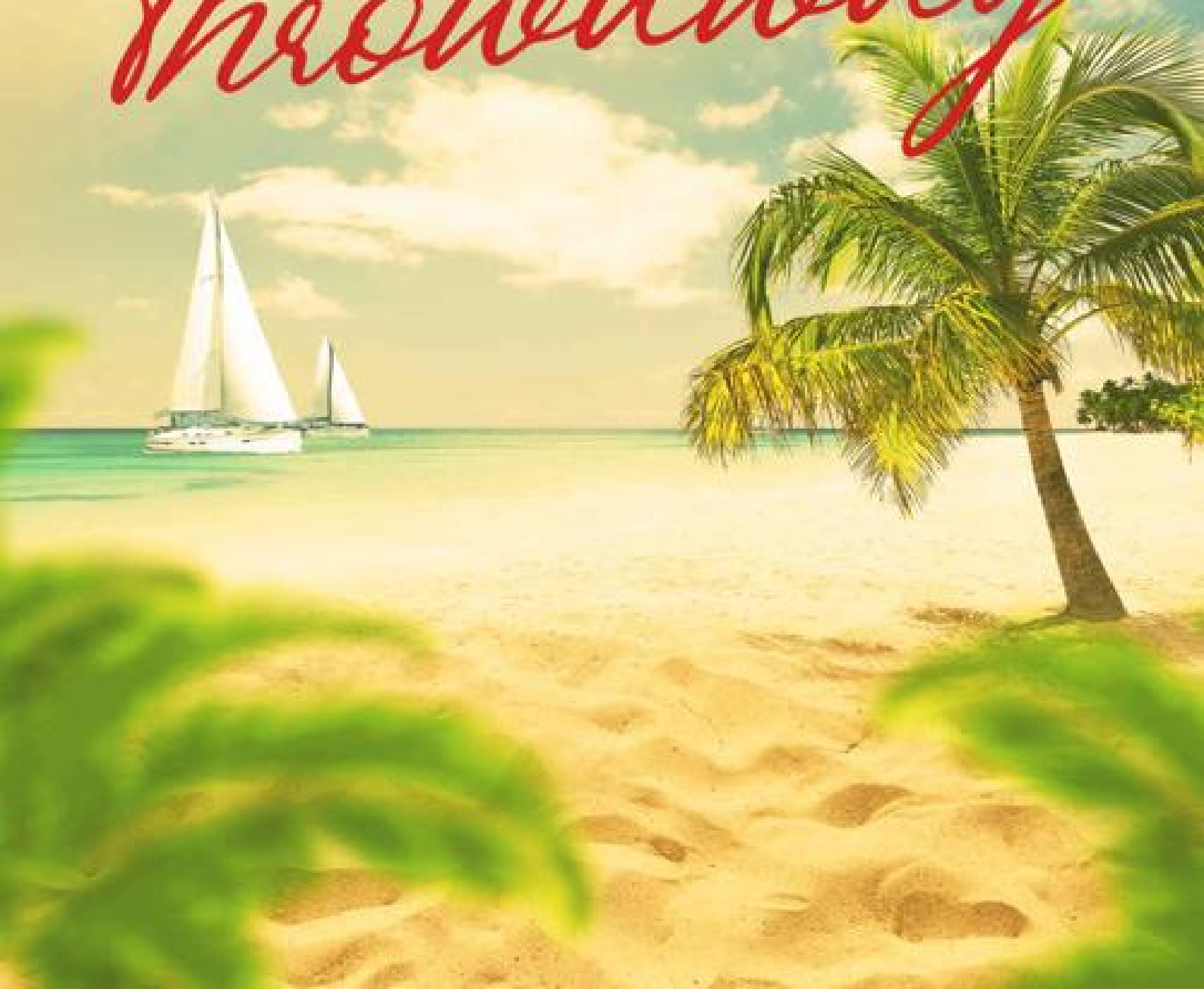


STEPHANIE
TAYLOR

SHIPWRECK KEY
BOOK THREE

*The
Throneaway*



The Throwaway

SHIPWRECK KEY BOOK THREE

STEPHANIE TAYLOR

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Prologue



“Marigold! We need you on set!” The director of the photo shoot calls out from one end of the giant, high-ceilinged studio that they’ve rented for the day in New York’s Industry City, a part of town largely known for its shipping, warehousing, and manufacturing complexes. Her voice echoes through the twenty-thousand square foot warehouse, competing with the upbeat, poppy sound of Deee-Lite singing “Groove Is in the Heart” on the CD player that’s hooked up to giant speakers.

On the far side of the building, Marigold Pim is seated in a canvas director’s chair in front of a giant mirror that’s ringed by lights. She looks at her own reflection as a makeup artist leans in, sweeping a soft, full brush across Marigold’s high cheekbones. As usual, she’s been turned into a different—and some might even say a better—version of herself, transformed by the carefully drawn lines over her eyes, perfect brows that have been filled in and arched, and lips outlined and colored red to look like shiny rubies next to her white smile. This whole process sometimes makes Marigold feel like she’s not even a real woman, but that instead she’s simply a two-dimensional, color-by-numbers creation who doesn’t even come to life until someone else paints her.

“Goldie Pim, get your sweet ass out here!” the set director calls again, this time with more force.

“I think they’re playing my song,” Marigold says, sliding off the chair and standing unsteadily on her five-inch heels.

“Careful, toots,” Jagger, the extremely flamboyant costume designer, says as he taps the ashes from the long, brown cigarette that he’s smoking near an open window. “We can’t have our star twisting an ankle before we get our money’s worth.” Jagger winks at her as he takes another drag of his cigarette and then holds it over the window ledge while he tips his head back and exhales up toward the ceiling.

Outside, the day is gray and the air is cool. It’s February 1991, the start of a new decade. Marigold is twenty years old, and she knows that hers is a tale as old as time when it comes to the world of modeling: beautiful girl from a small American town who has no idea that she’s actually gorgeous and not just weirdly tall and bony. She also knows that her quick rise into the stratosphere of her profession is thanks to nothing but a lightning strike against a metal rod; it’s essentially a lucky accident of genetics, combined with some great pictures taken by a photographer whose own star was on the rise at the very same time.

Marigold shakes out each leg, steadying herself after two hours of velcro rollers in her hair, cloud after cloud of aerosol hairspray, and so much makeup that she feels like an old house with multiple layers of paint. Jagger has dressed her in a black Thierry Mugler bra with slightly coned cups, a pair of black panties with a thick gold chain draped over them, a pair of black fishnet stockings, and the damned shoes that feel like giant patent leather stilts under her feet.

Marigold catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror and does a double-take; she is a glamazon with six inches of hair floating around her head like a halo. She is a sloe-eyed vixen

with a body honed by long runs and a steady diet of coffee and cigarettes punctuated every so often with a croissant or a salad. She is a supermodel who brings home over a million dollars a year before she can even legally buy herself a bottle of wine. She is a well-known face with a boyfriend whose band can fill Madison Square Garden. Marigold travels the world, ringing the globe each month to have her photo taken in bathing suits in the desert, to be captured skipping over a puddle beneath the Eiffel Tower wearing a leopard-print catsuit, or to lounge on a yacht off the coast of Greece as ad execs debate the precise placement of her hair over one shoulder and what it says about the perfume brand they're trying to advertise. Above all, Marigold is exhausted.

“We’re going to put you on that motorcycle,” Bennett James says, pointing at a 1990 Harley Davidson FXST with shiny chrome fenders and mirrors. “If you can just straddle that bike like it’s Cobb Hartley,” he says, laughing at his own joke, “and ride it into the sunset like you would ride him, then we’ll get our shot.”

Marigold stifles the urge to say something snappy back to the photographer, though she desperately wants to. It doesn’t matter to her that she’s a twenty-year-old girl who is making thirty-thousand dollars for this one photo shoot, she’s also a person with some decency, and a grown man telling her to straddle a Harley and pretend it’s her boyfriend both annoys her and disgusts her. She shoots him a long, dark look before stalking over to the bike and grabbing the handles. Marigold assesses the logistics of climbing onto it, but then she throws caution to the wind and slings one long leg over the leather seat, landing on it in a way that makes the eyes of every straight man on the set bulge indecently.

The song switches and suddenly George Michael's "Freedom" fills the studio. Marigold leans forward on the bike as Bennett rushes through his last minute light meter checks, the flash of the bulbs popping in time to the music.

"Ready," Bennett says eagerly, holding out a hand for one of his many assistants to set the right camera in it. He prefers to work without a tripod, kneeling, crawling, standing on tables, and moving around his subjects to capture them from every angle. He hits the button and forwards the film in the camera, ready to immortalize the not-yet-legendary Marigold Pim romping on a bike seat in teased hair and a pair of Mugler leather panties.

Marigold is just getting into the groove of the music, remembering how it felt to watch the famous video of her slightly older and more experienced supermodel friends as they lip-synched along to this George Michael song on MTV. She'd been eighteen and working at a coffee shop in Vermont when the video came out, and seeing those glamorous women—Cindy, Linda, Christy, and Naomi—cavorting and posing for the camera had made Marigold long for that kind of glamour. She'd put on her stained apron each day and made lattes, mochas, and teas for people on their way to the mountains, but in her heart she pictured herself as a city girl and not a country bumpkin. She desperately wanted to be someone who danced all night in fashionable nightclubs and then woke up in a Manhattan apartment on the forty-eighth floor.

"This is good stuff, Goldie," Bennett says, snapping away. "You're on fire!" His face is hidden behind his giant camera, but Marigold isn't looking at him anyway. Instead, she's leaning forward over the handlebars dramatically, eyes narrowed, jaw clenched as she focuses on some spot in the

distance. She knows from doing this job long enough now that the photos will be magnificent. She'll look tough, beautiful, and like *sex* is her middle name. She will earn every penny of this thirty thousand dollars from the client by making this campaign kick ass.

"Excuse me," Jagger says, stepping onto the set. Everything goes quiet except for the music as the flash and pop of the bulbs slows to a stop. "Phone call." He's holding Marigold's giant brick of a cell phone in one hand, looking slightly mortified. "I wouldn't have interrupted, but I answered when it rang and they said it was an emergency."

Bennett James lets loose a long stream of expletives as he kicks an extension cord in anger. It flips around in the air like a snake and smacks against the concrete floor when it lands again. "Dammit. Alright, fine," he says, running a hand dramatically through his greasy hair. He's got the carefully cultivated air of someone who takes himself far too seriously, and quite frankly, he doesn't scare Marigold.

She steps off the bike, reaching out uncertainly as Jagger walks over to her. "Hello?" she says, holding the phone, with its curved body and long antenna, to her ear. She covers her other ear to block out the loud, insistent music that's filling the cavernous studio space.

"Someone turn off that music," Bennett says angrily, looking at the floor but pointing at the stereo.

"Is this Marigold Pim?" a man asks in her ear.

"Yes, this is Marigold." Her heart races as she realizes that anything that constitutes an emergency is probably going to be something bad. Could it be one of her parents? Her sister? She can't even blink her eyes as she waits for more.

“Miss Pim, this is William Masters from New York-Presbyterian Hospital. I’m calling on behalf of Cobb Hartley.”

“Oh, god,” Marigold’s hand flies to her chest, which is clad only in a fitted, leather bra. She suddenly feels naked and clownish in her extreme hair and makeup. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

The eyes of every person on set turn to look at her, but she’s tunneled in on the words coming through her phone.

“Mr. Hartley is currently in our ICU. He’s suffered a...an incident of sorts, and his assistant listed you as his next-of-kin.”

“You mean like I’m his family?”

“Yes, ma’am,” William Masters says. He sounds older and authoritative, like Marigold’s own father, and this somehow soothes her. It’s not as if this man is personally responsible for Cobb’s care or for the outcome of this situation, but the way he sounds so capable and kind helps Marigold relax.

“I’m his girlfriend,” Marigold explains unnecessarily. “Should I come there?”

“Yes, ma’am,” William Masters says again. “You should come here as soon as you possibly can. When you get to the front desk, please ask for me and I’ll come down to the lobby and get you.” He pauses. “Because of the nature of this situation,” he says, clearing his throat, “we’ve enacted a slightly different protocol.”

“You mean because...he might not live?” Tears spring to Marigold’s eyes, threatening to wash away the meticulously applied eye make up and loosen the false lashes that are held to her lids with glue.

“No, ma’am. I mean because this is Cobb Hartley we’re dealing with. We’ve blocked off access to the ICU, and no one will be permitted on or off the floor without a higher level of clearance and security than normal.”

“Oh,” Marigold says, blinking rapidly. She knows this is where she should express her gratitude for this level of confidentiality and care. “Thank you so much. I’ll have them call you when I get there.”

“See you soon,” William Masters says, ending the call.

Marigold’s knees are quaking uncontrollably, and her teeth begin to chatter. This physical response reminds her of what it felt like to come out of the water at the beach as a kid and to be so cold that her body would tremble against her will. She can’t make herself stop shaking.

“Hey, Goldie,” Jagger says gently, coming forward and reaching out for her. “What’s going on?”

Everyone else on set remains exactly where they are, even Bennett James, whose annoyance has turned into silent contemplation.

“It’s Cobb,” she says, although everyone has heard her end of the phone call. “He’s in the hospital—in the ICU.”

There is a sharp intake of breath from all around the studio. Bennett is the first to speak.

“Someone call her a cab, but tell them to pick her up in an hour.”

Marigold’s eyes fly to Bennett’s face and she looks at him with disbelief. “But—”

“There is no *but*,” Bennett says. “The client is paying you more money for this one shoot than my brother makes in a

year as a policeman in Hartford.”

“Bennett,” Marigold protests. “Cobb is in the hospital. He needs me. Tell the client I don’t care about their money.”

Again, there is a sharp intake of breath from the various assistants, interns, stylists, and the makeup artist. No one can believe that a model as young as Marigold would simply “not care” about making thirty thousand dollars in one afternoon. This is a gargantuan fee for a model to charge, even considering the chunk that will go to her agency for their commission. This is enough money to impress anyone in the industry. This is supermodel money.

Bennett looks up from the spot on the floor that he’s been focusing on for most of this conversation. “If you leave now, you’re committing career suicide, Goldie. No one will book you.” The studio has gone silent, the music turned down to the lowest volume so that Sinéad O’Connor is nearly whispering “Nothing Compares 2 U.”

Marigold makes the decision without even a moment’s hesitation. She carefully steps out of her five-inch heels and leaves them standing side by side on the painted concrete floor, but even without them, she still towers over nearly everyone else on set.

“Then I guess I’ll have to go back to pouring coffee and paying my bills with the tips I get for making a decent cup of java.” She gives Bennett one long look and then walks across the cold floor in just her fishnet stockings, leaving everyone on set staring after her.

Marigold takes off the Thierry Mugler black underwear set and hangs them carefully on the rack in the dressing room, but doesn’t stop to wipe off her makeup or tamp down her inflated hair. Instead, she buttons her own white men’s shirt over a pair

of frayed 501s and tugs on her black snakeskin cowboy boots in a hurry, then she slips out the side door and down a set of metal stairs that shake and make a metallic clang with every single footstep as she descends them at top speed.

She'll get to Cobb as quickly as she can. Nothing can keep her away from the man she loves with all her heart when he needs her, not even the promise of a huge payday or the threat of losing it all.

And who cares, anyway? she thinks. The heavy steel door bangs against the wall as she exits the building and ends up on a street full of dock workers and men dressed for hard physical labor, all of whom look her way curiously and with open appreciation. *I'm dating Cobb Hartley. I won't need to go back to pouring coffee, I can just be a rockstar's girlfriend.*

The sky above is slate gray and threatening to dump rain like its going out of style. Marigold looks back and forth, dismayed by the lack of cabs or any type of public transport. She's about to give up and ask one of the men in overalls or Carhartt work clothes if they'll give her a lift back to midtown when a tiny Volkswagen Bug pulls up beside her, its engine idling loudly. The driver leans over and opens the door, looking up at her as she stands on the sidewalk.

"Need a lift?" It's Jagger, the stylist, and he's got a smirk of admiration on his face. "No one walks out on Bennett James, and I gotta hand it to you, Goldie, he wasn't expecting a twenty-year-old model to tell him off." Marigold cringes at this. "But girl, listen—he had it coming. Now get in."

Marigold looks up the street one last time as a gust of wind blows her hair and lifts the hem of her button-up shirt. She tosses her leather bag into the backseat of Jagger's Bug and climbs in.

“New York-Presbyterian,” she says hurriedly, buckling her seat belt. “I just need to get to Cobb.”

* * *

The floors of the hallways shine and reflect the fluorescent lights overhead. From the various ICU rooms come beeps and ticks: the sounds of machines keeping fragile beings alive. The elevators make a muffled *ding* from beyond the locked doors each time someone arrives on the floor.

Marigold rushes up to the nurses’ station on the heels of William Masters, who met her in the lobby when she arrived, as promised.

“Checking in for Mr. Hartley’s room,” William Masters says to the nurse on duty. She glances up from her stack of files, looking tired. When her eyes land on Marigold, she visibly changes.

“Oh,” she says, looking flustered. “Please sign in here.” She pushes a clipboard and pen across the tall desk, staring at Marigold.

Whether the long look is in response to the absolutely over-the-top hair and makeup, or to the fact that Marigold is a well-known model at this point, she isn’t sure. But either way, Marigold smiles at her politely, signing her name on the sheet and passing the clipboard back.

“This way,” William says, guiding Marigold down the hall.

A room enclosed entirely by glass sits at one end of the floor, and someone has closed the blue curtains that hang from floor to ceiling so that the patient in the bed isn’t visible to anyone standing outside.

“Okay.” William pauses at the door and holds the handle for a moment as he turns to look at Marigold. “Mr. Hartley is currently not conscious,” he says. “He has suffered from a seizure brought on by an overdose, and when we go in, you will see that he’s hooked up to several machines.”

Marigold’s heart plummets in her chest. *An overdose? Cobb?* She puts a shaking hand to her mouth and nods slowly. Of course she knows that Cobb and his bandmates—and really everyone else they know in the music business—dabble in marijuana, alcohol, and occasionally hallucinogenics, but an *overdose*? Isn’t that for people who do hard drugs and have no control over themselves? That’s not Cobb—not by a long-shot.

“It was cocaine,” William Masters explains gently. “He had a seizure and went into cardiac arrest.”

“Oh my god!” Marigold’s hand falls away from her mouth.

In response, William turns the knob and takes her hand, nearly dragging her into the small glass room. He closes the door behind them, and she’s confronted with a sight she never in a million years would have wanted to see: her boyfriend—her strong, funny, talented, kind boyfriend—lying pale and motionless beneath a white sheet. Sure enough, machines are attached to him with various wires, and the beep and hiss of mechanical life forces fills the little space. A small window on the wall looks out at the gray sky; rain has begun to fall in earnest.

“I’ll leave you here with him,” William says, watching Marigold while she steadies herself against the cold metal railing of Cobb’s bed. She grips it with both hands, her knees weakening. Cobb’s eyes move beneath his blue veined eyelids. “If you need anything at all, please press that button there,”

William says, pointing at what looks like a doorbell on the wall. “A doctor will be in shortly to update you.”

As soon as the door closes behind William Masters, Marigold sinks into a chair next to the bed. She lets a strangled sob escape her for the first time, covering her face with both hands. It doesn't even occur to her to find a bathroom and wash off her makeup, and soon she's sitting there with rivers of black mascara cutting trails of black tears through her foundation and over her powdered cheeks.

There's a knock at the door and Marigold swipes at her face with the backs of her hands. “Come in,” she says, sounding choked.

A young doctor opens the door and enters. He can't be much more than thirty, but he looks exhausted and worn down.

“Mrs. Hartley?” he asks, looking at the chart in his hands to give Marigold time to compose herself.

“Marigold,” she says, standing up unsteadily. “Marigold Pim. Cobb and I aren't married. Yet.” She adds this last part without even thinking. Certainly *she's* considered what life would be like as Mrs. Cobb Hartley, but they're young and have only been dating a year, so it's not as if Cobb has proposed or anything. At least not officially.

“Pleased to meet you,” the doctor says, looking at Marigold with what feels to her like pity. “And I'm sorry that you're here under these conditions, but this is serious. Mr. Hartley has suffered from a severe cardiac incident.”

Marigold lets an audible sob escape her again before she covers her mouth. “I'm sorry.”

“No need to be sorry,” the doctor says gently, reaching for a box of tissues and handing it to her. “I'm told that Mr.

Hartley was at a recording studio midtown when he began to seize, and an ambulance was called quickly. They resuscitated him, and once he was stable, they brought him here. He hasn't woken up yet, but I would imagine that when he does, he'll have a terrible headache from the seizure, assuming that he banged his head against the floor when he fell. That's fairly common."

"When can he go home?" Marigold asks hopefully.

The doctor gives her a small, patient smile. "Well, he'll need to wake up for us to give him a full assessment and to determine what sort of therapies or treatments he's going to need. These next couple of hours will tell us a lot. But Marigold, I think he's going to be alright." He pauses and gives her a long, searching look before going on. "This kind of cardiac event could have easily ended in tragedy. If you have any pull with Mr. Hartley, I'm going to encourage you to use it."

"Any pull?" Marigold frowns. She's having a hard time processing much of anything as she holds Cobb's cool, unmoving hand in hers.

"Yes, if you have any influence at all over his choices, and I'm guessing that you do, you'll convince him to seek professional help and get off drugs entirely."

Marigold's eyes fall to the floor and she tightens her grip on Cobb's hand. "Okay," she whispers. "I'll do everything I can to get him to stop."

"I'll be back by to check on him. Will you be here?" The doctor holds a clipboard under one arm.

"I'll be right here," Marigold promises, turning to look at her boyfriend as the doctor lets himself out. "Do you hear me,

Cobb?” she whispers to him as his chest rises and falls. He’s got oxygen tubes in his nose, and there’s dried blood on a cut over his eyebrow. “I’m going to be *right here*. Forever. I’ll never let you go, and I’ll never leave your side. It’s you and me, baby, until the end of time.”

In response, the machines continue their incessant humming as they work their magic on Cobb Hartley, and Marigold closes her eyes, imagining herself as his loving wife.

If Cobb marries her, she’ll do everything she can to make him happy. She’ll have his children. She’ll go with him to treatment. She’ll cook for him and travel with him and make sure that he’s got everything he needs so that he can make his music without a care in the world.

He just has to survive this.

Please, God. Just let him survive this.

Marigold



Marigold's bungalow on Shipwreck Key is a feminine cottage that pays no mind to masculinity whatsoever. It is robin's egg blue paint on the front door, mismatched teacups, and fluffy white hand towels. It is a queen-sized bed covered in so much white bedding that it looks like a dollop of whipped cream. It is a cupboard full of ironed linen tablecloths that she's collected over the years. Marigold has turned it into a retreat that speaks to her tastes and her tastes alone, with each room painted a different pastel shade. The wall behind her bed is papered in light blue covered with a hand-painted garden of wildflowers, and the majestic wrought-iron bed sits beneath an ornate chandelier and on top of a giant, soft pink rug. Without fail, every single room—even the bathrooms—has at least one white bookshelf, upon which Marigold has shelved Jane Austen next to Julia Child's cookbooks, and sandwiched her favorite memoirs between books of poetry and trashy paperbacks that she's read on the beach.

Everywhere in Marigold's little home there are nods to English country living, with a weathered bench perched just inside the door that leads from her bright, airy laundry room to the side porch, and an old-fashioned larder in her kitchen with a small window that she leaves cracked in the winter to keep her bins of onions and tomatoes and cartons of eggs cool. Her

marriage to Cobb had meant nearly twenty years of living in The Cotswolds, close to where he'd grown up, and everything about that lifestyle still informs the way that Marigold lives today. She turns on the BBC as she stands at her kitchen sink, hand washing pots and pans each evening. She goes around to all of her closest neighbors to deliver bits of anything she bakes, and to share bits of gossip or island news, and she keeps a small garden behind her house, difficult though it is to grow anything in the sandy ground that even passingly resembles the bed of roses and hollyhocks and hydrangea and foxglove that she'd loved and nurtured in The Cotswolds.

Marigold wakes up inside this English-cottage-on-a-tropical-island one Saturday morning the week before Christmas and makes a kettle of hot water to pour into the French press on her wooden kitchen counter. Marigold has her long hair pulled loosely into a braid that hangs down her back, and she's wearing a pair of black sweatpants, a gray t-shirt with an image of the *Golden Girls* on it, and the thick, black glasses she wears when she doesn't have her contacts in. She's humming along to "Blue Christmas" as Elvis sings on the kitchen radio when she hears a knock on her front door.

Marigold throws the door open wide and leaps into the arms of the man standing on her doormat. "Elijah!" she shouts, her arms so tight around his neck that he's forced to lift her off the ground.

"Hi, Mum," he says. His words are tinged with the slightest British lilt, and Marigold loves it when her thirty-year-old son calls her *Mum*.

She slowly loosens her grasp on Elijah and he sets her back on her feet. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

Her eyes are shining as she looks up at her boy, who is six-foot-four.

Elijah takes off the newsboy cap he's wearing over his brown hair, holding it in one hand. "Because," he says impishly, "I wanted to surprise you."

Marigold reaches up to hug him again, noticing for the first time that he's got a huge, overstuffed duffel bag sitting on the porch at his feet, and behind him is a gorgeous Christmas tree wrapped in a thick, clear plastic bag.

"Did you bring me a tree?" she asks, laughing as she looks back and forth between her son and the five-foot tree that's laying on its side on her porch.

Elijah turns and looks back at it. "In fact I did." He lifts up his duffel bag. "I know you, and I figured you'd skip the tree and just put a few candles and angels out if you were doing Christmas alone."

"Are you staying for Christmas?" Marigold's chest fills with and excitement that nearly bubbles over.

"If you'll have me." Elijah ducks his head shyly.

He's always been like this, her boy, just a bit shy and uncertain, though he's gotten height and good looks and charm from both parents, and wherever he goes, women eye him with interest. But the best part of Elijah is the way that he's blissfully unaware of his own magnetic pull.

"Get in here," Marigold nearly yells, yanking the sleeve of her baby boy's sweater and tugging him over the threshold.

"Thanks, mum," he says with a genuine laugh. "I'll just grab the tree and drag it inside, then maybe we can decorate it together."

“Buddy,” Marigold says, using the nickname she’s called him since he was just a tiny boy, “we can do absolutely anything you want. I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Aw, don’t cry.” Elijah grins at her happily, clearly pleased that his surprise is going over so well. “I missed you, and I thought it was crazy for both of us to spend Christmas alone when we could spend it together.”

Marigold wraps her arms around her son’s midsection, her cheek brushing against the front of his sweater as she hugs him one more time, inhaling the smell of his laundry detergent, his long journey, and the open water over which he’s traveled with a plastic-wrapped pine tree in tow. For her. Just to see her.

With a smile, Marigold looks up at her son. “We’re going to have the best Christmas ever,” she says, pulling away from Elijah. “But the very first thing we’re going to have is *coffee*.”

She pours them each a mug and brings out the cream, setting it on the table as they settle in.

“So how’s your dad?” Marigold asks, pouring cream into her mug and keeping her eyes on the swirl of white as it mixes in with the rich coffee. She stirs it and passes the cream to her son.

“Dad is alright,” Elijah says, keeping his eyes on Marigold’s face. He’s been through a lot with his parents over the years, and Marigold likes to keep things light when talking about Cobb with their son. No matter what’s gone on between her and her ex-husband, they’d made a deal years ago never to let their words about one another be hurtful. And they’ve stuck to that religiously, but now that Elijah is a grown man, he must know from observing them that there’s plenty more emotion running beneath the surface of their placid inquiries about one another. “He’s got cows.”

Marigold's eyebrows shoot up over the rim of her coffee cup. "Cows? Pardon me?"

Elijah shrugs, like nothing his parents do can shock him. "Yeah. Apparently all landed gentry need cows and milkmaids."

"Milkmaids?" Marigold's voice goes higher than her eyebrows.

"I'm kidding about that part, Mum. No milkmaids. Dad is single and refuses to go into London for much of anything these days. He's discovered the magic of ordering everything online, and most days he wanders the house with a book in one hand, looking for his reading glasses."

"Which are on top of his head," they say in unison, nodding and laughing as they do.

"He never changes, does he?" Marigold asks mildly, sipping her coffee and going quiet as the music changes to Christmas jazz.

"No, not too much," Elijah says noncommittally. He's avoiding her gaze.

Marigold loves holidays and family. She always has. Growing up in Vermont with a Mexican mother and a Dutch father was never boring. It was all maple syrup and changing leaves, combined with the smell of spices and albondigas soup. It was homemade tamales at Christmas, an ofrenda for Dia de los Muertos full of offerings for departed ancestors, and her mother shouting up the stairs in Spanish for Marigold and her sister to hurry up and get to the bus stop in the mornings. It was little wooden tulips and windmills sent from her grandparents in Holland for the Feast of Sinterklaas, and the way her dad never yelled or seemed ruffled by anything. It was

her mother's fiery temper and easy laugh combined with her father's reserved, stoic attitude. It had been a perfect small town life for a girl who got pulled into a much bigger life, and all of it had informed the way she raised Elijah and showed him the world.

"Well," Marigold says, setting her mug on the table. "We need to make a list of all the Christmas things we want to do while you're here." The kitchen is warm and cozy, with small pieces of stained glass hanging in front of the windows to catch the light, and a hodgepodge of coffee mugs in every color and design resting on the drying rack next to the sink.

"I'm too late for Sinterklaas," Elijah says, looking disappointed. "Don't tell Santa, but I always loved Sinterklaas more." He smiles at Marigold through his long lashes, and she watches his face, remembering Elijah as a sweet little boy who loved his grandparents dearly. Marigold's mother and father had both died of cancer in their sixties, and when her sister suddenly seemed rootless and lost, Marigold had felt grounded by her husband and son and their life in the English countryside. It's only now, as she enters her fifties, that she realizes how much she deeply misses them both and wishes they were still alive.

"Don't you worry," Marigold says reassuringly. "Sinterklaas will make an exception for you. He'll visit."

This gets a warm, deep laugh from Elijah. He looks around, taking in his surroundings. "I haven't been here in a while, but it always makes me feel like we're at home in the U.K."

Marigold feels a warm flush of pride. "I know. It's not very in-step with the tropical island vibe or the whole pirate thing, but it's my happy place."

“It’s perfect. It’s so you.” Elijah picks up his coffee and stands, stretching one arm over his head. “Do you mind if I shower and lose the winter clothes? Then we can go out and explore.”

“Absolutely. We can decorate the tree later on. I’ll make a Sunday roast.” Marigold starts to mentally comb her refrigerator and larder, making a shopping list in her head.

Elijah walks by her chair and puts a hasty kiss on top of his mom’s head as he carries his coffee mug with him to the guest room.

In the front room, the tree lays on its side, wrapped like a mummy. How had Elijah managed to get all the way from London to Shipwreck Key without her knowing? And with a Christmas tree in tow, no less? She shakes her head, smiling at the image of her son shelling out cash to a tree lot in Destin—probably more than he should have paid—and then dragging it onto a boat for the ride out into the Gulf of Mexico. Could it be that she’s the luckiest woman on the planet? Blessed with a huge, interesting life and a child who is just as sweet and loving at thirty as he was when he was a little boy?

The sound of the shower comes from the end of the hall and Marigold picks up her phone. With a few keystrokes she’s into her Instagram account, and she steels herself for what she’ll find. The comments on her latest post are mixed: Carol from Tennessee thinks that she’s “Total fire!!! Such a perfect representation of post-menopausal women everywhere!” (Marigold takes this as a compliment, but knows it’s not entirely true; she works hard to keep her figure and her looks, which is like fighting an intense uphill battle, as every woman over forty-five knows). Helena from Los Angeles is all about “Girl power and representation for the oldies,” (Marigold

nearly gags), “but COME ON with all those filters. No way is a woman your age looking like that.”

Annoyance flares up in Marigold, though she’s trying to stay as neutral as possible when she reads the comments of these strangers. When she’d decided to use whatever platform she still had in the world to step out onto the stage and make a statement about aging gracefully, she’d honestly been unaware of the depth of cruelty of other humans. For most of her life, Marigold has been treated the way beautiful people everywhere are treated: she’s gotten things for free, people smile at her wherever she goes, and men have glanced at her appraisingly and appreciatively. But not so anymore. At about the age of forty she realized that the eyes of passerby were trailing after younger women. That the men her age were all dating women ten to twenty years their junior. That any time she posted a photo of herself or saw that someone else had posted one, the comments ranged from extremely kind and flattering, to absolutely horrible and hurtful. Elijah had informed her at the time that “People are trolls, mum—no, quite literally—they are,” and she’d had to really grasp and accept that. Sometimes the commentary on her graying hair, her aging neck, and the way she refuses to “dress her age” are absolutely scathing. But the idea that women should have to accept being placed on some sort of back burner just because their childbearing years are over is unacceptable to her.

“You’re not hot, grandma,” an account with no real name, just the moniker ProudHog777 says. “Why would any man want to hit that old leather mitt when he can have a bangin’ young woman?”

Marigold sighs deeply and sets the phone on the table. She drinks her coffee for a moment, digesting the onslaught of opinions coming at her from every direction.

And indeed, why *should* a man want to spend his time with a woman of a certain age? *Well*, Marigold thinks, *how about the wealth of life experience? The fact that women grow more solid and know themselves better as they age? How about the fact that many women become financially secure in their own right, and also more comfortable with their body and the way they share it with you?* But she says none of that to ProudHog777, because really, he's just some troll, as Elijah says, and he probably doesn't have the privilege of spending time with *any* real live women, age notwithstanding, therefore his anger towards her is truly anger at all the women that he can't have.

Instead of replying to any of the comments, Marigold closes out the app and locks her phone, pushing it aside. She'll deal with it all later, and it will become fodder and fuel for the book she's been working on. But for now, she's got bigger fish to fry. Elijah is on Shipwreck Key, it's nearly Christmas, and she has tamales to make, a visit from Sinterklaas to orchestrate, and mugs of tea to drink by the tree as she listens to her son talk about his life and his travels.

Everything else can wait, because for Marigold, nothing matters more than being there for the people you love.

Athena



It's been months since Athena Hudson found out that Diego Santana was engaged to be married the night he took her virginity. The memory of it—all of it—still makes her visibly cringe, and not just in the way that people mean when they say something is cringey. Athena doesn't just recoil inwardly at the memory of how hard she'd fallen for the gorgeous Diego, or the way she let him take her back to his apartment after their first date, but she actually feels her stomach twist like a gnarled tree branch, and she squeezes her eyes shut, trying to push away the bad feeling that even just his name brings to her.

The whole thing had sent her fleeing to Shipwreck Key, right to her mother's house on the beach at the very same time that her younger sister was involved in a bar shooting in New York that brought her down to the island to get back on her feet as well. Essentially, Shipwreck Key has been a place of recovery and rejuvenation for all of the Hudson women: Athena has been trying to forget Diego; her sister Harlow has been doing Zoom therapy and learning to feel safe again in an unsafe world; and their mother, the former First Lady, is nursing her own broken heart after their father's death and the revelation that he had a second family tucked away in France.

Marooned With a Book, the shop that Ruby Hudson opened on the island, has been a place of total respite for all of them. Almost instantly, Ruby formed a book club that's filled with other local women, and they've become fast friends. Sometimes they read the book they've picked but never even get around to talking about it because there's so much else to discuss. As far as Athena is concerned, they're chosen family and she loves them all—even after only being on the island for six months.

“Oh, wow...” Athena catches a glimpse of a young man outside the window of the shop as he strolls down Seadog Lane with a cup of coffee from The Scuttlebutt in hand. She's holding a stack of twenties at the register as she and Tilly Byer get ready to open the bookshop for the day, but she's just gotten totally sidetracked by the sight of a gorgeous man her age, which is not something she sees much on Shipwreck Key. Her mom has taken the day off to attend a co-therapy Zoom session with Harlow and her therapist, and Athena is in charge of the shop.

Tilly looks up from counting change and follows Athena's gaze. “Ah, I see our fair maiden has discovered the island visitor.” She's watching Athena with amusement.

“Who is that?” Athena finally tears her eyes away from the man. His tanned limbs are visible from under a white t-shirt and black shorts, and he's got Converse on his feet and an unruly mop of coppery brown hair on his head. As his face turns from profile into full view, Athena sees that he's got eyes that are a light, unusual shade of mint green. He's stunning.

