

THE ROYAL'S
Enemy

The Gentlemen of Magnolia Bay
BRENNA JACOBS

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Chapter One

Henry

The Honorable Henry Wilford George Spencer smiled at the deed in his hands. They'd really done it. He, Theo, and Will, were officially the proud owners of The Wayfarer Hotel and the Aiken property next door, which was currently little more than an empty shell, courtesy of Hurricane Bianca. Now, roughly sixty days after first laying eyes on the damaged hotel and decimated property next to it, Henry was a part owner of both. He and the gents had a lot of work ahead of them—and plenty behind them already—but they were officially on their way to hotel mogulism. If that was the word for what they were doing.

His brother had said the word for it was *barmy*. Henry hoped he was wrong.

“You’ll need these.” The blonde Barbie-like real estate agent handed Will the keys to Cecil’s hotel and then a second set. “You don’t really need this set, seeing how there aren’t any windows, let alone working doors left, but they’re your keys anyway. Good luck to you!” She shook hands with each of them then hurried to her BMW, probably anxious to get away in case they changed their minds.

“Well, gents.” Will wrapped his arms around Henry’s and Theo’s necks. “We’re official. Shall we peek at what Peerless Enterprises has taken on?”

“What you’ve gotten us into. Let’s be clear about that.” Henry elbowed Will’s side and stepped out of his hold and walked toward the rubble that was the Aiken property, despite the work they’d done to clear most of the debris.

But in the rubble, Henry saw possibility. The name *Peerless* had been Theo’s idea, but it was the perfect description of their fledgling corporation. They hoped to convey the idea that they had no equals among companies devoted to hotel renovation, but the name was also cheeky. As younger sons without titles, the gents were not considered part of the peerage of England like their brothers who had inherited their fathers’ earldoms.

“You’ll need this!” Henry turned just as Peyton tossed him a hard hat. He caught it, then nodded his thanks as he put it on. Though they had helped clear some of the damage directly after Hurricane Bianca, once the Aikens put their property on the market, the gents hadn’t been allowed back until after they’d purchased it, as is. Henry was anxious to see what they were in for. As the architect of the project, there was no moving forward until he had drawn up plans for the renovation of The Wayfarer and the Aiken property—soon to be monikered The Coral Monarch in honor of Cecil’s late wife and as a cheeky nod to their own background.

Or rather, until Spencer & Sons had plans drawn up. The only thing that stood in the way of Peerless Enterprise’s success was Henry getting his brother, Marcus, to agree that their architectural firm should be the official architects of The Coral Monarch project and every other project that was sure to follow. Marcus had joined their father’s firm while Henry was still at university. (Their sister, Rosamond, chose to run Rosings, the family estate). By the time Henry had joined

them, the firm had already built a reputation as the architects to go to for renovations of historic, but crumbling, estates.

Henry had hoped to bring a fresher perspective to their family firm, combining the modern with the historic following the likes of Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, and David Closes. Rather than focusing solely on renovating houses back to what they'd been, Henry wanted to take on projects that envisioned what the old estates could be. His father had shown some interest in the idea but had died suddenly six months ago. Since then, Marcus and Henry had often butted heads over the future of the firm, with Marcus firmly on the side of preserving his father's vision.

Henry had taken the proposal to Marcus when Will had first presented him with The Coral Monarch idea, and he'd brought it up again two days ago before leaving London. Marcus hadn't given him a yes, but he hadn't said no either. Why would he? The Coral Monarch wasn't nearly as old as the projects they were used to working on, but they'd have to work around the sorts of historical guidelines and restrictions required by Charleston County that they were already familiar with in England. It would actually be an easier project than they were used to, and it would give them the opportunity to expand internationally.

There was no reason not to be excited about the project.

So why was he so nervous to call Marcus and get the go-ahead to start planning?

Henry tugged at the front door of the property and nearly toppled over backwards as its bottom hinges gave way. He let go of the knob, and the door swung precariously to its side on its top hinges. "Best go in through a window," he called over his shoulder before ducking in through the door.

Particles of dust danced in the light streaming through what was left of the ceiling. Tiny rainbows shimmered in the

sun's rays, refracting on the damaged walls. His eyes followed the source of the rainbows to the small chandelier that lay in the middle of the entryway, its crystals spread haphazardly across the floor. He made a mental note that whatever light they had in the entrance needed to be more natural than breakable.

Will stepped through a large window, his hard hat scraping against the lone shard of glass still hanging in the empty pane. "What do you see, Spence?" he asked, then as if reading Henry's mind, added, "A big open foyer that could somehow be closed off in cooler weather?"

An open foyer would certainly provide natural light. "Definitely a possibility," Henry answered.

His phone rang, but when he saw it was Marcus, he let it go to message. He'd rather talk privately over the specifics of Spencer & Sons signing on as architects. Particularly since he'd already assured Will and Theo the firm was "excited" to take on the project. Excited may have been a poor choice of words.

A bead of sweat dripped down Henry's back. He pulled at his collar, but the breeze he hoped to cool him came in a hot burst.

"Give it a try in the plans you've been working on, and let me see how it looks," Will said as he helped Peyton walk over some loose floorboards. The way she gripped his hand while leaping over the broken planks was quite tender. But the planks reminded Henry of what lay ahead. He had to create something from the wreckage around them that would please both his brother and his friends. His friends would be easy enough, but pleasing Marcus was a task that even Sir Christopher Wren himself couldn't do. He'd pointed out the flaws of St. Paul's to Henry on a number of occasions.

Will had asked Henry for a peek at the plans more than once, sometimes hinting that he suspected Henry wasn't working on them.

Which he was.

Technically.

He had a million ideas floating around his head, but they had to remain there until he got his brother's approval to move forward. They were a team, after all. Even if Spencer & Sons was still officially known as Spencer & *Son*. As in Marcus, not Henry. Marcus—the heir and the favorite. The star of the firm. Even if Henry's plans were usually the ones chosen by their clients. But being a team meant no single person got the credit for the designs.

Except it was always Marcus's and his father's names, specifically, that had been attached to the *team's* work. It was their names that were recorded and would be remembered in history while using Henry's plans.

Henry toed a piece of plaster, then bent down to pick it up. He examined it, looking closely, then scanned what was left of the wall to see if he could see where it fit. The Aiken property was one of the oldest on the island and, according to Cecil, owned by the same family for generations. They'd been one of the wealthiest families in Charleston by the mid-1900s when the house had been built, but their wealth had diminished with each passing generation until the heir who owned this property hadn't had the money to rebuild after Hurricane Bianca.

Some people might find the story of a once prominent family sinking into obscurity tragic. Henry's own family had been on the verge of sinking into obscurity themselves until his father had started his architectural firm. Lord Spencer had made considerable profits from his efforts by the time Henry had been born, and through smart investments had completely turned around the Spencer family fortune. In renovating The

Coral Monarch, Henry saw an opportunity to add to his father's legacy by expanding what the firm could do.

Henry wandered around the property for another thirty minutes, taking note of what part of the structure could be salvaged, what would have to go, and what they could do to emphasize the natural beauty of the island. The original home was decidedly Victorian with towers, gables, and decorative trim that made the architecture the focal point instead of its environment.

“Restoring or destroying?” Theo pointed his chin toward a damaged mural of angels on the wall.

“Bianca did us a favor there, mate.” Mixing Michelangelo-inspired angels Victorian gables wasn't in Henry's plan, but he did envision retaining some of the more subtle details in a way that melded the home into the landscape and history of Charleston. He'd jotted down only a few of the ideas flooding his brain when he heard Peyton's voice.

“Come on, Henry,” She waved him toward the window they'd come through. “We're going to celebrate.”

Henry followed her out the window and took in the view of the Atlantic Ocean which lay only four hundred meters away, the waves quietly lapping against the shore. They'd bought this place in conjunction with Cecil's for this very reason—its proximity to the ocean. Henry had to admit, there was a lot to like about this side of the pond.

But unlike Will, he wouldn't be staying. Peyton was beautiful—there was no denying that. But Henry could see in Will's eyes that he'd follow her anywhere, not the other way around. Will would not be returning to London. For centuries the Spencers and Maxwells had been political allies, but he and Will were genuine friends. Henry had pictured their children—he did want a family someday—growing up together.

By the look in Will's eye, however, his children would be Americans. He hadn't expressly stated it, but now that he and Peyton were engaged, Henry would put money on the fact they'd be settling in Charleston, not England.

Of course Henry still had Theo. Theo would never trade in his reputation as the "Haughty Hottie" for a private life in America.

Will clapped him on the back. "This is going to work. I promise. How could it not?"

Henry turned around and made a show of looking over the entire entry way they'd just walked out of. "Oh, I don't know. The word 'hurricane' comes to mind."

"Don't be such a pessimist," Theo chimed in. "You sound so English."

"Hm. I wonder why." Henry followed his friends to Peyton's car, the sun warming his skin and the smell of the sea filling his nostrils. He breathed it in deeply—the sun and the sea. He liked it here. They had every reason to be successful but worry clung to him with the same ferocity as the humidity in the air. If they failed, his family's name would be attached to it. Marcus had pointed that out to him more than once.

He climbed into the back seat with Theo, occasionally offering one word replies as they drove out of Magnolia Bay. The sky shone orange against the triangular arches of Arthur Ravenel Bridge by the time they crossed it into Charleston, reminding Henry that he'd been up since before the crack of dawn. Lately sleep had eluded him as often as Marcus's answer to his questions about taking on The Coral Monarch project had.

Henry leaned past Theo and placed a hand on Will's shoulder. "I'm afraid I won't be very good company tonight, mates. How about you drop me at our place?"

A cry of disappointment rang out and a barrage of “you have to come,” and “it’s a celebration” hit him, pushing him back into his seat. They weren’t going to take no for an answer, so he stifled a yawn and put a smile on his face.

“You’re going to love this place,” Peyton said from the driver’s seat. “It’s a total dive bar, but the food is great and the live music’s even better. It’s been featured in Condé Nast, so it’s a dive bar in name only.”

He winced at the word “music.” His head already hurt, and the only thing worse than going to a bar right now was going to a noisy bar.

“As soon as you see it, you’ll know why it’s so perfect,” Peyton continued. “Plus, my friend Addison is going to be there. She’s the one the island is sending over for the environmental study, and she’s the one approval has to go through, so play nice. The Sweetgrass Island Coastal Commission can be pretty strict about new builds, which you may qualify as with the Aiken property. We need her on our side.”

Henry held back a sigh. He knew all about environmental sticklers. They carried clipboards and shot down any kind of creativity in favor of endangered slugs and invasive clover that were suddenly “integral to the environmental health” of an area when someone didn’t want something to be built. He’d encountered them on every project he’d ever worked on in England. The women sticklers were the worst with their quippy t-shirts and khakis that included unflattering side pockets. They always wore hiking boots and their hair was always pulled back into a ponytail. He’d never met an attractive one yet, and their Save-the-Earth militancy made them all the more unattractive.

Peyton pulled up to the bar, and Henry wondered why one of Charleston’s most popular bars was built in the parking lot

of a three-story square office building. How could a city with a downtown full of beautiful architecture also produce something as boring as a cinderblock building in a parking lot? Everything outside of the historic downtown leaned toward the squat and uninteresting, and he missed London already.

“The Royal American?” he asked when he saw the sign above the door. “If there were such a person, I suppose this is the type of place he’d like.”

“See?” Peyton clapped. “I told you it was perfect!”

Henry laughed and followed the rest of the group toward the bar, whose dive vibe was definitely more than skin-deep, despite what Peyton thought. The vinyl chairs outside the door had stuffing spilling from their cracks, and the whole place smelled like a bag of fish and chips. Which, once he thought about it, actually made it more appealing to him. He might have been sold on the whole experience if the smell of tobacco hadn’t followed them inside past the No Smoking sign, all the way to a booth with sticky seats.

“They’ve got great food and cocktails. I promise you’re going to love it!” Peyton yelled over the noise of the crowd.

If they already had to shout to be heard and the band hadn’t started yet, Henry didn’t have great hopes that the subtle throbbing in his head wouldn’t turn into a full-blown migraine. Fortunately, he had his phone on vibrate because he never would have heard it ringing. He took it out of his pocket and saw Marcus’s name. Henry couldn’t avoid him again.

“I have to take this.” He held up his cell, then squeezed out of the booth and headed toward the back door which looked less crowded.

“Hello, Marcus,” he answered after he’d exited the bar into an empty back parking lot. It was after midnight in London, way past his brother’s usual bedtime. Not a good sign. “We got keys today. Can I get the go-ahead to start on plans?”

“That’s what I’ve called about, Henry.” His brother’s condescending voice had the same effect on him that it had since Henry was a boy. His breathing slowed, and he waited to be shot down. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for Spencer & Sons to get involved with Will’s project. I know he’s a friend, but—”

“It’s not just Will’s project. I’ve invested too.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean the firm has to. You’ll need to be a silent partner, I’m afraid. We’ve got more important work here. How soon will you be back?”

Everything slowed for Henry. He was twenty-seven years old, and for the first time in his life, he’d made a major life decision without waiting for input from his family. A decision he was excited about. And now Marcus wanted him to just give it up? Not take part in any of the plans that would have to be made over the next year before they opened the hotel? Not take part in the actual thing he was good at—the architectural planning?

“I’m not coming back, Marcus.” The words surprised him. “At least not for a while,” he quickly amended. “If Spencer & Sons isn’t going to be the architects, then I’ll do it on my own.” The anger he’d been carrying for months—no, years—came tumbling out in words he didn’t realize he’d wanted to say.

Long seconds passed before Marcus finally spoke. “We’re a team, Henry. If you’re doing this on your own, you’re no longer part of our team, so consider your next words carefully.”

Henry took a deep breath. He knew what he had to do, but did he really want to do it? Whatever his complaints about working with Marcus since Dad’s death, it was a good job. It paid well, and if he kept at it, his work might one day be recognized as his own.

He swallowed the “I quit” on the tip of his tongue in favor of a compromise. “I’ve committed to drafting the renovation plans, and I have to keep that commitment. Your name doesn’t have to be attached to The Coral Monarch, but mine already is.” He let out a sigh. “Just give me a few weeks, Marcus. That’s all I’m asking. If you don’t like my plans, I’ll come home and never say another word about it.”

A long silence followed, and Henry could picture Marcus chewing the inside of his cheek like he always did when he had to choose between getting his own way or preserving a relationship that benefitted him. Marcus knew clients preferred Henry’s designs. The firm would suffer without him.

“Two weeks, Henry. And the Spencer & Sons name won’t be attached to it unless you convince me it will serve us as much as it will serve your little endeavor.”

Marcus had an annoying tendency to parent Henry, especially now that their father was dead. But Henry kept quiet through his brother’s lecture.

“You know I’m not easily convinced,” Marcus finished in perhaps the firmest voice Henry had ever heard his brother use.

“I understand.” Henry ended the call without a goodbye, let alone any term of affection. *I love yous* were not part of the Spencer vocabulary.

Henry wished they were, even if he would have been hard pressed to use the word *love* with his brother. Although Henry had gotten what he wanted, it had come with the high price of working under the intense pressure of trying to please both his best mates and his brother.

The next two weeks would be utter hell.

And every week after that might just be the same if things didn’t change with his brother. Things had been better when

their dad had been alive, and Henry missed him every day.

A sudden feeling of hopelessness and loneliness washed over Henry. He sank to the curb, dropping his head between his hands, and fighting against the emotion he'd been keeping in check since the day his father had collapsed on his run.

Chapter Two

Addison

Addison McCrae was in no mood to meet any wannabe earls. And no matter what Peyton said about it being a “sort of” business meeting, Addison knew her friend was trying to set her up with Lord Henry Spencer—or whatever he was called in England. Peyton had been trying to get Addison to go out for weeks, ever since Landon Tradd had given Addison the “it’s not you, it’s me” talk. Which was a barely disguised “it’s very much you” sendoff after six months of “I love you for who you are.” Six months that had followed four years of on again off again dating.

Addison had agreed to go out tonight because The Royal American was within walking distance of her apartment, and she could really use some of their housemade potato skins and maybe a gin lime rickey—heavy on the gin, light on the lime—to wash them down with.

What she wasn’t going to do was change out of her work clothes. Who cared if the side pockets on her khakis made her thighs look wider than they actually were? The waders she’d worn all day while collecting data on Sweetgrass Island wetlands had kept her khakis from getting as filthy as they usually were. Besides, she wasn’t trying to meet anyone. So

why take time to change out of her *There is No Planet B* t-shirt into something fresher? Or put her hair down?

She did make one concession by changing out of her boots. Flip-flops were definitely the right call when the humidity hovered around one hundred percent.

Addison decided to go in through the back entrance of The Royal American to avoid the crowd that would likely be out front. As she rounded the corner into the parking lot, she nearly tripped over a guy sitting on the curb.

“Oh, sorry,” she said swerving around him.

He had his head between his hands and didn’t look up but answered with a brusque, “Quite all right.”

Addison usually would have kept walking, but his words stopped her. He hadn’t been polite, but he didn’t sound drunk. He did, however, sound English. Could this be the guy Peyton was pretending she wasn’t trying to set her up with? For a second Addison thought about running, but there was something about the way he was slumped over that made her stay. He looked so...

Sad.

“Are you okay?” She leaned over him trying to get a better look at his face.

He raised his head and put a hand on his forehead to shade his eyes from the last rays of the setting sun. Addison didn’t miss the red in them. Or that they were a very striking color. More gray than blue, with maybe a touch of green.

“You look upset,” she said hesitantly, knowing she should probably leave him alone, but she’d never been able to walk away from someone she might be able to help. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Drink my sorrows away? Is that your suggestion?” He cocked his head to the side, his eyes narrowing. He was definitely English, the upper-class kind. He had to be one of Peyton’s fiancé’s friends. How many fancy Englishmen could there be at The Royal American at the same time?

“I meant a glass of water.” Addison kept her voice neutral even though he’d been more sarcastic than teasing

He let out a frustrated sigh. “I apologize.”

She turned to leave, but then thought it would be awkward to encounter him inside again where he’d probably guess she’d known who he was the minute he’d opened his mouth. Better to sort things out first.

Turning back to him, she asked “Sorry, but are you English?” She kept her voice light, tiptoeing around him like he was a sleeping bear, trying to remember the nickname Peyton had given Will and his friends. “A noble... or something?” *The royals!* That’s what Peyton called them—maybe—but before Addison had a chance to correct herself, the “Royal” was answering her.

“I’m not nobility or royalty, or anything else. I can’t introduce you to the queen or Will or Harry or any of the bunch,” he spat as he stood. “And if you’ll excuse me, I’m obviously not in the mood to be polite.”

He brushed by her without looking back, but she could feel the heat in her cheeks long before he stormed through the back door. She took her time following him inside, hoping the whole time that whichever of the Englishmen Peyton was intent on introducing her to was not the jerk she’d just met. By the time she’d reached the door, however, her embarrassment had turned to anger.

And not just anger at whichever of the royals had been so rude to her. Whoever he was, he had the same sandy blonde hair and lanky build of Landon Tradd. They even had the same

deep-set eyes, though the Englishman had a more defined jawline and was slightly taller. But they were definitely enough alike for him to remind her of Landon, and all the anger and hurt her ex had caused her tangled up with the fresh shame the Englishman had inflicted.

She should have known better than to make conversation with someone so clearly entitled. She *did* know better. A lifetime of living among, but not quite fitting in with, Charleston's elite had taught her all the lessons she needed to know about how old families treated regular people. Didn't matter that one of the most well-known names among Charleston's elite was currently in prison on drug charges; the old families would always think they were better than everyone "from off" the peninsula. And "from off" meant anyone whose family hadn't been around when the city was still called Charles Town and was nothing but marshland.

Addison's family was one of those "from off," even though she'd lived her entire life in Charleston. The last thing she needed was for some British guy who was even more "from off" than her to treat her like he was too good for her too. Of course an English aristocrat would be as pretentious as the Charlestonians who thought of themselves as royalty.

To be fair—which Addison didn't currently feel inclined to do—she had met some old Charlestonians who were very nice people, and she hadn't officially met Will's friends, so she might be jumping to conclusions. But what she did know is that they wanted to build a hotel on the already fragile shores of Brittany Cove. As much as she liked Will, his decision to expand The Wayfarer made her suspect the royals were just like every other wealthy person she knew: more concerned with lining their pockets than anything else.

Addison brushed her bangs out of her face and went inside to find Peyton. She didn't need to be embarrassed about her behavior, so there was no reason to avoid Peyton or miss out

on the potato skins she'd been craving all day. She brushed past people crowded around the bar and found Peyton snuggled up in a booth with Will.

Will had proposed to Peyton the same day Landon had dumped Addison and seeing them together for the first time since only salted her wound. She was going to have a much harder time pretending to be happy for Peyton than she'd anticipated. At least until she'd pieced her own heart back together.

"Hey, Peyton." Addison leaned into the booth to get Peyton's attention.

"Addison!" Peyton jumped up and embraced her. "I'm so glad you're here! Will, you remember Addison." She turned to the man sitting across from Will. "And this is Theo, but I have no idea where Henry is." Peyton glanced around.

"Oh! There he is!" Peyton pointed to the same tall man in need of a haircut and shave from the curb who was now walking in their direction.

So, it *had* been Henry on the curb. Too bad. If not for his personality, she would have been attracted to him. Although he'd actually done Addison a favor by giving her an excuse to leave. "I think I may have already met him."

He barely looked at Peyton and only waved to his two friends as he passed right by them before going out the front door.

"Where's he going?" Peyton asked Will and Theo.

They both moved to scoot out of the bench, but Theo beat Will to it. "I'll check on him."

Will glanced at his phone, then stopped Theo. "No need. He says he's leaving." He showed the text to Theo.

"What's got his knickers in a bunch?" Theo asked.

“If that’s a way of asking if he’s upset, the answer is I think so,” Addison answered. “I saw him outside and tried to ask if he was okay, but, bless his heart, he was being too rude to tell me.” She meant to lighten the mood, but Will noticeably tensed at her words.

“He’s very private,” Will offered politely, but with an edge of defensiveness. “He would have been more polite had he known who you were.”

“Really? In South Carolina we pride ourselves on being polite to strangers. That’s why I offered to get him a glass of water. He looked upset.” She didn’t need to throw that part in. If Englishmen were anything like Carolinian men, they wouldn’t want their friends knowing they had cried. Maybe if she hadn’t wanted to be home in her pajamas watching a chick flick and gorging herself on ice cream, Addison wouldn’t have wanted to swing hurt around like a wet towel, dousing everyone with a little bit of pain.

Will put on a smile Addison suspected he’d used to charm more than one woman, including Peyton. “He’ll be more than a little cross when he hears he’s insulted the woman he was meant to persuade to sign off on our hotel.”

Addison was not charmed. Quite the opposite as he’d just confirmed her suspicions that the royals were just another group of rich investors who didn’t care about the beaches she loved. “Is that right?” She put on her own smile. The one she’d learned as a debutante and had used to charm more than one person herself, before she’d decided to quit being a phony. “You thought you could buy me a beer and some apps, and I’d be ready to sign onto any ol’ thing you want to do to our beaches?”

Will’s smile fell, and she felt Peyton stiffen at her side. “That’s not at all what I meant.”

“He’s only joking, Addison,” Peyton added quickly.

“Well, I’m glad y’all think protecting the environment is a big joke.” Addison stopped herself. She was headed into environmentalist outrage territory which only ever led to blowing up any productive conversation. It never led to the conservation she advocated for, so she clamped her mouth shut and took a deep breath.

“You okay?” Peyton moved to put her arm around Addison but stopped when Addison bristled. “Seems like Henry’s not the only one upset tonight,” she said softly but sternly.

Anyone else using that tone with Addison would have been itching for a fight. But from Peyton it was a warning that Addison was about to do something she’d regret.

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” Addison brushed her sticky bangs off her forehead. It was too hot. *She* was too hot. “I’m really not up for this tonight.”

With that, Addison mumbled, “Nice to meet you both,” to Will and Theo, then walked quickly away.

Peyton didn’t try to stop her as Addison headed for the front entrance, the closest one. The pointed arches of the Arthur Ravenel bridge, glowing against the night sky, greeted her the moment she walked outside. She took a deep breath, telling herself she might be able to smell the sea even though the ocean was a few miles away. What she really got was the smell of cigarettes from all the smokers on the front porch of The Royal American. Which wasn’t nearly as pleasant as the salty scent of the Atlantic.

She walked toward the path that ran next to Newmarket Creek and would lead her home. Before she made it out of the parking lot, she caught sight of Henry Spencer looking down the street. Probably waiting for a fancy town car, she thought. The way he glanced at his watch and shook his head brought back, full force, all the irritation she felt toward him. Did he

think just because he was “royalty” he deserved to have his ride show up as soon as he ordered it?

A hundred other things Henry Spencer might be entitled to ran through Addison’s mind, but the one she landed on was that he thought because he was some sort of royalty he was entitled to build a hotel wherever he wanted.

But he had another thing coming if he thought Addison was going to cut him any slack when it came to approving his designs for the hotel. She’d hold him and his fellow aristocrats to the highest environmental standards. They were royalty—or whatever—so they’d have the money for it. And, if they didn’t, well, they could find another beach to build on. Somewhere in Florida or Georgia or the like. But they wouldn’t be building on her beaches.

A twinge of guilt hit her as she thought of Peyton and what it might cost her if Will couldn’t see his dream through, but Addison quickly brushed it aside.

She changed direction mid-step and instead walked close enough to Henry for him to see her. Then, she put on her best debutante smile, waved her best debutante goodbye, and in her best debutante voice said, “Nice to meet you, Henry.” Then she doubled down on the sugar. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again real soon.”

Protecting South Carolina’s beaches was her job, and she’d do that job right. No matter what or who tried to stop her.

Chapter Three

Henry

Henry stuffed his shaking hands in his pockets and looked down the street for the one thousandth time. He knew his driver would be there as soon as he could, but that didn't stop him from repeatedly looking for Lemar's black town car. The man had come highly recommended as a driving service, and Henry had hired him before arriving in Charleston.

He'd been waiting at least ten minutes when he heard a woman say his name. He turned at the sound of it, but it took him a few seconds to place her as she talked to him. She was the woman who'd come onto him out back of the bar. What he couldn't understand, as he watched her walk away swinging her hips in a way he wished he'd seen the first time they'd met, was how she knew his name.

He squinted as she moved further away. Were those pockets on the sides of her khaki pants? And what had he seen on her t-shirt? *There's no Planet B?*

"Bloody Hell," he muttered. Was it possible the woman he'd been a bit of a tosser to was Peyton's friend? The environmental scientist. *Madison? Anderson? Something with a -son in it.*

Lemar's black town car pulled into the parking lot, and Henry waved him over. He felt bad for being rude to the woman, but she didn't seem too upset about it. In fact, she seemed pretty intent on keeping his attention as she walked away. And even if he had offended her, Peyton's friend was the least of his worries.

He climbed into the passenger seat of the car and leaned back.

"Where to?" Lemar asked.

Henry rubbed his temples. "Good question, mate." He hadn't spent enough time in the city to know anywhere to go besides home. Or, back to Peyton's place, rather, where they had all been staying.

"You need suggestions?" Lemar asked, his eyebrow raised. Though the man was twice his age, Henry had enjoyed their first conversation and had decided to have him be his driver as often as possible while Henry stayed in Charleston. Driving on the wrong side of the road was not a challenge he wanted to take on.

As long as he was completely unmoored from everything he'd ever known in a place he'd only visited once very briefly, Henry decided he may as well let someone else tell him where he should go and what he should do.

"Yes. Suggestions would be brilliant."

"Whatcha lookin' for?" Lemar smiled over his shoulder with such warmth that the worry gnawing at Henry fell silent. Or at least quieted down enough for Henry to smile.

Before he could answer the question, his stomach answered it for him by growling loud enough for Lemar to laugh. "I guess the answer is food." Henry smoothed his hands over his stomach, which elicited another growl.

"You didn't like The Royal?" Lemar asked.

“Didn’t get a chance to find out. Had some bad news and decided to take my leave.”

“Take your leave, huh? Well, I can take you and your leave somewhere better.” Lemar’s words ended in soft, pillowy sounds that comforted Henry.

“That sounds brilliant.” Henry sat back in his seat and closed his eyes.

“You like soul food, Henry? Best thing for a man who’s had bad news is food for his soul.”

“Never had it.”

Lemar shook his head. “Who you visiting in Charleston, and why haven’t they taken you to get some soul food yet?”

Henry laughed. “Apparently the wrong people.”

“Darn right you are. I’m taking you to the first place they shoulda taken you the minute you stepped off that plane that brought you here from London.” The lines at the corners of Lemar’s eyes deepened as he smiled.

“Have you been driving for a long time?” Five minutes before, Henry hadn’t wanted to make conversation with anyone, but now he wanted nothing more than to hear Lemar’s life story, and not just because he suspected it would be fascinating. He knew it would also take his mind off his worries.

“Nope, but I was a tour guide in Charleston for thirty years. I specialized in African-American history. Just retired last year, but I got bored, and my wife got tired of having me around the house all the time. So here I am.” Lemar took a sharp corner. “I’ve always loved driving.”

Lemar’s history piqued Henry’s interest. He’d been on a few tours the first time he’d visited Charleston when they’d helped Peyton fix up her place. The tours had always included

the history of the Africans enslaved in Charleston, but always from a white perspective. He'd wondered at the time what the story would be like coming from a Black point of view. If Lemar was willing to share it, he wanted to listen.

But Lemar wanted to hear about Henry first. When Henry told him he was an architect, Lemar had more questions and was anxious to tell him about some of the more architecturally interesting buildings in Charleston. They talked about different architects and types of architecture as Lemar navigated them over the now-familiar Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge.

"Have you always lived in Charleston then?" Henry asked as they turned toward Folly Beach.

