brother dead in the eyes. “This diary belonged to Márcia Sousa, also known as the Devil’s Charm and captain of the Crimson Tide.”

I study Ryan, looking for a clue as to who that is and why CJ is so astounded.

His face falls and his lips part as if he’s processing this slowly, not wanting to believe it. “She was our great-great-great or so grandmother.”

My jaw drops. I’m engaged to a pirate?

Ryan



CHAPTER 14

Before I let myself fully wrap my head around CJ's discovery and what it might mean, we call an emergency McGregor meeting.

Harley comes downstairs from checking on Luke. "He's fast asleep."

And I'm wide awake, my thoughts churning.

She looks me over. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just shocked that all this time I've been sitting on something so important." Chip would say life lesson there about putting off until tomorrow what should be done today.

"Is your vision okay?"

"Huh? Yeah. Why? You're the one who wears glasses."

"You don't have an eyepatch hidden around here?" She pats me down. "A hook for a hand. A peg leg? Are you feeling like raiding or pillaging?"

I bump Harley with my elbow.

"Ouch. Careful. Peg elbow?"

"Stop," I say with a laugh. "We're not pirates."

"But you come from pirates. I'd do well to hide my treasure."

I grip her upper arms. "Harley, you are the treasure."

She demurely presses her lips together to keep from smiling.

“When I was a kid and Chip told pirate stories, I was obsessed. Thought it was so cool. At some point though, when I grew up, I figured he made them up to entertain us.”

“Not me,” CJ says.

“You haven’t grown up,” Royal says, entering the house with Isla.

CJ pulls a face at our brother.

“Nope. CJ never stopped believing. In a way, wanting to distance ourselves from that old lore is what drove us apart. Like if you have an uncle who, at holiday gatherings, tells you all his conspiracy theories, you avoid him after a while.”

“Uncle Eddie has lots of those, but interestingly, they’ve all proven true. For instance, he claimed there was this huge squid that was terrorizing...” Harley trails off. “Never mind. As you were saying?”

I continue, “The problem was, Chip, never told him to stop.”

“Especially when it came to stuff about our parents,” Royal adds.

“I stand by my claim. They did not die in a boating accident. They’re not dead,” CJ says as forcefully as ever.

Royal and I look at our brother with the usual sympathy, but what if he’s not wrong? Like Uncle Eddie and the giant squid or whatever, what if CJ’s claim proves true? Something sparks in me.

“Then why did Chip say they were in a boating accident?” Royal asks.

“Because they were.”

“Which is it? They can’t have been in a boating accident and be dead?” Royal says sharply.

Isla plants her hand on her husband’s back and rubs it gently.

“Chip never said they died in the boating accident,” CJ says softly as if he knows this is a losing battle. “He said they

were in a boating accident. We were to assume they died.”

“But they never came home.” The splinters of being orphaned still sting from time to time.

CJ, expression set, says, “Not yet. And that’s why Chip did this.” He waves his hands at the room in general.

“And this is why we bicker, draw lines. Don’t answer each other’s phone calls.” It also pains me that we all got swept up in our respective lives and forgot about life here and Chip. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

“Not everything is black and white, fixed in one way forever. It could be some stories we heard had truth to them. With new details, aspects sometimes change,” CJ says.

“Or it could be some people take things too seriously,” Royal mutters.

“But you claim I don’t take things seriously enough,” CJ fires back.

Hoping to avoid their typical argument, I say, “People change. For instance, I’ve always been seen as a flirt, a rascal, and not necessarily reliable. But I can be a gentleman too.”

Everyone laughs.

“A flirty, rascally, wonderful gentleman,” Harley says.

I smirk.

“What are they putting in the water around here? I’ve never heard you say a nice thing about Ryan in your life,” Royal says.

She sticks her tongue out. “Takes one to know one.”

Laughter threads through the room, releasing some of the tension.

“Maybe we’re all not quite what we seem, like Mom and Dad,” CJ says.

The tension snaps right back into place like a rubber band.

“Wish I’d been able to meet them,” Harley says softly as if sensing I’m walking the tightrope of that tension.

“They would’ve liked you, I bet. Dad was an art history professor.”

“And an antiquities forger,” CJ says.

Ignoring him, I say, “Our mother was a librarian.”

“And a treasure diver. Night diving was her specialty. She held a second-degree black belt in jiu-jitsu and was an expert rock climber. She spoke four languages too,” CJ says with pride.

“Sounds like an amazing woman.”

“She was an amazing mother,” Royal says.

“As confirmed by Chip’s diary, they were both on the hunt for the Coroa de Lágrimas. The Lost Crown of Tears,” CJ adds.

“Let’s wait until Mag gets here before we go down that rabbit trail,” Royal says, gripping the back of his neck.

I clap CJ on the back. “In a roundabout way, those old stories of pirates and treasure are what brought us back together.”

“Chip gets credit for that,” CJ says.

Royal grunts. He’s come around in a lot of ways, but the subject of our parents and CJ’s insistence that they’re not gone is still a sore spot. It is all for all of us and we have different ways of coping.

Isla says, “Magnus and Lally wanted to let the dogs out before they came over in case we’re here a while.”

“Luke loves dogs—especially General, Lally’s mutt.” I tell them about how General will stand there, let Luke hold on to his back, and very slowly they’ll take steps together. It’s like his very own, living and breathing walker.

I glance at Harley for confirmation and instead of hiding her smile, she’s beaming.

“He’s such an amazing little dude—Luke—and the dog too.”

Isla wears a warm smile. “I’ve seen you in town with your son. He’s adorable.”

The wind blows outside and with it, Magnus opens the door with Lally by his side.

“Whoa. It’s blustery,” she says, smoothing her curly hair.

“There’s a storm way out to sea. Guessing it’s coming off that,” CJ says.

“What have I missed?” Magnus asks.

“Same old arguments,” Royal says.

Isla taps the air with her finger. “Ladies, let’s get some snacks and drinks together.” She drops her voice a measure. “I have a feeling it’s going to be a long night.”

I take one long look at Harley, my high school dream girl, my Miss Manatee, my frenemy, and now my fiancée. Wearing an off-the-shoulder shirt and leggings, she’s more beautiful than ever. I look forward to a future when all this is behind us.

First, I sense there’s an adventure ahead. One last quest, courtesy of Chip, before all of this can finally be put to rest.

While Magnus gives a quick update on the status of Boo’s Battle Bros and Royal talks about the quickly filling reservation list at the Driftwood, my attention shifts from their successes to the Sip & Scoop. Not only did our grandfather leave us with a treasure hunt, but he also left us his legacy... right where he started. He built these businesses from the bottom up. Time and storms and life knocked them down, so in some ways, we’re starting over, but on top of the strong foundation Chip provided.

I just hope that I can do him proud.

From the kitchen, where the women arrange a tray of beige foods like crackers, cheese, and chips and dip, I hear my name.

“Yes, Ryan was the biggest flirt,” Harley says.

“I can’t believe you’ve known these guys for so long.” That’s Lally.

“They were good friends with my cousin Brando. I was the brat. Whatever they told you about me is probably true.”

“We were warned,” Isla says.

Harley laughs it off. “I try to keep that to a minimum these days. But people do change. Though not everyone.” I stop listening when they commiserate over their loser exes.

The ladies’ chat is short-lived, and they soon bring over food and drinks.

Getting started, CJ says, “This is what we know.” Then he reads from the will. “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.”

“With a plume,” Harley interjects.

I love this woman.

CJ finishes. “To Chip Junior, I leave my sextant and the Salty Skeleton.”

“You’re Chip Junior?” Lally asks.

We all nod.

“He’s not Carlos, which was our grandfather’s name. His actual name is Chip Junior McGregor.”

“Which explains a lot,” Royal teases.

“At least my name isn’t Royal who thinks he’s sovereign,” CJ says.

Ever the equalizer, Magnus picks up reading where our little brother left off. “The Junk goes to Magnus. The Sloop, to Ryan. How are things coming over there?”

I shake my head slowly, exhausted at the thought of the scope of the project. “It’s a disaster.”

“It’s true. There’s hardly a roof. The floor is rotted. I’m surprised the walls are still standing. Pretty much everything inside is in shambles, broken, or covered in crud,” Harley says.

I scramble to my feet. “But we found something. I can’t believe I didn’t tell you all sooner. I don’t know if it’s—”

“What is it?” they all ask.

I pat my pockets, trying to find it then tap the air with my finger. “The diaper bag.”

“You found a dirty diaper?” Royal asks.

I take the fragment out of the Velcro pocket. “No, we found this.” I go on to tell them about the map mural behind the mirror.

Smoothing it on the table, everyone takes turns studying it. Royal nods at Isla and she digs through her purse before producing another piece they found on the resort property. Magnus reveals the third Lally pinched off the Dark Seas. We piece them together like a puzzle and sure enough, they fit.

It’s as if everyone in the room collectively holds their breath.

“We’re only missing one section,” CJ says heavily as if it rests on his shoulders to find the final section.

“Any ideas where it might be?” I ask.

We speculate, but no one has a strong lead.

Magnus continues to read the will, “Chip left the Galleon and the entire Driftwood property to Royal, where he found a part of the map and you found one amongst the rubble of the Sloop. And according to the will, CJ gets anything left that floats. Maybe the other piece of the map is...” he trails off because anything that floats could, well, be anything.

“Anything that floats,” Royal repeats, then picks up where Magnus left off on 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.”

“It’s safe to say we’re all a work in progress.” I swiftly move past that because I resent Chip naming me the shallowest. I prefer the flirtiest or the most athletic, thank you very much.

“Since we’re taking turns, you’re up, Ry,” Magnus says.

Clearing my throat, I read, “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.”

“We started on the eighteenth,” Royal says.

“Mini golf course,” Isla adds for those who weren’t aware.

I continue, “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.”

Royal scrubs his hand through his hair. “I still don’t understand why he did that. Glandman of all people.” He turns to Harley and me. “Talk about frenemies. They were the worst. More like bitter rivals. They despised each other.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that. Do you think it might be possible that their rivalry drove the other to strive harder, be better, and achieve more?” I ask.

Royal shakes his head. “We all know that Glandman’s business practices were shady.”

“Who’s to say Chip’s weren’t?” I ask.

“You’re talking about our grandfather,” Magnus warns.

“Yes, but we don’t know everything about what he did. And like I recently found out, some people, not mentioning any names, cough, assistant coach Webster, cough, are willing to do shady things. Or they convince themselves that it’s okay, the right choice, helpful even. My point is, we really don’t know.”

“Chip taught me a lot about business and I never got the sense he was involved in scandal,” Royal says.

Magnus exhales as if he’s arguing with himself about whether to make us do pushups every time we get off track.

“All I’m saying is maybe, in much the same way that Glandman and Chip drove each other to succeed, he wants the same for us and knew that if he didn’t issue an ultimatum,

we'd go about business as usual and not take the will seriously."

"He has a point," Harley says.

Everyone agrees.

"So, the question he asked me: When up is down, what do you do?" My oldest brother reflects on the direction his life was going, how he was in a dark place after the helicopter accident, and how Lally helped him surface.

It's deeply personal, especially coming from him, and I appreciate him trusting us with that level of honesty and vulnerability.

"Yeah, I suppose I learned a lesson too." Royal glances at Isla. "I thought I had everything figured out. That I got it right. But everything was wrong until Isla came along and blew up my life."

"I didn't literally blow up your life," Isla says.

"Your smoothie blew up on me."

"Harley ran me over," I blurt.

"It was more of a tap. A love tap."

"Okay, enough coochie coo, you two. I need more time to get used to the idea that you both being in the same room won't result in someone winding up in need of medical attention." Royal shifts as if uncomfortable.

Isla gasps. "Did that happen?"

"There was the time Ryan put a fake snake in her backpack and someone warned her, then she shrugged off her bag and ran into traffic screaming."

Harley narrows her eyes. "I hate snakes."

"Did you get run over?"

"No, but I twisted my ankle."

I huff. "And she's failing to mention that was in retaliation for putting palmetto bugs in my locker."

“Your locker smelled so bad. It was only a matter of time before they found their way inside, anyway.”

“So, you admit it?”

She playfully shoves me and I gather her into my arms, squeezing her tight in case this escalates.

From under my arm, Harley says, “I can’t tell if you’re trying to put me in a sleeper hold or if you’re hugging me.”

“Aggressive cuddling,” I whisper and loosen my grip before kissing her temple. Wrapping her arms around me, she leans in and we both laugh before exchanging a kiss on the lips.

Magnus lets out a shrill coach whistle. “Okay, kids. Wrestling practice is over. Break it up.”

“They’ve been like this forever.” Royal wipes his hand down his face.

I’m reluctant to let Harley go, but only because I’ll take a hug from her anytime, anyplace. A kiss too.

I contemplate the question Chip left for me, when inside is out, what do you do? I try to frame it in light of the changes over the last week—I was deep inside the world of football and am on my way out. But I haven’t lost anything like I feared. Instead, I gained a new relationship with Harley, and potentially a family with Luke and maybe more kids.

As if he’s been failing to crack the code for weeks, CJ mutters, “When high is low, where do you go?”

“I don’t know, bro.”

“I’m thinking high ground, flooding, flying, climbing, diving?”

“Or perhaps he intended those questions to pertain to our personal lives. At least that’s how the others interpreted them.”

“Look at you, sounding all smart and introspective,” Royal teases.

“There’s one more section,” Isla adds. “Solving this puzzle will be a great adventure that takes you beyond your comfort

zones. It'll be humbling and educational. Have you boys learned anything?"

We all chuckle.

Lally reads the last part. "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."

"Find who?" Harley asks.

Taking her hand in mine and noticing her ring finger is still bare, I say, "That's what we're all wondering."

"I started this by saying *This is what we know*. But we're after what we don't know."

"Yeah, yeah, Captain Obvious," Magnus says.

CJ leans over, and whereas I think he's going to dip a chip, he sets the diary on the table. "Chip left Ryan a journal."

"And a pen with a plume," I add.

"But it's not just any journal," CJ says. "The first half contains entries from Márcia Sousa."

"The pirate queen?" Magnus says.

Royal shivers. "The Devil's Charm."

"And our grandmother," I finish.

There's a room-wide moment of thoughtful silence as if we still can't fathom the enormity of this.

"What does the diary say?" Isla asks.

"It's in Portuguese and is very hard to read," Harley says.

Taking charge, Harley says, "We'll go through word by word. CJ, you read. If any of you brothers know the translation, tell us. Isla, set yourself up with a translation app and verify that it's correct. I will take notes and write down what they say word for word in case it's more of a matter of interpretation than direct translation."

We get started and learn about the Sousa's exciting departure from Portugal and their adventures on the high seas. Márcia discovered she was pregnant during the voyage, but the rocking of the ship somehow offset her morning sickness.

When we get to the end of the passage about the family's journey, because we all know the betrayal from the Royal House of Sousa back in Portugal that's coming, we discuss what we've read so far.

We continue, with Lally reminding us to slow down. "Not everyone understands Brazilian or McGregorese."

The diary corroborates everything Chip told us about João, the heir to the throne in Portugal, and his twin, Adão's, ploy to get rid of him.

"Don't get any wise ideas," Royal calls to me from across the room.

"You either." I playfully glare.

"It's so tragic that João was killed, leaving Márcia in a faraway land to take care of the family," Harley says, likely thinking of her ex deserting her.

"For better or worse, Márcia figured out a way to make sure the family survived," I say, knowing Harley has a lot of fight in her.

"By trading with pirates and then becoming the captain of her own ship," Magnus says.

"She made the Coroa de Lágrimas and swore revenge on the House of Sousa. Chip picked up where she left off," CJ adds.

"But I don't think he intends for us to take revenge," I say.

CJ shrugs in a way that makes me think he knows something we don't. Because we teased or withdrew from him for insisting our parents weren't entirely who we thought and aren't dead, maybe he has a secret. He was closest to Chip, and yet our grandfather left me the diary. I add questions to my questions.

"But we will recover the crown if we can," Magnus says.

“So, do you believe all this?” Harley whispers.

“It’s like we’re living our very own Indiana Jones movie.” The corner of my lip lifts with a smile. “With ice cream and a baby.”

“Thankfully, he’s sleeping through this. But I like our version better.”

“Me too, sweetheart,” I say in my best Indiana Jones imitation, then kiss her on the forehead.

Everyone has broken into side conversations as if we all need a break from the transcription of the diary. Isla curls up on the couch next to Royal and falls asleep. Magnus balances his elbows on his knees, deep in thought, while Lally and Harley clean up the snacks.

CJ gazes out the window into the dark.

I flip through the journal, wondering what we’ll learn next. If there even really is a lost crown of tears. There’s still more to go in Márcia’s portion of the journal and then Chip’s section. But I can’t help but feel we’re still missing something crucial.

