



# The Prince's Castaway Baby

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**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

**Description:** Fleeing scandal at home, the prince of parties finds himself washed up on an island that isn't as deserted as it seems, The only problem is, by the time he leaves, another scandal will be well on the way...

## HIM

I needed a place to hide out,

Nearly drowning in a yacht accident wasn't part of the plan, but when fate landed me in paradise with a beautiful – albeit furious – photographer for company, I wasn't about to complain.

Billie is gorgeous and talented and though she'd never admit it, I think she's starting to like me,

And best of all, she has no idea who I am...

## HER

With two weeks left on my island project, I have a job to do and I can't afford any distractions,

Especially not of the six-foot, blue-eyed, Scandinavian-looking kind...

It's not long before Jens starts to break down my defences,

And I begin to wonder if this thing between us could have a life on the mainland,

But to both our surprises, it's the start of a new life entirely...

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## PROLOGUE

### JENSEN

“Come on, come on, come on,” I mutter, pounding on the door. I know George is in. He works full-time from home and it’s a Tuesday morning. That’s the pro of having a rich daddy and a cushy job in finance — you can stay home every day.

Sure, maybe I should have told him that I was coming. But I was too afraid of the press hacking me and giving away his details. Not that it seems to have made any difference from the hoard chasing me.

The fact is, when you’re royal and notorious, journalists will find a story in anything you do.

I bang on the door again. “George, please. Let me in!” I holler.

If he doesn’t open this door soon, they’ll be on me. I can hear them approaching, like a herd of raging cattle behind me, photographers and reporters calling out to me, yelling and yelling like that’s going to make me want to speak to any of them.

Why the hell did I choose to flee to America? The press here are totally vicious. At least in Sólveigr, they only bother me because they’ve got nothing else to report on, and I know most of them by name. Here in Florida, I’m foreign and exciting — and getting a good story is sure to get them a big thumbs-up from their editors.

I guess the idea of being in my private jet, away from the world for a while, appealed.

Nobody can bother you in flight. And they don't need to know I have Wi-Fi.

Of course, flight trackers exist, which I forgot about, but I needed to get out, and I don't exactly have a lot of friends who would be happy to have me show up on their doorstep.

So maybe I'm making this a little more dramatic than it really is. The story wasn't even that deep, really. I was just supposed to be having a month off from all the scandals.

It's not like my parents will even notice I'm gone, not for a few days at least. They're both too busy fawning over my dearest, darling brother Erik.

After all, he's the heir and I'm the spare.

And being the spare means I have to shout twice as loud to be heard, and do stuff that's twice as dumb to be noticed.

Like this. Which, I have to stress, wasn't actually my fault. This time.

I lift my fist again, just as finally, George opens the door with a disgruntled frown. "Jensen," he says in his delightful Southern drawl. "How did I know I was going to find you here?"

I grin weakly. "You didn't?"

He holds up a newspaper. Prince of Parties does it again, reads the headline. Rumors of baby scandal sweep through Sólveigr court.

I bring both hands to my face and let out a long groan. "Okay. Well, first of all, that's not even a good headline. And secondly, it's not true. I want to make one thing

absolutely clear — this is completely false!”

The picture of me in the article smiles out smugly, and I glare at him. Damn him for being so charming that the idea of a surprise, scandalous pregnancy is something that people can believe without blinking.

George’s face softens, and he steps back. “I had a sure feeling it was, my friend. Now come on in, before the wolves get us.”

I slip past George into the safety of his home, and when he slams the door, I let out a sigh of relief for the first time in days.

How have I screwed things up this badly —again?

## CHAPTER 1

### JENSEN

I peer over the windowsill, my eyes scanning the driveway. All seems clear right now, but I don’t trust the silence. There’s almost definitely someone hiding out there, waiting to catch me.

Carefully, trying to make it look more like a breeze or draught than a nervous prince waiting to get caught out, I let the curtain slide shut again.

For the last three days, we’ve had all the blinds drawn, the curtains closed, all the lights off except for the ones we absolutely need. It’s like we’ve been hiding in a bunker, waiting for it all to be over.

And because George has been working, I, for the first time in my entire life, am being expected to keep house. I wanted to order takeout every day, but George pointed out

that letting people come to the door was probably a bad idea.

So, I've been learning how to use an oven, digging pre-made meals out of the freezer, and playing with the settings. At least he isn't expecting me to cook, and I haven't needed to do laundry yet.

## Page 2

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I can't stay here forever, though. Being normal is going to kill me.

On top of that, I feel kind of bad that I've taken over George's house and ruined his week. Any plans he might have had, he's had to cancel now. He claims he didn't have any, but it's possible that he's just being nice — he's always been a social butterfly.

We got up to a lot of mischief at college. They made a mistake making us roommates. We were out every night and spent all day nursing hangovers and scheming up ways to get girls to notice us.

That was the best year of my life.

"Anyone there?" asks George from behind me, making me jump.

"I can't see anyone," I say, turning to face him. "But I know they're there. I can feel it."

"Maybe they got bored."

I scoff. "You know as well as I do what the press are like when they get wind of a scandal, even if it isn't true."

George grimaces. "Yeah. I remember."

A few years ago, his dad, a preeminent lawyer in his firm, got into some hot water on a case surrounding a pop singer and her personal life. Something about fans stalking

her and negligence with her address, or something. Maybe she had been pregnant, too? I had been too caught up in my own dating life to pay much attention to the rumors.

It wasn't quite enough to be a scandal, but the journalists did harass the family for years afterwards. If anyone in the world can understand me, it's George.

"I'm bored of doing nothing," I sigh. "And I miss having a maid and a chef, or at the least a delivery driver — and I'm sorry for ruining your week."

George shrugs. "It's done now." I give him a pained look, and he shakes his head at me. "Jensen, stop stressing, all right? You're a media darling. That's all there is to it. They can get an easy story about you — you're always doing dumb stuff."

"Well, thanks a lot," I mutter. I press my lips into a firm line, unable to really deny it.

"You could just go out there and end it, man. Tell them your side of the story and hope they leave you alone."

"You know that never works." I sigh again, flopping dramatically back onto the sofa. I practically live here now, on this sofa. I'm becoming one with it. The two of us have shared many movies and meals together lately.

I just want to eat one meal from a restaurant. Just a taste of fast food. Anything that's not this.

George sighs. He might understand me, but that doesn't mean he's happy at the imposition. I wish it didn't have to be like this.

"You could try saying something to them?" he tries again.

I shake my head. “No, it’s hopeless. They’ll start asking me questions about who she is and why we slept together and what I’m going to do about the baby and is it definitely mine. And I don’t even know what her name is.”

“She’s a daughter of some duchess, by the sounds of it,” says George, scrolling on his phone.

“Are you reading the stories again?” I groan. I thought he was supposed to be on my side here, not reading the articles and seeing if he agrees with them.

Surely he knows me better than to agree with them? I might be stupid and reckless, but I’m not totally irresponsible.

“Her name is Maria von Holtz, and you met her three months ago at some charity ball to fundraise for the restoration of some castles or something.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying desperately to even remember the event. It’s not coming to mind.

I go to all sorts of events all the time. I stand there and I smile and I shake people’s hands, and they tell me what a rebel I am. And I keep trying to smile, just taking it all as my brother, who is always ever so proper and correct and perfect, takes all the attention. And it’s so frustrating.

They all act like I’m someone awful. It’s not like I’m trying to be a bad person. I just like partying. I don’t want to be some stuffy royal who never does anything except placidly pose for the media. I don’t want to be some faceless guy who people don’t remember.

And it’s not that I want to be the king, either. That seems like way too much work. I don’t want that responsibility.



But I don't want to be the king's brother, either. I don't want to be worth nothing except my title. I'm a real person. And I want people to understand that.

"You know you can stay here as long as you like," says George, finally coming back to my side. He really is the best friend I could ever ask for.

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And then it hits me. “Your yacht,” I say, turning my head to look at him.

“What?”

“Your yacht.”

“What about my yacht?”

“I want it.”

“What?”

“Stop saying that!”

“Start making sense!”

I shake my head and sit up. This is perfect. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it before. “You want your life back, right? I want to hide, and you know I’m so grateful that you would let me stay here, but even you can’t keep me here forever. So, trust me, okay? This way you can still feel good for helping me out, and you can go about your normal business.”

There’s a pause during which George frowns, trying to catch up to what I’m saying. I put it in the simplest possible terms for him. “Let me take your yacht, yeah? The press will leave you alone once they realize I’m not here anymore.”

George presses his lips into a thin line. I can see I’m going to have to try harder to

persuade him. “Just let me borrow your yacht for a few days. I’ll go out to sea. No one will be able to talk to me. And I’ll come back in a week or so when all this has blown over and they decide to start harassing someone else instead.”

“Jensen, it’s a two-man ship at least. You shouldn’t go alone.”

“It’ll be fine,” I say, waving his concerns away. “It’s not like I can take you away from your work, is it? And anyway, we’ve sailed it together before, just us. I basically know how it works. It’s all autopilot, right? Or whatever the equivalent is for boat. Auto-sail? Auto-drive? Whatever. My point is, it’s fancy. It does it all for you. I wouldn’t need another captain.”

“You only have one captain,” says George, giving me a withering look. “You would be the captain — period.”

“So that’s a yes?” I give him my best wide-eyed, persuasive look.

He sighs. “I’m still not sure this is a good idea. But I suppose you’re right. You’ve sailed aboard it before. And if you don’t go far, it can’t hurt.”

“Trust me,” I say, giving him my biggest winning grin. “What could possibly go wrong?”

I spend the rest of the day packing my bag and getting ready. George makes me review some of the safety material for the boat, and I pay maybe eighty percent attention. I know I should take it all in, but when he leaves the room, I start skimming the books, flicking through the pages and wondering why he even still has paper books. Hasn’t he heard of the modern world?

You’d think that manuals and stuff would all be digital these days. What’s the point of wasting a tree for stuff no one ever reads?

As darkness starts to fall, we sneak out of the house, narrowly avoiding an incident with a dog walker whose tiny, yappy dog draws the entire state's attention to us. Quickly, we hurry away and head down to the harbor.

The water looks murky in the half-light, and the sound of waves lapping against the dock makes everything feel eerily quiet and still. "We are meant to be here, aren't we?" I whisper to George.

He throws me a look. "Yes, it's fine. Stop worrying."

Technically, you're supposed to write a log about where you're going and what your plan is and all that stuff, but George told me he'll do it later and make it look like he was the one sailing. I trust him to know what he's doing.

I'm not so sure I trust myself.

We hurry over to the yacht, shining blue in the low light. "You know how it works, right?" asks George.

"Yeah, promise," I say. "Don't leave the engine running when I'm not in the cockpit."

"Good. Don't cost me my license, okay?"

"Yes, skipper!" I salute, which makes George smile. He gives me a final hug before pushing me aboard.

As I scramble up to the cockpit, I feel him watching me. I turn the key and the yacht roars to life, the engine vibrating underneath me. The controls all look easy enough, and I'm not going to play with any of the complicated-looking ones. All I need is backwards and forwards and stop.

“Be safe out there!” George calls up to me.

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“You got it!” I yell back with a wink.

I put the engine in gear, and on George’s thumbs-up, I cast off, leaving my best friend waving on the dock, holding the rope that had been tethering me to land. He waves, and I wave back.

Then I turn to my task, setting off into the darkness of the sea.

## CHAPTER 2

### JENSEN

It turns out that this sailing thing is easy after all. I don’t know what George was making such a fuss about — the boat practically sails itself. I spent all morning driving in a random direction, then stopped for lunch, and I’ve been chilling ever since.

I wish I’d packed more appropriate clothes in my rucksack, but I didn’t really stop to think about what I would need before I got out of Sólveigr.

But whatever. I’m all by myself, so it’s not like anyone even cares about me lounging around in my underwear.

This was a great idea.

I get no cell service out here, no internet, no messages. I have nothing to do except enjoy the vast collection of movies George has on board, sit on the deck and stare at

the water, sunbathe, and generally just relax.

This, as they say, is the life.

After two days of movie watching, I'm starting to get bored. Picking a random direction to sail in has started to lose its appeal, so I'm basically just sitting here, vibing. I figure that I'm saving fuel, at least, by hardly turning the engine on.

See? I'm not totally stupid.

God knows I can take a bit of boredom because nothing is as boring as royal dinners. I don't think I could stay out here forever without losing my mind — it would probably be less than good for me to go more than a week without speaking to a real human being. But for now I'm just enjoying the alone time. I don't get very much, usually; everyone always wants something from me. Whether it's to appear at their school charity event or to endorse some product, someone always wants something.

And because I'm the prince of Sólveigr, but not the important one, that means I'm the one who gets shipped out to all the events no one else wants to attend but that we need to have a presence at so people don't start hating us. It's all political and I don't care for it. It feels like such a waste of time.

I know I should be grateful or whatever for having been born special, but being special is so tiring. Just once, I'd love to be normal.

Whatever. I'm not here to think about real life.

I'm here to watch the eighth installment of the blockbuster spy film series Jane Green Strikes Back. The first one was a stupid parody, but it was so popular that it's been built into its own franchise. I can't confess to anyone else that I actually enjoy these movies, but while I'm all on my own, it's the perfect time to get caught up.

I'm just finishing Jane Green and the Cavern of Crystals when the boat jolts underneath me.

"What the hell?" I mutter, crawling over to the porthole to see if I can see anything. It just looks cloudy out there.

The boat shakes again, and it almost feels like we ran over something.

I pause the movie and head upstairs, where I'm immediately buffeted in the face by a huge rainstorm.

I yell out a string of expletives, spluttering and trying to wipe my face.

This wasn't forecast. Well, it might have been, but I haven't looked at the forecast recently. I just assumed the weather was going to be good.

I dive into the cockpit and stare at the controls. I'm not really sure what to do now. I feel like there's probably a setting I should press, some sort of lever I should pull—something.

Instead of figuring it out, I start pressing buttons at random. The windscreen wipers come on, thrashing back and forth like a dying bug. Outside, a great crack of lightning makes the sky a blinding white, followed by the low groan of rolling thunder, which is then followed by an enormous wave that rears up like an open mouth before it crashes down over the hull.

I'm thrown forward, smacking my head on the window and catching my arm on a corner, tearing a chunk of skin out of it. I swear hard, my vision blurring and my arm throbbing.

Outside, plumes of smoke have started rising, and an alarming amount of water is



filling the deck. This is bad.

This isreallybad.

I make a last-ditch effort to save myself, pushing the directional controls as far forward as they go, but all that does is throw the ship nose first into another wave, which starts sinking it properly.

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George is going to be furious with me.

If I even get out of this alive.

I can't afford to think like that, so I rush out of the cockpit, coughing as the rain lashes my body again, then race down the stairs of the cabin.

It's totally dark down here now. Not even the emergency lights are on, and the acrid stench of wet electrical fire sticks to everything. I'm not sure if the haze is my vision or the smoke, and to make things worse, a thin layer of water coats all the floors, getting deeper all the time.

Time to abandon ship.

Fortunately, one of the things I do remember is where the life raft is located, and the emergency kit. I snatch the kit and strap it to my back, then grab the raft, hauling it up to deck. It's heavier than it looks, but I grit my teeth, using all my might to drag it to the water.

As soon as the raft hits the sea, it inflates, and the sound of it makes me flinch. It's almost like an explosion, but right now I know I've never seen a more beautiful shade of orange in all my life, or a more attractive-looking dinghy. Carefully, I wade along the sinking deck to it, and, half-pushing, half-falling, I manage to drag myself into it and start drifting away from the yacht.

The rain doesn't stop, but the wind dies down as I start floating, hunched under the flimsy canvas roof. I'm sure it's not actually that flimsy, but a thin layer of water-

resistant canvas overhead and a thin layer of inflatable rubber underneath doesn't fill me with confidence.

I just hope George didn't go cheap on this.

I just hope someone will come to rescue me soon.

With a shaky sigh, I curl my knees into my chest and try my best not to move, shivering as I watch the yacht vanish beneath the water, leaving only a stream of bubbles behind.

## CHAPTER 3

### JENSEN

I have no idea how long I've been floating here for.

I know it's hours, not days, because night hasn't fallen again since the storm passed, but I know for a fact that I can't survive for long like this.

There's a tiny survival kit in the life raft — a pack made up of basic first-aid equipment, food rations, and a bottle of water that went out of date three years ago. Combining that with the emergency kit, I have three bottles of water, five protein bars, a bag of weird nutritional biscuit things, and a miniature fishing rod.

I crack open the water and take a tiny sip before I peel back the wrapper of a protein bar and nibble on the corner. I don't want to drink all the water now. I'll just have little sips whenever I feel thirsty. I think I have about three days before delirium kicks in.

Probably, with the supplies I have here, I have about a week, maybe two, before I die.

I'm pretty sure you can go for a while without food, but without water...

One day at a time. I take another tiny bite of the protein bar then fold it up and tuck it away. God, I wish I'd had a better dinner now. But even though I'm hungry, I have to conserve what little I've got. I think I'll alternate protein bars and biscuits, because the idea of eating handfuls of stale, hard crackers does not fill me with joy.

The reality is starting to set in and it isn't a good one.

The sun beats down on the roof and I feel sticky with sweat. This isn't great for the dehydration thing. Plus, as I drift, I keep turning in slow circles, the sun flashing over my skin. I'm a pale Scandinavian guy, so it's only a matter of time before I get sunburned.

There's a tiny travel-sized sunscreen in the first-aid kit, but when I squeeze it, it's almost completely dry. "Thanks, George," I whisper. "Great attention to safety practices."

I guess safety is one of those things you tend to become complacent about until it actually matters.

Shit. I'm going to die out here.

I curl up on the floor, listening to the waves slap against the rubber and roll underneath me. Drowning isn't supposed to be too horrible a way to die, so I've heard. Probably better than starving or going mad, anyway.

Someone will come, right? They track these things, don't they?

There must have been some sort of radar, some signal or alarm to say "Oh, no! The ship is sinking!" Someone, somewhere must have realized that I'm gone, and so is the

ship.

What if they all think I'm dead already?

I'm pretty sure I fall asleep for a while, curled up on the floor, because when I come back to consciousness, my arms are wrapped tightly around my knees and I have a cramp in my neck. Guess all this nearly-dying-in-a-shipwreck business is tiring.

Carefully, I sit up, every one of my limbs aching and heavy. It's not like I can get up for a walk, so I just shuffle around the raft, moving so I can sit with my legs stretched out in front of me. I'm so exhausted that I could go back to sleep right now without too much effort.

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But I'm scared to sleep. What if I never wake up again?

I reach for the emergency kit, wanting a snack, but then I hesitate. Is it better to eat tiny amounts often, or save it all for when I'm starving? Why didn't anyone ever teach me any of this stuff?

I never should have done this alone.

For a long time, I stare at the water, letting the bright blue mesmerize me as the sun glints off the waves. In the distance, there's a shadow of land, an island maybe, green and fuzzy, and...

Wait — land?

I sit bolt upright, rubbing my eyes in disbelief. Land! It's really land! If I can just get over there, then maybe I'll be okay. I'm still not exactly equipped for survival, but if I can get off the water, I can find shelter, maybe find some berries or whatever to eat. Who knows, maybe someone lives there!

The idea of human contact makes me dizzy enough that I'd fall over if I wasn't already sitting down.

Another great feature the life raft came with was a paddle. My arms ache, but the sight of land has filled me with adrenaline. I crawl over to the paddle, then wrestle for a minute with the ropes tying the roof to the raft.

In a move that can only count as a fail, I manage to release the roof canvas only for

the wind to catch it and whisk it off, far away across the sea. “Damn,” I mutter. Still, at least I can get shelter on the island, and some sun will give me a great tan.

It takes less than five minutes for me to realize why all rowers are absolutely ripped. This is exhausting. Every time I dip the paddle into the water, the waves snatch at it, making it skitter over the surface and fall back with a splash. I grunt, gripping the handle with all my might. I’m not losing the paddle. Without it, I’m screwed.

Eventually, I get the hang of it enough that I start moving in the right direction. It’s brutally tiring, and as the island gets bigger and bigger, the relief of knowing that it’s real is the only thing that stops me from bursting into tears. My knuckles are cracked from the salt water, my skin is going to be blistered from the sun, and my arms are going numb with the exertion, but I can’t stop now.

I have to make it there.

As I get close enough to see details of trees and the sand of the beach, I notice a flock of birds launch into the air and, squawking, flap noisily over my head. It startles me and I cry out, but my fists are clenched so tightly around the paddle, I think I’m going to need a crowbar to open them again.

When I look back to my goal, I see a figure on the beach, waving both arms at me. “Hello?” I shout, my voice cracking. Is this a figment of my imagination too?

But she doesn’t fade from view — in fact, she just gets clearer, until I can see that she’s a beautiful blonde, her hair tied in a loose ponytail, her tanned arms bare, and just the hint of her belly showing under the crop top she’s wearing. I must have done something right, because this is fate smiling on me.

Abandoning me on an island with a beautiful woman? Now, that’s like a dream come true.

Or at least it should be. I keep paddling with renewed determination, and call out again, waving. “Hello!”

She waves back, but finally I can just about make out her expression, and it’s not the joyful welcome I had hoped for. Her voice carries over the waves, faint but not too faint that I can’t hear it. “For God’s sake, what are you doing?” she yells. “You’re disturbing the birds!”

She’ll understand when I get there. Whatever she’s doing here, she’ll understand, and she’ll take me back home and everything will be okay.

Won’t it?

## CHAPTER 4

### BILLIE

From the second I spotted him on the horizon, I could tell that this guy was a moron.

With some people, it’s hard to know whether they would be any good at surviving in the wild.

Some people, you can tell straightaway that they spend a lot of their time camping or sailing or hiking. It’s written into their features and the way they hold themselves when they’re outdoors. It’s in their shoes and clothes.

And even if you can’t tell their skills from their appearance, you can tell whether a person knows how to work by looking at their hands.

This guy is one of those people you can tell immediately is not designed for this kind of environment.



He waves at me with his paddle and a frantic grin, then immediately falls over. For a minute, I'm worried that he's fallen overboard. But he manages to sit back up and wave at me again, slightly more sheepishly this time.

He calls something out, and the last of the red-footed boobies spooks and launches off, taking to the sky in what would usually be a spectacular sight to me. But I was getting some really great shots of them on the beach, and now they're gone. They very rarely collect like that in the open, so I'm just going to have to hope that the photos I got will be good enough.

When this guy lands, I'm going to kill him.

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“What are you doing?” I shout as he gets closer to shore.

With a grunt, I get to my feet. I probably shouldn’t be so cold — the guy clearly isn’t in a life raft for fun. He might have been stranded for days. For all I know, him surviving at sea might be nothing short of a miracle.

That doesn’t mean I’m not furious, though.

I wave again, hoping that some encouragement might bring him in. The guy starts paddling with renewed excitement, splashing around frantically as he tries to get the boat to go in the right direction.

Just as he seems to finally be getting the raft to head to shore, he stands up again, shouts something unintelligible at me and grins. He must be feeling so accomplished with himself for not dying.

And then the raft hits a hidden rock under the water, and he topples right overboard.

“God help me,” I mutter, kicking my shoes off. Looks like he needs more rescuing than I thought.

He surfaces, splashing around like a panicked goldfish, and though the water isn’t that deep where he is, he’s clearly not in his right mind. The guy might have ruined my shoot, but that doesn’t mean he deserves to drown.

I put my camera down in its case, then call out, “Hang on, I’m coming!”

As fast as I can, I run to the water's edge and splash into the shallows. At least he's stopped thrashing about as much. He must have realized he's not in as much danger as he thought.

"Hey!" I shout as I get closer. "Who are you? How did you get here? Are you okay?"

I don't get any reply.

The water is up to my knees now, and it makes hurrying hard, seaweed tangling around my toes and the waves lapping against me. I have to swim a little as I approach him. When I get there, I grab hold of him, dragging him towards the shore and lifting his head above water. He fights against me — or maybe it's him trying to swim — and gasps for air, choking on it like he really might be drowning.

"Hey, calm down!" I snap, too harshly considering he may have nearly died.

But in my defense, he did ruin my day.

He flounders again, but as our feet hit the sand and we can stand freely, he pushes me away. He takes a stumbling step, then wipes water from his eyes, slicks his once-perfect hair back on his head, and blinks up at me, his brilliant blue eyes glinting in the sunlight.

We stare at each other for a moment, neither of us sure what to say next. Then he glances behind him, and his shoulders slump. "Oh, my boat," he groans sadly.

The life raft bobs merrily away off into the ocean, and all we can do is watch as it goes. My eyes flick down to his wet T-shirt, and I tell myself off for noticing his abs underneath it. Really, how am I meant to notice, though? They're not exactly inconspicuous.

“I’m going to be in so much trouble,” he says, mostly to himself, his eyes fixed on the now distant inflatable.

“Who are you?” I ask again.

He frowns at me like that’s not a question he was expecting me to ask. After an almost uncomfortably long pause, he says, “Call me Jens.”

“Okay, Jens,” I say. “What are you doing on Isla Mostaza?”

He splutters, “Isla what?”

More proof of his cluelessness, then. I wonder where he came from. Our eyes meet, and I feel myself being drawn into them, like he’s exerting some magical pull over me. Frowning, I force my gaze away from his eyes and notice the gash on his shoulder.

“You’re bleeding,” I say, pointing at his arm.

“Oh,” he says softly, staring down at it like he just realized. Maybe he got stranded more recently than I thought.

“Did you just survive a wreck?”

“Yeah,” he says dopyly.

