

# Melodie March



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Healing  
Hearts

# healing hearts

Bluebird Island Medical

Book One

# melodie march



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# prologue

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## Sailor - Winterville, VT - November

The fluorescent lights in Dr. Rachel Thornton's office were buzzing *just* loudly enough to get under Sailor's skin. Every time they summoned him to see Winterville General's Chief of Staff, he felt like he'd been called to the principal's office, and today was no different. Usually, he was being chastised for going around departmental procedure, blowing off meetings, or "forgetting" to file paperwork with the billing department if the patient didn't have insurance. But after what happened the night before...

Sailor had a feeling this was different.

He was still staring through an infographic on hand-washing when the door behind him opened, then immediately slammed shut again. Sailor winced as the glass in her office windows shuddered from the force of the slam. None of that could have prepared him, however, for the expression of stony rage on Dr. Thornton's face.

"Dr. Hardesty, good of you to be on time... for once," she said as she sat down behind her desk. Instead of making eye contact, she scrolled through her email inbox with no sense of urgency. The *click click click* of her deleting junk mail was the only sound in the room for what felt like an eternity. Finally, Sailor cleared his throat.

“If it’s all the same to you, Rachel, I’d rather hurry up and face the firing squad so I can get on with my day.”

*Click.*

*Click.*

*Click.*

“Is this a joke to you, Dr. Hardesty? Do you think a major violation of our code of ethics is funny?”

Sailor sighed and ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t mean any disrespect, Rachel...”

“Dr. Thornton.”

*Oh, this is serious.*

“I don’t mean any disrespect, Dr. Thornton. I only meant that I’m willing to accept any punishment you’ve decided on, so I can get back to work.”

She finally looked away from her computer, and Sailor was sorry she did. When their eyes met, he shrank down three inches in his seat under her withering glare. Dr. Thornton crossed her arms over her chest and he felt his soul leave his body.

“You don’t understand. This isn’t a situation where you simply *go back to work*, Hardesty. This is strike three. You’re done. Until we can figure out how to explain this situation to the board, we’re putting you on an indefinite leave of absence. Unpaid. And effective immediately.”

Sailor felt like someone dumped a bucket of ice water over his head. If he didn’t have his job, he didn’t... he had to have his job. He just had to.

“Dr. Thornton, if I didn’t convey how sorry I am-”

She didn't say a word. She didn't have to. There was a vein throbbing in her neck that was doing all the talking for her. Sailor nodded his head to show that he'd be quiet.

"Please, make your way up to HR and turn in your ID badge. They will be in touch with you once they make a final decision regarding your status as an employee of Winterville General."

He opened his mouth to plead his case one last time, but Dr. Thornton had already picked up her phone and pressed the intercom button.

"Bev, can you let Human Resources know that Dr. Hardesty is on his way up? Yes, they need to have his paperwork ready and a security guard to escort him to his car."

Sailor held up his hand.

"Hold on a second, a security guard? Rachel, I think we're overreacting a bit. Can we please talk about this?"

Dr. Thornton put the phone down and took a long, deliberate breath.

"Overreacting? Sailor... I want you to look me directly in the eyes and say that one more time with a straight face. Look me in the eye and tell me I'm overreacting."

When he couldn't force his eyes up from her desk, he knew he was done. Sailor stood up and took his ID badge off his neck. Before he left the office, he turned back to Dr. Thornton, who was already looking at her computer again.

"For what it's worth, I *am* sorry."

Rachel didn't even glance in his direction as he walked out the door.



*What am I going to do now, Sailor thought as he walked past two elderly volunteers putting up a silver Christmas tree at the admission desk. What in the world am I going to do now?*

**one**

...

Jessica - Bluebird Island, NC - December

“Owen! Can you find the Christmas tree topper you made this summer? I put it in your suitcase!”

Jessica Darling put the last candy cane on the tree as her son scrambled up the stairs to find the only ornament she managed to pack when they left Portland. This wasn't their first Christmas away from their small Oregon cottage, but it *was* the first time she and her son were in a proper house for the holidays and not on the road. The owner of the Bluebird Island beach house was kind enough to leave the tree undecorated, so Jessica and Owen could do it together. Unfortunately, the wooden star that Owen made at camp was the only decoration she found room for, so the tree looked a little...

Ordinary.

Still, hundreds of little lights were twinkling and when Owen slid back down the stairs in his socks, his eyes were as bright as the tree.

“That looks awesome, mom,” he said as he walked up to her. She gave him a kiss on the head, then picked him up so he could put his star on the tree. Owen turned ten in November, but she couldn't believe how fast he was growing. It wouldn't

be long before she couldn't pick him up at all, and she dreaded that day.

Once the tree was done, Jessica turned up the volume on the record player that was spinning an old Nat King Cole holiday album. Then, she crawled down on the floor and laid flat on her back, so she was looking straight up through the glittering branches of the tree.

“Mom! What are you doing?”

Jessica reached up and grabbed Owen's hand, then pulled him down next to her.

“You turn ten and suddenly you're too cool to look at the lights with me?”

Owen sighed dramatically, but laid down by his mom's side. After a minute, he nuzzled in close and put his head on her shoulder.

“It's weird to be in a house again. I sort of missed having my own room.”

Jessica sat up and turned to her little boy. “We've only been on the road for a few months. And you had your own room when we were in LA! Has it really been that bad this time?”

Owen sat up too and shrugged.

“I guess I don't mind going on your book tours with you. It's cool to see other cities. I just miss my friends. And my stuff.”

She ruffled her little boy's hair and pulled him into a hug. Owen was good at acting tough, but Jess knew this tour had been harder on him. Her publisher added twenty additional signings, a ton of readings, and several morning show

appearances to this trip. They'd missed Halloween and Thanksgiving, and spent Owen's birthday at a TV studio while Jessica filmed promos for her events. This month off for Christmas on Bluebird Island in North Carolina was supposed to make up for *some* of that.

She only hoped it would be enough.

"Tell you what, kiddo," Jess said as she jumped to her feet, then helped Owen stand up. "Let's make some peppermint hot cocoa, grab a few blankets, and go do a little stargazing. There isn't a cloud in the sky. It's the perfect night to spot shooting stars!"

Owen raised his eyebrow. "Same rules apply?"

"Obviously. A dollar a star into the Space Camp fund. At this rate, you're going to go every year until you're eighteen!"

It was Owen's idea to save his own money to train to be a junior astronaut next summer, but he didn't know that Jessica already registered him for next August. All the confirmations were wrapped up in a box in the guest bedroom closet for him to open Christmas morning. She felt like it was the least she could do after his year had been so chaotic.

Owen took off running for the kitchen to find the cocoa mix, while Jessica grabbed some blankets from the hall closet. When they packed to leave for Bluebird Island, they assumed it would be warm enough for t-shirts and shorts since it was winter in the south. Instead, they landed in an unexpected cold front of thirty-degree temperatures and the lingering threat of snow. Jessica had already spent a small fortune at a local surf shop on sweaters, coats, hats, mittens, and boots.

They looked like they'd been swept up in a tornado of Roxy and Quicksilver.

“Mom! Can you put the milk on the stove? I don’t know how to work this one,” Owen called from the kitchen. She found her son staring at the gas burners in confusion and laughed as she scooted him away.

“I’ll get the cocoa. You go get geared up. I’ll meet you on the back porch in ten minutes.”

He was off and running before she could finish her sentence. It was nice to see her kiddo having so much fun, especially when he spent the rest of the year acting like her little assistant. Jessica was going to make sure this Christmas was special...

She just had to figure out how.

**two**

...

## Sailor

Sailor sat in the living room of his parents' Bluebird Island cottage, staring into the fire and sipping a glass of whiskey. It wasn't his first, and he didn't think it would be his last. When Wintervale General put him on unpaid leave, he couldn't afford to keep his apartment in Hadleigh. Since he didn't particularly feel like watching all his friends and co-workers going about their happy holiday seasons, it seemed like the ideal time to visit the Outer Banks town where his mom grew up. The Hardestys used to vacation at the family cottage every summer, but when Sailor left for college, the tradition slowly died off.

Based on the layer of dust on everything, he guessed his parents hadn't been back at the house in a while. Not that he'd spoken to them recently... All the time off from the hospital had given him way too much opportunity to think. The more thinking he did, the less he liked about his life lately. It felt like every choice he made since he got to Vermont was the wrong one. Maybe spending Christmas on Bluebird Island could give him some perspective.

Sailor shook around the icy contents of his glass. When he found it mostly empty, he got up for a refill. As he walked to the bar, he happened to notice a shooting star over the ocean through the porch doors. Without thinking, he wandered out



the doors and shuffled barefoot out onto the wooden deck. The sky was black and clear, and you could see every star for miles. Sailor looked up in wonder, so lost in the beauty that he didn't even notice the cold.

Or that the porch doors had clicked shut and locked behind him.

After a minute of staring up at the sky, he turned around to go back inside. Except no matter how hard he tugged on the handles, the doors wouldn't open.

“Ah, shark butt,” he grumbled as ran around to the front of the house to see if the front door was unlocked. Of course, this was the one time he was diligent about locking up. Sailor shivered as the cold pricked at his bare arms and legs. Why had he gone outside in gym shorts and his Cornell Medical School t-shirt?

“Right, the whiskey.”

He stumbled onto the beach to see if anyone was around with a cell phone. Since it was after ten and freezing, he didn't like his odds. Sailor slid down the small embankment that led to the shore, then started the awkward walk through the ice cold sand. He wasn't sure how long he'd walked when another shooting star caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. He only looked up for a second, but that was all it took for his legs to get tangled in something and send him flying to the ground.

“Oh, sh...”

Sailor's face was flat in the sand before he could finish.

It took a few seconds for the shock to wear off. When it finally did, he rolled over and quickly brushed the damp sand from his eyes. After he managed to blink away the last of it, he

realized there were two people standing over him. One was a little boy, and the other was possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She was all bundled up in pink and white snow gear, except it looked like her jeans were covered in some sort of dark stain. He sat up and after a moment, his eyes adjusted to the dark. That was when he realized what he did.

The woman and little boy had been sitting on a blanket and drinking what smelled like hot cocoa. That is, until Sailor showed up and tripped over them. The woman knelt down next to him and looked at him like she was ready for a fight if need be.

“Do I need to worry about you?” she asked under her breath so the little boy couldn't hear her. Sailor quickly wiped the last of the sand out of his beard and shook some out of his hair.

“I'm more worried about you. Are you burned? Did I hurt either of you? I'm so sorry. One of those shooting stars distracted me and I didn't even see you there.”

She looked down at her pants and sighed.

“It wasn't hot. Are *you* okay? You know what the temperature is out here, right?”

Sailor crawled to his feet and found he was a little unsteady in the sand, though he didn't know if it was from the alcohol or the fall.

“I got locked out of my house. It's just up the beach a little way. I'll leave you alone if I could just borrow your phone to call a locksmith?”

She stuck her hands in her pockets and groaned. “I didn't bring it. But we can go call someone for you if you give me

your address.”

The little boy tugged on his mom’s coat.

“We don’t have to call anyone. I can get him back in his house.”

She rolled her eyes and leaned over.

“I thought we agreed you wouldn’t broadcast this stuff, Owen.”

“Right,” the boy said. “But if it’s useful...”

Sailor didn’t know what was going on, so to diffuse the tension that seemed to have built, he held out his hand.

“I’m sorry, miss. I didn’t introduce myself. My name is Sailor. Sailor Hardesty. And you are?”

The woman reached out and returned his handshake with some hesitancy.

“Jess. And this is my son, Owen. He can open your door for you, but then we should get home. It’s past his bedtime.”