Not the last piece of the map and not the third gem for the crown, or even the crown itself. It has something to do with the messages in the will—why a pen with a plume? A pillow for Magnus, and what on earth is the Salty Skeleton?

Harley



With Luke happily with his uncles and cousins, I hurry to the Sip & Scoop.

By day, we've been doing demolition—though Hurricane Howie did most of that for us.

By night, we've been doing the painstaking work of translating the journal. We're about three-quarters of the way through and have learned a few crucial things: family can be deceptive, pirates are merciless, and the crown of tears was made of gold and had three points, one with a pearl, the second with a diamond, and the third is a piece of red coral.

That's the missing one. That's what we're looking for. But that's not what I found this morning when I was going through the kitchen cabinet at Uncle Eddie's.

In place of a front door, the Sip & Scoop has a gaping hole in the entry.

Before I can ask what happened, Ryan says, "I was lugging some of this material out to the dumpster, and the door just gave up and fell right off the hinges."

"That's not supposed to happen."

"I think the frame split."

"If this place weren't in such rough shape, I would accuse you of kicking it out of your way, but I'm glad it didn't fall on you."

"It's almost like this place wants to fall to pieces."

“Sorry, ip & oop. That’s not happening. You’re not giving up,” I call, pretending to be talking to the building. “We’re going to fix you up, start serving ice cream, and you’re going to like it.”

Ryan chuckles.

I bounce on my toes. “Not only are we going to serve ice cream, but I found it. I solved the problem.” I root through my bag to find the card.

“Which problem? We have about a dozen of those.”

I present the butter-stained, smeared, and well-loved recipe card. “I found the recipe for Aunt Martina’s coconut crunch. At first, I thought it might save the Plundering Pelican, but my sisters are working hard to do that. Plus, most people don’t order cookies for dessert at restaurants.”

“I’m kind of banking on them not being successful.” Ryan arches an eyebrow toward the restaurant. “They’re our competition.”

I swat him with the card. “You twit. Did it ever occur to you that if the Plundering Pelican does well, more people will come to Coconut Key and those same people might want an ice cream cookie sandwich to tide them over until dinner or to have ice cream for dessert?”

“I was joking. Of course, there’s enough room in this town for them and us. I just have your back since they excluded you.”

Tilting my head to the side, “Ryan, you and I both know that if I wanted a part in the Plundering Pelican, I would’ve claimed the throne as the Plundering Pelican Queen. As the youngest, I’ve never let my sisters boss me around.” I lengthen my spine. “In a way, it was a blessing in disguise, because look at what we’re doing.”

We both take in the remains of the Sip & Scoop. With little more than a couple of walls kind of standing, it looks relatively hopeless.

“Okay, don’t look, but imagine what it’ll be. And listen to this. Coconut crunch was my aunt’s special recipe. She sold it

in the gift shop at the Plundering Pelican. It's kind of like peanut brittle but with coconut. It's hard to explain."

"I remember it. Magnus loved the stuff."

"One early summer day, it was raining out. I was still little, maybe five or six. The others had gone off to do something, leaving me inside. Aunt Martina must've sensed I was feeling left out. For the record. I wasn't. I didn't want to go do whatever dumb thing my older sisters were doing." Probably. I don't remember.

"Sounds just like you." Ryan smooths his hand through my hair and then slides it behind my shoulder.

Slightly distracted because this could lead to a kiss, I try to recollect my thoughts. Lately, they've been primarily on Luke, secondarily on Ryan, and then evenly split between the ice cream shop and the treasure hunt.

Giving my head a little shake, I go on, "Aunt Martina asked me if I wanted to help her in the kitchen. She had a special recipe for us to try. The ingredients in the coconut crunch and her method were top secret, so I was kind of excited. But instead of simply making it, she wanted to try a cookies version of it."

Ryan doesn't look overly impressed.

"The cookies were a success—firm on the outside with a gooey middle. She gave me full credit and from that summer on, it was our special thing we'd do on a rainy day. Years later, I tried to replicate it and failed. My guess is she added the secret ingredient when I wasn't looking."

"That's sweet. Literally."

"But that's not all. The cookies are perfect for ice cream cookie sandwiches here at the Sip & Scoop."

Ryan smiles but doesn't quite have the enthusiasm I was hoping for.

"We've been brainstorming whether to keep everything here true to the original or put a modern spin or do our own thing. This is both. It's very Coco Key because this area used

to be a coconut palm plantation, so the coconut part provides a regional draw. The cookie sandwich bar is uniquely ours.” I describe the cookie sandwich bar with an assortment of fillings between the cookies and explain how it would work.

His gaze sparks as if he too can envision it, then he moves to kiss me.

I pull away.

His lips quirk like I’m playing hard to get.

No, he’s hard to resist, but we’re in public. I whisper, “We can’t kiss here.”

“We’re the only two people on the street. This is a small town, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Exactly. What about the Coconut Wireless?”

“I’m surprised the pink flamingos haven’t made an appearance.”

By the puzzled look on my face, he must realize I’m in the dark about this more recent development.

“Ask Isla or Lally. They’ll tell you. But kissing is something people who’re in love do.”

I bark a laugh. “In love? I’m not in love.”

Undeterred, Ryan tips his head back with laughter. “Yes, you are. You just don’t realize it yet.”

I am so in love. I’m a fool for this guy. A total and utter fool.

Ryan must read the change in my expression because he plants a huge kiss on my lips. I melt a little, and despite my crunchy exterior, I feel gooey in the middle, and unable to ignore the lure of his clean cotton scent.

When we part, he says, “Have I ever told you that you’re brilliant?”

“No, you haven’t.”

“You’re brilliant.”

“Thank you, and you’re handsome.”

“That’s new. Do tell...”

“You know it’s true.”

He smirks because he does. “And you’re beautiful, smart, and the hottest—”

My cheeks heat a degree with each compliment.

They don’t return to their normal shade until lunch because we work non-stop under the blazing sun as we remove the remaining debris from the front area and start on the kitchen of the ice cream shop.

Standing by the dock, and deciding whether to make sandwiches or go to the next Key over for something to eat, Ryan says, “Love can sneak up on you, be somewhere you least expect it, or have been right in front of you all along.”

His gaze locks on me, loaded with meaning.

I’m about to deny it again when a stream of water erupts like a geyser, splashing us.

Drenched, I look around, wondering if Ryan pranked me again, or if a speed boat disobeyed the no-wake zone.

Ryan is also soaking wet, ruling out the prank possibility because he probably wouldn’t have sacrificed himself in the name of me being hosed down. No boats at the dock either. Only a few bubbles pop on the surface of the water below.

Then a flipper emerges from the water as if claiming the prank.

“Lola?” I ask. “Lola the Sassy Sea Cow? I told you years ago, that only one of us can wear the Miss Manatee crown.”

Ryan laughs as I shake the water out of my hair.

“Looks like Lola got you good,” Lally says, appearing from Beans & Books. Robyn must still be on the solo honeymoon trip.

“It’s not the first time,” I mutter.

“Harley here was crowned Miss Manatee one year and while standing at the top of the dock, receiving her ribbon and

prizes, a splash of water came out of nowhere. Somehow, it only got her wet, not the other people on the dock.”

“I still think it was you.”

Ryan holds his hands up, the picture of innocence. “It was Lola. You looked beautiful that day. No way would I have wanted to ruin that.”

“I looked beautiful?” I ask, incredulous.

Ryan smooths my hair again, but this time his fingers stick. “I’ll keep telling you that until you believe me.”

The driver of a truck honks and then pulls to the side of the road. “I come with two new dogs and acai bowls,” Magnus says then does a double take. “Why are you two all wet?”

“Lola,” Ryan and I say at the same time.

“So, you admit it was her?”

“Yeah, she just flipped us.”

“And you admit it was her during the Miss Manatee ceremony.”

“Until I get her verbal confession, no.”

Ryan shakes his head in a *What am I going to do with you* kind of way.

“If I knew you guys were going to be here, I’d have grabbed extra acai for you,” Magnus says.

He was always the toughest of the McGregor brothers, but when he looks at Lally, I see a surprisingly soft expression.

Ryan wrinkles his nose. “No worries. Sounds weird.”

“You have to try it. I’ll grab an extra spoon from inside,” Lally says.

Magnus explains how she turned him onto the thick fruit, ice-cream-like mixture from Brazil with lots of bits and bites on top.

Lally divides the contents of her bowl in half and passes it to me. Magnus shares with his brother.

“It’s a pretty purplish pink,” I say, unsure about what it’s going to taste like. Taking a small scoop, I try it. “Oh, it’s good. Very good.”

“Let me be the judge of this.” Ryan tastes a sample. “Yeah. It is, actually. Kind of like fruity soft serve.”

“And it’s good for you,” Lally says, mentioning antioxidants and micronutrients.

“We should serve this at the Sip & Scoop for the health conscious,” I suggest.

“You want an ice cream cookie bar and ash bowls?”

Lally and Magnus laugh then take turns correcting Ryan until he gets the pronunciation right.

The acai is delicious, but Ryan is like a nutrient that I was missing. Despite the rough start and the teasing, we laugh so well together. Looking back, that was missing from my life since leaving Coco Key. We also work surprisingly well together and he’s great with Luke.

However, I won’t tell him about the whole vitamin thing because it’s not exactly romantic. As sassy as I can be, I’m goofy too. A goober. But I can be myself with him. Meanwhile, I’d been trying to mold myself into someone who wore suits to work and cared about other people’s PR. When the only personal relations that matter are ours.

Then again, the media storm with Riptide’s quarterback and Jayda hasn’t quite blown over, and after spending days clearing out the wreckage of Hurricane Howie, I’ve seen enough trouble for one lifetime.

Lally continues the story about how she made Magnus try the acai, by adding, “That was the day we were raising funds for the Manatee Jubilee.”

“And the last time I saw Glandman.”

Everyone knows he’s a slimy developer and will just as soon take your property and rob you blind as tell you it’s for your own good.

“I wonder why Aunt Lorena married him,” Ryan says absent-mindedly.

“Did they have kids?” Lally asks.

Magnus shrugs. “We don’t know much about that at all. It was a strange story. No one talked about it and I was never clear on whether it was before or after Chip and Gerome had a falling out—” Magnus cuts himself off.

Lally stops mid bite.

“The ship is back,” Ryan says.

“That means I’ll be playing pineapple poker soon,” Lally says.

“No, you won’t.” I’ve gathered that the last time they saw it offshore, they’d been arguing about whether she’d meet with the captain.

Brow furrowed, Ryan fills me in on how Lally went on a daring adventure to board the ship at night and played cards with the captain in exchange for information, which resulted in her stealing a ship in a bottle. “The ship’s sail was part two of the map. Speaking of that, we’d better grab lunch and get back to work.”

“Acai?” I ask because the drive to the next Key will give me plenty more time alone with my favorite nutrient.

“Doughnuts,” Ryan says.

“For lunch?”

“It’s all about balance.”



We spend the rest of the afternoon clearing out the kitchen area in the rear of the ice cream parlor, which took the worst of the damage.

Ryan cranks on some tunes and we sing along while we work. It passes the time because there’s nothing fun about hauling out broken plaster, wood with rusty nails, and cracked tile.

“Why aren’t we hiring a company to do this?” I ask Ryan when we meet by the dumpster.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I say.

“Seriously?”

He shakes his head slowly like it’s a revelation. “No, Chip did most of the work himself on the properties, so it didn’t occur to me. But now that you mention it…”

“We’re almost done, anyway,” I say, never one to back down from a challenge.

“That’s the spirit. But I should ask Royal for contractor recommendations since there is a lot of work ahead of us.”

On the radio, the song changes and we get back to work, singing along. Who’d have thought Ryan and I would genuinely have fun together, destroying an ice cream joint? Though I guess we’re tearing down to build back up.

The rest of the afternoon zooms by. I’m working on removing the last of a supplies shelf in the bathroom when I shift the base and a panel cut out of the sheetrock falls onto the floor. It may have been a plumbing repair that didn’t get taped, mudded, and painted with the lazy worker thinking it wouldn’t be noticed behind the shelf. From inside the cavity in the wall, white writing against red metal catches my eye.

Inside, I find an old coffee can. “I think I found some treasure,” I call to Ryan.

He’s beside me in a flash. “Really?”

“No, but maybe someone made a time capsule or hid their deepest, darkest secrets in this old can of Folgers coffee.”

“Dark secrets? Makes sense, it is a dark roast.”

I playfully roll my eyes. “Har har.”

“Chip liked Folgers’ Brazilian blend, a medium roast.”

I pass the can to Ryan since technically, this place is his. He removes the lid and then pulls out a stack of cards. “Recipe cards like your aunt’s coconut crunch?”

“Ice cream secrets?”

Ryan unties the string holding them together and plucks the first one from the pile, flashing it at me. It’s a classic white sand beach overlooking turquoise water and says *Hello from the Bahamas*.

“It’s a postcard.”

He reads the reverse side. “From my great Aunt Lorena, Chip’s sister.”

“That’s a strange thing to hide in a can in a wall.”

“What’s even stranger is this one is signed Lorena *and* Johnny.”

“Weren’t you guys saying she was married to Gerome Glandman? Perhaps she had a secret affair.”

“Maybe, but why would she send my uncle postcards with her new guy’s info too?”

“Because she knew her brother despised Glandman.”

Ryan shakes his head. “Something doesn’t add up.”

“Maybe it’ll make more sense after you read them all.”

There are at least a dozen, all with similar images of beaches, but with different greetings, including ones from *Beautiful Jamaica*, *Sunny Barbados*, and *Adventures in Aruba*.

“Looks like she was island hopping...for years,” I add, noting the dates spanning over a decade.

“But why and with whom?” Ryan asks.

“More importantly, why were they hidden there?” I ask, pointing to the hole in the wall.

Ryan

A decorative flourish consisting of three stylized, symmetrical scroll-like elements.

CHAPTER 16

After Harley and I find the postcards, we tell everyone to clear their schedules. Royal and Isla are busy with the resort so they ask if we can have the meeting there. CJ is already in the grand lobby as if he's been long awaiting this day.

Lally and Magnus appear next with several dogs in tow. One of them is having separation anxiety, so we move the meeting outside on the grand lawn overlooking the grounds.

Royal and Isla rush around because their staff is still in training and running an operation this big is a major undertaking. Makes me wonder how we'll do at the Sip & Scoop.

"Be there in a minute," Isla says, dashing by.

Royal paces while on the phone, wearing a scowl. What else is new? Then, without breaking character, as Isla scuttles past, he sweeps her into his arms, kisses her, and then spins away as if this is all very normal.

Give me a ball to throw or run one down a field and I'm on it. The pace of this place is something else entirely. An inkling of doubt about whether I'm cut out to manage an ice cream shop when I have no experience creeps in.

Harley sits beside me on the big, cushy chairs outside overlooking the water. The resort is built up to protect the property from big swells and storms. That didn't stop Hurricane Howie, but from the center of the grounds with the Galleon building, all the other structures and areas terrace downward. From here, we have the high ground and can see

everything from the mini golf course to the pool, and onward to the beach.

I imagine Chip in his office, surveying his accomplishments. But then I have a curious thought. “I can’t imagine my grandfather running this place by himself and raising us boys.”

“Maybe that’s why he sent us on so many adventures.” Royal pockets his phone.

“He also had help. It was a team effort,” Magnus adds.

Isla runs across the lawn, waving at us. “Wait for me!”

Once more, Royal lassoes her in his arms and they spin before pausing for a kiss.

“What a whirlwind,” she says, breathless.

“The two of you don’t stop,” Lally adds.

CJ claps his hands together, calling order. “So, what did you discover?”

Harley holds up the coffee can. “This.”

“I’ve had enough coffee for one day, but thanks,” Isla says.

Harley and I exchange a knowing look. “It’s not what you think.”

CJ opens the can, removes the stack of postcards, and flips carefully through them. “Aunt Lorena wasn’t lost after all.”

I shake my head. “No, but we think she may have run off with a guy named Johnny. She signs each card *Love, Lorena and Johnny*.”

“You think she skipped out on Glandman?” Isla wrinkles her nose.

CJ reads each card and then passes them around.

“Wait. This one says Johnny learned to ride a bike today. Would she brag that her secret lover only just learned to ride a bicycle as an adult man?” Lally asks. “No offense if some of you don’t know how.”

We all mutter that we know how to ride bikes.

“In this one, she talks about him preferring sailing over baseball,” Isla says.

“We waited to read all of them until now, but something doesn’t add up,” I say.

“Are there any McGregors we don’t know about? A missing twin. Twins run in the family,” I ask.

“No, you dufus,” Royal says, shaking his head. “I think Aunt Lorena and Glandman had a kid.”

“You’re the dufus,” I retort.

