

THE
ARTIST
AND THE
Playboy



An Opposites Attract Island Romance
LEIGH JENKINS

THE ARTIST AND THE PLAYBOY
AN OPPOSITES ATTRACT
ISLAND ROMANCE

SABINA ISLAND

BOOK FIVE



LEIGH JENKINS



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CHAPTER 1



WELCOME TO SABINA: THE SUNKISSED ISLAND.

Printed in bright red, yellow and green, and decorated with sprays of heliconia blossoms, the wide banner stretched across the entrance to the Customs Hall at the small tropical airport.

Romy Bauer followed the long line of arriving tourists into the hall. She wondered if it was her imagination, perhaps triggered by the fact that she had just finished a ten-hour flight to a small Caribbean Island on the other side of the world, or did the air really feel warmer and smell sweeter?

She brushed flyaway locks of flaxen hair up off her forehead, slightly irritated. When she'd left Berlin, her long blonde hair had been carefully put up in a French twist, but now it flopped damp and limp around her face, a face she could feel was reddening with fatigue and heat.

How did anyone stand this humidity?

"Bauer?" The Customs officer glanced at her luggage ticket and then at the large suitcase she'd hauled across from baggage claim after clearing Immigration. His accent was thick and melodious, so different from her own cool, clipped Germanic speech patterns. Charming, she thought. She'd marveled at it throughout the flight and since she'd disembarked. It was as if they were singing, these Sabinans.

He was dressed in almost old-fashioned regalia, a crisp tan and chocolate uniform with epaulettes and brass buttons. He turned his attention back to her eyes, pinning her down in that way people did when they were used to interrogating liars, making them feel shifty and uncomfortable. "Anything to

declare?”

“Um... no?” She hoped she sounded convincing. It wasn’t that she was *planning* on cheating the government of this island state of any taxes and duties due on the little cache of treasures she’d secreted in her carry-on, as much as she was loath to put up with the hassle of the paperwork. She was supposed to be on *vacation*, after all. She was supposed to be *fleeing* paperwork.

He glanced again at her paltry carry-on and single suitcase, his practiced gaze assessing. She could see herself in his eyes: late twenties, far from skinny, attired in a linen dress that had proven to be a misguided choice for a long flight. Sensible pumps and pantyhose that now felt like raggedy seaweed clinging to her legs. Pale blue eyes, clear and innocent, revealing nothing.

He ticked her form and handed it back to her with a smile. “Welcome to Sabina, miss.”

She was almost four meters away, relieved that she’d made good her escape, when he called her back. She flinched. Had she said or done something to give herself away? He beckoned, and she returned, wondering how it would take the cops to get here. Or did the airport have their own?

“Bauer, yes?”

“Yes.” She nodded vigorously. Then for good measure, she added, “Sir.”

“From Berlin?”

She nodded. Where was he going with this? Was Interpol about to become involved?

He gave her a smile. “We once had a great artist on the island by the name of Anja Bauer. Lived here twenty years, give or take. She was German, too. Not a native, but we loved her as if she was. She had the most amazing heart, and it showed in every single one of her sculptures.”

Romy’s face broke out in a smile so wide it chased away the fatigue and jetlag, if only for a moment. “Anja is my aunt! I’m her niece!”

He beamed at her. “That is so wonderful. Your auntie... she was a national treasure.” Then, he sobered a little. “My condolences on your loss.”

Romy nodded. “Thank you.” Anja had been gone almost two years, but it was only now that her will had finally been probated, and it turned out that she had left Romy her house on Sabina and all her remaining pieces of art.

“So, you are here for...?” he asked searchingly.

“To see to my aunt’s estate,” she supplied. *And to retrace her steps across this island*, she thought privately. *Find out what it was about it that*

caused her to give up her life in Berlin for good.

To her surprise, the customs officer clasped her hand warmly between his own. “Welcome again. Any relative of Anja’s is a sister of our soil. I hope you find happiness here.” She was too busy flushing at the surprising declaration to answer, and then he said, in almost confidential tones, “Outside in the main atrium, you will see one of your auntie’s most special works. Stop for a moment to admire it before you leave the airport. Most mornings, I stop there myself, just to take him in. Sometimes, I even say Mornin’!”

She nodded her thanks, took her leave, and hurried for the exit. Odd, she thought, this immediate sense of attachment the people of Sabina seemed to feel for strangers. She’d felt it on board the plane, as the local flight attendants ‘honeyed’ and ‘sugared’ her half to death. She’d even felt it as she disembarked, with a groundsman standing at the foot of the stairs at the airplane’s exit, offering his hand to help her step down, and saying, “Have a blessed day, pretty lady.”

In Germany, any comment on a woman’s physical appearance by a stranger would have felt woefully inappropriate, but here, it was charming.

She felt that warmth in the atrium as passengers bustled about, families reunited, and even vendors from booths around her looked expectant as she walked past, as if they could lure her into a purchase by will alone. It was the kind of casual familiarity that Anja had written about so many times, but which Romy had never quite been able to fully imagine.

There it was: she recognized it on instinct. Anja’s sculpture. According to the brass plaque at the base, which also bore Anja’s name, it was simply titled STEELPAN MAN, and stood almost nine feet tall. Made out of deep purple wood, it portrayed a willowy, long-limbed man with strong African features bending over a single steel pan hanging from a belt slung around his neck. The details were so minute—from his arched brows and thick eyelashes to large teeth and curved lips—that he seemed alive, captured in the middle of his tune, consumed by the rhapsody that he was teasing from his instrument.

She stood there, staring up at it, weirdly wishing she could meet the man himself, whoever the sculpture had been modelled on, because he seemed so real and approachable, he was almost like a friend.

She felt once more a pang of anguish at losing her aunt. She’d been just a kid when Anja had come to Sabina on vacation and then never left, much to the horror of their relatives. Even after twenty years, the family still treated

Anja's choice as a betrayal. But if living on this tiny island had allowed her to breathe life into dense, inanimate wood like this, wouldn't it have been worth it?

She realized she'd unthinkingly reached out and touched the statue's outstretched foot and snatched her hand back. *You don't go around touching other people's things, Romy.*

She consulted the airport signage and found what she was looking for. Once inside the car rental office, she presented a printout of her receipt. She'd rented a Mini Cooper for the first few days, until she got a feel for the place, and then she would renew the rental as necessary.

"You rented a car online?" the man asked, even though the evidence of such was clutched in his hand. He was small and dark and sported a combination of a Mohawk and an Afro, which Romy found quite fetching.

"Yes," she said simply.

"Nobody is coming to meet you at the airport?"

What an odd question, she thought. "I see no need for that," she answered pertly.

"You've been to the island before, I suppose," he said, nodding wisely.

She shook her head. "This is my first time." Why the questions, she wondered. She glanced at her watch. It was getting late and she had been airborne since practically yesterday. She just wanted to get to her hotel, the Half Moon Bay Resort, if she remembered correctly, and have a shower.

And a meal; Romy liked food, and she was getting peckish.

By now, the man had the car keys in his hand, but was dangling them off one finger, looking unsure. "You didn't want to take a taxi?"

"Why would I need a taxi?" she asked. She was getting mildly irritated now. In Germany, you did your business and took your leave. Was *everyone* on this island so talkative?

"Well, for one thing, here we drive on the left—"

"I think I can manage," she said crisply, although she'd never done such a thing in her life. But how hard could it be?

He sighed. "Very well, miss." He held out a bunch of documents, which she signed without reading... an action that was very un-Romy like, but she was on vacation. "Your phone can sync with the on-board GPS. It's more than an hour's drive, but once you follow the directions you will—"

"I have no phone."

He looked as if he hadn't heard her right. "Pardon?"

“No phone. No laptop. No nothing. I am being forced to rest by my doctor. I was instructed to do this. Step away from anything that would cause me stress. So, no phone.”

His mouth hung open just a tad. “You’re driving to Half Moon Bay without directions?”

“Of course, I have directions. I am not a fool.” In her irritation, her German accent became more pronounced, her words more clipped. “I ordered a map of the island online.” She dragged it out of her spacious carry-on and waved it at him, as evidence that she was not a half-wit.

The man glanced at the map, and then back at her.

She flipped the guide open to the right page, flashing it at him. “I have traced my route in red ink.” There was nothing more serious than red ink! “I will be fine.” She put away her map and leaned forward, placing both hands on the desk that separated them. “And now, may I have the keys?”

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CHAPTER 2



“*I* don’t want to say you asked for this, Charlie Brown,” Sam Drummond said as the two men stood side by side, looking at the damage done to Charlie’s truck, “but you *did* ask for it.”

Of course, his name wasn’t *really* Charlie Brown, it was simply a moniker that seven-year-old Sam had given him back when they were growing up together in Batali Beach, on the other side of the island. Sam claimed it was on account of his “big, round head”, but these days Charlie liked to remind him that he’d long since grown into his big head, and very nicely too.

He gave Sam a sour look. He was frustrated enough; he didn’t need any more I-told-you-sos, especially when he knew his best friend was right.

The two men stood in the parking lot of the Half Moon Bay Resort, which Sam owned. Charlie was his right-hand man, managing the marine operations offered by the resort. They’d known each other practically since birth or, as Charlie liked to put it, since they both fell out of the same mango tree.

They were staring at the two deep, parallel gouges scraped into the paint of Charlie’s truck, gouges which ran the length of the driver’s side, around the back, and up the passenger side. Probably done with a metal object, a key or a nail, and it was clear that the perpetrator had been royally upset.

He knew exactly who’d done it: a Brazilian foot model who’d checked out of the resort to return to her home country just this morning, after a weeks-long holiday fling with Charlie came to a natural end. Sam had reacted with his usual raucous glee to Charlie’s latest entanglement, commenting that

he had no idea that there was any such thing as a *foot* model, and Charlie had retorted that she was so gorgeous she could model any body part she chose.

“What did you do to that woman, Charles?”

“Nothing she didn’t ask me to do,” Charlie huffed defensively. When it came to him and women, mutual pleasure was the only way to go.

It had been a temporary thing, they’d both known it—until Mariana had caught feelings for him and spent her last couple of days on the island begging him to fly back to Manaus with her. “You don’t have to worry about money,” she swore, “I will make enough for both of us!”

He was forced to remind her that they’d gotten into it with no strings attached, and besides, being a kept man wasn’t high on his life’s agenda. She tried manipulating him with tears, and when that didn’t work, she’d turned him into a punching bag—she was a blue belt in Capoeira—accompanied by furious swearing in Portuguese. He’d stoically endured the smackdown without retaliating, reasoning that his dad, Big Charlie, had always told him that no matter what was happening, you never struck a woman. When she was all worn out and her fists were sore, he’d kissed her goodbye on the tip of her nose and called her an airport taxi. All the while thinking that it was a good thing she wasn’t a *hand* model, because the damage to her fingers would have cost her some jobs.

And this was the souvenir she’d left him. A pair of parallel tracks enhancing the recent holographic paint job on his favorite vehicle.

Women.

Maybe it was time to take a break from them... especially the tourists. They came here looking for a fling, got one, and then got dramatic when it ended.

“Oh my God, Charlie! What did you do to that woman?”

Both men turned to see Sam’s wife, Allie, appear behind them. She was fair skinned, with straight brown hair twisted into a braid over her shoulder and dressed in the resort uniform, just as Charlie was. Her coloring contrasted with Sam’s, who was biracial, with spice-colored skin, short, curly, golden-tipped brown hair and deep green eyes. She contrasted even more with Charlie, who was a typical Sabina islander, dark-skinned, black-eyed and beefy, with a chest like a young bull’s with biceps and thighs to match.

She stopped to kiss her husband lightly on the lips and then circled Charlie’s truck, mouth hanging open at the extent of the damage.

“Why does everyone assume I did something to a woman?” he asked in

frustration.

Allie put her hands on her hips. “Cause you’re a massive flirt,” she teased. “You’re such a fraidy-cat that, kill you dead, you’d never allow yourself to get into a serious relationship. Instead, you roll around with these single tourist women, who come here looking for a good time, and convince yourself you’re having one as well. And then when it comes time for them to go home, they lose their marbles.” She leaned against his shoulder and whispered onto his ear, “You really ought to take a break from women, dude.”

Just what I was thinking, he mused, staring miserably at the desecrated truck again.

Allie changed the subject abruptly, turning her attention to Sam. “Hey, love, I got a message for you from the front desk.”

“What is it?”

“Your special guest hasn’t turned up.”

Sam frowned slightly. “Anja Bauer’s niece?” He looked at his watch. “Her flight landed hours ago.”

Charlie knew Sam was a huge fan of Anja’s, as his father Stanley had been before him. He even owned a couple of her sculptures, which were now rare and valuable since her death. Sam had been excited at the prospect of receiving Anja’s niece, who was coming all the way from Berlin. And now she hadn’t turned up?

“Yeah.” Allie tilted her head to look up into the sky. It was already dark, and clouds had blotted out the moon. Clearly, it was setting up to rain. “And that’s not the half of it. They called the airport and confirmed that she arrived. But she didn’t take a taxi.”

Sam looked confused. “Were we supposed to send a car for her?”

Allie shook her head. “The booking desk offered, but she declined. Said she was renting a car.”

Sam and Charlie groaned simultaneously. They’d had enough experience with visitors from more developed countries arriving on the island and cheerily deciding they would get a car and just “figure it out”. Usually, they found themselves in hot water as soon as they realized that the carefully ordered infrastructure they were used to in their home countries was nowhere near the Sabina experience. Here, people put down roads and houses and even pigsties wherever they felt like it, and town and city planning committees had a lot of catching up to do.

Sam grunted. “Good grief. Did you speak to the rental office? Did the car she got at least have GPS?”

Allie made a face. “Yeah, I talked to them. Arnie Shemp was on duty. He says Romy Bauer has a map. *Only* a map.”

It was Charlie’s turn to curse. “Did he say what type of map? Printed? Digital?”

Allie shrugged. “He says it had a red cover. That’s all I know.”

Charlie was a licensed tour guide, and he knew the red map well. “Listen, we need to phone her. That map is so out of date, they don’t even sell it at the airport anymore. I mean, *ten years* out of date: before the restructuring of the wharf in St. Cillian, before the new highway, and the widening of the north coast road. There’s no chance she will find her way here with it.”

They stared worriedly at each other.

Sam said, “Call her, please hon. Tell her to pull aside and let us know where she is. I’ll send a driver to escort her over.”

Allie’s face look even more regretful, even more worried. “Arnie says she doesn’t have a phone.”

Charlie wasn’t sure he’d heard right, and judging from the look Sam sent him, he was equally perplexed. “Doesn’t have a what, now?” Charlie asked.

Allie threw her hands up into the air. “Arrived on the island without a single electronic device. Seems to think she won’t need it here.”

So much for a peaceful night at home, Charlie thought. He didn’t even bother to comment that he was adding this woman to his list of Top Ten Idiot Tourist Stunts, mainly because he didn’t want to offend Sam.

His friend was already turning to head back to the main office at the resort, saying, “Allie, let the band know I won’t be performing in the lounge this evening. See if they can call in one of our pinch-hitters.”

Sam had been a legendary soca singer in his youth, the kind of hot, stage-savvy superstar that made girls and even grown women scream and beg the moment he set foot on a stage. These days he had his own recording studio and filled the impresario role, guiding and building up new singers, but two or three times a week he did an hour’s set in the lounge, usually on weekends.

Charlie hated the idea of Sam giving up tonight’s performance, especially since the lounge was usually packed when word got around that he was singing, so he raised his hand. “It’s okay, compadre. I got you. You go ahead and perform; I’ll go look for this silly woman.”

Sam hesitated. “You sure?”

“Absolutely. I know that map by heart, and I can think of at least ten wrong turns she could have made. I’ll just have to work my way backward toward the airport and hope she had the common decency not to fall into a ravine.”

Sam studied him for a few moments, and then offered a fist bump. “Thanks, man.”

Charlie grinned his easy, laconic grin. “Don’t fret; I’ll bring your precious fräulein back safe and sound.” He fished his keys out of his pocket, winced once more as he glanced at the damaged paint job, and got in.

It was about then that the gray clouds that had been screening off the moon all night opened up, and it began to rain.

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CHAPTER 3



Romy pulled off the road and reached up to flick on the in-car lights once more. She'd read about how quickly the sun set in the tropics, but hadn't fully believed it until she experienced it for herself. One minute the sun was a massive flame-red ball setting the sea afire, and the next it was gone, having fallen out of the sky as if someone had dropped it.

She tried to squelch down her growing sense of frustration. She'd left the airport more than three hours ago, and it had taken her half that time to find her way to the city. She'd crawled along the highway at half the speed limit, enduring the irritated honking of drivers behind her, who pulled past at every opportunity, glancing over to see who had been keeping them back for miles. Their surprise that it was a young woman rather than a visually challenged octogenarian clutching the steering wheel was clear on their faces.

You try driving on the wrong side of the road without flinching every time cars pass you in the opposite direction, she thought peevishly. It had been especially traumatic negotiating her first roundabout; once she'd gotten into it, she'd driven clockwise around the darn thing for seven or eight laps, unable to figure out how to leave it.

Then, the city of St. Cillian had offered its own challenges, with taxis, accordion buses, and micro-buses stopping, starting or pulling off into traffic at random. Vendors with their wares, from fruit to knockoff Nikes to pots and pans, took up much of the sidewalks, so pedestrians were forced to walk in the road... right into her path. Without looking. Their overarching attitude to cars seemed to be, "Hit me... I dare you!"

At any other time she would have found it all exotic, even charming, but she was tired and annoyed and glad to leave the city behind her. When she realized the sea was stretching out to her left, she was relieved. Finally, she was on the coast.

But the side streets seemed all wrong, and already she'd gone down two, expecting to see the Half Moon Bay Resort rise into view, but so far she'd found herself having to awkwardly turn around on a coconut plantation and to reverse all the way back from a dead end.

She was no longer having fun.

She traced her finger along the red lines she had marked onto her map, peering outside the window, trying to remember if she'd passed the corner and not known it. The darkness made it hard to see... but the rain that suddenly began cascading down around her made it worse. Where had that come from?

She found the right route finally. Just two corners to go, and then she'd be there. She pulled back onto the coastal road, imagined herself settling into a nice hot bath, maybe calling downstairs to the kitchens for some tea. That would be amazing.

As she drove, her mind drifted back to her family in Berlin. She wanted to make notes in her head of all the fascinating things she experienced so she could tell them about it, although she had to admit that her motivation wasn't so much to share her visit as it was to justify it. Because when she'd left, her parents hadn't been so happy.

Even twenty years after the fact, her dad still hadn't forgiven his sister for "abandoning the family" to follow her "selfish dreams". Her mom had been worried; was she sure she'd be safe there? Why would she want to vacation on a tiny island, when she could be in Paris, enjoying the museums and theatre?

The lingering animosity toward Anja made Romy so sad. She'd been too young to have many memories of being with her aunt in the flesh, but over the years they'd written back and forth. By the time Romy was an adult, they'd become each other's confidantes, to the point where Romy almost felt as if she'd been to Sabina before. Why wouldn't she want to visit? Her only regret was not having come while Anja was still alive.

She almost felt guilty, since with the final probate of Anja's will, Romy had been stunned to learn that her aunt had left her the Batali Beach house and workshop. She'd never found the time from her driven career to visit her

in life, but at least now, she could honor her in death, and ensure that her assets and all remaining artwork were properly taken care of. So lingering under the surface of her vacation motive was a more serious, more sincere one.

A glimmer of light coming in from the coast made Romy slow down. Through the white haze of rain, she saw it, flashing again. There was something down there at the end of that road. Balancing the map on her lap, she looked down at it, and excitement rose within her when she realized she'd found it. That could be nothing other than Half Moon Bay!

She swung the wheel hard, feeling the relatively smooth paving of the north coast road give way to rougher terrain, a narrower access road that would take her down to the bay. Her flagging spirits rose. With luck, check-in would be quick, and maybe half an hour from now she would be soaking in a tub....

The little Mini Cooper struggled bravely to keep up with the rutted road, and Romy was proud of it. But between herself and the four walls of the car, she'd have thought that the road to such a well-known resort on the edge of a popular beach would be better maintained than this. Did they not have road repair crews in Sabina?

The descent plateaued out, and there it was, stretched before her, the glittering sea. By now, the rain had quietened to a drizzle, the sheets of water that had made life so difficult parting like curtains, allowing her a stunning view. The closer she got to the water, the more she felt as if the stars were coming out to greet her. Putting on a show just for her. Pinpricks of light dancing on the water that seemed so close she could almost reach out and graze it with her fingers.

The car slowed. Then it stopped, its wheels suddenly stubborn, digging into the softness beneath it. She hit the gas, first gently, and then more firmly, hearing with a sinking heart the whine of tires digging themselves in.

My God, she thought. I'm stuck.

She wiped clear the windscreen that was rapidly fogging over as her breaths became faster and more anxious. She found and hit the hazard lights, grateful for their firefly glow reflecting off the car. *Blink, blink, blink.* Then she leaned on the horn, long, anxious blasts that would certainly summon help. Surely the hotel staff would hear her and come to her aid.

Unless....

Gingerly opening the door, overwhelmed by the sudden, cloying humidity

left in the wake of a tropical rainstorm, Romy tried to get out. It was as if the ground had been waiting for her to be so foolish; it reached out to grab her, first one foot, and then the other. Sucking her calf-deep into cold, clayey mud. Gasping out in fear, she lifted her right foot, but that only made the other sink deeper. She grabbed onto the car door for life, wondering how deep the mud went. Would it completely consume her? Would it open up and take her in until she went down, down, down, followed by the car, until the little vehicle formed a seal over her, a metal slab above her tomb?

But that was stupid. She reached out and grabbed the door with one hand and the seat with the other, leveraging herself back into the car, hearing the hungry sucking sound of the mud as it resisted, then finally released her. She could see the streaks of mud she was creating inside the car, and the silliest thought crossed her mind: *Well, there goes my deposit.*

Panting, Romy sat back in the driver's seat, willing her mind to go calm. No need to panic. Someone would help....

And then she looked around herself with new eyes. The flashing lights she had seen and followed were still there, dancing on the water, but they weren't the warm welcoming lights of a resort, they were attached to buoys bobbing hundreds of meters out, a warning, she assumed, to boats that might stray too close to the rocks. Behind her, there was only darkness. In front of her, only water.

The reality of her predicament, and the enormity of her own stupidity, began to settle heavy upon her. She was stuck in mud, alone on a strange island, in the aftermath of a storm, and nobody knew where she was.

Then, in her rearview mirror, another set of lights pierced the darkness, slashing through it like a well-honed blade. For a second, she was confused, and then terrified. It was a truck, pulling up right behind her. It gave two short, angry blasts of its horn. Then it stopped, the door opened, and a man climbed out.

CHAPTER 4



Charlie Brown pulled off to the shoulder of the north coast road, partly to take a break, partly to check the map once again. He'd traced out all possible routes with a red marker, placing Xs each time he explored one and didn't find a lost idiot tourist in a rented Mini Cooper.

He was well known in the area and had asked at least six or seven people if they'd noticed the vehicle, but nobody had. It was so bizarre: the moment she'd discovered she was lost, why hadn't she asked a question? Hadn't she even stopped at a roadside café for a snack, a bottle of water? It was as if she'd disappeared. And, he thought uncharitably, considering that Sabina was such a small island, you'd have to be a special kind of stupid to get yourself lost in the first place.

Sucking his teeth in irritation, he took to the road again. It hadn't been a good day, and the keying of his truck was still a fresh wound. He'd have given anything to just go home, take a shower, help himself to a shot of good island rum, and settle down to watch a cricket match beaming in from Australia.

But nah, here he was blindly hunting down a luddite who didn't even have the sense to travel with a phone.

He slammed on the brake, noticing a gap in the foliage that he'd passed. It wasn't a road, exactly, more of a track, one which, if he was right, lead to a dead end—three or four meters from a cliff that fell a good forty meters into the sea.

Charlie stopped at the entrance, considering. A couple years ago a bunch

of kids had decided that, out of all the inlets and bays of the north coast, this one would be the best place for selfies. They proceeded to try to out-stupid each other, venturing closer and closer to the edge, until one thirteen-year-old had lost his footing and tumbled over, saved only by an outcropping halfway down. He'd literally clung to it for dear life for hours before he could be rescued.

It had taken the combined efforts of the Coast Guard, Army choppers, and three volunteer kayakers to get close enough to pluck the terrified child off the cliff's edge. Charlie remembered because he'd been one of the volunteers, and if the child hadn't been shaking and sobbing when he was lowered into his kayak, he'd have made sure the kid knew that if Charlie were his dad, he'd have gotten a wallop that would make him think twice next time the Devil put thoughts like that into his head.

He threw open the truck door, glad that the rain had decided to cut him some slack. The road was still wet though, and slippery. He pointed his flashlight down the track, wondering whether anyone—any normal thinking human being, at least—could possibly have been so foolhardy as to....

Yeah. There they were: tire tracks. Narrow ones. Just about the size that could be left behind by a Mini Cooper.

Reminding himself that his dentist had warned him to stop grinding his teeth or else, he got back into the truck and began carefully making his way down the track. In some places it was so narrow that the trees brushed the side panels, and only the knowledge that the truck had already been keyed stopped him from feeling too despondent at the thought of how badly it was getting scratched.

Near the end of the track, silhouetted against the backdrop of the sea, was a vehicle so small it looked like a stranded sea turtle. By now he was in such a foul mood that even her choice of car irritated him. Europeans and their obsession with miniatures. He probably wouldn't even get one leg and shoulder into that thing. What did these people have against a good old, red-blooded beast of a truck?

The headlights were on, and so were the hazards, flashing like fireflies, but even so they were of little use in the battle against the darkness. He could see the silhouette of the woman's head in the driver's seat; she was just sitting there. Her Royal Highness waiting to be retrieved.

He rolled a little bit forward, coming up just behind her, allowing his lights to illuminate the situation; what he saw, he didn't like. She was

properly stuck in, and considering that her tires were only slightly bigger than Oreo cookies, there was no way she was getting out of there without help.

He cursed, fed up with the way the night had gone, but glad that it would finally be over soon. Once he'd gotten her safely to the resort, he promised himself, he'd hand her over to Sam, and go catch the last few innings of the cricket match. His favorite Australian player was batting, after all.

He punched his horn in frustration, hearing the blare of it echo off the trees around them before rolling out to sea.

Inside the vehicle in front, the woman moved, whipping her head around in his direction, and then sank out of view.

Oh, it's like that, is it? We'll see. Propelled by his frustration, Charlie kicked open the door, leaped down, and fought his way through the squelching mud to the woman's car.

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CHAPTER 5



Romy had to contort herself to hunker down in her seat while at the same time keep watch on the apparition in her rearview mirror. It was getting closer.

The man was roughly twice the size of her Mini, and with every step toward her he had to lift his foot out of the grasping mud, which made his gait ponderous, lumbering and awkward. She thought of those pulp fiction jump-scare movies she'd enjoyed as a teen, where the creature emerged from the lagoon, lifting its legs high with every step, as if it was used to navigating in water but wasn't too sure about this whole walking on land thing.

The night was dark, but within that darkness he was like negative space, illuminated briefly by the flashes of her yellow hazards. She could see the whites of his eyes, eerily jaundiced by the light reflected within them, and strong white teeth clenched in a grimace.