Dammit. I want to be angry with him, but the more I look at him, the more of a mess he seems. He’s clearly dehydrated and has had too much sun exposure. I need to get him out of here and into the shade at the very least. There’s no way I have the right stuff here to deal with full-blown heatstroke.

So, I have no other choice but to drag him back to my camp. “Can you stand?” I ask.

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“Yeah,” he says uncertainly, holding out his arms like he’s testing his balance.

I’m not fully certain I believe him, but there’s no way I can carry him, so for both our sakes he’d better be telling the truth.

Shakily he takes a step forward. I let him hook an arm around my shoulder to steady his balance, and that’s when I know I must have been alone for too long.

As we make our way out of the sea, I notice the strong muscles in his arms and the firmness of his chest. I also notice his hands — despite the way they’ve been torn up from his ordeal, he clearly had a perfect manicure before he set sail.

Where has this man come from?

The second we get back to camp, I deposit him by the fire pit, and he flops down in the shade. “Wait here,” I say. Not that he’s going to be going anywhere.

This island is only ever inhabited for the purpose of scientific research, and there are three bases set up. I’m camping at the cabin to the far east of the island, my favorite one. I stayed in the north cabin last time, and it was too windy for my liking. It creaked so much I thought I might blow away.

Usually, the weather and the isolation don’t bother me, but it really got to me on that trip.

As a photographer, I’m closely associated with a couple of scientific teams, and when the guys asked me to come back here, I was over the moon. I love this island. I’ve

been here three times, and every time it gets harder to leave.

The cabin is big enough for a team of three to live comfortably with a room each, though often more people will stay at a time. Once, I came with the conservationists and I had a great time — they even let me help with some of their work.

I wished I never had to go home.

All alone, the cabin does feel a little big, but it means I get full run of the pantry and first pick of the expensive sun hats, so I can't complain too much.

I head inside to get the first-aid kit, and as I open the door, I glance back at Jens, who is still lying on the ground. Fortunately, the weather is good, so I don't have to worry about keeping him warm after his exposure to the water. I grab the kit but linger in the doorway to watch him for a second before heading back out.

His hair is a light brown; almost blond but without being muddy or dull or looking like it's dyed. He rolls over, spreading his hands on the ground like he's happy that it's solid beneath him, and I notice his perfect skin again, his long fingers, his blemish-free complexion. He has a chiseled jaw and high cheekbones, which, when paired with his dazzling blue eyes, make him look quite Scandinavian.

If that's true, I wonder where he came from. Mostaza is about as far away from Scandinavia as it's possible to get.

Then he notices me looking and smiles a wide, easy grin, which annoys me all over again. This guy has rocked up without any warning on my island, disturbing my peace and quiet and my job, when he clearly has absolutely no ability to live like this. And he's expecting me to patch him back together!

Pressing my lips into a thin smile, I walk back over to him and crouch down. "Give

me your arm,” I demand. He blinks at me like he’s not used to being spoken to like this but then relents, sitting up and turning his shoulder to me.

As I start cleaning his wound, I ask again, “So, how did you get here?”

“Shipwreck,” he says blandly.

“Yeah, I got that. But where did you come from?”

“Miami.”

“Are you just going to keep giving me one-word answers?”

“Yeah.”

I take a sharp breath, not wanting to lose my temper with him. “Look, I just dragged you out of the ocean and rescued you. The least you could do is say thank you.”

“Thank you,” he echoes. He winces as I wrap the bandage tight around his bicep, then turns his head to look me dead in the eyes again. “I don’t get why you’re so mad,” he says, speaking the most words I’ve heard him say since I picked him up “What are you doing here?”

Now he’s said a full, lucid sentence, I can hear it. He does have a European accent, though one that’s incredibly well polished, almost like he does a lot of public speaking. Which just raises more questions about where he comes from and what he’s doing here.

“Photography,” I say, deciding that if he isn’t going to give me answers, I’m not going to give him any either.



“Cool,” he says dismissively and I don’t even bother pretending to smile. “What’s your name?”

“Billie.”

“How did you get here?”

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“By boat.”

“Look, why are you being so pissy with me?” he snaps. “I haven’t done anything wrong. In fact, I was just in a really tragic accident, and I’m grateful you rescued me — but all you’ve done since is yell at me, and I think I deserve a little bit less of that, actually.”

“Pissy?” I scoff, my eyes widening as I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I tie the bandage off more roughly than I should, then sit back on my heels. “Okay, whatever. Just stay out of my way, all right? You can stay here, but I have an important job to do.”

“Important?” he says. And that’s the final straw.

“Yes, actually!” I say, slamming the first-aid kit shut. “Just leave me alone, okay?” I jump to my feet and march over to the cabin, slamming the door behind me. The front door doesn’t actually lock, so I just hope he doesn’t realize that and try to follow me.

It’s hot inside, so I have no choice but to turn on the fan. I try to save the generator for when I really need it, but its solar panels have no problem getting a charge at this time of year, so I’m unlikely to run out of electricity. And anyway, I think this counts as an emergency.

I can’t believe this guy.

I slump down onto the sofa and stare up at the thatch ceiling. Sure, I told him that he could stay, but I’m not actually certain I have the supplies for him. If I were really

mean, I'd go and get the spare tent and sleeping bag I keep on my boat.

But I'm not quite that vindictive, and I'm pretty sure Jens will never have slept in a tent before. Plus, it's not like there aren't enough spare rooms in here.

Eventually, I've taken enough deep breaths to calm myself down, and I pace over to the door, steeling myself to face him again. When I open the door, he's still sat exactly where I left him, picking grass out of the ground like he can't think of any other way of entertaining himself.

"Oh, there you are," he says mildly, looking up at me with a smile.

I ignore him and tell him I'm going to my boat. I don't have much of a reason to, but I'm too wound up to work now, and it's an excuse to be somewhere he's not. "Just stay here and stay out of trouble, okay?"

"Your boat," he says, his eyes lighting up with an idea. "So, you can take me home!"

"Absolutely not!" I scoff. "These are protected waters, and they don't like you to take too many trips out here, for a start. Plus, it takes two days to get back to land in Puerto Rico — let alone Florida. I only have two weeks left on my permit. There's no way I'm ruining that by ferrying you around. You'll just have to lump it."

He stammers some nonsense in response, and I ignore him, marching off towards my boat.

If he thinks I'm giving up earnings and time to look after him or to provide a taxi service, he could not be more wrong. They don't give out these licenses for free and it's a hard process to get one. In two weeks' time, he's coming back to Puerto Rico with me and then he can find his own way home.

If you can just stay out of my way until then, everything will be fine.

But somehow I don't think that's going to happen.

## CHAPTER 5

### JENSEN

Billie basically ignores me for the rest of the day. I want to go for a walk and see some of the island, but I'm too scared to go anywhere by myself in case I get lost and die.

After the first hour, I head back to the beach to stare at the sea. It's perfectly tranquil, and all I can hear is the cheerful chirp of birds and the occasional cry of an animal. There had better not be any snakes here. Or huge spiders. Or wolves.

I haven't come all this way to be eaten alive.

After the third hour, I start worrying that she's never going to come back. What did she even need from her boat, anyway? Maybe I should have followed her after all.

It's a gorgeous day, though. The sun is shining, and even though I can see dark clouds on the horizon, I'm not going to let the memory of the storm ruin my day. Right here, right now, on this island in the middle of nowhere, I'm enjoying a glorious moment of paradise.

I've already drunk all the water Billie gave me, and I'm still unbelievably thirsty, like nothing I've ever felt before. But I don't exactly want to go rummaging around in her supplies to steal some.

I could probably go into the cabin; it looks like a pretty big place and I feel like it

probably has a kitchen — but maybe they don't have running water here. Maybe Billie has a set number of bottles, and she's cursing me for being here because I'm going to take all her supplies.

That seems unlikely, though. She seems like a pretty seasoned traveler. She's probably prepared for anything.

I'll wait and ask when she gets back. For now I'm just going to have to lie back and relax and hope the pounding in my head goes away.

I sit back down next to the fire pit and reach into my pocket to get my phone to take a photo of the horizon. And that's when I realize that my phone's not there anymore. I've been so busy trying not to die that I forgot I might need it.

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How am I going to let anyone know I'm okay?

Then again, if I had it, how would I charge it? Where do they get electricity from on this island? There must be some sort of generator here, because Billie's camera is digital. Unless she has spare batteries.

The more I think about it, the more my heart sinks. There's a strong possibility that everyone thinks I'm dead right now.

Plus, I've never been anywhere without electricity before. I don't think I like the sound of it.

I've started pacing the beach like a caged tiger when Billie finally comes back. "Hey," I grin, glad to see another human being.

She ignores me and heads straight for the cabin, shutting the door behind her.

"Okay. Good to see you too," I say to myself, biting my tongue against saying you can't ignore the prince of Sólveigr, because she doesn't know that's who I am.

It was obvious from the second that she laid her eyes on me. Somehow, Billie doesn't recognize me. I guess if she spends all her time in places like this, she mustn't get much news.

And yeah, I might have lied to her, but Jens is genuinely my nickname, and the idea of being treated like any other person, even if it's just for a few days, by this one woman on this island... well, it's intoxicating.

At least, the idea of it was fun. In reality, I'm faced with a very angry lady who hates me, not because of who I am, but because I've shown up and interrupted her alone time on this island and her pictures of wild birds or whatever it is she does.

Eventually she emerges from the cabin again. I don't smile at her or even look at her, not wanting to annoy her more.

"Okay, look," she says. I blink at her, waiting for her to keep going. "I don't exactly like having you here, and you clearly don't want to be here either, but you are here, and I can't let you starve."

"Can I use your phone?" I ask.

She starts lighting the fire, turning her back on me. "It doesn't work out here, sorry."

"What if you have an emergency?"

"There's an emergency phone in the cabin. But that's just for emergencies. Besides, you don't really get any signal out here. This isn't exactly a palace here, not like anything you're probably used to."

I flinch as she says it, and clearly don't recover well enough, because she notices and frowns. She seems to decide against asking me what's wrong, but I can see it written all over her face that she's pretending not to care.

Then I realize that the comment wasn't about me being royal, but a joke about the fact that she thinks I come from money and she's trying to rile me up into telling her about it. I guess she thinks I'm soft.

"Have you ever heard of Sólveigr?" I say, deciding that giving her this much will satisfy some of her curiosity without giving the game away.

“Sólveigr?” she repeats. “That’s in Europe, right?”

“Scandinavia. We’re a tiny kingdom right up in the north.” I grimace at myself. I shouldn’t have said kingdom. Billie might not recognize me now, but she’s not stupid. There’s a good chance she’ll put the pieces together eventually.

But she glosses over it and says, “A kingdom. I’ve always thought that having a royal family seems so enchanting.” A dreamy look enters her eyes. “I used to wish I could be a princess.”

“It’s not that exciting,” I mutter. Then, noticing her raised eyebrow of suspicion, I quickly add, “Most people don’t care about the royals. If you talk to the average person, they barely remember they exist. It’s really not that exciting.”

“Oh,” she says in a small voice.

A small stab of guilt burrows into my stomach. I shouldn’t have crushed her like that. It’s not exactly going to endear me to her.

She takes a sharp turn away from the conversation and pulls out a camping pot. Carefully, she peels back the tab on a can and empties the contents into the pot.

“What is that?” I say, leaning forward and peering into the pan to see something brown and lumpy start to bubble.

“These are really good. It’s stew,” she says. And that’s all the explanation she offers me.

She stirs it for a minute, then gets up to find some bowls and silverware for us. Carefully, she sits back down, stirs the pot again, then scoops some of the so-called stew into a bowl and hands it to me with a spoon.



I grimace in thanks as I take it and stare down at it. It's lumpy and brown and smells weird. With my spoon, I poke at one of the lumps and it falls apart.

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“You’ve never been camping before, have you?” Billie says, looking at me with barely concealed amusement.

“What gave it away? I say weakly. “I don’t really do a lot of canned meals.”

“Suppose you have a live-in cook, huh?” she jokes.

I know she’s just teasing me again, but it still makes me flinch. I have to stop reacting like this to every joke she makes or else I’m going to give myself away. “I have a lot of takeout,” I manage to choke out.

She hums in acknowledgment, and I feel myself slipping off the hook. I got away with it this time, but it looks like this “normal person” thing is going to take some work.

Maybe I should just tell her the truth. Maybe I should out myself for who I really am and tell her that I’m going to annoy her so much she’ll want to take me back on her boat straightaway. Going home means I won’t have to deal with any of this back-to-nature-living stuff, and she can get on with her day.

I go to speak, but I waver, my mouth hanging open.

It would probably be easier for Billie to take me back and probably better for both of our blood pressures. But despite her irritation and my fumbling way of putting my foot in it, she honestly doesn’t seem to know who I am.

Despite all of my newspaper headlines and foolishness, she’s barely even heard of

Sólveigr.

And she doesn't exactly seem to want to take me home.

If I'm going to be stuck here for God knows how long, maybe it will be better if she doesn't know. Maybe this could be the "normal person" break I've been longing for.

Plus, the longer I stay here, the longer the press will go without bothering me.

This is starting to seem like a great scheme. I'll hide here, get a taste of "normal person" living, and then she can dump me back in Puerto Rico when we're done and she'll never have to see me again.

"Thank you for the food," I smile, despite the fact I don't really want to eat it. I poke at it with my spoon again then force myself to take a small mouthful. It's sloppy, but it isn't too bad.

Billie chuckles, the first glimmer of a smile cracking through her cold exterior. "You're welcome."

## CHAPTER 6

### BILLIE

The second I wake up, I hear the rain. A full-blown rainstorm can only mean one thing: Jens and I are not leaving the cabin today.

It's early still, and I lie in bed for a while, listening to the rain drumming on the roof. It's such a pleasant sound, a gentle white noise that usually soothes me right back to sleep. Usually.

Today, I'm faced with the unpleasant reality that I have a useless man in the cabin who's probably going to follow me around all day. Again.

If only telling him to go away didn't feel so much like kicking a tiny dog.

I let myself lie in for just a little while longer, then drag myself up. As I walk past Jens's room on the way to the kitchen, I hear the faintest sound of snoring coming from inside.

I guess I would be tired too if I had been shipwrecked.

Thankfully, the longer he's asleep, the less time he'll be spending bothering me. There's no way I'm going to wake him up before he's ready.

Breakfast on the island looks like toast and juice, every day. It's not exciting, but it's not too far from what I'd have at home. The fridge space here is so tiny that the orange juice is a special treat, and I try my best to make it last.

I take my time eating since it's not like I'm in a hurry to get anywhere today. These rainstorms are heavy and can last days, and this one is probably the one that washed Jens up here.

The more I think about him, the more questions I have. Who is he?

After breakfast, I go through to the common area and pull my laptop out. I want to upload some of the pictures from my camera onto my hard drive.

One of the things I'm most terrified about in the whole world is losing all my data, so I make copies religiously. I put all my photos onto my hard drive, my backup thumb drive, and when I get home, I upload to the cloud too. I'd do it here, but the internet is nonexistent.

It's not like I have anyone I actually want to speak to, anyway.

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Before I came out here, I was emailing with a scientist who was very interested in my photos, but she's happy to wait until I get back before we talk more. I've got some great shots of sea turtles that I think she's going to love.

It's the thing I like most about this job, though — the isolation. Not having to deal with anyone or anything except myself. I know it would drive some people mad, but it's perfect for me.

I'm just brightening some of the colors on a few of my exotic-plant pictures when Jens wakes up. I grimace as I hear his door open and shut again, then bare feet slapping against the wood, and the bathroom door creaking shut.

Hopefully he's smart enough to look in the cupboard under the sink to see if there's a spare toothbrush. If he uses mine, I might actually kill him.

I busy myself on my laptop, selecting a photo that needs a lot of work so I can look like I'm deep in thought when he comes in.

When Jens walks into the common space, he looks like a completely different man. His hair is greasy and sticking up at strange angles from where he slept. There are bags under his eyes like he's been tossing and turning all night, and the robe that's draped over his shoulders engulfs him. It's easily three sizes too big, but it was the best we could find at short notice.

Fortunately, there's a box of spare clothes in one of the closets, along with some basic provisions for doing laundry, so he should at least be able to find something that fits him for the next few days. And if he has to wear clothes that he thinks are ugly,

so be it. He'll have to live with it.

I certainly don't want him to walk around naked.

That thought leads to an unwelcome one. One which asks what his body looks like underneath the baggy pajama top.

Judging from what I saw of his arms yesterday, I imagine he has a well-toned chest, lightly defined abs, a taut stomach. I imagine strong shoulders and even stronger thighs, perfect and beautiful just like the rest of him. I let my eyes run along the line of his jawbone for a second then shake my head to snap out of it.

"Good morning!" he says brightly.

"Morning," I throw back, not really in the mood for a full conversation.

"How did you sleep?" he asks.

"Fine." Then, figuring I should be polite, I add, "How did you sleep?"

He shrugs. "I've had better. Glad to have a bed, though." He saunters over to me and peers over my shoulder, making my skin prickle uncomfortably. "What are you doing?"

"Backing up photos. Editing them. Nothing complicated," I say. He gives me a confused frown, and I sigh. "I told you already, didn't I? I'm a photographer. I take pictures and videos of rare wildlife, and I try to persuade people to like my work enough for them to pay for it."

"How did you fall into a gig like that?" he asks, coming around the sofa to sit down next to me.

I shrug. “It just kind of happened. You know how it is. You end up doing one job as a teenager, realize you’re pretty good at it, then get paid a massive grant in your last year of high school, go on a fully funded trip to Antarctica when you graduate, then spend a few years getting involved with scientists and researchers who want pretty pictures taken by someone who knows what they’re doing. And then suddenly you have enough saved up that you can go freelance.”

He nods along with what I’m saying like job hunting is fresh information to him. My curiosity sparks again. “What do you do? For work or... I don’t know, whatever.”

His face draws into a distant blank, giving absolutely nothing away. “Charity work, mostly,” he says like it’s boring information. “I spend a lot of time representing charities.”

“That’s nice,” I say weakly, doing my best to sound interested even though this is well outside my knowledge zone. “What sort of charities?”

“Oh, anywhere that needs me,” he says, picking at his battered fingernails. I bet he spends a fortune on them usually.

Clearly he doesn’t want to talk about himself anymore, even though I’m dying to know, so I change the subject. “How’s your arm doing?”

“Fine, I think. It barely even hurts now.”

“Good.”

A long silence passes between us.

I have no idea what to say to him next. I don’t know anything about him. I don’t really want him here. And he doesn’t seem to want to tell me anything either.



He could be a worse guest, I suppose. At least he's polite enough to say thank you, and his puppy-dog enthusiasm, though too much for me, is genuine enough not to be irritating.

I also can't help but notice his posture. He sits completely straight on the sofa, his shoulders pushed back, his chin lifted ever so slightly. It gives him an air of complete confidence and a superiority that isn't smug, but isn't quiet. This is a guy who is used to having some power, but tries his best not to exert it.

I can't work him out at all.

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“What’s for breakfast, then? Please tell me nothing else from a can.”

I shrug. “I’ve got bread and jelly, cereal, long-life milk, granola bars, that kind of thing. Nothing of the quality you’re used to, I’m sure.”

He doesn’t comment on my attempt to lead him into telling me about himself, and I let it drop. He’ll tell me more when he’s ready to. Or maybe he won’t. I’m curious, but I don’t really care. Once these two weeks are up, I’m never going see this guy again. Why should it matter to me if I know anything about him?

“I think I’ll risk the cereal,” he says, looking around as if to find it. “Where is it?”

“Let me show you around the kitchen,” I say. I don’t need him bothering me at all hours because he can’t find stuff. Best to get that out of the way now. “You can take whatever you want; you don’t have to ask.”

He follows me through the cabin to the kitchen, which is only really big enough for one person to cook in — a stove, a tiny fridge, a bit of cabinet space. There’s a pantry too, though that’s pretty empty right now.

“There’s no particular order to where anything lives,” I say, gesturing around aimlessly. “You just have to look in all of the cupboards to find what you want.”

People are always coming and going from this place, and it goes for long stretches without being used at all, so it’s hard to keep any sort of system that makes sense. Just as soon as I get it the way I like it, someone will come along and totally rearrange everything.

“Cool,” Jens says absently, as if he wasn’t really listening, then starts rummaging in the cupboards.

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” I say, backing away towards the door and breathing a heavy sigh of relief when he doesn’t even glance in my direction as I go. Maybe he really will stay out of my way.

Unfortunately, I’m not that lucky.

I get about twenty peaceful minutes to myself, then Jens saunters back in and comes to stand behind me, peering over my shoulder to look at my pictures. It takes all my strength not to give in to the prickling in my fingers and slam the lid of my laptop shut.

“I think it’s really interesting,” he says suddenly. “All this stuff.”

“Do you?” I ask suspiciously.

“Yeah. Show me some of your photos!”

I twist my head around to look at him. I’m not sure why I expect him to be leading me on, but I’m surprised to see nothing but genuine interest in his eyes.

“Okay,” I say, still not entirely trusting, but patting the sofa next to me anyway in permission for him to come and sit down.

He does, and looks at me expectantly. “What have you been doing?”

“Well, this island has some of the rarest hummingbird species in the world, and I managed to find some of them the other day, which was awesome. Hang on, let me just...” I navigate through the files and pull up a couple of images of the tiny blue

birds. The sight of them still makes my heart leap in delight.

“Oh,” Jens says. “That’s wonderful.” On most people, that tone would seem sarcastic, but I can tell he completely means it. His eyes widen as he takes the picture in, like it’s absorbing him completely.

“I’m particularly looking at birds on this trip,” I continue, flicking through some more photos. “The scientists I’m technically hired by are writing a paper all about the rarest bird species in the world, and most of these birds that I’m taking pictures of now — last time they were photographed was in the eighties or nineties, so the quality of the pictures isn’t that good. And some of these birds, I’m taking the first photos of maybeever.”

“That’s a real privilege,” he says quietly. “You must feel really lucky.”

“I do,” I say, feeling myself softening. “I get to see some amazing things.”

“I bet.”

It’s against my better judgment, but I keep showing him photos, and he keeps showering me in flattery. I am good at what I do, but there are a hundred other wildlife photographers out there, and Jens is acting like he’s never seen a picture of a bird before.

But it’s nice to have someone show an interest in my work, and despite appearances, his interest seems completely genuine.

I haven’t had anyone care so much about my work in a long time.

Eventually there’s a lull in our conversation, one that feels like we’re both working out what to say next. “Hey,” Jens says suddenly, “would it be okay if I took a book

off the shelf? I borrowed one yesterday when I was bored. I hope I was allowed to touch them.”

“Sure, no problem at all. It’s what they’re there for.” I smile.

Bookish, polite, bumbling. Every new fact makes him more of an enigma. There’s an intelligence in there, but it seems to be buried under layers and layers of performance.

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“Can I ask you something else?”

“Shoot,” I say, my chest tightening. This had better not be something stupid. I’ve only just begun to find him tolerable.

“If it’s okay by you, I’d like to come with you next time you go out. To see you in action, I mean. I think it would be cool to see your work.”

“Do you?” I raise both eyebrows, dubious. “You realize it’s outside, don’t you? There’s bugs and dirt out there.”

He folds his arms like he’s accepting a challenge. “I can take it.”

“All right, then,” I say, surprising myself as much as him. “I suppose if you can be quiet and don’t distract me, you can tag along.”

“You don’t have to worry about me at all,” he smiles in a way that almost makes me believe him. “I promise I’ll make myself useful.”

## CHAPTER 7

### JENSEN

Yesterday with Billie was great. We stayed inside all day, and she entertained me, and I read a whole book — which is more than I’ve read in years and years. I haven’t had time for that since I was a kid.

To my relief, I felt like I was kind of getting through to her, which is good if I'm going to be stuck here with her for two weeks. Not only that, but I surprised myself by genuinely being quite interested in her work.

I've never really thought about photography as a profession before. I think I always thought it was a job limited to people who take pictures of models or people like me, or a faction of journalists who want to bother you at all times.

But these photos, these are for articles. Not trashy newspaper articles or paparazzi-magazine-type articles, but real journals with scientists saying things that matter. The idea of it sends a thrill right through me, like this is the proof I've been looking for that life is more than smiling placidly and waving.

It looks like I was right after all. Almost every single other person on earth does a more exciting, interesting, and important job than me.

But that was yesterday.

Today isn't going quite as well.

Billie's gone off into the forest to hunt down some birds and left me with the task of preparing our food and lighting a fire. I had wanted to go with her, but she told me to stay in the cabin because she was going into the thickest part of the forest and didn't want me crashing through the undergrowth.

"Are you sure you know how to do this?" she asked as she left me with the job.

I shrugged. "Oh, sure. I can figure it out."

She gave me an odd look but must have decided to trust me, because she bade me goodbye and vanished.

And when she gets back, she's going to realize she's made a horrible mistake. I can't light a fire. I can't cook. I can barely make the bed.

What's worse is I can't even look up how to do it on the internet, because there is no internet and I have no phone.

I was pretty sure that wood was meant to burn, but I piled a bunch of sticks into the pit, threw a match in, and nothing happened. I'm not totally stupid — I made sure the sticks were dry first. But I'm half a box of matches down now, and I still have no fire to show for it.

I had no idea it was this complicated.

There's a stove in the cabin, anyway. I don't know why we can't just use that to cook. It must be easier than all this messing around with fire. How did they even invent fire, anyway? Was it lightning? A lightning bolt striking a tree and setting it ablaze? That seems like a scary way to make an invention, but I guess someone must have looked at it and thought to themselves, huh, imagine if we could harness that and throw bacon in it.