Owen looked at the Apple Watch on his wrist. “What? It’s not even...”

Jess tugged her ear, and he stopped talking right away. Sailor chuckled at the obvious signal.

“Well, I appreciate your help just the same. Mine is the cottage just past that dune.”

The mother and son walked behind him, whispering to each other quietly enough that the wind was drowning them out. Once they were in front of his back door, though, everyone was suddenly silent. Out of pure nervousness, Sailor clapped his hands together and laughed a little too loudly.

“So! Do you know some magic spell for getting a door open, kiddo?”

Owen looked at Sailor like he had snakes growing out of his head, then turned to his mother. “Can I have that thing in your hair, please?”

She reached into the braid under her beanie and pulled out a bobby pin. Jess handed it to Owen, and he straightened it out, then began to pick the back door lock.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Sailor asked in surprise.

Owen didn’t look away from the lock.

“I’m homeschooled.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question.”

Jess shook her head. “He sees things in movies and then looks up how to do them on YouTube. I didn’t know about this one until recently.”

With a click, the left door opened, and Owen stepped back with a proud grin.

“There you go, Mr...”

“Doctor, actually. But you can call me Sailor. I can’t say I approve of your hobby, Owen, but I don’t know where I’d be tonight without you.”

Jess put her arm around her son and pulled him close.

“No problem, Dr. Hardesty. We’ll let you get back to your evening. Stay warm.”

They started to walk away, but Sailor was overcome with the need to see them again... and to know more about Jess.

“Hold on a second. I’d like to make it up to you, for the cocoa. Can I take you both out for lunch tomorrow? There’s a

little beach-front cafe by the pier that makes amazing banana pudding.”

Jess looked like she was going to say no, but Owen stepped in front of her.

“We’d love to! Right, mom?”

Sailor waited patiently for Jess to answer, and she was taking her time. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she nodded.

“Sure. We can meet you there at one. Which restaurant?”

“The Waverider. It’s the last place on the right before you get to the pier. You can’t miss it.”

Jess took Owen’s hand and pulled him toward the beach. “We’ll see you then. Goodnight.”

Owen waved as they disappeared into the darkness, leaving Sailor to run into the house and sit in front of the fire. He was suddenly extremely sober, freezing...

But more excited than he’d been about anything in a really long time.

**three**

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## Jessica

Jessica picked up her son's wrist and looked at the time on his watch again. It was almost 1:30pm, and she and Owen had been sitting in the turquoise plastic booth for forty-five minutes. Owen didn't care; he was playing a game on his phone and perfectly content to sit there all day. But Jess was hungry, and she wasn't sure how much more sweet tea she could drink without getting twitchy.

"Kiddo, I think we should head back to the house. I don't think our beach friend is showing up. In fact, I'm not sure it was the best idea for us to come here at all. He probably didn't remember he was supposed to meet us."

Owen put down his phone and turned to his mother. She could tell he was trying to hide his disappointment. It was an expression she recognized easily, even though he thought he was a master of disguise.

"Can we eat something before we go home? That food smells so good and I'm starving."

A young waitress walked up for the third time carrying menus and a pitcher of tea. Jessica wanted to stop her from refilling her glass, but they'd tied up her table for almost an hour without ordering anything, so overloading on tea felt like the least Jess could do.

“You ready to order yet?” the waitress asked as she snapped her gum. Owen looked up at her and batted his huge ocean-blue doe eyes.

“What would you recommend, miss?”

Jessica watched as her son melted the waitress’s heart in five words. The kid was a charmer, there was no doubt about it. The girl, who couldn’t have been more than seventeen herself, took a pen out of her hair and pointed at a few things on the menu.

“We have a beer-batter fried cod that is fantastic. The coconut shrimp with pineapple salsa is the best on the coast. And you can’t go wrong with the lobster mac and cheese.”

“She’s right about the mac and cheese. The Waverider is famous for it.”

Jess, Owen, and the waitress all turned to see Sailor standing by the host’s stand. He had the sense to look sheepish as he waited with his hands in his pockets, but Jessica still wasn’t in a rush to let him off the hook.

“Order whatever you want, hon. I’ll have the coconut shrimp, please.”

Owen got the lobster mac and cheese as Sailor sidled up to the table.

“Katee, honey, can I get a bowl of the bisque and a bottle of whatever beer is cold?”

The waitress rolled her eyes. “They’re all cold, Sailor. This isn’t The Bait Shop.”

“Let your dad pick out something for me, then. I’m not fussy,” he said with a wave of his hand. The girl sighed and disappeared into the tiny, noisy kitchen in the back. Once she



was gone, and they were the only three people in the dining room, Jess turned to Sailor and crossed her arms over her chest.

“We were about to leave.”

He slipped out of his coat and took off a gray knit beanie, revealing wavy salt-and-pepper hair that Jessica didn't really notice the night before. His scruffy beard matched his hair and while he looked disheveled, it suited him... even if he looked more than a little tired.

“I am sorry about that, but I didn't have your number to call. There were some issues with my rental car and it took me a minute to get her up and running. It's a poor excuse, but I hope you can both forgive me.”

Owen took a long, deliberate sip of lemonade through the straw.

“You could have called the restaurant,” he said before picking up his phone to go back to his game. Sailor half-smiled and nodded.

“You're right about that, Owen. I didn't even think of that. Looks like the banana pudding is on me, if you're both willing to stay for dessert, of course.”

Jess knew there was no chance they were getting out of the restaurant without dessert if the offer was on the table. Her son had a sweet tooth that rivaled her own, and she'd gotten into her fair share of trouble when sweets were concerned. Out of the corner of her eye, she could already see Owen trying to read the dessert menu on the wall at the back of the restaurant.

Since Owen was distracted, and they were the only people in The Waverider, Jess felt like she had no choice but to make conversation.

“It seems like you’ve been to Bluebird Island before?”

A muscular guy in jeans, a white t-shirt, and an apron walked out of the kitchen carrying a bottle of beer on a tray. He handed the bottle to Sailor, mouthed a few obvious curse words to him, then turned and went back to the kitchen. Sailor laughed and took a sip of the beer.

“That was Tanner. This is his restaurant. His daughter Katee is our waitress. And yeah, you could say I’ve been here before. My mother was born and raised on Bluebird Island, so we spent a lot of time here when I was growing up.”

“Is that why you’re here? To see your family for the holidays?” Jess asked as she fished some ice out of her tea to crunch on. Sailor broke eye contact with her, but she still noticed the way the color drained from his face when she asked why he was on Bluebird Island.

Unfortunately, she didn’t have time to follow up because Katee appeared with their food.

“That was quick!” Owen said, as he tucked his phone into his messenger bag. When Katee set down a gigantic bowl of lobster mac and cheese in front of him, his eyes went wide with joy. Then she put down a plate of beer-battered french fries and winked at him.

“My dad made me fries for lunch and we had some left over. I thought you might enjoy them.”

Everything they ordered looked delicious and before long, they were so lost in the incredible food that Jess forgot about Sailor being late. The food was almost gone when Tanner returned from the kitchen and pulled a chair up to their booth. Jess couldn’t help but notice that he looked awfully young to

have a teenage daughter, but people said the same thing about her and Owen.

Tanner held out his hand to Jess, then her little boy.

“Welcome to The Waverider. I’m Tanner Caulfield. And according to my daughter, you’re kind of a big deal.”

Sailor turned and looked at Jess in surprise. “You are?”

“Well...”

Owen’s mouth was full of a yeast roll, but that didn’t stop him from chiming in.

“She writes kissing books about a lady pirate! People come from all over the world to meet her.”

Katee appeared next to the table with a hardcover copy of *The Night Sea’s Daughter Book 4: The Queen of the Caspian Sea* and handed it to Jess.

“Miss Darling, I don’t want to be rude, but would you mind signing this? My friends and I have been passing these books around for the last year and they’re going to *flip out* when they hear you’re on the island!”

She signed it with a smile, but felt Sailor’s eyes on her.

“You don’t have to tell everyone,” Jess said with a laugh. “My son and I are trying to fly under the radar this month. But we’ll definitely come back to this restaurant. Your food is incredible, right, Owen?”

He was already engaged in conversation with Katee about the banana pudding, so he wasn’t paying attention to his mother.

“Well, Miss Darling...” Tanner said.

“Jess, please.”

“Jess... Every year on Christmas Eve, the island has a holiday parade on the inlet. Everyone covers their boats with lights and the town meets for food and drinks and music. It’s a lot of fun. You and the kid should come. I bet Hardesty could use the company this year.”

It only took a fraction of a second for the mood at the table to change, but it was immediately clear that Sailor was annoyed, and Tanner felt it too. Jess wasn’t sure what to do to tone it down, but luckily, Owen was listening more than she realized.

“A boat parade?! That sounds awesome, mom! Can we go?”

She glanced over at Sailor, who still seemed to be lost in his thoughts.

“Sure, honey. We can definitely go. That sounds fun, Tanner. Thanks.”

For the rest of their time at The Waverider, it felt like Sailor had already mentally gone home, and she wasn’t sure what changed. When they left the restaurant and walked out into the dusky, cold, late afternoon air, she expected they would go their separate ways and that would be that.

So, what Sailor said next was such a shock, she almost snort laughed.

“Do you want to come over to my house for dinner on Saturday? There’s supposed to be a meteor shower. It would be a great excuse to take out my dad’s old telescope.”

Jess’s jaw dropped. Her first instinct was to say “no,” but she looked down at Owen and saw the stars in his eyes. She didn’t have the heart to say no, but...

“You want to see us again? Are you sure?”

Sailor cracked up.

“Of course. I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t.”

She nodded and took his phone so she could put her number in it.

“Text me and we’ll sort something out.”

After they said their goodbyes and walked off to their cars, Owen stopped on the sidewalk and looked at Jess in confusion.

“Mom, is it me or does Sailor seem a little sad?”

She unlocked the car and opened the back door so her son could hop in.

“He does, kiddo. He really does.”

She just hoped it wouldn’t take too long to find out why.

**four**

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## Sailor

**F**or the first time since he got to the beach house, Sailor was regretting his decision to skip decorating for Christmas. As he sat in front of the fire, sipping a beer and watching an eighty-year-old version of *A Christmas Carol*, he realized he missed the holiday parties and gift exchanges at Wintervale General. He thought it was all a little cheesy at the time, but now that he was sitting alone in this house, cut off from the life he'd made in Vermont...

Sailor realized the cheesy stuff was what he missed the most.

He was about to grab another beer from the kitchen when he heard his phone ringing from somewhere deep inside the couch cushions. It took him a minute to find it, but when he did, he saw it was his friend Reid Facetiming him. They met at the hospital when Reid was having physical therapy for an old hockey injury and had been buddies ever since.

When Sailor answered the call, it looked like Reid was on a balcony at a fancy holiday cocktail party. He was wearing a designer suit, but had a string of blinking red and green Christmas lights around his neck. Sailor couldn't help but laugh.

“You sure look festive, man.”

Reid rolled his eyes. “Claudia’s theatre agent is having a holiday party for his clients. I feel bad because she’s in her element, but I don’t know a single person here. I thought I’d come outside and get some fresh air. It turns out I miss the cold.”

A year earlier, Reid’s wife Claudia got an offer to adapt her television show into a Broadway musical, so they moved from Wintervale to New York to get it off the ground. Sailor told Reid that he was going to spend the holidays on Bluebird Island, but not the circumstance that led to him leaving. He hadn’t told anyone about that, yet. But word probably spread around Wintervale quickly, which meant Reid would hear soon enough. Sailor just hoped he could work up the nerve to tell his friend the truth first.