She wasn't the praying sort, but now seemed like a good time as any to try it on for size, especially when he began hammering on her window, yelling words she could barely hear. Not sure if she really wanted to.

He didn't seem to take to the idea of being ignored, so he leaned his face close to her window, so close she was scared he'd press it right up against the glass. "Roll. Your Window. Down," he commanded, as if training a dog to sit. He mimed the action, in case she was too dim to catch his words. Or, maybe he figured she didn't speak English.

She shook her head.

His eyes rolled skyward as if he was appealing to some entity above for

strength, and then he repeated himself, but this time it wasn't a request. It was an order. "Open the window, ma'am. Right now."

Romy considered. Not only was she alone on a track in the dark, on an island she didn't know, with hardly anyone around to miss her, but she also had more than fifteen hundred euro's worth of gold and gemstones in her carry-on.

This, she figured wryly, was what the English-speakers called 'being in a pickle'. But then she remembered what Anja had often said: "Sabina folks are the kindest in the world. They'd give you the shirt off your back or the bread off their plate if you needed it."

So surely this stranger meant her no harm. Maybe he'd seen her down there and come to offer help. No reason to be alarmed.

No reason to ponder on the fact that he looked almost big enough to haul the car out of the mud all by himself.

Gingerly, she lowered the window. Not too much, but just enough. Maybe she could reason with him, she figured. She was prepared to have a mature discussion between two adult human beings, in which she would explain her predicament and throw herself on his mercy.

Instead, what came out of her mouth was, "Back away! I have a gun!"

The man at the window stared at her, like he was trying to process her words. "Come again?" he asked.

"I'm armed!" She could hear the shrill panic in her voice but couldn't stop herself. "I have a gun and I'll shoot you. I swear!"

His face was a medley of emotions, each racing after the other and back again. Then he did the one thing she wasn't expecting. He began to laugh. Not in a *Heh heh, that's cute*, kind of way, but in a roar of amusement that cracked off nearby surfaces and clapped back at her from another direction.

She observed sourly as this man leaned against her car, grasping it for support as if it was the only thing stopping him from dropping into the mud and rolling around in mirth.

"What's so funny?" she snapped, thoroughly annoyed. She was the butt of a joke and couldn't understand why.

"What's so funny is that firearms are tightly controlled in Sabina, Miss Bauer, and I highly doubt you have the skills to smuggle one through Customs."

It wasn't nice being mocked. Nor to be called out as a liar. But two thoughts went through her head in rapid succession. The first was, *At least I*

had the skills to get gold and gems through Customs, and the second was, He called me by my name!

“You know my name?” she asked. Not sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“Yes, ma’am.” He sounded tired, as if this conversation was no longer fun.

“But how....”

The man reached into his pocket and Romy cringed, wondering what he was going to pull out of it, but it was just his phone. He hit the flashlight app and angled it towards his chest, until she could see the words HALF MOON BAY clearly embroidered on his blue polo.

And just like that, it fell into place. “You work at the resort!”

“Yes, I do.”

“Did you come to save me?”

He paused, “Theoretically, yes. Although a very tiny part of me came with the intention of wringing your neck for getting yourself into this predicament in the first place.”

It took her several seconds to figure that he probably *wasn't* going to wring her neck, and so she decided to be offended rather than afraid. “Why do you want to wring it, my neck?”

He held up his hand, clenched like a fist, and raising a finger with each point he made. “One, you were offered a taxi at the airport and refused. Two, the resort could have sent a driver for you, but you declined. Three, you rented a Mini Cooper, of all things. Might as well have borrowed yourself a donkey.” He sounded as if the very brand name of the vehicle was a personal offense to his soul.

He continued: “Four, you went driving alone at night without a phone or a map—”

“I have a map!” she protested defensively. She pointed at the booklet on the passenger seat, now creased from wear and scribbled over with red ink.

He gave her an evil look, and reiterated, “Four, you went driving alone at night without a map that was printed *in this century*....”

Oh, God, Romy thought. She glanced down at the map again, decorated in red ink scribbles that she had scratched off every time she'd found herself going down the wrong road. It was out of date! *No wonder I got lost*.

“And finally,” he said, raising his thumb, looking and sounding aggrieved as if this last point was the most unkindest cut of all, “Australia is batting!”

She had no idea what that meant.

She considered her position. Debated the pros and cons and decided that being nice to this guy—as obnoxious as he was—was a matter of survival for her right now. So she said as sweetly as she could, “Do you think you could get me out of this?” She reached out the window and pointed downward to the mud in which she was mired.

“It had crossed my mind,” he said dryly.

The glimmer of hope awakening inside her grew warmer. “So you can drag me?”

He frowned slightly. “Drag you?”

Maybe she’d used the wrong word. She was very proud of her English, but sometimes she missed the mark. “Pull me. Pull the car.” She demonstrated with large hand gestures. “You know, with rope.”

He was still looking at her, nonplussed. She wanted to groan with frustration. She pointed at the truck behind them, and then back at the car she was sitting in. “You tie the rope to your truck, you tie the other rope to my car, and you pulllll...” Surely he was catching her meaning.

“Ah,” he said, nodding wisely. “Tow you.”

“Yes!” she said, thrilled he was finally getting it. “You will tow my car!” She was jubilant.

“No.”

Romy stopped in mid-celebration to stare at him. “You came all this way looking for me and you won’t tow me?”

“I came all this way looking for you but I *can’t* tow you. This,” he thumbed in the general direction of the car in contempt, “is a Mini. Probably the most useless, saddest excuse for a vehicle you could have chosen to rent —”

“Oh, I suppose you’d feel better if I’d rented a big, gas-sucking, planet-polluting land-monster like yours!”

“At least my big, gas-sucking, planet-polluting land-monster can be towed,” he said with irritating assurance, “unlike your vehicle, which can only be moved on a tow dolly or the back of a truck.”

She stared at him, consternation beginning to rise inside her. That couldn’t be right. This guy, this truck-loving macho man, was making that up to make her cute little car look bad. “Says who?” she demanded.

“Says the manufacturer, and, I’m quite sure, your rental contract.”

She hoped he couldn’t see her blush in the dim interior of the car. “I

didn't read it."

"I'm shocked!" He flashed her a grin which, for a second, made his face look almost kind, and then he thought better of it and pulled his poker face again. "Come on, let's go."

"Go... where?" she asked, suspicious again.

"To my truck, for starters. Then we back up out of here, and I take you to the resort."

Did he really mean that? Was she really getting out of here? She had a moment of anxiety. Sure he was wearing the resort uniform. Sure, he sounded like he knew what he was doing. But could she really trust him?

"I promise you'll be safe with me," he said surprising her with his sudden gentleness. It almost seemed as if he understood. "Look, my name is Charlie Brown—"

"It is not!" She might just be a German tourist, but she knew a fake name when she heard it. Especially one based on an American cartoon that she read voraciously growing up.

He looked abashed. "Okay, sorry. Around here, that's what everyone calls me, so I guess that's what I call myself." He pulled his wallet from his pocket, pulled out a card and held it out to her. "See, I'm Charles Aguta. I'm in charge of tours and aquatic activities at Half Moon Bay. The owner, Sam, is my best friend. I promise I'm here to help you."

Keeping his eyes on her, as if she was a skittish wild animal and he was scared that if he took his attention off her she would bolt, he reached in through the window and unlocked the door from the inside. "Come with me, have a seat in my truck, and we'll get you home, okay?"

CHAPTER 6



Charlie looked into the woman's clear blue eyes as she silently worked her way through multiple possible scenarios, debating whether to come with him or lock the door and hunker down. As irritated as he was, he actually felt sorry for her. He wasn't oblivious enough not to be able to see himself through her eyes. He certainly was big enough to be scary on a dark night, especially since she was new here, vulnerable, and stuck in the middle of nowhere.

But he wished to God she'd just make up her mind and come over to the truck with him. He was fed up and wanted to get the hell home.

He chewed on the inside of his cheek and fought back the instinct to tell her to hurry up, figuring she'd feel a lot better if she was under the illusion that she had any choice in the matter.

Finally, she caved, unlocking the door and pushing it open, leaning out to look down at the sea of mud that surrounded her. "It's deep," she commented.

"Mm-hmm." He glanced down at his own boots that were well past his ankles in the muck, not wanting to think about how hard he'd have to work to clean them. He couldn't resist the obvious dig at her: "And yet you drove straight into it."

She scowled at him and said defensively, "If I'd *known* there was a mud-pit, I wouldn't have *driven* into it."

"Other than that, your navigation skills are spot on."

The look she gave him could have staked him through the heart. "Are you

going to rescue me or not, Mr. Charlie Brown?”

He smiled at the flicker of fire in her. “At your service, fair maiden.”

She looked around the cabin, and stretched into the back, trying to lug her carry-on bag onto her lap.

“You can leave your stuff,” he advised. “We can get it in the morning.”

She clutched her bag to her breast as if it was a baby in a kangaroo pouch. “This is mine. It comes with me.”

He joked, “Why? What do you have there? Gold and diamonds?”

She blinked, and even in the semi-darkness of the car’s interior her fair skin turned peachy rose. The hallmark of a bad liar. “No. No gold, no diamonds. Just... things.”

He figured that whatever she was trying to hide was none of his business, so he said encouragingly, “Sure. no problem. Bring your pirate’s treasure with you. Let’s just get to my truck before it starts raining again.”

She looked anxiously up at the sky. “It just rained. It will not rain again, will it?”

This time, he laughed outright at her naivete. “These are the tropics. The rain starts and stops as if a kid’s playing with a light switch. Now, come.”

She inched to the edge of her seat, swung her leg around, gingerly reaching down to stand, but he intercepted her, sliding his hands around her, lifting her into his arms. She was a curvy girl, quite a handful, and he discovered that that felt just fine to him. But his admiration was soon transformed into caution when she began to buck and protest. “What are you doing? You put me down! Right now! How dare you!”

“What am I *doing*? Saving you from having to wade through the mud. Put you down? Sure, as soon as we get to my truck.”

“I never asked you to carry me! My legs aren’t broken!”

“No, but if you were any shorter the mud would come up to your nose.”

Charlie owned a large luxurious boat, a forty-footer well equipped for marlin-fishing. He took tourist parties out at least once a week, and often indulged in the fishing himself, so he’d wrestled a few marlins onto the deck in his time. This woman gave the feistiest among them some stiff competition.

It was all he could do to get this squalling, wriggling woman to his truck door, feeling the mud grab at his feet with every step, open the passenger door and toss her in without losing his balance or getting smacked by her flailing arms.

She rolled in, still clutching her bag to her chest, hollering in German. Instead of bothering to try to figure out what she was calling him this time—nothing good, obviously—he slammed the door, cutting off the noise for a few precious moments of silence as he squelched his way around to the other side and got in.

“What was that? Why did you just pick me up? You just grabbed me! You just....” She was panting and struggling for breath, flushed hot pink, her eyes crackling. But at least she was relatively clean, although from the sight of her shoes it was clear she had ventured out at least once before, probably to assess the situation. He gave into the notion that, once they were out of this mess, he’d be taking his truck for detailing along with the repairs to the paint job.

The Bauer woman was still loudly complaining. “Picked me up! Just like that! Without asking me. Without—”

He reached out and started the truck, tuning her out so he could focus on getting them both out of Dodge. “You’re welcome,” was all he said, leaving her staring at him with her mouth hanging open, panting as she sought to catch her breath.

He twisted so he could look back over his shoulder, and hit the gas, slowly. There was no room to turn around down here, so they’d simply ease back up to the north coast road, reorient himself, and continue on to the resort.

He thought grumpily about the cricket match he was missing. He’d resigned himself to the knowledge that his chances of seeing anything worth watching were somewhere between zero and nil, but hopefully he could find some replays online. Or ask Sam to recap the highlights—preferably over a good, cold local beer.

The truck began to crawl backward, slowly, gently, with such perfect assurance that his heart gladdened. *Home, home, home*, sang a voice in his head.

And then he heard it, the sound that struck fear into every driver: the *skreeeee* of tires struggling to find purchase. He stopped at once, knowing that to continue to spin the wheels was to dig yourself even deeper into your predicament.

He opened the window, leaned out just enough to catch sight of his tires, and cursed a purple streak. It was too late. He was already almost up to the running board in mud. But it was a four-wheel-drive, so maybe if he kept the

wheels straight and gently switched back and forth between forward and reverse, he could....

Nope.

Old Betsy-Lou here was unimpressed by his efforts and let him know in no uncertain terms that she wasn't going anywhere. He was stuck in the mud, down a track, in the middle of the night. With a woman who had calmed down a little but was still cussing in German under her breath.

She stopped muttering long enough to look at him side-eye. "What is it? What is happening?"

"What do you *think* is happening? We're stuck, too."

"Stuck," she repeated, as if trying to translate the word into her native tongue.

"Uh-huh." He wanted to pound the hell out of the steering wheel in frustration, but he knew he was mad at himself for getting into this mess; it wasn't the truck's fault. So all he did was clench and unclench his fists and recite a calming mantra inside his head.

When Romy Bauer started laughing next to him, that mantra went clear out the window. He glared at her. "You can't really think this is funny!"

She clapped her hand over her mouth. "You mean, mister my-truck-kicks-your-Mini-Cooper's-*arsch* is stuck in the same mud? Oh, it's hilarious."

He wanted to remind her why they were both here in the first place, but he heard his mother's voice in his head, reminding him to play nice. So he said nothing.

When she was done laughing, he took out his phone and called his best friend and boss, who answered at once. "What's going on?" Sam demanded. "I haven't heard from you in hours!"

"Well," he said slowly, trying to figure out how to convey his news. "I found your *fräulein*."

Sam sounded relieved. "Is she okay?"

Charlie glanced over at Romy, who was unabashedly listening to every word he was saying. "She's great," he said dryly. "Just dandy." He tightened his lips and added, "I wouldn't recommend her driving skills, but—"

"Hey!" Romy protested.

Charlie grinned. That had felt good.

Then Sam said, "So we'll see you guys in a few? Are you leading her in?"

“Fraid that’s out of the question, bro,” Charlie said. “We’re stuck in the mud.” He described exactly where he was and what had happened, and Sam whistled.

“Okay. You two sit tight and I’ll send a tow truck—”

“No can do. We’re going to have to wait until morning—”

Next to him, Romy yelped and gave him a horrified look.

He ignored her and continued. “The mud’s too deep, and it’s starting to rain again. There’s no way they’ll get us out of here until the situation calms down.”

He continued talking to Sam for a couple more minutes, and then the men signed off. By the time he was done talking, she was glaring at him as if she was trying to figure out where to hide his body. She took a deep breath but he cut her off. “You do understand why we can’t get out of here, right?”

She said nothing, so it was clear she knew he was right.

“So best I can suggest, Miss Bauer, is that you climb over into the back seat and make yourself comfortable until morning.”

She glanced behind them in the twin cab and then back at him. “Why the back seat?”

“Because it’s big and roomy and there’s lots more space—”

“Is that a crack at my weight?”

“What?” He was aghast and confused, because one, why would she want to go there, and two, he’d held her in his arms a few moments ago and found her weight quite delectable, thank you.

“Nothing,” she said, flushing as if she herself realized she was losing her mind.

He figured that the best thing he could do was delicately approach both her and the situation so they could settle down and wait out the night. Maybe even catch some shut eye. “Just climb over and stretch out, Miss Bauer. I promise you, you can sleep unbothered.” Then, for the sake of his upholstery, he added, “Just take your shoes off first, okay?”

She looked as if she was about to refuse, purely out of stubbornness, but then she groaned in surrender and bent over, removing shoes that he didn’t think would survive even a professional cleaning. Then she began to slide down her pantyhose, which was filled with so many holes they couldn’t even be reused as butterfly nets. As her head was turned and her attention redirected, he took the opportunity to take her all in.

She was pretty; he’d already had to brace himself from stumbling and

falling into those blue eyes. He figured her for about twenty-seven, twenty-eight.

Her skin was flawless, with little evidence of makeup. Messy blonde hair that had probably once been neatly combed fell limply around her round cheeks. She wore tiny pearls in her earlobes, and a simple gold chain around her neck. Her linen dress, now crumpled and dingy, had once been tasteful and smart. She had an air of refinement about her, a kind of cool metropolitan elegance. Then he noticed a colorful tattoo high on her back, just kissing the base of her neck: a graceful, complex mandala. Because of her sensible collar, he could only see about a third of it, and idly wondered what the rest would look like, if she was naked.

He was actually surprised. So far, all she'd given off were uptight metropolitan office babe, but this, he hadn't been expecting. Maybe the girl had a fun side.

She shifted abruptly and caught him staring, frowning slightly, a question in her eyes. *You staring at me?*

Remembering that he wasn't just staring, but trying mentally to extrapolate what the rest of her bare back must look like, he felt his own face heat up, and was grateful that his coloring didn't allow for blushes. He shook his head 'no' like a guilty child caught sneaking cookies, and busied himself looking in the other direction as she hiked her skirt up on her hips to allow her movement to climb over into the back seat.

"You can look now," she said sardonically once she got there. "I'm decent."

He threw her a smile over the backrest, sensing that she had calmed down somewhat, and maybe that would mean a truce. She stuffed her precious carry-on bag of secrets down onto the floor at her feet and then, instead of pretending he didn't exist as he'd expected her to do, she said in a voice full of curiosity, "You said, Australia is batting?"

He lifted his brow, surprised that she'd even remembered his outburst. "Yep." It was still a sore point with him.

"Cricket, yes?" She leaned forward expectantly.

"That's right. The people of Sabina are cricket-mad, just like any other territory across the world that was once colonized by the English."

"And there is a big game tonight," she deduced.

Only the freaking Test Championship, he thought, trying not to be bitter.

She must have read it on his face, because she said sincerely, "I am so

sorry to have taken you from your game.”

He smiled at her, feeling for the first time that maybe the situation wasn't as serious as he'd thought. “It's okay.”

She pointed at his phone lying on the front seat she had vacated. “Maybe you can go online and catch the last of it?”

He glanced at the phone in surprise, not having thought of that, but the idea of becoming engrossed in a game while a passenger sat there alone didn't feel right to him. He shook his head. “I suppose as long as I can avoid any spoilers between here and home, I'll be able to enjoy the replay as if it was happening live.” He crossed his fingers. “I just hope the tow truck driver doesn't open his big mouth when he comes to get us in the morning.”

She laughed, and the dimple in her chin surprised him. Then she said, “I am also sorry you are forced to spend the night here, out in the bush.”

He was more entranced by the way she pronounced the word ‘boosh’ than he was bothered by his impromptu sleepover. He shrugged. “Oh, it's not that different from camping.”

“And you do a lot of camping,” she deduced.

“Enough.”

She tilted her head to look out the window; the drizzle had slowed once more. “So, tonight we camp, Charlie Brown, and look at the stars.”

“Just Charlie,” he suggested. “No need for the ‘Brown’.”

She gave him that twinkling smile that he was growing quite fond of by now. “And for me, it is Romy.”

“Romy,” he repeated thoughtfully.

Then she cried out and slapped her arm, frowning. “This is the third time I've been bitten. Mosquitoes, do you think?”

He leaned forward to inspect the tiny red spot rising on her arm. “Probably. The sand flies would be lower down by the beach.”

She smacked her arm again. “Ugh.” Then she looked anxious. “Do you think I will get malaria?”

He would have chuckled if she wasn't clearly worried, so he assured her, “I doubt it. We haven't had an outbreak in a very long time, and the government has been good with cleaning up their breeding grounds.” Still, he reached into the glove box and withdrew a small tube of cream. “Rub this on yourself. It will keep them off you and help dull the itching of those bites you already have.”

She took it gratefully, and he watched a little too intensely as her pretty,

pink-tipped fingers began to smooth the contents along her arms, legs, and neck. *Look away*, he chastised himself. *Look away*.

She held out the rest. "For you."

He shook his head, reaching out to close her fingers around the tube. "You keep it. I'll be fine. Mosquitoes don't like me."

"You are joking. Do they really pick and choose?"

He nodded. "Like all vampires, they have a preference for blood type and taste. Trust me, they've tried me and found me lacking. To them, I am day old pizza, only edible if there is no other choice. But you," he let his gaze sweep up and down her, "to them, you are cream-filled scones with strawberries on top. So keep the tube."

Charlie watched as her pink lips parted slightly at his description of her, and for a moment, their eyes locked. She sat back sharply and the connection was broken. She returned her gaze outside.

"Sleep, Romy," he said gently. "I promise I'll keep watch."

For a moment he wondered if she was going to protest, but she nodded, sliding down onto the back seat and curling into a fetal position, her hands clasped around her knees. "I am very tired," she admitted. "I've come such a very long way." It wasn't long before silence fell.

True to his word, he stayed awake all night, and in the morning, just as the sun was beginning to rise, he heard the rumble of the tow truck at the top of the incline. He slid out, feeling the creaks and kinks of a body that had stayed in the same position for way too long, and lifted an arm in greeting. As the large, powerful vehicle inched gingerly downward to hitch his truck, Charlie happened to glance over at Romy's ridiculous little wannabe car.

What he saw made his blood go cold. She'd gotten stuck in the mud at the very end of the track, wrapped in too much darkness to let her know that she'd stopped just two, maybe three meters from the edge of the cliff that he was more than familiar with. Down below lay angry white surf pounding against sharp, voracious rocks. The mud that had kept them both from making it home that night had saved her life.

He glanced back at Romy, who was just waking, looking around in confusion as if trying to remember how she'd gotten there. Someone up there must like her, he figured. He wondered idly if it was her aunt, Anja Bauer. If so, God bless them both.

CHAPTER 7



Romy woke up to sunshine so bright that it slashed through a crack in the curtains like a blade's edge. Between the cheerful colors of the room and the sweet scent of the air, it didn't take her long to orient herself. She was in Sabina, at her room in the Half Moon Bay Resort.

She glanced hurriedly at the clock on the table at her bedside—and immediately rocketed into a sitting position. It was already after midday. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten out of bed at this hour, being one of those annoyingly sprightly morning people who bounded up and got their day going at the crack of dawn as if it was part of their religion.

But she couldn't blame herself for what she would have considered to be the sin of sloth on any other morning. She'd made it to the resort at sunrise, after all, following a night of weird twists and turns and strange adventures.

The resort worker, Charlie Brown, had driven her himself, once his truck was back on the road, after they'd had a heated debate—okay, an argument—about whether she would drive her little car behind him to the resort. She insisted that it was her rental and she'd paid for it, so she was well within her rights to drive it if she pleased.

He'd responded that as long as he had anything to say about it, there was no way in hell he was going to let her drive in Sabina again.

She'd shot back that he *didn't*, in fact, have any say in it, and that if he thought he could “let her” do anything around here he was sadly mistaken.

He stared at her with those resolute black eyes of his, shrugged, and then whistled at the tow truck crew, pointing at her dear, sweet little car, and

instructing them to toss her suitcase into the back of his truck and tow the Mini back to the airport.

Romy had stood there, fuming in her own impotence, while the men had hopped to it, with a whole lot of, “Yes, Mr. Charlie, sir,” and, “Of course, Mr. Charlie, sir.”

So he seemed to be a big deal on the island, well known and respected, enough for his weight to be felt if he decided to throw it around. She’d leaped back up into the cab of his truck, folded her arms in stoic denial of defeat, and given him the silent treatment all the way to the resort.

Only, 1) he didn’t seem to care about the silent treatment, and 2) it wasn’t all that silent because the moment they were on the road he’d turned on some soca music, so loud she could feel the dashboard vibrate. The beat was infectious enough to make her toes begin tapping, and it took great effort for her to keep them under control. She would rather dig her own grave than allow him to see she was enjoying the music.

Once he’d made sure she was safely checked in, he’d bowed at her—bowed! Really!—and walked out of the lobby with a smirk and a, “Hope you enjoy your time here in Sabina, Miss Bauer.”

Ugh.

That kind of arrogance almost made her wish she wasn’t going to enjoy herself, just to spite him.

Surprisingly, she wasn’t yet ready to get out of bed, so she plumped her pillows, leaned back, and used the hotel phone to dial a number that she knew by heart, probably because it was her office’s direct line. She worked as a statistician with a small company in Berlin that provided actuarial data to insurance firms, government think tanks, and the like. Her friends back at home liked to joke about her being an automatic nominee if they ever established a Nobel Prize in Boring Jobs, but she liked working with numbers. They allowed her to focus, they soothed her.

Normally.

A pleasant male voice answered briskly, and she smiled. It was Maxon, her closest work buddy, a young gay man who was all demure business at the office but all party outside of it. She greeted him enthusiastically, only to have him say, “Hello? Hello? I’m pretty sure there’s no one on the other end of the line—”

“Maxon, it’s me! Romy!”

“I’m certain there’s *nobody* on the other end of the line because I *know* it

can't be my best friend Romy, because my best friend Romy is on vacation, and people who are on vacation do not call into the office!"

She laughed, conceding, "Okay, you got me. I was just wondering if you got those files I left on your desk—"

"Hello? Is this a ghost speaking? Has some version of Romy from another multiverse who is supposed to be working trying to get in touch? Because the Romy from this dimension has absolutely no business calling about files."

She sighed, still chuckling. "Okay fine. This version of Romy is just calling to say she arrived safe and is missing you already."

"And this version of Maxon wants to know if you've seen any of the island yet. Have you at least had a couple of rum cocktails? What are the men like there on Sabina? I hear they grow them big and hot in the islands!"

"Maxon!" she protested, aghast. Then she hedged, reluctant to confess to her own mistakes last night, "I, um, got in later than expected, so I haven't had a whole lot of time to explore."

"So, what are you waiting for? Do you want stress to completely kill you? I agree with your doctor; you need to take some time off and relax, get your stress levels back under control. Sniff flowers. Swim in the sea. Have an affair."

Her? An affair? Hardly likely. She was about to point out to him that vacation affairs were very un-Romy-like when he continued, warning, "And I don't mean with some drab, gray, boring tourist from Oklahoma or anything. I mean, find yourself a spicy islander." He dropped his voice to a whisper, making Romy imagine that a coworker was passing near his desk. "Trust me, honey. I've been there. Did I ever tell you about the three weeks I spent in Cuba? I have no idea how to say 'Ooh, la la' in Spanish, but if I did... Ooh, la la!"

She grinned as he went headlong into the details, glad that with him so focused on himself, there was no room for the attention to be on her, so she wouldn't need to promise him anything. An island affair? The Romy from this dimension pooh-poohed the thought.

Once her conversation was over, she showered, glad to be free of the ick from last night's debacle, and slightly abashed that she'd arrived at her room so tired that she had fallen into bed with only the most basic washing up. The shower was hot and powerful and made her think of a pounding waterfall, and the toiletries all smelled of honey and coconuts.

Refreshed, even excited, she left her room and headed outside. Instead of turning toward the lobby and the dining room beyond, she made her way round the back to a large, well-manicured lawn dotted with flowerbeds. She had no idea what kind of seasons there were in Sabina, but everything here seemed to be blooming. She walked from flower bed to flower bed, stopping to read the small signs that were helpfully posted, giving the names of the plants along with their uses. Who knew heliconia was good for diabetes and hypertension?

“Hey!”

The friendly, feminine voice behind her made her spin around. Standing there was a pretty young woman, about her age or slightly older, with wavy brown hair and the kind of tan you only get when you’ve made the islands your life. “Miss Bauer, yes?” the woman asked. At Romy’s nod, she offered her hand. “I’m Allie. My husband and I own the resort.”

