

The

ROMANCE

situation



USA Today Bestselling Author

ELLIE HALL





the
ROMANCE
situation



ELLIE HALL

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About this book

Could anything make visiting my sister on a tropical island better?

Actually, yes. I wish I could say my ex-boyfriend is an ex-con, but more like a current con-man. I'd rather not be hiding out, but I can't think of a better location than this forgotten Florida Key.

I'm not complaining because my sis and I are besties. When she's not working at a law firm, bonus, she's side hustling a bookstore-café. I'm all about the beach reads until I do my sibling a solid and stand in for her to read a will—thankfully, not my own. At least not yet.

It's rather mysterious, containing riddles and puzzles. Plus, the McGregor brothers aren't bad to look at—I mean the scenery. It's beautiful. Especially the second oldest—I mean the clear sky and turquoise sea. All this sunshine must be scrambling my brain.

Due to this inconvenient case of mistaken identity, I have to help the grumpiest McGregor brother, Royal, fix up the Driftwood Resort, a local landmark that he'd rather tear down. I have my work cut out for me. And by that, I mean making sure my ex doesn't find me—and not falling for Royal McGregor, a prickly businessman with a pair of pewter eyes I can't seem to escape.

...And as we explore, we discover the will is not what it seems. Then again, neither is he.

This is book 1 in this clean, beachy, small town, brothers, treasure hunt, romantic comedy series. This opposites attract/grumpy sunshine romance portion stands alone, but because of the mystery subplot, the books are best read in order.

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Isla



CHAPTER 1

Stepping back, I admire my masterpiece—if only I could say the same about my life. Having added all the finishing touches, with a curly flourish, I sign my name in the lower right-hand corner using black paint.

Isla Pratt.

If my mother could see me now, I imagine she'd be proud. Then again, this mural is a little too big to hang on the refrigerator, not that she ever did anything like that.

I put away all my paints and supplies, fold the ladder, and pick up the drop cloth.

Gina, the owner of the Clip and Curl, lets out a loud and happy squeal and then rushes toward me with her arms wide open. “Oh, my hair dye! Isla, that is ah-may-zing. It gives me the zings.” She bunches up her hands under her chin, taking in the string of women in her family portrayed in sepia shades who styled hair before her, and who she inherited the shop from. Various hair styling items, both vintage and modern, surround the mural in bold tones, making the piece pop.

“I envisioned a way to honor my mother, grandmother, and aunties. And you kicked it up ten notches. Thank you.”

Unable to hold back my smile, I say, “Glad you like it.”

She wraps me in a hug and says, “I love it. Free haircuts and whatever else you want for life.”

I tug on the bottom of my long brown hair streaked blonde by the sun. “I could probably use a deep condition. The mural

I did on the old Vanderkirk building on Rutledge Ave did a number on my hair.”

“You are a Charleston gem, leaving your mark all over this city.”

“Well, it’s a start. I really appreciate you trusting me with this.”

“My customers are going to love it. I’d ask you to leave me some of your cards, but this is one giant calling card. I have your contact info, so if anyone asks, I’ll pass it along.”

“Thanks, Gina.”

I gather up some of my supplies to bring out to my truck. After painting all day, I’m parched. Thirsty, I consider stopping at the new smoothie and juice bar a few streets over where I recently painted a “frame” on the wall around their menu consisting of pineapples and other fruit.

Like Gina, they offered free beverages and baked goods, but I don’t want to impose or expect anything. Plus, I should save my money. It’s a new year and mural painting is my new business. Then again, I made a New Year’s resolution to drink more smoothies and less soda. More dreaming big and less living small. Most importantly, more single life and fewer bad boyfriends—that made the list when a bomb exploded in my life on New Year’s Eve—and not the confetti kind at the stroke of midnight.

My other resolution is to grow my business and paint a mural a week, unless it’s a huge project like the one on the old Vanderkirk building.

I’d like to paint more murals so I can make more money, giving me some stability. The last few months have been rocky.

Thinking about my favorite blend from the Smoothery, I decide I should probably go make sure the paint didn’t peel off the wall. But I’ll pay for my strawberry shortcake smoothie no matter what they say. I’m not a freeloader, even if my pocketbook begs for bargains.

Before I bring my last load of supplies to the truck, I tell Gina I'm headed over to the smoothie shop and ask if she'd like me to bring her back one.

"Mind company? I could use some fresh air. I was doing inventory and skipped lunch. Even though we're closed on Mondays, that doesn't mean I'm not working."

"Well, you have the most loyal customers in town, so keep at it."

"I have the women who came before me to thank. I only wish my sisters could be a part of it."

Sudden sadness washes over me. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know—"

Gina waves her hand dismissively as we turn the corner onto Bull Street. "Tina and Lina are still alive and kicking—like a pair of old donkeys. They're twins and always treated me like Cinderella—think they're too good to wash hair and do dye jobs. Do you have any sisters?"

"One, Bean. Well, her real name is Robyn." I explain how when I was little, saying the letter R was tricky for me, so Bean it was—and it stuck.

"Sounds like the two of you are close."

"We are, were. I'd like to be. But she's in Florida and I'm here. We don't see each other nearly as much as we should. We both got busy with life, I guess. I last saw her over the summer."

"I know how that is."

We go into the Smoothery and even though I don't have to look at the menu, I do. The painting looks great, if I do say so myself.

Allie, the owner, comes out and sings my praises. My cheeks warm, because I'm not used to compliments. No gold stars for work well done from Mom. Our Aunt Olga, actually a great aunt from St. Petersburg—Russia, not the seaside city on the Gulf coast—raised us with an iron fist. Though, I can thank my hippie mother for my penchant for the arts, which is

about all she gave me. In a way, Bean and I have always been each other's cheerleaders. I'll call her later and see how her new shop is coming along.

When our aunt passed away, she left us with the apartment we grew up in outside New York City and a beach shack in Florida. We sold the apartment and my funds went directly to debt. Bean fell in love with the shack and had bookstore hearts in her eyes, so being responsible with money—unlike some people, ahem, me—she invested her savings in transforming the shack into a shop, complete with books and baked goods.

After painting all day, my stomach rumbles. Although I should eat leftovers I have at home, the jumbo cinnamon crumble muffin with the buttery, crunchy top calls to me.

Isla, you worked so hard today. You deserve a treat. Pick me! Pick me!

I reach for it in the case when a large, masculine hand brushes mine. I'm about to swat it away—my muffin!—when I discover it's attached to a very attractive man. Not just generically attractive or classically attractive. Extremely attractive. Like he entered the attractive triathlon and came out with the gold medal.

He draws his hand away, but the sensation from where his fourth and fifth fingers brushed mine tingles. Like the New Year countdown clock, something ticks inside me.

Ten, nine, eight...

Swallowing, I have the vague awareness that after Dax ditched me on New Year's Eve, I shouldn't notice Mr. Muffin's deep tan, athletic build, height, or strong shoulders. There is nothing doughy or soft about him.

"It's like he walked off the perfect-specimen factory floor," Gina whispers.

My cheeks warm another few degrees because she's right about that.

"It's the last one," I say softly, captivated by his pewter eyes.

“You can have it.” His voice is deep, a bit gravelly.

“Are you sure?”

He winks. “I’ll get the blueberry instead.”

“Thank you. That’s sweet of you.”

He smirks.

The wink and smirk package are supreme. If Allie captured it and could somehow package it up, she’d be a bajillionaire and I’d overdose on smoothies and Mr. Muffins.

Something jabs me and I realize it’s Gina, breaking me out of my trance. Also, there’s a line forming behind us, so I struggle to bring myself back to the surface of real life and not deep under Mr. Muffin’s hypnotic gaze, complete with the wink-smirk combo.

Make it a double, please.

I get my smoothie order and before I remove the wrapper topper off the straw to take a sip, I break the muffin in half. Strutting over to the guy like the considerate and concerned citizen I am—these muffins are the best and I won’t be able to sleep tonight if I don’t offer to share half with him—I juggle my smoothie cup, the bag, and the muffin. His profile is a sculptor’s dream. I bet I could paint it.

He turns at my approach. I admire his strong forearms (no tattoos) and powerful quads. He must participate in real-life sporting activities instead of video games, so the opposite of Dax, my ex. Lost in the brushstrokes of his tall, lean lines, I slip on one of those wax grabber papers used for baked goods.

Hands full, I reach out for something to steady myself at the same time Mr. Muffin reaches for me. The muffin halves sail into the air and as I try to catch them—priorities!—I forget the smoothie in my other hand, and like the non-professional clown that I am, I try to juggle them and fail. But because his hands are involved in saving me and the muffin pieces, once more, they brush. Instead of tingling this time, his fingers knock into my smoothie cup. In slow motion, the contents erupt like a fruity volcano, spewing all over me...and him.

Both halves of the muffin plop onto the floor in a soggy smoothie mess along with my dignity.

This goes down in the top ten worst moments of my life. Because Mr. Muffin is so tall, the pink smoothie spared him from the shoulders up but covers his blue T-shirt. As for me, the strawberry shortcake flavor matches my face.

Gina and Allie hurry over with towels and fuss about cleaning us off—him, mostly. Gina is not shy about handling his pectoral and abdominal areas.

The guy's smolder turns into a scowl, mostly aimed at me.

"I am so sorry. I was coming over to offer you half of the muffin and—" and talking myself out of giving him my number. This is what I get for not sticking to my New Year's resolution. I was doing so well, too.

Mr. Muffin's pewter eyes scan me, deepening my blush. "You have some—on your face." Taking a towel from Gina, he wipes the remains of the smoothie from his shirt.

And there I thought this was going to be one of those movie moments when he'd tenderly wipe the smoothie off my cheek and we'd gaze longingly into each other's eyes before moving closer and... Instead, I dab it, continuing to apologize profusely.

"Still there," he says, pointing.

I pat the spot. "It's not strawberry shortcake smoothie, it's paint." I'm about to explain how I did the mural here and at Gina's shop when he scans the three of us women, probably decides we're far more chaos than we're worth, and strides out of the Smoothery.

"Wait. I owe you a shirt. What's your name? Your number?" But the door closes at the guy's back.

And I feel anything but smooth.

Royal



CHAPTER 2

After leaving the smoothie shop, I stop in an upscale clothing store to buy a replacement for the T-shirt that Strawberry Shortcake ruined. She was cute, petite, and after her not-so-smooth move, covered in strawberry juice.

Me too.

The retail clerk's lips pucker and his eyes widen, as if I'm a vagabond off the street who needs to wear a bib. He says, "Sir, we don't allow food or beverages in the store."

Having already drank my coffee and eaten my blueberry muffin, I hold up my hands and say, "I don't have food or beverages."

He looks pointedly at my shirt.

My eldest brother would put my ego in check, but he's not here, so I gesture to the display of casual linens, cottons, and resort-style clothing. "I'll take one of each in a large. My tailor can make any necessary alterations."

The clerk swallows thickly at my command. Then, as if just to be sure that I'm not a hobo who got sick all over himself, he asks, "And how will you be paying?"

"Amex. The Black Card." I draw it from my wallet just to drive home the point. I don't flaunt my wealth, but I'm not going to have some kid in a men's clothing boutique question whether I belong in his store. I've worked too hard to be made to feel small.

He scuttles around, gathering the requested garments.

Standing tall, I wait by the register. When he folds everything neatly, I take one of the shirts, tear off the tag, and dispose of the one covered in the smoothie.

“Do I dare ask what happened?” the kid behind the counter asks.

Strawberry Shortcake barges into my mind with her long brown hair streaked blonde by the sun, striking blue eyes, a permanent tan, and a megawatt smile.

She wasn't so much a klutz, more like an absolute menace. Flirting with her tempted me, but I'm leaving tonight, so there's no point.

Not that there ever is.

My twin, Ryan, would've laughed it off, gotten her number, and would be smooth-talking her by sunset.

“You have some dangerous people in your town,” I say, answering the clerk's question about my shirt.

“I take it you're not from around here.”

“Based in New York. Traveling for business.” My office is in lower Manhattan. Wall Street adjacent. And that's where the big bucks are these days. They say the city is saturated, but there are still a few diamonds in the rough, and I'm polishing them to a shine.

He bags up the clothing and I send my assistant a message to have the items delivered to my hotel room. I won't be parading down the street, laden with bags like a tourist. Flicking my card at the kid, I tell him someone will be by to collect my purchases.

I don't know how Angela does it and I don't care, except that it gets done. The woman is a saint disguised as a middle-aged executive assistant with a sharp eye and the kind of efficiency my rivals dream about.

Yeah, I know I'm surly and I don't care about that either. My methods don't matter so much as the results, and they speak for themselves.

Clean shirt on, I march out of the clothing store and my phone beeps with a message. Angela confirms my requests and then asks for me to call when I'm available.

This means one of two things. One, she's requesting time off—not happening. This is a busy time of year with multiple accounts, litigation, and a lead that I can't pass up. I require her help with the legwork.

The other possibility isn't something I want to think about today or ever. I left the island and became one, a man unto myself—self-made, self-sustaining. Well, with Angela's help. Not going to deny that.

When I return to the hotel, I tap my phone to dial my assistant. "Angela," I say, giving her permission to deliver whatever request or news required me to call.

"Check the bedside table."

"Don't be cryptic."

"I didn't open it myself, but I think you'll understand once you see who it's from."

I limit the information available to my associates, but Angela is perceptive and knows that there is only one person in the world that has the ability to throw me off my game. No, it's not a woman, because I don't let them get that close.

Angela knows not to send the old man's calls through and not to pre-screen any correspondence. She gives any mail directly to me. The old man didn't advance to the technological age with email and texting, so I never have to worry about that.

On the lacquer table beside the king-size bed in my hotel suite sits a thick white envelope, embossed with my name in black. The return address on the back panel instantly makes my stomach of steel swim with dread.

I hang up the phone and repeatedly turn the envelope over in my hand, debating whether to open it.

One of these days, I'm going to get the call that the old man passed away. Apparently, today isn't that day because this

is the size and shape of a birthday invitation—roughly the same as the ones he’s sent for the last few years.

Do I bother sending my regrets? No, I’m well past that. Chip, my grandfather, gets silence just like the kind he gave. I washed my hands of the salty water surrounding that island and built something more solid under my feet than sand.

My phone beeps again, only this time it’s a message from my buddy Winston in the group chat who I met with earlier, along with some other guys from college before I dropped out.

They thought I was crazy, but I wanted to make money rather than spend money and rack up debt. The prevailing wisdom is you have to spend money to make money, but I’m doing just fine.

More than fine. I’m a shave under a billion and I’m barely over thirty. Chip can keep his sage wisdom and whatever pennies he has left. I toss the envelope in the bin.

My phone beeps again, this time with a few photos from earlier.

The guys and I chartered a plane, skydived, and landed on a private island off South Carolina. One of my clients owns it and said I could hunt, fish, or chill anytime I wanted. I’ll own an island before long and it won’t be that one or Coco Key. I’m thinking near Fiji—in other words, far from here. In the meantime, we played an aggressive game of flag football and I have the bruises to prove it.

Every year since we met during freshman orientation, Winston, Holt, Billy, and I take turns organizing a get-together. There are four of us and four seasons. It was my turn in the New Year, and they know that I get extreme. It was Billy’s turn last time, and we merely grabbed pizzas and watched a movie. When I’m up at bat, they know that I don’t bring the noise. I deliver the goods.

Someone knocks on the door to my hotel room at the same time the guys message. A hotel employee brings in my clothing. I drop him a tip and then look at the pictures of the four of us—muddy and mean.

We text back and forth, and Billy insists he and Holt would've won had Ryan been on their team. My twin is a professional football player, but I'm no slouch either.

Yep, today was just a regular Monday in my life. Tomorrow, it's back to work, but it's not a grind. Nope, I'm building an empire, and not only will I someday own an island, but I'll also commission a skyscraper to be built with my name across the top in gold, gleaming in the sun and glowing under the moonlight.

Running the hedge fund and multiple real estate investments has taken me far from the spit of land I could never quite call home.

From time to time, I wish things were still like they used to be. That if I chartered a plane, we'd all get together and be a family again.

But everything splintered when CJ repeatedly insisted that Mom and Dad were still alive. Who can trust him? My youngest brother hunts pearls, associates with pirates, and I wouldn't be surprised if he knew the menace that ruined my favorite blue T-shirt.

Yeah, he's that kind of guy.

To be fair, I have five more matching shirts at home, but still.

The problem is Chip, my grandfather, never told CJ to cool it. He let the kid get away with claiming our parents didn't die. Our grandfather should've told him to sit down and shut up. To stop because there is no sense in letting any of us have that kind of hope.

Magnus, Ryan, CJ, and I bickered. Lines were drawn. Phone calls have gone unanswered. Space continues to grow between us. It could be said that we each got caught up in our own lives and forgot about island life, and regrettably, our grandfather.

But I don't have any regrets, because here I am, at the top of my game, and nothing is going to slow me down.

Not an old man and his birthday party invitation, not a smoothie, and not a girl with a sweet smile.

I start to pack up to head to the airport when my phone rings this time. Magnus's name, my oldest brother, scrolls across the screen. I bristle because if this is about the party, it's not happening. Maybe it's a big one. Is Chip turning eighty? No, that can't be right. Seems like the old man has been eighty for a decade.

Reluctantly, I answer the call. If I don't, there's a good chance he'll land by helo on the roof of this building and bang the door down.

Without any introduction, he asks, "Did you get the envelope?"

"Yes."

"Did you open it?"

"Of course not."

"Open it," Magnus speaks with the kind of authority that only his superiors would challenge.

Old habits die hard and I find myself pulling it out of the bin and obeying without thinking. I don't look at the card, but a plane ticket for Miami falls out. I toss it in the trash. "I'm not going to his birthday party."

As if he didn't hear me, Magnus says, "We're going."

Stubborn defiance stiffens my muscles.

"Get on that plane. See you there."

Even if I were going, which I'm not, I don't fly commercial. Plus, who prints airplane tickets anymore? Oh, that's right, my grandfather, who is squarely stuck in the past. If I didn't know better, I'd argue that he holds CJ hostage there too, even though he's the youngest of my brothers and is hardly into his third decade of life.

As I finish packing, because the private plane I'm boarding later will bring me out west, not south, my thoughts wander to the more recent past. To the petite woman with her beachy,

messy hair, paint splatters from top to bottom, and the most striking blue eyes I've ever seen. They reminded me of the ocean at a certain time of day at a certain time of year. One I've worked very hard to get away from.

I'm not the type to pick apart or replay situations. I'm decisive, swift, and yeah, surly. But I recall that first moment of contact when our hands inadvertently touched as we both reached for the same muffin. It was the strangest thing, but for a second, it was like someone pushed a button and paused my life. It was brief, but I could breathe in a way I haven't in a long time—it was like I inhaled a big, deep open ocean breath, scented with summer, with freedom.

Then the second time our hands touched was when she tried to share half of the muffin with me but caused a calamity of a massive and messy scale.

She's the kind of woman who could bring down lesser men, literally. She tried to drag me to the ground as her smoothie went up and all over.

I give my head a dismissive shake, but that doesn't do the trick. She lingers there with questions about the future, but I've already painted that picture and I'm at the top, flying solo.

Uninvited, my brothers barge into the image in my mind, along with my grandfather. They chatter and bicker, one mentioning this might be the last time we see Chip.

In my mind's eye, CJ makes a case that we'll have fun. Ryan smiles because he's the kind of guy that's always along for the ride as long as it's a good one. Then there's Magnus, the Navy pilot. When he gives an order, I'll end up waging a battle against my sensibilities to defy him. I've yet to win.

At the end of a long sigh, I relent. I tap my phone and tell Angela there has been a change in plans and to postpone my meeting tomorrow.

In the imaginary painting, CJ cheers. I roll my eyes. But there's another figure there—Strawberry Shortcake painted herself in and I can't seem to erase her from my mind.

Isla



CHAPTER 3

After the disastrous encounter with Mr. Muffin, Allie generously gets me a replacement smoothie.

Like a normal person who knows how to walk on two legs, Gina grips her cup and the lid remains on her peanut butter banana smoothie with a cocoa cream drizzle.

“Well, that was a meet mess,” Allie says with a sigh.

“A meet what?” Gina asks.

“You know, like in those romance movies when two people—”

“Exactly,” I say, then tell them about how while I gazed up at Mr. Muffin, all swoony-eyed and smitten by his smolder, he had the opportunity to wipe the smudge of strawberry shortcake smoothie from my face.

“Ooh, then he’d lick it?” Gina asks.

“Not that kind of movie,” Allie says. She explains how often the prospective couple will meet in a funny or endearing way. “Like the classic collision in the hallway where papers go flying everywhere, then as they’re picking them up, their eyes meet, and they fall in love.”

I snap my fingers. “Just like that because it’s the movies, unlike real life.” Then again, I haven’t been able to forget about those pewter eyes.

“You don’t believe in love at first sight?” Allie asks.

After my recent breakup, I'm struggling to believe in love at all. "Well, the smoothie went flying everywhere and there was eye contact, but not of the love-at-first-sight variety. More like he ran away as fast as he could at first sight."

Gina and I help clean up. I thank Allie for not issuing a permanent ban on my entering the Smoothery.

When Gina and I get outside—the only place I'll trust myself to consume liquids from now on—she and I clink cups.

"To memorable moments," Gina says.

"Memorable moments that are a reminder to hold fast to my New Year resolutions."

We're about to leave when Allie rushes after me, waving some napkins.

She says, "Almost forgot. I'd been hoping to see you so I could give you these." Allie passes me napkins and a few pieces of paper covered with ink—names and numbers, it looks like.

"No less than six guys wanted me to give you these." She waggles her eyebrows.

My forehead ripples with confusion.

"I could've given them your contact info, but I don't think they wanted murals painted, if you know what I mean."

Gina giggles and elbows me. "They were hitting you up. I take it you didn't paint that piece up there after hours."

"Nope. We're open seven days a week from seven until nine, so that would've made for a very late night," Allie says.

I wave my hands. "No, no thank you. I recently got out of a relationship." And by that, I mean I just barely escaped. "Also, the meet mess was an apt representation of the current state of my life."

"Well, I'll hang onto them for safekeeping." Gina winks. "Maybe we can check out these guys' social media accounts and see if any of them are worth messaging."

“One of my New Year’s resolutions is to remain single until further notice.”

“I sense a story here,” Gina says.

“The relationship was broken well before the breakup, if I’m being real. The writing was on the wall when Dax literally wrote the phone number of a guy who insulted him on a restaurant’s bathroom wall, along with a rude message.”

“Man child,” Gina mutters.

“Exactly. But I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt.” Which is a bad habit I have when it comes to men.

“As for these love connection contestants, I could do some prescreening, see if there are any candidates here,” Gina singsongs as we return to the Clip and Curl.

“But I’m not looking.”

“If you were, who would be your ideal guy?”

“The opposite of Dax. So, tall, dark hair, distinguished. Stable job. Big earner. Smart. Honest, especially that.”

“I take it Dax betrayed you.”

“In more ways than one,” I mutter.

“Sounds to me like you were describing Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome from the Smoothery.”

“You mean Mr. Muffin?”

“You, an artist, of all people, should know that doesn’t quite paint the full picture.”

I jitter my shoulder. “I wasn’t, um, describing him.”

“Emphasis on handsome.” She bumps me with her hip.

“Might I remind you of my New Year’s resolution, namely the one that has to do with dating?”

“Sounds like you’re trying to convince yourself of something.” Gina unlocks the salon door and, once again, she gushes over the mural.

I appreciate her enthusiasm, but my thoughts wander. Someday I'd like to be in a healthy and fulfilling relationship, but so far, I've only attracted duds, no studs. Plus, I'm only twenty-nine. There's plenty of time to find the one.

After gathering up the last of my supplies, I head out to my junky pickup truck parked in the alley behind the Clip and Curl.

I take a moment to organize everything in the various boxes and bins I use to store my materials in case it rains. Clouds rolled in, so it might even though this is a relatively dry time of year. The wind blows and shivers creep across my bare arms. It's silly, but I sense someone watching me. When I came out here, only a pigeon pecked around. Otherwise, I was alone. I glance over my shoulder and a matte blackish-purple car idles perpendicular to the alley entrance and then pulls forward.

Hopping in the truck, I back out of the alleyway. I don't see the sedan and imagine it was probably just a coincidence. Turning on the radio to get out of my head, the knob pops off. I try to catch it and swerve slightly as it rolls onto the passenger side floor.

"And yet another thing to fix, along with the rest of my life," I murmur.

At the next set of lights, I peer into the rearview mirror. My stomach pricks because, if I'm not mistaken, the sedan from the end of the alley is a few cars behind. As an artist, I have an eye for color and notice it everywhere I go—shades, hues, and gradients. That thing is like an old eggplant with rust spots.

Biting my lip, I change lanes. It does the same thing, still keeping a ways back. I can barely make out the silhouettes of two males in the front of the vehicle.

"Too many paint fumes, Isla," I mutter under my breath.

Failing to distract myself with thoughts about a job well done at the Clip and Curl, I take a turn and the eggplant on wheels does the same.

If this is about the almost-forgery, I didn't know. See, the ex asked if I could replicate a photo on his phone. I accepted the challenge and it wasn't until I was doing some color research, so I could get it exactly right, that I realized it was a rare piece by DaVinci. The authorities don't know that I almost committed a major crime. That was a red flag. When I found Dax's search history on my laptop about minting money and then he inquired about my skills with ink, a flashing red light appeared in my mind that Dax had bad intentions.

It's probably not a good idea to return home, but I'm already on my street, which is a dead end. Instead of going in my driveway, though, I pull to the side of the road opposite my bungalow. The car cruises by. Unfortunately, I don't get a look at the two guys, but they keep going, so I hurry inside.

I don't imagine Dax would send a couple of goons after me, but I recently learned that he's not the laid-back loser I thought he was. Okay, he's the biggest loser ever and is a lot worse than I could've imagined.

The side door to my rental is open slightly and the pricking in my stomach races up my spine. My body stiffens as I nudge the door the rest of the way open with my foot.

My cute little boho bungalow is torn to shreds. Cushion stuffing strewn everywhere, drawers open, my stuff scattered and in heaps.

Panic seizes me, but I don't freeze. Options run through my mind.

Going to the police is the obvious choice, but I already did that. They're investigating Dax for various fraudulent wrongdoings. Unless...a lump forms in my throat.

Unless that was an undercover team following me. What if they think I'm part of his schemes? I'm not sure which would be worse—Dax's henchmen or the cops.

Actually, there is a worse option. What if the two guys in the car work for Dax's enemies? He didn't follow the 'ole adage to keep them close. No, he just made it his job to make his enemies multiply in number and reasons to hate him.

That leaves the other choice. Get out of town. Thinking on the fly, I'll go to my sister's for a while. I grab a bag and peek outside. The eggplant-colored sedan idles at the end of the driveway.

Dodging away from the window, I hiss, "This is all Daxel's fault."

But that doesn't matter. I have to take responsibility for my role in dating him a day longer than I should have. No, scratch that. I shouldn't have said yes to his puppy dog request to meet him for dinner in the first place—I'm ashamed to say I picked up the tab. Nothing wrong with that, but it set a trend. Though he was terribly cute with those baby browns. Emphasis on *terrible*, as it turns out.

The fact that my apartment and all of my worldly possessions are in tatters tries to catch up with me. I rush through the rooms as I rifle through and find my important documents, some paintings, and clothes. I can't fathom what they were looking for, but the only item missing is my laptop.

Good luck getting that thing to stay on for more than five minutes. It decides to nap at will and then, like a cranky old grandpa, won't wake up until it's good and ready.

This situation is already bad news, but what's worse is I'll have to run out on my rent. Gina paid me, which would've covered it, but Dax drained my account so that cash will have to feed my gas-guzzling truck. I leave a nice painting of the bungalow in return. Maybe someday it'll be worth something. Here's hoping.

After hoisting my bags, I square my shoulders and march outside to where the pair of thugs sit in their car, watching me like a couple of sharks. I sense blood in the water, or maybe it's just paint.

Inspired by the bold colors on the mural I painted for Gina, I stash my bags in the bed of the pickup truck and then hurry inside to grab one more thing. Three things, to be precise.

I won't be intimidated by these guys and by extension Dax. Well, not too much. Supplies in hand, I knock on the

car's window. The man in the driver's seat needs a shave, and it's not even five yet. A shadow crosses his dark eyes as he looks up at me.

I gesture that he rolls down the window. When he doesn't, I holler, "Is this about Dax? He's my ex and if you're looking for him, sorry, I can't help you. If you think I have something to do with his schemes, I'm going to emphasize the word ex. As in ex-boyfriend. As in big-ex-mistake. Like one of the biggest ex-decisions I've ever made. I said ex-goodbye. See you never ex-again. Understand?"

The guy opens the window and says, "You're Dax's girlfriend, Izla."

I roll my eyes. "It's Isla. Pronounced eye-luh." Why am I telling these thugs how to say my name?

His companion, with a tattoo on his meaty arm, says, "I told you. It rhymes with playa, the Spanish word for beach."

The guy in the driver's seat thwacks him.

"Anyway, did you hear anything I said? Dax is my ex, ex, ex to the tenth degree."

"He wishes that ain't so," the driver says.

"That's not what he—" The passenger starts before getting a sharp elbow jab in the gut.

Mine pricks with nerves. I toss them each a popsicle. "I wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood. Thank you for making yourself comfortable in my home. I presume you ransacked it. I brought these for you as a housewarming gift. Now, if you'd be so kind as to pay my rent and damages, that would be great. Okay, going to go meet my crew—Ali and Tyson. They're my boxer buddies. You know, Monday night fight training as usual. Toodles." With my popsicle in hand, I give them a wave and race across the street to my truck.

As I crank the ignition, I say, "Who says toodles?" Never mind that, I'm not acquainted with Muhammad Ali or Mike Tyson, but in my rambling panic, I guess I figured they'd be formidable against those two foes.

In a flurry and fright, I'm not sure what those guys in the eggplant on wheels intend, but given the state of my apartment, I don't want my own stuffing strewn everywhere.

Before I put the vehicle in drive, I tap my phone to call my sister. She answers on the first ring and I get into gear.

Trying to sound as casual as possible, I use my usual greeting. "Hey, big sis."

"Hey, little sis."

"So, how do you feel about murals?" With the phone on speaker, I pull onto the main road.

"I love your murals."

"Would you like one at your café? Think of it as a complimentary donation."

"No, I'll pay you."

"No need." I glance in the rearview mirror. Sure enough, the dark purple sedan is a few car lengths behind me.

"This is great timing. You're going to love it."

"Wait. What?" Bean asks.

Somewhat distracted, paraphrasing an old movie we watched when we were kids, I say, "If you envision it, I will come."

"What?" she repeats. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Fine. Traffic."

"Oh, you mean you're coming now?"

"Right now."

"What a pleasant surprise."

"Hold on—" I make a sharp turn, hoping to lose the guys who're tailing me.

"We can talk later if now isn't a good time," Bean says, ever cautious about multitasking when it comes to me—I've proven that I'm not a proficient juggler.

“Now is a great time to visit you. I meant to hold on to your hat because I was making an evasive maneuver.”

“But I’m not in the car with you, Isla.”

“Oh, right. That was a reflex.”

“Why were you making an evasive maneuver?”

“Oh, um, my defensive driver training.”

“You drive like a granny in that old truck of yours. What are you talking about?”

“We’ll have plenty of time to chat when I get there.”

“Are you sure everything is okay?”

I accelerate as I try to make a pregnant yellow light. “Yep.” But I’m not because the car continues to pursue me. Nope. Not okay. Not at all.

“Well, drive safely,” Bean says and the phone slides across the seat and disappears in the gap next to the passenger side door.

“See you soon!” I holler as I near the next yellow traffic light. But it’s too late. I have to stop.

I’ve reached the outskirts of town and there’s no more traffic. It’s just the assailants and me on the road. This could go one of two ways. Terrible or horrible.

“Think, think, think, Isla,” I say, drumming the steering wheel. Glancing at the hodgepodge of items on the floor, I unbuckle my seatbelt and reach for three large containers of paint in vibrant neon colors.

As the light turns green, I roll down my window, and then get up to speed. With the car still on my tail, I hold the first container of paint out the window, the lid facing backward, and squeeze it. Like a kite in the wind, ribbons of paint stream through the air and then splatter the eggplant-colored car’s windshield. They swerve but don’t slow down.

I do the same with the other two containers until I’ve created a modern, interpretive art design. Can’t say I’m a fan, but there’s a first time for everything.

The sedan's windshield wipers smear the paint and the car plows into a vacant bus stop. Ironic, since the city recently contacted me to inquire about an urban improvement grant in conjunction with the high school art department to paint the bus stop shelters. I'll have to let them know I'll be out of town for a while. And mention Daxel Norris's name if repairs to the Smith Street stop are necessary.

Taking a few irregular turns, I don't breathe until I'm off the Charleston peninsula. I check over my shoulder as I head southwest on Route 17. When I reach the entrance to the interstate, I don't see a clown car trying to run me down. My shoulders inch away from my ears as if unsure whether the coast is clear.

As the sun sets in the distance, my grip on the steering wheel slackens. "I'm safe. Everything is okay." But I blame Dax because those guys weren't undercover police. Either his goons or his enemies are after me and I'm not collateral for his crimes.

That wasn't one of my New Year's resolutions.

I'd like to pull an all-nighter and cruise all the way to my sister's, but fatigue soon replaces the adrenaline coursing through my system. The oncoming headlights blur and my head aches. Not too far into Florida, I stop at my favorite rest stop slash mega country store on the interstate. To be cautious, I pull between two tractor-trailers who're overnighing in the lot. This is the best I can come up with for a safety measure in case the driver of the neon eggplant comes looking.

Locking the truck and bedding down on the bench seat before I can rehash my wild ride out of Charleston, I doze off and dream about muffins.

Royal



CHAPTER 4

Not going to lie, last night I drove the BMW rental car hard and only stopped when I needed gas. And fine, I was also exhausted. It was probably the early morning wake-up call, jumping out of an airplane and parachuting onto an island, playing four-man flag football for several hours, and then getting a smoothie dumped on me, but my body ached and my eyes were heavy.

After a pit stop to use the facilities, I returned to the parking lot and didn't even make it to the gas pump before I passed out cold. Not usually like me. Working (and fine, playing) as hard as I do, I prefer to recover (and overnight) in luxury accommodations. My body literally creaks as I peel myself out of the driver's seat. I'll text Angela later and have her book me a massage.

Here I am, waking at dawn in a parking lot somewhere south of Charleston. I check the GPS. Looks like I barely made it into Florida last night. After several more hours at a high rate of speed, I'll reluctantly reach my destination.

But first, coffee.

The air is dry and relatively cool this time of year and I take a deep breath. Diesel and the scent of sausage fill my nose and my stomach rumbles with hunger.

After using the bathroom, I peruse the breakfast selection. Not going to lie, it smells good, but to stay in top form, I usually avoid roadside food—and muffins. Yesterday was an exception.

There are some hard boiled eggs, but those seem risky. The brown bananas look like they'd do better to use in a prank to make someone slip on the peel than provide a satisfying breakfast.

I double back when I hear rustling from a palm tree display covered in Christmas decorations. Must be leftover from the recent holidays. This place boasts a wild animal as its mascot, but if there is one in here, I'll report them to the board of health. I peer in the direction of the palm, and the fronds ripple again.

My brow furrows and I consider that because I'm tired and famished, maybe I'm imagining things.

Just then, a kid's boogie board shifts to the left and bumps into a man with a full load of coffee beverages on a tray along with a bag of doughnuts, reminding me of the run-in at the Smoothery yesterday.

"The parents of that kid should tell them to be careful, otherwise, someone is going to be wearing their breakfast," I mutter.

And now I'm talking to myself. I could also blame my destination for causing me to be off my game. Time to focus. I need hydration, nourishment, and caffeine.

I grab water from the cooler case and a breakfast taco from the pre-made section. Thankfully, it's warm. When I fix my coffee, I sense someone in my proximity, likely waiting for me to pop the lid on the cup so they can take their turn. I shift to the side to make room when out of the corner of my eye, someone streaks by.

I imagine it's a kid belonging to a family on their way to the amusement parks and no sooner did they get on the road was the kid whining and asking, *Are we there yet?*

Can't say I'll ever have that kid because I don't plan to have a family. I've dated a bit but can't give a woman the time they require.

As for love, I don't touch the stuff. Too messy. Too many demands. Too much risk. Too much like getting doused with a

strawberry shortcake smoothie.

I'll drop millions on a high-return investment, but I'm not going to bank any of my funds on romance. I'm committed to my job. Not relationships. I'm building something big and I can't get distracted.

Not by kids goofing around in a store at six am, not by my growling stomach while I wait in line to pay, and not by the woman with the long brown hair streaked blonde by the sun.

I do a doubletake.

Standing at the neighboring checkout counter, Strawberry Shortcake squishes up her face and gives me a tight little wave.

She wears the same short coveralls as yesterday with a tank top underneath. The faintest odor of strawberries wafts my way. Paint covers her sneakers and a fleck is still on her cheek.

Nope. Not going to acknowledge her. I'll pretend I've never seen her in my life and continue on my merry way.

I pay for my items and then march outside, blinders on. With my hand on the bar of the door, I'm almost out of here, when another, smaller hand overlaps mine. I don't dare look. But once again, I experience an internal pause. My breath presses deeply into my lungs and expands throughout my body, making me feel light, free.