He could see Reid examining the surroundings behind him and probably judging his lack of Christmas joy. Sailor didn’t exactly have Wintervale levels of holiday spirit (the town was well known for their Christmas festival), but he wasn’t Scrooge either. It *was* unusual for him to be alone around the holidays without so much as a tree.

“So... how is Bluebird Island?”

Sailor sighed and shrugged. “It’s fine. Quiet. I don’t know what to do with myself now that I don’t have to go to work.”

Reid gestured at the clump of beer bottles on the table next to Sailor.

“It looks like you’ve kept busy. Can you even afford to take this much time off of work? I thought your rent on that place in Hadleigh was pretty steep.”

*Tell him the truth. Just tell him. He’s going to find out eventually, anyway. Tell him.*



“Actually, I decided to take a leave of absence and stay down here for a little longer. Wintervale isn’t as much fun without you, buddy.”

Reid’s brow furrowed more and more with every word. Sailor knew there was a fifty-fifty chance that his best friend would see right through his lies. Apparently, the odds weren’t in his favor.

“Try again, but this time, tell me what’s really going on,” Reid said, emphasizing every syllable. Sailor was attempting to choose his words carefully when Claudia appeared behind Reid. She was wearing a sparkly black cocktail dress, a fluffy white faux fur coat, and she had cut her previously long blonde hair into a cute pixie. Claudia was practically glowing in the Christmas lights.

“Sailor, shouldn’t you be at the Wintervale General holiday party? Amber Sutton told me the pediatric care team was going to go caroling around the hospital with some of the kids tonight!”

*Ugh*, he thought with regret. He’d dated Amber, a really sweet nurse, for a month or so a few years earlier, too. He could only imagine the stories about him that were being passed around that party.

“I’m in North Carolina for the holidays, so no caroling. At least not tonight. You two should go back to your party and have fun. We can talk later, Reid.”

His best friend scowled. “No, I think it’s better if…”

“Have a great night!”

Sailor ended the call before Reid could argue with him and dropped the phone in his lap with a sigh. He hated lying to his friends, but he just wasn’t ready to tell them the truth about

why he left Wintervale. He wasn't sure he was ready to face the truth of it himself. Not yet, anyway.

Maybe after the holidays...

**five**

...

Jessica

“M om, where is the maple syrup you got at that farm stand?”

Jess was in her bedroom off the kitchen, digging through her bags from the surf shop for one of the sweaters she bought. It felt like the temperature was dropping every day, and while it got chilly in Portland, it was never *this* cold. Owen didn't care; he wanted to be outside all the time and was trying to scarf down his breakfast to get on the beach. She promised they could spend Saturday morning looking for Atlantic ocean shells. But all Jessica wanted to do was sit by the fire, drink cocoa, and watch old Christmas movies.

“MOM! Can you help me?”

*So much for that.*

“It's in the canvas bag on the kitchen table. Don't use the entire bottle, please!”

She was half-way into her sweater when she heard her phone go off. It took Jess a minute to struggle into the cream cable-knit turtleneck sweater before she could dig through the fluffy comforter for her cell. When she finally found it, it surprised her to see a text message from Sailor. After their mildly disastrous lunch, Jess didn't expect to hear from him again.

***Sailor Hardesty:*** *Good morning, Nell “Siren Song” Corrigan*

She dropped her phone and buried her face in her hands. Jess really hoped Sailor wasn't reading her books. As much as she loved talking about them with fans, and at readings, she didn't love for her status as a romance author to be the first thing people knew about her. It set certain standards that Jess wasn't sure she could live up to.

***Me:*** *Been doing a little light reading?*

While she waited for him to answer, she poked her head out of the room to check on Owen. He was sitting at the kitchen table, eating a stack of blueberry pancakes and reading a comic book. She had at least an hour of him reading before Owen remembered he wanted to go to the beach. Jess snuck back into her room and crawled under the covers, then pulled the comforter up and over her head. That was when she saw she had another text.

***Sailor Hardesty:*** *I wouldn't call it light. Nell is quite a firecracker. Once she started planning that raid on the Royal Navy, I couldn't stop reading.*

***Me:*** *You're already on The Court of Coffinfish? If you keep blowing through them like that, you'll be caught up by tomorrow.*

***Sailor Hardesty:*** *Hopefully, I'll be distracted tonight. Are you and the little man still coming over for dinner?*

Jess definitely didn't expect him to hold up his offer of dinner, so the entire conversation was hitting her like a ton of bricks. She wasn't convinced this was a good idea; for most of Owen's life, Jess had avoided letting men get too close. The idea of her son getting attached to someone only for them to leave was something she couldn't handle. But Owen knew

they weren't staying on Bluebird Island for long, so hanging out with Sailor couldn't hurt. Especially if it was just one dinner, right?

*Me: If you're sure you feel like cooking for us!*

She watched as the little bubble appeared and disappeared as Sailor typed and erased a response. This went on for about five minutes before he finally answered her.

*Sailor Hardesty: I'll figure something out. 8pm?*

Jess laughed out loud, which caused Owen to stir in the kitchen.

"Mom? Are you ready?"

She poked her head out from under the covers.

"Just a second! Get your coat on. I'll be right out."

*Me: By 8pm, I will have been in my pajamas for two hours.*

*Can we do six? I don't want to keep Owen out too late.*

*Sailor Hardesty: Six it is. Walk up the beach and come to the back door. Looking forward to it.*

"Mom?"

Jess tucked her phone into her pocket and crawled out of bed to find Owen standing in the doorway. His eyebrow was raised as he watched her put her new boots on.

"Are you ready to hunt for seashells?" she asked as she guided him out the door. She could tell by the look on his face that he had more questions, but as soon as they were outside, it was like the ocean called to him and Owen took off running.

They could talk more about Sailor later. For now... there were shells to be found.

**six**

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## Sailor

As soon as he sent that last text to Jessica, Sailor threw on his coat, jumped into his rental Jeep, and drove to the closest store that sold pre-lit Christmas trees. Unfortunately, that store was Jordy's Hardware, an overpriced decor shop that mostly catered to the people with summer homes on the island. But there were no ornaments, lights, or virtually *anything* related to the holidays at the beach house.

That meant he left Jordy's with an \$800 pre-lit, pre-decorated tree, a wreath for the front door that was way too gold for his tastes, and a bunch of poinsettias. Once he dropped his holiday haul off at the house, he turned around and went directly back to The Waverider.

Sailor knew the restaurant would be closed, but he also knew that Tanner would be there early, getting ready for the day. So, when he got to the door, he knocked as hard as he could without breaking the glass. It only took a minute for Tanner to wander out of the kitchen looking cranky.

"It's 9am! We don't open until eleven! Stop knocking!" he yelled loud enough for Sailor to hear through the thick glass door. When he saw Sailor, though, he flipped the lock and peeked outside. "What are you doing here, man? I don't have



anything prepped yet. Katee had a party last night, and I let her take the morning off.”

Sailor bounced from foot to foot and pulled his coat tighter around him. This cold was brutal... and unusual.

“Come on, Tanner. Let me in. It’s freezing out here.”

Tanner grumbled under his breath, but opened the door so Sailor could slip inside, then quickly locked it again.

“We haven’t served breakfast since the 80s. Why are you here at the crack of dawn?”

Sailor chuckled as he looked at his watch. “It’s not exactly the crack of dawn. Were you at a party last night, too?”

Tanner scoffed.

“I haven’t been to a party since I took over The Waverider. And you still haven’t answered my question, man. What do you need?”

Sailor sighed as he collapsed into a booth and dropped his head in his hands. Why didn’t he invite Jess and Owen *out* to dinner?

“Do you remember the woman I was here with the other day? And her little boy?”

Tanner rolled his eyes. “The best-selling author? Yeah, obviously I remember her. Did you charm her into being your next Bluebird fling?”

Sailor felt a twinge of regret when Tanner said that. His reputation for dating around wasn’t confined to Wintervale, but he thought since it had been a while since he’d come back to the island, maybe everyone forgot. Except, no one let anything go here, especially good gossip. He wouldn’t be

surprised if there was a separate daily newspaper delivery just for rumors.

“I’m not trying to have a fling. Jessica seems great and her son is something else. That’s not the point. They’re coming over for dinner tonight and I can’t cook to save my life. Could you do some sort of takeout situation that I can serve?”

Tanner furrowed his brow, and the lines etched themselves into his forehead like the intersecting roads on a map.

“If you can’t cook, why did you invite them over for dinner? The Silverlight is showing classic Christmas movies all week. You could have gone there. Or taken them out to dinner. We’re not the only restaurant on the island anymore.”

Sailor sank down into the booth and groaned.

“They’re coming over! It’s done. Can you help me or not?”

Tanner mumbled to himself as he walked up to the host stand and scanned through a list. As he tapped it with a pencil, he shook his head and continued to talk to himself. For a minute, Sailor thought his friend was going to tell him no.

“It looks like we’re not fully booked tonight, so I can put together a small spread for you. But you’re going to have to come pick it up yourself. I can’t spare Katee for the delivery. Can you be here at 5:30?”

Sailor jumped up from the booth and gave Tanner a hug.

“You’re a lifesaver, man!”

Tanner squirmed out of his grasp. “Yeah, yeah. Just make sure you give me credit for the meal. The pirate lady seems nice and I don’t want to be a part of lying to her. Those are my conditions.”

Sailor nodded vehemently.

“I promise. 5:30 on the dot and I’ll make a banner saluting your mind-blowing kindness.”

His friend growled under his breath and took a notebook out of his back pocket. “Are three courses okay? An appetizer, meal, and dessert? Katee made a gingerbread trifle thing. I can break it down into individual portions.”

Sailor held up his hands.

“I’m in no position to turn down anything. Whatever you want to make is fine by me. You’re a lifesaver, Tanner, truly. I need to head home to put up these Christmas decorations, but I’ll be back at 5:30.”

As Sailor rushed out the door, Tanner yelled after him.

“I MEAN 5:30! Not a minute later or I’m taking the food to The Bait Shop for Horace!”

Sailor waved at him and jumped into the Jeep, the top of the artificial Christmas tree smacking him in the face as he slid into the driver’s seat. He sighed as he shoved it to the side just enough that he could drive home without plastic tree branches in his eyes.

It was going to be a long day.

**seven**

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## Jessica

Jessica and Owen walked up the path from the beach that led to Sailor's back gate. It was a cloudless night, the sky a black velvet backdrop to a million glittering stars. The moon was nearly full and its snowy light flooded the sand. Owen wasn't looking where he was going, his eyes cast toward the sky, and he stumbled straight into the gate. Since he was carrying the loaf of cranberry walnut bread they made, Jess had to dive forward to catch it before it hit the sand after Owen dropped it.

"You have to watch where you're going, kiddo. It's not safe to walk around, staring up at the sky like that."

Owen brushed some stray sand off the front of his sweater. "Sorry, mom. Is the bread okay?"

She kissed her little boy on the top of the head, then ruffled his shaggy, pecan-colored hair.

"Perfect."

When they walked up to the French doors on Sailor's back porch, Jess could already see that he'd made a valiant effort at decorating for the holiday in the last twenty-four hours. Except, much to her surprise, his living room looked eerily similar to their own. He even had the same basic pre-lit tree

next to his fireplace. Owen noticed too, because he turned back to his mom with a smile on his face.

“Did he break into our house after we left and stuff all our decorations into a sack?”

Jess laughed. “Like the Grinch?”

“Who’s the Grinch?”

They both screamed when they found Sailor suddenly standing behind them, his hands full of paper bags. Jess felt like her heart was going to explode out of her chest.

“What are you doing out here? You scared the bejesus out of us!”

Sailor held up the bags.