The fact is, Billie asked me for lunch and a fire. At this rate, it looks like she's not going to get a fire. But at least I can deliver on lunch.

I give up playing with sticks and decide to cut my losses and use the stove instead. Surely that's what it's there for.

The downside to using a stove is that I don't do that very often either. Fortunately, I've had a little practice at George's lately, so I'm not completely incompetent when it comes to the concept of turning it on.

All of the ready meals in his freezer were fancy and expensive, though, with easy-



open plastic lids and explicit microwaving instructions. Cans are a little more complicated. I actually have to wrestle with a can opener and figure out how much is appropriate for two people to eat.

In the end, I throw the whole can in, to be safe. It doesn't help that the instructions are in Spanish too. I can't read them, and I can't use my phone to translate either. This rustic lifestyle sucks.

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When Billie gets back, she finds a handful of logs abandoned by the fire pit, and comes inside to see me standing grumpily in the kitchen, chunks of soup slopped everywhere.

I hear the door open and I turn to her, clutching a wooden spoon and grinning sheepishly.

Her eyes widen in horror as she takes in the scene, and I think for a second that she's going to yell at me, but then her face twists and she bursts out laughing. "What the hell is all this!"

"Lunch?"

Still laughing, she shakes her head. "Where on earth did you come from?"

"Sólveigr," I say, even though I know full well that's not what she's asking.

She covers her mouth to pretend she's not amused, but doesn't stop laughing. "When was the last time you cooked?"

"About three days ago. Give or take."

"Really?" Her eyes widen in disbelief again. "Because this looks like the work of someone who's never cooked a day in his life."

"Okay, so I don't cook often," I say defensively. "But I can more or less manage to make something edible."

“Edible, huh?” She raises an eyebrow, surveying the damage again. “I sure hope you’re not expecting me to clean all this up.”

“No,” I huff. “I was just waiting for you to show me where the cleaning stuff was.”

I don’t know why getting her approval is so important to me, but the truth is that I had barely considered the future consequences beyond cook lunch. Tidy up was far, far in the future, and the fact that she doesn’t believe that I would do it without being asked does sting a little.

“Over here,” Billie says, marching over to and opening a cupboard. “All the cleaning supplies you could possibly need.”

“Thanks.”

“I assume you know how to clean up?”

Again, the insinuation that I’m useless makes me bristle. “I’m not a complete incompetent,” I scoff.

She raises both eyebrows without comment, then says, “Tell you what, why don’t I take over dinner, and you can start cleaning?”

Much as I want to protest that I could do it myself, I have pretty much categorically proven that I can’t. “Okay, fine.”

I snatch up the cleaning products and starting to tidy up some of my mess. I keep noticing her glance at me and bite her lip as if to stifle a giggle, which does nothing to improve my mood.

I guess this is better than her being angry with me. But I’d like her to see me as

someone who's capable of looking after himself, because despite the fact that I don't know what I'm doing and I'm used to a lavish lifestyle, I can more or less manage to fend for myself on an island.

Sort of, anyway.

It would help if there was a restaurant.

When we finally sit down to eat, there's a weird feeling in the air, and I kind of get the sense that she wants to avoid me. But she's doing me the honor of sitting down at the table with me, so I should at least make an effort to be nice to her.

I don't try to be an asshole on purpose. I just come across that way sometimes because I forget that not everyone's been given everything they ever wanted. That sounds so snobbish, I know — that I forget that other people live normal lives and worry about normal things.

But I do.

I try my best to be kind and polite — when I'm not out partying, anyway. And even then, I mostly embarrass myself with the dumb stuff I do.

Unfortunately for me, you get a lot of attention when you do dumb stuff, and I like attention.

“Let me guess,” says Billie.

We had been sitting in total silence, so her speaking startles me. I blink in confusion. “Guess what?”

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“Yacht, charity work, can’t cook. Son of a CEO?”

I shrug, not sure I’m liking where this is going. “Something like that.”

“Heir to a fortune? Lottery winner? No, can’t be that — this is lifetime-of-privilege stuff.”

“Why do you need to know, anyway?” I snap, and immediately feel bad seeing the way her face falls.

“Sorry. I was just curious. I don’t know anything about you.”

I sigh. She’s not going to rest until I give her an answer, so I might as well go along with the narrative she’s constructing inside her head. “Yes, okay? My father and mother are both rich, and important in the places they work. Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, I did grow up with a chef and a cleaner. That doesn’t mean I’m an imbecile.”

“No,” she says quietly. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know,” I say. But I’m not sure how much I mean it.

We don’t talk much more after that, and when dinner is done, Billie excuses herself to her room, leaving me all alone in the kitchen to finish washing up.

Looks like living here might be harder than I expected after all.

## CHAPTER 8

### BILLIE

On the fourth day of Jens being on the island, I cave and take him with me into the wild.

All he's done since he recovered from his ordeal is follow me around like a lost puppy. He's constantly at my heels, wanting my attention. I wouldn't go so far as to say he wants my affection too because there's a rift between us about almost everything that's pretty much impossible to bridge. But he will not leave me alone.

Plus, he seems kind of weirdly eager to learn about things — not just how to do things, but about my work, the island, the cabin. It's like he's an alien who arrived on Earth looking like a fully formed adult man but doesn't have the first clue how to do anything that a real human does.

Thinking about it now, I don't even know how old he is. Same as me, I assume — twenty-five or twenty-six. He doesn't look like he can be any older, though he sure acts like he's a hell of a lot younger.

Here's a guy whose mother has done everything for him all his life, and he doesn't realize that women aren't there just to wait on him.

No, that feels unfair. I've met guys like that. I've dated guys like that — ones who think the whole world revolves around them, and you're simply there to do all the cooking and cleaning without complaint. The kinds of men who get angry when you bring it up with them that maybe it's their turn to do a chore, or let them know it might be nice if they'd listen to how your day went instead of whining on about how awful everyone in the office was all the time. The worst part about guys like that is they always start off acting like they care so much about you and make you feel so

special, but somewhere along the way, the magic rubs off and you realize you've stopped being a girlfriend and started being a housewife.

So, no, I don't think Jens is like that. He's weird and annoying, but he seems to be desperate to prove himself to me. That, his wide eyes, and his dogged desire to learn what it is to be a real human man have completely intrigued me.

I might teach him something about foraging. Maybe I'll just get him to carry my camera case.

I don't think I trust him with the camera yet.

To my surprise, as I lead him around the island, he isn't bothersome at all. He carries my stuff without complaint and doesn't even make that much noise trampling through the undergrowth. He does make a fuss whenever he sees a bug, but he could be much worse.

"What's this?" he asks, pointing at a bush with some pink fruit on it.

I walk over to the bush, its leaves rustling, and look more closely at it. "That's cocoplum," I say, standing back up. "You can eat it, it's good."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know what cocoplum looks like."

"What if there were other ones that look the same?" he asks innocently. From anyone else, I would think they were being facetious on purpose, but yet again, I think it's a genuine curiosity and desire to know more about the world that's shining through.

I'm certain that I should find his behavior really annoying, but somehow he amuses

me.

“Here, try one,” I say, plucking a fruit from the bush and offering it to him. I take another and eat it myself — I love these things. They’re sweet and fresh and utterly delicious.

Jens narrows his eyes suspiciously, but takes it from me and places it carefully into his mouth. He frowns, but as he eats it, he starts to nod in slow approval.



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“That’s actually okay,” he says, and somehow that feels like the highest of praise.

We continue through the forest. Overhead, some birds launch from the branch they’re perching on, and Jens stares up at them in wonder, his bright blue eyes wide as he takes in the beauty of the natural world.

“How do you know where to look for what you’re looking for?” he asks as he follows me.

I shrug. “I don’t really. A lot of nature photography is just about getting lucky. There are certain hotspots that I like to hit. I do a full scout of the area I’m staying in before I start shooting, and usually I have a pretty good clue of habitat the animals I’m aiming for like to live in. But knowing... you never can know for sure. All you can do is hope for the best.”

“What happens if you don’t get any good photos?”

“Usually I manage to get at least one or two. But generally, especially if I’m working at the request of someone else, they’ll pay me to come out here, and I’ll charge them a set rate depending on days, location, difficulty, stuff like that. The thing with naturalists is they understand that the animals don’t always want to come out. Often they have lots of stuff on their wish list so that they can get at least something out of my trip. Then sometimes I sell photos independently as well. I like to get funding to go on trips, but I don’t always have to anymore, which feels nice.”

He nods as I talk, taking in all the information. I get the sense that he’s formulating another question, but before he can say anything, a rush of noise overhead startles us

both as well as half a dozen more birds who take flight from the bushes.

“Damn,” I mutter. Overhead, a helicopter races past before heading back out into the ocean.

“I take it that’s not a common sight?”

I shake my head. “No, Isla Mostaza is about as as tranquil as an island can get. Sometimes this happens, but usually only when they’re looking for something or someone...” I trail off, realizing what that means.

Jens goes quiet. I reach out as if to take his hand in comfort, but pull away before I make contact. “You can use the emergency phone if you want. Let people know you’re alive.”

He shakes his head. “No. I’m here now. I’ve made my choice.”

I want to say something else, but I can’t figure out what, and then it’s too late, because Jens adds, “I want to go back to the cabin now. Please.”

I don’t question it and lead him back, and I don’t see him for the rest of the day.

The next day, I take Jens out with me again. Despite his general incompetence and bizarre way of thinking, he’s a decent conversationalist, and at the very least it’s nice to have someone to hold my camera case.

I’m a little bit concerned about it raining, but we head out anyway.

“I can always bring umbrellas to hold,” says Jens just before we head out, which makes me giggle.

“I don’t have an umbrella,” I say. “When it rains here, I stay inside.”

“Isn’t that boring?”

“I always have work to do.” I hold back from adding not that that’s something you would understand, because it feels unnecessarily nasty. “If it starts raining, we’ll just head back.”

Jens shrugs and doesn’t ask any more questions. We head out, skirting along the edge of the tree line on the beach. I’d love to get some pictures of birds in the sea today — the turbulent skies could make for some really dramatic shots. Plus, if it does start to rain, we can run back to the cabin without having to worry about crunching through the trees.

“How do you cope with getting all this sand in your shoes?” Jens whines as we walk, stopping to shake his feet every two seconds.

I turn to roll my eyes at him. “First of all, sneakers really are the wrong kind of shoes to be wearing in this place. Second, I don’t know. You just kind of deal with it. Surely you must have been to a beach before.”

“Obviously,” he scoffs. “I just usually don’t have to do this much walking.”

“Sure — you have your own personal donkey to carry you around.”

His mouth opens and closes like a fish. I probably shouldn’t have said that. “Some of us like to sunbathe, that’s all.”

“If I wasn’t at work, I’d agree with you completely.”

“You would?”

I stare at him, my eyebrows drawing together. “You really think I’m just some kind of scruffy, outdoors girl who doesn’t care about my appearance at all, don’t you?”

Wisely, he decides not to say anything to that, just shakes his head in a way that I can interpret however I want. I decide I’m bored of this conversation and don’t say anything else either.

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We walk in silence for a long few minutes. I've no idea what he's thinking about or looking at, but I'm too busy scanning the surroundings to pay attention to Jens and his hurt feelings. If he wanted to be babied, he should've started following someone else around.

I spot some birds in the branches and gesture to him to stand still and be quiet. To his credit, he does exactly that. I grab my camera, crouch down, and set it up, then get in position, lining up my angles on the birds.

And then it starts to rain.

I get a few shots in, but I don't want to get my equipment too damp. "Come on," I say to Jens, standing up and reaching out for my case. "We should head back."

His face falls like he's genuinely disappointed. "Oh. Okay. We haven't been out here very long."

"No, but this is the wrong weather for it. It's coming into storm season out here."

Jens nods slowly, and trails after me as I walk back towards the cabin. "What are we going to do for the rest of the day?" he asks.

I raise an eyebrow at him. "What makes you think there's awe?"

I'm half-expecting him to look disappointed again, but instead his smile twists into one of confidence, like he's sensed a challenge. "There must be games or something back at the cabin, unless you have work to do..."

“Yes, I do have work to do!”

When we get back, it takes twenty minutes before I cave and teach him a card game. He’s pretty slow to learn, which fascinates me. Didn’t he ever play cards as a kid? Didn’t he have any friends?

Maybe my friends and I were just weird, because we used to have a whole betting ring at recess.

But eventually he gets it, and the first time he wins, the light that illuminates his face is radiant and captivating. It’s like seeing a lightbulb turn on behind his eyes — and it should be so smug, but somehow it’s not.

“Good job,” I say, trying to be gracious in the face of his victory.

“Let’s go again. I’m sure that was just a fluke.”

“Maybe not. You’re pretty good at this.”

He dips his head, almost embarrassed by the compliment. “All right then,” he says. “Let’s go again so I can beat you.”

Despite his fighting words, he doesn’t. But the light in his eyes doesn’t go out, and by the time we go to bed, I’m left wondering more than ever about where he came from.

## CHAPTER 9

### JENSEN

I’ve been on Mostaza for a week now. At least I think it’s a week. It’s hard to keep track of time when all the days look the same and I don’t have a calendar to help me

differentiate.

The last few days, Billie's been taking me out more and more, explaining her job to me, telling me about everything she has to do. She's been teaching me all about the natural world, and it's opening my eyes to things I didn't even realize people needed to worry about.

It's been raining on and off too, and I've been doing my best not to annoy her, but it's hard when there's only two of us, and I'm bored. Soon, I'll have read every book in the cabin, and we've still got days and days left to be trapped here.

We're in a completely different part of the island today, somewhere that I've never been before. It's less dense with trees here, but thick with undergrowth and bushes. Every time I take a step, I feel like I'm being stabbed by a thorn or a twig or something. Just more scrapes to join the bruises all over my legs.

I've never looked so damaged in my life.

One of the best things Billie's teaching me is foraging — and not to brag, but I am getting pretty good at it. Obviously, I knew that people could eat stuff that grew in the wild, but I thought you had to have special knowledge to be able to decide what was good for you and what was bad. I guess you kind of do. But I didn't realize how easy it was for people to share this knowledge.

I guess if I'd thought about it, I might have figured that out. After all, before microwaves and freezers and the invention of indoors, people had to know what stuff from the ground would kill them, or feed them. I wonder how many people must have died before they got that one right.

"Look," says Billie, pointing at a bush. "You must recognize that one by now."

I follow her finger and wander over to the bush, crouching down to inspect it. I squint at the leaves — pointed and bright green — then notice the fruit is bright yellow, round, juicy-looking. I compare it to other things we've seen, like holding up paint swatches in my mind.

She must have given me an easy one on purpose. "That's got to be granadilla."



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“Very good,” she says. I look back at her over my shoulder, and she nods. The approval sends a warm flush all the way through my chest, making my heart thump a little faster. I could get used to this feeling. “You know, I didn’t realize you were going to be such a quick learner.”

She starts walking, and I hesitate, absorbing her words. I jog a little to catch her up, and, with an air of hurt that’s only slightly pretend, I ask, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I’m surprised to see a flash of confusion cross her face. She bites her lip like she’s trying to come up with something nice to say, then stammers, “Well, no offense, but guys like you usually don’t care about learning stuff, and don’t want to listen to the explanation when it’s given.”

“What kind of guy do you think I am?” I ask softly.

We come to a halt, and she turns to face me, pursing her lips like she’s trying to summon the right words to get across her meaning. “I think you’re pretending to be something you’re not,” she says eventually, and it’s surprisingly close to the truth.

She hesitates like she’s waiting for me to say something, but when I don’t, she keeps going. “I think you’re smarter than you let on, and I think you really care about other people. You just seem like you’ve never really had a chance to show it.”

My heart leaps into my mouth as she says this. I feel like I’m under a magnifying glass. No, something that zooms in more. A microscope. Every atom of me is being dissected and analyzed; every sinew of my body is being torn apart with a scalpel and

recorded in a little naturalist's notebook.

She's seen right through to the very core of me, and somehow she's still hanging out with me despite it.

I can only gawp in response, and she must think she's upset me because she turns away, her cheeks flushing pink. "Anyway, let's keep going?"

She keeps walking without waiting for me, and I chase after her again. I want to say something, but I can't think of the words. Nobody has ever said something like that to me before.

Usually, it's all Jensen, stop being so annoying, Jensen; you're an idiot; for God's sake, why are you making a fool of yourself? I'm so used to being a disappointment that anyone thinking I'm anything else is leaving me dumbfounded.

I wonder what she would think if she knew who I really was.

We head slightly deeper into the forest, and she holds up her hand to stop me. "Okay, here's a tricky one. What bird is that?" She points up to the sky, indicating that she wants me to listen. I tip my head up like that might help me hear better.

It doesn't. I'm met with a cacophony of sound: the trees rustling in the wind like whispers, birds singing atonal melodies, frogs and insects screaming into the void. It's all so loud, like they're all desperate to be heard over one another.

They say they know which noises birds make for certain things, like watch out — a predator! or I'm hungry! but I've always wondered how they know that. I mean, it's not like you can go up to a bird and ask it how it's feeling. Unless it's a parrot, I guess. But even then, aren't they just repeating what they hear?

How much do any of us really know about anything?

Before I can get totally existential, Billie adds, “And before you start, yes, you should know this one.”

“You’ve been teaching me plants, not birds,” I pout.

“Just listen, okay? If you’ve been paying attention, you should be able to get it.”

I look up to the sky again and strain my ears to take in everything around us. There is one bird calling slightly louder than the others, and it does sound kind of familiar. She’s right — she has been telling me all about the birds, and if I think hard, maybe I can remember...

“A kite?” I ask, not fully certain, and the way her face splits into a smile makes all the confusion of earlier melt away.

“See, you do pay attention.”

“I guess I must.”

We settle down next to a bush so Billie can try and get some shots of the birds, and my mind starts to wander as I wait.

The thing is, I am paying attention and I do care. I’ve never felt like this before, about anything. I’ve never believed that anything was worth my time and effort, but the more I listen to Billie, the more I realize that actually, yes, this does matter.

All this time, I’ve been searching for something to fill in this hole in my heart, the one crying out to be worth more than I am. The one that’s begging me to make a difference somewhere beyond getting into trouble in order to be noticed. Sure, all this

sitting around is boring, but it matters.

Everything Billie does matters.

And as I sit here next to her, watching her forehead wrinkle as she concentrates, one eye scrunched up as she peers through the viewfinder, I can hear my heart asking for more. I could listen to her talk about this stuff forever. Her opinion matters to me.

The way she treats me like a person is beyond intoxicating.

The way this makes me feel almost makes me never want to leave.

### CHAPTER 10

#### BILLIE

“Billie! Billie! Billie!” Jens yells my name about a hundred times as he bursts into the cabin, startling me.

I sent him out earlier to find some firewood because I just wanted a bit of quiet space to myself for a change. Fortunately, he’s eager to please, so he bounded away without complaint, leaving me to sit and think in silence, and to catch my breath before he starts being irritating again.

“What is it?” I snap at him, looking up from my computer. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah — no, it’s perfect! I was out finding wood, and trying to find sticks like you showed me, you know, not too flimsy, not too long, not too damp?—”

“Please, Jens,” I sigh. “Get to the point.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Well, anyway, I was by the woodpecker nest, and I heard them singing, and I looked up and I just wanted to get a glimpse of the eggs because I still can’t believe how small they are, but the eggs are gone.”

“Gone?” I gasp, my heart sinking. These red-chested woodpeckers are an endangered species, and we were so excited to find a nest the other day. As far as I know, this is the last island in the world where you can find them, and losing a nest would be a heartbreak.

He shakes his head, looking more like a puppy than ever as his hair flops about in a light-chestnut arc around his head. “No! They’re gone because there are babies! Hatchlings? Pecklings? What do you call baby birds?”

“Who cares?” I say, cutting him off before he can keep rambling. “Let’s go!”

I slam my laptop shut and jump to my feet, scrambling to grab my camera. I sling it around my neck, then leap towards the door, Jens following close behind.

We run out into the woods as fast as we can, only slowing down so we can be quiet as we approach the nest. We’ve been keeping an eye on this nest for a couple of days, but nothing had happened so far.

I’ve been trying not to get my hopes up, but as I told Jens yesterday, if I can get a shot of these baby birds, this will be some of the first photos of these babies ever taken.

Plus, there haven’t been many good photos of the woodpeckers themselves in recent years at all. The privilege of taking any at all has made this trip well worth it.

Quietly, we approach the tree where we found the nest. I have no idea how Jens managed to get close enough to see hatchlings without disturbing anything, but I believe him that he saw something. He’s just as invested in all this as I am now, and despite the fact that he’s definitely keeping secrets from me, I don’t think he’s a liar.

I signal to him to crouch down with me, and without hesitation he obeys. This isn’t the best ever vantage point, but I don’t want to startle any of the animals, and I can pretty much get a clear shot from here.

Getting any pictures of these birds would be a win.

After about half an hour, I can feel him getting restless, so I glare at him in a silent warning not to be a bother. “I got closer,” he whispers.

“I don’t want to stick a camera in there. I don’t want to spook them.”

“But we can’t see anything.”

“Shush,” I hiss. He’s being irritating again, even if he means well.

We lie in the undergrowth utterly still for what feels like forever. Overhead, birds are chirping, though none of them are the ones I want, and beside me, Jens is breathing heavily like he’s trying to hold back from sighing on a loop.

Two more minutes, I say to myself, because my legs are starting to hurt from where we’re lying. Two more minutes and then we’ll give up.

And for a second, it looks like I really am going to be disappointed, but then an adult sticks its beak out of the nest, and we get the breathtaking sight of some incredibly rare baby birds bumbling to the front of the nest and opening their brand-new eyes as they cry out for food.

“Wow,” breathes Jens as the adult flies away, and I have to hold back a tear.

“I can’t believe we saw them,” I whisper. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Of course.”

If we stayed for a few hours, we could almost definitely watch the parent come back, but I didn’t bring my tripod in my rush to get out here, and I’m happy enough with what I managed to get. Since we’re out now, and I feel like I’m walking on air, I get to my feet and say, “Come on. Let’s find the turtles.”

“The turtles?” His face lights up at the word, and I grin, offering my hand to help him up.



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Jens likes the birds, but he loves the turtles.

For just a second too long, our hands linger, but I'm too task-focused to think about that. All that matters now is finding the turtles.

We've been scoping out the beach for a few days because I promised Jens we'd try and find turtles, and he's been disappointed so far that we've only caught a glimpse of one turtle crawling back to its hole.

"Are we there yet?" Jens whines as we approach.

"Do you ever stop complaining?"

"No."

"Trick question — I already knew that."

He pouts at me, and I shake my head again. I refuse to be drawn in by that look. He knows just as well as I do where the nest is, and I'm not in any mood to argue with him.

When we get there, I point to the ground and wait for him to crouch down on it first. We've discovered that the best place to sit and observe the turtles is behind a bush, just next to the hole. Jens is sure that we're never going to see anything, but I keep telling him to be patient.

Fortunately, like this, I can set my camera up on the ground so I don't have to hold it

like with the birds. As I get it in position, Jens slides behind the bush, waiting expectantly for me to finish. I'm going to film a video on my camera so I can pull out the best snapshots later, so all we need to do right now is lie here quietly and wait.

I double-check that the camera is on, and settle into position next to Jens.

Like this, all still and silent, I can't help but notice how close we are. Because of the way the bush is aligned, to be properly hidden and have the right angle to see, we have to be pressed up against each other, our shoulders bumping.

I can't help but focus on the way his breathing is slow and even, and how my own falls in rhythm with it.

I wonder if our hearts are beating the same too.

Nothing happens for a long while, and it feels like time is suspended around us, but then Jens gasps softly, and I strain to see what he's seeing.

There, in the nest, the mother turtle pokes her head out to survey the scene, then, deciding it's safe, starts crawling out, followed by three babies. They start to waddle away towards the ocean, all in a line, and Jens gasps again, mesmerized by the scene.

I let my eyes dart towards him for a split second. He's transfixed, his eyes bright and wide, his mouth ever so slightly open in awe at the natural beauty before him. It's probably the most real expression I've ever seen him make.

Just for a second, I think he might be even more beautiful to watch than the turtles.

Then one of the babies stumbles and all my attention is back on the reason why I came here. It shouldn't be as funny to watch as it is, but something about the way the baby hasn't quite mastered its own power of walking has both me and Jens biting our

lips, trying not to chuckle.

It's only when the all turtles have vanished into the sea that I realize my left foot has gone numb. I push myself up to sitting, wincing as I do, and grab my foot to massage it back to the land of the living.

"That was amazing," Jens gushes, sitting up beside me. "I've never seen anything like that before. They're so tiny! I can't believe something like that can even exist!"

He keeps rambling as we get up, and he offers his hand to help me to my feet. I take it, his palm warm against mine.

When he lets go, the tiniest part of me almost wishes he wouldn't.

Jens doesn't stop talking the whole way back to the cabin, monologuing about how amazing turtles are and how cool it is that people dedicate their lives to conserving creatures like this, and how do turtles even breathe underwater anyway, and who decided to start studying them — but then again we study everything so it shouldn't really be a surprise, but still, whoever the first person was to find turtles probably found them pretty surprising, and...

Can I really be falling for this stranger? I barely know a thing about him, and yet his energy is making me feel cared for in a way I haven't for a long time. I don't remember the last time anyone asked about my work and listened to me talk about it for a week straight. Not just that, but listened and meant it.