Allie gave her a sympathetic smile and added, “From what I hear, you had a pretty rough night.”

Romy felt a flush of gratitude that this sweet-faced woman didn’t seem to be blaming her for her ordeal, acting as though the disaster had happened to her rather than *because of* her. Like Charlie Brown had.

Then Allie added, “Thank God for Charlie, huh?”

Romy felt her grin slip. Okay, fine. It seemed that everyone around here adored the man. But fairness forced her to admit that if it wasn’t for her rescuer, she’d have had a much worse night, so she agreed, hoping the subject would quickly change.

It did, as Allie beckoned to Romy to join her on her stroll. “I’ve planted a small herb garden just a little way farther. I like to pick my seasonings fresh; Caribbean meals are always so much better with seasonings straight from the —oh!” Allie looked excited, turning to grab Romy by the wrist. “Come for dinner tonight! You have to!”

The sudden invitation took her by surprise, but before she could process it, Allie insisted. “You must! My husband adored your aunt’s work. His dad even had her over to dinner down at his place in Batali Beach a couple of times, years ago. God rest my father-in-law’s soul. He adored her, too. Come to dinner, and Sam will show you the pieces from Anja that he owns. Please say yes!”

The unfettered enthusiasm, so different from the formality she was used to back home, made Romy warm to her even more. It even felt as though this

woman, clearly American, had allowed the warmth and spontaneity of the island to infuse her spirit. Romy wondered, a little jealously, how long that took to happen. Anja had certainly opened herself up and let it in.

Romy accepted gratefully. By now, they were standing at the edge of a brilliant green patch of herbs, which she could already smell, even though they were still in the ground. Allie happily gave her the cabin number and directions, dropping into a squat and starting to pluck fresh herbs. “Wonderful. Sam will be so happy.”

She broke off a long, green leaf with a spiked edge and held it out to her. “Crush it between your fingers and smell it,” she instructed.

Romy did as she was told, drawing her head back in surprise at the pungent, grassy odor. “It almost smells like cilantro,” she mused, “although ten times stronger.”

Allie smiled. “That’s because they’re related. What you have there is called chadon beni, the blessed herb. If you’re cooking and you haven’t got any, forget it. Fry an egg or something.”

Romy laughed, sniffing at the herb again. It almost made her hungry.

Allie twisted a little, pointing behind her. “While you’re strolling, don’t forget to stop off at the butterfly garden. One of my pet projects. It was almost completely wiped out last year during a hurricane, but Sam and I got it back up and running. It’s delightful.”

Romy thanked her and began to walk down the path again, noting that she was moving with a strange ease, sensing a sway in her hips that surely hadn’t been there before, a looseness of her limbs that would have seemed odd if she wasn’t already so relaxed. Was Sabina already working its magic?

“Oh, hey, Romy!” Allie yelled just as Romy was about to disappear beyond a hedge of sweet-smelling white flowers that were labelled SWEET LIME. Romy stopped enquiringly.

“I just texted Charlie Brown! He says he’ll be more than happy to have dinner with us. We can make it a double date!”

CHAPTER 8



Romy sat alone at a small table in the lounge near the edge of the little wooden stage at the resort. A dreadlocked reggae singer was belting out some groovy, old-school tunes, swaying to the beat in time with the four-person band accompanying him. He was flanked by two young girls in mini-dresses so white that their dark skin was thrown into startling contrast. Their hair was open and natural, their jewelry heavy gold, and their lips deep magenta.

They're good, she thought. Very good. When they'd taken to the stage for their one-hour set, the DJ had announced that the trio was the latest group to be signed by Sam Drummond's record label, and this made her even more interested in meeting the man later. She'd heard whispers around the bar that he was once a teen soca idol, giving up singing to manage artistes and run his resorts. He was barely past thirty, she was told, and that made his achievements even more impressive.

"Here you are." The pretty, smiling waitress carefully set down the drink Romy had ordered. It was served in a round, stemmed glass the size of a goldfish bowl, with a generous sprinkling of salt around the rim and a fruit-salad's worth of fruit cubes skewered on a bamboo stick. The drink was swimming-pool blue—as a matter of fact, it was called a Swimming Pool. She hadn't bothered to go through the drinks menu; she was on vacation, as Maxon had reminded her. So she'd just asked the waitress for something "pretty and fun". It sure was pretty, and in a bit she'd determine just how much fun it could possibly be. She took a long slurp from her straw, closed

her eyes, and allowed both the music and the liquid to infuse her soul.

She'd spent the afternoon browsing the shops at the resort, and the more she did so the more she realized that the linen outfits she'd so carefully packed were simply not on. So she allowed two shop girls to drape her in a succession of floral and brightly colored sundresses, shorts, swimsuits... everything a modern girl needed for a tropical escape.

Although her final bill made her eyes water, she whipped out her credit card and plunked it down at the cashier's register. *Relax*, a voice in her head reminded her. *You're here to have fun.*

So here she was, enjoying colorful cocktails, smelling like oleanders and orange blossoms from the complete suite of body products she'd splurged on as well, listening to music that made her want to sway. In an hour or so, she'd be following Allie's directions to the back of the property, where the owner's house stood separate and apart from the resort bungalows. She was looking forward to dinner. She'd liked Allie on sight, and the mere fact that Sam and his father had been so entranced by Anja had made her like him too, sight unseen.

The only little niggling thing was the fact that Charlie Brown would be there. How was she supposed to feel about that, she wondered. The mere fact that she was even wondering how to treat with him was disconcerting. So disconcerting that she made up her mind to pretend she wasn't thinking about him. Not about how annoying he was, or how infuriating... or how dark his eyes were. How white his teeth seemed against the backdrop of his face, like a full moon suddenly revealing itself from behind the clouds.

Such thoughts were pointless and irrelevant. So she wasn't about to waste any more time on them.

The reggae trio had moved from a well-known mid-beat tune to vintage Bob Marley, a slow, sensuous crooning that spoke to her in a low whisper: *Turn your lights down, low... Never ever try to resist... oh, no*

"How's that drink, miss?"

Romy's eyelids flew open, and she realized to her brief embarrassment that she'd been just sitting there, smiling to herself, hugging the empty glass to her breast. "Wonderful!" she said, adding on impulse, "I'd love another, if that's possible."

The waitress flashed her small, straight teeth at her. "This is Sabina, miss. Anything is possible."

In moments, another Swimming Pool was placed before her, and Romy

leaped right in. Then she reclaimed her mellow mood, slipping deeper into thought.

When she'd arrived in her room, she'd removed the pouch filled with her jeweler's tools and her gold wire and tiny gemstones and stashed them in the safe, thinking about her rescuer, Charlie, and his crack about her hiding diamonds. Well, they weren't the Koh-I-Noor diamond, but they were precious to her.

It meant a lot to her to know that she'd inherited her aunt's eye for art, although since she worked with gold wire and gems to create miniatures, rather than hacking away at tree trunks to create giants, they were a bit different in their approach. But she'd decided that on this trip she was going to work on a new series of tropical animals and flowers. Once she moved down to Anja's house—now hers—that was how she intended to spend her time while on the island. She'd only need to figure out a system to find and photograph specimens that she'd enjoy recreating with gold wire and gemstones.

That was it. She'd march down to the concierge in the morning and ask for a tour guide. Someone who would drive her around the island, take her to all the right places so she could find exactly what she was looking for without worrying about maps, or getting lost, or making a mistake and driving on the wrong side of the road and ending up flattened.

Buoyed by her resolution, she felt a rush of determination and enthusiasm. She was going to have the time of her life and find out for herself if she really had her aunt's gumption and skills.

A presence at her elbow surprised her, and she looked up, startled, to see a uniformed member of staff holding a phone on a small platter. "Call for you, Miss Bauer."

She picked up the phone and stared at it for a second, wondering who it could be. Not her parents, surely. It was already very late in Germany, and besides she'd already let them know she was safe. Was it Allie? Was she late for dinner, or was her hostess calling to cancel?

But the moment she put the phone to her ear she had her answer. It was Maxon. "Hey," she greeted him. "It's after midnight there, isn't it? Shouldn't you be in bed like a good little boy?"

Maxon snorted. "What have I ever done to you, little honey, to make you curse me like that? *Bed?* I'm young, I'm gorgeous, and it's Saturday night! I'm living my life like it was meant to be lived."

Judging from the thumping sounds in the background, he was at a club, so she figured he was making good on his word. “If you’re out there *living*,” she asked pointedly, “why are you calling me? We just talked this morning.”

“I know. I was just checking to make sure you’re keeping to your promise.”

“I promised you nothing,” she answered. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, you promised to have a good time. To relax.”

“Well, I took a long walk in the lovely garden, sat on a log and watched hundreds of butterflies flutter past my head, and bought myself a heap of short cotton dresses covered with flowers. Is that relaxing enough?”

“You’re on your way, but you’re missing the most important promise of all.”

“What promise is that?” she asked cautiously.

“To have an affair with some hunky, barefoot beach-boy in a straw hat and a thong—”

Romy let out a gasp of laughter, scandalized, then washed it down with the last of the Swimming Pool. “I never said anything about that, my friend.”

“No?” For a moment, his attention was taken away by another voice close to the phone, and then he was back with her. “I must have been mistaken.”

“You’re very mistaken,” she swore.

He went on ruthlessly. “There I was thinking my friend Romy had a sense of adventure. That she wanted to shake loose the shackles of her job—”

“I like my job—”

He didn’t bother to acknowledge her counter argument. “The awful monotony of the German bankers and businessmen she keeps dating—”

“I haven’t dated anyone in almost a year, those bankers and businessmen are ancient history.” Romy didn’t like talking about her love life, or her non-love-life as it would be fairer to call it. She wished Maxon would change the subject, but he could be like a dog with a squeaky toy when he wanted to be.

As she’d expected, he rolled on like a tank. “I hope at least you’re feasting on spicy island food and getting drunk.” He sounded like the severely disappointed father of a daughter who’d just announced she wasn’t joining the family business. “I hope at least you’re getting fat on coconut cakes and pounding Malibu shooters.”

“I’m already quite plump,” she reminded him. “And I like myself that way.”

“And so you should. You’re terribly fetching, darling. And that’s as great

a reason as any to make this visit a gastronomic adventure. But what about the shooters?”

Romy looked down at her hand and discovered that she had unknowingly licked all the salt off the rim of her glass. Did that count?

The digital readout on the clock on the wall above the bar brought her to reality. It was time to leave, if she was to have any hope of getting to Allie and Sam’s on time. “Got to run, Max,” she said, and added teasingly, “enjoy the rest of your night!”

“*You* enjoy the rest of *your* night,” he countered. “I’m already having a ball. And don’t forget what Daddy Maxon told you.” He ended the call without giving her any time to respond, and Romy set the phone carefully back down onto the platter.

It was only when she stood up and the entire lounge began to wiggle and wobble under her feet that it occurred to her that she should have asked the waitress what the heck was in those Swimming Pools.

CHAPTER 9



“Well, don’t you look spanking smart,” Allie said as she let Charlie into the cottage. She gave him an admiring up-and-down examination, making him second guess his choice of clothing for the evening.

Sam appeared over his shoulder and made it worse. “Wow. You look spiffy.”

He looked down at himself, re-evaluating the navy-blue Dockers and white linen shirt. It didn’t look that over the top, did it? He dined at least once a week at the home of his friends, but most of the time he just sauntered over from his own residential unit wearing the usual uniform polo. “Don’t hate me just ‘cause I’m beautiful,” he retorted. “You guys told me you’d invited a guest for dinner, so I made myself look decent. My mother would wreck me if I didn’t. She’d consider it a personal embarrassment if her only child went visiting decent folk looking a mess.”

“I guess your freshly shaven face and... wait...” she leaned forward and sniffed him without reservation, “an apricot facial scrub!” She squealed and clapped her hands. “My, we did put in some effort, didn’t we!”

Charlie grunted, gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and then stepped around her, heading straight for the bar. He poured himself a decent shot of good twelve-year-old Vallée d’Or rum, the best on the island, straight up, no ice, the best way to experience it. Sam joined him, still smirking.

“I don’t know why you have that stupid look on your stupid face,” Charlie growled.

Sam shrugged, leading the way to the porch where Allie had decided they would dine, overlooking the dark, distant sea. “I was just wondering if your sudden enthusiasm for grooming had anything to do with a certain lovely little blonde—”

“Forget it,” Charlie said, irritably. “First of all, we did *not* hit it off. She thinks I’m an ass, and if I was honest with myself, when I really think about how I acted with her last night, she’s probably justified in coming to that conclusion.”

Sam lifted his brow but didn’t say anything.

That’s why we’re friends, Charlie thought. “And secondly,” he held up two fingers and waved them in Sam’s face, “it’s bad enough my last encounter with a member of the gentler sex has led to my needing a new paint job. And this was from a woman who *liked* me. I’m done with these foreign women.” He discovered that he’d started off jokingly, but now he was inching toward something more serious. “I won’t lie to you, Sam, it’s been a blast. I’ve enjoyed myself tremendously these past few years, playing all their little games. But now I’m starting to feel like I’m just a commercial break, a few moments of distraction until they can get back to their regularly scheduled program.” He looked down at his neatly pressed clothes, still not convinced he was overdoing it. “So, nah. Nothing to see here.”

“Hey, Uncle Charlie.” Sam and Allie’s daughter, Daria, walked past, stopping to offer him a fist bump. She was twelve years old, wearing soccer shorts and a t-shirt, streaked with mud, obviously just coming in from practice.

Charlie loved her as his own, although he had to admit that when she chose soccer over cricket it had hurt just a tiny bit. “You’d look a lot better in batting gloves and knee pads,” he told her.

The two of them had had this conversation many times before, so she simply grinned as she passed him.

“Go shower quickly,” Allie said, puffing slightly as she popped her head out of the kitchen. “Sam, come give me a hand with this.”

Charlie watched as Sam rose, not even bothering to ask what he was supposed to be helping her with. She called, he went, happy to help. His friend had been a young soca star who’d spent his career flirting like crazy and enjoying encounters with the host of available women who wanted nothing more than to bed him and go boast to their friends later. Charlie had never expected that version of Sam to be replaced with this one, this fully

domesticated and blissful version. But he seemed happy, and that was all Charlie needed to know. The occasional twinges of jealousy were easy to chase away. He just needed to remind himself that Sam's life was different from his; that was all.

The doorbell sounded, once, and then immediately again. Then four or five quick, staccato blasts, as if whoever it was, was in an awful hurry to come inside.

"Charlie? Will you get that?" Allie called out from the kitchen.

It could only be their dinner guest, and since the hosts were holed up in the kitchen, he figured it fell to him to let her in. He carefully set down his shot of rum, reminding himself that he'd freshen it up later, and walked over to the front door, opening it.

Romy was there, standing bathed in the glow of the overhead lights, backdropped by the darkness of the garden. The first thing he noticed was how pretty her dress was, how plump and round her limbs, and how the lights turned her fluffy blonde hair into a golden halo that made the color of her eyes even more striking.

The second thing he noticed was how sparkly bright they were, those eyes, and how flushed and pink her skin. She had a warm, fine sheen of sweat on her brow and across her upper lip, and she was giggling. Her lips were parted, baring neat, white teeth, and leaving just the pink tip of her tongue visible.

Romy Bauer was tipsy.

"Charlie Brownnnn! Am I just standing here, or are you going to be asking me inside?" The question was moot, because she easily sidestepped him, letting herself in. She tripped past him in kitten-heel sandals and was halfway into the living room when she stopped so suddenly her shoes squeaked. "Oh! I am so sorry!"

She bent forward suddenly, giving Charlie a view down the front of her pretty cotton sundress, a view he hadn't been prepared for. He looked hastily away as she grasped one of her sandals and began yanking it off, hoping on the other foot and looking dangerously on the verge of falling over.

He rushed forward, holding his hands out, ready to right her if she tipped way too past the midline and went crashing. "What are you doing?"

"My aunt, Anja, she told me that Caribbean people go barefoot in their homes, yes? That it is rude to wear shoes?" She managed to get one off and cast it in the direction of the front door, narrowly missing his shins, and then

attacked the other one, discounting the buckle altogether and opting instead for the brute force method.

He hurried over. “Yes, many of us go barefoot at home, but no, nobody thinks you’re rude if you don’t remove... and they’re off.” She looked as if she was fixing to wing the second shoe after the first, so he hastened to take it from her. “Give me that.”

Now he was holding both the shoe and the girl, wondering whether the latter would be able to stay upright long enough for him to hurry over and deposit the second shoe next to its sibling.

“Romy!” Allie sailed in bearing a tray of something that smelled delicious. “Oh,” she said when she spotted them. Sam appeared behind her, equally weighed down with platters. They both saw what they saw and came to the wrong conclusion.

The only reason he didn’t unhand her at once and leap back was the certainty that if he did so, she’d go down like a Jenga tower. So he carefully led her to a large, comfortable patio chair and set her safely down.

She’d barely settled in when she squinted at him, examining his face as if she’d forgotten who he was for just one moment and then suddenly it all came rushing back. “You were rude to me!” she announced, like it was the memory of the century. “You were awfully, awfully mean!”

Really, he wondered. This, now?

Then she leaned in. “But it’s okay. I was rude to you too.” She paused at her pronouncement, as if it had world-changing importance, and waited for him to say something back.

“Was that your idea of an apology?” he asked.

Her pale brows butted up against each other. “No. No apology. You were a pig to me and I was a pig to you and now we are even and we move on. Yes?”

“How much have you had to drink?” he asked without thinking. She’d have had to pass through the lounge on the way over here, so maybe she’d made a pitstop. A long one.

Her pink lips pulled back in a happy, uncharacteristic grin. “I had the Swimming Pool.” She pointed vaguely behind her. “Back there, in the lounge, where there is a reggae singer.”

Ah. That explained it. He knew that drink well: three kinds of rum, plus a good helping of Blue Curacao. “The Swimming Pool’s pretty strong.” He wasn’t sure if he was commiserating with her or impressed.

“Yes, they were,” Romy agreed, and giggled.

“They?” Charlie echoed.

She held up three fingers, waving them in front of his face. “I had *two*.”

Oh, good grief, Charlie thought. He figured he’d have a word with the girls down at the bar, maybe to institute a strict one-Swimming-Pool-per-evening limit.

Sam shot him an enquiring look, but Charlie shook his head. The head shake was repeated, because he’d noted that Sam had been headed to the minibar where he stored his vintage Caribbean rums. He was proud of his carefully curated collection and could barely contain himself for ten minutes before offering whenever he had a guest. But as far as Charlie could see, Romy had had more than enough for the evening. She sat there looking flushed and happy, a far cry from the prickly, irritable woman he’d spent last night with in enforced close quarters.

Sam introduced himself and Allie, and Daria appeared looking freshly scrubbed, with her long, curly hair pulled back, and took a seat next to her favorite uncle. The happy grin she gave him almost made him forgive her for choosing football over cricket—but not quite.

Daria winked at him as if she knew what he was thinking, and then took her place at her steel tenor pan standing on its rack in a corner. Like her dad, she played well, having inherited the family musical gene. She picked up a slender pair of sticks and played an old calypso, explaining that Anja had based one of her best-known sculptures on the legend who had sung that song.

It was all Charlie could do to sit back and enjoy the scene, the comfortable domesticity of the Drummond family. He was naturally gregarious and loved being around people, but at the end of the evening, when his social battery was all run out, he returned to his cave and sank into solitude. It was only something like this, with its loving warmth, that could lure him back out again.

He leaned back, not participating much in the conversation as Sam launched into a description of his late father’s near hero-worship of Anja’s craftsmanship. It was enough just to be made a part of it.

At Allie’s invitation, they served themselves at the buffet and sat on the comfy chairs on the patio. It was too pleasant a night to waste indoors at the dining table.

Most of the conversation centered around Anja, as Sam eagerly soaked up

any information Romy was able to offer. “The house in Batali Beach, it is mine now. Soon, I will visit.”

Charlie listened idly as she spoke, discovering that he liked hearing her accent, with her clipped vowels and rhythmic consonants.

She looked determined, and as she filled her stomach with carbs from Allie’s delicious root vegetable stew, she slowly became more articulate. It would be a while yet for all that rum to be out of her system, but her eyes were focused and her speech less slurred, so that was a start.

“When I go, I hope to stay at the cabin for a few weeks and explore the island. Take photographs of the flowers, the birds, the wild animals. With them, I will create my art.”

Charlie watched, intrigued, as something changed in her face. The smile she gave when she mentioned her art was not the smile of twenty minutes earlier, the one that said how happy she’d been to take a nose dive into a bowl-sized glass of Blue Curacao. This one spoke of curiosity, creativity, and bliss. Romy was an artist like her aunt? He hadn’t known that.

He set down his knife and fork on his plate and tilted his body slightly toward her. “Tell me about your art.”

They say that the best way to draw someone out is to ask about their passion, and Romy opened up immediately. “My aunt, her sculptures are of wood and metal and paint, but I make miniatures, a hundred times smaller than hers.”

“You carve miniatures?” he asked, interested.

When she shook her head, her blonde hair flopped about. “No, I bend gold wire into their shapes, and use gemstones for the eyes and other decorations. The result,” she held out her hand, palm up, “is a bunch of tiny creatures, much smaller than my hand.”

“Gold wire, huh? And what kind of gems?”

“Anything from Swarovski crystals to turquoise, diamonds to emeralds.” She gave him a cheeky, knowing grin, and immediately he understood what she’d been so protective of in the car, stuffed inside her carry-on.

“So, you work from photographs?” Sam intervened.

Romy nodded vehemently. “I spend two days here at Half Moon Bay. I will hire myself a guide, and we will go to all the places where there are animals and flowers, and I will take many photos. And then, when I get to Batali Beach, I will begin to practice my art.”

“Sounds lovely,” Allie said.

“You’re in luck,” Sam said. “Charlie’s a licensed and experienced guide. He can take you.”

Charlie almost dropped his drink. “I can what, now?”

“Oh, go on. Don’t be modest.” Sam reached around and clapped Charlie on the back. “Charlie’s a great guide. He knows everyone and has a knack for finding the best wildlife. Tell them about the time you stumbled upon a whole field of coachman butterflies.” He beamed at Romy, looking extremely proud. “Coachmen are lovely; they’re green and cream, with beautiful markings on their wings. They’re very rare, and hadn’t been seen in Sabina for years, but Charlie found them.”

Romy was looking Charlie in the face as if that was the best idea she’d ever heard, but Charlie wasn’t even turning in her direction. Instead, he was focused on Sam, sending him the kinds of messages with his eyes that only best friends could interpret. Still, Sam was sitting there, nodding and smiling and sipping his drink. Right next to him, his wife was nodding and smiling as well.

Charlie wanted to strangle them both.

Daria decided to leap onto the bandwagon herself. “Dad’s right! Uncle Charlie is the best guide. You’ll see so much stuff. Last time I went hiking with him, we found a big, fat, pink worm that was really a lizard!” The awesomeness of that experience made Daria glow.

Charlie sat and listened as the deal was made without a yea or nay from him. He heard Sam promise to that Charlie would pick her up at nine tomorrow morning. He heard Allie tell her to make sure she packed lots of sunscreen and a pair of water shoes. But the one thing he didn’t hear was the sound of his own voice, saying *Yes*.

The moment he had the chance, he cornered Sam in the kitchen. “What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

Sam knew at once what he was talking about, but immediately, his expression was one of innocence. “What? Making sure Romy has the best guide available.”

“There are lots of guides on the island and you know it. Even your own concierge can arrange one for her, today for tomorrow. So, what are you up to?” He poked his friend in the chest. “Don’t lie.”

Sam looked smug. “I just thought it would be nice if you guys spent some time together. From what I saw out there, you two seem to have really hit it off. She was laughing at all your jokes.”

“That’s just the Curacao talking,” Charlie snapped. “She doesn’t like me.”

“Seems to me like she does,” Sam affirmed. “Couldn’t keep her eyes off you.”

That idea seemed preposterous to Charlie... and then slowly became less so. She did have the habit of glancing at him and then looking away. And she’d giggled throughout the meal. To be honest, he could do worse when it came to enforced day-long playdates. She was beautiful; pale and puffy with her hair constantly coming loose. But that was beside the point.

“Are you crazy? What did I say about staying away from these girls? They’re bad news, Sam, and you know it. Either they’re bored office workers looking for an island adventure, or they’ve got a boyfriend waiting at home and at the end of their trip they go back all relaxed and happy after their little interlude. Either way, I lose.”

“Funny,” Sam mused out loud, “you always said that was the perfect scenario for you.”

“Well,” Charlie said sourly, “let’s just say I’ve declared a moratorium.”

“On what?” Sam asked.

“Everything. Women, sex, flirting....”

Sam schooled his features into a look of grave concern. “You sure you can survive that level of deprivation? I mean, plants can only go without sunlight for so long....”

“Very funny,” Charlie said. He was used to the banter between himself and Sam, but for once he wished his friend would listen, actually *listen* to him. “I just need some time to think, get my head straight, okay?”

Finally, Sam looked as if he truly understood what Charlie was trying to say. “Okay, man. I hear you.” He tilted his head, looking Charlie in the eye, and said sympathetically, without a trace of sarcasm, “I hope it works out for you.” Then, after some thought, he said, “Should I arrange for another guide for Romy?”

Charlie glanced back onto the patio, where Daria was giving Romy a lesson on the steel pan. They were tapping out each note on the scale, moving up and down. He shook his head. “It’s fine. I already agreed to do it. I’m a professional, and this is business. We’ll do okay.” He added with a little glimmer of that Charlie Brown sparkle, “Pretty sure she doesn’t bite.”

It was getting late, and as the evening drew to a close Charlie could see that Romy was wilting. He felt briefly sorry for her. The incoming flight from

Europe was especially difficult because of the time zones, and jet lag was a very real thing. Add to that the cramped night she'd spent in the cab of a truck swatting mosquitoes, not to mention the six plus shots of liquor she had unknowingly consumed, and she was sure to be knackered.

So he crossed over to her and said gently, "Are you ready to leave? I can walk you back to your cabin if you like."

The effects of the two Swimming Pools she'd chugged were diminishing, and her exuberant glow was beginning to dim. She looked a little confused by the fact that he had asked her, but then nodded gratefully. "Thank you, Charlie. I'm not sure I'd have found it on my own." She glanced hesitantly out into the darkness that had completely enclosed them.

"You'll do great," he promised. He helped her get her sandals back on, and then, as his friends walked them to the front door, Charlie held out his elbow for her to take. "It will be slippery out there after all that rain," he warned her.

She slid her hand into the crook of his arm, and as she did so he noticed that even though her nails were short they were carefully manicured, as pretty and neat as the rest of her.

He guided her along the path, away from the private area where Sam and Allie's home was screened off from the rest of the resort by a row of palms, and back into the spacious gardens.

They said very little, until Charlie began to have that uneasy feeling that if silence fell between them it would never be lifted again, so he asked, "Did you have a good time tonight?"

"I did. I like your friends very much." She pondered awhile, and then blushed. "I think maybe I had a bit too much to drink earlier." She gave him an anxious glance. "Did I behave myself?"

He smiled indulgently, remembering how lovely she was when she was flushed and dewy with perspiration. "You were on your best behavior. I promise."

"Good." Romy nodded. "Very good."