"My family's been in this area for as long as the Ravenels, Pinkneys, Calhouns... all of them. My ancestors built this city, but you won't see our names on any of its streets. "Except for the ones who kept the names of their enslavers after the Civil War." Lemar still smiled, but under the surface of his too-light tone, there was hurt. Centuries of it.

"I'd love to hear all your stories. The few tours I've been on have all told some variation of the same story." After only twenty minutes with Lemar, Henry had already gained a greater appreciation for Charleston and its history than he'd gained after hours on tours.

Lemar was happy to share everything he knew over shrimp and grits at a place called Gillie's that he swore had the best food in Charleston. Henry had to agree with him, especially after his first bite of their banana cream pie. Lemar talked for hours, and Henry listened to story after story about Charleston. He heard about the Gullah foodways and traditions, the Jenkins Orphanage Band that had nurtured some of the best Black musicians in America, and the history of Sullivan's Island as a quarantine spot for enslaved people brought from West Africa.

“Now it’s all mansions and rich people,” Lemar concluded, “but it wasn’t that for my people.”

Henry thought about that. Brittany Cove wasn’t on Sullivan’s Island, but it wasn’t far from it. He wondered if there was a way to honor enslaved Africans by incorporating some of the aspects of Lemar’s stories and the histories of all of Charleston’s residents in his designs. The idea excited him, and for the first time since he had agreed to buy the property with Will and Theo, he was genuinely anxious to get to work on the plans. He didn’t have to wait for any ideas to be approved by Marcus or wait for his permission. Henry could just put pencil to paper and create.

It was nearly midnight when Lemar and Henry left Gillie’s. The restaurant had closed hours before, but since the owner was a friend of Lemar’s, he pulled up a seat and joined the conversation after the last customer left. Finally, after Henry couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer, Lemar said, “We’d better get you to wherever you’re staying.”

Henry checked his texts and found one from Will with the address to Peyton’s place. Half an hour later, Lemar dropped him in front of Peyton’s flat. “If you want to work tomorrow, I’d like to see the whole city,” Henry told him. “You know Charleston, and I want to learn everything about it. Especially about the buildings and their architecture.” The more Henry knew the city and its history, the better able he’d be to create something from The Coral Monarch project that would fit into the historical landscape of Charleston.

“Hey, you want to pay me to drive and talk, I’m game,” Lemar answered before waving goodbye.

The lights were all out when Henry went inside, and he was dead tired, but he wanted to get some ideas down. He and Theo were sharing the guest room and he was already asleep, so Henry couldn’t turn on the light or get out his drafting pad.

Instead he sat in the bathroom and typed ideas into his phone until he really couldn't keep his eyes open any longer.

Idea number one was to find a place to live. He'd told Marcus two weeks, but if he really wanted to get this project right, he'd need at least a month. A hotel would get expensive fast, and if things went even more sour between him and Marcus, Henry might be out of a job. Of course he still had his trust fund, but he'd dipped into a significant portion of it for the Peerless investment—hence the reason he and Theo were sharing a room in Peyton's flat rather than paying for a hotel room.

Henry slept restlessly, but the next day, Lemar not only showed him around Charleston, but also helped him find a flat to sublet close to the Ravenel bridge so that once Henry did start driving himself, he'd have easy access to Interstate 26 and Sweetgrass Island. The apartment was small but clean and private. As much as Henry liked spending time with Will and Theo, he needed his own space in which to work.

And work is exactly what he did, only taking occasional breaks to take some exercise in the apartment complex's gym or swim in the pool when he got stuck on a design element. Lemar's tour had really helped him get an idea of what would fit into the historical landscape of Charleston and Magnolia Bay, but the Gullah tour they'd gone on had given Henry ideas about how he could incorporate the Gullah's basket weaving artistry into his designs. Perhaps in load bearing columns made from black walnut. Their bases and tops could mimic the variegated designs weaved by the Gullah in their baskets. The pillars would be a focal point, and a symbolic nod to the enslaved Africans and their descendants who were integral to Charleston's history.

The day he sketched out that idea, he decided he'd earned a night out and agreed to Will and Peyton's invitation for a late dinner. Theo had returned to London the week before, and

Henry hadn't seen Will since. He'd barely seen him before Theo's departure, he'd been so focused on drawing up blueprints for the hotel.

As he locked his door behind him, he caught a glimpse of his neighbor coming down the hall. He'd seen her once or twice but hadn't had the opportunity to introduce himself. But he'd been hoping for the chance. Something about her intrigued him. Probably her sharp cheekbones, but there was something more that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

With his confidence soaring from being close to done on his plans, he decided this was the night to introduce himself. He pretended to fumble with the lock until she was at her own door. She had on a gorgeous white dress that hugged her curves in a very flattering way. Her eyes were an interesting mix of green and brown, and framed by dark bangs. Wherever she'd been, she'd no doubt turned some heads.

"Hello," he said, walking toward her.

A look of surprise crossed her face as she faced him. "Hello?"

"I'm your new neighbor." He tipped his head toward his door.

"You are?" Her eyes widened.

"I am." He stuck out his hand. "I'm Henry Spencer."

She blinked. "I know who you are."

Now it was his turn to be surprised. "Really?" He lowered the hand she hadn't taken. "Most Americans don't."

She squinted. "What?"

Henry grew more confused. "I'm in the papers in the UK sometimes, but most Americans don't read those." If she didn't know him from the tabloids he'd made it into—courtesy of his friendship with Theo—how did she know who he was?

The line in her brow grew deeper, then she smiled. But not in a friendly way. “You don’t remember me.”

Was it a question or a statement? He couldn’t tell. “I’m afraid not,” he said slowly. “Have we met?”

“We have,” she stated matter-of-factly. “I’m Addison McCrae.” She did not offer him her hand.

He stared at her, trying to place where they might have met. Then it hit him. “Peyton’s friend?”

She nodded once.

“The environmental scientist?”

“Uh huh.”

“Addison McCrae, the woman who holds the fate of my project in her hands?” He hoped cracking a joke would lighten the air between them a bit.

It didn’t.

“That’s the one.” She cocked her head to the side and raised an eyebrow.

He smiled weakly. “Well, you did promise me we’d see each other again, didn’t you?”

“At least you remember that part.” She turned away from him and stuck her key in the lock.

“I didn’t anticipate bungling both of my ‘first’ meetings with you.” He knew it was risky trying to make another joke, but he had nothing else in his playbook.

Her lip twitched almost as though she wanted to smile, but she opened her door instead. “I guess you wouldn’t. Good night.”

The door closed in his face, but not before every drop of confidence he’d felt minutes before followed Addison McCrae into her flat.

Chapter Four

Addison

Addison shut her door, tossed the keys on the table, then glared at her reflection in the hallway mirror. She'd been rude to Henry for making an honest mistake. Why would he recognize her when he'd only seen her one time when she'd looked more like Environmentalist Addison than Debutante Addison? She barely recognized herself as Debutante Addison. He didn't deserve her ire, because it wasn't Henry who she was mad at.

She was mad at herself.

She'd worn the white dress to meet her parents at the Charleston Country Club. The dress was one of Landon's favorites, and she'd hoped to *happen* to run into him at the benefit being hosted at the club. He hadn't shown up, but his parents had. They were polite, but also careful to mention that Landon and Shelby Calhoun had been spending time together lately.

Addison hated how jealous that made her.

What was supposed to be a pleasant night out with her parents and twin brother, Andrew, had turned into her sulking

and watching the door for Landon and Shelby while her family had tried to distract her.

“Adds, tell me what’s happening with your turtles,” Andrew had said before blocking her view of the door. Usually he just rolled his eyes the minute she even said the word turtle.

“Nothing. Nothing is happening with any turtles right now.” She stared him down until he moved. There was actually a lot happening with the loggerhead sea turtles along the coast since it was nesting season, but she wasn’t going to give Andrew the satisfaction of distracting her.

Her mother had finally pulled her aside, taken Addison’s purse, and pulled her keys from it.

“Go home.” She handed Addison’s purse and keys to her, then brushed her fingers over Addison’s cheek. “Cry. Work out. Watch terrible movies. Do whatever you need to do but try to get Landon out of your system.” Then she’d kissed Addison’s cheek and told her she’d call her in the morning.

It had been good advice, but now that she was home Addison just wanted to get out. What she needed was a walk along the shore. Maybe even a walk around Brittany Cove, which held her favorite memories.

Her parents used to rent a small house close to the Shellhouses every summer, and she and Andrew would spend all day at the beach with Peyton and her brothers looking for sea turtles or building sandcastles. There were no social engagements, and everyone was relaxed. They were a happy family.

A walk around Brittany Cove was exactly what she needed.

Except that Brittany Cove was small enough that she might run into Peyton and Will. Addison had been avoiding Peyton since the night at The Royal—not that Peyton had

much time for her since getting engaged anyway—and she didn't want to risk running into her. She loved Peyton, but she loved Sweetgrass Island too. And as Sweetgrass Island's official environmental scientist, she couldn't risk being influenced by her friend to approve Peerless Enterprise's plans that weren't in the best interest of the island. She guessed the plans would be landing on her desk sometime soon, and she needed to be totally impartial when they did (not that her interactions with Sir Henry Snooty-Pants would help with that).

So maybe just a drive.

Addison changed out of her dress, letting out a deep breath as she shed all the pretense that went with the dress and the Charleston Country Club. After putting on her favorite cut offs and her *May the Forest Be with You* tee, she headed for her car. She tried to focus on the drive ahead of her in order to keep her mind off Landon, but it didn't work. The tightness in her chest that usually loosened its grip when she got near the beach kept its hold and her thoughts turned unconsciously to Landon.

He had broken up with her out of the blue for being “insensitive” and “unable to read a room.” She'd thought things were fine. More than fine. She'd expected a proposal by the end of the year. Maybe at the annual Charleston Country Club Christmas party. That would have made her parents happy, although she would have preferred a more intimate setting for something as special as a proposal.

She had deconstructed their relationship a hundred times in the past month since they'd broken up, trying to pinpoint where she'd gone wrong. She hadn't figured it out yet, and so as she came to the end of the bridge, she let her mind drift back to that night again.

Even though she and Landon had dated on and off for years, the previous six months had been very much on. The fact he'd invited her to a client dinner for the first time was proof of that. When it came to his work, Landon had always kept Addison at arm's length. He was in property development. She was an environmental scientist. The two careers did not go hand in hand— according to Landon, anyway. Addison thought they could. It made more sense to her for developers to consult environmental experts to make sure their properties could coexist with nature rather than hurting it.

Unfortunately, developers were usually too blinded by dollar signs to pay attention to what Mother Nature had to say about them building in her more fragile places. And hazard insurance also made it easy to ignore her. If anything happened to their properties, insurance would pay for developers to build again. Along South Carolina's shorelines, there was a constant battle between developers and Mother Nature. They built, she sent a hurricane that tore down the mansions her beaches couldn't sustain, they built bigger, she sent a bigger hurricane, and the cycle continued. Addison could not understand why men thought they could beat Mother Nature. She'd proven over and over that she was stronger and always had the element of surprise on her side.

Which is what she'd said to Landon's client.

Not in a heated way. She'd been very matter-of-fact and said it with a smile, just like her mama had taught her. The only way to say hard things was by softening them with a smile. Addison had seen her mama do that very thing with Daddy a thousand times, at least.

Spent too much money shopping? Say it with a smile and a compliment about being such a good provider. Rear-ended someone's Mercedes? Admit to it with a smile and a little bit (or a lot, depending on the cost of the damage) of cleavage.

Husband's new secretary is a little too pretty? Smile, offer to massage his shoulders, then mention the article you saw about virtual assistants and how much money "one little ol' app" is saving the most successful businesses.

So where had Addison gone wrong?

She knew, of course. Charm and flattery always needed to accompany the smile. That part she'd never been able to master. Years of cotillion hadn't fixed her aversion to phoniness. If anything, all the debutante stuff had made her more attuned to her own phoniness, and she'd worked hard to become more genuine. Addison McCrae did not say things she didn't mean. Even if it meant losing friends.

Which she had, but the ones she'd really cared about stuck around. Friends like Peyton.

And Landon.

Landon had always come back, even when she'd pushed him away.

Addison passed the sign pointing toward Sullivan Island and, without a second thought, turned right. Brittany Cove could wait. What she really wanted to do was text Landon and ask him to meet her for a shrimp roll from The Obstinate Daughter. He usually spent weekends during the summer at the Tradd beach house on Sullivan's. She'd planned on being there with him this weekend. But that was before he'd told her he needed to find someone "more compatible," and that she should do the same.

Seeing a parking spot a few blocks from The Obstinate Daughter, Addison took it. It was close to nine, but there were still plenty of people on the island. She looked at their faces, searching for Landon while hating herself for looking for him.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered and took out her phone. If she wanted to see him, she'd text him and quit acting like a

crazy person waiting for him to happen to appear. She opened a new message, typed his name, then *I'm a few blocks away. Meet me for a shrimp roll?*

Landon would know exactly where she meant. They'd shared a lot of shrimp rolls on the beach, just the two of them, watching the waves and passing the roll back and forth, along with a frozen lemonade and gelato from Beardcats. It would be too late to get the lemonade and gelato, but Addison had never really liked the frozen lemonade to begin with.

Truth be told, the shrimp roll wasn't her favorite either. Shrimp rolls and lemonade were Landon's favorites.

As was the mint chocolate chip gelato they usually got.

Addison stared at her message considering her words. She blinked, then pressed the delete button.

Maybe it hadn't been Landon who'd always come back.

Maybe it had been her.

Sure, he'd always reached out first with a "Did I leave my sunglasses at your place?" or a "Do you have my Clemson sweatshirt/t-shirt/hat?" She'd follow it up with "I don't think so, but I'll check. Want me to drop it by if I do?" Because of course she didn't have what he was looking for, because what he was looking for was a way to see her again.

At least that's what she'd told herself.

He'd always answered with some variation of "That would be great. Or just come by..."

And she always had.

"Not this time," she said to her phone, then closed her messages.

She opened Google, and within seconds she had The Obstinate Daughter's website pulled up and was ready to put in her order.

Tonight she'd sit on the beach alone and eat the Duck Duck Peach pizza she'd always wanted to try, along with a sweet tea to drink. For good measure, she'd order the Peaches and Creme Brûlée.

Landon hated peaches.

With her head held high, she walked the few blocks to the restaurant to pick up her order, feeling good about her decision to eat on the beach.

Alone.

Alone was good.

She was *not* going to text Landon. No matter what.

Her resolve, however, did not keep her from scanning the crowd inside the restaurant. She didn't see Landon, but her stomach flipped when she saw another familiar face. The Obstinate Daughter wasn't just her favorite place, it was also Peyton's. Addison should have known Peyton would be there. Ninety percent of their Friday nights had been spent at the restaurant before Will had come into the picture.

And, speak of the devil, Will was by her side. If it had only been the two of them, Addison wouldn't have thought twice about going over to say hi, but there was another man at the table.

Henry.

The last thing she needed was another encounter with him, but just as she was about to bolt back to her car, Peyton saw her.

"Addison!" she called and was out of her seat faster than a cat with its tail on fire.

The smile Peyton gave her made it impossible for Addison not to return it, and the lightness she'd been hoping to feel came with it. No one could cheer her up like Peyton, and

Addison had been an idiot to avoid her. It wasn't her ability to be impartial that had stopped her from calling Peyton, it had been her jealousy over Peyton and Will's happiness. How shallow was that?

Peyton threw her arms around Addison. "What are you doing here? Are you with someone? Come sit with us!"

Addison didn't have a chance to refuse, before Peyton pulled her to her table, proclaiming, "Look who's here! You remember Addison, right?"

Will nodded, but Henry stood as Peyton directed Addison to the seat next to him. He waited for her to sit down before he did the same.

Then he crossed his arms, leaned on the table and looked at her. "You really know how to keep a promise."

"What?" Her heart was beating a mile a minute, and everything was moving so fast she couldn't get her bearings. Thirty seconds before she'd been ready for a dinner for one on the beach, and now she was sitting with the very people she'd been trying to avoid, fighting every urge to watch the door for Landon. What would he think if he saw her sitting next to Henry on what very much looked like a double date.

"We keep seeing each other." He broke into a smile.

Addison held back her laugh, but the way Henry's eyes danced made her pulse skip in a way she hadn't felt for a while.

In fact, she couldn't remember the last time Landon's smile had done that to her.

"Henry told us you two are neighbors," Peyton said. "Hopefully, you'll be seeing a lot of each other." She raised her eyes in a suggestive way that made Addison's face grow warm. Had she done something to give away what she'd been thinking when Henry smiled?

Because the last thing Addison needed was to fall for another guy who likely thought her worldview of saving the earth wasn't "compatible" with his plans to conquer said earth.

When did protecting the planet and having a stable, long-term—maybe even forever?—relationship get so complicated?

She didn't have an answer to that, but she did know she wasn't going to be charmed by the likes of Henry Spencer, Earl of Wherever. No matter how hard it was to look away from his perfect smile.

Chapter Five

Henry

As much as Henry enjoyed Addison in the white dress she'd worn earlier, he found he liked how she looked in shorts and a t-shirt just as much. She was beautiful in an interesting way, rectangular face with high cheekbones and a round nose. Large, hazel eyes with high, arched eyebrows. A small mouth with full lips that softened her defined jaw. Everything about her reminded him of a Zaha Hadid design: sweeping curves and windows reflecting lots of light that somehow exuded impenetrable strength and openness at the same time.

Beyond looking interesting, what Addison had to say was interesting. She didn't talk much until Peyton asked her about the sea turtle research she was doing. Then she couldn't stop.

"Numbers of nests and hatchlings have been going up for the past five years, but they're down this year," she said before picking a bit of cheese off her pizza and popping it in her mouth. Her fingers were long and thin, and he couldn't take his eyes off her mouth as she licked the cheese off her thumb. "The hurricane decimated their nesting areas, but usually the turtles will adapt fairly quickly."

"What do you think is the cause?" he asked, still looking at her mouth.

She shrugged. “It could be any number of things, but likely something human related, like pollution. It disrupts their navigation, and Bianca likely stirred up a lot of garbage.”

“That’s an understatement,” Will muttered.

“The hurricane, not your ex.” Peyton elbowed Will then turned to Henry. “Be careful, Spence. Addison will have you hugging trees and going vegan before you know it. She’s that convincing.” Peyton winked at her friend.

Henry liked that she’d taken to calling him by the nickname the gents had given him years ago. “This isn’t vegan,” he said pointing to her pizza.

“I’m not vegan.” Addison swatted away Peyton’s hand, but not before Peyton had stolen a slice of her pizza.

“You only eat locally sourced animal products, so close enough.” Peyton took a bite, then closed her eyes. “Mmm. Why haven’t we tried this before?”

“Henry went vegan once. For Clarissa Barclay. Remember?” The corner of Will’s mouth slid into a sly smile. “How long did it last? Forty-eight hours?”

“Forty-nine. Then you brought over a meat pasty from the Ginger Pig, knowing I wouldn’t be able to resist. You couldn’t wait to send Clarissa a picture of me eating it.” He raised an eyebrow and nodded his head toward Peyton. “And do you want to tell your fiancée why?”

“Oh, I was in love with her.” Will readily admitted, making Henry shake his head. “Everyone was. She was…” He let out a breath and sighed before catching the fiery darts Peyton was sending him. He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. “Nothing compared to you. Ugly, in fact.”

Henry leaned close to Addison. “He lasted twelve hours.”

“Theo brought over fish and chips,” Will said with a shrug.

“Let me guess,” Addison said, inching away from Henry. “He was in love with Lady Clarissa also.” She emphasized *lady* with just a touch of an English accent. Henry wasn’t quite sure if she meant it as a joke or jab. Maybe both.

“Oh, Clarissa Barclay was no lady,” he answered, and the whole table laughed, including Addison. Hers was a deep rich laugh that he would have liked to hear more of. “And Theo has never had a problem getting the ladies. He brought over the fish and chips so Will and I would stop doing exactly what she wanted, which was fight over her.”

Will nodded. “Then she moved on to poor Geoffrey.”

“Who’s Geoffrey?” Addison asked. “Another ‘royal’ friend?”

That one was a jab.

“Actually, yes. He’s the Earl of Bellingham, but he’s better known for his artwork.” Henry wasn’t about to let her get away with thinking they were all a bunch of entitled layabouts.

“Will, Henry, and Theo are gentlemen, but they won’t inherit a title,” Peyton broke in. “That’s why they call themselves the gents.”

“Oh.” Addison tipped her head to the side. “I remembered wrong. I thought you called them the royals.” She turned to Henry. “But your friend Geoffrey is the only royal.”

Henry shook his head. “He’s a member of the peerage, but only the Queen and her direct descendants are royalty.”

“Interesting. So Geoffrey is an artist?”

A sudden thrill ran through Henry at the thought he’d said something that interested Addison. “Have you heard of G?”

Addison shook her head and pushed her plate away with one unfinished slice of pizza.

“May I?” he asked, pointing to the plate.

“Sure.” She slid her it toward him. “But tell me about this G.”

Henry Googled G, even though he had plenty of his own pictures of Geoffrey’s work. G’s artwork was the first thing to show up. He passed his phone to Addison, then took her pizza. It really was quite good. He’d been tempted to order it himself but had made a safer choice at the last second. Who knew duck confit and peaches could be so good on pizza? Addison, apparently.

“I like this,” he said through his bite. “Good choice.”

“It’s the first time I’ve ever had it.” She scrolled through the images of G’s art. “He’s good. How does he come up with these ideas?”

Henry and Will took turns telling Addison and Peyton all about Geoffrey and then all about their school days. They talked about England and tried to explain where they fit in relation to the royal family, but when it came to talking about Marcus, Henry changed the subject. He brought up the hotel and some of his ideas, but then Addison bristled and moved even further from him.

“I’d rather not know anything about them until I see them.” She waved her hand dismissively.

Then when he paid the tab, she more than bristled. “I can’t be bribed into approving your hotel.”

“I’m not trying to bribe you, I just wanted to pay for dinner to apologize for my behavior the other night.” And because he’d enjoyed sharing a meal with her. Wasn’t that reason enough to pay for it? As a gesture of appreciation for the good food and good conversation?

“You don’t need to apologize. It wasn’t a big deal.” She took some American bills from her wallet and slapped them in

front of him. “Y’all are witnesses that he didn’t pay for my dinner,” she said pointing to Will and Peyton.

Addison McCrae was, without a doubt, a stickler. Henry pulled back his shoulders and looked her up and down, trying to figure her out. He’d designed buildings from concrete that had more give than she did. Even when she’d laughed, she’d seemed to be barricading herself from really enjoying the evening. Why? Because she didn’t think she could enforce whatever environmental standards she was bound to if they were friends?

It made no sense. He wasn’t so married to his plans that he couldn’t change things here and there to make them more environmentally friendly. Yet she seemed determined to think of him as unreasonable and inflexible before she’d even seen his plans. And her little jabs about his aristocratic background? The more he thought about them, the more irritated he grew.

“I better head back. I’ve got a long day tomorrow.” Addison stood and pushed in her chair. “Thanks for the fun.”

Henry was unconvinced by her thanks. Aside from one laugh, she hadn’t looked like she’d been having much fun at all, though looking at her long legs mitigated some of his irritation with her.

Peyton gave Addison a hug, who then did something totally unexpected. “Hey, if you’re headed back to Charleston, could Henry ride with you? I mean, you live in the same place.” She tipped her head to her shoulder in a gesture that said, “This is the completely logical thing to do.”

Which, obviously, it was.

But Addison narrowed her eyes in way that said logic had nothing to do with her desire to absolutely NOT have Henry ride with her. “I have to check on the turtles.”

“The turtles?” Henry looked from Addison to Peyton, hoping his confusion would be enough to save him from a thirty-minute drive in a tiny, electric car—she undoubtedly drove a Prius—with someone who clearly hated his guts.

“The sea turtles I was telling you about.” She stared down her nose at Henry. “There are some nests on the beach near here.”

And Henry had done it again. Offending Addison McCrae had literally become an unintentional pastime for him. “I’d love to see their nests,” he hurriedly said, trying to patch things up.

What else was Henry to do? Not only did he need to stay—no, *get*—on Addison’s good side, but also Will and Peyton were staying on Sweetgrass Island, which was in the opposite direction from Charleston. They shouldn’t have to go out of their way to drive Henry home simply because he’d been too nervous about driving on the opposite side of the road to rent his own car.

He could order an Uber, but he was pretty committed to only paying Lemar for driving him, and he knew Lemar had a family event to attend.

“Are you ready to go now?” she asked him in a very business-y voice.

“Of course.” He scooped up the bills she’d set in front of him and said his goodbyes to Will and Peyton. By the time he was done, Addison was already out the door, and he had to jog to catch up with her.

“Thanks for this,” he said when he’d reached her side. “I know Peyton sprang it on you, but I really do want to see the turtle nests. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. It makes sense,” she said stiffly.

She walked quickly, brushing past people milling on the sidewalks who stepped out of the way of her purposeful stride. Henry tried to keep up, muttering “pardon” and “excuse me” every time he had to step around someone. Hurricane Bianca had nothing on Addison when it came to clearing a path.

Within a block, the buildings and the people weren’t so close together, and Henry pulled up to Addison’s side. “Are we in a hurry, or are you trying to lose me?”

Addison did a double take, as though surprised to find him next to her, then slowed her stride. “Sorry. I’m a fast walker. Everyone complains about it.”

“I’m not complaining, just feeling a little insecure. I run a six-minute mile, and I’m out of breath.” He swerved around a seagull picking up a piece of popcorn.

She slowed even further. “You’re a runner?”

He shrugged. “Not a serious one. It clears my head.”

“A six-minute mile is pretty serious.”

Addison McCrae would know serious. She was the very definition of it.

“How far away is the beach?” After two weeks in Charleston, he was still turned around. He couldn’t get used to the fact that the Atlantic was to his east instead of his west, but the smell of it was the same. As it hit him, he was flooded with memories of summers spent in Cornwall, bathing in the sea, biking along the cliffs, and playing card games late into the night with Marcus and Rosamond. A feeling of longing hit him like a rogue wave, and he leaned against the fence of a home they were passing.

“We’re about a block away.” Addison’s face held a question as she stopped next to him.

“Sorry, don’t know what’s come over me. I just need to stop for a minute.” He knew exactly what had stopped him walking further. Nostalgia. He wanted to go back in time to before his father had died and his brother had become obsessed with doing things “the way Dad would want.” Back to when his mum wasn’t always sad, and he and Rosamond talked every day. He wanted to be part of a family again.

Addison’s shoulders softened. “Okay.”

Stars blinked above and soft light came from the few houses they passed. Henry breathed in the heavy air lined with the pungent taste of salt. A soft breeze hit them as they neared the beach, and Addison rubbed her goose-fleshed arms. “Are you cold?” he asked. She had to be. The temperature had dropped in the few minutes they’d been walking the closer they got to the ocean.

She shook her head but rubbed her arms again. He pulled his jumper over his head and handed it to her.

“I’m really fine but thank you.” She pushed it away even as she shivered.

“You’re really quite stubborn is what you are.” He was tempted to put the jumper back on, but he hooked it over his arm instead and started walking again.

Less than a minute passed before she relented. “Okay, I’ll take it.” She pulled it on, then muttered another thank you.

“Tell me something about yourself,” he said as they approached the wooden boardwalk he assumed would take them to the beach. Minutes had passed since they’d spoken, which did nothing to alleviate his homesickness.

She kicked a rock off the path and kept her eyes pointing downward. “What do you want to know? There’s not much to tell.”

What he really wanted to know is why she was so closed off. Yes he'd been rude to her on their first meeting, and he'd certainly stumbled the second time around, but hadn't he proven he wasn't the tosser she was treating him like? She was Peyton's best friend, he was Will's, not to mention the fact they were neighbors. They were obviously going to be in each other's company quite often, so why not be friends?

He could use a friend right now.

Instead he asked, "Have you always lived in Charleston?"

"Born and raised," she answered.

A few seconds passed as he swept aside every yes-or-no question that popped into his head. "What part?"

"Downtown."

"In an historic home?" He winced when he realized his mistake. He'd reverted back to easy-answer questions.

"Yes," came her one-word answer.

Another minute passed before he landed on a topic he knew Addison would talk about. "What do turtles' nests look like?"

"Follow me." She stepped off the boardwalk and led him to a sand dune. She pointed to a spot where orange mesh covered an area of sand surrounded by wooden stakes and flags. "They're buried there, but coyotes and raccoons like to eat them, so we put these up. That mesh has sides that go as deep as the nest to keep out ghost crabs. We sprinkle the exposed part with wolf urine to keep out other predators."

"Who's we?" He was strangely curious about her dealings with wolf urine.

"The group I volunteer with. S.C.U.T.E."

"Scoot? Like 'scoot over, dude'?" Henry attempted an American accent, and Addison almost laughed.

She shook her head, pressing her lips tightly closed. “No. Like, South Carolina United Turtle Enthusiasts.”

“Turtle enthusiasts?” Now it was Henry’s turn to hold back a laugh, which he could only do by turning around and taking long deep breaths that were made harder when he imagined the other pithy t-shirts she probably had in her closet. *I Slow for Turtles* or *Saving Turtles is a Shell of a Good Time*. His gut hurt from not laughing, but when he turned around the Very Serious look on Addison’s face knocked any fun out of the moment.

“How many eggs are there?” he asked as she examined the sand under the wolf urine mesh.

“Probably over a hundred.” She picked up something and handed it to him. “This is an old shell from earlier in the season. The turtles—they’re loggerheads—lay about four times a year, so if coyotes get some, it’s not the end of the world, but it does slow the turtles’ recovery from being endangered.”

“I thought it was development that hurt the turtles.” If coyotes weren’t such a big deal, why was she getting so hung up on development?

“They both do.” And her defenses were back up.

“Why not just kill the coyotes? Seems like that’s an easier solution than trying to stop people from building on the islands.” He turned the shell over in his hands, surprised at its softness.