It's busy and loud in here, so I thrust the door open without looking back because, regrettably, I have a place to be and can't afford to waste time.

Fully intending to bolt out of this parking lot, I remember the car needs gas. After guzzling some water, and taking a much-needed sip of coffee, I maneuver to the line of cars waiting. There are three pumps per lane and an old truck idles in front of me. I hate waiting, but this gives me a chance to chow down on the taco. I wish I'd grabbed two, but I'm not going back in there in case Strawberry Shortcake also decided she needs seconds—or got it in her mind to soak someone in smoothie juice.

My mind races with every objection, every reason I should turn back, but I'm locked in this line with cars in front of me, behind the BMW, and waiting for the pumps parallel to mine. There's a narrow passage, but a person with a tow-behind camper blocks the exit.

Yesterday started with a bang, in a good way, with me and the guys blasting out of the plane and toward the earth, playing football, and then catching up like old times over burgers for lunch.

Now, I'm heading to the place I dread most, and hoping that Strawberry Shortcake isn't going to materialize and spray gasoline all over my clean shirt—because, unlike her, I changed my clothing since yesterday.

As I creep ahead in line, I recall the interaction at the boutique in Charleston. I wonder if perhaps she hit hard times and is living in her vehicle, driving from town to town, and hoping for handouts.

No, that can't be true because she seemed to know the women at the Smoothery.

But she didn't pay for the smoothie or muffin.

However, she was wearing gold earrings.

But her clothing was covered in paint.

Maybe she's a painter or that's her style.

But she was wearing those same garments again.

However, she bought a breakfast taco, so she can't be out of cash.

Why am I analyzing this?

I finally reach the gas pump and get out of the car, leaving my incessant thoughts behind. While the tank fills, I grab the squeegee to clean the windshield. I could've flown to Coco Key, but then I'd still need a car and an escape hatch. No way am I getting stuck there.

However, when I get back in the BMW, I am stuck. The truck in front of me angles in such a way that they're blocking

both the way forward and the center lane between pumps.

I grumble. The guy probably ran into someone he knows and is having a friendly, morning chat. I tell myself to be patient and wait a full sixty seconds before tapping lightly on the horn.

“This isn’t New York or LA, but I have places to go, people.”

When the truck still doesn’t move, I get out of the car and march over, ready to give the guy a piece of my mind, when I see that the driver is a girl. Rather, a woman with brown hair and overalls.

Eyes squished shut as if wishing away the situation, she repeatedly turns the key in the ignition, but it just ticks. Letting out a defeated sigh, she turns to me and says, “Don’t worry. I got this. Just have to get the battery replaced. But give it a minute. Chances are it’ll start up. Always does. I hope,” she mutters, then she stutters, “Mr. Muffin?”

“Mr. What?” I ask. “Never mind. Pop the hood.”

My oldest brother knows his way better around cars than me, but I’m no slouch at this either. Chip made sure we could change a tire and assess and fix most simple automobile issues.

A disturbing hissing sound comes from the vehicle along with some steam where there shouldn’t be any. The problem is instantly obvious. “You said you need to replace the battery. But if you do manage to get your truck started, you’re not going far.”

Strawberry Shortcake opens her mouth as if to defend her old pickup.

Not interested in any nonsense this morning, I utter one word, well, I shout it over the cacophony of cars behind us. “Coolant.”

“Cool it? I wasn’t doing anything.”

“Coolant,” I repeat over the honking horns and peppy country song playing over the gas station’s speakers.

“It’s not hot out, but I’ll gladly get you something cold to drink,” Strawberry Shortcake calls. “Remember, I owe you.”

Letting out a grumble, I round to the driver’s side at the same time she comes around the corner. True to form, we bump into each other.

“Can this not happen?” I mutter.

Holding her hands up like she’s innocent, she says “What’s happening? Nothing is happening. My hands are where you can see ‘em and I don’t have any beverages on my person. Nothing hot and nothing cold.”

“You need coolant.”

“Why didn’t you just say so?”

“I—forget it.” I point to a pyramid of jugs, filled with fluids, including antifreeze.

If I had any sense, I’d return to the BMW and hide until a tow truck shows up, but that also means I’ll have more time to talk myself out of driving south. That’ll result in an angry Magnus and no one wants the US Navy showing up at their door.

Instead, I fill the truck while she goes inside to pay. At least, I hope that’s what she’s doing and not trying to sweet talk the clerk into donating the bottle because, by the state of her truck, it looks like she’s living in it. Boxes and bins fill the bed and several empty paint jugs, food wrappers, cups, bottles, and an assortment of random items litter the interior.

When she returns, I can’t help but watch the way she walks, the sway of her hips, and the lift of her shoulders. Trying to figure the woman out, she seems hapless, but she carries herself with confidence and is undeniably pretty, in a perky kind of way.

I close the truck’s hood and pat it. “It’s full. Hang onto the rest in case you need it.”

As I pass the bottle to her, our hands brush a third time. No, this is the fourth.

Why am I keeping track?

Time creeps to a standstill for a second and a half this time. I can feel the breath moving through my body. Not just in my lungs, but through my extremities—fingers and toes. Everywhere.

“Thanks for your help. I hadn’t even sipped my coffee yet and already I caused trouble. I’m usually low maintenance.”

“I’d argue quite the opposite is true.”

Despite her claim not to have consumed any caffeine, she seems jittery. “No, really. I typically spend eight hours a day —”

A car horn blares and a stream of vehicles formed behind the BMW during this ordeal.

She gets in the truck and closes the door. Through the window, she says, “I owe you again.”

With a dread-induced scowl, I say, “No. Please no. I don’t want to ever see you again. Not even if you offer to buy me a muffin, a breakfast taco, or an island.”

She laughs like I’m joking. “Are you following me? Because I’m dangerous with jugs of paint.”

I have no idea what that means, but I say, “And smoothies.”

“Drive safely.”

“Don’t crash into anyone.”

But I don’t think she hears me because I also get into my car.

The GPS says I’ll get to Coco Key in eight hours. Good thing this BMW goes fast because I plan to shave some minutes off the ETA. The thing is, I don’t want to spare another second thinking about how Strawberry Shortcake made my pulse stop and what that could mean.

Not that I’ll ever see her again.

Nope. I’m good at leaving. It’s what I do.

Except now. I'm returning to a place I pledged never to revisit. I just hope the past stays dead and buried because that's not something I want to dredge up.

Isla



CHAPTER 5

Still wearing my paint-splattered overall shorts and tank top—though let's be real, most of my clothing has paint on it—I woke to the low rumble of diesel engines before I remembered where I was and why.

Truck.

Gas station.

Florida.

After a quick refresh in the bathroom, I thought I was dizzy from déjà vu. Standing at the self-serve coffee station was none other than Mr. Muffin.

Because I'd spent an unhealthy amount of time etching his lean figure, strong muscles, and chiseled face in my mind, I'd recognize the guy anywhere.

Like an overtired, overwhelmed, and under-caffeinated weirdo, I tried to conceal myself in a holiday display—thanks for not taking it down, folks, otherwise I would've been out in the open.

The problem was, the guy's situational awareness meter is finely tuned. He must've sensed me in the vicinity because no sooner did I think I was in the clear, did he pivot left to right, barely giving me enough time to conceal myself behind a boogie board.

I don't ordinarily try to go incognito, but I have to preserve the shreds of my dignity, and my current state—raccoon eye

makeup, truck bed head, and yesterday's clothes, make me fit for neither man nor beast.

Seriously, as I exited the bathroom, I spotted a woman in the full-length mirror and gave her a wide berth.

Yeah, it was me.

After paying for a gallon-sized icy coffee beverage and a breakfast taco, I thought I could scuttle out, undetected. But no, Mr. Muffin and I had to exit at the exact same time.

Our hands brushed on the door, something inside me fluttered like I might get a case of the hiccups, and my pulse jumped.

Weird because I hadn't even sipped my sweet, creamy coffee concoction yet. Then my truck got all kinds of fussy and Mr. Muffin just had to be all handsome in the fresh dawn and swoop in to my rescue before zooming away in his sports car.

I create a list of all the reasons why I shouldn't give the surly, cocky guy another moment's thought. Of course, my brain and body alternate with reasons why I should—namely, that he's incredibly handsome.

Also, a little voice whispers about how he diagnosed the coolant issue. Another counters that it was an act of charity out of necessity because I was blocking him in.

Our gazes never met in a swirling frenzy of desire. My pulse didn't jog when our hands touched. And I've already forgotten what his deep, manly voice sounds like.

There. All is right in the world.

Except it's not, because those are big fat lies.

Back on the road, I putt along and give the Chevrolet a pep talk as I hit the Miami metropolitan area traffic at rush hour.

The truck whines and complains. "You did well yesterday, girl. All you have to do is get me off the mainland and we'll be good." I stroke the dashboard like I would soothe a horse or other large working animal.

Soon the morning commuters take their exits, opening the path for my chariot that sputters like this is her last ride. We cruise onto Dixie Highway at little more than a trot. If the Chevy had a mane, it would be breezing in the wind. Surrounded by the rich green of the Everglades and the deep blue mid-morning sky, it's like I'm in a painting and not running for my life.

My phone survived its fall onto the truck's floor yesterday, but I don't need GPS to get where I'm going. I imprinted the way to Coco Key into my mind because it's a haven, my secret place where I decided to drop the half dozen jobs I'd burned through and give my all to my dream.

Painting has always been my passion, but not on such a large scale. During my last visit, I figured why not go big... mural-sized, if I wanted to continue to live in a home or anything that resembled a shelter with a roof. Being a starving artist is seriously overrated, so I've given it my all to make this career move work.

Could anything make visiting my sister on a tropical island better?

Actually, yes. I wish I could say my ex-boyfriend is an ex-con, but more like an ongoing con man. I'd rather not be hiding out, but I can't think of a better location than this forgotten Florida Key.

I'll just let this paint-splattered mess blow over and then head back to Charleston and pick up my paintbrushes where I left off. By then, I'll need a haircut and will have plenty of smoothies to cash in.

I pass the greater Keys, breeze along the oversea highway, and roll the windows down, breathing in the fresh salt air. The mangroves cling to the coastline and kiss the white sand.

I'm not complaining about coming down here because my sis and I are besties, and bonus, she newly owns a bookstore-café when she's not working at a law firm. I'm all about the beach reads, baby!

Our aunt owned what amounted to a shack on the island, which was more of a liability than worth the back taxes had we sold it. Robyn got a job for a lawyer and we agreed that she'd try to make something of the old building that had seen a lot of storms, sun, and salt. More than scratching the pennies out of the property, I want to see her happy and fulfilled.

Time seems to slow down as I approach Coco Key—little more than a bump of sand, land, and vegetation in the middle of the Florida Straits.

A wooden sign says *Coco Key*, bordered by hibiscus, firebush, and an enthusiastically spiky cabbage palm.

Everything looks much the same since my visit last summer with the flags blowing in the wind outside the Treasure Chest. It sells souvenirs and more, everything from plungers to paperweights to oil pans. When several of the other shops on the island had to shutter, they consolidated items, because you never know when you'll need a plastic owl to scare away the seagulls.

There's also the Sip & Scoop, a beverage and ice cream shop, but it looks closed for the season, or for good, I'm not sure. I give a neighborly nod to the Plundering Pelican, a restaurant, and of course, the post office, church, and a few other buildings and businesses.

In the distance, the once lively and thriving Driftwood Resort sits vacant and probably inhabited by lizards and haunted by pirate ghosts.

I pull into the sandy backlot behind the beach shack and put the truck in park. She jitters a sigh as I cut the engine.

"Thanks, girl," I whisper, relieved to have arrived.

I'm afraid to tell Bean why I'm here, but before I can come up with a way to explain, she rushes out of the bookstore. We have a hug-filled, squealy, happy reunion.

"I officially welcome you to Beans & Books where you will find all things coffee, chocolate, and books, obviously."

"And my amazing, hardworking sister, aka you."

“Oh, stop.” She blushes.

“In other words, the best things in life.”

“You’re going to make me cry.”

We both laugh because the Pratt sisters don’t cry. It’s a rule. Aunt Olga said if we got tears in the borsch, it would ruin it. We’re also not good at taking compliments, which isn’t a rule so much as a byproduct of never receiving many, except from each other.

Our Aunt Olga was actually our great aunt and had the old-school stiff upper lip demeanor that taught us what bootstraps were and that tears only resulted from mosquitos flying directly into our eyes—thankfully, a rarity.

Bean and I head inside. The last time I was here, I painted the name of the shop on the big front window. Her cat, Nutmeg, lounges on the wide sill with her tail flicking as if to say, *You again*.

The comfiest, overstuffed loveseat in the world sits temptingly beneath the window, along with several other seating arrangements to the right, and a few of my paintings on the wall. To the left is the counter with an assortment of homemade chocolates, confections, and cold beverages of the coffee variety. Exhausted from the ride, I could go for some caffeine. There’s also the register, flyers for local events, and a few plants. Bean has greenery everywhere.

In the back is the kitchen and storage space.

Aside from that, bookshelves stacked with books cover every other surface. It’s delightful even though the last book I read was a romance when I was here. Don’t hate me. I love to read, but between a bad relationship and a burgeoning business, I haven’t had much time lately.

Bean pours me a lemon-limeade and we sit down on the plush loveseat.

“Hard to believe this used to be Aunt Olga’s place.” Bean and I made up fantastically fake stories about how she met an islander and this is where they’d clandestinely meet once a year.

“It’s come a long way, huh?”

“I’m impressed. Did you do it all yourself?” I hint at whether there’s someone special in her life.

“Yep, with a little help from online videos and Nutmeg.” Bean makes a clicking sound and her tabby cat lazily lifts her head as if she can’t be bothered.

I yawn and mutter, “More like nut case.” The last time I visited, Nutmeg climbed the curtains in the middle of the night and yowled as if tattling on me. All I did was move her off my pillow, promise.

Bean covers her cat’s ears. “Don’t listen to Auntie Isla. You’re the perfect kitty.”

“She also licked clean my pot of fine-line cream. It was sample sized but still.” I brush my finger across what are sure to be a pair of Hefty bags under my eyes.

“It was ginger green tea infused. She probably thought it was a treat. Who can blame her? Honest mistake.”

With what amounts to a sneer, Nutmeg lounges on the windowsill and watches the world go by. It’s quiet for a moment except for the windchime outside.

Bean says, “So what’s really going on?”

I swallow thickly then catch a yawn. I’m not going to tell her the whole story but will have to later. “Dax missed our Monday doughnut date a few weeks ago. I got him his usual and brought it to his house, thinking he’d overslept.”

“Don’t tell me you walked in on him and another—”

I nod. “I walked in on him and the girl he’d cheated on me with. It was instantly over between us. But as I was letting him know clearly and loudly what I thought of his behavior, several federal agents paid a visit.”

Bean’s jaw drops. “What?”

“Turns out my ex’s brother was a wealth manager and got Dax involved in an investment fraud scheme.” I cover my mouth when I yawn again.

“So, he’s in jail.” It’s a statement of relief, not a question.

“I wish that were the case. The weasel is on the run.”

Bean gathers me into a hug, one I’ve sorely needed. The tension in my shoulders releases a fraction.

“I learned that he was using my address as his. I’m not in trouble, but figured I ought to get out of town until things blow over.” I swallow because I don’t know why it looked like my apartment blew up.

“I never liked Dax,” Bean says.

“I know. You warned me.” I’d rather not think about my guy-dar deficiencies, as in my loser guy radar doesn’t operate optimally, or at all. Don’t get me wrong, the guy at the Smoothery was handsome, but I’m not looking. I mean, I was because it was hard not to notice him, but I’m not looking-looking. Though not to worry, there’s no chance I’ll ever see him again.

“I’m also not the biggest fan of the McGregor brothers,” Bean says off-handedly.

“Why does that name sound familiar?”

“Their grandfather bought this island and built the resort. His name was Chip Almeida.”

She says something else, but it’s a bit garbled. I squint as if looking into the past then shake my head as if waking up. Did I nod off?

Bean waves her hand. “Never mind. That’s another drama for another day. Tomorrow, in fact.”

Blinking rapidly, I look around as if waking up and not remembering where I am for two seconds until I place myself at Beans & Books on Coco Key.

“You’ve had a long drive. Why don’t we get you settled in?” Bean says.

“No, I’m fine.”

“You just dozed off.”

“I what? No, I didn’t.”

“Isla, you were snoring. This old chair is comfy, but we can do better.” My sister gets to her feet.

Getting a second wind, I say, “No, I’m fine. Never better. Let’s have some fun.”

She looks me over from head to toe. “You need to get some rest and maybe a shower. Where did you sleep last night?”

I wince because I cannot lie. “The bench seat in the truck is surprisingly comfortable.”

“Should I be worried about you?”

“No.” Not now that I’m here.

Bean’s uncertainty ripples across her soft, petite features which are much like our mother’s from what I vaguely remember. Whereas I inherited my father’s slightly more angular look—at least from the few photos I’ve seen. “Will you tell me the whole story when you’re ready?”

She knows me so well. “Yes.” As I follow Bean out of the café, I can’t help but admire all the work she’s done. The ramshackle building has transformed, but I can’t figure out where she sleeps. Surely, not on that loveseat under the window. Yes, it was comfortable for a cozy cuddle, but not something to stretch out and snooze for a solid eight winks way.

We walk down the street and then turn at a pathway that leads to an arbor-covered gate. Bean punches a code into the keypad and it opens.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“You can stay in the guest house.”

Standing in a rear courtyard, I turn in a circle. “This is your house, er, mansion? I thought you worked for the lawyer?”

“I do.”

“Are you and him a—?” I twine my first two fingers together.

“Are you asking whether I’m dating Mr. Edmonton?”

I nod rapidly, terrified of the answer. Then again, he’s a far more upstanding citizen than Dax.

“No, he’s like an uncle. He’s also nearly eighty. We play checkers together.”

“Will he mind that I’m here?”

“No. I already called him. He’s on the mainland recovering from surgery.”

“Bean, you had me scared for a moment.”

She gives me a look like the very reason I’m here is of far more concern than her dating a geriatric lawyer.

After showing me to the guest house, I say, “If Mom could see us now...”

“She’d throw open the doors to all her grubby and greedy hippy friends.” Suffice it to say, Bean is still a bit resentful.

Me too, but I say, “She probably can. I don’t know the technicalities of how heaven works, but I’m guessing she’s proud of us.”

My sister slings her arm over my shoulders. “Well, I’m glad we’re together.”

“Yeah, and I’m living in your guest house.” Just when I thought I’d finally gotten it together—with multiple murals under my belt and several contracts ready for my paintbrushes—things went south, literally.

“I don’t own the place.” Bean gazes at the floor.

“Sis, you own a business. You live in this house. You probably have your own wing.”

“I clean in exchange for my room and board.”

“And you’re his legal assistant, run the bookstore, and—” I waggle my eyebrows.

“Stop. Trust me, it’s not like that. No seriously. It’s not. I’m not looking for love. I have Nutmeg and that’s all I need.”

Our friend Jackie has been in hot pursuit since he met her at my birthday party and kissed her under the pinata. Then she said, *Sayonara*. I hold out hopes that someday they’ll have a HEA.

“Me neither.” But I don’t have a cat, so I can’t even count on being an old cat lady.

“Get some rest. If you need anything, I’ll be at the bookstore.”

“I was hoping we’d bunk together like old times. Have a pajama party.”

“We will, once you’re able to stay up late.”

“Fair point. I’m kind of a walking, talking, snoring disaster.”

Bean tilts her head from side to side. “Watch out for the McGregors. They’ll be here anytime now. You’ve been warned.”

“Are we talking a Dax-level of slimy ineptitude and sketchiness or Mr. Edmonton’s elderly cantankerousness?”

“They’re on an altogether other level.”

As soon as she closes the door behind her, I crash onto the plush bed with a pillowtop mattress. It’s pure luxury and deeply appreciated after the frantic escape and long drive.

My phone beeps in my back pocket. Face down, I contort my arm to get it out. Dax’s name scrolls across the screen. The situation is trying to slap me in the face—and not a soft pat either, more like attempting to take off a sweaty sports bra after a workout.

With a single swipe, I power off my phone. “Toodles,” I say with a yawn.

I wish I could say the last three weeks were a dream. More like a nightmare if I leave out the painting parts. I’m relieved

to be here and not have to face the stark reality I left up north.
I only hope it doesn't catch up with me.

Royal



CHAPTER 6

Years have passed since I drove off the mainland and onto this particular stretch of road, bordered on both sides by water, but my distaste for the area remains firmly in place.

Sure, it's objectively beautiful with the turquoise sea, soft white sand, lush vegetation, and palm trees hanging lazily over ocean vistas like they have nothing better to do.

But I called this place home for too long. Too many memories hide behind the sunsets and hope-filled moments I'm better off forgetting.

When I roll past the pathetic Coco Key sign, red flags, sirens, and flashing lights demand I turn back, but I ignore the warnings in my mind and continue into town.

Unsurprisingly, without the Driftwood Resort's influence, the town is in shambles. The place takes a beating from a few seasonal storms each year, but this is downright pathetic.

The Sip & Scoop sign is missing its S's and the C so it says *ip & oop*. Sand drifts like snow across the road. The pelicans have taken over, and trust me, what they leave behind is not polite.

I cannot imagine the state of the resort. "Chip, get it together."

With the cash the old man has squirreled away, he could hire people to at least trim the palm trees around here. After all, he owns pretty much all the property on this island except for a few houses and shacks.

The Island Blooms florist hasn't just seen better days, it's the equivalent of Strawberry Shortcake living in her truck and taking a bath in a public restroom. The potential is there, but she could do better.

Glancing at the clock on the dash, I scold myself. I'd gone exactly twenty-nine minutes without thinking about her. I can't seem to break thirty.

Despite what my rivals say, perhaps there is a kind, compassionate bone in my body, and the reason my thoughts repeatedly float back to her is that I want to do good in this world. Contribute to a worthy cause and improve the lives of those in need. The woman looked like she could use help and not just learn to juggle or top off her fluids.

But I don't need Strawberry Shortcake or Coco Key.

I'm the Lone Ranger, the Lone Wolf, a werewolf all rolled into one and women are better off steering clear of me.

Parked outside what appears to be the sole shop in this town where the owner bothers to sweep the doormat and wipe the smudges from the window, I give myself one last chance to go back.

But before I can throw the BMW into reverse, an SUV pulls alongside my car. The door slams. A man whoops and before I know it, Ryan pulls me out of the driver's seat and into a hug.

"It's been far too long."

"Not long enough," I mutter.

"Magnus gave the order. Said to come down here for the old man's birthday or whatever. I'm surprised you were the first to arrive."

"Trust me, I've considered doubling back."

He claps me on the shoulder. "Nah. Come on. It'll be like old times."

If only I had Ryan's sunny outlook.

“I’ll even buy you a—” He points to the ip & oop and shakes his head. “Looks like Kathy is closed for the season.”

“When were you here last?”

Ryan scratches his temple. “I’m not sure. Three years? Five? Seems like a lot has changed. This place is new. Let’s head inside.”

We enter Beans & Books, a cozy little bookstore café with a giant loveseat under the window and books everywhere. A cat eyes us carefully like she’s the loss prevention specialist.

A woman with dark hair and soft features emerges from the back and says, “Welcome, what can I get for you?”

Like the cat, she looks from Ryan to me. Her eyes are brown and somewhat familiar, but I can’t place them. I scrub my hand down my face. I could probably use a sound sleep and a solid meal served on a plate with a knife and fork.

Ryan smiles in that infuriatingly flirty way that woos women without a single word. “If you’re wondering whether we’re twins, yes, but not identical.” He points to my nose. “See, his is smooth. I have a bump. And he has a scar by his lip and bigger ears. Obviously, I’m the superior specimen.”

The woman’s expression ripples between concern for my brother and amusement.

Just to annoy Ryan, I say, “Don’t listen to him. I’ve never seen this guy in my life. He said he wanted to case the joint, and I advised against it. He’s wanted in three states for chocolate theft.” I point to the display.

He chucks me in the arm with his fist. “I am not. I’ve been told that I’m as sweet as pie. A real cinnamon roll. A cookies and milk kind of guy. However, my twin is as prickly as a pineapple, as tart as a lemon, and as—”

“Sounds like you have low blood sugar,” I interrupt.

“Admit that I’m the nice one and you’re the mean one.”

“No comment.”

“Bro, you don’t have a nice bone or muscle or impulse in your body,” Ryan retorts.

“I rescued a kitten once and I help old ladies load their groceries.”

“Oh yeah? When was the last time you were in the grocery store?”

I shift uneasily. He’s got me there. Angela knows what I like to keep stocked at my condo, otherwise, I eat out.

Ryan turns back to the woman behind the counter. “Okay, fine, my brother isn’t mean, so much as he’s misunderstood.”

“The only thing I don’t understand is why you’re trying to convince a perfect stranger who’s who. We just had a long ride and are looking for refreshments. We’ll take iced coffee. Mine, black.”

“Please,” Ryan adds, confirming he’s right about being the nice one.

On the upside, at least we’re not fighting or standing here in uncomfortable silence—we’ve done a lot of that in recent years. Perhaps Chip’s birthday invitation lightened the mood.

We get our coffees and sit down at a nearby table.

“Good to see you, bro,” I say, contradicting Ryan’s claim of my mean brother status.

“Considering all the time you spend in the office, I imagined you wouldn’t come out in the light of day.”

“Are you calling me a vampire?”

“You’re known for sucking the blood out of your clients.”

“I’m good at what I do.”

“Too good,” a deep, commanding voice says from the doorway.

Magnus walks in and removes his aviator sunglasses.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask as if he’d been part of the conversation all along.

“Too good to call or visit your brothers.”

“I talked to you yesterday.”

“I called you,” Magnus corrects.

“I saw Ryan at the playoffs.”

Ryan points at me and then at himself. “You were in the box. I was on the field.”

“We made eye contact. And I visited you at Walter Reed, Mag.”

“I was in a medically induced coma.”

Not going to lie, that had me on edge, but as soon as the doctor said he’d be fine, I went back to work.

Ryan practically pouts. “You missed my birthday. All of them since we turned eighteen.”

“I sent you a card.”

“Angela sends me a card.”

“How do you know about Angela?” I ask.

Ryan rolls his eyes.

“I didn’t know it was so special to you.”

“We’re twins. It’s *our* birthday. Why wouldn’t it be?”

I shrug, trying to remember where I was and what I was doing when we turned thirty-two. “I didn’t realize this demand that I meet with you was because it’s official dump on me day.”

“When was the last time you saw Emmie?” Ryan asks with a gotcha face.

“Last Thursday.”

“Oh, so you have time for our sister, but not for your brothers?”

“Last I checked, things were cool between us,” I say.

“Cool like we’re chill or cool like the icy wind of war blows from the north?” Ryan asks.

I give my head a shake. “The latter.”

“That’s the problem. You haven’t checked,” Magnus says, arms across his chest. “It’s like you forgot you have three brothers and a sister.”

“And you have checked in?”

They don’t reply because it’s easiest to pick a fight with me. They know I’ll come back swinging, and if not that, leave them to stew in stony silence.

“Wait. Where’s CJ?” Ryan asks as if just now remembering there are four McGregor brothers.

“Probably lazing on the beach somewhere.”

“Getting up to no good,” Magnus adds.

“Last I heard he was kicked out of Tortuga.”

“You’re thinking of Captain Jack Sparrow,” Magnus says.

“May as well be the same,” I mutter.

Ryan cocks an eyebrow. “Minus the general drunkenness and dreads. Looks wise, CJ is the opposite of the fictional captain of the Black Pearl.”

“But he’s no stranger to pirates. And he’s late, as usual.” Though CJ would argue that we’re extra early because nothing exciting happens until he’s present and accounted for.

“The party doesn’t start for another half hour,” Magnus corrects.

Stretching my legs out long and taking the last sip of my coffee, I say, “Strange to have a birthday party in the middle of the afternoon on a Tuesday.”

“Chip is a unique man. A big personality but mysterious. He’d have you watching his right hand, meanwhile, his left hand was doing all the work.”

Ryan leans in. “Mag, you’re the oldest, maybe you know the answer to this question. I’ve always wondered, why do we call our grandfather Chip and not Grandpa or the Brazilian word for it?”

“You mean *Avô*?” Magnus asks.

“Like avocado,” Ryan says, licking his lips.

I roll my eyes. Our mother only spoke Brazilian to us and it’s all faint in my mind, but that word is new to me because I too always called our grandfather Chip.

“Some say he got the name from traders who used to come through here—”

“You mean pirates?” I snort because I wouldn’t be surprised if the old man was involved in shady dealings.

“Just how old do you think he is?” Ryan asks.

I shrug. “He’s been old my entire life.”

Magnus raps me on the back of the head. “Respect.”

I wince and stand at attention because although I can hold my own, I don’t want to get in a tangle with Magnus, even if he’s approaching his forties.

“I’ve also heard Chip was a nickname from his days in the Brazilian military.”

“So, he played for the good guys then switched to the bad guys?” I ask.

“Watch it,” Mag warns.

I hold up my hands, “Alright, alright.” Can’t say that I’m not a little resentful. Chip raised us, but he had some pirate-type tendencies.

“There’s speculation, sure, but why don’t you ask him?” Magnus says.

“The guy intimidates me.”

“He’s ancient, how could he—?”

A growl-like sound comes from Magnus’s chest. I take it to be the three-strike warning. Unless I want to find myself out back with his fist in my face, I’d better watch my tongue. Message received. My big brother is the only human on earth to whom I will ever defer.

“What is that?” Magnus asks, leaning toward the door and listening.

“I thought it was you.”

“Sounds like a boat,” Ryan says.

“We should head over to the resort,” I say, eager to get this over with.

We stand in the doorway of Beans & Books. Ryan waves to the woman who likely witnessed the entire interaction and, if she loves writing books as much as reading them, she’ll feature our conversation in the pages of a novel called something like, *Bickering Brothers in Paradise*.

Magnus shakes his head. “You didn’t look at the card Chip sent, did you?”

I shake my head.

“We’re not meeting at the resort. We’re meeting across the street.”

“Why would Chip have a party there?” Ryan points at a stucco, two-story building with classic scrollwork and a patio wrapping around the top and wrought-iron railings. Looks straight out of a Pirates of the Caribbean movie—belonging to the wealthy settlers, not the rabble-rousers in Tortuga.

“I’m not sure it’s a party, guys,” Mag mutters.

“Then what are we doing here?”

Standing on the street, the conversation turns rowdy with confusion, insults, and questions.

Magnus calls order at the same time that I go silent.

A woman exits a gate wreathed in climbing vines with pink flowers. I vaguely remember *mamãe* calling them bougainvillea.

I take a careful look because instead of wearing short overalls and a tank top, she has on a denim skirt and a tank top. Same paint-stained sneakers. Same long brown hair streaked blonde by the sun.

Backing away slowly, I can only imagine my eyes are as big as saucers.

“You’re staring,” Magnus says.

“What are you staring at?” Ryan asks.

Not what. *Who*.

She’s just so confusing. Chaotic. Like one of those splatter paint works of modern art, except this time and from this distance, I don’t see any paint. Looks like she showered.

I rub my eyes. I’ve got to be seeing things. “We should go to the meeting.”

“Now you want to go?” Ryan asks.

My step stutters as *she* approaches.

“And who is this?” Ryan asks.

“What do we have here?” Magnus follows up as if it’s all too clear that there is a history between us, albeit recent and brief. A story I don’t want to tell.

Strawberry Shortcake waves tentatively, as if during the last twenty-four hours we were pioneers traveling to a strange land and had a few encounters, but mostly kept to ourselves. However, now that we’ve arrived, our connection makes us acquaintances, if not friends.

My instincts tell me to run, otherwise, there’s sure to be trouble—of the liquid variety. But my brothers watch her approach as if they’re scientists observing a rare species in the wild and eager to find out what’s going to happen.

“Hi, Mr. Muffin,” Strawberry Shortcake says.

“Hello,” I say shortly.

Magnus’s stoic expression hints with the faintest amusement. Ryan smirks—both likely at the stupid name.

Before I can explain or refute, before any connections or observations are made, a lukewarm splash comes from nearby.

Magnus coils, on alert. Ryan wipes his face. I glare at Strawberry Shortcake. Only, she’s wetter than me. There aren’t any cups or jugs or any types of containers in her hands. No muffins either.

Instead, a manatee dunks underwater by the nearby dock.

The woman from the bookstore rushes out, gives us all a once over, and says, “Looks like Lola the Sassy Sea Cow gotcha.” Then, turning to Strawberry Shortcake, she adds, “I need your help.”

They disappear inside.

Yeah, I need help too. Help keeping my clothing dry. Help avoiding this mysterious woman who repeatedly pops into my life and makes my pulse stop.

Isla



CHAPTER 7

Perspiring and her voice pitched in a desperate tone, my sister drags me back to the mansion, pleading for my help.

“What is going on?” I ask, glancing over my shoulder to where the three men stand, dripping wet and facing the water.

“I’ll explain, but what was that?”

“What was what?”

“The look you and the mean twin exchanged.”

“The mean who?”

“Never mind. I need your help. I’m in a bind. Please say yes.”

First of all, the look exchanged with Mr. Muffin was one of surprise, but it was at that exact moment that I also recognized the strange sensation I’ve now experienced at each of our encounters.

It’s like I have an internal hiccup, like my heart and lungs are playing jump rope. It’s a strange and all-consuming sensation, but unlike a regular hiccup, it’s not entirely unpleasant. But it’s strong and impossible to ignore. So is the tall man with the stylish and short-cropped hair. The deep tan. The powerful stature.

Unlike me, he’s wearing the same outfit as he was early this morning, making us even. I took a nice long shower and used my sister’s coconut conditioner.

Bean leads me to her wing and rifles through her massive closet, tossing clothing in my direction. “Put this on.”

“I just showered and changed,” I say as if that isn’t obvious given my admittedly crusty state upon my arrival in Coco Key.

“Lola got you wet. You have to change anyway.”

“You named the manatee?”

Bean shrugs. “That’s what everyone calls her. But that’s irrelevant. Listen, Mr. Edmonton is still in Miami recovering. He was supposed to be back, but they wanted to keep him an extra day for observation, leaving me to his duties.”

“I can handle the counter at Beans & Books no problem. I don’t see why I need to change.”

Still in the walk-in closet, Bean says, “All you have to do is read the papers.”

“Read what papers?”

“The will.”

My head tilts to the side like a dog, listening carefully and making sure it heard correctly. I stride over to the closet at the same time my sister emerges holding a pair of black, patent leather high heels. “These should fit.”

“Bean, what will?”

“The last will and testament of the Almeida estate. It’s simple. Don’t sweat it. Everyone on the island has more than one job.”

“Last I checked, I have *none* jobs on this island. As in not one, certainly not two.”

“Quickly, put this on.” She starts tugging at my tank top.

I grip her upper arms. “Robyn Patience Pratt, what has gotten into you?”

Despite my nickname for my sister, out of the two of us, Bean is the sister who has her life together—she is a paralegal with numerous other credentials. She runs a side hustle and

doesn't sleep at truck stops or spill smoothies on attractive men. At least not that I know of.

"I can explain everything later."

"If you want to stuff my feet into those high heels, I want the full story, now."

Two minutes later, I'm wearing an itchy business suit and am incredibly uncomfortable while Bean gives me a quick rundown of the Almeida estate—Carlos passed away, left everything to his grandsons, end of story.

"You look great." Bean's smile is the kind of frenzied derangement that I'm familiar with when I look in the mirror.

"I look like a penguin who got lost and landed in the tropics."

"You're going to be great," Bean says, pumping me up.

I stumble in her heels. Even though she's shorter, my feet are smaller. "Can I just wear my Converse?"

"Ask yourself, would I?"

"No one will see my feet under the desk."

"Remember to get up and greet the family."

"I have paint under my nails. No one will buy that I'm you."

"They're expecting Mr. Edmonton and don't know what I look like, so they'll be none the wiser. Those boys have been gone a long time. They don't know any different and no one has to know."

We pause in the hallway. Bean's eyebrows pinch together. "Please do this for me? I can't pass up my teleconference meeting with the coffee company from Brazil. If I get this account, Beans & Books is going to take off."

I let out a sigh, not feeling good about this situation.

"You said you're broke. I'll pay you."

"I said my credit card may as well have a no vacancy sign. There is no room on it. But you don't have to pay me."

“And you can stay here as long as you want.”

“What about Mr. Edmonton? What if I make a mistake? What if I get arrested for—?” The almost-forgery incident crashes into my mind.

“All you have to do is read from these documents.” She shoves them in my hands. “It’s that simple. Think of it like a script. That’s all I would do, anyway. I never even met Mr. Almeida.”

“But you studied law.”

“Right, but my job is just to file papers and read things. That’s it. Mr. Edmonton said it’s legal to do this. He would know.”

“Legal to pretend to be you?”

She wrings her hands. “Legal for me to read the documents. How about chocolate? All the chocolate you ever want?”

“You’re bribing me with chocolate?”

“And money. Books. Anything. This coffee company is incredibly hard to get a call with and it’s my ticket to Beans & Books’ success.”

I let out a sigh. “I haven’t had chocolate in months.”

“So, it’s a deal?” My sister bounces on her toes.