Tilly is holding a roll of quarters in one hand, and her hip is resting against the counter. “That's Marigold's kid—Elijah.

His parents are famous, your parents are famous...don't you guys all know each other already or something?"

Athena looks surprised, and she ignores Tilly's facetious question. "Marigold didn't tell us her son was coming."

"And yet, there he is," Tilly says dryly, nodding her head at Marigold, who steps out of a shop across the street to join him. "Out strolling with his mom."

"You know him?" Athena blinks, admiring again the way his tanned skin looks against the white cotton of his shirt.

"He's visited before. I would say he was cute if I were into dudes, but I'm not." She shrugs like she couldn't care less, then bangs the roll of quarters on the counter, breaking the wrapper and dumping the coins into the change drawer. "He is nice, though. When I was about ten, he came to visit and my grandpa let him take me on a boat with his parents. I think I had a weird, confused crush on him because I didn't know yet that I was allowed to like girls. As it turns out, he always wanted a kid sister, and I guess I fit the bill."

Athena laughs at this. "His parents were both here? I thought Marigold had been divorced forever."

"She has. But Cobb Hartley visits every so often. I've seen him a few times." Tilly tries to sound cool, but Athena can tell that she's anything but unimpressed by a star of Cobb's magnitude showing up in their tiny island.

"Hmm." Athena narrows her eyes at Elijah as he walks down the street next to Marigold. "How old is he?"

"Uhhh." Tilly squints her eyes. "When I was ten, I think he was about nineteen, so I guess that would make him...thirty-ish?" She makes a face. "Pretty old."

“Well, I’m twenty-four, so he’s not too old for me.” Athena instantly blushes as the words cross her lips. She hasn’t meant to show her hand to Tilly, but has instead been hoping that her interest in Elijah Hartley sounds innocent and curious rather than fan-girly.

Tilly huffs out a laugh. “Oh yeah? Then go get him, tiger.” She holds up one hand like a claw, her nails painted blood red as she fake-roars at Athena.

Athena laughs out loud and waves the stack of twenties at Tilly. “Oh, come on, Til. He’s Marigold’s son. He’s probably got a thousand girlfriends.” Her eyes skate back out onto Seadog Lane and fix on Marigold and her son as they cross the street slowly, stepping around golf carts. “Or boyfriends. You know—whatever.”

“How very forward-thinking of you,” Tilly says, banging a roll of dimes against the counter just like she had with the quarters. “But listen, you should meet him.”

“I will. I’m sure I will,” Athena says, watching his tall, loping frame as he follows his mother down the sidewalk and out of view.

* * *

There was a time when her dad was in the White House that Athena felt sure she’d suddenly stumble into a social life. After all, the daughter of a president had to be popular and well-liked, right? It all looked so easy for her sister as Harlow tripped out the door of their private residence wearing cute shoes and carrying expensive handbags to meet friends, and even though she was a year older than Harlow and it felt unfair to watch her conquer milestones first, Athena knew her time

would come soon. She knew that boys would eventually ask her out and that girls would invite her along for weekends at the beach or to birthday parties.

Only they never did. For the entirety of her dad's time in the Oval Office, Athena spent her nights in her princess bed with the bedside lamps on, a book open on her chest as she read about fictional characters having the kind of great adventures that she wanted to have. She laid there, night after night, dreaming that she would meet a boy in a cute way like all these book girls met boys, and that someone would cup her chin in his big, slightly rough hand, tip her head up, and kiss her gently. She flipped pages and read about the way the girls in her books dressed, talked, and did things, assuming that somehow she'd adopt their appealing mannerisms through osmosis. Never happened.

Instead, Athena had graduated high school at the top of her class, gone to Georgetown, gotten a degree in library sciences, and ended up at the Library of Congress, where she'd worked diligently and happily for two years, swooning over Diego Santana until he'd asked her out and broken her heart in the span of twenty-four hours.

So in the end, all the reading and all the daydreaming in the world about how she might somehow step into the shoes of one of her favorite characters has done her no good, because she still fancies herself a nerdy book girl with two left feet, an undeveloped sense of fashion, and a shy streak. And her younger sister Harlow is still—in Athena's eyes—a fashion goddess with no fear who can flirt with any boy, and talk her way into any job or situation she wants. Surely Harlow could walk right up to Elijah Hartley and charm him into laughing at her jokes without even thinking about it. Athena nearly burns with envy just imagining the way Harlow would have Elijah

wrapped around her finger if he were to walk into the bookstore while she was there.

“Earth to Athena,” Harlow says, waving a hand in front of her sister’s face. “Come in, Athena.”

“Sorry,” Athena says, putting her phone down on the arm of the couch in their living room.

The girls are home alone tonight. They ate quesadillas and Diet Cokes at the kitchen counter together before relocating to the couch to decide which Christmas movie to watch next to the fifteen-foot Christmas tree that their mom had ordered to be delivered from Destin.

“That tree is outrageous,” Harlow says, tipping her head back on the couch and looking up at it.

In typical Ruby fashion, their mother has decorated the tree in a cascade of glittering ivory ornaments, stringing white fairy lights and clear tinsel through the branches so that the entire lit-up tree looks like it’s covered in frosted snow.

“I don’t think it’s outrageous,” Athena says, admiring the tree, which looks a lot like the way Ruby might have decorated the trees in the White House. “I just think it’s Mom.”

“True, true,” Harlow says, tucking her fuzzy red socks under the blanket that she has wrapped around her body. “Now what’s going on in your phone that’s so urgent? You got a new man?” She tilts her chin up, glancing at Athena’s phone on the arm of the couch.

“Haha,” Athena says, sounding as sarcastic as she ever sounds. “I’m done with men.”

“You’re twenty-four! You’re not done with men, you just picked a bad apple out of the first bunch.”

Athena looks at the knitted blanket in her lap, sticking her pinky finger through one of the holes. “Kind of embarrassing that my first batch of apples didn’t come around until I was nearly a quarter of a century old.”

“Eh,” her sister says. “You didn’t miss much. There are a lot of bad apples out there.”

“Still. I probably should have been out there trying harder, instead of sitting inside with a book. I mean, who lives in the White House and never uses that kind of clout to get into nightclubs or parties?”

Harlow looks at her regretfully. “A smart girl,” she says, pressing her lips together. “I used it for anything you can imagine, and at least half of those things weren’t even worth my time.”

“Hey, do you know anything about Elijah Hartley?”

Harlow’s mouth quirks into a smile. “Marigold’s son? Yeah, we have a few friends in common.”

“Oh, so maybe Tilly was right then.”

“I don’t even know what Tilly was going on about, but I can say with a fair amount of certainty that she probably wasn’t right.” Harlow shakes her head. “That girl thinks she’s forty, but this island has kept her young in a way that makes her seem like a middle-schooler sometimes.” Harlow reaches for her glass of water. “What did she say?”

Athena shrugs. “She said that the kids of all famous people know each other.”

“Okay, well she’s not entirely wrong about that. But I wouldn’t say I *know* Elijah, just that he dated the older sister of my friend Megan at one point. No big deal.” Harlow sips

her water. “What’s brought this on? Are you following him on Instagram or something?”

“He’s here.”

Harlow sets her water down and swings her feet off the couch. “No way. On Shipwreck?”

“Yep. I saw him out on Seadog Lane with Marigold today, and Harlow...he’s hot.”

Harlow cackles uncontrollably. “Girl. I *know*.”

“But Tilly thinks he’s about thirty.”

“Sounds right.”

“He’s probably not single anyway,” Athena says, looking up at the top of the Christmas tree again and feeling wistful. “And even if he was, he wouldn’t be interested in someone like me.”

“Someone like you?” Harlow leans forward and slaps her sister’s thigh through the blanket. “Don’t be an idiot, Athena. He’d be lucky to have someone like you even glance his way.”

“Someone like me? You mean a former librarian who, until six months ago, was a twenty-four-year-old virgin? A book nerd who is currently living with her mother and her kid sister?”

“Okay, I mean *kid sister* is maybe a step too far...”

“But seriously. My only source of income at the moment is working on special projects for the library that I normally would have passed off to our interns. I think they just took pity on me or something.”

“BS,” Harlow says, waving a hand. “There’s nothing to pity. They’re giving you the special projects on contract

because Dad was the President, not because they feel sorry for you.”

“Ah,” Athena says with a roll of her eyes. “Even better for my self esteem.”

“Hey, get used to it. Own it. Work it to your advantage. The only reason I’m still freelancing on marketing projects is for the very same reason. Girls in their early twenties with marketing degrees and good fashion sense are a dime a dozen.” Harlow motions at the fuzzy zip-up Christmas onesie she’s wearing. It’s covered with reindeer and big white snowflakes, and she’s got her curly hair pulled up into a red scrunchy on top of her head.

Athena picks at the blanket on her lap again. “Do you think for the rest of our lives we’ll just be Jack Hudson’s daughters?”

Harlow looks up at the ceiling like she’s trying to come up with the right words. “Yes,” she says decisively, fixing her gaze on Athena. “I do.”

Athena takes a deep breath and reaches for her phone. She unlocks it and opens Instagram. “Okay, then I need your help.”

“Oh?” Harlow sounds intrigued.

“I want to meet Elijah Hartley. And I want to impress him. I need to find out who he is and what he likes and see if we have anything in common.” She finds his profile and scrolls through his photos, looking for clues as to who he might be. “I can’t turn twenty-five in February and still have had only one semi-thing with a guy. And not only that, but my only semi-thing can’t be with a total douchebag.”

“Diego *is* a loser,” Harlow agrees, taking the phone when Athena hands it to her. She scrolls through Elijah’s photos too.

“Oooh, look at this. Here he is shirtless in Central Park, training for a marathon or something. Damn, he looks good without a shirt.”

Athena snatches the phone back. “Not helpful,” she says with a frown, though she stops and looks at the photo before moving on. He *does* look amazing shirtless. “But look at this—he likes to bake.”

“So? You can’t boil water.”

“Come on. I can bake!” Athena protests. Harlow looks at her dubiously. “Okay, I can bake Pillsbury cookie dough. But he does other stuff too,” she says, looking at his photos. “He paints. He volunteers at a school. He has a dog. He loves London.”

Harlow looks unimpressed. “I’ve never seen you paint. You didn’t even babysit as a teenager, so I doubt you’re a giant kid-lover. We’ve never had a dog. And you prefer Paris to London.” She ticks each item off on her fingers as she goes.

“You’re killing my buzz.” Athena flops back on the couch and stares at the ceiling. “Maybe we have nothing in common,” she says, defeated.

“Maybe you don’t need specific things like that,” Harlow says. “I really think you should just be you and see where it goes. Assuming that he’s here long enough for you to meet him.”

“He will be,” Athena says with a knowing sigh. “I’d bet you a million dollars that he stays for Christmas.”

“Then start a dog-walking business, run into the craft store and buy some oil paints, and try not to burn a batch of cookies,” Harlow says sarcastically. “But really, just be yourself. I promise you, any guy worth your time will like you

for you, Athena.” She reaches out with her foot and prods her sister teasingly. “Just make sure you check the next apple you pick for worm holes before you take a bite.”

Marigold



Marigold is taming and pruning her bougainvillea blossoms in the garden, snipping full blooms of hot, bright fuchsia flowers to put in vases throughout her cottage. Having Elijah there has reinvigorated her in terms of all the little touches that she likes to do around the house: placing fresh flowers in each room, opening the windows to let the warm winter air blow through the house, and pulling out long-buried Christmas decorations and dusting them off so that the place feels more festive. When it's just her, Marigold falls easily and happily into her solitary routine, and she normally does Christmas by stringing lights through the palm trees in her yard and placing a two-foot tall potted palm in her front room, hanging a few ornaments on it, and playing a Christmas mix on her stereo system. It's not lonely at all to her; she's raised her son and lived that chunk of a woman's life that revolves around making a house into a home for her family, and for the most part, she relishes her independence now as she enters her fifties.

But having Elijah here with her for the holidays is grounding, heartwarming, and fun in a way that she's forgotten about. It's like being a hands-on mother is so ingrained in her that all her maternal instincts go into hibernation when her baby is off in the world, living his life like the grown man that

he is, but they spring to life again the moment he appears on her doorstep.

“Hey, Mum,” Elijah says, walking out the back door and into the walled garden and breaking into her thoughts. He’s wearing nothing but a pair of long shorts and a smile, one hand rubbing his flat stomach and the other holding a mug of coffee.

First thing in the morning, Marigold’s boy always looks exactly like the toddler he’d once been: hair mussed, eyes squinted shut, and torso bare. She smiles up at him from where she’s crouched in the dirt on her knees, lifting the floppy brim of her large hat so that she can see him better.

“Hi, buddy,” she says, pulling her hands out of the dirt-crusted gloves she wears when she digs around in the garden. In addition to the cascade of bright pink bougainvillea, Marigold also grows pineapple in their short, squat shrubs, and firm, yellow bananas on a tree awash in green leaves in the corner of the garden. “How’d you sleep?” She wipes a hand across her forehead and leans back on her heels, pushing herself up to standing.

“I slept like a baby.” Elijah takes a drink of his coffee as he watches his mom gather her bunches of flowers. “Something about the ocean air always does that to me.”

“If we were in London, you wouldn’t be walking around barefoot and shirtless in the garden a week before Christmas,” Marigold says, bending over to pick up the scissors she uses to snip flowers. She cuts a glance at Elijah. “Speaking of London, are you sad not to be there with Dad this Christmas? You said he wasn’t leaving the house a lot, so will he be spending the holidays alone?”

Elijah looks around the garden, one hand on his hip as he stares at the little pots that hold growing avocado plants. “Um, well,” he says, sipping his coffee again. “Actually, I have a proposition for you.”

Marigold stands there, dirty gloves and scissors in one hand, cut flowers in the other. “Oh?” she asks carefully, lifting her eyebrows. “A proposition?”

Elijah clears his throat, looking guilty. “So, Dad isn’t exactly in London at the moment.”

Marigold drops her hands to her sides. She has a feeling like she’s been standing behind a curtain without realizing that just beyond it is an entire audience, and that Elijah is about to pull that curtain up without warning.

“Where is he?”

“He’s in Miami,” Elijah says, looking guilty. “He had to have bypass surgery.”

“What?!” Marigold nearly screams. “Your father is in Miami and he’s already had heart surgery, and I’m only hearing about it now? What the hell is going on, Elijah?” She storms past him and into the kitchen, dropping the flowers on the kitchen table and walking over to the sink to wash her hands furiously. Elijah follows her inside sheepishly.

“He’s with Aunt Kerry,” Elijah says, referring to Cobb’s younger sister. “She came down to stay with him for a couple of days so that I could come here...and ask you if it was okay for Dad to come and recover here. With you. On Shipwreck Key.”

Marigold turns off the water and stands there, hands dripping, mouth open as she faces the window that looks out into her garden. She doesn’t turn around.

“So you came here not just to spend Christmas with me, but to ask me if I can play nurse to your dad for the next couple of months?” A breath catches in Marigold’s throat as she parses all of this for more meaning.

Elijah waits before responding. When he finally does, he sounds far younger than his thirty years. “Actually, I *am* here because I want to spend Christmas with you, but I was hoping that if we brought Dad here it could be like old times.”

Marigold spins around, wiping her wet hands on the front of her shorts. The sight of her son—her tall, lanky, fully grown son—looking at the floor sadly and admitting that what he wants is to spend Christmas with *both* of his parents nearly breaks her.

“Honey,” Marigold says, sighing. No part of her had ever envisioned Cobb on Shipwreck Key for any length of time, and no part of her can now picture him rambling around her lovely, dainty cottage filled with floral print couches, white linen curtains, fresh flowers, and old photos in delicate frames. She pushes her hair off her face with both hands and sighs. “Your dad and I...”

“I know, Mum. It’s fine,” Elijah says as he waves a hand at her. “It was a crazy idea. Aunt Kerry can take him back to New Jersey with her. I think. I’m pretty sure.”

From the look on his face, Marigold knows that this isn’t true. Kerry is a busy college professor with two teenage children of her own, and her house has no room for an over-the-hill rockstar brother and his lengthy recuperation. But her cottage *does* have room for Cobb—as does her life. And she knows it.

Marigold sighs again. “Okay,” she says, nodding and chewing on her lower lip as she considers the mechanics of it

all. “So when did he have surgery?”

“Four days ago.”

“Four days? And you’re just telling me about it *now*? You’ve been here for twenty-four hours already!” Panic rises in Marigold’s chest as she thinks of Cobb, poor frightened Cobb, lying in a hospital bed in Miami with no idea who will look after him while he recovers. “But wait, why did he come to the States for surgery? He could have stayed over there and paid for all the in-home care he wanted.” Her hand flies to her chest as a thought occurs to her. “Oh no, has he run through his money?” Marigold’s voice drops. “Is Dad *broke*?”

The thought horrifies her because she knows how much money Cobb *should* have, and she’s always felt that he deserved it—every penny of it. He wrote the lyrics for all of his band’s biggest hits, sang lead vocals, and played guitar on most of the songs. Not to mention the fact that he’s given away years of his life and a fair amount of his health as he’s toured and continued to entertain millions of people. If Cobb has run out of money, then something is wrong. *Perhaps a poor choice of money managers, or a gambling habit*, she thinks, feeling that same sense of fear coursing through her.

“No, he’s not broke.” Elijah shakes his head. “He just wanted to come here.”

Marigold puts a hand to her mouth to hold in a giggle. “No,” she says. She can feel a hysterical laugh coming on. “He came here and had surgery on my turf *on purpose*? Because he knew I’d step up to the plate and bring him home with me? You’re kidding, right, Elijah?”

Elijah drops his chin like a naughty puppy being scolded, and then he looks up at her through his messy hair. “Kind of?”

Marigold throws both hands in the air and shakes her arms like she's railing at the heavens. "Why?" she asks no one in particular. "Why me?"

Elijah looks so sad that she has to walk over to him and throw her arms around him. "Oh, come on, buddy, I'm only joking," Marigold assures him, stepping away and looking up at her boy. "Your dad and I have so much history," she says, letting the words trail off for a moment while she thinks. "We truly do. And a long time ago—long before you were even a twinkle in either of our eyes—I promised him that I would be there for him, and that I'd take care of him no matter what. So guess what we're doing today?"

Elijah watches his mom but says nothing as he shrugs one bare shoulder.

"We're getting our butts dressed, taking a boat to the mainland, and getting ourselves to Miami. Let's get your dad back here as quickly as possible so that we can have a nice Christmas, yeah?"

A slow smile spreads across Elijah's handsome face. "Really?"

"Yes, really," Marigold says, nodding firmly as she starts a running mental list in her head of things she'll need to buy, arrange, and do while Cobb is in her care. "But I have some bad news for you." She looks at Elijah with a serious face and makes him wait for a long minute to hear what the bad news is. "Now that I'm going to be waiting on Cobb Hartley hand and foot, I'm afraid Sinterklaas is off the table. He's back in Holland. *Hasta luego*. See you next year."

It's Elijah's turn to laugh, and he looks relieved that it's not *actual* bad news. "Okay. Fair."

“But if you behave,” Marigold says over one shoulder as she heads for her bedroom to shower and dress for the trip, “then Santa might still drop by. We’ll see.”

* * *

The scene at the hospital is familiar, even if the interior is different: Marigold checks in at the nurse’s station, gets directions to Cobb’s room, and walks there with her heart in her throat, expecting the worst.

Instead, she’s greeted by his sister Kerry and an unusually tight bear hug.

“Goldie!” Kerry shouts, holding her close as she rocks back and forth. “Thank god you’re here!” Her British accent is right in Marigold’s ear and then she pulls back so that they can look at one another. “You’re the only person he’ll listen to. No one else can talk sense into him.”

Marigold sighs. She already feels exhausted and she hasn’t even laid eyes on her ex-husband yet.

“His doctors want him to do nothing but rest for the next four to six weeks, Goldie, and you know I have my hands full.” Kerry is looking at her with eyes that are openly pleading.

A tenured professor at Princeton, Kerry Hartley has spent the past twenty-five years teaching British Literature to undergrads while her husband runs an investment firm in Manhattan, to which he commutes to and from each day. Between the two of them, they manage the busy active lives of their teenagers, and Marigold can imagine that panic is setting in for both of them as they picture Kerry’s notoriously

stubborn and famous brother camping out in their guest room from Christmas to Valentine's Day.

"I know, Kerry," Marigold says, reaching out and putting both hands on Kerry's arms so that she's holding onto Cobb's sister reassuringly. "I'm here to take him home with me."

Kerry looks like she might cry. "Thank you, Marigold...I know things have been weird between you two, and I can't imagine that this is going to be comfortable, but you know he loves you—"

"Shhh," Marigold says, tightening her grip on Kerry's arms to make her stop talking. The last thing she needs right now is to dissect her relationship with Cobb or the love that he still has for her. It will be her undoing. "Let me see him and then we can talk details, okay?"

Kerry nods as she fishes a Kleenex from her purse, dabbing at her sniffling nose. Marigold watches her for a moment, with her sleekly frosted blonde hair, patrician nose and sharp cheekbones, and the gold Cartier tank watch that slides up her forearm as she digs through her Valentino purse. Kerry and her husband, Porter Howell, do just fine, and Marigold knows that they could probably easily hire a nurse to come into their home to care for Cobb, but she can also imagine the disruption that he'd cause. Taking him home with her is still the best choice for everyone.

Inside Cobb's hospital room, Marigold finds him dozing with his face turned towards the window. For a moment, she flashes back to the very first time she'd rushed to his bedside in a hospital, only that had been a gray day in New York, and this was a sunny, blue December day in Miami. Outside the second floor window, palm trees wave lazily against an azure sky.

“Hey,” Marigold says softly, approaching his bed and reaching out to take her ex-husband’s rough hand in hers. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this.”

Cobb’s eyes fly open and he turns his head slowly on the pillow so that he’s looking straight at her. A smile that appears to take real effort creases his handsome face, and Marigold grins back at him. She could cry just looking at him, but instead she squeezes his hand.

“Goldie,” he says in a raspy voice. “You came.”

“Well.” She pauses and looks at him with hard eyes. “You sent our son to manipulate me into showing up here, so what else was I supposed to do?”

Cobb laughs but then immediately winces like it hurts. “Hey,” he says through a sandpapery throat, “I had to bring in the big guns.”

Marigold lets go of his hand and walks over to a table where there’s a water pitcher and a stack of paper cups. She pours some and jabs a straw into the drink so that she can hold it in place for Cobb. “You could have just called me, you know. It was wrong for you to come over here and have the surgery without even telling me. That is not okay.” She’s back at his bedside, holding the cup low and bending the straw so that she can put it between his dry lips. “Something could have gone seriously wrong, Cobb, and it would have taken me hours to get here. Did you even think of that?”

He sips the water gratefully, his blue-green eyes fixed on Marigold. When he lets the straw go, he smiles again. “There’s the potential for beautiful drama in that scenario, isn’t there? Cobb Hartley is unconscious—“

“Again,” Marigold interrupts dryly.

“Again,” he says. “And his beloved ex-wife has no idea what’s going on until she gets a call that she needs to rush to his bedside.”

“Jesus,” Marigold says, rolling her eyes. “It’s like you want us to pretend we’re still in our twenties. But we’re not, you know. We’re way too old for this, Cobb. You’re fifty-six years old.”

“I’m well aware.”

“And having a major surgery is not the time for you to set us up for a melodramatic reunion.” Marigold is scolding him and she knows it, but doesn’t care. In this, Kerry is correct: she’s the only one who can make him listen, who can give Cobb a full dressing-down, and she’s also the only person who can get him to understand how serious this is.

Cobb looks appropriately chagrined as he drops his gaze. “I know, boss,” he says. “I hear you. And I’m sorry. I just felt like it would all sound better coming from Elijah.”

“Yeah, and about that,” she says, feeling her blood pressure rise. “Buddy showed up on my doorstep purporting to want a special holiday with his mom, but in truth he just wanted to butter me up to take in dear old Dad.” She’s still feeling a little pissy about that fact, and she’s not ready to let it go.

“Now, hold on,” Cobb says, trying to sit up in his bed and grunting in pain as he does. Marigold gently pushes him back down. “Hold on,” he says again, laying back on the pillows with a sheen of sweat on his pale forehead. “Elijah came to you with the absolute truth: he does want to spend Christmas with you, and that was always his plan, whether I’d scheduled my surgery for now or later.”

“You just chose now so that you could crash our holiday?” She pops one hip out and puts a fist on it as she glares down at him.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. He really does look a bit tepid and unhealthy to Marigold’s eyes. “But when the boy says he thinks he can arrange for his old Pops to tag along for an old-fashioned family Christmas, then who am I to say no?”

“You’re both incorrigible,” Marigold says, hand still on hip. She looks around the room, which is filled with cards lining the windowsill, plants in pots, flowers in vases, and all kinds of gift bags. “How in the hell are we supposed to get all this back to Shipwreck Key?” she wonders.

Cobb follows her gaze. “Plants and flowers get donated to the pediatric and the maternity wings, and the cards will fit in my bag. I think there are gifts in those other bags...” He lifts a shaky hand and points around the room. “But you can go through them and see if they’re more appropriate to keep or donate.”

Marigold sighs for what feels like the eight thousandth time since she set foot in Miami and arrived on the second floor of the hospital.

“Nigel Cobb Hartley,” she says, switching her tone to a more serious one and using his full name. “You must think that I’m a lady of leisure with nothing better to do than be your assistant and nursemaid.”

Cobb smirks at her. “I love you, Goldie.”

“You know, you *say* that,” she says, softening just a few degrees as she looks at the father of her child. This is the man who she’s loved through more ups and downs and rollercoaster twists and turns than any woman should have to tolerate. This

is also the man who she eventually had to leave in order to save them both—a fact that she cannot afford to forget.

“I do say that,” Cobb says, reaching for her hand again. “Because it’s true. Thank you for coming to get me.”

Marigold lets him touch her hand before she heads for the door, stopping to look back at him one more time as she palms the handle. “I’ll talk to the doctors and find out what the plan is to release you. Then I’m throwing you over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and taking you back to Shipwreck Key. There’s no way we’re spending Christmas in a hospital, do you hear me, Cobb?”

“Aye aye, Captain,” he says, closing his eyes and keeping them shut.

Marigold watches him for another second as worry creeps through her veins. She needs to get him well. That’s her only job—her only mission.

That, and making sure that Christmas is just as magical as her son remembers it being back when they were all under one roof.

Marigold



It's seventy-two and breezy three days before Christmas Eve, and Marigold is sitting by her open bedroom window at her white wooden desk with its chipped paint and circular teacup stains all over it. Her laptop is open on the desk, and she's got the document pulled up that she's been working on for months now—the one where she gets to craft her very own manifesto about what it means to be a woman trying to age gracefully in a digital world. Will anyone read it? Maybe. Maybe not. But is it cathartic to write what amounts to a series of essays about the encroaching feelings of invisibility that close in on a woman starting at around age forty? Is there something to gain by putting her thoughts down about the way strangers (men, mostly) feel entitled to comment on her changing looks? Does it feel therapeutic to talk to herself on paper about the small indignities of aging, like knee wrinkles, loose arm skin, whatever it is that happens to a woman's neck, and the sad feeling that she'll never again wake up and be “morning skinny”? Yes, yes, and *hell* yes.

Marigold has been awake since four o'clock, drinking too much coffee and puttering around the house. One thing she's never struggled with—even through these menopausal years—is getting a good, hard night of sleep, but this morning she was dozing soundly in her cool, dark room when she heard the soft

strumming of a guitar coming from the front room. Wrapping a robe around her and tying it tightly, she wandered out to find Cobb sitting on a kitchen chair next to the tree that she and Elijah had decorated and strung with lights. His fingers brushed lightly over the strings of his guitar as he played “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” next to the twinkling lights of the tree.

“What are you doing?” Marigold asked quietly, slipping into the room and perching on the edge of the couch as she tried to blink herself awake.

“Jet lag,” Cobb explained, his fingers still moving over the strings while his eyes lingered admiringly on Marigold’s makeup-free face. “You are a true beauty at four a.m., Goldie.”

“Thank you,” she said, swiping a hand across her eyes. “But I meant what are you doing out of bed? Shouldn’t you be recovering?”

“It’s been eight days since surgery,” Cobb explained, changing the placement of his fingers on the guitar and switching to “White Christmas” seamlessly. “And I’m still young and healthy.”

Marigold shot him a look. “Then why aren’t you back in the U.K., recovering in your own house with a cute nurse at your side to attend to all your needs?”

“Ah,” Cobb said, still playing the song quietly, so as not to wake Elijah. “True recovery is a process that’s aided entirely by the love that surrounds a person.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her, looking as youthful as he had when they were first living together in New York more than thirty years earlier. “But also I have these spurts of energy in the morning, and getting up and moving around is good for me. Trust me, I’ll

burn through this feeling in about twenty minutes and be back in bed.”

Marigold stood up. “I’m going to make coffee.”

True to his word, Cobb had tired easily. By the time Marigold had returned to the living room with two mugs of coffee in hand, he was gone, his guitar propped up against the couch and the house silent again.

Now, at lunchtime, she’s stuck on a chapter she’s writing about what it feels like to be judged by the general public the same way she’d been judged by clients looking to possibly book her for a modeling job. For inspiration, she opens up her latest Instagram post, skimming the comments and trying to read them as if they aren’t actually about her, which is next to impossible.

“Her nose is too flat at the end,” someone says. They regularly dissect her amongst themselves as if she’s unable to read their words.

“Don’t you think her thighs look a bit more jiggly than they did when she was in the Victoria’s Secret catalogue?” *Good god*, Marigold thinks, *I was half the age that I am now when I worked for Victoria’s Secret.*

“I still think she’s pretty, but—“ *Here we go: the inevitable “but”*—“I just think she needs to get some minor work done. I mean, if you have that kind of money, why wouldn’t you get a little Botox or something?”

The wind picks up, blowing through the window and lifting her white linen curtain so that it floats on the breeze next to her. Her hair brushes away from her face and she looks out into the garden, which is the view she chose for her bedroom.

“I broke my nose when I was seventeen,” she types in response to the first comment. “My sister convinced me to play in a powderpuff football game at school, and I took the ball directly to my face. I kind of like it how it is because I think it adds character. But it’s okay if you don’t—that’s showbiz, baby.”

“Airbrushing existed in the 90s,” she types out angrily to the comment about her thighs and their Jello-like consistency. “Real women have a little meat on their bones, even if people like to pretend that we don’t.” She looks at the picture of the commenter: male, of course. “You should consider your own flaws and imperfections—would you enjoy people commenting on them?”

And finally, to the person who believes that her finances should support full facial reconstruction via fillers and muscle relaxers: “I’d rather donate money to a children’s hospital than spend it on face treatments,” she writes with a smirk. “I feel like that’s more in line with the spirit of the season. Merry Christmas.”

It’s funny the way people assume she’s got millions and millions of dollars. Sure, at the height of her career she was making an astounding sum, and she has invested it wisely and watched it carefully over the years, but Marigold had essentially stopped modeling full-time once she became a mother. The years she spent raising Elijah had been funded almost entirely by Cobb’s money, and when they’d divorced, she’d insisted on receiving the minimum amount of alimony, something her lawyer had repeatedly insisted was insane and unnecessary.

But to Marigold, it *had* been necessary. She never wanted Cobb’s money in the first place. Sure, it had provided them

with an amazingly comfortable and easy life, but once they decided to divorce, Marigold knew that one thing she never wanted for herself was to be on Cobb Hartley's payroll. So she'd set out to break back into modeling, which she'd done, scoring campaigns for brands that catered to busy moms and women of a certain age with a bit of disposable income, and things had gone well. Between those jobs and her own savvy investments, Marigold has been able to fund her life here on Shipwreck Key, building her dream cottage, traveling back and forth to London as needed to visit Elijah, and filling her time with whatever creative pursuits interest her—from writing, to gardening, to watercolor painting, which she loves to do at an easel in her walled garden. It's a good life. It's one she cherishes and feels proud of, in spite of the fact that she's alone most of the time.

“Mum?” Elijah is at the door to her bedroom and she turns around to face him. “I'm making lunch here. You want some?”

Marigold stands and follows him to the kitchen, which is filled with the delicious scent of a parmesan mushroom risotto and the smell of baking sourdough bread.

“Where's Dad?” she asks Elijah, who is holding up a wooden spoon of risotto for her to taste, cupping the scoop over one hand so that he doesn't spill it. Marigold leans in and takes the bite from her son, making approving noises. “Mmm, delicious.”

“Dad is napping,” he says, tilting his head in the direction of the room where Cobb is sleeping. “I thought you might want to take lunch in to him.”

“Buddy,” Marigold says with a frown, leaning one hip against the kitchen counter. “I know you're a grown man, but

you don't actually think that this whole thing is going to force me and your dad to get back together, do you?"

Elijah huffs in disbelief. "I've seen *The Parent Trap*, but no, I'm not harboring those kind of delusions." He turns his back to her as he checks the bread. "You and Dad split up for good reasons," he adds, closing the oven door carefully. "Didn't you?"

Marigold folds her arms over her chest as she watches Elijah. "Yeah," she says softly. "There were very solid reasons why we couldn't be together anymore. And I think your father would agree that we're far better apart."

"Would he?" Elijah glances at her over his shoulder as he pulls plates from a cupboard and sets them on the counter as quietly as he can.

Marigold admires the way Elijah knows his way around a kitchen; it's not a gift he necessarily got from her, though she can certainly bumble her way through pretty much any meal with better than average results. His innate understanding of tastes and textures were helped along by a three-year relationship with Claire, a chef he'd met in his early twenties. Together they'd created more than one unforgettable meal, several of which stand out in Marigold's memory as the best things she's ever eaten. Most importantly, Elijah loves the artistry of cooking, and she's more than happy to be the lucky recipient of his skills.

As Elijah continues to dish up the risotto, Marigold lets her mind drift back to one of the frayed seams of her relationship with Cobb. Sometimes she finds her mind turning these memories over against her will as she sinks her hands into a soapy kitchen sink, scrubbing dishes as she looks out at the sky. But this time she willingly conjures the image, letting her

mind shave away the years on both her and Cobb's faces, bringing to life a vision of them at twenty-five (her), and thirty (him), sitting in a hotel room in Copenhagen with a sleeping three-year-old Elijah in a Pack 'N Play crib near the window.

"You can't keep doing this," Marigold had whispered tiredly, hunched over at the foot of the hotel bed. She'd been in the room all night with their toddler while Cobb had gone out with the band—and presumably with its groupies—all night long, tripping through the doorway and into the room just as the sun started to come up. "This isn't real life, Cobb."

He'd looked absolutely steamrolled. Exhausted. Bedraggled. In his eyes, Marigold could see that he'd been mixing coke and booze all night, and the knowledge infuriated her, but it also made her sad.

"I can't raise him alone," she said, nodding at their beautiful little boy, curled up on one side with his sweet baby cheeks flushed pink with sleep. "And if you keep living this kind of life, we could lose you." Her words came out on a sob.

Cobb took off his jacket and tossed it in the general direction of the couch. He sat down next to the coat and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. "I have to go out, Goldie. I have to blow off some steam. You have no idea how much it takes out of you to be at the mercy of the entire world, and everyone wants something from you all the time."

"But Cobb, we have enough. You can quit. No more tours. Let's just go live in the countryside and raise our son and be together." Marigold got up and walked over to him, sinking down onto the couch next to her husband and curling up next to him so that she could put her head on his chest. "Let the world enjoy the songs you've already written, and let us enjoy our family."

Cobb opened his eyes and lifted his head, looking down at her with fire in his eyes. “See, Goldie? Even you want something from me. You want me to be this guy—this family man—and I’m not sure that’s even who I am.”

Marigold sat up like a jolt of electricity had shocked her body. “What? What are you telling me?” she hissed. “Are you saying you don’t consider yourself a husband and a father? That you don’t want to have a family? Are we holding you back?”

“No, no, no,” Cobb said, sitting up so that they were looking at each other eye to eye. “That’s not what I mean. I don’t know what I mean. I’m confused.”

Marigold stood up, still trying to keep her voice low so that they wouldn’t wake their sleeping child or the people in the hotel room next door to them. “Then you better get unconfused real fast, Nigel Cobb Hartley. *Real* fast. Because I’m not following a man around the world with a baby in tow, watching him self-destruct. I’m not going to let you take me and Elijah down with you.”