“There’s no point in pretending I know how to cook. Tanner made our dinner, but they were getting slammed at The Waverider, so he was running behind. I’m sorry I wasn’t here to greet you. Let’s head inside. It’s freezing out here!”

Jess and Owen both shivered as they walked into the living room, but right away, the cold seemed to melt away. Sailor’s house was warm and homey as the fireplace crackled and the firelight danced on the walls next to the Christmas tree. It smelled of rich pipe tobacco, old books, and cinnamon; there was something about it that was comforting in a way Jessica couldn’t quite place. As she took off her coat, Owen ran into the kitchen to help Sailor unpack the food.

“What are we having?” he asked as he crawled up onto a bar stool and started digging through the bags.

“Crab cakes, spicy salmon tacos, and a gingerbread trifle for dessert! I hope you’re okay with takeout. I’ve spent the last fourteen years of my life eating out of vending machines,

hospital cafeterias, and 24-hour diners. Learning to cook was never on my radar.”

Jess joined Owen at the bar stools and helped him take out the trifles.

“You said you’re a doctor?”

Sailor nodded as he poured them both a glass of Riesling.

“Pediatric emergency medicine. I’ve been working at a hospital in Vermont since I finished my residency, but...”

He trailed off as he started mixing a Shirley Temple with lime for Owen. He even popped a little umbrella in it, so it looked like he had his own fancy drink. Owen’s eyes lit up as he took the drink and ran off to the living room with it to check out Sailor’s collection of sea glass, leaving Jess alone with him for the first time since they met. She didn’t know why, but her stomach was rolling like the waves.

“But?” she asked, picking up where he left off. He laughed awkwardly and drank down his entire glass of wine in one gulp, before refilling it.

“But, my employer and I mutually decided I needed to take some time off. I might have burned out a little bit without noticing.”

Jess swallowed down a nervous lump in her throat. *What kind of chaotic situation had she walked her son into?*

“Did something happen... at the hospital?”

Sailor put his glass down and adamantly shook his head.

“No. Absolutely not. My job has been my number one priority for a long time, to the detriment of my personal life. I never really learned the whole self-care thing everyone talks so much about. I chose self-destruction instead.”

“I know something about that,” Jess said as she sipped her wine and glanced at Owen. She could feel Sailor watching her.

“Care to elaborate?”

Jess smiled and shook her head.

“No. No, thank you.”

He refilled both their glasses as Owen appeared next to them.

“Perfect timing,” she said as she put her arm around her little boy. This was not a conversation she felt like having tonight, even if she didn’t keep secrets from Owen. She didn’t want to have serious talks. She wanted to have dinner.

And thank goodness, it was dinner time.



**eight**

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## Sailor

**F**or the first time since Sailor got back to Bluebird Island, with Jessica and Owen at his kitchen table, he actually felt at home. As they ate the delicious food that Tanner made for them, Owen talked at the pace of a hummingbird about the upcoming meteor shower. The kid knew everything about it, like he'd been reading for weeks to prepare for a lecture.

Sailor finished his last bite of trifle and leaned back with a smile.

“Owen, have you been studying about meteors for a while now?” he asked.

The little boy looked up from his dessert, a spoonful of trifle in his mouth. Jess laughed and gestured that she would answer for him.

“He started researching the meteor shower last night after you told us about it. Owen is a quick study.”

Sailor couldn't hide his shock. “He learned all of that in twenty-four hours?”

“Less!” Owen said. “I caught up on a comic book this morning. But space is really my first love.”

In all his years as a pediatrician, Sailor met a lot of precocious kids, but Owen Darling might have taken the cake.

“I wish you’d been around to help me with my classwork in med school, kiddo! You might be smarter than half the people I graduated with.” Sailor looked at his watch as he finished his glass of wine. “We should get bundled up and head outside. The meteor shower is starting any minute.”

Owen jumped up from his chair so fast, he knocked it backward. Jess caught it right before it hit the wall and tilted it right-side up as her son scrambled into his coat and hat. Sailor didn’t even have a chance to stand up before Owen was out the door.

“I wish I had half his energy,” Sailor said with a laugh as he helped Jess slip into her puffy pink ski jacket.

“You should try keeping up with him.”

He didn’t know what came over him... Sailor never knew what came over him. But he leaned forward and set his hand on the side of Jess’s face, then kissed her gently. He noticed that her hair smelled of warm southern winds blowing through orange groves and fields of short grass. He could taste the salt from the sea air on her lips. The kiss only lasted for a fraction of a second, however, before she pulled away, and Sailor felt the regret immediately slap him in the face.

*Why do I always do this?!*

“Jessica, listen, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

She took a step back and shook her head.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just not sure that...”

Sailor stumbled toward the door.

“Hey, you don’t have to explain. We should go out there. Don’t want to miss those meteors.”

He turned and walked as fast as he could down the path to the beach without looking like he was running away, even though that was exactly what he wanted to do. How could he have messed this up so fast? What made him so desperate to blow up every good thing in his life before he even gave it a chance?

Sailor sighed as he got to the edge of the beach and looked up at the sky. Meteors were streaking across the darkness every few seconds, and it was gorgeous. For a moment, he forgot his embarrassment and whistled in wonder.

“Owen, are you seeing this?”

When he didn't get an answer, Sailor looked down from the sky and up and down the beach, suddenly aware that he didn't see Owen. Jessica appeared by his side, out of breath from jogging to join him.

“We can talk about what happened back there if you want to. I just... wait, where's Owen?”

Sailor felt fear begin to flow through his body faster than blood. “Does he hide? Like, does he play hide and seek?”

“No! But he doesn't look where he's going and he walks into things all the time. What if he fell and he's hurt?”

Jessica's own panic was palpable, so he reached down and took her hand, squeezing it as reassuringly as he could. He was about to suggest they start searching the beach when a hundred feet or so away, Sailor spotted a small lump on the sand, not far from where the waves were breaking. Even in the dark, he could make out the bright blue shade of Owen's coat.

His stomach dropped.

Sailor squeezed Jess's hand again and turned to her.

“Go get your cell, call 911, and come right back to me on the beach while you’re still on the phone with them. Tell them to come to the beach behind 47 Hummingbird Road. It’s a pediatric emergency.”

“Sailor...”

He shook his head.

“Jessica, now.”

She nodded and ran back to the house, as he took off in the direction of Owen. Sailor tried to ignore the terror he was feeling, and the dizziness from all the wine he’d had. Right now, he needed to get to Owen.

He had to save Jess’s little boy.

**nine**

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## Jessica

“I don’t KNOW what’s wrong with him! There’s a doctor with him right now. I’m just running back to see!”

Jessica was on with a 911 dispatcher, trying to give her information that she didn’t actually have. Every bone in her body wanted to run straight to Owen, but she knew that whatever was wrong, he needed Sailor by his side at that moment. Still, as she stumbled through the sand to get back to her little boy, she struggled to see through the tears that were clouding her eyes.

“Jessica, are you with your son yet?” the dispatcher asked. As she slid to a stop next to Owen and Sailor, she found her son still, but his eyes were open, and he was grinning. Shivering and soaking wet, but grinning.

“What happened?!”

Sailor gestured for Jess to hand him the phone, which she did. Before he walked away to talk to the dispatcher, he rested his hand on Owen’s forehead.

“Don’t move him. I think he’s okay, but I want him to have a neck X-ray to be sure, so they’re going to have to collar him and put him on a backboard. Remember, Owen. Still like a statue.”

As soon as Sailor walked away, Jess leaned over and gave her son careful kisses on his cheeks. He was so cold; it was like pressing her lips to a snowman.

“Baby, what happened to you?”

Jess took off her coat and put it on top of Sailor’s, which was already wrapped delicately around Owen’s shoulders.

“I wasn’t looking and I guess I got too close to the water. A wave knocked me down. It wasn’t even a big one, but when I fell, I hit my head on a rock. I don’t remember anything else. I’m sorry, mom. You said to look where I was going and I didn’t listen.”

She shushed him and held his sandy little hand in hers.

“Don’t worry about that right now. We’re going to get you checked out at the hospital and you’ll be all better before you know it.”

“Hey!” Owen said, his eyes lighting up. “I didn’t miss the meteor shower!”

Jess looked up and saw meteors still streaking across the sky. Even though she was freezing and the sand was wet, she turned around and laid down next to her little boy. They were going to watch the meteors together, one way or another. While they waited for the ambulance to arrive, Jessica kept Owen talking, just so she knew he was okay. As far as she was concerned, he could tell her about black holes and Einstein-Rosen bridges every minute of every day for the rest of his life, as long as she got to hear his voice.

About five minutes later, Sailor returned just as the sound of sirens filled the night.

“Okay, Owen,” Sailor said as he knelt down next to him. “Some nice people are going to take you and your mom to the



emergency room at Bluebird Island Medical. It's a great hospital and they're going to take fantastic care of you. I'll follow behind in my car and meet you there, just to make sure you're doing well. Are you still feeling brave?"

Owen smiled, but stayed completely still.

"Brave, but freezing."

Sailor turned and waved the two paramedics over. Jess could see that one was carrying a stack of silver thermal blankets. She pointed to them so Owen could look out of his periphery.

"They have everything you need to get warm, and I bet they'll turn the heat up for you in the ambulance. You'll be toasty again in no time, kiddo."

As the two paramedics carefully loaded Owen up onto a backboard and made their way to the waiting ambulance, Jess turned back to Sailor.

"I don't know how to thank you. If you hadn't been here..."

He shook his head and waved her away.

"Don't worry about it. Go be with your son. I'll be right behind you, Jess."

She nodded, then chased after Owen, who was already getting loaded into the ambulance. When she jumped in next to him, the woman in the back handed her one of the thermal blankets to wrap around her shoulders.

"We don't need you getting hypothermia, too."

Jessica felt her stomach drop. "He has hypothermia?"

“A mild case. We’ll be able to warm him up in a jiff at the hospital. I don’t think he has any injuries to his neck either, but Mr. Owen here does have a pretty impressive bump on his noggin. They’re going to want to take some pictures of his brain when he gets to the ER, right, Owen?”

Owen gave his mom and the paramedic a thumbs up.  
“Right, Maya!”

Jess shook the paramedic’s hand.

“Thank you for everything. Really.”

Maya scoffed as she tucked some warm packs under Owen’s blanket.

“You’re more than welcome, Mrs. Darling.”

“You can call me Jess.”

Maya’s eyebrow immediately went up. “*The Night Sea’s Daughter?*”

Jessica laughed and nodded.

“That’s me.”

“Our bookstore keeps selling out of your new one. I’m about to break down and order it online.”

Owen cleared his throat to get Maya’s attention.

“Mom has a few copies at the house! She can give you one for taking care of me.”

The paramedic turned to Jess with a look of embarrassment.

“Oh, I wasn’t asking for anything! You certainly don’t have to...”

“Give me your contact info and I’ll make sure you get one. It’s the least I can do.”

As Owen told Maya the few details he knew about Jess’s books, she quickly wiped away a tear that was rolling down her cheek. Half an hour ago, she thought she was going to lose her little boy forever. But now, thanks to Sailor and these amazing paramedics, he was going to be okay...

And Jess made a promise to herself that she was going to make the rest of this Christmas count.

**ten**

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## Sailor

Sailor walked through the sliding doors of the Bluebird Island Medical ER and the first person he saw at the admission desk was an old friend. Connie Leigh, who he played with on the beach for most of his childhood, was the attending physician in the emergency room. She left the island just long enough to get her degree and training, then came right back to Bluebird. It didn't surprise him to see Connie working; from what he heard, that was pretty much all she did.

When she looked up from her iPad and saw Sailor walking toward her, she laughed in surprise.

“Are you kidding me? Sailor Hardesty back on Bluebird Island? I must be having a Christmas vision.”