I thrust out my hands. “But if I get arrested, you have to pretend to be me and serve the time in the slammer.”

We shake on it. Then she hurries to the bookstore for her call. Does Bean really wear high heels to work? I find that hard to believe here in Coco Key. I shuffle to the office in a building on the edge of Mr. Edmonton’s property and on the main street that passes through town.

A faint cigar smell puffs from Mr. Edmonton’s office as I open the door. The formidable, mahogany desk sits in the center toward the back. A large window faces the street and I see Mr. Muffin with the two other guys. His shoulders are

broad, his arms substantial, and although he doesn't smile, his lips are the perfect amount of full.

There goes that hiccup again.

Letting out a long breath, I tell myself that I can do this. I'll just read these documents, follow the instructions, and then I'm going to eat all of Bean's chocolate.

Every. Last. Piece.

The man in the aviator sunglasses stands across the street with his hands on his hips. The athletic guy, who isn't Mr. Muffin, shrugs. Then the man himself crosses the street with a purposeful stride.

He's coming this way.

That means they're coming here.

Are they the Almeidas?

I have to take cover.

The door creaks open.

Halfway under the desk, it's too late. A deep voice calls, "Hello."

Clearing my throat, I squeak, "In here."

I can't straighten because the high heel catches in the carpet, locking my foot at an awkward angle.

The three men enter the room—at least, I can see their feet.

"I thought the woman called from in here," a rich, deep voice says.

"Affirmative." A large face with a beard peers over the back of the desk. "What's going on, miss?"

"Oh, hi. I dropped a paperclip."

"There are plenty more up here in this container," the guy with the aviators says.

"Oh, right. Yes. Silly me. It was my lucky paperclip." Kicking off the high heel, I extricate myself from under the desk.

The three men from across the street stare at me in various states of confusion and concern. Well, except for Mr. Muffin. His eyes are narrowed with suspicion.

“How can I help you?”

“We’re here because—” the athletic guy hands me an envelope. Across the front, it says, *Ryan*.

I get to my feet and then stumble forward, forgetting I’m only wearing one shoe. With lightning-fast reflexes, Mr. Muffin grips my arm, holding me steady.

“Oopsie. Wouldn’t want to spill anything on anyone,” I say.

The two who aren’t Mr. Muffin look at me with confused curiosity.

Smoothing my skirt, I say, “Welcome to Edmonton Law. Please take a seat and we will get started.”

I glance down at a neat stack of papers, praying for instructions or for God to send down a lightning bolt to spare me from the horrid humiliation that’s sure to ensue.

Instead, there is some fine print about taking on the role of reader, executor, and purveyor of all items related to this will and last testament.

The three guys settle in front of me. There’s a likeness among them. Definitely brothers. Bean said something about the nice twin, or was it the mean twin?

Ryan says, “Shouldn’t we wait for CJ?”

I frown. I don’t want to wait for anyone or anything. We have to get this over with. “I’m not sure—”

Just then, a roar comes from across the street followed by a thud and then a hoot. The front door flies open. All three guys launch to their feet. I would but don’t want to risk toppling over or running out the back door from this increasingly stressful situation.

“I’m here. We can get the party started,” a male voice calls from behind the wall of brothers. A man wearing an open

button-down shirt, shorts, and no shoes saunters into the room. His medium-length blond hair is wind-blown and he's the kind of tan that suggests lots of time in the sun.

"CJ," I'm not sure which brother says it or if it's a chorus of all three, but the tone is somewhere between tolerance and exasperation. My guess is he's the baby in the family.

Slouching into an empty chair, he kicks his heels onto the desk.

"Feet off," the aviator says.

I proffer an apologetic smile because I'm not sure what is about to happen, but I'm afraid it's not going to turn out well. "Okay, so we're all here."

"No," the three who aren't CJ say.

I glance at the time, my patience and put-togetherness at risk of unraveling. "I'm I-aye aye-aye, Miss Pratt." That was a close one. I swallow thickly.

Mr. Muffin eyes me carefully like he's onto me.

I discretely wipe the perspiration from my lip. "I'm here to review these documents with you, Misters McMgregor. We'll start with taking attendance."

My nerves double because I have no idea if I'm doing this part right. Bean has made me watch every episode of Law and Order, but I never paid attention to protocols. I was in it for the romantic subplots.

I gesture for the guy with the aviators to go first. "I'm Magnus McGregor, but I don't understand why we have to take roll."

CJ lifts his pointer finger. "I'm CJ."

"I'm Ryan," Ryan says.

"And I'm Royal," Mr. Muffin says.

I don't know what the listening version of a double take is, but I'm not sure I heard him right. Mr. Muffin is Mr. McGregor? Mr. McMuffin?

“Royal?” I repeat.

“Royal McGregor.”

An unusual and unexpected name. Then again, seeing Mr. McMuffin going on three times in going on thirty-six hours is equally so.

“Looks like we’re all here.”

“What about Chip?” Ryan asks.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any refreshments, but when we’re done, you can head over to the Plundering Pelican. If I recall, they have nachos.”

“Our grandfather, Carlos ‘Chip’ Almeida,” Royal says.

My attempt at a sunny expression falters. “I’m sorry. We’re here to read his Last Will and Testament.”

Magnus smacks his thigh with his palm. Ryan gazes at the window. CJ looks at me like this is sad but old news.

Royal leaps out of his chair and gets in my face, accusing me of trickery. “What is the meaning of this? Who are you? Do you think this is funny? Some kind of joke?”

Before the last word is out of his mouth, three pairs of hands draw him back and shove him into the chair.

Magnus remains on his feet, standing guard.

Ryan’s eyes are damp.

Drawing on my own losses, I say, “I’m sorry to be the one to deliver this tragic news. I wish I could tell you otherwise.” I want to add about how hard and confusing death can be. How prayer can help. But I remain seated, quiet, and let the brothers handle Royal’s outburst.

“I had a feeling this wasn’t a birthday party,” Magnus says.

“Should’ve read the card,” CJ adds.

“You knew?” Ryan asks.

CJ nods and his mostly sunny expression shadows with a combination of sadness and something else. Magnus catches it and watches his brother carefully as if trying to solve a puzzle.

“Miss, we’re sorry for being out of sorts, aren’t we, Royal?” Magnus says.

“It’s understandable. Receiving shocking and unexpected news is never easy.”

Magnus grunts.

Royal glares.

Ryan looks lost in the clouds.

CJ, the guy who dusted sand all over Mr. Edmonton’s desk when he kicked his feet up, sits surprisingly still as if he knows what’s coming.

Magnus lowers into the chair and says, “Please proceed.”

I read the cover page and all the formalities before I get to the section that’s unique to the brothers. Clearing my throat, I say, “To the eldest, Magnus, I leave my father’s pocket knife and a pillow.”

Pausing, I see all eyes are on him.

He shrugs. “Don’t sleep well.”

Continuing, I say, “To Twin Royal, I leave the family Bible and a book of matches.”

“Don’t you dare burn that thing,” Ryan says.

Royal looks like he’s about to deck his twin. “I would never.”

“To Twin Ryan, I leave my journal and a pen.”

Ryan frowns. “A pen?”

“Maybe it’s a magic pen,” CJ says. “It’s the one with the plume.”

We all look at him.

“To Chip Junior, I leave my sextant and the Salty Skeleton.”

The other three guys chorus, “The Salty Skeleton?”

His shoulders lift and lower, but his subtle smile and the light in his eyes suggest he knows exactly what that means.

“Where’s he buried?” Magnus asks, rather somber.

“Chip had a mausoleum built at the point,” CJ says.

After a beat, Royal asks, “So that’s it? One of his usual puzzles and nothing else?”

“Don’t sound so entitled,” Magnus fires back.

Ryan says, “These all seem like relatively arbitrary things. Chip left me a pen?”

I flip through the pages to see if there’s more. The next list is brief. “There are what look like several properties allotted to each of you as well, along with instructions.”

They lean in.

“The Junk goes to Magnus with a dollar amount next to it allotted for repairs.”

“Junks, plural?” Magnus asks.

I reread the line. “Yes, my apologies. Why would he leave you junk though?”

“A junk is a type of ship. He named his properties after boats. The Junks are some cottages on the other side of the island,” Magnus explains.

I tell him the total amount afforded for repairs. He scoffs like it’s laughable—either they’re little more than junk or that’s not enough money.

“Next is the Sloop, to Ryan.”

Royal chuckles. “He left you the little ship?”

Ryan shrugs. “I always liked the Sip & Scoop, aka the Sloop.”

“So, you got the building containing what could be a thriving business?” I say pointedly because Royal is being a jerk. “There are also funds designated for its revitalization. Next, the Galleon and the entire Driftwood property go to Royal.”

He leans back and slings his arms in front of his chest. “Don’t want it.”

“There is a sizable dollar amount here for repairs,” I continue, ignoring him. “Last but not least, it says, and I quote, ‘CJ gets anything left that floats.’”

He smiles like that’s great news.

A sticky note is on the top of the next page printed with the word *ship* and a string of numbers. I wish sister telepathy were real. I look around the room as perspiration dampens my forehead. Did she mean shop? Then my gaze lands on a painting in an alcove. While the brothers banter back and forth about the meaning of the bequests, I get to my feet and cross the room on shaky legs.

I carefully tug on the frame of the painting of a ship in a storm. It’s a nice piece, a bit dark and foreboding. Not something you’d necessarily want to stare at every day in a coastal area prone to storm surges.

Sure enough, the painting swings open on a hinge, revealing a safe. I punch the numbers from the note into a keypad and retrieve the items Chip left his grandsons and give them to each of the guys, well, except for the last item.

“What is a Salty Skeleton, anyway?” Ryan asks as if reading my mind.

CJ smirks. “Not a Salty Skeleton. The Salty Skeleton.”

Royal glowers. “Save it, CJ. We don’t want to hear your stupid stories.”

Something tells me that his grandfather and the youngest McGregor brother were closer than the others. Perhaps they shared secrets of the skeletons in the closet variety.

Royal



CHAPTER 8

I'm the kind of guy who has both feet on the ground—unless I'm skydiving. But right now, I feel like I'm spinning in a washing machine.

The last several hours have been a trip, literally and in a surreal kind of way. Multiple run-ins with Strawberry Shortcake. She sputters and shuffles through this legal presentation like it's her first day on the job. Or maybe she's nervous around me. Not to be cocky, but it wouldn't be the first time. The thing is, I feel something around her—the slow disturbance of time and like my pulse could explode if I don't keep myself under such tight control.

Oh, and Chip died. I should feel sadness. Mostly, I'm angry. Mad at him, but equally so at myself. I should've been a better grandson. But he could've done a better job too. It's the rule that the elder reaches out to the younger, right? Seems like it should be, but maybe I've had it wrong all along.

“Do you feel cheated?” Ryan teases our younger brother.

I do. Cheated out of parents. Cheated out of a normal life with Chip constantly challenging us, sending us on adventures, and keeping us at a distance. Because then what? Getting too close came with a risk.

Message received. Lesson learned. Thanks, Chip.

Strawberry Shortcake clears her throat, gaze flitting to mine as if she's checking on me. I don't need anyone's pity or pithy words of consolation.

I have no doubt my gaze is flat, dark. I'm staring into the void.

"To answer your question, no, that's not it. There's more," she says.

We all lean in and the oxygen in the room leaves as if Chip took it with him when he left this life.

"It says here: The youngest would sooner dive than the shallowest go deep. But neither will find what they seek without the strongest softening and the cleverest humbling."

She meets my eyes for a fleeting second before going on. "Start on the eighteenth. Avoid the sand. Seek her with all your heart and might. Bring your wits. You'll need them and each other."

Ryan lets out a shaky breath. "What does that mean?"

Strawberry Shortcake bites her lip. No comment, because I don't want to admit how I had the wild idea that if I planted my mouth on hers, she'd stop reading my grandfather's will.

She goes on, "If each of my grandsons answers the following questions, the family fortune will be theirs to do with as they wish. If even one of them fails, the funds and all properties on the island, including the Driftwood, go to Gerome Glandman."

"Glandman?" we all say at once in a tone that is decidedly *evil nemesis*.

"Why him? Chip hated Glandman," Magnus says.

"Chip and Gerome were mortal enemies," I add.

"Weren't they business partners at one point?" Ryan asks as if the details are foggy in his memory.

"Until Glandman started siphoning funds from their account," Magnus says.

"Then he sabotaged the big deal on Miami Beach. I learned everything I know about real estate from them." And that's all he gave me—no relationship, no warm memories. Just the cold, hard laws of the business world.

“The Driftwood property was Chip’s pride and joy. Would’ve been his legacy,” Ryan adds.

“And before that, they were best friends,” CJ says with an air of certainty.

Three sets of eyes stare questioningly at the youngest brother, mine included.

“I heard Glandman seduced our grandmother,” Ryan says. “Did they run away together?”

“Not even close.”

“Chip never talked about our grandmother,” Magnus adds.

“Maybe not to you,” CJ answers.

“Forget Law and Order, this is like a real-life soap opera,” Strawberry Shortcake mutters.

If only it was less fact and more fiction.

“So, what are the questions?” Magnus asks.

Nodding at him, Strawberry Shortcake reads, “Magnus: When up is down, what do you do?”

He turns his palms up and his eyes pinch in question.

She continues, piercing blue eyes on me. “Royal: When right is wrong, what do you do?”

“Whatever it takes,” I murmur, but by the way Magnus bristles, I don’t think that’s the answer.

“I’d go left, just saying.” The corner of CJ’s lip lifts.

“I think he means what’s morally wrong,” Ryan replies.

“Then I’d go right.” CJ hitches a smile.

“You never know with Chip, take this will reading for example. Our grandfather had a purpose, a point. I’m just not sure what it is,” Magnus says.

Strawberry Shortcake smooths the paper and says, “Ryan: When inside is out, what do you do? And CJ: When high is low, where do you go?”

“Cryptic.” Ryan scrubs his hand down his face.

I'll say. I didn't expect this. Though I should've.

"There's more. It says, 'Solving this puzzle will be a great adventure that takes you beyond your comfort zones. It'll be humbling and educational. It will require careful thought, collaboration, courage, and strength. Think of any setbacks as opportunities. Learn while you wait and learn to wait. You win if you don't quit.'" Strawberry Shortcake lets out a breath.

"There are a lot of chestnuts in there," Magnus says thoughtfully.

"Chestnuts?" Ryan asks.

"Platitudes," Magnus answers.

"Wisdom," CJ adds. "Pearls of wisdom."

"Confusion." My glare is all-purpose, a general demonstration of my frustration at this situation.

Strawberry Shortcake winces as if I'm directing it at her and all this is her fault. "Seems to me the McGregor brothers have a mystery on their hands."

"Was there a murder?" I ask. "Everyone knows mysteries start with a murder."

"Or a theft," CJ says.

"We didn't know Chip had passed away...or how. Did he even have a funeral?"

"Not a normal one," CJ says.

Roughly running my hand across my forehead, I say, "What's wrong with him?"

"What did we really know about him?" Ryan asks.

With a grunt, I say, "I know plenty. He drove his business into the ground."

"That was unlike him," Magnus says as if deep in thought.

"Speaking of the ground, the Driftwood is going to get leveled, one way or another." I shake my head slowly, done with this weirdness before we even get started.

“But that’s our grandfather’s legacy, the resort is practically a historic site. He built the place himself out of driftwood and salvaged ships,” Ryan says as if catching hold of memories of us running havoc over the place when we were kids.

“It would be better used for kindling.”

“I’d be more concerned about your relationships,” CJ mutters.

Strawberry Shortcake’s eyes are wide. “Do you really think there was a murder?”

CJ tilts his head from side to side.

“A theft?”

“For sure.” CJ nods.

“A crime?” she asks, eyeing the door.

“Likely,” CJ says.

“The only crime is your lies,” I fire back, unwilling to give him a chance to blather about our parents still being alive and pirate treasure tall tales.

“Miss Pratt, is there an answer key or any other clues?” Ryan asks.

“It goes on to say, *Go forth and find her. Godspeed and may the wind and tide be ever in your favor. The end.*” She flips the paper over and shrugs. “That’s it.”

“This is maddening.” My glare deepens because the last thing I want to do is play one of Chip’s games. It was never enough to have a regular Sunday morning trip to church followed by brunch. We had to hear stories about pirates and plunders, lost treasure, and quests.

“Do we care if the money goes to Glandman?” Ryan asks.

We all emphatically shout, “Yes.”

Strawberry Shortcake startles. “What will Glandman do with the money?”

“He’ll fund an evil dictator,” Magnus says.

“He’ll feed it to the alligators.”

“Or he’ll invest it in the Driftwood and make it everything Chip didn’t want it to be,” I add.

“Is that a bad thing? What if we explain the situation to him?” Ryan asks.

“Have you ever met Gerome?” It’s a rhetorical question. Of course, he has, multiple times and the slimy lizard man is the worst of the worst when it comes to business and in his personal life.

Dredging up things I’d rather forget, I say, “Glandman married Chip’s sister, our aunt, then used all her money to try to destroy her family and build up his own holdings on the backs of cheap labor and shady deals that went something like, *Oops, that was your property? Pity. It’s mine now.* Greedy land grabs.”

I’ll climb the rungs of the ladder to get to the top, but Glandman shoves people off the sides.

CJ makes a *yoink* sound like he’s taking something that isn’t his.

“The guy is duplicitous, slimy, and ugly—literally. I don’t know what Aunt Lorena could’ve possibly seen in him.”

“An opportunity,” CJ says.

“To ruin her father’s business?” I ask, aghast.

“Our great grandfather was a Sousa.”

“Oh, here we go.” I toss my hands in the air. Give CJ a chance to talk about the so-called family history and he’ll run with it.

“I’m just saying, sometimes it helps to keep your enemies close.”

“You’d know, you have plenty of those,” I mutter.

My youngest brother smirks. “Only friends and associates. But perhaps Aunt Lorena had a plan to get close to Glandman because he had something she wanted. Maybe she and Chip were playing a long game.”

“Well, they’re both gone now and I’m done playing games.” I’m practically yelling.

“I’m not a lawyer, but this document says that it’s legally binding,” Strawberry Shortcake says.

“I am a lawyer. Let me see it.” I grab it from her. This time, I’m careful not to let our hands brush. Can’t let time do anything slippery right now.

My brothers watch me as I scan the contents.

It’s all too clear. “We’d have to forfeit everything. Then I’d advise we bring Glandman to court, but I can’t see a world in which a judge would defer because everything is here in writing. The will says what it says.”

“What does it mean by *the end*?” Ryan asks.

“Why is CJ’s different?” Magnus says.

“Why does the message say, *find her*? Who is *her*?”

“More importantly, why isn’t Emmie involved?” I ask.

CJ answers as if the words were at the ready. “Because Chip didn’t include her in his games. It was just us boys.”

“But she’s not even in the will. Why would he exclude her entirely?”

“He always had good reasons for what he did.”

Ryan launches out of his chair. “Maybe the *her* Chip meant is Emmie.”

“We don’t need to find her. She lives nineteen blocks away from me. No mystery there.”

“May as well wait for a message in a bottle to wash up on shore.” Magnus sighs.

“Maybe the *she* is a ship,” CJ says.

“If so, a sunken ship.” Ryan gazes out the window toward the water.

Aggravation builds inside. I deal in numbers. Facts. Immutable things. I refuse to go along with this idiocy. “This can’t stand. I’ll look into state law. This is some kind of

manipulation. Were you there when Chip filed this version of his will, Strawberry Shortcake?”

Three pairs of eyes snap in my direction. I’m usually restrained, controlled, and professional. I didn’t mean to let that slip out.

“What did you call her?” Magnus asks.

“Strawberry Shortcake,” CJ answers.

“But the way he said it sounded disdainful, irritable like when Indiana Jones calls Willie Sweetheart,” Ryan says with a laugh.

She gives a slight shake of her head like she’d rather not draw attention to the fact that we’ve had some close encounters.

The aggravation burns into anger. I want to point fingers, take names, and hold people accountable. I’m in Strawberry Shortcake’s face again. Inches away. So, close I can see blue and silver gems in her eyes.

“Make. This. Right,” I hiss.

“Forget the hiccups. I want to burp in your face,” she whispers. “This has nothing to do with me. I’ve never met Chip. So, calm down and get yourself together.”

Straightening, I smooth my hand down my shirt. Rarely in my life do I not have myself together. I never come apart, yet Strawberry Shortcake has the dangerous ability to unbutton the tight control I have on everything.

The room falls silent. She may as well lead a flying squadron like Magnus. Strawberry Shortcake is a pint-sized ball of chaos, yet she puts me on my heels. No one has ever stood up to me like that.

“At least I don’t live in my truck,” I say, taking a low blow.

“At least I’m not a miserable grouch.”

“At least I change my clothes.”

“Oh, do you? I recall that same outfit from the gas station this morning.”

“It’s the same day.”

We bicker back and forth.

“It’s official, I’m the nice twin.” Ryan brushes his hands together like it’s decided.

“Wait, you guys know each other?” Magnus asks.

“This is ridiculous.”

“This is amusing,” CJ retorts.

“Well, I quit,” Strawberry Shortcake says.

“You can’t quit,” I say.

“Oh, that’s right. Mr. Big Businessman Bully. You’re used to always getting your way. Not today, buddy buster.” Strawberry Shortcake’s chest heaves as she fumes.

“Miss, please reconsider and forgive my brother for his behavior,” Magnus speaks through clenched teeth.

“He can apologize himself.” Standing by the door, her eyes dart at Beans & Books across the street and back again as if she’s conflicted, or really needs some coffee. “Actually, I change my mind. I unquit.”

“You could’ve at least waited to see him grovel,” Ryan says with a dark laugh.

“Good. Now, let’s do this!” CJ says.

I huff, feeling invisible bonds wrapping around my wrists. “I’ve reviewed the fine print. It says the personal representative in charge of the estate and trust must oversee our fulfillment of Chip’s wishes.” I stare at Strawberry Shortcake. If laser beam eyes were real, mine would be firing. If she wants to unquit, she’ll have to fix this.

“I don’t have that ability.”

“You’re being obtuse.”

“I’m following your grandfather’s wishes. My job was to read the will. End of story.”

With a snort, I say, “It says here the executor oversees my rehabilitation of the driftwood. I’m not a contractor. I didn’t

buy the property. I don't own a hard hat."

"You mean it'll mess up your hair," Ryan teases.

I ball up a piece of paper and huck it at him. "I don't want anything to do with the resort. From a distance, it looks like one windy day will blow the roof off the place. You manage the trust, do something about it," I say to Strawberry Shortcake.

"Is this what a Royal McGregor temper tantrum looks like?" Ryan asks with a chuckle.

Strawberry Shortcake glowers at me. "I'm not even supposed to be here. My—" But she doesn't finish.

Ryan complains about how his phone doesn't have service. He fiddles with an old TV in the corner. "Is there a sports channel?"

"Go ahead, make yourself at home," Strawberry Shortcake mutters.

A staticky news channel broadcasts a string of crime sprees, speculating that there's a vandal loose in the south. The final shot is of a car, crashed into a Charleston, South Carolina bus stop and covered in paint. The news anchor speculates about a connection between the events.

Ryan flicks it off at the same time Strawberry Shortcake steps in front of the television. "Listen. I didn't realize what I was getting into. But I'll do it." Her voice squeaks. "I'll oversee the trust and help you restore the resort to its former glory."

"You changed your mind just like that?" I snap my fingers.

"Yep. Just like that. I need to stay here. I mean, I need a job. I have this job. It's perfect."

"What if I don't want to restore it?"

"But the will—"

Gathered together, my brothers and I are an imposing crew, but she seems especially nervous. Then again, if her reaction

to me approximates how my pulse exploded in her presence earlier, perhaps she's having an inner meltdown.

I tell myself not to notice Strawberry Shortcake. She's here in a professional capacity. Plus, she's not my type. Too naive. Too bright. Too much smiling.

But as I glance at my grandfather's will, it looks like I'm stuck with her whether I like it or not.

Isla



CHAPTER 9

My sister is going to need to burn this dress suit because I have saturated it with flop sweat. And she's going to owe me more than chocolate because this was not what I expected.

Read from the script she said. It would be as simple as that.

She failed to mention having to share bad news, manage the rowdy brothers, locate and operate a safe, distribute bequests, and solve riddles.

She was right to warn me about the McGregor brothers, but little did I know Mr. McMuffin was part of the pack.

“So where do we go from here?” Ryan asks.

My question exactly. How do I get out of this? I can't very well tell them who I am because what if that nullifies the will or they call the authorities? That news report suggests they're already looking for me. Then again, I'm not sure how the driver and passenger will explain why they were chasing me down without implicating themselves. Nerves prickle under my skin.

“We go to the Driftwood,” CJ says.

“It's my project,” Royal declares with obnoxious authority.

“We each have our assigned properties,” Magnus confirms in a commanding tone.

“That doesn't mean we can't help each other,” the youngest McGregor says.

“When have you ever helped?” Royal asks.

CJ slouches at the verbal blow. Apparently, he’s the blond sheep of the family.

“But yes, I suggest you go check out the Driftwood,” Magnus says.

“When have you ever suggested anything? More like give orders,” Royal echoes.

Magnus flashes him a look that says he’s going to do a lot worse than give his brother a verbal blow if he doesn’t adjust his attitude.

I agree with Magnus.

The brothers debate. I’m not sure what to do so I take notes on a yellow legal pad in case Robyn needs the details later. Or if I get arrested and thrown in jail, I can prove I was doing my job, well, someone’s job and not trying to extort them out of their grandfather’s money. Rather, help my sister make more at her job, well, her other one.

This lie is getting more tangled by the minute.

Next to Magnus’s name, I write, *Focused, organized, clear-headed. Surly stars=3.5*

It’s a five-star rating system and I think it’s obvious who takes the top ranking.

The eldest McGregor is intimidating and I have no doubt he can back that up when needed, but he’s not purposely coarse like someone else I know. I’m looking at Royal. In fact, it’s hard not to.

Next to Ryan’s name, I write, *Funny, scattered, flirtatious. Surly stars, =2*

Beneath that, I doodle a picture of a pirate standing at the helm of his ship, sails billowing. CJ seems underappreciated but mysterious. Like he has something to say but knows no one will listen to him. *Surly stars=1*

He’s a big guy like the rest of them and seems as if he can hold his own, but it’s like he’s holding back. What, I’m not

sure. Perhaps it's a trained behavior from being in this family with three older brothers who suck up a lot of floor time under the spotlight.

Magnus's amplified voice draws me out of my thoughts. "Any other bright ideas?"

"I have one. How about doughnuts and doughnuts?" Ryan asks.

Royal, head dipped, holds his forehead in his hand like he knows where his twin is going with this.

"We can give away free doughnuts to anyone watching you and your buddies burning rubber on that freshly paved road," Ryan says.

"That's not a spectator sport. It's something my friends and I did last year."

"You guys still get together?" Magnus asks.

"Winston, Billy, Holt, and I went skydiving and played flag football on a remote island off South Carolina yesterday. How was that yesterday?" Royal murmurs the last part.

"That's what you were doing in Charleston?" I ask.

"Wait, you two really know each other?" Ryan points at each of us in turn.

Royal mumbles something. I wish hiding under the desk were socially acceptable.

Ryan smirks like he sees something no one else does, then says, "It's not a spectator sport unless it's on a race track."

"Why are we talking about this?" Magnus asks.

"I want to do something fun." Ryan slouches in the chair like he's bored and used to nonstop entertainment and stimulation.

I agree with him, mostly. I want to do something fun and this isn't it. A nap seems more fun at the moment, even though I took one earlier.

“Chip’s letters and the assignment seem like it could be fun,” CJ says.

That would be true if it weren’t for the involvement of the recipient of five out of five surly stars.

The other three start talking at once, objecting to the idea that the contents of the will approximate fun as if CJ suggested swimming with alligators. Then again, I wouldn’t doubt Royal would enjoy that. He’d just glower at them and they’d scuttle off, tails between their legs.

“So, we’re actually doing this?” Royal laughs like it’s preposterous.

Like a rubber band, the tension of the last hour is pulled so tight that I can’t help but let out a matching peel of laughter.

Yes, I agreed to help, but I didn’t think any of them would actually follow through with the unusual instructions and cryptic content in the will. To me, it rang more like a novelty. Like they’d entertain the old man’s request but not fulfill it.

Magnus is stone-cold and serious.

Ryan’s half smile suggests he could be convinced if doughnuts are involved.

CJ leans forward like he’s hoping he’ll be included.

Royal’s jaw ticks as if he’s going to detonate and then wipe up the room with our remains.

The oldest brother gets to his feet and claps him on the shoulder. “Yeah, we’re doing this,” he says as if it were ever up for debate. “I’ll let you two handle things from here.”

“What about what he left you?” Royal asks.

“You two get started,” Magnus says.

Ryan takes his items and his gaze sails between Royal and me like he knows something we don’t. His twin grunts.

“I guess we’ll go check out the resort and see how many bulldozers we’ll need.” Royal looks sharply at me.

Magnus adds, “Don’t fall through the floorboards.”

“Watch out for gators, or is it crocs? I can never remember.”

The brothers continue to issue warnings.

Then, with a wink, Ryan adds, “And beware of beautiful women.”

Royal’s gaze lands on me. He has paper-cutter eyes, like he wants to tear this situation to shreds, and me with it.

I swallow thickly, because even though I won’t let someone like him tread all over me, I’m out of my depth, pretending to be Bean.

They leave the two of us in the office, which is sizeable, but somehow seems smaller now.

With a click of my tongue, I say, “Well, I should close up here.”

“Don’t you have work to do? This is a law office after all.”

“You said you’re a lawyer. It’s not like they’re here around the clock.”

“I manage investments. My legal background helps. But if I didn’t know better, I’d think today was your first day on the job.”

As I close the office door behind me, I stumble in the high heels but catch myself without dumping liquids, breaking anything, or colliding with Royal. Best to keep my hands and arms inside the ride vehicle at all times, because boy, has this been a roller coaster ride of a day.

This is Bean’s territory. Earlier, I caught myself before blowing my cover and blurting my name and how I’m not even supposed to be here. But I don’t want to get my sister in trouble. When I quit, I looked across the street at everything she’s worked so hard for and don’t want to see it ruined because I couldn’t carry off the teeniest, tiniest of deceptions.

I’ll explain to her what happened and she’ll know what to do.

Royal and I stand in front of the entrance to Mr. Edmonton's office as if neither one of us wants to go over to the resort. Him, because he's a curmudgeon and probably wants to get rid of me. I want to change shoes but must remain in character. Sophisticated legal assistants can run marathons in heels, so surely, I can hoof it to the resort property without turning an ankle.

"You and your brothers seem close."

The other three McGregor brothers check out CJ's boat docked on the nearby shore.

"We used to be."

"Did you grow up visiting Coco Key?" I ask.

"We lived here. Chip raised us from the time I was about five."

"Oh," is all I can say because that might mean that something happened to Royal's parents too.

He scuffs his boot on the ground. "I told myself Chip summoned me here for a birthday party. Morbid that it turned out to be more like a funeral party. Not much to celebrate. The old man was eccentric, though. You shouldn't have sent the cards."

"I didn't." But I don't say more.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You were just following instructions. Chip probably sealed the envelopes and barked orders."

"Royal, I never met him."

"That's a surprise since everyone on the island knew him." He pauses. "Actually, everyone knew *of* him. I don't think any of us truly knew him. His stories were legendary. Mythic, even." Royal exhales a breath like his grandfather's death catches up with him.

"I'm truly sorry for your loss."

"Don't be. I never had him. Chip was the original Lone Ranger. A real swashbuckler. He was the captain, and we were

the pirates who regularly attempted to lead a mutiny. Even Magnus. Especially him.”

“He seems like a team player.”

“No, that would be Ryan.”

“Oh, right. He’s the football player.”

“Though, I guess you could say that everything we know, we learned from Chip.”

“Sounds like a larger-than-life kind of guy.”

“You got that right. But why am I telling you this, Strawberry Shortcake?”

My heart hiccups. He has a nickname for me. “I don’t know, Mr. McMuffin. Maybe you needed to talk instead of yell. Someone to listen so you didn’t stuff it all down, leaving it to fester.”

“I don’t need anyone, least of all you, telling me whether to talk, yell, or fester.”

“So surly,” I mutter as we continue down the sidewalk toward the resort. Of course, he has to keep a pace ahead of me.

When I catch up, I’m not sure if he’s talking to himself or me when he says, “I told myself I wouldn’t be back here anytime soon. This place has seen better days.”

“You speak like Coco Key personally offended you. Yes, it’s a noun, a place, but it’s not a person. In case you didn’t realize, it can’t act independently.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Well, my sister opened Beans & Books, a combination coffee shop, bakery, and bookstore. And I’d say it’s going pretty well.”

“Fair enough. I was there earlier. But the rest of this place could stand to see some improvements.”

I pause and squint. “Were you in the room when I read the will? That was your grandfather’s request—to fix up the

resort.”

“The place is beyond saving.”

“But you said yourself you haven’t been here in years. Have some hope.”

“That’s just it, Strawberry Shortcake. There’s no hope left here.”

The defeat behind Royal’s comment silences me.

An elderly man with leathery skin and walking with a cane approaches.

Royal clears the sidewalk so he can pass. “Surly? Only when I want to be,” he says like an afterthought.

“You should work on that.”

I smile at the man and am about to say a friendly greeting when he picks up his cane and shakes it at us.

“Don’t go digging up what’s long been dead and forgotten,” the man says.

“Digging? The last time I did that was in the sand when I was a kid.” Royal chuckles.

“You were a kid once? I thought you hatched, fully grown and fully surlified. You’re a certified surlified man.”

“That’s not a word or an expression.”

“Did you hear me? We don’t need trouble around here.” The man looks from me to Royal and then continues on his way.

I whisper, “That’s going to be you in twenty years.”

“How old do you think I am?”

“Old enough to be crotchety.”

But my laughter dies when the man glances at us over his shoulder, all beady-eyed and prune-lipped like he’s casting a hex over us.

As if operating on instinct, we continue in the opposite direction, walking faster than before. I’m not sure whether to

feel cautious, laugh it off, or what, but the pebbles that race across my skin, even in the heat of the day, make me want to sneak back under the desk in Mr. Edmonton's office.

I shiver and rub my arms. "That was weird."

"No, that was standard operating procedure for Coco Key."

"Old men with canes routinely walk through town, issuing warnings?"

"You live here, don't you?"

"I do now." We're about halfway to the resort property. Looking around, I say, "It's cozy, in a beachy way."

"Don't you mean nosy?"

"Like nosy neighbors? You could think of them as quirky residents of this quaint town."

"You can. I'll call 'em like I see 'em. They were all in cahoots with Chip."

"In cahoots how?"

"If I remember correctly, that was Ray Higbee. He and Chip would play chess on Tuesdays. Mondays it was canasta with Melly Lipman. Wednesdays were cribbage with Slidell Williams and of course, Thursdays were backgammon with Amelia Cross. Friday was poker night and they'd all get together."

"The guy looked like he was pushing ninety, at least." I glance over my shoulder, but he's gone.

"Don't underestimate the power of the islanders."

Royal's pewter eyes scan me briefly, concluding with a swoopy side eye that I try to ignore because if circumstances were different, I'd risk swooning.

"So, what are you doing here, in the middle of nowhere, after Charleston and the rest stop?" Royal asks.

"I took a spontaneous road trip. But I prefer to think of *here* as the middle of somewhere—somewhere quiet, peaceful, beautiful." I want to divert attention from my reasons for

leaving South Carolina and hiding out here. “And you were up north for a skydiving expedition. Sounds like you live for thrills.”

“Something like that. But this is a forgotten Florida Key.”

“Just how we like it,” I say on the fly because I hope Dax, his thugs, and the police forget all about me. “It’s a place where we can forget our woes.”

“Which are?”

“I wouldn’t dare burden you with that.”

“But you did want to burp in my face.”

“You can be infuriating, Mr. McMuffin.” Clean up necessary on aisle Isla. The guy gets me flustered and flushed and fluttery. I’m a mess—in real life and around him.

“I’ve been told that and you have my apologies.”

“Ah, so you can be civil instead of surly.”

We reach the resort and both go still as if uncertain about how to proceed.

Royal says, “Don’t tell anyone.” Then he winks.

My heart does a double hiccup.

Royal



CHAPTER 10

Strawberry Shortcake and I stop on the edge of the resort property. I'm still not sure why I let her tag along, other than legal reasons. But her comment about needing someone to listen repeatedly floats into my head.

I push it away. It comes back. It's a tidal-type situation with the thought coming toward me and then rolling out. Like a beach ball, I can't submerge it or toss it very far.

Turning the matchbook Chip left me over in my hand, I wonder what it would take to burn the old place down. Sounds dramatic and kind of villainous, but this place has seen better days and I'm all about investments. Alright, fine. It's more than that. I'm bitter because the embossed treasure chest on the book of matches is all too familiar.

"The Mermaid's Chest," Isla says over my shoulder, reading the words on the matchbook.

"Yeah, an old restaurant-saloon Chip took me to once on one of the other islands. Had a talk with me about my future and the meaning of success. A real heart to heart," I add with a sarcastic bite and not something I want to talk about.

Standing in front of the resort, a double swinging metal gate connected to tall stone and seashell columns sits closed and unwelcoming. Time to change the subject. Move on.