At that point, she’d gotten back into the bed, pulled the covers over her head, and cried until she fell back to sleep. She’d assumed that Cobb had simply passed out on the couch, but when Elijah’s happy baby chatter had woken her up around nine-thirty in the morning, she saw her little boy standing up in his Pack ‘N Play, singing and calling her name. The couch was empty. Cobb was gone.

“Here’s a tray for Dad,” Elijah says now, shocking Marigold back to the present moment. All of a sudden, she’s not a distraught twenty-five-year-old wife in a Copenhagen hotel, but a middle-aged woman about to spoon feed her ex-

husband a plate of risotto. “I’ll bring in a glass of water for him. And I’ll wait to eat until you’re done with him.”

Marigold smiles at her son and takes the food from him. Cobb is awake in bed when she walks into the room. He’s propped up on three pillows with a book open and turned facedown on his lap.

“Hey, lass,” he says to her with an exaggerated British accent. He can turn it on or scale it back at will, but he knows that she’s always tickled by his accent. “Thanks for the nosh.”

Marigold gives him a half-smile and sets the tray on his lap when he moves the book aside. “Do I need to feed the patient?” she asks, pausing next to him and putting the back of her hand to his forehead the way a mother might with a sick child. She does it before she even realizes she’s about to, and then jerks her hand away like she’s placed it on a hot stove.

“If I’m feverish, it’s because you grace me with your stunning beauty,” he says, winking at her as he lifts the fork. “And I can feed myself, thank you very much. Although a smarter man would definitely feign helplessness so that a gorgeous model might do everything for him.”

Marigold gives a hard laugh. “Not so gorgeous anymore,” she says, bending over to pick up a pair of socks that Cobb has discarded next to the bed.

Cobb is about to take his first bite but he pauses, fork in midair. “Come on,” he says, looking at her disbelievingly. “You don’t really think that you’ve lost your looks. There’s no way that a woman who posts pictures of herself gardening in a bikini thinks of herself as unattractive.”

“You’d be surprised,” Marigold says, tossing the socks into a laundry basket near the closet. “Sometimes the women who

seem the most self-confident are the ones scrambling to find a foothold.” She sits at the edge of his bed, hands tucked between her thighs. “It’s gotten tough out here, Cobby. People offer their opinions about how a woman looks at every turn, and no matter how much you try to shake it off, it sinks in. It hurts.”

Cobb sets his fork back on the plate without taking a bite. “You haven’t called me *Cobby* in years.”

“I haven’t called you much of anything,” Marigold says, turning her face to look out the window. “Elijah does most of our talking for us, and that’s okay. I didn’t want to hang around in your life like a ghost. I wanted you to be able to move on—if that’s what you wanted.”

“It wasn’t,” Cobb says, watching her face. “I never wanted you to leave in the first place.”

Marigold gives him a sad smile. “But we both know why I had to. I lost myself, Cobb. I did it happily, most of the time, and being a mom and a wife and running a little country manor totally fulfilled me. But then one day I woke up and realized that I had no idea who Marigold Pim was anymore, other than Elijah’s mom and Cobb’s long-suffering wife.”

“I made you suffer?” Cobb asks, though the answer is already there between them, and it has been for years.

“Watching you hurt yourself was torture. Elijah and I needed to love you from a distance while you got sober, Cobb.” Her words are soft and her eyes fill with unshed tears. “I was always right there—just like I promised I would be; just like I am now—but having a front-row seat to your inevitable meltdown was too much to ask of your wife and kid. We both loved you, and there isn’t a single day that goes by where I’m not quietly thankful for the fact that you found your way.”

Cobb's own eyes gloss over a bit and he pushes his food to the side. "Thanks, Goldie," he says. "Thanks for being you."

She stands up and looks back at him. "Even if we can't live *with* each other, I wouldn't want to live in a world without you in it, Cobby."

Marigold closes the bedroom door quietly and leaves Cobb to his lunch while she goes out to sit with Elijah.

Athena



Athena had a brilliant idea in the middle of the night: she'll hold a holiday craft event in the bookstore for all the kids of the island, and hopefully Elijah will be around to pitch in, or maybe just to attend. Either way, she hopes it will impress him.

“You want to do a crafty thing?” Ruby asks distractedly as Athena follows her around the shop. Ruby is shelving new books and looking harried. “I’m not sure if we have the time to pull it all together—we’re what? Three days from Christmas?”

“I can make it happen, Mom. Trust me.”

Ruby stops in the history section, holding a biography of George Washington in her hands. She looks at her older daughter and comes to a quick conclusion. “Okay, Bean. If you think you can pull it together and make it into something, then I say go for it.”

Athena refrains from clapping her hands together in glee, but she’s already picturing the event: pink-cheeked grade school children with glitter stuck to their hands as they glue cotton to construction paper Santa Clauses. And Elijah sitting at a table with a bunch of kids, smiling up at her as he admires her heartfelt volunteerism.

Without waiting for further comment from Ruby, Athena is out the front door of Marooned With a Book and walking quickly towards the island store. Fed Men Tell No Tales isn't exactly a Target or a Walmart, but for an island grocery store, it offers a surprisingly good variety of items.

As Athena walks down Seadog Lane, already writing a mental list of items she'll need, she picks up her phone and calls her sister.

"Whatttt?" Harlow sounds like she's still in bed. "It's not even ten o'clock yet and I have no plans today. I wanted to be lazy so please don't ask me to come to the shop and cover for anyone, or go to the beach or—wait," she says, interrupting herself, "I could actually use some beach time. Can we get coffee first?"

Athena waits for her sister to stop rambling. "No beach today. I'm holding an event in the bookstore for all the kids on the island—we're making crafts and I need you to—"

"Bye."

"Harlow!" Athena yells.

Her sister laughs on the other end of the line. "I'm still here. For at least ten more seconds. But the minute you tell me I need to dress like an elf and hand out candy canes, I'm outta here."

"No, I need your help advertising the event. I'll do everything else. I swear."

Harlow is quiet for a second. "Is this by any chance an event that might draw the attention of someone who also enjoys volunteering with children?"

Athena blows out an indignant breath. "I thought it would be a nice thing to do. And it would bring business into the

bookshop.”

“Uh huh.”

“Okay, also I want to impress Elijah,” Athena admits. “Happy now?”

Harlow gives a little cackle. “I knew it! And I can advertise this thing while I’m still laying in bed, so sure. I can do that. Let me get a cup of coffee and I’ll organize it all. Text me the details. I’m on it.” This time she really does hang up.

As Athena walks up to the front door of Fed Men Tell No Tales, she pauses to tap out a quick message to her sister:

Tomorrow. 10 am to 1 pm. Cookie decorating. Easy crafts. Holiday stories (Christmas, Hanukkah, whatever else I can think of...) Kids of all ages welcome. At the bookstore, obviously. Thanks!

She drops her phone into her purse and walks into the store, which is staffed by a single cashier up front and the owner of the store, Phyllis, who wanders the aisles constantly checking her stock, straightening cans and boxes, and occasionally belting out the words to the Christmas music that’s playing over the store’s speakers.

“Morning, Athena,” Joe Youngblood says.

Joe has been the cashier since Fed Men opened up in the seventies, and pretty much everyone on the island thinks that he and Phyllis have something going, though Joe is nearly eighty and Phyllis would have been a pre-teen when her parents opened the store fifty years earlier. Athena had wrinkled her nose at this bit of gossip, but one time when she was looking for a box of cereal she’d spied Joe leaning over to kiss Phyllis in the cracker aisle, his stooped shoulders and shock of white hair making him look like somebody’s great-

grandpa. Still, they were cute, and Athena had kept the secret kiss to herself.

“Good morning, Joe,” she says with a bright smile. “I’m looking for a bunch of crafting supplies.”

“Aisle 6,” Joe says without hesitation. That’s one thing that can be said for Joe Youngblood: he has a memory like an elephant, and he never forgets a name, a face, an aisle where something is located, or what’s currently in stock. “We have construction paper, scissors, glue, glitter, paints—pretty much everything.”

“Thanks,” Athena says, grabbing a blue plastic basket and putting it over one arm.

On Aisle 6 she loads up on as much of the art stuff as she thinks she’ll need, then walks back to the baked goods, checking out the plain sugar cookies. On her way to the register, she grabs tubes of icing, jars of sprinkles, and bags of small candies.

“Find it all?” Joe takes the basket and starts ringing up the items.

“I’m going to need like a hundred sugar cookies for tomorrow—do you think I can order them or do you have any stock in the back?”

“We get the cookies weekly and they were just delivered yesterday, so these are pretty fresh. I think there are more in the back. Should I get a hundred ready and call over to the bookstore to let you know when they’re ready?”

“Perfect.” Athena swipes her credit card and lifts the handles of the paper bags that Joe has filled for her. “Thanks, Joe!”

This is a little crazy, Athena thinks as she walks back down Seadog Lane towards the bookstore. *All of this to attract the attention of some guy I haven't even met yet?* She almost wants to stop herself from throwing a giant event based on the half-cocked premise of impressing Elijah Hartley, but deep down Athena knows that this is the kind of event that will be good for her mother's business too. So even if her motives aren't entirely altruistic, there will still be an outcome that could potentially benefit people besides herself, which makes it okay.

The bookshop is quiet when Athena gets back and her arms are laden with paper bags. She sets everything on the front counter.

"Mom?" she calls out. Silence. "Are you here?"

Athena starts to unpack the items she's purchased, making stacks of things and picturing how she'll arrange the craft stations. She also needs to pull any children's books she can find that have to do with holidays, and consider how she'll fit in story time between cookie decorating and mess making.

"Hey, Mom?" she tries again, bending over to put her piles of supplies on the floor behind the front counter.

Athena stands upright, turns to the counter, and comes face to face with Elijah Hartley.

"Hello," he says in a deep voice with a British accent. He pulls his hands out of the pockets of his jeans and holds them up to show her that he's unarmed, presumably. "Sorry to frighten you. When you called out for your mum I didn't want to shout back in my deep man's voice and freak you out."

Athena smiles at him. Her heart is racing, but not because she's scared. "Oh," she says dumbly. "Hi. I'm Athena."

"Yes." Elijah glances around the store, nodding as he takes it all in. "I knew that." The morning light is spilling through the high windows on the sides of the store, which runs front to back like an old-fashioned shotgun-style house. There are three rooms in a row that house floor-to-ceiling books, items that Ruby Hudson has brought in and displayed from her life as First Lady, and lots of cozy shabby-chic furnishings.

Athena stares at him. "You knew who I was?"

"Sure," Elijah laughs. "Your dad was the president."

"And yours was a rockstar. Is a rockstar," she corrects herself, shaking her head.

Elijah laughs again. "Well, yes." He's looking at her like she's the most amusing person he's ever met. "Currently he's just a guy recovering from heart surgery, but I suppose most people know him for his music rather than for his bum ticker."

"I'm sorry," Athena says, looking at the counter. "I had no idea your dad had been ill."

Elijah is still looking at her when she lifts her gaze to meet his. "He's good now," he assures her. "And he and I are spending the holidays with my mum—she lives here on the island."

"Marigold," Athena says, nodding. "She's part of our book club. I love your mom."

"Ahhh, yes! The book club." Elijah is smiling like they've finally landed on a topic that makes sense to both of them. "She's talked about it, and about how much she loves all the women she's met. She really admires your mum. It's great to hear her talk about books and friends and to really enjoy her

life here. It makes it a lot easier to be in another country when I know she's got her own full, happy life here."

Athena watches Elijah closely as he talks. It's clear that he loves his mother, and that he wants her to be happy, and she senses a touch of guilt that he lives so far away.

"She does seem happy," Athena offers. She looks at the bottles of glue and the assortment of candies and sprinkles that are still sitting on the counter between them. "Hey," she says, trying to sound as if she's just had a brilliant idea. "Since you're here for the holidays, I mean, only if you're bored or have nothing else going on, I'm holding an event here at the shop tomorrow for all the island kids. Holiday crafts, cookies to decorate, story time..." Athena trails off, suddenly feeling like the biggest idiot in the world. What could have ever made her think that a grown man—a stunning, sexy, worldly, grown man like Elijah Hartley—would ever want to help toddlers put glitter on paper in a tiny bookshop on Shipwreck Key?

A huge grin cracks his face as he glances at the cookie decorations. "Seriously? That sounds brilliant, Athena."

The way he says her name makes her whole body tingle with an electric current. His accent just adds to his overall appeal, and she can't help but smile back at him.

"Okay, I'll definitely pitch in." His smile fades as he thinks of something. "But how about you let me make the cookies—if you haven't already made them or bought them? I'm a decent chef and an alright baker, and it would give me a project for today." He lowers his voice conspiratorially as a woman enters the bookshop. "As much as I love my parents, a guy can only play so many hands of cards with his dad or wrap so many presents with his mum, so if you give me a mission,

I'll have an excuse to crank up my own music in the kitchen and get to work."

Athena smiles again as she pictures Elijah in an apron playing rock music and rolling out cookie dough.

"Deal," she says. "I can run back to the store and buy anything you need for cookies—just give me a list."

Elijah is already walking towards the door and shaking his head. "No way. I've got it all. You just tell me what time to be here tomorrow, and I'll show up with, what? A couple hundred cookies?"

Athena's laughter bubbles over. "I was thinking a hundred, but as many as you want is fine with me. I'm sure the kids will eat them. And the event starts at ten."

Elijah pulls open the door and lifts a hand in salute. "I'll be here at ten tomorrow with bells on, and hundreds of sugar cookies for this island's little elves to decorate."

Athena watches him as he crosses Seadog Lane. She's elated. This is the most exciting thing that's happened to her since she moved down to Shipwreck Key, and she's not going to mess it up.

"Hey, Joe?" Athena says into her phone after dialing Fed Men Tell No Tales and waiting for the cashier to answer. "It's Athena Hudson. I'm going to have to cancel that cookie order for tomorrow..."

Marigold



There's a lot to lose when your entire career has been based on people judging you for how you look. Because change is inevitable: without question, your looks will not always please people the way they did when you were young. Even the most devout sunscreen users, those of us who choose never to smoke, let nary a drop of alcohol cross our lips, those who sleep eight full hours a night, eschew sugar, and eat the healthiest of diets—even those people will face their own reckoning with aging. And I'm being honest when I tell you that none of those things apply to me. I sunbathed with the best of 'em in the 80s; I smoked cigarettes as a young model trying to stay thin and pass the time; I drank and partied and danced all night, forgoing sleep and bingeing on unhealthy foods the next morning to stave off a hangover. I'm not going to lie to you! Why would I? I, Marigold Pim, am just as human as the next girl. And now, at fifty-one, I wake up and look in the mirror each day to see the face I've earned, just like everybody else does.

So what's a woman to do for a career when the profession she's chosen (or the one that's chosen her, as it does for so many young girls with coltish legs, wide, innocent eyes, and just enough shyness to make us malleable and open to the suggestions of any man who picks up a camera and points it at

us) decides that we're no longer viable? That's a fabulous question. I've known former models who start their own agencies, stay in the fashion realm in some capacity, write books, turn to acting, or just give it all up and raise horses in Santa Barbara or live in the mountains in solitude. For me, the beach life called. I've been living next to the ocean for a decade now, and while my modeling days are mostly behind me (unless Ralph Lauren comes calling—Ralph? Can you come calling?), I think I still have things to offer. Words I want to say. Thoughts I'd like to share. Hence, this book.

If you've picked this up and read this far, then perhaps you're also a woman of a certain age. Perhaps you know something of what it's like to be going about your merry business, raising children, being a life partner to someone, working a job to pay the bills, when all of a sudden the world hits the brakes on you (as does your metabolism, let's just be honest). Maybe you know what it's like to wake up one day feeling like you're wearing padding around your stomach with no idea how it got there. Or perhaps you recall where you were the first time you walked down the street feeling like you'd knocked it out of the park—fabulous outfit, a good hair day, makeup that made you feel pretty—only to have not a single person notice. NOT. ONE.

If so, then this book is for you—yes, YOU. It's for the woman who knows what it's like to slide into invisibility. To suddenly be fighting an uphill battle with your body that you never signed up for. It's for the ladies who were so busy raising babies, keeping a house clean, and being everyone's Girl Friday that you never noticed that the babies were grown, the house was too big for just you (or just you and that spouse who you no longer seem to know how to talk to), and that no one needs you to be their Girl Friday anymore, because,

frankly, you're too old, too slow, or too out of touch to understand how things need to be done.

You don't need to have been a fashion model to know where I'm coming from, you just need to be a woman of a certain age. So let's take this journey together. Let's be each other's Girl Fridays.

Marigold lifts her fingers from the keyboard and takes her AirPods from her ears. She's been listening to The Police as she types, letting the words flow from her heart as she considers who her audience is. If she ever finishes this book of essays (which is how she's thinking of it—and she *will* finish), then she wants other women to pick it up, read her intro, and know instantly that it's for them.

“Elijah?” Marigold calls out, frowning as she closes her laptop on the desk in her bedroom. The smell of sugar cookies wafts through the house and she follows the sound of Elton John singing “Step Into Christmas” from the stereo in the front room. She can tell by the scratchy quality of the song that Elijah has put on a vinyl album and cranked it up. “Buddy?” she says, rounding the corner into the kitchen, where her son is dancing around in the midst of what looks like a baking disaster. There is flour everywhere. “What’s going on in here?”

“I’m making cookies,” he says, handing her a hunk of raw cookie dough, which she normally would wave off, saving the calories for actual fresh-baked cookies, but since it’s Christmas, she takes it and pops it into her mouth. For Marigold, the holidays are the one time she lets herself indulge as much as she wants, because if she doesn’t just cut loose and enjoy the season, then she’s depriving herself of one of the great joys in life, and she knows it.

“I see that,” Marigold says, licking the sticky dough from her fingers. “What for? And why so many?”

“I met Athena,” he says simply, sliding his right hand into an oven mitt and pulling out a tray of perfectly baked cookies. He replaces it with another tray of little round globs of sugar cookie dough and closes the oven door.

“So you’re trying to win her heart with a million cookies?” Marigold asks with a laugh. “Also, I’m glad you met her—Athena is a doll.”

“Yeah, she’s sweet,” he says. “I stopped into the bookstore to see if they had a book I wanted, and she walked in with all this stuff, calling out for her mother. Turns out she’s holding a big crafty day tomorrow for the munchkins on this island, and she invited me to join in.”

A sense of pride wells in Marigold’s chest; her boy is just as tenderhearted as a grown man as he was as a little boy. She knows he loves volunteering in London for anything to do with children’s charities, and so it’s easy to imagine him doing something with Athena at the bookstore.

“Sounds fun, bud. And the cookies are for the event then?”

“For the kids to decorate.”

“Ah. Gotcha.” Marigold reaches into the cupboard for a glass to fill with water, but then pauses and listens to the music for a second. “Is the music too loud for Dad? I assume he’s napping.”

“No,” Elijah says with a smile that looks full of pride in his dear old dad. “He went for a walk. He’s been gone a while, but he should be back soon.”

“He what?” Marigold’s heart begins to hammer in her chest. “It’s too soon for him to be out. Way too soon. He’s

good to be out of bed and to hang around with us when he has the energy to be up, but under no circumstances should he be out there walking alone.” She rushes to the front room and jams her feet into a pair of beat up beach shoes. “I have to find him. I can’t believe you let him go, Elijah.” She sounds as disapproving as she feels, and rather than waiting for Elijah to respond, she flings open the front door and rushes toward the beach.

“Mum!” Elijah calls from the open front door. He’s still standing there in an apron with an oven mitt on one hand. “I’m really sorry. He said he felt good enough!”

Marigold lifts a hand in the air to show that she’s heard her son, but she doesn’t slow down or stop.

The island is essentially an oval with bits of land bitten out of it by the water. Seadog Lane runs across the entire southern edge of Shipwreck Key, and Marigold’s bungalow is at the east end of the main road. If she were a betting woman, she’d put money on it that Cobb has ambled down to Seadog Lane from her property, with a plan to walk to the coffee shop and back home again. His thinking would be that if he suddenly doesn’t feel well, he’ll at least be in the presence of people who could pick up a phone and call Marigold to retrieve him. And though this soothes her a bit to know that her ex-husband, always a creature of habit, will most likely be found wandering down the sidewalk in plain view of the other islanders, it also rankles her that he’s even left the house.

“Hey, Marigold!” Heather Charleton-Bicks, one of her good friends and another member of the book club, is stepping out of Jolly Roger Rags with two giant shopping bags in hand. She stops short as Marigold plows down the sidewalk determinedly.

Marigold, harried to her very core and slightly breathless, stops too. “Hi, Heather. Merry Christmas. Almost.” She takes a deep breath and releases it. “By any chance have you seen a very attractive man in his mid-50s wandering down Seadog Lane and probably stopping to pet every dog he sees? He’d be about six-foot tall,” she holds a hand up to show how much taller Cobb is than her, “with light brown hair, a scruffy goatee, and the kind of eyes that make women fall in love with him simply because he’s held the elevator door.”

Heather laughs knowingly. “I know those kind of guys. In fact, I’ve married a few of them.” She lifts one hand, her heavy bag coming with it. “I assume you’re talking about Cobb Hartley though,” she says, looking a tiny bit starstruck. “He just went into The Frog’s Grog after standing around on the sidewalk and talking about music for fifteen minutes with Bev Byer.”

Marigold blanches. “He went into a *bar*?” She starts to walk the rest of the way down the street without saying another word to Heather.

“Wait, Marigold! You didn’t tell us your ex was coming for Christmas!”

Just as she’d done with Elijah as he stood helplessly in the doorway to her bungalow, Marigold lifts a dismissive hand over her shoulder. Only this time she calls out, “I’ll tell you guys all about it at book club!” before storming across the street and making a beeline for the bar.

“Nigel Cobb Hartley!” Marigold shouts as she flings open the heavy, scarred wooden door of The Frog’s Grog. Her voice is ragged, and she stands in the bright light of the midday sun, letting her eyes adjust to the dark bar with its pirate ship interior. Dark wood beams run the length of the ceiling, and

the bar and tables are all made of the same weathered ebony wood.

“Uh oh,” Bev says with laughter in his voice. He’s standing behind the bar, polishing a glass with a white rag as he talks to Cobb, who is sitting on a barstool right across from him. “Looks like the boss has found you.”

Cobb turns around on the stool guiltily, looking at Marigold in the doorway. “Hey, Goldie,” he says with a sheepish grin. “I went for a stroll and met this character out on the street. Real nice bloke, this guy.”

“Yeah, he’s a great bloke,” Marigold says, cutting through the nearly empty bar and walking straight up to Cobb. She puts an elbow on the bar and leans in to him, making sure that their eyes are level. “But what in the hell do you think you’re doing?” Marigold slaps the counter with her palm and then lifts her hands to the sky, letting her head fall back in disbelief. “In *a bar*, no less?” She looks at him again, letting her hands fall to her sides.

Cobb clears his throat and Bev sets down the glass politely, disappearing through a swinging door to give Marigold and Cobb some privacy.

“Goldie, you’re embarrassing me,” Cobb says quietly, trying not to look peeved. “I went for a walk, and then I came in here for a—“

“A drink?” she asks incredulously. “Did you seriously come in here to have a drink ten days after having bypass surgery? When you’ve been sober for—what—eight years now? Wait, *are* you still sober?” she asks, feeling the full weight of the horror that descends upon her. Has she, in fact, brought her ailing ex-husband into her home when he’s fallen off the wagon without telling her?

“Marigold,” Cobb hisses, sliding off the stool. He takes her by the elbow and steers her through the front door and out into the bright December sunlight. “Could you please keep it down? All of that is my personal business, and I don’t need random strangers talking about how Cobb Hartley just had bypass surgery, or how Cobb has started drinking again. So knock it off.”

Marigold puts both hands up and shakes her head. “Did you just refer to yourself in the third person? Are you that self-important?”

Cobb lets out a stream of breath, rubbing his lips together as he cools off. “Listen,” he says, putting both hands on his hips and looking at the ground beneath their feet. “I am sober. I have been sober for nine years. I met Bev out here on the sidewalk and we started talking about Neil Young. He invited me in for a lemonade, on the house, and it seemed innocent enough. I am not and have not been tempted by alcohol for a long time, Goldie. I like the way I am now, and I’m not willing to mess that up.”

Marigold’s anger starts to dissipate as Cobb talks, but she can still feel the panic that had grown inside of her, imagining him falling down on Seadog Lane as pains rocketed through his chest because he’d chosen to go on a walk when he wasn’t ready.

“Okay,” she says, nodding in defeat. “I hear you. But you still cannot get up and leave the house like this. Elijah was busy baking cookies and thinking nothing of his dad out wandering the island without supervision.”

Cobb laughs. His indignation melts away as he looks at Marigold’s concerned face. “Hey, love,” he says, reaching out a hand to touch her on the arm. She yanks away from him, still

mad. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m feeling pretty good today. And although your house reminds me of home, I was feeling a bit stir crazy, you know? Cooped up.”

“Then you should have walked in and interrupted me, Cobb. Told me you wanted fresh air. I would have gladly paused and come out with you, and it would have been safer anyway. But you don’t think like that, and you never have,” she says, getting ramped up again as the words spill out. “There were a million times during our marriage when it would have been so easy for you to put yourself in my shoes, or in Elijah’s shoes, but you never did, did you? Rather than simply asking for help, or making a decision that showed you’d given some consideration to someone other than yourself, you always chose you, didn’t you, Cobb?”

Cobb looks around as people pass by them on the sidewalk, his face showing a mix of mortification, anger, and guilt. “Goldie,” he says, “I’m sorry.” This time when he reaches out he takes her hand in his, trying to mollify her. “I truly am. You’re talking about a different person in a different time. That’s the old Cobb, but this is the new one.” He pats his chest with the hand that’s not holding hers. “And yes, I know I just spoke about myself in third person again, but cut me some slack. You’re out here shouting about our dirty laundry to a bunch of strangers, and it’s making me nervous.”

Marigold has more to say, but instead she stops herself. She holds her tongue for a beat, staring into the eyes of the man she’d loved for decades. It’s possible that he’s telling her the truth, and that he is an entirely different man than the one she’d finally left. It’s also possible that so much of what happened between them left a deep scar on her heart, one that won’t easily be healed with just apologies and with Cobb turning over a new, sober leaf. There are things between them

that she left unsaid when they divorced, because at that time, it was all Cobb could do to keep his own head above water, and the last thing she'd wanted to do was drag him under with her own hurts and accusations. It had seemed unnecessary then. But there's still a lot of unexamined pain between them, and it appears to be manifesting as anger.

Marigold takes Cobb's cue and looks around; there are definitely people out shopping for Christmas and enjoying an afternoon on Shipwreck Key, and while she can't help how she feels on the inside, she can definitely help the way she acts on the outside.

"You're right, Cobby," she says softly, still holding his hand. She shakes it and gives it a squeeze to let him know that she's calmed down. "You're right. I'm sorry for making a scene here. You just worried the crap out of me. And not for the first time." Marigold locks in on his gaze and holds it, making sure that he gets her meaning—there's a lifetime of worry and anguish between them, and all is not forgiven. Not yet.

"I know," Cobb says, holding her hand properly in his as they start to walk back down Seadog Lane in the direction of Marigold's house. "I know, love." They stroll quietly for a minute or two, watching as golf carts decorated with tinsel and lights tool around, their drivers stopping in front of The Scuttlebutt for coffee, at Chips Ahoy for fish and chips to eat on the beach, or for last minute gifts at Jolly Roger Rags or Doubloons and Full Moons.

"Will you take me home now?" Cobb asks her as they walk with their hands still clasped together. To an outsider they might look like teenagers on a romantic first date, but to

the two of them, they feel more like soldiers holding onto one another after they've survived a bleak battle.

“Yeah, I’ll take you home,” Marigold says, falling in step next to Cobb. The ocean rushes onto the shore to their right, breaking on the sand. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Athena



The bookshop looks like a winter wonderland. Athena had kicked it into high gear, staying at the store until midnight to hang decorations and to make *Marooned With a Book* look festive. And, true to her word, Harlow had used her marketing skills to quickly advertise the event, posting on the bookstore's Facebook page, website, and Twitter account, along with an Instagram photo of Athena up on a ladder hanging tinsel over a bookshelf. Then she'd made quick posts to Shipwreck Key's social media pages, using a cute graphic she'd whipped up of elves reading books and stringing popcorn with the details of the event.

At ten o'clock, Elijah is there holding three giant Tupperware containers of cookies, The Ronnettes are singing "Sleigh Ride" on the sound system, and both Harlow and Athena are buzzing around in Christmas sweaters and earrings shaped like snowflakes.

"You owe me," Harlow says, brushing past her sister with her arms full of holiday books for kids. She's setting up the story time corner in the back room of the shop, with one giant stuffed chair for herself, and a big patch of carpet for the kids to sit on and listen as she reads *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, *The Giving Snowman*, and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Athena watches her fondly. Harlow can grumble all she wants, but while she and her sister have different personalities and interests in life, Harlow is just as big of a softie as she is when it comes to things like putting on an event for kids. She's also happy to do something that will bring foot traffic into their mom's store, and helping her sister come up with ideas to get the attention of this hot man who is standing in front of her now with freshly baked cookies in hand is right up Harlow's alley.

"Cookie delivery," Elijah says, holding out the Tupperware containers as proof that he comes bearing gifts.

"Come in, come in," Athena says, feeling a little shy in his presence. "Thank you so much for making the cookies. You can put them right there." She points at a round table that she's covered with a vinyl tablecloth in a poinsettia print. The icings and sprinkles are already set up in the center of the table, with a cup full of plastic knives to spread the frosting and decorate the cookies.

"No problem whatsoever," Elijah says, setting the containers down and then taking a proper look at the shop. "Wow. Remember that scene in *Elf* where Will Farrell stays at the department store all night and everyone shows up the next day to find like, Lite-Brites with exquisite decorations, a whole Lego universe, and every rope of tinsel in the world wrapped around everything?"

Athena laughs as she looks around at her own handiwork. "Yeah, but this is nothing like that."

Elijah points at a string of white paper snowflakes that Athena has cut out and strung up across the shop like streamers, and then turns to look at the fake tree she's set up and decorated. "Um," he says. "It's kind of exactly like that."

Athena smiles, pleased. “Thanks. I just used my mom as inspiration. When it was time to decorate the White House every year, she always said, *When it comes to perfume, dessert, and champagne, sometimes less is more. But when it comes to holiday cheer, more is always more.*”

Elijah laughs appreciatively. “Your mom sounds amazing. I haven’t met her yet.”

Just then, Ruby comes down the narrow staircase that leads up to her tiny above-store office. She’s been paying bills and answering emails since seven a.m., and she’d promised to leave Athena alone to coordinate this entire event, which she’s done.

“As luck would have it,” Ruby says, holding the banister as she descends, “the amazing mom is right here. Ruby Hudson,” she says, extending a hand. “And you must be Marigold’s son. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Elijah Hartley,” he says, shaking her hand. “My mom has said how much she loves you—all of you—and the book club,” he adds, sounding like a polite young man there to pick up Ruby’s daughter for a first date.

“Well, we’ve certainly cobbled together quite a group of women,” Ruby says with a smile. “Your mom is one-of-a-kind, that’s for sure. We all adore her.”

“As do I,” Elijah says. “Hey, I was here the other day looking for a book, and I couldn’t quite find it before Athena strong-armed me into being her professional baker.” He casts a glance at Athena and her face burns. “Would you mind showing me where I could find the new biography about John Wilkes Booth?”

Ruby leads the way to the middle room, where biographies and historical books are shelved. “The Lincoln assassination—very Christmasy,” she says, waving him over to a spot that Athena can’t see from the front desk. As they disappear from her sight, Athena lets out the breath she’s been holding.

She’s only got a moment to herself before the sleigh bells that she’s hung over the door start to jingle and the children pour in like someone’s turned on a faucet. Athena’s smile starts to flag as she counts little heads amidst the chatter of high-pitched children’s voices. She didn’t even know that Shipwreck Key was home to over fifty small children, but within twenty minutes, the store is filled with them.

“Damn, girl,” Harlow says, materializing at her side in a Santa hat as she sucks on a candy cane. “You’re like an elementary school teacher right now. What do we do with all of them?” Athena scans the store with wide eyes. Her mom had always secretly harbored a desire to be a high-school teacher, so maybe Ruby will clap her hands and bring them all to order. “Also, where are their parents?”

Athena’s eyes scan the room, but there are almost no parent-like figures to be found. It seems like many of them have simply ushered their offspring to the front door of Marooned With a Book and then vanished like Santa up the chimney on Christmas Eve.

“Maybe we should have said something on the invitation about having a parent present,” Athena says, realizing much too late that this is precisely what she should have done. She turns to look at her sister. “What do we do with them now?”

They look at the kids, several of whom are just eating cookies without decorating them, or squeezing icing from the tubes directly into their mouths. (These are all boys, Athena

notes, watching as the girls sit down at tables and begin to quietly spread glitter and glue on paper without any direction.)

“I think we should have figured that out before they showed up,” Harlow says with wide eyes.

“Not helpful.”

Elijah walks out of the middle room with three books in his hands and Ruby trailing behind him. Ruby looks at her daughters and makes a face that indicates her mild displeasure at the chaos.

“Hey,” Ruby says in a stage whisper as she leans across the counter and looks at her girls. “You need to get these kids under control and give them some direction.”

“But there are just...so many of them,” Athena says, standing there stunned like a bunny caught eating carrots in a garden.

Ruby turns to the room and claps her hands together. “Good morning!” she says cheerily, turning on her First Lady charm like a switch has been flipped. “Welcome to Santa’s holiday workshop!” The children stop mid-activity and their ears perk up. “We have lots of activities to do today, but we need everyone to stop what they’re doing right now, and put all ten fingers in the air.” Ruby puts her own hands up to show them what she wants. “Now wiggle your fingers like you’re sending little sparkles of magic into the universe.” She moves her fingers and, shockingly, the room goes quiet as all the children do the same. “There we go. Now, let’s have everyone who has magic in their fingertips put their hands into their laps.” Ruby drops her own hands and laces them together. “Hold the magic in tightly, just like this, and turn up your ears so you can hear all the instructions.”

Fifty little faces are looking at Ruby expectantly as she explains the cookie station, the crafts, the singalong section near the Christmas tree, and the story time spot, where books will be read in thirty minutes. Athena watches in awe as every child listens.

“Now,” Ruby says. “I’m going to walk around and tap you on top of your head *very gently* with my magic hands, and if I do, I want you to go to the cookie station.” She walks around the store, sweeping between tables in her long, swishy skirt, laying her palm gently on little heads. She repeats the process for each of the other stations and lets them know that she’ll set a timer to go off when it’s time to move to the story time spot. “And...GO!” Ruby shouts with a huge grin, clapping her hands together as the kids spring into joyful action.

“Mom.” Athena is shocked. “How did you get them all to listen to you?”

“The same way I got the President of the United States to listen to me,” Ruby says, smiling softly as she watches the children engaged in merry play and chatter. “I spoke plainly, kept a smile on my face, and laid out exactly what I needed to have happen. You’d be amazed how well the same tactics work with both men and children.” She winks at the girls before sweeping away again, bending over to admire the kids’ work as she walks through the store.

“She’s something else,” Elijah says with awe, setting his books on the counter. “Can I pay for these later?”

“Yeah, sure.” Athena feels like a total idiot. She set up a whole event to impress this man, but now she’s standing behind the counter with her hands behind her back while her mother saves the day.

“What do you say we get the singalong going?” Elijah motions to the tree where a few kids are sitting on the ground, waiting.

Harlow gives Athena a light shove and waves her off with an encouraging look.

“Hi, guys,” Elijah says, sitting on the stool and looking down at the kids. It’s funny to see a man of his size talking to tiny kids, and Athena is instantly charmed. “What do you think about starting with ‘Frosty the Snowman’?”

There are eight kids sitting there, and they all shout for Frosty.

“Whoooooa.” Elijah laughs. “Okay, I guess you guys know that one.” He picks up the guitar that Athena has brought and left sitting by the tree. Playing guitar is one of Harlow’s many picked-up-and-quickly-forgotten pursuits, and she was totally fine with letting Athena bring the instrument to the bookstore, though Athena didn’t have a solid plan for who would play it. Until now.