Isla nods, “No, he might be right.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re married.”

All three of the women cock their heads in my direction.

I pump my hands. “Alright, alright. But don’t you think we’d know if we had a cousin named Johnny? And wouldn’t Glandman have raised his son to take over his empire someday?”

Harley gasps. “Unless he didn’t know.”

“Why would Aunt Lorena keep that from him?”

She shrugs, but then I realize that her horrible, yet brief, marriage and the resulting baby probably prompted her to consider certain things.

“Because Glandman is awful,” CJ and Royal say, agreeing for once.

Magnus says, “We need to know if there’s any mention of Lorena and Johnny in the diary.”

“First, let’s finish Márcia’s section. There’s not much more to go and I’ve been brushing up on Portuguese,” CJ says.

“I didn’t even realize you spoke it in the first place,” I say.

Magnus snorts. “CJ is fluent in French, Spanish, Brazilian, Dutch, and Portuguese.”

“Some Arabic and Mandarin, too.” CJ wears a private smile.

“Why do you know so many languages?” Royal asks.

“Communication.”

“Now we know who to contact if we have a guest in need of interpreter services,” Isla says.

We resume our roles, transcribing the diary, and learn that not only was Márcia heartbroken by the loss of her husband but depressed for a time too. Her life went from lavish, as part of the Royal House of Sousa, to each day being a desperate bid for survival. That early period in Brazil was no place for a widow with five children.

One day, her middle son went missing, and she found him trying to sell beans to help the family. That’s when she decided she needed to take the helm, literally.

By day, she would teach the children how to read, study math, and tell them about the splendors of Portugal. However, she made sure they knew it was their Uncle Adão’s fault they were hungry, dirty, and scared.

Without an honest way to earn money, at night, she put her ear to the ground, learning who feuded, had strife, and were competitors. She started to make connections with shady characters, learned her way around the port, and who needed supplies. As the most unlikely suspect, she’d rob the ships’ cargo. Through a web of proxies, she’d sell the items to the highest bidder or undercut and exploit the greed of the competition. Soon, people discovered she was behind the thefts and a price was put on her head.

CJ says, “Sounds like Márcia was at a crossroads. Her kids were suffering and it would only get worse if she were caught. It was sink or swim. Instead, she doubled down and decided to sail.”

We continue to translate and discover that she built a story around a character named the “Devil’s Charm,” and spread the word about the most fearsome pirate in the land. Even her children would hear about the captain from other kids. Starting with a small vessel and a questionable crew, she scaled up quickly, landing a barque called the Crimson Tide.

CJ goes quiet after the story of a particularly dangerous raid in the Bahamas.

“What is it?” Magnus asks.

“I skimmed the rest. It’s not good,” CJ answers.

“Where were her kids?” Concern laces Harley’s voice.

“The older ones were with her.” CJ names them. “The younger ones were probably back in Brazil. She was trying to return.”

We all lean in.

“You have to read it,” Royal says.

Heaving a sigh, CJ obeys and we learn that the Crimson Tide sustained cannon fire and then ran aground in Middle Bight Cay, almost due east of here.

“She was headed through the Straits of Florida and was blown off course while another ship hunted down the Crimson Tide.” CJ turns the journal around and shows us the last page. The one Harley and I saw with the water stains. Could they be tears? Had the devil’s charm worn off?

Everyone is quiet and only the shushing of the surf down below can be heard over our beating hearts. Even though Márcia became a pirate and probably did some terrible things, she was still our ancestor and her story is tragic because of the way she was driven to provide for her family.

“It’s safe to say the Crimson Tide sunk,” Royal says.

“And the captain didn’t survive to tell the rest of the tale,” I add.

“But Chip did obtain her diary, which was on the ship since she was writing about the events,” Magnus says astutely. “How did he get it and why did he leave it to you?”

“Maybe his entries provide answers.”

CJ continues with our grandfather’s section. He comments on Márcia’s diary entries, the sunken ship, and his intent to finish what she’d started and exact revenge on the Royal

House of Sousa for disavowing their family and leaving them adrift with nothing in a faraway land.

The long shadows across the lawn suggest we've been at this for a while.

With a glance toward the west, Magnus mutters, "Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in morning, sailors take warning."

Everyone is tired. Harley goes home to Luke, Lally checks on the dogs, and Isla attends to matters at the resort, leaving just us brothers, gathered here once again as we had done for so many years. Back then, we were carrying out our grandfather's directions to search for treasure, solve riddles, and learn how to tie knots, sail, and navigate. Now, we're reading about his adventures.

Long hours pass while CJ pores over the journal.

By sun up, the diary has revealed that Chip found the pearl and the diamond belonging to the crown on various diving expeditions well before our mother was born along with the coral later on.

"That means they were removed from the crown before it was lost," Magnus says.

Next, we learn that Chip found the map, intact, but is the one who tore it up.

"But why?" Royal asks.

"I think to answer these questions, we need some brain beans," I say, hungry and requiring caffeine.

CJ skims the rest of the diary and says it's worth reading, but doesn't see anything that will answer these questions. Exhausted, we head into town to find Lally and Isla where they're still covering Robyn while she's on their honeymoon cruise. At least they got a few hours of sleep.

Only, when we get there, Bean is back.

Isla stumbles in and nearly collides with her sister.

Eyes suddenly bright, she asks, “How was your honeymoon?”

Robyn’s mouth is pinched tight, but her eyes tell a different story. “We can talk later. I got worried when we got back last night and you weren’t answering your phone.”

“Tell me more about this *we* you speak of?” Isla asks, jutting out her elbow.

Robyn draws a deep breath. “I mean you and me and there won’t be any chocolate involved. For now, I’m changing the subject.”

“But you’re glowing,” Isla says.

Robyn looks at her sister carefully, “So are you. But everyone else looks terrible, like you were up all night. You’ve come to the right place. I missed the best coffee north of Brazil.” She takes a little spin around her coffee shop.

“We’ve been up learning about the mystery,” I say.

Robyn whips around. “The mystery of the lost crown of tears?”

“The very one,” Royal says with a yawn.

The sisters fix everyone’s coffee and Robyn eyes a plate of lumpen, soggy pastries with concern. “Why do they look like that?”

Royal takes his wife’s hand. “We’re working on baking skills.”

Everyone piles into the front of the bookstore with its cushy chairs. Nutmeg, the cat, weaves around everyone’s legs, selecting who she’ll allow the honor of petting her.

In turn, we give Robyn a rundown of everything we learned, which helps us sift through all the new information.

“But there’s a torn-out page,” I say, showing Robyn the diary. “And there’s a blank note.” I tell them about the envelope with the seal.

“Kind of odd,” Robyn says.

I still haven't wrapped my head around why he left this to me when everyone else has been helping decode it.

Robyn flips the blank page over and squints at the back of it. "What's this?"

"A blank page," Isla says. "Maybe Chip wanted to divide his section from Márcia's, but that doesn't explain why there's a torn-out page."

"No, if you look carefully...hold it up to the light." She angles it toward the window.

The sun burns as it comes up over the horizon in a blaze of fiery oranges and reds.

"Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky in morning, sailors take warning," Magnus repeats.

"There's a faint symbol there," Robyn says.

We all take a look at the diary page and agree that it looks like Chip must've sketched something on the torn-out page and the lead from the pencil rubbed off onto what, at first glance, looks like a blank page.

Lally gasps. "I've seen that before." She looks out the window again toward the shoreline. "I saw it on the poker table. It was like a wood burning."

"Like it had been on fire?"

From the doorway, someone shouts, "Da!" From Harley's arms, Luke reaches for me.

"You guys are up early."

"Someone missed you." Harley smiles.

"Do I want to ask which one of you?" I ask, kissing her on the cheek.

"So, you think it's a brand of some sort?" Magnus asks Lally, resuming the conversation, which is more like speculation at this point.

"Oh, Uncle Eddie has one of those for the buns at the Plundering Pelican," Harley says, describing it.

Lally taps the air. “Yes, just like that, but on a much bigger scale.” She widens her arms.

“Where did you see it?” Magnus asks.

“The poker table,” Lally answers.

“On the Dark Seas? Listen, this is not up for debate. You are not boarding that ship again. It’s too dangerous.” Magnus speaks with the authority of a military leader.

“No, the poker table used by the Pirate Defense League.”

“Who?” Harley asks.

“We have a lot to catch up on,” Isla says.

“But I think we all need a break.” I yawn.

Everyone agrees to reconvene after lunch. We have work to do and could use some rest.

Harley, Luke, and I move toward the door.

“Wait,” Robyn calls. “What did you say the ship was called?”

“The Dark Seas?” Magnus asks with some major punctuation after it like there’s no way anyone is getting on board.

“No, the other one. Captain Márcia’s?” Robyn asks.

“The Crimson Tide, well, in Portuguese.” CJ says the words, “*Maré Carmesim.*”

Robyn’s eyes widen. “I have the logbook. Well, not the Crimson Tide’s logbook, but the one from the ship that discovered the wreck.”

The room stills in surprised anticipation.

Harley



We were nearly out the door but all do a one-eighty as Robyn presents a thick leather-bound, rectangular book.

She explains, “The Petrel was a three-masted merchant ship that sailed from England to this area. Typically, the captain kept a daily record of pertinent details: the route, weather, crew members, and activity on the ship, and, of course, anything noteworthy or unusual they encountered. Sea cows they thought were mermaids, for example.”

“Is that in there?” Ryan asks.

“No, but I’ve seen other ones. Mr. Edmonton has an extensive library of maritime documents, books, and items. Some he donated to the bookstore here when I got started.”

“Yeah, and Glandman was mighty interested in the logbook.” Isla scowls.

“But was it this one?” I ask.

“Who cares about Glandman? He likes to think he can throw his money and influence around here, but get this: he and Chip were rivals. It was one on one. There are four of us and one of him. Whatever crooked schemes he has up his sleeve, he doesn’t stand a chance,” Ryan says with surprising passion.

“Actually, there are seven of us.” Lifting onto my toes, I kiss him on the cheek.

Ryan beams a smile.

Luke claps his hands.

“Correction, there are eight of us,” I say, adding Luke to the crew.

Despite Ryan’s and my rocky past, everyone seems to accept us. Although, CJ’s expression is indistinct. Maybe he just wants us to focus right now and with so many people, it’s easy to get sidetracked.

“The logbook will tell us about an encounter with a ship in distress or a sunken vessel?” Royal asks.

Robyn taps the cover. “It’s all right here.” She reads the description, outlining the wreckage the Petrel discovered and the coordinates of the location. “No captain or crew remained. It’s designated abandoned and sunk. Nothing worth salvaging.”

“Meaning, it might still be down there.” CJ’s expression brightens.

“Chip scoured this area. The Driftwood resort is practically constructed entirely of materials from wrecks. He would’ve recognized had he found the Crimson Tide,” Royal says.

Ryan says, “What if he didn’t find it?”

Everyone debates this at great length while I read and reread the logbook entry. The pages are thick and the spidery print is similar to Márcia’s except it’s in English.

“We do know that the captain of the Petrel discovered a barque named the Crimson Tide,” Ryan says.

CJ’s comments on focusing on what we don’t know come to mind. It’s an interesting way to look at the world.

I don’t know how I got wrapped up in this treasure hunt.

I don’t know how I ended up back in Coco Key.

I don’t know how Ryan and I decided we’re better together.

I don’t know what’s next.

Even though this last week has been like one wonderfully long dream, I have a son to take care of. Right now, he’s

getting heavy in my arms and the responsibility to care and provide for him will only grow as he does.

How does Ryan fit into our story?

“Yeah, but think about this,” he says, drawing my attention.

For half a second, I think he’s going to answer the vague questions in my mind.

Instead, he says, “Chip had a collection of boats.”

Royal’s brow crimps. “He had the Grady White and a couple of dinghies.”

“He had a collection of boats on land.” Ryan inclines his head as if that makes more sense.

Not to me. Then again, nothing about this wild treasure chase does, or how I feel about Ryan and what our future might be.

“He built all the structures on this island out of material from sunken ships and named them as such. At the resort alone, there is the Galleon, Frigate, and Schooner. The Junks are the cottages by Quiet Cannon Beach and of course, there’s the Sloop. Also known as the Sip & Scoop.”

CJ taps the air. “The Crimson Tide was a barque and that is a kind of boat missing from Chip’s collection.”

Royal shakes his head, unconvinced. “This is a bit of a stretch.”

“What if it’s actually missing? What if that’s what Mom and Dad were looking for? What if that’s where the crown is?” CJ’s eyes practically swirl.

“Meaning, maybe Chip hadn’t yet found it to salvage it,” Magnus adds.

“Robyn, you’re brilliant,” Isla hugs her sister.

“Let’s see the coordinates,” CJ says to Robyn.

Magnus takes charge, “We’ll assemble two teams. CJ, Isla, Ryan, and I will take the sea. Lally, Royal, and Harley, you’ll

meet with the Pirate Defense League and see what they have to say about the symbol and the pencil rubbing. First, everyone, get some rest, have lunch, and we'll meet back here at thirteen hundred hours."

Ryan, Luke, and I return home. After a snack, I lay down on my bed with Luke by my side for a quick song and snuggle before his nap. We both instantly fall fast asleep.

I wake up to my little Lukey-boy babbling by my side and playing with his toes. The rest of the house is quiet. I imagine CJ was eager to get on the water, so maybe he, Ryan, Magnus, and Isla already set sail. A light breeze ruffles the sheer curtain on the window and I think about the symbol in the journal. Did Chip leave that page there intentionally? Is there more to it? Or was it simply a dividing page?

I can't help but think we're missing something and, like Ryan being the guy for me, it's been in front of us all along. However, we just can't see it.

When Luke and I get downstairs, I find a note from Ryan saying Lally will pick me up around one. It's pretty amazing to see the passion everyone has for this treasure hunt. I find myself getting swept up into it. But what about when it's over? What if they don't find it? If they do?

What happens when we all return to normal life—the monotony of waking up, working, eating, winding down, sleeping? Repeat.

Luke toddles along with his hand in mine as we make our way to the door to wait for Lally. No sooner are we outside than a booming bark sounds from an SUV. Luke bounces at the sight of the dog with its head out the window and tongue lolling.

No, life will never be monotonous or boring with this little guy. He makes even the simplest things a joy. Scooping him up, I let the dogs race around us until they settle down from their happy greetings.

Lally tells me about how she dressed up as a pirate for one of the weekly games with the Pirate Defense League. "They

were not amused. Afterward, when I got home, I had to pretend I had a peg leg to trick Magnus into coming to my house for his surprise birthday party. He was not amused. So, let's just say I don't have high hopes for this meeting."

"I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I can never remember the poker hands or their value."

"I don't think they'll let newcomers play, but I bet Luke could be an asset. No one worth their salt can resist such a cute little guy." She tickles his toes.

While Luke pets the dogs, the questions that have been spinning around in my head seem to line up and one raises its hand. It's just Lally and me, no guys, so I take a risk.

"I've known Magnus a long time, and he's more the serious type than Ryan, for instance..."

"Each of the McGregors is unique. I still can't figure out CJ. But I think Mag suspects he's not playing all his cards, if you know what I mean."

"Ryan mentioned he and Chip were close, especially toward the end."

"The whole thing is a big mystery. But if you're asking whether mine and Magnus's love was..."

I exhale a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Yes. You read my mind. I don't mean to be nosy. But Ryan and I have a past." ...and I'm not sure we have a future.

Lally's nod is conciliatory. "I've gathered. While that may be the case, Magnus and I each had our own pasts, which didn't make things easier or clearer about where we stood as a couple. How can I put this? We both carried baggage and weren't willing to let it go, which meant our hands were too full to embrace what we had. But as soon as we dropped what we'd been carrying around, everything clicked."

That makes sense, and I apply it to my situation. "In the case of Ryan and me, we're both gripping one of the straps to the same bag and aren't willing to let go."

“But you seem so,” she looks from side to side as if to make sure we’re alone, “in love.”

“We do?” Sure, he tossed the words my way during the dough-posal and I know how I feel, but there’s so much behind us that keeps me from clearly seeing the path forward.

Lally calls the dogs and then says, “When I joined this treasure hunt, very little was clear. We had Isla’s pearl and Royal’s piece of the map. Look where we are now. Give things time and they become clearer.”

“Yeah. I suppose we have plenty of time.”

“Ready to go see Mr. Higbee and the crew?”

After transferring Luke’s car seat, I tell her about the time Royal and Ryan terrorized the old man by, at least once a week, leaving him cardboard boxes that looked like deliveries addressed to him but were empty.

She laughs and says, “I hate to say it, but the old guy could stand a little humor in his life, even if it involves a harmless prank. But maybe the brothers can make up for it by leaving him something fun.”

“I’m not sure what Mr. Higbee considers fun, if anything.”