“They produce more cubs when one coyote is killed.” Her chin jutted out, and he knew he was in for more than a basic lesson in biology. “Their DNA gets triggered to replenish the pack, so it’s not actually the easier solution than convincing humans with functioning brains that sand isn’t made to be built on. I mean, there’s a whole Sunday School song about it.”

Was she implying that he was not one of those humans with a functioning brain? The woman who spent her free time trying to stop the inevitable? “If you can’t thwart nature by killing coyotes, then why try to thwart the circle of life by protecting the turtles?”

Addison sucked in her breath and glared at him. “Only about one hatchling out of a thousand will survive, but if I have to explain why that statistic is about much more than ‘the circle of life,’ you wouldn’t get it.” Her chest fell as she let out a deep sigh. No, a huff.

It was definitely a huff.

“We should go.” Her eyes were still narrowed in on him like a member of PETA on a fur coat.

The thirty-minute ride home was long, silent, and uncomfortable. And it wasn’t until he flipped on the TV to *The Bachelor* (his love for it was his deepest, darkest secret) that he realized Addison still had his jumper. It was his favorite too. But there was no way he was getting anywhere near her to ask for it back.

Chapter Six

Addison

Addison was half-way through *The Bachelor* (she loved to hate it so much) before she realized she still had on Henry's sweater. Unfortunately, this realization came after her spoonful of Dutch Chocolate ice cream rolled down the front of it instead of into her mouth. She quickly pulled off the sweater, certain the label would say it was some dry clean only material. She sighed with relief when it read one hundred percent cotton. A little stain remover, a quick wash, and it would be as good as new. Henry would never know, and she could leave it outside his door the next time she heard his too-loud music.

She heard *The Bachelor* come back from commercial—she always watched it live so she didn't get spoilers—as she sprayed the spots. Had she not done all her laundry the day before, she would have washed the pull-over right away. But being ecologically minded, it only made sense to let the stain remover soak in for a day or two (it said right on the bottle she could do this) until she had some more dirty clothes to wash with it. Henry could wait two days—three, tops—for his pull-over, right? If he was anything like Landon, he had a dozen

more just like it. And the weather had been so warm, it's not like he'd need it.

In the meantime, she wouldn't miss any of *The Bachelor*.

A week-and-a-half later Addison opened her washer and wondered how the light blue thing in it had gotten there.

Then she remembered. Her throat closed as she dropped her armful of clothes and yanked Henry's pull-over out of the washer.

Addison was not a cursing woman, but she would have put her Marine Corps grandfather to shame when she saw that, not only was the stain still very much visible, but the washer also must have had standing water in it. The sweater smelled like someone had dropped an ice cream cone on the floor of a beach bathroom, then locked it up during the hottest week of the year.

"No, no, no," she mumbled as she examined it more closely. She didn't remember spilling anything in the armpit of the sweater, but there were definitely dark spots there that more closely resembled mold than Dutch Chocolate.

She double-checked the label to make sure she knew how to wash it and, more importantly, what brand it was. It would take a miracle for Henry's sweater to look like it had a week and a half ago. Her only hope, other than that her fifteen-year-old washer would actually get something clean (it didn't have a great track record), was that Moncler was an off-brand sold at England's equivalent to Target.

Did England have a Target equivalent? She felt sad for them if they didn't.

But she felt sadder for Henry's sweater. It was likely a goner.

And then she felt saddest for herself. Odds were she'd be buying Henry a new sweater. Which would mean admitting to

him what she'd done to the original.

After every awkward interaction they'd had, her destroying his sweater would look more intentional than accidental. Which it one hundred percent was—accidental, that is.

Wasn't it?

At the exact moment Addison started her washer—its sole occupant Henry's sweater—the Beatles blasted from next door. Henry had played “Help!” at least four hundred *thousand* times since he'd moved in, as though he knew it was her least favorite Beatles song. As though England had only ever produced one music group. No Rolling Stones. No Radiohead. No Coldplay, Mumford & Sons, or Florence and the Machine. Only the Beatles.

Always the Beatles.

“You could at least mix it up,” she muttered, glaring at the wall they shared. A wall that had been pleasantly quiet for the entire year she'd lived in the apartment complex before Henry's arrival.

The washing machine rattled loudly, mocking her for wasting water and electricity on an unsavable moldy sweater as she flipped open her laptop. She googled Moncler, then said a little prayer while waiting for the results to pop up. The first pictures were of puffy jackets. Her stomach dropped as she saw the prices beneath them. She quickly pulled up a site to convert pounds to dollars, hoping against hope the pound had magically decreased significantly in value to the dollar.

It had not, and Addison was faced with an uncomfortable truth.

Puffy jackets cost thousands of dollars in Britain.

She scrolled further, looking for sweaters, hoping against hope that Brits found cotton less valuable than nylon and

down.

They did not. The sweater most similar to Henry's may not have cost thousands, but that didn't make it cheap. Addison clenched her jaw as tightly shut as her eyes, but when she opened them the price hadn't changed, and she couldn't hold back her frustration.

“WHO WEARS SEVEN HUNDRED DOLLAR SWEATERS?” she yelled at the wall.

The wall answered with *Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice where a wedding has been*.

Three different washings, including one done by her mom, did not fix Henry's sweater. In fact, by the time Mary McCrae had finished with it, the sweater actually looked worse for wear.

“I don't think it was supposed to go in the dryer.” Her face was the same shade as the red stripe that ran across the front of the sweater as she handed it to Addison.

“Apparently not.” Addison stared at the pull-over. Henry would be lucky to get one of his lanky arms into it, that's how much smaller it looked.

“I don't really do laundry anymore, dear,” her mom said with an apologetic shrug. “I send it all out.” She grabbed her purse off the kitchen counter and dug for her wallet. “Let me help you pay for it. I think I've got a couple twenties in here. How much was it?”

“Six-hundred-and-ninety-two dollars. Give or take.”

Her mom closed her purse. “What kind of man spends seven hundred dollars on a sweater?” Her eyebrows went up as she waited for an explanation from Addison.

As though Addison were at fault for Henry's exorbitant clothing purchases. The stupid thing probably had been made by children in Malaysian sweatshops and the cotton definitely wasn't ethically or organically sourced. And it said something about her mother, who owned the priciest antique shop south of New York City, that even she thought seven hundred dollars was a ridiculous amount of money to spend on one piece of clothing.

"An English earl," Addison answered.

Her mother's eyebrows rose higher and the edges of her mouth twitched. "An earl?"

"Well, not actually. He's second in line, or something like that." Addison didn't really know or care, but she should have known her mother would.

"Whatever he is, he can afford seven hundred-dollar sweaters." The mouth twitching turned into a full-on smile eager enough to make Addison uncomfortable. *Very* uncomfortable.

"Or he has a lot of credit card debt." Addison balled up the sweater and stuck it in her backpack. "I have to get home."

In an ironic—though not surprising, given the current state of Addison's life—twist, after she'd dropped off Henry's sweater to her mom for a final, desperate attempt to fix what Addison had done, his Coral Monarch proposal had shown up in her email. A cursory glance told her it wouldn't meet Sweetgrass's standards. After what she'd done to his sweater, the least she could do was go through it with him point-by-point and tell him specifically what to change so that he could resubmit it quickly.

"You sure you can't stay for dinner?" Her mother's Georgia accent always got stronger when she really wanted something, but it never worked with Addison. The accent was a reminder that, even though she'd been born and raised in

Charleston, she would always be considered “from off the peninsula.” Maybe that’s why she felt more at home on the island beaches outside of Charleston than in its downtown.

“Thanks, Mama, but I’ve got some work to do tonight.” Work that involved confessing to material murder and begging forgiveness. If she didn’t face Henry tonight, she’d never do it. So Addison kissed her mother’s cheek, then opened the back door to leave.

“Just remember to take a break sometimes from the turtles. You might find a man who’s even more interesting,” her mom said before Addison shut the door.

She drove home with a sick feeling in her stomach. It wasn’t so much the certainty of having to replace Henry’s sweater as the certainty that she’d have to tell him about it that had her stomach in knots. She’d be less nervous about it if she’d been even a little bit nicer to him. He had apologized for his own behavior, and the dinner at The Obstinate Daughter had actually been the most fun she’d had in quite a while. At least since Landon had broken up with her. She’d just been so nervous that Landon would show up with Shelby Calhoun. And then hopeful that he would so that she could show him that she was having fun without him.

But by the end of their meal, Addison had decided she’d just drive past the Tradd beach house. Maybe she’d even text Landon and say she was in the neighborhood.

And then Peyton had foisted Henry on her. She had a sneaking suspicion that Peyton had guessed her plans. Peyton had never thought Landon and Addison were a good fit, and she’d made no secret about it either. She also wasn’t being very sneaky in her attempts to throw Addison and Henry together.

Which Addison absolutely did not appreciate. Peyton knew Addison eventually wanted to start her own

environmental consulting firm. Her job as Sweetgrass Island's environmental scientist was a stepping stone to something much bigger, but it was an important stone. She had to build her reputation not only as someone with expertise in protecting the unique landscape of the Carolina islands, but also as someone who couldn't be bought or influenced by big names with lots of money.

Getting involved with Henry Spencer was the absolute wrong way to do that, even if she did find him mildly attractive.

Okay. *Wildly* attractive.

Like, smoking, can't-take-my-eyes-off him, hot.

If she were being honest with herself, that is. Which she was currently trying hard not to do when it came to Henry.

As it turned out, Henry made it easy for her to confess. Too easy, truth be told. He was waiting for the elevator as she approached and held it open for her after stepping in himself. The doors slid closed, and they both stared straight ahead. The elevator stayed as still as they did.

"Would you like me to push the button for our floor?" Addison asked, even though she'd have to reach past him to do it.

"Oh," he said, startled. "It's quite all right. I've got it." He pushed the four, and the elevator moved.

"I got your proposal today." She forced back the urge to be snarky, her go-to move when she was nervous. "There are some changes, but I thought you might like the feedback in person so you can redo and resubmit fast." Best to warm him up before she broke the bad news to him.

"That's very kind." He smiled at her, excitement glowing in his eyes. Which, she noticed—not for the first time—were

very nice eyes. “Should I come into your office, or were you thinking...”

The office would be safer. Except that she’d be showing favoritism right in front of the very people she’d been worried would find out Henry had tried to buy her dinner. But inviting him over would look like she was *inviting him over*.

“How about I come by The Coral Monarch tomorrow around noon? We can do a walk through of both properties, and I’ll give you some ideas of what you can do to meet the standards.” That was the safest choice. They’d be outside and could keep their meeting all business, because technically, she’d be on the clock.

“I’ll look forward to it.” He turned his attention back to the metal doors, and Addison did the same, counting the seconds she had left with him in that small space.

“Oh!” His excited voice startled her. “I can’t believe I didn’t mention this first, but I think I stumbled on a turtle nest today!”

“What?” The elevator came to a stop, and Henry stepped out, but Addison was glued to her spot. “I’ve never seen turtles on Sweetgrass Island, but maybe with the hurricane their navigation got disrupted. Pollution will do that to them, and there was plenty stirred up by Bianca.”

“Will you be getting out, or shall I plan on holding this for a while more?” Henry asked, his hand pressed against the elevator door to keep it from sliding shut.

“Oh, my bad. Sorry.” Addison stepped into the hallway feeling her face heat both from embarrassment and excitement. Henry had no idea how big the news was that he’d given her.

“I’ll show you tomorrow.” He stopped at her door with her. “How about I pick up lunch? I imagine you’ll be on break?”

“As long as you let me pay for my half, that would be nice. Thank you.” She surprised herself by just how much the idea appealed to her. She’d planned on grabbing something quick, but if turtles were really on the island, she’d be there longer than her lunch break. And, if Henry had found them, he’d done her a huge service. The more turtles S.C.U.T.E. could protect, the sooner the loggerbacks would be off the threatened list.

“Brilliant! I’ll look for you then.” He walked to his own door, and Addison had walked through hers when she heard him again. “Incidentally, do you still happen to have my jumper?”

She stepped back into the hallway. “Your jumper?”

“The one I lent you on the beach.”

Addison’s heart slowed.

The sweater.

Things had been going so well between them, she’d forgotten about it, but she had to tell him. She reached into her bag and pulled it out, wishing she’d at least folded it nicely, even if it was ruined.

She held the crumpled “jumper” out to him.

“About that...”

Chapter Seven

Henry

The balled-up fabric Addison handed Henry looked suspiciously like his jumper. He hoped it wasn't, but his hopes were dashed almost as soon as he took it from her and unrolled it.

“What happened?” He held up the wrinkled, much smaller, and more spotted version of his favorite Moncler jumper. Of course, he had more jumpers—perhaps more than any one man should own—but Rosamond had given him this one as a Christmas gift.

“It's a really long story, and I'm so sorry! I promise I'll replace it.” Addison's cheeks were pinker than the candy floss he'd loved as a kid. They matched whatever shade of lipstick she wore. Or maybe that was the naturally becoming color of her lips.

Henry wadded up the jumper and tucked it under his arm. “Don't be silly. It's some cheap thing I picked up years ago.”

Her right eyebrow went up. As lovely as that was, her pointed stare told him everything she didn't say.

“You googled the brand, didn't you?”

She nodded. “You and I may have very different ideas of cheap.”

“My sister gave it to me.” He didn’t say the reason she had was because Moncler was his favorite brand. Admittedly he had a weakness for designer brands. But only if they were structurally as perfect as every Moncler piece he’d ever owned—*did* own.

“Are you and your sister close?”

Henry shifted his weight from one foot to the other. What were he and his sister, exactly? She was brilliant and managed the Rosings Estate better than anyone else in the family ever had or could, including him. But once their brother married and had children, the property would eventually be passed down to them. Even if Marcus didn’t marry, the property and title would skip Rosamond—even though she was the eldest—and go to Henry. The system wasn’t fair, yet she went along with it willingly. Her sense of family loyalty had led to a long lecture from her when he’d told her about the fight he’d had with Marcus. Their daily chats had become far less regular and far more tense since.

All of that was too much to explain to Addison, so he answered with a shrug.

“Now I feel even worse.” Her cheeks had risen from rosy pink to fire engine red.

“You shouldn’t feel bad at all. I’m sure it was an accident.” He took a step closer, then stopped himself. Why did he want to comfort her when she’d been the one to ruin his jumper?

“It’s either important to you because she’s important or it’s important because she wouldn’t usually buy you a seven-hundred-dollar sweater.” Addison kept her eyes on his arm where he had the sweater pressed to his side.

“It cost seven hundred dollars?” He held it up. He should have had an idea of its price, but seven hundred dollars was nearly six hundred pounds. That was dear, even for a Moncler. A fact that shouldn’t have made its loss more painful, but suddenly it did. “I honestly had no idea, and you’re absolutely not paying for it.”

“Yes, I am. End of discussion.” Addison pushed her door open before he could protest. “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon, and I’ll have the first installment of my sweater replacement payment with me.”

She smiled and shut the door, leaving him and his ruined Moncler in the hallway. If she’d let him, Henry would take that payment in smiles. He suspected Addison’s were hard won, and he felt accomplished to have earned one.

He went back to his apartment thinking about that smile and that Addison had agreed to lunch. He couldn’t let her give him money for something he could easily replace—though maybe not as easily at the moment given his current unsteady state of employment. Whatever had happened had been an accident, and Addison felt terrible about it. That was enough, and he wasn’t going to make her feel worse. Especially since she still held the keys to his project’s success.

Instead of bingeing *The Office* –UK version, obviously—Henry spent the next few hours going back over his Coral Monarch plans and the Sweetgrass environmental standards. Thinking of Addison’s smile and how excited she was about the possible turtle nest got him thinking about the natural surroundings of the loggerheads. He studied their color—shades of brown from golden to mahogany that could look green in the right environment, much like Addison’s eyes—and changed some of the materials he’d chosen to better reflect the colors of not just the loggerheads, but also the island itself. The small changes he made would make The Coral Monarch blend even more seamlessly into its

environment. That was one small step toward lessening its footprint.

By the time he'd finished, Henry not only felt proud of his work, but also confident that his father would have liked it. He even suspected Marcus might be impressed by it. He really hoped Addison would be.

When Lemar picked him up the next morning, Henry had him stop by Sweetgrass Specialties on their way to The Coral Monarch. He'd heard Peyton rave about Mabel's chicken salad. Between a good lunch and the changes he'd already made, Henry hoped Addison would see he was on the right track to creating a hotel Sweetgrass would be proud of.

As usual, there was nowhere to park in front of Sweetgrass Specialties, so while Lemar circled the block, Henry went in. Though Henry hadn't tried the gourmet grocery/bakery yet, he'd walked past the place once, and the fresh-baked bread had been calling to him ever since. If it had the same effect on Addison, she'd have a hard time not going easy on him when it came to approving the second round of his proposal.

"What can I get for you, sir?" asked a woman with white frizzy hair tucked into a baseball cap with an American flag on it.

"I've heard good things about your chicken salad. Can I have two of those on baguettes?" then he remembered Addison's conditions for eating meat. "Is your chicken local?"

"Well, it's currently in my refrigerator which is very close by, if that's what you mean." The woman's mouth pulled into a smile. "But if you're asking if it was Carolina born and bred, the answer's yes. You must be the other royal who's bought up Cecil's place." She talked as she opened a big industrial fridge and pulled out a metal container.

"I'm not a royal, but I am one of the investors who bought The Wayfarer." Word traveled around Brittany Cove. "I'm

Henry.” He held his hand over the counter.

“Mabel.” She shook his hand, then grabbed a baguette from a basket. “Both of these for you? I could just make you a big one.”

“Two will be fine.” He looked at the pastries in the case, wondering if Addison might like something sweet. She’d had the peach creme brûlée at dinner, so anything peachy would likely be a sure bet.

“You got someone coming over there with y’all? I know these aren’t for Will and Peyton cuz they’ve already been in.” She eyed him from under the bill of her hat, her dark eyes boring through him, drilling for information. He and the other gents had been the talk of the island since their arrival, but because Henry lived off the island, he’d only experienced it secondhand through Will. If Will hadn’t told him how “invested” the islanders were in their lives, Henry might have been taken aback by Mabel’s nosiness. But her smile was an invitation.

“I’ve got the environmental scientist coming out and decided I’d better butter her up.” He gave her a conspiratorial smile, now that they were mates who confided things to one another.

Mabel let out a whoop followed by a laugh. “It’s going to take more than my chicken salad to butter up Addison McCrae. You may as well resign yourself to doing exactly what she tells you to do. She tells you to build a windmill in the middle of the ocean, it’ll be easier to do it than try to talk her out of it. That girl won’t budge. Never has.” Mabel slathered the chicken salad inside the baguettes, shaking her head and laugh-smiling the whole time.

“Have you known her long, then?” Henry’s confidence in his charm was being sucked out of him faster than sand from the beach at high tide.

“Just her entire life.” Mabel handed him a wrapped sandwich, then wrapped the second one. “She and Peyton spent every summer here, and nearly every day of that summer in this shop at some point. When their mamas found out about the tab they’d run up, they sent both those girls over here to wash dishes for me for a week straight.”

“Is that right?” Henry should have been worried about the information Mabel had given him. Instead, he found himself picturing Addison as a young girl in pigtails, wondering if she’d smiled more then.

“Oh, yes. That girl worked her heart out, but she insisted on doing the dishes her way. Turned out her way saved me water, and I’ve been doing it the same way ever since.” While she talked, she made up another sandwich, despite Henry being the only customer. He didn’t ask why, but he did notice it was all veggies.

“She’s always been environmentally minded, then?” Henry asked.

Mabel stopped what she was doing to look him deep in the eyes. “That girl has done more to protect this island than anyone can imagine. She can’t keep us from losing beach or save us from hurricanes, but she’s made it safer by keeping out a lot of the developers who’ve wanted to come in and speed up the natural erosion.”

She set the veggie sandwich on the counter. “Take this one too, in case she’s not in the mood for chicken.” Then she opened the case with the pastries, cut a big piece of fruitcake, and boxed that too. “She loves my fruitcake. There’s enough there for you too. You’re going to need something to cheer you up once you’re done trying to ‘butter her up.’”

“If that’s the case, throw in a few of those peach pastries too.” If he was going to need something to drown his sorrow

in after his meeting with Addison, it wasn't going to be fruitcake.

Mabel boxed up three different types of peach desserts, which brought the total for the lunch to an amount surprisingly close to a decent installment payment for his ruined jumper.

“Could I have a bag?” Henry asked.

Mabel tipped her head toward an assortment of reusable bags hanging on the wall. “You're welcome to buy one. We don't do any disposable bags here on the island. I'll give you one guess who got that ordinance passed.”

Henry sighed. “I'll take the blue one.”

After taking his new bag with all its contents, Henry thanked Mabel and walked outside. She hadn't charged him for the veggie sandwich or the fruitcake, so there was that to be grateful for. He wasn't yet sure how he felt about her advice. Other than frightened. He definitely felt that.

Lemar pulled up and Henry climbed into the car. “I think I'm in trouble, Lemar.” Henry dug out a chicken sandwich and handed it to him. He should have bought him one in the first place, but with his plan to charm Addison shot out of the water, there was no reason not to let her eat veggies instead of chicken salad. She'd still get her fruitcake, and he wasn't even sure she deserved that. (To be honest he wasn't sure anyone *deserved* fruitcake, except maybe murderers and Liverpool fans).

“Oh, you're definitely in trouble. I could have told you that the minute you told me you were trying to build something new on Sweetgrass Island.” Lemar pulled onto the mostly empty street, laughing under his breath.

“How did you even know what I was talking about?”

“Addison McCrae's reputation precedes her. Everyone knows the kind of restrictions she's got passed on Sweetgrass

in the last coupla years. But you're in more trouble than that." His lip pulled into a knowing half-smile.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Man, I have heard you say that woman's name more times than I can count."

"That doesn't mean anything. I keep running into her, that's all." Henry was starting to think he needed to learn how to drive rather than endure Lemar's laughing and making things up. Yes, he'd told Lemar about his Addison blunders, and about The Obstinate Daughter and searching for turtle nests. He may have even mentioned how Addison had ruined his jumper.

There was an unfamiliar car parked by the hotel when they pulled up. Henry's face grew warm when he saw Addison through the window. He jumped out of the car before Lemar had come to a full stop to avoid Lemar saying something to Addison. "I'll give you a call when I'm ready for a pickup," he said, growing even more irritated when Lemar looked past him to Addison then back at him with a huge smile.

"I'm off-duty." Lemar grinned harder. Henry may have also mentioned to him that Addison lived next door to him.

He didn't bother waving as Lemar drove away laughing. When he turned around, he came face to face with Addison as she shut her car door. She had on the same big glasses she'd been wearing the first time he'd met her, but he realized they magnified her hazel eyes. The tortoise shell pattern brought out specks of gold in them, and he got lost in examining them.

She glanced at his bag then stepped closer to peek inside. "Do I smell Mabel's chicken salad in there?"

"Yeah." He tore his eyes from her face and looked inside the bag too, which had the added bonus of giving him something to pretend to look at instead of her. "There's a

veggie sandwich in here, plus fruitcake. She said you loved her fruitcake.”

Addison grimaced. “Peyton loves the fruitcake. I pretend to love it to keep from hurting Mabel’s feelings, but I can’t stand the sliminess of the cooked fruit.” Her eyes went back to him.

“I hate it for the same reason.” So they did have one thing they could agree on. “My mum tries to feed it to me every Christmas. I had Mabel throw in a couple of peach pastries, just in case.” He tried to look at a spot on her neck to keep from being sucked back into her eyes, but her neck was long and slim.

“Peach anything is my favorite, especially when it’s something made by Mabel.” She kept her neck stretched toward him, which—naturally—made him think about kissing it. It was that brilliant a neck. And he was still thinking about it when she spoke again.

“So where are we going to eat all of this?” She looked at the pile of rubble behind her, then at Cecil’s, which currently didn’t have any furniture.

“I thought we could go down to the beach.” He winced, realizing what he’d forgotten. “I brought a blanket, but I’ve left it in Lemar’s car. Do you mind sitting in the sand?”

“I don’t, but I’ve got you covered.” Addison popped the trunk to her car and pulled out a plaid blanket. “I always come prepared.”

“Brilliant! Beach picnic it is.” He began walking toward the path, but Addison didn’t follow.

“You know this is strictly business, right? I’m not going to go easy on you because you bought me my favorite sandwich in the whole world.” She put a hand on her hip. Today her t-

shirt read, *This is My Green Recycling Earth Day March for Science Save the Planet Environmentalist Shirt*.

“So your shirt tells me.” He nodded toward it and her gaze followed his. She pulled the hem in order to read it, as though reminding herself which environmental warrior shirt she’d put on that day.

She broke into a smile that made his heart plummet. “Good. Glad we’ve got that cleared up.”

They began their walk to the beach, careful to stay on the boardwalk to protect the dune flora that slowed erosion. “The veggie sandwich is for you, by the way,” Henry said before they’d gone far. If they were keeping things all business—which, obviously, was the right thing to do—he wasn’t eating veggies for lunch.

“Oh, bummer. Mabel’s chicken salad is my favorite.”

Maybe watching her almost skip down the path did it, but within point five seconds his resolve crumbled.

“We can share.”

Chapter Eight

Addison

If Henry hadn't taken the death of his sweater—jumper—so well, Addison never would have agreed to meet him. She was hungry enough that she may have been more persuaded by Henry's charms than she would have been if they hadn't been accompanied by Mabel's chicken salad. She couldn't resist that chicken salad any more than she could resist Henry's eyes. No man should have lashes that thick or long. Or eyes that color of blue. They reminded her of the ocean on a cloudy day, dark as the gray sky it reflected.

But there was little dark about Henry. He seemed to be pretty optimistic about life in general, especially as he talked about The Coral Monarch renovation.

"I thought Will was crazy when he told me about it, but its location intrigued me. I really tried to incorporate more of the natural environment into Cecil's old place and the new one we want to add to it," he said as he took a piece of the peach tart, then passed it to Addison. They'd already polished off both sandwiches, sharing both equally.

"I saw that in your designs, but there are some things that will have to change." Surprisingly, not many. Although if he really had found turtle nests that might change things.

“That’s all right. The more time I spend here and get to know the locals, the more I want to protect not just Brittany Cove but all of Sweetgrass.” He scraped the last bit of peach tart off his fork. “That was excellent.”

“You don’t have to pretend to love the environment to get me to okay your plans. They’re almost there, depending on this potential sea turtle situation.” She brushed off her hands on her pants, then stood. Technically this was a work appointment, but she couldn’t stay all day. “Why don’t you show me where you think they are?” She was skeptical that Henry actually knew what to look for, but he might surprise her.

“Happy to.” He crumpled the paper the sandwiches had been and stuck it in the sack. “We can just leave this here, right?”

Her head snapped in his direction, and she narrowed her eyes to a dangerous slit.

“I’m joking.” He laughed, then made a production of picking up the bag and a sliver of plastic wrap from the blanket. “Leave no trace. That’s my life motto.” His mouth slid into a sideways grin, and hers involuntarily followed. “But really, I’m not an idiot. I want to keep this place beautiful, and the look on your face was priceless.”

“Ha ha.” Addison turned away from him to hide her smile as she folded up the blanket. She’d never minded being teased. Her dad was a master at teasing her mom, and they were always laughing together.

Landon, on the other hand, hated teasing. At least when it was directed at him. He’d teased Addison a lot, but never in a way that made her laugh.

Henry took the blanket from her and tucked it under his arm, leaving her hands free but his full since he was already carrying the bag with their garbage.

“You remembered I love peaches, and you’re trying to be the perfect gentleman? Keep it up, and I just might forget about our first meeting,” she said as he led her further down the beach.

“And our second meeting?” He grinned over his shoulder.

“Oh, I’m not forgetting that you forgot me.” A soft breeze carried the scent of his cologne to her. It blended with the lingering smell of peaches and butter-laden pastry to create a perfect summer day.

“I didn’t forget you, I just didn’t recognize you. You’re fairly unforgettable.” He stopped and pointed, but not before her pulse skipped in response. “Don’t those look like turtle tracks?”

She shook her head to clear it and remembered what they were actually talking about.

Turtles.

They were talking about turtles. Not about her being unforgettable.

“Oh.” Henry lowered his hand. “I thought they looked like the same sort of flipper pattern we saw on Sullivan’s.”

“Oh, no, that’s not why I was shaking my head...” She let her words drift away and turned her attention to where he’d been pointing. And then she had no trouble keeping her focus where it was supposed to be.

“Those are tracks!” Addison walked quickly to them, careful not to step on any of them. They led to a series of sand dunes not two hundred feet from the what would soon be part of The Coral Monarch. “How did you know that’s what they were?” She hadn’t pointed them out on Sullivan’s.

“I noticed them near the nests at the other beach and wondered what they were. Then when I saw them here the

other day, leading straight from the ocean, I started wondering if they were turtle tracks. They rather looked like flippers.” He followed her as she inspected the sand. “I googled what turtle tracks looked like and, boom, mystery solved.”

Addison looked at him in amazement. The tracks were pretty obvious if you knew what to look for, but so many of her friends still couldn’t pick them out, no matter how many times she’d taken them to see fresh tracks. Landon included.

“I literally could kiss you right now, Henry! You have no idea what this means.” She couldn’t help it. She had to give him a hug. Just a quick one—nothing romantic about it. An arms-flung-around-him-in-joy hug where she pinned his arms to his side.

When she stepped back his cheeks were flushed a deep red. “Well...You...I mean...” He ran his hand through his hair. “I’m glad I could help. I didn’t realize it was such a big deal.”

Addison stood back from the dunes, studying them until she was fairly certain she knew where the nest was buried. “It’s a very big deal. We haven’t seen turtles on this island before. They lay eggs in the same spot where they were born. Sweetgrass is just far enough off course of the currents they follow to get here that it’s very rare for a turtle to lay here.” She took a notebook from her backpack and jotted the location of the nest, estimating its distance from the road and Henry’s property.