They stopped at the door of her unit, and as soon as she began fussing and fumbling through her purse for her keycard, Charlie leaned forward and inputted his universal override code. There were only three people at the resort who knew it: Sam, himself, and the chief of security.

They stood there with the door yawning open, and Romy looked as if she didn't know what to do now. Charlie had a few thoughts on that subject but

stepped away smartly. “Sleep well, Romy,” he said. “Tomorrow at nine, your adventure begins.”

He waited until she was inside with the door locked before he walked away.

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CHAPTER 10



Who gave the sun permission to be so bright, Romy wondered as she shielded her eyes with her hand. She was wearing a top-of-the-line pair of Dior sunglasses, and yet the light made her eyes feel like tiny disco balls. On top of that, her head hurt. Ugh.

What was it Charlie had told her was in those Swimming Pools? How many different types of rum? She dug into the pocket of her flowered sundress and pulled out a small bottle of Tylenol, popping her second in less than an hour. This headache had to go away, or she was going to die right here, on the path, just outside her door.

She could see Charlie striding down the path in her direction, wearing khaki Dockers and a blue uniform polo, looking powerful and confident, and oh, so utterly delectable. She almost bounced on her toes at the sight of him. The excitement, she reminded herself, was because of the fact that he was taking her on a boat ride, not because of the fact that the boat ride was going to be *with him*.

Then her view was obscured as an attendant stepped onto the path, holding a folded piece of paper on a platter. “Miss Bauer, it appears that you have no way to receive emails on your own?” the staffer asked politely, and Romy felt a twinge of embarrassment. She’d assumed that this tiny island would be barely on the grid, so leaving her tech behind wouldn’t have mattered. But already she was beginning to feel like an anomaly, as if everyone else who was wholly plugged in thought she was a weirdo.

She nodded her confession, and the young woman held out the platter to

her. "This email arrived for you."

She took it with thanks and the woman glided away. As she opened it and peered at it, Charlie arrived at her side. "Trouble?" he asked.

She scanned the document, noticing it was a series of questions from a higher-up about a project she'd been working on. A project she'd left in the capable hands of the man who was acting for her, so why were they bothering to bug her?

"No," she said firmly. She folded the note over and over, largely because she hated how messy crumpled paper looked, and slipped it into a nearby trash can. "I am on vacation. Therefore, there are no problems."

He looked at her admiringly. "That's my girl."

She wanted to point out to him that she was not, in fact, his girl, or anyone else's for that matter, but he plucked her duffel out of her hands and slung it over his shoulder, pointing out the path they were going to take. She wasn't used to people manhandling her possessions like that, but the bag looked so small and insignificant swinging from Charlie's big hand that she didn't bother to say anything.

When he realized she was trotting in double time to keep up with his stride, he slowed down. She was grateful for that small mercy.

"Coconut water and Angostura bitters," he said, completely out of the blue.

"Huh?"

He gave her a secret smile as if he understood and empathized. "For that hangover you've got there. Coconut water and bitters. And I've got both on my boat, along with some lemon slices. Fix you right up."

She brought her hands up to cover her face. "Am I that transparent? Do I look awful?"

"You're fine," he encouraged. "You're on vacation, remember? You're *supposed* to have a good time."

"I'm already having one," she said, smiling up at him, and then stopped. Did that sound flirty?

It probably didn't, because he didn't even bat an eye. They walked together out of the big resort gates and headed around the side to the path which led to the beach. She could see spangles of light bouncing off the water, so pretty that she didn't even mind that the light was searing her sensitized retinas.

People were walking past them: some were obviously tourists, with their

flipflops and broad-rimmed hats, board shorts and picnic baskets. But others were locals, kids laughing as they trotted down to the bay for a swim, or fishermen and other working people, weighed down by tools, baskets and fishing equipment.

“On that side,” Charlie said, pointing, “is the bathing area. People go swimming and surfing from there. Sam owns the aqua center, where we do kayaking classes, children’s camps, stuff like that.”

“And you teach the kayaking,” she guessed.

“Among other things.” He looked proud, happy to be near the water. She could just imagine how much he must love the sea, having grown up so close to it. Then he added, “On the other side is the commercial area. There’s a fishing village, and some docks for small sailboats and yachts.”

“And that’s where we’re going?”

Before he could answer, a deep voice behind announced, “On your right!”

Romy flinched and spun around to see a man on a bike pedaling purposefully past them. This, in itself, wasn’t unusual at all, but what caught her eye was the small metal birdcage strapped between the handlebars. She stared in amazement at the little birds inside, one blue and the other green, which were contentedly sitting on a swing dangling from the center.

“Morning, miss,” said the man said warmly as he zoomed past. “Welcome to Sabina.”

“Huh. Do I look that fresh off the plane?” she asked, not taking that as a compliment at all.

He glanced at her almost indulgently. “Well, you could do with a little sun.” He flashed his wide, white grin. “And today, we’re going to fix that.”

She was still soaking in the atmosphere, pondering the oddness of a man on a bicycle with birds strapped to it, when she first set foot on the sand. She sank into the powdery surface with a sigh of pleasure, inhaling sharply to capture as much of the sweet and salty scent of the surf as she could.

“Better if you take your shoes off,” Charlie advised.

She didn’t even hesitate, leaning forward to unbuckle her sandals and sink her polished toes onto the grainy warmth. He made a move to take her sandals from her but she yanked them away. “I can do it,” she told him. “I don’t need you to carry everything for me.”

“Suit yourself.” He seemed more amused than put off.

Two more men walked past them, each casually carrying a birdcage with one or two birds inside. She simply had to ask. “What are they doing, these

men? With the birds?”

“Taking their birds for a walk.”

She stopped and peered into his face, looking for any sign that he was pulling her leg. “You’re joking.”

“No, I swear. Most bird owners take their birds out every day. Like any other living thing, they need sunshine and air, after all. The birds enjoy it, and the men get some exercise too. Look.”

She watched where he pointed and saw another couple of men walking along the beach, deep in conversation. And, yes, each one was carrying a bird in a cage.

“But even if this is so,” she argued, “isn’t this an activity for children? This bird carrying?”

His smile grew even broader, and she got another good look at those white, gleaming teeth. “In Europe, maybe, but here in the Caribbean, it’s considered a very manly pastime. The men meet every morning down on street corners or wherever, enjoy a smoke and a shot of rum, and then place bets on whose bird can sing the longest or the best.”

That was enough to make her stop and gape at him. “They bet on the birds?”

He shrugged. “A good bird can win you thousands on a single bet. I’ve even heard rumors about a guy who bet a car and lost it.”

As they approached the dock, Romy noticed a row of men of all ages, sitting on the edge, doing exactly as Charlie had said, sipping on shot glasses, puffing on their smokes, and shooting the breeze, all with bird cages at their sides. “Amazing,” she breathed.

He looked pleased that she was happy, that she was appreciating his homeland. “I have lots more to show you. I promise.”

The men seemed to notice them coming and lifted either a cigarette or a nip of rum in greeting. “Charlaayyy!”

Charlie acknowledged them, hailing some of them out by name. Then he and Romy kept on walking.

“Popular guy,” Romy noted.

“Yeah,” he agreed without a hint of false modesty.

She followed him along the dock to a surprisingly large boat, declining his offer to help her up the ladder. She appreciated him being such a gentleman and all, but she could at least do something for herself!

As she stood on the deck he busied himself, making his checks, stowing

her bags, radioing in his departure and estimated time of return to what she assumed was some sort of control room.

The large boat swayed as they pulled away from the dock, and then held steady as they glided into smoother waters.

“Come on over,” he invited, patting the seat next to the pilot’s seat where he was already ensconced, “You’ll get the best view from up here.”

He didn’t even have to ask her a second time. Her curiosity and excitement overrode any reservations she might have had about sitting right next to his elbow. She clambered up onto the elevated dais and sat on the white leather seat. Comfy.

He glanced away from the water to flick his gaze over her. “I hope you’ve put on sunscreen.”

She rolled her eyes. “I get it, I’m pale. Metropolitan-city ghostly.”

“That’s got nothing to do with it,” he said gently. “It’s my responsibility to make sure you’re okay, and that includes protecting you from sunstroke or sunburn. So,” he pointed at the bag she’d brought with her, “if you haven’t already, slather up good. And keep reapplying. The sun’s brutal.”

At his mention of the word ‘responsibility’ her delight was just slightly dampened. This might be big excitement for her, but this was a typical workday for him. She was just another tourist passenger, fresh off the plane and wet behind the ears. She’d do best to curb her enthusiasm.

“Also,” he leaned over to a shelf and brought down a large-brimmed canvas hat. “As long as you’re in direct sunshine, you’re wearing that.”

She had already begun to smear high-SPF sunscreen onto her skin, but she stopped, looking askance at the proffered item. “You expect me to wear that?”

“Sure, why not?” He turned it over in his hand, examining it, seeming puzzled as to what reason she could have for refusing.

“I’d look like my grandmother! I can’t wear a big, church-lady hat like that!” Maxon would have been appalled, Romy thought. If a photo of her wearing that thing ever made it to her social media he was sure to block her.

“It’s not a church-lady hat. It’s a beach-lady hat! My mom has one just like it!”

Oh, God, Romy thought.

“It’s got a sunflower on it, see?” he added, sounding a little deflated. “I bought it for you. Thought you might like it.”

“Oh.” He’d gone shopping for her? Trying to protect her from sunstroke?

She was touched, pleased. “Thank you.” Completely shoving aside the awfulness of the hat, she placed it carefully upon her head and smiled at him. “It’s lovely. And so very kind of you.”

He took his hands off the wheel long enough to put the chin strap in place.

Lord, Romy thought, a chin strap. Haven’t worn one of those since I was about six.

“Keep it from blowing away in the wind,” he explained.

All she could do was nod.

He examined her with pleasure. “You look adorable.”

She didn’t dwell too much on that comment. Instead, she looked straight ahead again. They’d left Half Moon Bay behind, and the water was opening up before them. “Where are we headed?”

Charlie brightened, warming to his favorite topic, the beauty of Sabina. “I’m taking you to Coral Island. You’ll see lots of wildlife there.’

That sounded wonderful. “You mean like the book? The one by R. M. Ballantyne? I read it so many times when I was a kid. And I’ve seen two versions of the movie; one in English and one in German!” She felt the glow of nostalgia surround her.

Then Charlie looked at her indulgently, giving her an aw-that’s-sweet look, like she was a five-year-old who’d just announced that she’d learned her ABCs all the way to the end. “Not exactly,” he confessed.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the island wasn’t named after the book. It was, uh, how should I put this?” His eyes swiveled upward to the sky, seeking inspiration. Then he said, “There are only two venomous snakes on Sabina. One is the fer-de-lance. Big guy. A real monster. He’ll chase you through the forest if he’s in a really bad mood.”

Romy felt a shiver run down her spine. “Okayyy.” Why the talk of snakes? She wasn’t sure she really needed to know this.

“The other,” he said carefully, “is the coral snake. An itsy-bitsy little fella —”

Realization dawned. “Are you telling me the island is named after a *snake*?”

“Well, yeah. They seem to be rather fond of it.”

Romy clutched her armrests and shrank back. “There are coral snakes. On that island.” In the distance, a large gray-green shape had already begun to

loom, and the boat seemed to be headed dead toward it.

“Yeah, but to their credit, they tend to hang around on the north coast—”

“Oh, that’s a relief,” she cut in sarcastically.

“—and we’re going to be on the *south* coast.”

“How big is the island?” she challenged.

He wagged a hand to say he was only ball-parking it. “Oh, four or five kilometers wide, give or take.”

“And I suppose your average coral snake is unable to cross that much ground? From *all the way* up on the north coast?” Romy knew her eyes were bugging, but she didn’t care. She didn’t care if she looked like a raving lunatic. There was no way in hell he was getting her off this boat. “Turn the boat around, Charlie,” she demanded. “Right now!”

He cut the engine but didn’t turn. They stopped their forward movement and bobbed gently on the waves. Then he turned to her. “Romy, I promise you, you’ll be safe. I bring people here at least once a week. I’ve never had an incident, and never heard of another guide who has.” His voice was sincere, his face solemn. “I won’t allow any harm to come to you. I’m taking you to a network of caves so beautiful that field naturalists come from all over the world to experience them. I promise you there will be many lovely creatures for you to photograph. And you’ll make the prettiest sculptures.”

She was still uncertain. Still a little anxious. But her hand was in his and he was gently squeezing it, reassuring her. Promising that she’d be okay. So she inhaled sharply and then let it out in a gust. “I will stay close to you, okay?”

“And I to you,” he promised. He turned back to the controls and started the engine again.

As she sat back, congratulating herself on pushing beyond her comfort zone, he added, with that mischievous Charlie Brown sparkle, “Just remember, if you happen to spot a pretty red, yellow, and black necklace lying on the ground, don’t pick it up.”

“What?” she squeaked.

He chuckled. “That’s just a warning every parent in the Caribbean has given to their kids from the beginning of time, including my own mom. Corals are pretty little things, with their bright shiny stripes. It’s easy for a kid to mistake them for jewelry, and try to pick one up.”

She glared at him. He’d just finished comforting her, and now he was trying to freak her out again? “Bad joke, Charlie.”

He looked sheepish. "I know. Forgive me."

They lapsed into silence again as they approached the island, and in spite of herself, she felt curiosity fill her. Coral Island was a shade of green she'd never seen before, and dotted with trees bearing bright yellow, orange or red flowers. As they glided up to a narrow jetty, Charlie slowed so she could take photos. And all the while she was focused on what she was seeing through the lens, she had the sensation that he was focused on *her*.

He tied off the boat, looking satisfied. "We're here. You'll have a great time." He pointed up a stone path. "The caves are up there; it's just a fifteen-minute walk. But first..." To Romy's shock, he kicked off his boat shoes, and with a single swift movement, pulled his polo over his head. "We've got more than enough time for a swim."

Charlie was saying something, but she couldn't even hear a word coming out of his mouth because the rest of him was screaming at her. He was bare-chested, every muscled inch of him taut. His biceps bunched and relaxed with the slightest movement, as though his entire body was restless, yearning to propel itself forward. He had surprisingly little chest hair; instead he was sleek and smooth in a way that made Romy think of the dark velvet lining a jewelry box.

As he unbuckled his Dockers and began to peel them off, Romy began to feel a little dizzy.

He paused with his pants in his hands, stopped in the act of folding them over his pilot's chair. "Aren't you going in? Aren't you wearing a swimsuit?"

She remembered something vaguely about him telling her to come prepared to swim, but she hadn't thought to put her swimsuit on under her clothes. It was stuffed somewhere in her big beach bag, along with a towel the size of a blanket. Problem was, to get into it, she'd have to undress in his presence. She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

"Uhhh..." Why couldn't her mouth form words?

"You *can* swim, can't you?" he asked, furrowing his brows a bit. "I'm sorry if I made the wrong assumption—"

That piqued her pride, so her answer was sharp. "I can swim, Charlie. I swam in high school." She didn't add that all the swimming she'd ever done in her life was in a community pool. "I will not be a burden on you."

"How could *you* be a burden?" he asked, smiling as his gaze swept up and down her body, lingering in places.

"Oh," she said, hearing that thread of pique in her voice but being unable

to keep it at bay, “since I’m just a *responsibility*.”

He took two steps closer, so close that he could look deep into her eyes. So close that she could reach out her hand and touch him, find out for herself if that magnificent skin of his felt like velvet as well. “Yes, you are my responsibility, but this is also a pleasure for me.”

Her resentment dimmed. Was he enjoying her company as much as she was enjoying his? “Really?”

“Of course.” He nodded emphatically. “This island is my home and has my heart. I could show it off all day, every day.”

Huh, she thought. *Well, fine then*. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to put my bathing suit on,” she said primly, wishing now that there was more distance between them.

He must have understood, because he backed off. “You can get dressed in the cabin down below.”

Quickly, she scampered down the short ladder and made haste getting dressed, although she had no idea what she was hurrying for. Her skin felt hot and tingly and she wondered if maybe she was allergic to her sunscreen or something,

She pulled on her bathing suit, asking herself as she did so what could have possessed her to buy a bikini at the resort shop. She’d flown in with a perfectly serviceable one-piece bathing suit that covered all her bits and pieces, but, buoyed by the giddy enthusiasm that seemed to permeate the entire resort, she’d impulsively bought a bikini. It was navy blue, with golden hoops at her hips and between her breasts, and certainly did not cover all her bits and pieces. Matter of fact, her bits and pieces were making a run for it, spilling over the clasp at the hips and the front of the bra top.

And God, she was so pale! There was zero chance of anyone seeing her right now and not knowing immediately that she’d just stepped off a plane. She grabbed a bottle of tanning oil and frantically began to grease herself up. Maybe after they visited these caves of Charlie’s she’d have enough time to lie on the beach and fry herself like a slab of fish. Look a little less touristy.

“Everything all right down there?” Charlie’s voice came floating down the stairwell, causing her to respond irritably. “Yes. I’m *fine!*”

She snatched up her towel, hastily wrapping it around herself, and clambered back up the stairs. Charlie gave her that same slow up-and-down and Romy hated herself for feeling the red heat rush into her face, breasts, shoulders, and arms. *He must be laughing at me on the inside*, she figured.

But he said kindly, “You’ll feel cooler in the water, I promise.” He walked over to the ladder hanging over the side and added, “I’ll go in first, okay? Then I can help you down if you need it.” And then in a single swift movement, he dived over the edge.

Romy ran to the railing, looking down. She’d expected him to use the ladder like a sane person, but not Charlie. She peered into the water, which was not the crystalline blue of Half Moon Bay. It was deep green, crisp and mysterious. And she couldn’t see Charlie.

She wanted to call out his name in panic, but he wouldn’t hear her from down there, would he? Plus the man had entered the water like an Olympic high diver, without creating even a splash, so she couldn’t even tell where he’d gone in.

Romy watched as a large, dark shape glided toward the boat, like a sea lion about to breach the surface. When he appeared he was smiling. Water streamed out of his close-cut hair and down his face. “Your turn,” he said.

“Well, I’m certainly not launching myself over the edge of your boat like a cannonball,” she informed him primly.

“That’s fine,” he said, unperturbed by her sarcasm. “That’s what the stairs are for.”

She wanted to express her disgust at his mansplaining with a well-placed “Duh” but instead decided to let it slide. Carefully, but without revealing any trepidation, she clambered over the edge of the boat and, step by step, began to lower herself into the water.

That first contact was shockingly cold. She’d half expected Caribbean water to be like her bath at home, but it was cool and crisp and made her gasp when she was fully immersed. Charlie hovered, his hands partially extended as if he thought she’d need to be held. But her kick was strong and she began to tread water, her arms making graceful arcs about her body.

“You like?” he asked, facing her and treading water as well. There was no way that either of them could touch the sea floor, and Romy decided not to ask how deep it was.

“I like!” she confirmed, and was rewarded with a proud and delighted smile. This man really did make the island his everything.

Her confidence began to grow once she shoved from her mind the intrusive thought of all the many, many, many sea creatures who shared this habitat with her right now, and the fact that a few of them might not be so happy about it.

She began to swim, pacing back and forth along the length of the jetty. She was sure that it was possible to venture farther out, as the water was calm, sheltered as it was by the mainland on one side and Coral Island on the other. But she had nothing to prove, not even to herself, and so she was content to just give in and enjoy it. After a few laps, Charlie joined her, swimming lazily beside her.

Romy found his presence soothing, comforting, and when she grew tired and flipped over onto her back, floating as she caught her breath, he did so as well. She felt so filled with calm that she had no problem closing her eyes. She knew she was in no danger of floating away or coming to any harm, not while Charlie was there.

“Did you know that sea otters hold hands while they sleep so they don’t float away from each other?” Charlie’s voice was deep and close, and so unexpected that she almost panicked and began to sink. But he stuck an arm out under her, bolstering her. “I got you,” he said softly.

Even though she could float on her own just fine, being held like that was so comforting that she allowed herself to sink into him. It was like being in a giant bath, a cloud. A very big bed.

She righted herself hurriedly and began paddling away. “I think we go to the caves now,” she announced.

He didn’t argue. Instead, he followed her wordlessly to the stairs, allowing her to climb back up unaided. They dressed in silence after Charlie advised her to just pull her clothes on over her swimsuit. “You’ll be back in water before the end of the day,” he promised. Then added, “Don’t forget your hat.”

She crammed the oversized beach hat down onto her head and carefully adjusted the chin strap, not wanting to admit as they clambered back down onto the dock that maybe it had been a good idea. The sun blazed down, and it was only the pair of shades that prevented her from squinting as she followed him off the jetty and onto the path. Immediately, she was surrounded by the sweet, powerful scents of greenery and flowers, with an underlying tone of rotting fruit that must have come from a tree nearby. It seemed to be fermenting, giving a smell as if someone had dropped a bottle of mead.

“Hog plums,” he said helpfully at her side. He stopped and pointed at the ground under a large, dense tree, which was littered with small, yellow fruit. “If you bite them just like that, they’re acidic as hell but they make great

jam.” He glanced at her and smiled. “And even better wine. My mom makes great wines with any local fruit you can imagine. If you like, I can swing by and pick you up a bottle.”

“I’d like that.” She couldn’t help but be warmed by the knowledge that this big manly man still visited his mom and talked so proudly of her.

It took another twenty minutes to cover a path that Romy guessed Charlie could cover in eight, partly because she was slowly strolling and partly because she stopped several times to photograph plants and flowers that Charlie helpfully pointed out and described.

Then they rounded a corner and were greeted by a large sign that said, WELCOME TO THE CORAL ISLAND CAVES. The wording was followed by the usual admonitions about taking nothing but photos, leaving nothing but footprints, blah, blah, blah.

There was also a warning about coral snakes, how pretty they were, and why it would be a terrible idea to try to befriend one.

“Charlaayyy!” Someone stepped out of a little booth built into the side of the cave mouth, wearing the now-familiar Sabina Tourist Board uniform of khaki and white with brass buttons. He was a thin, older man, much shorter than Charlie, with a gigantic pouf of dreadlocks that had been crammed into a tall leather hat painted red, gold, and green. The large gap between his front teeth was filled in with gold that glinted as he smiled.

The two men greeted each other by clasping hands and doing a quick bro-hug, and then Charlie ushered Romy closer. “This is Brother Jasper,” he said by way of introduction. “Brother, this is Romy Bauer. She’s German.”

Jasper surprised Romy by snatching her hand and kissing the back of it, then refused to let it go as he turned to Charlie. “A very pretty one this time, huh, Charlie?”

This time? Romy had no idea what that was about, but Charlie looked like he wanted to bat the hat off Jasper’s head. “She’s Anja Bauer’s niece,” he informed, him almost stiffly. “Here to settle her aunt’s estate.”

“Oh.” The expression on Jasper’s face grew solemn. “I’m so sorry for your loss. What a beautiful soul she was, your tantie.” Instead of releasing Romy’s hand, he held it tighter, imprisoning it with his other one. “You are our sister now, in the eyes of Jah, you hear? Miss Anja belong to Sabina, and now you belong here, too.”

Romy was so touched by the spontaneous offering of love and acceptance that she felt her eyes prickle. There was no way that this could have happened

in Germany, this immediate inclusion and unabashed acceptance. “Thank you,” she said. She felt a rasp in her throat.

Brother Jasper finally let her go, looking from one to the other. “So, you visiting the caves?”

Charlie answered, “She’s an artist like Anja. We’re looking for subjects for her art.”

Jasper beamed at Anja. “Wonderful! You came to the right place.” He indicated the entrance to the cave with a flourish. “Would you like to go in and take a gander?”

Gander? If Romy’s brain had been a computer, it would have seized. Desperately, she scrolled through her English vocabulary of nouns. This was a goose, yes? A boy goose? Was it a custom on the island to offer birds to visitors? And was she expected to reciprocate? And this gander, would it be alive, or already prepared for cooking?

She gave Charlie a confused look. “Are there many geese in the caves?”

Charlie looked as though he was struggling not to smile. Instead, he leaned closer and whispered in her ear, “He means ‘to have a look’.”

“Oh.” Her relief was palpable, as was her embarrassment. *Foolish, Romy*, she chastised herself silently. Then, gathering up as much aplomb as she could muster, she said with great dignity, “Thank you, Brother Jasper, I think I will have a look.” She turned away from the two men, stepping into the mouth of the cave. Charlie could follow if he wanted to.

“That’s a fine stallion you got there, Charlie,” she heard Jasper say in great admiration, but only a murmur followed and then he joined her. Again, what was that about? And why did the people of Sabina constantly talk in terms of animals?

The interior of the cave was significantly cooler than the slow burn outside. It was also surprisingly nicer. She hadn’t exactly expected a damp, brooding space worthy of *Lord of the Rings*, where Gollum could pounce from around any corner, but she also hadn’t expected it to be clean and dry, with signage on the walls and handrails to guide you as you descended the several flights of rocky steps that led you deeper into the ground and away from the mouth of the cave.

Romy could hear the echo of her steps, magnified ten times, and something about the comparative silence of the cave made her feel like she should be tiptoeing. She felt almost reverent, as if she was walking through a cathedral.

Charlie put his hand to the small of her back as he guided her along a narrow passageway, until they stepped through an opening into a cavern so large that it made her gasp. It was much darker here; there was no hope of sunlight penetrating this deep underground. But even in the darkness there was a different kind of light, small glowing fairy lights that decorated the walls... and they were moving.

“What are those?” she asked in a deferential whisper. She felt as if even speaking in a normal voice would violate this sacred space.

He took her hand, and for a second she looked down, surprised, to see how it disappeared into his. “Come see,” he said in the same whisper. He took a step forward, reached out with his other hand, and grasped one of the lights. It flickered as he touched it but didn’t go out. And as he brought it close enough for her to see, she gasped. “It’s a lizard!”

He smiled at her, seeming to enjoy her own surprised delight. “There’s a species of bioluminescent lizards that are hardly ever seen beyond these caves. Scientists haven’t yet to figure out what it is about this exact spot that attracts them. But look.” He held the lizard out in the palm of his hand, and the animal lay there, still glowing blue-green. “Isn’t he beautiful?”

“He is,” she said, though still keeping her distance. She took out her camera and began snapping photos, already imagining how she would portray such a creature with her art. When she’d taken all the photos she thought she would need, she nodded at Charlie to let him loose, but still he kept the animal close to him.

“Touch it,” Charlie urged.

Romy stared at him in the semi-darkness. “Are you crazy? You think I want to touch that thing?”

“Why not? He won’t harm you. He’s gentle and docile. He isn’t even trying to run away.” He lifted his black eyes to hers, encouraging. “Just a fingertip. You’ll find that things you’re afraid of are a lot less scary once you actually do them.”

Romy wrinkled her nose, not really here for any of Charlie’s philosophizing, but she gingerly extended a finger. It made contact with the lizard, who wriggled at her touch—and then chirped at her.

Romy was so shocked that she jumped back. “It made a noise! Like a bird, it *cheep-cheeped* at me!”

“You’d be surprised how chatty lizards can be. Spend a night in the forest, and I promise you, half the squawking you’ll hear won’t be from the

birds.”

Romy knew there was literally zero chance of her spending a night in the forest, but still, she was pleased with the courage she’d shown getting this far. She clasped her hands behind her back, making sure he knew she wouldn’t be repeating her lizard-poking experiment. Once was enough, thank you.

“What did it feel like?” he asked indulgently.