We laugh because he’s the epitome of a grumpy old man.

After dropping Luke off with my sisters, we meet Royal in town.

He’s waiting with coffees for each of us, provided by Robyn who requested hourly updates.

He says, “I suggest we split up. There are four members of the Pirate Defense League: Ray Higbee, Melly Lipman, Slidell Williams, and Amelia Cross. I’ll take Ray and Slidell. You two visit the ladies.”

“I’d agree, except Ray is the one with the poker table,” Lally says.

“And he’s the mean one. Let’s visit him first as a team. There’s power in numbers,” I say.

Royal nods. “He did warn Isla and I about minding our own business.”

“And you remember the time you had a dozen pizzas delivered to the history classroom sophomore year,” I remind Royal since Mr. Higbee was our US History teacher.

“I’m lucky he invited me back for poker night after I showed up in a pirate costume.” Lally shakes her head as if the “fun” with grumpy ‘ole Mr. Higbee hasn’t stopped.

“If he’s no help, then we’ll split up and visit the others. Sound good?” Royal asks.

“Sounds good,” Lally and I repeat.

But we’re not more than halfway down the street when Rosalie waves at us.

“Coconut Wireless, incoming,” I mutter, warning the others not to say anything incriminating.

Lally says, “Hey, Rosalie, I haven’t seen you much lately. We should walk the dogs soon. Madame and General miss playtime with Roo.”

“Yeah. I’ve been, um, busy.” Her gaze snaps to me. “Looks like the band is back in town. You and the McGregor brothers, all here, all of a sudden. I can’t believe we haven’t seen each other yet. I can’t wait to meet your baby. Brando said—I mean, I heard you were visiting and then decided to stay. You and Ryan are fixing the Sip & Scoop, eh?” Rosalie rambles on as a faintly rosy hue creeps across her cheeks.

Royal is already moving away, not interested in a prolonged conversation when we’re on a mission.

Lally looks at her carefully and if she’s thinking the same thing I am, this behavior is odd for Rosalie. If you look her up in a thesaurus, her picture is listed as an antonym for *nervous*, and yet that’s exactly how she’s acting.

I say, “Yeah. Good to be back. I think. Missed it here.”

“We have to get together soon. Stop by my flower shop anytime you’re free and we can gab.” She pauses. “Actually,

text me first. I've been getting busier lately. Text me soon. See ya." She waves and rushes away.

"I gather you know Rosalie," I say to Lally.

"Sure do. She was one of the first friends I made when I moved here. We bonded over dogs."

"So do you think that was out of character?"

"Extremely."

"Do you think it has anything to do with the treasure hunt?"

Lally wears a private smile. "No, if I were to wager, I'd bet it has something to do with pink flamingos."

"Huh?" I ask.

"Meaning love is in the air."

We catch up to Royal and then soon arrive at Mr. Higbee's.

Lally asks to see the poker table, explaining that Magnus wants one for the cottage property game room. Or so she says.

Mr. Higbee reluctantly lets us in. I elbow Royal because the symbol from the journal is the exact match to the one branded on the table. He nods almost imperceptibly.

"Where did you get this?" Lally asks.

"What? Don't mumble. Speak more clearly. Louder," he practically hollers.

Lally repeats the question at a higher volume but just as clearly as the first time.

Rounding on Royal, he says, "Your grandfather had it specially made. He gave it to me and you cannot have it back, so don't even ask," Mr. Higbee barks.

"No, sir. Nothing of the sort. It's all yours."

Mr. Higbee seems relatively pacified and rocks back on his heels with a harrumph.

Royal continues, "It's nice to see something that belonged to my grandfather, though. As you can imagine, I appreciate

that you still make use of it. Treasure it even.”

“Miss McGuinness here would know. We play poker every week. Use coasters so we don’t stain the wood with our beverages.”

“That’s right. Mr. Higbee takes good care of the table. That’s why I was thinking something like this would work at the cottages. It would last a long time.” Lally lets out a long breath.

I refrain from speaking because I feel like anything might set the man off, but my focus is on the symbol burned into the wood in the center. Likely, what happened was Chip sketched it in his journal, and the pencil lead rubbed off onto the other page just as we speculated. Then Chip tore out the drawing and presented it to his friends.

Why did they need a symbol? What does it mean?

But those questions aren’t what I want answered. It’s something else. My mind floats to the envelope in the diary, the wax seal, which is a kind of symbol, and the blank paper inside.

I turn it over in my mind, but nothing appears. A message doesn’t reveal itself.

Royal says, “Sir, could you tell us about the symbol in the center?”

“It was our symbol.” He smooths his wrinkly hand over the branded wood with the shield and the skull covered by crossbones.

Lally asks a few questions about what it means.

Mr. Higbee grunts a reply, mumbling about the Pirate Defense League.

“Did my grandfather originally bring you a piece of paper with the symbol that he drew?” Royal taps the table.

Mr. Higbee makes a dismissive sound.

“Do you know anything about Royal and Magnus’s grandmother? Emmanuella Almeida?” Lally asks carefully.

“She was a lovely woman. She and my Francie were friends. Shame she went missing.”

“Chip didn’t talk about it. Do you know anything?” Royal asks.

“Why? What are you looking for?”

“He knows,” I whisper.

“We’re looking for answers. My brothers and I are trying to piece together a puzzle Chip left us.”

I’m surprised Royal speaks so close to the truth.

Mr. Higbee grunts and then sits down at the table before fussing with something on the underside. He pulls out a shallow, hidden drawer, and passes the paper to Royal. “I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

Peering over Royal’s shoulder, the page is the same size as the journal paper. The sketch is distinct and matches the pencil lead rubbing from the journal too.

Royal stares at it for a long time and his thumb rubs over a sequence of numbers in the lower right-hand corner. “Did he mention what this is?”

“You should know,” Mr. Higbee says.

“Thank you, sir,” Royal says, not pressing further.

We say our goodbyes.

Just when we reach the door, Mr. Higbee hollers, “It’s not what you don’t see. It’s what you can’t see.”

“Chip off of, uh, Chip’s block,” Royal mutters at the cryptic farewell.

While we walk back to town, I think about Chip’s will and what he left each of the boys.

“Why do you suppose your grandfather left Ryan a pen with a plume?”

“Maybe it was a special pen,” Lally says. “Special because he used it to draw that symbol.”

I shake my head. “That was done in pencil.”

“So is this number down here,” Royal points to the journal page Mr. Higbee gave us.

I shrug, not sure why I’m so hung up on paper and pens.

“Should we still try the others—Mr. Williams, Mrs. Lipman, and Mrs. Cross?” Lally asks.

“Actually, look.” I point to the bench overlooking the water, dedicated to Mr. Cross.

The three of them sit there as if expecting us.

We approach the old folks on the bench and make small talk.

“You’re coming from Higbee’s, right?” Mrs. Cross accuses like we robbed the joint.

“We took a look at his poker table,” Lally says.

“You know I’m going to get my winnings back from you,” Slidell Williams says to Lally with a good-natured smile.

“We were also wondering about this.” Royal shows them the page from the diary.

Mrs. Lipman’s eyes flash with recognition. “Chip figured we needed a standard.”

“Like a military flag?” Lally asks.

“A battle flag is used by fighting forces on land. A naval ensign if by sea,” Mrs. Lipman explains.

“After all, we were at war,” Mrs. Cross adds.

“With the pirates?” I ask.

“Oh, yes. It was a troublesome time. Back then we were an army of thirteen, mind you. Now, we’re all widowed or widowers, and Chip is gone.”

“What about my grandmother? Can you tell us anything about her?” Royal asks.

“We have loads of stories,” Mrs. Lipman says fondly.

“But you want to know about her going missing,” Mrs. Cross says perceptively.

Royal nods.

Mrs. Cross glares at the ocean. “It took everything that was good.”

“You mean she drowned?” I ask carefully.

“No, *it* being the treasure hunt. Chip wasn’t the only one after it, and it ruined friendships and business relationships alike—” Mrs. Lipman goes quiet when Mrs. Cross casts her a sharp look.

“One last thing. Do you know anything about a pen with a plume?” I ask.

They all chuckle.

Mr. Williams says, “Indeed. Chip used it to convey messages about when we’d meet. Not strictly for poker. But in the early days when the pirates were a greater threat, and we had to outfox ‘em.”

“So, he’d write in code? But why with a pen with a plume?”

Mr. Williams winks. “It wasn’t used with normal ink.”

The three of them turn their attention back to their watch over the sea.

We thank them for their help and take our leave.

When we’re nearly out of earshot, I hear Mr. Williams add, “Storm is coming. Best prepare.”

I shiver as a gust of wind blows. A dot on the horizon gets closer and I realize Ryan and the others are on their way back.

There’s no denying the treasure hunt is getting intense and could become dangerous. Not only do I need to protect myself, but my heart too. Like Mrs. Lipman was saying about friendships and relationships being ruined by the hunt, I don’t want to see something happen to the something-ship I have with Ryan.

Ryan

A decorative flourish consisting of three stylized, symmetrical scroll-like elements.

CHAPTER 18

We may as well be returning to land with an old, soggy boot. Royal, Lally, and Harley wait by the dock as CJ slows to adhere to the no-wake zone for Lola's benefit.

The wind ruffles Harley's long blond hair. Dressed in a pair of denim shorts and a T-shirt, she looks so much like she did in high school, yet small next to my twin. Being of even larger stature than him, I imagine I hulk over her.

Years ago, Brando warned me against dating his cousin, but maybe it wasn't only her heart that he was protecting. The treasure hunt could get dangerous and I don't want to see anything happen to her by being involved. She has a life and Luke to think about. What about me? All I can claim as my own is an ice cream shop and hardly that.

In the end, do my football stats, MVP status, and Super Bowl wins really matter? And if not, how can I make a life that does?

"McGregor," Magnus barks, reminding me to help tie off the lines to CJ's boat.

Isla hops onto the dock, as bouncy as ever, but then she stumbles, needing to regain her land legs. Royal catches her in his arms, steadying her. Am I able to catch Harley if she falls? Does she want me to?

"So?" Royal asks.

CJ scowls. "Nothing. Not a thing. There was no boat, no wreckage. No evidence."

“Maybe we had the wrong coordinates.”

“I contacted Robyn to check and double-check. Unless the captain made a mistake, we were in the right spot,” Magnus says.

“But the barque must be out there somewhere,” Harley says.

“But where? There’s a lot of ocean.” I shake my head with disappointment, feeling defeated.

“How about you guys, find out anything?” Magnus asks.

“Not much. We should take cover.” Royal points to the sky.

A nasty cloud looms to the west and lightning leaps toward the water like it’s warning us to get inside.

“Anyone order this weather?” I ask.

“We’d better get home to the dogs.” Lally is already halfway down the dock.

“What did I say about red sky in morning?” Magnus mutters, trailing her.

“Should we be worried about our Sip & Scoop progress being ruined?” Harley looks down the street.

“I doubt this is worse than Hurricane Howie. The rain might do us a favor and wash away the remaining grime.”

CJ unties the boat and starts it back up.

“Where are you going?” I holler over the combined roar of the engine and the wind.

“Home. I’ll catch up with you guys later,” he calls.

“Home? Where’s that?” I ask.

“This island isn’t that big, but we’ve never quite figured that out,” my twin mutters.

“Does he dock at the resort?” They have a small boat lift over there.

He shakes his head and I can't help but wonder about my baby brother's mysterious life, living on the edge during a lightning storm.

Clasping Harley's hand with mine, we all race toward Beans & Books which is closest. Only moments after we get inside, the sky opens up with a drenching downpour.

"That storm came out of nowhere." Thunder shakes the old beach shack converted to a coffee shop as if punctuating my statement.

"I got a notification about it twenty minutes ago. But no updates from you guys." Robyn jiggles her phone.

"There's nothing much to say. Water. Sand. Fish. That was about all we found." I hang my head.

"We learned a few things." Harley tells us about the symbol being a battle flag.

Royal shows us the original sketch of the Pirate Defense League's symbol on a piece of paper that is the same size as the ones in the journal. "And there are some numbers down here in the corner."

Squinting, I read them, "Eleven, two, nine, one, nine, three, nine. Not enough digits for a telephone number. Too many for a zip code. Do they mean anything to you?" I look at my brother.

"Chip could've needed some scratch paper," Royal supplies.

"Could be a code."

The room turns an electric shade of white for the briefest moment and Harley jumps to my side, clinging to my arm.

"I hope Luke is okay."

"He's in a house that's been standing for almost a century, which is saying something on this island. Plus, he's surrounded by his cousins, so chances are he hasn't noticed the storm."

Harley lets out a breath but doesn't release my arm. Instead, she grips it tighter.

In a flash, I realize something. "Everyone cover your ears."

"Is there more thunder?" Harley asks.

I hug her close. "No, a family secret."

The ladies cover their ears though I trust they won't commit any crimes with this information.

"I recognize the number," I tell my twin. "It's Avó's birthday."

Royal snaps his fingers. "Chip's go-to password."

I nod. "Okay, you can uncover your ears," I tell Robyn, Isla, and Harley.

She says, "I almost forgot. Slidell Williams said something cryptic about the pen with a plume not used with normal ink, but what other kind of ink is there?"

I straighten like one of the bolts of lightning outside woke me from a trance. "Invisible ink."

"Is that a real thing?" Harley asks.

"Of course," Robyn says. "I used to work at a bookstore where we had a gift section and sold it."

"I think Chip once taught Magnus how to make it. They may have used baking soda and vinegar. Held it up to a light to reveal the words," Royal says as if that's the extent of his knowledge of secret messaging methods, given our older brother's military background.

"So, the note from the diary could say something." I eye the door.

Harley tightens her grip around my arm as if holding me in place a little longer as the storm continues to rage.

"Growing up on the island made us wild but not stupid. Well, not too stupid. Remember the time we went boat-surfing

in the storm surge, seeing how we could ride and glide on those mega waves?" I ask.

Royal shakes his head because after that he rarely went out on the water.

I chuckle. That wasn't even the stupidest thing we did.

We reminisce about storm parties and the daring and dumb things we'd do, like to see who could hold on to the flag pole the longest in high winds.

"You guys once dared me to go to the top of the lighthouse during a tropical storm. I was so headstrong, I actually did it," Harley says.

Isla and Robyn share a mutual gasp.

"That seems super dangerous. Aren't you supposed to avoid high ground during a lightning storm?" Robyn asks.

I wince, regretting the dare.

"I didn't know that there's a lighthouse around here," Isla says.

We tell her about Nucifera Light on the other end of the island behind the resort.

"Everyone used to say it was haunted," Harley says.

"Everyone being us." Royal's gaze lands on me as if it was my idea alone.

Isla shivers. "Sounds haunted."

"I went up all two hundred and three steps and lived to tell the tale." Harley smiles, pleased with herself.

"I'd like to check it out sometime when the weather is clear. I bet Lally would too. She's a history buff," Robyn says.

"Sure, but it's in disrepair," Royal says.

"If it's historical, I wonder if we could rehabilitate it and make it another point of interest on the island." Isla bounces in her seat.

"That's a bright idea," I say.

I get a round of mild laughter at the pun.

“It used to be a tourist attraction, I think,” Royal says.

Thunder rolls and lightning strikes nearby again.

“After storms, the strangest things used to wash up too. Bunches of bananas, clusters of cannon balls, and once, a waxy blob. Never figured out what that was, but we named it Stigroid from the distant planet Xamox,” Harley says, dredging up memories of summers long past.

We talk and reminisce as the storm continues. Robyn passes around a plate of baked goods.

It’s all very quaint and cozy, not at all like when we were teenagers when we were always fixing for trouble and taunting or tormenting each other. That’s why I’m afraid it’s all fleeting. We had a good life with Mom and Dad, then that was taken away. I could have a good life here with Harley and Luke, but why wouldn’t they also disappear from my life just when I get comfortable?

Maybe it’s better to live on the edge like CJ, unattached. He takes risks that endanger him physically, but that’s not the same as the damage that can be done emotionally.

“Sailor’s Folly,” Harley shouts, breaking me from my thoughts.

Everyone’s attention snaps to her in question.

“There’s a bight along the coastline that’s only visible during certain tides.”

“A bite like you want another cookie?” Robyn gets up to refill the plate.

“A bight is a geographic feature. Around here, they can pose nautical hazards. When Uncle Eddie and Aunt Martina still had their boat, he’d drop anchor over there and we could walk for what felt like miles because it was so shallow.”

“I don’t remember them ever having a boat,” I say.

“This was when I was really little. I think they sold it when I was six or seven. But my sisters and I would play mermaid

because we could lounge in the shallows. It looked deep, but if you didn't know about it, you'd run aground. Uncle Eddie called it Sailor's Folly."

"I've never heard of it," Royal says.