“Wow. Brilliant.”

She looked up from her notebook. “You know you say that a lot.”

“What?” A quizzical look crossed his face.

“Brilliant.”

He broke into a smile and shrugged. “It’s an English expression.”

“I like it,” Addison said quickly, before finding something else that absolutely had to be written at that very second. After putting her notebook away, she could look at him again without wanting to stare at his eyes. “Let’s go back to the property, and I’ll give you suggestions for your next proposal. Although, the nest being this close will require even bigger changes.”

“How so?” Henry’s brow creased with worry.

“In the next few years, if we’re lucky, you may have even more nests here as the turtles who are about to be born return. That’s going to affect what kind of outdoor lighting you can have, when you’ll be able to use it, how many guests will be allowed on the beach.” There was more, but she didn’t want to overwhelm him all at once. And, the fact was, because they hadn’t had sea turtles in this part of Sweetgrass Island, Brittany Cove didn’t have any ordinances regarding them.

That would have to change, and it was her job to make sure it did.

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” he said more nervously than confidently.

“Uh huh.” She followed him to the property, but her mind was still on the nest. “The tracks only look a day or two old, so the eggs should hatch in early October. Right here on Sweetgrass. I may actually get to see it.”

“What happens when the eggs hatch? Does their mother come back?” Henry stepped off the path to let Addison go first.

“Nope. Mama Turtle lays the eggs and heads back to sea. Her babies have to dig themselves out.” Luckily this mama had buried her eggs close enough to the water that the hatchlings wouldn’t have too many obstacles to overcome when they did hatch and head for the ocean. “This is a good

spot. They'll have an easier time getting to the water than most hatchlings do."

"How do they know to go to the ocean?" Henry asked.

Addison could feel him close behind her, and she resisted the temptation to slow enough to walk side by side on the narrow path. Because, business. This was strictly business.

"They usually hatch at night and go toward the first light they see—the moon reflecting over the ocean." Sweat crept down her back as they approached the property, and she was relieved to see Peyton's car there. She'd liked being alone with Henry too much to trust herself.

"So the fact there aren't many houses here with bright lights helps?" He pulled up next to her as the path widened into the property, and again she caught a hint of his cologne.

"Yep." She was more than a little impressed he'd figured that out on his own, but she tried not to show it. "If there are bright lights on the beach, they'll go toward those instead of toward the sea. That's why it'll affect the lighting you can install at the hotel. If the nests aren't covered by wire, people may walk or drive over them, packing the sand down so tight the babies can't dig themselves out; raccoons, coyotes, dogs, and even crabs really like eating them. Basically, it's babies fighting the big, bad world all by themselves." She walked toward Peyton's car but didn't see her anywhere.

"And it's your job to save them?"

"Well, not just mine."

"But mostly yours?" He was teasing again. She could tell by the ways his eyes were dancing.

"Yes. Mostly mine. I'm very important to turtles everywhere. I'm, like, their superhero," she teased back.

“Cape or no cape? Or a shell? I bet you have a shell.” He patted her back. “You’ve disguised it very cleverly. I can’t even feel it.”

“I’m very good at disguises. All I have to do is twirl and suddenly the environmental scientist clothes are gone, and I’m the fifth Ninja Turtle. Supermodel Ninja.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing that.” His eyes traveled over her, and her face colored at the realization she’d said something about her clothes being gone. “Supermodel Ninja to the rescue.”

“Saving one turtle at a time,” she said softly, then turned toward Mr. Cecil’s property, her face still warm.

“So will you have to put up those mesh things, like at the other beach?” He stepped in front of her and jogged backward. “Wolf urine and all?”

She nodded, impressed he could walk backwards and somehow miss the roots of the trees or divots in the ground. “I’ll come back tonight to do it after work.”

Henry’s luck ran out, and he fell backward. Garbage flew out of the bag, landing on his chest.

Addison let out a laugh then covered her mouth.

Henry glared at her. “And I was about to ask if I could help you.”

She picked up the empty containers and stuck them back in the bag. “I’m sorry. I was just waiting for that to happen.”

Once Henry was back on his feet and Addison had quit laughing at him—not with, very much *at*—she considered what he’d offered.

She didn’t know how many times she’d begged Landon to volunteer with her or just come with her to set up barriers. He’d promised to, but then always backed out. She hadn’t

even been able to get Peyton to come out with her, for that matter.

“If you’d like to help, that’d be great,” she said softly.

It would have been easy to round up some volunteers, but she kind of wanted to keep the nest secret. At least for a one more day. Obviously, she couldn’t do it forever, but for right now the nest felt like hers, and she wanted to keep it that way.

Except, technically, if anyone could lay claim to the nest it would be Henry since he’d discovered it.

“Brilliant! Can I do the wolf urine part?” His eyes lit up like her brother’s had when they were kids and he’d been able to play all day without coming inside. Because, male anatomy.

“That’s why you want to do this? For the wolf urine? Do you care about the turtles at all?” They’d reached the property, and Will and Peyton’s voices traveled down The Coral Monarch’s corridor. As if by silent agreement, Henry and Addison both stopped and lowered their voices, as if to stretch their last moments together a little longer.

“I care very much for the turtles. I’m also strangely curious about the urine. Or, maybe more so, how one goes about collecting wolf urine and then selling it. Is there a market for it beyond Supermodel Ninja Turtles intent on saving all the world’s turtles?” He tapped his lips as though contemplating one of life’s great mysteries.

This wasn’t Addison’s first conversation revolving around wolf urine—it was a frequent topic among the S.C.U.T.E volunteers—but it was definitely the most entertaining. And definitely the first time her chest had fluttered while discussing the topic. “I will give you all the enthralling details this evening. And I’ll bring the sandwiches this time. You like veggies, right? And fruitcake?”

“Love them both. Nothing like canned fruit to ruin a perfectly good cake and veg to ruin a perfectly good sandwich.”

Addison laughed. And then they both laughed. And then they were looking very intently at each other and standing close enough to feel that intensity. Close enough that Addison could have done what she'd threatened earlier. Literally kiss him.

And she wanted to. Really a lot. More than she'd wanted to kiss anybody in a long time. Maybe even more than she'd wanted to kiss Landon before he'd broken up with her.

So, she stepped closer.

Henry followed, and they were very definitely within kissing range.

Chapter Nine

Henry

Henry wanted to kiss Addison. He knew he shouldn't, but that didn't stop him from moving closer to her. She didn't back away. She didn't even look away. In fact, the only thing she did do was lick her top lip with the tip of her tongue. As though she was inviting him to taste the salty air on her lips.

And he would have accepted that invitation if not for Peyton.

"There y'all are!" She called from the far side of the corridor. "We were wondering where y'all were hiding!"

Will didn't say anything. His smirk said it all. Henry had seen it every time he'd shown any interest in a girl and didn't let Will know about it first. Case in point, Clarissa Barclay. Will had seen Henry flirting with her in the Commons at university their freshmen year and had not only given him that same look but then proceeded to steal Clarissa from him. He hadn't been mean-spirited about it, he just wanted to prove the point that he could steal a girl from Henry, especially a girl like Clarissa who changed boyfriends more often than her shoes. And she had a lot of shoes.

Addison hurried toward Peyton and away from Henry. “We’ve been here for hours. Where have you two been?” She asked in a sing-song voice that made Peyton blush and Will beam.

“Nowhere. I don’t know what you’re trying to imply, Addison McCrae, but you need to get your mind out of the gutter.” Peyton cocked a hip and put her hand on it.

Henry watched it all, still frozen in place by disappointment. He hadn’t realized how much he wanted to kiss Addison until he’d lost the opportunity. Their afternoon together had been genuinely perfect. He’d expected it to be a simple lunch with an acquaintance he wanted to get to know better, but it had ended up being so much more. They’d talked. They’d had fun. She was so much nicer than she’d been the first few times they’d talked. They were on their way to being friends.

And then she’d hugged him. A friendly hug but having her so close had sent unexpected shivers down his spine. She smelled like summers in Cornwall. Citrusy with a hint of fresh seawater and a splash of sunscreen. When she let go, she left behind a feeling of happiness mingled with longing. He missed his family, but the longer he was in Charleston and worked on *The Coral Monarch*, the more confident he became that he could be successful without them and that success would help bridge the breach he’d created.

Which brought him back to the present. “Addison was just about to tell me what needs to change in my proposal.” He walked to Will and Peyton but kept his distance from Addison.

As much as he’d wanted to kiss her a minute ago, now that his senses were clearer he realized what a mistake that would have been. He couldn’t be the reason for her work being compromised in any way. She’d made that very clear, and he needed to respect that position. He had no idea what had led to

that moment of weakness on her part, but for him it was the loneliness that came from being somewhere new. He felt certain of it.

Even if that reasoning didn't necessarily explain why he found himself so attracted to her. Beyond looking at her, he'd really enjoyed talking to her over their picnic. Her passion for sea turtles and the environment fascinated him, and he liked hearing her talk about both. He couldn't remember ever feeling so passionately about something, and he envied her a bit for having a cause to be committed to.

An important something. He knew plenty of people who were passionately committed to making money or being invited to the most important social events. These things weren't important. They didn't make a difference in more than that person's life or to the world at large. But what Addison was fighting for did. The earth was a fairly important place, and he had to agree with her that it would be nice to keep it around a bit longer.

And turtles? Well, he'd never really thought much about them until Addison explained all the dangers they faced and why they were so important to the environment.

"Without sea turtles," she'd told him, "ocean ecology would be totally off balance. They're essential to healthy seagrass beds and coral reefs where other sea life live and thrive," she'd explained, her face lighting up with excitement. "I should take you to the Charleston Aquarium to meet my friend Avery. She can show you all these really cool exhibits on the local ocean ecology." He'd decided right then he wanted to help protect the nest he'd found. Although he'd only been scuba diving a handful of times, thinking about losing any of the amazing marine life he'd seen made him want to do his part, even if it was just sprinkling some wolf urine over protective wire cages.

“Henry?” Will said his name, and by the confused look on his face, Henry realized he’d said it more than once.

“Yeah?”

“Addison said you found a turtle nest.” Will’s mouth curved into a sly smile, as though he were sussing out what was distracting Henry.

“I did. I’m going to help her put a barrier around it tonight. Have to keep my little hatchlings safe.”

His joke did nothing to wipe away Will’s grin. “Just the two of you, then?”

“You and Peyton are welcome to come too,” Addison said, her words rushing out. Like she wanted to make sure she wasn’t alone with him again. “I’m sure Henry won’t mind sharing urine duties.”

“Not at all.” He shrugged. The key was to play it cool in order not to let on how disappointed he was that she’d invited Will and Peyton. Maybe he could convince himself he didn’t care either way.

“Urine?” Will raised an eyebrow.

“Wolf urine. The smell keeps predators away,” Henry explained, involuntarily glancing at Addison. *Had her lip quirked into a smile?*

“Really?” Will’s eyebrow went down. “That does sound interesting.”

“We have that thing tonight, or we totally would,” Peyton hurried to say.

Will looked down at her, his eyebrows squished together in confusion. “What thing?”

“The *thing*,” she said forcefully and slipped her hand through his arm. “With my parents. I can’t remember the name of it.”

“Oh, that thing.” Will nodded, catching on, though Henry doubted there was actually anything to catch on to.

“Huh uh.” Now it was Addison’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “The *thing*.”

“What? There is a thing.” A smile played at the corner of Peyton’s mouth. Addison’s did not follow.

“How about we go through that report?” Henry asked, growing more uncomfortable the longer Peyton and Addison stared each other down, Peyton holding back a grin while Addison pressed her lips together and crossed her arms.

“Actually, now that we know about the turtle nest, I have to add some more requirements.” She kept her eyes on Peyton. “I’ll give you my recommendations in the next day or two. I don’t really need to go through the property.”

Peyton’s grin disappeared, and she tilted her head to the side, staring at Addison. Henry didn’t know what was going on between them, but he suspected it had something to do with Peyton’s very unsubtle attempts to get him and Addison together.

“Brilliant plan. I’ll walk you to your car.” He put his hand near Addison’s back, but stopped himself before touching her. He dropped it back to his side and followed her out the door.

“Everything okay between you two?” he asked once they were out of earshot.

“Completely fine,” Addison said through clenched teeth.

They walked a few feet in silence before she spoke again. “I’m really okay walking to my car by myself.”

“All right then, what time tonight?” He stopped, but she kept walking.

Only then did she stop. She turned, examining him like a Cadbury bar she wanted but knew she shouldn’t have. He held

his breath waiting for her decision. To bite or not to bite.

“You need help,” he said, more hopefully than he’d meant.

She bit her top lip, and he couldn’t help staring at it, wondering what it would have been like to kiss it. “I’ll be done with work around six. I’ll be by then.”

He smiled as she walked away, hating himself for not being able to take his eyes off her until she was in her car. Even then, he watched until she turned the corner and disappeared out of sight.

Which was utterly ridiculous and did not go unseen by Will or Peyton. Both of whom had a number of things to say about his “watching her longingly” for the next few hours as they did some cleanup on the Aiken property. Their teasing only stopped when he threatened to never show them where the turtle nest was and to make sure Addison didn’t either.

Addison arrived at just after six o’clock but without the promised sandwiches. “It’s better if we don’t smell like food,” she explained. “That might attract predators.”

He wasn’t sure he believed her, especially since Stand-Offish Addison rather than Surprise-Hug Addison had shown up. It might be that Peyton’s comments had gotten to her, and she was pushing him away before he could get close.

Or maybe it was the fact he’d almost kissed her when they’d only known each other a short time, and today was the first time they’d really been nice to one another. That had been a huge tactical error—the near kiss, not the being nice. Addison had made it abundantly clear that she needed to keep their relationship professional. Even friendship would be a stretch.

“That makes sense,” he said, making sure not to get too close as he helped her unload supplies from her car. “Just tell

me what you need me to do.”

She handed him a plastic container. “First order of business is to make sure you don’t spill this.”

“No walking backwards. Got it.” His smile quickly disappeared as the smell from the container hit him. “The secret weapon, I take it. I’d stay away too.”

“The secret weapon. It doesn’t wash off easy. You’ve been warned.” Her mouth twitched at the corners giving him hope he might yet get Surprise-Hug Addison. If he got a few more smiles and managed to go home not smelling like wolf pee, he’d call the night a success.

Henry carried the urine at arm’s length as he followed Addison to the beach. She pulled a wagon full of stakes, orange flags, and heavy wire mesh.

“Tell me how all this works,” he said as they walked.

“We’re going to wire these pieces of mesh together to make a type of cage so we can surround the nest on top and around the sides. The cage has to be deep enough to keep out crabs. Then the weave of the mesh has to be wide enough for the turtles to crawl through when they hatch, but not wide enough for coyote, raccoon or dog paws. The wolf urine should also scare them away because wolves are bigger predators.”

“Are there wolves around here?”

“No, but there used to be. It’s in the smaller animals’ DNA to recognize larger predators, so the urine usually keeps them away. But not always.” Addison’s shoulders were starting to relax, and even though Henry couldn’t see her face, he could tell by her voice that she was letting her guard down.

“Have you always liked science and nature? Every time you talk about it, I can hear the excitement in your voice. Maybe if I’d had teachers as enthusiastic as you, I would have

been more interested in all this stuff.” He shaded his eyes from the sun reflecting off the water while still being careful with his Very Important Package.

“I guess so.” She paused, then opened up more. “We stayed at the beach one year during hatchling season—I think I was five. My dad took me down to the beach to nests that were supposed to hatch. He thought I’d get bored waiting—there’s no way to know exactly when they’ll hatch—but I didn’t. When they didn’t come out that night, I made him take me every day and night until they finally did.” They reached the dunes and she dropped the handle of the wagon. “It was the most amazing thing I’d ever seen—still in the top ten best days of my life.”

“So you’ve wanted to be a scientist from that moment?” He set the container in a safe spot and helped her pick up the heavy mesh.

“I took some detours,” she said as she led him carefully around the nest. “Scientist isn’t exactly the career path my debutante training prepared me for—especially the environmental variety. I toyed with some of the careers my friends were going into—event planner, business, political science —”

“—political science is an okay kind of science?” He helped her set the cage down gently in the sand.

“That’s the kind of science that leads to tailored suits and business lunches rather than khakis.” She pointed him to the rubber mallet, and he handed it to her.

“Ah, got it. Lunches in fancy restaurants whilst wearing expensive suits, acceptable. Sandwiches and khakis on the beach, not as much so.” He held the cage while she pounded on the other side to anchor it in the sand.

“You’ve got Charleston figured out already.” She gave him the smile he’d hoped for, and he’d never been so glad to

handle wolf urine in his life.

“I do have some experience with not fitting the mold society has prepared for me.” He returned her smile, then added sadly, “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“Do you regret it? Being here, I mean?” Addison came to his side and motioned for him to hold the already hammered side steady.

He took his position across from her, then lifted his head to meet her gaze. The sun hung in the sky just above the horizon behind her, turning the wispy clouds pink and orange. She blew the hair out of her eyes, and he caught a glimpse of the flecks of gold in them.

“Not at this moment I don’t,” he answered.

And he was met with another smile that made his knees weak.

Chapter Ten

Addison

Addison should have called another volunteer to help her with the predator barrier. She had plenty of options who were far less single and less hot than Henry Spencer. Mary Lou Spangler, for example. Addison had absolutely no interest in the sixty-year-old grandma with bleached blonde hair and generous hips, beyond friendship. But, no, she'd been so confident in her ability to resist Henry's charms that she'd agreed to have him come with her.

In the words of Angelica Schuyler, Addison was an Icarus who'd flown too close to the sun. A setting sun that was currently bouncing off Henry's tan skin and bringing out the blond in his hair. Anyone who described the English as pasty white with crooked teeth had not spent a summer's day at the beach with Henry Spencer. Sure, they hadn't been surfing or fleeing from waves like other beachgoers, but that's what made it all the harder to resist him. He'd come to save turtles. What could be more attractive than that?

As he pulled the now-empty wagon up the beach for her, she couldn't hold back the question that had been eating at her for the last half an hour. "So, how have you broken the mold you were expected to fill?" She knew Will had broken his by

deciding to stay in Charleston, but, as far as she knew, Henry planned to return and carry on with his old life as soon as The Coral Monarch was done.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” she hurried to add. She’d already treaded into dangerous more-than-acquaintances territory by allowing him to help her. Her question was wading deep into personal territory.

“I don’t mind.” He slowed so she could walk by his side, which put them very close together. “My job is on the line because I’m not happy doing the same renovation work all the time, and I have no idea if I’ll return to London after this project is done. In fact, if The Coral Monarch goes under or can’t be completed, I have no idea what I’m going to do.” He kept his eyes forward, but she could tell his mind was somewhere besides on the path ahead of them.

“And I’m not saying that to put any pressure on you to approve my plans. I’m only answering your question honestly,” he added.

The knot in her chest that had been loosening since they’d started their walk to the beach came undone. She liked his transparency. So much of her life had been spent trying to say and do the “right” thing in order to please the right people that his honesty was a breath of fresh air. She believed him.

“Why is it on the line? Because of The Coral Monarch?” Her arm brushed against his, and her arms broke into goosebumps.

Henry took a deep breath. “I’ve been trying to take the firm in a direction my brother doesn’t believe my father would have wanted. I’ve been considering leaving all together, because I don’t feel like I’m getting the credit I deserve—which sounds very entitled, I realize—but it comes down to Marcus not trusting me. Not on this project and not on anything else.”

Henry took a deep breath and raked a hand through his hair. “I really want to be a part of Peerless Enterprises. It’s the smart move for Spencer & Sons to expand our business, and we can do so as the architects for Peerless. There are only so many old estates in England that need renovation. At some point they can’t all be deemed historical, nor can they all be saved.” He chewed his bottom lip, and even in the shadow of the setting sun, she could see the pain on his face. “Maybe it’s not so much that I don’t fit the mold as that my brother doesn’t think I’m good enough for the mold.”

Now he let his breath out, and his shoulders sank. “I never really put that together until right now.” Henry glanced at her and attempted a smile. “Sorry to lay something that heavy on you.”

Addison quickly shook her head. “It doesn’t feel heavy at all. It feels...” She took her own breath, sucking in the courage she needed. “It feels familiar.”

He waited, but when she didn’t go on, he nudged her elbow with his. “Your turn to spill. Don’t hang me out to dry.”

Addison let out a laugh. “My boyfriend broke up with me recently because I’m not the kind of girl he can take to meet his clients. I ask too many questions and talk politics.”

Henry stopped and looked at her. “His clients don’t like interesting conversations with an intelligent woman? What kind of business is he in? Nudie club owner?” He cocked his head to the side, his eyes as wide and curious as a puppy’s.

“Real estate.” Her heart pounded as her gaze met his.

He broke the connection between them and pulled the wagon again. “Well, he sounds barmy to me.”

“I don’t know what that means, but it’s not brilliant, right?” Her heart slowed, but she couldn’t stop the smile that had spread across her face.

He laughed. “The complete opposite.”

They walked on in silence until the path opened up into the Aiken property. Then, since Henry seemed to like the fact that she asked questions, she asked the one she’d been holding back. “Do you really think I’m intelligent? And interesting?”

He did a double take. “Are you being serious?”

She nodded.

“You just taught me all about sea turtles and their importance to the environment and this island, and you’re really wondering if I think you’re intelligent and interesting?” He talked lightly, like maybe he thought she’d been joking with him.

“Well, yeah. I guess so,” she said softly.

Henry stopped and turned to face her. “Addison McCrae, I don’t handle wolf urine for women I find boring.”

Her stomach leaped to her throat, and blood rushed to her cheeks. The tenderness in his eyes drew her closer to him. Close enough for the kiss that had almost happened earlier that day. Addison had thought she’d wanted Henry to kiss her then, but what she was feeling now was a thousand times stronger.

Henry swallowed and his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. His eyes were bright, and the rising moon shone behind him, a white circle in the middle of a blue gray, dusky sky that matched his eyes. Palmetto leaves rustled in the breeze with a soft shushing sound that made her want to curl up in Henry’s arms. He moved closer and dropped the handle of the wagon.

Just as Addison expected to feel Henry’s arms around her, a loud growl broke the peacefulness of the moment.

“Was that your stomach?” She took a step back, her eyes skimming over his very firm chest to his middle.

“You did promise sandwiches.” He crossed an arm over his stomach as another growl escaped.

Her mouth tugged into a smile. “How about soul food?”

“If it’s from Gillie’s.”

Her mouth fell open. “You’ve been to Gillie’s?” She’d been about to suggest Lou’s, but Gillie’s would be safer. They wouldn’t run into anyone who might question her ability to protect Sweetgrass Island if she were seen eating with the newest wannabe developer. Not to mention the fact—and she really hated to admit this, as much as she loved Magnolia Bay and all its businesses—Gillie’s was as good as Lou’s.

“My friend took me there. The night I met you, actually, although perhaps I shouldn’t mention it. I’d rather you wiped that encounter out of your mind.” Henry picked up the handle of the wagon and pulled it toward her car.

“Your friend? Who do you know besides Will and Peyton?” She hurried to catch up with him, her own stomach throwing a fit over being hungry.

“He’s the driver I hired. Lemar. He asked where I wanted to go, and I let him decide. He chose Gillie’s. I liked the food, but I liked him more, so I’ve had him drive me since. Apparently he used to be a tour guide, so he knows everything about Charleston, especially the stuff most people don’t want to hear.” Henry stopped at her car and waited for her to open it.

Addison, however, was standing a few feet away, mouth slightly ajar and blinking slowly. “Lemar? Do you mean Lemar Jackson?”

Henry nodded.

Addison raised her eyebrows. “Lemar Jackson took you to dinner and has been driving you all over Charleston?”

“You know Lemar?”

“Everyone in Charleston knows Lemar.” The words of Miss Emily from cotillion about flies and open mouths came back to her, and she closed her mouth. “His tours were the most popular in Charleston before he retired. He has a PhD in African-American history but decided to use it to educate the public through tourism rather than limit his knowledge to college elites. You’ve been here two weeks, and you’re his new bestie he drives all over?”

Henry shrugged. “I wouldn’t say bestie, and I am paying him.”

Addison shook her head and popped her trunk. “Whatever it is, it’s not enough. He made a fortune on his tours business. He doesn’t need your money. He’s doing you a favor telling you everything he knows about Charleston for anything less than a thousand dollars an hour.”

She folded up her wagon and put it and her tools in the trunk then slammed it shut. “You’re not paying him a thousand dollars an hour, are you?” If Henry could afford to not care about a ruined seven-hundred-dollar sweater, he just might have that kind of money.

Henry scoffed. “Remember how I told you I’m not the heir?”

“But you’ve got some kind of trust fund or something, don’t you?” She could have kicked herself for saying the question she’d been thinking about since she’d met him. She was grateful the sky was dark enough to hide the cheeks she could feel burning. “Forget I asked that. It’s none of my business. Do you want to follow me there?” she asked, wanting to get into her car as quickly as possible and escape the too-personal question still hanging in the air. She climbed in, then realized Henry was still standing outside the passenger side door.

She climbed back out. “You don’t have a car, do you?” she asked over the roof of her Prius.

“Do you see Lemar here?” He flashed a close-mouthed smile.

“Get in,” she ordered, but not without wondering if he’d planned all along for her to drive him home. It would make sense. After all, they lived in the same place. But had he just assumed she’d want to? Or had he hoped she would?

The air inside the car hung heavy with heat and moisture, and it didn’t get any cooler with Henry only a foot away from her. She flipped on the AC, which shot out a blast of hot air that fogged her windows. Addison wiped the front window with her fist as she pulled onto the road, trying not to breathe through her nose. The last thing she needed was to smell the hints of cinnamon and oak from his cologne when the car was already a sauna. No need to heat it up anymore.

“Bit stuffy in here, isn’t it?” Henry asked before putting down his window. Were his cheeks flushed?

“Humidity can get pretty bad on the island.” She rolled down her window, but the air outside was still too warm to cool her down. A bead of sweat trickled between her breasts, and it took every ounce of willpower to stop herself from wiping it away.

They traveled over the sea bridge in silence, but not the comfortable kind. She thought of everything she’d learned about him that day. Everything she liked about him. His understanding, his humor, his ability to make friends right away with one of the most well-known and well-liked figures in Charleston—at least among the people who didn’t think an old name determined your likability. That said a lot about Henry.

She hazarded a glance at him, and he caught her eye.

“Much of my trust fund is wound up in investments I can’t get out of at the moment without losing money.” A smile slid across his face sending sparks of electricity through her. That was not a question he had to answer or that she should have asked. Yet, he’d been completely honest about it.

Addison had found out about some of Landon’s bad investments through mutual friends and the newspaper. The fact Henry was open about his own mistakes should have been a point in his favor. Instead, it scared her.

Landon had always kept a part of himself hidden from her, which had made it easy to do the same. Addison could pour her passion into the things she really loved: Carolina’s shoreline and the marine life that lived there. She and Landon had always been able to retain their separate lives even when they were at their most serious dating-wise.

If she let this attraction to Henry grow into actual feelings, and he returned those feelings, she sensed she wouldn’t be able to hold anything back from him. Not if he was willing to open his heart fully to her. The thought frightened and excited her all at once. Did she want the kind of relationship that could possibly consume her?

Questions turned over and over in her head, even as she kept up a conversation with Henry. She let him do most of the talking so that she could do all her thinking. By the time they arrived at Gillie’s and Henry jumped out of the car to open her door for her, she was even further from finding answers than she’d been before she’d thought of the questions.

So, when in the middle of dinner she got a text from Landon, it seemed like the answer she needed.

Can I see you?

Chapter Eleven

Henry

Henry watched Addison pick at her shrimp and grits, wondering what had happened. They'd been talking throughout the drive from Brittany Cove to Gillie's, then she'd received a text and had gone quiet.

Henry had received his own text from Marcus but pushed it out of his mind in a way that Addison hadn't. She'd checked her phone over and over and stayed quiet through dinner, an impressive feat considering the cacophony of noise surrounding them. Music played over the speakers, filling the small space with steel guitar and banjo. People talked and laughed over the music, shouting to the waiters and the other patrons. The whole room was alight with joy, and he and Addison were a black hole in the middle of it.

"Are you all right?" he asked after she answered his question about what she wanted for dessert by muttering, "Sure."

"I'm fine." She gave her head a tiny shake then offered him a slight smile. "Just tired, I guess."

Henry suspected there was more than that to her sudden distance, but he had no idea what. Likely something to do with

the text she'd received. Had it been her ex? That's what he'd lay money on. Her face was too much like Will's after he'd received a text or call from Bianca: crestfallen and questioning. Henry might be jumping to conclusions about the prat, but Addison's ex sounded like a male version of Bianca. What kind of git would tell someone like Addison that she wasn't the "right" kind of woman to show off to his clients?

Addison met his gaze, and he quickly looked away.

He'd been staring at her.

He'd been staring at Addison McCrae, and he wanted to knock out her ex-boyfriend's teeth.

Blimey.

Henry raked his hand through his hair and stood. "Shall we head out, then?"

A look of confusion crossed over her face. "No dessert? We should at least pay the bill first."

Henry sat back down, feeling foolish. And not just because he'd tried to light out without paying. He was being foolish thinking about Addison as anything other than an acquaintance, no matter how much he'd enjoyed spending the day with her. She had made it clear the only kind of relationship she was interested in with him was a business one.

Yet, unless he'd completely misread the situations, she'd wanted to kiss him as much as he'd wanted to kiss her both times they'd come close. Both times *that day*. Even now, the thought of how close they'd been sent heat to every part of his body. He could still smell the citrus undertones of her perfume or whatever it was that had him imagining if her lips tasted like summer.

"Are we splitting the check or can this one be on me?" he asked as the waiter dropped off the bill. "You could think of it as my repaying you for an authentic sea turtle experience."