“I don’t know. Not cold or slimy. Kind of like a finger. A bony finger.”

He laughed at that, then held his hand up against an outcropping of rock to allow the lizard to crawl back where he belonged. Then he faced her again. “Let’s keep going,” he said.

They walked side by side, keeping their steps as quiet as possible. Charlie showed her a type of moss that he said was good for healing wounds, and a small family of frogs that were sleeping all heaped upon one another. “They’ll find cracks in the cave and make their way outside to hunt at night,” he told her.

She took a lot of photos, even of things that couldn’t possibly become part of her art, and slowly became less interested in the wildlife than she was in her guide, who was such a solid, confident, comforting presence. She tried to focus on his words as he described the history of the caves, from providing shelter to indigenous Taino tribes for at least a thousand years, to later becoming a hideout for enslaved people who had escaped the cruelty of the plantations on the mainland and either swum across the bay or paddled there on rafts.

She felt her entire body relax, the tension oozed from her neck and shoulders. Maybe Maxon was right; she could unwind, fully give herself into

There was a flapping overhead, like the flutter of sails in the breeze. Like flags being whipped in the wind. “What is—” she looked up, and that was when she saw it, a small cloud of black bodies, densely packed, their scalloped wings moving in unison. It took her brain a long time to process what she was seeing, so incredulous was she. As they flapped closer, they swooped lower, investigating, maybe. Or preparing for an attack. “Bats!” she screamed.

She felt Charlie’s arm tighten around her, heard his soothing voice. “It’s okay,” he said. “You’re all right.”

But she wasn’t all right. She was under attack. There were more of them,

and more and more, and Romy couldn't stop her terrified chant. "Bats, bats, bats!"

"Shh," he tried to warn her, to calm her, but terror made her touchy.

"Don't you shush me! Don't you ever shush me!"

"All I'm saying is, the more noise you make, the more freaked out they become. You're only going to make it worse!"

Some logical part of her brain reached out to embrace that thought, to bring reason into her current state of panic, but to no avail. She was *definitely* panicking. All she could fixate on was the black cloud that kept on coming, and as she screamed, they began to swirl, equally panicked. A tornado of wings, screeching at each other and at her, swooping down and then up and then at the walls and away.

"Get me out, get me out, get me out!" she begged, and immediately he responded, grasping her by the arm and spinning her around, heading quickly for the entrance to the cavern. The cloud swooped and swirled, and then she felt it: a presence above her head. On her head. A thumping atop the big hat Charlie had given her.

There was a bat on her head.

Romy began running around in circles, shrieking, panting, wanting nothing more than to throw up. She crashed into a wall of the cave, not even noticing it was there.

"Romy, Romy, Romy," she heard Charlie say. "Be still, so I can get him off."

He didn't really think she was going to stand there and get bitten, did he? What about rabies? There was no cure for rabies.

Feeling the leathery flap of wings beating down around her head, in her face and eyes, Romy began to run, sobbing in earnest now, with Charlie right behind her, calling out her name, begging her to stop. "*You* stop!" she screamed back at him and kept on going.

Charlie lunged, done with dancing around and begging her to stop. It was time to get tough, and tough he got. It was like being pounced on by an animal, a much larger beast than the bat still clinging to her hat. He pressed her against a cave wall with his broad body, whipped the hat off her head, complete with bat adornment, and with a few deft flicks of his hand, removed the creature and let it go.

It swirled and swooped, rising high to the cave ceiling before locating the rest of its swarm, and dropped lower, flapping its way through the opening,

back where it had come. She could hear the high-pitched squeaks as its family welcomed it, and a moment later the black cloud disappeared back into the gloom.

“Romy.” Charlie’s voice was soft in her ear, comforting and low, but she wasn’t ready to be comforted. She didn’t know *how* to be comforted. She could feel the tears flowing down her cheeks and hated herself for that. Hated the fact that she couldn’t even suck in a full breath, much less stop crying. She knew she was hot and her face was turning red. And in that moment, she hated Charlie.

“His claws were stuck in your sunflower,” he tried to explain.

“I know! Don’t you think I know? You and your big, stupid, big, *ugly* hat!” She punched him in the chest, trying to shove him away, but she might as well have been pushing back on the very wall where she’d sought refuge.

He looked down into her face, implacable. Unmovable. “You’re safe now.”

She was still traumatized, still angry, and needed a place to put it. She kept on pounding on him, never mind she was doing more damage to her own fists than to his chest. “Why did you have to give me that big silly hat? I bet it attracted him. I bet that bat saw it and said to himself, “Oh, a big ugly flower, why don’t I—”

She said nothing more, because Charlie’s mouth had come down over hers, cutting off her tirade. Romy was so stunned by this turn of events that she froze, and then immediately went limp. Her brain was spinning like a multicolored top but her body was suddenly stilled, as if the panic was all over now. As if the insane beating of her heart had gone quiet. As if her rigid muscles, poised for flight just moments before, were now fluid and soft.

Mmmm. She wasn’t sure if she’d said that out loud, but she was certainly saying it in her head. Because Charlie was delectable. His lips were firm and soft at the same time, if such a thing was even possible. He smelled like the sea they’d just swum in and the breeze that had whipped at their hair on the way up the path.

Then he broke the kiss and looked down at her. She could see the bright white of his eyes and the large pearls of his teeth as he smiled, and she had the eerie feeling that one of Anja’s sculptures had come to life and was holding her in his arms.

But she hadn’t given him permission to hold her, and she hadn’t given him permission to kiss her—and it hadn’t been all that wonderful anyway, his

kiss. That had been the panic talking. He'd only kissed her because of the bat, only held her to keep her from going stark raving mad all the way down here in a cave that she really, really needed to get out of now. That was all.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice very soft.

“Augh!” she said, reaching down and picking up her hat, but not putting it on. She was never wearing that thing again, as long as she lived. She shoved it at him, couldn't get rid of it fast enough. Then she straightened her spine, collected herself, and said with as much authority as she could muster, “I am ready to leave this cave now, Charlie Brown. And Coral Island.”

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CHAPTER 11



Romy stood just outside her cabin, all her packed bags at her side. A whole day had gone by, enough for her to compose herself and put her trauma with the bat on the back burner. She'd spent all of yesterday with a busload of other resort guests, touring the north of the island. Two hours rambling in the capital city of St. Cillian, shopping the high-end boutiques and sitting quietly for half an hour in a small park dedicated to soldiers native to Sabina who had fallen in Europe during World War II. At the time, with the island still a British colony, many men and women had been summoned to serve, and only about half of them had made it back home.

The tour had ended at El Fuerte de los Reyes; The Fort of the Kings. It was an imposing 18th century stone fortification that faced the Caribbean Sea, from which a series of colonizing forces, from Spanish to French to English, had warded off both pirates and challengers.

So it had been a good day, good enough to allow her to repress the memory of her terror. Unfortunately, the memory of what had come afterwards—Charlie's kiss—wasn't as easy to forget. It had remained there in the peripheries of her mind throughout the tour, as if the pressure of his lips on hers still lingered. The memory returned in even greater intensity last night, when she was alone in bed, with nothing to distract her. Nothing to ward away the onslaught of remembered sensation.

But that was over and done with. Last night before retiring she'd gone down to Reception and requested a driver to take her all the way to the south-

east coast of the island, to the cabin she had inherited. There, she would go through all the photos she had taken—none of which involved bats—and get started with her project. She hoped the serenity that Anja had spoken of so often would be there for her too, and help her focus on her art.

“Good morning.”

Romy stared up the path in disbelief, hoping that apparition she beheld was a figment of her imagination. Because surely it couldn't be Charlie there, all neatly pressed in his resort uniform, walking toward her. “Good morning,” she responded primly.

He stopped right in front of her, hands on hips, taking a mental tally of her belongs. “I guess this is everything?”

“Yes it is,” she said shortly, trying not to focus on his mouth because, as perfectly shaped and inviting as it was... well, no good would come of staring at it.

“Great.” He scooped up all her bags except her now-notorious carry-on, nodding at it, “You can carry your king's ransom on your own.”

He was already moving up the path, so she had to snatch up her carry-on bag and hurry after him. “What are you doing? Where are you going with my things? I hired a driver to take me to Batali Bea—”

“And you're looking at him. At your service, ma'am.” He swung her bags at the end of his arms as if they were as light as baskets of flowers.

She panted as she kept pace, but still had enough air to snort indignantly. “You aren't a driver!”

“I have many portfolios here at Half Moon Bay.” He grinned at her in a way that let her know for sure he was just having her on.

“Oh, and you just *randomly* decided that today of all days you'd be holding this one? A taxi driver? Don't you have people to torment in the caves or something?”

They were out front now, at the main entrance, and Charlie was already tossing her bags into the back of the truck. “Nope. My only trip today is down to Batali.”

“Well, I want someone else!” she demanded.

His calm was irritating. “But you've already paid for my services.”

She folded her arms stubbornly. “Then I want a refund!”

He faced her, folding his own arms in mimicry. “Sorry. Resort policy forbids refunds.”

She gaped. “That can't possibly be true! You are such a liar, Charlie

Brown!”

“Morning, Romy.”

She spun around in the direction of the deep, pleasant voice to see that Sam had walked up to them. He was dressed in a lightweight but managerial business suit and was beaming at her. “I heard you had a wonderful time on tour yesterday.”

Did everybody on this island know everything everyone did? “Yes, I did. Thank you, Sam.” She cut her eyes at Charlie. “I was just requesting a driver.”

Sam nodded at his friend. “I’ve made arrangements for you to have the best.”

Romy took a step back in surprise, catching Charlie’s triumphant expression. This had been Sam’s idea?

“Uh, that is very kind of you.”

“Remember,” Sam went on, “Charlie and I were born in Batali Beach. There are many of our old haunts that he’ll be happy to show you over the next couple of days.”

Couple of days?

“Just until you’re safely settled,” Sam explained. “Your aunt would have wanted it this way.”

Romy realized there was nothing she could say right now that wouldn’t make her sound ungrateful or rude, so she nodded miserably. “Thank you.”

Sam turned his attention to Charlie. “Take good care of our special guest, Charles.”

“I’ll be sure to, Samuel.” There it was, that trace of amused familiarity that only passed between best friends.

He rubbed his hands together and said, “Ready?” Then he opened the passenger door and allowed Romy to climb inside with her carry-on. They waved at Sam as he returned in the direction of his office, and even after he was gone, Romy resolutely stared out the window, not feeling to have her new driver lord it over her right now.

“Let’s hit the road, *doux-doux*,” he said amiably.

She turned her head and squinted suspiciously at him. “What did you just call me?”

He shrugged. “It’s a French Creole term of endearment. It means, ‘my sweet’.”

“Well,” she huffed, “I am certainly not your sweet and I certainly have no

use for your terms of endearment.”

“Fair enough.” They proceeded out of the wide gates, past the security booth, and then he snapped his fingers as if he’d just remembered something. “Oh, one more thing.”

To Romy’s utter incredulity, he reached into the rear cab and pulled out the hat he’d gifted her with, made a big show of dusting it off, and rammed it onto his head. The oversized sunflower was askew, and facing backward to boot, so he looked ridiculous. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Keeps the sun out of my eyes.” He grinned at her.

“We are traveling south,” she reminded him pedantically. “There is no sun in your eyes.”

“Well, I think it looks pretty on me anyway.”

Oh, the things she wanted to do to that smirking face! “You look like a clown.” She dragged her gaze away from the ridiculous sight, refusing to allow this man to rattle her this early in the morning. She’d barely had time to digest her breakfast!

Instead of rising to the bait, he reached forward and fiddled with the controls on the speaker, and the sound of island music filled the room. “This is called groovy soca,” he informed her. “It’s soca, but with a slower, more laid-back beat.” He added with a smile, “Do you recognize the voice?”

She listened for a moment. “Is that Sam?”

“Sure is. This is a compilation of his best, from his younger days as a singer.” The pride in Charlie’s voice was clear.

Romy allowed the tune to wash over her, fill her, and replace the irritation she felt at being stuck with this man for so long. There was something about Sam’s voice that was at once soothing and energized, seductive yet friendly.

The truck slid away from the north coast road, turning deeper into the interior of the island, where sand and rocks gave way to small, busy towns, and then fertile expanses of farmland. She gasped when they entered sugar cane country, as the blades of the grass towered above them. “We’ve got a very good friend who belongs to the Ramtahali family, who own the biggest sugar estate on the island. Her name’s Saira. Her family’s refinery, that’s where some of the best rum is made. Vallée d’Or.”

“I’ve tasted it, I think.”

“I think you have.” He gave her a teasing look.

“The Swimming Pools,” she said, nodding. “In that case, it is most delicious.”

Romy found her resentment melting away. It was Charlie, after all, one of the most gregarious men she'd ever met. How was it possible to stay mad at him?

The closer they got to Batali Beach, the more lyrical he waxed about his hometown, rhapsodizing about the blue crabs he and Sam caught in the marshes and cooked, about the size of the grouper you could catch if you went out far enough on your boat. "Twenty kilos, easy," he said. "Enough for everyone to get a piece."

Romy realized she was enjoying the ride, even though she wouldn't go as far as to say it was all because of him. At one point he pulled off the road near a roadside vendor's small hut, where he bought a bag of ripe clementines, and they sat perched on the front bumper of the truck, peeling and eating them. They washed them down with coconut water straight from the nut, with the tops lopped off by the vendor with a single swipe of his machete. She didn't think that anything had ever tasted so sweet.

It was late afternoon when the truck slowed, and a long, wild coast revealed itself outside their window. Charlie was smiling, looking even more relaxed than normal, and she immediately guessed the cause. "This is Batali. You are home again."

"This is Batali, yes."

She looked out the window, taking it all in. Small shops lined the main road, selling canned goods, sodas, brooms, and mops. Men hung around outside little bars sipping beer, raising their bottles in toast as the vehicle rolled past. And, yes, a few of them had birds in cages at their side.

He pulled up in front of a plain, red brick structure. A faded black on white sign on the fence said BATALI BEACH GOVERNMENT PRIMARY, ESTABLISHED 1966.

"Is that where you and Sam went to school?" she guessed.

"Yup." He pointed at a massive tree with tiny oval leaves that drifted down, sprinkling the pavement like confetti. "That's the tamarind tree where the principal—God rest his soul—picked switches for whippings, of which Sam and I got several." He actually grinned at the memory. "Nothing stings like a tamarind whip, let me tell you. And the way it whistles through the air!" He gave a high whistle in mimicry.

She was horrified. "They *whipped* you in school?"

He laughed. "It's not as bad as you think. A rite of passage for naughty Caribbean boys. And there," he pointed at another large tree near the back of

the building, “that’s the mango tree where we ran to hide from those whippings.”

Romy knew she was taking this all in from a very progressive European perspective, but still, she was appalled.

He must have sensed her thoughts, because he said, “The guy that spanked us as kids was the same guy who gave up his Saturdays to give us all math classes for free when exam time rolled around. And he’s the same guy whose wife brought my mother pots of soup when she was sick, so she could stay in bed and not have to worry about making sure I ate. He wasn’t a bad person.”

Then he added kindly, “Don’t be sad for me. Sam and I could not have grown up happier. All the big cities in the world, all the snow on the mountains, all the sophisticated lifestyles out there couldn’t make up for the joys of roasting breadfruit on hot coals, or sneaking out to swim at night, or playing the steel pan at Carnival time. I wouldn’t change a moment of my childhood.”

She looked at him carefully, taking in that serenity he seemed to have that came from within, that complete satisfaction with who he was, and almost envied him. How was it possible to find that kind of peace? She nodded slowly as she gave her pronouncement, “Yes, I think it’s clear you had a happy childhood.” Then she glanced up at the hat that he still hadn’t taken off. “But you still look silly in that big, funny hat!”

He laughed so hard that she began laughing too, feeling the tendrils of their laughter wind between them, making them feel almost joined. Connected. The feeling made her look away.

He continued on, finally stopping at a large gate and hopping out, holding the keys she had given him. He lifted the padlock, but it seemed to be open already. He gave her a puzzled look and then shrugged, throwing back the huge metal gates.

Romy leaned forward to peer through the windscreen as he drove into the overgrown yard and parked under a spreading tree with big leaves and a gnarled trunk. This was it. She recognized the wooden cabin from Anja’s photographs, and the fading paint of turquoise and yellow. Anja had proudly done a lot of the work herself, with the help of her live-in Sabinan lover, Boscoe, who’d died a year or so before Anja had.

She hurriedly hopped out of the truck and followed Charlie as he walked around the yard, assessing.

“Grass needs cutting. I’ll get two whacker-men in early tomorrow.”

She guessed that a whacker-man was a gardener, one who could plow through the high, spiky grass with weed-whackers.

There were three large sculptures in the yard, some of Anja’s early works. She could see by the relative roughness of the work that these were her aunt’s earlier pieces, before she developed the finesse of the master artist she was to become. Nevertheless, they seemed to have come alive under her hands, freed from their imprisonment in logs of wood by Anja’s artistic gift.

Charlie was standing over another plinth, only this one was empty. His hands were on his hips, balled into fists. “Huh.”

“What, huh?” She came to his side, concerned by his own worried expression.

“There was a statue here.” He pointed at rough marks on top. “Now it’s gone. It’s been sawn off.”

She looked anxiously at him. “Taken?”

“Yes.” His full, beautiful lips were pressed into a line. “Once she died, the value of her artwork shot up. One of her early originals would fetch a pretty price on the black market.” He turned slowly, suspiciously, eyeing the entire yard, the full surroundings. Then he said, “I’m going to take a look around. Wait here.”

Like hell, she thought, hurrying after him. “I’m not waiting. I come with you.”

He didn’t argue, probably knowing it was a waste of time. She followed his gaze as he examined the windows, the doorways, the tiny back porch, and finally, they were in front again, by the three short steps that led to the main door. He stood there with the keys in his hand, contemplating them. “What is it?” she demanded.

“Someone has been here, regularly. The windows have been opened and closed, and there’s no dust on the windowsill.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Someone is living here?” In her aunt’s house? No, in *her house*?

He didn’t answer, but instead unlocked the door carefully, and sidled in, his entire body tense. When she followed close on his heels he gave her an exasperated look, but he didn’t try to stop her.

The floor had been swept, because although it was dusty it wasn’t unduly so. And there were signs that the house had been inhabited by someone who wasn’t all that neat. A crumpled cigarette pack on the floor, empty Coke

bottles on the counter.

He shook his head. "I don't think you should stay here tonight."

"I *will* stay here tonight," she said stubbornly. "This house is mine now."

He frowned, looking frustrated. "The Batali Beach Resort belongs to Sam. I can make arrangements—"

Romy grasped his wrist. "Charlie, I know you mean well, but I will be fine. Someone has been here, but to my eyes, it was a long time ago. They were not here today, were they?"

He shook his head reluctantly. "No, probably not."

She shoved her hands into her pockets and took a wide stance, looking resolute. "Then tonight, I stay."

"Very well." He gave in with the sigh of a man who knew that arguing would be fruitless. "Then I will sleep at Batali and come back in the morning to help you clean this mess up."

She didn't argue. Didn't want to. She kind of liked the idea that he would be nearby tonight. Before she could say any more there was a feminine voice out in the yard, calling, "Hello, hello, hello!"

They both walked to the front door to see a short, bony, dark-skinned woman in a cotton dress picking her way across the yard, a wide smile on her face. She looked to be in her sixties, and her head was wrapped elaborately in a piece of cotton. She lit up when she spotted Charlie.

"My boy!" she yelled, opening her arms and hurrying towards him. She embraced him in a hug. "You know how long I ain't feast my eyes upon you?"

"Sister Margaretha," he said in welcome, not even struggling in her tight embrace. "Good to see you too."

"Oh, ridiculous!" She snatched the big floppy hat off his head and swatted him on the back of the legs with it, like she was spanking a naughty puppy. "Why you such a fool, boy?" She shoved the hat down onto her head, over the scarf. "This is mine now."

"You're very welcome to it," Romy said hastily, in case she was only joking. She was never so happy to see a hat go.

Charlie introduced Romy. "This is Anja's niece—"

She waved his words away with a flap of her hands. "You don't need to tell me that. She's young Anja in print!" The woman grabbed both of Romy's hands, smiling broadly. "What a pretty, pretty thing you are. Lots of meat on the bone, eh, Charlie?"

Romy was stunned into speechlessness. She would never, ever get used to the way these islanders spoke their mind.

Charlie hurried to explain, "Margaretha's the younger sister of Anja's, uh, companion, Boscoe."

Ah, now she understood.

"Since Anja and Boscoe were sort of married, that makes me your auntie too, yes?" Margaretha beamed.

Romy nodded, because that was all she could do. She listened as Charlie and their visitor caught up briefly. "So, what's new around town?" he asked.

Margaretha shook her head. "Tantie Mae Mae passed two days ago."

Charlie nodded. "I'm sorry." Then he explained, "Tantie Mae Mae is... was... an old stalwart of the town. She ran the snackette on the corner for like, seventy years."

"Snackette?" Romy repeated, figuring out the word.

"Yeah. She was old school. Almost everything handmade: fresh juices, cakes, sweets, iced lollies. Half the time Sam and I were late for school it was because we were hanging around here, hoping she would slip us some candy." A wistful look crossed his face. "Which she often did."

Margaretha pointed out, "That's because she liked you. You could always talk your way into anybody's heart. Always got what you wanted."

Charlie said to Romy, "She was also Sister Margaretha's aunt."

"I'm sorry," Romy said automatically.

Margaretha bowed in acceptance, but said placidly, "Thank you, but it was her time. She was called home to the Lord, and she is living in glory right now." Then a wonderful idea seemed to strike her. "You have to come to the wake tonight!" She grabbed Charlie's arm. "It's right down the road. You have to come, both of you!"

Romy couldn't believe what she was hearing. She'd arrived in the village not an hour ago, and now she was being invited to a *wake*? Obviously, Charlie would explain that it was inappropriate, but to her horror, he was smiling broadly and nodding. "Yes, yes, Romy and I would love to come."

Love to come? The words bounced around in her skull, tinted by her incredulity. Who in the world *loved* to go to a wake? "I... thank you but...."

Margaretha was already out the door, stopping only to wave goodbye before picking up her skirts and gingerly picking her way through the high grass. "Sundown, then," she yelled. "See you!"

Romy could only turn her baleful eyes to Charlie, too bowled over to

speaking. Her mind churning, whizzing, whirring. This man had committed her to a wake for an old woman she had never met. And grinning while he did it. Was he insane?

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CHAPTER 12



In the time that Charlie had left her to go to the Batali Beach Resort to shower and dress, Romy had worked herself into a lather. She'd unpacked her bags, unwrapped sheets of plastic that had swathed her aunt's bed, and put on the new bed linens she'd purchased in town. She'd opened the windows to air out the place, and was certain she'd sleep comfortably.

But this wake! Once Margaretha had left she'd turned on Charlie, protesting that she had no black clothes, no black pumps, no pantyhose, nothing that would suit a wake. But he'd responded by tossing her suitcase onto the bed, opening it up before her incredulous eyes, and poking through until he withdrew a simple powder blue short-sleeved cotton dress and tossed it at her. "You'll look lovely in this. Sets off your eyes."

Romy clutched the dress to her breast, unable to even say anything.

Then he pulled out a pair of leather sandals. "This would go great with it."

And before she had anything more to say, he swaggered out to his truck and leaped in, promising to come for her in an hour. The last thing he said before he drove off was, "Trust me, Romy."

Huh.

He was back for her in sixty-five minutes, irritating her even further by his punctuality. Was there anything about this man that *didn't* get on her nerves? She walked around to the passenger side of the truck, preparing to get in, but he shook his head. "We can walk." He looked up into the dark sky.

“It’s a perfect night. The stars are out, see?” He gave her a boyish grin that almost completely erased her anxiety and annoyance. The stars *were* out, and they were gorgeous.

He cocked an elbow at her, inviting her to take it, which, surprisingly, she did. Her hand closed over his massive bicep, and as they began to walk, she felt dwarfed by his bulk, but not intimidated.

They didn’t have far to go. Just a couple of blocks down, flickering lights came into view, lining both sides of a narrow street, like runway lights at an airport. As she drew closer, she could see they were made with beer bottles filled with liquid and stuffed with rags. They looked like little Molotov cocktails.

“Flambeaux. They go all the way to the dead-house, guiding anyone who want to drop in and pay their respects.”

She didn’t bother to voice how odd it seemed to her, following rows of tiny fires to the home of someone who had died, to attend their wake on a whim.

The next thing she heard was the music. As they entered a large, scraggly yard with a small, unpainted concrete house in the middle, she spotted big speaker boxes wedged into the branches of trees, blasting loud, upbeat reggae. There were people everywhere, sitting around on mismatched chairs at mismatched tables, making her think that many of the neighbors had simply dragged their own furniture over.

On one side of the yard, fires were roaring, with men and women bending over, flipping whole fish that they were roasting above hot coals. Huge metal pots bubbled, and as he walked her closer she could see that one was filled with boiling corn while the other seemed to be soup. The cook smiled at her as she stirred, bringing to the surface a tangled bunch of chicken feet, each clenched like a tiny fist.

Romy had no idea what expression crossed her face at that moment, but Charlie intuitively said to the cook, “She’ll have the corn.”

He held both their cups of boiled corn and led her even farther, to the side that served as a bar. A small group of young men were pouring generous helpings of dark or white rum into proffered cups. Romy glanced away from Charlie’s knowing look. He’d never let her forget her adventures with alcohol that first night at Sam’s.

“Charlie!” One of the young men looked up, pleased. “Nice to see you back in town.”

Charlie nodded. "Sorry about your auntie, Ricky." He made introductions. "These are Boscoe's nephews, Margaretha's sons: Mickey, Ricky, Andy, and Tony."

Romy tried not to smile, thinking their names sounded like a 1990s boy band.

"This is Romy. Anja's niece."

Everything stopped. Serving the drinks, chatting with guests... everything was put on hold as the young men stared at Romy. Was it because she looked like Anja, or was it something else? She felt the hairs on the back of her arms stand up.

Eventually, Ricky nodded. "Welcome, Miss Romy. Can I get you something to drink?"

The other boys offered murmured greetings, and then immediately returned to their chores, with Andy wheeling around, announcing they needed more beer, and disappearing into the house. Tony was right behind him, announcing that he was going to get ice.

Romy glanced at Charlie, but he didn't seem concerned, so she accepted the two sodas and they stepped away from the makeshift bar.

"Charlayyyy!" Voices called out in unison from a group of people at a table. The greeting was echoed across the yard as they moved, with people standing to shake his hand or offer fist bumps.

Did every single breathing human on this island know this man?

They came to a stop at a small, square table. While some around them were playing cards, here they were playing dominos. "Come play, Charlie!" one man yelled, pointing at two empty seats. "Come and collect your beating like a man!"

"You wish," Charlie answered, pulling out a chair for Romy, and asking, "Can you play?"

"I can play," she said, almost miffed that he would ask. "Why would I not know how to play dominos? And why would you think I cannot beat you?"

He lifted a brow as he sat next to her. "Well, we shall see."

Even as the tiles were distributed, Romy looked around, marveling at the atmosphere. People were drinking, laughing, swaying to the music, and there was nothing but alcohol-fueled good cheer and joy. Not the kind of wake she'd expected.