"It's not part of Coco Key, it's along the next one. We'd stop there and Aunt Martina would load up on coconut for her coconut crunch recipe."

I snap my fingers. "Ah, that's where the old coconut processing mill is. Remember, we were going to explore it one night, but Magnus said it was too dangerous."

"I somehow find that hard to believe. I bet you guys chickened out." Harley elbows me.

"No way. The weather was bad. He probably knew about Sailor's Folly," I counter.

"I had no plans to go on that adventure," Royal mutters.

"When I was at the lighthouse, I circled the widow's walk. I'm guessing at some point it had been open to tourists because there was one of those binocular units mounted on a pedestal and a sign with all the shipwrecks in the area." She squints as if trying to see the image far away in her memory. "There was a barque listed on the plaque. I thought the word was funny. You know, bark like a dog does."

"The only way to find out is to go up." I waggle my eyebrows.

"Do you think that's what the part of the will that said avoid the sand could mean, referring to Sailor's Folly?" Isla asks.

We all go quiet because that's exactly what it could mean. Perhaps the Crimson Tide is over there.

"I love you, Strawberry Shortcake." Royal hugs her close and kisses her forehead.

Robyn wrinkles her nose. "Okay, enough you too. You're making Nutmeg uncomfortable. You probably should've gone on your honeymoon."

“But I thought you had fun,” Isla teases.

“Where did Mom and Dad’s boat supposedly sink?” I ask, because if the barque is along Sailor’s Folly, maybe that’s where they went missing too.

The door opens and CJ stands in the doorway, dripping wet. “It didn’t.”

“You look like something the cat dragged in,” Royal says.

Nutmeg flicks her tail with disapproval.

The ladies are so excited to catch CJ up on our most recent developments, that we don’t have a chance to ask him where he docked his boat or why he returned in the storm. Okay, not to ask, but to tell him he’s an idiot.

We linger in Beans & Books until the rain lets up. Eventually, when it does, Harley leaves to get Luke and I head back to the house to get the journal and the pen with a plume. Maybe there is something written on the blank page that was inside the envelope after all.

No one is home, but before I return to town, I spot Harley on the beach with Luke. The treasure hunt is captivating, but I can’t think of anything I’d rather be doing than spending time with these two.

I wave as I approach. Luke lunges toward me, arms wide open. The sand is still damp from the rain and Harley passes the little bundle of boy to me.

Carefully and gently tossing him in the air because Mama Bear has her eyes on me, I blow a raspberry on Luke’s belly each time he comes back to me. I used to think the fans cheering when I scored a touchdown was the best sound in the world, but his giggles take the championship.

“I had no idea what I was missing,” I say.

“You’re really good with the little guy.”

We start walking, both of us quiet at first as if recollecting the morning and all the days before now. I don’t know about Harley, but I’m not sure where to start or what to make of it.

Eventually, I break the silence. “I have to go to the Dry Tortugas,” I say, referring to a nearby island.

“I’ve always wondered why it’s called dry when it’s surrounded by water,” she says.

“Because it’s a desert island. Get it?”

“A desert here? This is the tropics.”

“It’s like a desert, dry, sandy, deserted, not to be confused with dessert unless there’s some ice cream there. It was a dad joke.”

She laughs lightly. “A bad dad joke.”

“Aren’t they all?”

Harley lets out a breath like she’s about to take a risk, “You’d make a great dad.”

“I would? Never thought of that.”

“Never?”

“Okay, maybe a little.” I shift Luke in my arms.

Somehow, I slid right into the role. We went from a something-ship to a relationship. These last weeks, after long days clearing out the Sip & Scoop, we’ve had dinner with the rest of the Owens, at the Driftwood, or on the beach. We get Luke ready for bed and then Harley will read to me from Chip’s portion of the journal—trying to see if we’ve missed anything. There are passages about business, including someone by the name of Kurt Jerkovic. Chip’s opinion of the guy soured before he disappeared from the entries entirely. Mostly, my grandfather wrote about missing his wife, taking care of us, and the treasure hunt without any mention of the crown itself.

I can’t help but fear that all my treasure will get snatched away. Washed away by a storm, caught up in some mysterious, unsolved event like the waxy blob.

Harley



Eyes not quite open all the way, and still wearing my watermelon pajamas with seed-like eyelet lace around the hems, I wander into the kitchen at dawn to get Luke his morning milk. At the old studio apartment, all I had to do was roll over and it was practically in my hand. It's almost the last of my breastmilk I pumped and he's nearly a year with his birthday coming soon.

Lost in thought, I hardly notice the gathering around the kitchen island. Blinking a few times, I squint. "Good morning? I don't have my glasses on so if you're a bunch of pirates, we don't have what you're looking for."

"Friends, not foes," Lally says.

Ryan puts a coffee mug in my hand and I quickly realize everyone is here. "What's the occasion?"

"This is the only time we could all meet."

"Don't let me interrupt." I go about warming up Luke's milk, but by the time I get upstairs, he's wide awake and hears everyone talking. We head back down to join the group where he makes his rounds as the most popular member of this treasure-hunting crew before happily sitting on the floor with the dogs.

"It's not happening." Magnus's tone is firm and final.

"It's not entirely up to you," Lally says.

"Should we vote?" Ryan asks.

It takes me a moment to catch up and wake up, but I glean that they're talking about Lally going to play pineapple poker on the Dark Seas, the brigantine ship that appears offshore now and then.

"We'll all go with her," Isla says.

"Over my dead body," Royal retorts.

"That's because you don't like going on the ocean."

"But I went when we had to rescue Lally from imminent peril," Royal counters.

"I'll go by myself, same as before. I don't want to spook the captain," Lally repeats.

"Is he a ghost?" Isla asks.

"It's a ghost ship, meaning it's unregistered," CJ says.

"No way," Magnus says.

"We'll all go," Isla insists.

"Captain J sent you an empty bottle of Sempre Spirits with a note that said, *Rematch*. Whoever he is can come to us." Magnus remains unyielding.

"Wouldn't that put us at a disadvantage?" Lally says.

"You know what they say about home turf," Ryan says.

They go back and forth until CJ appears.

"Sorry that I'm late. I had, uh, stuff."

Royal grunts. "That's a first."

"Him apologizing or that he had stuff—whatever that is?" Ryan asks.

Lally gets to her feet. "Listen, the clock is ticking. This is happening tonight or maybe not at all." Her shoulders lift and lower on a breath. "I haven't wanted to mention this because it could be nothing, but when we were at your wedding reception, Royal and Isla, I saw a guy with a unique pair of cufflinks. Well, I didn't see him, just the cufflinks because they were distinct. I'd seen them not long before."

Everyone leans in.

“Captain J had a pair with two cards, aces. So did the guy at the wedding.”

We fire questions her way, but she maintains that she didn't see his face. Thought maybe she imagined it and hadn't said anything because she wasn't entirely sure.

“I'm just saying, it's worth it. This ship has been prowling the shores of Coco Key. The captain had the ship in the bottle. He's tied to this somehow and I want to find out what we can.”

“She has a point. I'll go with her,” CJ offers.

“And what are you going to do? Scare the pirate captain with the Salty Skeleton?” Royal asks.

CJ rolls his eyes.

“We still don't know what that is,” Ryan adds.

“Guys, focus. I have to get to the cottages. Magnus and I have work to do today. It's tonight or never,” Lally says.

“We have your back.” Isla rolls her fists like she's ready to duke it out if necessary.

“Let's divide into teams again,” Ryan suggests.

“I'll keep watch on shore.” Royal raises his hand, volunteering.

“Me too,” I say, my very real responsibility sitting in my lap and petting a large dog's muzzle which is also in my lap.

I'm afraid the debate is going to take until sundown, but eventually, it's Royal, CJ, and me who'll remain on shore and Lally, Magnus, Isla, and Ryan who'll go to the Dark Seas.

After everyone disperses, Ryan goes to the Sip & Scoop to meet with a contractor. Luke and I spend the rest of the morning lounging and playing, just the two of us like it had always been. Around lunchtime, we visit with my sisters and end up spending the rest of the day there, sampling dishes for the Plundering Pelican, which will be hosting its grand reopening in exactly thirty days.

Despite my daredevil youth and the last weeks being a wild ride, I rather like the quiet life. Even though we've been working hard on the Sip & Scoop, I kind of miss the simplicity and routine of working at the Gastrodome.

Life wasn't always easy, but it was familiar. Back here in Coco Key, I don't know what to expect each day, and even less so tonight.

Luke and his cousins have a sleepover, which they're all thrilled about. Ryan picks me up and we say our goodbyes on the shore.

"Take good care of her," CJ says to Magnus.

Magnus frowns. "Of course, Lally is my fiancée."

"I meant my boat." CJ looks at it lovingly.

The oldest McGregor brother grumbles.

As it motors away, I catch the name on the stern *Mon Jolie*.

The three of us remaining on shore watch until the aft lights on the boat could be a trick of the night.

Settling on Mr. Cross's bench, we're all quiet for a time.

"Did Ryan figure out what solution to use on the paper with the invisible ink?" Royal asks.

"He's hesitant because if it's the wrong one, it could ruin it."

"Smart," Royal says before we return to contemplative silence.

After a time, CJ says, "We could do something crazy."

Royal angles his head toward the open water. "Is this not crazy enough for you, Hot Shot?"

My nerves fire and not only because that's what I sometimes call Ryan, and he's out there. He and I have circled the conversation about the future and have done everything except give each other a commitment. We're still working off the dough-posal. What if, like the Givenator, he decides being

a husband and father isn't for him? What if I'm left alone, again?

"Why don't we climb the lighthouse? See if that old sign is up there indicating where the barque may have sunk," CJ suggests.

I jump to my feet, eager to do anything other than sit here and stew in my thoughts. "I'm in."

Royal scrubs his hand down his face. "Guys, no. That's insane. It's dark out. The lighthouse has long been condemned. We're supposed to keep watch."

"Magnus can handle whatever is happening out there." CJ speaks with confidence that's a level beyond simply trusting in his older brother's abilities.

"It's dark out," Royal repeats, making one last attempt to convince us it's a bad idea.

He's not wrong, but I want to escape the doubts in my mind. "What, are you chicken?" I holler as CJ and I start to walk away.

The youngest McGregor makes bok-pok noises.

Royal catches up to us and says he's keeping his feet on the ground and that we can go up.

Twenty minutes later, we stand at the foot of Nucifera Light. It rises into the moonlit sky like a punctuation mark against a giant sheet of paper.

The jungle grew up around it, hiding a fence, but I know where to sneak through.

Royal continues to hedge, but CJ is by my side, his phone illuminating the undergrowth. We're careful as we make our way to the base of the massive structure.

Royal hollers, "Be careful."

"Yes, Mom," CJ retorts.

Taking a deep breath, I say, "It's only two hundred and three steps." I step onto the first one.

When we're about halfway up the spiral, CJ starts counting out loud. So far so good.

The platform on the next landing we reach wobbles and my stomach lurches in a way it didn't when I came up all those years ago.

"We should put a little space between us, just in case," I suggest.

"Nothing is going to happen. If it did, Ryan would kill me and I plan to live a bit longer," CJ says.

"Interesting reasoning."

We make it to the top without any more trouble. The wind whips my hair and I draw it into a ponytail bun.

Stepping out onto the widow's walk, the stone underfoot slides, eroding from the weather. I grip the rail.

"If something happens to me, just be sure to go to my house," CJ says.

I can't tell whether he's joking.

"CJ, that's the most cryptic thing I've ever heard. First of all, nothing is going to happen. Secondly, no one knows where your house is."

"It's not hard to find. Is there a thirdly?"

I'm about to ask what I would do at his house, find the Salty Skeleton, another mystery, when I spot the silhouette of the Dark Seas in the moonlight. Distracted, I slide. But there's no rail at chest level to catch me. Arms windmilling, I lose my footing and the ground disappears. With surprisingly fast reflexes, CJ grips my wrist, but my feet dangle over the edge of the lighthouse.

It's a long minute before I hear the stones hit the ground below. Panicked, thoughts of Luke fill my mind.

"Everything alright up there?" Royal hollers.

CJ meets my gaze. His grasp is firm and his tone low when he says, "Everything is fine."

No, it's the opposite. Very not fine. Unfine. Fine inside out and backward.

My heart thunders and perspiration breaks out across every inch of my body, including my wrist where CJ has hold of me.

Not breaking my gaze, he says, "Harley, you were a gymnast. You're just on the high bar. You're going to grip the bar to your right with your free hand. I've got you."

I'm afraid to let go of the stone ledge, but my fingers are slipping as the old stone crumbles. Taking a deep breath, I take hold of the remains of the busted bar. It's rusty yet slick from the salty and humid air.

"We're going to do this together." He instructs me to lift my left leg toward the edge without using momentum at the same time as he slowly draws me upward.

My heart is my throat, but I manage, which has little to do with flexibility from my youth and everything to do with determination. It's hard not to notice CJ's steadying presence—the baby of the family, the goofball.

Yet, he seems to know exactly how to handle this situation.

Soon, my back is against the wall of the lighthouse. My chest rises and falls. My limbs shake. Adrenaline makes the stars seem extra bright. I thank my lucky ones and send up a prayer of gratitude.

CJ leans there by my side.

Still catching my breath, I say, "That was close. Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

"Literally, let's not mention it to Ryan."

CJ grunts, reminding me of his other brothers.

Leaving me to recover, he finds the sign I referred to and his cellphone camera shutter sounds before we make the slow descent. My legs wobble all the way.

I've never been so glad to return to solid ground. I want to curl up in the underbrush and thank those lucky stars again.

Instead, I do my best to act normal and like I didn't almost fall to my death.

"You got it?" Royal asks.

"We did," CJ says. "The sign was there just as Harley remembered."

"That took a while. Was it in rough shape up there?"

"Restoration will be considerable," CJ answers.

"You're quiet, Harley, not keen on heights?" Royal teases.

If he dares make chicken noises, I have enough adrenaline left in me to clobber him. He doesn't and I remain quiet, thankful that I didn't fall.

We return to the bench as if we hadn't left, and wait, studying the photos CJ took and speculating until the boat lights come into view.

Unlike the three of us, the seafaring party is nonstop chatter about what they learned. In short order, I find out that Lally was right about the cufflinks.

"Lucky aces," she says as we walk toward the Driftwood Resort to debrief.

Ryan hangs back and says, "Pretty boring, watching the Dark Seas, huh?"

I bite the inside of my lip. My voice is a little higher than normal when I say, "Actually, CJ and I climbed the lighthouse to see if that old sign was up there."

Ryan stops. "At night?"

"As if that's any different from going on the ocean to a strange, creepy ship."

"Something could've happened to you."

"That is true." But I don't say more.

As usual, Ryan and I bicker about each other's safety before reaching the Galleon where we occupy a lounge area. Isla gets everyone drinks and sets out a basket of plantain chips.

CJ rubs his hands together. “Okay, so the rundown. What did the boo crew learn?”

“The boo crew?” Magnus asks.

“Yeah, boo because the Dark Seas is a ghost ship.”

They moan and groan about the bad play on words.

“You’re not going to believe it,” Lally says.

“Yes, the cufflinks were the same ones worn by a guest at Royal and Isla’s wedding,” he says, repeating what we already heard.

“But I didn’t recognize the guy.” Isla shakes her head.

“Then what was he doing at our wedding reception?” Royal asks.

“If you saw him, you’d recognize his weaselly little eyes.” Magnus narrows his.

Royal frowns.

Anticipation builds as we wait to find out who the wedding crasher is.

“Who do we know with weaselly eyes?” Ryan hints.

We all speculate and I cite a few teachers from high school.

“Turns out that Captain J is none other than Gerome John Glandman,” Magnus says.

CJ, Royal, and I gasp with shock.

“How did you work that out?” CJ asks.

Isla hops to her feet and rushes toward the gift shop down the hall, returning with a tricorn cap and a plastic sword. “I’ll be Captain J. Everyone else, you be yourself.” She closes her eyes as if getting into character.

I’m glad CJ and I aren’t going to reenact our climb and my near fall off the lighthouse.

“I’ll set the scene.” Ryan describes the old ship, the poker table, and the menacing crew.

Isla clears her throat and menacingly looks at us. “Avast, yea dare board me ship from the cold, dark drink?”

Everyone laughs.

Lally shakes her head. “He didn’t say that. Silently, he invited me to sit down at the poker table.”

“But we weren’t there to play games,” Magnus says.

“Technically, he did ask me to a rematch.”

“But to what end? That was my mission objective.”

Lally says, “I asked his name.”

“Captain J,” Isla says in a mock-male voice.

“Full name, date of birth, social security number,” Ryan says.

I tilt my head in his direction. “Seriously?”

“Magnus grilled the dude.”