He expected her to say no, which was absolutely infuriating. No woman had ever turned him down. In fact, they were usually falling all over themselves to get an invitation to dinner with him. So why was he so drawn to this woman who had no interest in who he was or where he came from? Addison McCrae treated him like anyone else. She didn't put on a show for him or try to impress him in anyway.

And that, he decided, is where the attraction lay. It was just a matter of him not getting what he wanted. If they had kissed, he would have already lost interest in her. Keeping that perspective was the key to not falling any harder for Addison.

And, he realized, he was staring at her again.

But she hadn't refused his offer to pay. In fact, she was staring into space.

"That's not a bad idea, actually," she said as he took the bill.

"What?"

"An authentic sea turtle experience." She turned her eyes to him, and for the first time since they'd arrived at Gillie's, Addison really looked at him.

"What do you mean?" He cursed to himself as he got sucked into her eyes. He'd have to avoid looking at those if he were going to keep his head on straight.

"Magnolia Bay, and Brittany Cove in particular, are remote enough that we don't get a lot of tourists. The Wayfarer has been the only hotel for generations, and the residents here don't want that to change, but they also need the income from tourism or the businesses in Magnolia Bay won't survive. Sweetgrass Island won't survive. The next hurricane will wipe us out financially." She pulled back her shoulders, and her whole face lit up with the confidence he found so beguiling.

“I’m not following.” But he wanted to, and that meant he was in trouble. He’d turn out as bad as Will if he didn’t tread carefully.

“Older residents are talking about selling out to the big chain hotels that want to come in. They’re being offered a lot of money, but if we set Brittany Cove up as a kind of turtle sanctuary where their nests could be relocated, we could prevent that from happening.” Addison pulled her notebook out of her backpack and started writing.

“What would that do to The Coral Monarch?” As attracted as he was to her, he still had to keep his business in mind.

“That’s what I’m getting to.” A smile spread across her whole face. “Y’all could market it as an eco-tourism adventure where your guests could learn about sea turtles and conservation, and possibly see the hatchlings emerge if they’re here at the right time of year. You could keep a turtle expert on staff—there are hundreds of volunteers who would fight over that job.”

“Okay...I’m listening.” He didn’t hate the idea, it was just not what any of the gents had had in mind when they’d purchased The Wayfarer. They’d pictured a nice little beach hotel.

“I know I’m throwing all this at you a million miles an hour, but I’m going to be honest. You’re going to have a hard time getting any plans approved once the Sweetgrass Commission learns we’ve got turtles.” She tapped her pen on her pad. “The bigger islands are always getting into it with South Carolina’s Department of Natural Resources and other environmentalists because the island commissions have allowed too much development and tourism that hurts the turtles. Sweetgrass isn’t having any of that.”

If he looked at her any longer, she’d have him agreeing to knock down The Wayfarer and what was left of the Aiken

place in favor of sand dunes for all the turtle nests in South Carolina. He and the gents would be procuring wolf urine instead of fine liquors for their resort.

“Are you telling me that unless we make our property a turtle sanctuary, we won’t be able to do anything with it?” Henry rubbed the side of his neck and kept his eyes pointed at Addison’s shoulder rather than her face. The ambient noise had turned irritating and now pressed in on him from all sides.

“Not exactly, but I do have an obligation to protect the turtles. Any new plans you submit will have to take that into consideration.” She kept her voice gentle but with enough firmness to let him know he was in for a fight.

Which was a pity, because he really did like her, but not enough to let her push him around.

“Peerless Enterprises isn’t going to agree to throw away all of our plans in order to become a turtle sanctuary. We’re not in the tree-hugging, or turtle-hugging, business.” What would Marcus say if he knew Henry’s hotel had become an environmentalist project?

I told you so. That’s what he would say.

“I’m not saying you have to throw out all your plans. I’m just *advising* you that those plans can’t infringe on turtle nesting grounds, but if you were careful about it, you could make the turtles a way to market the hotel and fill a niche demographic. Eco-tourism is becoming more profitable every year.” Addison shut her notebook and shoved it in her backpack.

“As profitable as just marketing The Coral Monarch as a hotel for everyone, not just the small ‘niche’ who enjoy staring at sand dunes until turtles emerge?” His voice rose as the voices at the bar did. Henry didn’t mean to sound as angry as he did, but Addison was also being ridiculous.

The waiter took away the cash Henry had set down, which prompted Addison to grab her backpack and stand. “Everything can’t be about profits, Henry. At some point businesses have to care about the environment or there’s not going to be any beach left to enjoy.”

“Without any businesses, there won’t be a Sweetgrass Island to protect. You said it yourself.” Henry stood directly in front of Addison, not intending to block her way, but very intent on making her understand that she was asking too much.

Addison’s eyes turned cold. She swept her arm to his side and, literally, pushed him out of her way.

Henry was shocked enough at her strength that it took him a second before he followed her outside. Even then, he had a hard time keeping up with her despite the fact he had at least a half foot on her. Finally, he caught her arm and turned her around. The hurt and anger in her eyes shot through him. She glared at the fingers he had wrapped around her arm, and he let go.

“I’m sorry.” Heat ran through his hand. He hadn’t hurt her—not even close, but what right did he have to touch her? As much as he wanted to hold her, whatever attraction he had toward Addison had to be kept in check.

Addison unlocked the car and climbed in without a word. Henry opened the passenger door but thought better of getting in.

“It’s probably best that I get a ride.” He hoped she’d disagree.

She stared straight ahead. “Probably.”

He sighed. “I’ll do what I can, Addison, but profits have to come first for us. We have loans to repay and other... obligations.” Not necessarily financial ones, but each of the gents had an obligation to uphold their family names.

Henry shut the door, and Addison pulled away. He waited until she'd turned the corner before pulling out his phone and texting Lemar. *Can you give a poor chap a ride?*

Twenty minutes later, Lemar arrived.

"Thanks, mate," Henry said as he buckled his seatbelt.

"No problem. I started charging the minute I got your text." He winked at Henry then slapped him on the back. "What's got you down? You were all excited when I dropped you off to see the turtle nests."

"That's before I knew those nests and Addison McCrae were going to be my downfall." Henry tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

"Ah, I knew you liked her."

Henry didn't even try to argue that point. He didn't know Lemar well, but he knew enough to recognize Lemar knew how to read people. He'd see through Henry, so what was the point in denying anything.

"She wants us to make the hotel some kind of eco-tourism turtle sanctuary adventure." Saying it aloud only made it sound all the more outrageous.

"But she's okay with you keeping it a hotel, even if the turtles are on the beach?" Lemar prodded. He sounded like Will, a barrister trying to trip up a witness.

"Yes, but how could that ever be profitable? Revolving everything around keeping those turtles safe?" Henry was not going to let Lemar take Addison's side.

"I don't know. But I know I don't want to see that island over-run by people who put profits over everything else, be it humans or turtles." He turned onto the interstate, talking slowly and carefully. "But if Addison McCrae is trying to find a way for you to make that hotel work while still protecting

the beach and everything on it, you best listen to her. She's compromising where she doesn't have to. Everyone on that commission is like minded when it comes to keeping Sweetgrass small and safe from the erosion the other islands have suffered."

"Well, when you put it like that..." Henry let out a deep sigh. "I knew this whole thing was a bad idea. I should have listened to my brother."

"I don't know anything about that." Lemar's voice held a warning against Henry's feeling any sorrier for himself. When he spoke again, he did so in a softer voice. "Do you like Miss McCrae?"

"She's nice," Henry answered after a time.

Lemar laughed. "I think you think she's more than nice. Do you trust her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is she trying to keep you from doing what you set out to do? Does she know her stuff? Do you like talking to her? Do you want to tell her stuff you don't tell other people?" Lemar glanced at Henry with each question, and Henry thought about each of them carefully.

If Addison really wanted to, she could shut their whole project down, but she was trying to make it work. Perhaps because she was Peyton's best friend, but perhaps for other reasons too. She definitely knew her stuff. She'd proven that today. And he really liked talking to her. But also listening to her. He'd shared his feelings about his job and his brother with her in a way that he hadn't with anyone else.

Which meant...

Henry cursed.

Lemar laughed. “Didn’t I say you were in trouble? I’ve been married thirty-five years and each of my four kids is married. I know what love looks like.”

“I’m not in love with Addison McCrae.”

“No, but you’re in the beginnings of it.” Lemar’s laugh filled the whole car, booming like the inside of a speaker.

“I’m glad you think this is so funny.” Henry tried to sound serious, but he was having a hard time holding back his own laugh.

“Look, man, you like this girl, so show her that you trust her.” Lemar laid a hand on his shoulder, leaving Henry with a longing to talk to his father. Lord Spencer hadn’t been anywhere near as boisterous or open as Lemar, but he had given Henry plenty of good counsel throughout his life, even if he’d tried to steer Henry on the path he wanted for him, rather than the one Henry wanted for himself.

“That’s good advice. Thanks, mate.”

“Driving and therapy. I should be charging you more.”

“Addison said if I was paying you anything less than a thousand dollars an hour, I wasn’t paying you enough. I didn’t realize how well-known you are.”

“I’m famous, all right. And I knew that girl had to be smart.”

Henry smile and leaned his head back again. Tomorrow he would apologize to Addison first thing in the morning. Then he’d go through his second proposal with her and listen while she told him what he could do differently.

The sooner they got past all this proposal stuff, the sooner he might actually be able to take her on a real date.

Chapter Twelve

Addison

Addison didn't get far before feeling guilty for leaving Henry stranded on Folly's, but she let her anger build back up and suppress every ounce of guilt. She'd been trying to help him and the gents, and her solution was a good one. It might not be as profitable for them to make sea turtle protection a part of their mission, but they already had plenty of money. Far more money than the world had sea turtles.

She'd thought maybe Henry was different from most people who came to Sweetgrass wanting to enjoy its resources without respecting them. Treating the island as though everything on it would last forever. As though everything wasn't finite. Or as though its finiteness were an excuse to use its resources while they were still available rather than conserving them so they'd be available for future generations too.

The Henry she'd seen on the beach working hard to protect sea turtles was not the same Henry who'd freaked out at the mere mention of refocusing their mission to a more conservation-minded approach. But which one was the true Henry Spencer?

She wanted it to be the first, but she suspected it was the second.

About the time she approached the turn off into Charleston, her phone pinged. She glanced at it and saw another message from Landon. A simple *Addy?*

He was the only person who called her that, and her heart did a funny skip when she saw it. She'd never returned his first text. She'd thought about it, but she wasn't sure what to say to him. Did she want to see him? Had he asked her a few days before, the answer would have been yes. But even though she and Henry had been technically working, she'd enjoyed being with him. She'd enjoyed being with someone who, while not exactly sharing her passion, was at least willing to support her in it. Henry had listened to her talk about turtles for hours.

Landon had never done that.

But Landon had also never needed her to sign off on one of his projects.

Addison held the key to the gents' success with The Coral Monarch. It seemed Henry was willing to do just about anything to get the approval he needed from Addison, except actually listen to her.

Without thinking further, she changed lanes and headed toward Sullivan's Island. It was Friday, and Landon would be there at the beach house. For the first time in the history of their breakups, Landon had asked to see her before she'd caved and gone to see him. That fact couldn't be ignored. Maybe he'd come to his senses and seen that they had the potential to make a good team.

As she drove to the Tradd beach house, Addison kept her attention focused on thoughts of Landon to keep them from drifting to Henry. It worked as well as keeping an unmoored boat from drifting to sea. She couldn't put Henry's smile out

of her mind or the way he'd called her both intelligent and interesting.

Those words kept coming back to her as she parked her car and walked to Landon's door. She knocked softly, almost hoping he wouldn't answer. The lights were on, and she could hear the TV, so she knew he was there, but she'd turned back to her car with a sense of relief by the time he answered.

“Addy?”

Her stomach dropped at the sound of his voice, which she quickly chalked up to nervousness rather than disappointment.

“Hey.” She pasted on a smile. “I got your text and was in the neighborhood.”

His lips slid into a half-smile that bordered on snarky. Like he knew she'd show up. Because even though he'd sent the text, she'd been the one—again—to do the work of actually reconciling.

“Do you want to come in?”

She swallowed. “Sure.” It would be weird not to.

He waited for her to walk by him before closing the door behind him. She stopped in the foyer to wait for him even though he'd once given her a key to the house and she knew every room and object in it.

“Come sit down.” He brushed by her, and she followed him into the living room. Two wine glasses, one with lipstick, sat on the coffee table.

“Have you had company?” She waved her head toward the glasses.

“Mom was here.” He quickly picked them up and went to the kitchen, but not fast enough that she didn't notice the flush in his cheeks.

Addison sat and waited for him to come back. When he did, he was carrying a beer and a glass of wine. Red.

Her least favorite.

He handed the glass to her, then sat close. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Busy.” She swirled the wine in her glass and took a sip. “You?”

“Same. I have a few big deals getting ready to close.” He went into more detail than she was interested in, as he stretched his arm across the cushions, his fingertips landing lightly on her shoulder.

“I found a nest of sea turtles on Sweetgrass,” she said when he’d finished, even though he hadn’t asked her. “It’s the first time on record we’ve had them. I think it means our conservation efforts are working. We’ve found far more nests this year than we did last year, or any previous year, really.”

“That’s amazing, Addy.” His hand drifted to her shoulder and rested there.

“It is.”

A brief silence fell between them, and then his lips were on hers. The familiar scent of his musky cologne tickled her nose, and she fell easily into his kiss.

Too easily.

She felt none of the electricity that had pulsed through her in the moments before she’d thought Henry was going to kiss her, and none of the disappointment she’d felt when he hadn’t as Landon pulled away.

He took her glass and set it on the table, then moved closer. Without waiting for any kind of consent, he pulled her to him and kissed her again. Hard, with an uncomfortable insistence. There was no longing in his kiss, like he’d missed having her in his arms. Only power and a desire to take.

Addison pressed her hands against his chest, pushing him away before moving further down the couch from him. His brow wrinkled, but he sat back, a look of anger-tinged resignation on his face.

“That’s not why I came over, Landon.” She ran her thumb over her lips, still feeling his teeth on them.

“Why did you come over?” He took a swig of his beer.

She blinked back her hurt. “You said you wanted to see me. I didn’t realize it was a booty call.” Maybe she should have, based on previous experience.

Landon set his beer down. “It wasn’t a booty call. I wanted to see you. Tell me what’s been going on with you.” The anger was gone from his face, but not the resignation. Like he was going through the motions of acting interested in her life. Like he had to act like she was *interesting*.

“Just what I told you. Work and turtles. The usual.” She inched forward, moving slowly toward making an exit.

“I heard Old Man Cecil finally sold his property.”

She winced at hearing Mr. Cecil so casually called Old Man by someone who hadn’t spent his summers helping Mr. Cecil and Miss Coral at The Wayfarer with anything they needed in exchange for their stories the way she and Peyton had.

“He did,” she answered.

“I’m surprised a chain didn’t buy him out, but I guess Peyton had some sway over who got first dibs. I heard it’s her royal fiancé who got it.” Landon licked his lips with an unsatiated hunger. He hated to lose out on a property. Usually his name gave him first dibs.

“Will and his friends put in a lot of work helping Mr. Cecil fix his place up after Bianca. I think that had as much to do

with it as anything. Will and Peyton weren't even dating when the gents bought it."

"The gents?" Landon muttered through gritted teeth.

"It's the nickname Will and his friends call themselves..." It sounded so trite when she explained it like that, which Landon's eye roll only confirmed.

"They gave themselves a nickname? Pretentious much?" He took a long drink of his beer, side-eyeing her as he did.

"They really aren't." The way she'd explained it made them sound pretentious, but since she didn't know where the name had come from, she couldn't undo what she'd done.

"You're pretty close to them? Sounds like you've been doing more than working and saving turtles since we broke up." He swung his beer bottle in a slow circle, watching her carefully.

Her face heated, as though in agreement with Landon that she had something to be ashamed of. "I've only spent any time with Will and Henry, but they're both much more down to earth than you'd expect from the sons of earls," she hurried to explain while her face continued to grow hotter but from anger rather than shame. Why should she have to explain herself to Landon? He'd been the one who'd broken up with her, and she doubted very much that those were his mom's lip prints on the glass she'd seen.

"Why is it any of your business how I've been spending my time anyway? You dumped me, remember?" She scooted off the couch and walked around the back side of it to avoid going by him.

Landon jumped up. "You're right. It's not my business. I didn't mean to be rude."

Addison slowed her retreat and Landon came closer, but not within reach.

“I just wish I could have had a chance at buying The Wayfarer, that’s all. Doesn’t seem fair some foreigners were the only ones who got it.” He tapped the arm of the couch with his knuckle as he spoke, then hazarded a glance at her.

It wasn’t quite an apology, but it was closer than he usually got to saying *I’m sorry*.

“I didn’t have anything to do with that.” Her shoulders softened. Landon had a point. Maybe a property with The Wayfarer’s history should have gone to an investor who shared that history. Landon’s family was one of the oldest in Charleston.

“I know.” He offered a conciliatory smile, then wagged his head toward the sofa. “Stay a little longer?”

She should have said no, but Addison had always had a weakness for Landon’s softer side. He worked so hard to be the strong Southern gentleman whose success came easily and naturally. He liked to project the persona of an easygoing socialite who didn’t care about money but who always had it without showing any signs of having worked for it. But she’d seen how hard he worked. He came from money, but Landon Tradd was ambitious. He’d never been content to rest on his family’s laurels.

She nodded, then took a seat next to him. When he put his arm around her and nuzzled her neck, the affection between them felt as natural as it always had, even if there wasn’t much spark to it anymore.

They drifted into a conversation about some of Landon’s partners and who was dating who. This was safe ground for both of them. They knew all the same people, and while Addison was on the outside edge of Charleston’s elite, she knew them well enough to carry on a conversation about what was happening in their lives. Not that she liked gossip, but the subject never led to fights between her and Landon.

After a while, Landon turned on the TV. “You want to watch a movie?”

“Sure,” she answered with a yawn.

“What are you in the mood for?”

Before she could answer, he’d landed on one of the *Fast and the Furious* movies. Usually Addison would have protested, but the choice gave her an excuse to shut her eyes and lean against his shoulder.

Hours later she shivered awake. The room was dark, and Landon was nowhere to be seen. Addison checked the time on her phone. *Three a.m.* She considered driving home, but that would take far more energy than she had. Then she considered climbing into bed next to Landon but quickly dismissed that idea too.

She settled on getting a blanket out of the basket near the couch—an expensive Gullah basket she’d given Landon’s mother—then set her alarm for seven a.m. Landon never got up before nine on Saturdays.

Then she rolled over and went back to sleep.

The next morning, she left Landon’s and headed home before he woke, stopping only long enough to grab coffee from a place that used to be their favorite. It had nothing on Magnolia Mugs, but it would have to do. She’d been in her clothes for over twenty-four hours, and there was the tiniest scent of wolf urine on them. Perhaps that was the reason Landon had left her on the couch.

While waiting in line to order, she made an impulsive decision to order an Earl Grey, hoping it would stay warm until she got back to her apartment. When she got to her complex—and after pulling her hair up and popping a mint into her mouth—she walked past her own door and knocked on Henry’s door. She assumed he’d be awake since she’d often

heard the Beatles playing much earlier in the morning than she liked.

In fact, she thought she heard them now. She pressed her ear to the door and the melody of “Here Comes the Sun” greeted her. She smiled. That one she liked. Her dad had often sung it to her—sometimes still did—when she walked into a room.

Suddenly the door opened, and she stumbled inside Henry’s apartment. The only thing that kept her from falling flat on her face was his arms. He grabbed her and set her upright again, but not before she’d spilled tea down the front of his T-shirt.

“I’m so sorry,” she gasped, wiping at it with her free hand. It didn’t help, but she kept smoothing her hand over the stain, very aware of the muscles that lay beneath his T-shirt.

He put his hand over hers and took it off his chest. “I don’t think that’s helping. Come inside while I get something that will.”

She followed him to the kitchen, her whole body flooding with a warmth that could only partially be explained by her embarrassment. “Please tell me that shirt cost you less than seven hundred dollars. I’m going to owe you an entire wardrobe soon.”

He laughed and wiped at the stain with a wet dishtowel. “You’re safe. It’s something I picked up at Gap years ago.”

“Oh, this is for you. What’s left of it.” She thrust the tea toward him.

“Thanks. What did I do to deserve this?” He pulled off his shirt and walked toward his room. “Be right back.”

Addison stared after him, struggling to find words. She had vastly underestimated the muscles his shirt had hidden. “Um, it’s an apology tea,” she sputtered as he came back into

the room pulling a black tee over his head. “I didn’t mean to turn it into another I’m sorry.”

He laughed again and smoothed a hand over his hair to put it back in place. It didn’t work. A piece in front stuck up in a thoroughly adorable way.

“I’ll let you explain why you’re apologizing just after you explain why you were listening at my door.” His lip twitched into a teasing smile that both increased the heat coursing through her body at the same time it put her at ease.

“I thought I heard *Here Comes the Sun*. It’s one of my faves.” She took a seat at his counter as he sat on the barstool next to hers.

“Mine too. I love the Beatles.”

“So I’ve heard.”

His head tipped in a question.

“Our walls are very thin.”

He shook his head. “Well, now it’s my turn to apologize.”

“Me first. I got a little heated last night and shouldn’t have left you by the side of the road.”

He shook his head again but more forcefully. “No, you were completely justified. I’d planned on coming over this morning to apologize to you by actually listening to your ideas about The Coral Monarch and turtle preservation.”

“You were?”

“I was. So I would very much appreciate it if you would go home so I could follow through on my plans.” He grinned, but then his eyes traveled over her and the grin faded. “But maybe I should give you some time...” He drifted off, leaving something unspoken in the air.

Addison followed his eyes to her T-shirt and shorts.

The same ones she'd been wearing the day before. Her head shot up to meet his questioning gaze. She only hoped her face didn't reveal the answer as to why she hadn't changed her clothes.

Chapter Thirteen

Henry

If Addison McCrae falling into Henry's arms wasn't a literal sign from the universe that he should pursue her, he didn't know what other explanation there could be. One minute he was pacing his living room wondering what time he could knock on her door without waking her up. The next moment, there she was, spilling lukewarm Earl Grey all over him.

The tea could have been boiling hot and he wouldn't have noticed, so shocked was he that Addison had materialized out of his thoughts and into his front room. Wearing the same clothes she'd been wearing the day before, which caused him pause. But she was there, just the same.

Would she have come to his flat straight from someone else's house at eight in the morning? Straight from, perhaps, her ex's house? She'd likely fallen asleep in them. Though that didn't really answer the question as to why she wouldn't change before bringing him tea. Which she'd obviously gone out for.

"Want to come over in thirty?" Addison climbed off her barstool, not quite meeting his eyes and, unless he was mistaken, her ears were bright red. "I might could even dig up some tea for you since my first go-round didn't work so well."

“Brilliant. I’d love some tea not squeezed from my tee.” He let a sly grin creep across his face.

Addison barked a short laugh. “Clever. I’ll see you in a half-hour.” She walked toward the door, and he switched from wondering why she was wearing the same clothes as yesterday to being grateful he got to see her in the same cut-offs two days in a row.

After she left, Henry turned up his Beatles even louder so she wouldn’t hear him doing jumping jacks. He had to do something to burn off the adrenaline pulsing through his veins, and he didn’t have time to go to the gym.

Women didn’t usually make him quite so nervous, but Addison was different. Everything that women usually found attractive about him didn’t work on her. He’d tried charming her with no results. She didn’t care about his name, and she didn’t fawn all over him trying to flesh out what he liked so that she could like it too. In fact, she’d sucked him into her own passions.

Twenty minutes of jumping jacks, push-ups, and a quick shower later, he carried his laptop to her apartment. When she opened the door, she wasn’t wearing her cut-offs anymore, but she did have on a strapless sun dress thing in a yellow color that brought out the gold flecks in her eyes.

“Hey,” she smiled showing off the toothy smile he’d rarely seen. “Come on in. I found you some tea.”

She smelled like vanilla and...was it lavender? He liked lavender. The smell always soothed him. He followed her to the kitchen which mirrored his own. But unlike his gray and boring flat, she’d added touches of orange and blue that brightened the whole place.

“So, I have a question for you,” she said as she handed him a mug. “Do you listen to anything besides the Beatles? I mean,

they're good and all, but other bands have come along in the last fifty years. Even in England.”

He had to wait for the urge to laugh to pass before he could swallow his tea. “So I've heard, but I haven't found any that are as good.”

“Really?” Her eyes danced with light. “Because I could name, like, fifty just in the past ten years.” She led him to her davenport, her bare feet padding softly against the wood floor. Tiny droplets of water from her wet hair pooled on her shoulders, and he had to resist the urge to wipe them away with the tip of his finger.

“I'm positive you can name a hundred musicians, just as I'm positive none match the genius of John, Paul, Ringo, and George.” He set down his laptop bag and sat at the opposite end of the sofa from her. He wanted to be closer, but from a further distance he could better study her. The way she brushed her fringe from her eyes and pressed her hand to her chin as she listened.

“U2 is English. They're old, but more relevant now than the Beatles are, and their music is better.” She tucked her legs underneath her, pulling her dress over her knees. Her tan skin glowed against the yellow fabric.

“Irish.”

Her brow wrinkled in a question.

“U2. They're Irish.” He took another sip of tea. It was truly terrible tea, but drinking it gave him something to do with his hands and his mouth.

She waved a hand through the air. “Same thing, isn't it?”

Henry blinked slowly then set down his tea on the coffee table. “We're going to set aside your first misconception that any band can ever be as brilliant as—”

“You really do love that word—brilliant.” A smile played on her lips, which he met with a glare.

“As *brilliant* as the Beatles and tackle your even greater misconception about who is and who is not English.”

Her smile grew.

“Because if you ever happen to call someone who’s Irish English, well, I would hate to see the fight that would ensue. You’re tough, but you would not win.” He sat back against the cushions, grateful he didn’t have to try to swallow the tea anymore, but not quite sure how to pretend he wasn’t so nervous about saying something daft that his hands were shaky.

Then her smile covered her whole face. “Did you really think I don’t know the difference between the English and Irish? You are too easy to tease, Henry Spencer.”

She raised an eyebrow in a challenge that he couldn’t answer. He had seen glimpses of this Addison when she’d been with Peyton, but to see the whole show left him speechless.

“That’s certainly a relief. You’d have to be daft not to know U2 is Irish, but please tell me you were teasing about them being better than the Beatles.” He slung his arm across the back of the sofa, but only because it brought him closer to actual contact with her. Her bare shoulder was only inches from his fingertips.

“Oh, I wasn’t teasing about that part. They are better.” Her smile was replaced with her Very Serious face he knew so well.

“Perhaps we should change the subject before we hate each other again.” He was a little afraid of Very Serious Addison. Afraid of, but not in a way that made him want to run. Quite the opposite, actually.

“Good plan. Although, I never hated you, I just thought you were a tool.” Her serious face remained but her eyes danced with amusement.

“I am a bit of a tosser.”

“I don’t know what that is, but I’m not going to disagree with you.”

They went quiet but it wasn’t the awkward silence he’d experienced with her. This was a nice quiet with a slight undercurrent of energy. Like Regency Park on a pleasant summer day when people strolled the paths and soaked in the sun.

He wanted to soak in Addison in the same way.

“You ready to talk shop now?” she asked, breaking the spell.

“Talk shop?”

“Talk about what Peerless Enterprises can do to attract guests while also protecting turtles and their environment.” She untucked her legs and reached for the Macbook sitting on the table, glancing at his mug of unfinished tea next to it. “You still want this tea?”

“No, but thanks.”

“I’d offer you a beer, but it’s nine a.m.” Her eyes darted to his. “Please tell me you wouldn’t take me up on that.”

“It is two o’clock in England...” His lip pulled into a grin. “But I’ll hold off.”

“How very responsible of you.” She opened her laptop and set it on her lap. “Okay, let’s get down to business and see if you’re serious about following through on your ‘listen-to-you’ apology. I have some data I want to show you on eco-tourism. It’s a rising industry, and I think y’all have the potential to make good money doing it. Some of which I hope you’ll put

back into protecting the turtles who are going to be the driving force behind your success.”

She flipped her computer around to show him the graphs on her screen. “This group started ten years ago before eco-tourism was even a word but look how their profits have increased in comparison to other hotel groups.”

Henry studied the graph, then pulled out his own laptop. “What’s that website? I want to pull it up myself. Did you send me the new conditions that have to be met to get my proposal through? Let’s talk about how we can tie all this eco-tourism stuff into what you’re already requiring Peerless to fix.”

They spent the next three hours going back and forth about the direction Peerless could take if they were committed to truly making The Coral Monarch and their future hotels blend into the environments they were part of. The more ideas Addison proposed, the more excited Henry got. For years he’d been suggesting architectural fixes and changes to restore old estates to their original state with a few modern conveniences. He didn’t mind doing it, but the work didn’t require much creativity. Nor did it give him the opportunity to really leave his mark.

But The Coral Monarch and the changes Addison suggested could open up a whole new world for him. A world where he could embrace progress and change rather than recreating a past in order to maintain dying systems of power. The history of England’s aristocracy and landed estates was important to remember and preserve, but at some point, new history needed to be made.

By incorporating Addison’s ideas about eco-tourism and conservation into both his architecture and Peerless’s business plan, Henry had an opportunity to make history. He’d be marrying business and environmentalism into a cohesive example of how the two could work in harmony.

“Excuse my saying so, but I think you’re working far below your pay grade,” he said to Addison as they finalized the last details of the proposal he’d have to take to Will and Theo before submitting his re-drafted architectural plans that were even more environmentally friendly. “Sweetgrass Island Coastal Commission can’t be paying you much to do this kind of work.”

Her cheeks pinked. “I don’t usually put this much work into helping potential developers meet our environmental standards. And by ‘not usually’ I mean never.”

“I’m honored, although I suspect you’re doing it more for Will and Peyton than for me.” He shut his laptop and set it on the table, subtly moving closer to her as he did.