He read her face and leaned near. At first she thought he was trying to peek at her tiles and she glared at him, but then he said, "It's not a sad

occasion, Romy. This wasn't the death of a child. Mae Mae was ninety if she was a day. We're all gathered to celebrate a life well lived, and to give her the sendoff she deserves. She'd have loved it." To her surprise, he touched her on the cheek. "So relax. Have fun." He nodded at her dominos. "And beat me if you can."

Over the next forty minutes or so, Romy did her best. While there were two other players at the table, it soon became clear that this was a two-horse race. Romy, a statistician by profession, used her knowledge of mathematics to plan her strategy, counting pips on tiles and trying to predict the best move to make, while Charlie, in his usual bold, brash fashion, made daring moves, took stupid risks, and still managed to come up shining.

When he placed a tile, he did so with showmanship, either gently touching it to the tabletop and then sliding it toward her with a fingertip, almost like a caress, or slamming it down with a clack so loud it made her jump. The whole time, his eyes were more on her face than on the table. He was smirking, taunting. Even when she beat him, he acted as if the victory was his.

The more he won, the more intensely she played, leaning forward on her elbows, focused on the table, eyes flicking from tile to tile, trying to plan several steps ahead. When she advanced, he pushed her back, and when he attacked, she dodged. They moved like this together, back and forth, back and forth. *This is like dancing*, she thought. Mind locked with mind, an intellectual tango. The next time she reached to place a tile, she noticed her hand was shaking.

"Charlie!"

They both looked up in unison to see Margaretha walking toward them. She was still wearing the dress she'd had on earlier, and upon her head was poised the Hat That Would Not Die. "We need you, m'boy." She pointed to the roadside, where Romy could see men gathered in a circle around small heaps of fires, tilting drums close to the flame. Heating them gently, and then tapping to test for sound.

Although they were in the middle of a game—and he was poised to trounce her—Charlie smiled, looking pleased as he got to his feet. He leaned close to her ear and whispered, "We'll dance again soon, I promise."

She gaped. He'd felt them dancing, too?

As men began to pick up their drums and enter the yard, Charlie bent forward, surprisingly fluid for a man of his size, and removed his shoes. He

tucked the socks inside and placed the shoes under his chair. He straightened. He carefully unbuttoned his long-sleeved cotton shirt. Then he draped it neatly across the back of his chair. As soon as he was bare-chested, Romy began having problems breathing.

He took his place in the circle, choosing a large leather-topped drum and sitting on a wooden chair. He slid the drum up between his legs and grasped it with his powerful thighs, pulling it close to him. Romy realized she was clutching a domino in each fist so hard that they were leaving prints on her palms.

She wished Maxon could see this. Why had she been so stupid as to leave her cell phone at home?

The men began to drum. As if drawn on invisible strings, almost everyone got up and drifted closer; even a couple of Margaretha's sons abandoned the bar and stood around, way on the other side of the drumming circle.

The sound was like nothing she'd ever heard. A deep, booming groan, rising to a wail and then falling again. It wasn't an instrument, it was a voice, speaking, calling her. Addressing itself directly to her, and she had to struggle not to answer, not to step closer. As she glanced around, she could see that others heard it too, that voice. They were entranced, enraptured, swaying in unison as though they were being moved by a puppet master. Romy looked down at her own body and realized she was moving too.

She closed her eyes, feeling the thrum of the drum as it entered her body. She was convinced that her heartbeat had adjusted itself to keep time; the boom in her chest couldn't be separated from the thunder that filled the air. And when she opened her eyes, Charlie's black eyes were upon her.

She should have been offended by his arrogance, the impertinence of his steady, challenging gaze, but all she could think was, *God, he's building up a sweat*. Under the flickering flambeaux and the orange, hastily strung-up lights that crisscrossed the trees, he glowed. He gleamed. When he leaned closer to the drum, tightening his grip so that she could see the bulge of his thighs even through his pants, Romy stepped away hastily, almost running over to the bar. Only Ricky was there, his brothers having abandoned him, and she begged him for a bottle of water. Before opening it and taking a sip, she pressed to her face, rolling it over her temples and around her throat.

She'd never get used to this tropical heat.

At last, the drumming ended, with a resounding crescendo that was

greeted by applause, whistles, and screams of appreciation. Charlie made his way back to her, grinning that oh-so-Charlie grin. He was panting, sweat rolling down his heaving chest, dripping down his almost-purple nipples. She began thinking thoughts that shouldn't be thought, and wished he would just put his dang shirt back on.

"You okay?"

Someone ran up to him and offered him a roll of paper towels, which he accepted, and then Romy had to stand there and endure the sight of him drying himself off.

"I'm fine." But not really; she needed another bottle of water.

As the night wore on, he remained at her side, ensuring she had plenty to drink and eat, anything that didn't have bird's feet floating in it. At one point, Margaretha yelled across the way that Sugarhead wanted to meet Romy. Curious, Romy walked with Charlie over to where a striking young woman sat. She was brown-skinned and brown-eyed, but her hair stood out like a beacon. It was a bright reddish blonde that Romy instinctively knew to be natural, standing out all around her head in thick, bouncy curls. Hence the nickname, Romy guessed.

The young woman stood to meet her, surprising Romy with a hug. Then she said, "My mom had hair just like mine; she was the original Sugarhead. And she was the first person on the island that Anja ever carved. The sculpture ended up in the national art gallery." She beamed at Romy. "I'm so proud that my family was the start of your auntie's success!" She said this so sincerely that Romy instinctively hugged her back. The impulsive gesture was totally un-Romy-like. The island must be rubbing off on her.

Without needing to consult each other, Charlie and Romy turned to go, waving their goodnights as they left, passing back out of the wide gateway and along the street where the flambeaux were guttering out and dying, having used up all their fuel. Romy felt breathless, giddy. "I've never experienced anything like that!" she enthused. "Everything was so...." Unable to express herself, she threw up her hands.

"And those drums. Those drums! I heard them talking to me." She glanced cautiously up at him. "Does that sound weird?"

"Not at all," he said somberly. "Because drums *do* talk. Especially when they're mounted."

"Mounted?"

He explained, "When you first start using a new drum, you pray on it.

Nothing elaborate; you just acknowledge it and consign it to doing great things. Before our ancestors, you acknowledge the role that the drum plays in our history. And when you say the right prayers, a spirit comes to live within the drum.”

“Charlie....” She peered into his face, trying to determine if he was kidding.

He continued unperturbed. “A mounted drum is a powerful drum. You heard it, didn’t you? Inviting you to dance? That was the voice of the spirit, speaking to you. It spoke to all of us, including me.”

“Are you joking?” Unnerved, she tried to convince herself that he was. Charlie was such a clown, always coming up with some mischief. Surely....

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

She noticed he wasn’t leading her the way they’d come. Instead, they were taking a narrower path, one that led close enough to the sea for her to hear and smell it. He must have noticed her curiosity, because he said simply, “Scenic route.” Then he took her hand.

They walked along the path until Anja’s cottage came into view, the back fence and gate a few steps away. Then she stopped, forcing him to stop, too. She could feel that pounding in her veins again, the rhythm of that mounted drum, and she realized she wanted Charlie so badly that it was making her dizzy.

He saw that desire in her eyes seconds before she stood on tiptoe, reached up, and kissed him. That first contact raced through her like a shockwave, taking away her ability to breathe. He seemed thrown at first, but gave in almost immediately, kissing her back ardently. The sweat on his body had dried, and as she placed her hands against his chest, she could feel the heat radiate through his shirt. She could feel the denseness of him, his solidity.

And all the while, her brain was screaming. What was it Maxon had said? *Have an affair*. Not with another tourist, but with a hot, handsome local. Find your groove again while you’re here, so you can go back to Europe refreshed and renewed. Cleansed of all the pressures and stress of metropolitan life.

Something told her that there would be nobody better to do this with than Charlie. It would be so easy. They could go into the cabin, enjoy each other without strings or commitments. Maybe more than once during the course of her stay. It was clear that he was attracted to her, so why not?

She asked him, hating the tentative note in her voice. “Um, Charlie? Do you want to go inside? With me?”

Their eyes locked. He stared at her, and for several very long seconds said nothing. Didn't blink, didn't move. And then he stepped away, letting her go and allowing his hands to fall to his sides. Romy felt as if she had been released at the edge of a deep well, and was falling, falling. She heard the sound of her house keys jingle as he withdrew them from his pocket where he had been keeping them, and then he held them out to her.

"Get some sleep, Romy. You've had a long couple of days. You must be very tired."

She felt humiliation bloom in her cheeks as he reached out and yanked open her back gate, indicating with a sweep of his hand that she should enter. She opened her mouth to call his name but her tongue was stuck.

Without another word, he walked swiftly around the property, headed for the road out front where he had left his truck. In the darkness of the night he moved like a shadow.

Romy heard the roar of the engine as he started it, and then the peel of tires as he pulled away. The truck purred like a restless animal until it rounded a corner and was gone. She slumped against the fence, weak and drained. He was right... she was tired. But also deeply ashamed. What had caused her to act like that? This wasn't like her. She wasn't the type to throw herself at a man, not like that. Was it the island air, or simply Charlie's magnetic personality?

Either way, she'd screwed up. Gone and embarrassed herself in front of this devastating man. Would he ever let her forget it? She half-hoped she wouldn't have to see him again, but knew in her heart that wasn't a possibility. This was the great, the legendary Charlie Brown. He was everywhere.

Shoulders slumping, she entered the yard, noting that the keys she had were only for the front door. She walked around and stepped up on the low balcony. Clumps of red, clayey dirt were scattered along the wooden floor, all the way across the front door. It hadn't been there before. She glanced around, feeling mildly unsettled, but the wind was lifting her hair and causing the leaves to flutter. Clearly, it had blown in.

She shrugged, opening the door and retrieving the broom that Charlie had used to tidy up earlier. She'd have a lot of work to do to bring the cottage up to scratch. Might as well start now. She swept the dirt off the porch and onto the ground outside.

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CHAPTER 13



Charlie was furious with himself, for more than one reason. What had caused him to act like that last night? First, he'd allowed Romy to kiss him... he'd kissed her back, actually, deep and hard. This didn't surprise him. He was intensely attracted to her, and had been even on that first night, when she was busy getting on his nerves.

This was his second problem, this attraction. Why was it that on the very same day that he'd sworn off women, taken a temporary vow of celibacy, that he'd met this woman? Were the gods laughing at him? Or testing him? If it was a test, he'd failed. He wasn't going to fail again.

The final source of his self-directed ire was the way he'd left. He'd walked away from a woman, leaving her standing on the sand in the dark, because, God help him, if he'd walked her to her door he'd probably also have walked her inside. Tossed his impulsive, ill-advised vow into the trash.

But it wasn't just about his male ego, his disappointment in himself at being so churlish; he'd seen her face. Perplexed, embarrassed, and hurt. This beautiful, sweet woman had offered herself to him and he'd acted like she'd committed a crime. Backed away from her like she was somehow tainted. That was inexcusable.

As he drove from the resort into town, he noticed that he was grinding his teeth, and a headache was coming on. The devil's advocate sitting on his left shoulder argued back that he'd been darn right to do what he had. Romy was sweet, but she was literally what he had sworn to avoid, a lady tourist on the island for a short time, bored and looking for someone to entertain her. They

came in droves, season after season, having swallowed wholesale the legends (and truths) about island men and their romantic nature, their ability to seduce and beguile. Their sexual prowess. And, to be honest, men like himself fit that imaginary bill to a T.

He snorted. He was honest enough with himself to acknowledge that for years he'd fed into that narrative, working it to his advantage. Laying on the charm for the waves of beautiful foreign women who stepped off their boat or plane, eager to delve into all the pleasures that their little getaway had to offer. He'd enjoyed being what Sabinans called a "sweet man", sampling the array of fruits laid out before him like some sort of demi-god.

He made a face. Sam had teased him over and over that the only thing that separated him from the classic beach gigolos was that no money ever changed hands. Instead, the currency of exchange had been pleasure.

He slammed the brakes as he pulled up outside a small concrete shop in the center of the village. It was relatively new, painted in pretty pastel colors, and sold everything from sodas to frying pans to mops and brooms, which was what he was here for. Anja's estate had provided for someone to come into the house from time to time to sweep and mop, take down the cobwebs, so that the property wouldn't fall apart. Still, if Romy was going to stay there awhile, it would need a proper cleaning, top to bottom.

He took armloads of cleaning supplies to the counter, where an older man was waiting. Charlie vaguely remembered him from around the village, but he didn't think they'd ever spoken.

The man, however, knew him. "Morning, Charlie boy." He didn't look up from his cashing, but his tone was pleasant. Like most of the villagers, he launched immediately into gossip. "I see that tourist lady is moving into Anja's house."

"That's her niece," he corrected automatically.

"Yes, yes. Very well." The man accepted Charlie's money and began to bag the items. "She there to stay?"

"Awhile," he answered noncommittally. The grapevine here in Batali was legendary, and he didn't like the idea of Romy being ensnared in it.

The guy nodded amiably, saying. "Right you are. I only hope she's careful, eh?"

Charlier felt a tiny prickle at the back of his neck. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "Oh, you know. House been empty a long time. Every now and then, a couple of folks might seek shelter in it for a night or two. You

know how it goes.” His eyes caught Charlie’s, and his expression was meaningful. “Some people, they borrow something for too long, they start to think it’s theirs.”

Charlie thought of the tiny signs around the house yesterday that someone—or multiple someones—had been in it. Cigarette butts, soda bottles, even signs of tidying up. He knew the shopkeeper was right, and that unnerved him. Hurriedly, he took his purchases and slung them into the back of the truck, driving over to Romy’s a little faster than he planned to.

When he got there he was happy to see the front door and windows wide open. Romy was welcoming in the warm beach air. She was nowhere to be seen, but he could sense her presence. He offloaded his parcels on the low front porch, then took a slow, cautious tour of the yard. The two statues stood sentry over it, but the empty plinth bothered him even more. Given what the shopkeeper had said, he was almost certain now that the third statue had been sawn off and sold after Anja’s death. He didn’t like that at all.

The back gate leading to the sea was leaning open, and immediately he spotted Romy, standing at the water’s edge in a white cotton dress. She had grasped the hem and was raising it above her knees as the incoming waves splashed at her calves. Her lovely blonde hair was loose around her face, whipped by the wind, her shoulders bare. He could see that even after a few days her tan was coming in; her skin had taken on a tawny rose blush that made his fingers itch to reach out and touch it. She was dancing back and forth, running toward the sea as the waves receded, and darting back as they came forward, playing a game of catch-me-if-you-can. Tiny sandpipers joined her in her game, running up to the water’s edge to pluck up any little crustaceans or sand worms laid bare by the receding water. He watched, utterly entranced. She was so beautiful.

Then she happened to glance around and spot him, and immediately the laughter died. The smile rolled away from her face just like the water was rolling away from the shore. He knew instinctively that it was his fault. She was still stinging from his rejection of her last night.

If he could physically kick himself right now, he certainly would.

She stepped away from the water, walking carefully toward him, not wanting to twist an ankle in the undulating sand, which was coarser and less predictable than the north coast beaches like Half Moon Bay. As soon as she was within speaking distance of him, she said a quiet hello. She was clearly chastened in his presence, and that near killed him. “Why are you here?”

Direct, this girl was. He pointed back to the house. “I brought cleaning supplies. I figured I’d help you settle in.”

She glanced where he’d pointed and nodded contemplatively. “Very well. Thank you.” Then she sidestepped him and walked to the porch, opening the bags and looking approvingly of their contents.

He followed her, feeling chastened. “Romy, I’m sorry—”

“You are here to clean? We will clean.” Without looking in his direction, she headed to the bedroom and shut the door with a bang. Moments later she emerged, the pretty white dress replaced by a t-shirt and pair of shorts.

He sighed, giving in. She didn’t want to talk, clearly. His apology could wait. Without discussing roles or assignments, they began to clean, wiping down cobwebbed walls and washing windows. Mopping floors and cleaning cupboards of detritus and spiders which, unlike bats, Romy wasn’t scared of.

There were several drawers filled with men’s clothing, all old, all the same size, and Charlie guessed they had once belonged to Boscoe, Anja’s partner. It was a sad, sweet touch that she’d loved him enough to hang onto his clothes after his death.

“I can’t bear to throw these away,” Romy said.

He looked up from what he was doing. They’d worked in silence for most of the morning so he was glad she was speaking to him. “Maybe you can box them,” he suggested. “I can bring you some storage boxes.”

She smiled at him for the first time that day. “That would be lovely. Thank you.”

The exchange seemed to have caused something to shift, and the tense, still air that filled the house escaped through the windows, making things lighter. For the next hour, they made small talk, mainly consisting of him asking Romy questions about her work and life in Berlin.

He called a time-out, leading her to the porch and distributing packed picnic lunches he’d brought with him from the resort, consisting of fresh juices and sandwiches with fruit for desert. As she sat next to him on the porch steps and placed her box on her lap to eat from, he felt immensely grateful. Perhaps the little storm had passed.

She began talking about her miniature sculptures, and how at peace she felt when she was creating them. “I know in my heart that was how Anja felt when she was carving. This joy of creation. The feeling that there is something alive in the material, yearning to get out, and that God has chosen you, charged you with the task of setting them free.”

He glanced down at her, charmed by her whimsy, understanding what she was saying. "I'm glad she found her purpose."

Romy winced. "To hear my family talk, my aunt threw her entire life away. She was a professor of anthropology back in Berlin, you know."

He shook his head. He'd had no idea.

"She came down for a visit with her girlfriends, and fell in love, first with the island, and then with Boscoe. She gave up her job at the university and stayed here for good. My grandparents were livid. They'd spent a lot of money on her education, and she was well respected in her field. They couldn't believe she'd given it all up to live on some tiny island with some island boy." At that, she glanced at Charlie and then looked hastily away, turning crimson. "My father, her brother, agreed with them. Over time, relations became so strained that it's a wonder they allowed me to stay in touch with her at all."

"But Anja was happy here, and well respected. There's not a person on the island who bears her any ill will. Just the opposite. Alive or dead, she's a rock star to us."

Romy nodded slowly. "She lived her life the way she wanted, no matter what anyone else thought or said. That took courage."

He couldn't contain his curiosity. "Show it to me. Your art."

She tilted her head. "It's not very good," she began, but he stopped her in her tracks.

"Don't say that. I've seen how passionate you are. I watched you photograph the birds, the flowers, the little frogs, to make your sculptures. There's no way you could love something so much and be bad at it." His voice softened. "Please. Share it with me."

She seemed to be thinking hard, and then got to her feet, dusting herself off before carrying their empty lunch boxes back into the kitchen. When she emerged, she was holding the same carry-on bag that she'd so fiercely protected from him on that first night. "I've only had time to start on one," she cautioned him. She withdrew and held out a tiny lizard made of twisted gold wire, sitting in the palm of her hand. Dotted around its belly were several bright green stones that Charlie couldn't identify, evoking the thrilling glow they'd seen in the caves that day.

She showed him two tiny round beads of deep green jade, held in the palm of her hand. "These, I will use for the eyes."

He gently took the lizard from her, noticing how much smaller it looked

in his hand after hers, and brought it up to his eyes. “Beautiful,” he said very softly. “So perfect.”

She smiled at him in pleasure, and he wondered if she knew that his words were meant for her, too.

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CHAPTER 14



Romy dried her hands and carefully hung up the hand towel, glancing around the little cottage in satisfaction. They'd worked side by side all day, and now the place was sparkling. It smelled faintly of oranges and lemons, thanks to the cleaning liquid that Charlie had generously brought that morning. She was sure that when she went to bed she would dream she was in an orchard.

She glanced out the back door, to which Charlie had found a key in a drawer. It was yawning wide open, framing his large bulk as he stood just inside the back fence, arms folded, looking out at the sea.

It was quite late, well after ten at night, and she wasn't sure she could get over how dark it could get without streetlights and city skyscrapers throwing their light everywhere. Outside, the sky looked like navy-blue ink, scattered with glitter. And Charlie's shape looked solemn, contemplative as he tilted his head up toward the sky.

She felt a shiver and looked away. She hadn't slept that well last night, not after doing something as brash as offering herself up to such a devastating man—and then being so summarily rejected. She felt again the chill of his rebuff, and in her mind once more saw the stiffness of his back as he stalked away from her. For a second her cheeks tingled and she knew she was blushing.

She had been sure she would die if she ever had to spend more than a few moments in his company again, but now they'd spent the day together, working side by side. At around seven they'd even stopped awhile and

walked out to the main road to buy hot street food from a truck parked near the town square. She'd experimented with a lot of local foods since her arrival, but tonight she'd been glad to indulge in some good old burgers and greasy fries.

And then when they got back, they'd put the last finishing touches on the cabin, including packing away Anja's woodworking tools and clearing her workshop shelves and table so that Romy would have a place to craft her own sculptures. She was excited to begin tomorrow.

The whole time, Charlie had been so kind. So funny and charming and so very Charlie that she almost forgot she'd had reason to be embarrassed.

As she looked on, he sensed her presence and turned around, smiling and beckoning. "Come on out. It's beautiful!"

Romy followed the sound of his voice and went to stand next to him, lifting her chin to look up as well. It was a lovely warm night, but the warmth that he radiated was even more magnetic. She struggled against the urge to lean just a smidge closer. He'd rejected her, and that was that. She wished again she hadn't been foolish enough to leave her phone behind, because all she wanted to do was call Maxon and yell at him for his stupid idea. *Have an island affair*. What a silly idea.

So she settled for saying something innocuous. "It's a lovely night."

He nodded. "Turtles will be out."

"What kind of turtles?" she asked curiously.

"Huge ones. Leatherback sea turtles that migrate all the way across the Atlantic from Africa to the Caribbean every year to mate and lay their eggs. You'll find a huge number of females coming onshore around this time, especially on the east coast."

She shifted her gaze from the sky to the sea, peering into the darkness. "Are they really out there?"

"Yup."

"Can I see them from here?"

"You can see them from the beach, but there are laws that govern the beaches at night during mating season. After a certain time, you need a permit to be out there. It's a bid to prevent poaching. They're an endangered species, you know."

She felt crestfallen. "Oh." It would have been lovely, seeing creatures she'd only read about.

Then he flashed her that grin that had rapidly become so familiar.

“Fortunately, as a licensed guide, I have a permit. Would you like to go down?”

Her eyes were shining. “Yes! Can we really?”

“Go get your shoes on. And bring a jacket. The wind coming in from the sea can get chilly.”

She sniffed at him. “Oh, please. I’m German! I know chilly!”

“Get it anyway.”

Romy made haste inside, dragging on her sneakers and a light jacket, partly excited to embark on the adventure and partly worried that he would change his mind. But by the time she got back outside moments later, he had already gone out to the truck to grab a flashlight and was waiting on the back porch.

He offered her his elbow again, and she hesitated. “It’s bumpy out there. I don’t want you twisting an ankle.”

She didn’t argue after that, taking his arm as though they were sauntering into an opera house. He clicked on the light and shone it along the path, out through the gate and onto the sand. It was quiet, almost eerily so. The after-hours ban seemed to be strictly in effect. They were the only humans on the beach—but that didn’t mean they were alone. All around them, crabs scuttled, lifting their claws in warning as the intruders got in their way. Above them, she could hear the cawing of night birds, even seeing them silhouetted against the sky as they flitted above.

He led her to a wide expanse of beach, saying, “This is where they’re most likely to come up.” He swiveled his head, and then pointed to a fallen coconut tree. “We can sit there while we wait.”

The moment she sat next to him, he turned the flashlight off, explaining that the turtles found artificial light disorientating. Romy nodded and settled next to him, allowing the evening to enclose them like a blanket over their shoulders.

He didn’t talk much, so she didn’t volunteer to, either. But she could hear his breathing, inhale his scent, which seemed, as usual, almost salty. Even though she knew he hadn’t been in the water that day, she guessed that he’d been immersed in this island so long that it had almost become a part of him.

And despite her promise to let the foolish idea of an affair go, she felt her desire for him increase. It was like a deep-rooted tingle that started somewhere inside her, flowing outward to him.

She watched him covertly out of the corner of her eye, and felt excitement

rise when he seemed to lean nearer, tilt his body toward hers. He trapped her eyes in his, their black ensnaring her blue like the night overcoming the day.

Romy swallowed hard. Last night, she'd been bold enough to kiss him. Was it remotely possible that he would want to kiss her? Make that move?

Charlie got up abruptly, putting several feet of distance between them, and once again Romy felt a rush of anger toward herself. Would she ever learn? These silly fantasies of hers were not to be indulged.

"There's one," he said in a low voice. "No, wait, *two* coming in dead ahead, and another a hundred meters off." He took her hand and pulled her up off the stump. "Come."

They stood atop a dune, completely focused on the ocean as two dark shapes emerged onto the land. They were huge, easily as long as she was tall, and must have each weighed a hundred kilos. The moment they hit the sand they lost their grace. Their almost otherworldly gliding through the water gave way to unsteady, ponderous lumbering as they left their natural element, now feeling every single kilo of their weight. Romy almost felt sorry for them; they looked like mermaids forced to hobble around on ungainly feet.

Charlie said nothing, and neither did she. They simply stood at a respectful distance and watched as the females roamed the sand, looking for a sign that a particular spot would be just right to lay their eggs. And once they were satisfied, they began to dig, methodically clearing space with their powerful hind flippers.

Only when the female began to lay her eggs did Charlie allow Romy to get closer. They squatted on the sand, watching as egg after egg after rubbery egg plopped down into the nest. The turtle's expression was implacable, but Romy clapped her hands over her mouth when she noticed long streaks of tears rolling down the creature's face. "She's crying! Is she in pain?"

"Not really," he explained softly. "She's just keeping her eyes moist."

When the turtles had laid their eggs—at least a hundred each, by Romy's estimate—they carefully used their flippers to cover them with sand, patting them down to remove any trace of digging. They circled, checking for God knew what, until they were satisfied. And then, without even looking back, they lumbered back into the water, their job done. Once they were immersed, their natural grace took over, and they became mermaids again.

Romy exhaled, feeling a little dizzy, not realizing that she'd been holding her breath. To her surprise, she almost wanted to cry. "That was so beautiful. I've never seen anything like it."

Charlie agreed solemnly. “If everyone in the world could witness something like that, the birth of endangered creatures, and the amount of effort it takes for the mothers to ensure their offspring are safe, even when they can’t be around, the environment would be in much better shape, I can promise you that.”

To her surprise, instead of offering her his arm again, he grasped her hand and clicked the flashlight on again, showing the way as they recrossed the beach back to the cottage. *Don’t react*, she told herself. *It’s nothing. He just doesn’t want you to fall.* But nevertheless, she tightened her hand around his fingers.

They walked around to the front, and she could hear the thumps of his footsteps as they climbed onto the porch. He was saying, “Did you know that the sex of the baby turtles is determined by how close the mother lays her eggs to the water? It all has to do with the temperature of the sand. The cooler the sand, the more boys—” He stopped, frozen on the porch, looking down.

There was a long, thick line of red soil spanning the porch, cutting right across the front door. The same type of soil she’d cleaned up last night. She felt a momentary irritation; after they’d spent so much time cleaning up today, it was dirty again?

“It’s the wind,” she volunteered. “It keeps blowing dirt in.”

He glanced at her and then looked down at the dirt again. Then he said, “This isn’t the wind. This is obeah.”