I don't remember the last time I saw someone smile like he does. At the world, and at me.

Maybe it's just been too long since I was with someone. That, or he's got some strange power to charm, and I'm falling for it.

But you know when you meet someone and you just know they're it —they could be a friend or a lover; it doesn't matter. There are some people with whom, from the very first time you speak, something deep and primal inside your chest connects to something inside theirs, like some threads of a great web have come together and made sense of a part of the universe between you.

And sure, maybe my very first reaction to Jens was irritation, but when he opened his mouth and stopped acting like a complete idiot, well... I guess something in me connected with him.

There's just such an easiness about him. It's something simple and honest, and despite everything, it's real.

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:33 am*

I don't want to call it love — not yet, anyway — but I don't want to lose him either.

That's becoming more obvious to me every day. I don't want there to be a day after this where we never speak again. Part of me wants something more, but I would take anything I can get. If he will be my friend, I will be happy.

That night, he tells me to sleep well and vanishes to his room, and I lie awake for a long time, trying to get that smile out of my head.

## CHAPTER 11

### JENSEN

After the turtles, nothing seems exciting anymore. Okay, that's not exactly true. I am still overcome by the beauty of the natural world, but the turtles were an amazing sight, and nothing has beaten it so far.

Billie seems totally convinced that we're going to get some sightings of some more birds this evening. But the evening is quickly turning into night and we haven't seen anything in hours and hours — and I'm kind of getting hungry.

"Hey," I whisper. "I want to go back."

She shushes me with a glare.

"There's nothing here," I continue.

Her glare intensifies, her eyes blazing with the words shut up!

“Billie, come on. There’s nothing here and there isn’t going to be.”

“There might be,” she snaps quietly.

I bite my tongue from snapping anything in response. Instead, I just sigh and settle back down into the undergrowth. My legs are getting spiked by some weird plant, and my knees and back hurt. I shuffle to try and get more comfortable, and Billie glares at me again.

“Can you sit still?”

“Sorry,” I mutter and do my best to not move anymore.

Clearly, I don’t do well enough and my shuffling gets too much for her because she sighs, throws up her hands, and turns to me. “Okay, fine. Let’s go somewhere else.”

I sit up, my shoulders sagging in relief. “Thanks.”

“Nothing’s happening here — I’ll let you be right this one time. Let’s go stake out one of the turtle spots again, all right? You like the turtles, don’t you?”

“I’m not five, you know,” I grumble. “But yes, I do like the turtles.”

She gives me an I told you so look, then gets to her feet, offers me her hand, and drags me away. Our fingers almost interlock for a second, and the feeling of it makes me catch my breath. Embarrassed, I play the breathlessness off as a result of exertion, just in case she’s paying attention to me at all.

I don’t think she is, but it doesn’t hurt to be safe.

Billie told me after we saw the baby turtles that it was pretty unlikely that we'd see them again, but I begged her to let us try once more. She wasn't happy at the idea, but I wasn't happy at the idea of lying on the ground for hours waiting for nothing to happen.

Never mind that I technically never needed to come along at all.

We walk along the beach and go past the place where we hid out the other day. This time, Billie has a scheme to hide us behind a different bush in the hope that we might see something else.

This spot is slightly more secluded than the other one, and we have to squeeze into place together, our bodies bumping against each other, knees and elbows and hips.

I swallow hard, willing myself to pretend that it's not that deep. We're just friends hanging out, after all. A few days isn't long enough to fall in love with someone.

Is it?

Before this, I would have taken that as a certainty. I should know — I've had more than enough flings to last me a lifetime. But with Billie... there's something thumping away in my chest that feels far more than just superficial.

Yeah, she's gorgeous, and smart, and funny, and maybe her not knowing who I am has something to do with it too, but I've never been with a girl as real as she is.

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What do I know about love, though? I've never really loved anyone.

Once, I thought I did. When I was twenty-one, my high school sweetheart and I discussed getting married. I would have been so happy with her, but her dowry wouldn't have been enough, and despite how modern the royal family might pretend to be these days, she was still a commoner. In my parents' eyes, she wasn't good enough. Her parents had no titles. She wasn't an heiress or due to inherit a fortune.

Our relationship had been fine during school, they had said. They had even been glad that it kept me out of trouble, by and large. She had been so sensible compared to me, and she had stopped me being rash and stupid.

But it could have gone no further than it did. I had been told that in no uncertain terms, so Clara and I had broken up a few months later, and I had never seen her again.

And that's when I turned into the man I'm reputed to be today. I spent the next four years of my life going wild, partying and being as outrageous as I possibly could. I don't need a psychologist to tell me what the motivation for that was.

I haven't thought about Clara in years. I wonder if she's happy now. Maybe she's married. Maybe she's not. I don't really have a way of knowing.

No doubt my parents wouldn't be happy to see me consorting with Billie, either. Not that we're consorting really — not anywhere except inside my head, anyway. Yes, we're lying incredibly close to each other, and my mind is running to places it shouldn't, but none of this has to mean anything.



I don't have to think about the heat of her body as it presses against mine.

Despite how real this feels in my head, Billie would never be an acceptable match for me. We could never go further than this, in reality. And the worst part is that just makes me want her more.

She keeps her eyes fixed on the horizon, and I keep mine fixed on her: the gentle curve of her chin, the way her blond hair falls around her face and she keeps pushing it back behind her ear with a frown.

I let my eyes linger on her plush lips, noticing the way they're slightly chapped from the salt air, and betray myself by wondering what they would feel like pressed against my skin.

And I'm thinking about this now, so I might as well finish the thought and then put it away forever.

What's more, it's hot on the island and she's been wearing a lot of T-shirts and tank tops, and her breasts aren't exactly small. I've tried my best not to notice them, but they're perfectly formed — round and firm and soft-looking, and the shirts she wears do nothing but complement them, giving her just the right amount of cleavage.

A little fantasy of seeing her naked can't hurt — right?

It's only weird if I act on it. What's inside my head can't hurt her unless she knows about it.

It can hurt me, though.

The more I dwell on this, the more I want it. God, why am I doing this to myself?

I force myself to look back out into the ocean, but my mind is still firmly stuck on Billie. She has less than a week left on her permit. That means we have less than a week of being together.

After that, I'll never see her again. Somehow that thought makes me ache even more than anything else. Attraction can be fleeting. It could vanish overnight and that wouldn't bother me, much.

But the bonds we're forming? This strange, easy friendship? I wish this could be forever.

We lie behind the bush for a while, and this time it's Billie's turn to get bored. She huffs a sigh as she sits up, then pushes herself to her feet. "This is a waste of time," she says. "Let's just go back."

"Okay," I say, jumping to my feet before she offers me her hand again.

I don't think I can handle skin-to-skin contact again today. That doesn't stop me looking longingly at her hand as we walk back, though.

I have to stop thinking like this before it really becomes a problem. It's never going to happen anyway, because she clearly doesn't feel like that towards me. She's only just starting to warm up to me, to stop being irritated by everything I do. There's no way she's looking at me with attraction at all.

I'd take her looking at me even in friendship, though.

We get back to the cabin, and I excuse myself to my room. She gives me a funny look but doesn't question me. No doubt, she'll be glad for some alone time too.

What she doesn't know is that I'm going to lie on my bed and feel sorry for myself.

Today was a complete write-off. I didn't get any turtles, and worse, I didn't get Billie.

And I'm pretty sure I never will.

## CHAPTER 12

### BILLIE

*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am*

“How can this island possibly be big enough for a waterfall?” asks Jens as we crunch through a barely visible trail. “It’s not tall enough, is it?”

I shrug. “I mean, it’s not that small. It’d take you two days to walk from one side to the other. And there is a waterfall.”

He hums thoughtfully, as if rotating a map in his mind. Or constructing one. Or maybe he’s just off on another one of his tangents. Then he says, “Are we almost there? I don’t like hiking.”

“You don’t like anything!” I scoff.

“Not true,” he says, too quickly, then clamps his mouth shut like he was about to say something that he didn’t really mean.

I squint at him in curiosity, but by now I know better than to ask him questions. It’s not like I’m going to get any answers.

“Whatever. Yes, we’re nearly there,” I say. “We’re just going the scenic route.”

“Why?” he whines.

“Because I thought you might be interested in seeing some of the conservation efforts that are going on here. People don’t just come here for the animals, you know.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, for sure. Why do you think we get no signal out here? This is one of the few places in the world where we’re trying to keep as much negative human impact away as possible.”

“Cool,” he says, his eyes widening.

I tell him some more about it as I walk, and as I keep glancing back at him, I can’t help but notice the way he looks. In the week or so of being here without products or a razor, his hair has grown shaggy, no longer well-groomed and styled. Scattered stubble prickles at his chin, and the sun has kissed his skin, turning him from a pale Scandinavian into a golden island boy.

I just wish he would give me some answers.

As we pass some birds perched on a branch, I point out the way they’re all tagged. “All those tags have a microchip in them,” I explain. “So we can track where the birds go, who they interact with, stuff like that. We can build a pretty good picture of all the different habits of the birds.”

“That’s really cool,” he says, then tilts his head a little, thinking. “Billie, why don’t you have a degree in this stuff? Why aren’t you studying it for real?”

I bite my lip, then thinkoh, what the hell and confess to him. “I was an only child, and my mother... well, it was just me and her, and we never had the easiest relationship. And college in the US isn’t exactly cheap, and I was never smart enough for a full-ride scholarship or sporty enough to get in that way. But I would have loved to have gone, and studied ecology and conservation. God, how cool would that be?”

My face falls as I get snapped back to reality. There’s no point in dreaming about this again. “But I didn’t, so I’m here now.”

“You’ve still got time,” Jens says gently. “You’re what, twenty-three, twenty-four?”

I chuckle at his flattery. “I’m twenty-five.”

“There you go, then. You’re still young. There’s still plenty of time. What’s stopping you?”

“It’s not time that’s the issue,” I mutter.

I can’t say it doesn’t feel good to have him believe in me so wholeheartedly, but there’s no use in trying to explain. Somehow, I’d let myself forget that he clearly comes from money, and that means he’ll never understand what it’s like to have to work for everything you’ve ever had.

“You should think about it. I bet you’d be really good at it,” he keeps going, as if motivation is the thing I’m lacking.

“I would,” I say, nodding. I know more than enough to breeze through a bachelor’s by now.

“There you go, then! You should go!”

“Yeah, me and whose money?” I sigh, then wince at seeing his face fall. I don’t want him to feel bad about this, but facts are facts.

It’s not worth dwelling on.

“Look, we’re nearly there!” I say, changing the subject decisively.

I run ahead, disappearing around the corner where the path widens up. Jens crashes along behind me and comes to a sudden halt with a gasp when he sees the lake.

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It's a beautiful spot — not quite the tropical lagoon of movies, but gorgeous nevertheless. It's surrounded by greenery, huge leafy trees, birds flitting about the sky, and mammals snuffling around in the bushes. And at one edge of the lake stands the waterfall, crashing down in a white torrent that casts a sense of serenity over everything.

“Wow,” says Jens, stepping forward, looking around, mouth wide open. “This place is awesome “Don't you just want to come on vacation here like all the time?”

“You can't,” I chuckle. “You have to get a permit, remember?”

“Damn,” he frowns, almost disappointed that he can't make this a destination for the future. “I'm glad to be here now, then. Wait — is this illegal? I don't have a permit. Am I allowed to be here?”

I laugh. “Don't worry, I think they would make an exception for a guy who got shipwrecked and washed up on shore and had to be rescued by...”

“Rescued by?” He frowns, puzzled by why I stopped halfway through my sentence.

The truth is, I was about to say rescued by a beautiful woman, but somehow flirting with him feels like something I shouldn't do, even though he's gorgeous. And even though we've spent way too much time together over the last week, the chances of him — a handsome, rich guy — wanting anything to do with someone like me are very, very small.

“By someone,” I say lamely, not knowing how else to end the sentence.

Jens nods sagely, as if that's a good enough response for him, and I'm just glad it gets me off the hook.

We keep walking in silence, and I feel that stupid desire to hold his hand again. A few times, we've held hands — not in any meaningful way, but every time he's helped me up or I've guided him through the woods and our hands have entwined, sparks have flooded through my fingers.

I crush it all down. There's no point getting caught up in something that can't be.

Even if he is utterly gorgeous.

"Can I swim?" he asks as we approach the waterfall.

"You want to swim?"

"Yeah, why not? I don't mind getting my shirt wet. Unless it's not allowed. I mean, if there's, I don't know, important fish or special seaweed, or?—"

"Yes, Jens. You can swim. I'm going to catch us our dinner."

"Catchit?"

I burst into laughter. He's just so adorable like this, when he's clueless and confused.

"Yeah, dummy. A fish. You know, those things that come from the water. Please tell me you know where food comes from."

He rolls his eyes. "Yes, of course I do. I just didn't realize that would be allowed here."

I could swear that for a fraction of a second, his eyes dart down to my breasts, and I



have to stop myself from throwing him my own wanting look. He probably wasn't. He's not that kind of guy. It's just my own wishful thinking going wild.

He strips off his pants as I settle down with my net, and I stare down at the water, willing myself not to stare at him as he jumps into the lake. He swims right up to the waterfall, dives under the surface, then emerges, throwing his hands into the air. He pushes his wet eyes out of his hair, then waves at me. "This is awesome!" he yells.

I just smile back. His T-shirt is sticking to his chest, showing off his defined pecs, teasing me with the idea of his abs, his taut stomach. His muscular thighs...

This is becoming a real problem.

Fishing. I am fishing. I am not looking at Jens, standing under the waterfall, grinning back at me whenever he catches my eye. I've promised him a fish dinner, and that's what we're going to have.

He swims back over to me eventually, giving me that puppy-dog smile again. "Got anything yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Oh. How long does it usually take?"

"What — you in a rush to get back?"

He shakes his head and flops back into the water with a splash. "No! Not even a bit!"

"You'll scare the fish off with all that noise," I laugh, and cover my mouth with my hand to stop myself from giggling as he keeps splashing around to amuse me.

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“You love me really,” he winks, then dives back under the water like he doesn’t want to see how I react to the comment.

Which is good, because I react with open-mouthed shock. There’s no way he can know, can he?

And then, a fish all but jumps into my net.

I whoop for joy, which brings Jens back to the surface, blinking the water out of his eyes so he can stare at me again. “Oh! You got one!”

Quickly, I pull it out of the net and, as humanely as I can, put it out of its misery. Jens winces, but I ignore him. How else does he think we’re going to eat it?

“Does this mean we have to go now?” he asks, frowning pitifully.

“Not at all,” I grin, leaning back on the grass, tilting my face up towards the sun so I can absorb its warm rays. “Take as long as you want. We’ll go back whenever you’re ready.”

He winks at me again, then heads back out into the lake. I watch him go. I can’t pretend it isn’t a pleasant sight.

And I’d be lying if I said I wanted this to end. Sitting here in the sun, watching my new friend having the time of his life on my favorite island in the world? Yes. I could do this forever.

## CHAPTER 13

### JENSEN

It's late when we finally get back to camp. Billie carries the fish in her net, and the second we get back, she takes it into the kitchen and cuts off its head. I force myself to look as she scales it and starts filleting it. It should seem more brutal than it does, but she's so gentle as she handles it, and I find I can't look away.

Noticing me hovering, she says, "Why don't you go light the fire?"

I nod. "Okay."

"Are you sure you can manage?" she adds, and I roll my eyes.

"Yes, actually. I've learned one or two things this week."

She raises an eyebrow at me, but nods. "Go on, then. I won't be long."

I head outside and stack the logs exactly the way she showed me how to do it. I splash a little lighter fluid on them and stuff some tiny dry sticks in the gaps. Then I grin and throw a match into the pit, setting the whole thing ablaze.

Satisfied and more than a little proud, I smile.

Then Billie comes out of the cabin holding two big fillets of fish, some plates, and a skillet. She sits down next to me by the fire and smiles. "Good job."

My heart swells at the compliment, and I have to stop myself from smiling too widely in case I seem weird.

Billie places the pan on top of the fire, then carefully lowers the fish into it. It hits the metal with a sizzle and starts smoking deliciously.

“Are you okay with canned vegetables?” she asks, holding the can up to show me.

With a smile, I say, “I suppose I’m going to have to be, aren’t I?”

She grins. “Yes, you are.”

The fish crackles and browns in the pan, and we lean into one another to watch it. Billie’s shoulder brushes against mine, and an electric tingle runs all the way up my arm.

Doing my best to ignore it, I ask, “Who taught you to cook?”

She shrugs. “I mostly taught myself. You pick it up quick when you live alone. It’s not like anyone else is going to cook for me.”

“How long have you lived alone?”

She bites her lip, and for a second I think that this is going to be another one of those conversations where we both ask each other things we want to know, but neither of us is quite willing to give any answers.

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Then, quietly, like she's not quite sure what the right words are, she says, "I got my first photography gig when I was sixteen. I was young and inexperienced. It was for some modeling agency, and I knew right away that I didn't want to do that long term, so I started looking at how I could make money taking pictures of stuff I actually like. And then I fell into the scientific-research community after school, and never looked back."

"And your family?"

"What about them?" she bristles, and I know I've touched a nerve.

I should stop there, but curiosity gets the better of me. "What do they think? They must be proud."

She scoffs bitterly. "No comment. What about your family — are they proud of you?"

I take a sharp breath. This is getting dangerously close to talking about myself, which is something I don't want to do.

"Well?" Billie says expectantly.

"My parents and I have a strained relationship at the best of times," I say, figuring it can't hurt for her to hear at least some of the truth. "My brother is the favorite."

"I can't imagine why," she says teasingly. I let out a dark chuckle. If only she knew. "You're not close, then?"

“Oh, no — we live together,” I say then clamp my mouth shut hard. This is getting dangerous.

“But you don’t get along?” Billie asks, her eyebrows drawing together like she’s trying to solve a mystery.

“It’s complicated,” I say, and she nods with such understanding that it compels me to keep going. “They do their best for me, and I know they care, but they don’t really understand where I’m coming from. I’m not what they want me to be, and I don’t know how to be that person. It makes it tough.”

Billie scoffs in bitter recognition. “Too true.”

“What about you?” I ask, trying desperately to get things back on a track that’s far away from me. “Parents, siblings?”

“Just me and my mom,” she says. “She lives in Philadelphia too. But I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Oh. How come?”

She takes deep breath, and for a heartbeat I really think she’s going to do it, that she’s going to spill her soul out to me so I can hold it gently in my hands and keep all her secrets. But instead, she just turns back to the fire and pokes at the fish with a fork.

“I think this is done,” she says with a forced smile.

Yes. I definitely touched a nerve here.

And I’m dying to know more. Everyone I’ve ever met has been like me in the sense of being rich and privileged. They all have their wealthy families and camera-perfect

smiles. But you never know what's really going on behind closed doors. I'm not exactly close with that many people. I don't really have any friends.

And George isn't exactly a good example. He loves his family, and with good reason. They're awesome. His mother is one of the only people in the whole world who doesn't think I'm really annoying. Or if she does, she hides it really well.

They're all close and perfect and tell each other everything. There are no secrets in that house. The first time I met them all, it made me want to run. Everything about them was just so real, so true.

I didn't have the first clue how to deal with any of that.

But Billie, she's nothing like that. She's prickly and secretive and clearly has her own demons — and I want to know about them all.

I want to feel like I'm not the only person in the world who struggles with this whole family thing. I want to stop feeling like a bad person about it.

Carefully, she takes the pan off the fire and pokes at the fish to check it's cooked all the way through. She nods to herself as she does, then grabs the plates and serves up the food.

She offers me a plate, and I take it with a quiet thanks. Neither of us says anything as we start to eat. Instead of talking, we sit and listen to the birds, and I do my best not to stare at her.

I don't want her to know that I'm trying to memorize every inch of her body so that when we leave, I'll have something to remember her by.

## CHAPTER 14

BILLIE



*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am*

I'm almost finished eating by the time Jens speaks again. "I wish I was closer with my parents."

"I feel the same about my mom," I say softly, then add, "but there was always so much pressure." I don't think I fully meant to say it, but Jens gives me that curious look again, and there's something so real in his eyes that I blurt out the truth.

"My mom always wanted the best for me. But I was never good enough for her. She wanted too much, and we argued about it all the time — when we were still talking to each other. She doesn't like that this is my career. She thinks I'd have been better off doing, well, anything else really. I've tried to tell her that I'm seeing the world, that I'm having an amazing time. And she just can't see it. All she wants is her perfect daughter — and I have never been that, and I'm never going to be that. And it breaks my heart that she'll never get that."

Jens nods slowly, and I take a shaky breath, feeling tears prick at my eyes.

"I get it," he says, and my face must twist to give me away because he adds, "I know you think I don't. And you're right; I do come from a rich, fancy family. Too fancy, really, but being r?—"

He cuts himself off and shakes his head as if he was about to say something personal and real. It takes a second, but when I realize he's not going to continue, my heart sinks. I just opened my entire heart up to him, and it feels like he doesn't want to trust me in return.

"I've had everything that I always wanted," Jens says instead of whatever he stopped

himself blurting. “And I know that makes me lucky. I know I shouldn’t complain, but I guess... well, some part of me feels like I don’t deserve this. I’m not the perfect son my family want. I let them down. I...”

He trails off and stares at the ground like he’s trying to dig a hole with his eyes.

“You can tell me,” I say suddenly, impulsively reaching out for his hands. “Whatever secret it is you’re hiding, you can tell me.”

He scoffs, staring at the sky as if he’s looking for an answer. “I don’t have a secret.”

“Sure you don’t.”

“I don’t want you to hate me.”

“Why would I do that?”

Suddenly it feels like something is pulling us together, like the whole world’s shrinking down to a pinpoint, with us at the center, like a spotlight is shining down on us. It takes my breath away.

“I thought you already did,” he says quietly, staring into my eyes. I can’t look away. There’s something sparkling in them, something that he desperately wants to say, and without thinking, my eyes flip down to his lips.

I take a shaky breath. “You’re annoying. But I don’t think I could ever hate you.”

Time freezes for a second, and then the whole world explodes around me as Jens leans forward and presses his lips against mine.

No kiss I’ve ever had has felt like this. This is electrically charged. This is sparks and

passion.

This is perfection.

He reels away, almost pushing me back. “God, I’m sorry,” he says, staring down at his feet again. “I shouldn’t have?—”

“No,” I cut him off. “No, it’s okay.”

“It is?”

“Yes. Do it again.”

I don’t need to tell him twice. He leans in again, this time entwining our fingers deliberately. This kiss is slower, deeper, assured. He tastes like lake water and sweat and sweet fruit, and the more I kiss him, the more addicted I think I’m getting.

Growing bold, I wrap my arms around him, pushing myself closer, and almost like an instinct, he draws me in, sliding his hands down my back. “Billie,” he growls, kissing my jaw, “I want you so badly.”

“Then take me.”

“You mean it?”

His big blue eyes shine wide, and I smile, reaching out to caress his cheek. “I really mean it.”

“You have condoms here?”

I chuckle. “No, but I’m on the pill and I’m not going to give you anything.”

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“Good. I mean, obviously good, but I’m clean too. I wouldn’t want to— I mean, I wouldn’t suggest that?—”

Sensing one of his rambles coming on, I kiss him again to shut him up. There’s a fire burning inside me, and it’s not going to get doused by listening to him talking nonsense about STIs. If anything, that’s the opposite of what I want to hear right now.

What I want is for him to strip me naked and kiss me so hard I lose all ability to think coherently.

Fortunately, he gets the message. He jumps to his feet and lifts me to mine, all but sweeping me up as we stumble towards the cabin, snatching kisses in between watching where we’re going.

We make our way into my room, and he wastes no time pinning me up against the wall and sliding his hands up my shirt. His palms are warm against my belly, but I still shiver as that electric crackle spreads over my skin again. I help him get me out of my T-shirt, then feel faintly embarrassed by the fact I’m wearing a random old sports bra.

If I’d known Jens was going to see me naked today, I’d have put a little more effort in.

But he still rakes his eyes over my body like he’s looking at something precious. “You’re gorgeous,” he breathes, and a hot rush floods both to my face and in between my legs.

“No, you’re gorgeous.”

“But you haven’t even seen me yet.”

“The wet shirt left very little to the imagination.”

“You liked that, did you?”

He raises a cocky eyebrow, and I shake my head fondly. “You say that like you did it on purpose.” He shrugs, not disproving my idea, but doesn’t comment. “But,” I add, “I think I might need to see it again.”

With a grin, he slides off his shirt and throws it to the floor. And I was right. The wet shirt had given me exactly the right idea about his physique.

He’s muscular, but not in that weird, movie-star way. Instead, he just looks strong, well built and powerful. He’s streamlined. He is most definitely gorgeous.

We fumble our way out of the rest of our clothes, helping each other by undoing buttons and clasps, and by the time we fall into bed, we are completely naked and our lips are fused together. I would be happy enough to keep kissing him forever, but there’s a throbbing between my legs that I need to address.

Carefully, I take his hand and guide him to my core, and to my relief, he gets the idea quickly, his fingers tickling over my belly then drifting down. “Please,” I gasp, not wanting to wait.

As he slides his fingers into my folds and dives into my wetness, his lips capture mine again, and the sparks that have been flying between us turn into a live wire in water, exploding into a pleasure that makes me shake and cry out and curl into his body. His fingers are gentle, exploratory, and when he finds just the right place to

touch, he zones in on it, bringing me closer and closer to climax.

And when I do come, he doesn't stop. He holds me and touches me and kisses me as warm, intense pleasure floods into every nerve ending in my body.