“Well, that’s definitely part of it—a big part—but I also want to start my own consulting business, and this is good practice.” She tucked her foot under her knee and faced him.

“What would that look like? Your own consulting business? You don’t seem to need much practice at it. Why wait to do it?” He’d met few women who had Addison’s passion or her knowledge. Not just about the environment, but also about the politics and economics that went into conservation. There were no easy answers, and no one political party that would get it right.

“Well, with the growing interest in eco-tourism across the world, I’d like to help corporations, like Peerless, figure out how to do it. But it’s a huge jump to go from what I’m doing now to marketing myself as an environmental consultant and finding clients willing to take a chance on someone with very little experience. Sweetgrass is a good place to gain experience I can use to ‘pad my resume’ so to speak.” She brushed her fringe away from her forehead in a way he’d seen her do a number of times, but each time he found it just as endearing.

“So, you need a client who will help you get your name out and build your reputation?” Henry studied her carefully, an idea percolating in his mind.

“Basically, yes.” She lifted her shoulder in a slight shrug.

“Why couldn’t Peerless Enterprises be that client? You’ve basically done all the preliminary work already. Why not consult for us on the whole project?” If the idea had been exciting to Henry, the look on Addison’s face told him it was a thousand times more exciting to her.

“Really? I mean, that would be incredible. I’d love to be part of it. I have so many other ideas I haven’t even told you about because I didn’t want to overwhelm you, but if I was consulting, I could just dump them on you every day.” Addison fairly bounced in her seat. Henry’s heart did the same as he watched her face light up.

“Give me an estimate of costs for what you’ve proposed so far and then what you’d charge to consult.” Seeing Addison so excited filled him with a sense of pride that he hadn’t felt for quite some time. Not the kind of pride that came from a good design, but the kind of pride that came from knowing you’d done something good. Altruistic, even.

“Oh, my gosh, totally. I’ll have to charge you the going rate though, because I’d have to quit my job. It would be a conflict of interest to work for the commission and act as a consultant for you.” She tilted her head to the side, holding her breath.

“Of course. I think the guys will want to help you out as much as we can. Especially Will. You’re Peyton’s best mate, after all.”

“That is so generous of you,” she breathed. “Thank you.”

If he were being completely honest, altruism wasn’t Henry’s only motive. He hadn’t needed Addison to tell him

she'd need to quit her job to work for them. He'd already thought that through, along with all the benefits that came with her not working for Sweetgrass's coastal commission.

"Perhaps...once you quit...you'll actually let me take you out for dinner. Or something of the sort." He swallowed hard, not daring to look in her eyes. He'd really be mucking things up if she wasn't interested. He genuinely wanted to use her as a consultant.

"I'd like that," she said in a low, breathy voice that sent shivers down his spine.

Henry moved closer to her, a smile spreading across his face. "Really?"

She nodded.

Another pleasant quiet settled between them, but this one had a decidedly more electric charge flowing beneath it. He looked deeply into her eyes which drew him closer, begging him to kiss her. And he so wanted to.

But not yet.

"I'm going to leave instead of kissing you right now because, well, conflict of interest." He stood and picked up his laptop. "But if you could get me that proposal right away, I'll take it to the others, and we can get working on it as soon as possible."

Now Addison stood, and she didn't even try to be outside of the potential kissing range. Henry swallowed again.

"Because I really don't want to wait much longer to kiss you."

"Then I don't think you should," she whispered before gripping his T-shirt and pulling him closer. She rose on tiptoes and leaned into him, kissing him lightly.

Henry was too surprised to do anything other than let her kiss him. But when she pulled away and lowered back to her feet, Henry wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her back to him. His hands rested on the curve of her back, and he leaned into Addison, his cheek brushing hers as he bypassed her lips to kiss her bare shoulder.

The first kiss was followed by another next to it, then another as his lips moved from her shoulder to her collar bone. He moved a hand from her waist to her cheek as his trail of kisses moved up her neck to her jawline. By the time he pressed his lips to hers, she greeted him with all the desire they'd both been holding back.

Chapter Fourteen

Addison

Addison had to call forth every ounce of willpower she possessed to pull herself away from Henry's kiss and step out of his arms. Even then she couldn't keep herself from running her hands down his chest as she stepped back.

"That was nice." She sucked in her top lip searching for one last taste of his mouth. "Really nice."

"We don't have to stop." Henry inched closer, and she pressed her hands against his chest.

"We do if I'm going to keep any measure of impartiality." A river of fire ran from her cheeks to her chest. She'd had plenty of practice kissing in her life, but no man had left her feeling quite so hot and breathless.

"I should go then." He stared down at her, not moving.

"You should definitely go." She very definitely didn't want him to and stayed planted in front of him.

"Okay, I'm going." He still didn't move.

"Okay." Her eyes darted involuntarily to the couch. It made an excellent makeout spot. And she suspected Henry

would make an excellent makeout partner, based on her preliminary research. Research she'd thoroughly enjoyed.

"When will I see you again?" he asked.

"The engagement party tonight." She'd almost forgotten about the party Peyton's parents were hosting. Of course, Henry had been invited. They could see each other there. It wouldn't be a date to be at the same event. They could hang out, no problem.

"We should probably drive together, shouldn't we? No reason for me to hire Lemar if you're already driving there. We can conserve fuel and energy." Henry nodded as he talked as though he'd found the answer to the world's greatest problem.

"Of course. For the environment." Addison joined him in nodding.

"I'll be here at six."

"It doesn't start until seven."

His mouth slid into a half-smile. "I know." Before Addison knew what had happened, Henry had pressed one more kiss to her lips, before walking quickly to the door. "I'll be thinking about you until then," he said as he slipped out the door.

Addison dropped to her couch as the door closed and pressed her fingers to her lips. She needed to put a little more time into their proposal in order to give the gents an estimate of how much everything would cost. She checked her watch then carried her laptop to her kitchen table. If she worked for a few hours that would leave her plenty of time to get ready for the party.

After five minutes, she couldn't sit still and decided she needed to pick out what she'd wear. She went to the closet where she kept the formal dresses she wore as infrequently as possible. After flipping through them twice she couldn't find

anything worthy of Henry. Which meant she needed to pull out the big guns.

Peyton.

More specifically, Peyton's closet. If she didn't have anything for Addison to wear, no one would.

I know this is your day, but I NEED a dress, she texted.

Within seconds, Peyton answered. *What's his name?*

Addison bit her bottom lip, considering whether or not to tell her. The truth of the matter was, she and Henry would have to keep a low profile in public until Peerless got official approval to move forward with The Coral Monarch plans. But something she hadn't considered was what it would look like if her first consulting job was working for someone she was seeing.

"Ugh," she muttered just as "I Want to Hold Your Hand" blasted from Henry's apartment.

A laugh replaced her frustration. They could cross that bridge if—no, *when*—they got there. Whatever the status of their relationship, her consulting work could speak for itself.

Right now, she had to prioritize.

I'll tell you soon, she texted Peyton, knowing her friend would be needling her from here until Christmas to spill.

Then she yelled from her living room, "Alexa, play U2 at full volume."

Be over with dresses in twenty. Will hold them hostage until you tell me, Peyton texted back.

"Playing U2's 'In a Little While,'" Alexa answered from the kitchen, as though she knew exactly how to answer Paul McCartney on the other side of the wall behind her.

Addison smiled, then went back to her work. With Peyton on her way over, Addison only had four—no, more likely three—hours to get her first consulting proposal done. And she would have to do it while trying to keep from exploding with excitement or daydreaming about kissing Henry again.

Just as she opened her computer, there was a knock at her door. Music was still blasting from Henry's apartment, but that didn't mean he wasn't the one at her door. She told Alexa to stop, then hurried to the door, not sure how she'd get anything done if it was Henry. Or how she'd explain to Peyton why Henry was there.

Addison's smile quickly disappeared as she opened the door and saw Landon standing there.

"Hi." He greeted her with a smolder that she suddenly had a hard time believing she'd ever fallen for.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, blocking his view into her apartment.

"You left before I could make you breakfast." He pulled his hands from behind his back and handed her a bouquet of daisies. At least he'd gotten that right. Daisies were her favorite. "Can I come in?"

She opened the door reluctantly and took the flowers from him. "I didn't realize you knew how to make breakfast." He'd never made her so much as a piece of toast.

"Well, I could have ordered some in." He flopped on to her couch and put his feet on the table, totally oblivious to the glare she sent him from across the room.

And why wouldn't he be?

Spending time with Henry had given her an idea of what it would be like to date someone who actually cared about what she cared about. She'd only known Henry a few weeks, but he'd already shown far more interest in her work and her

passions than Landon had. And he made her feel smart. The only things Landon ever complimented her about were her looks. Henry had only complimented her mind, yet she knew he liked the way she looked too. She'd seen that in the way his eyes had lingered on her when he'd seen her that morning. Both the first time and the second.

"You could have covered me with a blanket too, but you didn't do that either." Addison set the flowers on the counter. She'd decide whether they deserved a vase once she knew why Landon was there.

"Oh, yeah, sorry about that." He took his feet off the table and sat up straighter. "I figured you knew where they were if you got cold."

She took a seat at her kitchen table within his line of sight but with a safe ten feet between them. "I do know where they are, I did find one, and I'm glad you didn't bother to think of doing that for me before going to bed yourself. It made me realize that I'd be crazy to ever go back there or anywhere else with you again."

Landon flinched, then blinked slowly. She watched him process what had to be the first time a woman had been so blunt with him. He shook his head as though shaking off a hard punch. "You're that mad I didn't put a blanket over you?" His question seemed more out of disbelief rather than concern.

"No. I'm mad that I've wasted five years of my life with someone who thinks only of himself." She said the words without emotion. That she let roil around her belly, allowing herself to feel, for the first time in years, what she'd been pushing away. But she could only hold it back for so long before she'd explode, so she went to her door and opened it. "Peyton's on her way over, and I've got things to do, so you should go. And you shouldn't plan on coming back."

He took a lifetime to stand. Meanwhile her anger grew exponentially by the second, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her express any emotion about him.

Before walking out, he came within inches of her face and stared her down. "I'll be fine without you, but you're going to regret this."

"The only thing I regret is not doing *this* sooner." Addison glared back and didn't move until he walked into the hallway.

Once he was gone, Addison sank to the floor. She crossed her legs and tipped her head back against the metal door, its coldness smothering the heat burning through her. After three deep breaths, a lightness came over her that she hadn't felt in years. She closed her eyes and smiled.

It felt good to be free.

Moments later, there was a kick at the door followed by Peyton's voice. "Let me in, Adds. My arms are full."

Addison flung open the door to find Peyton's arms so loaded with black garment bags that she couldn't see over the pile. Grabbing an armful from her, Addison held the door with her foot while Peyton came in.

She shuffled into Addison's room and dropped the bags on the bed, then turned to Addison with her hand on her hip. "If you're planning to wear one of these dresses for Landon, you best find another dealer. I just saw him on my way in, so don't think you can hide anything from me."

Addison shook her head, then broke into a wide smile, "I just told him I never wanted to see him again."

Peyton's hand fell to her side and her eyes went wide. "For real?"

Addison nodded, still smiling.

“It’s about dang time. Except you’ll be seeing him tonight at my party. Which means you need a dress that’s not only going to make him wish he hadn’t been such a jackhole, and but that’s also going to make whoever your new guy is thanking God he met you.” Peyton unzipped one of the bags a few inches, smiled and hung the bag over Addison’s door.

“The dress inside this bag is the perfect revenge you-will-be-madly-in-love-with-me-by-the-end-of-the-night dress. It will have Landon crying in the corner and New Guy bringing you drinks faster than you can drink them. You in this dress will be etched into the brain of Jackhole Landon until his dying day and have every other bachelor at my party down on one knee proposing to you.” Peyton used her best Superbowl commercial voice, luring Addison closer and closer.

“Shut up and let me see it.” Addison reached for the zipper, but Peyton swatted her hand away.

“First, New Guy’s name.” Peyton put both hands on her hips and widened her legs to block Addison.

Addison tried to reach around her, but Peyton had the advantage of three inches on her. “Come on, Peyt. Let me see. Is it the Chanel?”

Peyton shook her head. “You know the conditions.”

Addison stepped back and glared. “I’m not telling you his name. There’s ten other bags here. I’ll choose one of these.” She unzipped the bag nearest her but didn’t get the dress out of the bag before Peyton upped her game.

“There’s only one dress that’s red.” She paused, and Addison let go of the zipper. “I’ll let you guess which one it is.”

Addison considered her options carefully. On the one hand, red was her favorite color. On the other hand...she looked hot in red. Which left only one option.

Playing on Peyton's sympathies.

She turned slowly to face Peyton. "It's not that I don't want to tell you, it's just that...it's complicated. I need to keep it on the downlow for a while."

Peyton relaxed her position on guard duty, but she didn't give up her interrogation. "Are you trying to drive me to aggravation on the night of my engagement party? Dropping all these details?" She waved her hands and mimicked Addison. "'It's complicated. I need to keep it on the downlow.' Come on, Adds, you know I can keep a secret."

"I know, but it could mean losing my job," she pleaded, but she could feel herself caving.

Peyton responded by setting her jaw and making her eyes go big. She didn't move away from the dress.

"Fine. Ten questions," Addison conceded.

Peyton smiled. It had been their favorite game as kids. Addison remembered too late who usually won.

"Do I know him?"

"Yes."

"Is he from Charleston?"

"No."

Peyton's nose scrunched into her thinking face, and Addison knew she was in trouble.

"Will he pass Miss Mary's inspection?"

Addison clenched her mouth shut. That question narrowed the field considerably and put Peyton closer to guessing right. Addison's mother had very high expectations for who her baby girl would marry. Important connections was one of them. An old name was another.

But fair was fair, so Addison reluctantly nodded her head.

Peyton tipped her head to the side and looked up. Addison was very familiar with Peyton's stumped face and should have been relieved, but she'd seen her bestie come back from too many near losses to feel confident.

Peyton narrowed her eyes and examined Addison closely. "Does Miss Mary know New Guy?"

Addison slowly shook her head and Peyton's eyes went wide.

"Oh my Gosh! It's Henry." She grabbed Addison's hands and bounced up and down. "It is, isn't it? It makes so much sense. He lives next door, you were all sexy looking at each other at The Coral, and he's totally into your turtles!"

Addison couldn't help smiling at Peyton's enthusiasm. Her insides were dancing along with her best friend. "Will you keep it down?" She laughed as Peyton spun her around. "He's right next door."

Peyton stopped. "Have you kissed him? Please tell me you've kissed him, because for real, if I weren't madly in love with Will, I'd be signing up for a makeout sesh with Henry."

Addison answered with a smile and a deep flush she could feel spreading from her cheeks to her neck.

"You. Have. To. Tell. Me. Everything." Peyton dragged her to the bed, pushed her dresses to the floor, and sat down.

"No. I'm going to try on this dress to make sure it's perfect, we're going to pick out some shoes, then you're going home to get ready for your big night. I can give you details after we've celebrated you."

Peyton let go of her hands, and Addison went to the unguarded bag to unzip it all the way. She let out a small gasp as she pulled out the bright red sheath dress embroidered with large, but subtle flowers. The sweetheart neck would

accentuate her collarbone and shoulders and while it was knee-length on Peyton, it would show off Addison's longer legs.

"It's perfect."

She couldn't wait for Henry to see her in it.

Chapter Fifteen

Henry

Henry had a lot of work to do once he returned to his flat, for which he was grateful. He needed something to keep his mind off Addison or he would have gone right back to her place.

Her ideas to use the salvageable material from The Wayfarer and the Aiken property had sparked some new design ideas that he was anxious to incorporate. Between his Gullah-inspired pillars, re-purposed wood and glass, and muted colors, Henry felt he had a solid design to take to Marcus.

He also knew that if Marcus still didn't want Spencer & Sons to be part of the project, Henry no longer wanted to be a part of Spencer & Sons. Even though it was rather late in England by the time he finished his drafting, Henry forwarded the plans to Marcus, then texted him to let him know they were in his inbox.

Surprisingly, Henry got a call from Marcus within the hour.

“All right?” Henry answered.

“All right. I've looked over your plans,” Marcus replied, cutting straight to the chase.

“And?”

“They’re...interesting.” A long pause followed during which Henry dared not breathe. “But not right for Spencer & Sons.”

“Not right?”

“No. And I realize that’s a disappointment to you, and you’re welcome to pass them along to Will and Theo with your own name attached, but not the firm’s name.” Marcus’s voice lay somewhere between stern older brother and disinterested boss. “And now we need you back home. I tried calling you yesterday. There are a number of—”

“I’m not coming home, Marcus.” Henry blurted the words before he could lose courage. “If this is going to be my project, then I’m staying here to see it through.”

“I don’t think you understand...”

“I don’t think you understand, Marcus. I don’t want to be part of Spencer & Sons anymore.”

A long, tense silence followed.

“If that’s how you feel,” Marcus said finally.

“It is.”

“Cheers, then.” If Henry didn’t know Marcus so well, he would have believed it was hurt he heard in his brother’s voice.

“Cheers,” Henry responded before ending the call.

An hour of pacing followed, accompanied by a lot of Beatles, before Henry felt like himself again. Or at least close to.

Things would never be the same with his brother, but Henry was optimistic they would be better in the long run. They’d be able to just be brothers—like they’d once been—

rather than a boss and underling. And though the dull ache that settled in his chest was still there when he went to Addison's door, Henry was happy.

In fact, he had a hard time not shouting for joy when Addison opened her door. The dress she'd chosen fit just tight enough to show off her figure without hugging every curve. It draped her in a way that only a sculptor could replicate. And the color...

He loved red.

He loved red on Addison.

He loved...

Addison...in red.

"You look amazing." He breathed her all in. The way the red brought out the green undertones of her eyes. The way the wide red straps hugged her lean shoulders. The way she'd pulled her hair up into some sort of concoction that emphasized her cheekbones.

"Not brilliant?" she asked with a smile tugging at her lips. Like she'd gotten exactly the reaction she'd hoped for from him.

"Brilliant, gorgeous, jaw-droppingly beautiful. All the things." He couldn't keep his eyes from roaming over all the places he'd like to touch her.

"Thank you. You look rather *brilliant* yourself," she said in her poshest voice. "Tom Ford? Just want to get an estimate of how much I'm going to owe you once I spill something on your suit."

Her joke set him at ease. She was still Addison, even if she was the most splendid woman he'd ever seen in his life. "Can I come inside for a bit?"

“We have an hour. Might as well. I can give you a run-down of what I included in your proposal.” She opened the door, and he followed her to the kitchen. Her feet were bare, and he noticed she’d painted her toenails since that morning. The same bright red of her dress that sent his pulse racing.

“Or we could pick up where we left off this morning with less...businessy things.”

Addison smiled invitingly over her shoulder. “Aren’t you cheeky?”

She turned back around, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her to him, wrapping his arm around her waist.

“That’s one way to describe it.” He leaned down, the tip of his nose brushing against hers. The urge to kiss her, to pull her against him and get lost in the sensation, the heat, the taste of her lips nearly overwhelmed him, but he didn’t want to get lost just yet. He wanted to savor her, breathe her in, go slow enough that every second of their kiss was a second he would remember.

“Are you going to kiss me or not?” Addison said, her voice shallow.

Henry grinned, finally closing the distance between them. Her lips were soft and warm and welcoming; an ache of longing filled Henry’s chest and he pulled her even closer, deepening the kiss. She gripped the lapels of his suit, a moan sounding in her throat that lit him on fire. She stilled, breaking the kiss with a light laugh. “I might wrinkle your suit.” She ran her hands over his chest, smoothing the imaginary wrinkles.

Henry chuckled. “An acceptable risk if you ask me.”

“But not me.” She gently pushed him away. “We have to look respectable when we show up. And we have to walk in five minutes apart. Most of Sweetgrass Island is going to be

there, so none of this,” she wagged her finger between them, “is going to happen there.”

He sighed. “Agreed, but I am dancing with you.”

“Oh, you’re definitely dancing with me. Now go sit while I touch up my lips.” She walked past him, dangerously close. “The proposal is on my table if you want to take a look at it,” she called from her room.

Henry sat on the sofa and picked up the folder holding the proposal, impressed she’d been able to put together something so professional looking in a short amount of time. He flipped through it until he got to the pricing page. When he saw Addison’s estimates, his stomach dropped. They were much higher than he’d expected. Theo was the finance guy, so Henry didn’t know how much they’d accounted for, but he suspected their budget was far lower than Addison’s projections.

“What do you think?” Addison walked back in her room carrying a strappy pair of heels. She sat down close to him, crossed her leg and leaned down to slip on her shoes.

“I think I could watch you do that all day.” He traced his index finger down her spine, then kissed her shoulder.

She shivered at his touch and eyed him over her shoulder. “You know what I mean. And I’m not redoing my makeup again, no matter how good that feels.”

“We have time.” He kissed a different spot on her shoulder, then went in for another. “Or we could just not go.”

“You know that’s not an option,” she said breathlessly before standing, wobbling slightly as she did. “We best go now. You are too tempting.”

Henry took the hand she offered and held it until they got to the car. Without any words, they linked hands again once Addison had pulled out of their complex and stayed entwined

until they reached the country club. Addison parked at the back of the parking lot in a secluded spot shaded by trees.

“I hate being early. We can sit here for a minute, then I’ll go in.” She picked a hair off Henry’s jacket then let her hand linger on his sleeve.

“It’s seven. That’s early?”

“Something you should know. Punctuality is not a virtue I believe in.” She ran her fingers across his forehead, brushing back some hair that had fallen out of place.

“It’s highly overrated.” Henry hated being late, but he’d caught a whiff of her musky perfume and couldn’t help but press his lips to her wrist. “Especially when it means I have a few more minutes to do this.” He brushed his lips against her cheek and made his way to her lips, kissing her lightly. “I’m being very careful of your lipstick,” he said without moving away from her.

“Not careful enough.” Addison didn’t move either. “I think you’d better go in first, and I think you’d better do it now before we end up out here all night.”

Henry let out a disappointed sigh but pulled back. He would have liked to kiss her all night, but his punctuality alarm was getting in the way of his truly enjoying kissing Addison McCrae.

“Can we at least sit at the same table?” he asked before opening the door.

“No tables. It’s a mix and mingle. We can definitely do that, but not only with each other.” Addison pulled down her mirror and dabbed on lipstick then smoothed it with her pinky. Henry had never seen anything he’d like to watch again and again quite so much.

“If you really want me to leave, you really have to stop doing things that make me want to stay.” Henry climbed out of

the car, then leaned back in. “Hurry in, please. I’d like to do as much mixing and mingling with you as humanly possible.”

He shut the door and headed toward the club but didn’t get far before he heard a man’s voice.

“So is he the reason you think we’re through? We have too much history, Addison, to ever be really through.”

Henry stopped in his tracks.

“He’s a reason, but you’re *the* reason, Landon. I don’t want any more history with someone who only cares about his own story.”

At the sound of Addison’s voice, Henry backtracked to her car. He knew she could handle herself, but he wanted to be nearby in case things got out of hand.

“Come on, Addy. All this because I didn’t put a blanket on you? I’ve done a million other things for you. I’m the only reason anyone who’s worth knowing in Charleston still talks to you.” The man stepped closer to Addison, trapping her in her open door, and Henry picked up speed.

“Everything okay here?” Henry came behind the man and planted himself on the other side of the door Addison was trapped behind. Landon looked him up and down but took a step back.

“It’s all good. We were just talking.”

“I don’t think she wants to talk, mate.” Henry moved forward, forcing Landon to back up enough for Addison to step away from her door.

Landon cocked his head to the side and studied Henry. “You’re one of the English guys, aren’t you?”

Henry answered with a glare.

“Interesting.” Landon backed up more, nodding and smirking. “I wonder what the guys on the commission will say

when they find out their environmentalist is hooking up with the developer she's supposed to be keeping in check."

Henry lurched forward and grabbed Landon by the lapels but stopped himself from raising his fist, even though he would have loved to punch the guy in the mouth. "I think you'd better leave."

"You gonna make me?" Landon smirked again, and Henry had to wonder how Addison had ended up with someone who was so clearly a complete prat.

He let go of his lapel, then smoothed it. "No. I've got more important things to do with my hands." He took Addison's hand and left Landon calling threats after them.

"You're going to be fired, Addison! And there's no way you're getting any plans passed by the commission. I know everyone on it, and they don't want any foreigners taking over their beach."

Henry and Addison ignored him, but Henry could feel her hand shaking in his. He would have let go as they approached the club, but she gripped his hand tighter than he had a hold of hers.

"Is this okay?" he asked when Peyton waved to her from the veranda.

"Peyton already knows, but as far as everyone else, there's not much I can do. I'd guess Landon has already texted everyone he knows on the commission. They won't want to cave into his threats, but I'm also, clearly, not the neutral party they need anymore. They'll have to let me go." Even as she said it, her grip loosened so that by the time they entered the club she no longer held his hand. They were among the first to arrive, and Henry understood that even though the chances of their makeout session not being publicly broadcasted were low, Addison still wanted to keep a low profile.

Someone called Addison's name, and she left him to go say hello to friends. Henry didn't know anyone besides Will and Peyton, so he made his way to them.

Will's stupid grin told Henry the news of he and Addison had, at least, made it that far. "Anything new, Hank?" Will clapped him on the back and laughed. "I guess snogging Addison is one way to get our proposal approved. I hope you put in your best effort."

Henry spotted Landon within hearing distance. "Shut it, mate," he whispered gruffly as he walked Will further from Landon. "It's not like that, and we need to keep it on the quiet."

Will turned serious and led Henry to the bar. He handed him a bottle of beer, and they made their way out front. They'd just walked through the main doors when a Tesla pulled up and parked illegally right in front of them.

"Theo's in that car. I'd put money on it. Perfect timing as usual," Will said, then took a long sip of his beer as Theo did, in fact, emerge from the car.

"Cheers, mates." Theo strolled nonchalantly to them as though he would expect nothing less than them waiting for him just in case he appeared.

"Wasn't sure you'd make it. Your RSVP must have been lost in the mail." Will shook his hand first, and Henry followed.

"Hm. I assumed you knew I'd be here. Have I missed anything?" Theo leaned against an entryway column and crossed his arms.

"Henry's been snogging Addison McCrae," Will offered up helpfully.

"Well done, mate. Should I know who that is?"

“The environmental scientist whose approval we need to start work on The Coral Monarch,” Will explained while Henry shifted back and forth uncomfortably.

Theo registered his surprise with a slight twitch of his eyebrow. He beckoned toward Henry, and Henry passed him his still unopened beer. “Bit of a conflict of interest but could work in our favor.”

Henry ran his finger across his upper lip, wiping away beads of sweat that had started to form there. “It’s a massive conflict of interest, and she’ll likely lose her job, and I need to do something to make it up to her. She’s got the perfect plan for The Coral Monarch becoming an eco-tourism destination, and we’ve got to hire her as a consultant.” Henry let the words spill out as quickly as possible before he could lose courage at the look on the gents’ faces.

They both went silent for an uncomfortable amount of time before Theo shook his head. “I imagine there’s a higher price tag that goes along with this plan.”

Henry answered with a short nod.

Theo rubbed his hand across his face. “You two gits. Every time you start snogging a girl, it costs me money.”

“I think this is more than a snog.” Henry kept his eyes pointed at the ground. The last thing he needed was any taunting from Theo. Theo knew how to hold onto money, but he had no idea how to hold onto a good woman. Nor did he have any interest in doing so.

“How much?” Theo took another sip of Henry’s beer, then passed it back to him.

“At least two hundred thousand.”

Theo nearly choked on his drink, and Henry knew he was in trouble. “At least two hundred thousand?”

Henry nodded. “She won’t have a job if we don’t hire her as a consultant, and we couldn’t do it without her anyway.”

Theo’s chest fell and he raised his eyes to meet Henry’s gaze. “I haven’t got it, mate,” he said softly.

Henry looked to Will who shook his head slowly.

“I’m sorry, Spence.” Theo didn’t often show emotion, but when he did there was no mistaking what he felt. His apology was sincere.

“As am I.” Henry took a long draw of his beer before handing it back to Theo.

Then he turned and walked slowly back inside, dreading breaking the news to Addison. Dreading breaking her heart.

Chapter Sixteen

Addison

Addison's parents arrived shortly after Henry disappeared, which was both disappointing and a relief. She wanted to introduce him to her mom and dad, but she and Henry had literally been dating for less than twelve hours— if what they were doing could even be called dating. How desperate would she look if she introduced him to them?

One hundred percent desperate.

Especially since they *couldn't* date. Which was where the relief came in. The longer they could keep things private—which wouldn't be long—the longer she could keep her job. And until she could approve Peerless Enterprises plans, she needed to keep her job. The commission would have a hard time saying she hadn't represented their best interests if the plans she approved went above and beyond the island's environmental standards, but Landon's name carried a lot of leverage with it. She couldn't underestimate his ability or inclination to keep the gents from opening The Coral Monarch.

“Give me some sugar,” her dad ordered as Addison approached their circle of friends.

She kissed his cheek, hugged her mother, then snuggled back into her dad's waiting arms. They had a very close relationship, and she knew he'd like Henry. If for no other reason than they both thought she was smart and beautiful.

"Did you come with Landon?" he asked, his brow creasing. Her dad was not a fan.

"No."

"He's coming this way." Her dad nudged her, and she looked up to see Landon less than ten feet away, a smile plastered across his face.

"Hello, Mr. And Mrs. McCrae." He kissed her mom on the cheek and shook her dad's hand, then directed his attention to Addison. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure," she said hesitantly. If he wanted to negotiate—and she doubted there was any other reason he wanted to talk to her—she needed to talk to him.

"Lead the way," he told her before waving goodbye to her parents. "Nice seeing y'all again."

She led him to a private corner where they could talk without being overheard but where they would also be within sight of her parents if things got ugly with him. He'd never hurt her physically, she knew that, but he had cornered her at her car not more than an hour before. Addison didn't want a repeat of that and positioned herself so she could make a quick exit if needed.