CHAPTER 15



Charlie dropped to one knee before the line of red dirt, feeling a tumult of emotions. Most of it was anger, a protective resentment against whoever had done something like this, attempting to intimidate such a gentle lady as Romy. But there was also a fine silver thread of disquiet, a kind of inborn, ancestral anxiety that even the most practical, non-superstitious, rational thinker experiences when faced with the occult. It didn't matter how educated or worldly you were, how much you poo-hooped the arcane practices of yesteryear, once you were raised in the islands, being confronted by obeah made your hair stand on end.

Romy squatted next to him. Her puzzled eyes went from the dirt to him and back again. "What do you mean?"

"This dirt didn't blow in from anywhere. First of all, there is no red dirt around the house. There's dark soil in most of the garden and sand out back." He picked up a chunk of red clay and crumbled it between his fingers to demonstrate. "This is red clay. Not very common around here; as a matter of fact, I know for sure where it came from."

Her eyes were like moons in her face, wide and questioning. "Where?"

He tilted his head in the direction of the town. "The Batali Beach Presbyterian churchyard." He added, trying to play it down so as not to scare her, yet wanting her to understand that this was serious, "This is grave dirt."

She pulled back. "That's not possible!"

"It is." He dusted off his hands, wishing he could wash them, to wash away that creepy sensation that still tingled at the back of his neck. "The

Presbyterian cemetery is notorious for being hard to dig in the rainy season, because the clay soaks up so much water. And it's also the closest graveyard to you. The Catholic, Muslim, and county cemeteries are all on the other side of the village. And all clay free."

Romy looked puzzled. "Why would anyone do this. Just scatter dirt?"

He pointed, wishing he didn't sound as idiotic as he felt while he explained. "It's laid out in a straight line across the door. The message is clear. It's a binding. Whoever did this doesn't want you inside."

She got to her feet, folding her arms, sticking out her plump lower lip as she pouted. "You and your jokes, Charlie Brown. So very funny. You and your mounted drums and your *bindings*...! Have fun with the tourist girl, yes?"

He got up as well, wondering what he could do to convince her. "I wish I was joking, but I'm not."

"You think this is serious? Why would anyone want to do this?"

He explained patiently. "Clearly, whoever has been using your cabin as a hideout," he pointed outside to the yard, "is probably the same guy who stole your aunt's statue. And they're miffed because you're here to get in their way."

Romy looked as though she understood the motive, and her face wrinkled with distaste at the intrusion. Still, she wasn't buying into this magical nonsense. She pointed at the clay. "Does someone really think that a line of dirt can keep me out of my cabin?" There was a jingle of keys as she unlocked the door and shoved it open, then stepped across the threshold in a dramatic gesture. "See? I am inside. I have crossed their line. And I am unharmed."

Ignoring the tiniest frisson of dread, he stepped over it and followed her inside, shutting the door and locking it. "That's not how it works. This isn't a teen fantasy show, with lines of mountain ash forming a physical barrier. This is meant to make you uncomfortable, uneasy in this space. Make it so you will never have peace as long as you are here. But most of all," he folded his arms, "it's meant as a warning. You are simply not wanted here."

He loved the stubborn streak in Romy that caused her to lift her chin and assert, "They can want me or not want me, but this cabin is mine and I am here to claim it."

Charlie was already circling the place, cautious, moving from living room to bedroom to workshop, his eyes sweeping all surfaces for signs that

something had been tampered with. They'd only been down on the beach for an hour, which meant that their visitor must still be nearby—near enough to have seen them leave. He didn't like this.

"Pack your overnight bag, your gold and gems as well."

She looked at him as if he had suddenly started speaking another language. "What?"

"I don't want you sleeping here tonight. It's not safe. I'm taking you to the resort."

He must have said it wrong, because it had exactly the opposite effect. She set her feet apart, put her fists on her hips, and announced that she wasn't going anywhere. "I will not be pushed around!"

"I'm not pushing you around. I am merely trying to protect you—"

"*They* are pushing, and *you* are pushing. I will not run to a hotel and hide." Her face was resolute, and just looking at her, he could tell that this woman wasn't giving an inch. As irritated as he was, he admired that. She announced, "This is my cabin. And here I will sleep."

If that's how she wants to play it, he figured. "Fine," he said agreeably. He headed abruptly toward the entrance, stepped over the line of dirt and walked to the truck, throwing open the door and digging around.

"Where are you going?" she hurried out after him as if she hadn't expected him to give in so fast.

"I've got a toothbrush in here somewhere." He slammed open the glove box and began digging through his assortment of crap.

"Toothbrush? What do you mean?—"

"If you won't go with me, I'll stay with you."

She gaped at him. "Are you kidding me? You plan to sleep here tonight?"

"Of course." He found his toothbrush, spun around, and headed back toward the cabin. By now he was properly irritated, miffed that she hadn't seen things his way, even though a small part of him admired her stance.

But Romy wasn't done taking her stand. She rushed after him, darting in front of him and holding up a hand to halt him. "No. I don't need your protection. And I don't need you here tonight."

"I'll sleep in the living room," he bargained. "You'll never hear a peep out of me."

"No."

Was she really doing this? Was this really the hill she chose to die on? "Fine. I'll sleep on the porch."

“No.” She moved forward, placing her hands on his chest and pushing him backward out the yard. He was well aware that a simple resistance stance, planting his feet and strengthening his core, would have been enough to halt her. There was no way a woman of her size would be able to force him back unless he permitted it, but he wasn’t willing to use the full brunt of his physical power. That wouldn’t have been fair. So he allowed her to back him up all the way to the sidewalk, and as soon as she let him go, looking triumphant, he said cockily, “Fine. I’ll sleep in my truck. It’s a public roadway and I’m a taxpaying citizen. So it’s perfectly legal.” He opened the door of his truck again. “Sleep well. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Romy gave a yowl of frustration and threw up her hands. “I said no. Why are you deaf to no? I’m not a little baby and I don’t need you to stay.” She made a shooing motion with her hands. “Go home, Charlie Brown! Go home!”

Charlie glanced from the cabin to the truck to Romy, and all the way back again, and realized he didn’t have a choice. What the lady wanted, the lady would get. He sighed gustily. “Okay, warrior woman. You win. Go on inside, and go to bed. You’ve had a long day.”

She looked almost surprised that she had won, and smiled just a little at the pleasing thought. Then, with only a single anxious backward glance, she returned to the house, head bent, stepping carefully across the uneven lawn.

He called out as she got to the balcony, “I’m not leaving until you lock up!”

She smiled and said, “I know.”

CHAPTER 16



There was one more thing Romy had to do before she went to bed, and that was to clean up this unholy mess. She picked up a broom and scoop and gingerly brushed the long line of red dirt into it, taking care not to get any of it on her. Not that it mattered. Not that it was anything else but plain old *dirt*. But, you know, it didn't hurt to be careful.

She gingerly tipped it out under a hedge in a corner of the yard, hoping that the rain would come soon and wash it away, and then propped up the broom and scoop against the wall. The last thing she saw just before she locked the door was Charlie's truck, still idling near the gate. She raised a hand to signal she was done, and he tooted in response. Then she locked and double-checked the door, asking herself if it had been a mistake to send him away. She was going to be okay, yes?

It was more than ten minutes before she heard his engine rev up as he pulled away.

OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, her sense of caution slowly relaxed. As far as the spiritual attacks went, there seemed to be nothing going on, although Romy had that niggling feeling that if there was anything going on in the unseen realm, how would she know?

She got into a routine of waking up early and taking long walks on the beach. She guessed from looking both ways that Batali Beach was several kilometers long, and she determined that before she left again she'd have

covered all of them on foot.

She could feel the effects on her health immediately. Her mind was more relaxed, and her breaths were deeper. How could they not be when the air was so fresh and salty sweet? Her skin glowed from the sun; her cheeks were constantly flushed. She wondered what Charlie would have said if he saw that she'd weathered the heat well without having to rely on his big, stupid hat.

At the thought of Charlie, Romy stopped in her sandy tracks, jingling the handful of shells she'd collected this morning. Every time he crossed her mind, her body stopped doing whatever it was she was doing, whether she was walking, working, eating or swimming. How annoying it was that he could have such an effect on her!

He'd left the area one day after they'd gone to watch turtles, stopping by to check on her and to warn her to be careful. When he told her he was going back up to Half Moon Bay, she felt a pang, but reminded herself that was ridiculous.

"You take care," he'd said, towering over her, looking down at her with an expression she couldn't read.

"I'll be fine," she promised. But felt she'd be finer if he was near.

He reached out and took her hand and Romy felt her pulse leap. Then he fished into his pocket and pressed a small box into her palm. It was a cell phone. "Fully activated and online. For God's sake, Romy, keep it on you. You can't be alone out here without a way to stay in touch."

She smiled at the thoughtful gesture. To be truthful, she'd been kicking herself daily at not bringing her phone, and Charlie had come along and solved her problem. He seemed to have a knack for doing that.

Impulsively, she hugged him, and his arms came up around her, holding her tight to him. He was solid and warm and for a second she thought maybe she could feel the thump of his heart, but that was foolish. She didn't know who made the first move to break away, but they were standing there, breathless, each wondering what to say.

He simply nodded, smiled at her, and went back to his truck. Then he was gone.

That was days ago; surely she should be used to being alone by now! Wasn't this the solitude she'd sought? Romy spun around on the beach, returning the way she had come, heading back to the cabin. Breakfast, and then work. Then she saw something on the porch steps that stopped her dead.

A large, brown paper bag, sitting on the top step.

Her blood chilled and instinctively, she slid her hand into her front pocket to make sure her phone was there. The first name that popped into her head, the first person to call if this meant danger, was Charlie's.

"None of this," she said aloud. "I am not afraid of any of this nonsense." She approached the bag with caution, nevertheless, and gingerly opened it. Inside was a ripe pawpaw, and it looked delectable. It was only then that she tilted the bag to see a note hastily scribbled on it in pencil. *You weren't there so I left this for you. Margaretha.*

Romy hugged the bag to herself and smiled. Margaretha had been a good neighbor, passing by almost every day with gifts like these. She never stayed long, only enough to check on her and let her know if there was anything going on in town, like a bake sale at the community center.

Sometimes, she reminisced about what it was like when Anja and Boscoe were living in the cottage. Handing over a bunch of freshly picked yellow and orange ixoras, she'd said, "Boscoe got Anja flowers every week, you know. The cottage was never without them." Romy had placed the flowers in a vase near to her workbench, and that simple splash of color made her feel more connected to her aunt.

This morning, as she sliced the pawpaw and placed it on a plate, scooping out the sweet-smelling pulp with a spoon, she thought of Anja again, as she did several times a day. What courage she must have had to break away from her metropolitan moorings to settle here! Romy was sure she didn't have anything like that in her.

Mouth full of fruit, Romy picked up a tool and began working on her latest creation. It was a leatherback turtle, about the size of her hand, making it slightly larger than her other sculptures, but she wanted to convey the size and quiet strength of the beautiful creature. It was almost frustrating, though. No matter how much of herself she poured into her sculpture, she still couldn't convey that magic of the surrounding night, its beautiful, reverent silence, and the canopy of dark overhead. Her art was so limiting! At least, she thought, she could keep the memory of that quiet beauty safe in her heart.

"Good morning! Good morning!" There was a male voice outside, and it was immediately followed by another, saying, "Howdy, howdy!"

Romy smiled and put down her pliers, always amused by the Sabinan habit of saying greetings at least twice. It was just another quirk that endeared them to her, and the warmth they seemed to carry around with them.

She went to the door, opening without the caution she'd usually exercise in Germany with an unknown visitor. The relaxed vibe that permeated everyone was beginning to seep into her!

She immediately recognized the two young men standing there. It was two of Margaretha's four sons, Boscoe's nephews. She had no idea who was who; she vaguely remembered the four of them had a set of rhyming names: Ricky, Mickey, something, something.

They looked both barely out of their teens, and were simply dressed in jeans and t-shirts. Their hands were clasped behind their backs like polite schoolboys. Neither seemed inclined to say anymore.

"Yes?" she asked, prompting them.

"Good morning, Miss Romy. We brought you this." The slightly taller one handed her a small loaf of bread, wrapped in waxed paper. "Our mother baked this morning."

She took it, noting that it was still warm, but surprised that Margaretha would send her two gifts in one day. "Did your mother send this?"

"No." The taller one was moving past her and into her house, something that shocked her. She knew that her European sense of protocol might be a bit more rigid than here in the islands, but still.... She hurried after him, with the younger brother in her wake.

"We saw it on the table and thought you might like it," said the other.

She gave him a surprised look. "You shouldn't be taking your mother's things," she said gently. She knew they wanted to be kind, but it wasn't right.

The younger shrugged with the casualness of youth. "She can bake some more."

Romy offered back the bread. "Maybe you should take it back before she notices it's gone."

Both boys looked horrified, throwing up their hands in rejection. "We can't take that back!"

"We don't want no cattle boil!" said the other, alarmed.

"Cattle boil?" she asked, utterly uncomprehending. Maybe her English was betraying her. Maybe something was being lost in translation.

They nodded vigorously. "If you give a gift and take it back, your eye will swell up." He pointed at his eye and made an exploding gesture.

"It's karma. Bad karma."

They both looked so completely convinced that this was the truth that Romy had to hide a smile. Island magic at work again. She set the bread

down onto the table. “Well, then tell your mother I will enjoy it, but please don’t take her things again without asking, okay?”

Instead of answering, the taller was already headed into her workshop, knowing exactly where it was, she guessed, because they’d often visited their uncle. “We’re going into the forest tomorrow. Do you want us to bring you a walnut tree? We can sell it to you for cheap.”

Once again, she was sure she hadn’t heard right. “Walnut tree?”

He nodded vigorously. “Miss Anja, she liked to work in walnut wood.”

“And lime wood,” the other piped up. “Good wood for statues.”

“And we used to bring her trees. She used to buy them.”

Ah, now she understood. They were here looking for a job. “I don’t work in wood,” she explained.

They looked dumbfounded, as if that didn’t compute. “But Ma said you were an artist too!”

“Yes, but I work in other materials.” She answered vaguely, knowing already how the Sabina grapevine worked, and not wanting it to get out that she had a cache of precious metals and stones in here. She knew she was being watched, and couldn’t be too careful.

“Oh.” They both looked crestfallen. Then brightened. “Well, then, do you have any other work we can do around the house? Clean up your garden?” asked the younger.

The elder looked scornfully at his brother. “Mr. Charlie already did that. He cleaned up everything. You didn’t see?”

Yes, she was being watched all right.

“Then what about painting?” asked the younger, not ready to give up on his odd-job search just yet. “We can come paint the walls for you, if you like.”

“And the doors,” said the other.

“And the roof.”

Romy had already been thinking about freshening up the paint, and was perfectly capable of doing it herself, but she didn’t mind conceding. “Sure. When I’m ready to paint I will let your mother know, okay?”

They looked delighted. There was a short pause in which all three of them stood in a circle, not knowing what to say next. Romy half wondered if she was expected to offer them a drink, but to be truthful, she didn’t want company right now.

Then one brother nudged the other and they turned around in formation,

like soldiers, and headed outside. “Have a nice day, Miss Romy,” they said.

She smiled at them both and shut the door behind them. It was going to be a good day of work, and she’d better get cracking. But throughout the morning, even as her sure hands knew what they were doing, her mind was way over on the other side of the island, at Half Moon Bay. Where Charlie was, living his life without her. Without even thinking about her, she’d bet. What would happen if she went up there for a visit?

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CHAPTER 17



Charlie was tying up his boat to the jetty, having said goodbye to a group of tourists from Belize after taking them on an early morning sail along the north coast. He looked up instinctively, responding to a tingle that he barely understood, to see Romy walking down the pier. His surprise was immediately followed by a wave of genuine pleasure.

She was wearing a white top and white shorts with leather sandals, a far cry from the stiff, dull linens she'd favored when he'd first met her. Today her hair was loose, shining in the sun, and her skin was a glowing, rosy gold. He imagined that the last few days had been spent in the sun. He smiled. It suited her.

"Hi," he said, finishing his task and walking along the pier to meet her halfway. "Fancy seeing you up north." He added mischievously, "Did you come to see me?"

She lifted her head to look into his eyes. "I came to do some shopping in St. Cillian. There are a few things I need for my art, and there's a jewelry store in town that said they could supply what I want." Her blue eyes narrowed just a tad. "Why would you think I'd taxi all the way to the other side of the island just to see *you*?"

He shrugged. "'Cause I'm handsome, virile, and charming?"

She looked as if she was wavering between glaring at him and smiling, and eventually decided to smile. Then, without warning, she hugged him, holding onto him for just a while as his own hands came up around her. It felt good. It surprised him, too, considering the awkward way they'd parted, and

the fact that this awkwardness had been his fault.

“I missed your silliness,” she said into his shirt.

“I missed you, too,” he said honestly. Then deflected. “How are things at the cabin?” He put her away from him so he could look down into her face, searching for any telltale signs that she was in trouble. “Is everything okay? No more... incidents?”

She shook her head. “I have been safe. No more grave dirt. The people of Batali have been so nice to me. I got more gifts than I did last Christmas!”

He smiled, feeling a sense of pride in his people. “It’s the island way.”

She tilted her head, assessing him and what he had said. “Well, then, I guess I like it, this island way.”

“Enough to stay a little longer?” He turned, walking her back to the end of the pier and onto the white sand. He didn’t like how much he was hoping her answer would be in the positive, because, to be truthful, it had nothing to do with him. No matter how instinctively he’d taken to this woman, how deep this odd attachment, she was still only here temporarily, a tourist whose destiny lay outside of this island. That made her off-limits.

She made a broad gesture with her hands. “Maybe a while longer. I have so much more art inside me, and here in Sabina, I feel like it is yearning to get out.”

“Good,” he said. By now they’d walked back to the path that led up to the resort, and as they entered the gates he saw Sam watching him. Romy lifted her hand and waved to him, and he waved back, mouthing hellos across the distance, but there was something else in Sam’s eyes that only Charlie could see. They’d known each other for so long that communication didn’t need to be verbal. It was a smug, yet encouraging, *I see you!*

You see nothing, Charlie messaged back with his eyes. *This isn’t what you think.*

Sure, it isn’t. Sam grinned and kept on walking.

“I’ll take you into the city,” Charlie heard himself saying.

She pointed in the direction of the parking lot. “I’ve got a driver waiting. I’ve got him for the day. He’s taking me back to Batali afterward.” She added pointedly, “Since you’ve decided I’m not to drive on the island!”

He laughed out loud. “I’m sure you can pick it up slowly, now that you’re settled. And now that you’ve got GPS rather than relying on an out-of-date map. But for today, stay with me. I’ll take you where you want to go.”

She hedged. “Don’t you have tours to do?”

Charlie shrugged. “As you can see, I just got in from one, and it’s my last for the day. So you can enjoy the benefit of an original, custom designed Charlie Brown expedition, no charge.”

He didn’t wait on an answer, in case he got one he didn’t like. He felt Romy’s eyes on him as he walked out to the waiting car and had a brief conversation with the driver. He knew the man well from down in the village, and the negotiation didn’t last long. Once several large bills changed hands, the driver saluted Romy, gave her a smile and a wave, and made a U-turn.

“What’s going on?” she asked. Her face was puzzled. “Where is he going?”

“I paid him and sent him back to Batali.” He reached out and took her hand. “You’re mine for the day. Now, which store are we going to?”

All she could do was laugh. “Very well. You win.”

“I like winning. Winning is good.” He offered her his arm and was happy when she took it. They walked together to his truck, and Charlie noticed that their steps were in sync. It was a small observation, but it pleased him no end.

For the next couple of hours, he immersed himself in her company, taking her where she wanted to go, enjoying watching her as she sorted through the precious materials she wanted, asking pointed questions of the salespeople and looking pleased when what they offered was exactly what she was looking for. She bought silver wire and an assortment of semi-precious gems, which she carefully placed at the bottom of her bag, snug in their velvet pouch. She was clearly happy with her purchases, and he was happy because more art material meant more art, and more art meant she’d be staying longer.

When they were hungry he offered to take her to a nice Asian restaurant in the city, but she had a hankering for street food, so they took their steaming boxes up to the cliffside fort and sat in the tray of the truck, watching the sun go down as they ate. And the whole time, they talked and talked.

Charlie listened with interest to stories of her life and work in Berlin, about her oh-so-boring job—at least, he thought it sounded boring, but she seemed to find fascination in numbers. About her friend Maxon, who sounded like a scream. “He’s the one who encouraged me to come. He’s the one who thinks I should stay longer.”

“Then I think I like your friend,” he said at once.

She looked conflicted. “What about my family? They think this is a silly

idea, that I'm being just as silly as Anja." She extended her hand and swept it across the view of the bay. The sunset had turned the water red and gold, and the clouds had gone purple. It was a sight he never tired of. "How can I explain to them what this is like? How would they believe it, how perfect this is, how easy it is for this island to penetrate your heart?"

He wondered silently if she had any idea how easy it had been for *her* to penetrate his heart. But he struggled to keep it about her, not about him. "Romy," he said quietly, "in the end, the only person you have to please is you."

Her eyes were glistening when she finally lifted them to him. "I'm confused. With every day that passes, I find another reason to stay. And the reasons I have to go, they get weaker and weaker. Smaller and smaller." Then she added, almost murmuring to herself. "And you...."

"I what?" he asked, immediately taut. Leaning closer to her even though he could hear her just fine.

"Maybe you could be a reason too." Then she clapped her hand over her mouth, shaking her head. She leaped from the tray of the truck and began to walk to the walled cliff's edge, fixing her eyes on the darkening sea.

"Why?" he asked.

"Nothing. I apologize."

"Why do you have to apologize?"

"Because I made a fool of myself with you—twice—and I'm not going to embarrass myself again. It was stupid."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing, and how conflicted it made him feel. But he hated the thought that she would be hurting, so he said firmly, "You didn't embarrass yourself. I was the one who embarrassed you. I was rude and unkind and I am sorry. I beg your forgiveness." He took her hand. "But I still want to hear what you were about to say."

She dragged her hand away. "No."

"Am I a reason?" he persisted. "Could I be a reason you want to stay?"

She was backed against the stone wall, and he was glad of that because it meant she couldn't go. She had to stay here and answer. Her breaths were shallow, and he could see emotions chase each other across her face, although he couldn't identify all of them. But she didn't answer.

He filled the silence by kissing her. Very gently at first, so he wouldn't scare her, and cautiously in case she told him to stop. But she didn't tell him to stop. Instead, she kissed him back, reaching up to wrap her arms around

his shoulders. She was so much shorter than he was, but he solved that problem by lifting her and placing her to sit on the low wall, then slipped between her knees, pressing his body against hers.

Everything in his head was warning him, reminding him, that this was trouble, but his heart and his body would pay him no mind. They kissed until he heard her soft sigh, his name against his cheek. He pulled away, seeking out her gaze. Hoping that he would see something there that mirrored how he felt.

She shook herself, gathering her strength and her self-control. Then she slid down the wall. "I think you should take me back home now, Charlie."

She said 'home'. He liked that. He nodded, and together they returned to the car. She took his hand and that delighted him. The gesture was sweet and coy; there was nothing in it that reminded him of the women in his past, the ones who threw themselves at him, pulling out all the stops. Leaving no doubt in his mind about what they were here for. When Romy smiled up at him, all he could see was pleasure in being there. Close to him.

They released each other's hands only long enough to get into the truck, and as he pulled off, heading for the coastal road, it was she who took his hand again, making him so dizzy he wondered if he should be driving.

He turned on the music and they settled into the long ride. Neither seemed willing to talk about what was happening; instead, they took in the scenery, and talked about inconsequential things that suddenly meant the world to him.

It was quite late when they finally arrived in the village, and instead of parking outside, he opened the gates and parked in the yard. Some heightened instinct made him want to be closer to the house. She'd been gone all day, and he didn't like that. Maybe she hadn't meant to return after dark, because none of the lights were on.

"I'll get the gate," he said. Once he'd helped her out, he walked over to drag the gate shut. He'd only just slid the padlock shut when he heard her scream, a shrill, sharp sound that sliced through the quiet night.

Charlie wheeled around, taking only a few long strides across the yard to get to her, eyes casting left and right, looking for the threat. She was standing on the top step, hands clasped to her mouth, eyes wide with horror. A quick assessment told him she wasn't hurt, but he also immediately saw what it was that had upset her.

Dangling from a string tied to the porch light, just in front of the door,

was a hummingbird. Its feathers flashed shades of violet, emerald, and aquamarine, its head hung limply on a floppy neck, while its tiny red feet were trussed by the string. Its beautiful gemstone eyes were wide and blank. Next to him, Romy softly began to cry.

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CHAPTER 18



Charlie couldn't remember the last time he'd been this angry—or this torn. On the one hand, he wanted desperately to put his arms around Romy to comfort her, but on the other, this abomination, this crime against nature, was dangling before their eyes, a violation of the sanctity of the beach. And although three hands wasn't physically possible, if he did indeed have a *third* hand, it would be designated for the stealthy dread creeping up on him that the person who'd left this might still be around.

Romy rubbed her eyes, looking at him with confusion and pain. "Why?"

He acted swiftly, signaling her to stay. "Don't move." And, knowing how stubborn she could be, he put some iron into his command. "Stay here!"

He reached up and snatched down the string hanging from the lightbulb, then immediately cradled the bird in his hands. It was tiny, not even as long as his thumb, but even in death its feathers were resplendent, glowing like a jewel in his palm.

Charlie was horrified, revolted by the casual cruelty, and felt a desperate need to rid himself of the sight. He leaped over the porch railing and onto the ground, darted around the cabin to the beach, where he viciously kicked a hole into the soft sand, then tenderly placed the hummingbird into it.

A movement behind him told him that Romy, naturally, had completely disregarded his admonition to stay there. She got to her knees beside him and, using her bare hands, scooped sand over the little grave and patted it down.

Tears streaked her face, and her hair was in disarray, a tendril sticking to her damp cheek. He reached out and brushed it away. She didn't resist.

He squatted, staring past her to the dark sea. There was something he wanted to share with her. He began to speak. “You know, the original people of this island were the Taino. Indigenous Amerindians who had settlements up and down the islands, all the way to South America. There’s a story about the hummingbird that all little Sabinan kids know. Do you want to hear it?”

She nodded.

He began to recite, in the same manner that his mother taught him. “The gods who created the heavens and the Earth called the hummingbird their most perfect creation. They have no enemies, harm no one, and yet are flawless in design. They were more valuable in the eyes of the creators than even the gemstones buried deep in the ground, so the gods told mankind that they should never, ever be deliberately harmed. People listened; because they also admired the beauty, speed, and agility of the little birds. They thought they brought blessings and good luck.”

“I see them in the garden every morning,” she confirmed softly. “Feeding on the flowers. They fly so fast, they’re a blur.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “But there was one young warrior who saw them as a challenge. He was the best archer on the island and wanted to prove it. He claimed he was so accurate and so skilled he could shoot a hummingbird out of the air. The elders warned him, then begged him, but he didn’t listen. He nocked his arrow, took aim, and killed the first bird to fly by. People screamed and wept, because they understood what he had done, and that he had doomed them.”

Charlie stopped. He almost felt silly, telling a story he’d heard on his mother’s knee as if it was gospel, but he couldn’t stop. Even Romy seemed entranced, motioning him to go on as though scared to break the spell by speaking.