“And we learned several important things. Captain J is Glandmans’s son, however, Aunt Lorena left before she gave birth.”

“Did he actually have a sword? Did you get this info out of him under threat of him walking the plank? Leading a mutiny on his ship?” I ask.

“Magnus can be convincing,” Ryan says.

“How can you be sure he was telling the truth that he’s your cousin and not just some interloper who’s trying to cash in on the treasure?” I ask, having known and been briefly married to a scam artist.

“My question exactly,” Isla echoes.

“His middle name is John. João in Brazilian. Same as Márcia’s husband. Our great, great, well, you get the idea.”

“So, Captain J is Chip’s sister’s son, making him our cousin?” Royal asks, gobsmacked.

Ryan nods. “Dude doesn’t look anything like a McGregor though. Lorena and Chip had different fathers.”

“Hat off,” Royal says to his wife.

“Captain J is Gerome John Glandman, aka Johnny, from Lorena’s postcards,” I whisper, piecing it together.

“Affirmative,” Magnus says.

“Why would Chip hide them? Why wouldn’t he tell us that we had a cousin?” Royal asks.

“He kept the kid thing quiet because of Glandman. But he didn’t hide the postcards at the Sip & Scoop. Turns out Johnny has been prowling around town for quite a long time, collecting intel. Prior to Hurricane Howie, he snagged the postcards from Chip’s office and stashed them.”

CJ snaps his fingers. “Chip thought someone had been snooping.”

“And that’s not all. He confessed that he’s trying to get the treasure and crown because it’s his inheritance,” Ryan says.

“How’d you get that out of him?” Royal asks.

“Magnus can be very convincing,” Lally repeats.

“But how’d he even know about it? Chip did all the work,” CJ counters.

“His mother told him and I surmise that because Glandman took everything from her, leaving them with nothing, he too has a motivation, maybe even a vendetta.”

“Why would he have a vendetta against his own family?”

“It wasn’t entirely clear, but it’s against Glandman because once upon a time, he too was seeking the crown,” Isla says, still in storytelling mode.

“Did he know anything else? Like what happened to the Crimson Tide?” Royal asks.

“We didn’t want to give away our position, but he didn’t seem to have any additional intel that we don’t already possess. I think he was telling the truth.” Magnus’s tone is pure confidence.

“So, is he an ally or enemy?” CJ asks.

“That remains to be seen.”

A fully functional lighthouse would be useful right now because there's a lot that remains in the dark.



Any progress on the hunt gets put on hold as life and work fill the next weeks. Ryan has been preoccupied, but the Sip & Scoop has a roof and proper walls, so that's progress.

Everyone in my family prepares for the Plundering Pelican's grand opening and the McGregors band together, leaving Luke and me just like it had been for so long.

Not going to lie, I feel a bit lonely. A bit out of place. Like I'm halfway between my old life and this one.

Before I go to bed on a breezy night that brings to mind a song about the winds of change, I check my email to see if we've heard back from a couple of vendors for the ice cream shop.

The top message is from Staff@AppealPR.com It's from my old boss, offering me my old job, well, my job before I got my last promotion. The one I had to decline because I needed to take maternity leave.

I read the email a couple of times before putting my phone away. The fact that it's not an instant no from me gives me pause. It would be a great opportunity, but I'd have to leave Coco Key. I'd be away from my sisters and life here. Then there's Ryan.

My thoughts flip-flop.

Luke would have to go back to full-time daycare. Yet, we'd have benefits, and I'd have the potential to move up, obtain that promotion, and keep climbing.

I'd be gone long hours. At least waiting tables at the Gastrodome offered some flexibility. It was hard work, but my schedule was around Luke. However, at Appeal, I could get dressed up every day and wouldn't get hit on by drunk football fans. Okay, I did get hit on, Troy Givens being a case in point.

There were long hours there and late nights at Appeal PR. Though, I've had plenty of those here.

But what do I want? What's best for Luke?

I fell for Ryan, but I'm afraid that if it doesn't work out, there's no one to catch me like CJ did at the top of the lighthouse. I have to fend for myself and Luke. That means making the hard decision to take the job at least for a little while. Maybe Ryan and I can make something work long-distance and we can visit on the weekends.

When the night fades to morning and the birds start chirping, I make my decision and reply to the email.

I just hope I don't regret it.

Ryan

A decorative flourish consisting of three stylized, symmetrical scroll-like elements.

My life used to be one thing and one thing only. Football. Now, if my life were a pizza, it would be divided into three equal pieces: Harley and Luke, the Sip & Scoop, and the treasure hunt.

Why am I thinking about it this way? Because I'm stuffing a slice of leftover pepperoni from last night into my mouth for breakfast as I dash out the door.

But before I get there, my phone rings. There's only one person who'd call me this early. Okay, two. Magnus...and my coaches. It's Webster.

My stomach drops, and with my mouth full, I'm not sure whether to answer. It might be important or maybe this is a peace offering, so I swallow quickly, nearly choking on the crust.

"Sir?" I answer, out of habit.

"Morning McGregor. I regret to inform you that I'm retiring this year. As you know, things became a little complicated a few months back."

I fumble, caught off guard and not sure how to reply.

He continues, "My entanglements and suggestions weren't wise, so I'm stepping down."

It's not an apology, but I say, "I'm sorry to hear that. You were a great assistant coach. The team was lucky to have you."

"Well, thanks. It's big of you to say that."

I don't necessarily believe that, but my brothers and I were taught to take the high road.

"I was also advised to offer you," he clears his throat, "double pay to stay on the team for one more year."

This time I do choke, but not because I took another bite of pizza. No, it's colder than ever, forgotten on the counter.

"Wow. I don't know what to say. I'll have to think about it."

Webster is quiet for a long moment as if surprised I didn't jump at the opportunity. "In that case, be in touch with Coach Becker before the end of the day. All the best to you." He hangs up.

Sliding my phone in my pocket, I press my hand to my forehead and then hammock my hands behind my head, turning in a circle.

Wow. Whoa. What just happened?

The ultimatum must've been exposed and I'm guessing Becker forced Webster to call because it's essentially the assistant coach's fault they lost the best quarterback the team has had in its history.

Just saying.

My contract was up for renewal. Webster told me the only way to stay on the team was to marry his daughter, but I've recently gathered from the other guys that he was on the chopping block and thought the way to stay on was to make sure I did. It was an evil plan.

The problem is, I almost fell for it.

But the PR patch-up worked, I announced my retirement, and now they're offering me double to renew. I'd be crazy not to. Grabbing my Miami Riptide ball cap, I slide it on and hurry to meet Harley and tell her the great news.

She left earlier to drop Luke off with her sisters for the day so we can finalize the game plan for the Sip & Scoop. Thanks to Chip, I have the funds to hire a crew to repair it. Thanks to my football career, I can hire people to manage it, leaving

Harley and I with fewer responsibilities and more time together...or me to play one more season. I have to check the new contract. Webster didn't specify the terms. But one more year and another chance to win big? It's a no-brainer.

After grabbing a couple of coffees from Beans & Books, I head over to the Sip & Scoop. Harley approaches from the other direction and I lift the coffee cup in a wave.

"There's my favorite business partner."

"And there's my favorite beverage provider." She kisses me on the cheek and then takes the paper cup.

"Ready for our morning coffee conference?" I open the door to the Sip & Scoop.

"I just noticed the building no longer looks like a jungle creature habitat."

"We're making progress," I say, feeling hopeful.

"You're in a good mood this morning," she comments.

"Aren't I always? But I got good news." I'm practically like one of Magnus and Lally's dogs, ready to run circles around her in my excitement.

"Me too." Harley smiles broadly.

"You go first."

"No, you go."

"No, you."

She tilts her head because we will go round and round for the rest of the day. Even when we're not at odds, we can still be surprisingly stubborn.

"Okay, fine. Webster called earlier and all but apologized to me. He said the team is offering me double pay to come back."

Harley's lips part, but no words come out right away. "Really? Wow. That's amazing. Way to go."

"I have you to thank for helping me navigate that mess."

She wears a tentative smile. "Of course."

“Your turn.”

Swallowing, she says, “My old boss offered me my old job at Appeal PR.” She explains about the almost-promotion.

“Where was that again?”

“It’s in Montgomery.”

“I thought you came here from Mobile?”

“I moved there after I found out I was pregnant because my dad’s rig is on the coast.”

“Oh, so Montgomery?” I scratch my head, not loving the idea of her and Luke being so far away.

“Yeah,” she says softly.

As if coming out of a sudden fog, I tap my coffee cup against hers. “Congratulations. That’s great. Your boss must miss you and appreciate you.”

“Yeah,” Harley repeats.

We’re both quiet for a moment that stretches longer than is comfortable. I’ve heard in movies and on shows, couples talking about being comfortable in silence when with their significant other. This is the opposite. It’s like we both have the same question but are afraid to ask.

“It used to just be me that I had to think about. My life and future. But now with Luke too, I have to consider what’s best for him, you know?”

“Yeah, of course. Family first.”

Sadness fills Harley’s amber eyes.

“I’ve always admired how strong and independent you are.”

Harley’s shoulders droop. “Yeah, but I wound up right back where I started.”

I rub her arm and then gesture at our surroundings. “Is this so bad?”

“But it’s not mine. Your grandfather left this to you.”

My jaw feels shaky. I thought it was becoming our thing. The words don't form though.

More silence follows until I ask, "So what's next for us?"

Harley turns to me. If I didn't see what was coming before, I do now. Her eyes aren't filled with mirth or mischief, like usual. No, there's something else there that tells me she's looking toward a future without me in it.

"I shouldn't have let my guard down. This has all been great, but doesn't it seem like we have an expiration date? Like this is too good to be true?"

I stagger back. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're leaving to go back to the team and I have this job offer."

"What about this island? This place?" I gesture at our surroundings. "It's ours. Plus, Miami isn't far. Can you work from home or—?" No sooner are the words out of my mouth, that I realize what I'm asking her to give up.

She looks away. "What if we just keep going back and forth, a battle of the wills? I'm not sure we're good for each other."

During a legendary game against the Arizona Thunderbirds, their punter came out of nowhere and ran the ball down the field toward their own endzone, giving us two points. It all happened so fast and unexpectedly, we stood there, stunned. I feel that way now.

Only, during that game, the strategy was to run down the clock. I don't know what play to make or what Harley's strategy is, only that it has taken me completely off guard.

Trying to loosen the tightness in my throat, I say, "You have a point."

"My focus has to be on Luke. I probably shouldn't get so swept up in treasure hunting, business running, you." Harley's voice wobbles.

"I understand," I whisper.

Her expression crumbles.

I can't help but take her in my arms and give her one final hug. Before she pulls away, I kiss the top of her head, then she's gone.

I lean against the wall and then slide down, dropping to sitting. I'm not sure how long I remain there, feeling hollowed out, lost, alone. My thoughts don't go anywhere good.

Harley was here and now she's not.

She sidelined me. Us.

There I was, thinking I was winning, and now it's like I never played. Like it was all a dream.

The patch of sunlight coming in through the front windows traces its way across the floor until it disappears behind the ice cream cooler display.

Voices float to me from outside.

"But I want to know one thing. Was Chip murdered?" Magnus asks.

"No, but like with Mom and Dad, not everything about his life and business dealings were above board," CJ says.

"Leave our parents out of it." That's Royal.

"Will you just answer the question?" Magnus asks.

"No, I don't believe Chip was murdered. But crimes were committed," CJ says.

"What do you know?" Magnus asks.

"Where is he? He's not answering his cell," Royal grumbles, annoyed.

"Probably off somewhere with Harley," CJ says.

"I saw her with Luke earlier going back to her uncle's house, alone."

The door to the Sip & Scoop opens. "Ry, you back there?" CJ calls.

Magnus sees me first and strides toward me. “Are you okay?” With one hand he checks my pulse and with the other, he lifts my eyelids and checks my pupils. “Answer me, brother.”

“Yes. No.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “I need you to be clearer than that.”

“Is it about Harley?” CJ asks as if he recognizes my state.

I nod weakly.

“She broke up with you?” Royal slaps his hand on the counter. “I knew it. That—”

Magnus and CJ slide their arms under mine and hoist me to standing. Then, as if I were injured on the field, they lead me toward the door.

The world is a blur until we’re seated in the sunroom at the Frigate at the Driftwood. It’s where Chip stayed before his passing.

They drop me into a leather chair. I have the vague notion that Magnus sits down opposite me, elbows resting on his bent knees. As always, feet planted firmly on the floor. CJ gazes out the window. Royal returns after a short time with refreshments.

“You have such a hard time loosening up,” CJ says to Royal.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“For instance, you don’t wear island-appropriate attire.”

“You mean I don’t look like a hobo, like you, in baggy shorts.”

“They’re quick drying.” CJ tugs the hem.

“I’m running a business. I wear business-appropriate attire.”

“I’m just saying, loosen up a little.”

Royal says, “I’m as loose as a goose. I’m just concerned.”

I sense eyes on me, but I can't bring myself to look up. I went from flying high to crashing. This must be what rock bottom feels like.

"He's wallowing, but did we expect her to do anything other than make him miserable?" Royal asks.

CJ scoffs. "Lighten up. He has a right to wallow. It's still fresh."

"What do you know about relationships?" Royal asks CJ.

"I know plenty," CJ says.

"Do you want to talk about it, brother?" Magnus asks.

Not really, but I have a feeling no one will be leaving this room until I do. "She broke it off with me."

"As predicted." Royal grunts.

"Harley and I always had this complicated thing. We pretended to hate each other, but would hook up in secret."

"We know," all three of my brothers say.

"You do?"

"Of course we do. It was a complex and confusing layer cake of the two of you being friends one day, hating each other times, and then kissing each other's faces off the rest of the time," CJ says. "Then smashing the cake into each other's faces."

"Like a pie?" Magnus asks.

CJ shrugs. "Or a wedding cake."

But we always kissed and made up, in a backward kind of way.

"Gross," Royal says.

"He's not wrong," I manage. "I asked her to help me out after that mess with the assistant coach's daughter—"

"About that. Next time you're thinking about making a major life choice that involves us, why don't we discuss it first?" Royal says.

“How would my marrying Jayda Webster involve you?”

“I’m your twin,” Royal says.

Then the other two add, “Your brothers. We’re family. What you do affects us and vice versa.”

“I asked Harley to marry me.”

“With a doughnut,” Royal says as if it’s ridiculous.

“I could go for a doughnut.” CJ pats his belly.

“Anyway, at first it was fake. A game we were playing. Then it seemed real. Turned out she was breadcrumbing me. Leaving me hints that she wanted more only to leave me in the dust.”

“Why would she do that?” Magnus asks.

“We’re talking about Harley here. Why wouldn’t she? Just to mess with him,” Royal says.

“But she changed. Or at least I thought she did.”

“Did you want more?” Magnus asks.

“Yeah.” Clips from the last weeks play through my mind like a video montage—our laughter, kissing, adventuring, time with Luke...

“You want more and that’s a problem because...?” Magnus trails off, leaving room for me to answer.

Royal does instead. “Because she’s stubborn. Sassy. This is Harley we’re talking about, guys. She’s always been trouble and always will be.”

Even though she broke up with me, I rush to her defense and tell them about the offer from the Riptide and her job up in Montgomery wanting her back.

“Sounds to me like you both got in your own way,” CJ says.

Magnus snorts. “More like in each other’s way.”

“It would be a major flex to be honest, tell her how you really feel,” CJ says as if that’s a novel idea.

“What did you tell her?” Royal asks as if hoping I gave her a good chewing out.

My shoulders lift in a shrug. “Nothing. Just that I understood.”

Magnus gets to his feet and paces. “You understood that you were both willing to put your careers before the relationship? You both want validation from a title given to you by a coach or a boss above what you mean to each other. That you place more value in your career than—”

I pump my hands. “Okay, okay, I get it. What made you the relationship guru?”

Magnus rounds on me again. “Because I did the same thing for twenty years while I was in the military. I put mission before everything.”

“And we appreciate it. Someone needs to serve in the armed forces,” Royal says.

“And it worked out because along came Lally,” CJ adds.

“But it took me a long time to realize that, and I almost messed up things with her. Don’t want to see you do the same thing. Harley is a single mom. You, the least likely brother to do so, swept in and rose to the occasion, being available to her and the baby. You grew up.”

“But have you seen him play with Luke? He’s still a kid at heart,” CJ says.

“So, it was both of us,” I whisper, my mind waking up and my heart coming back to life.

Clapping his hands as if the intervention is over, Magnus says, “Enough of these feeling farts. We have work to do.”

My brothers laugh. Mine comes lightly.

“You’re going to fix things with Harley, but first, we have some matters to discuss. CJ says Chip wasn’t murdered. But mentioned there were crimes. What were they? Against who? Why?” Magnus asks rapid fire.