All I can do is cling to him and gasp his name.

When he slides his fingers out of me, I'm left with a gaping void, a desperate desire for more, but almost like he can read my mind, he shuffles his position and lines his hardness up with my entrance. "Please," I whisper. "I need you inside me."

"Your wish is my command," he growls, then surges forward, connecting us in a way I barely imagined could be possible.

We entwine in perfect harmony, our bodies fitting together like a key in a lock, like two halves of a whole that never realized they were supposed to be one. I come again, clawing at his skin, and he doesn't stop, almost like he doesn't know how.

I almost wish he never had to stop.

This feeling, the crackling electricity and the smell of sweat and sex, the hair sticking to our faces and hips colliding against each other — it's all perfect.

For the first time in a long time, I feel perfect.

I really can let myself believe that Jens wants me. He's proving it with every second.

Deep in my heart, I know it without a doubt. This is true.

CHAPTER 15

JENSEN

Waking up with a girl in my arms has never felt this good.

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Billie is still asleep when I wake up, so I close my eyes, holding her against me, listening to us both breathe. It feels like our hearts must be beating in perfect synchrony.

The days we've spent together have been great, but it's been like they've been building to this the whole time. Well, maybe not this exactly, but something, anyway. To a lasting friendship, at least. Now, maybe, if I'm lucky, it might even be a romance.

My head spins at the idea. For a second, I let myself get lost in a fantasy, imagining a year or two from now, still waking up with Billie in my arms, bringing her back home and treating her to the life of a princess. Of course, she would soon learn that it's not that glamorous at all, but I wouldn't let her worry about a thing.

She would have anything she had ever dreamed of. I would give her the world if she asked.

As it is, we've got three days left before Billie's permit runs out. The finish line is racing into view and no amount of pretending is stopping that.

"Jens?" mumbles Billie, shuffling in my arms as she wakes up.

"Good morning," I say, kissing her face as best I can from the awkward vantage point I've got.

"It wasn't a dream, then," she whispers.



“No, it was better,” I whisper back.

She giggles, and the sound of it fills me with a lightness I haven’t felt in a long time. Would it even be possible to live on this island forever? I like the idea of that a lot. Me and Billie, here in blissful paradise, forever.

“How did this happen?” she says, her eyes heavy from not being fully awake yet.

“Well,” I say, pulling her closer to me again so I can nip at her throat, “when I have a beautiful woman in my bed, I usually want to give her a good time.”

With that, I let my hand roam down her body a little, feeling the soft curves of her waist, mapping them with my fingertips. This is something I want to remember.

She sighs into me, her hips bucking towards mine fractionally, and it takes all my strength not to roll us over and take her again, here and now. But I can be patient. I can take it slow.

I’m happy enough tasting the sleep on her skin as I kiss a trail down her neck. She smells divine, even after a night of sweat and sex. She smells real, like musk and wood and smoke. I want to breathe in every inch of her.

If she’d let me, I’d devour her.

I decide to push it a little further, letting my fingers make their way to her still-bare ass, barely concealing my smile at being able to touch her.

“God, Jens,” she moans. “If you keep doing that, I’m going to have no choice but to do very bad things to you.”

My grin widens, and I lean in to kiss her, savoring her warm, soft lips. “What sort of

bad things?”

“Well,” she says, pushing herself up onto her elbow and smirking wickedly down at me, letting her fingernails scratch a light trail down my chest, lighting me up like she’s plugging me in. “Last night was good, but I’m sure you can do better than that. And,” she pauses, her hand tickling its way down my body towards my hardening length, “I’m sure I can think of a way to motivate you.”

“God, Billie,” I growl, my heart pounding in raw desire. I prop myself up and lean over her, pinning her down to the bed so I can tease her nipples with my teeth, in a promise to put my mouth exactly where she wants it. “I just want to eat you all day long.”

She moans in response, a sound that’s a perfect harmony to my ears. I shuffle down her body, rolling my tongue down her belly, hungry for the taste of her wetness.

“How did I get so lucky for you to want this?” she gasps as I settle between her legs.

“You’re lucky?” I say, leaning forward to nip at her thigh in that spot that I found last night that makes her shiver. “I think you’ll find I’m the lucky one.”

“Surely you could have any girl you wanted,” she says, that self-conscious doubt forming a blush on her face.

“True, I guess. A lot of people have tried. After all, everyone thinks they want royalty.”

“What?” Billie sits up slightly, her eyebrows lowering in confusion and recognition, and I realize the moment is completely shattered. “What do you mean, royalty?”

“Not like, royalty... like, ooh, royalty,” I say, panicking. “More like, um...” I trail off

and grin weakly, flustered as I can't think of a lie good enough to put her off the trail.

She sits up straight, pulling away from me and wrapping the covers around herself. "I mean, I assumed you were rich, but I didn't realize you had royal blood. What are you — some kind of duke or something? A knight? Are they royal?"

I reach out and take her hand, probably for what's going to be the last time, and close my eyes, steeling myself for the confession I have no choice but to make. She doesn't deserve any more lies. "A prince," I say softly.

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Her mouth opens and closes again, like she's trying to comprehend what I'm telling her. She takes a shaky breath. "A prince?"

All I can do is watch as she put the pieces together, and the moment when it clicks is sickening — a flash of sudden, horrid realization crosses her face, and then she gasps, snatching her hand away in shock. "Prince Jensen?"

I close my eyes and nod. I don't know what else to do.

"As in, a thousand parties a year Prince Jensen? Slept with a million girls Prince Jensen? Doesn't care about anything Prince Jensen? Sólvéigr's biggest celebrity export Prince Jensen?" She gets more and more agitated with each sentence, shaking her head like she can't understand it.

I can only sit and watch as she thinks of every bad thing she's ever heard about me. I reach out for her hands again, but she's already flinging herself out of bed and dragging on a shirt, hiding that beautiful body from me. "I can't believe you didn't tell me!" she says, her voice loud. It's not quite shouting — there isn't enough anger for that.

It's more a total horror.

"Why would you lie about this?"

"I didn't lie... I just omitted some truth."

"A lie of omission is still a lie!"

I can see tears forming at the corners of her eyes, and more than anything I want to go and hold her, to reassure her that all of that crap she's read about me online is utter nonsense. Well, some of it's true, but most of it is exaggerated to hell.

But she's right. Anything I could say now would be a terrible defense.

"Billie," I say pleadingly, not sure what else to do.

She holds up a hand and shakes her head, her golden hair falling over her shoulders. "Please, Jensen. Stop. I think you've done enough. Thank you for last night. But I need some space."

With that she rushes out of the room, and I hear the door to the cabin slam behind her, leaving me all alone in the bed, surrounded by sheets that smell like her skin.

I guess the experiment of being normal is over.

It was fun while it lasted, but now I've been left with a gaping hole inside my chest. One that I know will never be filled.

And it's all my fault.

## CHAPTER 16

### BILLIE

I get dressed quickly and head out. To my relief, I don't bump into Jens — Jensen — in the kitchen or the communal area and I manage to get out before he can see me.

I don't know why all this feels like such a betrayal when I probably should have recognized him to begin with. I don't really follow celebrity news, but Prince Jensen

of Sólveigr is hard to avoid. Really, the mention of Sólveigr should have tipped me off straightaway, but the terrible lie of his name being Jens should have sold me on it.

How could I have been so stupid as to not see right through that? The more I think about it, the more I realize how often there was a sense in the back of my mind that he was familiar to me. And it's because he was.

And like an idiot, I slept with him.

And like an even bigger idiot, I think I've caught feelings for him. Or at least the him I thought I was getting to know. The one who wasn't a prince. I could tell he was keeping a secret, but this?

I've never felt so dumb in my life.

I don't know where I'm going, and I didn't bring my camera, so I spend an hour just walking, trying to clear my head. Automatically, like they're thriving on the irony, my legs take me right to the sea turtle nest.

When I realize where I am, I crumple to the floor, crushed by the flood of emotion that surges through me. Tears flow down my face as I think about Jensen and I lying side by side, wondering if the way we were feeling might be more than what we were admitting.

I guess I was just a fun time. Just something for him to do while he was away from reality.

Even as I'm having that thought, it feels too cruel. I've heard hundreds of stories about the Prince of Parties, and I guess part of the reason I didn't recognize him was because he's nothing like that, not really.

He's ridiculous and unassuming, inquisitive and sharp. He's polite and gentle and so, so hot. It's hard to imagine the bumbling Jens I've come to know being so reckless and callous. I can imagine him being a massive idiot — that doesn't take much of a stretch of the imagination at all.

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But for him to be thoughtless and unkind...

I don't know what to think anymore.

Which means it's time to stop thinking. I wish I'd brought my camera after all. At least then I could throw myself back into work. But I don't want to risk going back because I don't want to see Jensen. Even less do I want to speak to him.

If my best friend Ella were here right now, she'd be having a ball. She's the kind of person who does keep up with celebrity gossip, and often she's the one who tells me about TV or sports or movie stars. She's always telling me how out of date I am, and she's right.

It's not easy to keep up with all that ephemera when you're busy traveling the world. And I know which one I'd rather do.

If she knew I had just slept with Jensen — Prince Jensen!

I hug my knees into my chest, staring out at the ocean. Maybe it would be worth taking him home early. It's not like I want to cut my trip short, but the idea of another few days here with him is hardly appealing.

Eventually, the sun makes my shoulders feel like they're blistering, and all the tears in me have been spent. I scrub my eyes, breathe the fresh, salt air in deep, and make a decision. I have to go back to work.

And to do that, I need my camera.



When I get back to the cabin, it's quiet. Maybe Jensen has gone out too. I would like that. That means I don't have to look at him.

I left my camera in the communal area, and I rush to snatch it up. There's still no sight or sound of Jensen, so I fumble to grab my case and head back out into the wilderness.

And then, the second I step out the door, he's there.

"Billie." He smiles, and it's so hard not to cave to him here and now.

"Please, Jensen. Don't."

"Don't what?" he says, getting up from where he's crouched by the fire pit.

By the looks of it, he's been out getting stuff for a fire. I guess he wants to try and do things for me, like he's trying to apologize. He really is like a child. It's as if he thinks that if he finds and shows me a shiny enough pebble, it'll make everything all better.

It doesn't matter that he's right. At the moment, I need time to process everything that's happened.

"Don't give me that look. I don't want to talk right now."

He takes another step towards me, his hands slightly outstretched, then he hesitates and falls back. "Okay," he says quietly. "You're going to take photos?"

"Yes."

For a second, I think he's going to ask if he can come too, and I grit my teeth in

preparation to say no, but then he just smiles again. “Okay. We can talk later?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

He nods in acceptance, and I can’t help but notice the sad glimmer behind his eyes.

It would be so, so easy to forgive him. If I did, I could fall back into his arms and pretend he still wanted me. I’m sure he would take me — it’s not like he has any other girls to flirt with on this island. We could have a beautiful island fling. It could be passionate and perfect and intimate. It could be sunsets together and swimming in the lake. It could be sea turtles and forest walks and paradise.

Suddenly it clicks. That’s why I’m so mad with him. It isn’t really the lie, and I think I do believe he meant everything he said about me. It’s not the fact that he’s a prince that bothers me.

It’s the fact that I thought we were making something that could last beyond our little slice of heaven. And all along, he knew that could never be.

Before he can say anything else, I grimace at him and march back off into the forest. I don’t know how much longer I can remain strong if he keeps giving me that look.

Usually, the best part of my job is the fact that I get to spend great portions of the day all by myself, sitting still, thinking about all sorts of things. Which is the opposite of what I want to be doing today. I need to find something that’s going to engage me. I need to take some pictures that make me focus on that, and that alone.

So, I head off to search for some insects. They always require concentration to find.

I more or less succeed as I waste time through the afternoon. I stumble across some pretty spiders, spend an hour chasing down a butterfly, and follow a buzzing all the

way to a nest of bees.

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When I finally get back, I open the door to the cabin very tentatively. I can hear the creaking floorboards of another person in here, but Jensen is nowhere to be seen. Thank God. That means he must be safely hidden away in his room.

I sling my camera down on the table and go through to the kitchen. On the stove is a pot, and I sigh, thinking Jensen must have left dirty dishes out. Unbelievable. I go one day knowing who he really is, and already he's treating me like a maid.

With a frown, I approach the stove, and that's when I spot the note. I pick it up and squint at the curly handwriting.

Thought you might be hungry when you got in. J.

I stifle a gasp, not wanting him to hear anything that might make him think he's won. Damn him for being so thoughtful. Damn him for being so kind.

Damn him for stealing my heart and refusing to give it back.

## CHAPTER 17

### JENSEN

"Oh! I'm sorry," I say, throwing up both hands as I nearly crash straight into Billie as she comes out of the kitchen. I take a big step back to give her some space. She smiles awkwardly at me, and the air prickles with tension.

Neither of us quite know how to act around each other anymore. I don't blame her for

not wanting to associate with me since she found out who I was. After all, she's right. I did lie to her, and I am notorious for my conquests.

She probably thinks that I slept with her just for something to do.

I'm not even sure I could tell her that that wasn't true and truly believe myself.

But it wasn't just that. Yes, the sex was great, and she is so attractive, with her pouting lips and perfect breasts, but there was something in our relationship that was unlike anything I've ever felt before.

If she would just give me five minutes to try and explain that to her, maybe she would understand that I wasn't taking advantage of her. If she would let me, I think I could love her.

But that ship has sailed and the bridge has burned, and I don't want to push her into doing anything she doesn't want to do.

So, all day yesterday and all day today we've been doing our strange little dance to avoid each other. We're being polite enough to keep things civil, but we don't quite know what to say either.

I don't think there is much more to say.

The fact of the matter is I've betrayed her completely. And she's never going to forgive me for that.

This isn't at all how I thought my stay on the island would go. For a moment, I was under the delusion that our last day here in paradise would be spent in united bliss, me and her out taking photos and being together — well, her taking photos and me being completely useful as a camera holder. And I wouldn't mind it because that's

basically the whole point of me now. To hold stuff and watch how it's really done.

I was enjoying it for a time. But I suppose it could never have lasted.

This is what I get for trying to be normal.

As she makes her way into the communal area, she passes me on the sofa. She's clearly on her way out, but I stop her. "Billie? Sorry to interrupt, but will you be back for dinner?" I give her my best smile to try and win her over. I would love one last meal with her.

Instead, she shrugs. "I don't know. Why?" Her tone is harsher than I hope she means it to be, but it still pains me to hear her utter disdain for me.

"It's just, you know, I could make something. If you wanted. You know, take the stress off a little bit."

She shrugs again and gives me a thin smile. "That would be good, I guess," she says. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I beam. It's not much, but it's more than anything she's given me these last couple of days, so I'll take it.

I miss how easy we used to feel. I miss the way things were when we were friends.

Billie heads out, and I have no doubt she'll be gone all day, on a joint mission of avoiding me like the plague and trying to make the most of her last day on the island.

After all, she has a real job to do.

I entertain myself for a while by browsing through a couple of the books on the shelf.

I've read quite a few of them now, and I'm planning to buy my own copies when I get home.

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Eventually, I get bored of being inside and decide to take a walk on the beach. As I get up, I notice Billie's laptop lying on the table, and it calls to me. I stare at it for a long moment, almost tempted to open it up and see if I can guess her password. I just want to look at some more of her pictures.

But she already hates me enough right now. The last thing I need is for her to come home and catch me hacking into her computer. If she saw me doing that, there's no chance she would ever forgive me.

So I resist temptation and head out into the open.

It's another gorgeous summer's day on Mostaza. The sky is slightly hazy from the heat, but it's a brilliant blue, washed through with clouds that look like little strands of cotton candy. To my left and my right is a beautiful, pale beach with the softest sand I've ever felt, and behind me is the loud, thick forest that holds so many creatures that I could never have imagined seeing.

And then, before me, is the great expanse of the ocean.

As far as I can see is water, the clear waves breaking on the shore, the constant white noise of the tide causing something to settle inside me, to grow calm.

If only I could stay like this forever.

I walk down the beach until I lose sight of the cabin. Like this, I could easily pretend I was the only person left on the planet. Like it was just me and the sea and the insects screaming in the forest. Oh, and the turtles of course.



The thing is, I don't want it to be just me. I want Billie to be here too. Why did I have to screw things up so much?

When I get back, my skin is hot from the sun and I feel itchy and uncomfortable. Much as I might like the idea, I don't think I'm designed for this kind of life full-time. I miss my phone too much.

I swing into the kitchen and see that the clock reads four thirty. Billie's not back yet, and she'll be hungry from her long day, so I decide to take my opportunity to make her one last dinner, just as I promised I would.

I'm pretty much a pro when it comes to operating a stove now, and I've been paying attention to her for the last two weeks. I've noticed that her favorite is the chicken casserole, so I rummage through the cupboards looking for a can.

I really want to make her smile again.

"Aha!" I exclaim as I spot a can of casserole right at the back of the cupboard. Grinning, I hook my finger under the pull tab, rip off the lid, and dump it into a saucepan.

I stir the pot, humming to myself as it begins to bubble. I don't dare to leave the kitchen while it's cooking, afraid that it might set fire or explode or something. It would be typical of me — can't start a fire when I want to, but when I don't... It's not worth thinking about.

I'm going to make Billie dinner, and that's going to make her smile.

I guess I mistimed it, though, because she's nowhere to be seen when the casserole is ready. I'm tempted to wait for her to get back to eat, thinking it might be nice to share a meal for our last day together.

But I don't want to put her in an awkward position, so I scoop my portion out into a bowl and eat slowly, staring off into the horizon as I do. I can only drag it out for so long, though. It looks like she won't be back anytime soon.

I get up to put my bowl in the sink, and that's when I hear her footsteps outside.

I freeze.

Does she want to see me? Of course not. I want to see her, more than anything. But she wants space. I have to respect that.

Quickly, I rinse out my bowl and scurry away to my room. We miss each other by a hair, because the second I cross the threshold to my room, I see her in the crack of my door as I shut it, entering the kitchen.

And it's probably my imagination, but I could swear I hear her say "Thank you."

## CHAPTER 18

### BILLIE

I decide to take us back first thing in the morning on the day my permit runs out. If we set off early and make good time, we should hit port early tomorrow. Quick is good. That means I can minimize the amount of time I have to spend with Jensen.

The worst thing about all this is the way I almost want to forgive him. The more I've thought about it, the harder it is to stay angry. Sure, it's been awkward the last few days, but he's been as polite and kind as ever. God, he's even cooking without being prompted. Not so long ago, that was something I never thought I would see.

It's like he's been trying to get me to forgive him. And though all his efforts aren't

the reason I keep wanting to, I can't pretend they're not helping. But no — the real reason I want to forgive him is because I can't quite reconcile that image of Jensen that everyone's told me about with the one who's been sitting right in front of my face for the last two weeks.

That Jensen is a party maniac, the kind of guy you hear a dumb story about and roll your eyes at. That Jensen is an idiot, aspoiled brat, a kid from a rich family who thinks he owns the world.

But the Jens I know? How can he be the same man?

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I wake him up on the morning of our departure by knocking hard on his door a bunch of times. I open it slowly and peer around it to see a pair of groggy, puffy eyes staring up at me. “It’s already time to go?” he groans.

“Yes. Get your things.” He blinks at me until he comprehends then pulls the covers up over his head. “You’ve got five minutes or I’m leaving without you.”

I close the door behind me to give him some dignity as he gets dressed, then spend the next few minutes pacing the living room, worrying that I’ve forgotten something. I haven’t. I packed last night, and I’ve double-checked everything about four times now.

Passport, laptop, camera. Nothing else really matters.

To Jensen’s credit, he does emerge five minutes later, clean and dressed. I’m glad he didn’t have anything to pack because I don’t imagine he’s much of a night-before packer. I’m not sure he ever does his own packing at all.

“Morning,” he mumbles, looking distinctly like he hasn’t slept at all.

“You ready to go?”

He shrugs an affirmative. That’s probably the best I’m going to get, so I don’t bother pushing it any further.

“We have a little time for breakfast, if you want.”

“Nah, I’m not hungry.”

“Okay,” I say, raising an eyebrow and feeling like the mother of a petulant child.

“But I’m not listening to you if you complain about it later.”

“Okay,” he says, not even putting up the slightest bit of fight, which seems kind of strange for him.

Actually, his whole aura seems off. Subdued, like he’s bummed out about something. Which is almost definitely wishful thinking on my part, but the idea that he’s sad to leave fills me with a kind of fond feeling.

And it lets me believe it might be that he’s going to miss.

Without a word, I lead him out to the boat, my big rucksack slung over my shoulders and my small one strapped to my chest. I’m waiting for the comment, to tell me I look like a turtle or an idiot, but nothing comes. He just gives me a funny little smile and follows me.

Just like that, the connection between us has snapped.

When we get to the boat, I throw my bags on board, then gesture for Jensen to get on. He looks between me and the boat, then, with all the grace of a newborn deer, drags himself aboard. It’s all limbs and flailing, and when he finally flops onto the deck, he grins up at me like he just performed a great feat.

I shake my head at him and try my best not to smile back.

I nimbly climb aboard and begin raising the anchor. I did all my checks and inspections yesterday to make sure we were good to go, so I don’t have much to do today. “Make yourself at home in the cabin,” I say, gesturing to the small door that

leads below deck. He gives me a dubious look.

This is not a big boat. I wouldn't want to keep two people on here for any longer than a few days. It's simply not designed for that. But one person can get along just fine.

I enjoy it, actually. Sure, it's cramped and you can barely sit up in bed, and the control deck is only just covered from the elements, but on a good day, alone at sea, I can be perfectly content.

So, as long as Jensen stays below deck and leaves me to sail, this should work fine.

As long as I stop having thoughts about him down there, alone in my bed. The single bed, the one that is good for one person, but that would require snuggling up real close if there were two of you...

That part of all of this is over. I have to let it go.

It's evening by the time I see Jensen again. I've been enjoying the day, snacking from the little lunchbox I prepared. The sun is just dipping below the horizon, making the whole ocean blush a rosy pink when Jensen pops his head out from the cabin.

"Stupid question," he says sheepishly, "but what's for dinner?"

I want to snapfigure it out for yourself, but I don't. "There should be some protein bars and snacks in my backpack. Feel free to look. Sorry — there won't be anything better until we hit land."

"That's okay." I'm expecting him to retreat back under the deck, but he lingers like he's trying to formulate something to say. "Can I use your phone? Just to text my friend George. I feel bad; he'll have been worrying."

“Sure. It’s in my bag. You might not get signal, though.”

“That’s okay. Are we still on track to arrive by morning?”

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“So long as we don’t hit any adverse weather, we should do.”

He nods once, then blurts, “Where are you going to sleep?”

I shrug. “I wasn’t really planning on it.”

“You can come down here if you want.”

“With you?” I say, my heart in my mouth. I should be dead set against this. Shouldn’t I?

But if that’s what Jensen wants, he doesn’t admit it. “Whatever. We can swap, if you want?”

This is the kind of moment you have in dreams, those dreams where the sun is setting and the thick light leads you to make foolish, foolish love, alone and adrift on the ocean. Our eyes meet, lingering, that magnetic pull almost drawing my body towards his without asking.

But we’ve been there. Whatever my heart wants, I shouldn’t listen.

“It’s okay,” I say, looking away. “I was planning on being here all night anyway. Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh. Okay.” He hesitates a second longer, then slumps, as if he just lost his last chance. “Good night, then.”



He disappears before I can say anything to him.

I spend the rest of the night awake and alone, thinking about him.

The dawn comes and goes, and I assume he's sleeping through it. I kind of want to go and wake him up, just so he can see how gorgeous the land on the horizon looks as the sun crests over it. But I also don't think I can handle another conversation like last night again, so I stay put.

Jensen must sense some change in the waves beneath us because he comes out of hiding just as we're coming into land. "Did you see the sunrise?" he asks, then shakes his head. "Of course you did. It was amazing, wasn't it?"

I allow myself a smile at the idea of him staring out of the porthole. "Yes, it was. We're about to weigh anchor."

"Right."

I force my face into a light smile, and with as little emotion as I can manage, say, "Well, then, you'll be home soon. You can go right back to your life. You can forget all about this torment."

"Yeah," he mutters uncertainly, and I can feel another one of his moments of sincerity coming on.

Quickly, I say, "So I should check in with the port, let them know we're coming. Make sure there's a place for us."

I duck back into the control deck and pick up the communicator. It's a lie — they definitely do know I'm coming — but Jensen doesn't know that. This felt like a solid, important reason not talk to him, even if it is a lame excuse.

But the tension was rising again, and it was getting too awkward to handle. Even now, watching him sit on deck, looking out at the sea is too much to handle. Everything about Jensen is too much to handle.

Reality is setting in, for both of us.

We are never going to see each other again.

I can't tell if I should be heartbroken or relieved.

As expected, when we pull into the dock at San Juan, someone is waiting for us. I wave to him, and frown when he doesn't wave back. He seems confused, or upset, which is weird.

And it all makes sense the second we step out onto the dock, as a million photographers and journalists descend on us.

Instinctively I cover my face, cowering behind Jensen who, by his own instincts, has reached out as if to shield me. I would have felt something about it if I wasn't painfully overwhelmed by all the people here to see us.

Well, it's all for Jensen, really. They have no interest in me, I'm sure.

Or at least they didn't until now.

"How did they know you'd be here?" I hiss, leaning in to him.

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*Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 6:34 am*

He slaps both hands over his face. “God, Billie, I’m so sorry. They must have tapped George’s phone. I have no idea how else they would have found out.”