Sailor gave her a hug and got a face full of her curly chestnut hair.

“I want to catch up, Connie, but first, can you direct me to a little boy that just came in here? Hypothermia and possible C-spine injury.”

She pointed to an open curtain behind them. His and Jess's coats were hanging on a chair, but they weren't there. Connie took a long sip from the coffee cup next to her and then put her iPad down.

“Our portable X-ray had been down since Thanksgiving. We can’t get anyone out here to look at it, so they took him straight to radiology. They’ll be back any minute. Friends of yours?”

Sailor shrugged. “Sort of.”

Connie tucked a pen behind her ear and her eyebrows shot up.

“Oh! It was *you*! You were the doctor on the beach. I heard over the coms that someone was already on scene. What happened?”

He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

“It’s a long story. How long do you think they’ll be gone?”

Connie gave Sailor a gentle shove into one of the high stools next to the admit desk. “They’re going to want to do a full series and an MRI. It’s going to take a minute, so relax. Sailor, what are you doing here alone at Christmas? I know your parents aren’t here, because my parents would have said something.”

He wasn’t sure if it was the stress of the situation with Owen or hearing the voice of an old friend, but suddenly, he was spilling everything. Sailor told Connie the entire story, from the incident at the bar in The Mountain Wolf Lodge, to the meeting in Dr. Thornton’s office, and up to tonight. By the time he was done, her jaw was practically on the floor.

“Sailor... what were you thinking?”

He threw his hands up in exasperation.

“I don’t know! I wasn’t. I’m never thinking. And now I don’t have a job. I don’t have an apartment. Heck, I’m

basically sleeping in my childhood bedroom again. This is such a mess, Connie.”

Without hesitation, his friend turned around and grabbed her iPad, then flipped through a few screens and handed it to him. It was a job posting.

***TO BE FILLED ASAP-***

***Pediatric Attending Physician Needed at Small Island  
Hospital***

***Salary and terms negotiable...***

Sailor didn't keep reading because he felt a little queasy and had to put the tablet down. He needed a job, desperately. And he needed a place to live. But the idea of coming back to Bluebird Island permanently? Sailor wasn't sure he was ready for that.

He must have looked a little unsteady, because Connie grabbed his arm.

“You don't *have* to take the job. I'm just saying it's an option. Especially if you're going to have a hard time getting references from your last hospital.”

The sound of the elevator doors opening distracted them. When they saw Jess and Owen coming back to their curtain area, Connie pulled up his X-rays and Sailor peeked over her shoulder to get a look. He sighed with relief when he saw they were clear and went straight to Owen's bedside.

“How are you feeling, buddy?”

The little boy shrugged, then winced. “I have a pretty bad headache, but Dr. Connie said that's normal.”

Jess sat on the bed next to Owen and squeezed his hand.

“The doctor said if his X-rays came back clear, he could have some more medicine? Did you see his X-rays?”

Sailor was about to give her the results out of habit when Connie walked in.

“No broken bones! And while we don’t see any signs of a concussion, because of the head injury and the hypothermia, I’d like to keep Owen here overnight for observation.”

Owen immediately grabbed at his mom’s arm.

“No, please. I don’t want to stay here. Can we go home?”

Jess patted his shoulder and shushed him gently.

“Owen doesn’t like hospitals since we had a car accident in Italy when he was four. Is there any chance I can take him home tonight and bring him back tomorrow for a checkup?”

Connie tensed up and didn’t look like she was going to agree, so Sailor stepped forward.

“I can stay with them tonight. I’ll monitor him for signs of worsening hypothermia or concussion, and if anything seems off, I’ll know how to treat it. That seems like a fair compromise, right?”

Jessica nodded adamantly, but Connie still seemed suspicious.

“I don’t know...” she said as she tapped her fingers on the bed.

Sailor sighed and mumbled under his breath.

“I’ll apply for the job.”

Connie leaned forward.

“Could you say that a little louder? My hearing in my right ear isn’t great.”



Sailor glared at her.

“I said I’ll apply for the job. Now, will you sign the discharge papers?”

Connie smiled and handed Owen a juice box.

“As soon as his temperature is above 98 and we get him something for that headache. In the meantime, you all hang out here. The nurse will be in to take his vitals in a few minutes. Drink that juice, bud.”

Once Connie left, Jess ran around the bed and threw her arms around Sailor.

“Thank you again for the beach. And for this. He was on his own in this hospital in Sicily for hours and ever since then... we’re working on it, but it’s a process. There is a guest room right next to Owen’s that you’re welcome to sleep in tonight.”

Sailor waved her off. “I’ll probably sit up with the kid and keep an eye on him. But thank you. Why don’t I go see about hurrying that paperwork along?”

He tried to keep his pace slow as he walked through the curtains and closed them behind him. But Sailor knew if he didn’t get a breath of cold air in his lungs, he was going to start to panic. The job offer from Connie was still rattling around in his head and now that it felt like a genuine option?

Was Bluebird Island really his way out?

**eleven**

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## Jessica

The last thing Jess wanted when they got home was for Owen to go straight to bed. She knew he was tired from his ordeal, but she also wanted him somewhere she could watch him too, especially if he was going to fall asleep. So, as soon as they got back, Jess and Sailor wrapped Owen in blankets on the couch. Then they piled him up in a pillow fort, put on Christmas episodes of his favorite animated show, and gave him a mug of hot cocoa. The little one didn't make it twenty minutes before he dozed off, leaving Sailor and Jess on the other side of the giant sofa...

Watching him.

An hour passed by before either of them seemed to breathe. Once it seemed like Owen was only sleeping soundly, it felt like Jess could finally relax a bit.

"I don't know how you stay so calm," she said to Sailor as she leaned back into her own pile of pillows. "If he skins his knee, I'm ready to go through the roof. What happened on that beach... it's a good thing you were there."

She watched Sailor out of the corner of her eye as he drank his cocoa. Jess couldn't help but notice how handsome he looked in the Christmas tree lights. His salt and pepper hair was still thick with salt from the ocean, and his eyes sparkled

from the twinkling lights. Sailor looked older than he was, but still soft, like he hadn't grown into himself yet.

“You would have been fine, Jess. He's a good kid, and it looks like you're doing that on your own. I'm willing to bet you've weathered worse together.”

His voice trailed off in a whisper of music on the wind, a cool winter's song, and it brought up memories of a decade of past Christmases with her son. It *had* always just been them, and some years were better than others, but they'd made it this far pretty well. Jessica glanced over at Owen again, who was still sleeping peacefully, and smiled.

“We have, but I'm still glad you were with us. I overheard Dr. Leigh say something about a job offer? I didn't realize you were moving back here.” She noticed Sailor tense up and wished she could take back her question. “If I'm being nosy, you can just ignore me.”

“No, it's fine. I... I'm not officially fired from my job in Vermont, but it's only a matter of time. I needed time to think about my next steps, and I knew my parents wouldn't be here, so it seemed like the best place to think. Everything has been such a mess lately.”

In the short time since they met, Sailor made it clear that he wasn't much for details, so Jess had no intention of asking him follow-up questions. But before she could move on, he kept going.

“I started dating this pediatric nurse intern, Marnie. It was only for a couple of weeks and I only saw her a few times. But one night, we met at a bar at this resort and her parents saw us together. I messed up,” he said as he dropped his head into his hands.

Jess furrowed her brow in confusion and leaned forward.

“I don’t understand. Was it because she was an intern?”

He looked up and quickly brushed a tear from his eye.

“She was the chief of staff’s daughter.”

Jess sat back and let out a long sigh. “Woof. Your boss’s daughter *and* an intern? I’m surprised they didn’t fire you right then and there.”

Sailor laughed sadly.

“Honestly? So am I. I would have deserved it. The hospital, Dr. Thornton, everyone gave me more than enough chances to get my crap together. I’d be doing them a favor if I left.”

Jess grabbed her mug off the coffee table and took a long, thoughtful sip of her cocoa.

“I’m sure that’s not true. Any hospital would be lucky to have you as a doctor. But maybe it would be better for *you* to get a new outlook. I understand better than anyone that coming home doesn’t always feel like the freshest outlook, but it worked for Owen and me. It could work for you, too.”

Sailor reached over and took her hand in his, their fingers intertwining as she felt a spark of warmth travel to her heart.

“Thank you for listening to all of this, especially tonight. You must be exhausted, Jessica. Why don’t you go get some sleep and I’ll sit up with Owen tonight? Then I can head out in the morning.”

Every fiber of her being wanted to sit up all night talking with Sailor, but Jess was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open.

“Okay, but my room is just on the other side of the kitchen. If you need anything, or if he does, just yell. Promise?”

He kissed the top of her hand. “I promise. Get some rest. We’ll be okay out here.”

As she walked to her bedroom, she couldn’t help but glance back at Sailor, who was checking Owen’s temperature. She wasn’t about to judge him for his past; goodness knew she had one of her own. But as she crawled into her bed, Jess couldn’t help but wonder what Sailor was looking for...

And if he was trying to find it with them.

**twelve**

...

## Sailor

“Do you want honey or agave, buddy? It looks like you have both.”

Owen scrunched up his face as he debated, and then winced at the pain it caused him to scrunch. He held the little ice bag that Sailor made for the bump on his head and pointed at the honey. Jess was still sleeping, and neither of them wanted to wake her, so they decided to put together yogurt parfaits. Sailor couldn't cook, but he could assemble with the best of them. He put one bowl in the fridge for Jessica, then brought the other two to the table. Owen started digging in like he hadn't eaten in days.

“Don't eat too fast. You don't want to get sick,” Sailor said as he mixed his yogurt and granola together. Owen gave him a thumbs up but kept eating and Sailor couldn't help but laugh. They both ate in contented silence and watched *Frosty the Snowman* until Jessica's bedroom door opened and she shuffled out in her fluffy pink terrycloth bathrobe and matching slippers.

“Why didn't someone wake me up? I could have made pancakes.”

She went straight to the coffeepot and filled a huge ceramic Santa mug, then added the tiniest splash of cream.



Sailor appreciated her no-nonsense coffee order; he'd been using the stuff as a meal replacement since college and didn't waste time on anything but black. Jess crossed the kitchen to refill his cup, and he gestured to the fridge.

"There is a parfait for you, too. Owen said you like blueberries."

Jess nodded with a smile. "I do! Thank you. Sailor, Owen and I were talking about going to that little hardware store in town, Jordy's? Do you want to come with us?"

Sailor almost spit out his coffee.

"Why would you want to go there?"

Owen pulled his spoon out of his mouth and gulped down his yogurt.

"Why wouldn't we?" he asked.

"It's Christmas. You don't want to hang out in a store that sells junk for the summer renters. There's a toy store on Atlantic Avenue called The Treasure Chest. They also sell comics and collector's items. I think it will be more your thing."

Owen dropped his spoon and turned to his mom in excitement. "Can we, mom? Can we? You'll come, right, Sailor?"

He felt a sharp stab of panic in his stomach, but he didn't know why. It was like a voice in his head was telling him to blow everything up, and he hated it. That voice was how he ended up on Bluebird Island again. The only problem was, he still didn't know how to tell it to be quiet.

"I wish I could, buddy, but I have to go home and take a shower. Then I really need to go talk to my friend at the

hospital. But you and your mom should have fun today! I'll come back tonight to check in on you, though. Jess, you'll let me know if you need anything for Owen?"

She nodded, but there was a look of surprise in her eyes.

"I will. Are you sure you don't want to come with us? We can wait until after you talk to Dr. Leigh."

Sailor was already at the door, putting his coat on.

"Nah, don't wait on me. I don't know how long I'll be at BluMed. I'll call you in a few hours. Have fun, okay?"