Elijah glances at Athena, who is sitting on the floor behind the children. She can tell that he’s asking for her permission to tune the guitar, so she nods.

“Let’s see here,” he says, picking at the strings and tuning as he goes. He strums it a few times and then launches into an acoustic version of “Frosty the Snowman.”

From here, it all goes smoothly—or as smoothly as it possibly can with a roomful of unchaperoned children, a pile of cookies and sugary toppings, and full access to glitter and glue—and Athena can’t wipe the smile off her face as she runs the vacuum after the kids are gone. There’s a lull in foot traffic once all the parents have retrieved their munchkins, paid for

various children's books, stocking stuffers, and last minute gifts for family, and Ruby seems happy with the uptick in sales. All in all, Athena is feeling pleased with herself.

Elijah taps her on the shoulder and she turns off the vacuum. "Hey, where should I put all of this?" He's holding up a giant trash bag filled with frosting-covered paper towels, plastic knives, half-eaten cookies, and other craft leftovers.

"By the door is great, thank you." Athena points at a spot by the front counter. "I'll take it all out to the dumpster here in a minute. I really appreciate you helping me clean up," she says, looking at him as she tugs at the vacuum's cord unnecessarily. "And for doing the singalong, making the cookies—everything."

Elijah looks amused. "Hey, it was no problem. I'm just here, hanging out for the holidays. My mom is taking care of my dad, and I basically cook for them and make sure they don't kill each other."

Athena laughs, surprised. "Is it that bad?"

"Nah," he says, smiling indulgently. "I'm joking. They don't really fight too much, as far as divorced people go. But they do act like siblings sometimes and I have to referee. And keep them fed so no one gets grumpy."

"Well, thank you for taking time away from that to be here."

Elijah sets the trash bag by the door, making sure that the red plastic string is secured so that it's tied off. "I know it's like forty-eight hours until we all start doing turkey and wine and Christmas crackers—"

"Christmas crackers?" Athena frowns.

“You know, the little things where you pull both ends and then it makes a loud *crack*?” He pretends to tug at both ends of an object to show her, then waves a hand. “I’ll bring you one. I know it’s an English thing, not an American one, but you should definitely add it to your family dinner.” He puts his hands into the pockets of his cargo pants and smiles at her disarmingly. “Anyhow, I thought maybe—if you aren’t busy doing holiday stuff at home—you might feel like a walk this evening? We could have a drink at that bar across the street,” he says, tipping his head in the direction of The Frog’s Grog, “or at the restaurant down the road.”

Athena is honestly a little stunned—had she actually pulled off this event *and* scored a date with Elijah Hartley? She tries not to nod excitedly like a bobblehead doll and instead plays it cool.

“Yeah, that could be fun,” she says, tucking her chestnut-colored hair behind her ears. “I could do that. What time?”

“How about six? I can meet you here in front of the shop.” Elijah points to the sidewalk outside Marooned With a Book.

Athena looks at the clock on the computer. Six is perfect. That gives her time to go home and change out of her frosting-covered sweater and actually get ready.

“I’ll be here,” she says with a huge smile.

Elijah tips his head at her as he ducks out the door, the sleigh bells tinkling behind him.

“Well look at that.” Harlow pops into the front room with a huge grin on her face. “Looks like somebody got herself a date with the man of the hour, and no cookies were burned in the process.”

Athena watches Elijah stride across Seadog Lane before turning to look at her sister. Her smile fades and the panic sets in. “What do I do now?” she asks, looking terrified.

Without an ounce of concern, Harlow bites into a cookie as she smirks at Athena. “Now you go home and put on something cute, and then get ready to be kissed by the hot son of a rockstar, you ding dong.”

Marigold



Marigold wakes up on Christmas Eve with a dream in her head, and it's not a happy one. In it, she's waiting for Cobb to come off stage after a concert, but he never does. Every other band member, set technician, lighting director, and band affiliated person comes and goes, but Marigold sits in an empty dressing room backstage, waiting for her husband as the auditorium empties out and goes silent. It's chilling.

But when she opens her eyes it's still early—too early to get up and start grinding coffee beans and turning on the kettle while her son and ex-husband are still sleeping nearby. The sky is still a dusky blue, but the clouds are pink as the sun rises and throws its winter light all around the Gulf of Mexico. Marigold rolls onto her side and looks out her open window as the curtains move gently in the morning breeze. The dream won't leave her.

As she thinks about the meaning behind the dream, her mind turns over a real memory like she's examining a coin in her palm. It's a time she prefers not to think about too much, but her confrontation with Cobb on Seadog Lane outside of The Frog's Grog had brought it all rushing back. Frankly, having him in her house has brought *everything* rushing back, and she's doing her best to filter her thoughts and feelings so that she doesn't act on every single one of them, and also so

they don't color her writing any more than they need to. But life influencing art is real, and to that end, she'd written an entire chapter the day before about the very memory that's playing out in her mind now, as the sun rises over the water.

It was midway through their marriage when Marigold started to wonder what—or who—might be taking some of Cobb's attention away from his life with her and Elijah. This was about 1999, early in the days of everyone using email, but certainly before smartphones and everyone constantly tip-tip-tapping away on phone screens to send texts pinging into the ether. This was back when Cobb's manager handled all of his email and he and Marigold shared an address for any personal correspondence (GoldieCobb99 on either yahoo or AOL or some other long-unused email provider). Anyhow, she'd sat down at the big, slow to boot up computer that sat in the rec room of their English cottage, listening to Elijah playing with Transformers in the next room as he imagined some other world full of trucks and robots and good guys versus bad guys.

Without any sort of intentions, Marigold had opened an email from her childhood best friend and read up on the latest details from home, then she'd sent a quick note to her sister, letting her know that they were considering coming to Vermont for Thanksgiving. It was only after she'd sent the message that the thought occurred to her to check whether an email she'd sent to the head of a charity board had gone through, as she hadn't ever gotten a response.

Marigold opened the "sent" file and combed through them, recognizing all the email addresses in it except for one. Frowning, she'd hovered over the email and then double-clicked, curious as to what this message was and who had sent it.

It was from Cobb to a woman named Susan Smyth-Rounder, and the message was short and to the point: *I can't do this anymore. It's too painful. I want to be a good husband to Marigold, but this is killing me. Can we quit for now? Or pause this? I can see you again at some point, just not now.*

She'd read the message over and over, becoming more frantic with each re-reading. Susan Smyth-Rounder's name looped through her brain on repeat, and within an instant, she had an image of the woman: younger, pretty in an uncomplicated way, someone without children or baggage or anything that would weigh Cobb down. *He wanted to leave her. He was already in the process of leaving her.*

With a sob, Marigold had logged out of the email before she did anything crazy like email the woman herself, and she'd spent the rest of the day cleaning—scrubbing the uneven tile floors on her hands and knees, beating the rugs that she dragged out of every room of the house—and poor Elijah watched with wide eyes as his mother became a whirling dervish of activity in order not to lose her mind.

At the time, Cobb had been on tour. A short one, but gone on the road nonetheless. Talking about Susan Smyth-Rounder had not been something she wanted to do on the phone, so she'd held the name under her tongue like a hard candy that she wanted to savor, letting images of Cobb and this unknown woman dance through her mind each night when she closed her eyes to sleep. It was a torturous two weeks, and by some mysterious reserve of willpower, Marigold had really and truly held her tongue.

Until Cobb returned.

That night, she cooked a huge roast dinner. She had the table set like it was a national holiday, and she, Cobb, and

Elijah drank their sparkling water in wine glasses. Everything was perfect, and Marigold had spent two weeks polishing the stone of her anger to a high shine. She was ready.

“Gorgeous dinner, Goldie,” Cobb said with a gleaming smile lit by candlelight. Elijah looked back and forth between the two of them with wonder; he was a boy who clearly adored both parents, and in turn, they adored him. Cobb reached over and mussed his son’s hair. “What’s the occasion, love?”

Marigold sat down slowly, looking across the table at her husband magnanimously. “The occasion is your return, darling.” She lifted her wine glass, sipping the sparkling water like it was the finest champagne. “And the fact that you have something important to tell me.”

Cobb looked confused. Confused and surprised. He stared at her over the flicker of the candles. “I do?”

“Mmm,” Marigold said, setting her glass on the freshly ironed and starched tablecloth. She’d pulled out all the stops for this dinner. “You were going to tell me all about what your friend Susan Smyth-Rounder is up to. I assume she was with you on tour?” Marigold picked up her knife and fork and cut into a baby potato like she was dissecting a small animal. Her slicing was meticulous, her eyes glinting as she glanced up at Cobb.

“Excuse me?” Cobb’s confusion and surprise had morphed into annoyance. “What are you talking about, and how in the hell do you know Susan Smyth-Rounder?”

Marigold turned to Elijah. “Sweetheart,” she said to him in a calm voice. “I know we’re just starting dinner, but if you go play in the other room for just a few minutes, I’ll let you eat all the dessert you want tonight, and you can stay up an extra hour to play in your room before bed.”

Elijah seemed to be weighing this offer, but not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth (and not being a kid who cared too much about roast or potatoes, but one who *definitely* cared about extra dessert) he shoved his chair back and bolted into the front room, falling right into his game of Transformers or Legos.

“What kind of game are you playing?” Cobb hissed, leaning forward over the table and lowering his voice. “Have you gone mad? Flinging my personal business in my face over dinner? And in front of our *child*? What is this, Marigold?”

Marigold stood, tossing her napkin onto the table. She needed leverage—physical if not emotional—and she stood over him, staring down at Cobb with all the hurt a wife feels when she realizes that there’s another woman in her husband’s life.

“I was sending my sister an email and I happened to see the one that you sent to Susan,” Marigold said, folding her arms across her chest. “I can’t do this anymore, can we quit for now?” she quoted, spitting the words at him like rapid-fire bullets. “What is going on, Cobb? Tell me now.”

To Marigold’s complete and utter shock, Cobb dropped his head into his hands and sobbed. Sobbed like a man who’d just had his whole life taken away from him, which, if she didn’t get the answers she wanted, was exactly what she was about to do to him.

“Cobb, answer me,” she insisted, though some of the fire had gone out of her tone and her stance. Her hands fell to her sides. “Cobb?” Marigold said, feeling a little frightened at the way her husband was crying. “Tell me.”

It took him at least a full minute before Cobb could even lift his head, and when he did, the candle flames caught like

specks of glitter in his tears.

“Goldie,” he said, reaching out a hand to her and looking up at his wife, who was still standing. “Come here.”

She didn’t want to—she hadn’t wanted to give an inch—but something about the way Cobb responded to her accusation had left her undone. She went to him and took his hand, waiting.

“Susan Smyth-Rounder,” he said, looking up at Marigold pleadingly. “Is a drug treatment specialist. A psychotherapist. I’ve been seeing her for about six months.”

Marigold blinked. And then blinked again. A psychotherapist? He was dating a psychotherapist and wanted to rub it in to his wife, who’d only graduated high school before becoming a fashion model, that he’d landed a better deal? She tried to yank her hand away but he didn’t let her.

“Dr. Smyth-Rounder has been working with me on something that I’m finding very difficult. It’s called ‘cognitive behavioral therapy,’ and it’s meant to retrain a person with an addiction. We’re looking at the way that I frequently find myself in situations where drugs are available. I need to find out what causes me to give in to them, and then retrain my brain to take a different path.”

“What?” Marigold was lost. At that point, she truly felt lost. She’d been unable to let the train switch tracks in her mind, and she still had visions of Cobb Hartley squiring the young, gorgeous, insanely brilliant Susan Smyth-Rounder around London. “She’s...your doctor?” she asked, finally comprehending.

“Yes,” Cobb said, tugging on her hand. Gratitude that she was finally getting it washed over his face. “Yes. And she’s

been helping me, but...Goldie, it's hard. The drugs have a hold on me. It's part of my life and my lifestyle, and I keep falling off the wagon."

Marigold let him tug her toward him, pulling her down into his lap. He put his face against her and she wrapped both arms around him as he began to sob again. Her husband. Her strong, talented, creative, funny husband sat there crying in her arms because he felt a weakness and had no way to cure it. Marigold hugged him even tighter to her, bending forward so that her lips were pressed to the top of his head.

"Cobby," she whispered, planting a series of kisses on his hair that she hoped felt like an apology for her madness. She'd had no idea. How could she have known? Would he *really* have sent an email to a lover from the account they shared openly? How could she have thought such a thing? In their entire relationship, she'd never seen Cobb so much as flirt innocently with another woman, and he'd disapproved loudly on several occasions about the way his bandmates hooked up willy-nilly with the women who showed up at every concert. "I'm so sorry, baby," Marigold said softly, rocking him back and forth in her arms as he cried. "I want to help you, not hurt you."

"I couldn't do it without you, Goldie—any of it. I don't want this life if you're not in it, I just want to fix myself—for you, and for buddy," he said, using Marigold's nickname for their son. "I want to be the best version of me that I can be, and I can't do that if I'm not able to stay sober."

A pang tightened up in Marigold's chest then, a memory of Cobb lying unconscious in the hospital, nearly defeated by drugs when he was still young and able to bounce back. But now...with every passing year, with every year of creative

output, travel, performing, touring, and giving himself to the world, Marigold knew that Cobb was depleting himself and making his ability to recover from a major illness less likely. She needed him to be better. Elijah needed him to be better.

She kissed his head again as they rocked together slowly by candlelight, Elijah's happy playing noises audible from the next room. Dinner had been all but forgotten. "I told you I'd be by your side, Cobb, that I wouldn't leave you, and I'm right here," she said that night in the dining room of their country house. She meant every word of it. "I'll help you, okay? I'm right here."

Marigold rolls over in bed now on Shipwreck Key, sighing as she stares up at the ceiling on Christmas Eve morning. That life in England with Cobb and young Elijah sometimes feels like a million years ago, and there's a fissure in her heart from her divorce that no amount of sunshine, relaxation, or joy can repair. It's simply there, and she lives with her feelings of failure every single day. She'd promised to always be there for Cobb, and in the end, she hadn't. She'd left him. She'd abandoned him and left him to fix himself, and she hasn't entirely forgiven herself for that.

The clock says seven, and this seems like a reasonable time to get up and make coffee. Marigold pulls a white robe from the end of the bed and wraps it around herself. She winds her long hair into a bun and holds it in place with a clip as she yawns and pads out to the kitchen.

To her surprise, Cobb is sitting there at the table with a steaming mug of tea in front of him next to a pad and pencil.

"Oh," Marigold says, flipping on a light. "Good morning. Can you see in the dark?"

Cobb chuckles. “It’s never dark when I’m close to you, Goldie.” He lifts his mug of tea. “I hope the kettle didn’t wake you. Happy Christmas.”

Marigold pulls the French press from the cabinet and pours some beans into the grinder. “I didn’t even hear the kettle. I was actually waiting to come out and start it myself so that I didn’t wake you two.”

Cobb smiles at her. “I told you, this is my best time of day. I wake up early, feel strong, and then sort of lose that as the day goes on.” He picks up his pencil and taps it against the paper. “I’ve been noodling about here with some song lyrics that have been running through my mind. Remember when I used to play you everything as soon as I wrote it?”

Marigold smiles with her back to him. She nods. “I do. I loved the way I felt like I had a front row seat to genius at work.” She presses the button and the coffee beans grind loudly. “And Happy Christmas to you too,” she adds when the grinder stops whirring.

“So are we having pizza and beer for Christmas Eve, or does our resident chef have something fancier planned?” Cobb teases, calling up an inside joke between them. Their first Christmas Eve together had been in New York back when Marigold was twenty. They’d missed the sit-down dinner at her aunt’s house in New Jersey, so instead they’d picked up a pizza and a six-pack in Manhattan and eaten their holiday dinner on a bench in Central Park as flakes of snow fell all around them. It had been bracingly cold, but somehow perfect.

“No pizza or beer,” she says with a smile, pouring the hot water from the kettle into her French press and setting it aside. “I think Elijah is planning a feast, and I’ve been instructed to

procure a few things today and basically be his sous chef. I'm told the entire meal will be 'heart healthy for Dad.'"

One side of Cobb's mouth hitches up in a smile and he sets the pencil back down. "Goldie, if I haven't properly thanked you yet for taking me in, then thank you. It's not every woman who'd bring her ex-husband home for the holidays and take care of him after surgery."

Marigold leans against the edge of her counter, placing her hands on it as she looks at Cobb in the full light of morning. "You're right," she says, nodding. "Not every woman would. But we've got history, Cobb Hartley, and I will never leave you to twist in the wind." Marigold pauses, looking down at her painted red toes against the Mexican tiles she'd chosen for her kitchen floor. "Again," she adds. "I'll never leave you in your time of need *again*."

"Hey," Cobb says, looking at her seriously. "You did what you had to do, Gold. I know that now and I knew that then."

Marigold nods to show that she's heard him and then turns abruptly to the coffee, pressing the plunger in and pouring it into a mug. "I'm just gonna breathe in a little morning air," she says by way of explanation, carrying her coffee across the kitchen and letting herself out the side door to the garden.

It's Christmas Eve and Marigold wants to sit amongst the hibiscus and bougainvillea in peace while she sips her coffee. She pulls her robe tighter around her and sits on an iron chair, placing her mug on the small round table where she likes to watch the sun come up. This island is her paradise, her home. It's also been the place that's allowed her to put so many parts of her past behind her and to leave them there...until now. Having Cobb in her house has unwound some of the knots that she's tied around her memories, and even though it hurts to

confront some of the things she's kept tucked away, she knows it's time.

From inside the kitchen comes the soft strumming of a guitar, and although she can't quite make out the words, she can hear Cobb humming and working out the lyrics as he plays.

A bird lands in the garden, and Marigold smiles.

Marigold



Marigold posted a photo of her coffee mug held aloft with her flowers in the background that morning on Instagram, wishing all of her followers and friends a very merry Christmas Eve, and when she opens the app later that day, she's surprised to find that the comments are a mixed bag. Word of Cobb's surgery is widespread and common knowledge by this point, so at least half of the comments are from people asking how he is, with some inquiring genuinely, and others reaming Marigold for not being a caring enough ex-wife to post detailed updates about him and his recovery.

It's these last comments that inflame her, and she stomps out of her bathroom wearing just a towel around her body and one wrapped around her head, holding her phone slightly away from her so that she can read the fine print with her reading glasses on.

"Cobb!" she calls out, walking down the hall in just her towel. Normally she would have taken a minute to dress, but most of the free world has already seen her in a bikini, so her ex seeing her in a towel isn't something that ruffles her feathers.

"In here," Cobb says, opening the door to the guest room. He's standing there in a pair of faded 501s and a gray t-shirt,

his hair damp from a shower. Marigold stops short when she sees him, admiring for the millionth time since she met the man just how handsome he is in even the simplest things. There's something about Cobb's rakish grin and British charm—if not specifically in his looks—that has always reminded Marigold of Hugh Grant. He smirks at her towel and opens the door wider. “Come in.”

“Listen,” Marigold says, ignoring the slight quirk of his eyebrow as she yanks off her reading glasses and looks at him. “How do you feel about your surgery and recovery being public?”

“Can't really help it,” Cobb says with a shrug. “I'm used to people knowing my business. It's been going on for most of my life.”

“So then are you fine with me posting updates? Maybe a photo here and there? You can approve everything before I do, I'm just tired of people coming at me from all directions and telling me that it's my job to be updating the world on how you are. No one even knows you're staying here, do they?”

Again, Cobb shrugs, this time turning his palms to the ceiling. “Dunno, love. Don't much care, either. Do you?” He frowns.

“That you're here? Of course not. We're adults and we can do whatever we damn well please.”

“Well, then post away, my darling,” Cobb says generously, sitting on the edge of his unmade bed. It's always driven Marigold insane the way he can live in clutter, sleep in an unmade bed, and plunk a lightly used teabag right back into a mug of hot water after finding it dried up on the counter. “And if it helps you to sell copies of the book you're writing, then even better.”

“It’s not that, Cobb,” Marigold says, folding her reading glasses closed and holding them in one hand. But is it? She’s been engaging with fans and followers for a couple of years this way, and without any sort of endgame in mind. At first she’d done it because she could, then she’d carried on because her voice felt like the only one out there sticking up for women and aging and the respect that both things deserve, but now she’s trying to be more self-aware: is she, in fact, on a mission to pen and sell some sort of memoir or best seller? She’s not even sure, but Cobb isn’t totally wrong. “Okay, it might be that a little. In order to find your audience, you have to give away a bit of yourself in the process—“

“Preaching to the choir, sunshine,” Cobb says, holding up a hand to let her know she doesn’t need to say any more than that.

“You’re right,” Marigold says, chewing on her lower lip. Just then, Elijah walks by, pausing when he finds his parents together in the bedroom.

“Oh my god!” Elijah says in mock horror, covering his eyes like a little kid who has seen too much. “Mum!”

Marigold looks down at her towel-clad body; she’s forgotten that she’s not dressed. “Sorry, buddy. I had an idea—something I wanted to talk to Dad about—and I just rushed in here.”

“Not to shock you, but I’ve seen your mum in the all-in-all before,” Cobb says, smirking again.

Elijah pretends to gag. “Gah, Dad. Gross. So disgusting.” He shakes his head and walks back to the kitchen, leaving Cobb and Marigold giggling. “Come help me make the cranberry sauce once you’re decent, Mum.”

Marigold and Cobb exchange a final look of amusement before she goes back to her room and puts on a pair of black overalls over a long-sleeved white t-shirt. She's barefoot with damp hair when she emerges again, ready to work in the kitchen with Elijah.

"You know," she says to him, washing her hands at the sink. "There was a time when you weren't such a sass. You were a very obedient young lad." She's teasing, of course, as Elijah is a dream of a boy, even at thirty.

"Yeah, yeah," he says, smiling at her as he brings over a colander full of freshly washed cranberries. "It's too late to send me back though, so I think you're stuck with me."

"Hey," Marigold says, changing the subject as Cobb sets an album on the turntable in the front room. She hears the unmistakable scratch of the needle falling into the grooves, and then the opening licks of The Beach Boys singing "Little Saint Nick," the first track of *The Beach Boys' Christmas Album*. "What do you think of me documenting Dad's recovery while he's here? Like, posting it on Instagram or writing about it in my book?"

Elijah rubs his ear against his shoulder to scratch it, as his hands are covered in dough and flour. "I think that's up to Dad to say," he offers diplomatically. "Did you ask?"

"He's fine with it," she says, leaning against the counter and ignoring the cranberries for the time being. Elijah has asked for her help, although he knows that his mother's strong suit is not so much the cooking, but the actual setting of a scene. Maybe it was all the years she spent on different sets and photo shoots, but she can look at a room and envision exactly what it needs to be magical: the color scheme, the right combination of fabrics and patterns, the lighting. So while

she'll roll up her sleeves in the kitchen if he truly wants her to, they both know that at some point Marigold will drift out to the dining room and set the table, light the candles, and leave a shiny Christmas cracker on each place setting.

“Of course he's fine with it,” Elijah says mildly. “Since when has Dad ever said no to you?” Marigold watches her grown son as he works smoothly in the kitchen, completing one task before picking up the next. She doesn't respond, and her silence prompts Elijah to glance at her. “Okay,” he says in a quieter voice. “He didn't actually say *no* when you asked him to get sober, Mum. That's not fair.”

“I didn't say anything.” Marigold raises both hands in surrender.

“But it's what you were thinking.” Elijah stares at her, and in his eyes she can see how much Cobb's addictions have hurt him, too. They may not have divorced until Elijah was twenty, but he'd spent the majority of his life with a mother who was always trying to compensate for his dad's inability to be there, to be present, and to be drug and alcohol free.

Marigold feels guilty now, because it *was* what she was thinking. She walks by Elijah, stopping behind him to put her hands on both of his shoulders and to plant a kiss on his cheek. “I'll be back for the cranberries,” she says, “I'm gonna make sure Dad is settled in the front room.”

Sure enough, Cobb is sitting on the floor by the tree with the record spinning on the turntable, writing something in his leather-bound notebook.

“Hey, kid,” Marigold says, sinking to the floor next to him. “You busy?”

Cobb puts his pencil between the pages and closes the book. He looks at her with soft, serious eyes. “Not terribly. Just busy writing a Grammy winning song here.”

Marigold laughs. “I should leave you to it then,” she says, prepared to stand up and find something else to do while Cobb works. When he gets busy writing song lyrics, she tries to steer clear, because interrupting a genius at work means you might be depriving the rest of the world of ever hearing something magical.

Cobb reaches out and grabs the loose cotton fabric of her pant leg. “No,” he says, “stay.” He puts the notebook on the couch that he’s leaning against and focuses on Marigold. “Tell me about your life.” He looks around the room. “I feel weirdly at home here.”

“Could be all the English country cottage touches,” she says, glancing at the leaded glass windows and the hand-knotted rugs tossed around the wood floors of the house. She’d even had wooden beams installed across the ceilings, and everything about the place, from the walls to the floors, felt cool and inviting—even in the dead of summer.

“I think it just feels like you, Gold,” he says, turning his gaze back to her. “Everything you do just somehow feels like you.”

“Thank you,” she says, pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around her shins. They’re sitting there on the floor like a couple of kids, listening to a Christmas album together, and it reminds her of the first summer they’d met. “Hey,” she says, reaching out one bare foot and tapping his shin with her toes. “Remember that first time you came to Vermont with me to meet my family?”

Cobb lets his head fall back against the couch and he closes his eyes, a smile playing at his lips. “Of course. You had just turned twenty, and I wanted to meet your folks so that they didn’t think that you were running around New York with some sort of debauched rockstar.”

“But they were too in awe of you to see you as anything but a famous person,” Marigold remembers. “And my sister... oh my god, Christina was beside herself.”

“I can’t believe you never warned me about that poster she had of me on the back of her bedroom door.”

Marigold cackles at the memory. “I didn’t want to ruin the surprise. And after you left, she was the only girl in town who had a personally autographed Cobb Hartley poster in her bedroom.”

“She was also the only girl in town—besides you—who’d seen me naked,” he says, reaching out with his own foot and tapping hers playfully as he winks.

“Oh, nooooo,” Marigold says, falling back on the carpet and putting both hands over her eyes. “I’d forgotten about that—intentionally!”

Cobb laughs. “I hadn’t. It’s every man’s dream to have two cute sisters see him naked.”

Marigold sits up and reaches for a throw pillow, which she tosses at him. “Stopp!!! Christina was only seventeen!”

“I kid, I kid,” Cobb says, catching the pillow with both hands and putting it behind his lower back. “I truly do kid, because it was honestly kind of horrifying. I’d gotten out of the shower and I was standing there, unaware that the bathroom door wasn’t latched, when Christina walked in.” It’s Cobb’s turn to put his hands over his eyes. “And this was back

in the days before kids stumbled onto naked people online all the time—I'm pretty sure I was the first man she'd seen that way."

"Well, based on her scream, I would say yes," Marigold remembers, chuckling. "She slammed the door and shouted for me, and I thought she was bleeding to death or something."

"I forget—how did you get her to not tell your parents about it?"

Marigold blushes. "I told her she could tell all her friends how hot you looked naked."

"You did not," Cobb says, lowering his chin and looking at her with disbelief.

"Hey, I didn't want my parents to hear about it and think you were flashing my kid sister."

"But you didn't mind her little teenage friends thinking that I'd done that very thing?"

"Eh, who cares. They were just teenage girls and it made for a great story. She lived on it for years."

"Well that's embarrassing. No wonder she's never been able to be alone in a room with me since. How is Christina, by the way?"

"She's good." Marigold nods, trying to think of her last text from her younger sister. "Since the divorce she's been a little bitter, I think. I try to talk on the phone to her once a week, but she usually comes up with a reason why she can't. Truthfully, I think she's depressed. She's seeing a therapist though."

"You know," Cobb says, pausing as The Beach Boys switch to a new song. "That's one thing about you that I truly

admire, Goldie: even in the thick of our divorce, you were never bitter.”

She watches the lights on the tree, nodding her head so slightly that it’s almost imperceptible. “I was,” she finally admits. “I was bitter. Angry. Tired. I never planned on living a life without you in it, and honestly, it’s really hard when you’re in the thick of it to truly understand why another person would choose a substance over you.” She looks at him with eyes full of truth and regret. “I know better now, of course—I know that it was never as simple as you choosing drugs over me—but that’s how it *feels* when you’re living through it.”

“I put you and Elijah through some stuff, Marigold. And I’ve apologized a million times—”

“I’m not asking you to apologize again,” she says, giving a hard shake of her head. “I know you’re sorry.”

“Right. And words are just words. I’ve apologized, but then I’ve tried to live differently. I’ve tried to be someone who deserves to have the two of you in my life—in whatever way you’re willing to be in it. Because at this point, I know that I forfeited my right to have you as a wife and Elijah as a son.”

“Oh, Cobb. Stop it,” Marigold says. “You and I may have split up, but I’ve never once been completely out of your life, no matter how complicated things got. And Elijah is absolutely your son. He chose to live in London instead of over here, for God’s sake. Don’t you think that was by design?”

They look at one another while Elijah bangs around in the kitchen, singing along to the song on the stereo while his parents sit by the tree in the front room.

“You think he stayed there for me?”

“I know he did,” she assures him. “We never discussed it in plain terms like that, but he wanted to be close to you.”

Cobb looks as if he might shed tears. “He’s an impressive man, isn’t he?”

Marigold leans forward and reaches out with one hand, putting it on Cobb’s knee as she looks at him. “He is,” she says. “He’s the best of both of us. He’s never wanted anything but to make you proud, to look after you, and to follow in your footsteps.”

“He’s a damn fine musician,” Cobb says, tossing a glance towards the kitchen. “Plays the guitar more smoothly than I do. He’ll have his own moment in the sun.”

“If that’s what he wants,” Marigold says, pulling her hand from Cobb’s knee and leaning back. “The beauty of being his own man is that he gets to decide exactly what he wants.”

“Would that we could all have exactly what we want,” Cobb says, letting his eyes drift to the Christmas tree. “I would want to go back in time and be a better man. I would want to be a better husband and father.” He looks right at Marigold. “I would have wanted to be strong enough that I could have gotten my shit together sooner, then I never would have had to let you go.”

“Oh, Cobb,” Marigold says, feeling her own eyes sting with the tears that threaten to fall whenever she remembers how much she loved Cobb all those years, and how much she’d had to draw on that deep well of love in order to finally pack her things and leave. She’s about to get to her knees and lean over to hug him when Elijah pops his head into the doorway.

“Can I interest either of you in a snowball?” he asks, holding up two frosty drinks. As a kid, Marigold had always given Elijah one snowball cocktail at Christmas, putting just a splash of amaretto liqueur in his to mix with the ice cream and vanilla. “The alcohol in your drink is a more generous splash than what you used to give me, Mum.”

Marigold stands up, pushing back the tears. This is no time for wallowing in regret, because her family is here in her house with her, and they have a holiday to celebrate. “Snowballs at noon? Why not?” she says, reaching out to take the drinks from Elijah. “Thanks, buddy.”

“Let’s not get too tanked before the main course,” he says with a wink. “And Dad,” he says, turning to Cobb. “Yours is the one in Mum’s left hand, and of course it’s a mocktail.”

“Thanks, chap,” Cobb says, accepting the drink from Marigold and holding his glass so that she can tap hers against it.

“How about we take ours out and sit on the beach,” Marigold says, looking at Elijah to make sure he’s fine with her totally shirking her kitchen duties.

“Go,” Elijah says, waving them off with a roll of the eyes like a mom who knows her kids will be of no help to her so she might as well send them off to play. “Go on now.” He turns back to the kitchen, shaking his head as his parents clink their glasses together one more time and head for the door.

Marigold



“He has to go,” Marigold says. Her eyes are glassy as she holds a mug of tea in both hands. “I need him out of my house.”

The book club has agreed to meet on Boxing Day—the day after Christmas—to get a break from all their holiday responsibilities and to catch up. This, quite frankly, is the first time that Marigold has talked about Cobb at any length, and the other women are on the edge of their seats.

“I’ve been following your Instagram posts,” Heather admits, lifting the string of her tea bag and bobbing the bag in her hot water as steam rises. “Looks like Christmas went well, but I’ve gotta be honest, Marigold—not many of us could play nurse to an ex-husband.”

Marigold sets her tea on the table next to her and sits back in the chair, lacing her fingers over her stomach. “I told you all it was complicated between me and Cobb, and I wasn’t lying.”

“Well, I still can’t believe that Cobb Hartley is on our island,” Vanessa says, looking starry-eyed. “He’s the most talented musician of our time. Even my parents love him.” Tilly nudges her to stop her fangirl gushing. “Sorry,” Vanessa says, blushing.

“Quite alright.” Marigold is amused. “You’re not the first person to be a fan of Cobb Hartley, nor will you be the last. He does have a certain...magic,” she admits, letting her eyes graze the group of curious faces. “But ladies, he’s driving me insane.”

“I thought things were going really well,” Athena says, then puts her fingertips to her mouth. “Sorry, I went for a walk with Elijah last night, and he said having Christmas as a family was more than he could have hoped for.”

Marigold takes this in. “I’m happy that he’s happy, hon,” she says, smiling at Athena. “But Cobb and I know exactly how to push each other’s buttons, and I have to admit, spending time in close quarters with someone you have unfinished business with isn’t easy.”

“Especially during the holidays,” Ruby says. She pours her own mug of hot water and drops a tea bag in. Given the abundance of food over Christmas, the women have deemed this a “food free” book club meeting, with just tea and coffee early in the afternoon and a bookstore that’s officially closed so that they can commandeer the back room and indulge in as much girl talk as they need and want to.

“Exactly,” Marigold agrees, nodding. “There’s that whole element of feeling like you have to be on your best behavior, and in the best mood for everyone around you. And also constantly battling that sort of melancholy feeling that the holidays bring. Do you know what I mean? That feeling?”

The women all nod.

“I get that every Christmas,” Heather admits, her gaze fixed on the floor in the middle of the circle. “It’s like you have a minute to remember every magical Christmas you ever

had, every loved one who is no longer with you, and you also get that weird nostalgia for the year that's almost over.”

“Which has flown by without warning,” Sunday adds, lifting her tea mug. “The years seem to be going faster and faster.”

“They do,” Marigold says. “Which is why I feel like I want—no, I *need*—to come to terms with Cobb. I don't know what that looks like, but I have to somehow forgive him or something. I'm not even sure, to be perfectly honest.” She frowns.

“Okay, let's start with what's making you want to boot him out the door,” Ruby says, crossing her legs and sipping her tea. “You said he has to go, but why?”

Marigold gives a throaty laugh. “I've been a single woman for a decade. If I fall into the toilet one more time because this man doesn't put the seat down, I'm going to strangle him with a hand towel.” The other women nod and laugh knowingly. “He plays records on my turntable twenty-four-seven. I'm not kidding, you guys. I wake up to Bob Dylan, listen to The Smiths while I'm drinking coffee, put my AirPods in to block out Carlos Santana, and then eat dinner with Leonard Cohen in the background. Cobb is like a little boy, bouncing off the furniture with ideas about which album we need to hear next.”

“Wow, you have a huge music collection,” Tilly says, looking impressed for maybe the first time since the book club's inception. “Is that all your vinyl that he's playing?”

“I got it in the divorce,” Marigold explains. “It was our shared collection, but Cobb felt like he couldn't be responsible for anything tangible at that point in his life, so he insisted I take it. And I'll be honest: I prefer to listen to the BBC around

the house on satellite radio. It makes me feel more at home,” she says, shrugging.

“Okay, so music all the time, toilet seat up...what else?” Ruby prods.

Marigold’s eyes narrow. “He eats all my berries, puts the dishes in the wrong cabinets, and can’t figure out how to use a microwave to save his life.”

The other women are watching her, waiting for something that truly sounds annoying enough to want him out of her house.

Marigold pauses, thinking. “And we keep ending up in these situations where we *talk*. It’s just so...emotional.”

“Ah,” Ruby says. “I get it now. The emotions are too raw. He digs up feelings you forgot about, or never wanted to confront in the first place. And because he’s here in your face, you feel like you need to talk about things.” Ruby looks teary-eyed as she blinks a few times. “I get that it’s uncomfortable, but don’t forget what an opportunity this is, Marigold. You really have the chance to understand and to let go of some things.”