“When word reached the gods about what he’d done, they were outraged. As I said, the hummingbirds were their chosen ones. They spoke a curse and the earth began to tremble. The water rose, and the island sank—the entire thing, with everyone on it—beneath the sea.”

He lifted his eyes to hers, noting that they were completely fixed on him, shining like moonstones. “You Europeans, you talk about Atlantis, the lost city. Here, we talk about the Hummingbird Island. Nobody knows where it once stood, but we all know that it’s gone.”

They rose of one accord, with Romy saying, “That’s so sad.”

“Yeah,” he growled, all whimsy gone. “And when I catch who did this,

he'll wish he was at the bottom of the sea, too." He let his hand rest at the small of her back and together they walked to the cabin. He knew by now that "stay there" wasn't an option for Romy, so as he did a methodical search of the yard and then the interior of the house, he allowed her to shadow him without complaint. He saw nothing out of place.

Back inside the cabin, Romy didn't object when he locked them in. They stood facing each other in the middle of the living room, and her head dipped low. He touched her cheek. "You okay?"

She shrugged. "I was wondering if Anja suffered like this, too. Do you think they hated her as well?"

"Nobody hates you," he explained gently. "Resentment, sure. But not hate. All these tactics have only one purpose: to hasten your return to Germany. That way, the person who did this can enjoy crashing in your place again."

She made a face, acknowledging the truth of what he was saying. Then asked, "Do you think I'm in danger?"

Charlie put his hands on his hips, staring down at his feet as if searching answers. He made a decision. "The only person in danger right now is the guy who did this. And I think I have an idea who it was."

She looked surprised. "You do?"

"Yeah." He wheeled around and headed toward the door, propelled by rising anger, mainly at himself for not having seen the truth. If his mind had been where it should be, this could have been averted. Just being around this woman made his brain fuzzy. She impeded his rational thought, and that scared him. "And I'm going to see if I'm right."

"No!" Romy surprised him with her strength as she shot out an arm, grabbing him by the bicep and halting his forward movement. "Don't go."

"I have to—" he began to protest.

"Don't leave. Don't leave me alone tonight, Charlie. Stay." Her little pink tongue flicked out and wet her lips, and the gesture was so mesmerizing that his field of vision suddenly narrowed until all he could see was her. All he could think about was her.

He swayed a little, because her presence was like a drug, weakening him. Confusing him. "I shouldn't."

"Why not?" This was the Romy he'd come to know, piercing and resolute. Demanding answers.

"I can't." He felt and sounded weak and wondered if there was anything

nearby that he could grab onto to physically prevent himself from being sucked into her. He knew he was fighting a battle... and that he was losing. Whenever Romy came near, how could he help but lose?

She stepped closer, pressing her body against his, and almost short-circuited his brain. "You're scared of me. Why?"

Scared? Try terrified. How was it that this woman could just appear out of nowhere and completely take control of his mind like this? And why was he so stupid that he never thought to prevent it? Being around Romy was like feasting on a bag of candy, knowing all that sugar was bad for you, but not being able to stop yourself from dipping into the bag, over and over.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Are you going to hurt me?"

He shook his head and tried to find his tongue. Ah, there it was, stuck to the roof of his mouth. He barely managed to croak out the word "No," when Romy rose to tiptoe and gently clasped his head, bringing it down to meet hers. She kissed him, he kissed her back, and every single iota of his resolution flew out the open window.

He didn't just want to be with her, he wanted to be consumed by her. And with all this talk about magic and spells, here he was, being utterly bewitched and not even wanting to save himself.

They kissed and caressed, held onto each other for a long time, and then, dizzy, confused and drunk with emotion, he allowed her to lead him to her bedroom.

CHAPTER 19



Romy awoke to brilliant sunlight and rolled over to discover that Charlie had drawn back the windows. Long yellow rays bathed the room and settled upon her body, making her glow. No, wait, that wasn't the sun's doing. It was Charlie's.

The way he'd touched her last night, and the way he'd held her, that was what made her shimmer and shine. She felt tired and languorous and utterly fulfilled. Maxon's words came unbidden to her mind: *Have an affair with a spicy islander*, he'd suggested. Now that she truly understood, that idea was preposterous.

Why would you have some meaningless vacation fling when instead you could meet someone who made you feel like this? Who made your heart sing, who awakened your curiosity, who made your body tremble with a touch, and who annoyed the living hell out of you? Why would you trawl the beaches for some meaningless tryst when you had *this*? When you could give everything you had and everything you were to a man like Charlie? She wondered what Maxon would say when she called him on the little phone Charlie had bought her and told him where to shove his idiotic idea. That made her laugh again.

"What's so funny?" Charlie rolled over, sitting up in bed, looking at her with curiosity.

"Oh," she said, holding out her arms, inviting him to fall into them again, "it's silly. It's nothing." She remained in that position, frozen, like a ballet dancer halfway between poses, and when he made no move to lean forward,

hold his body against hers like he'd done all night, she made tiny come-hither motions with her fingers, smiling into his face, inviting.

Instead, the bed creaked and sank as he shifted away from her, swinging his legs around until his feet hit the floor. His gaze didn't hold hers.

Puzzled, she let her arms fall to her sides. "Charlie?"

He said nothing, looking around for his clothes and scooping them up from the floor where he'd tossed them last night. "I need to get going," he said to the bedpost.

Romy shot up, getting off the bed as well. She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling more naked than naked. But that didn't even matter, because he didn't even glance her way. "What is this?" she asked. "What happened?"

He was already dressed, and that didn't seem fair, so she dragged on her own clothes, yanking on the zipper so hard she almost broke it. She was confused yes, but another emotion was muscling in as well: anger. "You're leaving," she stated. She didn't need to phrase it as a question because it was clear. He already had his shoes on and was walking out into the living room.

"I have something to see about," he said, his voice oddly distant. "Something to do—"

"Oh, so you *do* me and then go *do* something else?"

He looked at her, as if surprised that she would talk like that. But she had news for him. If he thought she was all sweetness and light, he had another think coming. "I would never treat you like that."

"Huh," she said, her voice weighted down by doubt. "Then come have breakfast—"

"I'm not hungry."

"Then come watch me have breakfast." She indicated her curvy body with a sweep of the hand. "We big girls, we need to eat!"

Incredibly, he walked past the kitchen and headed for the door, not swayed by her demand. "I need to—" He paused with his hand on the doorknob.

Romy had a vision of herself as a volcano, simmering heat on the inside, but placid and unmoving on the outside. If this was how he was playing it, if all that had passed between them had meant so little that he couldn't even stop for breakfast, then she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing what it had meant to her. If he could play that game, then so could she.

"Very well," she said, as coolly as she could. She seized control of his grand exit by grasping the doorknob, opening the door for him, and standing

there waiting for him to exit. “Thank you. It was quite pleasant.” She forced herself to smile. “I’m happy that Sabina has lived up to its reputation as the perfect place to de-stress. And I’m glad that I found the right person to help me in my mission.” She clapped him on the shoulder encouragingly, as if he’d scored a fine penalty kick and the rest of the team was grateful for his efforts. “Good job.”

“Job?” he echoed, eyes widening.

“Yes, well, last night suited its purpose, didn’t it? I’m grateful.” She rolled her neck in a slow circle, keeping the smile pasted to her face. *Just a few more moments of this*, she reminded herself, *and then you can drop the act*. She pointed with her chin at the truck outside. “Don’t you have to get back to work?”

Under his dark skin, Charlie had gone gray, and Romy was fine with that. If someone was going to be left hurt, it wasn’t going to be her. Strike swiftly and hard, and let your opponent protect themselves.

“I do,” he said slowly. “But first there’s something I need to—”

She didn’t even let him finish. She said cheerily, dismissively, “Great. I hope it works out for you. Now, if you don’t mind, I have that turtle sculpture to finish.” She closed the door in his face.

It took less than a minute for the truck’s engine to come alive.

Romy leaned against the door, panting from the effort of keeping it together in front of him. She’d won that round, shoved him out of there before he could see how much he’d hurt her, and how deeply she felt for him. If an emotion that powerful didn’t come in the other direction, it didn’t need to be aired at all.

She wove her way to her workshop on unsteady feet, tired, miserable, lonely—and still angry. But art was her refuge; it always had been. So she laid out her tools, sat on her stool and began to work, immersing herself in her art, and in Anja’s loving presence.

Then there was a knock on her door.

CHAPTER 20



Charlie was teeth-gnashing mad, and mostly at himself. What had he been thinking? Hadn't he sworn off women for a while? Especially short-stay tourists? Hadn't he taken a vow of celibacy, promised to avoid that silken trap?

But no, he'd willingly entered into it, and this time, he was the one who'd caught feelings. He was the one who'd tumbled into love. And he couldn't even claim that he regretted what had happened between them last night; every second in her arms had been special. Transformative.

At least for him.

Even as he was reeling in shock this morning, after he woke up, trying to process what had gone on between them, and deal with the impact of these unfamiliar and downright new emotions, Romy had put him in his place. She had reminded him that he'd simply served a purpose. He'd been just one part of her vacation package: sun, sand, relaxation, and sex.

He pounded his fist on the steering wheel. Suckered. That's how he felt. When they were in bed together last night she had kissed him, touched him, murmured his name as though nobody else mattered, but now that the sun was up, everything was different. She'd made it very clear that he'd simply been part of the entertainment.

Charlie thought about all the times he'd struck that same accord with visiting women, and been perfectly happy to accept that. They'd had their fling and gone their separate ways. At least, most of the time. He thought ruefully of the long, deep scrapes on the side of his truck, now covered over,

that had been placed there by an angry lover. A woman who had felt rejected by his casual approach to love and romance, a philosophy he now bitterly regretted.

Two weeks in Romy's company had changed him, irretrievably. And though she'd made it clear that that was as far as it would go, he knew that he'd never go back to being the old him. His playboy days were over.

He slammed on the brakes in front of an old, sprawling house and got out, walking into the unfenced yard as he had done many times before as a youth. He didn't even need to call out, because the door opened suddenly and Margaretha appeared with a broad smile. "Charlie, m'boy!" She opened the door wider and motioned him in, but he wasn't up to being confined by four walls, so he stood in the yard where he was.

"Which one was it, Miss Margaretha? Which of your boys had been staying in Anja's house?"

She looked surprised at the question, and then her warm expression became suffused with guilt. "Well," she admitted. "I know a couple of them have been in and out. Looking after the place, you know."

"That's not what I mean. At least one of your boys has been living there on and off, long enough to think it's his?"

She didn't need to think long. "Well, I know Andy stays over sometimes, maybe Mickey, when things here start to feel crowded." Then she added, in defense of her sons, "But they cleared out as soon as we got word that the niece was coming. And they'd never do the place any harm."

"Not true," Charlie said abruptly. "One of Anja's statues is gone."

She looked both surprised and puzzled. "How can it be gone when it's stuck to a base?"

"Sawn off and sold. And that's not all." In a few clipped sentences he described the warning messages left on Romy's doorstep, and when he got to the hummingbird, she clapped her hands over her cheeks in horror.

"Oh, Charlie, boy, I'm so—"

Charlie adored Margaretha, but right now he had no patience for her. "Where are they? Where are Andy and Mickey?"

The vague expression returned. "They left a while ago. In a rush."

"Were they late for work?"

She shook her head. "They don't work. Not these days."

Charlie scoffed. "But I bet they always have money." He knew exactly how much a full-sized Anja Bauer sculpture would go for on the black

market. Those boys would have enough money to keep them going for a long time, and there were two more sculptures just like it in Romy's yard.

A feeling of dread crept up his spine. He stepped up to Margaretha and grasped her hand. "Please, where did they go?"

She shook her head, eyes squeezed shut as if she knew that if he looked into them he would see the truth. Then she answered in a broken voice, "Down to the beach."

Charle dropped her hand, spun around, and ran back to the truck.

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CHAPTER 21



Romy stood in her workshop with her back to the table, eyes focused on two of Margaretha's sons as they paced the room like angry lions. These were the older two, not the sweethearts who had come to visit earlier in the week, bringing her bread. These two were not here out of kindness.

They were angry, cursing. Andy, the eldest and the angriest, was shouting, "Fifteen years! Fifteen years our uncle lived here with your aunt. He built this house for her, you know. Built it from the ground up."

"My aunt was good with her hands," Romy countered. "She never stood by. This was a house built with love, by both of them."

Andy sucked his teeth in annoyance. "That doesn't matter. This property was theirs. They lived here together."

"The deed was in my aunt's name. This land, *she* bought. Paid for by her art—"

The other brother—she didn't know his name—slapped his chest. "But we were family too! Why should you inherit? All this time, you didn't even care enough to come down from your high-and-mighty big city, to check on the place." He waved all around them. "And we were the ones to take care of it!"

She didn't want to admit it, but she was scared. These guys were strong and very angry, and if it got worse, there was nobody around to help. She thought about Charlie, regretting sending him away, not just because of how awful that made her feel, but because she could use his strength and

protectiveness right now.

Andy stepped closer, but she was braced against her work table, and there was nowhere to go. “You speak of her art, but it’s not only yours. It can’t be —”

She gasped as realization hit. “You’re the one who stole that statue from the yard!”

“*Took*, not *stole*. It was ours.” The other brother grinned. “And we’ve been living off that money all year.”

Andy suggested, “So, tell you what. Let’s split this evenly. You keep the cabin, we take the sculptures. We can saw them off and be gone in an hour. And then you can be happy your little house—”

“Which shouldn’t be yours—!”

“Forever and ever.”

“You think I’d give away my aunt’s sculptures?”

“You wouldn’t have had to give away anything, if you’d packed up and went home like you were supposed to.”

“Ignoring our messages....”

She narrowed her eyes at Andy, suddenly sickened. “You killed that hummingbird.”

“You’d be surprised how hard they are to catch.”

Romy felt her eyes sting at the casual cruelty of the remark, and her tummy hurt at the memory of the burial last night. “You’ll pay for that,” she reminded him.

He laughed. “We don’t believe in fairytales.” Then he added with greater menace. “You need to go. If you stay, we will make your life hell.”

This was enough. She wasn’t going to stand here and be threatened. And even more startling, when she opened her mouth to speak, she discovered she was telling the truth. “I have news for you. I will never give up this cabin.” She folded her arms. “And now, I want you to leave.”

The men gaped, as if unable to believe that their scare tactics weren’t working. Andy reached out for her, but she slapped him away. “Don’t touch me. Get out of my house.”

To Romy’s horror, he grasped her by her arm, so tight that she knew there would soon be bruises. She wriggled, trying to shake herself free, but his grip was iron. “Why don’t you listen? Why don’t you give up?”

She didn’t even need to answer, because a booming voice answered for her. “This woman never gives up.” One second, Charlie was in the doorway,

and the other he was grasping Andy by the shoulders and hauling him off of her. Andy was so surprised that he let her go at once, swinging around wildly, fists clenched. His brother, delayed by shock for a few seconds, never saw Charlie's left hook coming.

Romy wouldn't call it a battle as much as it was a smackdown. Both men had their mother's physique; wiry and small-boned, and that alone was a disadvantage. But Charlie's fury was another matter, fuel on the fire that raged in the room for the next couple of moments, until finally, both men were hanging limp by their collars, one in each of Charlie's fists.

"I want you to know that the only reason you two will be able to walk out on two legs is the respect I have for your mother. But let me tell you, you are never to set foot in this yard again. You are never to even look at Romy again. If I even hear—"

There was a howl of fury, startling everyone. A frantic blur flashed into the room, shrieking—and it was Margaretha. Charlie reacted in surprise, and the boys cringed as she started in on them, slapping and yelling as if they were eight and ten years old. "This is how I raised you?" (Smack.) "To menace decent people?"

"Maa!"

"How dare you embarrass me?" (Smack.) "How dare you shame your uncle's good name?"

"Moomm!"

Charlie let go of the young men who, in the presence of their mother, seemed almost like children, chastened and ashamed, not an ounce of bravado left. Even though Romy had been scared during the encounter, now she wanted to laugh. Like all bullies, they were cut down to size in the presence of a more powerful opponent. When they finally left, the only thing Margaretha didn't do was drag them out by the ears.

When she commanded them to follow, they meekly did, stopping only to murmur their *I'm sorrys* before she frog-marched them down to the beach. The air they left behind was leaden and dull, like the empty air you felt when a storm was approaching. Romy struggled not to cry but lost the battle.

"It's okay," Charlie murmured as he pulled her against his chest. "You'll be all right. I will make sure they never come back."

She nodded in relief but was surprised that topmost in her mind right now was not the shock she'd felt at the encounter with the boys, but the fact that she was so close to Charlie again. It felt so comforting to be back in his arms,

and she wished she could stay there.

But she couldn't, could she? Not if she wanted to hide from him the fact that she had fallen for him. And *that* she would never reveal, not after this morning. It burned her to know that he could just walk away from her after a night in her bed. She felt again the hurt at his casual dismissal. This was the side of Charlie she had heard rumors about, the man who people seemed to admire for being such a player. She wondered how many women like her had fallen into the same position, into the same trap that she had, while this big, handsome, charming man had entertained himself at their expense.

She stepped out of his arms, rubbing her reddened eyes. As formally and as coolly as she could, she said, "Thank you, Charlie. I'm glad you were here."

He nodded, smiling a little, and reached out to touch her cheek.

"And now, I need you to leave," she added.

The look on his face was as though someone had punched him in the back of his head when he wasn't expecting it. He sucked in a deep breath, his mouth falling slightly open. "But, Romy, I..."

"Go, Charlie." She pointed at the door behind him. "Please."

CHAPTER 22



Over the next few weeks, Romy's little golden, gemstone-encrusted menagerie grew. When word got around that she was sculpting local animals, people began texting her photos of creatures they had come across on the beach and in the forest. She soon had an array of pieces of art that were almost as colorful and eye-catching as the creatures themselves: monkeys, turtles, lizards and frogs, fish and dolphins, even a couple of snakes and spiders.

"But no bats!" she said to Maxon with a laugh during one of their regular phone chats.

"Are you sad to be leaving?" he asked abruptly one day, just as she had begun packing up the cottage for her return to Germany.

The question hurt, and the answer hurt even more. Was she sad? Terribly. In a couple of months, she'd come to understand exactly how Anja had fallen in love with Sabina and all the people here. And to be honest, she would have been tempted to extend her visit a little longer—if she hadn't *also* fallen in love with one particular resident.

A man who had taken her at her word and stayed away. A man who drove down to Batali on business at least once a week, or so she'd heard, but who'd never so much as driven past her street. She didn't know whether to be relieved or miffed, so settled for both. It was a good thing she wasn't seeing him, right? That way she didn't have to struggle against her instinct to go back on the promise she'd made to herself to stay away from him. She reminded herself that as long as she stayed away from him, her heart would

be safe.

“Romy?” Maxon prompted her. “You know, you don’t have to come back. If you’re happy there....”

“I have to,” she said, trying to convince both herself and him. “Those actuarial tables aren’t going to compile themselves, you know.”

He said quietly. “Those actuarial tables aren’t what make you happy. Maybe before, but now you’re different. That island changed you, like it did your aunt.”

My aunt was changed by the island and by love, she reminded herself. She groaned. “I’ll come again,” she promised. “There will always be vacations. But I can’t... I won’t stay.”

Maxon sighed. “Well, I will welcome you with open arms. We will have dinner, and a drink—and I will do my best to talk you into going back.”

“You want me to leave Germany permanently?” she teased. “Don’t you love me?”

“I want you to leave Germany *because* I love you.”

She hung up, feeling oddly melancholy, but reminded herself that she’d made the right choice. Just because Anja had been happy here didn’t mean she could be. Being an artist full time was just a pipe dream. It was time to go back to reality.

As was her daily custom, she walked down into the village in the late afternoon, to chat with villagers who now knew her name, and to buy things like fresh bread and eggs for breakfast. On her last day she made sure to step into every store, stop by every fence, to say goodbye, something that would never have crossed her mind to do in Germany.

As always, she felt a shiver whenever she passed Margaretha’s yard. She hadn’t seen much of her since the incident, and when she did, Margaretha was quiet, almost shy, and it pained Romy to see this normally exuberant woman so chastened, but understood how embarrassed she must have been about the behavior of her sons.

This time, Margaretha was standing at the fence, almost as if she’d received warning that Romy was on her way. She stopped Romy with an upraised hand.

“Margaretha,” Romy greeted her with a smile.

Margaretha paused for a moment and chose her words. “Miss Romy, I just want you to know how sorry I am about—”

“It’s okay,” she said hastily. The gossip had gone spinning around the

village within hours of the incident, and Margaretha had suffered enough embarrassment.

Margaretha swallowed and nodded. "I sent my two son to live with their father in Grenada. They won't be bothering you anymore. And your cabin will be safe until you come back." She added shyly, "And I hope you come back."

Impulsively, Romy hugged her. "I will. Soon."

The next morning, there was a beep outside the cabin. Romy's bags were all packed and waiting in the doorway, and she gave a last look around, feeling oddly torn. It was a long drive to the airport, and she'd ordered a car. The last time she'd done that, Charlie had hijacked her ride, so she half expected to see him standing there, grinning as if he'd pulled off a tremendous coup.

But to her surprise, her driver was Sugarhead, the beautiful daughter of Anja's first model. She stood there in the sun, her fiery hair glowing, and came forward to gather up her bags. "Hey! Ready?"

Was she, she wondered. Would she ever be ready? Unable to say any more, she helped Sugarhead stow her bags in the car, and got in. As they pulled away, Romy couldn't resist turning her head longingly, straining to get one last look at the cabin and the yard, where flowers were blooming. Then she sat back, closing her eyes. It was a long way to the airport, and she felt as if every minute would hurt.

She expected Sugarhead to head straight for the main road, but instead, she veered in the other direction, heading to the village square. "I just have a little stop to make," Sugarhead said. "Won't be long."

Romy swallowed her irritation. She was accustomed to the almost lackadaisical Sabinan perception of time, in which "close enough" was as good as "on time", but she said, with rising anxiety, "But I have a plane to catch!"

Sugarhead acted as if she'd barely heard. "Won't be long," she said again.

Romy could see that the village square was full of people, gathered around a cricket game in the middle, which seemed hotly contested, if the screams, cheers and jeers were anything to go by. Children ran about whooping, and peanut and snow cone vendors pushed their trolleys. "I don't understand," she began, and then stopped.

The villagers were chanting one name, over and over. "Charlie! Charlie! Charlie!"

She looked more closely. There at the bat was Charlie, as handsome as ever in his cricket whites: helmet, shirt, pants, gloves, and shoes all gleaming bright. He was poised, bat clenched in both hands, waiting for the next ball. She had no idea what was going on, but it was clear that he was on top of the game, and the crowd was going wild.

Then he spotted her, and something changed. For a second, all he could see was her, and all she could see was him. The bowler wound up to pitch, threw back an arm, and let fly... but Charlie wasn't even looking. There was a dull thud as the ball made contact with the stumps behind him, and a howl of horror from his fans. Charlie was out, too busy staring at Romy to notice. Howls of anger from his side, jubilation from the opponents, but Charlie didn't seem to care. He simply let his bat fall where he stood, and walked toward Romy, removing his helmet as he did so.

"What's going on? Why am I here?" she demanded. It was only when he looked back and smiled at Sugarhead and she threw him an enthusiastic thumbs-up that Romy understood. She gasped. "You made her bring me here!"

He grasped her arm, not even bothering to argue the point. "Let's walk."

"No!" She pulled her arm away and stamped her foot, something she hadn't done since she was eight. "I'm not going anywhere except for the airport!"

His handsome face was implacable—which, again, was annoying. "You can walk with me, or we can talk here. Then I'll take you to the airport."

Romy folded her arms. "We talk here. Then *Sugarhead* will take me to the airport."

He inclined his head. "Deal."

"Talk, then. And fast. Because planes don't wait."

"Fine." He stood before her, spread-legged, arms folded, and snagged her gaze. "You're annoying," he began. "And stubborn. And God, you're a terrible driver."

She gaped at him. "You kidnapped me to insult me?"

"No, I just wanted to let you know up front how much you get under my skin."

"You aren't an angel either," she came back at him. "You're pushy, cocky, and you talk too much."

"You cheat at dominos."

"I don't cheat," Romy snapped. "Memorizing tiles isn't cheating."

“If you say so.” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t like losing to you.”

“Play better, and you won’t lose.”

“That’s not what I meant. I don’t like losing my heart to you.”

Everything around Romy seemed to disappear. There was no cricket pitch, no village square, no spectators. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. But when it finally sank in, she grew *more* angry, not less. “What you say is nonsense! *You* walked away from me. No, you *ran* away from me!”

He answered patiently, “I walked away because you reminded me of what I didn’t want to be anymore. *That* guy. The player.” He winced. “And then you confirmed for me what you thought of me, that morning when we woke up together. That I was dispensable, just a summer thing.”

Romy remembered exactly what she had said to him and regretted the immeasurable hurt she had caused. “I’m sorry. You pushed me away, so I pushed you back.”

He pondered, his expression changing as realization dawned. “And we just kept on pushing each other.”

She thought of the long weeks she had spent at the cabin, wanting him, missing him. Believing he didn’t want her. God, this was such a mess.

He came so close that all she’d have to do was reach out and touch him. “I wasted a lot of time chasing girls I knew I wouldn’t catch. Who I knew didn’t want to be caught. I don’t want to do that anymore.” He shook the thought out of his head and shuddered. “And if this is a game to you, I won’t play.”

This time she was the one stepping closer. Now she was near enough to feel his warmth. “I’m not playing. I don’t want to play with you, Charlie.”

“What do you want?” He was tense, staring down into her face as if everything relied on her answer.

“I want what Anja had,” she said sincerely. “I want to live on this beautiful island and make my art and...” she paused, because the next thing she was going to say could bring about a world of hurt if it didn’t land right. “And I want to be properly loved.”

He pulled her against the crisp white cricket shirt of his and let his helmet fall to the ground. “You *are* properly loved. And if you say you’ll stay, I’ll prove it to you. Every day.” He seemed to be waiting for her to speak next, but she had no idea what to say, because her throat was tight and her eyes were brimming.

She nodded emphatically. "I'll stay."

"With me?"

"With you."

He pulled her against him and began kissing her through her tears. She kissed him back, feeling warm relief and happiness flow into her. This must have been how Anja felt, what it was like for her to travel halfway around the world and find her purpose. The emotion was so intense that she had to relieve some of it with a joke. "Maybe I will even teach you how to play dominos the right way."

He lifted her and swung her around. "Nah. I like the way I play, because when you and I play, we dance." He kissed her again, and it was only then that Romy realized that the cricket game she had walked in on had never resumed, and that every single pair of eyes on the cricket grounds was focused on them.

Deep and low, like a groundswell, rose the chant, "Charlie, Charlie, Charlie...!"

She screwed her eyes shut, trying to get used to the fact that she'd fallen in love with the most popular man on the island, and that their happiness was everyone's business.

The old shopkeeper from the store where she bought her supplies actually had the temerity to walk right up to them and clap Charlie hard on his shoulder. "You really hit it for six today, Charlie!"

Romy gasped. "*What?*"

He laughed at her ignorance of cricketing terms, and at the image that must surely be going through her mind. "It doesn't mean what you think it means," he said, ruffling her hair playfully and kissing her again. "But it's much, much better!"

She believed him.

THE END

ALSO BY LEIGH JENKINS

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