By the time Sailor got into his car, he was cursing under his breath. Was he really doing this *again*? What was wrong with him?



The silence in Connie's office was deafening as she stared at him, waiting for Sailor to say something. But the longer he sat there, the harder it was for him to start the conversation. When he texted, he said he wanted to talk to her about the job. Except as soon as they were alone, Sailor's shoulders slumped, his head dropped, and he couldn't will himself to speak. He had no idea how much time passed before Connie sighed and looked at her watch.

"Hardesty, as much as I'm enjoying this, I only have forty-five minutes for lunch, and you've eaten through twenty of them. So, if you just need somewhere to think, I'm going to run to the cafeteria and leave you to it."

Sailor held up his hand and sighed.

“No, don’t leave. I’m sorry. I want to talk about the job, but I think I did something really stupid.”

Connie sat back down behind her desk and crossed her arms over her chest. “Something worse than the chief-of-staff’s daughter?”

He frowned and dropped his head onto the edge of the desk a little too hard. The *thunk* made Connie laugh, but then she slid her fingers between his forehead and the wood and forced him to sit up.

“Please, don’t do that again. I’d rather not explain to the ER staff why you need stitches. Now, will you tell me what’s going on before I have to go back to work?”

Sailor was about to spill everything racing through his mind when Connie’s pager went off. She glanced at the screen and groaned.

“It’s a 911 page back to the emergency room. I have to go. Don’t go anywhere, okay? Fill out the application and wait for me to come back. We’ll talk whatever this is out.”

Connie grabbed her ID off a hook and ran out the door before Sailor could say anything, which was probably for the better. He still didn’t know how to verbalize what was going on in his head. All he knew was that he felt panicked, and excited, and content, and a dozen other things whenever he was around Jessica that didn’t make any sense. He’d only just met this woman and her son, but it felt like his whole heart was tangled up in them...

And Sailor didn’t know what that meant.

All he knew was that he couldn’t think inside of BluMed. He’d fill out the application later, but for now, he needed to do

some thinking. Except there was only one place on Bluebird Island where he could do that.

He just hoped Logan would unlock the door for him.

**thirteen**

...

## Jessica

It was after 8pm, and Owen was reading one of his new comic books under the Christmas tree. After breakfast, they went straight to The Treasure Chest and, as Jess expected, her little boy got lost in the aisles for over two hours. Given everything he went through the night before, she had no intention of rushing him. Luckily, the shop's owner, a lifelong resident named Crystal Lang, entertained Jessica with colorful stories about the history of Bluebird Island. By the time Owen was done, he had enough new comics to keep him entertained until the next Christmas. After a quick lunch at a food truck by the pier, they headed home to watch holiday movies.

Even so, after a busy afternoon running all over the island, Jess still hadn't heard from Sailor.

When he left that morning, she had a feeling something was wrong, but didn't want to push. She knew he was going through a lot, and she'd been in his shoes more than once. Sometimes, when it felt like your life was falling apart, you needed time to think on your own. Jess didn't want to crowd Sailor if that was how he felt, but she couldn't help but worry about him, too.

Just as she picked up her phone to text him, the animated version of *A Christmas Carol* they were watching ended and

Owen sat up.

“Mom, can we have sugar cookies?” he asked with a smile that always got him what he wanted. She put down the book in her lap, which she wasn’t really reading anyway, and nodded.

“Sure! You pick out another movie and I’ll put the cookies in the oven.”

Grateful they’d bought pre-made cookie dough at the store earlier, Jess quickly put a batch of snowflake cookies on a tray. While she waited for the oven to preheat, she decided to send a text to Sailor.

*Me: Hey! Hope you’re having a good night. Just checking in to make sure your meeting at the hospital went well.*

She stared at the message as the blue bar at the top of the screen sat frozen at the halfway point. After what felt like an eternity, the bar disappeared and an aggressive red exclamation point appeared next to the message with the words “not delivered” underneath. Jess muttered to herself as she frowned at her phone.

“What the heck is that about?”

“Mom?” Owen asked from the living room. “Doesn’t the beeping mean the oven is ready?”

Jess looked up in a daze, then over at the cookies. “Oh, right. I’m on it, kiddo.”

She put the baking sheet in the oven and set her timer right away so she wouldn’t forget and burn them... which happened frequently at home. Then she went back to staring at her phone. Why wasn’t the message going through? Her phone was connected to the Wi-Fi, and she’d had a perfect signal since they got to Bluebird Island.

“Hey, mom! Can we watch this? Santa is holding an ax, but it looks funny!”

Jess dropped her phone and glanced up at the screen. Whatever Owen was looking at was rated R for just about everything. She considered herself a pretty permissive parent, but even she had limits.

“Hold on there, Mr. Darling. Why don’t we save that unique pleasure for five or six years from now? I think we should stick with PG or lower on the Christmas movies. Just until you’re a teenager, please.”

Owen grumbled as he backed out of a movie that Jess was pretty confident she’d seen herself when she wasn’t much older than him. But he didn’t need to know that tonight. Once he was distracted scrolling through other options, she went back to looking at her phone. Jess was afraid if she hit “try again,” the message would send twice, and then she’d look like a stalker. But if the text didn’t send at all...

“Why is this so hard?”

“What, mom?”

Jess bit her lip and laughed lightly. “Nothing! Sorry!”

With a sigh of resignation, she went with the “try again” option, but the message still didn’t send. There wasn’t much else she could do, so she put her phone into her back pocket. Jess turned to look out the enormous picture window over the sink at the ocean as it lapped against the beach. The sky was fully clouded over now and it looked like it might snow at any minute. Since she grew up in the Pacific Northwest, it wouldn’t be the first time she saw snow on the beach. But it felt different here, somehow.

“Mom! Is something burning?”



Jess turned around and groaned, then grabbed a towel and pulled the tray out of the oven.

“They’re not burned! Just... toasted. We’ll see how they are when they cool.”

She quickly lifted each cookie off the baking sheet so they’d stop cooking and put them on a cooling rack, then went back to the living room. Owen was on the couch, waiting for her to press play on *Gremlins*. Jess turned and furrowed her brow.

“You said PG! It’s PG!”

She laughed and kissed him on top of his head. “Fine. But if you get scared, please tell me.”

Owen nuzzled up next to her and started the movie. Before long, she completely forgot that the night was supposed to be about anyone other than her and her little boy.

**fourteen**

...

## Sailor

When Sailor got to The Rowan Beach Lighthouse, he could see that the lights in the attached lightkeeper's house were on. That meant that Logan Esparza, the lighthouse keeper, was probably somewhere nearby. Ever since he was big enough to sneak out of his bedroom window, Sailor had been coming to Bluebird Island's oldest lighthouse to think. When he was younger, he would sneak in after the Esparzas went to bed and spend hours sitting under the spinning light. Luckily, when he got older, and breaking and entering stopped being cute, he became friends with the lighthouse keeper's son, Logan. Logan slipped him a key that he only used for emergencies, but the key was long gone now.

He just hoped that his friend would be happy to see him after all this time.

Sailor knocked on the lighthouse door as hard as he could, since he knew Logan wouldn't be able to hear him if he was in the lantern room or the watch room. After a few minutes, he banged one more time, worried that his friend wasn't home.

"Dude, you can knock all you want. No one is going to answer."

The sound of his friend's voice from behind him startled Sailor so badly that he swore as he turned around.

“Jeez, man! Where did you come from?”

It had been a decade since the last time Sailor and Logan saw each other, but Logan looked like a different man. He looked like his father. He had a full, bushy black beard and a mass of curly black hair under a red wool beanie. Between his puffy coat, yellow rubber boots, and giant scarf, he looked more like a New England fisherman than an Outer Banks lighthouse keeper. Sailor couldn't help but laugh.

“What's so funny?” Logan asked as he pulled Sailor into a hug.

“Nothing. I just can't get over how much you've changed. You look just like...”

Logan stuck his finger in Sailor's face. “Don't say it, Hardesty.”

“Your dad.”

“If you came here to ask for a favor,” Logan said as he pulled his beanie down lower against the wind, “you're off to a terrible start.”

Sailor grinned as he looked around Rowan Beach. Almost nothing had changed since the last time he was here, when he was eighteen. Even the shingles on the roof of the lightkeeper's house looked the same. It was comforting in a way he didn't expect it to be. For the first time since he came back to Bluebird Island, he felt that same peace he'd known as a kid here. There was just something about this lighthouse, and he wasn't the only one in town who thought so. The Rowan Beach Lighthouse was almost magical, especially on a night like tonight, when the smell of snow hung heavy in the air.

“I was actually hoping to spend a few minutes in the lighthouse, but since you're here and in such a great mood,

maybe we can talk? If you don't mind setting aside a few minutes for an old friend."

Logan scowled at him for a second, then gestured for Sailor to follow him to the house. Walking into the lightkeeper's house was like walking into a time warp. Except for some upgraded technology and a nicer easy chair in front of the TV, everything looked exactly like it had when they were kids. Even the smell... a combination of salt water, wood smoke, and the wax that Logan used on his surfboards. It made Sailor want to curl up on the old floral couch and sleep for a year.

"Where are your parents?" he asked as he flopped onto the couch and sunk down like he was laying in a hammock. It definitely didn't have the cushion support it used to. Logan appeared in the living room with two bottles of soda, which Sailor looked at suspiciously.

"I don't drink anymore," Logan said, answering Sailor's unspoken question. "Mom and Pop spend Christmas in Palm Springs with her cousin, Hector, every year now. They still live on the island, but Pop decided he was tired of taking care of things, so they're in a condo near the inlet. Now, the lighthouse is mine. It turns out I'm suited for the job. But you're not banging on my door right before a snowstorm because you wanted to catch up. What's going on, Hardesty?"

For what felt like the hundredth time in three days, Sailor told the entire story from beginning to end, with a few more details than he gave Jessica or Connie. The whole time, Logan didn't say a word; he only sipped his soda and nodded. When Sailor was finally done, Logan put his bottle down, leaned forward in his chair, and looked him dead in the eye.

“You need to cut the garbage. You’re not a kid anymore, Hardesty, and it’s time to stop acting like you are. What are you going to do? Keep ruining every good thing in your life until you’re bitter and old and alone?”

Sailor scoffed. “That was a little harsh. Do you talk to Crystal Lang from The Treasure Chest like this?”

Logan wagged his finger at him.

“Not the same thing. Crystal decided to stay single. She likes her life as a free spirit-slash-toy maker. You, on the other hand, have always been an unfortunate combination of attracted to the wrong people and incapable of being alone. Now, you seem to have the potential for something special with this writer and you’re going to run away from it for what? Nothing. You won’t find anything if you keep running away from everything.”

Sailor collapsed back into the flat pillows and let out a long breath of air.

“Thanks for going easy on me, Logan. I appreciate you sparing my feelings.”

Logan shrugged. “People have been sparing your feelings long enough. It’s time for some hard truths, buddy. The lighthouse wouldn’t be that honest with you, would it?”

Sailor took a long sip of his soda, then nodded.

“You’re right about that.”

The two friends sat in silence for a while, watching the fire and lost in their own thoughts. This wasn’t exactly what Sailor was looking for when he came to Rowan Beach, but maybe Logan was right...

A little tough love was exactly what he needed.

**fifteen**

...

## Jessica

Jess had just carried a sleeping Owen into her room since he was too big to carry up a flight of stairs anymore, when she heard a knock on the front door. After *Gremlins* ended, Owen insisted on watching the sequel, so it was after midnight.

“Who could that be?” she said through a yawn as she shuffled to the front door. Before she opened it, Jessica pulled the collar of her turtleneck up over her face and tucked her hands into her sleeves. Even from a distance, she could feel the frigid air beating against the windows and it made her shiver. When Jess walked to the door and pulled the curtain aside, she was shocked to see Sailor standing on the front steps.