Marigold’s eyes go wide. “I’m so sorry, Ruby. You’re right.” She shakes her head and reaches for her mug of tea, feeling guilty. “I need to stop looking at it this way and start thinking of it as an opportunity. One that maybe *you* would want, if you had the chance to take it.”

“Would you?” Sunday asks Ruby, turning to her closest friend on the island. After their years together with their husbands serving as Vice President and President, respectively, they have a shorthand of unspoken glances that they share

with one another, and the other women have already picked up on this.

Ruby looks at Sunday. “I would,” she says, giving a single nod. “If Jack were alive and I had the chance, I’d want to talk about some of the hard stuff and get closure.”

“But what if it’s not closure?” Tilly asks, showing a wisdom far beyond her years. “What if it just opens things up again? What if it shows that you’re not really done with each other?”

Every set of eyes in the room turn to Tilly as the women process this.

“Well,” Marigold finally says, pressing her lips together as she ponders the idea. “That’s a distinct possibility. Things between me and Cobb have always been complicated, so I’m not sure why that should change now.”

Marigold turns her head and looks out the windows at the sky while the other women sip their tea and shift in their seats. Mercifully, Ruby asks Heather a question about Christmas which prompts a change in the conversation, and Marigold has a chance to let her mind wander as she holds the warm mug in her hands. Her thoughts drift back to the time when she first realized that her feelings for Cobb would never be simple, and she lets the image form in her head—a vision she rarely entertains because of how much it hurts.

Cobb had been fresh off a tour for the biggest album of his career. He was on top of the world, and both a critical and public success. There was nowhere on the planet they could go and find the anonymity that Marigold craved.

“Morocco,” Cobb had said, holding a glossy brochure that, when opened, revealed three plane tickets. “Let’s take Elijah to

Africa and let him see the world. Plus, I don't think anyone will know me there. It will give me a chance to just be me, and I won't feel the temptation to disappear into the alcohol. I promise, Goldie."

Even as she stood there, looking at the beautiful photos on the brochure of textiles, pottery, open markets, and delicious looking foods, she knew this wasn't true. There was no place on Earth where Cobb Hartley wouldn't be Cobb Hartley. No place where he could truly blend in and not feel the pressures he felt in London, Los Angeles, New York. She knew this, and yet she still plastered a smile on her face and stood up on tiptoe to kiss his lips.

"Yes," she'd said. "Yes, let's do it. I'll make all the arrangements for Elijah to be out of school, and we'll go be a family somewhere totally different."

Cobb had grinned happily, kissing her back. "I promise, Gold. I'll be a totally different man there."

The first twenty-four hours had gone well. Marrakech was a riot of color and sound and everything felt different and exciting. Elijah marveled at the open courtyard at the center of their *riad*, or hotel, and the way a shallow pool full of warm water just sat there without children splashing in it. Marigold had allowed him to get in while she sat in one of the lounge chairs, watching him. The whole place felt like a tranquil spa, and everyone who worked there waited on them politely, bending at the waist as they offered Marigold fresh mint tea, sweet pastries, or hot coffee in a *carafe* for her to sip as she sat poolside.

Her first real feeling that things were going off the rails came that evening. Cobb had made reservations for dinner at a Moroccan restaurant, but when it was time to leave the *riad*,

he'd stumbled out of the bathroom with glassy eyes and a look that Marigold knew all too well.

"You guys go ahead without me," he said, swiping at his nose furtively. "I need to talk to my manager, and it's still morning in L.A. I can meet you at the restaurant," he added, sensing Marigold's displeasure. "I'll get a cab for you two and then I'll be there in thirty minutes. An hour, tops."

They'd eaten a full meal: a fragrant chicken tagine with vegetables; couscous; makouda, which were little fried potatoes; and for dessert, b'stilla, a flaky pie filled with almonds and spiced with cinnamon and sugar. Ten-year-old Elijah had eaten so much pie that his stomach hurt and he laid down in the back of the cab with his head in Marigold's lap, his eyes closed as he dozed off and she ran her long fingers through his hair.

When they got back to the hotel, their room was dark and empty. She'd had to rouse Elijah and walk him inside, where she tucked him into bed fully clothed, sliding his shoes off and letting him fall asleep with just a kiss to the forehead. Marigold closed the door softly and walked back to the courtyard, where lights lit the pool from beneath the water, and people sat scattered around on chairs, talking quietly or sitting alone, looking up at the starry night sky above.

Finally, around three o'clock, Cobb stumbled into the empty courtyard, his footsteps too loud and his breathing ragged.

"Goldie," he said, surprised. He stopped at the foot of her lounge chair, looking as guilty as a teenager trying to sneak in after his curfew.

All she had to do was look at him to know that he was both drunk and high. A rage that felt like a giant dust storm was

brewing inside of Marigold, and she took three deep breaths, willing herself not to cry or to yell.

“Tell me again how this trip is going to be different than the rest of our life back home,” Marigold said, unable to look up and meet his gaze. Her heart was hammering in her chest, and she knew that if she even so much as looked at Cobb, she’d crack.

“I’ve been nominated for three Grammys,” Cobb said in response. He sank down onto a lounge chair and put his head into his hands, elbows resting on his knees. “Everyone watches me, Goldie. Everyone. All the time. And there’s a lot of pressure from every direction. What if this is the best it ever gets? What if I can never replicate this level of success? What does that say about me as a person?”

Marigold shook her head, completely perplexed. “What do you mean, Cobb? What does it say about you that you might never have another number one hit record?” Her feelings of confusion quickly snowballed into disbelieving anger. “Umm, how about it says that you’re like every other human on the planet who sometimes gets it right and sometimes gets it wrong.”

“Marigold,” Cobb said, looking up at her as if he were pleading for her to understand. He spoke to her slowly, like she was a stranger in a foreign land who just didn’t speak the language. “I can’t get things wrong. I don’t have the freedom to mess up.”

“Give me a break,” she said, standing up from the chair without warning. Her long dressing gown flowed around her bare legs. “You’ve messed up so many times that I’ve lost count. Look at you,” she said, feeling disgusted as she waved a hand at her husband. “You’re high as a kite. I’ve been saving

you from yourself for a long time, Cobb, and you know who forgives you every time you mess up?” She stared down at him with a hurricane raging behind her eyes. “Huh? Do you? ME. I forgive you, so don’t you ever tell me that you don’t have the freedom to mess up. Because you mess things up plenty.”

Without warning, Cobb leaned forward again and covered his face with both hands, sobbing into them like his heart was breaking. Marigold blinked at him. Her anger, still white hot and indignant, felt sideswiped by his tears. She looked around at the closed doors all around the ground floor level of the *riad*, hoping that no one would poke their heads out to see what all the commotion was.

“Cobb,” she whispered urgently, hoping to snap him out of it. “Cobb, stop. Please.”

In turn, he only sobbed louder.

“Jesus, Cobb,” she said, falling to her knees in front of him and putting both hands on the sides of his head, forcing him to lift it and look her in the eyes. His face was streaked with tears and dirt, and his nose was running. The famous, beloved, adored Cobb Hartley was a total mess, and the only person standing between him and certain disaster was Marigold.

“I know I wreck everything, Goldie,” he said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. “I’m not good enough for you, and I don’t deserve you. I just—“

“Stop,” she said, cutting off his pity party mid-sentence. “Just stop. You need to pull it together *now*. For me.” Marigold looked around again, but everything was as silent as the water of the pool. “You brought us to another country to have a change of pace. You wanted things to be different, and here you are, doing the same garbage you always do. It’s your

responsibility to pull it together and fix this, alright? I'm not leaving and neither is Elijah—not right now—but we need you to buck up and sleep this off.”

Cobb nodded then, his head still cradled between his wife's hands. She looked at him with pity, the first time she'd felt that particular emotion for him. The whole world thought of him as this creative genius who had everything he could ever want, and she saw him as a helpless boy who couldn't say no to the siren song of drugs and alcohol. Who couldn't keep his head above water without her there to act as a life preserver. Who, for whatever reason, couldn't manage to see that he *did* have everything he could ever want, and that he was ruining it all by refusing to get the help he needed to get clean once and for all.

Still crying, Cobb let his head fall on Marigold's shoulder and she wrapped her arms around him there under the Moroccan night sky. The pool filter hummed softly and the rest of the city seemed to slumber as she held him and rocked him back and forth in her arms. No, her feelings for Nigel Cobb Hartley were not uncomplicated. They were not simple. There was no easy way to fix him, help him, or make him understand. At that point in their marriage, all Marigold knew how to do was to be there for him through it all—the good and the bad.

“Marigold?” Sunday says now, which shakes her out of her own thoughts. She looks away from the window and back at the group of women there in the bookstore. The conversation they'd been having while she fell down the rabbit hole of memories has stopped, and they're all looking at her curiously. “Are you okay?”

Marigold feels like she's just reentered the atmosphere after a trip to outer space and she blinks at them for a moment, still holding her tea in her hands. She sets it on the table and stands up. "I'm so sorry," she says, shaking her head so that her hoop earrings swing back and forth, bumping against her sharp jawbone. "I need to go." Without another word, she walks through the store, leaving them all gaping behind her.

"Are you okay?" Ruby stands up hesitantly. "Do you need one of us to walk you home?"

"I can drive her," Athena says, hurrying through the store on Marigold's heels.

"Hey," Athena says outside, catching up to Marigold. "Let me drive you home." She touches Marigold's elbow lightly, steering her to the passenger side of the golf cart that she and Ruby and Harlow share. Marigold doesn't argue, but instead lets herself be tucked into the front seat like someone who is incapable of moving of her own volition.

"How do I know if he's really changed?" Marigold asks, looking at Athena with searching eyes.

Athena stares back at her, clearly out of her depth here. "I don't know, Marigold. I truly don't know." She reaches over and takes Marigold's hand in hers. "But let me take you home, alright?" she offers in a gentle voice.

Marigold nods vacantly and they drive down Seadog Lane in silence for a few minutes, eventually turning onto the shell drive that leads up to Marigold's bungalow. Athena comes to a stop but doesn't set the park brake or turn off the cart. "Here you go," she says, nodding at the front door of Marigold's house. "Home."

Marigold stares at the cheerful blue of her front door, painted to look like it belongs in the countryside. “I should go in,” she finally says, still looking at the door and the house, which holds her son and her ex-husband and all of the hurts and shattered hopes that their failed marriage brought into her life. “Athena?” she asks, finally turning to look at Ruby’s daughter. “Could you please do me a favor and not mention any of this to Elijah? Nothing I said today, and not my weird change of mood here. Please?”

Athena reaches for her hand again and takes it. “You got it, Marigold. It stays between us and the book club forever.”

Marigold gives her a small, sad smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Thank you.”

Wordlessly, Marigold slips off the seat of the golf cart and walks up to her front door.

Ruby



Ruby stacks the tea cups and picks up discarded saucers and spoons as she makes her way around the bookstore. After Marigold's departure the women had stayed maybe thirty minutes more, talking and sipping tea, but then things had broken up from there and everyone had drifted off tiredly. Ruby can't lie: everyone looked bedraggled from the holiday, and having a food-free meeting had been their best choice after overindulging the previous two days.

“So?” Ruby asks Athena, who is back in the shop and leaning against the front counter, chewing a piece of gum as she scans the New York Times Bestseller list to see which titles they need to order. “How was Marigold when you dropped her off?”

Athena keeps tapping at the computer keys as she snaps her gum. “Fine,” she says, not giving away much with this single word answer.

“She didn't seem fine, Bean.” Ruby sets the stack of cups and saucers down as she pauses on the other side of the counter with a hand on her hip. “I'm actually really worried about her. It's got to be stressful to have your ex-husband staying with you and recovering from a major surgery.”

Athena lifts a narrow shoulder, lets it fall. “She was just tired, I think. Have you seen her Instagram photos? Everything looks like it’s going well.” Athena pulls her phone from the back pocket of her jeans and opens the app, scrolling until she gets to Marigold’s page. She hands the phone to her mom across the counter and Ruby wipes her hand on her corduroy pants before taking the device.

The first holiday photo that Marigold posted was of Cobb and Elijah together in front of the Christmas tree, each with a guitar on his leg. The men are posed so that they’re facing one another, and Cobb is watching his son intently. Marigold has captioned this one: *There’s nothing like family for the holidays—the family you’re born into, and the one you choose. For anyone worried about Cobb, I should let you know that he’s doing fine and recovering with me here on the island. He’s doing well, and he says thank you to everyone for the concern and the love you’ve sent his way!* This is followed by a string of heart emojis, and Ruby’s eyes skim the message twice before she clicks on the comments.

You’re an angel for taking in your ex, Marigold! I could NEVER!!! reads one comment.

Your son is just as hot as your ex... says another commenter, who has followed up this statement with a fire emoji. Ruby rolls her eyes. It never sits well with her when people comment inappropriately about the children of famous people, but she knows that it’s part and parcel of being in the spotlight.

Her eyes focus again on the comments. *You really did him wrong, Marigold. Do you ever think that maybe he needed heart surgery because YOU BROKE IT, you dumb b*tch?!*

“What in the...” Ruby looks up at Athena and holds the phone up, tapping at the screen with her fingernail. “Did you see this one?”

Athena has her hand on the computer mouse but she stops scrolling the bestseller list and leans closer, reading it. “No, I hadn’t seen it, but I’m not surprised. Are you?”

Ruby turns the phone back around so that it’s facing her. “Kind of. I’m used to having people say crazy things about me, but I was married to a President, and there’s always going to be controversy surrounding the leader of the free world. But Marigold is amazing. She’s smart, beautiful, ballsy, and suffers no fools. She was married to a beloved musician, and they’ve raised a polite, handsome son. How can anyone find fault with that? And furthermore, why would they want to point out those faults to her?”

“Mom,” Athena says, shooting Ruby a disbelieving look. “People can find fault with anything, and they love nothing more than to point them out in front of the whole world. These people are called trolls, and they aren’t worth our time or energy.”

“Maybe not,” Ruby mutters, using her finger to drag the comments up on the screen. “But Marigold sure uses a lot of *her* energy trying to fight them.”

The next series of photos are from Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and Marigold has posted a few shots of their dinner table, complete with candles, fine china, and sumptuous looking meals. Comments on these range from the fawning: *So. Beautiful. Where do you find time to cook on top of all the other things you’re doing? You’re so fabulous!!!* to just plain mean: *But the real question is, do you even EAT the food, or*

do you just chew it up and spit it out so that you can keep your figure looking even a tiny bit like it did in the 90s?

Ruby skips the rest of the comments and admires the next photos, which are of Elijah and Cobb sitting on the sand wearing Santa hats, followed by one of Marigold herself in cut-off denim shorts and a red bodysuit with the men on either side of her. They're all grinning, but in Marigold's eyes, Ruby can see...something. Exhaustion? Worry? Conflict? She isn't sure, but there's definitely a quality to her friend's gaze that makes her look different than the Marigold that Ruby has known for the past nine months.

She skips the comments on those and hands the phone back to her daughter. "Well," Ruby says, patting the counter. "She's certainly posting photos that make it all seem very adult and easy, but my personal feeling is that it's got to be anything but easy to spend the holidays with your ex-husband. That's just my opinion, and it might not be worth much."

Athena has stopped working on the computer as she listens to her mom. "I think she'll be okay."

"I hope so." Ruby picks up the stack of plates again and grabs the tea cups by their handles, trying to carry the whole load into the bathroom with her so that she can rinse it all and take everything back to her house in a plastic tub for a proper washing.

When she's done, she drifts back up the stairs to her office space, opening a new email from Dexter North, who she'd been working closely with on his next book when he decided to take a breather and go to Ukraine on a special assignment for the BBC.

Merry Christmas, Ruby! I hope this finds you well. I'm home and wrapping up my freelance piece, which means I'll

be back on track for us to start working together again very soon...assuming you're still up for it? I know I kind of vanished on you, but I'm hoping that the holidays were a busy enough time for you that it made sense for me to put our work on hold. Anyhow, I'm actually on Christmas Key rather than in New York (it's quieter here; I work better), and I'll be here through New Year's. Any chance you might be up for a visit? Either me coming to you, or maybe you making a trip back over to my humble island?

Yours,

Dexter

Ruby steeples her hands in front of her face, putting her elbows on the desk. To be fair, the holidays have kept her busy. Even without the White House to decorate, she still expends an outsized amount of energy on trimming trees, baking, stringing lights and tinsel at the bookshop, and attending every cocktail or cookie party that she gets invited to throughout the month of December. Of course she's thought of Dexter—at least a few times—but she also understands his need to step back. Writing a book on a single subject has to be grueling and all-consuming, so giving it a small break will undoubtedly allow him to return to the book about Ruby's late husband, Jack, with fresh eyes.

She thinks for a moment about inviting Dexter over to Shipwreck for New Year's Eve, but then she has a better idea—a much better idea.

Ruby puts her fingers to the keyboard and starts typing.

Cobb



With full clearance from his doctor in Miami, Cobb is bundled up and tucked into a corner of a boat bound for Christmas Key. All around him, the women from Marigold's book club chatter over the rushing wind, holding their hats in place and grinning wildly at the thought of spending New Year's Eve on some island that's decorated for Christmas. They are like a group of happy hens, fussing over him and making sure he's warm enough/comfortable/hydrated, and to be perfectly honest, Cobb is chuffed. There's nothing he loves more than seeing Marigold smile, and her new friends are a great bunch of birds.

The thing about Cobb—maybe the one thing that's kept him in Marigold's good graces all these years—is that he has an easygoing nature. Even at the height of his addiction, Cobb was always trying his hardest to please Marigold, and not because he had to, but because he *wanted* to. They'd been a team from the first moment they'd met, and just because he'd hit the skids in his twenties and thirties, spending more time trying to figure out what he could ingest or shove up his nose to keep him on an even keel than he'd spent being a calm family man, Cobb had never once seen himself as separate from Marigold. If he's being truthful with himself, he can admit that he's never viewed himself as separate from her—even after the ink had dried on their divorce papers.

He watches her now, the sunlight warming the freckled skin of her bare shoulders. Marigold throws her head back, laughing at something that Ruby Hudson has just said. How is his ex-wife living here, in the Gulf of Mexico, and hobnobbing with American royalty like the former First and Second Ladies? He almost laughs out loud, shaking his head in wonder. That has always been the thing about Marigold: she dives in and really lives, and whatever interests her, she rolls up her sleeves and gets it done. It's just who she is.

When they'd found out that she was pregnant with Elijah, Cobb's first thoughts had been panicked ones: *Am I ready for this? What do I have to offer to a child? How will it change our lives to be parents?* but Marigold...his lovely, patient, totally capable and confident bride, had smiled like the cat that got the cream and looked him right in the eye. "We're going to be the *best* parents, Nigel Cobb Hartley. This kid is gonna travel the world with us. He'll come with me to photo shoots, and we'll put those little earmuffs on him so he doesn't go deaf and take him to all your concerts. Just wait and see—we'll be the best parents."

So Cobb had smiled and gone along with it, convinced just through Marigold's sheer confidence and determination that they *would* be a great mum and dad to some lucky little bugger who'd pop out looking like its stunning mother, but with the creativity and musical ear of its dear old dad. And sure enough, Elijah had been a beautiful baby, an easy boy, and he's grown into a soft-spoken, kind, talented, and wonderful adult son. Cobb could ask for nothing more. Except maybe for Marigold to still be his wife.

They arrive at Christmas Key after a relatively short ride across the water, and the bartender from The Frog's Grog eases them up to a dock, tying up and helping the ladies off

first, as he should. The bustle of excitement continues as a handful of women converge on the dock—young, middle-aged, old, and even a baby girl in a candy cane striped outfit on the hip of a lovely woman wearing a sundress. Cobb sits at the back of the boat, smiling and watching it all. The high-pitched chatter of women has always charmed him, and watching them all greet one another, exchanging hugs and shaking hands, he feels a stab of envy. For the past ten years, he’s been staying sober, reading books, strumming his guitar, and basically hiding out in the Cotswolds, while Marigold has been thriving. She’s built herself a gorgeous home on a quirky island, and she has friends—real friends—here.

“Come on, Cobby,” Marigold says, stepping back onto the boat with the help of Bev the bartender. “Let’s get situated here so we can explore the island.”

He smiles at her and stands, reaching for his duffel bag and holding onto it tightly when she tries to take it from him.

“I’ve got it, love.” He smiles. Cobb doesn’t want her to carry his bags for him and usher him around like an invalid in front of a bunch of strangers, though he kind of *has* enjoyed her looking after him at home when no one is watching.

“Welcome to Christmas Key,” the woman with the baby on her hip says. She glows with sunshine and goodwill, and Cobb takes a liking to her instantly. “I’m Holly, the mayor of Christmas Key, and this is my daughter, Stella.” She gives the little girl a single bounce, which makes Stella giggle.

“We’re hell-bent on Shipwreck and Christmas Key becoming sister islands,” Ruby says with a laugh, looking at the group that’s assembled there. “This is my second time coming here, and I’m trying to get Holly and some of the others to come over to Shipwreck for a weekend.”

“We’d love to,” Holly says. “Now, let’s get you all shipped off to your various spots.” She nods at a redhead who is standing with Bev. Cobb thinks he heard someone say that the redhead from Christmas Key is Bev’s cousin, Bonnie.

“Okay!” Bonnie says, consulting a sheet of paper in her hands. “We do have a tiny little New Year’s Eve event here that’s forcing us to be creative with lodging, but we’ve got this. Trust me.”

The women from Shipwreck Key wait expectantly and Cobb just stands there, looking at the decorations that line the street. It look like the set of a holiday movie.

“We have two rooms at the B&B that aren’t being occupied by our group of visitors,” Bonnie says. “And I have Ruby and Sunday sharing one of the rooms—two queen beds, of course—and the other room is for Marigold and Cobb, which also has two beds.”

Ruby and Sunday look perfectly fine with the arrangement, but as Cobb glances at his ex-wife, he sees that she’s just the tiniest bit put off by the prospect of sharing a room with him. He’s thrilled by it, but she’s not, and he can tell just by feeling the tension that radiates off of her.

“Heather is bunking with me in my spare room,” Bonnie says, looking at Heather Charleton-Bicks with an apologetic smile. “I hear you love men as much as I do, so we’ll have plenty of girl talk between the two of us to keep us up all night,” she says with a wink.

Heather laughs. “That sounds wonderful,” she says gratefully. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

“And,” Bonnie continues, glancing at Banks, who has been quietly along for the ride, as usual. Cobb watches him,

admiring the silent stoicism of the man, and wondering what drives a person to spend their entire work life putting themselves last, vowing to risk life and limb to protect another human being, whether you agree with their politics, morals, and fundamental beliefs or not. “I have Banks in a tiny home on the north side of the island. The owners are not here for the holidays, and they were willing to rent it out for the night. Now, if it makes more sense, we could put Banks in the second room at the B&B and move Cobb and Marigold to the tiny home, but Marigold asked for something close to the doctor’s office, and moving to the tiny home will kind of defeat that purpose, so...” She makes an apologetic face.

“Everything is totally fine as it is,” Ruby assures her with a smile. “Banks and I don’t need to be in adjacent rooms. We’ve been to Christmas Key before, and I think we’re good with this set up.” She glances at her Secret Service agent, and he gives a single nod to let her know that if she’s comfortable with it, then he is.

Cobb leans over to Marigold. “You wanted to be close to the doctor?” he whispers in her ear. “Are you worried I’ll keel over from the excitement of being on a Christmas island, love?” He pinches her right above her waist, meaning for it to be playful, but Marigold pulls away from him.

“I worry about you,” she says softly, privately, as she turns to look at him. “I brought you here because the doctor said it would be okay as long as there was someone close by with medical training, but we’re farther from the mainland out here, and I wanted to make sure I had all my ducks in a row.”

Cobb gives her a long look, trying to stay unbothered by the nuisance of being treated like an elderly man with a chronic condition, but as usual, he can’t ever be mad at

Marigold. In fact, he can't think of a time in all the years they've known each other when she hasn't somehow put him first, and it cows him to realize that fact.

"Thanks, Goldie," he says. "And I'm sorry we have to bunk together—I know that's not what you want, and I promise not to snore."

Marigold's concerned face morphs into one of annoyed amusement. "Pleeeaseeee," she says, dragging out the word. "You snored every single night for twenty years. I brought earplugs with me because, darling, men don't start to snore *less* as they age."

Cobb can't help but laugh at this. "I know, I know," he says, shifting his duffel bag from one hand to the other. "We don't age like fine wine the way that women do, but you put up with us nonetheless, and I'm eternally grateful."

Just then, a tall man in his thirties approaches the dock, one hand tucked into the pocket of his shorts, and a pair of aviator glasses covering his eyes. He has the strong, confident lope of a man who is effortlessly handsome and also incredibly intelligent. He lifts a hand in greeting, walking directly toward Marigold, and for a second, Cobb feels his heart constrict dangerously. *Is this man waving at Marigold? Does she have a lover on this sister island who she hasn't mentioned yet?*

But just as Cobb is ready to panic, the man takes off his sunglasses, and his eyes are trained on Ruby, not Marigold. He reaches out one arm to give Ruby a tentative hug. She stands up on her toes to hug him back.

"Dexter North," Marigold says, leaning over and putting her mouth to Cobb's ear. "The writer who's working with Ruby on the book about President Hudson."

“Ahhh,” Cobb says. Relief courses through his veins. Marigold has no idea how close he’d been to dropping his bag and squaring up with this man, regardless of the fact that Dexter North is clearly twenty years Cobb’s junior and most likely hasn’t recently undergone heart surgery.

“Let’s get everyone to their rooms, and then you can join us for this evening’s New Year’s events,” Holly says, walking at the head of the pack with Stella on her hip. The baby tugs at her mom’s long braid as Holly talks. “We’ve got a group on the island, as I mentioned, and they’re pretty low-key, so we arranged for some things we thought they might like.”

“Is it a fun group?” Sunday asks, carrying her bag as she walks next to Ruby. “I heard that you sometimes get kooky groups like *Wizard of Oz* fans, or murder mystery tours.”

“That’s true,” Holly says, glancing over her shoulder. “We’ve had some great events. Once we had a family reunion made up entirely of redheads, and we’ve also had a seafood festival, a celebrity wedding, and two reality shows. It’s always fun for us.”

Cobb gives a low whistle. “I had no idea this place was so popular,” he says to Marigold as she walks beside him at the back of the group. “It’s like the Ibiza of America.” Marigold nudges him with her elbow.

“But this group is kind of a secret society,” Holly says. “At least I think that’s what they are. They’ve kept pretty mum about the whole thing, but from what I’ve gathered, they’re called The Seven Society.” She looks around, but Main Street is quiet at the moment. “I’m not entirely sure what they do. They’ve spent most of their time on the island so far buying cigars across the street,” she says, nodding at a shop with a sign above it that says North Star Cigars, “and walking around

in twos and threes, having serious conversations. It's all very mysterious." Holly shrugs as she walks up the steps of the B&B. "They kind of remind me of a group of grandpas, or retired college professors who like to get together to talk about Poe or compare stocks. Anyhow, I'll get everyone checked in here. Bonnie, if you'll take Heather to your place and Banks to the tiny home," she says, "then we'll meet back here for dinner at seven."

Cobb follows Holly gratefully. He's ready to get into an air-conditioned room and put his feet up. Under normal circumstances Cobb is game for pretty much anything, but right now (and he'd never admit it to anyone but Marigold) all he really wants is a nap.

* * *

When Cobb wakes up it's almost dark outside. Their room at the Christmas Key B&B is on the second floor and has a view of Main Street, which is strung with so many lights that it looks like a county fair at night. Cobb had laid on the bed as soon as Marigold unlocked the door, closing his eyes and falling into an instant, dreamless sleep.

Now, in the semi-darkness, he sees that she's pulled the half of the blanket he's not laying on over the top him while he naps. Cobb kicks the blanket off his body and stands.

"Goldie?" he calls out, though the bathroom is dark too. He lifts his phone from the nightstand and sees a message from her—she's down in the ballroom for dinner, but didn't want to wake him.

Cobb quickly showers and changes, then takes the stairs down to the ground floor and follows the sounds of holiday

music and laughter.

The ballroom isn't large, but then the B&B isn't either. He steps through the open doors and into a room with a tall, decorated tree in one corner. Christmas jazz is playing in the background, and more people than he expected are milling about with drinks in hand. Heads turn in his direction, and while Cobb is more than used to being stared at, and more than aware of the fact that his face is nearly as well-known as his music, there's a strange, underwater feeling that comes after a nap that stretches through the afternoon and into the evening, and it's left him feeling somewhat discombobulated.

"Cobb Hartley," a tall, distinguished-looking man with a gray mustache and a full head of silvery hair holds out a hand to shake. "I'm a fan of your work, and a lover of music in general. Robert Lupone."

"Pleasure to meet you, Robert," Cobb says, shaking his hand. There are men sprinkled all around the ballroom who give off the same self-assured air as Robert, and as Cobb's eyes glance over them, most of the men turn to him and give a smile and a nod, as if they also know exactly who he is and are waiting for their turn to have a chat. Again, this is not a new sensation for Cobb; pretty much every party or awards show he's ever attended is essentially a room full of people with whom he'll be required to stop and talk to, exchange pleasantries, accept compliments, or make small talk about people they might know in common.

"Hi," Marigold says breathlessly, appearing at Cobb's elbow. She looks stunning with her hair twisted up and off her face, and she's wearing a black dress with pinpoints of white polkadots sprinkled all over it, and a pair of black sandals with

a small heel. “Sorry I didn’t wake you, but I thought the nap was important.”

“Marigold,” Cobb says, placing a hand over hers as she loops it through his elbow. “This is Robert Lupone. Robert, Marigold Pim.”

“Ah, the one who got away,” Robert says with a fatherly wink. He’s got to be close to seventy, which doesn’t actually make him old enough to be Cobb’s father, but there’s something about him that *feels* that way. Robert’s eyes are wise and intelligent, and for once Cobb doesn’t have the urge to wrap up a conversation and move on.

“So you know that we were married,” Cobb says, not sure if he feels flattered that a stranger knows this much about him, or worried that he’s just shaken hands with a man who thinks he’s an idiot for letting a woman like Marigold get away. (Although he is well aware that he *is* an idiot for letting a woman like Marigold get away.)

“Certainly, sir. I’m a great follower of popular culture, as well as music, art, and all things scientific,” Robert says, shaking his glass of bourbon and making the ice cubes rattle. “A man needs to have a variety of interests to make life worth living, you know.”

Cobb nods and looks around. The other men who look like Robert are standing in small groups. Some are chatting with the women from Shipwreck Key. Heather is standing particularly close to a tall man with a shock of white hair and a deep tan, her hand resting on his arm as he talks. Banks is posted at the side of the room, and he sticks out like a sore thumb, given that he’s alone and not holding a drink or anything. After taking in the rest of the Shipwreck Key crew, Cobb’s lips quirk in a smile and he looks back at Robert.

“I’m sorry, what is it that you do?” Cobb asks, though not rudely.

Robert clears his throat. “My colleagues and I are all members of an organization that likes to gather occasionally to distribute funds to worthy causes. We’re philanthropists, if you will.”

Holly’s words on Main Street earlier that day come back to Cobb. “Are you all members of The Seven Society?” Cobb isn’t even sure what that is, though he’s already intrigued by the idea of a secret society. What man worth his weight in gold *wouldn’t* want to belong to some sort of secret group of other men? One that perhaps has a top secret handshake, a motto, or maybe a jacket that one only gets after joining? It’s like every teenage boy’s dream come true, being a part of an exclusive clubhouse or gang.

Robert laughs harder than he needs to. “Oh, what a vivid imagination, Mr. Hartley. That must be what fuels your creative fire.”

“No,” Cobb says, skimming the room for Holly so that he can point her out. “Someone told us earlier that—”

Marigold squeezes his arm. “My husband just woke up from a long nap. He hasn’t been feeling like himself lately, so please excuse us. So nice to meet you.” Marigold steers Cobb away and towards the bar. “Let’s get you a club soda,” she says in a low, soothing voice. “I found out that this society is top secret, so none of us are supposed to know.”

“Well, they’re not doing a great job of keeping it under wraps if we all know about it,” Cobb is grumpy and for the first time in a long time he wishes that he could order a real drink. He’s not seriously tempted to break his long sobriety, but there is something manly about ordering a bourbon and

joining the other guys for a drink, and he misses that. "How was I supposed to know?"

"It's fine," Marigold reassures him, stepping up to the bar. "I'll take a glass of champagne, please," she says. "And a club soda."

The man behind the bar looks up at Cobb and starts to pour the drinks, but then does a double-take. "Cobb Hartley! I'll be damned!" He steps out from behind the bar and offers Cobb a hearty handshake. "I'm honored. Truly. Name is Joe Sacamano, and we played together once at the Hollywood Bowl."

"We did?" Cobb suddenly feels like he's on the set of an improv play, and the one thing he doesn't like is feeling caught off-guard. He should have stayed upstairs in his room and skipped dinner altogether. Nearly everything that's happened so far since he came down to the ballroom has felt jarring and lopsided.

"I was playing guitar with The Eagles for a few shows," Joe Sacamano says, "and you were there performing after you did that album with all the guest stars."

"Oh." Recognition dawns on Cobb. "I *do* remember that. Mid-nineties?"

"Would have been mid-nineties for sure," Joe says, nodding and wiping his hands on the black apron he's wearing over his black shorts. "I think I was on wife number two and kid number five. Sounds about right." He smiles, and a pair of eyes so light and blue twinkle from beneath a pair of white eyebrows that Cobb feels like he's looking into the Aegean Sea. Joe Sacamano is incredibly handsome for a man in his seventies, and his silvered hair and deep tan make him look like he's lived on an island bathed in sunlight for his entire

life. “I retired down here not long after that, and now I run a bar on the beach—you should drop by while you’re here on Christmas Key. I take out my guitar every so often and give unsolicited concerts to the locals, whether they like it or not. I’d love to jam with you, if you’re up for it.”

“Yeah.” Cobb nods as he slowly warms to the idea of being at a beach bar, strumming his guitar alongside a fellow musician. It sounds chill. Relaxing. “I could do that.”

“Right on. Let me get you the champagne and club soda, friends,” Joe says, stepping back behind the bar and making their orders in seconds. “Hope to see you again.” Joe offers Cobb another handshake, and then Marigold leads him to a table that’s covered by an ivory cloth with candles and little bits of glitter and confetti sprinkled all over it.

“Happy New Year.” Marigold holds her champagne up to clink against Cobb’s club soda as they sit down. “Thanks for letting me drag you out on a boat to spend the night on an island that looks like Santa’s tropical paradise.” She smiles at him and he can see by the light from the candles that her cheeks are flushed and pink with happiness. Cobb hopes desperately that he’s the source of at least *some* of that happiness.

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be,” Cobb says, clinking his glass against hers. “Though, if you would have asked me two months ago, I never would have dreamed that I’d be spending New Year’s Eve on an island with you.” He laughs. “But it is beautiful here—at least what I’ve seen of it.”

Much to his surprise, Marigold’s eyes fill with tears and she reaches over and laces her fingers through his. “I’m really happy to be the one to look after you while you get back on your feet,” she says softly, leaning into him so that he can hear

her over the jazzy Christmas music. All around them, people are taking their seats at the tables.

“Well,” Cobb laughs. “My sister didn’t want me, so I’m afraid you kind of won by default, sweetheart.”

“I could have said no.” Marigold looks at him over the rim of her champagne glass. “No one forced me.”

Cobb appreciates her saying this, though he knows that he’s staying in her house only through a combination of her innate kindness, her promise to him years ago when he’d first overdosed, and possibly because of their unfinished business. But he plans to be as easy as he can for Marigold. To cause her no more trouble, and no concern. To make sure that she doesn’t ever regret bringing him back to Shipwreck Key and helping him to recover.

“Still,” he says, holding onto her delicate fingers as she leaves them intertwined with his. “Thanks, Goldie. Thank you for being you.”

There’s the clink of a knife against a glass as the music is turned down low, and they all search the room for the source of the sound. It’s Holly, the pretty young mayor, dressed in a white dress and pearl earrings, and she’s standing at one of the tables holding a glass in one hand.