"Things got a little heated earlier, and I just want to make sure we're cool with each other." In typical Landon style, he seemed to apologize without actually doing it. But unless she wanted him to really go after her, Addison had to play nice.

"It's all forgotten. Is that all you wanted to say?" She glanced toward the growing crowd, wanting to get back to the celebration.

“I’m hoping we can come to an agreement,” he said in a sticky sweet voice.

“What kind of agreement?” Her eyes narrowed, and he had her full attention.

“I’m sure you don’t want to lose your job with the commission, and I’d like a chance at owning some property on Sweetgrass. The Wayfarer, to be specific.” He pulled back his shoulders and looked her in the eye, daring Addison to challenge him.

“The Coral Monarch is already owned by a group who’s not interested in selling.” She stuck her chest out and returned his gaze.

“They will be if they can’t get their plans approved by the commission.” He leaned forward, his broad frame looming over her. It was a posture she was familiar with. He used it every time he thought she might not agree with him.

“Are you trying to blackmail me, Landon? Someone you swore you loved not too long ago?” Addison held her ground. She would not be intimidated by him, especially when she had a better opportunity with Peerless if she did lose her position on the commission.

“Blackmail? I guess if you want to call it that...” He shrugged. “I’d like to think of it as more of a verbal agreement that will benefit both of us.”

“How do I benefit from being blackmailed?”

“You get to keep your job.”

“And you get to swoop in and buy The Coral Monarch when Peerless can’t open it because they won’t pass environmental standards? That’s your hope?” She didn’t know whether to be horrified or totally unsurprised that Landon had come up with a way for the two of them to destroy Peyton’s fiancé and his company.

“See, I knew you’d understand.” His mouth slid into a tight-lipped smile that gave her chills.

“I understand you’re an idiot if you thought I’d go along with you in anything that would hurt Peyton. Or hurt anyone, for that matter.” She glared at him, seeing who he really was for the first time. Shame washed over her as she realized how long she’d fooled herself into believing he was something he wasn’t.

His smile faded and his face went taut. “I’m not playing about telling the commission you’re involved with Henry Spencer. Don’t underestimate me and what I can do. I know everyone on that board. More importantly, everyone on that board knows I’m a Tradd. They’d rather have a local developing the island than someone so far off peninsula he lives on the other side of the Atlantic.”

“Go ahead, Landon. I’ve never underestimated you. I only overestimated who you were. I should have seen through you years ago. You’ve got nothing inside, so it should have been easy, but I was too generous to think anything bad about you.” Addison moved within inches of his face, forcing him to lean away from her. “Do your worst. It won’t be any more painful than the regret I’ll live with for wasting five years on you.”

Droplets of spit landed on him as Addison’s voice rose, and he wiped them away with the back of his hand. His eyes were tiny slits by the time she finished, and he clenched his jaw so tight that the muscles bulged.

Addison jabbed him with her shoulder as she brushed past him back into the open grounds of the Charleston Country Club. Her heart pounded and her knees shook, but she kept her legs steady as she walked away from him. This time for good. Her lungs expanded at that thought and her heart slowed. She’d forgotten what it felt like to really breathe.

She looked for Peyton, knowing Will would be nearby and Henry wouldn't be far behind. She found them inside where music played and people danced. As she'd predicted, Henry was close by, but he didn't return the wide smile she'd expected from him. Maybe he'd seen her with Landon and thought she still wanted to be with him. She'd set his mind at ease.

"Hey." Addison ran her hand down his arm until she could weave her fingers through his, which didn't wipe away the worry on his face, but his smile grew. "How about that dance?"

She didn't wait for him to answer, just led him to the dance floor where she wrapped her arms around his neck. Her fingers traced the nape of his neck and she ran them through his hair.

He held her close, his hands resting on the lowest part of her back. Their faces were only inches apart, and his chest rose and fell in ragged breaths. "Have I told you how good you look?"

"Not so much in words, but I got the general idea," she said slowly, in a low voice. If she was going to lose her job anyway, she wasn't going to hold back anything with Henry. She liked him. A lot. And not just because he kissed her in a way that made her melt. She liked that he made her laugh, he listened to her, and he wanted to learn from her. Most importantly, she liked him because he liked her for who she was, not what she could do for him.

Addison clutched the hair at the nape of Henry's neck and pulled herself closer to him. Her lips met his, and she let him know that she didn't care who saw them. Though he responded carefully at first, he soon got the message and met her with the same urgency she felt. An urgency to make up for lost time. She'd known Henry for nearly a month, yet she'd only just seen him for who he really was.

When he pulled away, he traced his fingers along her back and held her even closer. “I take it we’re not keeping this low key anymore?”

Addison shook her head. “Landon threatened to blackmail me. He promised not to tell anyone on the commission he’d seen us...you know.” She leaned into his arms to look at him.

“Oh, I know,” he said deeply. “What did you have to do in exchange?”

“Not approve any plans you proposed so you’d have to sell The Coral Monarch.”

Henry blinked with surprise. “And you told him no?”

“Of course I did. First of all, it’s totally unethical. Secondly, even if I lose my job, I have a new one as your consultant, and there’s no way the commission can turn down plans that go beyond their environmental protections.” She smiled, then laid her head on his shoulder, happy that Landon was not only out of her life but would also not be getting anywhere close to owning a hotel on Sweetgrass Island. She knew very well he wouldn’t be as open to her ideas about conservation and eco-tourism as Henry had been.

It took her a few seconds to realize that Henry had stopped swaying with her and wasn’t holding her as closely as he had been. She stopped and looked up at him, her stomach dropping as she saw the worry written on his face.

“Addison.” He took half a step away from her. “I’m really sorry...”

“Sorry for what?” She held her breath, pretty sure she knew what was coming.

“I talked to Will and Theo. We don’t have the money.”

She moved further from him, the music and dancing couples around her mocking the sick feeling creeping into her

chest. “You’re not going to hire me? I don’t have a job anymore?”

Addison didn’t wait for his answer before walking off the dance floor, away from the glances of the couples around them. She headed for the veranda at the front of the club. Fresh air and some distance from Henry were the only things that would clear her head.

But Henry followed her outside, taking long strides to put himself in front of her.

Once she stopped, he rushed to tell her, “I’m going to do everything I can to find the money, I promise.”

Addison stepped back but didn’t run away. “I’ve put my job on the line because you promised me I’d have one with Peerless.”

Henry’s brow creased. “I never made a promise, but I’m making one to you now that I’m going to make it happen.”

He was right, and she knew it. He’d never promised her, only shared her excitement about the idea. She closed her eyes trying to push back the disappointment and worry threatening to overpower her.

When she opened them again, Henry reached for her hand, but she pulled away. “How am I supposed to trust you when I’ve given up my job based on what you said?”

Henry cocked his head to the side and studied her. “Would you have rejected Peerless’s proposal in order to keep your job? I’ll grant you that we should have been more careful until you’d approved the plans, but that’s a responsibility we both have to bear.”

She chewed the inside of her lip, glaring at him as she considered what to say. He wasn’t wrong, which was slightly infuriating. She knew the consequences when she’d kissed him in the car. She’d known the consequences when she’d kissed

him that morning. Yet the only thing she felt regret over was that her feelings for Landon had kept her from doing it sooner.

“You’re right.” She let out her breath, and her shoulders relaxed. “I wouldn’t have given into Landon’s demands no matter what.”

“Because you’re too honest.” He took her hand, and this time she let him.

“And because he’s a tool.” She ran her tongue along the bump that was already forming inside her mouth where she’d been gnawing on it. “The problem is, if he does influence the board before your original plans are approved, they won’t get passed. If I get fired, he could get someone in that job who wouldn’t pass off on your plans.

She leaned against the porch railing and chewed her lip. “Our super environmentally friendly plans would get approval no matter what—there’s no way they’d reject those—but then you wouldn’t actually be able to follow through with them if you don’t have the money.”

Henry rubbed his eyebrow. “It’s bollocks for us either way, isn’t it?”

“Not necessarily.” Addison’s stomach turned. “I could still give you approval for your original plans with an attached addendum agreeing to the few fixes I suggested. If you e-sign them, I could approve and file those tonight.” She hated letting go of her bigger dream, but it was her only choice.

“The commission can’t do anything to me until after the weekend. If they do, anyone else who cares enough to fight the approved proposal will have to put a lot of time and money into trying to prove I’d been unfairly influenced by you. Which they’d have a hard time doing because the fixes meet the island’s minimum standards. There’s no reason for me to reject them, but if we wait any longer, someone else could come up with a reason.”

She'd been so close to creating something that could really make a difference to the natural environment of the islands, and now it was slipping away. Her turtle retreat, the opportunity to educate visitors through eco-tourism, and her chance to start her own firm with some pretty hefty credentials under her belt. It all sucked. The only thing that made it bearable was the man standing in front of her sharing her hurt and disappointment.

“Is that really the only option?”

She nodded. “And we need to make it happen right now. Which means I have to leave now to get it done before Landon does anything else to try and stop me.”

“I'll go with you. I can't offer you anything but moral support and the promise that I'm going to fix this.” He lifted her hand to his mouth and brushed his lips across her knuckles.

“I'll take that for now, but you're not leaving the party. Will needs his bestie here, even if Peyton doesn't get hers.” She returned his gesture by kissing the tips of his fingers. “But stop by when you get home. I'll want to hear everything I missed.”

She let go of his hand, and his face dropped, looking so sad that she almost changed her mind about taking him with her. There were certainly enough guests that Henry wouldn't be missed.

Except that he would be by Will who knew practically no one at the party.

“I'll get a ride from Theo and be home as soon as possible.” He leaned down and kissed the top of her head.

Addison watched him walk back inside, his kiss lingering on her scalp and the word “home” echoing in her ears.

She liked the idea of being his *home*.

Chapter Seventeen

Henry

Henry wanted to be happy for Will and Peyton—and he was—but without Addison at the party, he didn't feel much like celebrating. Theo, of course, never showed any enthusiasm, so he was no help. The two of them found a table outside and parked themselves there for the rest of the night. Will came by on occasion when he could break away from Peyton and her family.

“I hadn't thought remembering all the Charleston families and how they're connected would be more difficult than memorizing the peerage, but I've been proven wrong tonight,” he said as he sank into a seat next to Henry. He picked up a glass on the table and sniffed. “Gin?” Without waiting for an answer, he took a drink.

“That was here before us, mate,” Theo informed him.

“I've given every guest here ‘some sugar’ tonight. I'm impervious to germs,” Will answered and took another sip.

“I'm not impervious to being thoroughly disgusted by your drinking out of a stranger's glass. I'll get you your own.” Henry needed to stretch his legs anyway, and he wanted to work out a strategy to get Will and Theo on board with

Addison's plans, so he headed to the bar. As he approached it, he spotted Peyton and realized that he'd found his secret weapon.

He ordered a gin then waited for her to be done talking to a couple of women who he might have found attractive if he hadn't seen Addison in her red dress. When the women left, Peyton turned to Henry.

"Have you seen Will?" she asked, then ordered a drink.

"He's at my table." Henry held up the gin. "This is his. Want to join me?"

"Yes, please." She took her glass of wine, then put her arm through his. "I know he needs a break, but I'm going to have to pull him away soon. Everyone's asking about him. Word's gotten around about him being an almost-earl. Every lady of a certain age here wants to ask him about Princess Diana."

"I'm actually the one related to her." Henry slowed his steps so she could keep up in her heels as they crossed the grass.

"Really? I had no idea."

"Distantly. And don't you dare tell anyone, especially the 'ladies of a certain age.'"

"Agreed, on one condition." Peyton slowed her steps even more, and Henry worried they might never make it back to his table. Especially as people kept approaching her. "I'll be right back," she'd say, waving one after the other away.

"What's your condition?" He steered her around a piece of cake that had been dropped on the ground.

"Tell me what you're thinking about Addison. Keeping in mind I'll kill you if you hurt her. And I'll kill you twice if you're the reason she had to leave early without explaining a

thing to me.” She dug her fingers into his arm to emphasize her point.

“I am part of the reason she left, but so is Will. I need your help with him.” Her grip loosened, but they were almost to his table, so he needed to talk fast. “Addison has come up with a proposal for The Coral Monarch to be an eco-tourist destination. She would be our environmental consultant on the project, experience she’d leverage to start her own consulting business.”

“She’s wanted to do that for forever.” Peyton’s voice rose with excitement. “You found a way to help her do it? Whatever you need me to do, I’m in. And you have my official permission to date her.”

They were within feet of his table, and Will and Theo both looked up as Henry and Peyton approached.

“Glad I have your approval, but I don’t think Addison looks for permission to do much. But the way you can help her is by convincing Will to agree to her much more expensive proposal.” Henry nodded toward Will, then passed Peyton to him and sat across from them both.

“If y’all need more money, I can talk to Daddy about investing with you.” Peyton slid into the chair next to Will and draped her arm around his shoulders. “He might even be willing to give me the money as a wedding present. I am his only daughter.”

The three friends glanced at each other. They’d made a pact to not bring in any other partners, not even spouses.

“It’s at least a couple hundred thousand dollars,” Will said to Peyton but kept his eyes on Henry. “I wouldn’t feel comfortable taking that kind of money from your father, especially when a much higher price tag means it will take longer for us to turn a profit, which, in turn means a longer time until we’d be able to pay him back.”

“But we’ve got to do something to help Addison. What if you submit her proposal for approval, but you don’t start doing the expensive stuff until you have the money?” Peyton sat up straighter. “She could still work for the commission and just do part time consulting for you. Would that bring down the price?”

Henry liked Peyton’s suggestions, but they weren’t possible.

“Landon caught us...” Henry raked a hand through his hair, coloring at the memory of kissing Addison. “In a bit of a compromising position. He’s threatened to tell the commission, in which case they’ll have to let her go. She can’t give her unbiased approval if we’re dating.”

“Snogging, more like,” Theo chimed in.

Henry shot Theo a glare. Addison was much more than a fling to him.

“That’s not good.” Peyton sat up and looked at Will. “We have to think of something to do for her.”

The group went silent, except for the ping from Henry’s phone notifying him he had an email. He opened it to see the documents from Addison to sign. Rather than the pleasure he should have felt knowing The Coral Monarch could move forward, Henry had rarely felt more disappointed than when he signed the addendums agreeing to the most basic fixes. Fixes that were merely sticking plaster on a serious wound.

Will and Theo looked at each other, then to Henry. “Let’s take a look at the proposal. Maybe we can figure out something, but we’ve borrowed as much money as we can without putting ourselves at significant risk,” Theo answered for them.

“That’s a start. I’ll take it. I left the proposal at Addison’s. If you’ll take me there, we can look it over.” Henry stood and

looked pointedly at Theo who ambled out of his seat.

“I guess that’s my cue to bow out,” Theo said to Will, then leaned over to kiss Peyton’s cheek. “Thank you. The drinks were wonderful. The company less so.” He wagged his head toward Henry, and Peyton laughed.

Theo took his time driving to Henry’s complex, which was unusual. He generally didn’t worry about being ticketed for speeding. At first Henry thought he was doing it to annoy him, but then Theo said something that surprised him.

“You really like this girl, don’t you?” Theo was very rarely serious, but there was no ribbing in his voice.

“I think I may be in trouble, Ted.” Henry only used that nickname in their most sincere conversations.

Theo let out a sigh. “I’m losing both my best mates to Americans. Who could have predicted it?”

They both laughed, but with a little sadness. Although they were tied together professionally, their lives were moving in separate directions. They would always be friends, but their circle would have to expand beyond the three of them.

They changed the topic to football— Arsenal in particular—and kept up that train of conversation until they were at Addison’s door. He hadn’t realized how late it was and hoped she hadn’t gone to bed yet as he knocked.

He also hoped she hadn’t changed out of her red dress. He hadn’t seen enough of her in that.

His face lit up into a smile when Addison answered the door, even though she had changed out of her dress. Theo groaned and muttered under his breath, “You’re a goner.”

“I left the proposal here, and Theo wants to take a look at it,” Henry explained as he followed her inside. She had on sweats and a t-shirt (this one emblazoned with *I’m an*

Environmental Scientist. To Save Time, Let's Assume I'm Never Wrong) and he decided she could wear anything, and he'd find her attractive.

“Really? Do you think there’s a chance it could still happen? I got the first proposal submitted, but that doesn’t mean you couldn’t still do what will really make a difference.” She led them to the table and handed the folder to Theo. “Do y’all want to sit down for a minute?”

Addison directed the question to them both, but her eyes were on Henry.

“I’ve got some reading to do.” Theo held up the folder and gave Henry a knowing smile. “But thank you.”

“I’ll pop over to my place to change clothes and be right back.” Henry went to follow Theo, but Addison stopped him.

“Or you could let me admire you in the suit a little longer.” She ran her hand down his sleeve.

“If you two could just hold off until I’m out the door, I’d appreciate it.” Theo called from across the room before hurriedly slipping out.

“I’ll keep my suit on if you’ll put on your red dress. I’d like to do some admiring of my own.” He put his arms around her waist and pulled her close.

“Forget it. I like being able to breathe.” She went on tip toe and kissed him lightly. “Go change, then hurry back.” She gently pushed him away, but he kept her close.

“You’re not angry with me?”

She shook her head. “It’s not your fault. But I’ll find a way you can make it up to me.”

He let her push him away, and he went to his own apartment. Within minutes he was back at her place ready to do anything to “make it up” to her, assuming it would involve

a proper snog. But when he implied that, Addison looked at him like he was crazy.

“No. I meant you could watch *The Crown* with me and explain all this English royalty stuff.” She pulled him to the davenport and flipped on the TV. He was disappointed until she curled up next to him.

They watched the first episode, talking about a million different things as they did. Then they watched the next and the next. Then the next thing he knew, a buzzing sound woke him. Addison was asleep in his lap, and he had to lean over her to reach his phone on the table.

He picked it up and saw his Mum’s number. He checked the time. Nine a.m. in London. Early for his mother. Except in an emergency.

“Mum?”

“Sorry to wake you, love.”

“What’s wrong?” She’d either forgotten about the five-hour time difference, or she hadn’t been able to wait any longer to tell him bad news.

A long pause followed. Then a sniff. Not a loud one. The kind that accompanied a quiet cry.

“Mum?”

Addison stirred on his lap, so he slid a pillow under her head, then slipped out from under her.

His mum answered with another sniff. “Marcus had some tests done yesterday. His doctor found a tumor.”

“What? Where?” He braced himself for more bad news, wondering why Marcus hadn’t told Henry himself before realizing that maybe he’d tried to before Henry had cut Marcus off and quit his job.

“His brain.” The cry she’d been holding in came out.

“How bad?” He walked to the kitchen table and sank into a chair.

“The doctor didn’t say. Or I didn’t hear. I couldn’t stay in the room. I didn’t want Marcus to see me...” She trailed off, but Henry knew. The diagnosis had to be the worst kind. He couldn’t remember ever seeing his mother cry.

But wouldn’t it be okay to show some tears at this news? Did he need to keep fighting back the lump in his own throat? Cancer news deserved a good cry. Nobody would expect his mum to be stoic in the face of losing one of her children. At least he wouldn’t, no matter how stoic he was trying to remain himself.

“Did the doctor recommend a treatment plan? Or is he just...” Henry ran a hand through his hair and closed his eyes, but he couldn’t block out the picture of his mother crying by herself. Where was Rosamond? Shouldn’t she be with their mum?

Or was she with his brother? Marcus would need her too.

He would need Henry.

“They’re scheduling a surgery as soon as possible. Probably in the next few days.”

“Will he be okay? What are his...?” *Chances? Odds?* Henry couldn’t finish the thought. Surely they were good. Marcus was barely thirty-two years old. He ran every morning and followed a strict diet of lean meat and vegetables. He avoided carbs with the same intensity that he avoided Henry.

“He’ll either survive or he won’t. That’s how the doctor put it.” She said it without crying, and Henry almost cried himself over the first moments of vulnerability he’d ever shared with his mum.

“Okay, Mum. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Thank you, Henry. Marcus will be so grateful for your support.”

Henry doubted that, but he'd be there for his mum.

He set down his phone and rubbed the corners of his eyes. He thought about what it would mean to go back to London. Back to face his brother. Back to his mother who would be doting on his brother, and back to his sister who was likely angry at him for deserting Marcus.

The prospect wasn't enticing.

“Everything okay?”

Henry jumped at Addison's voice, and she laid a hand on his shoulder. He reached back to her. This was the worst time for him to leave, and not just because he needed to be part of The Coral Monarch's future. He really didn't want to leave Addison when things were just beginning.

But he had a duty to his family.

“I have to go home,” he whispered, then pressed his cheek to her hand.

Chapter Eighteen

Addison

Addison spent the rest of the night—what was left of it—listening to Henry talk about his family. The tension between him and his brother. His mother's distant nature, his sister's desire to please that meant keeping all her emotions tucked carefully away.

“I feel we barely know each other. I'm far closer to Will and Theo than I am to anyone in my family.” He cupped his hands around the mug of tea she'd made for him and stared into it. “How do I fix that before my brother goes into a surgery he may not come out of?”

Addison stood behind him rubbing his shoulders. “You don't. You just show up, so he sees you by his side. That's all you can do with family. Keep showing up.”

“Yeah.” He took a long sip of tea. “That's hard to do when you've spent more time apart than together. I lived with Will and Theo far longer than I lived with my family. They shipped me to boarding school when I was ten.”

Addison wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek to the top of his head. Her own family was very close, even if she and Andrew had very different worldviews.

He'd fight for every developer to build wherever they wanted—but he was always the first to show up when she needed help. Andrew had spent many nights helping her set up the turtle barriers, but only because he loved her. Turtles he could care less about.

“I'll help you find a ticket,” she whispered, then kissed the top of his head. She grabbed her laptop and set it up next to him, then asked the question that had been nagging her for hours. “One-way or round trip?”

“I don't know.” Henry's eyes held such a look of aching that it stopped her breath. Their chests rose and fell with all the unspoken feelings between them.

When he looked down, Addison knew what his answer would be.

“One-way?” Her voice squeaked as she pushed the words out.

Henry nodded, keeping his eyes glued to the mug in front of him. “I don't know how long I'll have to stay.” He reached for her hand and stopped her typing. “But I know I'll be back.”

“I'll still be here,” she said, pulling the first smile from Henry that she'd seen in hours before he laid a gentle kiss on her hand.

They spent the rest of the weekend together eating and talking about everything except The Coral Monarch, but it was always at the back of Addison's mind. It was likely at the back of Henry's mind too, but she didn't want to talk about it when he had much bigger worries.

Early Monday morning, Addison dropped Henry at the airport before going into work herself. He'd promised to call once he landed, but she hadn't pulled away from the airport before he texted *I miss you*.

She hoped, somehow, they'd still be able to put her eco-tourism ideas into place, but that seemed highly unlikely with the one partner invested in her ideas being on the other side of the ocean. It was a solid plan, and she grieved the fact it wouldn't happen.

At least not on Sweetgrass Island. But creating the proposal had given her the confidence that she was capable of being a paid consultant. No matter what happened at work that day—and something would happen, she was sure of it—Addison had decided it was time to pursue her own dreams.

She enjoyed working for the commission, but it was a safe job. The commission officials were serious about protecting their island and its natural resources, but part of their motivation for limiting development was to keep the island for the wealthy Charlestonians who lived there. Many of whom had made their fortunes through real estate in areas that had been decimated by their development. There was an unspoken feeling of entitlement to the island's beauty by those who could afford it. In that sense, she wasn't a threat to the status quo.

The eco-tourism plan she'd proposed for Peerless Enterprises would benefit not only the travelers who could afford to stay at The Coral Monarch but also those who couldn't. The plan included setting aside funds to document their conservation efforts with sea turtles and other marine and plant life. Peerless would be able to share their work on YouTube and other outlets, letting people all over see the hatchlings being born and making their way to the sea. It would mean more outsiders would have access to the island and its resources that Charleston's elite thought of as their own.

The idea had been a stroke of brilliance on Addison's part, and she was sorriest to see that aspect of her plan not be fulfilled. Having The Coral Monarch as her first project would

have been an incredible way to start, but Addison felt confident in her ability to find clients even without the boost Peerless Enterprises would have given her.

Addison stopped at Magnolia Mugs and grabbed coffee for everyone at the office. By now the entire commission would have heard from Landon about her and Henry. Half of Charleston had been at Peyton's engagement party, so even if Landon hadn't told them, anyone who had seen her and Henry dancing would have reported it to Elena Calhoun, the head of the commission. Elena had probably been there herself, though Addison hadn't stayed long enough to see her.

When she arrived at her office, she passed out the coffees, but saved Elena's for last. She popped her head into Elena's office and held up the cup for her to see. Elena was on the phone but motioned Addison in then mouthed for her to shut the door. Addison set the coffee in front of her then sat, waiting for her phone call to end. Magnolia Mugs made the best coffee around, but not even their French roast—Elena's favorite—would be enough to smooth the deep line between her brows that told Addison all she needed to know.

Elena knew about her and Henry, and she was not happy about it. Addison tried to play it cool until Elena ended her call, but inside she was squirming. However the conversation went, Addison knew it would be the end of her predictable life.

“Are you trying to get back on my good side?” Elena asked after ending the call and picking up her coffee. She took off the lid and smelled it before taking a sip. “I'm warning you now, it's going to take more than one cup. Maybe a lifetime of cups.”

Addison let out her breath. Elena was angry, but not boiling mad. “So you heard?”

“Oh, please. I didn’t need to hear. I saw you and Lord Spencer all over each other.” Her eyes bore into Addison as she took another sip. “I don’t blame you. I’d jump at the chance to snag a prince or duke or whatever he is, especially one who looks like him. Money is even better when it comes with a crown and a nice face.”

Addison’s face burned. She would rather have Elena mad at her than thinking she was interested in Henry for any other reason than that he was...well, he was *Henry*.

“He doesn’t have a title. Or really very much money, relatively speaking.” He had told her what his brother would inherit as the heir compared to what he was entitled to. There was a vast difference since the lands and wealth that came from them stayed with the title.

“Hmm. Too bad. You put a lot on the line for a nice face.” Elena clasped her hands on her desk, and Addison buckled in for the storm brewing on Elena’s face.

“You knew when you took this job you would have to remain completely objective. I warned you about doing anything that would call into question your ability to be impartial. You’ve done that well for five years, but now my phone is ringing off the hook with people accusing us of giving Peerless Enterprises preferential treatment. They’re threatening lawsuits.” Elena stopped, giving Addison time to let her words sink in.

“Let me guess. The *Tradds* are calling.” Addison sat up straighter. She’d built a reputation for being fair. She’d helped a number of people wanting approval to build find a way to do it while meeting Sweetgrass’s environmental standards, even when she would have liked to see builders go even further to protect the environment.

Elena nodded. “But there are others. A lot of developers wanted that property, and they weren’t happy with Cecil or the

Aikens for selling it to outsiders.”

“So I’ve heard,” Addison muttered, then backed down when Elena’s eyes narrowed. “But we don’t have any control over who people sell to. I didn’t even know Henry then.”

“You know why it’s a conflict of interest,” Elena said sharply, then her face softened. “I hope you understand why I have to let you go, even if I don’t want to.”

“I do.” Addison pushed herself up from her chair and stuck out her hand. “Thank you. For everything. I’ve loved working here.”

Elena shook her hand, and Addison left her office feeling lighter than she had when she’d gone in, even though she was scared to death. She’d be embarking on an unknown path that meant disrupting the status quo. She’d be fighting for the environment from her own platform, not hiding behind someone else’s. Any criticism would be directed squarely at her.

Beyond her job, she had no idea where things would lead with her and Henry. She’d always thought she’d marry someone from Charleston. As much as she didn’t always feel like she fit in with Charleston expectations, she couldn’t imagine living anywhere else. The reason she fought so hard to protect Charleston’s landscape was because she loved it so much.

But Henry had his own connections in England that went back centuries. He was far more entrenched in English society than she was in Charleston. How could he ever leave that life? And why would he? Their relationship was far too new to even entertain thoughts that he’d choose being with her over his life in London.

That thought made the process of cleaning out her desk much sadder than it should have been. By the time she’d gathered her things and told everyone goodbye, the tears

pooling in her eyes were as much over losing Henry as over losing her job. Because what else could a one-way ticket back to England mean? Of course, he'd have to come back as construction began on The Coral Monarch, but how likely was it that he'd stay?

As she climbed into her car, Addison's phone rang, and, as though he had read her mind, it was Henry.

"I miss you," he said as soon as she'd said hello.

"I lost my job," she answered. She didn't mean to dump it on him, but she'd been so relieved to hear his voice that she couldn't help sharing her bad news.

"I'm sorry, Addison. I'm not giving up on my promise, though. We're going to make your plan happen." His voice echoed, and he felt even further than an ocean away.

"It's okay. I have some savings. I'm still going to open a consulting firm."

"Of course you are. It's what you should be doing."

They talked for a few more minutes before she asked the question they were dancing around. "How's your brother?"

"I'm at the hospital now. He's headed into surgery in a few hours." He suddenly sounded tired.

"Did you have a chance to talk?" She hadn't started her car because she wanted to give Henry her full attention and couldn't do it while driving, but her car was heating up quickly.

"We talked about football. That's Marcus's love language." Sadness underlined the hope in Henry's voice.

Henry and Addison talked for a few more minutes before he had to go, and she was nearly roasted. She wasn't sure where to go. Home would only remind her that Henry's apartment next door was empty and would be indefinitely.

Peyton would probably be at her beach house or The Coral Monarch next door, but Will would likely be with her. Addison needed a shoulder to cry on privately.

That left her parents. They would be at their antique shop, but Mondays were usually slow. And they never hesitated to close down if she needed them.

So she made the thirty minute drive to downtown Charleston and parked in front of the store.

The bells above the door rang as she walked in, and she was relieved to see the store empty.

“Mom? Dad?” she called, and they both appeared from the back room.