"This is new. Chip must've had it installed in recent years." I spot a call box and keypad and try a pin code—Emmie's birthday, which is all of our secret passwords. The gate creaks and slowly opens.

Strawberry Shortcake proceeds while I remain rooted to the spot, because once I pass through, I'm not sure what I'll find.

With a glance over her shoulder, she calls, "You coming?"

She has terrible footwear—like a baby giraffe in high heels. Only so she doesn't twist her ankle on an uneven surface and turn around and sue me, I follow after her.

The once tidy St. Augustine grass is long and the formerly impeccably landscaped grounds are lost to nature. The pathways are overgrown and the outbuildings resemble shacks, rather than sheds.

"It needs some TLC," Strawberry Shortcake says brightly.

"It needs to be burned to the ground."

"That's extreme."

In the distance, the main building sits lonely on the peninsula, with the scattered villas orphaned and forgotten.

I don't want to do this. Pausing, I'm about to turn back, when a hand lands on my arm. I lock it in my sight like I would a stinging insect. But at Strawberry Shortcake's touch, time slows. My heart softens. Something wet fills my eyes. Must be this wind.

She gazes at the old, classic resort, fallen to ruin. It was once the place to be before the fancy mega-resorts accumulated all the tourists with their promises of non-stop fun, all-inclusive packages, and cookie-cutter properties created by greedy developers, aka Gerome Glandman.

"This was a place for families, old-school activities, and relaxation," I say with an air of nostalgia I could do without.

"Old fashioned fun."

"Without all the flash and fuss of modern resorts, but with genuine homestyle hospitality."

We continue down the winding paths, bordered by ships' mast posts and thick rope instead of fencing. The tiki bars with thatched, palapa roofs are sparse if not completely bald. The

mini golf course looks like a crime scene. Vegetation and probably creatures that bite, fill the nooks and crannies.

“This sounds like my kind of place. What happened?” Strawberry Shortcake asks.

“A confluence of events. An elderly man whose grandsons neglected him, old wood, a lapsed insurance policy, and a massive storm.” The raw honesty of my reply makes my throat feel thick.

“There’s potential.”

“More like a hassle.”

“Well, Mr. McGrumpkin, my favorite side to look at is the sunny one. You should try it sometime. The view is spectacular.” Her gaze skirts our surroundings, flits to me, and lands on the water.

The hope in her voice makes me feel feral. The light in her eyes, resistant. I can’t let myself go there. “No, this place needs to be leveled.” I make a sweeping motion with my hand toward the docks that are half-sunk and have broken slats.

“But hard work and—”

“Nothing can bring it back.”

She goes still and tilts her head in question. “You’re aware that almost every year storms damage resorts, buildings, and homes, yet repairs are made, power is restored, and people return.”

I kick one of the giant chessmen that was part of a checkers-chess set we’d put on the lawn every weekend. “Magnus would crush me. I’d beat Ryan and he’d win against CJ.”

“I’m not sure what to make of you, Mr. McMuffin, calling a resort home but wanting to burn it to the ground.”

“Not home. No, home is—”

“I thought it’s where the heart is.”

I laugh darkly.

“Oh, right. In that case, you’d need to have a heart.”

“Ouch. That was harsh.” I press my hand to my chest.

“You were the one who let out the maniacal supervillain laugh. Just reading the room.”

My lips quirk.

We’re closer to the main building than I’d like to be, but the real danger zone is the villa where my brothers and I lived. Chip called it the Lost Boys Cabin, like from Captain Hook. He had no idea how lost I felt. Still do, at least here...and with Strawberry Shortcake.

I’m not sure what to make of her. Something about her natural look—hair bleached by the sun, tan like she’s not overly concerned about loading on skin products and fussing with makeup, and the paint around her nails tells me she’s not like the women I’m used to.

My breath catches when the sunshine glints in her eyes. She said something, but I didn’t hear. Maybe I’m the one who needs to listen.

“Come on, let’s go exploring. Show me around. This is going to be fun.” She bounces a little and then links her arm in mine.

Never mind time slowing. At this sustained touch, it stops all around me—the wind doesn’t blow the palm fronds, the waves don’t shush on the shore, and the sun hangs suspended in the sky. Yet inside, I’m more alive than I’ve ever been. Eighteen again, feeling those seminal first moments anew—bubbles and fizz and excitement.

But I can’t let myself go there. “No, there’s nothing to see. A developer has reached out several times. They want to turn it into a modern resort property with all the bells and whistles—boutiques and water slides.”

Strawberry Shortcake drops her arm from mine. “But you were just saying this was a classic family resort with the bells but not the whistles. Like how things used to be. Granted, I never visited one, but can imagine it from summer movies and beach reads.”

I shake my head, trying to loosen any notion of moving forward with Chip's plan.

"I bet Glandfellow—"

"Gerome Glandman?"

"Yeah, I bet he's been wanting to get his hot little hands on this place."

"His hands are small...probably clammy, slimy."

She wrinkles her nose and then says, "Yours aren't. They're not little either. Or hot."

"How would you know about my hands?" I ask, belatedly realizing the answer.

"Because Mr. McMuffin, for some reason we were like two ships, passing in the night, er, colliding the last couple of days."

"You know what happens to ships that collide, right?"

"Bad analogy. But look, here we are after the smoothie slip-up and the coolant debacle."

"You named our encounters?"

"Sure did, Mr. McMuffin, and if I'm not mistaken, you call a certain Miss Pratt, yours truly, Strawberry Shortcake. Is that because the smoothie had strawberries in it?"

"And because you're short."

"I'm five feet five inches. That's average height. It's not my fault that you're a giant."

"I'm six-three. Shorter than Magnus and Ryan—by half an inch," I add because he'd have a field day if he heard me admit that.

"No other reason, eh?" she asks.

"Nope. I'm a practical person. It was for practical reasons. I didn't know your name."

"You could've chosen from a variety. Smoothie Lady or ___"

“Your friend had a smoothie too.”

“Muffin Maven.”

“Menace to Society.”

“That’s not inaccurate.”

I almost laugh.

“What about Truck Driver Who Forgot To Check Her Fluids Before Getting On The Road? Though in my defense I left in a hurry.”

“No, that’s too long.”

And we’re too close. Strawberry Shortcake stands by my side. If someone put a zipper between us and lifted it, we’d be touching. But I also didn’t realize while we bantered back and forth that we’d looped back to the main resort building—the Galleon, named after a type of ship like the rest of the buildings on the property. Safety tape covers some of the windows—a storm precaution. Others are broken. Shingles hang askew. The welcome sign paint is chipped and battered.

She starts up the steps, but I grip her wrist. “No.”

“Let’s see what we’re working with.”

“We can’t go in. It’s too dangerous.” And there are too many memories.

She pivots as if ready to lay into me about the will when she teeters. Her upper body swings toward me but her legs don’t move. Both heel tips of her shoes stick in the gap between the wooden slats of the steps.

I catch her in my arms and half of the shoes go flying across the lawn. The lower sections remain jammed in the steps.

Her striking blue eyes are wide, filled with fear until seconds later she must realize she’s not splayed on the ground.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Her lips loosen from a frozen *O* and lift into a megawatt smile. “Thanks for catching me.”

“Thanks for not spilling anything on me.”

“I still owe you half a muffin.”

“If we’re keeping track, a T-shirt too.”

“Are we keeping track, though? If so, by my accounting of the back and forth, we’re even.”

I quickly run the numbers in my head—she drenched me with a sticky juice beverage, ruining my shirt. Then she got stuck and I helped her get her truck going. Next, she read my grandfather’s will. So no, I’d say we’re not even, unless I count the way her touch makes my world slow down for just long enough for me to breathe again.

My voice is low when I say, “We have to stop doing this.”

“Do we?” she asks with a flirty smile.

I’m not sure how to answer that question with her arms ringing around my neck. Mine are on her waist. Chests together, her heart pounds from nearly falling down a short flight of stairs.

Something rattles against my ribs and I should resist it.

“Yeah, it’s a conflict of interest.”

“Whose interest? The guy who has a cage around his heart? The one who is afraid to look at the past because of what it might tell him about the person he is now? Who can’t slow down long enough to see what he’s given up and the loneliness he hurtles toward if he doesn’t change course?”

The wind picks up and we’re close to the water. I can’t be sure if Strawberry Shortcake spoke or if those words were echoes in my thoughts.

Letting her go, I stand there, frozen in the warmth of the day because the truth is icy, sharp, and painful.

Her gaze doesn’t waver from me as if she’s waiting for me to reply, to atone for my errors in judgment and the distance I’ve placed between myself and the world.

“Who put you in charge?”

“Your grandfather.”

“I don’t answer to him.”

“No, you answer to me. Now, please pick me up. I can’t walk with these pegs on the ends of my feet.”

The intensity of the moment explodes with my laughter.

A deep, genuine belly laugh pours out of me at her comment, because it reminds me of when my brothers and I would play pirates. One of us always had to have a peg leg. Another, a hook for a hand. An eye patch for the third, and the lucky one would get to have a big, bushy beard.

Like a contagious yawn, she sputters a laugh and then it grows between us until our gazes catch. Her smile is magnetic and I notice her front tooth on the left crowds the one on the right ever so slightly. Silver specks make her blue eyes striking, and the sound of her laugh is like a song I’d forgotten.

“I suppose it’s not safe for you to be at the Driftwood barefoot. At least not in its current state. You’ll get a splinter or tetanus. Come on. I’ll carry you, Strawberry Shortcake. Hop up.” I crouch down and gesture she gets on my back.

“I was hoping that you’d cradle me in your arms like you’d just rescued me from a shipwreck.”

“We’re not quite there yet.” And it’s too dangerous because then her lips would be close enough to mine to kiss.

Isla



CHAPTER 11

Should you ever find yourself gazing longingly into the pewter eyes of a strong man with a deep tan, powerful arms and quads, who's well dressed and successful, does extreme sports, and knows his way around trucks, don't be tempted to plant your lips on his if you meet the following criteria:

- Your ex-boyfriend is potentially hunting you down
- After said ex ripped your heart out on New Year's Eve, you made the resolution to remain single for the foreseeable future

And you qualify for at least one of the following:

- The handsome man with gainful employment thinks you work for his late grandfather's lawyer
- You pretended to be your sister, aka Miss Pratt
- The circumstances surrounding your proximity are built around what could generously be called a white lie

Oh, what, that's just me? If the situation were different, you'd better believe I'd lift onto my toes and pucker up.

We're so close I can smell Royal's spicy, manly, expensive aftershave cologne. I'm not sure of the difference. Dax couldn't grow anything that would require shaving and all my previous boyfriends sported various stages of, *Too lazy to*

shave regularly, Shaved the other day, or What's a razor? styles.

That's all to say that Royal McGregor is quite the catch. Not that I'm looking. Well, I am. At him. It's hard not to get snagged by the smile he teases like it's a treat or the fact that when I said that I was hoping he'd cradle me in his arms he replied, "We're not quite there yet."

Emphasis on the word *yet*. Meaning we could be someday.

As I slingshot myself onto his back because Bean's high heels broke in a spectacularly dramatic style, resulting in Royal and me sharing genuine laughter, I let myself soak in the warmth of a reverse embrace. I'm one big heart hiccup, which is different from butterflies but in the same family.

Since we came up here to the resort, I've sensed that hidden behind his Fortress of Solitude silhouette is disappointment, pain, hopelessness, something else, or a combination of all of it. I'm not sure exactly, but I've caught glimmers.

If my hunch that he lost both his parents is true, then we're not so different. See, it takes one to know one and I'm well acquainted with the emotions that people like us have to put aside to make life work without our parents in it.

It's a chin up, shoulders back, take on the world kind of attitude.

Under my chest, which presses against Royal's back, his lungs fill and then release.

"Wait. Did I say any of that out loud?"

"About pain and loss? You did, Strawberry Shortcake." The resignation in his tone suggests I hit a target that he could not. In other words, I was able to articulate the things that he doesn't let himself bring to the surface.

"But there is a difference between us," I say.

"Do I want to know what you think that is?"

"I let myself have a little bit of fun. You're zippered up self-control."

“Or I could say you’re chaos and I’m order.”

“Maybe I’m delight and you’re difficulty.”

He winces. “Your brutal honesty is a lot to manage.” Royal tromps along the pathway away from the resort with me on his back.

“Was my honesty brutal?”

“The truth is brutal. Your honesty was—” He pauses a beat as if fishing for the right word. “Courageous.”

“Funny, Courage is my middle name.”

He laughs like I’m joking. I’m not. But I don’t press it because then I might have to ‘fess up and tell him my first name, which is not Bean or Robyn Pratt, the employee of Mr. Edmonton.

Instead, I say, “If Chip wants us to get our hands dirty, I’m up for it.”

“Us? It’s us now, is it?” Royal asks like that’s a novel notion.

I pump my hands. “I know, I know. You do things your way and we will, but the will is clear. I’m overseeing this or else the funds go to Gerome Glandular.”

Royal chuckles. “Glandman.”

“Whether you like it or not, it’s us,” I say, resting my head against Royal’s back and gazing out to sea.

As if I’ve brought us a little too close for his comfort, he says, “Looks that way. No ghosts or squatters haunting the old place.”

“Should we do a before and after, and get footage of the in between like one of those small-town makeover shows? Or should we contact HLTV?”

“I’m hearing a lot of us’s and we’s, Strawberry Shortcake. Give me time to catch up.”

“All the time you need,” I say, liking the way his muscles feel under my palms, that he’s strong enough to tote me

around like a backpack, and that we're not at each other's throats, ready to tear out the jugular.

I wince. "I said that out loud too, didn't I?"

Royal clears his throat and doesn't answer. Instead, he says, "I still think we could see a better return if we sell to a developer."

"Did you hear me read the will?"

"I'd like to think of it as a reinterpretation."

"What's your middle name? Skydiver? Race Car Driver? Extreme Sports Enthusiast?"

"Those aren't middle names."

"No, but you do all those things. I think you can handle revitalizing a resort."

"There's a lot of baggage here."

"I thought you said there aren't any ghosts or squatters. In other words, the place is empty."

"Har har. The place is a dump. We'd all be better off to see the slate wiped clean."

"But it's charming in its way, well, once we get it fixed up." Earlier, I read a little plaque that explained that Chip constructed much of the resort from salvaged ship parts, plus driftwood and other reclaimed items from seafaring expeditions.

"It's no longer charming and inviting. More like it spent too long out at sea and washed ashore in shambles."

"True, it's leaky and spooky."

"Dank, dark, damp. It's a lot of work, Strawberry Shortcake."

"I'm ready to roll up my sleeves."

We're on the edge of town where there's a sandy path. Royal gently drops me back onto the ground.

"You're wearing a tank top and a skirt. How'd you ride on my back with—?" He points at Bean's skirt.

“It was a temporary tunic-style situation. Moving on, because let’s just say you haven’t seen me at my best wardrobe-wise since we’ve met.”

Royal’s shoulder lifts an inch. “I don’t mind what I’ve seen.”

“Paint splatters, smoothie slop, sleeping in my truck, and sweating all afternoon? No, I clean up much better than this.”

His lips struggle between a smile and keeping whatever he’s thinking to himself. “What if I wanted you to show up to work on Monday all cleaned up?”

“We start tomorrow, and that could probably be arranged.”

On a sigh, he says, “But no high heels. Work site hazard.”

“Understandable.”

We start walking toward the center of town where Royal’s brothers remain by the boat, standing around laughing. I realize they probably don’t have anywhere to go. There are loads of resorts on the other islands, but the Driftwood was the only one in Coco Key. Never mind a work site hazard, sleeping there would be a health hazard. I should ask Bean if Mr. Edmonton would mind if they stayed in one of his guestrooms, considering he’s not yet back from the hospital.

As we near the guys, the light mood, the setting sun, and the laughter filtering from the McGregors in the distance seem to instantly frost over like a winter cold snap, even though that’s never happened this far south.

My sister sweeps the step in front of Beans & Books. Leaving Royal to catch up with his brothers, I scuttle over to her in my bare feet.

“Looks like you have a story to tell,” she says.

Nodding, I reply, “I’m also eager to hear how the call with the Brazilian coffee company went, but I have a big ask.”

“How big?”

I glance over my shoulder at the McGregors. “End to end, about twenty-five feet long, my estimation’s about nine

hundred pounds. Maybe a little less.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t think those guys have a place to stay tonight. Do you think Mr. Edmonton would—?”

She holds her hand up before I can finish. “No way. Not the McGregors. I warned you. They’re trouble.”

I arch an eyebrow and cock a hip. “I am aware, as I had to spend all afternoon with them, inform them their grandfather passed away, and left them with what amounts to a treasure hunt—which three out of the four seem fairly skeptical about.” I go on in great detail, outlining everything that transpired.

“Didn’t look like Royal troubled you much.”

“Oh, you’d better believe I’m troubled.” Because the way he makes my heart hiccup is confusing.

Bean lets out a long sigh. “Okay, fine, but they’re staying in the rec room. There’s a pull-out couch and—”

I jump up and down, hug her, and then rush over to give them the good news.

“Wait, why are you barefoot?”

I skid to a stop and bite my lip because I don’t want that to be a dealbreaker. “I owe you a pair of shoes,” I call over my shoulder. I’m about to give myself a moment to shine in the spotlight with good news, but the brothers are deep in conversation.

“All we know is that Chip started as a member of the muscle class. Moved to the US from Pará, Brazil,” Royal says, shifting slightly to let me stand beside him on the dock.

CJ lounges in the captain’s chair of the boat, bobbing in the water. Ryan sits on the edge of the dock with his legs dangling, and Magnus leans against a wooden pylon.

“He was muscly? Must be where I get it.” Ryan looks at me and then kisses his bicep.

Royal shoots him a searing look. Then again, his looks are always searing, burning me up even when the sun hides behind

the clouds.

“Meaning he was a laborer, had backbone,” Magnus clarifies.

“At some point, he bought this island and built the Driftwood Resort. But how? With what? His savings from a meager construction wage?” Royal shakes his head slowly like he’s missing a piece of the puzzle.

Ryan shrugs. “Perhaps he had a loan. The Driftwood more than made up for any debt back in the day.”

“But there was a lot of overhead. Where’d he get his fortune?”

“Wise investing.” CJ scratches his jawline.

“What was that?” Royal asks him.

“What?” CJ asks.

“Why’d you do that?” He imitates the scratching gesture.

“I had an itch?”

“No, we’ve played enough poker for me to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you know something that you’re not telling us.”

CJ’s grin ghosts. “We were told our parents passed away in a boating accident. But they’re not who you think they are. Neither was our grandfather.”

Royal puffs an exhale. “Oh, this again.”

Undaunted, CJ continues, “Chip’s life’s work was to find the crown. Sure, it was a priceless treasure and could’ve made him wealthier, but he wanted to return the item to its rightful owner. His beloved’s family.”

“And if it’s true, why would he have wanted to do that?” Ryan asks us if we haven’t heard this story over a dozen times. Then again, my twin’s head is often in the clouds.

“Carlos Almeida believed that he wasn’t the husband he should’ve been. Couldn’t save our grandmother, Fernanda Sousa.”

“We never met her.”

“She went missing when Mom was little. Took a walk on the beach and was never seen again. Some say pirates abducted her. Others, washed away by a rogue wave. Either way, Chip never forgave himself and he picked up her quest to find the *Coroa de Lágrimas*.”

“The what?” I ask.

“The Lost Crown of Tears.” Royal shakes his head as if it’s nonsense.

CJ, smiling greedily for the spotlight to tell this story, says, “Long ago, in Portugal, a branch of the royal family took to the sea to settle in Brazil.”

“The Régia Casa de Sousa,” Magnus says off-handedly.

“The plan was to rule there and expand the royal family’s territory. However, once João, his wife Márcia, and their four children arrived, they were cut off from their rightful line to the throne. Discarded, forgotten.”

“Why?” I ask, rapt by the story.

“If you’re smart, you’d stop listening right about here,” Royal says.

Undaunted, CJ continues, “Rumors were that there was an illegitimate child. It was a lie because, like Ryan and Royal, the two heirs to the throne were twins. Sending João to the new land was Adão’s ploy to get rid of him.”

“Sinister,” Ryan says, eyeing his brother.

“You realize that’s a load of baloney Chip probably told you. Tall tales. Campfire stories,” Royal says.

“Baloney?” Ryan asks.

“Your insatiable appetite can wait, Ry,” Magnus says.

“Actually, my sister has some frozen pizzas and said we can stay at her place,” I chime in. “Er, Mr. Edmonton’s mansion.”

“I was going to bunk here on the boat,” CJ says, tapping the gunwale.

“Don’t you have a house around here?” Ryan, now on his feet, spins in a circle, pointing.

“Eh, yeah. It’s occupied at the moment.”

“By raccoons?”

“Renters?”

“Squatters?” I suggest.

“It’s complicated.”

“Meaning you lost a bet or something and it’s in foreclosure.” Royal frowns.

“It’s nothing, but you guys go ahead and check out Mr. Edmonton’s place. It’s nice.”

Bean appears. “You’ve been there?”

He wears a roguish grin and unties the lines to the dock. “Of course.”

“Everyone, meet my sister, R—Bean.” I wink at her because I’ll explain later and lead the way to the house before she changes her mind.

“Another Miss Pratt?” Royal asks. “How many of there are you? Do you multiply?”

Bean smiles. “I thought he was the surly one.”

“Oh, trust me. He is.”

Magnus chats with Bean to make sure spending the night is okay while Ryan trails behind Royal and me.

“So does all this mean we were disinherited?” Ryan asks.

“It’s not like any of us are struggling, living paycheck to paycheck, except maybe CJ,” Royal says.

“We’re not disinherited. The money is ours conditionally,” Magnus says over his shoulder like he has ears and eyes on everything and everyone.

“As I said, I don’t need it,” Royal counters.

“However, if you fail to comply with the wishes in Chip’s will—” I start.

“The money goes to Glandman,” all three brothers chorus.

Twenty minutes later, the five of us are in the rec room, eating pizza after Magnus surprises me by saying a blessing over the food. The McGregor brothers didn’t strike me as men of faith, but it’s always a pleasant surprise to learn that other people share the love of the Lord.

“If we’re going to try to figure this out, I need brain juice,” Ryan says.

Magnus’s expression darkens. “Don’t tell me you’re taking steroids.”

“No, I meant coffee. Caffeine.”

“Not now. You need to shower and sleep.” Magnus speaks with finality, having the last word.

“I have a question first,” Ryan replies, pushing back. “Chip never found the treasure, right?”

“Nope,” Magnus says shortly.

“So this isn’t a scavenger hunt with him leaving us clues to find something he’d already discovered. It’s more like we’re picking up where he left off.”

“And if the will, the messages, and the items he left us are any indication, his search was about as organized as his office.” Royal grunts like he disapproves.

“That’s to say, not organized at all,” Ryan adds as if remembering something.

I interject, “Did your grandfather have a record of his search, like a diary or—?” I shrug, gleaning all my treasure hunt information from movies.

“We’ll figure this out in the morning,” Magnus says.

“It doesn’t matter because it’s all for nothing,” Royal says around a yawn.

I catch it and yawn too. “Good night, guys. Sorry that I was the bearer of bad news.”

Magnus’s eyes are already closed. Ryan is on his phone. Royal nods in my direction and doesn’t turn away as he watches me leave the room, sending those hiccups rushing through me.

Bean walks me out to the guest house.

“Will you be alright in there with them?”

“I have my own wing, remember?”

“Good point. Plus, how much trouble can they really cause?”

“Plenty.”

“How do you know if you just met them today?”

“The McGregor brothers are legendary on this island. They were wild, always getting into trouble, boat races, car races, and pranks. The locals could tell you stories.”

“What about that old man with the cane? Mr. Higbee, I think Royal said.” I tell her about how he warned us against digging up what’s long been dead and forgotten.

Bean waves her hand dismissively. “Mr. Higbee was one of Chip’s buddies. They had a consortium of anti-treasure hunters. Like a neighborhood watch, but offshore too.”

“But Chip’s will seemed kind of like a treasure hunt, it was rather mysterious, containing riddles and puzzles.”

“They called themselves the Pirate Defense League.”

“Were they defending the pirates or fighting them off?”

Bean shrugs. “All I know is that if you listened to Chip’s stories you could get sucked into believing that there’s treasure on this island. If I’m not mistaken, he didn’t want anyone other than his grandsons to find it.”

“By sending them on a wild goose chase?” I tell her how upset Royal was. That Magnus was mostly quiet and

reflective. Ryan seemed somewhat curious and CJ definitely has secrets.

“Secrets or stories his brothers don’t want to hear because they think it’s nonsense? Anyway, thank you for being me today.”

“There’s one more thing. I’m supposed to oversee the fixing up of the Driftwood.” I tell her about being named the executor.

“That’ll do the island wonders.”

“Bean, I can’t take on that role.”

“Did you sign the cover page?”

“Yes. Does that mean I signed away my life, firstborn, and made a promise to forgo chocolate forever?”

She winces.

“Not the chocolate. Please no. It was little more than a scribble. Could easily say *Robyn*.”

“Except I’m guessing it matches your signature on every painting and mural you’ve ever made. No one would believe it says my name. Have you seen me paint? Or write? I can hardly read my handwriting.”

She has a point. I hold out my hand, palm up. “Where’s my chocolate?”

“There’s a chocolate on your pillow, sis.”

I give her a hug and then jitter. “Wait. How did the call with the coffee company go?”

Bean grins. “I got the account.”

“Happy dance time.” I do the silly little dance we’d do when Aunt Olga wasn’t watching.

“Things are looking up. Plus, the McGregor brothers aren’t bad to look at. I mean the scenery. It’s beautiful. Especially the twin with the pewter eyes. I mean the clear sky and turquoise sea. All this sunshine must be scrambling my brain.” I tip my head from side to side framing it and flutter my hands.

“Good night, sis,” Bean says with an amused smile.

“Hang on. What happened to their parents?”

She shifts like this question cuts close to our shared loss. “Colin McGregor and Emmanuella. She was Almeida before they married, Chip’s daughter.”

“You call him Chip too?”

“Everyone did. Anyway, I’ve heard it was a boating accident. But the couple was never found.” Her shoulders rise and drop on an exhale.

Me too. “So sad. That means they’re also orphans.”

We hug again because even though anyone would argue that our mother wasn’t interested in the role, we always wonder what it would’ve been like not to eat Aunt Olga’s borsch five days a week.

“The oldest three brothers are a bit growly. Grumpy. Grouchy,” I say.

Bean asks, “Even Ryan?”

“When he’s hungry,” I say, sharing my observation.

“The triple G.”

“G to the third power.”

“CJ, the youngest one, is funny, if not a bit wily. Kind of like a ray of sunshine in the wind.”

“And what about Royal? Looked like the two of you were friendly.” Bean bops me with her hip.

“I’m going to go eat that chocolate. I earned it.”

“Sweet dreams,” Bean calls.

There’s nothing sweet about Royal McGregor, but I have a feeling he will be in my dreams.

Royal



CHAPTER 12

After a sound sleep on a fold-out couch next to my twin—who claimed I kicked him all night—we tidy up the rec room and head over to Beans & Books.

“Thanks for the hospitality,” I tell Strawberry Shortcake’s sister. Disappointment pricks me like a thorn when I see she’s not here.

“Anything for the McGrumpy brothers,” the sister with darker hair mutters.

I tilt my head. “We were perfectly polite.”

“Robyn and I were just joking around.” Strawberry Shortcake appears, bright-eyed and wearing a knit coral tank top and dark green shorts. “We were calling you Forrest Grump. Magnus is Simon Growl and Ryan is Oscar the Grouch because he gets hangry.”

“We were?” Robyn says.

“Speaking of, do you happen to have any doughnuts?” Ryan points to the display case.

“Breakfast baked goods include muffins, banana bread, bagels, and on Wednesdays, I make biscuits. You can leave the island if—”

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed,” Ryan mutters.

Strawberry Shortcake elbows her sister as if reminding her to be nice.

Heads inclined together, they whisper back and forth. I catch words like abandoned, grandfather, old, and selfish.

Then Robyn says, “If we had family, we wouldn’t abandon them.”

I grunt because they don’t know the first thing about our situation.

“Where is CJ?” Magnus asks.

“Where is he ever?” I mutter.

“Hold on,” Magnus says. “You’re Robyn? Weren’t you supposed to read the will?”

I tuck my head, recalling Strawberry Shortcake introducing herself. “She said she’s Miss Pratt.”

“That I am,” Strawberry Shortcake says with a smile. “We both are. Miss Pratt and Miss Pratt.”

“But Mr. Edmonton, Chip’s lawyer, contacted me early this morning. He’s been recovering from surgery. He commented that Robyn was standing in for him and if I had any questions, he’d be available by the end of the week.”

“I have questions,” I say, looking from a pair of striking blue eyes that are like a Key Deer in headlights to a darker set that cast downward toward the counter. “If she’s Robyn then who are you?”

“You can call her Bean,” Strawberry Liar Pants Shortcake points to her sister.

“We do things differently around here. Had you visited your grandfather more often you’d know that,” Bean says, eyes slit with accusation.

Ryan whistles low. “Oh, burn.”

“Don’t look at me. I just paint murals,” Strawberry Shortcake says.

“I haven’t yet had coffee. You lost me. Who’s who and why is this confusing?” Ryan says.

“How about first, we start with the truth? What’s your real name?” I ask, taking charge.

Strawberry Shortcake sighs and her lips twist to the side like the jig is up. “My name is Isla and this is Robyn. We’re sisters. She needed me to do her a favor yesterday, so I stood in and read the will.”

I glower. “So, you lied about your identity?”

“Technically, I am Miss Pratt.”

My gaze cuts between the two sisters. “I’m going to tell your boss and I’m going to see you in court.”

Strawberry-Isla lengthens her spine. “Please don’t tell Bean’s boss. He just had surgery and she’s trying to get her coffee shop off the ground so when Mr. Edmonton no longer practices law, which seems like it’ll be sooner rather than later, she has a job.”

Anger slides through me. “Never mind her boss. I’m going to the police.”

“Stop blustering and making threats. Was any harm done?” Isla asks.

“I’m not blustering.”

She gives her eyes a little roll-shake. “But was any harm done?”

“Our grandfather is dead, for one.” The details of which are murky. Was it old age or something more sinister like murder?

“And I’m sorry for your loss.” Isla softens. “I’m also sorry that you didn’t get to say goodbye, attend the funeral, and had to hear about it all from me. But don’t shoot the messenger, please.” She lets out a breath.

Arms crossed tightly in front of my chest, I pace. “This isn’t right.”

“Then what’s wrong?” Isla asks, planting herself in front of me.

I open my mouth to reply, but I'm not sure what to say. Everything she said she was sorry for, offering her condolences, are the reasons I'm upset, but there's nothing I can do about it.

"As I see it, there are two choices. You can fulfill your grandfather's wishes, restore the resort, and do whatever else he asked you. Or you can forfeit it all and Chip's funds go to Glandless."

"No," we all say at once.

"Okay, then we'll start on the eighteenth. That's not long from now." Isla grins widely like it's decided.

The woman gives me whiplash. "Are you always this peppy? Energetic?"

"On every day that ends in Y."

"Well, there is a third choice and it involves the consequences of you breaking the law," I say, not ready to give up.

Magnus says, "You're not going to go to the police, Royal." And just like that, the oldest McGregor has the last word.

Undaunted, she says, "Okay, let's not have everyone bicker. To recap. This is Robyn 'Bean' Pratt. I'm Isla 'Strawberry Shortcake' Pratt." She shines a smile in my direction.

"I thought you said your middle name is Courage."

"It is," both women say at the same time.

"I was just hoping that would help since that's what you'd been calling me. Because I dumped a strawberry smoothie on you and, in your words, I'm short."

"You're not short," Robyn says, scowling at me.

"That's what I said."

"But why did you read the will, Isla?" I give my head a little shake. It's going to take me a minute to get used to

calling her that or thinking of her as anything but Strawberry Shortcake.

“Because I have a chocolate habit I have to feed somehow,” Isla says.

The corner of Ryan’s lip lifts. “I get that.”

“If you’re on steroids—” Magnus is ready to wind up.

“I’m part of a voluntary testing transparency program for athletes. The grit on the gridiron is all mine, no performance-enhancing drugs involved, and I’m proud of it,” Ryan says.

“We have to get some food in these guys,” Isla says, rustling behind the counter.

Like last night with the pizza, she’s efficient and brings out an assortment of baked goods and beverages, including fresh squeezed orange juice.

“I helped myself to Mr. Edmonton’s tree.”

“You were up early,” Bean says.

“I hardly slept.” Isla’s gaze flitters to me like a butterfly on a bush.

I frown, wondering what that was supposed mean, but then the sisters exchange a look like calling me Forrest Grump wasn’t the only time my name was brought up in conversation.

True to form, Magnus calls order. “Chip left us with a stipulation. We’re going to figure this out.”

Instead, gripes are shared. Complaints pitched. Discussion about whether there really is a family fortune along with who and how to manage it bandy between us.

“CJ was telling us the story about the lost crown, is there more?”

“Of course, but it’s baloney, like I said.”

“From what I understand, João, the heir, was distraught,” Magnus starts.

“You’re onboard with this too?” I ask my oldest brother.

He blinks slowly and says, “I never claimed not to believe it. Anyway, our great-great or so grandfather became despondent, but that soon turned into bitterness. He was angry and got into brawls. Mostly, he held his own, but eventually took one too many punches and was killed, leaving Márcia to take care of the family. A royal family she’d married into, and they had five kids at that point. She appealed to the House of Sousa but they offered her nothing, not even help for the grandchildren.”

“Are we really listening to this story hour?”

With a rapt audience of three—Isla, Bean, and Ryan—Magnus carries on. “Márcia was resourceful. She did what she needed to do to help the family survive, including trading with pirates.”

I let out a sigh, and add, “Even becoming one if you’re inclined to believe this campfire garbage.”

“She was the pirate queen and crafted, then wore, the *Coroa de Lágrimas*—over the loss of her husband and status—and swore revenge on the House of Sousa for driving her to it,” Magnus finishes like he too has a vendetta to pay back.

Turning to Isla, I say, “If you’re still inclined to associate with so-called descendants of pirates, your estate administrator tasks can start with forgetting the entire tale.”

She smiles as if emboldened by the pirate queen and says, “I prefer executress. Sounds more powerful. And yes, you’ll carry out instructions under my supervision.”

“Don’t let this go to your head or anything,” I mutter.

Isla leans toward my brothers and me. “The way I see it, the McGregor brothers received an invitation from an estranged family member. Things are not entirely what they seem—or what certain family members want to see. Your grandfather left you with a challenge in place of the family fortune, perhaps a way to reconcile the past. Will you rise to the occasion and solve an age-old mystery along the way?”

“Aye,” Ryan says like he’s part of a pirate crew.

I'd like to lead a mutiny, but after thinking about the Driftwood half the night, I say, "Although I'd like to tear down the buildings on the peninsula, I'll go along with rehabbing the resort because it could become a lucrative investment."

"Then yo-ho-ho. We have our heading," Isla says like a character in a pirate movie.

I drain the rest of my coffee. "I'm surprised Chip put everything in a trust. Figured he'd leave me to handle it."

"You'd just hoard it in your tower along with the rest of your riches," Ryan says.

Isla turns to her sister. "It's like this, Royal is the businessman. He's mature, logical, serious, and efficient. Sense of humor uncertain. Doesn't get involved in emotions. Stays away from them like hot coals."

We're all suddenly silent, intrigued by that somewhat accurate assessment.

I nod because she's not wrong about me. But she left something out. I can't deny that her touch does something inside, makes it easier to breathe, to be. To touch those emotions without getting burned.

Despite Strawberry Shortcake, aka Miss Pratt, aka Isla Courage's deception about her name while reading the will, being around her makes me feel better and makes life easier. If she hadn't splashed me with the smoothie, gotten her truck stuck in front of my car at the gas station, and wasn't there yesterday when I received news that changed my life, I might be adrift on a raft in the middle of the ocean somewhere, seeking escape.

She goes on, "The older brother is Magnus. Move over Maverick. He's a Navy pilot who considers himself broken yet remains strong. Look up the word *stoic* and his face is in the dictionary."

He runs his hand along his jaw. "I'm retiring."

"That's news," Ryan says.

“Coming up on my twenty years. I’ll stay in the reserves, though.”

Ryan gives him a fist bump.

“Thanks for your service,” Bean says as if realizing we’re not all as bad as she thought.

Isla continues, “Then we have the athlete, Ryan. He’s a flirty rascal. Not always considered reliable, but he’ll be there for you when you need him. Also, he has a huge appetite in every imaginable way.”

He waggles his eyebrows in confirmation and Magnus swats the back of his head.

“Last but not least is the wildcard, the Rogue, Chip Junior, aka CJ.”

I didn’t even notice CJ join us. His smile is faint.

“He’s a rogue treasure hunter and has been everywhere from Grenada to Guyana. It’s hard to keep track of him. What happens in Chip’s life stays in Chip’s life. And his brothers underestimate him because he doesn’t so much keep his cards close to his vest, nobody even knows where they are.”

To my surprise, CJ wears a perfect poker face. No tells.

Isla turns to him. “How’d I do?”

My baby brother makes a zipping motion along his mouth. “My lips are sealed.”

“See? Cards. Concealed.”

“I don’t think that’s how card games are played,” Ryan says.

“It’s a figure of speech.”