“Thank you to all of you for joining us here on Christmas Key as we ring in a new year,” she says, raising her voice to be heard. At her table, a handsome man with thick, black hair and disarming dimples holds Stella in his lap as he watches Holly with eyes full of love, and a few people who Cobb assumes must be locals sit with them. “I know we’re a merry bunch of misfits—”

“And a motley crew, at that,” one of the men from The Seven Society (or whatever secret organization they truly belong to) pipes up. Everyone else in the room chuckles politely.

“But I like to believe that we all ended up here tonight for a reason, whether it’s simply to share the sense of togetherness that’s so important during the holiday season, or because we need to make important connections with one another. Either way, I’m thrilled to see you all here, and I wish you nothing but health, happiness, and prosperity in the year to come!”

“Hear, hear!” everyone shouts, lifting their glasses with Holly. At each round table, people clink their glasses together and drink, and the happy sounds of conversation pick up all around them again as dinner is served.

“So, Cobb,” says one of the secret society men. He’s seated to Cobb’s right, and is wearing a blazer with a pastel plaid pocket square over a baby pink golf shirt. His hair is thick and wavy. He has a gold signet pinky ring on one hand, and a wedding band on the other. “Tell me a bit about yourself.”

Cobb chugs his club soda thirstily. “Well, I’m a musician,” he says, trying not to assume that this man knows anything about him. “Lately I’ve been spending some time in the English countryside, and working on new music. How about you...”

“Chuck,” the man supplies for him, giving Cobb an indulgent smile. “And I really meant, tell me about your inner life. Is it strong? Are you mentally driven? I mean, a man who has achieved your station in life would have to be, but have you lost that fire, or is it still in you?” Chuck’s eyes hold Cobb’s with an intensity that Cobb isn’t used to. Making chit-

chat with strangers is generally a surface affair, but Chuck seems ready to dive into the deep end, and for some reason, this feels better than talking about the weather.

“My inner life?” Cobb replies. “Well, I like to think I’ve still got a fire in me. No man wants to imagine that he doesn’t, right?”

Cobb stops talking and considers this; after his surgery, he’d woken up with lyrics and music in his head again, and it has been a number of years since he’s felt that particular drive to create. To get something inside of him out and into the world. For so long he’d focused only on getting sober, staying sober, and on really looking deeply into his heart to see who he was as a man, that he’d let his creative side flag a bit. But he’s determined not to let that happen again.

Chuck gives him a long look as he picks up his knife and fork. “Never met a man who was willing to admit that he’d thrown in the towel,” Chuck says as he slices into an asparagus stalk. “And I hear you know something about our little organization.” This feels like it might be a trick question, so Cobb waits to hear what Chuck will say next. He leans in closer to Cobb like they’re co-conspirators. “We always meet under the guise of being just a group of old geezers who were once in a fraternity together at the University of Virginia, but that’s not entirely true, as you’ve gathered.”

“Sure, I gathered as much,” Cobb says, picking up his napkin and spreading it over his lap as a server sets a plate of prime rib in front of him.

“There’s a lot to be said for spending time with a group of like-minded individuals, Mr. Hartley. We bounce ideas off one another, we encourage each other to reach our goals, and, perhaps most importantly, we work together in tandem to

direct our charitable funding in the right directions. Giving of oneself and one's resources is an important cog in the wheel of a full life."

"Sounds like a positive endeavor," Cobb says, nodding as he listens. And it does. He's never really had a group of men in his life to talk to about real stuff. Over the years he's certainly known plenty of musicians, and some he would even call great friends, but there's a different vibe between creative people, and most of the ideas that you bounce off one another tend to be somehow related to music or art. There's a bit of drama thrown in, and generally some drugs or alcohol, in his experience. But he'd like to believe that he might find that kind of camaraderie in his life, and that he could live with that kind of intention. "And is that why you're gathered here on Christmas Key?" he asks, cutting off a bite of prime rib.

"It is indeed," Chuck says, smiling beneath his perfectly groomed mustache. "We like to meet right before the new year to decide which directions our funding will flow for the next twelve months. Now," Chuck says, leaning in even closer to Cobb and speaking so quietly that no one else at their table can hear him. "Generally speaking, no one knows when a man is a member of The Seven Society until after he dies. At that point, a 7 made of black flowers appears on his grave, and then he's acknowledged posthumously as a member of our great club. It's all very clandestine," Chuck says with mirth and mischief in his eyes. He picks up his wine glass and swirls the burgundy liquid around. "I'm letting you in on our little secret and entrusting you with it because I sense that you're a man of integrity, but also a man who is searching for his own purpose."

Cobb considers this as he glances at Marigold, who is seated to his left. She's turned in her seat and is deep in

conversation with Sunday Bond and a man with a white ponytail and a gold hoop earring who can't be a day under seventy-five. For a moment, Cobb envisions himself as a different kind of man, a man who'd gone to college, who'd chosen a life of the mind rather than a life trying to satiate the passions of the heart. What if he'd been a Cambridge man? Someone who toted a dog-eared Proust around in a worn-in leather satchel? A man who wore tweed blazers unironically and dedicated the last decades of his life to philanthropy and deep discussions?

“Find your purpose, Mr. Hartley,” Chuck says indignantly, tapping the tip of his forefinger against the tabletop. “Whatever it is, declare it, and then pursue it with your whole heart. It will invigorate you, give clarity to your life, and—I would even venture to say—bolster your creativity. Just don't wait until it's too late,” he adds, forking a bite of vegetables. “Don't wait until some secret club finally claims you as its member when you're already cold in the ground.”

Cobb nods thoughtfully, as if the idea of being cold in the ground doesn't terrify him to his core, but he knows that Chuck has a good point. He does have something that he needs to aim for, and while it has nothing to do with giving away his money to worthwhile causes, it will undoubtedly give clarity and focus to his life.

Though he watches her laugh and talk to their table companions, her face animated and happy, it isn't until after dinner is over that Cobb gets Marigold alone. He's convinced her to stroll with him down Main Street, to wander beneath the garlands of greenery and holiday lights that are strung from one side of the street to the other. It feels good to be out in the night air after the merriment and conversation of the ballroom, and Cobb looks up at the sky as they walk, surprised once

again by how clear the stars are in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. He has to go far away from London to really see the night sky, and it's been years since he's felt this pleasantly removed from everyone and everything he knows.

They hit the beach next to the dock and stop at the base of a palm tree that's wound from ground to fronds in colorful lights; it feels like standing beneath a Christmas tree.

"This is pretty magical," Cobb says. He has his hands tucked into the pockets of his linen pants as they watch the water lapping on the shore. Cobb turns his head just slightly, admiring the profile of his gorgeous ex-wife as the water dances beneath the light of the moon. Chuck's words have been playing through Cobb's mind since dinner, and he knows now that he's landed on his true purpose, and that the time to pursue it has come.

"When Ruby suggested coming here, I knew we needed to be on that boat." Marigold turns to him with a smile. "After you're all better and you're back home in the U.K., I want you to have some good memories to call on. I want you to look back at Christmas and New Year's and think of the little bright spots of joy we found together—us, and Elijah. It's felt good to have you both here for the holidays."

The sound of his son's name makes Cobb smile. "I've loved spending time with the two of you," he admits, looking down at the sand. "But Goldie, I don't need for you to manufacture happy moments for me. It kind of makes me feel like I'm just starting rehab, and you want to make sure I have some positive things to think about so that I don't relapse. And I'm nowhere near that. I get that once you're an addict, you're always an addict, but I'm not on the verge of slipping or giving up. Not even close."

“Oh, Cobb.” She throws her arms around his shoulders and hugs him close. “No. I don’t think of you like that. You’ve come so far, and Elijah and I are both really proud of you.”

Cobb reaches up and puts his hands on her arms as she holds him. “Okay, good. I just don’t want to be coddled, you know? I’m sure of a lot of things in my life, Goldie, and I have a lot of confidence in myself.” He looks out at the water as she watches him. “I’m sure about making a full recovery, and I’m sure about the music that I’ve been hearing in my head lately—I really think I can turn it into something good.”

“I *know* you can,” she says without hesitation. “I have always believed in your music wholeheartedly.”

“I believe that Elijah is a good and strong kid, and that we’ve raised him to be successful and kind and independent. I couldn’t be more proud of him.”

“I feel the same way.”

“And,” Cobb says, taking a deep breath before he goes on. “I believe in you and me, Gold.”

Marigold’s arms go slack around him, and he can feel the smile slip from her face even though he’s not looking directly at her.

“Cobb...”

“Just hear me out,” he says, stepping away from Marigold so that he can turn his whole body towards her. “I’ve always known that we belonged together,” Cobb says. “I didn’t ever want you to leave, though I understood why you had to, and frankly, I thank you for leaving. It made me realize how much I was screwing up my life—and everyone else’s—and it pushed me to get help. But I’ve been sober for nine years,

Marigold. I've been leading a quiet, reflective life that truly suits me. The only thing that's missing from that life is you."

Behind them on Main Street the other guests begin to trickle out of the B&B to head to a stretch of beach where Holly's husband and the island's only police officer are going to set off fireworks at midnight. There is joyous laughter from all around, but Cobb doesn't take his eyes from Marigold's face. They stand there with a million moments of love, heartbreak, joy, and pain passing back and forth between them as they remember it all.

"Cobb," Marigold finally says, shaking her head like she's trying to stop a movie from playing there. "You've had a major health scare—that's a life-changing event for anyone."

"No," he interrupts, reaching for her hands as the first fireworks explode in the sky from down the beach. "Goldie, this isn't me speaking from a place of fear, this is me telling you what's been in my heart all along. I'm sorry—for everything. For hurting you and Elijah, and for destroying your trust in me. I did a lot of damage to both myself and to you guys, and I know I'll have to spend the rest of my life making up for it. You don't know how sorry I am."

Rather than telling him he doesn't need to apologize, Marigold lets him take her hands in his and hold them. "Thank you," she says softly. "I appreciate that."

"I figured out so many things while I was in treatment, Goldie, but one of the most important things I learned was that addiction means you're giving up everything for one thing. I did that for years and years and years. I gave up everything to feed my addiction."

"I remember," she says softly. There are tears in her eyes.

“But I also discovered that true recovery is giving up that one thing to get everything else back. Nine years ago I said goodbye to ever again using any type of substance and my world opened up, Goldie. I started to get back the things I’d lost. I was able to think about music again, and to rebuild my relationship with my son. I learned that I love walking for miles and miles in silence and just listening to my thoughts, and that I can read a book in a day without even pausing to eat. I discovered that I really enjoy watching old movies and baking bread, but I also discovered that I’d never be whole again without you.”

Marigold laughs through her tears, which she swipes away with her fingertips. “It kind of sounds like you discovered that you’re actually a British grandmother in the body of a fifty-six-year-old man.” Cobb laughs at this. “But truthfully, I don’t want to be a replacement for substances, Cobb. I can’t do that.”

He’s stunned by this. Is she not understanding what he’s saying? What he’s offerering? “What do you mean?”

“Cobb, you are very much prone to addiction. What if all I am is one more thing to lose yourself in? What if *I’m* an addiction?”

He steps back as if she’s just slapped him. “But...you’re not. You’re the woman I love. The woman I’ve always loved.”

Marigold’s eyes turn heavenward, where bright bursts of color shoot into the night sky, celebrating the dawn of a new year. She suddenly looks sad.

“A lot has happened,” she finally says. Marigold searches his face with tears on her cheeks. “Maybe too much has happened. I just don’t know.”

“But Goldie.” Cobb reaches out for her as she starts to walk away. “These are the first minutes of a brand new year. We could start fresh—be the people we are now, not the people we were then.”

Marigold stops walking and faces him again. She shrugs, looking helpless beneath the bright, festive lights of Main Street. “I’m not sure that we’re new people now, Cobb. I think we’re just older, wiser versions of the people we’ve always been. And I don’t know that I can go back—even if I wanted to.” She waits a beat, then shrugs again. “Happy New Year, Cobb,” she says. Her voice is almost a whisper.

Cobb stands there on the sand and watches as she walks back to the B&B alone.

Athena



It's New Year's Eve and Elijah's parents are gone. Athena feels a rush of excitement as she leans into the bathroom mirror, slipping the hooks of her earrings through her lobes. She shakes out her loose hair.

The bad situation with Diego is definitely in her rearview mirror, but there's no way that Athena can look at herself honestly without admitting that she simply made a poor choice when it came to spending the night with him. And it wasn't even her fault, because it's not like men walk around wearing engagement rings—she couldn't have known intuitively that she'd chosen to lose her virginity to a man who was about to get married. And if she had known, then she certainly wouldn't have done it!

“Heyyyy.” Harlow slides into the bedroom and flops onto Athena's bed. She's in sweats, eating an ice cream sandwich out of a paper wrapper. “You look like a fox, girl. You trying to get in trouble tonight?” Harlow wiggles her eyebrows suggestively as she takes a bite out of the corner of her ice cream.

“No, I'm not looking for trouble,” Athena says. She leans back from the mirror and appraises herself from head to toe. “Does this outfit send the wrong message?”

Harlow props herself up on one elbow and looks at her sister. “I don’t think so. It’s pretty straightforward.” She shrugs. “You’re in all black, which is sexy, but not too sexy. And you have leggings tucked into boots—again, sexy but not overly. And then your sweater hugs your body, but it’s a turtleneck, so it also leaves something to the imagination. I think it’s totally you.”

Athena smooths her sweater down as she exhales. “Okay. Good.” Unspoken between them is the fact that Athena doesn’t trust her own judgment yet when it comes to men. She’s worried that she might be making another misstep, but at the same time, she knows she can’t—and doesn’t want to—stay on the sidelines forever.

“Hey,” Harlow says, sitting up and taking another big bite of her quickly melting ice cream sandwich. “Elijah seems like a good guy. He really does. And he has good energy.”

Athena turns away from the full-length mirror on her wall. Her room is done in shades of pale blue and white, and her mother has chosen a fluffy white rug that covers about half of the bedroom’s hardwood floor. Harlow is sitting at the edge of her white wooden sleigh bed, legs dangling several feet off the ground.

“I like him a lot,” Athena admits. She really does like Elijah, and not in the same way that she’d liked Diego. This isn’t some crazy work crush based on fleeting glimpses and stolen moments of proximity. “He’s been super nice to me, and I think he’s really funny and sweet. I trust him.”

“I’ve only heard good things,” Harlow confirms, nodding and glancing around at the framed paintings of seascapes on the bedroom walls. Their mother had done the room—the entire house—tastefully, and the only things the girls had

added to their bedrooms were their clothes, books, jewelry, and prized possessions. “Plus he was so good with the kids at that bookstore event you did. You really get a feeling about a guy when you see him sitting around singing with a bunch of five-year-olds, because little kids are programmed so that they physically can’t lie. If someone is a bad egg, they get that vibe right away and you can tell.”

Athena nods. “That’s true,” she says. “Little kids and dogs are the truth-tellers of the world.”

Harlow licks a drip of ice cream off her wrist. “So are you gonna make out with him?”

“Oh my god!” Athena nearly shouts, frowning at her sister as she watches her eat ice cream on top of her white duvet cover. “I have no idea. But could you possibly eat that thing somewhere cleaner, like in the shower?”

“I’m not a total slob.” Harlow pouts as she slides off the bed, rolling her eyes and taking another bite of the dark cookie that sandwiches her ice cream. “And I think you should kiss him. Definitely. I can’t believe you haven’t already.”

This comment hits right at the heart of everything that Athena fears to be true about herself: that she’s undesirable. Unkissable. Unlovable. That the only reason Diego took her home with him was because she was drunk and available. He’d clearly seen no long term prospect in her, and therefore the way he’d treated her had reinforced all of her own insecurities.

“Hey,” Harlow says. She jams the last bite of dessert into her mouth and chews it so that it won’t drip on her sister’s bedroom floor. “You’re a catch, Athena. Seriously. You’re a beauty, and some guy is going to know it and treat you the way you deserve. Maybe it will be Elijah,” she says, looking

right into Athena's eyes, "and maybe it won't. But I think you should have fun while you're young, and don't let Diego's bad behavior determine how you feel about yourself." She wipes her hands on the front of her sweats. "Women already have to spend too much energy apologizing for the way men act, and frankly, most of the time it has nothing to do with us."

Athena bites on her lower lip. "Okay," she says quietly, turning back to the mirror. "I'll keep that in mind."

By the time Elijah swings by to pick her up in his golf cart, Harlow has already taken a book and a glass of wine up to her bathtub on the pretense of soaking away the year that's about to end. To be fair, she'd moved from New York down to sleepy Shipwreck Key after surviving a bar shooting and losing a friend in that tragic event, and now she's starting the new year single and without any exciting romantic or job prospects.

"Wow. You look gorgeous." Elijah pats the seat next to him. Athena climbs into his golf cart.

As he drives slowly over the crunchy shells of Ruby's driveway, Athena can feel herself glowing. She's on a date with Elijah Hartley, a beautiful, single, talented man who seems to actually like her.

"Thank you," she says, holding her clutch purse in her lap. "What do you want to do?"

"Well," Elijah says, steering casually with one wrist on top of the wheel. "Since we're not in a big city where the hottest joints fill up months in advance with New Year's Eve reservations, I got a table at The Black Pearl for dinner, then I signed us up for the ghost tour that the tarot card lady is leading."

Athena turns to him with a surprised look on her face. “Ella? From Doubloons and Full Moons? I can’t believe you went in there.”

Elijah gives a self-conscious laugh. “I was walking by and she mentioned it to someone on the sidewalk. It sounded fun, but if you’re not up for it, then no worries.”

“No, I’m game.” Athena holds her purse tighter as they bump over the unpaved road. She’s feeling excited about the evening ahead, and the fact that Elijah has given some thought in advance to what they’ll do together thrills her.

Dinner at The Black Pearl is delicious. The restaurant is still decorated for Christmas with ropes of garland and lights, shiny hurricane lamps that reflect the candlelight, and a black baby grand piano in one corner where a pianist sits, tinkling the keys and playing softly as people dine and talk. They might be on a small island in the middle of nowhere, but the ambience is cozy and romantic, and their conversation flows easily from topics like what it was like to grow up with famous parents, to their favorite restaurants in the world, to their biggest fears about being adults.

For Elijah, the fear is that he’ll never live up to his parents’ expectations or even reach the level of their successes, and Athena admits that she’s afraid of making all the wrong choices.

“I mean,” she says, “when you’re a kid and your parents have certain positions in life, people make the choices for you. Or they at least advise you strongly. But then suddenly you’re an adult, and you make dumb choices and you just have to *live* with them...it’s kind of jarring.”

Elijah chuckles and tips his head to one side. “It is. But I supposed we all have to go through it, right? Doing dumb

things, backpedaling or trying to mitigate our own disasters. I'm thirty now and I still feel like I'm forever making ridiculous choices. Spending money on the wrong things. Choosing to go here and not there." His eyes drift over to the darkened window that looks out on the water and the night sky. "But I knew the minute my dad told me he needed surgery and wanted to have it in the States that I'd drop everything and come here. That was a nonnegotiable for me, and the one thing I've done recently that I know is right."

Athena looks at him with a heart full of sympathy. She knows the feeling of being there for a parent when they need you; the months after her dad's death had been rough for all of them, but she'd taken time off of work, moved back into the White House to be close to her mom, and basically just made sure she was available, which seemed to be the most soothing thing she could do for her mom at that time.

"I'm sure both of your parents appreciate you being here," she says, bringing his eyes back to her face. He's so good looking that sometimes it's hard for Athena not to look away from him or blush, but she holds his gaze to let him know that she understands.

Athena politely refuses when Elijah tries to pour her a third glass of champagne. She loves bubbly, but she knows from experience that overdoing it this early in the evening will ruin the whole night for her, so she sips slowly and tries to savor the fresh, lightly seasoned grouper, which is in season.

While they eat, Elijah regales her with funny stories about his time in private school in England, and he listens as Athena tells him more about what it was like to live in the White House. She doesn't sugarcoat it for him, but instead tells him how lonely she sometimes felt, and how much of a quiet

bookworm she'd been, holing up in her room rather than going out with Harlow.

“To be honest,” she says, suddenly feeling the melancholy of the second glass of champagne weighing her down, “you probably have far more in common with my sister than you do with me.” She says this and then lets it sit there in the air between them as the clink of silverware against dishes makes music all around them.

“You know, I don't think that's true.” Elijah looks at Athena across the table. “You might have the idea that I did the whole London party scene, but to be perfectly honest, all I ever truly wanted was to be a musician like my dad. Not a rockstar, but a musician.”

Athena looks up from her plate. “Really?”

“Yeah. I was kind of a quiet kid, and at heart I just liked to play with my toys and run around the countryside. I never dreamed of private jets or wild nights out on the town. Not at all. And my mom really kept a lot of that from me. My dad would go on tour, and she and I stayed home together. We'd walk the dogs through the mud, cook pasta together, and read before bed. It wasn't the life of a rockstar's kid—not like you'd imagine.”

“So,” Athena says, feeling her spirits lighten just a bit. “Your idea of an exciting New Year's Eve truly is a ghost tour on a little island with a girl who spent her childhood dreaming about living in books?”

“Absolutely,” Elijah says with a big grin. He glances away from her shyly. “I've been having a great time here on Shipwreck Key. Being with my parents for the holidays has been really good, if a little weird at times. The three of us

haven't spent any extended time together in years. And hanging out with you has been awesome. I've loved it."

Athena waits for him to look back at her and when he does, she can see it in his eyes: he really is as reserved as she is. Nowhere in his gaze does she see the hungry, wolfish look of a man on the make. In the time she's spent with Elijah, not once has he put his hands on her in a suggestive way, nor has he done anything that makes her feel as if he's looking to score with a random girl while he's on the island. She relaxes as this realization comes to her, letting loose the muscles she's been unknowingly clenching all the way to her core. He really does seem to be the guy he'd appeared to be on his Instagram account: a music loving, dog walking, art appreciating, easygoing guy who volunteers to work with kids in his spare time.

"I've loved it too," she says, holding her fork in one hand as they grin at one another.

They meet Ella on the beach at nine o'clock. She's waiting there with a handful of other people—all older than Elijah and Athena—who are talking quietly, hands in pockets as they get ready to hunt ghosts and share stories about the supernatural.

"So when you think New Year's Eve, you think ghosts, huh?" Athena bumps Elijah with her shoulder as they walk across the sand in the dark.

He thinks about this before answering, and when he does, he looks down at her with an impish grin. "I just wanted to find something that might spook you out and make you jump into my arms." Without warning, he lunges at her, grabbing her by the waist playfully.

Athena jumps and gives a little squeal that makes the others on the beach turn to them with indulgent smiles.

“Sorry,” Elijah says to them in his charming British accent. He holds up both hands as he and Athena move closer to each other and laugh a little more. “We’re ready for the spirit walk.”

Ella greets them all. “Welcome.” She shines her flashlight out at the ocean. “My name is Ella, and I think we’re all here now.” She does a quick headcount as she waves a hand at each of them. “Five, six, seven, and I’m number eight.”

The group shifts around eagerly, and a man with a giant white beard clears his throat. “Are we on the hunt for the famous Flora?” he asks, running a hand down his beard as it lays against his chest.

“I would expect that we might see her.” Ella wraps a long, hand-knitted sweater around her body and holds it there tightly. She turns off her flashlight and tucks it into her pocket. “Flora is the most popular ghost on the island, and for good reason: she was a stunning woman who died in her prime after losing the love of her life. She haunts the shores of Shipwreck Key to this day, hoping to find him and bring him home with her again.”

Athena takes a step closer to Elijah in the darkness, letting her arm press lightly against his.

“But there are no hard and fast rules with the Other Side,” Ella warns them, spreading her long fingers as she talks. The rings that cover both hands catch glints of light from the moon. “If any of you have loved ones looking to make contact, then that could easily happen. I’ve certainly taken groups out on spirit walks assuming that all we’d do is talk about island folklore, only to find that a departed grandmother or a long-lost love is waiting eagerly to send a message to one of my guests.” Her eyes skim the group. Now that their eyes are all

accustomed to the dark, they can see one another more clearly.
“Shall we?”

They follow Ella down the hard-packed sand by the water. She walks backwards, arms spread wide while she tells them about Flora and her beloved sailor, John Lee. They’d crashed just offshore in 1513, and Flora had been the only survivor of the *Flor de Azucar*. Rumor has it that Flora stayed on Shipwreck Key for the rest of her life, which had ended far too soon because she’d died of a broken heart. Flor had spent those long, lonely years wandering the shores and waiting for John Lee to appear on the horizon, and she’s still waiting there now, as the story goes.

A shiver runs up Athena’s spine as she thinks about a woman walking the beach eternally, waiting for her lost love. What would that be like, to love someone so much that you were willing to spend the rest of your life mourning his loss, hoping fervently that he’d magically reappear? She’s not sure she’ll ever know what that kind of love feels like, and that actually kind of depresses her.

“Stop, please,” Ella says, waving her arms back and forth so that everyone will halt on the sand. She’s standing there next to the crashing waves, her long, silvery blonde hair blowing in the breeze. “I have someone with us—someone who the rest of you can’t see.”

On instinct, Athena slips her hand into Elijah’s.

“Who among us has lost a father?” Ella asks, closing her eyes.

Athena can feel people looking at her. It’s old news that Jack Hudson’s widow and two daughters are living there on Shipwreck Key, and even though a few members of this ghost

tour are visitors to the island, Athena can feel that they know who she is.

“I have,” she says meekly, pressing her lips together and squeezing Elijah’s hand tightly.

“And I have as well.” An older woman raises her hand.

“I have a father here who says he called his little girl ‘Bean,’” Ella says, opening her eyes and looking at Athena and then at the older woman.

A sob catches in Athena’s throat. “That’s me,” she says. Her knees start to shake. No one but her family knows that her dad had nicknamed her Bean at birth, though it’s a name her mom still regularly uses for her.

Ella’s eyes focus in on Athena in the darkness. “He wants you to know that you’re doing all the right things. He’s incredibly proud of you.”

Athena starts to cry as she nods. Elijah slips his hand from hers and wraps his arm around her, pulling her close.

“He’s showing me a small child, which is my way of understanding that we’re talking about a younger sibling, and this is a boy,” Ella says, holding up a hand to indicate a person only a few feet tall. “I can’t tell the age, all I know is that he’s younger than you. Does this make sense?”

Athena nods in the darkness. Her body is tucked under Elijah’s armpit protectively. “Are you okay with this?” he whispers in her ear. “We can get out of here if this is too weird. I promise I had no idea this would happen.”

“It’s fine,” she says, glancing up at him. In truth, it’s more than fine. She’s hungered for some kind of message from her father in the time since his death. He’d left a letter for her mother that she’d shared with the world, and that was totally

fine with Athena, but to have a message just for her is something that her heart has wanted desperately.

“He’s showing me that there’s a divide, honey. He wants you to fix that somehow.” Ella puts the palms of her hands together and presses her fingers to her lips.

“A divide?” Athena frowns. She has some idea what this might mean, but she needs to hear more.

“Yes,” Ella goes on. “Your mother has too much pain to do this on her own, and your sister doesn’t have the right temperament. He’s showing me that you will have to be the one to bridge the gap between all the members of this family, and most importantly with this young boy. He’s sorry if that puts a burden on you, darling, but he knows you can do this.”

Athena nods through her tears. “Okay,” she says. “Okay.”

Everyone in the group is either openly staring at her with curiosity or envy over her receiving a message from a loved one, or they’re surreptitiously looking away in order to give her a measure of privacy as she processes this information.

Athena’s whole body is shaking now as Elijah basically holds her upright. “Hey,” he says, gripping her more firmly so that she doesn’t fall to her knees. “Let’s go do something else.”

“I’m sorry,” Ella says, putting both hands to her cheeks. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I just relay the messages as they come.” She looks at Athena helplessly. “I don’t want you to leave the spirit walk feeling unsettled.”

“I’m fine.” Athena puts on a watery smile for Ella. It’s not Ella’s fault, nor is it Elijah’s, as he’d just wanted to do something fun and different for New Year’s. She keeps the smile on her face and reaches out to take Ella’s hand when she

offers it. “Thank you for the message,” she says, touching Ella’s fingers and then letting go. “But I do think we’re going to head home.”

Elijah thanks Ella as well and steers Athena quickly away from the water and back to where he’s parked his golf cart at The Black Pearl.

“Whoa,” he says, spreading his fingers in the air and then letting his palms fall heavily on the steering wheel as they sit there in the cart. He looks stunned, like he’s just hit a deer on a country road and watched it get up and sprint away. “Athena. I’m so sorry. This whole night just took a turn, and I didn’t see any of this coming.”

Athena leans her head on his shoulder. “That was... incredible,” she finally says, glassy-eyed. “I didn’t mean to freak out and make us leave the tour.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

She sits up and looks at him. “Of course not. Why would I be mad?”

“Um, because I took you to an event where some lady gave you a message from your dead father in front of a bunch of strangers?” he says, making it sound like a disbelieving question.

“Okay, to be fair, I’m a little shaken, but Elijah, that was *incredible*.”

“It was?”

“Yeah. I know exactly who and what she’s talking about, and I know that the message came directly from my dad.” Athena wipes her eyes, pushing away the tears that have started to fall again. “No one outside of my family knew that he called me ‘Bean,’ and honestly...I’m just overwhelmed by

the whole thing.” She stares, wide-eyed, past the plastic windshield of his golf cart and out into the darkness where they can hear the waves breaking. “Just, wow.”

Elijah pats the steering wheel again, then laughs to himself. “I was considering inviting you back to my mom’s house, but now I’m thinking it might be best to just take you home and let you unwind a bit.”

Athena nods as she stares blankly ahead. “Probably,” she says. “Yeah.”

Neither of them speak as Elijah backs out of his spot and drives her over the darkened streets with just the headlights of his cart to illuminate the way.

When they get there, they sit outside Ruby’s giant house for a minute with the cart running.

“Sorry,” Athena says, turning to Elijah. “I was a total dud this evening.”

“You weren’t.” He reaches out a hand and rests it on her knee. “I loved talking to you at dinner, and even though the psychic thing was totally unexpected, I’m happy that you got something out of it.” Elijah stays quiet for a minute, and they can hear the ocean even though they can’t see it. “This might be the wrong thing to ask, so feel free to just say no, but since it’s New Year’s Eve and we’ll both be alone at midnight, would it be totally out of line for me to kiss you now?”

Giddiness wells inside of Athena in spite of the shock she’s still feeling following Ella’s revelations. She nods and tries to squelch the giant grin that’s spreading across her face. *Elijah wants to kiss me, she thinks. And he’s asking first, like a real gentleman.*

Elijah leans across the seat and puts one hand to her cheek gently. He looks into her eyes without speaking and a soft breeze blows through the open cart, bringing with it the tangy salt air and the promise of a brand new year. Athena shivers.

After what feels like a full minute, Elijah leans forward and brushes his lips against hers. It's a soft kiss without the insistence of passion or the hurried frenzy of desire. It's pure and sweet. Athena leans into him and puts her hand to the back of his neck, pulling him closer as she deepens the kiss.

When they finally break apart, the wind kicks up another notch, blowing sand and whipping Athena's loose hair around her.

"Goodnight, Athena," Elijah says as he smiles at her. "There are only good things ahead next year. I can feel it in my bones."

Athena steps out of the cart and walks the few steps up to her front door, holding her long hair in one hand so that it doesn't blow over her face. She opens the door with a soft click and turns around to give Elijah another wave.

"Happy New Year," she whispers as he drives away. "Only good things next year."

She watches until his red taillights disappear around the bend.

Ruby



Ruby wakes up with a start. Everything is blurry and she doesn't know where she is. She blinks and swings her legs over the side of—what is this? A couch?

Her mouth is dry as she reaches for her glasses, which are resting on a coffee table next to her. It all comes back in a flash as she looks at the blanket that's draped over her legs and at the nautical decor all around her: she's inside Dexter's tiny home on Christmas Key.

The little house is quiet, and all of the curtains are closed, thank god. Ruby finds her phone and looks at the time—it's 7:02 am. When she peeks around the curtain over the front window, she sees that the sun is still low in the sky. There will be time to rush back to the B&B, maybe even enough time to stop and pick up a coffee at Mistletoe Morning Brew at the corner of Main Street on her way, and tiptoe back into the room to mess up her bed before Sunday even wakes up and realizes that she's been sleeping in the room alone all night.

Quietly, Ruby picks up her sandals and gives herself a quick pat down: dress on and fully zipped; underwear in place; hair a total disaster. Okay, nothing happened between her and Dexter, which is good...and kind of bad, she supposes, because she's entirely convinced at this point that a night with

Dexter North would be like throwing a match on dry tinder. But no, no, no—they're working together on a book! He's thirteen years her junior! She's the former First Lady! There are right and wrong ways to behave, and ohhhh, as she glances longingly up the open stairway that leads to the loft where he sleeps, she desperately wants to climb up there and behave the *wrong* way.

“Pull it together,” Ruby mutters to herself, bending over and reaching for her purse, which is wedged under the couch. She shoves her phone into her bag and carries her sandals in her hand as she tiptoes to the door.

Now that she's fully awake she remembers coming back here with Dexter after watching the fireworks on New Year's Eve, ostensibly so that he could show her his photos and his work from Ukraine. They'd put on music and opened a bottle of wine, and the next thing Ruby knew, she was feeling drowsy. And then, boom, it was morning and she'd woken up covered by a blanket and with Dexter nowhere in sight. So now she knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that he's either A) a true gentleman, or B) not interested in her. It has to be one or the other.

The front door creaks loudly and Ruby winces as she pulls it shut behind her, standing on her bare feet on his sandy porch as she tries to creep away without waking him. The humiliation of having to face Dexter with her slept-on hair and cottony morning breath when she'd basically passed out on his couch after a single glass of wine is more than she can bear.

“Oh my *god!*”

Ruby nearly jumps out of her skin when she hears a female voice. She whips around guiltily, only to find herself face-to-face with Sunday. “Oh my *god!*” she shouts in return. Both

women cover their mouths in surprise, then point an accusing finger at the other. “What are you doing here?” Ruby asks, looking at the tiny house that Sunday is sneaking out of. “Wait, that’s where Banks is staying...”

“Shhhh!” Sunday waves both hands crazily, scrunching up her entire face to quiet Ruby before she wakes the neighborhood. “Shh! Hush! No words!” she hisses, reaching out and grabbing Ruby by the wrist.

The two women—both in the dresses they wore the night before, and both barefoot but holding their shoes—tiptoe hurriedly across the sand. When they finally get past all the tiny homes and they’re alone on a stretch of sandy beach they slow to a walk.

“I have so many questions,” Sunday says, swatting Ruby on the butt with the flat sandals that are swinging from her hand.

“*You* have so many questions?” The bottom of Ruby’s dress blows wildly in the wind coming off the water. “I just ran into you coming out of the house where my Secret Service agent is staying!” She gives Sunday a totally gobsmacked face. “Did you...?”

In return, Sunday rewards her with a totally pleased-with-herself grin. “Yep,” she says. “I did. And I’m not even a tiny bit sorry.”

Ruby laughs. “Good for you!” She reaches out and pulls Sunday in for a hug. Their hair tangles together in the morning wind.

Three identical blonde women in different colored shorts and tank tops come striding up the beach, arms pumping in unison. “Good morning!” they call out, lifting their hands and

smiling at Sunday and Ruby, who let go of one another and hold their hair back so that they can see the identical triplets who own the gift shop/grocery store on Main Street. “Good morning!” they shout back, waving as the triplets walk on.

“Let’s get coffee.” Ruby takes Sunday by the hand and pulls her directly into the wind as sand blows up around them.

“Oh no you don’t, Ruby Hudson!” Sunday pulls her friend to a stop. “I dished the dirt to you, so you better dish it back! I just caught you sneaking out of Dexter North’s house with your panties in your purse, so I want details!”

Ruby laughs. “Unfortunately, my panties are exactly where they’re supposed to be, but you did catch me sneaking out of Dexter’s—that part is true.”

“And?”

“And...nothing,” Ruby admits plainly. “I went over there with him after the fireworks and we opened a bottle of wine and started to talk about the book again, but all it took me was one glass and I curled up on his couch and fell asleep.”

Sunday makes a disappointed face. “Oof.”

“Well, yes and no to that *oof*.” Ruby has already weighed the two possible outcomes and decided that the way things went the night before is probably for the best. “If we’re going to be working together closely, then maybe we shouldn’t be working together *that* closely, if you know what I mean.”