“I’m still working that out. We do know that we’re not the only ones on the hunt for the crown. Captain J is on the trail too,” CJ says.

“Should we do something about that?” Magnus cuts his gaze.

“Like eliminate the competition?” Royal asks.

“We’re not committing any crimes. I’ve had enough screen time for one year,” I say, referring to the scandalous post-bachelor party posts.

“I wasn’t suggesting anything illegal,” Magnus says. “You’re an athlete. You should know there are acceptable strategies one can employ to win.”

I tip my head from side to side, taking in his point.

“Any progress on the blank page from the journal?”

Panic seizes me. So caught up in everything with Harley, I realize I haven’t seen the leather diary in days.

My twin, ever tapped into my state of being says, “Calm down. It’s in the safe.” He spins a wooden ship’s wheel mounted to the wall, then turns it in the other direction before one more turn to the left. From a recess in the wall, he removes the journal.

I unfold the blank page from the envelope. “I’ve been nervous to try to reveal the hidden message because if I use the wrong solution, I might destroy it.”

Royal jiggles the ice in his glass. “If the Pirate Defense League used this method to pass messages about their meetings, what would they all have had on hand to decode messages?”

CJ and Magnus look up at the same time and say, “Rum.”

“Be right back,” Royal says.

Moments later, he returns with a bottle of Sempre Spirits, Chip’s brand. “But how to apply it without drenching the paper?”

“A paintbrush?” CJ suggests.

I gasp, shocked at Chip's genius, if it works. "Or a pen with a plume. The plume end, obviously."

It takes a few tries to get the right dispersal of liquid, but soon letters appear on the paper and then sentences. Magnus takes a photo with his phone in case it fades.

Swallowing, I read, "'Boys, If you're reading this, you'll know half my secrets. The others are hidden in the mermaid's cement chest, the mahogany carving that belonged to my heart, and in plain sight if you know where to look during a sky painted red at night.'"

"The mermaid's chest refers to the pearl," Royal says.

"And the diamond in the wooden box, whose pair was part of our grandmother's engagement ring," Magnus says, having solved that puzzle.

"But the last one is in plain sight if you know where to look during a red sky at night," CJ says, gazing out the window.

I slouch in the chair. "I have no idea."

"In plain sight," Magnus repeats.

We look around the room. I suggest we divvy up the areas around the property.

"No, it's not here. We've been over every room in these buildings. I would've noticed a rare red piece of coral." Royal paces as if that'll move him closer to an answer.

But one doesn't come. However, an idea does.

All of us lost in thoughtful silence, I say, "Guys, I'm going to officially ask Harley to marry me."

Royal's head snaps in my direction. "I don't know if that's a good—"

"You have my blessing," Magnus says.

CJ nods. "Marriage will look good on you."

Royal huffs. "Guys, seriously? Harley?"

I nod. “Yeah. We’re not playing a game, but I’m not going to just lay down and lose. We’ve both grown up a lot. And are independent in our own ways. But it’s time for us to grow together.”

Royal exhales slowly and then nods. “I respect that. But if she toys with you—”

“Yeah, yeah. You won’t ever let her stay at the resort.”

“You either.”

The corner of my lip lifts in a smile. “I think we’ll be guests here sometime soon. Maybe on our wedding night.”

Royal rolls his eyes.

“In the meantime, we’ll keep searching for the last stone for the lost crown,” CJ says.

“And we’ll let you know if we make any discoveries,” Magnus adds.

I give each of my brothers a hug before going to win back my girl.

Harley



Not even when I found out about Troy's deceptions did I feel so low, empty, and miserable—and it's not just because I reached the bottom of Aunt Martina's coconut crunch recipe that I made the other day.

I thought I was making the right decision to be a good mom and prove that I could do it all myself. That I don't need Ryan's money or his help.

When I got the job offer from Appeal, I thought it was a sign that I'd gotten off track. That the life I'd originally envisioned for myself was still available and wanted me back.

That I could still make a name for myself, achieve financial success and respect, and reach the top in my field. To show Luke that I'm strong, capable, and the kind of mom who can do it all.

But at what cost?

Seated in the sand with Luke picking up fistfuls and watching it sift through his pudgy fingers, I feel like the last weeks of my life are crumbling and soon they'll wash away.

Someone drops onto the sand beside me. For a moment, I'm afraid it's Ryan, but he's never been the type to run after a girl. No, he's used them chasing him.

It's Heather, and Harper sits down on my other side. Luke climbs into my lap.

"This is very off-brand," Heather says.

“Yeah, you don’t sit contemplatively in the sand, gazing into the middle distance. In fact, you’ve hardly stopped moving since we got here or taken your eyes off Ryan,” Harper says.

“It’s about him, isn’t it?” Heather asks.

I nod and then sniffle.

“Did he break your heart?” Harper asks.

“You know our sister better than that. No, she’s the heartbreaker,” Heather corrects.

I nod then shake my head. “I don’t know.”

They both rub circles on my back as the sobs break loose. Luke twists to face me and then tries licking the tears away.

We all erupt into laughter. I tell them the story and how everything has happened so fast from the Romance Game, to the dough-posal, to things feeling anything but fake between us.

“A little voice in my head told me Ryan could be another Givenator. That I have to do everything myself, to prove to—”

“Prove to who?” Harper asks.

I shrug. “To myself?”

“And haven’t you already? Look at this little guy. He’s amazing. You’re a wonderful mom and working or not doesn’t change that. You could go back to your old job and love this boy to bits. You could stay here and we’d all love him to bits,” Heather says.

We all chuckle.

“You know which side we’re on,” Harper says. “Yours, no matter what you decide, but we’d rather you’re here, of course.”

Heather pats my hand. “But I don’t think this has as much to do with Ryan as you’re telling yourself. He’s proven that he’s changed. You’ve changed. You’re good together. I think there’s an old fear hanging around and that’s the problem.”

“And you know what we say about fear,” Harper says.

“We do?” Heather and I ask at the same time.

Harper smirks. “Yeah, we chop it up into itty bitty, teeny tiny pieces and feed it to the sharks.”

“Is that what you tell your kids?” Heather’s brow furrows.

“Because if so, it’s kind of scary,” I add.

We laugh again and it feels better than crying. And that’s one of the best things about Ryan and me, we laugh a lot.

Heather grins. “She has that look.”

“The gleam is back.”

I wipe my eyes. “I’m having second thoughts about having second thoughts.”

“Go on then.” Heather nudges me.

“We’ll look after Luke.” Harper scoops him up.

I kiss him on the head, hug my sisters, and hurry down the beach. I’m halfway to town when I realize that I left my phone in the house. If Ryan isn’t still at the Sip & Scoop, I’ll go back and call him.

The ice cream parlor is empty and regret tightens and expands inside me, pushing out hope. What if he already left for Miami? What if he doesn’t want to talk to me? What if it’s really over?

“Nugget?” a voice asks softly.

I whip around. Ryan stands a few paces away outside the ice cream parlor.

“You’re here.”

“I came looking for you.”

“I did too. I wanted to—”

“To talk?”

The hope slowly filters back, bringing with it tears of relief.

Ryan opens his arms. I rush to him, letting myself fill his embrace, allowing him to fill me.

“I thought it was truly over,” I say, my voice a crackly mess.

“I was afraid of that too, but I realize that we are being so dumb.”

I slit my eyes. “Speak for yourself, Hot Shot.”

His eyebrow lifts sharply. “Admit it, you were dumb too.”

“Fine. Why are we so dumb?”

“Dumb for each other,” Ryan says, pressing his forehead against mine

The corner of my mouth curls with a smile. “That we agree on.”

Ryan holds me far enough away that we can look into each other’s eyes. “Harley, you’re a strong and independent woman. You have your own mind. I appreciate that about you. You’re also soft in places and you always smell really good.”

“And here I am, always worried I smell like baby spit-up.”

He shakes his head. “It’s a rarity.”

“Har har.”

“What I want to say is that we’re not on opposing teams. I’m a football player, if I wanted to walk around all day wearing a helmet and cup, fearing a tackle every time I turn a corner, I could. I have the gear. But I want this mind of yours, this heart. All of you. If you need protecting, I’m your guy. If you want to laugh, look to me. Talk. I’m all ears. But you don’t have to walk through life like you’re looking for a fight. I save that for the field. And when it comes to being with me, it doesn’t have to be a battle. I’m here to support you in whatever you do, however you want life to look, so long as we do it together.”

My heart grows and fills and then overflows with each word Ryan speaks. He doesn’t waver from my gaze. His tone

doesn't drop or lack promise. His hands remain firmly around me.

But the hope and truth about this moment supersedes it all.

Keeping my eyes on him, I say, "I told myself I don't want romance. I do. I also told myself that I don't want anything complicated. That's still true. Forget romantic-plicated. More than anything, I want us."

The space closes between us and we seal this pledge to each other with a kiss that's better than our first and every single one we've shared since.

It's the ideal balance of sweet and deep, with a give and receive, and a little purr from me to counter Ryan's growl that tells me he's lost in this kiss, but that's only because we found each other, the real treasure, after years of hunting.

When we part, I remember where we are. "Oh, great. This will be on the Coconut Wireless before long."

"What? The two of us kissing on Main Street? That's nothing new."

But this feels new, or like a renewal, and no matter what happens we'll keep moving forward. Taking my hand in his, Ryan and I start walking. It's only when we reach the peninsula that I realize we've been talking the whole time without a particular direction in mind and that's because we're going to stay here. Ryan is going to retire—quit a winner, as he said. Everyone will think he's insane for not taking the money, but he wants a life more than cash. I plan to decline the job offer in Montgomery because I have ice cream to serve, a boy to raise, and a man to love.

The wind blows out here on what Ryan calls *Ponto Fim*. It's McGregor territory with Chip's mausoleum on the point and reminds me of the treasure hunt.

"Any progress?" I ask.

He knows what I'm referring to without my needing to specify. He tells me about revealing the message on the blank paper with rum and applied with the plume end of the pen.

“Chip never ceases to amaze me. Clever guy. Mysterious.”

“And with perfect timing. Looks like we’re going to get a beautiful late summer sunset.” Deep orange and crimson washes the sky in vibrant hues.

He recites the old sailing expression, “Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in morning, sailors take warning.” Ryan goes still.

We both look toward the west.

“No doubt Magnus, Royal, and CJ are turning the island over, looking for the rare red piece of coral. I hope that it wasn’t disturbed when they were redoing the resort.”

“Do you think he would’ve hidden two of the missing stones there though?”

Ryan tips his head from side to side. “Not likely, so what if it’s somewhere else?”

“CJ is always talking about what we don’t know. Until recently, we didn’t know about the contents of the journal, the sketch of the Pirate Defense League symbol, and the numbers on it.”

“Another safe deposit box or a code to safe?” I ask, referring to where Lally and Magnus found the box containing the diamond.

He shakes his head. “Royal has searched them all and safe deposit boxes require a key.”

“We also know about Captain J.”

“And let’s not forget the piece of the map and the old map of the area painted on the wall of the Sip & Scoop.” Ryan sighs.

“I’d say we’ve made some progress, but how does it all fit together?” I lace my hand into his.

“I’m not sure, but I know it does.”

We’re quiet for a moment as the sun burns like liquid fire melting into the horizon.

“Chip and my grandmother used to come out here every night to watch the sunset.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“But I guess it isn’t the most romantic place for us to hang out, considering he’s buried right over there.” Ryan points to the mausoleum.

“It’s nice that you can visit him, but tragic that you don’t know what happened to your grandmother.” Uncle Eddie brings flowers to Aunt Martina’s grave every week, and even though she’s gone to heaven, we all agree it helps him to feel connected to her still.

Ryan kisses my hand. “I can’t imagine how much Chip must’ve missed her.”

“Was there an investigation?” I ask carefully, wondering if that’s a lead we can follow.

Ryan straightens a little as if questioning why that hadn’t occurred to him. “I’m not sure. Magnus probably knows.”

“Maybe we could find out something useful.” After a beat, I add, “This must’ve been their special spot since he was buried here.” Getting to my feet, I say, “Since we’re out here, let’s go pay our respects.”

The mausoleum isn’t readily visible from the point unless you know what you’re looking for. The long mass of land gradually drops toward sea level and Chip cleverly had the stone mausoleum constructed to look like the front of a ship jutting toward the water.

As the sun continues to lower, it glints against the stained-glass window on the entryway to the structure. A ship’s wheel sits beneath that with pieces of glass, sea shells, and ceramic shards, likely from old ships, forming a mosaic in the wood.

“Do you suppose he salvaged that from a sunken boat too?” I ask, pointing to the glass, glowing in the light.

“Probably. He was always finding old things and giving them a good home.”

“Funny that the letter said the line about a red sky at night.” I gesture to the last rays of sunshine, dissolving into the sea.

Ryan slings his arm around me. “It’s beautiful.”

His gaze drops to mine, but then we both slide our eyes toward his grandfather’s gravesite.

“Sorry, Chip,” Ryan murmurs as if maybe a private moment here isn’t quite appropriate.

“I’ll take a rain check on that kiss, but what did the letter say about the stone and a red sky at night?”

Ryan shakes his head slowly as if trying to remember. “Magnus took a photo.” He texts his brother. A moment later his device beeps. “It said, ‘The others are hidden in the mermaid’s cement chest, the mahogany carving that belonged to my heart, and in plain sight, if you know where to look during a sky painted red at night.’”

We both look at the stained glass again, but it’s nearly dark. Ryan shines his phone’s light and we search for anything unusual that might provide a clue.

“Not going to lie, this is kind of creepy,” I whisper.

“The stained glass is of a ship with red sails. Like the Crimson Tide?” He runs his hand over it. “I feel like we’re getting closer, like that old game hot or cold.”

“Wait, I don’t think the ship’s wheel is the door to open the mausoleum. Look, there’s a handle here.” I point.

Ryan gasps. “The safe in Chip’s office where Royal kept the journal has a wheel like this, well, not with the mosaic, but the wheel itself.”

“I have no idea what that means, but cool, I think?”

He grips the ship’s wheel and turns it to the left and then the right and back to the left like a dial on a padlock before pulling it toward us. It hinges open, revealing a small recessed cavity, the exact right size for the box that fits in the palm of Ryan’s hand.

We both inhale sharply.

I hold my breath. “Do you think?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” Ryan pauses and looks up. “Chip, if this is the last stone, thank you. If I’m violating your grave in any way, I’m sorry, but it’s your fault.” He lifts the lid on the box and inside, resting on a white silk cushion is a shiny, rare red piece of coral.

“It’s amazing,” I say softly, almost reverently.

We examine it a moment longer.

“Is it really the stone?” I ask.

He nods. Closing the box and tucking it in his pocket, Ryan casts a cautious gaze around and then out to sea as if making sure no one is watching before smiling widely.

We both whoop into the night and hug. Ryan spins me around. “We found it. I can’t believe it.”

Ryan lets out a long breath. “Wow. This is incredible.”

“We have the coral, the diamond, and the pearl. Next stop, the crown.”

“I think we have a stop to make before that.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Ryan winks.

We go straight to the resort and call another meeting. Everyone is astounded and awestruck—me too, but less about discovering the coral and more that Ryan and I did our own relationship patch-up.



The next morning, Luke is up bright and early and the scent of coffee comes from downstairs.

“Da!” Luke calls.

“Okay, hold on. Let me brush my hair so I don’t scare the guy.”

Ryan leans in the doorway as if he'd been waiting for us to wake up. "The only thing that could scare me is waking up and not finding you here. Come on. I have a treat downstairs for you."

Even without caffeine, my mind races with thoughts about our discovery last night. When we get downstairs though, everyone involved in the hunt is gathered, but to my surprise, so are my sisters, their families, my dad, Brando, and Uncle Eddie.

"What's going on?"

My dad takes Luke from Ryan's arms and winks.

A huge spread of breakfast foods fill the center island, but in the middle is a pyramid of doughnuts.

"Your favorite," Ryan says, pointing.

My gaze slides from the doughnuts to our families and friends. "What's going on?"

"You'll want to be sure to get the cinnamon doughnut before anyone else gets it." Ryan points.

I blink a few times and a sparkly stone on the top comes into focus. Nestled into the doughnut hole is a diamond ring.

"Ryan?" I ask, my heart stopping.

He plucks the ring from the center of the doughnut and takes my hand in his. "Harley, I thought you and me were a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Turns out we're twice in a lifetime. Let's stick with that. No third or fourth times. Will you please marry me and be my always-time?"

My smile fills the room and my eyes prick with happy tears. "Yes. Yes, I will."

Ryan slides the ring onto my finger then everyone claps and cheers.

He picks me up in his arms and does a victory lap around the room, hooting like he won the game. But this is pure romance. No more games.