“Addison? What are—”

Before her dad could finish, Addison was in his arms, letting all the tears fall she’d been holding back.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” her mom asked while rubbing her back. “Does this have anything to do with Landon? Or the Englishman?”

Addison nodded, then sniffed loudly, and her mom ran for the Kleenex box. “I’m texting Andrew to come over. This looks serious.”

Andrew’s law office was next door, so he appeared within minutes and joined the group hug. “What’s wrong, little sister?”

His joke almost stopped her tears. They were only two minutes apart, but he liked to hold it over her head.

“I lost my job, Henry’s gone, and I’m afraid I’m going to spend my whole life disappointing y’all.” The words gushed out of her, and more tears followed.

“Oh, honey. How could we ever not be proud of you?” her dad asked before wrapping her in a tighter hug.

For the next few hours, they talked about everything that had happened and everything she was worried might happen. They ordered barbecue from their favorite place, comfort food being their go-to fix for just about anything. Then she spent the rest of the day helping her parents in the store, something she'd done most of her life until she'd graduated from college.

“You want to come sleep in your old bedroom?” her mom asked as they locked up. Addison was tempted, despite the fact her old bedroom looked nothing like what it had when she'd lived at home, and everything like a miniature replica of her parents' store.

“I'll be okay, Mama. Thanks for everything.” She kissed both her parents goodbye and drove the twenty minutes to her apartment feeling hopeful again.

Her phone dinged as she parked, but she didn't look at the message until she was in her apartment, and it was already too late to take her parents up on the offer of a night in her old room.

It was from Henry, and the news had her reeling all over again.

Marcus died in surgery.

Chapter Nineteen

Henry

Even knowing how high the risks were, Henry had expected Marcus to come out of surgery alive and well, back to his old self. England's preeminent brain surgeon performed the surgery, and Marcus had received the best care possible. But despite Marcus's health and all the care money could buy, the tumor beat him. It was too deep and too big, too close to major veins. The doctor had nicked one of those veins, and Marcus had bled out.

The Spencers had been warned of that risk, but Henry hadn't believed anything could kill his big brother. Marcus had been his hero when they were young, and even as they grew apart, Henry remained in awe of him.

He texted the gents the news first, then Addison. His impulse had been to tell her first, even though she'd never met Marcus, but she'd been there when he'd first heard the news and had talked him through it. That night seemed like a lifetime ago, but it had been less than a week. In a matter of days, he'd fallen head over heels in love with someone he'd just met but felt like he'd known forever and lost a loved one he'd known his whole life but felt like he barely knew.

Addison didn't text back.

She called.

Which was exactly what he needed her to do.

Henry, his mum, and his sister were in the Rosings smaller sitting room waiting to meet with the mortician when Henry's phone lit up with Addison's number, beckoning him out of the darkness that had surrounded him since the doctor had delivered the news.

"Excuse me, Mum, I have to take this." He squeezed her hand, then stepped outside. It was the rare perfect summer day at Rosings, neither too hot nor too rainy. Every rose seemed to be blooming as though to mock the life that had been cut too short.

"Hello? Addison?" Henry pressed the phone close to his ear, wanting to be as close to her as possible. The shadow of Rosings loomed over him, and he walked toward the gardens where the sun could reach him.

"Henry, I'm so sorry about Marcus. Are you okay?" The soft drawl of her voice warmed him as much as stepping into the sun did.

"I'm better now. Thank you for calling." He sat on a stone bench and turned his face toward the light.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Her question unlocked everything he'd felt he couldn't let out in front of his mother. His regret that he hadn't worked harder to patch things up with Marcus before he was on his deathbed. His anger that Marcus hadn't told him he'd been ill sooner. His frustration that even in the midst of mourning, his mother had flinched at being embraced.

All those feelings were easy to pour out to Addison, but he knew he'd have to tell her the hardest thing too.

"I'm the Earl of Rosings now, Addison," he said slowly.

“What does that mean? I mean, I know it’s a big deal, but what does that mean for...” Her words trailed off. “Maybe it’s too soon to ask that.”

“It’s not too soon.” Henry was glad she had. It meant his feelings weren’t one-sided. “It means good news in that, if Will and Theo are on board, I’ll have the funds Peerless needs to hire you and implement all of your suggestions for The Coral Monarch.”

“Really?” Her voice lifted, and his heart went with it. “That is good news, but I wish it had come in a better way.”

“Me too.”

“There’s bad news too with the good, isn’t there?” she asked, and his whole body tightened.

“Depends on how you look at it, I suppose.” He tried to say it lightly, but it only brought back the darkness he wanted to escape. “I’ll have to come back to England. My sister does a lot of the estate management, but the bulk of the responsibility will fall to me. I’ll have to shut down Spencer & Sons, or else run it myself.”

“So you won’t be coming back to Charleston?” The sadness in her voice hit him in the gut.

“Only long enough to get my things and get construction started on The Coral Monarch. So maybe a week. I’ll be back on and off after that, but I won’t be able to stay for long stretches of time.” The sun had gone from warming his skin to making beads of sweat form on the back of his neck.

“Oh...”

Henry waited for Addison to say more, but she didn’t.

“But think of it. We’ll be able to do everything we wanted with the hotel. You’ll have your turtle sanctuary, and you’ll be able to make a huge difference with the videos you’ll be

creating.” He hoped she was smiling. The idea of Addison doing everything she wanted brought a much-needed smile to his face.

“I’d rather have you here, Henry,” she answered softly.

“I know. Me too.” His chest tightened, and he had to move out of the sun. He had to move, period. Otherwise the weight of everything would come crashing down on him, and he’d never be able to move again.

“We can make this work. I can visit England—I’ve always wanted to go. And you’ll be here sometimes.” Her brightness lifted his spirits but lacked the conviction to soothe him. Addison would be trying to get her business up and running. He would be dealing with the estate. How realistic was it to think they’d be able to find the time to travel back and forth to see each other? Even when they could, those visits would be short.

Yet, he couldn’t fathom not trying. He couldn’t lose Addison along with everything else he’d lost.

“I’d love to show you Rosings,” he answered.

“Tell me about it.”

He pictured her sitting on her davenport, her legs curled under as he described Rosings to her. The stately marbled halls, the rooms that kings and queens of old had slept in when they’d come to hunt, the turrets and stained-glass windows. He described it all to her.

“It sounds amazing. You think I’d like it there?” Her voice sounded dreamy and far away, and he tried to picture her at Rosings. He tried to imagine her walking around the grounds in her quippy t-shirts and cut-offs, and he couldn’t do it. Even the image of her in that red dress felt wrong when he tried to move it from Charleston to Rosings.

He couldn't imagine Addison anywhere but on Sweetgrass Island.

"It's not as beautiful as Brittany Cove."

"Nothin' is!" Her exaggerated drawl pulled a laugh out of him for the first time in days.

"You are, Addison." Henry turned serious again as a car pulled into the drive and the mortician stepped out. "Nothing is as beautiful as you. Thank you for brightening my day and my life."

"If someone had told me how much I'd miss you when we first met, I wouldn't have believed them," she answered. "Come home soon."

He took those words with him as he went back inside, ready to plan his brother's funeral.

Will and Theo arrived a few days later in time for Marcus's funeral, by which point Henry needed them more than he ever had before. His mother kept saying things like, "It will be so nice to have you back where you belong," or "I only wish you'd been closer to Marcus," and, "Nothing will be the same, but we must keep Rosings as your father and Marcus meant it to be." All of which made him feel like a caged tiger. In fact, he'd paced his room so often in the week since he'd been there that a footpath began to appear in the carpet.

"Terrible thing about Marcus," Theo said, mumbling a, "my lord" after hugging Henry.

"Now don't start that already," Henry said with a half laugh.

"Marcus always did have a knack for bungling our plans," Will added.

"True. And this is the biggest bungle of all."

Henry firmly believed that the best way through a thing was with humor. He knew his friends were devastated for him. Marcus had been too many years ahead of them at school for Will and Theo to know him well, but they'd shared a few pints with him. They liked him, even if they didn't always like how he'd domineered over Henry.

"There is one bright spot, however." He'd printed out a copy of Addison's proposal, and now he laid it in front of them. "We have the money to do this now. We can make The Coral Monarch a truly unique hotel. If the eco-tourism works here, we can do the same thing in other places."

Theo grinned, but Will's brow creased.

"What do you mean 'we have the money'?" he asked.

"I've inherited Rosings. I can borrow against it or sell other assets. We have the money," Henry answered.

"So, you're really going to do this?" The crease between Will's eyes deepened.

"Do what?"

Will swept his arm around the room. "This. Be the Earl of Rosings. Go back to the old life that you hated. Give up on Peerless Enterprises. Give up on Addison."

"When did I say I was giving up on Peerless?" Henry looked from Will to Theo who leaned against the wall looking at his fingernails.

"You'll have to be here. Your presence in Parliament will be expected because of the precedent your father and Marcus set. You'll have to take over Spencer & Sons. There won't be time for any other business ventures." Will sunk into the davenport and leaned on his hand. "To be honest, mate, I had hoped things would work out with you and Addison and you'd settle in Charleston too."

Henry let out a sigh and sat in the chair across from him. “I’d hoped that too.”

“What am I? Chopped liver, as they say?” Theo quirked an eyebrow.

Henry and Will both laughed. “There’s no hope you’ll ever settle down,” Will said. “But if you do, I hope it’s in Charleston. I can’t take Peyton away from her family without incurring their eternal wrath.”

“Absolutely,” Henry and Theo said in unison.

A silence fell over the room as the reality of their situation sunk in. Henry had been avoiding really thinking about what his life would look like as the Earl of Rosings. He’d been holding out hope that he’d be able to fulfill both his family obligations and his obligations to Will and Theo, but Will had brought him back to reality. He would have to choose one or the other.

“What am I supposed to do, mates? I don’t have another brother I can pass off the title to.” Henry dug his thumb into the arm of the davenport, tracing it over the embroidered flower.

Before Will or Theo could answer, Rosamond burst into the sitting room. “It’s true! My favorite second sons are here!”

Henry had always been closer to his sister than to his brother, and she knew Will and Theo far better than Marcus ever had. Will and Theo had each wanted to marry her at one point or another, but they’d never been able to convince her to fall in love with them.

A conspiratorial look passed between Will and Theo before they jumped up to hug “Rosie,” as they both liked to call her, much to her chagrin. They both told her how sorry they were about Marcus, and after drying her eyes, she grabbed both their hands.

“How are you, boys?” she led them to the davenport where she forced Henry out of his place so that she could sit between the two of them. “How is the hotel? Henry hasn’t said a word about it.”

“Rosie.” Will glanced at Henry. “We have a problem. We need Henry in Charleston.”

Henry cocked his head to the side, wondering what Will was playing at.

“Of course you do.” Rosamond patted Will’s leg. “And now you’re worried he’ll be kept here instead of going back to America?”

“Exactly.” Theo nodded. “I can come and go without worry, but Henry’s our architect. He needs to be there.”

“Of course he does.” Rosamond nodded, then eyed Henry. “He’s fallen for an American too, hasn’t he? He won’t admit it to me, but I can tell.”

“You’re sharp, Rosie.” Will shook his head in disbelief. “No one can keep anything from you. He does have a girl, and he’s head over heels for her.”

Henry’s face grew warm, but he couldn’t deny what Will had said.

Rosamond studied him carefully. “You can go back, Henny,” she said gently, using the nickname she used to call him when they were young. “I can keep running things here until you’re done in Charleston.”

Rosamond had been a second mother to him. Perhaps even a first, as his mother had always been more focused on her charity work than on her children. Aside from the gents, Rosamond was the person he trusted most.

He raised his eyes to her. “I don’t ever want to run things, Rosie. That’s the problem.”

Her lip twitched in a sympathetic smile. “I know. I wish I could change things for you.”

“Oh my...” Theo rolled his eyes and stood. “You both are daft.” He again took up his spot leaning against the wall, while everyone’s eyes turned to him. “Let Rosie be the Earl of Rosings.”

“Countess,” Rosamond corrected at the same time Henry said, “What?”

“Marcus wasn’t running this place. Everyone knows Rosie’s in charge,” Theo explained, still leaning and talking as nonchalantly as if he were suggesting they have oatmeal for breakfast instead of sausage and eggs. Like he hadn’t said something that would change the course of Henry’s life forever.

“Dad wanted the estate to follow the male heirs, like it always has,” Rosamond stated, but as a fact rather than a rebuttal to the idea.

“With all due respect, Rosie, he’s not the earl anymore. Henry is. He can change it if he wants to.” Will glanced at Henry as he finished, the question of whether Henry wanted to written on his face.

“It’s true, Rosie. I can change the terms of inheritance so that it’s not strictly male-line primogeniture.” The idea spilled out of Henry as the knot in his chest loosened. “It’s what should happen. You’re older than I, you’re far better at running Rosings than even Marcus or Dad were, and it’s stupid and sexist that you didn’t inherit. Especially when architecture is my passion, not Rosings. That’s yours.”

Henry stopped and took a deep breath. “And, if you inherit, I can go back to Charleston.” He met her shocked gaze and added softly, “I can go back to Addison.”

Chapter Twenty

Addison

Addison could not stop thinking about Henry and their conversation for the rest of the day. As much as she wanted to have Peerless Enterprises as a client and move forward with the plans for The Coral Monarch, she wanted Henry more. But how could she put pressure on him to leave his family for her? She'd already gone too far by telling him to "come home," and she felt guilty about it.

By the following night when he still occupied all of her thoughts to the point that she couldn't focus on creating the business plan she needed to be working on, she decided she had to know more about what his title and inheritance meant.

She opened her computer and Googled his name. A surprising number of links appeared. She scrolled past the Wikipedia entry for him to an article from an English paper. As she read about the Spencer family's influence in Parliament and their commitment to preserving traditional values and the historic homes in England, her heart hurt. The article stated within the first paragraph that "the Queen's subjects hoped for the same from the new Earl of Rosings, Lord Henry James Wilford Spencer," though there was "some concern as he had been spending so much time in America as of late."

Addison chewed her lip as she read the rest, feeling Henry grow further and further away from her with each paragraph. How could she ever expect him to leave behind his commitments in England for her? Not that they were even to the point of seriously considering *that* kind of decision. She could picture them together forever in a way she'd never been able to with Landon, but could Henry? Or was it just wishful thinking on her part? A case of getting swept up in the moment?

Her own parents had known each other only two weeks before they had known they wanted to spend their lives together. They'd reminded her of that every time she got back together with Landon. She'd heard, "If you don't know by now that it's right, he's probably not the one" at least a thousand times from her mom and her dad.

They'd been right, she'd just been too stubborn to see it. Too worried about disappointing them by marrying someone who would take her out of Charleston.

And now she'd fallen for someone who she knew, the more she read, she would have to move across the Atlantic Ocean for. The scariest part to her was that the more she read and thought about him, the more she knew she'd be willing to leave Charleston and Sweetgrass Island behind for him.

She forwarded the article to her family in a text and said, *Are there even sea turtles in England?*

Her mom texted back right away. *He sounds rich enough to take you to meet every sea turtle on earth.* Her dad quickly followed with, *And to fly you home as often as we want.*

Andrew chimed in with, *Earls over turtles.*

Addison laughed out loud. More importantly, she felt sure of what she wanted for the first time in years. She'd thought her biggest dream was opening her own consulting firm, but

now that she was so close to making that a reality, she knew there was something she wanted even more than that.

To be with Henry.

She took a deep breath and composed a text, erased it, composed another, then repeated the process at least ten more times until she finally landed on one she hoped didn't sound too desperate or too casual.

I miss you like crazy but please don't come back to Charleston. You need to be with your family, but if you want me to be there too, I will be. I'll take the first plane to London. Swim if I have to. Hitch a ride with a sea turtle... You get the point. I'm here for you. Or there. I'll be anywhere for you.

Addison pressed send before she could change her mind, then jumped up from her seat. She couldn't sit still, and she'd have to wait at least twelve hours for a response. It was the middle of the night in England, and Marcus's funeral had been that day. Henry probably had so much on his plate that he wouldn't have time to respond to her anytime soon. She paced from her living room to the kitchen, shaking her hands and wishing she'd waited another day to send it. Or at least until the next morning. There was no way she'd be able to sleep that night.

And she didn't. At least not for much of the night. She had no idea what time it was or what time she'd fallen asleep when a buzzing sound woke her. Through the fog of sleep she realized it was her phone. Without opening her eyes, she patted her bedside table until she found it. By that time, she was just awake enough to remember she was waiting for Henry to answer her text. Her eyes flew open, but her heart fell when Peyton's name and face appeared on the screen.

"Hey," she said without any attempt to hide her grogginess. It was only nine a.m., which was later than she usually got up but early for Peyton.

“Hey! What are you up to?” Peyton’s voice was way too chipper for Addison when she hadn’t had her first cup of coffee.

“Sleeping. Why are you up?” Addison pushed herself to a sitting position and leaned back against her headboard.

“Day’s a wasting, girlfriend. Come over to the beach house and hang with me. Will’s gone. You can have me all to yourself, and we can work on your website.”

Addison rubbed her eyes. Peyton’s offer was tempting. They hadn’t spent any time together really since Will had come to Charleston. “I’ve got to get all my materials together so I can get my firm of one up and running. My savings aren’t going to last long.”

“One of the perks of owning your own business is that you can work wherever you want. Today that place is the beach.” Peyton was the Ferris Bueller in their relationship. Every time she proposed an idea Addison was iffy about, she could hear Cameron from that movie saying, “He’ll keep calling and calling.”

That’s exactly what Peyton would do, and Addison wouldn’t get any work done. To be honest though, she wasn’t likely to get much work done anyway. She knew herself well enough to know she’d be checking her phone every thirty seconds to see if Henry had called or responded to her text.

“Fine. But not until after lunch. Like maybe two-ish. I have to actually get some work done today, and I know I won’t be able to do it with you pestering me.” She stifled a yawn and swung her legs to the floor.

“I should be offended, but I’m going to let it pass because I love you so much. Get here soon though. I promise you won’t regret it.” The teasing in her voice concerned Addison.

“What are you up to?”

“Me? Why in the world would you think I was up to anything?” Peyton’s pretended innocence had Addison even more concerned.

“I’ll see you around two.” She ended the call and shuffled into her kitchen. After pouring herself some coffee, she checked her phone. Still no message or call. She double-checked that it wasn’t on silent, even though its ring had woken her up not five minutes before. Then she popped open her laptop. The more she thought about it, the more appealing a day at the beach with Peyton sounded. But she also knew she couldn’t get in the habit of taking half a day off on a regular basis just because she was working for herself. Especially not before she’d actually made any money.

For the next few hours Addison worked on her business plan and outlining everything she wanted on her website. By the time one o’clock rolled around, she was pleased not only with the work she’d done, but also by the fact she’d managed to go fifteen minutes at a time without checking her phone. She wasn’t as pleased that Henry still hadn’t responded to her. In fact, she had to work hard not to spiral into thinking she’d come on way too strong. She replayed every conversation they’d had where he’d made it pretty clear he felt the same about her.

She debated whether or not to take a shower and touch up a little bit since she’d just get sandy at the beach. In the end, however, she decided to clean up, mostly because it had been a few days since she’d showered. That, she’d decided, was one of the downfalls of working for herself. Her grooming standards were definitely not as strict as her previous employer’s had been. And theirs hadn’t been strict.

As she drove to the beach, Addison’s thoughts kept drifting to Henry, and her eyes kept drifting to her phone. It was nearly seven o’clock in England and still no call from him. She didn’t want to worry, but she couldn’t help but

wonder why he couldn't shoot her a quick text just to let her know he'd seen her message. It was possible that he'd lost his phone or had slept the day away, but it was also possible he'd decided his life was in England, and she wouldn't fit into it. One of the articles she'd read had mentioned a number of potential matches for him, and their names all started with Lady.

As Addison pulled onto Sweetgrass Island her phone rang, but the number didn't look familiar. It definitely wasn't Henry's, but the lost phone theory popped into her head, even though the number had a Charleston area code.

"Hello?" she answered, hoping against hope that she'd hear Henry on the other end.

"Is this Addison McCrae?" a woman's voice asked.

"Yes, it is," Addison answered, smothering her disappointment.

"I'm with Cooper Construction, and we're looking for an environmental consultant to help us out on a project we're starting. Could I set up a meeting with you?"

A few seconds passed before Addison could process what the woman had said. "Um, yes, I'd love that. Can I ask how you got my number?"

"I saw it on some signage at a hotel being built on one of the Islands—Sweetgrass, I think. How about Monday at nine?"

"You... what?" Addison muttered, then came to herself. "Yes, Monday at nine is great. Just text me your address."

Addison sped up as her words tumbled out. Peyton had said she wouldn't regret coming over. Was this why? Had the gents decided for sure to go with her proposal and already put up a sign? Her heart sped up at the same rate that the needle of

her speedometer clicked up. Henry had promised he'd make it happen, and she suspected that he had.

At the same time, if he'd put up the money for the project, he'd been able to do it at the expense of not only his brother's life, but also his ability to stay in Charleston long term. A sign with her name on it as an environmental consultant would never be worth more than having Henry's arms around her.

As she parked in front of the Shellhouse's, Peyton met her out front. "It's about time you got here. I've got something to show you," she said before Addison had even closed her car door.

"What is it?" She was pretty sure she knew, but the look of excitement on Peyton's face convinced her to pretend she didn't.

Peyton grabbed her hand. "Quit asking questions and follow me." She pulled her toward The Coral Monarch with all the excitement of a kid at Christmas, but Addison braced herself to be disappointed. Without Henry there, she'd feel like she hadn't quite gotten what she wanted for Christmas. Like the time she'd asked for a specific American Girl doll and had gotten the Target knockoff instead. She'd loved the doll just as much as she could have loved the original she'd wanted, but it hadn't stopped the twinge of disappointment.

As they approached the front of the hotel, she saw it. A large sign announcing the Peerless Enterprises project in conjunction with Addison McCrae Environmental Consulting. Her breath caught. It was better than she'd imagined, but she still wished Henry were there to share it with her.

"How did this happen?" she asked Peyton as Will came out of the front doors.

"With plenty of begging and promises of kisses." He picked up Peyton and kissed her. "And this one helped too."

“What?” Addison asked, confused.

“I did not promise to kiss you,” Henry said as he came out the same doors Will had come through. In a few short strides he was standing in front of Addison. If she hadn’t felt the sharp poke of a mosquito at that moment, she would have pinched herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. “What do you think about the sign?” Henry asked as he pulled her into his arms.

“I love it,” she stuttered, leaning away from him while trying to make sense of what was happening. “What are you doing here?”

“Are you disappointed?” A look of concern crossed his face that she hurried to erase.

“No! I’m just surprised. I didn’t expect to see you back here. I almost booked a ticket to come to you.” Now she let out a laugh of relief because he was there. She wasn’t imagining his arms around her or the beating of his heart as she squeezed him.

“Why would I stay in England when you’re here, and we’ve got this project to work on together?” He ran his hand over her hair, then drew wide circles on her back.

“Because you’re an earl and you have to do Parliament-y things and have tea with the queen or whatever it is that lords and ladies do,” she said into his chest, too close to tears to look at him.

“Oh, that.” He loosened his hold on her, then tipped her chin up. “I’ve decided messing about with wolf urine and sea turtles is far more exciting than wearing powdered wigs.”

“Hear, hear!” Will cheered.

Addison glanced at him then locked her gaze on Henry. “What do you mean?”

Henry's cheek twitched like he might smile, but he turned serious instead. "I mean, I've given up the title. I'd rather be here with you."

Addison blinked hard. "You. Did. What?"

"I've given up earl-ing," he said in his poshest voice. "You're still welcome to call me my lord, obviously."

Addison let out a noise that was somewhere between a cry and a laugh then threw her arms around his neck and kissed him with all the emotion she'd been wrestling with for days. When she pulled away, she had tears in her eyes, but so did Henry.

"I am not calling you 'my lord.' Ever. I hope that's not a dealbreaker." She wiped at the tears on her face, overcome with happiness.

"It's negotiable," Henry said, putting on his most serious face, before softening into a smile and pulling Addison close. His hand went behind her head, and he weaved his fingers through her hair. He kissed her lightly on one side of her mouth, then the other, then softly kissed his way to her lips. There his kiss deepened, in a slow, searching way.

Addison was vaguely aware of Peyton and Will slipping away, but she and Henry stayed where they were, enjoying every part of being together. There was no rush. They had a lifetime ahead of them.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Henry had just drifted off when his phone dinged. He bolted out of his bed at the nearly-finished Coral Monarch and slipped on his shoes before grabbing his phone. He didn't need to look at it to know what it said, but he still whooped when he opened the message and saw the picture and all caps message Addison had sent. IT'S TIME!!!

Combing a hand through his hair, Henry didn't bother to check a mirror even though he knew this would be the most important night in his life. Yanking open a drawer, he rifled through his socks and underwear until he found the box he was looking for. He stuck it into the pocket of the shorts he hadn't changed out of knowing this might be the night he and Addison had been waiting for.

Henry ran into the hallway, slowing down only long enough to forward Addison's message to Will who was staying next door at the Shellhouses. He knew Peyton was already with Addison, but he knocked on Theo's door and Pippa's across the hall from him. Theo opened his door, saw Henry and grabbed his jacket. Henry didn't wait for him, and barely registered that Pippa was right behind Theo, but he'd only heard one door open and close. Rosamond opened her

door before Henry got to it and fell in line with Theo and Pippa; Andrew came next followed by his and Addison's parents.

“Hurry!” he yelled over his shoulder. “We don't want to miss it.”

They all ran to the pitch black beach, careful not to shine their lights too bright. They dimmed them even more when they could make out Addison and Peyton's shadows. No one spoke as they walked carefully to stand in the cold sand next to the two women. Henry wrapped his arms around Addison's waist and peered over her shoulder at the slight indentation in the sand she shone a soft light on.

Suddenly, Addison patted Henry's hand and whispered loudly, “Here they come!”

The sand caved in and within seconds a tiny head poked out it, followed quickly by a second head, then two sets of flippers. Two tiny turtles no bigger than the palm of Henry's hand emerged. They looked around, and by the time they'd located the moon, a dozen more turtles had appeared from the same hole with more following.

Addison gasped, and Henry kissed her temple. They'd witnessed the same thing the year before, and he knew Addison had seen a “turtle boil” at least a dozen times before, but it still took her breath away. If Henry were the kind of man who was comfortable using the word *adorable*, that's exactly how he would have described Addison's excitement at seeing baby sea turtles hatching.

He hoped that after a year he still took her breath away too. She still took his away, and he couldn't imagine a time when she wouldn't.

Henry let go of Addison just long enough to stick his hand in his pocket and run his thumb over the velvet box. Then he

wrapped his arm back around Addison, gave her squeeze and nuzzled her neck.

But Addison only had eyes for the turtles. “Are you getting all of this, Peyt?” she whispered to Peyton who had a camera zeroed in on the nest.

The hatchlings didn’t take long to follow the first ones out, and within minutes there was a line of baby turtles scurrying toward the sea. The tide helped by rolling in and carrying them into the ocean. After two months of waiting for this moment, it was over within only a few hours, leaving them all overcome by the miracle of watching Mother Nature at work. The relocation of turtle nests to the relative safety of Brittany Cove had been successful.

Addison let out a deep sigh and snuggled into Henry’s chest. “I will never get tired of that. It’s special every time. I’m so glad we got to share it again.”

“Me too.” He kissed the top of her head, then unwrapped her arms from his waist and stepped back. “I hope this night will be even more memorable.”

Henry went down on knee, which was everyone else’s cue to turn on the decorative lanterns they’d carried down but that Addison hadn’t noticed in the dark. With the moon shining behind her and the lanterns lit, Henry could just see the surprise in her eyes.

“Addison McCrae,” he said softly while he dug the ring out of his pocket. “The first time I met you I made an ass of myself. The second time I didn’t do much better, but by that time I was already half in love with you. Every day since, I’ve fallen a little more in love with you. And I want to spend every day of the rest of my life doing the same.”

Henry opened the box and Addison covered her mouth with her hands. “I can’t imagine my life without you, and I want to share the rest of it with you, saving sea turtles,

building hotels, making babies. There's no one I'd rather love forever."

"Yes!" she shouted before throwing her arms around him. "Of course yes!"

Henry took the ring out of the box and slid it onto her finger to the applause of their closest friends and family. "We'll have to get it sized. It was my mum's and my dad's mum before that."

"And his before that," Rosamond called.

Addison stared at the emerald surrounded by diamonds. "It's beautiful," she hiccupped.

Henry stood and used his thumb to wipe the tear that had spilled onto her cheek.

"Kiss her already, mate!" Theo yelled.

Henry didn't need any encouragement. He cupped his hands around Addison's face and closed the distance between them. Her lips met his as they had a thousand times before, sending the same sparks through him that he'd felt the first time he'd kissed her. But this kiss held so much more than sparks and electricity. It blanketed him in warmth, drawing him to a place he'd always searched for.

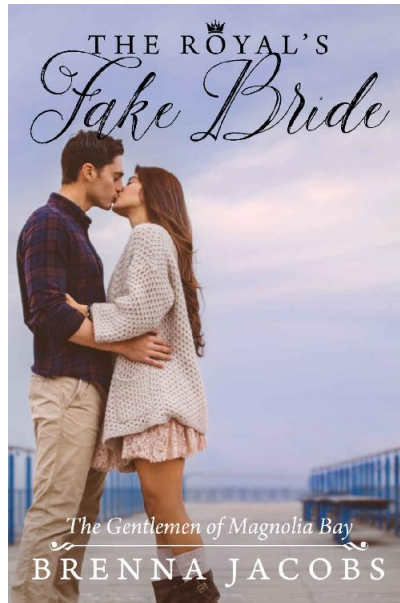
Drawing him home.

I hope you enjoyed Henry and Addison's story!

You can find the next book in The Gentlemen of Magnolia Bay Trilogy,

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