“I do know what you mean, and I violently disagree.”

This makes Ruby laugh. “I hear you. And I’m not going to lie and say that I wouldn’t have had a perfectly lovely time,” she says.

“Perfectly lovely?” Rubes, you two would have blown the roof off. A gorgeous, brilliant, sexy man in his thirties, and a worldly, beautiful, vibrant woman of fifty?” Sunday whistles. “Damn, girl. I want to see that happen.”

“Well, be that as it may,” Ruby says, arching an eyebrow, “I think keeping things professional is maybe our best bet at the moment.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sunday says, nodding as she gives Ruby a single eye roll. “Just don’t let it bother you too much that Banks and I have gone a tiny step beyond professional.” She grins happily.

“Oh, just a tiny step?” Ruby nudges her friend as they approach the end of Main Street, which is where the paved road starts. Mistletoe Morning Brew is there at the corner and they walk in, disheveled and still in the clothes they’d been wearing the evening before.

“Shoot,” Sunday says, trying and failing to tame her hair by running her fingers through it. She looks at Ruby and lowers her voice. “These people were all at dinner last night. Are we doing a walk of shame?”

“I’m not,” Ruby says with a wink. “But if it will make you feel any better, I’ll pretend to be so that we can get judged together, because that’s what friends are for.”

Sunday takes Ruby’s hand and pulls her up to the counter. “Coffee’s on me, then, sister.”

* * *

The boat ride back to Shipwreck Key is quiet and, if Ruby is honest with herself, a little tense. She’d parted ways with

Dexter and there had been no awkwardness, but a tiny piece of her wished that they'd had a reason to be awkward.

The rest of the boat's occupants are acting a bit off for reasons that aren't completely known to Ruby. Sunday and Banks are sitting at opposite ends of the boat and sneaking furtive looks at one another like two teenagers who haven't confessed their crushes yet (or like two people who've just seen each other naked for the first time and are already thinking ahead to when they might do it again), and Marigold and Cobb are sitting silently, each wearing a pair of dark sunglasses as they watch the water like something fascinating might happen there. Heather has decided to stay on Christmas Key for a few extra days, with the promise that she'll make her way back to Shipwreck on her own, but now Ruby kind of misses her, as she would have been easy to talk to amidst all this stilted silence.

"So," Bev says loudly, steering the boat with one hand. He's come back to Christmas Key to pick them up, and even though the night before at the bar must have been a busy one, he's smiling and cheerful under the bright New Year's Day sun. "Did you all have a good time last night?"

Marigold and Cobb continue to stare out at the waves, but Sunday smiles knowingly at Ruby, and Banks keeps his focus on the ground in front of him. Ruby ignores them all.

"It was wonderful," Ruby says. "The dinner, the fireworks—all of it. And the locals were just as welcoming as they were the first time we went over. I truly love it there."

"Everyone does," Bev agrees. "I've never met someone who moved to Christmas Key, hated it, and left. Not to be grim, but most people stay there until the end."

“I can see that. Why not live in paradise until you leave for your final paradise?” Ruby says, realizing as she does that it sounds a bit dark.

“Exactly. And I always love to visit,” Bev says, carrying on the conversation with Ruby even as everyone else tunes out and gets lost in their own thoughts. “But I’ve never once considered giving up my life on Shipwreck. There’s something magical about Christmas Key, to be sure, but there’s a pioneering spirit and a mystery surrounding Shipwreck that feels right to me.”

“How long have you been there?” Ruby puts her hand on top of her hat to hold it down as they bounce over a wave.

“Coming up on forty years,” Bev says, squinting at the horizon. “I moved to Shipwreck with my young bride, and we lived there happily until she got sick. I took her back to the mainland and we stayed there while she was in hospice, then I came back to my island alone.” He keeps his eyes trained ahead, not looking at Ruby as he speaks.

“Bev, I’m so sorry. I’ve known you for a while now, and I didn’t know about your wife. I feel terrible that I never asked.”

“Please, don’t you spend a minute feeling that way,” he insists, looking back at her. “Everyone who lives on Shipwreck knows that I don’t speak of her often, and they know better than to bring her up. But when I feel like talking about her, I do.” He gives a single nod.

In a way, Ruby can understand this. She’s accustomed to people speaking freely to her and asking questions about Jack, because when you make the unwritten agreement to be in the public eye, it’s somehow understood that you become community property. Your thoughts, feelings, and secrets are not automatically yours anymore, and being forced to endure

stories and questions from strangers that would feel intrusive to most people is all part of the gig.

“That makes sense,” Ruby says, swallowing her thoughts of Jack. “Talking about a spouse who has passed on is something that you don’t always feel like doing.”

“Says a lady with the experience to back up that statement,” Bev says appreciatively.

They ride in silence for several minutes with just the hum of the motor and the rush of the waves until Ruby breaks the silence.

“May I ask about Tilly?” She scoots closer on her bench seat so that he can hear her and she’s not shouting so much. They’ve both given up hoping that anyone else might join in on their conversation.

“Of course you may. You’re her boss, after all,” he says with a twitch of his thick, graying mustache. “Brave soul that you are, employing a teenage witch to sell books in your shop.”

“Oh, she’s easy, Bev,” Ruby says with a wave of her hand. “I’ve raised two teenage girls, as you know, so there isn’t much that throws me. She does have a unique fascination with books and documentaries about serial killers, but beyond that, I find Tilly pretty straightforward.”

Bev chuffs audibly, but Ruby can see grandfatherly pride on his face. “Her fascination with all things dark and bizarre is a mystery to me,” he admits. “I thought raising girls was supposed to be all sugar and spice and everything nice. At least with her mother it was.”

“That was my question,” Ruby says. “If it’s not too bold or personal. Your daughter sent Tilly to you when she was only

six?”

“She did,” he says, putting both hands on the wheel as he inhales deeply. “She was in an abusive relationship, and getting away from the guy was all she could handle at the time. Not to mention the fact that her mother had just recently passed. So she sent Tilly to me, and we leaned on each other. I was lonely, and Tilly was a little girl whose mother had been so wrapped up in her own relationship drama that she’d forgotten to be a mother. Once we found each other, we created our own little family unit. We’ve been that way since.”

“And her mother?” Ruby presses, hoping it’s not too much.

“She comes to visit a couple of times a year. By the time she found a decent man, married, and had another baby, Tilly was settled in and happy on Shipwreck. She’ll tell you otherwise when she goes on about how the kids at school never liked her, or how everyone thinks she’s weird, but that’s just a protective mechanism, you know?”

“I can see that,” Ruby says, nodding. “I’ve even called her on it before.”

“Good.” Bev chuckles. “Because I want her to be who she is, but I also want her to know that it’s okay to bend a bit. To be yourself, but to make it palatable to the rest of the world. For years and years we all strove to do that, didn’t we? To be our authentic selves, but to fit into society? It seems like recently people have stopped doing that and what’s happened? All hell has broken loose.” Bev cuts the motor as they approach Shipwreck Key.

“That’s true,” Ruby agrees mildly. She’d like to bring up a discussion she had with Tilly not long ago about the fact that Tilly prefers dating girls and thinks that her grandfather disapproves, but without the loud hum of the motor, it seems

like far too personal of a topic to broach in front of everyone else on the boat.

They slide into the slip at the dock and Bev ties up. As he does, Ruby looks around, watching as visitors and locals stroll up and down Seadog Lane. A gull is standing on a wooden piling, watching them with interest.

“Home,” Bev says, throwing a rope with his strong, muscled arms. He jumps out of the boat—or nearly jumps, which is impressive for a man his age—and has them tied up and disembarked from the vessel in under five minutes.

“Thank you again for taking us and then coming back to fetch us,” Ruby says, stopping to look Bev in the eye. The others have taken their overnight bags and are ambling away from the boat after saying their goodbyes, but Ruby lingers. “I really appreciate how easy you’ve made it to feel at home here.”

“Ah,” Bev says, brushing off her gratitude with a look of embarrassment. “It’s nothing, Mrs. Hudson.” His cheeks turn a light shade of pink and Ruby realizes that he’s not accustomed to people taking the time to be overly kind to him. After all, Bev is kind of a salty old bartender with a sharp tongue, and he’s also the elder statesman of the island—someone who seems like he’s always been there, and therefore is easy to take for granted.

“No, I mean it,” Ruby insists, putting a hand on his arm. “You’ve been friendly to me and my girls, willing to run me back and forth to Christmas Key a couple of times, and one of the things I like best about you is that you don’t gossip and you don’t judge.”

“I leave that to the womenfolk,” he says, then looks even more embarrassed. “Sorry, but you know what I mean. No

offense to the ladies, but you all seem to enjoy conjecture and speculation far more than any of the men I know.”

“No offense taken.” Ruby smiles up at him. “And you’re right, I’ve known a lot of men and a lot of women, and we do tend to spend more time taking things apart and trying to put them back together for our own entertainment than men do. So I hear you.”

“And thank you once again for your willingness to take on Tilly at the bookshop. She’s a wonderful girl with a lot of endearing attributes, but not everyone gets to see that.”

The gull that had been sitting and watching them with one eye suddenly lifts its wings and swoops away, leaving Bev and Ruby standing there with the water lapping against the wooden dock at their feet.

Ruby lets go of his arm, but before she does, she gives it a light squeeze. “You’ve done good work with her, Bev. The bond you two have is really something to observe.”

She decides to leave everything else alone for the moment and to let Tilly and Bev work out any of the things that they don’t see eye to eye on. Sometimes just hearing that you’ve done a good job raising another human is enough.

Ruby walks home with a smile on her face; there’s a whole new year ahead of her.

Marigold



For the next few days Cobb and Marigold cut each other a wide berth. He spends his days sitting on the front porch with his guitar, picking at the strings and working out a tune, and Marigold spends hers sitting at the computer in front of her bedroom window, working on a chapter that she keeps having to take apart and stitch back together. Nothing feels quite right, and it's nagging at her like an itchy tag in the back of a sweater.

“Umm,” Elijah says, standing in her doorway as he leans one shoulder on the frame. “Do you think that you two might ever speak again? Because it's getting a little uncomfortable for those of us who are doing all the the cooking and trying to play mediator.”

Marigold turns around in her chair and takes off her glasses as she looks at her son. “Sure, buddy,” she says with a forced smile. “Of course we'll talk again. And for the record, we're not *not* talking, we're just doing our own things at the moment.” Marigold refrains from telling her son how complicated things can be in life, and in particular, how complicated his father has made things by telling her that he wants her back.

“Uh huh,” Elijah says skeptically, making a face. He pushes away from the doorframe and goes back to the kitchen to make the dough for homemade calzones for dinner.

Letting someone in is always hard, Marigold types as she goes back to the document on her laptop. Letting a person know you—truly know you—is always a gamble. Being vulnerable isn't easy at any phase of your life, but it seems like it gets harder with each passing year. Take my ex-husband, for instance: at twenty I was ready to bare my soul to this man, and I did. We spent nights laying awake and talking about anything and everything, and we shared it all: hopes, fears, desires, needs. We wound ourselves around each other both literally and figuratively, and by the time our son was born, we were completely enmeshed. I stopped caring whether the modeling jobs were coming in or not, because I had these two men who needed me, fulfilled me, and kept me busy. I loved every minute of those early years, and I felt as though I was free to be my true, authentic self. But who actually knows who their true, authentic self is at twenty-two or twenty-six? Maybe some lucky people do, but not me.

Raising a child and dealing with the ups and downs of travel, fame, and life certainly did a number on us and on our marriage, but I would never tell you that the love died. I wouldn't even begin to lead you to believe that Cobb and I felt anything but fondness for one another, even in the darkest times.

And there were dark times. Cobb's hard-won sobriety is a well-known topic, so I'm not telling tales out of school here, but for the twenty years we were married, I watched him try to self-medicate and to prop himself up with chemicals of one sort or another. He used them when he was happy, sad, afraid,

or feeling celebratory. He used them so much that Elijah and I often felt that if the house was on fire, he'd save his drugs first.

Is that a kind thing to say? No. Is it truthful? Well...I don't know. You'd have to ask Cobb. But that's how it felt, and therefore, that's how I experienced a big portion of our marriage. He tried and failed at counseling and rehab a number of times (and again, this is well-known, so I think Cobb would be fine with me sharing this information) but ultimately, the one thing that pushed him to be successful at it was my leaving.

If that seems counterintuitive—leaving to saving someone—then that's okay. I'd tried everything at that point, and I'd done absolutely everything I could think of. I'd staged interventions. I'd gone with him to therapists. I was encouraging. I kept all alcohol out of the house. I traveled with him everywhere he went—but still, he found ways to get high. People poured him alcohol when I wasn't looking or invited him to share their drugs. It was simply not working, no matter how hard I tried to save him myself. I didn't have the tools to do it on my own.

So, as many women do and for many different reasons, as we entered our forties, I left. Our son was over twenty at that point, and I felt I'd preserved the family unit through so many highs and lows, just to keep us all going. But at what point is a woman owed her own chance at survival? Happiness? Peace? And at what point does staying no longer equate to love, but become simply enabling? So I left. I told Cobb that I'd always love him and that I'd always be here if he truly needed me, but that he needed to find his "reason" alone. Because a person does, right? A person has to have their own reason for living, for striving, for getting up each morning and deciding to fight for another day.

Marigold stops typing here as she feels the winter air come in off the ocean. The book she started writing blindly and for her own personal catharsis is coming along, and even if she does absolutely nothing with it, the writing itself is healing. It's like a meditation of sorts. The remembering, the thinking, the ruminating—it all helps her as she works through her feelings about her life.

On her desk, her phone lights up with notifications from Instagram. She'd posted a bunch of shots of Christmas Key while they were there, including a shot of herself at the pool, a selfie she took where she's in a bikini top and sunglasses on New Year's morning, drinking a cup of coffee in solitude. The comments, as usual, range from complimentary ones about her looks, her good luck to be living in such a gorgeous part of the world, and love for her ruffly flowered bikini top, to the blatantly rude, where people ask her what the hell she's thinking taking selfies at her age, or what kind of woman is so desperate for attention that she would post a photo where her cleavage is visible. (These particular comments coming mostly from men who undoubtedly seek out plenty of photos on their own time where cleavage is visible. They hypocrisy of it astounds her.)

Marigold takes even breaths as she skims the comments, letting them roll in and out of her head without giving them much credence. Good or bad, she simply acknowledges them and moves on, then sets the phone down and folds her hands in her lap. She casts her eyes out the window as she thinks of how these interactions with strangers online fuel her desire to keep writing. Because they do—they make her want to speak up even more—and she doubles down on her resolve to keep writing, and in the next chapter to address her thoughts about the way people love to comment on her looks as if they are her

only value, and, more importantly, the way they feel free to do so.

“Mum?” Elijah calls out, his voice semi-urgent but not panicked. Marigold closes her laptop and stands, picking up her phone as she does and sliding it into the back pocket of her cargo pants. “Mum, where are you?” he shouts again, sounding more urgent.

Marigold leaves the solitude of her bedroom behind as she walks barefoot down the wooden floors of her hallway. “What’s up, buddy?” The front room has been completely denuded of Christmas decor. The tree is gone, the decorations packed away for another year. “Everything okay?”

The front door is open, and Marigold steps around the couch, frowning to make out what she thinks she’s seeing there. It’s a lump, a figure on the porch.

“Elijah?” she says, puzzled. And then, with rising panic, “Cobb?”

Marigold falls to her knees in the open doorway as she realizes that what she’s seeing there outside her beautiful, cozy English countryside cabin at the beach is the most horrible thing she could have imagined: Cobb, lying on his back on the wooden porch, one hand over his heart, his eyes closed and his face gray. Next to him, his guitar has fallen to the deck, a new crack visible across the body that echoes the crack spreading through Marigold’s heart.

Elijah looks up at her with eyes full of worry as he gets his dad in position so that he can do CPR. “Mum,” he says, instructing her calmly with his even tone. “You have to call for help. Call now.”

* * *

Tallahassee Memorial is a hospital like any other, in Marigold's mind. It's quiet, brightly lit, and finds her, once more, at Cobb's side, waiting and worrying.

"How is he?" his sister Kerry asks over the phone. She sounds tired and strained.

Marigold puts a hand over her eyes and massages her temples as she holds her phone to one ear. "I don't know," she says, and she doesn't. The doctors are telling her that he made it through the emergency surgery to fix a blockage, but looking at Cobb as he lies prone in yet another hospital bed is doing a number on Marigold. "He's been sleeping most of the time."

"Should I come down tonight?" Kerry offers, though Marigold knows that she doesn't want to—not because she isn't worried about her brother, but because she doesn't want it to be that serious.

"I think...no," Marigold decides. "I'm going to sit by his side all night, and I'll send Elijah back to our hotel for some rest. We'll touch bases again tomorrow morning, okay?"

Kerry is crying softly on the other end of the line. "You're sure?"

Marigold nods, but then remembers that Kerry can't see her. "Yes. I'm sure. How about if you think about coming to Shipwreck Key when I get him back there? At least then you'll be somewhere fun while you visit him. Seeing him here with tubes and wires..." She shudders as she thinks of Cobb as he is right now. "Shipwreck Key is way more fun than Tallahassee anyway."

Kerry manages a laugh. “I can imagine. And okay, I’ll take you at your word, Goldie.” She sniffles. “But if anything changes—anything at all—I’m on the first flight, got it?”

Marigold swipes at a tear that’s escaped her own eyes. “Got it.”

Over the next forty-eight hours Marigold manages to get about seven hours of sleep, she drinks eighteen cups of coffee, and Cobb’s condition improves in fits and starts.

“He’s awake,” Elijah says, stirring her from her partially upright position near a window that overlooks a busy street lined with palm trees. Marigold has been dreaming about an Irish Setter that they’d had when Elijah was a small boy, and about the way the dog—Heathcliff—would run ahead of them on their walks through the countryside, traipsing through the high grass and chasing rabbits. “He’s asking for you.”

Marigold stands and stretches, throwing her cold cup of coffee in the trash can. “Let me use the restroom and I’ll be right there,” she says, snaking her arms around her son’s neck and hugging him tightly.

After brushing her teeth quickly, wiping her face with a wet paper towel, and combing her hair, Marigold enters Cobb’s room. He’s awake and looking at the television on the wall. The screen is black and reflects the sterile hospital scene like a dark mirror.

“Hey,” Cobb says in a raspy voice. “I’ve got to stop testing you like this.”

“Testing me?” Marigold feels weepy with exhaustion as she sinks into the chair next to his bed and reaches for his hand. The overload of emotions that happens each time Cobb is in the hospital makes her feel frayed and worn; when she

looks at her own reflection, she sees a woman who is light years older than Marigold actually is.

Cobb puts out a weak hand, which she takes. “You told me all those years ago that you’d always be there for me, and now I keep testing that promise.” He winces. “Unintentionally, of course.”

“You know I keep my promises.” Marigold scans his face. His color is gone, and his eyes look flat. Something isn’t right. “Cobb?” she says, shaking his hand, which she’s still holding. “Hey, Cobb?”

As she watches him, a machine behind him starts to beep insistently. It’s high-pitched and urgent. Marigold stands, trying to make sense of the message that’s flashing on the screen as the lines that show his vital signs jump, dive, and peak perilously.

Suddenly, the door opens and the room floods with medical personnel in scrubs. Everyone looks efficient, but panicked. “Excuse me, ma’am,” a nurse says, nearly shoving her aside. Marigold watches, helpless, as nurses and doctors surround Cobb’s bed, each person taking the lead on something different as they work in tandem to figure out what’s going on.

“What’s happening?” Marigold asks, looking from face to face and hoping that someone will tell her. “Is he okay? What’s wrong?”

Finally, a male nurse in a pair of jade green scrubs that matches his eyes turns to her, taking her by the elbow and steering her out of the room with gentle force.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” the nurse says, holding her gaze. “Your husband is in cardiac arrest, and we need the room clear.

This is serious.”

“No,” Marigold says, shaking her head as the nurse turns abruptly and goes back into Cobb’s room. “No,” she says again, shaking her head as she collapses into the nearest chair. “He’s not my husband,” she adds weakly.

These are the things you say and think when you’re in shock, when you can’t even help yourself.

“He’s my ex-husband,” she whispers to no one, folding forward in the chair and putting her head into her hands.

Marigold



“I can’t believe you’re back to square one.” Sunday shakes her head and echoes the sentiment of the rest of the women at the book club meeting a week and a half later.

“I can’t believe it either.” Marigold is deeply exhausted from spending so many days at Cobb’s bedside in Tallahassee, but showing up here for book club was a nonnegotiable for her, even though Elijah would have preferred to see her stay in bed with a bowl of soup and a movie on her iPad so that she could start to recover from the long, hard days and nights they’d put in at the hospital.

“So what happens next?” Ruby asks as she walks around the circle, holding open a pizza box to offer each woman a slice. Sunday takes one with olives and mushrooms, Molly takes one with sausage and onions, and Marigold passes on the pizza with a distracted wave of her hand.

“His sister is there right now to give me a break,” Marigold says on an exhale. She’s wearing a lemon yellow cable knit sweater and a pair of oversized denim overalls. Her hair is in a messy bun, and she actually has no idea which book they’ve been pretending to read for the past two weeks. She’s been completely removed from everything in her normal life, and just being here amongst her friends feels refreshingly

normal and good. “Kerry—that’s Cobb’s sister—showed up and told me I should come back here and sleep in my own bed for a few nights, so here I am. She’s going to come back here with him once he’s released and help me to get him settled. Again.”

“Well,” Molly says, taking a bite from the end of her slice of pizza and then dabbing at her chin with a paper napkin. “You did say at the last meeting that you wanted him out of your house. So mission accomplished.”

“But not like this!” Marigold sits upright and puts her hands to the sides of her head. “I thought he’d get better and hop a flight back to London, leaving me to go back to my gardening and writing in peace. But now I truly am back to square one. I don’t know how I’m going to nurse him back to health while I keep writing, because frankly, that’s the only thing keeping me sane right now. Writing, and being around all of you.”

“Marigold,” Ruby says, blowing out a long breath. She watches her friend’s face with concern. “I think you’re burning the candle at both ends here. And if it’s okay for me to say so, I also think that you’re taking on a lot of responsibility when it comes to Cobb’s recovery. Have you considered getting him professional care instead, or maybe someone to help out in addition to your care?”

Marigold frowns and puts her elbows on her knees as she leans forward. “Like bringing a nurse to the island?”

Ruby tips her head from side to side. “Well...yeah. Sure. That could be one option. Or he might be more comfortable in a rehabilitation facility, where they can watch over him closely and make sure he’s getting the medication and the rest that he needs.”

“I can do those things on my own,” Marigold says stubbornly. “And Elijah will stay on to help me. He’s been working on an album of his own in London, and he has the luxury of putting that aside for the moment and sticking around here if I need him. Between the two of us, I think we can make this work.”

“Marigold. Honey.” Heather leans all the way forward in her chair so that she can reach across the small circle and put a hand on Marigold’s knee. She’d stayed on Christmas Key for several days after New Year’s and come back from the trip completely in love and talking about marrying one of the men from The Seven Society, but the women have pushed that turn of events aside for now to focus on Marigold’s needs. “It’s completely honorable that you want to take care of Cobb like this, but Ruby is right: it’s a lot for one person.”

Marigold can feel herself getting defensive. “So you think I should just let him live with strangers? Pay some random people to take care of him? What if someone violates the privacy policy and posts photos of him when he’s recovering? You can’t trust everybody, you know, and I don’t—”

“Hey,” Heather says, cutting her off gently as she shakes her head. “That’s not what I meant.” She looks around at the group. “I can’t speak for everybody else, but I can speak for myself when I say that I’m willing to pitch in and help you make this happen. If you want him here, then you’ve got an extra set of hands.”

Marigold inhales sharply; this is not what she expected.

“Count me in,” Sunday says, raising a hand. “I’m not a medical professional, but I’m a decent cook, and I don’t mind sitting next to a sleeping patient or fluffing a pillow here and there.”

“I’m here at the bookstore most of the day, but you know I can always pitch in,” Ruby assures her. “All you have to do is say the word, and I will make it happen.”

“I’ll keep the coffee supply coming your way,” Molly promises. “I’m no good at sitting around and entertaining people with my sparkling wit, but I’m strong as an ox,” she says, flexing a bicep under her flannel shirt as proof. “And I’m happy to come over and help you clean, move your man from room to room, or do anything else you might need help doing.”

Marigold’s surprise turns to tears of joy as she cries openly. “You’re incredible friends,” she says, wiping her face with the pads of her fingers. “Seriously. I could never ask you to do all of this.”

“You aren’t asking,” Molly reminds her. “We’re all offering.”

“Thank you,” Marigold says, holding out her hands so that she can clutch each of the other women’s hands in turn. “Thank you so much.”

“Now that we have that settled,” Molly says, “let’s talk about this damn book we were supposed to read. Who chose a romance novel where the heroine has a spicy fling with a Secret Service agent?”

Everyone turns to look at Sunday, whose face goes up in flames as she puts a hand to her heart and laughs. “Guilty!” she says, fanning herself with the paperback book she’s been holding in her lap. “But ladies, I *had* to!” she adds. “I wanted to know if this author could make the fantasy seem as good as the reality. Because, girls, the reality *is* a fantasy.” She wiggles both eyebrows.

“Reality is fantasy?” Molly shakes her head as she looks at Sunday skeptically. “Famous last words,” she says, pursing her lips. “Famous last words, Sunday Bond.”

* * *

It takes another week to get Cobb transferred back to Shipwreck Key. Once Marigold and Kerry have him comfortable again, he starts his recovery from scratch, convalescing in bed and looking out the window at the sunny winter sky with a wistfulness that tugs at Marigold’s heart.

“I think we overdid it by going to Christmas Key,” Marigold says to him the day after his sister has flown back home. “This is all my fault.”

She’s bending over and scooping discarded t-shirts and bits of paper from the floor near his bed as she talks. There’s something endearingly boyish about a man when he’s sick, and Marigold is not immune to the sadness in her ex-husband’s eyes as he lays there with a book open on his chest, not bothering to read it. “Aw, Cobby,” she says. “You look like a kid who came down with the measles at the beginning of summer break.”

He turns his head slightly and gives her a dry-lipped smile. He’s looked paler and more wan since coming back this time, and she knows that being life-flighted to Tallahassee and undergoing yet another surgery has taken something out of him that will be hard to replace.

“I feel worse than that,” Cobb says. “I feel like I might as well give up on everything and just never get up and walk down the beach again. What if I collapse? What if no one is

there? What if I go back to the U.K. and I'm making myself a cup of tea and it just ends? And no one finds me for days?"

Marigold sits on the side of his bed with the papers she's picked up still clasped in her hands. She straightens them and sets the papers on the bedside table. "I can see where all those things would worry you," she says carefully, brushing her hair back from her face. It's nearly lunch time, and she's just barely showered because she woke up early to write while Elijah did the dishes from the night before. He's gone into town now to have coffee at The Scuttlebutt with Athena, leaving Marigold and Cobb alone. "But I think you have to go forward with blind faith, as we all do, and get up every day like you've got purpose and intention."

"I don't even know what my purpose or intentions are anymore, Goldie." Cobb lets his hands flap and land on the paperback book that's on his chest with a loud slap. "I feel like I have more music in me, but I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to get up and just play the guitar. Maybe I should be using what little energy I have for something else."

This makes Marigold angry. She stands and reaches over to grab the corner of his duvet, flinging it back. The paperback book goes flying, but Marigold ignores this. "Get up," she says, pointing at the floor. "Stand up right now, Nigel Cobb Hartley."

"When you say my full name I know I'm in trouble," he says, staring at her with a challenge in his eyes. "But why would I get up and risk falling down again?"

"Why does anyone risk getting up and falling down again?" she counters, still pointing at the floor.

Rather than standing up, Cobb folds his arms across his chest and glares at her. "I tried getting up already on this trip,

Gold, but you shot me down.”

Marigold can feel the heat rise from her core, travel across her chest, and spread up to her face. A hyperawareness floods through her limbs, like a tingling that won't stop.

“Are you blaming me for this backslide?” she asks incredulously, the finger that had been pointing at the floor dropping to her side. “Is that really what you're doing here? Guilting me into feeling like I had something to do with you needing another surgery? Because that would be extremely manipulative, Cobb. I do think taking you to Christmas Key might have been too much, but I meant the actual physical journey, not me being unprepared to hear that you want to get back together.”

It's not like him at all, but his eyes fill with tears as he watches her. “I'm not trying to dump guilt on you,” he says, shaking his head. “I'm being honest, like you were with me when you finally left. You told me you couldn't take it anymore, and I understood that. I never once blamed you. But now I'm being honest with you, Goldie. I've always loved you—even the day you packed your things and left. Everything I did, I did for you. I mean, I got sober for myself too, obviously, but I also did it to prove to you that I was ready to be the best version of me that I could. I stuck with it through some hard, lonely times because I wanted to continue being the kind of man you could believe in. I've put in the work, Marigold, and all I'm asking you to do is see it. See it, acknowledge it, and tell me once and for all if you could love me again.”

Marigold is completely taken aback. In fact, she stumbles a little and catches herself against the windowsill. She'd known that her leaving was the impetus for Cobb's finally getting

sober, but she hadn't known that his success had hinged largely on becoming someone *for her*. That he'd done it so she would see how sincere he was and how much he wanted to make things work between them.

"Cobb," she says, her body going limp as she sits on the bed next to him again. She stares at him and takes his hands in hers, holding them gently. "Oh, Cobb."

There are no more words to say between them, no battles to be fought or won, no past hurts that need to be dissected or parsed for meaning. They simply sit there, together.

For Marigold, it takes her back to the morning of Elijah's birth, when she was the one lying in a bed, and Cobb had been the one next to her, holding her hands.

"He's beautiful," Cobb had said with tears in his eyes. He was wearing a pair of tattered jeans and some beat-up motorcycle boots. His shirt was unbuttoned to mid-chest, and his hair looked slept on. "You did it, Gold," he said, bringing her hands to his lips. "Elijah James Hartley. He's going to be a star."

Marigold's eyes had drifted to the windows that looked onto a brick courtyard in Manhattan. She'd just given birth to her son, and she felt exhausted and elated. She nodded and glanced back at Cobb. "I don't want him to be a star," she'd said. "I just want him to be happy and whole. I never want him to feel like he has to go searching for something to make himself feel complete," she said pointedly. Her eyes caught fire as she remembered going into labor the day before and being rushed to the hospital alone.

"I'm sorry, Goldie." Cobb leaned his head on her chest. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here."

Marigold had turned her face away from him again, refusing to yield so easily to the man who she'd counted on to be there at her side—the man who had, once again, gotten lost in his own needs and forsaken hers. And their son's. This new addition—this baby boy—made it all so much less forgivable. Marigold sighed.

“We needed you, Cobb,” she said, trying not to cry or let the hitch that she felt in her throat give away her fear and anger. She needed to close herself off from that point on and become the kind of woman who could sustain herself and not rely on others for anything. She needed to be the firm backbone that Elijah could count on, the parent who would never let him down. “We needed you, and no one could find you.”

Marigold needn't have worried; she didn't cry, but Cobb started to. His tears dampened the front of her hospital gown as she tried to ignore the fact that he reeked of marijuana and whiskey and cigars.

“I was in the studio,” he croaked through his tears. “I was working on a song for you. And one for Elijah. They'll be on the next album. And then I'll be home with you. I drank, Goldie. I had a drink after we laid down the tracks, and then I had a couple more and I passed out. You don't know how sorry I am. I missed my son's birth, and I'll never forgive myself. I understand if you never forgive me, either.” He wept openly, his head still on her chest.

She wanted to push him away in anger. She wanted to make him understand how she felt about his absence and his choices, but instead she put her long fingers into his unkempt hair and rubbed his scalp, slowly, soothingly. “Shh,” Marigold said, training her eyes on the gray afternoon outside, her

fingers working rhythmically through her husband's hair. "Shhhh," she whispered as a single leaf fell from a tree against the October sky.

"I can't make any of it up to you," Cobb says to her now in the bedroom on Shipwreck Key, tapping his thumbs against her hands as he holds them. "But I can tell you that the man I am now and the man I was then are not the same. And that I'm sorry for all of it."

The vision of that October sky thirty years prior fades from Marigold's view and she refocuses on the room they're in. It's a beautiful guest room in her beloved cottage near the beach. The walls are hung with framed watercolors and small pieces of art that she's gathered over the years. On the floor is a hand-knotted rug that she purchased in India; across the foot of the bed is a soft, expensive wool blanket bought in Iceland. This is her home. This place holds everything that's happened to her so far: family photos, souvenirs from her travels, every item that brings her comfort or joy. This is her life. This is her chance to do what she wants to do going forward, and to be who she wants to be.

She looks at Cobb. "I want you to get better," she says, her voice firm and direct. "I *need* you to get better. So does Elijah. So let's make that happen, okay?"

A door shutters behind Cobb's eyes as he takes in her words. She hasn't said no and she hasn't said that she doesn't love him, but she certainly hasn't said that she wants to be with him. For now, all she's promised is that she'll be by his side as he gets back on his feet.

Marigold knows it's not what he wants to hear—or at least not *all* that he wants to hear—but she can only do what she can do. She can promise him that she'll be here. She can

provide him a safe, peaceful place to recover. She can offer him the friendship that she's always held in her heart for him. As for the future...that's still unwritten. For Marigold, each day is its own fresh start; another chance for them to grow and learn. She just can't make him any promises—not yet.

And for the time being, that's going to have to be enough.

Cobb



It's slow going, the road to recovery, and in fact it's so gradual that Cobb doesn't even realize it's happening until one day he's sitting on the front porch with his notebook on one knee, a pencil behind his ear, and his guitar resting in his lap. He strums the chords and listens to the waves like they're responding to him. The early February air still holds a hint of winter—but a balmy, tropical winter without the heavy humidity of summer.

“Hey, Dad,” Elijah says, pulling up in the golf cart and parking in front of Marigold's bungalow. He's already packed and has a flight booked to head back home to London, because Marigold thinks it's best for him to get back to his regularly scheduled life rather than hanging around with his parents on a far-flung island much longer. “How are you feeling?”

Cobb stops strumming and smiles at his grown son. “Not bad, buddy. I think I'm truly on the mend, thanks to your cooking and to your mom letting me stay here for as long as she has. I feel my strength slowly coming back.”

Elijah sits on the top step of the porch and pulls one knee up, resting his elbow on it. “You think she's tired of us yet?”

“Not of you,” Cobb says with a half-smile. “A mother's heart is full when her kids are around. But an ex-husband...”

maybe that doesn't bring quite so much joy." He laughs at his own joke and pulls the pencil from behind his ear so that he can scribble something in his notebook. "How's Athena?" Cobb looks up at Elijah as he writes something down.

It takes Elijah a moment to answer, and he smiles to himself like he has a private joke but isn't going to share it. "She's good, Dad. Great girl."

"Mmmm," Cobb says, trying to sound noncommittal. "Well, from my own personal experience, I can tell you that great girls don't come along every day."

"I can confirm that." Elijah nods. "I've known a fair amount of women, and getting the perfect combination of beauty and brains and personality in a girl who also doesn't find you at least mildly repulsive is more challenging than you'd think."

Cobb laughs appreciatively at his son's display of self-deprecating humor.

"So, can I ask what's going on there, or is that too Dad-like to inquire about your intentions with this girl?" Cobb lets his fingers brush against the guitar strings softly as the lyrics he's been toying with dance through his head.

"You can ask, but I'm not sure I have an answer. So far I think we've decided on being friends, which suits us both. Living as far apart as we do makes it hard to commit to anything more. And frankly, I think Athena's coming off of some sort of break-up or bad situation, because she's a bit guarded with me." He shrugs. "I do get that. People can hurt you and leave scars, and sometimes it takes a while to get over it."

“True,” Cobb agrees mildly. “And maybe she’ll visit you in London at some point.”

“I’ve invited her,” Elijah says. “As soon as she sorts through the stuff with her dad, and starts to feel like putting herself out there again romantically, I’d be open to it.”

“She still hung up on the stuff that crystal ball lady said on New Year’s Eve?” Cobb doesn’t put a ton of credence in the supernatural, but he also can’t write it off entirely. In his mind, just because you can’t see things doesn’t mean that they don’t exist, but it’s never happened to him, so he’s not sure whether it’s real.