“Jensen! Prince Jensen!” the press clamor. “You’re alive!”

“That I am,” he grins, and suddenly I see him. This is the smooth, cool guy everyone thinks they know. No longer is he Jens, the sweet, bumbling man I’ve been getting to know over the last two weeks.

This is a prince — who knows everyone wants him.

“Jensen, how did you survive your ordeal? Are you okay? Have you got any comments?”

He holds up both of his hands, moving in front of me. “I’m okay, thank you. I’ll issue a full statement later on, but in short, I’ve been very fortunate to find a good friend who was willing to help me out. No further questions, please. We’ve had a long journey.”

To nobody’s surprise, that does absolutely nothing to stop the press attention. He looks back over his shoulder at me and quietly says, “I’ll get you out of this. Trust me?”

Frozen in shock, all I can do is nod. Because for all that’s gone between us, I am certain I can trust Mr. Media Scandals to get me away from all of this.

He takes me by the hand, and then rushes at the crowd, bulldozing his way through.

The ranks of journalists and fans close around us, and I gasp for breath, feeling like I'm being crushed, but Jensen squeezes my hand as if to tell me not to worry. As if he's telling me we'll be all right.

In this moment, I let myself believe it.

He pushes us through the masses, and once we're on the other side, he releases my hand and turns back to wave for the cameras. There he is, in prince mode again.

And here I am, standing next to him, getting caught on film.

I think I'm going to be sick.

My stomach churning, I turn on my heel, ducking away from the cameras and rushing in the exact opposite direction of everyone else. Jensen follows me, his footsteps heavy on the wooden jetty. "Wait, Billie, please. I'm sorry. Let me just?"

"Save it, Jensen," I hiss, doing my best to keep it together. I can just see the headlines—Jensen in a fight with his island girlfriend—and I want no part in it. "I don't care."

"Please, Billie, you know I never meant for them to find me. I didn't want it to be like this."

"I know," I say, pulling back, worried he's going to try and take my hand again.

But he doesn't. Instead, he just sighs. "Okay... well, thanks for everything," he says. "I'll always remember this, and you."

It should be sweet, but it sounds more like the kind of thing you say to your favorite teacher at the end of a class rather than something genuine and heartfelt to the girl you... fell in love with? Had a fling with? Used for a few days?

Whatever. My head is spinning, and I'm painfully aware of the journalists still watching us from a distance. I guess Jensen is too, because we're both rigid, frozen to the spot. And I guess he thinks he's protecting me, which should be sweet, in a way.

But the thing is, I don't need protecting from anyone, and I definitely don't need it from him. "Great, okay. Goodbye, Jensen. Enjoy the rest of your life."

I make sure to bump into him with my shoulder as I pass him, and when he calls after me, I don't turn back around. I clench my fists and I don't look back.

I'm terrified that if I look back, I'm going to launch myself into his arms and do something stupid.

Instead, I march all the way back to the bus station, my mind reeling. On the boat, he seemed to be begging for attention, for one last chance, and then, all of a sudden, it's like a switch flipped. Like he stopped caring at all.

I stand, pacing with my arms folded as I wait for the bus. When it comes, I board it in a trance, taking a seat and staring blankly out of the window. I need a shower. A long, hot shower and a long, deep sleep. Two things the hotel will be able to offer. I've stayed there before, so I know that for a fact.

And that really is the plan, and it's all going so well — until I actually step into the shower and burst into tears.

Damn it. Damn him. Why can't I get him out of my head?

This hotel can provide me with everything, it seems, except the one thing I really want. The one thing I'm never, ever going to have.

After all, I didn't even get his number.

CHAPTER 19

JENSEN

“I think it’s time to get out now, Your Highness,” says Anders, looking at me with a level stare in the rearview mirror.

Anders has been our driver for as long as I can remember. To me he’s about a thousand years old even though he can’t be much more than sixty, and he is the greatest man in the world. When I was a kid, he would take me for ice cream and always treated me with absolute kindness. Deep lines form a network of a life lived over his face, his hair thin and white. His eyes are a bright blue, and he has a smile that always makes me feel better.

But Anders can only do so much.

Nothing can prepare me for the way my parents are about to react. Not even Anders can protect me from this wrath that’s about to get thrown at me. The one thing they made me swear never to do was make our family look stupid.

And lo and behold, guess what I’ve gone and done!

Not only about the original reason I ran away — the paparazzi’s fabricated pregnancy scandal — but now everyone’s spinning rumors about Billie as well, which is the exact opposite of what I want. If she wasn’t already furious with me, this will definitely have ruined any chance of our friendship lasting. I spent the entire flight home thinking about her.

I hope she’s okay now. I hope everyone wants to buy her photos. I really, really hope

that the press aren't bothering her.

I hate those guys more than I can say.

Anders smiles at me again. He knows as well as I do that I'm about to get the worst yelling-at I have ever had. They can't exactly ground me. I'm a full-grown adult, after all. But this time I'm willing to admit I screwed up, at least.

Maybe that'll count for something.

"I'll see you later," I say with a grimace.

"May the stars have mercy on you," Anders says softly. It's a Sólveigan phrase that we use to wish people luck, and right now it feels more appropriate than ever.

I get out of the car, my limbs heavy with trepidation and bone-deep fatigue. I barely slept on the plane, and I doubt I'll sleep much tonight either. I may be back in my own bed, in my own clothes, in my own home, but there will be something missing.

Someone.

At least I'll be able to eat some real food. I might have screwed up, but my parents can hardly send me to bed with no supper.

We're at one of the smaller stately homes in our possession, Redwall House. It's called that because of the bricks that were used. Here in Sólveigr, we have an abundance of deep red clay. So much so that most of our historically important wars are called something like the Red Battle because of how often soldiers would get completely covered in the stuff.

It doesn't look that much like blood when it's on clothes, but I confess I do enjoy the



poetic license.

Slowly, I drag myself to the drawing room. I had a chance to freshen up slightly on the jet, and someone brought some fresh clothes for me, but I still really want to shower and sleep and eat. My hand shaking, I grip the ornate doorknob and twist it until it clicks. I let the door swing open, watching it go and steeling myself for what's next.

My parents are both there, standing waiting for me, staring as I step forward towards them. "Hi," I say nervously.

"Jensen," says my mother, shaking her head. "Maybe one day you will listen to us when we speak."

"I'm really sorry," I start, but my father cuts me off by holding his hand up.

"How many times, Jensen? No pregnancy drama. We've been tolerant of your other antics, but this really is going too far. How many times do you need to be told?"

"I know," I say, hanging my head like a naughty kid. "And I'm sorry. But if it helps, it's not true."

"No," says my mother with a hard glint in her eye. "It doesn't really help. We've given you so many chances to behave appropriately, to act in the way your birthright dictates. We've let you behave like a fool and make a mockery of yourself, but to bring this scandal upon us all... Why do you still insist on acting like this?"

"You're old enough to know better, aren't you?" adds my father, trying and not really succeeding to soften to blow of my mother's words.

"Yeah. I don't know," I mumble.

“How many more chances do you need?” asks my mother, her face crumpling in that way it always does when she’s disappointed. “When are all your antics finally going to be enough for you?”

There’s a long pause, then I ask quietly, “Can I say something?” It’s better not to make assumptions and speak when I’m not supposed to. That’s something I’ve finally learned after years of getting it wrong.

My father nods slowly, and I take a deep breath. “Okay, so I screwed up. No, the rumor wasn’t true, but it’s my fault that I’ve lived in a way that meant people believed it. But listen; I won’t need any more chances after this. I promise. I know what you’re going to say next — that I’m useless or whatever, and I don’t deserve this title — and that’s probably true. But I guess there’s an opportunity here, isn’t there? To go and talk to some journalists and promise to be better. And the thing is, I want to be. I will be.”

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My parents stare at me like they can't believe what they're hearing. But they don't say anything, so I keep going. "I really mean it this time. I can't promise I'll be perfect. I don't really know what I'm doing, but I'm tired of this life I'm living. I don't want to be Jensen the party boy anymore. I want to actually do something useful with my titles, with my life. And I think I need help to get there."

My mother's face twists into something I can't comprehend, and my heart pounds in my chest. Maybe I am about to get grounded after all.

Father takes a step towards me. "Jens," he says, and I clench my fists to stop myself from wincing because the last person to call me that was Billie.

Even she didn't believe I could be better in the end. If nothing else, even if she won't see it, I want to prove myself to her.

"I do not want to be angry with you, my son. I want you to make us proud. What is it that's given you this change of heart?"

"Don't tell us it was a girl," Mother says sourly.

I decide not to mention Billie, even though they will both have seen the photos. Assuming there are photos. I haven't dared to look.

"It wasn't," I lie. "It was just, I don't know. Being out there in nature. It made me see that, like, there's a whole world, isn't there? All this time I've been partying and—" I cut myself off before I say trying to get your attention because that would only go down like a lead balloon. "What I mean is... that's something people do, isn't it?"

When they're like us? I've seen it before, famous people and stuff — they go on boats and write songs and make normal people look at animals or trees or people in cocoa mines... or farms?"

"Jensen," my father says gently, reaching out to touch me on the shoulder. "Are you telling us you want to start doing conservation work?"

"Yes!" I say, glad that he understood the point of my word vomit.

Please don't let this be the moment they say no.

"You mean it?" asks my mother.

I nod. "I know it's unexpected, but yes. I mean it."

"Then let us see how we can help you," she says. "I'm sure there are some scientists who would be eager for royal endorsement."

"Wait, but — really?" I blink in surprise, my mouth moving before my brain catches up.

They liked the idea?

"You're still in trouble, mind you," says my father. "When a scandal breaks out — whether it's true or not — it is your duty to stick around and answer to your people. I still can't begin to understand why you thought running off to a desert island was a good idea."

"It wasn't a desert island," I say without thinking, and bite my lip to stop myself blurting anything else.

They both give me a raised eyebrow. “But if you’re serious about this, then yes. We will help you. It’ll be good for you to put your brain to something useful.”

I get another lecture about etiquette and behaving after that, but I barely hear it. They actually responded positively to my idea. They actually want me to do it?

I can hardly believe what I’m hearing.

After I get excused, I go up to my bedroom and flop down on the bed. I call George on his new number, using all the codewords we’ve developed over the years just in case someone has decided to hack him again. As I’ve been reminded lately, the press are demons.

I tell George about my plans, and how shocked I was that my parents supported them. We talk for hours, but the whole time I can’t stop thinking about how much I want to tell Billie. I tell George all about her, and he tells me off for not getting her number.

But he doesn’t understand. She would never have wanted that.

I want to tell her everything. But I let her down.

I let her go. And I regret it more than anything.

## CHAPTER 20

### BILLIE

Usually I enjoy staying in a hotel after one of my trips, relaxing back into modern life without thinking about work for a few days, but this time felt different. With two days to burn before my flight back to Philly, I knew I would have to occupy my time somehow.

The day after arriving in San Juan, I treated myself to a fancy breakfast in the café on the corner, then headed back to my room, opened up my laptop and dove into work.

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I spent much of that first day editing my photos and contacting clients. Dr. Matthews — the woman I had been emailing before I went away — had sent me several more messages, and to my relief she was still really excited about my work.

As soon as I'd finished it, I sent her one of my sample images along with a full list of the species I could identify that I took photos of. There were a few birds I snapped that I didn't recognize, and I'm hoping there are some scientists somewhere who will give me the answers.

By the second day, the work has slowed down, but that's okay because my flight is in the evening, and I can occupy my mind with getting to the airport. I have a taxi booked, but I've had a lot of bad luck with taxis before, so I made sure to give myself plenty of time.

When I step out onto the street to wait for my driver, evening is falling. It's hot and muggy, and cars are racing past on the street in front of me. With any luck, the traffic won't be too bad, but I'm not going to hold my breath.

I stand on the corner, sweating and bouncing my weight from foot to foot. At exactly six thirty p.m., the driver calls me, and I answer the phone in Spanish, relieved that he seems to be on time. He pulls up a second later, and proceeds to talk my ear off the whole way to the airport.

Mostly, I nod and agree. My Spanish is pretty good, but being conversational in a local dialect is a whole other matter.

Fortunately, there's AC in the airport, but the line for check-in is unbelievably long.

I'm so tired that all I want to do is sleep, and standing here in this line is really not helping.

Looking at all these people, wondering where they're going, I can't help but think about Jensen. I bet he got a private jet back home. I bet he got personally escorted. I bet he didn't have to suffer his way through a sweaty security line like this.

I've done my best to avoid news outlets for the last few days, not daring to catch a glimpse of the celebrity-gossip segments in fear of finding my own face plastered all over the pages. Maybe that's narcissistic, expecting to see myself as the center of all gossip. There's a chance that nobody is paying me even the slightest bit of attention, which is the way I would like it.

But then again, even though I don't really use social media and don't really go on the internet that much, I've still seen the articles about Jensen. I've still heard the rumors. I know exactly how crazy people online go for speculating about his love life.

A couple of years ago, they posted a list, a year's review of Jensen's girlfriends from the last twelve months. It probably wasn't remotely true, and I imagine it was quite hurtful to everyone involved, but people were talking about it for months afterwards.

The press made it sound like he had a new girl every month and didn't care what happened to the last one. And just to rub salt into the wound, they gave each girl a rating to really emphasize the point that they were awful.

Now I've met him, I feel surer than ever that the carousel of girlfriends can't be fully true and must come from extrapolation of pictures of him with women, but I guess I'll never know the whole truth.

And I hate that it's happening to me.



Finally I step up to the counter, and the woman behind it squints at me. “Hello, how are you?” I say, pushing my passport forward.

“Do I know you?” she asks as she takes my documents, then squints at my passport as if that might give her some answers.

“I don’t think so,” I say with an awkward chuckle.

She scans my passport, then frowns at me. “Hang on — aren’t you that girl who rescued the prince?”

“No,” I lie quickly, hoping my tone doesn’t give me away. “That wasn’t me. I must just look like her, I guess.”

We both chuckle awkwardly again, and she finishes checking me in, not quite sure what to say next after embarrassing herself. At least she believed me. That’s something.

And I guess that’s all the answer I really need to my curiosity. I am all over the papers.

Goddamn him! If people start recognizing me, it’s going to be intolerable. I’m a keep-to-myself kind of girl. I don’t go out much. I’m fun, but I’m private. The last thing I need is to be associated with the Prince of Parties.

Even though I sleep for most of the flight, I still fall straight into bed when I get home. I’m so tired that I can’t bring myself to even think about doing anything else.

My traitorous mind summons dreams of Jensen, though. They’re distant and vague, but they’re of him, of Mostaza, of smiling at birds and swimming shirtless. Of laughing together in bed. Of kisses I wish I didn’t desire.

I wake up sometime in the afternoon the next day, jet lag catching me completely and biting me. My head's pounding and my eyes feel bone-dry when I crack them open. All I can do is lie there and groan. Dehydrated, I conclude.

I'm still in my pants and shirt from yesterday, so I drag myself out of bed, strip them off and put a hoodie on before heading to the bathroom. The AC in my unit is incredibly effective, so I can wear a hoodie even in the depths of summer.

Once I've washed my face and brushed my teeth, I feel a little better. My head still hurts, though, so I drag myself to the kitchen, rummage through the cupboards for an ibuprofen, then pour myself a glass of water. I down it with some water, then find an apple in the fridge.

It's bland, with a vague taste of chemicals, and it makes me long for the fresh, juicy fruit I ate back on Mostaza.

It's only after I've eaten and had a moment to myself that I check my phone. Not being on social media means I can often go all day without looking at it, which is a habit I'm glad to have. It does mean that sometimes people get upset, because I don't reply straightaway, but really that's their problem. If they can't handle waiting an hour for something not important, I think they need to look at themselves.

There are a bunch of unread emails, and a few texts from my friend Ella. I smile as I read them, and text with a promise to call her later.

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But for now, work.

I take a seat in my office, put all thoughts of Jensen out of my head, and open up my photos. Yes. I can keep myself busy all day like this. I won't think about anything else at all.

## CHAPTER 21

### JENSEN

I wake with a start, my book falling to the floor with a thud. I stare down at it and curse, blinking the sleep out of my eyes. I've lost my page now. And I've probably ruined the spine. Ugh.

It was pretty interesting, though — it was all about the fauna of the Arctic, written by a professor who wants to protect the world from the stupidity of humanity. And it turns out we really are very stupid.

This is a guy who's spent his entire life researching ways that we can help save the animals and the ice sheets that are melting more and more every year. It's alarming, actually, to see all the statistics laid out like this.

The more I read, the more I want to do something to help. And I have been reading a lot, lately, trying to absorb as much knowledge as quickly as I can.

Because as a prince, I get lucky. Being a prince means I have a platform, which means people will listen to me even if they shouldn't. Up until now, my position has

basically been to entertain people across the world with my dumb exploits, but finally, I've found my purpose.

I've realized what I'm supposed to be doing, who I am supposed to be. I've seen a way to put my voice to a good use — and I'm sure as hell going to do it.

What I haven't realized yet is how to stop my stupid brain from fixating on stuff. I can more or less ignore it in the day, but every night I have dreams that are full of Billie and the island. Every time I close my eyes, she's there — I see her smile, the curve of her body, the way she rolled her eyes at me when I did something dumb.

Which was all the time.

Okay, so maybe I am still thinking about her way too much. But what else am I meant to do?

It would have been great if I'd managed to get a better sleep, but it's going to have to be what it is for today, because I have places to be. All my sleep has been pretty strange and disturbed lately, so this isn't exactly unusual.

Having to get up before nine a.m. is, though.

I'm going to a talk today, by a guy who wrote a book about the creatures of Sólveigr, and how they relate to animals in the rest of Europe. The book was really fascinating, and I reached out to him — Dr. Schröder — to ask if I could come to his talk and speak to him.

Happily for me, he said yes.

Unhappily, I have to leave the house in the next fifteen minutes or I'm going to be late.

Anders drives me to Filgenn, our capital city, where the talk is happening. It's part of a bigger scientific conference that's going on right now, but Dr. Schröder is part of the more public-facing side, so hopefully I'll be able to understand what he's talking about.

I arrive at the lecture hall ten minutes early, and I pull my hood up over my head in an effort not to be recognized. Everyone around me is at least smart-casual, wearing dress pants and button-up shirts. Some of them are even wearing ties, albeit novelty ones with polar bears or test tubes. I'd always thought of scientists as uptight, but the more I dive into their world, the more I'm realizing how fun they can be.

I slide into the back row and sit in the shadows, alone. The last thing I want is to take the spotlight away from the people who deserve it.

When Dr. Schröder walks out onto the stage, he smiles at the crowd and nods nervously before pointing his little clicker at the screen, opening the first slide of his presentation as we all applaud warmly.

"Hello, everyone," he says, speaking Sólveigan with a faint German accent. This guy knows something like four languages. It's so impressive. He's going to give the presentation in English, though, because there are people from all over the world here to see him.

He's a tall man and he hunches slightly when he stands up. He's wearing a sweater vest and seems to have a permanent squint, and he fiddles with the clicker in his hand. Looking at him, you would think he would be bad at public speaking.

You'd think that he would be nervous and shy and give a terrible presentation.

But I'm glad to be proved wrong. The second Dr. Schröder starts talking about his research, his whole demeanor changes. He comes alive. Throughout the entire hour,

his voice is captivating, his arguments compelling and wonderfully articulated.

If this guy narrated audiobooks, they would send me straight to sleep — and I mean that as a compliment. His voice is soothing and gentle, and makes you want to trust him.

I take in the photos that flash up on the screen. Some of them are Dr. Schröder's own work, a little blurry, and it makes me think about Billie, and how amazing her photos are.

Maybe I should give him her name, see if he wants to collaborate with her.

After the talk, I muscle my way to the front of the crowd. People are surprised to see me, but I let Dr. Schröder have the spotlight when he needed it. Now I'm just going to make it brighter.

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“Dr. Schröder,” I call, trying to get his attention. He turns to me, blinks in surprise, then comes over.

“Can it really be the famous Prince Jensen?”

I grin and take his hand when he offers it, shaking it firmly. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you. I had no idea that our landscape is under threat so badly, and I want to try and help do something about that. I’d love to learn more. If I can do anything at all, I want to.”

He chuckles kindly. “It is good of you to offer. Between you and me, it is always difficult to get funding for this kind of research.”

“I don’t understand why. This is so important.”

“Yes, it is. I must say, I never realized you were so passionate about this work.”

“I’ve recently had a change of heart about... well, everything. Have you ever heard of Isla Mostaza?”

He nods slowly, a knowing smile growing on his face. “Ah, yes. I did see you had a recent excursion there, yes?”

“Yeah,” I say, trying not to fiddle with the hem of my hoodie. I want to present a professional image to him. Well, as much as I can.

Ugh, I should have worn a suit.

“I am sure you saw much good wildlife there, hmm?”

I’m not sure if he’s making a joke or not, so I just smile warmly. “Yes. I think I discovered a new passion.”

“Well, we are pleased to have a figure like you supporting our work. Here, take my card.” He hands it to me, and I pocket it carefully, like it’s something precious. “You must contact me so we can arrange to meet. Perhaps you could tour with us sometime.”

“Really?” I hear myself lighting up like a child at Christmas, and he chuckles again, taking my hand for another handshake.

“Yes, of course. I would be delighted.”

We talk for a little longer, but then other people want him, and I feel bad for taking up his time. I thank him again for entertaining the idea of me getting involved with his work, then turn to leave the convention hall, feeling like I’m floating.

If only Billie could be here to see.

I’m so wrapped up in the excitement of the day that it’s only when I scroll through my socials on the way home that I realize I was spotted by the press, and people are speculating about the new chapter in my life.

“Look, Anders!” I say, waving the phone at him knowing full well he won’t look while he’s driving. “People are writing about me, and it’s not about my love life. Look, me and science mentioned in the same article.”

“Congratulations, sir,” he says, and though his tone may sound cool, I know he means it.



And I mean this. For the first time in a long time, I'm excited about the future.

I can't wait to see what's to come.

## CHAPTER 22

### BILLIE

The thumping on the door gets more insistent, and I groan. "I'm coming!" I yell. "Hang on!"

Fortunately for my head, the banging stops. I force myself to get up off the bathroom floor, my stomach lurching. I take a deep breath, desperately trying not to throw up again.

I've been sick for a few days now, ever since I got back from meeting with Dr. Matthews and her team. I'm blaming all this on the lunch they took me out to. It's the only time I've been out of the house recently, and all it takes is one weird bit of seafood to put you out of action for a while.

It's annoying, though, because I'm supposed to be meeting with Ella today. Right now, in fact; she'll be the one at the door.

I should have told her not to bother coming today, feeling like this, but if I'm honest I kind of forgot she was coming.

She rings the doorbell again just as I'm approaching the door. Trying to ignore the rush of nausea that floods through my stomach, I yell, "Oh my God, calm down! I'm coming!"

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Fumbling with the latch, I finally swing the door open to let Ella in, and she sweeps me into a great big hug, squeezing me so tight that everything seems better already.

“Did you dye your hair again?” I ask as she releases me. It’s only a week or so since I last saw her, but her previously mid-blond bob has turned platinum. It suits her. It makes her blue eyes sparkle.

“I was bored,” she says with a shrug, then looks me up and down. “And you look terrible.”

“Thanks a bunch,” I scoff.

“Sorry, hon. But you do. You’re sick, aren’t you?”

I grimace. “It’s just a stomach bug, I’m pretty sure.”

“Should I not come in?”

“No, please. I’m okay really, and I don’t think it’s contagious. It’s great to see you. I’ve been stuck in on my own for days.”

“Sweetie, why didn’t you say? I live literally just down the road. You can just come over anytime you want. You don’t even have to ask.”

“I know,” I say. “I just?—”

“You just nothing,” she says firmly, inviting herself in. “Don’t you dare ever feel like

you're not welcome."

"Okay," I sigh, knowing I'm defeated as I follow her through to the living room.

"Let me make some coffee," she says, gesturing for me to take a seat.

"Oh, no, let me. Stop mothering me."

And that's when my stomach betrays me again, making me double over as I attempt to keep it together.

Ella points firmly at the sofa. "Absolutely not."

Defeated, I sink onto the sofa and don't bother protesting as she heads into the kitchen, returning a few minutes later with two mugs of coffee. Mine's full of cream and sugar, just the way I like it.

"Okay, tell me everything," Ella says, handing me my mug and sitting next to me. "Tell me all about these scientists. Have they bought all your photos already?"

I chuckle. "Not all of them. But a few. Enough. And I've been in some really interesting talks with people. Do you remember Dr. Matthews?"

"She's the one who likes birds?" guesses Ella, and I grin.

She doesn't really know that much about my work, but I love her for trying. She always makes me feel so listened to.

I tell her all about the red-footed boobies, and how Dr. Matthews and her team are inviting me along on their next tour, which is such a privilege I can't even begin to believe it. They want my photos! They want to teach me all about their work! It's

unbelievably exciting to me.

And then nausea rises up my throat, and I can't keep it down any longer.

I excuse myself to dash to the bathroom, where I promptly throw up.

"Are you all right, honey?" Ella calls from the living room.

"Yeah," I lie, swallowing thickly, my eyes streaming. "I just keep throwing up. Stupid bug."

I hear Ella's footsteps approaching, and I know then that I'm not going to keep denying just how bad I feel. It's not like she hasn't seen right through it already.

Ella chuckles. "You know, if you hadn't just been trapped on a desert island for weeks, I might have assumed you were pregnant."

All the blood drains from my face as her words sink in. It's a stupid joke. Unless...