“Someone is missing,” Ryan asks.

“Ah yes, the secret sister,” Bean confirms.

Magnus springs to his feet. “What do you mean Emmie is missing?”

“Chill, bro. I mean she wasn’t included.”

“About that, did she ignore the invitation or—?” Magnus asks Bean.

“That would be a question for Mr. Edmonton, but there were only the four of you named in the will. I did everything exactly as my boss said.”

“Except read the will yourself,” I murmur.

Isla slips her arms in front of her chest. “I did a great job for a first-timer.”

“Emmaline should be here,” Ryan says.

“No,” Magnus and I say at the same time.

“It’s better to keep her out of it. Protect her from this madness.”

“She said she’s going on a writing retreat. Won’t answer her phone when she’s in the zone,” I say.

“I hate that she does that,” Magnus says.

Ryan comments about microchipping her ear.

“She’s not a pet,” CJ says.

“No, she’s our sister and there are a lot of bad people in this world,” Magnus grinds out.

CJ leans back in his chair like he’s confident Emmie can handle herself, but I doubt he’s even talked to her in the last six months. Isla is right about him, but not that we underestimate him. No, he’d need to do something meaningful to measure his contributions to the world.

Bean and Isla talk about the Driftwood.

Bean says something about Hurricane Howie that ruined the town. “The insurance had lapsed. Chip said it would all wash out in the end.”

“But he ended up washed up,” I murmur.

Isla elbows me. “Don’t say that about your grandfather.”

CJ gets to his feet. “You guys don’t see, do you? You never did. You’re all too preoccupied with your aspirations and accomplishments.”

“Better than being a deadbeat,” Magnus says.

“A beach bum,” I add.

CJ smirks like his sense of self-preservation is so minuscule, he’ll take it on both cheeks, clinging to the dream of treasure. “The three of you knew Chip the longest, but you didn’t know him the best.”

“And you did? How’s that work with you couch surfing and, well, surfing?”

“I have a boat, Magnus,” CJ says as if that explains everything.

“What am I missing?” Ryan says.

“I took care of our grandfather after the storm,” CJ says.

“I was up at the resort yesterday and you took care of nothing. The place is in shambles.”

“He moved into the villa at the end of the peninsula. I was with him most days.”

“Freeloading because you don’t have your own place.”

CJ lets out a stilted breath. “I am a homeowner, Magnus. I was not freeloading, Royal.”

“Then what were you doing?” Ryan asks.

“Chip had unfinished business. He sent me on errands.”

“CJ, when you grow up and stop believing our grandfather’s fairy tales, we can talk.” I get to my feet, tired of this conversation “Either I’m going to tear down the resort or find a way to repair it.”

Isla hops to her feet. “Might I remind you that your grandfather left specific instructions?”

“I don’t need your help.”

She squishes up her face. “I beg to differ and thought—”

“Says the person who sticks up for my loser brother. You don’t know us.”

“You really just speak your mind, huh? No filter.”

“Actually, Isla was spot on in her assessment of each of us,” Ryan says.

“Fine. If you’re so eager to help, let’s get out of here.”

“And quick to give orders.” Isla rolls her eyes but follows me out the door, toting a slim bag over her shoulder.

“Listen, Mr. McMuffin, I’m the boss around here. The executress.” She lengthens her spine and I won’t lie, it’s adorable. Like a little kitten wiggling its rump to attack a dust bunny.

“Have you ever managed a property? Rehabilitated a building? Knocked one down?”

“No, but there’s a first for everything and I did just fine yesterday.”

“You were sweating bullets. I knew something was up.”

“I can handle this, Royal.” She steps closer to me and we’re toe to toe. I sense everyone on the other side of the window at Beans & Books is watching. Probably everyone in Coco Key. “You think you’re the big man around here. And fine. You’re very big.” She cranes her head to meet my gaze.

I force myself not to get lost in her striking blue eyes.

She stabs her finger into my chest, making her point. “And you’re very much a man. But try paying attention for once. You might just learn something.”

With each touch, it’s like she turns my breathing on and off. I can’t take it and stride down the street, ready to demolish something. Never mind a sledgehammer, I’ll use my fists.

Isla catches up. To keep my cool, I tell her the first three steps we have to take to determine if the place is salvageable.

But I can’t stop tracing what she said about there being a first for everything. Yeah, that’s for sure. The way I feel about her, for one. It’s like I’m pushing a boulder uphill even though there isn’t ground above sea level for miles.

If I want to keep my life as is, I can’t let Isla in. But like water finding the path of least resistance, I have a feeling

she'll seep through whatever cracks I have no matter how hard I try to resist and shore up my vulnerable places.

We reach the gate in front of the Driftwood.

“Listen if we're going to work together, you have to cooperate and can't act like a toddler who doesn't want to share his toys.”

“I'm the toddler, Strawberry Shortcake?”

“It's Isla. Can we start over? Try again?” She holds out her hand to shake. “Hi, my name is Isla Courage Pratt. I'm a mural painter and love jumbo cinnamon crumble muffins. I drive an old, beat-up truck, reading is just about as important to me as breathing, and I don't entirely dislike tall men who drive BMWs but know their way around the aforementioned old trucks. It's nice to meet you.” Her eyes sparkle.

My hand slides into hers and my entire life slows down. Past, present, future. I cannot imagine living without this woman by my side. I've never been at a loss for words until now because no way can I tell her that.

At a stage whisper, she says, “This is where you're supposed to introduce yourself.”

I don't. Can't speak. Unable to move. My breath is steady but every other system I rely on is paralyzed because I can't do this the same way I always have.

It's all Isla or it's nothing. No one. A lonely life on that raft forever more.

Lowering her voice to a deeper register, like she's imitating me, Isla says, “Hi, my name is King Royal Your Honor His Heiny the Third Esquire Majesty Sir McMuffin.”

My lips twitch with a smile. “You are ridiculous.”

“I've been called worse.”

“Gorgeous?” I risk asking.

“Coming out of your mouth, that sounds worse than ridiculous. Like an insult. Like seeing something gorgeous

would make your eyes burn. You should come watch the sunset with me tonight. Now that'll be gorgeous.”

“It’s barely past sunrise. Plus, we have work to do.”

“Oh, right. The resort.” She spins in a circle, getting her bearings, points, then thinks better of it. We’re on the sand that blew into the road. Isla loses her footing. I reach for her.

“That’s not a good idea. I might start liking it.” Her cheeks tint pink, suggesting she already does.

“Am I really grumpy and uptight?”

“The manatee in the harbor has better manners than you.”

Maybe I should do something about that.

From her tote bag, Isla pulls out a clipboard, legal paper, and a camera. We spend the entire day combing every inch of the resort, taking photographs, and creating lists of what needs to be done.

Everything.

“This is tedious,” I mutter.

“Then how do you suppose we make this work?”

“Next time, we bring lunch and have a picnic.”

She tucks her chin with surprise. “I like the sound of that. It’s delightful. Lovely. Pleasant.”

“Not words you’d associate with me?” I wager a guess.

Her secret smile answers the question. “It’s almost dinner time.”

“Even better. Meet me at Hidden Hammock Beach in an hour,” I say and start for the gate.

I’m playing with fire here. Isla, the kind of woman whose favorite color is sunshine—morning, midday, evening—is dangerous, and gorgeous, especially for a shades of grumpy and gloomy kind of guy, but maybe that’s changing. Good thing we’re surrounded by water.

Isla



My wardrobe options are limited because I left Charleston in such a rush, so I sneak over to the main house and into Bean's closet. Mr. Edmonton is back, but he mostly stays in his room while he continues to recover.

After trying on three different sundresses, I settle on a pale yellow one with an off-white stitching design along the hem. It's more my sister's style than mine, but it's clean, it fits, and it doesn't look like I'm trying too hard to make this a date.

I've gotten used to Royal's quiet yet commanding presence. He's not the kind of guy to put neon paint on a wall. I bet his apartment in Manhattan is monotone and manly. Probably dark wood and stone surfaces.

But there's something about him that I can't resist. It's not that I want to dig deeper until I find something sparkly or soft inside of him. It's not that I want him to change for me, not really. I mean, he could stand to loosen up a little and maybe smile more.

It's more that he's a counterbalance to my chaos. Calm and logical to my, well, me. You might say it's an opposites attract romance situation.

Or perhaps he plans to poison me so I can't conduct my duties as the executress and oversee the repair of the Driftwood Resort.

As I slide on my sandals and head outside, I guess I'm feeling like living on the edge tonight. A pleasant breeze blows from the water as I scoot past Beans & Books, intending

to sneak by undetected. Until I know what this is between Royal and me, I don't want to have to try to explain anything to my sister. She's not the biggest fan of the McGregors, which I'll also have to ask her about later. There are the obvious factors in that they're loud, large, and grumpy at times, but she takes special umbrage with them and I'd like to know why. Perhaps it has something to do with Mr. Edmonton. She's been in and out of his room all day, making sure he has everything he needs and that he's okay.

The screen door opens behind me and Bean calls, "Isla, where are you going? Why are you wearing my dress?"

I wave over my shoulder and say, "I'm out of clothing. I owe you shoes and a dress now. We'll talk later."

Picking up my pace, I cross the street and cut past the Plundering Pelican before the road opens up with vegetation on both sides. Hidden Hammock Beach is a secluded hideaway beyond the cypress and palm trees.

I follow the path until I spot a man seated on a blanket and leaning on a hamper basket while gazing out to sea. The waves lap softly to shore and a seagull makes a pleasant trill overhead. It's a picture-perfect paintable scene except for one thing, I'm not in it.

Not yet.

Royal glances over his shoulder as if checking to see if I'm going to show up—I'm about five minutes late due to multiple wardrobe changes.

I wave and then cross the sand.

He gets to his feet. For a split second, I glimpse a break in his confidence. He wears a boyish smile as if relieved I showed up.

"Hi, Mr. McMuffin," I say.

"Hello, Strawberry Shortcake. I was starting to wonder if I was going to eat these grinders myself."

"Grinders?"

“Yeah, short on time, I couldn’t go off island to get something a little more, um—”

I lift my eyebrows, placing a bet with myself about whether he can say the word. When he doesn’t, I help him out. “Romantic?”

He taps the air with his forefinger. “Yeah. That. I hope you like turkey.”

“Gobble gobble.” I flap my arms a little bit.

He chuckles softly like I’ll never cease to amuse him, and maybe that’s what Royal McGregor needs in his life, a little levity to counterbalance his steely grip of control.

We settle in the sand and to my surprise, he says a soft blessing over the food.

“I figured that was just a Magnus thing.”

“Guess I learned a few things from Chip. Time with God every morning. Scripture before bed. Church on Sundays.”

“Maybe we could go together sometime.” My mother rejected religion, except for the worship of herself and the commune she was a part of. Aunt Olga, on the other hand, raised Bean and me to know how much Jesus loves us. I believe that’s the only thing that saved us from not wandering down the same path as Rainy Blue Moonflower Echo, as our mother renamed herself.

We talk about our faith while we eat our grinders, sip soda, and crunch on plantain chips. Everything about it is so ordinary and perfect. However, the sunset is extraordinary. We marvel at God’s creation. Just before the last of the liquid light disappears beneath the horizon line, I glance at Royal to take a snapshot in my mind because I had an idea for a mural and want to capture him in this moment.

I meet his pewter eyes so I can memorize how this particular light changes them, but neither one of us looks away. My heart hiccups as he leans in a little. I meet him halfway. Once more, we hold each other’s gaze as if we’re challenging each other to break it—daring and defying the

other in the typical Mr. McMuffin and Strawberry Shortcake kind of way.

But instead of pushing back, we move together. Our lips meet at the same time my eyes close, but I keep this particular shade of pewter, sparking with interest and desire, for myself.

It's a soft connection at first, as if we're both testing the waters. Royal's lips stutter against mine as if he's having second thoughts. I pause, inhaling because I'm not so sure this is a good idea either, but I've had worse.

I pull back slightly because I don't want him to ever think of me as a mistake. His lips quirk and then as if he makes a decision and fully commits to this kiss, Royal grips my jawline, drawing me closer.

My heart hiccups as he presses his lips to mine. Warmth whooshes through me and I can't hold back. My fingers slide into his hair. His weave through mine. My palms travel along his shoulders and I press them into the firm plane of his back. His hands travel along the valley of my torso before he grips my waist. It's like we don't know where this kiss began or where it'll end, but we want to explore and enjoy everything in between.

I melt into Royal, never before having given myself over to a kiss like this. It deepens and goes to a new place—one where we can get along, not be at odds, and delight in each other's company. Where he's not closed off, letting me into his private world. As for me, I've been burned countless times by guys, but Royal warms me through—not too hot and not lukewarm either.

Everything about this kiss is just right. No, it's better than just right. It takes my breath away.

And who needs to breathe, anyway? Not me. Not when Royal's lips are on mine.

When we part, we're both as quiet as the stars twinkling overhead. I steal a peek at his profile, trying to gauge his reaction, but he's stationary, made of stone. Patting my hair, I

make sure it didn't become a nest of snakes, making me Medusa.

Still seated, Royal's hands are planted behind him and his legs stretch long in the sand. He crosses his ankles and then finally breaks his silence.

"It had been a while."

I take this to mean he hadn't kissed anyone in a hot minute. "Well, if you're looking for a performance evaluation, I give you five stars. You already have five surly stars and now you get five kissing stars. In some warped way, that kind of balances you out."

Royal transfers his weight to the hand closer to me, lifts his other to my cheek, and says, "I'm not even going to ask what that first part means." Then his lips are on mine again.

I guess I also got outstanding marks in the kissing department, even though it hasn't been that long for me. But I don't want to think about Dax right now.

Nope. This moment belongs to Royal, me, and the stars above.

After smooch number two, we rest on the blanket. Royal remains on his back, gazing skyward, and I tip onto my side, facing him. This time, it's not to study him for a work of art, more like I want to know more about who he is so the outside can reflect the inside when I paint his image.

"So, I'm wondering, where does your name come from? Royal and Ryan."

"My grandfather on my father's side was named Ryan, so my brother was named after him."

"And you?"

"Obviously, I lost the name lottery."

"I think Royal is cool. Makes me wonder about you, Mr. McMuffin, a man of mystery."

He laughs. "I thought I was Mr. McGrumpy. For the record, I don't get involved in emotions."

“You mean you’re a robot?”

“I don’t think even with the most advanced technology, robots will ever be able to kiss like that.”

I flop onto my back with laughter. “Well, don’t you think you’re hot stuff?”

His chest quakes with an identical laugh. “You’re the one who gave me five stars.”

“Grumpy is an emotional state, not a lack of emotion, by the way.”

Instead of arguing with me, he says, “The story behind my name is what you’re after, eh?”

“Just curious.”

“What if I told you I was a prince, royalty?”

“I’d wonder just how heavy your crown is because you’re so grumpy.”

“Ha ha. What if I told you my parents thought Royal sounded good with Ryan?”

“I’d gently suggest that the name has distorted your ego.”

“Are you always so honest?”

“Just with you, it seems. You somehow draw it out of me.”

“What if I told you that I like how you hold your ground with me?”

My heart hiccups in a slightly different way than when Royal gazes at me, we touch, and during the kiss. This is less of a jump rope cardio workout and more like a soft yielding to invite the man closer. “I’d applaud you for letting me be your match.”

The look he gives me makes me think he let down his anchor and plans to stick around. We chat until the moon is high in the sky before packing up the picnic dinner date.

At least, that’s what I think it is because when he walks me back to the guest house, we seal the night with one more kiss.

Royal



After the night on the pull-out couch, Ryan insisted we rent a house while we're here. Not sure how long that'll be. This morning, I was itching to get back to New York City. Tonight, I wouldn't mind staying a while.

The only place we could get on short notice is on the other side of the island. As I drive back, even though it's dark, it's like the light of Isla's megawatt smile shines on me. She's sunshine. Being around her, I need SPF 50, at least.

It's hard not to notice her, her hair, her eyes, and the paint along her cuticles. She smells like summer and the subtle tang of fresh paint. How her arms felt around me when I gave her a piggyback. How her lips on mine breathed new life into me.

Joking around, she asked if I'm a robot. Of course not, but I had a strange thought that I want to show her that I'm human.

When I get to the house, the second-story lights are off, meaning Magnus is probably asleep—he's an early-to-bed and early-to-rise kind of guy. The blue light of the television flashes in the window of the room on the lower level, meaning Ryan is probably still up watching sports highlights. I'm guessing he'll only be here for a few more days because he has a game next weekend, but I want to avoid him all the same.

No sense in him asking where I've been and having to lie. Legally, there's nothing saying I can't be involved with the personal representative of Chip's will, but Ryan will want details, he'll tell the others, and it'll become a *thing*.

The word *romance* was already floated and that's enough for one night.

I creep through the back door and start to pass through the kitchen when the light flicks on.

“Oh, hey. What are you doing sneaking in at—?” Ryan checks the time on his phone. “It's past eleven. Isn't that a little late, little brother?”

“I'm your twin and I don't have a curfew, Dad.”

“Don't let CJ hear you say that.”

“Is he here?”

Ryan points to the ceiling. “He said something about there being trouble in paradise.” With a roll of his eyes, he opens the fridge and pulls out a neon sports drink.

“CJ better not be in my bed.”

Ryan chuckles and then takes a sip from the plastic bottle.

I'm about to go upstairs when he says, “Wait. Something is different.”

I frown. “That our freeloading brother is here?”

“He said he'd chip in.”

“When has he ever?”

“Hold on, though. When you came in, you weren't scowling.”

“Well, I am now.”

“But you weren't before. You were wearing a lazy smile. A specific kind of smile. Royal McGregor, what were you doing tonight?” Ryan wears a knowing smile himself.

With a shake of my head, I say, “None of your business.”

I'm not going to kiss and tell. But in the privacy of my mind, I cannot ignore how kissing Isla made me feel. Her touch slows down time and allows me to breathe easier, more fully. But her lips on mine were something else altogether. She turned down the volume on everything that occupies and

crowds my mind—numbers, clients, and building my Arise Brokerage and Capital empire.

It feels like freedom and I want to come up with every opportunity to do it again and as often as possible.

I could get used to this island life.

Plunking down, because that's not part of the grand master life plan for one Royal McGregor, the Bible Chip left me catches my eye on the counter. Magnus must've been leafing through it.

Parting the cover, it opens to the Gospel of Matthew. Blue pen underlines several lines.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.” (Matthew 13:45-46)

Flipping through the rest of the pages, there isn't another passage that's underlined, anywhere. I take this parable to mean to seek the Godly over the goodly, as in earthly goods. But why would Chip underline this in particular, considering he left it to me? It doesn't make sense because his will is like a treasure hunt. One that my youngest brother hopes leads to gold, pearls, jewels, and gems. It's nothing more than fool's gold.

With a huff, I stomp upstairs. When I open my bedroom door and flick on the light, CJ grumbles and pulls the pillow over his head.

“Out of my bed,” I order.

“It's a king size. Can't I just sleep over on this side? I'll stay on the edge, promise.” His voice is muffled.

Mine is not. “When have you ever kept a promise?”

He bolts upright and tosses the pillow aside. His eyes flame with fury as he gets to his feet. “Royal, I lost them too.”

“Yeah, but you still think they're alive.”

“At least I'm not devoid of hope.”

I shake my head. “It’s a fool’s hope.”

“You can keep trying to cut me down with insults and anger, but I won’t give up.”

“Nope. You’ll just keep coming back like a weed.”

“I will find them.”

“You won’t. Chip exhausted half his resources before he realized he wasn’t going to have anything left and gave up.”

“He didn’t give up and what else are resources for? Squandering them away like Scrooge McDuck?”

“It’s Ebenezer Scrooge and our last name is McGregor.”

“I’m trying to lighten the mood,” CJ says.

“My mood was fine until I found you in here. Why don’t you try to earn some resources,” I use air quotes, “and get a place of your own? Get a job. Make yourself useful.”

“For the record, I have a place of my own. I have a job and I can’t think of anything more useful than trying to find our parents.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“I accept the challenge, Royal. And you can also put it on record that I’m not the only one who hasn’t lost hope.”

I scoff. “You think Emmie believes they’re still alive?”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“That wasn’t an answer. You think Emmie is on your side?”

“This isn’t about sides. We’re a family, and even though you, Magnus, and Ryan had the most time with Mom and Dad, we haven’t forgotten them.”

I’ll have to talk some sense into our sister, but first, I need to get rid of my pesky brother. Before I can tell him to get lost, he storms out of the room.

After a shower, my thoughts slide between Isla and everything CJ said. Between the next months of potentially working on the resort to how I’ll balance that with my career.

The house is quiet, but my thoughts aren't. I try to find that place where Isla slowed time, helped me breathe, and silenced my mind.

Instead, I hear CJ's voice, asking me questions. My thoughts float to Chip's cryptic riddle and the ridiculous stories about pirates and treasure—I'm convinced none of it makes sense because there was often an abundance of rum involved when he'd go off on a tangent about pirates and weave old stories.

When another hour ticks by, Chip's question repeats in my mind: *When right is wrong, what do you do?*

I don't come up with an answer before I fall asleep.

The first thing the next morning, I call Roy, a contractor out of Miami that I know and trust. I ask for an estimate for repairs at the resort. After describing the scope of work, he says that he'll be down here tomorrow. Must've been juicy for such a quick turnaround, meaning the bid will probably contain a lot of zeroes at the end of a very high number.

But 'ole Chip reserved some funds for repairs. Not sure why he didn't do them himself if he had the money, but not much he ever did made sense to me.

Before I get off the phone with Roy, my phone beeps with a text, immediately followed by a call from my assistant Angela.

Switching lines, she tells me there has been a development in the lawsuit that I've been doing my level best to forget about—hence, doing things like skydiving and staying here in Coco Key longer than is advisable.

I'm the plaintiff in the case, but the guy who tried to scam my company is slippery and did a good job covering his tracks. Angela tells me to check my email.

Having studied law and passed the bar, I fully understand the legalese and the content of the email. However, I cannot fathom why I'm reading the name *Isla Pratt* associated with Daxel Norris, the brother of the main defendant.

Hands hammocked on top of my head, I pace the room, trying to make the connections. No, that's not quite right. The connections are there in black and white. However, I don't understand why the woman who dumped a smoothie on me, who I ran into on the road down here, then who read my grandfather's will, and who I kissed last night is involved in one of the largest digital finance scams in history.

I reread the report. It turns out that Gavin Norris's brother Daxel used his girlfriend, Isla Pratt's, home address as the base for their crimes.

The question is: was she knowingly involved? The problem is: would she tell the truth or protect the guy?

My emotions blaze through me like a meteor threatening to scorch the earth.

Worse than a house of cards toppling, sandcastles always wash out to sea.

Erasing what happened last night from my mind, I head over to the Driftwood. Unfortunately, forgetting Isla, or getting rid of her like CJ, won't be as easy.

Wearing a button-down plaid tank top, denim shorts, and work boots, Isla looks ready to take on the day and the jobsite.

"Good morning," she says brightly. "So, is an executor like an executive? I always wanted to be a CEO and have a corner office with a view."

I find that hard to believe.

"Is it like I'm your boss and you're my employee? If so, we need to talk to HR because—" She shimmies her shoulders, likely referring to last night.

"No and no. Listen, this isn't going to—"

Holding the clipboard she used to take notes yesterday, Isla says, "Reminder, Royal is not a morning person."

"I'm not an any kind of day person."

"I'll also talk to HR about company morale because yours is in the morale dumpster." Her voice is bubbly like this is all a

big joke.

“Morale? How about morals, Isla?”

She goes still and shuffles back a couple of steps.

“Why are you even here?”

Her expression falls, but she quickly recovers. “Ah, I see. We’re doing this? Pretending last night didn’t happen.” With a surreptitious look around, she turns back to me and then winks. “Okay, got it. You just go on and keep pretending that I get under your skin and I’ll, well, just be me.” She snickers.

But I’m not joking though. She has gotten under my skin...and inside. She reached a place that I’ve never let anyone go, especially not someone who it turns out is a liar and a thief, and potentially guilty of a crime, and no, it’s not stealing my heart.

“You might like to know that I got a machete and am prepared to hack away at the jungle bits.” She makes a slashing motion toward the out-of-control greenery.

I give her a tightly controlled look.

“I’m kidding. I contacted a landscaper and they’re going to handle the overgrowth so we can have a better look at what we’re working with.”

“I already got ahold of a contractor. They’ll be down tomorrow afternoon.”

Isla bounces on her toes. “So, we’re really doing this.”

“Regrettably.”

“You should probably change out of that suit. Looks like you’re going to a funeral and it’s impractical.” She juts out her elbow and tries to tap mine. I draw away.

“This is what I wear to work and when I’m in the courtroom.”

I’ll drop hints that I know all about her little scheme. I’ll watch her squirm and then surprise her at the hearing. Then she’ll feel as betrayed as I did this morning when I read the report, associating her with Daxel and Gavin Norris.

“You and Magnus seem to have the hardest time loosening up. You ought to wear island-appropriate attire,” Isla prattles on.

I’m not listening. I’m done with her just as quickly as things started.



As the days roll by, I do my best to keep my distance from Isla. I can tell she’s starting to get confused. I’m not fooled that easily. Granted, I thought the run-in at the Smoothery was random. The truck stop, a coincidence. The law office, serendipity.

Now, I know the truth. Guess I made an easy and gullible mark.

Not anymore. She gets the cold shoulder. Pure steel from now on. She must get the message because it only takes a few days for her to cool off—probably, she’s getting nervous, afraid that I’m onto her scheme.

I’d been getting my morning coffee and muffin at Beans & Books, but as the days pass, I’m operating at a coffee deficit because she’s been in there early in the morning painting a mural. Working before we meet at the Driftwood.

I can’t stomach the sea swill they call coffee from the Plundering Pelican. As I pass Beans & Books, I spot Isla balanced on a ladder, painting a leaf on the wall when she lifts her cell phone to her ear. Her paintbrush veers away from the outline, sending a scribble across the wall. With a glance over her shoulder as if looking for someone, she hurries to the back of the shop. I doubt she saw me, standing here in the shadow of the awning like a lovesick weirdo, though.

It wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest if she skips town. In which case, she’ll be hearing from my lawyers for impersonating her sister.

However, something pinches inside, redirects my breath, and makes my thoughts rush. But I won’t soften and let Isla’s

touch, her voice, or her lips ever trick me again.

Isla



CHAPTER 15

Like a good little ex-girlfriend who's been burned, I deleted and blocked Dax from my life. I erased him from my phone and social media. After kissing Royal, I'd done a decent job of forgetting about him entirely.

Until Royal seemed to have forgotten about me...and Dax remembered my existence. His call was threatening, warning me that if I cooperate with the police, I'll find myself under the sea. My stomach roils with nerves and I pace in the back room at Beans & Books, trying to figure out what to do.

There's no way Dax knows where I am. For now. Taking a deep breath, I focus on what's in front of me. Well, books, Nutmeg, whose slitted eyes gleam in the shadows, and the resort restoration project. We're supposed to meet with an online news outlet, showcasing local events and reports with a splashy article about the big Driftwood makeover.

But my mind scrambles and not only because Royal must've decided that kissing me was a mistake. The morning after, I thought he wanted to play it cool so his brothers didn't give him a hard time or to prevent things from getting tricky with the will and resort project.

I gave him some grace as the day passed and he remained distant, cold. The next morning, I thought perhaps he was experiencing a caffeine deficiency, so I brought him a coffee and some treats from Beans & Books. He said he didn't want it and threw it in the trash.

Now, today, he won't even speak, never mind look at me. I'm a keep-my-chin-up kind of person, but I wouldn't mind burying my head in the sand right now and pretending that none of this is happening. It's bad enough that my ex is after me, but now the guy who I thought might be my *next* won't even acknowledge me.

The curtain to the back room swishes open at the same time someone says, "Boo."

I jump at least six inches off the floor and bonk my head on some books. Nutmeg also startles and streaks out of the room. But it's just Bean, wearing a smile. At least I have her.

"So, you and Royal, huh?"

Never mind. Return to sender. There's no one by that name at this address.

She waggles her eyebrows.

"What do you mean?"

"I see the way you look at each other."

"You mean with raw, unadulterated hatred."

Bean's eyes widen and her jaw lowers toward her chest. "I must have a dictionary around here somewhere, but last I checked the definition of hate is not the same as the heat that radiates between you two."

"When was the last time you saw us together?"

"Yesterday when you were walking back from the resort."

"You mean when he was jogging ahead, trying to lose me like a stray dog?"

"I mean the way he watched you walk away. You probably couldn't see because of the glare on the glass, but that big window in the front provides a front-row view of most everything that happens in Coco Key."

"If that's the case then you'd know that ship has sailed."

"So, there was a ship?"

“No, there was never a ship. I said that wrong. I’m the executioner. I mean executor. Said that wrong too. Trust me, I’m taking one for the team, sis, considering that was supposed to be your job. Royal McGregor is no day at the beach. No picnic.” A little sigh escapes when I think about our grinders on the beach.

“What was that?”

“Nutmeg hissing at something?” I stiffen, afraid it could be the enemy, aka Dax, tracking me down. In that case, I’ll owe Nutmeg treats for life.

“No, that was you letting out a little sigh. A swoony sigh? A lovelorn sigh? A sigh that’s the sound of a heart in need of soothing?”

“Bean, you’ve read way too many romance novels.”

“Mostly, I read legal documents, but I do cleanse my palette with a happily ever after from time to time.”

“Listen, Royal is a mood. The man only has one setting and it’s to scowl. At me. It’s like his life mission.”

“Getting a rise out of you? Sounds to me like he’s emotionally immature and trying to get your attention.”

“No, it’s definitely not that. We’re well past that phase. He had my attention. Made it clear he didn’t want it. He’s smug. Arrogant. Dumb.”

“Dumb?” Bean asks as if this simple word has more significance than meets the eye.

I cross my arms in front of my chest and pout.

“The last time you called a boy dumb was in fifth grade when Benny Gallegos kissed you on the cheek and then stole your lollipop right out of your hand.”

I point toward the door. “Oh, look, something shiny.”

Bean’s gaze doesn’t waver from me. “You should’ve said my book boyfriend just strode through the door bearing chocolate. That would’ve gotten my attention. But I don’t

think a book boyfriend or chocolate is the issue at hand.
Question: Do you think Royal is attractive?"

"All the McGregors are. It's in their DNA."

"But Royal specifically?"

"No, he's gross and dumb."

Bean laughs. "I see how it is."

My phone beeps and I startle.

"Waiting for a message from Mr. Love Muffin?"

I cock my hip as I pull my phone out of my back pocket.
"No, Bean. That's Jackie."

"Jack Caruso? You guys are still in touch?"

"And he's still asking for your number."

"If you gave it to him—"

"No, silly. That's why he texts *me*." I let out a sigh, trying to recalibrate post-Royal's dismissal, Dax's missile aimed in my general direction, and Bean's allegation that I like the grown-up man who kissed me then may as well have stolen my lollipop."

Jackie messages, saying he found me someone to date.
Bean reads over my shoulder.

"Haha. Jackie Boy. I won't be dating today or ever again,"
I say as I rapidly type.

Bean reads his reply. "It's a guy from college. He just got some troubling news and could probably use a distraction. You're the best distraction on the market.' This is true," Bean affirms. "I've hardly gotten anything done since you've been here."

"Oh, except score that coffee deal and wait on Mr. Edmonton hand and foot. Also, let's not forget the amazing mural that's in progress out there."

"Fair point. And for the record, I don't wait on Mr. Edmonton hand and foot. I'm of service."

"Like indentured servitude."

“No, Isla. Of service, like how we’re called to help people. He doesn’t have a family. I don’t either except you.”

What she’s saying becomes clear. “Oh, you think of him like a grandpa?”

She lifts and lowers her shoulder. “I make sure he doesn’t miss his appointments. Plus, I like his old war stories—and the romantic entanglements—even if I’ve heard them a dozen times.”

I nod, understanding what she means. From what I’ve gathered, Chip was quite the character, yet the McGregor brothers got caught up in their lives and seemingly forgot about him. I don’t like the idea of leaving a loved one lonely like that. We were with Aunt Olga until the very end even though she was crotchety and would make us reheat her borsch every two minutes, complaining that it wasn’t hot enough even though it was molten.

My phone beeps again. “Oh, here it is. The request.” I flip the screen so my sister can see.

She reads, “Request #392: Can I have Robyn’s number?” Her nostrils flare. “No. If you dare share it with him—”

“That number three hundred ninety-two isn’t an exaggeration. If I can resist almost four hundred times, I think I can keep your digits to myself one more time.”

Bean gives me a narrow-eyed look of warning and exits to the front of the shop.

Jackie commented on how his friend is in trouble. Join the club, buddy buster. And I have a lot of distractions. Okay, perhaps that is an overstatement. My distraction is singular, but man, oh man, there’s a lot of Royal.

“I don’t have any customers. Let’s go find you something to wear,” Bean calls.

The door jingles and relief sweeps through me. I don’t want to go on a blind date even though most of Jackie’s friends are good-looking. So is he, which is why I’ll never understand why Bean won’t give him a chance.

I wander to the front of Beans & Books only to see Magnus walking away with a paper cup and a paper bag in hand. If he overheard any part of our conversation, he's the least likely McGregor brother to report back to Royal.

As I inspect the progress on the mural, including the spot where my paintbrush swerved off course when Dax called, I get a flash of brilliance. "Bean, why don't we swap? You go on this date for me like I helped you out with the will and pretended to be you?"

"What's the swap?"

"Um, I'll hang out here and eat chocolate."

"No. Jack thought this guy would be a good match for you. Wait. Don't tell me he introduced you to Daxel?"

"No and let's never speak of him again."

Bean straightens, then punches the air. "Do I need to bust out my sister bear gloves?"

"No, but you could go on this date for me. You still owe me. I could go to jail. That's what Royal said."

She winks. "Sure. Yep. I'm sure that's what he said and a lot more. Love bird jail."

"You need to get out more, which is why you're meeting Jackie's friend for the blind date."

"Is that so you can meet up with Royal in secret? The flamingos are chirping."

"Flamingos don't chirp. They honk like geese."

She winks. "By that I mean, the flamingos are poised. You'll see what I mean."

"Okay, we are getting your head out of these books. You're not making sense, Bean. And for the record, I am not interested in Royal."

"Prove it. Go on the date Jack set up."

"It's on another island twenty-five minutes away."

"You can take my car."

She plies me with chocolate and I cannot resist. “I’m only going because I haven’t fallen for Royal.”

“Famous last words,” Bean mutters.

An hour and twenty-five minutes later—I definitely dragged my flip-flops, since I ruined Bean’s high heels—my sister pushed me out the door. Next thing I know, I’m seated at a table near a water feature in a swanky resort restaurant. It’s all opulent gloss and manicured shine—if this is what resorts are like these days, the Driftwood has a lot to live up to. Then again, my vision for it, not that it matters, is more of a homestyle place for families. Where guests are comfortable yet not afraid that they might chip the crystal sculpture that looks an awful lot like a sandcastle that a kid would love to climb on.

I wait with water at my place setting because if this guy stands me up, I’m not paying for a fifty-dollar entrée when I could go home and gorge myself on Bean’s chocolate. That woman has an impressive stash in her closet, which is near the AC vent so it doesn’t melt.

Just when I’m about to ask the server if they charge for ice, I catch the scent of spicy, manly, expensive aftershave cologne—I still don’t know the difference. With a glance over my shoulder, a man in a three-piece suit, killer quads, strong hands, a deep tan, stylish and short cropped brown hair, and pewter eyes stares down at me.

“Hello, Mr. McMuffin. What brings you here? Trying to ruin my evening like you did my day?”

“Is this a practical joke?”

“That someone would be interested in going on a date with me? I prefer your stony silence to you slinging insults. I’m here on a blind date, so if you wouldn’t mind, vamoose.”

His gaze darkens. “Strawberry Shortcake, I’m here on a blind date.”

I wave my hand dismissively. “Then shoo. Go find her...” I trail off when I realize what’s happened. “Jackie is not a jokester.”

“Jackie as in Jack Butler? How do you know him? He doesn’t seem like—”

“Like someone who would hang out with me? We go way back and he has a lifelong crush on Bean, so if you’re saying he’s not good enough to be my friend then you’re insulting her and I will knock out your pretty, perfect teeth.”

Royal blinks at me like he’s temporarily lost his vision. He blocks the aisle for the busboy and shuffles behind me.

I crane my head and say, “You’re hovering. Please sit down or go away.”

“Gladly.”

“Buh-bye.”

But before he can disappear, our server comes over and apologizes profusely for making us wait. “My name is Finley Kline and I’ll be your server this evening. Wait. You don’t need my last name. I keep forgetting. I’m nervous.” She leans in and adds, “It’s my last day. I mean, my first day. Hopefully, not my last. I’m saving up for a mission trip and am hoping tips will help. Okay, so what can I get you to drink before I come back to tell you the specials? Wait. I have that backward. First, I get your drinks order and then share the specials so you can think about them while I’m gone.”

I offer her an understanding smile. “I’ll take a lemonade refresher and my dining companion will have the most expensive beverage on the menu.”

Royal glowers.

“Think of this as a business meeting.”

But by the time we’ve placed our orders, we fall into easy conversation as if we forgot we hate each other. Now, we just severely dislike each other, which is an improvement because I don’t want to walk away from this meal with a case of indigestion.