She opened the door and gestured for him to come inside.

“Sailor, it’s freezing out here. Come inside.”

He shook his head and stuck his hands in his pockets.

“It’s late and I don’t want to bother you. I just really wanted to apologize for running out on you guys this morning. It was rude, and I’d like to make it up to you both. Can I take you to the Christmas Eve parade at the inlet tomorrow night? If you haven’t already made plans.”



Jess could see that he was shaking, even under multiple layers, and she couldn't focus on anything else.

"I can't think while you're turning into a popsicle on my porch. Can we talk about this where it's warm?"

He looked like he was fighting a battle with himself, but eventually nodded and jogged into the house, straight to the fireplace. Jess was glad she hadn't turned it off yet, because Sailor immediately started warming his hands.

"My car wouldn't start, so I left it at the lighthouse and ran here. It's really dang cold out there. I think it's going to snow any minute."

Jessica went to the kitchen and turned on the electric kettle, then set up a cup of tea for him. "You *ran* here at midnight when the temperature was below freezing to invite us to the Christmas parade? Sailor, it could have waited until the morning. We weren't going anywhere."

Even from the kitchen, she could hear him laugh softly, but sadly.

"I've done more than enough waiting. I also wasn't so sure you'd be willing to open that door when I came back."

Jess fixed his tea and brought it to the living room. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, I suppose I have a habit of giving up on things when they get a little bit hard. And usually, by the time I realize I've made a mistake, it's too late. I was worried I'd done it again."

As Sailor drank the Earl Grey, Jess plopped down on the sofa and pulled the cable-knit blanket around her shoulders. "You were worried that because you left this morning to go

apply for a job, when you're on the brink of being fired, we'd be angry with you? That would be pretty irrational."

He looked at her for a second like he was perplexed, then shook his head.

"I don't know what to make of you, Jessica Darling."

She yawned and nuzzled down deeper into the couch, resting her head back on the pillows. "I'm not that complicated. I have the same cat I've had since I was eighteen, a Persian named Colonel Pickering. Owen calls him Bug. I was a party girl who got engaged at twenty-two to someone who was too old for me, and when Owen came along, he didn't want to be a dad. So it's just me, the kiddo, and my career."

"And is that... all you want? Just your career and the kiddo?"

Jess sat up and saw Sailor was staring at her. His cheeks were flushed from the fire. At least, she assumed it was from the fire. His dark eyes sparkled with all the starlight that was hidden behind the snow clouds. Suddenly, she couldn't look anywhere else.

"No one has ever given me a reason to consider anything else."

Sailor stood up and walked over to Jessica, then kneeled down in front of her. She couldn't move when he reached out and took her hand, then softly kissed the top.

"I'm going to leave, because it's the gentlemanly thing to do. But tomorrow night, may I come back and take you both to the parade? It starts at seven, but I can pick you up at six?"

Jess had to shake off the butterflies she was feeling just so she could answer.

“Sure, six is fine. Owen will be excited.”

She went to stand up to walk Sailor to the door but he shook his head.

“Don’t get up. You look cozy. Sleep tight, Darling.”

People had been calling Jessica by her last name since she was a kid, partially because of the family in *Peter Pan*, but mostly because everyone thought it was cute. Usually it annoyed her, but the way Sailor said it...

It made those butterflies come roaring back.

Once Sailor was gone, Jessica curled up on the couch under the blanket and watched the flames dance in the fireplace. For the first time in a long time, she was thinking about something other than her son, or Nell Corrigan’s next adventure, as she drifted off to sleep. She was thinking about Sailor...

And it didn’t scare her.

**sixteen**

...

## Sailor

Sailor didn't know what came over him, but as soon as he woke up on Christmas Eve morning, he went straight to the surf shop in town. Wipeout, a fairly new store run by a West Coast transplant named Irina Blair, had an epic collection of Christmas sweaters in its front window. When the shop opened at 10am, Sailor was there buying the loudest, most obnoxious sweater they sold. Then, he went to the grocery store and bought the biggest bouquet of holiday flowers he could find. His last stop was The Treasure Chest, where he asked Crystal for a box full of comics similar to whatever Owen bought when he visited.

By the time he showed up at Jess's front door, his arms full and the Rudolph nose on his sweater blinking, he felt like the biggest Christmas nerd in town.

So, when Jessica opened the door and was still in her bathrobe, Sailor's stomach dropped.

"I'm siiiiiiick," she said, her voice barely a croak. "I would have called and canceled, but I'm trying to convince Owen to go with you to the parade. Please, talk him into it. I don't want him sitting at home with me, listening to me sneeze all night."

She really did look like she felt awful. But even with her hair in a messy ponytail, her pockets full of tissues, and a cough drop in each cheek, Jessica Darling was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Sailor walked into the house and put down the flowers and the present, then led Jess back over to the couch.

The coffee table was covered with tissues, cold medicine, and empty cups, from what looked like a long day on the couch. Once she was laying down again, Sailor began clearing up the mess and taking everything to the kitchen.

“You don't have to clean up after me! Owen is upstairs in his room playing a video game. Ask him again to go to the parade. He's insistent on sitting home with me all night and I'm going to be so boring. It's not fair.”

Sailor sat down on the sofa next to her and pulled her feet into his lap so he could massage them. Jess sighed contentedly, coughed twice, then closed her eyes.

“I won't talk your little boy into spending Christmas Eve away from his mom,” Sailor said. “But maybe we can figure something else out. I'll go talk to him.”

“Your sweater is adorable.”

Sailor laughed. “What?”

“Your sweater. It's adorable.”

He leaned forward and put the back of his hand against Jessica's forehead.

“You have a fever. I think it's time for another dose of this.”

Sailor poured her a cup of cold medicine, which she took gratefully. Then Jess closed her eyes and immediately began to

snore. Once he was sure she was asleep, Sailor went upstairs to the tower room, where he could hear Owen playing his game. He found the little boy sitting on a beanbag playing his Switch while *The Grinch* played on the TV in the background.

“I only came up here so mom could get some sleep,” he said without looking up. “I’m not leaving mom on Christmas Eve.”

Sailor plopped down on the bed and rolled up his sleeves. The sweater was feeling a little heavy in the warmth of the house.

“Nah, we don’t have to go to the parade. But what do you think about ordering your mom some soup from the Chinese restaurant in town? We can grab some dinner for you and me, too. Then we can do whatever you usually do on Christmas Eve.”

Owen put down his game and crossed his arms over his chest. His little brow was furrowed so deeply, it made him look ten years older.

“Why are you being so nice to us?”

Sailor was completely taken aback by the question, and how frankly Owen asked it.

“What do you mean? I like you.”

The boy scrunched up his mouth in suspicion.

“You like me, or you like my mom? Because a lot of guys have liked my mom, but once they realize she’s not going to ship me off to a boarding school, they don’t stick around.”

Sailor couldn’t help but laugh in surprise.

“You know an awful lot about an awful lot for a little kid.”

Owen shrugged. “I watch a lot of movies when I can’t sleep.”

*Well, that explains everything,* Sailor thought with a smile as he scooted forward on the bed.

“Owen, I’m going to be straight with you, buddy. I spend my days working with kids, so I’m a little better at relating to them. Which means, I’m not always the most mature person in the world. Are you with me so far?”

He nodded. “I think so.”

“Good. But ever since I met you and your mom, I’ve realized that the things that used to make me happy weren’t really making me happy at all. And, with your permission of course, I’d like to get to know the both of you better. Because I think being with you makes me happy. Does that make sense?”

Owen stood up from his beanbag and put his hand out to help Sailor off the bed.

“Let’s go get mom some soup.”



**seventeen**

• • •

## Jessica

When Jessica opened her eyes, she was surprised to see Owen standing over her, holding a big bowl of steaming Chinese chicken soup.

“What... where did that come from?” she asked as she looked at the clock. It was already after seven and she didn’t know where the last two hours had gone. “Is the parade over already?”

Sailor appeared in the living room with a glass of iced tea, a thermometer, and an ice pack. He sat down next to her as Owen put the soup on the coffee table.

“Let’s check your temperature before you eat. I want to make sure you don’t need to go to the hospital.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “It’s just an awful cold or a touch of the flu. I’ll be fine in a couple of days. You two should get going before you miss the whole thing! I can stay here with my soup and one of a hundred versions of *A Christmas Carol*.”

Neither Owen nor Sailor moved. Sailor just stuck the thermometer in her mouth and told Owen to go dish out their dinner.

“We’ll eat in the dining room so we don’t bother your mom,” he said as he checked the temperature on the beeping

device. “Ninety-nine, even with medicine. That’s not great. Eat a bit of your soup and then it’s right back to sleep.”

Sailor picked up the bowl and delicately set it in her lap. Then he took the ice pack and put it on the back of her neck. Once she was all set up, he leaned forward and whispered to her.

“If you tell me where Owen’s presents are, I can put them under the tree once he goes to sleep. I don’t want you to have to get up.”

Jessica looked at him, her eyes wide with surprise and a little of a cold medicine buzz.

“Sailor, what are you doing? Seriously. You don’t have to give up your Christmas Eve to take care of me, of us. Don’t you have other things you’d rather be doing? I’m sure some of your friends are at the parade.”

He shrugged as he handed her a spoon.

“I’d rather be here. Is that so crazy?”

“Kind of,” Jess said with a laugh as she sipped a spoonful of broth. The warmth of the soup burned her throat a little as it went down, but as soon as it hit her stomach, she realized she was hungry. She wanted to gobble down every last wonton, but she felt Sailor watching her.

“Go slow. You don’t want to get sick. The presents?”

She leaned forward as far as she could without getting dizzy. “There is a third bedroom at the very end of the hall. I put them in the closet there. But he knows where his presents come from, so you don’t have to whisper. I just hid them so he wouldn’t snoop. Everything is pretty small since it had to fit into my suitcase.”

He nodded conspiratorially, like he hadn't heard a word she said, and was still trying to preserve Owen's belief in Santa. It was unbearably adorable.

"I'll sneak them out after he goes to bed. Understood."

Jess laughed as he left to join Owen at the table. As she slowly ate her chicken soup, she watched her son and Sailor talk and joke about Owen's favorite video game and the shows he liked. She and Owen had been a little unit, just the two of them, for so long that it never even occurred to her their family could open up to include someone else. They were just getting to know Sailor, but maybe there was a chance for something more... for all of them.

The sound of a cell phone ringing snapped Jessica out of her hazy thoughts. She realized Sailor had left his phone on the coffee table. Dr. Leigh's comforting, sweet face was flashing on his screen.

"Sailor, Dr. Leigh, from the emergency room is calling you," she said, her voice cracking when she spoke. Sailor waved for her not to say anything else and hurried over. Jess tried not to listen to his one-sided conversation, but he was sitting right next to her. She couldn't help it.

"Merry Christmas, Connie! Don't tell me you're working tonight... that's a bummer, but if the OT is good... really, they looked at it *already*... that soon... and they know about... right, I can be there Monday morning... 9am... you bet. Thanks, Connie, you don't know how much... from The Mainsail, huh? Well, I guess that's fair. Expensive, but fair. You have a wonderful holiday too, Connie. Stay safe."

Jess put down her spoon. "The Mainsail?"

Sailor laughed as he put his phone down.

“It’s a fancy hotel on the other side of the island. She said I owe her a gift card for their restaurant, because I have an interview for the pediatric attending position at BluMed the day after Christmas.”

Jessica tried to squeal with excitement, but all that came out was a pitiful squeak.

“That’s amazing, Sailor! Do you think you’ll take the job if they offer it to you?”