It was one night. It was just one stupid night with Jensen, and I'm on birth control. Things like this aren't supposed to happen.

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The symptoms I've been having would kind of make sense, though.

My hands start to shake.

"Billie? Are you all right?" Ella calls again, but my head is rushing too much to be able to answer. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," I say weakly.

At once, Ella opens the door. She rushes over to me and crouches down beside me on the floor, stroking my hair. "Sweetheart, what's going on?"

"It wasn't a desert island," I say softly, closing my eyes and seeing the luscious green of Mostaza in my imagination. "I had company, remember?"

"What?" asks Ella, but then her face drains of all color as she puts two and two together. "No way. Prince Jensen and you... You and him..."

"Well, thanks a lot," I scoff, trying to wiggle out of the conversation. "Do you think I'm not good enough for him or something?"

She shakes her head apologetically. "Oh, God, no. I didn't mean it like that. He'd be lucky to have you. But you looked so angry in the photos. You told me he was a jerk! How did this happen?"

"It was just one stupid night," I groan. "One really stupid, really, really good night."

“Uh-huh,” hums Ella, raising both eyebrows playfully.

I roll my eyes and sit back on my heels. “It wasn’t like that at all. I didn’t even know who he was. He lied to me. He pretended he was just some guy from some foreign country, and I guess I let myself get swept up in it all. It was my own stupid fault for being so out of touch. It was stupid — and I guess I must have forgotten to take the pill that morning or something... I don’t know.”

“That’s not how birth control works, sweetie,” says Ella gently, squeezing my shoulder.

“I know,” I whisper. “But I just can’t think of any other explanation.”

“Well, we don’t know yet for sure,” coos Ella in her very best situation-defusing voice.

But it’s too late because I’ve already started spiraling. “What am I going to tell my mom?” I choke, trying not to burst into tears.

A blind panic starts gnawing away inside my chest. I can’t breathe anymore. My rib cage is tight like it’s being squeezed. My throat is closing up like a hand is around it. My heart pounds. My palms sweat. I think I’m going to vomit again.

Ella keeps stroking my shoulders, massaging them to stop me having a breakdown. “Hey, look at me. Deep breaths. We don’t know anything for certain yet, so we’ll just stay calm until we do, okay?”

I nod, looking into her eyes to anchor myself back to reality.

“Let’s get some facts before we panic,” she says. “Most likely, this is a weird blip, and you can wait until you’re married to have kids, just like you always wanted. And

if not?—”

“If not then I’m gonna be a single mother to a prince’s child,” I sob, crumpling into her arms.

She holds me for a while, then says, “Okay, let’s get this settled. Let me get my bag.”

I sit up and squint in confusion as Ella leaves the room, and then a few seconds later she reappears with a pregnancy test. “Do you just carry those things around with you?” I ask, my mouth dropping open in disbelief.

She shrugs. “You never know what you’ll need to be prepared for.”

“I guess,” I frown, “But pregnancy tests aren’t one of those things that you put in your emergency bag usually, you know? You don’t exactly say to yourself, okay, I’m going to pack ibuprofen, some pads, and a pregnancy test just in case!”

“Well, if you don’t want it...”

“I didn’t say that.”

I hold out my hand, and Ella places the cardboard box on my palm. It’s lighter than I was expecting it to be. I guess it’s only a tiny piece of plastic, really. Nothing much to it at all.

Amazing that it has the power to change someone’s life forever.

Ella slips out of the bathroom and lets me pee on the stick in peace.

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My body suddenly feels like it's not my own. All this could be happening to somebody else instead of me and I wouldn't even notice the difference. One part of me feels light and panicky. But the rest of me is floating away, detaching from the reality that seems to be taking root inside me.

I can't stay here like this. Instead, I walk back out into the living room where Ella is waiting, and we sit in silence as the seconds tick past, staring at the stick on the table.

Eventually, Ella says, "That's two minutes."

It's not really a question, but I understand what she's asking anyway, so I nod slowly, looking away as she reaches forward to pick up the stick. She looks at it and takes a sharp breath, and before she even utters a word, I know exactly what she's going to say.

"Oh my God, Billie. You're pregnant."

## CHAPTER 23

### JENSEN

### ONE MONTH LATER

Fortunately, being Sólveigan means that I'm good with the cold. I don't often go as far north as we are right now, but my family does have a palace inside the Arctic Circle, so I know better than most just how important a good coat and thick layers can be.



Dr. Schröder was kind enough to invite me along with him and a couple of other scientists on an expedition to the Arctic, and I was so happy that he asked. I've never been allowed to do something like this before, especially not when I'm fundamentally just extra baggage.

One of the scientists, Professor Laurent, is from France, and she hasn't stopped complaining about the cold since we set sail. I'm finding it all quite funny — you'd think that someone who dedicated their life to studying the Arctic and its wildlife would be comfortable with the idea that it's more than just a little cold up here.

We also have the captain, a man named Jackson, and I can't tell if that's his first or last name. He's a good guy. Very loud. He's a scientist too, from what I can tell, but his research stories all seem a step away from a boat-disaster story, which somewhat fills me with dread.

Professor Laurent hates him.

There's another guy with us who's some sort of biologist or geologist or biogeologist. I'm not even sure if that's a thing, but I've barely had a chance to talk to him because he's hidden away in his cabin since we launched.

We've been at sea for three days, and I've got to say, my stomach is not too happy about all this time we've been spending in choppy waves. I've never been one to get particularly travel sick, but this trip is testing my stomach to the max.

Mostly I am just a figurehead here, but it seems like everyone's happy to have me here because I am actually interested in the work and I'm bringing in a ton of publicity. And publicity in this world means money, and money means you can do whatever you want.

And in the case of these scientists and me, sitting on this boat in the Arctic Sea,

waiting to try and see a handful of birds or a seal, money is what we want.

“It’s freezing,” says Professor Laurent, slipping into the tiny lounge space where I’m sitting reading.

“Is it?” I say. “I hadn’t noticed.”

She rolls her eyes. “You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

I shrug. “People have been known to say so.”

“Well, they really shouldn’t have — because you’re one of the least funny royals I’ve ever met.”

“Thanks,” I grin. Mostly I am trying to wind her up, and it is astonishingly easy to do.

She sniffs in disdain, frowning even harder. “Beh. I think it’s going to rain today.”

“Good job we’re inside, then,” I say, not looking up from my book.

“What would it take for you to view something non-optimistically for a change?” she tuts, folding her arms and staring me down. “Have you never wanted to complain about anything in your life?”

A challenge. I slide a bookmark into my book and squeeze my lips together as I think. “Hmm. I don’t know. I mean, what have I got to complain about really? I’ve got an easy life — everything I ever wanted or could want.”

“It’s all right for some,” she mutters, and I ignore her.

“Everyone’s always nice to me because they think I’ll give them something. I want

for nothing. I could have it a lot worse.”

“Yes,” she presses, “but has there never been something that made you unhappy? Never something that you’ve wanted more than anything and not been allowed to have? Have you never yearned?”

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An answer flashes into my mind immediately, but I don't say it out loud. Instead I say, "Well, there was that winter coat that I saw and loved, but it was limited edition and out of stock by the time I got around to trying to order it. That was pretty disappointing."

Professor Laurent just scoffs, frustrated that I won't give her a juicier answer. She sighs loudly, then flops back onto the sofa so she can ignore me. I can't say I'm disappointed by that. I don't dislike her, but we're definitely not compatible personalities.

Besides, I've barely known her for long enough to want to tell her about how desperately I want to be seen as more than I am, about how badly I want to change my public image because I'm so tired of everyone assuming the worst of me.

And I definitely can't tell her about how much I still miss Billie every single day.

There's very little that I've not been allowed in my life, and I am very, very lucky for that. But I know without question that Billie would not be one of them. She's an unfavorable match, and my parents would never approve. They've made me give up more for less before.

That said, they've seemed way less disappointed in me than usual lately. Looks like actually doing something useful with your life makes people proud of you. I wish I'd figured that one out a few years ago instead of doing whatever the hell it is I've been doing with my life.

I turn back to my book, but I barely read a page before Jackson swings inside. He

shuffles up on the sofa next to me, squashing me into Professor Laurent, and grins.

“Professor Laurent. Your Highness,” he says to each of us in turn.

Professor Laurent shoots him poison daggers from her eyes, and I contain my smile. I know he’s doing it to wind her up too. But really, I’d rather him call me by my first name. I hate the formality of being addressed as a royal.

“How are we all doing?”

“It’s cold,” says Professor Laurent.

“Please, Captain, call me Jensen,” I say quickly, breaking up a fight before it can begin.

“Only if you call me Dan,” he grins.

I nod, conceding to his point.

“When do we make land?” demands Professor Laurent.

Jackson shrugs. “Should be within the day. It’s hard to tell right now – the conditions out there are pretty rough.”

“Yes, we’d noticed,” I say.

“You’ve done well if you haven’t thrown up yet.”

I beam, pleased at the compliment. And even though I won’t say it out loud, I do actually agree with Professor Laurent. It is absolutely freezing.

Despite the fact that they don't really get on, at least Dan and Professor Laurent are mature enough to realize they are both here to do the same job, and that job is way more important than any of their petty squabbles. Dan excuses them, taking the professor aside so he can discuss some charts and maps with her.

Looks like the weather is going to get in the way of our original plan. I hope it doesn't mean we'll have to cancel everything. Dr. Schröder promised me a polar bear. Of course, I know promises like that are empty, because animals never do what you want them to do — but I'd still really like to see one.

From a distance, anyway.

Their conversation drifts on to topics I have no idea about, and I turn back to my book. I'm trying to cram as much knowledge into my head as I can about all the stuff we might see. After all, if I'm going to be posting on my socials about this, I don't want to get my facts wrong.

But I can't concentrate while they're both deep in conversation, and my head hurts too. "I'm going to go to my cabin for a bit," I say as I get up, trying not to interrupt them too much. They both smile at me, and I duck away.

The ship isn't big, but it's got enough room for all of us to have a tiny bunk to ourselves. You'd think I'd be terrified of going to sea after the year I've had, but honestly, my last shipwreck was kind of my fault, so with a professional at the helm, I'm not worried at all.

I flop down onto my bed, feeling the boat sway beneath me as we battle the waves. I can't even stretch out all the way on this bed, and though I should feel suffocated, I don't. I feel like a baby in a crib, swaddled in blankets and staring out at a world I've never seen before.

It's harsh out there, the sky gunmetal grey, rain lashing the portholes, and visibility next to nothing. The land could have disappeared into the ocean and I wouldn't even know.

At least I get service out here. It feels like I shouldn't, what with being in the Arctic, but the ability to use my phone is a happy side effect of the amount of scientific interest in the area. One of the things I agreed to when I came out here was to make videos to get people interested in the work, and now seems like as good a time as any.

I fumble for my phone and pull up one of my social apps. I hesitate for a second, not quite sure what I'm going to say, then decidewhat the hell, I'll make something up, and hit record.

"Hi, everyone, it's me, Jensen, live from the middle of the Arctic Sea. And let me tell you, it's cold down here. Up here? Being on a boat, you lose all sense of direction."

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My livestream is shaky and poor quality, and usually I'd hate to see my face in so few pixels, but hundreds, then thousands of people tune in to watch, and as the hearts and comments start streaming in, I take questions. I can't answer a lot of them very well, but that doesn't stop people from asking.

It doesn't matter if they're doing it because they think it makes me look stupid. They're still caring. They're still engaging. And that is the whole point.

The entire time I'm talking, I grin. This is what I'm here for. This is the whole point of me, and it fills me with a lightness and a joy I never believed possible.

## CHAPTER 24

### BILLIE

"Come on, sweetie, you have to eat," says Ella, watching me push food around on my plate.

I frown, staring at the pasta so I don't have to look at her. I can't stomach this right now. I just can't. "I'm not that hungry, honestly."

"Yes, but the baby will be."

"Stupid baby," I mutter.

"Honey, we talked about this. You don't really mean that, do you?"



“No, I don’t,” I sigh, and it’s true.

I want this baby.

Motherhood has always been on my life plan. I just expected it to happen a little differently.

All the same, I think I’m allowed to be upset when my boobs are swelling and I’m being sick multiple times an hour.

And I’m still only in my first trimester. How much worse is this gonna get before the baby comes?

“I know what’ll make you feel better,” says Ella. “You need to go on vacation. Get back to work. Go to some tropical paradise for a while and take some photos. You’ll feel good as new.”

I smile thinly at her. She’s been so good to me over the last few weeks. She’s a nurse so she’s always busy, but she’s managed to come over at least once every few days and make sure that I haven’t died.

“I can’t go away like this,” I sigh again. “I feel too sick all the time.”

“I’d come with you if I could.”

“I know,” I say, closing my eyes. “I’m sorry, I’m just being grumpy.”

Ella grins. “Honestly, if you’re not allowed to be grumpy when you’re pregnant, when are you allowed?”

I chuckle. “True, but I shouldn’t be grumpy when my best friend is looking after me

so well.”

“I’m just sorry I can’t do more.”

She squeezes my hand again, and I know what’s coming. It’s a subject we’ve been skirting around for a while now.

“Billie,” Ella says softly, “you can’t just raise this baby by yourself.”

“Why not? Plenty of people do it. I’ll be fine.”

“And I’m sure you’re right about that, but you know what I’m saying. Have you thought about telling Jensen?”

I swallow hard, clenching my fists and willing myself not to cry.

More than I would like to, I’ve been having this dream, this fantasy of Jensen holding our baby in his arms, giving our child that reverent smile he does when he’s seen something beautiful. I’m sure he would be a great dad. He just can’t be the one for my baby.

“Of course I’ve thought about it. But I can’t. How would I even get in contact with him? I can’t exactly slide into his DMs. He’s a prince, for goodness’ sake.”

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“Haven’t you searched for him online at all lately?”

“What would be the point? He’s not coming back. He’s probably off with some other young, hot girl right now.”

Ella shakes her head firmly. “Lucky for you, you know the world’s best celebrity-gossip follower. I’ve made a point of not following him, out of solidarity, but I know all his handles.”

She pauses for a moment, tongue out as she looks him up.

I’m not sure if it’s the idea of seeing him that makes my stomach lurch, or the sickness that seems to not be going away. Typical of me, really, to get worse-than-average morning sickness. The name is misleading, anyway — I’ve been sick all day every day.

My baby doesn’t care if it’s morning or not.

But the fact is that thinking about Jensen fills me with a cold chill. I have a whole folder on my computer filled with pictures we took together, selfies and dumb stuff, and photos I took of him when he wasn’t looking. He’s beautiful in every single one of the candid shots, and I can’t bear to look at any of them.

Even hearing his name makes me want to burst into tears.

And I haven’t said that to Ella, because I know exactly what she would say. That I feel this torn up inside about everything because I’m still in love with him.

But how can I be in love with a man I only knew for a couple of weeks?

How can I still miss him this much?

““Playboy Prince ready for his next act?” ‘A new era for the Prince of Parties?’” Ella mutters a few more headlines like this out loud, and I slump back in my chair.

“See? I told you. He’s forgotten all about me.”

“Ah, but did you know he’s been doing charity work?”

“Charity work?” My mouth drops open in shock.

Jensen is a caring guy, but I would have assumed him to be way too self-obsessed to think about other people for long enough to do charity work of his own volition.

“Yeah, look,” says Ella, scrolling through some photos he’s posted lately. “He seems to have done a total one-eighty on his public appearance.”

“Really?”

“Yeah! Oh, wait, he’s actually livestreaming right now.”

She pulls the phone back for a second, taps on a button, then points the phone back at me. A blast of static blares out of the speaker like a heavy windstorm has swept through the kitchen. And there, on the screen, wrapped up in a thick winter coat, goggles, and a furry scarf, is Jensen.

“That’s a great question, LemonPlay32,” he shouts as if he’s trying to hear himself over the wind and through his thick hood. “Dr. Schröder told me this morning that there have been a bunch of studies on how the melting ice is impacting us humans,

and how it's literally making us sicker because contaminated stuff can get frozen in the ice."

A comment pops up from another user, demanding to know how we can stop it, as well as letting Jensen know how brilliant and handsome and wonderful he is.

"Individual action goes a lot further than you think, actually! One of the most useful things you can do is call whichever politician is in charge of your local area and demand that they demand that the government puts more focus on the environment and climate issues. The more people that speak up, the more we can get done — together."

I watch as he keeps answering questions, absolutely enchanted by the man I'm seeing. Can this really be the party prince transformed? Because this Jensen that I'm seeing on the screen is my Jens.

This is the man I fell in love with. The one who's well-meaning and caring and trying his best to make things better.

All this time, I had thought he would go straight back to being the guy from the gossip mags again, but he's doing expeditions to the Arctic all by himself. And he's not talking nonsense, either! This is real conservation stuff!

This is exactly the kind of work I'm trying to do.

Could this have really been because of me?

"Okay, he's changed," I concede. "So what? It's not like he would want to hear from me now, not after everything that happened. It's fine, really. I don't have anyone else, so I'm going to do it myself and I'll just have to cope."

Ella stops the video, and my heart aches with the need to hear Jensen's voice again.

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As gently as she can, Ella says, “I know you can cope. But I just don’t think this is the best idea you’ve ever had, that’s all.”

I don’t want to argue, so I drop the subject with a huff and force myself to eat instead. Fortunately, Ella either gets the hint, or my distraction works enough to get her to talk about something else instead. I don’t mind her fussing over me and the baby, but I wish she would stop trying to bring Jensen into it too.

God knows I’ve been worrying about what I’ll tell this child about their father when they grow up, and he or she is not even born yet.

But even though I try to push my doubts and fears aside, I’m still thinking about it all even after Ella has said her goodbyes and left me for the evening. Normally I like my own company a lot, but right now I don’t like the way it gives me time to think.

And the fact is, the idea of doing this all alone is terrifying. I’m not really sure that I can do it. But what choice do I have?

I know I’ve got Ella, but she has her own life too. She can’t be here for every diaper and sleepless night. She doesn’t have that kind of time.

It’s times like this that I regret having such a small network. My work means I travel too much for maintaining friendships, and I’ve never truly understood the downside of that until now.

There’s only one other person in the city with a phone number I still know, and I don’t think she would be willing to help.

Maybe she would, though. Maybe she's been waiting for me to make the first move. Maybe this is the kind of push we need to bring us back together.

It's not like I have many other options.

Before I can second-guess myself or really think about what I'm doing, I pick up my phone and dial the number.

I've been saying to myself for years how I'd love to be closer to her. Maybe it's time to put my money where my mouth is.

She picks up after two rings, to my surprise, and says, "Billie? Is that you?"

I smile shakily, letting out a breath of something that's approaching relief.

"Hi, Mom."

## CHAPTER 25

JENSEN

ONE MONTH LATER

I've only just laid down on my bed when there's a knock on my door.

"What is it?" I groan.

I've literally just got back from a trip to Canada, and I feel like I could sleep for a thousand years. No such luck for me, though.

One of the servants opens the door, dipping his head in reverence or possibly



embarrassment to be bothering me. “Your Highness,” he mumbles. “May I enter?”

It’s Kristian, one of the newer boys. He’s shy and a bit unsure, but very friendly.

He inches forward a fraction so he can just about be considered in the room, then announces, “I have a message from the king and queen, sir. They’ve requested your presence in the drawing room.”

“Oh,” I grimace. This can’t be good. “What have I done now?”

“I’m afraid it’s not for me to tell, sir.” Kristian stares at the floor so hard I worry his eyeballs will pop out.

I grin at him, hoping it’ll make him relax. “I’m kidding. It’s not your fault, whatever it is. It’s probably mine. It usually is.”

He smiles thinly, clearly not quite knowing what to say next. I wonder if he’s deciding if he should join in with the joking around, or if that would be considered unprofessional and only get him into trouble.

I decide to put him out of his misery. “Tell them I’ll be down in a minute, please.”

“As you wish, sir.”

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Kristian closes the door quietly, and I hear his soft footsteps retreating down the hall. The drawing room. That means it'll probably take him two, maybe two and a half minutes to get back down there, which gives me a couple of minutes' respite before I have to go down there myself and face them.

I pull a pillow over my face and let out a growl of frustration. Why can this not be enough for them? I've been trying my hardest for months now.

When will I be good enough?

With a grunt, I get up, throw on a hoodie, and head downstairs, holding my head high while also taking the tiniest steps known to man.

This is so typical of them, summoning me to a telling-off the second I get home. Couldn't they at least have waited until I'd had a sleep first? Don't they realize I'm less likely to be in a bad mood that way?

It's not even like I've done anything wrong this time, though. About the only thing I've been doing lately is touring the northernmost points of the world with various scientists and taking videos to drum up support.

I guess that's the problem right there. All I do is take videos and post about it. If I were better, I'd actually get involved. I'd have a degree.

I'd be perfect, just like my brother.

When I reach the door, I waver, my hand hovering next to the ornate wood paneling.

I take a deep breath, clench my fists to steady myself, then push open the door.

The first thing I notice is that they're smiling. It's weird. They're smiling and they don't even stop when I come into the room. I've seen them smile before, obviously; they do it all the time. They more or less have to.

But this is the exact kind of look that they give Erik after he's done anything at all. This isn't the kind of look like give me, not ever. Not even when the media are around and we have to play happy families.

Something suspicious is going on here.

"What's up?" I ask as I approach, my heart pounding as I wait for the other shoe to drop.

"Jensen," says my mother. "Come here, darling."

Okay, this is beyond weird. Am I getting told off here or not? Has someone died? Am I dying?

She gestures for me to sit at the table with them, and slowly I lower myself into my favorite chair, the one with the chipped leg and embroidered elephants on the upholstery.

"Jensen," echoes my father, and I tense, preparing for the worst. "How was your trip?"

"It was good, thank you. Great, actually. We saw some more seals, which was good. The scientists were very excited because they're experts in Arctic mammal habitats, but personally, I think I prefer birds. All the same, it's so interesting getting to go with them and hearing what they've got to say about everything. I'm learning so

much, and I'm having a great time doing it."

Both my parents nod as if they're really, actually listening for a change, and I keep going, an avalanche of words streaming from my mouth.

I tell them about the day we saw the polar bears, the hundreds of different bird species I've seen now on my travels, how the polar ice caps are an incredible part of the world and how drastically our world is going to change as they get smaller. I tell them how excited I am to have been invited to go again.

I tell them how I wish I could do more, but also how doing anything at all feels great. I am making a difference, even if it's small.

"That's wonderful," says my mother, smiling like that is what she genuinely thinks.

"I— It is?" I say, blinking in surprise.

She nods, her lips twitching in amusement. It's a tiny expression, but I've learned every face she has ever made over the years, and that one is definitely for real. "Yes, Jensen. It is wonderful. We have been waiting for such a long time for you to come into yourself — your father was starting to worry that you would be a troublemaker for the rest of your life."

My father chuckles at that. "I'm glad not to have been right for a change."

I squeeze my lips together to stop myself from smiling. This is not how I was expecting this day to go.

"We're glad you finally found something to do," says my mother.

"I don— I guess I— Um... thank you," I stammer, my brain short-circuiting.

“We really mean it, Jensen,” says my father. “We’re proud of you.”

My mouth opens and closes at least four times.

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For so long, those were the exact words I wanted to hear from them. All these years, I've been chasing this high, the one that comes from being recognized for who I want to be, the potential I have to mean something.

But to hear them actually say it, out loud... I can hardly believe it.

"You're proud," I say slowly, waiting for the catch, the but at the end of the sentence.

But there isn't one.

My father gets to his feet and places his hand on my shoulder. "Yes, Jensen. We are. You've been doing excellent work these past months, and you're living up to the family name at last. You should be proud of yourself. And, you know, we've never wanted you not to have fun."

"Really?"

Out of everything they've said, this is the hardest thing to swallow.

"Despite what you might think," says my mother, raising an eyebrow, "we never wanted to be harsh. But you haven't exactly made it easy for us."

"I'm sorry," I say, staring at my feet. "But I get it now. This is way more fun."

They both smile again, and I smile back.

That night, over dinner, I tell them some more stories about my travels, and there's

this rush of something that goes through me the whole time — I don't know if it's relief or joy or what, but for the first time maybeever, I actually enjoy spending time with them. It's good to talk.

For a second, I contemplate asking them whether they would change their minds about me dating a commoner, but I don't.

After all, my life is blooming into something amazing now. But Billie is gone, and nothing I can do will bring her back.

## CHAPTER 26

### BILLIE

When I pull into my mother's driveway, the feeling of being seven years old again floods through me. The last time I was here, I was twenty, trying desperately to get through to my mother, promising myself I'd give her one last chance to show me she can be the kind of person who might understand me. One last opportunity to be the person I've always wanted her to be.

In the end, it was no surprise when she let me down.

I had told her all about the new job I got — it was the first time I ever got to go to Isla Mostaza. I had been so excited because finally it felt like my life was coming together the way I wanted it to. But the entire time I was here, all my mom did was tell me how poor my career choices were.

She told me how much she wished I'd gone to college. How I should have been more like my cousin, who was a doctor. How this career path was going to bring me nothing but pain because I was never going to have a steady income and I was never going to succeed. And she didn't say a single word about how pleased she was for

me.

I cried the whole way home after that, and never came back. Until I called her last month, it had probably been two years since I spoke to her at all.

It's not that I don't want to talk to her. But every conversation we've ever had has been us talking over each other and not listening, like both of us are standing at a crossroads, yelling and yelling at one another, neither quite able to see the other's point.

Neither of us was ever going to be the person the other wanted us to be. For all that I feel she doesn't understand me, I know she feels I don't understand her either. That's a fact I have never been able to recognize until now.