“So, you’re not a morning person, an afternoon person, or an evening person?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re just so cranky.”

“I have a lot going on.”

“Don’t we all?”

Finley brings us three appetizers. I’m going to insist Royal leave her a double tip.

“Thank you. You’re doing great,” I add, recalling the many first days I’ve had on various jobs over the years. “Royal, what do you say to our waitress?”

“Can I get some extra cocktail sauce to go with the shrimp?”

“He means to say thank you and please.”

Her smile wavers as she rushes off.

“You make everyone nervous,” I say, kicking him under the table. Only, I’m wearing flip-flops and he has on wingtips and I instantly regret it.

“But not you,” Royal says.

“You look at everything like you want to stab it. You have a stabby glare.”

Like flicking a switch, he turns it on me. “Is there a guy in this room you’d rather be on a date with?”

I look around out of habit to make sure Dax or his goons aren’t watching, waiting to pounce. “No.”

“Is there someone else in your life?”

“Nope. My grand New Year’s resolution was to enjoy the single life, er, tolerate it.” I let out a sigh, recalling my start to the year. “I was dating someone. Turned out he was a real bum. Betrayed me in more ways than one.”

Royal listens carefully, instead of the typical aloofness as of late like he’s not all that interested in what I have to say and merely tolerates me. He asks, “What attracts you to a guy then?”

I look around the room and my gaze lands on the man in the chair opposite me. Strong thighs, capable hands, a tan,

chiseled jaw...eyes that I get lost in.

No comment.

“What about him?” Royal discretely points to a man with a paunch.

I shake my head.

“Him?” He tips his chin toward a spindly guy that reminds me of a praying mantis.

I shake my head double time.

“What about tattoos?”

“Do you have any?”

“No. Bad boys? Long hair? Scrappy beards? Piercings?”
Sounds like he’s describing Dax.

“No to all of the above. What about you?”

“What attracts me to a woman? Eyes that I could swim in. A touch that slows time. Honesty. That’s all I want.” Each word penetrates a place in my chest, painting a picture that looks a lot like the night we kissed.

“I hope you find her and she makes you very happy.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Only, Royal doesn’t look around the room. His gaze lingers on me as if he’s trying to figure something out.

That makes two of us.

Royal



Isla and I remain at the restaurant until we've sampled three of the desserts—Finley is good at the upsell. My blind date also insists I leave a fifty percent tip, along with a few words of encouragement for the new server.

“You did great. Understandably, you'd be nervous on your first day, but keep in mind the great dining experiences you've had and try to deliver that to your customers.” I sound wooden at first but soon come off as genuine.

“Thank you,” Finley says.

“See? I can be nice,” I say to Isla.

A smile plays on her lips, but she continues to reassure the server. “Your guests are here for an experience, try to read what that is. It comes with time, but some people are jokesters, others want a more formal approach.”

“That's a good tip.”

“You worked for yours tonight,” Isla adds. “I doubt you'll ever have a customer as grumpy as my blind date.”

“Hey,” I say, affronted.

“Seems like you two knew each other before now.”

Our eyes dart together. “Yeah, we did,” we both say at the same time.

“Sounds like a love story,” Finley says.

Isla squishes up her face like she ate a lemon. “Pshaw. It's definitely not that.”

“More like a hate story,” I add.

“Who asked you?” Isla sticks her tongue out at me.

Finley chuckles.

“We’ll be praying for you on your mission trip,” Isla says.

“Godspeed.” The farewell is reflexive, along with the salute.

As we exit the restaurant, Isla says, “Your grandfather wrote that in his letter. What does it mean?”

I shrug. “Something we used to always say by way of departing along with a little salute. We weren’t much for hugging. That was Mom’s department. Then again, you never knew when any one of the members of my family would get you in a submissive jiu jitsu hold.”

“You guys are like ninjas?”

I explain the difference between the martial art and the gentle art.

“Sounds deadly to me.”

“Can be.”

So can Isla’s smile. Her gaze. The way she moves. The way she laughs.

We wander outside and into the balmy night. Isla wears a dress that floats around her thighs. It also shows off the slopes and curves of her shoulders and collarbones. Everything about her is perfect except her sordid backstory involving the guys who tried to rob me blind.

Did she really break things off with Daxel? Earlier, the emotion on her face suggested that she was hurt and that she’s strong and doesn’t want anything to do with the loser. What am I to believe? I could communicate like an adult, but what if I don’t like the answer?

“Thanks for dinner,” she says.

“Glad to help fund a good deed.”

“Yes, feeding me is always a good idea.”

“Do you get hangry like Ryan?”

“No, I’m usually pretty agreeable, but that was the biggest and best meal I’ve had in a while. I typically cook at home, but —”

“But you’re just visiting.”

“For a while.”

My heart pumps like I just took a few flights of stairs. “How long is a while?”

“Maybe permanently.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a plan.”

“I’m helping you with the resort.”

“I’m a lawyer, I’m sure I can find an off-ramp.”

“You really want to get rid of me, huh?” Her smile wavers with sadness.

“No, I just don’t want any complications and you come with a few, Isla,” I say.

“You’re not the easiest nut to crack either, you know. What with the *he loves me-he loves me not* bit.”

“Love? Last I checked we’d only just crawled out of a pit of hate.”

“I meant it as an expression. But we kissed.”

“That doesn’t equate to love.”

“No, but it was quite a kiss.” She blushes, but then her expression drops. “The next day you pretended it didn’t happen. The day after that, you acted as if I didn’t exist. I’m strong, Royal, but you don’t have permission to toy with my heart like Nutmeg and her catnip mouse.”

I scrub the back of my neck with my hand. Isla doesn’t hold back. She doesn’t back down. I want to apologize to her for suspecting that she was trying to defraud or manipulate me, but my middle name isn’t Courage.

The best I can do is apologize. “I’m sorry. I felt the need to create a verbal force field. When that didn’t work, a physical

one.”

I expect her to ask why, but she says, “Your walls are high, Royal. I understand that more than you know, but it can get lonely inside the fortress. You say you stay away from emotions, but like the color wheel, there’s a whole spectrum. Grumpy ones, angry ones, indifference. You’re no stranger to those.”

I let out a long breath, but it doesn’t quite reach the bottom of my lungs because I’m keeping the lawsuit and my knowledge about her connection to Daxel Norris to myself.

“Apology accepted. I’m glad we went on a real date.”

“What was the beach picnic?”

“You’re wearing a suit.”

“I thought you said I need to lighten up, dress more casually.”

“I like you in the suit.”

Warmth creeps up my neck. It’s not every day I receive a compliment from someone as true as Isla Pratt.

“Remember when you asked me what turned me on? A tailored suit, muscles—quads especially—kind eyes that make me forget my name...and a clean kitchen sink.”

I can’t help it. My lips lift in a smile. “Noted.”

“Oh, look. You have teeth!”

“What? How else would I eat? If I recall, you said something violent about knocking them out.”

“It was all in theory. But I saw them just then when you smiled for the first time.”

“Of course I smile.”

“Not until right now.”

“Trust me, I smile.”

“Prove it.” That playful grin plays on her lips again.

“You just saw me smile.”

“For the first time since we met. I guess I understand why you keep that thing hidden.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s lethal.”

I give Isla a long, appraising side eye that’s more dangerous than the upturn of my lips because of the places it could bring us as I catch her striking blue eyes.

Our gazes dip together.

The corner of Isla’s lip lifts like she knows what I’m thinking.

About her. Always about her. Her eyes, her lips, even her teeth. Her shoulders and soft touch. The brush of her hair against my bare skin. The warmth that emanates from her like she orbits around her own inner sun. Or perhaps she’s drawn me into her gravitational pull.

I smooth a piece of her hair and then polish my palm on her shoulder before tracing my gaze along her collarbones. I arrive at her lips. Two perfect pillows and a gateway to everything I didn’t realize I needed—her voice, the way she conveys her thoughts, insights, smarts, and humor.

And her kiss.

Our heads dip together, our noses skim, and our mouths connect.

The kiss is a waterfall, a natural wonder and awe-inspiring. It’s a refreshing pool, something I didn’t know I desperately needed. A glass of water, quenching my thirst.

It’s all that and more.

Isla has no idea what she gives to me with her lips and I want to give everything I have—anything good about me—to her.

So I do. I’ve been called controlling, greedy, an opportunist, but I put my all into that kiss, giving more than I take because Isla deserves that and more. As she sinks into me,

our mouths melding together, I have a funny thought—giving is even better than receiving.

Even after we part, say goodnight, and go our separate ways, I can't stop thinking about Isla and how she came into my life like a wrecking ball, forcing me to release my grip on control. How good it feels to be with her, to talk to her, and to kiss her.

With that, I slip into sweet dreams that keep me in Coco Key, with her, always.

The next morning, I wander to the kitchen for some cold brew when I find CJ studying a nautical chart and measuring something with a sextant.

“Planning to get lost at sea?”

Without looking up, he says, “Someone's pleasant this morning.”

“Want some eggs?”

CJ glances up and confusion ripples across his face. “Eggs?”

“Yeah. Breakfast. Meal for champions.”

“Sure. That would be great. Thanks. Uh, but why are you being so nice?”

“I'm making breakfast. You're in the kitchen. It would be rude not to offer you some.”

“When have you ever cared about not being rude?”

I think about Isla encouraging me to use my manners last night at the restaurant.

“Also, you're smiling. What's up?” He taps the air with the sextant.

“I'm not smiling.” I crack an egg and see my reflection in the stainless-steel bowl. CJ isn't wrong.

“Ah, now the flamingos make sense. Love is in the air.”

Scrambling the eggs, I say, “You don't make sense.”

“No, this map doesn't make sense.”

“Is that Chip’s sextant?”

“Sure is.”

That reminds me of the bequests. “What’s the Salty Skeleton?”

My younger brother chuckles and goes back to his work. “Hop on board and I’ll tell ya.”

That means he wants me to talk to him about his theories. With a roll of my eyes, I set a plate with some toast in front of him.

“There’s more to the lost crown story, if you want to hear it.”

“Not especially, but I have a feeling you’re not going to spare me.”

CJ hitches a smile. “As you can imagine, with pirates involved, there was a lot of bad behavior. One of Márcia’s grandchildren was kidnapped and became a pirate herself, if the legends are true.”

“Let me guess, you’ve followed in their footsteps.”

“I’m not a pirate, Royal.” CJ’s brow furrows like I’ve read him all wrong. “The kidnapped granddaughter, Flávia, was eventually recovered, but the crown was lost and the Almeidas have been seeking it ever since.”

“I take it this includes you.”

“Chip left me with a commission.”

“Well, have fun looking for something that probably doesn’t exist. You realize he told us these stories so we’d have something to cling to after our parents died.”

CJ shakes his head slowly. “There’s a map in three parts. Supposedly, if you put them all together and flip them over, it leads to the Coroa de Lágrimas.”

“I’m the one over here crying at hearing this story again.”

“No, the lágrimas are something else—precious stones, rubies, diamonds, pearls.”

“Dare I ask what you’ll do if you find this crown?”

“First, we have to find the lágrimas, then the map, the treasure chest, and last but not least, the crown itself.”

“Then what?”

“Then I will make things right.”

“You have a vendetta too?”

“Remember what Chip said, *When right is wrong, what do you do?*”

I toss my napkin on the counter and walk off, not willing to think that anything having to do with the story of the lost crown will change my life.

After a shower, during which I think about last night and Isla, I head over to the Driftwood which brings back to my mind everything CJ said. I tell myself it won’t be awkward to work together after the blind date or the kiss. Things are going to be perfectly normal between us.

As I pull into town, I notice a proliferation of flamingos in front of houses and various businesses. To be clear, they’re plastic flamingos. Maybe CJ isn’t as far out to sea as I thought. Cruising past Beans & Books, I decide to stop and see if Isla wants a ride to the worksite.

Her sister tells me she’s not here.

“Where is she?”

Bean shrugs. “I’m guessing she’s still sleeping. She had a hot date last night.” Her tone is one of sisterly protection like she knows I was mean to Isla but doesn’t realize I was the hot date.

“Please let her know I stopped by.”

Bean narrows her eyes with suspicion like she can’t believe the word *please* came out of my mouth.

When Isla doesn’t show up around lunch time, I drive into town for something to eat. And okay, fine, to try to find her.

She's not at the café, the Plundering Pelican, or anywhere else that I look. I'm tempted to contact my brothers so we can do an island-wide search when a palm tree ahead shakes profusely. Concerned it's going to fall across the road or coconuts are going to crash onto my car's hood, I slow down. Squinting, I see a slight figure perched up high in the tree.

Getting out of the BMW, I call, "Isla, is that you up there?"

"No. Not me. Nothing to see here. I'm not stuck."

I stride over there and find Nutmeg, Bean's cat, standing guard at the bottom. Scratching my temple, I mutter, "*Is there something in the air today? Why does everything seem so weird?*"

"Change in the direction of the wind? The tide?" she calls with a shaky voice.

CJ comes across the beach carrying a grubby bag. For a split second, it's like we're kids again, free-ranging adventurers on this island, believing tall tales and searching for pirate treasure.

"Hey, CJ," Isla calls like there's nothing peculiar about her being in the tree.

Before he can reply, a splitting sound rents the air and she squeals before dropping from the tree. I lunge forward, arms extended, and just barely catch her.

Eyes wide, she blinks a few times and then starts laughing.

CJ joins her.

My heart pounds because she could've broken her back. But with Isla in my arms, time slows. My breath comes easily and I realize that she isn't hurt at all.

"You don't seem like you laugh much. This is a moment to laugh. What are the chances that I'd fall out of a tree and you'd be here to catch me?" She's light in my arms. Carefree too. A beam of sunshine on a cloudy day.

"You didn't just fall. You were stuck. But that begs the question, why?"

“Stuck like a cat,” CJ says, eyeing Nutmeg.

“Did she chase you up here?” I’m ready to catch the thing and bring it to Bean with a warning label. Anytime I walk into the café, the animal eyes me like I’m going to rob the joint.

“No, she was my spotter.”

Giving my head a little shake, I’m not sure if I want to know what caused this predicament. “I’m more of a dog guy.”

“Nope. You’re a cat guy,” Isla says.

“One hundred percent,” CJ agrees.

“Independent, finicky, and aloof.”

“Yep, that sounds like my brother.”

I roll my eyes as I set Isla down. No sooner do her feet hit the ground than we’re both instantly drenched when a splash comes from the nearby water.

“Hey, Lola,” CJ calls to the manatee.

“Why does she do that?”

“And what’s with all the plastic flamingos?”

“Stick around for a little while and you’ll find out.” CJ chuckles.

“Coco Key is a cozy town,” Isla says warmly.

“Do you mean nosy? If I didn’t know better, I’d say this cat reports all my comings and goings.” She won’t stop staring at me.

“Sure, there are quirky people, but we look out for each other,” CJ says.

I shake my head. “Bro, leaving and seeing the world could do you some good.”

“Trust me, I’ve seen a lot of the world.”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere anytime soon, I hope,” Isla murmurs.

I remind myself of last night’s conversation and tell myself to believe her and that she doesn’t want anything to do with

her ex, also known as Daxel Norris. I want to believe that our repeated meetings were all just a big coincidence and there's nothing fishy going on. Yet, I'm suspicious. Maybe it's because they both look at me as if awaiting confirmation that I'm here to stay.

"I have work to do, so I'll probably be between here and New York." The court case comes to mind. "But I'll mostly be here overseeing the renovation at the resort."

They both cheer like they were in cahoots to keep me in Coco Key. "Am I missing something?" I ask.

"I was just up there in the poop deck, keeping watch," Isla says.

"For what?"

"Pirates."

I brush my hand across my forehead. "Not this again."

"What do you mean? I was just joking, Royal. I went up there to take a photo because I wanted to try to get a bird's-eye view on the way into town for the rest of the mural at Beans & Books."

"Don't mind Royal. He doesn't like when I talk about our parents," CJ says.

"Where'd that come from?"

"Just a hunch."

"Will you stop?" The brotherly teasing in my tone vanishes.

Isla steps closer to me. "Royal, I lost mine too. Sometimes it helps to talk about it."

"It doesn't help to hope, though."

Isla glances from CJ to me. "That's not true."

I meet her striking blue eyes and in them, I realize what it is about her that makes me breathe easier. Some people gaze toward the future. Others look into the past. But wherever Isla Pratt looks, she sees hope. Hope for me. Hope for us.

Isla



Royal gives me a ride back to town because I promised Bean I'd look after the shop while she takes Mr. Edmonton to an appointment.

I have to admit, I don't mind this little oasis from real life. Charleston is a fun town and I regret having to postpone the murals I'd promised to a couple of businesses and the bus stops, but that wasn't until this summer, anyway.

I could get used to life in Coco Key...and life with Royal. There's a long road ahead of us at the resort too. But it's hard to ignore the niggling in the back of my head about Dax tracking me down and threatening me if I don't keep my mouth shut.

"My lips are sealed."

"Huh?" Royal asks.

"Oh, um, I'm good at keeping secrets if you ever want to talk—things with you and CJ seemed kind of tense." Nice recovery, Isla. I give myself a little mental pat on the back.

He flashes me a look as if to say that's not happening anytime soon.

"And it seems like the neighbors have been wagging their tongues."

"That's an odd expression."

"And so are all those flamingos." I point out the window.

Let it be known that BMWs are luxury vehicles. I feel very fancy and cool riding in it—though my loyalty will forever lie with my trusty Chevrolet. After all, she got me here in one piece, with Royal’s help.

“Is it national plastic flamingo day or something?” he asks.

“No, those are love birds. And it’s love month. I just realized it’s February first.”

Not surprisingly, Royal makes a grunting sound.

“I take your caveman noise to mean that you acknowledge that I said something but aren’t a willing participant in anything that has to do with Valentine’s Day.” As he pulls up in front of Beans & Books, I bounce a little in my seat and then peck him on the cheek. “I plan to do something about that.”

The corner of Royal’s lip lifts in a sweet little smile as if he doesn’t entirely mind catching some of the fallout from my enthusiasm for life but would never admit it.

I lean on the doorframe of his sports car and say, “Thanks for the lift. Oh, and Bean said that the pink flamingos are a system used by locals to indicate love is in the air.”

This time I get a full smile from Royal even though this is another matter of which he will not speak. But I don’t mind because teasing him, pushing him right to the boundary he built that blocks him from emotions and things like love is half the thrill.

After Bean leaves for Mr. Edmonton’s appointment, Nutmeg and I have a stare-off. “I can tell you want me to paint you into the mural, but not unless you have a catitude adjustment.”

Seated on her haunches, she licks her arm.

“Yeah, you heard me. You can’t expect Bean’s business to flourish if you stare at customers like you’re going to use the knives on the ends of your paws to slit their throats.”

She flicks her tail.

“I’m serious. If you’re worried about losing your spot as Bean’s #1, Jackie is her one true love and we both know that’ll never happen, so you get to be queen kitten around here. But seriously, tone down the glares and I’ll add you to the mural.”

Nutmeg struts over to me and rubs her head on my leg. Then, tail high in the air, she disappears into the back room.

Since the café is empty, I climb the ladder and put the finishing touches on the mural, including Nutmeg, lying on a stack of books with the sweetest expression on her face. We’ll see if she keeps her end of the bargain.

No sooner do I sign my name in the corner with a flourish does the door open with a jingle. A slender man with a shovel-like chin and a horseshoe of dark hair on his head comes in and looks around like he routinely inspects whatever room he enters for valuable objects.

“Hello. Welcome to Beans & Books. Can I get you a refreshing beverage or help you find a special book?”

“I am looking for something special. Have any ship’s logs?”

“Um, like boat building?”

With a frown, he says, “Never mind. I don’t know that I’ll find it here.”

Taken aback, I tuck my chin. “Well, I’m going to wash the paint off my hands and then if there’s anything I can do, please give a holler.”

He takes a turn around the room and I notice his expensive, polished leather shoes and the quality linen of his suit.

“Sir, do be careful, the paint on the mural is still wet. I’d hate for you to get paint on it on purpose. I mean, by accident.” I know I shouldn’t profile people, but I don’t like this guy’s vibe.

He gives me a funny look. “You did that?”

“Sure did.”

“I have a wall at one of my properties that could use enhancement. Visitors like to take photos with a unique backdrop. Come by Platinum Shores at nine am tomorrow.”

I open and close my mouth because it was a command rather than a request, suggesting he doesn't think we're on equal footing. I have no problem reminding Royal that we're peers, but this man is on another level—not that he's better than me with his Rolex and pinky ring. But I don't think the word *humility* is in his vocabulary.

“I'll see what I can do.”

“And I'll take a coffee. Don't be stingy with the cream and sugar.”

While I fix his drink, he peruses a nearby shelf, and then as if thinking out loud he says, “If I were shiny and valuable where would I be?”

I pass him the coffee. “Here you go. Are you sure I can't help you find something?”

“You're the girl from the news report helping revitalize the Driftwood, right?”

I reply with a hesitant nod.

Wearing a strange smile, he says, “You may already have.”

As the screen door closes, sending a little breeze my way, I shiver.

But not five minutes pass before a tall and handsome hunk strides through the door with a boyish grin on his face.

“You look like a cat that just ate a canary.”

“Again, weird saying.”

“I was raised by a woman named Olga and hang out with Bean who spends a lot of time with Mr. Edmonton. Could've rubbed off on me.” My jaw drops and I grip Royal's arm as a surge of knowing rushes through me.

“Hold the phone. Olga and Oliver Edmonton were—” I clap my hand over my mouth. “The beach house, er, this

building.” I jog in place and shake my arms. “That’s why Bean must think of him as a grandfather...no, a great uncle.”

Royal stares at me like I’ve lost my coconuts. Nutmeg glares like I’m embarrassing her.

“But why didn’t she tell me?” I spin in a circle as if my sister will appear. Then like a sleuth, I pace as if I’m about to break down the case and piece together how I figured out that my great aunt and the town lawyer were lovers. Okay, that’s a tad dramatic because the only thing warm about Aunt Olga was her borsch, but still. Companions.

Royal gazes at the mural and then grips my upper arms. “You’re making me seasick.”

“But I just solved a mystery I didn’t even know existed. Just call me Sherlock Pratt.”

His pewter eyes blink slowly as if taking me in.

“You’re looking at me like you’re trying to decide whether you want to be along for the ride. Of course, you do!” I sling my arms around his neck and then like I’m launching myself over a track hurdle, I leap into Royal’s arms.

He readily cradles me there. “As long as you keep still for a minute, sure.”

“Do you actually get seasick?”

Royal tips his head to the side as if reluctant to admit it.

“But you grew up here, right? We’re surrounded by ocean practically on all sides.”

“And my brothers and Chip never let me forget it.” The way he says the words makes me think that it wasn’t a small thing and whatever they said made him feel excluded like he didn’t quite measure up to their seafaring expectations.

“Well, we can stay on dry land.”

“I can handle rafts, kayaks, paddle boards, and big boats like yachts—most of the time. But medium craft with the churn and the chop—” Royal turns a faint shade of green as if the mere thought makes him ill.

He sets me down and my heart hiccups like it doesn't like the space now between us.

"I got you something." Royal opens his palm to reveal a disk drive, like the kind that stores data, music, or photographs.

I turn it over in my hands like a treasure because, let's face it, Royal doesn't seem like the type to give things away.

"I had my drone from the skydiving trip and took some footage out by the tree where I found you earlier. Captured the road into town all the way out to the peninsula. Figured it would help you and we could use some of it to track our progress on the resort."

"A little before and after action?" Seems my guy is going through a transformation of his own. I squeeze my arms around him. "Thank you. This is going to be awesome. I have a special surprise too. But my lips are sealed." I wink.

As if words of praise and recognition aren't Royal's love language, he turns to the painting on the wall. "You said you just paint murals. Isla, this is a work of art. The way you made it look like the books washed to shore and the dock built of books, and the cat mermaid—?"

"Oh, that's nothing."

"It's magnificent."

Maybe my love language is words of praise, at least when coming out of Royal's mouth. He's usually so set on looking like he's going to destroy everything in his path—what with the full-lipped pout and those pewter eyes—when he likes something he sees, it's refreshing, a small miracle.

I pour us each an iced tea then drop into the loveseat. Turns out that painting and solving small-town mysteries that I didn't know existed is exhausting.

Royal joins me. Because the plush chair is so smooshy we kind of sink together at the seams. I let myself lean into him because I can't get enough of the heart hiccups at his touch.

He continues to take in every detail of the bookish seascape design. “You’re talented. Wow.”

“Careful with those compliments, Royal.”

He angles to face me as if seeing a new side of Isla Pratt—not just a goofball bundle of sunshine, but a real artist. My mother’s opinion of me would’ve mattered. Bean’s opinion definitely does, and so does Royal’s, as it turns out. I want him to see and know that there are various dimensions to me, not just a woman who fled Charleston because of a bad boy decision. ...And I’m starting to believe that Royal was the best one I’ve made in a long time.

“Everything I said is true,” he says.

“It’s better you don’t give me the wrong idea.”

“That you’re immensely talented?”

I playfully swat him. “Stop being so nice. I might just start liking you.”

His eyes dip to my lips. “What if I told you that—?”

“What are you love birds doing in the loveseat?” Bean stands in the doorway of her shop, but instead of the sharp brow of an angry parent scolding us, a smile plays on her lips.

Nutmeg stands at her side looking rather smug, though, as if she’s just waiting for us to be told there won’t be any dessert with dinner tonight.

“Look, I painted your cat.”

My sister glances down at her feline.

“No, I didn’t paint the actual cat. I added her to the mural.”

I catch Bean’s grin as I grip Royal’s hand and we run out of the shop like two teenagers almost caught smooching. We don’t stop until we’re at the end of the dock. We drop to sitting, letting our toes skim the water.

“Sorry about the abrupt departure, but I didn’t want to miss out on this,” I whisper before bridging the space between us.

We kiss and it's as spectacular as the first time. Kind of like how seeing fireworks never gets old or how I'd never tire of eating ice cream.

However, whereas at the start of our initial kiss, Royal was hesitant, now he's sheer confidence, a man who knows what he wants and how to get it. The thing is, in this short time, he's figured out what I want—how I like when his fingers thread in my hair, the gentle press of his thumb along my chin, and the exact moment to switch sides before my neck gets tired.

A smile on my lips builds toward a laugh, but I hold back.

His mouth goes still and he asks, "What?"

"Who knew this could be so perfect?" I say.

Royal chuckles. "Not me. Not even close. Yet you're right. It is perfect."

We return to the kiss and it intensifies as if we each want to catalog the exact ways we fit together, complement each other's contours, and know the precise measure of when to give and when to take.

When we part, I say, "Thanks for what you said about my painting. It means a lot. It's nice when strangers admire my work, but it's extra special when someone who knows me sees that side of me."

I briefly recall the man who stopped by and practically ordered me to paint a mural at his resort. Then again, if it's a Platinum Property, he'll get the platinum price and I sure could use the cash.

Royal smooths a loose piece of my hair between his fingers. "You don't seem like the kind of person who is ever at a loss for words."

"Are you saying I talk a lot?"

He smirks. "But I see something else translated into the paint. Things that maybe you can't say out loud."

My eyes prick and I instantly remind myself of the rule: Pratt girls don't cry. "Funny you say that, because for a long time I believed that if I painted enough, I'd remember more

about my mother. All our family photos were destroyed in the fire.” I go on to tell him about how my mother was part of a commune.

“Bean and I have different fathers. We need knew them. They were doing some kind of ritual or something and a fire broke out—I was too young to understand the details and quite frankly, don’t really want to know. Our mom didn’t make it. A firefighter rescued Bean and me.”

We’d been talking, but I don’t need to hear words of consolation right now. Somehow Royal knows that and pulls me into a hug instead. He takes the deepest breath like the ocean itself is inhaling. When he lets it out, flattening his chest, I exhale too and sink a little deeper into his embrace.

When we part, I say, “What about your parents?”

“My mother was a librarian and Dad was an art history professor. Though CJ would tell you otherwise.”

“What would he say?”

“We don’t listen to CJ. But we lost them to a boating accident. My brothers and I were always different from each other—opposites in many ways. We were competitive too. But tight-knit. It was family first. Then everything changed. They’re not coming back and CJ is an idiot for thinking otherwise.”

We gaze out toward the water. I find Royal’s hand and weave my fingers between his, giving a squeeze. Though I’m afraid if I let go, I could lose him too.

Royal



CHAPTER 18

If this were one of Chip's games of chess—the regular kind and not the one with the giant chess pieces—I'd like to wipe the pawns off the board. Those represent the nonsensical content of his will, the riddles and rhymes because there is no reason. There never was.

The rook is the ongoing legal case against the Norris brothers.

The bishop is Gerome Glandman who repeatedly tries to ruin my family.

I'll keep the knights, my brothers, even if we hardly get along.

That just leaves the king and queen. The thing is, I'm afraid that Isla is drawing me in and I'll be trapped. Once the king is captured, that'll mean game over.

She and I are at the rental house, waiting for a storm to blow by the massive windows that span three walls overlooking the water. Magnus left the TV on after watching Ryan's game. The Miami Riptide, his team, won. They always do.

Isla has become increasingly interested in the contents of my grandfather's will, which makes me question my assessment that she doesn't have anything to do with Gavin and Daxel's crimes.

Perched on a counter stool with the wall of windows overlooking the water at her back, Isla is a pretty silhouette.

An innocent one at first glance. But I never know who I can trust.

“So, tell me about your job,” she asks.

“It’ll bore you.”

“Then spice it up. Do you have high-powered executive meetings where you crush your enemies with your whiplash words of witty intelligence?” She leans her knuckles on the counter as if lording over a team of employees. “Watson, I wanted those reports yesterday. Explain exactly what Chip meant by the matches and the cleverest needing humbling.”

I don’t want to think about the will—second to Isla, it’s all I’ve been thinking about lately. And I don’t know. I don’t have answers. I have no idea what Chip meant about *When right is wrong, what do you do?*

Instead, I say, “You think I’m the cleverest?”

“Of course. Chip did too. He wrote, ‘The youngest would sooner dive than the shallowest go deep. But neither will find what they seek without the strongest softening and the cleverest humbling.’ If I’m not mistaken, he was suggesting a certain twin was in need of humility.”

“I’m plenty humble.”

“Yeah, and I’m a millionaire. But what do you think he meant by starting on the eighteenth? That’s a few days after Valentine’s Day.”

“If you’re hinting that you’d like chocolate, I’ve already talked to Bean.”

Isla bounces over to me and wraps her arms around my neck. “Humble and romantic. Ooh la la.”

I grip her arm and make a pathetic attempt to loosen it. “I detect sarcasm.”

She winks. “Maybe so, but not criticism.”

The TV blares the news in the background, and I want to shut it off, but Isla gazes into my eyes. Hers are bright today, sparkly despite the storm raging outside.

My gaze drops to her lips, but instead of moving in for a kiss as I expect, she says, “And what do you suppose he meant by avoid the sand and, well, the rest of it?”

I give my head a little shake, prepared to bore her with anything other than the stupid letter from Chip. “I majored in law and minored in finance. I have a mind for numbers, but lived for the thrill of the judge dropping his gavel.”

“Have you read the Bible?” she asks.

I blink a few times. “In its entirety? No.”

“I meant have you looked at the one Chip left for you.”

With a shrug, I nudge it across the counter toward her. It’s thick and leatherbound. Isla lifts the cover with care, reverence. I half expect a moth to flutter out, the thing is so old. A faint smile traces across her lips as she skims her finger along the inner cover.

“It’s hard to believe this survived so long. I mean, it’s not because it’s the living truth of God’s breathed word. But I mean this particular copy, having belonged to João and Márcia Sousa. They had five children.” Isla tries to pronounce their Portuguese names.

Not going to lie, it’s adorable.

Then I do a double take, a double listen?

“Wait, the Bible has my great, great, grand something’s names in it?” Peering over Isla’s shoulder, I read through the genealogy, confirming CJ and Magnus’s accounts of our ancestors is correct. João and Márcia and five children and numerous grandchildren, including Flávia. She had two children, Carlos and Lorena.

My voice is a whisper when I say, “That makes Flávia my grandfather’s mother, my great grandmother.”

“Maybe the story of the lost crown of tears isn’t so farfetched,” Isla says.

Snapping to, I give my head a little shake. “No, it’s nonsense. This record of my family’s genealogy doesn’t confirm much of anything.” I don’t mention how I’ve been

pondering the underlined passage from Matthew for weeks now. There's something there that my grandfather wanted me to see. No matter how hard I squint at the horizon, I just can't spot it.

Isla rolls her eyes like she's merely entertaining my disbelief. "Okay, numbers guy, what do you think Chip meant by the eighteenth?"

Ignoring the repeated inquiry and what it might mean if, like CJ, she's sniffing around for treasure, I continue, "I'm a self-made man. Worked hard and saw to it that justice was served every day because losing my parents felt incredibly unjust. I couldn't stop and wouldn't stop taking cases because if I won enough—"

Isla's eyes are wide, her expression pinched with concern.

I've said something out loud that I shouldn't have. Revealed too much of my interior. In that same letter she references, Chip said to keep my wits.

"But you no longer practice law."

I keep my lips zipped, but winning cases was a hedge against further loss in my life. Being that busy kept my family at length.

Instead, I tell Isla, "I went to Wall Street. I was better with numbers than keeping track of the ever-changing statutes and codex. Numbers don't shift course midway through a case."

"Do you mean codex like codes? Do you think what Chip wrote were codes or clues?"

"No, he just liked to mess with us. It was a sport to him, really. Send us on quests with riddles and maps."

"As a lawyer, if you're familiar with wills and such, why didn't you stop me from embarrassing myself when I read your grandfather's?"

"My focus was on corporate law." On that day not long ago, my attention was on the injustice of my grandfather tricking us into attending what amounted to his funeral, rather than sparing the messenger embarrassment. Funny, how now

that's flipped. I'm less angry now and more just want to rebuild the resort because it could prove to be a lucrative investment. Then I'll move on with my life—with or without Isla in it.

I look for the controller to turn off the television and ask, "Let's talk about painting. If you could paint anything, what would it be?"

At that exact moment, a reporter says the name Gavin Norris. My gaze snaps to the TV. He says that Gavin was found dead in an alleyway outside a club last night. "His brother Daxel, also involved in the ongoing investment fraud scheme, was not available for comment."

Isla gasps.

This is quite a development and I should be on the phone with the legal team, but I whip my head in Isla's direction.

"Everything okay?" I ask, giving her a chance to confess.

"Yeah. Sorry, there was a big wave and the wind, a tree." She points and then fidgets nervously.

"Isla, is there's something you want to tell me...?"

"No, it's fine. But I should head back to Beans & Books. My sister is probably wondering where I am."

I can't help but fear that she's not the only one, yet the fact that she won't trust me enough to confess that she knows those guys makes me suspicious.

Isla is quiet on the ride into town and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek before scuttling into the bookstore.

The queen on the chessboard closes in on me. I haven't puzzled out what she could possibly want, other than money, but if that's the case, she's playing well. Dare I say expert level.

Isla had me fooled.

My thoughts darken as I cruise over to the resort where work is on pause because of the bad weather. A sleek black sedan winds down the road. I narrow my eyes, but the rain

drives down too hard and the windows are too dark for me to see the driver or any passengers. When I glance in the rearview mirror, the license plate says, *The Man*.

“Glandman,” I hiss. What was he doing poking around up here? If I know anything about his intentions, they’re always good for him, bad for everyone else.

A staggering thought makes me swerve. I took a survey class in college when determining my direction in law. My knowledge of wills and trusts is rusty, but it’s very likely he received a copy of Chip’s will since he was named as a potential recipient, should my brothers and I renege on our grandfather’s wishes.

Isla commented that the will could’ve been code and, of course, I’ve given it thought. The old man couldn’t speak straight whether in Brazilian or English. It was maddening. Getting dessert after dinner on Sunday was a scavenger hunt of riddles, puzzles, and solving mysteries.

He told us he wanted to teach us to earn everything in life, especially the extras. All I earned was the family Bible and a book of matches, along with a major renovation project.

“Whoop-de-doo.”

If I were interested in a multi-million-dollar rehab, I could’ve taken one on myself at a property with fewer memories and associations.

I suppose I could go check out the Mermaid’s Chest, see if it’s still standing. Coming to a stop, I do a search on my phone, but the results say the old tavern closed years ago due to storm damage. Guess I won’t go over there to find pearls of wisdom haunting the two barstools Chip and I occupied all those years ago.

As I loop the road that winds around the Driftwood, I near the Frigate, the name for the house where Chip lived. Although, CJ said he had been staying in the Brigantine when he passed. My brothers and I lived in a building called the schooner, a smaller boat.

I'm sure they're equally thrilled about their inheritances. Magnus got a pocket knife and a pillow. Chip left Ryan a journal and a pen with a plume. I wouldn't be surprised if the guy forgot how to do anything with his hands except throw a football. That leaves CJ with the sextant and the Salty Skeleton, whatever that is.

I get out and explore the main building, the Galleon.

Not only did Chip supposedly seek treasure from sunken ships, he salvaged the boats themselves, including the bells, masts, canons, and wheels, among other things—all of which he used to construct this building, along with vast quantities of driftwood. It's like a Disney film set dream, only it's real life.