Once everything settles down and everyone digs into the breakfast spread, I have a moment alone with Ryan. “So, when are you thinking you’d like to get married?”

He glances at the clock on the wall. “In about ten hours if that’s okay.”

I incline my head. “Huh?”

“I arranged for us to take a sunset cruise. A boat ride to the Bahamas where weddings on ships are permitted.”

I look around the room. “All of us?”

“Again, if that’s okay.”

“Ryan, it’s wonderful! It’s a dream I didn’t realize I had. We’re really doing this?”

“No pressure. We can take the boat ride and celebrate our engagement or we can take the boat ride and take the plunge.”

I tip my head back with laughter. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Pulling him into the coat closet, I take him up on that kiss from last night before we found the coral.

The day goes by in a delightful whirlwind. It’s not until we’re kissing again, as the red sky spills into the sea, and Ryan and I have said I do, that I fully appreciate what everyone did today.

My sisters supplied a white sundress and flowers.

My father gave me away with Luke in his arms.

Brando personalized our vows.

And everyone celebrated Ryan’s and my love for each other.

I couldn’t have imagined a more perfect day. I know we’ll have many calm seasons and face some storms, but we’ll weather them together.

As the last of the sun vanishes and the moon rises, Ryan says, “Remember when we were talking about our rules for the

game and I mentioned buried love? Whether or not we find the crown, the real treasure is this.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” My lips twist with a smile. “But you still owe me an ice cream.”

“I love you too, Nugget.”

We both laugh because we’ll probably always have our own way of communicating.

Ryan says, “I owe you a lifetime’s supply, and funny thing, we happen to own an ice cream shop.”

“I love you, Hot Shot.” I snuggle in close, breathing my husband’s fresh cotton scent, breathing deep because we both found the treasure—each other.

Epilogue



One thing I've learned about being part of the McGregor crew is they like to celebrate. In the span of one week, Ryan and I got married, the Plundering Pelican opened, where we hosted our wedding reception, and we partied it up at the Driftwood after Ryan told his brothers we had the last stone to the crown.

Apparently, up until then, he'd merely said we'd had a major breakthrough with the treasure hunt, but would only tell them if they helped him plan our wedding day in a single night.

Today, Luke turns one and Ryan insisted on a bounce house in the yard, a blowup slide that goes in the shallows by the shore, and a pirate ship fun house.

I'm afraid Luke's face is going to freeze into a permanent smile. The kid is just so happy.

And so am I, because not only does it look like we bought out the entirety of a party décor store, but when I drove through town this morning, I noticed the pink plastic flamingos have the Sip & Scoop surrounded.

Yes, love is in the air and it's not leaving Coco Key any time soon.

Thankfully, there are a few delays getting the Sip & Scoop open again. I'm relieved because I need time to perfect Aunt Martina's cookie recipe and catch up on my sleep after all this fun we've been having.

Also, Ryan and I have been house hunting and treasure hunting, though there is still one piece of the map missing. When the other three are put together, it seems to be the most important one. Actually, no one can make sense of it because nothing is orienting the blobby shapes we assume are islands.

It's nearly the end of summer by the time we're ready to open the doors and windows to the Sip & Scoop—in the redesign, we created an order window and a pick-up window. Inside, the ice cream cookie sandwich bar is loaded, except for the cookies. I keep praying that I can make them exactly like my aunt did, but I'm afraid something is missing. I'm just not sure what. A dash of cocoa? Aunt Martina was a firm believer that everything was better with chocolate. I'll have to try that.

I hang up some banners and balloons in town on the morning of our grand opening. For many places, this would signal the end of tourist season, but not down here. People will flood the Keys looking for a winter escape and ice cream for the next eight months, at least.

Then summer will be ours again.

Just as I tie the last balloon on the folding sign in the center of town, a black sedan stops a little too close to me for my comfort. I recall the story of Isla being kidnapped and take one giant step back, not caring if the people inside the vehicle are offended. They'll be more than insulted if they abduct me—and it's not just because I'm still sassy and bratty from time to time—they'd have four very angry McGregors on their hands, plus a football team, as well as part of the US military, to worry about.

Ryan's buddies from the Riptide came down for our wedding reception and some booked stays at the Driftwood for off-season R&R. Boos Battle Bros is loaded with guys looking for bonding time with K9s and other vets.

I'm not too sure about CJ, but I have a feeling he knows some people in low places. Just saying.

The passenger side window of the black sedan lowers slowly, revealing Gerome Glandman. He's as balding, portly, and pasty as ever. I dislike him only because he didn't have a

sense of humor the time Ryan, Royal, and I spray painted the sandcastles he had constructed to wow his guests. The thing was, he wasn't letting anyone on the beach in case they got ruined.

We didn't damage them in any way. I thought of it as a color enhancement, of the neon variety.

"You're that Owens girl, won the Miss Manatee crown one year, right?" he asks.

My hackles lift. "Mrs. McGregor now."

"I suggest you be careful of the company you keep. I'd hate to see anything happen."

Hand on my hip, I say, "What's that supposed to mean?"

He wears a mild smile. "Just a word of caution about what you get involved in, little missy."

With a scowl, I battle with my inner brat about what to say next. "Thank you for your concern. As you can see, the Sip & Scoop is having its grand reopening today. We're offering free ice cream from eleven until five. You're welcome to stop by. Unless you're intimidated by the competition."

Okay, I don't say that last part, but I really, desperately want to.

With my best Miss Manatee smile, I spin on my heels and stride back to the Sip & Scoop.

Before I can tell Ryan what happened, I'm pulled in three different directions with last-minute questions from our new employees.

Finally, after six hours of scooping ice cream, pouring fountain soda, and welcoming new customers, I get a breather.

My first stop is visiting with Luke who just arrived with my sisters and their brood...for the second time. The first trip was for their promised ice cream. This one is just to make sure we survived. Brando is with them too. Ryan says hello and then takes Luke down to the dock and they look for Lola—their favorite activity. Well, one of dozens. Our little boy goes

bananas when Lola breaches and snorts water everywhere. Funny though, she's never splashed Luke.

"I thought Ryan was allergic to children," Brando says, dropping beside me on Mr. Cross's bench by the dock.

He calls over his shoulder, "I took an antihistamine."

"I don't think that's how it works," I say.

Ryan adds, "I thought you were the one with an aversion to kids and didn't want any."

"Of course I'm not allergic to kids," Brando says.

"You have that look," Ryan says, putting Luke in Brando's arms.

"What look?" I ask.

"The one Emmie would get when she'd see a puppy. Kind of glazed over."

"He'd have to be in love first," I say with a laugh.

"What's funny?" Heather asks, appearing with a collection of our family members.

"Our cousin. I think he likes kids."

"He'd better. He's on babysitting duty Friday nights," Harper says.

"We have a huge party coming into the restaurant."

"How's your sister?" I ask Ryan.

Strangely, Emmie has been left out of the entire treasure hunt adventure. I'm not sure if it's by choice or by design.

"She's sorry that she couldn't make it to the wedding on such short notice, but she's under a tight deadline. On top of one project, she was given six months to co-write a book with some guy out west. The clock is ticking down, and she only has until the end of the year to get the final draft done, so we haven't heard much from her."

"Did she ever get a puppy?" I ask.

Ryan snorts. “Nope. But I’ll tell you what, the second this kid asks for a dog, he’s getting one. Aren’t you, my little Lukey-boo?”

Everyone gawks at Ryan.

“What?”

“Anyway, kids aren’t the same as dogs. You can’t leave a kid home alone,” Heather says to our cousin.

“Afraid they’ll chew your shoes?”

“No, Brando. Where have you been sneaking off to, anyway?”

Frowning, he tucks his chin, but the faintest hint of rose creeps up his neck. “I haven’t been sneaking off.”

I tap my chin. “You have so. Odd, it hasn’t been reported on the Coconut Wireless.”

“Then it didn’t happen.” As if wanting to take the attention off himself, Brando says, “Ryan, I’m joking around. You’re a great dad. And you’re glowing,” my cousin says to me.

“I’m glowing?”

My husband’s eyes land on me.

My lips play with a smile and it’s then I realize the rest of the crew has gathered around—Ryan’s brothers and their significant others, well, not CJ, obviously, because he’s the lone wolf, wild card of the family.

Harper and Heather study me from head to toe.

“Yep.”

“She’s glowing.”

“If I’m glowing, so are you.”

Heather winks.

Harper shrugs as if she’s keeping her secrets.

“We’re all married women. We can glow, you know. But mine is more of a sweaty sheen after working here all day.” I brush my hand across my forehead.

Then Ryan blurts, “I can’t keep it to myself any longer. Can we tell them, Nugget?”

But Luke beats us to it and points at my belly yelling, “Ba! Ba!”

“Ba like a sheep?” Brando asks.

“That’s baby speak for baby,” Rosalie says, joining our impromptu gathering.

Brando breaks out into a blush and, flustered, says, “Oh, right. I knew that.”

“You’re expecting?” Isla bounces.

I beam a smile at Ryan. “We are.”

“Baby boy number two.”

Everyone cheers and we discover that not only are Ryan and I growing the family, but Isla is also pregnant along with my sisters. Twins and singles respectively.

“Coco Key is having a population explosion,” I say.

I expect Brando to laugh, but he’s gone. Rosalie too, though I expect she went to make a report on the Coconut Wireless. Oops. I don’t think I’m supposed to share that she’s behind our gossip messaging system.

The rest of the evening breezes by and it’s only later that night, after Luke goes to sleep, that Ryan and I have a moment together. We’re splayed on the couch. Completely exhausted. Lights off. Just lying there, chatting and laughing in the darkness.

Then I bolt upright. “I can’t believe I forgot to tell you. Glandman stopped me when I was hanging up the balloons.” I describe the interaction.

“That creep.”

Both Ryan and I go quiet when we hear a crunching sound.

“What was that?” I whisper.

“Don’t mind me guys. Just having a sandwich.”

We whip around and Ryan flicks on the light.

CJ sits at the kitchen island, eating a sandwich.

“We really need to get our own place,” Ryan mutters.

“The others should be along any moment.”

“The others? We were together all day.” Ryan flops back onto the couch.

“There has been a development.” CJ wipes his mouth and slides something across the marble countertop.

Ryan picks up a postcard. He blinks slowly and I’m concerned he can’t read it, like the spidery script in the journal.

When I peer over his shoulder, I see that it’s to Chip, from Lorena. “Dated somewhat recently.”

We turn to each other, eyes filled with questions.

“She needs you? What does that mean?”

CJ shakes his head slowly.

“This is like the postcard she sent him when Captain J was still a kid. To be honest, I’m kind of surprised she’s still alive. But she must not know that her brother passed.”

“Do you suppose Captain J would know where she is?”

“There are a lot of unknowns,” CJ says.

“Aren’t you in the business of finding out what we don’t know?”

CJ lets out a breath. “Yeah. I think we’ll have to use some leverage, though. Maybe Captain J would be willing to help us if we made introductions to Glandman, ensuring he provides his son with additional funding for his hunt.”

“Isn’t Captain J our competition?”

“Keep your enemies close,” Magnus says, having entered silently.

“A full security system. Top of the line,” Ryan says, tossing up his hands at our revolving door.

“All of you lived here at some point, so it makes sense that they have keys, honey,” I whisper.

In the next five minutes, everyone arrives, we pass the postcard around, and ideas bandy about regarding what to do.

CJ reviews what we know.

“And let me guess, you’re going to tell us what we don’t know.” Ryan’s tone is wry.

“For starters, we still don’t know what the Salty Skeleton is.” Royal stares at his brother accusingly.

“And you had a golden key, what was that all about?” Magnus follows up.

CJ exhales as if dealing with a bunch of low-IQ students who’ve been sitting in the back row all semester. “The golden key belongs to the treasure chest. Mom and Dad were looking for it. That’s not to be confused with a skeleton key or the Salty Skeleton, though it is a key.”

The shared confusion is real.

“Let me lay this out for you. We have all three stones, but no crown. The barque, aka the Crimson Tide, isn’t where it’s supposed to be, but after a treacherous climb up the lighthouse, we have another place to look.”

I bite my lip. “Ryan, this might not be the best time to tell you this, but I almost fell that night.”

His eyes widen.

“The cement and railing were busted up on the widow’s walk. I slipped, um, over the edge. CJ saved me.”

Face somewhere between as white as a sheet and as red as a lobster, I’m not sure if Ryan is going to implode or explode.

Magnus plants a hand on his shoulder. “She’s okay, brother.”

“CJ saved you?” Royal asks. “I was there. I thought I heard something.”

I nod guiltily.

Royal looks at his little brother with newfound respect.

“Thank you, CJ,” Ryan says, extending his hand and then pulling him for a hug.

“Okay, where were we? The found stones. The lost crown. The possibility of the ship. Will that lead us to the map which will lead us to the treasure chest or something else?” CJ says, getting us back on track.

“Now we have this postcard from your Aunt Lorena. Who could she be referring to?” Isla asks.

“There’s also the map on the wall at the Sip & Scoop. Isla, your restoration of it was magnificent,” Lally says.

“Even after staring at it and tracing it for hours, I can’t quite make sense of it.”

“It’s safe to say the Pirate Defense League might know more,” Royal says.

“We’re rereading Chip’s portion of the diary too, in case there’s anything we missed,” I offer.

“Do any of you remember Chip mentioning a man named Kurt Jerkovic? Apparently, he was Chip and Glandman’s business partner early on,” Ryan says.

“There was someone else?” Magnus asks.

“I guess that answers that question,” Royal says.

“Never heard of him, but he’s worth looking into.” CJ shakes his head.

“About Glandman...” I tell them about my encounter and his warning.

“Nugget, I told you, just ignore the old man. He’s all bluster.”

Isla scrunches up her nose. “Glandman warned me to be careful about getting involved with the McGregors when I painted the mural over there. Little did he know it was too late. I was already happily married.”

“You’re both spunky, you can handle Glandman,” Lally says. Gazing down at her hands, she adds, “Magnus, don’t be upset, but there was something else.”

He stiffens, fists clenching like he’ll tear anyone who hurt her limb from limb.

Pumping her hands, she says, “It was harmless. But I was afraid if I told you, you’d stop me from going on the ship and I knew, I just knew we had to.”

“Nothing is worth risking your safety, Love Muffin.”

I’m not sure whether to be terrified or giggle.

Ryan and I exchange a look. *Love Muffin*? It reminds me of when he said that thing about Love Butter.

“What happened?” Magnus grinds out.

“I was walking the dogs on the beach. Madame and General were fighting over a bone. Well, a bunch of them, actually. Tied around an especially big one was a note.”

My heart leaps into my chest.

“Are we talking like biscuit bones or like—?” Ryan asks.

“The second one.”

“Animal? Human?” Magnus asks.

“Animal. They weren’t human bones,” CJ says dismissively.

A chill works around my spine.

“What did the message say?” Magnus asks.

Lally pulls it from her pocket. Typed on a crinkled piece of paper are the words:

“Say a word, get tossed overboard. Stop the pursuit, or you’ll get the boot. Let it go, or get the heave-ho. It’s not yours or hers, so I suggest you leave the heirs. You’ve been warned, so leave it alone or you’ll soon be mourned, and remember, loose lips sink ships.”

Isla shrugs. “Could be Glandman or Mr. Higbee.”

“Or not,” CJ grumbles as if supremely annoyed.

“Do you think it’s Captain J?” I ask.

CJ shakes his head. “No. Not at all.”

I sense he knows something he’s not saying, and by the sharp look across Ryan’s brow, he agrees.

Speculation circles the room and we go round and round about everything from the stones, to the crown, the map, the postcard, and now someone trying to scare us off the treasure hunt.

By the time everyone leaves, I can hardly lift myself off the couch.

“Would it be the worst thing if I just slept right here?”

Ryan kisses my cheek and then my neck before working his way back to my lips. We share a sweet if not sleepy kiss.

“It’s been a big day,” Ryan says. “How’s our mini nugget holding up?”

I lovingly rub my belly. “He loves the excitement.”

“I hope we solve this mystery and wrap up the treasure hunt soon, otherwise, we’ll all be off the case.”

“I have a feeling CJ knows more than he’s letting on,” I say.

“Much more.”

“I heard that,” he hollers from somewhere in the house.

“I’m literally buying the first house I see tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be out of your hair by the end of the week,” the youngest McGregor calls.

“Where are you going?”

“Back home.”

“For goodness’ sake, where is that?” Ryan asks.

But CJ doesn’t answer, at least I don’t think so, because I nestle into Ryan’s arms; my favorite place to be—and

somewhere I never expected to be, but it's perfect—and start to drift to sleep.

He drops a kiss onto my cheek and says, “I love you, Nugget.”

“I love you, Hot Shot.” And that's the last thing I remember before I dream about the future and our happily ever after.

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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.



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