“I think she took it to heart,” Elijah admits, pushing himself up and standing. “And that’s another big part of her healing, figuring out what to do about her half-brother.”

Elijah told his parents about their encounter with Ella on the beach, along with her premonitions and feelings about Athena’s family. Surely a girl with so much on her plate emotionally is someone who needs to work through her stuff before getting into any type of relationship, so Cobb has to admit that he’s glad his son isn’t rushing into anything.

“What are you working on?” Elijah asks his dad. He has the face and body of a grown man, but sometimes his mannerisms still remind Cobb of his little boy, and it makes him smile.

“I’ve had some songs in my head since I got here, and they won’t leave me alone until I get them written down.” Cobb puts his fingers on the frets and then starts to strum. “It’s all knocking around in my brain, and I need to get it worked out.”

“Number one hits, are they?” Elijah’s eyes dance. He’s always been Cobb’s biggest fan, and Cobb knows that his son

has gotten into music purely because of him. And he's a damn fine guitarist, his kid. Cobb is incredibly proud of Elijah and his work, and while the boy could have become anything he wanted to—a chef, a writer, a session musician who works with other artists and just makes a steady income doing something he enjoys—he loves watching Elijah live the life of an artist, sharing a flat in London with a couple of other guys, writing his own music, and working odd jobs as he fits in studio time and tries to make something of himself on his own talent.

“I'm not sure if we're talking Grammys and millions of dollars here,” Cobb admits, “but I'm having fun. It's been a long time since I really felt the music in my soul and couldn't rest until I got it out.”

“That's awesome, Dad.” Elijah says. “I'll let you get on with it while I check on Mum, and then I'll try to whip something up for dinner to feed you two before I leave you to your own devices.” It's a running joke between them that Marigold and Cobb would subsist entirely on toast and jam and coffee without Elijah there to prepare full gourmet meals, and while Marigold is a solid cook in her own right, she doesn't relish the process like Elijah does. And now that they're in their fifties, she and Cobb both prefer to keep things simple and focus their energies on other things. So they *will* miss him; they'll miss his company, and they'll definitely miss his cooking.

“We won't starve, buddy,” Cobb says, turning his head to watch as Elijah walks through the open doorway and into the house. He shakes his head, charmed as always by this little family that he and Marigold created together.

And things between him and Marigold have been reasonably good, he thinks. Her book club friends have been in and out, keeping her company as she tends to him. And he's grown to love Ruby and Sunday in particular. He appreciates Ruby's levelheaded, practical kindness; in all ways except the literal way, she seems to still be a First Lady. And Sunday Bond—what a minx that one is! He's heard all the gossip coming from the kitchen as the women sit in there and talk about her and the Secret Service agent, and he's enjoyed teasing her whenever she comes in to have a cup of tea with him in the front room. She's the only one he's talked to about the songs he's writing, and she's been sworn to secrecy, which is fun. Cobb loves having the women come and go, each bringing her own brand of humor and care into the house, and leaving behind the scents of their perfume and the ringing of their laughter.

But Sunday—she gets him. One day while they sipped their respective cups of cinnamon-orange tea, she'd shot him a knowing look. "You still love her, don't you?"

Cobb had finished swallowing his tea before answering. "She's the light of my life. I mean, look at her: she's gorgeous, her heart is as big as the moon, and she took in an old codger like me in my time of need. There's no woman on the planet like Marigold Pim."

"Indeed," Sunday said then, smirking at him over the edge of her mug. "They broke the mold after they made her."

"It's wrong of me to ask, Sunday, but do you think there's any chance she'd ever take me back?" he'd ventured, looking out the window instead of at Sunday.

She took a beat to think it through before answering. "I've seen the way you look at her, and I think she'd be a fool not to.

I was married for thirty years, and not once did I catch my husband gazing at me with love and adoration the way you do to her—and you two have been divorced for a decade. However, in my situation, there *was* the added factor of my husband being attracted to men,” she said with a smirk, “but still.” Sunday held her mug of tea with both hands as she assessed him coolly. “She can have her complaints about the way your marriage went, and those are valid feelings, for sure. But now that I’m a woman of a certain age, I know how rare it is to find someone who loves you wholly. And I believe that you are a man who has loved Marigold—all of her, entirely—since the day you said ‘I do.’”

“I have,” Cobb said without hesitation. “I have. And if I could go back and undo any of the things I’ve done wrong, I would. In a heartbeat. Hurting her or Elijah in any way would go at the top of my list of regrets. But all I can do is get things right going forward.”

“I hear you,” Sunday said. “And I think that with time, Marigold will hear you, too.” At that point, Sunday had set her mug down on the coffee table and stood up, wiping her hands on the front of her jeans. “But now, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll bring the laundry in that she’s hung in the garden. I know she can do all these things with her eyes closed, but it feels good for us to pitch in and find ways to be useful. You know how women are.” Sunday winked at him and let a hand rest on his shoulder as she stopped next to him.

“I am well acquainted with the intricacies of women,” Cobb agreed, looking up at her. “But I have to say, the novelty of having the First and Second Ladies swing by to bring in my laundry or fix me a cup of tea never wears off.”

This made Sunday laugh uproariously. “It keeps us humble,” she’d said, patting his shoulder and walking through the house and out into the garden.

But today Marigold and Heather are working together in the kitchen while Elijah cooks. They’re talking through something that Marigold wants to do on her Instagram page—at least as far as he can tell. Cobb admires Marigold deeply for what she’s doing at the moment; he’s always admired her, but seeing her roll up her sleeves and resist being pigeonholed based on her age is beautiful to watch. He doesn’t care if no one ever hires her to model again—he never cared whether or not she was a famous model in the first place, though he has always admired her beauty—but what he doesn’t like is the way that people see fit to tear her down over her looks. That’s not right.

From the kitchen comes Heather’s laughter as she and Marigold kick around ideas. He can hear the lilt of their voices, but not their words, which is okay. It makes working on his music easier. With his guitar in hand again, Cobb goes back to his strumming, singing the words he’s working on quietly to himself as the women chatter excitedly in the kitchen.

Marigold



With Heather’s help, Marigold has put together a live Q&A on Instagram for the Saturday before Valentine’s Day. She’s been writing like a madwoman and posting some of the bits and pieces of her thoughts and ideas from her book on Instagram as she goes, drumming up interest and getting feedback from her followers. But this live session is meant to be a symposium of sorts to talk about aging gracefully in a society obsessed with the way women look, and Marigold is hoping that it will afford other ladies the opportunity to be heard and to share their ideas about how to combat the negativity.

“Is this a good spot?” Ruby asks, pointing to where the chair is set up in the corner of the bookstore. Rather than closing the shop, she’s made up invitations for other women to take part in the discussion by joining them in person, and Harlow, their resident marketing whiz, has advertised the event and will help to streamline the questions coming in on Instagram with the ones that the women in the shop will hopefully be asking.

“I think the light here is good.” Harlow gives her mom a thumbs up as she points Marigold’s phone camera that direction to see how it looks. She’s got the phone attached to a tripod, and a ring light set up just out of the camera’s view to do away with any shadows that might be unflattering. Harlow

walks over and moves the chair about one inch to the left, fluffing the pillow that's tucked into one corner of the wicker seat.

Marigold is touching up her makeup at the front counter, using a handheld mirror to check her lipstick nervously. "Do you think this is actually a good idea?" she whispers to Heather and Athena, who are huddled nearby. "What if the trolls come out from under their rocks and start saying rude things while we're live? What if I make an ass of myself?"

"They might," Athena says truthfully. "And you might. But that's always a possibility, right?"

"If they show up, then you just ignore them," Heather says, folding her arms across her chest. "You've been preparing for this, and you have your pages, right?" She turns around, scanning the front counter.

"Yeah, I have them." Marigold nods at the folder next to her. She's printed out a section of her book that she'd like to share, and she's hoping that the flow of the event allows her to read the chapter she's written about the cloak of invisibility that starts to descend some time around the age of forty for a woman. "I'm just really nervous." She blows out a breath and shakes her hands out before smiling at Heather and Athena. "Thanks for helping me with this, ladies."

"Of course," Heather says, handing her the folder. "You should go set up, and we'll start seating people as they come in."

In all, forty-two women stream into the bookstore and fill the seats that Ruby has set up facing Marigold's chair by the window. Harlow has advertised the event far and wide, so it's no surprise that the group of women includes a few day-trippers who've come to the island specifically for this talk.

“Welcome,” Ruby says, smiling at everyone as they enter. A few of the women look a little starstruck in the presence of Ruby, Sunday, and Marigold, who is sitting in the chair with her notes in her lap. She looks nervous, but also excited as she waves and smiles at the women taking their seats.

“It’s time,” Harlow says from behind the camera that’s set up on the tripod. Marigold smiles at her.

“Hi, everyone,” Marigold says to the group gathered in the bookshop. The women smile back and some say hello. Addressing the camera, Marigold smiles. “And hello to all of you,” she says with a wave. “I’m glad you could join us for this live session from Shipwreck Key. We have about fifty women gathered here at Marooned With a Book, our island’s bookstore, and I’m really looking forward to talking to you all about something that I think is incredibly important for us as women.” She pauses, looking around the room. “I want to talk about what it means to be a woman after the age of forty. I want to hear what you think, and to share our experiences as we talk about the way society views us, how that colors our feelings about ourselves, and how we can ultimately take some of the negative things about middle age and turn them into positives.”

Unbidden, the entire room breaks into applause—a couple of women even cheer out loud. This makes Marigold smile.

“Thank you,” she says. Her eyes shine as she scans the room and takes in every gorgeous and hard-earned wrinkle and curve of these women who’ve lived full and interesting lives. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who feels like this is an important issue. Just out of curiosity, how many of you feel like there’s a certain point in our lives when we’re simply written off as women? I’m not talking about as contributing

members of society, because that's a whole other discussion about how we treat and value our elders, but I mean written off as a feminine, sexy, vibrant female." Hands go up, some quickly and others slowly, until every woman in the room is holding her hand in the air.

"Wow." Marigold looks around at them. "So you feel it too? Can I hear some of your thoughts?"

Ruby stands, clearly willing to break the ice and go first. "I'm about to turn fifty," she says, turning to look around at the other women. "And I think the general consensus is that we're supposed to give birth and then hand over the baton of femininity to our daughters." Ruby looks at Athena and Harlow with pride and love. "And while I understand that they're the next generation and that they have youth and vitality to offer, I disagree with the notion that we should just crumble and turn to dust as we age."

Again, applause breaks out around the room.

"Everyone," Marigold says with a proud smile, "Ruby Hudson, our former First Lady."

Harlow motions to Marigold that she's got questions coming in from the people watching on Instagram, and Marigold waits for her to choose one.

"Astrid from Los Angeles has a question," Harlow says, sounding professional and very much like they're running a real show or a podcast. "She'd like to know what you think about the pressure to give in and get plastic surgery or use fillers. Is that something you have done, or would do? And do you think it's wrong that women feel like they need to do these things in order to stay beautiful and relevant?"

Marigold crosses her legs and leans back in the chair, putting one elbow on the arm of it. She's completely in her element and her nerves are totally gone. "You know," she says, looking right into the camera, "Astrid, I think that's a fabulous question, and one that a lot of us confront at some point."

The women around the room are listening intently, and at a glance, Marigold can tell that some of them have given in to the pressure already. She doesn't judge that one bit—in her line of work, nips and tucks and tweaks are what keep a girl on the runway and in front of the camera.

"Listen," Marigold says, folding her hands together. "You are beautiful just the way you are, every single one of you. I can assure you that it's not easy to look in the mirror each day and tell yourself that you're beautiful as you watch things fold in and sag in what looks like some kind of bizarre time-lapse photography trick." The woman laugh at this, nodding in agreement. "But who decided that it's not beautiful to have lines around our eyes and mouths from decades of smiling and laughing? Who gets to tell us that our rounded hips and filled out bodies aren't luscious and beautiful? Why do we let men who don't even know us dictate our self worth based on whether their eyes graze us appreciatively, or if they ignore us completely?" She sweeps a hand up and down her body to indicate her own womanly figure. "And for God's sake, why do men—and I'll be honest, because it is mostly men on my Instagram page—dissect our looks and tell us that we're 'too old' to dress a certain way, or that we need to just give up and go sit in a rocking chair until we die?"

There's more laughter from the crowd, and again, a smattering of applause. When it fades, Marigold goes on. "But seriously—and this is for Astrid and every other woman in this room or watching us live—if you decide that you want to do

anything to your appearance and you're truly doing it for *you*, then more power to you. I support a woman's right to decide how she looks as she ages. But if there's any part of you that's doing it for someone else, I beg of you to reconsider. We need to stop letting magazines, airbrushed photos, strangers, the media, and *men* tell us what we're supposed to look like."

Sunday gives a whoop from her chair and the women around her clap again. She raises her hand and stands up tentatively. "Not to segue away from what we're talking about," Sunday says, clasping her hands in front of her as she looks around at the crowd gathered there, "but many of us are at a point in our lives where we have spent the last two or three decades giving to others. We've been wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends, and there's an alarm that goes off at some point inside of us where we realize that what we really need to do is to go back to being ourselves—whoever that might actually be. We get to decide what comes next for us: hobbies, volunteering, helping to raise grandchildren, or finding love again. And I think that's a very important hallmark of being where we are in life."

"You're so right," Marigold agrees, pulling the conversation back to the camera. "We're at a point where we get to essentially have a rebirth. Let's just be honest: changing hormones, menopause, the freedom that comes from no longer having babies or small children—all of these things afford us the chance to start over. And if the way you want to start your next act is by getting a little Botox around the eyes or covering your gray hair, then by all means, you should do that. But you should *also* feel free not to do that. Because as I said when we started this discussion, you are *all beautiful*." She looks around at the women, who have gone quiet as they watch Marigold. "You are beautiful when you're crying for an aging parent."

You're beautiful in a bikini that shows off your C-section scar. You are lovely when the years you've spent in the sun with your children shows up on your arms or your chest. You are a vision when you let your hair go gray. And whether anyone looks at you with admiration or not, you are stunning and perfect—EXACTLY. AS. YOU. ARE. Never let anyone tell you otherwise.”

There is a moment of silence, and then every woman in the room stands, clapping and cheering, some with tears in their eyes.

By the time the Q&A session is over, Marigold is more convinced than ever that she's struck a nerve with women her age. These are topics that are important and worth talking about, and she floats home with her head in the clouds afterwards, ready to sit down at her computer and keep writing. She'll write for the women who came up to talk to her after the Q&A was finished, like Catherine from New Orleans, who made the trip to Shipwreck Key with two of her best girlfriends from high school. They'd recently attended a class reunion and been told by the men who'd been the popular jocks at school that it was a good thing their years in cheerleading skirts were behind them. And this from a bunch of pot-bellied men with angina and pre-diabetes just hanging onto the wisps of hair on their own heads. The nerve!

She wants to keep writing for women like Erica, who wrote in a question on Instagram about what she should do now that her husband has died. She's only fifty-nine and wants to find love again, but every message she's getting is telling her that she's too old and too far past her prime to even hope that a man will look at her. Marigold will push ahead with her own messages of acceptance and aging gracefully for women like Patty, whose ex-husband left her for a younger woman,

causing her to spiral and go in for a tummy tuck and breast augmentation that she didn't even want. It's time to speak up—for herself and for every woman she talks to—and let the world know that cellulite, crinkled décolletage, tummies that are never perfectly flat again, and a few shiny silver hairs are not the end of the world.

Marigold drives back to her cottage in her golf cart with a smile on her face and the wind blowing through her hair. Regardless of how many people try to drag her down with their unsolicited comments, she'll keep going. Keep writing. Keep talking. Keep aging proudly and gracefully in front of anyone who wants to watch.

She's found her purpose.

Cobb



Seeing Marigold thrum with life and energy has done wonders for him, and there's a huge part of Cobb that doesn't want to get well quickly. Okay, that's not true: he wants to get well, he just doesn't want Marigold to know he's doing as well as he is for fear that she'll send him packing.

There's a doctor from Destin who makes the trip out to Shipwreck Key twice a week to check on Cobb, eliminating the need for him to get on a boat and travel to the mainland. She's a wonderful cardiologist with a dry sense of humor and silver rings on every one of her fingers.

"I think it's the music," she'd said with a wry smile the last time she'd come to the island. She took off her stethoscope and hung it around her neck as she watched Cobb with her knowing, mirthful blue eyes. "You must be singing yourself back to health."

Cobb sighed. "If only it were that easy." He ran a hand through his floppy hair, tossing his head as he'd done when he was much younger. The hair was still cut in the same way he'd always had it done, only slightly thinner now and with gray at the temples. But Cobb liked to think it was a timeless look, and beyond that, he wasn't overly concerned with changing his looks.

“You know,” Dr. Berry said, putting her hands on his knees as she faced Cobb there in the front room of Marigold’s house. “I think it is that easy. You’re here in a peaceful setting, getting lots of fresh air. You sleep well, and you have plenty of people around who care about you and have taken an interest in your recovery. And beyond that, you’re feeling creative and alive. All of those things contribute to a patient getting better much faster than they might otherwise.”

Cobb likes the idea that music is healing him, and so he’s pursued it doggedly ever since Dr. Berry’s declaration. He wakes up in the morning and takes a coffee and his somewhat repaired guitar out to the front porch, working on the songs and melodies until Marigold wakes up and asks him if he’d like her to run and get scones from The Scuttlebutt or just poach an egg for him. He naps and wakes up humming to himself, then spends the afternoons recording himself doing rough versions of his songs on his iPhone. He’s been sending those quick takes to other musician friends, checking and double-checking to make sure that the songs he’s dreaming about aren’t ones that he heard somewhere else. So far all he’s gotten back from the people he’s sent his songs to are words of encouragement and hyped-up replies about how he could have his next huge hit on his hands.

Cobb doesn’t know about all that, but he does know how important it is for him to get this right. To that end, he’s employed Sunday, the only person on the island who has actually heard him play a full version of each song.

She pulls up in front of Marigold’s bungalow in her cart at six-thirty on the morning of Valentine’s Day with two cups of coffee from The Scuttlebutt in the cup holders. Cobb is waiting on the porch as the sun rises over the water to the east.

“You ready, rockstar?” she calls out, tapping her thumbs on the steering wheel.

Cobb takes one backward glance at the house. He feels guilty. He hasn't told Marigold anything about this project, and rather than waking her this early he's left her a note by the electric kettle that simply says, *Went to breakfast with Sunday. She's taking me to the grocery store and I'm cooking dinner. Don't make other plans. xxx Cobb*

In truth, he's ordered dinner to go from The Black Pearl for Valentine's Day, but that's not an important detail at the moment. Right now, all Cobb needs to focus on is the music.

“So your friend arrived last night and got the room all set up,” Sunday says, steering them up Landlubber Lane and around some of the pot holes in the sand. “He turned my guest room into a cave, which I assume is what you're wanting.”

Cobb laughs as he reaches for the paper cup of coffee that Sunday has brought for him, but he waits to take a sip until they're on flat road. “A cave sounds perfect,” he says, holding up his fingers in an OK symbol.

And the guest room is exactly what he needs it to be. Horatio, the sound man who Cobb hired to come in from Nashville, has hung thick blankets on every surface of the room, covering the walls and windows so that the acoustics of the room are just right. He's set up a portable mixing system and a microphone, and as Cobb stands there in the middle of the room, he can feel something stir inside of him. It's been a while since he was in a sound booth, and the desire to pour his heart into a microphone has been hiding away somewhere for just as long.

“Morning,” Horatio says, nodding at the guitar he's brought for Cobb to use. The one he'd broken the morning he

fell on the porch is fine for strumming and picking out chords, but he's going to need something far better if this plan is going to come together. "Brought you the Martin." Horatio lifts the guitar, handing it to Cobb so that he can admire the smooth, honeyed surface of the guitar, running his fingers over it and tracing the way the wood changes and gets darker, its ombre pattern fading into mahogany at the edges. "That work for you?"

"It's perfect," Cobb says, feeling the way he has so many times in his life. The pulse of the music, the actual electric energy of it, ripples through his body. The years of sobriety and of finding himself have done wonders to fine tune Cobb's senses. No longer is he a lost man, self-medicated by whatever is on hand, trying to prop himself up as he gets on a stage somewhere to entertain the people who have made his rockstar lifestyle possible. No longer is he stunted by the prospect of losing it all, therefore sending himself into a never-ending spiral as he tries to hang onto everything—his place on the charts, the rights to his music, his family.

He's someone different now. Now, Cobb is comfortable in his own skin. Now he can read all day, cook for himself, watching a documentary on Charles Dickens or The Rolling Stones and then sleep hard at night without drinking himself into a stupor. So yes, maybe he has relaxed into middle age a little too comfortably, but he's finally happy. In his eyes, he finally has something to offer to the woman who has always given him so much.

Within minutes, Horatio has everything set up and Cobb is perched on a stool, guitar in his hands. Sunday has left them alone in her house, still sworn to secrecy about what they're working on there, and has gone to Seadog Lane to occupy herself while they're recording.

“I’m ready when you are, Cobb,” Horatio says, adjusting his thick-framed glasses and jamming a pencil through the knot of hair on top of his head. Cobb glances at the younger man, admiring his freedom to wear his hair in a man-bun or his beard trimmed into an artful style. *It’s different being a young guy these days*, Cobb thinks.

And then he sees the ring on Horatio’s finger and realizes that it’s probably not that different. Being a man simply means learning how to give love, accept love, and be the best version of yourself that you possibly can. It means finding your passions and pursuing your dreams, but at the same time not taking away the dreams of the person you love. He took away Marigold’s dreams for long enough through his inability to give up his own selfish pursuits. But not anymore. Not now. From this point forward, he wants her to understand that he’s grown. He’s matured; grown calm. Now Cobb can support her as she chases her own creative pursuits. He’s the one who will promise to be by her side, to never leave.

The time has come for him to give back to her everything that she’s given to him.

He strums the guitar as Horatio gives him the signal.

There, in the tiny guest room of Sunday’s house, Cobb sings his heart out. He lays it all down for Marigold in the best way he knows how—through his music.

All he can do is hope that it’s not too late.

Marigold



Valentine's Day is warmer than a typical February day and the sun turns everything outside bright and hot. Marigold awakens to find a note from Cobb, and while it worries her enough that she races to the door of the guest room and stands there, staring at his empty bed for a moment, the panic subsides quickly when she realizes that he's off with Sunday—a friend she both loves and trusts—doing something sweet for Valentine's Day.

After having coffee, Marigold puts on shorts and a t-shirt and grabs a baseball cap so that she can take a long walk on the beach. It's gorgeous out, and rather than bringing AirPods to fill her ears with music or a podcast, she lets the ocean provide her soundtrack, and she feels the sand between her toes as she walks barefoot, appreciating the natural beauty of Shipwreck Key for about the millionth time since moving there a decade prior.

In the distance, a man is jogging. As they approach one another, he slows, waving at Marigold.

“Good morning,” Banks says, putting his hands on his hips as he slows to a walk. Sweat is streaming down his bare chest and Marigold wills herself not to look at his strong physique. She and the rest of the book club are well aware of what's

going on between him and Sunday, and, truth be told, she's thrilled for both of them.

"Hi, Banks," Marigold says, tilting her head up so that she can see him from beneath the brim of her yellow baseball cap. She squints in the bright morning light. "Beautiful day for a run."

"It is," he says, turning to look at the horizon over the water so that his profile is facing Marigold.

Banks is an incredibly handsome man—the strong, silent type. There's no woman alive who would say that he wasn't attractive, but he's not exactly Marigold's type. Much to her own amusement, her brain quickly squares him up against Cobb and she realizes how much she loves her ex-husband's lanky, boyish looks. He isn't as fit as he was in his thirties, but he's still lean. Even with the health crisis he's been through, he's retained his strong posture, easy gait, and the twinkle in his eyes has come back.

"Do you have any big Valentine's Day plans?" Marigold asks, trying to keep the teasing out of her voice. She's well aware that she's digging for info, but it feels good to joke around with a neighbor she's bumped into on the beach, and she hopes he'll tell her that he has a dozen roses for Sunday or something equally romantic.

"The lady I'm seeing has requested that we take a trip to Destin and spend a night there in a hotel to attend a jazz concert on the beach, so I've arranged for that." He's picked up on her jocular tone and matched it, smiling knowingly as he says "the lady I'm seeing."

"Well, isn't she a lucky broad. Good on you for giving her what she wants." Marigold drags her bare toe through the cold,

wet sand as they talk. “I know you already know this, but she deserves everything.”

Banks still has his hands on his hips, but he’s quickly caught his breath after running and he nods now. “She does.”

“She went through so much...” Marigold trails off as she remembers that Banks lived in close proximity to Sunday and her ex-husband, the former Vice President, and probably had a front row seat to the way Peter Bond treated her.

“Indeed she did,” he agrees, glancing at the horizon again. “I’ll treat her right.” He turns his eyes back to Marigold and looks right at her. “Sunday is the kind of woman who deserves happiness. And if that means a jazz festival on the beach, then she’ll get it.”

Marigold smiles at him, resolving not to launch into some version of a “don’t hurt her or the entire book club will come after you” speech. She believes him, and so she doesn’t need to say anything else.

“Hey.” Marigold frowns. “If you’re leaving the island, then who’s watching Ruby?”

“She swears she can look after herself, but I actually took a week off here, and Eldrick Watkins, Harlow’s former Secret Service detail, will be filling in for me. So everything will be fine here.”

“Oh, I’m not worried—Ruby is a tough old broad, I just didn’t know how that worked. Like, are you allowed to have a day off?”

Banks smiles at her in amusement. “Of course. Yeah. I’m allowed to do a lot of things that real people do.”

“I’m happy for you, Banks,” Marigold says, readjusting her baseball cap. “I think this is great.”

“That I get a week off?”

“That you get a week off and that you get to take a trip with Sunday.” She reaches out and pats his bare shoulder. “Have a fabulous time, alright?”

“Will do,” Banks says with a crisp nod. “See you around.” He starts jogging again immediately, running along the shoreline as Marigold watches him go.

She’s happy for Sunday, of course. Most sentient American adults are aware that Sunday and Peter didn’t have a fabulous relationship, and the women in the book club are even more aware of how bad things were. If any woman deserves happiness and a second chance at love, romance, or even just lust, it’s Sunday Bond.

Marigold turns and starts walking again, heading down the shoreline in the opposite direction that Banks is running.

She can’t compare herself or her own marriage and divorce to Sunday’s—their situations are light years apart—but she can think about her own hopes and dreams, and she can wonder whether she herself might ever get a second chance at love, romance, or even just lust. Marigold kicks at a piece of seaweed on the sand as she walks.

She wouldn’t mind a second chance, and she might even be ready for it.

* * *

Marigold has taken Cobb at his word and assumed that he truly was at the store getting things to cook for dinner, so when the afternoon bleeds into evening and the sun starts to

dip, she wraps a cardigan around her shoulders and closes the laptop on the desk in her bedroom.

“Cobby?” she calls out, holding her sweater around her body. Elijah is gone back to London now, and it’s just the two of them. The house echoes weirdly even though Elijah was just one extra person in the space, and she can tell that Cobb feels his absence too. “Cobb, are you—”

Marigold turns the corner to the kitchen and sees Cobb standing there, holding a bunch of wildflowers in his hands.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Marigold Pim,” he says, giving her the same hopeful, impish grin he’d worn the night he asked her to marry him. “For you.” He holds the flowers out shyly and she takes them, then looks down at her battered navy blue sweat pants and the oversized t-shirt she’s wearing under her cardigan.

“Cobb,” she says, putting her nose into the wildflowers and inhaling deeply. “These are beautiful. But I’m not dressed for dinner, and you look like you just stepped out of a magazine.”

He does, too. Cobb is wearing a forest green shirt over a pair of perfectly worn-in blue jeans, and his feet are bare. He’s showered and combed his still-damp hair, and he smells like aftershave.

“It’s nothing too fancy.” Cobb holds his arms out to the sides and models his button-up shirt like it’s a tuxedo.

“We’re not going out, are we?” Marigold looks around the kitchen with confusion on her face; there are no food smells and the stove and oven are cold.

“Well, actually we’re going outside.” Cobb reaches for the bouquet to take them back from her. “How about if I put these

in a vase with water while you throw on a dress or whatever you feel more comfortable in?”

Marigold looks down at her frumpy clothes again, but this time she laughs. “We’re going outside? Did you make us sandwiches to eat on the sand, Cobb?”

He turns his back to her. “Put on a dress, Goldie,” he says, opening a cupboard and pulling out a blue glass vase.

It takes Marigold ten minutes to find a floaty, long-sleeved chiffon dress in a pale tangerine color, change into it, brush out her hair, and put on lipgloss and mascara. She emerges barefoot to find Cobb still standing in the kitchen, leaning against the counter with his arms folded across his chest. He looks happy and not the least bit perturbed, and it occurs to Marigold that she’s not used to this version of Cobb. In their married life, he was either missing in action, lounging on a couch or in bed as he slept off a bender, or looking at his watch as he waited for the people around him to snap to and get the ball rolling.

But now...now he looks at peace.

“You look stunning,” Cobb says, offering her his arm. Without a word, he leads her not through the house and out the front door to the beach, which is what she’s been expecting, but out the back door in the kitchen and into Marigold’s little garden.

“Oh,” Marigold says, breathing out. She’s been on her computer all afternoon, writing and listening to Fleetwood Mac, and she hasn’t heard a thing that’s apparently gone on right under her nose. “This is gorgeous.”

Without her knowing, Cobb has had servers from The Black Pearl come over and set up a table for two under her

palm tree, which is wound with lights. The sun is low in the sky, but the garden is still warm, and he pulls out her chair so that she can sit.

“Cobb,” Marigold whispers, leaning across the table as a server in a black apron appears with a bottle of wine in hand. “I can’t believe you arranged all this.”

He spreads his palms to the sky. “For you, Goldie, I would arrange for the moon to be pulled down from the sky if you wanted it to hang right here in your garden. I would find a way to make it snow in June. I would—”

“Get sober and stay that way?” she offers, lifting an eyebrow as the server pours wine for her and sparkling water for Cobb.

“Absolutely,” he says with a full, happy grin. “One thousand percent, no question, and without reserve.”

Marigold reaches both hands across the table for his, and he puts his palms on top of hers as they look into one another’s eyes.

“Thank you,” Marigold says, rearranging her bare feet on the sandy ground under the table. “Not just for a Valentine’s Day dinner with a table for two under the stars,” she says, looking up at the sky as it goes purple with twilight, “but for the candles, the wine that’s all for me, for letting me take care of you, for Elijah, for twenty years in the Cotswolds, for a life of tour buses, concerts, music, love...thank you for all of it.”

Her eyes are shining as they hold each other’s hands, and the server disappears into Marigold’s kitchen, where the lights have been turned on and a second restaurant employee has joined the first. She can see them moving around efficiently in

her kitchen through the window over the sink, but Marigold blocks them out and focuses on Cobb.

“There’s a lot of bad stuff in there too, Goldie—we both know that. I did a lot of things wrong, made a lot of choices I wouldn’t make now.”

She shakes his hands to get him to stop talking. “Shh,” Marigold says. “Let me say more.”

Cobb laughs. “Okay, you say more, Gold.”

Marigold can’t help but feel a smile tug at her lips whenever he calls her that. “I want to say that I’m glad you’re on the road to recovery, and not because I want to get you on a plane back home and out of my hair.” Cobb laughs at this, but doesn’t interrupt her. “I’m glad because...well, because the Cobb I know is strong and creative and not a quitter. When I heard you laying in bed that day, talking about how you didn’t even want to get up for fear that you might fall down again, it broke my heart. And I know what you wanted from me, Cobb—I know you wanted me to tell you I’d take you back and that things could be the way they used to be, but I didn’t want to make you promises like that when you were knocked down. I never want you to think that I’d take you back just because I felt sorry for you.”

Cobb lifts his brows and tilts his head to one side, still holding her hands. “Yeah, receiving the love of a woman solely out of pity isn’t really an ego boost,” he admits.

“So I’m sorry if I couldn’t say the things you wanted to hear.” Marigold’s eyes fill with tears as she says this, and Cobb lets go of her hands.

“I have something else for you,” he says, standing up and pulling two pairs of AirPods from his pocket. He hands her

one. “They’re both paired to my phone,” Cobb says, opening the case and popping his into his ears. Marigold watches him, confused, but then does the same.

Cobb reaches for his phone, which is sitting on the table, and he taps at the screen. The opening notes of a song fill Marigold’s ears; it’s one she’s never heard before, and she looks at Cobb with a puzzled expression.

He holds up a finger to her and the strumming of the guitar turns into Cobb’s warm voice filling her ears.

I’m going to be right here. Forever. I’ll never let you go, and I’ll never leave your side. It’s you and me, baby, until the end of time... Cobb sings in the recording, his voice going ragged with emotion.

Marigold’s eyes widen. *He hasn’t...he couldn’t have...*

Cobb nods at her as she realizes that in fact he *has* taken her promise from the hospital that day so long ago—he’s taken it word for word—and turned it into lyrics with so much heart, so much meaning, that it takes Marigold’s breath away. She puts a hand over her heart as the tears spill down her cheeks.

Cobb stands up again and offers her a hand, which she takes. He pulls her up from her chair and then tugs her hand gently, bringing her body into his as the stars come out overhead. They fall into each other’s arms the same way they’ve done so many times, and it’s a feeling of pure comfort for Marigold. She may have thought her little bungalow near the beach was home, but this—Cobb’s arms, his heartbeat, the very smell of him—*this* is home.

The song ends and Cobb pulls out one of his AirPods, nodding at her to do the same.

“So, do you think we have a hit on our hands?” he asks, pulling her back to him so that they’re still swaying together like two lovers on a dance floor, even though the music has stopped and all they can hear is the roar of the ocean in the distance.

She thinks about this. “Well, I have no idea if anyone else will love that song as much as I do, but I can tell you that I do love it. Deeply.” Marigold looks into his eyes and in them she sees the majority of her life and her heart and her history. “And I think you might have struck creative gold by being here on Shipwreck Key, so let’s not throw that away. I think you should stay here for a while and keep writing songs.”

“And us?” Cobb asks, looking hopeful and uncertain as his heart beats against Marigold’s chest.

Marigold shakes her head slowly, not tearing her eyes away from his face. “I don’t think I want to throw that away, either,” she says softly, standing up on tiptoes so that she can kiss him.

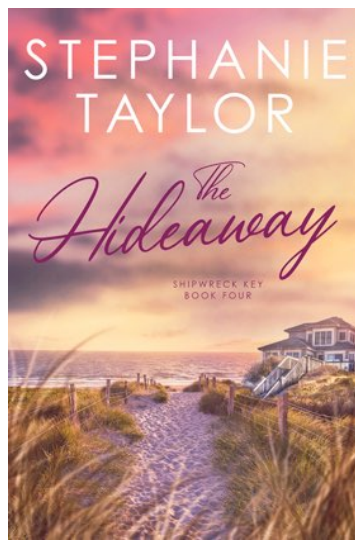
Cobb lets the hand that’s on the small of her back drift lower as he pulls her close, parting her lips and kissing her with all the passion he has inside of him. Marigold can feel her body turn to molten lava at his touch; she can feel herself give way beneath Cobb’s familiar kiss. And suddenly, there in his arms, she realizes that she’s not caring for him in his time of need out of pity, and she’s not dancing with him as a final goodbye—she’s doing it all out of love. It’s a love that’s seen its fair share of ups and downs, and it’s a love that has weathered some major storms, but it’s real, and it’s solid. It’s theirs.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hartley?” the young server asks, holding two plates in his hands as he stands in the doorway to the

kitchen, the light from inside flooding out around him.
“Should I bring out the first course now?”

Marigold looks at Cobb with laughter in her eyes. “It’s been a long time since anyone called me Mrs. Hartley,” she says, pulling away from Cobb and smiling at the young man in the apron. “But I’ve been called worse,” she says with a wink, “so I’ll take it.”

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Stephanie Taylor is a high-school teacher who loves sushi, “The Golden Girls,” Depeche Mode, orchids, and coffee. She is the author of the [Christmas Key](#) books, a romantic comedy series about a fictional island off the coast of Florida, as well as [The Holiday Adventure Club](#) series, and the [Shipwreck Key](#) series.

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