As a child, I found her put-downs cruel, but as an adult I can see that she did care. I get why she acted the way she did. I can understand the stress she must have been under, with a kid and no support, and a job she hated.

It all makes sense the way it never did before.

That doesn't make any of it right, and I haven't forgiven it all yet, but in a wicked twist of irony, I'm pregnant and on my own just like she was.

I'm scared, just like she must have been.

I need her help.

I sit in the car for a while, taking some steadying breaths. I don't have to do this. I wouldn't lose anything by just turning around and heading back home.

But if I did, I'd be letting her down again, and this time it really would be my fault.



Unbidden, an image of Jensen drifts into my mind. I imagined him facing his parents just like this. I wonder if what he told me was true, about the pressure they put on him and the disappointment they felt as they watched him act out like a dumb kid.

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Even after everything that happened, I can't see him lying about something like that. He only lied about who he really was. I'm pretty sure of that. Everything else we talked about was true.

But what does it matter to me, anyway? He's off traveling the world, our time together nothing more than a footnote.

Slowly, I undo my seatbelt and get out of the car, taking small, deliberate steps towards the house. I clench my fist and knock on the door, and inside I hear footsteps approach in time with my beating heart.

The door creaks open, and there she is, just the way I remember her.

She's a little older now, of course, but she has the same box-blond dyed hair — her roots need doing again. She has the same creases around her eyes and mouth, the same sharp look with the blue eyes she gave to me.

"Hello, Billie."

"Hi, Mom."

"Why don't you come in?"

I smile a little and step into the hallway, the smell of my childhood rushing back to me in muddy shoes and scented candles.

"I wasn't really expecting you to come," says my mother, and I wince at her intuition.

Of course it's going to be a little bit shaky right now. We're only just getting to know each other again.

In reality, if this works, it might be more like getting to know each other for the very first time.

We make our way through to the living room, and I notice her eyes dart down to my stomach as we sit. My bump is barely noticeable, but if you're looking for it, I'm sure it's clear enough.

"How are you finding it?" she asks. "Pregnancy, I mean?"

I grimace. "It's not very fun, is it?"

She laughs, and I'm suddenly reminded of my mother during the good times when we used to play together, when she would take me places and laugh with me and tell me stories. When she really felt like a mother rather than someone who was just looking after me.

"Did you buy those vitamins I recommended?"

"Yes, I did actually. Thank you. They've been making a big difference."

"Good." She smiles again, and the lump in my throat grows. "I've been through all this before, after all. I do know a couple of things."

Without meaning to, I blurt, "I've missed you, Mom. I'm sorry."

She looks squarely at me, her eyes shining with tears. "I know, baby. I've missed you too. And I'm sorry. I let you down, and I'm sorry."

I blink in surprise. This was hardly the confession I was expecting from her. “You didn’t really,” I say quietly. “I’m sorry I let you down.”

She shakes her head firmly, taking my hands and holding them so tight I feel like I’m about to lose all feeling in my fingertips. “Billie, baby. You haven’t let anyone down. How could you?”

“I left, Mom. I just left you here, alone.”

“You were just a kid. You weren’t getting what you wanted, so you did what kids do. I’ve had a lot of time to myself over the last few years, and I’ve realized a thing or two. Things I should have known years ago. I should never have let my stress my loneliness get in the way of us.”

A shaky tear slides down my face, and it’s mirrored on hers too.

Of all the things I was expecting my mother to say, this wouldn’t have even crossed my mind as one of them. I never thought I’d live in a world where she could be so self-aware.

And yet, here she is, being truthful with me. I still feel so guilty for running out on her, and sure, we have years of pain that are still stitching themselves back together, but I feel a lightness that I haven’t felt in a very long time. It’s like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Like this is the right thing to do. Even if it’s going to be hard, this is right. This is the way it should be.

“I always wanted you to have a good life. You are having a good life, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I say, and mean it. “Do you want to see some of my photos?”

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She doesn't say anything, but she nods. I pick up my phone, and she shuffles closer to me on the sofa, close enough that I can breathe in the scent of the same deodorant that she's worn since I was born.

I flick to one of my most recent photos. "This little guy is a turtle baby, going home to his mom."

"Tell me more," she says with an honest intensity that makes my heart sing. "Tell me all about the places you've been."

I swipe to another image. "Okay. Uh... here are some red woodpeckers from Mostaza, which is an island north of Puerto Rico. Here are some more turtles. These are just some nice scenery shots."

Quickly, I bypass a few selfies of me and Jensen, but it's not fast enough to stop me thinking about him or the joy on his face when he was on the island — or for my mother not to notice him.

"Wait a second," she says, narrowing her eyes at me. "Isn't that that prince? Wasn't he washed up on... Oh, Billie, please don't tell me it's his."

She looks down at my stomach, and I feel myself flushing. I laugh awkwardly, and mumble, "Well, about that..."

My mother's mouth drops open. "Billie Ballard, I was joking! You're telling me this is the child of a prince!"

“It was an accident, Mom. I never meant for this to happen.” I clench my fists, feeling seventeen all over again.

I wait for the yelling, but it never comes. Instead, she sighs. “Yes. I know a thing or two about accidents.”

This is something I already knew — that I wasn’t planned, and my dad was nowhere to be seen, though I’ve never known for sure what happened to him. “Yeah, Mom. You know, I never used to believe any of your stories about Dad.”

“You didn’t?”

“One time you told me he was a prince, and another time you told me he was an explorer. And one time you told me he was a TV anchor who got fired for sleeping with you!”

Her face glows pink at that. “I’m sorry I was never honest with you,” she says quietly. “The thing is, I don’t know where he is. He and I... well, the real, honest truth is that we were a fling. Holiday romance. Just like you, I suppose. Met by accident, fell in love for a few weeks. Oh, we had such a wonderful time, Billie. The two of us together... I never wanted it to end. And then we went home — and never saw each other again. And nine months later, I had a baby.”

She pauses for a breath, and I let the information sink in. Looks like fate really does have me following my mother, beat for beat through her life. The thought of it makes me want to laugh maniacally, but she’s clearly not done, so I hold it in.

“I had no idea what I was going to do with you. But I’ve always loved you. You know that, don’t you? I have always loved you.”

“I do,” I whisper. “I love you too.”

She pulls me in for a hug, and I wrap my arms around her, nestling into her chest like a baby bird.

“You still should have gone to college, though,” she says, and I finally let out a laugh. Some things are never going to change.

“I’m serious,” she says, staring me down. “You always had a brain. You should do something with it.”

“I am doing something with it,” I throw back, immediately jumping on the defense even though I don’t mean to. “I’m traveling the world. I’m helping.”

“Helping with what?”

“Science. Conservation.”

“Wouldn’t a college degree help with that?”

“You know why I didn’t go to college.”

I bite my lip. I don’t want to cry again, but she’s making it pretty hard to keep it together. I also don’t want this to blow up into a fight, so I hold my tongue, waiting for her to make her next move.

“You could still go,” she says.

I chuckle again. “Yeah, sure. Me and whose money?”

“You have a college fund.”

I’m sure I must have misheard, so I say, “I’ve what?”

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“A college fund. I’ve been saving up for you since you left home.”

“Hilarious, Mom,” I say breathing deeply to stop myself from snapping.

“Billie, I’m not joking. It’s not enough to cover everything, but it’s yours. You should take it.”

“I can’t,” I say hoarsely. “I’m pregnant.”

“After, then. You should do it. Follow your heart. And I’ll help you every step of the way. Not that you’ve ever needed my help before.”

My head is still reeling, but she really does mean it. I can see it written all over her face. She’s not playing a game or trying to trap me. She really is trying to understand.

So, I should do the same for her. With a smile, I wrap my arms around her again.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

## CHAPTER 27

BILLIE

SIX WEEKS LATER

It’s a series of events that I would have considered impossible just a few months ago, but the second I get the letter in the mail, I go straight over to my mother’s.



Things aren't perfect between us, but it's better. We're speaking and see each other regularly, and she's helping me with everything I need during this time.

It's exactly the support I had been yearning for. I can hardly believe that it's happening.

The second I get in, Mom takes the envelope and tears it open, finding out my fate. She gives very little away as she reads the letter to herself.

"Well? What does it say?"

"You want to know?"

"Yes! Of course I want to know!"

Mom clears her throat and reads aloud. "Dear Ms. Ballard. On behalf of the Nature Photography Awards, we are writing to let you know that you have been nominated for Wildlife Photograph of the Year."

I jump into my feet and squeal, clapping my hands together. "Are you for real?"

My mother rolls her eyes in mock disapproval at my outburst. "Would I lie to you?"

I launch at her, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and squeezing her tight. "I can't believe I did it!"

"I can. Your photos are good." It's such a simple sentence, but it's enough to make me want to skip down the street for joy.

"Where's the ceremony?" I ask.

She skims the letter again. “New York.”

“Oh. That’s kind of a long way away.”

“Billie, you go to all these tropical islands. Aren’t they far away?”

“Yeah, but that’s different. That’s for work. This is…”

My mother folds her arms at me. “You have to go. This is prestigious. You’d be foolish to miss it.”

“But…” I start weakly. I don’t have a good argument against going. I’m not ready to admit that I don’t want to go without her, though. “I don’t have anything to wear.”

I get a stern, disbelieving look for that. It’s a lame excuse and I know it. “Good job we can fix that, then.”

“We?”

“Yes, we. Unless I would embarrass you if I came shopping with you.”

“No!” I say quickly, cutting her off from spiraling before she can even start.

“Good,” she smiles. “Let’s get to the mall.”

That afternoon, Mom’s staying true to her word and is dragging me around the shops. It isn’t, but all of a sudden my bump feels huge, and I’m convinced that everyone can notice it.

“We’re not going to find anything,” I say with a sigh as we have another failure.

“What is the point of any of this?”

“We’ll find something. Don’t you doubt me. I’m not having my baby girl win a big award looking hideous.”

“I’m not going to look hideous. I just don’t think we’re going to find a dress that looks good.”

She doesn’t argue any further, but she does take me into every single shop. I was losing the will to live by the fourth one, but now we’re on number seven, and I’m close to tears.

Mom’s trying her best to be patient, but I can tell this is just as frustrating for her as it is for me.

“I need something to eat,” I say, hoping to put us out of our misery. “I can’t keep walking around without eating something.”

“Okay. We can stop for a while.”

“We could just go home?” I try.

But Mom shakes her head. We have a goal, and we’re going to achieve it. We’ll get ramen or burgers or whatever you want — and then we won’t give up until we find perfection.”

“We could be waiting a while,” I mutter.

Much as I hate to admit it, lunch does help me feel better. As I finish my noodles, I sigh. “Can we just go home now?”

Stubborn as ever, my mother stares me down. “No.”

“Mom...”

“I’ll make you a deal, okay? One more store, then I’ll let you give up. But I know we can find something if you’ll just try.”

“Okay, fine,” I groan. “But if I vomit, it’s not my fault.”

Turns out, listening to my mother is a good idea sometimes, because when we enter the final store, it turns out to be the one.

I wander among the racks, looking at satin and short skirts and despairing at how so many of them are close-fitting and have holes cut in strange places. It’s starting to feel like the only options are boob-window bodycons or frumpy layers designed to

make you look like a five-year-old.

“Billie, come here,” calls Mom, and with a sigh I trudge over to her.

She holds up a dress, and I gasp. It’s blue, it’s flowing, it’s loose — but it’s still flattering, and it’s absolutely gorgeous.

“Where did you find this?” I ask her.

“I have my ways,” she grins. “Go try it on.”

I don’t hesitate, and when I come out of the changing room, I have to swallow hard to stop myself from crying. It fits around my bump in a way that would be obvious if you were looking for it, but hides it in enough layers of fabric that you could easilybypass it if you didn’t know. It goes to the floor and makes me look tall and elegant.

“It’s perfect,” I breathe, turning to stare in the mirror.

“No,” says my mother, coming to stand behind me. “You’reperfect.”

“Mom, come with me to New York,” I say. “I get a plus-one, and I want you to be there.”

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Her mouth wavers before twisting into a smile. She wraps her arms around my waist and kisses my cheek. “Of course, honey. I’ll always be there for you.”

By the time the ceremony comes around, I’m scared my dress isn’t going to fit anymore, but with a little help from my mother tugging on the zippers, it does. We take our seats in the theater, and I shrink into my seat, realizing how out of place I am.

Most of these people are career professionals, much older and more experienced than me, and I’ve seen all of their photos. I’ve been trying to emulate them for years. I’m good, but no way am I on their level.

I’m only here because of how rare the woodpeckers are.

My heart is pounding in my chest. What am I doing here?

“Nervous?” asks Mom. I nod. “Don’t be. You have every right to be here. You have as good a chance at winning as anyone.”

“I know my photo was good,” I murmur. “It’s just intimidating to see all these people who are well-known in my field, that’s all.”

She takes my hand and squeezes it. “Even you being nominated has made me so proud.”

I swallow thickly hearing the words I never expected my mother to say. A lifetime of guilt threatens to rise up in my chest again, but I shake my head to push it away. The

past is already gone, and now is not the time to be dwelling on it.

Besides, Mom is right. It's an honor to have been nominated at all.

The ceremony gets underway and of course, my category is the last one. By the time we're getting close, I'm fighting not to fall asleep.

I've also been thinking as people have got up and down for their awards. My photo was pretty good, and I was pleased with how it turned out, but these awards are by nomination only. Who could have nominated me for this? I didn't nominate myself, and while it could have been one of the scientists, why wouldn't they tell me?

Finally, we get there, and Mom pokes me excitedly. The lights go down, another fanfare plays, and the crowd goes quiet.

And all my questions get answered because Jensen, Prince of Sólveigr, walks out onto the stage.

He waves to the crowd, grinning, then steps up to the microphone as the music ends. "As many of you know, I haven't always been interested in conservation."

Laughter breaks out at his understatement. He waits for it to quiet before continuing. "But in recent months, I've had reason to reassess my priorities. Partying is fun, but as a prince of Sólveigr, it is my duty to help uphold and look after the land that I call home. Of course, here in the US, you also have many brilliant and clever people looking after your own land. If you can, find a conservationist and speak to them. Listen to what they have to say, find out what you can do to help. You might be surprised by how little can make big difference.

"That's definitely something I've learned as I've gone on this journey. Even a little bit of effort, of action, of time — any of those things can become greater than the

sum of their parts. And if we all did just a little bit more, then maybe all of us could make a big difference. It is, therefore, my great honor and privilege to announce the winner of the Wildlife Photograph of the Year Award.”

He fumbles with the envelope and throws a cheeky smile out into the audience, making some more people giggle. He might be unrecognizable from the party prince now, and all these people might be impressed with that speech, but I know in my heart that all his words are because of me.

Does this mean he’s been thinking about me ever since Mostaza?

He pulls out the card, and his eyes widen as he scans the name. He leans in to the microphone, and reads the card with a warm smile. “The winner is Billie Ballard.”

“Billie, it’s you,” Mom whispers, pushing me to get up out of my seat as the crowd applauds.

But my body does not belong to me. Of all the ways I could be seeing Jensen again, this wouldn’t have made my top-fifty list of fantasies.

God, the idea of having to be close to him now, it’s almost more shocking than the fact that I won. Almost.

I take a sharp breath and force a smile, knowing that cameras are going to be on me. I’m more relieved than ever that I’m not wearing heels. My ankles are way too swollen for that, anyway, but with the way my legs are shaking, I don’t think I could have made it up the steps to the stage in anything but these flats.

Jensen smiles at me as I approach, and I cannot for the life of me tell what emotion he’s feeling. This is that smile I saw a hundred times on the island, the one with the vacant eyes that gives nothing away.



He holds out his hand and I take it, hoping he doesn't feel how sweaty my palms are as we shake hands. "Congratulations," he says, handing me the trophy. "You really deserve this. Your picture was wonderful."

"Thank you," I say quietly.

Then the panic really sets in. I know I should make a speech. Mom told me I should prepare one, and I scoffed at her — but she was right. I find Mom in the crowd, grit my teeth, and step up to the podium. I'm not that great at improvising but I have to say something.

"Wow," I say into the microphone, wincing as I hear my own breathless voice echoing through the speakers. "I just want to say, thank you so much for this. It's a privilege to be here, and I never thought I was going to win. Um..."

I chuckle nervously and decide it's best to just say something quickly and get out of here. "I want to thank my mom, who's here with me today. Her support these last few months has meant the world to me. And I want to thank everyone who's ever given me an opportunity to travel the world. I couldn't do this without the efforts of conservation teams worldwide. Really, this is all down to them. So, thank you again."

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I hold up the trophy, grin awkwardly, then rush off the stage. The applause is thunderous around me, but I don't stop to return to my seat. Instead, I keep going, willing my feet and legs not to give in before I reach the exit.

The aisle seems so much longer than when we came in, and time is slowing down with every step, but at last I reach the way out. I slam my hand against the door and walk out into the lobby — and that's when I finally allow myself to burst into tears.

### CHAPTER 28

#### JENSEN

I see Billie rushing towards the door and know that I have to run if I want to catch her. I walk off stage with as much haste as dignity will allow, then the second I get backstage, I run towards the exit.

I burst through the doors to the lobby and see Billie there, lingering next to one of the posters for the event, crying.

“Billie!” I call. “Billie!”

She looks up at me, scrubs at her eyes, then turns her back as if to leave. “Wait, Billie, please,” I gasp, breathless. “Don't go. Let me talk to you. Just two minutes, I promise.”

I'm almost expecting her to ignore me, but she doesn't. She wheels around to face me and snaps, “What do you want, Jensen?”

I take a shaky breath. What do I want?

“Congratulations. I just wanted to say well done.”

“Was it you?” she demands, which takes me off guard. It’s not exactly the response I thought I would get.

“Was what me?”

“Don’t play dumb. Was it you who nominated me for this?”

I open my mouth and close it again. How can I explain to her without making it weird that I’ve thought about her every single day since we parted. That I want nothing more than to be her friend again but I haven’t figured out a way to ask for forgiveness.

But she’s right; I do owe her the truth. “Yes,” I say simply. “It was me. I’ve been following your work.”

“You have?” Her frown deepens, her eyes boring holes into me.

“Yes, of course!” I say with way too much enthusiasm. “I mean, not like a stalker or anything. I didn’t mean it to be weird. I guess... you made my world bigger. And I’m grateful. And I wanted to do something nice for you in return.”

“Oh, great,” she snaps, tears filling her eyes again. “So, none of this was even about my work at all?”

“No! Ugh, God, I’m getting this all wrong. I nominated you anonymously. I didn’t want my name to have any sort of sway. I just thought you deserved it. And clearly the jury agreed. There’s no motive here except wanting to show you how special you

are. That's all."

She blinks slowly at me. "You think I'm special?"

"Of course I do, Billie. And then, when they asked me to present the award, it felt like fate was trying to tell me something. I know you probably haven't forgiven me, and... and I'm not really asking you to. It's just good to see you."

"I have forgiven you," she says, but her tone is so incongruous with her words that it takes me a second to register what she said.

"You have?" I frown. "If you've forgiven me, why are you still so angry?"

"I'm not," she says angrily, then takes a sharp breath, closing her eyes. "I mean, I'm not angry about that anymore."

"Then what is it?"

She lets out a shaky breath and a laugh. "Jensen, why didn't you call? Or email? Anything? It's not like my contact information is hard to find."

"I didn't think you wanted me to." This is taking a strange turn. I feel like anything I say is going to be wrong.

But does this mean she wanted me too, all this time?

"I would have answered."

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“Well, I can see that now. But in case you don’t remember, we didn’t exactly part on good terms.”

She chuckles, then takes my hand, sending a hot shot of electricity up my arm. “Jens,” she says softly, and it makes me smile to hear her use my old nickname. “I have something I need to tell you.”

“You’re not dying, are you?”

She laughs again. “Exactly the opposite in fact. I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, congratulations. Who’s the...” I trail off as the answer dawns on me. “Who’s the father?” I ask again, tentatively.

She bites her lip, and I remember exactly what attracted me to her in the first place. “You are.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“But it was just one night. You said you were on birth control.”

“It’s not perfect. I mean, obviously it’s not. How do you think we got ourselves into this situation?”

“We?”

“You don’t have to be involved. God knows I would understand if you didn’t want to be. But... if you did want to, then... yes, we.”

“No,” I say, and her face falls in confusion. I groan at my own stupidity. “No, not no. But no! Of course I want to be in this baby’s life. I don’t care what my parents say. I think I’ve proved that I’m old enough to be able to make my own decisions now. And we don’t have to rush into anything, but we probably should be married before you have the baby.”

“Whoa!” She throws up her hands to stop me. “I’m not ready for that just yet.”

“Oh, God, sorry. Ugh, this is all coming out wrong. What I mean is yes. I want to be the father. I want to be with you. We can go as slow as you want. I don’t care who says what. I just want you in my life. Billie, I need you in my life.”

She swallows hard, her tears rolling down her face. I have no idea what she’s about to do.

Then she just smiles. “I think I love you, Jensen.”

“Good,” I breathe, “because I think I love you too.”

“You’re not going to run this time, are you? You’re not going to leave us just because things get tough?”

“No,” I say forcefully. “I swear it. This is for life. If you’ll let me be, I’m yours for life.”

She doesn’t say anything else to that.

All she does is lean in to kiss me hard, and as our lips meet, I know I’ve found my

own slice of paradise.

## EPILOGUE

### TWO YEARS LATER: BILLIE

“Maybe we should call,” says Jensen, rolling over to face me.

We’re lying on the beach on Isla Mostaza. It was kind of a joke to come here for our anniversary last year, but it looks like it’s going to turn into a kind of a tradition.

I don’t really have a problem with that, though. After all, this island was where it all began. This island gave me the love of my life.

Both of them, actually. I love Jensen more and more with every passing day, but he shares my heart with our daughter, our beautiful baby Hannah. She has her father’s eyes and my nose and the cutest laugh you’ve ever heard. She’s my whole world.

“They’ll be fine,” I say, shaking my head. “Stop fussing.”

“I’m not fussing,” he says. “I’m just worried, is all.”

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“Well, you shouldn’t be. It’s not like my mother hasn’t raised a child before.” He makes a face at me, and I shake my head back at him. “Just because it was complicated with me doesn’t mean she’s going to screw our daughter up too.”

“You’re not screwed-up,” he says. I raise my eyebrows hard at him for that but decide not to comment further.

The last thing I want to do is argue while we’re supposed to be on a romantic vacation.

“It’ll be good for her to spend some time with her grandma,” I say. “Besides, my mom loves getting treated like she’s royalty. It will all be working perfectly.”

In reality, the nanny is probably going to help out plenty during my mom’s stay at the palace while we’re away. I feel so lucky to be able to keep traveling like this even with our daughter being so young. We’re not doing trips for as long as I used to because I don’t want to miss too much time with her, but knowing that I can makes me feel so free.

I also can’t risk too much time away because I’m taking a part-time course to get a degree in conservation and ecology. It’s hard work, but it’s so worth it — and I would never have been able to do any of it without Jensen. He’s been so supportive of me this whole time.

He hasn’t rushed me into doing anything, hasn’t made any demands. We didn’t even move in together until Hannah was nearly ready to be born, and he’s taken his fair share of the dirty diapers without even being asked.



I haven't felt quite ready to give up my life in Philadelphia, either, so we have a house there now. I can visit my mom whenever I want and keep in touch with Ella.

But otherwise I'm living my life as a full-time princess of Sólveigr. Sometimes I remember that and it makes me dizzy with disbelief.

Jensen's been busy too; he's sat in on a few of my lectures with me, trying to learn more about what I'm doing. He claims he's not smart enough to learn any more about conservation than he already knows, but I know that's not true. I'm hoping that, after I graduate, I can persuade him to take some classes to learn more about this subject that he clearly loves.

He's done everything to support me. All I want now is for him to thrive too.

"Maybe we should call tomorrow," he says. "We'll be halfway through our vacation. It won't feel like we're being pushy."

"Jens," I say, "you're so cute when you worry." I reach over to take his hand, and he brings my knuckles to his lips and kisses them gently.

"I love you," he says, smiling.

"I love you too."

With that he sits up, gesturing for me to do the same. "Let's go for a walk."

"Okay," I giggle, not quite sure what's gotten into him. He can be so ridiculous sometimes.

"Let's go to the waterfall. We haven't been there in a while."

I don't complain, and the walk is beautiful. He can even navigate there all by himself

now. He's still not exactly an outdoorsy type, but looks like he belongs here more than ever now.

He lets go of my hand as we reach the water, and I frown at him. "You okay?"

Biting his lip, he takes a sharp breath and shakes his whole body like he's preparing for something. "I wanted to do it here, but..."

"But what? Jens, what's going on?"

"I love you," he starts, and I just frown back at him. "Please don't make this weird."

"Make what weird?" I sigh, exasperated by his ramblings.

Then he drops to one knee and pulls out a ring. "Marry me," he says simply, and I get the sense that he went through an entire awkward monologue in his head just now to reach this point.

And even if he'd said it all out loud, I wouldn't have cared.

The first thing I do is wrap my arms around him and kiss him, and he pulls me down to the ground beside him. "Yes! Of course I'll marry you," I grin, pulling away for a second.

"It can be however you want it — I don't care. My parents will want a whole celebration, and it'll probably have to happen, but I don't care if it doesn't. I just want you. I want you forever."

I cut off his words with a kiss. The truth is, we probably will have to have a royal wedding.

And the thing is, he's right. I don't care at all either, as long as I've got him.

The End