Even though the Galleon has seen severe storm damage, as I look around and up—at the main mast that reaches toward the stained-glass ceiling—I never quite appreciated the clever architecture. It's like I'm on a boat, but lucky for this guy—who didn't inherit the Almeida or the McGregor sea legs—I'm on solid ground.

Skepticism replaces the curiosity weaving an infinity loop in my mind. That was the thing about Chip, he always kept us guessing. No straight answers. Only winding roads that doubled back and clues without maps.

He never said, *Sorry, boys, your parents are dead.*

Instead, he alluded to them being gone for a very long time. He used analogies and symbolism. Some might argue, because of our various ages, he was trying to soften the blow. However, not having a definitive answer and hearing the harsh but black-and-white truth, made living the reality without Mom and Dad even harder for me.

I exit the building, wondering what the point of it all was. Chip wasn't cruel, intending to hurt me. He was eccentric, caught up in his quest, and we were just members of the crew—at least it felt that way.

But the personalization in the will suggests he did know us, maybe in ways we don't even know ourselves. At least not yet.

Heavy with thought, I return to the car. As I pass through town, my gaze travels to the soft glow from inside Beans & Books. Things with Isla and me could be great. But we don't have enough in common. She's a ball of chaos, and she's connected to the recently deceased defendant in my legal case.

I spot her in the café, talking animatedly to a spindly, bald man. A man whose sleek sedan idles across the street. The license plate says *The Man*.

My chest threatens to crater at her betrayal, but I push against it, stuffing it down to fester, just like Isla warned against.

Not only is she involved with Daxel Norris, but now is she making friends with Glandman, my family's biggest rival? I should've known better than to wade into the water with her.

When I get back to the rental, Magnus packs his bags.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"Why'd you ask that like I did something to upset you?" His tone suggests he didn't appreciate my rude and accusatory tone. The kind Bean might use if she discovered all her chocolate missing—the woman loves the stuff and so does her sister.

Which is exactly why my tension is ratcheted up to a breaking point.

"Is this about Isla, Glandman, or something else?" Magnus asks, as perceptive as ever. I'm convinced the guy has eyes on the back of his head. Intel everywhere too.

"All of it. She sees the world differently than I do," I say, starting with Isla without meaning to. If things were good with her at the moment, the rest would be more bearable.

He nods. "She looks through rose-colored glasses."

"Paint splattered rose-colored glasses."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"It's not practical."

Magnus shrugs. “Is it any better than seeing the world through a brick wall?”

“I don’t—”

“You think everything is a wall.”

“I’m not the one who goes around smashing things.”

“Only the bad guys, Royal.”

“You say that like I’m one of them.”

He shakes his head slowly. “Nah, but sometimes you’re your own worst enemy.”

“Why don’t you butt out of other people’s business like an old goat.”

He squints because that wasn’t my best line and I can’t afford that. But I’m off my game. I blame Isla. “She keeps asking about Chip’s will.”

“Not surprising. She was there. It’s an unusual but not entirely surprising thing—our grandfather leaving us a puzzle to solve or else all his treasure goes to Glandman.”

“I saw him earlier.”

Magnus nods as if he already has eyes on the guy, tracking his movements, and is ready to fire a proverbial shot if necessary. “Glandman isn’t getting a penny of Chip’s money. Not a splinter of wood from the resort. Not a grain of sand from this island.”

“You and whose army is going to stop him?”

My tactical, stoic brother laughs dismissively. “I don’t need an army.”

“Then how are you going to stop him?”

“You started it.”

“Started what? A war?”

“You might say that, but not everything has to be you against us. You *started* to repair the resort as instructed. We’re not going to forfeit or fail to fulfill Chip’s wishes,” my brother says as if my involvement was half the battle.

My gaze floats over to the Bible, still on the counter. “Yeah, well, I assure you nothing has become of the Bible or the bonfire or whatever else he meant in his letter.”

“You sure about that? Because if I’m not mistaken, that woman with the paint-splattered rose-colored glasses has served up the cleverest brother a slice or two of pie.”

He doesn’t need to add the word *humble* pie for me to know what he means. I’m an investor, not a gambler, and shouldn’t have taken this risk with Isla. I shouldn’t have come here. Shouldn’t still be here.

These thoughts burn me up inside. With a fiery glare cast in Magnus’s direction, I grab the Bible and stomp upstairs. I don’t come down until I hear his truck drive away. And when I do, I locate a lighter and newspaper. I’m going to set the past—both recent and distant—alight.

After building a bonfire on the beach, I light the single match from the Mermaid’s Chest matchbook and toss every thought of mine into the blaze. In goes my grandfather’s wishes and the foolish treasure hunt he set my brothers and me on in the will. The kindling between Isla and me goes into the flames, sending them higher. I don’t believe in love. I never will. Opposites don’t attract. They repel, and I cannot have that woman in my life.

The fire roars and every time I think about my parents, the will, or Isla, I stare into the flames, burning everything away, including love.

I remain there until I’m nothing more than an ember, letting the fire take everything, including my last remaining slivers of hope.

Then in the dying firelight, my thoughts return to the family Bible—the genealogy and the passage from the Gospel of Matthew. When I get back to the house, I open it. After scanning the family tree, printed on the inside cover, I return to Matthew’s passage. My grandfather left this for me as a reminder of what’s truly important, or rather, *Who*—our Lord God and my family.

I'd venture to guess at times in his life Chip put the treasure hunt above all. That's why I don't want anything to do with it. If it's even real. My thumb holding the Bible's pages slips and they all flip to the left.

Wedged against the spine is a folded piece of paper. I open it to see a faint sketch of a crown, tipped with three "tears," one of which is a pearl, reminding me of the conversation in the law office about pearls of wisdom and the parable with the pearl of great price, and that everything comes with a price.

Message received, Chip.

Portions of the conversation he had with me at the Mermaid's Chest return to me like tattered pages from my very own book—one I thought I'd kept in pristine condition.

Chip had asked me what I was willing to pay for success? He told me that nothing was worth more than my relationship with God and our family. He told me to be the glue—to be sure we stuck together no matter what.

Problem is, I don't think he picked the right man for the job.

Isla



Tomorrow is Valentine's Day and I'm so excited, I just can't hide it. I sing along with my own lyrics to the song on the radio. I'm in the kitchen at Beans & Books, shaping the last clump of the rice crispy treat mixture into a heart. All I have left to do is drizzle them with chocolate and dust them with little pink and red sprinkles.

Who's the Valentine's Day queen? That would be me. Even though Royal isn't particularly romantic, he won't be able to help himself when he tries one of these. By help himself, I mean repay me with kisses.

The guy isn't particularly talkative—though he's not nearly as quiet as Magnus. Nor is he in touch with lovey-dovey feelings, but the man can kiss. Maybe that's his love language. Translating what he can't put into words into the best, deepest, most generous kisses on the planet.

We haven't seen each other since the day of the storm at his place when I panicked after seeing the news report about Gavin's death. But I cannot stop thinking about Royal's lips on mine.

I've been trying to live in this little island bubble and leave the bad decisions of previous relationships behind me on the mainland. While Gavin's death is tragic, it's no secret that he had a lot of enemies. I just hope Dax doesn't come to me for consoling—he's the last person I want to see.

With music playing, I bop around the kitchen, excited to shower my sweetheart with love. Giving my eyes a little roll, I

can't believe I went from dating a loser like Dax to finding a winner like Royal. He's the embodiment of confidence and cleverness. Sure, he could use a little humility, but we'll work on that.

I should be warm and fuzzy all over, overflowing with love as I lick the chocolate off the spatula after I'm done with the drizzling, but two things linger in the back of my mind.

Dax's brother was found dead, which is tragic and I feel bad. But it's not my problem. However, a little itch that's just out of reach reminds me that my ex has a way of making things my problem, like the not-so-little issue of using my address as the site of his criminal activity. And let's not forget the quite big issue of the almost-forgery.

Then there's Gerome Glandman, the McGregor brothers' family enemy and rival resort owner, who wants me to paint him a mural. He stopped in the café earlier, inquiring why I haven't gotten started.

When he told me how much he'd pay, I had to pick my jaw up off the floor along with a stack of books Nutmeg sent scattering when Mr. Glandman came in. Her fur stood on end and she hissed before dashing away—not holding up her end of the agreement from when I painted her into the mural on the bookstore's wall.

“Thanks for nearly ruining my chance to make some money, Nutcase,” I whisper to the cat in case Bean is nearby.

I still haven't committed to the mural at Platinum Shores, but the offer stands. Would I be a fool to say no? But I don't want to think about that right now. The stress of the dual situations presses against me from both sides like two moldy slices of bread, sandwiching me in the middle.

Moving on, I go over my surprise plans for Royal tomorrow. He's going to love the rice crispy treats and the little adventure around the Keys that I have planned—we're going to play tourists and see some sights. I bounce on my toes and then clean up.

After putting everything away, Bean comes into the small kitchen area having locked up for the night. “I see Cupid has been hard at work back here.”

“Just a little sweet for my sweetheart. Also, there are extra if you want to give one to Mr. Edmonton. Plus, I set aside one for each of us. I thought we could have a sleepover tonight.”

“I doubt he’s ever had a rice crispy treat.”

“Is he even human? I’ve never seen him come out of his room.”

Lips twisted dolefully, Bean lifts and lowers her shoulder. “He’s not doing well. The surgery took a lot out of him.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I hope one of these will cheer him up.”

“Thanks for thinking of him. If you ever want to go up and visit, I’m sure he’d like to meet you.”

Recalling my Aunt Olga and lawyer mystery epiphany, I say, “Speaking of that... Bean, is there something you want to tell me about Mr. Edmonton?”

She rolls her eyes. “Isla, he’s ancient, so please don’t start in with anything about that or how Jack is my age.”

“No, I meant about him and Aunt Olga.”

Bean’s expression turns crimson. “What? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I stalk closer, my finger tapping the air. “I think you do. Did Olga and Oliver Edmonton spend Valentine’s Day together every year? That would explain why she’d come down here in February. Why she had the beach shack.”

Bean swallows. “That’s part of the story.”

“Ah ha! I knew it.” I lean in, eager to hear more.

Bean shifts from foot to foot. “What were you saying about that sleepover? Because I could go for some chocolate.”

After making frozen pizza, popping popcorn, and hitting Bean’s chocolate stash hard, we sit on the couch together in

the guest house wearing our matching pajamas for just this occasion—hers are purple and mine are pink.

“So, Olga and Oliver, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G—?”

Bean gives me a big sister look.

I go quiet. “Okay, but really, what happened?”

“When I started working for Mr. Edmonton, he gave me a lot of busywork, organizing files, and transferring data to an online program so when he retires, whoever takes over for him has access to everything. During that time, we became friendly and I was a willing ear to listen to his stories. When I was done with the filing, he asked me to help him sort through old boxes, photos, letters, and the like.”

I gasp. “You found one of him with Aunt Olga?”

Bean nods. “By then I knew all about his *Kulkoka*.”

I nearly snort Sprite out of my nose. “Doesn’t that mean little baby doll?”

Bean wears an affectionate smile, but she’s had plenty of time to come to terms with this secret sweetheart romance. “They had secret rendezvous here on the island.”

She keeps nodding as if I’m onto something.

“But they could never be public with their relationship because—?” I ask, not sure of the answer.

“Because of us. Not that we were a burden, but by then we were in our aunt’s care and she didn’t want to move us down here and disrupt our lives.”

“But we would’ve had an Uncle Mr. Edmonton?”

She nods one more time. “We do in a way.”

Tears brim in her eyes. Mine too. I’m thinking about the love our aunt could’ve let herself have as well as the potential to get to know the older man...and selfishly, the love I never want to miss out on. Our aunt made a tremendous sacrifice. But when I think back, she made a couple of extra visits down here when we were in high school, so I’m hoping she and Mr.

Mayweather made some happy memories before she passed away.

“So now you know and I want the scoop on you and Royal.”

A fluttery little sigh escapes.

“You like him.”

“A lot.”

“You love—?” She gasps. “It’s the real deal?”

Wearing what I’m sure is the biggest, goofiest smile, I nod.

Bean throws a piece of popcorn at me.

“Hey!” I toss one back.

She catches it and pops it into her mouth. “That was for not spilling the beans.”

“Ha ha.” But it’s true. We’ve always told each other everything. “This time it feels different and I wanted to be sure before I said anything.”

She squishes up her face. “I see your point. There have been a lot of duds you thought were the one.”

Which is exactly why I hardly said a word about Dax.

“So, is it romagical?”

“Like magical?” Warm fuzzies flutter through me. “It’s romantical. Like the most radically romantic thing I’ve ever felt.”

“But what about when he goes back to New York?”

I shrug. “It’ll be romantech—a long-distance relationship with technology.”

Bean laughs. “You sound romansick like you can’t stop thinking about him.”

“But there’s a problem. An opportunity came along and I’m struggling with whether to accept or decline.”

Bean grasps my hands. “Please don’t go back to Charleston.”

“It’s not like I can stay in Mr. Edmonton’s guest house forever.”

“If you go sit with him and spend some time getting to know him, you could come close to staying here forever. Remember, he doesn’t have any other family.”

“The project actually isn’t very far. It’s at Platinum Shores.”

“That’s the ritziest resort in the Keys.”

“And owned by Gerome Glandman.”

“The name sounds familiar. Should I know who that is?” Bean asks.

I remind her about the will and how he’s named as being the recipient of the Almeida fortune should the McGregor brothers not fulfill their grandfather’s requests.

“So, he’s their rival.”

I nod slowly. “I’m not sure what to do. Do I tell him no way or—?”

“Only if you hate money.”

“But is it a betrayal to the Driftwood??” Then with a sinking feeling, I add, “To Royal?”

“I think we ought to analyze your priorities. You’re broke. You need money. Why not do this?”

“But what about being loyal to Royal?” I repeat, though I already know the answer.

The seriousness of the conversation dissolves with us giggling about my rhyme.

When I regain my composure, I say, “But seriously. What do I do?”

“I see the dilemma, but think about what having your name signed in the corner of a mural at the most exclusive resort on this island chain could do for your career.”

“I was doing well in Charleston, getting my name out there.”

“Speaking of, how are you paying your rent? What about all your stuff up there?”

Biting my lip, I say, “About that, um, I think we’re going to need more chocolate for this part of the story.”

When I get back from raiding my sister’s chocolate stash, Nutmeg fills my seat. Bean gathers her cat in her arms. The animal looks over her shoulder with a, *Ha ha, she loves me more* smirk.

I tell Bean about dating Dax. “He started to miss our Monday doughnut dates and was acting kind of shady.”

“How so?” Concern ripples across my sister’s brow. I should probably keep the near-forgery to myself.

“He repeatedly asked to borrow things. My truck, some of my mail, and my ATM PIN.”

“You didn’t give it to him, did you?”

I bite my lip. “Not that there was much in my account.” I tell her about New Year’s Eve and what I found out about Daxel and his brother Gavin along with the news report about his death.

“Oh, Isla. Why didn’t you tell me?” She tugs me into a warm sisterly hug. Supremely offended, Nutmeg perches on the arm of the couch.

“Because you’ve got everything figured out down here. You have a solid job, started a business, and—”

“And you were the one who inspired me to open Beans & Books when you told me you were going to start your mural painting business.”

“But I started my mural painting business because you decided to go all in on the shack.”

Slow laughter ripples between us because it’s a chicken-egg situation and I don’t mind. Not a bit, because I answered the call of my dreams and my sister did the same.

Wearing a big smile, she nods, but then it quickly falls. “Wait, what did you say your ex’s brother’s name was?”

“Gavin Norris.”

Bean’s eyes widen. “Mr. Edmonton has been tracking an investment fraud case. One of his associates lost a lot of money to Gavin Norris. A lot of people did. Just today, he told me that Arise Brokerage and Capital took the Norrises to court.”

“Yeah, glad someone wanted to see justice. But I’m not sure what’ll happen now that Gavin is gone.”

Bean shakes her head slowly. “Isla, you don’t get it. Royal is the CEO of Arise.”

“No, that can’t be right.”

Bean types on her phone and then flips the screen in my direction, showing me the distinct image of a man with dark hair, pewter eyes, and killer lips on the company’s website.

I swallow thickly.

“Why didn’t we have a sleepover sooner? Why didn’t you tell me all this the second you got here?”

I’m stunned silent. Had I told her, I wouldn’t have gotten involved with Royal. The second he finds out about my connection with Dax, he’s going to want to become *uninvolved* with me. A new dilemma replaces the opportunity at Platinum Shores. Do I tell Royal or do I quietly walk away?

“I should think about my career and not these silly feelings.”

“For once, I disagree.” Bean and Nutmeg give me a long, appraising look as if they don’t buy the silly string I’m spraying.

“Oh, come on, you’re the older, level-headed logical sister. Don’t try to sway me.”

“But the look on your face, the smile, the love in your eyes... What if he’s the one?”

“Do you really want Royal as a brother-in-law? I thought you despised the McGregors.”

Her shoulder lifts. “They’re growing on me.”

“Let’s put Casablanca on before it gets too late.” Now I understand why Aunt Olga watched it so many times. It’s Bean’s and my favorite film because it reminds us of her.

“You said it, not me,” Bean says.

I did. I do. I mean, I think I love Royal. But as I told him, I always thought if I painted enough, I’d be able to remember my mother. I’ve had a lot taken away and have gathered enough crumbs to get by. My budding relationship with Royal is like an entire cookie, but he’s not going to share if he finds out about Dax. The mural at Platinum Shores could give me a big payday. Getting my name out there is another kind of cookie—one that’ll keep me fed for a long time.

While we watch the movie, my thoughts loop and return, leaving me as unsure as I was when we turned it on. Bean is fast asleep with Nutmeg snuggled close.

This has all happened so fast. I like it here but am not sure what future I want. My breath comes short and I tiptoe outside for some fresh air, hoping for more clarity than Casablanca brought. Spoiler alert, the happy ending I want is different than the one Rick and Ilsa got.

I walk down the path to the edge of the property and the shoreline. The waves softly lap the sand. The moon hangs like a saucer of milk overhead.

The funny thought that I could have both cookies and milk—Royal and a flourishing career—sails into my mind, but it just as quickly breezes away.

I’ve been running for a while now and the last month catches up with me, leaving me feeling like I’m nearing empty. My eyes mist because I have to make a hard choice, and someone is going to be left with not so much as a cookie crumb.



The next morning, still without clarity or so much as a direction, I wander over to the Driftwood to scout a spot for

the mural I want to paint there as a surprise for the guys.

In only a couple of weeks, the landscapers have made massive progress cutting back the vegetation that threatened to turn the resort into a jungle. The debris from several storms is gone and the paths are clear. Scaffolding and construction equipment seemed to have appeared overnight and I'm guessing the workers will be here within the hour.

I pass the various buildings I learned are named after ships—the Frigate, Galleon, and the Brigantine. I pause in front of the Schooner.

The image of the brothers, interwoven with a nautical theme, takes shape in my vision. I can picture the mural on the wall. An idea pops into my mind. I'll paint it before I do the one at Platinum Shores so Royal knows that I'm loyal to him and that the other one is nothing more than me seizing an opportunity.

Resolved, I continue walking and then pause in front of a stone mermaid perched atop a dry fountain. Three stone clam shells dot the area where the water would've been deepest so they'd have looked like they were floating. Stone treasure chests sit atop two of them. One fell to the bottom of the fountain along with dead leaves and debris scattered along the chipped cement base.

I imagine this place in its heyday, alive with excitement, laughter, and flowing water. I hope we can restore it and invite guests to make new memories.

If I had a coin, I'd toss it into the fountain and make a wish that it be so. Instead, I say a prayer and when I open my eyes, they land on the mermaid's hand. She points to the edge of the fountain. I glance over my shoulder and my pulse jolts.

The Mermaid's Chest.

The name of the saloon Chip took Royal to that was on the matchbook. Squinting my eyes, I pick up the pieces of the fallen stone treasure chest that, at one point, must've squirted water on the mermaid. This one, smashed open, reveals

something wooden inside. I carefully remove the cracked ceramic to find a box. The hinge is rusty as I open it.

A work van approaches rapidly. The guys are probably late, which means I should put on some boots and a hard hat if I'm going to hang around here much longer.

I carefully remove a large pearl from the box hidden inside the cracked stone treasure chest.

“What do we have here?”

Trembling with excitement, I call Royal. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

“Gag. What’s next for us? Matching tracksuits?” he asks.

“Ooh. I hadn’t thought of that. I love crushed velvet, though that might not be the best fabric this far south.” I think back to Bean’s dress suit and how much I sweated in it before belatedly realizing his tone wasn’t playful.

“Isla, we have to talk.” Royal’s voice is flat, but he’s just a Valentine’s Day hater, eager to complain about the commercialization of love. Can’t people have any fun anymore?

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I have exciting news. Do you want the good news or the good news first?”

The van stops on the road nearest me. The driver looks vaguely familiar. Even though Royal has been handling the contractor and workers, there has been so much activity this past week, it’s hard to keep track of who’s who. The door slides open as I turn my attention back to the pearl in my palm and the conversation with my beau on the phone.

“I’m not sure any of this news is good, Isla,” he says.

Before I can ask what he means, footsteps pound my way.

I struggle to breathe as a clammy hand suddenly covers my mouth. Everything goes dark as a potato sack covers my head, at least that’s what it smells like. My phone slips to the ground along with the pearl.

“Double-crossing me was your first mistake, Isla. That little article online about the work you’re doing here was your last,” the guy says.

Only, it’s Dax’s distinct voice that comes muffled as I struggle to get free from him and his thugs.

I say, “No, trusting you was my first mistake, Dax,” but the words are muted and garbled.

I kick and struggle to get away, but it’s no use. My breath rushes in my ears and my pulse pounds against my bones. Tears prick my eyes as I’m tossed into the van.

Royal



Isla doesn't respond. She must've forgotten to charge her phone as usual, and it died. She plays music on it constantly, draining the battery.

More than anything, I want to be mad at her for deceiving me, but then I think about her singing and dancing—to her own drummer and radio classics alike. Not going to lie, it's adorable.

I'm about to click off my device and go talk to her in person when I hear a shuffling sound followed by someone that isn't Isla. Maybe her phone didn't die. Did she drop it? I listen carefully for a moment and it's a jumble of shifting cotton and muted voices. One is distinctly male with a slight accent. The other sounds like Isla.

It's hard to understand what she says.

Oh, busting goo bratwurst beefsteak wax.

I frown. That can't be right. It's not even lunchtime and she's not big on meat products.

"Isla, I'm still here. We need to talk," I repeat.

Then the line goes silent. A tingle runs through me.

Was she talking to me? Someone else? Once again, I try to figure out what she said.

Yo, busting boo buzz lie worst milkshake, Jack.

Maybe Jack is visiting. But he would've gotten in touch with me too, especially after I thanked him with three dozen

pizzas delivered to his workplace after the blind date. The guy hates pizza, which calls into question our friendship, but I digress.

“Also, Isla calls him Jackie,” I mutter.

Dough dusting foods thirst cake, tax.

I must be getting hungry for lunch.

The tingle inside quickens and my pulse picks up as questions race through my mind as I stride to the BMW. I should’ve met Isla in person to tell her it’s over. That I know about her and Dax.

I swing by Beans & Books. Isla’s sister helps a customer ahead of me in line while Nutmeg, the bookstore cat, stares daggers at me.

“Good morning to you, too.”

“Are you talking to my cat?” Bean asks.

“Sorry. My mind is elsewhere.”

She waggles her eyebrows. “I bet you’re thinking about making someone feel extra special this Valentine’s Day.” She passes me a bakery box tied with red and pink ribbons.

“Almost forgot about the chocolate.” She has an in with several specialty chocolatiers.

Bean cocks her head. “Let me tell you something about my sister. She has a big heart. Don’t be surprised if she comes home with a lost dog—” She glances at Nutmeg. “Maybe even a cat. She’ll have half the neighborhood over for Thanksgiving. The woman loves big. She’s generous, almost to a fault, and she trusts people when she shouldn’t.” Bean closes her eyes for a moment.

“Is that a warning?”

“No, you doofus. That’s a sister telling you the truth about someone she loves. Someone whose feelings are big, in case that wasn’t clear.” She gives me a little *don’t be thickheaded* look.

I take that to mean Isla has big likes for me. But there are things Bean doesn't know. Things that have come between Isla and me.

"She doesn't ask for much, if anything, in return. She'll let people walk all over her, use her truck, and address. Luckily, she stopped short of giving out her ATM PIN. Then again, she didn't answer that question directly." Bean waves her hands as if she got off track and is saying more than she should.

I can't help but read between the lines. However, I can't go there. I have to bring things back into focus, instead of getting carried away by false loves and false hopes.

"She's had some bad relationships in the past. Turns out, most recently, with a very bad person. But Isla doesn't have a bad bone in her body. Don't make her regret wanting to figure out your love language this Valentine's Day."

Staggering back, the words I could hardly hear from Isla's phone float toward me, a reminder of the strange non-end to our conversation. However, they remain blurry.

"Have you seen her today?"

"No, actually. Not since last night. We had a sisters' sleepover and a major heart-to-heart. But she was gone first thing this morning. Probably trying to solve the McGregor mystery, seeking mural inspiration, or scouting spots."

"There's no mystery."

"Well, there is a mural aside from this one, of course. That Glandman guy who owns Platinum Shores wants to hire Isla to do a project at his resort. It would be a great way to help her get the word out there."

She sounded excited on the phone, was that her news? That she's going to play for the rival resort team? I grunt. "Do you know if her friend Jack is visiting?"

Bean's face turns a shade of red that I'm not sure is a blush or hot rage. "No. As a matter of fact, he's banned from Coco Key."

My eyebrows shoot upward. "What? Jack Caruso?"

She grinds out, “How do you know that scallywag?”

I stifle laughter at her word choice. “We’re college buddies.”

“We’re going to have to rethink this chocolate exchange.” Bean reaches for the box of candies that I fully intended to eat myself, alone, later, after I deliver the news that things between Isla and I are over, despite Bean’s sisterly words of advice.

“What are you—?” But the muffled words from Isla’s phone come to me.

No, trusting you was my first mistake, Dax.

The tingling turns into lightning as adrenaline shoots through me. My vision sharpens and my ears pick up every sound. Nutmeg yawning, someone sipping coffee, and Bean saying, “Everything okay, Royal?”

I shake my head. “No.” I tell her about the call earlier. Isla said, *No, trusting you was my first mistake, Dax.* “Where did you last see Isla?”

“At the guest house last night.”

I race out of the bookstore and down the street. Bursting through the courtyard, I rapidly assess my surroundings. No shady characters hiding in the bushes. Nothing is out of place. I knock on the door and check the handle. It opens. “Isla, you should lock your door.”

Then again, no one does on this island.

I check over the small space and nothing seems out of place except the rice crispy treats and the card with my name on it.

My heart tumbles, but I’ll think about what that means later. Where is Isla?

I rush back to my car and Bean stands outside her shop. “What’s going on? Is Isla okay? She told me about when she left Charleston and the guys that were chasing her in the eggplant on wheels. Did they follow her here?”

I give my head a little shake because there isn't time for silly stories, but the first part of what Bean said doesn't sound like a joke. "What do you mean the guys chasing her?"

"She had an awful ex-boyfriend. When she broke up with him on New Year's Eve and she didn't cooperate with his threats, especially when the police got involved, he sent some thugs after her. She made a grand getaway by splashing paint all over their windshield. Turning their eggplant on wheels into a colorful clown car." Isla's sister beams with pride.

My adrenaline doubles, because if these guys are after my girl, paint is the least of their worries. I blink once, twice, each for the words *My Girl*. Part of me wishes I could leave her like a stray, that I could claim otherwise. But the other part of me knows that woman is mine and I am hers.

"I care about Isla Pratt more than anyone I ever have in my life. Even if we can't be together, I will make sure she is safe. If you hear from her, contact me right away." I rattle off my phone number and am not sure Bean got the digits before I peel down the street, going faster than I should. As fast as Ryan and I used to go when we'd race late at night, long after the town residents were tucked snuggly into bed. Doughnuts on the road after dark and doughnuts at sunrise.

We used to have good times here. Tragic how it all washed away. Like sand into the sea. Then again, it's that very sand that forms a pearl. When an oyster or other mollusk encounters an irritant like grains of sand, it releases a substance to protect itself. Over time, a pearl forms. Something beautiful from something unpleasant.

Glancing to the horizon, the sense that Chip meant for me to humble myself and see what I have instead of what I want comes into focus. My breath whooshes in my throat in an affirmation. Maybe Chip's will wasn't so much a game, but a lesson in life, love, and truth.

My focus returns to the road as a couple riding beach cruisers with a dog in the basket on one and a work van, driving herky-jerky approach. I honk when the vehicle nearly careens into me.

“No driving and texting,” I yell like an angry old man.

With a glance in the rearview mirror to make sure they don't strike the cyclists, I notice the license plate is from out of state. It has a palm tree and a sunset in the background.

The adrenaline kicks in the closer I get to the resort. As I cruise past the palm tree I rescued Isla from, realization dawns and I spin a U-turn in the middle of the road.

The van was from South Carolina. So is Isla. Is she in the van I passed? I call Magnus. It goes to voicemail. Likely, he's heading back to his base. Ryan answers, but it's so loud in the background, I can't hear him and doubt he can make out anything I say. That leaves CJ.

“Hey, bro. What's up?” he asks casually as if I were calling to meet him for frosty drinks on the beach.

“If you're anywhere near town, there is a van with South Carolina plates. I need your help to stop it.”

“I'm on the boat, but as long as they haven't crossed the bridge by Hidden Hammock Beach, I'm on it.”

Zooming forward, the rear running lights of the vehicle come into view unless it's a different van or a truck. I've had numerous commercial vehicles coming and going since the start of the resort restoration.

Accelerating, I'm still too far away to tell. I realize that CJ offered to help, no questions asked. Then again, that's his downfall. He never asks questions. Presumably, that's what gets him into trouble. Thankfully, this time, he's on the side of the good guys.

As I get closer, the van slows. I blink as red sparks vault toward the sky. Is someone setting off fireworks during the day?

It's then I see a speedboat beached and my brother standing in the middle of the road, waving his arms with an array of road flares sparking toward the sky.

To the driver and passengers in the van, he'd look like a stranded motorist, er, a sailor who has spent a lot of time at

sea.

Behind the stopped van, I throw the BMW into park and let CJ deal with the brutish guys who get out of the driver and passenger sides. Having spent countless hours practicing jiu jitsu, I know three things for sure. Magnus is a barbarian. Ryan is fast and furious, especially on the field. CJ is scrappy and can handle two guys at once without breaking a sweat—that's the trick with the gentle art. Conservation of energy. That leaves me, and I am a man on the warpath. If Dax so much as touched a hair on Isla's head, he is going to find himself deep in the water offshore.

I tug on the van's rear door, but it's locked. I try the rolling side door and it sticks like someone grips the handle from the inside. The adrenaline in me nearly tears the thing off the track. Inside, crouches a man with spiked hair and an earring. It's Daxel Norris. Someone squirms behind him with a cloth bag over her head.

Gripping Dax by his scruffy shirt, I toss him out of the van. As I reach for Isla, he jumps on me from behind. I'd much rather give Isla a piggyback ride. Throwing myself from behind into the side of the van, I say, "Get. Off. Me."

Dax lets go and I return to help Isla. Again, Dax comes at me, and I fend him off with one hand while releasing her bonds with the other.

When I tear the covering from her face, she gasps a breath. Her eyes are glassy and meet mine. The striking light that's usually in them is dim. Her lips tremble. Seeing her scared and potentially hurt strikes a match inside.

"Get in the car, Isla," I order.

In less than a minute, CJ and I dispatch the three assailants and stick them in the back of the van. My brother ties up his boat and gets in the driver's seat of the out-of-state vehicle.

"Where are you going?"

CJ smirks. "I know what to do with people like these. We'll see how well they do at sea for six months."

I raise my eyebrows but now is not the time to hear sketchy explanations. I get in the car and rapid-fire ask Isla a half dozen questions.

“Yes, I’m okay. No, he didn’t hurt me, much. My wrists sting a little. I hit my head, but I don’t think there’s a bump. No bruises. Dax was mad that I’d talked to the police and then skipped town when his goons came after me. Um, am I missing anything?”

A wave of relief washes through me as we pull up at Beans & Books. I don’t turn off the BMW. I’m afraid if I do, I’ll be wearing a crushed velvet tracksuit by this time next year.

“Why don’t you go inside,” I say, my voice gruffer than I mean.

Fingers wrapped around the door handle, Isla hesitates. “Are you coming back?”

“You still have news,” I answer, but that’s the best I can do as the rush of adrenaline leaves me with questions going up in my mind like the road flares.

Bean waves from the doorway, expression stark as if she saw the high-speed chase through town. I half expect lawn ornaments to signal the activity, but the plastic pink flamingos are nowhere to be found.

I go back the way I came to tend to my brother’s boat. The tide down here doesn’t fluctuate too much, but after helping me out, I’d hate to see his one possession go down in the drink.

Leaving the BMW on the side of the road, I untie the boat and push it out of the sand, chest-deep in the water before I dare start the motor. It’s shallow here, but I know the contours of the shoreline despite not being a boating aficionado. I head toward the marina as a speed boat flies past, ignoring the low wake zone.

Giving my head a shake, I spot three lumps in the back, or maybe it’s trash. Idiots dump things in the water all the time. The van from South Carolina sits on the shoulder of the road and I spot my brother, rifling through it.

I wave and he rushes through the shallows toward me.

“Thanks for looking after my girl.”

“You call your boat your girl? CJ, you should probably do something about livening up your—”

“Oh, like you letting the love of your life get abducted? I’ll handle my personal life without your input, thanks.”

“Thanks.”

“Are we playing the echo game? I hope not because you know I can go all day.” He’s dead serious.

The edge of my lip quivers with a laugh because he was the most annoying little brother in the land. But also not a bad guy, as it turns out. “No, I meant thanks for helping me out back there.”

“That’s what family is for, right? You’d do the same for me.”

“You’d need to have a girlfriend, first.”

CJ gives me a lazy, hazy look that I’m not sure how to read then chuckles. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Where is Isla now?”

“Back at Beans & Books with her sister.”

“And why are you here?” CJ asks like I’ve taken on too much water.

“Making sure you’re okay.”

My brother claps me on the back. “While you’ve been out there building your empire, I’ve held down the fort just fine.”

“Have you been up to the Driftwood lately?” I ask.

“Yeah, it’s starting to look good.”

“I meant before I got back. Before Chip’s directive.”

“Yep. I’ve been over every inch of the place.”

“So that’s why it was practically in ruins.” No sooner are the words out of my mouth do I think about his comment about my empire. I thought I wanted one, but without anyone

occupying the kingdom with me, it's left me feeling empty. Could that be what Chip meant about *When right is wrong, what do you do?*

"Thinking about Isla?"

"Yeah, get out of my head."

"I know that look."

"How would you know that look, CJ? You're practically a man-child."

He chuckles again. "Can a man-child handle two guys at once and make sure they never set foot on this island again?"

"Fair point. What did you do with them? Don't tell me you made them walk the plank?"

"Something like that. I used them to pay off a debt. Let's put it this way, they'll work on a boat until they think twice about ever being involved in criminal activity again."

I raise my eyebrows. "Do I want details?"

"Probably not, but it's not as illegal as you'd think."

I cup my hand over my face. "Sometimes I worry about you."

"Nah, I've got just about everything under control. It's you I'm concerned about. Brother to brother, I think you have a few things to get off your chest."

I hardly consider his offer before the words pour out of me. "Isla is a fountain, meanwhile I'm a drain. No, more like a sewer. She's so sweet. So giving. Meanwhile, I was going to tell her to get lost."

"But you rescued her."

"I was going to say goodbye. Not see you later. Not *até logo*. Goodbye. Emphasis on *bye*. Meanwhile, she had good news and was excited for Valentine's Day."

CJ glances toward the sky. "It's barely afternoon. There's a lot of day left. Why don't you go tell her this instead of me?"

“Because she made my pulse explode followed by stillness, silence inside. Like time itself came to a standstill. The striving subsided. She gave me a kind of inner calm I didn’t know was possible. Didn’t know I needed.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“She’s the only one who makes me feel better. Her hand on mine. Her touch. Her lips.”

CJ waves his hands to stop me from saying more. “I guess I’m playing the echo game with myself. Tell me why that’s a bad thing?” he repeats.

“I’ve been a fool for thinking that Isla and I can’t be together. That my life is anything without her.”

“Now, we’re talking. While you’re having life-changing revelations, about Chip...”

“A conversation about our grandfather will have to wait.” I don’t have the bandwidth to hear CJ’s wild theories. For now, I’m thankful Isla is safe. As far as I’m concerned, the Norris brothers still have a debt to pay, but seeing as one is dead and the other will probably avoid me for the rest of his life, I can forget about the lawsuit for now.

Waving CJ off, I turn my attention to my phone. With the briefest explanation of why, including Bean’s story of Isla fleeing Charleston, I punch out a text to Angela with the sparse details and think about sending her a post-holiday bonus, maybe even some chocolates for putting up with me. If she accepted tips, I’d double hers.

My phone swiftly beeps with a reply—a link to traffic cams, showing a young woman dumping paint all over an eggplant-colored sedan that’s in hot pursuit.

I proud peel of laughter pours out of me. “That’s my girl.” And if Isla’s abduction didn’t prove her innocence, this proves she wasn’t in cahoots with Dax.