He sank down onto the couch and stretched, his smile practically glowing.

“I think so. It will be a big change to move back down here, but maybe that’s exactly what I need.”

Owen appeared at Jessica’s side to refill her iced tea and take her soup back into the kitchen. She grabbed onto the corner of his sweater before he could walk away.

“Kiddo, you’re not supposed to be waiting on me.”

He shimmied free of her grasp and hurried back to the kitchen.

“I can help! There’s some cookie dough left. Why don’t I try to make some cookies to celebrate? I can’t do any worse than you, mom.”

Jess couldn’t muster up an argument. He wasn’t wrong.

“Owen, don’t touch the oven. Let Sailor help you.”

Sailor jumped up from the couch. “I got it.”

She watched as this sweet and fascinating guy, one who saved her son’s life only a few days ago, went out of his way to make sure they had the perfect Christmas. And despite the

fact she felt like garbage, couldn't smell or taste anything, and wanted to take a nap again...

It was the best Christmas they'd had in a long time.

**eighteen**

...

## Sailor

Sailor woke up to the sound of a whistle, followed by a small voice full of wonder.

“Would ya look at that?”

He sat up from the couch, where he fell asleep, to see Owen standing in front of the glass porch doors. Even from the sofa, Sailor could see what Owen was looking at; in both directions, the beach was covered in a soft blanket of perfect sparkling snow. Sailor jumped over the back of the couch and wrapped himself in the quilt he’d slept under. He and Owen looked at the scene in front of them in awe. There wasn’t a single footprint in the snow. Not so much as a bird had landed in front of the house, and a light dusting was still falling.

It was beautiful.

“Have you ever seen snow like this before?” Owen asked him. Sailor shook his head.

“I see a lot of snow in Vermont, but never anything like this. I’ll have to take pictures for my friends back north.”

*AH-CHOO!*

The sound of Jessica sneezing started Sailor and Owen both. They screamed, which made Jess shriek in response to them.



Sailor quickly shushed them all.

“The neighbors are going to call the police,” he said with a laugh. “You need to take your medicine, Miss Darling. Owen, let’s get ready for Christmas!”

The sound of his little feet sliding across the floor made Sailor and Jess grin as he poured her a tiny cup of cold medicine. After she took it, then drank a sip of melted iced tea, she grabbed Sailor’s hand.

“You didn’t have to sit up with me all night. It feels like you’ve been our private doctor ever since we met. We’ve completely stolen you away from your vacation time.”

Sailor picked up her glass and paused by her side as he walked by. Without giving himself time to overthink it, he leaned forward and kissed her softly on the top of the head. Even as sick as she was, her hair smelled like almond and cherry blossoms.

“I’m exactly where I want to be,” he said before he walked away.

Owen came charging back out of the bedroom, holding a box in each hand. He wrapped one in shiny green wrapping paper, and the other in the same comic book paper Sailor got for Owen at The Treasure Chest. He put them both under the tree and then jumped on the couch with his mom.

“Can we start? Mom, do you feel up to cocoa?”

Jess scooted up on the couch and coughed into the sleeve of her sweater.

“If I’m ever too sick for Christmas cocoa, you better check my pulse. Pick one present and then we’ll make it!”

Sailor watched with a grin he couldn't contain as Owen ran to the tree and picked up one small box for himself. Then, he brought the presents from the bedroom over to Jess and Sailor.

"I got this for you when mom and I were at The Treasure Chest. I hope you like it. It reminded me of you. Open yours first!"

Sailor held the box in his hands for a minute as he tried to cement this moment in his memory. He didn't know why, but it felt like it was going to be an important one. One piece of tape at a time, Sailor unwrapped the paper from the box, then opened it. Inside, there was a little figurine of one of his favorite comic book heroes. He looked up at Owen in surprise.

"This is..."

Owen shrugged. "He reminded me of you. He's a doctor and a superhero."

Sailor pulled Owen into a hug and held him close.

"You're a great kid, Owen Darling. A really great kid."

When he finally let Owen go, Sailor had to brush a tear away from his cheek. He thought he didn't get caught, but Jess was smiling at him when he looked up.

"Mom," Owen said, nudging Jessica. "Your present next!"

Jess took apart the sparkling little box and inside, there was a necklace made of two sea glass hearts. One was green, one was blue, and they were nestled together on the end of a silver chain.

"Owen, how..."

His face glowed with pride. "I took some money out of my Space Camp fund. I wanted to get you something nice this

year.”

Jess’s eyes filled with tears.

“I want to hug you, but I don’t want to get my germs any closer to you. Owen, honey, you shouldn’t have spent your money on me.”

Sailor pulled Owen into another hug and ruffled his hair. “He’s a great kid, like I said. Why don’t you open your present, Owen?”

He reached over and grabbed the small, flat box, looking at it like he was confused. Sailor prepared himself to act surprised, even though Jess told him the night before about Owen’s big present. The little boy opened the box and took out a single piece of paper, then stared at it for what felt like five minutes.

“What is it, Owen?” Sailor asked as he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

“It’s... it’s... I’m going. I’m going to Space Camp. This summer. But mom, I haven’t saved the money.”

Jessica covered her face as she coughed, then she took a few sips of tea until she got her composure back.

“Baby, you followed me all over the country this fall, and part of the summer. I know you were pretending to have fun for most of it, so it’s your turn to do something fun! Besides, you’re the kid. I’m the adult. You’re not paying to go to camp. You can keep saving and spend it on something cool when you’re ready.”

Owen threw himself into his mom’s arms.

“I don’t care about germs. I love you.”

Sailor let them have their moment and went to warm the milk for the cocoa. While he was pouring it into a pot on the stove, he heard Owen get up and walk to the middle of the room.

“Hey, mom. I had a crazy idea last night... you have to start writing *The Siren’s Champion* in January, right?”

Jess rested her head against the back of the couch. “When we get back to Oregon, yeah.”

Owen turned and glanced at Sailor for a second, just long enough for them to lock eyes.

“Maybe it would inspire you if you wrote the book on Bluebird Island?”

Sailor felt his stomach flop at the mention of them staying on the island. He looked at Jessica to gauge her reaction, but her eyes were closed and all she did was nod.

“We can talk about it after the holiday. I’m just going to close my eyes for a minute while you’re making the cocoa.”

Owen spun around and grinned at him. It wasn’t a yes, exactly...

But Sailor had a feeling this Christmas was going to be one they would never forget.

# epilogue

...

## Jessica - Valentine's Day

**I**t was just after sunset on Valentine's Day and Sailor was getting ready to leave for his shift at the hospital. Since he had just officially started at Bluebird Island Medical in January, he was still trying to prove himself as the pediatric attending. So, Jess did her best to hide her disappointment that he had to work on their first Valentine's Day together. But ever since she and Owen moved to the Island while she worked on her book, the new man in her life had filled every day with romance. Valentine's Day was pretty much like any other day.

Owen made friends with a girl who lived in a cottage up the road from the small beach house they rented, and he was having dinner with her family tonight. Jess and Sailor didn't have time to eat since she was writing all day. Which is why she was surprised to walk out of her office and see him standing in the living room holding a bouquet of purple roses and two glasses of what looked like champagne.

"It's sparkling grape juice," he said with a boyish smile and shrug. "Because of work. We can save the good stuff for tomorrow night."

Jess put down the printed chapters and red pen in her hand and wrapped her arms around his waist. She looked up at him

and Sailor kissed her softly, giving her butterflies. It happened every single time they kissed.

“I thought we didn’t have time for anything tonight! What’s the special occasion?”

He laughed as he handed Jess her glass. “Besides Valentine’s Day?”

“I thought we agreed we wouldn’t make a big deal out of it. And I don’t want you to be late, so this was sweet, but we can celebrate tomorrow night at The Mainsail. My agent had to bribe someone to get the reservation,” she said as she kissed him on the cheek.

Jess was about to walk to the kitchen for something to eat when Sailor grabbed her hand and spun her back toward him. She laughed as she almost dropped her glass of cider.

“Hold on a second, Miss Darling. BluMed knows I may be a few minutes late, because I have a very important question to ask you.”

Jessica froze where she was standing and looked at Sailor with her mouth hanging open. He couldn’t be... not this soon. But if he was? Why wasn’t she scared?

“Sailor, what are you doing?”

He reached into the pocket of his scrubs and pulled out a perfect, intricately designed ring with a sparkling aquamarine stone in the center. It was the same color as the ocean waves crashing against the beach just outside the door. When he held it out to her, Jessica’s heart beat a mile a minute.

“I know it seems fast. I know it *is* fast. But Jess, from the minute I knocked that cocoa all over you the night of the meteor shower, I knew you were the love of my life. And

when you find your person, you don't want to waste any time. We don't have to rush anything, but I wanted to..."

"Yes, I will."

The words tumbled from her lips before she even realized she was saying them. Jess couldn't help but laugh once she realized how perfect the decision felt as soon as she made it.

"You will?" Sailor asked in shock. "Just like that?"

Jess nodded. "I will. Let's do it. I love you, Sailor. Owen loves you. What else matters?"

Sailor picked her up off the ground and spun her in a circle as he kissed her, making her giggle. When he finally put her down and she slipped the ring on, she couldn't stop staring at it. Jess never thought she'd be the type to go googly-eyed over an engagement ring, but Sailor changed the way she and Owen looked at a lot of things in their life. And neither of them ever wanted to look back.

Sailor reached down and brushed a piece of hair away from Jess's forehead.

"I hate that I have to go to work. But how about we have a pre-celebration with Owen tomorrow at The Waverider? I'll pick you both up at noon?"

Jess nuzzled her head into his chest.

"That sounds perfect."

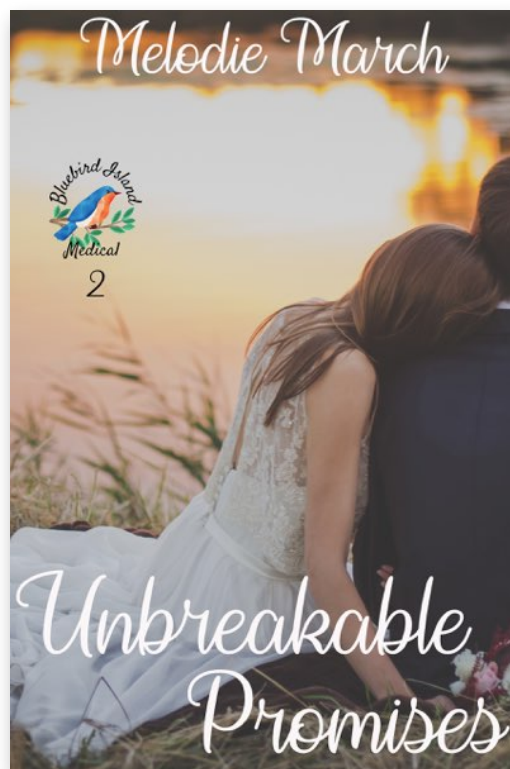
As Sailor, her fiancé, held her close, Jessica couldn't help but be grateful for everything that brought her to this moment...

For everything that brought her to Bluebird Island.

*~The End~*



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# about the author



Author photo by Crissha Figarella

Melodie March is a dreamer and a lover of nature who grew up in Vermont and can't imagine living anywhere else. When she isn't writing, she is drinking tea on her porch or volunteering at her local animal shelter. She could never pick a favorite holiday, but every winter, she's the first to start decorating her old farmhouse. She lives in Vermont on her very own Pine Street with her husband and rescue yellow labs, Honey and Lemon. If you'd like to contact Melodie to ask about your favorite Winterville Promises character, tell her your best Christmas story, or just have a question, join her on Facebook!