In addition to the chocolates for my secretary, I’m going to make sure Isla has a lifetime supply of chocolate—of anything and everything she wants.

But my one hope is that she'll take me back.

Isla



Bean doesn't let me go of me for a long minute. I start to draw away, needing to catch my breath after the ordeal in the van, but she still doesn't loosen her grip. When I wiggle, she drops her arms.

"Sorry, but I was so worried. Are you okay?"

I glance over my shoulder. "Yeah, I think so."

My sister flips the sign at Beans & Books to *Closed* and locks the door. Nutmeg prowls by the window as if keeping watch.

We sit down on the loveseat with an assortment of chocolates nearby, but my appetite is shot.

"So what happened?"

"I deciding what to do about the mural, I found something by the fountain at the Driftwood. I called Royal to tell him the good news. Then everything went dark when Dax attacked."

"He tried to kidnap you?"

"He did kidnap me. Royal ran him down. There was a fight and CJ took off in the van with the three guys." I recount what happened, my pulse still catching up to me.

"Should we contact the police?"

"I have a feeling they'll be contacting me after Gavin's death and Dax's disappearance."

My sister's eyes are wide. "Sounds like something straight out of a thriller novel."

“And we have a mystery on our hands—” But before I can tell her what I found at the resort, someone raps on the door.

I stiffen, heart racing and on alert. Nutmeg arches her back.

Bean peers out the window. “It’s our knight in shining armor.”

Eyes heavy, I sigh. “I need a minute or ten to recover. Can you let him know I’m okay while I sneak over to the guest cottage?”

“Are you sure?”

I nod, still gathering my scattered emotions.

“Lock the door behind you and text me when you’re safely inside.”

I give my sister a little salute then she grips me in a hug before I sneak out the back.

My heart trips over the deep tone of Royal’s voice. I hesitate, but things just got complicated. I don’t want to involve him in my mess. I let the door close at my back.

Scanning to make sure no one is tailing me, I hurry down the street and through the gate to the guest cottage. I make a beeline toward the door when I spot someone sitting on the bench in the side garden. I startle, but the man is stooped and leans heavily on a cane.

He has a full head of white hair and tired eyes under the bushiest eyebrows I’ve ever seen.

“Mr. Edmonton?” I ask.

The corner of his lip lifts. “You must be Robyn’s sister.”

It takes me a moment to answer because I’m not used to anyone calling her by her full name. “That’s right. I’m Isla.”

“Ah, yes, Isla. Named such for this very island. Your mother visited her aunt here long ago.”

My lips tug down. “How do you know that?”

“I know most of the secrets this Key keeps. Your mother met a local during her visit. He went out to sea. Didn’t return after you were born.”

Emotion ripples through me. “I didn’t know that.” I only once saw a photo of my dad and that’s now merely a memory after the fire.

“I’m an open book. Ask me anything. Well, I don’t know Carlos’s secrets. He kept those under lock and key.”

Confused, I ask, “By Carlos do you mean Chip Almeida?”

He nods. “He loved this island. I do too. We were good friends.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. Were you able to go to his funeral?”

“He didn’t have a traditional service, but I was able to say goodbye before I fell ill.”

“Bean said you’re feeling better each day. Glad to see you outside.”

“Glad to see you safe. When the alarm sounded, I prepared to do battle.” His shaky hand grips the cane, but his firm tone suggests he’s seen more than one fight and wouldn’t back down from another.

“Thank you. I got mixed up with a lousy guy. He stole lots of money from another guy that I coincidentally got involved with.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Let’s say, with Royal, you’re on the right track. I’ve known those boys since they were little. Though they might not remember me, I’ve watched them grow up. They each have a way to go, but I believe there is a finish line.”

I snort a laugh. “Do they know they’re in a race?”

“Reluctantly. Their grandfather put them through their paces, as it were, whether they realize it or not.”

“Does the race have anything to do with Chip’s will?”

Mr. Edmonton lets out a full belly chuckle. “Of course it does. Everything he did leads to the will.”

I frown. “That’s kind of morbid.”

“Maybe he wanted to make sure they were prepared for the end.”

I tilt my head. “Those were the final words in the will.”

“Ah yes, you helped out Robyn and took on the role of executress.”

“Am I in trouble?” I hold my breath.

He lets out a light laugh. “No, as you may have noticed, we do things differently down here. As long as no harm was done, it’s okay that you read the will instead of Robyn. I’m not sure how far along the boys are in solving the puzzle and I can’t claim to have the answer, but I can say that it’s worth the search.”

“Do you think the lost crown of tears might have anything to do with it?”

Mr. Edmonton smiles. “I’d wager it’s worth looking into.”

“But where to start?”

“Historical accounts suggest it was last seen at sea.”

“So it’s in the briny deep?”

“While Coco Key can’t claim its own library, Beans & Books contains many books from my personal collection. I’m guessing you’ll find a reference there.”

I get to my feet. “Really?”

He tips his head from side to side. “I reckon so.”

“Hold on one sec.” Determination and inspiration rush through me. I go inside and grab one of the rice crispy treats then give it to him. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Mr. Edmonton. Aunt Olga didn’t have much of a sweet tooth, but I’m guessing she’d like you to have one of these.”

He smiles with delight. “Thank you and please don’t be a stranger.”

“I’ll report back with anything I find.” However, I have a feeling he’ll somehow know about any developments before I have a chance to process them.

“Bean is lucky to have you.”

“And I always appreciate a bird’s-eye view.” He winks and then takes a bite of the rice crispy treat. I’m pretty sure he mutters, “Kulkoka.”

Throwing caution to the wind, I hurry back to my sister’s bookshop. Royal isn’t here, and for half a second, I consider going after him, but first, I need to look for something.

I tell Bean about my conversation with Mr. Edmonton.

“A bird’s-eye view. Ha ha,” my sister says given the fact that her name is Robyn.

I grip her arm. “Wait. He somehow knows all the goings on in town. The plastic pink flamingos are part of a townwide messaging system.”

“We have our own coconut wireless.”

“But—” My thoughts race and I scramble around behind the counter, looking for the disk drive Royal gave me.

“What are you doing?”

“Mr. Edmonton mentioned his personal library. Do you have any books that have to do with the Driftwood?” I power up the laptop.

“Isla, I’ve cataloged every book in this store. I wish there were a book about the Driftwood, but that has yet to be written.”

“What about Coco Key? Anything to do with this area?”

I plug the disk drive into the device and while it populates the content, I scratch my head. “Why would Gerome Glandman want the resort? It’s a dump. No, he’s interested in the property itself. Think about the will. There’s something there. Something valuable.”

“Don’t you think Chip would’ve found it?”

“The Driftwood is like a ship on land, maybe we’re looking for—”

Bean’s eyes light up. “Be right back.”

I click on the most recent folder, searching for the images Royal took with his drone. First, there are a few photos of him skydiving, and I can’t help but feel my heart plummet. Yes, he rescued me, but when I asked if he’ll be back, his reply, *You still have news* sounded more like a goodbye than a promise to return.

However, even if he doesn’t think his grandfather’s message meant something, I’m the accidental executress. It’s my duty to see this through.

“If I were Chip Almeida, where would I hide my secrets so my grandsons could find them?” From above, the resort property on the peninsula moves inward in concentric circles like ripples formed by a stone dropping into still water—or a boat at sea. There’s the coastline running a ring bordering the water. Inland from that are sweeping lawns moving out from the building structures themselves—the villas and the main resort building. It reminds me of a fleet of ships moving across the Atlantic Brigantines, Frigates, and Schooners filled with treasure.

I gasp softly as the overgrown outline of the mini golf course takes shape. “Start on the eighteenth,” I whisper. “The eighteenth hole.”

“Found it,” Bean calls from between the stacks of books. She carries a dusty, leatherbound book that looks older than Mr. Edmonton.

“Me too. Maybe. I found something, but what’s that?”

“A ship’s log. Mr. Edmonton salvaged things from old boats, planning on someday starting a museum. He and Chip would compare artifacts. This was the first item either one of them ever discovered.”

I squint as if hoping my sister’s flash of brilliance will become clear.

“The ship’s captain claimed this land. He was the original property owner, if you could call him that. According to Mr. Edmonton, Chip won the island in a bet from the pirate’s great-great-grandson.”

“Really?”

“Who knows for sure, but it’s worth looking into.”

“Speaking of looking, what do you see here?” I point at the computer screen.

“The beginnings of a jungle. A lot of overgrowth.”

I trace my finger around the miniature golf course as if I were connecting the dots on a grade school worksheet.

Bean’s mouth drops open. “Oh. That looks like a crown—”

I nod at the same time someone knocks on the door. Pulse quickening, I duck under the counter.

“Bean, it’s CJ. Is my brother here?” he calls from the other side of the door.

Straightening, I peek out the window to make sure it’s him.

CJ’s face brightens. “You’re okay.”

“Thanks for your help back there. If, unlike your brother, you’ve taken interest in your grandfather’s will—”

“It’s my life’s work,” CJ says with complete sincerity.

I’m sure Royal would say this is because CJ is a freeloading deadbeat looking for a handout and free money, er, treasure, but I see something else in the youngest McGregor brother. He’s seeking the truth.

“I think I found something,” I say.

CJ comes in and I turn the laptop around.

Before he can get a good look at the miniature golf course, someone bellows from the doorway. “This door should be locked.”

“Oh, there you are,” CJ says.

I give a little wave of relief. Royal came back. “And here I am. I appreciate you and your brother working together to help me out back there.” My voice sounds small, uncertain about where Royal and I stand aside from across the room from each other.

Royal nods. “By the way, what was the good news?” His tone starts off gruff but softens.

A smile blooms on my lips. “I’m so glad you asked.”

CJ and my sister exchange a look, and then head outside to the bistro tables in the front with the ship’s logbook, leaving Nutmeg, Royal, and me in the bookstore. Perched on the windowsill, the cat sits between us as if prepared to mediate this conversation.

“The good news had to do with a mural I want to paint and something I discovered at the Driftwood.”

“The mural at Platinum Shores? The painting for the enemy who wants to level my family’s resort?”

“No, yes. I’m not painting anything for Glandman unless my proximity will help us better understand why he’s after the property. Keep your enemies close and all that. I want to paint a mural at the Driftwood, but the other thing might have to do with your grandfather’s wishes. I found something while scouting a spot to paint a mural.”

“Why are you trying to help?”

I look up at him. “Because I know a good cause when I see it.”

Royal glances down at his hands as if debating whether to lay down his arms once and for all or keep fighting with himself and by default, me. A moment stretches between us. Nutmeg flicks her tail as if her patience runs thin.

He twines his fingers into mine and lets out a long breath as if he’s finally made a decision. “You told me to pay attention. That I might just learn something. I learned that I’d put up barriers to love. To keep you at a distance. I hedged against loss by not taking risks in my life. I channeled that

energy into sure investment bets. But I've been fooling myself into thinking I was winning."

"Does that mean you were losing?"

"Without you in my life? Yes. But I'd also lost hope. You restored it, Isla." His expression turns tender, appreciative.

"That's giving me a lot of credit." I study our linked hands.

"Not a lot of credit. All the credit."

I tip my gaze up and our eyes meet. His blaze with meaning. It melts my heart.

"Chip taught me to earn the extras in life. I want to earn your love, Isla. I'm sorry for being moody and for fighting this. The battle is over. I want you in my life and the only fighting I'll do is for you. For us."

"Thank you for apologizing." I sling my arms around Royal's neck. "The good news is the war is over. You've got my love now and always."

The man who rarely smiles beams. He glows. He's brighter than the sunshine streaming through the window. His lips land on mine in an intense kiss. Only seconds pass before he relaxes with relief as if time slows down. I welcome it, him, and whatever adventures come our way. Mysteries too.

I sink into the kiss, knowing that together we can manage any storms and sail calm seas.

When we part, he says, "I told you we needed to talk. What I need you to hear is that I love you too."

We kiss again before I sense eyes on us.

A certain big sister and a little brother fill the doorway.

Bean says, "Ew."

CJ says, "Gross."

Royal and I part. My cheeks are warm, but that's partly from the scratch of his scruff on my skin.

"As if you've never kissed anyone, including Jackie," I mutter to my sister.

Bean gags. “Double ew. No way.”

“Except that one time,” I singsong.

“No. Stop.”

“CJ when was the last time you even went on a date?”
Royal asks.

“It’s been a while, but I don’t need to go on dates. I’m perfectly content with how things are, er, were,” he corrects.

If that was a strange thing to say, Royal doesn’t pick up on it. Bean and I exchange a look though and I wonder about CJ’s love life. Maybe he has a special someone on a distant shore or keeps it a secret so his brothers don’t tease him.

“Are you ready for the truth?” CJ asks.

“If it has to do with our parents—” Royal stops himself and lets out a breath. “I’ll listen, but I’m not making any promises about believing what you have to say.”

This seems like a *we should be seated* kind of situation. Bean brings out cans of soda while we gather around the ship’s logbook.

“It’s easy to see things how you’d like them to be, Royal. You, Magnus, and Ryan think Dad was an art history professor and Mom was a librarian.”

He shrugs. “She loved books. What else could she have been?”

“How many libraries do you know that are open at night?”
CJ asks.

Bean shakes her head. “Not any around here. Maybe college libraries in Miami.”

“Our mother was a local branch librarian. Maybe she shelved books at night, working the second shift so she could be home with us during the day. Family first,” Royal says.

“Family first for sure. But the truth is, Mom was a treasure diver.”

Royal laughs.

CJ doesn't. "Dad let you think he was an art history professor. Not a big stretch, considering he was well informed on antiquities, but that's because he'd obtain the real ones, make forgeries, and then—"

"You're telling me that our parents were criminals." Royal raises an eyebrow with amused disbelief.

I try not to think about my near forgery.

CJ winces. "Criminal adjacent."

"What are you saying, Chip Junior McGregor?" Royal's voice has an edge to it.

"You wanted the truth. It's that Emmanuella McGregor was a librarian out of college, but she got that degree so she could have access to books. Turns out most of what she sought was right here on this island. She was also in the top five best deep-sea divers in the world. Night diving was her specialty. She was also a second-degree black belt in jiu jitsu and fluent in several languages."

Royal looks dubious. "And Dad?"

"They were seeking a specific treasure. He handled the history and research, the hunt on the ground, and our mother did the diving. They were close, so close when a storm came up."

"And they were never seen again," Royal says gravely.

"Missing, but not dead," CJ replies.

Elbows on his knees, Royal holds his face in his hands. "CJ, we've gone over this a thousand times."

"Then explain this." I expect him to unfold a map. Instead, he produces a golden key.

"That could be a trinket from a souvenir shop. Fool's gold. Pirate's booty."

"No, it's the key Mom and Dad were looking for."

"A key."

"Coco Key?" I ask with a laugh.

“I reckon so. Chip got ahold of this island because he knew the lost crown of tears was here. He’s left us to find it.”

“Did you hear me? We don’t need trouble around here.” Mr. Higbee, the man that hollered at Royal and me, stumps inside as if he’d been listening all along.

“We don’t either, Mr. Higbee,” CJ says.

“Then you’d do well to deter that boat from coming ashore. I’ve kept watch nigh on seventy-five years and we’ve avoided trouble.” He points toward the water with his cane.

A dark sail dots the horizon.

“It looks like trouble found us,” CJ mutters.

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“See that barkentine out there? Those are the bad guys,” the youngest McGregor brother says.

“What are they doing here?”

“Looking for us.” Royal’s brother speaks matter of fact like this is a normal, expected development.

“Why would that be?” Bean asks.

“Because we’re the key to the lost crown.” CJ waves the golden key. It glints in the sun.

“But you said *we* are the key,” Royal says.

With surprising speed, Mr. Higbee whips his head in Royal’s direction as if he just realized something.

Whatever it is sails close to me, but first, I have a question of my own. “The night after the reading of the will, Ryan asked a question about whether your grandfather intended for you to pick up his search for the crown where he left off or if he’d discovered it and was leaving clues for you to find like a scavenger hunt.”

CJ answers, “Knowing our grandfather, a little of both. He’d found some items, hid them well. Others are still out there somewhere.” He glances at Royal. “More than anything, I reckon he wanted us to do this together.”

Biting my lip, I piece this together then jump to my feet. “I think I found a clue along with figuring out where Chip wanted you to start looking.”

Leaving Mr. Higbee watching the ship, we rush toward the Driftwood.

Bean hurries after us, ship’s logbook in hand. When we reach the spot that I thought would make the perfect place for a mural, I explain that I was taking measurements, lost in thought while envisioning what it would look like when I noticed the mermaid and made the connection to the book of matches embossed with the name of the saloon, the Mermaid’s Chest. “She was pointing at one particular treasure chest in the open clamshells.”

CJ climbs into the empty fountain and examines the treasure chests.

“When I was abducted, I dropped the pearl, but it must be around here somewhere.”

We scramble around, looking.

“Be careful of the drain,” CJ warns.

I grin. “No, it was too big to fit down there.”

Bent over, Royal gasps. “I found it.” Pinched between his fingers is the massive pearl—about the size of a marble. “The Mermaid’s Chest.”

“The book of matches was a clue,” I say.

“Do you think it’s real?” Bean points to the pearl.

“Let me see?” CJ asks. He puts it between his teeth.

“What are you—?” Royal asks.

“Testing whether it’s real.”

“By eating it?”

CJ rolls his eyes as if his older brother is hopeless in the art of island life and treasure hunting. “It’s real, by the way.”

“Do you think the crown is here or at sea?” I tell them what Mr. Edmonton said.

Bean stabs the front of the ship's logbook. "It's for Her Royal Cartagena."

The corner of CJ's lip lifts.

"Does that mean anything to you?" Bean asks.

"It's Royal's middle name."

He flicks his brother on the arm.

With a laugh, I say, "I thought it was Wallaby."

"Ha ha, No, it's not."

"Smart Aleck?" I ask.

"Very funny."

"I'm going to keep guessing until you tell us. Pineapple? Prickly on the outside and sweet on the inside?" I singsong.

"I'm definitely not sweet," Royal rumbles.

"Nope. As tart as a lemon. Good thing I love lemonade." Balancing on one foot like a flamingo, I peck him on the cheek.

Ignoring our banter, Bean says, "Her Royal Cartagena was the name of the boat that sailed out of ports in both Spain and Portugal, ferrying the queen's treasure to Brazil, by way of Columbia to thwart pirates."

CJ smirks. "And it's the name of the ship our parents were on when they met. Everyone just called it the Royal."

"And that's where your name came from," I say.

He wears an expression that suggests he's wondering if he really knew his mom and dad at all.

"And this pearl is the beginning."

"Aren't we looking for a treasure chest?"

We all turn to CJ. "We need the map for that."

"And you have the key."

"Remember the note from Chip said to start at the eighteenth? Why don't we go check the mini golf course?"

“From above, it looked like a crown, maybe that means something.” I tell them about the drone footage.

While we walk over there, I ask, “Do you suppose this is what Glandman is looking for?”

Royal looks at me sharply. “What do you mean?”

“When he was at Beans & Books, he said something about boat building.” I go still. “He must’ve been looking for the logbook. Then he said, *If I were shiny and valuable where would I be?*”

“You can guarantee,” CJ says.

“I thought he just wanted to build another fancy resort because this is prime real estate.”

“That too, no doubt.”

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Royal says.

CJ practically skips ahead. “Think of it like a game.”

“If you remember, we rarely won. Chip always did.”

“Maybe the tide has turned,” I say brightly.

“What about your sister?” Bean asks.

“We’re leaving Emmie out of this for now. No sense in getting her upset,” Royal says with authority.

“She’s a writer, I’ll send her the CliffsNotes,” CJ says.

I understand the brothers wanting to protect Emmie, but I’m guessing she doesn’t like being left out. I wrap my arm across my sister’s shoulders. “Thanks for helping us. I’m glad we’re doing this together.”

We reach the mini golf course with its wooden windmill, a molten volcano, and a giant pink flamingo.

“Yet another thing to fix. I say we make it into a regular golf course.” Royal has a wide stance, arms crossed in front of his chest as if surveying the ruins of something once great.

“Platinum Shores has that covered. I think our guests will like the miniature lighthouse with neon blue stripes,” I counter.

When we get to the eighteenth hole, sure enough, the feature is a treasure chest, but the flag is missing from the pole.

“Chip used old nautical flags from sailboats for each hole. The eighteenth one is endless, leading to the ball return,” CJ explains.

“So, what are we looking for?”

Everyone shrugs except Royal. “The map.”

“Supposedly, it’s just a fragment,” CJ adds.

We all start looking around, pulling up the old fake grass, and peeling back the pieces of the treasure chest.

“Where could it be?” I murmur.

“Chip always said to keep an eye on the horizon. In other words, to look up and out.” Royal strides over to the fallen flag, designating the hole and picks up the tattered fabric.

“Look, there’s stitching here.” I point.

Royal smooths his fingers over it and glances up at me, eyes bright.

If it were printed, it could certainly be part of a treasure map.

Royal’s lips part with wonder. I hardly believe my eyes. This is the real deal. We’re all quiet, eyes flitting from the map fragment to each other.

Royal grips his brother’s shoulder. “Sorry that I doubted you, CJ.”

“Well, don’t thank me yet. That ship is still out there.”

Our gazes turn toward the water where a massive ship glides past.

“Glandman is likely going to try to make opening this place difficult, and—”

“Save it. We’ve had enough trouble for one day.” Royal shakes his head sharply.

“Yeah, but—”

The sound of helicopter blades cuts through the air. CJ glances up, an unreadable expression on his face—excitement, trepidation, something else.

“When is Magnus supposed to return?” he asks.

Royal shrugs.

“I’d better get back,” CJ says, already rushing away.

“Expecting company?”

“Something like that,” he calls over his shoulder.

“I have some reading and research to do. I’ll find out if Mr. Edmonton knows anything.” With the ship’s logbook in hand, Bean heads back to the bookstore café.

Royal and I remain at the Driftwood, keeping a weather eye on the ship with the dark sails.

“So, your mother was a princess?” I ask, recalling the story of the House of Sousa.

“The descendent of a princess.”

“Does that make you a prince?”

Royal smirks like he has a secret. “I thought of this whole thing like one of Chip’s chess games. You were the queen, positioned to undo me.”

“I wouldn’t think of it. We’re equal partners in this endeavor.”

“I’ll settle for that.” We link hands. “We have adventures ahead and I can’t think of anyone I’d rather go on them with.”

“As long as it doesn’t involve skydiving.”

“Have you tried it?”

I swallow thickly. “Once. I liked it about as much as you enjoy being in a boat.”

“I guess that’s something I’ll have to get used to. And saying I’m sorry. Sorry for being a royal jerk.”

I lace my arms around his neck. “Sorry for getting you involved in that mess with Dax and his goons.”

Royal rings his hands around my waist, clasping them behind my low back. “No, I’m sorry you got duped by the Norris brothers. You’re not the only one, though.”

“They were sketchy, to say the least.”

He tells me about the court case and that he’s dropped it. “Mostly, I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“I wasn’t entirely innocent. I got caught up.” I explain the painting and the near forgery.

“I told you that your skills are impressive.”

“Only when used for good. Speaking of—” I ask about painting a mural at the Driftwood.

Gazes locked, Royal says, “You don’t even have to ask. The answer is yes, Isla. From now on, the answer is always yes.”

“Then can I have a kiss?”

His lips twitch with an amused smile and our mouths meet.

The kisses continue, on and off for the next couple of days while we catalog what we’ve learned about the will and the crown, trying to make sense of the map fragment and the ship’s log book, but it’s not much to go on.

It’s like the tide remains slack, not rising or falling. No new information, just speculation and guesswork. Luckily, we don’t see Mr. Glandman again and I hold off on committing to his mural project. I could be an asset if I gain access to the grounds over at Platinum Shores.

My vision for the Driftwood takes shape and I gather my supplies, but before I can head over to the site, I find a folded note on top of my box of brushes.

Unfolding it, I read the inked scrawl.

Lemons are yellow.

Flamingos are pink.

Meet me at seven for a sweet drink.

Xo R.M.

On the back is a little map with an X that marks the spot at Hidden Hammock Beach. I meet my beau over there just in time to watch the sunset. He's wearing a suit and has bare feet, the perfect Royal McGregor combination, if you ask me.

Pink and yellow lemonade fizzers chill in the cooler. He's quiet for a spell as the ship with the dark sails makes a bump in the otherwise smooth horizon. Taking my hand, he draws a deep breath. "Whatever happens next, will you do me the honor of becoming Mrs. McGrumpy?"

I do a double-take because that's not what I was expecting.

Our gazes meet. His eyes sparkle in the descending twilight. He blinks a few times, giving me a moment to recover from the shock of his question.

But there is only one answer. I say, "Only if you become Mr. Sunshine."

"Not sure I can pull that off, but for you, I'll try." Royal opens a box with a silver ring inside. A pearl surrounded by baguette diamonds sits in a vintage filigree band.

"I'll say yes to our happily ever after, but you had me at the hiccup." I wink.

"Do I want to know what that is?"

"You did something to my heart, Mr. McMuffin."

"You captured mine, Strawberry Shortcake."

"Was it love at first sight?" I ask, recalling the conversation with Allie and Gina.

"It was *something* at first sight," he says with a laugh.

Royal slides the engagement ring on my finger. Turning to me, our eyes meet. "Isla, you're better than an adrenaline rush, closing a deal, or discovering treasure. You are my future and I love you. I don't want to just give you a good enough life. Together, we will have a great life."

With a half smile, I say, "Define great."

"Never wanting anything."

“It’s good to want. Keeps you sharp.” My smile grows.

“I mean food, Isla. I’ll keep you stocked with muffins, smoothies, breakfast tacos, and chocolate. Lots of that.”

I tip my head back with laughter. “Now, that sounds great indeed.”

“I’m an investor. Not a gambler. I invest money, time, and energy in things I believe in. I believe in us.”

“Sounds like we’re a pair of stocks.”

“Not publically traded.” His eyes dip to my mouth.

“Does that mean you’re all mine?” I ask as our future paints itself in vibrant color in my vision.

His lips quirk. “Indeed it does. Will you be my Valentine?”

I nuzzle closer. “Your forever Valentine. If you’ll be mine.”

“I’m all yours, Isla. All yours.”

His lips catch mine and we kiss as the sun melts into the sea.

Epilogue



I end up painting not one, but two murals at the Driftwood Resort. The first is of the McGregor brothers on a ship with Chip at the wheel. It's not obvious at first glance, but they're sailing toward an island where a couple stands on the shore, waving them in.

Imagining them to be Mr. and Mrs. McGregor, the real lost treasure, makes me stress less about the actual mystery at hand.

It's hard not to steal a glance at my ring finger where the engagement band with the pearl and diamonds sparkles in the sunshine. We've been discussing the big day and Royal had only one request, that a passage from the Gospel of Matthew be included during the ceremony. The guy has become obsessed with pearls.

The second mural is still a work in progress as progress is made on the rehabilitation of the resort. The scene is one a guest might find on the grounds complete with a pirate ship playground, mini golf with the tackiest features in the best sort of way, along with croquet, pickleball, volleyball, cornhole, and of course, a giant game of chess. The scene also showcases poolside and beachside lounging, sandcastle contests, snorkeling, gameday, movie night, and s'mores around the campfire. And let's not forget dining alfresco alongside live entertainment.

It depicts all that the resort will be, a combination of serene seclusion and lively activity.

I even paint Royal and me in the scene, smiling lovingly at each other, but that's no forgery. That's the real deal, an expression I get to see on the daily as we plan our wedding. It'll be right here as part of the soft opening of the resort in a couple of months.

In the meantime, love is in the air, in the water, and all around. It turns out that Royal and I work well together. He'll handle the business end of the resort and extreme sports excursions while I'll handle hospitality, guest relations, and making sure that no smoothies are harmed in the many meet cutes we're sure to sponsor.

As I add some brown onto the fur of a dog in the painting, a yip sounds from behind me. Startled, I whirl around, sending my can of paint splattering onto the fluorescent orange safety fence surrounding a shallow hole in the ground. Something glints from inside. I crouch down to see a little brindle dog dotted with pink paint.

"What did I do?" Hands pressed to my face, I get to my feet, turning in a panicked circle.

A woman hurtles toward me, hollering, "Madame, Madame!"

"I am so sorry. I didn't see your dog. I apologize."

"You found Madame?" the woman with a halo of brown hair asks.

Squinting with confusion, I say, "Huh? Madame? I thought you were calling me—"

The woman crouches next to the hole. "Madame de Pupadour, get up here right now."

The dog yips again.

I scratch my head, not sure I heard her correctly. "Madame what?"

"Madame de Pompadour is a historical figure. This is Madame de Pupadour, Madame for short. In college, I was at a crossroads. Did I study history or veterinary sciences? You can tell which one won."

“Um, not really.”

She holds out her hand. “I’m Lally McGuinness.”

“McGregor?”

“No, McGuinness,” she says, shimmying into the shallow hole to retrieve the dog. “And this is Madame de Pupadour. She’s a mutt, but I’m sure she has some papillon in her. That’s a French breed, like the original Madame de Pompadour. She was King Louis XV’s chief mistress.” Lally waggles her eyebrows. “Yes, it’s what you think it means. But she also advised him and rumor has it that she may or may not have been involved in brokering deals with pirates. Let’s just say she was a fan of finery and had a particular affinity for porcelain. Go figure. Anyway, you probably don’t want a history lesson. Madame and I will get out of your hair.”

“But I got paint in her hair, er, her fur. I am so sorry.” There’s a streak across her flank and some on her tail, which wags happily.

“I’m sure it’ll wash right out. I apologize. She got out of the run behind my cottage and I’ve been searching high and low for her.” Lally nuzzles the dog. “She’s a little escape artist is what she is.”

“Again, I’m sorry. I can pay for a trip to the groomer or—”

“I’m a vet. I’ve handled much worse. You don’t even want to know what happened to General MuttArthur when he got into the swamp last time we were on the mainland.”

“By the way, I’m Isla, the official Driftwood Resort mural painter.”

“Nice to meet you. This one is amazing. I moved here after the resort closed, so I missed all the fun, but I can almost see it brought to life. You’re very talented.”

Royal appears and lassoes me by the waist. “I agree.” He kisses my temple.

I introduce him to Lally.

“Ah, so you’re why the flock of flamingos appeared. Forget cupid. They say when those birds appear, love matches

are made on Coco Key every season.”

“But they’re plastic.”

“Stand-ins for the real ones.”

My eyes widen. “Anyway...” I explain what happened to Madame. To my utter shock, Royal gets down on the ground and makes an epic fuss over the dog.

“Be careful, she’ll become your biggest fan,” Lally says.

“Yeah, Madame de Pompadour was the king’s mistress in the mid seventeen hundreds. Word is she even cavorted with pirates,” I say, recapping my history lesson from Lally.

“Oh, the stories I could tell you,” she says with an exhale. “Though, I don’t think this Madame has any such aspirations. Mostly, she just wants bacon treats.”

We all chuckle.

“I had no idea you were a dog guy?” I recall the conversation with Royal about how he’s like a cat.

“We all are, my brothers and me, I mean. Unfortunately, Chip wouldn’t let us have any pets. He said we had an entire island teeming with life to explore and adore.” Royal tips his head and gives a little eye roll. “We snuck Emmie a kitten once though. She’s a cat person like Bean.”

“I happen to be on a first-name basis with Nutmeg. So when do you expect to be open?” Lally asks.

Royal and I exchange a glance because the soft opening is also our wedding day.

“We’re actually meeting with my brothers to discuss—I was looking for you. The mural is coming along swimmingly.” He points to the pool. “Well, except Mag, he won’t be joining us because he’s at a bachelor party.” Royal rolls his eyes.

“Not yours, though.”

“Nah. The guys and I are going to swim with sharks.”

“No, no. I don’t want to marry fish food.”

Lally looks at us in question.

“We’re getting married and this one loves extreme sports.” Royal has his arm slung across my shoulders and I poke him in the side.

“Last one best one?” he asks.

“No, it’s the worst idea ever.”

“How about cave diving? Volcano boarding?”

“I don’t even want to know what that is. How about one where I don’t risk being a widow before we say I do.”

“Well, I won’t let Madame give you any relationship advice,” Lally says. “It was really nice meeting you both. I’m sure we’ll see each other around the island. And if you get a dog or need a history lesson, come find me.”

We wave goodbye as Madame—paint-stained tail lifted high in the air—trots beside Lally.

“I have a feeling we’ll become friends,” I say.

“Yeah? Does that mean you’re a dog person too and are fishing for—?”

I poke him in the side again.

“Oof. Watch it with that finger.” He glances down. “Nope, that was a paintbrush.”

“Let me clean up before the meeting. But no, I wasn’t fishing for anything. Lally seems nice, though, and seeing how Coco Key is now home...”

Royal claps his hands together. “So you decided.”

I beam a smile.

He scoops me into his arms and spins me around.

“I didn’t expect you to be so enthusiastic.”

“I’ve been holding my breath since our conversation about where to live and if long distance could work.”

“When I thought about it, unless I hook up with a private jet or a helicopter, traveling between New York, Charleston, and here was going to be exhausting. Romantech wouldn’t work. Plus, I think island life is growing on me,” he says.

It's then I realize Royal is wearing a short sleeve shirt instead of his usual business attire. "I like the look, Mr. McGregor."

Royal brushes his nose against mine. "And I can't wait to call you Mrs. McGregor."

"So what are we waiting for?"

"For the building inspector to sign off on the plumbing in the main building. I guess they ran into something underground."

I inhale sharply.

"Not a treasure chest. But nothing is going to stop us from saying I do."

"I hear ship captains can marry people at sea." I eye the water. The boat with the black sails must've moved on.

"True, but we already have a time slot at the church. We just need to make sure this place is up and running."

"If only I could fix it with paint."

Royal goes still. "Maybe you could fudge the inspection report. Sign on the dotted line."

I swat him. "A forgery? I will do no such thing."

He bursts into laughter and kisses me. "I know and that's what I love about you."

"That I follow the rules, most of the time?"

"Yep. Don't worry. The cheap chocolate bar you bought to replace Bean's stash after you accidentally ate it is safe with me."

"I think she knows it wasn't the good stuff. I owe her."

"You know, Jack will be at the wedding."

My eyes widen. "You're right. Maybe I could have him bring her some of it. I'll pay for it of course, but then she won't suspect me." Then I shake my head. "No, I can't lie. And she'd throw it in the trash if she thought it was from Jackie."

“What happened between them, anyway?”

“It’s a long story, but let’s just say she’s committed to her work.”

“I know a guy like that.”

“Do you mean Magnus?”

“Yep. You don’t think the two of them—?”

“No, not a good match. Not with Ryan either, who’s the opposite and has dated a lot.”

“I vote no on CJ, no offense. I think they have more of a sibling thing going on.”

“But I do want to see my brothers as happy as you’ve made me.”

I kiss Royal on the cheek. “Likewise.”

He kisses my cheek. “You’ve got some paint there.”

“Don’t I always.” With my paint supplies cleaned up, I glance over my shoulder at the progress of the mural as we walk over to the Galleon building.

“It’s picture perfect.”

“And just think, the best is yet to come.”

It’s not our wedding day, not yet, but I can envision Royal and me here, surrounded by friends and family, celebrating the past and the future. Maybe, just maybe, I’ll add that to the mural too.

Read book two, *The Romance Fiasco*, Magnus and Lally’s love story as the hunt for the Crown of Tears continues [here](#).

The Last Will and Testament of Carlos 'Chip' Almeida

To the eldest, Magnus, I leave my father's pocket knife and a pillow
To Twin Royal, I leave the family Bible and a book of matches
To Twin Ryan, I leave my journal and a pen
To Chip Junior, I leave my sextant and the Salty Skeleton

The Junk goes to Magnus
The Sloop, to Ryan
The Galleon and the entire Driftwood property go to Royal.
CJ gets anything left that floats

The youngest would sooner dive than the shallowest go deep. But
neither will find what they seek without the strongest softening and
the cleverest humbling.

Start on the eighteenth. Avoid the sand. Seek her with all your heart
and might. Bring your wits. You'll need them and each other.
If each of my grandsons answers the following questions, the family
fortune will be theirs to do with as they wish. If even one of them fails,
the funds and all properties on the island, including the Driftwood go
to Gerome Glandman.

Magnus: When up is down, what do you do?
Royal: When right is wrong, what do you do?
Ryan: When inside is out, what do you do?
CJ: When high is low, where do you go?

Solving this puzzle will be a great adventure that takes you beyond
your comfort zones. It'll be humbling and educational. It will require
careful thought, collaboration, courage, and strength. Think of any
setbacks as opportunities. Learn while you wait and learn to wait. You
win if you don't quit. Go forth and find her. Godspeed and may the
wind and tide be ever in your favor. The end.

Carlos Chip Almeida

Also by Ellie Hall

All books are clean and wholesome, Christian faith-friendly and without mature content but filled with swoony kisses and happily ever afters. Books are listed under series in recommended reading order.

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About the Author

Ellie Hall is a USA Today bestselling author. If only that meant she could wear a tiara and get away with it :) She loves puppies, books, and the ocean. Writing sweet romance with lots of firsts and fizzy feels brings her joy. Oh, and chocolate chip cookies are her fave.

Ellie believes in dreaming big, working hard, and lazy Sunday afternoons spent with her family and dog in gratitude for God's grace.



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